

**Redefining feminist rhetoric in stand-up comedy:
Offering cultural critique through subversion and silence**

by

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The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

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DEDICATION

It is with gratitude that I dedicate this thesis to all of the funny women who ever had the balls [Read: vagina] to crack a joke. This is for each badass woman with the courage to break the prescribed script of a traditional patriarchy and subvert the dominant culture through humor. The work you do is important and supports feminist artistic movements. You validate the experiences of women and potentially inform the ignorant about our unique experiences. Thank you past, present, and future funny women. You made this thesis possible.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the use of feminist humor paired with specific rhetorical strategies in Netflix Original comedy specials in order to identify how female comics are gaining success through their public social critique. Specifically, this thesis details the sparse history of women in stand-up comedy, debunking the claim that women are not funny and instead articulating the power structure at play, which has limited opportunities for women comics. This project asserts that Netflix is offering a significant number of women's voices through the online streaming service, demonstrating a shift in popular culture with feminist implications. After detailing the historical context, an explanation of humor and feminism offers insights into how jokes are an interesting site for feminist investigation. A clear break down of joke structure and discussion of feminist thought links the concepts in order to set the stage for the later argument regarding feminist humor. Through linguistic analysis, a table of characteristics, definitions and examples has been developed to demonstrate how feminist humor is perceived in the context of this thesis. Following the introductory chapters, this thesis offers two conceptually-oriented analyses using close reading and visual analysis of jokes from stand-up comedy specials, which specifically use feminist humor.

A detailed account of the rhetorical use of subversion is applied to feminist humor in order to identify how women comics are using humor to subvert the patriarchy. An explanation of the rhetorical use of silence shows how silence has shifted from a tool for oppressing minority groups to a tool used by the oppressed as a conscious activist tactic. Then a close reading of jokes demonstrates what the rhetorical use of silence is doing for feminist humor. In

conclusion, this thesis demonstrates the recent shift in popular stand-up comedy, citing instances of how women are using subversion and silence as social justice rhetoric.

CHAPTER 1. RHETORICAL REVISIONS IN STAND-UP COMEDY: A HISTORY OF FUNNY WOMEN

Introduction

With 94 million paid subscriptions, Netflix is the leading Subscription Video on Demand service in the United States. Thus it is influential in the shifting landscape of contemporary media consumption (Molla 1). Netflix is a valuable site for critical inquiry because media directly informs social and cultural ideologies (Ortmanns 53). In this thesis, I join rhetorical, feminist and cultural studies scholars such as Meier, Schmitt, Auslander, and Krefting, to examine a pivotal moment in the context of popular stand-up comedy. My goal is to identify how rhetoric functions in the discourse of stand-up comedy, especially as a new wave of comedians use feminist humor as a form of nonviolent activism, potentially provoking their audiences to reevaluate learned expectations of patriarchal culture.

Stand-up comedy is a contemporary example of the traditional rhetorical situation. A stand-up comedy act features a single speaker standing before a live audience with particular intentions to evoke laughter from their listeners. Examining the rhetorical implications of the recent increase of women using feminist humor in their stand-up comedy specials will provide new insights into the foundational work of humor scholars. According to Meier and Schmitt, “stand-up comedy performance remains one of the last remnants of the rhetorical tradition in contemporary culture” (Meier et al. xxiii). Stand-up comedians are what Meier and Schmitt call “comic rhetors” and explain that comedians interact with their audience with purpose, constructing their language in ways that drive their listeners to a particular reaction, thus making the act both entertaining and persuasive. Historically, women in US stand-up comedy have used self-deprecatory humor, often reaffirming societal stereotypes by enacting them on

stage (Auslander 318; Dow et al. 451; Gilbert 320). Charged humor is unpopular in reaching widespread audiences because it draws on content that makes people uncomfortable. Therefore, women who share their point of view as second-class citizens by telling personal stories about being pushed into the margin are less likely to succeed among their male counterparts who address light-hearted issues (Krefting 134). The rising number of successful women stand-up comics addressing feminist issues in their acts represents the changing rhetoric produced by women comics, contradicting Krefting's claim that "there [is] no incentive to buy into women's points of view [or] any point of view that calls into question the male ideal or the category of the ideal citizen" (Krefting 134). This thesis responds to Krefting's work, demonstrating the ways that women *are* shattering the traditional comic personae of self-deprecatory broads, and making successful careers as confident, provocative, sexy, funny women.

Other scholars have commented on the limited research on humor, which has produced misunderstandings of women's humor and misrepresentations of male humor in American culture (Auslander et al., Kotthoff et al. 8). This thesis demonstrates recent feminist strides in popular culture that are rewriting public perceptions of women who use humor. The rhetorical analyses in this thesis will elaborate on the ways that feminist humor has been paired with particular rhetorical strategies in order to generate these changed perceptions. This contribution is warranted, because 1) Scholars have called both for more study of the way mass mediated messages create intractable "power imbalances between men and women" (Dow et al. 467) and 2) how humor functions as rhetoric with practical and theoretical consequences

(Sorenson 186). By performing close rhetorical analyses of popular stand-up comedy specials by women, I attempt to address each of these calls for more research.

Women *are* combatting the original trend of women comics as self-deprecatory figures who reaffirmed rather than challenged stereotypes. These new women comics routinely take to the stage with the intent to raise social consciousness about feminist topics while bringing laughter and happiness to crowds of strangers. Take, for example, the recent success of women such as Amy Schumer, Ali Wong, Chelsea Peretti, Aditi Mittal and many others. Drawing on examples from the Netflix specials of these comics, I explore the functions of feminist humor through a close reading of several, specific jokes. I consider the jokes' structures, premises, punchlines, timing, context and other elements in an effort to identify new understandings of how stand-up comedy is able to function as a form of social justice (specifically, feminist) rhetoric.

Thesis Chapter Overview

Chapter 1: feminist stand-up comedy: a history of funny women

This chapter situates the project by highlighting the significance of studying the rhetoric of feminist humor. First, I articulate the methods used throughout the analyses. Then this chapter grounds the examination of contemporary women comics by identifying the legacy of women who paved the way for a feminist comedy movement. I will detail a comedic history of women that brings us to the present moment. Although inequality is a constant in US society, this study articulates the history of funny women in order to identify some of the recent strides in media production via the increasing number of female stand-up comedians. Finally, this

chapter describes Netflix, the platform from which each artifact used in the subsequent analyses have been drawn.

Chapter 2: defining feminist humor

This chapter offers definitions of critical concepts used throughout the analyses. To articulate a clear understanding of what constitutes stand-up comedy, I offer a formulaic understanding of the way that jokes work by defining setups and punchlines. Next, I explore the parallels between joke structure and feminism in an effort to identify their unique connection. Finally, I display a table I created to define feminist humor, which is used in identifying jokes for analysis in the subsequent chapters. This chapter expresses how media both produces and represents culture, noting that the recent use of feminist humor in contemporary stand-up comedy specials is challenging media consumers to question authority by emphasizing points of contention in our social and political culture.

Chapter 3: subverting the patriarchy, penetrating male-dominated stand-up comedy

This chapter examines the feminist use of subversion as it is employed by contemporary stand-up comics in order to identify how comics use subversion to perpetuate stereotypes or deconstruct them. Addressing the continuous problem of gender inequity in the US, this chapter explores how women stand-up comedians use their platform to critique the male-centric dominant culture in the US. Identifying the rhetorical use of subversion as a social critique by comics such as Amy Schumer will help us understand stand-up comedy as a platform for social justice activism. A close analysis of the use of subversion in the stand-up genre uncovers the ways that women stand-up comedians are changing the art of comedy by

challenging patriarchal constructions through subversive humor, altering our understanding of what constitutes “normal” through public social critique.

Chapter 4: speaking silence: audience roles in the rhetoric of feminist stand-up comedy

Drawing on scholars’ conceptualizations of silence (Glenn; Picard; Lorde) and the recent call for further research on humor (Auslander; Kothoff) this conceptually-oriented analysis of jokes pulled from Aditi Mittal’s *Things They Wouldn’t Let Me Say* and Chelsea Peretti’s *One of the Greats* examines the strategic use of silence in stand-up comedy specials. A close examination of the strategic use of silence informs the distinction between being silenced and being silent. Through close reading, I parse out the ways that when consciously used, silence functions as a rhetorical tool. This analysis suggests that deliberate uses of silence in stand-up comedy cultivates audience agency, as comics urge their audience to contemplate cultural taboos during soundless moments.

Chapter 5: conclusion

The final chapter of this thesis gives a clear overview of the contribution that this project has made to rhetorical scholarship. The conclusion discusses limitations of this particular study, conclusions based on the analytical case studies, and ideas for further research.

Methods

My thesis employs close reading as its primary methodology. This allows me to draw on various analytical approaches in order to fully interpret each rhetorical artifact. For each joke, I conduct a close reading of the text, paying attention to elements such as the context of the special, the joke’s structure, premise, punchline, timing, and context. I use linguistic analysis in

the development of a characterization schema, which is used to identify feminist jokes. Visual rhetorical analysis is employed when examining the props, facial expressions, and body language comics use to accompany the delivery of their jokes. Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 employ conceptually-oriented criticism, framing each analysis through a specific rhetorical concept. These chapters begin with literature reviews that introduce the concept, then articulate a clear definition of how it is understood in the context of each particular joke analysis. Each analysis suggests interpretations and evaluations of the ways that comics use particular rhetorical devices in their act. To narrow my artifacts and keep the analyses uniform, I have only selected jokes from Netflix Original comedy specials.

Historical Context

Feminist Perspectives: Women Are Funny

Feminism, though defined in many ways, can be understood in the context of this project as, “among other things, a response to the fact that women either have been left out or included in demeaning and disfiguring ways in what has been an almost exclusively male account of the world” (Kolmar et al. 18). There are many specific areas where one can cite the absence of women’s voices or misrepresentations of them; humor is just one. Early investigations surrounding women and humor have focused on the question of whether women are funny. Much has been written in an attempt to debunk this question, yet many women comics still report being challenged with questions and comments regarding their work as a “female comic” (Kohen 306). “When men fail at comedy, failure is not seen as a product of their maleness or endemic to men as a whole; however, when women bomb, the default

explanation is her being a woman” (Krefting 113). Many scholars and writers have attempted to alter this rhetoric around women in comedy.

The earliest record of a man claiming that women aren’t funny was William Congreve in 1695, who expressed that a woman might be funny only by accident due to her mannerisms (Nimmo 352). In 2007, Christopher Hitchens argued in an article published in *Vanity Fair* that men’s chief task is to impress ladies and so he *must* learn to be funny explaining that, “women have no corresponding need to appeal to men in this way” as they already appeal to men without being funny. Although he is not explicit about *how* women appeal to men, his rant does make the comparison that humor is to men what beauty is to women.

This thesis is not concerned with excoriating Hitchens’s baseless arguments, as scholars like Krefting have exposed the countless pitfalls of Hitchens’s work, reframing the unanswerable question to better address the issue at hand. Instead, I ask: What about our societal expectations maintain the idea that women are not funny? Contemporary humor scholarship in the humanities “does nothing to address the fundamental question of why women comics fail to meet with success equal to their male counterparts” (Krefting 10). Other researchers, like Catalina Beretta, investigate the claim through analysis of psychological studies. Beretta found that in the first six years of a girl’s life, she is taught to repress her humor (2). It is important to emphasize that the ways women internalize expectations of their gendered role are not limited to ideas that they should not be humorous.

To counteract the internalized norms taught to women from an early age, it is important that they stand up and speak out openly about their lives. Female comedians are exemplifying

feminist standpoint theory which, “has had the effect of problematizing absolutes and universals, focusing attention instead on the situated, local, and communal constitution of knowledge” through the praxis of individual women sharing their personal experiences (Kolmar 356). There is distinguished importance for women in comedy to take to the stage and share their personal experiences with mass audiences in order to extend feminist activism into popular culture. Although research on gender, media and humor by Auslander, Dow, and Gilbert have focused on the nature of self-deprecatory humor in women’s comedy, this project seeks to identify and articulate the more recent phenomenon of comics using the stage to promote positive understandings of women and other marginalized identities by subverting the dominant culture. Although the women comics featured on Netflix addressing feminist issues differ in approach, their opportunity to take the stage can be informed by their predecessors, who laid the groundwork for women to succeed in the stand-up comedy arena, even if their performances were seemingly less apt to critique oppressive ideologies in meaningful ways.

A United States History of Stand-Up Women in Comedy

In the United States, the term stand-up comedy did not come into fashion until the middle of the 20th century, arriving as a “uniquely oratorical form of entertainment that was both captivating and provocative” (Meier et al. xxii). During the rise of American stand-up comedy, acts were performed predominantly by men such as Lenny Bruce, George Carlin and Richard Pryor. The women who took the stage and managed any level of success during the prefeminist era did so by telling jokes and adopting attitudes that were not threatening to men. This often led women to perform self-deprecatory jokes, enacting the stereotypes that had been prescribed to them.

The 1960s started the wheels of cultural transformation as the counterculture pushed back against the dominant conservative culture, a social upheaval of traditional expectations. In 1964, Lenny Bruce was arrested in New York City for using obscene language in front of his audience, which leads to a major landmark trial in US freedom of expression, and his stand-up became “the standard by which subversive comedy—comedy for social change—would be judged” (Meier et al. xxi). Among the Anti-War Movement and Civil Rights Movement came Second-wave feminism, leading to the Equal Pay Act of 1963, Title IX. The Act protested discrimination against women in the workplace and other aspects of life, which coincided with the scarcity of women succeeding in stand-up comedy at that time.

As the feminist movement was fighting for equal rights, stand-up comedy remained a male-dominated arena, since “women’s liberation threatens the power base of the mass media” (Bradley 194). The men in charge of the media had little to gain by allowing women into the boys’ club. A few women gained success through self-deprecatory humor about their appearance, their status as single, or poor skills as a housewife, “Phyllis Diller, Totie Fields, [and] Joan Rivers had achieved stardom comparable to the top male comics in the 1950s and ‘60s and continued working through the 70s” (Zoglin 181). Representing their own push as a minute counterculture, the women had made way into the male-driven comedy circuit and paved the way for others to join.

The 1970s is referred to by humor scholars as the Comedy Boom. By 1972, the Equal Rights Amendment had passed by the U.S. Senate but was later denied, falling short of the necessary approval deadline in 1982. In addition to the proposed bill, 1973 is marked by the Roe v. Wade court hearing, which brought discussions about abortion to the forefront of the

American conscience. While the country seemed to be concerned with women's perspectives, in the realm of stand-up comedy, opportunities for women remained sparse. For example, aired from 1975-1980, the *On Location* concert was an essential stepping stone to gaining recognition as a leading comic of the time. Phyllis Diller was the only woman to headline out of the 43 *On Location* concerts aired. Diller made her fame as a jokester known for her "freaky outfits, electroshocked hair, and braying laugh" who "made fun of her looks, her sex life and her ineptness at housework" (Zoglin 184). Unfortunately, women still were not being recognized as funny at large. Few were able to make a career in stand-up, and those who did were successful at the expense of their identity as women.

