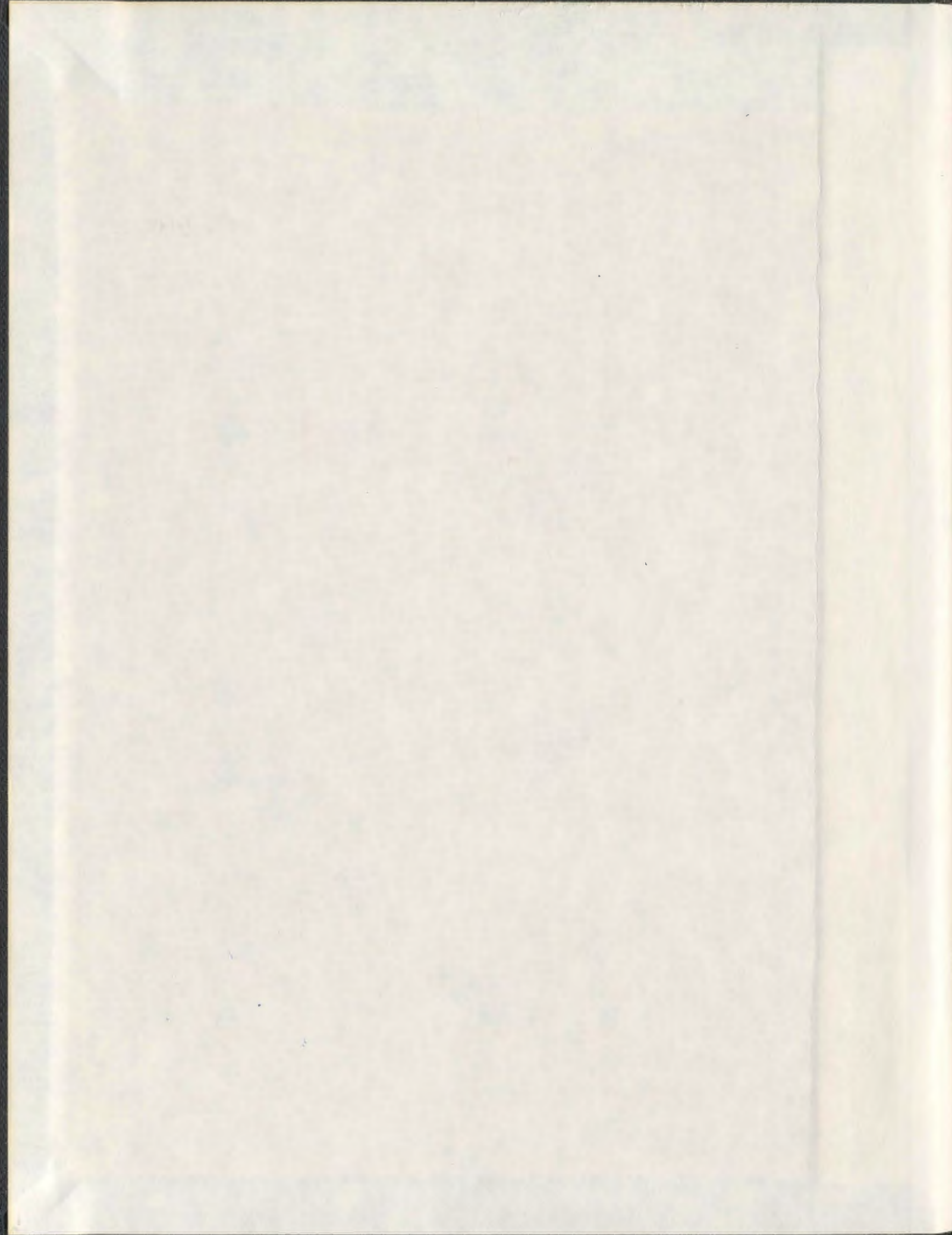


STAND-UP COMEDY:
A FOLKLORISTIC APPROACH

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A thesis submitted to the
School of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Folklore
Memorial University of Newfoundland

November 2009

St. John's

Newfoundland

For Jackson

You want to hear stupid? Major stupid? Stand-up comic. You walk onto a bare stage absolutely alone, no comfort, no help, no script or actors to support you, no lyrics and music to give you life—just yourself saying your words out of your own head, telling each person, one on one, the weirdest corners of your psyche. And everybody is judging your personality, judging whether you are worth their money, whether you make them happy. When they do not laugh, that silence is a rejection of *you* personally, only you. Not your mother. Not your piano player—if you have one. A thousand people in a room are saying, “You stink. You’re nothing.”

Joan Rivers

Rectus aut erectus [To stand up – or be set up?]

Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, VII.12

Abstract

Building on both a textual analysis and ethnographic fieldwork, this dissertation employs folkloristic analysis to examine stand-up comedy, a professional verbal comic performance with its roots in vernacular forms of talk. It requires an audience: all broadcasts and recordings of stand-up comedy without exception are recorded in front of a live audience, which makes it unique among popular culture forms. Working backward from this observation, it is evident that an audience is vital for performances, and that the stand-up comedy performance is a collaborative act between a comedian and an audience. It emulates the intimacy of face-to-face encounter, although it is made distant by the concrete division of performer from audience by virtue of it occurring on a stage, and subsequently by the spatiotemporal distancing of broadcasts and recordings. This dissertation examines the strategies through which the stand-up comedian reconciles intimacy and distance, through examining how the various media of stand-up comedy's dissemination – amplification, broadcasting, recording, and each of their respective variations – are adapted by and used by the comedian to replicate intimacy and bridge literal distance, and how the stand-up comedian develops a biography, a persona, and observations on the local and the universal which address cultural distance.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation was partially assisted through a grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). I would like to recognise the Memorial University of Newfoundland School of Graduate Studies and the Department of Folklore for student assistantship bursaries prior to that. Dr. Martin Lovelace, the departmental head for the bulk of my tenure, Dr. Diane Tye, who was there at the end, and the administrative assistants, Ms. Sharon Cochrane and Ms. Cindy Turpin, have consistently gone out of their respective ways to make the lives of students easier, for which they receive far too little praise.

Dr. Peter Narváez nursed this work through several stages – including previous, now long-forgotten thesis ideas. The high standards set by his own work in the intersection of folklore and popular culture have been influences which, it is hoped, are evident in the present work. Dr. Diane Goldstein was inordinately helpful during the grant-writing stage, turning ideas into research council-friendly prose. Dr. Lovelace, removing his then departmental head hat and donning a supervisor's beret, was instrumental in curbing my orotundities, when not distracted by Canadian Tire flyers. Drs. Diane Tye and Cory W. Thorne were particularly charitable in their quick yet detailed reviews of my penultimate drafts when deadlines external to the process were looming.

Ron James was kind enough to allow me to follow him around on his tour of Nova Scotia in November of 2005, and provided me – unbidden – with complementary tickets to his shows. And, when they did not want me driving from Truro to Sydney in

the middle of a rainy November night, he and his tour manager, Mr. Terry McRae, arranged for a hotel room, going far beyond the call.

Dr. Lorie Brau kindly sent me the manuscript for her paper on rakugo. Several people – Drs. Lovelace and Narváez among them, but also including anonymous benefactors placing items in my Memorial University of Newfoundland graduate student mailbox – have simply presented me with obscure source material they have encountered, saving me much time and effort.

Portions of this work were presented at the Brown-Bag lecture series of the Department of Folklore in February of 2005; meetings of the American Folklore Society (Brodie 2005; 2006b); meetings of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada (2006a; 2008a; 2009); Perspectives on Contemporary Legend (2007a); and the joint meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada and the American Folklore Society (2007b). Many thanks to all participants and panel co-presenters for their invaluable comments and suggestions. Portions have appeared in different form as “Stand-Up Comedy as a Genre of Intimacy” (Brodie 2008b), and I thank the editors and the anonymous readers for their suggestions (particularly for directing me towards Augestad 2004).

My wife, Jodi McDavid, has always been supportive, even when she was reluctant that I follow her into the field of folklore. Her own practically innate understanding of the dynamics of folklore is something I can only hope to emulate, while her ongoing respect – in all spheres – is that for which I always strive to earn.

My father, Bernard Brodie (1945-2002), took the family to see Joan Rivers live in concert, and brought the *Carlin at Carnegie* video home from work, all before I had turned ten. Responsibility for the following therefore lies with him.

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A note on transcriptions

To transcribe performances, I have employed a system to indicate a variety of audience responses and to demonstrate performance rhythm.

Audience Sounds [bracketed]	A	Applause
	Aw	"Aw" (e.g. disappointment, sadness)
	B	Boos
	C	Cheers
	H	Hisses
	L	Laughter
	O	"Ooo" (recognition of taboo topic)
	S	Silence (pronounced)
	W	Whoops
Qualifiers	:	Two (or more) occurring at once
	→	Transition from one to other
	[<__>]	Discernible words
	[!__!]	Single reaction
	♂ ♀	Gendered response / Gender of respondent

Line breaks occur at prolonged pauses, audience interruptions, or to indicate the cadence of the line. Words in *italics* are specifically emphasised, underlined words indicate that the previous audience reaction is sustained but the performer is talking over or during it, and ... ellipses indicate false starts. The performer's gestures, "stage directions," and other non-verbal cues are {in curly brackets}, and, when indicating tone or accent, qualify the words following, which are in double quotations [" "]. Text enclosed in |straight lines| denotes characterisation. Ellipses in brackets on their own line [...] indicate a non-transcribed section.

Introduction: A Vulgar Art

I am a stand-up comedian, and I love that title.
Stand-up comedy is a vulgar art. It can be vulgar in
the usual way we use that word. But vulgar really
means "of the people." It's the people's art.

George Carlin

A Preliminary Question: Stand-up Comedy – "Folklore" or "Not Folklore"?

At the Perspectives on Contemporary Legend meeting in Logan, Utah, I was presenting some of the work to follow, in particular noting – what I thought innocently – a similarity between what was *au courant* in legendry research and what I had noticed about stand-up comedy (Brodie 2007a). After a brace of encouraging questions, Linda Dégh asked the inevitable, inimitable question, "What does this have to do with folklore? This is not folklore! This is show business!" I like to imagine that I handled the question bravely, if not actually well, but I wish I had the following few pages to hand.

In current folkloristic debate, there is a division that can be boiled down to whether one can legitimately assert that something is "not folklore." There seem to be three possible meanings for "not folklore" going forward.

One is of a project that does not meet the rigours of folkloristic analysis: "That documentary is interesting, but let us not kid ourselves: it's not folklore." It seeks to avoid the misconception that a study of a folkloric process is in and of itself a folkloristic effort, instead of, say, a popular study.¹

¹ During the question period following a panel on the potential use of the documentary *The Aristocrats* (Provenza 2004*) as an introduction to folklore, Gary Alan Fine raised this precise objection. The panel, convened by Thomas Waggner, George Ross, and Michael Kinsella of Western Kentucky University at

Related to this is a second sense, by which something “not folklore” is something that falls outside the parameters of folkloristic analysis: “That’s not folklore: that’s anthropology (or sociology, history, communications, literature, etc.).” This delimits not the distinction between professional and lay analysis but the perspectival differences that give rise to disciplinary boundaries and conventions in the first place.

Lastly there is a judgment of content, whereby something is considered “not folklore” by dint of it being part of a different communicative process – popular culture or high culture – even by those who accept a sense of continuum between these processes. “Chain e-mails? That’s not folklore.” It is this distinction that seeks to establish what is properly the domain of the folklorist, and, despite the field constantly expanding to accommodate material far removed from the narrow(er) strip of human activity that was its object proper in the middle of the nineteenth century, it is the distinction which always tends to demarcate avant-garde from conservative.

While these three qualifications – rigour, perspective, and object – are both subjective and political, there is consensus on what lies well-entrenched in both the “not folklore” and “folklore” ends of the spectrum: it is the ground in between which is contested.

Which brings us to this work.

I would like to imagine that what follows is not “not folklore” in the first sense, and that it meets the standards of rigour and the project of putting its content into a larger perspective that distinguish the academic from the amateur or the popular. Given the

the 2006 meeting of the American Folklore Society in Milwaukee, provided much insight for the present work, and I would like to thank the three of them for our extended conversations afterwards.

appeal of writing about popular culture in general and comedy in particular (demonstrated by the wealth of lay analyses of comedy available), it is at times tempting – or easy – to stray.

I also assert that what follows is not “not folklore” by way of it being entrenched in the disciplinary perspectives of folkloristics. It is not a literary analysis, nor a popular cultural study, nor anthropology, and has been little influenced by same, save that stand-up comedy has not been studied much by folklorists but has to this point largely fallen within these other domains. I would rather imagine that the flaws in what follows derive from this quite synoptic perspective.

But is it not “not folklore” in terms of its object? Stand-up comedy, by virtue of it being a professional activity, takes that first step away from a wholly folkloric process and bestrides the folk and popular ends of a continuum (Narváez and Laba 1986b). Despite analogies to vernacular forms of talk, and despite the stand-up comedian’s frequent use of vernacular forms of talk, the relationship between audience and performer, in terms of systems of exchange and in terms of spatio-temporal distance, however slight, make it “something other.” Dr. Dégh’s point was, in part, quite valid.

Perhaps stand-up comedy may be best compared to country music. Country is rooted in vernacular music, and presents itself as intertwined with vernacular traditions. But it also has its own traditions, its own expectations, its own requirements of being able to transcend locality and idiosyncrasy. This dual-life – both vernacular and popular – need not be understood as disingenuous: it is simply a different beast to be considered on its own terms. Or, to be more precise, and to allow for the argument for this work, given country music’s intricate relationship and association with local traditions, the

employment of the tools of the folklorist is a natural fit: but one must bear in mind that it is also something other.

So too, I believe, with stand-up comedy. It is so self-evidently related to vernacular, folk, everyday talk that folklore is a natural fit and, moreover, one which illuminates elements within the tradition and technique of the stand-up comedian which get lost when it falls under the purview of other disciplines. But I am sensitive to the concerns – and at times share them myself – of those who are wary of the rush to the boundaries of folklore and thus are willing to employ the “not folklore” sobriquet. I thus proceed with caution.

The Question

Stand-up² comedy is a form of talk. It implies a context that allows for reaction, participation, and engagement on the part of those to whom the stand-up comedian is speaking. When it is mediated through broadcasting and recording, an audience present to the performer is included in that mediation. However heavily one-sided, it is nevertheless a dialogic form, performed not to but with an audience.

² A primary issue is establishing a term of choice for the subject matter. There are three apparent choices: “standup,” “stand up,” and “stand-up,” the latter with the capitalisation options “Stand-Up” or “Stand-up.” Following more recent conventions, this work will use “S/stand-U/up” comedy or comedian throughout, save for when quoting others directly. Robert Stebbins cites the ninth edition of *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* and designates the origin of the term at 1966 (1990:5), while John Limon, without citation, assigns it to “in or around the year of Lenny Bruce's death,” again 1966 (2000:126). Russell and Porter (1973) provide a 1961 citation from the August 6 edition of *Parade*: “A stand-up comedienne is a female who stands in front of an audience and tells jokes at which the audience laughs, but *laughs*” (140). Interestingly, George Carlin himself referred to “the stand-ups” to designate an older form of comedian, different from contemporary performers like Mort Sahl, during an appearance on the television show *Talent Scouts* dating from 1962: “The old school is largely made up of the fast-paced stand-up comedians, the one-liner comics who came from vaudeville and burlesque, and they comprise the insult school of humour” (archival footage in Carlin 1997*). An article in *Time* from 1960 gives weight to this meaning: “Always Garry considered himself a stand-up comic. But by 1949, when he started the Garry Moore Show on CBS Radio, he had learned that he got a bigger response simply by playing himself” (*Time* 1960a).

The form stand-up comedy takes, therefore, is very much the same form of intimate talk that occurs in face-to-face encounters. However, there is a distance between the performer and the audience that is imposed by the requirements of the professionalization of this intimate talk, whether that be the proxemic distancing of the performer being on a stage and the audience not, the indeterminate spatiotemporal distancing of stand-up recording being listened to or viewed, or the socio-cultural distance between a performer from one “social category” group and an audience from another.

We are left with a bit of a paradox: how does one reconcile “intimacy” with “distance”? That is the question this dissertation seeks to answer.

By framing the act of stand-up comedy in this manner – working towards the successful reconciliation of intimacy and distance – we are able to side-step much of the academic discourse about what role or function the stand-up comedian plays or has in society. Stand-up comedy scholarship attempts the argument of the comedian as “cultural anthropologist” (Koziski 1984), “social mediator” (Mintz 1998), as engaged in a “minor discourse” (Schulman 1994), or on a “quest for goodness” (Fisher and Fisher 1984). But the intimate relationship of face-to-face communication momentarily suspends other extant social roles and identities.

The purpose of stand-up comedy is entertainment and its aim is laughter: it is in the form of verbal play and utilises humour. Countless theorists (Bergson 1900; Freud 1976; Lonergan 1957; Oring 1992) identify the phenomenon of the humorous as the revelation of (by the performer) or a reaction to (by audiences) a physical, intellectual, social, moral, or emotional incongruity, which could just as easily elicit feelings of terror.

The context and manner in which the humorous observation is made is that which differentiates the humorous from the tragic (Chiaro 1992).

What critics often leave unsaid is that the identification of the incongruous implies a more or less shared worldview. Much as those engaged in legend telling are negotiating an underlying truth proposition (Ellis 2001), so too do the stand-up comedian and his or her audience negotiate a claim of incongruity. Simultaneously, there is a negotiation of the appropriate response to the incongruity: of the interwoven nexus of commonly held assumptions that constitutes the worldview of the group. The more the assumption is exposed as incongruous, the more the reaction elicited can be terror or grief instead of laughter. Lastly, the stand-up comedian is in a position of re-affirming his or her right to be the one to reveal this incongruity: that he or she is not making an outsider's pronouncement and judgment but knows whereof he or she speaks as a member of this particular folk group. To put it another way, there are opinions that one may express – or implicitly proclaim through joking and humour – among friends that one would not express in a public forum: the stand-up comedian expresses them in a public forum by turning that forum into an intimate venue. This negotiation is a continuous process with the specific audience to which he or she is performing, and thus the stand-up comedy performance is a collaborative act. If stand-up comedy is play, there is a deepness to the play (Geertz 1971), as the collaboration with the audience can just as easily fail as succeed, and this failure is an assault on not only his or her status as a performer but as an intimate.

To immediately qualify the above statement, not all stand-up comedy is *de facto* profound: much of what is revealed as incongruous would be already known as such to

the audience at large. The content of stand-up comedy often clusters around culturally accepted quandaries and exoteric pronouncements (Hicks 2004). Furthermore, they may not be reflections on fundamental cultural beliefs but rather on mundane particulars of everyday life. Genuinely novel revelation would be the exception rather than the rule. Audience reaction is based in part on an assessment of the abilities of the performer to express revelation in an unanticipated manner that corresponds with the aesthetic and moral sensibilities of the group. Furthermore, as will be argued throughout this thesis, homogeneity for the group is rarely in play, and there are multiple sets of aesthetic and moral sensibilities: part of the stand-up comedian's technique is to create frisson by bringing these sets of sensibilities into conflict with each other during the course of performance, if only to reconcile them by performance's end.

Because stand-up comedy is this private communication, it is unclear whether stand-up comedy is essentially and intentionally counter-hegemonic, or whether it is simply the professionalisation and commodification of the forms of counter-hegemonic joking discourse present in everyday life (Limon 2001). Nor is the question irrelevant, for whatever "licence" the stand-up comedian may have, it is not a totally free rein, as the issue of taste and offense has a very real consequence for his or her livelihood. Gershon Legman claims that "Under the mask of humour, our society allows infinite aggressions, by everyone against everyone" (1968:9), but the professional stand-up comedian can introduce an irreconcilable distance from a potential audience should he or she transgress some fundamental boundary. Bill Ellis, writing from within the context of September 11 jokes, notes that humour following disasters arises after a latency period, at which point the "making and passing on of jokes provokes laughter and provides social rewards that

outweigh the social risk of being thought sick or insensitive" (2003:41). Ellis's comments are directed at the process of informal joke telling, but clearly professional stand-up comedians faced similar challenges of timing and perception following the tragedy. For the professional comedian, this period of sensitivity is compounded by (a) the difference in intimacy of audience between moments of informal joke-telling and mass-mediated performances, howsoever talented they are at creating an atmosphere of intimacy in performance, and (b) the inherent professionalism and, by extension, commodification of humour wherein the professional comedian can be perceived as profiting from the tragedy of others.

The dilemma of the professional stand-up comedian is characteristic of the inherent tension between social expectations and the occupationally required identification and exploitation of cultural incongruities. This thesis explores the nature of professional stand-up comedy as a field which, by its nature, is both forced to and expected to negotiate the edges of cultural sensitivity and risk. Through ethnographic research the project will explore the means by which professional comedians identify and develop contextual strategies for challenging and engaging with norms of appropriateness.

Humour and jokes have been a staple of folklore research (Bennett 1991; Dundes 1987; Narváez 2003; Oring 1992), although little has been written about the professional comedian until recently (Brau 2003; Del Negro 2003; Misje 2002). Furthermore, there have only been a few studies in the social sciences on stand-up comedy (see Fisher and Fisher 1984; Koziski 1984; Limon 2001; Mintz 1998; Pershing 1991; Pulliam 1991), and just two major histories of stand-up comedy in Canada (Clark 1997; Stebbins 1990).

While there have been a few reflective works on the art of stand-up comedy by professional comedians (Allen 2002; Belzer, Charles, and Newman 1988; Carter 2001), most biographies (Collins and Skover 2002) and autobiographies (Butler 1996) tend not to reflect on the craft (although cf. Bruce 1967; Stephenson 2001), instead providing emic presentations into the occupational life of the stand-up comedian. They do not provide insights that an ethnographic occupational folklife study would (see McCarl 1985; Stebbins 1994). As Oring notes, much of the published work on humour is inherently trivialising (2003:ix) with the strong exception of writings on humour in reaction to tragedy (Ellis 2003; Simons 1986; Smyth 1986).

The discipline of folklore, which has at its focus and object proper the communications that take place in small, intimate, informal groups, brings the appropriate perspective to the study of stand-up comedy through its examination of the mutually-mediating relationship between a group's identity and the expressive forms of that group. This thesis examines stand-up comedy using the theoretical models developed by folklorists to study traditional narrative art. Intrinsic to the role of both "storyteller" and stand-up is the notion of performance (Bauman 1975; Burns 1972; Georges 1969; Goffman 1959; Hymes 1975). Both are vernacular art forms, requiring fluency with locally-situated knowledges that are particular to the culture in which they operate (Eco 1986). However, the commodification and professionalisation of stand-up comedy makes it different from traditional narrative performances: these differences include the breakdown of the intimacy of face-to-face communication (Ben-Amos 1971) that comes from larger venues and media dissemination (Fiske 1989; Narváez and Laba 1986b); and ownership of material and the emphasis on novelty contrast against perceived notions of

a shared or traditional repertoire (Belzer, Charles, and Newman 1988).

Part One begins to set the case for why folklore, the discipline, is well-suited for the study of stand-up comedy. Chapter 1 is an overview of stand-up comedy scholarship; Chapter 2 examines several themes within folklore scholarship that would shed light on various aspects of stand-up comedy.

In Part Two, I look at how the stand-up aims at bridging distances – both the spatial distance from the audience occasioned by a stage and the socio-cultural distance of speaking to a group of which he or she is not a member. This involves using the microphone to allow for an intimate voice, manipulating visual and aural cues (the physical self, accent, costume) to be located within a particular worldview, capitalising on the social identity of “stand-up comedian,” developing a comic persona that individuates this social identity, and constructing material that addresses the concerns and understandings of the audience.

Part Three turns to broadcasts and recordings, which introduce a further distance between the stand-up comedian and the audience, one that is not occasioned by a stage but by not being present to one another. The distances that must now be bridged require an engagement with two audiences: one immediately present to react to and thus construct the stand-up performance itself; and one removed, the reactions of whom the comedian can only anticipate and who is indeterminate, whether in taste, in esoteric understanding, or even in desire to participate in the intimate stand-up event. However, broadcasts and – particularly – recordings also provide the greatest opportunity for reputation cultivation and thus adapting material for their various conventions is a most important skill for the stand-up comedian to develop.

PART ONE: THE STUDY OF FOLKLORE AND STAND-UP COMEDY

When I think of a storyteller, I think of an old folkie, over by a puppet theatre at a folk festival. I don't think a storyteller would have been able to get three 90-minute specials on major Canadian networks.

Ron James

In the following two chapters, I begin to make the argument for why a folkloristic approach is best suited for an analysis of stand-up comedy. Chapter 1 is a review of the literature of stand-up comedy research. Drawing from a variety of disciplines – Communications, English, Anthropology, Cultural Studies, Philosophy – I demonstrate how the field is fragmented as authors struggle with parallel issues: the function and purpose of stand-up comedy; the role the comedian plays in society; and the empowerment and emancipatory potential of comedy. If one mines it deeply, however, a very general consensus of a definition begins to emerge.

Chapter 2 turns to folklore: as a discipline both interdisciplinary and disciplinarily distinct, it has throughout its history synthesised a variety of approaches and applied them to the performances of vernacular culture. My aim is to demonstrate how its insights can be applied to the cultural performances that bestride vernacular and popular. It also looks at folklore genres and genre theory, and how, while loosely framing the materials of stand-up comedy along genre lines helps locate the comedian as engaged in a process of interpersonal communication, stand-up comedians switch between “genres” so effortlessly that one must look to the entire performance as an integral unit.

Chapter 1: Stop Me If You've Heard This Before: Literature Review

If you've uh
 ever seen this bit before I want you to tell me
 stop me if you've seen it [pause]
 {formally} "I'm going to piss on you"

Lenny Bruce

"The Sickniks" was the title of an article appearing in the July 13, 1959 issue of *Time*. A polemic against the rise of a new form of comedy, it identified Mort Sahl, Jonathan Winters, and Shelley Berman as key players, but reserved much of its venom for Lenny Bruce.

What the sickniks dispense is partly social criticism liberally laced with cyanide, partly a Charles Addams kind of jolly ghoulishness, and partly a personal and highly disturbing hostility toward all the world. No one's flesh crawled when Jack Benny carried on a running gag about a bear named Carmichael that he kept in the cellar and that had eaten the gasman when he came to read the meter. The novelty and jolt of the sickniks is that their gags ("I hit one of those things in the street—what do you call it, a kid?") come so close to real horror and brutality that audiences wince even as they laugh. (*Time* 1959)

By 1960, Sahl was a major cultural force, providing material for John Kennedy's appearance at the Al Smith dinner during the Presidential campaign, and earning over three hundred thousand a year. He appeared on *Time*'s cover that August (*Time* 1960b). Outside of his influence, most notable was his style, so different from what had preceded him.

Holding a rolled newspaper in his right hand, flashing baby-blue eyes and a wolfish grin, he states his theme and takes off like a jazz musician on a flight of improvisation—or seeming improvisation. He does not tell jokes one by one, but carefully builds deceptively miscellaneous structures of jokes that are like verbal mobiles. He begins with the spine of a subject, then hooks thought onto thought; joke onto dangling joke, many of them

totally unrelated to the main theme, till the whole structure spins but somehow balances. All the time he is building toward a final statement, which is too much part of the whole to be called a punch line, but puts that particular theme away forever. (*Time* 1960b)

Partly in response, *Playboy* convened a panel of comedians for its March 1961 issue: included were Sahl, Bruce, and Winters; Bill Dana (best known for his José Jimenez character); Mike Nichols (of the improvisational sketch comedy team Nichols and May); *Village Voice* cartoonist Jules Feiffer; and Steve Allen, former host of the *Tonight Show* and an early supporter of these comedians. This “new,” “hip,” and, occasionally, “sick” school were consistent only in identifying themselves as different from forebears. Sahl pointed out the comedian as specialist, noting how “There is no new school of humor. Here are just a lot of guys working now who can’t sing or dance” (35). Winters saw the “gimmick [...] was to get away from jokes per se. [...] I pray to God we’re past the pie throwing phase” (35). Allen located it in the upsurge of youth, proved by the election of Kennedy, while Dana thought it inherently cyclic. But Nichols saw them as “all peddling a kind of *inside* humor, which gives an audience the impression that they’re the only ones who really understand it” (35). It is perhaps Nichols who was the most prescient, as the premise of a performer and an audience working in collusion opposite an indeterminate “outsider” or “other” has been the dominant theme in the scholarship of the intervening fifty years.

The *Playboy* panel appears as a line in the sand, one of the first opportunities to reflect on the burgeoning “new comedy,” if only within a vernacular theory approach. *Playboy*, *The Village Voice*, and later *Rolling Stone*, vanguards of “new journalism,” continued to examine it, but, despite the commercial successes of Bill Cosby, Richard Pryor, George Carlin, and Steve Martin, stand-up comedy, as it became known, was

largely considered a counter-cultural phenomenon.

Previous Approaches to Stand-up Comedy and Comedians

Like many popular art forms, stand-up comedy was slow in being recognised by the academy. Outside of a few passing references – which would posit stand-up comedians as modern examples of the phenomenon of their immediate interests but rarely follow up on that point – not much scholarly attention was paid it until its sudden growth in the late 1970s, coincident with the emergence of cable television, particularly HBO.

The following survey is by no means exhaustive, but is representative of much that has gone forward. All of the authors are, to a greater or lesser extent, concerned with stand-up comedy as a more-or-less homogeneous entity, a sphere of human activity which can be differentiated on the basis of professional and amateur, original and derivative, good and bad. They all note, implicitly or not, that a variety of performance strategies are required for the different audiences the comedian can face. But, in making general statements about what stand-up comedy is, there is a tendency to conceive of it as an Ideal, a pseudo-Platonic form against which all actual occurrences are contrasted. (As discussed below, Limon (2000) does this explicitly with his notion of “absolute stand-up.”) Some of the more general approaches, in the “Stand-up comedian as...” genus, will look at a specific adjectival group of stand-up comedians, while others take this as their starting point, sometimes through a focus on one exemplar performer. In this manner, the stand-up comedy of a specific group is again contrasted with “mainstream,” “typical,” or “regular” stand-up comedy, implying, of course, a similar homogeneity to the latter. Whether through a general approach or through an examination of the stand-up comedy of a particular comedian or group of comedians (categorised by nationality, by ethnicity,

by gender, by sexuality) and how they contrast with the larger field, all implicitly present what “stand-up comedy” and who “the stand-up comedian” is. I proceed chronologically, as many writers build on or react to the work of those before them.

Stephanie Koziski (1984)

In “The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Culture Critic,” Koziski, drawing on Edward Hall’s concept of tacit knowledge (1973), makes the bold assertion that “Documenting areas of tacit knowledge and bringing them to the conscious awareness of their particular audiences are important functions performed by the anthropologist and the standup comedian in their respective roles” (1984:57). With reference to a few routines – George Carlin’s “Teenage Masturbation” from his *An Evening With Wally Lando* album (1975*), Bill Cosby’s “The Golfer” from a 1972 compilation on Scepter Records – she notes how “an artistic construction composed of truth and distortion” (65) enable comedians to, in Victor Turner’s words, “cut out a piece of society for the inspection of his audience [and] set up a frame within which image and symbols of what has been sectioned off can be scrutinized, assessed, and perhaps remodelled” (1977:35). She then outlines a strong argument for comparison, all the while keeping clear the differences both of audience and of intent: the anthropologist’s task is scholarship, and the comedian’s entertainment. Of note is her explicit positioning of both the anthropologist and the comedian as a “marginal man,” with the former as a sympathetic outsider of another culture, and the latter a cynical insider of his or her own (63).

A survey of the writings of anthropologists like Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, John Adair, Clifford Geertz, James Spradley and David McCurdy indicate optimism about human potential. Most hold hope for the

possibilities available to human society, in contrast to standup comedians who are informed by anger and despair at the inherent weak, stupid and evil tendencies in human nature. The comedian's pessimism goads him or her into looking for society's flaws and broadcasting those revelations through a special kind of enacted social drama to a select public. (1984:63)

Through these processes, the comedian is presented as a "licensed spokesperson" who "can grasp and articulate contradictions in the culture of which other Americans may be unaware or reluctant to openly acknowledge" (65).

Although an anthropologist, Koziski's essay is slim on ethnography, but she does record how at one show she observed the emcee asking questions of the audience to find out about its composition, and how his "quick ethnography" enabled him to link "association upon association from the informational clues the audience transmitted," and how the emcee and performers "discarded issues and explanation forms that met little response" in favour of "ideas and polarizing strategies that commanded attention and stimulated further meanings" (67). Her own recommendation that "the social context in which imaginative material occurs in a cultural drama should be examined very carefully" is enacted only in this one instance.

There are two deficiencies in Koziski's approach. First of all, she never defines stand-up comedy, and as a consequence bases some of her conclusions on Bob Newhart's single person sketch comedy, a Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner routine (transcribed, confusingly, with no indication as to when the speaker changes), and, perhaps most peculiarly, Hal Holbrook's one-man show on the life of Mark Twain. Secondly, she also tends to associate the "intentional culture critic" moniker only with certain comedians: "the more sensitive and critical artist" is contrasted with "the unreflective artist" (65), both of whom may depict covert traits of culture, but the latter does so as if by accident.

The general function she claims for the comedian she qualifies by making an assessment of acting with “intention” for a privileged few.

Feeling uncomfortable with psychological approaches to humour theory, she is never quite able to clearly demarcate how laughter fits into the picture, save for one small section when she locates the comedy situation as similar to play (“playlike worlds” is her construction of choice), and she makes a passing reference to the Opies’ 1959 work on children’s folklore, with particular reference to how children address taboo subjects. But not much is made of this point.

Koziski ends with something that – almost – seems to contradict what she has been saying throughout:

The comedian’s routines are stories for the adult and like the myths in primitive cultures may answer his need for explanations of good and evil in human experience, help him manage fear and anxiety and by constant admonitions of what happens when there is social chaos, underline the normative outlines of his culture. (1984:73)

It is odd that such a romantic simile as the traditional storyteller is appended to a contemporary critique of the stand-up comedian, but throughout the article both the stand-up comedian and the anthropologist are presented as having certain “functions” and Koziski cannot reconcile functionalism with “mere” entertainment. Nevertheless, this is a seminal article in the history of the study of stand-up comedy, much cited by the following authors.

Lawrence Mintz (1998)

In “Stand-Up Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation,” originally published in 1985, Lawrence Mintz maintains that stand-up comedy is “arguably the oldest, most universal, basic and deeply significant form of humorous expression (excluding perhaps

truly spontaneous, informal joking and teasing)" (193). He begins with a premise that humour is "a vitally important social and cultural phenomenon, that the student of a culture and society cannot find a more revealing index to its values, attitudes, dispositions, and concerns" (194). However, the proposal that stand-up comedy itself is universal comes from a more encompassing definition than I would propose, as he extends it to include "seated storytellers," the employment of costume and props, team acts, stand-up comedy routines within dramatic vehicles, and stand-up comedians in sitcoms. With this broader definition, he is able to trace stand-up comedy thus understood back to the Middle Ages and the fool tradition.

Citing Orrin Klapp's *Heroes, Villains, and Fools*, the functions of fools are indicated as sublimation of aggression, relief from routine and discipline, control by ridicule, affirmation of standards of propriety, and unification through a Bergson / Burke "communion of laughter" (Klapp 1962:60). He also draws on Mary Douglas' discussion of a joke as irreducible from its performance context: she adverts to rite and anti-rite, a public affirmation of shared cultural beliefs and a re-examination of these beliefs. Finally, Turner's notion of public liminality is again invoked re-establishing the ritual process of comedy performance.

Mintz introduces the notion of the comedian's "*license* for deviate behaviour and expression" (196, emphasis in original), which complements Koziski's "licensed spokesperson" model. Although predicated on a "comedian as fool" paradigm, the idea that the comedian is somehow marginalised ("Traditionally, the comedian is defective in some way, but his natural weaknesses generate pity, and more important, exemption from the expectation of normal behavior.") allows for the comedian to act as negative

exemplar. We laugh at him, but insofar as we also "identify with his expression or behavior ... he can become our comic spokesperson" (197). The comedian, according to Mintz, has an exaggerated flaw which is contemptible but, by its simultaneous location as performance and ludic entertainment, permissible.

It may be possible, by this reasoning, to class comedians according to their "flaw." His examples include Steve Martin and Martin Mull's boorishness, the sex-role inadequacy of Joan Rivers and Phyllis Diller, the weaklings that are Woody Allen and Rodney Dangerfield. Using Rivers as an example, her act began with presenting herself as the butt of humour regarding her failures to live up to gender expectations: her routine, however, has transformed itself to a pride in not meeting these expectations and her contempt for those who do. He or she acts as spokesperson or anthropologist (and here he is citing Koziski). In a discussion of a Redd Foxx performance concerning oral sex, where Mintz witnessed an older generation laughing while pulling back, the younger audience members leaned forward as if to confirm. "Foxx led them in an expression of their cultural truths" (198). Interesting to note is Mintz's use of the word "trickster" (199) regarding comedians, although it is used in passing and more casually than would a folklorist.

[It] is possible to see that our modern American stand-up comedians provide us with some of our most valuable social commentary. While some critics of popular entertainment try to distinguish between a traditional stand-up comedy characterised by an irrelevant quest for laughs, and a so-called new-wave comedy which is more socially and politically satiric or insightful, such categorizations belies the consistent role of stand-up comedy as social and cultural analysis. Traditional comics like Bob Hope, Johnny Carson, and Alan King are less openly "counter-culture," certainly, but their complaints contain a critique of the gap between what is said and what we believe should be. Moreover, the "new wave" comics were not always exclusively, openly political or even satiric. Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, Dick Gregory, and others were

controversial because many of the issues they addressed were causing social divisions. Yet other “new wave” comedians – Jonathan Winters, Shelley Berman, Mike Nichols and Elaine May, Bill Cosby, and Joan Rivers chose less openly divisive material. Even the informal “new wave” style – casual dress, the use of longer “bits,” fewer “punchlines,” and more spontaneous improvisation – recalls the nineteenth century platform lecturers as much as it heralds a break with tradition. (199-200).

Mintz, like Koziski, emphasises the need to witness stand-up comedy in live performance to fully comprehend it as “true social and cultural mediation,” and he notes the performance of two important functions prior to any routine beginning. First, the comedian

establishes the nature of the audience by asking questions of a few people close by or by making statements about the audience followed by a call for agreement or acknowledgement (if the audience is too large for the question-and-answer session). This function is often performed by an MC or warm-up comic, but it is not merely a matter of gathering information. The comedian must establish *for the audience* that the group is homogeneous, a community, if the laughter is to come easily. (200, emphasis in original)

The comedian’s next move is to establish a comic persona, “discussing personal background, lifestyle, and some attitudes and beliefs,” allowing for the audience’s acceptance of the comedian’s marginal status and “to establish that the mood of comic license is operative” (201). And as the routine progresses, he finally notes that “Audiences laugh and enjoy themselves, but they also express themselves, nodding concurrence, applauding, and offering verbal agreement” (201).

Mintz is an improvement on Koziski in that he is not so resolutely functionalist: by virtue of its polyvalent meaning, “cultural mediator” is somehow preferable to “intentional culture critic.” And by not being beholden to the comedian-as-anthropologist metaphor, his analysis of the emcee’s preamble as more than mere information gathering but rather community establishment is a leap forward. But there is something offputting

about the “flaw” approach to the comedian’s marginal status, the monstrosity that invokes pity and sympathy and thus allows the comic license: the examples he chooses – Steve Martin, Woody Allen, Joan Rivers – may be “monstrous” in the eyes of a white bourgeoisie, but how would Mintz account for the popularity of comedians of colour among that same audience? It is through monstrosity and flaw that he connects stand-up comedy with the fool tradition, and thus arguing for its status as “oldest, most universal, basic and deeply significant form of humorous expression.” As such it is a difficult argument to accept, and one that seeks to avoid the consequences of interpreting stand-up comedy as a “new” creation.

George E.C. Paton (1988)

Avoiding Koziski’s functionalism and Mintz’s quasi-functionalism, in discussing the comedian’s “role” George Paton is implying “the mutual expectations of his behaviour in interaction with other significant role players, especially his audience in contemporary society” (206). He also emphasises, through his title if not elsewhere, that the comedian is a *portrayer* of social morality: the performative aspect is never lost to him, and he perceives the comedian as playing a part rather than serving a function.

One facet of the role of the comedian with regard to listeners’ expectations of him is that he legitimates a situation whereby, in laughing with him at the stereotypical patter of his jokes depicting the humour of a morally stressful social situation in real life, e.g. living with a mother-in-law, being discriminated against because of one’s race, ethnicity, etc., this distances the listener from or temporarily suspends involvement on a real-life situation which clearly would be stressful, intolerable or insufferable for social actors themselves in reality, especially if they expressed such unvoiced resentments in non-joke form in real-life situations in which social tensions exist. Similarly, the comedian articulates and expresses linguistically the moral sentiments, attitudes, opinions, etc., which his listeners perceive as meaningful or recognisable and which they are inhibited by normal conventions from saying or cannot articulate/express

so readily or so well. (207)

Paton employs Raymond Williams' conception (via Bauman 1975) of the presence of both residual and emergent culture alongside the hegemonic centre: insofar as the comedian is "consciously articulating" an existing/traditional morality he can be judged "conservative"; and insofar as he is "unconsciously venting" a new/emergent morality he can be judged "radical" (208-209). The comedian's art stems in part from locating the social morality of his audience along this spectrum and, further, presenting his own position. The audience and the performer need not be similarly minded, as, by virtue of its attendance and pre-existent expectations, the stand-up comedy audience "[issues] a 'licence to joke' which establishes a frame around the subsequent joking behaviour of the [...] comedian" (210). The joking frames may be conventional ("category-routinised") and the comedy premises therein are well-established (the aforementioned mother-in-law tropes), or they may be situational ("setting-specific") with premises "derived locally within the setting in which the activity occurs and the joking behaviour follows an indeterminate course" (210). The former is better suited for "intra-group" joking relationships when commonality is expressed, typically in contrast to another, while the latter is more the domain of "inter-group" joking relationships. As such, the comedian can switch frames and thus switch from being in collusion with his audience to being in collision with it (212).

The greater catholicity of taste in humorous entertainment now available in [modern society] has both crystallised and fluidised the cultural codes and modes of humour in [social] groups and joking frames in which the normative communication via the publicly negotiated exchange of humorous stimuli and responses between the comedian and his audience is conducted. Thus elements of residual morality as well as an emergent morality, and the inevitable social tensions between the two, are socially ventilated or played on in both category-routinised and setting specific joking frames by comedians. (229)

I cannot glean from Paton what he means by “moral/morality/moralist,” although by all appearances it operates within the “is/ought” paradigm. Precisely how the comedian determines a social morality to portray to a specific or even a general audience is not elucidated: there is an intimation of both a “cultural critic” and a “flawed/liminal” person, but nothing explicit. It is, by design, not Paton’s intent to delve beyond the portrayal to the person beneath but, by virtue of speaking in generalities, there is room for further exploration. He admits as much in his conclusion (228-230), which is followed by two case studies – one of Les Dawson (conservative) and one of Spike Milligan (radical, albeit not a comedian of the type he presented in the first half). These studies, however, are based on the texts themselves and not as they may or not relate to the performer’s own biography and/or interpretation.

Robert Stebbins (1990; 1993)

The Laugh-Makers: Stand-Up Comedy as Art, Business, and Life-Style (1990) is a sociological study of stand-up comedy in Canada. Unlike Limon (see below) it is not attempting to develop a theory of stand-up comedy, nor is it a history, although both definitional and historical elements substantiate his argument. Stebbins begins with a convenient definition:

Stand-up comedy is the art, initially developed in the United States, of humorous [sic] dialogue presented before an audience. The talk itself is memorized and, today, usually expressed in a spontaneous conversational manner, as if the performer were speaking to friends. Although it tends to be one-sided, there may be interaction between performer and audience, which the former does not always want. Often verbal content is augmented with a range of theatrical embellishments such as special costumes and props, grunts, snorts, and howls, bodily movements and facial gestures. The typical act consists of anecdotes, narrative jokes, one-liners, and short descriptive monologues, which may or may not be related. (Stebbins 1990:3)

Thus pure stand-up comedy is distinguished from other forms of variety comedy: quasi-stand-up comedy, comprising single-performer verbal styles such as ethical monologues, storytelling, satire, and impersonations; mixed stand-up comedy, combining physical and verbal single-performer styles such as prop comedy (juggling, music, ventriloquism, and entertainment magic), singing, sound effects, pantomime, and clowning; and team comedy, whether sketches or improvisatory (Stebbins 1990:4-5). In this manner, Stebbins goes beyond Koziski, Mintz, and Limon to narrow the field to something that resembles an emic definition of stand-up comedy. Stebbins' strength is reiterating the conversational make-up of stand-up comedy and its direct reliance on an audience.

There can be no stand-up comedy without an audience. [...] Interaction with the audience is an essential part of the comic's act. The performer communicates jokes and sketches, the audience indicates, chiefly with laughter, whether they are funny. As noted, in the typical case the comic communicates in a conversational manner, using sweeping eye contact and a friendly demeanor while treating familiar subjects. The audience responds with smiles, chuckles, howls, applause, comments to one another and, occasionally, to the performer. From such cues the latter knows that he or she has hit on an effective set of lines and their delivery. (53)

A comic receives immediate feedback about the quality of his or her act as presented to the audience. No other art, performing or non-performing, offers artists so quick and clear a measure of quality. (83)

In his history, he distinguishes contemporary stand-up comedy's precursors, first monologists like Mark Twain and Will Rogers, and then variety theatre and vaudeville, from its emergence in the late 1950s as a form resembling today's. Emerging from the coffeehouses of Greenwich Village, amid poets and folk singers, where "The atmosphere was informal, the premises small, and the audiences sympathetic to amateurs and experimenters" (10).

An entertainer was bound to reveal something about his or her outlook

when taking on the emotional, moral and political issues of the day. But the public wanted more. It was attracted to performers who treated the problems and experiences of everyday life – sex, money, relationships, the bureaucracy. Self-revelation and self-deprecation gave the audience a sense of intimacy and involvement with the performer unknown in the days of wisecracking [...] comics. The conversational element was now becoming more prominent in stand-up comedy. (9-10)

However, outside of “The times were changing” (9), Stebbins does little to account for why the style and interest changed. This period is distinguished from contemporary stand-up comedy only in terms of the professionalisation of stand-up comedy, its viability as a potential career and investment opportunity, and its growth with HBO and other forms of dissemination (11-12). A further element of its growth, which is Stebbins’ unique insight, is how stand-up comedy, having no props or “special skills” associated with it, can be repeated by the audience the next day: “[The descriptive monologues and narrative jokes were] of manageable length and about familiar events, delivered in a conversational style that invited repeating the next day at work, at the bar, in the den, whatever” (15). Finally, stand-up comedy is an affordable entertainment – for both audience and presenter – which, once a market was established, could flourish (16-17).

Much of Stebbins’ work is sociological ethnography, describing the business and lifestyle of stand-up comedy (as the title suggests) as it is practiced in Canada. Some of this is disappointing: the principal ethnographic chapter (Chapter 3: Comedy Club Comedy) is of a “fictitious club in Toronto, presented here as a typical setting for stand-up comedy in Canada” (35). His reasons for an amalgam go unstated, the descriptions of the place, however rooted in ethnography they may be, are somehow less convincing, and the performances recounted never make it past conceit. His account of regionalism in Canadian comedy is similarly dissatisfying:

Regional stand-up is distinguished from what might be called mass stand-up by local references, which are relished by the locals who make up the principal part of the audience. Mass stand-up exploits the people, events, and situations familiar to big-city dwellers everywhere in North America. The comics who practice it are interchangeable parts in the vast machine of mass entertainment. Regional comics are more esoteric. (30)

A closer reading of his own data, however, appears to challenge this notion. In his discussion of "Canadian Humour" he notes that, "Apart from *occasional gaps* in the knowledge of American comics about some aspects of daily life in Canada, the American and Canadian observed in this study were indistinguishable in content and style" (33, emphasis added). However, in the "ethnography," the performers make reference to Torontonians ideas about Winnipeg (38) and Buffalo (39), the *Toronto Star* (39), Toronto driving habits (40), and the escalators at Eaton's (the department store, he goes without saying) in Toronto (41).¹ And in the discussion of life on the road, the adaptability of material is presented as key to success, with one comedian noting how Jewish jokes succeed in Toronto but fail in Calgary, where jokes about Southeast Asians find firmer footing (101). Such examples demonstrate some sense of the regional adaptation required on the part of the stand-up comedian even in what appear to be cosmopolitan venues: esotericism is a judgement that is often exoteric in nature, and rarely self-reflective.

Stebbins' three major interrelated insights – stand-up comedy as a (scripted) conversation with an audience; the intimacy which distinguishes newer from older forms; and the connection with an audience through a demonstration of overlapping areas of

¹ Pauline Greenhill makes a similar point about the all too common equating of Toronto with Canada and (in this instance) Winnipeg with 'Region': "[Despite] persistent critiques of the viewpoint, some knowledges in this country are seen as local and regional; they are usually the ones found outside Ontario and Québec. But whatever information comes from those two provinces - or, to be more specific, from their urban, near-border areas, from Toronto or Montréal - is seen as national in source, scope, and value. This part of our country is called 'central Canada'" (1999:6).

shared knowledge – only emerge when one examines the book's shortcomings. They are wrapped up in discussions of comedy as an art or skill which comes only through practice, a conclusion which, although no doubt true, is ultimately lacking in content.

Stebbins followed up on *The Laugh Makers*² in a brief article (1993), part of *Canadian Theatre Review*'s special issue on comedy, in which he identifies seven "social roles" of the stand-up comedian: as *entertainer* (someone expected to provide diversion, in the comic's case through humour); as *spokesperson* (which he takes from Koziski and limits to members of "minorities stigmatised by sex [...], religion [...], race [...], and region" [5]); as *moralist* (whether conservative or radical, which he takes from Paton [1988]); as *provider of social relief* (a foil for social conventions); as a *role model* ("for those members of their public who want to be funny" [6]); as *humorist* (a creator of new material for incorporation into a repertoire); and as *artistic inventor* (one who discovers and creates "new ways of presenting humour and new subjects [...] amenable to conceptualization in humorous terms" [7]).

I am not sure how clean-cut some of these distinctions are. By his own admission spokesperson is closely associated with moralist, the difference being – primarily – that a spokesperson is communicating from one group to another, while a moralist communicates to the group his or her own group from a position of, one assumes, enlightenment. Similarly, entertainment as both diversion and social relief is a fine distinction. And while I am intrigued by the roles of role model, humorist, and artistic inventor, they seem triune and, in many ways, indivisible. In one mode or another all of

² Stebbins 1994 also revisits this work but, despite its inclusion within an anthology on ethnography, it does little but provide a summary of the book, and does not address the concerns expressed above on his ethnographic chapter.

these social roles are all implicit in *The Laugh Makers*, but their presentation here is useful.

J. Jerome Zolten (1993)

Zolten begins his article, "Black Comedians: Forging an Ethnic Image," by referencing both Aristotle's *The Rhetoric* and, more generously, Cicero, and how he found humour "becoming" to the orator, as there is an implicit goodwill in laughter, which alleviates the tension of a serious message. This leads to his essential premise, that "In modern times [...] the stand-up comedian has emerged as a new kind of orator. The ancient formula has been reversed. Instead of a serious message laced with humor, the contemporary comedian-as-orator laces humor with a serious message" (65).

"Social" or "topical" comedians use humor as a candy-coating on an otherwise bitter pill. Their comedy communicates information about minority experience. They persuade by satirizing prevailing social attitudes. They undermine by highlighting the absurdity of social situations. They caricature the enemy. The best become a voice for the entire underclass they represent. They come out on top by making the repressive forces in society the butt of an enormous joke. (65)

The adeptness of African American comedians at challenging stereotypes is presented as ironic, given popular culture's role in perpetuating those same stereotypes. With the rise of viable popular entertainment for black audiences – the "Chittlin" circuit and urban black theatres – there arose an alternative to the mainly white American-centred vaudeville: a positive image could be presented built on an emic understanding of black cultures and not the etic one of the Caucasian audience. A cross-over appeal subsequently grew, in part from a white appreciation for (or fascination with) the less socially constrained comedy of the black entertainers, particularly regarding sexuality. But in the 1950s with the rise of the "new type of comedian with a social conscience and

the desire and opportunity to change prevailing attitudes" (71), a black comedy building on the explicit theme of subjugation emerged.

Dick Gregory was the first African American comedian to achieve nationwide success with comedy about racism, a type of comedy that in previous times had been reserved for primarily black audiences. In essence, Gregory made the mass audience, black and white, a party to "in group" humor. For blacks, the message was one of unity, catharsis and courage, because, in the latter case, the act of standing before the oppressor and telling the truth about oppression, even though presented in the guise of entertainment, was an act of bravery. In the hands of Dick Gregory, comedy became a direct line of communication about the sources of tension for blacks in America. (72)

Bill Cosby took it one step further, not by even greater emphasis on the gulf dividing American blacks from whites but by building on shared experiences, with a "meta-message" of "'You and I are no different. We experience the world in the same way. We find the same things amusing'" (73). Richard Pryor, meanwhile, kept the contrast in the foreground, and in routines such as 1976's "Bicentennial Nigger" would, on occasion, drop all pretence at humour, ending not with a punchline but with a statement of principle.

Zolten makes a strong case that African American comedians, once they were allowed a stage, have successfully contributed to the negation of much of the stereotyping of blacks in popular culture, particularly beginning with the socially conscious comedians of the 1950s (a phenomenon possibly both a cause and an effect of the cross-over appeal of heretofore segregated performers into the mainstream). However, that is surely not all that is going forward in stand-up comedy, unless it is a field limited to those who are part of an underclass. The "role of comedian as social commentator and hero" (72) is two

roles, often interrelated but distinct.³ This is clear in Zolten's comparisons of Cosby with Gregory and Pryor. The latter were explicitly about race, the former was implicitly about race: is all African American comedy about race? Are comedians limited by their provenance to (a) what they can speak about or (b) how they will be interpreted, regardless of what they say?

I am sympathetic to this approach, but Zolten's seeming unwillingness to spell out his premises and thus consider its logical consequences is dissatisfying. He is far from alone in this, however, as many of the following will make clear.

Norma Schulman (1994)

Whereas Zolten holds that the social commentary role is implicit in all African American stand-up comedy, Schulman, in "The House That Black Built: Television Stand-up Comedy as Minor Discourse," examines the explicit racial comedy of African American comedians as it is performed on "black-on-black" programmes (specifically BET's *ComicView*, 1992-2006). In contrast to their mainstream appearances (if indeed they ever make it, or care to make it, to the mainstream), these comedians performing to and for a primarily black audience create a "minor discourse": "a system of stylized communication that is perpetuated by an oppressed group [...] to cement its own distinctive identity" (109), intentionally aimed at the inclusion of insiders and, perhaps most importantly, the exclusion of outsiders, those unversed in its subcultural allusions. It is oppositional by nature. Where inequality is an assumed inevitability from which there

³ According to Zolten, "Ironically, the first to become widely known in that role was white comedian Lenny Bruce" (72). Within the context of the article one could identify Bruce as 'white' insofar as he is 'not black': however, so much is made about Bruce's Jewishness (Davies 1989; Limon 2000) and how being Jewish is being inherently and expressly marginalised (see, for one, the discussion of Roseanne Barr in Mock 1999) that, at the very least, Zolten's use of the word "ironically" needs to be questioned.

is no relief, the tactic becomes resistance to silence, and not assimilation. Despite its spirit of confrontation, it is not, ultimately, "racist."

[The] "us-against-them" spirit of revelry in black stand-up television comedy is directed more against the practice of whitewashing racial difference than against white people. This is clear from the fact that the zany humor rarely constitutes plausible social commentary. Instead it almost always implies a key premise of minor discourse: that (racial or ethnic or sexual) identity is a zero-sum game. That is to say, the more there is of a dominant perspective in a culture, the less there can logically be of any other. (113-114)

Schulman is very clear that she is talking about a particular manifestation of stand-up comedy but does not choose to contrast this with a more general conception, save for occasional remarks like "Stand-up comedy [...] revolves around the comic monologue" (109). This is not a weakness in her approach. One of her more piquant observations, however, is a challenge to the "consensus building" trope of stand-up comedy performances: the strict dialectic of white and black (or rather white and non-white, as other minority groups are "embraced as allies in oppression" [112]) groups the audience together as participants in a culture defined by oppressiveness, but divides it based on a differentiation of beneficiaries thereof. The performance can become a "mock display of power in which the occasional white member of the studio audience is made pointedly aware that he or she is outnumbered" (111).

Schulman rescues stand-up comedy from the "stand-up comedian as ..." mode by admitting a distinction between one who gives voice to social injustice and one who is engaged in social commentary, something which demands an articulation of principles and a programmatic of change, something beyond the comedian's "sheer ingenuity expended in coming up with new and more extreme variations on an old theme" (113). And, by recognising that differential identity (cf. Bauman 1971) is just as common a

baseline as is commonality, she introduces a complexity to the stand-up comedy audience heretofore glossed over.

Keith P.J. Moore (1997)

Fantasy Theme Analysis is the description of rhetorical communities through the articulation of how community members envision their world narratively, and the identification of "characters," "settings," and "actions" (Bormann 1972). The setting is where the characters are in action. Moore, in his study of Denver area professional stand-up comedians, identifies seven fantasy character themes: the major ones are the *Hero* ("an internally motivated individual who adds original formulas to the art of stand up comedy"), the *Mercenary* ("an externally motivated individual that replicates known comedy formulas"), and the *Tragic* ("an individual whose success is limited by some significant character defect or personality flaw"), with the rest identified as the *Harmless Hack*, the *Evil Hack* (who, respectively, naively copies or deliberately steals material), the *Booker/Owner*, and the *Denver Comic* as a species (Moore 1997:53).

Heroes are presented within the comedian's world as those who are able to contribute material heretofore inconceivable, who deliver standard, tired material in a new way that revives it, who are role models (cf. Stebbins:1993) for the professional comedian, and who cannot be imagined doing anything else. They are conceived of as artists (64), and they appear both in the larger pantheon (Cosby, Carlin, Bill Hicks, etc.) and in local lore. They also demonstrate a lack of artifice (Moore quotes one interview: "The best comedians are just being themselves" [65]). Unwilling to identify themselves as heroes, Moore's respondents nevertheless distanced themselves from the other types (66).

The mercenary is in specific contrast to the hero in that he is not motivated by an intrinsic need to perform but by money, fame, and control (71). The material is formulaic (72), albeit not stolen, and the distinction is made between holding heroes up as role models (which the interviewees do) and emulating or imitating them like a mercenary. They can do harm to both the art of stand-up comedy (by not contributing anything new) and to the business (by being cheaper substitutes for the “real thing”).

The flaws of the tragic character involve not only more obvious ones (alcoholism and drug abuse) but also anger, low self-esteem, and an inability to strike a balance between art and commerce. The tragic comic can overcome or confront these flaws: as a consequence, unlike the other types presented, many of the comedians identified themselves as having been – or having been in danger of becoming – tragic figures at one time (88). Simultaneously, there is at times an admiration for those living on “the edge” (91) and some, like Lenny Bruce, are presented as both heroic and tragic.

Hacks are certainly seen as contributing nothing to the art-form, but, whereas the harmless hack is too inexperienced to know the difference and is often considered in the domain of the open mike night amateur, the evil hack is deliberate and, as they are typically professionals, disguises thefts by performing in other regions while on tour. The hack is distinguished from the mercenary who, albeit derivative and unoriginal, is not a thief.

The owner/booker is, of course, distinct from the comic, and is typically seen in some form of adversarial role. Greedy, evil, and stupid were common themes, nuanced by the overlapping notions that (a) they see comedians purely as commodities and thus not as artists, and (b) their indifference to the content and the art leads to an ignorance of

how best to promote, book, or provide a venue for it.

The Denver comic, as a theme, was of the community as a whole, and included having the respect of comedians from other cities, the frequency of requests for Denver comics to go to Los Angeles, the support comedians give each other ("big family of comedians" [124]), and the habit of constructive criticism of each other's work.

In addition to character themes, Fantasy Theme Analysis calls for "settings" and "actions." The setting is where the characters are in action. The first setting Moore identifies is *Life on the Road* and its subtypes "Relationships" (adverse impact on), "Structure" (different from normal working life), "Audience" (difficult ones), "Accommodations" (substandard ones), and "Travel" (burdensome). The other setting, and the more interesting one, is the *Battleground*.

The Battleground is a theoretical construct setting that emerged from the data. It is defined as a figurative setting without traditional spatial parameters where the Hero Comic entangles himself/herself with all the other components in his/her environment. Here on the Battleground, the Hero Character attempt to interact with the Booker/Owner, while fighting off the aggressions of the Mercenary and Hack and perhaps even their own Tragic tendencies to survive in the shrinking stand up comedy business. (130)

Only one action is identified by Moore: *Being on Stage in the Light*. Action is not the simple "what happens" in the setting, but the entire rationale for being there, "their primary purpose for existing as characters in the setting" (156).

The main components of this action fantasy theme construct are the ideas that being on stage, in the light, in front of a hot crowd, when things are working, can be at the least a unique experience, and at the most a reality-altering experience. The essence of this theme includes an energy exchange with the audience sufficient enough to transform the perceived reality of the performer. (157)

Moore's account is rooted in ethnographically collected narratives that Denver comedians told in cultural scenes (Spradley and McCurdy 1972:22-37; McCarl 1986:72-

73) (green rooms, poker games), through interview, and through a detailed questionnaire. The character types are understood by the comedians themselves as not being mutually exclusive (179), and the general movement and motivation is, ultimately, towards being a hero. Although it doesn't have much to say about *what* a comedian says on stage it does provide an interesting analytical framework for something almost approaching a Proppian (1968) study of stand-up comedians' lives as communicated to each other in narratives told offstage to each other.

Daniel French (1998)

French, who has worked and continues to work as a professional stand-up comic, presents in large part an autoethnographic account of life as a stand-up comedian. In the introduction to his dissertation "Through the Eyes of the Comic Mask," he explains how being a comic has three separate yet interrelated aspects: a "self," an "identity," and a "persona."

Comedy gives its practitioners a "self" – an internalized way of being, doing, and feeling; a personal orientation toward the world and one's place in it. It becomes central to one's "identity" – a way of defining parameters of who and how one is, located somewhere between an internal state and an externalized manner of acting that can be recognized by others. It also becomes a "persona" – an entity with particular characteristics that can be publicly observed and recognized, and that can be performed in an almost generic or shared manner between members of a culture. (28-29)

The comedian makes "suffering tolerable, loss normal, alienation noble, and even nonsense sensible," and thus becomes "a hero who is able to explore ironic life and who embodies the kinds of qualities that best survive it" (32). Employing the metaphor of (but not the term for) the interstitial, "comedy grows up and thrives in the cracks and seams" of more serious schemes of interpretation: morality, ideology, political exigency (33).

French describes five personae in his performance repertoire: "One-Liner Me," "Happy Me," "Raincoat Man," "Skank," and "Johnny Ozone." These personae are increasing abstractions from an untenable, purportedly natural "self": One-Liner Me, for example, is described as the "Romantic self" (76), which is founded on the premise that it is organic in nature (120). Happy Me and Raincoat Man, on the other hand, were "Socially Constructed selves," deliberate characterisations which French himself recognised as emerging from audience expectations, but no less "real" than the self in quotidian life, thus busting the concepts of authenticity implicit in Romanticism. The Socially Constructed self is dialogic in nature, existing between the individual and the audience (125). Whereas the material of One-Liner Me was what was funny to French, Happy Me's material emerges in performance.

This reveals one of the most fascinating characteristics of the socially generated self – that its text is always generated in the dialogic space between self and community. It's almost as if my mind is located in the corridor between myself and the audience. I cannot generate these jokes in isolation. The audience joins me in a type of symbiosis that is simultaneously external and internal, almost a dual consciousness. And it isn't a particularly schizophrenic consciousness. I feel very comfortable with the duality. The audience doesn't totally control the equation, and neither do I. We exist in a type of active relationship that allows me to generate text that they can then consume, and the corridor between us seems filled both with original thought and with recycled/expected content.

