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Sabrina Fuchs Abrams
Editor

Transgressive Humor of American Women Writers

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To my daughters, and all the women who find a voice through laughter

Catherine Loving, Sonia Alvarez Wilson, Diarmuid Hester, Anne-Marie Evans, Linda A. Morris, Joanne Gilbert, and Rebecca Krefting. Thank you for your insights, your wit, and your inspiration in sharing the empowerment of female laughter with your readers.

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Dueling Discourses: The Female Comic's Double Bind in the New Media Age

Rebecca Krefting

Introduction

For comics and fans alike there is much to celebrate when it comes to changes in the comedy industry as a result of the internet and the rise in shared networking sites. On one hand there is greater access to preferred comics and information, new connections and exchanges between comic and fans, more autonomy in creation, and the potential for comics to control distribution. On the other hand, there are many concerns raised alongside the advent of new technologies and platforms: ownership of image and comedic content, unsolicited feedback from fans who charge comics with being politically incorrect, use of social media (SM) to "out" sexual predators in improv performance communities, and the increasing siloing of interests into ideological online tribes. Everything just mentioned bears one thing in common—they are all observable claims that reflect shifts in practices and behaviors in the comedy industry in the new media age. While this is interesting, I want to focus on the curious persistence of two popular discourses that have proven untrue, in particular

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how such beliefs work to circumscribe women's professional success in the comedy industry.

Two popular discourses—one arising in the late nineteenth century and the other in the late twentieth century—have (re)emerged as of late. Together they buttress one another in maintaining women's inferiority in the realm of humor production. The first discourse portends that our online revolution has made it possible for *anyone* to succeed. In the early years of social networking sites, platforms were commonly characterized as rising from the bottom with the intent to connect with communities centered around shared practices, traditions, and world views.[1] Having begun as a grassroots effort to collapse geography and create virtual connection and community, social networking sites help foster the illusion of democracy online maintaining the popular discourse that the internet levels the playing field in the comedy industry.[2] This supports the notion that anyone can succeed if they have good material. Invoking all the trappings of the myth of meritocracy, I call this the "content is king" discourse. Over time, this belief has gained traction and shows up in popular media and personal interviews. In one such interview with John Leguizamo, he said: "Beautiful thing about all this is that it has made *content king*. This is a great time for writers and creators ... All great writers are going to cable TV, Amazon, Netflix. And great actors have gone to these too ... where they are doing the most challenging stuff, the most freedom [sic], the most mature."[3] A few years before, Patton Oswalt made a similar proclamation during his speech at Montreal's annual Just for Laughs Festival—he welcomes the changes afoot in the comedy industry and roars: "Content is king!"[4] Declaring that "content is king!" implies a sort of democratic triumph because it promises reward for the best material regardless of creator. The statement is rife with assumptions that ignore the effects of social stratification. As the object of utopian fantasies of virtual parity, discourses of such a nature obscure the real ways in which gender and other biases continue to play out in these so-called democratic spaces. An alternate popular discourse—one that has been around for over a century and documented in historical print media—continues to circulate, namely that women are not funny or not as funny as men. For women comics, belief that they are not as funny as men informs hiring decisions, online traffic, income, and more.

These dueling (and damning) discourses lock women comics into double binds, a term feminists have long linked to the conditions of oppression. Feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye likens oppression to a birdcage, rather, a "network of forces and barriers which are systematically related" that impose irresolvable double binds or "situations in which options are reduced to a very few, and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation."[5] This oft-cited metaphor and tool for identifying marginalization in action continues to be useful in a society still encumbered by sex stratification in order to identify new double binds as they morph and shift alongside changing political, social, economic, and technological forces. In this case, women's success is read as validation of the content is king discourse and when women do *not* succeed, you can cite their "content" as inferior because remember: Content is king! Together these discursive double binds present a paradox. The belief that women are not funny contradicts the content is king discourse because content cannot possibly be king if women are always already handicapped when entering the same arena to strut their comedic stuff. To be clear, new technologies do not create these discursive double binds. In fact, the internet has proven quite helpful in dispelling the belief that women are not funny. Enterprising funny ladies like Abbi Jacobson, Ilana Glazer, Issa Rae, Mindy Kaling, and Maria Bamford have cultivated online followings compelling profitable industry contracts for television shows. This is not an attempt to discount the value of new technologies for humor production; rather, that we exercise caution in uncritically celebrating new media as democratizing. It may have the potential to be so, but only to the extent that its users are too.