According to Zoglin, the key transitional figure who bridged the gap between the self-deprecating jokesters like Diller and the liberated women comics of the feminist era was Joan Rivers (184). Rivers had looked to Lenny Bruce for inspiration, watching him perform live at the Village Vanguard in 1962. While Rivers did not sound too different from Diller in terms of cracking jokes about her looks or her difficulty finding a man, the approach was different. Somehow, Rivers was able to organically tell a story, unlike Diller who performed one-liners that had been written for her, some by Rivers (Zoglin 185). At a time where comics bolstered their fame by guest-starring on Johnny Carson's *The Tonight Show*, it was challenging for women to gain publicity. In a 1979 *Rolling Stone* interview, he said some women are "a little aggressive for my taste. I'll take it from a guy, but from a woman, sometimes, it just doesn't fit too well." However, Carson allowed multiple appearances by Joan Rivers, perhaps because her self-deprecating one-liners did not pose a threat. Although the scarcity of women comics featured on Carson's show in the 1970s could mirror the limited number of women doing

stand-up at the time, Krefting's work establishes a reason to believe that this is more of a reflection of our US power structure (Zoglin 192). There was little incentive for people to buy into a woman's perspective, they were second to the men, thus less regarded for their craft as humorists.

Although few women were being offered major timeslots at the time, men in comedy faced their own challenges in the field. For most of the '70s, comics performed at Mitzi Shore's Comedy Store without compensation. Other club owners of the time, like Budd Friedman who owned clubs in New York and L.A., did not pay the comics who did the work of drawing in crowds. Considered a space to work on and perfect acts, Shore refused to pay in order to preserve the "very integrity of the art form" (Zoglin 195). Among the unpaid were David Letterman, Jay Leno, and Robin Williams, who performed in the Main Room for free, bolstering Shore's profits while honing in their talent. Today, it is hard to believe that such successful comedians had started their careers by performing for free. Eventually, Tom Dreesen helped to establish the Comedians for Compensation, conspiring to negotiate payment for the comedians' efforts. Following Shore's refusal to pay the performers they went on strike from March of 1979 until May 4th, when a settlement was finally reached (Zoglin 197). This pivotal moment is remembered by many comics as "the end to an age of innocence, the dividing line between an era of happy camaraderie and a more complicated one of competing factions and big business" (Zoglin 201). As comics were able to expect compensation, the competition for stage time grew tougher, thus further distancing the unprofitable women's perspective from selling out shows.

Although the 1970s saw the rise of stand-up comedy as a popular form of entertainment, it was not until the 1980s that this field led to nationally acclaimed stardom, and even then “stand-up remained a boys’ club, but the rapid expansion of comedy venues hungry for talent, cable television outlets hungry for stand-ups with sitcom potential created an unprecedented opportunity for women” (Kohen 155). Paula Poundstone and Ellen DeGeneres had made their way to the stage, but Rosie O’Donnell was “the woman Johnny Carson embraced most enthusiastically in the ‘80s...a whiny, overweight housewife from Denver, who became an overnight star with her *Tonight Show* debut in August 1985” (Zoglin 193). Unfortunately, the goal of comics moving from the ‘70s into the ‘80s was not about stirring the social and political pot by challenging taboos, instead, due to the business model that comedy had adopted, comics became concerned with “making the stand-up revolution palatable for a mass audience” (Zoglin 209). In order to succeed, they had to play it safe, which often meant performing jokes that coincided with patriarchal ideals.

Along with the support of television exposure, the comedy boom hit its peak in the late 1980s. By then, there were at least three hundred full-time comedy clubs in the US and an estimated fifteen hundred people making a ‘comfortable living’ doing stand-up comedy (Zoglin 205). Cable programming offered more opportunities for comics to perform on TV with premium channels that allowed comics more expressive freedom like Showtime, HBO (Home Box Office), and Cinemax (Krefting 71). At the time, these paid channels were important spotlights for comics, as they allowed profanities and sexually explicit content from the acts to be broadcast, bolstering authentic performances that would be restricted as offensive on other networks, to wider audiences, similar to Netflix today. By the mid- to late 1990s, there were

comedy clubs in all major cities. While support for charged humor had decreased, Comedy Central was released in 1991, a network that has launched the careers of contemporary acts like Amy Schumer.

Today, the atmosphere of New York City comedy clubs is different. Scholars have reported different ideas about how the comedy scene has shifted. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, New York resurfaced as an important city for up-and-coming comedic talent. However, the scene had changed from Manhattan's Upper East Side to the gentrifying Lower East Side, where women performed "softer, quirkier" material, reflecting "the alternative movement's idiosyncratic sensibility" (Kohen 267). Others describe the capitalist intentions of clubs eager to turn a profit. Zoglin, for instance, describes comedy clubs today as having a factory style, where audiences are pumped in and out to improve profits. He explains that the number of comedy clubs has increased dramatically in New York, from three in the 1970s to almost a dozen in the 2000s (2). Like many niche markets, as the trendiness of the art form caught on, the essence of being part of something intimate dissipated. Today, comics can reach millions by recording their specials and streaming them online. Netflix has shown a major influx of available comic material, adding new stand-up comedy specials every month. While in the early days a spot at a New York City comedy club would have marked that they had "made it," many comedians today strive to have their own Netflix Original comedy special.

Netflix as Artifact Repository

Recently, women's voices have proliferated via Netflix, demonstrating a shifting landscape regarding the rhetoric in stand-up comedy. As of January 1st, 2018, the Netflix library reflects Krefting's insights that, "Being White, able-bodied, and/or straight is less predictive of

success than is being male” (Krefting 134). Under the category “comedies” and subgenre “stand-up comedy” there are 205 results listed. Of those, 34 (16.6%) are specials performed by women comedians. The paltry number of women comic offerings is unsurprising considering the historically sparse representation of women in the media, specifically as stand-up comics (Auslander 330). It is necessary to note that the 34 specials featuring women comics are comprised of 28 different women comedians because five of them have multiple specials streaming on Netflix. The earliest recorded comedy special by a woman available on Netflix is *Mo’Nique: I Coulda Been Your Cellmate!* (2006), over three decades later than the earliest male special featured, *Richard Pryor: Live and Smokin’* (1971). As one of the largest contemporary media producers, Netflix’s influence regarding the dissemination of comedy specials has major implications for feminist progress.

The media generates societal ideologies surrounding identity and representation that result in “a form of dynamic learning by and for the audience, i.e. ‘public pedagogy’” (Ortmanns 53). By understanding the way the media functions in our society, we might discover progressive approaches to entertainment production, fostering positive impressions of diverse identities by expanding the characters presented in media contexts. Individuals construct their social identities by consuming mediated artifacts that show them what it means to be a particular gender, race, religion, socioeconomic status or other distinctive identity characteristic. For example, being able-bodied or a natural-born citizen, a person is afforded certain distinctions in Western culture, which separate individuals in detrimental ways (Brooks et al. 297). If the media is shaping the general public’s conceptions of our society and culture, it is necessary that scholars spend more time producing knowledge focused in this area to move

our media industry towards more accurate representations of reality, rather than faulty displays of life that reify patriarchal practices, such as women as housewives. Because Netflix reaches millions of viewers, it is a pivotal time in regards to media consumption as “this audience is shaped by the social relations and material conditions specific to this historical moment” (Krefting 135). As Netflix starts streaming more comics spouting feminist ideas, so too, might the people watching those specials. If the representation of marginalized peoples in media were to change, the general population, educated or not, would benefit from gaining insights grounded in understanding diversity and appreciating our differences.

Conclusion

At this point, it is obvious that women have been less successful in stand-up comedy contexts historically. Those who have made a successful career of cracking jokes on stage have traditionally done so through self-deprecatory humor. This thesis addresses the recent shift in feminist comedy rhetoric, which demonstrates an influx of women performing stand-up comedy that does not rely on reinforcing harmful stereotypes. By identifying the use of feminist humor for the purpose of activist agendas, this thesis identifies how women are redefining their role in comedy.

Although the stand-up comedy specials available on Netflix are predominantly straight white male comedians, the streaming service has made available a selection of stand-up acts that star marginal individuals. Many of the recent Netflix Original comedy specials starring women employ feminist humor, which demonstrates the contemporary cultural shift in mass media via popular comedy. The following chapter further defines feminist humor in order to contextualize the later case studies.

CHAPTER 2. DEFINING FEMINIST HUMOR

Chapter Overview

First, I define stand-up comedy and break down joke structure. I offer a general schema for understanding the way jokes work. Although jokes can be made about endless topics, in countless styles, using many approaches, I discuss the two criteria present in every joke. Second, I explore the parallels between joke structure and feminism in an effort to identify their unique connection. Finally, a table I created to define feminist humor is presented, which is used in identifying jokes for analysis in the subsequent chapters. Since media both produces and represents culture, the recent use of feminist humor in contemporary stand-up comedy specials is challenging media consumers to question authority by emphasizing points of contention related to gender in popular culture.

Throughout my thesis, I have considered the question of whether joke structure is itself patriarchal. Since stand-up comedy remains a male-dominated field in US culture, which has devalued women's communication, the question remains an overarching concern driving my research. Although the scope of my thesis does not allow me to articulate if joke structure is inherently patriarchal, this curiosity drives my historical, rhetorical and feminist discussion, perhaps setting the groundwork for further exploration of this question in future projects.

Joke Structure

By way of broadly describing joke structure, I draw on a variety of stand-up comedy guides such as *Stand-Up Comedy: The Book* by Judy Carter, *Get Started in Stand-Up Comedy: Make 'em laugh* by Logan Murray, *Step By Step To Stand-Up Comedy* by Greg Dean and *How to Be a Working Comic* by Dave Schwensen to inform the following definitions. Stand-up comedy

is an art form where a single speaker takes the stage alone to tell jokes. In order to succeed, a comic must be original, and although “There are no specific guidelines, plans, maps, or rules to follow when it comes to making people laugh,” there is a general formula for how comedians tell a joke (Schwensen 16). Sure, modern comics share their ideas with the audience, but when they tell a joke, it requires two key elements: a setup and punchline (Murray 21). Thus, stand-up comedy is a special type of entertainment formed by a series of setups and punchlines. While “material based only on formulas sounds contrived, without soul, and is not very funny,” all stand-up material must be organized into setup/punch format. “If your material isn’t organized like this, you’re not doing a stand-up” (Carter 46). Despite how these terms are labeled in stand-up comedy guides, there is a “consistent, intrinsic *structure* that everyone identifies as a joke” (Dean 2). Therefore, stand-up comedians’ work consists of writing successful combinations of setups and punches in order to get an audience laughing. Using a setup and punchline, comics create humor by “going against what is expected” (Carter 57). This is the nature of joke structure.

Setup

The setup of a joke offers the audience a premise, whether it be a description of a place, person, feeling, thought, or anything else, the setup simply gathers the collective conscience of the audience to join the comic in focusing their attention to one concept. The setup is the unfunny part of a joke that introduces the subject matter (Carter 47). Successful setups engage the audience without giving too much detail. The setup creates audience anticipation and allows the comic a chance to establish ethos “by having truthful, honest, uncomplicated setups”

(Carter 55). Despite what the setup consists of, it should be concise, to the point, and guide the audience in one direction.

When a comic starts a joke with a setup, they are giving us information and “We expect the story to continue along that theme, so we’re surprised when the punch reveals a 2nd story” (Dean 3). The 1st story “is the detailed scene imagined by the audience of what they expect to be true” (Dean 4). The 1st story refers to when an audience creates a larger story in their imagination, based on the limited setup. An assumption can be any thought an audience member uses to fill in the gaps or expand the setup into a 1st story artificially. Although it is logical, it is something that the comic has not explicitly stated. This is instinctual as humans want things to make sense. “We do that by making assumptions based on our past experience” (Dean 6). In this definition of joke structure, it is clear that a joke works by provoking audiences to make assumptions. Then tossing in a curveball, the comic is able to surprise the audience and evoke laughter.

For example, Christina P opens her special *Mother Inferior* by walking onto the stage in front of a roaring audience. From the second she reaches the microphone, her jokes begin, “Stop it. You guys know I can’t handle that much approval” (Christina P). In this joke, she begins with a common response to praise, “Stop it.” An audience might generate a 1st story that goes something like, “She is so humble. She does not want to acknowledge our praise, so she asks us to stop our cheering.” Then Christina interrupts the expectation with her punchline “You guys know I can’t handle that much approval” (Christina P). This punchline interrupts the imagined 1st story that she is a modest performer by accentuating an unexpected response to applause—

an inability to deal with approval. This joke demonstrates the classic setup/punchline structure of jokes while opening the show by addressing feminist issues.

Punchline

In a joke, the comic offers their setup. The audience comes to terms with an understanding of the first story that requires imagination of what was left unsaid by the speaker, then the comic surprises the audience with their punchline. A punchline can be understood as the comedian's effort to try "to find an answer to a problem. It may not be the best answer, or the most socially responsible, but it is their answer" (Murray 23). A setup and punchline work together, and no unnecessary information should be shared. Like haiku poetry, there are no extra words, "Every syllable is weighed, judged, and has to be exactly right" (Carter 56). The punchline follows the setup and breaks away from the audience's imagined 1st story. The punch often offers an offbeat or shocking reaction to a particular setup, contrasting the setup with the unexpected (Carter 48-49). Dean says that audiences magnify punchlines in a similar way to setups by expanding the limited information offered by the comic into a larger assumption. He emphasizes that a lot of the information in a joke is not stated in the setup or punch, but is instead added when we make assumptions (5). The assumptions an audience makes based on a given setup can say a lot about their limited perspective. Murray describes a punchline as an afterthought, explaining that, "an afterthought is a continuation of the previous thought; it is not a contradiction" (26). A punchline must continue the initial thought, but take it in a different direction that shocks the audience and evokes laughter.

Jokes and Activism

Although individuals all have a unique, limited perspective, a joke works because a comic offers us a setup and “we fill in the remaining void with assumptions allow[ing] us to be surprised by something other than what we assumed” (Dean 6). These assumptions often reflect the traditional values of the environment in which audience members were raised. These assumptions say a lot about the ideologies that audience members have internalized in their respective cultural upbringing. Thus, all jokes have subversive elements in that the goal is for the comic to undercut audience expectations with something surprising. When a comedian uses their humor to subvert a dominant assumption, they might do so by drawing to mind an expectation, which reflects, for instance, the accepted structures of an oppressive society, and then provide us with a punchline uncharacteristic of our initial expectations. Humorists can enact political resistance by emphasizing gaps, holes or outright injustices in our social structure, without explicitly stating them.

A comedian might create their performance with a particular message in mind. However, audiences will be divided on their individual interpretations. When performing jokes in front of a large audience, there will always be people who “get it” and those who “don’t get it.” Comedians’ work consists of addressing audiences comprised of all kinds of people and bringing their thoughts into a similar space in order to generate laughter. In an audience, some people might identify with the absurdity of what is being spoken, whereas others might laugh at the joke and accept it as a truth. For example, when Aditi Mittal starts a joke with the setup, “I am 30, I am single, and I am an Indian woman, and I realized that being 30 and single and Indian woman,” she engages audience members who are 30, or single, Indian, and/or a woman

to identify with what she is about to say (Aditi Mittal). Those who do not specifically relate to her positionality might be filling in a 1st story with what they assume about being 30, single, and an Indian woman. Then Mittal breaks into her punchline, “is like being that Tupperware container at the back of the fridge, there like, is this still good?” Her punchline emphasizes the self-consciousness she feels about her positionality. An audience member who does not “get it” might think Mittal is funny because the comparison is spot on in articulating that Mittal is like questionable leftovers, whereas an audience member who does “get it” would recognize the absurdity in her statement, recognizing that Mittal is inherently valuable but that society has exaggerated expectations. In either case, a comic is unable to predict how their audience will receive their jokes, regardless of intent.