Thus, the talk that makes up Happy Me is culled from the audience, and in order to exist as this self I must be able to perceive and explore the social experience of the audience, often using their own narratives to construct what seems like my personal humor. I think about their lives and if I invoke them correctly the text itself grows from our union. (127)

Whereas Happy Me is an exercise in psychic contagion, reflecting an audience's giddiness or projecting giddiness onto them, Raincoat Man is a "social hero," a person "who can articulate what the moral system is supposed to be, who can use symbols to

expose the evil of the current system, and who can persuade people to listen to the 'correct' way" (144). (The comedian's folk etymology for stand-up comedy is herein invoked, one who both stands up to and for the culture [145].)

Johnny Ozone and Skank, conversely, are Post-modern Selves. The former is an "absurdist," whose non-sequiturs make no claim of being grounded in the "authentic," in the experiences of either the audience or French himself: "I don't employ the referential anchors that would allow the audience to see me as anything other than a comic self" (171). Skank, on the other hand, is the "anti-social," a "deviant persona totally dedicated to discourse that negates any and every moral stance" (178). Having recounted a joke (of another comedian) about a relative killing themselves at Christmas and an adverse reaction from an audience member whose father had killed himself at Christmas the year before, French observes how "Comedy stands in a peculiar space in the argument as to whether public discourse is required to be moral" (180). Further to this, "I take the license given to comics – to break the barriers of what is allowed in moralized public space – and use that license to its fullest. Skank's allegiance is to the comic process rather than any social effect" (178-179).

In addition to the absurdist and the anti-social self, French contemplates two more post-modern aspects implied not by one of his personae but by his creation of all of them. The "commercialised" self stems from the recognition that the rationale behind the creation of personae is not simply the invocation of laughter but the relationship between the laughter and its identification as a commodity. "The commodified self is perhaps the most alienated self I feel, partly because it isn't only adapted to an audience, or a social construction – it is driven by a capitalistic dictum" (186). The self is sold. Finally, the

“simulated” self – whether Baudrillardian simulacrum or Jamesonian pastiche – is the final negation of the Romantic notion that there is a real self in the first place. French self-professedly “balks” or “tries to deny” (190) these last two approaches.

My final haven against the belief that I have sold out, or that I have taken the easiest costume available, is that I believe ultimately that the postmodern is a system of language games, and the idea that I am moving through various linguistic systems allows me to escape the guilt/shame these selves might otherwise bring. (192)

His final insight from postmodernism is that “This text [his repertoire at any given moment], in many ways, is ‘me’” (198). (This sounds, to me, less like Derrida and more like Aquinas on the processions of the trinity.) However, postmodernism’s heightened awareness of the contingent relationship between signifier and signified lends itself to the observation that comedy, as a stream of discourse, both recognises itself as a stream of discourse and is often a stream of discourse about itself.⁴

His concluding remarks summarise his position on the “function” of stand-up comedy, especially if one reads “the broader audience” to include academics:

Stand-up is a cultural moment that appears in many different visages according to what eyes are looking upon it. It has its own masks, including those of the clown, the hero, the artist, and the critic. Which of those masks it will take up seems highly dependent upon cultural moments, and upon which of those masks we as the broader audience want it to take up. (284-285)

Grounded as it is in the both the ethnographic (like Moore) and more directly the autoethnographic, French brings a remarkable amount of insight into the discussion, and by virtue of using his own performances and personae as backdrop it is a deep analysis. I only wish I found his jokes funny, as he so explicitly wants – and, I believe, clearly

⁴ This is picked up on – brutally – by John Limon, discussed below, and the notion of “metajokes.”

expects – his readers to do.

Darby Li Po Price (1998)

Price's focus, in "Laughing Without Reservation," is American Indian⁵ stand-up comedians. He contrasts his work with that of studies of Indian humour in general, noting among the differences how stand-up comedy is urban and individual rather than rural and tribal, and how ethnically diverse audiences in comedy clubs turn Indian stand-up comedians into "cross-cultural entertainers and educators" (255). Price's definition of stand-up comedy is clearly presented.

In standup comedy individual performers stand on stage and say funny things directly to an audience to make them laugh. How they convey their self-identities in their routines is an integral aspect of their stage persona, character, and point of view. Al Hans explains, "You want to establish your personality and character so your way of seeing things or point of view opens up to them." Standups are expected to address how their distinguishing physical features such as ethnicity, race, gender, or body type inform their experiences and comic worldviews. Indian identities may serve as central, secondary, or even minor aspects of routines, and may be conveyed in numerous humorous ways. (256)

For Price, then, the emphasis is on identity, and expressions such as "distinguishing physical features" appear to imply a concept of a non-distinct identity against which identity is measured. On this "scale," one comedian, "Beecher" Ed Sykes, who is of both Otami and Mexican descent, discovered that, whereas the Mexican persona he enacted when he first started out alienated much of his audience, the Indian persona he gradually adopted was met with empathy from blacks and even apologies from whites: "Beecher gets away with saying critical things about whites when he

⁵ I will retain the term "Indian" for the duration of this discussion of Price, in lieu of the Canadian preference for "First Nations."

performs as an Indian much more than as a Mexican" (258-259).

The complexity of contemporary Indian "ethnicity," the prevalence of the multiethnic Indian both in terms of intertribal contact and white, Hispanic, and black contact lends a further nuance to the performance of identity and the possibility of playfully insisting on shared ancestry with an audience. Much is made of "half-Indian" status, where two cultural stereotypes are combined, typically at the expense of the implied third "mainstream/oppressor" identity, such as: "I met some of the most beautiful people in America that are of African and Indian heritage, and boy are they strong because not only did they get their lands stolen, they gotta work on it for free" (Oneida-Mohawk-Cree comedian Charlie Hill, qtd. in Price 1998:260-261). Multiethnicity works well in multiethnic audiences, creating "a collective sense of we-ness" (263).

Price prefaces a section on cultural critique by citing Koziski's quote on the comedian as "traditional storyteller," noting how, having ingratiated themselves with jokes about their own ethnicity, they can turn to disparaging the dominant group. This includes not only the continued oppression of Indians by whites but also concessions made to this oppression by fellow "sell-out" Indians, particularly actors portraying and thus perpetuating the stereotype in the popular culture. A final note is reserved for the distinctions between rural/reservation and urban Indian audiences, where shared experiences overlap and where they diverge. Although a useful illustration of "oppressed" comedy, Price adds little to the overall discussion of stand-up comedy as a form, save for the complexity he brings to the issue of "selective" identity.

M. Alison Kibler (1998)

Like Schulman, Kibler is limiting her discussion to one form of televised stand-up

comedy. In “Gender Conflict and Coercion on *A&E’s An Evening at the Improv*,” she brings a feminist perspective not to the content of comedians’ material but to audience responses: “[The program] encourages feminist critics of stand-up comedy to depart from their almost exclusive focus on the content of female performers’ routines to explore the gender power relations within an audience and between audiences and performers” (46).

She begins with a passing observation of Lawrence Mintz, that two members of an audience may both be laughing but for different reasons, and builds to a challenge of the “community” created between audience and performer. If jokes operate typically at the expense of someone who is made subordinate in the act of joking (a trope of stand-up comedy scholarship), a man’s laughter at a woman’s (joke)-subordination is – more or less – understandable, but is a woman’s laughter necessarily masochistic or self-negating? Kibler draws on the work of Tania Modleski to suggest that anger may be a “pleasurable alternative” and working through anger a “potentially liberating pleasure” (47): she also draws on Mary Russo and her use of Bakhtin and the “ambiguity” of renaissance laughter.

My reading of *Evening at the Improv* finds that women may bond with other women in the audience against a “masculinist” comedian and that the ambiguity of jokes often encourages gendered laughter. Thus, even without “feminist” comedians, women may indeed find space for “rebellious and self-affirming laughter” at the Improv. (47)

To laugh, in other words, is not necessarily to agree with or concede the underlying point being made by the comedian. Gendered laughter – either particular to men or women – gives the lie to the sense that the audience is homogenous on either composition or reaction. Compounding this, however, is the television producer’s need to demonstrate the universality of appeal: audience reaction shots are invariably of a male and female couple laughing together, implying communal, shared, equal laughter. Non-

laughter or other reactions – heckling, for example – are never shown, even if they are clearly evident or (a point never fully explored by Kibler) elicited as a tactic of the comedian as he or she builds to a greater pay-off.

The display of laughter in televised comedy, what one might call “quantifiable laughter,” is rarely able to render the “qualitative laughter” of anger or agreement, so Kibler’s is largely an interpretation of how a, let us say, “sensible,” “liberated,” or “self-aware” woman could actually laugh at sexist material. (I detect a hint of implied autobiography here, but that point is unaddressed.)⁶ Nevertheless, she provides a fascinating perspective, that “when women laugh along with men, they are not necessarily *following* along” (50, emphasis added). As I read this alongside Schulman and her description of black television stand-up comedy, where the African American performers, producers, and audience constitute the norm and the white audience are the explicit minority, and consider the laughter of whites at comedy so pointedly directed at them, I take pause. The difficulty lies in the temporary subordination occasioned by joking within the context of the systemic subordination that occurs outside of the playworld of stand-up comedy.

John K. Limon (2000)

John Limon’s book, *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, is, in his words, a first approximation of providing stand-up comedy with a theory (1). Limon

⁶ Cathy Lynn Preston’s article on “Tying the Garter” (1992) discusses how women need to shift to the androcentric viewpoint to find bawdy humour funny. As Goldstein studied English monologists, he was surprised by the small number of women who participated in the tradition. It was suggested to him that “monologue recitation requires a performer to take an aggressive stance, in public, toward an audience. Women in western European society are neither required nor permitted to assume aggressive roles in public” (Goldstein 1976:16).

is a literary theorist and literary historian, and his work reflects that approach. His contention is that, circa 1960, "Jewish heterosexual men formed the pool of American citizens that produced most American stand-up comedians" (1), citing Steve Allen's (unattributable) estimation of eighty percent. He does not attribute this to Jewish heterosexual men being "funnier" (which is unverifiable) nor to the preponderance of Jewish-owned performance venues (which would have brought about, presumably, a commensurate representation of Jewish heterosexual singers). He contrasts the preferences of the "general American public" (which he does not define, but whose preferences appear to be for those comedians who made frequent appearances on television) with the audiences of the Apollo Theatre (i.e. north-east urban African American) and the Grand Ole Opry (semi-rural southern white), and dismisses the latter two as largely anomalous and thus outside his frame of reference.

As his title suggests, Limon frames his analysis through Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject (1982): that part of human living that we wish to reject (the excremental and, to a lesser extent, the sexual) but, as it is tied up with being corporeal beings, we cannot wholly reject, and thus for which we have a strange fascination. "The one-sentence version of the theory of this book would state the claim that what is stood up in stand-up comedy is abjection. Stand-up makes vertical (or ventral) what should be horizontal (or dorsal)" (4). It is Limon's contention that the abject (not far removed from either Freud's or Mary Douglas's notions of taboo) is a realm of discourse for comedians, starting with Jewish men in the 1950s and 1960s as they were caught in three inter-related cultural trends: the shake-up of contemporary Judaism and the move to assimilation in the wake of the Holocaust; the affluence of post-war America; and the suburbanisation of the

American middle class.

Limon wishes to demarcate what he calls “absolute stand-up,” akin to Clausewitz’s “absolute war”: an ideal type which no actual performance can ever resemble. For this he gives three axioms: “If you [meaning the audience] find something funny, it is” (11); “A joke is funny if and only if you laugh at it” (12); “Your laughter is the single end of stand-up” (12). Framing it thus allows for some interesting conclusions:

It is simple to intuit in this ideal structure (the audience can not err, it cannot feign, it cannot be misled) why comedians might, above all other artists and entertainers, hate their audiences; but the most comprehensive way to put the matter is that they hate their audiences because they are not, as performers, entirely distinct from them. Audiences turn their jokes into jokes, as if the comedian had not quite thought or expressed a joke until the audience thinks or expresses it. Stand-up is all supplement. Freud describes in the teller-told exchange a system of transitive inhibitions [...], but I am noting a formal as much as a psychological relationship. Laughter is more than the value of a routine; more than a determinant of the routine (its rhythms influencing the comedian’s timing of its volume his direction); it is the arteries and veins of the routine. [...] In this light, it is hard to fathom how a stand-up performance can be outrageous, that is to say (etymologically) *outré*, outside the circle. In stand-up as opposed to all other modes of art and entertainment, there is only the circle. (13)

There is much to be said for some aspects of Limon’s approach, particularly the irreducible nature of performance context as dictating the interpretation of the text: that one judges the effectiveness of a performance by whether it is funny; it is funny if there is laughter; and it is the laughter of the immediate audience – not that of a subsequent exegete – that counts.

But by setting up a construct of absolute stand-up comedy Limon is contrasting what is actually performed by stand-up comedians with what, in its unreachable purity of form, ought to be performed. By focussing on “abjection,” moreover, he limits the zone proper of stand-up comedy to the corporeal. He draws comparisons to this approach with both Freud’s study of jokes and the model of socio-economic relationships and Bergson’s

study of laughter and his model of mechanisation, but stand-up comedy, as a distinct form of humour emerging at a distinct moment, is rooted in abjection expressly. The ur-form of the abject (within the urban, Jewish context) is this bit from Lenny Bruce which was followed by an apparently unparalleled seventeen seconds of laughter:

If you've uh
 ever seen this bit before I want you to tell me
 stop me if you've seen it [pause]
 {formally} "I'm going to piss on you" (Bruce 1970*)

An investigation into why the bit was found as funny as it was forms the basis of the first chapter of the book. Limon draws heavily on Albert Goldman's 1974 biography of Bruce, which references other, unsuccessful performances, culminating in walkouts and physical violence, in both London and Australia, and makes a strong case that the American audience was expecting to be "outraged" (a term he finds problematic, as did Bruce). As to whether this expectation was by virtue of his reputation – and thus a specific audience prepared for the profane – or of the national mood – and thus a generation prepared – it would appear that Limon thinks it more the latter, with only a nod to the former.

His next chapter takes a similar approach: how a bit that is not structured like a joke – Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner's "Nectarines" from the *2000 Year Old Man* – is found to be so funny by an audience. In response to Reiner's "I think most people would be interested in leading a long and fruitful life," Brooks interrupts:

Fruit is good, you mention fruit. Fruit kept me going 140 years when I was on a very strict diet.
 Mainly nectarines – I love that fruit. Half a peach, half a plum, so it's a hell of a fruit. [big laugh]
 Not too hot, not too cold, you know, just nice. [halcyon moment]
 Even a rotten one is good [big laugh] – that's how much I love them.

I'd rather have a rotten nectarine than a fine plum, what do you think of that? [big, startled laugh] (qtd. in Limon 2000:29, line breaks by Limon)

For Limon, the key to understanding this routine is in the straight man / funny man tension between an assimilated Jew (Reiner as interviewer, and in real life) and an un- or less-assimilated Jew (Brooks as interviewee, and in real life), the homosocial tension inherent in comedy teams, and the particular evidence of this tension in the work of Reiner and Brooks, here emphasised with the multiple meanings of the term “fruit” (the metaphorical “fruitful” of Reiner’s initial use, the literal interpretation of same by Brooks, and the slang term for homosexual).

Both Bruce’s “Piss on You” and Reiner and Brooks’ “Nectarines” are described as “metajokes,” and we are assured more than once that “the best” or “the funniest jokes are metajokes” (“best” 18; “funniest” 31). By metajokes he means jokes which force a reflection: “To analyze a joke – this is what a metajoke invites us to do” (53). But with his examples he identifies a metajoke as that which should not be judged funny but nevertheless is, an identification which brings with it the implicit condition that there are jokes that should unequivocally be judged funny.

As he moves to his next chapter, Limon again looks at a comedy team, Mike Nichols and Elaine May, comprising two highly assimilated Jews (this is, as always, important to Limon). He also presents what he sees as a paradox: comediennes, at least of that era, were typically harridan types (Phyllis Diller being the sole example); Elaine May was far from a harridan; therefore Elaine May should not have been found funny. That she was found funny is the metajoke, forcing us to examine why. Neither (a) that the initial premise is spurious and unfounded, nor (b) that, although Phyllis Diller may have been a created persona, there is something fundamentally different between a persona

interacting with an audience and a changing roster of characters interacting with other characters in front of an audience, appears to occur, or matter, to Limon. For him, May's cause for abjection derives from the ambiguity felt towards a woman who can easily fit the role of either lover or nurturing mother.

Moving forward from stand-up comedy's Jewish, flight-to-suburbia roots, Limon turns to David Letterman, whose style is vacuity without vacuousness: "Letterman's jokes are, disproportionately, metajokes: they are about the formal intelligence with only dreck for substance" (69). For Letterman, like Johnny Carson before him, the fascination with the abject stems not from the Jewish flight from urban to suburban but the Midwesterner's move from rural to urban. In deference to that which he cannot attain – mind, spirit (to put it in Manichean terms) – his embodied self, his mere body, is made all the more apparent.

Richard Pryor, on the other hand, moves against the white bourgeoisie and, by embracing and extolling aspects of his abject self (and, by proxy, the abjection of the black male in American history by that white bourgeoisie) demonstrates that he is more than mere abjection, and that the category itself is moot:

[...] we infer that the comedy of Richard Pryor is based on a radical overthrowing of abjectness all at once, not standing it up, in the manner of stand-up. Pryor cannot humor abjection, in the stand-up way, because he belongs to an abjected race. (98)

Not until his final chapter, however, does Limon give something of a crystallised definition for what he is trying to achieve or, rather, how he conceives stand-up comedy. It comes immediately following his revelation that he was amused by the comedy of Ellen DeGeneres and Paula Poundstone, and it is worth quoting in full, because it exemplifies all that is both interesting and terrible about his approach.

Female stand-up comedians, on the other hand, had only earned from me a grudging laugh – which, from the point of view of the purist, is equal to an easy laugh – insofar as they joked about husbands, boyfriends, commitment, airline stewardesses, and PMS. These subjects are comfortable to laugh at, for men as well as for women; a knowing distance from the joke is available to everyone, and nothing interesting transpires between performer and audience. The tension of nature and artifice is diminished rather too easily in a complete triumph of the conventional, as in ancient mother-in-law gags. But the fascination of stand-up – and its identifiability in contrast to old-style comedy of the wicked mother-in-law variety – has everything to do with its essential abjectness; all stand-ups are abject insofar as they give themselves over to the stand-up condition, which is a non-condition *between* nature and artifice. (They are neither acting nor conversing, neither in nor out of costume.) Reality itself, in the way of the abject, keeps returning to the stand-up comedian, who throws it off in the form of jokes. Obliviousness is earned from moment to moment. (105)

The idea of “the purist,” the judgement that “nothing interesting transpires” because “a knowing distance is available to everyone,” and the conclusion of “the triumph of the conventional” all simply smack of a cultural elitism that chooses to relegate much of the phenomenon of stand-up comedy (not simply “female stand-up comedy,” if such a broad category is even valid, although Limon makes an effort to demonstrate the propensity for it within this realm) to a category of the incidental, the inconsequential, and the insignificant.

The entire chapter was occasioned by Limon noticing that (a) he was surprised to find Poundstone and DeGeneres funny, and (b) both wore suits when performing. For Limon, DeGeneres and Poundstone each address their female embodiedness and what that may imply for the audience – participation in heterosexual intercourse; the expectation of or desire for motherhood – but otherwise camouflage them within personae which are decidedly, not asexual, but nonsexual.

The desire not to have desire, in fact, is not the challenge so much as the essence of the joke. If joking can alleviate pain by distraction from the body, it can (the logic of joking would go) eliminate pain only by

fantasizing the destruction of the body. (120)

In his work on the interplay between folklore and popular culture, Harold Schechter has written that one of the consequences of examining a work of popular culture using the same criteria with which one examines high art – in his case, literary criticism – is the inevitable undermining of both the critic and the work:

The critic, by insisting so emphatically on the seriousness of his subject matter, is bound to come across as someone who protests a bit too much, while the work can only end up looking decidedly second- (or third- or tenth-) rate art: skillfully constructed, perhaps, but completely devoid of “higher value.” (Schechter 1988:8)

Here Schechter is referring to the purported proponent of popular culture, but the same criteria of high art are invoked by those who disavow the value of popular culture. Schechter simultaneously manages to reaffirm the distinction between elite and popular cultures in terms of aesthetic and ideal criteria while introducing a second criteria-set based on his understanding of folkloristics. Whereas Schechter himself proposes the emphasis on narrative as both the appeal of popular culture and the basis for a relationship with folklore, the contemporary folklorist would approach the continuum not exclusively from the text, in its most loose definition, but from the context of the popular performance and its reception.

Limon’s study is, explicitly, in the former camp. That which does not fit into his model is typically that which he does not personally find funny. While there is nothing inherently wrong with the subjective voice in academic writing, it cannot be the basis for canon-formation. He is compelled to examine the reception by an audience because, by virtue of stand-up comedy being an art form that exists solely in live performance, the audience’s reaction is part of the communicative act: but the only explicable laughter – or, rather, the only laughter that is worth seeking an explanation for – is that which he

shares. It is a supremely unsatisfying work, whose motivations are questionable.

Academic critics, whether of literature or film, have a personal stake in convincing people (including themselves) that the value of any work is located precisely in those qualities that only an academic critic is quipped to shed light upon – as well as the fear of the nonrational, the discomfort many academics feel in the presence of stories that play on their emotions so brazenly. (Schechter 1988:6)

In a review of Limon in *TDR (The Drama Review)*, Richard W. Mitchell, besides noting the absence of both performance studies and comparisons of stand-up comedy to Brechtian theatre, interprets the benefit of the book as allowing scholars to “have a book-length work that approaches what Clifford Geertz might call the ‘deep play’ of stand-up comedy” (2001:173). Alas, Geertz and Brecht are two of the many perspectives that would need to be brought were the work to be in any way fleshed out and more than merely academic. It is, however, the first of its kind, and thus attention needs to be paid to it.

Anne-Karin Misje (2002)

Writing in English, but for a primarily Scandinavian audience, Misje begins her article (“Stand-Up Comedy as Negotiation and Subversion”) not by trying to define it but by simply introducing the phenomenon. She bases her history primarily on Stebbins (1990). Her principal concern and thus her main contribution stems from her folkloristic sensitivity about the community formed in the act of stand-up comedy performance. Her framework is “popular imagination,” the public shared meaning of both performer and audience rooted in their mutual participation in a pre-existent community of both immediate (folk) and mediated (popular) culture. The popular imagination is that within which “the *individual imagining* of the stand-up artist, and the *collective imagining*

present in the interpretation process, and the construction of community among the audience" takes place (90, emphasis in original).

The dynamic between the comedian and his audience is a highly structured process where a balance must be established between the audience's expectations of the show and the comedian's act and material. The audience must be persuaded to drop their guard [...] in order to appreciate and laugh at the comedian's material. On the other hand, the comedian must perform *in awareness* of any specific cultural preference among the audience. (90, emphasis in original)

For Misje, a stand-up comedy performance provides opportunities for gaining insight into another person's "lived experience" (her term of preference) and for experiencing communality with other audience members, through the exchange of laughter and applause (91). The experience, if it is shared, may move from unarticulated to articulated, and thus there is communality in experience. That shared experience may exist only in part: an experience of poverty, say, which has individuated manifestations but a commonality nonetheless. The performance only works for the audience if there is recognition or identification with the topic, perspective or dilemma presented (92).

In stand-up comedy, the individual imagination is apparent in the study of the creative material produced by the comedian, or the comic writer. Less apparent is the collective process of imagination that takes place among the audience. It may at first glance seem as if the comedian is the creative and active party, while the audience is receptive, passive and re-active. However, the process of interpretation is in fact highly active. The audience continually deciphers meaning and gives response, in a dynamic and dualistic process whereby meaning is created in a collective setting. This is an instance where the comedian and the audience engage in a mutual and collective fantasy, and where meaning is negotiated within a shared frame of mind. (93)

Such is the negotiation of her title. An audience is comprised of members from different constituencies; the experienced comedian will move an act through a variety of materials based on how he measures the audience's tastes, shifting as he goes to accommodate a full range of constituencies. On the other hand, there is an assumed

baseline of knowledge – “social institutions, laws, traditions or social rituals, and other current events” (95) – for much of the material and, when the shared frame of mind is not present (as is the case “where the comedian represents a marginal group, and where the audience represents a mainstream group”), the audience must be coaxed or persuaded to allow for an alternate frame of mind (95).

An audience in a comedy venue is expected to enter into a collective frame of mind, created by the particular circumstance of a comedy show. The setting of a stand-up show and the expectations attached to the show, may persuade the audience to accept positions and perspectives, postures and attitudes that they may not have accepted in any other situations. [...] In this *ritual communication*, both the comedian and the audience enter into a space in time that allows for temporality; a space that offers a ritual possibility for communality. (95-96, emphasis added)

Beginning a performance by establishing rapport, then, not only brings the audience into this liminal place but is also critical for the comedian to size up the audience, to determine its tastes and preferences, and thus to determine how to present the show. Misje calls this the “construction of an audience persona” (99) and quotes Billy Connolly who compares performing for a well-primed audience to talking to one person.

Misje turns to female stand-up comedy, and makes good arguments about the role that marginality plays: by presenting it on the stage, the “enactment of marginality [...] comments upon normality, and it may be viewed as a subversive *resistance* to the political and economic power centre of, at least, Western society” (108, emphasis in original). Although marginalised groups bring this into sharp(-er) focus, I would argue that the performance of marginality is common to *all* stand-up comedy, and the marginal status is a premise or a conceit that is framed in rapport establishment. It is one of the perspectives “they may not have accepted in any other situation,” but, as Misje says, “It is crucial that the comedian manages to convince the audience to step into the comedian’s

perspectival world and allow for his humorous accounts of his everyday experience” (97). Misje brings a folklorist’s sensitivity and sense of group identity to her analysis. It is also the sole folkloristic effort at an overall analysis of stand-up comedy.

Zoe Parker (2002)

Parker is in an enviable position, if only as her field of inquiry, stand-up comedy in post-1994 South Africa, is in the process of emergence. There is an international body of scholarship and established patterns of performance development against which the new local practice can be contrasted and checked. In “Standing Up for the Nation,” she takes the stand-up comedian’s role of social commentator and stand-up comedy’s “potential to be a democratic performance form” (8) quite seriously, making a call for the increase in the number of female stand-up comedians in a entertainment field that is, even in the post-Apartheid context, almost an exclusively white male phenomenon.

South Africa’s social and political history was one of extreme limitations that constrained personal space and liberty. In contrast, the ‘new’ South Africa seeks to grant previously marginalised groups the political freedom to articulate their experiences. Stand-up comedy is arguably well-suited to the ‘new’ South Africa because it is a democratic performance form as its style promotes freedom of speech and individual expression. (9)

Her article is full of descriptions of stand-up comedy: it “is able to directly and powerfully confront political correctness and the prejudices inherited from the past” (10); it “sets up a space in which there is licensed abuse” (11); within it “the audience actively participates in the system of meaning-making” (15); it “presupposes a performer speaking directly to the audience [making it] a highly vulnerable performance form” (25). In contemporary South Africa, it has emerged as a new form of protest theatre, but in contrast to the protest theatre of the Apartheid era, which was almost universally

concerned and thus united with dismantling the Apartheid regime, stand-up comedy is disunited, individualistic, and iconoclastic (10). Although idealistic ("It is important for comedians to realise that they have a social responsibility that should influence the kind of comedy they produce" [16]), she is not so innocent as to suggest that comedians are alone sufficient for effecting change.

Women comedians are also in a double bind: the woman comedian is in the position to shatter stereotypes but first must overcome the stereotype that a woman cannot be an effective comedian. Her engendered, embodied self is either downplayed or the object of humour: once "discovered to be funny," they can move beyond this simple patterning to more complex forms. It could be argued that the history of women comedians in North America bears that out on the macro-scale, with early women using the stereotypes to prove themselves funny, allowing for more recent performers who can base their material on more general, less marginalised themes.

Parker's great strength stems from problematising the relationship between the audience and the performer in terms of power, a keyword not raised often by most stand-up comedy theorists:

In stand-up comedy a given social contract is established between the comedian and the audience. This contract involves an exchange of power. [Power] in discourse belongs most obviously to the speaker, but at the cost of seeking confirmation from the [listeners]. If the speaker is constructed as discursively powerful, then it follows that he or she is listened to. Comedy and laughter are both controllable and uncontrollable; a position of power is at stake but is not stable. Therefore, on the one hand, stand-up provides a forum for the aggrandisement of the comic: on the other, the audience holds the power because they must laugh if they are to succeed. Stand-up comedy does allow for the empowerment of the woman performer through her construction of herself as discursively powerful. Her work is, however, made difficult as she is subject to the prejudices of the audience and conservative attitudes that linger in post-Apartheid South Africa. (20)

Albeit an unusual test case, one highly laden with unprecedented historical context, the lessons of South African post-Apartheid stand-up comedy Parker that sheds light could be applied to a variety of other comedy sites.

Eric Shouse (2004)

In his dissertation "Outlaw Heroes and Road Warriors: Standup Comedy and the Quest for Fame," Shouse sets out to examine the "folklore of a community of standup comics" (ii), and the "subcultural myths told to [him] by men who like to think of themselves as outlaw heroes" (1). Like French, Shouse is a working stand-up (and, like French, this dissertation comes from the University of South Florida's Department of Communication); like Moore, he is examining the narratives stand-up comedians tell each other, framed as heroism. It is a cumulative "mythology":

When contemporary standup comics tell tales of their experiences on the road they are not only [framing] them in terms of the outlaw hero mythology in general, but in terms of specific legends that have developed around previous standup comics. Of course, the tradition of men telling stories about their heroism is much older. (12-13)

Joseph Campbell is invoked as the explanatory framework for both myth and hero, and Barbara Myerhoff is cited only through her citations by Victor Turner. The references to folklorists are thin on the ground. However, irrespective of his framework, there are insights to be had, albeit accidental. "It doesn't matter if the stories that comics tell one another are objectively true [...]. Because even if they have no connection to events as they actually happened, they reveal a different, deeper sort of truth." Shouse is operating in the realm of legend, despite not naming it such: he equally could have

employed Mukerji's "bullshitting" term (1978).⁷ His most piquant observation, however, stems from the rationale for the genre of storytelling that takes place in cultural scenes:

Standup comics like to tell our own jokes/bits/material; we do not like to hear other people's jokes. I mean anyone else's jokes, including (especially including) those of other standup comics. The drunk who comes up after the show and says, "You were funny. I damn near peed my pants. Hey, I got a joke for you..." is a pain in the ass. The standup comic who can't stop performing, who is always on, is an even bigger pain in the ass. This is my opinion, but it is not simply idiosyncratic. It is a view shared by many of the standup comics I have met over the years. It is my contention that the road stories I have collected represent an adaptation to a constraint. Comics have the desire to be perceived as funny by our peers. On the other hand, we are constrained by social mores that look unkindly on the telling of jokes. The road story genre has developed within this subculture, in part, as a response to these conditions. (45-46)

Shouse neatly summarises "the three main groups of theories about humor" (106):

Aristotelian and Hobbesian superiority theories (a mocking of the inferior); Kantian and Schopenhauerian incongruity theories (two possible meanings, with preference for the less likely); and Spencer's and Freud's tension release theories (the relief of psychical pressure). Shouse gently rejects all three as products of times "when certainty and uniformity were all the rage" (108). Instead, he uses Bakhtin's work on Rabelais and the carnivalesque to discuss stand-up comedy, moving from a "comedy of manners" approach to a "comedy of ambivalence," which does not limit what can be seen as comic to a secondary field of human experience by holding that "that which is important and essential cannot be comical" (Bakhtin 1968:67). This is especially true within a contemporary society, with its complex of what is "important and essential."

If stand-up comedy is Rabelaisian, that doesn't mean that the audience is: because

⁷ Much later in the work Shouse also cites Timothy Tangherlini (2000) on the use of personal narratives as "coping strategies" in high stress occupations.

there are sacred cows there remains the risk of transgression beyond the “licensed” limits. This again ties in with the ambiguity of who the comedian “is” on stage, a performed role or a genuine self. “The potentially intimate nature of standup comedy, its mode of first person, informal address can create real connections between people” (128). The issue of the persona enacted onstage is further complicated by Shouse’s identification of the persona enacted backstage, the “outlaw hero.”

Summary: So What is “Stand-up Comedy”?

This is a fairly broad survey, representative of much contemporary scholarship.⁸ From the many approaches reviewed above, a set of interrelated themes emerge. The contemporary stand-up comedian does something more than tell jokes, but they must still “be funny.” The something they do is observational by the comedian grounding it in an experiential, proto-ethnographic act; reflective by endeavouring to interpret that experience; perspectival by taking a particular position for interpretation; critical by privileging that position; and, above all, vernacular by locating it in the local rather than the universal. This locality is both figurative, the assumed or anticipated shared experience of the audience and performer, and, as the performance progresses, literal:

⁸ For reasons not only of time but because they tend to focus on individual star performers and do not add significantly to a broad understanding of stand-up, basing much of their insights on the works already discussed, not discussed are Larry Coleman’s literary comparison of Trinidadian storyteller Paul Keens-Douglas and comedian Richard Pryor (1984); studies of the *shiteil* tradition and its legacy in the works of Lenny Bruce (Ioan Davies 1989) and female Jewish comedians (Roberta Mock 1999); Will Kaufmann’s (1997) study of the comedian as ‘confidence man,’ with specific reference to both Lenny Bruce and Bill Hicks; Stephen Small (1999) on the black comedy circuit in England; Jacquelyn Rahman’s linguistic study of black comedians’ characterisations of middle class whites (2004); Loyal Jones (2001-2002) on the decline of Appalachian and ‘Country’ comedy; Rachel Lee (2004) on Margaret Cho; monographs by both Lara Starceovich (2001) and Susan Lavin (1997; 2004) on women stand-ups; Frances Williams (1999) and Colleen Coughlin (2004)’s respective studies of lesbian comedy; and Anna Woodrow (2001) on identity in Canadian stand-up.

informed by the audience's reactions, the experienced comedian customises the performance.

Whereas many of the authors reviewed above do not bother with a definition for stand-up comedy, others make bold attempts. Here is a sampling, presented chronologically.

A strict, limiting definition of stand-up comedy would describe an encounter between a single standing performer behaving comically and/or saying funny things directly to an audience, unsupported by very much in the way of costume, props, setting, or dramatic vehicle. [...] Our definition [stresses] relative directness of artist/audience communication and the proportional importance of comic behaviour and comic dialogue versus the development of plot and situation. Such a definition is hardly pure, but it is workable. (Mintz 1998:194)

Stand-up comedy [...] is a rather strange and precarious line of work in which to succeed one must routinely win the attention, approval and laughter of a large assembly of people. (McIlvenny, Mettovaara, and Tapio 1993:225)

[Stand-up comedy] is a single performer standing in front of an audience talking to them with the specific intention of making them laugh. (Double 1997:4)

In standup comedy individual performers stand on stage and say funny things directly to an audience to make them laugh. How they convey their self-identities in their routines is an integral aspect of their stage persona. (Price 1998:256)

Stand-up comedy is verbal entertainment presented by one person to others. It is a monologue spoken to and for the audience, and its purpose is not to inform but to invoke the audience's response. It is a speech that always presupposes a reply. Applause and laughter are the audience's answers to the address of the comedian. (Lo 1998:160)

[Stand-up] is a form of public address – one speaker speaking directly to a live audience with a variety of intents and purposes. It is both serious and not serious, because [...] stand-ups range in their talk from the most trivial details of everyday life [...] to the most potent political and social issues of the larger culture [...]. (French 1998:57)

[Stand-up] may best be described as a humorous monologue (although the

comedian usually starts his show with an attempt to engage the audience in a dialogue), presented to an audience in a seemingly spontaneous and conversational manner. (Misje 2002:87)

Narrative [i.e. stand-up] comedians are, in a sense, like modern day jesters, publicly smashing assumptions that underlie attitudes and behaviors that exist in society. Where comedians are socially conscious, the assumptions that explode are often ideological ones. But the fact that they keep audiences laughing gives the comedians licence to provide incisive and sometimes biting social commentary. (Rahman 2004:1)

To describe something as “defying definition” is a conceit, and to apply that description to stand-up comedy would be a disservice to those who have made that effort before. Each of the above definitions, however, is more descriptive than definitive. Stand-up comedy, very much like folklore, is difficult to circumscribe but, nevertheless, seems recognisable when encountered. Patterns of features emerge. Stand-up comedy is typically:

- a) a spoken, verbal performance by a sole individual;
- b) in front of, to, and in collaboration with an audience;
- c) with a clear demarcation between performer and audience;
- d) without conspicuous staging, costuming, or props;
- e) in prose and without musical accompaniment;
- f) with minimal characterization;
- g) seemingly extemporaneous;
- h) largely autobiographical or observational;
- i) presented as emerging from a particular worldview (place, perspective, values, experience, etc);
- j) claiming shared, complementary, or overlapping worldviews between performer and audience;
- k) esoteric;
- l) ostensibly counter-hegemonic;

- m) deliberately aimed at evoking laughter from the audience to whom it is being performed;
- n) taking place within an exchange economy and thus with attendant expectations of value for money; and
- o) often recorded, broadcast, and disseminated as a tangible product for sale and/or for purposes of reputation cultivation.

For each feature one could easily find a comedian who would prove the exception, but most of these features would be present to virtually every performer who either identifies him- or herself, or is identified by others, as “stand-up comedian.” It is a skeletal description that is deliberately avoiding both functionalist approaches and necessary historical antecedents. This point is taken up further in Chapter 4, where the social identity of stand-up comedian is further qualified through the lens of vernacular theory (Baker 1984; McLaughlin 1997). It is, like Mintz’s, workable, and a starting point for the work that follows.

Chapter 2 begins with a discussion of various approaches within folklore that would seem to illustrate the complexities of stand-up comedy: if one agrees that stand-up comedy is an informal, interpersonal communication (as, one could argue, all but items c, n, and o would suggest), a discipline that examines informal, interpersonal communication would seem best suited. The relationship between folklore and popular culture is also considered, with particular emphasis on there being a continuum between the two and how a more legitimate distinction is between professional and amateur. It then looks at genres from within folklore, particularly as they concern spoken, verbal performances, moving through from third- to first-person narratives and proto-narratives, and the relationship between prose forms and worldview. It also stops short of, and aims at reversing, the urge to genre-spot, as one must look to the entire stand-up comedy

performance, and not only to its constituent items, as the object of study proper.

Chapter 2: Stand-up Comedy and the Contribution of a Folkloristic Perspective

That's *another* thing they don't like at the airport
jokes y'know
 yeah you can't joke about a *bomb*
 but why is it just *jokes*
 what about a *riddle* [L]
 how about a *limerick* [L]
 how about a *bomb anecdote* [L]
 you know no punchline
 just a *really cute story* [L]
 or suppose you intended the remark
 not as a joke but as an *ironic musing*
 are they prepared to make that distinction
why I think not [L]

George Carlin

This work is built on the argument that stand-up comedy is a complex transposition of vernacular forms of talk into a more formal, mediated context, and that this more formal, mediated context introduces a distance between audience and performer that needs reconciliation. In the last chapter a number of previous efforts to examine stand-up comedy – drawing from literary theory, anthropology, sociology, communications, philosophy, and one solitary folklorist – were reviewed. Whereas each had its merits, each also seemed to falter at something cohesive. The discipline best suited for stand-up comedy's analysis is the discipline which studies vernacular expression: the discipline of folklore.

But very little has been written by folklorists on stand-up comedy. Patrick Mullen as early as 1970 draws comparisons between it and the improvisatory nature of a street performance, noting how it “places [the performer] closer in style to improvisatory stand-

up comics than to any epic tradition" (97). Norine Dresser cites comedians Sam Kinison and Charles Fleischer as both building routines around a 1990 variant of the colo-rectal mouse (1994:232). Kay Stone mentions it briefly in passing when she writes of the vagueness of the term "storyteller," listing it among forms ranging from reading aloud from books through mime to puppetry (1997:234). Peter Tokofsky, in a discussion on the concept of "communal creation" in folk drama (specifically *Moritat*, specially composed songs performed during *Fasnet*, a carnival in Elzach, southwest Germany), concludes with the following: "The combination of spontaneous inspiration and deliberate tinkering with texts characterizes the author-function of *Moritat* authors and other folk artists, scholarly and other elite writers, as well as stand-up comedians and other popular figures" (1997:229). Susan Rasmussen draws parallels to how one of her informants in Tuareg blacksmith theatre understands himself: "A smith friend once remarked to me that he felt 'like a journalist for women' and 'advertised' this feeling in his jokes and songs, thereby suggesting a proximity to our own media specialists, stand-up comedians, and talk-show facilitators" (1997:9). DoVeanna Fulton's 2004 article on black female stand-up comedians is significant in that it applies Gary Alan Fine's "folklore diamond" model (1992:5) to stand-up comedy, but does not bring much fresh insight otherwise. Anne-Karin Misje (2002) was discussed in the previous chapter. Giovanna Del Negro has presented on women's stand-up comedy at meetings of the American Folklore Society (2003; 2005; 2006) but has yet to publish her work.

In general, the assumption that underlies what few references there are to stand-up comedy by folklorists is that there is something analogous to vernacular talk going forward, whether that be in terms of the function of stand-up comedy, or the appearance

of folk texts within popular performance (as in the example from Dresser), or the “storytelling” process (Fulton). These claims to analogue are rarely tested: they remain the product of “common sense.” In part, I would imagine, this is due to the concern of stand-up comedy being “not folklore,” the same question I raise in the introduction. However, they are by no means untenable: and much of the present work is concerned with demonstrating the very real connection between vernacular talk and stand-up comedy and thus the applicability and importance of folklore to its study.

Group

All communicative acts presume a group of people present to the act, as performer and receiver of the message. Stand-up comedy is an explicit example of this, demonstrated by how broadcasts and recordings are without exception of the comedian’s routine as performed in front of an audience. The comedian and the live audience constitute a group, as do, implicitly, the comedian, the live audience, and the audience at home.

Contemporary folklore is rooted in the concept of the folk group. Alan Dundes brought the concept of group to the fore when, shifting the definition of “folk” away from unlettered, rural, quaint, antiquated, and so forth, he suggests that “‘Folk’ can refer to *any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor. [...] In theory [it] must consist of at least two persons, but generally most groups consist of many individuals” (Dundes 1965:2, emphasis in original). It was this sense of group that informed Dan Ben-Amos’s encapsulated definition of folklore as “artistic communication in small groups” (1971:13).

Such a definition of group coincided with the interest in small groups within

sociological circles of the time, but Theodore Mills, in his *Sociology of Small Groups*, adds two important qualifications: "To put it simply, [groups] are *units composed of two or more persons who come into contact for a purpose and who consider the contact meaningful*" (1967:3, emphasis in original). "Purpose" appears to limit groups to those with apparent functions or operations, while "consider the contact meaningful" shifts the definition from the etic to the emic. It could easily be argued that in many contexts the "purpose" of contact is to find the meaningful, i.e. that the search for shared meaning is an objective in itself, and ostensible purposes are consequently effects and not causes. Ben-Amos also uses the term "reference group" (1971:12) which brings with it (a) the notion that the common factor does not have to be limited to the statistical, like language, ethnicity, or occupation, but can include common experience, and (b) an emphasis on the audience's role not as passively receiving but as actively interpreting and locating the communication within the accumulated reference frame. It is this reference frame that we have been calling worldview.

Group becomes the base unit of folkloristic analysis: as folklore is a communication, the two-persons criterion is met by one communicator and one receiver; they are in contact with each other through the medium of communication itself, whether that be in immediate face-to-face communication, over space via some transmitting medium, or over time via some recording medium; the factor they have in common is the shared referent required to encode and decode the communication. As the receptor's discovery of meaning is not necessarily the same as the receptor having a correct interpretation of the communicator's intended meaning, the shared referent may be as minimal as the recognition by both communicator and receptor that a communication is

taking place.

Although such excursions to the boundaries of what constitutes a group are a growing avenue of exploration within folkloristics, for the most part folklorists study groups that are more recognisably assemblies of similar persons. There are certain broad social categories, like "Newfoundlander" or "children," which identify groups whose named common factors are recognised as culturally significant keywords, even to the purported members themselves, but are simultaneously contestable given the numerous interpretations of how to define that common factor. For each folklorist, and indeed for each member of the constituent group, the common factor *qua* keyword implies a specific, central, identifiable common factor at the core of an almost innumerable set of interrelated, inferred, consequential factors.

In practice, identifying a large-scale group by its common factor can be most fruitful, as the delineation of immediately consequent additional common factors by the folklorist is likely to coincide with a general consensus among the constituent members of the group under discussion. (As Woody Allen wrote: "[Juan] Gris was provincially Spanish, and Gertrude Stein used to say that only a true Spaniard could behave as he did; that is, he would speak Spanish and sometimes return to his family in Spain" (1972:71-72).) But these immediately consequent additional common factors do not proceed syllogistically by necessity but suggestively by implication, and the larger the group the less the utility of these generalities as models. For these reasons, as folkloristics has developed over time, the focus has been on smaller and smaller groups which can be described less by implication than by explicit enumeration of details.

In "Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore," Richard Bauman makes

the argument that, whereas traditional folklorists, and even his contemporaries, argue for folklore being a phenomenon that exists "within groups," there are numerous examples from the work of folklorists themselves which evidence folklore occurring between groups, and the folklore performed is expressly adverting to the differences between the groups. He presents the immediate counter-argument to his statements, which he has illustrated through the example of storytelling sessions between the Tahtlan and Tlingit tribes of north-western Canada:

The objection may be raised, of course, that it would be perfectly consistent with group theory to view the Tahtlan and Tlingit storytellers as jointly constituting a group in their own right, by virtue of their interaction in face-to-face trading-storytelling relationships. It would then be technically true that the exchange of folklore between them occurs within the boundaries of the group. Not only would this be valid in a sociological sense, but it is illuminating as well, for it draws attention to the interactional dimension of folklore performance which is central to the issue of this paper. This is not the sense, however, in which folklorists (and I, at times, following their usage) have used the term "group," that is, for a set of people with shared identity. Such an aggregate is termed by sociologists a "social category": "a plurality of persons who are not organized into a system of interaction (and therefore do not form a group) but who do have similar social characteristics or statuses." The key factor, let it be stressed, which has been lacking from the conceptual formulations of folklorists is interaction, the interaction which is a concomitant of the performance of folklore to others. (1971:35)

Reformulating Bauman, the common factors – being present to one another, participation in face-to-face trading-storytelling relationships, or, as he writes at his conclusion, sharing linguistic codes and/or widely if not universally recognised paralinguistic or kinesic markers (41) – are, as real and quantifiable by the folklorist as they may be, held with far less significance by the participants than the factors which differentiate one set of participants from the other. Identity is created, in large part, through contrast.

Building on Bauman, the comedian and audience are part of a group "by virtue of

their interaction in [a] face-to-face" relationship. The comedian's task – especially in instances where performer and audience are in different social categories – is to deconstruct (in all senses of the word) the differences in self-identity and introduce criteria from which to create an intimate shared identity, often by virtue of contrast with a non-present "other."

William Hugh Jansen makes a similar point in "The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore" (1959), wherein he describes not only how part of a group's folklore concerns its perception of itself and its perception of others, but also how it is aware that it is in turn "othered," so that its folklore also reflects what it perceives the other thinks of it, and what it perceives the other thinks the group perceives of the other. How one chooses to identify the self is often predicated by how one identifies the other: commonality is sought, as is difference.

When encountering the other for the first time, certain cues give the subject an initial orienting of the other within his or her worldview, allowing for the projection of sets of both common and opposite factors. This initial orientation is based on culturally and experientially grounded expectations for the worldview of an other associated with particular, culturally significant keywords. Such projections are prejudicial, and as such, quickly contestable. They are, however, prejudicial in terms of both commonality and difference: they have both esoteric and exoteric expectations associated with them, dependent on the particular category of keyword projected. With each new cue proffered – as one moves beyond visual identify markers to the other's articulation of dities and narratives – the subject's understanding of the other's worldview is challenged, deepened, reaffirmed, nuanced, and developed until expectations are as grounded in

experience as they are in prejudices. And as they arise, each cue is scrutinised and evaluated in terms of its group referent: this position on a topic, this articulated understanding, this articulated experience, something consistent with my understanding of the universe, something identifiably inconsistent, or something apart from but not wholly other, something new but not threatening? Such scrutinies occur more or less spontaneously: within the context of a finite but intense contact, such as between audience member and comedian, an innumerable number of such judgments may be made. For this type of contact, one can identify the possibility of a simultaneity of having shared, complementary, and opposing worldviews, dependent on the keyword under discussion. Whereas exclusivity and dissent would be destructive in certain forms of discourse, stand-up comedy, which is play and not polemic, thrives in the milieu of difference. The sociocultural distance of performer and audience that often occurs is reconciled not through its negation but through both its recognition and the recognition of other sets of commonalities. In his study of British monologue traditions, Kenneth Goldstein notes how the performer depends “upon the empathic identity of this audience with the material he performs, and through it with himself” (Goldstein 1976:20).

One way of looking at the group, then, is as an association of people with shared expectations or norms: I expect members of this group – mine, yours, ours – to know this history, to share these values, to behave in these manners, to hold these attitudes, to draw meaning from these experiences. I am reassured when expectations are met; I can discover new groups, new factors from which meaning is derived, where things are unexpected but not contrary to expectations, and from which I draw a blend of fear and delight; and I am challenged when expectations are not met, when something other

happens, and I must reflect on what caused me to have those expectations in the first place.

Groups, whether from the etic perspective of the folklorist or the emic perspective of the group members themselves, are categories for the organisation of people in terms of potential future contact based on previous experiences. As models, people of the "same" group hold the "same" worldview: when seeing the world from the context of organising principle *X*, there will be consensus as to how to interpret and engage that world. But the individual has not one but a multiplicity of organising principles, and context dictates which one may be at the fore at any given moment: as such, he or she "switches" groups, as he or she brings up and operates within a new set of expectations based on the context. Audiences are comprised of individuals, and the comedian addresses a heterogeneous group which may share many common factors (African-Americans; Maritimers; trades people) but which also varies in experiences.

But you're still the *audience*
 you all came from different *places*
 that's what I like
 everybody comes from a different *house*
 different apartment different *room*
 {in awe} "you left your *rooms*" [L]
 | {paranoid} "I'm leaving my *room*" |
 must be special
 and you come all the way here to act as a *unit*
 you ought to have a *reunion* next year y'know [I]
 get together talk about the show (Carlin 1977b*)

One of the skills of the comedian is to identify a worldview within which he or she is operating and express that to the audience more or less immediately: simultaneously, he or she must begin to indicate a position and perspective that allows for challenging the audience's expectations. Established comedians have the advantage of

being known to the audience already: they can bring a more nuanced worldview to the stage. "New" comedians (new to the particular audience, at least) require a catch that orients them for the audience. In the continuum between wholly unknown to established and celebrated comedian, each is engaged in the task of establishing an intimate exchange between him or herself and the audience.

Performance

Critical to any study of folklore is a study of the context in which it is performed. This is in part a breakthrough arising from technological advancement. Erika Brady (1999) has demonstrated how the introduction of recording technologies, which allowed for the collector to capture elements of performance that live transcription could not, also allowed for the amassing of larger and larger collections with multiple attestations found within ostensibly identical contexts, and the variation discernible between performances was thought to be of interest in and of itself. Furthermore, the text as an "object" – still important, albeit re-imagined – could be deciphered from the recording later: the ethnographer, in essence, looked up from the machine and watched the performance. Who was the performer? How was the performance augmented: through dress, through gesture, through posture? Who was listening? What was their reaction? Why was the performance being performed? In terms of the text, how was it different from other performances of this text? How was it modified by the performer to the particular performance context?

The revolution in American folkloristics in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the "performance school," was in the long run a simple advertence to the notion that, in addition to the text, there was the manner in which the text was performed, and the

particular setting in which the performance transpired. For the student of stand-up comedy, this will appear self-evident.

First of all, stand-up comedy is concerned with and directed towards audience reaction: the manner in which it is received is, in a manner of speaking, the whole point. Second, the texts of stand-up comedy are, or are meant to be, the performer's own creations: he or she is not a conduit of a traditional text, either as an incidental and flawed narrator separated by space and time from the original pure source, as in the antiquarian conception, nor as an active and dynamic re-creator of a tradition, as in more contemporary understandings, but a specific artist making original contributions to a realm of performance. Third, as the text is collaborative between performer and audience, the words do not make much sense – or are often not “funny”, which is worse – without the audience's reaction, and the audience is responding to delivery, gesture, dress, and a whole range of non-verbal cues. This is evidenced, as will be discussed further, by the drastic reworking required for a performed text to work on the printed page, as has happened often on the past twenty years when established comedians are offered book deals. Fourth and finally, as stand-up comedy is a profession, where the most mercenary objective is to eventually be recorded for purposes of large-scale broadcast and attendant revenues, the text as it appears in performance *is* the ur-text: once a routine is committed to a fixed medium and broadly disseminated, the emphasis on novelty requires new creations.

Again, at Carnegie Hall [Lenny Bruce] said, ‘Now my humor: I dig, first, recall – abstraction. I can’t be ponderous. People say to me, “Hey, how come you don’t do the bits on the records?”’ The reason, he explained, was that he would be like the guy at a party who tells the same funny story to every neighbor who walks in: “And by about the fifth neighbor you really get *drugged* with him, man. He tells the same story and you say,

“He’s *corrupt*, man, he’s not funny – *I could tell that story now.*” ... So that’s it: if you dig hearing the same thing, go by your neighbor’s.’ With the gauntlet thus thrown down, Bruce affirmed that he would not play the game that was demanded of him by popular comedic convention, the delivery of the smooth, rehearsed bits that flowed from the mouths of the television comedians, the false impression of spontaneity in entire pages of memorized chatter” (Kaufman 1997:77-78).

Performances prior to the recorded one are, as it were, rough drafts. Whereas a traditional text may be emically or etically understood as a recreation of its original performance, or as existing solely within and for the purposes of one specific context, stand-up comedy performances are teleological, in that they aim towards a final, definitive version. Stand-up comedians work through their routines, making alterations from performance to performance until they develop a honed, rehearsed version that – when performed in front of a specific audience but knowing it is to be recorded and thus the “definitive” version – will elicit the most laughter. The final version is privileged and intentionally considered the definitive version and, as it gets committed to a recording and becomes a potential source of inspiration for subsequent comedians, it is the version that enters the canon.

When considering the idea of performance as a keyword in folklore and related disciplines, another complementary approach is that of Erving Goffman, as exemplified in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Goffman uses the overriding metaphor of the world being a stage to approach how people interact. He defines performance as controlling the definition of a situation through meant and unmeant gestures (3). Extending the dramaturgical metaphor, he uses setting, front, and notions of backstage and (front) stage to delineate space, manner and decorum to delineate character, and so forth. For each performance there is a performer and an audience: this gets extended when performer and audience interact so that both are audience to and

performer for each other. For Goffman it is better to approach the notion of performance as performance by a team, where there is complicity and collusion between team members to collaboratively create an impression for the audience (77ff). This leaves, of course, the option of a team of one. Within stand-up, the “team of one” may seem at first to be the obvious initial approach. However, as one moves into more formal contexts, the stand-up begins operating in specialised spaces, in conjunction with management and staff, and later with technicians and event coordinators, and beyond. Part of the impression that they collectively create is that of a solo, intimate performance. Finally, one must make mention of the outsider, the person (or team) who is outside the sphere in which the performance takes place and for whom the performance is not meant.

Such categorisations are important, as much of Goffman’s work involves what happens when these categories are breached: what constitutes bad performance, what happens when an outsider witnesses a performance not intended for them, and so forth. So much of the work on performance, both by Goffman and those he has influenced, is on breach and its consequences, whether fearfully anticipated or actual, that perhaps one should look instead at “consequences of breach” as the operative movement in performance studies. “Breach” as a category comes more from Victor Turner (1974:38ff) than from Goffman. His basic performance comes from a fourfold process of breach, crisis, redressive action, and reintegration.

Implied in Goffman, Turner, and most of the literature are the notions of disequilibrium and equilibrium. Each participant in the performance has a general worldview in which he or she both orients and orientates him- or herself. With each encounter, one’s equilibrium is disturbed, one’s worldview is questioned, by its exposure

to another's, and restored by some restorative action. Defining the situation is the assumption of control over the variables that are inherent in spontaneous interaction with an other. The control, however, is not the work of an omnipotent actor: the situations in which an actor finds him- or herself are not created *de novo* but are one slice of space-time over which the individual participants have little direct influence. However, the skilled performer will be fluent enough in the codes and conventions that are part of the commonsense worldview to manipulate them to his or her advantage.

Setting is one factor over which one can exert a fair amount of control. The "home turf advantage" allows one to orient the physical world in a manner which best serves the purposes of the impending and intended interactions which are presumed to go forth there. In a service industry, for example, the reality of the preparation areas is kept away from the customer, who is permitted to see only the brisk and efficient service at the front. In a form of synecdoche, the actions of the front are meant to represent the actions of the cumulative performance team.

The specific setting of the comedy club and other performance venues for the facilitation of the comedy performance provide two interpretations: firstly, an unadorned, stripped-of-artifice stage synecdochally indicates the unadorned, stripped-of-artifice performances that take place thereupon, highlighting the "authenticity" of the performance, or rather that what is occurring on the stage is not a "performance" but one half of a direct, sincere, intimate exchange between the performer and audience; simultaneously, there is a continued definition of the situation by the performance team (comedian, emcee, club managers and staff) to frame these performances as occurring firmly in the realm of play.

There are three questions one can initially ask of any particular performance. Who is speaking and what is his or her established relationship with the rest of the group? In what venue or through which media is he or she speaking? What cues are present which further inform how the narrative is meant to be received?

Who is speaking? Groups tend to organise themselves in hierarchies, wherein greater authority is invested in the pronouncements of certain members over others. Those with more experience within the group, with a larger accumulated store of conventional wisdom, will be understood as speaking with more authority and thus his or her words will be more likely understood as speaking for the group. As authority becomes less a matter of convention and more a matter of institution, those with authority have more tools at their disposal to reinforce their position and the non-negotiable elements of their words. At the opposite end of the spectrum, those in whom authority has not been invested, either through inexperience or through being found wanting or through their own resistance, will have their words interpreted as idiosyncratic.

In what venue is he or she speaking? This is in many ways an extension of the previous question, for the group though its collective investiture of authority controls the fora available to the individual members. Nevertheless, granting a certain liberty and mobility through space and place, whether virtual or not, there are cultural expectations about what kind of performances take place in what kind of space. The kind of talk emanating from a pulpit is different from the kind of talk emanating from one side of the water-cooler: even when forms are virtually contiguous – one can tell jokes in a sermon, just as one can pontificate during a coffee break – either their purpose, or the manner in which they are received, or both, are different, as they are more or less opposite ends of

the scale of communal and personal.

What cues are present? This again builds on the question previous, for one of the cultural cues may in fact be the forum of communication. Cues may also be explicit and verbal: "I have a joke to tell" indicates that the following is understood within a joking context. A genre could also be selected, switched to, or announced retroactively. Ben-Amos writes: "When a person in our society retracts his words by saying, 'I was only joking,' he actually redirects his words via another genre" (1976:225). Body language and movement, pitch and cadence of voice, and other expressive cues may indicate that there is a performance commencing indicative of a particular genre.

The current work is, in large part, an effort to articulate an answer to these questions and the ramifications of those answers as it applies to stand-up comedy, but we can at least begin by shifting away from the most general sense of the word "performance" as used by folklorists and advert to the more explicit and popular sense of the word: an activity with a clear distinction between performer and audience, and thus attendant and respective expectations of being something that is (a) an intentional demonstration of that activity and (b) undertaken specifically to be observed by an (or "the") audience.

All three questions are initially answered with reference to the comedian as a professional performer. They are framed and self-identify as having a "different" perspective, a frame that they cultivate through a variety of media including their stage appearances, and that interstitial perspectivism thus constitutes their general relationship to the group. In addition to the immediate presentation of self, they are part of a larger entertainment system, wherein the emcee or compère, the club manager and booker, and

anyone connected with putting the comedian on to the stage is framing the performance in this manner. When they perform, they are on a literal stage within a venue expressly purposed for performance, and their relationship to the group in that immediate performance context is thus further qualified by being part of an exchange economy: the venue brings heightened expectations of operating within that frame. And by operating within that frame, the expectation from the audience, informed by both the larger context of “stand-up comedian” as a type and the specific reputation of the individual comedian, is cued towards interpreting the performance as a fictive or play genre, and precluding those reserved for more formal contexts.

Play and Deep Play

Prior to the 1950s, there were few, if any, studies of play in folklore outside of the study of children’s games which, although it produced much insight, was constrained by “the assumed triviality of the whole subject-matter [which] made it difficult for most serious scholars to rise to new theoretical heights” (Sutton-Smith 1972:296). Johan Huizinga (1949), however, established that play is a universal aspect of any form of human culture, existing no less in Western corporate culture than it does within children’s groups or less-developed cultures. Indeed, the framing of his work – *Homo Ludens* (“playing man”) – implied that the fact that humans play is axiomatic: one need not look for causes or functions of play. It is a realm of consciousness and subsequent activity which allows for imaginative reorientations of worldview by temporarily introducing new motivations and objectives without the consequences inherent in the non-play sphere. For Huizinga, culture emerges out of play: it is coincident with imagination, and looks at possibilities: without the capacity and freedom for imaginative reconfiguration, patterns

would simply repeat themselves.

In contrast to this is Clifford Geertz's notion of "deep play." Drawing from Jeremy Bentham, he is referring to play "in which the stakes are so high that it is, from [a] utilitarian standpoint, irrational for men to engage in it at all" (1971:15). Play is not consequence-free, but the consequences of win or loss, or success or failure, are typically those that would not arise in "regular" life. Geertz was writing about cockfighting among the Balinese and the wagering culture which surrounds it: the ultimate fight is that which is so evenly matched that outcome is uncertain, and it is on these fights that the highest wagers are placed. Putting down a large bet is simultaneously wagering one's status: "It is at stake symbolically, for [...] no one's status is actually altered by the outcome of a cockfight; it is only, and that momentarily, affirmed or insulted" (16).

Performance can be interpreted as a form of play: it is an enactment of certain cultural codes which allow for novel situations to arise. Goffman's notion of performance and "interaction rituals" (1967) are on one level a negotiation of status: when two persons encounter each other the "contest" ends in a draw, as status is mutually recognised and reaffirmed. Talk and the performance of narrative can equally be a form of play: the imaginative and aesthetic possibilities of language allow for the presentation of a reinterpreted worldview which could partially or wholly undermine that of the listener, what we have been calling the genres of disequilibria.

Stand-up comedy is inherently play: it is understood as entertainment, as something enjoyed within the context of leisure time, as a commodity extrinsic to the basic economic circuits. Furthermore, the consequences of stand-up comedy do not extend into the "real world": there is a mutual understanding between audience and

performer that what is said in performance does not require enactment. But the nature of that entertainment, for both performer and audience, both participants in a performative exchange, implies how the “text” presented by the stand-up comedian can so easily fail in its immediate goal of eliciting laughter. It can be found “not funny” in one of two ways: it can simply not elicit laughter as it is found trite, dull, uninspiring, or insipid; or it does not elicit laughter by it being too painful, too scandalous, too threatening, too novel.

Roger Caillois, in *Man, Play, and Games*, categorises certain play activities as *ilinx*, “based on the pursuit of vertigo and which consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind” (23). Such games include tightrope walking, downhill skiing, roller-coaster rides, and even ecstatic dance. The “safety” of the stand-up performance is the play-frame for a (potentially) vertiginous performance that stirs up not the physical self but one’s worldview. The stakes – both in terms of economics and status – are equally high for the performer in either instance of “not funny,” but the risk involved is substantively different: the possible consequence of rejection and anger is different from the consequence of dull stares and yawns. A “successful” comedian is one who consistently elicits some form of laughter, but it is the one who treads that line of disapproval, and who therefore is risking the most, that tends to be the more memorable.