In this chapter, I examine these two discourses circulating, the ways those discourses circumscribe women's professional success as comedians and the various ways comics are challenging such discourses. Employing ethnography—interviews with digital media scholars, agents, and industry executives along with comic entertainers and writers—I draw directly from the experiences of folks in the industry. Using those interviews, alongside feminist discourse analyses of popular media (from *Wired* to *The Wall Street Journal* to *Huffington Post* to *Slate*) and textual analysis of comedy performances, I closely interrogate these discourses. For both discourses, I demonstrate their widespread circulation and indoctrination and then enumerate various challenges posed to dispel these discursive lies—some of which might surprise you. I conclude by commenting on why certain popular discourses continue to flourish despite lacking verisimilitude.

Discourse - Internet as Democratizing

From comedians to journalists, a range of folks in the comedy industry laud the internet as an egalitarian space where anyone, if they have the talent, has the capacity to succeed. Writer for *The Wall Street Journal*, Christopher Farley, notes: "Social media humor is more 'democratic and diverse than the trickle-down comedy of the heyday of Leno and Letterman."[6] In other words, more people get a crack at comedy nowadays and conventional modes of achieving success are changing. Even comics with varying degrees of professional success share a sense of fair play in this increasingly technocratic landscape. Travis Tapleshay, a white comic from Hesperia, California, barely scraping by on income from stand-up comedy offers the following advice to fellow comics:

> For myself and other performers, the key to success has a lot to do with hard work but also just getting yourself out there as often as possible ... It's important to use social media, too. I have gotten quite a few gigs through online connections and also just by networking with people. It's a very competitive business but anyone can be successful if they keep working at it and stay true to themselves.[7]

White comedian Liam McEneaney, having successfully used YouTube to draw a crowd of admirers and eventually an invitation to South by Southwest Film Festival to screen his documentary *Tell Your Friends! The Concert Film*! on alternative comedy, echoes Tapleshay when offering advice to comedy hopefuls: "There's such a glut of comedy and comedians right now, all of them clamoring for a limited number of opportunities, that you kind of need to work harder to keep your voice heard above the noise ... It's definitely no longer a game for people who are lazy-but-lucky."[8] Two important stories are being told here. One is a story about who can become successful: *anyone*. The other tells a story about what it takes to become successful: *hard work*. In other words, this story advances the myth of meritocracy—the tallest American tale we continue to tell. For comics, in this particular moment in time, hard work/ambition must be directed towards establishing an online presence because SM provides potential employers with the metrics they need to make hiring and firing decisions without having ever met you in person. When relaying stories from their own lives or from their professional counterparts comic writers and performers repeatedly confirm the

role that metrics play in capturing the attention of future employers or producers.[9] In the same interviews, there is little mention of the ways metrics can be compromised or difficult to procure in higher numbers based on the sex and/or gender of the comic in question. This comes as no surprise since overt discussion of sex-contingent metrics would force interrogation of the veracity of the content is king discourse.

