



# TAKING A STAND

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Contemporary US Stand-Up Comedians  
as Public Intellectuals

Edited by Jared N. Champion and Peter C. Kunze

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# MARIA BAMFORD

A/Way with Words

Rebecca Krefting

I really do think that comedians are the modern-day philosophers. . . . And I think that gives us a very important role, because who else is doing that? Who else has that commentary that quickly, and also, is able to make light of painful things and give it some perspective.

—Hari Kondabolu<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCING MARIA BAMFORD

From comedic web series, to voice-overs for animated television shows, to experimental documentary, to comedy concert films, to star of the Netflix series *Lady Dynamite* (2016–2017), Maria Bamford's résumé as an entertainer is (like those of most comedians who cross over to television and film) as eclectic as it is impressive. According to her official website, her comedy career began at the age of eleven when "she starred in the Chester Park Elementary production of *How the West Was REALLY Won!*" She has been chasing after laughs ever since. You never know what Maria Bamford will say next, or with which voice. Her alternative comedy stylings, most notably a cavalcade of voices and characters that draw inspiration from family members, friends, and even enemies, inspired Zack Ruskin of *SF Weekly* to call her "one of the most innovative stand-up comics working today."<sup>2</sup> During her guest appearance on *The Late Show* (2015–), Stephen Colbert said to Bamford in all earnestness: "You are my favorite comedian on planet earth."<sup>3</sup> Judd Apatow echoes this, almost verbatim: "Maria Bamford is my favorite comedian ever. Nobody makes me laugh harder. To all my friends who are comedians, I apologize for saying this. I hope it didn't hurt you. But it's just

a fact. And deep down, you know I'm right."<sup>4</sup> They are not alone in their assessment. Over time, Bamford has created a cult-like following from fans drawn to the wacky cast of characters that inhabit her body and her deft treatment of an array of social issues—as in this joke:

Certain English phrases you really don't learn until you've been here at least a couple hundred years. Things like [*assumes a dyspeptic nasally voice*]: "Why vote? Who cares? It doesn't even fucking matter [*laughter*]." And like [*assuming an indignant tone*]: "Yeah, I'm not racist but they're lazy [*laughter*]." [*Assumes normal voice*] Sounds racist when you say it [*laughter*]. My favorite English phrase that I have been hearing a lot frequently is [*assumes a spoiled tone*]: "Yeah, I need money but I'm not going to work as a fucking . . . [*assumes normal voice*] fill in the blank [*laughter and clapping*]." Very difficult to enunciate that. [*Speaks as if her mouth is full and gestures to her cheeks*] Got to keep the silver spoon between my cheek and gum.<sup>5</sup>

This recitation of statements weighted with privilege, entitlement, apathy, and judgment boldly skewers the attitudes and the systems that sustain such problematic beliefs. For Bamford, the payoff for performing stand-up comedy is twofold: validation of her experiences and sense of humor, and the possibility that her comedy might unmask social issues and coax new ways of thinking about them. To that effect, she says: "[T]here's something wonderful about hearing people laugh, especially if it's something that's important to me like mental illness. Those laughs can feel really affirming."<sup>6</sup> Without being heavy-handed, Bamford's humor tasks us with confronting social stratifications, global inequality, issues of gender parity, and negative attitudes towards mental illness. Over time, she has become a spokesperson especially in matters of mental illness. Given her profession, her sex, and her conscientious efforts to destigmatize mental illness, Bamford—an anxious blonde white woman of slight frame and a childlike voice—seems a surprising choice as a public intellectual.

Bamford was born in Port Hueneme, California on September 3, 1970, but her family moved shortly thereafter to Duluth, Minnesota, where they stayed. When speaking of her childhood, Maria Bamford refers to herself as a "dark kid" who "would occasionally stage my own death for fun. . . . I never really thought of myself as depressed though as much as *paralyzed by hope*."<sup>7</sup> She channeled her energies and anxieties into building an arsenal of wacky characters, performing both stand-up and improv while attending college. Believing she could turn those voices into a profitable profession, Bamford

moved to LA at the age of twenty-two and quickly infiltrated the thriving West Coast alternative comedy scene of the 1990s. It was not long before she secured well-paying jobs for voice-over work for shows like Nickelodeon's *CatDog* (1998–2005), *Hey Arnold!* (1996–2004), and *Back at the Barnyard* (2007–2011).<sup>8</sup> She earned her chops as a comedy writer by signing on as a staff writer for *Second City Headlines & News* (1996–) in 1997, and later snagged a sweet gig writing for *The Martin Short Show* (1999–2000) in 1999.<sup>9</sup> Stand-up comedy was a constant passion and continuous focus while she was working other jobs as a comedy writer and voice-over actor.