When a comic uses humor to address a history of oppression by calling for change either implicitly or explicitly, it is activist humor. Stand-up comedy allows audience members to connect to comics who tell jokes with “a certain unifying power - one that does not necessarily have to inhibit action but can help persuade people on the fence about the issue” (Rizkalla 1). Although the speaker may not be a formal activist, using the stage as a platform to advocate on behalf of a political cause or social issue qualifies their humor as activism because of the effect it can have on audiences. “At its best, humor sharpens understanding of injustice, brings communities together, and provokes dialogue and action” (Rossing 60). Activist humor can be satirical, self-deprecating, shocking or tendentious, but strives to offer solutions. In the context of this thesis, I will discuss the use of feminist humor, a form of activist humor.

Feminism

First, consider who is recognized as a feminist. In the context of this thesis, a feminist is any person concerned with social and cultural equality among all peoples regardless of their genitalia, skin color, country of origin, socioeconomic status, or physical ability. While there are different forms of feminism, I focus on feminism concerned with equality of all people. Specifically, feminists acknowledge that women (both cis- and trans-women) have been left out of many historical accounts, decisions or opportunities, or have been included in demeaning and disfiguring ways in what has been an almost exclusively male account of the world. A feminist is any person, regardless of their identity, who wishes for equal representation of all humans. Feminist humor, then, is the result of efforts by comedians to establish social, cultural, and political change through activist agendas in mainstream entertainment discourse.

Generating the new feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, two distinct groups of women assembled together despite their different political agendas. Women's-rights advocates were concerned with altering the political establishment to effect change, attempting to update laws and public policy in the effort to establish equal rights, whereas the women's liberationists were interested in changing societal ideologies that informed women's ways of thinking and behaving that inhibited women's growth, maintaining their position as subordinate to men (Walker 147). The women's rights advocates accepted the existence of political structures and wished to infiltrate them to achieve legal equality, but the liberationists proposed a more personal and individual transformation.

These different approaches to feminism inform the distinctions between the two types of women's humor that might be considered feminist in American culture. The first kind

operates subversively in the cultural system of oppression, acknowledging women's subordination and protesting it in subtle or overt ways (Walker 147). The other is concerned with the fundamental absurdity of that system altogether, calling for a reevaluation of socially constructed gender (Walker 148). In either case, feminist humor uses comedy to combat the oppressive forces of the all-encompassing patriarchal order of American culture.

Feminism and humor

More clearly laid out in the table presented on Page 27, feminist humor is any style of humor using a feminist lens to discuss comic material, often focused on situations or experiences specifically felt by women. A comedian's goal is to elicit laughter from their audience, but the methods by which they achieve laughter differ in approach. A comic using feminist humor considers *how* they are making their target audience laugh and at whose expense? They consider the material for its topic, setup, and punchline, always taking aim at the surrounding culture to intentionally promote equality while creating a safe and accepting space for audience members from all walks of life.

The goal of feminist humor is to make obvious the absurdity of a culture's views and expectations of women (Walker 143). When a comic employs feminist humor, they are making it clear that women are not ridiculous, rather, the culture that has subordinated them as second-class citizens is flawed. In 1988 Nancy Walker argued in *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* that, "Feminist humor does not laugh at the mission itself, for to do so would trivialize it. Instead, it laughs at the very idea of gender inequality in an attempt to render such inequality absurd and powerless" (145). Lisa Merrill echoes Walker's work in "Feminist Humor: Rebellious and Self-Affirming" when she explains, "...the point-of-view

represented in feminist comedy is one that affirms women's experience, rather than denigrating it" and that "Oppressive contexts and restrictive values would be ridiculed, rather than the characters who are struggling against such restrictions" (Merrill 275). In feminist humor, being a woman is no longer a punchline.

Generating a Schema

In order to generate a table for identifying feminist humor, I employ a linguistic approach to trace patterns in a sample of jokes. Drawing on the work of Mary M. Lay, who succinctly categorizes the six common characteristics of feminist theory, I establish a similar list of characteristics applicable to feminist stand-up jokes. First, I select jokes by different women comics discussing feminist issues from the selection of Netflix Original comedy specials. After transcribing the jokes, I apply Lay's list, which is meant to identify feminist theory, and coded the sample of jokes for the presence of each characteristic. Using her broadly defined characteristics, I identify the consistent presence of all six categories in the joke sample. From there, I develop my own characteristics with narrower definitions that fit in the context of humor. Additionally, I draw on Sorensen's "Humor as a Serious Strategy of Nonviolent Resistance to Oppression" in which he develops three different ways that humor can be understood as a nonviolent act of resistance to engage the activist intentions behind feminist jokes (175). Following the same process, as I described above, I apply his characteristics to the sample of jokes. From there, I identify patterns between the two datasets, focusing on what characteristics overlap in order to solidify my own categories for identification of feminist humor.

From the iterative process of coding jokes for various moves and steps, I am able to define a series of six characteristics found in feminist humor. Feminist humor is comprised of material that features any combination of the following characteristics: 1. The comic acknowledges their difference or sameness, which in turn qualifies them to comment on the topic. 2. The comic initiates action or social change directly or indirectly through verbal cues. 3. The comic acknowledges their positionality regarding their individual background, values, and biases. 4. The comic discusses women's experiences broadly or specifically. 5. The comic points out patriarchal assumptions that society has internalized. 6. The comic offers new perspectives or suggests new understandings through social or cultural critique. These characteristics can be combined in many ways to engage audiences with feminist humor. These characteristics are broad, but they encompass the tactics used by comedians who employ feminist humor on stage. After establishing these various categorizations, I apply them to various jokes addressing feminist issues to test my work. Many jokes had all of the characteristics present, some explicitly while other times, more implicitly in the comic's performance of the material. Below, I generate my own table for what constitutes feminist humor.

Table 1

Characteristics of Feminist Humor

Characteristic	Definition	Examples
Acknowledgment of difference and sameness that generates each individual's capacity to participate	The comic notes the presence of different people or people with things in common, to engage audience members in identifying with the joke	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • upper-middle-class white woman" • "women of other ethnicities" • "Jenifer Lopez" • "white girls"
Facilitating action or social change	The comic notes their effort to make a change or provides a call to action/highlights problematic social justice issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I can't help you guys because I'm a girl and I can only fight one fight at a time."
Acknowledgment of comic's background, values, and biases	The comic notes what facets of their identity shape their perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I'm an upper-middle-class white woman."
The inclusion of women's experience	The comic notes experiences shared by women, whether through general or specific examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "we tell strong women to bring it down right?" • "It became okay to tell white girls to their faces, 'You're fat. Kill yourself.'"
Highlighting the patriarchal assumptions we have internalized	The comic notes taboo material to draw to mind what we have internalized as normal which forces us to fill in the blanks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "the expectation of being thin" • "with everybody having an agenda in our social conversation" • "men are always told to toughen up"
New perspectives/revised understanding/critique	The comic notes an alternative conclusion to the joke's setup, shattering our expectation and thus engaging us in critical thought	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "White women don't have a fire in them." • High heels? "Can't run from your attacker"

Conclusion

Feminist humor ranges in style, form, structure, and content. The context of each performer's life is different. Therefore, the stories they share vary in content and delivery. Like other realms of feminist thought, "Women speak from multiple standpoints, producing multiple knowledges. But this does not prevent women from coming together to work for specific political goals" (Kolmar 363). This said, each woman drawing feminist issues to the forefront of their comedy specials is making a pointed attempt at destabilizing the dominant hegemonic structure in which they reside, regardless of upbringing. What bonds these acts is purpose rather than execution or specific subject matter. These comics align with their intent to critique patriarchal expectations through humor.

In the following chapters, I use this table to identify jokes that employ feminist humor and conduct deep readings of those jokes. Taking into consideration specific rhetorical strategies such as the use of subversion or silence, I overlay the table to begin dissecting the joke in order to produce new knowledges about what women using feminist humor are doing and how they are achieving their intended goals.

CHAPTER 3. SUBVERTING THE PATRIARCHY, PENETRATING MALE-DOMINATED STAND-UP COMEDY

Chapter Overview

This chapter grounds rhetorical considerations of humor by citing the perspectives of Greek Classicists. In order to trace the deeply seeded rhetorical connection between feminism and humor, I consider the early works of Plato and Aristotle to identify their perspectives on the rhetorical function of humor. Identifying the limited consideration of humor by the classical theorists, I then argue how subversive humor can be an effective rhetorical strategy, specifically in activist comedy specials. Finally, I move into specific case studies of Amy Schumer's *The Leather Special*, Ali Wong's *Baby Cobra*, Jen Kirkman's *Just Keep Livin'?*, and Chelsea Peretti's *One of the Greats* to explicate how these comics merge their use of subversive humor and feminist humor. Through a close reading, I identify how the comedians use subversion in their acts in order to offer social criticism and evoke new understandings in their audiences by means of laughter.

From Classical Greek Ideologies to Stand-Up

Recently, stand-up comedians have used their platform to perform feminist material, which critiques social inequality in the US through subversion. Debates over the value of humor date back to the early Greek thinkers, such as Plato and Aristotle. An influential critic of laughter, Plato says in the *Republic* that those in power should avoid laughter, "for ordinarily when one abandons himself to violent laughter, his condition provokes a violent reaction" meaning that authority denies laughter as a reasonable approach to judgment (388e). If Plato meant to discredit one laughing as maniacal, he limits the possibility that humor possesses

multiple functions. Instead of investigating the persuasive qualities of humor, Plato denies the credibility of someone who is laughing altogether. Plato's perspective on laughter limits the exploration of how strategic rhetorical devices, such as subversion or, for that matter, any number of stylistic figures, can be paired with humor to influence audiences.

Plato also objects to laughter in *Philebus* when he cautions that due to its malicious nature laughter is a kind of evil or vice (48-50). While humor can be used to attack or embarrass, subversive humor can challenge harmful stereotypes. Comedians might embellish stereotypes in their acts in order to critique dominant ideologies. In accordance with Plato's perspective, Aristotle sees laughter as an expression of scorn. He says in the *Rhetoric* that wit is the cultivation of educated and disrespectful acts (2, 12). Aristotle, like Plato, seems overly concerned with the negative uses of humor when in reality people can successfully employ humor without hurting anyone else along the way. More recently, we see women using humor in order to empower others.

When questioning the validity of these early conceptions of humor, consider Aristotle's *Politics*, "...as regards the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject" (1.1254b). His male-centric views, though not uncommon today, demonstrate the flawed ideologies of a man traditionally known as educated and wise, who both believed in the subservience of women and harbored strong suspicions of humor. Linking Aristotle's belief in the superiority of men to his perspective on humor emphasizes why humor remains a feminist issue. It seems these skilled thinkers could understand humor as a tool that might put the power structure that privileged them in check. Therefore, they were not

interested in exploring humor's potential to deconstruct a system working in their favor. Plato and Aristotle's discontent towards humor is an early indication that perhaps humor and feminism are linked.

Aristotle's sexist remarks highlight how long the journey to ameliorate the historical absence of women's voices and specifically, women's humor has percolated. In "Gender and Humor: The State of the Art" Helga Kotthoff explains that the absence of women's humor occurs in everyday life, scientific models, and theories of humor. She asserts that women are more often the objects and rarely the subjects of jokes in public settings (Kotthoff 4). Consider the history of female stand-up comedians who themselves placed womanhood in the crosshairs when firing off one-liners or stories that reified why women maintain second-class citizenship. Telling a joke is a form of power, which is why women are denied the right to be funny. Instead, "girls grow up to aim it [jokes] at themselves, building up a repertoire of stories of their social failures, physical shortcomings, and general inadequacies" (Zeisler 153). While scholars are inconclusive about Plato's stance on feminist thought and despite Aristotle's accused chauvinism, women's voices *have* been silenced historically and stand-up comedy is one arena where we are starting to hear more women stand up and speak out, employing feminist humor as a method of persuasion, specifically as a form of subversive rhetoric.

Subversive Humor as Rhetorical Strategy

This section details the rhetorical concept of subversion. First, contemporary examples of subversive rhetoric in feminist activism are cited. Then I provide a detailed description of how subversive humor is employed by comics addressing feminist issues.

When Women March

Recently, women have gained success on stage speaking about their experiences from their uniquely female perspective. For example, in recent efforts to gain recognition, such as the activist organized 2017 and 2018 Women’s March on Washington protests, U.S. culture is seeing more women come together and speak out about the prejudices they have faced. At the January 21, 2017, Women’s March, Ashley Judd recited Nina Donovan’s poem “Nasty woman,” incorporating passion and humor to speak publicly about feminist issues, subverting the use of “nasty” to emphasize her feminist critique. Judd recites:

‘I am not as nasty as racism, fraud, conflict of interest, homophobia, sexual assault, transphobia, white supremacy, misogyny, ignorance, white privilege.

I’m not as nasty as using little girls like Pokémon before their bodies have even developed.

I am not as nasty as your own daughter being your favorite sex symbol—like your wet dreams infused with your own genes.

But yeah, I am a nasty woman?!

A loud, vulgar, proud woman.’ (Bruk)

This poem was written in response to Donald Trump’s comment during the third and final presidential debate, during which Trump interrupted Clinton’s response to a question about social security uttering, “Such a nasty woman” (Gray). The comment went viral,

prompting the spread of #NastyWoman on Twitter and in an hour of the debate, Nasty Woman T-shirts were for sale to benefit Planned Parenthood (Gray). Following the debate “Nasty Woman” became a major feminist trend. Months later, Judd recited the poem with passion and humor to subvert the term’s accepted meaning. The poem uses “nasty” in the context of inequality and white privilege, as it is practiced by those in power. Then, shattering our expectations with an unexpected punchline, the poem juxtaposes the first use of nasty. Nasty turns into a positive attribute, meaning a proud woman with the courage to speak out. Instances like this have set the stage for similar work in other public discourses, such as stand-up comedy.

When Women Stand-Up

Today, comics are taking the stage and challenging the illusions of American democracy and meritocracy in similar ways as seen in the “Nasty Woman” poem. Now, comics are exposing the flaws of the US’ long patriarchal reign. Comics illuminate the history and consequences of excluding women from meaningful conversations, decision making, and other opportunities, by addressing social injustices in their specials to change social consciousness.

The recent explosion of feminist activism is paralleled by the work of stand-up comics who are gaining recognition through their specials that actively address feminist issues, perhaps as a result of the greater sense of group solidarity that feminists have felt because of the women's movement. If more consumers watch specials with activist agendas, it will alter the economy of humor because women’s ideas will prove to be profitable. The very action of women standing up on stage and speaking honestly about their personal experiences is a strike

against a traditionally male-dominated field. Those women who are successfully pursuing stand-up are actively subverting the dominant culture by infiltrating an entertainment form historically ruled by men. As more women attract large crowds or wide viewership, agents, network executives, and comedy club owners are more likely to invest in acts performed by women comics (Krefting 136). There is already an influx of women stand-up comedians featured on Netflix, the most subscribed to widespread media streaming service, so it serves scholarship to understand what these comics are doing to change the script.

Currently, women are finding new ways to achieve success as comedians. The ability for women to thrive using different performance tactics reflects the influence of public consciousness-raising by the women's movement, as mentioned earlier. Although Krefting argues that there are three ways for female comics to succeed in the male-dominant industry, this thesis explores new ways that women comics are succeeding. Krefting argues that women can appeal to scattered niche markets comprised of like-communities such as LGBTQIA or popular culture enthusiasts. They can androgynize themselves or their material to remove their womanhood as a focal point of their performance. Or, as Krefting suggests, they can "achieve industry accolades when they caricature women, using themselves and other women as the butt of the joke" such as when their comic persona capitalizes on stereotypes about women, reinforcing a highly socialized demoralizing narrative about women's incompetence, their frailty, or obsessions with romance, flowers and the color pink (Krefting 127).