Not much changes in this story when the tale turns to lady comics. Popular media frequently posits that anyone can be successful as long as they work really hard, and when it comes to addressing how female comics fare today, journalists celebrate SM as being a potential game changer for women in the profession, offering them greater visibility and a wider fan base. "[T]he level playing field of Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr means no one gets between ambitious talent and a potentially receptive audience. All it takes is perseverance, ability, skill and infinite patience," exults Alex Leo.[10] Meredith Lepore makes similar claims, presenting a narrative of female empowerment and command over new media. Neither author addresses how issues of gender parity in comedy are not resolved online, and yet traces of the gender gap seep through this laudatory veneer. Alex Leo's title "Lady Comics: Who Needs Late Night? We've got Tumblr" implies that women are *not* getting coveted performance slots on late-night television talk shows. Put another way, it might read: "No worries, ladies, we cannot compete with the boys on television, but luckily you can find a niche audience for your style of humor online. If that doesn't work, you can always pretend to be a man! See, we *do* have options." Lepore concludes her glowing review of new media, writing: "Thank you internet! You've given us kittens in tubas and an amazing platform for female comedians to reach a wider audience."[11] It is true, women comics have alternative means of communicating with fans, but this does not disrupt common public perceptions that are biased, for example that men are funnier than women.

Challenges to This Belief

There are a number of ways to falsify claims that the internet is neutral territory where all have the capacity to succeed. For one, there's an economic argument that belies its impartiality. The internet became a real revenue generator around 2005, when larger corporations usurped popular SM platforms to profit from the creative—but more importantly, lucrative—explosion. Users who had organically created or joined

online tribes found their platform adopted and modified for the purpose of solidifying and targeting niche markets. A market-driven ideology became the internal logic of many SM platforms and user participation became what it looks like today: consumers volunteering behavioral and profiling data, which in turn allows platforms to continually reshape their for-profit business models.[12] Companies like Facebook are rendering sociality technical, tracking, and coding users' activities, likes, and comments in the effort to seduce users into spending more time on Facebook and viewing promotions. Facebook came under fire when the public learned from a published study that it adjusted the algorithm of 700,000 people's newsfeed, directing them towards either positive or negative posts to see if the nature of the posts would affect their own status updates and postings.[13] Altering the mood of users' newsfeed appeared less like academic research and more like market manipulation. Although this research was upsetting to Facebook users, it is a clear signal to consumers of how much power SM companies hold with their data. Ideologies that are heavily shared and followed among users can become technical trends, allowing companies to track these ideological currents then manipulate them over time for marketing and advertising purposes.[14] Companies do often employ this data-wielding power, constantly adjusting algorithms, running randomized trials of content or designs in order to hit the target of the various economic, political, and cultural "micro-tribes" to which consumers belong.[15] In lieu of this, one wonders just how organically we migrate towards and populate these tribes when SM platforms manipulate our newsfeed (including advertisements) and distributors have elaborate software that can anticipate our consumptive proclivities. It is important to consider to what extent technology engineers our consumption of goods and the company we keep in virtual worlds and what that means for comics and the industry at large. Most importantly, we must remain aware of the commercial interests and economic stakes in the content available to consumers—comedic or not—and aware of the volume of that content; there are politics in the management of that content that complicate whether you or I can ever actually "stumble" across anything online.

In addition to the structural forces that challenge this discourse, there are a number of folks calling everyone's bluff on the SM-equates-to-egalitarianism myth. Interestingly, some such naysayers are white men. Former regular opener for audiences at *The Colbert Report*, the short-lived *The Nightly Show with Larry Wilmore*, and *The Daily Show*, stand-up

comic Kevin Bartini uses his own difficulties in the business to illustrate that SM has not leveled the playing field:

> When I was starting out, it was a little bit difficult being, in comedy, being a straight white dude. You know, where, where there's a bazillion of us [*he was being interviewed by two white radio hosts*] in this industry and have traditionally over the last thirty years been the vast majority of what you've seen comedy. So, you know, it's just my luck I start comedy in the late '90s and that's when they stopped giving out sitcoms and start making reality shows and stopped just hiring you just because you are straight white guy. And every show, every other show at every club is some sort of a diversity night. Which is basically: we'll have a night for everybody but straight white guys. So, for a long time it was actually a bit of a hindrance. [*the hosts of the radio show follow up with a chorus of: 'yeah, it's tough out there' and 'they got our backs up against a wall'*].[16]

Precisely as the internet and SM began generating new online venues for comedy production, Bartini cites a professional squeeze impacting white male comics. Patton Oswalt's speech in Montreal at Just for Laughs responded to similar conditions but with an entirely different reaction—nearly giddy. He wants folks to have to work hard in the business. Though Bartini complains in this podcast that white guys can't get a break and who you know doesn't matter anymore, he later shares that he got the job on *The Daily Show* because a friend recommended him. There was no formal posting of a job and no audition. He just showed up for work. New media may not be the equalizer that some boast it is, but it does reduce the likelihood that you will get hired for just being in the right place at the right time. This is the source of Bartini's laments and Oswalt's delight.

