OPEN MIC? GENDER AND THE MERITOCRATIC MYTH OF AUTHENTICITY IN THE CULTURAL PRODUCTION OF STAND-UP COMEDY

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation demonstrates the ways in which gender plays a role in the validating of authenticity and merit in the cultural and industrial spaces of stand-up comedy. Merit and authenticity are arbitrary signifiers invoked by comics, fans, critics, and industry gatekeepers to protect the privilege of straight, white men who continue to dominate the field. I argue that the ideology of comedic authenticity is a means through which to police the boundaries of stand-up comedy while masking its underlying sexism, racism, and homophobia. More specifically, I argue that women, operationalized here as an industrial identity category, are constructed as comedy outsiders who must continually prove their worth through a shifting and slippery set of aesthetic and cultural norms and conditions. Further I explore the emotional and material labor women must perform to achieve success within the field, both on the local level and the industrial level.

I draw attention to gatekeeping in stand-up comedy by theorizing it not as a type of rhetoric or artistic form, but as an industry with a particular culture. To this end, I connect three case-studies that highlight gendered gatekeeping in stand-up comedy: 1) A televised debate between writer Lindy West and comic Jim Norton about rape jokes and the subsequent violent backlash West dealt with on social media; 2) Reviews by television critics of female-led comedies that reinforce masculine standards of quality comedy; and 3) Interviews with women in Chicago and Champaign-Urbana’s comedy scenes that explore how they adapt to fit into masculine, and oftentimes unwelcoming, spaces or how they create their own spaces, classes, festivals, and shows. Through these case-studies, I argue that the study of women in comedy must move beyond attempts to fit women into already existing paradigms and instead use such scholarship to question common sense assumptions about humor and comedy.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Throughout my research for this project, I keep remembering an argument that I had with a friend about the venerated comedy writer, actress and producer Amy Poehler. It was 2010 and we were discussing the NBC television show *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015), which I loved and he thought was a bad knock-off of *The Office* (2005-2013).

“Amy Poehler just isn’t funny. She’s always tries too hard,” he opined.

I countered, “You may not find her funny, but that doesn’t mean she objectively isn’t funny. She’s a renowned, critically acclaimed comedic performer.”

“But, she’s just not funny. And she doesn’t even write for the show, so you can’t give her real credit as a comic anyway.”

“She has a producing credit and directed an award-winning episode…”

This segued into an argument about women not being as funny as men, and about my not being as funny as he was. I tried to stand my ground, as I know deep in my gut that I was, and continue to be, funnier than he is. He argued that because he produced more jokes in his Facebook statuses and got more likes than I did, it was quantitative evidence of his superior sense of humor. I couldn’t gain any ground on his terms. This was two years before I started graduate school, before I learned the language of feminist theory, and before I had any confidence in defending my taste and my opinions. I eventually, exasperated, gave up and changed the subject.

I remember this conversation vividly because it is emblematic of the often exasperating experience of being a woman defending her expertise on virtually any topic, an experience exacerbated in this instance by the belief that women don’t have a sense of humor. The stand-up industry doesn’t start and end in New York or Los Angeles; rather its rules, norms, and
discourses seep into local comedy scenes from big cities to college towns and into the conversations about comedy among friends, family, and romantic partners. I have been a stand-up comedy fan since I was a kid. My sister and I taped and re-watched Jerry Seinfeld’s 1997 HBO special *I’m Telling You For the Last Time* until the VHS tape broke. And yet, throughout high school and college I never felt like a real comedy fan. My 9th grade drama teacher told me I was a terrific comedic performer, but I never believed I could get on stage and perform comedy. During my Master’s program, I took a comedy writing class, yet insisted throughout the course I was just taking it for fun. I could never really *be* a comedy writer. I would never be good enough.

I arrived in Champaign in 2012 to start my Ph.D. program and started going to watch local stand-up open mics occasionally. There were some very funny performers, but most were mediocre at best. There were few women, and when they did perform, the hosts tended to make off-handed remarks about their sexual prowess or what they were wearing. Comics tossed off jokes about “crazy” ex-girlfriends and sexual assault. I had always wanted to try performing, but I could never spend any sustained amount of time in such a hostile environment. I was stressed enough with teaching and my doctoral classes to muster up the confidence to be vulnerable in front of a dark room full of potentially hostile men.

Then, in 2016, during my fifth year of graduate school, I finally got on stage. After years of loving stand-up, of taking occasional classes, of denying that I had any talent, I finally found my confidence after *literally* researching stand-up comedy for my dissertation for the better part of two years and deciding to start my own open mic with a local comic I interviewed for my research. I got on stage only after putting together the least intimidating, most inviting, most friendly possible situation in which to perform my first set. Even within such a positive environment, I still wrote and rewrote my five minutes of material for a month and downed two
glasses of red wine before I went up. All of this to muster up the courage to do something I had wanted to do since I was a teenager. And, I loved it. I wish I could go back in time and tell my 17-year-old self to take the leap.

So, why did it take so long? No one was stopping me. I was being actively encouraged by several friends and teachers. Most cities and smaller towns are littered with open mics that are free to sign-up for. Yet, I couldn’t even admit to people I wanted to do it for fear they would make fun of me for entertaining such an idea. Why did I not feel like I could be a comic? Why did I not feel like a real comedy fan? And why did I not feel like my comedic taste was as legitimate as my partner’s? This question – how and why do many women continue to be discouraged from being stand-up comedy performers and fans to the point that they feel like outsiders or imposters- is the foundation of this dissertation. Through three case studies and my own experiences in and around stand-up comedy, I explore the culture of the stand-up industry through the lens of gender, meritocracy, and authenticity. My research makes visible the ways in which women continue to be delegitimized by cultural and industrial gatekeepers through material and discursive boundaries that construct them as enemies and outsiders of stand-up comedy.

**Gender, Comedy, and Power**

Because humor and power are inextricably linked, women’s exclusion from the field of comedy is linked with women’s continued exclusion from societal power (Walker 1988, 10). In her book *Women and Laughter*, Frances Gray (1994) makes the case that jokesters occupy a powerful position in our society: “To define a joke, to be the class that decides what is funny, is to make a massive assumption of power” (8). Even in contemporary culture, the most powerful jokesters still tend to be white, cis, straight men. And so, comedy researchers continue to explore
how this class wields the discourses of laughter and wields the power to “let people in” to the comedic arena on their terms (6). Daniel Wickberg (1998) traces the history of how a sense of humor became a valuable personality attribute and has been used as a tool of social exclusion, showing that the “repeated and systematic insistence that women lacked a sense of humor had the result of reinforcing a fundamental gender distinction at the level of everyday life” (92). The aim of this project is to understand how this historical trajectory continues today, specifically the ways in which the defining of women as humorless continues to keep them from the same levels of comedic success as their male counterparts. I choose stand-up as a specific industry within a broader field of comedy because it continues to be dominated by men at all levels, giving insight into other male dominated fields both within and outside of the cultural industries. In 2016, Amy Schumer was the first woman to make the Forbes list of top ten highest paid comedians, and continues to be the only one on the list (Berg 2016). *Bitch Magazine* (Mitchell 2015) recently investigated the visibility of women comics in New York by counting how many performed at Caroline’s on Broadway, a useful barometer of female visibility in the field as a prominent club that features a mix of famous and up-and-coming talent. The authors found that between 2011-2015, women accounted for 14% of total performers, and only 8% of headliners.

Further, stand-up has seemingly lower material barriers to entry than other comedic forms in that it requires only oneself, five minutes of material, and a local open mic. Unlike improv or television writing, one doesn't need to find a group, doesn’t need to take a class, and doesn’t need to be hired or gain permission from anyone to write or perform. Because of the individualistic nature of the form, stand-up tends to be the comedic form most dominated by a competitive, meritocratic discourse that contends that anyone can make it in stand-up if they work hard, suffer for their craft, and are funnier than their peers. The dominance of this
meritocratic discourse, though, obscures gendered barriers to entry and success. Thus, my aim is to make visible these barriers and the social, cultural and discursive forces that thwart women in their comedic careers from their first open mic to their first stand-up special.

To this end, this project examines responses to women performing stand-up comedy at both the local and national level, with a focus on how the ideology of comedic authenticity in stand-up is used by comics, fans, and critics to reinforce white, straight, masculine values while masking the process beneath the veneer of meritocracy. While much scholarship, and celebration in general, of women in comedy take moments of achievement or political subversion as their focus, I want to focus on instances in which women are attacked, thwarted, or criticized for failing to live up to an imagined authentic comedic ideal, because they critiqued the industry, performed material that failed to live up to masculine-set standards of quality, or didn’t perform “being themselves” in ways legible to audiences and gatekeepers. In studying women and the responses to their work within the stand-up industry and within stand-up culture, I see this project as contributing to industrial studies of media and communications in addition to gender and women’s studies, cultural studies, reception studies, and comedy studies. My point of departure from previous scholarship on women in comedy, a robust and growing body of work across disciplines, is my focus on early and mid-career comics, my ethnographic work within local comedy scenes, and my theorizing of stand-up comedy as an industry and subculture with its own “ideological economy” and “sub-hegemonies” (Hebdige 1988, 18).

Because subcultures reveal important tensions between dominant and subordinate positions (Hebdige 1988, 132), studying stand-up as a subcultural and industrial ideological economy reveals how women understand and construct themselves in relation to their subordinate positions both within stand-up and within American culture more generally. As
Willis (1978) notes, “the internal structure of any particular subculture is characterized by an extreme orderliness (113). I make clear the orderliness and expanse of the comedic ideological economy beyond the industry itself through a multi-site analysis of the trenchant discourses defining comedic authenticity as ever-elusive to women comics. I show that the same debates, discourses and ideologies are continuously articulated online, in televised debates among comedians, in reviews of comedic TV shows, and among stand-up comics in local scenes. Many comics turn to humor as a reprieve or a way to push back on elements of dominant culture that have hurt or otherwise negatively affected them; comedy is often seen as the realm of the marginalized and socially awkward. This means that comics often downplay or ignore sexism, racism, misogyny, classicism, ableism and other forms of hierarchies, oppression, or dominance within the ranks of comedy because even white, male comics have trouble ideologically understanding themselves as socially powerful agents. I argue that the ideology of comedic authenticity is a means through which to police the boundaries of stand-up comedy under a guise of meritocracy that masks its underlying sexism, racism, and homophobia. Gray (1994) tells us to pay attention to the ways in which men keep women from wielding the power of comedic discourse: this project argues that the ideology of authenticity is the key discourse that undermines women’s comedic talent to the point that women start questioning it themselves.

**Operationalizing “Women In Comedy”**

A feminist approach to women in comedy requires that we don’t automatically ascribe feminist value to women’s humor. Angela McRobbie (2009) laments that she was overly optimistic in her early work analyzing the emancipatory capacity for women’s magazines, arguing that feminist scholars must take care not to lose sight of feminist critiques in our rush to celebrate work created for and by women (11). Because women have historically been left out of
conversations about humor and comedy, feminist scholars studying women’s film, literature, humor, and art often struggle with how to move beyond simple reappraisal and tokenism. Instead, we need to contextualize work created by marginalized artists within the wider field beyond the site of the text. Rather than “rescuing” women’s art and fitting it into a predefined canon, the study of women’s art should question the assumptions on which canons are constructed and the very notion of canons themselves. Feminist theater historian Tracy C. Davis (1989) argues that revisionist history is a “first step,” but that feminist scholarship needs to not only “add” women back into the existing canon, but to challenge the terms of that canon (63).

The exclusion of women from the canon in the first place makes visible the ways in which characteristics that define talent or art are not fixed or natural. In addition to adding marginalized voices that have been excluded from any canon, we need to also need to acknowledge that the existence of a canon “relies on positivist and coherent definitions of value” (65). To this end, this project does not seek to define what women’s humor is, to celebrate it as subversive or revolutionary, or differentiate it from men’s humor per se. I am interested instead in the ways in which women continue to be marginalized through the ideology of comedic authenticity regardless of their specific jokes, style, material or aesthetic and possibilities of intervention.

When crafting a theoretical framework for the study of any marginalized group’s contributions to a field in which their accomplishments have been overlooked, ignored, or diminished, scholars also face a balancing act between recovering and simplifying. The exploration of “women in comedy” risks essentialism and a flattening of the definition of “woman.” Scholars need to strike a balance between acknowledging that women as a group have faced certain unifying historical and contemporary issues, while at the same time considering
differences in gender identity, race, class, ability and sexuality. Because I am interested not in what defines something called “women’s humor,” but in the ways in which a group called “women” has been marginalized within the field of stand-up comedy, I use the word “woman” in this project to signify people who identify, as my one of my favorite comics Rhea Butcher (Esposito 2017) puts it, with women from a political and social perspective and not necessarily as women from an identity perspective. There has long been a tension between political, cultural, and philosophical definitions of gender. Because I operationalize gender in this project as an industrial categorization, I’m interested less in internalized gender identity here than with the ways in which “woman” functions as an othering external identification in ideologies like “women aren’t funny,” the creation of diversity spots for women on showcase line-ups, and the creation of “women’s open mics” and “women’s comedy classes.”

In this way, I see gender identity operating in this project not as a static description of “who we are” but rather as an investigation into “how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves” (Hall 1996, 4). Gender identity is not static or coherent, but are rather the conversion of multiple discursive selves, which have various material and political effects (8). This, of course, does not mean that our sense of “selves” are imaginary or personal inventions, rather they’re a necessary tool through which we understand how to perform in different contexts, how to understand the world, and how to signal to others how to understand us (1-17). Gender is not a fixed, pre-existing identity but is “constructed out of a mixture of continually shifting interacting and contradictory structural and cultural arrangements” (Rakow 1986, 131). In discussing women in comedy, woman is thus not an essential, inner-identity, but as Van Zoonen (1996) argues, “a mechanism that structures material and symbolic worlds and our experiences in them” that needs to be considered with other
identity formations like race, class, sexuality and ability (3-4). Judith Butler (1990) famously argues that gender is a regulatory discipline; I’m interested in how the regulatory discourses of gender and comedy intersect and act on the bodies and practices of comics who are understood to be women in comedy and how these comics in turn understand their own work and position with the industrial and cultural comedic economy.

The subjects of first two chapters identify as cisgender women, so I default to “woman” as a descriptive term. The final three chapters are based on interviews with comedians who identify as cisgender women, transgender women, and non-binary folks, but who all share the experience of being marginalized and associated with women in masculine spaces due to their gender identity and expression. I switch to the term womxn in these final chapters as a shorthand to acknowledge and encompass the collective experiences of being othered by gender, acknowledging that there is a difference in individual experience, especially within spaces created “for women.”

Finally, I want to acknowledge the ways in which women are treated like second-class performers and fans in stand-up comedy cannot be separated from the day-to-day mistreatment of women in society more generally; however, there are specific kinds of double-standards, harassment, and glass ceilings women face in the cultural industries and in comedy more specifically. The goal of this project is to analyze how these common gendered practices work to marginalize women within stand-up comedy in particular ways.

Women in Comedy

In her work, Rebecca Krefting (2014/2017) asks why the assumption that “women aren’t funny” so stubbornly refuses to go away. She gives a brief overview of the recent evolution of
the ideology in American culture as traced through newspaper articles about women’s’ senses of humor throughout the 20th century:

In the 1890s, newspapers printed editorials and articles speculating that women were born sympathetic, disallowing a fondness for jokes since humor is often mean-spirited. An editorial published in 1901 in The Washington Post beings: “The question was an old one: Do women have a sense of humor? They have long been accused of having a hollow where that bump out to be (‘Woman’s Sense of Humor,’ 1901). The early 1900s delivered more of the same biology-as-destiny argumentation, i.e., women are born lacking the DNA necessary to appreciate and produce humor. The debate raged on over the next century: women can exercise wit but not humor; vanity prevents women from pursuing comedy because women can be funny only by sacrificing their beauty; a woman’s comic appeal requires she be beautiful otherwise she risks losing male patrons; funny women are unnatural; funny women are manly; women cannot be ladies and comedienes-the two are antithetical; women cannot be funny and feminine; women can be funny and feminine; women are too emotional to be humorous…and on (2014, 129-130).

Similarly, Gray (1994) breaks down the five steps through which she sees women being excluded from comedic success. She lays it out like a playbook, step by step: 1) Foster the myth that women talk too much, 2) When faced with women’s objections to specific jokes, call them humorless, 3) When women are funny, deny it is related to any creative process or talent, 4) Construct an alternative label for women’s humor, and 5) Show that women’s humor is evidence of humorlessness (8-12). Scholars also argue that women aren’t socialized to be funny and aren’t taught to value their own sense of humor; “being deliberately foolish” has long been
considered inappropriate feminine behavior under patriarchal gender norms (Kotthoff 2006). Further, women’s sense of humor is often defined by laughing at men’s jokes rather than telling their own to the point that oftentimes women find men funnier than they do other women (Kuipers 2006; Bore 2010). In turn, women don’t see comedy as a field open to them. Because popular discourses labelled women as humorless long before the advent of modern American stand-up comedy, the continued reproduction of masculine hegemony in the field is hard to break. Additionally, the spaces in which stand-up comedy blossomed between the 1950s and 1970s, like gentlemen’s clubs and bars, were hostile and less accessible to potential female comics and audiences (Macdonald 1995; Hicks 2011). Most comedic performances don’t take place in gentleman’s clubs anymore, but the late-night shows at dark clubs and bars where most local comedy proliferates are still often hostile spaces for women. Stand-up comedy also continues to be defined by traditionally male features of aggression and completion which has maintained male dominance and power across the comedy landscape (Zoglin 2009). Without an institutional history of their own, women still find it difficult to break into stand-up. The ways in which I found women to be treated or labelled in my research is just the most recent incarnation of a centuries old process of excluding women from the realm of public humor and professional comedic success, however, the celebration of women’s success in comedy over the past ten years tends to overlook the ways that we haven’t made as much progress as we may have hoped.

As women continue to struggle with breaking into and succeeding in stand-up comedy, the discourse of stand-up comedy as a meritocratic field masks this reality. As Jo Litter’s (2018) incisive work makes clear, meritocracy both as an ideology and a social system “has become they key means of cultural legitimation for contemporary capitalist culture” (2). While a broad meritocratic ideology plays a significant role in the global project of neoliberalism, it also
expands into the “nooks and crannies of everyday life” and across industrial sites in contextually specific ways (2-3). In stand-up comedy, Krefting (2017) associates the current iteration of the “women aren’t funny” discourse with the meritocratic belief that “content is king” in our digital age. This iteration of the meritocratic myth holds that the proliferation of streaming outlets and the internet are a democratizing force that has made it easier for everyone to succeed in comedy regardless of race, gender, class, or status. When women don’t succeed, it isn’t because they are at a historical disadvantage, but because they are not funny, talented, or driven enough to succeed. Their continued lack of comedic success compared to men in the digital age therefore proves that women aren’t as funny. Women are always to blame for their own failures in male-dominated fields, and their successes are exceptions that prove the rule.

Even scholarship that celebrates women in comedy tends to center on current and past comedians, who, despite all the odds, made it. The history of women in comedy is then the history of women who achieved the level of success required to be remembered and canonized. Because the study of women in comedy grew largely from literary studies and English departments, there is a tendency to focus on texts and the women who produced readily available source material to analyze in the form of books, plays, films, television shows, and recorded stand-up specials. Cultural and material barriers to entry, not to mention barriers to success, have historically been high for women, which means most scholarship centers on a familiar list of women comics who have succeeded within a masculine dominated field. Work abounds on historical and contemporary icons like Moms Mabley (Harris 1988; Watkins 1994), Mae West (Curry 1996), Lucille Ball (Horowitz 1997), Phyllis Diller (Lavin 2004), Joan Rivers (Horowitz 1997), Totie Fields (Osborne-Thompson 2017), Carol Burnett (Marc 1992), Roseanne Barr (Lavin 2004; Rowe 1995), Ellen DeGeneres (Limon 2000, Mizejewski 2014), Margaret
Cho (Fraiberg 1994) Wanda Sykes (Gilbert 2015), and more recently, Tina Fey (Lauzen 2014) Sarah Silverman (Mizejewski 2014), and Amy Schumer (Marx 2015, Bore 2017, Rowe 2017). Feminist media scholars have also sought to recuperate and reexamine female performances that have been overlooked, like silent slapstick film comediennes (Hennefeld 2018, Warner 2018), early television talk shows hosts (Osborne-Thompson 2017), and social media users (Monk-Payton 2017). But, because this scholarship tends to center personalities and texts, less work has been done on amateur or even mid-level comics, especially women. Sociologists, anthropologists, and folklorists have explored the working conditions of stand-up comedy, but most of their work touches on gender only briefly (Double 2013, Brodie 2014, Reilly 2017) and tends to reinforce meritocratic and authenticity myths of stand-up rather than unpacking or problematizing them.

While scholars tend to focus on the most recognizable comics, Rebecca Krefting (2014) calls for scholars to pay more attention to comics outside of the mainstream to draw attention to how labor and cultural capital work within the economy of stand-up. She analyzes who is able to make a living performing stand-up, and who has the power to decide “what’s funny.” Her focus is not just on the work of comics, but on how the comedy market works and how cultural capital plays a role in who becomes successful. Her work is important in pushing back on the notion that comedy is a meritocracy and that “funny” is an objective measure of value. I seek to further this work by shifting the focus away from the most famous, subversive, or notable comedic figures to the conditions of comedic production and instances of comedic failure in order to make visible and question the gendered standards by which “good comedy” is judged. By studying stand-up comedy as a cultural industry with a specific ideological economy, we can start to make visible
the ways in which norms and aesthetics taken for granted as natural or inherent to stand-up comedy are historically specific constructions that maintain hegemonic masculine dominance.

A Brief History of American Stand-Up Comedy

Lawrence Mintz defines stand-up comedy 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” (194). Oliver Double (2005), a stand-up comic, performer, and academic, adds that what defines stand-up comedy as a unique art form is that comics perform a version of themselves, create an intense relationship with an audience, and speak in the present tense in a way that acknowledges the fact that they are performing (19). Ian Brodie (2014), a folklorist defines stand-up comedy less as a performance than a “form of talk” in which the performer dominates the conversation, but nevertheless is “performed not to but with an audience” (5). While most scholars tend to agree on what stand-up comedy looks like, there is disagreement about where the term “stand-up comic” originated. Double (2005) notes that the Oxford English Dictionary points to the first use of the word in a Listener article published on August 11, 1966, but that he found a transcript of Lenny Bruce using the term in a radio interview in 1959 with Studs Turkel (17-18). Kliph Nesteroff (2016), a journalist and comedy history expert, says that according to octogenarian comic Dick Curtis, the term was coined by the mob that ran most stand-up venues in the 40s and 50s. The mob managed fighters and fighting venues, and a “stand-up fighter” came to mean a fighter who was a reliable puncher. The term found its way into the lexicon of mob owned nightclubs to mean a guy who “just stood there and punched jokes---joke, joke, joke--he was a stand-up comic” (53). Ineed, there has long been a mythos of danger surrounds stand-up comedy. Comics frequently understand themselves as tough, aggressive, renegades; bravely tackling a job that isn’t for faint
of heart. Gerald Nachman (2003) claims that “after auto racing,” being a stand-up comic is the “world’s most hazardous occupation” (36), because comics are alone and unadorned on stage. If the audience doesn’t laugh, it is because you have failed.

Because comedy is porous, flexible, adaptive and playful, comics work across media forms and influence the development of media technology and practices. This makes it nearly impossible to disentangle the evolution of stand-up as a form from the evolution of American mass media. Over the past 200 years, comics have been transmedia exemplars, working in several forms of media simultaneously. While today’s comics will often tour, host podcasts, run Twitter accounts, write sketch shows, produce films, and release stand-up specials simultaneously, comics of 1940s and 50s would similarly move between radio, television, film and the stage. There is not one comedy history, but many overlapping comedy histories. Stand-up comedy binds various strands of media history, from comedy’s influences in minstrelsy, vaudeville, and lectures to the role comics played in the early development of radio, film, and television. In this section, I’ll briefly trace the evolution of aesthetic forms and media genres that both influenced and were influenced by stand-up, from the development of mass popular culture in the 1800s to rise of the digital outlets for comedy like podcasting and streaming services.

Daniel Wickberg’s (1998) thorough account of the history of what he calls the meta-language of humor traces the ways in which our understanding of the “joke” are historically specific and “peculiarly modern” (9). While we tend to think of having a sense of humor as an essential, natural human trait, the term sense of humor did not appear until the 1840s and wasn’t prized as an important personality trait until the 1870s (8). Once a sense of humor became an important, interiorized individual trait, the commodification of the labor of creating laughter soon followed, as the invention of a sense of humor as a personal, moral attribute was tied
closely to modernization, individualism, industrialization and corporatization (9-13). While British humor prized wit as a sign of bourgeois intellect, the most popular American humor instead embraced the “uncouth but charming average Joe” defined by monologists and writers like Mark Twain and Artemus Ward (Lee 2016, XVI). In her work on Twain, Judith Yaross Lee (2012) also attributes the evolution of the commodification of jokes and comedic branding to the seminal American humorist, whose career was encouraged by major advancements in communication technology, including the typewriter and Linotype, and the emerging post-industrial intellectual property laws which allowed Samuel Clemens to turn Mark Twain into a brand he could monetize (8-10).

Samuel Clemens was born during the heyday of the minstrelsy circuit, touring satirical, comedy variety shows that mined humor from blackface and the mocking of African-American culture, that was arguably the first form of American mass culture (Lee 2012, 41). Most significantly, antebellum minstrelsy established a common corporate pattern for American popular culture: the sanitizing of radical or subversive cultural material borrowed from the periphery to establish a viable commercial product for a mainstream audience (Mahar 1999, 329). Eventually, vaudeville took the touring variety show even more mainstream, serving as a site of negotiation between high and low culture and further encouraging the growth of an American mass culture at the turn of the 20th century (Kibler 1999, 9-11). Vaudeville managers organized theaters into national chains and developed centralized bureaucracies for arranging national tours, monitoring the success of acts, and crafting formulas for popular bills that would please audiences all over the country. Before the invention of the microphone, comedic acts in both minstrel shows and vaudeville found that spoken word didn’t translate well in huge theaters, and so comics relied on exaggerated physical and vocal humor and slapstick gags. In the 1920s,
vaudeville started to lose its customers and performers to Broadway revues, radio, and eventually film. The vaudeville grind was punishing, comedic stars could gain more notoriety elsewhere, and audiences began to prefer more polished entertainment. The shift from vaudeville to radio, film, and television brought in a new kind of quiet, conversational, personal comedy that worked better with the new technology. Comic radio stars adapted a more natural style of conversation, no longer able to rely on their physicality or to use the same jokes every night. Radio comedy built a sense of intimacy with the audience, mining humor from characters and relationships (Hicks 2011, 50).

With the fall of vaudeville, live performers and up-and-coming comics started performing primarily in mob-run speakeasies that became legitimate nightclubs after the repeal of Prohibition (Nesteroff 2016, 53). In the 1930s, the Borscht Belt in the Catskills resort near New York City became another venue that hosted old vaudevillians and young performers looking to refine their material and make a living. From the 1920s to the 1940s, live comics depended on wisecracks, one-liners, and other forms of short, rapid-fire jokes. Many comics focused on performing rather than writing, often performing material they bought from joke-writers, adapted from joke books, or “borrowed” from other comics (xiv-xv). By the start of the 1950s, television had also grown in popularity beyond upper-class, educated, coastal demographics, and audiences began to push back against TV’s early urban, ethnic, brash, comedic sensibility. This pushback led to the rise of family friendly, domestic sitcoms in the late-1950s (Murray 2013, 115), and by the late 1950s, American popular culture was ripe for the development of an edgier, more political, personal kind of live comedic performance.

Kliph Nesteroff (2016) refers to the aesthetic shift in the early 1960s to personal storytelling and political humor as “stand-up’s great change” (155). During the folk revival and
the rise of the beats in the 1950s, comedy adapted to the public’s growing interest in vulnerability and individuality. While the older comics who came up through vaudeville and the Borscht Belt continued to perform the old wisecracking style in supper clubs, the new wave of comics like Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, Jonathan Winters, Dick Gregory, Mike Nichols, and Elaine May wrote their own material and developed highly individual styles. The new comics performed in Greenwich Village, coffeehouses, strip clubs, and jazz bars between beat poets and folk singers (159). The new wave comedy aesthetic not only followed cultural trends, it also made economic sense. During the heyday of vaudeville, comedians didn’t need to brand themselves as unique or individual; they just had to put on a lively and entertaining performance. Once comics stayed in one city and performed for similar crowds each night, they found the need brand themselves by adopting their own unique voice. Personal branding was also insurance against joke theft. After Redd Foxx, a prominent African-American comic who became famous for his raunchy nightclub acts in the 1950s and 1960s, became one of the first comics to expand his audience through comedy recordings, comic discovered they could use comedy albums to find national audiences with edgier material not fit for mainstream nightclubs, radio, or television. During this period, the new stand-up comics branded themselves as counter-cultural, political artists and found they were still able make a living (Thompson 2011, 33). However, while new wave comics like Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl are often memorialized as “renegade role models” and radical political performers (Zoglin 2008, 11), Ethan Thompson (2011) argues that they were more culturally subversive than politically subversive, questioning the norms of post-war American mass media rather than radically undermining entrenched political or cultural ideologies (147).
The press labelled this new wave of joke-tellers “sick comics.” In the era of McCarthyism and obscenity laws, comics like Lord Buckey and Lenny Bruce made a name for themselves getting arrested for public indecency and obscenity and speaking out against censorship (Hicks 2011, 61-62). *Time* Magazine labelled Bruce and his associates in a 1959 *Time* magazine article called “The Sickniks.”

What the sicknicks dispense is partly social criticism liberally laced with cyanide, partly a Charles Addams kind of jolly ghoulishness, and partly a personal and highly disturbing hostility toward all the world. [...] The novelty and jolt of the sickniks is that their gags...come so close to horror and brutality that audiences wince even as they laugh.”

While the rise in politically subversive humor is generally attributed to the sick comics, black comics in the supper club era who weren’t invited to perform in mainstream arenas had already developed a brand of subversive comedy on what is referred to as the Chitlin’ circuit, a collection of mostly black nightclubs and theaters. From the 1930s to the 1950s, comics like Moms Mabley were incisive and critical of the South, of white liberals, and of the American government (Watkins 1994). Dick Gregory, a comic and civil rights activist, was one of the first black crossover comics, breaking away from caricature and blackface to develop a more naturalized, personal style of comedy (Nesteroff 2016, 186). Even then, it was often hard for black comics to make money in white venues, even if those venues booked black musicians. Black comics didn’t get paid as much, and white comics often stole jokes they heard in black nightclubs (189).

The first clubs specifically designed for stand-up comedy performances arrived in the 1970s, and in 1975 HBO started producing stand-up specials on television for the first time. As comedic stars gained national recognition, television networks increasingly poached stand-up
comics to host variety shows like *The Richard Pryor Show* and *The Gong Show*, creating synergy and allowing audiences to see their favorite comic stars both on television and in comedy clubs when they came to town (Nesteroff 2016, 299-301). The emerging comedy boom of the 1980s was also spurred by the publication of the *The Last Laugh* in 1975 by journalist Phil Berger, the first book about stand-up comedy as an art form that served as a how-to guide and inspired a generation of fans to get on stage (304-305). By the late 1970s, comics began agitating for pay, which owners who imagined their clubs as training grounds and artist colonies actively discouraged. Comics got their start at these clubs but couldn’t make money until they jumped to headliner status or television. The education model gave comics more freedom to experiment, but also starved comics of a decent living. This led to the six-week comics strike of 1979, after which comics started to be paid. The rise of popularity of stand-up as an art form, the growing number of comedy clubs, and comics’ newfound ability to pay rent by performing led the comedy boom of the 1980s and early 90s. Stand-up was now a mainstream big business, which led to rising profits, falling experimentation, and a return to aggressive jokes and predictable set-up punchline structures (Gray 1994, 144). While women started to gain a foothold in the more experimental stand-up comedy world of the 1970s during the women’s movement, the rise in stand-up as a cutthroat profit-maker squeezed women out who weren’t comfortable with club style comedy or who weren’t taken seriously enough by club owners to merit being paid.

By the early 1990s, however, audiences learned they could watch or record their favorite comics on television without paying a two-drink minimum, and clubs began to rapidly close. By 1992, the so-called bubble burst, yet with the death of the boom, the cycle of experimentation continued. The 90s saw the rise of burgeoning black comics like Chris Rock and Dave Chappelle who came up through Def Jam Comedy, Russell Simmons’ break-out hip-hop comedy venture
with HBO. The decade also fostered a group of dry, experimental, self-referential alternative comics including Patton Oswalt, Maria Bamford, and Janeane Garofalo who returned to an earlier style of personal, vulnerable comedic storytelling and who would hit big in the 2000s with the rise of streaming services and digital comedy consumption. After 9/11, Jon Stewart’s iteration of Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show* (1998-2015) ushered in a newfound interest in political satire, while the growth of digital outlets like MySpace, YouTube, Twitter, and eventually podcasting gave comics a new platform to grow their audiences outside of television and comedy clubs. In 2017, we’re arguably in the midst of another comedy boom, brought on by the growing number of outlets for comedic performance - Netflix in particular has begun aggressively producing stand-up comedy specials- and the ability for more comics to make a living by finding a niche, but passionate audience. Today’s stand-up comedians fetishize authenticity even more as a strategy to brand themselves while working across multiple media forms to find and connect with their fans. Comics strive to have a relationship with the audience, to be vulnerable on stage, to perform a version of themselves that appears to be real, and to discuss taboo subjects. In the next section, I will look more closely at how this ideology of authenticity is yoked to the larger neoliberal project of meritocracy.

**Authenticity as a Humor Theory**

Analyses of stand-up comedy often invoke the so-called three classic theories of humor: relief theory, superiority theory, or incongruity theory (Barreca et al. 2014, xxiii-xxiv). Relief theory is based largely on Freud’s (1966) *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, in which he argues that humor acts as a release of the energy we normally exert to maintain the inhibitions necessary to perform appropriate social behavior. Superiority theory, credited to Aristotle and Hobbes maintains that humor acts to define the joke-teller as superior to the joke object through
mockery or put-downs (Strauss 1963). Finally, incongruity theory, attributed by humor theorists to Kant and Schopenhauer, theorizes laughter as something we do when something is irrational, paradoxical, illogical, incoherent, fallacious or inappropriate. The uncritical reliance on these theories has also been criticized by scholars for ignoring gender relations (Gray 1994), for being ahistorical (Wickberg 1998), and for being uncritical (Hokenson 2006).

I would argue that authenticity theory has become a new kind of humor theory informed primarily by broader discourses of meritocracy and that proliferates both in popular and scholarly accounts of the form. Littler (2018) traces how meritocracy has become a “moral obligation” that adopts the language of empowerment and equality as put forth by civil rights discourses in a way that “promotes opportunity whilst producing social division” (3). Because stand-up has evolved on club stages wherein comics must command attention from intoxicated audiences, compete for limited jobs within an industry defined by labor precarity, and perform versions of themselves alone on stage, the individualistic meritocratic discourse of neoliberalism predictably has become the dominant means through which the industry and culture understands stand-up as an art form. Meritocracy is embedded across industries, especially within the precarious labor markets of the culture industries that “incite self-exploitation through their appeals to passion for work” (197). In stand-up comedy, these discourses specifically embed themselves within the ideology of comedic authenticity, which works to further “safeguard against a reduction in privilege on the part of those wielding it” (159). By appealing to authenticity, a subjective and abstract value judgement, as the primary criteria of good stand-up comedy, the privileged purveyors of this discourse are not only able to mask underlying inequalities in the field, but to produce and further exacerbate them. Littler argues that meritocracy is not only, as many have argued, a system that hides inequalities, but one that
actively creates them. Similarly, comedic authenticity both ignores cultural and social 
inequalities in the field of stand-up (and society more generally) and reproduces and entrenches 
them.

In articulating authenticity as the defining characteristic of stand-up comedy, critics point 
to the form’s supposed directness, lack of artifice, and personal vulnerability. Scholarly and 
critical definitions explain stand-up as a blurring of the line between the comedian’s on and 
offstage personae. John Limon (2000) says that stand-up is a kind of abjection in which 
comedians are “not allowed to be either natural or artificial” (6). Judith Yaross Lee (2012) 
defines stand-up as an “oral narrative, usually monologues” in which comics “express 
themselves rather than play a role” (28). She adds that stand-up “clearly announces itself as a 
genre focused on the performance of an exposed individual” (28). Her notion of “authenticity” 
and “simplicity” are echoed by many comedy scholars. Marc (1997) differentiates stand-up from 
other comedic art forms through its lack of artifice and directness in communication between 
artist and audience. However, not all stand-up comics perform a lack of artifice, and a lack of 
artifice is in itself a performance. Some stand-up comics use props. Some use costumes. Some 
comics are playing a role or embellishing stories. All stand-up comics are playing versions of 
themselves, even when drawing from their own experiences. Authenticity, then, often becomes a 
way to differentiate and elevate the form beyond mere entertainment. Lawrence Grossberg 
(1992) argues that the inability to adequately explain affective investment in popular culture 
often leads to the invocation of authenticity as the explanation. In pop culture, fans define often 
define authenticity through negation and difference rather than as a present or inherent quality 
(62). Alternative music is authentic because it isn’t popular. Country music is authentic because 
it isn’t cosmopolitan. Authenticity becomes a way of justifying intense connection to a form of
popular culture that might otherwise be considered meaningless. Ian Brodie (2014) sees comedy fans, comics, and even critics and scholars, as invoking a similar rhetoric: “There is an impetus for an explanatory model that rationalizes the appeal: it must do something other than merely entertain” (153).