Today, Netflix features a variety of women comics, each taking on different comic personas and discussing varied content in their specials. However, I have identified instances where women employ feminist humor to critique the dominant culture in order to understand

how these women have managed to gain recognition while shifting the conversation towards unpopular talking points. Bear in mind that not every comic who addresses feminist issues is inherently feminist, nor does it mean that only female comedians can incorporate feminist material into their specials. Whether the comics I address in the analyses have explicitly stated, “I am a feminist” or not, their specials use feminist rhetoric to influence their audience’s perceptions of US culture. Additionally, just because a woman performs stand-up does not mean that her jokes will be subversive.

Problematizing Subversive Humor

Subversive humor, in its broadest sense, refers to humor that uses what we expect or understand about something in order to challenge those beliefs. When one takes the stand-up act at face-value, their interpretation can misconstrue the underlying cultural critiques as reification. When women use their marginalized status to challenge authority through subversive critique of hegemonic culture, while eliciting laughter, “the comic may make himself or herself the butt of a joke, but in so doing simultaneously externalizes some cultural incongruity or imperfection as the target of the audience’s laughter’s corrective capacity” (Meier et al. xxiii). This means that a comic might use the qualities a prejudiced society has prescribed to them as leverage to make social critique in their act. Subversive humor is not a new approach, but it does offer a new means of achieving success for female stand-up comics.

Irony requires that the audience picks up on the literal and indirect meaning of the joke, which makes it possible for humor to offer subtle critiques in otherwise direct communication. While audiences can interpret an essentialized portrait of a character that draws on cultural stereotypes as a method for reinforcing negative prejudices, audiences who are able to pick up

on the irony understand the underlying subversive effect of emphasizing the inaccuracy of reducing an entire gender to only a few exaggerated traits. “Ironic displays of culture and hyperbolic exaggerations of stereotypical characteristics allow a comedian to subtly and subversively offer a social critique while maintaining a positive, light-hearted atmosphere” (Lowrey et al. 16). The potential danger of such practices arises when an audience member does not detect the subversive quality of the humor. If one receives a joke seriously, accepting the exaggerated stereotypes as truths, they may misinterpret the joke as reinforcement of a harmful cultural stereotype, thus complicating the effects of subversive humor.

Audience Assumptions

When a comic tells us a joke, they simply offer scraps of material, and the larger story is built through making assumptions about the information shared in the setup. “Assumptions allow us to make sense of something when we get limited information. Based on our own life experience, we constantly make this kind of speculative leap” (Dean 5). Further, jokes without setups work because there is still a target assumption in the minds of the audience.

Assumptions manifested in audience members might highlight the ideologies that they have internalized. The ideas an audience uses to fill in the blanks following a comic’s setup might emphasize pitfalls in their own assumptions. This is the work of subversive humor.

When a comic starts a joke with a setup, we fill in the blanks, and what we are filling in says a lot about what we are raised to believe. When a comedian uses jokes to subvert a domineering patriarchy, they might do so by drawing to mind an expectation, which reflects the patriarchal structure, and then provide us with a punch uncharacteristic of our initial expectations. For example, consider Ali Wong’s joke from *Baby Cobra*. The Chinese-Vietnamese

American uses the setup, “I think that for marriage, it can be nice to be with somebody of your own race” (Ali Wong). This setup likely prompts some audiences to consider patriarchal ideologies regarding miscegenation. Viewers might think “Marrying in her race means her parents will approve” or, “It is good to marry your own race so that you do not face public scrutiny.” Then Wong subverts the patriarchal expectation, “The advantage is that you get to go home... and be racist together” (Ali Wong). Her punchline undermines the idea that only white people can be racist or perhaps that it is unexpected that Asians have racist views. The joke, at face-value, draws to mind the idea that we should marry in our own race, bringing audience consciousness to a cultural expectation. Then, if taken literally, the joke reinforces the idea that being racist together is an enjoyable marital pastime. An audience member who “gets it” likely detects the underlying absurdity, noting that the joke is funny because racism is hateful, damaging and not a valuable use of time. In this way, humorists can enact political resistance by emphasizing gaps, holes or outright injustices in our social structure, without explicitly stating them.

Subversive Humor as Feminist Tool

In “The Power to Subvert?: Beyond North-South dichotomies in Gender and Development Discourse” Lata Narayanaswamy writes that “information provided to, and shared among, women will empower them” (50). The power of knowledge is that one can use that knowledge to subvert dominant power structures. Subversive humor connects the personal to the political. By sharing individual experiences, women can recognize that their problems are shared by other women, validating the authority of women’s experiences and perceptions when it becomes clear that there is a bigger problem at play (Walker 148). When

subverting the power structures in place, comics articulate the current practice or expectation to make it clear that something is not working. “Instead of merely recording women's problems with life in a sexist culture, this humor challenges the assumptions that underlie that culture and reveals their fundamental absurdity” (Walker 148). This is the work of feminist comedic acts today. The function of subversive feminist humor is analogous to the function of the women's consciousness-raising groups that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s as women attempted to emerge from their isolation and understand their common experiences as women (Walker 145). Following, I will move into a close textual analysis of jokes by comics who have recorded a Netflix Original comedy special. I will examine jokes from Amy Schumer’s *The Leather Special*, Ali Wong’s *Baby Cobra*, Jen Kirkman’s *Just Keep Livin’?*, and Chelsea Peretti’s *One of the Greats*.

Joke Analysis

Following, I provide a conceptually-oriented criticism of various jokes pulled from Netflix Original comedy specials. The joke analyses are each guided by a close reading, which focuses on the respective comic’s use of the rhetorical strategy of subversion.

Entering Man-Stream Media

The first subversive act of successful women comics such as Schumer, Wong, Kirkman, and Peretti is their presence in a male-dominated entertainment arena. Only 34 of the 205 Netflix comedy specials available (as of January 1st, 2018) star women. Therefore, their presence alone subverts the dominant cultural expectations. “Women’s visibility in humor production marks a contribution and a disruption, indeed reminds audiences of exclusionary constructions of citizenship” (Krefting 124). Although the number of women stand-up comedy

specials streaming on Netflix seems low, at only 16%, the truth is that this number is significant in the context of stand-up comedy history. To narrow my artifacts and maintain a level of uniformity among my sample, each of the jokes selected for this analysis has been pulled from Netflix Original comedy specials.

Each of the following analyses suggests interpretations and evaluations of the ways that comics use subversion as a rhetorical device in their act. Close reading guides my analysis in order to dig deep into the content of each joke. Additionally, visual rhetorical analysis is employed when examining the props, facial expressions, and body language comics use to accompany the delivery of their jokes. Feminist theories are applied to various jokes to demonstrate how the comic is subverting patriarchal constructions. Further, I consider the jokes' setups, punchlines, contexts, and other elements in order to articulate what is happening in each joke, how it is working, and what it is doing in the larger context of popular culture.

Amy Schumer

The first comic I analyze is Amy Schumer due to her unparalleled success as a woman comic.

Context

In order to situate the following analysis, I offer a detailed explanation of the context surrounding Amy Schumer, *The Leather Special*, and one specific theme of jokes pulled from the special.

About the comic

Not only are more women gaining success in the comic arena, but Amy Schumer made history as the first woman to reach the *Forbes* "Top 10 Highest Paid Comedians List" in 2016

and remained on the list in 2017 (Haylock). Schumer has made history in regards to her success as a stand-up comedian. US culture often strips individuals down to the anatomy of their reproductive system and consider their sex to be a defining factor of their identity. This leads to distinguishing accomplishments as “amazing for a woman.” While her sex should not influence her success, in US media, her role as a successful female comedian speaks to what she has accomplished in an industry that historically avoids bold, aggressive and critical women.

About the special

Like many successful contemporary comics, Schumer has achieved the benchmark of earning her own Netflix Original comedy special. Schumer’s Netflix Original, *The Leather Special*, recorded at the Bellco Theatre in Denver, Colorado in November 2016, was released on Netflix in March of 2017. The special follows Schumer’s reputation as a raunchy comic, discussing intimate sex stories and her experiences blacking out from drinking while exposing very personal moments to her audience. Although the special received negative feedback on Netflix after one week of premiering, a *Splitsider* article shares that Reddit commenters contributed to the one-star status. Citing posts on a Donald Trump-supporting subreddit that actively encouraged people to go review the special negatively, the negative reviews reflect prejudices of the alt-right, eager to undermine a successful woman who challenges patriarchal expectations by publicly discussing explicit content (Wright). Schumer responded to the *Splitsider* article and her trolls with an *Instagram* post which said, “It makes me feel so powerful and dangerous and brave. It reminds me what I’m saying is effective and bring[s] more interest to my work and their obsession with me keeps me going” (Amy Schumer). Schumer is aware of

her strength, carefully selecting to include the word brave in her post, which is a theme throughout her special.

About the joke

In the beginning of the hour-long special Schumer shares with her audience, “I tweeted out a photo of myself wearing just underwear. Nothing but underwear” pausing to hear whether her audience had seen the post. The crowd starts to cheer with high pitched “woo”s and Schumer lifts a hand and shrugs. She takes a step back and crinkles her neck, and says with a stern look, “Thank you, just the women” while scrunching up her face in disapproval. A man in the audience tries to make up for his initial silence by starting to cheer. Shaking her arms and raising her voice, Schumer yells, “What the fuck? No! It’s too late, sir.” In this opening dialogue, Schumer engages her audience in feminist humor while using subversion as a rhetorical strategy in order to challenge her viewers’ to consider *why* men do not cheer when she mentions taking off her clothes. After the initial comment about sharing the tweet, Schumer expands on her experience. She says that it went viral and “that’s when I learned the word you don’t want people to use when a nude photo of you goes viral. *Brave*” (Amy Schumer). The joke explodes into a major theme that bookends her comedy special, making her “bravery” a legendary feat for women in comedy at large. Schumer subverts beauty expectations, promotes self-confidence, and demonstrates individual autonomy by standing up for herself; thus, she empowers her female fans.

Subversive Criticism

Amy Schumer's special critiques the feminine beauty system, uses visuals to provoke audience contemplation, and demonstrates mean-girls theory. Below, I explore Schumer's public social critique.

The feminine beauty system

Schumer begins critiquing the feminine beauty system less than two minutes into the show, proving a point that women do not have to accept the male gaze. Schumer dismisses the compliment that comes from a male audience member as an afterthought, which in turn might teach the quiet men in the audience something about their expectations. As she shares "I tweeted a photo of myself wearing just underwear," Schumer elicits an image of her bare body in panties to the audience (see fig. 1). In a culture that has strict rules about women uncovering their breasts, Schumer does not shy away from an opportunity to emphasize an internalized social taboo that women should not expose themselves in this way. Unless, of course, they are stereotypically beautiful.

The tweet led to a lot of publicity, which itself opened up the discussion of beauty, nakedness, and contradictory expectations in our mainstream media. Had Schumer been attractive by Hollywood's standards, meaning skinny, sexy, and with a facial expression exuding helplessness rather than censure, the responses to her post would probably read much differently. Her discussion of beauty standards in her comedy special addresses the incongruity in American culture.



Fig. 1. Controversial Schumer Tweet

The tweet shows Schumer sitting on a stool and wearing high heels, a traditional emblem of femininity. In nothing but lace panties fitted beneath her stomach rolls, Schumer has a hand on her knee as if to say, “Can we do this already?” Schumer holds a cup of coffee in front of her, perhaps to signify her tired life as a working woman, and her expression is unamused. Her decision to be photographed bare is not a daring attempt at looking sexy. Instead, Schumer wanted to share this image to provoke viewers to reconsider our very concept of sexy. She knows she is sexy, she says so on stage and in interviews, so the tweet had nothing to do with getting viewers’ approval.

Schumer is speaking about an experience she had as a public figure in an appearance-obsessed society. She does not embellish the story for comedic effect but uses subversion as a rhetorical strategy to evoke laughter. In her telling what happened, she highlights the way things are to expose her listeners to the unreasonable expectations that our society has of women. She then offers comic relief to the audience by adding a clear setup and punchline, “Can you imagine? You take your clothes off in front of someone for the first time, and they’re just like, ‘Damn! You look mad brave right now. Whoo-ee! Shorty looks empowered!’” (Amy Schumer). Schumer addresses the problematic use of positive character traits like bravery to describe a woman who is comfortable in her own skin. Her joke challenges the audience to consider why we attribute bravery to women who are okay being themselves, specifically based on physical traits. Schumer critiques the detrimental effect of teaching women that they must look a certain way, subverting the idea that heavier women posting vulnerable or risqué images does so as a marker of her courage, rather than her agency, autonomy, or happiness.

Visual Analysis

Schumer, like other contemporary stand-ups, incorporates visuals into her act for comic effect. Schumer circles back to her theme of bravery in her last joke of the show. She shares the story of meeting Bradley Cooper and humorously explains the crush that developed, saying that she considered him her new boyfriend after meeting him at an event. The next night she saw him on TV with his actual girlfriend. Schumer explains in explicit detail the unbelievable beauty of Irina Shayk, Bradley Cooper's real girlfriend. As Schumer hyperbolizes how sexy Irina is—saying that she looks like a panther and gazelle had a baby that bred with Gisele, a Brazilian model—Schumer contrasts herself to Shayk with photographs for a visual comparison.

When discussing her shock over the realization that she is not in fact Bradley Cooper's girlfriend, before turning the crowd's attention to two photos, Schumer says, "I was thinking I

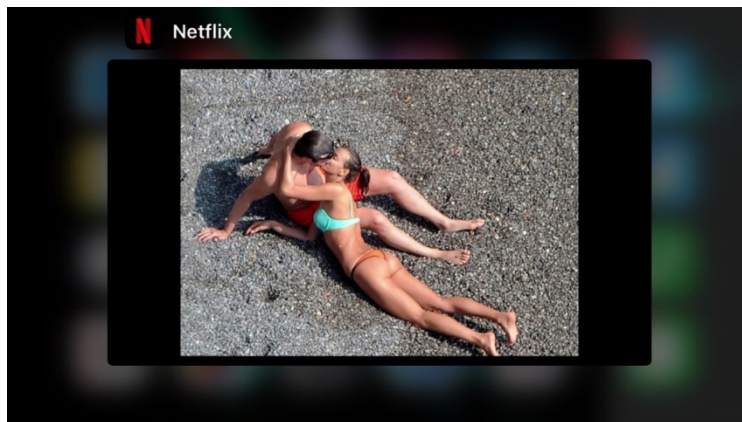


Fig. 2. Bradley Cooper and Irina Shayk on Beach

was gonna be rolling around on a beach with him" (Amy Schumer). To set up her audience, Schumer asks, "And, I don't know, is this me? Is that my ass?" (Amy Schumer).

