Getting serious with comedy: power, stand-up comedy, and American public life

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GETTING SERIOUS WITH COMEDY:
POWER, STAND-UP COMEDY, AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

by

Andrew Michael Cutrone
A Thesis
Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York
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Abstract

This master’s thesis theorizes the political and cultural significance of stand-up comedy as an institution in the contemporary US public sphere, against the dominant perception that it is an enterprise severed from social consequence. Via a critical application of Ferguson’s theorization of power in *The Reorder of Things* (2012), in addition to a reading of stand-up comedy routines and related public discourse that utilizes feminist and queer of color theory, I show how subjective terrains of race, gender, and sexuality produce the discursive and political materials which organize stand-up discourse and performance in moments of “racial comedy,” “gender comedy,” and “sexual comedy.” I argue that this landscape of cultural production emerges from, but also partially constitutes, a general conflict (as well as many specific ones) between dominant and critical formations of race, gender, and sexuality. Further, I show that the historical and political viscosity between hegemonic and critical projects has deep implications for contemporary modalities of perspective-taking in, enjoyment of, and affect toward stand-up comedy. To support this argument, I examine dominant articulations of the social formations of racism and heteronormativity and posit their salience in contemporary iterations of stand-up comedy; and I theorize how a critique of those intersecting political domains—stand-up, racism, and heteronormativity—suggests a new space for and mode of critique and critical pedagogy. I conclude by discussing the emotional politics of doing critical scholarship as a hegemonic figure in the milieu of US cultural politics.
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Getting Serious With Comedy: 
Power, Stand-Up Comedy, and American Public Life

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Spring 2019
Preface (with many acknowledgements)

The Writing is on the Wall

The essay you are about to read is a result of innumerable relationships, encounters, and moments. It was compiled in between courses, conversations, and, dare I say, gallons of coffee. And, though paradoxical at best, the solitude that underwrites my writing process is a constant reminder of what made this project possible: being social. From the materials that informed my analyses, to the conversations and debates and implorations with friends and colleagues to “see what I’m trying to get at,” it was all about being social. Laughter is an irreducibly social act; that is, laughter is something that can only be achieved in the presence of others. In this sense, it is a performance.

This project began in my mentor Lisa Arrastia’s temporary, bland, basement office. While the original home of her department was under construction, Lisa’s new basement office offered little artistic inspiration by itself. It had a metal desk, a professorial lamp that hung over it, a whiteboard, and not much else. We had to get creative a lot of the time to plan our lessons for first-year students. The walls of Lisa’s office were white, which more often than not meant we forgot the board existed—until we colored it with red, and pink, and blue dry-erase markers. When I took my marker to it—excited, but unsure exactly of what I was producing, like my hand had said, “thank you, next” and pushed me out of the way—I drew a circle that would come to represent “the arena of stand-up comedy.” My writing—before I knew exactly what was going on—was, it looked like, all over the walls.

Lisa wouldn’t forgive me for equating the cultural studies keyword text to “writing,” literally meaning, “that which is written down,” as in what I had written all over those walls. We know that that equivalence is unfair, because text seems to be an infinitely complex category that
understands itself to be anything to be looked at, queried over, understood, felt. But the walls of that room, like Kendrick Lamar’s “These Walls” from *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015), to the walls of stand-up clubs see and feel things; they are those key repositories who beg to speak as we arrogantly say to ourselves: “If these walls could talk…”

The walls of stand-up, from an acoustics perspective, yes, are meant to suppress our laughter and contain it, so it doesn’t disturb the patrons right outside of it. The walls of stand-up, which also suggest something altogether political and cultural, mean a lot to my own theorizations of radical space, to culture, and to power. And, “to be clear and nowhere twisted,” as my friend and *dope* scholar of black and queer feminism Marquis Bey has said, I do not want laughter to be contained, especially if the container in which it is contained is working with capital; and relying on our common access to some form of inhumanity; and impeding laughter’s capacity to “renew our habits of assembly,” as indigenous studies scholar Manolo Callahan would say (Callahan 2012).¹

That’s what this essay is really about: What I’ve been thinking about, what I’ve been trying to say, regards comedy’s social and political capacity to produce the possibilities of togetherness. I’ve been thinking about the sociology of comedy’s access to “our common humanity” (a phrase on which my mentor Lisa rests her professional, personal, and scholarly life), but also on the intricate ways that that access is short-circuited and replaced with other (often delimiting) imaginations. My goal in this essay is to estimate exactly why this “short-circuiting” exists in historical and sociological terms. It also urges us to re-place stand-up comedy at the doorstep of The Undercommons, a space of radical acceptance, a project dedicated—within the project of black studies—to “walking more lightly on the earth,” as my far-away teacher, Fred Moten, would constantly offer up as *crucial* (UofTDaniels 2017).
To be sure, in between my explorations with the sociological considerations of stand-up are some real conversations with my friends. They’d tolerate me every time I said, “Let me run something by you,” or even as I detailed my own ever-tentative theoretical scaffolding. Chief among them are my dear friends Esteban Ceballos and Ian Callahan. My professors, especially Joanna Dreby and Karyn Loscosso, provided indispensable feedback on prior iterations of this thesis. Thank you to you all.

My partner, Katie Gowing, listened to me read aloud all drafts, and offered honest, always-generative feedback. There were many days and nights when I would have to pause my life and go to my pen. I’d write—freestyle—for hours sometimes. I felt like a hip-hop purist who works only with pen and paper, like Eminem or Kendrick or something. I would describe to her those times when ideas hit me—when taking a shower, sleeping, running, or making dinner; when I was altogether, as far as I was concerned, not supposed to be thinking about my writing. But I couldn’t help it. It was always on. And it was in Katie’s presence that the ideas for this paper really took form.

For the better part of two years, I’ve encountered scores of people who’ve learned of my budding scholarly interests. They might ask what my research is about, and I sometimes begrudgingly reply, “stand-up comedy,” if we are just in passing. However, if I spend, like, five minutes with someone, they get the gamut. They hear it all—and some halt to problematize what I say, while some hurl, “That’s so cool!” This full spectrum of responses—from total fondness to blowing critique—has both energized and forced me to think more deeply about my ideas.² I must thank the people who’ve challenged me to make this project more critical and invigorated me to continue.
My committee members on this project—Kate Averett, Lisa Arrastia, and Ron Jacobs—have given feedback, stolen hours away from their families and from their own important work to answer my questions and teach at every step of the way. Kate Averett met with me biweekly in the fall 2018 semester to hear my ideas and explore them alongside me. Kate also made sure that I was familiar with both the history of feminist ideas, with the contemporary media environment, and with both of their connections to stand-up. I am grateful to all of them.

And ultimately, I thank my parents, Lucy Cutrone and Frank Cutrone, for their continued encouragement, for making sure I’m “all good” and for having the sensibilities to notice when I wasn’t. The story of their lives was not written on the wall, but along the way, they bought pens, pencils, and markers. They got through; they wrote. They always put my sister, Cristina, and my brother, Robert, and me first. Always. They sustained the walls around which we slept; they bought me a bookshelf.

I have a general tendency to admire bookshelves, especially messy ones—ones that have no order, no rhyme or reason. On the floor of the building which houses my sociology department, the offices have a whole sidewall lined with bookshelves. With each professor whose office I entered, I stole brief moments in which I gazed at, or inquired specifically about, the books on their wall. When I walked in to Kate’s office for the first time, I took more than a glance, as we adventured down the rows of books together, as she told me brief stories about what each book meant to her, when she bought them, where she was when reading them. Though I haven’t asked her about this directly, I got the sense that she did not mind this exercise. As that moment wrapped up, she pulled two books out and handed them to me. Those books, *Demonic Grounds* by Katherine McKittrick and *Space Invaders* by Nirmal Puwar, in the very fact that
Kate was handing them to me, suggested a crucial reorientation that, in part, laid the groundwork of the essay you’re about to read.

The unmappable arena of what I call “the institution” or the “social formation” of stand-up comedy certainly begins in that space enclosed by walls, but ultimately it expands beyond it and negotiates, in all places, power’s interest to regulate and manage it. Laughter is not necessarily interested in standing up. Instead, power invests in and stands laughter up. We are only familiar with the form of stand-up comedy after it has been “stood up,” but I take it as a task here to imagine stand-up differently and figure out the technologies of our commonplace format. It is when laughter becomes a horizontal mode for sharing and communicating more deeply our joys, concerns, fears, and interests that it will engage a radical recalibration. That has not yet happened; and it won’t, as long as someone is standing-up and the rest of us are sitting ducks.

Andrew Cutrone
Albany, NY
2019
Main

Standing-up (And Seeing) Comedy’s Techniques of Power

The Social Formation of Stand-up Comedy; Social Formations of Race, Gender, and Sexuality

The sociologist Arlie Russell Hoschchild defined the term “magnified moments,” which represent the orienting vision of this project. Magnified moments are “episodes of heightened importance, either epiphanies, moments of intense glee or unusual insight, or moments in which things go intensely but meaningfully wrong. In either case, the moment stands out; it is metaphorically rich, unusually elaborate and often echoes throughout” (Hoschchild 1999).

Though magnified moments may seem “elaborate,” they transpire within and because of the cauldron of the social, cultural, and political conditions that preceded and bespeak them. Yet, sometimes, we are still surprised by them. They are the jokes we cannot seem to forget; the events by which we’re absolutely shocked. They’re moments of redemption, excitement, grief, or shame. They stick to our individual and collective memories. In order to be magnified, though, they must work as microcosmic events within a larger field of action. The jokes I present in this essay are magnified moments for me, and the analysis I do of them highlights the ways they are part of a larger political and cultural project. You might not like these jokes, or they might make you deeply uncomfortable, as they did for me in many cases. We can connect through discomfort in the same way that we can connect through laughter, and that should tell you (and me) a whole lot.

One such magnified moment occurred for me in 2017, when Louis C.K., among the most famous mainstream comedians, was accused of, and subsequently admitted to, sexual misconduct, in which he masturbated in front of two women without their consent. The larger
field in which this moment took place is the #MeToo movement, whose goal is to call attention to and eliminate sexual assault and gendered violence in general, and sexualized abuses of power in the workplace in particular, through systemic recognition of and change to a culture of toxic masculinity. The following two statements simultaneously exist, illustrating a contradiction. The first is from C.K. (2013), and took place during a comedy routine, and the second is from Rebecca Corry (Ryzik, Buckley, and Kantor 2017), one of the women in front of whom C.K. masturbated:

"A woman saying yes to a date with a man is literally insane and ill-advised, and the whole species’ existence counts on them doing it. I don’t know how they…how do women still go out with guys, when you consider the fact that there is no greater threat to women than men? We’re the number one threat to women. Globally and historically, we’re the number one cause of injury and mayhem to women. We’re the worst thing that ever happens to them. That’s true! You know what [men’s] number one threat is? Heart disease.”

—Louis C.K.

“He asked if he could go to my dressing room, so he could masturbate in front of me… I said ‘no.’ His face got red, and he told me he had issues.”

