

# IN FOCUS: What's So Funny about Comedy and Humor Studies?

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## Introduction

by MAGGIE HENNEFELD, ANNIE BERKE, and MICHAEL RENNETT, editors

**A** guy walks into a bar. No, wait. *Three* guys walk into a bar. No. Let us start over. Twenty-some professors, graduate students, contingent lecturers, and independent scholars walk into a gray-toned hotel conference room, arrange the chairs into a makeshift semicircle, and energetically debate the future of comedy and humor studies as an academic field. It might not sound like the start of a promising joke, but if it's any consolation, it only gets funnier from there.

The essays that follow have been borne out of our annual meetings of the Comedy and Humor Studies Scholarly Interest Group at the Society of Cinema and Media Studies Conference.<sup>1</sup> Across the essays in this section, our goal is to highlight the exciting scholarship in our field while also drawing attention to its limits and blind spots. We argue that comedy studies has been widely marginalized, deployed only to consider conventional genre comedies or identifiable comedic performers. Yet comedic issues have crucial bearing on nearly every aspect of contemporary life, media culture, and interdisciplinary humanities scholarship. Above all, this section is a springboard for exploring many of these untapped intersections of comedic modes, social politics, and critical media scholarship.

**The Opposite of Comedy Is . . .** “Comedy” used to mean the opposite of “tragedy,” but now laughter sprawls out everywhere. In an era when breaking-news headlines read like satirical *Opinion* articles, social activism is fueled by pithy memes, and comedians

1 This scholarly interest group was established in 2013 by Philip Scepaniski. While the three of us have all served as faculty or graduate student chairs of this organization, we must also acknowledge the contributions of leadership past and present: Scepaniski, Stephanie Anne Brown, and Maria Corrigan, as well as the group's former board liaison, Linda Mizejewski.

are often better equipped to explain current events than scholars or journalists, it is crucial to reconceptualize the genre's qualities, as well as its psychological dynamics and social politics.

Contemporary uncertainties about comedy's limits stem from broader cultural and institutional shifts. The utter ubiquity of comedy in twenty-first-century life dovetails with profound technological changes that have fundamentally altered our very notions of truth, knowledge, and the evidentiary status of the sign. For example, the indexicality debates, which questioned the material basis of the digital image, loomed large for film and media studies throughout the early 2000s.<sup>2</sup> Comedy and humor scholars have approached these crises of mediation and belief primarily through notions of "fake news" and "truthiness," which are both variants of political satire.

The comedian Stephen Colbert famously defined "truthiness" in 2004 as "the fact that you don't think with your head but that you know with your heart." He elaborates: "Who's Britannica to tell me that the Panama Canal was finished in 1914? If I want to say it was 1941, that's my right."<sup>3</sup> When emotion holds a higher purchase on knowledge than science or rational debate, laughter plays a vital civic function: to signify truth against the rampant spread of disinformation (e.g., climate-change denialism) and the digital media-precipitated crisis of the indexical sign and evidentiary image.

Since the rise of truthiness during the George W. Bush presidency, comedy scholars such as Jonathan Gray, Ethan Thompson, and Amber Day have argued that political laughter holds the power to reinvigorate civic discourse while renewing the capacity for media images to sustain belief in scientific evidence and fact-based knowledge.<sup>4</sup> But it is doubtful that political satire can still defend democratic values in the age of "post-truth," election cyberhacking, and the appropriation of "fake news" as authoritarian disinformation.

In response to these dual crises of liberal democracy and liberating laughter, scholars in the field have questioned their earlier optimism about the genre while imagining new ways in which political laughter can continue to be globally consequential. Books, edited collections, and conference panels have proliferated, including *Stand-Up Comedians as Public Intellectuals*, "Political Laughter and Its Consequences," and *Behind the Laughs: Community and Inequality in Comedy*.<sup>5</sup> Alongside this commitment to the contemporary, a rich array of archival studies have explored the historical formations of comedy's capacity to effect social change while defending the methodological value of archival documentation and exploring new approaches to humor historiography.

2 For an excellent overview of the indexicality debates, see the issue of *differences* edited by Mary Ann Doane, "Indexicality: Trace and Sign," special issue, *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 18, no. 1 (2007).

3 "The Word: Truthiness," *The Colbert Report*, aired October 17, 2005 on Comedy Central, <http://www.cc.com/video-playlists/kw3fj0/the-opposition-with-jordan-klepper-welcome-to-the-opposition-w-jordan-klepper/63ite2>.

4 See Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson, eds., *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Amber Day, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

5 Peter Kunze and Jared Champion, eds., *Taking a Stand: American Stand-Up Comedians as Public Intellectuals* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Political Laughter and Its Consequences (panel, American Humor Studies Association, July 12, 2018); Michael P. Jeffries, *Behind the Laughs: Community and Inequality in Comedy* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

The essays in this section continue that important work of framing the vital epistemological functions of comedy and humor in the age of far-right populism, social media echo chambers, viral archive fever, and declining media credibility. Their authors tackle a range of issues, including laughter as a mode of classroom pedagogy, the global politics of internet trolling and social media bigotry, and the radical potentials of feminist metajokes in stand-up comedy and television. As these essays reveal, comedy studies now encompasses a vast field of diverse media objects, theoretical methodologies, and intersectional social politics. It is the wager of this section that laughter and humor are core matters across the critical humanities—we all have a stake in the affects, theories, and social consequences of comedy.

**Beyond the Three Bs: Theory, Object, Methodology.** A promiscuous feeling of interdisciplinarity has yielded a series of passionate conversations at our annual SCMS meetings, which have been both rigorous and freewheeling, academic and, at times, deeply personal. We have tried to import that sense of invigorating fun, urgent relevance, and affective play here to share with *JCMS* readers.

Many of our members lament the discursive hegemony of a select group of white male European philosophers from the early twentieth century, whose names all coincidentally start with the letter *B*: Henri Bergson, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Georges Bataille.<sup>6</sup> Within this schema, Bergson represents the disciplinary approach to a mode of humor that polices social norms through cruel, corrective laughter. In contrast, Bakhtin opens up a festive or even revolutionary space in which carnivalesque laughter mocks authority and subverts sovereign tyranny. Bataille lands somewhere in the middle, emphasizing the messy materiality of the burst of laughter itself and the inherent unknowability of its social or psychological effects.<sup>7</sup>

These ingrained comedic orthodoxies, which have calcified around the holy triad of the three *Bs*, no longer seem adequate to address the present moment of comedy studies and its relation to twenty-first-century culture, society, and politics. It is not just that Sigmund Freud's theory of jokes or Simon Critchley's taxonomy of incongruity has outworn its usefulness.<sup>8</sup> Although these key texts remain fruitful objects of study, their ubiquity can lead to intellectual tedium and even boredom—both anathema to the spirit of critical problem solving and speculative theory. Incestuous methodologies foster growing anxieties that our academic fields will simply not be able to keep pace with the rapid-fire transformations in media culture, online social relationships, and networked global politics.

On that note, one of the major challenges for comedy theorists today—if not for all film and media scholars—is to distinguish what we do from, say, a well-written think piece on laughter by Emily Nussbaum, Masha Gessen, Roxane Gay, or Lindy West. How do we square the value of our expertise and the slow-burn temporality of

6 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (New York: Macmillan, 1911); Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2009); Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

7 Bataille, "Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears," *October* 36 (Spring 1986): 90.

8 Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 1960); and Simon Critchley, *On Humour (Thinking in Action)* (London: Routledge, 2002).

academic publishing with the relentless eruption of media events and breaking-news headlines? And how do we even define or delimit our object of study today, given the ongoing collapse between comedy and whatever else used to stand in opposition to it? Again, absurdity is everywhere, from Sean Spicer’s “Holocaust centers” to the all-too-brief political celebrity of “The Mooch,” but it often appears as anything but funny.<sup>9</sup> To quote Diane Lockhart from TV’s *The Good Fight* (CBS, 2016–), in her valuable addendum to Karl Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire*, “First as tragedy, second as farce, third as porn.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, there is often a fine line between dialectical farce and pornographic spectacle.

The subfield of feminist comedy studies has exploded in recent years, with books and articles by Linda Mizejewski, Bambi Haggins, Glenda Carpio, Rebecca Krefling, Jennifer Bean, Sianne Ngai, Anca Parvulescu, and many others. These writings have moved well beyond Kathleen Rowe Karlyn’s formative Bakhtinian polemic in *The Unruly Woman* (1995), emphasizing issues of affect, race and sexuality, neoliberal economy, and social media power politics.<sup>11</sup> It is telling that Roseanne Barr once epitomized unruly feminist disruption, famously grabbing her crotch while singing “The Star-Spangled Banner” in front of President George H. W. Bush at a San Diego Padres game in 1990; Roseanne’s politics have since taken a startling turn to the far right.<sup>12</sup> From comic-grotesque rabble-rouser to white-supremacist troll, her optics of bodily subversion have been further appropriated by the alt-right, revealing the limitations of the transgression argument: that disrupting the norm is the same thing as dismantling it. Instead, feminist comedy scholars are increasingly engaging with new media studies, queer affect theory, and critiques of neoliberal capitalism to analyze the intersectional politics of gender, technology, and social power in the twenty-first century.

As Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai write in their introduction to a 2017 issue of *Critical Inquiry*, aptly titled “Comedy Has Issues,” we are now living in a state of “permanent carnival . . . in which people are increasingly supposed to be funny all the time. . . . But the world and comedy change when there’s a demand for permanent carnival.”<sup>13</sup> For Berlant and Ngai, this crisis of permanent carnival—in addition to fostering the election of buffoonish tyrants like Donald Trump and Silvio Berlusconi—is primarily a problem of affective labor. Ngai and Berlant invoke Slavoj Žižek’s

9 Zack Beauchamp, “Sean Spicer Made Not One but Several Gaffes about the Holocaust on Tuesday,” *Vox*, November 4, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/4/11/15262100/sean-spicer-assad-hitler-holocaust-gas>; Roger Cohen, “Goodbye to the Scaramouch,” *New York Times*, August 1, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/01/opinion/goodbye-anthony-scaramucci.html>.

10 “Day 464,” episode 9, season 2, of *The Good Fight*, Phil Robinson and Michelle King (2017, CBS), television. From Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire* in the first section on Hegel: “Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.” Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1998), 15.

11 Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

12 Geoff Edgers, “Roseanne on the Day She Shrieked the ‘Star Spangled Banner,’ Grabbed Her Crotch, and Earned a Rebuke from President Bush,” *Washington Post*, July 23, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2015/07/23/roseanne-on-the-day-she-shrieked-the-star-spangled-banner-grabbed-her-crotch-and-earned-a-rebuke-from-president-bush/?utm\\_term=.833f0be29dd7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2015/07/23/roseanne-on-the-day-she-shrieked-the-star-spangled-banner-grabbed-her-crotch-and-earned-a-rebuke-from-president-bush/?utm_term=.833f0be29dd7).

13 Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, eds., “Comedy Has Issues,” special issue, *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (Winter 2017): 236, <https://doi.org/10.1086/689666>.

notion of the injunction to enjoyment that proliferates when amusement becomes a precious form of cultural capital. Žižek argues, paraphrasing Lacan, that this injunction “marks the point at which *permitted enjoyment*, freedom-to-enjoy, is reversed into *obligation* to enjoy,” adding that it is no doubt also “the most effective way to block access to enjoyment.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, many of us live in constant terror of failing to enjoy ourselves or of not having enough fun, and no end of TV laugh tracks, social media emoticons, or underpaid customer service representatives can convince us that we are thriving in our daily access to pleasure and entertainment.