The movement towards a “deep play” understanding of stand-up comedy brings with it Geertz’s own proviso about the deep play reading of the cockfight:

The Balinese attempt to create an interesting, if you will, “deep,” match by making the center bet as large as possible so that the cocks matched will be as equal as and as fine as possible, and the outcome, thus, as unpredictable as possible. They do not always succeed. Nearly half the matches are relatively trivial, relatively uninteresting – in my borrowed terminology, “shallow” – affairs. But that fact no more argues against my

interpretation than the fact that most painters, poets, and playwrights are mediocre argues against the view that artistic effort is directed towards profundity and, with a certain frequency, approximates it. (Geertz 1971:15)

Proceeding along these lines, it is not being suggested that all stand-up comedy is inherently profound or vertiginous or “deep” in any sense of the word, but as is apparent from the literature review, the stand-up comedian is presumed to be one who articulates “dangerous” propositions. Therefore, what is being noted is the necessity to bear in mind that stand-up comedy has profundity as one of its ostensible goals, despite the playful garb it wears. The profound comedian is held up as one of stand-up comedy’s heroes, and his or her work informs the canon.

Function

William Bascom’s “Four Functions of Folklore” (1954), written within the context of trying to bridge the gap between the literary and anthropological approaches to folklore, outlines how anthropologists have traditionally looked at the “uses” of folklore within a culture. The first function is amusement, but amusement is couched in terms of being an escape mechanism from society’s repressions (343). The second function is the validation of culture, wherein the rationale for accepted patterns, those for which dissatisfaction or scepticism would otherwise be a natural reaction, is presented (344). Third, folklore educates, not only through the teaching of facts but through the inculcation of values (344). Finally, and related to, but distinct from, the second and third functions, folklore helps to maintain conformity by applying social pressure through its ability to be used for criticising incorrect behaviour and praising correct behaviour (345). In combination, the overall function of folklore is to aid “in integrating society and

maintaining social cohesion" (348).

This conception of folklore's function does seem to apply to certain genres quite well, particularly those which are instances of the group communicating itself to itself: myth and Märchen. But personal genres, like testimonial (Lawless 1988; 2000) and bullshitting (Mukerji 1978), and the genres of contestation, like legend and personal experience narrative, almost by definition do not have the aim, goal, purpose, function, of group cohesion. Testimonial and bullshitting may have complementary functions, especially "validating" the self, and personal worldviews may not be contradictory or wholly other from that of the group so that personal genres are not necessarily aimed at dis-cohesion. Genres of contestation challenge: what is being challenged is not necessarily group cohesiveness but that around which the group may cohere.

The question becomes relevant to our discussions if one returns to the literature review and consider how many studies of stand-up comedy aim at establishing who the stand-up comedian "is," what stand-up comedy "does," what "role" the stand-up comedian plays within a culture. Because stand-up comedy exists in a culture, it is argued, there must be a reason, one which surpasses mere amusement. That it also has an audience, for both its message and its marketable products, means that it appears to serve a function in not only a folk culture propelled by tradition but a popular culture propelled by economics.

As I suggest in the introduction, one of the benefits of locating the stand-up comedian within an intimate relationship with the audience sidesteps this question of function as the primary frame for understanding stand-up comedy as a phenomenon. If one simply drops the idea that the stand-up comedian has a "role" – and it can be dropped

if we suggest that roles and social identities are secondary considerations between intimates – the question of function more or less evaporates. This is somewhat in keeping with Huizinga's proposition that play is axiomatic, and that one need not seek functions for it. This approach is not wholly ingenuous: much vernacular theory is spent on establishing the comedian's role, and comedians themselves often ascribe a role to their occupation. Perhaps one can tautologically suggest that the stand-up comedian's role is the very breaking down of formal structures and functions through intimate encounters with people from whom he or she is formally distanced.

Occupational Folklife and Canons

Stand-up comedy is, on one level, an occupation. There are expectations that arise when one deigns to perform in exchange for compensation. Occupations, like any other group, have their own particular sets of techniques, technical and metaphorical jargon, and narrative histories. The key proponent of occupational folklife is Robert McCarl: however, one can go beyond his work on "canons" within occupational contexts to a more general application of canon which is a useful contribution to the study of groups in general.

McCarl's principal contribution to the folkloristic study of occupations concerns what he calls the "canon of work technique," referring to the "body of informal knowledge used to get the job done; at the same time, it establishes a hierarchy of skilled workers based on their individual abilities to display that knowledge" (1986:72). Using firefighting in Washington D.C. as his primary ethnographic context, he examines how firefighters' knowledge is communicated in their workplace. As firefighting is a high-risk occupation, where the inability to "get the job done" can lead to dire consequences, status

within the workplace is accorded in direct relation to ability. One could contrast this with office-place contexts, where status is often accorded by fellow workers based on less quantifiable criteria such as “personality” (Narváez 1990; Scheiberg 1990). The high risk also implies that “instruction” of new workers cannot be undertaken during their actual performance, save for instructing by example. Nevertheless, as the official training regimen is often lacking in the real-world understanding needed to get the job done, initiates learn either through observation or through participation in “cultural scenes.”

A cultural scene is a recurrent social situation in which two or more people share some aspect of their cultural knowledge or folklore. An end-of-the-week get-together at the local bar after work, a coffee break during the day, a quick conversation in the teacher’s lounge, or a critique of a particular fire while fire fighters clean up the equipment are all examples of cultural scenes. As daily work rituals, these scenes provide the folklorist with an excellent opportunity to see how the knowledge of the workplace is both acted upon and evaluated in a natural setting. (1986:72-73)

Within cultural scenes the relative abilities of co-workers are critiqued, either directly through praise or scorn, or indirectly through narratives of particular events where ability or inability was demonstrated. Biographies of stand-up comedians invariably include learning how to perform through listening and watching other performers in a manner not much different from the learning through observation or participation in the cultural scenes observed by McCarl. For examples of studies of cultural scenes, albeit not by that name, see Chapter 1 and the discussions of Keith P.J. Moore (1997) (pp 32ff) and Eric Shouse (2004) (pp 55ff).

The word “canon” comes from the Greek *kanon*, literally meaning “reed” but implying “rule” or “ruler.” Canons are those things within a group against which similar things are measured. The use of the term extends to expressive elements within a culture as well as to rules governing behaviour. If the group is organised around the performance

of immediate, practical tasks, “the canon” will be constituted by a combination of a set of practical skills and the narratives which serve to illustrate those skills. Robert McCarl’s significant contribution to the study of the workplace, which is the contribution of the folkloristic perspective, is that the practical skill-set is made manifest in its execution or in the narratives concerning its execution: rarely are they articulated as a set.

On the other hand, the same biographies of stand-up comedians that describe cultural scenes also demonstrate the use of recordings by comedians as a source for inspiration and emulation, how they learn the craft in part from repeated listening to comedy albums. Recordings inform the “canon” in a different sense of the word. The complementary use of canon in terms of religious texts is the designation of those scriptures which not only inform the sacred narratives of the group but also, as they contain tenets of faith and guides for salvation, act as something against which current religious practice can be measured. When one speaks of the “Western Canon” of literature, like Harold Bloom (1994), one is typically referring to a body of literature that has informed subsequent literature and against which subsequent literature is, consciously or unconsciously, measured. In folk music, one sometimes speaks of a “canon” to refer to a standard repertoire of both song and performance style outside of which “inauthenticity” dwells: Francis James Child’s *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-1898) and Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952*) each in their respective ways did much to delineate what constituted “true” folk music.

For an occupation concerned with narrative, such as stand-up comedy, notions of canonicity are compounded: the “canon of work technique” for doing comedy routines is wholly coincident with yet distinguishable from the “core narrative tradition” equivalent.

Through examining the canon, the stand-up comedian learns what sort of narratives to tell and how to tell them. As will be explored in Chapter 8, in the section 'Recordings as Resource and "Canon"' (357ff) stand-up comedy has its own concepts of canonicity. The canon is engaged through mediated forms, specifically audio and video recordings.

When one speaks of the canon of stand-up comedy, one is mainly speaking of the routines of particular comedians that serve as exemplary executions of the comedian's art. Stand-up comedy, being a contemporary, popular genre, is a genre of novelty, so one does not learn the canon so much as learn *from* it, locating oneself within a tradition not simply to continue it but to develop and add to it.

Canon, as informed by McCarl and as used in this work, thereby means both the inherited collection of exemplary performances of a given process and the techniques exhibited by those exemplary performances which can be applied to the current performance. It should be understood that, whereas there may be consensus found among the group at any given moment, canons are in a constant state of formation and evolution: although groups may retain and value the performances long after the under-girding techniques have been found wanting, for such reasons as nostalgia and a sense of historical continuity, they are fluid, dynamic, vital, adaptable, and, above all, susceptible to change.

Genre

An initial impulse, for the folklorist, is to immediately make strict correlations between the verbal performances of the stand-up comedian and the verbal forms of "the folk." As has already been stated, to speak of "the stand-up comedian" as an example of a homogeneous species is as specious as to speak likewise of a unified and predictable folk.

Nevertheless, generalisations and models are always practical tools for comparison, despite their later qualification or, on occasion, abandonment as insufficient.

Currently, when the issue of genre is a topic at all, the preponderance of folklorists maintain the practice of genre analysis as methodologically central, acting in concert with other theoretical approaches, so as to “[act] as a check on the arbitrary use of [...] materials” (Honko 1989:27). Learned societies, such as the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research (ISCLR), will treat a given genre, like “legend,” more as an ideal type, in the Weberian sense of something based on reality but not a manifestation of it. Versions of a particular narrative can be discussed within this holistic framework and, with reference both to the general concept of legend and the particularities of the performance contexts, can be located within the genetic systematics of contemporary folkloristics (Brodie 2004). The name for a particular genre should be treated less like a term with a precise, invariant definition and more like a keyword (Williams 1976; Feintuch 2003): with each use it carries the polyvalent meanings associated with it both diachronically and synchronically; potentially contradictory meanings are implied; and its meaning is further nuanced for subsequent scholars.

The first chapter of this work is, of course, also an exercise in genre: in the middle of the twentieth century and centred in North America, a particular form of popular entertainment verbal discourse comedy emerged which, while related to previous forms, was identifiably and explicitly understood as distinct therefrom, to which the predated term “stand-up comedy” was eventually attached. As efforts began to formalise the definition of the emerging genre both practitioners and academics suggested a variety of formal characteristics and functions, but the move towards absolutising definitions has

given way to simply sketching out some of its features – as I did at the chapter’s conclusion – and treating stand-up comedy, likewise, as a keyword. In that sketch-definition, I suggest (in points h through k), that stand-up comedy is largely autobiographical or observational; is presented as emerging from a particular worldview; is claiming shared, complementary, or overlapping worldviews between performer and audience; and is largely esoteric. They all pertain to saying something specific about a worldview, and as such they hinge in part on what is considered “true” within that worldview.

One of the ways of distinguishing between genres of folk narrative is this issue of truth and belief. The three “major genres” of folklore – myth, Märchen, and legend – are frequently distinguished this way. Myths concern origins: they are foundational, invariant, sacrosanct, existential, and static, and the reality of the events narrated and the underlying truth claims are not subject to negotiation or contestation. They are buoyed by the inertia of the group, for, had the events they relate not happened, the group itself would be fundamentally different insofar as it would not have come into existence. Legends are dialectic in that they are opportunities for negotiating or contesting the truth of the events or the claims. Märchen are not true, but that truth is not as opposed to falsehood but as opposed to fiction: the historical truth or falsity of events is not open for debate because they never purport to be history. Nevertheless, the characters operating within the fictive world operate as would the members of the group. They are “true,” therefore, in that they are in keeping with the understanding of the nature of the world, not that they are accurate representations and accountings of actual historical events. There is a consequent suspension of disbelief: to dispute whether or not the events

happened misses the point.

When the stand-up comedian performs, there is a frequent switching between belief stances. At times, his or her narratives are mythic, as they are accounts of events not subject to debate. They are coincident with the worldview of the group and, as proof, they are met rarely with laughter but with signals of assent and agreement: whoops, applause, and vocalised assent (“Amen,” “That’s right.”). At other times his or her narratives are Märchen-like, as they are grasped either as fictions or as unnecessary to contest as histories, and they are met principally with laughter at the creative distortions and imaginative and playful descriptions employed by the teller. And at other times his or her narratives are legend-like, as they are accounts of events that are either contestable or, even if the audience understands them as fiction, are coincident with a worldview that the audience does not share, or is not comfortable adverting to, or – as the audience is not a homogeneous mass – divides the audience. These narratives can be met with either laughter, which demonstrates either assent to a risky proposition or the judgment that the risky proposition is merely vertiginous play, or active booing, demonstrating dissent. Bill Ellis points out that one of the features of legend is that the narrative’s ending, i.e. the restoration of equilibrium, is suppressed in the telling, and the listener must somehow supply an appropriate ending for him- or herself (2001:59). I suggest that the same is true for what is happening in both jokes and in stand-up comedy performances, where equilibrium is restored by recognising that it is a comic narrative and laughing.

What is held absolute, contingent, or subjective varies from group to group and, within, from individual to individual. The audience for a stand-up comedy performance varies both collectively from the performer (especially as the performer moves literally

and figuratively from his or her own group) and individually among themselves: how a particular stand-up comedy item is received, how it is interpreted along that belief spectrum, and – most importantly – how well it will generate laughter, will often depend largely on whether a line of sacrality has been transgressed, or skirted, or carefully avoided. Even though the performance setting is not sacred and is understood as play and as profane, there are limits to transgression.

The stand-up comedian, moreover, speaks more often in the first-person than he or she speaks in the third. First-person narratives have an explicit connection between the narrator and the protagonist: the convention is that they are one and the same. The narrator is the narrative's referent, and events refer to his or her history and/or worldview. That history and worldview may or may not be representative of the group: he or she may in fact stand on the periphery of the group or, as is the case for itinerant stand-up comedian, ostensibly wholly outside it. The history is personal, in that it is either from the narrator's perspective or it is the narrator's own experience. So too is the worldview presented: it is perspectival and, as a possible consequence, iconoclastic.

There are parallel genres to myth, legend, and Märchen as one shifts from communal to personal, from third- to first-person. Analogous to myth is testimonial: they both concern origins inasmuch as they both concern fundamental events, although the latter are fundamental to the individual's history and worldview. Examples of such narratives would include conversion narratives, which maintain an interaction with the supernatural extraordinary, or narratives of traumatic events, which are secular albeit nonetheless extraordinary: they are understood and told as true and are not subject to negotiation or contestation. Although I do not believe she would interpret her work in

quite these terms, Elaine Lawless has devoted most of her research career to the study of “personal myths,” first with Pentecostal conversion narratives (Lawless 1988) and more recently with narratives of battered women (Lawless 2000; 2004).

Roger Abrahams (1975) identifies a similar phenomenon in African-American traditions of talk as “accounts” and “testimonies.” “[They] are not framed and marked as performances because they involve routines that arise in conversational contexts as part of the apparently spontaneous flow of interaction and are used to assert one’s perceived role, to focus or realign one’s face in relation to others in the conversation and, by extension, in the narrator’s network of relations” (60). They are recognisably formulaic insofar as one can recognise the form and anticipate what is coming. They are not without style *per se*: rather they give the impression of spontaneity and signal “a willingness to focus on content features to the exclusion of stylistic considerations – what we seem to mean when we say we’re ‘just talking’” (61). Accounts and testimonies are opportunities for presenting arguments or rationalizations that orient and orientate the speaker within the worldview of the group, the former within established groups within which a momentary misalignment may have transpired and to whom one is “giving an account of oneself,” and the latter for presumed but not established groups.

Märchen have their analogues in tall tales: they are narratives concerning the narrator’s extraordinary adventures and fantastical achievements, and they are wholly commensurate with the narrator’s worldview. To dispute the history, the truth of the events, is to miss the point: they are not told as history, even when they explicitly claim to be so. Again, disbelief is suspended. Chandra Mukerji (1978) makes a similar case in her study of “bullshitting” among hitchhikers:

To say that people feel free to lie in these situations is both an accurate description of the possibilities of 'talking off the record' and a misrepresentation of the intentions behind doing so. When people bullshit or gossip, they do so not so much tell lies as create situations where events can be elaborated in non-ordinary ways. Just as a stage play is not a lie though it takes events from life and heightens their drama to make good theater, so bullshitting takes events and heightens their storytelling possibilities. (1978:242)

Legends have parallels in what could be loosely termed personal anecdotes: there is the same implication of a narrative told as if true but subject to contestation and negotiation. The historicity of events and the worldview that informs them are open to challenge: the narrator simultaneously challenges the worldview of the audience.

Much of what can be said for narrative verbal forms can be said for non-narrative verbal forms. If narrative illustrates worldview by describing events concerning disturbances of and restorative actions for equilibrium, non-narrative verbal forms are units of worldview. Carl von Sydow (1948) referred to non-narrative verbal traditions as "dites" while Gary Butler (1990) borrowed the term "traditum" from the work of Edward Shils, as he struggled with how to refer to a "belief" that no one believes. Alan Dundes offered a third possibility, what he termed "folk ideas," "the unstated premises which underlie the thought and action of a given group of people" (1971:95-96). Barre Toelken used a similar approach in his term "multiform folk ideas" (1979:171-81). He was, in the main, writing about elements that appear across genres, and not explicitly about how they constitute units of worldview. Nevertheless, his definition of worldview is predicated on the notion that "the members of any given culture perceive reality in terms of culturally provided sets of ideas and premises" (226).

These provided sets can be brought into question: elements of worldview can be contested or challenged through adverting attention to them, subjecting them to some

form of scrutiny, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses, and questioning their supposed heretofore tacit acceptance. It is a form of criticism. Criticism implies participation within a group while simultaneously adverting to a personal questioning of one of the group's tenets or conventions, with the implication of withholding acceptance, which places the critic momentarily "outside." Edward Ives makes this point in his discussion of Larry Gorman and his talents for satirical song.

What was the position of a poet like Gorman in his community? He was "odd," he "wasn't the sort of man you'd choose for a pal," he "wasn't like other men." He was not, perhaps, an outsider looking in but an insider looking on, always a little on the edge of the crowd, watching. (1962:68)

Criticism is observational, and the observation can be accepted, rejected, or left within an arena of contestation. As it is personal, it is interpersonal, and dialectic/dialogic.

Lastly, stand-up comedians often speak in the second-person: they project events or opinions onto the audience, sometimes passively (asking "Have you ever...?" or "Has this ever happened to you?") and sometimes directly ("You're going to be driving home tonight..."). This direct engagement brings the audience even more fully into the performance, as their worldview is being either validated or impugned. In *Raw* (1987*), Eddie Murphy explicitly draws the audience in to his performance by speaking to women ("you") about men (both a collective "we" and the absent "him").

{emphatic gesture with each stressed word} Men must *find* and *conquer* as
much *pussy* as they can *get*
do not think for *two seconds* that you are the only one your man is fucking
he is a *man* and *has* to conquer women
I see a lot of you women out there going
| {emphatically} "not my man" |
yes *your man too* [L]
your man too
if he's not here with you *tonight*

he's *fucking* somebody [L]
cause he is a man
 has nothing to do with *you*
 you can have the best pussy in the world
 there could be a *cape* hanging out your pussy with a big S on it [L]
 your man is still going to go fuck somebody else
 cause he is a *man*
 it is a *dick* thing
 do not try to *understand* it
 you have to have a dick to understand this
 we are *men*. (Murphy 1987*)

The performer mediates between the worldview of the group, and its implied self-understanding, and his or her own worldview. Because they are personal they are by default interpersonal: they are not communications of the group to itself but from one to another within the group. When one is determined to be speaking for *the group*, the group allows one to continue unchallenged: when one is determined to be speaking for *oneself*, the group seeks clarification, objects, belittles, grows fearful, and challenges the speaker. Moreover, it is the group itself which determines "membership" status, and its reaction is the marker of that status. The group determines its own constituency and reinforces it through reactions (or actions): the performer may or may not be within that group at any given moment.

"Jokes" and "Monologue" as Genres, and Stand-up Comedy

Jokes constitute one of the more problematic areas for the student of stand-up comedy. Comedians do not understand themselves as telling "jokes" per se: when the term is used, it is more as a coding strategy¹ which seeks to undermine their own art form

¹ Radner and Lanser (1993) write of strategies of coding in women's folk culture. One strategy is "trivialisation": "Trivialization involves the employment of a form, mode, or genre that the dominant

(Murphy 1987*; Rock 1994*) or simply a sardonic reminder that what they do is largely play (Hedberg 2002*; Martin 2006*). There is also an implication that jokes are isolatable and easily repeatable narrative units, more or less independent of the teller. The artistry of stand-up comedy is the interweaving of these units into a cohesive piece whose sum is greater than its parts and which are virtually inseparable from the teller. Nevertheless, the association between stand-up comedy and the cultural keyword “joke” is such that it must be discussed.

Although important for folklorists, jokes had, in the main, been a neglected area of any sustained inquiry until the middle of the twentieth century. This may be in part a bias based on the simplicity of the form and its apparent dearth of multiple motifs. Gerald Pocius (1977-78) has outlined a history of the discipline’s neglect of jokes. Studies of jokes typically try to ascertain why a joke or joke cycle is popular or effective within a certain group at a certain time, which typically further implies a study of the worldview of that group (Barrick 1974; 1980; Cochran 1989; Dundes 1979; 1985; Fish 1980; Howard 1962; Kerman 1980). On occasion, the study focuses on an individual teller (like Pocius 1977-78; Thomas 1997), or within a certain medium (Ellis 2003).

But there is a question that does not seem to have been answered or even asked: what, precisely, *is* a joke? Does it have formal characteristics? Mahadev Apte writes that “the genres of joke and riddle are identified on the basis of both form and content” (1992:74), but is this the case? Most writers, if they do consider definitional characteristics, focus more on the *how* and *why* of jokes, taking as their key humour

culture considers unimportant, innocuous, or irrelevant. When a particular form is conventionally non-threatening, the message it carries, even if it might be threatening in another context, is likely to be discounted or overlooked” (19).

theory. The chief preoccupation is content.

Jokes should be understood more as instances of humour than as a particular form. Granted, they often take a form, like riddle-jokes, or have recurrent motifs (rabbi, priest, and minister; Pat and Mike) and verbal patterns (“walk in to a bar”) so that they are emically more quickly recognisable as jokes. Through whatever cultural cues are present, they may be identifiable as having a beginning, middle, and end, and thus can be extracted or redacted from a longer flow of talk. But their recognition as “joke” is ultimately dependent not on form or even content but on reception.

Like legend, jokes do not provide their own resolution. The listener restores equilibrium by “getting it”: recognising the vector the narrative should have taken had it unfolded according to expectations, contrasting that against how it did unfold, and grasping the proposition one must admit to shift the former to the latter. This proposition is a traditum or folk idea, something not necessarily believed but widely known to the group in which the joke is performed: the “nature” of blondes, Aggies, Mainlanders, etc. (cf. Davies 1990; Henken 2006; Thomas 1997). “Getting it” differs from “finding it funny”: the former is noetic, a consequence of understanding; the latter psychic, a consequence of affective resonance. There is a mutual mediation between the two, but one can examine each one apart from the other.

Jokes differ from legend largely in how one frames them: narrative cues and the context in which jokes arise typically indicate that the narrator means the listener to understand jokes as play and not legend’s serious talk. Jokes, unlike legends (but like legend reports [Ellis 2001:65]), tend to be self-contained, discrete units. One can understand them, for the most part, outside of their performance contexts (which is not to

say that one will necessarily find them funny or appreciate them). Unlike legend reports, such self-containment is not the consequence of questionable collectors and emendations: joke-telling is framed much like Märchen- or myth-telling: a listener gives focus to the teller until the completion of the narrative. In joke-telling sessions, the performer role might switch between jokes, this switch might be rapid and frequent, and one joke might lead to another one of a similar type or content, but the narratives are isolatable not simply by folklorists, but by the participants themselves.

In *Jokes and Their Relations* (1992), Elliott Oring emphasises the primacy of the punchline:

The only distinction that seems critical in distinguishing the joke from the humorous tale is the presence or absence of what is colloquially referred to as a *punchline*. A joke without a punchline is no joke. Indeed, virtually all the other traits that have been used to distinguish the joke from the tale would seem to be concomitants of the punchline. In other words, it is the punchline that conditions the other conspicuous features of the joke. (Oring 1992:82, emphasis in original)

The punchline, “a device that triggers the perception of an appropriate incongruity” (83), brings about an abrupt cognitive reorganization in the listener, and its presence brings about further characteristics as a consequence. Its abruptness means it must be novel, as it is a surprise (84). It must be in the final position because it marks the end of the joke as a discourse (85). The “characters” in the joke are vehicles for the appropriate incongruity, and it is “the transformation in the perception of the audience that is the point of the narrative, not the ultimate situation of the characters” (86): only the tale is concerned with the consequence of action within the fictional frame. Any didactic commentary needs to be clearly demarcated from the joke itself (87). A joke’s “brevity” (sometimes considered a formal characteristic and what clearly locates it in the “minor genre” understanding) is not an inherent characteristic but a strategy for ensuring

that the information required to perceive the appropriate incongruity is not lost in unnecessary and – as the aim of the joke is the punchline – ultimately superfluous detail (88).

Oring's observations are intelligently derived and considered, but they appear to do little to aid in the study of stand-up comedy, save as negative example: if the presence of a punchline is the generic qualification for a joke, as is Oring's contention, stand-up comedians do not tell jokes. Instead, they interweave material into a routine, which may run from five minutes to over two hours. Each unit, or "bit," is inexorably linked with the others in the routine, the performance venue, composition of the audience, the perceived relationship between the teller and the audience, the technological medium (beyond amplification) in which it is being transmitted, and the personality of the comedian him- or herself. Punchlines – insofar as they are opportunities for laughter – are deliberately scattered throughout any particular stream of talk, narrative or observational. The stand-up comedian may switch between narration and didactic commentary throughout a given performance text (wherein didacticism must be as loosely construed as are "anthropologist," "cultural mediator," and all quasi-functionalist qualifiers of the stand-up comedian). Especially given how stand-up comedy routines are first-person narratives, there is an investment in the ultimate situation of the characters, and the text ends with resolution: it is typically "funny," but its function is to bring the narrative to a conclusion, not to be the end-point of a long build-up of appropriate incongruity. If the laughter is loudest (or if it actually generates applause) it is not expressly for the concluding line *per se* but the recognition for the cumulative and now concluded performance. Whereas novelty is certainly a value within stand-up comedy, novelty as a necessary element

cannot be reconciled with the phenomenon of a fan's repeated listening to recorded performances.

As an illustration, the following is an example from Lorne Elliott's routine "Shopping." It is self-contained, with a beginning premise (including an overture encompassing an even more self-contained, quasi-narrative), a middle, and an end.

I'm a married man I should tell you about that
and I've figured out some things
you've got to figure out in your marriage ah
what you like *doing* with your wife and what you don't
I know for a fact I don't like going *shopping*
with my wife
Christmas shopping that's the worst
show me a shopping mall around Christmas
five minutes I want to take hostages [L→A]
you too eh?
I've got my Christmas shopping down to an art now anyhow
I just flip everybody a *loonie*
say it's a *gift certificate* for a *dollar store* [L:a]
I know for a fact I do not like going *grocery* shopping with my wife
she always uses me as a *stand-in* on the *check-out* line [L]
{hesitation noises, sounding like "I mean, she's got"} well you got the
shopping cart there
she takes an empty *shopping cart*
puts a loaf of *bread* in 'er [I]
goes over to the *cashier's* line
says | *stay here* | [L]
then she's off foraging [L]
so I'm staying there
Humming along with the Muzak [I]
reading the cover of the National Enquirer two or three times [I]
lady arrives with a bunch of *groceries*
I see no sign of my wife
so I *let her in*
then my wife arrives | {high pitched} "what are you doing" [I]
{very fast and precisely articulated} "your job is to keep the place in line if
you can not perform this simple function I will divorce you and marry
someone who *can*" | [L]
she drops off the groceries that she has foraged
and she's back to *foraging* [I]
so I'm moving up the line
{sinisterly} "and I'm not letting anybody in" [L]

but I'm getting near the *cash*
 and there's no sign of my *wife*
 and the ladies who have formed in this line behind me *by this time*
 they're starting to *smell blood* [I]
 I get the *feeling* if I leave for a *second*
 just to see where my *wife* is
 the second they're out of my *sight*
 they're going to scatter my groceries and throw my shopping cart out the
door [I]
 and that explains that lone broken shopping cart you see in the parking lot
 of every grocery store [I]
 they're from guys who have *left their post* [L]
 so now I'm up to the *cash*
 {dramatic pause} and no sign of my *wife*
 I'm feeding stuff through as *slowly* [I]
 as I can *do it* [I]
 and they women behind me are all *casting daggers* at me
 still no sign of my *wife*
 I've got *nothing more* to feed *through*
 so I'm buying stuff off the shelves [L]
 {exasperated and drawn out} "and they put the most useless garbage in the
 world [L] for just such an eventuality as this" [L]
label-maker repair kits [I]
 I had to buy *three* of those [I]
 I don't even have a *label-maker* for god's *sakes* [I]
 {quickly, excitedly} "I've *cleaned out* the shelves by the time my wife arrives
 big armload of groceries
 pushes her way to the front" |
 | {high pitched} "I'm with him! I'm with him!" |
 and I'm saved but at the back of the line
 there's this guy
 empty shopping cart
 one loaf of bread
 and I'm thinking oh-oh he's got it worse than me [I]
 I've cleaned out the shelves next to the cash. [L] (Track 7, Elliott 2000*)

The laughter which is occasioned by the last line is in part from the line itself but
 no less is it from the recognition that the story has reached a resolution. The bigger
 laughs occur after the comments on taking hostages, on the loonie as gift certificate, on
 being a stand-in at the checkout line, on the threat of divorce, and on the origins of the
 lone broken shopping cart. And it is perhaps only the loonie as dollar store gift-certificate

that could be easily reworked into a stand-alone joke. The question arises about what else is being performed if not jokes?

One could suggest that a joke is precisely that form of humorous narrative that can be – and is – abstracted from its original performance context. What makes a joke a joke, in other words, is that the listener (and the collector) can make it wholly independent from a specific performer and treat it as an isolatable or discrete unit. It is not based in personal but in collective worldview. Were one to incorporate wholesale someone else's joke into one's own repertoire, one would still need common ground with the original teller in order to effect a similar interpretation and reaction. The greater the manipulation required for the listener to abstract it, or the more inextricably the specific performer weaves it into their repertoire, the less one can successfully transfer it across repertoires. These bits sit nestled in the midst of a larger performance and are extracted only with difficulty.

Eddie Murphy makes this point explicitly in his stand-up comedy concert *Delirious* from 1983. He is speaking to a young child in the audience, who Murphy imagines to have expected performances of his characters from *Saturday Night Live*. The following section does double-duty, as he notes how inextricable his material is from the flow of his entire performance, while what he says also serves as an illustration of an extract from a performance which is not – by most definitions of the word – a joke. It is also worth noting that the bit takes place within five minutes of the end of the performance, which allows for references to elements previously performed:

I'm gonna tell y'all a little joke y'all can tell in school alright cause I've been telling this <i>dirty</i> stuff okay

here's a little joke for y'all
 {Turning to crowd at large} y'all can listen to it too [L]
 cause I know *lots* of times people see my show and then go to work and try
 to tell my *act* and fuck my jokes *up* on the job and shit [L]
 they're like | {in Caucasian voice} "and then he said 'goonie-googoo' [L]
 and he had a G.I. Joe up his ass! | [L]
 'hey-hey-hey I'm Mr. T
 I'll rip your cock off with my ass'" | [L]
 and a dude will be standing going
 | {dry and sarcastic} "yeah that's very funny shit" | (Murphy 1983a*)²

Robert Stebbins adverts to the stand-up comedy strategy of including within the final minutes of an act material which is more easily retold the next day at the proverbial water-cooler as a means of promotion (Stebbins 1990:15), and Murphy's routine is about five minutes shy of the end of the concert.

A similar but far graver observation was made by Lenny Bruce almost twenty years prior. Bruce had spent much of the last few years of his life defending himself on obscenity charges, and the trials became fodder for his onstage performances. He repeatedly returns to the theme of context over the course of the performance recorded as *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* (1992*):

And I've figured out after *four years* why I got arrested so many times
 see what happens
 it's been a comedy of errors
 here's how it happens
 I do my act at perhaps uh eleven o'clock at night
 little do I know that eleven a.m. the next morning
 before the grand jury somewhere
 there's another guy doing my act who's introduced as Lenny Bruce {sotto
 voce} "in substance" [I]
 | Here he is: Lenny Bruce {sotto voce} "in substance" |
 a peace officer
 who is trained for
 to recognise clear and present dangers not make believe

² Goonie-googoo, G.I. Joe, and Mr. T are references to routines from earlier in the performance.

does the act
 the grand jury watches him work and they go *that stinks* [L]
but I get busted [L]
 and the *irony* is that I have to go to court and defend *his act* [I]
 because you can only defend the *complaint*
 [...]

Now don't forget the *peace officer*
 is given the gig, he's given the job
 | okay you're going to do Lenny Bruce's act in *six weeks* |
 {tone of reluctance} | "ah I'm not a *comedian*
 what kind of job..." |
 | that's it | | well what kind of direction
 do I go to school a training program |
 | no | | well what kind of script do I get |
 | you don't get no script you get a *paper* and *pencil*
steal his act
 go ahead
 you've got the *gig*. |
 and here's this poor cop he's sitting in the audience he's going to write the
 act down
 | shit... *what'd he say* |
 now he's missed fifty words [I]
 it takes ...
 with the frame of reference of spelling
 it would take to transcribe a *tape* about thirty-six hours
 and after that they always come back to me to {unclear} "veto it"
 now the cop's going to do the *act*
 before the judge who never heard of Lenny Bruce before
 now the cop is nervous
 {emphatic} | "now I'm not going to get any laughs now"
 let's see {mumbling delivery} "I got the one bit I think I can remember that
 bit okay" |
 | alright officer |
 | well the suspect entered the platform eleven o'clock blah blah blah
 I don't remember the whole act your honour but I've made these notes |
 {rote delivery} | "through the doctrine of revived recollection you may
 permit yourself to look at the notes" |
 | okay uh let's see now
 {deciphering} "*Catholic*
asshole
shit
 let's see
 in the *park*
 and *tits* and *shit*
 and *Catholics* and the *Jews*
 and *shit*"

that's about all I remember that's about the general tenor of the act those are the words that were used is that <i>all</i> of it no your honour that's not all but he used those words yeah yeah yeah he said shit all those times (1:45ff; 6:44ff)
--

One should further distinguish between the manipulation required to abstract a joke from one context and the subsequent artistic or aesthetic manipulation the individual performer may choose to employ in order to render a unique performance. *The Aristocrats* (Provenza 2005*), a documentary about a joke type known to most stand-up comedians, but one which is performed backstage as an exercise in comedic artistry as opposed to onstage as part of professional repertoire, demonstrates how a text with a fixed and formulaic opening and closing but with unlimited liberty in the middle section can be made distinct with each performance. The formulaic pattern allows for its infinite variation: like most jokes when reduced to their structures, it is context-independent until it is performed.

Although there are several key figures in folkloristics who have devoted considerable energies to joke scholarship (Gershon Legman, Alan Dundes, Elliott Oring, Christie Davies), the overall tendency has been to conflate the study of “jokes” with the study of humour. In the end, “joke” is only ever an emic category. Something that is identified as a joke within a culture can certainly be studied and labelled as such by the folklorist, but the connotation remains of a cultural phenomenon that can be abstracted from its context. This work treats the term joke only within this context, as a keyword implying an emically recognised instance of humour, not as a generic form.

The monologue has been less studied than the joke. In a special issue of *Southern*

Folklore Quarterly on monologue, Kenneth Goldstein defines it as “*a solo, stylized, theatrically-mannered oral performance from memory of a self-contained dramatic narrative in either poetic or prose form*” (1976:8, emphasis in original). He denotes the monologue as a public formal or semi-formal genre, “at home on the stage or quasi-stage of scheduled events and required performances” (1976:13).

Public affairs are those in which at least part, and sometimes all, of the audience are either strangers or, at most, merely acquaintances of the performer, and which take place outside of a homey or familiar milieu. By *formal* affairs, I mean those which are organized and scheduled, and in which performance is required. *Semi-formal* events are those in which performance may be expected but is not required. (1976:12)

The topics of the monologues range from history and legend to local and national topics, politics, bawdy and sexual scenes, and recent news events, including tragedies and disasters. Humorous pieces “put the needle to the truths assumed by earlier generations; cultural habits, class structures and value systems all come in for a fair share of knocks (1976:19).

Edward Miller’s contribution to the same volume notes a further contrast between “traditional” folklore items and the comic monologue: “Gone are the ideal, rural environments and romantic, natural imagery of so many forms of folklore. In their place, such monologues use the normal and mundane settings of life such as the pub, the mine, the construction site or the soccer game. Indeed, the pieces go further to accentuate particularly squalid aspects of local life” (Miller 1976:33). The monologues are understood in part to be assertive reactions to the mocking perceptions “outsiders” hold, achieved by embracing negative local images and making them positive ones, with which “insiders” can identify (Miller 1976:38). The effectiveness of a humorous monologue depends on its being expressive of the situation in which it occurs: it implies not only an

esoteric understanding, but an understanding that such an understanding is esoteric (1976:40).

There is much in both Goldstein's and Miller's studies which bears directly on the study of stand-up comedy, but certain aspects differ from typical stand-up comedy. Perhaps it is best indicated by the very term "monologue" – a term which is of course retained in stand-up comedy circles, with particular reference to the introductory comic performance at the beginning of a variety show. Traditional monologues are expressly integral units, with beginnings, middles and ends, which are meant to be received by audiences more or less passively: although a laughter reaction is expected and welcomed, and certain forms – particularly verse recitations – have refrains which the audience is meant to say along with the performer, the audience does not contribute to the performance-text itself. One of the conclusions drawn from both Goldstein's and Miller's contributions is how theatricality, through over-saturation of dialect and through emphatic gesture, is a feature of the comic monologue tradition, as is the express contrast between the content and the manner in which that content is communicated. At no time is an ambivalent reaction anticipated. The performer assumes a character, one which is identifiable as of the group while not interchangeable with the performer in his non-performance time.

One can see this tradition operating among certain comedians: in Newfoundland, character comedy and one-person shows are far more prevalent than stand-up comedy. Andy Jones, Cathy Jones, Lorne Elliott, Rick Mercer, Mary Walsh, Kevin Blackmore ("Buddy Wasiname"), and Joel Hynes, to name but a few, are much more comfortable with set character pieces than with a more dialogic form. For example, Cathy Jones, at

such venues as Just for Laughs in Montreal and the Halifax Comedy Festival, recently attempted to drop her "Babe Bennett" character and perform material "as" herself: she has since, however, reverted to the character. Such a comfort with character could explain in part their successes in other performance genres. For the most part, however, stand-up comedy aims at the impression of extemporaneity and, as such, studying the British monologue tradition, however fruitful, is not sufficient for appreciating stand-up comedy as a form. Like "joke," however, the term "monologue" is part of the emic world of stand-up comedy, referring less to a style or genre than to the occasion of solo performance.

Small Talk and the "Genre" of the Intimate

If stand-up comedians don't tell "jokes" or perform monologues, what do stand-up comedians do?

The form of talk that is most coincident with stand-up comedy is "small talk," talk which is understood by the participants as primarily concerned with the establishment or re-establishment of interpersonal relationships and less with instrumental communication for the facilitation of a specific concrete goal. It is ostensibly a form of play only insofar as it is not a form of work. It may prelude more "serious talk," and in part it is a recognition that, although particular lines of authority may be required in order to promulgate particular tasks, and these lines of authority are manifested in serious talk, the formal hierarchical structures do not by necessity extend into all aspects of the relationships between participants: hierarchical divisions are contingents and not absolutes, and relationships are not merely instrumental but can be built on fellow-feeling. Small talk is not so much concerned with building consensus as it is with

building community in which diversity can be fostered. It builds intimacy. It is not inconsequential, as it is not trivial: rather, it is non-consequential, in that it does not require enactment.

Small talk is thus a frame of talking in which the talkers are allowed a license for a certain ambiguity in regard to the connection between what they are saying – whether in narrative or in belief statement – and what they “actually” hold to be true. The elusiveness of meaning and the allowed license of talk have their limits, as the relationship between talkers will only allow so much encroachment by one talker into another’s central core of what they hold to be true. The parameters of what is allowable in small talk – including whether small talk is even permissible to any extent – are contextually set, defined by a negotiated understanding between talkers, and continuously renegotiated through the act of small talk itself. The truly playful aspect of small talk stems from the testing of those parameters, where assumptions are deliberately challenged, held up to scrutiny, mocked, or rejected, whether through an explicit discourse on these assumptions or implicitly through their enactment in narrative, all the while retaining a frame of non-consequentiality.

Michael J. Bell’s *The World from Brown’s Lounge* (1983) discusses this kind of small talk within the confines of a middle class African American neighbourhood bar, and he categorises some of the forms of talk experienced using emic terms. “Talking shit and running rabbits” was a phrase used by one patron to dismiss the activities of the bar, considering them unworthy of Bell’s scholarly attention. The bar provided a safe venue for talking shit: soft lighting, background music, the tongue-loosening effects of alcohol, and a constituency of patrons homogeneous enough to feel among a group sharing the

same worldview so that diversity of opinion would be heeded. The expectations of patrons and staff were that the talk be kept to small talk, whether contemplative and ruminative or playful and humorous: operating as a team, the bar would ensure that, should the frame of talk shift to actual acrimony, it would somehow be brought back to simply “talking shit.” On occasion, the focus of the small talk performance would shift to one patron who had begun to control the aesthetics and direction of the talk, egging on others and anticipating their responses in a manner that was far more “performative” and recognised as such. This mode of talk, referred to by patrons as “styling,” is a style of talk “in which the participants were constantly searching out each other’s utterances in the hopes of discovering some aspect that could be turned around, turned inside out, worked over, and thrown back into the collective flow of talk” (108). It is antagonistic within the context of play, and expressly dialogic: although the successful instance of styling brings attention momentarily to the talker, it is a “critique” of another’s talk, and thus attention shifts back and forth. In time, the patron might move from styling to “profiling,” which emerges from styling as an “intensified organization of conversation in which [one person] attempted to control and order interaction by transforming it into an obviously theatrical scene” (136).

Although both styling and profiling are performative insofar as they imply a heightened awareness of an artistic manipulation of words, the latter is more so, as it starts to imply a distinction between performer and audience: “the relationship between [a profiler] and his audience became one in which they were excluded from the process of creation. [...] The effect [...] was to place the evolution of talk beyond the reach of the other present” (139).

“Talking shit” is the non-consequential talk of casual, intimate, quotidian encounters: it is an exchange of ideas and opinions, often venturing away from units of worldview to disquisitions on a particular idea, supporting that argument with narrative examples, and so forth. It can erupt into other genres, but always returns to its flow.

Barbro Klein (2006) describes a similar form of talk using her father’s term *skitprat* (“shit talk”): within the context of informal conversations among family and friends, her father

took advantage of nuances in conversations and other kinds of interaction in order to stage stories and other forms of verbal art in which he utilized a number of stylistic devices and verbal techniques to make the past come alive: rich metaphors, play with dialects and other paralinguistic resources, traditional migratory motifs and turns of phrase, cultural historical explanations and elaborations. (79)

Starting with Koziski, all writers on stand-up comedy, without exception, specifically emphasise that a stand-up comedian is on a stage talking with an audience. Stand-up comedy is neither a series of narratives nor of jokes: it is a form of small talk, which can make use of a variety of genres and breakthrough to performances, all at the service, however, of the social, interpersonal, and collaborative nature of its shared creation between performer and audience. Insofar as the success of the stand-up comedy performance, the impetus for it to continue, and its ostensible goal are all the audience’s reaction in the form of laughter, the audience cannot help but be part of the performance.

Coincident with a discussion of such emic genrification as “small talk” and “talking shit” is, much like in the above discussion of “jokes,” the process of trivialisation as a coding strategy. These genres of marginality (evidenced by the minimalising words used in their names) are explicitly perpetuated as not only non-consequential but also inconsequential by the participants themselves: in part so that, should the transgression of

boundaries go beyond the acceptable confines of play, the participants can restore the play-frame through reference to genre; and in part so that, should those outside the participating members express concern about the content, assurances of the non-consequences can be quickly made.

Radner and Lanser (1994) argue that, as women's discourse is often about risk and danger, the act of addressing that danger is in itself a risk behaviour. Strategies of coding allow for the discourse to take place in the presence of, but outside the notice of, power: groups emerge as subcultures whose aesthetic forms are in part defined by their coded relationship to their dominant culture's forms. But rather than coding through metaphor or inversion, trivialisation encourages the dismissal of what is said by marking it off from the serious. Much as Oring writes about how, as opposed to the tale, the consequences of characters' actions are irrelevant in the joke (1992:86), and much as how Ben-Amos sees the retroactive identification of a comment as "joking" as a form of "retraction" (1976:255), an entire discourse framed as small talk and joking can allow for the avoidance of consequence. It impels one to frame the performance as play until such time that we cannot reconcile it as such. Eddie Murphy dramatises this point in *Raw*, in the conclusion to the routine discussed above.

I know there are a lot of guys sitting out there right now going like this too
 | {angrily} "yo Ed shut the fuck up man" [L]
{alternating between obsequious smile to person at side with "quit it"
gesture of hand drawing across throat}
 {more angrily} "I didn't spend all my money for this motherfucker" | [L]
 cause you're going to be driving home tonight with your wife in the car like
 this
 | {suspiciously inquisitive} "you don't really be fooling around like Eddie
 Murphy says do you" |
 | {steering and smiling broadly} [L] ha ha
 no baby that's just jokes [L]
 that Ed sure is funny ain't he

look why don't we change the *subject* let's talk about something completely
different I don't even want to *talk* about this fooling around stuff |
 | {quickly and pointedly} "I *do* want to talk about this fooling around stuff
 cause you know something
 why does he have to lie to me
 I think he was telling the truth
 you know something if you were fooling around I would be so hurt and
 disgusted
 you know what I would do
 I would wait 'til you went to sleep and I would come inside the room and I
 would *kill you*" |
 | {steering and smiling broadly} ho
 ya
 that Ed *sure is funny*. | (Murphy 1987*)

In everyday, small talk, people exchange information, share interests, express opinions, and mutually reaffirm their commonality while not obviating differences. There may be some elements of functionality to it (and some elements of mere convention), but it is not an instrumental form of talk. The inertia of the exchange is interpersonal, as the roles of performer and audience move between the constituent participants. Other relationships beyond that of audience and performer – male/female, elder/youth, employer/employee, oppressor/oppressed – have an influence on how balanced that back and forth movement may be in practice, but a surfeit of egalitarianism and collaboration is maintained. On occasion, focus may be drawn (or may be given) to one of the participants as he or she elaborates on a particular point. This focus is typically granted through implicit consensus by those present on the anticipation of meeting expectations of a culturally and contextually appropriate performance and, should those expectations not be met, the granting of focus may be withdrawn. When focus is granted, however, the performer is never dislocated from the audience, which must continually reaffirm the performance's continuation. It is forever dialogic. If a performed text is of a type where, irrespective of the presence or absence of an audience, it would both produce an

intelligible text and vary little from version to version, one is encountering something other than small talk.

Stand-up comedians do not tell jokes: they do not tell stories, spout proverbs, or spread legends. They talk on a stage with an intent to be found funny. Like small talk, they engage in a flow of discourse with “an” other, and, *within this primary talking frame*, they tell jokes and stories, spout proverbs, and spread legends. In other words, again just like everyday conversation, my immediate point is that stand-up comedy is a dialogic form. No matter how one-sided the conversation between the performer and the audience might be, there is a required reciprocity between performer and audience.

We can see this negatively through the questionable success of transliterating live performances into the recording studio or onto the page (as discussed later at 349ff): without the audience’s reaction, however coerced or manipulated by the skilled performer that reaction might be, and however little it “interferes” with the narrative flow of the performance, the text is incomplete. The stand-up comedian needs an audience, not like an author needs a reader or an artist needs a muse, but like a skier needs snow. Folklorists have been adverting to performance contexts for nigh on fifty years now, so this should not be a revelation, but stand-up comedy is the only mass-mediated cultural performance activity whose normative consumable product is a recording of a live event.

Popular Culture Study

Much like folklore, popular culture is recognisable when encountered, and yet it is difficult to identify those features common to all instances thereof. To study popular culture first requires its distinction from other spheres of culture, typically from “high” or “elite” culture. Such is the case with the English “Cultural Studies” model, which tends to

obfuscate any theoretical distinction between popular culture and folk culture, and which equates popular culture with post-modernity and the incumbent ethereality of fashion, and elite culture with modernity and necessity. Such a distinction is not an absolute, and is in fact identifiably perspectival, as the judgment of what is or is not mere fashion is the prerogative of power elites. Certain popular culture products are “elevated” to elite cultural status when their value, in terms of retroactively having met some criteria, is recognised: the films of John Ford; the illustrations of Robert Crumb; the writings of Charles Dickens; the music of Robert Johnson; the stand-up comedy of Lenny Bruce. Such an elevation – their admission to “the” canon – often entails their preservation through their institutionalisation, wherein they are kept safe from the very whims of fashion that either gave rise to them in the first place or allowed for their commercial viability.

Such a reading allows for a refinement of what is meant by “popular.” North American popular culture study tends to make three distinctions of culture: elite, popular, and folk. The last two appear to be implied subcategories of popular within the Cultural Studies model. North American theorists place the products present within small group, immediate, intimate cultures in one frame, i.e. folk culture, and the products present within large group, mediated, and widespread cultures in another, i.e. popular culture. In part, these different approaches stem from different interpretations and emphases of cultural production. It could be argued that the Cultural Studies model does not understand anything “new” emerging from folk cultures: although new forms may emerge, they are primarily individual reactions and re-incorporations of the products of mass society. Folk groups are little differentiated from “subcultures,” which are in

opposition to a larger hegemonic culture but, unable to engage in a discourse of the hegemonic on the level of theory and language, instead invert the signs of mass culture for their own end (Hebdige 1979:17-19). These new signs are quickly reincorporated by the hegemonic culture industry, until their value as critique has been subsumed by their value as cultural commodity. North America, meanwhile, tends to see folk cultures as occasionally engaging in and being influenced by the products of popular culture but, in the main, being isolated from it.

In his introduction to popular culture criticism, John Storey draws on Raymond Williams (1976) and presents four possible interpretations of popular: well-liked; inferior; populist; or by, of, and for the people (1998:7). The first is statistical; the second largely a judgment of aesthetics; the third largely a judgment of content; while the fourth is folkloristic. As it is the last one which decentres the discourse from a position of elite culture, it is the last which is of most interest to folklorists. It places the means of production and producerly intent within the control of "the people."

John Fiske (1989) presents this as one of the directions that the study of popular culture has taken. It suggests that popular culture is more or less the culture that emerges from the people in their manifest differences and has attained or found a broad popular appeal: popular culture is discerned as that which is pleasing to most, in that it overcomes difference, and thus it is determined by consensus (20). It is, in a way, either a confluence of the products of folk cultures or the product of a single folk culture that has found large-scale purchase.

Such a model is appealing, as it is an optimistic portrayal of popular culture. However, it fails to take power into consideration: that broad dissemination implies

access to conduits of said dissemination through direct or indirect control of media; and that popular culture rarely conflicts with the interests of those who do wield control. A perspective based on power is almost in direct opposition to any optimistic reading, but it more or less disavows the possibility of active engagement with popular culture by people, save for through the lens of resistance.

Fiske (1989), among others, has therefore argued for a third, mediating position: that one should talk of "mass culture" as the product of Theodor Adorno's (1991) "culture industry," and "popular culture" as what is made therefrom (24). Though fruitful, this approach introduces a certain rigidity to the differentiation between the producers and consumers of popular culture. The culture industry can be taken to be a relatively homogenous entity from which hegemonic product is emitted, and the people, transformed from being merely "the masses" by active engagement with the product, subvert it to their own purposes through distortion or bricolage. From the analytic perspective of the "consumer" or "audience" – two terms which emphasise different aspects, respectively economic and aesthetic, of the recipients' participation in the interchange between themselves and the correlating "producer" or "performer" – the "product" or "performance" is interpreted as being initially presented as a repertoire for their own uncritical consumption, but which is instead selectively ignored, passively received, actively received, rejected, actively rejected, or any other manifestation of engagement, what Antonio Gramsci termed "compromise equilibrium" (1971:161). In this manner, it forces the investigator to study what is created from mass culture within real contexts, and therefore requires an ethnographic component and, what is more, a description of the actual people, as opposed to a projected, indistinct, undifferentiated

“people.”

While this model is highly effective, it has its limits. By emphasising the unidirectional aspect of mass-mediation, this model tends to gloss over the culture industry's propensity for reacting to “popular” consumptive trends unless those trends are pervasive and apparent and their reaction serves the hegemonic need. A further limitation is the supposed homogeneity of the culture industry. Related to its reactive element, producers of popular culture are understood to make available products both for which there is a demand – which the producers themselves may create – and which allow for the perpetuation of the hegemony. Esoterically, people believe that the culture industries see them as a mass, occasionally broken up into demographics but otherwise virtually interchangeable.³ Exoterically they believe the culture industry to be a juggernaut that although ostensibly divided into different corporations in competition with each other is in fact co-operating in the production of content meant to appeal to the broadest consumer base independent of aesthetic value. When genuine aesthetic value is chanced upon, the industry is quick to imitate until it becomes conventionalised and, ultimately, a further commodity.

If the distinction between “mass culture” and “popular culture” is the difference between the passive reception and the active engagement with the product, the distinction between “mass appeal” and “popular appeal” is the difference between the etic and emic aesthetic categories for which the product has resonance. From a producer perspective in an economic model, there would be an underlying assumption not only that there is an

³ Although she does not call this an esoteric assumption on behalf of the audience, S. Elizabeth Bird makes this point in relation to problems with much audience research (1992:110).

audience for a particular product but also *why* there is an audience. As there may be both resonance and dissonance with emic aesthetic categories, a producer attempting to cultivate the broadest possible audience would create a product that either resonates or is neither resonant nor dissonant with such categories, and avoid the dissonant. For an audience comprised of differentially smaller groups, either a differentiation of quantifiable demographics like age, gender, region, or “ethnicity,” or a differentiation of qualitative demographics like interest, there is an emphasis on similarities. Ironically, as will be discussed later, for stand-up comedy this appeal to the broadest possible audience can introduce the greatest distance between audience and performer as it avoids the esoteric in favour of the commonplace. When people comment on the banality of stand-up – either stand-up comedy theorists contrasting their “exemplary” stand-up with the dross of “ordinary” stand-up comedy, or simply non-fans – it is inevitably the performances on broadcast television to which they are referring. (This is discussed in greater detail in the conclusion to Chapter 7, 326ff).

Concurrent with the practice of appealing to the broadest possible audience, however, is the practice of appealing to a narrower yet hopefully more engaged audience, which in one manifestation is termed “narrowcasting.”

[A] narrowcast code resists conventionalization (e.g., current musical fashions); it is elaborated, exhibiting specialist jargon (e.g., kinds of blues, artists, labels, aesthetic terminology); and in narrowcasting, an audience anticipates enrichment from knowledgeable communicators. A successful narrowcast code, therefore, not only teaches but it also cultivates elitism, in the dichotomous, insider-outsider, esoteric-exoteric sense of “we” know more than “they.” (Narváez 1993:248-49)

Narrowcasting in this guise is a derivative form of cultural product that serves as an opportunity for higher order reflections on a previous cultural product. Concurrent with the narrowcast as information source, which tends not only to appeal to but to

dictate the aesthetic standards of its subject, is the narrowcast as focus of para-social narrative communities (Narváez 1992:192). Although there is bound to be overlap in the two, the latter aims at utilising an esoteric-exoteric distinction among its audience which is not expressly built on a hierarchical model of cultural elitism. Narrowcasting in this sense is more akin to the marketing term “niche.” The cultural products themselves may derive from the vernacular culture of a particular group and the culture industry serves as little more than a redistribution opportunity. Popular cultural producers of niche product may direct it towards an intended audience, who may or may not engage with it, but it may also find an audience outside of this group, often either by happenstance or by a wider diffusion in the express hope of finding this larger audience. The economic exigencies of cultural markets may also persuade culture industries to modify the “authentic” vernacular expression in order to have either a broader, less esoteric appeal, or, in some cases, a greater esoteric appeal for the elite created by narrowcasting.

Examples of narrowcasting in stand-up comedy are legion, but Norma Schulman’s discussion of black television stand-up comedy (1994) and her framework of “minor discourse” serves as the most immediate illustration, with DoVeanna Fulton’s discussion of women on *Def Comedy Jam* (2004) implicitly doing similar. However, unlike the secondary literature of conventional narrowcasting, performers, promoters, and audience are all collaboratively involved in the esotericism of a particular instance of the form, in part by defining themselves in opposition to those not present and in part by affirming and reaffirming their shared identity with the audience, their “authenticity.” The meta-discourse surrounding the content of the performance is indistinguishable from the performance itself and becomes part thereof, as the performance is inextricably linked

to the performer.

Stand-up comedy introduces a third problematic. The two “products” of stand-up comedy are performances, whether that be an intangible live performance for which tickets are sold (or covers are charged, or drinks are more expensive, etc.) and for which the performer is paid, or a tangible recording of same, able to be redistributed through media or through stores. An audience’s immediate and active engagement with the producer/ performer’s product is manifest in all instances. With broadcasts, there may be an Adorno-esque passivity to its reception, although it can quickly shift to an active engagement, whether the simple aesthetic response of laughter to the pursuit of further work by the comedian, to repeated viewing or listening, and – ultimately – to the incorporation of routines into the individual’s own repertoire (as Stebbins suggested [1990:15]). At its core, however, is audience engagement: laughter is both the ends (the validation by the live audience of the comedian being found funny) and the means (data for the subsequent listener to consider in judging whether the comedian could be found funny).

Sometimes people laugh and nothing comes out of their face
 this is what upsets me the most
 I *look* at them and I can *tell* they’re laughing and enjoying themselves
 but they’re silent laughers
 I don’t *need* them here
 get out [L]
 they’re just {mimes enthusiastic silent laughter} [L]
 you only hear them when they need *breath*
 to fuel their *shit non-laugh* (McIntyre 2007: pt.2 2:42ff)

This differentiates it from popular music, which is experienced both through live performance and recordings, but for which the live recording is the exception rather than the rule. Stand-up comedy, however mediated it becomes and however great the spatio-

temporal distance between performer and a specific audience member, is always formed by, and thus retains, the intimacy of face-to-face communication.

The Folklore-Popular Culture Continuum

Studies of popular culture fall into three main clusters: studies of mass-produced objects (Hebdige 1979; McRobbie 1998), as they deal with concrete, ontological items, are a perfect venue for discussing how mass mediated products can be adapted, made unique, and, perhaps, inverted by an audience; studies of recorded communication like literature (Brusseau 2000; Schechter 1988), television (Spence 1995; Van Fuqua 2003), cinema (Koven 2003; Ping-kwan 2000), and music (Frith 1996; Shukur 2001), focus on reception, interpretation, and reinterpretation of texts which are invariant across contexts (unlike folk texts, which are by their very nature subject to variation); studies of contemporary spectacle (Freedman 1983; Kugelmass 2003) examine the interplay of mediated forms within intimate contexts. The three designations correspond roughly to the traditional delineations within folkloristics of "material culture," "folklore" (as limited to folk literature and folksong), and "folklife." The categories suggested above are not absolutes: many studies, particularly those that incorporate an ethnographic element, cross all three, as text informs spectacle (Porter 1999) and material culture (Roth 2003), and so forth. These are studies primarily of fan cultures (Byrne 1987; Hills 2002; Ladenheim 1987; Tye 1987).

For stand-up comedy, again we find ourselves in an indeterminate place between mediated and intimate cultures. Stand-up comedy is inherently folkloric, as it is performed in front of an immediate audience. The economics of stand-up comedy, however, are directed towards turning live performances into objects – something which

is not subject to further variation that can be sold as a commodity and broadly disseminated through distributive or redistributive networks.⁴ But unlike the immediate analogue of musical recordings, which for the most part are recorded in studios and which can be reworked into something approaching the ideal version from the perspective of the artist and producer, stand-up comedy recordings are based on live performances. They may be selected from a number of versions to create the best one,⁵ but they contain within themselves the manner in which they have already been received: there is laughter, applause, heckles, and all other manifestations of audience reaction. They both record and suggest response. The immediate products of stand-up comedy are proto-ethnographic, as they include text, texture, and context (Dundes 1964).

Stand-up comedy products, when viewed through the lenses of popular culture studies, have already been subjected to some form of active reception: as such, they are more difficult to classify as hegemonic or counter-hegemonic. On one level, comedy brings with it an aura of counter-hegemony, as humour is one means to the revelation of inconsistency within a system. At another level, as comedy builds on exoticic assumptions, it can strengthen cohesion within a group by "othering" those outside it, and

⁴ This is not to suggest that stand-up comedians make more money through sales of recordings than they do through live performances: however, mass-mediation, whether it be through albums, television appearances, radio appearances, websites, or through appearance in other performance genres (notably television and film), leads to a greater name recognition and potentially larger audiences and markets and / or higher ticket prices.

⁵ Ron James' *Quest for the West* (2005*) was filmed over two nights (19 & 20 Sept. 2005): it aired as one performance, and there was an extended "performer's cut" of the same show created for when it was released on DVD. Mitch Hedberg's *Comedy Central Presents* (1999*) performance was 22 minutes, edited down and rearranged from the 45 minutes originally filmed (both the released version and the unedited performance were released on Hedberg 2003*). Such is not always the case: as often as not, the performances that are mass-mediated are based solely on one live performance. They are also sometimes explicitly marketed as such: Jerry Seinfeld's *I'm Telling You for the Last Time* (1998a*), Robin Williams' *Live on Broadway* (2002*) and George Carlin's *Life is Worth Losing* (2005*) were all broadcast live on HBO: each was preceded by an extended tour to hone the act (see Ressler 1998). For more of this discussion, see Chapters 8 and 9.

as such can just as easily serve hegemonic interests. They are small-group focussed and, as it were, filtered, but they aim at broader dissemination. There are narrowcast aspects to its distribution but, from the individual comedian's perspective, not necessarily to its original intention.

Peter Narváez and Martin Laba have elucidated a folklore and popular culture continuum (1986b:1). This model places at one end artistic expressions within a small and intimate group (folklore), of which "the spatial and social distances between performers and audiences [...] is (sic) slight or non-existent and there tends to be a high degree of performer-audience interaction." At the other end of this model are the artistic expressions transmitted through technological means to or in mass societal contexts, with attendant "significant spatial and social distances between performers and audiences." Their model therefore focuses on differences of neither content nor socio-economic class but on group size and medium of transmission:

[Artistic] communication within small groups (folklore) and mass societies (popular culture) may be understood as polar types spanned by a complex continuum of different sized groups in which communications are transmitted via various configurations of sensory and technological media. (Narváez and Laba 1986b:1)

By suggesting the continuum model, one navigates through some of the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies of the various approaches to popular culture. First of all, if one positions "folk group" as one's basic element of the model, one begins with a model that has as its focus notions of similarity but not homogeneity: there are factors shared, and one can rightly talk about the group as a whole, without disallowing the possibility of further complexities to one's analysis. Second, as groups are defined by their common factors, one can use the cultural product as the common factor: it is not directly the product per se that makes for a common factor but the experience of the

cultural product; it is not blue jeans, but the experience of blue jeans; it is not the films of Adam Sandler, but the experience of the films of Adam Sandler, which make for the common factors of groups in terms of popular culture. Furthermore, small groups are no less operating within the context of small-scale hegemonic pressure – the weight of “tradition,” the local “institution” however defined – as are large scale, mass groups: the same patterns of resistance and the self-awareness of interstitiality that appear within folk contexts repeat themselves in macro-contexts. Lastly, as any study of culture beyond the statistical or theoretical eventually must return to the actual reception of the cultural product within a real context, popular culture studies can only ever ultimately be framed within small-group contexts.

Such an approach also seeks to address the issue of what defines “the people.” As folklorists have struggled to define “the folk,” they ultimately dispensed with pedantic nominalism and defined folklore as any artistic and / or intimate communication in small groups. A group that can be identified as such has an integrity all its own. When attention is turned back to the large-scale group, integrity becomes a nebulous issue: the lack of intimacy and spatial contiguity between performer and audience, particularly in mass-mediated performances, and the attendant indeterminateness of the intended audience, tend to break down the group integrity ideal. One of the performer’s (or performance team’s) responsibilities is to create intimacy through her performance, overcoming the obstacle of unidirectionality and distance.