Schumer projects a photo of Bradley

Cooper and Irina Shayk for the audience to see. She presents the visual of Cooper and Shayk before offering one of herself, juxtaposing the couple with a candid image of Schumer in beachwear. Schumer puts up an image of herself in a bathing suit, legs spread, mouth open with a smile. She flips back and forth between the images, "Is this me? Or is this me? I can't—Fuck! Which one is me? Is that me? Or is that me? I don't know." Her faux ignorance is

emphasizing her critique of the feminine beauty system, leading the crowd to uproarious laughter. Schumer provokes audience members to consider the juxtaposition of the images. She is challenging them to face their own judgments as she flashes between the photos. She is highlighting the differences between the kind of woman who dates Bradley Cooper, a level of achievement in an image-obsessed culture, and the kind of woman who just fantasizes about him being her boyfriend. When she asks what image depicts her, she might be blurring the lines of what one considers sexy, insinuating that she can hardly tell the difference between the view in either image.

Mean-girls theory

Finally, when the laughter starts to settle Schumer brings the audience back to her through line. She exposes her reason for sharing and articulates her purpose behind the comparison between her and this Russian model. To end her show, Schumer exclaims, “You know what? Fuck her. That bitch will never be brave” (Amy Schumer).

This addresses the feminist concern that women are trained to be mean to one another. An article

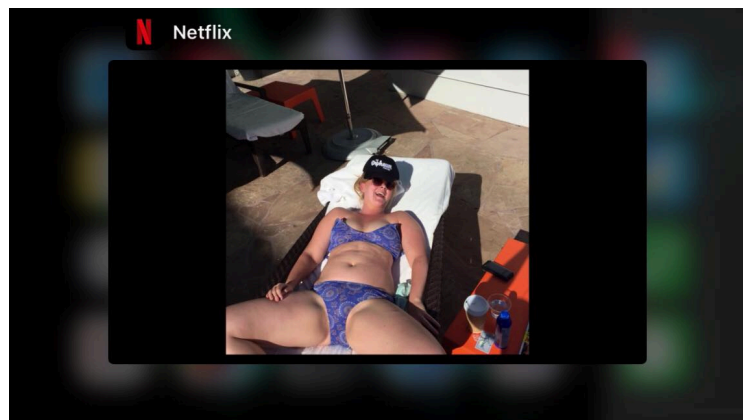


Fig. 3. Amy Schumer Bikini

originally published in *Bitch Magazine* explores the question: Why Does the Media Love Mean Girls? The article describes how mean-girls theory has been lumped into the larger scope of bully psychology and ignores gender differences except for when it adds titillation (Moss 46). Instead of understanding the phenomenon of why girls are mean, our media generally explores

the ways that they are mean. “The media’s interest seems to be less about spreading awareness of behavior that hurts girls than about the potential of having real, psychological proof that the only asses girls kick are each other’s” (Moss 46). Although Schumer’s decision to end her special pinning herself against Shayk can reinforce ideas about women being in competition with each other or that beautiful women deserve to be called bitches in a pejorative way, Schumer could have strategically made these final remarks in an attempt to subvert that very notion.

Schumer emphasizes the absurdity of the entire competition when she calls Shayk a bitch who will never be brave. Shayk was not involved with the scrutiny Schumer faced for sharing the unclothed image. Thus, attacking her in response does nothing to serve justice. Schumer might act out the role of mean girl to draw attention to how “the mean girl” has been absorbed as a popular culture figure, “while any insight regarding how she got that way (or the degree of cultural change necessary to eliminate her kind) is forgotten” (Moss 47). Although anti-mean-girls rhetoric (Read: Mean Girls) sounds feminist, it “doesn’t ask girls to explore their anger or aggression, nor does it address why they’re expected to be ‘nice’—and, more important, how being nice doesn’t always leave room for being smart, strong, capable, independent, or adventurous” (Moss 48). If the audience understands the feminist underpinnings of the “brave” through line in Schumer’s special, then it might be true that Schumer *is* giving audiences an exploration of anger and aggression, pinpointing the cause of her emotional turmoil, openly discussing her self-medication via alcohol, then exploding in aggression at the end, to show us, that “bravery” does not mean being comfortable in one’s own skin.

In her final words, Schumer is pointing out that the media has painted her as some courageous martyr for “fat” women. She is drawing a comparison between the beautiful and the average, reclaiming the word that she initially said that one does not want to be called when a photo of yourself wearing just underwear goes viral— brave. Schumer is trying to speak up about unfair expectations that women in the US face, using visuals to drive home her point. Schumer subverts expectations of beauty, confidence, and finally, of bravery.

Following, I offer other examples of jokes that employ both feminist humor and subversion as a rhetorical strategy through close reading of the setup, punchline and subversive critique. These jokes display how subversive humor can lead to activism depending on the audience perception. While taken at face-value these jokes could be misconstrued as reifying patriarchal ideologies, a critical audience member who “gets it” can detect the absurdity, thus the underlying subversive quality of the joke.

Ali Wong

In her special *Baby Cobra*, Wong openly discusses her experiences of being pregnant as a means to address the cultural inequalities of childbirth and childrearing for parents:

So, I don’t know if you guys can tell, but I am seven and a half months pregnant. Yeah. It’s very rare and unusual to see a female comic perform pregnant, because female comics... don’t get pregnant. Just try to think of one. I dare you. There’s— None of them. Once they do get pregnant, they generally disappear. That’s not the case with male comics. Once they have a baby, they’ll get up on stage a week afterwards and they’ll be like, “Guys, I just had this fucking baby. That baby’s a little piece of shit. It’s so annoying and boring.” And all these other shitty dads in the audience are, like, “That’s hilarious. I

identify.” And their fame just swells because they become this relatable family funny man all of a sudden. Meanwhile, the mom is at home, chapping her nipples, feeding the fucking baby, and wearing a frozen diaper ’cause her pussy needs to heal from the baby’s head shredding it up.

(Ali Wong)

Setup

Wong describes what happens when a comedian is going to become a parent. First, she details how female comedians usually end their careers when they are pregnant. This reflects a cultural incongruence between new mothers and new fathers. Unfortunately, while men are often able to keep their jobs throughout the entire process of becoming a new parent, mothers are not justly compensated or supported through the same process. Consider, for example, this chart of paid maternity leave for new mothers in various nations (see fig. 4). Notice how the US offers the least support in corporate settings. A performance artist such as a stand-up comedian would not be offered the same support.

Punchline

Wong challenges the audience to consider what other instances of pregnant comics they can call to mind, before sharing the punchline of how male comics use becoming a dad as material to further their career, “Guys, I just had



Fig. 4. Paid Maternity Leave

this fucking baby. That baby's a little piece of shit. It's so annoying and boring." Wong's joke is subversive in the way that the juxtaposition destabilizes traditional patriarchal culture. Calling out the way that men can propel their career, while their child's mother is at home "wearing a frozen diaper 'cause her pussy needs to heal from the baby shredding it up" she is speaking out about a topic that challenges traditional views of the happy, kept housewife and the hard working man providing for his family (Ali Wong). Wong forces the audience to imagine a more accurate image of what happens when a woman has a baby. It is not true that female comics do not get pregnant as Wong mentions at the start of the joke. Instead, our culture has particular expectations of pregnant women that do not involve standing on stage cracking jokes.

Subversive Critique

Wong is pregnant as she performs her special and uses her experience to generate material that openly critiques patriarchal roles. She does not hold back in offering criticism and performs using vulgar language that undercuts the femininity of her tiny frame with its protruding baby bump. She chooses to address pregnancy to bring the audience's consciousness to the cultural inequality between becoming a new mother or father.

Jen Kirkman

In her special, *Just Keep Livin'*, Kirkman discusses the negative reactions that people had when she said she would be traveling to Italy alone. She says how people were concerned that her boyfriend did not plan to accompany her and that generally, she was discouraged to travel alone:

I was excited for this trip before people started putting a damper on it. My dad was saying, 'Aren't you afraid of ISIS? ISIS is everywhere. Be afraid of ISIS.' I was like, 'Who...

I'm a woman. I don't have time to be afraid of ISIS. I'm just busy being afraid of plain old men. Are you kidding me? You ever walked by a bar at 1 a.m. when dudes in baseball hats are getting out? Fuck ISIS. ISIS are adorable. ISIS have costumes and beards, look like bartenders. ISIS, they're not... I'm not afraid of them at all.'

(Jen Kirkman)

Setup

In this bit, Kirkman flips the script about an extremist terrorist group, ISIS and explains that they are nothing to worry about in comparison to men in general. She takes the idea of ISIS, a violent group which controls a vast territory in Syria and Iraq, and criticizes her father for assuming that she has any less reason to fear men. ISIS executes prisoners of war, enslaves minorities, and have raped thousands of women and girls, but Kirkman uses the reputation of this group to explain to her dad that as a woman, she has every right to fear men more than ISIS.

Punchline

The subversion of ISIS occurs in the punchline, where she says, "Fuck ISIS. ISIS are adorable. ISIS have costumes and beards" and that she is not afraid of the group (Jen Kirkman). This joke emphasizes the idea that while men may fear terrorist groups who have control of oil, women are afraid of men in general, because so often women fall victim to them, even just a group of men leaving the bar.

Subversive Critique

This critique helps to illuminate the severity of issues that US women face daily. Issues that men often overlook or even have caused without consequence. Unfortunately, sexual

assault statistics in the US support Kirkman's concerns. Every 98 seconds (570 times daily) someone in the US is sexually assaulted (Vagianos). From violent rape scenes on TV to sexist dress codes that reinforce rape culture, to the recent instance of a President of the United States being accused of sexually assaulting more than 15 women, US culture normalizes sexual violence, allowing 99 percent of perpetrators of sexual violence to walk free (Vagianos).

Kirkman subverts the expectation of fearing an international terrorist group by saying that they are cute compared to her fear of men in general. Kirkman is not brave for going to Italy alone; she is brave for going anywhere alone. It does not matter if she is in a foreign country because atrocities happen in the US just as frequently.

Chelsea Peretti

Chelsea Peretti uses physical comedy to subvert audience expectations when discussing the taboo of eating a common snack in public:

I don't like eating bananas in public. That is so stressful if you're a girl. Like, it's so annoying because it's such a portable, good snack, you know? But like if you're a girl and you want to eat a banana on the bus or wherever you may be all of the sudden you are in the position of like, 'How do I de-dick this delicious treat so that I may enjoy it without people imagining me blowing them?' You know? So I have a system again here, and I think a lot of us do this. What you do is you peel it, then you break a piece off, right? Then you mash it up in your palm into a paste. Then you push it up between your fingers, you eat it like [gestures with tongue between fingers, making a lalalala sound] Right ladies? Cause you don't want it to look sexual. That's a no-no in society.

(Chelsea Peretti)

Setup

When Peretti performs her bit on eating bananas in public, she begins by articulating the public concern for women of being sexualized doing normal everyday activities. She notes how it requires conscious effort to ensure that onlookers will not misconstrue eating a healthy snack as some kind of sexual innuendo. As she does throughout the special, she shares with the audience her fool-proof system for addressing this “challenging” situation.

First, Peretti describes peeling the banana and breaking off a piece to eat it, like many people do because they share her self-consciousness.

Punchline

She does not stop there. She proceeds to act as though she would take the broken off piece of banana and mash it in her hand, putting some between her fingers. Peretti decides to subvert the expectation by acting out a vulgar gesture, placing her fingers in a V under her mouth and rapidly moving her tongue, a common gesture for going down on a woman. Peretti flips the script from a banana symbolizing giving oral pleasure to a man and instead acts out the gesture of giving oral pleasure to a woman. This unexpected turn does a lot in the context of feminist humor.

Subversive Critique

Peretti calls out a culture that normalizes sexualizing everyday acts such as eating fruit. She addresses the problem by showing an equally vulgar gesture, pretending that it is a “safe”

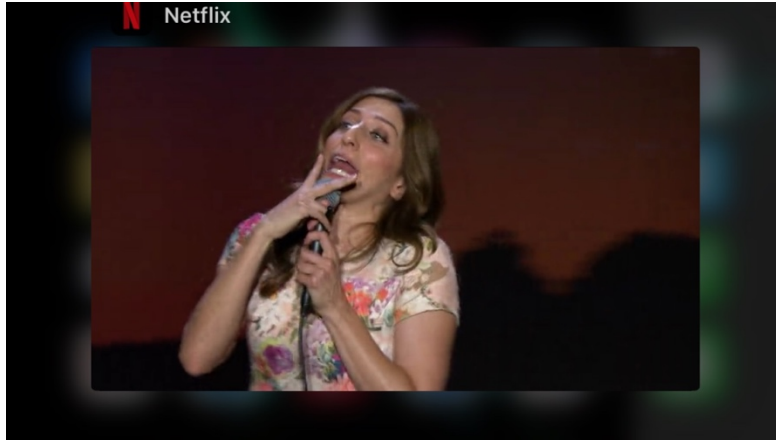


Fig. 5. Chelsea Peretti Demonstrating How to Eat a Banana

alternative to eating a banana. Sexualizing women or sexualizing a banana in this instance reflects a culture that sexualizes unnecessarily and objectifies women. Peretti addresses the

feminine beauty system from the standpoint of showing how women are often victims of being sexualized even when doing normal everyday things.

In order to subvert the idea of eating a banana as looking like a blowjob, Peretti pushes it even further, acting out a less common and potentially more alarming sexual gesture, flicking her tongue “lalalala” between the V of her pointer and middle finger. Instead of cowering away from someone interpreting her snacking as a sexual act, she hits the gas and over exaggerates through an altogether awkward approach to eating anything, besides a pussy.

CONCLUSION

This chapter develops the concept of subversion and applies it as an analytical lens for understanding feminist jokes. By applying the rhetorical concept subversion to jokes using feminist humor, it becomes obvious that women comics are achieving success through tactics common in male comedians’ acts as well. The difference is the material they are taking on, which is pulled from their unique female perspective. The use of subversion allows women

comics to crack jokes that undercut the expectations of the society they live in, and project new meaning onto cultural taboos in order to engage audiences in critical thought. The use of subversive humor in comic acts allows women to challenge the traditional ideologies of the patriarchal society they live in, bringing a new sense of awareness to their audiences.

CHAPTER 4. THE RHETORIC OF BEING SILENT IN FEMINIST STAND-UP COMEDY

Chapter Overview

This chapter begins by introducing the rhetorical concept of silence. Offering insights about who has been heard or silenced, I provide a clear connection between silence and feminist thought. Next, I review the historical silencing of women in a patriarchal society. First, I explicate the historical silencing of women, specifically drawing the distinction between being silenced and being silent. Then I describe how rhetorical silence has transformed into an activist tool, specifically as it is used in female stand-up comedy. I define silence as it is used in a comedic context to inform the joke analysis at the end of the chapter. Finally, a conceptually-oriented analysis of jokes using feminist humor will show the rhetorical function of silence in female comedy specials. The analyses expose how silence is used, what it is doing and why it is important in a comedic context.

Introduction to Silence

The following details the rhetorical concept of silence in order to situate the conceptually-oriented analyses of jokes performed by Aditi Mittal and Chelsea Peretti.

Silence as Rhetorical Concept: An Overview

In rhetorical studies, investigating silence will inform our understanding of oppressive power structures. While silence itself is not inherently feminist, it does have a direct correlation to the field of feminist studies. Analysis of silence provides insights into what information has been given and withheld, whose voices have been heard and what groups of people have been marginalized. Essentially, the rhetorical tradition is only a fragmented scope of what stories

have survived the generations and does not necessarily portray an accurate account of reality because much is left behind in silence.