Where does laughter fit in this matrix of free labor and affective capital? On the one hand, the reflex of laughter offers a coping mechanism for processing the bottomless unreality of our crisis-ridden historical present. For example, when the US president invokes a deceased, nineteenth-century Black abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, as if he were still alive, praising him as “someone who’s done an amazing job and is being recognized more and more,” mockery is not only fitting but also profoundly therapeutic as a survival strategy for rationalizing the sheer incongruity between executive power and the deteriorating mental capacities of those who wield it.<sup>15</sup> As the German critical theorist Walter Benjamin once wrote, in the context of Disney cartoons and against the rise of Nazi fascism in interwar Europe, “collective laughter” provides an inoculation against “mass psychosis.”<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, and more vitally, laughter is a tactic of rhetorical combat at the very front and center of the escalating culture wars in the United States (if not globally). Laughing at the Other—whether it is enabled by Rush Limbaugh or Sacha Baron Cohen, Milo Yiannopoulos or Samantha Bee—has become a daily ritual that entrenches our tribalist political beliefs and ideological values. As Sara Ahmed has put it, “When it is no laughing matter, laughter matters.”<sup>17</sup>

**Beyond Genre Studies: Archives, Pedagogy, Trolls, Feminism, and Male Rompers.** The essays that follow include both historical and contemporary case studies, revealing the vast scope of our methods and objects. Yet our conversations remain firmly anchored in the present, as working writers and teachers. When assembling this collection, we kept returning to the question, Why now?

The best critical thinking often takes root in the classroom. Historian of slapstick Rob King draws on his experiences of teaching W. C. Fields’s *The Fatal Glass of Beer* (1932) to a group of students who simply did not get the joke. In “Historiography and Humorlects,” King uses this classroom anecdote as a springboard for understanding the vernacular contingency of how humor ages. He defines “humorlects” as the affective modalities through which humor is lived and thought. Where King asks what it

14 Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (New York: Verso Books, 2008), 237.

15 Cleve R. Wootson, “Trump Implied Frederick Douglas Was Alive. The Abolitionists’ Family Offered a History Lesson,” *Washington Post*, February 2, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/02/02/trump-implied-frederick-douglass-was-alive-the-abolitionists-family-offered-a-history-lesson/>.

16 Walter Benjamin has described “collective laughter [as] one such preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis.” In *Selected Writings, Vol. 3: 1935–1938*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and Michael Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 118.

17 Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 261.

would mean to make archival humor more teachable, Kriszta Pozsonyi and Seth Soulestein emphasize the pedagogical value of group laughter and of “classroom clowning.” They draw on field interviews with three experts—Bambi Haggins, Linda Mizejewski, and Samantha Sheppard—to explore the power politics of how laughter can both subvert and reinforce default hierarchies between professor and student.

From university pedagogy to internet message boards, the following two essays focus on comedy’s unraveling relationship to online discourse and social media politics. In “On Trolling as Comedic Method,” Benjamin Aspray questions the putative difference between satirical laughter and predatory “lulz,” or online laughter at another’s pain and aggravation. He analyzes the shock humor series *Million Dollar Extreme Presents: World Peace* (2016), considering it in relation to the strategies of comedic performance art—from Andy Kaufman and Lenny Bruce to Nathan Fielder and Sacha Baron Cohen. Lulz are not just the property of the alt-right. Alfred Martin emphasizes the tensions between intersectional humor and social media connectivity. In “The Tweet Has Two Faces,” he analyzes the antagonisms between race and sexuality that erupted on Twitter in response to the RompHim: a pair of rompers designed for men and marketed particularly to Black men.

Beyond social media, what tools do we have to combat the abject laughter of alt-right trolls or the corrective mockery of predatory tweeters? Beck Krefling looks to the stand-up stage to unleash the feminist powers and potentials of laughter. In “Hannah Gadsby Stands Down: Feminist Comedy Studies,” Krefling reflects on her own experience as an audience member of Gadsby’s *Nanette* in 2017, a show that has since gone viral on Netflix and provoked a groundswell of conversation and debate. Focusing on the limits of self-deprecating laughter, Krefling critiques the subversive impulses of feminist comedy studies and suggests compelling alternatives to the transgression hypothesis.

Between affect and power, the eruption of laughter no longer represents that zone of carnivalesque exception or of special truth-telling license that it once did and long has. Beyond genre studies, we argue, problems of comedy and humor should be at the very front and center of our attention as interdisciplinary media scholars. This immense but urgent task requires a sense of joyful play, intellectual mischief, risky coalition building, and open collectivity that comedy scholars have long cherished and without which our field would scarcely be more than an in-joke. We invite you, critical reader, to laugh with us in that generous spirit of imagining new interdisciplinary formations—ones that will long foster our shared political commitments and intellectual passions. \*

# Historiography and Humorlects

by ROB KING

**H**istory/Theory. I once had a competition with a screenwriting instructor in my program. Which of our students would most appreciate W. C. Fields's oddball melodrama parody *The Fatal Glass of Beer* (1933): the MFA screenwriters (his team) or the MA class in film studies (mine)? The result, a draw. Love-all. Two classes at Columbia that year got to sit stone-faced through one of Fields's most divisive two-reelers; two instructors were shamed in their tastes by their unlaughing students, and no amount of appeals to the work of Linda Hutcheon would save us.<sup>1</sup> Such are the delights of teaching comedy.

This essay is an exercise in licking my wounds. Because I want to use that experience—and, indeed, that film—as a way of thinking about the oft-perplexing qualities of past laughter and the difficulties of evaluation that they impose. What methodological protocols do we draw on, as historians, to make sense of old comedies? And what in particular do we do in the case of past texts whose comedic properties puzzle us, leaving us uncertain as to their operations? At issue here is not just the tricky task of how to explain an old joke—which always risks killing it—but also the way our theoretical and historiographical methods can have a pigeonholing effect on the apprehension of past laughter. For too long, the media historiography of comedy has made do with only a paltry set of theoretical templates—primarily Bergson, Freud, and Bakhtin, with occasional nods to Bataille, Douglas, and (for parody) Hutcheon—with the resulting effect of flattening comedy's history into a tiny series of prescribed themes and variations (the return of the repressed, the grotesque body, and so forth).<sup>2</sup> But the historiography of comedy has also, I think, failed to give sufficient traction to humor theory's most singular virtue—namely, its sensitivity to how humor works in the moment as an innovative practice of sense-unmaking. As Paolo Virno has written, jokes—and we may include other forms of humor here—are “diagram[s] of innovative action” that display our capacity to make

1 I am referring of course to Linda Hutcheon's seminal *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of the Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (London: Methuen, 1985).

2 To take only two recent examples, the introduction to Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant's *Hysterical! Women in American Comedy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017) discusses only Bakhtin, Bergson, and Freud under the heading “Critical Models of Comedy and Women's Comedy” (10–13), and Nick Marx and Matt Sienkewicz's *Comedy Studies Reader* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018) organizes its first four sections around the same trio of theorists plus Hutcheon.

abrupt deviations from collective norms and conventions; they turn upon a “practical shrewdness” that seizes on “states of exception of discourse,” and in so doing, they provoke in microcosm the “variation of a form of life.”<sup>3</sup> And yet once a joke enters history, it may begin to appear simply as part of a past “form of life” and not as the latter’s state of exception, a dead letter that sediments into its contexts, more easily read as culturally symptomatic than as a live resource of cultural transformability.

The challenge, then, will be to formulate a historiography that somehow holds close to this “in the moment” work of comedies past. What makes *The Fatal Glass of Beer* a keeper, in this respect, is that its very strangeness has, over the past eighty-plus years, provoked several readings that seek to do exactly that. We can learn from them how different interpretive modes in humor studies can be related to different protocols within the genealogy of criticism itself—what I call, in what follows, hermeneutic, modernist, and vernacular reading strategies. But we can also gain a sense of more labile possibilities for historical evaluation that would avoid extinguishing humor’s fuse between the rock and the hard place of a theoretical *demonstrandum* on the one hand and a determining historicism on the other.

**The Fatal Glass of Beer.** Before we plunge into these readings, however, some words on the film itself. *The Fatal Glass of Beer* was Fields’s second two-reel short for legendary comedy producer Mack Sennett, made after the critical success of the first—*The Dentist* (1932)—persuaded Sennett to give Fields a carte blanche that the producer would soon come to regret. What Fields did was go experimental, turning back to the well of his vaudeville experience to offer an eccentric adaptation of his stage sketch “The Stolen Bonds,” a parody of antique melodramatic theater he had first performed for the *Earl Carroll Vanities* of 1928. (This sketch supplies the film’s overall narrative framework and the specific events of the second reel, in which a young man returns from prison to the cabin of his parents, played by Fields and Rosemary Theby.) Fields further lengthened “The Stolen Bonds” to two reels by layering into it another parody, also grabbed from the stage, by way of blackface comedian Charlie Case’s temperance-song put-on “The Fatal Glass of Beer.” (This song becomes the framework of the first reel, in which Fields sings the sad tale of his son’s delinquency, all the while strumming a zither with woolen mitts.) Add to all this the disarmingly deadpan way in which the film exposes the creakiness of its illusionist machinery—paper snow repeatedly flung into Fields’s face, perspectively mismatched rear projection—and one is left with a film that plays out as though blissfully unaware of its own absurdity, puzzling viewers ever since. (It would probably be best if you watched it before reading further: it’s all over YouTube.)

**Hermeneutics.** What, then, are the critical operations that might clarify the comedic praxis of this film oddity? The most straightforward move is to try to recover the humor by restoring its references, as though the historian’s perplexity is simply due to historical remove. This is your basic “we no longer get it” approach. *The Fatal Glass of Beer*’s function as parody, it is argued, is lost on contemporary viewers, for whom the

3 Paolo Virno, *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008), 73, 91, 123.

conventions of the ten-twenty-thirty melodrama are no longer live values.<sup>4</sup> The “problem” of *The Fatal Glass of Beer* is in this way addressed through what we might call a hermeneutics of reference, the oldest interpretive tradition in the book, for which the task of understanding is simply a matter of recovering the proper denotations.

As a first pass, such an approach is correctly premised on the truisms that comedy is a historically embedded phenomenon and that such embeddedness needs reconstruction. Yet it falters in its tendency to confuse interpretation with evaluation, as though demonstrating the presence of a joke is sufficient to appreciation. It is, after all, perfectly possible to understand what *The Fatal Glass of Beer* is doing with melodrama and not find it funny, which, in fact, seems to have been the case with some of the film’s contemporaries. A critic for *Variety*, for instance, recognized the film’s parody of “old-style . . . melodramatics” but still recorded “hardly a snicker.”<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, Sennett himself, surely no slouch when it came to sending up melodrama, was entirely bemused by *The Fatal Glass of Beer*, to Fields’s not-inconsiderable resentment. “You are probably 100 percent right,” Fields wrote Sennett in a backhanded letter. “*The Fatal Glass of Beer* stinks. It’s lousy. But I still think it’s good.”<sup>6</sup> If the comedic praxis of *The Fatal Glass of Beer* remains perplexing, then this is not just because people somehow don’t, or didn’t, get the parody.

**Modernist Readings.** Perhaps *The Fatal Glass of Beer* has proved impenetrable because it challenges the ordinary pleasures of laughter. Perhaps the film should be understood as a kind of metacomedy that deforms comedic convention (as Frank Krutnik has said of Jerry Lewis’s work), or even as a kind of anticomedy (as per Jeffrey Sconce’s essay on *Tim and Eric*), in either case laughter ceasing to be a straightforward test of success or failure.<sup>7</sup> Here, historical interpretation comes into contact with modernism’s legacy of theories of humor, for which comicality’s most remarked-on characteristic is its tendency to involute into its apparent opposites, usually in one of two ways. Formally, there is what Anne Beatts called “comedy about the failure of comedy,” as characterized by the deliberate deferral of punch lines and the annulment of comedic convention.<sup>8</sup> Affectively, there is comedy as a cause of psychic disarray, provoking what is usually portrayed as a distinctly manic form of laughter, always seeming on the verge of sobbing.