The early aughts brought greater success and notoriety, as Bamford exercised innovative branding through new technologies and platforms circumventing traditional pathways to fame. She pumped out an impressive four comedy albums in the span of eight years (2003–2010)<sup>10</sup> and became a celebrated must-see comic after participating in the Comedians of Comedy Tour with Patton Oswalt, Brian Posehn, Zach Galifianakis, and (later, when he joined the tour) Eugene Mirman.<sup>11</sup> Notably, Bamford adapts her comedy to multiple media; as an early adopter of the platform, she used YouTube to launch the popular web series *The Maria Bamford Show* (2006) and *Ask My Mom!* (2013). The first of these shows offers a prophetic answer to the hypothetical question: “What will happen if I have a mental breakdown?”<sup>12</sup> She shocked and delighted fans with her low-tech, low-cost version of a stand-up special, which she playfully titled *Maria Bamford: The Special Special Special!* (2012), essentially a self-produced full-length stand-up routine.<sup>13</sup> A skeleton crew filmed the show in her living room with only her parents in attendance, and Bamford made it available through Chill.com for a mere \$5. In 2013, she caught the attention of *Arrested Development* (2003–2019) creator Mitchell Hurwitz, who cast her in the rebooted season of the show; she went on to become one of the creators and writers of *Lady Dynamite*, a semi-autobiographical digitally streamed Netflix series based on Bamford's life released in May of 2016. After a few more years of experimentation with form and audience, Comedy Dynamics produced her first traditional stand-up special. *Weakness Is the Brand* (Cohen, 2020) landed her on a number of top ten lists for what would be one of the strangest years in comedy history. Not surprisingly, Bamford was at the vanguard of visionary performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. You would be hard pressed to find a working comedian unaware of Bamford's comedic brilliance. She has established herself as an innovator in the field of stand-up comedy—a critical voice with a loyal and growing fan base of public intellectual proportions.

What follows is an exploration of the qualities necessary to inhabit the role of public intellectual, and how charged humor commands this designation.

By charged humor, I mean the humor that intentionally seeks to reveal social inequalities while also doing its own work to celebrate difference, cultivate cultural citizenship, and present suggestions for change.<sup>14</sup> The questions about which I am most curious are: What are the criteria necessary to be cast as public intellectual? Do the criteria have inherent biases, and how does that play out? For example, androcentrism informs the collective choices that continually reify men as more able to serve in such distinguished positions, illuminating the difficulty women have achieving status as a public intellectual. This, along with the fact that Maria Bamford's comedy takes on many issues of inequality, not just stigmas about mental illness, makes her position as cultural mouthpiece all the more impressive. Using her corpus of comedy work, including concert films, audio recordings, web series, YouTube clips, and television work, I aim to frame, contextualize, and analyze the myriad ways that Bamford uses her profession to generate charged humor or urge social consciousness and political change, most particularly around long-held negative attitudes toward and stereotypes about mental illness. Widespread respect for Maria Bamford—her life and her creative work—has catapulted her into the role of public intellectual, which is not that surprising since comedians are frequently included in *Time Magazine's* lists of 100 most influential people. When *Foreign Policy* gave readers the chance to offer suggestions for whom to include in a list of the world's top twenty public intellectuals, Stephen Colbert received the most votes.<sup>15</sup> Popular opinion demonstrates that someone like Jon Stewart or Whoopi Goldberg can be stacked up against the likes of Maya Angelou, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Al Gore, or Umberto Eco. Though laughter may be a primary objective for stand-up comics, their words are freighted and fertile with possibility. Indeed, this is what makes comics suitable as public intellectuals in the first place.