While truth-telling and relatability are at the heart of many theories of comedy, the aesthetic trajectory of American stand-up comedy as tied to “authenticity” can be traced back to its roots within the folk revivalist movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the invention of the microphone, and the economic imperative to keep the production costs of stand-up low (Brodie 2014, 53). The classic stark brick background, the microphone’s ability to create a sense of closeness and intimacy once comics didn’t have to project in large theaters, and the folksy, intimate, plain talking style of folk culture merged to create an art form defined by a vernacular of intimacy, relatability, and truth-telling (53-56). Unlike vaudeville or early Borscht Belt comedy, today’s comedians brand themselves as individuals with specific points of view based in their personal biographies. Comedians build a relationship with the audience that is symbolically, and usually spatially, closer than it was pre-1950s (Gray 1994, 142). Comics like to have audiences close to the stage and close to one another to amplify and create communal laughter. The space of the comedic performance, whether in a comedy club, the back of a bookstore, or a bar, primes the audience to expect a certain type of communication and a certain type of relationship between performer and spectator. In this way, the comedic space serves as a metaphor for the performance. Despite the playful, slippery nature of comedic performance, the “stripped-of-artifice stage” is a synecdoche for the “stripped-of-artifice performances” that take place on them (Brodie 2014, 20).
Authenticity, though, is arbitrary, and the uncritical usage of the term to define *good* comedy and *talented* comedians has become a means through which to police the boundaries of stand-up and to “foreclose possibilities,” often validating certain racial and gendered performances over others (Johnson 2003, 3). Authenticity in the arts denotes an ever-shifting and overlapping set of characteristics that tends to reinforce socio-cultural power relations (Weisethaunet and Lindberg 2010, 466). It can denote the kind of creative self-expression that is the legacy of the Romantic artistic genius (471), sincerity in speech and thought (477), the performance of a collectively held truth (478), or a seemingly transparent self-disclosure that lacks perceived artifice (Banet-Weiser 2012, 60). Authenticity signifies non-performance, or the “spontaneous, instinctive, unrehearsed” embodiment of the self (Dubrofsky and Ryalls 2014, 396). Despite the multifaceted and slippery nature of the term authentic, in the end, “authenticity is about validity” (Van Leeuwen 2001, 396); something or someone is authentic if it is “declared authentic by an authority” (Van Leeuwen 2001, 393). Authenticity is policed by the gatekeepers of the stand-up comedy industry or those with the cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984/1993) to define the terms of good stand-up comedy. The ideologies of authenticity and the role of validation underlies subcultural and industrial spaces of stand-up comedy from the amateur level through the entertainment industry professional level. A belief in the importance and existence of authenticity in stand-up comedy is a part of what Raymond Williams (1961) might call stand-up comedy’s *structure of feeling, or social character and cultural pattern of a community* within a certain period (65). Because authenticity has become the primary commonsense characteristic of modern American stand-up, it has become a trope that is manipulated for cultural capital (Johnson 2003, 3) in ways that are exacerbated through an adherence to the myth of meritocracy. The aim of this project is to unpack the ways in which
gender plays a role in the validating of comedic authenticity and the ways in which authenticity furthers the project of meritocracy within the industrial practices of stand-up.

**Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks**

While I go into more detail about theoretical and methodological frameworks at the start of each chapter, I’ll briefly touch on them here. My research investigates how ideologies of authenticity are used to invalidate the work of female comics throughout their careers, how women navigate their gender and comedic identities and understand their position within the stand-up comedy industry, and how authenticity works as a form of meritocracy that furthers gendered inequality. I see my project as responding to Saukko’s (2003) proposal for dialogic, multi-sited studies that examine “how a given phenomenon takes shape in and across multiple locales and sites “(176). To this end, I designed a multi-site, mixed-methods approach that merges feminist theory, cultural theory, and media studies with textual analysis, discourse analysis, ethnographic interviews, and autoethnographic reflection. Together, these form the basis for three case studies that highlight the ways in which gatekeeping works through language, norms, behaviors, and practices within and surrounding stand-up comedy to marginalize women based not only on their gender identity, but also their race and sexual identities. These include: 1) Debates on Twitter among fans and comics that construct “feminism” and “comedy” as mutually exclusive and that continue to question whether women can be funny; 2) Reviews by television critics of female-led comedies that reinforce masculine standards of comedy as markers of quality; and 3) The subculture of local stand-up scenes in both Chicago and Champaign-Urbana and interviews with women comics about how they adapt to fit into masculine, and oftentimes unwelcoming, spaces or how they create their own spaces, classes, festivals, and shows. As feminist theater historian Tracy C. Davis (1989) notes, feminist
methodological practice should not be approached as a “fully formed, unitary vision,” but rather should remain “emergent and multifaceted” throughout a research project (65). My textual analysis and ethnography informed one another throughout the research process with the overarching discourse analysis making visible the ideologies and norms shared between various sites of study.

Ethnography and the study of language as a discourse frequently function as co-projects. For instance, Nancy Baym (2000) takes as her ethnographic method what she refers to as a “practice approach” which examines groups through their language and practices as they engage in a shared project. This approach understands language as constructive and understands that languages function as “microcosms of the communities in which they are used” (21-22). Because the structure of a community’s language reveals how the culture frames the world, studying language is a way of understanding the culture itself (Bacon-Smith 1992, 302). Language is a medium in which we produce meaning; it doesn’t just reflect the world, it “articulates it” (Hall 1980, 30). According to Foucault (1979), discourse, which encompasses both images and language and the institutions and practices that produce those languages, functions as a form of discipline that produces subjects that think and act a certain way. Discourse works to diffuse power throughout society, therefore a discourse analysis seeks to make visible the ways in which discursive power and knowledge construct certain ways of viewing and understanding the social world through language and images (Rose 2001, 140). Discourse analysis is not only interested in language, but the dialectical relationship between language and society (Fairclough 2007, 8) and allows us to use textual analysis to analyze larger societal trends (11). In my project, I use discourse analysis to locate ruptures, contradictions, and patterns across ethnographic data and
media texts to make visible the ways in which women are invalidated and delegitimized as comedic performers, critics, and fans across sites of study.

In examining these multiple sites, I specifically work to make visible the ways in which common sense meritocratic discourses that “the funniest, most authentic comedians succeed” exacerbate and mask gendered inequalities in the industry. Jo Littler’s (2018) recent genealogical tracing of the ways in which meritocracy manifests itself across industries is valuable to my project in examining how stand-up comics, critics, and scholars characterize comedic success primarily through hard work, authenticity, talent, and sense of humor. The celebration and study of famous comics doesn’t overtly articulate this belief, but embeds the assumption within its focus on celebrating women comics who do succeed rather than critically examining why they succeeded when so many others failed. Further, critics, gatekeepers, comics, and fans reiterate on stage, in reviews, on podcasts, and on social media that anyone who is naturally funny can succeed in comedy so long as they “work hard and market [themselves] in the right way to achieve success” (Littler 2018, 2). *Merit* in stand-up comedy is the seen as the by-product of two things: innate talent and hard work. Both the essentialized understanding of inborn comedic talent and the moral belief in work ethic are articulated as “neutral, factually objective” terms that are “free from the vagaries of different subjective opinions, of cultural value judgements (150). We tend to treat *funny* and *hard work* as indisputable and self-evident facts, while in reality they are “profoundly contested” and “loaded, yet unstable” signifiers (151). In stand-up, being authentically funny has become a “value judgement” and a “term that affects who is permitted to act and how” (155). This project therefore works to unpack how authenticity is mobilized in discursive and material practices as a neutral term that contradicts the reality of the gendered and racialized “exclusionary politics of merit” (157). The shifting, slippery
definition of authenticity appears to empower everyone equally while in practice, acts “as a safeguard against a reduction in privilege on the part of those wielding it” (159).

Littler (2018) maps out five key problems with meritocracy that I argue manifest themselves in stand-up comedy through discourses of authenticity: 1) It creates and legitimates through the guise of fairness a hierarchical system that requires actors to compete for a limited number of top spots; 2) It assumes the existence of innate talent; 3) It ignores gendered and racial barriers to entry and success; 4) It uncritically celebrates particular forms of capital; and 5) It obscures inequality by exclusively prioritizing a focus on hard work and talent as tickets to success (3-7). These problems embed themselves within discourses and practices of stand-up comedy through an uncritical celebration of competition and hardship in becoming a successful stand-up comic, the articulation of stand-up comedy as a free space where all topics should be joked about but where freedom of speech is more often granted to straight, white comics, and the uneven characterizing of comedy as authentic based on gendered and racial definitions.

In theorizing authenticity discourse in stand-up comedy as a particular form of meritocracy and cultural capital within stand-up comedy, I have found Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984/1993) work on cultural production and cultural capital, Sara Ahmed’s (2012, 2017) work on institutional boundaries, and John Caldwell’s work on Hollywood’s para-industrial discourses to be particularly useful. Audiences, critics, and even some humor scholars, fetishize jokes as self-evident units of data without taking into consideration the cultural practices and power dynamics in which they were created and consumed. Bourdieu, instead, challenges those who wish to understand the social forces behind cultural production to avoid the reductionism by focusing too much on text without considering the broader struggle over social group legitimacy and social group distinction (Lopes 2000, 183). Within the comedic field, as in other fields, the
agents must be recognized by others in the field as having the authority to define comedic norms and taste. In cultural fields of production, this recognition comes in the form of symbolic capital, or prestige, and cultural capital, or competencies and knowledge (Bourdieu 1993, 7). While Bourdieu’s work centers almost solely on class and does not unpack taste hierarchies within popular culture, media studies scholars (Fiske 1992, Couldry 2003), feminist scholars (Butler 1999, McRobbie 2009), and comedy scholars (Friedman 2014, Krefting 2014) have adapted, critiqued, and expanded his work. As many have noted, Bourdieu was not concerned with the ways in which class, race, and gender were inextricably related to one another; however, Bourdieu’s theorization of the ways in which culture is tied to the reproduction of power within society is useful to understanding the ways in which hierarchies of taste and power function within the world of stand-up comedy. Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of habitus is also useful in understanding how comics learn to fit into and succeed within the comedy industry. Habitus, often defined as a “feel for the game” or a “practical sense,” relies on a deep sense of the accepted norms and practices within a given field. The concept is useful in exploring the ways in which marginalized comics adapt to norms and rules that weren’t designed for their success.

Sara Ahmed’s work is similarly productive for theorizing the ways in which women and other marginalized comics are constructed as problematic outsiders, never fully fitting into stand-up comedy as an institution. Specifically, I frequently invoke the figure of the “feminist killjoy” as a specter that haunts women in stand-up comedy. For Ahmed (2017), the feminist killjoy is defined by the refusal to “make one’s own cause the happiness of others” (74) when their happiness means adhering to the status quo and remaining quiet in the face of oppression. Instead, feminist killjoys remain “willful” and “obstinate” in the face of sexism, racism, and other oppressions (75). Ahmed notes that the feminist killjoy is “a close kin” to the figure of the
“humorless feminist,” or one who refuses be complicit in offensive jokes by laughing at them (245). This does not mean that feminists are humorless, of course, just that the failure to join others in laughter at offensive jokes reads as humorless to those protecting society, and stand-up more specifically, from meaningful change toward inclusion. I also find Ahmed’s imagining of the institution as a body to be provocative and emblematic of her work on race, gender, and sexuality in institutional spaces. On her blog Feminist Killjoys (2015), a co-project with her latest book, she draws on Merleau-Ponty’s (2010) metaphor of habitual body:

> Maybe an institution is like an old garment: if it has acquired the shape of those who tend to wear it, then it becomes easier to wear if you have that shape. The ease of movement, the lack of a stress might describe not only the habits of a body that has incorporated things, but also how an institution takes shape around a body.

This theorization is similar to Bourdieu's concept of habitus; those for whom an institution's rules are designed will much more easily fit and will more likely be validated as authentic members of that culture.

Finally, I see my research as aligning with John Caldwell’s (2008/2014) work on production cultures in which he asks, “What does it mean to critically analyze and theorize an industry that critically analyzes and theorizes itself?” (2014, 720). In his study of film and television production workers in Los Angeles, Caldwell (2008) explores the ways in which film and TV workers do not only produce popular culture, but also produce discourses about the production of popular culture (2). Stand-up comedy is similarly self-reflexive and these discourses are readily available to even the most casual comedy fan through a growing array of stand-up specials on television and streaming services, social media, comedy podcasts, and comedy websites. While most comics likely haven’t read scholarly accounts of the three classic
humor theories, the language and basics of the theories still percolate through popular accounts and casual conversation about what real stand-up comedy is. Ian Brodie (2014) refers to the ways comedians understand themselves and how comedy fans understand comedy as “vernacular stand-up comedy theory” (65). My project explores such vernacular theory, not only discourses about what stand-up comedy is but also how these discourses manifest themselves within comedic subcultures as material practices that characterize women as inauthentic comics.

In his later work, Caldwell (2014) coins the term para-industry to describe the ways in which the culture industries produce their own self-referential discourses, texts, and practices in and around commercial media content. He argues that media texts cannot “be understood without understanding the integral social and political-economic contexts that animate them” (721). Media texts are not only sites of negotiation and interpretation once they reach audiences, but are always already sites of collective negotiation by industrial players (721). He advocates for scholars to move beyond textual approaches, or risk missing the larger picture (737). With this project, I similarly attempt to conduct comedic scholarship that places comedic performances and media texts within their larger social, industrial, economic, and cultural contexts. Further, Vicki Mayer (2009) argues in Production Studies that we as media scholars should conduct more considered analyses of “the way that power operates locally through media production to reproduce hierarchies and social inequalities at the level of daily interactions” (15). Because cultural industries are marked by short-term precarious employment, informal networks of entry, and a lack of managerial structure or formal policies on diversity and inclusion, they are rife for abuses of power and the rampant proliferation of gendered and racial inequality. My inclusion of local sites of stand-up production is an effort to examine the informal
networks of entry into the media industries and to tie discourses in these local subcultures to broader national industrial discourses.

Chapter Previews

My research takes the form of three case-studies meant to illuminate the meritocratic ideological economy both within and beyond the stand-up comedy media industry. Specifically, I focus on the slippery and shifting construction of authenticity in comedic spaces and discourses and the ways in which the concept is wielded in such a way that maintains masculine norms and invalidates women as authentic comedians. Chapter two analyzes the discourses surrounding a televised debate called “Comic vs Feminist” between feminist comedian and writer Lindy West and stand-up comic Jim Norton. This debate, held on FX’s since-cancelled socio-political late-night talk show Totally Biased with W Kamau Bell, was prompted by a year-long, often aggressive debate about offensive humor ignited by an incident in which comedian Daniel Tosh responded to a heckler by making a joke about her being raped. Because of her participation in this discussion, feminist humor writer and performer Lindy West ended up leaving comedy after suffering backlash both within her local comedy scene and through violent online emotional and mental abuse. This incident illustrates Gray’s (1994) argument that the because our culture fetishizes humor, when one objects to any specific joke, one is labelled as “an enemy of laughter in general” (4). The chapter specifically analyzes West’s critique of misogyny and offensive humor in stand-up, the framing of West as a feminist killjoy both in and after the debate, West’s framing of her own comedic authenticity, and the online abuse she suffered in the wake of the Jim Norton posting the debate on Twitter.

Chapter three looks at the ways in which TV critics legitimize or invalidate the authenticity of stand-up comics. I analyze reviews of three recent television series: Oxygen’s
Funny Girls (2015), the fourth season of Comedy Central’s Inside Amy Schumer (2016), and MTV’s Loosely Exactly Nicole (2016). In each of these instances, I unpack the ways in which critics’ characterizations of the series as inauthentic draw on constructions of feminine artificiality and reinforce masculine hegemony within stand-up aesthetics. Whether a series is considered funny or not funny is not merely a function of an individual audience member’s personal taste, but the result of a process of meaning making within the whole field of stand-up comedy, of which critics play an integral role in the legitimation of comedic texts. While the recent success of women-helmed comedy series like Insecure (HBO) and Broad City (Comedy Central) in the form of accolades, positive reviews and growing buzz seems to signal a shift in the historically male-dominated arena of comedy, television critics tend to take seriously women-centric comedic programming only when they abide by masculine standards of good taste, telling us more about the process of gendered legitimation within television comedy than about the comedians themselves.

In many reviews I examine in this chapter, women comedians are criticized for failing to be authentic because of their association with traditionally feminine markers of mass culture: reality television, soap operas, teen programming, and celebrity. I argue that in this case, authenticity is being policed through an adherence to masculine aesthetic standards of quality stand-up comedy and also through criticisms of the shows’ failures to represent proper progressive explorations of race and gender. If comedy is about pushing the envelope, acting in bad taste, and commenting on your own failings, women aren’t allowed those opportunities because they either aren’t acting enough like a lady or aren’t subverting so-called stereotypes enough. For women, the marker of good comedy isn’t merely being yourself, but being yourself in a way that adheres to the often-conflicting standards of proper femininity.
Chapters four and five draw on ethnographic interviews with women in local stand-up comedy scenes including Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York, though the emphasis is primarily on Champaign-Urbana and Chicago. Through these interviews and my own experiences doing stand-up, these chapters explore how ideologies of authenticity and the aesthetic and subcultural norms of contemporary stand-up comedy often contribute to an environment that is hostile towards women and especially towards queer women and women of color. Further, this hostility is obscured and reinforced through the tightly-held belief that taking an active role in encouraging diversity and inclusivity is antithetical to comedy as a meritocratic field. Additionally, I explore the ways in which marginalized comics work to adapt to these spaces, to change them, or to create their own. I continue to use authenticity as a framework to argue that women in local scenes are treated as outsiders constantly trying to adapt to rules of the game that reinforce masculine dominance both on and offstage.

In the conclusion, I comment on the rise of the #MeToo movement that occurred after I finished the initial research for this project and talk about ways that women are pushing back against current comedy culture and creating new inclusive spaces. The overarching goal of my project is to define comedy as a culture in order to imagine alternative cultures and possible interventions. Humor and comedy scholarship rarely questions underlying assumptions about how humor and comedy operate or common sense definitions of what comedy is and what it isn’t. I therefore argue that the study of women in comedy must move beyond attempts to fit women into already existing paradigms and instead use such scholarship to question common sense assumptions about what characteristics define humor and comedy. In her work on feminist theater history, Tracy C. Davis (1989) argues that imagining alternatives to the male-dominated canon is just as important to theater history as adding women to it. I would argue similarly that it
is important to embark on the project of redefining comedy rather than just working to fit women into already existing paradigms. As a society, we value the work that comics do, as evidenced by all manner of think-pieces written by journalists about issues like the political legacy of the *The Daily Show*, the implications of offensive humor and rape jokes, the celebration of diverse voices in comedy, and the role of satire in the age of the Trump administration. Comedy plays a role in shaping politics and culture, and so it merits serious discussions that include the questioning of its current norms and practices and the imagining of alternatives.

Questioning is a first step to building these alternatives. As Davis (1989) argues in calls to reimagine what counts as serious theater, “imagined form can become genuine content” (67). In her argument, she invokes Gramsci’s (2000) call to fight for and build alternate spheres of cultural expression: “if the cultural world for which one is fighting is a living necessary fact, its expansiveness will be irresistible and it will find its artists” (399). Gramsci’s insight suggests that questioning traditions of cultural forms and rethinking appraisals of “greatness” are an important first step not only in using scholarship to make sure women “become visible in their own right and not just in the shadow of men” (67), but also in opening the possibility for alternate and potentially progressive or radical alternative forms of comedy. In the conclusion, I explore how marginalized comics are pushing back against the idea that comedy must be an aggressive, hostile, competitive space and are creating new comedic spaces centered around community, support, and social justice.
CHAPTER 2: “COMIC VS FEMINIST”: GENDERED CAPITAL AND 
AUTHORITY IN THE FIELD OF STAND-UP COMEDY

Stand-up comedy is defined by boundaries. The stage is a boundary separating the 
performer from the audience. Comedy club bookers enforce a boundary between comedians who 
are in shows and those who aren’t. Critics draw a boundary between good and bad comedy. 
Comedians cross boundaries to make the audience laugh. Audiences decide what boundaries are 
acceptable to cross in the pursuit of a joke. Peter McGraw, the founder of the Humor Research 
Lab, and Joel Warner, a journalist, argue in their book The Humor Code (2014), that laughter is 
the result of “benign violation,” or the crossing of a boundary that is both dangerous enough to 
be funny and safe enough to be innocuous. In this chapter, I will start to explore how gender 
plays a major role in defining comedic boundaries, both on and off stage. Specifically, I will 
examine the discourses surrounding and ideologies undergirding comedic authority in, leading 
up to, and in the wake of a televised debate called “Comic vs Feminist” (Perota 2013) between 
feminist humor writer Lindy West and stand-up comic Jim Norton. This debate, held on FX’s 
since-cancelled socio-political late-night talk show Totally Biased with W Kamau Bell, aired 
during a year-long discussion across popular media about offensive humor sparked by an 
incident in which comedian Daniel Tosh responded to a heckler by making a joke about her 
being raped. After the segment aired, Lindy West suffered backlash both within her local 
comedy scene in Seattle and on social media through a barrage of emotional and mental abuse 
from self-described comedy fans. As a result, she gave up stand-up and distanced herself from 
the scene. This chapter focuses on her attempts to make changes to how comics understand and 
deploy offensive humor, the ways in which she struggled to claim comedic authority as a
feminist and activist, and the ways in which she was punished by the comedy community for attempting to change norms she saw as harmful.

I draw both on Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory (1984, 1993) and Sara Ahmed’s (2012, 2017) work on institutional change and feminist killjoys to argue that masculinity activates the authority through cultural and symbolic capital to decide what is and isn’t funny, and that the concentration of this authority in the hands of largely straight, white, male gatekeepers keeps the field hostile toward women and other marginalized comics. If comics can say anything, “so long as it’s funny,” or, in scholarly parlance, if comedians have the license to articulate ideas that would be offensive in other contexts, how does the unequal granting comedic license reinforce misogyny, racism, and homophobia in stand-up? This incident makes clear the paradox of cultural capital in the field of mainstream comedy: such comedic capital requires the adherence to a set of rules enacted by male comics that only they have the power to change. In the next section, I will explain the ways in which Bourdieu and Ahmed’s work is a useful supplement to the work that has been done on women in stand-up comedy. Next I examine the ways Lindy West constructs her own authority as a comedy performer, fan, and critic in three articles she wrote for Jezebel in response to debates about rape jokes. I then look at the ways in which comedic authority is established and contested in the televised debate itself. I close by drawing connections between the constructions of authority within West’s articles and the “Comic vs Feminist” segment to the extreme, and often violent backlash West received in response to Jim Norton posting the debate on YouTube. Taken together, these examples illustrate how common sense ideologies of comedic authority work to punish women who try to discuss, critique, or change the field of stand-up comedy to be more welcoming to women performers and fans. Further, the debate and subsequent backlash illustrates the ways in which diversity is understood
to be antithetical to the authentic, merit-based comedic hierarchy. In this instance comics and comedy fans lashed out against West and other feminist critics in order to protect comedy from diversity initiatives that would, in their eyes, “dilute, diminish, or pollute merit based systems (Littler 2018, 157).

**Institutional Resistance to Change in Stand-Up Comedy**

The power to define the boundaries of appropriate laughter and humor is closely tied to social power, and historically the socially powerful have wielded the discourse of humor and humorlessness as a weapon against women. Gray (1994) explicitly likens discourses of laughter to discourses of sexuality as theorized by Foucault (1976):

> Just as cultures in which sex was perceived as evil recognized women as having sexual desires, and cultures which saw sex as a normal healthy sport for chaps developed the concept of female frigidity, just so cultures which did not exalt humour to its current overblown status could attribute it to women. [...] Only when laughter is the sign of civilized man – as, say, in Congreve’s world, where ‘wit’ is the equivalent of the white hats in early Westerns – do women appear to suffer from a mysterious frigidity of the funny bone (6-7).

As with sexuality, she argues, feminists won’t be able to shift the ideological ground of the debate until they impose their own definitions on humor and laughter (6). Those with the power to shape language in their image can deny less powerful groups the ability to define themselves. While women have slowly been making inroads within stand-up comedy, their success is determined by how well they can abide by an ever-shifting set of standards intended to keep them on the outside. Scholars who study gender and comedy often note this power dynamic. Regina Barreca (1992) argues in the introduction to the edited collection *New Perspectives on*
Women and Comedy that, “without being stated as such, the study of comedy has been the study of male comedy” (2). Nancy Walker (1988) similarly explains that “a sense of humor” for women has long been defined as “laughing at men’s jokes” (142). Men have been accusing women of being humorless since the word was first coined. Gray (1994) references a 1695 letter in which William Congreve, an early adopter of the term “humor” to refer to laughter, announces: “I have never made any observation of what I apprehend to be true Humour in Women” (3). This comedic power dynamic is inextricably linked to wider social hierarchies. Stephen Wagg (1998) agrees that, "the silencing of women in comedy is synonymous with that of women in the wider public sphere" (52). Julie Webber (2013) refers to gendered gatekeeping around comedy as the “crass ceiling,” which she defines as a “seemingly shifting invisible limit (or tolerance) for women’s public mode of the expression of humor” (79). The presence of a crass ceiling means that even if women are funny in public, audiences and comedy gatekeepers tend not to read them as funny or to reward their work (79).

Scholarship on women who defy the odds to succeed in comedy often addresses the potential for women’s humor to subvert these gender hierarchies. Maggie Hennefeld (2017) states in her introduction to a recent Feminist Media Histories special issue on women in comedy that within such scholarship, “compelling examples abound of women who use comedy as a social and political platform to articulate forceful critiques of white patriarchal power and systemic intersectional misogyny” (4). A central debate in scholarship on women in stand-up is whether comedy subverts that status quo and or reinforces it (Mizejewski and Sturtevant 2017). Is the mere act of getting on stage as a woman a feminist gesture? Do jokes taking aim at racism, misogyny, and the patriarchy have material effects outside of the comedy club? Is women’s humor more subversive than men’s humor? Joanne Gilbert (2004) argues that humor cannot be
materially political because it functions as “anti-rhetoric,” always disavowing any potentially radical message with the caveat that it’s “just a joke.” On the other hand, Hennefeld (2017) notes that many feminist comedy scholars draw on an understanding of carnivalesque humor as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) in which subversive laughter can “have an impact on everyday gender relations of power” (Hennefeld 2017, 4) by undercutting sexist conventions and unfurling “liberating social potentials of extravagant laughter” (5). Kathleen Rowe (1995), explores the Bakhtian figure of the “unruly woman,” who revels in excesses of fatness, filth, joy, or language, and her potential to subvert gender norms when she asserts her subjectivity and “lays claim to her own desire” (31). More recently, scholarship has examined the ways in which feminist rhetoric is deployed in women’s stand-up comedy. Linda Mizejewski (2014) argues that women’s comedy “has become a primary site in mainstream pop culture where feminism speaks, talks back, and is contested” (6).

These theorizations more often focus on the potential for stand-up comedy to address wider social and cultural structures rather than the potential for change within the institution of stand-up comedy itself; however, women can only affect change on a wider scale if they can successfully navigate the field of stand-up comedy in the first place. The focus on the texts and performances of successful, famous women stand-up comics has the tendency to give less attention to the system through which women do or do not achieve the success and visibility required to be studied. Stand-up comedy is a useful location in which to study gender and institutional change because it has relatively low barriers to entry compared to other forms of comedy. Unlike improv or sketch comedy, entrance into the field doesn’t require expensive classes or a group of comics; all one needs is five minutes of material to sign-up for a local open mic and the will to tell jokes in front of possibly antagonistic strangers. Instead, potential comics
face a barrage of cultural, emotional, and often immaterial boundaries. Entrance into the field of stand-up comedy requires the socialization to believe you can tell jokes and success requires cultural and symbolic capital – all which women are often denied.

Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984, 1993) field theory is a useful framework through which to understand comedy not just as a set of performances or texts, but also as a field in which artists and agents accumulate power within the field (9). Bourdieu (1993) uses the concepts of symbolic capital, or accumulated prestige and recognition, and cultural capital, or forms of knowledge, talent, and dispositions, to explain how artists achieve power within fields of cultural production. To enter and succeed within artistic fields, one must possess adequate skill, talent, and knowledge and be accepted by authorized gatekeepers with the “recognition, consecration, and prestige” to legitimize artists (Johnson 1993, 7). Through this authority, those with the most power within a field can define their subjective tastes as objective. Ideologies of meritocracy within comedy obscure the hidden power relationships that are naturalized through the power dynamics of artistic taste. Bourdieu calls this the “ideology of creation,” which fetishizes the author as the sole creator of value in his or her work and masks the role cultural authorities (art dealers, publishers, critics etc.) play in establishing artistic value (1993, 76). Further, he illuminates the role that our collective belief in hierarchies of taste plays in obscuring the social conditions that produce these hierarchies (35). While Bourdieu discusses the ways in which social processes within fields like painting and literature objectify certain tastes as natural, comedy is arguably more likely to be constructed as natural, as laughter is often described as an a priori, pre-political response.

Bourdieu tends to focus on class and the ways in which capital is unequally distributed and doled out by those of the upper classes, but as a field within popular culture with low
economic barriers to entry, gender plays a major role in who can gain the cultural and symbolic capital required to succeed. Rebecca Krefting’s (2014) work on what she calls “charged humor” examines gender and stand-up within this framework. She explains that women fail to achieve the same levels of success in stand-up comedy because women are assumed to be socially inferior across social and economic fields and so, “there is simply no economic incentive for anyone, men and women alike, to learn to identify and ‘buy in’ to a women’s point of view,” (119) a necessity for audiences to find a comedian funny. Bourdieu’s later work ties capital to masculinity as well. Bourdieu (2001) sees the reproduction of dominant masculinity as a historical “labour of reproduction,” carried out by individual men in tandem with social institutions like the family, the church, and the state (34). He argues that this dominance is not only present within institutions but also becomes subsumed within the habitus, or the internalized “set of dispositions which generates practices and perceptions,” (Johnson 1993, 5) of women as dominated subjects (Bourdieu 2001, 37-40). Women, in effect, are not responsible for their own domination willfully or even consciously, but because domination is “durably embedded in the bodies of the dominated” (40). As opposed to Marxist notions of false consciousness, in which liberation may come through knowledge or understanding of oppressive structures, liberation also involves overcoming unconscious embodiments of oppression in the form of feelings of shame, timidity, impotent rage, anxiety, guilt, or deference. In the case of stand-up comedy, this might present itself in the form of self-denigrating or self-deprecating jokes, a deference to male comics and masculine norms of comedy, fear of attempting to perform within masculine spaces, or the inability to imagine being a stand-up comic. Bourdieu argues that even when official barriers to entry within a field are lifted, such as the passing of equal pay and workplace discrimination laws, or the entry of some women into a field, embodied dominance within
habitus is the primary reason for continued inequality (96). While gendered socialization is often one component of why women don’t enter stand-up comedy or other male-dominated fields, the habitus argument fails to account for the material consequences women, especially women further marginalized by race, gender expression, or sexuality, face when they try to succeed within or to change sexist institutions. Even when official rules are changed or anti-discriminatory laws are passed, unofficial sexist and misogynistic norms, behaviors, and barriers persist. When women capitulate, or adhere to, masculine, sexist, or oppressive norms, it is often not the result of habitus, but a logical reaction to the backlash they face whether it be physical, economic, cultural, or emotional.

This is where Sara Ahmed’s (2012; 2017) theorization of institutional diversity work is a useful complement. Ahmed (2017) argues that sexism does not reside merely within individuals and their behavior, but within institutions in which “individuals are encouraged and rewarded for participating in sexist culture” (35) through peer affirmation and various other forms of cultural and symbolic capital. Ahmed makes visible the continued cultural, emotional, and physical barriers to institutional change even in the absence of sexist codified regulations and even when an institution claims to want to change. Both Ahmed and Bourdieu recognize that barriers to equality --whether based on race, gender, or sex-- are often invisible to those in power, but Ahmed (2017) argues that these barriers are further reinforced because it is in the interest of those in power not to see them (138). The barriers make themselves visible only in response to attempts to change existing sexist and racist politics, whether codified or not: “When no attempt at modification is made, a wall is not necessary; nothing needs to be blocked or stopped” (138). When marginalized artists call out sexism, racism, or homophobia, those invested in the system either respond with dismissal, as in “It was just a joke!” or “I didn’t mean anything,” or with
malice, as in “You are the problem!” or “You’re ruining this institution’s reputation.” If sexism is foundational to an institution, pointing out sexism is destructive to that institution. If women have struggled to achieve success within the field of stand-up comedy, they have struggled even more to change it. Because stand-up comedy as a field operates within societal power relations, those with the most power to change the rules of stand-up are the ones least affected by them, and those who are most affected by oppressive rules and norms have the least capital with which to change them (Ahmed 2012, 2017). In stand-up comedy, for instance, white-male comics at all levels of fame get far less pushback for anti-racist, feminist material, both on and offstage, than do marginalized comics speaking on their own behalf (Krefting 2014). Women’s authority within stand-up comedy is regulated both through the adoption of masculine comedic norms and through external policing in the form of dismissal, harassment, and acts of violence, both of which are illustrated through Lindy West’s participation in the “Comic vs Feminist” debate.

‘I’m Not a Comic, but...’

In 2012, the combination of a famous comedian and a viral Tumblr post allowed what might have been an isolated social media debate to jump to the wider blogosphere and pop cultural landscape. That July, a female audience member recounted on her Tumblr page her experience at a Daniel Tosh show at the Laugh Factory in Hollywood that she’d attended the previous night. According to her post, Tosh, a comedian whose persona is built on boundary-pushing and ironic racism and sexism, claimed that “rape jokes are always funny,” to which she called out, “Actually rape jokes are never funny!” (Holpuch 2012). While the post has since been removed, several outlets posted sections of her post that described what happened next:

After I called out to him, Tosh paused for a moment. Then, he says, "Wouldn't it be funny if that girl got raped by like, five guys right now? Like right now? What if a bunch of
guys just raped her..." and I, completely stunned and finding it hard to process what was happening but knowing I needed to get out of there, immediately nudged my friend, who was also completely stunned, and we high-tailed it out of there. It was humiliating, of course, especially as the audience guffawed in response to Tosh, their eyes following us as we made our way out of there. I didn't hear the rest of what he said about me (Ryan 2012).

News and pop culture outlets soon picked up the story, and comedians and comedy fans opined on Twitter, some arguing that the woman was a heckler who got what she deserved, that comics should be allowed to say offensive things in comedy clubs without pushback, that jokes don’t cause violence, and that telling comics not to tell rape jokes is akin to shutting down freedom of speech. The other side argued that rape jokes are never funny, that rape jokes should be about the perpetrator not the victims, that comedy is inherently hostile toward women, and that complaining about rape jokes is not a violation of one’s free speech (Valenti 2012). While the debate over what one should and shouldn’t joke about is well-worn territory, with rape jokes often serving as a microcosm of the debate, this incident gained considerable traction not only in comedy circles but more widely in popular culture as well, with blogs and even MSNBC covering the issue.

The frequency and familiar rhythms of rape joke debates make them fruitful sites in which to study discourses of gender, power, sexism, and language (Weaver et al 2016). One side insists that the joke form automatically renders any subject safe, while the other side insists that the seriousness of rape automatically eliminates the possibility of joking. As Elise Kramer (2011) notes, such debates play out almost constantly online:
Across the vast metaphorical expanse of the internet, a Sisyphean battle is playing out. The battle takes place in countless forums, waged by countless different participants, but each instantiation takes roughly the same shape: someone tells a rape joke. Someone else posts a reprimand, stating that “rape is never funny”. A third person disagrees, asserting that “rape CAN be funny”, and throws in another rape joke for good measure. Soon, it seems that the entire English-speaking internet-browsing world has joined in the argument, as words of opprobrium and comparisons to unsavory figures fly from both sides (137).

Rape joke arguments are perhaps so rampant because they serve as a distillation of gendered power dynamics in comedy. The telling of rape jokes invokes one of the most violent and insidious forms of gendered power dynamics, making the discussion about rape jokes about more than individual humor tastes. The subject of rape implicates sexism and misogyny more so than other forms of tasteless jokes because women are disproportionately the victims of sexual assault, and rape is an underreported and under-prosecuted crime (RAINN 2016). Because women already hold less power within the comedic field, the joking about a crime that disproportionately affects women and for which women are often blamed has the potential to further diminish both the seriousness of crime and the standing of women in the field. Further, when women fans, comics, and critics condemn rape jokes, comics counter by dismissing them as “just a joke” or blaming women for “not being able to take a joke.” In these debates, women are framed as the problem, not rape jokes. Rape jokes then, as Raúl Pérez and Viveca Greene (2016) argue, are not just jokes, but also serve as a “site of political and ideological struggle” (279). Our understanding and appreciation of these jokes are not just informed by our beliefs about the purpose of jokes, but also by our ideologies about gender, our identity, and our “access
to critical pedagogies” (279). Our understanding of jokes is thus both individual and social. Our understanding of rape jokes is based both on our personal beliefs about joking and our sociological beliefs about gender, power, and violence.

Lindy West, at that time a writer for the Gawker Media owned women’s publication *Jezebel*, was tasked with writing a response to the debate by her editor due to her having a more “comprehensive understanding of the mechanics and history of comedy than your average feminist blogger.” (West 2016, 123). Because West was a comedy fan, humor writer, and member of the comedy scene, her editor thought she would be able to bridge the perceived gap between feminists and comedians. Here, I examine the three articles West wrote leading up to the televised debate to explore how West defines her own comedic authority before it is defined for her by Jim Norton and W. Kamau Bell in the “Comic V Feminist” segment. *Jezebel* is West’s home “turf” as it were, and so her characterization of her own comedic expertise reveals a tension between her outspoken confidence and her defensive posturing that she has a right to speak out about comedy.

West wrote three articles for *Jezebel* during the year-long public “debate” over stand-up comedy and elaborates and contextualizes the experience in her 2016 memoir *Shrill*. The first article, “Hey Men, I’m Funnier Than You,” was posted on May 29, 2012 and was written in response to a social-scientific study on gender and humor in the workplace that made the rounds in the press with the slant that men were better at telling jokes than women (West 2012a). West challenges the notion that women have biologically inferior senses of humor than men. It’s not, she argues, that “every time a woman tries to tell a joke, an invisible dream-catcher telescopes out of her vagina and snatches it from the air” but rather, that women are “trained from birth that we're supposed to be pleasant, pliable, and inoffensive, and that we should pander to men at all
times lest we be labeled an undesirable.” Women are raised to defer to men’s sense of humor, to not tell jokes, and to stay demure and silent. It isn’t that women are born without a sense of humor, rather that it is socialized out of them. West adds that women, even when they do make jokes, aren’t always read as funny by others because we adhere to masculine standards of comedy. However, even in defending women’s humor, she does what many other defenders of women in comedy do: reify masculine norms of what defines good comedy. She notes that being funny requires “outspokenness, unapologetic honesty, supreme self-assuredness, and an outright refusal to pander,” all qualities that are aligned with masculinity and masculine forms of joke-telling. This leaves no room for the expansion of comedy to include more feminine forms of joking. Without essentializing “feminine” humor as merely “jokes told by women,” critics and scholars tend to define the feminine tradition of comedy as cyclical, often depending on a whole story rather than just on the punch line. It can stem from righteous anger, but transforms that anger into the challenging of oppressive societal structure (Barecca 2013, xi). Feminine forms of joking are softer, less aggressive, not as tightly tied to set-up punchline structure. Feminine humor covers the private and domestic sphere, topics often brushed off as inconsequential.