In the case of *The Fatal Glass of Beer*, both tendencies coalesce in a somewhat unexpected 1991 essay by literary critic Harold Bloom, who, deeming the film “the sublime of cinematic art,” reads Fields’s two-reeler not as an exemplar of mirthful fun but as testimony to an “aesthetics of outrage” that bridges the comedian’s work

4 This, for example, is the position taken by Stan Taffel and Nick Santa Maria in their Blu-ray commentary to the film in *The Mack Sennett Collection*, vol. 1 (CineMuseum, 2014).

5 “Talking Shorts,” *Variety*, June 20, 1933, 11.

6 Quoted in James Curtis, *W. C. Fields: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 253.

7 Frank Krutnik, “Jerry Lewis: The Deformation of the Comic,” *Film Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (Fall 1994): 12–26; Jeffrey Sconce, “*Tim and Eric’s Awesome Show, Great Job!* Metacomedy,” in *How to Watch Television*, ed. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 74–82.

8 From an interview published in Denise Collier and Kathleen Beckett, *Spare Ribs: Women in the Humor Biz* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980), 34.

with Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* and the literature of William Faulkner.<sup>9</sup> Here, laughter becomes salient only to the degree to which it empties into more turbulent registers of feeling. “Our laughter is not joyous as we watch,” Bloom writes, because “humorous outrage remains outrage.” Such a claim clarifies that it is the outrage and not the humor that, for Bloom, sanctions the attribution of value. “Nothing is funny in itself,” he insists. “Even the traces of parody dissolve,” because it is the “totality of outrageousness that matters” in a film whose “ultimate outrage is a father’s murder of his only child” (which is how Bloom interprets the ending, when Fields kicks his son out into a blizzard).<sup>10</sup> The ordinary pleasures of being amused are here canceled out in a reading that appropriates laughter to a spectrum of psychic devastation. Bloom might thus be seen to join hands with a Bataille or a Wyndham Lewis in channeling shock and discomfiture into a theory of comicality. What is excluded, however, is the possibility of an assessment that would allow comedic value to be imagined in terms other than these seismic registers. Might we not do better to unlearn an attachment to psychic drama as that which convinces us that comedy matters?

**Humorlects.** So let me propose a third possible approach to *The Fatal Glass of Beer*—one less inclined to such shock and awe—that seeks evaluation in terms of what Sianne Ngai describes as “trivial aesthetic categories.”<sup>11</sup> This looks, in any given period, at vernacular modes of comicality to be reconstructed through a kind of discursive and affective archeology, and it seizes on them as evidence of the ephemeral “structures of feeling” (to borrow Raymond Williams’s term) that inform comedic expression in any given situation.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, it builds on the value of our first reading—the insistence on comedy’s historical embeddedness—even as it doubles down on that insistence. We are dealing here with the gap that often exists between the broad categories of humor, as these have manifested across history (e.g., satire, wit, clowning), and the more localized inflections or sociolects of comicality whose affective resonance does not always “carry through” beyond their moment. We are dealing, that is, with an irresolvable tension between humor’s universalism and its particularity, in which it is not merely the denotational content of humorous expression that is historically relative but also the affective tones and vocabularies that color its practice. The term that I propose to give to these is “humorlects.”

Consider, then, by way of a third reading of *The Fatal Glass of Beer*, the following *New York Morning Telegraph* review of Fields’s original stage sketch and, in particular, the use of the term “hokum”:

The sketches are hokum. But what Fields does . . . is not hokum. I like hokum. And there is art hokum. Why object to hokum? . . . The throwing of the paper snow into the face of Fields is grand. It’s hokum. BUT THE

9 Harold Bloom, “The Fatal Glass of Beer,” in *The Movie That Changed My Life*, ed. David Rosenberg (New York: Viking, 1991), 151.

10 Bloom, 153, 156.

11 Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

12 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), chap. 9.

RECEIVING OF THE SNOW BY FIELDS IS LITTLE SHORT OF PERFECTION. He doesn't "hoke."<sup>13</sup>

I don't want to go too far down the rabbit hole of defining "hokum," on which I have published elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> Suffice it to say, the term was in vogue in the mid- to late 1920s to describe entertainment forms that traded in strong or obvious effects, like melodrama or slapstick, usually with the additional sense of being "old-time." More pertinent is how the derived concept of art hokum—which I love—establishes an optic that encompasses the two previous reading strategies, even as it sources them in a vernacular and historically particularized category ("hokum"). A broad parody of broad melodrama, *The Fatal Glass of Beer* may be seen as hokum twice over, yet a hokum that contains within itself a reflexive inversion—not quite an outrage that displaces joy but a hokum that, in Fields's deadpan performance, refuses to "hoke."

The issue here is not, of course, that the *Telegraph's* reading is more "correct" than, say, Bloom's, but it does restore *The Fatal Glass of Beer* to the localized palimpsest of practices and values within which comedians worked, and it further permits an understanding of the field of comedy production within which Fields was registering an innovation. What is truly lost to viewers today, I dare say, is less the fact that *The Fatal Glass of Beer* is parody, which is really quite obvious, than the nature of the intervention—the film's reflexive art hokum—that rendered the film so puzzling even for many of Fields's contemporaries. And if there is a lesson in this, it is simply that we need to historicize past comedy not by rushing to assimilate it to the metalanguages of this or that theoretical system, but through a more careful reconstruction of the private languages—the humorlects—that index the singular modalities through which comedy has been both felt and thought.

**Whither Theory?** I do not want to end with the impression that I am trying to dislodge humor theory's purchase on historiography. What I would propose, rather, is an approach that would see humor theory less as something to be applied in top-down fashion to the history of comicality and more as something conditioned by that history. The move here is a quasi-Deleuzian one, coined somewhat in the image of the philosopher's approach to cinema, namely, to take the history of comedy not as some object that theory should then unpack but as a horizon of innovation that provides fresh frameworks and concepts for theory.

Current scholarship provides us with several leads in this direction beyond the admittedly limited case of art-hokum reflexivity. To take one of Ngai's own examples, for instance, we need to think about how the language of "zaininess" updates Bergson to designate a category of comic behavior linked less to the machine-age references of Bergson's own study ("something mechanical encrusted on something living") than to

13 *New York Morning Telegraph*, quoted in W. C. Fields, *W. C. Fields by Himself: His Intended Autobiography with Hitherto Unpublished Letters, Notes, Scripts and Articles*, with commentary by Ronald Fields (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973), 82.

14 Rob King, *Hokum! The Early Sound Slapstick Short and Depression-Era Mass Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).

the affective strain of post-Fordist labor.<sup>15</sup> Or, to follow the suggestion of pop-culture historian Nic Sammond, we need to read the “sick” humor of Cold War underground comics as a humorlectic mutation of carnivalesque comicality toward a foregrounding of abjection.<sup>16</sup> Or, to bring things into the present, we can take Whitney Phillips’s lead in exploring “lulz” as online trolls’ fetish of choice for sustaining the emotional dissociation so often posited by theory as a catalyst for comic pleasure.<sup>17</sup>

Hokum, zany, sick, lulz. Put another way, there are dimensions to comedic experience and pleasure that are not sufficiently honored in the bald terms of our existing theoretical models—Bergsonian superiority, Freudian release, et cetera—but that require us to think about comedy historically as what Lauren Berlant calls a “sensitized epistemology” or, again, a “structure of feeling” that operates only in the atmosphere of particular constellations.<sup>18</sup> Only then will we have the tools to trace microcosms of comedic innovation to the macrocosms of social praxis with which they correlate and, in so doing, fuse historiography inseparably with theoretical renewal. \*

15 Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, chap. 3.

16 Nicholas Sammond, “Flatulence Will Get You Everywhere: The Kipper Kids and Non-Sense Video” (presentation, Society of Cinema and Media Studies conference, Toronto, March 14–18, 2018). Thanks to Annie Berke for suggesting “humorlectic.”

17 Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), chap. 2.

18 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 64.

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# Classroom Clowning: Teaching (with) Humor in the Media Classroom

by KRISZTA POZSONYI and SETH SOULSTEIN

**C**ollege is a place for serious work. But does it need to be a serious place? In our efforts to communicate the importance of what we are teaching to our students, we may be casting aside one of our most valuable tools as educators: humor. Teaching with humor has tangible—and intangible—benefits, and media scholars are well positioned to use it. We tend to fear class clowns as distracting from our work in the classroom, but what if we view ourselves as the class clowns?

We, the coauthors of this piece, are doctoral candidates who teach courses on film and television comedy, and while our demeanors and identity markers in the classroom are different, we operate from similar levels of junior-scholar precarity within current-day American academia. This position has a deep impact on our comfort with inviting

the anarchy of laughter—or worse, failed humor—into our classrooms. In writing this collaborative essay, we decided to engage in conversation with prominent scholars, teachers, and mentors in our field. We reached out to three professors currently working in varying educational and institutional contexts who are in different stages of their professional careers: Bambi Haggins (associate professor in the Department of Film and Media Studies at University of California, Irvine), Linda Mizejewski (professor in the Department of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Ohio State University), and Samantha Sheppard (assistant professor in the Department of Performing and Media Arts at Cornell University).

Across several branches of education and pedagogy scholarship, there is a general consensus around the usefulness of humor as a pedagogical tool. Numerous studies have concluded that “humor and laughter can not only coexist with serious learning and rigorous investigation, but can actually enhance them.”<sup>1</sup> Following a larger study with more than a hundred undergraduate students, R. L. Garner highlights the mental, emotional, and physiological benefits shown to result from laughter.<sup>2</sup> In case this was not convincing enough, Ronald A. Berk offers an extensively detailed list of positive effects of using humor in the classroom based on a review of hundreds of research papers.<sup>3</sup> In short, “scientifically speaking,” it is fairly easy to demonstrate that learning through humor is advantageous.

All that said, teaching with or about humor is not at all a risk-free endeavor; it entails a particular set of challenges for both teachers and students. Garner, Berk, and Gordon might be strong advocates for pedagogical styles interlaced with humor, but their shared identities as white, male senior scholars afford them a certain freedom. Although the two of us work as graduate teachers in the same PhD program, even we have often compared our own perceptions over the past few years of how our students responded to our classroom joking differently. For instance, some language-based jokes, when told by Kriszta, a nonnative English speaker, may not register to her students as jokes but rather as errors.

Laughter itself is also a specific, embodied experience and, as such, always socially coded. For this very reason, however, it makes an excellent topic for in-class discussion. Sheppard provides this illuminating explanation:

I . . . try to teach my students to think about the sonic quality of laughter. I love to laugh, and I know that it can be helpful for students to hear me laugh. . . . Using my own (rather loud) laughter, I try to teach my students to embrace the intended and unintended tonal shifts in various media. At the same time, I also try to use my laughter to show students how race contours the politics and policing of laughter. First, I remind them of the recent controversy about a group of Black women who were kicked off a train for “laughing while Black” to show how racial biases contour the reception of laughter. Second,

1 Mordechai Gordon, “Using Humorous Video Clips to Enhance Students Understanding, Engagement and Critical Thinking,” *Think* 13, no. 38 (2014): 85.

2 R. L. Garner, “Humor in Pedagogy: How Ha-Ha Can Lead to Aha!,” *College Teaching* 54, no. 1 (2006): 177.

3 Ronald A. Berk, “‘Last Professor Standing!’ PowerPoint Enables All Faculty to Use Humor in Teaching,” *Journal of Faculty Development* 28, no. 3 (2014): 81–87.

I turn their attention to Bambi Haggins' chapter on Dave Chappelle in *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America*, where she questions: "I know what I'm laughing at, but what are you laughing at?"<sup>4</sup> Using this question, I make my students grapple with the cultural (il)legibility of laughter and how humor can invite multiple, contradictory, and ambivalent readings and responses.<sup>5</sup>

Our respondents all describe using humor both for critical purposes and for navigating the affective dynamics of the classroom. Sheppard continues:

As a young-ish, early-career Black woman, I love that I can make my students laugh. However, my desire to be fun and funny is always measured because of the way my students may read my body and humor within existing tropes of Black women (e.g., as sassy and not studious individuals).<sup>6</sup>

Sheppard thus reminds us of the different stakes of teaching with humor. Some teachers are more vulnerable than others to being questioned about the "seriousness" of their commitment to their work when they opt for a more playful tone in the classroom.