—Rebecca Corry

That C.K.’s polemic on gendered violence (an inward reflexivity of sorts) was extracted from one of his comedy routines frustrates the unique effectiveness of the argument that says comedians are “just joking” as a way to sidestep culpability for their otherwise morally despondent discourse (Wilson 2008; Tropp 2017); Freud (1928), too, registered a similar analysis. But more broadly, when folks say that they are “just joking,” it is under the rubric of personal defense, as if to say they are not a “bad” person, as their language might otherwise suggest. As a matter of fact, this sequence is common (see, e.g., Brawley 2015; Steed 2004). In
some cases, the stings it produces are minor. In others, there are significant social and political implications.

But what happens when we are presented with a kind of “negative” example of that sequence of events, like C.K.’s, in which, for example, a person says something oriented toward social justice, but then acts in ways that contradict this message entirely? In this case, the “just joking” discourse does not work because the “joke” from which C.K. is trying to recover is altogether *more moral* than the “extra-comedic” event. That C.K. wasn’t roundly condemned for his actions, and instead advocated for by conservative commentators who say that he “served his time” (Shapiro 2019; Burr 2018)—when in fact he served no time—suggests that C.K.’s comedic material, or his status as a famous comedian, or as a famous white man (or all of it) produced a discontinuity between his behaviors and what would constitute an appropriate punishment. As a matter of fact, his cultural and social privilege as a famous white man cushioned the effects of his actions, which might have otherwise ended his career. If this magnified moment teaches us anything, it is that the stakes are far too high to deploy “it’s just a joke” as a defense against consequences, whether social or legal.

This magnified moment prompts us to ask a series of important questions at the intersection of stand-up comedy and social inequality: How did this moment alter how we hear C.K.’s comedy? What did this set of events teach us about stand-up comedy, if anything at all? Conversely, in the context of the #MeToo movement, what new avenues can we open to think about the relationship between comedy, social (in)justice, and broader political projects of racism and heterosexism in the United States? C.K.’s “misconduct” (what does this word really mean?) speaks to the prevalence of gendered and sexual violence, and more specifically to the ways that such violence is also racialized and classed. I theorize that what’s at work here is a socially-
constructed, but deeply-seated epistemological contradiction in C.K.’s thoughts and actions—
divided between his “good” thoughts and violent, gendered actions, and which are altogether
layered in his whiteness. However, this specific case alone only begins to scratch the surface of
the question of stand-up comedy’s capacities to contribute to a broader conversation of the
cultural politics around the social formations of race, gender, and sexuality. That is the task of
this essay.

Why Stand-up? Why Think Beyond It?

As an extension of previous accounts that consider various comedians, histories, and
styles of comedy, this master’s thesis queries the relationship between the institution of stand-up
comedy—what I will also refer to as the “social formation of stand-up comedy”—and the
political-intellectual projects of intersectionality, women of color feminism, and queer theory
which have best accounted for the power of racialized, gendered, and sexualized domains of
social life. In part an attempt to explain what happened with Louis C.K., this essay interrogates
how systems of knowledge/power that invest in projects of race, gender, and sexuality impact
our understanding (and, importantly, our enjoyment) of stand-up comedy as well as the larger
cultural fields and political questions that orbit it.

More pointedly, this project thinks about the social and political significance of stand-up
comedy, particularly when those magnified moments during comedy routines—so-called
“jokes”—ask us to engage, as individuals and audiences, with the complex systems of race,
gender, and sexuality. As such, the data under my magnifying glass fall under the rubric of
“racial comedy,” “gender comedy,” or “sexual comedy.”

Instead of thinking about race, gender, or sexuality as individual domains absent from the
meanings and power of the other categories of difference, I think about these jokes within an
intersectional framework, arguing that jokes are “successful” because race, gender, and sexuality are mutually-informing, co-constitutive systems of power/knowledge (Crenshaw 1989). In other words, contrary to dominant conceptions of race, gender, and sexuality as separate domains of social and political life, “racial,” “gendered,” and “sexual” jokes achieve intelligibility because their social formations are always intersecting and working within and between one another; that is, race, gender, and sexuality do not embody discrete systems of meaning or power. Instead, they work together—intersecting, producing different social and epistemological realities within what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as a matrix of domination (Collins 1990). This intersection of inequalities contributes to the vast terrain of subjectivities that situate our experiences in (and outside of) stand-up comedy.

At the same time as it attempts an intersectional analysis, this project locates the origins of the systems of power/knowledge active in stand-up comedy beyond the walls of stand-up venues. Constructed through a kind of critical-institutional and post-structural scaffolding, I show that there are multiple convergent as well as divergent meanings and genealogies of race, gender, sexuality that inform and influence the fundamental elements of stand-up comedy. Though this project grounds its primary analysis within comedy’s physical space, it also conceptually and theoretically extends beyond it to understand the effects of stand-up’s durability in the public sphere and its relationship to other modes of cultural production. Centrally, I am interested in the complex ways subjective terrains of race, gender, and sexuality structure our perception of, and affect toward, stand-up. Conversely, I am interested in how stand-up participates in the multi-sited enterprise of US cultural “production and exchange” (Hall 2001, p. 1), which retains the general capacity to transform how we subjectively understand race, gender, and sexuality as political, embodied, historical, and epistemological formations.
Sometimes, this “general capacity” can function as a methodology to disrupt hegemonic social arrangements—but more on this in a moment.

The main argument of this essay is that this “structuring” of the subjective terrains of race, gender, and sexuality in stand-up emerges from, but also constitutes, a general set of antagonisms between hegemonic and critical formations of race, gender, and sexuality. I have chosen the particular phraseology of the “structuring” of subjective terrains, instead of the “structure” of subjective terrains, to suggest that the conflict between dominant and critical formations is active and ongoing, and not just a formulation based on a prior, terminated set of social and political engagements and arrangements.

I theorize this phenomenon as a process rather than an entity because political and cultural arrangement, which is to say the general form of the social order, relies upon the naturalization of the material and discursive practices of dominant social groups, which get practiced in US social life amidst various forms of critical social thought and action contesting and reconstituting it at all times. On the other side of this argument is the doubt that is cast by subjects who are intersectionally-privileged; that is, those who are privileged in race, class, gender, and sexual domains have a far more difficult time recognizing the viscosity of these enduring negotiations. Perhaps more insidious is the shy complicity of the hegemonic subject to name this project. Similar to Ferguson’s definition of power, which is “derived from the ways in which hegemonic investments in minority difference and culture are distributed across institutional and discursive terrains” (Ferguson 2012, p. 7), this essay defines power as the project (or process) that facilitates the unequal distribution and management of material, discursive, and subjective structures within and between hegemonic and critical formations of race, gender, and sexuality. I apply this definition to more clearly critique the ways power creates
the itineraries for both discursive and spatial arrangements in the social formation of stand-up comedy.

To be sure, though, this theorization recognizes the fundamental ways that race, gender, and sexuality, as intersecting landscapes to which material, discursive, and subjective structures are assigned, are required within the logic of power’s own exercise. The structures here being magnified are racism, patriarchal heteronormativity, and hegemonic masculinity. The seminal black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins defines racism as “a system of unequal power and privilege where humans are divided into groups or ‘races’ with social rewards unevenly distributed to groups based on their racial classification. Variations of racism include institutionalized racism, scientific racism, and everyday racism” (Collins 1990, p. 300). In some similar way, Ta-Nehisi Coates argues that “race is the child of racism, not the father” (2015, p. 7). Patriarchal heteronormativity describes the “gendered and sexual ideals of normative heterosexuality” (Ferguson 2004, p. 10), out of which masculinity ferments as the dominant (that is, the universal) expression of gender (Connell 1993).

The critical articulations of race, gender, and sexuality have emerged from knowledge produced through scholarly interventions in black studies, feminist theory, and queer of color theory, as well as from convivial and vernacular forms of knowledge produced in opposition to power’s various maneuvers and techniques. As a theoretical orientation, it’s this kind of social and intellectual conflict within the field of power/knowledge that constitutes the meaning of “the joke” and determines how stand-up’s discursive practices get arranged.

Why With Comedy?

On the excellent but under-viewed YouTube series Left of Black: Black studies for the digital soul, hosted by scholar of black popular culture Mark Anthony Neal, the black feminist scholar
Alexis Pauline Gumbs provokes a critical question about the politics of community. As a student of the literary theorist Hortense Spillers, Gumbs asks: “What does it mean to be with Hortense Spillers? How is that different from writing about Hortense Spillers?... How can we have a writing with? That was the experiment… How can we be with this work in a way that honors [it]” (Left of Black 2017, my emphasis)? In the way that Gumbs theorizes her engagement with Hortense Spillers’ scholarship as a process of empathetic engagement, she argues for a holistic approach to critique that privileges the ethic of community as its primary ontology. In a similar way, I approach my theorization of stand-up—and my engagement with it—as an exercise in radical empathy, a practice that aims to speak to the historical, political, and social-emotional activities that produce and sustain it. Being with comedy is the beginning of that effort.

I had originally titled this project would be “Getting Serious On Comedy…” as if to be solely critical of comedy for all its shortcomings and offenses. As I was writing, however, I began to feel that this formulation sounded both polemical and paternalistic. So, after reflecting on Gumbs’ challenge to practice thinking with a subject, I changed the title to “Getting Serious With Comedy…” Some might dismiss this change as minor; I want to suggest otherwise. What would have been produced under the title of “Getting Serious On Comedy” is an analysis absent from the standpoint of “empathy as an epistemology” (Callahan 2019). As a student of culture and power, I am requisitely interested in epistemology, which is, in the Foucauldian sense, the relationship between power and knowledge and how that relationship produces certain social arrangements and empirical sensibilities (Foucault 1980). Central to this relationship between power and knowledge is language, the ways we deploy language, and language’s multiple systems of meaning, which are diffused across the planes and axes of difference through the conduits of race, gender, sexuality, class, nation, and so on and so forth.
Unlike “on” and “about,” “with” connotes a radical empathy that is attuned to the nuanced maneuvers of power within systems of language and performance. The vernacular and linguistic modes of community-building encapsulated by the preposition “with,” instead of “on” or “about,” might seem like “naïve knowledge… beneath the level of cognition or scientificity” (Foucault 1980, p. 82). Yet, within (and outside of) this theorization of power in stand-up, being “with” stand-up represents a totalized effort against extrication, against the very idea that stand-up comedy can ever be an individual affair. So, I am (and we should be) with stand-up, not solely about it.

Theorizing the Intersections of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Aesthetic Publics and Comedy’s Presentation

Of what practical use is it step back and away from comedy’s empirical trove to think in a more concerted way about some looming theoretical ideas? Indeed, it might be said that a more useful analysis of comedy might be in a strict empirical approach, say, comparing the comedy and politics of this or that comedian. Taking more than just one step back from this empiricist suggestion, then, I aim to reveal how the extra-comedic relationships between hegemonic and critical projects produce stand-up comedy’s discursive, physical, and performative materials—what would constitute the empirical data. This specific intervention can allow scholars and consumers of comedy to 1) to think with stand-up comedy, instead of just thinking “about” it; and, conversely, 2) to think more critically about how, contrary to popular belief, stand-up is not a straight-forwardly “silly” enterprise, but instead is a social-intellectual one in which its practitioners and audiences are engaged in thinking through and within their specters of power/knowledge.