To me, the most significant assumption in West’s definition of “funny” is the conflation of “funny” with “professionally funny.” This is a common defense to the assumption that women aren’t funny that illustrates how we can end up reinforcing meritocratic, capitalist definitions of talent if we don’t question underlying assumptions. In a follow-up article to Christopher Hitchens’ (2007) infamous “Why Women Aren’t Funny” op-ed for Vanity Fair, Nora Ephron, an accomplished comedic writer and film director, is quoted as saying, "There is no question that there are a million more funny women than there used to be” (Stanley 2008). This claim only makes sense if we accept that for a woman to be called funny, she must
work in comedy. It very well may be true that women did not often write or perform comedy professionally due to industrial and socio-economic barriers, but girls and women have been laughing and telling jokes throughout history. Here West makes the same argument, that women like her can succeed within the industrial constraints of comedy, but she fails to question aggressive, professional joking as the standard.

Even writing for Jezebel, an online magazine marketed to women and popular for its brand of snarky feminist rhetoric, West opens her articles by methodically laying out an argument as to why she is able to offer an opinion on the reality of performing comedy as a woman. After describing the frustration and discomfort of attending open mics and performances in clubs that are “run by men” and made to function as “safe spaces for men,” she adds that she makes these claims “not as a shy, funny girl at her first open mic,” but as “a woman who’s achieved a certain level of comedic credibility.” The use of the words “girl” and “woman” are notable; the word “girl” connotes immaturity and timidity rather than the mature, confident, successful “woman.” She supports this claim by listing proof of her comedic capital: she spends most of her free time with other comedians at comedy shows, people think she’s funny, and she’s been paid to write comedy. She also pre-emptively argues against any “trolls” who can’t wait to tell her how not funny she is by reiterating her credentials and adding, “I am probably funnier than you. The end.” This shoring up of comedic capital is likely a pre-emptive defense mechanism necessitated by frequent attacks online from comedy fans and aggressive trolls who seek to put her in her place every time she dares to speak out about comedy.

She uses similar strategies of self-legitimation in her first article that directly addresses the Daniel Tosh controversy. Her next article, “How To Make a Rape Joke,” posted on July 12, 2012, was written at the behest of her editor who thought she “had enough cred on both sides to
bridge the gap between the club and the coven” because her sharp sense of humor meant that no one could say she “didn’t get jokes” (West 2016, 123). The goal of the article, which provides explanations of several rape jokes that West finds funny, is to show that she is a discerning comedy critic and fan who just wants to make comedy better. She may be a feminist, but she is not an outside agitator. Through her deconstruction of these jokes, she illustrates her knowledge of comedic performers and joke construction. As she does in the previous article, she also makes sure to cite her comedic capital as a reason she can make an argument about good and bad rape jokes in the first place:

I’m not a comic, but I’ve done comedy (and told jokes I regret), I’ve lived with comics, I’ve dated comics, I write jokes for a living, and I’ve had both transcendent and crushing experiences in comedy clubs. I’m not saying all of this because I hate comedy--I’m saying it because I love comedy and I want comedy to be accessible to everyone.

The part of this I find most telling is that she claims not to be a comic before launching into a list of descriptors that define her as a comic. She writes jokes, she goes to comedy clubs, she performs comedy, she makes her living writing funny articles, and yet, she still does not claim comic as an identity. In her book, she describes the article as having “bridged the gap between feminists and shock comics in a definitive, reasoned way” (123). The idea of reason is one that comes up again in her debate with Jim Norton. Reason, rationality and intelligence are three traits comics, fans, and critics often cite as necessary for comedy and that they often claim women don’t have. This harkens back to the Enlightenment understanding of white masculinity as the site of “rational logic and merit” needed to create culture, positioned in contrast to volatile, irrational femininity too irrevocably entwined with the natural world to produce art (Littler 2018, 166). In the case of comedy, women are too emotional to produce humor and feminists are too
angry to appreciate it. West here is again ceding ground to those that would accuse her emotions of getting in the way of her reason by taking pains in her article to illustrate her ability to make a rational case against rape jokes that make fun of rape victims. To assure readers of her even-handedness, she acknowledges that she neither agrees with the sentiment that “rape jokes are never funny” nor that the “thought police” is coming to silence comics. She places herself in the “middle” of an implicitly objective debate as a reasoned arbiter between the two sides. She then acknowledges the points on which she and those defending Daniel Tosh agree: “The world is full of terrible things, including rape, and it is ok to joke about them.” However, she goes on to argue, good comics make jokes at the expense of those doing the horrible things, not the victims.

A year later, a similar debate about rape jokes arose when cultural critics Sady Doyle (2013) and Molly Knefel (2013) wrote essays questioning the use of rape jokes by two prominent comedians and were subsequently inundated with threats from “self-proclaimed” comedy fans. In the final article of the Jezebel comedy capital series, “An Open Letter to White Male Comedians,” posted on May 10, 2013, West defends Doyle and Knefel in a much “less affectionately fraternal, less pliant” tone than her previous articles (West 2016, 125). In the article, she addresses the abuse that she, Doyle and Knefel faced in the wake of covering rape jokes. In this article, she acknowledges that she won’t be taken seriously for minimizing her feminist killjoy lady anger, so she might as well address the controversy with the level of outrage she thinks it deserves. Despite the acknowledgement of her own anger, she still includes paragraphs citing her comedic credibility as she does in the first two articles. She cites her masculine demeanor, professional credentials, and relationship to the world of stand-up comedy. She is aggressive, loud, and unapologetic, she gets “paid to perform on stages, in various contexts, all the time,” and she states that “most of my friends are comics…and my boyfriend is
a comic.” West is therefore “not a fucking tourist” and claims the capital to talk authoritatively about comedy. Notably, she never feels the need to note her feminist credentials. While *Jezebel* is a site that brands itself as a women’s magazine, it steers clear of claiming the mantle of feminism. Similarly, *Jezebel* is branded by the same humor and snarky takes as the rest of the Gawker Media empire. In other words, *Jezebel*’s writers are known for their senses of humor in equal measure as for their takes on gender issues. But, West only feels the need to prove herself as funny when making arguments about gender and the field of stand-up comedy; she doesn’t take the same time to illustrate and defend her feminist credentials. This is significant, because *Jezebel* is critiqued at times for failing to live up to its feminist ethos. For instance, the outlet was heavily criticized for its offer of 10,000 dollars to anyone who would provide them with non-retouched photos from writer and producer Lena Dunham’s 2014 *Vogue Magazine* cover shoot (Clarke 2014). By spending paragraphs defending her comedy credentials rather than her feminist credentials, West illustrates the ways in which past experience with virulent misogyny and backlash from self-professed comedy fans shapes the ways in which she writes about her expertise.

In fact, an important point that I haven’t yet explicitly mentioned is that West’s articles are very funny. She doesn’t just make arguments, she couches them in jokes. The backlash she gets in response to her writing makes visible the ways in which the boundaries of comedy are policed. While comics and fans argue, particularly within rape joke debates, that comics should be allowed to make joke at the expense of whoever they want without pushback, they tend not to extend the courtesy to feminists making jokes at the expense of people who tell rape jokes. Humor is a way to deal with terrible issues, so long as the terrible issue isn’t a comedy fan feeling traumatized at a comedy show. This policing is so common and so expected that West
cites her comedy credentials even as she is writing jokes. Marginalized voices within comedy often cede ground to those with power to stave off inevitable harassment or to find some measure of success. Krefting (2014), for instance, found that marginalized comics often start their careers by playing into regressive stereotypes. Other scholars have found that even if comics don’t reinforce stereotypes, they often address or acknowledge the stereotypical images the mainstream audience expects them to represent (DeCamp 2015; Gillota 2013). Women comics often acknowledge their historically marginalized place within comedy because they’ve been harassed or dismissed in the past for failure to do so. Because West’s previous attempts to speak on and speak out against the issues that women face in comedy were nearly always met with aggression and threats from online detractors, she enters subsequent debates by explaining why she deserves to speak on the topic. We can see this in her associating the right to speak about comedy with confidence, aggression, professionalism, and experience – all of which tend to be masculine definitions of comedic authority.

In these articles, West also works to legitimate herself as a comedy writer and fan, shoring up her own comedic capital through the demonstration of her credentials. These articles illustrate the ways in which, even someone who is the definition of an assertive and “unruly woman” -- fat, outspoken, unapologetically feminist, funny, and critical of patriarchal culture – needs to prove herself on masculine terms before critiquing comedy and, more specifically in this case, rape jokes. These articles also demonstrate how, as Jo Littler (2018) considers in her work, “meritocracy is particularly vigorously incited as an internalized state of being to constituencies with less social power” (172). Within meritocratic regimes, those who are most disempowered are often “most intensely incited to construct a neoliberal meritocratic self” (172). Lindy West doesn’t buy into the notion that women, or that she, isn’t funny, but in her writing
still adheres to the meritocratic notion that she must prove herself against masculine standards of comedic authority. In the next section, I will examine the televised debate that followed this series of articles about rape jokes, specifically the ways in which West’s authority to speak on stand-up is even further undermined by the segment’s framing her as a feminist killjoy.

**Comedic Capital and the Feminist Killjoy**

As a debate framed literally between a “feminist” and a “comic” – the conversation between West and Norton illuminates and crystallizes the ideologies undergirding this most recent public debate about rape jokes and ideologies surrounding the construction of “freedom of speech in comedy.” While this debate has been well-covered in both the press and in humor scholarship (Cox 2015; Gilbert 2015; Pérez and Greene 2016), these accounts largely examine underlying ideologies about misogyny, gender, and rape jokes. Less has been written about how the debate fits into the wider context of comedic capital and authority. I find the debate to be a useful microcosm not only for the ways in which it makes visible humor ideologies and the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic framing of sexist humor and rape jokes, but also because it makes visible the ways in which masculinity functions as a form of cultural and symbolic capital in the determination of who has the authority to decide who is and isn’t a real comedian or a real comedy fan. If, as Jim Norton argues in the debate, comics should be able to say whatever they want, “as long as it’s funny,” how does comedic capital affect who is admitted to this free speech zone and who isn’t?

One way in which women’s humor, especially critical humor, is undermined is the specter of the “feminist killjoy” that has long haunted feminist comics, cultural critics, and audiences. In her work, Sara Ahmed has sought to reclaim the term, even using it as the name of her blog. For Ahmed (2017), the feminist killjoy is defined by the refusal to “make one’s own
cause the happiness of others” (74) when their happiness means adhering to the status quo and remaining quiet in the face of oppression. Instead, feminist killjoys remain “willful” and “obstinate” in the face of sexism, racism, and other oppressions (75). Ahmed notes that the feminist killjoy is “a close kin” to the figure of the “humorless feminist,” or one who refuses be complicit in offensive jokes by laughing and instead calls them out (245). This does not mean that feminists are humorless, of course, just that the failure to join others in laughter at offensive jokes reads as humorless to those protecting society, and stand-up more specifically, from meaningful change toward inclusion. The debate and responses to the debate frame West as a feminist killjoy, forcing her to defend herself on Norton’s and Bell’s terms rather than framing her as a comic using humor to offer critiques of the field of stand-up. Throughout the debate, Norton discursively undermines West’s authority to define, critique, and discuss humor in ways that are representative of the wider silencing of women in comedy. While the televised debate was cut to six minutes, the full sixteen-minute version posted online the following morning was tweeted by Jim Norton to his followers, which set off the virulent backlash to the segment (West 2016, 141), so I will be referring to the full version in this section.

Unsurprisingly, West’s final article for *Jezebel*, the most righteously angry of the three, brought the most negative attention. After the renewal of the previous summer’s rape joke debate, West’s friend W. Kamau Bell, then-host of the since-cancelled late-night FX sociopolitical talk show *Totally Biased* (2012-2013), invited her to appear in a debate about rape jokes with stand-up comic Jim Norton. *Totally Biased* combined the type of topical monologue and clip-based jokes one would find on late-night shows like *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*, with interviews, correspondent segments, and out-of-studio packages. While many of these segments took on familiar forms, the production value was more casual, and the rhetoric
involved, the topics covered, and guests interviewed often fell outside of the purview of the typical late night sociopolitical show. The show gave a voice to gender, race, and class issues not typically seen on television at that point. *New Yorker*'s television critic Emily Nussbaum (2012) referred to Bell's show as "intersectional progressivism," and argued that the show worked because Bell could "simply take black culture as the show's default, the way network shows presume white culture."

West (2016) recounted that she was hesitant to accept the offer at first, given that she had never been on television before, but Bell reassured her that it would be a fair segment (129). However, the segment belies the generally progressive show’s adherence to masculine comedy norms. The framing of the debate, while characterized as a discussion about "freedom of speech" in comedy, actually reifies masculine authority to define stand-up comedy and is emblematic of the rhetorical moves through which women and feminists constructed as inauthentic creators or consumers of comedy. In the previous section, I showed that in her writing, West claimed her authority through comedic capital defined by masculine credentialing standards: her history as a comedy fan, her experience performing, and through her association with male stand-up comics. In the debate itself, she was again forced to defend herself on masculine terms, putting her at a disadvantage and forcing her to cede ground. As Pérez and Green (2016) note in their analysis of the debate, “caught between her professional commitments as a writer to uphold freedom of expression, and her ideological values as a feminist/activist dutifully taking a public position on the power of language to harm marginalized groups,” she at times failed to “take a stronger position” and offered an “underdeveloped” counter-debate (290). In her book, West capitulated as much, recounting her mistakes and what she would do differently had she not been caught off guard and had she been a more seasoned television guest.
By masculine standards of unrelenting confidence, West, in her first television appearance, was at a disadvantage to Norton, a seasoned performer, radio host, and television guest.

Norton is not only a stand-up comic, but a comic who frequently tweets his support of comics accused of inappropriate jokes, criticizes feminists, and generally dismisses all critiques of his offensive humor both in his stand-up performances and in his appearances on the *Opie and Anthony* radio show. However, he is able speak as the stand-up comic, even though he is a just one specific type of stand-up comic. On the other hand, because Bell refers to the segment as “Comic vs Feminist,” West is denied any authority as an agent of humor, and instead assigned the role of “feminist.” Bell introduces her as a “staff writer for Jezebel” and someone who has “called out everyone from Louis C.K. to Daniel Tosh, and is ready to put Jim on blast” immediately framing her as antagonistic toward two very successful comics likely admired by the show’s target audience. The use of the word “call out” summons images of nagging, punishment, and anger. In this role, she joins a long line of women accused of policing the behavior of others, banishing fun, and taking jokes too seriously. In this way, any relevant or necessary critique can be dismissed because West doesn’t have the authority as a comedian to charge or change the institution from the inside. She’s an outsider with no understanding of the rules of the game. Before even making an argument, the title frames West not as a comedy fan that wants to critique a specific kind of victim-mocking rape joke, but as an enemy of all comedy of which she personally disapproves. Her purview is to get in the way of others’ fun, not to try to make comedy better and more inclusive of all comedy fans and performers. Further, the title suggests that the segment is not a roundtable or discussion among peers but an antagonistic debate between two mutually exclusive, opposing sides: the humorless feminist and the funny
comic. The title reinforces the belief that feminism and social justice are actively hostile toward laughter.

Though Bell and the show’s producers grant West authority within the debate only as a feminist blogger and not as a comedian, she is in fact a humorist. Her writing became popular because it was so funny. At the start of her career she wrote about film and popular culture for Seattle’s alt-weekly The Stranger. She was also, at the time, a part of the alt-comedy scene in Seattle. She performed stand-up, was friends with comedians, and was dating a comedic performer. In fact, Bell invited her to appear on Totally Biased because they were already friends from doing comedy together (West 2016). None of this information of course, made it into the segment nor would viewers, unless they were already fans of West, know this information. As she notes in her book:

The majority of Totally Biased viewers would have no idea who I was, and they heard no mention of my lifelong comedy obsession, the fact that I’ve done comedy, that I write about comedy, that (at least at the time) I was most widely known in my career for writing humor. They had no reason to assume I had any standing to critique comedy at all. (122).

Further, the decision to invite Jim Norton to serve as the stand-in for all comedians is emblematic of popular discourses in which humor is often defined as a free space in which everything must be OK to joke about, otherwise there will be a slippery slope to comedic fascism.. A white, middle-aged comedian with a propensity for anger, Norton brands himself as a comic who will say and do anything in the name of getting a laugh. As co-host of the controversial radio show Opie and Anthony and producer of comedy albums with such titles as Please Be Offended (2012), American Degenerate (2013) and A Mouthful of Shame (2017),
Norton built his brand on saying and doing outrageous things, claiming that comedy is supposed to be offensive, and making appeals to freedom of speech whenever he is charged with misogyny or racism. He frequently rants about “P.C. Culture,” for instance in the lead up to his jokes about Islam from his HBO Special *Monster Rain* (2007):

> People love being offended and feeling self-righteous indignation. It’s like if you talk about Islam. You can’t make fun of Islam because that makes you Islamaphobic. Which is fear of Islam. [beat] Ok, accurate. Look, I don’t hate Muslims, I really don’t, but as a group their problem handling skills…are not good.

Norton argues both on and offstage, using a popular theorization of humor, that all topics are equally appropriate for comics to exploit onstage for laughs because stand-up comedy is a unique zone of language where there are no consequences for offensive speech. As part of this ongoing argument, Norton builds his acts around material that is purposefully offensive, often drawing attention to this kind of material in the titles of his comedy specials. He constructs this as “truth-telling” when it is actually a carefully constructed branding strategy.

Bell kicks off the segment by asking Norton, “Do you think comedians should be able to say whatever they want to say without any repercussions?” To which Norton responds:

> Well, I mean, if you’re trying to be funny, I think. Everybody knows the difference between...like Michael Richards said something in anger.¹ And reasonable people can sense when you’re trying to be funny and when you’re trying to be angry. So, if you’re

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¹ Here, Norton is referencing a 2006 incident in which Michael Richards, who played Kramer in the 90s sitcom *Seinfeld*, went on a racist, expletive filled rant at Hollywood’s Laugh Factory, a video of which was posted online by tabloid site TMZ.
trying to say something funny, yeah, I mean like Matt and Trey said from *South Park*, it’s either all OK, or none of it’s OK. ²

This first point, that comedic speech operates in a liminal space in which comedians are given license to speak uncomfortable truths, is a common theorization of humor. Ian Brodie (2014) refers to this as the “license frame” (Mintz 1998 and Koziski 1984) in which the audience permits the comic “a certain latitude in opinions and the freedom to express them, for the audience knows that, like our friends, the comedian means well (141).” This license is granted due to the “unique rhetorical situation in the comedy club” that allows stand-up comics to “push the envelope” and to say things that would otherwise be read as inappropriate, shocking or offensive (Meier and Schmitt 2016, xxvii). However, this conception ignores the power relationships outside of the comedy club. Who is granted such a license and who isn’t? The ramifications of such a license to break taboos only make sense when put in context of comedic capital. Audiences, critics, and comics don’t push back against the comedic speech of those who already have social power.

Norton claims that comedy should be a “free space” in which “reasonable” people can tell the difference between aggressive speech and comedic speech. Of course, *reason* and *rationality*, like *funny*, are distinctions that are not available to everyone equally. Most often white men wield the ideal of rationality as weapons against women and other marginalized people. One need only to think about the ways in which women have been stereotyped as angry, nagging, harpies or how women of color have been stereotyped - by white men and white women -- as scary, mean, sassy, and fiery. Armed with *emotional* as an epithet, men have been

² This is a common refrain of the creators of *South Park*, a show that similarly prides itself as “offending everyone.” Their contention is that picking and choosing which groups can and cannot “be offended” is tantamount to censorship. More context can be found here: Tapper, Jake and Dan Morris (2006) “Secrets of *South Park.*” *ABC News.* https://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/Entertainment/story?id=2479197&page=1.
using appeals to reason for centuries to silence women. Therefore, the division of types of speech into *funny harmless* speech and *unfunny harmful* speech is a judgement call that is only able to be made by those with the comedic capital to do so. Norton brushes off West’s critiques as “unreasonable” and “angry” while granting himself and comics like Tosh license to make rape jokes with impunity.

Christopher Medjesky (2016) argues that comics like Jim Norton and Daniel Tosh use irony not just a comedic device but as a part of their persona. This persona, in turn, serves as a blanket shield for any offensive joke they might tell, and as a blanket shield for the audience to not feel guilty for their laughter. This type of persona “emphasizes the idea that as long as we recognize that whatever he is mocking is bad, he is free to joke about it and the audience is free to laugh about it, because any reasonable person would already know it is bad” (207). He labels this “pseudo-satire,” as it looks and sounds like satire, but without the underlying critique or call to action, ultimately perpetuating harmful ideologies (208). Similarly, according to Seshandi-Crooks (1998) racist jokes “rechannel overt racist beliefs that have become taboo” into a mode that can be disavowed if critiqued (362). Rather than disappearing, overt racist ideology instead hides itself within what this so-called ironic racism. Further, Raúl Pérez (2016) argues that even as racist jokes have started to make audiences more uncomfortable, new ideological strategies have emerged to render racist humor acceptable. He uses the example of the “equal opportunity offender” defense, in which comics deflect criticism by claiming to tell jokes about “all races,” reinforcing the logic of what he refers to as “color blind racism” (88). We therefore need to critically focus on how comedy can simultaneously work to weaken and strengthen social inequalities and racial ideologies in an ostensibly color-blind and post-racist society (88). These so-called “ironic” and “colorblind” racisms are the application of larger post-race sentiments
embedding themselves within the comedic field. As feminist and critical race scholars have shown (see, e.g. Giroux 2003; Mukherjee 2006; Hasinoff 2008; Joseph 2009) underneath this post-racial mindset is the popular assumption that “the civil rights movement effectively eradicated racism to the extent that not only does racism no longer exist, but race itself no longer matters” (Joseph 2009, 239). Like meritocratic discourses, post-race discourses (and post-feminist discourses) both ignore intransigent oppression and reproduce it, claiming that calls for diversity paradoxically harm white people (Bonilla-Silva 2003).

Comics like Norton also often deny the deeper meaning or significance of humor to deflect criticism (Kramer 2011), while at the same time claiming that the critique of humor is harmful because comedy is significant and important. In this way, humor is unique in its ability to function as "anti-rhetoric," simultaneously promoting and disavowing itself, renouncing its intent while advancing certain agendas by generating audience laughter (Gilbert 2004, 12). Palmer (1987) calls the belief that the use of humor disarms criticism of the content of joke the "logic of the absurd" (198-199), and Littlewood and Pickering (1998) note that this dichotomy allows comedians to deny responsibility for the content of their jokes, claiming that humor annuls any sexism or racism embedded in their jokes. In his interviews with comics Raúl Pérez (2013) found comedians often understand their comedy both as consequential speech and as speech immune from critique due to their status as social and cultural critics, which they ultimately used to justify the use of racial stereotypes (479). On the other hand, many feminist comedy studies scholars have argued that such avowal allows for progressive comics to wrap their critiques of patriarchy, racism, and homophobia in more easily digestible jokes, leading to possible social change. In the edited collection Standing Up, Speaking Out, Judith Yaross Lee (2016) notes that the stand-up comic “invokes social rules in order to transgress them, if only
symbolically through language, visual art, or other modes,” and so we can read stand-up comedy as “an advance guard of social change, mocking values in flux” (xv). In short, comedy grants license to comics to say things that may raise ire or make audiences uncomfortable in on other contexts (Mintz 1985); however, marginalized comics face backlash for their transgression in ways that white, male comics do not. Within the uneven power dynamics of stand-up comedy, racist and misogynistic jokes are often defended in ways that anti-racist, anti-sexist jokes are not.

Norton’s argument erases race, class, gender, and sexual hierarchies by instead characterizing speakers as either funny or not funny. Funny people can say whatever they want, unfunny people cannot. But, because those with the power to decide who is and isn’t funny are white, able-bodied, middle-class, heterosexual men, their sense of humor reigns. Hence, West is not a comic whose speech is protected against backlash, but a feminist killjoy who lacks comedic license. Even though her critiques are funny, they aren’t jokes because she lacks the power to define them as such. Her arguments instead become “call-outs.” Further, Norton argues that it’s OK to complain about comedy you don’t like, but that calling for a comic to “get in trouble” or audiences “targeting advertisers” crosses a line, since “the market should dictate if people enjoy you.” Here, Norton is also removing feminists from the so-called “market” as well as appealing to a supposed value-free space where comics are judged equally. This first ignores the fact that feminists are audiences and are therefore a part of the market in which comics should supposedly be judged, and assumes that the market isn’t also an arena built on inequality. Norton goes on to argue that comedy thrives because of the existence of bad people and bad events, noting that the existence of power-hungry presidents and conservative pundits like Glen Beck are good for comedy. He jokes that no one wants to hear a nice voicemail from Mel Gibson, referencing the actors emotionally abusive, misogynist, and anti-Semitic tirades. This line of argumentation
comes from a place of white, male privilege in which it’s easy to make jokes about social policy, racism, and misogyny if they do not materially affect your life. This further underlines the fact that the imagined comedic free space where everything should be joked about is a site of privilege where social inequality and violence are just abstract concept to be used as joke fuel.

During the debate neither Norton nor Bell recognize that West's written critiques of rape jokes are *funny* and that she uses comedy as a rhetorical tool to speak truth (jokes about rape can be victimizing) to power (heterosexual, white, male comics and comedy fans). Even though Norton is supposedly arguing that comics should be able to use humor to deal with any and all subjects, he simultaneously discounts West’s use of humor to deal with a difficult subject. By not recognizing that West is a comic making an argument through comedy, he is constructing himself as the authority on comedy while diminishing West’s. Norton claims that his stance in the debate is “freedom of speech for comics” but his actual argument is “freedom of speech for those with the cultural capital to be called a comic.” Those with the capital to take on the role of joke-teller occupy a space of, if not actual power, rhetorical power. Those that have the power to tell jokes and to decide what’s funny are then able to place those without such power into the role of joke object, reinforcing entrenched power relations. In his conclusion to the edited collection *Standing Up, Speaking Out*, Stephen Olbys Gencarella (2016) reminds us that although scholars and fans frequently make arguments for the importance of comedy by exalting it as a form in which to discuss uncomfortable topics, we should not ignore the role that comedic capital plays granting such a license. I will reproduce this quote in its entirety, because he sums up succinctly many points I’ve been making throughout this chapter.

Let us admit that in mainstream U.S. American society, the privilege of humor performances – formal comedy especially – has historically been a grant to men. In other
words, ludic space and ludic performance – space and performance that playfully, even subversively, upend rules of form and propriety – cannot escape critical considerations of gender (to mention only one example) simply because comics have marked – and frequently condemned by moralists – as free to experiment, to break taboos, to say what cannot be said in polite society, and to push the line. Such resistance to the suffocating forces of pious expectations is useless if the only bodies allowed on its stage are the same bodies and same experiences representing the dominance or political correctness against which they rebel. While we may praise the beneficial applications of this liminality, we cannot do so with a blind eye toward its potential disadvantages, especially if it protects freedoms of speech, gesture, and thought for only a select few (238).

As I have been arguing, comedic freedom is largely an ideological construction that benefits everyone differently. West’s response to Bell’s question, “Should comics be allowed to say anything they want without any repercussions?” is to question its underlying premise. “Well first, of all,” she states, “I think that question is dumb.” This is the only time during the debate that she refutes the premise of a question. The remainder of the debate, she is forced to defend herself on the male comics’ grounds. She reiterates that her point is not that comics should legally be barred from joking about certain topics, rather that comedy fans should not be punished for critiquing a joke (in this instance, about rape victims) and that comics should be more thoughtful about how they approach sensitive topics because society isn’t equal. “If you choose to say something that traumatizes a person who has already been victimized” she argues, then it should be ok if people “choose to call you a dick.” Comics with cultural capital, in other words, should not use that capital to further oppress audience members or other comics, and if they do, audiences should be able to critique them without fear of retribution. Further, she
attempts to argue that “offense” is not a blanket term that applies equally in all cases. Throughout the debate Norton conflates Christians protesting art museums for displaying controversial images of Jesus with sexual assault victims protesting Daniel Tosh for joking that an audience member should be raped, shutting down any room for nuance or exploration of privilege in comedy. Such refusal to engage in a thoughtful conversation on the issue leaves West on constant defense, attempting to open up complexity in a difficult issue while being labelled an enemy of comedy.

In the final section, I will briefly touch on the online backlash that West faced because of her appearance on *Totally Biased* that ultimately made her leave the field of comedy altogether. West’s unrelenting punishment via online trolling and her subsequent decision to leave comedy makes two things visible: that the trolling by comedy fans is not an anomaly, but the logical conclusion of the comedy ideologies espoused by Jim Norton, and that feminist studies of humor that celebrate the success of women need to also recognize the ways in which successful women have to abide by masculine norms and often harassment in order to succeed.

**“An Unyielding Wall of Vitriol”**

The response to the televised segment was mild until the full 16-minute clip was uploaded to YouTube by the show’s producers, after which Jim Norton posted it on his social media accounts. West was inundated with harassment, threats and “an unyielding wall of vitriol....on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, my e-mail, the comments on Jezebel” (West 2016, 141). A week after the debate, on June 4, 2013, West wrote a follow-up article for *Jezebel* in which she posted a video of herself reading some of the rape and death threats she had since received via Twitter. The article, "If Comedy Has No Lady Problem, Why Am I Getting So Many Rape Threats?” covers just a sampling of the violent and misogynistic threats she received
both from social media and from acquaintances after the debate. In her book, she notes that while she “had been trolled before...nothing could compare to the misogynist rage of male comedy fans at being challenged by an unfuckable woman” (142). Not only was she attacked online by comedy fans, she also faced backlash in her own comedy scene from people she knew. Fellow comics called her “a cunt, a fraud, a failed comic.” One comic wrote on Facebook that he wished that she’d fall down a flight of stairs, simply for daring to speak out about rape jokes and how women often feel uncomfortable in comedy clubs (143). During the initial debate, Norton, argued that rape jokes are harmless and that “reasonable people can sense when you’re trying to be funny.” As the subsequent trolling shows, Norton’s comedy fans apparently couldn’t tell, or refused to believe, that West was trying to be funny when she said things like “comedy clubs are dark basements full of angry men,” a comment for which she received a great deal of harassment. As Pérez and Green (2016) note, this trolling revealed the limits of Norton’s logic that speech intended to be funny has no consequences, as many of his fans thought their death and rape threats were funny. It also reveals the insidiousness of the ways in which comics and their fans use harassment as a tool with which to silence women, feminists, and anyone critical of mainstream masculine stand-up comedy.

Scholarship on trolling is useful in contextualizing the behavior of these comedy fans and the ways in which their threats, Jim Norton’s arguments about comedy, and the constant undermining of West’s comedic authority are a part of the same discursive ecosystem. In her extensive work on trolling, Whitney Phillips (2015) argues that such destructive behavior is not an anomaly nor can it be disconnected from mainstream institutions and ideologies, but rather that it draws on the same “stuff” as celebrated Western ideologies (8-10). For our purposes, this includes “freedom of expression” rooted in “gendered notions of dominance and success” and “a
sense of entitlement spurred by expansionist and colonialist ideologies” (10). Trolls see online space as their “birthright,” and attack any attempt to “dictate their behavior” whether from lawmakers, the media, or, in this case, feminists (129). In this way trolls push ideologies that are accepted and celebrated to their logical extremes, exposing them as oppressive or harmful. While trolls target a wide range of online behavior, causes, and individuals, the ultimate trolling ethos is to exploit displays of earnestness – whether that take the form of public grieving, political conviction, or ideological rigidity (25). What trolls call “lulz,” the laughter produced by such attacks, function as a “highly ironic stance” and a takedown of “any and all forms of attachment” (25). All this goes to say: feminists objecting to rape jokes is a prime target for such trolling. The comedians and comedy fans attacking West saw stand-up comedy as their territory much the same way that many trolls see online spaces as their domain. Attempts to regulate or critique any form of content online – whether comedy, videogames, or social media posts- are seen as a threat. Further they could sense West’s earnestness in her beliefs about stand-up, rape, and women’s rights - even when couched in humor- and saw it as a sign of weakness, irrationality, or hysteria ripe for exploitation. Much of the trolling was also function of good, old fashioned misogyny. Joanne Gilbert (2015) waded through YouTube comments in response to this video and found that female fans who took West’s side also become targets of hate when they articulated views perceived as threatening to male privilege.

Nortons’ fans’ trollish responses were guided not just by misogyny or quests for so-called “lulz,” but also by a fannish devotion to Norton. In their article on the use of social media by comics, Rebecca Krefting and Rebecca Baruc (2015) explore the ways in which social media tools like Twitter and YouTube are changing the relationship between comics and their fans. They find that social media gives “rise to tribalism among like-minded comedy fans, which has
an impact on audience composition and the content of comedy” (1). Social media is most often used to “maintain and build relationships with fans…to brand a comic persona…to know your audience…to promote…to entertain…and to circumvent industry gatekeepers. (6-7) They find that the most major change in the relationship between comics and fans as influenced by social media is a turn toward “homophily,” or the creation of intensely enthusiastic fan communities surrounding a comedic personality (8-9). Comics can gain a following by appealing to specific demographics rather than courting a large, heterogeneous following. Much like the splintering of the television audiences with the rise of cable and streaming services, comics no longer need to a large audience, just a devoted one. Fans “flock to voices that are speaking to their personal truth, who share the same tribulations and jubilations…social media makes one’s own Messiah more visible and accessible” (9). In this case, audiences who feel a sense of affective connection to a comedic voice can intensify their connection online both to other fans and to the comedian. Comics can build an intensely loyal following and potentially an echo chamber. Norton’s fans, united by a devotion to Norton’s brand of comedy and ideologies on humor as freedom, saw their quest as righteous and devoted their energy to uniting as a community to threaten West with death and rape threats.

The attacks died down two months later after Patton Oswalt (2012), a well-respected comedian, posted an essay on his blog referencing, among other things, the rape joke debate and explaining how he came around to Lindy West's position called “A Closed Letter to Myself About Thievery, Heckling and Rape Jokes.” The post was widely re-published, referenced, and praised by bloggers, journalists, fans, and even West (2013b) herself. Oswalt makes nearly the same argument that West had been making, but due to his standing in the comedy community, his comedic credentials, and the fact that he’s a middle-aged, white, male stand-up comic, he
faced little-to-no pushback. He was, instead, praised and hailed as a great ally and feminist. Other men came around to his position, or at least finally stopped attacking Lindy West. This serves as a fitting end to the year-long saga -- the only person who could end the debate between a stand-up comic and a feminist humor writer was a more famous male stand-up comic.

**Comedic Capital and Masculine Domination**

In this chapter, Lindy West serves as an example of the ways in which women adapt to and push back against masculine dominance within stand-up comedy and the dismissal, ridicule, or outright violence they face as a result. As in art, science, or literature, those with the cultural and symbolic capital to decide what counts as legitimate set the standards for being able to enter those fields. Success in breaking into such fields requires not only being allowed into those spaces, but living up to the standards of those who hold the power to define them. At the end of her chapter recounting her appearance on *Totally Biased*, Lindy West (2016) recounts just how joyless her attempt to change stand-up comedy norms through her own use of humor were:

> I can’t watch stand-up now—the thought of it floods me with a heavy, panicked dread. There’s only so much hostility you can absorb before you internalize the rejection, the message that you are not wanted. My point about rape jokes may have gotten through, but my identity as a funny person—the most important thing in my life—didn’t survive. Among a certain subset of comedians and their fans, “Lindy West” is still shorthand for “humorless bitch.” I sometimes envy (and, on my bad days, resent) the funny female writers of my generation who never get explicitly political in their work. They’re allowed to keep their funny cards; by engaging with comedy, by trying to make it better, I lost mine (151-152).
West’s outspokenness, point of view, and sense of humor - characteristics that are celebrated by humor scholars, fans, and critics – were in turn weaponized against her when she used it to critique stand-up comedy itself, rather than society more generally. She was fat, funny, and outspoken, but in a way that threatened to change the institution of stand-up and to question masculine standards of comedic freedom. Unruly women can exact social change, but only if they don’t push back too hard against the stand-up comedy field itself. As an addendum, Hulu announced today as I revised this chapter that Lindy West’s *Shrill* is being adapted by Saturday Night Live creator Lorne Michaels as a television series starring Saturday Night Live cast member Aidy Bryant. Five years after stand-up comedy fans and comics ousted her from the field, she found an alternate path to industrial comedic success through personal writing and the rise of streaming outlets. I both look forward to and dread viewers’ and critics’ response to the series. On that note, in the next chapter, I explore the standards by which television about stand-up comedy is legitimated against masculine standards of meritocracy and authenticity in order to illustrate how women’s comedy is celebrated by critics only when it abides by masculine standards of good comedy.
CHAPTER 3: TV CRITICS AND DELEgITIMATION OF WOMEN’S COMEDY, OR WHY NOBODY WATCHED OWN’S FUNNY GIRLS

Celebrations of women who have found comedic success tend to ignore the process through which comics are judged and the criteria by which critics and audiences decide a comic is good or bad. These accounts don’t generally acknowledge the ways in which success based in meritocratic marketplaces is a complex process scaffolded by largely undiscussed criteria. This chapter discusses and analyzes the underlying criteria by which comedy series by women are judged in an effort to unpack often self-evident “pronouncements of greatness” in reviews and critiques of comedy that obscure the gendered and racialized codes that are often perpetuated therein (Littler 2018, 159). I do this by analyzing the critical distaste for three recent television series about women stand-up comics: Funny Girls (TBS), the fourth season of Inside Amy Schumer (Comedy Central), and Loosely Exactly Nicole (MTV/Facebook). Through a consideration of these reviews, I argue that critics and fans invoke gendered notions of authenticity to ascribe value to comedic texts and that the sexist and racist double-standards of this process of delegitimation are hidden beneath the guise of determining whether a comedic text is funny or not funny.