For some educators, comedy can feel like it breaks down classroom hierarchies too much, whereas for others, it serves only to reinforce them. Seth, for example, who works with students on a first-name basis and often uses self-effacing forms of humor, sometimes worries that his authority in the classroom is undercut by his being too "jokey"—yet at the same time, he is constantly aware of how easily his joking may come across as a display of power or even bullying from a white, male classroom leader. Garner does warn that "humor should be used cautiously . . . as it can be a potent medium for communication or a social impediment in pedagogical settings."<sup>7</sup> Minna Uitto further points to humor's exceptional potency in stirring up distress or even trauma, noting that several years after certain courses, "teachers' rage, discouragement, ridicule, or mocking words could be recalled [by their students] word-for-word."<sup>8</sup>

Despite these (justifiably) perceived risks, as media scholars, we can beneficially incorporate humor into not only our teaching style but also our syllabi. (Mathematics faculty might, for example, have a harder time finding a wealth of funny equations.) We are well positioned to interrogate how humor proliferates in our political media landscape. In the age of Trumpism, important policy statements or derisive comments made in front of the press or on Twitter get written off as "just a joke." Meanwhile, comedians such as Michelle Wolf use jokes to unnerve antagonistic audiences and to make them

4 Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 234.

5 Samantha Sheppard, email interview, April 20, 2018.

6 Sheppard, interview.

7 Garner, "Humor," 178.

8 Minna Uitto, "Humiliation, Unfairness and Laughter: Students Recall Power Relations with Teachers," *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 19, no. 2 (2011): 273–290.

squirm and groan rather than laugh.<sup>9</sup> Contemporary media literacy curricula therefore need to account for how humor is used as an excuse and a political vehicle.

Several scholars have made the case for employing self-reflexive forms of screen comedy to teach students analytical skills. Jonathan Gray has illustrated metacomedie's special usefulness for media literacy. Gray focuses on Umberto Eco's view of comedy, and specifically parody, as a way to communicate or indicate mastery of another media form. Consequently, he promotes parody as "critical intertextuality . . . [that] reveals a genre's inner workings."<sup>10</sup> When teaching critical media analysis, humor becomes a springboard for explaining intertextuality. For example, the parody of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) on *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989–) can be an excellent way to highlight salient aspects of the original film while also opening up conversations on adaptation, genre, or reception.

At the same time, many of us educators see even more complex and ambitious—or, dare we say, more serious—potential in comedy, humor, and laughter. Working within a critical pedagogy framework, Timothy Lensmire finds academia's commitment to seriousness uninspiring, especially in contrast to his experiences growing up in a working-class culture: "Critical pedagogy . . . helped me understand the hierarchies of meaning and worth created and enforced, the violence perpetrated, by schools and society. At the same time, these critical perspectives did not seem to offer the reserves of perseverance and impiety that my laughing, rural, working-class community had—these critical perspectives were too serious."<sup>11</sup> While prioritizing a commitment to social justice might easily lead to a more serious or somber tone of teaching, we strongly agree with Lensmire's argument that a better classroom would reflect, embrace, and utilize (even, heaven forbid, reward and encourage) the resourcefulness—including laughter loving—of marginalized communities. Moreover, Lensmire takes issue with how this academic commitment to a serious tone aligns with a conceptualizing framework of "schools-as-preparation-for-work, or SAPWork."<sup>12</sup> This paradigm, rooted in the early twentieth-century refiguring of the school as a "smoothly efficient factory," and now an established tenet of neoliberal academia, posits that the main—if not the only—goal of education is the production of graduating students who are ready and eager to be employed. As many of us have seen, the increasing institutional embrace of the SAPWork model has often served to justify decimating programs in the humanities in particular.

In imagining his alternative to too-serious teaching, Lensmire proposes that we apply the Bakhtinian concept of the carnival to the classroom setting. He argues that carnivalesque practices can make space for students to imagine a better world rather

9 See Maggie Hennefeld, "Michelle Wolf's Stellar Feminist Killjoy Roast at the White House Correspondents' Dinner," *Star Tribune (MN)*, May 1, 2018, <http://www.startribune.com/michelle-wolf-s-stellar-feminist-killjoy-roast-at-the-white-house-correspondents-dinner/481291841/>.

10 Jonathan Gray, "Television Teaching: Parody, *The Simpsons*, and Media Literacy Education," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 22, no. 3 (2005): 227.

11 Timothy J. Lensmire, "Too Serious: Learning, Schools, and Bakhtin's Carnival," in *Bakhtinian Pedagogy: Opportunities and Challenges for Research, Policy and Practice in Education across the Globe*, ed. E. Jayne White and M. Peters (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 117–128.

12 Lensmire, 120.

than simply becoming aware of what is lacking in the present one. For this reimagination to happen, he suggests, interpersonal relationships need to be systematically both understood and transformed. Students and (some) teachers often treat college as something apart from the grown-up “real world,” yet we tend to re-create real-world social structures in the classroom. Lensmire, then, provokes us to think of schools as potentially also “embodying the ‘second life’ of the people,” as does the carnival.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, restructuring hierarchies in the classroom might be more easily argued for than done. The idea of doing away with a rigid hierarchical relationship between students and the instructor presumes a specific dynamic that is simply not available to many teachers, whose authority is often called into question—including graduate students, early-career scholars, women, scholars of color, or even a teacher who is simply young or young looking. At the same time, all three of our respondents specifically addressed utilizing humor in navigating—and arguably transforming—student-student and student-teacher relations. We propose, then, that thinking of the teacher as a comedian of sorts can have salience. In particular, we find value in how Sheppard explained—albeit with slight hesitation—that her high school role of class clown helped shape her tactical use of humor in the classroom to this day.

Indeed, it is no coincidence that “class” and “clown” so often go together. Anthropologist Victor Turner has noted that, in many cultures, clowns serve a ritual function as “liminal *personae* (‘threshold people)’”: those who guide us through states of transition and change.<sup>14</sup> Is that not also the role of the teacher? In a similar vein, Kevin McCarron and Maggie Savin-Baden highlight the many ways in which professional comedians and effective teachers share the same tools and techniques, provoking us to question how different the two roles really are.<sup>15</sup>

If we accept that “clowning is not about entertaining an audience of spectators,” as Laurel Butler claims, but rather about “relinquishing one’s knowledge, certainties, and reliance on conventional symbols and cultural codes,” then the practices of clowning would seem to align with the goals of teaching.<sup>16</sup> It should come as no surprise that all of our respondents describe using humor and comic material to break down students’ preconceived notions and encourage more self-reflexive viewing habits. Haggins, for example, uses a bit from a Dave Chappelle stand-up special to provoke students to interrogate their own changing reactions as his narrative unfolds. Mizejewski also encourages such self-critique, noting that “it’s pedagogically valuable to get students to reflect on their laughter.”<sup>17</sup>

Beyond igniting students’ self-reflection, our respondents employ humor as a community- and rapport-building mechanism. Mizejewski, for instance, sees humor as a way to assist students’ critical work when she teaches Wanda Sykes’s special *I’ma Be Me*

13 Lensmire, 120.

14 Victor W. Turner, “Liminality and Communitas,” in *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial (London: Routledge, 2008), 95.

15 Kevin McCarron and Maggie Savin-Baden, “Compering and Comparing: Stand-Up Comedy and Pedagogy,” *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 45, no. 4 (2008): 355–363.

16 Laurel Butler, “‘Everything Seemed New’: Clown as Embodied Critical Pedagogy,” *Theatre Topics* 22, no. 1 (2012): 71.

17 Bambi Haggins, email interview, April 23, 2018.

(Beth McCarthy-Miller, 2009): “These topics are more easily navigated because the class has already loosened up and bonded through their laughter. So this is the moment to unsettle the idea of bonding and pose the tricky questions about identity. Do I enjoy this performance specifically as a white liberal woman because it makes me feel good to laugh along with black people?”<sup>18</sup>

All three respondents emphasized that humor can be a double-edged (or, rather, many-edged) sword when navigating affective relations in the classroom. Mizejewski, for example, uses Emily Nussbaum’s essay “How Jokes Won the Election” when teaching about “laughter as a bonding device and how this works for and against women and minorities.”<sup>19</sup> When discussing the piece, Mizejewski pushes her students to think more about the social dynamics that surround the telling of racist, sexist, or homophobic jokes, and “the inclusive effect of joining in and the danger of being excluded” when such jokes are circulated.<sup>20</sup>

Haggins also highlights the concepts of insider and outsider humor to explore the social relations at work in, and structured by, jokes. Beyond using humorous media and scholarship as pedagogical tools, Haggins further encourages joke telling in her classroom:

We went around the room sharing our jokes, considered whether it was insider or outsider humor, and why the possible offensiveness of humor was mitigated by who delivers the joke. By sharing the jokes, which almost universally were examples of insider humor for the person recounting the bit, we could enter into a discussion about privilege and power: whether the jokes were punching up (challenging power) or punching down (ridiculing those with less privilege). While this is a risky endeavor (depending upon how the joke sharing goes), by sharing myself during this exercise, it helps to facilitate an open discursive space in the seminar or discussion section.<sup>21</sup>

In these examples, our respondents challenge students to understand how social relations are woven into the fabric of jokes, and while doing so, they also nurture (and, arguably, transform) class participants’ relations. Of course, utilizing humor in this way is also a form of affective labor—and it should be recognized as such.

Again, classroom clowning is not (just) about entertaining students. We are certainly not making a case for filling the class period with a steady flow of zingers (as impressive as that would be). If the teacher as a classroom clown, like Butler’s clown, aims to “relinquish certainties,”<sup>22</sup> that will inevitably come with unease. Haggins warns her students of the dynamic and complex relation between humor and discomfort early on: “When I teach about comedy, I always begin the course with a very big caveat: dying is easy, comedy is hard—it can also be considered obscene or profane by some. Comedy screened in class may be bluer (more sexually explicit) than you are

18 Linda Mizejewski, email interview, February 28, 2018.

19 Mizejewski, interview.

20 Emily Nussbaum, “How Jokes Won the Election,” *New Yorker*, January 23, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/23/how-jokes-won-the-election>.

21 Haggins, interview.

22 Butler, “Everything Seemed New,” 71.

comfortable with and it may also dip into lived experiences, identity positions and cultural/social practices that don't fit the accepted mores of the day. I stress that often the comedy with the biggest impact tests boundaries."<sup>23</sup> We advocate classroom clowning as a way of using humor in the classroom that introduces and embraces productive discomfort and that invests in the communal, attentive analysis of the cultural norms and values shaping that discomfort. For instance, when Seth screens a notably raunchy episode of *Broad City* (Comedy Central, 2014–) in one of his classes, awkward giggles or outright silence might take the place of laughter. However, that awkwardness can be followed by a meaningful discussion of the contexts in which laughing out loud feels inappropriate or “wrong.”

