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THESIS

Comic Trans

Presenting and Representing the Other in Stand-up Comedy

JAMES LÓRIEN MACDONALD



LIVE ART AND PERFORMANCE STUDIES (LAPS)

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ABSTRACT

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<p>This thesis is a companion to my artistic work in stand-up comedy, comprising artistic-based research and approaches comedy from a performance studies perspective. The question addressed in the paper and the work is "How is the body of the comedian part of the joke?"</p> <p>The first section outlines dominant theories about humour—superiority, relief, and incongruity—as a background to the discussion. It touches on the role of the comedian both as untrustworthy, playful trickster, and <i>parrhesiastes</i> who speaks directly to power, backed by the truth of her lived experience. It also provides some context for the contemporary comedian, whose work follows them off stage and into the thunderdome of social media, where trolling and speaking truth are taken very seriously.</p> <p>Another section presented as background to the discussion is on transgender bodies in performance, focusing on performance art and in stand-up comedy. I argue that embodied transgender performances are largely still situated in the act of encountering a trans body.</p> <p>Speaking of contemporary stand-up comedy, I discuss the ways in which an abject identity or body may be exploited by the comedian onstage for laughter and also for activism. The comedy of Tig Notaro, Maria Bamford, Hasan Minaj, Jess Thom, Eddie Izzard, Dave Chappelle, Cameron Esposito, and others come into play. Comedy is a complex and interesting site of resistance and social change, since it deals in mockery and non-seriousness, but precisely these qualities allow it to convey messages that are necessary and not polite elsewhere.</p> <p>Finally, I describe my final artistic work, a one-hour comedy show called <i>Gender Euphoria</i>, which is about my own experiences in transitioning from female to male. I describe the ways in which the space and experience were designed to mimic the conditions of a stand-up club inside an institution of learning, and to what aim. The arc of <i>Gender Euphoria</i> is described as an autobiographical work of discovering identity, encountering medical institutions with that identity, encountering new social norms, and travelling through wave after wave of certainty in identity towards more complication, ambiguity, and liberation. I also discuss the material that I was too afraid to do, or that I self-censored out of a sense of not being able to convey the message properly, and fear of backlash from a community I attempt to support.</p> <p>As a whole, this thesis attempts to provide a viewpoint towards the playful and serious contradictions in stand-up comedy, in a way that is informed by practice in the field, from the point of view of a subject whose identity has up until recently been the object of derision, rather than the subject of resistance.</p>			
ENTER KEYWORDS HERE Stand-up Comedy, Transgender artists, Performance art, Live Art, Performativity, Gender, Stand-up Comedy—Finland, Embodiment, Abject art, Transgender people, Queer, Artistic-based research			

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1. INTRODUCTION

London, UK, the summer of 2000: my boyfriend and I were cat-sitting for some colleagues of his; the big sell was that they had a huge flat-screen TV and a few hundred DVDs. The downside, which curiously they didn't tell us about beforehand, was that they were the sort of people who hadn't cleaned their kitchen floor since Thatcher was devastating The North. I remember two things about that weekend: one, a kitchen floor that was remarkably sticky for being so matted with cat hair, and two, Eddie Izzard's stand-up special *Glorious*.

Izzard is world-famous for being not only a stand-up comedian, but also, in his own words, an “action transvestite”.¹ He dressed in varying degrees of femme—makeup, painted nails, heels, tailored suits with a feminine cut, skirts, and in *Sexie*, had breasts that he described as “not implants; they’re ims, but they’re not planted”. He wasn’t a man in a dress making fun of men in dresses. He was *himself*. He only briefly even mentioned transvestism in the 100-minute show, and when he did, I understood it better. His jokes largely concerned anthropomorphic animals and absurd, nerdy/popular takes on history and culture (Noah, when asked to build an ark, speaks in Sean Connery’s accent and tries to convince God that a speedboat would be sexier; Achilles could have saved himself by putting his foot in a block of concrete but would then be a hero with a maximum radius; etc). His gender presentation, however, was always noticeable and constantly part of the act—not as travesty, but as a definitive expression of his identity. The joke was not “Eddie’s a transvestite”, but at the same time, his transvestism also *said something*.

Gender-nonconforming and comfortable about it, openly nerdy, left-wing but not aggressively so, and hilarious, Izzard presented an image that was, to me, unique among comics. His challenge to the audience came in the form of a celebratory show, revelling in all the stupidities and frailties of human nature, and doing so in a way that was more inviting than accusatory. The materiality of the appearance of a man in drag, but not performing drag, was perhaps so challenging already that to make political comedy about it would be overkill.

¹ Izzard nowadays often identifies as a transgender person or even “transgender man”, which I find absolutely delightful, since he identifies as transgender *and* as a man. Usually a person assigned male at birth *and* trans would be a trans woman, or nonbinary trans person, but I like that his definition focuses not on what he was “born as”, but what he identifies as now.

In any case, the challenging appearance alongside the inviting performance was a successful combination.

For a long time, Izzard was the only comedian I appreciated. I was averse to public anger and averse to public sexuality, while at the same time idolising and romanticising counterculture literary figures like Kurt Vonnegut and Allen Ginsburg. I also didn't care for the trappings of a stand-up performance: a too-wide grin, shouting and posing, performing rather than just being. It's amazing I ever ended up in comedy.

In the same year, I was introduced to the work of Bill Hicks, which is not to say I was a fan at first. Much of Hicks' act was dark, angry, misanthropic, misogynistic, libertarian, homophobic, and crass, and has not improved with the passing of time. The rest I still find brilliant. In *Revelations* (1993) he presents an uncompromising argument towards marketing and advertising professionals to kill themselves for the good of the species, and the routine turns in on itself so many times, caught in an escapable web of capitalism, that it's worth watching for the rhetoric alone.

Even though I hated about half of Hicks' material, I never forgot the way he presented it: ugly. Sweating through a bad haircut, screaming at the audience so hard he distorted the mic signal then ranting to himself onstage as though nobody else was even there (a terrific contrivance), and using language that went far beyond rude; he was never an object of desire. He could go for minutes onstage without a laugh, which, in comedian years, is a very, very long time. It looked like he didn't even care if the audience liked him at all, a contradictory position for a profession of people who need people to like them.

Comedian Stewart Lee wrote of Hicks in *The Times*:

Hicks was given to philosophical pronouncements on the comic's role. The actual material on his first two albums rarely fulfils his theories. "The comic is a flame, like Shiva the Destroyer, toppling idols no matter what they are," he said. But Shiva would have had better targets to destroy than the harmless media nonentities, such as Debbie Gibson, Tiffany or George Michael, that Hicks wasted his talent taking pornographic potshots at on *Dangerous*. Much more honest and self-knowing is Hicks's description of himself as "Noam Chomsky with dick jokes". He had pretensions towards being a radical social theorist,

dealing in unpopular truths, but would always sacrifice them when the going got too tough for a crowd-pleasing vulgarism. (Lee, 1997)

Hicks and Izzard, to me, represent diverging tactics in resistance against the status quo, as well as failure to unyoke the project of political pronouncement from the need for stand-up comedy to be *pleasing* in some way.

This trap of contradiction is where I would like to start thinking about stand-up comedy, and how a person with a transgender body ends up making comedy that is inseparable from that body; comedy that gets described as “activism” or “trash”, depending on the day.

Generally, it can be said that stand-up comedy has a specific aim of eliciting laughter, and a success or failure mode. This is important when trying to understand how comedians make people laugh, and what the nature of humour is at all. This paper explores the tactics comedians use in order to evoke the desired response, how this intersects with the body and social identity of the comedian, and with the politics of the comedian and that comedian’s community.

The question I will explore is “how does the body of the comedian affect the performance of stand-up comedy?” Our bodies reveal some (but not all) of our identities; our identities inform our experience; our experiences give the weight of authenticity to our stories.

I am a gay transgender man, a gigging stand-up comedian, and an artist who approaches stand-up also from the perspective of performance studies. Those three trajectories inform this work fairly equally; my work as a stand-up is inseparable from my trans identity, and I speak of the conditions and motivations underlying my performances using concepts often found in performance art. Embodiment, abjection, deep play, and performativity all inform this analysis and discussion.

The thesis opens with *Humour and its Practitioners*, a background of stand-up comedy as an art form and some theories on how humour operates. The chapter also includes some discussion on how context affects jokes, how seriousness and truth-telling affect jokes, and how stand-up comedians may play with the form and expectations of stand-up comedy, even to the point where it’s impossible to tease out the joker’s “real” intentions or message.

The next chapter, *The Body Also Speaks*, concerns transgender and transsexual bodies in performing arts. I draw on the work of Cassils and Kris

Grey, and point out that the main theme in trans performance is still the brutal corporeality of the subject, and the work of trans artists is still entwined with a general project of de-stigmatising transgender bodies.

The fourth chapter, *Bodies in Comedy*, considers various stand-up comedians whose work highlights that their bodies are inseparable from the jokes they're telling. I also discuss comedy's long-standing relationship with the abject as a source of derision, but also a source of empowerment when the abject subject takes the microphone.

The last chapter is *Gender Euphoria*, and contains an analysis of my solo show, which premiered at the Theatre Academy of Finland in May 2017.

Gender Euphoria was developed over a 3-year period, and is a collection of material I wrote and performed throughout my gender transition, starting in early 2014. Some of the material was written specifically to create a cohesive one-hour solo show, but most of it was developed as part of an ongoing practice of stand-up in clubs in Finland and abroad. I performed roughly 3 times a week for that 3-year period. Some of these would be unpaid 10-minute spots at open mic gigs in bars to a dozen people; other times I would be headlining with a 30-minute set in a more theatrical venue to audiences of 200. Stand-up comedy is not often rehearsed; it's developed through performance practice. "Bombing" or "dying" onstage—failing to make people laugh—is a normal part of live work, particularly when developing new jokes.

Most of the knowledge concerning the art of stand-up is gained experientially and is difficult to source. I have learned stand-up comedy by doing it, and even though I had prior experience in theatre, there were innumerable techniques and principles I had to learn from scratch. I have learned by talking to colleagues in Finland, but also tend to find that whenever I travel and perform, I wind up talking shop with the local comedians well into the evening. I've spoken to beginners and 30-year pros in Germany, Denmark, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Singapore, and tend to find the approaches and insights remarkably consistent. When I speak of "most comedians" as a source in this thesis, I am generalising from the ones I have spoken to.

I also end up spending a lot of time on Twitter and have developed a literacy particular to the platform. It is blisteringly fast, gladiatorial in verbal altercations, a place to observe groupthink and social trends, and also an excellent primary source of people's feelings and thoughts about nearly

everything. Many comedians use Twitter to tell jokes and announce gigs; many also use it to further political causes (Sarah Silverman and Kathy Griffin tweet about US politics; Ricky Gervais is active in animal rights, and Hari Kondabolu tweets about colonialism, for example). Alternating between seriousness and joking, and sometimes joking about serious things, is also a central theme in this thesis, which, without further ado, should commence.

2. HUMOUR AND ITS PRACTITIONERS²

“Among the honour-sensitive Athenians [...] the distinction between abuse and jesting often called for nice judgement ... One man’s joke is another man’s slander, depending on the skill of the jester and the butt’s reaction. Comic poets, like orators, had to be able to sail very close to the wind.”

—Jeffrey Henderson, “The Demos and the Comic Competition”, 1990

With this chapter I open the discussion on specifically marked bodies in stand-up comedy by outlining some established theories about the qualities and function of humour, describing the field of stand-up comedy, and then discussing the comedian’s relationship to trickster/prankster behaviour. The chapter closes with a discussion of Foucault’s notion of truth-telling from lived experience, *parrhesia*, and its role in stand-up. Throughout all these attempts, definitions will remain slippery and full of exceptions. It is not the scope of this thesis to pin down the most precise interpretations of how and why we laugh, and how to make others laugh, but to provide the context needed to understand a comedian’s work. It is also important to keep in mind that comedians, as artists who are invested in laughter, surprise, and playfulness, are conscious of many of the contradictions inherent in their work, and will deliberately indulge in them—with or without letting the audience know that this is what they’re doing. Meaning is to comedy as scrambled eggs is to Teflon.

At its simplest, we think of laughter is an involuntary physiological response that signifies joy or mirth in humans. However, there are many complications. Laughter can also be a misdirection to mask other emotions we are less free to express (such as nervousness or feeling threatened). When some people in a social group laugh, it can be difficult for others in the group to suppress their own laughter, even if they are not feeling mirth. Researchers studying conversations and discourse have found that people use laughter as a kind of

² For a comprehensive study of laughter, humour, and theories about comedy, Andrew Stott’s 2005 book *Comedy* is indispensable. It covers nearly everything in this thesis in greater depth, which, having discovered the book after writing this paper, was at once infuriating and encouraging. Tricksters, sexuality, abjection, the body, politics, and theories of laughter are all included.

aid to speech, not just as a response to something funny—laughter is placed deliberately in conversation to help manage tricky emotions and relationships (Glenn & Holt 2013). It signals positive group interactions and helps clarify the speaker’s intent. The act of laughing is linked to the release of endorphins and the suppression of cortisol and epinephrine, which are stress hormones, and can improve pain tolerance (e.g. Dunbar 2011).

Clearly, there are many good reasons to laugh and to be able to make others laugh; nearly everyone is capable of both, and experts may develop their capacity into a marketable skill, such as stand-up comedy. I have yet to meet a professional comic who would not say that the core of stand-up comedy is that it is *funny*. Laughter appears to be a universal measure of success and good artistry in the field. However, as we will see, it would be wrong to draw the conclusion that because “good comedy” is what makes people laugh, that anything that makes people laugh is good comedy—and of course, if there is a universal measure of success and good artistry, it is not hard to find artists who purposefully subvert, bend, or break these conventions entirely.

Stand-up comedy

Stand-up comedy’s most common and stripped-down elements are: a single performer, speaking to an audience, with the intention of making them laugh. Comedian and comedy researcher Oliver Double defined it as follows: “a stand-up comedy act usually involves a solo performer speaking directly to an audience, with the intention of provoking laughter, within the context of formalised entertainment, but it is an entity in itself, and is not contained within a larger narrative structure” (Double 1991, 4).

However, as Double points out, it is not *always* solo, it does not *always* involve speech (physical clowning, props, and music are part of stand-up’s genealogy and still remain part of many acts, to say nothing of the way that intonation, facial expression, gesture, and other affect displays influence communication), and it doesn’t even always involve laughter. Sometimes this is because the comedian fails to make the audience laugh even though they intended to, whereas on other occasions there is no or little laughter because the comedian is speaking about something in a serious way. However, the frame of stand-up comedy involves an expectation of laughter; otherwise, it would be included in genres such as spoken word poetry or storytelling. It’s also significant that comedy can be seen as *successful* or *failing* based on the

reaction of the audience—an involuntary reaction at that. Comedians hone their skills to consensually manipulate audiences into laughing using many different tools at their disposal: wordplay, mockery, satire, absurdity, storytelling, incongruity, character impersonations, stereotypes, shock, transgression, physical clowning, song, and meta-communication about the performance situation. The tastes and mood of the audience and the skills, character, and identity of the performer all influence the success of the manipulation. Other forms of performance are rarely as immediately results-oriented—though horror films, while not live events, would also fit this bill. Moreover, the comedian is not the only one who knows whether or not a joke has landed—everyone in the room has this information, and this may influence how the next joke lands. From my own experience, I would say that comedy is one of those activities where success is rewarded with instant thrills, but if you make a mistake, punishment is immediate and unequivocal; sort of the rhetorical equivalent of snowboarding.

Contemporary stand-up comedy is thought to have its genesis in American vaudeville and English music hall, where comic monologues started to appear in what were usually song and dance shows (Tafoya 2009, 16).³ Eddie Tafoya makes the argument for Charley Case, a mulatto American who performed in blackface in the 1880s and 1890s, as the first performer to do what we would recognise as stand-up comedy, in that he performed comic monologues without props or costumes (Tafoya, 108). Speaking directly to the audience as oneself, without a character, was further developed in the US in strings of nightclubs and theatres, such as the “Borscht Belt” (resort venues popular with Jewish performers and audiences from the 1940s to 1960s) and the “Chitlin’ Circuit”, a tour of venues that were deemed safe for African American performers.⁴ In the 1950s, we begin to see flashes of what is expected in stand-up comedy today, with Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl introducing two new conventions: a conversational delivery, and “the topical joke that called out sacred cows such as the president, Congress, corporate bigwigs, national

³ Of course, this potted history follows an Anglo, Western tradition that led towards the contemporary stand-up scene, but these stand-up prototypes were not necessarily the first time such performances, of entertainment incorporating commentary on contemporary events and social criticism, existed: see the Indian Chakyar Koothu, or the cynics and epicureans of Ancient Greece.

⁴ Eddie Tafoya’s *The Legacy of the Wisecrack: Stand-up Comedy as the Great American Literary Form* provides a fascinating overview of the history of the form, which is outlined here in only a gross trajectory.

hypocrisy, and neo-Victorian values” (Tafoya, 117). Whilst it had its roots in the US and UK, nowadays the style, production, and audience literacy of stand-up is remarkably similar worldwide—a YouTube video of a single performer speaking as themselves, into a mic, in front of a brick wall in a nightclub filled with giggling (or complaining) people could be from anywhere, from New York to Oulu to Singapore.⁵

Around the world, people understand the context of a stand-up comedy show and will pay to hear someone make them laugh. How does this work? Why do we laugh? How do we manipulate (consensually) a group of people into laughter? I will introduce three major theories on what makes something funny: Superiority, Relief, and Incongruous Juxtaposition, before further muddying the argument with tricksters and truth-tellers. Other theories are available, but these three have so far dominated the field, at least insofar as it relates to a Western critical context.

Theories of humour: Superiority

The oldest explanations of laughter concern a tendency to laugh at the misfortune or perceived inadequacies of other people. In Plato’s *Philebus*, Socrates says, “When we laugh at the ridiculous aspects of our friends, the admixture of pleasure in our malice produces a mixture of pleasure and distress. For we agreed some time ago that malice was a form of distress; but laughter is enjoyable, and on these occasions both occur simultaneously” (Plato 1975, 50). Plato’s writing reflects the oldest existing theory of why we laugh: because something that someone has said or done makes us feel superior to others. If this seems like insufficient stimulus for a loud, embodied reaction, consider the way sports fans react and express their emotions when their team wins or loses. The idea that someone who is not us, but whom we choose to support, can make us whoop and gasp with excitement on the basis of their superior performance lends credence to the idea that a spontaneous,

⁵ I performed five shows in five different clubs in Singapore in 2016. I didn’t know what to expect at first, but when I got to the first club, I found the comedians milling about nervously with notebooks, happy to meet someone from outside their scene, and I was asked if I could do a “tight five”—a five-minute set of well-developed and reliable material. I said yes. The MC asked me if I “wanted a light at four”, waving his mobile phone. The practice of using the flashlight on the back of a mobile phone to signal to a comedian onstage that she is X minutes into her set is completely familiar to me from the Finnish scene, but I was astonished to find exactly the same practice, down to the vocabulary and gestures, employed on the other side of the planet.

uncontrolled reaction like laughter can result simply from an acute sense of *winning*.