I do have the immediate concern that what I’ve presented as a theory of stand-up comedy might not accurately describe the field of action the theory attempts to explain. To account for
this concern, to which scholars of power and culture are well-attuned, I employ Jacobs’s (2012) concept of the *aesthetic public sphere*. Claiming that “aesthetic publics provide a space for commentary about important matters of common concern,” Jacobs theorizes, after Habermas, that entertainment media have deep semiotic and cultural connections to public discourses and political structure (p. 2). Jacobs writes: “Actors in civil society do not simply make arguments in the public sphere and then wait to see whether their arguments are the most rational or the most convincing. If they have any civic skills at all, they will have developed their arguments by relying on existing cultural styles, traditional narrative forms, and well-known character types to express and authorize their arguments” (2012, p. 2). Thinking about the literary character of public discourses, Jacobs illustrates how discursive imaginaries are not neutral, nor are they static. Discourses instead circulate across institutional and subjective terrains within the public sphere, politicized at every turn and every level.

Perhaps most crucially, Jacobs argues that “participation in the public sphere is premised upon an acceptance of a variety of aesthetic and performative structures. These include rational argument and the presentation of evidence, as traditional models of media and the public sphere would expect. But they also include more playful forms of argument” (2012, p. 2), like, for example, stand-up comedy’s unique performative capacities to illicit laughter as a tool of permission and relief (e.g., in a tense room, when someone makes a joke for the sake of breaking the tension of a prior discursive sequence). I argue, then, that instead of thinking about dominant and critical social thought as the subjects of rational deliberation or the subjects of comedic discourse, these projects *in and of themselves* constitute political conflicts and reflect performative styles, and thus, produce the grammars and subjectivities with which we consume comedy.
Take as an example of this theorization Bill Burr’s routine from “Let it Go” (2010) called “What Are You, A Fag?” in which comic Bill Burr engages with “the fag” as an object purported to have comedic value, and simultaneously, though from the hegemonic position, problematically deploys what sociologist and queer theorist C. J. Pascoe calls the “fag discourse” (2007):

I swear, it took me four trips to the supermarket to finally be able to buy this goddamn pumpkin, [because] every time I would walk in there to get it, I would be thinking all of these happy thoughts: ‘this is a great thing. I’m embracing the holidays. It’s going to bring me and my girlfriend together. It’s a very loving thing to do.’ And then I reach out and grab it and all I hear in the back of my head is: ‘What are you, a fag?’ and immediately I had to turn around and walk out.

Alright, let me explain that joke to functional people in the crowd… This is how it works with guys—anytime you do anything remotely sensitive, heartwarming, anything that’s going to make you more of a loving, caring individual, immediately all of your guy friends suggest that maybe, just maybe, you wanna suck a dick!

Pascoe (2007) argues that “the fag” has little to do with actual homosexual sexual activity, but rather with how power invests in heteronormativity—“those localized practices and those centralized institutions which legitimize and privilege heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and ‘natural’ within society” (Cohen 1997, p. 440)—and thus produces “the fag” as masculinity's object to be policed. Refuting a biologic presumption of gender which otherwise underwrites hegemonic discourses, Pascoe states,

Masculinity is not a homogenous category that any boy possesses by virtue of being male. Rather, masculinity… is a configuration of practices and discourses that different youths (boys and girls) may embody in different ways and to different degrees. Masculinity, in this sense, is associated with, but not reduced or solely equivalent to, the male body. [Achieving] a masculine identity entails the repeated repudiation of the
specter of failed masculinity. Boys lay claim to masculine identities by lobbing
homophobic epithets at one another. They also assert masculine selves by engaging in
heterosexist discussions of girls’ bodies and their own sexual experiences (2007, p. 5).

As a discursive product of masculine homophobia, “the fag” disciplines boy’s transgressions of
masculinity’s normative social-emotional boundaries, particularly manifested in the development
of close emotional relationships and healthy emotional output. That Bill Burr pauses for audience
laughter after screaming “What are you, a fag?” suggests the power of this phobic cultural
circulation, which is transmitted through the conduits of normativity in the space of stand-up.
The sexualized cultural object within that site—“the fag”—halted Burr’s attempts to defy the
pressures of his “guy friends” to become closer with this girlfriend. But after Burr hurls “What
are you, a fag?” (and pauses for laughter), he proceeds to explain “that joke” to “functioning
people,” suggesting that the social and emotional demands of masculinity are irrational, despite
dominant understandings of gendered power insisting that men are pathologically rational and
logical thinkers whereas women are the emotional and irrational ones. This routine also provokes
similar questions to the kinds that scholars of gender and masculinity ask: Why are men not
allowed to express their emotions in a healthy way—without judgment and isolation—and why
is that emotional avoidance a direct cause of gender violence toward women?

At the same time that this routine engages explicitly with sexuality and gender structures,
it is also implicitly raced, but in ways we might not immediately recognize. Jane Ward notes that
“the privilege of whiteness [is] to both normalize and exceptionalize one’s behavior” (2015, p.
34). In this vein, I do not simply suggest that we must recognize Burr’s skin color or chastise him
for being white. Instead, we should recognize that his particular elaboration of homophobia
emerges from within and alongside specific racial and national formations. To support this
argument, for instance, Ward argues that “whiteness intersects with masculinity and sexuality,
shaping the relationship between men’s…sex and their sense of ‘self’” (2015, p. 26). In addition, Ward argues that “all heterosexual practices—indeed, all sexual practices—are embedded within gendered and racialized circuits of meaning” (p. 5). With respect to the ways Burr engages with his own positional knowledge of race, gender, and sexuality, he extends the endowment of his whiteness and his maleness onto the stage, then enact s a dual performativity: his performance as 1) American, straight, and white, and 2) his spatially-specific role as comedian, who is already encouraged to “push the envelope.”

The discursive and performative materials with which Burr engages emerge from, and acquire critical comedic “success” because of, the conflicts between, in this case, heteronormativity’s and queerness’s contests for masculinity’s racialized definition. Yes, heteronormativity’s conception (or iteration) of masculinity is certainly the prevailing social one; that is not necessarily the point I’m making. Instead, we should look to how queer ideas about masculinity challenge heteronormativity’s already-hegemonic iteration of it, and consider that this large-scale political and epistemological conflict produces—deep in the trenches of our social imaginations—laughter in the first place.

A counter example of the hegemonic subjectivities of race, gender, and sexuality that Burr has expressed is Hannah Gadsby’s polemic on heteronormativity and gender violence in *Nanette*:

I should quit. I’m a disgrace. What sort of comedian can’t even make the lesbians laugh? Every comedian ever. That’s a good joke, isn’t it? Classic. It’s bulletproof, too. Very clever, because it’s funny… because it’s true. The only people who don’t think it’s funny… are us lezzers… But we’ve got to laugh… because if we don’t… proves the point. Checkmate. Very clever joke. I didn’t write that. That is not my joke. It’s an old… An oldie. Oldie but a goldie. A classic. It was written, you know, well before even women were funny. And back then, in the good old days, lesbian meant something
different than it does now. Back then, lesbian wasn’t about sexuality, a lesbian was just any woman not laughing at a man. “Why aren’t you laughing? What are you? Some kind of lesbian?” Classic. “Go on. You gotta laugh. Lighten up. Stop taking everything so seriously! Fucking learn to take a joke. You need to lighten up. I’ll tell you what you need to lighten up. You need a good dicking. Get a cock up you! Drink some jizz! You know?” Actual advice? It’s counterproductive (2018).

By linking typical tropes of comedy to sexualized practices and gender identity, Gadsby exposes how the model of comedy that is normatively enjoyed relies of dominant epistemologies of gender and sexuality as hierarchical, fixed, and assimilatory. Gadsby is a queer woman, who grew up in Tasmania, in a social context where homosexuality was illegal until 1997. Prior to 1997, Tasmania exercised the harshest anti-homosexuality policy in the West (Marks 2013). Later on in the comedy show, connecting her experiences in Tasmania with the performative style of comedy, Gadsby suggests that comedy’s punchlines are constructed around moments of tension and trauma:

The way I’ve been telling that story is through jokes. And stories… unlike jokes, need three parts. A beginning, a middle, and an end. Jokes… only need two parts. A beginning and a middle. And what I had done, with that comedy show about coming out, was I froze an incredibly formative experience at its trauma point and I sealed it off into jokes. And that story became a routine, and through repetition, that joke version fused with my actual memory of what happened. But, unfortunately, that joke version was not nearly sophisticated enough to help me undo the damage done to me in reality. Punch lines need trauma because punch lines… need tension, and tension feeds trauma (2018).

Gadsby’s critique acknowledges that stand-up is a patently inappropriate place to outwardly express the trauma that structures of oppression impose on sexual and gender minorities—
because the audience is “[there] to laugh, not cry,” as she exclaims. The audience was *actively listening* and quiet during the performance of the excerpt above—more like an audience of a poetry event than one watching stand-up comedy. But at almost all other points in the show, they were laughing, participating along with her, as if to say, “We can’t sympathize with what you’ve experienced, but we *hear* you and we are laughing along with you.” Laughter, here, functions as a technology of power by which audiences engage with her politically as she demonstrates that the social “qualities” that places encode are circumscribed by the power of normative social formations of race, gender, and sexuality.

Juxtaposing the two comedians’ routines demonstrates, in one moment, a liberalism that unproblematically deploys hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality and, in another moment, a critical awareness of those same discursive structures. Inasmuch as Gadsby’s recognition of her abjection connotes the subjectivities of a queer standpoint, Burr’s inability to recognize the structuring power of heteronormativity and whiteness in that site conveys a privilege that can only be recognized by intersectionally-privileged people when it’s placed in great relief. In other words, we can better see Burr’s “cultural freedoms” when we internalize Gadsby’s “cultural binds” (Ridgeway and Kricheli-Katz 2013). Yet, at some other level, Gadsby’s critical recognition of stand-up’s discursive, material, and subjective structures and Burr’s problematic deployment of those structures from a hegemonic position—in addition to the fact that these discourses can both be understood under the rubric of “stand-up comedy”—suggest that stand-up emerges within the logic of power’s capacity to produce and circulate grammars and subjectivities to enact itself, as well as the critical formations that contest it on the other.
A Site of Power’s Elaboration?

*The Reorder of Things*

The main argument of this paper is that social, political, and epistemological conflicts between dominant and critical social and intellectual formations of race, gender, and sexuality construct the discursive and performative materials of stand-up comedy. In this section, I show how the political and epistemological ontics of U.S. critical social formations always involve negotiating what Roderick A. Ferguson refers to as “technologies” of power (Ferguson 2012, p. 12). In *The Reorder of Things* (2012), Ferguson frames the university as an “archival institution,” “whose technologies…are constantly refined to acquire the latest innovation” (12). Like the university, the “technologies” of power in stand-up are the innovative and adapting methods, techniques, and discourses with which stand-up comedians purposefully or inadvertently engage to produce intelligibility in their routines for the audience and the broader public. “Intelligibility” connotes the “successful” transmission of meaning, according to subjective landscapes of race, gender, and sexuality. Sometimes, this intelligibility *sounds like* laughter. Thus, in this section and in addition to a historical and theoretical analysis of the ways race, gender, and sexuality provide the logic for much social action in moments of acute duress, I will argue that, for stand-up, laughter is a technology of power that diffuses through subjectivities, instantiating a quasi-insidious form of biopower, as Foucault might call it (Foucault 1979).