White men comprise only a portion of the constituents countering the belief that everyone has an equal chance for success in this increasingly technocratic world. For women, it is difficult to accept the axiom "content is king" when that content requires public endorsement from someone of status (usually male). Maria Bamford's career took off after Patton Oswalt invited her to tour with him on the Comedians of Comedy Tour. Before that, she had hit the laugh ceiling in Los Angeles, and was making most of her income via voice-over work for animated series and steeling herself for a life of touring in feature purgatory throughout the country. If anyone can succeed then why did it take Louis CK to catapult

Tig Notaro to stardom after a performance at Largo where she shared about the loss of her mother, being diagnosed with breast cancer, and dumped by her girlfriend? She had been working hard at the craft for nearly twenty years before CK put her on the national map. Thanks to the far-reaching powers of the internet and a lot of hard work, over the next several years Notaro landed comedy roles, churned out specials on Showtime and HBO, and even a critically acclaimed documentary, titled *Tig* (released directly to Netflix). Despite a bevy of successes to add to her résumé, journalist Gina Vivinetto points out that Tig has been the subject of *more* than just public adoration. Vivinetto asks: "We've seen a lot of 'Tig Notaro: Cancer As A Path To Success' headlines this year. How does that sit with you?"[17] Lucky for Notaro, she is not too concerned about such argy bargy, but it does illustrate another double bind for women. If you don't achieve fame as a comic, it's because you weren't good enough and if you do achieve fame, then your talent is always suspect; that is, she slept her way to the top, she wouldn't be here without the endorsement of her guy comic friends, her success is linked to a disability or disease, and so on. The reality is that women comics benefit from being promoted because all the same cultural trappings and biases that exist in society, exist online as well, affecting chances for job offers and professional success.

Some women in the comedy industry openly address these false perceptions that women have equal opportunities for success in this technocratic space. Los Angeles improv actress, Lara Zvirbulis, hosts a weekly improv show: "That's What She Said Ladies Night" formerly called "The Lady Jam." While she makes good use of SM to promote the show, her own work, and others' she admires, she points out that if the playing field were truly equal for men and women, there would be no need for an all-women's improv revue.[18] A nod of approval from Caroline Hirsh, owner of the infamous Caroline's on Broadway, can make a comic's career. She prides herself on being able to spot "funny" and for helping out female comics along the way, knowing all too well that compared to their male counterparts, women comics struggle to get the same stage time and bookings. So, when Hirsch finds women funny and puts them on her stage, she does it so "they can get it out there … It's not that this is making somebody *funnier*. They'd be funny anyway."[19] Women comics are lucky to have someone like Hirsch going to bat for them; it's not often that women occupy positions of power in the comedy industry.

Stand-up comic and educator Micia Mosely, Ph.D., agrees that SM can make the work of women comics more visible, but asks us to interrogate which women get to be visible and the kind of women's humor the public consumes.

> I think that we see more female comics kind of out front with their own fan base being able to headline their own shows than we have in the past but I think that's true in general and I feel like social media has helped in general. It still doesn't deal with intersectionality. I mean I don't know if you can name five Black women who, or even one Latina women, or one, besides Margaret Cho, Asian woman that are really at that, that you could go across the country and everyone would know their name, or they could put together a national tour and they could actually, you know, support themselves … And you'll see with female comics who are, I think, edgier and who can also seem more masculine or more patriarchal in their approach, you see a little bit of a distinction, right? So I'm thinking of the Chelsea Handlers or the Sarah Silvermans who, they could easily go on tour with some of the guys who do that type of comedy, and it's like: "Woo! We got a woman!" But they're not necessarily doing anything to fight misogyny. So yes, I think it has helped as a platform but has it dealt with the core issues? No.[20]