I choose these programs because they aired in the past three years, they were covered by critics covered less often than their “quality” television counterparts, and they were each critiqued for failures to live up to ideal standards of progressive representation. I also examine television series about stand-up comedy, written by and/or featuring actual stand-up comics as opposed to stand-up specials or comedic films, because these shows represent, comment on, and invoke discourses about the experience of being a woman in comedy in sustained ways that comedic films and stand-up specials do not. These series all portray the struggle of being a
woman comic from the point of view of women comics. In their reviews, then, critics comment not only on the success of the jokes, but also the extent to which shows authentically represent the experience of being a woman in comedy. Additionally, examining the representation of stand-up comedy within different television genres (reality TV, sketch comedy, and sitcom respectively), allows for an examination of how reviews establish television genre hierarchies in ways that studying films or stand-up specials would not.

While the recent success of women-helmed comedy series like *Insecure*, *New Girl*, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* and *Broad City* in the form of accolades and glowing reviews seems to signal a shift in the historically male-dominated arena of comedy, television critics tend to take seriously women-centric comedic programming only when series abide by masculine standards of good taste, telling us more about the process of gendered legitimation within television comedy than about the comedians themselves. Critics cite failures to live up to appropriate performances of authenticity and respectability in these series as the reason they aren’t funny, masking underlying gendered taste hierarchies. In many of the reviews I analyze in this chapter, critics associate inauthenticity with traditionally feminine markers of mass culture-reality television, soap operas, teen programming, and celebrity- and comics’ failure to promote “proper” progressive representations of race and gender. As in the last chapter, critics often deny women the license to be funny, to push the envelope, and to comment on uncomfortable truths about themselves. In the next section, I will discuss the role that television critics play in legitimizing television before looking more specifically at prevailing discourses of what defines good taste in comedy. Then, I will look at how these discourses play out in reviews of *Funny Girls*, *Inside Amy Schumer*, and *Loosely Exactly Nicole*. 
‘Self-Appointed Taste Leaders’: How Critics Shape Our Understanding of Television

Television critics are involved in the processes of meaning-making, textual production, and textual reception by mediating and co-authoring a program “at the constitutive moment when it becomes a text and launches itself into popular culture” (Gray 2011, 116). Critics don’t just offer opinions, they serve as first line interpreters and decoders, signaling to audiences how they might understand or make meaning from a comedic text. Whether a text is funny or not funny is not merely a function of an individual audience member’s personal taste, but the result of a process of meaning making within the whole field of stand-up comedy, of which critics play an integral role in the legitimation of comedic texts. Further, legitimation often requires the delegitimation of other texts. Because the process through which taste affirms and legitimates individual preferences is rooted in power, legitimate taste is most often defined against others’ illegitimate tastes. As Bourdieu (1984) famously argues, tastes are “perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance of the tastes of others” (56). Art “fulfills a social function of legitimating social difference” by separating those with superior artistic taste from those who prefer course, lower culture (7).

Comedic television texts circulate within discursive ecosystems to which audience, producers, and critics contribute. Within this ecosystem, reviews operate as paratexts, offering an additional layer through which audiences decode and create meaning from a television show. Gérard Genette (1997) coined the term paratext to describe the authored packaging surrounding a book that acts as a “threshold” or an “undefined zone between the inside and outside” of the book that marks a liminal boundary between the audience and the author (1-2). Paratexts include the design of the typeface, the table-of-contents, author interviews, and blurbs on the outside cover that co-construct the meaning of the book for the reader. These paratexts guide readers and
instruct them how to understand the content within the book. Genette described paratexts as functioning like an “airlock,” easing readers in and out of the world of the text (408). Television scholars have adapted and expanded the term to apply also to extra-textual elements like studio produced promos or trailers (Gray 2010); fan produced videos, stories, or discussion (Gray 2003; Sandvoss 2005; Hills 2012); and television reviews (Gray 2011). In his discussion of critic reviews as paratexts, Jonathan Gray (2011) complicates Stuart Hall’s (2001) encoding/decoding model by arguing that reviews play a “constitutive role in proposing actual decoding strategies, labelling a show with a genre, suggesting characters to identify with, and proposing intertextual links to and similarities with other programs” (114). Critics function as intermediaries between production and reception, receiving television texts and producing paratexts for public co-consumption (116). Audiences decode texts according to their individual background, cultural standing, and knowledge, and critic reviews are a part of that knowledge. Reviews serve as a companion guide, offering a means through which audiences can understand a text. Even if audiences don’t read all reviews, influential critics still become part of the discursive ecosystem in which a text is decoded. Similarly, if viewers don’t personally enjoy, or even watch, a television show, their understanding that a show is either good or bad is shaped by critical consensus. If one wants to take a contrarian view -- either hailing a show disregarded by critics or dismissing a show loved by critics -- articulating such view necessitates an engagement with the prevailing understanding of the show.

Not only do critics have the professional capital with which to legitimize their reading of a text over the average viewer, their takes are also often the first non-marketing reading to become available to the public. Critics often see shows before they air to the public, giving them additional knowledge that regular viewers don’t have. Critics have professional capital, a
platform, and the knowledge with which to claim authoritative standing on the subject of television show quality (Gray 2011, 115). Further, television outlets and content have proliferated to the point that FX Networks Chief John Landgraf coined the term “peak TV” during the Television Critics Association press tour in 2015, which subsequently became the buzz word used by critics to describe the current television landscape. He argued that the glut of television programming “has created a huge challenge in finding compelling original stories and the level of talent needed to sustain those stories,” and from an audience perspective, has had “an enormous impact on everyone’s ability to cut through the clutter and create real buzz.” (Garber et al 2015). Though it’s admittedly hard to track exact numbers, according to Indiewire (Schneider 2017) the number of original scripted shows on network, cable and streaming outlets was up from 216 in 2010 to nearly 500 in 2017. This doesn’t include non-scripted, non-original programming that also competes for viewer attention in addition to activities other than watching television. Within the peak television landscape, critics become one defense against the glut, advising audiences on what to spend their precious television viewing hours watching and what to avoid. As Amanda Lotz (2007) notes, in a post-network era with an ever-increasing number of outlets, critics become “legitimate, unbiased sources within the cluttered programming field” (109) able to help viewers prioritize and organize their television schedules.

Reviewers don’t just recommend or bring attention to programs, they also police the bounds of good taste and place television texts within prevailing hierarchies of value (Gray 2011, 125), not only within the reviews themselves, but also by choosing what shows to cover or not to cover. Critics, being largely well-educated and upper-middle class and still majority white men, tend to converge around certain types of programming that don’t generally correspond to the popularity of the series in the ratings. While Bourdieu positioned popular culture as the antithesis
to high culture or art, cultural studies scholars have recognized similar stratifications within popular culture. A 2015 *Economist* (W.Z.) article on the growing taste differences between “coastal critics” and the average viewer notes that while CBS’s *NCIS* (2003-present) and *Big Bang Theory* (2007-present) are two of the most watched series on television, they garner considerably less attention from critics than prestige cable series like *Mad Men* (AMC 2007-2015) and *Game of Thrones* (HBO 2011-present). Hip shows targeted toward younger, more affluent educated audiences tend to garner wider coverage by critics than those targeted toward older, rural, less-affluent viewers because critics often fall within the former category.

Critical influence plays major role in the legitimation of television texts, genres, and styles. In their book *Legitimating Television*, Michael Newman and Elana Levine (2012) examine the discourses of television’s changing cultural value as they struggle for dominance (3). Television critics function within “a discursive formation made up of a multitude of expressions that echo and reinforce one another and are made powerful in the breadth and frequency of their appearances” (11). One critic’s opinion does not legitimate a television text, rather critics function as one node within an intertextual discursive ecosystem in which consensus about what constitutes quality is negotiated. Paul Rixon (2011) theorizes the ways in which critics operate within this ecosystem by shaping how “the community, including the producers and the consumers, make sense of television, how they value it and how it connects to their lives” (4). TV criticism operates as a secondary text, instructing audiences how to understand television within larger ideologies of the field. While critics in the pre-1980s television landscape largely stuck to evaluating and reviewing television, “as television went niche, so did the critics” (8) who began to provide more heavily opinionated reviews, personal reflections and post-modern commentary (9).
While it’s difficult to predict how different viewers will understand each individual review, the analysis of reviews within this ecosystem allows us “a greater knowledge of the semiotic environment into which new shows arrive, and of the reviews’ role both in creating that environment and in co-creating the text” (Gray 2011, 125). Critics reify artistic hierarchies by maintaining class, gender, race and other “prevailing structures of status” even as television as an institution ascends in cultural prestige (3). Critics and scholars play a role in this process by perpetuating “the distinctions of value and respectability that denigrated the medium in the first place” (3). While television has struggled for legitimacy since its inception, the process intensified following “quality” television trends of the 1970s and 1980s, when the fragmentation of the audience increased opportunities for networks to make lucrative ad buys by aiming their programming as sophisticated, affluent niche audiences (4). As a result, highbrow publications followed suit, treating television accepted by the critic class from an “aesthetic perspective once reserved for more established arts” (4). With the rise rewatchable television in the form of DVDs, DVRs, On Demand, and streaming services, critics legitimize television through comparisons with already legitimate art forms like the novel and film and by distancing more technologically advanced modes of watching television more traditional viewing habits like live-viewing, watching broadcast networks, and sticking to well-worn genres. For some kinds of television to be “consecrated as art,” other kinds must be dismissed or left-behind (5). As Levine and Newman put it, “New is elevated over old, active over passive, class over mass, masculine over feminine” (5). While television is more prestigious than in the past, the same aesthetic hierarchies still exist, and critics continue to apply them within the landscape of television programming. While women are finding success in comedic television, they are doing so within a system that reinforces gendered standards of quality comedic programming.
Highbrow/Lowbrow Laughter: Legitimizing Comedic TV

Texts within the comedic genre are so characterized by their intention to be funny rather than their success in making audiences laugh (Mills 2009, 94), so critics and audiences are the arbiters of whether a comedic text becomes funny. Further, within stand-up comedy, critics, bookers, popular comics, theater owners, executives at outlets like Comedy Central and Netflix play a major role in creating and determining comedic value. However, these processes are distorted by comedic ideologies of meritocracy, authorship, and authenticity promoted most often by white, male comics, critics, and audiences.

Just as the creation of art requires critical distance from non-art, so does funny require critical distance from not-funny. Comedic performance has gone through a similar, often intersecting, process of legitimation as television. Critics and audiences have defined stand-up comedy both against and alongside television throughout its modern history. Often stand-up comedy has defined itself against television through its characterization as an “absolute directness of artist/audience communication” as opposed to the mass produced, inauthentic, assembly line genres of television (Marc 1997, 15). Historically, critics have regarded sitcoms contemptuously as the most conservative, formulaic, and artless of narrative forms (Newman and Levine 2012, 59). In the 1950s and 1960s, stand-up comedic began distancing themselves from television with the rise of politically charged, stream-of-consciousness, aggressive “sick” comedians like Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce who, as opposed to vaudeville and Borscht Belt era comedians, wrote their own jokes, commented on the day’s news, and mined their own lives for material. While vaudeville and television stars were “performing roles,” this new brand of club comics were just “being themselves.” Ethan Thompson (2011) explains that disillusionment with the supposed postwar “good life” inspired this new strand of sick comedy, which sought to
break the boundaries of good taste and shatter the fantasies of suburbia, consumerism, and the nuclear family (18). Sick comedy gave rise to the modern notion of comics as “truth tellers” as comics positioned themselves as a more authentic, raw, and edgy form of counterprogramming for the young, educated, hip, urban class tired of post-war family-centric and escapist sitcoms that dominated the airwaves (26). Additionally, urban comics no longer needed television to gain a national audience as comedy records exploded in popularity, and so could position themselves as counter-cultural, political artists functioning outside of the mass culturally produced mainstream pop culture (33). Thompson argues that while many saw sick comics as politically subversive or radical, they actually functioned as a type of cultural subversion, questioning the norms of the relatively new form of U.S. mass media (147). David Marc (1997) sees the sitcom and the stand-up comic as the two dominant modes of U.S. comedy between the 1940s and the 1980s where television sitcoms are a “technology of the assembly line brought to art” while stand-up comedy is the “surviving bastion of individual expression” (13).

Stand-up comedy in the U.S. has long been defined and legitimated against the sitcom, particularly through the lens of authenticity, individuality and truth. Similarly, quality sitcoms are discursively distanced from the genre through their association with cinematic and novelistic characteristics. Giselende Kuipers (2006) argues that comedic taste is not only as a pattern of preferences and aversions but also as a form of cultural knowledge linked to one’s social status. Highbrow comedy is defined by formal and narrative experimentation, complex subject matter, references to other TV genres (Mills 2004, 70-71), absurdism and surrealism, and a degree of disagreeableness or difficulty (Kuipers 2006, 371). Each of these characteristics requires some sort of cultural knowledge to understand and appreciate the jokes, so laughter signifies that you are educated enough to “see the fun in it” (371). Highbrow laughter is a performance of social
competence and worth. (374). In practice, this means that single-camera style is considered more artistic than a multi-cam program with a studio audience. Sitcoms that feature experiments in form, original soundtracks, serialization, and the mining of humor from character rather than gags are more artistic than the traditional sitcoms with set-up punchline formula, theatricality, broad characters, and happy endings (60-72). Both stand-up comedy and sitcoms are art only when they don’t look like traditional sitcoms.

Not only is comedic taste associated with class, it is also highly gendered. In her study of comedy audiences, Inger-Lise Kalvinknes Bore (2010) found a stratification of taste based not only on the audience’s gender, but on the performer's. She argues that female-led comedic programs, like other feminine cultural products, tend to be “marginalized as niche products with limited appeal to male viewers,” which reinforces the dominance of masculinity in television comedy (139). Both her male and female participants saw male comics as addressing concerns that were universally relatable while female comics were thought to only be relatable to female audiences (147). Stott (2005) also notes this “ghettoization of women’s comedy” is rooted in the assumption that women comics only discuss “women’s themes” like “relationships, shopping, and menstruation” whereas male comics are “unbounded” and therefore have more universal appeal (99). Additionally, as noted above, mainstream, mass culture, lowbrow comedy is associated with femininity as distinguished from transgressive, highbrow, masculine humor (151). Further Hollis Griffin (2017) illustrates that critics increasingly include political evaluations of television as a way of legitimizing or delegitimizing certain texts to the detriment of more holistic analysis. Along this axis, comedy is good insofar as it represents and pushes progressive ideologies about race, gender, or class according to the critics’ own moral compass. An unintended consequence of an insistence on ideological critique is the dismissal of comedy
that isn’t politically subversive enough, reifying legitimizing discourses that malign genres like soap opera, romance, melodrama, and reality television. Critics often disparage comedic television texts that they associate with feminized pop culture by couching their distaste within critiques of “problematic stereotypes.”

In the following reviews, I focus on how authenticity, or rather inauthenticity, is a recurring theme that critics use as a stand-in for gendered distinctions between funny and not funny, ranging from genre critiques to political critiques of representation. Most of these critics call these shows inauthentic, but for inconsistent reasons that mask underlying critiques based on gendered and raced associations with lowbrow comedic television.

**Funny Girls and Comedic Melodrama**

My first example is Oxygen’s 2015 docu-series *Funny Girls*, which chronicles six women navigating the notoriously difficult stand-up comedy scene in Los Angeles. Each episode blends stand-up sets with ongoing stories of the six women, some friends and some frenemies, dating, dealing with their kids, talking about their careers, trying to book shows, performing at open mics, and struggling with day jobs. The series is not only about showcasing stand-up performances, but representing the quotidian experience of being stand-up comic. TV critics and comedy fans largely ignored *Funny Girls*; aside from basic announcements that the show would be airing in the lead-up to the premiere and a smattering of middling reviews about the pilot, there was little written about the series after the first episode. Further due to the series’ low ratings, Oxygen rescheduled the series from Tuesday nights at 9:00 to Tuesday nights at 11:00 PM halfway through the first season and then quietly cancelled it.

The reviews that were written mostly scorned the series as a “reality show,” focusing more on critics’ own disdain for the genre rather than highlighting the ways in which the docu-
series format shed light on barriers to entry for women in the stand-up scene and featured up-and-coming comedic performers. *Flavorwire*’s (Viruet 2015) review couldn’t even be bothered to get the title of the show right in the headline, declaring that “Oxygen’s ‘Funny Women’ Relies Too Much on Reality Show Tropes.” The legitimation or delegitimation of new shows relies on associations with or against familiar genre formats, comedic voices, or television networks to quickly convey information to audiences unfamiliar with new series and to assign value judgements based on defined hierarchies of taste. As this review illustrates, *Funny Girls* had two feminine, lowbrow associations working against it: The Oxygen Network and reality television.

The Oxygen Network, an NBC Universal network whose line-up heavily features reality television shows geared toward women, rebranded itself in 2014 to grow its audience of millennial women. *Funny Girls* was part of this effort, along with reality series about struggling choirs, nail artists, street art, and hip-hop (Golberg 2014). Critics often denigrate (with a haughty eye roll) reality television for women, calling it melodramatic and inauthentic. In fact, the *Flavorwire* review starts with such a critique: “On the whole, Oxygen’s *Funny Girls* is easy (and understandable) to dismiss […] *Funny Girls* barely even registers (and not many people pay attention to Oxygen to begin with).” The critic lets the audience off the hook for being unaware of the series in such a crowded line-up, performing the function of legitimizing the reader’s cultural knowledge (or lack thereof). In this case “people” does not mean general audiences but rather critics and audiences with legitimate tastes, as Oxygen boasts a higher overall audience than the higher brow IFC, a network to which critics pay much more attention (Schneider 2016). Rather than dismiss the series for targeting women or portraying women comics, though, the reviewer uses associations with lowbrow cultural objects and the policing of the bounds of authentic comedy to justify the negative review.
Other reviews echoed this complaint. *A.V. Club’s* (Eichel 2015) review argues in its title that, “*Funny Girls* forces stand-ups into a reality show mold,” again defining stand-up against reality television as some sort of taste binary and harkening back to the standard mass culture assembly line production metaphor. The *A.V.Club’s* review contrasts David Marc’s (1997) definition of stand-up as a “singular art form where it’s all about the creator” with reality TV as corporate string-pulling and manufactured drama. This definition ignores how stand-up is a field of cultural production in which comics react to the whims of audiences, television producers, club owners, and agents. These reviews recognize the industrial constraints with which reality television is produced but not those that constrain stand-up comedy. This erects a false dichotomy in which reality television is “formulaic” and constrained by outside non-artistic actors, while stand-up is solely the creation of the comic. These critiques fall into the trap Bourdieu (1993) argues many analyses of art do: isolating texts from the social conditions of their production, circulation, and consumption (8); however, they ignore these conditions only in stand-up. The reviewer underlines this point by arguing that when stand-up comics are forced into “the confines of this fake reality…their material feels labored as well.” Here, the critic defines stand-up as an authentic art form free from outside manipulation, while defining reality television as an inauthentic scripted industrially produced product. Stand-up is art; reality TV is work. Stand-up is real. Reality TV is fake. Stand-up cannot therefore naturally align with the aesthetics of a docu-series, but rather must be violently “forced” into a “mold.”

Most other reviews echoed the industrial labor metaphor, with *Variety’s* (Lowry 2015) review similarly commenting that the show was at its best when the comics “stop working at being funny,” as if authentic comedy requires no effort. Of course, the illusion of authenticity does require work and is itself a type of performance. As Judith Yaross Lee (2010) argues,
modern comedy venues, outlets, and performances merely create the illusion of authenticity by professionalizing intimate one-on-one conversations. Authenticity here is instead used as a means through which to dismiss a docu-series for women as “reality TV” and to police the gendered boundaries of legitimate stand-up comedy. Complaints that docu-dramas are inauthentic, scripted and over-produced ignores the fact that all media are constructed. The critically acclaimed FX series *Louie* is, of course, not real either, and according to *A.V.Club*’s review of the pilot, can actually be unpleasant and alienating (Rabin 2010). However, because critics associate *Louie* association with highbrow, cinematic art, they celebrate the series as more authentic than the standard sitcom. The gendered subtext is that representations of comedy tied to masculine formats and narrative arduousness are authentic while representations of comedy tied to feminine formats like reality docu-dramas are not, even though both are carefully constructed, produced, and scripted by a sprawling team and subject to industrial constraints.

Critics also panned the series for being too centered on melodrama rather than comedy. These complaints associate the series with both soap opera and reality TV tropes. *Entertainment Weekly* suggests the show “focus less on drama and more on the craft” (Smith 2015) The *A.V.Club* guesses that the women’s “desire for men is probably a gambit to make them relatable and likable to the audience,” though the gambit backfires and “instead feels like every female stereotype lobbed at female comedians” (Eichel 2015). *Flavorwire* contends that the worst part of the show is “the manufactured drama between the women,” because “it takes away from the characters’ real compelling narratives: their struggles in the comedy world” (Viruet 2015). One of the only genres historically more denigrated than the sitcom is the soap opera; despite critical exultation of serialization in television drama as a sign of prestige, this discourse rarely makes positive reference to the soaps that pioneered serialized narrative (Levine and Newman, 2012,
Negative reviews often compare shows disfavorably to soap operas or hail serial dramas that aren’t “soapy” (82). The legitimated serial narratives of the convergence era masculinize the serialized form by negating the “feminized other upon which their status depends” (82). Critics often apply the term “melodramatic” pejoratively to soap operas and to soap opera adjacent series to connote a distasteful or excessive focus on emotion, relationships, and storylines associated with the private or domestic sphere (Gledhill 1997, 350). To be taken seriously, female cultural creators often “must abandon or suppress those features characterized as feminizing” (Gledhill 1997, 349). Critics celebrate female-led series like *Broad City*, a serialized, single-camera comedy on masculine-dominated Comedy Central that follows two 20-something friends through their weed-soaked adventures in New York City, while they mock shows like *Funny Girls*. One adheres to masculine standards of legitimate comedy while the latter does not. Notably, in reviews of *Broad City*, critics celebrate emotion, conflict, and female friendship with headlines like “*Broad City* Is A Fearless, Priceless Ode to Female Friendship” (Cills 2015), because the show takes narrative risks and experiments with form. Or as *A.V. Club* describes it, the show is “Surreal and So Real” (Upadhyaya 2016).

Most acclaimed comedy shows focus on the emotions, relationships, and love lives of the main characters (see *Maron, Louie, Insecure, Atlanta, Girls, Seinfeld*, etc). Additionally, spats and ‘drama’ between comics are both common and well-publicized, whether these fights are scripted or not. Both the real and fictionalized versions of Louis C.K. and Marc Maron are notoriously unpleasant frenemies- even before C.K. stepped out of the limelight after admitting to sexually assaulting several women. But, when they have fights with fellow comics on their TV shows or podcasts (sometimes with each other) critics celebrate them as *markers* of authenticity, rawness, and truth. Reviewers’ complaints that *Funny Girls* should ignore tension between
comics and focus on their craft reinforces the false notion that comedy is a “singular art form,” free from the personal grudges, complicated romantic relationships, and infighting that characterize the actual Los Angeles comedy scene. Whether these fights were scripted or not, they nevertheless portray the emotional truth of being a stand-up comic.

Again – the actual issue critics have with Funny Girls isn’t that female stand-up comics don’t really worry about their love lives or fight with each other, it’s that comedy critics don’t think reality shows are a legitimate format for representing stand-up comics. There are, as always, critiques to make of the show: while the cast features two women of color, a single mom, and a gay comic, the cast is predominantly young, white, straight, and conventionally attractive. A lack of diversity, of course, is something this series has in common with other shows these outlets commonly praise. The series also, like most docu-series, manufactures connections between the comics to craft a compelling and ongoing storyline, so anyone looking for an accurate representation of the LA stand-up scene might be led astray. However, the series, just as scripted comedic programs do, necessarily sacrifices an adherence to facts for emotional truth and compelling storytelling. Critics are not rejecting fictional representations of stand-up comedy, but representations of stand-up comedy in traditional feminized forms of mass culture.

Notably, the mentions of Funny Girls on women-oriented sites like VH1 and Glamour were much more positive. VH1 (Tietjen 2015) heralded the series as “The most Hilarious Show You’re Not Watching,” and Glamour (Angelo 2015) included the series in its “Obsessed TV report card” round-up. Glamour’s review is particularly relevant in that Megan Angelo takes the opposite stance on authenticity than do the reviews on entertainment-centric outlets. While sites like A.V. Club argue that reality show conventions painted the comics as inauthentic, Angelo notes that what sets these comics apart from the typical reality show character is that they’re
funnier and more authentic than the bachelorettes or housewives. While this comparison reaffirms similar taste distinctions between comedy and reality TV, it epitomizes the ways in which both authenticity and comedy are not only subjective, but tied to the gendered genre taste hierarchies often reinforced by TV and comedy critics. In the next section, I look at how the fourth season of Inside Amy Schumer, a show critics often compared positively to standards of authentic comedy, was taken less seriously by critics after Amy Schumer became a celebrity.

Inside Amy Schumer and the Inauthenticity of Celebrity

In promos for the fourth season of Comedy Central’s sketch series Inside Amy Schumer (2013-Present), well-known for skewering gender norms and representations of women in the media, creator Amy Schumer sits in a medical gown in her doctor’s office. Her doctor, an older white man with slicked back curly hair, a beard, and glasses informs her: “Your test came back positive. I’m sorry to tell you this, but you’ve been overexposed […] You’re everywhere” (Strause 2016). A shocked Amy responds, “What’s the cure?” to which her doctor emphatically suggests that she go away for a while: “No late-night TV show appearances. No podcasts. And do not go back to your basic cable TV show.” The promo sends up the widespread and inevitable backlash Schumer received and that seems to follow any female performer whose fame suddenly skyrockets. At the same time, the doc’s admonishment not to return to “basic cable,” hints at the angst swirling around the mediasphere about Schumer’s ability to balance her comic persona with her new celebrity persona. The comedienne uses the space of the ad to let her audiences know that she hears them, she’s in on the joke, but at the same time: she isn’t going anywhere. In this way, the promo serves as a microcosm of the tension between comedian and celebrity and the gendered ways these roles are regulated by industrial discourses.
The previous section focused on the ways in which critics compare stand-up comedy unfavorably to soaps and reality TV. In this section I look at how critics erect boundaries between comedy and celebrity, particularly in the case of women comics. As Inger-Lise Kalvinknes Bore (2017) argues, Amy Schumer both conforms to and transgresses ideals of postfeminist celebrity: she is white, blonde, and pretty, and wears makeup and fashionable outfits (125), but she is also heavier than the typical Hollywood actress and she uses her comedy to rebuke and challenge “the cultural identification of women with their bodies” (Mizejewska 2014, 92). Schumer and her audiences both negotiate her complex identities across various texts: stand-up specials, social media, magazines, television reviews, Pinterest boards, and talk shows (Bore 2017, 122). While Bore’s work focuses on the ways in which images of Schumer circulating on Pinterest “produced a paratextual dialogue characterized by tensions created by Schumer’s various performances as a comedian, as a postfeminist celebrity and as a celebrity feminist” (136), here I examine how reviews of the fourth season of Inside Amy Schumer reveal a gendered anxiety surrounding the loss of authenticity in Schumer’s comedy as her public persona shifted from famous stand-up comic to comedy celebrity. I chose to look at the change in tone between reviews of seasons three (2015) and four (2016), in which critics shifted from seeing Amy Schumer as a comic to seeing her as a celebrity. Comparing reviews from the third and fourth season illustrates the increased policing of her comedic authenticity by television critics the more press coverage aligned her with feminized celebrity culture.

When Inside Amy Schumer premiered in 2013, Schumer was largely known for coming in third place on NBC’s Last Comic Standing and for her appearances on Comedy Central’s frequent roasts of D-List celebrities. Between the end of her show’s third season in the summer of 2015 and the start of the show’s fourth season in the summer of 2016, she starred in the
blockbuster comedy *Trainwreck*, won two Emmy awards, was honored as one of “*Time’s Most Influential 100 People,*” was crowned one of “*Glamour’s Trailblazers of the Year*” for 2015, and was invited to speak at the Ms. Foundation For Women’s Gloria Awards and Gala. To top it all off, at the close of her show’s fourth season in June of 2016, she became the first female stand-up to headline (and subsequently sell out) Madison Square Garden. As she has gained notoriety as a stand-up comic, self-proclaimed feminist, and movie star, she was reframed as a celebrity comic by the press. As her fame rose, so too did a noticeable anxiety within critical reception of her series and stand-up material: how would her newfound fame affect the quality of her comedy?

The overwhelming theme in reviews of the fourth season of *Inside Amy Schumer* focus on the disconnect between her celebrity status and the perception that she was now too famous for her basic cable sketch series. Marah Eakin’s (2016) *A.V. Club* review wonders, “Will *Inside Amy Schumer* Crumble Under the Weight of its Own Success?” The *Washington Post* (Butler 2016) similarly opines, “Amy Schumer is Super Famous Now. How Will That Change her Comedy Central Show?” The *Wrap* (Grierson 2014) follows suit: “Can the former underdog strike the same rich comedic veins now that she’s a star?” The *Atlantic’s* (Sims 2016) headline, “Is Amy Schumer Too Famous for *Inside Amy Schumer*,” is followed-up by a suggestion that the show’s star needs to “veer away from her newfound superstardom and back toward the blunt, abrasive honesty that made her a success to begin with.” This, of course, sets up a false dichotomy that one cannot be famous and funny. Rebecca Emlinger Roberts (2000) notes that for a piece of work to be called art, it must be famous enough to be recognized by the public as art; however, the popularity of a piece of art also causes the public to question its authenticity (159). Fame is a double-edged sword; comics need a certain amount of fame for audiences to recognize
them as artists and to hear their messages, yet the public has tendency to distrust anything too famous or too popular. Roberts is specifically interested in stand-up comic Tim Allen’s career and the ways in which his 90’s sitcom Home Improvement was wildly popular but never considered art. While such a tension is tied to issues of taste and class, the tensions between celebrity, popularity and comedy-as-art are also complicated by gender.

Splitsider (Hugar 2016), an online publication specifically focused on comedy, makes a similar argument to Roberts in its review of Inside Amy Schumer’s fourth season. The publication notes that before every season critics tend to wonder if Schumer has gotten too famous for her basic cable series, and every season the show manages to deliver its trademark version of subversive humor. Schumer’s celebrity status, instead of ruining the show’s voice, has allowed the show to “give people we normally wouldn’t hear from a chance to tell their stories” and allows Schumer to take on an activist tone “without giving up the bawdy humor that made us love her in the first place.” Paste Magazine (Saunders 2016) too notes that this backlash is unwarranted, noting that complaints about the fourth season stem from “bizarre expectations based on a retroactive and rose-colored memory of her previous work.” Whether pushing back against the argument that Schumer is too famous for Comedy Central or making a case for it, most reviewers feel the need to take a stance one way or the other. As the Paste reviewer puts it, Schumer’s newfound fame became the focus on most reviews because, “frankly, it’s a good angle.” By longing for the time when Schumer was “more relatable” to regular women, these reviews fail to acknowledge the fact that Amy Schumer’s comedy has, in fact, never spoken for all women. She has always spoken for a small subset of straight, white, well-educated, urban-dwelling, 20-30-somethings. As she has joined the ranks of celebrity, she continues to do what she’s always done: lampoon her own experiences of the world.
Critics’ focus on Schumer’s celebrity status is emblematic of the gendered ways in which female comics, and female public figures, are surveilled differently than their male counterparts. Female celebrities need to appear relatable in ways that masculinized public figures generally don’t. Lenard Berlanstein’s (2004) historicization of celebrity culture coverage in French magazines is useful in understanding this gendered differentiation. Throughout the 19th century, magazines redefined celebrities, once noteworthy for embodying masculine ideals of public life and “personal striving and achievement” (67), as embodiments of feminine ideals and domesticity. This shift, Berlanstein explains, came as magazines realized that they substantially increased their audience by appealing to women who saw female celebrities as most interesting when they could relate to their shared affinity for domestic life (81). By the end of the 19th century, the relationship between public and private had shifted within the coverage of celebrities and magazines increasingly featured them as an “idealized model of ‘ordinariness,’” (83) rather than exceptionally accomplished public figures. In other words, we’re interested in celebrities now because, as Us Magazine’s famous column puts it, “they’re just like us!”

While audiences find pleasure in identifying with celebrities (Dyer 2004), Julie Wilson (2010) adds that contemporary celebrity coverage also invites fans to “sit in judgment,” of celebrities, a process she refers to as “star testing” (32). She argues that this star testing within celebrity gossip doubles as a “gendered instrument of governmentality” in which both celebrities and the (primarily female) readership are implicated (34). In this way, female celebrities and their fans adhere to a set of neoliberal, post-feminist requirements in which women have to be “self-entrepreneurial, self-promotional workers on equal footing with their male colleagues” while continuing to abide by the rules of traditional femininity in both appearance and behavior (34). Because the realm of celebrity media is largely female-focused and aimed at a female
audience, male celebrities are under less scrutiny than their female counterparts, and less likely to be celebritized by critics in the same way that women are.

For example, The Atlantic suggested that by leaving their shows at their most popular, comics like Dave Chappelle and Key and Peele “set an example Schumer might be wise to follow if she wants to ensure the show remains fresh to the end” (Sims 2016). However, Chappelle and Key and Peele, while extremely popular, were never celebrities in the same way that Schumer is. And while their shows may have eventually been accused of becoming stale, they rarely face accusations of overexposure. The discourse surrounding Key and Peele (2012-2015), a sketch show created by and starring comics Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele that takes an arguably parallel approach to race as Schumer’s series does to gender, serves as a useful contrast to Inside Amy Schumer. Key and Peele premiered a year before Inside Amy Schumer on the same network, has also won several awards, including a Peabody, and attracted a larger audience (Guerrasio 2015). Key and Peele’s streaming numbers, arguably a better gauge of audience reach and popularity, also vastly outpace Inside Amy Schumer’s. Comedy Central reported to Business Insider that while Inside Amy Schumer had 27 million YouTube Streams for its fourth season, Key and Peele drew a staggering 195 million. This suggests that Schumer’s celebritization and the ensuing scrutiny of her fame is based not on viewership numbers or popularity, but on industrial and cultural definitions of celebrity as heavily tied into white femininity.

These related critiques come throughout The A.V. Club’s coverage of Inside Amy Schumer’s fourth season. I choose to focus on this outlet because, while short posts surrounding notable sketches were written by a wide-variety of online outlets throughout the season, The A.V. Club was the most prominent of the very small number to review every episode in detail. Their
recaps are also emblematic of the anxiety surrounding authenticity and celebrity that shaped the coverage of the fourth season. In the opening paragraph of her season premiere review, Marah Eakin (2016) is biting in her description of the changes that have taken place in Schumer’s life, hitting on the perceived disconnect between her old “relatable” material and her new lavish life:

Success can really fuck over a comedian. Take Amy Schumer, for instance. She rose to fame making jokes about dating stoned losers and having an ass. Now, a hit Comedy Central series and a *Trainwreck* later, she’s leaving $1,000 tips for bartenders and zipping off on Caribbean vacations with Jerry Seinfeld.

Notably, Schumer’s relationship with Jerry Seinfeld is critiqued in ways that Seinfeld’s own fame is rarely critiqued. As Brett Mills (2010) has explored, celebrity comics often refuse to conform to the common conventions of celebrity or star status, choosing instead to use their humor to comment on and make visible the mechanisms of celebrity (191). However, while Mills primarily examines the star texts of male comics, female celebrity comics like Schumer are not given the benefit of the doubt when it comes to commenting on their own fame. Despite the fact that Seinfeld, one of the most famous comics of the past twenty years, produces and stars in the webseries *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee* (2012-present), in which he and famous comedians (you guessed it!) drive to get coffee, I have yet to see a headline asking “Is Jerry Seinfeld Too Famous for his Webseries?” Instead, the series is a critical darling and favorite of avid comedy fans (Donahue 2014).

In her review of the season’s first and third episodes, Eakin (2016) contends that while she appreciates the continued inclusion of sketches relating to everyday experiences like office gender politics and, such sketches are now more likely to be “sprinkled in among jokes about what it must be like to be Amy Schumer,” a change she insists messes with “the voice of the
show.” Because, she assumes, Schumer is no longer someone who is regularly “in sweats sitting on the couch ordering Seamless,” her humor has lost its edge. Emily L. Stephens (2016b), who is the show’s weekly recapper for the season, echoes may of Eakin’s initial concerns. Throughout the season, the reviews judge the episodes against the rubric of Amy Schumer performance of authenticity as defined by her relatability. Of a sketch called “Size 12” (4.4), showing the plight of shopping for “plus-sized” clothing, Stephens laments that the focus is on Amy Schumer and Lena Dunham (playing herself) instead of on “regular women,” which works to make the sketch “less a statement about a common experience and more a remark about her own idiosyncratic experience.” In the sketch, after irritating a slim saleswoman with a request for a shirt in a size twelve (“Could you keep your voice down, you’re scaring the thinner customer.”), Amy is led to a “whole section for your situation,” which is a field with a stack of wood with a tarp, a single cow, and Lena Dunham who was left for three months after asking for turtleneck.

While the inclusion of Dunham in the sketch lead some critics to the conclude that Schumer was focusing too much on her famous friends rather than on “regular” women, critics celebrated previous sketches involving famous funny women. One of the series’ most praised sketches, “Last Fuckable Day,” (3.1) includes three other famous women, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Tina Fey, and Patricia Arquette, as they lament the way Hollywood pigeonholes women over 40.

Julia: In every actresses’ life, the media decides when you finally reach the point when you’re not believably fuckable anymore.

Amy: Who tells you?

Tina: Nobody overtly tells you, but there are signs. You know how Sally Field was Tom Hanks’ love interest in punchline and then like 20 minutes later she was his mom in Forrest Gump?
Patricia: Or you might get offered a rom-com with Jack Nicolson where you’re competing with another woman to fuck him.

Unlike “Size 12,” *A.V. Club* praised the sketch as a “deft” and “dreamy confection” (Knibbs 2015). While “Last Fuckable Day,” is arguably funnier and better written than “Size 12,” during the fourth season, critics invoke Schumer’s fame, not the writing quality, to critique the strength of the show’s comedic material. To be fair, pinpointing or making an argument about why something is funny is a subjective and slippery task; however, we see in these critiques the anxiety and distrust surrounding female celebrity comics. The requirement of comics to be authentic and to draw from their own lives for material seems not to extend to Schumer as a feminized celebrity. Instead, reviews critique her discussion of her own fame as inauthentic, associated, like *Funny Girls*, with feminized, mass-produced culture.