Though different from the university in many ways, I am drawn to the notion that stand-up can also be an archive of heterogeneous historical and cultural moments which take place under its purview. As a theatre for diverse social histories and aesthetic performances of race, gender, and sexuality in the United States, stand-up comedy has retained a similar material arrangement—between comic and audience—despite macro-social and historical changes in the
United States that happened beyond its walls. Though the comic-audience relationship has barely changed in any meaningful quantitative way (only with the relatively minor presence of performing duos), it has changed in some qualitative ways, most importantly with the increasing prevalence of women, queer folks, and people of color on the stage. At the same time as this change with the figure of the comedian, the collective entity of the space, the audience, normatively participates according to traditional expectations and norms; for example, they are “instructed” to sit, listen respectfully, and laugh where it is deemed appropriate (though we are sometimes surprised when an unintended punchline strikes us as funny!). This much hasn’t changed. Nevertheless, like other cultural practices that produce music, literature, and art, stand-up comedy catalogs the histories of multiple divergent styles and intellectual-artistic formats which reside in a matrix of material and vernacular inequalities between comic and audience. This inequality exists as an asymmetry in the discursive terrain of the site of stand-up; between an adaptive dynamism of stand-up comics and a static immovability of audience members. Does the agency accorded to comics “teach” audience members and the broader public anything new about the power’s strategic arrangements; or is this just “performative materiality” in its most unintelligible, subversive iteration?

It is empirically true that contemporary stand-up comedy now possesses a more diverse set of bodies and ideas compared to its institutional predecessors, including the mainstream success of black and brown people, queer people, and straight-identified women (Podugu 2017; Luckhurst and Rae 2017). To some, this change might suggest that whiteness’s and heteronormativity’s grips on social control, what Puwar (2004) calls “somatic normativity,” are weakening. To the contrary, I argue that this interpretation fails to recognize “the productive—and not simply the repressive—capacities of power” (Ferguson 2012, p. 8). In other words,
though there is a greater presence of “minoritized” bodies in stand-up, the dominant forces of whiteness and heteronormativity instead absorb and repurpose this insurgency on its own terms and to its benefit. These forces that govern aspects of cultural and historical change produce subtle conditions to contest power’s continuity and legitimacy.

Ferguson, in *The Reorder of Things*, elaborates on this point to say that “networks of power have attempted to work through and with minority difference and culture, trying to redirect originally insurgent formations and deliver them to the normative ideals and protocols of state [and] capital…” (2012, p. 8). Thinking about how power exists as a force of “absorption” rather than as a quantitative entity that increases or decreases its presence as its challenged, as the late cultural theorist Stuart Hall did (Hall 1997) regarding the former, I extend to stand-up comedy the analytic that whiteness’s and heteronormativity’s structuring capacities aren’t weakening, but are productively adapting to the queer, feminist, and anti-racist insurgencies represented by the epistemological interventions of people of color, queer people, and women. Because comedy has been an archive of—and site for conflict among—these heterogeneities, it retains the possibility to be a site of critical influence and radical social reorganization.

This argument about power’s productive, and not simply repressive, capacity to accept minority epistemes and cultures, to de-fang them and reorient them to the goals of state and capital, intonates a theory of change that does well to explain the both surge of minoritized comics and the accompanying hegemonic backlash. On the flip side of that coin, it prompts us to seek other forms of historical evidence to support this claim. As I continue, I show the ways stand-up comedy fits within this idea as an archive of historical changes at the same time that it indexes a series of internal, somatic diversities.
Historicizing Power’s Conflict Between Dominant and Critical Formations

Ferguson’s argument about power’s dual potential emerged from a critical historical analysis of the student movements of the 1960’s and 1970’s. The expansion and “birth of the interdisciplines”—that is, ethnic, women’s, and black studies departments—into the university demonstrated an epistemological and institutional breach by insurgent minoritized social formations into the bourgeois capitalist and nation-statist university (Ferguson 2012). Through an archival investigation that critiques Kant’s theorization of the hierarchy between philosophy and politics, to a recovery of the aesthetic and political histories of the social movements by black, brown, and queer students to demand access to the resources and opportunities that the university had only previously guaranteed to white men, Ferguson illustrates how institutional power simultaneously acquiesces and administrates in moments of insurgency.

The social history that Ferguson pushes back against many liberal capitalist historiographies about minority rights and freedoms that reside throughout a range of historical accounts. The hegemonic (and implicit) narrative is that, through top-down legislative benevolence and the “natural” progression toward “freedom” that liberal philosophers of political economy promised would happen, everyone would “eventually” get rights. The university, according to Ferguson, however, was not interested in fundamental recalibration; so, in spite of the fact that it did not acquiesce to the demands of the student movements, it produced certain intellectual and institutional formations that absorbed the radical imaginations of minoritized movements and transformed those insurgencies into something intelligible to the bureaucratic capitalist university. Ferguson identifies where this conflict happens and how it transpired before the doorstep of power’s investments in certain institutions and ideas. The general theory here is that both hegemonic and critical imaginations contest for discursive and
intellectual power within and across institutional and material terrains, informed and adapted through convivial and vernacular negotiations of, as well as through broader political and intellectual projects around, race, gender, and sexuality.

Davies and Bansel apply Foucault’s theorization of political order called “governmentality,” which describes “new modes of government that work at the level of individual subjectivity,” to explain the rise of neoliberalism. Government, in Foucault’s sense, does “not refer only to political structures or to the management of states’ but also designates ‘the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed’” (Davies and Bansel 2007, p. 248; quoting Foucault 1994, p. 341). The authors argue well that neoliberalism in the 1980’s and 1990’s achieved a governmental hegemony at the level of individual and group subjectivities, which produced a peculiar discursive landscape. Much of the discursive landscape describing neoliberalism is coated with “the accusation of ‘conspiracy theory!’... to the idea that social change might be engineered in a concerted way, and to the benefit of those who engineer the change” despite “considerable evidence that the development of neoliberal discourses, policies, and practices has been concertedly financed and engineered by those with a great deal to gain financially from the resulting labor practices and flows of capital” (Davies and Bansel 2007, p. 248). Crucially, they point out that “on the other side of that conspiracy lies an innocent romanticism regarding the natural evolution of social processes and social change” (p. 248).

What is produced alongside neoliberal policy, then, is a set of epistemological and discursive appropriations and recalibrations at the level of the individual, whose central aim is to obfuscate neoliberalism’s technologies of control.

What strikes me about this analysis of neoliberalism’s rise are the powerful ways elite stakeholders produced discursive landscapes in which “the ‘social’ and the economic are
constituted... as binary opposites, with the economic in the ascendant and the social representing all that good economics is not” (Davies and Bansel 2007, p. 251-2). As a reorganization of “the conduct of conduct” (Brown 2015), neoliberal political and cultural policy re-affirmed and reified the individual and the nation-state conterminously, as a discourse of the privatization of social services (such as healthcare and education) and the globalization of market influence took place. Domestically and subjectively, as these discourses broadly redressed the “inevitable” progress of modern states as a function of economy alone, the “social” was rendered a liability, through the “restructuring of those welfare provisions that are seen as producing what are now construed as the untenable passivity and dependence of the paternalistic or ‘nanny state’” (Davies and Bansel 2007, p. 252). These broad restructurings, like the Clintonian “workfare” policies, implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) drew upon racial, gender, and sexual stereotypes, such as “the lazy, Cadillac-driving, steak-eating welfare queens of Ronald Reagan's imagination” (Cohen 1997, p. 457). In the same way that Burr deployed the fag as the discursive object to be policed, neoliberalism necessitated the production of its own linguistic objects to justify its necessity. Neoliberalism thus edifies already-existing material and discursive hierarchies of race, class, and sexuality, making new assumptions based on a kind of economized logic.

Of another period, the brilliant historian of whiteness and labor David Roediger’s book, *Seizing Freedom: Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All* (2014), deals among other things with the “slave emancipation thesis,” the argument that slaves’ actions and multiple demands for justice and refusals of domination provoked their emancipation and liberation from slavery. At the same time that this argument details how the state inhaled the slaves’ demands and reformulated them within its own grammars of liberalism and constitutionality, it also gives us pause as we consider Ferguson’s theorization of power’s productive—and not simply
repressive—dimension. In order to de-fang the multiple rebellions of slaves and retain their labor power, the state produced new sets of formal rules in its legal and political structure at the same time that it militarized newly emancipated cartographies and reconstituted slave labor under the rubric of capitalist wage labor. It was a new form of exploitation of second-highest order.

Together, Roediger’s 19th-century historical account, Ferguson’s analysis of the student movements of the 1960’s and 1970’s, and Davies and Bansel’s critique of neoliberalism’s invisible rise to hegemony in the 1980’s and 1990’s highlight an important quality of power: that US political, subjective, and discursive landscapes are actively engaging the salient racial, gender, and sexual formations of their time. As slave emancipation represented a critical anti-racist formation it was continuously in conflict with the US racial state, one intent on maintaining slavery as a racial-capitalist socioeconomic and political formation. In the 1960’s and 1970’s as the student movements frustrated the university’s capacity to administer in ways that represented and reproduced dominant articulations of state, academy, and capital, the push for “interdisciplines” had at their core an anti-capitalist racial and gender politics that rebuked hegemonic national and capitalist practices that repressed such insurgencies. In many ways, the racial and sexual conflicts of the civil rights moment in the United States was the pretext for a new neoliberal order, which transformed power’s technologies of control toward an economic model absent of blood—the exact opposite of the humanist recalibrations that student movements sought.

Indeed, what these accounts tell us is true is that non-white men; women; and black, brown, indigenous, and queer people, at every turn, have had to demand their recognition within the hegemonic political and legal apparatuses of the nation-state. Inclusion and recognition within the nation-state, however, is not an end-goal of these radical projects. Instead, what it
might represent is a political arrangement organized by hegemonic forces of state and capital to regulate the insurgencies of oppressed populations with transcendent “freedom dreams” (Kelley 2002). This iteration of conflicts that preside within, and which are negotiated in relation to, the nation-state implies a hierarchy of community and identity in which white, heterosexual men—and the institutions of their philosophical imagination—are at the top. The new arrangement of the university that came out of the minority insurgency of the 1960’s and 70’s, as a general argument of black and feminist political thought, are temporary survival tactics, not an end result. I thread the above examples to show that there are social-historical underpinnings that influence what we’d call “present-day” meaning systems. Historical contests for power provide the materials of historical change. In stand-up, as local conflicts regarding race, gender, and sexual representation arise, their discourses take on the specter of somatic normativity (Puwar 2004), the notion that there is a normal or correct bodily representation in institutional and public spaces. Though contentious in their own right, these debates between hegemonic and critical formations insist on maintaining normativity or contesting it. Rarely do they focus on economic, political, and historical forces that shape normativity in the first place. What Ferguson shows about those moments of insurgency—that is, when critical formations have mobilized their critiques of hegemony—is that dominant institutional and discursive formations are always-already articulating their capacity for repression, often veiled as a productive and progressive force.