Despite the large formal structures responsible for its broad dissemination – culture industries, as it were – stand-up comedy is the “product” of individual creators and performers: along the folklore-popular culture continuum, it begins firmly at the

folklore “end” as it is performed within an intimate small-group context, and, unlike other popular culture products commodified by cultural industries, it explicitly retains that small-group frame, by including a record of its reception. To lose sight of the initial performance context – including the audience, which indicates the primary group for whom the performance is intended – is anathema to stand-up comedy research.

Professional and Amateur

One of the further distinctions to be made when discussing the applicability of folklore study to stand-up comedy is the commercial aspect of the latter. There are distinctions to be made between the amateur and the professional, but this distinction is not made merely on the basis of performance competency. Rather, there are separate expectations for each, of which performance competency is but one. Just as important is the active cultivation of cumulative reputation and goodwill by the performer, in a manner similar to that described by Neil Rosenberg (1986) in relation to country musicians.

In “Big Fish, Small Pond: Country Musicians and Their Markets,” Rosenberg proposes a model through which one can understand the complex relationship between purely avocational performers and those for whom performance is an occupation (153-57). The distinction of amateur and professional has, in Rosenberg’s experience of country musicians, an emic connotation of the latter lacking in musicianship: should that lack be shown to be demonstrably false, the emic distinction is maintained by identifying the professional not in terms of musicianship but in terms of being an “entertainer,” one whose skills transcend that of mere musical ability. Ron James distinguishes “having the goods” of being funny from “having the balls” of working at professionalism:

I don't know if I did this
 observation before
 but I just do it for my own *volition* rather than an *audience*
 I do it to let them *know* that it didn't happen overnight
 I do this phrase to let them *know*
 that it's been a *long road* since I was funny in university or high school
 or my *kitchen*
 | I've shared the stage with the illegitimate spawn of the Charles Manson clan
 who came down from the Topanga Canyon warrens with their poetry and
 prose
 lookin' for the love that Charlie never *gave* |
 I wanted them to *know* that it just wasn't
 | *Oh fuck*
 that's the guy who was funny in *high school* and *university*
 look where he is *now* |
 and *everybody*
thinks that
 and
 it just wasn't ...
 it just wasn't that *way*
 I had the goods but a *lot* of people had the goods
 but a lot of people didn't have the *balls* (James 2005a)

These transcending skills concern the cultivation of reputation. Rosenberg offers four categories of occupational performer, which are to be understood more as points along a continuum. The first is "apprentice," wherein technical proficiency – already assumed prior to the decision to shift from avocational to occupational – is honed in conjunction with a growing competency and fluency with the group's ideals of performance and its repertoire. Eventually, the musician develops a style and repertoire which is recognisable as genetically related to established modes but which is simultaneously distinct. This second category is "journeyman," wherein the individual's mastery of and potential contribution to the artistic realm is recognised; he or she is actively sought out as having an identifiable sound. It is at this stage that distinct repertoire development leads to the performer also becoming a songwriter. In time the personal accomplishments and abilities of the performer become so well known to the

audience that individual repertoire and perhaps even skill become less important. The performer has become a "craftsman," when it is the person and the personality more than that person's abilities that people come to see: "his repertoire may include eclectic as well as unique elements, for his audience accepts him in personal terms" (157). At the opposite end of the continuum from apprentice is the "celebrity," one who is well-known for being well-known.

Rosenberg also considered how these various categories along a notoriety spectrum are affected by market size, which he again breaks down into four ideal types along a spectrum, each of which subsumes the ones before it: local, regional, national, and international. The impetus is for the professional musician to move into larger and larger markets. As market sizes increase, the musician undergoes a drop in status, as the collective notoriety garnered in a smaller market will only take him or her so far. The regional craftsman becomes a national journeyman; a local journeyman becomes a regional apprentice, and so forth. Implicit in this drop in status (but not expanded by Rosenberg) is a requirement to familiarise oneself with the ideals of performance and repertoire of groups no longer defined by face-to-face interaction but by ever-increasingly broader forms of mass-mediation.

A baseline of worldview less defined by locality than by the inertia and precedence of the popular tradition itself needs to be understood before one can be idiosyncratic and unique, as one needs to comprehend what, precisely, one is idiosyncratic *to*. When a larger market is understood as an amalgam of constituent smaller markets, each with widely varying tastes, and with a commensurately greater reliance on the "delivery" of performance through broadcasting and recordings, the

professional musician must be willing to alter style and repertoire in the direction of maximum generality. Finally, one of the distinctions between both an amateur and a professional and the various tiers of professionalism is the skilful use of the media to aid in reputation cultivation.

There are two qualifications for the immediate applicability of Rosenberg's model to stand-up comedy: firstly, whereas the musician may require an apprenticing stage in which technique is honed, and group expectations of performance and group repertoire are learned, for the comedian, with its emphasis on novelty and "originality," the requirement to develop new texts necessitates writing his or her own material from the very beginning. Secondly, whereas for the musician the penetration of larger markets – reputation establishment – comes primarily through broadcasting and sales of studio-recorded music, and only secondarily and infrequently face-to-face interaction (i.e., distance precludes a constant interaction between audience and performer in all markets), the comedian's main form of market penetration stems from the broadcasting and sales of live recordings which were recorded in a specific locale. These performances have a "double-market" context: they must in some manner operate within the immediate specific expectations of the specific audience present at the venue, while simultaneously operating within the mediated general expectations of an intended but unknown audience. Neither of the qualifications, I feel, precludes the use of Rosenberg's paradigm for the present purposes.

Summary Conclusions

By virtue of its interdisciplinarity, folkloristics has historically borrowed concepts and approaches from a wide array of disciplines to shed light on its object proper,

informal interaction in small-group contexts. This chapter has laid out several of the more general approaches that this thesis will use to explore stand-up comedy. I then turned to the issue of genre and the forms of talk that stand-up comedians engage in.

Most stand-up comedy implies a level of performed autobiography. At first one gives some of that biography through an explicit introduction, but over a comedian's career some form of persona is established, mostly concerning the life lived offstage or off the road. It is one of the factors which further makes material unique to the performer and harder to transfer across repertoires. Furthermore, returning audience members bring a foreknowledge of this persona to subsequent performances, and a framework for how to interpret a specific performance is already established. The intimacy of the performance style makes intimates of the performer and audience: even for the unknown comedian just starting out, the ultimate goal is this establishment of intimacy.

If these last two chapters have been arguing the analogies between stand-up comedy and vernacular forms of talk, the next part begins to introduce the differences. Once there is a distancing between teller and listener and once the performance becomes less ephemeral, the media of that distancing – from something as simple as a stage to something like digital distribution of performances – changes the talk. Part Two first looks at the formal characteristics of a stand-up comedy performance, how the stage and the microphone increase and bridge distance respectively, and how they influence the form of talk that happens on that stage. I then move to discussing other ways the stand-up comedian creates intimacy with an audience by bridging not the spatial but the social distance between them.

PART TWO: DISTANCE BEGINS: CREATING INTIMACY

We go out naked.

Johnny Carson

Throughout this work I have been maintaining that stand-up comedy is a form of talk that on the surface is more or less indistinguishable in potency from everyday forms of vernacular discourse. Much of stand-up comedy's appeal is precisely its contiguity with small group talk, as opposed to oratorical or theatrical modes. Stand-up comedy is certainly a "performance," but much more in keeping with "styling and profiling" (Bell 1983:33-36) and the performances studied within sociolinguistics (Hymes 1975) than the performances of the conservatory and proscenium. The expressive or artistic patterning of everyday talk falls under the purview of folkloristics. Nevertheless, the study of stand-up comedy as a form cannot consist of a wholesale application of the tools and genres available to the folklorist without taking into account that which distinguishes it from everyday talk.

Much of the rest of this work operates within the "folklore and popular culture continuum" framework as described in Chapter 2. Narváez and Laba's model (1986b) suggests that spatiotemporal distance between performer and audience is the principal distinguishing marker between folk and popular performance, and that the various media of transmission are connectors between audience and performer.

The next chapter concerns the separation of performer and audience through the use of a stage, and how the microphone subsequently bridges that distance and returns the talk to the intimacy of face-to-face encounter. The following three chapters cover how the comedian bridges the socio-cultural distance that is typically there, the consequence of

the professional comedian's itinerant life. It ends with a denouement on how the stand-up comedian, both of professional necessity and by virtue of being "trapped" in this social identity, can never fully bridge that distance, as there is always the expectation of being an outsider.

Chapter 3: Where is the Stand-Up Comedian? Stand-Up on Stage

Some people think I'm *high* on stage
 I would never get high before a show
 because when I'm *high*
 I don't wanna stand in front of a bunch of people I
 don't know [L]
 that does not sound *comfortable* [L]
 like when you're high and a joke doesn't work it's
 extra scary
 it's like | whoa what the hell happened there [L]
 I am retreating within *myself* [L]
 why have all these people *gathered* [L]
 and why am I *elevated* [L]
 why am I not facing the same way as everyone else
 [L]
 and what is this *electric stick* in my hand | [L]
 I like the way
 this is *situated* here
 it seems like you guys were *chasing* me
closing in
 and then said | fuck it let's sit down |

Mitch Hedberg

We experience through our senses – taste, touch, smell, sound, sight – and to be present to a thing allows for the potential of experiencing that thing with all senses. When that thing is a person, we are approaching intersubjectivity and intimacy. Spatial and temporal proximity – “being there” – is our assurance of authenticity, much like courts privilege eye-witness accounts and dismiss hearsay (Auslander 1998). For performances, being there allows us to avail ourselves of all our senses for the interpretive act of understanding and judging it, and not having some experiences cut off from us by an intermediary. And in stand-up comedy, which is dialogic in form, there is a requirement for the immediate presence of someone at the comedian's performance to react and thus

move the performance along.

This chapter looks at the various mediations of stand-up comedy performance that still imply the spatio-temporal co-location of performer and audience, and the experience of the live event.

The "Unmediated" Performance

We can take as our baseline, one theoretical end of our continuum model, the unmediated performance. "Unmediated" is a misnomer, of course, a conceit for our model: language is a medium, as is tone and gesture, and costume and stance. But we allow, in our ideal-type, for the possibility of an immediate and spontaneous coding and decoding of linguistic, paralinguistic, and kinesic symbols between performer and audience.

Robert A. Georges names these complex communicative events "storytelling events" (1969:316). His model for understanding the storytelling event builds on several postulates. First, it is a communicative event: for every event there is at least one "encoder" (performer) and at least one "decoder" (audience member), between whom there is direct, person-to-person communication, and who communicate through a coded message, utilizing linguistic, paralinguistic, and kinesic codes transmitted through audio and visual channels, which generate continuous perceptual responses interpreted by performer and audience as feedback (317). Second, it is a social experience, wherein participants establish a set of identity relationships and assume social identities for the purposes of the event: one as "storyteller" (again, for our purposes, performer), and at least one as "story listener" (audience member). This matching set of reciprocal identities is "selected from among multiple social identities of the social personas of the

participants in the storytelling event,” and during the event becomes the most prominent (318). It is the performer’s responsibility and the audience’s right that the message is formulated, encoded, and transmitted in accordance to socially prescribed rules shared by all participants in the event; simultaneously, it is the performer’s right and the audience’s responsibility that it is received, decoded, and responded to thus. The event has social uses, which can be articulated by participants, and social functions, which can be inferred through analysis. Although each storytelling event is unique, events can exhibit degrees and kinds of similarities, which allow for members of a society to group together certain storytelling events (319).

Implicit in Georges’ model is the plasticity of the assumption of particular social identities for the participants: at another moment, if the social use or social function warrants it, the assumed identities of performer and audience member can be switched. One can easily imagine a session of “swapping stories,” wherein the identities of storyteller and story listener are continually reversed. At the same time, folklorists have long recognised the position accorded members of groups who have a certain mastery over both the group’s repertoire and its preferred mode of aesthetic patterning and whose presumptive identity as storyteller may be an *a priori* in any group interaction. Furthermore, with reference both to the social use and social function of storytelling events and the multiplicity “of social identities of the social personas of the participants,” certain other reciprocal social identity pairings – Georges gives the example of father and son – may determine the assumption of the storyteller identity. Nevertheless, in our ideational model, there is nothing that inherently limits the assumption of particular identities to particular participants, as the distinction between performer and audience

member is one that lasts only for the duration of the storytelling event itself.

As it is a professional activity, the plasticity of this model does not immediately apply to stand-up comedy. There is no sense of anticipation that the performer and the audience member will actually switch roles, nor that the distinction between performer and audience member is mere happenstance. However, as the talk that is performed on stage aims at replicating this intimacy and informality, it can be retained as not only a model for one end of our folk and popular culture continuum but also as an aspirational model for subsequent performances.

The Stage

“Stage” could be understood in one of two ways. Ostensibly, any place where any type of performance is taking place could be called a stage. The performances of everyday life, as described in the dramaturgic analysis of Erving Goffman (1959), determine by context what specific areas are considered front stage, backstage, offstage, etc. Specialised stages (for example, commercial establishments such as restaurants) may develop over time that help to facilitate the impression management and control of the situation required for such interactions. Similarly, as one shifts from interacting behaviours to performances that are expressly and intentionally artistic, ludic, affective behaviours, participants, both performer(s) and audience, may position themselves in a manner which, through kinesic and proxemic codes, indicates the audience’s collective focus on the performer. In his study of English monologue traditions, Kenneth Goldstein notes how the monologist

invariably stands up to perform, thus rising above the seated audience, or, if the members of the group are all standing, then the performer draws back. Both actions serve to establish the social and dramatic distance

required for the performance and to explicitly indicate the separate and distinct roles of the parties to the interaction. (1976:10)

In these instances stages are ad hoc, temporary spatial distinctions between performer and audience which disappear at the end of the performance event.

The stage as meant for our purposes is a concrete and physical entity. They are pragmatic concessions to the size of the group present or potentially present for the performance: it would be unwieldy for a crowd to rearrange itself spontaneously to give focus to one individual. Sight lines and the projection of sound – increasingly problematic issues as the crowd gets larger – are further issues.

A dedicated space solves these problems, but alters the nature of the performance. Most immediately, the stage makes formal the distinction between performer and audience. Such a distinction is the catalyst for I. Sheldon Posen's "cultural schizophrenia" when he reflects on the "authenticity" of the folksong revival of the early 1970s and his own involvement in the Mariposa Folk Festival (Posen 1993:128; 134). In a different context, Dick Hebdige notes how the ideology of professorial authority and the hierarchical relationship between teacher and taught is naturalised through the layout of the lecture theatre, wherein the unidirectional flow of information is dictated by "benches rising in tiers before a raised lectern" (1979:12). George Carlin, in "Goofy Shit" from *Toledo Window Box*, speaks to the minimised participation of the audience that the stage engenders:

Yes you *are* in this you can say *anything* you like
 you don't have a lot of *lines* granted right on
 you have to think of them but...
 it's often hard for me to *understand* them
 because oddly enough these places were built for the voices to go | *that*
 way | [L]

and what / hear is | {distorted sounds like a record played backwards} |
 [L→A]
 I have to turn around and hear | {angry} "get off there you asshole" | [L]

By making such a distinction there is effected a movement from "performance" to what Milton Singer has called "cultural performance" (1972), or, in Richard Bauman's formulation, a conception of performance

as a specially marked mode of action, one that sets up or represents a special interpretive frame within which the act of communication is to be understood. In this sense of performance, the act of communication is put on display, objectified, lifted out to a degree from its contextual surroundings, and opened up to scrutiny by an audience. Performance thus calls forth special attention to and heightened awareness of the act of communication and gives license to the audience to regard it and the performer with special intensity. Performance makes one communicatively accountable; it assigns to an audience the responsibility of evaluating the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's accomplishment. (Bauman 1992:44)

As a stage facilitates the signalling of such a performance, one which is of a different order from face-to-face, "unmediated" performances, the kinesic codes and proxemic codes of being on or off the stage also serve to change the expectations of the performance event from both the performer's and audience's perspective. As Johnny Carson put it, "You were *different* from other people. You were up on the stage and they were sitting down here, and there's a certain, I don't know if you want to call it... power, but it makes you different" (Carson 1979). Their interlocking nexus of rights and responsibilities as suggested by Georges is supplemented with a tacit testing of the performer's assumption of the storytelling identity.

For example, the rap artist Ice-T, interviewed for the Comedy Central series *Heroes of Black Comedy*, expressed it this way: "Every black man got a little comedy streak in him: all of us think we can shoot the dozens and say something funny. So, it's

almost like, when you hit the stage at the Apollo [Theatre in Harlem] or something, the audience is like, [crossing arms defiantly] ‘*Make me laugh*’” (Ice-T 2002*). In an unmediated performance, should the performer fail to live up to his or her responsibilities, the performance would simply dissolve, with focus shifted elsewhere. With the introduction of the stage, the intensity of the focus on the performer is such that, should that same failure occur, the performance cannot simply dissolve: the stage accentuates the failure.

Nevertheless, within stand-up comedy the intent is to retain both the connection with the audience and the notion of the stage as a concession to performance, and not a divisive structure. In an interview which appears as a special feature on the DVD of *The Original Kings of Comedy* (Lee 2000*), Cedric the Entertainer describes his style:

When I go on stage I try to take the energy of
this is all my living room
all these people my friends
and I’m just up here *entertaining* them
for a few minutes (Lee 2000*: “Bonus Scenes”)

Staging

Staging for the stand-up comedy performance is minimal. Typically, there is a stool, a microphone stand, and a neutral backdrop.

The backdrop is either a blank wall (frequently brick) or a curtain. At times, there are more elaborate backdrops, but they tend to be abstract or impressionistic. In the case of specific comedians, there may be some attempt to indicate something of the particular comedian’s worldview,¹ but the economics of touring often prohibit anything so

¹ The staging for D.L. Hughley’s *Goin’ Home* concert (1999*) is essentially a recreation of a Southern black home, and for his final routine (“Come Home With Me”) he provides a vernacular ethnography of the

elaborate. Furthermore, comedy performance spaces, either permanent ones like comedy clubs or temporary ones like theatres, are more often than not going to be shared by more than one comedian over the course of an evening: anything too idiosyncratic would be ultimately counter-productive to one or more of them.

Most historians of North American stand-up comedy trace its origins to vaudeville, burlesque, and variety theatre (Franklin 1979; Mintz 1977; 1998; Stebbins 1990). The names that are often invoked as antecedents of stand-up comedy include the Marx Brothers, WC Fields, Jimmy Durante, Burns and Allen, and so forth. While their influence is present, particularly in reference to the anarchic, surreal, or absurdist nature of some stand-up comedy performances, stylistic antecedents would be found more in the masters-of-ceremonies for variety shows. As an intermediary between audience and act, and as "filler" between acts, they had the onus of responding to audience reaction, smoothing over any adverse reactions, and contextualising the following act, all done with a drawn curtain behind them.²

Within the coffee house circuit, the aesthetic was based in part on the reclamation of found space: basements, in particular, in Greenwich Village were popular due to their being inexpensive. In Eric Lax's biography of Woody Allen (1992), Art D'Lugoff, owner and founder of the Village Gate, is quoted as saying:

Where I settled was a rather reasonable place because no one else wanted to go there and I got a decent price for a big space. There was a tradition

home, using the set as referent. For the first five minutes of Damon Wayans' *The Last Stand?* (1990*) – during which he performs a routine about the danger of doing comedy for the money and becoming 'safe' for white audiences – there is a mural suspended from the rafters that depicts other African-American comedians, both contemporary and forebears. The mural is withdrawn at the end of the routine, although no explicit mention is made of it.

² For an interesting parallel, see Gelo 1999 on the role of the master of ceremonies at intertribal powwow events.

of coffee shops from the old country that continued. Midtown had nothing like it. The area was ripe for something to happen culturally and the business could support itself. Folk music was self-contained; there was not a big expensive group to pay. (Lax 1992:144-45)

Max Gordon, founder of the Village Vanguard, recounts a similar economic rationale for the basement locales of his own club (1980:19-25).

The original look, albeit born from an economic need, was perpetuated by the interrelatedness of class consciousness and “authenticity” in the folk revivalist movement. Robert Cantwell, in “When We Were Good: Class and Culture in the Folk Revival” (1993), provides a history of this interrelatedness and frames it in part in terms of “style” (39).³ Eric Lax writes that “The bare-brick-wall backdrop for the acts that is so common in clubs today was first used at the Bitter End” (145). Contemporary stand-up comedy clubs, including chains like Yuk-Yuks, intentionally install brick facades as part of the décor. The brick wall for the comedy stage has reached the point where it is now iconographic for stand-up comedy: and one notes its metonymic use in *The Simpsons*,⁴ and in packaging for books (Carter 1989; Sankey 1998); albums (Regan 1997*; Rock 1997*; 1999b*), and videos (*Best of the Improv Vol. 1* 2001*; *Laughing Out Loud* 2003*).

In both instances, the curtain and the brick wall, the impression created is that of performance abstracted from any artifice. If it is theatre, it is theatre removed from any of its trappings, with nothing intruding on the intimacy between audience and performer. “It is often stripped bare of any competing symbology [...], so that the talk itself is

³ See also Everett 2003:343 for a discussion of the “earthy, casual look” in the folk revival scene. Dress is discussed at 173ff.

⁴ See, for example, Daniels 1994*; Cary 1988*; and Frink and Don Payne 2002*).

highlighted as the dominant symbol” (French 1998:90-91). Similarly, in Rachel Lee’s study of Margaret Cho the “focus [is] on the literal site of performance (the bare stage) as a space of assemblages, as a platform for revealing the body’s infirm boundaries and borders as well as its embeddedness in histories of migration” (2004:109). Ron James, lamenting how comedy on television is presented, told me in interview that “you know what you should be concentrating on? What’s being said” (James 2005a).

The stool, although it can on occasion be used as a prop, more or less serves its utilitarian function. It can double as a table, but is principally used as a seat, even though sitting is just as often a piece of stagecraft as it is a concession to tiredness.

I see we ah
we have a *stool* here
that’s good
comedians work for
what
half an hour a *day*
but we might want to take a *break* at any time [L]
I guess the message here is *don’t* underestimate our laziness (Barker 2008*)

The Microphone

The last object, once one considers the stage and the stool, is the microphone. All three are part of the “found landscape” of a comedy performance: their presence as utilitarian objects is not only not a contradiction of the abstraction and minimalism of the stage but also an *a priori* for and a convention of the genre.

The Microphone I: Amplification

The microphone serves a basic function: amplification. Through it one is able to transcend the acoustic limitations of physical space and have one’s voice projected without recourse to shouting. It makes one loud without forcing one to be loud. As such,

it changes the nature of what one says and how one says it. The medium of the microphone, therefore, not only alters the stand-up comedy performance but also allows for new expressive forms to take place on the stage.

Parallels can be drawn to other forms of expressive behaviour. In his 1965 article "An Introduction to Bluegrass," L. Mayne Smith writes of the requirements for bluegrass musicians to orient themselves in relation to a microphone. Bluegrass music blends banjo, mandolin, guitar, dobro, fiddle and string bass, with instruments taking turns at lead. Although all the instruments are acoustic, there is need for amplification not for the general purpose of being heard in a large venue but also so that naturally quieter instruments can be heard and not overpowered by the louder instruments playing alongside.

An important part of any bluegrass musician's skill is his ability to maintain the proper relationship, spatially and thus aurally, with the rest of the band and the microphone. A bluegrass band carefully gears its movements and its music to the microphone, and its techniques of integrating voices and instruments as a unified ensemble depend on the use of that device, for without the microphone to give it prominence, the lead part cannot stand out. (254)

Neil Rosenberg reiterates this point with his assertion that "Bluegrass depends upon the microphone, and this fact has shaped its sound" (1985:6). Bluegrass, then, is a musical style where the impression given is of simplicity of style (albeit with proficiency of musicianship) but with a highly developed understanding of the use of microphone as instrument. It is a style which emerges with the advent of the technology, and cannot exist without it.

Singing is the area which has been most closely scrutinized with respect to the effect of the microphone. Paula Lockheart writes, in her article on the history of early microphone singing, that with the introduction of the microphone in both broadcasting

and live performance,

[The] volume, pitch range, and vocal production of both the men and the women became closer to that of their conversational speech, and the presentation of text became more like that of conversational American English in pronunciation and phrasing. (2003:380)

Simon Frith, in *Performing Rites*, indicates how

[The] microphone made it possible for singers to make musical sounds – soft sounds, close sounds – that had not really been heard before in terms of public performance [...]. The microphone allowed us to hear people in ways that normally implied intimacy – the whisper, the caress, the murmur. (187)

Robert O'Meally notes that Billie Holiday, "whether in clubs or on recording dates, [...] continued to deliver her lyrics as if only for one or two listeners whom she addressed face to face" (1991:32). Roy Shuker summarises the affect of microphones by describing how it "revolutionised the practice of popular singing, as vocalists could now address listeners with unprecedented intimacy" (2001:52).

The spoken word has similarly been studied in terms of amplification. Amanda Dargan and Steve Zeitlin in their work on street vendors write how, "Today many market vendors use microphones which make rhythm and rhyme more important than the use of falsetto and vowel sounds to throw the voice" (1983:6). Both Lockheart (2003) and Peter Narváez (1986) have written on the use of the microphone by politicians to create an "intimate" connection: Lockheart on the "Fireside chats" of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Narváez on Joey Smallwood and his ability to address a crowd through the public address based on his experience as a broadcaster. John Szwed draws comparisons between Miles Davis' use of the microphone, Frank Sinatra, and Konstantin Stanislavsky:

Sinatra, the man they called "The Voice," phrased conversationally, closely, at moderate volume, emphasizing words rather than melody. He

stretched vowels and de-emphasized consonants, allowing musical phrases to extend beyond their normal length. Moving into and away from the microphone, shifting position in relation to the hearer and the band, Sinatra learned to avoid the sibilants and pops of microphone use. At the peak of his career, he could record in a studio with a 25-piece orchestra and a hundred guests and still make it sound intimate. Like [Orson] Welles and Sinatra, Davis grasped the potential of the microphone to set the body free. He sensed that a mike could be used like a close-up lens in motion pictures, focusing and amplifying small gestures and emotions, making histrionics and grand stagecraft unnecessary. With a microphone, singers and musicians could join the new naturalistic stage rhetoric that was developing in the wake of the Russian director Stanislavsky's plea that actors should cease portraying emotions to the audience and begin communicating them directly. In the same era when audiences were becoming accustomed to closer and more intimate looks at actors on film, the mike removed the need for musicians and singers to struggle to close the physical distance between themselves and the audience. (2002:188)

Kate Augestad likewise notes the cross-over between naturalistic speech and singing:

The microphone invited a different way of pronouncing the words, a more clear diction and a new singing style that came to reflect the *vernacular of everyday-like speech*. Microphonic singing enabled a *speech-like voice* production to be used [...] Singing that comes close to speaking seems to signal something popular, something trustworthy, something everyday-like. One often sees that the most popular singers are those who manage to combine a speech-like way of singing with a kind of natural, but subdued virtuosity, in an easy recognisable form of competence that still comes forward as something extraordinary in its ordinariness. (2004:46-48, emphasis in original)

There is not that much written, all told, on the microphone and/or amplification within the context of live performance. The emphasis is typically on either recording or broadcasting. Barring technical discussions, one of the principal points made about the use of the microphone is that, through projecting the human voice at its natural register, either through space in the case of live broadcasting or through time and space through recordings or the broadcasting thereof, an illusion of intimacy can be created despite those space/time distances. What is only alluded to is how this restoration of intimacy is

also possible in large-scale theatre contexts. A performer can be heard within a room without recourse to shouting: he or she can talk in a manner commensurate with one-on-one communication.

Just as “red hot mama” vocal stylings gave way to crooning, the use of amplification allowed for comic performances that did not rely on being heard above a crowd. Short one-liners could give way to longer pieces. Whispers, mutterings, and going off on tangents become possible again. As Allison McCracken wrote about crooners, they “not only did not project their voices in traditional ways, but they also chatted with their listeners; they created an identifiable personality” (1999:392). So too could the comedian: a patter could be built up which was not simply a stream of jokes but an interplay of genres. The reaction garnered from the crowd did not need to be exclusively laughter: a proposition could be put forth, which could elicit a reaction from the crowd, which could then in turn be developed and defended. The comedy performance thus became a creation of both performer and the audience.

DoVeanna Fulton alludes to this collaboration between comedian and audience with respect to the performances on *Def Comedy Jam*, a series of comedy performances produced by Russell Simmons of Def Jam Records and originally broadcast on the cable channel HBO.

“Def Comedy Jam” is an extraction of the hip-hop scene: its setting, music, performers, and audience are all part of the contemporary rap arena. The stage is set very close to the audience so that comics are neither at a distance from nor at an exaggerated level above them. This setting engenders a sense of community and familiarity. Indeed, instead of the usual monologue that comedians normally present in stand-up comic situations, this setting allows for the comics to carry on a dialogue with the audience. Comedians often ask questions of the audience, and the answers are heard by nearly everyone. This dialogue is a form of African American oral tradition of call and response, which is quite different from the

hecklers mainstream comedians may encounter. Although hecklers are generally an undesirable, but often expected, aspect of stand-up comic routines, the call and response of "Def Comedy Jam" is an essential element of African American dialogic performances. (2004:87-88)⁵

Although this newly available intimacy between performer and audience does not have the exclusive unidirectionality of a broadcast or a recording, where the audience may be an active or passive listener but cannot alter the performance (as is discussed below), neither is there the potential for the switching of assumed identities of performer and audience member that Georges suggests. In the relationship between performer and audience, power resides with the performer. Deborah Wong makes a similar argument about the relationship between the microphone and power in her discussion of a Vietnamese-American rapper:

His rap is emphatically about the eye/I, the process of defining a self. In performance, his hands are constantly in motion; one grips the defining microphone, the other points again and again to himself: *I have the microphone, I'm an Asian, I will be hard to kill*. But this is of course only half of the dynamic. As often as he gestures toward himself, redefining and positioning himself, he then points to the audience—the defining listener. (Wong 1994:164)

But the amplified performer's voice literally overpowers that of any one member of the audience. Wong goes on to make this same point concerning the general allure of karaoke among Asian and subsequently Asian-American populations: the control over artistic production, even mimetic performance, is made explicit through use of the microphone. The more the audience operates as a collective, the less it can articulate its position with any precision or nuance. Stebbins notes how "One [source of control] is the

⁵ Although her point about the intensity of the interchanges between audience and performer on *Def Comedy Jam* is well made, I disagree with her generalisation about "the usual monologue that comedians normally present in stand-up comic situations." I believe that she is using the television appearance in a variety show as the basis for her understanding of a "usual" monologue.

electronically amplified voice, against which it is difficult for patrons to compete” (1990:56), while Frith, again in reference to the sung voice, observes that “the microphone allows the voice to dominate other instruments whatever else is going on” (1996:188). The microphone, in conjunction with the stage, allows for the performer to control the situation by continually drawing focus to him- or herself.

The Microphone 2: Sonic manipulation

Insofar as the microphone is an instrument, vocal performers not only work around but also exploit the limitations of the technology. As was mentioned above, part of the way the microphone changed the nature of the performance was the newfound ability to speak at a natural register and nevertheless be heard. The inverse to this is the occasional need for the performer to speak outside of a natural register, whether in a whisper or scream, and maintain a more or less consistent volume level. This is typically achieved through the simple act of drawing towards or away from the microphone. At times, the distancing is taken to an extreme. In *Raw*, Eddie Murphy leaves the microphone on the stand during a retelling of a heated argument at a night club; as he simultaneously distances himself and projects his voice away from the microphone, only snippets of talk are picked up and amplified, and the performance takes on the character of a dumb play.

Conversely, getting too close to the microphone introduces distortion, over-amplification, and additional reverberation. This is often used to great effect as a means of switching voice and employing characterisation, when the stand-up comedian is interjecting an authoritarian or contrarian characteristic to part of his or her text, an oral – and aural – parallel to the use of italics. In “Teenage Masturbation,” from *An Evening*

With Wally Londo Featuring Bill Slaszo (1975*), George Carlin drops his pitch and introduces distortion on the word “fantasised” when he says “we didn’t know that we *fantasised*, we thought we thought about people.” In “Travel Tips,” from his *Live at McCabe’s* album (1992b*), Henry Rollins recounts being molested while on a childhood trip to Greece: when his assailant first approaches with him the offer of a pack of gum, he asks the crowd, “What’s the big rule, everybody? *Don’t take candy from strangers*. You’ve got that one embedded in your head.” In either instance – moving away from or towards the microphone – the process of amplification and its “unnatural” presence are alluded to. Even when the comedian is quoting him- or herself in the context of a personal experience narrative, the use of this form of distortion is to indicate a voice other than the performer-narrator present to the audience.

Others have used the properties of microphone distortion to create sound effects. Michael Winslow has built a career around an uncanny ability to imitate various mechanical effects – notably gunfire and machine noise – using only the microphone. Bill Hicks had a routine wherein he would imitate Jimi Hendrix’s distorted electric guitar. In *Delirious*, Eddie Murphy imitates the sound of his aunt falling down the steps, interjected with her imprecations to Jesus to help. Andrew ‘Dice’ Clay, in one routine from his *Live at Madison Square Garden* concert (1991*), holds the microphone to his Adam’s apple to imitate the sound of someone talking with an electronic voice box. I asked Ron James, in my interview, why he had not made the move to hands-free microphones:

- IB In Halifax you had a microphone on a *stand*
 with a wire
 and each night you come out
 you take the mike off the stand
 you move it behind the stool
 RJ yeah

- IB and you don't really use the microphone as a *prop*
 you don't sort of.. really use its *amplification*
- RJ no
- IB its capabilities for *distortion*
 you don't use it as a makeshift *phallus* or anything
 um...
 have you ever thought of using *hand's free* mikes
- RJ yeah
- IB have you *done* so
- RJ yeah I did it in my first special *Shakey Town*
 cause it was a one man *show*
 beginning middle and an *end*
 it was more of a *theatrical* presentation
 and I think that I would ah...
 I just don't do that *now*
 because I've got to make the sound of the *fart*
 of the *Huns*⁶
 coming over the *altar*
- IB the *whoosh* sound
- RJ yeah
 so that's a *technical* response to that (James 2005a)

On *Class Clown* (1972b*), George Carlin makes admirable use of the *prima facie* function of the microphone by using it to amplify the sound of swallowing: holding the mike directly to his throat, he emphasises the two parts of the swallow, pausing between them for optimal effect.

Much as a performer without benefit of electronic amplification might change his or her voice through timbre, pitch, or volume, or supplement it with gesture and sound effects, the sonic qualities and limitations of the microphone provide the performer with further opportunities for vocal modification and supplementation. It is used sparingly, however, as it draws attention to the presence of artificial amplification and thus tends to be an irruption into the conversational and "natural" flow of the comedian's intimate talk.

⁶ "The Huns" refers to a routine set in 'the round Church' in Halifax, comparing the flatulence of the old Anglican ladies with mustard gas in the trenches of World War I.

The Microphone 3: Empowerment

It would be tempting to ascribe some totemic meaning to the microphone – a modern “talking stick,” as it were – but there is nevertheless ample evidence that the microphone is symbolic of the act of stand-up comedy itself. Just as the brick wall is metonym, so too is the microphone, and its use on book jackets (Borns 1987; Nachman 2003; Schwensen 2005), albums (Foxx 1997*; Rock 1997*; 1999b*; Seinfeld 1998b*), and videos (Rock 1999a; Seinfeld 1998a*; 2002*) to represent comedy is equally ubiquitous. The expression “on [or at] the mike” as a shorthand for the stand-up comedian’s life and work is a commonplace (Stebbins 1990:40; see also Bernie Mac’s use of the phrase in “The Kings of Comedy” episode of *Heroes of Black Comedy* [Billing and Upshall 2002*]). In his study of teddy boy, skinhead, and punk subcultures, Dick Hebdige discusses how the most mundane of objects can take on symbolic dimensions, “becoming a form of stigmata, tokens of a self-imposed exile [...] these objects become signs of forbidden identity” (1979 2-3).

Chris Rock provides an interesting example of the use of microphone as metonym: in addition to its conspicuous use on his album covers, part of his trademark is to drop the microphone to the ground at the end of a performance: when it is dropped, the performance is done, with the implication that it is never to be repeated. This derives from an early successful performance when he was starting out: Eddie Murphy was in the audience and asked to see Rock, who was the only African American comedian present. At the end of his set he half-dropped, half-threw the microphone to the floor (Quinn 2002*).

But perhaps the most explicit example of the microphone as representative of the

act of stand-up comedy is from Damon Wayans (1990*) in his HBO special *The Last Stand?*. Filmed at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem, on the final show of what was then to be his last stand-up comedy tour, he begins by telling the audience how it is to be his last performance, as he is doing comedy for money. In due course, he ends the performance, and smashes the microphone against the stage. The camera lingers on the electronic detritus.

If one wanted to take the totemic nature of the microphone seriously, one could also suggest that microphones are inherently phallic. Microphones as phalli are nothing new: John Hellmann, writing about the appropriation of blues terminology by the Rolling Stones, notes that, "in 'The Spider and the Fly,' [Mick] Jagger uses a common metaphor in the blues argot to spin a personal story of an after-show seduction, identifying himself as a leering spider seducing a willing fly who likes the way in which he holds his 'microphone'" (Hellmann 1973:371). Lesbian comic Marjorie Gross observed that the physical act of standing on stage holding a microphone is "like holding a penis" (Parker 2002:19). But the stand-up comedian occasionally takes the implicit and makes it explicit. The minimalism of the staging means that the comedian has few props at his or her disposal: the diegetic microphone can easily "become" a penis for illustrative purposes.

In *Raw* (1987*), Eddie Murphy describes an episode where "your woman" has gone down to the Bahamas in an effort to clear her head: as she walks along the beach, "all of a sudden / a dude named Dexter walks up / Dexter St. Jacques / who'll walk up swinging his dick." He then grabs the cord about two feet from the microphone and makes slow circles in front of him like he was swinging a watch on the end of a chain.

The action is repeated – a “call-back” – when it is revealed that the boyfriend is back in New York, and on a third occasion, when they are going back to his place to “just talk,” the same length of cord and microphone is slung over his shoulder. In Chris Rock’s *Bigger and Blacker* (1999a*), the microphone is tentatively and perfunctorily fellated as he describes “women that give you just enough head to shut you up.” Margaret Cho, in *I’m the One That I Want* (2000*), repeatedly grabs at a limply held microphone to illustrate the perils and consequences of the sexual relationship between two alcoholics. Stebbins notes the following occurrence:

One night the microphone suddenly sagged in its cradle, which brought American comic Jebb Fink an unexpected round of laughter and which he spontaneously prolonged with the tag: “Oh, the story of my life. It’s always going limp when I need it most.” (Stebbins 1990:92)

Microphones can be used as representations of non-phalluses, of course.⁷ David Cross uses his to emulate a bong in his performance on *HBO Comedy Half Hour* (1996*), while in Eddie Murphy’s *Delirious* concert (1983a*), it represents an ice cream cone. But the association with the microphone as phallus is strong. In the *Lenny Bruce Performance Film*, a documentary recording of one of Bruce’s last shows in 1965, he opens the show by grabbing the microphone and using it as an aspergillum (the rod used for sprinkling holy water). He then tells the audience that he likes to use that gesture, as it is an example of “eye of the beholder,” that only Catholics interpret it correctly. Later on in the performance, as he is recounting his court experiences for his obscenity trials, he alternately reads from court transcripts and explains them.

I tell [my attorney]

⁷ “[The microphone] can be removed from its stand to serve as a rope, a club, a penis [...], an electric shaver, and so on. Kenny Robinson, a Yuk Yuk’s headliner, briefly performs fellatio on it as part of his impersonation of Margaret Trudeau applying for a job” (Stebbins 1990:43).

| look one thing I want to make sure... | [inaudible]
 this was reported as
 | he took the microphone from the stand and he made... |
 well I'll read it to you.
 [...]
 | during the first performance Bruce fondled the microphone stand in a
 masturbatory fashion |
 okay now that was the same thing in Chicago
 all that it is the attorney for the people building his case
 because there's a part of the [model?] penal code test that says | and goes
 substantially beyond the customary limits of candour in description or
 representation |
 so
 | not only did the guy describe
 he represented
 he not only said *jack off* but he did it |
 that's where he's going with this
 I said
 | make sure to tell them it's a gesture of benediction not masturbation |
 I would never make gestures of masturbation 'cause I like ladies
 I'm concerned with my image and I know it offends chicks (Bruce 1992*)

Without sufficient context, the undercover officers testifying at his trial made the leap to the use of the microphone as penis. (See Collins and Skover 2002:141-188 for a detailed account of Bruce's Chicago obscenity trial.)

The microphone cord and the stand can also both be used. In addition to the Eddie Murphy *Raw* use already noted, George Carlin, during his *At USC* concert (1977a*), takes his lead from the whipping effect of a random tug on the cord and develops it into a sustained cord movement, with the ad lib "'Within the first few moments he had the snakes going.'" Henry Rollins, in his *Talking From the Box* performance (1992a*), begins by binding the microphone to his hand with the cord, a technique developed no doubt when he was the lead singer of the seminal Los Angeles punk band Black Flag. In the former instance the cord is a reality whose presence is adverted to by Carlin so that it can be subsequently forgotten. In the latter the cord is a part of a routinised prelude to a

performance, although it may be a consequence of affectation or habit.

In his *Wired and Wonderful* concert (2002*), Lee Evans begins his act *in medias res*, miming speech and then beginning half-way through a sentence, as if there had been a microphone malfunction. He then takes the stand, which in this instance is a goose-neck, and, while making appropriate sound effects, sprays the audience with machine-gun fire, before moving the stand to the side. Louie Anderson, a comedian whose short act in the early days was based more or less entirely on his being overweight, removed the mike from the stand and put it to one side, telling the audience that he was doing so “so you can see me” (Carter 2001:140). In such instances, the stand is an obstacle, the removal of which is incorporated into the comedian’s routine, either spontaneously or, in the case of Anderson, deliberately.

If one wishes to maintain the impression of pure performance, one must be careful to use discretion when utilising the found landscape. Steve Harvey, during his *One Man* special (1997*), only uses diegetic props once: when imitating the actions of a black man getting fired from a job, he overturns the stool and pushes the stand over. Margaret Cho’s phallic use of the microphone noted above is the only instance of its use as prop in an hour and a half long performance: for her *HBO Comedy Half Hour* show (1994*), she never removes the microphone from the stand, and touches it only to rest her hands during extended applause or laughter.

However, a problem with the physical reality of the microphone is how it interferes with the smooth performance of gesture. For performers who wish to incorporate more complex gestures, the microphone must on occasion return to the stand. In his routine about women and cheques (1990*), which begins with the microphone in

his hand, Jerry Seinfeld seamlessly brings the stand forward and returns the microphone to it in order to effect the “quick-draw gunslinger” pose for chequebook and identification, and then removes the microphone again and continues with less elaborate gestures. Removing the microphone from the stand typically implies the desire for additional movement around the stage: leaving it on the stand means staying in one spot. With the former, gesture is limited (while talking) to one hand: with the latter, two hands are possible. In combination, the comedian is allowed an ample freedom of movement.

The stand is also used for leaning on and other non-gestural kinesic movements. Dennis Miller rarely if ever removes the microphone from the stand: he will occasionally hold on to the stand, and sometimes will lean forward when emphasising a point, bringing the stand with him. Comedians will also sometimes simply fidget with the stand, adjusting the height or angle when neither gesture nor stillness seems either appropriate or possible. With cordless microphones, which intend a greater freedom of mobility for the performer, the need for a stand has diminished (sometimes the microphone is lying on the stool for the performer) but it is still in use, precisely to allow for complex gesture.

As technology develops, the use of hands-free microphones has become a possibility: several physical or prop comedians – Carrot Top, Gallagher – have been using them for years. Prop comedy is somewhat outside of the purview of this discussion, however, for the non-prop comedian, the hands-free allows for a freedom of gesture that is not dependent on returning to the same spot and replacing the microphone on the stand. In her biography of Billy Connolly, Pamela Stephenson phrases it thus:

Billy’s live performing has been liberated by the radio microphone. He resisted it at first, clinging to his old stand and hand-held mike, but now he can move more freely over the whole stage, and use both hands. He strides back and forth, crossing the audience from side to side, almost forcibly

yanking people into the world he's exploring and drawing them together as he explores the depth and width of the space as well. (Stephenson 2002:364)

Robin Williams and Eddie Izzard are two further examples of contemporary comedians who refrain from hand-held microphones when they have the option. Notable is their use of gestures: the former quite natural and the latter quite theatrical. There is something less formal about the absence of a microphone: gestures can be more natural and uninterrupted, and the distinction between performer and audience in terms of physical referents is now back to the onstage/offstage dynamic. Charles Goodsell has written about how different kinds of political discourse arise in legislatures with hidden or exposed media of amplification (1988:298). With hands-free microphones, amplification is still a presence, but it is not given physical form.

Nevertheless, the decision to go without a microphone or not is occasionally outside the comedian's domain. As will be discussed below in the section on television performances, variety shows dating back to Ed Sullivan and continuing to late night talk shows of today typically use the boom mike. Conversely, just as shared spaces have backdrops suitable for the widest assortment of worldview, so too do they have the amplification equipment suitable for the widest assortment of comedians. The comedian needs to be able to adapt his or her use of gesture to the circumstances of performance. Given the reliance on the microphone for performance, Stebbins locates it as one of the "things that go wrong onstage," the coping with which further serves to distinguish amateur from professional (1990:92). He also notes the rarity of weak sound systems in clubs (54). Larry Horowitz developed a rating sheet for his stand-up comedy classes taught through Yuk-Yuk's in Toronto, and which is used to evaluate amateur acts: the question "Do they use the mike well?" is listed under "skills" (in Stebbins 1990:80).

An appreciation of the microphone is central for an understanding of stand-up comedy performances. Amplification changes the nature of the relationship with the audience: it is an enhancement of the uni-directionality of mediated performances that is a natural extension of the stage: at the same time, it reintroduces a level of intimacy by enabling the voice to be used in its natural register, allowing for natural speech patterns that more closely resemble face-to-face communication and dialogue. Furthermore, it is part of the diegetic landscape of the stage: it becomes something that not only must be dealt with as a potential obstacle but something which can be employed as a device that goes beyond and enhances verbal communication. Finally, it represents the act of stand-up comedy itself: as occupation, as social role, and as calling.

Video-Projection

When Andrew ‘Dice’ Clay sold out Madison Square Garden in 1990 (1991*; 1994*), it marked the first time that a North American comedian had filled a sports arena. Thus comedy hit the scale that popular music hit twenty-five years earlier when the Beatles played Shea Stadium. The distance from performer to his audience had surpassed its natural limit: without the aid of video projection – which is to the seeing what amplification is to hearing – one can speak of the performer and audience being present to each other in only the most notional sense.

As many sporting and musical audiences now anticipate a supplement for their immediate experience with video projection (in part from the routinised experience of watching these sorts of events on television), the venues are already set-up with the technology, and the comedians who play these venues can avail themselves of it. Lee Evans’ *Wired and Wonderful* concert DVD (2002*) provides an excellent referent, as

there are moments where a wide establishing shot includes the video screen, and it is clear that the crowd at Wembley is being shown something different from what the audience at home is seeing. What is being shown to the crowd, how the performance is affected by the directorial choices of the team running the video display, is ultimately not much different from what would be shown in a video-recorded or filmed performance, as will be discussed below: the audience member, however, has the benefit of switching between the immediate, albeit spatially distant, and the mediated, albeit spatially close, performances. Philip Auslander, in his (largely critical) appraisal of the impact of what he calls “mediatized” culture – a term he admittedly applies loosely to products either of the mass media or of media technology (1999:5) – on live performance, briefly notes the emergence of video-projection:

Live performance now often incorporates mediatization such that the live event itself is a product of media technologies. This has been the case to some degree for a long time, of course: as soon as electric amplification is used, one might say that an event is mediatized. What we actually hear is the vibration of a speaker, a reproduction by technological means of a sound picked up by a microphone, not the original (live) acoustic event. Recently, however, this effect has been intensified across a very wide range of performance genres and cultural contexts, from the giant television screens at sports arenas to the video apparatus used in much performance art. The spectator sitting in the back rows of a Rolling Stones or Bruce Springsteen concert or even a Bill Cosby stand-up comedy performance, is present at a live performance, but hardly participates in it as such since his/her main experience of the performance is to read it off a video monitor. (24)

Auslander’s stance is reasonably evident in such expressions as “the original (live) acoustic event” and “hardly participates in it as such,” and (although I oversimplify his argument somewhat) he appears to suggest that mediatization is something that happens to extant art forms and performance genres, not something which creates new ones. Nevertheless, his general argument – that while being physically present at a

performance event is commonly understood as somehow more authentic than experiencing it through a mediated form like broadcasting or recording, the performance itself is (a) often “imitating” (insofar as the performer aims to replicate) mediated performances and (b) already going through some process of mediation (amplification, video display) – remains problematic for a performance genre like stand-up comedy which is predicated on (a surfeit of) interactivity. It is perhaps because of this distance between himself and the audience, complemented by the interrelated phenomenon of the Madison Square Garden concert being less a comedy performance and more a popular culture event, that in the weeks between the concert selling out and the concert itself Andrew ‘Dice’ Clay performed two unadvertised and largely improvised and interactional shows at Dangerfield’s in Brooklyn, which were recorded and released as *The Day the Laughter Died* (1990*).

Summary Conclusions

With the media of the stage, microphone, and video, we have made a more or less full transition from vernacular talk to cultural performance. There is a clear demarcation between performer and audience: kinesic, proxemic, and aural cues are now directed fully towards the performer, who is granted control over the situation, albeit with the audience’s expectations of providing a “good” performance. It is what is referred to as the “live performance,” which appears to indicate explicitly no disjuncture in time and space. However practically distant the audience might be from the performer in the foregoing, the two are present to each other: however large, diffuse, heterogeneous the audience might be, the performer is performing to it and for it and, collectively, it is reacting and responding back, propelling the text forward. As the audience is constituted

by individuals, each audience member has the potential to contribute to and affect the performance through a reaction and response (including the absence of a reaction or response). That potential is very real for those who are immediately within the field of intimacy of the performer, and perhaps approaching only notional for those in the furthest reaches.

There may indeed be a practical limit, to the extent that the performer does not have recourse to their own amplification or video-projection and can only see or hear particular audience members through the unaided senses. Thus the first few rows become a "proxy" audience for the entire venue, although the comedian is careful to include the furthest members, through alternating eye contact between the closest and furthest members, references to "the people in the back," and surveying the audience where answers are gauged through applause or cheers. The performer, who uses the mediation of stage, microphone, and (on occasion) video-projection, and the audience, which is fluent with mediation enough to ignore it partially, are in the same place at the same time. Irrespective of mediation, the performance is, for all intents and purposes, immediate to the audience, experienced with all five senses, in real-time.

If microphone and video-projection bridge spatiotemporal distances between audience and performer, they do not bridge cultural distances. It is one thing to engage in face-to-face talk with someone, but that alone does not make them your intimate. How does this stranger engage with an audience, reconciling the distance not of the stage to the floor but of differing worldviews rooted in their different respective social identities outside of the performance context? For that, we turn to the next two chapters.

Chapter 4: Who is a Stand-Up Comedian? The Social Identity

[Joseph Campbell] says that the role of the *artist*
 is to stand *outside* the village
 but he's also got to *understand* them
Jerry Seinfeld in one of his uh...
 unusually *profound* moments I found
 when he's not talking about what to do with the
 soap when it gets thin
 he said that we're contemporary *shamans*
 I mean we're invited in to the village to tell them
 what's *going on*
 and then we go back *out* again
 and Dennis Miller said we're essentially *assassins*
 we come into a place make a hit and *leave*
 we come in at *night* make a *hit*
 we kill 'em and we *leave*

Ron James

In the last chapter I was arguing that the stage introduces a distance between the audience and the performer, while the microphone and, recently, video-projection bridge that distance. Indeed, without amplification speaking at a natural register in front of a crowd of any size is almost impossible, so stand-up comedy as a form cannot exist without the technology: furthermore, that technology in turn becomes symbolic of the act of stand-up comedy itself.

Such is the apparatus of stand-up: the material culture and media that constitute the found comedy landscape. But it takes far more than being heard to be recognized as an intimate. Breaking across physical distance is one thing, but breaking through cultural distance is another. In earlier chapters, I have been examining some conceptions about what stand-up comedy is and what the stand-up comedian does. These questions can be rephrased as efforts at determining *who* the stand-up is. Apart from academic

conceptions, however, there also exist vernacular conceptions of the person of the stand-up comedian. To identify oneself as “stand-up comedian” is to assume a social identity with a number of connotations and expectations. Non-theorists go to performances by stand-up comedians – or are members of a broadcast audience, or are participants in listening to audio recordings or watching video recordings – with this set of expectations already in place, knowing it to be a performance of a particular kind. Even if they do not know the particular comedian, they come to the performance informed by a “type.”

There are no better sources for determining this set of expectations than fans of stand-up comedy and the comedians themselves. Stand-up comedians understand themselves as figures in the culture: they have an informed understanding all their own on the role of the stand-up comedian in modern society. They also have, as professional necessity, a need to establish not only their identity as a stand-up comedian, as an artist, but also their worldview.

This chapter first examines how fans and comedians understand the role of the comedian and comedy through the lens of vernacular theory. Then it turns to a study of the narratives that comedians tell about themselves, off-stage and on, that complement their onstage performances of non-autobiographic material. These narratives frame the performed material for the audience, providing the lens through which it is meant to be interpreted.

Starting with this chapter I begin to refer to the comedian Ron James as my primary example but, rather than introduce him at this point, he is introduced into the text in a manner that emulates an audience “coming to know” a comedian.

Vernacular Theory and the Social Identity of the Stand-Up Comedian

One of the dissatisfactions of the literature review (Chapter One) was the sense that, for all the earnest theorising, each attempt at explaining stand-up comedy tended to ignore what fans or, more frustratingly, stand-up comedians thought about it. Even the work of French and Shouse, working stand-ups themselves, reflected a conscious decision to employ a particular critical theory.

Robert Stebbins notes how “Common thought holds that the early career of all stand-up comics is affected by two contingencies: a tension-filled childhood and adolescence during which they were either the class clown or the life of the party or both, both being manifestations of psychological problems” (Stebbins 1990:60). He does not attribute this common thought, and he goes on to qualify this by saying “Our sample does not always conform to this image.” But for our purposes it is this common thought that is of interest, as it speaks to a perception of the social identity of the stand-up comedian.

The concept of “vernacular theory” was proposed by Houston Baker (1984) and developed by Thomas McLaughlin (1997). Insofar as the task of critical theory is “the uncovering of cultural assumptions that dominate in a society” (McLaughlin 1997:4) – the identification and thus challenging of ideologies – the task is not critical theory’s exclusive domain.

[It] isn’t only “theorists” who raise important questions about the premises that guide cultural practice. The studies in this collection deal with theory in a vernacular mode, theory that would never think of itself as “theory,” that is mostly unaware of the existence of the discipline. I claim that individuals that *do not* come out of a tradition of philosophical critique are capable of raising questions about the dominant cultural assumptions. They do so in ordinary language, and they often suffer from the blindness that unself-conscious language creates. But the fact that vernacular theories therefore do not completely transcend ideologies does not make them different in kind from academic theories. They manage in spite of

their complicity to ask fundamental questions about culture. (McLaughlin 1997:4)

Given his concentration on African American literature and the blues, Baker advisedly emphasises the etymological significance of "vernacular": from *vernaculus*, meaning "a slave born within the home," he stresses both the remove from power and the local nature of vernacularity. By his own admission, McLaughlin abstracts from Baker, but retains these two elements. Ironically, one of his objectives is not simply the elevation of vernacular theory from mere chatter to a rich tradition of ideological critique, but also the retrieval of critical theory from charges of elitism: the two are ultimately engaged in the same project, and "distinctions between academic and vernacular theory have more to do with status and style and scholarly rigor than with the goals and strategies of these practices" (6). Although vernacular theory has been found critical for theorists of identity politics, "Membership in a marginalized group is not the only entry into vernacular theory" (21): it is the intellectual form of resistance in everyday life, and occurs whenever a reflection on experience notes discrepancies between the received and the experienced.

In interviews and elsewhere, stand-up comedians have a lot to say about the figure of the stand-up comedian in society, their function, and the nature of stand-up comedy. I would contend that, not only is this a process of self-reflection a natural consequence of the specialist, but also, inasmuch as their presentation of self offstage contributes to their interpretation onstage, it is a professional strategy.

While writing a paper for Henry Jenkins' Media Theory and Methods graduate proseminar, which explicitly uses the lens of vernacular theory, Andres Lombana interviewed Dana Jay Bein, a stand-up comedian who also teaches stand-up at the Boston

Center for Adult Education.

"Comedy comes from the darkest moments of human day to day life"

Dana stated.

"Comedy is like no other" he continued, "it started as tragedy but now you are putting it out there as humor." From his point of view, failure and pain were in the origin of comedy. "Everybody has that instinct to laugh of other [people's] failures, or even your own failures. You see somebody gets splashed by a car driven into a big puddle in a rainy day, and one of your instincts is to laugh" he said.

Comedy is an honest and truly defensive mechanism against the tragedy of life. "I think you have to make it funny otherwise it hurts too much. Your honest painful experiences can be brought to the stage and can be shown to people as an honest expression of comedy" Bein claimed. "Comedy did something for me personally, it allowed me to turn things around" he added.

"Self-deprecation" is the key concept for understanding Dana Jay Bein's approach to comedy. "I was introverted as a child, so self-deprecation became my defense mechanism in middle school and high school" he said. "Self-deprecation is rooted in people making fun of you. The only way to really defeat other people making fun of you is to get on the board and start to make fun of yourself, kind of show them that it doesn't bother you" he added. "Then, self-deprecation comes to the next level when you find your own voice in that self-deprecation." Nowadays, Bein takes "self-deprecation" as the most effective way to connect with his audience. "I make fun of myself and not only does it make the audience comfortable of who I am as a performer but it also gives me the green light to make fun of other things as well" he said. (Lombana 2007: paras 3-6)

"Tragedy," whether the explicit failures and horrific events of a life or the mere failure to meet the social constructed expectations of one's culture, is the touchstone of stand-up comedy for Bein, who can transform it, through honest address, into something emancipatory: what is more, that he has been made marginal through these failures allows him to expose the failings in others.

Similarly, for an entry in his *New York Times* blog, Dick Cavett wrote about the impulse that drives comedians:

Why would anyone want to be a comedian?

Obviously those who burn to be professional jesters mean that they want to be *successful* comedians. And those are always an elite, microscopic portion of the population. But, oh how they try. And in droves. It is a

profession where, as the saying goes, many are called, but....

There can't be many professions where the aspirant risks so much. Or where you can get such instant, smack-in-the face humiliation. And get it time after time for a long time.

Coming up through the ranks of any calling can be rough, but that battered soul who survives the early years of courting the comic muse comes close to knowing what only the soldier knows: What combat is like.

What puts that vulnerable soul standing up there in the most brightly lit part of a room, clutching a microphone, to be judged by skeptical and often hostile strangers?

Desire to be loved is surely part of it, cliché though it be.

What better substitute for real love than a sea of eager faces, beaming, laughing, applauding and celebrating your existence? (Cavett 2008: paras. 2-8)

Cavett, who started his career as a writer for Johnny Carson before turning to stand-up in the 1960s, is tapping into a common theme in the comedian's story: audience approval – love – as a substitute for approval and love from some other, less ostensibly contingent source. The immediacy of the audience's reaction, whether approval or humiliation, may make stand-up comedy the most extreme example, but this need for love is more related – in this pop psychology way – to the general urge to become an artist or, more accurately, performer. Johnny Carson made a similar point in a 1979 interview, in response to a question about when he knew he wanted to be a performer:

I think it's when you find out, at least for me, that you can get in front of an audience and be in control. I think that probably happened in grade school, fifth or sixth grade, where I could get attention by being different, by getting up in front of an audience or even a group of kids and calling the attention to myself by what I did or said or how I acted. And I said, "Hey, I like that feeling."

When I was a kid, I was shy. And I think I did that because it was a device to get attention. And to get that reaction is a strange feeling, it is a high that I don't think you can get from drugs. I don't think you could get it from anything else. The mind starts to do things that you didn't even realize it could do. It's hard to explain. (Carson 1979)

Cavett is reticent to explore too fully any further underlying motivations for comedians specifically, but the mantle was picked up in a variety of comments to his

post, many making reference to Lenny Bruce in response to an aside Cavett made about him ("whose alleged genius largely escaped me"). Without negating Cavett's observation about the need for approval, the themes that emerge strongest are a sense of distance, marginalization from the dominant culture, and the related desire to make informed observations about that culture.

"Mirror" and "reflection" and "seeing differently" are metaphors commonly employed: "They simply see or interact with the world which is antithetical to most peoples' prosaic perceptions" (David Chowes in Cavett 2008, comment 11); "[We] get to hold up a mirror and say, 'hey, this is life!'" (Kehau Jackson in Cavett 2008, comment 108); "Bruce ... reflected America's puritan image back on itself" (Martello in Cavett 2008, comment 18); "Lenny's mortification was more of an individual comedic mirror-image of the society at large from which he sprang" (John Blake Arnold in Cavett 2008, comment 61).

This reflection, however skewed through comic artistry, is coupled with a sense that it is true, and truth and honesty become guiding principles: "So, others laugh at seemingly strange comments which were never conceived (by them) — because there is a degree of or complete validity" (David Chowes in Cavett 2008, comment 11); "Comedy is essentially an expression of truth. That's why when people laugh the loudest, they often say, 'That's so true!'" (Kehau Jackson in Cavett 2008, comment 108); "Richard Pryor [...] wished he could be more honest on stage" (Leo Flowers in Cavett 2008, comment 118).

And this mirror is held either outside of, or trapped within, the larger culture it is reflecting: "I think comedians [...] always suffer from strong feelings of inferiority

coupled with an aggressive, competitive nature” (Rob L. in Cavett 2008, comment 9); “Lenny’s humor is the humor (but not the language) of people in exile waiting for G-d to redeem them. It is the humor of man caught in a system run amok. It is a moral humor” (Yehuda Jordan Kaplan in Cavett 2008, comment 106). In a different context, Richard Pryor puts it thus:

These guys on stage now, being all cool, saying they were influenced by me, show me when I was cool. I never said ‘Dig me. Look how cool I am and how messed up everybody else is.’ Hell, I got all the material I *need* just on how messed *up* I am. I mean, how screwed up a brother I gotta be to stand up in front of a million strangers and say ‘Listen to *me*’? Yes, stop what you’re doing and listen to me so I can make you laugh – so the sound of your laughing drowns out the voices in my head. (Pryor 2004:ix)

But Cavett’s comparison to combat resonated as well: “I have to wonder why anyone would willingly step in front of an emotional firing squad” (Elizabeth Fuller in Cavett 2008, comment 23). Ron James made that comparison in my interview with him, but with a sense of exhilaration, not trauma.

Oh jeez I had a corporate gig
I don’t play the clubs anymore
but I had a corporate gig a while ago where they were all *hammered* in the
daytime
and I was playing a *pub* in Halifax
and it was *great*
I had a small *stage*
and it was like I had that
second show Sudbury knife in my boot set
y’know where you just had to *survive*
and your wits are *singin’*
but you know
it was just... it just
it felt so *alive*
y’know it’s *combat* man
it’s *combat*. (James 2005a)

Elsewhere he mixes the combat metaphor with the idea of it being a calling:

I think *stand-up*

Is the Promethean *fire*
 it *burns* you [IB: It's a different order]
 it's *dangerous*
 there's no safety
 you walk away from this *cut*
 you walk away with *wounds*
 you step up to the *plate* in this thing
 with a *legitimate* calling
 it's life or death
 it's *true*. (James 2005a)

This seeming contradiction, or duality, that the metaphor of violence and the metaphor of a redemptive love can be equally extended to the stand-up comedy performance, is tied into the idea of “good” comedians purposely exposing themselves to risk, and that the greater the risk the greater the reward. It is tied into the painful honesty that looking at the mirror requires. It is tied into the tension of someone existing simultaneously outside and inside the group.

These themes are frequent in the stand-up comedian's story. At times they are merely implied, where coded hints of marginalisation are peppered throughout a routine. At other times they are made explicit, either on the stage or off. The comedian works to establish the social identity of stand-up comedian by identifying his or her story as containing these elements, thus providing the frame through which his or her performance is meant to be interpreted.

