

# THE LAUGHING STALK

Live Comedy and Its Audiences

Edited by Judy Batalion

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## Acknowledgments

While I had known that a stand-up set could be four minutes, I had not realized that a book about stand-up sets could take the better part of a decade to complete (and it's a good thing I hadn't). Myriad people were involved in making this collection, from brainstorming to polishing stages, and they all deserve acknowledgment. Sadly, most won't get it.

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and understands that life is quite possibly a joke to begin with—and often a joke in extremely poor taste. . . . Whereas women, bless their tender hearts, would prefer that life be fair, and even sweet, rather than the sordid mess it actually is.” Perhaps Christopher Hitchens has done us the favor of qualifying the category—its scope, pervasiveness, and thankfully, its limitations—of male sexist humor. This kind of humor assumes all women are sexually available and the objectification of women, and assures listeners that what women have to say is less important or valuable than men’s contributions (Mulkey). An auspicious genre, which in the wake of the women’s movement should be all but outmoded, is, as Hitchens graciously reminds us, quite present and operational in live comedy performances across the US.

His essay articulates an argument that upon closer inspection quickly unravels, not because he is not correct that women are *perceived* as less funny but because he offers biological and otherwise deterministic arguments to explain this largely cultural and economic phenomenon. In doing so, he reduces audiences’ reception of humor to something natural, innate, predetermined, and therefore moot, which for him is ideal because it leaves him and every other swinging dick with the upper hand, the “equipment” necessary to incite laughter and be the arbiter of precisely what should elicit laughter.

Hitchens’s article sparked a series of public discussion—circulating online and in print—introducing arguments spanning from physiological to sociological to psychological explanations for public estimations of women’s *perceived* inadequacy in the realm of humor production. Overlooked in the current public/print investigation of mixed audiences’ favoring male humor over female humor, however, is a cultural analysis examining the economy of humor or the way humor is shaped by economic forces, the material incentives shaping popular cultural forms in the US. Related, notions of citizenship, particularly those circulating and enacted socially rather than legally, shape identity and its material accessories, e.g., shoes, musicians, jewelry, cars, and yes, even comics. Citizenship is not simply a legal construct but a social one that necessarily includes acknowledgement, something grudgingly given, if at all, to subordinated populations. Who is acknowledged and accepted and who is not is itself a legend of that nation—its assumptions, attitudes, beliefs, and structures of power. I argue that audiences will affirm the perspectives and identify with (read: invest in and support, laugh or otherwise respond favorably) comics whose categories

## 8 Laughter in the Final Instance: The Cultural Economy of Humor (Or why women aren’t perceived to be as funny as men)

Rebecca Krefting

Rebecca Krefting is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Skidmore College in the Department of American Studies. Her research specializes in humor and laughter; gender and sexuality; race/ethnicity studies of visual and popular culture; identity and difference; feminist and disability theater; and pedagogical studies. She is currently working on a book about the ways women use comedy in the service of social justice. Beck performs stand-up comedy sporadically—for money or a cause or a pint.

*I have suggested that citizenship is a status whose definitions are always in process. It is continually being produced out of political, rhetorical, and economic struggle over who will count as “the people” and how social membership will be measured and valued.*

—Lauren Berlant

In *Vanity Fair*, Christopher Hitchens published the controversial piece, “Why Women Aren’t Funny,” giving voice to the largely unspoken but generally shared cultural perception that women are not as funny as men. Humor, on and in his terms is best pursued by men, is understood most clearly by men, and should include only those issues pertaining to men. His insight into the gender divide in humor production is as follows: “Male humor prefers the laugh to be at someone’s expense,

of identity correspond to ideal citizens, i.e., white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied.<sup>1</sup>

This connection of nation and economy to audience preferences for male comics is conspicuously absent from public and academic discourses on the matter. Contemporary humor scholarship in the humanities addressing gender differences largely focuses on performative differences between male and female comic performers, such as content and stylistic differences, which still does nothing to address the fundamental question of why—specifically—female content and styles, along with women comics performing in gender neutral ways, fail to meet with success equal to their male counterparts. What are the rewards—material, social or otherwise—for audience engagement with or identification with comics? How do cultural notions of and attitudes about citizenship inform humor production and shape preferences for the consumption of humor? Drawing from my own experiences as a humor scholar and comic performer, along with feminist theories and studies in performance, culture, and humor, this text uses critical discourse analyses to examine live audiences' lack of enthusiasm for women comic performers as symptomatic of power differentials evinced in the cultural economy and a direct product of modern articulations of national belonging.