Cultural theorist John Limon prompts an interesting empirical question about historical change that this critical reading of Foucault and Ferguson speaks to. In the beginning of his book *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (2000), Limon queries the “cultural fact” of the “connection between being a Jewish heterosexual man in America in 1960 and making
one sort of living” (p. 3), as he gestures toward the coterminous movements of Jewish
suburbanization away from cities and the production of an aesthetic as well as a material culture
befitting to that change. As Limon puts it, “The job was… to provide humor of a certain kind in
a certain setting” (2000, p. 3). Limon’s argument highlights the ways in which racial and ethnic
difference simultaneously produced certain geo-residential arrangements while also articulating
specific cultural, aesthetic, and linguistic productions. Observing this historical change from a
specific cultural formation to a national and plural institution, Limon argues that “America,
between 1960 and the millennium, in a process that began around the ascension of Johnny
Carson or the Kennedy assassination, comedified. Stand-up was once a field given over to a
certain subsection of a certain ethnicity. By now, roughly speaking, all America is the pool for
national stand-up comedy” (2000, p. 3). By framing—and phrasing—comedy as a force for
cultural and national assimilation and aggregation, Limon simultaneously shows the divergence
of comedic styles that depart from mainstream Jewish, heterosexual comedy. The ascension of
black comedians or woman comedians, for example, was, in part, a relational production of
cultural and political ideas guided by the relationship between hegemonic and critical ideas of
race, gender, and sexuality.

As I’ve begun to illustrate the ways subjective formations of race, gender, and sexuality
serve as the basis for comedy’s intelligibility and performative “success” over historical time, I
suggest also that the subjectivities that inform its intelligibility have a structural quality, too,
despite strict materialist thinkers insisting that “structure” is a material phenomenon. Ferguson’s
analytical entanglements between distinct political, aesthetic, and intellectual projects of the
1960’s and 1970’s contributed, at one level, to the specific magnified moment of the student
movement and, at another level, to a more theoretically-oriented treatment of the ways
hegemonic and critical social formations collide and compete before the foothills of power. In the same way that Ferguson could’ve hypothetically identified the internal and historically-specific events and ideas of that moment, but extended such an empirical investigation into a robust theorization of power, I am performing a kind of intellectual labor to think about something as commonplace and normative as stand-up in the context of a larger social field of power and conflict. In part, my efforts to do so reside in the deployment of terms and concepts such as “intellectual project” and “social formation.” Moreover, I believe that there are critical-pedagogical and political implications in thinking about stand-up along such conceptual and theoretical lines, especially if our goal is to produce and sustain more equitable social institutions and communities for sharing our experiences, so as to “walk more lightly on the earth,” as indigenous scholar Manolo Callahan (2012) would say. I am convinced that stand-up comedy can be one such site to “walk more lightly,” to share creatively and empathetically, to imagine new terrains that challenge the coy reproduction of what we think we understand about the Other. I am also arguing that these possibilities are handcuffed by power’s creative and regulatory operations in the terrain of stand-up.

In the following sections, I will review some of the critical literatures of black feminist thought, anti-racist black studies, and queer (of color) theory, which represent the critical social and intellectual formations committed to resisting and exposing the mechanics of dominant forms of social power. The social practices of these intellectual formations, I have argued, are constantly in conflict with, and negotiating, power’s incursions and calibrations. Thus, they underpin the performative and discursive dimensions of stand-up comedy that allow for audiences and comics to engage in the cultural practice of laughter. I frame these “interdisciplines” of social thought as resistant to dominant social formations of
power/knowledge, though not as reactionary to hegemonic social and political activity, but rather as a multitude of insurgent and transformative projects that power seeks to de-fang at every turn.
Black Feminist Thought, Black Studies, Queer of Color Critique, *Straight White Man Author*

Thinking *with* Critical Literatures while Intersectionally-Privileged

The theorization of stand-up I offer in this essay, and the conflicts that are both produced by and recognized within it, comes from women of color feminism, black studies, and queer of color analysis. By no means exhaustive in their critical capacities, these intellectual and convivial traditions diverge in several significant ways, and they represent some of the social and intellectual practices always in conflict with hegemonic projects across institutional, discursive, and subjective terrains in US social life. Seminal black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins pointed out that “African-American social and political thought analyzes institutionalized racism, not to help it work more efficiently, but to resist it” (1990, p. 9). Resisting the hegemonic formations of capital, racism, and heterosexism defines the logic (and pathos) of critical social-intellectual and convivial practices. By “convivial,” I mean those quotidian practices that, alone, might not suggest anything spectacular; but, in their aggregate, teach and (re)produce community values, ideals, and knowledges that embody the intellectual and social commitments of hegemonic resistance. Within this tradition, scholars work to disprove the ostensible “neutrality” (Hurtado and Stewart 1997, p. 316) accorded to scientific methodology of the social scientists who studied race and gender, as if those methodologies could step outside of the hierarchies of the societies in which they were constructed. Before the 1960’s, the academy was a space for the reproduction of white male authority over the scientific method. The massive anti-hegemonic block to disprove the “neutrality” of those paradigms inaugurated a certain neo-canon of scholars, Collins among them. Somehow, however, and in many ways, claims about a deep political structure of knowledge are contested to this day via several political, cultural, and philosophical conduits.
In this section, I will show how black feminist thought, black studies, and queer of color analysis have mounted serious critiques to those dominant social and intellectual traditions which invented racism and heterosexism. I argue that these critical literatures are uniquely poised to charge such critiques because of their commitment to systemically analyzing systems of power, but also because of their humanist recalibrations which attune to reflexivity, the process by which intellectuals productively think about their social position as a tool for doing more accurate social science. Having a firm grasp of these literatures can encourage consumers of comedy to more critically engage with comedy’s conceptual frameworks of race, gender, and sexuality. It can also help consumers think more thoroughly about the ways stand-up is a domain in which power gets negotiated via meanings and structures of those social formations.

Before I think *with* and alongside the critical literatures to better articulate my position on how stand-up makes use of racialized, gendered, and sexualized systems of power/knowledge to make comedy “intelligible,” as the title of this section suggests, I want to more thoroughly consider my own position relative to these literatures. My thoughts on the philosophies of these critical literatures are informed through my own kind of “double consciousness” (Du Bois 1903): between those lessons of my upbringing being intersectionally-privileged and my post-secondary critical-intellectual adventures. By “intersectional privilege,” I mean that I am white, cisgender, heterosexual, and male. Embodying the hegemonic position with respect to the social formations of race, gender, and sexuality carries political and epistemological consequences, particularly with regard to truth validation and the relationship between power and knowledge (Collins 1990). Harding (1987) argues that “epistemology constitutes an overarching theory of knowledge” (Collins 1990, p. 270). My community (and the components which comprised it, such as my school, family, and close peer network) not only reproduced these hegemonic
identities and epistemes but valorized and reified them. This, I now understand, is “cultural hegemony” at work in the very way Gramsci theorized it (Gramsci 1935). But, when I came to begin my undergraduate career at University at Albany, SUNY, I was thrust into a new mentorship with an instructor who showed to me black feminist literatures; who taught me classical, Marxist, and post-structural cultural and political theory; who introduced me to the historical and sociological study of whiteness. When I returned home, to no one’s surprise, I was faced with new challenges from people who I knew for many reasons did not and would not understand what I’ve learned to see (and what I’ve previously learned to “unsee”). In my mind, alone, I was realizing the contradictions between what I thought I understood of myself, my community, and this country and the trove of critical-intellectual life I didn’t know existed. I had (and still have, let me not forget) a lot of hard intellectual work to do to catch up. What does it look like to now question all of that which was previously taken-for-granted, or worse, out of sight for me to consider? How does my distance from the intimacies of power’s multiple capacities to repress and smolder affect my capacity to be an accomplice? Though my answers will always be tentative, as this is an always-unfinished, iterative, and self-reflective process, I think they lie in The Undercommons (Harney and Moten 2015)—that is, in my authenticity to be “with and for” oppressed communities; to realize that “this shit is killing [me] too, however much more softly” (2015, p. 141) then do something about it. But I also need to caution you, and remind myself, that these imperatives to be “with and for” should not begin with the ego-driven realization that these inequalities hurt privileged folks, too, as if to say that those who are intersectionally-privileged should begin to care only when the issues reach our front doors. Instead, our motivations for being “with and for,” and with and for comedy’s redemptive capacity, should be motivated by a deeper commitment to humanity, a humanity that recognizes
all of power’s incursions onto it; one that’s committed to tearing down racism, heteropatriarchy, state violence, and capitalism as an act of solidarity. “The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house,” Audre Lorde (1984, p. 2) once said. But “what if,” as Ian Callahan (2019) likes to say, “the master himself picked up the sledgehammer and took the first swing?”

There’s an emerging social position of intersectionally-privileged people in US society that embraces the truth-claims to social and political life that critical intellectual formations have presented and embody. The performances and grammars that constitute these embodiments have their own epistemological and ideological underpinnings. Sometimes, however, dominant discourses too-quickly valorize intersectionally-privileged subjects who are engaged in the serious political work of recuperating racial, gender, and sexual inequalities; and, sometimes this valorization supersedes the ongoing, but often unrecognized, work of activists and thinkers who are not privileged at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class. In the case of men’s involvement in the antiviolence work, Messner, Greenberg, and Peretz note that,

a growing number of men are involved in antiviolence work, but their numbers pale in comparison with the tens of thousands of women who in recent decades have launched rape crisis centers, staffed hotlines and domestic violence shelters, run campus and community women’s centers, and mobilized on the local and national levels to change laws, reform institutions, and challenge sexist beliefs and practices that fuel violence against women. There is no question that today’s women activists and professional leaders who work against gender-based violence welcome men’s involvement and see it as crucially important (2015, p. 7).

But while critical formations, in this case feminist anti-violence workers, sometimes welcome hegemonic actors’ involvement and commitment, according to the authors, some of their informants note that there are implicit and explicit concerns that gendered hierarchies also reside within these critical movements. One of Messner et. al.’s participants stated that “men need not
only to be a part of this, as an essential ingredient, but their involvement should be welcomed and celebrated, . . . [but] it’s kind of swung the other way: any man in the room, everyone like gets up and starts clapping for him and it’s just ridiculous, so just ‘cause you show up doesn’t mean that we’re going to throw you a party” (2015, p. 9). This participant’s frustration with men’s advanced recognition in sexual assault antiviolence work is a critical affirmation of the hegemonic biopolitics inherent to all projects surrounding race, gender, and sexuality. But the analysis should not stop there; instead, we must recognize that these biological or somatic arrangements emanate out of the ideological, discursive, and otherwise political details that constitute these racial, gender, and sexual projects in the first place. Like with Louis C.K., the broader public is miffed by the idea that a famous white man is culpable of sexual violence despite publicly decrying it. That Louis C.K. had been celebrated at all for his comedy about gender violence, however, supports the claim that those intersectionally-privileged actors receive disproportionate credit for their alliance to the ideas that critical projects have been formulating for decades and centuries. He is intersectionally-privileged in several significant ways, and he has strategically communicated some feminist stances in his stand-up comedy. But, as I argue, stand-up’s discursive and performative capacities should be understood as cultural products of the racial, gender, and sexual projects in which hegemonic and critical formations have always been engaged and competing for power over. That Louis C.K. is among the most contentious subjects between hegemonic and critical discourses within the #MeToo magnified moment should be a shock to no one.