However, as Wallace L. Chafe remarks, “Plato comes across as a rather humourless individual, and his few remarks on the subject can hardly be said to form a comprehensive theory” (2007, 140). The superiority theory was fleshed out more by Thomas Hobbes, who wrote in his discourse on *Human Nature*:

Also men laugh at the infirmities of others, by comparison wherewith their own abilities are set off and illustrated. Also men laugh at jests, the wit whereof always consisteth in the elegant discovering and conveying to our minds some absurdity of another; and in this case also the passion of laughter proceedeth from the sudden imagination of our own odds and eminency; for what is else the recommending of ourselves to our own good opinion, by comparison with another man’s infirmity or absurdity? For when a jest is broken upon ourselves, or friends of whose dishonour we participate, we never laugh thereat. I may therefore conclude, that the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly; for men laugh at the follies of themselves past. (Hobbes 1962, 45-7)

Hobbes suggests that we laugh at the perceived weaknesses of others, as it bolsters our own perception of our own strength; and that we *do not laugh* when others make jokes about us or those close to us. We might also, as Hobbes pointed out, laugh at ourselves: at how stupid we were to behave like this, or to think like that. Humour can also create social groups in fluid, informal ways, with those who “win” in the joke constituting an in-group and the “losers” the out-group. Professional comedians seem to have the skills to create temporary social groups on the basis of positioning those groups as superior or inferior to each other. As an example, one of the quickest ways to get a room on your side is to make fun of a neighbouring town. The slightest inference that “those idiots over there” are distinct from “us idiots over here” will result in the crowd laughing; it’s a cheap shot, but it works and is often

used as a simple icebreaker.⁶ This is not to say that feeling superior to others *always* makes us laugh, as Frances Hutcheson points out in his critique of Hobbes: sometimes we see those less fortunate and feel pity; we may feel superior to animals without laughing at them; and often we laugh at things that have nothing to do with any social hierarchy (1750). Nevertheless, the superiority theory persists, and is most recognisable these days by the concepts of “punching up” (jokes and mockery at the expense of those in positions of power) and “punching down” (laughing at and othering the oppressed). Thus, jokes at the expense of Donald Trump are often found acceptable, no matter how violent or crude in nature, while Donald Trump mocking a disabled reporter is seen by many as grossly cruel, and an indictment on Trump’s character.

In the superiority theory, humour may be observed to be a kind of aggression, and linked to bullying, but it should also be linked to emancipation. Being able to laugh at oppressors or at authority shows signs of agency, although whether that agency has any material value is a much larger question, and one that has deeply affected social media and public life in the last decade, where derision, mockery, and wit are chief weapons in ideological tribalist warfare. Jokes on Twitter made at the expense of a person, concept, or institution can result in a fault line of opinionated responses and counter-jokes, with both camps digging in their heels as deep as the Mariana Trench. In an age of fake news, however, often the spin doctor’s job is to convince people that his party is, in fact, the oppressed one, no matter what those people over there might say about the matter, and all politics are seen as a zero-sum game. Thus, instead of it being objectively clear that one side is “punching up” (resisting oppression and power) and the other is “punching down” (oppressing and bullying), multiple tribes continually attempt to plant their flag in the underdog territory, with each group insisting that the other

⁶ Cheap shots are very valuable when used judiciously and are an essential part of the comedian’s arsenal. Even though one might argue that it is creepy and vile to watch an audience contort itself over the most rudimentary manipulation, if the cheap shots are employed to warm up the audience in the service of better, more sophisticated jokes, this makes it all part of a greater good.

I have one opener I frequently use in small towns in Finland: “*Canada is a lot like Finland, really. There are tonnes of trees there, lots of trees here. It’s cold in Canada, it’s cold in Finland. In Canada we play a lot of hockey; in Finland you’re learning how to play hockey.*” This usually gets an outraged shout from the audience, followed by laughter, and I continue, “*Fight me*”, which gets another laugh. The bravado of claiming superiority and then drawing attention to the fact that I’m in the minority and would certainly lose a fight with the entire audience seems to be fun for everyone.

side is the hegemonic power.⁷ As a result, political social media resembles a kind of pointillist propaganda, with millions of droplets of “justified” derision performing an ocean of obfuscated rage.

As Don Waisanen notes in *An Alternative Sense of Humour: The Problems with Crossing Comedy and Politics in Public Discourse*, jokes in the public sphere can also have the effect of regulating and silencing us: “The very vividness of jokes may prevent voices from entering public discussion, be used to trivialise rather than debate an issue, or absolve communicators from the need to present evidence for their claims” (in Rountree, 303).

On a less fraught note, there is another kind of superiority joke where the target isn’t an externalised enemy, and expressions of superiority are not necessarily hostile. In George Carlin’s charming closing routine from his 1990 show *Doin’ It Again*, he lists “little moments that make us all the same”, which are essentially dozens of instances of laughter directed at one’s previous self: “*Do you ever look at your watch... and then you don’t know what time it is?... D’you ever try to pick up a suitcase that you think is full but it isn’t, and for a split second you think you’re really strong?... How about when you’re walking up a flight of stairs and you think there’s one more step?*” It’s a light-hearted approach, revealing common follies that most people will have experienced, but would have kept to themselves for fear of appearing stupid. In this case superiority is involved in a process of self-reflection and learning or humility.

Theories of humour: Relief

In the 18th century out came the valves, pistons, and steam, and all kinds of psychological and bodily functions were fashionably described in terms of automation and machinery, much in the same way that we describe ourselves today in the language of computers. Lord Shaftesbury’s “An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour” in 1711 is the first recorded use of the word “humour” to mean *funny*, and speaks of nerves, organs, and “animal spirits”.

⁷ Thus, incel culture on 4chan is partially predicated on the notion that women hold the power when it comes to sex, romance, and companionship, and that they, imperfect, non-alpha males, are oppressed by this. As another example, trans-exclusionary radical feminists or TERFs argue that the inclusion of trans women into women’s spaces is oppressive towards cisgender women. If trans women argue for their own inclusion, TERFs argue it proves that trans women are willfully oppressing cis women.

His theory was that pressure builds up amongst all the fluids and gases of the body and mind, and they find their release in laughter:

The natural free spirits of ingenious men, if imprisoned or controlled, will find out other ways of motion to relieve themselves in their constraint and, whether it be in burlesque, mimicry, or buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves and be revenged up on their constrainers. (Shaftesbury 1999, 34)

Laughter is, according to relief theory, a homeostatic control, relieving tension both psychological and physical. English philosopher and polymath Herbert Spencer wrote of it as an “economical phenomenon”, where all laughter was seen as the release of surplus, pent-up nervous energy—often energy of “inappropriate” emotions. As Andrew Stott discusses, Spencer believed laughter to stem from rather improbable physiological causes: “[on] occasion, nervous energy will be displaced from its proper outlet and redirect itself in short bursts of activity such as heavy breathing, jumping up and down, or rubbing one’s hands with glee” (Stott, 138). Spencer’s idea of relief was akin to a steam valve letting off pressure, but Sigmund Freud, influenced by Spencer, developed the relief theory towards a more nuanced approach.

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud suggests that the release comprises energy that would have been used for another task, but which is now superfluous. He imagines a division into three kinds of laughter situations: *der Witz* (jokes), the comic (clowning or physical humour), and humour (a situation that should involve a “distressing affect”, which is then suddenly inhibited or subverted so that the distress never actually occurs). Respectively in these situations, laughter is caused by the sudden release of energy that had been called up for repressing emotions (controlling one’s response to the joke), thinking (the clown’s movements are so pronounced and ridiculous that the energy called up to understand it is declared surplus), and feeling emotions (while the set-up may have prompted us to feel pity for someone in a story, the next plot twist renders that pity null and void, and it is released as laughter).

When it comes to *der Witz*, Freud suggests that most jokes are about hostility or sexual aggression, as these are the most commonly repressed emotions. When we hear a joke, we momentarily stop repressing these

emotions, and release the energy used to hold them in, without actually giving in to those desires in action:

And here at last we can understand what it is that jokes achieve in the service of their purpose. They make possible the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way. They circumvent this obstacle and in that way draw pleasure from a source which the obstacle had made inaccessible.
 (Freud, 2014)

Unlike Spencer's steam valve, which lets out physical tension directly, Freud's conception is that the tension released is *not* the tension relating directly to the presence of a negative emotion, but rather the tension caused by the *effort required to control it*.

The inference that dirty and hostile jokes have, in fact, a civilising effect on the laugher is another argument at the core of contemporary comedy. One could argue that swearing, sexual humour, or even sexist, racist, and homophobic humour are healthy expressions of uncivilised thoughts, and that those people who can't handle being in the room when those jokes are told are simply unable to acknowledge those thoughts in themselves; they have "no sense of humour" and will die as joyless, uptight husks dependent on the nanny state. In this argument, shared rude jokes are effective at creating bonding emotions between people because they allow us to appear uncivilised in front of each other, acknowledging each other's brutality. A counter-argument to this is that uncivilised jokes have a *normalising* effect as regards their content, and it is difficult to tell who might be "letting off steam" by revealing their anxieties,⁸⁹ and who might be sincere in their bigotry. So instead of (or perhaps in addition to) homophobic jokes constituting an opportunity to relieve oneself temporarily of the energy required to be anxious

⁸ For example, see O'Connor, Ford, and Banos' 2017 study "Restoring Threatened Masculinity: The Appeal of Sexist and Anti-Gay Humour", asserting that straight men found sexist and anti-gay jokes funnier after they were exposed to a possible threat to their masculine identity.

⁹ Writing as a man of complicated homosexuality, I tend to find that I don't have much need to relieve the tension my psyche creates over worrying that I might be homosexual myself, so those jokes do very little for me—although I can take pleasure in watching other people wrestle with that tension in themselves, particularly when the joke-teller is clear that he is aware of his own anxieties, and that the butt of the joke is his own insecurity and not "those fags".

about homosexuality, homophobic jokes are then simply considered homophobia in action.

Comedians often discuss whether we ought to avoid making jokes if their language or content includes harmful terms or hostility. What does it matter if the subtext is constructive if what is said *sounds* prejudiced—won’t many people take the joke at face value? Is the comedian willing to do harm, and if so, how much? To expect that audiences have no irrational, dark, or brutal fears that can be exposed and exploited for laughs would be to advocate and accept only ideological purity in thought and action, and to miss an opportunity for public reflection.

I would also note that what constitutes distress is different for individual audience members and changes for the individual over the course of time. Not too long ago, I split with my partner, and ended up joking onstage about the breakup process. After the show I saw an audience member sitting alone and crying, and went to talk to them. They’d just recently broken up, too, and were in an acute state of heartbreak. They hadn’t been able to laugh at the jokes. However, most other audience members—those who did laugh—had presumably also experienced heartache and loss in this way, but their capacity to laugh wasn’t hindered by proximity to the event. It wasn’t “too soon” for them.

Theories of humour: Incongruous juxtaposition

*What do you call a cow with no legs?
Ground beef.*

“Ha, I get it.” Two concepts contained in one statement are simultaneously true; or, like a puzzle, they require active resolution. The incongruity theory, or incongruity-resolution theory (sometimes so called because laughter is a product not of the incongruity itself, but of the realisation and resolution of it in the mind of the beholder), began developing in the 1700s with contributions by many, including Francis Hutcheson, Arthur Schopenhauer, Hegel, and James Beattie (Morreall, 2016). Immanuel Kant proposed that the comic is “the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” (1790, First Part, sec 54), while Henri Bergson related the incongruity to

“living” and “mechanical” phenomena, giving numerous examples of comedy arising from “something mechanical encrusted on the living” in his collection of essays *Laughter (Le Rire, 1900)*.

A typical joke will have a *set-up* (*what do you call a cow with no legs?*) and a *punchline* (*ground beef*). The first line of the joke sets up the expectation, and the punch line holds an idea that is incongruous but related to the set-up,

that must then be resolved in the mind of the audience.

Robert Mankoff, cartoon editor for The New Yorker magazine from 1997 to 2017, explains that humour “not only tells us how to understand things; it tells us something about the limitations of our understanding. ... In logic, something is ‘A’ or ‘not A’. In humour, it’s both ‘A’ and ‘not A’” (Big Think, 2009). He then



"No, Thursday's out. How about never—is never good for you?"

Figure 1 No, Thursday's Out. How About Never - New Yorker Cartoon, May 3rd, 1993. By Robert Mankoff.

uses an example of his famous cartoon of a man in an office talking on the phone and looking at his schedule, with a caption reading “*No, Thursday's out. How about never—is never good for you?*” The message of the text is “I don’t want to see you” but it’s communicated in the polite language of “let’s do lunch”. The co-existence of rudeness and politeness creates an A and not A situation.

What happens if we don’t get the joke? The incongruity never resolves and it just makes no sense. Also, the resolution of an incongruity does not necessarily result in laughter—the violation of our expectations may result in fear, pity, disgust, or anger. A humorous response to incongruity is the *enjoyment* of that incongruity. Michael Clark, for example, suggests three features as necessary and sufficient for humour:

1. A person perceives (thinks, imagines) an object as being incongruous.
2. The person enjoys perceiving (thinking, imagining) the object.

3. The person enjoys the perceived (thought, imagined) incongruity at least partly for itself, rather than solely for some ulterior reason.
 (quoted in Morreall 1987, 139–155)

Juxtaposition of *identity* and *message* can also be incongruous: we don't just hear a joke by itself; we understand it as being told by a social actor. Without consideration, we judge whether or not a certain kind of person is able to say X about subject Y, and this judgment informs our enjoyment. A man telling a straightforward joke where the punchline is about women being unable to parallel park, for example, is read as hacky. However, a woman telling the same joke instantly becomes more complicated. Is she also being hacky and rehashing an old, tired stereotype, or is she saying it ironically? Is she subverting it in some way, or reinforcing it? Is it a commentary on how her identity changes the reception of the joke's hackiness? Is that then a commentary on the inescapable fact that we perceive and judge her identity? Where does this incongruity resolve, if it does at all—and is it funny if it never does?¹⁰

When the incongruity is in the joker's intentions, we may never get that moment of "I get it", but instead be caught uncomfortably in a space of no resolution, trying to work out if the comedian is sincere, or if they are being ironic, or even if our own assumptions about the comedian is what is preventing us from getting the joke. Ambiguous intentionality is sufficiently a trope in comedy that there are meta-comedic routines about it. In Bo Burnham's 2016 special *Make Happy*, he sings a song about how difficult it is to be a straight white male, and then immediately follows the song with, "*If you were offended by that, it was ironic. Isn't that fun? I meant the whole opposite of it.*" The notion that Burnham would actually have to clarify his position speaks to the myriad ways audiences will interpret irony.

It may even be that the comedian is unsure of his position on the subject, and is simply enjoying the confusion it creates, delivering sarcasm, make-believe, sincerity, imitation, satire, deadpan delivery, or any other style of communication, to the point where multiple, contrasting positions on the

¹⁰ I might argue that Tig Notaro or Stewart Lee are good examples of comedians who deliberately engage with this kind of "infinite incongruity loop", where the resolution never occurs, but the laughter trickles in in wave after wave as each layer of meaning is exposed. This might be why audiences either love or hate these comedians and they earn the dubious honour of being "cerebral". They, of course, make reference to this with yet more jokes that fall into the infinite incongruity loop.

argument may exist simultaneously. Bo Burnham has remarked of his use of this style of opaque positioning: “I try and write satire that's well-intentioned. But those intentions have to be hidden. It can't be completely clear and that's what makes it comedy” (in Gottlieb).¹¹

A lightbulb moment

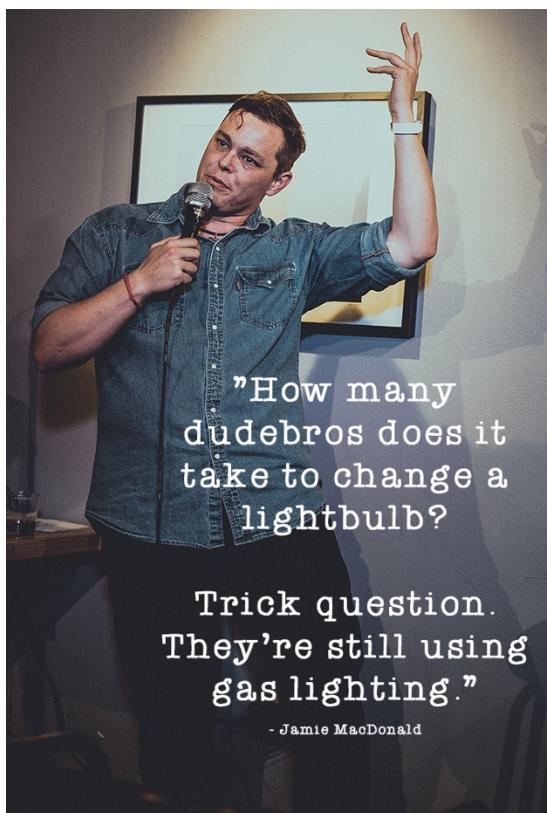


Figure 2. Photo: Juha Hanhinen. Meme: Jamie MacDonald 2017

Individual jokes may work with all of these theories. I present an example of one of my jokes that keeps going viral¹² every few months: *“How many dudebros does it take to change a lightbulb? Trick question. They’re still using gas lighting.”*

Lightbulb jokes are classic incongruities: they all rely on puns (visual, conceptual, linguistic) to make the audience laugh. Here we have the incongruity that “dudebros” would not need lightbulbs because they’re still using gas lights—but gaslighting is the abusive practice of making a person doubt their own mind in order to control them.

Inferred, it becomes a joke about certain kinds of men abusing women.

¹¹ The lack of clarity in play is also discussed in games researcher Jaakko Stenros’ *Playfulness, Play, and Games*, with the introduction of “bad play”: “if one seeks to fully understand play, one simply cannot turn a blind eye towards its darker expressions. Play can be aggressive, destructive, and disruptive, it can be joyous, mirthful, benevolent and beneficent, something that builds character and prepares for the slings and arrows of life. In a social setting it can be coercive, manipulative, used to ostracise and to humiliate, yet it can also be used to overcome conflicts, to establish common ground and a feeling of togetherness, to create social cohesion, and to strengthen relationships. Sometimes play is many of these things at the same time, and often it can be difficult to estimate from the outside what it feels like for all participants – let alone guess what the outcome of an act of play will be. Play is many things, and it cannot be nailed down in any one moral category.” (2015, 76)

¹² I’ve seen this image on Instagram and Facebook every once in a while, usually credited to me when the image is used. I have also seen it on Twitter presented as that user’s own joke, with upwards of 60,000 likes. There are variations criticizing instead Trump cabinet members, narcissists, TERFS, or even specific people, and I suppose I should just be pleased that the joke has now made it into folklore.

And yet the image of a gas light (and a frat boy tending to it) is still created in our minds before it disappears as useless; the joke transforms that “strained expectation” into nothing.

Who is superior in the joke? People who align with feminism, or anyone who believes dudebros who commit abuse are good targets for mockery. This was the first meme joke of mine to be distributed way beyond my own control, and watching it spread, I notice the sense of in-group and out-group it instantly creates wherever it gets traction and a few thousand likes. The responses are either enthusiastic laughter, or angry scorn. It generates no constructive discussion whatsoever. I have read accusations that the joke is man-hating or divisive (often along with the words “not funny”, or its perennial cousin “feminists have no sense of humour”, which is in itself an interesting attack on the idea behind the joke by attacking the joke’s validity as humorous), and I agree that it is divisive. It is a joke; it’s a reductive simplification of the phenomenon that many men, particularly those invested in an uncritical masculinity, abuse others (often women) through psychologically controlling methods such as gaslighting. The joke takes as its basic assumption—the barest bones of the set-up, if you will—that this phenomenon is a *fact*; anyone who disputes that it is a fact will probably not like the joke. It is clearly making fun of abusers and aiming at solidarity towards victims. All this in a lightbulb joke.

In terms of relief theory, any joke works when it results in the release of pent-up energy. One could suggest that the inappropriate emotion that is normally suppressed is anger towards dudebros (or patriarchy in general), or anger about psychological abuse. Those who don’t get the joke (or don’t see it as funny) may not experience any release, but may simply feel as though they’re being ridiculed and experience the joke as hostility.

This particular joke is fairly straightforward in analysis; partly because it’s a decent joke, but also because I wrote it and understood my own intentions. As we will see, comedians are figures who often resist having their work analysed and pinned down in meaning or intention.

Tricksters and pranksters

The figure of the joker or trickster is as at least as old as literature. In the oldest recorded literary bromance *Epic of Gilgamesh* (2200 BCE), both of the main characters, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, are tricksters. Pantheistic religions

across the globe often included a designated trickster, from the Norse Loki to Ojibwe's Nanabozho and Anansi in Ashanti folklore. These Chaotic Neutral figures sometimes help others, sometimes hinder them, sometimes act selfishly, sometimes with great generosity. They give voice to a drive for total moral flexibility and complete freedom to choose how one behaves regardless of group norms, but if they go too far, they can be reined in and punished by agents acting on behalf of the group.