It is Robert Georges (1969) who speaks of the assumption of “social identities” in the storytelling event, proposing a matching set comprised of storyteller and story listener. These social identities “are selected from among multiple social identities of the social personas of the participants of the event [... and] become the most prominent” (318). In the extended elaboration he provides of a man assuming a storyteller identity and a son assuming a story listener identity,

the social identities of father and son and man and boy are certainly relevant during the storytelling event and will even have important effects upon the choices that both the storyteller and the story listener can make during the course of the event. (318)

According to Georges, the storytelling event proceeds with each participant – teller and listener – operating in accordance with a complementary set of duties and rights. What Georges does not explicitly state (but which is not, I believe, in contradiction to what he does say) is that the process of establishing the social identity relationship of storyteller and story listener is in large part itself conditioned by the multiple social identities of the social personas of the participants. And we can carry this forward to a similar complementary set of duties and rights for the stand-up comedian and the stand-up comedy audience. Ron James put it thus:

He also realizes people have certain expectations about his shows and he tries to give them what they came for. He has seen some of his own comic heroes perform and he doesn't appreciate it when people don't give their audience the best they've got. "I don't want to sleepwalk through a set. I never want to do that . . . I've seen some bad shows and paid a dear price for the tickets. That kind of experience stays with you. I want people to walk out of my shows feeling great. And it can be really exciting out there when everything's working, when you get the wind in your sails. There's a double relationship when I'm out there. It's my responsibility as a comedian to deliver and the audience's responsibility to enjoy the journey." (Gallant 2003)

The stand-up comedian is engaged in an exchange with an audience: he or she is an outsider who becomes accepted as an intimate by the audience, who are in turn expecting humorous insight. Laughter becomes not only a sign of approval but of acceptance. When an audience comes to a stand-up comedy show, whether they know the particular comedian or not, they are expecting this sort of interaction.

Appearance

Before stand-up comedians open their mouths, they are seen. As such, their appearance already sends a set of stimuli to the audience that frames how the subsequent performance is to be interpreted. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Erving Goffman calls this “personal front,” which he defines as “the other items of expressive equipment, the items that we most immediately identify with the performer,” including “clothing; sex, age, and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures, and the like” (24). Whether control over them can be exercised (costume) or not (physical characteristics), they are often either used by stand-up comedians or addressed and then moved beyond. They serve to locate him or her in a particular worldview, if only to be immediately flouted.

The Physical Self

As embodied beings, the stand-up comedian’s physical appearance can immediately locate them within a particular interpretive framework for the audience. The comedian can either use this to his or her advantage or introduce a qualification. Once, on the *Tonight Show*, Bill Cosby recounted his first appearance on the show, twenty years previous:

I came out—the guy put Lena Horne’s makeup on me—I walked out and I was going to do my karate routine. And I hadn’t really thought that it would be funny. But I guess the people were so conditioned to see a black person come out—they said okay, he’s gonna talk about the back of the bus and the front of the restaurant and the side of the tree—and I walked out and I said I wanna talk about karate. And they went wooh hah hah—and I almost backed up and said, ‘Well, what’s so funny?’ Then I went into the routine. (qtd. in Smith 1997:54)

Physical characteristics have denotations – sex, genetic ancestry – but also

connotations, socially constructed and historical categories such as gender and ethnicity. These connotations extend to what topics are going to be considered, and these expectations can in turn quickly be either affirmed or flouted. What these expectations are is determined by the local audience, and the issue of relevance may be obscure to a mediated one: in her appearance on the “Prairie Crop” episode of *Winnipeg Comedy Festival*, comedian Erica Sigurdson began her set with “You guys can probably tell by my *ears* / I’m with the *Icelandic* contingent,” which, in a part of the country with a substantial Icelandic community, occasioned her first laugh of the set (Sigurdson 2004*), but which I personally could not understand.

Body type further influences how the comedian is perceived, although it is mostly those types which diverge from a cultural standards of “normal”: conspicuous tallness or shortness; conspicuous thinness or fatness; for men conspicuous muscularity or frailty; for women conspicuous shapeliness or underdevelopment. “Attractive” and “unattractive,” even more contingent markers of identity, further cue the audience towards how to interpret the comedian. Darby Li Po Price, in his discussion of American First Nations stand-up comedy (discussed above, 39ff), expresses it thus:

Standups are expected to address how their distinguishing physical features such as ethnicity, race, gender, or body type inform their experiences and comic worldviews. Indian identities may serve as central, secondary, or even minor aspects of routines, and may be conveyed in numerous humorous ways. (Price 1998:256)

Although one might hesitate to phrase it in this manner, Ron James is “ethnically Maritime-looking.” His is a physiognomy and body-type similar to many people in Nova Scotia: fair-skinned, medium height and build, vestiges of red hair. In the course of his act he makes reference to this “Celtic” physique, particularly as a child, but to suggest that it does not somehow frame an audience’s expectations would be naïve. He uses a

routine in performance that is also used in his official biography and in interviews:

Ron was a non-stop stuttering, freckle faced red headed kid, who weighed only forty-five pounds until he was fifteen years old and thirty-seven of that was his head! With a pedigree like that, was comedy even an option...when the circus came to town his mother had to hide him. He was educated in a public school system during a day when teachers would dwarf toss you for singing a wrong verse to God Save the Queen. He 'took air' often. (*ronjames.ca* 2004)

"I happen to have a colourful palette to use, the real friends who graced my mother's kitchen. I was just a little kid sitting on the counter. I weighed about 45 pounds until I was 15, and 37 pounds of that was head. It was a great perch to have if you're gonna end up doing what I do. "With a pedigree like that was comedy even an option?" (Ward 2005)

His appearance allows him further license to make claim both to a Maritime persona and – especially with the “was comedy even an option?” tag – to the social identity of stand-up comedian.

Not having control over physical aspects of their appearance, comedians either use it to their advantage or, when desirable, deliberately flout those expectations. With time, as their individuated narratives are performed and cultivated and they become known, their physicality doesn't so much recede as ceases to be the only data the audience has for interpretation: the “what he or she is” gives way to the “who he or she is.”

Costume

But there are aspects of stand-up comedians' appearance over which they can exercise immense control. Clothing, grooming, and comportment contribute to a front, a presentation of self (Goffman 1959) that indicates and informs the desirable interpretation. Stand-up comedians make deliberate decisions on how to present themselves on stage.

When Mort Sahl first began performing in the 1950s, one of the first things to distinguish him was his dress, “the signature cardigan sweater, slacks, loafers, rumpled hair, open collar, rolled-up shirtsleeves” (Nachman 2003:50). It was distinct insofar as it was so very much not a discernible costume, a deliberate effort to look indifferent to appearances.

“It occurred to me that you mustn’t look like any member of the society you’re criticizing. What could I be? I went out and got myself a pair of blue denims and a blue sweater and a white button-down shirt open at the neck: graduate student. And I went out there and I did it and it worked. It let the audience relax.” When he wanted to discard the sweater later, it was already part of his image and he was stuck with it. (Nachman 2003:58)

When George Carlin tried to make the switch from his character comedian style of the 1960s to the countercultural comedian style of the 1970s, the first thing he changed was his appearance.

George is back on TV and has another album out, but he sure looks different. The ties, jackets, and tuxedos have been replaced by T-shirts and jeans, he has a long pony tail where his hair used to stop, a gold earring is sticking out of one of his ears, and his eyes seem suspiciously blurry. Actually, his eyes always looked like that only nobody noticed. Anyway, this woman wanted to know how come, at age 35, he’s suddenly turned into a hippie. So, for the thousandth time, George explained this phenomenon.

“Well, the reason that I only showed what I used to show was because I thought that would help me get what I wanted, which at the time was a half-hour TV series. And, oh yeah, I wanted to be an actor. I wanted to get all the movie roles that Jack Lemmon turned down. But then I decided that I’d really rather be myself. Which is what you see now.” (Werbin 1972)

Carlin was at pains to indicate how the self he was then presenting on stage was his authentic self, in large part because it was a change from how he had looked in the past. He spoke about it on stage as well:

<p>One of the things that occurred when I began to uh just y’know feel some <i>changes</i> happening to me</p>
--

uh naturally I was kind of still entertaining uh
 in *gin joints* y'know
 I mean I realise they sell gin here
 but it's really not the same as
 as middle class *night clubs* where I spent like a *lot* of years
 and it was *weird* to start having *hair* and start having a *beard* ("The Hair
 Piece" 1972a*)

To suggest that there is deliberateness to the "anti-costume" aesthetic is not to suggest disingenuousness, although the deliberateness of the "costume" is derided by the anti-costume crowd, especially when it is part of the performance. In the documentary *The Comedians of Comedy*, there is an exchange on this topic between the stand-up comedians Brian Posehn, Patton Oswalt and Maria Bamford, that turns into an improvised routine:

Posehn: There was that one... remember that guy in San Francisco that had
 to wear a Hawaiian shirt every time he went on stage cause
 his j- his opening joke was always about the Hawaiian shirt
 it was like uh
 Oswalt: I don't remember that guy
 Posehn: was uh | I know what you're thinking
 did he blow Don Ho for that shirt |
 and uh
 | no I blew Don Ho cause he's a *great entertainer* |
 and that was his opening joke *every night*
 Bamford: Oh but come on that's not...
 Posehn: yeah but he had to wear the *Hawaiian shirt* every night to get to *that*
bit
 [...]
 I love the idea of like that you're mad...
 it's like somebody else dressed you
 Oswalt: Yeah
 {looking down at his clothes, angry} | "what the fuck is..." |
 {grabs his shirt and points to it, still angry} | "look at this *shit*" |
 Posehn: | What happened to me |
 Oswalt: | *Look at this* |
 Posehn: | Look at what happened to me on the way here... |
 Oswalt: | *fucking ridiculous* |
 Posehn: | ... and this shirt I jumped into... |
 Oswalt: | oh, these guys... |
 Posehn: | ... this shirt I put on and buttoned up |

Oswalt: | ... these guys *jumped* me and put this *shirt* on me
 and they sewed it to my skin and I'll
 I'll never be able to take it off |
 Posehn: | I *have* to talk about it
 that's the first thing on my...
 cause I know *you're* thinking if I *didn't* mention it ... |
 Oswalt: | it would be *crazy*
 Posehn: | my shirt is so *insane*
 that you couldn't even *concentrate* if I didn't bring it up
 because you'd be watching
 | *when is he going to talk about his crazy fucking shirt* ||
 Oswalt: || god if a shirt like that got put on me I wouldn't have a joke |
 but I *know* that you're thinking that I will
 and I do
 because I'm a *comedian*
 I'm a *comedian*
professional comedian | (Blieden 2005*)

Costume-as-prop considerations aside, the aesthetic of dress for these comedians is that what they wear onstage is essentially no different from what they wear offstage. A distinction between audience and performer is reified when dress indicates “costume” and the impression of a stylised performance. Stand-up comedy works within the illusion of extemporaneity. If the impression is that the stand-up comedian has in essence emerged out of the audience and moved on to the stage,¹ removing themselves spatially only for the purposes of being seen for the duration of their enactment of the stand-up comedian social identity and then returning to the audience upon that enactment's completion, anything that smacks of premeditation introduces an irruption into that sense of the extemporaneous and intimate.

There is a second connotation to the “non-costume” which is an extension of that emergence from the audience theme: that what they wear onstage is essentially no

¹ This is frequently how performers do take to the stage in club situations: waiting at the back of the room or exiting a backstage room that opens up into the back of the room) and walking through the crowd and onto the stage.

different from what the audience is wearing. This point is potentially moot, because there are moments when that is expressly not the case: Sahl and the transforming Carlin were expressly differently attired from their mainstream audiences. However, their dress was consistent with the group from whose worldview they aimed to speak. Like all forms of costume, it can mark solidarity with one group while it marks distinction from another. It becomes, in essence, a statement of what they would wear were they members of the audience.

The white suit that Steve Martin wore as part of his stage persona (which was predicated in large part on the vacuity of performance) was likely the moment when the slick suit disappeared from the stand-up comedy stage. But suits remain a staple of the stand-up comedy wardrobe. They tend to be unobtrusive, formal items of apparel.

One exception to this is among African-American comedians, who often wear exquisitely tailored and colourful suits, something very much a part of twentieth century African-American tradition. In his discussion of the zoot-suit, Stuart Cosgrove writes how

The zoot-suit was more than the drape-shape of 1940s fashion, more than a colourful stage-prop hanging from the shoulders of Cab Calloway, it was, in the most direct and obvious ways, an emblem of ethnicity and a way of negotiating an identity. The zoot-suit was a refusal: a subcultural gesture that refused to concede to the manners of subservience. (Cosgrove 1984:78)

Such modes of dress were not reserved exclusively for a counter-cultural youth.

In their book *Stylin'*, Shane and Graham White discuss how elaborate and attention-grabbing dress was part of working-class African-American leisure.

On Sundays and in their other leisure hours away from work, however, urban blacks regained control of their bodies and of their souls. Shucking off their work clothes – the overalls and maids' uniforms that more often than not were a mark of the degradation frequently associated with their

employment – ordinary African Americans dressed up like “fashion plates” and congregated in convivial black spaces. Such activity, which, as Robin Kelley has astutely observed, tended to be “alternative rather than oppositional,” was one of the liberating features decisively influencing the distinctive African American culture that was emerging in the northern cities on the first half of the twentieth century. (White and White 1998:245-246)

In other words, if we can fairly say that a stand-up comedy performance, particularly of African-American comedians, is a “convivial black space,” then the clothes worn by comedians onstage are no different from the clothes they would wear were they to be in the audience. Filmed performances and ethnography both bear this out: the clothing of the audience tends to complement the clothing of the performer when they are members of the same social identity grouping, irrespective of which social identity – African-American, Southern white, urban bohemian, Maritimer – is examined.

Until 2005, whenever Ron James appeared on stage he invariably wore a flannel shirt. It is the dress he employed for the publicity posters for the concerts, the pictures he supplied to the local theatres for their in-house bulletins and websites, and how he appeared on his own website. In a 2002 *Globe and Mail* article on the flannel shirt as “the uniform of the Canadian Everyman,” James was specifically interviewed on the topic.

James, the veteran standup comic (who always sports a plaid shirt on stage) and the star of the quirky TV series *Blackfly*, says he remembers years ago when someone told him to, “‘Get your look and stay with it.’ That phrase always stuck with me.

“The plaid in my shirts represents, and I don’t want to sound too lofty, the regional diversity of the country,” James says, very seriously. “It doesn’t reek of urban pretension. I don’t think the content of my shows reflects a sophisticated urbanity. And the shirt puts me on the same page as those 700 folks who just came to hear me at a hall in Cranbrook, B.C., or the crowd that might assemble at the neon-lit Mirvish theatre in Toronto,” James adds.

“It is an equalizer. If my content is a tapestry of Canadiana, then that’s what my shirt reflects.” (MacDonald 2002)

By the time I followed him on tour in November of 2005 for a leg of his Atlantic

Canadian tour, the flannel was still part of his wardrobe but not the only shirt in circulation. He would alternate between a red cotton shirt with khakis and a variety of flannel shirts with black casual pants. In *Quest for the West* (2005*) (filmed before but aired after this Maritimes tour), he wears the red shirt and black pants, and in the following year's *West Coast Wild* (2006*) the shirt is burnt orange. Having firmly established his "Canadianness" and trusting that this interpretation of him will be brought to the performance by the audience, he no longer needs to demonstrate it through material objects like a costume as explicit as the flannel shirt. Again, like body type, its prominence gives way as the "what he is" is replaced by the "who he is."

Although not atypical for Canadian comedians, and not a dress sense particular to the Maritimes, his overall dress sense nevertheless reflected the dress choices of much of the audiences in the three cities on this leg of the tour, and being neither too casual nor too formal, it appeared at the very least in keeping with a Maritime sensibility of appropriate attire.² In my fieldnotes I was struck by what the audience members themselves were wearing. For the most part they too wore presentable casual attire: the men wore Dockers pants, solid-coloured button-up dress shirts with no ties, nice but comfortable shoes. At the first Halifax show I wrote "People aren't really 'dressed up' per se: more like going-to-a-bar attire." This was in the context of noting how they were "Really middle aged – white exclusively, predominantly Anglo." In Pictou I wrote "In general, an older crowd, dressed clean, casual, but not too flashy." In all the venues, the majority of the men in the audience were wearing clothing similar to James: to put it

² In a CBC marketing practice of having a performer 'host' an evening of programming, introducing the individual programmes while promoting a future broadcast, James hosted the evening of December 6, 2005, the Tuesday prior to the airing of his *Quest for the West* special: in the course of his introductions, he made explicit reference to the rare occurrence of seeing him in a suit.

another way, on stage Ron James wears what a Maritimer would wear to an event like a Ron James performance.

In part because the whims of fashion vacillate to greater extremes and are thus in retrospect less forgiving for women than for men,³ the dress of women comedians has sometimes been caricatured as androgynous, the donning of mannish sports jackets with shoulder pads, trousers, and the occasional waistcoat.⁴ The literary critic John Limon (discussed above, 42ff) made the observation that the more successful comic persona for a woman stand-up comedian was nonsexual (2000:120). Framing it this way, however, suggests that it is a successful strategy in a world where women's experience is not interesting, let alone fodder for comedy.

The debate about how women present themselves on stage is inextricable from the ever-present and unnecessary question of whether women are funny, something that is still a going concern in vernacular theory arguments about the nature of stand-up comedy. A *Vanity Fair* article tackled the issue which of late has been compounded with another observation: "It used to be that women were not funny. Then they couldn't be funny if they were pretty. Now a female comedian has to be pretty – even sexy – to get a laugh" (Stanley 2008:185).

Whether Limon had a point is debatable: he may have been right but for all the wrong reasons. It may have been an accident of history that, just as African-American

³ However, Jay Leno, for his first *Tonight Show* appearance in March of 1977 famously wore a bright green suit. "Years later, the only thing that people remembered about my first appearance was the green suit. On his anniversary shows, Johnny [Carson] would play the clip—which I came to call the *blackmail tape*—and unfailingly remark on my sartorial style. I was always secretly thrilled to be comic fodder for him. Once, he described the suit as 'a used clown outfit.' Another time, he said that I looked like an Italian elf" (Leno 1996:190).

⁴ Molly Shannon created the character of Jeannie Darcy for *Saturday Night Live*, who was similarly attired, replete with 'mullet' haircut.

and Hispanic comedians needed to present themselves in a particular way to get time and notice on a predominantly white comedy circuit, so too did women have to present themselves in a particular way to get time and notice on a predominantly male comedy circuit. Furthermore, women didn't have the same narrowcasting opportunities as emerged within the African-American comedy market in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with shows like BET's *ComicView* and HBO's *Def Comedy Jam*, to develop viable and highly lucrative careers wholly separate from the mainstream clubs. Since that time a number of women comedians – Margaret Cho, Ellen DeGeneres, Janeane Garofalo, Sarah Silverman, Rosie O'Donnell, Roseanne, Brett Butler – have attained enough of a place of prominence that women comedians in general are no longer seen as the aberration they once were. And thus, since the 1980s, the forms of dress are also less caricaturable than they once – ostensibly – were: women stand-up comedians wear on stage what they would wear were they going to see themselves perform.

Accent

Accent is another indicator of social identity. Not only can it confirm or flout ethnic identity, it can connote national, regional, socio-economic, sexual, or gender identity. It is something that can be an affectation, granted, but that affectation is more likely to be an exaggeration rather than a deliberate falsehood.

Henry Cho is a Korean-American comedian raised in Knoxville, Tennessee. The epigrammatic quote on his website is "I'm an Asian with a Southern accent. To a lot of people, that right there is funny" (Cho 2006). In his early television appearances he would assure the audience that there was nothing wrong with their television sets. For a profile on Asian American personalities, it is "his jaw-dropping accent [that] was the

springboard for a roaring comedy career” (Nahm [n.d.]).

In his early career, Jeff Foxworthy would make a similar advertence to his Georgian accent. During a performance filmed at Rascal’s Comedy Club in Montclair, New Jersey, he began with a bit on regional differences based on the Southern accent.

This is my real voice
 this is how I *talk*
 it is a *y’all* so
 go ahead and *laugh* at that now
 I *love* to work up here
 because *y’all* think we’re so
 so much *goobers* down in the South [L]
 and I *know* a lot of people up here in the North
 you think everybody from the South is married to their sister and has seen a
 UFO [L]
 I’m just *dating* my sister and I couldn’t swear it wasn’t a *weather balloon* [L]
 I *do* realise this
 the *Southern* accent is the hardest accent to be *cool* with isn’t it
 I mean cause like New Jersey New York it’s just a *cool* accent *y’know*
y’all come down South you *fit right in*
 it’s like | Yo
 pass the *freaking* grits *y’all* alright | [L]
 you *can’t* be *cool* with a southern accent
 you can take us somewhere *nice*
 somewhere like a *nude beach* on the *French Riviera*
 we’d be out there going
 | *damn* [L]
 this is a good place to *fish* here [L]
 {hollered} “hey Ed bring the *cooler*” |
 we’d be going up to naked women
 | hey you don’t know where we can pick up some *red wiggles* do ya |
 (Foxworthy 1989 in Rascals 2003*)

Ron James’ accent evidences a biographically validated blend of Newfoundland, Cape Breton, and downtown Haligonian. It is decidedly Eastern Canadian, although not identifiably of one place. His is not the strong affected accent of character comedians like Jimmy Flynn, Andrew ‘Dice’ Clay, or Roy “Chubby” Brown, but neither is it the same as his normal speaking voice. There is an aspect of Hymes’s breakthrough to performance

(1975), where performance competency and audience expectations require an elevated or heightened presentation of the self. As he put it:

You know
 maybe my accent's a little exaggerated a bit
 I get called on that from time to time
 they say | you don't sound like that in real life |
 but I say
 I don't know
 when I'm channelling something out there... (James 2005a)

His accent is also mentioned frequently by reviewers and interviewers.

His speech is full of interesting metaphors and stream-of-consciousness jokes and he uses words like visceral and catharsis more naturally than a university professor. But the sentences roll so quickly off that Cape Breton tongue and his accent is so engaging, the nuances of his story are easily missed. (Hepfner 1999)

The rapid-fire pace of James' marathon routines – delivered in that distinct Maritime accent, hey? – covers so much territory, it's enough to send Olympic gold-medal triathlete Simon Whitfield into premature retirement. Among a gazillion others, there was his macarena-on-speed talk 'n' dance regarding the joys of camping, the conspiracy behind the Disney Channel, and the differences between the earthy, hard-faced Tim Hortons' staff and the phony, "Up With People" smiles of the Starbucks folk. (Nathanson 2001)

"They gave me a bun on Air Canada that was as hard as the hobs of hell," he says in an East Coast accent. "Stale? This thing came off the table at the Last friggin' Supper. And in the middle was a slice of ham so thin the pig never even felt it comin' off his arse." (Dunn 2003)

Just like his physical appearance and his stage costume, his accent aids in locating him in a particularly Maritime and/or Atlantic Canadian identity, although he allows a certain ambiguity as to precisely where in Atlantic Canada we should place him.

Irrespective of the particular content of their talk, stand-up comedians have their embodied selves at their disposal to create an image and present a front for their intended interpretative frame by an audience. It not only appears on the stage: it is in promotional

materials like flyers, posters, and websites, and, in the case of accent, it is the voice they use in interviews. These expectations are in part conditioned by history, but that conditioning can be the very content of the talk itself.

The Anticipatory (Auto-)Biography

In his book *Acting*, John Harrap makes the following observation:

At the simplest level, the muscleman, the Miss Universe contestant, and the stand-up comedian are projecting themselves. They may be making adaptations to the conventions of the performance, but they are not playing a character ... only the actor is both present on stage and yet at the same time absent, replaced by the illusion he or she creates. (Harrop 1992:5)

Contra Harrop, I would suggest that the comedian *is* replaced by the illusion he or she creates, and that the created illusion is that what is projected *is* him- or herself. One could suggest a taxonomy of comedians along a spectrum, with one end being a wholly natural performance, with no distinction between performer and performance, and the other end being a pure contrivance, with no pretence of direct correlation between performer and performance. The performative aspect is made most clear with “character comedians,” like Pee Wee Herman, Andrew ‘Dice’ Clay, or Judy Tenuta, for whom the worldview presented through their onstage personae is not meant to be understood as coincident with their offstage life. The adoption of a different persona through costume, props, and voice modulation is an explicit expression that the worldview they inhabit onstage – however artfully rendered, and, in the case of Clay especially, however difficult it is for the audience to disassociate from their own worldview and enter – is a fiction. This fiction is nevertheless grounded (or “groundable”) in the expectations and experiences of the audience as a satire of, or foil to, consensus reality.

But such is the case for all comedians, even for those whose onstage persona is

presented as indistinguishable from their offstage persona. There is an argument to be made here about Baudrillardian processions of simulacra (1994): what is the difference between the perfectly rendered map and territory to which the map refers? Another, less post-modern but equally fruitful, framework is Erving Goffman's notion of "front," the manner in which we portray ourselves to the world in everyday life (1959).

On- and offstage does not imply that the persona or front is wholly dropped once the spotlight is off. One of Rosenberg's (1986) insights into the distinction between the amateur and the professional is how the latter is skilled at rapport and reputation cultivation and uses a variety of methods – mainly the media and interview – to project a memorable persona that frames the eventual onstage performance and the audience's expectations thereof.

Unlike the musicians Rosenberg was studying, the stand-up comedian is not solely displaying technical proficiency at an instrument or demonstrating mastery at performing and subsequently contributing to a culturally acceptable repertoire. The comedian is performing the self. The worldview expressed onstage is expressed offstage, outside the framework of "Performance," but within the professional necessity for building rapport and reputation. The audience brings what they know about the comedian to the performance, derived from both prior performances and the media, so the comedian is well-served to take as much effort to frame their off-stage talk as they do their talk onstage. And there is a mutually mediating relationship between the extant expectations of who the comedian-as-figure is – marginal(-ised) and lonely, which grounds and informs the perspective they bring – and the individual comedian's particular story. Stand-up comedian is a social identity to which the individual comedian

actively lays claim.

In *Sounds So Good To Me* (1984), Barry Lee Pearson made a contribution to the understanding of the bluesmen's art by paying attention to their stories: "I wanted them to tell me the story they usually tell when they present themselves to the public" (xiii-xiv). His insight is in part predicated on how the bluesman – his focus is on the generation of bluesmen "rediscovered" with the blues revival of the 1960s – understands the interview as a part of the "blues business" (35), and that "Because a tradition of the interview has led over the years to the same questions and to a certain degree the same answers, they develop a predictive awareness of what to expect" (37). The bluesman is "creating an artistic version of his past" (39), one which "authenticates his background and justifies his claim to the bluesman's role" (30).

Blues musicians are not passive victims of stereotyping. They also consciously manipulate their own image. From childhood on they have confronted a set of beliefs about their character and work which [...] affected their lives. For better or for worse, they learned the advantages as well as the disadvantages of their ambivalent role. While musicians may chafe at being typecast, they often share their public's beliefs concerning who they are and what they do. [...] But earning the right to play the blues and be recognized as a bluesman demands an ideological commitment and the creation of a public persona. (1984:122)

The stand-up comedian is doing something similar. Through the opportunities at their disposal, they present themselves as someone who conforms to the audience's beliefs about who they are and what they do, thus earning the right to be recognised as a "stand-up comedian." When they are unknown, in the "apprentice" phase of Rosenberg's paradigm, they only have the resources of their onstage performance and, hopefully, an accommodating emcee to authenticate this claim to the name stand-up comedian. As journeymen, these resources are complemented by the beginnings of a cumulative reputation: they have been seen before, they have been given performance time by

recognised authorities, their performances may have been mediated in some way (predominantly broadcasts), and there may be the beginnings of interest in their offstage life. The audience members are exposed to more opportunities for discerning whether, why, and how they should interpret this person as stand-up comedian. As craftsmen, they are fully adept at using the media to tell their stories or present their worldview, they have been more heavily mediated through broadcasts and quite possibly through recordings, they have been given performance time by even greater recognised authorities, and their performances are actively sought by audiences. If they reach the celebrity level, they are known as much for who they are as they are for what they do on the stage.

The autobiography, the stand-up comedian's story, is not reflective: it is anticipatory. It is not "How I got here," so much as it is "How I got here to be with you tonight." It is aimed at the "next" performance to a specific group of people. When the comedian speaks to local media – radio, newspapers, local television – and to a local audience, he or she takes pains to emphasise some connection with the local. Ron James has proven quite adept at this, emphasising these connections, whether vicarious or real. For his 2002 tour, his first to bring him to Newfoundland, he was interviewed for the *Corner Brook Western Star*.

"People say 'what about Los Angeles, especially for comedy?' No one produces comedy like Americans, but for every person that wins down there, there are a thousand people that do not," James responded. "Six hundred people laughing in Corner Brook sounds exactly the same as 600 people laughing in Los Angeles."

[...]

James is eager to visit Newfoundland for a couple of reasons. His father's family is from Burgeo, and James is looking forward to rediscovering these roots. Secondly, the adventure of visiting a new place is something that appeals to the comedian.

"I can't wait for Newfoundland," James said. "To be able to see these places and experience new places, that is a real plus to me. I talk a lot about new places and my experiences travelling it. I always come away from a new place with 20 minutes of new material." (Callahan 2002:20)

He begins by emphasising the importance of laughter as universal, and stresses that a successful performance is always irrespective of place.⁵ He locates the province in his own biography, and makes mention of how the new experience will contribute to his repertoire.

When that media or audience is national – for example, in mediated performances – the emphasis on locality is lessened and the stand-up comedian emphasises some connection to regional, national, or (in rare instances) international identity. But in all instances, there is some emphasis, even if only implicit, on the social identity of the comedian as culturally understood and on themselves as meeting the audience's expectations for fulfilling that identity.

Typically for stand-up comedy performances the right to assume the stand-up comedian social identity is a given, as the audience, through the necessary act of transporting him- or herself to the performance venue or, in the case of mediated performances, selecting the performance to play, has already tacitly and provisionally accepted the assumption of the stand-up comedy audience social identity even if the particular stand-up comedian is an unknown entity. Commercial apparati are in place – critics, bookers, programmers,⁶ compères or emcees, and so forth – which vet the

⁵ "Six hundred people laughing in Medicine Hat on a Tuesday night sounds exactly the same as 600 people laughing in Las Vegas," he says" (Lewis 2002); "At the end of the day, 1,000 people laughing in Nepean with a blizzard outside sounds exactly the same as 1,000 laughing in Las Vegas when it's warm" (Ward 2005); "James says an audience of 2,000 in Calgary sounds the same as an audience of 2,000 in L.A." (Mitges 2006).

⁶ The controlling mechanisms of bookers, censors, and markets can often lead to little innovation and

comedian by proxy, providing assurance that the comedian will perform “in accordance with socially prescribed rules with which he [or she] and the other participants in the storytelling event are familiar” (Georges 1969:318).⁷

Collaborative Biography: The Role of the Emcee

When referring to established acts, the performance context typically presumes a pre-existing relationship between audience and performer. For less-established acts, the performance context is often a series of comedians presented over a stretch of time in order of increasing notoriety, presided over by an established comedian (who may be the same comedian as the final comedian of the night). The presiding comedian – the emcee – contributes his or her own reputation and audience goodwill to the show, performs at the beginning of the show and between acts, and, most importantly for our immediate purposes, introduces the lesser-known comedians to the audience.

As one example, in the HBO special *Cedric the Entertainer's Starting Line Up* (Small 2002*), the comedian Cedric the Entertainer (Cedric Kyles) hosts an evening of new comedians. For the concert, filmed in the boxing ring of the Biloxi Grand Casino in Biloxi, Mississippi, Cedric, having performed for fifteen minutes, makes introductions in

limited exposure in the most lucrative venues and media on the part of new comedians and those from traditionally marginalised groups. Chris Rock makes this point in passing, and speaks to its probable causes, when discussing the ‘whiteness’ of sketches during his time on *Saturday Night Live*: “That’s how it was in comedy clubs too. One black comic goes on at nine o’clock, they will not be putting me on at nine-fifteen. Same goes with women. It was just men in power overreacting, overthinking things” (Shales and Miller 2002:385).

⁷ Cf. Rosenberg 1986: “The higher up the market scale the performer rises, the more impersonal and uncertain performer-audience relationships become. Decisions about repertoire, style, performance context and other aspects of career are determined less by direct feedback from the audience. Mass culture mechanisms – trade charts, sales figures, the opinions of potholes inside the music business – become increasingly important and usually add to the pressure for change [away from a local, idiosyncratic repertoire]” (159).

the style of a ring announcer:

This first comedian coming to the stage
has been
ripping shit up [L] *all around the country*
performing on the Bud Light Comedy Tour with Cedric the Entertainer
he hails from *Jacksonville Florida*
weighing in at an even
one hundred and thirty-five pounds soaking wet with work boots on [L]
this brother is *naturally* funny
please welcome to the stage
a member of the *starting line up*
Roland Powell
let him hear it (15:53ff)

This next comedian
that I'm about to bring to the stage
hails from *Houston Texas* [C]
he has a comedy record of *numerous* shows
and *numerous* standing ovations
he is pound for pound one of the funniest *Latinos* in comedy
ladies and gentlemen please welcome to the stage
Juan
Villereal (27:10ff)

I want to bring this next comedian to the stage ladies and gentlemen
this next comedian is coming to you direct from *Memphis Tennessee* [C]
he's a *smooth* brother with a very quick wit
he's *known* as the brother of a *thousand* voices
and *just* as many personalities
please put your hands together
for *Tony*
Luwellyn! (44:17ff)

Alright
this next comedian I'm bringing to the stage
he is a *Mississippi homeboy* [C]
representin' the *seuth'*
this brother is *joke-for-joke*
one of the *funniest* young comedians in the country
he is a *fool* by nature
he said that he did not want to have a career of shellin' *peas* [L]
all the way from *Jackson Mississippi* [C]
y'all show some love
for *J.J.* (56:07ff)

In this manner, the “craftsman” emcee asks that the extant personal goodwill between him- or herself and the audience be extended to these more or less unknown comedians. In effect, if we take Rosenberg’s model (1986) of markets and status seriously, these comedians may be accurately categorised as “craftsmen” in their local markets, and “journeymen” in their regional ones, but as their market shifts to national, their status drops to “apprentice.” Through the sketchiest of biographies, incorporating a presentation of generalised professional credentials, a statement of geo-social provenance, an attestation to his or her comedic skills, and, if necessary, an advertence to particular possible counter-expectations (i.e. Powell’s small stature; Villereal’s “Latino” designation in a predominantly African-American panel of performers and a predominantly African American audience; Luewellyn’s use of mimicry), the emcee contextualises the performer and the performance to come.

Jason Rutter (2000) has made a similar argument for British stand-up comedy venues and the tradition of the “compère” (the functional equivalent of the North American emcee).

The compère is a constant figure in British stand-up venues. It is compères who manage proceedings and organise the performance and who act as an anchor for the evening’s events in the venue. It is they who have a responsibility to ensure that the evening’s entertainment coheres as a ‘social occasion’ [...]. Compères are more than just announcers who bring on the act. They provide continuity between acts who often have varying reputations, divergent styles and or different performance skills; perform routines between acts using their own material; pass comment on performance skills; share details of the evening’s itinerary. Further, they encourage the audience’s participation in the proceedings on stage. (Rutter 2000:464)

Rutter identifies six “turns” evident in the compère’s talk: Contextualisation (giving background details), Framing of response (directing the audience to greet the comedian with a certain attitude), Evaluation of comedian (commenting on performance

skills), Request for action (typically applause), Introduction (naming), and Audience applause (466).

Mitch Hedberg makes light of the standard introduction in his appearance on Comedy Central's *Premium Blend*.

Anyone see me on the uh
David Letterman show [S:!A!]
no {laughs}
no man
four million people watch that show
and I don't know where they are [L]
but I believe it's a good *introduction*
for a comedian | you might have seen this next comedian on the David
Letterman show |
but I believe more people have seen me at the store [L]
and that might be a better *introduction*
| you might have seen this next comedian at the store | [L]
and people would say | hell yes I have | (Hedberg 1998*)

One of Ron James' first televised stand-up comedy performances was in 1996, on an episode of *Comedy at Club 54*, a show recorded at the eponymous club in Burlington, Ontario, for Hamilton's CHCH (an independent station since subsumed into CanWest Global). Although a seasoned professional entertainer, he was relatively new to stand-up comedy: he was, in effect, in an apprenticeship stage. The producer and host, Ben Guyatt, read his introduction off of an index card.

Moving right along your next act this evening
get a load of this
this guy was on the *main stage* at Second City for a number of years
he's got over *thirty*
television appearances
he co-starred in the movie Ernest Rides Again
please welcome
the very *high energy* and *fast paced* storytelling
of Mr. Ron James [A:C]
give him a hand (Guyatt in James 1996*)

As James walks to the stage through the crowd, he assumes a hyperkinetic crouching hop, which he maintains throughout the performance, confirming Guyatt's "high energy" statement. As he speaks his Maritime accent comes across strongly, frequently punctuated with and interrogative "huh." He wears a flannel shirt. After a quick remark about adjusting the mike stand ("Let's get this microphone down to circus performer level huh"), he begins with "I live in Toronto by the crystal blue waters of Lake *Ontario* [L] / a lot of good that does you can't *swim in it* eh [L] / *mind you* it's great for developing your film," at which point he mimes the act of dipping photographic paper.⁸

A "performance team," which extends past the emcee and the performers to include the stage crew, the promoters, the designers of the space and the audience itself, is engaged in the creation and maintenance of a small talk frame. Such is the case for large-scale tours premised on introducing proven local or regional acts to a larger market, but even for open-mike nights at local comedy venues: before the performer has started to speak, a frame has been created that anticipates that what follows will be "funny." Whether or not it is funny will largely be a consequence of the comedian's ability to (a) establish relevancy by demonstrating active participation in the worldview of the group through adverting to points of commonality; (b) establish interest by demonstrating active non-participation in the worldview of the group through the provision of a different

⁸ A reviewer of a James' stand-up performances of just a few months prior thought that his stand-up "wasn't so much enjoyed as it was endured," going on to justify this charge by explaining how "The material changed but James' delivery remained the same. He set-up with a 'And what about?' observation. Threw out his punchline in a staccato voice that drew up in inflection. Then James tagged the joke (added smaller jokes to the main gag) by acting out the punchline. [...] James flitted from topic to topic with no through-line: from federalism to television commercials to Los Angeles. It was the standup equivalent of spraying a deck of cards into the air." (Clark 1996a)

perspective on topics of the group's concern; (c) conform to the audience's aesthetic expectations of what constitutes a "good" story; and (d) reaffirm that what is said is simply talking shit, talk among intimates. However, it is the host or emcee and the comedian, when he or she is an unknown quantity, who through their performances establish some sort of biographical sketch, however limited, to further authenticate the legitimacy of the performer's claim to the social identity of stand-up comedian.

Summary Conclusions

Reputation is cumulative. Most stand-up comedy implies a level of performed autobiography. At first one gives some of that biography through an explicit introduction, as in the Cedric the Entertainer examples above, but over a comedian's career some form of persona is established, mostly concerning the life lived offstage or off the road. It is one of the factors which further makes material unique to the performer and harder to transfer across repertoires. Furthermore, returning audience members bring a foreknowledge of this persona to subsequent performances, and a framework for how to interpret a specific performance is already established. The intimacy of the performance style makes intimates of the performer and audience.

Stand-up comedians are characters in their own narrative, of their own making. They profess to have had certain experiences and express certain opinions not merely in front of but to an audience. Those experiences and opinions are, going back to Bascom's definition for legend (1965), intended to be "regarded as true," and the audience makes a determination of the truth behind them. But legend-like testimonial statements and personal experience narratives blend with tall tales. The audience is expected to try to determine what is true and what is play. The comedian provides cues and clues, and will

quickly try to establish how best to guide a particular audience towards the preferred interpretation. His or her aim is not to assist them in the discernment of an actual truth, but to deliver whatever will pay off with laughter, at the time or over the course of the performance. These are offered within the context of ostensibly non-performative off-stage narratives which, outside of the play world of the stage, are not subject to the same negotiation of truth as the onstage variants

In the next chapter I examine the concept of “marginalised” figure in greater detail and discuss how stand-up comedians develop a persona that builds on this marginal stance.

Chapter 5: Who is This Stand-Up Comedian? The Performance of Self

Sometimes when I work I try to say something of
importance you know
 I think about *racism* and how sick
 how big of a *sickness* it is for our country
 I think that racism is the biggest problem we've got
 in this country
 Some people think it's *drugs* and *crime* [A]
but I think it's *racism*
 I think that racism is so *stupid*
 I cannot see *disliking* a person because of the colour
 of their skin
 I only wish that people did not dislike me because
 of the colour of *mine*
 but this is *America*
 that's how it goes

Steve Harvey

In the last chapter I demonstrated how the stand-up comedian makes the claim to the culturally significant social identity of "stand-up comedian." This social identity, demonstrated by the vernacular theory about the stand-up comedian as a type, is largely focussed on someone having a perspective and speaking from margins. The right to claim this social identity is done through a collaborative apparatus of venue, emcee, and onstage autobiographical snippets, until such point as the stand-up comedian has access to an off-stage performance of biography. It is also cumulative, and as he or she becomes known for being a stand-up comedian he or she no longer has to demonstrate and legitimate a claim to that identity.¹

¹ When a comedian has been successful in other fields and has thus been absent from the stand-up circuit for a stretch of time, there is a sense that she must return to the stage if she still wants to claim that identity. Martin Lawrence's *Runteldat* (2002*) and Robin Williams' *Live on Broadway* (2002*) both

In this chapter I examine how the stand-up comedian makes claims to further complementary social identities that serve to locate him or her in relation to the audience beyond that single pairing of “stand-up comedian” and “stand-up comedy audience.” If the social identity of stand-up comedian is a sketch of marginality, the performer needs to fill in that sketch with detail. Comedians locate themselves and their narratives in a specific time and place, their sense of marginalisation is made more explicit, and they establish a relationship with the audience in terms of shared, overlapping, complementary, or – at times – contradictory or oppositional social identities that exist independent of the performance relationship. Again, I will be using Ron James as my primary example, although I will be framing the arguments with examples drawn from differing contexts.

Performed Onstage Autobiography

Barry Lee Pearson notes how the “artist tells his story to someone else in the context of an interview, or less often as part of an onstage act, and his tale reflects the presence of an audience” (1984:29). Rosenberg notes how “non-musical aspects of the musician’s career become increasingly important” and how skills involve “the projection of personal charisma, the facility to handle relationships with “fans” on and off-stage, and the manipulation of performance situations” (1986:155; 157).

The same holds true for stand-up comedians, that onstage they project their personal charisma and tell their stories. Musicians, however, perform music, and the non-musical moments are easily distinguishable from the musical moments. Stand-up

emerged from tours which saw them performing stand-up comedy for the first time in several years.

comedians, on the other hand, talk, and to distinguish absolutely the “charisma-projecting” talk from whatever else is going on in their routine is difficult at best and, perhaps, ultimately quixotic. Moreover, in music where songs are performed in the first-person, as is often the case in blues music, the protagonist within the songs sung is meant to be understood as rooted in the worldview projected by the singer through their non-musical narrative, but the singer and the protagonist are not necessarily contiguous. Such is not the case with stand-up comedy, where the narrator is understood as “the same” as the protagonist of his or her first-person narratives.

Stand-up comedians are never not performing the self while onstage, as the incongruities they present in their efforts at humour are determined to be “appropriate” and therefore “funny” (Oring 1992:1ff) in part by the audience reconciling its flouted expectations with its comprehension of the comedian’s persona. However, one can certainly make the observation that there are moments on stage which are more explicitly autobiographical than others. In the brief time available to the apprentice comedians they, in collaboration with the emcee, hint at a way to make their biography understood and lay claim, somehow, to the social identity of the stand-up comedian.

In *Cedric the Entertainer’s Starting Line Up*, Juan Villereal, who is Mexican-American, needs to emphasise some commonality with the African-American crowd, and begins by re-establishing his personal connection, and debt, to his host.

<p>Keep it going one more time for Cedric please man [A:C] <u>I know you all clapped for him but please</u> <u>keep it going for Cedric man</u> trying to make a Mexican some money and I want money man cause I’ve been poor for like a long time I know you fuckers’ve seen me on BET and I’ve done some shit but don’t let that shit fool you people I’ve still got co-signers and shit [L]</p>

my caller ID says *out of area* I don't answer that shit *either* bro [L]
 {gesturing keeping the phone on the cradle} | *uh uh uh*
 that shit says *unavailable*
 I'm unavailable too then don't answer that shit | [L] (Small 2002*)

Without having explicitly tried to forge a connection with the audience by claiming a shared identity, his discussion of poverty at least decenters him from a position of power. J.J., on the other hand, implies that for him comedy is a career of last resort:

I appreciate these few *giggles* you're all giving a brother because
 I'm *tired* of switchin' jobs every six months
 this is *it* [L]
 I tried a *lot* of shit before I started doing comedy
 I tried working at *UPS*
 and I thought I was going to *move up* and drive the *truck* [L]
 they wanted my little skinny ass to start at the *bottom*
 unloadin' all of them heavy-ass boxes
 I'm in there *cryin'* and every god damned thing man [L]
 I go tell my little *supervisor*
 he tells me | go get one of them belts that go around your waist |
 I'm like | *man* that shit's not working
 my back *still* hurts | [L]
 I ain't return from break one day like | *no* we don't want this shit | [L]
 I told them I was going to get some water
 I went *straight* to the *car* [L]
 [...]
 I *appreciate* these few *giggles* cause
 when I look back on my life a brother like me could not depend on school
 for *no* job
 I was a *dumb* fucker (Small 2002*)

Access to broadcasting, whether live or pre-recorded, and to distributed mediations like LPs and DVDs, allows for a stand-up comedian to have their performed persona known to a particular audience in advance of a performance. They cannot be assured that the audience will have necessarily seen them before, but there is a good chance that they have had some exposure, either by chance through broadcasting or

directly through purchased mediations.²

By the end of his performance on *Comedy at Club 54*, Ron James had made explicit reference to having relatives in Newfoundland, that he was from Nova Scotia, that he lived in Los Angeles, and that his Maritime accent would stand out on occasion. This was woven into a routine about the misunderstanding Canadians had about the intensity of the hot weather in Los Angeles, coupled with the misunderstanding Americans have about Canada in general. Although very little of the material is autobiographical per se, enough hints are given, with particular reference to his Maritimes persona, to provide something of a framework for interpretation.

James made the transition from improvisational theatre and comedy acting to a one-man show and finally to stand-up comedy. He is perhaps an unusual case insofar as the content of his one-man show was explicitly autobiographical, detailing his time in Los Angeles and his struggles to find work there. *Up and Down in Shakey Town: One Canadian's Journey Through the California Dream*³ had been developed and performed in theatre venues rather than stand-up comedy venues: there was in that time a run in April and May of 1994 at the Factory Theatre Studio Café in Toronto (Kirchhoff 1994), a taping the following year for broadcast on CBC Radio (Mietkiewicz 1995), and a recorded performance filmed on 21 March 1997 but unaired until 6 June, 1999 on The Comedy Network (*Halifax Daily News* 1999), an appearance at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August 1997 (Corrigan 2001), and a two-week run at Halifax's Neptune

² While being on television or radio does not assure that everyone who could have heard or seen a comedian's performance did so, it is not disingenuous to suggest that a person who is in the audience of a stand-up comedy performance also seeks out broadcasts of stand-up comedy.

³ The spelling of the show alternated variously between 'Shakey' and 'Shaky.'

Theatre in June of 1999. The one-man show structure, with a beginning, middle, and end – and the use of light cues and music – was broadcast and framed as a stand-up comedy performance, and became his first mediated stand-up comedy project (James 1997*). It still occasionally appears on Comedy Network, and the entire performance is available on its website. On the strength of this show, James was awarded Best Stand-up at the first Canadian Comedy Awards in 2000.

There was significant overlap of his more theatrical work with his stand-up comedy work: *Shakey Town* was a going concern between 1994 and 1999, and his stand-up comedy dates from 1996. His *Comedy at Club 54* performance draws heavily on *Shakey Town*, particularly and explicitly the episode set in Los Angeles, where the material is a direct transplant. By the time James made the switch to stand-up comedy fulltime, he had the benefit of a fully fleshed-out persona to build upon.

Shakey Town begins with the title song from the Roy Rogers and Dale Evans film *San Fernando Valley* (English 1944*): the opening credits of the *Comedy Now* version are superimposed over a clip from the film. He takes the stage, wearing his flannel shirt, and begins

Well that *music* you were just listening to there
is being sung by Roy Rogers and Dale Evans
from a film called the *San Fernando Valley*
and I saw that film for the first time as an eleven year old kid at the Capitol
Theatre in Halifax Nova Scotia
it was *nineteen-sixty-eight*
of course their film was made in *nineteen-forty-one* [L]
it took a while for movies to make it back home in *those days* [L]
but so *what* if it was in black and white
it was a Saturday afternoon matinee and it was a *western*
and while grisly sleet from the Atlantic pounded on the doors *outside*
inside
safely cocooned in that warm of hum of movie screen

I watched Roy and Trigger ride across those forever hills a chaparral and
 sunny southern California
 and that night when my head hit the *pillow*
 I faded into *dreamtime*
 whispering incantations to that place *far away*
 and I *believed*
 a few years ago with family in tow I took my own journey there
 hopped a 747 Conestoga wagon [L]
 to follow well worn trails on the jet stream west
 like so many other *beaming pilgrims* before me [L] (James 1997*)

All that is needed to understand the performance is included within this opening section, as it frames the Maritimer as outsider to the larger, more wondrous, and mediated through fantastic images-world of California. The entire show concerns James' efforts at regrouping following the cancellation of his sit-com and the eventual development of the one-man show itself.

Performed Offstage (Auto-)biography

When the stand-up comedian has reached a certain status, they have access to opportunities to become known outside of their purely performative moments: they are sought out by media, or are successful in their efforts to garner media attention. Again, like bluesmen and country musicians, they become practiced in being interviewed. The interview becomes central to their efforts to frame performances and claim the social identity of stand-up comedian. Outside of the "duty" to be funny, the stand-up comedian has the opportunity to present his or her story, and it is in this non-comedic performance where many of the tropes of the vernacular theory of stand-up comedy are enacted.

In an interview for the book *Revolutionary Laughter: The World of Women's Comics* (Warren 1995), Joy Behar (prior to her mass exposure as one of the co-hosts of *The View*) uses her own biography to express a point about stand-up comedy in general:

It empowers you not to be victimized. One of the reasons people become comedians is so they can say these things about themselves first. For instance, growing up I had really, really kinky hair. Everybody used to tease me about it; they called me Brillo head. My fifth grade teacher used to call me Brillo head. I was hurt by this, so finally I started to make jokes about my hair. I'd say, "I've got a Brillo head" first, before anyone could say it to me. This defuses it; it takes away their power to hurt me. (Warren 1995:15)

In that same volume, Brett Butler is interviewed. For the preamble, Roz Warren notes that she "married at age twenty and endured an abusive relationship for three years before getting out," and "Her fans love Butler because she's a survivor. Because she's funny as hell. And because she doesn't take shit from anyone" (38). Over the course of the interview, Butler twice mentions – albeit only in passing – this marriage: "When I did get on stage again, after a grim first marriage, I felt that I had things to say" (39) and later, "On the subject of bombing, like the marriage I left in which I was battered for three years, I honestly feel that I had to go through that to become who I am now" (42).

Ron James was born in Glace Bay, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, the child of a Cape Breton mother and a Newfoundland father. At nine the family moved to Halifax, Nova Scotia's capital city and the largest in the Maritime Provinces. After finishing a BA in History at Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, he moved to Toronto to become a comedic actor: he joined The Second City Theatre Company, appeared in several films, including *Strange Brew* and *The Boogeyman*, and was an earnest do-it-yourselfer in a Home Hardware national advertising campaign. He was nominated for a Genie Award, the Canadian film industry awards, for his supporting role in *Something About Love*. A short-lived sitcom, "My Talk Show," brought him to Los Angeles in 1990 where, when it was cancelled, he found himself working for a landscaper, pulling a tree out of Robert Urich's yard. His need for work led him to try monologues at local comedy clubs, and,

when he returned to Canada two years later, he parlayed his experience as an Atlantic-Canadian in America into *Up and Down in Shaky Town*.

It was more this experience than his early childhood that becomes his master narrative, over and above what got performed on the stage: being a Maritimer in Los Angeles frames the outsider perspective; being out of work frames his drive and ambition; his ambivalence about the promises of American success frames his desire to succeed in Canadian show business; and the entire experience forms the background of his early solo work.

The Down East comic and Second City alumnus returned to Canada in 1993 after mixed experiences from his stand-up years in Los Angeles. "We were in Newsweek on Tuesday, cancelled on Thursday and on Monday I was pulling a tree out of Robert Urich's front yard with my buddy's pool-digging company." (McKay 2000)

He stayed three years in L.A., working standup. "I'd put my name in a hat with 30 other people and the detritus of the American dream would filter down from Topanga Canyon, the 'illegitimate' sons of Charles Manson, with songs of pain and angst." And what material was James doing? Canadian. Stories about deer hunting in the Maritimes or comparing the stormy Atlantic coast to the idyllic Pacific coast. (Posner 2001)

After 10 months, the show was cancelled and Mr. James became yet another actor struggling in Tinseltown. He had some luck with commercials, doing voice-overs for Fruit Loops and other products, but eventually it was costing him more to live and work in Los Angeles than he was getting paid.

That's when he moved back to Toronto and started over. Mr. James looks back on his Hollywood experience as bittersweet. (Bouw 2001)

The start of his Canadian dream began when his wife, June, urged him to take his stories to the small cafés in Los Angeles, to test his ability as a standup comedian and the worth of his material. He found that his tales of deer-hunting, among other stories, were funny to all sorts of people. So they moved back to Toronto, where he worked on his craft at The Laugh Resort. He wrote a standup routine called *Up and Down in Shakey Town*:

One Man's Journey Through the California Dream. (James 2005b)⁴

In my interview with him, he brought many of these themes together, including a brief admission that he keeps stock phrases at hand to explain his time.

My model for doing this was hitting the wall in Los Angeles as an actor in
1991
and knowing full well that I was the only person responsible for *my life*
period
no *middle ground* in America no *safety net*
no *small town* to run back to no *nothing*
no *idyllic halcyon* day to try to embrace during the two months of summer in
Cape Breton in Ingonish
no *Queensland Beach* outside of Halifax anymore
it was just *me* man
and I *knew*...
you know a person can go *everywhere*
in the world
and uh
not be *happy*
and I knew that a *declaration* of self
would make me *happy*
and I'd always *done that*
through being *funny*
and when I hit the wall in *Los Angeles* in '91
was out of work for eleven months
and I started going up to these *amateur nights* on Ventura Boulevard
this was after ten years of pretty *serious*
employment in Canada
and there's no *middle ground* down there
and my wife said at the time she said ah
| just go up and read those *stories* that you're reading to me all the time |
and I wasn't even a *stand-up* I'd go up and *read them*
and I used to ... and I *told* people
I don't know if I did this
observation before
but I just do it for my own *volition* rather than an *audience*
I do it to let them *know* that it didn't happen overnight
I do this phrase to let them *know*
that it's been a *long road* since I was funny in university or high school
or my *kitchen*

⁴ See also, inter alia, Mietkiewicz 1995; Hepfner 1999; Dunn 2003; Rankin 2004:1.

| I've shared the stage with the illegitimate spawn of the Charles Manson clan
 who came down from the Topanga Canyon warrens with their poetry and
 prose
 lookin' for the love that Charlie never *gave* |
 I wanted them to *know* that it just wasn't
 | *oh* fuck
 that's the guy who was funny in *high school* and *university*
 look where he is *now* |
 and *everybody*
thinks that
 and
 it just wasn't ...
 it just wasn't that *way*
 I had the goods but a *lot* of people had the goods
 but a lot of people didn't have the *balls*
 and a lot of people didn't have a
 a *healthy recognition*
 that your *time* is only so limited on this planet
 to *achieve* the thing you want to
 a recognition of death is a celebration of life
full circle
 when I came back to Toronto from Los Angeles
 I knew this was the place I had to make it work
 and to quote the *wizard*
 I had to follow my *bliss*
 and my *bliss* was always *this*
 that's all I have to say (James 2005a)

James' Los Angeles experience may have a certain flexibility to it depending on
 the audience and performance context: onstage it is the stuff of comedy; in his brief
 interviews with the press it is an explanatory background narrative that serves to inform
 what the audience can expect; and in the long interview it takes on the aura of personal
 myth and testimony. Had the events that the narrative relates not happened, he would be a
 fundamentally different person. It is an existential story that concerns origins, it informs
 his career and his personal life, and it forms the basis for a belief system.

The other central narrative for James, both on stage and off, is his constant touring
 and travels through Canada: it forms much of the discussion of the next chapter.

The Stand-up Comedian in Popular Biography and Autobiography

In an interview one is subject to the interviewer's questions: they can be anticipated, as interviewers may have a particular agenda or angle they are more interested in pursuing, but they are not guaranteed. When the recorder was turned off after our interview, Ron James said that I had some good questions, some of which seemed to genuinely surprise him: he was able to answer all of them, but not with the same practiced air of many of the other, more routine questions. James Kaplan recounts an even more explicit example as he was writing a profile of Jerry Lewis for the *New Yorker*:

When we returned to his office, Lewis handed me a ten-page memo, addressed to me, on Jerry Lewis Films Inc. stationery, entitled "Notions JL has had for 5 decades." It was a list of talking points for our interviews, a hundred items in all, ranging from "1. DEAN MARTIN ONLY!!!!," "2. THE MOB," and "3. SINATRA," to "12. HARRY COHN/SAMMY," to "18. JOHN KENNEDY (OVAL OFFICE)," to "26. THE NRA HAS GONE BACKWARDS 40 YEARS WITH CHARLTON HESTON THE POSTER BOY FOR INANE SNOBBERY," to "32. JL FILMS HAVE GROSSED OVER 2 BILLION DOLLARS (MOSTLY WHEN TICKETS WERE 25¢," to "48. AUSTRALIA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!," to "67. 49 TELETHONS AND NO CUE CARDS MEANS JL HAS TALKED FOR ABOUT 800 HOURS FROM HIS GUT. (WITH THE EXCEPTION OF CARDS THAT CONTAIN VITAL INFORMATION SCIENTIFICALLY THAT I MUST NOT OOPS WITH)," to "81. V.P. AGNEW CALLED JL TO DO ONE MAN SHOW AT THE WHITE HOUSE (THIS ONE IS A BEAUTY!!!!)," to "99. VIDEO PIRATES (\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$)," and "100. MAKING MY MOVIES AGAIN."

It was a list of such Whitmanesque proportions that I was temporarily halted in my tracks. I recalled an admiring remark he had made about Sinatra's decision, at a certain point in his career, to stop talking to the press. Why didn't he stop? "I am too good a showman," he said, "and too smart a businessman not to do to the press what they did to me. And that was use them. But the press is not the problem; I'm the problem. I need to understand that I have all of my life been a target, because I have a *point of view*. I have a hundred and seventy-four I.Q. I am a *very bright* young man! And I really need to say what I have to say!" (Kaplan 2000:58)

But this amount of control, or effort at control, is reserved for only the most

tireless egomaniac. When comedians have reached an even greater status, they frequently become the subjects of unauthorised or authorised biographies, or write their own autobiographies. Often, stand-up comedians who have become the subject of biographies, or who initiate or are approached to write their autobiographies, have typically attained a level of fame in a sphere outside of stand-up comedy alone. Dick Gregory's *Nigger: An Autobiography* (1964) was written more from and about his involvement in the civil rights movement. Albert Goldman's *Ladies and Gentlemen—Lenny Bruce!* (1974) was written almost ten years after Bruce's death when he had already become an icon for the counterculture. Some have been exposed to a larger audience through television work, like Tim Allen's *Don't Stand Too Close to a Naked Man* (1994), Brett Butler's *Knee Deep in Paradise* (1996), Jerry Oppenheimer's unauthorised biography of Jerry Seinfeld (2002), Bernie Mac's *Maybe You Never Cry Again* (2003), and George Lopez's *Why You Crying?* (2004), or film, like the biographies of Woody Allen (Lax 1992), Bill Cosby (Smith 1997), or Jim Carrey (Knelman 1999). A certain number are written by older or retiring comedians as a form of life review, like Rodney Dangerfield's *It's Not Easy Bein' Me* (2004), Bob Newhart's *I Shouldn't Even Be Doing This!* (2006), Don Rickles' *Rickles' Book* (2006), or Steve Martin's *Born Standing Up* (2007), all of whom have achieved success in other spheres as well.

Unauthorised biographies tend to be either intentionally glowing and effusive or intentionally disparaging and critical. In either instance, their primary materials are previously published sources like press interviews, original interviews with people outside of the comedian's active circle, and archival material dating from before the comedian was able to (or thought to) exercise control over their press. However, both are

useful sources for information about the comedian's life, and the glowing biography also emphasises how the life story fits into the extant social identity of the stand-up comedian. Authorised biographies are rare, especially as the comedian is often presumed to be a writer, thus questioning the need for someone else to write for them: the exceptions to these are the posthumous biography, sanctioned by the comedian's estate, and the extended journalistic profile.

The biography provides the opportunity to uninterruptedly reframe the stand-up comedian's story. Sometimes it is to salvage a damaged reputation or a potentially damaging moment: Joan Rivers' *Enter Talking* (1986) was published at the launch of her own talk show on the then new Fox Network, a consequence of which was a very public falling out with Johnny Carson, for whom she had been the permanent replacement host for *The Tonight Show*. Although it is not the focus of the book, Rosie O'Donnell's *Find Me* (2002) was her first public statement about her homosexuality. British comedian Russell Brand's *My Booky Wook* (2007) is as much a memoir of his very public drug problems as it is of his rise.

Even when the biography is more in keeping with the transference of routines to the page (as discussed in 349ff) and less a biography per se, the comedian who has been able to reach a status that makes book publishing viable will use it to their advantage. In all instances, publishing becomes yet another venue for the cultivation of a comedian's reputation.

Marginality

As was suggested in the last chapter, it is practically a trope of stand-up comedian culture that comedy derives in part from a marginalised voice: it is a recognition of

inconsistencies – seemingly incompatible positions – within a dominant structure that are accepted by that structure and help to sustain it, only to be exposed by one who is by virtue of circumstance neither privy to the inner workings of said structure nor a beneficiary thereof. The example I always return to is that of the little girl in Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Emperor’s New Clothes”: having no vested interest in either maintaining the illusion that there were clothes or being blind to that fact, she could laugh not only at his nakedness but at the crowd’s inability to recognise the same. Marginality – “outside” enough to be distanced from the power structure: “inside” enough to understand the implications of the power structures – is a first step.

The point that has been stressed throughout this work is that stand-up comedy is a speech event that requires an audience. It is a dialogic form: there is both performer and audience and, while the former is the principal actor in the exchange, the performance is co-operative, moving forward via the audience’s reaction to the performer’s text, often in the form of a non-verbal or terse verbal utterance or ejaculation which variously expresses assent, recognition, disagreement, outrage, bewilderment with request for further explanation, or delight at bewilderment sated. Laughter and, to a lesser extent, applause further propel the text forward. The audience makes a judgment of the performer’s right to engage with them, and validates that right throughout the successful performance, indicating that the stand-up comedian’s responsibility to provide a comic performance is being met. Despite the power of the performance ultimately residing with the performer, stand-up comedy is a genre predicated on having someone beyond the performer interpret, develop, and shape it as it progresses, which makes it distinct among professional solo performance genres.

The audience is historically situated. The comedian adapts a potential performance (a type) to meet the expectations of that historically situated audience (creating a version). However, as will be discussed in Chapter 8, the most readily available and accessible versions are commercial recordings which are intended to serve a larger market: the performer is deliberately aiming to meet the expectations of not only the immediate audience but also of an indeterminate, physically and temporally distant audience. In such recordings comedians heed the local audience in order to establish and maintain rapport, and thus elicit the greatest possible response – supportive dialogic utterances, alongside peals of laughter – which by proxy will hopefully translate through psychic contagion to an analogous reaction by the “home” audience. However, for the most part the idiosyncrasies of a purely localised performance are passed over in favour of a broader appeal. What is the nature of this “appeal”? Or, more precisely, what is being appealed to?