## THIS PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL IS CHARGED

Comedians have been called a lot of things—not all of them nice, either. Humor studies scholars confer upon stand-up comedians many roles, among them: “comic auteurs,”<sup>16</sup> cultural and community spokespersons,<sup>17</sup> and “cynical insider[s].”<sup>18</sup> Stephanie Koziski positions stand-up comics as cultural anthropologists, a designation that entails closely observing a community or group, commenting on community norms and cultural contradictions, offering new interpretations and ways of envisioning the past and present, and connecting language and forms of expression to social roles (e.g., the way certain dialects and mannerisms evoke regional, class, or racial/ethnic

distinctions).<sup>19</sup> Beyond securing the yuks, comics also function to hold up a mirror to our shared assumptions, values, and cultural practices, bringing new kinds of awareness to who we are and what we deem important. Because they “see” our culture from many angles, comedians can use humor to make the normal seem strange, so that we might reexamine our behaviors. In other words, comics scrutinize aspects of life so we have to rethink our norms. They do not have to be purveyors of charged humor, nor must they be actively seeking to raise social consciousness, but they can and do these things, and the most accomplished of them at filling these roles become our public intellectuals.

Scholarship framing modern conceptions of public intellectuals may not use the precise term yet may refer to the same kinds of social savvy, authority, visibility, and cultural critique. Antonio Gramsci characterizes organic intellectuals as holding positions of leadership (this could be in any profession), having specialized skills, and raising awareness around economic, social, and political issues.<sup>20</sup> For Maria Bamford, lecherous bosses, quirky coworkers, and all manner of humiliations common to temporary work became fodder and fuel for stand-up comedy.

I used to have this really creepy, creepy boss. He would always come up to me and say stuff like: [*heavy breathing into the microphone*] “I really like it when you wear your hair like that. Hehehe. [*breathes heavily into the microphone while audience laughs*] Why don’t you come in the meeting, take shorthand, cheer up the guys with your pretty face? Come on smile for me. You look so much more beautiful when you smile. Hehehe” [*breathes heavily into the microphone while crowd laughs*]. Like I go in his office and say stuff like [*assumes a sexy voice*]: “Hi, I really love the way your gray curly neck hair comes up over the edge of your peach polyweave sweat-stained sport shirt [*laughter*]. Why don’t you come in my cubicle and tell me more about my partial dental benefits after ninety days [*she winks seductively and crowd laughs and claps*]? Come on, smile for me. The fact that I net \$6.49 an hour to provide you with the sexual stimulation you’re not man enough to get in your personal life [*smattering of cheers and laughter*] is so much more apparent [*she drops the voice and looks directly at her audience*] when you smile” [*clapping and cheering*].<sup>21</sup>

Bamford offers an agentic response to the ubiquity of being devalued as object or decoration for male pleasure, and by drawing attention to these matters she knocks a small but mighty chink in the armor of patriarchy.

On stage, in a position of authority (read leadership), she nimbly moves from character to character, each with their own voice, body language, and idiosyncrasies (read specialized skills) to reveal the gendered dimensions of inequality.

Gramsci’s organic intellectual presents a facsimile for public intellectuals, though one not quite as nuanced as Edward Said’s discussion of the same. Using different terminology but banging on the same set of drums, Said positions the “role of the intellectual as outsider, ‘amateur,’ and disturber of the status quo.”<sup>22</sup> He goes on: “Insiders promote special interests, but intellectuals should be the ones to question patriotic nationalism, corporate thinking, and a sense of class, racial or gender privilege.”<sup>23</sup> For Said, it is not enough to report what you see; rather, the public tasks intellectuals with maintaining critical distance from our political and social institutions. For this reason, Elizabeth Bruenig, a writer for *New Republic*, does *not* believe that comedians should be deemed public intellectuals. She suggests that televised comedy—whether stand-up or late-night talk shows—panders to the broadest possible audience. This generally dilutes excoriating critiques of society or our political system. Bruenig writes: “Mistaking gentle jokes about Republicans for subversiveness is dangerous because it convinces those in the center that they’re on the vanguard, which severely delimits their view of the range of political possibilities.”<sup>24</sup> Her point is well taken and is echoed in Edward Said’s scholarship about public intellectuals (i.e., the degree to which one can occupy that role while being subject to corporate interests).<sup>25</sup> Comedians *are* subject to media censure and do make career decisions to maximize profit, which can work to minimize the extent of the critiques they offer. The degree to which anyone can locate themselves outside the system is debatable; however, most important here for Said and Gramsci is the imperative of a critique leveled at systemic inequality. Comedians such as Hannah Gadsby, Steve Martin, Dave Chappelle, Marc Maron, and Wanda Sykes remain beneficiaries of the system while pointing to its flaws.