If a simple pun is the sort of joke that pushes at the boundaries of language, a trickster's instinct is to push at the boundaries of social behaviour, or even at physical or psychological limits. The motivation to push at these boundaries can stem from a desire to point them out as false boundaries, perhaps with the benevolent aim of creating better boundaries; or they can be more selfish and malicious, enjoying the momentary superiority over the victim. A trickster who has detangled his benevolent and malevolent motivations and works only in the service of one is no longer a trickster—a god or a devil, but not both. Andrew Stott describes the “comic mobility” of the trickster as a “means of bringing about reconciliation through the interpenetration of apparently irreconcilable realms of existence” (2005, 55).

Tricksters are hardly relegated to mythology. Human cultures contain traditions from carnival to April Fool's day—a day literally devoted to practical jokes. Practical jokes are ritualised and physicalised tricks, some of which are as classic as the most known knock-knock jokes. In the same way that a knock-knock joke always starts with the same ritualised lines, classic pranks have scripts of their own. The old “water bucket over the door” prank not only creates a hilarious moment when the target is drenched; it refers back to the entire canon of instances of “water bucket over the door”, in the same “restored behaviour” that Richard Schechner uses to describe meaningful human action: all human performance consists of behaviour that is not-for-the-first-time (2006, 34). Both the pranksters and the target will be aware that this is a known prank. While the prank *could* be intended to be hostile, it is even funnier (and usually seen as a better prank) if the target is able to take it in a gracious manner.

Moira Marsh describes pranks as “ritual degradations” and “playful performances” that have the function of both breaking societal norms *and* enforcing the will of the group over the ego of the individual (2015). With this in mind, one can argue that if the person who gets drenched by the water

bucket feels attacked by the practical joke, it's not necessarily the pranksters who are in the wrong, because wrong is not an absolute, but a function of group values. Perhaps the target is too full of themselves and falsely believes themselves to be better than the group; the intent was to make the target a more suitable member of society. Maybe the pranksters are the mistaken ones, and they chose a prank that went too far for the sensibilities of the target, so if their goal was light humiliation for the purposes of social cohesion, they did not prank appropriately. Or perhaps it was simply a terrible moment for the prank to occur, for example, if the target was on the way to a job interview. A person being upset at a joke is not a reliable indication of right and wrong; it is only an indication of where that person situates themselves in relation to the values of the joker(s)—and this is further complicated when jokers perform deliberately ambiguous values. One could simply avoid the whole activity of pranking altogether in order to avoid humiliation or making mistakes, but where is the fun in that?

Parrhesia

There are comedians whose work prioritises wordplay or imagery, such as one-liner comic Milton Jones, who exploits innocent, absurd juxtapositions such as “*I've just finished my book; I wrote it on penguins. Come to think of it, paper would have been better*”, or “*We live in an uncaring society. I was in the park the other day watching an old man feed the birds, and after a while I thought to myself: 'I wonder how long he's been dead?'*” These jokes are self-contained units; they don't require any reflection on the state of the nation, or of the body politic, or of the artist or the audience member as flawed human beings; they are vol-au-vents that aren't designed to hold any more than one savoury idea. Jokes whose only goal is delight and laughter are a robust pillar of the comedy profession and are not to be undervalued, but they are only part of the comedy profession.

Trickery may motivate the comedian to push at boundaries in a morally ambiguous manner and possibly just for the sake of pushing at boundaries, but she also has another mode of speech at her disposal; that of telling the truth. But because the comedian makes a joke out of everything, we don't trust her not to be lying at any given moment, with one particular exception: when she is describing, directly or indirectly, her own experience. Michel Foucault speaks of this activity as *parrhesia*:

... *Parrhesia* is a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain type of relation to himself or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty. More precisely, *parrhesia* is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognises truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself). In *parrhesia*, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy.

(Foucault 2001, 19-20)

Foucault notes that etymologically, *parrhesia* translates as “to say everything,” and is a form of public speech that ignores social hierarchies in favour of a direct line from the speaker to power in service of the truth. Whilst rhetoric champions persuasion, and therefore is vulnerable to lies and trickery through the artistry of the speaker, *parrhesia* requires that what the speaker says coincides exactly with what he believes to be true. Here the weight of the critique carried by direct speech is not inconsequential because the speaker is uneducated or informal; rather, lived experience of identity along with knowledge and opinion gives the speaker authority (Rossing, 2014).

This is not to say that whatever someone utters, so long as they believe it, is “truth”. The point of *parrhesia* is not that what is uttered is universally correct, but that it is a specific kind of speech wherein the speaker’s relationship to the truth is absolute, and where he feels a responsibility to speak.

Many comedians work in this frankness and criticism, informed by their first-person experience of the world. In his essay “Critical race humor in a postracial moment: Richard Pryor’s contemporary *parrhesia*”, Jonathan P. Rossing describes Pryor as a *parrhesiastes* when it comes to race in America.¹³

¹³ It will not be the intention of this paper to conflate racial, gendered, ability-based, or any other kind of minority status in a kind of “all minority comedy” lump; rather, the idea is to examine a common

He describes how Pryor's comedic skills, courage, and tactics allowed him to speak to both Black and white audience members, using what Foucault called the *parrhesiastic contract*, where the party who has the power but desires the truth grants the speaker the freedom to present those truths without punishment:

This tacit cultural contract is moral, not legal or institutional, and thus truth-telling still carries some potential for consequence. However, the agreement constructs a sanctioned space for truth-telling that lessens the risk and vulnerability of criticism. Critical race humour offers an avenue by which truth-tellers might render criticism more palatable and help others receive and digest racial truths. By making people laugh as they confront the truth, the humourist constructs a parrhesiastic contract that shields her from sharp retaliation. Humour also protects the receivers of criticism from acrid attacks that would preclude the possibility of reception and transformation. As a contemporary *parrhesiastes*, Richard Pryor strategically overcame opposition to racial truths through humour without diminishing the critical project. (Rossing 2014)

Framed in the “not serious” context of the comedy show, serious ideas can be presented without the threat of punishment or disagreement—or at least with a diminished threat, as hecklers are always a possibility. I would suggest that the comedy frame also allows a member of the hegemonic class to entertain a serious criticism with relative ease, since they have *afforded* the speaker the privilege to criticise them. A white person attending a Richard Pryor show is paying money to be both criticised and entertained; perhaps entertained *by being criticised*.

Comedian and theorist Rebecca Krefting has a book on the topic of political, “charged humour” and the commercial implications of its various methods. She proposes that “a performer produces charged humour when she foregrounds her marginality in order to call into question and disrupt the terms of her subordination; charged humour both repels and attracts” (2014, 25).

relationship towards *audiences* by a minority *comedian*. Thus a trans experience is not comparable to a Black experience, but comedians do share a context independent of these other identities: comedy.

The humourist in question seeks to bring new worldviews that eschew inequality into public consciousness and discourse. It is humour deployed in the service of creating cultural citizenship.... This kind of humour is intentional, meaning the humourist has designs on an outcome, specific or general—a change in attitudes or beliefs or action taken on behalf of social inequality. Finally charged humour can limit the commercial potential of a comic persona. (*ibid.*)

This is not to say that this kind of comedy is superior, or inherently progressive, or that the criticisms uttered by comedians who are sincere are words that we all should take to heart. *Parrhesia* is only a condition of speech in which a relationship to truth is perceived.

American talk show host Glenn Beck made a career out of speaking from whatever organ substitutes for the heart in conservative talk radio, spouting wild paranoid theories about everything from global warming to gun control to Obama. He broke ranks with other conservative pundits in denying Trump, and much of his audience moved on to the even more bombastic and parasitic Alex Jones, who is so sincere he can barely keep control of his bodily fluids whilst ranting on-air. Conveniently for this point, the right-wing, pro-gun, anti-trans conservative comedian Owen Benjamin had his Twitter bio set to “I might be wrong but I’m not lying” (see Fig.

Figure 3. "I might be wrong but I'm not lying." @OwenBenjamin on Twitter. Screenshot 2 March 2018.

2), shortly before his account was suspended, depriving some 120,000 followers of his hate speech.

It should not be overlooked that the parrhesiastic contract has *economic value*, as well as imposing limits on what is commercially viable. People will pay money to hear what only someone else can tell them, even if it’s criticism. I am aware that my own performances, when they concern gender transition, are uniquely valuable. I know I am booked for particular gigs on the basis of my identity (and I suspect my identity makes some producers nervous to book me for some others), and the message I convey is inseparable from my body



and experience. I also might be wrong in my thoughts on gender, but I'm not lying.

When capital is involved, how can we be sure these performances are authentic or sincere?¹⁴ After all, comedians may even *appear* to be performing *parrhesia*—speaking with sincerity and frankness from their own experience—but even this can be an act or a manufactured persona, or at the very least a style. One might even say it's a popular style in stand-up comedy: Bill Burr's act relies on a righteous, cynical, masculine anger that is only tempered by occasionally directing it towards himself, much in the same way that Bill Hicks created his act, and Lenny Bruce before him. Also, what is currently perceived to be a hegemonic (white, Anglo, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, middle class, neurotypical, male) audience may enjoy frank, honest talk from another white straight male who presents the case that he is actually speaking truth to power, whether he names (or even genuinely perceives) that power to be Black Lives Matter or “the left” or Hollywood elites or feminism. Audiences respond to frank, direct, straight talk that is funny, which means that an appealing persona may gain access to social and monetary capital through such a performance. Whether or not it is an expression of *parrhesia* depends on the perception of whether the speaker is in fact speaking truth to power, or a charlatan who belongs to the power class and uses a *style* of “truthiness”, to borrow a term from comedian and faux-right-wing talk show host Stephen Colbert.

What affordances does the comedian have, in speaking their truth? Following his 2016 special *The Age of Spin: Dave Chappelle Live at the Hollywood Palladium*, Chappelle earned criticism for his jokes concerning transgender people—mainly, that he had used incorrect and insensitive terminology and made jokes proliferating the harmful notion that trans women are “dudes in dresses”. In response to the criticism, he refused to apologise and even doubled down on his work in *Equanimity*, this time making jokes about trans people who can't take a joke, whilst offering the

¹⁴ It is strange to consider a profession full of tricksters who also possess a genuine desire and commitment to speak truth to power. Ironically, through the telling of “idle” jokes, they promote an ethical or political position. Hot takes on current events are a popular format for TV, radio, and podcasts, particularly with a left-of-centre focus: *The Daily Show* and its various international spinoffs such as Finland's *Noin Viikon Uutiset*, John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight*, and BBC's *The News Quiz* and *The Now Show* all provide comedians with a platform to make critical commentary and jokes about prominent news stories and public figures. How is it that this “protest” entertainment is so mainstream and so well funded?

caveat that he actually supports transgender people and that it's just for the purposes of *equality* that he makes fun of them, and that it would be less honest of him to give any one group of people special consideration (2017). This, predictably, went over about as well as his original special. In *Equanimity*, Chappelle closed his routine on trans women with:

My problem has always been with the dialogue around trans people. All this talk about how they feel inside ... since when has America given a fuck about how anyone feels inside? ... The only reason all of us are talking about transgenders [sic] is because white men want to do it. If it was just blacks and Mexican like, 'Hey, y'all, we feel like girls inside,' they'd be like, 'Shut up, nigger, no one asked how you felt.'

(Chappelle 2017)

I think it's relevant that Chappelle's insight and authority when it comes to race relations in the U.S. is considerable, and he's considered one of the world's top comedians with good reason. This is a very interesting move, then, appealing to his ability to speak frankly about race (even underlining this and claiming his territory by using the n-word), in order to bolster his argument about "transgenders", while he knows so little about trans people that his terminology is a good decade out of date. In this case, his point that white privilege has allowed transgender people to gain recognition seems crass, pitting minorities against each other and erasing trans people who are not white and not trans women. When he speaks of race, he is unapologetic but also understands how to set the scene so as to bring the entire audience—including white people—along for the ride. This is a tactic I recognise from my own work on gender in comedy; I spend time setting up the argument to make sure that even people who have no knowledge about the subject have enough information to follow my thread. However, understanding the limits and landscape of one's own position is essential for speaking any kind of truth to power when it isn't your own truth you're speaking—what on Twitter is known as "staying in your lane."

This calls to mind the theory of intersectionality as introduced by bell hooks¹⁵, stating that various forms of oppression such as race, class, sexual orientation, disability, gender, and age do not act on the subject independently of one another, but entangle in each other in specific ways, resulting in specific experiences for the subject. This comes into play in comedy when the subject, speaking from her viewpoint, expects audiences to either find her experience or her point of view relatable, or foreign. The assumption that a white woman could make jokes that “all women” relate to may erase the experiences of other women. Or even more grossly, when someone with one oppressed identity leans on that affordance to make commentary about another oppressed group, that person may be told to stay in their lane.

Callback to theories of humour: Benign violation

A fourth, more contemporary theory of humour is outlined in Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren’s 2014 book *The Humor Code*: the “benign violation” theory. Using psychological testing methods, they tracked responses to morally charged scenarios, and suggested that many people find amusement in something that is both “wrong”, and “harmless”. Respondents are often simultaneously disgusted and amused by the scenarios—disgusted because of the violation, while we can afford to be amused because it is seen to be benign.

Critics of the BVT note that both “benign” and “violation” are value judgements and not universal absolutes, so what one person finds benign, another person may not. Also, comedian and scientist Raj Sivaraman points out that the theory defines humour via *a posteriori* definition—attempting to define humour by using what people report is funny after the fact (2012).

I also bring up the benign violation theory not because it presents an all-encompassing theory to end all theories, but because it is popular in social media, and the very nature of the theory comprises a tension between contemporary comedy and contemporary ideas about intersectionality, social mores, and activism, often played out on platforms like Twitter with endless complaints about “free speech”. Some people will stubbornly insist that a joke is *always* benign because it is a joke. Others believe that a joke is a violation,

1. ¹⁵ See hooks, bell (2014) [1984]. *Feminist Theory: from margin to center* (3rd ed.). New York: Routledge.

but because it is a benign one it is a healthy expression of human activity, and suppressing that activity is a bigger danger to society than the content of the joke. Others take the position that jokes may appear to be benign, but they contribute to minority stress (the phenomenon that minority groups are associated with greater stress-related health problems, on account of continuous exposure to external and internal pressures¹⁶) and thus are not actually benign. Still others will take jokes at their literal face value, arguing that the benign intent of the joke is irrelevant and that only the affect matters.

The entire genre of stand-up comedy could be seen to fall under the category of benign violation, since comedians often say shocking or disgusting things, but in a specific context and with a twist, both signalling that the violation is only play.¹⁷ Audiences pay money to sit in the dark in a half-empty basement bar, with the expectation that someone will go onstage and violate their sense of linguistic, social, and moral norms. Many comedy fans specifically seek out performers who peddle in jokes that are as violating (offensive) as possible, because they find these jokes the funniest.

Take shock one-liner comedian Anthony Jeselnik's joke: "*I can't talk politics with my cousin because he's such a hypocrite. He's against the death penalty and he hanged himself.*" If he had walked up to someone on the street and stated that his cousin had hanged himself, that person would take this news seriously. But because it's told on a stage, it's seen as benign—furthermore, many would assume that his cousin was completely made-up for the purposes of the joke; thus, nobody was harmed at all. Jeselnik dances towards jokes that are as violating as possible, then twisting them back towards a trivial, more benign direction with material such as: "*You don't know anything about pain until you've seen your own baby drowned in a tub... and you definitely don't know anything about how to wash a baby.*"

¹⁶ See Meyer, I. H. 2003. "Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence." *Psychological Bulletin*, 129, 674-697.

¹⁷ It would be useful here to remember Gregory Bateson's concept of *metacommunication*, the signals in communication that indicate to the other party that "this is play". Bateson also acknowledges the paradox that arises when all parties are not aware of or able to understand the metacommunication, or those signals "which are exchanged in within the context of play, fantasy, threat, etc. Not only does the playful nip not denote what would be denoted by the bite for which it stands, but, in addition, the bite itself is fictional." (Bateson, G. 1955. "A Theory of Play and Fantasy." *Psychiatric Research Reports* 2. 39-51)

If Jeselnik's tool is a scalpel, other comedians use more of a sledgehammered, shock-jock approach. They may maintain the position that offensiveness is virtuous because life is hardship and death is inescapable, or just because it appeals to their view on the world. Many offensive comedians appear to be politically disengaged, such as equal-opportunity offense joke artist Jimmy Carr, whose one-liners go after any and every minority (and who appears apolitical in his act whilst performing neoliberalism in life¹⁸), while others are card-carrying socialist party members. Scottish comedian Frankie Boyle, whose sets are notoriously offensive, writes the most scathingly left-wing column The Guardian publishes. I suspect the reason why I can enjoy Frankie Boyle but want to turn off right-wing shock jock comedian Joe Rogan every time I hear him, is because I have an idea of both of their political intentions, and I trust Boyle's.

It is not the purview of this paper (nor, indeed, anyone's comedy career) to come up with a solution as to whether jokes should be considered free speech, or harmful, and who can say what. However, it is relevant to know that the entire field of stand-up comedy is steeped in this tension, and thus creates performances that extend well beyond the stage and beyond the figure of the comedian themselves, including political declarations, public stances taken onstage or on social media, private or in-group conversations between comedians as to how to navigate this or that controversy, the insistence by fans and observers that comedy is an exceptional situation (or arguments that it is not), etc. It also makes of the comedian a particular kind of mythos. Often described as "fearless" or "controversial", comedians may be seen as amoral, harmful, or preternaturally liberated and "free" to speak the "truth". Instead of thinking that moral flexibility and the desire to mock is an essential personality quirk of some comedians, I would suggest that moral flexibility and mocking are *practices* the comedian may engage in. The consequences of these practices include gaining fans and detractors, both of which may be exploited for financial gain. The job (and the art) is to find unique, personal, and maximally entertaining ways to speak truth, and a comedian's value is directly proportional to the number of people who are paying attention.

To sum up this chapter, stand-up comedy is a genre that is expected to involve laughter. We may laugh at a joke or situation for a number of different reasons, and can analyse the humour in terms of superiority, relief, or

¹⁸ Carr was caught up in a tax avoidance scandal in 2012, but managed to do it again in 2016.

incongruous juxtaposition; perhaps seeing it as a benign violation. Comedians are known to be verbal and political tricksters, but also truth-tellers, and this puts them in a unique position of agency and responsibility towards their subjects, the public at large, and structures of power.



Figure 4 Itäminen, 2008. Solo performance in the middle of nowhere by James Lórien MacDonald.
Photo: Karolina Kucia.

3. THE BODY ALSO SPEAKS

Moving to Finland changed the art I engaged in, not really because I found myself in a field with new people, but because language was suddenly removed when I arrived in 2002, speaking only a few Finnish words. I was a young and serious acting student who wanted to do Pinter and Shakespeare and had nowhere to go. This led to a gravitation towards physical theatre, training styles like Meyerhold's biomechanics, Suzuki training, and butoh dance. By the time I drifted to performance art, my body was the central point of all my work, and looking back I can see the joker was already present. In my 2008 piece *Itäminen* I dressed up as a statue performer like you might see in a busy tourist area, went out to the middle of a country road outside of Salo, Finland, and spent a few hours being a statue near the side of the road.

In this chapter I introduce some ideas about body art and gender as performance, before discussing specifically transmasculine bodies in contemporary performance, and the obligations and demands they face.

Body Art and Gender

At first glance, stand-up comedy may not seem like an art form that emphasises the body, but seen through a lens of performance studies, we can see that a great deal of information is exchanged, and a significant part of the performance may ride on the material attributes of the performer.