Given the nature of its professionalisation, the stand-up comedy audience is not a single person but always a group of Robert Georges’ story listeners (1971). They quantitatively have in common the primary characteristic of co-presence at the particular performance event, and by extension are likely to share consequent social identities that their presence at the event implies, above all, an initial willingness to participate in a stand-up comedy event as a “story listener.” The venue’s location – country, region, municipality, neighbourhood – implies national, regional, or local sympathies: its cultivated reputation – say for alternative or family-friendly comedy – or its cumulative reputation for its other performance uses (music venue, casino, theatre) further contextualise the constitution of the audience; and the price of admission may alternately

indicate either the disposable income of the audience or a willingness to spend to participate in the event. The performer's expectation of the constitution of an audience is based on a series of implications extrapolated from the context of the performance. With rare exceptions – those being either comedians who have reached such a level of notoriety and fame that they could be described as celebrities in Rosenberg's sense,⁵ or comedians whose performance material is principally a series of one-liners (Emo Philips, Steven Wright) – performers adapt their material to their audience. But what form does that adaptation take? And so I return to the same question as before: what is the nature of this appeal?

But stand-up comedians are also performers: they do not simply passively operate within a "Western" worldview. Rather, they actively create or invoke the worldview in which their talk is meant to be interpreted. Like Georges' example of father and son as a social identity pairing, there is a social identity pair which precedes the storyteller and story listener identity: unlike Georges' father and son, however, the social identity-pairing for the comedy performance is in large part a creation of the performer, who simultaneously addresses and moves beyond statistical or quantifiable associations and establishes a bond of common cause with the audience, permitting the story-teller identity. This common cause is often in relation to an other. One way of building intimacy is suggesting that you and I are equally distinguishable from someone else: that alone may be sufficient to initiate an engagement.

⁵ When George Carlin performed in St. John's in 2004, his first and only time in Newfoundland, he said in an aside that all his material used American references, but that it didn't particularly matter as "we're all one culture, really": the assertion passed without opprobrium, largely (most likely) out of a sense of excitement of such a performer coming to town, but it is certainly not how Newfoundlanders understand themselves, even compared to the rest of the Atlantic provinces and certainly to the rest of Canada.

A Comic Persona

If the social identity “stand-up comedian” is equivalent to a type, then the specific and distinct persona he or she cultivates is equivalent to a version. In the last chapter I demonstrated how, even in the sketchy biographies that the emcee provides for the apprentice comedian, there is some effort to locate the comedian within a particular worldview so as to better orient the audience to how the act is meant to be interpreted. This persona is enacted on stage, developed over time and, as it becomes better known to its potential audiences, can mature: less effort need be expended on proving the type, as the version has an established history and the flow of talk can, more or less, pick up where it left off. The audience brings foreknowledge not only of what *a* stand-up comedian is, but who *this* stand-up comedian is. The comic persona is the stand-up comedian’s projection of a character who is, simultaneously, meant to be identical to his or her “real” self.

A complexity stems from the economic necessity for the professional comedian to frequently operate outside of his or her specific small group. Within the small group each member, performers and non-performers alike, shares in an accumulated and cumulative nexus of interlocking terms and relations that forms the baseline of a common worldview. Some may have only a tentative grasp of this worldview, some may have a mastery over certain areas, and some may have a broad and rich understanding of most areas. Should a performer emerge within this group their success or failure as a talker will be judged in part on the basis of a mastery of the group’s canons, its repertoire of modes of talk, motifs, and topics. And, as Neil Rosenberg reminds us, with any folklore form it is necessary to distinguish between individual competence and ideals of performance

(1986:165).

When one moves outside of one's immediate indigenous group (using indigenous not to denote any meaning other than that group in whose context and worldview one primarily arose), there may be a great amount of overlap between the worldviews of the new group and that of one's own. The criterion for success or failure as a talker within this new context remains the same: an audience's judgment of demonstrable mastery of this new group's canon. With the worldview of the performer largely but not wholly contiguous with that of the audience, he or she has two options: either obfuscate the points of difference and thus enforce the impression of a contiguous worldview, or advert to the points of difference and thus frame one's presence in part through the esoteric and exoteric understandings the two groups have about the other.

The comedian may, and typically does, do both, vacillating between an insider and outsider identity. Indeed, peripherality and interstitiality appear to be base requirements for the comedian. When one speaks of group, of course, one is typically referring to an ideal type, in which each member is interchangeable. We know this to be a mere convention which allows us to continue using "group" as a term with meaning, despite our recognition that within groups (a) there are distinctions of complementarity and (b) constituent members may also belong to other groups. Active participation in a group is the conscious advertence to points of commonality and deliberate inhibition of points of difference.

By whichever humour theorist one chooses – Kierkegaard, Freud, Bergson, Douglas, Oring – one is told that comedy stems from the artful revelation of some underlying double meaning, discrepancy and/or contradiction. A humorous performance

is one in which the performer, for however brief a moment, communicates having figuratively stepped aside and seen the discrepancy. There is a deliberate advertence to a second possible interpretation, one which is in contrast to the straightforward “commonsensical” interpretation of “the group.” Occurring as it does within a non-consequential play frame, the recognised discrepancy need not be resolved nor its consequences dwelled on. Were it to have occurred in a frame of consequentiality, we might then be talking about the tragic, for which resolution is sought. If active participation in a group is the conscious advertence to points of commonality and deliberate inhibition of points of difference, then what is occurring in humorous performance is a simultaneously active non-participation in a group, i.e. the conscious advertence to points of difference.

Whereas the quotidian humorous performance need only be a consequence of a temporary “stepping outside,” the professional comedian, who is persistently needing to be funny, must be persistently “stepping out.” The comedian, then, is one who has a solid grasp of the worldview of the group but who has also moved outside (or beyond, or the spatial metaphor of your choice) of that worldview and has gained a separate perspective which highlights inconsistency and discrepancy. Whereas all group members are both of the group and outside it, the vocational stand-up comedian, much like the artist, cultivates interstitiality while maintaining a non-consequential frame.

If the vernacular theory of comedy sees the stand-up comedian-as-type as marginalized, as rooted in loneliness and the need for approval, and as seeing the world from a different perspective, the comic persona developed and portrayed by the stand-up comedian-as-version needs to establish *how and from whom* is he or she marginalized,

how is he or she lonely and *from whom* is he or she needing approval, and *from what* does he or she see the world.

In a North American context, one can quickly identify comedians who are representative of a marginalised group. There are comedians who are women, black, Asian, Hispanic, Jewish, homosexual, visually impaired, obese, Southern. Their comedy is not wholly defined by their identification with marginalised groups, but an *a priori* marginalisation provides an entry into the comedic universe, and there is an established comedy vein into which they can tap.

Wholly defining the comedian's voice as *a priori* marginalised, however, leads to a difficult dilemma: how does one account for the comedy of comedians positioning themselves as representative of groups that are – by any objective, measurable, sociological, and/or historical standard – not marginalised? One can avoid the question, which is simply laziness, or one can argue that they are somehow not performing comedy, which is a conceit. Instead, the marginalisation is a subjective framework created by the performer in collusion with the audience.

This is the technique by which comedians representative of groups so clearly not forced into the margins – the proverbial middle class white male – are able to maintain an outsider stance: Dennis Miller (pre-MSNBC) evokes a political universe in which the literate and intelligent – like himself – are cast aside in favour of a lowest common denominator; Larry Miller evokes a civilised demeanour above the fray of current lapses in judgment and sense. This claim of marginalisation need never be “proven,” simply argued and accepted by the audience, and, as it occurs within a realm of play, the consequences of understanding the world in such a manner are nil, as it is a framework

which can be dropped at the end of performance.

Brad Stine, the American conservative and born-again Christian stand-up comic is a particularly strong example of an explicit self-marginalisation.

Stine's act is built around his rants, which often have the flavor of sermons. He rails against atheists, liberals, Darwinists, pro-choicers, animal-rights activists, moral relativists—pretty much anyone who doesn't believe that the Bible is the literal truth—with a vitriol that seems to tap into his audience's own resentments. "This country is changing," he told the Estes Park crowd [of several hundred men on a Christian retreat]. "And there is, in fact, a civil war—of ideology. It's real." Stine said that in the future Christians could wind up being imprisoned just for expressing the ultimate tenet of their Christian faith: Accept Jesus as your personal Saviour or spend eternity in Hell. "Well, what are you saying—I should just believe in Jesus so I don't go to Hell?" he asked, mockingly. Then he whispered, "Pretty much." This got a huge laugh and a round of applause. (Green 2004:47)

In his set, Stine hit some familiar notes, "I'm a conservative, I'm a Christian, and I think the United States is the greatest country that has ever existed on the face of the earth!" he shouted, provoking one of four standing ovations. "And, because of those three belief systems, when I die, by law, I have to be stuffed and mounted and placed in the Smithsonian under the 'Why He Didn't Get a Sitcom' display." (Green 2004:52)

The same issue can be approached by asking "marginal to whom?" For as much as a comedian may or may not be identifiable with a marginalised group, it is more important to establish a common ground with an audience and, as such, identify an other in contrast to whom both performer and audience can find common cause. Differences, if any, can be quickly addressed or ignored in light of a greater similarity, in contrast to an other which appears to have some semblance of power, domination, or influence over or threat to those present. The object is to build upon the established exoteric assumptions of the audience and identify oneself as *primum inter pares* at articulating those assumptions. The challenge is to do so without losing one's soul, especially when the group one is contrasting oneself and the audience against is in reality an historically marginalised one.

The shared connection between audience and performer is a fragile one, which must be maintained and reaffirmed throughout the performance. The parameters can also shift and, as the audience itself is not homogeneous, the performer can claim common cause with the multiple social identities of the constituent members, framing him- or herself in opposition to another identity component over the course of the performance (taking sides with men over women in one routing, then African-Americans over whites in another, etc.). One continually, sequentially, appeals to a common cause that is shared by the plurality if not the majority of the audience: the antagonism that may arise from those left outside simply fuels the catharsis from their eventual and inevitable reintegration.

Ron James and an Atlantic Canadian Persona

It is arguable that Ron James is currently Canada's top working stand-up comedian. He tours extensively nationwide, performing to capacity crowds in theatres and other large-scale venues; he is in regular demand as a writer and performer for television, both for political satire and revue shows (*The Rick Mercer Report*, *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, *Royal Canadian Air Farce*) and character-driven work (*Made in Canada* and *Blackfly*, a show of his own creation); and he has produced six television specials, the "one-man show" *Up and Down in Shakey Town* (1997*) for CTV and (then brand-new) The Comedy Network, and *The Road Between My Ears* (2003*), *Quest for the West* (2005*), *West Coast Wild* (2006*), *Back Home* (2007*), and *Manitoba Bound* (2008*) for CBC, the first four of which are available on DVD.

In November of 2005, in the time between the filming and the broadcasting of *Quest for the West*, I followed Ron on the second half of his Nova Scotia tour. Altogether

he played five cities in Nova Scotia: Wolfville, Liverpool, Halifax, Glace Bay, and Pictou: and I saw him starting in Halifax, the only city where he performed two shows. I interviewed Ron on the last night, following the Pictou show. The Nova Scotia stretch was the second and longest leg of a three week Atlantic Canada "Gone With Ron" tour: he had just completed four shows in Newfoundland, and was about to do five more in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. On the strength of ticket sales, a second swing through the Maritimes, constituting seven shows in two weeks, was scheduled for the end of January.

For a Canadian audience, the easiest way for a performer to build this legitimacy of voice is to shift focus to the United States and distance him- or herself from it. It is a strategy that works equally well for American performers as it does for Canadians, even if the plurality of what is to come is immersed in American references. Canadian comedians can make more of this by providing the second half of a compare and contrast approach through the use of Canadian-specific references. In a market as fluent with American culture as Canada's – through both direct media penetration of American networks and cable channels and indirectly through Canadian broadcasters' purchasing of syndicated American product – a voice framed within a Canadian perspective is one distinct enough to catch the attention of an audience and make it stand out.

Such was the theme of "Sleeping with the Elephant" (2004*), a specially commissioned show at the Winnipeg Comedy Festival in 2003, named for a remark of Pierre Trudeau's about the Canada-US relationship,⁶ hosted by transplanted American

⁶ "Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant. No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, if I can call it that, one is affected by every twitch and grunt" (from an address to the Press Club in Washington, D.C., 25 March 1969).

comedian JeBB Fink. I quote from columnist John Doyle's review from when it aired in 2004:

Near the end, along comes Ron James who is, as usual, a bundle of fierce energy. His rapid-fire rants are always well written and scathing. But even he gets into the territory of cliché. On the topic of American television, he says this: "Survivor? Surviving in the tropics, nonetheless! Jeez, we're a winter nation. I'd like to see those Darwinian foot soldiers of the American dream tucked into a minus-40 lean-to up there in Lake of the Woods country!" At this point, there is raucous cheering in the Winnipeg theatre. (Doyle 2004)

Five years later, Ron James has produced five network television specials in the past six years. He was the only Canadian stand-up comedian asked to perform on *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* when it did a week of shows from Toronto in 2004. And, in one of his more recent routines, he continues his American material: "Talking about obese American tourists on [a] trip to Mexico he says, 'Jeez, it's not 9/11 that's killing that country, it's 7-Eleven!'" (Doyle 2005).

But Canada is also a country of regions. Some are identifiably so simply by means of geography, while provinces like those in the west, whose borders were largely conventions based on lines of latitude, developed regional identities as their respective political autonomies and settlement patterns emerged over the last century. Running alongside geographic distinctions is the historic development of settlement, with the early settlement of the Maritimes by Acadians, Irish, United Empire Loyalists, and Scots, the settling of Quebec by the French, Ontario and the English, Loyalists, Scots, French, and Germans, the establishment of a Pacific Ocean presence in British Columbia; and the "filling in" of the Prairies with the acceleration of immigration in the latter half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, especially from Eastern and Northern Europe. The consolidation of economic and political power in central Canada

gives rise to Ontario as bourgeoisie, the “urban” in an urban/rural dichotomy that is echoed both in the micro scale throughout Canada’s regions and on the macro in its relation to the United States.

Thus, being twice-removed or twice-marginalised, first from the dominant culture of the United States, and second from the dominant culture of Central Canada, Maritimers in general and James specifically are allowed a certain license in what they can get away with saying. Their *de facto* marginalisation becomes representative of all instances of the marginalised. An analogy may be to Nebraskan Johnny Carson or Indiana’s David Letterman: a Midwest sensibility (no matter how long removed from that context their lives may have taken them) can be invoked which instantly allows for rapport through the establishment of a distinction between themselves and a dominant, East or West Coast, culture.

Parallel to Atlantic Canada’s sense of displacement is the recent phenomenon – recent in that it now has economic and political consequences – of western isolation. The economic boom of Alberta and the Oil Sands, reserves which are said to dwarf those of the Arabian Peninsula, albeit in a form which only recently has been feasible to develop, means that the West is the source of much of Canada’s overall economic health, which engenders a reappraisal of its place in the Confederation.

As discussed in the previous chapter, prior to any interpretation of his spoken “texts” Ron James uses a variety of devices to frame his performance within a particular set of audience expectations, that of the, in his words, “happy-go-lucky” Maritimer. In both local Maritime performance and trans-national performances, James is able to play on an audience’s *a priori* expectation for a Maritime identity which helps to delimit, but

not exhaustively so, the interpretation of what is to come.

Although he has not lived in Atlantic Canada since 1979, Ron James' Maritime identity is very much part of his performance persona. Primarily through accent and speech play, but also through costume and musical accompaniment,⁷ he establishes and cultivates a heightened persona of Atlantic Canadianness. Reasons for this may not be immediately apparent to the non-Canadian. But, as television critic John Doyle put it:

Television comedy in this country is dominated by East Coast wit and it flourishes because the regional attitude and sass is used to mask a much more savage, anti-establishment comedy that wouldn't be tolerated if anyone else tried it. The best of Canadian TV comedy of the last two decades [... is] anchored in a colourful language that's just outside the mainstream. The style is rooted in regionalism, a literal and figurative distance from the mainstream and the centre of power. The accent is a scalpel used to eviscerate the pomposity and smug assumptions of the rest of Canada. (Doyle 2003)

His Atlantic Canada persona – more or less localised depending on the press audience – is often explicitly identified in the press, whether through his own words or those of the reporter.

James grew up in what he calls “a real colourful neighbourhood and a very active kitchen.

“There was a swinging door in my mother's kitchen and this great pantheon of personalities that came through who were all really lacking in any kind of formality.

“I was so fortunate to be sitting on the counter when all those shenanigans were going on and somebody was making rum toddies and somebody was making a face and somebody was playing accordion and somebody was falling down and it was fractious, passionate, humorous and contentious.” (Hepfner 1999)

⁷ A second, more implicit way the Maritime persona is developed is through the opening music: at the beginning of the shows on the Nova Scotia tour, following an announcement by his tour producer Terry McRae, a short, exuberant pop-Celtic instrumental piece is played over the PA, at a volume considerably higher than the music playing as the audience is being seated. It is identifiably proto-Celtic through the use of bodhran, Uilleann pipes, and tin whistle, and accompanies the dimming of the house lights, the raising of the stage lights, and the introduction, again by McRae, of “Ladies and Gentlemen, Ron James.” It is the same music that opens the *Road Between My Ears* special (2003*).

"The essence of that piece [*Shakey Town*] was comparing where I was born and raised in the Maritimes – by that water – to the Pacific, and the juxtaposition of myth meeting reality; the California that I saw in movies, in books and on TV with the one I was living in and investing in."
(Spevack 2000)

"Maritime audiences are quick to respond – which is one of the things about being at home I like," he says. "There's a Maritime voice behind my work, and the Maritime way of looking at things fuels the comedy."
(Pedersen 2001a)

"I think there's a certain Maritime point of view to my work," notes the longtime Toronto resident, attempting to pull back the curtain without giving anything away.

"There's a tradition where I was born of standing on the porch watching the rest of the country have a party through a big picture window. You get a greater predisposition for humour." (Rubinoff 2001)

James moved to Halifax from Cape Breton when he was nine and believes his comedic sense – honed on the stage of Second City in Toronto – is innate to Nova Scotia's kitchen culture.

"When you're sitting on the kitchen counter and the door is swinging off its hinges with the characters coming through, you learn something from those guys with their rum-toddy grins, their sun-burnt arms. I feel fortunate I had that." (Smulders 2003)

Of course, Ron James is also a known entity: already, by buying tickets, the audience has a certain set of expectations based on reputation and previous experience. Using Rosenberg's model (1986), James is by all accounts a craftsman at the national level: his reputation is such that his theatre tours typically sell out in all regions of the country, and his television specials are not only feasible but profitable for the national network. Although James is identified in part with a particular region, his career is not rooted in those local or regional markets, and he is not a "performer of place" like Buddy Wasisname or Jimmy Flynn: as such, unlike these performers, it is not likely that the audience draws outside of the region can be attributed exclusively (or even in large part) to other transplanted Atlantic Canadians.

Rosenberg notes how a craftsman's repertoire "may include eclectic as well as unique elements for his audience accepts him on personal terms" (1986:157). There are two consequences of this for James' performance. Firstly, as was discussed in the last chapter, he can assume his audience has some inkling of his biography, and he does not need to introduce himself cold to them. As such, the Maritime framing apparati are present to reinforce what is known of him already, but are not as required as they would be were he a *tabula rasa*. Secondly, with the "personal acceptance" an audience has for the craftsman, James is able to not simply coast on that goodwill but to capitalise on it, allowing himself to venture into riskier material knowing that the audience – however cautiously – will follow.

For Rosenberg, one of the distinctions between an amateur and a professional is the use of the media to aid in reputation cultivation, and James is adept at interviews. I sensed, in part, that he understood my request to interview him as being along these lines: as I have mentioned in passing, some of his answers were from a repertoire of answers to anticipated questions. He also had performative expectations of how he should answer, and (as the quote on pages 225ff suggests), he wanted to get it right and answer them properly.

The Nova Scotia shows first and foremost provided an opportunity to see someone on their "home turf." Ron James was born in Glace Bay in 1958. His father (a Newfoundlander originally from Burgeo) worked for the phone company, and in 1967, when Ron was nine, he moved the family to Halifax. He attended Acadia University in the late 1970s and, in 1979, moved to Toronto to become a comedic actor, beginning with Second City. Although he has not lived in the Maritimes for over thirty years, his

Maritimer persona is in part a strong residue and in part deliberately cultivated for the stage. Three of the four shows were, in their way, homecomings. The fourth, in Pictou, was nevertheless presented in the guise of one, and his identity was negotiated as a regional, albeit not local, figure.

One could be tempted to describe James as a “character.” During his earlier stand-up material (his initial forays following the more structured *Shaky Town*) his freneticism of performance tempted a number of reviewers to peg him as such: “His stage character is that of a bandy-legged, fast-talking, wisecracking Mr. Average who can fire off a quip to take your head off before you get a retort clear of its holster” (Pedersen 2001b). Diane Tye (1989) uses the term “character” for someone whose “dramatic performance, consistent within a particular context, is recognized as being in contrast to, or in conflict with, governing social norms [and is] seen as nonthreatening, and often humorous, by most if not all of the group members” (182), yet who is also an accommodated minor non-conformist (198). Just as they are recognizably different from the group they are simultaneously a part of it: “Although the character may not be the most successful group member, he or she is not a stranger” (195). Indeed, Tye suggests elsewhere (1988) that assuming the social identity (her term is “role”) of character is a strategy adopted by stigmatised individuals.

Although Atlantic Canada, and especially Nova Scotia, is certainly part of his biography, it is not a persona he dons exclusively for Eastern Canadian audiences. I asked him about how and why his performed biography and his onstage persona as a Maritimer is an effective (and an affective) one:

Well I think we're part and parcel with the greater Celtic *diaspora* you know and I think that ah... y'know

we're just *driven* by the wind
 it's just our... our *nature* and I mean
 the Scots have been *moving* since day *one* and...
 so... y'know
 I touch on that a little bit in my new special *Quest for the West* about Alberta
 that
 y'know the uh..
 | when the oil boom *hit*
 and the clarion call was *heard*
 the East hadn't seen an exodus in numbers like *that*
 since Charlton Heston parted the Red Sea
 only thing missing was a biblical *soundtrack*
 fast-moving *Jews* and slow moving *Egyptians* |
 so we do um...
 I think that...
 I think to answer your question it's a marriage of ... um
necessity and *feeling*
 it's a necessity because I have a certain Maritime persona on-stage
 and um I know that *people*
 have certain *expectations* with that persona
 that's not to say I won't grow *out* of it
 but um... and in terms of ...
 ask me that question *again*
 I want to get it *right*
 I want to answer it *properly*
 [...]
 Well uh...
 from a *stage* persona uh
 I know that the country doesn't find Maritimers very *threatening*
 we're *funny happy-go-lucky folks the life of the party* uh etc. etc.
 and for a person whose job is to get laughs
 that's uh
 a *very* convenient place to come from
 and we're also traditional *outsiders*
 which is a place you want to come from when you're a *comedian*
 you never want to be a card-carrying member of the *country club*⁸
 I know shows are very *successful*

⁸ "And I think that's a good place for a comedian to be – you never want to be a card-carrying member of the country club; you always want to be out on the porch, looking in through the picture window and making fun of them" (qtd. in Oswald 2004:F2); "I think the last place a comedian wants to find himself is a card-carrying member of the country club. It's always important to be standing outside the circle of power. You definitely want to be on the porch looking into the picture window" (qtd. in Rankin 2005); "In terms of Canada, [James] says he thinks Maritimers are welcome right across the map. 'Because we come from a have-not region, we haven't exactly been card-carrying members to the country club of Central Canada. I think we've really built the west'" (Furlong 2006).

that cozy up to *politicians*
 and have an almost *jocular affinity* with them
 I think that's the last place I want to *be* you know
 so I uh...
 well I think that's an *advantage* for me as a
 as a *comedian*
 having contempt for the *status quo* and authority
 is really *important*
 and I think that *Maritimers* when they've travelled around the country
 have traditionally been *hewers of wood* and *drawers of water*⁹
 even though I'm university *educated*
 I do have a working class *background*
 so I always do have a *soft spot*
 for the perpetual *traveller*
 and I'm *part and parcel* with the Celtic diaspora as well y'know
 | driven to the far corners of the *worth...*
 of the *earth* in search of a *better run* at a *new day* |
 and I think that I've always been looking for my little *acre of green* y'know
 my little *place in the sun* (James 2005a)

By explicitly invoking not only his Maritime provenance but also the stereotype of the Maritimer both as outsider and as storyteller, he establishes a trans-Canadian right to address an audience anticipating a comedic performance. As was suggested in the last chapter, as his reputation has grown he has dropped this intensity of characterisation, and has developed into someone more and more indistinguishable from his audience.

Atlantic Canada has always had an ambiguous relationship with the west. Starting in the early 1900s, trainloads of Cape Bretoners and other Maritimers would travel to the Prairie Provinces to work the land as seasonal farmhands. Starting with the oil boom of the 1970s – which coincided with the death knell of coal and steel in Nova Scotia – and continuing to this day, flocks of younger people moved to Alberta with the promise of

⁹ "I got off the plane there to take the shuttle to the hotel, and the driver looks at me and goes, 'Where you going to, my darling, my honey? My little partridgeberry? Where you going to, my love?' And I thought to myself, 'Jeez, if it wasn't for unemployment in Atlantic Canada, the West would have to hire real Mexican labour.' 'Cause we're hewers of wood and drawers of water out there" (qtd. in Cooke 2005).

\$75,000 per year working the oil fields, or even the promise of twice to three times the minimum wage to work the service sectors of donut shops, Home Depots, and McDonalds.

For James' *Quest for the West* special, the ostensive purpose of the performance was an effort at communicating the western experience to the rest of Canada. He explained it thus to an Edmonton newspaper just prior to the show's airing in December 2005:

"I guess I wanted to get a grunt's-eye view of the land and the people and embrace a sense of people and place and to basically pay homage (to a place) that I've grown to love over the last six years of touring through there. And I wanted to explain to the rest of the country what it is and what it was that appealed to me."

He says he almost ended up living out west in the '70s, when thousands of Maritimers fled "the grip of pogeys culture. [...] The West has always been the land of the second chance for people from my neck from the woods, and definitely that's a theme that's always resonated for me," James says. (Rankin 2005)

James has achieved his rank as a craftsman on the national stage in part through his facility with the press. This "homage" to the west comes through in his interviews, which he adeptly uses to set up audience expectations and build goodwill. The following quote comes from an interview with the *Calgary Herald*, just prior to filming the special in September:

"Alberta's always been a golden beacon of opportunity," he deadpans in a sing-songy Nova Scotian lilt at a speed that makes Robin Williams sound lethargic. "It's the land of the second chance, promising release for we eastern bums and scums from our soul-sucking burden of pogeys culture, where we can finally score big-time boons in the oil patch and shirk unemployment's Sisyphean lump of f.k." (Moore 2005)

But contrast this with how he talks of the west in Atlantic Canada: From the St.

John's *Telegram*:

In my Newfoundland show, I talk about the role of the Canadian West as a

“land of second chances” for Atlantic Canadians. The enclaves of Atlantic Canadians in Alberta makes me wonder about other countries and peoples in the world - if they have the same phenomenon of people being in exile in their own country, the way Maritimers are in the west.” (qtd. in Hayward 2005)

The metaphor of opportunity seems to be supplanted by one of exploitation when he shifts in audience from West to East.

A question remains where the non-performative James stands on the issue. From my interview, his sympathies for his home region seems to be challenged by what he sees as an inherent flaw in Eastern psychology. Ron’s stand-up comedy career emerged from his one-man show, *Up and Down in Shakey Town*. Intensely autobiographical, its focus was on three years spent in Los Angeles. As I have already mentioned, having moved with his wife and child to Hollywood to be part of the cast of *My Talk Show*, a verité situation comedy much like *Fernwood Tonight*, the show was abruptly cancelled, and, having been a professional actor in Canada for almost fifteen years, Ron found himself looking for work. I repeat this episode, as it is foundational not only to James’ career as a stand-up comedian but to his offstage narrative as well. It is a personal myth or testimony, in the sense I discuss in Chapter Two, insofar as, had the events therein not occurred as they are related, he would be fundamentally different from what and who he is today. In this manner the narrative is not open for debate (not that I choose to debate it), although one can still examine it as narrative, as a deliberate reconstruction and representation of events. It is a watershed moment for him, as it caused him to move away from what he understands as the “company town” mentality endemic to the Maritimes:

I think that also plays in to your Maritime *motif* that you’re speaking of um... because essentially Atlantic Canada is a *victim* culture
it’s a culture of *woe is me*

it's a culture of...
 it's a culture that lives in the *past*
 it's a culture that feels its best day is *behind* it
 [...]

But it's *very very* important for me to
 have a *deference*
 and a *respect* for the average *man*
 and I don't...

I just can't *imagine* not ever *having* that
 I mean that's in my *DNA*
 that being said uh I'm ...
 on my *road*
 far away from a victim culture of dependence on *handouts*
 I've been self-employed
vigorously
 for ten years
 well I've been self-employed for *twenty-five*
 but this *stand-up* thing
 so that's kind of different than the traditional *Maritimer* going out looking for

...

see I think a *Maritimer* carries
 especially guys that *hunt* for work
 they carry a *company town* mentality
 that they'll go out there they'll make the money and *somebody somewhere*
 will give them something for their hard work
 they'll never really *get* their place in the sun
 but it's worth the *struggle*
 it's worth the *journey*
 and I think as an *artist*
 a *creator*
 I'm constantly *aware* of that y'know
 [...]

America taught me not to expect *handouts*
 and it was a *hard lesson* to learn but the most *important* one I learned in my
 life
 and I think that extinguished whatever ...
flame may have existed for a deference for the company town (James 2005a)

The persona James enacts on stage and in (most) off-stage interviews is not
 wholly coincident with his own understanding of Maritime identity, and this
 understanding is not something he particularly broadcasts in his interviews. However, to
 suggest disingenuousness on his part would be to misapprehend both the professional

necessity of the stand-up comedian and, more importantly, his own understanding of the comedian's role: as much as he is an outsider by virtue of being a Maritimer which allows him to make general comments about the dominant culture, so too he has put himself outside of a synoptic Maritime worldview in order to make general comments about the Maritimes themselves.

The stand-up comedian is a solo performer who is making some claim to both difference – he or she has something interesting and distinct to say to an audience (and will say it in a fluent way) – and solidarity – what he or she has to say is relevant to the audience as he or she is recognisably similar to the them. As a performance strategy, the stand-up comedian has to establish this dual persona of simultaneously insider and outsider, especially when he or she is expressly not of the same group as the audience. There is sufficient distance for a fresh perspective, but sufficient intimacy for a safe performance of that perspective. Viability in larger markets requires the ability to perform material that is not too particular to a smaller region: in stand-up comedy it is not simply the material and repertoire but the comedian's persona that must be adapted lest it be found iconoclastic.

Testimonial Statements: Proclaiming "Truth"

For all the play that occurs in the stand-up comedian's performance and for all the validating laughter sought, there are moments in performance when the stand-up comedian's talk elicits applause unaccompanied by laughter. Jason Rutter (2000) identifies applause as "practically non-existent" in stand-up comedy (479). I would tend to disagree with this point, although it is certainly less common than laughter. He does qualify this statement, however, by saying, "Applause during stand-up tends to follow

non-comic events. These often include events such as the putdown of a persistent or aggressive heckler, the announcement of a competition winner *or the offering of an ideological statement*" (479, emphasis mine).

If the stand-up comedian's ultimate goal is laughter, why spend time on stage talking and not getting laughs? Why make these ideological statements? Part of the stand-up comedian's technique is not simply the stringing together of a series of artful revelations of discrepancy and inconsistency: for all the ambiguity as to the "truth" of his or her statements that allows for laughter to be released, this series must be interwoven with declarative statements or testimonial personal experience narratives which squarely locate the comedian as sharing a core of fundamental precepts with the audience. Much like the classic folkloristic formulae for what constitutes myth, these precepts are incontestable and, for lack of a better word, "sacred" to the group, and are met not with laughter but with applause and calls of approval.

In his *One Man* concert (1997*), filmed in Augusta, Georgia, Steve Harvey makes the act of establishing a baseline of commonality explicit:

Before I get started tonight
I'd like to say that God is to me
God is everything [C:A]
everything I *have*
and everything I *am*
I owe to God [A]
now that I done said that [L]
going to be some times tonight when it'll sound like I don't know God [L]
but I do
good to be here in Augusta
it was a hard fight for me to get HBO to go *along* with coming to Augusta
they said [C]
that ...
they told me that Augusta was too small of a town to support five thousand
people for comedy [C]
but here we are

here we are [C:A]
 but I'd stop all that clapping cause they was right about one thing
 this is a little ass town [L]
 you can clap all you want to this a *little ass town* right here [L] (Harvey
 1997*)

An expression of personal religious belief establishes a social identity beyond that of the stand-up comedian: the connotations of one who “knows God” need not be articulated but imply a shared system of ultimate values with others who know God. Judging by the applause this statement elicited it is a social identity shared by many if not most of the audience, who individually bring their own interpretations of that identity. However much his comedy performance veers away from that implied value system he remains committed to it. In the second phase of this introductory section, he identifies himself as opposed to and successfully rebuking the dominant culture – as manifested by HBO executives – which systemically and systematically marginalises smaller cities (markets) like Augusta as non-viable. This in turn then allows him to mock the city for its size: the next few minutes build on this theme. Further along in the performance he makes similar testimonial statements, about how grateful he is to his parents and that they are still alive (11:33ff), and about how racism is nonsensical and yet pervasive in contemporary America (19:20ff).

These ideological, testimonial statements need not come solely at the beginning of performances. Chris Rock's *Never Scared* (2004*), filmed in Washington, D.C., was his first tour since the attacks of September 2001. He comments on the “acceptable racism” – racism that was acceptable to espouse – that emerged as a consequence. “You’d watch TV man / and you’d see these weird *white guys* / nobody here / you guys okay / but uh [L] / you’d see these weird *white guys* / getting *overly patriotic*.” He makes reference to

the invocation of “American” as an absolute category that permitted this racism to be made manifest.

A lot of white people like to scream they American as if they got something
to do with the country being the way it is [A]
know what I mean
like they was on the *Mayflower* or some shit [A]
I mean when you *really* break it down
there ain't even many Americans in this *room* okay
contributing Americans
check this out
if you're a *veteran*
if you fought in *any* war for the United States
you are American [A]
God bless all the veterans
big up to the veterans
I can't say *nothing* wrong about the veterans *okay*
you American
now
if you *swam* here from some shitty *country* [L]
that didn't allow you *Bubbalicious* [L]
you *too* are American
because you overcame *obstacles*
and made *sacrifices*
to actually *get here*
you are a *true American* okay [A]
you really are
don't let nobody tell you no different
everybody else
you're just lucky
that's it
you're just lucky
all you crazy white | “*I'm an American*” |
all you did was come out of your *mother's pussy* on *American soil* [L:C:A]
that's it
that's it
you think you're better than somebody from *France*
because you came out of a *pussy* in *Detroit* [L] (Rock 2004*)

There is nothing much risky about praising the sacrifices of veterans or of refugee immigrants and validating their claim to the social identity of American, and the applause the comments receive affirms that validation. It is only by introducing this concept of

“contributing” American that allows for the follow-up counter argument of “circumstantial” Americans, those who are “lucky.” Furthermore, by attributing the overly simplistic appropriation of the “American” social identity to a non-present other, he can label everyone present as “just lucky” – explicitly using the second-person voice – without necessarily suggesting that they too were naïve appropriators. The “lucky” theme continues later in the performance:

Now I love America I must say
 I love America
 I've got to say it is the greatest country in the world okay [A]
 the greatest country in the world
 in the whole world
 it's the best place
 there's no place I'd rather be
 there's no place I'd rather be *from*
 and we are *all* lucky to be here
 everybody in this room
 lucky to be here
 even *black* people
 lucky to be here [L] (Rock 2004*)

The “even black people” tag, which is met with laughter, qualifies but does not contradict his initial premise of luckiness by recognizing that the shared social identity of American does not wholly negate the consequences of the social identity of black. Lucky and marginalised are juxtaposed: they are seeming contradictions inasmuch as they are not reconcilable.

Harvey and Rock, returning to core ideological statements, provide an explicit contextualising framework of commonality, which then provides them with license for expressing alternate viewpoints. They can then make similar declarative statements that are contested (or are contestable) by the audience. Other comedians might not make claims as explicitly as “God is everything to me,” and “I love America,” but applause at

certain lines indicates that the audience recognises that there something has been said that is a shared sentiment of the plurality of its members.

One of the most dramatic instances of this testimonial phenomenon comes in *Richard Pryor: Live on the Sunset Strip* (1982a*). Following a discussion of a trip he took to Africa, he recounts the following:

One thing I got out of it was *magic* I'd like to share it with you
y'know it was like
I was *leavin'*
and I was *sittin'* in the hotel
and a voice said to me said | look around
what do you see |
and I said | I see all colours of people doing everything |
y'know
and the voice said | do you see
any *niggers* | [!L!]
and I said | no |
and he said | you know why
'cause there *aren't* any | [!A!]
and it *hit* me
like a *shot* man
I started *cryin'* and shit I was sittin' there I said
| yeah I've been here *three weeks*
I haven't even *said* it
I haven't even *thought* it | [<!that's right!>]
and it made me say | oh my god I've been *wrong*
I've been *wrong*
I've got to *regroup* my shit | I mean
I said | I ain't gonna never call another black man nigger | [<!yeah!>:A:C
(sustained)]
you know 'cause we *never* was no niggers
that's a word
that's used to describe our own *wretchedness*
and we *perpetuate* it now
'cause it's *dead*
that word's *dead* we're men and women we come from
we come from the first people on the earth [<yeah>:C:A]
y'know the first people on the earth were *black people* [A]
'cause *anthropologists*
{emphatic} "*white anthropologists*" [L]
so the white people go {caucasian voice} | "that could be true you know" |
[L]

yeah Dr. Leakey and them found
 people remains *five million years* ago in *Africa*
 you *know* them motherfuckers didn't speak *French* [L]
 so black people we the first people that had *thought*
 right we's the first one's to say
 {bemused} | "where the fuck *am* I [L]
 and *how* do you get to *Detroit*" | [L]
 so you can *take it* for what it's worth I know... I ain't tryin' to preach nothin'
 to nobody I'm just talkin' about *my* feelings about it
 and I don't want them *hip white* people coming up to me calling me no nigger
 or telling me nigger jokes
 {emphatic} "I don't like it" [L]
 I'm just telling you it's *uncomfortable* to me
 I don't like it when *black* people say it to me [<!yeah!>]
 I *really* don't no more
 it's *nothin'*
 it don't *mean* nothin'
 so I *love* you all and you can take *that* with you [C:A (sustained)] (1982a)

This confessional moment, a moment of apotheosis and apostasy for a man who
 had released albums with titles such as *That Nigger's Crazy* (1974*), and *Bicentennial
 Nigger* (1976*), is not without laughter, but for the first fifty seconds there is none, save
 for one uncomfortable laugh at the first use of "nigger." When the applause and cheers
 come, they are sustained, both at his avowal to renounce the word and at the bit's
 conclusion. Laughter isn't heard until eighty seconds in, with the "white anthropologists"
 line.

At the beginning of *Quest for the West* (2005*), Ron James, speaking to his
 Calgary audience in the year of Alberta's centennial, makes introductory remarks that
 simultaneously refer to Alberta's humble beginnings, its current wealth, his Maritime
 persona, and Ottawa and Toronto as the hegemonic power.

There you go well well *Calgary* huh
 pleasure to be back in the *red meat lands* of the west
 to celebrate a hundred years made manifest huh
 who'd a thought in the dusty days of turn of the century *Calgary*
 that a hundred years *later*

Albertans would be sitting in a multimillion dollar *Epcor* Centre
 watching a home-grown Maritimer
 now living in *Toronto*
 do a show about *them*
 for a network owned by *Ottawa* [L→A] (James 2005*)

However one chooses to interpret this, and there are a number of possible interpretations, the applause appears to indicate that for the participants the context of this performance is indicative of a notable, unlikely, and unifying confluence of events. A more explicit moment occurs a few minutes later, just after making light of then Leader of the Opposition Stephen Harper's immovable hair and his need for "a makeover from *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*":

Course he lost on the same-sex marriage thing
 oh glad *that's* over with
 about *time* huh
such a fuss about that that it's gonna
 destroy the sanctity of the institution
 look
 if the sanctity of the institution can survive the forty percent shit-kicking
 divorce rates gave it over the last fifty years
 surely two people *tying* the knot cause they *believe in it* sounds like a vote of
 confidence to me
 I don't know huh [A (sustained)]
 besides
 after *twenty years* together it all boils down to not passing wind in *bed* and
 who stole the friggin' blankets *anyway* [L] (James 2005*)

When I followed James around on tour, it was between the filming of this special in September and its airing in December. Much of his new western material was included, including the above routine. Although it went over well in the two Halifax shows and in Glace Bay, it did not work in Pictou. I asked him about it that evening.

- IB The same-sex marriage joke works in a similar way in that you always have
 that sort of...
 RJ went quiet tonight
 IB yeah

and you comment on the quietness
 RJ well
 IB | ooh, a polite smattering of Maritime applause |
 RJ oh great one good one
 I think those are important things to say
 I mean that's where you learn
 that ...
 that's where you learn that it's more than *laughs*
 to get back to your first question
 you know you start *off* getting *laughs*
 and then when you know that's ... *part* of it
 you've actualised that part of yourself
 that you can get away from a *kitchen*
 or away from a *classroom*
 and step up to stage and get *laughs*
then you realise
what are you going to get your laughs on
 and that's what separates the men from the *boys*
 you're going to content yourself with your forty-five minutes like
 eighty-five percent of the comedians in the country do
 and because they've been doing it for twenty years figure that the boons are
theirs
sorry man
 not part of the *equation*
 what are you going to *talk* about
 what are you going to *say*
 and I happen to think that the role of the comedian is to be *progressive*
not to be reactionary
 some people support...
 some people *delude* themselves into thinking...
 I mean
 there's a couple of comedians out there who are *very accomplished*
 comedians
 but they're *intransigent*
 not *progressive*
 they're not moving history *forward*
 not *proactive*
reactionary
 I don't want to go there (James 2005a)

Until October of 2006, Nova Scotia was the only province in Canada that still had
 strict laws prohibiting Sunday shopping. He had developed a joke on the topic, one which
 again worked in Halifax and Glace Bay but fell flat in conservative Pictou. An addition to

the joke, which reflected on the availability of casinos and video lottery terminals on a Sunday, went over reasonably well in Halifax, but didn't work well in Glace Bay.

You can be subversive here
 I just think you *have to* umm...
 be uh...
 a little more *careful* how you do it
 you've got to *run the ball* a little bit
 and before you know it you're *throwing long* and they're *catching it* with you
 I mean you know uh and uh...
 I mean you know the Sunday *shopping* thing's pretty exciting I'm playing
 around with these days you know
 I mean that's my new favourite *joke*
 | Sunday *shopping*
 before you know it
 the *coloureds* will have the vote |¹⁰

IB Yeah that's a great joke

RJ *thank you*

and it's *everything*
 and I think that the Maritimes have been their own worst enemy
 I've lived away for *twenty-five* years
 and I *love* it here

IB I think it was on the uh...

the *Saturday* show
 where you took the Sunday *shopping* thing
 and then you added the the comments about
 well they still have the *casinos* and the video lot...
 the *VLTs*

RJ Right

IB and y'know people are are spending the *money*
 that they're not able to spend on *Sunday*

RJ but that's a joke I *love* man

IB well exactly but how...

RJ but how 'bout *that* nine hundred people going quiet
 don't you *think* about that
 don't you *think* that y'know
 you can't buy groceries for your family on *Sunday* but you can lose every
 fucking penny on a *VLT*

IB on Sunday

RJ you can lose every penny on *Sunday*
 don't you make the *connection*

¹⁰ In performance, this is said with a strong North Shore accent, and is often addressed to "Martha," as he walks in purposeful indignation across the stage.

and that's where I think Atlantic Canadians are *fooling* themselves
[...]

I was *surprised* that's why I stopped doing that joke I did it twice and I
thought it was an excellent *tag* a thinker's *tag* (James 2005a)

When a comment is not met with laughter, it is sometimes intentional. Silence can be a natural condition of a set-up, such as the silence of the audience as they listen to Pryor's routine. Applause is a validation for something other than the humorous: it validates that what has been said is "true" and ought to be affirmed as such. On the other hand, something that is met with silence – when all cues by the stand-up comedian indicate that laughter was anticipated – calls the routine into question. For James, the problem was not the joke, it was an audience not prepared to listen, not ready to accept that the premise he was espousing was true.

In Chapter 2 I wrote of the benefits to the study of stand-up comedy of employing the contemporary folkloristic discourse surrounding genre and generic classification without engaging in a "genre-spotting" exercise. In the flow of talk that comprises the stand-up comedy routine, there are times when the talk is an incontestable truth, times when it is an occasion for questioning and engaging with the truth proposition, and times when it is not true, but in the sense of "fiction" not "falsehood."

Myths are incontestably true: they are foundational, and were they not true they would undermine the very constituency and existence of the group itself. To challenge them is to threaten one's continued membership within that group. Myths – the violence and ignorance of Americans, by contrast with us Canadians; the inherent selflessness of mothers; the legacy of slavery; that there are no better audiences than New York audiences – can elicit no reaction other than assent within that group context, and are met not with laughter but with applause and calls of approval. The performance context of the

stand-up comedy venue, where amplification is provided to the performer, doesn't allow for much more nuanced response than this and, given the cumulative desire to maintain a framework of non-consequentiality, those in the audience who do dissent do tend to do so more by keeping silent. In a different context, myths can be more greatly scrutinised.

Whereas myths are third-person narratives, one can infer the same sense of incontestability when the narratives are in the first-person (testimonies) or are non-narrative belief statements.

Having established him- or herself as operating within the worldview of the group by reference to myth, the comedian can immediately turn around and directly challenge myth, the deeply held convictions. At this point dissent is anticipated, but those who approve of the comedian's counter-position are able to vocalise it, so there is a mix of both approval and opprobrium. The talk has become dialogic insofar as it is dialectic: truth is now ambiguous and subject to negotiation, and we are entering the realm of legend. It is also deep play: as it is the most threatening to a sense of operating within the same or a contiguous worldview, it is the talk most likely to break the frame of non-consequentiality.

One of its features is how it assumes that the audience, the group, is not homogenous, and that there are differences within the group can be explored. The most obvious example is pitting men against women, where a comedian, of either gender, makes a generalisation, typically unflattering, about the opposite gender, and immediately elicits an anticipatable response. One needs considerable expertise and/or considerable accumulated goodwill to keep a performance within or bring a performance back to a talking shit frame.

The comedian may also directly challenge other cultural assumptions, ones shared but less central, less integral or foundational, to the group's worldview. He or she is anticipating that some of these will be met simply with laughter, as a fresh perspective is provided on some of the group's peculiarities. Such is the domain of the observational comic, where there is a form of ethnography going forward, as manifested in one half of the ethnographer's adage: making the familiar strange.¹¹ It still takes the form of the dialectic of legend, but less, it appears, is at stake. The second part of the adage, making the strange familiar, also is in play, as the comedian deliberately adverts to a different experience but demonstrates how it is the same in kind to that of the audience.

Locating in which modes the comedian is operating at any one time will only ever be an interpretation by the exegete. This judgment, however, can be informed by paying attention to the responses of the audience. The stand-up comedian, through his or her words, shifts between speaking for and speaking to the audience, and the performance depends on this risky negotiation.

Discussing each separately is a difficult task precisely because they do not often appear in total isolation: a declarative, testimonial statement is made, and quickly thereafter a more contestable one is made, or a fanciful one which is judged aesthetically. When they emerge as isolatable – when they are performed distinctly enough that the audience has time to affirm them – they are nevertheless quickly qualified by a follow-up, and their presence only makes sense by virtue of them being qualified. They are setting up a comic moment or series of comic moments, but even though they have that instrumental purpose, they are not dropped once the comic moment has been attempted.

¹¹ This topic is explored in greater detail starting on page 266.

Because stand-up comedy is a performance of self and the professional comedian has a professional need to make themselves known, they both contribute to the development of a comic persona and emerge from that persona's enactment on stage.

Reclaiming the Comedian's Story

There are times when the comedian loses control over his or her story: something happens in his or her real life and there is both a professional need and, strangely, an obligation to the audience to address it and incorporate it into their narrative, thereby reclaiming control over their story and reassuming, or reiterating the claim to, the social identity of stand-up comedian.

An audience has a certain investment in the life story of someone it has gotten to know through their intimate performances. When famous comedians' life events spill out into the public sphere they are often revisited on the stage. This stems in part because the intimacy between performer and audience and the audience's investment in his or her life story implies a set of mutual rights and responsibilities. Further, the performer must edit the autobiography, providing a version of events over which he or she has greater control.

In effect, the comedian reframes the history as legend. Determining its truth, falsity, or mootness is no longer the purview of an indeterminate, uncontrollable public arena, but of the present audience.

On July 26, 1991, actor Paul Reubens, better known as the character comedian Pee-Wee Herman, was arrested in Sarasota, Florida for public indecency, specifically, for masturbating while in the audience of an adult movie theatre. Although his critically acclaimed children's show, *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*, had stopped production, its episodes were immediately withdrawn from rerun and syndication, and he quickly became a

ubiquitous punchline. On September 5 of that year, he made his first public appearance as a presenter at the 1991 MTV Video Music Awards. Met with a standing ovation, his opening line, "So, heard any good jokes lately?" addressed the issue sufficiently to move beyond it. "I was just hoping I wasn't going to get booed. I had no idea what the reaction would be. I was optimistic, but what was going through my mind was, 'I hope they like me'" (Horowitz 2007).

In May of 1996, Martin Lawrence was picked up by police for erratic behaviour, when he was found screaming in the middle of a busy street in the San Fernando Valley section of Los Angeles with a loaded handgun in his pocket (*Jet* 1996). In September of 1999 he fell into a coma while jogging in multiple layers of clothing in extreme heat (*Jet* 1999). Both episodes were revisited in *Runteldat* (2002*), his concert film. The concert began with a brief film about the incidents, with footage taken mainly from media outlets, and in the last third of the concert he addresses them directly.

I don't know if you guys got a chance to see the *film*
it kind of highlighted my *life* [C:A]
you know
through it *all*
I come to *learn*
what I got to do in my *life*
what we *all* got to do in our life
is to ride this motherfucker till the *wheels*
fall off [A]
you know we got to live
ride it till the wheels fall off
you might have looked at the tape it said one day I was uh
{angry, indignant, struggling for words} I was out in the street [L]
yeah that was some shit that they *said* about
they had they had it *highlighted*
they said I was out in the *street*
with uh... you know... I was yelling... stuff out in the street
and that I was *doing stuff*
listen y'all okay
look I was married at the *time* I'm not blaming *that* for that

okay... but okay
 at the time
 I'm going to tell you what *happened* though
 cause *that*... they... that's how they... that's how they put *their* story down
 okay
 I'm gonna tell I'm gonna tell
 but that's how they do there
 but see I
 the *day* that all that went down um [L]
I'm gonna tell
 the *day* that all that went down see um
 I was *married*
 and the *wife* at the time asked me to go the store to get something to eat
 and I said being a good husband and I *am* I said sure I'll go to the store and
 get something to eat
 now that I *think* about it I don't know why I was *out* there
 okay
 getting something to eat at *McDonalds* or whatever
 when as *hard* as I work
 I should have had a home-cooked fuckin' meal [<C>]
 but then *again*
 but then *again* I should have asked that question that *day*
 and
 so I go out in the *street*
 and I go to run *across* the street
 I was trying to catch the *light*
 I go to run across the *street*
 and because how the *light* changed I got caught in the *middle* of the street
 next thing I know
 they got *firemen*
 they got they got *ambulance*
 they got um the *police*
 everybody out there with *guns*
 all of them had guns
 out there *just* because I tried to um
 run across the *street* [L]
 {relaxing} nah I'm *fuckin*g with you I was higher than a *motherfucker* y'all [L:C]
I was high as shit
oh my fucking goodness
oh I was smoking that ooh-weed [L]
that shit had me on lunch box
 and I should have *known* something was wrong
 I start blazing that *shit*
 and I knew I start seeing *blue* smoke
 but the shit didn't hit me till I'm walking in the *street*
 some shit said | run *real fast* right now | {runs on spot} [L] (Lawrence 2002*)

The routine moves on to discuss how he was indeed carrying a gun and how, when he passed out and subsequently recovered, he was hallucinating so badly that he was taken to hospital rather than to jail, albeit to a padded and locked room.

Then it was time for me to go
 cause I was *together*
 the ooh-weed had gotten out of my system
 I couldn't believe I was on... on you know
 out on the street *lunchin'*
 I had the *hottest show* on
 I couldn't believe all these things was *happening* to me you know
 my marriage was on the *brink*
 all *kinds* of shit after that
 but before I left the *hospital*
 I got your *love*
 and I *felt* your love
 and your *support* for me [A (sustained)] you know
 you know and it was a *beautiful thing*
 and I thank each and every *one* of you
 it meant a *lot* to me and uh
 it just it just truly meant a *lot* to me
 and I'm forever grateful (Lawrence 2002*)

The “facts” of the incident up for negotiation are presented through video evidence, along with the media’s interpretation: Lawrence provides his own interpretation and a supposed justification and plea of innocence, and the deliberateness of his display of indignant self-justification is understood by the audience as a cue to take this interpretation as fiction, so that his eventual confession and presentation of true events – even with the exaggerated and fantastic flourishes – is accepted. His moments of sincerity, including both the coda of thanking the crowd for loyalty and support and the proverbial “ride this motherfucker till the wheels fall off” – an expression he uses both throughout the performance and in the documentaries that accompany the DVD – are met with prolonged applause, indicating the audience’s affirmation. By performing his own version of events, Lawrence assumes control over them, much as Richard Pryor did in

Live on the Sunset Strip (1982a) after his self-immolation while freebasing, and what Lenny Bruce tried to do following his multiple obscenity convictions, as recorded in *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* (Bruce 1992*).

Summary Conclusions

In this chapter I have tried to establish in greater detail that the stand-up comedian develops a persona onstage that is both in keeping with the social identity of “stand-up comedian” and is recognisably of a particular place and time, so as to be found accessible and acceptable by an audience whether the audience be from his or her group or otherwise. It is adaptable, and what is brought to the stage is not going to be consistent from group to group. As the audience increasingly knows the stand-up comedian through cumulative reputation, the more “performance” aspects of the persona can be dropped, and the potential disjuncture between on- and off-stage personality becomes lessened.

Both as a technique of building an identifiable persona and as a consequence of having been accepted as a legitimate voice, the stand-up comedian can also express ideas onstage that either are not said specifically for laughter or, if they fail to elicit laughter because they have transgressed in some manner, are not retracted. Like intimates, differing opinions can strain but, with an overriding goodwill, they can be typically expressed without irreparable damage to the relationship.

In the next chapter, I further examine what the stand-up comedian is saying in order to be accepted by an audience and how the social identity of the stand-up comedian as “outsider” and “spokesman” plays out.

Chapter 6: What is the Stand-Up Comedian? Intimate Other

My job essentially is
 thinking up *goofy shit* [L]
 it comes right down to that
 I mean *you* don't have time all week [L]
 so
 signing *cheques*
 going to the *laundry*
 answering the *door*
 | Herbie come *here* |
 a *lot* of interruptions
 [...]
 so I think up the *goofy shit* and I come on the
 weekend and *report* it to you

George Carlin

Starting from the claim of being “a” stand-up comedian, and all that implies, a comedian locates him- or herself in a specific relationship with the audience beyond that of the complementary set of comedian-and-audience. For the most part, these additional social identities are also complementary sets: comedians are presented as venue- or medium-appropriate based in large part on an informed perception of an aggregate of the social identities of the audience. When that complementarity is not self-evident – as when a white comedian performs at an ostensibly African-American venue, or a Southerner performs in the urban north – the stand-up comedian, in collaboration with the emcee, will typically address the difference, as was discussed in Chapter 4. This is developed into a persona, which builds on this initial effort at biography and creates a larger and more complex set of social identities beyond the “stand-up comedian” one, as was discussed in Chapter 5. In this manner the stand-up comedian is seen as “inside” enough to be accepted as an intimate, as permitted to speak frankly with, to, and to a certain

extent for the group, that what he or she has to say is relevant. In this chapter, I turn to what the comedian says, not in an effort at autobiography but as a detached observer: in this manner, the stand-up comedian is seen as “outside” enough that what he or she has to say is interesting.

Repertoire in Context: Specific, Universal, and Adaptable

Like most comedians, Ron James’ skills at cultivating a national audience lie in most part on respecting the worldview of not one but a variety of particular local or regional audiences, and thus having in his repertoire material that can fall into one of three categories: it is more or less the same text irrespective of place; it is adapted for use in a particular region or locality, but can play more or less anywhere; or it is specific to a region or locality. These categories are by no means absolutes, as repertoires are dynamic not static constructs, and the professional comedian’s imperative for producing “new” material further exacerbates the need for interpreting repertoires as dynamic: region-specific material that has proven successful may be tried out and adapted in a new locale; adaptable material may find a variation that works trans-regionally and thus find a “fixed-form”; and extemporaneous material – that which is not yet part of a repertoire or which allows for the immediate and drastic reformulation of a set piece – is unclassifiable.

Specific Routines

James begins his shows with some location- or time- specific material: in the first of the Halifax shows, for example, which was on Remembrance Day, he saluted veterans (which was met with applause from the audience) and spoke of people’s spurious suggestions to him that he purchase painter Alex Colville’s South Shore house, which

had recently been put on the market. At the second Halifax show (at which I was able to take much more substantial notes), he began by saying that he bought three lobsters when he landed at Halifax Airport from the Clearwater store, which cost him \$32.50:

“Anything I can do to keep the Risleys in real estate,” a reference to John Risley, president and founder of Clearwater Seafood. In Glace Bay, where he lived the first nine years of his life, his show began with a ten-minute reverie of his childhood, mentioning local businesses and pubs on Commercial St., his own experiences going to movies at the Savoy Theatre (the show’s venue), and the barrenness of the Sydney to Glace Bay highway: it ended with a query about luxury cruise liners passengers docking at Sydney and being presented with the Tar Ponds. And in Pictou, he spoke about the emergence of the mile-long box store strip in New Glasgow (a larger municipality on the main highway where his hotel was located), and the drive from Cape Breton (which allowed for a flurry of *blason populaire*).

I asked James how he finds this material, especially in contexts outside of his regular lived experience:

Well ...
 I read the *papers*
 talk to *people*
 and I go for a *run*
 I run 6 to 8k every city I’m *in*
 and it slides into my *head*
 stays at the front of my *head*
 in fact my new special called *Quest for the West* was written just *as* that
 IB one long run
 RJ well
 three different tours out to *Alberta*
 I’d accumulated enough *material*
 but the trick *is*
 how do I make that stuff about *Alberta*
 how do I make the specific *universal*
 and that’s what we’ll see in December with the *numbers*

and uh yeah
 so that's how I do it y'know
 and I uh
 I *talk* to people
 I like to *engage* people y'know
 someone will tell me something I'll write a *word* down
 someone will tell me something else I'll write *another* word down
 and you start putting this *puzzle* together
 [...]
 I usually do make a concerted and serious effort to let these people know that
 they matter (James 2005a)

I was interested in how James framed this engagement as “letting people know they matter”: it was a theme he referred to throughout the interview:

I think they're going to come see *somebody*
 who's going to take the time to *get them*
 that's the *best* compliment I got out west
 a transplanted Atlantic Canadian who'd been there for *twenty-five* years
 and made his *millions*
Jesus
 he said thanks for taking the time to understand us
 it's one of the best *compliments* I ever got
 you take the time to *understand*
 and uh
 it's getting *harder*
 because I'm trying to rediscover a place again for the *third time* (James 2005a)

The personal relationship between performer and audience is established through this rapport, which can be deemed a sharing of worldview or, more precisely, the performed demonstration of a shared worldview. In the short term, there is an occupational advantage to establishing this rapport, pertaining to the techniques of stand-up comedy performance, for within the performance context it provides an emic and esoteric framework for the interpretation of what is to follow: in the long term, there is a professional advantage, for goodwill is cumulative. That a personal relationship has advantages does not necessarily imply that it is somehow disingenuous, a charge James is

ready to defend:

but *every* town I go to
 I *try* to ...
 I try to let them know that they *matter*
 it's *important*
 it's a *big* country
 and it's *important* that they matter
 it's *important* to me that
 they know I *think* they matter
 and uh...
 cause it was never about *fame* y'know
 it was about doing what I'm *supposed* to be doing
 and if
 if people find that uh...
 kind of ...
dubious
fuck 'em
 I know when my heart rings *true*
 and that's one of the good things about *stand-up*
 it *validates* the life journey (James 2005a)

Another long-term advantage of specific material is how it can, with time and thought, evolve into routines that work elsewhere. He often makes the claim that every visit to a place provides him with new material.¹ Presumably, the vast majority of that new material is never performed more than the once, but that which does can be retained, honed, and developed into something more permanent in the repertoire. As he told me, three different tours of Alberta and the west provided him with enough material to make a special: the trick was, as he puts it, to make the specific universal.

¹ "To be able to see these places and experience new places, that is a real plus to me. I talk a lot about new places and my experiences travelling it. I always come away from a new place with 20 minutes of new material" (qtd. in Callahan 2002); "This is what's really heightened my awareness of the country, is pulling into a Corner Brook or a Fort McMurray on a Wednesday night and walking around. Anywhere you go, you walk around and you walk on stage with at least 10 minutes of material about them. It's interesting that I'm able to wrap my head around some idiosyncrasy or personality characteristic of a place and put it up on stage. I think no matter where people live they like to be immortalized, get some kind of recognition that they're not forgotten in the big picture" (qtd. in Lewis 2002); "I got a haircut in Charlottetown and everybody was chinwagging in the shop and I walked on stage that night with 20 minutes of new material" (qtd. in Foley 2004).

Universal Routines

There are two advantages to having routines that are “universal” (which means the broadest range of viable markets for the particular stand-up comedian). Most obviously, it prevents the comedian from having to write new material for every locality and region. It also forms the basis for material that can be broadcast to a national audience. This material will be performed before an historically situated audience when it is recorded for broadcast, so the imperative is to make it funny for them while simultaneously making it funny for an indeterminate yet historically-situated listener, different in space and, most likely, time.

Universal material tends to fall into two categories: it is either rooted in a national or international participation in and understanding of mediated culture – politics, popular culture – which is not particular to a region or locality, or it is rooted in quotidian living – bodily functions, the differences between men and women, generational differences – that may have local manifestations but tends to be recognisable irrespective of place. Because it is the material that makes it to media, it is the most easily accessible to the student of stand-up comedy. A performance will often begin with localised material before launching into universal material: this holds true even for recorded and mediated comedy, although the “localised” will not be so esoteric as to not engage the indeterminate viewer or listener. Rather, it will more likely build on exoteric understandings about the region or its people, known to the locals and non-locals alike but not necessarily believed by the locals themselves.

Conversely, the issue of what is “universal” is a subjective one and, as will be discussed in Chapter 7 (at 296ff), when the centres of media production are limited and

the live audiences are drawn from that area, their particular culture is understood as normative.²

I asked James about his universal material:

- Well my *universal* material
computers
Future Shop
 anything about people walking through the modern *world*
 that plays *anywhere*
 old ladies in church with the *hat*³
- IB yeah
 RJ *kills*
 never *didn't* kill
 but you know where it *doesn't* kill
 at a *corporate* function
 too *stuffy*
- IB do you think that's *why*
 I'm *interested*
 are the corporate *functions* too *stuffy*
- RJ *yeah*
 IB or maybe the context of *church* is too *stuffy*
 RJ *maybe* the context of church is too *stuffy* or they're too...
 yeah I *think* that it's got to do with that
 farts are not...
 farts are not material for a *corporate* crowd
 but farts are good to have in your *show* you know
 [...]
 yeah so there's some things that don't play *well* in certain *contexts*
 but *Future Shop* always works um...
 did I do my *wave and boat* thing⁴
- IB not today
 RJ not tonight but I've *done it* you've *seen it*
 IB yeah
 RJ that *works*

² For more on this point, see my discussion of Robert Stebbins (1989) at 25ff.