New media may offer the potential for more voices, more points of view, but as Mosely (herself a Black lesbian) points out, it has not yet changed the material circumstances (i.e., job offers and income) for women of color comics. Furthermore, public consumption trends seem to support women comics unlikely to challenge inequities in the industry or larger society. If we are simply looking for more female voices to rise above the din, SM can and already has proved useful for broadening a fan base; however, who gets heard and the substance of their social commentary has everything to do with consumer interest and demand, which hinges upon individual belief and valuation of women's voices as funny.

Discourse - Women Aren't Funny

I'm reluctant to even talk about the belief that women are not funny because doing so reifies and validates the discourse once again. However, to ignore it would also prove insulting to the reality of women's shared experiences in the comedy industry. The evolution and recycling of arguments waged in defense of women being funny have been captured by

a number of scholars. In *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents*, I detail the history of this discourse as follows:

> In the 1890s, newspapers printed editorials and articles speculating that women were born sympathetic, disallowing a fondness for jokes since humor is often mean-spirited. An editorial published in 1901 in *The Washington Post* begins: "The question was an old one: Do women have a sense of humor? They have long been accused of having a hollow where that bump ought to be."[21] The early 1900s delivered more of the same biology-as-destiny argumentation, i.e., women are born lacking the DNA necessary to appreciate and produce humor. The debate raged on over the next century: women can exercise wit but not humor; vanity prevents women from pursuing comedy because women can be funny only by sacrificing their beauty; a woman's comic appeal requires she be beautiful otherwise she risks losing male patrons; funny women are unnatural; funny women are manly; women cannot be ladies *and* comediennes—the two are antithetical; women cannot be funny and feminine; women *can* be funny and feminine; women are too emotional to be humorous … and on.[22]

The point is that this belief exists and persists. Unfortunately, people skeptical that women are funny are not likely to seek ways of changing their beliefs. And just because our mechanisms for delivering information have changed does not mean that inequities related to gender, race, sexuality, or otherwise will cease to occur. Media producers and directors have played and continue to play powerful parts in what images, ideas, and representations we have access to. A shift in how information circulates, at times obviating the power of industry executives, disturbingly reveals the ways consumers are themselves responsible for upholding social inequalities, assuming there are few commonalities or shared interests across sexes, races, generations, or sexual orientations. Such beliefs effect consumption practices and choices: what YouTube channels you subscribe to, which kinds of comedy you browse or explore further, which videos you share or are shared with you, and so on.

Given the insularity of our online tribes, chances are that if you don't think women are funny, your friends don't either. Studies of online behavior show that we belong to multiple tribes with whom we share common interests, be they ideological, recreational, professional, religious, political, and so on.[23] The increased siloing of interaction with communities into micro-tribes who *think like we do*, means that we are less likely to have our world views challenged. "People aren't looking to get their opinions changed or to try and understand a situation they can't relate to in another country or another continent or another religion," digital scholar Amelia Wong explains.[24] In other words, tribalism has the potential to breed intractability. In a 2012 sampling of college students that asked whether men or women are funnier, 89% of women and 94% of men cited men as the funnier of the two sexes.[25] With numbers like this, the odds are that we all keep company with folks that sustain and perpetuate the belief that women are not as funny as men, reducing the likelihood we will be exposed to arguments or evidence belying these claims.