#### THE QUESTION . . .

Emily Wilson, journalist and freelance writer for the liberal online news source *AlterNet*, published the piece "Are Men Threatened by Funny Women?" on September 4, 2007, roughly nine months after Hitchens's initial *Vanity Fair* piece. I was interviewed for this article, along with notable Jewish comic Judy Gold, *Bitch* co-founder and editor Andi Zeisler, and well known women's humor scholar Regina Barreca, all of whom affirmed that women struggle to achieve similar popularity and success performing comedy in the US. There are many reasons contributing to this, but Andi Zeisler provided what I believe to be the primary reason for this disparity: "we need to look at *who* is defining what is funny" (emphasis added, qtd. in Wilson). This means we need to pay attention to the prognostications of folks like Christopher Hitchens or other widely read writers defining what is funny and moreover, the *ideal* candidates for humor production (hint: for him that would be men).

Nearly a year later, I received a lengthy email from a cordial engineer living in Maryland who read the *AlterNet* article, located me through the university, and emailed me with questions about why women are not as funny as men. In his email, Ken Winiecki shared that he finds women comics to be irritating, or at least more so than most male comics, and was earnestly "trying to figure out why [he] find[s] a significantly higher proportion of female than male comedians unfunny." The tone was apologetic but firm: many women comics are annoying and he thought my research would lend some insight to the matter. From the *AlterNet* article he became acquainted with one of the leading arguments for why women are more likely to be perceived as not funny, namely that women who are funny are seen as potentially threatening. He found the argument to be less than thorough in addressing his antipathy toward women comics and countered the hypothesis, saying: "Usually when I am threatened I think I feel fear and/or defensiveness, but my negative responses to comedians usually seem to include boredom and/or irritation, which don't seem to me much like a threat response." I considered his queries seriously and placed them in the context of my own work, which, among other objectives, seeks to look beyond the very useful but too oft employed discussion of women's comedy as resistant.<sup>2</sup> It is resistant and we can gain much from these thorough and insightful analyses of what women are resisting, the tenor and quality of that resistance, and how visibility of these resistant practices can lead to social change. However, simply elaborating this argument would never address the real question that was publicly framed by Christopher Hitchens, echoed in Ken Winiecki's email, and now the subject of this investigation: Why are men (perceived to be) more funny than women?

#### THE ANSWER . . .

To address this query that resounds in various ways in public and personal discourses, I defer first to Andi Ziesler and her question of who is defining what is funny, and second to the cultural economy of humor, which shows us there is simply no reward for engaging with or learning to identify with women whose power is already determined as secondary to men in this society. The willful adoption of views, opinions, and behaviors in contradiction to mainstream ideologies requires incentive, a payoff of sorts. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu recog-



nized that material gains and advantages are not easily calculable or reflected in one's bank statement. He dissected the many forms capital takes, generating the terms "cultural capital" and "social capital," as forms of capital gain that yield benefits (e.g., prestige, networks, education, opportunities, experiences, proximity to power, etc.) not quantifiable in dollars or relative currency (66). This thinking positions this discussion right where it should be—in the shifting realm of culture as it plays out in the economy, rather than Hitchens's biologically deterministic explanations.

We cannot deny the overwhelming power of our economy—a hyper-capitalist republic—to dictate popular culture forms including who and what we enjoy (read: consume). Shane Phelan, in *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians, and Dilemmas of Citizenship*, argues that

[s]truggles for inclusion are shaped not only by the needs of the excluded and the fears or needs of the excluders, not only by whether demands can be framed within the rhetoric of the polity, but by whether state actors have an incentive to include the excluded. The incentives of those actors will not only affect whether a group is included, but will importantly shape the terms under which inclusion will occur. (149)

Based on women's proximity to power, in other words their tacit social standing as inferior to and subordinated by men, there is simply no economic incentive for anyone, men and women alike, to learn to identify and "buy in" to women's point of view. Understanding as male perspectives and experiences—which are more recognizable as the standard or norm by which we measure all other experiences—whether or not you are yourself male, bears the promise of incentive, or Bourdieu's social and cultural capital. Women's experiences and identities as marketable commodities will fail every time when placed alongside their male counterparts, whose lives and identities bear far greater promise for cultural and economic viability.