In the following analyses, I take into consideration the methodological difficulties in identifying silence because “to identify something that is absent, and how to do so in a systematic fashion,” is challenging (Huckin 353). First, I draw on Huckin’s conceptualization of a textual silence. Textual silences must “be relevant to the topic and the surrounding context; otherwise, virtually anything unsaid would count as a ‘textual silence’ in virtually any text” (Huckin 353). What is unspoken within the following jokes matters because the comic makes a conscious decision about what not to say in relation to sociopolitical, cultural and rhetorical factors. The context relevant to a particular speech-act might be evaluated by a context model, which includes factors such as “social or professional domain, genre, purpose, location, date, time, circumstances, participant role and affiliation” (Huckin 353). Therefore, while we rely on what a comic is saying, this analysis seeks to identify the significance of what the comic does not explicitly state.

Silence can be a critical site for rhetorical investigation, as it holds many possibilities for uncovering truth. Although it would be impossible to recover centuries of unrecorded material to update the incomplete history we have available to us today, turning our attention to discourses that demonstrate intricate relationships with silence, such as humor, will inform rhetoricians about how silence works in practice. This chapter seeks to update critical rhetorical scholarship, which has “for too long ignored the rhetorical powers of silence” (Glenn 2). Silence is present in all rhetorical acts, and in many cases, rhetorical action either uses silence purposefully or breaks the silence at a particular kairotic moment. Without silence, there would

be no gap to fill with speeches, conversation or, as I will explore, humor. Although much scholarship in humor studies has focused on what is explicitly shared in an act, “communication involves more than just the linguistic markers used to encode it... often what is not said or written can be as important, if not more so, than what is” (Huckin 348). Thus, silence warrants further rhetorical consideration. Additionally, silence is a function of communication and has a long history in feminist studies. “Silence may well be the most undervalued and *under-*understood traditionally feminine site and concomitant rhetorical art” (Glenn 2). Silence is a traditional trope of womanhood due to the historical silencing of female voices, a trend that has recently been changing in stand-up comedy discourses. A deeper understanding of the shifting uses of silence will provide an understanding of how silence performs domination, persuasion or rhetorical listening that leads to understanding.

Historical Silencing of Women

Historically, patriarchal structures have silenced women in order to maintain ideologies that privilege men as powerful while devaluing and discrediting the contributions of women. Patriarchy does not refer generally to men but, instead, means a familial, ideological or political system in which men control through “ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor” thus determining “what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male” (Rich 57). Whether through force or customary pressures, men are in control in a patriarchy thus promoting male privilege because it is “male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered” by nature (Bach 246). It is important to note that not all men have gained equally in patriarchal society, as other identity markers allocate privilege to individuals such as race or sexuality; for example, gay men have

often suffered directly from patriarchal societies. Additionally, women have not been innocent of collusion with patriarchal power structures; “some have supported it, some have benefited from it, and most have raised their daughters and sons to conform to it” (Bennett 56).

However, generally speaking, women are at a disadvantage in any patriarchal reign.

Stand-up comedy is a male-dominated entertainment enterprise, thus complicating women’s roles in comedic contexts. Consider how women who disrupt traditional expectations by inhabiting nontraditional occupations are resented. “Never totally absent, harassment increases for those women because they are directly challenging patriarchal authority” (Glenn 281). This perspective is echoed by the limited number of female stand-up comedians available on Netflix, a major provider of stand-up specials, and in the negative reviews these women receive for their work. Many successful female comics are scorned for their directness, aggression, or risqué blue-material, characteristics that have propelled male comics’ success.

Repurposing Silence as Activist Tool

Although silence is not inherently feminist, women have recently prospered in the male-dominated stand-up comedy arena and repossessed silence in ways that progress feminist ideals. This project seeks to identify and articulate the more recent phenomenon of comics using silence in their acts to promote positive understandings of women and other marginalized identities, thus subverting the male- dominant culture. Silence can be understood “Like the zero in mathematics,” as it is an “absence with a function, and a rhetorical one at that” (Glenn 4). This conception of silence urges us to develop a deeper understanding of where silence is *used* in persuasive practices, more specifically, *how* silence is functioning. Humorists can enact

political resistance by emphasizing gaps, holes or outright injustices in our social structure, without explicitly stating them.

Silence is a strategic part of joke-telling and it is not restricted specifically to feminist humor. In silence rests a community's norms, therefore silence functions as the unspoken understanding of certain cultural expectations (Huckin 351). Silence can be used in even the most sexist male comedic acts. However, women in stand-up comedy are using silence twofold: by infiltrating a male-dominated arena to tell their jokes in public, and, through the use of silence in the telling of their jokes. Thus, silence has many functional benefits in the context of stand-up comedy and activism. There is an expanse of rhetorical purposes for silence, "a feminist position that can resist disciplinary pigeon-holing, embrace political resistance, and refuse the discipline (or 'correct training') of sociopolitical culture and power" (Glenn 262). The US is presumed to be a society based on freedom and equality; however, women continue to fight for equal rights. Standing up on stage to perform jokes is one area where women have begun speaking about issues in an attempt to critique patriarchal expectations. Recently, women have made themselves heard on the comedy stage, breaking their silence, and strategically repurposing silence in their comedy to generate audience agency, providing their viewers the means of contesting the patriarchy through critical thought.

This project investigates the use of silence in female stand-up comedy routines to further our understandings of how silence is being used and to what effect because "Silence and silencing both resist the traditional discipline of rhetoric—at the same time that they work to transform it" (Glenn 282). Following, I explore the strategic *use* of silence by focusing on how female comics Aditi Mittal and Chelsea Peretti integrate silence into their acts in order to

provoke audience reflection. Citing the placement of silent spaces in their jokes, I will identify the careful omission of particular ideas, fleshing out the information that these comics selectively exclude. In order to assert gravitas in a traditionally whimsical performance art, female comics transform a history of being silenced, into a strategic delivery of being silent. This purposeful use of silence promotes audience engagement with feminist humor. It is in the textual silences that comics prompt their audience to consider the significance of what has been left unsaid (Huckin 354). Female comedians such as Aditi Mittal and Chelsea Peretti deliver silence in ways that make them *appear* to be compliant in a patriarchal society. Contrarily, these comics are emphasizing their refusal to take responsibility for abiding by such expectations in order to offer social and cultural critique.

Being Silenced

Women have only recently begun to achieve any significant recognition in mainstream stand-up comedy. Historically, women have not been granted equal opportunities as men in stand-up comedy clubs, venues, or performance opportunities such as TV programs. Thus, stand-up comedy represents feminist conceptualizations of silence as an absence or a gap (Fivush 90). The historically sparse number of female comics represents the lack of recognition women have as being capable of profitable comedy. In this way, women performing stand-up comedy have been silenced historically, meaning that although they may have been participating in the art, they were not granted equal opportunities as men and thus were unable to gain the same cultural acclaim.

Considering silence as a gap or censorship gives power to verbalized communication, such that “in silence truth is passive and slumbering, but in language it is wide-awake; and in

language active decisions are made concerning truth and falsehood” (Picard 16). This provides an understanding of silence as a result or impact of power structures selecting who is allowed to voice their positions. Few women have achieved success comparable to their male counterparts in stand-up comedy and thus the history of stand-up reads as a man’s club because “what is given voice will be recalled and what is silenced will be forgotten.

Marginalized experiences or oppressed groups are not given credibility and therefore their voices are silenced” (Fivush 90). Since women have rarely succeeded in stand-up, researching the current influx of female comics reaching international audiences represents a rhetorical success story worth analyzing and will give credence to the role of female comics in the historical progress of feminism.

Emphasizing the work of women who are standing up and speaking out in stand-up comedy specials will extend humor scholarship to include women who do not use self-disparaging jokes to succeed. Many of the early female comics succeeded by telling jokes that appeased patriarchal scripts, demonstrating “power derived from conformity” which leads to being silent in essence. In order to gain recognition, early female comics had to make jokes at their own expense, leaving them at risk of tarnishing their career if they were to say anything meaningful or critical that contradicted patriarchal expectations of women (Fivush 96). Now, women are addressing taboo topics on stage, deviating from the cultural expectations, which historically led to being silenced and instead are gaining back power through their individual voice (Fivush 96). Today’s successful women comics are making their voices known, performing acts that emphasize pitfalls in patriarchal power structures, and using silence as a rhetorical strategy. Acknowledging female voices is important work because “what is voiced becomes

privileged in memory and what is silenced becomes more and more difficult to recall” (Fivush 91). Thus, silence is shifting from a tactic used by oppressors to a tool used by the oppressed in order to fight back.

Of course, feminist scholars caution the use of silence as an act of resistance, because “Your silence will not protect you” if you miss your opportunity to speak out altogether (Lorde 41). If one does not speak out at the right time, opportunity can pass. Lorde speaks of silence from a more historical standpoint, citing instances of women’s silence and articulates that “the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger” (42). She acknowledges the fears women face raising their voice in a male-dominated society, but reminds us that “we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us” (Lorde 44). There is power in speaking about important issues before the oppressed fall victim to the overbearing voices of their oppressors. This view of silence is important for those female stand-up comedians hesitant to start their career, as they have important things to say and must not let the fear of critique paralyze their stepping up to the microphone. Instead, speaking out against oppressors might initiate change by transforming traditionally patriarchal ideologies into more egalitarian perspectives.

Breaking a history of being silenced is a powerful move because “what has been unspoken, therefore *unspeakable* in us, is what is most threatening to the patriarchal order in which some men control, first women, then all who can be defined and exploited as ‘other’” (Johannesen 28). It is the job of the silenced “other” to continue to make noise, articulate their

experiences and speak until they are heard so that the social order can be corrected. Women must first speak in contexts where they have traditionally been silenced in order to reclaim silence as a source of power. Then they might repurpose silence, using it deliberately in their speech in order to direct their audience to particular conclusions.

This conception of silence as a result of oppressive forces does not acknowledge that silence can be used as a conscious rhetorical tactic. To say silence is passive negates a history of oppression, which deliberately silences women and “othered” identities. It must be considered that silence is not always passive, and can be a means of survival in instances where speaking up could be life-threatening such as wartime or perhaps in the presence of an abuser. Further, silence can be a form of conscious resistance, a decision to remain quiet, to alarm listeners through what is not being stated or to provoke quiet contemplation.

Being Silent

Although “silence has long been considered a lamentable essence of femininity, a trope for oppression, passivity, emptiness, stupidity, or obedience” comedians performing feminist humor have repurposed muteness as a tactic to assert audience roles, strategically placing silence in their jokes to emphasize various injustices faced by women and “othered” identities (Glenn 2). It is through sharing their personal experiences, filtered through their unique perspective as women, that female comics have been able to create stories that redefine traditional expectations in patriarchal society. Contemporary female comics have overcome the historical silencing of funny women and now self-select their *use* of silence. Female comics found a kairotic moment in the internet age, rising through self-branding and perseverance to interrupt the silence that Fivush describes as having led to power, “through providing the space

for the creation of narratives of resistance and healing” (89). Women who have infiltrated the male-dominated arena of stand-up have broken the silence, filling it with jokes about womanhood and unique female experiences. Sharing these stories on stage opens up a dialogue with viewers, bringing light to issues that women can relate to or that men need to learn about.

Silence can be used as a rhetorical strategy in numerous ways. First, consider Huckin’s conceptualization of manipulative silences, which intentionally mislead the listener in a way that is advantageous to the speaker (354). Therefore, manipulative silences are directly related to joke structure. The setup of a joke only offers the audience a snippet of information that draws to mind a story. Then the punchline interrupts the expectation in a way that the audience does not expect in order to provoke laughter. Thus, a comic guides an audience in one direction so that their punchline generates laughter. It is in the textual silence of what is not said that the audience can identify why the joke is funny.

Silence can be conceptualized as “quiet, restful, reflective,” “a form of intimacy, being silent together,” or “a form of privacy, being silent alone” (Fivush 90). Obviously, work has been done to articulate more purposeful or positive uses of silence, proving that it is not always the result of oppressive forces. “In contrast to liberal feminist theories that posit voice as power, post-structuralist theories posit silence as power.” Essentially, the expectations of a dominant culture are internalized. Thus it is unnecessary that those expectations be voiced. In the US, our patriarchal structure is canonical. This means that patriarchal expectations become internalized, thus creating an “invisible background of shared understanding” (Fivush 94). Thus, when comics strategically use silence, they can refrain from over explaining the blatant

inequality in the US, and instead act out a scene that paints a picture of a particular instance that might criticize beliefs that men are superior to women. In this way, comics are free to selectively *be silent*. They have the freedom to assume certain social constructs are unnecessary to discuss because all citizens recognize these truths in society. The need to vocalize an experience comes from a need to explain it to others and oneself. “From this perspective, when power gives voice, silence is oppressive, but when power gives silence, voice is justification” (Fivush 94). This complicates how silence can be used by showing that it can be an intentional act that exudes authority.

Female stand-up comics have sought to reclaim silence as their own tactic against oppression, not an effect placed upon them by the oppressor, to refute the traditional silencing of women. It is in the gaps, the pauses, the quiet inhales that the audience has time to think, consider, and contemplate the impact of what the comedian has said. I seek to expand our understanding of humor by demonstrating the presence of women in comedic contexts and their effective use of being silent as a rhetorical strategy in stand-up comedy performances. Women now *use* silence intentionally as a comedic strategy.

Defining Silence in a Comedic Context

Considering the nuance between *being silenced* and *being silent*, it is important to have a clear understanding of my conceptualization of silence as rhetorical strategy in a comedic context. “The delivery of silence can be a way of taking responsibility, all the while refusing to be compliant; it can be a way of refusing to take responsibility, all the while appearing to be compliant” (Starhawk 283). Starhawk’s conception of silence is essential in relation to my project. It identifies the ways silence can be used purposefully, yet remain undetected as an act

of resistance. Comedians such as Aditi Mittal and Chelsea Peretti deliver silence in ways that make them *appear* to be compliant in a patriarchal society but instead emphasize their refusal to take responsibility for abiding by such expectations in order to offer social and cultural critique.

In their comic acts, silence is any instance void of sound. When a comedian chooses to be silent, they replace the noise of logical language with vacant stage time. When comedians use silence towards rhetorical goals, they remain quiet in order to give their audience members space, time and peace to concentrate on their own thoughts.

In the following analysis, I acknowledge the connection between unfamiliar language and non-words to silence. For example, the use of a language that the audience does not recognize, such as Aditi Mittal's bilingual performance, has parallels to the impact of strategic silence. Additionally, I frame the use of non-words, like sighs or grunts, as a rhetorical force that works in a similar way to silence. I argue that because these sounds do not form comprehensible ideas, they affect audience members in a way that aligns with my conceptualization of silence.

Silence is time for quiet meditation and consideration of the comic's spoken words. Unfortunately, in some viewers, silence is a time filled with discriminatory ideas, critical thoughts regarding the performer based on how they appear, rather than the values they bring to their act. However, in the best case scenario, silence is the site of critical thinking, where audience members digest the setup of a comic's joke, consider the implications, and thus understand the consequences of a patriarchal society in a new way.

Joke Analysis

Following, I provide background information to situate the comic before moving into a conceptually-oriented analysis of jokes pulled from each respective special.

Context

Although many nations have passed laws to protect women's rights, social and economic inequalities have been growing (van der Gaag 1). Women have moved into paid work in unprecedented numbers; challenged sexism, discrimination, gender inequality, and violence; yet women and girls in many countries continue to be seen as second-class citizens, especially if they are poor, or come from a black or minority ethnic group (van der Gaag 2). The persistent denigration of women is tragic, and as the adage goes, "comedy is tragedy plus time." Stand-up comedians Aditi Mittal and Chelsea Peretti have honed in on tropes of womanhood in order to generate critical performances through strategic uses of silence. They have turned oppressive "norms" into profitable material, speaking out about important feminist topics, and selectively being silent to engage audience reflection.