To be clear, being a comedian does not a public intellectual make. Generalizing statements identifying all comedians as public intellectuals ignore the reality of the banal comedy so readily available to consumers. Not all comics portend to play such a part, and most people would reserve that designation for stand-up comedians who comment on social and political issues, critique the status quo, and deliver profound maxims all steeped in humor. Carrot Top and Adam Carolla are, for instance, in no danger of being misidentified as public intellectuals. As Stephanie Koziski puts it, “The unreflective artist may merely betray and depict covert traits of culture without analysis. The more sensitive and critical artist will discover, analyze and account for the

discrepancies found in their observations of how things *should* operate in culture but *don't* (italics hers).<sup>36</sup> Koziski's "critical artist" is just another way of alluding to charged humor or the comedy that pays particular attention to unmasking social inequalities, troubles the notion that there is anything "natural" about disenfranchisement, and stokes cultural citizenship. Just as with Edward Said's description of an intellectual, this kind of charged humorist positions themselves as an outsider, divested of the interests of the ruling classes and invested in pointing out where the trouble lies in our production and reproduction of social and political institutions. Nearly everyone agrees on what constitutes a public intellectual and that comedians can serve in such a capacity, but this does nothing to diminish the reality that women are less likely to rise to such a status in the first place.

Dimensions of inequality inform whom we choose to view as public intellectuals. Whether we are talking about captivating orators, celebrated specialists, or public intellectuals, these positions of authority tend to be held by those occupying dominant categories of identity: e.g., able-bodied, white, male, heterosexual, Christian, affluent, etcetera. Some time ago, in a conversation with colleagues, someone compared Hillary Clinton to Barack Obama as an orator, citing Obama's abilities for public oration as superior to Hillary Clinton's. Both are compelling leaders, savvy political strategists, and intellectual giants. But put up one against the other when it comes to delivering speeches that inform, counsel, and motivate, and most people will agree that Obama executes better than Clinton. Indeed, an article in the *Huffington Post* lauded Obama as the third greatest orator in the modern era.<sup>37</sup> Hillary Clinton was not even a contender, perhaps because she lacks what Eliana Johnson, a writer for *National Review*, describes as willingness to offer "exposure, access, the illusion of intimacy."<sup>38</sup> In an ironic twist, based on those descriptors, it appears that Clinton does not do a good enough job of exuding feminine traits. Or it could mean that people interpret differently the careful balancing act of exhibiting authority versus vulnerability when the subject is female versus male. The point is not whether Obama is a better orator; rather, it is that women will be judged differently while performing in exactly the same ways as men. Clinton's public speaking abilities are not deficient; they just ring oddly to ears accustomed to hearing men speak. We are socialized to accept men as political leaders; that power looks good, if not exactly right, when nestled in the arms of men.<sup>39</sup> Historically we designate mainly white male comics as cultural critics. It's true that some African American men have attained such status, such as Dick Gregory and Richard Pryor, but in the United States people more readily accept white men in the role of public intellectual. Comics—Black, white, and brown; men and

women; straight and queer; Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and atheist have all performed in the role of public intellectual at some time or other. This is not to say that women have not served in such capacities; rather, the point is that women will struggle more than their male counterparts to demonstrate aptitude as public intellectuals, because we are socialized to believe that men are more efficacious orators, critics, observers, and leaders.

In the mid-twentieth century, comedians like Mort Sahl, Dick Gregory, Richard Pryor, George Carlin, and Lenny Bruce took up roles as public intellectuals, using humor to speak with cultural authority. Their commonality: *wide-spread visibility and charged content destabilizing cultural norms and critiquing political and social institutions*. In using charged humor to challenge what was assumed to be natural or normal, and then to imagine otherwise, they captivated the public's ear; consequently they continue to exist in our history and cultural imagination as comic icons and public intellectuals. There have always been smart comics who pack a moral wallop in their jokes; the question is whether we buy what they are selling and enable them to break into the mainstream. The same charged humor that catapulted Gregory, Carlin, and Pryor in the 1970s fell out of favor in the 1980s alongside the rise of neoliberalism, making room for a sharp rise in comedy that was apolitical, gag-heavy, and television appropriate.