Challenges to This Belief

There have been a number of challenges posed to the belief that women are not as funny as men, including studies seeking to explore the veracity of such claims. A recent study reveals that in blind tests rating the funniness of cartoon captions, in the United States there are no differences in how we evaluate the funniness of cartoons authored by men versus women. When asked to guess the sex of the funniest cartoons, overwhelmingly participants chose men.[26] This and similar conclusions found by research psychologists Laura Mickes et al. debunks the notion that women are not as funny as men.[27] Women *are funny and as funny as men*, but proving this does little to diminish the persistence of that belief. It may not be true, but as a stereotype, it is operable still. Social psychologist Claude Steele explains "stereotype threat" as a condition that presents contingencies based on identity that impact performance.[28] This particular stereotype has two negative outcomes that are mutually supporting. One, since the consumption of comedy is seldom dissociated with the visual/aural, the belief that women aren't funny impacts consumption of women's comedy. Two, as happens in similar trials conducted by Steele, upon activating this stereotype threat, women are likely to overeffort and underperform. The stereotype threat leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy—your ability is called into question, creating anxiety that impedes performance.[29] In other words, the belief itself can impact both the caliber of women's performances and consumption of women's humor. Because we can trace this belief back to when women began performing comedy professionally on vaudeville stages, we have no understanding of what it is like not to operate under this stereotype threat. And, yet, women do.

Examples of successful female comics like Wanda Sykes, Margaret Cho, Amy Schumer, Kate McKinnon, Ali Wong, Kathleen Madigan, or Iliza Shlesinger aid in dispelling the belief that women are not funny. Resistance to these claims emerges in a variety of venues serving up visual culture: YouTube videos, women's stand-up comedy, documentaries, print media, and television shows. Women's web series such as Bamford's *The Maria Bamford Show* and *Ask My Mom*, Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson's *Broad City*, Grace Helbig's *DailyGrace*, and Issa Rae's *Awkward Black Girl* have turned more than a few heads—so many that all of these women's web series yielded opportunities for television shows. Glazer and Jacobson have enjoyed greater visibility on Comedy Central after the channel picked up *Broad City* in 2014 (network executives promise a 4th and 5th season). Maria Bamford lit up Netflix in the experimental series *Lady Dynamite*, Helbig hosts *The Grace Helbig Show* on E! and with Larry Wilmore as her creative co-pilot, Issa Rae's web series has been transformed into a television show called *Insecure* which has garnered critical acclaim since its premier on HBO in October 2016. Broad popular success ensured that HBO renewed the show for a second season. This should be reason to wax jubilant; however, it illumines that women are less likely to be given a crack at television *until* they demonstrate an existing fan base to support production of the show. That women have to undergo online hazing proves just how strongly we have invested in the belief that women are inferior in the realm of humor production. To comedian Micia Mosely's point that women of color do not have the same opportunities as white women, it should be noted that it is much easier to find evidence of white women's success in mainstream comedy consumption than to report on the success of women of color comic performers.

That the impact felt by both of these discourses may be compounded when considering the experiences and opportunities for women of color in the comedy industry barely factored into Bonnie McFarlane's unfortunately titled documentary, *Women Aren't Funny* (2014), which sought answers to why this belief continues to circulate despite evidence to the contrary. Instead of offering cultural, historical, economic, or political answers to this question, she places herself as centerpiece of the documentary that devolves into the real conundrum: Why am I not as famous as my husband, Rich Vos? Standing in a field naked from the waist down and unable to take herself or the topic seriously, McFarlane makes a mockery of any valuable insights about why this belief continues to thrive. The tragedy of her failed denouncement of this belief coupled with a title meant to be ironic but isn't, makes for a painful viewing experience. Failed though her efforts may have been, her frustration reflects a tenuous career that can be linked to her subject position as a woman, further evincing the toll this belief takes on women comics.[30]

Unlike Bonnie McFarlane's half-hearted attempt at confronting and challenging this belief, the three-minute YouTube video, "A Day in the Life of a Female Comedian" (2011), takes a satirical stab at the stereotype. This cast of lady comic notables such as Amy Schumer, Nikki Glaser, Maria Bamford, and Jackie Monahan spoof sexist beliefs and simultaneously raise critiques about what it means for women to have to "pay their dues" in the comedy industry—favors for male agents, club bookers, and comic friends—and the pressures placed on women to fulfill white beauty ideals and develop content consonant with their subject positions as women (and in this case, as white). In other words, being a funny white lady requires a combination of shoulder pads, vulva jokes, and making ignorant observations about people of color. More pointedly, the video suggests that being a woman comic is akin to navigating an active minefield ranging from skepticism to outright repudiation before she has even stepped on stage.[31]

Just as women use social networking sites to broadcast evidence of their humorous potential, so, too, the content of women's comedy belies the stereotype that women are not funny. In her Netflix comedy special, *Baby Cobra*, Ali Wong turns our attention to gender expectations when it comes to performing stand-up comedy.