Aditi Mittal

Overview

The following analysis will investigate the strategic use of silence in one joke from Aditi Mittal's *Things They Wouldn't Let Me Say*. First, I will contextualize and introduce the joke, offering a brief description of the performance to set up the analysis. Next, I will offer an analysis of the special's title before discussing the rhetorical use of silence in Mittal's act throughout her bilingual performance. Later, I specifically detail the multicultural nature of the joke in reference to US pop culture and Indian cultural taboos. Then, I will apply visual

rhetorical analysis to discuss the facial expressions Mittal uses in her performance. I will conclude by discussing the implications of her joke, what silence is doing and how this rhetorical use of silence subverts patriarchal expectations.

The Joke

In her aptly named special, *Things They Wouldn't Let Me Say*, Aditi Mittal takes on feminist topics such as being a single 30-year-old Indian woman, the feminine beauty system with its prescriptive attire, and feminine hygiene products to simultaneously provoke laughter and critique the ideologies women are raised to internalize as “normal.” Trailblazing as the first female stand-up special from India, Aditi Mittal exemplifies the persuasive move from silence to speaking out, reconfiguring her silence as an intentional rhetorical act. Since Mittal’s special is available to US viewers, she has the potential to expand viewers’ understandings of diversity. Mittal’s identity hinges on her womanhood and Indian heritage, which offers a new perspective on the increasing number of specials by women available on Netflix. Following is a transcription of the joke:

I have realized that saying the word “sanitary napkins” in public is like standing in a Hogwarts common room and saying “Voldemort” 'cause immediately, everyone's like “Gee, What's wrong with her? Why is she talking about that which must not be named? (Switching to Hindi) That's why she's not married.” (Switching back to English) And there has come that time in every woman's life when she has gone up to an absolutely random stranger and been like, “Hi, uh excuse me, uh, do you have an extra ...” I'm like, what does she want? “Do you have an extra...?” [makes *pop* sound]

(Aditi Mittal)

In *Things They Wouldn't Let Me Say*, Mittal emphasizes the unmentionable nature of discussing menstruation management products through her strategic use of silence. It is in her silence, her avoidance of discussing various aspects of periods, that Mittal instigates audience contemplation. She challenges her listeners to assess what they know about periods and further, to consider the significance of why the topic remains taboo. Through the conscious use of silence in the joke, Mittal speaks out about an issue every woman faces, yet has been taught to mute, despite the repeated occurrence and inevitable arrival of a monthly flow.

Mittal's act is well-organized, clearly rehearsed, and deliberate in her decision not to cater to the needs of English-only speakers, an experience they are likely unfamiliar with. Her choice to maintain recognition of her heritage through the combined use of her home language might bring awareness to her ethnocentric viewers. In this way, Mittal uses a strategy similar to silence in that she shares language that some of her audiences do not understand. As she vocalizes in Hindi, English speakers hear but do not understand the ideas being shared.

Mittal alludes to the experience of a period popping up unexpectedly, every month, give or take, depending on the woman. Mittal does not explicitly review menstruation with her audience. She does not take the time to explain that when a woman matures physically, her body prepares for fertilization in the uterus unless she is impregnated. She spares the gory details of the excess tissue built up on uterine walls, which shed and excrete as blood and tissue through the vagina. Mittal does not review that periods often bring with them painful cramps, headaches, or hormonal changes that might alter her mood in drastic ways. Her joke hinges on the frustration of maintenance a woman endures while bleeding for several days, using multiple tampons or pads, perhaps even staining her panties or pants, and sometimes, not

having one right when she needs it the most.

Implications of silence in the title

The title *Things They Wouldn't Let Me Say* emphasizes Mittal's intent to specifically address the issues she was never allowed to discuss for the entire length of her comedy special. The title provokes questions of who "they" are, as Mittal was born in Pune, Maharashtra, lived in the UK and eventually moved to New York City. In any case, these societies, like much of the world, operate under varying degrees of patriarchal order. Although she returned to India to pursue comedy, it could be a culmination of her many residencies that comprise the "they" who Mittal insinuates kept her silent about the topics she discusses in her special. Mittal makes references to popular culture from her various backgrounds, discussing Bollywood as well as Hollywood films, insinuating that her performance represents experiences felt in multiple societies. She addresses common topics such as love, offering insights generated from her unique perspective, in order to connect with and inform her audience simultaneously. The idea that she was not *allowed* to speak about the material in her special urges the audience to consider why these topics remain taboo.

Bilingualism and its relation to silence

Her diverse identity is felt throughout the special due to Mittal's stylistic choices. Mittal moves between English and Hindi, a bilingual approach that encourages US viewers who only understand English to consider the experience of being "othered." Throughout the special, Mittal rolls her Rs and emphasizes her Ts, never breaking from her inherent Indian accent, further, she transitions between two languages. As viewers watch Mittal speak in English and seamlessly transition into Hindi mid-joke, they are provoked (perhaps for the first time) to

recognize the diversity of Mittal's multi-faceted identity. Those viewers who only speak English are forced to listen without understanding, without someone catering to his or her needs as an English speaker. Thus Mittal promotes audience identification with the sensation of being pushed into the margin. This is a very powerful move in terms of Mittal's role as the first widely known female Indian comic. She is forcing audience members to inhabit a new identity themselves, excluding those English-only speakers from her jokes without apology.

Mittal moves from her set up about "sanitary napkins" to citing examples of the reactions she has seen by those strangers who hear someone speak the words that must not be shared in public. Switching from English to Hindi, Mittal explains that people wonder what is *wrong* with her, then in Hindi, she utters, "That's why she's not married." This language change impacts audience reception in a couple of ways. First, it emphasizes a point about Indian culture, where one would blame a woman discussing sanitary napkins for being single just because of their willingness to utter the words allowed. Additionally, this is an instance where English-only speakers might be placed in the position of being "othered." Take, for example, the idea that a male audience member is paying attention to the context clues, hearing Mittal ask, "What is wrong with her?" followed by an untranslated language leaves them feeling like they are missing something. Unable to understand the detrimental words being uttered, this audience member faces, maybe for the first time, the experience of being marginalized, ignored and left out. This part of the joke maintains people's prejudices about saying the words "sanitary napkins," blaming an unmarried woman, and for *obvious* reasons. Without explicitly stating that the topic is not up for discussion, Mittal shows us that in patriarchal contexts, women should not speak about their period. While this type of silencing extends into many

areas of a woman's lived experience, their monthly cycle is likely to be one of the more consistent. Mittal strategically selects her words, leaving English-only speakers in silence about the crux of her critique. Although she does not explicitly state that women *should* be allowed and even encouraged to discuss their periods, Mittal does imply this through her telling of the joke.

Popular culture

Drawing on a popular film reference, Mittal equates uttering the words "sanitary napkins" to expressing "Voldemort" at Hogwarts, J.K. Rowling's fictional school of wizardry. She assumes the audience will recognize the level of intensity of the culturally constructed taboo of discussing feminine hygiene products by comparing it to the forbidden act of speaking the name Lord Voldemort. Like saying Voldemort, bringing it into the conversation is evoking images of evil. Voldemort himself is obsessed with blood purity and hates non-pureblood wizards, an interesting parallel in the metaphor comparing Voldemort to menstruation. While Voldemort wishes to conquer Muggle and wizarding worlds to achieve pure-blood dominance, the metaphor draws to mind the significance of moving women away from discussing their period. Just as wizards have no control over whether they are pureblood, neither does a woman have control over her menstruation cycle. Perhaps, similar to Voldemort's interest in purity, those who abhor talking about sanitary napkins prefer to think of women as modest, pure, virgins. If this is the case, then the image of blood expelling from their vaginas disrupts this conceived innocence in some manner, despite women's inability to control their bodily function.

There are many reasons that suggest why speaking about menstruation is taboo. It might be because the experience is gross and unpleasant. Perhaps the reason women are discouraged from talking about it is that it destroys the pristine image of a virgin woman in pure white. Mittal highlights her own recognition of this taboo when beginning her joke, articulating that she has learned that “sanitary napkins” is not something you are meant to say in public. She establishes a metaphor connecting periods to “he-who-must-not-be-named,” articulating the unmentionable nature of females’ monthly interaction with the crimson wave, Aunt Flo, being on the rag, red tide, riding the cotton pony, lady business, wearing the red badge of courage, experiencing moon time, girl flu, Mother Nature’s gift, shark week, The Red Baron, that time of the month, women’s trouble, menstruation, menses, or more commonly known, her period. For a topic we should not discuss, there is quite an abundance of terms we use to refer to the time. Thus, Mittal’s decision to discuss the “things they wouldn’t let me say” demonstrates how silence is the parent of invention. In being silenced, comedians such as Mittal have developed a new strategy of how to selectively be silent. Women have learned to use silence, ironically, in a way that actually leads to more discourse. Silence itself entails subversive rhetoric. When Mittal uses silence in her bit about periods, she takes a topic that is not meant to be discussed and finds a way to speak about it publicly to a large audience. She subverts the expectations of a culture that shames women for discussing their periods by making it the focal point of her bit. The taboo nature of discussing periods spans across cultures, but in considering Mittal’s address, let us consider Indian perceptions of menses.

Mittal addresses the lack of sex education in India throughout her special, explaining that it is illegal to offer sex education to anyone under the age of 18. In Indian culture, there are

two primary myths surrounding the idea that menstruating women are impure. First, many women in urban areas are forbidden to enter the “puja” room, a place of worship, while they are menstruating. Additionally, many rural girls are not permitted to enter the kitchen during menstruation because they are considered unclean, and thus their exile from the kitchen prevents contamination of food (Garg et al. 182). Because of cultural beliefs around impurity, Indian girls and women are restricted from offering prayers and touching holy books during menstruation, thus internalizing the idea that their period makes them impure. According to Garg and Anand, “It is believed that if a girl or women touches a cow while she is on her period, that the cow will become infertile – leading girls to associate their own bodies with curse and impurity” (184). This cultural ideology is not uncommon, and in Mittal’s deliberate focus on talking about periods, she calls attention to the forbidden nature of such discussions. Raised in a culture that does not permit, never mind promote, sexual education, it is unsurprising that periods are a hushed topic. Thus, speaking aloud about periods provides Mittal’s audience members, who are familiar with the Indian narratives about the impurity of menstruating women, solace in silence. Mittal challenges societal expectations by articulating her thoughts on periods. When the audience watches Mittal stand-up and discuss periods, she calls attention to the phony nature of it as taboo.

Visual analysis

As Mittal acts out the awkward moment when one must ask a stranger for a sanitary napkin, her voice trails off as she says, “Hi, uh excuse me, uh, do you have an extra ...” Mittal performs a hilarious look of innocent desperation. She presents with her silence, a facial expression that many women can relate to, as she stares wide-eyed in silence, her



Fig. 6. Aditi Mittal Asks for Sanitary Napkin

head cocked to one side, trying to get a pad from a stranger. Looking out with her mouth gaping open, Mittal never finishes her sentence. She stares with this awkward look, showing her audience how ridiculous it is that women, even in a public restroom, feel uncomfortable asking another woman for a pad when they need one because we have internalized the nature of this taboo.

Through her blank stares and an awkward gaping mouth, Mittal provokes an audience of listeners to consider the taboo of speaking about periods in a manner that strategically places silence for emphasis. Mittal’s choice to be silent amplifies the detrimental nature of periods as taboo. Her silence lingers, as the audience waits for her to finish her sentence. Meanwhile, the audience fills in her blanks themselves, and they start to recognize the way women have internalized this silence.

The trailing off of her voice might represent a young woman, left in the dark about what

a period is or how it should be managed, and thus, the girl is unable to articulate what she needs. Her voice trails off because she has not been taught to ask for sanitary napkins, tampons, pads or a menstrual cup. Mittal emphasizes the confusion in this interaction, expressing that it is unclear what the woman might want and again, she asks “Do you have an extra...” followed in silence. The second time Mittal says, “Do you have an extra...” she interrupts the silence by an onomatopoeic pop sound. In this instance, silence is replaced with a noise, a pop, a siren begging for recognition of that which must not be named. Although breaking the silence, Mittal still does not finish the sentence with coherent language, instead using a vocal gesture, a pop sound, to insinuate the unmentionable request. Mittal shows the confusing nature of feeling that your lived experience must not be expressed. Mittal effectively uses silence to subvert the cultural taboo of speaking about periods.

Comic effect

Women have learned to discuss their periods without explicitly saying things that would elucidate specifically what they mean. However, women deserve to express themselves by sharing stories and support regarding this female experience. Since women are taught to be quiet about their menses, some are unable to communicate their needs because they have never discussed the issue such as a culture that discourages discussion of sex altogether. Sometimes, this tendency to hide their period or concerns about it can leave young girls with misunderstandings about what their period *is*, raising concerns about the cultural implications of such taboo. Through subversive truth-telling, Mittal demonstrates the oppressive nature of silencing women regarding their cycle through her anguished pause as she asks for a sanitary

napkin.

As a whole, this joke subverts the internalized idea that women *should not* discuss their periods publically, or even privately, by making us question *why* women who talk about such things are seen negatively. Considered unfit for marriage or flawed, people look at a woman who says “sanitary napkins” as being inappropriate, a spectacle susceptible to ridicule. Mittal relinquishes the responsibility of critique to her audience, as she prods them with her setup. In her silence, Mittal allows audience members to fill in the blanks about what is not being said. This forces audience members to consider why the topic is taboo, potentially harnessing their passion to act.

For some, Mittal’s bit might simply illuminate the idea that women are discouraged from discussing personal and vulnerable experiences regarding menstruation. For others, Mittal’s use of silence for emphasis might instigate frustration, highlighting the injustice of hushing women about their lived reality. In either case, in silence, Mittal prompts the audience to contemplate the implications of a culture that silences the discussion of women’s vulnerability by discussing an issue specific to women’s experiences. Of course, others might hear Mittal without listening to her implied arguments. There might be audience members who are disturbed that Mittal chooses to share jokes about menstruation, tune her out, and miss the point completely. Alternatively, they might agree, thinking that her metaphor is meant to solidify the belief that women should not talk about their period. Unfortunately, the minds in need of change are likely those least susceptible to understanding women’s experiences differently.

Mittal maintains control of silence in her performance of the joke in order to initiate thoughtful consideration by audience members of why women should not discuss their experience. Mittal's silence is effective because "when the delivery of purposeful silence is considered a strategic choice, its presence resonates with meaning and intention—just like that of the spoken word" (Glenn 282). In this joke, it is what Mittal leaves out that resonates with her audience. The combination of words spoken and silences imposed upon the audience throughout the joke remove the responsibility of criticism from Mittal and instead, places it on her audience. Through what is left unsaid, she has implied to her audience that they must consider the bigger picture. She instigates audience members to question why "sanitary napkins" should not be brought up in conversation. As an example of a woman speaking publicly about periods, she encourages audience members to take a closer look at the taboo, thus reconsidering our cultural views on speaking about periods.

Chelsea Peretti

Overview

First, I will introduce the context and content of the joke. Next, I will analyze the feminist motives implicit in the special's title. Then, I will analyze Peretti's use of nonverbal cues such as sighs and groans throughout the performance of this joke. After, I will discuss Peretti's critique of cultural stereotypes of aggression and passivity through strategic silence. The analysis will wrap up with a visual analysis of her performance of this joke, and finally, it will conclude by detailing the subversive effect of her strategic use of silence throughout the bit.