Louis C.K. and #MeToo

In November 2017, Louis C.K. was accused of, and subsequently admitted to, sexual misconduct against several female comedians between 2002 and 2005. In more than one case, he
asked these female comedians if it were “okay” to masturbate in front of them. In August 2017, Tig Notaro, a well-known female comedian, had advised C.K. to “handle” the “rumors” about him (Wilstein 2017), which ceased to be just rumors just three months later in November.4 “These stories are true,” C.K. said in a comment. As both a fan of his comedy and an academic, this scene disappointed me; I questioned C.K.’s merit as a case in my original study of the sociology of stand-up comedy. But, with careful guidance and a crucial change in perspective, I began asking a new set of questions, with a different aim altogether. “What is it about masculinity, in whiteness, and the power therein, that let C.K. do this, despite his supposedly ‘feminist’ approach to comedy?” Some feminist arguments would support the idea that C.K.’s bashing the horrors of heteronormative violence in his comedy served to protect him against accusation in the public eye—effectively silencing women’s real experiences and ability to be heard—to attain social justice. This is especially evident during the performance of stand-up comedy, where the comedian is perceived to be candid and, also, the most powerful person in the room. Louis C.K. noted, however, in an HBO special, Talking Funny (2011), with Jerry Seinfeld, Ricky Gervais, and Chris Rock, that “it always sounds like I’m fumbling over my words, like I’m barely getting it out, but, in reality, I know all the moves.” He engages the science of social connection through stand-up comedy, effectively manipulating people’s emotional and spatial flexibility; C.K. negotiates the space uninterrupted, in a calculated form with complete control. For C.K.—well, perhaps for me—this was the last case I had expected to surface in the #MeToo Movement. But C.K. might very well mean the things he says in his comedy. It is possible for straight, white, men to have feminist and anti-racist situational positions. The question is whether or not straight, white (and powerful) men can embody feminist and anti-racist constitutions that situate their behavior as a progression toward feminist, anti-racist embodiment. Of course, the
answer is (theoretically) yes, but the barriers for this achievement are vast and high; therefore, the practical likelihood of such embodiment is low.

In one popular joke, C.K. introduces some racialized perspectives within stand-up’s discursive arrangement. The following monologue is intended as a joke, but the kinds of historical information and identity presentation to which C.K. adheres invites a general problematic to the site of stand-up comedy that’s worth discussing. The joke is called “Of Course, But Maybe,"

Everybody has a competition in their brain of good thoughts and bad thoughts. Hopefully, the good thoughts win. For me, I always have both. I have like, the thing, I believe the good thing, that’s the thing I believe. And then there is this thing. And I don’t believe it, but it is there. It’s always this thing and then this thing. It’s become a category in my brain that I call “Of course… But maybe”.

I’ll give you an example, okay? Like of course—of course(!)—children who have nut allergies need to be protected—of course! We have to segregate their food from nuts; have their medication available at all times; and anybody who manufactures or serves food needs to be aware of deadly nut allergies—of course! But maybe… Maybe if touching a nut kills you, you’re supposed to die. Of course not, of course not, of course not. Jesus.

I have a nephew who has that. I’d be devastated if something happened to him. But maybe—maybe if we all just do this for one year [a gesture to look away], we’re done with nut allergies forever. No, of course not! Of course, if you’re fighting for your country and you get shot or hurt, it’s a terrible tragedy, of course—of course! But maybe—maybe if you pick up a gun and go to another country and you get shot, it’s not that weird. Maybe if you get shot by the dude you were just shooting at, it’s a tiny bit your fault.

Of course, of course, slavery is the worst thing that ever happened! Of course it is, every time it’s happened. Black people in America, Jews in Egypt, every time a whole race of people has been enslaved, it’s a terrible, horrible thing, of course, but maybe. Maybe every incredible human achievement in history was done with slaves.
Every single thing where you go, “how did they build those pyramids?” They just threw human death and suffering at them until they were finished (C.K. 2010).

By positioning historical hindsight as a supposed moral decision between a binary of “good” and “evil” (Alexander 2003, p. 1-26), Louis C.K. asks the audience to negotiate (i.e. laugh or not laugh) with a perverse engagement of history that, by design, does not take history seriously. Instead of taking slavery seriously as a historical epoch whose logics and effects must be countered with great, holistic force, C.K. is encouraged to pursue such white-washed interpretations of history because it is both encoded and permissible within the space of stand-up comedy, but also because, for him, it’s fundamentally “comedic” to engage with incorrect historical interpretation. Thus, comedy serves as a consequential conduit for an intersectionally-privileged actor to make broad-brushed judgments about the nature of historical change. In this sense, C.K. is acting through his whiteness and upper-class endowments; through his “American-ness.”

Yet, stand-up has not come under immense public critique for its engagements with historical and political contradictions because American public life surrounds us with innumerable contradictions at all times. Within spheres of U.S. public culture that claim to be “progressive,” we are confronted with racism’s ubiquity and persistence (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Stand-up comedy is among the theatres of civil society that hosts these contradictions but does so within its own rules for cultural production and exchange. Stand-up adheres to a routine joke-laughter-joke-laughter cycle that suggests a crucial relationship between public voices and public reception. It also signals that the relationship between comic and audience relies on those several contradictions, like the one between hegemonic and critical narrations of racism, in order to produce meaning. Roderick Ferguson notes in *Aberrations in Black* that there’s a pivotal
contradiction between “the normalization of heteropatriarchy on the one hand, and the emergence of eroticized and gendered racial formation that dispute[s] heteropatriarchy’s universality on the other” (2004, p. 11). According to C.K., “racism is just a mistake. It’s like, just an error. It doesn’t really make any sense, we can just do away with it, but sexism isn’t going anywhere” (2015). Perhaps this malleability of race might be a product of C.K.’s own experiences growing up in Mexico, learning about the “othering” process with respect to white and Latino ethnicity. With respect to sexism, C.K. might follow what Ahmed theorizes as heterosexuality as “gift” from kin (Ahmed 2006). Ward offers an extension of this theorization: “Heterosexuality, as the intimately close, familiar, normalized, and celebrated couple formation, is the space in which the child lives and becomes the space in which the child feels ‘at home’” (2015, p. 31). But for Patricia Hill Collins, addressing racism is always a project of linking it to other structures of domination that illustrate its strategic and sedimentary characters:

Race is far from being the only significant marker of group difference—class, gender, sexuality, religion, and citizenship status all matter greatly in the United States (Andersen and Collins 1998). Yet for African-American women, the effects of institutionalized racism remain visible and palpable. Moreover, the institutionalized racism that African-American women encounter relies heavily on racial segregation and accompanying discriminatory practices designed to deny U.S. Blacks equitable treatment (1990, p. 23).

The stark difference in these analyses of race, gender, and sexuality in the US point to C.K.’s value as a subject in a study of racialized heteronormativity. While Collins’s words in Black Feminist Thought represent decades of rigorous scholarly, activist, and professional engagements with the topics of race, gender, and sexuality, Louis C.K.’s commentary reflects only his opinions on this matter. Important, also, are the ways this type of commentary is allowed to be called “comedy” in the first place. His social commentary reflects a hegemonic white,
heteronormative worldview. While less extreme than some narratives—like, “slavery happened, but now it’s over and everyone is equal”—C.K.’s position is consistent with the theme that “racism is a mistake.” We can clearly see how differently Collins and C.K. structure racism and their non-mutually-exclusive emergence within formations of gender and sexuality. Thus, we see how matrices of power infiltrate constructions of identity, particularly via the invisibility of whiteness, and how perceptions and performances of identity become contextualized in and consequential because of the sites to which they are bound. These wholly different perspectives derive from, first, doing one’s homework on the history and scholarship of these issues; but, second and more importantly, on the legitimating elements of social thought stemming from the privileges of embodying whiteness as a mindset.

This argument is constructed with the assumption that heteronormativity is the cultural backdrop, the dominant organizational system, in front of which other organizational systems of gender and sexual activity, politics, and institutions stand as “deviant” or “nonconforming.” Jane Ward calls these organizational systems “cultural domains” (2015, p. 34). The inverse of this assumption exists only in particularized spaces, as in, for example, Jason Orne’s Boystown, which investigates a neighborhood in Chicago where queer lifestyle, sexual activity, and relationships are the local dominant form of gender and sexual organization that exist in a safe space in which queer folks can express their gender and sexuality in non-repressive ways, that is opposite to the ways they are actively (and passively) repressed in heteronormative, masculine spaces (Orne 2017).

To be clear, however, the site of stand-up comedy is not a queer space; it is patently heteronormative, and possesses a “heterosexual imaginary” (Ingraham 1994), where assumed heterosexuality is not questioned. However, with heterosexual imagination representing a
confirmation of others’ assumed heterosexuality, as a sexual orientation, the cultural dimension of heteronormativity situates itself not as a sexual orientation, but as an organizational force. According to Ward and Schneider, “… [H]eterosexuality and heteronormativity are not synonymous… to understand the latter requires analysis of the ways that heterosexual bodies, subjects, norms, and practices are always articulated and naturalized in relation to non-normative genders and sexualities and queer ‘ways of life’” (2009, p. 434). Ward and Schneider refer to heterosexuality as the sexualized derivative of heteronormativity: “a key organizing principle of the matrix of domination” (2009, p. 434). Heteronormativity, though, is not a social formation independent of power structures embedded within racism and sexism; instead, it intersects with them, producing certain social arrangements which are viewed as natural and inevitable. Instead we should think about these arrangements as actively constructed through a multi-modal cultural production by intersectionally-privileged actors like Bill Burr and Louis C.K. However, the role of capitalist labor relations and classist social life remains an absent dimension of cultural analysis. Queer of color critique extended to capital Foucault’s argument of power/knowledge that pervades through sexuality, race, and gender formations.

The central role of heteronormativity’s intersection with capital, racism, sexism, and national culture is best understood through the lens of “queer of color critique.” In Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique (2004), Ferguson defines queer of color analysis as [the] interrogat[ion] of social formations as the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with particular interest in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices. Queer of color analysis is a heterogeneous enterprise made up of women of color feminism, materialist analysis, poststructuralist theory, and queer critique (p. 149).
*Aberrations in Black* is, primarily, a theoretical work about how the ideas of Marx, Kant, and Foucault (among others) need crucial revisions that account for the ways social life is fundamentally shaped by sexuality’s intersection with racial, gendered, economic, and national practices and ideologies. But it also demonstrated an asymptotic quality to Marx’s theory of historical materialism—one that “disidentifies” with Marx’s naturalization of heterosexuality. Instead, Ferguson thinks *with* and extends Foucault’s theory of power and sexuality within a critique of liberal capitalist property relations. The Marxist historian of whiteness David R. Roediger notes that Ferguson is “identified so much with queer of color critique, that [he] sometimes don’t realize that [Ferguson] writes as a Marxist” (Roediger 2017).