The rise of the conservative Right in the 1980s shaped public attitudes, and changing technologies delivered more content to more people, forever altering modes of distribution and consumption of comedy.<sup>40</sup> In his history of anti-intellectualism in the early to mid-twentieth century, Richard Hofstadter charts the ebb and flow of public ambivalence bordering on hostility toward intellectuals, demonstrating that a confluence of political events and cultural beliefs can produce or quash the people's faith in and need for public intellectuals. Sometimes we want our public intellectuals to remind us of ways we can improve; sometimes we don't. Neoliberalism propelled shifts in public opinion around our social contract, and formerly celebrated words like "welfare state" and "government aid" took on increasingly negative connotations. Individuals, not the government, were to blame for poverty, homelessness, medical illness, and disability. Those same beliefs that gave rise to neoliberalism in the 1980s diminished the gravitas granted to intellectualism—not altogether, but enough to diminish the public's desire for vocal spokespersons critiquing a system that had been soundly declared democratic and equal for all citizens.<sup>41</sup> Visible inequalities like poverty became not a reason to doubt the American Dream, but a sign of bad choices and individual failure. The centralization of media used to distribute comedy to the masses in the 1980s was another crucial factor in the heft that comedians—or



anyone, for that matter—could bring to topics when subject to censorship and advertisers' restrictions. The big bucks were in television, especially in sitcoms, and producers had no intention of jeopardizing ratings by signing on a comedian with polarizing political views. The later twentieth century was an era in which cultural critics need not apply. When it comes down to who we turn to for guidance—excepting religious or political authorities—public allowances for social critique matter as much as the communication systems we have in place to share and connect with one another.

In a world with gender parity (not this one), it takes only two important components to achieve status as comic-*cum*-public intellectual: *critical comedic commentary* and *visibility*. Charged comics already have the content; it is the visibility that proves more difficult to procure, particularly when the most effective and widespread forms of media exposure have vested interests in trafficking ideas palatable to middle America. The fact is that one cannot be a public intellectual if no one is listening, but when a comic has a captive audience they may wield a great deal of power to unpack and transform the American Mind. Having worked diligently for decades as a charged stand-up comic, Bamford is more than up to the task. She takes on mental health struggles and a number of other social issues related to gender, race, sexuality, and class. For this, she attracts fans from many communities and groups who can identify with her critiques of sexism, racism, classism, and stigmas about mental illness. I discovered Bamford in the early aughts and was initially impressed with the way she critiqued gender inequalities, offering incisive perspectives on the female condition while never losing the funny.

I wanna do a makeup commercial. I'd do one. [*Pretends to narrate for a commercial, assuming an upbeat voice*] My old lip color can barely keep up with my busy schedule. Ha ha! In the time it takes to notice the wide discrepancy between my salary and that of my male peers, I'd have to reapply, ha ha [*laughter*]! In the seconds it takes to count the number of women in high political offices, seated on corporate executive boards, and featured in film and television over the age of forty, my lip color would be as invisible as this glass ceiling only inches above my head [*laughter*]. L'Oreal, because I am worth it and because holding myself to an impossible standard of beauty keeps me from starting a riot [*laughter, clapping, and several "yeahs" from the audience*]<sup>33</sup>

This charged humor identifies ways gender disparities play out in politics, business, and entertainment. Moreover, the way preoccupations with beauty

serve to distract us from important issues that perpetuate the subordination of women—like essentialist beliefs about women's biological inferiority that interfere with women's professional success, a gendered income gap, and the lack of complex female protagonists over the age of forty in film and television. Bamford's sweet voice, her delivery, her femininity, and of course her whiteness help to make this kind of excoriating critique palatable. She serves as a Trojan horse, using multiple media to champion society's underdogs. Her comedy grapples with a variety of social ills and inequalities, but it is her discerning critique of social treatment of mental illness that has commanded the most public interest and praise.