Work that is dependent on the physical presence of the performer has a limiting quality, in that the performer can only be here and now, and if there is an audience, it can only be this particular audience here and now, engaging in this particular encounter.¹⁹ Of course, in a field such as comedy, much of what audiences see is mediated by television, Netflix, or YouTube.²⁰ What we usually see is on a screen: a record of a temporally immediate encounter that is the comedian's performance. We see the way that particular crowd responded to that particular comedian on that day and in that space.

A comedian's body is usually mediated by the microphone and lighting, creating emphasis on the voice and body of the individual on the stage. Aside from the communication of the comedian's words and movements, the body and the voice are themselves communicated. Body and voice are both material fact and social actor; they define what we are capable of doing and saying, as well as place us in relation to those around us, carrying with them specificities as well as universalities that may be exploited by turns.

Amelia Jones has traced a feminist trajectory of performance wherein the subject and object are located simultaneously in the body of the performer. The body of the artist can be considered a product for objective appreciation but also as the author, an actor in the encounter who possesses agency, and

¹⁹ This is not to be simplistic about presence. The emphasis on physical shared presence of performer and audience has been tested and broken innumerable times in theatre and performance art, from Samuel Beckett's 1969 play *Breath*, where the only human presence exists as a recording of breath and cries, to the J-Pop band AKB48, which has over 130 members divided into teams, so the band can perform as often as possible. Philip Auslander challenges the privilege of physical and temporal presence as conditions of *liveness* and argues for liveness as a condition of agreement and convention between the audience and the medium. See 2012. "Digital Liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 34 (3): 3-11.

²⁰ Creating a performance for television is a rough affair. I have only had the privilege of doing it a few times, but every time the green room has been full of miserable comedians complaining that this gig is too much of a spectacle, or that it's somehow "unreal", and how nice it will be to get it over with and go back to the clubs where you can actually focus on the people who are there, instead of thinking about people who exist in the future, in living rooms and hotel lobbies, watching you prance on a screen. In my experience in comedy culture, unrecorded liveness is privileged over a performance mediated by screen or recorded playback, even though we rely on these channels for distribution.

this is particularly emphasised when the subject of the performance belongs to an objectified group of people:

By surfacing the effects of the body as an integral component (a material enactment) of the self, the body artist strategically unveils the dynamic through which the artistic body is occluded (to ensure its phallic privilege) in conventional art history and criticism. By exaggeratedly performing the sexual, gender, ethnic, or other particularities of this body/self, the feminist or otherwise nonnormative body artist even more aggressively explodes the myths of disinterestedness and universality that authorise these conventional modes of evaluation. (Jones, 1998, 5)

The presence of the subject as a physical being draws attention to the historical, structural, and desire-based interests that are easily ignored when we imagine the spectator to be a disinterested party, concerned only with aesthetics and technique. Jones argues a dynamic contingency informs the work of art when the body of the artist is present, though she also reminds us that any political activism in this idea is a potential one and not a foregone conclusion:

For those who wish to privilege performance or body art for its merging of art and life, its delivery of the body/subject of the artist directly to the viewer, the body must be seen as an unmediated reflection of the self whose presence guarantees the redemptive quality of art as activism. (35)

The pure presence of the body of the artist on its own doesn't solve problems of oppression. Any "purity" of meaning that could be enacted by the performer is muddied by the presence of a complicated, self-reflective subject, capable of seeing itself as an object at the same time. Again, the trickster appears: the subject, aware of his presence as subject and object, and making guesses as to his position in relation to the audience, may deliberately (or even unconsciously) play with that relationship. As an example, take Stewart Lee's routine from the *Childhood* episode of *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle* known

as “Playing the room as it’s dealt”.²¹ In a 12-minute bit, he first appears to get upset at the uneven laughter and unenthusiastic response from his audience, which leads to a meta-communicative tirade about the futile work of the comedian and the power audiences hold over their very lives. In it he brings up multiple comedians he has personally interacted with who took their own lives, and blames the current audience’s indifference for those deaths. When Lee remembers the fallen, he appears as sincere as well as joking, and a profound discomfort emerges in the solemnness coinciding with irreverence.

It can also be argued that the aims and desires of presenting one’s own body and identity as marked can be contradictory in nature, and dependent on context. Feminist scholar Peggy Phelan discusses the politics of making oneself visible in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, writing about Jennie Livingston’s 1991 film *Paris is Burning*, which documents competitive drag balls in Harlem in the late 1980s:

The models, who walk and compete for huge trophies during the ball, are Latino and African-American gay men, transvestites, and transsexuals, most of whom are poor. Counter-intuitively, the balls reveal the performers’ longing to be made unremarkable-to pass as “normative” (and thus be unnoticed) rather than to be seen as “other” (and constantly surveyed by the upholders of the normative). Excessively marked as “other” outside the arena of the balls, the walkers employ the hyper-visibility of the runway to secure the power and freedom of invisibility outside the hall. (Phelan, 1996, 93)

According to Phelan, taking the stage as a marked body is an act of hypervisibility, with the aim of reducing visibility in everyday life. The bodies in *Paris is Burning* are marked for their skin colour as well as their gender expression, sexuality, class, and any other marked effects on the individual. In my own work, I have dealt with mainly gender identity, expression, and sexuality, but usually in an arena that still constitutes, to some degree, everyday life: I am not usually performing for a crowd of people who are *similar* to me. I would agree, however, that when I do perform at queer or

²¹ This routine, for my money, is the most virtuosic example in contemporary comedy in making a scripted performance seem to go off-script, and should be required watching in comedy.

feminist-branded comedy nights, it feels appropriate to “perform” my *transmasculinity* in a way that makes it hypervisible. There, the aim is freedom and liberation, while at a more conventional venue, the point of the performance is to demystify transgender people, and also to open a conversation about the contingency of gender for people who are not forced to confront such questions. I think that conversation can be summed up in this passage from gender theorist Judith Butler:

As a corporeal field of cultural play, gender is a basically innovative affair, although it is quite clear that there are strict punishments for contesting the script by performing out of turn or through unwarranted improvisations. Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds. (Butler, 1988)

Transmasculine bodies in art

Transmasculine bodies are those that are purported to be once “female” by conventional measurements, but whose subjects now actively resist and redefine that designation. It is difficult to make any definition concerning the transgender bodies without contributing to erasure. A person with a transmasculine, or “transgender and masculine” identity may present with any kind of body. Maybe they have altered their appearance with testosterone and/or surgeries. Perhaps they have not desired these treatments or had no access to them; if they identify as trans and masculine, their body must be included in the set of transmasculine bodies. At the same time, we are still operating within a dominant system of gender organisation whereby conventional bodily characteristics signify male or female (to say nothing of those characteristics that signify both or neither), and bodies may or may not be read in a way that aligns with the subject’s identity, depending on the context.



Figure 5. ADVERTISEMENT: HOMAGE TO BENGLIS

Photo by Cassils and Robin Black, 2011

In contemporary performance, it is not easy to find many transgender masculine subjects with widespread notoriety.²² Cassils is undoubtedly the most known; their 2011-2013 work *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* reinterprets Eleanor Antin's 1972 performance *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, in which Antin crash dieted for 45 days, documenting her body. Cassils instead engaged in months of bodybuilding—without hormone use—and recreated the documentation. From their own artist statement, Cassils says, “This twist on ‘getting cut’ queers the trans body by showcasing

the cut of musculature as opposed to the cut of the surgeon’s knife.”

Performance artist Kris Grey/Justin Credible is another trans masculine figure whose works frequently involve an encounter with his own trans body. In *Homage* he stands naked on a plinth with 10 three-inch needles piercing the line created by his mastectomy scars. One by one, he removes the needles, opening up the wounds and creating rivulets of blood that run down his torso. It is at once a psychic revisiting of the trauma and positive self-determination of that surgery, and also a quiet chance for an audience to encounter what is inscribed on his flesh.

²² Photography and visual art carry more artefacts of trans and intersex bodies, such as the photographs of Del LaGrace Volcano and Loren Cameron, whose 1996 book *Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits* was one of the first documentary collections of FTM transition that was artistic rather than medical.



*Figure 6 Homage.
Solo performance by Kris Grey, Pioneer Works, Brooklyn, NY, 2013.*

A great deal of transgender performance involves an encounter with the material fact of the trans body, and the trans artist displaying various means of body work—working out, dressing, cutting, removing hair, or simply being visible and naked. Trans art is still very much about what is done or can be done to the body in service of survival, and as such assumes a cisgender gaze, presenting a body for cisgender consumption. It often feels like gross limitation and constant insistence that the only relevant definition for a trans identity involves a bodily difference, but this may also be a temporary project of familiarisation. Also, insisting that the body is only there for the cisgender gaze erases trans audiences, who view other trans bodies as possible templates, guides, inspiration, or affirmation. Just as white audiences pay to be exposed to Richard Pryor or Dave Chappelle's critiques of whiteness, cisgender audiences need to seek out encounters with trans bodies in order to get a basic understanding of what they'll never know first-hand.

Part self-determination (like Cassils' musculature) and part medical intervention (like Grey's scars), a trans body is like any other human subject in that it is unique in its experiences, but trans bodies walk a particular common line between attraction and revulsion, to the extent that simply exposing others to that body is seen as a necessary project. If this seems somewhat exaggerated, consider that the only way I could find to see a typical,

naked trans body before my own transition was by searching for pornography. Surgery sites often have documentation of medical procedures, but very few of those involved images after full healing, and the cropped squares of medical photos with no faces offered a fragmented, depersonalised artefact in place of a human. In the very few films portraying trans men, the parts were played by cisgender female actors. This is not to say that there were no trans male actors, but even five years ago it was a big deal to be openly transgender, and very few trans people would consider displaying their body for public consumption. In contemporary culture, it seems obvious that far more trans bodies are represented in drag, burlesque, spoken word, and other less “high brow” forms, which are often more slow to catch the attention of critical theorists.²³ Thus, the number of prominent, openly trans performers in the entire Western context is very small, and the nuances of trans experiences are frequently overshadowed by the overall project of exposing the mainstream to our existence and our “harmlessness”.

Another demand on trans masculine performance is its relationship to masculinity; it is impossible for a transgender performer’s body and work to not end up as a corollary problematisation of gender and masculinity, because most of the time the audience cannot help but read the transgender body’s history, even if the performance were to have nothing to do with the body or with gender. Indeed, the trans performer also brings with them the entire baggage of gender performance in general, as he, she, or they are subject to being read in terms of the “success” of their gender performance: “ah, he looks really muscular!” or “his hips move a little bit feminine...” as the audience who is not accustomed to seeing trans bodies every day is unable to escape the uncanny emergence of a body outside the accepted binary. Most of us read cisgender performers and, indeed, people on the street for their gender performance, but in these cases it is usually done unconsciously. As an openly transgender performer, it is impossible not to appear as trans, masculine, feminine, and androgynous all at the same time. The only way around this is

²³ Indeed, the most prominent transmasculine performer—or more accurately, the only one I could find at all in the late 1990s and early 2000s—was drag king and emcee Murray Hill. Prominent gender theorist Jack Halberstam wrote of drag kings like Del LaGrace Volcano, Murray Hill, Elvis Herselvis, and others as “transforming masculinity and exposing its theatricality”, but wrote about this performative masculinity in contrast to the everyday masculine performance of the butch lesbian. (In Haggerty, George, and Bonnie Zimmerman. *Encyclopedia of Lesbian and Gay Histories and Cultures*. New York: Garland, 2000.)

to be stealth; to perform without revealing one's transgender status. I have, on occasion, performed stealth as a way of making sure that I'm still funny even if nobody knows that I'm trans, because my trans-related material is so exotic to most of my audiences that I worry it's a crutch that lets me get better laughs with less work. The other strategy, as many trans artists use, is to lean in to the inevitability of mainstream curiosity about their bodies, and to mark the body consciously in their work.

In terms of stand-up comedy, the most prominent openly transmasculine performer is American comedian, actor, and trans man Ian Harvie, whose 2010 solo show *Parts Sold Separately* toured extensively, and whose material about transitioning from female to male has many overlaps with my own material. I actually make a point of listening to whatever I can find of Harvie's jokes just to make sure I'm not overlapping too much with him; I'm unsure as to whether this is because I don't want to be seen as stealing jokes, or whether I'm just somewhat embarrassed that my material, which in my local scene is very valuable because it's unique, would turn out to be bog-standard within the community of trans comedians. There are great similarities to our approach, in that we both have transmasculine jokes written to appeal to the queer in-crowd as well as to the general public, we present images of positive, well-adjusted and mentally sound transgender men, and we speak in a frank and factually explicit way about bodies, genitals, and sexual acts. His line from *May the Best Cock Win* references having a detachable penis and going to sex shops at the start of a new relationship: "*If you go out with me, we'll get you what you want. May the best cock win.*" My own take also references penis envy and male anxiety about the penis as an advantage for a trans man in a relationship: "*I say I don't have a penis; actually, I have five.* (laughter) *They're just at home.* (laughter) *Laugh all you want, but I can choose the size* (laughter)... *I can choose the colour* (laughter)... *I can even choose the species...* *If you've never tried the octopus, you're missing out.* (laughter)" Speaking for my own work, constantly referencing the body and sex is a way of normalising the trans body, whilst at the same time exploiting the aspect of transness that fascinates cisgender people the most and indulging in those low-brow and life-affirming aspects of humour. It's important to me that the information is presented in a way that is funny but not sensationalised; the idea is not to present my body as an anomaly, but to acknowledge the way

other people consider it to be one and challenge them to be more exploratory and less prescriptive when it comes to sex and gender presentation.

Callback to parrhesia: the body speaks

There are bodies that speak, and bodies that speak truth to power. Stand-up comedians and other who have non-normative bodies by necessity include their bodies in their acts, because their audiences cannot help reading the visible aspects of their identity and including that identity and experience in their interpretation of the text. Stand-up comedy involves speakers who may or may not be serious, may or may not be pretending, but with a body that cannot pretend to be otherwise.²⁴

I would like to take an example of a body that spoke to me from the wildly popular HBO fantasy series *Game of Thrones*, based on George R. R. Martin's novels. It features a dwarf person named Tyrion Lannister, played by Peter Dinklage, who himself has dwarfism. On trial accused of murdering the king (some plot lines never die), Tyrion claims he is the one being framed and persecuted, and that he is only the scapegoat because people hate him for his dwarfism. His father remarks that he's not on trial for being a dwarf; Tyrion replies, "I've been on trial for that my entire life!" In that moment, the sword-and-dragon fantasy collapses and the suspension of disbelief makes way, however briefly, to watch Tyrion and Dinklage speak the same truth to their respective hegemonies: Tyrion in the fictional world, and Dinklage in ours. For a fleeting moment, the fact that Dinklage is acting or pretending seems broken, as the words he speaks are reinforced by the materiality of his body, which cannot act or pretend to be different than it is, and which he *has* carried his entire life. His body is still seen in our current world as an anomaly and curiosity; if his body were not seen as remarkable by an average-height world, this moment of collapse would not happen. There is no acting about that aspect of his body, and no acting about the relationship of that body to norms; the body engages in a kind of *parrhesia*.

²⁴ In a recent conversation I had with Finnish comedian Ali Jahangiri, we remarked on the difference in our acts in that I have to come out as trans over and over again, because the testosterone has now made it so that I pass as a cisgender male, whereas Ali's brown skin is immediately apparent the moment he steps onstage. I can employ the tactic of "revealing" my difference, unlike Ali. Three to four years ago, I also had this "inescapable" appearance, as I presented as a female crossdresser. If I didn't make a joke about it, I could sense the audience weren't paying attention to my jokes, but my looks; the moment I acknowledged it in a joke, I would feel them relax and listen.

Bodies may be marked or unmarked, and this property of being marked may be temporarily suspended by, for example, being present in a space where one's body constitutes an instance of a majority. However, that space achieves its contingency through a relationship with the normative outside world. Performers whose bodies are marked may intentionally complicate that status through playfulness and metacommunication.

4. BODIES IN COMEDY

This chapter introduces non-normative bodies performing in stand-up comedy. Most of them are not transgender bodies for the simple reason that there are so few transgender stand-up comedians whose work is widely disseminated, but there are commonalities in presenting an Other²⁵ onstage.

The body of the comedian presents a set-up to the joke before she says anything. Even five years ago, about half of the time I would be introduced to the stage with the words “*our next comedian is a woman...*”, as though the emcee felt the need to assuage or reassure the audience. Female comedy, Jewish comedy and Black comedy, for example, have all been written about extensively as sites of resistance and agency, though perhaps the true litmus test of agency is being introduced as a *comedian*, and not a member of a social class.

This chapter focuses on Julia Kristeva’s idea of the abject as it appears in comedy, and the difference between introducing the abject via one’s text versus introducing the abject via one’s physical presence. I then call upon numerous examples of prominent stand-up comedians whose work is entwined with abjection.

The abject

“The daily defecation session is daily proof of the unacceptability of Creation. ... The aesthetic ideal of the categorical agreement with being is a world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist. This aesthetic ideal is called kitsch. ... Kitsch is the absolute denial of shit.”

—Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

Ugliness, disgust, violence, death, and barbarism are such core parts of comedy that there are entire genres dedicated to them, such as the theatrical

²⁵ The Other here refers to the phenomenological concept as introduced by Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* in 1807, as the counterpart that delineates and defines the Self. My reading of the Other, however, is more proximal to Edward Said (*Orientalism*, 1978). Said discusses the *creation* of the Orient by the West, not in order to know its culture, but to define itself in contrast with it, and to subjugate it. Transgender people have also been mythologised and fetishised, described as mentally ill, deviant, and unnatural, so that the dominance of cisgender norms are both created and justified as natural and appropriate.

grotesque, which has made a form of expression out of physical deformity. Piss, shit, vomit, sperm, boogers, and even ear wax are perfectly acceptable topics for comedic stories, even as detractors complain in disgust. The criticism that comedy is resolutely low-brow and juvenile in its tastes and manners inadvertently describes one of its functions: to return us to the body and to the material world. Comedians joke about violence, rape, death, abuse, and tragedy as a stubborn memo that these things can, may, and will happen to us, and that nobody is above the horrors of existence. Comedians may deliberately draw the abject back towards us when we have tried to evict it from our experience.

Put simply, comedy strategically bypasses civility to return us to our body, emphasizing our proximity to the animals, reminding us of our corporeality and momentarily shattering the apparently global imperatives of manners and beauty. Obscene, sexual, or taboo humour is predicated on an understanding of the socially tolerable body that it perverts in order to provoke laughter. (Stott, 2005, 86)

The abject is that which we categorically reject, on an instinctive level, but we reject it because it is not completely alien to us. It nauseates us but is not totally separable from us. Philosopher Julia Kristeva, who developed the concept of abjection, writes in *Powers of Horror*:

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. (Kristeva 1982, 3)

Any person may joke about the things that we “permanently thrust aside in order to live”. One difference to note here, however, is between the comedian joking about the body of a dead baby (which probably does not refer to any specific instance of a dead baby, but to dead babies in general), and a

comedian who embodies an abject. The dead baby in the joke does not actually appear on the stage, whereas the body of the abject comedian is inseparable from the act. A further distinction could be made between, for example, the drag queen, who assumes the travesty for the purposes of the stage, and the comedian with a body that is inescapably Othered, by virtue of skin colour, deformity, age, disease, size, or modification.

This is not to say that some comedians are inherently funnier than others because they have non-standard bodies, but it could be argued that their material presence brings to mind ridicule—even if individuals in the audience would not ridicule the comedian's body, and feel no abjection towards it, the spectre of the mainstream order looms large and furnishes us with the thought that this body is likely to *have been* ridiculed. Thus, the comedian is understood to be no stranger to pain, humiliation, and the material inevitability of decay and death. It has been suggested that this makes people trust stand-up comedians. Jerry Seinfeld once said that conventionally attractive people don't make good comedians because audiences "distrust beauty and want their clowns to be imperfect" (in Stott, 84). One does not have to be visibly or obviously Othered to indulge in all available imperfections for the purposes of one's comedy, but it's interesting that some of these imperfections must be revealed by the comedian, whilst others are read by the audience immediately.