Queer of color analysis shows us the multiple ways that formations around race, gender, class, and sexuality converge to produce complex social relations and realities. Instead of thinking about the proliferation of minority bodies in stand-up comedy as a victory of liberal multiculturalism’s successes in the public sphere, queer of color critique allows us to understand that liberal multiculturalism assumes philosophical conclusions that “occlude the intersecting saliency of race, gender, sexuality, and class in forming social practices” (Ferguson 2004, p. 4). As a recognition of women of color feminism’s historiographies of developing a queer of color theory, Ferguson notes that “Queer of color analysis extends women of color feminism by investigating how intersecting racial, gender, and sexual practices antagonize and/or conspire with the normative investments of nation-states and capital” (p. 4). By linking intersecting dimensions of social life like race, gender, and sexuality that have been thought of as separate to the political-economic formulation of nation-statist capitalism, queer of color analysis locates social and discursive practices within institutional formations being actively held accountable to the demands of state and capital. In a similar vein, ethnographer James Thomas employs a post-
structuralist critique of stand-up to note the ways in which social relations of race, gender, and sexuality structure the ways elite stand-up venues structure these spaces based some assumptions guided by heteronormativity and racism. Scholar of race and stand-up comedy Simon Weaver writes of Thomas’ work:

…the venue values the hiring of conventionally attractive female staff members for front of house roles, and does little to discourage heteronormative and sexist discursive practice from male staff members and customers. Body types are further discriminated against – audience seating is planned so that conventionally attractive individuals and groups are placed nearer to the stage and thus in more favourable seating. Obesity stigma is present here because the obese are sat to the margins of the venue and ridiculed by staff when out of earshot. With regard to class and race, the customer dress code at the venue is designed to exclude poor whites and African-Americans. Comedians are booked who reproduce hegemonic and mainstream values, and African-American or minority comedians are seen to present particular “problems” because of the audiences they draw. Finally, free ticket promotions are posted to customers only after race and class profiling of collected customer information (2016, p. 2484).

The management practices of the venue in which Thomas conducted his ethnography demonstrate “shared,” which is to say “cultural,” knowledge of racism and heteronormativity. Collins argues that “African-American social and political thought analyzes institutionalized racism, not to help it work more efficiently, but to resist it” (Collins 1990, p. 9). In the opposite form, hegemonic institutions like stand-up venues employ knowledge of institutionalized racism and heteronormativity to help it work more efficiently in the service of capital. These practices (re)produce discourses and narratives that rely on these themes for laughter. In a broader sense, these practices represent and constitute a structure of the ways categories of race, gender, and sexuality orient comics and audiences to this thing we call comedy. Thomas’s ethnography also implicitly supports Puwar’s claim that, despite formal access to most positions and spaces,
“social spaces are not blank and open for any body to occupy. There is a connection between bodies and space, which is built, repeated, and contested” (2004, p. 8). And while urban sociologists and comedy scholars alike admit that the space of stand-up comedy regulates based on gender and race, and props up boundaries around heteronormativity (Thomas 2015), what’s missing from the frame are the ways marginalized and normative intersectional identities get co-opted for comedic effect vis-à-vis the site in which it’s taking place.

Queer comedians like Jaboukie Young-White implicitly disrupt the somatic normativity of the space of stand-up as they disrupt the geographies of heteronormativity and racism. In one routine, Young-White jokes, “I’ve noticed that my race changes from city to city. When I’m in Chicago, everyone thinks I’m half black and half white. In New York, they think I’m… Puerto Rican. And when I’m in CVS, everyone thinks I’m stealing” (Young-White 2018). By highlighting his and others’ sense of self in different cities, he evinces Puwar’s argument about somatic variability and intersectional marginality. Though Young-White is Black (specifically, of Jamaican descent), he is often read as being racially ambiguous. And like the social anthropologist of race H. Samy Alim, who was “racialized nine different ways over the span of five days,” Young-White’s comedy demonstrates that, “rather than stable and predetermined, racial identities can shift across contexts and even within specific interactions” (Alim 2016, p. 7).

Certainly diverging from Alim’s erudite formulation, Young-White was intoning at the relationship between race and geography in a site that was just not prepared for such an intervention. A guest of Jimmy Fallon, Young-White was inheriting a late-night television crowd—and received some surprise laughter when he said: “I have a hard time flirting because people don’t always read me as queer when they first meet me because I’ve been told that I could come across as ‘masc,’ and if you don’t know what that means, it’s basically just gay for
“[stereotypical feminine smirk] I’m not like other girls” (Young-White 2018). Introducing queer of color comedy into a white, heteronormative space, Young-White tugs at the notion of experience to disrupt their immediate space. Not expecting a queer comedian, we must examine audience reception to gauge their management of somatic normativity. Certainly, for Young-White, twinges and second-glances matter; the second glance is an affirmative recognition of difference diverting from the somatic norm.

Young-White’s comedy attunes the audience to the ways the space of stand-up is both a repository of social commentaries and a space that’s formulated through the interconnectedness of race, capital, gender, nation, and sexuality. Embedding those social formations in a discourse meant to be understood as “comedy” underscores the argument that power invests in comedic discourse. These examples show that comedians can strategically engage with social formations of race, gender, and sexuality to various ends—as do C.K. and Young-White, for example. That we can analyze audiences’ primary framework for consuming comedy emanates as their subjective positions within structures of power/knowledge at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality is the central theoretical application of queer of color theory to stand-up comedy. The space provides distance from lived experience for C.K; but is intimately engaged with by Young-White. Both produce laughter, but from light-years’ distance apart.

In this section, I have introduced queer of color critique and women of color feminism as analytic lenses through which to explain Louis C.K.’s specific positionality at the intersection of his taboo comedy and admission to sexual misconduct. Queer of color critique thinks specifically about how race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation intersect to produce multiple social practices and epistemes which exist in a hierarchical matrix of power. By thinking about the stand-up venue and the audiences’ laughter as proxies for the structural and cultural forces of racism and
heteronormativity, and analyzing both C.K. and Young-White within that framework, we can better understand the subtle techniques employed by these comedians as they invoke meanings and structures of race, gender, and sexuality. The subjectivities that constitute multiple intersecting formations of race, gender, and sexuality emerge from the iterative, ongoing antagonisms between racism, heteronormativity, and masculinity and the critical projects Contesting and resisting them at every turn.
Conclusion

“Just Joking”: Cultural Discourses of Inequality

Let’s imagine you’re sitting at the dinner table, presumably among people with whom you feel safe. One person decides to say a sentence, which includes a pejorative word, like “fag,” to make their point. We might think of a sentence like this: “Those guys on the TV are such fags—look at the way they dress!” As this person speaks from a perspective that doesn’t highly value non-masculine expressions of gender by men, we see how they establish distance between themselves and the object of their criticism, and thus produce a power dynamic staked within their “circuit” of cultural exchange (Hall 2001). You, then, say that that kind of language is not appreciated, for it is dehumanizing and predicated upon homophobia. You then hear: “Stop being so sensitive! It was just a joke.” The “it’s just a joke” defense imposes a dual hierarchy in this context—between the men on the TV and your table-mate and between you and your table-mate. Upon someone declaring that what they said prior was “just a joke,” they assign a burden of sensitivity to the accuser and produces a power dynamic between actors that’s inexorably tied to the politics of race, gender, and sexuality.

In the preface to this essay, I noted that “we are only familiar with the form of stand-up comedy after it has been ‘stood up,’” but then sought to imagine this differently, figuring out the technologies of power that (re)produce our commonplace format. Let the phrase “It’s just a joke” serve as a kind of reminder of the ways in which hegemony defends itself and secures its power (“Stop being so sensitive. It was just a joke). The phrase by itself contains a compelling cultural construction, because of the ways the person who said “it’s just a joke” assigns a burden of sensitivity to the accuser and produces a power dynamic between actors that’s inexorably tied to the politics of race, gender, and sexuality. And let’s think contextually: when does this phrase of
rebuttal, “It’s just a joke,” need to be spoken? If someone says something powerfully racist, or homophobic, or transphobic—or utters some other biting, inhumane gesture toward another person or group—we often hear it. And regardless of a “joke’s” affect or political or cultural consequence, they are effective precisely because they are these irreducibly social things. Joking, I argue, cannot be an individual affair. The techniques that powerful things engage with to defend their power stings the skin of those it pushes against and it affirms and thickens its antagonist’s skin. This relationship is as unconscionable as it is understandable. We might think of jokes as microaggressive conduits of power, which function within the logics of the simultaneous human capacities for joy and for violence. How can it be possible for these things called jokes to be indexed within the social and political capacity for violence at the same time that they realize the immense capacity for joy and togetherness?

Things envisioned under the rubric of “comedy,” including jokes and the comics who perform them, are simultaneously not to be taken seriously and yet are endowed with a unique digital, political, and material position from which to speak publicly. This paradox about comedy’s simultaneous exercise of social value, power’s influence to determine that value, and the multiple ways in which that value is regulated, sits at the heart of this essay.

Finally, what comedy might learn from critical social analysis is the ability to notice, critique, and mobilize to remedy those forces which produce and reproduce unequal societies. Might comedy be a site of radical upheaval or for social critique and transformation? I pose this question because 1) it is a goal of scholar-activists to identify how we can multiply those spaces dedicated to ecological preservation and 2) because it is entirely possible that comedy could be (and already is) one of those sites in which counter-hegemonic discursive and material activities are practiced and legitimated. Insofar as Moten (UofTDaniels 2017) calls for the production of
ecological tranquility in direct opposition to the footprints that capitalism stamps on the Earth, normatively defended by the rubrics of property and surplus, he invokes Manuel Callahan’s (2012) theory of convivial research. This includes Callahan’s call to protect ourselves from capital’s active and always-possible incursion—to “renew our habits of assembly” (Holland 2015, in which Fred Moten cites Callahan). I meditate on this call to assemble (and its necessary renewal) to think about why “the audience” is fascinating as far as power is concerned. An audience is an active thing. Like an assembly, an audience comes together with the pretext we are going to get shit done. Governments assemble. Board rooms assemble. To assemble—and to renew those “habits of assembly” on radically different terms—means rethinking what it means to be together. It means taking back some power. Stand-up’s radical potential—its potential energy, to be chemical about things—lies in its audience’s capacity to recognize its activity in power’s mystical technique.

The systems of knowledge/power that invest in projects of race, gender, and sexuality impact our understanding and enjoyment of stand-up comedy as well as the larger cultural fields and political questions that orbit it. I argue for a critical analysis of stand-up comedy that frustrates the idea that comedy ought not to be taken seriously. I’ve attempted to steamroll that argument by showing how stand-up comedy is already/always engaged in deep political and cultural debates around race, gender, and sexuality. What I hope for is an Undercommons effort to think with laughter as a bridge of connection and to embrace it as a method to recognize our common humanity. In order to achieve this, however, we must first explore all of the ways in which we are currently falling short of that goal, recognizing how whiteness and heteronormativity short-circuit our capacities to connect. In order to do this, we must look to the deep historical and political conflicts that infiltrate all of our identities in relation to one another;
our social and intellectual practices in relation to one another; and the deep ways that both of these are all bound up in meanings and structures of whiteness, heteronormativity, and American-ness. All of this ought to get us hip to the fact that power is no simple thing, but rather, it is like a character in a story—a story that, for stand-up comedy, is still waiting to be told more completely.
Afterword

Studying Stand-up and the Comedy of Study: Ontologies from the Undercommons

“The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it’s fucked up for you, in the same way that we’ve already recognized that it’s fucked up for us. I don’t need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?”