> So, I don't know if you guys can tell, but I'm seven and a half months pregnant. [*cheers and applause*] Yeah! It's very rare and unusual to see a female comic perform pregnant ... because female comics ... don't get pregnant. [*laughter*] Just try to think of one, I dare you, there's none of them. Once they do get pregnant they generally disappear. That's not the case with male comics. Once they have a baby they'll get up on stage a week afterwards and they'll be like: "Guys, I just had this fucking baby, that baby is a little piece of shit, it's so annoying and boring." And all these other shitty dads in the audience are like: "That's hilarious! I identify!" [*laughter*] and their fame just swells because they become this relatable family funny man all of a sudden. Meanwhile the mom is at home, chapping her nipples, [*laughter*] feeding the fucking baby, and wearing a frozen diaper because her pussy needs to heal from the baby's head shredding it up. She's busy [*laughter*]!

She ends the bit saying: "So, I don't know what's going to happen to me." It is meant to be funny, but the concern is real. There is no model for Ali Wong, no manual to unpack what to expect when you are expecting (as a female comic). Wong gives us some context for why we don't often see mothers on stage, let alone pregnant women. Importantly, she cites identification with a comic spokesperson as critical to their success. Why are women's experiences, including but not limited to pregnancy and parenting, not considered relatable? The answer has less to do with women being unfunny and everything to do with gendered social expectations posing as natural or normate. As Wong illustrates, the outcome radically transforms who populates our comedic landscape, what subject matters we get to hear about, and even the ways we broach that content.

Why do these discourses trafficking false beliefs continue to circulate despite the vast evidence to the contrary? What is our shared investment in treating them as truths versus false beliefs or stereotypes? I contend that what we find humorous reflects who we are—as individuals, as citizens, and as members of communities organized around religion, region, race/ethnicity, sexuality, politics, and so on. We rally behind the beliefs we *want* to believe are true because they serve us in some way; in other words, they are functional. We have long extolled the value of a democratic government and equal opportunity for all, taking up arms to defend this right for others in Asia and the Middle East even as racism, sexism, poverty, and homophobia remain an accepted part of our social and political institutions. The desire to be viewed as egalitarian far outweighs the desire to fix the system so that it actually works the way we say it does. It is not surprising then that new media prompted another chorus of self-congratulatory claims to parity. The functionality of the stereotype that women are not funny is simple. The belief maintains comedy as a male-dominated profession, ensuring more stage time, money, and opportunities for men. More opportunities to make us laugh means more opportunities to inform and shape audience's world views. For male comics, in theory, what's not to like? Kevin Bartini's complaints about a changing industry that no longer hands out gigs to white men (except it did for him) reflect professional concerns that will only intensify the desire to maintain the discursive fiction that women aren't funny. Watching this discourse circulate over time and seeing the vitriol dispensed by comics towards members of the public charging them with being politically incorrect, it is clear that certain comics are wedded to maintaining the current comedy status quo. And, to be fair, so are we—the fans, the consumers, the groupies.