Gender determines incentive because each audience member has to work to identify with and hence share in the humor and laughter. If there is no payoff, no capital gains—culturally or otherwise—to be had, audiences will opt out or experience distancing or negative emotions much like those described by Ken Winiecki, such as apathy, boredom, annoyance, and/or disapproval. Cultural attitudes affect economic choices and buying tickets to see comics or in other words,

purchasing the opportunity to identify in humorous terms with individuals, is no exception.

Successful comedy relies heavily on affirmation of and identification with the comic. A comic leads her audience "in a celebration of a community of shared culture" (Mintz 89), what I am calling a shared national imaginary, similar to Benedict Anderson's definition of nation, which is "an imagined political community," making it an ideal popular cultural form to gauge social constructions of citizenship that include extralegal concepts of inclusion such as social acknowledgment (6). Phelan avers the importance of considering citizenship as central to one's identity and a social and legal construct routinely excluding gays and lesbians. Therefore, the relationship they have with constructions of national identity is one of "sexual strangers," and Phelan emphasizes the imperative of analysis and activism that incorporates sexual strangers into the fold without rendering their differences moot. Central to her argument is the notion that "[c]itizenship is more than theory and constitution, however. The acknowledgement that is its sine qua non requires that one be recognized as being 'like' existing members in some ways" (87). Accordingly, citizenship is more than just a legal construct or a set of rights conferred to an individual, and not all persons believe and feel that, despite status as US citizens, they are treated and given rights corresponding to full citizenship. The appeal of comic performances based on whether audiences identify with the performer reveals not just Phelan's "sexual strangers" but gender strangers and racial/ethnic strangers as well.

The success of live comic entertainment functions as litmus test or cultural index for national belonging. Success stands in for belonging, which is largely predicated on Phelan's idea of positive acknowledgment. Comics must establish some or many points of identification with their audience in order to be successful; laughter signals belonging or affirms that one "gets" where you are coming from.<sup>3</sup> We laugh because we simultaneously appreciate the lawlessness of comedy and because we get it, and through our getting it, we also belong. Humor issuing from the mouths of women and members of minority communities that falls flat with audience members can reflect a culture's lack of desire to acknowledge the experiences of the "other," signaling their tacit exclusion from the national imaginary. Group laughter in response to a joke affirms one's position in the national imaginary by signaling group belonging and agreement; this is Mintz's "community

of shared culture.” The experience of being part of a live audience offers audience members a more participatory and authentic community of shared culture than televised performances, which undergo serious editing to add laugh tracks and remove any unfavorable or lackluster responses from the audience, leaving only a stream of cackling patrons not necessarily laughing at the joke just performed.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the responses of audiences during live shows are the most useful indices of gauging the success of the jokes and the extent to which audience members identify with the comic performer. In sum, audience identification illumines cultural/social outsiders and determines who “sells” and who does not.

The preeminence of cultural discourses and narratives of national belonging emerging out of patriarchy producing white male norms are taken to be the natural order of things. This always already ensures that masculinity, whiteness, and heterosexuality prevail as superior and desirable and determines who belongs and who does not. Loosely translated, this means when it comes to comic performance, socially constructed notions of national belonging or cultural citizenship dictates success with the live audience. Comics occupying privileged social locations in the national imaginary, i.e., white, heterosexual, male, advance a position and bear identity markers audiences recognize as dominant in the shared national imaginary and thus bear the promise of incentive, e.g., if I can understand dominant modes of being I will increase my chances of gaining access to the power and prestige of the dominant class or ideal citizens. Heterosexist, sexist, racist, classist, and ableist ideas of nationhood work to create a cultural economy that supports these beliefs. It comes as no surprise then, that most comics touring the national circuit are heterosexual men.<sup>5</sup> The DC Improv in Washington D.C., where I lived for six years, booked five female comics (Sheryl Underwood, Erin Jackson, Sommore, Aisha Tyler, and Loni Love) in the last three years (August 2008–August 2011) constituting approximately five percent of their bookings (several women returned each year). With some exceptions, I attribute this to the overwhelming majority of folks identifying with a heterosexual male standard because affirming this identity bears the greatest incentive and cultural cache in society.