The joke

Peretti uses physical humor to draw a comparison between the way a male would perform a classic bit and her reinterpretation of the same bit, as performed by a female. She begins the joke, “I just wish I was someone else. Honestly, I do, all the time. I wish I was a guy. You know what I mean? Like, I just want to feel what it feels like to have male confidence” (Chelsea Peretti). In her opening line, Peretti does not shy away from her perspective that men have a high level of confidence just because they are men. She goes on to say that being a man seems like it would be amazing, following with an impression, “Like, my fantasy of what it’s like to be a guy is you just wake up in the morning and your eyes open and you’re like ‘I’m awesome! People probably want to hear what I have to say!’ Ya know?” (Chelsea Peretti). Peretti describes how this is different from her point of view because she constantly doubts herself. Then her joke breaks into the physical comedy bit:

Male comedians get to have so much fun, they get to do stuff where they talk about having sex with a girl, they’ll do a joke, ‘Ah, I was having sex with this girl’ they’ll act it out on the stool ya know?

[Grunt] Be like ‘I was having sex with this girl, I was fucking this girl, I was like [6 seconds of exaggerated grunting as she humps the stool] Like

they’ll always use the mic as their dick, their like [7 seconds of thumping the

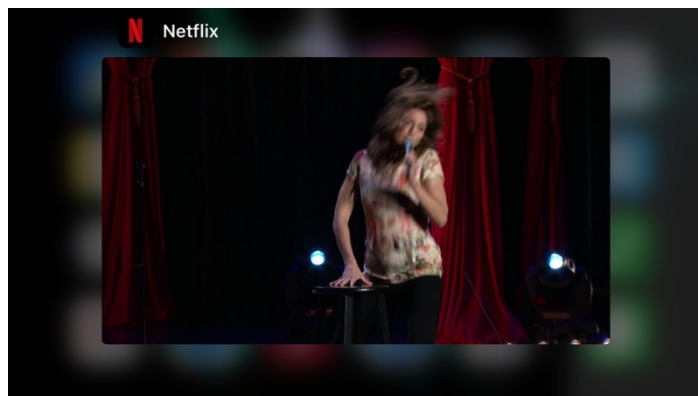


Fig. 7. Chelsea Peretti Thrusts Stool

microphone against stool, thrusting with the mic as her pretend dick] I'm always just so blown away by their creativity. I want in, ya know?

(Chelsea Peretti)

Peretti starts her joke by comically acting out how a male comic might make jokes about having sex with a girl. She uses exaggerated thrusts with her body, letting her hair fly wildly, to demonstrate the level of enthusiasm a male comic might bring to their performance of having sex. Next, she explains and performs the second half of her joke:

So I've been kind of working on my own version of this classic bit. Where I just passively take it from the stool. So in my version, uhm, you know I would be like, so I was fucking this guy, [Pauses for 6 seconds, standing still looking off to the side, then sighs]. Then things got a bit crazy. [Peretti turns around to face the opposite direction for 3 seconds]. And that's my take on a classic.

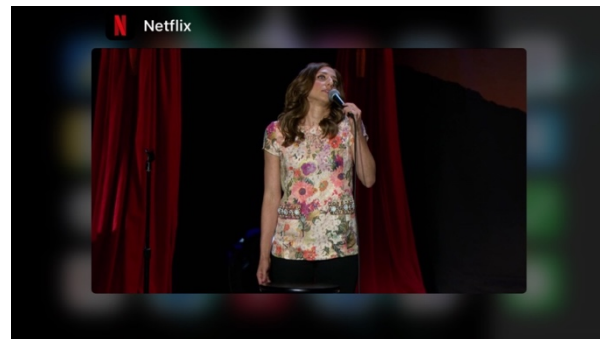


Fig. 8. Chelsea Peretti Stands Passively

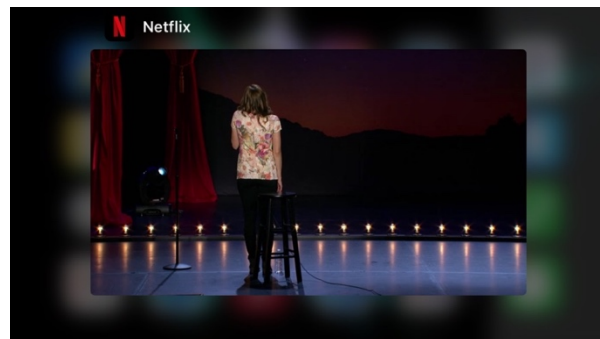


Fig. 9. Chelsea Peretti Turns Around

(Chelsea Peretti)

In this bit, Peretti juxtaposes the imagery of a male comic acting out a sex joke with the image of a female envisioning the same joke from her particular perspective. Drawing on cultural stereotypes, Peretti performs the man as aggressive and the female as passive.

Implications of feminist move in the title

First, similar to *Mittal's Things They Wouldn't Let Me Say*, Chelsea Peretti's *One of the Greats* features a title that sets feminist undertones. By calling herself "one of the greats" Peretti is labeling her act with confidence. The title asserts that she is as talented as any of the successful male comedians out there, starting her special with a jab at a male-dominated entertainment arena.

Grunts, groans, and sighlence

During Peretti's impression of a male comic telling a sex joke, she thrusts and thumps against the stool in order to display the chaotic movements and get the audience laughing. As she humps the stool, she is shaking and making noise with her mouth, without explicitly saying any words. This portion of the performance aligns with the tactic of bilingualism discussed in Mittal's bit. While Peretti is not clearly saying any words or articulating traditional moaning sounds associated with sex, she makes wild and exaggerated noises to engage the audience in what a ridiculous performance a male comic might offer. In these sounds, Peretti simply communicates the overbearing approach of a male thrusting a woman, sharing the experience publicly, and embellishing it for entertainment purposes.

Cultural stereotypes: aggression vs. passivity

The joke uses silence to emphasize the difference between stereotypically aggressive males and stereotypically passive females. While the male bit uses unidentified noises to articulate the pleasure the male is getting from the experience, the silence of the female's perspective is only interrupted by a sigh. This shows a difference between the traditional story-

telling of sexual encounters while drawing attention to the idea that while two people might be involved in a sexual act, their experiences can take on completely different forms.

Visual analysis

The use of silence is most evident in connection with the visual performance by Peretti. While she maintains making some sort of noise throughout her performance of the male comic's version of the joke, Peretti is quiet when acting as the passive female. As she starts the impression of a female take on the classic bit she says, "So in my version, uhm, you know I would be like, so I was fucking this guy" and then stands still behind the stool, with her head tilted to the side, silent for 6 seconds (Chelsea Peretti). In this silence, Peretti is making a social critique on the difference between male and female pleasure. She is suggesting that while a man might be emphatically thrusting and enjoying himself, the female could be simply lying still, experiencing the moment with a completely different reaction. She interrupts the long, silent pause with "then things got a bit crazy" turning her body in the opposite direction, again standing still in silence for three seconds (Chelsea Peretti). This is the end of her joke.

In the visual juxtaposition of the two takes on a classic bit, Peretti is subverting the patriarchal structure by openly displaying the discontent of being on the receiving end of the aggressive male performance. She interrupts any expectation that her performance would be offering a rowdy, sexy performance of a woman approaching sex with the same excitement as the male comic offered, making an understated punchline through the strategic use of silence.

Comic effect

Peretti's joke uses silence in order to critique a culture that has double-standards regarding sexually active men and women. While men are encouraged to discuss their sexual

prowess and success stories, women are often shamed for oversharing their personal sexual experiences. By subverting the audience's expectations, Peretti performs the female take on this joke in a very calm, passive and quiet approach. This makes a more general statement about how women are often left unsatisfied in an act that should support the needs and desires of both parties. This example demonstrates the link between silence and subversion once more. Peretti uses the stage to act out vulgar gestures that are unladylike. In order to critique the hypocrisy of a culture that expects men to be explicit about their sexual escapades, but shames women for expressing their sexuality in a similar way, Peretti subverts audience expectations by performing the bit in a way that gives power to women in spite of their passivity. While the male exaggerates the amazing time that they are having, Peretti's demonstration of a women having sex shows passivity, boredom, and even a sigh of discontent. This provides the audience with a new understanding of the event, sans dramatization of a female orgasm as might be seen in film or pornography. Her take on the bit provides the image of a women— not resisting sex— but enduring it for the sake of the man.

Conclusion

Women comics have repurposed silence as a rhetorical tool that emphasizes feminist critiques of patriarchal structures. Rather than being silenced, women are now selectively being silent on stage in order to emphasize their social critiques. In combination with facial expressions, body language, gestures and proper setup, women comics are using silence as a tool to deconstruct patriarchal expectations in their stand-up comedy performances.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

Here I articulate the implications and limitations of my analysis. I identify what aspects of the study are lacking or what work I would like to complete in future iterations of this project. Then I discuss potential ideas for future research that stem from this thesis. Finally, I move into a review of the work this thesis has accomplished, reiterating its scholarly contribution.

Implications

Recently, stand-up comics have used Netflix as a platform for promoting feminist ideas in their specials. The inclusion of feminist humor in comedy specials has the potential to impact the ideologies of viewers raised under patriarchal power structures. My focus on women comics contributes to spotlighting marginalized voices. However, male comics may also use feminist humor in their specials. The focus on the rise of feminist humor emphasizes the current shift in popular culture, specifically stand-up comedy, towards social justice activist goals.

Through rhetorical subversion, comics are able to undercut audience expectations and highlight inconsistencies or injustices in their respective cultures. Calling attention to particular “norms” and exposing the absurdity of such expectations, comedians using feminist humor offer a social critique that can raise audience social consciousness. This thesis has contributed to understandings of subversion in rhetorical scholarship by demonstrating how subversive rhetoric can function in a comedic context. The use of subversion in stand-up comedy acts represents the use of deception for a positive outcome on two levels. First, the comic moves the audience to laughter. Second, with regards to feminist humor, jokes that subversively

critique the dominant culture challenge audiences to reconceive what they know about the patriarchal culture that has imparted specific “norms” to them via media consumption. As one of the few contemporary examples of a rhetor-audience relationship, stand-up comedy is a rich site for rhetorical inquiry, and the exploration of rhetorical subversion within comedic acts demonstrates one area that scholars can benefit from such investigation.

Additionally, through their reclamation of silence, women comedians are repurposing silence as a tool to generate jokes that criticize the societal “norms” that maintain women as second-class citizens. The analyses of Mittal and Peretti’s jokes provide new rhetorical understandings of how silence can be used to manipulate an audience to the speaker’s advantage. The detailed explanations of silence demonstrate the dichotomy between being silenced and being silent. Offering rich rhetorical understandings of how silence is not always a negative force, I show how marginalized individuals have reclaimed that which has oppressed them through their conscious use of silence. The exploration of textual silences helps us to recognize more than just quiet spaces, providing evidence that what is unspoken often carries as much (or more) weight than what is explicitly stated in a performance or speech. The analyses of silence also provide connections between the use of silence and the rhetorical use of subversion by showing how being silent about specific information can have a subversive effect in a comic’s performance of a joke. Often, silence, whether it is imposed on a population or appropriated by that population, creates subversive new discourses.

As mainstream media shifts and women share their personal experiences with wider audiences, so too might the societal “norms” under which we live. Although the primary goal of the comics discussed in this thesis might not be feminist activism, I have identified jokes in their

specials that serve this purpose nonetheless. With more activist material available for streaming, viewers might grow up with different values than generations of people who only ever saw women represented as subordinate in popular media.

Limitations

Although this thesis has offered clear literature reviews of the rhetorical concepts of silence and subversion, it is limited in the examples explored. In future iterations of this project, I would like to draw more material from stand-up comedy acts that demonstrate the self-deprecatory humor discussed in the historical context to serve as a control group. Also, examples of non-feminist humor could offer a clearer comparison between what feminist humor and non-feminist (or potentially misogynistic) humor do differently. Finally, my analysis only explores works of women comics, in an attempt to highlight marginalized voices. However, in a larger project, it would be important to incorporate male voices as well. Additionally, I would like to expand the analysis by offering more examples of jokes throughout. Further, having other academics assist in coding each joke using Table 1 would validate the schema I have developed in order to identify feminist humor.

Additionally, my research does not delve into the question of *why* audiences laugh at subversion. Connecting the rhetorical use of subversion to humor theory might offer a deeper understanding of why people laugh at jokes that subvert patriarchal ideologies and what this reflects about US culture. I am also limited by lack of information regarding who has seen each comedy special on Netflix. There is no data publicly available regarding how many people watch each special available on Netflix. Even with this data, there would be no way to determine whether those audiences watching specials that use feminist humor do so because they are

interested in feminism, or if they watch the specials with narrow-minded views that could be changed during their engagement with feminist humor. This thesis digs into how comics are using specific rhetorical strategies in their acts but offers limited discussion regarding the audiences' roles and responses to the specials.

The other limitation faced throughout this thesis is that there is no certainty to what extent these jokes were written to push a feminist agenda, or what the comedian's intent was at all. I did not interview any of the comedians personally, so my work is speculative. Although I have offered clear connections and explanations of why the jokes selected are feminist, interviewing the individual comedians would validate this information. So, women comics, when you read this hit me up!

Future Research and Summary

The exploration of the use of feminist humor has supplied me with many potential offshoots of this project. For example, many female comedians have generated enough success to warrant their own television shows, many of which are addressing feminist issues head-on. For example, Ellen Degeneres's *Ellen*, Chelsea Handler's *Chelsea*, Sarah Silverman's *I love you, America*, and Amy Schumer's *Inside Amy Schumer* all have themes of social justice rhetoric. It might be interesting to trace the progression of their careers to see how their stand-up comedy platform has set the stage for careers that promote activist ideologies and bring awareness to their audiences.

Further consideration could be given to the question of whether joke structure is inherently patriarchal. A linguistic analysis of jokes could further explicate if the structure of jokes using setup and punchline has larger patriarchal implications. Additionally, the ways that

women's communication has been devalued in comedic contexts might further inform this question.

Finally, a broader project might explore the shifting social justice rhetoric of mainstream media culture and investigate the connections between popular culture television and social media. As some of the jokes I explored indicated connections to websites like Reddit, Twitter or Instagram, tracing audience reactions through social media engagement could better inform us about viewer responses to individual comedy acts.

In this thesis, I have joined rhetorical, feminist and cultural studies scholars to examine a pivotal moment in the context of popular stand-up comedy by offering critical analyses of jokes using feminist humor pulled from various Netflix Original comedy specials. This project has updated the conversation about women in comedy by first identifying the historical shift from women spouting self-deprecatory humor to thoughtful feminist jokes that offer societal criticism. Providing the reader with a clear outline of what categorizes a joke as feminist in order to situate my case studies, I have identified how rhetoric functions in the discourse of stand-up comedy, especially as a new wave of comedians use feminist humor as a form of nonviolent activism. I discuss how audiences are forced to reevaluate their learned expectations of patriarchal culture as they watch performances of feminist humor. Specifically, I have shown how comics using feminist humor, then apply the rhetorical tools of subversion and silence to enhance the impact of their performances.

Although the scope of my thesis does not allow me to articulate if joke structure is inherently patriarchal, this question situated my historical, rhetorical and feminist discussion. Thus this thesis sets the groundwork for further exploration of this question in future projects.

In conclusion, women are funny, and many funny women are using their knack for irony to undercut patriarchal expectations publicly.

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