Even positive episode reviews focus attention on the tension between Schumer’s fame and her message. In a largely positive review of “Brave” (4.3), Stephens (2016c) undercuts her approval for the episode’s success in “finding a way to connect with her audience” with a reminder that Schumer’s fame means that “she shares fewer experiences with her viewers than ever before.” In the highest-graded episode of the season, “Psychopath Test,” the review notes (Stephens 2016d) that while the episode is “full of potent ideas” and “solid laughs,” because of Schumer’s “highly publicized recent experiences” it is a relief that the show is still able to deliver a good episode. Stephens has a similar response to “Welcome To The Gun Show,” (4.2) an episode grounded in Schumer’s recent activism on gun control sparked when a gunman shot several people at a screening of her movie *Trainwreck* in the summer of 2015. In her review, Stephens (2016e) praises Schumer for using her fame for the greater good, noting that the episode showcases Schumer’s “more recent embrace of explicitly political agendas.” Instead of
previous episodes that she insists “play awkwardly on Schumer’s fame,” this blatantly activist episode finds Schumer sharing “the limelight gracefully” and “using her fame to spotlight a cause she believes in.” The use of the gendered term “gracefully” echoes common critiques public women often face when calling attention to their own success. Schumer’s fame is acceptable only when she uses it to shine the spotlight elsewhere. These reviews draw a boundary between Schumer’s celebrity and her ability to be funny. The ratio of sketches about Hollywood and sketches about more common experiences likely hasn’t shifted that much, rather the perception of Schumer as an out-of-touch celebrity has shaped the reception. Schumer is praised most when she humbly steps aside, allowing either a political issue, a fellow actor, or the experiences of her fans, to take center stage.

Unlike shows like *Funny Girls* designed to appeal to a female audience *Inside Amy Schumer* has been lauded by television and comedy critics because it fits into masculine comedic norms. Her popularity is due in large part to her acceptance by male comedy gatekeepers and mainstream comedy outlets with primarily male audiences. Brooke Posch, a production executive at Comedy Central told *The New York Times* that the network’s ad buys are primarily for men, so even their female-led series, like *Broad City* and *Inside Amy Schumer*, need to appeal to this target demographic (Zinoman 2013). Television and comedy scholar Nick Marx (2015) notes that these female-led series are a part of Comedy Central’s new strategy to attract more diverse audiences in ways that cultivate a culturally progressive brand “without alienating the core viewership of straight white men” (280). Even *Trainwreck*, the 2015 film she wrote and starred in, was only made possible because successful producer, writer, and director Judd Apatow (2015) heard Schumer on Howard Stern’s radio show and thought she was so funny, he decided to sign-on to executive produce. While her adherence to masculine norms has brought
success, the concern surrounding her newfound celebrity in 2016 reviews of her show illustrates the potential limits of female comic celebrity. In the field of comedy, women must achieve a certain level of success to gain control over their own projects and to produce the kind of comedy they want to, however, the response to Schumer’s rising fame serves as a potential counterpoint: female comics must also deal with their fame appropriately. Schumer was praised for skewering gendered double-standards and sending up celebrity culture so long as she remained on the outside of that culture and took an appropriately self-deprecating tone. As Danielle Russell (2007) argues, self-deprecatory humor is a form of self-censorship in which women can subvert the aggressive posture of joke-telling by adhering to social and cultural norms of appropriate femininity. Self-deprecatory humor therefore requires a delicate balancing act: the comic needs to retain power over the audience while performing inadequacy. Schumer is aware of society’s distrust of celebrities, especially ones who take themselves too seriously or overstep their bounds. She also knows that her continued comedic success depends on her ability to maintain a balance between connecting with her audiences through shared experiences while also mining her own life as a comic celebrity for humor.

Schumer skewers these expectations in the fourth season sketch “Down To Earth” (4.6) in which she mocks celebrities for buying into and failing spectacularly to uphold the fantasy that they are no different than their fans. Schumer plays a version of herself: a “totally regular person just like you” hosting a show called “Down To Earth” which is recorded “40,000 feet above the earth aboard a luxury airship that never touches the ground for tax reasons.” Schumer appears in a long-sleeved black dress, her hair pulled tightly back in a top knot. She introduces her band, Selena and the Schumtones (fronted by Selena Gomez playing herself) which then plays her theme song:
She has a chef for her dog
She bought a condo in Prague
She owns three precogs
This girl is just like you. Just like you.

Schumer sits on a luxurious fainting couch in front of a window of fluffy clouds; an unsubtle visual metaphor.

Do I have a maid? Yes. Do I know her name? No. But I’m just like you! I still shave my own legs. I still do my own masturbing, thank you.

Schumer then goes through a few useful life hacks like “shredding your phone so internet robots who are super jelly can’t hack it” and segments like “interview a poor person” in which she interviews her blimp driver. She gets her crewmembers’ names wrong, misuses common words, uses her (real) sister as a chair, takes selfies, and promotes her lifestyle website “Engorge.biz.”

Critics did not review this celebrity sketch as positively as the show’s earlier sketches about celebrity culture. In the A.V. Club’s review of “Fame” (4.6), the episode in which the above sketch aired, Emily Stephens (2016a) asserts that if Schumer wants to connect with her audience, she needs to “stop insisting [she’s] relatable while doing segments about [her] Annie Leibovitz photo shoot.” The upshot being: she can’t have it both ways. When Schumer does the types of sketches that made her famous – sketches about more mundane, everyday experiences---she’s criticized for not acknowledging her fame. When she writes sketches skewering celebrity culture, she’s criticized for being self-involved. Schumer has always skewered Hollywood’s standards for women and celebrity culture, but she has now become a part of that culture. No longer commenting as an outsider, it has become more difficult for Schumer to draw a clear line between comic commenter and self-indulgent celebrity. While she may produce similar comedic
material, the reception of that material is read in the context of how the audience understands her as a media personality. Although Stephens claims that the season’s “fixation” on Schumer’s celebrity is tiresome, Schumer has commented on her role as a public figure in previous seasons, most famously perhaps in her episode long sketch *12 Angry Men Inside Amy Schumer* (3.3), which parodied the classic film as jurors decided whether Schumer was “hot enough for television.” However, likely because Schumer’s celebrity wasn’t at its peak, these previous sketches generally received unabashed praise from critics (Gennis 2015). Having entered the feminized world of celebrity, critics increasingly question Schumer’s comedic authenticity. Again, this shows that “authenticity” is not some inherent characteristic of comedy tied to truth or reality, but rather a means by which gatekeepers can question the validity of a stand-up comic’s material, often through gendered double-standards. In the final section, I will look at the ways in which critics disparaged Nicole Byer’s MTV series *Loosely Exactly Nicole* for drawing on her experiences as a fat, black woman in the entertainment industry in ways that didn’t live up to (mostly white) critics’ expectations of an appropriately progressive representation of young black womanhood.

**Lowbrow Comedy and Respectability Politics in *Loosely Exactly Nicole***

In the Fall of 2016, a month before Issa Rae’s highly anticipated half-hour comedy series *Insecure* launched on HBO, Nicole Byer was the only black female comedian anchoring her own scripted series. Byer, a stand-up comic and Upright Citizens Brigade alum, gained national prominence after her breakout performances on MTV’s hit series *Girl Code* (2013-present), a series in which female comic talking heads discuss the ups and downs of being a woman. MTV sought to capitalize on her newfound fame by developing *Loosely Exactly Nicole* (2016-present), a star vehicle based on her experiences as a struggling comic navigating friendships and
romantic relationships in Los Angeles. The show is based on Byer’s experiences, though it was created and is helmed by two white showrunners with oddly similar names, Christine Zander and Christian Lander. Byer had to do the heavy lifting during press appearances in assuring critics who expressed anxiety that the writing team would not capture the authentic black experience that the white writers listened to her feedback and that the four person writers room included two black writers (Jones 2016). This is an expected and necessary critique, but the labor Byer had to do in reassuring potential fans of the series speaks to the ways in which the most marginalized members of any organization are often responsible for ensuring internal diversity and managing external perception. As an emerging comic, Byer also has less power than the producers or network executives in charge, relying on them to listen to her notes but ultimately not having final say. In this way, Byer also had to manage the expectations of her audiences and critics while managing her comedy career, in which there are often few opportunities for black women.

After its first and only 10-episode season on MTV during which its initial 360,000 viewers dwindled to 150,000, the show was quietly cancelled along with two other female-led shows in a rebranding effort by the network’s new president Chris McCarthy (Andreeva 2017). The following summer, Facebook announced it was picking the series up as a part of its new video initiative and later announced an official season two to begin late 2017. The show was likely picked-up because former MTV executive Mina Lefevre, who developed the series, left the network to work for Facebook as head of development (Golberg and Jarvey 2017). Though covered more widely than Funny Girls, Loosely Exactly Nicole was reviewed heavily in the lead-up to its premiere and largely ignored after its debut. Much of the coverage, including LA Times’ and Vanity Fair’s fall television previews, lumped the series in with FX’s Atlanta (2016-present) and HBO’s Insecure (2016-present) in pieces about the growing presence of black millennials on
television (Bradley et al 2016; Braxton 2016). It’s likely that the series would not have received as much coverage if not for its association with higher prestige half-hour comedies, both of which continue to receive accolades and heavy critical attention. While praised as a part of this shift toward more inclusive programming, *Loosely Exactly Nicole* was often compared disfavorably to the other series for not being as smart, funny, or representative of black womanhood due to its broad comedy and white showrunners. The overriding anxiety in reviews and in interviews with Byer about the series stems from tension between Byer’s perceived responsibility to positively portray black womanhood and her goal to mine comedy from her messy individual experience of black womanhood. Just as with *Funny Girls* and *Inside Amy Schumer*, my goal in the exploration of these reviews is not to argue that the series is progressive, unproblematic, or hilarious but rather to highlight the double-standards inherent in the burden of authentic representation that women comics, especially women of color, face that their white, male counterparts do not. This is not a new problem, but one that has long plagued marginalized artists, especially black women. In 1990, Kobena Mercer wrote in “Black Art and the Burden of Representation:

Artists positioned in the margins of the institutional spaces of cultural production are burdened with the impossible role of speaking as ‘representatives’ in the sense that they are expected to ‘speak for’ the black community from which they come” (62).

Artists feel a sense of “urgency” around this perceived responsibility as critics often ignore “the actual work,” of black artists, instead wringing their hands over “extra-artistic issues concerning race and racism” that in obscure and ignore “the structural and institutional context” of a piece of work (61).
As one of the only sitcoms on television in the 2016 fall season centered on the experience of a black woman, and the only sitcom centered around a fat black woman, reviews expectedly focus on the role race plays in the series. Byer seemed to bristle at this focus in interviews noting that the fact that she’s a black woman “is the least interesting thing about the show” (Merry 2016). Of course, that didn’t stop reviewers from addressing it. The Washington Post notes that the series “doesn’t revolve around race,” rather, it is comparable to “other bawdy shows featuring millennials and their shenanigans” (Merry 2016). As Richard Dyer (1997) notes, “the sense of whites as non-raced is most evident in the absence of reference of whiteness in the habitual speech and writing of white people” (2). Indeed, reviewers rarely feel the need to mention the ways in which shows like Inside Amy Schumer or How I Met Your Mother do or do not “revolve around race,” even though they both are deeply embedded in narratives of upper-middle-class whiteness. Nicole Byer, though, must prove she can be just “another millennial,” by not bringing down the series with overly serious discussions of race and racism in the U.S. Byer’s attempts to downplay discussions of race in her interviews acknowledge the burden of representation placed on black women to not just be funny, but to address race and gender in an appropriately post-feminist, post-racial, in which success means rising “above racism and sexism to the point where identity categories themselves no longer exist” (Joseph 2009, 249). Comics have it hard enough just proving that they’re funny, getting cast in their own series, and selling that series to a network without the additional burden of speaking for all black women. In interviews, Byer rejected this additional job of making sure the experience of her own identity was palatable to audiences and critics.

While the Post’s review appreciates the downplaying of discussions of blackness on the show, other outlets negatively contrast Byer’s series with more prestigious series staffed by
largely black production teams. In these reviews, the critics are careful to celebrate a fat black woman fronting her own comedy before expressing disappointment that it ultimately fails to live up to the level of intelligence, humor, or progressiveness of its fellow premiering comedies. Frustration and pessimism seep into the language in these reviews marking *Loosely Exactly Nicole* as the misguided younger sister in the progressive slate of black auteur fronted television series. In a lead that echoes the *Funny Girls* reviews, *ScreenerTV* compares the series to Donald Glover’s *Atlanta*, Issa Rae’s *Insecure*, and Ava Duvernay’s *Queen Sugar*, noting that amongst such high-profile company, it might be “easy to overlook MTV’s *Loosely Exactly Nicole*” (Flores 2016). The reviewer notes that while authentic blackness is built into the DNA of these other series, *Loosely Exactly Nicole* relies on “mainstream tropes we know all too well” that “we mostly left behind in the late 2000s,” and wonders if the series will move toward “less hacky territory.” He does praise Byer’s character as “strong, unapologetic, and unafraid,” but laments that the show’s “desire for edginess on the road to success gets in Nicole’s way.” The reviewer, though, fails to acknowledge that the production environment on MTV differs greatly from HBO or FX. While the other series were developed within network structures whose brands are built on cinematic sitcoms that blend drama, absurdism, and subtle humor, MTV programming is necessarily lighter, broader, and produced for a younger, less affluent target demographic.

*The L.A. Times* (Blake 2016) similarly laments that the show “doesn’t live up to the promise of its lead.” As an outspoken, confident, and physical fat black comedian, Byer’s character is often accused in reviews of playing up the sassy black woman stereotypes that the comic frequently speaks out against on press tours and in her own stand-up. Blake worries that “some of her antics are more cringe-worthy than courageous,” and wonders if “there’s a smart show lurking inside” that he hopes “manages to escape.” In sending up race and racist tropes,
the series was also dinged by several critics for scenes, including one in which Byer “affects a stereotypically downscale accent” to get a discount at a braiding salon (1.3) and one in which she paints her babysitting charge, a young Asian boy, in blackface for an audition in which she’s supposed to have a son (1.1). *Common Sense Media* (Camacho 2016) raises similar concerns, arguing that while the show is empowering due to its “main character who’s unapologetic about her size and comfortable with her sexuality,” the “reliance on crude sexual humor” feels too “cheap,” and a reliance on racial and ethnic stereotypes makes the show’s attempts at being politically charged feel “dim and offensive.” Like similar critiques that the show’s writing is dull, insensitive, and unintelligent, the reviewer calls the jokes “more silly than smart.” This point was most emphatically made by *We Got This Covered* (Broussard 2016), in which the reviewer argues that the show is “hounded by a dearth of originality” while making sure to note that it’s still an important step forward for Byer to not only land her own show, but star in a show that makes neither her race nor weight the punchline of a joke. While the series has “the noblest of intentions,” namely that MTV is magnanimously showcasing a fat, black woman, the humor ultimately “just isn’t very funny.”

In her exploration of gender, genre, and soap operas, Christine Gledhill (1997) argues that the reliance on realism and well-roundedness as the method by which to judge television characters is not the most useful remedy for underrepresentation. The problem, she says, lies not in the “rejection of media distortions,” but the supposed remedy” (346). She goes on to state that:

We encounter very practical problems in appealing to ‘reality’ as a means of assessing the constructive work of representations. [...] The psychologically rounded character, so often appealed to as a kind of gold standard in human representation, is as much a work of construction as the stereotype (346).
Further, the well-rounded or non-stereotypical character is not an objective measure by which characters can be judged, but rather a negotiation over what constitutes reality on white, patriarchal terms. The most striking thing about these reviews is that nearly all the aforementioned negative reviews were written by white critics. Not to argue that there isn’t room to discuss the appropriateness of blackface being used for comedic effect, even if done by a black character, but within these arguments Byer is not given the benefit of operating within the free-space of stand-up comedy in which transgression is supposedly celebrated. Where Byer is called “not funny” or “dim” for sending up, commenting on, and playing with race in ways that fall outside of the bounds of good taste, her white male counterparts star in shows that critics applaud for pushing boundaries (see South Park or It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia). In these reviews Insecure and Atlanta are hailed, rightfully so, for featuring an abundance of underrepresented black talent, but also for doing so in a way that adheres to the boundaries of appropriately progressive comedy and highbrow, sophisticated, television aesthetics. Byer, the odd woman out, is dinged for transgressing the boundaries of good taste in ways that she might not have if she were a fat white woman, or a man.

In her work on black womanhood, reality television and respectability politics, Kristen Warner (2015) argues that black female representation is so scarce that any woman cast in these roles is believed to have “the power to stunt the progress black women have made in society,” making the burden of expectations placed on black women characters “nearly impossible to fulfill” (137). As I argued in the last chapter, marginalized comics are least able to joke or speak out about sexism or racism without facing backlash. It seems also that marginalized comics are also least able to *not* speak out against racism and sexism without backlash. Warner argues that “historical spirals of racism and shame yield a demand for ‘respectable’ representation,” and a
fear within the black community that multidimensional representations of black women might be seen as “airing dirty laundry” (134). This fear of loud, broad, or excessive black women characters, she argues, tends to impede “much-needed analyses of the multifaceted operations of race and media” (134). Black women face a double burden: being tasked with performing “the most entertaining versions of themselves,” while also “navigating the murky and often unintentional pitfalls of stereotypes” (135). If the authenticity mandate for stand-up comics is to make their own experiences as funny as possible to an audience, Byer faces a difficult situation as a comic who has always been loud, silly, and transgressive. Either she plays down her personality and appears inauthentic, or she attempts to mine comedy from her persona and risks being labelled a sassy black stereotype. When Byer emphatically assures critics in interviews that her show is not the “Next Great Woke Sitcom, but a specific coming-of-age story told by a non-white person,” she is signaling that even though she doesn’t feel the “need to prove her blackness to anyone” she does feel the weight of representation to the point that she needs to defend herself. Just as Amy Schumer bristles at critics labelling her a “female” comic, Byer would rather be judged as a comic, not necessarily as a black female comic. This is an example of the ways in which black women, on both scripted and unscripted series, “are often tasked with the labor of having to disarm and acknowledge their performances as not representative of their people or racial group” (Warner 2015, 135).

Not all reviews were negative, however. Several positive reviews recognized the need for a breadth of black characters on TV who don’t adhere to the “white-washed mainstream tendency to portray black characters as ‘cool’” (McGee 2016). Flavorwire (Zarum 2016), The Grio (McGee 2016), and The Ringer (Davis 2016) praise Byer’s character for portraying a “female fuckup,” a role that has “too often felt like the province of white privilege” (Zarum
Both critics see Byer’s “sexually adventurous, confident, outspoken, selfish” character not as a stereotype, but as a refreshing and funny step forward for black female representation on television. Davis (2016) calls her “mouthy, vulgar, a little bit goofy, relatable but ridiculously charming, and not afraid to infuse her broad comedy with a confident sexuality.” McGee also compares the series to *Atlanta* and *Insecure*, not disfavorably, but as a part of an “awkward revolution,” that finally highlights the “special type of diversity among black people” who “all deserve to be included in the fold.” Further, he argues that *Nicole* is “the greatest” of the three in terms of celebrating “awkward blackness” that “doesn’t fit into any of the standard norms of being a black woman in LA.” These critics see Byer’s role as inherently authentic, as if “we’re about to be let in on the real Nicole, not the happy face she presents to auditions and first dates” (Zarum 2016). Davis and McGee were among the only black critics I found who covered the show at length and two of the three major positive reviews. This isn’t to essentialize black critics as necessarily responding positively to all black-fronted television series, but rather to say that expanding the pool of critics leads to a greater depth, breadth, and nuance in discussions of the role of marginalized characters on television.

**Conclusion**

Though I have focused in this chapter on professional critics, gendered discourses of authenticity and comedy circulate in amateur reviewing spaces as well. Karen Boyle (2014) finds that spaces like IMDB, in which unpaid audience members write movie reviews, still tend to be “discursively constructed as a male space where male voices and systems of value dominate” (31). Further, she found that amateur reviewing culture reproduces structural inequalities on the grounds of gender, sexuality, race, and class. She found that reviews constructed “a discursive terrain which is distinctly male both through the gendered presentation of raters/reviews and the
in/visibility of gender as a frame of reference for film evaluation” (32). This growing research on reviews, critics, and taste shows that while we seem to have thankfully reached a point where the consensus is that women are, in fact, funny, we’re still largely judging them according to white, masculine standards of quality. The critics I’ve cited in this chapter want to celebrate women comics, but only within certain boundaries of “appropriate” taste. By celebrating women comics only when presented within masculine genres or styles, critics tend to reinforce gendered taste hierarchies, the same ones that construct certain shows – like soaps, reality shows, or melodramas- as fake, pointless, silly or at best, “guilty pleasures.”

During this research, I interviewed an old friend of mine who was serving as the director of comedy development at an L.A.-based production and management firm, and she explained that she has trouble pitching sitcoms or sketch shows starring women because executives have a narrowly defined idea of what kinds of women comics will succeed. Because those making the decisions within the entertainment industry who have the power to anoint the “next generation of comedy voices,” are still largely men, the women who succeed in comedy are those who fit into masculine, male-defined genre, voice, and comic style. However, historian Daniel Wickberg (1998) holds that “psychologists, philosophers, and others continue to treat laughter as an ahistorical phenomenon” (46), and so we hear all the time, “what’s funny is funny” or “the funniest people will succeed.” But, we know that there are structural and cultural biases within the entertainment industry that don’t allow women comics the same opportunities as men, and ideologies of authenticity and meritocracy hide these structures. One reason it’s important to study humor and jokes is that they represent and reproduce our cultural, political and social reality – but, so too do popular our discourses and ideologies surrounding those jokes. Therefore, industry gatekeeping, critical responses to comedy, and common sense ideologies about good
comedy also need to be a part of a feminist approach female-centered comedy. Good comedy is “culturally significant,” but what counts as culturally significant is gendered, raced, and classes which privileges certain forms or characteristics as “high culture.” The privileging of forms and characteristics needs to be seen not as a difference of opinion nor a standardized artistic hierarchy, but “as a part of a struggle within patriarchal culture to define reality” (Gledhill 1997, 349). In the next chapter, I turn my focus from the mediasphere to physical spaces of comedy, drawing on interviews and ethnographic data to explore how the standards of authenticity and meritocracy in stand-up comedy play out discursively and materially in local comedy scenes.
CHAPTER 4: THE GENDERED POLICING OF AUTHENTICITY IN LIVE STAND-UP PERFORMANCE

The meritocratic myth that “the best comedians succeed” ignores the reality that stand-up as an industry and a culture erects boundaries invisible to most men who don’t run up against them. The through line of this project is an exploration of the various ways in which marginalized stand-up comics often fail to find their footing in an arena governed by rules developed by and for male comics and male audiences. Whether through social media backlash, debates about the nature of stand-up comedy on masculinist terms, or gendered critiques of quality, women find the stand-up industry to be uninviting and slow to change. Thus far, I have investigated these boundaries within the context of comics well into their careers. In this chapter, I shift my focus to early-career and amateur comics. In the first two chapters, I explored both the harassment of women who try to change the norms of stand-up and the aesthetic dismissal of women as authentic comedians or humorists on television. In the next two chapters, I explore these trends on the local level to show the ways in which comedy culture and the ideology of authenticity pervades all levels of the industry.

Most scholarly theorization of stand-up comedy is based primarily on professional comics. For instance, Ian Brodie (2014) a folklorist, theorizes stand-up in terms of professional stand-up comics “where the most mercenary objective is to eventually be recorded for purposes of large-scale broadcast and attendant revenues” (19). In his sociological research or urban nightlife and comedy clubs, James M. Thomas (2015) notes the discrepancy between the study of professional and amateur comic spaces, specifically pointing out the understudied ways in which the “formal and informal rules that govern interactional order within these sites [amateur comedy performances] both enables and constrains prevailing norms of race, class, gender, and
sexuality” (6). He decenters the role of the stand-up performance in reproducing or subverting power hierarchies and instead contextualizes them within the larger urban nightlife scene. He theorizes the production of comedy within local entertainment economies rather than within the context of national media industries. He argues that the study of the “interiority” of comedy, or the “linguistic, discursive, or symbolic components of comedy” have been overemphasized to the detriment of the study of the “exteriority” of comedy, or “the spaces in which comics, good or bad, perform” (9). Anyone who has been to an open mic knows that “great comics are the exception, not the norm,” (9) and so studies of amateur, semi-professional, and early-career comics are as necessary to our understanding of stand-up as a form, subculture, and industry as the study of famous comics. By studying the contexts in which jokes are performed, we can gain a better understanding of the connection between “macro-level processes of global capital, racial, and heteronormative formations” and the “micro-level contexts” through which people negotiate and contest these processes via their everyday interactions (11).

If the previous chapters highlighted the ways in which women are thwarted once they achieve some level of industrial success and fame, the next two chapters highlight the roadblocks women face at the start of their careers, as they’re entering and working their way up through local comedy scenes. To this end, these chapters focus on the experiences of women in local stand-up comedy scenes including Champaign-Urbana, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York, though the emphasis will primarily be on Champaign-Urbana and Chicago. Through these interviews and my own experiences, these chapters explore how the aesthetic and subcultural norms of contemporary stand-up comedy often contribute to an environment that is hostile towards women and especially towards queer women and women of color. I contrast the reality of these hostile spaces with the meritocratic discourse that comedic success is equally available
to everyone. Additionally, I explore the ways in which marginalized comics work to adapt to these spaces, to change them, or to create their own. I continue to use authenticity as a framework to argue that women in local scenes are treated as outsiders constantly trying to adapt to rules of the game that reinforce masculine dominance both on and offstage.

When listing characteristics required to be successful in stand-up, the most common answers I heard from comics aside from talent were the ability to “be yourself” and the ability to be “easy to work with.” As I quickly learned, acceptance onstage as an authentic comic and acceptance offstage as a part of the comedian in-group are tightly intertwined. Frequently comics told me that to be accepted in the scene by other comics, they must first think you’re funny. As illustrated thus far, though, women comics are less likely to be read as funny according to the masculine, aggressive norms of stand-up comedy, whether they make attempts to adhere to them or not. Similarly, because humor is based on shared perspective, comics are more likely to find people who look like them -- whether in terms of age, race, gender, or sexuality-- funny. Further, because stand-up comedy is an amateur to semi-professional industry at the local level, relationships with other comics over determine a person’s success within the scene. To get booked on shows, those doing the booking need to relate to you enough to find you funny, you need to be friendly with the person booking the show. It helps a comic to have a reputation for being both funny and easy-going. Women are then automatically at a disadvantage due to the ingrained notion that they aren’t as funny as male comics and that they unrelatable and uptight off stage.

This chapter will focus on what it means to “be yourself,” while the next chapter tackles what it means to be “easy to work with.” Specifically, I will focus on the gendered policing of insider and outsider status within the comedy scene characterizes aspiring women comics as
fake, humorless, complainers. Furthering the argument I have made thus far, I will show how comedic ideologies of authenticity and meritocracy extend beyond the entertainment industries of Los Angeles and New York to local comedy scenes in ways that detract women from trying stand-up, force them out of the scene, or keep them from finding the same levels of success of men. Specifically, in this chapter I’ll focus on aesthetic norms of “being yourself” on stage, extending the discussion of critics’ reviews from the previous chapter, examining how women comics are held to double standards in which they, in practice, are never truly read as authentic, even when playing by the supposed aesthetic rules of stand-up. In the following chapter, I will unpack the idea of “being easy to work with,” specifically how it becomes a means through which to keep women and other marginalized voices from creating waves, speaking out against harassment and sexism, or more generally, making men in the scene in any way uncomfortable.

**Interview Subjects, Terms, and Methods**

First, a note about the use of the term womxn throughout this chapter. While the subjects of my first two chapters identify as cis-women, I defaulted to “woman” as a descriptive term. The following two chapters are based on interviews that encompass comedians who identify as cis, trans and non-binary, but who all share the experience of being marginalized in masculine spaces due to their gendered interpretation and expression. I find womxn to be a useful shorthand to encompass the collective experiences of being othered by gender, acknowledging that there is a difference in individual experience - particularly a difference between white womxn and womxn of color and between cis-womxn, trans womxn and non-binary performers especially within spaces billed as “for women.” As the interviews show, all my subjects have complicated relationships to their gender identity in these spaces and in their strategies for combating marginalization. Some comics do not think of themselves as marginalized nor do they identify
with any larger political movement, while others fiercely align themselves with other womxn as a political and coping strategy. Some comics who identified with womxn in masculine spaces still feel othered in feminine spaces because of their gender, sexuality, race, class, or age. I also use this term to signify that I’m not including trans men, gay men, or other male identified comics with marginalized gender or sexual identities as they were not part of my group of interview subjects. In future research, I hope to explore the underrepresentation and marginalization of a wider range of gender and sexual identities, but for the purposes of this exploratory research, I focus on womxn as a category of political identification with the experience of being treated as other in ways that align with being categorized by the industry as a “woman” regardless of any nuanced gender expression and identity.

Overall, I conducted 27 open-ended in-person and phone interviews between April 2016-June of 2017 (see Appendix B for a list of questions). To supplement these conversations, I also solicited responses to a survey that I posted on social media and in comedy Facebook groups and sent to potential interviewees that preferred the survey format (see Appendix C for survey format), to which I received 14 responses. In these interviews, we discussed comics’ experiences starting out in stand-up, gatekeeping within various comedy communities, harassment and sexism within the scene, and the growth of womxn-only comedy spaces. I went into these interviews with a set of questions, but let the interviewee guide the conversation. According to the performers’ self-identification, the 41-person total sample included 10 LGBTQ performers and 31 cis-straight performers, 31 white and 10 comics of color, comics ranging in age from 19-53, and comics who have been performing from one month to over a decade (see Appendix D for list of subjects). As the aim of this project is to understand early career and amateur comic experiences, while some of the comics have achieved high levels of notoriety in
Chicago and have toured other parts of the country, none have reached national recognition status.

In addition to drawing on the experiences of my interviewees, I flesh out my exploration of the gendered nature of local stand-up comedy scenes with my own experience performing comedy in and around central Illinois from October of 2016 to February of 2018. My experience includes attending shows as an audience member, taking a Chicago-based women’s stand-up class, starting and running a local open mic, and performing in Champaign-Urbana, IL, Davenport, IA, and Chicago, IL (see Appendix E for list of shows and spaces). While my sample is small and confined largely to a pocket of comics in central Illinois, the themes I found in these interviews is consistent with themes in the previous two chapters and represents a site for further exploration for other scholars interested in gatekeeping in local comedy spaces. Because comedy is a business built on relationships and reputation, I refer to comics by name only when in reference to a major show or class they are associated with in order to give them credit for their work and only when I’m referencing that work. In the cases of personal experiences, I use pseudonyms to preserve the relative anonymity of their identities. I debated whether to anonymize the cities, but because Chicago and Champaign have specific histories and specific comedic contexts, I thought it best to include these for a deeper understanding of the situational context.

I started my interviews with local comics I met by going to shows and asking for referrals. The snowball nature of this sample meant the subjects tended to refer me to similarly identified interviewees. For instance, because the womxn I met in Champaign-Urbana who referred me to Chicago comics were all white womxn in their early twenties, my interviews tended to be with younger college-educated women living on the North side of the city who
participated in the alternative comedy scene (which I will explain in more detail below). I
gathered more interview subjects by reaching out to groups that catered largely to this scene, and
so my sample is drawn largely from one segment of Chicago comedy. In addition to taking
recommendations from interviewees, I also searched line-ups, promotional posters, and websites
for performers, especially non-white performers, queer performers, and performers from outside
of the scene in which most of my previous interviewees were located. However, likely because I
was reaching out myself rather than through someone they knew, I did not have as much luck
cold e-mailing comics I found online.

In studying the experiences of womxn in local comedy scenes, I seek not to provide an
exhaustive account of gendered gatekeeping, but rather to give voice to these comics. Most
theories of comedy, and specifically stand-up comedy, are heavily focused on the experiences of
men (Gray 1994) and feminist attempts at decentering masculinity in stand-up comedy still tend
to focus on the performances of relatively well-known comics (Krefting 2014). My task as an
ethnographer is to, in Sara Ahmed’s (2012) words “describe a world that is emerging and to
account for the experience of that world from the points of view of those involved” (12). I am
both an insider and an outsider to the world I am describing, which helps me to understand the
ways my subjects feel like both insiders and outsiders. While I didn’t embed myself within the
Chicago comedy scene, my interviews were enriched by my experiences frequently attending
and performing in shows in Chicago and Champaign-Urbana, joining closed comedy Facebook
groups, following my interviewees on Facebook and Twitter, taking a comedy class, and running
my own local comedy show.

Ethnographers wrestle with the role of evidence and truth in the interpretation of
interview data. I don’t necessarily seek to offer my or my interviewees’ experiences as
unquestioned fact. Rather my task has been to engage with and analyze how marginalized stand-up comics describe and understand their experiences as outsiders in stand-up comedy communities. Janice Radway (2009 [1984]) explains that the goal of the ethnographer is to “infer from women’s conscious statements and observable activities other unacknowledged significances and functions” (11). As both an interviewer and a performer, I was constantly checking what my interviewees had told me against my own experience and drawing on my own experience in my questions and relationship with my interviewees. My data is drawn not only from formal interviews with comics in person, on the phone, and through digital surveys, but also my own experiences in these spaces.

Deborah Reed-Danahay (2017) describes the autoethnographer’s view as that of a boundary-crosser, a role characterized as that of a dual identity (3). In her edited collection on autoethnographic methodology, she defines the form as a “self-narrative that places the self within a social context” that is both “a method and a text” (9). I am a comedy fan and comedic performer studying comedy. I don’t see the comics I interviewed as informants and participants, but friends, colleagues, fellow comics, and acquaintances with whom I share some understanding of operating as a womxn in a male-dominated comedic space. I have been performing for longer than some of my interviewees and for much less time than many of them — therefore the line between expert and novice here is also blurred. I am an expert in my own experience and I have gathered information from womxn who are experts in theirs. Norman Denzin’s (1989) conception of autoethnography similarly blends ethnography and autobiography, erasing the lines between objective and subjective, insider and outsider; rather the researcher draws on her own life experience when writing about others and makes this very clear to the reader (6). An objective truth or a clear picture of reality is not what I’m after in this chapter. Rather, I offer an
interpretation of the experiences told me to me by comics filtered through my own experience in
and around Illinois comedy scenes.

**Stand-Up Comedy in Chicago and Champaign-Urbana**

While I talked to a few comics who work in Los Angeles and New York, most of my
interviews were with comics who perform in Chicago and Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. First I
want to give a brief overview of the contexts of these scenes. While stand-up norms and
ideologies tend to be similar across localities, they adapt to the size and demographics of a
location. While Chicago is a major city with a historically venerated comedy scene, it differs
from New York and Los Angeles in that it lacks a closeness to the industry. This relative
distance allows for more experimentation and more community building. While Chicago, like
any major arts scene, is competitive, it enjoys a more supportive comedic community due to
relatively low stakes. Comics have the freedom to experiment and find their brands and their
voices. Champaign-Urbana is heavily influenced by Chicago in its proximity to the city. Comics
from Chicago will perform in Champaign-Urbana frequently, and many comics from
Champaign-Urbana will move to Chicago once they’re ready to build a career, or, in the case of
students, once they graduate.

Chicago houses a historically prominent and growing comedy scene consisting of
improv, sketch, stand-up, storytelling, and theater performances among other niche forms. Some
comics move between spaces and some confine themselves to one form. Stand-up comedy
specifically tends to define itself as one of two major strands: club comedy and alternative
comedy. While nebulous and ill-defined, club comedy takes place in for-profit, traditional
comedy clubs in which patrons pay a cover and are held to a two-drink minimum. Spaces in
Chicago like The Laugh Factory, Zanies, Up Comedy Club, and Riddles tend to attract broader
audiences not necessarily well-versed in the comedy scene and to be popular among tourists. The profit-driven nature of these clubs means these spaces are harder to break into and historically tend to be dominated by male comics and aggressive, masculine humor. Audiences in these clubs are less likely to be comedy aficionados and more likely see a comedy club as just another type of nightly urban entertainment. Comics in these spaces are more likely to stick to a classic set-up punchline structure, familiar joke premises, stereotypes and other character shorthand, loud pitch, and aggressive tone to be heard above table chatter and break through alcohol-induced hazes. Bookers tend to be older and more traditional at clubs as well, so breaking in also requires adhering to traditionally masculine norms of comedic quality.

On the other hand, alternative comedy tends to take place in non-traditional spaces like bookstores, blackbox theaters, and comic book shops. These shows are often free or charge a small ticket fee, don’t have a drink minimum, or don’t have alcohol available at all. These also tend to be non-traditional shows with specific goals, such as women’s only shows, LGBTQ friendly shows, show featuring only comics of color; shows based around themes like body positivity or geek culture; or shows that experiment with form like The Riff, a show in which comics pull a word from a hat and improvise a new set, or Strip Joker, which combines storytelling, stand-up, and elements of stripping and burlesque. The goal of these shows is not to attract the largest possible audience and turn a profit, but rather to showcase marginalized voices, spread a message, or push the boundaries of what stand-up comedy is or can do. At times, alt-comedy and club comedy are also used as shorthand for comedic style; club comedy describes a more conservative slant, an aggressive demeanor, set-up punchline structure, and a reliance on recognizable tropes and stereotypes while alt-comedy describes experiments in form, storytelling structure, subdued voice, or overtly progressive political slant. This shorthand for style means
that a comic may perform club style comedy in an alternative room or vice-versa, or that comedy clubs may offer alternative style shows.

Finally, Chicago comedy is historically segregated between the North side and the South side. While some comics find success in both spaces, the North side tends to house both comedy clubs and the younger, more experimental alt-comedy scene in which most of my interviewees perform, the South Side draws mostly black comics and audiences and is marked by a more traditional, aggressive style. Ashley, who has performed in both locations, explained that in alt rooms on the Northside, and even in comedy clubs, audiences tend to want you to succeed and give you some leeway, while Southside rooms operate more like New York comedy clubs, in which audiences expect laughs and they expect them quickly:

Southside rooms – I love ‘em dearly, because they make you work, but at the same time they’re like…we paid money for this. And we’re gonna make sure you have a difficult time making us laugh. Now go! It’s tough!

In her history of Chicago Comedy, Margaret Hicks (2011) includes a quote from a comedy veteran describing the difference in the two scenes: “The North Side will get you famous, the South Side will get you paid” (105).