## DESTIGMATIZING MENTAL ILLNESS

Mental illness is tough, and especially so when it remains undiagnosed or controlled. Falling prey to bulimia during her teenage years was just one of many coping mechanisms, including performing stand-up comedy, that Bamford used to stave off depression and anxieties—what she now knows was undiagnosed bipolar II disorder. When she was sixteen, she attended an eighteen-week workshop for a Dale Carnegie sales training and management course that gave her another set of strategies for coping with negative thoughts and suicidal ideations.<sup>33</sup> At the age of twenty-one, not long after spreading her wings as a fledgling comic, she sought professional treatment for her eating disorder.<sup>34</sup> This was the first of a series of hospitalizations for mental health issues. It also became the wellspring from which she draws her comedy. Maria Bamford's bipolar II disorder remained undiagnosed until 2010, when her depression and suicidal thoughts were too overwhelming to control. She canceled shows in Chicago and checked herself into the hospital for what would be the first of three hospitalizations over the next year and a half. Psychiatrists suggested and prescribed mood stabilizers, which she was reluctant to take—she felt that doing so would be an admission that she was dealing with something bigger than depression. Bamford explains this resistance in her stand-up comedy and interviews: "I was fine with saying I was depressed, but I was not fine with saying that I was bipolar. For whatever reason—it's very odd because there's tons of mental illness in my family—I had some deep prejudice against it."<sup>35</sup> After accepting the bipolar diagnosis, acceding to her daily dose of Depacon, and realizing that she could still perform comedy, she came to acceptance: "I like how I feel now," she says. "This is how people should feel."<sup>36</sup> And the things that make her happy are not always congruent with societal expectations like competition,

success, and wealth. Early on Bamford's history of mental illness forced her into a position as outsider, and it is from here that she has been able to use charged humor to recast our norms and challenge prevailing assumptions and ideologies in ways both funny and subversive.

Just as Hannah Gadsby has become a spokesperson for gender nonconformity and neurodiversity, Bamford has become a respected voice around matters of mental illness. David Gillota, a humor studies scholar, writes, "most stand-ups also represent the point-of-view of a particular demographic defined by race, gender, class, or sexual orientation."<sup>37</sup> Niche marketing capitalizes on the same categories of identity, helping to promote comedians as spokespersons for various communities; in Bamford's case, she speaks on behalf of the disenfranchised across many communities, and most clearly for those dealing personally with mental illness. She goes off script on stage and in interviews, saying all manner of things countering pervasive narratives circulating about mental illness. Cultural forces, religious practices, and political and social institutions overtly and tacitly condemn suicide—those who do it and those who contemplate it. Although it is no longer criminalized in the United States, there were state laws making suicide a felony well into the 1990s. In *Ask Me about My New God!* Bamford uses her comedy to get these views across, joking: "Over seven thousand US veterans die of suicide every year which is funny [*she starts chuckling*] because you would think they would die over there but they come home, right [*pause and audience laughter*]. [*Fake goofy laughter from Maria*] I thought it must be funny because nobody was taking it that seriously [*clapping and cheering*]."<sup>38</sup> By telling her audience about her own thoughts about suicide and demonstrating that suicide is endemic to US veterans—a respected segment of the population—she exposes the social and cultural forces that discourage admission of depression and silence discussion on the topic of suicide, simultaneously revealing how problematic and dangerous that can be. When asked about her objectives whilst performing comedy targeting mental illness, she says: "For myself, it's all very selfish. I would like to make it okay to ask for help in a major way like in an embarrassing way. . . . [P]eople need to know that maybe there is hope."<sup>39</sup>

As early as 2007, Maria Bamford's stand-up comedy referenced battles with OCD, depression, and suicidal ideation; and after being hospitalized in 2010 and 2011, she went public with having bipolar II disorder. She reports that at the outset she was terrified of talking about her personal experiences, but that the more she did, the easier it became. Being frank about what happened, according to Bamford, "has been a real gift to me too, that the art form allows, that you can talk about anything. . . . Like it doesn't become this

private horrible, horrible thing."<sup>40</sup> Mental health was not a focus early on in Bamford's comedy—or at least it does not show up on her comedy albums until her second album *Maria Bamford: How to WIN!* (2007)—when it does, it is referenced sparingly. For instance, when she sings her famous "Anxiety Song" and for the first time reveals that she is seeing a therapist.

[*Sings in a faltering voice while repeatedly clenching one fist then the other*] If I keep my ice cube trays filled it'll be okay. As long as I clench my fists at odd intervals then the darkness that's within you won't force me to do things I don't want to do that are inappropriately violent [*laughter*]. As long as I keep singing this song I won't turn gay and God can't kill me. It can't get you if you're singing a song, yeah [*laughter and clapping*]:<sup>41</sup>

The antidote to a barrage of repetitive negative thoughts becomes an incongruous assemblage of preventive measures like singing this song. It doesn't require having OCD to identify with Bamford and find this bit humorous. We all exhibit idiosyncratic behaviors that are only sensical given our personal and social histories, experiences, and dispositions. Most other jokes on this album are about her family, living in LA, and bad credit, but she also targets other global issues like child labor.