—Fred Moten from The Undercommons

I have to admit: I wrote this afterword before anything else. It is not a central object of this study. Its supplementary position in this work, though, doesn’t imply its reduced importance. To me, it is the most crucial part. It is an ontological and a phenomenological declaration, in many ways, of who I am and why I am. It’s an afterword because it needed to be included, not because it’s an afterthought. I wrote it first.

As you’ve seen, I focused my attention on the political and cultural significance of stand-up comedy. But I did so radically, or at least, since I haven’t yet written it, I intend to write it as such. But it scratches the emotional surface. My emotions in their supra-transcendental salience are truly terrifying. Nevertheless, to illicit them is the goal of this essay.

I want(ed) to shout. Not because of frustration that the world is fucked up; but because of your refusal to see that the world is so fucked up. I need you, please, to recognize that this shit is killing you and me. But I will not let you, for sake of preserving The Undercommons, absorb its modes of organization. It exists by rules you’ve never heard of. And it will dismantle the terms upon which you set the rules on which you’ve built your world. Jack Halberstam says that “Revolution will come in a form we cannot yet imagine” (Halberstam 2017, p. 11).
The Undercommons pulled me in. *The Undercommons* also gravitated toward me—the black hole of, and for, black study. Like I was chosen, but also like it was unearned. Like it was just another privilege in the long, endless, line of privileges I’ve gotten. So, I don’t know.

The Undercommons is the space that has always existed, you know? It exists whether you like it or not; and you won’t ever get to be a part of it. (But maybe I won’t either?) My access to it exists only insofar as I believe in my allegiance to the “with and the for.” It’s visceral. It’s beautiful, especially in its pain.

My relationship to the “with and the for” is one characterized by tumult and instability—mostly because it can’t not be. How could it not be? (Note: *The Undercommons* is the book by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney; but The Undercommons is that sovereign, antinormative trove in which the ‘with and the for’ are, where ‘study’ happens. But more on that in a bit.)

And I fear that I threaten the very basis of The Undercommons by speaking (in admiration) of it without its permission. The permission here is more a concern of the most foundational questions about the politics of social formations. They are unavoidably ontological and phenomenological. Questions of “Should I?” precede questions of “Could I?” as if to say “I know I can, but would it help anything?” But can I, even? I have no idea. And if I do, how do I measure the volume, which is always to say the force, of my commentary? *Do* The Undercommons want me? I use ‘Do’ instead of “Does” because The Undercommons refuses to be a singularity (like the black hole I described above). The only correct thing I know about The Undercommons is that The Undercommons never *is*, it is only “The Undercommons are.”

Whether they want me is up to them. My selfishness to be there is motivated by my desire to be “with and for.” My selfishness is selfless, but that needs to be tested. I shouldn’t yet be trusted. After all, is the person who announces that they’re the smartest person in the room
ever truly the smartest? Someone else, by way of their genius or their ingenuity, needs to admit me to The Undercommons. On their criteria, not mine. It’s time for new standards of adaptation.

“The Undercommons are.” Not “The Undercommons is.”

The Undercommons are not an institutionalized, physical space either. (If it were, it could be brought under the umbrella of normative social and political control.) It exists everywhere but has been so forced down, so forced out. The abjection of the The Undercommons signals its necessity, as well as its existence. And one of the dictums of abjection from the hegemon’s point of view is to starve what—because using ‘who’ would be humanizing, in a really messed up sense—they deem abject of their ability to plan their liberation by way of erasure. Not just the erasure of history, but the erasure in the purest sense of the oppressed by way of exclusion and recognition of them as political subjects, normative social participants, human beings. The contradiction between the contradictions is the contradiction; the implications of pure inhumanity are incomprehensible to me. Yet I, too, am being killed, though so much more softly. But I recognize my stupidity. In many ways, I subscribe(d) to the ideologies of the settler, the murderer. I am the stupid motherfucker. Does my recognition of my stupidity, and thus my (attempted) entrance into The Undercommons signal the “with and the for?” Oh, it couldn’t be that easy, Andrew, you stupid motherfucker. This shit—"this erasure,” to quote Marquis Bey, “yo, is so real” (Bey 2016, p. 3).

So fucking real…
When “polite” language doesn’t do it for me, I curse. Emotions live inside of language, but language elides them softly yet ever-so-forcefully. Like when mom “has had enough” and needs help but is contained by the limits of her language’s expressive capacities. It’s really just emotions pressing upon the boundary of their escaping sociality. This escape is a fugitive one, where emotions interplay and supersede their supposed rational counterparts. If, though, emotion is the tool of the oppressed and “rationality” is the machinery of the oppressor (which is supposed to machine the tool the oppressed is supposed to use), then the logic of such a relationship between emotions and rationality is predicated upon the very inferiority of the oppressed, for their tool for survival is understood via a machinery which is said to understand it. But it doesn’t, and it couldn’t. Emotion escapes rationality’s reach via its fugitive character, which is to say eliding a comprehensible character altogether as far as rationality is concerned. It’s this indescribable character of the fugitive that enables emotion’s intellectual and liberating capacity.

From Queer Nation’s “I Hate Straights”:

Year after year I continue to realize that the facts of my life are irrelevant to them and that I am only half listened to, that I am an appendage to the doings of a greater world, a world of power and privilege, of the laws of installation, a world of exclusion. “That's not true,” argue my straight friends. There is the one certainty in the politics of power: those left out of it beg for inclusion, while the insiders claim that they already are. Men do it to women, whites do it to blacks, and everyone does it to queers (1990). If your belief in your frail ego trumps your willingness to listen and change your mind, if you choose to be the antagonist whose pride comes from antagonizing, then I have nothing for you. You don’t study. You can’t.

And it must be “we.” You know what Patricia Hill Collins says, right? That it (“we,” that is) is an epistemological choice (Hill Collins 1990, p. 19). It’s a survival tactic. It’s a timeless
and ever-so-simple modality of coalition, one responding in force to the force that forced its creation. Frantz Fanon,

according to Moten, wants not the end of colonialism but the end of the standpoint from which colonialism makes sense. In order to bring colonialism to an end then, one does not speak truth to power, one has to inhabit the crazy, nonsensical, ranting language of the other, the other who has been rendered a nonentity by colonialism. Indeed, blackness, for Moten and Harney by way of Fanon, is the willingness to be in the space that has been abandoned by colonialism, by rule, by order (Halberstam 2017, p. 8).

To inhabit that is to be “with and for.” The Undercommons is quite literally under the space of common (or normative) political action. In the normative space, there is antagonizing and more antagonisms. It’s a fight for control, for power. The abject cannot participate. Abjection, in order to have meaning, means absence from view, because it’s fucking disgusting to you. Even the thought is disgusting. But that’s killing you, too, you stupid motherfucker.

I digress. I curse when I digress. I digressed. Can this be a word of the past tense? Or is it only a word of the present—hence, “I digress”—that represents a state of past behavior?

And I wrestle—perhaps for the rest of my life—with being “with and for.” Certainly nominally, yes, of course. But what are the terms with which I need to qualify the magnitude of my “with” and how do I measure my “for”? For it is “the with and the for” that lets the coalition build. My participation in it transcends the (post-) modern individuation of self, and instead engages in those beautiful communities that reject the hegemonies of individualism.

I remember the first time I cried. Well, not really. But I remember the first time I cried for being angry, for feeling like I had been implicated. I was not okay because it was not okay. To echo Moten, who echoed Fanon, it was mind-blowing to still now be of the mind which said colonial thought and action and the whiteness and white supremacy, the patriarchy, the heteronormative control endemic to it, no, required for it, seemed to make sense. We “want not
the end of colonialism but the end of the standpoint from which colonialism makes sense” (Halberstam 2017, p. 8). It’s fucking tragic, it really is. A crowd gathered to watch a hanging of a black man not too long ago. In the United States of America. It happen(s/ed) almost every day.

My incessant, obsessive inclinations to regulate my grammar by way of paying attention to the temporality, the tense with which I describe my feelings and The Undercommons tell me that it matters. I feel the need to apologize for it. My double use (between the past and the present) is more a signal that these ideas cease to be regulated by the constraints of timeliness, or at least to the idea of linear history. To believe that “this happened, then this happened, then this happened” as a modality for historical understanding is to erase the erasure and institute permanence to hegemonic historical narrative. I never thought grammar mattered so much to how I understand history. Wasn’t it all in the past (tense)?

The Undercommons, though, tell a different story. Its history is always plural, so as if to say histories. And I can’t help but wonder how The Undercommons’ histories are in some inverted, perverted way, a history of me. Literally of me. Did I tap the nozzle to the pressure-filled Undercommons? James Baldwin noted that he will always be black as long as I continue to believe I am white (Baldwin 1989, in Roediger 1998, p. 178). The Undercommons’ reading circles, modes of living, and sites of expression occupy the physical world; but meta-emotionally and transculturally, I am an outsider all the way. I was. That’s what “study” is for. But am I allowed to study? Was I ever supposed to find The Undercommons? What about The Undercommons?
References


Notes

1 It’s often serendipitous—no, it is often luck—when we are lucky enough to encounter new ideas and new voices. Marquis Bey’s unique ability to write poetry is always uniquely fused with their capacity for powerful prose. Having a hard time making the distinction between poetry and prose as a reader, in my experience, often means that the writer is saying (and doing) something profound.

2 I don’t think I should hide the fact that this broad spectrum of responses, especially those that were generally negative or ones that charged these ideas as being “tenuous,” as one commenter put it, did seriously affect the outcome of this project. They forced me to re-work the ideas; sit with my discomforts; get heated about things and, while still simmering, write.

3 Thinking about the enterprise known as an “institution,” Roderick Ferguson (2012) thinks through Gayatri Spivak’s argument that there is no “non-institutional environment”: “… Rather, institutions do not “exist in isolation,” a fact that obliges us to analyze our frameworks and modes of interpretation. Spivak, therefore, rebuts the notion that institutions can be thought of as entities discretely removed from the spaces outside their walls. Instead, we get a picture of institutions as not only material objects but also discursive edifices characterized by promiscuous interactions. As such, we are obliged to look at frameworks and structures of interpretation if we are to understand those promiscuities that compel institutions to do anything but stay put, those affairs that betray institutions’ interests in and desires for seemingly noninstitutional terrains” (129).

4 These rumors certainly predated 2017. Melissa McEwan, for example, wrote in 2014 of the rape scene and reproduction of rape culture on Louis C.K.’s show “Louie.” <http://www.shakesville.com/2014/06/on-louie-again.html>. The #MeToo Movement allows for the social conditions of exposure and confirmation of sexual harassment that were previously less available.