Conclusion

If the future of the comedy industry looks anything like the music industry's past, it could be characterized as "white space," a term Los Angeles talent agent Peter Clemente used to explain the current open-endedness of the comedy industry due to changing dynamics. Clemente asserted that "influencers," those who have traditionally supported, sponsored, and shaped a cultural icon, are driven by the ulterior motive of profit. Complicating the dynamic of the comedy industry today are the "advocates," those who whole-heartedly, without ulterior motive, aim to protect, share, and spread the word about something in which they are personally invested. These are the fans, the ones who post comedy clips to their Facebook newsfeed, who retweet a comedian coming to town on their Twitter account, and who may even fill the seats at the comedy clubs. In the comedy world, the biggest influence used to be late-night talk show hosts directing our fandom. Now the advocates, the fans, and the consumers bestow a comedian with popularity and power. This model is far more decentralized and unquantifiably powerful, with more voices recommending which comic to listen to, which comic writer to read, or which video to watch. As we reside in this "white space," Clemente sees the fertile ground for an entirely new model. He foresees an industry in which content creators and consumers have far more agency in shaping what becomes popular comedic content, and distributors seek to listen to these voices. In contrast to the popular discourse that SM is an impartial and equalizing force, Clemente's observations seem a far more accurate assessment of the role that new media plays in the comedy industry.

In conclusion, both discourses lock women into a double bind. If women are not funny—subjective though this may be—then the belief has been confirmed. If women are funny then they don't shift the rule, they are an exception to the rule, a pleasant mirth-inducing aberration. If women put out comedic content online and it is not successful, her failure becomes one of content, ignoring the ways her subject position may dictate consumption of her comedy. The blame for failure lies with her, rather than the way we have been socialized to appreciate male humor. As long as the belief that women aren't funny remains salient,

it's difficult to know where the responsibility lies. With consumers? Definitely. Our beliefs shape our consumptive practices—just ask anyone why they buy local. Does the responsibility lie with her humor? Maybe. Anybody can fail at comedy, men and women alike. But when the tastemakers are trained to see male humor as humor genera, when we are still socialized to value a male opinion over a female's, consumers will gravitate towards male comic perspectives and world views. So long as either belief exists—content is king and women aren't funny—it continues to delimit what counts as humorous, negatively impacts interest in women's comedic production, and impedes potential for women's success. It is both a blessing and a curse that these beliefs cannot be substantiated as factual or objective: a blessing because *beliefs are tractable* and a curse because *most people cling intractably to their beliefs*. What may appear to be an easy resolution—stop believing this horseshit—remains complicated and deeply ingrained in the American psyche.

Notes

1. José Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
2. For a lengthy and detailed discussion of the cultural history of Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Flickr, and Wikipedia, see: José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
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5. Marilyn Frye, "Oppression," In *Privilege: A Reader*, edited by Michael S. Kimmel and Abby L. Ferber, 13–20 (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books Group, 2003), 18 & 14.
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9. All of my research participants speak to this metrics phenomenon and stress the importance of an online presence as mandate for professional success, particularly for those without name recognition.
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12. José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, 16.
13. Cornell University professor (Jeffrey T. Hancock) and graduate student (Jamie Guillory) along with a member of Facebook's Core Data Science Team (Adam Kramer) published a study based on data gleaned from adjusting the algorithm titled "Experimental evidence of massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks."
14. Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*, 20–21.
15. Marty Kaplan, "Facebook and the Powers of Media Manipulation," *Highbrow Magazine*, July 21, 2014, accessed July 23, 2014. http://www.highbrowmagazine.com/4155-facebook-and-powers-media-manipulation.
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17. Lara Zvirbulis, E-mail, July 21, 2014.
18. Caroline Hirsch, Personal Interview, July 17, 2014.
19. Micia Mosely, Personal Interview, August 12, 2015.
20. "Woman's Sense of Humor: Mr. Depew, May Irwin and Other Discuss Its Existence," *The Washington Post*, June 23, 1901, 22.
21. This list draws from dozens and dozens of articles published in twentieth century historical newspapers like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Chicago Defender*, *Pittsburg Courier*, and *Los Angeles Times*. I would like to thank students enrolled in multiple sections of my course: *Introduction to American Studies: A Humorous (Dis)Course* for locating, analyzing and discussing these articles and the evolution/cycles of

this popular debate with me. For a lengthier discussion of the same, see Chap. 4 in Rebecca Krefting, *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2014), 129–130.

22. Danah Boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2014); Carrie James, *Disconnected: Youth, New Media, and the Ethics Gap* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014).
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