It is all too often said that explaining a joke ruins the fun of it. Granted, it changes how we hear the joke next time, but that is precisely the point of much of our work as educators. There is also some precious pleasure in doing this analytical work, especially in a class setting, as part of communal meaning making and as a way of participating in the cultural work of humor and laughter. As Haggins notes, “To paraphrase a quote from either George Bernard Shaw or my eighth grade English teacher, Mrs. Roshko, ‘[O]nce the audience is laughing, when their mouths are open, you can shove the truth in.’” With that in mind, why are we still scared of clowns? \*

23 Haggins, interview.

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## On Trolling as Comedic Method

by BENJAMIN ASPRAY

**F**or evidence of the reinflamed American culture wars, look no further than the cancellation of popular television comedies. Well before ABC’s much-debated termination of the *Roseanne* (ABC, 2018) reboot season, Adult Swim caused a stir when it axed the sketch-comedy series *Million Dollar Extreme Presents: World Peace* (Cartoon Network, 2016) in late 2016. Both shows were charged with advancing a specifically Trumpian ideological agenda, prompting counterprotests of liberal intolerance. *World Peace*, which aired after midnight on Cartoon Network’s niche Adult Swim programming block, simply advanced its ideology to a smaller audience than *Roseanne*. Its relatively marginal position is significant: if *Roseanne* exemplified the mainstreaming of Trump’s vulgar revanchism, then *World Peace* represented the aesthetic and political vanguard credited with shaping that style in the first place. This vanguard, described by Angela Nagle as disparate factions “joined under the banner of a bursting

forth of anti-PC cultural politics,” is widely known as the alt-right and originated within the proudly antisocial internet subculture of trolling.<sup>1</sup> This essay examines the intersection of comedy, politics, and trolling at a historical moment when, as Maggie Hennefeld puts it, “laughter has become the lingua franca of the escalating culture wars.”<sup>2</sup> *World Peace* represents an emblematic case study of the migration of digital trolling sensibilities into “old media” contexts. Trolls’ sudden omnipresence in today’s political landscape, where they embody a perceived lapse into “post-truth,” makes trolling conceptually useful for the interpretation of contemporary political comedy. Because the trolling ethos demands a terminal irony in pursuit of tendentious laughter, its ability to function as political satire is diminished. Trolling, as a comedic method, harnesses political language yet repeatedly fails to promote a coherent politics.

But first, what is trolling? The term’s current ubiquity obscures its more specific reference to targeted antagonism in online spaces, antagonism meant to disrupt, offend, and exasperate. Sometimes this disruption is achieved by inundating targets with crude or inane content, or “shit posting.” Other times trolls commit to elaborate bad faith arguments. Either way, as an online subculture primarily interested in upsetting and alienating as many people as possible, trolls have cultivated a lexicon that combines shocking pornographic imagery and hateful, bigoted tropes with digital aesthetic sophistication and arcane nerd-culture in-jokes. Million Dollar Extreme (MDE), the New England art collective behind *World Peace*, developed its following in this subculture by reflecting back to trolls their lived experience of being “extremely online,” of having one’s brain pickled in the audiovisual sewage of the outlaw internet. Early vertical videos depicted MDE mastermind Sam Hyde as a pallid, pimply “neckbeard,” unemployed, living with his mother, and perusing feminist Tumblr accounts with vocal disdain. Later, more sophisticated videos deploy a troll lexicon of conspiracy theories, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), *hentai*, and police violence—often compiled in manic collage patterns. MDE’s fans demonstrated their love in proper troll fashion, using a photo of Hyde with a semiautomatic rifle to convince multiple media outlets of his involvement in numerous mass shootings.<sup>3</sup> *World Peace* is more polished and accessible than MDE’s earlier work, but references to online shit-posting culture still abound.

Once confined to niche digital spaces such as the early Usenet newsgroup alt.tasteless and 4chan’s /b/ and /pol/ boards, trolls now permeate comment threads and social media platforms. Indeed, trolling has become so pervasive and widely recognized that, according to Whitney Phillips, the term has definitionally expanded nearly beyond usefulness to include myriad aggressive behaviors online and off.<sup>4</sup> Hence the use of “troll” as a catchall accusation of bad faith; Lars von Trier, Slavoj Žižek, Armond

1 Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2017), 19.

2 Maggie Hennefeld, “Fake News: From Satirical Laughter to Alternative Facts: Humor in America” (presentation, Humor in America Conference, Chicago, July 12, 2018).

3 Fruzsina Eordogh, “How 4chan Tricked the Internet into Believing This Comedian Is a Mass Shooter,” *Forbes*, June 2, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/fruzsinaeordogh/2016/06/02/explaining-the-sam-hyde-as-mass-shooter-meme/>.

4 Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 154.

White, and Camille Paglia, once contrarians and gadflies, are now routinely cast as trolls.<sup>5</sup> Hence also the widespread conception of Trump as troll in chief. His unfiltered misogyny and racism together with his willingness to promote conspiracy theories expanded from his Twitter account to the national stage, where he happily courts spectacle and take inconsistent, ad hoc positions.

Nevertheless, online trolls have become antagonists in an accelerating epistemic crisis. By demoralizing adherents of “legitimate” political narratives and offering robust, compelling alternatives, trolls can have a real impact. If notions of the internet as a utopian public sphere were always suspect, then trolls eliminate all doubt, sowing discord and “butthurt” wherever consensus and good faith retain a hold on civil discourse. Even when trolls don’t target specific interlocutors, they promote viewpoints defying decency or facticity. Despite the “mask of trolling,” the state of perpetual play in which trolls operate, these viewpoints nevertheless achieve credibility in the context of information overload.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps most dystopian of all, however, is the troll’s nihilistic, dissociative laughter. The oft-cited trolling credo is to do everything “for the lulz,” the laughter of superiority over anyone naïve enough to fall prey to the troll’s provocations.<sup>7</sup> The Platonic ideal of trolling demands a mastery of political language but an absence of sincere ideological commitment. Any argument is fair game as long as it pisses somebody off. Trolling discourse is thus fundamentally, but undetectably, ironic. Specifically, trolls adopt the Socratic mode of irony, which entails provoking their interlocutors into expressing easily challenged positions, then exhausting them through mockery and circumlocution. Phillips writes that Socrates’s method “isn’t a position as much as it is an attitude toward the pursuit of answers.”<sup>8</sup> At base, then, trolling is about triumph over truth rather than producing truth itself.

Insofar as both demand a strategic manipulation of tone, trolling overlaps considerably with satire. Andrew Auernheimer, best known as the prolific internet troll “weev,” describes trolling as “satirical performance art” in the tradition of Jonathan Swift, Lenny Bruce, Andy Kaufman, and the Situationists, “the art of disrupting the status quo to make people think.”<sup>9</sup> Fans of MDE have invoked similar defenses.<sup>10</sup> Weev’s conflation of trolling and satire resonates also with the appearance of troll-like tactics in the stunt-based comedy of the Yes Men and Sasha Baron Cohen. But whereas these satirists mark their work as such, trolling discourse, strictly practiced, obfuscates

5 For Lars von Trier as a troll, see Manohla Dargis, “Is Lars von Trier Trolling Us?,” *New York Times*, May 16, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/16/movies/lars-von-trier-the-house-that-jack-built-cannes-film-festival.html>; for Žižek, see B. Miller, “Slavoj Žižek: Great Philosopher or Frivolous Highbrow ‘Concern Troll’?,” June 2012, *Contradictions*, <https://oldhickorysweblog.blogspot.com/2012/06/slavoj-zizek-great-philosopher-or.html> 2018; on White, see Roger Ebert, “Not in Defense of Armond White,” *Roger Ebert’s Journal*, August 14, 2009, <https://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/not-in-defense-of-armond-white>; and for Paglia, see E. G. Ryan, “Camille Paglia, Please See Me after Class,” *Jezebel*, December 16, 2013, <https://jezebel.com/camille-paglia-please-see-me-after-class-1484324950>.

6 Phillips, *This Is Why*, 33.

7 Phillips, 27.

8 Phillips, 127.

9 Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 30.

10 Chris Bodenner, “The Battle over Adult Swim’s Alt-Right TV Show, Cont’d,” *Atlantic*, November 18, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2016/11/the-battle-over-adult-swims-alt-right-tv-show-contd/508106/>.

its intentions. The closest trolls come to weev's "art" is revealing the opportunism and epistemic instability of mass media when their hoaxes go viral.<sup>11</sup> Yet this critique is hardly self-evident, requiring considerable interpretive effort from the observer, including knowing not to take trolls at their word, for trolls are unable to articulate a viewpoint uncompromised by irony. Satire requires coherent argumentation, which is anathema to the constant provocation and disavowal that forms the shit-posting dialectic. Thus the question of trolling's satirical value remains unanswered. If trolling discourse is just a means to the end of sadistic laughter, willing to take any position ironically, can it ever present a coherent political argument?

The eventual emergence of weev as an avowed neo-Nazi and the rapid growth of the alt-right within troll watering holes in the run-up to the 2016 election seemed to belie trolling's alleged lack of political convictions.<sup>12</sup> But because subcultural trolls have marked out online spaces of absolute free speech, they have become bedfellows of the right-wing extremists who take refuge there, and even if trolls adopt extremist ideas only for the lulz, they can have the same impact of promoting these ideas into wider circulation. If the alt-right narrative of an American polis besieged by left-wing authoritarians is at least as old as the conservative "political correctness" panic of the 1990s, in the context of Trump's rise, it is shaped by a uniquely contemporary trolling ethos.<sup>13</sup> By recontextualizing white nationalism, antifeminism, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia as nonconformist gestures, alt-right trolls lend reactionary ideology renewed currency. Right-wing ideologues and rank-and-file Republicans alike can imagine themselves as provocateurs hell-bent on "triggering the libs," united by derisive laughter whenever offending progressive sensibilities.

The fractures that have opened in the alt-right coalition since Trump's victory, however, suggest an inability to reconcile trolling's bad faith with extremism's straight-faced conviction, as the fascist ambitions of true believers send the opportunists and subcultural trolls into paroxysms of disavowal.<sup>14</sup> The question of the status of trolling as a comedic discourse returns: if trolling is "satirical performance art," per weev, at what point can it convey a coherent satirical point if the trolling discourse is always ipso facto ironic? Can an uncompromised trolling ethos be mobilized to political ends without committing ideological self-sabotage? To pursue these questions further, I conclude with a closer look at *World Peace*, the alt-right's "very own TV show," revisiting an earlier concern in the process: the usefulness of textual interpretation for navigating trolling discourse's all-consuming irony.<sup>15</sup>

Critics have made sense of MDE's trollishly oblique irony as a form of anticomedie. Philip Auslander describes anticomedie as "comedy that seems to have given up on the possibility that it could function as a significant critical discourse on the model of

11 See Phillips, *This Is Why*, 69.

12 "Andrew 'weev' Auernheimer," *Extremist Files*, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/andrew-weev-auernheimer>.

13 Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 55.

14 Andrew Marantz, "The Alt-Right Branding War Has Torn the Movement in Two," *New Yorker*, July 6, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-alt-right-branding-war-has-torn-the-movement-in-two>.

15 Joseph Bernstein, "The Alt-Right Has Its Very Own TV Show on Adult Swim," *BuzzFeed News*, August 25, 2016, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/josephbernstein/the-alt-right-has-its-own-comedy-tv-show-on-a-time-warner-ne>.

classical satire and, instead, takes the failure of comedy, the impossibility of being a comedian in the postmodern world, as its subject.”<sup>16</sup> Anticomedy prompts laughter specifically by frustrating comedy’s conventional structures with frissons of discomfort. In addition to reflecting the alienation and incoherence of digital-age hypermediation, anticomedy is also analogous to the comedic discourse of trolling in its deliberate absence of joke-work. Transgressive raw material is presented as is in anticomedy, adding to its alienating effect on two fronts: unadulterated shock value and distanciation, whereby the very fact of its being a joke becomes the joke. In this sense, anticomedy extends familiar defenses of satire—“It’s not a racist joke; it’s a joke *about* racism”—that are themselves versions of the founding comedic disavowal “It’s *just* a joke.” *World Peace’s* anticomedy can thus be read as a televisualization of the shit-posting dialectic, whereby a deliberate crudeness confers plausible deniability for offensive rhetoric.