Champaign-Urbana, on the other hand, is a very small comedy community. While Chicago comics and comics from across the country come to town to perform in various locations on and off the University campus, the local Champaign-Urbana comedy scene consists largely of three locations: Clark Bar, The Blind Pig and Soma. All three locations are bars that have an agreement with local comedy groups that they can come in on certain days of the week to run shows. The Blind Pig has an open mic run by a group called DMZ Comedy at 11 PM on Monday nights that is attended mostly by other comics. The Clark Bar and Soma house shows
run by C-U Comedy, a group started by local twin brothers in their late-twenties in 2012. The Clark Bar runs an open mic Wednesday and Thursday nights in which anyone can sign up to perform by e-mailing the group ahead of time. Unlike the Blind Pig open mics, these shows are often heavily attended by audience members who aren’t themselves comics, including graduate students, undergraduates, and locals. The open mic used to be once a week, but was expanded to two nights a week due to popular demand both by comics and audience members. The show is capped at 12 performers, who perform five minutes of material each. At present, there are only two women who regularly perform at these shows and 2-3 others who perform occasionally, myself included. Most nights, the line-up consists of mostly men, though, in the past year the line-up has gotten somewhat more diverse in terms of race and sexuality. If a comic consistently performs well at the open mic, they are often invited to perform at Soma shows, which used to take place on Wednesdays, but now take place Fridays or Saturdays. Soma is a bar/nightclub with a performance space in the back. Showcase shows are usually free if performers are all local and cost between $5 and $20 when an out-of-town headliner performs. Showcases usually consist of 4-7 performers, and headliner shows usually consist of 3-5 performers. If there is a cover, local talent will be paid a small amount, around $20-$40.

In October of 2016, I started an open mic specifically for womxn called Broad Comedy with Theresa, one of the comics I interviewed for this project after she frequently lamented about being the only woman left performing comedy consistently in Champaign-Urbana. She stepped down from co-producing after a year, and I brought two of my friends, Lisa Graff and Andrew Schiver, who liked performing comedy but also didn’t feel comfortable in the C-U comedy spaces in town, to co-produce the show with me. We run the show once a month on Tuesdays from 7-9 in the back of a brightly lit pizza and coffee shop in Urbana. At first, we advertised the
open mic as open only to womxn, womxn-identifying, and non-binary performers, but have now shifted to welcoming any comics who want an alternative space to perform. I’ll discuss the show in more detail in the conclusion within an exploration of the ways in which comics are trying to create more inclusive comedic spaces.

Champaign-Urbana and Chicago offer unique sites of study in the realm of the stand-up comedy as an industry and subculture in that they are more removed from the industry than New York or Los Angeles. To become a famous stand-up comic, one needs to eventually jump from Illinois to one of the coasts. Comics performing in Chicago are either at the start of their careers, performing just for fun, or are professional comics who have creatively found a way to make money without leaving the Midwest. Studying these comics gives a clearer sense of the subcultural aspects of the scene while also providing a picture of the start of the industrial pipeline.

**Authenticity and Relatability as Norms of Performance in Local Stand-Up Comedy Scenes**

While many studies of the relationship between stand-up comics and their audiences theorize the importance of shared frame of reference, fewer discuss the ways in which the in-group dynamics requirement for a connection between an audience and comic is complicated by gender, race, sexuality or other identity markers. In this section, I’ll explore the ways in which the comics I interviewed navigated breaking into stand-up comedy while often being made to feel like outsiders by male comics and audience members due to their gender, appearance, and comedic material. I’ll also show the ways in which the common sense, unquestioned accepted practices and aesthetics of comedic authenticity are not equally available to all performers. Often when womxn try to adhere to these practices, they are often questioned, harassed, or, paradoxically read as inauthentic. The denigration of womxn in comedy for not
being funny, not being authentic, or not fitting in exposes more about the ways in which comedy adapts the same double standards womxn face in nearly every facet of their lives while shifting the blame to womxn for not fitting the historical standards of successful comedy performance.

Audiences are co-constructors of comedy, creating the environment in which performances become funny or not funny (Zillman and Cantor 1976; Billig 2005; Scarpetta and Spagnolli 2009). Because open mics are meant for new comics to get comfortable performing and for experienced comics to test new material, the jokes are often roughly written and laughs from the audience can be few and far between. Ian Brodie (2014), however, contends that open mic spaces are framed as comedic spaces by the host, the stage set-up, and the promotion of the event as a comedy show. Open mic performances are still comedy whether the audience laughs or not (88), but they aren’t always funny. How does an audience decide whether a performance is funny? Brodie defines stand-up as a performance akin to “small talk,” a mode of communication concerned with the “establishment or reestablishment of interpersonal relationship” rather than with the instrumental communication of a specific message (31). For a stand-up comedy performance to work, the comic performer and the audience must create an in-group type intimacy in which the norms of the conversation mimic those within a discussion among friends rather than the norms of public address. This means if performers are accepted by the audience as part of the in-group, performers can get away with skirting the rules of polite society and are allowed to talk about personal issues, push the boundaries of good taste, and show vulnerability. During a stand-up performance, the audience decides through their laughter whether to accept the offer of the comic’s intimacy and whether to accept the comic into the in-group (24). In terms of authenticity and gatekeeping, the extent to which an audience accepts or rejects a comic is based both on the way the performer is treated or acknowledged by the host and other
performers in the show and by the acceptance of the performer by the audience as *one of us* based on their reading of a performer’s identification, appearance, and material. The newer a performer is within a space, the more important cues from the regulars and audience identification becomes to their ultimate acceptance. Before a performer has a following or name-recognition, they must win the audience to their side by creating an in-group either through the inviting in by another comic or by sharing a frame of reference, experience, or point of view with the audience. Essentially, comedic performers are read as funny if the audience accepts them as part of the group; however, womxn have a much harder time with winning this acceptance.

*The Sexualization and Embodiment of Womxn Comedians*

The host’s introduction is the first signal to the audience of an unknown performer’s status within the group. If the host welcomes the performer as a friend, colleague, or with an assurance of the performer’s talent (ie, “Please welcome the next comic to the stage, a good friend and one of the funniest people I know!”) the audience is primed to give the performer the benefit of the doubt, at least for the beginning of the set. Many of my interviewees recounted the ways in which a host’s introduction immediately objectified or characterized them as an outsider, usually in terms of race, sexuality or gender. The most common intros that marked the performer as an outsider were those that sexually objectified or called out the feminine appearance of the comedian. Within comedy circles, comics form bonds by making fun of one another, therefore it’s not uncommon for hosts to introduce a friend by mocking them. This signals that the comic is part of the group and game enough to take a joke. However, insults between men are traded and understood by audiences as different from insults aimed at womxn by men, especially by men that they aren’t friends with. Insults that call attention to womxn
comics as sexual objects instead serve to belittle them, render them to an outgroup status, and undermine their subjectivity, making it hard for them to immediately command the attention of an audience.

For instance, Katie, a comic in her 30s who has been performing for a decade, told me that she’d been the target of countless introductions by male comics over the years that called her out as the “token” womxn comic, made a comment about her appearance, or characterized her as a sex object. She likened these introductions to an extra reminder that she didn’t belong in comedy and had to constantly be proving that she was a real comic:

The general feeling of you don’t belong here, is just kind of a thing. And an extra “prove it.” Also, I’ve had terrible intros. I had a guy in Madison introduce me – or extroduce me -- by saying: “She’s pretty funny, I’d fuck her.”

Other comics told me they were tired of being called out as “the lady comic” on the line-up or being introduced with a reference to their appearance or sexual prowess. Several comics told me of times that the host or other comics would refer to their material to riff about having sex with them. Womxn consistently deal with being excluded via excessive embodiment. Straight, white men, as the assumed default, are able to be defined through their material much more easily than womxn are. Whiteness, maleness, and straightness are unmarked positions, still allowing them to be the default in pop culture representations. This allows these comics to be read as normal, regular, or invisible, allowing them to define themselves as unique individuals through their jokes. On the other hand, womxn, men of color and queer men (though not the specific focus of this chapter) are forced to define themselves as or against what makes them other, which is first apparent in their physical appearance.
One of the clearest examples of this anxiety came across in discussions of what womxn wear on stage. Brodie (2014), who largely focuses on male comics in his theorization of comedy defined by in-group intimacy, observes that most comics tend to dress like their audiences (75). Further, in his brief discussion of women’s appearances on stage, he contends that since the 1980s women dress “less caricatural” than they once did and now “wear on stage what they would wear were they going to see themselves perform” (78). However, this explanation of womxn’s onstage appearance greatly oversimplifies and flattens the power dynamics present in the anxiety womxn deal with over what to wear on stage. Brodie’s contention works if we also acknowledge that most womxn, whether on or offstage, worry about what they will wear in public so as not to garner unwanted attention or negative reactions. Womxn on stage and in the audience likely have been taught that they have are responsible for negative reactions to their bodies by others, and in this way, womxn comedians do dress similarly to how they would if they were going to see themselves perform. However, his explanation fails to acknowledge the anxiety that goes into the decision over what to wear, an anxiety I heard from nearly all my interview subjects.

Linda Mizejewski (2014) notes that women comics were historically forced to operate within a pretty/funny binary, where comics were not allowed to be both simultaneously. They often had to choose whether to be pretty or funny. Now famous comics are expected to be both classically pretty and funny. While comics often try to subvert or play with these norms, they are still nearly always defined as or against their bodies (5). This binary seemed to be felt by most of my interviewees. Most comics had anxiety both about looking attractive and looking unattractive onstage. They tended to agree that there were no good options, because they would be defined against their appearance no matter what. While most seasoned comics acknowledged
that their appearance and outfits were more of a concern early in their careers or experiences performing, nearly all of them - both new and experienced - had stories about an audience member or fellow comic commenting negatively on their appearance or giving them unwanted sexual attention. Ashley told me about one of her first open mic experiences performing on the South Side of Chicago when she decided to wear something overtly feminine:

This dude was like “You’re not going to get anywhere looking like that. First of all you’re attractive […], and the girls in there aren’t going to want to listen to you and the guys are going to be trying to fuck, and they’re not going to be listening to you.”

I heard this sentiment from many comics: both that men wouldn’t be able to pay attention to womxn’s jokes if they were too attractive and that women in the crowd would get jealous or worry about their dates’ wandering eyes. I heard no stories, however, about women telling comics that they were distracted or jealous of their appearance on stage, so I’m apt to believe that men claiming female jealousy is more rampant than any actual jealousy that is occurring.

Queer comics faced an extra level of discomfort in performing their gender identity appropriately on stage, not only worrying about the perception of their appearance, but also in acting as a member of an underrepresented group in front of a potentially hostile audience. Because stand-up requires the building intimacy with an audience, comics learn to frame themselves differently, in appearance and material, depending on if they’re already an accepted member of the audience’s identity group. Sam, who had been performing for about five years told me that they felt the pressure of serving as a stand-in for the queer community for audiences of largely cis-identified, straight people:
As a queer performer, I feel like I need to be very aware of how I look for certain venues and audiences. The way I style my hair, even the things I choose to talk about at certain venues gets put through a filter.

Not only did queer comics talk about figuring out what material they could and couldn't use in front of primarily largely non-LGBTQ audiences, they also took caution to present themselves in ways that didn’t feel exploitative of their identity. They often felt they couldn’t really be themselves in front of these audiences because they worried some aspects of their identity or appearance might read as reinforcing stereotypes or that audiences would laugh at them rather than with them.

Nearly all womxn I talked to worry about the appropriate performance of femininity on stage, wanting to avoid stereotypes about femininity with their appearance, to be taken seriously as comics, and to avoid being hit on after the shows. However, what nearly all the comics told me was that they were locked in an ongoing battle between looking too pretty or not pretty enough or looking too feminine or not feminine enough. I found that comics generally felt like they were stuck in a lose-lose situation wherein they felt like men didn’t take them seriously unless they looked attractive but also didn’t take them seriously if they found them too attractive on stage. Some comics told me that “hot” womxn got more laughs because men wanted to impress them. Conversely, womxn told me that they felt like they weren’t allowed to look “too girly” by showing cleavage, wearing too much make-up, or looking too nice, because pretty women aren’t taken seriously or are seen as a threat. Interviewees also worried about their weight, though I got the sense many womxn felt that they audiences didn’t take them seriously regardless of their body type. Lacking data on laugh frequency vs perceived hotness of a comic, it’s hard to say to what extent these feelings would bear out empirically, but it’s obvious from
these interviews that most comics feel they face a double-bind when it comes to their performance of femininity and their own embodiment. It seems womxn comedians face pushback, harassment, and exclusion no matter what they decide to look like or wear, just as womxn do within our culture at more generally. This double-bind in stand-up is therefore not shocking. Womxn also tended to express frustration that they didn’t see men dealing with similar pressure to present a certain way on stage. Comics frequently told me that men could be “schlubby” or could “wear sweatpants or ripped jeans” on stage and still be seen as serious comics, whereas womxn felt like they needed to put in effort. Comics did tend to become less concerned with their appearance the longer they had been performing, because they were more confident that their talent overshadowed their appearance, they felt more accepted and well-known within the scene, they decided to be pickier about where they would perform, and they realized they would be treated in sexist ways no matter how they dressed. The more experience a comic has, the more confident they get in their ability to relate to an audience or win over an audience despite their appearance. Ashley followed up her story about the first time she performed at an open mic with an explanation of her growing comfort with her appearance:

But then I had a moment when I was like – I think I’m attractive even if I’m in sweatpants, so it doesn’t really matter. If you think I’m attractive, you’re going to think that regardless of what I’m wearing. And I just focused on the jokes, and I thought, well if the jokes are good enough it won’t matter. And I have found that to be true.

Relatability and being the only one on the line-up

This additional pressure means women not only need to work on writing and performing good material, they also must concern themselves with the appropriate performance of their gender and sexual identity. It’s not a question of “what’s the funniest way to present myself,” but
a question of: what’s funny but also not drawing on harmful stereotypes? What’s funny but isn’t going to get me harassed after the show? What’s funny but won’t distract from my jokes? If stand-up comedy is an artful communication defined by intimacy and shared points of view, femininity marks comics as outsiders and threats to the traditional aggressive masculinity of most traditional, mainstream comedic spaces. Talent, good writing, and other attributes celebrated under the guise of meritocracy often become less important than the ability of the performer to relate to the audience and for the audience to see truth in a comedian’s identity or message. The importance of relatability means that womxn are put at an immediate disadvantage, needing to work harder to be seen as part of the group and therefore to be accepted as funny. The old adage “it’s funny because it’s true,” begs the question “true to who?” To seem authentic, womxn often have to shift their personae and material to fit into spaces and shows dominated by men, and womxn of color have to fit their personae to fit into shows dominated by men and by white women. Sruthi, an Indian-American comic in her 40s told me:

So you’ll still see all white male and white female line-ups all the time. Zanies does a monthly thing that they call “Female Funnies” and every single person on that show is white. And I’m like - oh my God there’s nobody who looks like me.

Being the only womxn, person of color, or queer comic on a line-up means a comic is likely facing an audience that largely doesn’t look like them. A comic outside of the in-group is required to perform their identity to a degree of verisimilitude that reads as authentic to a potentially hostile or at least ignorant audience. To be accepted by the audience and the other comics, womxn have to perform in ways that are legible, understandable, and recognizable. Often, if they follow the adages of “be yourself” or “tell your truth” or “be vulnerable,” on stage - all often collapsed under the guise of comedic authenticity - audiences don’t find them funny or
don’t understand their references, get angry or upset at their content, or feel entitled to their bodies even when they are offstage. Womxn are often set up to fail if they try to play by the rules as they understand them.

A common punchline that doubles as an immediate connection to the audience is the reliable pop culture reference. However, a connection via reference requires the comic and the audience to share taste and background. This was another common complaint, especially from black comics who felt they had to tailor their set depending on their audience. They told me that while they were expected to understand *Game of Thrones* and *Friends* references, white audience weren’t expected to understand references to shows like *Moesha* or *A Different World*. Again, comedians need to connect with the audience for references to land, or for the point-of-view in the act to be congruous with the audience’s. This means that black comics in white spaces or womxn in male spaces will often see the jokes that ring true for them personally fall flat, because they don’t share a frame of reference to the audience. Amy Seham (2001) also found this was a common complaint in her interviews with improv performers; womxn and performers of color were always expected to play on the field of white, male performers with no effort on the part of the majority to understand references other than their own. This is another instance of the white, male, heterosexual frame of reference remaining the default except in rooms specifically produced for diverse audiences. Two black performers, Andrea and Kari, who co-produce a show specifically for women of color explained how being in white spaces means they can’t speak as their true selves, because the audience often won’t get the jokes they want to tell:

It’s that expectation of the majority of the country and the comedy scene is white so you should alter yourself to make sure you know everything we’re talking about but they don’t have to do the same for us. Like their cultural references just are a fact.
Comics who are told that to be good comics, you must be your authentic self, don’t have the opportunity to speak as themselves in white spaces because majority culture requires an adherence to a certain set of references and experiences. The rules as set forth by meritocratic comedy norms don’t apply equally. White men can be themselves, while black women must change their frame of reference to succeed in a majority of spaces. Because pop culture references are, at least in the United States, associated with a highbrow sense of humor and play into cultural distinction, the reading of pop culture references has an exclusionary effect (Kuipers, Sociology 222). Black womxn, and all non-white male comics, must play on the field of acceptable cultural references as dictated by the tastes of white male comics and comedy fans, to the detriment of their ability to perform their identities as they want.

Judith Butler (1990) describes the performativity of gender as a process of naturalization through repetition as individuals learn to perform socially acceptable forms of gender identity. While comedy is often thought to upend social norms and question the status quo, often comics paradoxically feel the pressure to conform to appropriate gender expression on stage. To advance, get booked, or even get laughs at an open mic, comics need to perform their gender, race, and sexuality in ways that the audience recognizes. Not to put too fine a point on it, but marginalized comics often draw on what Butler calls “strategies of survival within compulsory systems” (139) to keep from being dismissed from the stand-up scene. Not only do they need to be funny and to seem naturally themselves, but they need to perform a version of their identity that adheres to the norms set by an industry dominated by straight, white, masculinity.

Jason Zinoman (2011), the comedy critic for The New York Times wrote a notorious profile on Eddie Brill, David Letterman’s long time comedy booker, that encapsulates the ways in which masculine definitions of authenticity in comedy keep women from being taken
seriously. At the time the article was published, Brill was 53 and, Zinoman argued, “the most influential comic you’ve never heard of,” running workshops, judging stand-up comedy contests, and trading on his job with Letterman to brand himself a comedy guru. When he started on the show in 2001, he also booked all of the stand-up comedy spots on the influential late-night show. His taste in comedy was incredibly important to the success of many comics’ careers. And because he acted as a mentor to other comedy bookers, he likely had an outsized influence, especially before the recent proliferation of stand-up specials and outlets on streaming services like Netflix. Most notably, he told Zinoman that he looks first and foremost for “honesty and vulnerability,” even though as a comedian he knows honesty and vulnerability are performances. Unsurprisingly, only one woman comedian was booked in 2011. The general trend of comics who were booked was “white, middle-aged guys from the Midwest,” or comedians who looked like Eddie Brill.

Comedy taste is based on shared reference, and we see truth in experiences that ring true to us. The inability of older, straight, white men to understand the perspective of a queer black woman or a young Latina comic will stifle marginalized comics’ careers and perpetuate the white boys’ club of stand-up comedy. Brill explained that he didn’t often book womxn because he thinks that there are “a lot less female comics who are authentic” and that he doesn’t like when “female comics who to please an audience will act like men.” This quote assumes a lot: that he knows what any of these comics act like, that gender is a strict binary that divides all possible behavior into two categories, and that all comics who identify as women tell the same kind of jokes. When he explains what makes the comics he likes “authentic” it becomes clear that he’s using a meaningless term to justify his specific taste for comedians who look and act like he does. In a sign that the industry at least wants to appear more inclusive, Brill was fired
shortly after this article was published for lashing out at critics who took issue with his
comments. Regardless of his fate, the article makes clear that comedy gatekeepers - bookers,
critics, other comics, and audiences - often objectify their subjective taste, assuming that their
taste is fixed and universally valid in an effort to legitimize their job and claim comedic
authority. Of course, as I’ve been arguing, while funny and authenticity are subjective
characteristics, gatekeepers yield them to mark marginalized voices as outsiders and allow
entrance to comedic spaces only on the terms of white, masculine gatekeepers. Admitting that
stand-up comedy doesn’t have to only be one thing is to let go of the power to dominate the
industry. Authenticity has become a shorthand for ‘merit,’ an idea whose point is not to reward
or promote the best comics but to “act as a safeguard against a reduction in privilege on the part
of those wielding it” (Littler 2018, 159).

Comics understand this masculine gatekeeping, and explained that they often felt the
need to play to the tastes of male comics and audiences regardless of the actual demographic
make-up of a space. Many interviewees felt that it didn’t matter what womxn in the audience
thought was funny, the key to their success lied with making men laugh. As Olivia, an Indian-
American comic in her early 20s, noted:

    So if they [men] don’t think you’re funny, you’re less likely to get hired. I even feel that
    pressure – I have to make jokes that men find funny. But I never think “I need to make
    jokes that women think are funny.”

In practice, making men laugh often means playing to stereotypes that are legible to the
majority’s experience and understanding of marginalized performers. Authentic takes on a
Baudrillardian aura: performers don’t need to make their actual experience legible to audiences,
they need to perform simulacra of their experiences based on the representations white, male
audiences have seen repeated in popular culture. This means womxn performers, especially womxn of color, are recognizable as authentic and funny only when playing into stereotypical expectations that are read as typical experiences to white, male audiences.

While some feminist humor scholars like Regina Barreca (1988) often want to claim that womxn’s laughter is inherently feminist, arguing that, “anytime a woman breaks through a barrier set by society, she’s making a feminist gesture of a sort” (182), Gray (1994) says we must also recognize the pain often faced by womxn who break into any male dominated field. Gray explains that “the breaking of silence can bring its own pain, for one enters most fields of discourse on male terms” (13). Rebecca Krefting (2014) found that marginalized comics often play up stereotypes about themselves in order to find early success in front of potentially hostile audiences. Only once they find success and name recognition did the comics she interviewed feel comfortable talking about their actual experiences and pushing back against stereotypical narratives about their identities. One tactic womxn often use to break into comedy is to play into tropes of femininity: the spinster, the unruly body, the nagging wife, or the ditsy blonde. Kristen, who had moved to LA and so was closer to the industry, told me that while she never noticed a difference in how she was treated when she started performing in Florida, now that she was auditioning for networks and studios, she could see that her style was starting to confuse bookers. When she took meetings or performed in showcases, she kept getting asked to fit into a different mold or trope, which generally lined up with whichever female comic was the most famous at the time:

But it’s like – oh you’re not really what we think a female comedian should be. So try to be more like that [feminine, sexy etc]. So it’s much more of a struggle now trying to be unique. It seems like every few years there’s a new – there’s only one female comedian at
a time seems to be able to be exploding. [...] So when I’m doing shows for industry, they’re like – oh well can you be a little more like Amy Schumer? [...] I have to be what people think I need to be as opposed to what I actually am.

Comics are not only compared to feminine stereotypes, but to a handful of popular female comedians like Tina Fey, Amy Schumer, or Sarah Silverman. While male comedians can be unique and break new ground, mainstream networks and studios want to fit womxn into already recognizable types. Womxn of color that I talked to in Chicago talked of this happening to them much more often than the white womxn I spoke with. For instance, two Indian-American comics told me they were frequently compared to Mindy Kaling just because she is the most visible Indian-American woman comic right now, despite the fact that the three of them are very different from one-another in terms of appearance, material and disposition. Sruthi is a comic in her mid-40s who performs political humor while Olivia is in her early-twenties and talks mostly about gender and mental illness. They have completely different styles that bear no resemblance to Mindy Kaling, who despite being a comedy writer and actress, doesn’t even do stand-up comedy.

The flip side of bearing the burden of representation for a group is the worry that you’ll say or do something that reflects poorly on your community. This worry was voiced to me by most comics. Womxn worried about promoting female stereotypes by talking about sex, dating, and their appearance. Black comics worried about promoting stereotypes of angry black women by yelling on stage. Mia, a latinx trans comic told me that she worried that talking about her body in ways that felt truthful to her would cause the audience to objectify her in ways she didn’t want or to upset fellow trans people in the audience who were being constantly harmed by
objectification of their bodies. She noted that balancing her identities as a trans woman, a comic, and an activist was often difficult:

My truth as an activist and as a stand-up comic is different from other trans’ people’s truths. My experience is mine. So when I choose to objectify my own body, I’m calling it out because that’s the hard part of my life. I’m 100% woman, but my body is different. But making that statement, I don’t want anyone else to objectify me in that way. So, I’ve had trans people be like, that’s really offensive, and then I’ve had trans people say, you’re telling my story.

I heard similar stories from most of the comics, but especially from comics of color and queer comics. There was an underlying tension between telling one’s story and “hurting the cause,” especially in front of mixed-crowds. The burden of under-representation both makes comics feel the need to play to stereotypes, but also the added pressure of being a model representative for their group. Many comics worried that pushing boundaries - what one is expected to do in comedy - might be read as problematic because it plays into certain assumptions about their group. This is, of course, an untenable position in which a comic must balance their story with the needs of their community and their desire to get laughs. Adhering to the requirement in comedy to “speak your truth or “tell your story” is complicated for marginalized comics and requires additional work, concern, and precision.

Many of my interviewees also mentioned the ways in which they felt like they had to fit into what they saw as masculine norms of stand-up when they started while some criticized this tendency in others. Sruthi told me she saw this pressure in other comics:
When I first got into the scene I noticed two things - women felt that they had to have very strong opinions about sex and be very vocal about it or they felt they had to act very loud and aggressive on stage, and I feel that both are a shorthand for a male persona.

Gray (1992) confirms these exact strategies in her theorizing of gender and the norms of comedy, noting the tension womxn face in adhering to patriarchal attitudes while simultaneously trying to subvert them. She argues that a comic often has three options when breaking into stand-up. The first is that she can “act like a man,” by being aggressive, outspoken, and overly confident (137), though this risks the audience turning on her if they find masculine behavior off-putting in womxn. Second, she can “efface the very personality that is her stock and trade,” through self-deprecation (137). The caveat is that self-deprecation works only if it is “perceived to be an act” (137). To command an audience, a comic needs to command the audience and be seen as in control. This requires a careful balancing act between the confidence required to retain authority and the aggression that some audiences find too threatening coming from a womxn. Alternatively, if a comic’s self-deprecation is read as too sincere, the comic may lose the audience by not commanding enough respect. Finally, a comic may exploit their sexuality to the point that it “teeters on the edge of parody” (141), playing into and making fun of the patriarchal status quo. This, though, can backfire by inviting male audience members to cat call or yell sexually suggestive comments. Sexual availability, she argues, is a game that “may send up male pretension” but that also “signals a willingness to negotiate on familiar patriarchal territory” (141). These strategies reveal that womxn in stand-up face a never-ending series of double-binds that make visible the slippery rules of a game that historically sets up marginalized comics to doubt themselves and to be doubted by mainstream audiences and gatekeepers.
Another aesthetic of authenticity often linked to stand-up is the act of confession or exposing one’s innermost thoughts, desires, and feelings. Laura Lake Smith (2017), drawing on the work of Foucault (1978), explores the ways in which confession is a form of contemporary storytelling that often must adhere to a rigid set of artistic standards to seem truthful to an audience. She contrasts this with a more traditional understanding of authenticity as sincere truthful admission. In his work, Foucault insists that one’s “hidden essence” need not be revealed in a confession, rather, confessions function as a spectacle and performance of truth (1978, 53-73). Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) explores these types of performances within the confessional culture of YouTube video producers, noting that disclosure and transparency in these contexts becomes a moral obligation in which producers promise their viewers a full accounting of their inner selves (60). Dubrofsky and Ryalls (2014) refer to this act of seeming natural under surveillance as “performing not performing,” or the demonstration of lack of artifice to an audience. The authentic self paradoxically becomes the performance of transparency or a spectacle that draws attention to a lack of artifice.

The spectacle of transparency and the moral obligation to strip oneself down to some bare existence are both characteristic of contemporary stand-up comedy. To be fake, to try too hard, to not “be yourself,” to not speak in your own voice, or to take jokes from others are then both moral failures and signs of a bad comic. Even critics and scholars tend to invoke these characterizations of stand-up comedy. Cultural critic Lawrence Mintz (1985) classically compared performing stand-up comedy to being “naked” on stage. Similarly, David Marc (1989/1992) described the stand-up comic as “a naked self, eschewing the luxury of a clear-cut distinction between art and life” (13). Judith Yaross Lee (2012) argues that stand-up comedy announces itself as a “performance of an exposed individual” (28). When I asked why my
subjects gravitated toward stand-up, I usually got answers explaining how the performance allowed them to be vulnerable and truthful:

- You’re allowing yourself to be vulnerable in front of an audience, and I think that’s the most gratifying thing [….. ] performing is one of the hardest things for a human being to do because you’re afraid of what other people will say (Kate).

- What you get from me is what my life is – I’m telling you the truth about my life (Heather).

- I love humor as: humans are flawed, humans are in pain, laughter eases tension. And that beauty of it crosses all genders, all races, all whatever, because we’re all in pain in different ways (Katie).

In the best circumstances, when a comedian feels comfortable in a room and shares a point of view with a friendly audience, stand-up comedy can absolutely be a transformative experience for both the performer and the audience. Olivia, for instance, told me she felt like she was more herself on stage, because she talked about issues like depression in her comedy that she didn’t feel comfortable talking about with her friends offstage. In my own performance experience, I’ve also felt the ability to talk about sensitive issues like body issues and sex that I don’t bring up in conversations with my friends and family, even when my friends have been in the audience. In this way, I don’t think that comics are more themselves on stage, but that the position of performer gives a comic the distance with which to feel comfortable discussing sensitive subjects. Lawrence Mintz (1984) refers to this phenomenon as “comedic license,” in which audiences allow for the pushing of boundaries or to broach taboo subjects. Comics also internalize this license, giving themselves permission to talk about topics they may be scared to
talk about offstage. While comics often describe this as an authentic experience, in fact it’s the artificiality, distance, and performance of stand-up that allows them to broach subjects with confidence that they may not feel comfortable discussing with friends and family. In this way, stand-up isn’t “small-talk” per se, but the performance of small-talk within a frame that allows more leeway to performers to feel confident taking risks.

To feel free to say things on stage that connects your experience to the audience’s, to make other people feel less alone, to speak the emotional truth of a shared experience, or to bring light to a story that often goes untold can make stand-up feel important and powerful. However, unfriendly audiences often reject, ignore, or misunderstand the truth that marginalized comics want to speak. While most of my subjects expressed a love of stand-up because of the license it gives to explore personal, painful, and controversial topics, they also noted a myriad of hurdles they faced to fully expressing themselves on stage. One reason for this may be that audiences are often uncomfortable with displays of female vulnerability or emotion. Regina Barreca (1988) observes that male comics who perform anger are usually seen as “letting off steam” or being “cathartic” while womxn are characterized as “bitchy”, “crazy”, or “shrill” (94). Femininity is often culturally constructed as performative, unnatural, artificial – or even distracting or threatening -- in ways that masculinity isn’t. Womxn often see their femininity as a hurdle to be taken seriously in comedy.

Comics frequently talk about sex and their bodies as a way to either signal vulnerability or to connect with an audience. However, womxn are often held to a different standard by audiences and fellow comics when they talk about sex, even fellow womxn comics. For instance, several of my interviewees told me that they’ve seen a lot of younger womxn comics relying heavily on talking about sex, masturbation, and dirty humor in an effort to signal that
they’re able to perform crassness or fit into the boy’s club. There was often an air of superiority in these reports from more seasoned comics, and they tended to make the argument that these womxn were using gross-out humor as a form of fake masculine aggressiveness rather than as a way to speak some truth about themselves. This speaks to the blurry line between appearing vulnerable and appearing to be trying too hard. “Trying too hard,” on stage is often the mark of inauthenticity to audiences and other comics. “Trying too hard” is a shorthand that signifies not that comics aren’t being themselves but that they aren’t adequately hiding the performance of themselves-ness. Womxn are more susceptible to being accused of trying too hard or putting on a fake personality, because of the widespread cultural assumption of feminine artificiality. For instance, a few months after I started performing, one of the creators of C-U Comedy told me that he liked my material because it was “more observational” than other womxn’s material and that I didn’t “just talk about sex.” This was after a performance in which nearly every male comic on the line-up mentioned his penis at least once. This accusation that womxn comics talk about sex too much, that queer comics talk about their sexuality or gender too much, or that comics of color talk about race too much are common complaints thrown at marginalized comics that reinforce an assumption of white, straight, male neutrality. If an unmarked comic makes a joke, they are seen as speaking their truth only for themselves, while marginalized comics are speaking for a group, proving a trend, or trying too hard. Comics frequently told me that they’d been criticized by audiences for swearing on stage, for talking about sex, or for telling dirty jokes because it wasn’t appropriately feminine. Heather, who quit comedy after a year performing in Champaign-Urbana when she grew frustrated with the harassment and negative feedback she often faced as a woman who told jokes about sex and bodily functions on stage, told me a story about talking about anal sex on stage:
And then after the show I had a girl tell me how inappropriate it was and how un-lady like it was. And it’s a total double standard. If a guy did that joke – there would be no problem. […] And I can’t talk about pooping, farting – can’t talk about that stuff because I’m a ‘lady.’

This story illustrates that womxn comics don’t just get pushback from men in the audience; womxn who subscribe to certain ideologies of proper femininity will also call out womxn for their jokes. Thus, even when they aren’t talking about a topic that is overtly sexual, just discussing the truth of their love-lives can invited criticism or aggression from an audience. Kate, a comic in her thirties in an open marriage, says she stopped trying to talk about her relationship when performing on the road in the Midwest, because audiences were often too uncomfortable with the topic. Even in Chicago, she said:

I make jokes about my marriage situation and people react with disgust. I can’t talk about any of that part of my life on stage, and I have some good jokes like, I thought I attracted slimeballs before – stuff like that. But they don’t work because I’m a woman and people think it’s gross for me to want to have multiple partners. But if I were a man, it would be a different story. They see it as me cheating on my husband, whatever, that’s not it at all. They don’t understand the dynamics.

Womxn are told to tell the truth on stage, but in reality they often have to perform telling the kind of truth an audience finds tasteful, believable, and appropriate. Further, while comics, fans, critics, and scholars alike often praise stand-up for its directness and vulnerability, the blurring of the line between onstage and offstage persona often puts women at risk of unwanted sexual and physical attention, especially when performing sets about their own sexuality. Because women are generally defined by and against their bodies (Rowe, 2011; Mizejewski,
2014), the performance of raw, personal material within masculine spaces often intensifies societal expectations of public ownership over female bodies. While such raw performances are often praised as vulnerable, such material attracts differing levels of unwanted attention once performers leave the stage. Annie, a comic in her twenties, told me a version of a story I heard from nearly all of the comics I talked to:

And I joke about sex and my sexual history and I think that gives men this idea that I’m down for anything because I talk about it. [One time], this guy came up after and was like “Oh when are we gonna hook up?” I said my back was hurting and he started massaging me without me saying that it was ok. And there is another man who comes to a bunch of comedy shows and I made a joke about blow jobs, and he came up to me after and whispered in my ear, “Oh, I bet you 100 dollars I’ll give you the best sex of your life.” They assume just because we talk about it, we’re ready to do it right then and there. Which, if a man goes up and talks about having sex with a woman I’m not gonna go up to him and ask if he’ll have sex with me. I know it’s just a story or a joke.

Almost every comic I talked to told me of situations in which men justified their harassment by referring to the comic’s material. Jade, a comic in her late-20s who is also a burlesque performer, compared it to taking her clothes off onstage. She explained that both in comedy and burlesque she constantly had to deal with men who thought they were being given ownership of her body because she showed it off or talked about it onstage. The ideology of comedic authenticity and the blurring of the lines between the self and the performer is troubling within a culture that already treats womxn as sexual objects and public property. It is safer and more allowable for men to talk about sex and their bodies on stage because they have ownership over their own bodies and freedom to draw humor from them without risk. While Judith Yaross Lee
Conclusion: Caught in a Comic Double-Bind

The idea that comedy is essentially a free and safe space in which taboos, anti-social desires, and non-normative ideas can be more easily and acceptably expressed is echoed in many popular and academic accounts of the form. Porter (1998) describes comedy as “essentially an anarchic form that consistently resists notions of political correctness and polite behavior” (66). Littlewood and Pickering (1998) invoke this idea as well, adding that any attempt to question moral implications of humor is “doomed to failure for the simple reason that it mistakes the very nature of the comic impulse” (291). However, as Stuart Hall (1980) argues, the abstraction of texts from the social practices which produce them obscures the “ways in which particular ordering of cultures come to be produced and sustained” (27). Authenticity, truth, and vulnerability are often held up as standards of stand-up comedy performance. However, these avenues aren’t equally available or safe for all comics, nor are they read the same in all comics. It’s important to interrogate the ideological assumptions we (as a culture and as scholars) make about merit and authenticity in stand-up and how these parameters are tied to gender, race, and class.

Sarah Schaefer (2015) a comic known for speaking out about the double standards womxn face in comedy tweeted a picture of a tongue-in-cheek “Comedian To-Do List” with two separate lists for male and female stand-up comics. They read:
Male Comic To Do List: be funny

Female Comic to Do List: be funny.

Be pretty.

But not TOO pretty!!!

Be feminist

But not TOO feminist!

Make sure all your ideas will appeal to a male audience as well.

Don’t make fun of your body too much.

Don’t talk about sex too much.

Don’t! Criticize! Men! In! Your! Business!

Solve climate Change.

Redefine beauty.

Don’t turn 40.

Her list captures, much more succinctly than this chapter does, the additional emotional and immaterial labor womxn must put in to be taken seriously in comedy and hits home the point that no matter what they do, womxn will be criticized for not being funny the right way. More to the point, the comments under her initial post accusing her of “whining” or “complaining because she isn’t funny enough” or ignoring the fact that comedy is hard for men too, again show the further backlash comics receive if they call attention to this unspoken set of additional expectations and double-standards. Heather, one of my interviewees, put it more succinctly than even Schaefer did: “Curse less. Curse more. Look cuter. Look bitchier. There's no way to win.”