³ This refers to a routine in which he describes sitting behind an old Anglican lady who breaks wind in a particularly malodorous way: the comparison is the gas in the trenches of World War One. Because of this routine, he needs the distortive effects of a microphone, which has precluded him from switching to hands-free (see the discussion on p. 148). In the Halifax shows, he locates these Sunday mornings as transpiring at St. George's Round Church, a local landmark, which evinces recognition from the audience.

⁴ A routine in which how he describes how Canadians, when riding in a boat, no matter how otherwise sophisticated, will wave enthusiastically at the passengers of any boat they pass, who in turn do likewise. It is punctuated by particularly frenetic waving.

- the things that usually work *anywhere*
 are things that everybody's *experienced*
 futility in the face of change
- IB computer crashing
 RJ all the *technology* stuff you know that uh...
 I think that *red meat* joke is going to work anywhere
 I think the *smart car* is going to work anywhere
 I think that the *Greenpeace* people coming door to door is going to work
 anywhere
hangover jokes
sex works anywhere you know like that joke that I closed with tonight⁵
 you know *that* works anywhere
- IB Air *Transat* material
 Air *Canada* material
- RJ yeah
 you know I'll tell you
aficionados usually say that um... airplane food jokes
 and we can't make Air Canada airplane *food* jokes anymore cause they're not
serving it
 they say that airplane material is the sign of the *amateur*
 just like talking about *dogs and cats*
 and I always say it's *how* you deliver it
 and *how* you say it
 and I think that's also...
 something that separates me from the *pack*
 is *how* it's delivered
- IB yeah it's in the context of a larger *narrative*
 RJ larger narrative
 a *story* (James 2005a)

In press releases, it is the universal material that is mentioned, as in the following two examples, for his 2002 and 2005 Fall tours of Atlantic Canada, respectively.

With intelligent observations and a Maritimer's folksy irreverence, Ron James skewers everything from American consumer culture and the mosquito-driven torment of a northern camping trip to the financial trials of aging Canadian baby boomers and his own growing uselessness in the face of rampant technological change. (*Halifax Daily News* 2002; *Corner Brook Western Star* 2002)

⁵ He contrasts the sympathy his wife got during her pregnancies – friends and relatives rubbing her belly – with his own experience after a vasectomy, comprising a bag of frozen peas and the use of the remote control (“I had to get *neutered* to get that thing in my hand”).

James calls the show a rocket-fuelled rant on a world out of whack, from a man in collision with cosmic forces beyond his control. In the show, James bounces from the war in Iraq to home renovations; mid-life meltdowns to airport security; family vacations to Future Shop 'blue shirts'; flatulent elders in church to party-hearty camping trips of youth, cutting a wide swath from past to present and back again. (*Corner Brook Western Star* 2005)⁶

The "universality" of universal material is a conceit: with respect to popular culture and politics they are particular to larger markets as opposed to small ones, and they are perhaps thus less idiosyncratic, but, without being pedantic, they do not transcend language, and they largely do not transcend the nation. There are exceptions, of course: Billy Connolly and Chris Rock have each undertaken international tours, and Montreal's Just For Laughs Festival brings comedians from around the world. To take material that works nationally to an international stage one needs to adapt it in a manner similar to how one adapts material when moving from a regional to a national stage.

Adaptable Routines

Midway between the universal routines and region- or locality-specific routines are those with "replaceable" punchlines or tags: fixed routines with a local reference thrown in. In one example, James describes the carnival rides of his youth. In the Maritimes, he evokes the Bill Lynch Show, the travelling amusement company based in Mount Uniacke, Nova Scotia, which was greeted with applause. When I saw him in Newfoundland a few years previous, he did not use the Lynch name, and as it appears in *The Road Between My Ears*, it is simply "the midway." He speaks of the fear instilled by

⁶ "Known for his rocket-fuelled rants on a world that is out of whack, James uses his unique poetic style and performance-driven physicality in bouncing from the War in Iraq, home renovations and mid-life meltdowns to airport security, family vacations, flatulent elders in church and party-hearty camping trips of youth, cutting a wide swath from past to present and back again" (*Charlottetown Guardian* 2005).

the Ferris wheel:

That midway *flaunted* safety standards
 the Ferris wheel had bit of flesh and *clothing* hanging off it [L]
still the scariest ride of *all*
 the *Ferris wheel*
 when you're a kid they'd keep you in that *bucket*
 that's what the ride is essentially a *bucket*
 at the very star top
 forever
 jeez I'm watching *weather patterns* change over the *Gulf Stream* [L]
 family of cretins in the bucket in *front* of me
 rocking it *back* and *forth* [mimes rocking with a gormless expression] [L]
 (James 2003*)

In local performance, he tags this line with, in Glace Bay, “easy to spot the folks from New Waterford” (a town between Sydney and Glace Bay on the old coastal road) while in Pictou it was River John, a town on the Northumberland Strait a few kilometres to the west. In another example, he performs a routine that was written for *Quest for the West*:

But I'm *told*
 the most *dangerous animal* in the parks hmm
 mother elk during *calving* season
 and they'll drop a calf *anywhere* too y'know
 makes no never mind to *nature*
 grocery store parking lot *bowling alley*
 laundromat *street corner*
 they'll just *have at her* huh
 hard to make a deposit at the ATM machine when there's a
 nine hundred pound mother blockin' the *doorway*
 lickin' the placenta off her *spawn* (James 2005)

In Halifax, on the second night, he tagged this with “it's worse than Spryfield” (a poor neighbourhood of Halifax), while in Pictou he described it as “worse than an afternoon in Stellarton,” another town just down the road.

I used to have a *joke*
 when the people *beside* me
 when I was camping were playing *splits*
 Mum and Dad uh...

| Mum and Dad are playin' *splits*
 kids are in the middle of the *road*
 guttin' a squirrel on a *Ouija* board
 easy to spot the folks *from*
blank |
 [...]
 but see those are *just*
 that's certain tricks of the *trade* y'know ah
 and it's *always* good to
 take a shot at the town down the road or something like that
 so I like that
 and they like it *too*
 and *they* like it and even the people from *there* like it (James 2005a)

The flexibility of such material is self-evident, and it allows for a re-affirmation of place without diverting too far from established routines. It also works without references, which allows its use in national broadcast performances.

A similar routine, "paid in game," can serve as an example of a similar yet distinct flexibility. The routine runs roughly as follows:

Five hundred people in the town
 two last names [L]
 there was a couple in the front row
 came backstage after the gig
 handed me a brown paper bag dripping blood
 put my hand in
 pulled out a seven and a half pound sirloin tip moose roast
 you know you've made it in Canadian show business when the locals are
 paying you in butchered game
 don't get those perks playing Las Vegas
 people give you a brown paper bag dripping blood there
 probably has the head of a teamster in it⁷

⁷ Reconstructed from fieldnotes. James did not give me permission to record his performances. Also: "He knew he hit humour's big time when, while on a recent tour of Northern Ontario, he was 'in this town called Atikokan, which is up on the Voyager Highway, right across from Quetico Park, you know? Way, way, way up there. At the end of the show, this man and his wife came up to me and gave me a big, brown paper bag. It was really heavy. They handed me the bag and, like, my arms went down and I said, 'What the hell is this?' I opened it up and it was a seven-pound sirloin moose roast! I came home and people said: 'Boy, you know you've made it in Canadian show business when you're getting paid in Moose meat!'" (Spevack 2000)

Although the text is performed more or less verbatim from performance to performance, what varies is the setting for the anecdote: at the first show in Halifax, it was said to have happened only the previous week, following the show in Grand Falls Windsor, Newfoundland; at the second, it took place in the generic “North”; in Glace Bay, it was by Lake Superior, near Lake Kujjubujjibak (a made-up name reminiscent of communities such as Kashabowie and Shebandowan); and in Pictou, it was in the same Lake Kujjubujjibak, with proximity to Superior not noted. The variations were not dictated by the particular performance context but by where they could fall in a performance: as he spoke of travels in smaller communities, whether that be the interior of Newfoundland or Northern Ontario or Alberta or the Territories, he could interject that routine without introducing a notion that clashes with the verisimilitude of that particular larger narrative arc.

When I asked him about this routine in particular, he at first dismissed it by saying

That's just *laziness*
 it's got nothing to do with actual *credibility*
 it's all about um...
 not *laziness*
 but it's all about uh
 where it falls *in*
 it's a *technical* thing (James 2005a)

I am inclined to equate this “technical thing” with oral-formulaic composition, such as that suggested by Milman Parry and Albert Lord (see Lord 1960; Taft 2006), and that for comedians the “routine” is akin to “the formula” in a number of ways, most particularly, for present purposes, that: with certain routines in hand, substitutions can be made on the basis not of syllabic but of conceptual similarity; the most stable routines will be those

for the most common ideas; and the stability of routines are almost wholly a result of utility. Like formulas, a routine should not be considered as such until for the particular individual performer it is established through regular use in their performances.

The complementary issues of common ideas and of utility raise the question of how. We can assume they are funny, insofar as they invariably get a solid round of laughter from the audience (which is the only measure we need ever apply). And routines which vary in response to a local *blason populaire* easily connect an observation with place. (One could argue that the “Paid in Game” routine at the first Halifax show, being as it was performed during the opening few minutes of the performance amid a larger routine on being in Newfoundland the previous week, may also work as *blason populaire*.) However, a formula-routine that is employed variously from performance to performance and which is adapted not only for an audience but for use in different places within a larger routine indicates its utility in illustrating a specific theme about place, and its frequency of use indicates that the theme is one he wishes to apply to a variety of contexts.

So I was unsure of James’ dismissal of the variations on the “Paid in Game” routine, and I pressed him on the point, going over how it was able to work not only in different settings but also shoehorned into or alongside different narratives. Why does it work?

I think the *visual*
 I think the uh...
 the *wonderful* uh...
truth about Canada that we’re an *affable* country
 that somebody *would* walk backstage and give me a bag of meat
 and it’s *true*
 they gave me a bag of *meat*
 [...]

IB does that joke play in *Toronto* the same way
 RJ yeah it *does* it *does*
 it plays in *Toronto* in a different context than it plays here
 it plays in *Toronto* that
 | oh wow
 this guy has gone to the far points of *frontier* |
 cause it goes back to that *Atwood* or *Northrop Frye* thing again
 that we know the north is *there*
 we know it *exists*
 I mean I mean *Roots* [clothing] built its credibility up on
 I mean it's become an urban *style* thing now but it
 it did have the *canoe* for a long time
 it did have that
 that uh
 that *fur trade* connotation the *warmth* the *fleece* ...
 the *hearken* back to an earlier day of y'know
 of campfire *camaraderie*
 I think that motif is really *strong* in Canada
 I mean I'm talking to you now I'm looking at that *maple leaf* at the foot of
 that thing [a small brochure display rack] you know
 and these are motifs that are in our *DNA*
 and I think
 somebody providing a *traveller* with a bag of *meat*
must have a kind of *resonance* you know
 and I just
 I just know it as a *truth*
 and I had to leave it outside my hotel room *door*
 every *night*
 when I travelled *Superior*
 but *since* then
 that's the *first* bag of meat I got
 I've gotten meat *everywhere*
 in fact my wife in *Toronto* said
 | please don't bring any more wild *game* home |
 and I was up in Cold Lake *Alberta*
 and they brought me half a side of *elk*
 IB [laughs] how do keep *that* fresh for the drive home
 RJ well it was all frozen so I flew home on the plane so that was *cool*
 but it's, it's uhh
 that's one of the *mysteries* of this country
 why does that work in *Pictou* and *Glance Bay*
 and *Alberta* and *everywhere*
 why does it work in *BC*
 why does it work in *Toronto*
 it's because I think Canadians have a deference for the *wild*
 which gets back to...

and I think we ...
 even though eighty *per cent* of us still live in cities
 and less than five per cent have *seen* the north
 I think that that *mythology* of drawing sustenance from the *land*
 it still *holds* with us
 and I think we're probably going to be reaching for it *more* as the twentieth
 century moves
 on and technology *overwhelms* us
 that's *my* call on it anyway (James 2005a)

James' major routines, the themes he appears to be exploring, are presented through a performed autobiography of an inveterate traveller moving through Canada's regions: the working comedian qua contemporary explorer, whose movements towards "the four points of frontier" (one of his stock phrases) is no different from that of either "the Great Celtic diaspora" or a pan-Canadian mythos.

As a working comedian, James has to "strike a balance between artistic needs and audience expectations": one could reframe this, that what marks the difference between professional and amateur, as Rosenberg suggests, is precisely the ability to balance the two.

Vernacular Ethnography

Having spent much of my commentary in the first chapter lamenting the "stand-up as..." genre of academic approaches to stand-up comedy and comedians, it may at first appear contradictory to ascribe an implicit function such as "Stand-up Comedian as Vernacular Ethnographer." I do not want to suggest that the surface purpose of stand-up comedy – entertainment or amusement – is somehow subsidiary to a deeper purpose. I am more interested in the techniques stand-up comedians employ in order to effect amusement.

Like conversation, or legendry, or any interpersonal exchange, a second related factor in stand-up comedy is the establishment of some form of relationship between teller and listener: the comedian needs to provide credentials which the audience will accept so that he or she may speak to this group on this subject. Some (Koziski 1984; Mintz 1998) frame this permission-granting through the term “license,” but for our purposes, this concept is ultimately too rigid: instead, the audience accepts the performer as an intimate and, as we do among friends, we permit them a certain latitude in their opinions and the freedom to express them for we know that they mean well.

Whereas when we speak of the stand-up comedian as a type we intimate a *general* permission, when we speak of a specific comedian there is a process whereby a *specific* permission is sought and granted. It is granted by a two-fold expectation of both *relevance* – understanding the worldview of the group by demonstrating some shared participation therein – and *perspective* – having a particular insight into that worldview.

There are a number of strategies used to effect this permission. First of all, as was discussed in the two last chapters, by claiming the social identity “stand-up comedian” the performer anticipates that his or her talk will be interpreted in a particular way. By virtue of allowing him or her a space to perform, those who run the performance venue suggest to any potential audience that the claim to the stand-up comedian social identity is justified. Local media, if a possibility, can be used to communicate the stand-up comedian’s persona and begin to frame his or her particular perspective. If media is not available, the introduction by the host, emcee, or compère extends whatever goodwill the audience has shown to him or her to the comedian. By the time a performer arrives on the stage he or she is, to some nascent extent, “known” by the audience, insofar as they have

been provided with enough information for an initial framework of interpretation.

Reputation is cumulative, so an established comedian does not need (although may avail themselves of) the assistance: an unknown comedian relies heavily on such assistance.

Once the comedian hits the stage, however, he or she cannot rely solely on the continued goodwill of the audience. The stand-up comedy performance is a process through which relevance and perspective are simultaneously and continually reaffirmed. Above I referred to stand-up comedy performances being met principally with laughter but also with solemn affirmation. To briefly reiterate, throughout a performance the comedian often intersperses declarative statements that are not meant to be met with laughter and which, by my interpretation at least, are not disingenuous. They serve as small testimonial statements which explicitly and directly inform the audience of the comedian's worldview.

In this manner the comedian locates him- or herself (or, more accurately, locates the comic material) within an identifiable framework, within a worldview of conscience, and, by virtue of them now "knowing" him or her, is accepted (or not) by the audience as an intimate. Another strategy the comedian employs is locating him- or herself within a worldview of historical space and place, becoming a chronicler of place that is recognisably that of, or consistent with the experiences of, the audience. In that measure I refer to stand-up comedy as occasionally engaging in "vernacular ethnography."

"Ethnography" is a term that should not be bandied about carelessly, so I wish to be cautious with my terms. However we choose to define ethnography, we can most likely agree that it is a focussed experiencing with the aim of understanding and, more directly for our purposes, the representation and communication of that experiencing and

understanding, typically through words. Furthermore, that representation implies a hermeneutic of honesty or authenticity or even objectivity, however futile or in vain we may perceive that ultimately to be as a goal.

The comedian in his or her vernacular ethnography is not subject to the same constraints and set of expectations as the academic ethnographer: he or she is subject, however, to a parallel set of expectations, that of ongoing relevance to the audience. “Verisimilitude” is the order of the day: the account is expressly subjective but implies a recognisable truthfulness therein. The comedian is judged relevant by the audience in part by the accuracy of the worldview presented: it needs to be credible. This credibility is similar to the “signifiers of authenticity” Narváez has written about in the blues tradition (2005), and Pearson’s work on the bluesman’s story as a strategy for the reception of his repertoire (1984, discussed above at 186ff) would further add to this discussion. Martin Lovelace, in his study of the life history as a source for folklife data (1983), and John Cowley (1993), in his study of the bluesman as ethnographer, each suggested that although these texts were not created with the same questions in mind as the ethnographer per se, they are honestly rendered representations of a particular moment in time and thus can be legitimately used as source material for the folklorist. I suggest that this is the case for the stand-up comedian’s text as well. I thus refer to “vernacular ethnography,” invoking the same sense as Baker and McLaughlin use the term “vernacular theory” (see above, 163ff).

Novalis’s aphorism on the essence of Romantic poetry “The art of estranging in a pleasant manner, making an object unfamiliar and yet familiar and attractive, that is

romantic poetics" (Fragment 3053, in Novalis 1962:502)⁸ has merged with Chesterton's on the role of the imagination ("not to make strange things settled, so much as to make settled things strange" [1907:84]), then adapted to the more proverbial "making the strange familiar and the familiar strange," and adopted by artists, semioticians, and ethnographers alike as a definitional dictum. In his essay, "On Ethnographic Surrealism," anthropologist James Clifford makes the point thus:

The term *ethnography* as I am using it here is evidently different from the empirical research technique of a human science that in France was called ethnology, in England social anthropology, and in America cultural anthropology. I am referring to a more general cultural predisposition that cuts through modern anthropology and that this science shares with twentieth-century art and writing. The ethnographic label suggests a characteristic attitude of participant observation among the artefacts of a defamiliarised cultural reality. The surrealists were intensely interested in exotic worlds, among which they included a certain Paris. Their attitude, while comparable to that of the fieldworker who strives to render the unfamiliar comprehensible, tended to work in the reverse sense, making the familiar strange. The contrast is in fact generated by a continuous play of the familiar and the strange, of which ethnography and surrealism are two elements. (Clifford 1989:121)

The same can certainly be said for the comedian. The latter half of the proverb – making the familiar strange – should be virtually self-evident: observational comedy, wherein the everyday is subjected to scrutiny and questioning, is the basis of much contemporary stand-up comedy.

In *Hip Hop America*, Nelson George discusses Richard Pryor's "The Wino and the Junkie" routine and its depiction of "the wino as a city-living country wit and the junkie as a wasted young urban zombie. The split is significant in that Pryor, an artist/cocaine addict himself, provided nuance to the difference between addiction to

⁸ "Die Kunst, auf eine angenehme Art zu befremden, einen Gegenstand fremd zu machen und doch bekannt und anziehend, das ist die romantische Poetik."

heroin and alcohol and how it would eventually affect the entire black community” (George 1998:36). In the conclusion to his liner notes to *Classic Gold*, a two-disc release of George Carlin’s first three albums (*FM & AM*, *Class Clown*, and *Occupation: Foole*), Tony Hendra writes: “What is striking about these albums twenty years on, are not just those things we have come to expect from Carlin [...] but their warmth and range. They teem with people, none of them good or bad, but simply authentic, the voices of kids, cops, priests, parents, old folks, barflies, the sounds of the street, blaring radios, tinny commercials, rinky-dink dreams, posturing gangs, in a word, the whole wonderful, lumpy, loony mess we call humanity” (in Carlin 1993*). This observational role is used in the promotional materials for comedians, as evidenced by three examples taken from the back covers of DVD releases:

Whether suffering Lake Superior salt licking moose, the torments of home renovation hell, or brain bursting futility at the hands of techno-speaking computer geeks, Ron [James] keeps a comic’s eye peeled for the absurd and a poet’s ear tuned for the language. (DVD of James 2003*)

Ellen DeGeneres: Here and Now features the kind of humor that first made her a star, offering her offbeat insights into everyday life. (DVD of DeGeneres 2003*)

In this live performance before a sold-out crowd [Steve Harvey] continues to draw on his childhood experiences, observations about life and human nature. (DVD of Harvey 1997*).

This comprises the “universal material” as discussed above.

The British comedian Michael McIntyre, during an appearance on BBC’s *Live at the Apollo*, began his set by making some comments about life in London (where the show is filmed and where he lives), before moving on to this descriptive section.

<p>You probably all had to come here on public transport it’s a <i>nightmare</i> down there I’d never <i>experienced</i> it ‘til recently</p>

I had to do some work in central *London*
 it's *unbelievable*
 people are so *desperate* to get home
 the trains come *very regularly*
 you see them *one minute two minutes three minutes*
 this means *nothing* to people
 as soon as you get on the platform {looks side-to-side in competitive
 anticipation} it's a *level playing field* [L]
 | I don't care *when* you arrived I'm getting on this train | [L]
they *all try to* work out where the door is going to stop [L]
{running from side to side} | where where where
{stopping} here I feel *good* about here
 but other people are *gathering* over *there* [L]
{shuffling to the side} maybe *they know...* [L]
 no I'm going to *stay* here
 for no reason at all I feel *lucky* about this [L]
 people are *gathering* around *me*
 they *think* I know
 {excitedly} "*I don't know*" | [L]
 and you *never get it right*
 they always go {miming train doors passing by} | *vroom* | [L]
 and you have to go equidistant | {increasingly excitable} "*which one do I go*
to which one" | [L]
 | please let the passengers *off* the train first |
 British people have an *amazing* ability to let people off a train
 whilst at *all times* moving forward [L→A] {leaning backwards while taking
incremental steps}
 | {triumphant} "*I'm on*" |
 and when you're on you don't *care* about other people
 | move *right down* inside the carriage | | *no* [L]
 why would I do *that* [L]
 it'll be *squashed* in here | [L]
 you look at other people {gestures making eye contact, speaking
 conspiratorially} | "*we're on we don't need them we don't need them*" |
 [L]
 you don't vocalise it but there's an *understanding* between you [L]
 and everyone's *reading*
 you *have* to read
 you can't be on the tube without *reading*
reading is very important
 you *get on in the morning*
 every *single person* is reading the Metro
 everyone everyone {mimes gormless expressions reading} [L]
 why doesn't *one person* just read it to the carriage [L]
 I remember in the *old days*
 with the *broadsheets*

with the *huge* pieces
 you couldn't *fold* them {mimes struggling with paper}
 you had to fold them like *linen* | {mimes along to words} you take two
 corners and we'll walk together | [L]
 it is *amazing* how you *have* to read
 people read in the most *uncomfortable* situations
 {contorting himself} arm going arm
 book over here
 turning the pages with your mouth [L]
 I was on the train the other day and it was it was the *most busy* it's ever
 been
 it was my y'know the my personal best
 everyone's been on public transport
 when it's been *more busy* than you can *possibly imagine*
dangerous levels
 and more people are *squashing* in because they *keep squashing* | {urgently}
 get in get in get in |
 and everyone felt this is this is *dramatic* [L]
 and we saw somebody *running* for the doors
 and I think there was a *shared* emotion
 | *enjoy the run* [L]
 you *ain't* getting on this train | [L]
 and he ran *all the way* to the doors
 and he *stopped* right at the edge
 and then *retreated* [L]
 and I think we *all* felt | *good decision* | [L]
 or so we thought
run-up [L]
 he was merely *assessing* it
 and then *retreating* [L]
 then *charged* into the train
 and he *actually* made on I couldn't *no one* could believe it
 his *feet* were on
 but his *head* was still out [L]
unbearable excitement
 even the Metros came down | what the hell is going on here [L]
his head isn't in [L]
what's he gonna do | [L]
 nobody said this but you could *feel* the excitement
 I think one woman overflowed she went | {small high-pitched whimper} | [L]
but that was the closest
 we got to a *conversation* [L]
 his *head* was *equidistant* to either door
 they closed | boom |
 he *took the hit*
 no one could believe it | {high pitched} "he took the hit" | [L]

nobody needs to get home this badly
get out man get out [L]
but no
he took another | boom | [L]
save yourself [L]
and then with his with his ever decreasing mind power
being smashed in repeatedly by the doors
he came to the conclusion
he should move slightly to the right
use the door
accept another hit
to smack his head into the train
the doors close | boom | and it hit him right in
and he made it
no one could believe it | he made it {high pitched} "he's in" |
then he reached into a pocket
and got out a book [L→A] (McIntyre 2007)*

The first half of the routine is descriptive and, for anyone who's been either on London's underground or to any crowded city's mass transit system, it is very familiar. The audience's reactions throughout the routine are ones of recognition, including people turning to each other and nodding. Its moments of questionable veracity, like the broadsheets so large one folds them like linen, are allowable diversions from this recognisable and fanciful ethnographic exercise. The crowdedness, the mercenary attitude of passengers, and the cultural imperative to read are brought forward and become the themes which guide the narrative of the train-jumper. Moreover, his use of the second person directly draws the audience in, implicating them in the attitudes of public transit.

For the former, making the strange familiar, one can cite as extreme examples Richard Pryor's experience of setting himself on fire while freebasing (recounted in Pryor 1982a*), or Henry Rollins' near-molestation as a nine-year-old on holiday in Greece (recounted in Rollins 1992b*), both of which were represented on stage in routines that

were ultimately accepted by the audience (inasmuch as there was laughter and applause). In my interview with James, he phrased it in terms of making the specific universal: the particular episode does not have to coincide exactly with the life experience of the audience, but it registers as a recognisably analogous experience.

Stand-up comedy audiences are historically situated. When the stand-up comedian is local she builds on esoteric knowledge, demonstrating and reaffirming her insider status. When the stand-up comedian is not a local, it is a standard technique to describe that place as she sees it, which both addresses her “foreignness” or “otherness” and demonstrates an effort to make a connection with the day-to-day world of the local audience.

Furthermore, in the case of recorded or broadcast stand-up comedy, which is invariably a recording of a live performance in front of a specific audience, there is a qualification to the notion of “local”: the performance cannot be so esoteric as to be incomprehensible to someone from outside if it is meant to be appreciated (found funny and thus commercially viable). The performance typically builds not only on esoteric knowledge but, in William Hugh Jansen’s sense, secondary esoteric knowledge: not only what the group thinks of itself but what it supposes others think of it (1959:206). A related approach is to talk of themes that are not particular to the specific audience but are shared with the larger anticipated audience which is regional, national, or international. This includes exoteric knowledge about the site of recording, but also includes politics, popular culture, or – perhaps most universal – the differences between men and women.

For his *Kill the Messenger* special (2008*), Chris Rock recorded performances in New York, London, and Johannesburg, which were then edited together into one

contiguous performance. In each city he started with localised material,⁹ although only the South African narrative was included in the final product.

Yes
Jo-burg
I finally *made it* [C]
whoo
now let's hope I make it the fuck out of here [L]
'cause it is *violent* right about now [L]
and I ain't talking about the *jungle* [L]
man oh man it is *good* to be here
it is so good [C] to be here
the first time I'm ever playing uh Africa Africa
first time I'm ever playing Africa South Africa¹⁰
I was on *safari* with my family out there
taking pictures of the *animals*
and you're driving *around*
and you've got this guy with you called a *tracker*
the tracker's *amazing* 'cause you're just *driving around*
and the *tracker* goes {excitedly, with South African accent} | "stop-stop stop-stop" | [L]
and you stop the *jeep*
and {leaning} he *leans down*
and {poking} puts his finger in some *piss* [L]

⁹ A three-disc "Collector's Edition" of the special was released in January of 2009, featuring the entirety of all three concerts. In the New York show, filmed at the World Famous Apollo Theater, he emphasises how he want to do a good show "'cause it's the *Apollo Theatre* / and I know if it *ain't* good you all'll let me *know*." He transitions to a reference to Britney Spears on the MTV Video Music Awards which had aired three nights previously. In London, he expressly admits to doing something "ethnographic":

I've been here a couple of days man y'know
and I had to study the *culture*
of the people
had to figure what makes *you guys* tick
what makes *you guys* y'know feel good
and I realized you guys drink a *lot* [I] of alcohol
you drink a *ton* of alcohol
you motherfuckers *draenk* [I]
you don't drink you *draenk* [I]
that's right cause you got to drink a *lot* of alcohol
to think that *darts* is a *sport* [L]

¹⁰ At this point in the unedited concert, he explains how this was not his first time visiting Africa, and how "like most Americans that *come* to the motherland I was very *ignorant* / when I got off the plane I was looking for *lions* [I] / and tigers [I]." He then segues into the safari story by saying "when you're on *safari* it's like being *underwater* and you can breathe you know what I mean like [I] / there's like there's that much *nature* around you."

he's like {licking fingertips} | ah lah | [L]
 {pointing} | uh fifteen *miles*
 to the *right*
 should be *zebra* | [L]
 and and and you *get there*
 and there's *zebra* [L]
 there's *zebra*
 wow
zebra
 and you're driving *some more*
 and he'll say | ah stop-stop stop-stop | [L]
 and {leaning} he leans down and picks... picks up a little *shit pellet*
 and {miming crumbling it under his nose and sniffing} | "mm mm [L]
 thirteen *miles*
 to the *left*
rhinoceros |[L]
 and you *get there*
 and there's a *rhino* right *there*
 you're like | how the fuck's he *do* this shit | [L]
 and it's *beautiful*
 and I'm out there taking pictures of the *rhino*
 took the pictures of the *zebra*
 and I was having a *good time*
 and I was out there with my *family*
 and I felt *great*
 'til I looked over at *another jeep*
 and I saw a bunch of *white people* taking pictures of *me* [L:C]
 now I didn't [unclear]
 | I ain't no *animal* | [L]
 but they had a *tracker* trackin' *my black ass* [L]
 evidently I must have dropped some *chicken* or something [L]
 at another *spot*
 and they're like | ah *chicken bones* [L]
 thirteen miles to the *left*
niggers will be there | [L] (Rock 2008*)

It is, for all intents and purposes, a joke: an isolatable unit that can be extricated from its performance context and still be rendered sensible with little editing. However, within the performance context, and through his use of the first and second persons, and the third person use for *white people* ("they had a tracker") he plays on both esoteric and exoteric understandings of the South African context while simultaneously presenting himself as

operating within it, howsoever touristically.

As I have been framing the question, part of the stand-up comedian's craft is establishing a sense of contiguity between his or her worldview and that of the audience. Simultaneously, he or she presents a different perspective on that worldview. By the former comedians prove themselves relevant; by the latter they prove themselves interesting. The concern of this section is primarily with the former: it is a vocational necessity for comedians to depict a recognisable and realistic cultural backdrop against which the comedy can unfold. The process is similar for when the comedian is communicating to his or her "own" group (i.e., as has been discussed above, groups whose aggregate set of social identities is largely contiguous with the comedian's own and differences are, in the main, elided), and for when the comedian is communicating across "marked" otherness (when differences in region, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, or other social identities are adverted to and inform the insider/outsider perspective). In either instance, the depiction must be one which bears a great degree of verisimilitude to the audience's experience and expectations, which can then be flouted.

I do wish to present one simple example of how the folklorist could use the work of a stand-up comedian as ethnographic material. The children's game Buck Buck dates back to Roman times: it is one of the depicted activities in Brueghel's "Children's Games." In *The Folkgames of Children*, Brian Sutton-Smith provides this description from Adair, Canterbury, New Zealand from 1890.

The first boy leans against the school wall with his arms horizontal against the school and his head and face looking towards the ground and his back in an horizontal position. The next boy leans against him in the same way with his head down and his back horizontal, and so on back to the last boy. Then another [player] who is going to call the tune jumps on the back of the boy at the end of the row ... and works his way along the backs of all

the boys until he gets to the [one] against the school. (1972:192)

In this version, there is a guessing game, with the boy on top asking how many fingers he is holding up, and the boy below guessing. Edith Fowke provides a similar description, although she notes that the guessing game aspect is not common in Canada:

This game is played by two teams of five or more each. One team forms a long back beginning with one boy, the "cushion," standing with his back to a fence or wall. One member of his team then bends forward from the waist and nestles his head and right shoulders in the side and belly of the first boy. The next boy also bends forward and leans his right shoulder against the rear of the second boy, and grasps him firmly by the waist. The others form up behind him, each placing his head on the side opposite to that of the boy in front, until the whole team forms a long back. When they are ready, they shout, tauntingly, "Buck, Buck number one," The first member of the other team then races towards their backs from some distance away, leapfrogs over their endman, and lands as far along the backs as he can. The first team then calls for "Buck, Buck, number two," and so on until either all the Bucks are on top of the Backs, in which case the Backs are the winners, or the Backs break under the weight of the Bucks, in which case the Bucks are the winners. (Fowke 1988:76)

Complementing these two accounts is the following account from post-War Philadelphia, from Bill Cosby's 1967 album *Revenge*.

Now
I wanna tell you
this story
this is a game that we played when we were
when we were kids and it's called
Buck Buck we played it in Philadelphia
Buck Buck
now
you people out here on the west coast probably know nothing about it
in New York it's called Johnny on the Pony and
other things
it's where fo[ur] uh five kids line up you see
and they bend over
they're in a straight line
and they bend over
and one kid grabs a fence or wall or pole holds onto that
the next kid puts his right arm around his waist you see
bends over tucks his head under

and you've got five guys lined up exactly like that [whoosh sound]
 so they all look like a *long* horse
 now,
 the object of the game is that one at a time
 one by one
 kids come running up and they say
 | [high pitched, Lone Ranger voice] *Buck Buck Number One Come in |*
 and they run up leap in the air and land on the horse [pumph]
 and they keep going
 BAM BAM BAM
 until they collapse the horse you see
 now
 that's the object of the game then you count how many kids you held then
 you go back and forth you see
 now
 we had
 the champion Buck Buck team of the world
 when I tell you we played Buck Buck there was nobody that whipped us
 anywhere man
 and you can tell kids that play a lot of Buck Buck because
 they're built like this [L] you see
 and their legs are only four inches long [L]
 that's all they have
 cause they've been *crushed* so much [pumph] [L] ("Buck, Buck," Cosby
 1967*)¹¹

It may not be immediately apparent, but not until the description of the "kids that play a lot of Buck Buck," over a minute into the routine, is there any laughter, which would seem an inordinate amount of time. Cosby has repeatedly been heralded as one who was able to communicate an urban, black, lower middle class childhood in a manner that made it recognisable to a broad swathe of his audience. In other words he made the strange familiar, made the specific universal, largely through an effort at authentic representation. That he could then build upon that ethnography and develop scenarios of appropriate incongruity, and that the ethnography is in place in order to develop said

¹¹ For those even passingly familiar with the Cosby oeuvre, it may be of interest to note that "Buck Buck" later includes the first appearance of his Fat Albert character, a serious Buck Buck contender.

scenarios (and one could indeed argue that he is, in essence, making the strange familiar in order to thence make it strange), do not undercut the utility of the description as potential source.

In March of 2003 I conducted an interview with Kelly Roubo, a fellow doctoral candidate in the Folklore programme at Memorial University, after she had informed me that, as a child growing up in rural Maine in the late 1960s and early 1970s, her family would often entertain themselves by sitting around listening to Bill Cosby albums. Over the course of the interview she expressed how much the appeal of Cosby – even for material which she had never listened to before – was in his descriptive powers, and how his comments on the everyday rang true. As we listened together to *Why Is There Air?* (1965*), an album she had never heard before, Cosby describes a silent crier, and she commented: “That’s such an image!” She had strong positive reactions to several passages of material, which she either related to her own life or anticipated the punchline. At one point Cosby describes his mother’s warning about what would happen if he continued to play with his navel, which would involve deflation and flying around the room. Kelly reacted, “Now my mom used to tell my brother that if he didn’t stop playing with it, he’d unscrew it and all his arms and legs would fall off.” At the very beginning of a routine on the difficulties of driving in different cities, she asks “I wonder if he’s ever been to St. John’s” [Newfoundland, where the interview took place]. When Cosby speaks of taking Midol for a toothache, and assures the audience that he had no side effects, Kelly suggests that he must have grown breasts moments before he says that every twenty-eight days he gets a little irritable. Much of the appeal of Cosby for Kelly comes from his skill at observing the everyday.

- IB: What do you think it was that your family liked about it so much? If anything, if you could even answer that specifically.
- KR: I think it's the familiarity of what he's talking about, that so many people just don't seem to comment on, they just live with these things as they happen to you...
- IB: Sort of focusing on the everyday.
- KR: Yeah, and it's almost conversational, so that if you were standing beside him it would be a conversation (Roubo 2003)

Anticipating what he is going to say demonstrates one aspect of Cosby's appeal.

This mix of conversational style and conversational content narrows the gap between performer and audience. Familiarity with the delivery is not necessarily the same thing as familiarity with the substance of what he is talking about. The delivery may become trite or stale, and be seen as affectation more than novel style. "I wonder how funny I'd have found him if we had all his albums, y'know? 'Cause listening to this, you're hearing the same sort of thing over and over again." Even with a new piece of material, as this album was for Kelly, the tension between convention and novelty, or tradition and variation, is nuanced: if it is too "familiar," i.e. relying on tried and true formulas, the routine becomes mere rote. If, however, the material strays too far from a sense of a shared experience, which happens with dated or obscure references, it is only the formulas that can save it.

As Cosby refers mostly to his own experiences with an emphasis on the ordinary, the everyday, the routine, he employs an assumption of shared experience. Some of Cosby's success may have been a result of the avoidance of the esoteric. An African American from urban Philadelphia could be understood by a white family from rural Maine by emphasising common or parallel experiences. In this manner his potential "otherness" is obviated: this is helped, of course, by the already distancing mechanism of the album itself.

- IB: Did the fact that he was black ever sink in, or was it ever an issue? Was he just a funny guy?
- KR: He was just a funny guy. And I don't know how much of that comes from where I grew up. I mean, he was a black guy on the cover of an album, he was not a black guy standing in my living room. I don't know how old I was when I first saw a black person. There aren't that many in Maine, or there weren't at the time, and so I think the whole civil rights thing was something that was distant, particularly as a child. You have some recognition, you hear it from the news, you know something is going on but, particularly if you've never seen a black person, and it's not happening where you are, you're not connecting with the relevance of it. I don't remember ever thinking about it, of him being a black person. That doesn't mean I didn't, I just don't have the recollection of it. (Roubo 2003)

Ron James describes his method in a manner that is very much that of the ethnographer, the "deep hanging out"¹² of participant observation, while this understanding, this trying to (re)discover, seems to be the essence of the ethnographer's quest. Each of his specials is, for lack of a better term, an ethnography.

His one man show, *Up and Down in Shakey Town*, began expressly as a series of observations about Californian life as seen through the eyes of an Atlantic Canadian. A reviewer of the stage version mounted in Halifax (after the filming of the special) described it thus:

The emotional heart of James's presentation, however, is the acute cultural difference he plays up as he describes everyday life in the imagined paradise of Southern California. From an extended, edgy sequence about being stuck for four hours in traffic with a tragically full bladder, to a series of hilarious comparisons between American and Canadian gun laws, James draws the line between the cold-but-civilized North, and the go-go craziness of Southern California.

James's observations about arriving in Los Angeles are pointed and sometimes painfully funny. He got there just as an endless train of plagues (riots, floods, fires) afflicted a place that had formerly been defined by its

¹² Guha Shankar, of the Library of Congress, used this expression as the best description of ethnography he knew during a conversation at the American Folklore Society meeting in Milwaukee, WI, in October of 2006.

24-hour liquor barns and consistently hot climate. These extremes of human and climatic behaviour make ideal fodder for a comic such as James. (Macdonald 1999:45)

In one passage (a favourite of his which he had until recently also streamed on his website), he describes the lure of American consumer culture for the Canadian, with particular emphasis on “the liquor barn”:

Down there the *consumer* was king
whoa
 I used to *buy*
forty ounces of Captain Morgan Dark Rum
 for nine ninety-five [L]
 at a place called the *Liquor Barn*
 the {slowly} “*Liquor Barn*” [L]
 a *theme park* to booze [L]
 and a temple of homage for *any* Maritimer [L→A]
 eh | what are you doing *today* Ronald |
 | nothing at all just perpetuating a regional *stereotype* [L]
 and dancin’ on down to the *Liquor Barn* is all [L]
 {singing and dancing} “oh the *Liquor Barn* [L:A]
the *Liquor Barn*
we’re all going to the *Liquor Barn*”
 sing along the lyrics are fairly simple hey [L]
 follow the bouncing pint [L] “we’re all going to the *Liquor Liquor Barn*”
 oh there were deals to be had around every *corner* people
 and the intoxicating lure of the Golden State’s *bounty*
 was never more apparent than when Maritimers came to *visit*
 I lost my dad for day’s on end at Sears’ *tool department* [L]
 jeez every time I came home from work he had a *new wrench*
 {accented, miming holding a wrench} | “have a gander at that *Ronnie boy* [L]
 four feet of tungsten steel chrome wrapped *wrench* [L]
 a *buck ninety-five* [L]
 {swinging} *steel boy steel* [L]
 here feel *that* in your head
steel
 you don’t get *that* at Canadian Tire” | (James 1997*)

The consequent proviso is that, as rich in ethnographic detail as the performer’s text might be, the intent is ultimately not to be an ethnographer but to be an entertainer: the ethnography is at the service of the laughter. In his profile of comedian Eddie Izzard,

John Lahr captured the following moment:

[Izzard] was talking about Guy Fawkes and how he was “hung, drawn, and quartered.” At the word “hung,” Izzard tilted his neck and mimed a noose around it. At “drawn,” he stepped back and pretended to sketch Fawkes.

“No, that’s not it,” a man shouted from the audience.

Izzard’s eyes twinkled as he peered into the murky room. “Have you only just worked out that that’s the first lie I’ve told you all night?” he said. “As it happens, there’s a constant lying that goes on through the whole show.” Instinctively, Izzard did a little of his “positivizing.” He put his hands on his hips and rolled his eyes to the ceiling, imagining the man’s bad review of the show. “The lies that were said in that room,” he said. “I wanted to go out for a good night of realism.” (Lahr 2000:181-182)

James made a similar point when he described the “Paid in Game” routine as having “nothing to do with credibility”: stand-up comedy, as much its vernacular theory refers to “truth,” “honesty,” and “authenticity,” is not an exercise in objectivity nor absolute veracity. It is forever and always a means to an end: laughter.

KR: You do have to wonder if you think about all of the odd little kids [Cosby] describes, whether he knew anyone normal. So everyone is portrayed as a sort of weirdo.

IB: Or at the very least everyone is portrayed as a character, but almost in a local character phenomenon kind of way. Everyone’s just a little bit off.

KR: So in that way he makes everyone interesting (Roubo 2003)

The Comic Gaze

Throughout this chapter I have been suggesting that there is a professional obligation for the comedian to be outside his or her group, or from outside of the group which comprises the audience, in order to have something interesting to say. The vernacular theory concepts of “holding a mirror up to culture” and “seeing things differently” demand it. This outsider status has a further implication of someone without express power or privilege, somehow disenfranchised: to find something amusing is to point out some of its internal contradictions, its flaws, or, at the very least, its difference

from an esoteric understanding of “normal,” and for someone to do that from a position of privilege is a breach of the compact that stand-up comedy is emancipatory.¹³

like *fat girls* can say whatever they want to about *skinny girls*
fat girls can talk about *skinny girls*
all day long
 | fuckin' *skinny bitch* [L] fuckin' *skinny ass* anorexic bulimic fuckin'
 regurgitatin' *bitch* [L] fuckin' cheerio belt wearin' *bitch* [C] *salad-eatin'*
 motherfucker
 I hope she chokes on a *crouton* | [L]
 but *skinny girls* can't talk about *fat girls*
 that's just *mean* [L] (Rock 2008*)

The idea of ethnography, particularly as expressed in the “make the strange familiar and the familiar strange” proverb, provides one lens through which one can view the stand-up comedian’s act. Like the contemporary ethnographer, the stand-up comedian locates him- or herself within a particular worldview and then examines phenomena from that perspective. For the purposes of that performance, and within its non-consequential frame, that worldview is portrayed as normative, and the audience – again within the non-consequential frame – alternately agrees and disagrees with the normativity of that worldview. The comedian makes a concerted effort to ensure that the disagreement does not last for long, and that most are reconciled to that worldview. A successful unknown comedian will not alienate his or her audience: a comedian with a more established reputation will have the benefit of both having already weeded out those who would be alienated and attracting those who share – or wish to experience – this worldview.

There is something a little grandiose, I feel, in some of the literature and rhetoric about stand-up comedy and comedians. There is an impetus for an explanatory model that rationalises the appeal: it must *do something* other than merely entertain. I am not adverse

¹³ See Amy Shuman’s discussion of “entitlement” in Shuman 2005:9-12.

to the suggestions that the stand-up comedian acts as artist, social critic, anthropologist, mediator of social morality, forger of an ethnic image, or even indeed ethnographer, but the emphasis is on the “acts” aspect. As George Paton notes (1988), the comedian is a *portrayer* of these roles, not necessarily fulfilling the role itself. These are also roles that are assumed, briefly, in everyday talk, and they arise in the flow of everyday conversation, although we would hesitate to frame them as “roles.”

Stand-up comedians, out of professional necessity, are focussed on “otherness”: whether as an observational comedian reflecting the culture of an audience back on to itself or as a chronicler of an experience foreign to their audience, they deliberately seek out the other as a source of material. They fix their “comic gaze” at difference.

“Comic gaze” is invoked casually by many writing about humour and comedy.

Sigmund Freud began the “Analytic Part” his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* by quoting Kuno Fischer:

“The subject-matter of comedy is what is ugly in any of its manifestations. ‘Where it is hidden, it must be revealed in the light of the comic gaze, where it is noticed but little or scarcely at all, it must be brought out and exposed in such a way that it stands open to the light of day’” (Freud 1976:1-2).

In his study of Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy and “The Cool Pose,” Herman Beavers notes that “To be cool is also to be mobile, free to aim the comic gaze outward in all directions” (1997:266). Ron James uses the gaze metaphor indirectly, through his invocation of the “satirist’s eye for detail” (Lisk 2005) or the “comedian’s eye peeled for the satire” (Ward 2005), which he pairs with the “poet’s ear for language.”

Inasmuch as stand-up comedians are engaged in a consideration of otherness, and inasmuch as they are doing something on a stage that is done in everyday talk, I would suggest that much of what one can say about “the comic gaze” can be equated to “the

tourist gaze.” A number of the routines already discussed in the pages above – both Richard Pryor and Chris Rock on Africa; James on the far points of frontier – explicitly refer to travels to exotic locations.

But to equate the stand-up comedian’s project with that of the tourist appears, at first, to diminish it. We tend to hold the tourist at an arm’s remove. Malcolm Crick suggests that anthropologists express a certain repugnance for tourists, in part stemming from a reluctant recognition of commonality (1985:77-78). We may indeed identify our own leisure travel as precisely that – “travel” – something less a project of consumption and more of encounter, and leave “tourism” for others. Ellen Badone notes how the boundaries between tourist, ethnographer and pilgrim are blurry at best, as their ostensibly respective projects – leisure, understanding, self-transformation – are shared by all three, with different emphases (2004:182). Much of this hinges on the issue of “authenticity”: the tourist is seeing a constructed reality of signs prepared for him or her precisely in a system that benefits from accentuating difference as an object for the tourist gaze; the traveler (and the ethnographer) sees the real.

In the literature review (Chapter 1), I noted how among stand-up theorists there tends to be an implicit or even explicit hierarchy, a delineation between “true” stand-up comedians and others. Comedians themselves tend to distinguish good comedians (and implicitly themselves) from “hacks” (Moore 1997:93-107) and “boat-acts” (Pulliam 1991:166). The same issue of saying something “real” or “authentic” drives that division. So I would imagine an invocation of “tourist” as a blanket rubric would give one pause. However, they are comparable. John Urry (1990) describes several features of the tourist gaze which I believe have analogues in stand-up comedy. For example:

The tourist gaze arises from a movement of people to, and their stay in, various other destinations. This necessarily involves some movement through space, that is the journey, and a period of stay in a new place or places. (Urry 1990:26)

The very act of being a touring comedian, and the itinerancy that suggests, is part of the comedian's story. "Life on the Road" is one of the settings Kevin Moore suggests in his Fantasy Theme Analysis of Denver stand-up comedians (1997:128); Eric Shouse frames his study of comedian's backstage stories with the concept of the comedian as "Road Warrior" (2004). Ron James and his reviewers invoke the "traveller"¹⁴ identity frequently: "I talk a lot about new places and my experiences travelling it" (qtd. in Callahan 2002); "The highly animated comic, who last played P.E.I. two years ago, said he's developed a lot of new material since then, much of it based on the adventures he's had on his travels across Canada. A keen observer of humanity, he said he tries to keep a poet's ear as he travels from place to place" (Gallant 2003); "Like the touring vaudeville comedians of the 19th century, 46-year-old James travels the country performing at its far reaches and it is in the small towns and remote regions that he finds much of his comedic inspiration and exasperation" (Clark 2004). Life on the road is such an integral metaphor that it formed the narrative backbone of his second special *The Road Between My Ears*. As discussed above (250ff), he specifically credits travels as the source of his material.

The journey and stay are to, and in, sites which are outside the normal places of residence and work. [...] Places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is an anticipation [...] of intense pleasures, either on a different scale or involving different senses from those customarily encountered. Such anticipation is constructed and sustained through a variety of non-tourist practices, such as film, newspapers, T.V., magazines, records and videos which construct that

¹⁴ Urry allows for a distinction between "traveler" and "tourist," mainly through the emic perception of the latter being subject to mass-production: however, when his focus is not on the concept of tourism as a consumable, that distinction is largely a matter of emphasis.

gaze. Such practices provide the signs in terms of which the holiday experiences are understood, so that what is then seen is interpreted in terms of these pre-given categories. (Urry 1990:26)

That the tourist gaze is directed at sites outside the everyday ones of residence and work, and that it anticipates intense pleasures, brings with the notion that it is deliberately directed at difference, and the different is sought out as such. But in addition to the ethnographic descriptions of otherness through travel or through personal experience, the stand-up comedian also turns to the immediate everyday world of the audience and, with an eye on noting difference, makes observations on it as well.

I think it's just the way you perceive things around you. You've seen the silliness, the absurdity, the craziness that goes on in the world and you jump on that and expand it. You look at things in a different light. That's what makes comedy. (Carson 1979)

The itinerant stand-up comedian is a tourist at the moment of performance, not only recounting his or her perceptions of otherness in places far-flung but of places immediate to the audience. The local material presented at the beginning of a performance is a demonstration of the local as perceived through the gaze of an interested, engaged other.

The gaze is constructed through signs and tourism involves the collection of such signs. When for example tourists see two people kissing in Paris what they are gazing upon is 'timeless, romantic Paris', when a small village in England is seen, tourists think they are gazing upon the 'real (merrie) England.' (Urry 1990:26)

"Signs" are also how the stand-up comedian uses the previously held assumptions about a place and frames his or her performances around those signs, either utilising them directly – especially when communicating a far-flung experience to an audience – or setting them up as mere conventions to be discounted – especially when communicating a local experience to a local audience. These conventions – stereotypes, motifs, dities, units

of worldview – are conventions the comedian can use in precisely the same manner as the tourist: they are known (or at least accessible) to the audience through the mechanisms of vernacular and popular culture (not only the same sort of “non-tourist practices” Urry alludes to above but also through oral tradition), and, through legend-like discourse their underlying truth or falsity can be negotiated through narrative, affirmed, denied, or left uncertain.

The gaze is directed to features of landscape and townscape which separate them off from everyday and routine experiences. Such aspects are viewed because they are taken to be in some sense out-of-the-ordinary. [...] People linger over such a gaze which is then visually objectified or captured through photographs, postcards, films, models, and so on. These enable the gaze to be endlessly reproduced and recaptured. (Urry 1990:26-27)

Urry’s point concerning souvenir seems at first glance the least relevant to the study of stand-up, but I would suggest, building on how others have built on his concepts, that it is the most critical. In addition to how the *site* is visually objectified or captured through photographs and models, the *experience* is “narratively subjectified” through the narratives that are formed there and become part of the teller’s repertoire. The folkloristic approach would be to suggest that the souvenir, Urry’s visual objectification, is a form of memory object that occasions narrative (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989:331): but even without an object to occasion it narrative is also a product of the tourist gaze, and the telling and retelling of the narrative communicates and allows for reproduction and recapture – really, its recreation. Narratively that experience is recreated to an audience who now experience it themselves, albeit vicariously. When they are presented with narratives of places far-flung they come to know that place touristically, and when they are presented with narratives of their own locale they experience that too through the lens of otherness and difference.

Tourism is a leisure activity which presupposes its opposite, namely regulated and organised work. It is one manifestation of how work and leisure are organised as separate and regulated spheres of social practice in 'modern' societies. (Urry 1990:26)

I have been making the suggestion that stand-up comedy is the professionalisation of everyday talk, small-talk, "talking shit": talk that exists in the informal realm of play and leisure and is distinguished from "serious talk." Professionalisation brings heightened expectations of consistent competency, particularly stemming from the comedian's place within an exchange economy. Tourism is located in the leisure sphere, but stand-up comedy takes those activities that occur on that leisure sphere and professionalises them. The stand-up comedian is, on one level, a professional "tourist," perennially casting his or her gaze on difference, to communicate that experience of difference to an ever new audience. The talk of stand-up comedy is no longer the leisurely talking shit of face-to-face interaction, "a leisure activity which presupposes its opposite, namely regulated and organized work": it is work. Michael Robidoux, in his study of professional hockey players, noted the difficulty in reconciling the cultural division between work and play when one speaks of someone whose work *is* to play.

The dictates of play demand that participants comply with the structure (or world) of the game; otherwise, the game will not be successfully realized. Of course, play theorist Roger Caillois, in his description of play, referred to what is intended to be a momentary departure from "the rest of life," Individuals who play for a living, however, are forced to abandon themselves to this principle, to the extent that the realm of play becomes their way of life. For professional hockey players, the notion of leaving or entering this "enclosure" becomes a very literal function, in that the game is not temporary, but rather, their livelihood. (2001:16)

The stand-up comedian cultivates the comic gaze by professional necessity: whatever peripheral stance they might have had prior to their engagement in the professional life of stand-up, and however much that peripherality and marginalization informs the content of

their work, it must be continually reestablished through both the explicit identification of self as “othered” and implicitly through drawing attention to how their perception of difference is something worth listening to.

Ultimately, as far as the comedian aims at intimacy with an audience, he or she also is forever divided from it, as the professional obligation to remain an outsider is always in play.

Summary Conclusions

When a person goes to a stand-up comedy performance, they expect to be hearing a form of talk that is consistently funny. Stylistically the stand-up comedian may not be substantially different from “good talkers” he or she may encounter in the course of everyday life, but by virtue of being paid for it, making a claim about their particular skill set, the comedian had better deliver. One way to accomplish this is to meet the audience’s two-fold expectation of both *relevance* – understanding the worldview of the group by demonstrating some shared participation therein – and *perspective* – having a particular insight into that worldview.

Stand-up comedians do this by cultivating a hermeneutic of marginality, of pointing to the centre from its periphery. This lens of outsidership fits in with the established cultural understanding of what the social identity of the stand-up comedian connotes. This outsider is a persona that is performed and enacted on the stage, and it is built around previously held assumptions about similar persons. When a reputation is firmly established and the comedian becomes known this sketched persona can be dropped or, at least, allowed to recede to the background as a more nuanced stage persona develops. Specific statements may be made that are not meant to be understood

as funny but rather as testimonials, explicit opinions and belief utterances that serve to firmly locate the comedian within some form of framework. These appear (and are far outnumbered by) the more ambiguous statements which are – hopefully – interpreted by the audience as funny, insofar as they are open to some negotiation of meaning.

The stand-up comedian adapts material according to the audience: some material can more or less go unchanged from performance to performance; some can be easily adapted to local contexts, and some is wholly localised. This localised material, however, can be reworked into something more permanent when the comedian communicates that local experience to a different context, and the performance becomes an evocation of place in something similar to the project of the ethnographer. The comedian's need for new material brings a requirement for noting difference as a category for comic fodder.

In Part Three we turn to mediated performances, where the performance becomes adapted to the various media, where a repertoire becomes fixed, where canons are formed, where reputations cumulate, and where the stand-up comedian in addressing two separate audiences – one at home and one immediately present to him or her – divines new ways for building intimacy across the spatiotemporal distance.

In Chapter 7 I examine broadcasts, starting with live, where the audience and performer are distant from each other in space, then recorded, where the audience and the performer are distant from each other in both space and time. Then in Chapter 8 I turn to recordings, where both the performer and audience are distant from each other in time and space, and the audience has control over the scheduling and availability of the performance experience, and which provide the stand-up comedian with the greatest tool for reputation cultivation.

PART THREE: DISTANCE INCREASES

McLuhan-wise, I mean, it's ... it's hot. It's a hot medium: it isn't a cold medium, because they're, they're involved, they're involved in the routine.

Bob Newhart

As a dialogic form, stand-up comedy requires the reaction of an audience to propel itself forward: it does not “work” without an audience. At the same time, although much of the power in the performance context resides with the performer, and although the skills of the performer are measured in part by how he or she wields that power, the reactions of an audience can be anticipated but not predicted with certainty. For further mediations, the reactions of the audience, more accurately now rendered as “viewers” or “listeners,” have no direct affect on the outcome of the performance.

In reality, however, there are (at least) two audiences. Just as the first few rows of an audience may be the proxy for the entire crowd, albeit with respect paid to the presence of the entire crowd, similarly when combined they are the audience at the site of the broadcast or recording, who together with the performer produces the performance, and who act as de facto “proxy” (a term I begin to discard in the next section) for the much larger audience at the receiving end of the broadcast or recording. Moreover, the broadcast or recorded performance is ultimately intended for that other non-present audience, who outnumber (and thus outspend) the audience present to the performance. One cannot, therefore, simply examine further mediations as simulacra or, at best, documentaries of live performance, as the media alter the performance itself, both in its production and certainly in its reception.

These two chapters examine mediated performance where the audience and

performer are not co-located, not present to each other. This chapter examines broadcasts, both live – through which the audience is experiencing the performance at the same time but not at the same place – and pre-recorded – through which the audience is experiencing the performance at a different time and place. The following chapter is on recordings, through which the audience is not only experiencing the performance at a different time and place but has control over which time and place they are experiencing it. In some cases, these categories are notional at best, especially as the performances appear on multiple media platforms, but if one considers them separately as ideal types they bring to the fore a range of complementary but distinct concerns.

Chapter 7: Stand-Up Comedy Broadcasts

Well, pure television to me is also immediacy. That's why I don't like to do *The Tonight Show* a week or two in advance, like a lot of shows do. I like to be able to go out tonight and talk about what's happening *today*. So the immediacy of doing this kind of show, I think, has a certain value in it. People *know* it's happening right now. Sure, we're delayed on tape, but we don't edit the show; we don't shoot two hours and edit it down. When *Saturday Night Live* says, "Live, from New York!" it's live in the East but it's not live out here. Doing it the same day on tape is exactly the same thing as doing it live.

Johnny Carson

Stand-up comedy emerged in the post-war period at about the same time as television was supplanting radio as the dominant broadcast medium. The perceived intimacy of television seemed to suit stand-up very well, and a performer could be seen by millions of people at one time. The inexpensiveness of stand-up suited television producers' budgets equally well. Several minutes of airtime could be filled without expending anything on sets, costumes, or staff writers, and while the comedian performed in front of a backdrop or curtain a new set could be arranged behind it. Wide-scale network broadcasting altered the form of stand-up comedy irrevocably, both for good and ill: it was the predominant medium for stand-up comedy in its early days, and has yet to be supplanted.

Broadcasting in the United States, and elsewhere to a similar extent, has been affected by three interrelated limitations. First of all, as the airwaves are licensed from the government, they are subject to regulatory agencies, who act in the public interest, or

their interpretation thereof.¹ Secondly, programming was largely sponsored by businesses through advertising: for material that was or is not considered legally obscene, indecent, or profane, individuals and groups with no recourse to complaints to regulators could nevertheless make their displeasure known to the sponsors through threats of product boycott.² Lastly, both the broadcaster and the sponsor are aiming at engaging as large an audience as possible – the latter for maximum exposure of their products, the former for demonstrating that a “public need” is being met, which is a condition of broadcast licence renewal – and as such are invested in appealing to the broadest possible base. The issue of “acceptable” language and content, predicated less on proactively imposing a standard of propriety and more on proactively avoiding controversy and retribution, becomes a consequent limit on performance. Obscenity and other risky material are not inherently part of stand-up comedy, but their avoidance can require a self-censoring and avoidance of certain topics that might not be present in conversation among intimates.

We imagine that those present to a performance, certainly present to a light entertainment, are there of their own volition, that they can exercise the option of leaving or staying, and that they can give voice to a reaction, whether positive or negative. Together the performer and the audience negotiate what is appropriate and what is inappropriate. How much actual control any one member of the audience has over the performance may be negligible but not absent entirely. With a broadcast, however, that

¹ The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) follows Title 18 § 1464 of the United States Code, “Broadcasting Obscene Language”: “Whoever utters any obscene, indecent, or profane language by means of radio communication shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than two years, or both.” See FCC 2007.

² In Canada and Europe, where state broadcasters established a presence prior to private broadcasters, the influence of corporate interest has been somewhat less and, relatedly, a standard for the medium emerged prior to the influence of corporate interest.

negligible control is not available to the listener "at home." To maintain an appropriate performance, the performer needs to read the reactions of his present audience, and anticipate the reactions of his distant one.

There is more to appropriateness, however, than the highly subjective albeit straightforward issue of what constitutes obscenity or indecency. Relevancy and topicality are also determined in intimate performances. What might make sense to a local audience – references to landmarks, local characters, *blasons populaires* – would likely not make sense to an audience distantly removed. In an effort to be relevant to a group not defined by locality, broadcasted comedy necessitates the establishment of a framework of common reference, and thus tended in two directions: firstly, there was a move towards generality, either in terms of making reference to popular culture, national politics, or observations on everyday life not bounded by place; secondly, the local culture of the broadcast centers – primarily New York and subsequently Los Angeles in the American context, and Toronto in the Canadian – became dominant and, somewhat, normative.

What resulted was an intimate genre transposed to an open medium wherein the participants became engaged in a dialogue they neither actively initiated nor could respond to directly. The fear of a negative response would certainly have had an impact on what was broadcast, but by that same token a positive response would have been cultivated. The two audiences concept rears its head once more, somewhat similar to how the audience in the first few rows of a live stand-up performance represent the entire audience. On one hand, the audience in the immediate presence of the performer is understood as being in a synecdochic relationship with the home audience, and the

reaction of its small and finite number represents the reaction of the larger and indefinite number at home. On the other hand, there is something of James Frazer's "homeopathic magic" transpiring, where a performer directs him- or herself at one audience for a reaction, with the hope of engendering that same reaction in another. In both cases, the reaction of the studio audience *is* what the reaction of the home audience *ought to be*, whether in its representative or denotative function.

The studio audience not only shows the home audience what works and doesn't work but, by its response, tells it so. Another way of examining this phenomenon is through Max Scheler's notion of "psychic contagion," one of the means by which, as he understands it, masses operate in a way whereby the individual is lost. Manfred Frings, the Scheler scholar, makes a reference to this within similar contexts: "The taped laughter used in commercials, for instance, infects their viewers who smile along, although what the laughter is about would, in reality [sic], hardly or not at all be even worth a chuckle. [...] The same holds for types of entertainment and activities as Mardi Gras, opera, rock concerts, parades, organized election gatherings" (2003:34). Less stridently, Sara Kiesler and Jonathon M. Cummings make a similar argument: "Members of the audience at a live performance enliven one another, an effect simulated in the television laugh track" (2002:62). The audience is an integral part of the packaging of the performance and, although the reaction would be difficult to fabricate *de novo*, certain manipulations, such as careful microphone placement, warming up the audience with more direct interaction prior to broadcasting, and applause (and laughter) signs, are used.

The studio audience becomes the arbiter of "funny." Moreover, this audience may not simply be a representative sample of the audience at home but more likely comprises

a particular demographic that connotes certain ineffable qualities: urban, sophisticated, adult, and so forth. If the audience is thus representative of a group to which one is meant to aspire, the performance serves to demonstrate the tastes of this particular group.