Some abject objects, such as a corpse, are—barring any particular psychopathology to the contrary—universally revolting. Others are more or less contingent or even social constructs, and most depend on locality and hegemonic standards which are themselves changeable. For example, performing comedy as a Black person where Black bodies are not stigmatised, would remove the abject element of Blackness. Thus, a Black comedian performing at a predominantly Black club such as *Def Comedy Jam*²⁶ has a different relationship to that identity than one performing at Carnegie Hall, or Finlandia Hall. However, even in the *Def Comedy Jam* studio, the audience will have in mind that Black people are Othered in America (even if they are not currently so in that particular club), and so will be able to laugh at jokes that depend on the knowledge that Blackness is abject in America at large.

²⁶ *Def Comedy Jam* was an HBO television series produced by Russell Simmons, creator of the *Def Jam* record label. The show ran from 1992 to 1997 and was the break-out show for many Black American comedians.

Likewise, I have performed in Pride week gigs in multiple countries so far, and every time I perform in a queer space, the Othered nature of queerness is completely understood by the audience. Even if everybody in the club is queer, the jokes will depend on an understanding of queerness as “not hegemonic”. As one’s audience gets wider and more international, so too changes the imagined hegemony against which one is asserting individuality and life force. It becomes more American, more white, more wealthy, more invested in patriarchy and consumerism, more straight, and more removed from the actual individuals in the audience.

For my act, the stage is not just a place to reveal my true, imperfect nature, indulge in abjection, and relieve myself of the pressure of conforming to heteronormative social demands; it is also a place where I temporarily assume the position of “normal”, and my authority in the situation allows me to create a liminal space where I am also not abject, in contrast to life offstage, where acceptance of my body is contingent on legal and social whims of the hegemony. Or, perhaps the abject nature of my medically altered body remains, but I assume more control over its reception. When I have performed to more conventional audiences, I have typically done ten or so minutes of jokes about food and nationalism and current events before I suddenly reveal that I’m transgender, and the wave of confusion and change in mood is palpable in the room—it falls dead silent every time; you can’t even hear breathing because they’ve stopped doing that, too. I remark, “and that silence is the same silence I get everywhere in the world”, which characterises their reaction as normal and universal, and effectively breaks the ice so I can go forward. I take my best guess as to the ways in which “transgender” constitutes an abject in the minds of the audience, and I ride on their reactions.

In John Limon’s study of abjection in comedy, he writes that the abject is “a psychic worrying of those aspects of oneself that one cannot be rid of, that seem, but are not quite, alienable—for example, blood, urine, feces, nails, and the corpse” (Limon 2000, 4), and I would argue that trans bodies are challenging the limits of the alienable. This is why so many cisgender comedians seem completely unable to talk about transgender women (and transgender always means “trans woman” in their act) without making specific and lurid mention of “chopping off” the penis. Leaving aside its medical inaccuracy, their jokes bring to the forefront their own visceral horror

of alienating a part of the body. And this body part is not only seen as part of the whole in general, but it is specifically the penis, the presence or absence of which decides identity, culture, and destiny in a heteronormative mindset. The question of who and what one would become without the penis is unthinkable, an abjection, something that Dave Chappelle manages to evoke in a way that is simultaneously sympathetic towards those struggling with transphobic norms and steeped in transphobia, in *Equanimity*:

"I had read in the paper that Caitlyn Jenner was contemplating posing nude in an upcoming issue of Sports Illustrated. And I know it's not politically correct to say these things, so I just figured, fuck it, I'll say it for everybody else: yuck. You know, sometimes, I just want to read some stats. I don't know why you gonna cram some man-pussy in the middle of the sports page lines. I just didn't think that was the place for it. But I wasn't saying anything like Caitlyn Jenner's a bad person. I'm not mad at her. I'm not even mad at Sports Illustrated. If I'm mad at somebody... I'm probably just mad at myself. You understand? 'Cause deep down, I know that I am not strong enough... to not look at those pictures. And I don't think I'm ready to see what she's trying to show." (2017)

Even with the hostile language ("yuck" and "man-pussy"), one still gets the impression that Chappelle might be wrong, but he's not lying. In the first half of the idea he indulges in transphobic instincts, but then he shifts the responsibility for the transphobia at least partially to himself. When it comes to humour about trans people, I chiefly appreciate jokes by trans people themselves as their knowledge is much deeper and their jokes therefore more nuanced and funny, but it must be said that I get valuable information from every honest take by those who examine their prejudices, even if they come across poorly. As transgender comedian and writer Amanda Kerri discussed, Chappelle's material reveals the common vulnerabilities conventional masculinity finds when encountering trans women, and remarks: "I don't hold this against him, since I can have my own internalised phobias and fear when my identity is threatened. However, it's what we do with it from there that's important" (Kerri, 2017).

For many trans people, the modifications one makes to the body (particularly the first ones) are backgrounded with this horror, which is a product of internalised transphobia, or the centering of cisgender bodies as “normal”. The notion of “willingly” relegating oneself to the territory of the Other, the subjugated and lesser, seems insane. The loss or gain of body parts and characteristics challenges deeply held beliefs about what is alienable about the body. We may lose our fingernails and remain intact as a subject; transitioning people have proved that we may alienate ourselves from our genitals and other sex-aligned characteristics, and still remain a subject; the robustness of the identity remains undiminished, and perhaps even strengthens. This is still a radical step to take, even if its normalisation is currently on the rise. The existence of transgender people is enough to destabilise all gender identities, even cisgender ones, for if it is possible to be otherwise, then one cannot argue that one’s identity is based on fixed characteristics. Cisgender people, when encountering a transgender person, frequently interpret the significance of the trans person in terms of their own identity: “this person’s gender has been through a period of flux; what does that imply about mine—is it stable or not?” This is why my comedy writing often starts from the mainstream point of view—I’m interested in connecting with their fears and desires in order to make mine more relatable. I myself am subject to internalised transphobia and understand the process of overcoming objections to transness as I’ve worked on it fairly intensely for a number of years and made a number of blunders, so I don’t expect the average person to do any better than I have done.

I address my own relationship to this process of re-mapping one’s own body, and how I encountered questions of my own abjection in *Gender Euphoria*:

I looked a lot on the internet for images of what would happen to my body, and, you know, I’d see images of guys who still had breasts but also chest hair, and I’d think oh, that’s weird, I’m not sure I’d want that... and of course that’s because we’re not used to it, but it’s different when it starts actually happening to you, and it’s gradual enough that you realise you’re totally fine with it and you even really like it. My current attitude towards body hair is that it’s a lot like

fascism: (laughter) as long as you're exposed to it gradually, you're basically fine with it. (laughter)

The twist at the end of the joke is one I'm not going to pretend I'm not pleased with: it makes the positive point that one can get used to a different body through a process of gradual acceptance, and then points out that the process of gradual acceptance is also what allows fascism to take hold in seemingly reasonable societies. It also indulges the trickster in the comedian: the ultimate project for me *should be* to resist normative limits on who can have body hair, and the intention is to normalise a trans body. However, by claiming that getting used to body hair is *definitely a positive process*, and then immediately likening it to fascism in an ironic way, the joke refuses to be completely positive. Body hair is not bad like fascism is bad, and obviously if I say we should not have a problem with body hair, I am not saying that we should not have a problem with fascism; rather, the implication is that we get used to things *so easily* that it's important to know what to resist and what to embrace.

The comedy stage is also a place to describe one's own relationship to the abject in oneself, and wrestling with trying to figure out which parts of one's internalised horror are given to us by nature (for instance, the rejection of death), and which ones are made for us to maintain a social order (for instance, the rejection of gender variance). Having one's body parts removed or modified as a matter of expression or aligning with one's inner identity are not obviously on one side or the other for me, although to most cisgender people it would likely be a clear case of nature compelling one's disgust and rejection of the act. This results not only in transgender people having to overcome this view in themselves, but in public it becomes fraught for transgender people to describe their relationship to abjection. If they voice any doubts as to the sanity and value of the surgical process, for example (which would be a reasonable question when faced with the modification of one's own body), it is immediately used by transphobes as proof that trans people are mentally ill and "self-mutilating", but it is also suppressed by the trans community for fear that transphobes will use it in exactly that way, producing more hateful criticism. Fearless speech, however, dictates that what we fear shall not be silenced, because even if it is "wrong", it is a part of us.

Abject to subject: Contemporary comedy

Stand-up comedy has a history of creating or reinforcing abjection—of defining Others as stereotypes and reinforcing those stereotypes, of dividing people into sympathetic and antithetic groups according to the mores of the comedian and/or the audience. Some contemporary stand-ups resist normativity, displaying their difference in material ways, presenting themselves at the same time as representing, storytelling, or embellishing with jokes and punchlines. Even in many acts who are not so obviously Othered in their society, the comedian may lay out his own relationship to normativity and expectations.

Sometimes we laugh at the expense of the Other; sometimes the Other laughs at us. Sometimes we laugh at ourselves and create a critical distance to our own behaviour in the process; a kind of othering of the self. We see our own behaviour as performance; we note that our own performances are sometimes hypocritical in their aims, and this is often seen (particularly by certain comedians and their fans) as not only entertaining, but psychologically healthy.

Minority comedians may frequently find themselves in rooms where they are usually Othered by the majority of the audience—but this doesn't mean that this is always the case, or that it means that the subject is Othered in every possible way. I am usually in rooms full of cisgender people and I present myself as trans. I am also usually in rooms full of white people and I am white. I am usually in rooms full of well-educated middle-class people and I am well-educated and middle-class. Occasionally I'm also in a room where being transgender or queer is not a minority state, and this changes my performance significantly, because in order to surprise and make people laugh, I need to establish who is the in-group and who is the out-group, and appeal to or challenge the sensibilities of the group that is dominant in the room.

What is not abject? The familiar. How does one make the abject familiar? Through non-threatening exposure. Laughter can be a signifier that the associated message is not a threat. The project of minority comedy could be to subjectify the abject and replace fear and hostility with familiarity. In some cases, this may be a conscious and activist choice, undertaken by the comedian in order to raise awareness. Or it may be a choice, and activism, but undertaken partially out of a sense of duty to one's community—or fear of

being criticised by one's community. It may also be a way of carving out a niche in a competitive field, where any difference can and should be exploited in order to make your act stand out. At the same time, whatever the difference is that one possesses, there is a normalising effect to presenting your difference on a stage and inviting an audience to poke fun at it with you for an hour.

Whatever the motivation, contemporary comedy seems filled with stories that are personal rather than universal. Scottish comedian Richard Gadd won the Edinburgh Comedy Award in 2016 with *Monkey See, Monkey Do*. Gadd was sexually assaulted some years previously, and before he learned to process the threat to his person and his masculinity, he took up running in an attempt to deal with the fallout. During the entire 50-minute show he runs on a treadmill, centering the physicality of the experience whilst engaging in verbal gymnastics. Using video and conversing live at break-neck speed with his own voice via a pre-recorded dialogue, the piece reflects an intense and personal process of recovery and is still recognisably stand-up comedy.

Hasan Minhaj's *Homecoming King* caused a buzz when it came out on Netflix, both for its innovative use of visuals in comedy, but also because it's a touching autobiography of a child of Indian immigrant parents growing up in the USA and learning about his two cultures. As a child, he lived with his father in the U.S., while his mother completed medical school in India. When he was eight, she returned to the States with a sister that Minhaj hadn't even known he had; hilarity ensues. *Homecoming King* is a normalisation and re-centering of a first-generation immigrant experience in a way that most American television does not allow—immigrants are sidekicks and a foil to a white citizen's story, rather than centered themselves. Watching the special as a white son of European immigrants to Canada, I recognised many similarities to my parents' experiences, but also sensed that many of the jokes were simplified (or whitened) significantly for my benefit. A basic education in Minhaj's world is part of the normalisation project.

Tig Notaro had a double mastectomy following breast cancer some years ago, and performs the second half of her special *Boyish Girl Interrupted* shirtless, her flat and nipple-free chest a literal manifestation of a comedian baring themselves onstage. In typical Notaro style, she takes off her shirt, and then instead of talking about it, starts doing a string of corny airplane jokes. She literally “continues about her business”—that is, telling jokes—whilst the

rest of us take in the sight of her body. The profoundness of her personal history, written on her body and available for us to see, is underlined by the deliberate banality of the comedy material. The encounter entwines seriousness with frivolity. In limiting her speech to not speak about her body, she lets the body speak, and also doesn't tell the audience what to think about what they're seeing; instead, she offers them space to come to their own understanding. The image is jarring at first, but gradually becomes something sublime and touching. When asked if she worried that people might think it's a stunt, replied, "Make no mistake. It's a stunt. It's definitely a stunt":

"I want people to talk about my comedy, about cancer, about body issues, about scars, because cancer, it's a big deal, but scars are not a big deal. My skin healed. Relax, you know? That's all it is. My skin healed... When [I've been] told, 'Gosh, you had a platform to make statements as a woman or as a cancer survivor,' and my point is, I am though. Through my actions. I don't need to sit here in my film and plug in all the right statements, and I'm allowing myself in the progression of my career to make statements, but also not just for shock value. It's funny. It was funny to take my shirt off and not acknowledge it. And just take my shirt off and go, 'So, anyway, when I was traveling...'" (Miller, 2015)

Notaro specifically appeals to the statements that can be made by the body, rather than those that are made through verbal language. There are other strategies used by comedians to use the phenomenon of the body as communicator rather than text: Maria Bamford performs comedy about mental illness; she suffered a mental breakdown in 2010 and has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. She tells jokes onstage about being sectioned. However, her affect when performing (or indeed when being interviewed) also creates an embodiment of mental illness: she speaks using strange voices, or occasionally lies down onstage and refuses to get up or even move. One might think that this was just her way of being and not done consciously, but she frequently does uncanny, jarring impressions of "normal" people in her act, which flips on its head the expected formula of a normal person doing impressions of strange people. With every show she produces, she appears to double down on her own weirdness. *Old Baby* in 2017 starts

with her performing her set to a mirror, and then gradually to larger audiences in living rooms, bookshops, bowling alleys, backyards, small clubs, and finally a major stage, playing with the notion of a comedian as an individual with unique quirks and experiences, the comedian as part of a folk art or community experience, and the comedian as a product that is consumed by a larger audience. The jokes remain the same, but the laughter changes in tone; it loses the individual reactions and dialogue, and becomes a mass ritual.

Jess Thom's alter ego is *@Touretteshero*, and a good chunk of her stand-up comedy is completely out of her control. She is one of the 10% of people with Tourette's Syndrome whose tics also manifest in swearing and inappropriate outbursts. Typically, an encounter between a neurotypical person and one with Tourette's could involve the neurotypical person distancing themselves and recoiling from a perceived threat, or, if they were being "polite", simply ignoring the "problem". It would be rude to stare, and rude to laugh. Thom uses the comedy stage to recontextualise that encounter and allow people to look and to laugh. Her website clarifies her work is "not about mocking or commiserating—it's about reclaiming the most frequently misunderstood syndrome on the planet", and she tweets her more amusing uncontrolled phrases using the hashtag #dailyoutburst: "I'm sorry I Bitcoined you" and "There's a duck stuck in my anus reading poems about snails" are recent entries. In live appearances, she tics continuously both verbally and physically (hitting her own chest, turning her head, and bouncing up and down), to the point where it appears as though two conversations are concurrent: one scripted, and the other a barrage of frankly delightful nonsense. Often, Thom will find her own tics funny and laugh, and in a sense she becomes one of her own audience.

Stand-up comedy is created by subjects; it even resembles a caricature of subjectivity, with its single person getting up in front of society and letting them have it, whatever "it" is. In contemporary stand-up, acts like Notaro, Thom, and myself undergo objectification, as the audience is free to look at us and observe us as an instance of a particular phenomenon. But through that objectification, subjectification is achieved. The objectification is done on the comic's terms; the set-up of the joke is achieved by leading the audience to understand and empathise with our particular position. Part of that project might be establishing basic knowledge and making sure jokes are not ruined by common misconceptions. It's important not to conflate working with the

level of knowledge in the audience with working with the moral values of the audience. Of the two, I prioritise knowledge: if an audience member is both ignorant about transgender experiences *and* objects to my existence on moral grounds, I find I have better luck reaching them by addressing ignorance before morality. This means my work sometimes prioritises basic education and activism directed towards people who have no interest in queerness, rather than playing with queerness for queers.

Isn't it Ironic

Plenty of comedians tell jokes onstage that they claim do not reflect their own personal values; the point of the joke may be to shock, or to exaggerate for comic effect. In either case, this sets up a tension that is very difficult to untangle, where the “actual” values of the comedian and audience might be but are not necessarily separate from the “joke” values of the comedian and audience.

There is nothing to stop a minority comedian from hiding her true intentions and indulging in what Richard Schechner calls dark play: that which “subverts order, dissolves frames, and breaks its own rules—so much so that the playing itself is in danger of being destroyed, as in spying, double-agency, con games, and stings. Unlike carnivals or ritual clowns whose inversions of established order is sanctioned by the authorities, dark play is truly subversive, its agendas always hidden” (2006, 107).

A common tactic in minority stand-up, used by Maria Bamford, Cameron Esposito, Trevor Noah, and countless others, is to adopt a naïve position of delight towards an outcome that, outside of the bubble of play, would be a negative one. Cameron Esposito has a 2011 set where she and her girlfriend saw a man outside a nightclub fall over and knock himself out, so they called 911 and waited for the ambulance. A man approached them, asked if they were girlfriends, and then propositioned them for a threesome. Esposito says with a wide smile, “*now as a group I would like us all to get together and applaud this man's sense of TIMING. I would like to think that this guy just rolled up on his board like ‘wait – lemme see what's going on here – two lesbians in a committed relationship and a guy bleeding out on the sidewalk? Now is my MOMENT!’*”

Of course it's irony, and said with a wide smile, telegraphing her playfulness. Perhaps laughing about the world's cruelties is better than being

angry about them—but the comedian still gets to *present* the conditions for justified anger. However, as the clip continues, it becomes apparent that irony is easily misinterpreted if the audience member desires the statement to be true at face value. Esposito goes on to argue that all a straight guy needs to do to get two lesbians in a threesome is to catch them by surprise, and her demeanour is enthusiastic until she catches two men in the audience wondering out loud if, in fact, that would actually work. She centres in on them immediately and says, still smiling and enthusiastic: “*Did you turn to your buddy and go ‘that’s true’? Why would you say that? What - oh, you wonder if it’s true?* (More serious tone) *Look me in my eyes. It’s not true.* (Turning to audience) *Let me just say this to all straight men in the audience: this is not true.*”

Esposito is compelled to drop the ironic level for a moment to clarify her position to people whose position in society is less precarious than hers. This speaks to the onus of community responsibility that can fall on a comedian who is a member of a minority group—the highly popular British comedian Ricky Gervais, for instance, only ever has to answer for himself; Cameron Esposito can be seen as representative of lesbians everywhere and can be called upon to defend them.

One could argue that the frame of the stand-up comedy club places all comedy in the “carnival” category, where everything that is said constitutes a momentary reprieve from the established order, but I think the way that the punishment and praise for jokes extends into Twitter, the press, and well beyond the walls of the comedy cellar shows that a stand-up performance can exist both inside and outside the magic circle of play,²⁷ and the threat of community anger and ostracization is only as far away as the next context collapse.

Audiences

It is not just the body and subject of the performer that is present for the comedy show. Audiences are not a monolith, although every live audience of sufficient size does create a reaction and mood in the room that is also a collective character. “Reading the room” is the act of establishing that

²⁷ Johan Huizinga coined the term magic circle to describe the bounded space of a play situation as a temporary world “within ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart” (*Homo ludens*, 1949 [1938], 10).

character for a stand-up comedian. If particular jokes go over particularly well or poorly, he has a better idea of where to take his show in order to connect with that audience and establish the desired level of trust. Jokes that are offensive, very clever, meta, or low-brow often serve as a litmus test in a comedian's toolkit. Often being in front of an audience with a particular background—whether that's identity, profession, or hobby—is a delight because certain jokes may only be told to that audience.