In this chapter, I argued meritocratic discourses of authenticity in comedy mask and reproduce the cultural power dynamics at play within comedic performance. Appeals to honesty
ignore the ways in which stand-up comedy is itself just a type of performance of the self, and one that requires a different, often sexist, set of standards from comedians who aren’t straight, white men. Theorizing comedic performance must take into account not only recorded, polished performances by well-known comedians, but also the labor that goes into writing and performing a set, even at the open mic level. Additionally, we must recognize the work that comedic capital plays in reception of stand-up performances both by audiences and by other comic and industrial gatekeepers. To theorize comedic performance without an understanding of the labor that goes into every stage of a comic’s career is to ignore much of the experience of what it means to be a stand-up comic, and flattens comedy into an artistic form equally available to all potential performers. Without an understanding of how performers are treated in their early careers, we miss the full picture of why white, straight, men continue to dominate the upper echelons of mainstream comedy success, despite slowly growing parity within the industry. In the next chapter, I expand this exploration by looking not only at the labor that goes into comedic performance and the reception thereof, but also the role that networking and hang-out culture play in the success of stand-up comedians.
CHAPTER 5: INFORMAL NETWORKING AS GATEKEEPING IN LOCAL STAND-UP SCENES

Sociologists who study career paths have examined the trajectories of stand-up comics as cultural production workers to understand the norms undergirding their “seemingly disorderly career paths” (Reilly 2017, 146). Through his five-year participant observation study of stand-up comics in Los Angeles, Patrick Reilly (2017) found that comedians develop follow a model he calls a *layered career*, wherein each layer of a comic’s career relies on a different set of “social dynamics, organizational attributes, and audiences” (146). Constant within each layer, though, is the importance of collegial groups to the success of a stand-up comic’s ultimate success. These collegial groups share information, support one another, and help comics to garner endorsements from prominent and established comics (146-147). Echoing Bourdieu's (1984/1993) field structure, this layered career model illustrates the importance of relational capital in addition to persistence and talent. This relational capital is based primarily on, as mentioned in the previous chapter, a comic’s perceived talent and ability to get along with other comics in the group. As many of my interviewees told me, you won’t be accepted as part of a group of comedians if they don’t find you funny or if you rock the boat by critiquing the local scene too loudly. Cultural, symbolic, and relational capital are often inextricably linked to one another. While it might seem like being funny and being easy to get along with are apolitical positions, in this chapter I argue that networking, finding one’s group, being accepted, and being endorsed by established comics is a political process in which comics who aren’t straight, white men or who don’t play by established rules are excluded by gatekeepers in ways that negatively impact their careers. I also tie this process of exclusion into my ongoing focus on the construction of authenticity in comedy as a driving ideology that constructs womxn comics as outsiders who aren’t *real* comedians.
Stand-up comedy as a pursuit often blurs the line between job, hobby, and entertainment. Comedians relate to each other through overlapping and ever-changing roles: friend, fan, boss, romantic partner, colleague. The sphere of intimacy created by the audience and a performer discussed in the previous chapter also extends to the ways in which comedians connect with each other in local comedy scenes. Different comics within the same scene, or even the same show, often have differing and shifting career goals. While most of my interviewees wanted to eventually become professional comics in some capacity, some wanted to use stand-up as a launching pad for professional writing jobs or professional acting jobs, five were just “seeing where it went,” and eight just did it for fun. Regardless of career goal, most of the comics I interviewed were all, in terms of Reilly’s (2017) layer model, functioning within the proximate layer, in which comics are novices just starting out, and the community layer, in which comics are accepted as scene insiders but still haven’t reached fully professional status (151). The final layer of his model, the industrial layer, in which comics start working in the mainstream entertainment industry and have access to the industry’s attendant professional structures, generally requires a move to Los Angeles or New York. Even when comics are working at a professional level in Chicago, there are few industrial or institutional structures for maintaining a professional atmosphere. Everything, from managerial hierarchy to human resources to mentorship norms is governed informally. Relationships and relatability are even more important to succeeding within the scene than in traditional workspaces.

Reilly’s (2017) model, while useful in understanding the value of networking and relationships within a stand-up comedy career, fails to recognize the ways in which the emphasis on collegial relationships undermines the contributions of womxn and other marginalized comics and stifles their ability to succeed. Sarah Ahmed (2017) argues that a reliance on relatability in
hiring decisions paradoxically restricts entrance and creates institutions in which “Norms might become more regulative the more casual the spaces” (154). In an industry/subculture hybrid space governed by loose relations and intimacy, womxn, queer people, and people of color - in addition to older comics, comics who are parents, or comics who don’t drink -- find it harder to fit into spaces designed for straight, white men to hang out with one another. Ahmed (2012) also notes that “the kind of person you could grab a drink with,” often becomes shorthand for describing how well someone fits in with a group in ways that are exclusionary to marginalized people. A desire for sharing social space with someone who looks, acts, and understands the world like you “restricts to whom an institutional space is open by imagining a social space that is not open to everyone” (emphasis hers, 39). Here, she also invokes Althusser’s (2011 [1970]) concept of interpellation, in which whiteness (and for my purposes, maleness and straightness) recruits and reproduces itself. Straight white men see other straight white men on stage and in comedy spaces and feel called to join. Similarly, these men reach out to other men and invite them in, or once they are there, mentor, coach, and help them, seeing in the new comics pieces of themselves. In the following sections, I break down the ways in which networking and an emphasis on being able to hang out and fit in with other comics becomes a means through which to exclude womxn from important opportunities to their growth within the stand-up comedy scene.

The First Five Minutes: Tackling the Open Mic

Entering stand-up comedy, of course, begins with performing at an open mic, a notoriously unnerving experience even if you think you’re funny and your friends think you’re funny. Many womxn I spoke with needed an additional push to feel welcome and confident enough before signing up to perform at their first open mic. Womxn often needed to take a class,
to know comics already performing in the scene, or to find an overtly inclusive open mic or first performance venue. While some of my interviewees performed for benefits, college festivals, comedy competitions or classes their first time on stage, only Abbey, an undergraduate student, had escaped the gauntlet of the open mic, because she stopped performing after she won a comedy contest the first time she performed.

For those who haven’t had the privilege of performing in an open mic lineup or attending a local show, an open mic is simply a comedy show that anyone can sign up for. Some shows have a sign-up sheet at the venue, some ask performers to e-mail ahead of time, some have online forms, and some very popular mics have lottery systems in which potential performers put their name in a hat for the chance to perform. Performers have anywhere from 3-7 minutes depending on the format, but the most common time frame puts a five-minute maximum on material. Depending on the location, audiences may be full of non-performers out for a night of entertainment, friends comics bring along for support, or, in the case of many Chicago open mics, other comics just waiting for their turn to perform. I see open mics as synecdoches of stand-up comedy culture in that material barriers to entry are low but cultural and social barriers are high. Unlike improv or sketch, starting to perform stand-up doesn’t require classes or even a group of other people with whom to perform. You don’t have to audition or gain permission from a director to get on stage. All you need is the confidence to sign up and five minutes of material. However, the fear of the first open mic can leave many too afraid to enter the space. Kelsie Huff, a Chicago comic who founded an all-womxn’s comedy collective called The Kates and has taught two different womxn’s only stand-up comedy classes explained that womxn often need to feel like they have permission to get on stage:
The thing about the open mic is they are accessible. You can get up. You know all you have to do is sign up your name and then stand on a stage. But it is amazing how people don’t. People feel like they need permission. And people feel like they have to apologize for being bad. And that is one of the things society has fostered in us as females. It’s like: I’m sorry I’m not great. I don’t deserve to be here. You’re the funny one. I’m not the funny one.

When I asked my interviewees how they got into comedy, only four knew from a young age comedy was what they wanted to do, went to an open mic, and started performing. Most needed permission or an overt welcome into the space, whether in the form of taking a stand-up comedy class or being encouraged by friends who already did comedy to try doing an open mic. Eleven were already performers in another type of group or genre like improv, sketch, or musical theater and transitioned into stand-up comedy. Several comics had a unique first performance in a welcoming space with a supportive audience that made them feel confident enough to keep going in stand-up. For instance, Beth performed ten minutes at a college womxn’s arts festival and Danielle performed at a cancer benefit. Both eventually started to perform at open mics but found the support of their initial performance to be necessary for giving them the courage to enter a potentially less welcoming space. In my own experience, I was too afraid to get on stage until I started my own open mic and had been doing research on stand-up comedy for two years. Even as a teacher, a former high school theater student, and someone who doesn’t get scared talking in front of groups of people - a barrier to entry for many - I could not see myself going to the open mics in town. I was uneasy within the spaces of comedy in Champaign-Urbana where womxn were few and far between and I often felt uncomfortable about the kind of casual racism and misogyny I saw at performances. Fear of public speaking and fear of failure, two things all
budding comics deal with no matter their identity, is often compounded for womxn with a gut sense that they don’t belong and aren’t welcome.

While being invited into the scene by established comics was often seen as a positive first step, a few womxn I talked to felt more intimidated to try comedy if they already knew comics in town. Maria worked as a waitress at a comedy club for eleven years before getting the courage to go on stage, and told me that hosts will still often refer to her as their former waitress, which she finds frustrating. Samantha, a student improv performer at the University of Illinois who has only performed stand-up at Broad Comedy told me that she’s too nervous to perform at the other open mics in town because one of her fellow improv troupe members also performs and she’s intimidated by his experience:

I’ve done stand up in my sorority because I like to practice material on them. Besides that, just Broad Comedy. I want to [go to the other mics], but I think I just get nervous and [my friend] scares me because he always does comedy. He’s so intense about it, and I think if I bomb in front of him I would fry.

Usually if a comic is friends with others in a scene, they’re more likely to feel a lower barrier to entry, however in Samantha’s case the presence of her friend isn’t comforting, it’s intimidating. Rather than a sense of camaraderie, she feels a fear of competing against him and failing. This is especially significant to me because having seen both comics perform several times, Samantha is a much more assured and inventive joke-teller than her friend. She performs with several improv groups on campus and performed in Los Angeles for three months while she interned one summer. Yet, she hasn’t been able to get past the fear of failing in front of someone she sees as a more established member of the local comedy scene, even though she is just as talented as he is. This speaks to Kelsie Huff’s point that many womxn are socialized to never
feel that they’re talented enough to compete in stand-up alongside overtly confident male performers.

Womxn’s fear of failure is, of course, well-documented across industries. Sociologists studying gender and employment argue that “interactional gender mechanisms” create new forms of gender inequality in workplaces even as laws, official policies, and socioeconomic conditions create more level playing fields (Ridgeway 1997, 218). Gender stereotypes become self-fulfilling expectations that shape women’s assertiveness and confidence, their judgements of others’ competence, and their actual and perceived work performance (222). Even when societal beliefs change, gender equality in workplaces lags, leaving men to “retain their advantage in power and resources within newly emerging organizational forms” (223). In their study of television writers’ rooms, a type of workplace governed by more casual rules and norms than traditional corporate offices, Bielby and Bielby (1995) found that between 1982 and 1990, women earned about 25% less than men of similar age, experience, and work history. Their argument being that “interactional gender processes” created a gendered hierarchy in employment in the absence of a rigid organizational structure.

The fear of failure being a barrier to trying stand-up came up in most of my interviews, especially when I talked to comics who had taken a class in Chicago called The Feminine Comique, a 7-week, womxn-only stand-up class offered by Tight Five Productions, “whose mission is to pursue opportunities to bring stand-up comedy and affiliated performers to a wider audience in Chicago while providing overall support in increasing the quality of live stand-up comedy throughout the market.” The course was started in 2008 by Cameron Esposito, now a nationally recognized comic who hosts several acclaimed podcasts and stand-up shows out of Los Angeles, and recently produced the series Take My Wife with her partner Rhea Butcher for
now defunct comedy channel SeeSo. At the time, Chicago had even fewer women performing comedy than it does now, and Esposito decided that the best way to encourage womxn enter the comedy scene was to create a class in which they felt comfortable. When she started the class, Esposito also started hosting a now famous open mic at Cole’s in Logan Square that served as a comfortable space for womxn in the class to perform. She told Fast Company (Berkowitz 2016) about the success of the co-projects in an interview:

And before long, during the second session that the class existed, almost every woman in it started coming to the open mic. And then women who weren’t taking the class would come to the mic and realize there were other women signed up for it and they would sign up too.

Many of my interviewees attributed the class with greatly increasing the number of womxn comics in the Chicago comedy scene. Esposito explains in her own words how the class worked to push back against the symbolic annihilation of womxn in stand-up in Chicago in a way that was echoed by many of the comics I talked to:

Women are limited in our imagination by the things that we have seen women do. So if you just go to a room and you watch other women tell jokes, there is something that switches in your mind where then you realize that you can tell jokes.

The class, generally referred to as FemCom, is now taught by local comic Alex Kumin, who was the instructor when I took the class in the summer of 2017. My class consisted of eleven students, most in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties and one lawyer in her 60s that wanted to be more comfortable in the courtroom. The students were also all college-educated white womxn with the disposable income to pay $300 for a comedy class and with reliable transportation to get into the city. Several comics of color who had taken FemCom at various times mentioned to me
the overwhelming whiteness of the students in their class. Sruthi described the class as “somewhat homogenous in terms of perspective,” with students being mostly young, educated white women. She found this dynamic frustrating, but she told me that she still found the set-up useful in terms of getting on stage for the first time in front of a supportive audience:

I got a lot of laughs and it was exhilarating. It was really the first time I had been on stage when I wasn’t in a spelling bee.

Three students in my class were seasoned performers either in improv or theater, but most were womxn who had always wanted to try stand-up but had been too scared to do it without the safety of a class and who found an all-womxn’s class especially comforting. One student had joined the class because she had talked about it for so long that her boyfriend bought her the class as a surprise for her birthday, telling her the night before the class started so she couldn’t get scared and back out. Many former students I interviewed expressed similar sentiments in explaining to me why they took the class. Allison, who has now been performing for almost a decade, told me she signed up in the early days of the class because:

A) Cameron was teaching it, B) because it was all women, and C) because my friend was also signing up. A lot of stand-up classes in the city at the time being taught by men were taught by some really weird people.

Most of the comics I talked to who took the class attributed it to their entrance into the Chicago stand-up scene. They cited four key reasons: 1) they wrote their first five minutes of material within a supportive community, 2) their first performance on stage was in front of a supportive audience, 3) they got permission from a seasoned comic (Kelsie, Cameron, or Alex) to enter the scene and assurance that they were funny, and 4) they made friends that they could go out to other mics with. This last point is incredibly important. Networking is key to breaking into and,
more importantly, sticking with stand-up. As Reilly (2017) found, comedians often bond with and create friendships with those who start performing in the scene around the same time. Sometimes referred to as “classes,” these relationships often turn into cliques in which comics share information and give each other support. Further, Reilly notes, these cohorts:

serve as each other’s initial audiences. They cultivate chemistry, familiarity, and trust over time. These organizational units are optimal for satisfying the challenges of collaborative creative processes and frequently endure throughout careers—even at the highest echelons. These cliques also persist as a source of emotional support and other intrinsic rewards. (160).

While performing stand-up comedy is a solo act, nearly all my interviewees stressed the importance of bonding with other comics, relying on friends to keep them accountable, and simply having a buddy to walk into a new performance space with. In our overemphasizing of the comedic performance itself, the importance of networking labor often gets lost in the examination of gender and the comedy industry. Not only do comedians work to hone their performance and writing skills, they must also form a network of fellow comedians with whom to trade feedback and advice and who can help them get booked on shows. From an interpersonal stand-point, having friends within the scene is a necessary support system for succeeding within a notoriously draining and punishing atmosphere. Many comics I talked to either thought about dropping out, dropped out, or knew someone who dropped out of the scene because they didn't have a group of people who made them feel welcome or safe within the scene. Finding a supportive group is imperative to both joining and maintaining a presence within any local comedy scene.
Networking and Mentorships

Even after the initial entrance into a scene, networking and friendship are crucial to advancing from open mics to booked showcases and in finding and building mentoring relationships. Hanging out goes beyond mere friendship and is a key part of networking and mentoring within the stand-up scene. When I asked my interviewees how networking and mentorship played into success in comedy, they tended to mention the ability to get along with and relate to other comics. Comics bond by hanging out with each other after shows, and to fit in with the group you must be friendly, easy to hang out with, and able to joke and laugh with other comics. Often being funny and being accepted are conflated, with acceptance often coming only after comics have proven themselves both on and offstage. To be accepted, you have to be funny, but in order to be seen as funny, you have to appeal to masculine sensibilities of what being fun to hang out with looks like. Annie told me that she felt like she had to act “like one of the guys,” to fit in.

You have to act like a bro [...] if you don’t act like you’re one of them, people think you’re this angry feminist. I really feel like I’ll have to police myself for right now. Especially since my friend told me my set sounded like it should be at a gender equality convention last time.

This is emblematic of what I heard from most of my interviewees. Material that comes across as too feminine or feminist both on and offstage leads to women comics being rejected or questioned. Some comics, like Kristen, my interviewee working in Los Angeles, attributed feeling like an outsider as part of every comic’s experience, regardless of gender:

Comedy is very cliquey and comics are very judgmental of each other. When I first moved here [LA], no one talked to me for the first five times I performed. Everyone
ignores you until you get on stage and you kill. And once you kill, everybody wants to be friends with you. So there’s no such thing as “they’re not talking to me cause I’m a girl, or I’m pretty.” No, they’re not talking to me cause they don’t think I’m funny. That is what’s so cool. It’s one of my favorite things about stand-up. It’s a meritocracy, you have to be good.

However, as I’ve explored in previous chapters, funny is very much defined by masculine aesthetic norms despite the myth of fairness. Being funny on stage, especially at a Chicago or Los Angeles open-mic attended mostly by other comics, requires being relatable to a primarily male audience. And being relatable offstage requires being funny. This cycle of relatability and sense of humor, both constructed by masculine norms, is a requirement for mainstream comedic success that often excludes womxn in the scene through appeals to meritocracy. In our discussion of open mics, Beth, a comic who identifies as non-binary, told me about their initial frustration with attending open mics in ways that underlined this cycle:

So they’re more of a networking event in reality. So I would say there are maybe two or three big ones every week, and Cole’s was a big one. Lottie’s is a big one -- and that’s the other thing---all the networking ones are really bro oriented. If you’re a straight white dude you’re gonna do great there, and you’re around all your other straight white dudes who are all gonna laugh at you.

The next step a comic takes after performing at open mics is getting booked on a showcase. Comics will perform at open mics to practice, to befriend other comics and to make themselves known so that they get booked on showcases, line-ups that ostensibly feature the best comics in the area. During showcases, comics perform honed material in front of audiences that often paid to attend. Some showcases pay their comics and some do not. Getting booked on a
showcase requires repeated successful appearances at open mics and often requires being friends with the right people. Comics need to be successful performers and successful networkers to attract a variety of show bookings. As with most measures of authenticity, there is also a danger in appearing like you are trying too hard to network and fit in. Not only must one work hard to fit in, one must always appear as if one is not working too hard. Several comics, like Wendy, tried to thread the needle between being fun to hang out with and coming across as being too into networking:

If you just keep good company and you’re a good person, people will want you around more. You don’t want to become a networking whore, but even if you’re trying not to, you find yourself networking. You have to figure out how to not fall into the trap of being a manipulator and just not being an asshole.

The use of the word “whore” here is extremely gendered, reinforcing pejorative connotations of feminine sexuality and artificiality. This was one of a series of catch-22s that womxn, and often most comics, face. You need to get to know everyone well, because that’s how you book shows, but you can never be too obvious about it.

Because stand-up scenes operate in a liminal space between amateur and professional, many showcases tend to rely on pre-existing relationships with or loyalty to the person in charge of booking. The smaller the scene, the more likely decisions are made based on relationships. For instance, in Champaign-Urbana, C-U comedy is the only showcase in town, which means that to be booked, you have to perform regularly at their open mics, and, more importantly, to be on good terms with the guys who run the shows. From my conversations, I gleaned that in towns where there is one major comedy club, the club owners are often notorious for banning comics who perform at other spots in town. Those who book showcases have an outsized influence on
who succeeds and their favor and taste become powerful. Even in Chicago, many comics explained to me that showcase line-ups tended to just reproduce friend groups. As Olivia explained:

All the shows I’ve done I’ve tried to book a wide range of people. And that’s mostly because that’s who my friends are. But I understand how it’s tricky doing that by accident. Because you book your friends. If your friends all happen to be dudes, then....

Networking is super important. And you get to know guys and eventually they’ll remember you exist.

Because most bookers are men, this means womxn are often subject to harassment or hostile environments if they want to stay in the scene. And, as Brynne told me, there is often a choice to be made between being booked on as many shows as possible, and avoiding shows in which comics doing material you find uncomfortable, problematic, or offensive:

But being friends is the number one thing you can do. Which I also find frustrating [...]

Sometimes I feel really uncomfortable and out of place and I don’t want to be here. It’s weird because I want to work with people I get along with and have the same respect for and the mission, rather than just be on the show. I don’t care that much. I would rather be doing good work than to just be cast all over town.

Being picky about shows is not a luxury that marginalized precarious workers have. The pressure of working in an industry marked by ethos of meritocracy and passion means that comics are not able to say no to experiences that make them uncomfortable.

Hanging out also leads to informal mentorship opportunities. While comics are often skeptical of classes or other formal institutional modes of learning how to do stand-up, there is a tradition of mentorship, informal instruction, and guidance (Double 2014, 3). Being denied
entrance into the informal spaces of stand-up means being denied opportunities not only to network, but to learn and grow. Mentorship often takes the form of advice, writing groups, or note-giving. While there are classes to take and books to read on improving one’s craft, comics largely learn to get better by performing and getting feedback from other comics. The informality of the learning process means that relatability becomes even more important to gaining access to opportunities. As Reilly (2017) found in his study of Los Angeles comics, “Since mentoring takes time, mentors prefer aspirants with whom they can interact with repeatedly and intensely. Affinity encourages them to volunteer to help” (158). Being a skilled performer does not end when a comic gets offstage; she must continue to perform according to subcultural norms to be accepted and to succeed. Reilly’s work, though useful in structure, never takes identity or cultural difference into account. He doesn’t mention gender or race once in his entire explanation of affinity relationships. In fact, womxn don’t find affinity groups as easily in male dominated spaces and must adapt to a set of masculine standards to fit in both on and offstage. Many comics, like Mia, are working to create mentoring opportunities for womxn like festivals, showcases, and classes. Mia told me that men tend to only mentor one another, often leaving womxn to fend for themselves:

In those male spaces, they’re all hanging out and talking and shooting the shit together. And they’re mentoring each other, but they aren’t mentoring women. And plus, I don’t even think they’d know how to mentor a woman if they had the opportunity, other than by trying to get in their pants.

Kristen told me that because there are still far fewer womxn performing at her level, the material practices of booking stand-up shows means that she doesn’t even have the chance to meet other
womxn comics, because they tend to be booked on different shows. The lack of womxn further limits the ability for womxn mentorship groups to form organically without additional effort:

Most female comedians aren’t as close with each other because we don’t see each other as much […] I think that for some reason there is a subconscious thing going on – where they say, let’s spread them out. Cause we can’t put five of them on a show with seven people.

Because there are fewer womxn, and because shows like to signal diversity by having at least one comic who isn’t a straight, white, man on their line-up, these “diversity spots” tend to be spread out among shows. It’s common for a show to have only one or two womxn on a line-up. In my own experience in Champaign-Urbana performing for a year-and-a-half, I have only performed for three showcases in which there was more than one womxn performing. The shows in which there were other womxn to talk to before and after the show were vastly more comfortable experiences. Womxn comics from out of town talked to me where male comics from out of town tended to say a sentence or two to me. Further, I dreaded going to open mics other than Broad Comedy, especially if I couldn’t bring along my ever-patient roommate for support, because most of the male comics didn’t talk to me very often. Even being able to look at a friend and share an eye roll at a misogynistic joke makes the experience more bearable. Without any support system, it’s that much harder to keep showing up.

**Facing and Combatting Sexual Harassment**

Studies have found that heavily masculine-dominated work spaces often lead to frequent sexual harassment, the derailment of womxn’s careers, and a continuing the wage gap. In their longitudinal mixed-methods study of workplace harassment, McLaughlin, Uggen, and Blackstone (2017) found that womxn often find themselves having to choose between
“participating in misogynistic cultures at work,” which takes its toll on mental health, stress levels, and workplace satisfaction, or “resisting these cultures,” which turns them into the office problem and often leads to retaliation (352). Harassment is also used as a form of reinforcing masculine hegemony within leisure spaces like online gaming. Within leisure and work spaces bound up with hegemonic masculinity, like gaming and technology, the ideology of masculine dominance has become so entrenched that “mastery forms the basis of masculine esteem and status” (Salter 2017, 2). Feminine encroachment on these spaces leads to emotional backlash in which men respond to the perceived threat by diminishing the talent of womxn, treating them as sexual objects, or harassing them to the point that they leave altogether. Because stand-up comedy is a liminal space between workplace and leisure, it is similarly characterized by masculine mastery where womxn are outsiders who lack the skills necessary to belong. Stand-up comedy is constructed as a skill set that falls squarely and solely within the pantheon of men. Womxn pose an existential threat not only to male dominance of the art form, but a threat to the art form itself.

I was therefore not surprised to hear stories from my subjects of career derailment, harassment, and outsider status that echoed the harassment Lindy West faced with online trolls and that researchers have found that women face in nearly every male dominated arena. Every comic told me they had been harassed, faced sexism, or weren’t taken seriously as comics because of their gender identity at some point. Further, 23 of my interviewees said they had been harassed or assaulted, nine said they hadn’t, and three ominously said they hadn’t been harassed yet. Notably, comics tended to downplay whatever level of harassment they had faced, with most telling me that “I haven’t had it that bad,” before listing a series of events that, to me,
sounded like high levels of harassment. I also found that the general feeling of not feeling accepted into the scene weighed heavily on comics’ mental health and physical well-being.

The most common forms of harassment comics faced were onslaughts of Facebook messages or texts from comics who tried to hit on womxn in the scene, sexual advances couched in offers for bookings, and general sexist comments on and off stage. While many comics couldn’t pinpoint specific instances in which they felt personally threatened, many pointed to a sense of unease within spaces dominated by men, especially when jokes were sexist, racist or homophobic. When comics faced harassment or rejection, they seemed to respond with three dominant strategies: 1) they ignored the gendered dynamics at play and used their anger and hurt to fuel their success within male dominated spaces, 2) they acknowledged the barriers they faced were due to their gender identity and they sought out womxn-friendly spaces and tried to make changes to mainstream spaces, or 3) they quit comedy.

Beth started performing at open mics around Chicago and quit because the environment was so draining and they constantly felt rejected:

And I noticed too, it didn’t matter how well I did, only a couple male comedians would actually even introduce themselves to me. Even if I did fine. I would get laughs. But, I would get messages from other male comics being like “Hey your friend was really hot, who was she?” Like, you didn’t even tell me I did well, or anything about the show, or ask me anything.

They eventually got back into comedy only after taking the FemCom class, networking with other womxn, and finding friends to attend shows with. Many comics told me the key to their initial and continued success in comedy was to find and stick with an affinity group. Several comics also spoke of experiences with male comics assuming they weren’t comics at open mics.
and showcases. Womxn were frequently asked if they were audience members or were outright ignored until vouched for by a male comic. Heather, a Champaign-Urbana comic who has since quit performing because she was so frustrated with the harassment she dealt with, spoke of another common occurrence: the assumption that women comics get ahead by sleeping with the male gatekeepers. She told me of one such experience visiting another central Illinois comedy club for a show:

This guy said to me “So which one of them are you fucking?” “What?” Like, neither. He’s like, “Oh I just figured, you gotta sleep with someone to get on stage, right?” And I was like “No, maybe I’m funny,” without being too cocky. Maybe they put me up because I tell good jokes. And I had never seen him before, and I would never see him again, and so I just chalked it up him being kind of drunk and kind of a douche.

Heather’s story is also emblematic of two trends I saw in comics recounting harassment they had experienced: the attempt to downplay or brush off these situations as either innocent or the result of being drunk, and the concern about coming across too aggressive or self-assured. The attempt to fit into masculinized spaces means adapting to those spaces in ways that don’t upset the masculine hegemony and make you a target. Heather eventually spoke out about the various ways in which she felt uncomfortable in the local comedy scene, only to have her concerns downplayed and ignored by the men she confided in. I learned from speaking to other womxn who were also in the scene at the time that the men who heard her concerns attributed them to her having thin skin or to being a “bitch.” Womxn learn that to adapt to masculine spaces, they need to keep their concerns to themselves or learn to brush them off. A Chicago comic similarly spoke of the fact that being accepted requires adhering to norms that don’t discomfort men. The discomfort must always be shifted to those that are marginalized within the space:
If some dude is harassing you but he's a big name or he's friends with someone else who is important in the community and could start trouble for you, you keep your mouth shut. Comics also told me about a related, but opposite problem: that being too nice to the male comics invites harassment and being hit on. Often bookers proposition womxn by offers a promise of a booking with sex as their ulterior motive. Jane, another Champaign-Urbana comic who has since moved to Chicago, told me:

And you have to be friends with the other stand-up comics cause they’re the ones booking the shows. [But], the other thing too is like – as a woman you have to guard yourself because you don’t know if someone’s asking you to do their show because they like your stuff or because they want to have sex with you. And that happened to me, this guy asked me to do his show in Chicago [...] and then he started talking to me about other things. And I was like – I’m not interested and I tried to make that clear but without losing that connection. I tried to keep it strictly business, but then he ended up sending me a shirtless picture. And now this feels invasive and I can’t be around you which means that I can’t do your show, which now limits my ability to be seen.

Stef similarly told me that even being nice to the other comics sometimes has its drawbacks:

When you're a woman and you're friendly to guys, they want to try to make you a prop in their male-ego-fantasy [...] also, they immediately want to hit on you. Being less friendly and less open has been much more helpful for me in the last year or two.

It’s a familiar double-bind. Womxn must be nice to the male comics to fit in and be accepted, but constantly risk being hit on, harassed, or propositioned. Because stand-up takes place in bars or other places with alcohol, generally late at night, the spaces become even more fraught with potential for harassment. I also talked to many comics who were uneasy that their
mechanisms for managing male behavior required additional labor on their part. Jane, who called herself a feminist throughout our conversation, reflected on how she was becoming more mindful of the kinds of jokes she told, and more uncomfortable playing into stereotypes about women and not calling out aggressive male behavior. She told me about how she saw her ability to flirt with men as a way to manage their behavior toward her, but noted that it made her increasingly uncomfortable as a feminist:

I think I’m also OK with fitting in with the dudes. And I’m questioning this – I think I flirt a lot and I think that’s my defense mechanism and I’m good at making men feel good about themselves in casual conversation, and making myself look like an independent person. It gets you through things and it gets you by, and I’m questioning that.

Several comics attributed rampant sexual harassment in the scene to the fact that comedy takes place at bars and comics often go to parties before or after performances. They told me that coverage of rampant harassment in the improv and stand-up scenes were just “gray area stuff” where everyone had been drinking. They also wanted to balance the victimization of womxn within a larger conversation about teaching consent, teaching womxn to stand up for themselves, and attributing harassment to gendered socialization. Throughout our interview, Jade tried to balance combating harassment with an understanding of how men are socialized:

I don’t think most guys are trying to be assholes, I think that they – they’re definitely not taught, and they’re definitely not willing to listen if they feel attacked. It’s generational too. And women are taught not to stand up for themselves. So if a woman isn’t saying no, and men aren’t taught – how are they supposed to know not to continue? And I’m not making him right – it’s just a larger conversation and I want everyone to win.
Most comics I talked to were frustrated by discrimination based on their gender identity and wanted to make changes to the scene, while a smaller group of comics were frustrated by other womxn who complained about discrimination. The comics who were frustrated by complaints about gender discrimination generally acknowledged that things might be harder for womxn, but saw it as part of the profession that had to be dealt with individually and without complaint. They explained their own rejection as part of being a comedian and told me their strategy was to simply work harder. These comics tended to have been performing for at least five years, were career-motivated, and felt they fit in with men due to their confidence and aggressive demeanors. Further, many of the comics argued that taking a feeling of discomfort was part of being a comic that one must endure without complaint. Kristen argued that it was the complaining about harassment that led to escalation. She insisted that and that ignoring any harassment was the best tactic:

I’ve gotten random lonely dudes and audience members harassing – but if you just ignore it, it goes away. It’s the people who respond to it and make a big deal about it and post about it that it becomes an issue. Because it’s like throwing it on the flame. Like you get a few messages, and you ignore it, and it stops. So I’ve just ignored it and it goes away. I’ve never had to deal with bad harassment – I’ve had people send me stuff – like you’re ugly and you’re not funny and stuff – but I’ve never taken the bait. I’ve noticed a lot of younger comics that get that a lot and they post about it and take screen shots of it and I’m like – you’re just gonna make it worse.

From a professional stance, these kinds of reactions make sense as they result in the least friction and allow the person being harassed some amount of control over the situation. The path of least resistance becomes to, as the saying goes, grow a thicker skin. If you point out that there is a
problem, you then become the problem. In her calling the men who harassed her “lonely,” Kristen is also assigning some measure of pity to them. This undergirds many ideological excuses for such behavior like “boys will be boys” that allow for men to never change and for womxn to bear the weight of emotional labor in managing their own harassment.

Comics gave me a range of strategies they used to deal with sexist behavior, but they often they most often consisted of post-feminist strategies of managing their own behavior rather than pushing for change, creating coalitions, or vocalizing disapproval. Ros Gill's (2007) illustrates extensively in her work on the sensibility of post-feminism the ways in which womxn will prioritize autonomy, self-improvement, and self-surveillance as responses to discrimination and disempowerment over collaboration and system-wide solutions. Further, post-feminism focuses heavily on the body as both a site of power and a site that constantly requires monitoring and discipline to perform correctly according to societal standards (255). Womxn also often blame themselves and others for making the “wrong choices” or failing within structures stacked against them (163). While men are also imbricated within similar neoliberal practices, womxn “are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen” to a much greater extent than men (164). Further, because stand-up comedy, unlike improv or sketch comedy, is constructed as a uniquely individualized art form, post-feminist cultural values like empowerment, individuality, economic independence, choice, freedom, and productivity are also embedded within the discourses of stand-up. As such, I wasn’t surprised to find that in the face of discrimination and harassment many comics did not question the underlying assumption that comedy was a meritocracy, but instead turned to neoliberal, post-feminist strategies of self-improvement.
Lisa Nakamura (2017) found similar strategies in her study of sexism and racism in gaming spaces. She found that several of her students, instead of advocating for a diversifying of game makers, advocate for what she calls “procedural meritocracy,” or the idea that the best way to create a space where there is less sexism and racism is to be better than everyone else and prove your worth (245-246). This is a common ideological strategy that draws on neoliberal ideals of individual responsibility, competition, and self-surveillance. In trying to change the system, you become an outcast, the problem, the nuisance. You can only prove your worth within the system and hope it brings better treatment according to the already sanctioned meritocratic rules of comedic spaces. I heard this strategy from several comics, especially those that were further along in their careers and were performing largely in comedy clubs. They often pushed back against the idea that women had a hard time in comedy were largely critical of women who were vocal about the treatment they’d faced, calling them annoying or whiny and arguing that they were “making the problem worse.”

Selena, a latinx comic in her 40s, told me that she was too old to deal with what she saw as the drama of younger womxn complaining about sexist comedy.

I mean, if you’re offended by something, you don’t have to listen to them. But you don’t have to get on a soapbox either. If you go see someone you don’t like, what do you do? Walk out.

Kristen similarly bristled at the complaints she had heard from fellow women comics. She advocated for getting mad and getting better rather than “complaining”:

So I guess I have a different female comedian mindset, because I don’t want to blame it on being a girl. Because I want to be better than that. I don’t want to be like – oh I’m not
getting this because I’m a girl. I don’t want to let myself off that easy. [...] Take that anger and get really mad and write a killer five minutes. And then work it all around town and shove it in their faces.

Kate understood the importance of speaking out, but explained that sexual harassment was part of the game and was “not the worst thing she’d ever faced.” She echoed a common characterization of comedy that comes across in pop culture that depicts the industry: comedy is difficult and sexual harassment is just another part of the challenge. That doesn’t make it right in Kate’s eyes, but she sees it as an unavoidable part of performing the job that she loves. She also saw the determination womxn needed to succeed in spite of harassment as a mark of character and a badge of honor rather than a systemic problem in need of a solution:

But it seems like the women who get into it tend to stick around, because it’s a hard fucking road. [...] Those women have grit.

Attributing the ability to deal with sexism and harassment as a necessary inner toughness reinforces the idea that women who quit in the face of these obstacles don’t deserve to be comics, don’t want the job enough, or are too vocal about their treatment reinforces the hegemonic understanding of comedy as an inherently unwelcoming industry in which marginalized comics are responsible for toughening up and managing their own potential trauma. It also constructs comedy as an unchangeable institution where individuals need to adapt or leave rather than try to rework the system. What I found most enlightening is that these comics didn’t just see their strategy of managing their own behavior as a different strategy than coalition building, but as a superior strategy. Further, they were frustrated that other womxn were complaining and concerned that they might be associated them. In this, they saw themselves as individual comics
fighting for their own survival rather than fellow comics responsible to making the system work better for those that came after them.

*Offensive Humor as Harassment*

In addition to offstage harassment, marginalized comics also must learn to put on a smile in the face of a barrage of sexist, racist, homophobic and otherwise offensive jokes, especially at open mics where comics aren’t screened. While generally not targeted at a specific person, offensive humor is a signal to marginalized comics that they aren’t welcome in these spaces. Jane told me she sometimes had to leave shows after her sets because she didn’t feel like listening to any more misogynistic jokes:

> And his set ended up being very anti-woman, I guess, and it made me feel really uncomfortable, and I ended up leaving the show after that because I knew the next guy coming up was equally as misogynistic. So I was like, I can’t do this, I need to go home.

Similarly, Wendy, a queer comic living in L.A. at the time of our interview, told me about feeling uncomfortable at The Comedy Store, a major club where she frequently performed:

> I went to a show last night called Roast Battle that they do at the Comedy Store here. And it was very racist and homophobic, and it was all guys. There was one gay guy in one of the battles and every joke about him was about AIDS.

Comedy clubs tend to have a more aggressive energy and feature comics whose material is often more offensive than those who stick to alt rooms. Comedy clubs are more entrenched in the traditional norms of “anything goes” comedy and are businesses that need to turn a profit, so they also tend to be even more overwhelmingly male than alt-rooms. Not only are comedy clubs less likely to feature and book womxn comics, women often self-select out of performing or even attending shows at comedy clubs because they feel uncomfortable in these spaces. And because
comedy clubs are necessary to advancing one’s career and making money, the fact that womxn feel even less comfortable in clubs puts them at an even further disadvantage.