Progressive critics David Gurney and Matthew Thomas Payne refuse to give MDE the benefit of the doubt, interpreting *World Peace’s* ambiguity as a means of making “punching down” relevant in liberal cultural hegemony.<sup>17</sup> Antifascist critic E. G. Daymare more resolutely characterizes the sketch comedy as a Trojan horse for white-supremacist messaging and iconography.<sup>18</sup> These writers demonstrate convincingly how *World Peace’s* extremely online anticomedy delivers its ideology to a niche audience of antisocial reactionaries. I would argue, however, that MDE’s engagement of trolling discourse, with its implicit reduction of political utterances to meaningless doggerel through presumed ironic framing, opens *World Peace* to against-the-grain readings. That is, the show’s overdetermined quality may undergird defenses of the show across the political spectrum. Is Hyde’s blackface performance in the second episode, for example, a mockery of African Americans, a satire of blackface itself, or targeted trolling of the shared cultural offense Americans take in regard to the practice? Perhaps its formal crudeness marks the performance as “edge-work,” Nicholas Holm’s term for humor that reinforces taboos by presenting them unadulterated by joke-work.<sup>19</sup> Or, from another ironic remove, perhaps the performance can be read as a mockery of Hyde himself, whose clumsy, retrograde depiction of blackness is extremely online, betraying the stunted sociality of spending one’s formative years on Something Awful, 4chan, and other havens of trolling’s transgressive rhetoric.

None of these interpretations is mutually exclusive, nor do the more charitable readings neutralize the performance’s offensiveness. But trolling as a comedic method has an overdetermining effect that demands careful textual interpretation to account for the full range of its potential meaning making. In other words, the extratextual fact of MDE’s alt-right leanings should not compel comedy scholars to assume the show serves up a coherent alt-right political worldview. Indeed, its trollish signification

16 Philip Auslander, *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 137.

17 David Gurney and Matthew T. Payne, “On the Limits of #Lulz: Niche Taste and the Implosion of Satire,” *In Media Res*, <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2017/03/06/limits-lulz-niche-taste-and-implosion-satire>.

18 E. G. Daymare, “No Joke: Untangling the DNA Code of Alt-Right Comedy,” *Mute*, April 10, 2017, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/no-joke-untangling-dna-code-alt-right-comedy>.

19 Nicholas Holm, “Humour as Edge-Work: Aesthetics, Joke-Work and Tendentiousness in Tosh.0 (or Daniel Tosh and the Mystery of the Missing Joke-Work),” *Comedy Studies* 7, no. 1 (2016): 108–121.

sometimes does quite the opposite, offering an ambling and caustic but vivid portrayal of moribund right-wing psychology. The most compelling sketches are frenzied, one-act melodramas of veiled alt-right archetypes beset by aggrieved paranoia and tightly coiled rage. Their grievances come across as stunted and absurd, their imagined enemies as remediated constructions. Consequently, and whether intentionally or not, MDE turns its free-floating incongruity and superiority humor against its own ideological kin. In its commitment to the *lulz*, its allergy to earnestness, and its unceasing need to ironize everything, *World Peace* can never actually present coherent arguments for alt-right ideology. It might signal to existing fascists with arcane gestures buried in its overdetermined *mise-en-scène*, but it is impotent as a recruitment tool. Rather than make a case for fascist correctives through satirical joke-work, the alt-right ideology of *World Peace* is taken as a given within the show's anticomic framing but then persistently negated by its indiscriminate irony.

In one representative sketch, a sweat-drenched, disheveled schoolteacher, played by Nick Rochefort, is shown struggling to gain his students' attention and respect: he smiles ingratiatingly, sits among them ignored, and walks up and down the aisles as the set tilts, literalizing his uphill battle. The stylized set and wide-angle photography evoke the oblong surrealism of Terry Gilliam. In voice-over, the teacher laments his looming failure, trotting out recognizable tropes of right-wing male aggrievement: leftist indoctrination in public school curricula ("First three weeks: Holocaust. Next three weeks: Black History Month"); professional redundancy ("It makes me nervous to think that if I ever had to re-apply for my job, I wouldn't be hired"); government suppression of critical thought ("I didn't make them stupid. That's on the parents . . . that's on the government"); and especially loss of sexual viability to younger, nonwhite counterparts ("The female students don't really get me turned on anymore. It's all those goddamn sexy kids on all the sports teams").<sup>20</sup> As if to leave no uncertainty about the implied political pathology, Rochefort scrawls on the chalkboard "9/11?" "3 towers?" and "#7"—all signposts of the conspiracy theory that the World Trade Center attacks were actually controlled demolitions, another common theme of right-wing discourse. As the editing accelerates, the screen turns red with anguish, and Rochefort, finally, ties a noose and hangs himself.

It is hard to read this sketch as anything other than a burlesque of reactionary self-pity. Where legibly conservative satire would likely depict the decline of patriarchal common sense as unwarranted, the teacher character embodies mediocrity and insecurity. As in much of *World Peace*, the style of the sketch subjectifies the image, framing it as a fevered inner vision. The three weeks apiece spent on the Holocaust and Black History Month, then, may be the credulous distortions of a white man convinced he has lost all cultural primacy now that minority populations have gained some of their own.

This close reading is not meant to contradict charges of extremist affinities against the show or its creators. If they quack like fascists, then perhaps they are fascists. Rather, I mean to suggest the limits of trolling discourse as a mode of political satire.

20 "3 Down 47 to Go Countdown to Mass Funeral," episode 3 of *Million Dollar Extreme Presents: World Peace*, dir. Andrew Ruse, August 20, 2016 (Adult Swim).

As soon as trolling lapses into a fixed political claim, it ceases to be trolling, as political discourse is always already ironized by trolling discourse as a means to the ends of lulz. Perhaps this seems an overly fine semantic point. If trolling has come to represent a broad range of provocative, facetious behavior and discourse, perhaps that reflects a renewed vigilance against opportunistic bad faith in the commons. Trump’s rise upon the ascendant forces of the alt-right has demonstrated the real threat to contemporary civic life posed by reactionary digital vanguards. Hence the drive for trollish gestures among the left, including the Guggenheim Museum’s ostensibly sincere offer to loan a solid-gold toilet to the White House instead of the Van Gogh painting that Trump originally requested.<sup>21</sup> Now that the aesthetics and cultural logics of online spaces have migrated into offline space and old media platforms, trolling’s ubiquity warrants attention from media scholars in general and comedy scholars in particular. Trolling and the shit-posting dialectic of provocation and disavowal are emblematic sources of laughter in a world where comedy and politics are routinely conflated. If trolling is the lexicon of being extremely online, then its analysis is a necessity for an extremely online world. \*

21 Rafi Schwartz, “The Guggenheim Offered Trump a Gold Toilet Instead of the Van Gogh He Wanted,” *Splinter News*, January 25, 2018, <https://splinternews.com/the-guggenheim-offered-trump-a-gold-toilet-instead-of-t-1822428224>.

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## The Tweet Has Two Faces: Two-Faced Humor, Black Masculinity, and RompHim

by ALFRED L. MARTIN JR.

**B**eginning in early summer of 2017, the internet was abuzz about the RompHim, a romper designed and intended for men. The incredulity of the prospect of men wearing rompers soon turned comedic as a means to make sense of this new fashion trend. RompHim, like its predecessor the man purse, or “murse,” exposed a schism in idea(l)s about the sartorial choices of heterosexual men. RompHim provides an ideal case study to explore humor in the twenty-first century for three reasons. First, it rearticulates the ways humor often works to reassert the hegemonic order. Second, and related, it helps illuminate how offline forms of humor, particularly

those invested in maintaining the status quo, are imported into online spaces. Third, RompHim provides an ideal opportunity to examine the ways humor functions when black masculinity, (homo)sexuality, and fashion collide.

With respect to RompHim and Twitter, the rhetorical question became how to articulate displeasure with the RompHim without appearing antagonistic toward it and those who might choose to wear it. Platforms like Twitter allow users to build their online communities by both curating what content they see and who can see their content (depending on settings, one can also control the ability of users to share their tweets). Particularly when discussing humor, this selection bias functions much like the audience for a stand-up comic: those who have “opted in” are considered part of an “insider” crowd, affording the Twitter user the ability to joke freely because she or he is “among friends.”

This insiderness is particularly important when discussing the kinds of humor that can occur digitally, because it can be disciplinary. Simon Critchley reminds us that humor functions as a “form of cultural insider-knowledge, and might, indeed, be said to function like a linguistic defense mechanism . . . [that] endows native speakers with a palpable sense of their cultural distinctiveness, or even superiority.”<sup>1</sup> In this way, humor and jokes adhere to the contours of localized notions of taste and decorum and endow the joke teller with a status “above” those about whom jokes are told. Jokes, then, are hegemonic in that they labor to shore up the boundaries between what is acceptable and what is not. Wylie Sypher suggests that “one of the strongest impulses comedy can discharge from the depths of the social self is our hatred of the ‘alien’ especially when the stranger who is ‘different’ stirs any unconscious doubt about our own beliefs.”<sup>2</sup> In this brief essay, I use RompHim to examine the ways humor and heterosexual masculinities collide to elucidate what I call “two-faced humor.” My theorization of two-faced humor builds on Freud’s tendentious jokes, which he suggests require three people, “apart from the one who is telling the joke, it needs a second person [archetypally a woman] who is taken as the object of the hostile aggression . . . and a third person in whom the joke’s intention of producing pleasure is fulfilled.”<sup>3</sup> Concomitantly, the expression “two-faced humor” is rooted in popular vernacular, where referring to someone as “two-faced” means they display duplicitous behavior. Within the context of RompHim, the “first face” might include someone telling a man he looks great in his RompHim. The “second face” emerges when that abject person is imagined as outside of the intended audience for the joke. In this sense, while the person may compliment the wearer of the RompHim, when he is not around, a joke about his RompHim might be deployed, thus demonstrating the “second face.” While Freud’s triumvirate includes a third person who is responsible for producing the “pleasure” of the joke, two-faced humor is explicit in its operation as a somewhat covert form of humor in that its humor is deployed when the abject person is removed from the situation in which the joke is told. In illuminating the function of two-faced humor

1 Simon Critchley, *On Humor* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 68–69.

2 Wylie Sypher, “The Meanings of Comedy,” in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 18.

3 Sigmund Freud, “The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious,” in *Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 97.

via RompHim, I examine the ways such two-faced humor exposes fragile fault lines around gender roles and fashion. Put another way, both gender roles and gendered fashion are fiction. Throughout this essay, I demonstrate the ways men and women participate in the reification of such boundaries, “protecting” what it means to be a “real man” in the twenty-first century. In this way, while two-faced humor may appear similar to the ways comedy studies has so laboriously and brilliantly theorized humor, the addition of the digital demonstrates the spreadable nature of hegemony, which is especially important as we culturally awaken to the failed promises of social media and equality.

While Twitter and other social media spaces are ostensibly public, they are also self-selecting, because one can prohibit those who can see tweets, as well as which tags to use (or not use) for certain posts. Additionally, depending on the number of followers a user has (and notification settings), comments and replies might be missed as well as possibly ignored. In sum, Twitter ultimately functions as a curated public that differentiates insiderness and outsidership by allowing users to control privacy settings. This distinction is particularly important for the kinds of humor that I suggest are exemplified within an examination of RompHim—that is, humor that reinforces sexist and homophobic social norms.

At base level, the RompHim allows for an examination of the ways sartorial choices are used as a means to prop up the artificial boundaries between masculinity and femininity.<sup>4</sup> In other words, hegemonic gender roles and their collision with fashion shift the efficacy of clothing from shielding the body from the elements to building and reifying societal norms by providing a cultural mirror for them. In such a reification, as Kathryn Bond Stockton argues, clothes “may function as a sign of a sexual preference.”<sup>5</sup> Semiotically, a failure to conform to “proper” gendered scripts of fashion can lead one who is reading clothes as a sign to make assumptions about another’s sexuality—or at the very “least,” sartorial choices can emasculate the person making them. In many digital spaces, the RompHim was discursively understood as a violation of “acceptable” men’s fashion. Many social media users used tweets, memes, and two-faced humor to question the masculinity of those men who might choose to buy and wear a RompHim. Via three exemplary tweets, I explore the ways Twitter users deployed humor as a means to prediscipline any man considering the RompHim as a sartorial choice via the discursive deployment of two-faced humor.