Before a comedian knows the character of the audience, he makes a number of assumptions and imagines who they are, and this imaginary mass audience is not necessarily a reflection of some generic mainstream. He has at his disposal the location (both geographical and venue), how they dress, how they present themselves, the ticket price, the theme of the night, the day of the week and time of night, the amount of alcohol consumed, how they reacted to the emcee's warmup, etc. Do they look rich? Very white? Are they students? A lot of queer people? It can also affect the room if the audience members themselves know the typical character of the club they're going to, and individual audience members often become flummoxed if they find themselves in a club where everyone seems to have a different sense of humour and values to themselves.

Nowhere is “reading the room” more important for me than when I’ve run the *Feminist Comedy Night* in Helsinki, first at Mad House in 2015, and now a monthly show selling 100 seats at Korjaamo in Helsinki’s Töölö district. I have consciously avoided telling people what they can and cannot say at Feminist Comedy Night, but I have given advice as to what I think will go over well and what will not. This can be difficult when comedians and audience members may all have different understandings of feminism—at one recent evening, a lesbian comedian joked about her bisexual experiences and coming to terms with falling in love with a person with a cock, which would make her “not a lesbian”. Her experience is what it is; however, there were lesbian trans women in the audience whom I know found that remark excluding. It also would have been easier to take if there hadn’t been half a dozen other jokes throughout the night that equated one or another gender with corresponding genitalia—something that is “obvious” for most people on the planet, but a fierce site of resistance and cornerstone of respect for many transgender people: trans men should be conceived of as men regardless of their genitals, and not seen as “men... except for the vagina part” or something similar. In

the landscape of contemporary social justice, those kinds of “mistakes” are considered somewhere between mildly problematic and bannable offences.²⁸ However, controlling comedy content also means making the intentions of the joke completely transparent, which I find kills the trickster, and risks creating a show that, instead of expressing solidarity with feminism, revels in its superiority. Someone else can make that show. I cannot in practice put on a comedy show with the guarantee that nobody will be offended, but I can try to provide a particular kind of room.²⁹ I put most of the impetus on regulating the assumptions and politics of the jokes to the audience and to the comedians reacting to that audience, as a learning and encountering opportunity. This, of course, must be balanced with the fact that the audience are paying money for entertainment and not to be the teacher of some hapless comedian; most of

²⁸ After the second Feminist Comedy Night on November 28, 2015, I received a good deal of criticism. The show itself seemed well received, but social media told a different story. One comedian had joked that instead of Muslim women wearing a niqab, they could save fabric by covering the eyes of men. I myself joked about the confidence I got from my (new) prosthetic penis and advised women in the room that they ought to try it, “*maybe on a hot date... though you might want to take it out before things get serious*”, which is pretty insulting to trans women who have penises and reinforces the sense of a woman with a penis as abject. Immediately after the show, I found out from a friend that I’d been banned from the popular Facebook group Feministiryhmä and that there was a discussion of the show and of me there. This wouldn’t have been the end of the world, except that I felt I relied on that social media platform for getting the word out to its few thousand members about my show, and also I had no way of joining the discussion to engage and learn or even defend myself to a few thousand people who all of a sudden must hate me—it’s also a rule that nothing in the group can be discussed or shown to anyone outside the group, so I had no way of speaking without having someone else break the rules. I heard enough to know that a very large debate ensued, with camps largely arguing that banning someone without warning for something he did outside of Facebook was unprecedented and too authoritative; the other side arguing that in the interests of the safety of vulnerable members, it was the right thing to do.

There’s no need to try to excuse my jokes; they were bad and particularly unhelpful in the service of a feminist comedy show, and I apologised for them. However, that night has reverberated in my work since and had a surprisingly intense effect psychologically: for a few months I was afraid to enter queer spaces, expecting to get attacked. It’s taken years to start enjoying performing for younger queer audiences again. I still stay away from that group as well as the “Rento Feministiryhmä” (relaxed feminist group), which was a spinoff of Feministiryhmä shortly after, because the moderation was too heavy-handed in the first group. Rento Feministiryhmä now has over eight thousand members and is a very strict conversation space, even more policed than the original group; it has kicked out members who were journalists on the basis that they threatened the safety of the space by being journalists, and at one point banned *all* discussion of Islam as there was nobody on the moderator team who could judge those conversations with authority. I’m much happier on Twitter.

²⁹ This “room” has changed from Mad House’s small, cosy bar in Suvilahti to the more bourgeois cultural production house Korjaamo, and accordingly, I have noticed a shift in the character of the audience in the addition of more people who are middle-aged and professional. It is an audience of its own, the character of which I am still working out after a year or so of performances.

my control over the content of the show comes in curating who performs there.³⁰

Becoming part of the audience is a tactic used by many comedians in front of crowds less likely to empathise with them. This means establishing common ground, sometimes by presenting the audience's own (presumed) opinions back to them. When I was at the Comedy Masala club in Singapore, an internationally mixed crowd heard comedians from India, Korea, Malaysia, and Singapore all throwing vaguely racist shade at each other, and at one point the host, Pakistani comedian Umar Rana, remarked "white people in the crowd have no idea what's going on right now." It got a tremendous laugh, and I saw my own position recognised and mirrored back to me. Rana, in that moment, both criticised the centering of the white experience, and included white people in the joke.

Another way the comedian "becomes the audience" is through spontaneous shared experience, like dealing with a heckler or making a mistake, or improvising something that is new for everyone in the room. Jess Thom ends up doing this inadvertently by laughing at her own outbursts.

In order to figure out what will make the audience laugh, it's important to know what they already understand. A comic in Los Angeles can tell a very nuanced joke about the Kardashians, where their daily dramas are followed by a significant fan base; in Helsinki, one cannot expect that the audience knows much more than "on TV", "rich", "dysfunctional family", "Caitlyn Jenner", and "Kim Kardashian". In the same way, there's no point for a transgender male comedian such as myself to joke about binding³¹, Chase Ross³², Aidens and Jaydens³³, and other transmasculine secret handshakes in front of a cisgender audience who are just getting their heads around the idea that the words "sex change" are no longer considered accurate. It is necessary to work from the level of knowledge that the audience presumably possesses.

³⁰ Interestingly, it's not the identity of the performer that is the best indicator of who will have a good set at *Feminist Comedy Night*; I would say it's their ability to establish good will with the audience, and the extent to which they are sensitive to the limitations of their own viewpoint. Young, straight white cisgender able-bodied men frequently do very well if they place themselves in a position of not knowing everything; cisgender women do less well if they are insensitive to intersections of race, gender, class, and ability, or being dismissive of fat people or sex workers—although it's possible the audience holds them to a different standard.

³¹ The act of using specialised clothing or bandages to suppress one's breasts for flatter chests.

³² Trans male YouTuber and probably the most well known trans man to the under 35's.

³³ So many Aidens appeared in the last 5 years that it became a running joke that all trans men are named Aiden, unless they are named Jayden. Also see Skyler, Skylar.

Thus a minority comedian's set, if they are speaking about their experiences as that minority, usually constitutes a gross simplification of that experience. One danger of this oversimplification is misrepresentation of that experience. When one belongs to a minority group, misrepresenting one's own experience can be seen as a problem for other members of the same minority, which means that the minority comedian may experience pressure to represent the experience in a particular way. For example, I used to say onstage that I was "born a girl", because I thought that my audiences would understand that level of information most easily, and I didn't care that they would say of me that I was "born a girl", because I don't think it is actually relevant to trans liberation. However, plenty of other trans men dislike this terminology as they feel they were never girls or women; they were born with an innate sense of gender identity and theirs is male. I personally do not describe myself in this way, because it assumes that the correct view is a biological-neurological essentialist one (that one is born with an innate and fixed gender identity) and I'm just not convinced that's the entire story. However, I see how "born a girl" is used by opponents of trans liberation to delegitimise trans male identities—and much more visible is the way "born a man" and "still a man" are constantly used to attack trans women. Thus, because of the precarity of the trans identity in larger society, the risk of arguing nuances of trans experiences and trans politics in public and in the presence of cisgender people is very high. The community does a great deal of self-policing in order to present a viable, acceptable, simple and rational message to the outside. The justification for this self-policing is that trans people, trans women in particular, are subject to so much violence and discrimination that the priority must be to create more safety and security; the unfortunate side effect of this is that self-limiting public speech about doubts, conflicting theories, and differences of experience ends up silencing trans people, preventing them from processing their conflicting emotions and thoughts in a healthy way, and it also creates stress within the community. This is the background noise in my mind every time I talk about trans issues onstage, and most of my audience has no idea at all of the baggage and danger behind seemingly innocent phrases.

Presence and resistance: Recovery of the trickster by Netflix

As much as the abject trickster comedian is a force for challenging the status quo, he is also bound and shaped by it: not just through criticism received when his jokes go too far, but through the machinations of capitalism.

As Philip Auslander discusses, there is a divide in comedy between the drive for the raw, unmediated presence of the performer—often reified in the example of the dingy, brick-walled and low-ceilinged cellar where nobodies come in, take the mic, and lead their audiences to ecstasy—and the glitzy, showbiz act that criticises the media by becoming yet more media. He uses Andy Kaufman as an example of an artist employing a “negative strategy” to combat this “by refusing to fill the context of popular entertainment with the expected content” (1992, 140). Tig Notaro is our contemporary Kaufman: appearing on the intensely coveted six-minute stand-up spot on Late Night with Conan O’Brien in 2011, she spent half the set moving a stool around the studio floor because it made a strange noise, all the while commenting in ultra-deadpan on whether or not she thought people should find it funny. Notaro, like Kaufman, continuously draws attention to the expectations of the comedy situation, particularly the televised spectacle.

Still, there is something doomed about Notaro’s efforts to troll television whilst appearing on television. As much as her jokes poke at us for caring about show and celebrity, she is now a celebrity herself, and her affectation of being unaffected is in itself a kind of product, and a style that many others would like to emulate. The project of dismantling popular culture through the use of popular culture is perhaps Sisyphean, but on the other hand one may make a good career out of rolling that stone.

Still, *Equanimity* was one of three specials in a 60 million dollar deal between Netflix and Dave Chappelle, and Ricky Gervais’ *Humanity* part of a 40 million dollar contract.³⁴ Both specials spend at least 15 minutes cracking jokes at the expense of transgender women, and both comedians insist they’re only treating trans women just as badly as they would treat anyone else. At present, the controversial nature of their acts has a net positive effect economically, since notoriety is what allows them to command such high price tags. Ironically, the “straight-talking” comedian can become a hero of

³⁴ Lynch, John. 2018. “5 comedians Netflix has paid insane amounts of money – including \$40 million to Ricky Gervais.” *Business Insider Nordic* 23 March 2018.

abjection for his fans—he may not have an abject body, but he assumes abjection by airing his unpopular opinions. He's so dedicated to free speech that he's willing to become a multimillionaire pariah, the best kind of pariah.

Even without mainstream appeal and television appearances, economic questions influence the content of a comedian's material. First and foremost, it must be funny, but it must also afford the comic sufficient appeal to translate into a viable income. Comedy is not funded by arts grants but by ticket sales, which means a sufficiently large number of people must buy in to the show. With this facet of the question in mind, I have fewer qualms about tailoring my act to appeal to and assuage the sensibilities of the hegemonic mindset, because I aim to take their money. Getting cisgender and heteronormative people to pay for transgender activism is, I feel, on the cusp of being a noble cause.

Stand-up comedy provides a complex platform where the abject can be both ridiculed and subjectified, even possibly in the same performance. When the non-normative body is presented onstage and speaks with its own agency, it calls into question the relationship between that body and society at large. However, when the abject subject is also doing this within a frame of playfulness, metacommunication (telegraphing that *this is play*) makes it possible to complicate even that complexity. The comedian might *desire* to present an abject figure, or might be working with self-deprecation. At the same time, the minority comedian's relationship is not only with society at large; they also have an audience consisting of those whose identity they share and therefore represent. This relationship can be empowering, but also can become subject to policing and a source of stress.



Figure 7 From the photo shoot for Gender Euphoria. Photo by Mira Eskelinen. I was incredibly uncomfortable dressing like this, a discomfort that informs the entire show.

5. GENDER EUPHORIA: A STAND-UP SHOW

When I began transitioning, I was about three years into doing stand-up comedy. I knew that if I continued performing throughout my transition, that it would become an inseparable part of my act and my public identity. For a long while I thought I would much rather disappear for a year and then just reappear on the scene as a dude, without anyone knowing anything about my past. That past, however, is splattered all over social media as I've always been an enthusiastic and early adopter. The project of being stealth was impossible.

The moment anyone looked me up, they would know, and then I would be on the back foot, attempting to explain myself. It was better, I decided, to go on the offense instead, and explain myself before anyone even asked.

Even just a few short years ago, it seemed more ballsy to be an openly trans person in public. Trans men are still far less represented than trans women, and trans people are still represented in fiction and media as tragic figures; suicides waiting to happen, because *hey, who wouldn't kill themselves if they were so mentally ill?* I noticed that as I got more confident in my transition, I also became less apologetic. I presented a happy, self-assured image of a trans person who was not sorry in the least to be trans.³⁵ Gender dysphoria is one of the hallmarks of a transgender diagnosis or identity—the persistent and consistent sensation that one's gender is at a mismatch with one's body, social role, and/or expression, etc. We were constantly defining ourselves in suffering and lack; I wanted to define myself in the opposite, in euphoria. In practice, my jokes about gender, the body, and socialisation ping back and forth constantly between success and failure; often the incongruity in the joke comes from success and failure happening simultaneously. *Success: Airport security assumed I was male. Failure: The guard frisked my pre-operative chest as though I was male and thus we were bonded forever in mutual embarrassment.*

In this final chapter, I will discuss my final work, *Gender Euphoria*, a solo (with special guests) stand-up performance about transitioning. First, I will outline the parts of the experience design that occur separately from the text of the show itself (space, timing, re-creating and re-mixing aspects of the typical or ideal comedy club), and then I will discuss what the content was, and what it *wasn't*. Jokes that were omitted because of their sensitivity further delineate the message.

³⁵ This, believe it or not, was occasionally controversial within the trans community, as I'd get comments from other trans people saying that I must be very lucky, very privileged, and that I couldn't possibly relate to their struggles. This all may be completely true, but being criticised for being "too happy" is odd. Transness has been so strongly associated with suffering for so long that *performing suffering* may also be an identity-affirming act. I, for one, did not think I was trans for about a decade because I did not see myself as in crippling distress all the time. Ultimately the assumption that suffering is a necessary symptom of a transgender identity is transphobic.

Gender Euphoria: designing the situation

For my thesis artistic work, a one-hour stand-up comedy solo called *Gender Euphoria*, I created a simulation of a comedy club within the institution of the Theatre Academy. I performed three shows, to audiences of 60-80 people each night.



Figure 8 Aatu Raitala in the *Gender Euphoria* space during rehearsal.

The space I was given was a black box theatre, to which I added a raised, circular stage covered with pink vinyl, on which were a stool and a single microphone on a stand. The backdrop for the stage was a projected image sized to fit the back wall of the space, using abstract, rainbow-coloured images. Occasionally, photographs were shown to accentuate or help explain a joke, but in general the setting was meant to be bright, colourful, and reminiscent of televised stand-up. (The mimicry goes two ways, as well: with photographs in a projected screen, the

stand-up club also mimicked the expectations of an institution of learning, by appearing partially as lecture.) Near the sound booth, I placed a phone with a timekeeping app so that I could always see how long I'd been going. The plan was to hit around 1 hour and wrap it up.

The stage was round and surrounded by the audience in a semicircle; this is a design choice inspired by other comedy venues. I do not know if this has been studied, but comedians will often agree on what makes a “good” space for comedy, and these features differ depending on the size of the venue. A general rule is that a sense of intimacy usually helps, so people should be

sitting close to each other and close to the performer. In London's legendary club The Comedy Store, I found the chairs slightly too close together and then noticed they were all bolted to the floor. As I sat with my body touching the bodies of people to either side of me, I realised that I could physically sense their laughter, and that having people too close together was most likely by design.

A great deal of comedy is by design. Bob Mankoff, editor of the *New Yorker* cartoon from 1997 to 2017, speaking to Google employees about computers and humour, remarked that he doesn't react to jokes the same way that his audiences do, but he knows what will work and what won't: "I know what will make you laugh" (2014). Comedy is *designed* by the creator to elicit a specific, uncontrollable response from its audience. Especially in long-form stand-up comedy, lasting more than 30 minutes or so, there may be long stretches of spoken word that are thoughtful, sad, touching, interesting, but not actually funny; but if an entire comedy set fails to elicit laughter, it fails to be comedy.

I had not worked with projections in stand-up comedy before, but have seen them used to different effect in others' shows; they are very common in solo shows of the last decade. Bill Bailey, performing *Qualmpeddler* (2014) at Linnanmäki, used abstract backgrounds as well as videos to go along with his musical numbers, and photos as part of storytelling in the encore. Dylan Moran has, for at least a decade, used as a backdrop a slideshow of his own doodles and drawings, which do not have any direct relationship to the jokes being told at the time, but allow us to see another side of Moran. Hasan Minhaj's *Homecoming King* uses timed graphics and photographs to illustrate his jokes in a way that is more familiar to a TED talk than a stand-up show.

For *Gender Euphoria*, I used a gradient of pink and blue as a backdrop that gradually changed into a messy rainbow of colours—a simple gesture of a femme and masc binary moving into complication. I also projected the names of all the comedians during their sets—both for informative purposes, and also to give a nod to the showbiz aspect of comedy: stand up is a popular art form and whilst it is possible to be respected in the field as an artist, most of the recognition comes in the form of your name in lights, plastered all over a TV screen. Coming from a stand-up background, this kind of presentation is commonplace—it's polite and kind to make acts look attractive and sophisticated, because everyone but the most stubborn contrarians rely on ticket income and luring punters in is simply business; coming from

performance art, it brings to mind the spectacle: the ways of lulling and controlling an audience, style over substance, normativity, and entertainment.

Comedians often say that “real” comedy happens in a club. The ideal parameters vary from person to person, but much less than one would think. Dim lighting is good. A low ceiling is good for creating intimacy. The space shouldn’t have too many distracting noises, but it also shouldn’t be too formal. Audiences should be able to hear and see the comedian clearly. They should be sitting close to the performer and close to each other. There should be alcohol, but nobody should be too drunk. Ticket prices are even known to affect laughter: free shows are notoriously difficult because the audience have not invested anything in the show apart from their presence, whereas stadium tours are so expensive that the show doesn’t even have to be funny for the audience to laugh; they’ve paid to do just that and by gum they will. Slick, spectacular comedy is seen by those of us who haven’t become stars yet almost as another genre unto itself; an “unreal” variation of stand-up comedy.

Breaking the Ice

To further mimic the situation of a comedy club, I provided alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks for the audience, included in the price of the ticket. Intoxication is by no means a prerequisite for a good comedy audience, but again most comedians I know talk about a “sweet spot” where people are a little less inhibited. Providing alcohol in a theatre space also affects the audience’s expectations for their own behaviour. I wanted to encourage people to think they were in a playful, non-serious space, and to sense that it would be okay or even expected for them to interact and react to the show. From my previous work in performance, especially the interactive performance/ritual/larp *Tower Room* (2010) and fake pop-up dating agency *The Lovers’ Matchmaking Agency* (with Aarni Korpela in 2012), I learned that if my work depended on the audience behaving as though they were in a particular context, I have to provide a critical amount of that context for them, or their behaviour will not follow. In games, these are called rules. If the context given by the artist is too confusing or unclear, audiences either do nothing or go into a sort of random discovery mode, where they try anything to enter the piece. (If a context is strongly suggested by the space, place, ticket price, time, setting, name of performance, or other cues, it may have to be actively disrupted in order for audiences *not* to behave in a particular way: for

instance, when we enter a performance space in a gallery with white walls, we tend to line the walls with our bodies and watch the action from there. There are no seats along the walls, but some people will sit down anyway. If the artist wants us to do otherwise, they must explicitly tell us and give us rules for engagement.) The mimicry of “authentic” comedy club elements was always intentional for this reason.