I wish I could get mad about something that actually mattered [*laughter*]. Go in Target, be like: "You know what, if you can't help me then I need to speak to someone who can because this is a \$3 pair of flip-flops made by a five-year-old Guatemalan girl and I'm not leaving until she gets benefits and an education under the NAFTA Fair Trade Agreement [*clapping and laughter*]. You better go get a manager [*laughter*]." [*Speaking to the audience*] This could take a while [*laughter*].<sup>42</sup>

It is easy to admire Maria Bamford. Never preachy, the humor often comes at her own expense, as she fails time and again to live up to society's standards or to take appropriate action against inequality. Her messages are clear: social standards need to be revised to account for diverse identities and experiences, and we are all complicit in national/global wealth disparities.

Anyone who has dealt with mental health issues will tell you that in order to be functional, healthy, and happy you have to find new ways of approaching life and new methods for drowning out the din of social demands. It's the same mental short-circuiting required for challenging representations

of any “Other,” a never-ending process of unlearning. This means eschewing maxims and ideologies engrained in the very fabric of American identity—beliefs that what we produce or how much we earn is a measure of our worth, that independence is more valuable than interdependence, and that different physical and mental abilities equate to deficiency. Bamford explains this further:

Either people put it into terms of like you can get yourself out of it. It's not a genuine illness, a moral failing. And/or the moral failing as in spirituality like [*assumes a sanctimonious tone*]: You're blocking your chi. You're not being honest with yourself about something [*assumes regular voice*]*—and that the brain isn't an organ like any other part of the body that can malfunction.*<sup>43</sup>

Bamford alludes to these beliefs in her comedy and chides Americans for perpetuating a myth of triumphalism—that the strong will triumph over anything, which makes it hard for anyone with mental illness to feel adequate.<sup>44</sup>

I get mad and stuff 'cause there's still stigma, you know, talking about any kind of mental illness. They don't talk about mental illness the way they do other illnesses. [*Assumes woman's voice*] “Yeah apparently, Steve has cancer. It's like fuck off, we all have cancer, right [*laughter and clapping*]?! Right?! [*Sustained laughter*] I have cancer pretty bad right now but I get it taken care of. I go to chemotherapy. I get back to work” [*laughing and clapping*]. [*Assumes man's voice*] “Yeah I was dating this chick and apparently, you know, she needs contact lenses, you know, all this time. She wears glasses and yeah, I was just like I don't believe in all that Western medicine shit, you know [*laughter*]. If you wanna see, like, other people, it's all about attitude [*laughter*]. You gotta want it! [*laughter*] You gotta want it” [*laughter*]. [*Switches voice to a sad women*] “You would think you'd be able to stop vomiting for me and the kids” [*laughter*].<sup>45</sup>

Bamford makes visible the range of stigmas leveled at folks with mental illness: that you should take care of it (quietly), that using willpower you can overcome all manner of physical and mental ailments, and that caring for others means ignoring your own needs. Her charged comedy compels listeners to examine their own beliefs, biases, and assumptions about mental illness. This is the power wielded by Stephanie Koziski's “cynical insider” who writes: “The comedian can use [their] power as a symbol-maker, interpreter

and articulator of information to transform past and present experiences into a new cultural focus.”<sup>46</sup> In this case, the new cultural focus pinpoints attitudes and behaviors surrounding mental illness and health, drawing admiration from a broad swath of people who have been affected themselves or know someone who has.