One such meme from Twitter user @Humble\_Slim repurposes an image of a postcoital Eddie Murphy from the film *Boomerang* (Reginald Hudlin, 1992) by adding the caption “After sex and she just throws your romper over to you and says ‘your Uber here.’”<sup>6</sup> The choice of this image alongside this caption raises three distinct issues. First, the syntactical arrangement of “Your Uber here” invokes black vernacular speech patterns, which, in this case, positions the meme as taking aim at reasserting the hegemonic fault lines of black masculinity. Second, the text associated with the

4 Georg Simmel, “Fashion,” *International Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (1904): 130–155.

5 Kathryn Bond Stockton, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where “Black” Meets “Queer”* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 34.

6 @Humble\_Slim, tweet, May 16, 2017, 11:54 a.m., [https://twitter.com/Humble\\_Slim/status/864539583782035456](https://twitter.com/Humble_Slim/status/864539583782035456).

image functions to invert gender norms. Whereas American culture problematically expects a man to dismiss a woman after sex, this inversion, rooted in a man's choice to don a romper, subtly calls his manhood into question.<sup>7</sup> Third, Murphy's star text is important because it includes lingering questions about whether he is "truly" heterosexual, largely on the basis of his 1997 arrest for having trans\* woman (and prostitute) Shalimar Seiuli enter his car. Additionally, his symbolically violent repudiations of homosexuality in his stand-up comedy specials *Delirious* (Bruce Gowers, 1983) and *Raw* (Robert Townsend, 1987) suture Murphy's image to "questionable" heterosexuality and the RompHim. Concomitantly, this meme performs its two-facedness in its disavowal of what remains outside the frame of the image: homosexuality. In most Western cultures, homosexuality carries the stigma of being dissociated from forms of "authentic" masculinity, which are always-already understood as heterosexual.

Twitter user @notdejon also connected the RompHim and emasculation when he tweeted "When you haven't shaved yet but she say 'boy idgaf take that romper off.'"<sup>8</sup> The accompanying image depicts what appears to be a pair of female legs in Timberland boots. At the same time that it performs a digital emasculation of the imagined RompHim wearer, this tweet and accompanying image collide with another trend: manscaping, men's desire to groom body hair. This collision results in a double disavowal in which these two activities, wearing a RompHim and grooming one's body hair, are understood as passive. In one sense, as with the Murphy meme in the previous paragraph, the "woman" is understood as assuming a more dominant sexual stance. Concomitantly, the image features a pair of female legs in Timberland boots, not standing upright but on her back. In this way, as the images rhetorically substitute a RompHim-wearing man in the place of the woman in Timberland boots, it also connotes bottomhood. Alan Sinfield summarizes the gender inversion model of human sexuality, which postulates that to be a bottom—the receptive partner during sexual intercourse—is to want "to be female[,] and his desire, like that conventionally expected in a woman, is for a man."<sup>9</sup> The curating of one's initial audience for social media posts is also important here. Humor seeks approval at the same time that it exposes its two-facedness. The audience for this post in its initial inception is presumed to be at least one of four things: a heterosexual, a person with an aversion to the RompHim, a person who believes that no man should ever wear a RompHim, and a person (heterosexual or homosexual) who equates bottomhood with emasculation.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, the meme disavows the bottom, who is excluded from the intended audience, revealing the meme's two-facedness. Simultaneously, by semiotically connecting the bottom to the lower echelons of an imaginary sexual food chain that positions heterosexual men at the top (and as tops), the meme performs a double disavowal of queerness and femininity. The RompHim, and those who choose to wear it, falls to the figurative bottom of men's fashion and masculinity as imagined in this meme.

7 "Manhood" here signals the ability to embody an aggressive, sexually capable form of masculinity.

8 @notdejon, tweet, May 16, 2017, 11:20 a.m., <https://twitter.com/notdejon/status/864531028286857216>.

9 Alan Sinfield, *On Sexuality and Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 18.

10 I distinguish here between the ways a tweet can be subverted via retweeting or snarky, counterhegemonic commentary.

Lest it seem that only male-presenting internet users participated in disavowal of the RompHim, Twitter user @odotkay, a female-presenting user, tweeted, “Ladies \$10 at the door. Men free with Rompers.”<sup>11</sup> This reversal of gender roles works as an emasculator in which, instead of nightclubs offering women free admission, they do so not for men generally, but specifically for those who choose to wear a romper or RompHim. Working as an articulation of the incongruity theory of comedy, this tweet, like the other two highlighted, is successful because the norms of gender roles and nightclub culture are well known or well established: “real men” pay for admission, while women are admitted at no charge on Ladies’ Night. This tweet stops short of calling a man who chooses to don a RompHim gay, but it does call his sexuality into question by implicitly referencing inversion theories of sexuality that suggest gay men are more akin to women than to men. Byron Hunt articulates that black masculinity requires “real men” to “be strong, you have to be tough. . . . If you’re not any of those things, people call you soft, or weak, or a pussy, or a chump, or a faggot. And nobody wants to be any of those things.”<sup>12</sup> While Hunt is specifically discussing black masculinity, his suggestion that nobody wants to be “a faggot” applies to masculinity holistically. Moreover, it exposes the two-faced nature of this gender-reversal joke, which subliminally rearticulates the prescription for “proper” forms of masculinity. In other words, the calculus the joke implies suggests that a man who chooses to wear a RompHim is understood as less than fully masculine. In this tweet by a female-presenting Twitter user, a man who wears a RompHim is also understood as an unsuitable partner. The first two tweets by male-presenting Twitter users might be construed as men trying to eliminate the competition for a woman’s affection by homophobically associating the RompHim with “improper” forms of masculinity. However, a female-presenting user like @odotkay, configuring a RompHim-wearing man as an undesirable partner, emasculates in a way that imbues the RompHim with meaning about the wearer’s sexual identity and his suitability as a sexual and romantic partner. This tweet demonstrates that reified contours of hegemonic masculinity are “protected” both from within masculinity and from outside of it. Once again, the specter of the homosexual other is ridiculed in the process of the RompHim’s abjection, this time by a female-presenting user acting as a torchbearer for what constitutes a “real man.”

These tweets, while functioning within a supposedly humorous register, are successful because they work to consolidate hegemonic power. The refrain that it’s “just a joke” seeks to obscure the serious business of humor within digital spaces. Because of its spreadable nature, dismissing the humor around the RompHim elides the ways such jokes and images are deployed in the service of upholding the boundaries of hetero-masculinity, to the exclusion of the queer other. The RompHim memes engage two-faced humor because these disavowals of the garment—and men who wear it—assume an intended audience/reader comprised of those who would consent to such a line of humor and not men who perhaps already own a romper or are seriously considering buying and wearing a RompHim. While all the tweets I have discussed

11 @odotkay, tweet, May 16, 2017, 12:04 p.m., <https://twitter.com/odotkay/status/864541976179462149>.

12 Byron Hurt, dir., *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 2006), DVD.

in this essay were from black-presenting Twitter users based on their public photos, I want to be careful to refrain from suggesting that the attack is from within blackness or that such a critique as the one I engaged in here is limited to blackness. The discursive understanding of black masculinity as always already antigay and patriarchal elides how white men are similarly antigay and patriarchal. Particularly problematic within such a construction of black masculinity is that it is often white men who lead the charge to introduce and pass antigay legislation. The humor around RompHim served to police what could be understood as acceptable fashion for men of all races. As a black queer man, I have chosen not to wear a RompHim—but not because of the jokes about it or people questioning my “improper” fashion sense. Because it would make my butt look big. \*

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## Hannah Gadsby Stands Down: Feminist Comedy Studies

by REBECCA KREFTING

Sitting in a large auditorium at Edinburgh University, the audience of approximately two hundred hummed, tweeted, and buzzed in anticipation of stand-up comic Hannah Gadsby’s much-discussed *Nanette* at the 2017 Fringe Festival. Within moments of taking the stage, Gadsby’s performance—a feminist-queer metacommentary on comedy—distinguished itself from standard stand-up shows when she declared, “I am going to have to quit comedy.”<sup>1</sup> She spent the next sixty minutes telling us why.<sup>2</sup> I saw *Nanette* again in London in November 2017 at the Soho Comedy Club. The sold-out show was at capacity, at 175. Gadsby had been performing *Nanette* for more than six months. She looked tired, but the show was equally powerful and emotional. I was delighted to learn that Netflix would stream *Nanette*, making it available to millions overnight—the content exposes and unapologetically derides sexism, gender violence, homophobia, and xenophobia.<sup>3</sup> But I was concerned about what that would mean for consumption of the show. At a live

1 John Olb and Madeleine Parry, dirs., *Hannah Gadsby: Nanette* (theater performance, August 12, 2017, Edinburgh University, Edinburgh, Scotland).

2 Gadsby’s comedic swan song set off a media maelstrom and earned her the Barry Award for Best Show at the 2017 Melbourne International Comedy Festival as well as the Edinburgh Comedy Award the same year.

3 Netflix released the special to viewers on June 11, 2018.

show it is difficult to ignore the sounds of stifled tears, people hugging in the aisles, wiping their eyes, or looking stunned. We gain much in how popular Gadsby's special has become, her messages disseminated widely, but is anything lost?

This essay places Gadsby's farewell performance—an affective journey rejecting catharsis and intending to elicit emotions beyond laughter—in conversation with the field of feminist comedy studies.<sup>4</sup> For Gadsby, comedy as performance practice has problems. It encourages self-deprecation, which she insists doubles as “humiliation.” It also forces comics to generate humorous resolutions to any tension created, which can function to diminish the serious nature of social critique. Most important, Gadsby believes that comedy does not allow her to tell her story fully. While stand-up comedy can be an important vehicle for speaking truth to power, Gadsby often purposely omits difficult, violent truths connected to her subordinate identities, seeming to kowtow to stand-up's formulas, which elide the complexity of lived experience. For Gadsby, these are dangerous omissions. Personal testimony reveals the emotional pain of telling her story within the framework of comedy and complicates the notion of comedy as liberating, a long-standing axiom in feminist comedy studies.

Gadsby plans to quit comedy, but before shucking off that performative coil, she has a few unfunny things to say about homophobia, sexism, and internalized oppression. The intimacy of what is offered in the live show, between performer and audience, and among audience members, may be compromised with the more permissive medium of Netflix, which people watch in the comfort of their own homes. Yet the popularity of the special following its release indicates how deeply her work has affected so many people. Just as Lady Gaga and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter use their artistry to offer new models of feminism, Gadsby likewise models a feminist critique of the limitations of stand-up.<sup>5</sup>

About *Nanette*, Hannah Gadsby says: “It’s a show where I decided to see how people would react to a story that I have made funny—but also reveal that it isn’t really a funny story. . . . That is what *Nanette* is—to show how much you have to adapt in order to make an audience laugh.”<sup>6</sup> In Gadsby's adaptations, we lose essential parts of the story because—told straight—they would not have elicited laughter.

According to her, comedy's formula is fairly simple. First, the comic introduces the premise for the joke; this setup primes the audience for the delivery of the punch line. Gadsby asserts that repetition of this pattern throughout a show does not allow for the context necessary to tell a full story, which, in the Netflix release, she defines as having “a beginning, a middle, and an end.” In an interview, Gadsby explains, “Everything I do evolves—I started by looking at a story I told during my first show. . . . It ended in violence—but I had stopped short of telling the real story. I thought, what happens if I tell the story properly? But when I started doing that I realised it wasn't going to be very funny.”<sup>7</sup> Comedy taught her to tailor her life stories to highlight the

4 For a helpful primer on the field of feminist comedy studies, see the introduction to Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant, eds., *Hysterical! Women in American Comedy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 1–34.