To further break the ice, I started each show with a 5-10 minute introductory warm-up set, where I joked about the situation of being here inside a school at a comedy club, asked a few questions from the audience, and told jokes that I consider uncontroversial, reliably funny (most of them have been told many times before), and easily relatable.

Clap if you've never been to live stand-up before...

(Sparse applause by 3-4 people.)

(Pause, smiling, looking at the people applauding.)

*Just the Deans of the school, okay. (Laughter)*³⁶

The warm-up set is a convention of the stand-up scene and is usually performed by the MC of the night; in television recordings, there will often be someone even before the MC to come on and “hype” the crowd with high-energy jokes and forced participatory clapping and whooping. The production of laughter on a grand scale is a hideous business.

I then had opening acts comprising about 8-minute sets from local comedians Ray Zambino, Raisa Omaheimo, Aatu Raitala, and Juuso Kekkonen (two performers most nights). When a very famous comedian comes to Helsinki and sells out Kulttuuritalo or Jäähalli, they may or may not have opening acts (Louis C.K. had three; Jimmy Carr, Bill Bailey, and Dylan Moran had none). I chose the opening act structure in order to be able to showcase some other local talent for a crowd that may not have seen comedy before, as well as to give paying gigs to my colleagues/friends. Scratching backs and getting your own scratched are processes not to be ignored in a gig economy where performers simply must rely on each other to be included and ride each other’s coat-tails, and I consider the economic activity surrounding

³⁶ When transcribing these jokes, I try to include pauses, facial expressions, gestures, and audience responses. Affect contributes significantly to my comedic style, to the extent that my supervisor Jaakko Stenros has suggested that I write an entire paper on my facial expressions onstage.

Gender Euphoria to be part of the performance of comedy. I thought, as well, that if audiences unfamiliar to stand-up could see two or three performers instead of one, they might get a better sense of some of the conventions of stand-up (the way a comic takes and leaves the stage, the relationship of the comedian's persona to the material and to the comedian themselves, the way people treat the microphone stand, the convention of set-up and punchline, the verbal and gestural delivery, the way a comedian and audience might react when a joke fails, etc).

I invited comedians to perform who would be able to fit in well in an academic or otherwise socially critical situation, and performers who know me well and have an understanding of what is at stake in my show. Zambino is a Scottish comedian who specialises in one-liners and puns; Raitala is my on-stage partner for *Comedy Idiot*, our monthly English-language club night since 2013; Raisa is known in the feminist and performance scenes for her comedic monologue *Läski* (Fatso), and Juuso Kekkonen runs leftist/feminist *Kekkosklubi*, as well as the political comedy night *You Can't Be Serious* with me. Their sets were received warmly, if not with as much enthusiasm as my set (which is to be expected as it was my solo), but it wasn't terribly important that they be hilariously funny. They didn't need to talk about the same topics I was going to talk about; the intention was to replicate the activity of truth-telling and joking performed by multiple comedians on a single night, which is the core of a stand-up club scene. Of course the content of their material could be considered as part of the analysis of the text as a whole, but I don't go into deeper analysis of their specific performances here.

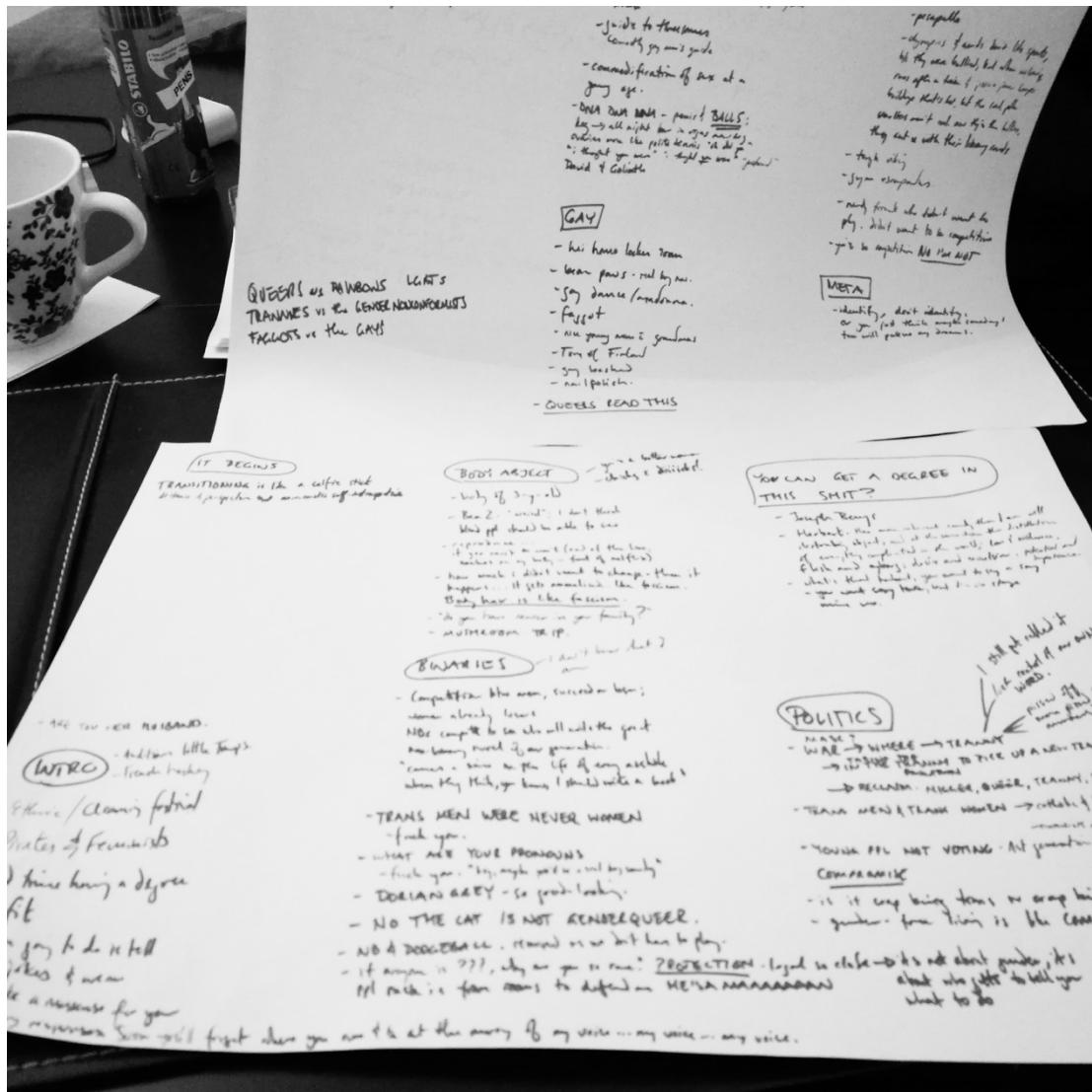


Figure 9 The working "set list" for Gender Euphoria; about 60% of this would appear in the actual performance; when developing work, a set list operates more like a menu of possibilities than a script.

The Set: What the Jokes Were

The set list of *Gender Euphoria* differed significantly from one night to the next. Some entire 10-minute segments only appeared in one show; other parts were repeated each time. This may seem odd but is fairly usual for my way of working. Some comedians develop sets that are repeated word-for-word every time; I am not one of them. I work in a more modular fashion, where bits are shortened, lengthened, reorganised and even recontextualised (by their placement in relation to other bits) and the configuration may differ greatly

from one night to the next.³⁷ A bit is a collection or series of jokes on a particular subject or idea. For each bit, I need to remember what the jokes are and in what order. For a set, I remember which bits are in which order. When I do a show longer than 30 minutes, it gets more difficult to remember all the bits and their order, and so I tend to rely on 4-5 themes or sections. I do as many bits as I can remember for each theme, and then move on to the next one. I do this until either my time runs out, or I sense that the audience has had enough, and then end with a pre-planned closer. The closer will be a bit that is reliably hilarious, tested many times, and usually also something uplifting and fun.

Gender Euphoria also relies on storytelling (common in autobiographical comedy), and the piece follows a fairly simple timeline. It starts in gender-free-floating childhood where tomboys were commonplace, into dealing with being gender-nonconforming throughout my teens and twenties and how it affected my confusion around sexuality. From there I talk about how I learned about the existence of trans men, started identifying with trans men, and then started identifying as a trans man. I talk about the process of transitioning in a bodily, legal and medical sense, and then in a social sense. I tell stories of successes (the time a nurse, giving me my testosterone shot, clearly mistook me for a cisgender man; I took this to mean I must have a sufficiently masculine bottom) and failures (the time I accidentally left my silicone penis at someone's house). Mark Twain is credited with the adage "humour is tragedy plus time". One could be forgiven for considering swathes of stand-up comedians as people who have learned one way to monetise tragedy and personal crises.

Peppered among the jokes are explanations of common misconceptions about trans identities, presented mostly as I myself had to learn them in order to understand myself:

I didn't think I was trans because I wasn't into women, and I didn't know you could be trans and gay... When I told my friends they were

³⁷ This also speaks to my relative inexperience and the novelty of the show. Obviously, if one sells a tour and performs a show 300 times, by the end the show will be honed into a predictable, reliable unit. I would say that performing *Gender Euphoria* at the Brighton Fringe Festival in 2018, I finally started to shape the piece into a more understandable arc. The idea that a comedy show ought to have a cohesive dramaturgy speaks to the expectations of critics and the relationship of stand-up to theatre, but it does make a show more marketable. Also, jokes themselves are capital: it makes sense to constrain your set so you sell the same joke to the maximum number of people before you start selling new ones.

like (impersonating friend) ‘*Wait, you’re into men?*’
 (as self) ‘*Yeah.*’
 (as friend) ‘*And you want to be a man.*’
 (as self) ‘*Yeah.*’
 (pause, miming friend with a very confused face, then slowly) ‘*Wouldn’t it... be easier... (laughter)... just to stay a straight woman?*’ (Laughter)

It is very common that audience members tell me that they learned, via this joke, that being gay and being trans are independent identities. Not all the information I present is so unambiguous, however; nearing the end, the text includes more resistance towards the idea that I’ve now got it figured out, or that I’m somehow complete or whole as a subject, and that I actually understand what it is I’ve done to myself and what others do to me as regards gender. The gross arc of the hour had sections titled SHAKESPEARE,³⁸ TRANS 101, MEDICALISATION, GAY, GENDER ROLES. These were basically signposts to help me remember where the show was going.

The first two sections concern memories about gender from childhood, coming-of-age, and young adulthood, during a period of time when trans people had access to very little representation, information, and understanding of their identities. I describe watching trans women on the *Jerry Springer Show* in the 1990s and seeing a trans man for the very first time in the 1999 film *Boys Don’t Cry*. There aren’t so many jokes in this section as a lot of it is set-up: providing context for how it took me until the age of 36 to begin transitioning. It also helps me “become the audience” somewhat, as I document my own path from ignorance to understanding to action, mirroring the audience’s own ignorance in the process and showing that I understand that position. After figuring out for myself that I might not just be a broken lesbian, I began the process of taking that suggestion to

³⁸ Shakespeare is a brief history of a gender non-conforming childhood, including an account being taken to see *As You Like It* at the Stratford Festival in Ontario in 1990. The main character is a woman who disguises herself as a man and meets her love interest in disguise. She “pretends” to woo him to help him pursue someone else—but he also falls in love with her male persona. “*If I had been a Hollywood executive at the age of 12 I would have green-lighted basically everything involving this plot; go, make this film, have all the money!*”

medical and legal institutions, which began auspiciously enough³⁹:

Finally, I went to a doctor, Finnish doctor, nice guy and all. I said Doctor, think I'm transgender and I want to transition. The doctor was really nice, he just said, 'Oh.' (pause, then surprised face) 'OH.' (pause, laughter) 'And... you were born as a...?' (looks up at audience, eyebrows raised, pause as if asking for the answer to the question) (laughter)

Presenting an encounter such as this *as comedy* is a prominent and important aspect of my work. When a person asks for help from a strange medical professional to begin modifying their body to conform to their gender identity, and the medical professional then reveals they not only know very little about the topic but who also suddenly can't tell what gender you are, this would often be interpreted as a negative encounter of embarrassment and insensitivity. I remember being only very briefly embarrassed, and worried about whether this doctor would be able to help me at all, but also bemused at his discomfort. It's difficult to pinpoint the target of the joke—is it the doctor? Is it me, because I managed to find a hapless physician? Is it the general panic that people often succumb to when surprised by a trans person? The doctor in the joke is not presented in any mean-spirited light (I call him “nice” twice and emphasise how helpful he's trying to be), yet at the root of the joke is the hostile social landscape where one appears to be at the beginning of an impossible journey, only to find that nobody knows the way, because trans bodies are new, strange, unusual, abject.

Tragedy presented as comedy is a cornerstone of the show. There are limits, of course: Tig Notaro became famous for a legendary half-hour set in 2012 at the Largo in LA, now released in audio as *Live*. In the space of a few months, Notaro had been hospitalised with an infection, her mother died in an accident, she broke up with her girlfriend, and had been diagnosed with Stage 2 cancer in both breasts. Andrew Marantz describes the night:

She walked to the mic and, while the audience was still applauding, she said, ‘Good evening. Hello. I have cancer. How are you? Hi, how are

³⁹ Every story told in *Gender Euphoria* is true, although many are embellished with more facial expressions.

you? Is everybody having a good time? I have cancer.' After a few seconds, she exhaled heavily and murmured, 'Ah, god.' Then, in a loud, pinched voice: 'Oh my god!' She seemed to be experiencing several conflicting emotions at once. The audience response, which had been warm, fractured into hoots and nervous titters. People were beginning to realise that this was not a bizarre set-up; Notaro was telling the truth and groping blindly for a way to make it funny. She said, 'It's weird because with humor, the equation is Tragedy plus Time equals Comedy. I am just at tragedy right now.' (Marantz, *The New Yorker*, Oct 5, 2012)

Instead of waiting for time to do its alchemical work on tragedy, Notaro performed a rough sketch of the present moment. It isn't a very funny set but is considered by many comedians to be a valuable, beautiful one. Where much of Notaro's material has been meta-comedy and awkward pauses punctuated by laconic one-liners, *Live* presents something like a diary entry.

The set in *Gender Euphoria* is filled with small once-tragedies that have now become funny; the process of being diagnosed with a psychiatric condition is unpleasant, but is presented as though it's a fun thing to do. Homophobic encounters also get a different twist:

Sometimes I'll be walking down the street, holding hands with my boyfriend, and you know, someone just says 'vitun homot'. And I'm like... thank you. (laughter) Thank you for acknowledging that this is a gay male relationship, because otherwise that'd be totally transphobic (laughter) and we wouldn't want that!

What makes these jokes funny is probably the unexpected attitude towards oppression—leaning in to it, rather than complaining about it. Of course, the underlying message is a critique and a complaint, but the surface is where the joke is. Most Finnish audiences I encounter understand 'vitun homot' to be a wholly negative thing to hear, as an aggression against gay people. The joke is the idea that achieving that aggression could be seen as a win for someone whose primary worry is that their gender identity, not their sexuality, would be respected. In any case, part of goal of ambiguating these emotional responses can be seen as liberation: how much of the oppression we

experience is of our own making, or at least reinforcement? How much can we laugh off, and how long does it take?

Another aspect of the text in *Gender Euphoria* is a repeated centering of my own perspective in order to critique or explore femininity and masculinity. By positioning myself as a person who remembers what it is to be a woman but is in the process of understanding what it is to be man, I present myself as a valuable source of insight and information. At one point I criticise masculinity as being far more limiting than I had previously expected—a line that signals to masculine people in the audience that *I understand your frustration with expressing masculinity*, and signals to feminine people that *this is something you might not have noticed, so listen up*.

The thing about masculinity is it's so rigid, you have so few options, really. Like you can either be gay, or you can be this big macho warmongering type. Right? So you can either suck a cock, or go to war. (laughter) Now, you can try this at home, too, on your friends: (laughter) Are there any straight men in the audience? (laughter, a few hands go up) How many of you would rather go to war? (silence, followed by laughter) (facial expression of 'I told you so') I'm just sayin', that's how thin that line is.

The Body in the Work

Throughout *Gender Euphoria*, the body, the genitals, and sexuality take a prominent role; they are the sites of contention in the trans experience, and also sites of taboo in all human bodies, lending themselves to comedy.

Often, a shared assumption of embarrassment is the basis of a corporeal joke—an assumption that carries with it normative values about what a body should be like (e.g. fat jokes often imply that people should be embarrassed), or what it should do (e.g. a straight man joking about the horrors of anal sex usually conflates anal sex with homosexuality). Embracing the abject, however, and presenting oneself as shameless, is a different tactic. Margaret Cho's work, for example, is sex-positive to the point of being mortifyingly explicit, with lurid act-outs of sexual acts.

For *Gender Euphoria*, there is a balance between embracing the abject and presenting it as a new norm, whilst acknowledging its abject status as a means of retaining common ground with a cisgender audience. For instance, the joke

about body hair and fascism conveys both that I was worried and distressed about gaining body hair, and that I am now very happy to have it.

Sexual explicitness is also part of a program of normalisation. Though sex is a private business, it is a topic of intense curiosity particularly when it concerns transgender people. Journalists in interviews still sometimes ask me, “so how do you have sex?”, without realising what a stupid, invasive question this is. I oppose shame and regulation as regards human sexuality, and in this way my comedy has a “shock jock” quality of its own. Though a typical shock jock may joke about dead babies and the dangers of immigration, I interpret my shock-jockery as resistance towards an unnecessary and harmful mindset in the status quo, where people must apologise for their sexuality and hide anything that could be regarded as deviant. The lack of public discussion about failure and embarrassing situations as regards gender, sexuality, and the body is one of the things that prevented me from clarifying my own identity for so long.

For instance, I have a routine about a medical checkup for a urinary tract infection, where the doctor mistakes me for a cisgender male:

She said ‘one more test’ and I said ‘okay’; she said ‘take off your trousers’ and I said ‘fine’... and then I looked over and saw her with a glove in the air... (mimes two fingers in the air, pause) And she’s looking at my crotch, and I’m looking at her glove... Finally she says, ‘you don’t have a prostate, do you?’ (laughter) And I said, ‘no’ (pause) but what I should have said was (pause) keep looking. (laughter) Because if you have the opportunity to have a professional finger up the ass, for free, when the taxpayer is paying for it (laughter) you need to take that opportunity.

This is a true story, although in actuality there is nothing sexy for me about a trip to the doctor and I would not expect to get gratification from a rectal exam. However, in my comedy I will always take the opportunity to be *enthusiastic* about a sexual act, even if I would consider it outlandish. Another routine concerns testosterone and sex drive, specifically, the way trans men typically experience a usually temporary but considerable increase in their libido when starting hormone therapy:

*I have a whole new empathy for 17-year-old boys on reddit, now.
They're all there like (pubescent, cracking voice) I don't know what to
do can't concentrate on anything I've masturbated eleven times today'
(laughter) and I'm all like eleven times? (pause) Amateur. (laughter)*

One gag⁴⁰ that I particularly enjoy is showing a photograph of myself as a toddler, naked in the paved backyard of a townhouse in London, Ontario, with a tricycle in the background and with my arms raised in a very macho pose (for a two-year-old). I let the audience assume it's a picture of me, then say '*this is just some random kid I found on the Internet*', a joke that will probably get me arrested someday. I show the picture when describing how curious people become about your body when they find out you're transgender: have you had the surgery, what do you look like naked, etc. I present it as '*so if you ever wanted to see a transgender person naked, there you go.* (laughter) *The funny thing is—see that flat chest and chubby belly—nowadays I look exactly like this* (laughter) *only scaled larger and with more hair*' (laughter).