In *Vince Vaughn's Wild West Comedy Show*, Vince Vaughn hits the road for thirty days of consecutive live shows with four up and coming comics—Sebastian Maniscalco, Bret Ernst, Ahmed Ahmed, and

John Caparulo—most of who have achieved feature status in comedy clubs nationwide. In one city, Sebastian Maniscalco mocks men who wear flip-flops and who order feminine drinks, as characterized by fruit juices and garnishes. The crowd boos him following the flip-flop joke and he commences to cut that particular segment short so as not to lose the audience entirely. Here he is reinforcing what he sees as gender appropriate foot apparel, an opinion not shared by the majority of those in the audience. Maniscalco employs the strategy of using humor to reference concepts of staid masculinity and to ridicule questionable behaviors that undermine “real” men as macho, caring little for their outward appearance and participating only in consumptive practices acceptable for men (i.e., electronics, cars, tools, etc.). In an interview following that show, he shares that he routinely performs this joke because it has proven successful in the past and with audiences in other cities on the same tour. This joke typically meets with success because it draws from stereotypical notions of masculinity circulating in contemporary culture: “[a]nd when a joke bases itself upon a distortion—a ‘stereotype’ perhaps—and gives the lie to the truth so as to win a laugh and stay in favor, we’ve moved away from a comic art and into the world of ‘entertainment’ and ‘success’” (Griffiths 22).

Jokes emerging from and capitalizing on gender stereotypes and differences are used frequently and continue to be successful, particularly if they make women the butt of the joke (Crawford). In my own experience performing stand-up comedy there are two surefire ways to get a laugh: use obscenities and make fun of women. Despite drawing from a wellspring of easily identifiable gender conventions, this audience did not identify with Maniscalco’s parameters of masculinity as set forth in his jokes because it made questionable the masculinity of a number of those in attendance (most likely those men, Maniscalco’s gender truants, wearing flip-flops at the time). In this way, there is a palpable exchange between audience and performer where laughter signals affirmation and negative responses such as booing, hissing, or shaking one’s head signals disagreement, disapproval, or lack of identification with the fundamental premise of the humorous material. Both the blessing and the curse of live comedy is that not all audiences will respond similarly and the comic must be prepared for this.

Put simply, live audiences populating the comedy clubs across the nation will identify with and affirm the perspectives of the comics



whose beliefs and lifestyles reflect mainstream, socially acceptable norms—values shared, condoned and exhibited by many.

Since these dominant ideas and values arise from a mainly white patriarchal epicenter of power (and based on the hiring trends in comedy clubs across the US), we can conclude that the humor emitting from the mouths of men has been and will continue to be highly sought, an economically viable investment, and a safe bet for mixed race and gender audiences who are well trained in what *should* make them laugh. Andy Medhurst, a humor scholar in the UK, writes in *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities*, “nation construction is also involved in the business of identifying internal others, who are seen by those subscribing to an imagination of national community wedded to closed, fixed and impermeable versions of belonging, as threatening groups that are *on* the inside but must on no account become *of* the inside” (28–29). Critical here is the understanding that comic performers situated as outsiders on the inside are going to struggle to establish mutual points of identification with their audiences and in the process be perceived as less competent or funny.

To be clear, I am not arguing that all male comics will be successful and all female comics will be unsuccessful; in fact, there is evidence contrary to this. Many US female comic performers such Wanda Sykes, Kathy Griffin, Margaret Cho, Chelsea Handler, Sarah Silverman, Tina Fey, Ellen DeGeneres, Amy Poehler, and Molly Shannon have found national recognition and acclaim. (Though, when placed in their respective performance venues, i.e., national comedy circuits, talk shows, sitcoms, and variety shows, they are the gender minority.) I *am*, however, suggesting success is largely predicated on audiences’ ability to identify with the jester in question, and there is a greater likelihood of this when the subjects and topics broached are gender neutral or fulfill existing stereotypes about women, e.g., women are high maintenance, nagging, passive, sweet, bitchy, etc. The women humorists garnering a following have done so by either appealing to broadly dispersed niche audiences comprised of like-community members (e.g., Kathy Griffin enjoys a fan base of primarily LGBT persons, women, and popular culture enthusiasts, of which she belongs to the latter two, and while she is not herself a lesbian, she is very supportive of the LGBT community) or because their comedy is non-threatening and while offering a female perspective, seldom focuses on specifically female issues or overtly challenges patriarchy or the status quo (e.g.,