In a *New York Times* article, “The Weird, Scary and Ingenious Brain of Maria Bamford,” Sara Corbett writes, “After the show, a crowd lingered late in front of the theater, waiting to speak with Bamford. She is frequently approached by people who view themselves as part of her tribe, who want to talk about their own diagnoses and tell their own tales of being misunderstood.”<sup>47</sup> Mental illness cuts across all categories of difference—race/ethnicity, class, sex, gender presentation, sexuality, etcetera—making Bamford's fans a diverse tribe. She describes the way comedy becomes an invitation to connect with her fans—whom she describes as “super-sweet”<sup>48</sup>—based on shared experiences, saying: “So all of a sudden I have a ginormous community of strangers who say: ‘Oh that happened to me or my friend.’ You know, where it makes it less of a freak show thing.”<sup>49</sup> Bamford reports that she struggled with internalized stigmas and intolerance toward mental illness, and that it wasn't until after going through what she did that she was able to confront her lack of acceptance. What the audience gets from her is a humanized view of working through society's dicta and cultural conditioning around these topics. Her comedy exposes her identity-in-the-making as she processes her own mental illness while simultaneously becoming a beacon for people in various stages of acceptance and understanding. Edward Said argues that public intellectuals are representative of something: a cause, a set of beliefs, a set of political strategies. Moreover, “in so doing [intellectuals] represent themselves to themselves . . . you do what you do according to an idea or representation you have of yourself as doing that thing.”<sup>50</sup> Bamford's role as cultural spokesperson is repeatedly reflected back to her in the many exchanges between her and her fans both on stage and off. Her comedy oscillates between her own experiences and broader critiques of the institutions and beliefs fueling misperceptions about people with mental illness.

If you ever start thinking [*assumes a depressed voice*]: “Oh, but I'm a waste of space and I'm a burden.” [*Resumes normal voice*] Remember that also describes the Grand Canyon [*laughter*]. [*Assumes a dejected voice*] “Oh oh, but I owe people a lot of money and everybody hates me.” [*Resumes normal voice*] Hello Europe [*laughter*]! [*Assumes a guilty voice*] “Oh oh, but I've done some other horrible, unspeakable, unforgivable thing.” [*Resumes normal voice*] GOOGLE IT!

Somebody has done exactly what you have done or worse, has gotten past it and is currently on a book tour. You're never alone [*applause and cheering*]<sup>51</sup>

She turns self-doubt into a natural wonder—something to be admired because it simultaneously inspires awe and evokes fear—and humorously reminds listeners that no situation is experienced in isolation. Comedy albums she recorded during the 2010s reflect Bamford's awareness that she has become a trusted ally and critical voice waged against the silence, the stigma, the condescension, the judgments, and the pity. In her own words, "I went through a nightmare, but it means a lot to me that other people with mental illness tell me the show [*Lady Dynamite*] has helped and made them laugh."<sup>52</sup> She has stepped up to and settled into a role as public intellectual, a position she didn't ask for but was given anyway.

Though delighted by the popular reception of her comic performances and proud to play the role of public intellectual, Bamford isn't angling for more fame. In an interview for *Esquire*, she explains: "Well I like to work, but I feel a bit afraid of fame and stuff. It seems a little frightening. But I also know that people who are very successful work really hard, and I have to admit I'm not the hardest worker. And I think that's okay."<sup>53</sup> She chooses to reject Western notions of success if those efforts compromise her mental well-being. As she sees it, she has already achieved what she wants and is happy with her current level of fame.

Oh my god, I feel like I made it five years ago. Or ten. I've got a joke about how people in LA are always asking [*dons a peppy voice*], "So what are you working on? What's going on with you? What's the next page? What's coming up for you? What's going on? What's on the horizon?" and I say [*resumes normal voice*], "Oh. I'm done. Yeah, I finished early. I'm actually living in a gravy boat filled with gravy." And I do feel like that. I just want to have more potluck dinner parties and walk around with my dogs. Those are my main goals now.<sup>54</sup>

Maria Bamford's stage persona and life serve as a model for approaching issues of mental health in new ways that value individual differences and needs regardless of whether they fly in the face of American beliefs about independence that denigrate anyone who needs help. Others, like Josh Blue, Maysoon Zayid, Danielle Perez, Nicki Payne, and Brett Leake, use their positions as comic performers and motivational speakers to advocate on behalf of those who are differently abled—physically, mentally, or otherwise—but

none have as broad an audience as Maria Bamford does. When COVID-19 gutted the stand-up comedy industry, she exercised ingenuity by creating virtual performances. She spoke openly about her mother's battle with cancer alongside offering free therapy to fans and fellow comics—not necessarily *good* therapy, but she tried. These intimate exchanges illustrated the depth of respect and gratitude the public has for her work. A fellow comic, Erin Foley, describes Bamford as "all parts smart, honest, poignant, imaginative, brilliant and silly. I think she might be from the future."<sup>55</sup> If her comedy portends the future, then we have much to look forward to.<sup>56</sup>

## Notes

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