A picture of myself naked as a child: as well as being a joke about the endless curiosity of strangers and the violence of individual curiosity when multiplied by the mob, it's an exploitation, of me, by me, in service of education and a comedic opportunity. It is work.

Arlie Hochschild coined the term “emotional labour” to describe jobs in the public sector that fulfil three criteria: they require face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the public, they require the worker to produce an emotional state in another person, and they allow the employer (through training and supervision) to exercise some control over the emotional activities of employees (2003). Stand-up comedy easily fulfils the first two criteria, and I might suggest that the third could also be appropriate if we change “employer” to be “relationship to the audience”. Hochschild also warns that this kind of work risks the worker becoming estranged from the “aspect of the self—either the body or the margins of the soul—that is *used to do the work*” (2003, 7).

I recognise in my stand-up work a mismatch between my own feelings and thoughts, and the feelings and thoughts I present in order to evoke particular responses (laughter, empathy, understanding) in my audience. I provide an opportunity for ignorant, disinterested people to learn about my experience without fear of being attacked for their ignorance, or of being censured for

⁴⁰ This bit did not appear in the opening night show but has appeared in subsequent performances.

their curiosity. At the same time, I know this ignorance and curiosity is something I can exploit for financial gain. I try to get them to relax and feel taken care of, so they can listen better. I take on that work so they don't have to. I think all stand-up comedians do emotional labour now and again, but in the case of a minority comedian specifically addressing the group within which he is a minority and *about* that power dynamic, the amount of emotional labour is pronounced, and also inseparable from the body and identity of the comedian. South African comedian Trevor Noah performs similar tactics in front of white British audiences when he speaks of colonialism; they appreciate his jokes about the murderous Brits, and they appreciate his presence as a being whose experience was directly affected by colonialism in ways that theirs wasn't.

The mob does not learn or change its mind; only individuals do, and every individual must have opportunities to encounter difference in order to change a problematic status quo. When you represent 0.1% of the human population, as trans people do, you become a site of encountering and learning nearly every day.

Improvisations and failures

(Drinks beer) *It's a bit weird, isn't it, to be in a position where you're sort of... (gesture of pushing) forced to be happy, with other people.*

(laughter) (smiles) *It's weird, opinions get kind of like—I can say things and then people laugh and you think 'oh, that must be true, then'.* (laughter) (quietly) *'Am I wrong for not liking that, or agreeing with that? I dunno, like is there a violence going on?' (energetically) Anyway, that's the performance part.* (laughter)

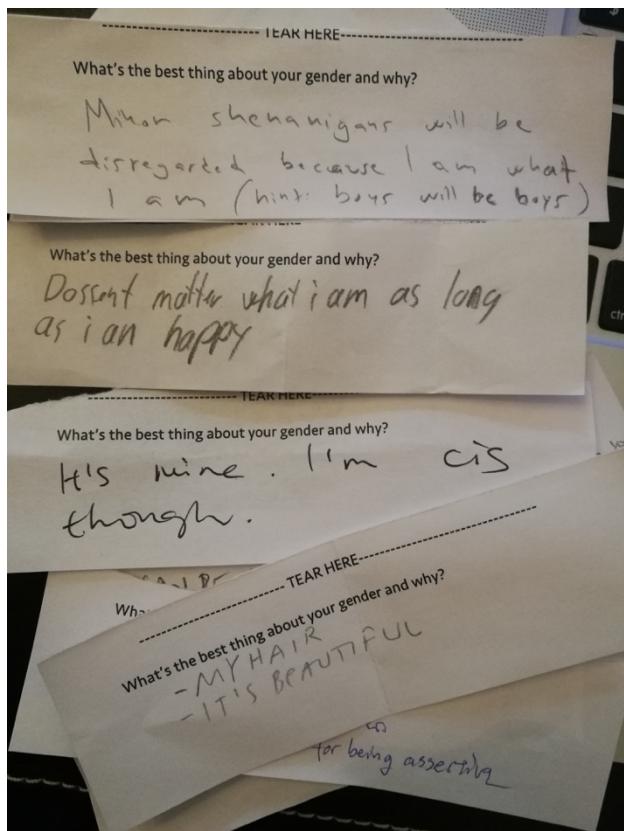


Figure 10 Some examples of the answers given by audience members in exchange for a drink.

members fill out a paper answering the question “what’s the best thing about your gender and why”. Near the end of the show, I read out some answers as an interactive and improvised bit—it wasn’t as exciting as I would have hoped though there were good moments. I believe that if I were to practice more audience interaction and also word the question differently, I would be able to better control the pacing of such an improvised bit; 3) I spoke of experiencing male homophobia only after passing as a man—I wore nailpolish in public and found it made me nervous around tough-looking men, in particular the extremely large and powerful Turkish bloke who sold me some protein powder at the fitness shop. I attempted to make a point about how his skin colour affected my fear, since I associate some cultures with a higher degree of machismo and lower bar towards homophobia, and how “interesting” it was to have that racialised element in my new set of self-preservation instincts, but I came across as a moderately racist confused white boy, which I probably deserved.

Briefly out of respect for the scope of the paper, I introduce some failures without too much deeper analysis: 1) I took my prosthetic penis out of my pants and attempted to have a ‘conversation’ with it, without enough material to actually make the bit funny. (However, after I realised the bit didn’t work, I carelessly tossed the penis offstage. This caused screams of protest from the audience, who seemed to have grown attached to the thing and were shocked that I would treat it so poorly, which to be fair made the entire failure worth it); 2) I made it a prerequisite for getting a drink that audience

That last failure, the inelegant commentary on my own racism, I would put back in now that I've had a year to think about why it went wrong. What I did, and what I see in open mic comedy sets all the time, is the attempt to have the audience agree with my findings and absolve me of guilt. The punchline I attempted was "*part of my mind was thinking 'Don't be fucking racist' while the other half of my mind is like 'Don't get fucking killed!'*" This is not a punchline; it ought to be a setup for a more mature exploration. In essence, I repeated the confusion and fear towards the Other that I criticise in other comedians who speak thoughtlessly of transgender people. It showed that at that moment, I had noticed my own racial biases as they coincided with my new self-preservation instincts and attempts to pass as male in society. My attempt in the show was a brute force attempt to have the audience indicate that my fears were not a problem, by laughing with me, but without me having to take responsibility for my own thoughts. If I would bring it back in, I would start from a position of owning up to my own problematic behaviour. I had a sense at the time that I had a good point, but I didn't know how to phrase it. Quite often, comedy that fails in its social commentary functions very well as a barometer indicating where that artist currently struggles in confusion, and where they are choosing to take or avoid responsibility.

Confessional

Near the end of the show, I told a story for the first time – that of an experience with psilocybin mushrooms a few months into my use of testosterone. In the experience, I recall how I had been expecting a trip involving mild hallucinations, laughter, and general feelings of connectedness with friends, as I had experienced in my early 20s with the drug. Instead, I had uncomfortable visual sensations of geometric patterns in the air, which led me to focus on introspection as a means of diverting my attention. Once there, I heard voices telling me that I was, distressingly, going against my real essence as a being; that I would never be able to lie to nature; that I was female and everything I was doing was a kind of veneer.

It took me about 18 months to even talk about this experience; I would say it was the single most disturbing thing that happened to me in my entire transition so far, partially because I genuinely wasn't sure whether or not the voices were right. It was much easier to ignore other people who told me I was wrong, than it was to ignore a voice from inside myself saying the same thing.

The comedic elements of the bit are in the characterisation (the imitation of being on a mushroom trip, giving license to say in a breathy, out-of-it voice that is recognisable as a stereotype of a person who is high: “*your skin is so dry... your womb is like an upside-down tree... what happened to the apples?*”), to some extent in the shock factor, since possessing mushrooms is still illegal, and also in the language—saying “you’re barren” to a trans person draws attention to something painful and taboo in the trans experience. There is also part of it that isn’t comedic in itself and presents a reversal of the stage persona who has, up until now, been taking every part of his transition journey in jocular stride; suddenly there is a revelation of unfinished business, and real doubts about the entire legitimacy of the transition process. There is vulnerability and a reminder that the performer does not have all the answers, and that not everything is okay all the time. Knowing that my audience includes many transgender people, it is also a bit of a troll move. Having created an environment where trans people are very likely to be able to identify with many of the things said, and are not expecting to hear themselves challenged, they then hear a trans person speak with dead seriousness about doubts, returning their identity to contingency. I am counting on audience members to find this thought genuinely distressing, and I also take advantage of the opportunity to exorcise the whole nasty business in public with a microphone. The alibi provided by the mushrooms allowed me to express self-doubt and internalised transphobia without any filter of politeness. On the first night, when I said quietly, as though on a mushroom trip “*oh, what have you done to yourself?*”, I heard gasps of horror, and they were as rewarding as any laugh I’ve ever torn out of an audience.

It seemed natural to me to put it in the act, because joking about things that are genuinely raw, uncertain, and uncomfortable for me is a performance tactic—albeit one with diminishing returns. By the time the story has been repeated enough times that it’s been honed into comedy material, it is no longer raw and the vulnerabilities described have little power over me. The troll reaction was strongest on the first night; I think the audience also sensed that I didn’t know how they would react. Ever since then, I’ve known what the reaction *ought* to be, and this makes it more difficult to achieve the same level of social precariousness.

It could be theorised that there is an element of danger in comedy—the sense that one is playing with volatile material and making oneself vulnerable.

Reliable jokes are the core of stand-up comedy, but it can be even more fun to chase the moments of ecstasy, when the comedian and the audience are both taken by surprise and affected by the performance. It could be seen as part thrill-seeking and part shamanistic in its intent, to insist that the performer go on the same trip as the audience, or at least, one of similar intensity.

Normally, these moments appear fleetingly—as responses to heckles, or comments on one's own set in the moment that reveal the banal, contrived situation of the stand-up show itself, and the comedian's private persona comes to the foreground. Why are audiences so hungry for that?

“Tranny” and the limits of parrhesia

In every stand-up performance I've ever done, jokes are left out. Usually this is simply because I tend to plan for about 30% more time than I need to, and I decide on the fly which jokes to use based on what's working with the audience. Other jokes get left out because they're too offensive.

One joke is notable because even after a few more repetitions of *Gender Euphoria* in other contexts, I have not been able to bring myself to do it, even though I've been told by other trans people that it *should* be done.

I worry about Russia and the US getting everybody in a war. I fear the idea of going to war because I won't have anything to do. I'm one of the only Finnish men I know who is totally untrained for an army situation, and I'm 39; they're not going to train me now... not with these bad knees. In fact, the only thing I'm really trained to do is entertain people, which as we know is very important for morale in wartime, but can you imagine me walking out on stage in front of a bunch of Finnish troops?! ‘Hey look, it's the tranny on steroids who won't pick up a gun to save the motherland!’ What am I going to do, yell queer manifestoes at the Russian border?

The problem with the joke is the word “tranny”, a derogatory term for a transgender or transsexual person and overwhelmingly used towards trans women. The reason why I won't say it on stage is exactly the reason I want to say it onstage: its disputed and complicated “ownership” and denotation. I also think it sounds good rhythmically in the sentence, and on top of that, using it in reported speech (i.e. as though it were said to me by an intolerant

person, rather than by me) situates its usage in its contemporary, hostile context.

Kate Bornstein suggests that the term tranny originated in Australia in the 60s and 70s as an in-group term that was preferred to other medicalised or hostile terms (2009). This origin hasn't been corroborated, but trans historian Cristan Williams (2014) notes the first recorded American usage in New York in 1985 was also as an in-group term, often referring to self-identifying queer performers. That is, "tranny" was not necessarily a term that came from outside the trans community, and instead of being a hostile word that would later be reclaimed (such as "queer"), it has instead been taken *from* the community and become a tool of oppression.

Bornstein, Williams, Julia Serano (2016) and others note that this probably coincides with the rise of transfeminine pornography on the internet ("tranny porn", to say nothing of other insulting terms like "shemale"), and that a cisgender, male population consuming these images and making a commodity of trans feminine bodies reduced any sense of agency connected with the word. The Othering of trans women included creating a product of them, as sexual objects defined and used by cisgender men for their own purposes.

Transgender men, while they are sometimes called "tranny" as a derogatory term, are not subject to its usage anywhere near on the same scale as trans women. This creates a particular tension in trans activism where transgender men or other trans people who are not trans women may want to reclaim the word "tranny", but the general consensus (a word used with great caution whenever it comes to trans activism) is that trans men do not have the right to do so, as they are not the usual targets of physical and verbal abuse. Julia Serrano, while supporting this position, points out the caveats in this argument: "Historically, people on the trans female/feminine spectrum have garnered virtually all of the public's attention and backlash, whereas (until recently) trans male/masculine folks have been almost entirely invisible" (2016). Indeed, it can be frustrating for trans men that the public discourse seems to be overwhelmingly about trans women.⁴¹ Trans men are expected, in

⁴¹ This can even manifest in a perverse kind of jealousy towards trans femme people for actually having a term of derision, while trans men are so insignificant that nobody will even bother to insult them. Of course that is neither *truly* desirable, nor rational, but it plays into trans masculine social dysphoria. TERFs often describe trans women as aggressive, barging into their spaces, while trans men are written about as poor, vulnerable, brainwashed girls who self-mutilate. Ironically, people for gender equality don't seem to notice that they attribute entirely sexist differences in agency to trans women and trans men.

activism, to make space for trans women, while trans women are not expected to do the same. This aligns with the assumption of different privileges (trans men gaining male privilege, trans women losing whatever they had of theirs) and a principle that those with male privilege make space for those without it. Serrano also suggests that this is due to “societal effemimania”, the disproportionate carnivalization and sensationalisation of (trans) femme entities. Quietly, though, I have found that some trans people (of many genders) suggest that it may also be affected by growing up with a masculine or feminine socialisation: AMAB⁴² people are socialised to take up space and advocate for themselves; AFAB persons are socialised to give space and take care of the needs of others. Some trans women of my acquaintance are very capable of being assertive and attribute this partially to their socialisation; likewise, many trans men I know struggle to be more outspoken and blame the feminine socialisation for their lack of practice. Does this socialization bleed into the way transgender people do activism? Is it unfair? Is it useful for a trans man to advocate that AFAB people should take up more space and AMAB people should be more mindful of other people? Given the real threat of violence and unbalanced injustice towards feminine people as a whole and trans women in particular, that would seem petty at best. At worst, it would offer fuel to Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists and other “gender critical” opponents, who rely on an argument that trans women are, by their essentialist biological nature, violent and oppressive (though whether TERF rhetoric should influence trans liberation at all is another question).

What I have wanted to do, on stage, is unpack this entire dynamic because it interests me, and because I believe that it is important for activists to keep other activists honest. The fact that I haven’t been able or willing to do this bit on stage, even though I’ve had it on my set list about 10 times, is both telling and personally infuriating, as it is an obvious case of self-censorship. To be clear, it’s not the ire of trans women, who may believe that the word is not mine to utter, that really prevents me from doing the joke, because the word is at least partly mine to speak, and it’s certainly possible to do so in the context of artwork and asking particular questions.⁴³ Instead, I feel it is the

⁴² Assigned Male at Birth, a preferred descriptor over “born male”; likewise, Assigned Female at Birth.

⁴³ Transgender artist Kris Grey has an ongoing series *Ask a Tranny* (2011-), where he walks around in public with a sign bearing the title of the work and engages people in conversation. They ask him personal questions, they are sometimes hostile and sometimes curious, but most of the interactions are

cisnormative pressure, and possible damage caused by the confusion around the term and my position on its context and usage, that stops me. What if my advocacy, by being complex and nuanced, simply caused damage? Wouldn't it be better for *any* trans person at all to say "tranny" instead of relinquishing the word's power to those who attack trans people? Or is the situation so delicate that, in fact, it is not the time to ask questions, but instead to present a unified front? With whom, exactly, am I supposed to be unified? When one has to toe the line, what damage is done to the *subject* who could otherwise explore difficult thoughts and ideas? To someone whose art form is dedicated to revealing contradictions, hypocrisies, and weaknesses, this is not a pleasant position to be in. Weighing the value of fearless speech with the possible negative outcomes and sense of responsibility towards one's community is part of the minority jokester's territory. Perhaps some ideas really aren't well suited for a comedic treatment. Maybe it's just "too soon". And perhaps I am a good soldier after all.

obviously well-meaning, even if ignorant. Indeed, it often seems that the work of trans men involves being the "friendly" ambassador for transgender people—men who are understanding and kind, who will answer all your questions, and who do not carry the complicated, deadly burden of being an object of straight male desire. I asked him about his usage of "tranny" when I met him in Copenhagen, and he replied that it is not an attempt to reclaim the term (as he agreed this was for trans women to do should they ever wish to), but a provocation towards the public.

6. CONCLUSION

In what ways does the body of the stand-up comedian inform the jokes they tell? Stand-up comedy, because of its commitment to laughter, is a performance form with a goal. Charged humour, of the kind performed by me and other comedians whose identities are subjugated, will have multiple goals, from informing to persuading to making people laugh to attempting mainstream appeal in spite of one's contingent appearance. Comedians will encounter multiple challenges in trying to serve these goals simultaneously, both from within the confines of the form, and among one's own community.

The goal of laughter can be achieved through multiple (occasionally simultaneous) strategies including (but not limited to) inducing a sense of superiority, relief, or incongruous juxtaposition. These strategies can further be complicated through metacommunication about the situation, communicating that “this is play”, or metacommunication about that metacommunication. Comedians may deliberately obfuscate their messages, if there is indeed a message beyond laughter.

A secondary goal of truth-telling informs many comedic acts. The comedian's lived experience, often also visible in the body, reinforces his, her, or their authenticity and right to speak truth to power, as perceived by the audience.

In *Gender Euphoria* I attempted a synthesis of my own process of learning what I could do about my own gender troubles, and what happened when I took those actions. The goals were to present this information for the consumption of interested parties both inside and outside of the transgender community, and to be hilarious in the process, contributing (if possible) to a reputation of being a funny, interesting, very marketable comedian who should have a long and industrious career. I was also aware of being one of the few people to ever come through the Theatre Academy of Finland with stand-up comedy as their artistic form, and that there would be some jostling for position between the theatre institution and a populist form.

On stage, my body is a site of presentation and representation: the embellished stories, honed linguistically and with gestures in order to maximise the audience response, create a stylised image of James Lórien MacDonald, a funny guy with a wild life full of sexual and gender-based

adventures; at the same time, nearly everything I say is informed by what people think is in my pants. My capacity to provide insight is signed by a medicalised body.

Among the other contradictions present in my stand-up are the sense of self-exploitation, the question of whether my dignity is more important than activism and humour, and the constant tinkering with the message to maximise commercial appeal without compromising one's values. This is, of course, to say nothing about whether or not what actually comes out of my mouth at any given moment is a success or failure in terms of simply being funny. The sense of responsibility I feel on behalf of a community—to represent us faithfully, not to create harm—is always tempered by trickster worship. Every audience has its own average set of norms and values, and the only true calling is to mess with them, whatever that takes at this moment.

In two months I will travel to Denmark to perform *Gender Euphoria* at the Oops! Festival. This spring I brought it to the Brighton Fringe Festival in the UK. In the comedy clubs I still perform at multiple times a week, material flows fairly quickly and most of the material in that show is only brought out for special occasions, because while it's solid and reliable material, it's also old to me, and I want to make sure that I'm also a good comedian, and not just someone who can lean on an identity to interest audiences. I enjoy doing gigs where I don't talk about being trans. However, it's so frequent when I do that someone approaches me after the show and comes out to me on the spot (sometimes as the first person they're coming out to), or speaks to me about a sibling, friend, or child who is coming out, that I feel the show is something of a public service. Those moments are very precious and I can't help but think what things would have been like if I'd seen a performer like me when I was twenty. To that end the show continues to develop; it has a more reliable arc and the performances seem less like I'm filling an hour with whatever is in my reach, but I'm actually on a journey from one point to another. It now begins with material about the question "*how did you know you were trans?*", spends about an hour explaining how I knew, and then concludes with "*you don't ever know.*" Even tricksters can perform public service.

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