Sarah Silverman endorses a brand of shock comedy that targets everyone with equal vehemence so as to render any real satire or critique moot).<sup>6</sup> The promise of comedy is that these challenges can be made in subtle fashions; therefore, it is important to note that many of these women certainly strive to incorporate critiques of patriarchy, gender norms and stereotypes, capitalism, racism, and heterosexism into their comic performances, albeit in ways that do not risk alienating audiences.<sup>7</sup>

For many of us not belonging to the mainstream, humor functions as a way to create community and culture among the marginalized. For instance, feminist humor and lesbian humor “affirms the values, beliefs and politics of the in-group and forms part of a shared stock of stories and myths that help form, disseminate, and preserve an imagined community” (Bing and Heller 158). Kate Clinton, a Caucasian lesbian comic whose biting political humor has made her a favorite among liberal and lesbian audiences in alternative performance venues, repeatedly stated at a live performance at Ellington’s in Austin, Texas: “You create the world; you invite the people in” (qtd. in Petshing 222). In her case, that world is one comprised of her experiences as female, as a lesbian, as an American, and as an intellectual. The problem she and other subordinated comics face is that mainstream audiences, when confronted with the comedy of the marginalized (by virtue of race, sexuality, gender, ability, class, and age), tend to struggle to find common referents, experiences, and ideologies compatible with their own. If the world created is one based on marginalized subjectivities and experience, you can invite people in, but it does not mean they will understand or value (literally, in economic terms) that world. Audiences tend to enjoy themselves more when they can identify with the comic. Unfortunately, when identification is primed as white, heterosexual, and male oriented, women must struggle all the more to be heard and to legitimate their experiences, let alone have them qualify as being humorous.

One of my favorite bits I perform addresses the lack of synonyms or slang words circulating for discharge, or women’s vaginal fluids. This is in direct contrast with the plethora of synonyms in play for a man’s seminal fluids, i.e., jizz, spooze, Petey’s protein, spunk, etc. I consider this disparity in my stand-up and the way the term itself (associated with the firing of weapons and being released from the hospital) alienates women from their bodies. To improve the situation, I offer the

audience my own alternative term for discharge and invite them to use the term as a substitute in the future:

Instead of using the term discharge, I would like to suggest the term "panty soda." Say it with me now: PANTY SODA! It's fun, it's fizzy, it's *you*. I can't create this kind of change on my own people. I need your help telling others about panty soda. So, tell your family, neighbors, and friends at Bible Study and together we will spread panty soda all over the nation.

Reactions to this joke vary based on my audience. Performing in 2004—for Ladyfest Ohio, a feminist arts festival—for an audience comprised mainly of feminists (male and female alike), this joke brought down the house eliciting cheers, clapping, hooting, and roaring laughter. Performing at the Columbus Funny Bone in Columbus, Ohio the joke elicited nervous titters from a smattering of women and some applause from a group of women (without any men) seated at a table in the back of the club. Like Maniscalco's failed flip-flop joke, I sensed I was losing the audience with this joke and adjusted my set to jokes less particular to the female condition. This joke, by virtue of its subject matter, has nothing to do with men and unless male audience members are willing to imagine otherwise, namely what it might be like to be a woman, to occupy a body pathologized and considered substandard by Western patriarchal medical theories and practices, there is little pleasurable yield from this joke other than the humorous term itself: panty soda. When there is no point of reference listeners can detach, which often leads to negative judgment and alienation, a phenomenon I believe is more likely to occur during the performance of a female comic. Women and men are conditioned to perceive male experience as the norm or template genera, and thus when women take the stage and implicitly request or require your attention and/or identification with female experiences, many find themselves experiencing a kind of distancing, confusion, or simply an ambivalence toward this performance of "otherness" or what Joanne R. Gilbert calls a "performance of marginality" (xviii). This might explain why Christopher Hitchens struggles with such a myopic and sexist view of what constitutes the humorous.