5 Intellectual curiosity about *Nanette* as a performance has spawned the beginnings of Gadsby studies.

6 Claire Smith, “Hannah Gadsby on Her Award-Winning Comedy Show *Nanette*,” *The Scotsman*, August 5, 2017, <http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/culture/edinburgh-festivals/hannah-gadsby-on-her-award-winning-comedy-show-nanette-1-4522729>.

7 Smith, “Hannah Gadsby.”

humorous and to omit the unfunny, including frequent homophobic attacks, childhood molestation, and gang rape.

Gadsby identifies the limitations of comedy for her even as feminist comedy studies extol the potential of comedy to inform, politicize, and critique. Motivated by the lack of scholarship about women jokesters, early analyses sought to recuperate the voices of women in the male-dominated fields of comedy production by publishing monographs and edited collections focusing on women's literary humor and comic performance, among them those of Nancy Walker, June Sochen, Regina Barecca, Lizabeth Goodman, Linda Martin, and Kerry Segrave.<sup>8</sup> They argue for the subversive potential of comedy and do so by applying or revising several canonical theories and texts, such as Victor Turner's idea of liminality as offering a view from the margins, Henri Bergson's notion of laughter as a social corrective of unacceptable behavior, Sigmund Freud's exploration of social taboos, and Mikhail Bakhtin's reading of the carnivalesque as transgressive. The film theorist Kathleen Rowe, in *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, uses Bakhtin's theory of the carnival to interrogate the "power of female grotesques and female laughter to challenge the social and symbolic systems that would keep women in their place," mostly ignoring Bakhtin's temporal argument.<sup>9</sup> Although the carnival succors transgressions, order will invariably be restored. A decade later, Joanne Gilbert argued that distinguishing between women's sociological marginality (how society organizes and structures identity) and rhetorical marginality (how people identify and position themselves) "is key to understanding the potentially subversive nature of female comedic performance."<sup>10</sup> While she questions comedy's ability to effect lasting social change, her theory of performing marginality positions women's comic performances as emancipatory and oppositional. For quite some time, we have been chasing the transgressive.

By contrast, Gadsby suggests that the optics of stand-up comedy—an individual commanding everyone's attention—inflates the amount of power women actually have and ignore ways that performing comedy may negatively affect a woman's self-worth. Women performing stand-up enact a kind of female empowerment that seldom corresponds to their lived experiences as women or as comics. In *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism*, Susan Douglas cites a similar dissonance between representations of powerful women in media versus women's reality in professional, political, and social spheres.<sup>11</sup> The comedian Laurie Kilmartin corroborates Douglas's point: "The

8 Regina Barreca, ed., *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1988); Lizabeth Goodman, "Comic Subversions: Comedy as Strategy in Feminist Theatre," in *Imagining Women: Cultural Representations and Gender*, ed. Frances Bonner, Lizabeth Goodman, Richard Allen, Linda Janes, and Catherine King (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1992), 257–277; Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, *Women in Comedy: The Funny Ladies from the Turn of the Century to the Present* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1986); June Sochen, ed., *Women's Comic Visions* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991); Nancy Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

9 Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 3.

10 Joanne R. Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 5.

11 Susan J. Douglas, *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism: How Pop Culture Took Us from Girl Power to Girls Gone Wild* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2010).

moment a female comic steps offstage, her power dissipates. She is a woman, again. A famous comic can masturbate in front of her and his powerful manager can tell her to stop complaining about it. In standup comedy, the contrast between those two states is so depressingly clear. We get to be the person onstage who we wish were offstage.”<sup>12</sup>

When feminist comedy studies focuses exclusively on elements of resistance, transgression, and subversion, it neglects considering how such rhetorical gestures of empowerment ring hollow when compared to women’s or any marginalized person’s experiences. What of the ways that comedy reinforces narrow conceptions of gender performance, or traffics in sexism, racism, and homophobia? The rhetorician Sean Zwagerman warns of two distinct problems in theorizing women’s humor: doing so in binary ways (think “transgressive versus regressive”) and as fundamentally subversive.<sup>13</sup> Attention to the liberatory elements of comedy skews analyses to eclipse the vast amount of women’s jokes that foment aggression toward marginalized identities, reinforce compulsory heterosexuality, and naturalize the subordination of women. One solution would be to examine comedy as a performance mode—*Nanette*, for example—that is alternately transgressive and regressive, or both, or neither of these things.

**Nanette Live.** Popular reception of the filmed version of *Nanette* has been affirming. Although you can certainly find haters (mostly accusing Gadsby of being some combination of angry and not funny), a Netflix spokeswoman reported that “*Nanette* is among its most-positively received specials ever.”<sup>14</sup> Critics and the public laud the transgressive content of the show despite production elements like editing and sound choices that mute the intensity of her performance. Analysis of *Nanette* raises the same question as critiques of feminist comedy studies in general: How do we account for the regressive and the transgressive all at the same time?

The special opens with Gadsby coming home. This is her sanctuary, a place where she is nurtured, safe, and loved by her dogs. We are offered images that communicate ideas about who Hannah Gadsby is: animal lover, tea drinker, homebody, and so on. These prefacing images contradict the vitriol in her performance, as does the absence of close-up crowd shots registering audience response, which are typically used to help guide affective response to a broadcast performance. Occasionally, we see a long shot of the audience from behind or from Gadsby’s vantage. It is difficult to discern individual faces. In so doing, the filmed version removes the emotional responses of the live audience from the viewer’s experience. In the last ten minutes, when Gadsby is performing her most emotional material, television viewers see a close-up shot of Gadsby and have no way of gauging the emotional response of individuals watching the show.

12 Laurie Kilmartin, “Being a Female Comic in Louis C.K.’s World,” *New York Times*, November 10, 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/10/opinion/sunday/louis-ck-harassment.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/10/opinion/sunday/louis-ck-harassment.html?_r=0).

13 Sean Zwagerman, *Wit’s End: Women’s Humor as Rhetorical & Performative Strategy* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 4–5.

14 Melena Ryzik, “The Comedy Destroying, Soul-Affirming Art of Hannah Gadsby,” *New York Times*, July 24, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/24/arts/hannah-gadsby-comedy-nanette.html>.

At the climax of the show, Gadsby says: “To the men in the room, I speak to you now. Particularly the white men, especially the straight, white men. Pull your socks up! [*pause*] How humiliating, fashion advice from a lesbian [*laughter*]. That is your last joke [*clapping and cheers*].” She keeps that promise, although there are eight minutes remaining in the special. In the live performances I saw, she exited the stage and did not return, denying us catharsis and resolution. In her Netflix special, she does return. Not to crack a final joke but to take another bow. To see her again, if only for a moment, even that gesture feels merciful. In her Netflix special, she tells us why she refuses to dispel tension with laughter: “And this tension is yours. . . . You need to learn what this feels like because this, this tension is what not-normals carry inside of them all of the time because it is dangerous to be different.” The lesson here: these conditions do not deserve a punch line, and Gadsby’s pain is not to be laughed at.<sup>15</sup>

Juxtaposing Gadsby’s unapologetic anger, sound, and visual elements in the Netflix special situates Gadsby as approachable and nonthreatening. No music played as I left the venues in Edinburgh and London. By contrast, the filmed show closes with the empowering lyrics and upbeat sounds of Rilo Kiley singing “A Better Son/Daughter,” competing with the audience’s clapping and cheers; ultimately the clapping fades, but the music persists as the camera shifts to Gadsby looking satisfied and snuggling with her dogs in what I presume is her living room. Interestingly, this is where the majority of the audience is consuming this show via Netflix. How do we account for vastly different ways of consuming the same (or quite similar) material when *Nanette* can be watched at home or on the bus, with or without people next to you who are also watching it? And do these production elements interfere with the import of Gadsby’s messages?

Despite the ways the filmed special makes her performance more palatable, discussion on social media indicates a deep appreciation for *Nanette*, celebrating its incisive critiques and attesting to the raw emotions it stirred.<sup>16</sup> Fellow comics leaped to encourage fans to check out *Nanette*, as did the general public. White, male musical artist Scott Hoying wrote: “please go watch ‘Nanette’ by @hannahgadsby on Netflix as soon as you can. i cried laughing. i cried from heartbreak. i cried i was so inspired. i’m actually exhausted.”<sup>17</sup> Gadsby’s fellow Australian David Catoo tweeted: “Just watched Nanette. @Hannahgadsby, I’m a straight white, Tasmanian male and you made me squirm, feel uncomfortable and defensive. It forced me to think from a different perspective. Thank you. We all need to think more about others and less about ourselves.”<sup>18</sup> Gadsby cites stand-up comedy as inadequate to the task of telling her full story. Her critique contrasts with the overwhelming focus of feminist comedy studies

15 This is not to add to the stale debate around whether rape can be funny. Of course a rape joke can be funny, but it is all about context and perspective. Instead, Gadsby suggests that there are some aspects of women’s lives (beyond rape and specific to individuals) that should not be made laughable, for that laughter runs the risk of being at the expense of her and/or women’s humanity.

16 Gadsby’s family was present for the filming at Sydney’s Opera House for the Netflix special. Some content was unknown to her family, but that night Gadsby did not edit to protect her family. This made for an emotional performance for Gadsby, who, in an interview with the *New York Times*, says: “‘You can see that in the film.’ She nearly broke down before the cameras.” Ryzik, “Comedy Destroying, Soul-Affirming Art.”

17 Jenna Guillaume, “28 Tweets about ‘Nanette’ to Send to Your Friends Who Haven’t Watched It Yet,” *BuzzFeed*, July 6, 2018, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/jennaguillaume/nanette-netflix-hannah-gadsby-tweets>.

18 Guillaume, “28 Tweets.”

on comedy as a source of empowerment. The Netflix special and popular reaction to it traffic in this same territory: the show—Gadsby’s command of the stage—makes her seem very powerful. But is she? She is leaving comedy, and not because she has the power to change it.

Gadsby’s performance gestures toward exciting new possibilities for feminist comedy studies that account for the diverse ways people produce, perform, and consume comedy. Feminist analyses of comedy rightly identify subversion as an important tool of radical comedy, but much remains to be said about the proliferation of comedy that shores up powerful systems of racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and classism—why it is done, how it is done, audience responses to it, and what this says about who we are. Scholarship can benefit from examining larger industry forces—comedy club bookers and managers, agents, network executives, advertising and social media—as networks of power that reproduce social inequalities and perpetuate masculinist comic traditions. Differences in the experience of consuming *Nanette* filmed versus live further attest to the value of attending to the production elements that shape consumption.

Following Gadsby’s performance at the Fringe Festival, we were supposed to see another show. We never redeemed our previously purchased tickets. It felt impossible to go to another comedy show afterward. Again and again, on social media, the refrain arising from viewers seems to be: speechlessness, a need to process, a visceral undoing. That the filmed version of the show despite production choices was able to elicit similar emotions speaks to the power of Gadsby’s messages. Her final performance of *Nanette* took place in July 2018 in Montreal at the annual Just for Laughs Festival. She maintains she will not continue in comedy but has promised: “If Louis C.K. finds his audience, I will definitely not quit stand-up. Because my work here is not done.”<sup>19</sup> Clearly her work is not done: on August 26, 2018, Louis C.K. performed an unannounced set at the Comedy Cellar. It appears he is making a comeback. We can only hope it coincides with Gadsby doing the same. We benefit from her voice and the voices of minorities. We need them now more than ever. About which, Gadsby says in the Netflix show: “I believe we could paint a better world if we learned how to see it from all perspectives, as many perspectives as we possibly could. Because diversity is strength, difference is a teacher. Fear difference, you learn nothing.” Gadsby reminds us that we can do better. So, let’s do that. \*

19 Ryzik, “Comedy Destroying, Soul-Affirming Art.”

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