As discussed in chapter two, comedy is often associated with freedom, though freedom is defined differently by marginalized comics than those with power. Marginalized comics often feel *more* freedom within inclusive spaces because they don’t feel pressure to be a good sport despite being offended or uncomfortable. On the other hand, in the case of comics like Jim Norton, many white-male comics feel victimized when they are asked to think about the feelings of other people in the room. Comics who associated freedom with offensive material claim that their personal freedom to tell offensives jokes is more important than the freedom of audience members or other marginalized comics to feel comfortable within a space. The upholding of offensive humor as an important and necessary component of stand-up comedy also feeds into the commonsense definition of stand-up as a purposefully uninviting field in which comics must develop a thick skin to succeed. However, as I’ve been arguing throughout this project, such ideologies often go unexamined in theorizations of humor and comedy. Laughter doesn’t *require* discomfort or aggression. Laughter can bring people together; it can be communal; it can be joyous. For instance, in Champaign-Urbana, C-U Comedy shows are driven by the ideology that comedy is not supposed to be welcoming, while we created Broad Comedy in order to favor the ideology of inclusiveness above all else. To their credit, C-U comedy has banned comics for telling rape jokes or making people extremely uncomfortable, but the threshold is high for being asked not to come back. Comics and audiences have told me that they enjoy performing and attending our show because they can relax knowing they don’t have to grit their teeth through a series of offensive jokes.
This tension between comedic ideologies was a frequent topic of discussion in my interviews. Annie told me a story that encapsulates the tension between comedy and inclusivity about a benefit for a local sexual assault hotline in Champaign-Urbana. When asked to submit a set list for approval before the benefit due to the sensitive nature of the show, many balked at the request:

Because it was a benefit for RACES they were like – we’re gonna need you to type something up to let us know what you’re talking about. The men threw a fit. They were like – I can’t really do that. I can’t plan what I’m gonna say. You can’t stop me from saying certain things. But they can though, cause it’s a benefit for something that’s more important than you’re creative whatever. So the guy comics get really upset when they’re told no.

The belief that all jokes inherently speak truth to power regardless of message was baked into the definition in the 1950s and 1960s with the rise of the “sick comics,” as they were labelled by the press. In the early evolution of modern stand-up comedy, sick comics were literally fighting against government censorship, often using offensive speech to draw attention to the hypocrisies of racism, war, classism, inequality, and violence that post-war mass culture sought to gloss over. However, today’s comics often harken back to comics like Lenny Bruce to defend themselves against the sorts of homophobic, misogynist, sexist, and violent speech that many sick comics spoke out against. Comics that defend their jokes on these grounds take the words of the argument but ignore the spirit. Many sick comics used their comedy to draw attention to inequality while many comics today use their defense to, as the saying goes, “punch down” in ways to reproduce inequality.
The ways in which stand-up comedy is conflated with freedom, justice, and truth harken back to Foucault’s (1978) theorization of power, repression, and discourse. Foucault’s argument that Western societies adhere to a commonsense belief in confession, discourse, and offensive speech as the way to fight against repression explains the ways in which many comics and comedy fans see “political correctness,” or the pushback against sexist, misogynistic, homophobic, or racist speech, as an attack on their freedom. Foucault notes that the “transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions” and “an interruption of speech” are often held up as necessary to maintain freedom and push back on oppressive power structures (5). However, people adhere to this common-sense belief in transgressive speech as freedom because it is a fight that is easy to undertake, as it allows for claims of transgression through the mere suggestion of sex or other topics deemed socially inappropriate at any given time (5). Foucault refers to this as “the speaker’s benefit” (6). Comedians and their fans frequently invoke the speaker’s benefit when arguing that offensive jokes are automatically subversive, important or necessary. Some wonder why we keep repeating the same “P.C. Wars” every decade; Foucault would argue that people cling to the repressive hypothesis because it offers “the opportunity to speak out against the powers that be; to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures” (6). Comics who rail against political correctness want to keep being able to tell offensive jokes while simultaneously knighting themselves as warriors against state tyranny. The speaker’s benefit works to maintain the power of straight white men within comedy spaces.

Authenticity in comedy often functions as a floating signifier with which to reinforce masculine standards of truth, and comedy’s obligation to “push boundaries” has become naturalized as a license for privileged comics to tell racist, transphobic, homophobic, or
misogynistic jokes without pushback. Comedy should be celebrated as a space for pushing boundaries and talking about tough topics. But the celebration of stand-up comedy as a liminal space operating outside of the confines of polite society is useful only to the extent that it lets everyone in. Stand-up comedy needs to become a space that’s safe for all comics to feel comfortable breaking social taboos and feeling vulnerable, not just a space where white, straight men feel safe cross the lines of good taste.

*The Changing Discourse Around Harassment*

The stories comics told me don’t sound much different than the stories of womxn in politics, in tech, in entertainment, in academia, or any other field. But the conflation of working, drinking, hanging out, performing, and mentoring makes for an environment with extremely tricky gender politics and constant blurring of the lines between professional and non-professional behavior. I conducted these interviews in the year leading up to the eruption of the #MeToo movement, a campaign created in response to the Pulitzer-winning *New York Times* (Kantor and Twohey 2017) profile that confirmed years of sexual harassment and assault carried out by Harvey Weinstein, a leader of independent cinema for the past three decades. Writing in the midst of the fallout from that movement, and the increasing comfort women have with coming forward to name harassers and label their experiences as harassment or assault, I wonder if the answers that my interviewees gave or the way they framed their experiences would be different, even one year later. The downplaying of their own harassment seemed to be a coping mechanism, a necessary armor built in order to survive the comedy scene, a product of the lesson womxn have been taught to not blow things out of proportion, a lack of common vocabulary to define these experiences, and an adherence to the post-feminist ideology that comedy is hard for everyone and so women don’t have room to complain about their unique experiences. Almost a
year since I completed interviews with comics, the language around harassment has changed rapidly, with comics acknowledging that they now have the vocabulary and support to name harassment. For instance, Shannon Noll, a comic who performs in similar circles to the comics I interviewed for my research, told *Chicago Magazine* in a roundtable on comedy during the #MeToo movement (Wellen 2018) that before she had the language for it, she had probably been harassed before but “just didn’t know what was happening.” Before there was a common vocabulary and a critical mass of agreement that harassment shouldn’t be tolerated, she assumed harassment was “just how it goes,” and women “were just supposed to put up with it,” to find success in comedy.

**Beyond Gender Diversity**

Even in womxn’s only spaces, comics and color and queer comics often feel like their voices are drowned out by white women or straight women. As is typical, those that are most marginalized within a community are often tasked with fixing it. I talked to several comics who run shows specifically for womxn of color about the double burden they face within the Chicago stand-up comedy scene. While they acknowledged that womxn are making strides in pushing back against the boy’s club, many groups are still reproducing existing racial hierarchies. Womxn of color feel unwelcome in male spaces and in white spaces:

I think they’ve (white women) done a great job creating spaces for them but it isn’t necessarily intersectional and doesn’t necessarily include us. And so it’s just, we have to work two times harder, and I feel like we could just do our show and just put black women on. But we also make it a point to put on other women of color cause its like – they still need a platform too. I feel like we’re all helping out, but when it comes to other people, they’re just focused on themselves. Especially black women, we’re just so quick
to put so much on our backs and accept it and not complain about it. Because empathy often comes from either learning to listen to marginalized voices or being a marginalized voice, the more diverse a scene is, the more welcoming it will likely become. However, trying to get non-marginalized comics to understand the feeling of being uncomfortable within comedic spaces is often a hurdle to convincing them to recruit marginalized comics or to change their spaces to feel more inclusive.

Even in groups pushing for more diversity in comedy, the most marginalized folks risk being labelled a detriment to “the cause” by pushing for even more inclusivity, especially around race and sexuality. One group that was frequently criticized in my interviews is a Chicago organization called Women In Comedy that was founded in response to a growing number of reports of sexual harassment in the Chicago and Los Angeles improv scenes. In the winter of 2016, the group gathered stories of harassment anonymously from womxn in Chicago and then planned a February 5th “blackout” of comedy theaters and shows at which time the group hosted a panel discussion at The Laugh Factory about sexism and harassment in the Chicago comedy scene. The boycott, scheduled for a Monday, drew criticism because Mondays are the night comedy theaters often reserve for comedy troupes that feature performers of color, because clubs and theaters are often unwilling to sacrifice popular nights to marginalized voices. Beth told me about the pushback Women in Comedy got in response to the proposed boycott:

A huge voice for black women in the improv community [...] was like, this blackout is cool and all, but you know this is the one night that the black improv troupe gets to perform? You know the day you’re asking people to boycott, in fact, that’s also when the only latino improv group gets to perform? [...] Why are they asking us to boycott this night?
Comics started requesting for the boycott to be moved to a different night, but Women In Comedy countered that they’d already told the media about the boycott, so wouldn’t be able to reschedule. They offered counter-proposals, like comics could go to the panel and then attend performances, or attend performances but not buy drinks. Beth continued:

We’re expressing sincere concerns about this and you’re trying to lead this movement, and I don’t think you have the best interest at heart if you’re telling us the only reason you aren’t cancelling this event is because the media knows. So it started to turn. 85% of women were like, yeah I’m done with this whole group.

Beth added that the invitees to the panel were questionable as well. They were especially frustrated that the only queer comic invited to speak was a popular bisexual comedian who seemed like, in their words, “an LGBT token.”

The comics of color I talked to often expressed frustration with the whiteness of groups like Women in Comedy and the tokenism that goes on in spaces trying to diversify their line-ups. Sruthi, and others, complained about diversity quotas and check-box marking that took the place of significant reform or engagement and tended to reproduce existing power structures:

What I’ve noticed is that the shows that want to check a box seem to go back to the same comic of color. Like, “Oh, let’s get some diversity and call such and such.” And it’s because they go to the same open mic or they play in their sandbox.

Even in trying to diversify their line-ups, comedy clubs rely on the kind of in-network promotion that reproduces hegemonic power structures and works to promote only those comics who run in the same circles as the white men who hold most of the capital in the scene. These comics are also the ones most likely play into white masculine hegemonic stereotypes so as to not disrupt the power dynamic in these comedy clubs. These practices also seek to give the appearance of
diversity without doing the work of changing underlying dynamics and norms needed to truly open spaces to a larger circle of comics. The “diversity work,” as Sara Ahmed (2012) calls it, becomes about generating an image or perception of whiteness or maleness rather than changing the organizational reality of whiteness or maleness of the performance space (34).

Changing these spaces relies on the diversification of voices, which isn’t a groundbreaking concept, though, my interviewees differed as to the extent to which effort should be put into actively recruiting womxn, people of color, and queer comics into heavily straight, white, male spaces. One told me she didn’t think people should get ahead just because they aren’t straight, white men. She noted that it still needs to be a meritocracy, reiterating the myth that comedy is a meritocracy and that diversity initiatives are antithetical to rewarding talent. Similarly, some comics argued that complaining about the boys’ club would never do anything, and the only way to succeed was to get better, be funnier, and break into those spaces. These post-feminist, post-racial, neoliberal responses echo similar debates about affirmative action in which “quotas” are brought up or in which numbers become the primary means through which to judge diversity. However, these claims ignore broader institutional realities and don’t question the very means by which we judge “good” and “bad.” Stand-up comedy, both locally and industrially, needs to change underlying values, but this won’t happen without more voices being brought into the fold.

**Shifting Norms and Building Inclusive Spaces**

Whether they brushed it off, came up with defense mechanisms, or fought back, every comic I interviewed acknowledged that fitting into male dominated spaces made breaking into and succeeding in stand-up comedy scenes more difficult for womxn comics. Many acknowledged that harassment, from dealing with sexist jokes to violence and sexual assault,
came with the territory. Learning how to deal with harassment has become just as important in becoming a comic as learning to write and perform. Womxn comics must acquire and wield an additional set of tools that straight, white men often don’t even think about and often don’t acknowledge. While men do face the ribbing by other comics, the harsh crowds, the failure of bombing a set, womxn must deal with the typical hardships of becoming a comic *in addition to* constantly negotiating a space that was not built for their success.

To truly create diverse, inclusive comedy spaces, bookers need to recruit performers outside of their friend group and stop waiting for diversity to happen on its own. The most frustrating part, for me and many comics I talked to, is the failure of male comics to acknowledge a disparity between men and womxn in local scenes. The myth of comedy as a meritocracy both obscures the fact that womxn are at a significant disadvantage within comedic spaces and exacerbates it by allowing those with the power to make structural changes to ignore the problem. Within the C-U Comedy scene, producers see actively recruiting women, providing extra encouragement, or making their space feel more inclusive as a form of special treatment that undermines the perceived fairness of stand-up. I had several conversations with one of the producers of C-U comedy about why more womxn didn’t perform at the open mics and why so few womxn stuck around after performing a few times. I explained what I’d found in my research, what I’d heard from other womxn who have performed in town, and what I had experienced performing at their open mics: it isn’t one thing that anyone is doing overtly or physically that discourages womxn from performing, but a general feeling of being in a space that you don’t fit in and don’t feel welcome. Despite my and other womxn’s explanation, the men were unmoved, frequently asking for proof that women are socialized not to take up space and wondering why women couldn’t deal with being made fun of. “But,” they told me, “stand-
up is scary for everyone, if someone wants to do it, they’ll do it. We can’t patronize women by making it easier for them.” However, as I’ve shown through my interviews, hegemonic masculinity within stand-up spaces actively reproduces itself without any intervention. Requiring marginalized comics to adhere to unchanging norms of relatability within comedy spaces is not a solution.

After most Broad Comedy performances, the C-U Comedy producers would tell me to encourage women to come out to the other open mics in town. Most of my performers refused, saying the spaces were too intimidating and often miserable. If they didn’t want to be professional comics, why subject themselves to feeling uncomfortable and unwelcome just to perform for five minutes? Jane expressed similar concerns in her interview:

I think they encourage women once they’re there, but they don’t do active recruiting. I think it’s the same as everything else. If more women start doing it, and other women see them doing it, it gives more women the confidence to think that they can do it, and then through the funneling eventually we’ll have more women doing stand-up.

Comics often noted this “chicken or the egg” conundrum. Womxn will perform if they see more womxn performing, but how do you get them into the spaces in the first place? In running my mic, it has been much more difficult than I thought to get womxn to sign up to perform. In the year-and-a-half we have been producing the show, we have steadily found a bigger audience and more performers as word of mouth grows, friends convince their friends to try it, and people grow comfortable with the community. However, even I was surprised how hard it was to find womxn who wanted to perform; I think shrinking the gender gap does go deeper than just creating new spaces. For instance, classes and workshops that give a foundation for learning how to be on stage work better than simply having an open mic, because many womxn don’t want to
perform unless they feel 100% confident they will do a good job. On the other hand, men will talk to me after the show and say “Oh hey, I think I could do this,” after coming to one performance and having never performed before. Shifting the demographics is a larger conversation about female socialization and how people who like stand-up see the industry from the outside. Classes like FemCom and the active recruiting of womxn into comedy is therefore vital to growing diversity. In the final chapter, I examine the strategies through which womxn in Champaign-Urbana and Chicago are working to grow diversity through classes, mentorships, showcases, and non-profit organizations and the ways in which these spaces both question the ideological assumptions about humor, relatability, and authenticity in stand-up comedy while reinforcing others.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

REWRITING THE RULES IN THE POST #METOO COMEDY SCENE

I have argued in this project that authenticity is invoked in stand-up – as it is elsewhere - as an unstable signifier with which to reinforce masculine hegemony, that the ideology of “pushing boundaries” is used as a license for privileged comics to tell racist, transphobic, homophobic, or misogynistic jokes, and that ingrained ideologies of meritocracy in stand-up mask, protect, and reproduce gendered and raced inequalities in the field. Negra and Tasker (2007) note in their introduction to Interrogating Postfeminism that feminism challenges us “to imagine the world other than it is, to conceive of different patterns of work, life, and leisure” (22). However, most studies that aim to push back against the marginalization of women within comedy continue to use masculine humor and male norms of comedy as the standard by which feminine humor is constructed, measured, or explained. Even when celebrating women’s humor, scholars often fail to unpack hegemonic definitions of humor and comedy. An oft-theorized figure in comedic scholarship is the “unruly woman” (Rowe 1995) whose body, mannerisms, and jokes are excessive by traditional standards of femininity, subverting patriarchal definitions of appropriate womanhood. However, even this frame reifies patriarchal standards by referencing them and using them as the “ruly” standard by which “unruly” is judged. To be “unruly” is to not fit an agreed upon construct of gendered norms. How do we move beyond this construct?

While we often have a hard time explaining why we do or do not find something funny, our individual cultural values and experiences inform which subjects will make us laugh. However, on a community or societal level, comedic taste is constructed similarly to other cultural tastes; those within society who have the cultural and social capital to qualify as
tastemakers set the “official” standard by which cultural products are measured (Bourdieu 1984). The power to render a hegemonic valuation of what is and isn’t funny falls to those in society with the most economic, social, and cultural power; in the U.S. that means heterosexual, white, able-bodied men. White men generally serve as gatekeepers to the fields of both mainstream and alternative comedy and legitimate certain types of humor. Therefore, success within comedy as a field requires not only being allowed into those spaces, but living up to the standards of those who hold the power to define them.

This project represents a first step in imagining alternatives by acknowledging and making visible the material realities of the current state of stand-up comedy. In chapter two, I illustrated the ways in which women who pushback against the status quo – by acknowledging that stand-up is hostile toward women or criticizing offensive jokes -- are often met with derision if not outright threats of violence. In chapter three, I argued that critics invoke discourses of comedic authenticity to reinforce white, masculine standards of quality television comedy in ways that delegitimize feminine forms of comedy. Finally, in chapters four and five, I explored how gendered discourses of meritocracy and authenticity shape norms and practices in local comedy scenes in ways that characterize women as perennial outsiders. Through these case studies, I have demonstrated how faulty characterizations of stand-up comedy as a meritocracy and as a site of authentic performance reinforce historically entrenched gender disparities in the field.

How, then, do we start to fix this disparity, not just in stand-up but in the culture industries (and all industries) more broadly? Jo Littler (2018) argues for unpacking meritocracy as an “ideology charged discourse,” and replacing it altogether with “less divisive priorities of mutual progress and egalitarianism” (8). However, not all my interviewees were interested in
creating alternatives or building coalitions. This tension - between marginalized comics who want to burn it all down and start over and the ones who want to succeed in the field as it currently stands- is a tension common in alternative media and in debates between liberal feminists and more progressive, intersectional, or radical forms of feminist politics. I was only able to scratch the surface in my short ethnography, but future research should wrestle more deeply with questions not just of what we as feminist comedy researchers want but also the different outcomes that actual comics want. Out of all my interviews, the one that stuck with me the most was with Kate, a tall, outspoken red-head in her mid-30s who started performing in Chicago just a few years ago. What struck me most about our conversation is how much she defended conditions in the comedy scene that I saw as hostile or untenable. Several times throughout our conversation, she would tell me she hadn’t been faced with that much sexual harassment, and then tell me about sustained instances of sexual harassment. When I was skeptical that she wasn’t getting paid for her labor at a comedy festival, she defended it as an important opportunity. She, more than almost any other interviewee, illustrated the mindset that comedy is brutal, punishing and worse for women than men and that is what makes pursuing stand-up worth it for her. I excerpt a longer piece of our conversation here because it captures both the tension I often found between comics who see the need to reform stand-up and those who see the precarity, the exploitation, and the hardship as a feature of stand-up comedy rather than a flaw. This quote also illustrates a common sentiment expressed by exploited laborers in late-capitalist industries, especially the culture industries:

But it’s because I love having the opportunity to go up in front of an audience and making them laugh. Because it makes me feel like I can do something that nobody else can do. It’s the only thing I’ve ever chosen to do that has been my idea. And I’m good at
it. And I think that a lot of people have other things they can do with their lives. Things that aren’t as difficult or will be more rewarding. But this is what I can do. And sometimes it sucks. But most of the time, it’s fucking awesome. And, being a woman, especially a funny woman, in comedy is an asset as much as it’s a detriment. Sometimes things can stand in your way. There’s all the sexual harassment, there things you aren’t allowed to talk about. [...] But it seems like the women who get into it tend to stick around, because it’s a hard fucking road. And the women who say ‘I think I’m gonna do like the hardest thing possible and be the person who’s least likely to succeed at it. I think I’m gonna do that with my life.’ Those women have grit. So those women tend to keep showing up. [...] But trends are all changing. There are a lot more women-run shows than when I started. When I started, it was like one and now it’s like eight or nine.

My knee-jerk reaction was, of course, to attribute her views to internalized neoliberal, post-feminist sentiment or false-consciousness. But, it’s important to give our subjects more agency than this. I’ve dabbled in stand-up comedy, but I’m not pursuing it full time or as a career, and so I come from a different perspective. In future research on the working conditions of comedy, it will be necessary to address this tension with nuance, depth, and reflection. What kinds of changes do women in comedy want or need and what informs their perspective? How should we reconcile these varied beliefs about what stand-up comedy is and can be?

On the other hand, I conducted most of my research before October 2017, when the #MeToo movement started to quickly (and, I can only hope irrevocably) change the broader cultural conversation around sexual assault and gender politics. It is impossible to talk about gender and stand-up comedy without acknowledging the changing conversation around both since the movement took off. This research project has quickly become an examination of the
moment in time just before a great cultural reckoning took place about the issues explored in this project including labor precarity, gendered gatekeeping, harassment, offensive jokes, and the policing of insider and outsider status within media industries and aesthetics. The conversation around these issues was quickly changing as I wrote these chapters, so it was often difficult to keep up with ever-shifting dynamics. As the #MeToo movement developed, my interviewees that I followed on social media started to understand the discrimination, harassment, and causal sexism they constantly face as an insidious barrier to their success, and not, as they are often told, just another punishing part of the job that they need to grin and bear. It’s likely I would have a set of completely different interviews if I started this project today. It’s possible Kate’s stance has changed since I talked to her nearly two years ago. Future research will be examining a post-#MeToo comedic scene and would benefit from a deeper and more sustained ethnographic examination of how gender operates in local comedy scenes, how norms are changing, and how men in local scenes are responding.

My ethnographic research also sought to theorize local comedy scenes as spokes in the larger stand-up comedy industry and comics as early career professionals. By understanding local comics as a part of a national production culture, I wanted to make visible the ideological connections and cultural norms that affect women’s comedy careers from their first open mic to their first Netflix special. Studying the most precarious part of the comedic pipeline allows us to see how women and other marginalized performers and production workers face barriers to their success or leave the industry due to frustration with sexism and sexual harassment long before they move to Los Angeles or New York. My hope is that future research not just on comedy, but on other aspects of the media industry look more closely at precarious labor in the early part of production workers’ careers to identity how gatekeeping happens at every level, especially in
terms of marginalization based on gender, sexuality, class, and ability. My project focused specifically on women and gender, but in the future, I would like to explore marginalization from more angles, especially the unique challenges faced by queer men and men marginalized by race. Further, to expand this project I want to talk to more comics who perform in larger comedy clubs, in the Chicago suburbs, and on the South Side to get a broader sense of the Chicago comedy scene.

Ethnographic research on gatekeepers and those with power in the industry would also help to deepen our understanding of how discrimination works structurally. While my goal was to give voice to women who are often ignored by studies of the work of stand-up, this research would benefit from hearing from those with the power to change structures, norms, and practices about their understanding of harassment and the invalidation of marginalized voices in stand-up. Studies examining the overlap between gendered gatekeeping in comedy and on social media platforms, like Twitter’s failure to address harassment aimed at women and YouTube’s demonetization of LGBTQ content, would also be useful in exploring the ways that marginalized comics are further stymied in their careers by discrimination built into technologies and platforms. Finally, I would like to see research on decision-makers within companies heavily investing producing stand-up comedy, particularly Netflix, which has in the past year drastically ramped up its production of stand-up comedy specials. While discourses surrounding the proliferation of comedic content tend to uncritically hail more outlets and more investment as automatically more democratic and progressive, it’s important to look closely at the ways in which “comedy booms” are both subverting or reinforcing pre-existing inequality. As Kristen Warner (2017) explains in her work on what she calls “plastic representation,” we still tend to understand diverse representation in terms of quantity rather than quality.
A feminist approach to comedy means not just defining what “feminist” comedy looks like or studying women who tell jokes, it also means taking seriously alternative forms of comedy, centering unknown and amateur comics, and studying women performing comedy female-only spaces or queer spaces. While patriarchal influence on comedy is difficult to ignore in a culture so embedded in and defined by male-culture, future research and humor theory should continue to think through what an alternative or radical definition of comedy would look like. Is it even possible to create a truly feminine or feminist stand-up comedy culture? Future feminist approaches to stand-up should wrestle with these questions.

“Imagining Alternatives”: New Comedic Spaces in Chicago and Champaign-Urbana

Nancy Fraser (1997) defines the ideal Habermasian public sphere as one in which “inequalities of status [are] bracketed” and “discussants [are] free to deliberate as peers” (72). Defenses and celebrations of stand-up comedy frequently echo such an imagined ideal space in which expression is free and power relations are erased. However, when we champion “rationality” in the public sphere, we position masculine notions of debate and performance in opposition to imagined feminine emotion and artificiality (73). Further, class, gender, and race based exclusions from the bourgeois public sphere are not failures to realize the Habermasian ideal, but an inevitability. Additionally, Fraser explains:

A discourse of publicity touting accessibility, rationality, and the suspension of status hierarchies is itself deployed as a strategy of distinction. Declaring a deliberative arena to be a space where extant status distinctions are bracketed and neutralized is not sufficient to make it so. (74).

Similarly, popular arguments that comedians should be able to make jokes without consequence if they are “funny” only makes sense if we accept at face value that there is an objective standard
of “funny.” Instead, such an ideology works to silence the voices of those who do not have the cultural capital to enforce their own taste. Merely claiming that a comedy club is a space free of gendered, raced, or classed status distinctions does not make it so, and further, reinforces the marginalization of already peripheral voices.

Joanne Gilbert (2004) argues that any attempt at feminist humor puts women in a double-bind: while seeking to subvert patriarchal norms through humor, they often must simultaneously abide by the standards set by decades of male performers and critics (33). Or, to tweak the famous words of Audre Lorde (1984), the master’s humor will never dismantle the master’s house. One way to disrupt the masculine hegemony of a public is to create counterpublics or in this case, countercomedic publics. Counterpublics work to contest the “exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public” by creating alternate styles of political debate, activism, and public speech (Fraser 1997, 75). To create spaces where they see themselves and can make their own rules, women are producing their own shows, classes, festivals, and open mics to increase the visibility of all types of female and non-gender conforming comics. Some specific examples in Chicago include the BAPS (Beautiful and Powerful Sistas) Showcase, a show run by four black women that exclusively features women of color; the Feminine Comique and The Kates University, two groups that offer women-only stand-up and storytelling classes; Just Dicking Around All Genders Open Mic, an open mic in Boy’s Town that prioritizes inclusivity explicitly; Simmer Brown, a recently cancelled showcase run by three comics of color that strove to feature diverse line-ups; and The Kates, a women’s group that produces stand-up and storytelling shows across the city. These spaces have all been mentioned in my interviews and comics frequently credited with dramatically shifting the demographics of Chicago comedy over the past 5 years by creating places where women can be vulnerable and speak their “truth” without the attendant risks or
pushback. Though the extent to which the hegemonic comedic framework informs alternative spheres differs widely from space to space. As some of my interviewees told me, some spaces run by women reproduce the same marginalizing discourses and practices as their male-run counterparts and many spaces are dominated by white, well-educated women with similar perspectives.

Sameena Mustafa, who helped start Simmer Brown, told me that she and her co-producers wanted not only to expand the pool of comics working but also to expand the types of people in the audience who may be turned off by what they see as a predominantly white, straight, aggressively male space. When they started, she said they agreed that they wanted to reach out beyond the typical comedy audiences:

Let’s target a crowd that isn’t going to comedy shows that often or isn’t part of the scene, so we’re actually getting people who don’t seek out stand-up comedy or are surprised like ‘oh, I didn’t know you guys existed!’ They might be; they might be some other immigrant, or they might be someone who thinks it’s cool that there’s a mix of performers and it’s not 100% dirty.

Kelsie Huff, founder of The Kates and a former instructor of The Feminine Comique, explained that her mission is both to get more women into the comedy scene, and to change the comedic mindset to one of a community rather than that cut-throat competitive environment she often sees. Her classes serve not only an instructional function, but also the function of welcoming women into stand-up comedy and giving them support networks.

The mission was to increase the number of women in comedy, and how do you do that? You teach them. People are so angry about safe space in comedy. ‘Well life is hard, comedy is hard.’ It comes from the philosophy of: are you competitive or are you
building a community?

Women have also created Facebook groups meant to network, to form a supportive community, to report harassment, and to advertise shows. One group, called Taco Takeover, is a planning group for women to go to open mics together, to support one another, and to make sure they aren’t “the only one in the room.” The non-profit organization Women In Comedy, while less grassroots and more corporate, has started putting together writing workshops, panels, benefit shows, and networking opportunities for women comics across the country.

In addition to studying alternatives, we can also implement our own. Even within a stand-up scene as small as Champaign-Urbana’s, I heard stories of comics who dropped out after dealing with harassment, women and queer comics who felt too uncomfortable within the aggressively masculine spaces of the local open mics to try stand-up, and comedy fans who wished they could enjoy a night out without worrying about hearing jokes about sexual assault or homophobic punchlines. After attending and talking to creators of more purposefully inclusive performance spaces in Chicago and the success they’ve found in getting more marginalized voices into the scene, I decided to create a more inclusive, welcoming open mic in Urbana called Broad Comedy in October of 2016. Located in the back of a pizza and coffee shop, we have been running the performance once or twice a month as a space specifically for comics who don’t feel comfortable performing at other open mics in town to diversify the local comedy scene. At first, I advertised the open mic as open only to women, women-identifying, and non-binary performers, but have now shifted to welcoming any comics who want an alternative space to perform. By setting norms of inclusivity, setting rules for jokes -- no racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, misogynistic material ---holding the show in the early evening at a time performers with families or full-time jobs can attend, and performing in a bright room, we’ve created a space
where comedy can feel like a celebration of community and difference. In the year-and-a-half the show has been running, our show featured has featured a mix of graduate students, undergraduate students and community members - nearly all who performed comedy for the first time at our show and most of whom are women and/or members of the LGBTQ community. Some of our performers just wanted to go on stage once to prove to themselves that they could do it. Some have come back every month, improving and building a following. A few started performing at our mic and then drew on their newfound confidence to start performing at more intimidating open mics in town. One graduate student who started performing with us a year ago went on to win third prize in our University’s Research Live competition, in which grad students give lightning talks on their research. She attributed her entering the contest to the confidence she gained through performing at Broad Comedy.

We’ve also attracted a loyal, and growing, audience of students, professors, and community members who don’t usually attend comedy shows because they thought stand-up wasn’t for them. I have audience members come up to me after every show to thank me for providing a space to watch stand-up that makes them laugh instead of wince and welcomes them in rather than excluding them. The show has succeeded in my goal of bringing new voices into the scene and to provide a fun, welcoming and inclusive environment to enjoy stand-up comedy. I hope that this research is just one small step in a larger project of raising up marginalized voices in stand-up comedy, and across all sectors of the culture industries and in society more generally. From a theoretical perspective, I also hope drawing attention to the masculine hegemony within conceptions of stand-up comedy be another step toward turning humor from “a male construct which women have borrowed” into a “framework for permanent and joyful change” (Gray 1994, 35).
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APPENDIX A: IRB LETTER

03 March 2016

Ms. Stephanie Brown
c/o Dr. Norman Denzin
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
225 Greg Hall, 810 S. Wright St.
Urbana, IL 61801

Re: IRB-16-001
Dear Ms. Stephanie Brown:

Thank you for submitting your Application for Research with Human Subjects Review. Your research project is exempt from review by the Human Subject Review Committee of the College of Communications based on the judgments that

1) Your research is not externally funded.
2) Your research does not involve more than minimal risk to human subjects.

Please proceed with your research project. Should any changes occur to the funding, research protocol and recruiting measures of your project, please inform us immediately.

Yours most sincerely,

Norman K. Denzin
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

This is the list of questions that I used to guide my ethnographic interviews which provided data for chapters four and five. While I started with this list of questions, conversations tended to meander as I let the interviewees steer the direction of the conversation.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
1. How did you get into stand-up/what drew you to it?
2. How long have you been performing?
3. What are you career goals and/or goals with doing stand-up?
4. Describe your first experience(s) performing.
5. Can you think of a time that you thought about quitting comedy?
6. Did you have a strategy for writing and performing material that resonated or connected with audiences at first? Has that changed over time?
7. Can you think of a time when you started out when you felt out of place within the scene or around groups of comics?
8. Do you feel like stand-up is still a “boys club”? Do you have strategies for dealing with that environment?
9. Why do you think comedy is such a male dominated space? Do you see it changing?
10. Are there norms/rules you had to learn to be accepted as a comic?
11. Have you ever been introduced onstage in a derogatory way or a way that drew attention to the fact that you’re a woman?
12. Have you ever changed what you were going to wear on stage to either detract harassment, be taken seriously, or for any reason other than you felt like it?
13. Do male comics or club owners/show-runners ever try to pressure you into dating or hooking up in exchange for putting you on a line-up or otherwise helping with your career?
14. Aside from over-the-top or blatant sexism, have you ever felt any subtle sexism from other comics or audiences, either through something they said or how you were treated?
15. Is there some form of mentorship in the stand-up scene? Did you have any particular mentors?
16. Beyond pure talent, who or what do you see as the “gatekeepers” of success within comedy, either on a local level or more nationally? How do you deal with such gatekeepers?

17. Have you spent time doing other forms of comedy? How do the environments or cultural rules differ?

18. Do you gear your comedy toward certain audiences/spaces or change your set depending on the audience or area?

19. Do you have topics you won’t joke about or ways that you self-censor regarding certain words or topics?

20. What do you think defines stand-up comedy as its own genre?

21. What makes a good stand-up comic?

22. Is there a difference between been a good comic and a successful comic, in your mind?

FANDOM

1. Before you started performing, would you have considered yourself a fan of stand-up comedy?

2. Do you consider yourself a fan now?

3. Are there comics who influence your work?

4. Did people tell you that you were funny growing up? Was developing a sense of humor important to you?

5. Do you put your material online or connect with potential fans or audiences online?

HARASSMENT

1. Have you ever faced harassment (either on or offline) from fellow comics, fans, audience members, club owners, managers, agents etc?

2. Have you heard of such harassment taking place?

3. Do you think current efforts like the non-profit Women in Comedy or related FB groups or awareness campaigns will help such harassment?

4. Are there ways you think comedy should work to be more inclusive not only of women, but also for comics of color, LGBTQ comics, or other marginalized voices?
APPENDIX C: SURVEY QUESTIONS

To supplement in person interviews, I e-mailed this survey created in Google Forms to comics who couldn’t meet in person in addition to posting it to national and Chicago-based comedy Facebook groups and posted on my own Facebook and Twitter pages.

Survey On Personal Experiences in Stand-Up Comedy

This is a qualitative survey used in lieu of interviews. This means the questions are open-ended and on a variety of topics. Do not feel like you have to answer all of them -- feel free to pick and choose.

The following questions seek to gather data in order to understand how identity shapes one's experience performing stand-up comedy.

Demographic Information
How do you identify your:
Gender?
Sexuality?
Ethnicity and/or Nationality?

How old are you?

How long have you been performing stand-up comedy?

Experiences in Stand-up Comedy
1. How did you first get started in comedy?

2. How did your first open mic/performance go?

3. What do you think makes a good stand-up comic?

4. What are your career goals (if any) as they pertain to stand-up?

5. Do you think about how you look on stage or put a lot of thought into what you wear?

6. Have you ever felt you’ve been treated differently than fellow comics in ways that are overt or subtle? Do you feel comfortable in the comedy community?

7. Have you ever faced harassment (in person or online) from fellow comics, fans, audience members, club owners, managers, agents etc?

8. Are there ways you think the comedy community, both locally and nationally, can work to be more inclusive across race, gender, and sexual identity?

9. Is there anything else you'd like to include about your experience in stand-up comedy?
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW AND SURVEY SUBJECTS

Below is a list the pseudonyms of interviewees used in the text with demographic information and demographics for interviewees not explicitly referenced in the text.

In-person Interviews

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Pseudonym</th>
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<th>Location</th>
<th>Still Performing?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Abbey</td>
<td>Early 20s</td>
<td>Champaign-Urbana</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allison</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>Mid 20s</td>
<td>Champaign-Urbana</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>Late 20s</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>Mid 20s</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brynne</td>
<td>Late 20s</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>Early 40s</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heather</td>
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<td>No</td>
</tr>
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<td>Jade</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Mia</td>
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<td>Olivia</td>
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</tr>
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<tr>
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### Survey Respondents

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<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
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<td>Chicago</td>
<td>1 and half</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stef</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>4</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Tempe</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unnamed</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unnamed</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unnamed</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unnamed</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unnamed</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Chicago/Vermont</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unnamed</td>
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<td>Chicago</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unnamed</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unnamed</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Champaign-Urbana</td>
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<tr>
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<td>21</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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APPENDIX E: COMEDY CLUBS, SHOWS, AND SPACES

I attended many comedy shows over the course of this research, not all of which I explicitly talk about in the text. This is a list of the stand-up comedy shows and spaces that I attended and in which city they took place. I’ve bolded the shows in which I also have performed.

Champaign-Urbana
Broad Comedy
Pizza-M (2016-2018) and Blackbird (2018-present). Currently running one Tuesday per month.

C-U Comedy Open Mic
Clark Bar. Currently running every Wednesday and Thursday nights.

C-U Comedy Showcase
Soma. Currently running certain Fridays and Saturday nights.

DMZ Comedy
Blind Pig. Currently running every Monday night.

Chicago
BAPS: A Comedy and Variety Showcase
Public House Theater, last Sunday of the month.

Chicago Women’s Funny Fest
Stage 773, Annual summer event.

Feminine Comique
All women and women-identifying stand-up class. July-August 2017. Class taught throughout the year.

Jokesplaining
Laugh Factory, last Friday of the month.

The Kates
The Book Cellar, Second Fridays and Last Saturdays of the month.

Strip Joker
Various locations, second Saturday of the month.

VooDoo Open Mic
@Northbar, every Saturday afternoon

Davenport, IA
Triple Crown Comedy
Triple Crown Whiskey Bar & Raccoon Motel, every Thursday night.