## CONCLUSION

In April 2008, Christopher Hitchens's invectives against lady humorists were countered in the essay "Who Says Women Aren't Funny?" by Alessandra Stanley, paired with a *Vanity Fair* cover of female comedy greats including Sarah Silverman, Tina Fey, and Amy Poehler. The magazine cover invites you to consider this article in contrast to/with Hitchens's essay published a year earlier. Not to be outdone and certainly unable to allow Stanley the final word on the matter, Hitchens responded to Stanley in a follow-up essay, "Why Women Still Don't Get It," posted exclusively to *Vanity Fair*'s website. The second essay advances a tired reiteration of the first, equally rife with contradictions and misogynistic language that either turns women (including his colleague Alessandra Stanley) into vampish sex kittens or castrating bitches. He reduces Stanley's essay to a flirtatious overture, writing: "Oh Alessandra, oh angel, if you wanted a giggle or even a cackle, you only had to call me." And in the tradition of great bombasts, he gloats that Stanley's essay coupled with a layout of sexy, funny ladies is precisely what he intended: "Did I never tell you this was my Plan A, and was my deepest-laid scheme all along? I forgive you for being so slow to see my little joke because—ah well, just because."

The last line casting Stanley as simple-minded or naive is not meant just for her. Every woman becomes the butt of this joke, though we may not even know it, though we may be complicit and laugh along with it. If there truly existed substantial evidence and objective data (whatever that is) indicating that women are biologically and genetically inferior in the realm of humor production, I would not waste my time concerning myself with these matters. But I am loathe to allow anyone to invoke biological determinism for what is and always has been culturally determined. The premise of Hitchens's diatribe is hardly original; he follows in the footsteps of other notables using science and genetics to support their racist, sexist, classist, ableist, and heterosexist agendas. Fortunately, women have the advantage in this day and age to be in a position to combat these kinds of views and it is imperative to do so. For this, we should applaud Stanley and the other pundits, scholars, and comic performers who argue, demonstrate, and perform otherwise.

As I argue throughout, audiences will identify with performers representative of the most ideal or desirable citizens, i.e., those comfortably situated within the dominant culture and bearing the privileges of

not only legal but social inclusion, namely white, male, heterosexual, able bodies. While stand-up comedy may appear an innocuous form of entertainment, successful performers often reflect the status quo. Our beliefs about ideal members of the polity influence whom we support with our time, energy, and money. It is most advantageous to understand and identify with those with the most access to privilege and power. This phenomenon of the cultural economy, at least for the time being, ensures that white, male, heterosexual comics will elicit the laughter necessary for continued advancement in the business of humor production.

There have been many outstanding male comics who are gay, disabled, and/or people of color, e.g., Josh Blue, Richard Pryor, Bill Cosby, Eddie Murphy, Dick Gregory, Eddie Izzard, etc. The history of stand-up comedy is full of exceptions and it is simply inaccurate to say that only white dudes can get a break and achieve success. However, any analysis of the schedules for headliners in the mainstream comedy club circuits reveals white men far outnumber their black, Latino, and Asian male counterparts, and heterosexual male comics are more prevalent than their gay male counterparts. In main, though, what is most important to recognize is that despite occupying a marginalized subject position like being a differently-abled male, a Black male, etc., being male trumps the subordinated subject position, still making them more ideal candidates for identification and yielding greater social/cultural capital than women. *Being white, able-bodied, and/or straight is less predictive of success than is being male.*

Women, try as they might, will continue to flounder when placed next to their male counterparts, as will queer comics alongside heterosexual comics, disabled comics alongside able-bodied comics, and comics of color alongside Caucasian comics. There will be exceptions to this rule, but for the most part those exceptions will be marginalized comics who opt not to discuss or bring their marginality to the forefront—such as Ellen Degeneres, who has gained national adoration for her quirky, girl-next-door brand of comedy. These exceptions will be the fodder for the naysayers (like Hitchens) as they argue either that anyone can succeed in stand-up if they work hard enough or that unequal success between men and women is merely a product of genetic encoding or biology. Both arguments are problematic, the former invoking the myth of meritocracy and placing the blame on the individual for lack of success and the latter making moot any possibility

for equity among male and female comic performers. Both are equally strategic and safe arguments to make because neither holds the people or the audiences responsible for their lack of desire or willingness to identify with and collude with women's comic perspectives, which in turn dictates their success in the business of stand-up performance.

In sum, Christopher Hitchens presents an argument for which there is no debate, at least on his terms. In the face of such myopia, Alessandra Stanley can do little other than point to the history of women's disenfranchisement from the industry of humor production and pay homage to the small but growing army of women jokesters active in the world of comedy today. Replacing biological determinisms, which have the unfortunate history of reflecting whichever cultural attitudes are in mode, with cultural determinisms places this debate back into the actual realm responsible for women's *perceived* ineptitude in comic performance compared to men. It also opens the door for change, the possibility that the cultural economy will shift over time, making women's ideas and perspectives profitable investments for audiences, and in turn profitable investments for booking agents and comedy club owners. While I cannot say that it pleases me, I can say with a certain amount of confidence that the extent to which capital—material, social, and cultural—dictates success and opportunity, and the way it determines laughter in the final instance, explains the question of why men are (perceived to be) funnier than women.

## NOTES

1. My argument will attend more exclusively to parsing out the theory and evidence supporting public preferences for male comics over female comics; however, I include these other categories of difference like heterosexual, able-bodied, and white to reference and recognize the multiple dimensions of power and privilege operating in society and to paint a complete portrait of other privileged categories of identity in the US.

2. Scholars have published extensively on the subject of women's resistance vis-à-vis humor. Some of those I find most useful to understanding the functions and goals of women's comic performance are: Nancy A. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); Susan Horowitz, *Queens of Comedy. Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller, Carol Burnett, Joan Rivers, and the New Generation of Funny Women* (Amsterdam: Gordon & Breach Publishers, 1997); DoVeanna S. Fulton, "Comic Views and Metaphysical Dilemmas: Shattering Cultural Images through Self-Definition and Representation by Black Comediennes,"



*Journal of American Folklore* 117.463: 81–96; Allison Fraiberg, “Between the Laughter: Bridging Feminist Studies through Women’s Stand-Up Comedy,” *Studies in Humor and Gender*, Vol. 1, Ed. Gail Finney (New York: Gordon & Breach Science Publishers, 1994), 315–334; Fraiberg “Beyond Indiscipline: Agency, Comedy, and Contemporary American Women’s Writing and Performance,” unpublished dissertation, University of Washington, 1993; Suzanne Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance*, Ed. Jerome Nadelhaft (New York and London: Routledge, 2004); Philip Auslander, “Brought to you by Fem-Rage: Stand-up Comedy and the Politics of Gender,” *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism on Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 108–126; Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

3. For further explication of laughter signaling belonging and affirmation see Mintz; Allison Fraiberg “Between the Laughter: Bridging Feminist Studies through Women’s Stand-Up Comedy,” *Studies in Humor and Gender*, Vol. 1, Ed. Gail Finney (New York: Gordon & Breach Science Publishers, 1994), 315–334.

4. For further discussion about the editing of televised comedy to create a simulated comedic effect not necessarily indicative of the experience of the live audience, see Philip Auslander, “Comedy About the Failure of Comedy: Stand-up Comedy and Postmodernism,” *Critical Theory and Performance*, Ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press: 1992), 196–207 and Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television 1750–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

5. I intentionally do not include White as part of the standard, not because Black men do not experience racism and hence occupy marginalized social strata, but because Black men in particular have achieved an inordinate amount of success in stand-up comedy compared with their female and queer counterparts.

6. Russell Peterson, in *Strange Bedfellows: How Late-Night Comedy Turns Democracy into a Joke*, discusses shock comedy in the chapter, “For Whom the Bell Dings,” and makes this argument about Sarah Silverman and the creators of *South Park*, Trey Parker and Matt Stone: “Yet most of the ‘edgy’ comedy sold and celebrated as such is as nihilistically ‘neutral’ in its way as the equal-opportunity offender political comedy of the late-night mainstream.” Russell Peterson, *Strange Bedfellows: How Late-Night Comedy Turns Democracy into a Joke* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 149.

7. Margaret Cho, like Kathy Griffin, has achieved and maintained a certain status as female comic icon because she appeals to specific niche audiences like LGBT persons, feminists, liberals/leftists, and intellectuals. She pushes the envelope in ways most televised female comics listed above do not

and cannot, simply because her career unfolds onstage and not in front of the camera (unless taping a live show for a new video). In fact, she overtly fights gender stereotypes and has used her comedy to expose Hollywood’s preoccupation with beauty standards and white norms. She can do so because of her position *beyond* the nightclub circuit; however, the material that made her famous and got her to this point in her career was not her more controversial humor, employed now with more gusto and frequency, but the ethnic humor she employed as a Korean-American young woman impersonating her first-generation Korean immigrant mother.

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