One can easily and accurately give examples of this hegemonic exercise as it relates to socio-economic class, region, sexual orientation, and so forth, but a simpler demonstration can be given with reference to age. When a child hears an adult audience laughing at a particular point in a comedian's routine, the child reasons that he or she ought to find it funny as well. In my own experience, as a child I would often listen to comedy that, for all intents and purposes, I didn't understand, but knowing that there was something to understand, appreciating that people (certainly) older and (ostensibly) more mature than me did understand it, prompted me first to laugh without really actually getting it, and subsequently to focus on coming to understand it. "Getting it" or "not getting it" becomes a marker for insider or outsider status, doubly problematic when "it" is a cultural product on the public airwaves.

Distant in Space

With a live broadcast, the audience members are made aware that the performance is going forward in real-time, that they are experiencing it as and when the audience present to the performance it experiencing it. Immediacy is central to the experience. At the same time, live-to-air broadcasting was the default broadcast form for variety shows until the late 1960s, so in the early days the audience wasn't necessarily perceiving this immediacy as anything special or unique. In recent years, the "liveness" of a live broadcast is emphasised as part of the spectacle.

Live Radio

Stand-up comedy emerged in part out of radio, insofar as the vocal techniques that were practiced by early radio hosts introduced an intimacy of voice that lent itself well to a conversational style. And as the light entertainment divisions of early radio would often use the extant variety show format and broadcast it to a larger audience, the amplified variety show emcee (host or compère) would be the immediate progenitor. In his preamble to a 1979 interview with Johnny Carson, Timothy White observes how “[Carson’s] conversational comedic style, which he acknowledges as having been shaped by such early heroes as Jack Benny, Bob Hope and George Burns, has become the very paradigm of nonchalant patter for every aspiring young stand-up or sit-down wit” (Carson 1979).

Bob Hope – however much his stiff and cue-carded delivery was fodder for impressionists in the last fifty years of his life – is the exemplar of this age of voice broadcasting, as it was he who not only took his cue from the crooners of his time – Sinatra, Bing Crosby – and spoke rather than shouted into the microphone, but also was consciously aware of working to two audiences, that of the studio or theatre and that of the home. Nowhere is this more evident than in his broadcasts from the Armed Forces camps in the Second World War, performed simultaneously for the servicemen and for a home audience.

The immediate limitation of radio as a medium for stand-up comedy is that it is exclusively auditory: the sensory data available to the listener are exclusively that of sound. As a consequence, in order to be understood by the non-present listener the physicality of performance – slapstick, mime, facial expressions, gesture, costume,

appearance – must be pushed to the margins in preference to the verbal. Characterisation, if it occurs, must be done through voice alone. Writing on the radio preacher, William Clements notes how he “must employ a delivery style different from that used in natural church contexts. Gestures, facial expressions, and personal allusions—all valuable aids to the transmission of the sermon message—are useless for a radio audience” (1974:324).

The conversational mode of radio stand-up comedy is thus not much different from the conversational mode of the telephone, a technology which was becoming more universally available at the same time as the rise of commercial radio. In this vein, it is perhaps not surprising that some of the earliest comedy recordings, albeit not stand-up comedy, were the “Cohen on the Telephone” series (Smith 1998:90-92). The limitation to the aural and the conversational also meant the temporary absence of the more florid vaudevillians from the mainstream.

The demise of radio networks with a centralised source of programming largely meant the demise of radio variety and the rise of both talk radio and the disc jockey. By the time stand-up comedy emerged in its contemporary manifestation, radio was already being superseded by television as the primary variety entertainment medium. There were exceptions in local broadcasting. Robert Stebbins recounts how CFOX in Vancouver broadcast open-mike sessions live from Punchlines comedy club. Ironically, the collaboration ended when the radio station’s format was becoming too coarse for Punchlines, at a time when the club’s managers were encouraging comedians to develop material that was more television-friendly (Stebbins 1990:22). In Canada, stand-up comedy continues (or, rather, re-appeared) on radio through recorded variety programming such as Lorne Elliott’s *Madly Off in All Directions* (1996-2006).

Although never a huge medium for stand-up comedy, as an influence on voice performance radio left a mark on verbal entertainment by virtue of it being a solely auditory medium, namely the disappearance, more or less, of physicality – gesture, props, costume – for characterisation and humour, and a consequent “naturalisation” of the form. The intimacy of voice at its natural register, already a factor from amplification but more tightly focused through the absence of visual cues, moved content further away from contrivances to quotidian observations. Since it was broadcast into the home, rather than being a deliberate engagement by the listener, content was selected so as not to disengage the listener. Finally, an understanding of the relationship between the live audience and the home audience – whether that be representative, synecdochic, homeopathic, hegemonic, or all of the above – had its grounding in radio.

Television

Much of what can be said for radio can also be said for television. Radio laid the groundwork for variety entertainment programming and the relationship between the live and home audiences. However, whereas radio had not allowed for visuals, television obviously did. The use of non-verbal cues was a possibility again.

In one perspective, television could be understood as a transposition of a theatrical stage, with the audio and visual technology merely mimicking the experience of the theatre goer. Physical comedy and the work of the more florid vaudevillians who were left out of radio were thus able to find a home on television. Television performance was directed at the live audience, with the home audience as bystanders.

But the camera allowed for the close-up. Already understood through the medium of film, the close-up allowed for a natural physicality much as the microphone had

allowed for a natural voice. The intimacy of the clubs and coffee shops where stand-up comedy was brewing could be emulated through a close-up which virtually represented someone “in your living room,” just as the radio replicated someone “on the other end of a telephone.”

The TV producer will point out that speech on television must not have the careful precision necessary in the theater. The TV actor does not have to project either his voice or himself. Likewise, TV acting is so extremely intimate, because of the peculiar involvement of the viewer with the completion or “closing” of the TV image, that the actor must achieve a great degree of spontaneous casualness that would be irrelevant in movies and lost on stage. [...] Technically, TV tends to be a close-up medium. The close-up that in the movie is used for shock is, on TV, a quite casual thing. (McLuhan 1964:276)

The static (or mostly static) single-shot³ allowed for further impressions to be made: although the studio audience could be heard – and, as in radio, remained an integral part of the performance for the home audience – it would not be seen, and attention was more closely pulled to the performer. So too would the use of overhead boom microphones which hid the intermediary technology and reinforced that sense of naturalness. A static shot framed the performance space in such a way that for the duration of the performance the space off-screen could be re-imagined as something other than a television studio: that space includes not only above, below, and to the sides of the performer (the *x* and *y* axes of the two-dimensional frame of the camera), but also behind and, most importantly, in front of the performer, behind the camera, the *z* axis of face-to-face orientation.⁴ That the comedian does not stare at the camera directly is not a contradiction of this intimacy,

³ I discuss multi-camera shots in “‘As-live’ Broadcasts,’ 309ff.

⁴ “A fifth segment [of off-screen space, following up, down, right, and left] cannot be defined with the same seeming geometric precision, yet no one will deny that there is an off-screen space “behind the camera” that is quite distinct from the four segments of space bordering the frame lines although the characters in the film generally reach this space by passing just to the right or the left of the camera” (Burch 1973:17).

as the diegetic sound still betrays that an audience is present within that space: the audience at home, however, is amongst it. At times, the comedian does turn to the camera directly, and establishes a further intimacy with the audience at home.

Well, television is an intimate medium. I'm not conscious when I use the camera. I know it's there. I use it like another person and, do a reaction at it – lift an eyebrow or shrug or whatever. I'm conscious of it, but I'm not conscious of it. (Carson 1979)

Mort Sahl was an earlier exponent of this naturalism. He brought from the coffee houses his habit of wearing a cardigan and a shirt with no tie, which broke the conventions of the suit-and-tie or tuxedo. He would also have that day's newspaper as a "prop," using its headlines as an entry point for political satire. When he attained a Hymesian "breakthrough into performance" (1975) it was after much intentional delay: the stuttering, false starts, and trailing-off sentences that marked his talk at the beginning of his routines, together with flipping through the newspaper and some vague gesticulations, would eventually give way to a freer flow of talk, in a deliberate effort at emulating face-to-face interaction. That this was "a Performance" was obfuscated by an appeal to naturalism and intimacy. (Nachman 2003:50-51)

Speaking both of radio and of television, Gunther Anders had this to say in 1956 about the idea of intimacy as created by these media:

[To] enable the program consumer to treat the world as something familiar, the televised image must address him as an old chum. In fact, every broadcast has this chummy quality. When I tune in on the President, he suddenly sits next to me at the fireplace, chatting with me, although he may be thousands of miles away. (I am only marginally aware of the fact that this intimacy exists in millions of copies.) When the girl announcer appears on the screen, she speaks to me in a tone of complete frankness, as though I were her bosom friend. (That she is also the bosom friend of all men is again only a marginal realization.) (1957:365)

Stand-up comedians appeared alongside other forms of variety entertainment:

shows were not dedicated to comedy exclusively, and the comedian would be one of a number of acts, interspersed between commercials. This had two immediate consequences. First, the length of time allowed for performance was restricted, typically to about five minutes. Much like how the cylinder, the 78, and the 45 recording formats each restricted the time available to a song text and thus had an influence on how long a song could be, so too would a five minute time-slot foreshorten a routine from the longer and/or undetermined lengths in a club context.⁵ Open-mike nights at comedy clubs typically limit performances to five minutes. However, in addition to being a concession to the number of performers wishing to take the stage, the timing is partly based on the standard set by television convention.

Bill [Hicks] was not really coming across on television. What the audience saw was a smooth, intelligent act by anyone's standards, but with only six minutes Bill lacked time to build momentum or really work an idea and it robbed him of the fiery crescendo so critical to his act. The demand from network television for a quick witty spray of set-up punchline fare seemed designed, however insidiously, to abbreviate anything approaching actual social commentary. Just as Bill started to build, one sensed him halting as he shifted down, changed gears, moved to the next bit. (True 2002:91)

Second, these short units needed to be immediately accessible to an audience who was likely not in attendance expressly to see this particular comedian. Routines were self-contained and discrete, ones that work with virtually no further contextualisation needed. "With TV, it was quick minutes and scram. A comic did not have the time to woo an audience with the cumulative rhythm of his act. The café or coffeehouse gave him up to an hour, long enough to live or die grandly" (Berger 2000:168). The host of the programme, like the emcee discussed above, might give a brief introduction, but this

⁵ Cf. "While a folk preacher may not necessarily be longwinded in a natural church context, the presence of a strict control over the amount of time allowed to him during a broadcast must have an inhibiting effect" (Clements 1974:324).

would be little more than a sentence or two: otherwise, the routine needed either to be on a topic immediately accessible to both audiences – politics, popular culture, history, or the prejudices of the general population – or, if they were presenting a perspective that might be different from the general population, to include a short autobiographical statement that contextualises what was to come. Robert Klein puts it succinctly:

Television presents a very unique problem. The audience didn't pay to see you. They may have sent away for tickets to the Johnny Carson Show nine months ago and there could have been anybody on that night. They are fairly conservative, middle of the road audiences, not particularly hip or educated, and usually of one mind. The most crucial thing about television in addition to language and other restrictions is timing. Six minutes, which is a long stand-up period for T.V., is a lot different than an hour and twenty minutes. You must be funnier in a hurry. You must be extremely economical and very universal. You must use material that doesn't require an awful lot of explanation. You have so little time and it requires a special kind of preparation. (Klein 1977:8)

Finally, and most self-evidently, content is restricted: both language and premise need to be meet a standard of acceptance by the network. In the interview prefacing George Carlin's first HBO special, he is asked about how he alters his performance for television:

The most important alteration is that you can't use the body of language that's generally called 'dirty' or 'bad' or 'filthy' language. And that's not a bad restriction if you have something to say: obviously you don't need a series of street terms to make your ideas clear. But they're very useful at enhancing ideas and enhancing characters and in giving the element of reality to speech that you want. You can suspend that for six minutes on television. I wouldn't want to suspend that for two hours on the stage because I think it would take something away from it. [...] But you don't go in there to try to change their system, usually: you go in there to fit within it for your own narrow purposes (Carlin 1977a*)

Television Appearances and Reputation-Building

Despite the restrictions and limitations imposed on content, television was the easiest way to reach a vast number of people: far more might see you in one appearance

than in a lifetime of working clubs. Comedians' biographies and autobiographies are replete with narratives about television exposure. In *Pryor Convictions*, Richard Pryor recalls his first television performance:

On August 31, 1964, I made my TV debut on Rudy Vallee's summer variety show, "On Broadway Tonight." Rudy himself, over the producer's objections, insisted on putting me on the show. I considered it a stroke of luck, my first opportunity at nationwide exposure. Back then, Cosby, Dick Gregory, and Nipsey Russell were among the few black comics who appeared on TV. I was happy to join them. (1995:80)

An appearance on network television variety programming was and continues to be one of the most important stepping in stones in a comedian's career, as it not only provides immediate exposure to the largest possible audience but, as he or she can now be introduced as having appeared on a particular program, it reclassifies the comedian as having been deemed worthy by a respected authority. One can move from a middle act to a headliner, demanding higher pay and longer time on stage.

The best part of getting on the Tonight Show was that I was able to go directly from the clubs in Denver to a concert tour. I never had to really work the clubs and be ground down; they would have killed me, I would've never made it. (Barr 1989:185)

Being on *The Tonight Show* presents more problems than solutions after the initial flurry of excitement wears off. You begin the process of getting the hell over it. Right after my appearances, I was trying to book myself as usual, and what I was hearing was, "Just because you've done Carson doesn't make you a headliner." I would reply, "I know. Just keep me middling." Then they'd give me another Catch-22. "Well, we can't middle you if you've done Carson, either." (Butler 1996:237)

First among all media, television exposure allows for the comedian to enter a larger market, while repeated exposure allows the comedian to develop a reputation, to create both a cumulative repertoire – with which a personal, idiosyncratic style can be developed – and cumulative goodwill – for which expansions within that repertoire and style are warmly anticipated.

This expansion of repertoire is also expected. One further downside to television appearances is how widely disseminated one's material becomes, and the attendant need to create new material for a subsequent appearance.

I soon realized that I'd made the classic mistake among comedians. My first shot [on *The Tonight Show*] had been a compilation of my very best material—and it had gone extremely well. The second shot was okay, not as funny—because I used the best of what I had left over. And the third shot, all in all, wasn't very good. The real trick is to get hot and then keep coming up with new stuff at this incredible pace. If you continue to take from the well, eventually the well runs dry. (Leno 1996:192-93)

Live television eventually gave way to shows being pre-recorded, which are discussed below. *Saturday Night Live*, the obvious North American exception to this trend and a deliberate throwback to the potential for spontaneity of early television, also subverted the variety format by having a revolving host from week to week. Stand-up comedy was not part of the regular rotation of variety acts: following a cold opener and the credits, each show began with a host performing a monologue, whether they were stand-up comedians or not. With some notable exceptions (Andy Kaufman's regular appearances in the first season, appearances by Sam Kinison, Damon Wayans, and Stephen Wright in season 11), stand-up comedy has never been part of the variety format outside of the monologue.⁶

When a stand-up comedian was the host, the monologue would be an opportunity to do a part of their regular act. Richard Pryor, hosting the seventh episode on December 13, 1975, was legendarily put on a ten-second delay lest he say something offensive (Shales and Miller 2002:64): this despite no similar delay for George Carlin, host of the

⁶ On occasion, cast members who came from stand-up would use the 'Weekend Update' section to perform reworked routines as 'editorials' or 'commentaries': Chris Rock, Adam Sandler, David Spade, Norm MacDonald, and Colin Quinn, to name a few, all made significant names for themselves through these segments.

first ever episode (October 11, 1975), and no stranger to strong language. Andrew ‘Dice’ Clay, the host for May 12, 1990, had already been rebuked by cast member Nora Dunn who refused to appear that week, and proposed musical guest Sinéad O’Connor followed suit by refusing to perform alongside him: his was the only monologue where security needed to throw out hecklers, and metal detectors were in place at the entrances (Shales and Miller 2002:337-41). Martin Lawrence, hosting on 19 February, 1994, went off-book and performed a monologue about declining women’s hygiene: he was banned for life from the show, and was, for a time, banned from NBC altogether. When his episode was rebroadcast, this section of the monologue was replaced with a voiceover.⁷

In July of 2006, Comedy Central began broadcasting *Live at Gotham* from New York’s Gotham Comedy Club, following the format of other stand-up comedy anthology series (see 314ff). The initial evening broadcast was live but censored, with rebroadcasts left uncensored depending on the broadcast time.

Television, with its broad reach, was what often introduced stand-up comedy to both fans and future performers in the first place. In addition to accounts of first television performance, biographies often speak of first encounters with stand-up comedy as viewers which inspired them either as children or as adults to become comedians, often in an emancipatory way:

“Mama,” I ask her again, “why you cryin’?”

⁷ Voiceover: “At this point in his monologue, Martin begins a commentary on what he considers the decline in standards of feminine hygiene in this country. Although we at Saturday Night Live take no stand on this issue one way or the other, network policy prevents us from re-broadcasting this portion of his remarks. In summary, Martin feels, or felt at the time, that the failure of many young women to bathe thoroughly is a serious problem that demands our attention. He explores this problem, citing numerous examples from his personal experience, and ends by proposing several imaginative solutions. It was a frank and lively presentation, and nearly cost us all our jobs. We now return to the conclusion of Martin’s monologue.” (*Saturday Night Live Transcripts* 1993)

"It's nothin', Bean. Sometimes I think sad thoughts."

"What thoughts?"

She didn't answer. She was lookin' at the TV. Black guy's talkin' to Ed Sullivan, I look at him, but I don't hear but a few words. And I can't make them out anyway, see, because suddenly my mama's laughin' to bust a gut. Her whole lap's shakin'. I got to hold on tight or get thrown clear across the room.

I turn to look at her—this is the same woman that was cryin' a second ago?—then turn back to the TV. "Who that man, Mama?"

She's still laughin'. Takes her a while to catch her breath. "Bill Cosby, son, He's a comedian."

A comedian?

"What's that?"

Now she's laughin' harder. Tears still comin' out of her eyes, but she's happy. She's slappin' the arm of the chair, she's so happy. She's lettin' it out.

I look over at this Bill Cosby again. I don't know what he's talkin' about—something's going on in his bathroom—but I know that whatever it is, it's got *power*.

"That's what I want to be, Mama. A comedian. Make you laugh like that, maybe you never cry again." (Mac 2003:7)

In the main, broadcast television has moved away from live stand-up comedy just as it has moved away from live television in general, in part because it allowed them to record at a time and pace not dictated by the broadcast schedule, in part because the technology of recording allowed them a better, more polished product, and in part because they had greater control over the product as content.

"As-live" Broadcasts

Although live radio and television variety broadcasting ceased to be the norm, programming that was close to live continues. Variety programming – especially shows such as *The Tonight Show* and *Late Night with David Letterman* – was often used as a vehicle for promoting other appearances, new movies, and so forth. To serve its promotional function its moment of broadcast could not be too far removed from its moment of recording.

Towards the end of his great run as a talk show host, Merv Griffin taped his shows on a six-week delay. Of course, this made it difficult to keep a daily show current. And sometimes it made for surreal situations. Once, I was on the show with another guest who was a well-known television actor. A few weeks after we taped the show, he accidentally drowned in his swimming pool. But our show aired a couple of weeks after that. And there he was telling Merv, 'I just put a pool behind my house. Boy, Merv, it's the best thing I ever did! I love that pool!' (Leno 1996:239-37)

Typically, filming would be the day of (or, in the case of daytime programming, the day before) the broadcast. The style of the program often emulated a live performance at that time of day: the backdrops behind the desk of *The Tonight Show* represented the Los Angeles skyline at night, a technique copied on virtually all successor and imitator programs. Shows were also recorded in real time, to set the proper pacing and, presumably, to emulate somewhat the frisson of a live performance. But the hours between filming and broadcasting did allow for a certain flexibility: if needed, a performance could be edited.

How the joke ended or who that televangelist might be remained a mystery to TV viewers watching Bill [Hicks] hours later that evening. In post-production, *Late Night [with David Letterman]* cut into the joke, interrupting Bill mid-sentence with canned applause. Meanwhile, the camera awkwardly cut to the studio audience (too brightly lit and from what appeared to be a different part of the show) smiling blankly. The edit was so crude that not only was the punchline buried but Bill was not even shown saying thank you or goodnight to the crowd. The next bizarre shot was of Bill walking over to Letterman's couch for some stiff patter. (True 2002:94-95).⁸

The continued emulation of a live broadcast, despite the awareness by the audience (both in the studio and at home) that it is a conceit, appears to speak to the impression of immediacy needed for the "proper" appreciation of stand-up comedy specifically and the contemporary variety talk-show in general. The casual conversation

⁸ More famously, in October of 1993, Hicks' entire routine was cut by Letterman's producers on the new *Late Show*: see True 2002:209-27.

with the host at the couch – frequently as planned and structured as a solo performance and providing opportunities for performing further material – is a further performance that seems to demand immediacy. Although shows that are recorded as-live are repeated, they are typically no more than a few weeks old when rebroadcast.

However, although audience reaction continued to be a key element in the success or failure of a specific performance, and although half a century of television means that North American audiences are comfortable with its conventions and do not have their illusions shattered by being aware that the performance is taking place in a television studio or that a microphone is in use, studio-based variety programmes rarely if ever show audience reactions to a comedian's routines. It would take a new form of televised stand-up comedy to more fully incorporate the audience.

Cable Television

In December of 1975, HBO aired *An Evening with Robert Klein*. Broadcast live from Haverford College and filmed with multiple cameras, it shows the audience waiting for the performance to begin and then reacting throughout: he begins with a comment on getting to Haverford (a suburb of Philadelphia) from New York via the New Jersey Turnpike: the crowd applauds and laughs when he mentions the “section between Newark and Elizabeth: “the *oil* refineries there / you get a smell of / universal *fart* [L] for about 20 minutes” (1975*)

It was the first HBO comedy special, a format that would become the dominant medium and revolutionise stand-up comedy, much as the LP did fifteen years prior. The move to presenting stand-up comedians was an effort by HBO at expanding its audience through diversifying its programming, heretofore based mostly on airing unedited and

uninterrupted films. Original programming that it would own and not have to license and which was inexpensive to produce – like stand-up comedy specials, documentaries, and reality television – soon proved to be if not more lucrative then at least successful enough to use as a bargaining chip with film studios (Berger 2000:381-82).

With cable television specials, three factors that alter television performance in general – namely issues of appropriateness in regards to indecency or obscenity, a highly restricted and/or segmented allowable performance length, and that comedians are not performing to an audience who is there to see them specifically – are absent. “[Viewers] saw comics do their acts as God intended—not as five-minute excerpts but as the full-length unexpurgated performance that previously only cabaret or concert-hall audiences glimpsed” (Berger 2000:381). The subscription based nature of cable television in the United States, particularly broadcasters like HBO which do not supplement with advertising revenue, means that broadcasters are not making use of the public airways and therefore are not subject to the same federal regulation.⁹ Nor are they subject to pressure from sponsors, as their revenue comes from subscriptions and not from advertisers.

“Appropriateness” is still in place, however, in the sphere of market viability: the performers who appear would typically be understood as having reached a significant plateau in their careers to warrant the investment in the broadcast, with an anticipation of subsequent recoup of expenses through rebroadcast, syndication, and repackaging as audio and video recordings. The almost invariably mandated one-hour limit is

⁹ Canadian equivalent to the FCC, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, does regulate cable television.

approximating the typical performance duration while headlining on tour: the performance needs to be worked out to fit the time more exactly, but the televised performance would be constructed more or less along the same lines as an untelevised one.¹⁰

Although the specials were not always live, live broadcasts of stand-up comedy specials carry with them the spectre of being an “event.” Paul Rodriguez’s *Behind Bars and Live in San Quentin* (1991*), Jerry Seinfeld’s *I’m Telling You for the Last Time* (1998a*), broadcast live from Broadway’s Broadhurst Theater, Robin Williams’ *Live on Broadway* (2002*), broadcast from the Broadway Theater, and George Carlin’s *It’s Bad for Ya* (2008a*), from the Wells Fargo Center for the Arts in Santa Rosa, were all preceded by much publicity concerning the potential rawness of the performance. Although they were sure to be rebroadcast and available on recording formats, to watch them live is considered akin to having “been there.”

The quasi-ephemerality of live broadcasting brings to mind the social dimension of broadcasting itself, and an aspect of ritual. Building on Hegel’s suggestion equating newspapers with prayer – “Reading the morning paper is the realist’s morning prayer” (in Rosenkranz 1977:543) – Benedict Anderson suggests that the exercise in orientation is shared with others:

[Each] communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. (Anderson 1991:35)

Similarly, particularly with comedy performances like the host’s monologue on

¹⁰ As of this writing, the latest live broadcasting technology – streaming audio and video – has yet to be used for stand-up performances in any systematic way.

late night variety shows – less a routine and more a series of jokes whose directive is topicality – there is an awareness that, as one listens and (presumably) laughs at one person's perspective on recent events, a large section of the nation is doing likewise. Participation in a broadcast performance by virtue of being a member of the viewing audience is a shared experience that bears similarities to the shared experience of live performance.

Distant in Time and Space

Live broadcasting of stand-up comedy performances continues to this day, but by its nature it is ephemeral. When it is broadcast it is with the intent of some form of redistribution in order to maximise the investment, and the redistribution – now temporally distant as well as spatially – orients the form.

If the physical distancing of performer from audience introduces some limitation on the pool of common referents that a group immediately present to each other would share, the temporal distancing does likewise. But the audience is still bound temporally to the scheduling of the replayed performance, and watches or listens to it in real-time: it is a homeostatic phenomenon, not to be repeated until its next availability, control of which lies outside the control of the audience.

Series

Cable television had started a greater interest in comedy, but it was still absent from network and basic cable television save for on variety shows. In 1981, Canadian investors looking for a tax shelter funded *An Evening at the Improvisation* (later shortened back to *An Evening at the Improv*) (Berger 2000:450). Filmed at Budd

Friedman's Improv club in Los Angeles, a celebrity host (Louis Gossett, Jr., Andy Kaufman, Mark Hamill) would introduce three or four comics over the course of an hour. The fifty-two episodes were syndicated to the A&E Network, who commissioned new episodes in 1987, which ran until 1996.

An Evening at the Improv introduced some new facets to televised comedy. Performances were longer, often ten or twelve minutes. By virtue of being shot on location, the "natural" context of club performance was restored, as the audience was seated, not in the risers of a television studio nor at the theatres typical of cable television specials, but at tables. Multi-camera shoots would allow for more than simply the sound of the audience: audience reaction could also be shown. Performers would walk through the audience when getting to and from the stage. Unlike in the studio, specific members of the audience could enter into exchanges with the performers, and cameras would capture that interaction. Finally, a cutaway to the audience – and to specific members of the audience – could be employed by the producers to frame and encourage a reaction for the home viewer.

Alison Kibler (1999) discusses audience response in great detail in her article on *Evening at the Improv*: the show's use of close-ups is integral to these processes, although it does not explicitly constitute the focus of her argument. However, in passing, she notes the techniques employed by the show directors:

The basic unit of this congenial Improv audience is a man and woman laughing as a couple. Audience close-ups most often capture laughing pairs of men and women. Performers ensure that couples in the audience will be coded as heterosexual. [...] These portrayals of men and women laughing together reassert the predominant mode of the consumption of leisure—heterosexual romance—and also attempt to guarantee that the common laughter of the Improv is, above all, not divided by gender. (50)

The imperative of "congeniality" (using Kibler's term) is achieved, in other words,

through demonstrating that, however discordant the performance might become, however divided the audience might be, the comedian always works towards a resolution that the group collectively enjoys, and the congenial, communal, intimate atmosphere is restored.

[Bobby Collins'] response to his wife, "Shut up. Shut the hell up," brings a mix of boos, catcalls, and cheers from the audience. While the camera maintains a close-up on Collins during this volatile and obviously divided audience reaction, Collins quips, "On the inside," thus upsetting the gender expectations and his gender alliances with the audience. Following his confession that his verbal subjugation of his wife was merely an unexpressed wish, the camera captures a laughing woman, a patron who may have been booing when he told his wife to "shut the hell up." Located just behind the pleased woman are laughing men. (52)

The question of why the sight of discordance and not the sound would disturb the sense of congeniality, and the related question of why the sight of congeniality serves to reinforce it so effectively, are perhaps best left to a different analyst, but televised stand-up comedy outside of the studio context continues to use the audience as a visual prop, following *Evening at the Improv's* format.¹¹

By framing the series by the venue, the show's producers were also able to demonstrate that, unlike the audience for a variety broadcast, the audience members here were deliberately present to observe a stand-up comedy performance, although not necessarily a performance by any of the particular comedians on stage that evening. They were fans of stand-up comedy as a form, if not of the individual comedians. They had come to the venue with the expectation that they would be presented with a stylistic form that could conceivably offend them and, although they would still judge the individual comedians according to their respective merits, they were there with the expectation that

¹¹ Jay Leno recounts an earlier effort at televised stand-up, where the performers were shot without an audience in the morning, and then filmed in the afternoon as members of the audience and a laugh-track added in post-production. Incredibly bad continuity meant that Leno was in the audience for his own performance (1996:158-160).

they would be entertained by this particular form. The performances were still constrained in that they needed to conform to broadcast standards, but they didn't need to be so generic in content that they would be palatable to the non-fan. .

Other shows would follow. *Caroline's Comedy Hour* (also an A&E production) debuted in 1989, running for five seasons. Virtually identical in format, it differed in part by being explicitly located in New York City. Following a number of annual specials that started in 1985, CBC began an eponymous series filmed during the Gala shows at the *Just for Laughs* festival in Montréal. This was followed a few years later with the *Ha!ifax Comedy Fest* (1994–present) (which was filmed since its inception) and *CBC Winnipeg Comedy Festival*. *Just for Laughs* would be interspersed with host segments taken from backstage or the streets of Montreal, but avoided an onstage host. *Ha!ifax Comedy Fest* would have no host, and would be filmed in a variety of venues, ranging from auditoriums to pubs, throughout Halifax. *Winnipeg Comedy Festival* varied further, in that the gala events were specially commissioned material on a given theme – “Sleeping with the Elephant,” “Turtle Island – North America's Best Aboriginal Comics” – which would have a well-known theme-appropriate host. In the United States, HBO and Russell Simmons started *Def Comedy Jam* (1992–1996; 2006–) which used a similar format – an established comedian introducing a number of less-well known acts – but without the censoring restrictions of basic cable or network broadcasting: BET's *ComicView* (1992–2006; clip show 2006–), launched the same year and equally an example of “narrowcasting,” (see Schulman 1994) did have to abide by those restrictions.

In 1989, HBO introduced *One Night Stand* (1989–92; 2005). Whereas the anthology style shows which preceded it relied on a group of performers and – typically –

the mediating presence of a host, this show was a half-hour devoted to a single performer who at that point in time in their careers might not have been able to sustain an entire special. Filmed in studio, the audience was not typically shown, and the backdrop was unusually elaborate.

And that's where TV *blows it* you know
 but they've got to have their...
 they're set into a visual medium
 But you know, fuckin'
 Comedy Now is just *ornate* [IB: Yeah.]
 Comics was *ornate*
 And that's the tone the producer wants to set y'know
 some ornate vampire Lestat living-room sort of backdrop and it's just...
 you know what you should be concentrating on?
 What's being said. (James 2005a)

CBC's *Comics!* (1993–99), HBO's *Comedy Half-Hour* (1996–2006), The Comedy Network's *Comedy Now* (1997–), and *Comedy Central Presents* (1998–) each follow the same format: with relatively few exceptions, they were in stylized venues, without a host, and with standardised opening credits. By taking place outside of a comedy club, outside of a “natural” venue, the audiences were specifically invited to participate in the taping of the show, whether or not they were fans of the specific comedian.

In the unedited footage for Mitch Hedberg's episode of *Comedy Central Presents* (1999*), Hedberg makes frequent references to the audience clearly having no idea who he is, and having no familiarity with his material, delivery, or background.

Thank you
 hey
 welcome to my *half-hour special*
 does anybody know who I am? [I]
 Why did a bunch of people who don't know who I am show at my special?
 [I]
 That's *bullshit* [L]

alright everybody
this will be *fun* (1999*)

Unlike the variety show comedy performances, there is not the presumption with series that they are recorded in a timely fashion: there may be a significant distance in time between the performances and the eventual broadcast. This is further the case when shows are continually rebroadcast in syndication, and the span becomes not weeks or months but decades.

Homer: Oh, I like it better when they're making fun of people who *aren't* me. [*gasps*] I know, "Evening at the Improv." They never talk about anything beyond the 1980s.

Comedian (on TV): See, I think about weird stuff. Like, what would happen if E.T. and Mr. T had a baby? Heh, well, you'd get Mr. E.T., wouldn't you? And you know, I think he'd sound a little something like this: "I pity the fool who doesn't phone home." [*audience laughs*]

Homer: [*laughs*] Ooh, I wouldn't want to be Mr. T right now. (Daniels 1994*)

With the proliferation of speciality cable channels, both those specialising in comedy and those whose focus is classic television, the continual rebroadcasting of stand-up comedy series as part of their regular line-ups means the increasing distance in time between the original performance and today. However, given the nature of their original recordings, although the precise distance could not be anticipated, that there was distance was a known factor, and the material either avoids the intensely topical or aims at what is believed at the time to have greater time-depth (as the E.T. quote suggests).

Specials

Already discussed briefly above, the one hour solo stand-up comedy special is a lucrative goal for the comedian. For one thing, merely having the opportunity to do a special is an indication by a media outlet that one has reached a certain level in one's

career. Unlike the half-hour specials discussed in the previous section, the comedian's name is included in the title.

Specials would have had their origin with variety specials – one-off versions of variety series – which like their forebears incorporate solo performances, sketch comedy, and musical guests. The Bob Hope television specials, starting on the 1950s, set the template. Notable specials with stand-up comedians as the host include *The Alan King Show* (1969*), *The Richard Pryor Special?* (1977a*) (later spun off to the four-episode *The Richard Pryor Show* [1977b*]), and Andy Kaufman's *Andy's Funhouse* (1979*). The requirements of commercial broadcasting – the strictures imposed on performance content and the interruptions of advertisements – did not allow for extended performances, nor was it thought that the single performer could sustain the interest of the audience at home without either the support of some featured artist or a variety of content styles.

It was cable which introduced the long-form special, building on the precedent of comedy feature films. An hour of uninterrupted and uncensored airtime allows for an approximation of the rhythms of a live performance. As it is original programming, cable channels heavily promote them, emphasising how this form of programming is unavailable on regular broadcast networks.

They also replay them frequently, and for long after their original airdates. For example, in July of 2008, on HBO Comedy (the comedy speciality network), David Cross's *The Pride is Back* (1999*) was scheduled for broadcast four times, Dennis Miller's *They Shoot HBO Specials, Don't They?* (1994*) three, D.L. Hughley's *Going Home* (1999*) three and his *Unapologetic* (2007*) twice, Martin Lawrence's *You So*

Crazy (1994*) five, Dana Carvey's *Squatting Monkeys Tell No Lies* (2008*) five (in addition to four showings on other HBO networks and availability through the On Demand service), Larry David's *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (1998*) four, George Carlin's *Playin' With Your Head* (1986a*) twice and *It's Bad for Ya* (2008*) four times (plus On Demand), John Leguizamo's *Freak* (1998*) twice, and Robert Klein's *The Amorous Busboy of Decatur Avenue* (2005*) twice (with one showing on the main network). This is in addition to multiple showings of episodes of *One Night Stand* and *Comedy Half-Hour* and anthology shows such as Rodney Dangerfield's *Nothin' Goes Right* (1988*) and the *1995 Young Comedians Special* (Shandling 1995*).

In Canada, CBC has been the sole progenitor of the independently named comedy specials. (CTV and the Comedy Network still use the *Comedy Network Presents* and *Comedy Now* format.) Mike MacDonald's *On Target* (1991*) was the first stand-up comedy special on Canadian television, followed in quick succession by two more (1992*; 1993*). Although cleaned up for television, the less restrictive broadcast standards in Canada – and the need for programming content that is both Canadian and inexpensive to produce – has allowed for the special to flourish on regular network television. Ron James has created four such specials in the last five years.

One of the real draws of the comedy special is the flexibility of the content. Following the effort involved in its production, the comedian or the network can subsequently redistribute the performance in other media. The same performance can become an audio or a video recording (or both), and thus become a specific durable good which the comedian can sell, as happened when home video became a viable market in the early 1980s. Furthermore, unlike live broadcasts, specials are often recorded over the

course of a number of performances: the comedian wears the same outfit and largely keeps to the same order of material. This allows the opportunity to present a smoother program. Unused footage can also be added to subsequent mediations – albums or videos – in “director’s cut” versions. For Ron James’ *The Road Between My Ears* (2003*), two nights were filmed at the Elgin Theatre in Toronto. For the television broadcast a twenty-minute bit about an Air Canada flight went unaired, having been too long to include uninterrupted by commercial breaks or within the allotted hour less commercials. It is restored in the DVD.¹²

Film

In total, there have not been a large number of mainstream stand-up comedy films. They were originally a way of circumventing the economics of touring and promoting a comedian whose material excluded them from mainstream media. They tended to be remarkably low-budget independent productions when gauged by today’s standards, and would not get the major theatrical releases of standard cinema. If one discounts *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* (1992*), which was filmed using a single camera in an effort at documenting his act to use as evidence in his obscenity trials, Richard Pryor’s *Live and Smokin’* (1971*) is perhaps one of the earliest examples of a film created for commercial purposes, although it maintains a documentary feel, using a three-camera shoot and capturing much of the feel of a live performance, with walkouts, false starts, and running commentary on how well the performance is going. Rudy Ray Moore’s *Rude* (1978*), on the other hand, acts as an extended commercial, replete with

¹² In the following chapter, I devote specific time to discussing the relationship between the stand-up special and audio and video recordings of it, using George Carlin as my example, starting on page 339.

breaks wherein he looks directly at the camera and encourages the audience to purchase his album.

By the time cable television came into full swing, the potential market for full-length comedy was now recognisable, yet film remained the exception rather than the rule. It was an expensive proposition, requiring the support of distributors, and needed to be of sufficient technical quality (i.e. filmed, not recorded on video) if the comedian wanted distribution to theatres. The incentive for going through such a process was that a film could generate an enormous amount of revenue if the comedian was of sufficient stature. Whereas the cable companies themselves owned cable specials, comedians owned the films, and would be directly entitled to that revenue. Richard Pryor made three more concert movies, through small independents and later through his own production company: *Live in Concert* (1979a*), *Live on the Sunset Strip* (1982a*), and *Here and Now* (1983a*), each of which grossed over fifteen million dollars. Each also generated its own LP (Pryor 1979b*; 1982b*; 1983b*).

In 1983 Bill Cosby wrote, directed, produced, and self-financed *Bill Cosby: Himself* (1983*), which in turn generated its own album of the same name released six months prior to the film's release (1982*). The film resuscitated public interest in Cosby at a time when his comedy was seemingly out of synch with Pryor, Eddie Murphy, and Robin Williams (Smith 1997:160). Some of its routines on family life were direct inspirations for the pilot episode of *The Cosby Show*, which started in 1984.

As his *Delirious* HBO special (1983a*) had been one of the first to have a significant impact through video sales and rentals, and while at the height of his film career, Eddie Murphy wrote and executive produced *Raw* (1987*). It remains one of the

top-grossing concert-movies ever made, only recently eclipsed by the *Hannah Montana* concert film (Hendricks 2008*) and Michael Jackson's posthumous *This Is It* (Ortega 2009*). Unlike some of Pryor's films, the camera never leaves the stage, and the filmmakers maintain throughout the illusion that the film audience is no different from the live audience. Although no album came from it (unlike *Delirious*, which produced *Comedian* [1983b*]), portions of the performance were included on his *Greatest Comedy Hits* CD (1997*).

When Andrew 'Dice' Clay sold out Madison Square Garden, the event was filmed and released as *Dice Rules* (1991*): in part because the venue and the frenzy of the event did not lend itself to a particularly good performance, the film did poorly at the box office, earning only six hundred thousand dollars. For the album that emerged, *Dice Live at Madison Square Garden* (1994*), half of the tracks were taken from a club recording in October of 1991.

For most of the 1990s stand-up comedy films seemed to disappear. The dynamics of home video had shifted from primarily rental to buying, and cable channels proliferated, including the development of comedy-only channels. But since 2000 a number of comedians have returned to film as a potential vehicle.

Margaret Cho has made three theatrically released stand-up comedy films: *I'm the One That I Want* (2000*), *Notorious C.H.O.* (2002*), and *Margaret Cho: Assassin* (2005*) through her production company Cho Taussig. Without having achieved the mainstream success of Murphy or Pryor, she has an intensely loyal fan base, particularly among gay men, which has enabled her to continue making films, albeit with limited distribution (only *Notorious C.H.O.* played on more than twenty screens at the same

time). They have all fared well as home videos.

Martin Lawrence's *Runteldat* (2002*) was his first recorded performance since his HBO special *You So Crazy* (1994*). Opening in over 700 theatres, it went on to gross almost twenty million dollars in its thirteen week run. The next year Eddie Griffin released *DysFunktional Family* (2003*), which interspliced his full-length performance with footage of him walking through the streets of Kansas City, MO (his hometown) and interviews with his family. With a similar opening of just over 600 theatres, it was pulled after only four weeks, having failed to recoup its three million dollar budget. However, it produced an album and a video release, which became his first consumable, and perhaps not coincidentally his HBO special (1997*) had its DVD release in 2005.

Perhaps more than any other mediation, the stand-up comedy performance film is best able to emulate the dynamic of live performance inasmuch as seeing a movie in a theatre is a collective and ritualised activity. "People go to movies in groups... People do not read in groups" (Riesman 1970:256). The potential people in the audience at a screening are closer in number to that of the audience at the filming, and far more than would be possible at a home viewing. Simply put, unlike television watching or radio listening, there is a specific effort, outlay, and risk required for attending a film. As Austin states:

Movies are a consumer product, unlike many other products, that do not offer "trialability." Also, the film consumer typically enters into a "consumption agreement/situation" with little precise knowledge of the commodity itself; while the form is perhaps familiar, the exact content remains enigmatic. Further, with movies, unlike other consumer products, few "repeat purchases" (i.e., attendance) of the same product (i.e., movie) are likely to occur. Additionally, movie selection and attendance is a costly commitment in terms of time, finances, and effort (i.e., one *goes* to a movie as opposed to sitting down to watch TV). (1982:22)

An audience member needs to leave the house, go to a specific, specialised venue,

purchase tickets, sit in fixed seating alongside both intimates and strangers, and, as decorum dictates that focus be on directed towards the screen, keep the interaction with each other to a minimum in favour of the reaction to the comedian. The decision to do so is predicated on the expectation of seeing something worth the effort. Prior to the advent of cable television and subsequently home video, the only other way for an audience to experience and actually see a full-length unexpurgated stand-up comedy performance was live, which requires a similar effort. The extraordinariness of film as a stand-up comedy medium turns the films into events. (When Eddie Murphy's *Raw* premiered in Los Angeles, fights broke out at three separate theatres, resulting in the shooting death of one man and the stabbing of another [United Press 1987].)

I remember going by myself to see *Raw* in January of 1988 (it had been released in late December). It was in the wake of my father moving out and, fourteen though I might have been, I was able to disappear from home on a weeknight for a few hours and get in to a restricted movie. The sense of occasion in the theatre was palpable, with laughter, catcalls, and applause coming both from the recorded audience and the one of which I was a member. Outside of live performances, it is perhaps my most palpably focussed stand-up comedy audience experience.

Summary Conclusions

Network broadcasting is the most pervasive medium for stand-up comedy, it is the one through which most people – fan and non-fan alike – have been exposed to it.

It cannot offend; it cannot be too esoteric; and it must be aimed at appealing to the non-fans present at the site of performance. As one moves towards narrowcasting – stand-up comedy specific programming, specialty cable channels, films – the

performances begin to more greatly reflect the interest of the audience, in part because they are being specifically sought out, and in part because they are not at pains to be wholly inclusive of those who are not seeking them out.

For the audiences of stand-up comedy on radio, television, or film, the experience is homeostatic: its scheduling is beyond their immediate control, and there is a certain ephemerality to it, for re-experiencing it is either at the whim of the broadcasting programmers or, in the case of film, involves a return to the cinema. But there is a desire to re-experience a stand-up comedy performance, and to do so at one's own leisure. The next chapter looks at recordings which, although not the most pervasive, are collectively the stand-up comedy's most important medium.

Chapter 8: Stand-Up Comedy Recordings

Have they told you enough
that we're... we're recording a CD [A] [!<Yeah>!]
so you might pick it up
and not recognise your *laugh* [L]
you may not want to *buy* it
cause you've already seen it [L]
this is not the *target market*

Mitch Hedberg

In both Chapter 3 and the last chapter we have been examining how various media – from such simple things as the elevated platform of the stage to modern contrivances like video-projection – affect the stand-up comedy performance itself, discerning what each new mediation allows and proscribes, whether it be a consequence of the medium itself or its control by owners. In this chapter, on recordings, we turn to formats where the media still have their limitations and contributions, but the audience has more or less total control over the experience of the performance. Recordings allow performances to travel beyond the confines of a live performance and a broadcaster's prerogative of retransmission.

When thinking about stand-up comedy in recorded media there are a few things to consider. Firstly, it is with recordings that stand-up comedy becomes a merchandisable product. Comedians certainly get known through media exposure on radio and television, and are paid for it. Typically, the benefit comes from the exposure more than from the remuneration, as being able to identify oneself as having appeared on a particular program can change the comedian's professional status for live venues. A recording, however, becomes a tangible product that not only serves as exposure but can produce

ongoing revenue for the comedian directly. Furthermore, as recordings progress, the comedian has a developing and accumulating back catalogue that allows for a cumulative reputation: for an established comedian with a number of recordings, new material can be introduced in the context of past material, and performed with the expectation that the audience is for the most part familiar with his or her work.

Building on this, because a recording can be stopped and started, and replayed, the recorded performance need not be experienced in a homeostatic way. The audience can go back and listen to a section again and again, if he or she desires. In this manner, the performance becomes something like a printed text: parsable, revisitable, reviewable. It also becomes fixed and, just as certain versions of Märchen become elevated to canonical status when fixed in print, when a comedian commits a routine to vinyl or binary it becomes the *de facto* canonical version. Moreover, with recordings a part of the comedian's natural and professional landscape, that recordings are canonical is a given: when the comedian wishes to learn the craft, they turn to recordings as much as they turn to live performance.

That being said, humour theory tends to indicate that part of the way humour works is the revelation of the unexpected or unanticipated. This demands the question as to why anyone would *want* to experience a comedic performance – the exact same comedic performance – a second time. Either humour theory is wrong, or there is more to stand-up comedy as a content than humour alone, or each re-listening brings something new.

The Comedy LP

As we have been proceeding along a spectrum of ever increasing distance,

recordings have been placed at the end of this discussion of mediation. But comedy recordings pre-date radio. Roland Smith notes how, during the “classic age” of the 78,

Comedy records flourished. One reason was that record companies found it economical to hire comedians. Unlike singers, they didn’t require expensive backup musicians. Primitive technology was well suited to simply reproducing the sound of a person talking. (1998:3)

Records were often used as a form of parlour entertainment when, in lieu of having a member of the party perform a monologue or poem, guests would listen to a recording instead. Although musical comedy and duos were the norm, these recordings would often be a short monologue by a solo comedian, recorded in-studio. Major labels were releasing these discs, including Columbia, RCA Victor, and Okeh. With the advent of radio and the proliferation of comedy freely available through broadcasts, recording sales slumped. The 1950s saw the advent of “party albums,” recordings of live performances, which availed themselves of new LP technology. These party records, however, tended to be released through smaller independent labels and were performances of artists who couldn’t attain mainstream success, excluded from broadcasting largely from the (tautological) perception that they would not appeal to a large enough audience.¹

In 1959 the jazz label Verve released *Inside Shelley Berman*, which became the first comedy album to sell 100,000 units: encouraged by the possibilities, major label Warner Brothers began its own comedy imprint, starting with Bob Newhart’s phenomenally successful *The Button-Down Mind of Bob Newhart* (1960*).

Newhart’s comedy principally revolved around one half of a conversation, most

¹ Giovanna del Negro has done extensive research into party albums of Jewish women comedians of the 1950s (2006*), and I would refer people to her work on the matter.

famously half of a telephone conversation, the other end of which was only ever implied by his straight reactions. It was a technique he borrowed from Berman, and it in turn dates back to the Joe Hayman's "Cohen on the Telephone" 78s from the 1910s and -20s (Smith 1998:90-92). A typical bit involved an introductory premise, sometimes rooted with a passing autobiographical note ("I was in the army," "I used to work as an accountant") and then the portrayal of a character. These characters were either identifiable types (a man returning a toupee, a driving instructor) or tangential witnesses to history (Abraham Lincoln's public relations man, Sir Walter Raleigh's agent). As such, although Newhart was recognised as the artist behind the material, it was not inextricably linked with Newhart's own biography, as he was not engaged in a performed autobiography. To put it another way, a fan might look forward to hearing Newhart's material, but it is equally accessible to a neophyte.

An early artist to the Warner Brothers roster was Bill Cosby. His first album, *Bill Cosby is a Very Funny Fellow, Right*, was released in 1963. Recorded at the Bitter End in New York City, it consists of 12 tracks, only one of which is longer than five minutes. Similar in style to Newhart, some are character monologues of a recognizable type (the football coach in "The Pep Talk"), a few are observations about everyday life (eccentrics on the subway in "A Nut in Every Car"), again often rooted in a passing albeit generic autobiographical note ("I played football at, uh, Temple University," "I am not from New York City / I was born in Philadelphia / raised in Philadelphia / educated in Philadelphia,"). The most famous tracks are the three about Noah, ("Right!", "And the Neighbor"; and "Me and You, Lord") explicit conversations between Noah and either God or a nosy neighbour, in which Cosby performs both roles.

For the modern listener, what is striking about these tracks (and others on the album) is the use of non-diegetic sound: the voice of God is introduced with a bell and is distorted with reverb, and there are sound effects added of rain and thunder. A YouTube search reveals his only (surviving) televised performance of this routine, and the non-diegetic sounds are indeed absent. What worked on television was thought to not work unaided on record.

His next album, *I Started Out as a Child* (1964*), had 15 tracks, five of which clock in at under a minute and a half. However, several features distinguish this album from the one previous. For one, there is an absence of non-diegetic sound. Furthermore, he begins to introduce autobiographical and ethnographic details that do not speak to a pan-American experience. In his liner notes to the album, comedian Allan Sherman puts it thus: "This is the world that you and I live in, turned inside out so we can see what *really* makes it tick, and laugh till we hurt." With this album we are first told of his poor Philadelphia background. As for ethnography, the first track, "Sneakers," involves a long description of how worn-out dress shoes would be resoled with tacked-on rubber and become shoes for playing street football, in the absence of real sneakers. Beyond the description of a street life which fell outside a mainstream American experience, so too was some of the biographical detail about home life, specifically a drinking father ("The Giant").

One very striking difference is how, whereas *Funny Fellow* fades to silence between tracks, *Started Out*'s tracks blend into one another, and the division of the performance into tracks is, albeit not arbitrary, certainly a matter of judgement. The first five tracks are all about his childhood and, although the specific topics and themes do

vary, they could just have easily been one larger track. Following the first five tracks and their personal, idiosyncratic content, the rest of the album has more universal material: “The Lone Ranger,” “Half Man,” “The Neanderthal Man,” and “Seattle” each build on premises that are not anchored in some form of performed autobiography. Others are purportedly first-person narratives, some of which (“My Pet Rhinoceros”) are more tall tale than personal experience narrative, while others (“Oops!” “Medic,” “T.V. Football”) have the same grounding in only the most superficial autobiographical detail as *Funny Fellow*.

The album’s penultimate track, “T.V. Football,” is of particular interest as it is revisited, with much expansion, in “Hofstra,” the last track of 1965’s *Why Is There Air?* In the latter, which is almost seven times as long, he extends the anecdote by providing further detail about his football days, including an introduction that begins with the insistence that it is indeed true that he played college football. Below, the two tracks are transcribed next to each other, “T.V. Football” in full, and “Hofstra” with the additional material summarised.

<p>“T.V. Football” (1964*) 1:14</p> <p>The first time ever televised... we ever had a game that was televised we played against a school called <i>Hofstra</i>.</p>	<p>“Hofstra” (1965*) 8:02</p> <p>[0:00-0:58] True that he played football at Temple University; not good team at the time, played mainly weak teams, and Hofstra, losing to all.</p> <p>[0:58] We were going to play against Hofstra which is a really terrible school they killed us every year, boy</p> <p>[1:04-2:28] Time spent in locker- room, praying not to be hurt. Description of second team as ‘nut squad,’ trying to avoid going on field by acting crazy. First team getting last</p>
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[0:04] The athletic director
came into the locker room
and he says

[0:08] now listen fellas he says
you guys are on television he
says
and this is a first time for ya,
he said

I am *not* really concerned with
winning
as I am with the fact that you
guys are *on* television
and there are *certain* areas of
your body that you *shouldn't*
touch
because it's *embarrassing* to the
people watching TV

rites. Coach diagramming trick plays.

[2:28-2:56] The athletic director asks
to speak to the team, is introduced by
coach as the person responsible for
scholarships.

[2:46-3:44] Gives long pep talk, how
Hofstra consistently beats them 900
to nothing, how Hofstra's players are
even bigger than last year, how there
are twelve people in the stands
despite homecoming.

[3:44] | This is our first game
on television [L]
we want to *keep* this television
contract going because this
is the only way we can
make some *money*
to buy little scuba diving suits
[L]
and snowshoes and ice skates
for all the *weirdo* squads
here [L]
so we're going to *say* to you
please
remember that you're on TV
by that I mean don't worry
about winning the game as
much as we want you to be
concerned with the fact that
while you're out there on the
field
we're going to ask you *please*
do not touch certain areas of
your bodies
while you're [L] out there on
the football field
because if you're out there
diggin' and scratchin' people
at home are going to turn
you right off
and we're going to lose the
contract so *please*
do not [L] touch certain areas
of your bodies
while you're out there on the

<p>[0:25] so the guy says yeah okay we know what you're talking about [0:27] so he made us sign an affidavit promising that we would not touch certain areas of our body</p> <p>[0:33] So we ran out on the field...</p> <p>[0:34] I don't know <i>why</i> it happened to me first time I carried the ball</p> <p>[0:37] I went up to this <i>hole</i> and I saw this guy on the ground, the defensive man he was down and I started to step over him and just as I raised the left leg he came <i>up</i> and really <i>hit</i> me {WACKO!}, y'know in the worst place [0:51] and I said ohhhhn! and I started to grab it and You'd better not touch any areas of your body </p>	<p>field</p> <p>[4:36] Now we're going to pass out these affidavits and I want you to sign 'em saying that you will not touch [L] <u>certain areas of your body</u> while you're out there on the football field alright </p> <p>[4:34-6:30] Players sign affidavits and run onto field. Hofstra players are described. First and second teams run around petrified. Entire first team injured in first play. Second team takes field.</p> <p>[6:30] Alright run the kamikaze play on one, alright [L] kamikaze Cosby up the middle whole team off the field break [L]</p> <p>[6:36-7:10] Play is run. There is a hole, which he has never seen. Rumination on the anomaly of hole in opposition defence.</p> <p>[7:10] There was a big hole with a defensive man on the <i>ground</i> I planted <i>one foot</i> stepped over him when I did he stood up and hit me {POOM!} [L] and the <i>pain</i> [L] <u>was</u> tremendous [L] and I threw down the ball [L] [7:28] and I said {very calmly} oh [L] {urgent} <u>I've been</u> hit in the You'd better not touch [L] <u>any areas of your body</u> while</p>
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<p>[0:58] So I grabbed my <i>head</i> And I went into the huddle guys said what's the matter I said [series of groans] and to make it look <i>good</i> they bandaged up my <i>head</i> [L]</p> <p>[1:09] That's the truth. That's the truth</p>	<p>you're on the football field [L:A] [7:42] <u>So</u> I grabbed my head [L] <u>and went into the huddle</u> guys say what's the matter I say I can't say nothin' 'til they bring the commercial on alright? [L] [7:50] Thank you and good night.</p>
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Already, by this third album, Cosby is moving away from the staccato rhythms of segmented routines and being more languorous, more descriptive, more discursive, and more prone to tangents. He is availing himself of the freedom the LP allows. There are only eight tracks on *Air*, averaging five minutes a piece, and the material, for the most part, avoids the universal material of the first two albums. Absent altogether are pieces about popular culture or historical persons, and none are character monologues. The patterns continue over the next few albums: the routines become longer and less constrained – as they emerge out of a flow of longer material rather than as isolatable units – and the material becomes more rooted in autobiography, with characters and family members introduced in earlier albums revisited and, as his children are born and age, developed.

In a more or less steady progression from *Funny Fellow* onwards, the routines grow longer and fewer per album. One could even argue that tracks could have been fewer and longer were they not divided up at all: when they are all on a similar theme one could just as easily have left it as one large track, eschewing the thought of the album as a compilation of smaller units and moving towards exploring the possibilities of long play.

It is with the two albums from 1968, *To Russell*, *My Brother*, *Whom I Slept With*

and *200 M.P.H.*, that Cosby fully takes advantage of the LP format. In writing about the phonograph in general, Marshall McLuhan has this to say about the LP:

With regard to jazz, l.p. brought many changes [...] because the greatly increased length of a single side of a disk meant that the jazz band could really have a long and casual chat among its instruments. The repertory of the 1920s was revived and given new depth and complexity by this new means. (1964:247-48)

Both *To Russell* and *200 M.P.H.* are structurally similar: four shorter tracks on the first side, and then the second side taken up by one long eponymous bit. “To Russell, My Brother, Whom I Slept With” begins with a polling of the audience about who in the crowd is an only child, then a brief restatement of how being the oldest by seven years made him take revenge on his younger siblings. He then describes his apartment and his family’s sleeping arrangements growing up in the projects. There is then a three and a half minute diversion, wherein he speaks of pranks he used to pull on his father and the bemused “that child is not right” reactions they would engender, and then of the differences between mothers and fathers with respect to their ease of manipulation and how seriously they are taken as figures of authority and threat. He then pulls back to the original thrust of the sketch, setting the scene for a twenty-minute re-enactment of a discussion between the two brothers, regularly interrupted by their father bursting in with threats of punishment. It contains whispers, lines mumbled, and long stretches of silence.

“200 M.P.H.” is the first routine on record that makes mention of the fact that he is not only a celebrity but also a wealthy one. Although it is very much in keeping with his delivery and basic style, there is something fundamentally odd about the routine. On the other hand, he had reached a level of fame and wealth, and to avoid that as a topic would have started to sound disingenuous. He was by this point a celebrity in Rosenberg’s sense of the term, wherein he was famous for being famous, independent of

his ability. In his final album for Warner Brothers, 1969's *It's True! It's True!*, he continues touching on narratives that are from his current position as wealthy celebrity, such as a fear of helicopter travel (in "Helicopters").

Over the course of these eight albums, there is a shift from small self-contained, discrete tracks that could essentially be performed by anyone, to longer routines that are self-referential, cumulative, and inexorably linked to Cosby's autobiography. There is a stark contrast between the zingers of *Funny Fellow* and the languorous descriptions of *To Russell*, but when one looks at the intervening albums one sees an artist honing a craft to a specific medium and, just as importantly, an audience following along. In one development, the possibilities of the long play format are explored more fully, and the performances are geared towards those possibilities, rather than the album being a compendium of material better suited for radio or television. In a second development, with each new album the cumulative body of work reaches a critical mass, not only listened to but *re*-listened to, and which informs the audience's expectations for each subsequent album. Cosby's fame as a performer begins to impinge on the everyman persona, and he must at least begin to address the fact that he has had several years' worth of life experiences in the public eye, and that the audience is familiar with him as much for that as they are for his comedy.

Cosby effectively transformed the stand-up comedy album from a compilation of pieces best suited to another medium to one that needed to be seen as wholes and, ultimately, parts of an oeuvre, and consequently helped to move the understanding of the stand-up comedy performance from a series of small routines to a contiguous whole.

From Albums to Specials, CDs, and Videos

If by 1969 Bill Cosby had firmly ensconced himself in the established culture, in 1970 George Carlin was working to remove himself from it. For ten years he had been a stand-up comedian in an older sense of the word, doing characters and monologues. He had recorded the album *Take-Offs and Put-Downs* (1967*) which had been nominated for a Grammy. With characters like the hippy-dippy weatherman and the disc jockey at WINO radio, he had become a television favourite, mocking the beatnik and hippie culture. However, with the foment of the end of the 1960s, he had become disaffected with the middle-class expectations of his audience. In the liner notes to *Classic Gold*, Tony Hendra traces the “epiphany” to a show at the Lake Geneva Playboy Club on November 27th, 1970.

He could play it safe, stick to the officially approved noncontroversial material that has made him a rising star in the mainstream media. But because deep down he is more than a play-it-safe happy clown he is torn. He is aware vividly that he is entertaining the parents of the people he sympathizes with, whose point of view he shares. He is living a lie. He feels he is nothing less than a traitor.

[...] Carlin goes out to perform. Instead of the material his audience expects—the hippy-dippy weatherman they’ve seen on Ed Sullivan and the Tonight Show—he tries to share some of his misgivings with them, some of the changes he feels taking place. (Hendra in Carlin 1993*)

Over three nights in June of the next year, at the Cellar Door in Washington, D.C., he records the album *FM & AM* (1972a*), a deliberately transitional album. The “FM” in the title refers to the more experimental material of the first side, while “AM” refers to cleaner sketches and characterisations. On both sides he often roots the performance of the routine in some form of autobiography. The opening track, “Shoot,” is a rumination on the word “shit,” which begins with a brief narrative adverting to the hypocrisy of his previous show business life, while “The Hair Piece” is a poem to his long hair and then to

his beard. It again refers to this transitional period in his professional life. The tracks on the rest of this side are observational pieces but dealing with topics (“Sex in Commercials,” “Drugs,” “Birth Control”) that had not been fodder for mainstream comedians on record. Although it is the first side, at the end of the last track he thanks the audience as if it were the end of the performance.

By his next album, *Class Clown* (1972b*), his counter-cultural credentials had been firmly established. The first eponymous track is over sixteen minutes long, although it is divided into three sections. The first four tracks on the second side return to childhood, but, as opposed to the more universal experience of “Class Clown,” this time it is the distinctly New York Irish-Catholic schooling that informed his early life. Finally, the last track is the infamous “Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television.” Much like “Shoot” at the beginning of *FM & AM*, it continues the theme of how certain euphemisms are branded profane while their synonyms are deemed acceptable. When he finally lists the words, over a minute into the seven-minute routine, it is the first use of profanity on the album, which aids in both their shock value and, conversely, their neutralisation.²

Six months after recording *On the Road* (1977b*), his last album of the 1970s,

² A performance of “Seven Words” in Milwaukee in July of 1972 – two months after its recording for *Class Clown* but prior to that album’s September release – led to obscenity charges which were dismissed when it went to trial that December, at which the recorded routine was played as evidence (Stingl 2007). In October of 1973, “Filthy Words” – a continuation of “Seven Words” that appears on *Occupation: Foole* (1973*) – broadcast on WBAI radio in New York, which led to the Supreme Court Case *FCC v. Pacifica Foundation et al.* In a five-to-four ruling, the Court held that there is a heretofore undefined difference between “obscene” and “indecent” language; that the routine was the latter; and that, whereas “obscene” material is not permitted on the public airwaves, “indecent” material is permitted, building on the FCC’s original claim that it “never intended to place an absolute prohibition on the broadcast of this type of language, but rather sought to channel it to times of day when children most likely would not be exposed” (*FCC v. Pacifica Foundation et al* 1978). There was never a suggestion that the material shouldn’t appear on record, however.

Carlin did his first HBO special, *On Location: Carlin at USC* (1977a*). When it aired, it was prefaced by an introduction by Shana Alexander, then one of the “Point-Counterpoint” debaters on *60 Minutes*, followed by an interview with Carlin where he speaks to both influences on his comedy and the limitations of broadcast television. The concert begins by adverting to the fact that the performance is being recorded, which will constitute the first time he will have had the chance to actually see one of his full-length performances. In later interviews, he would describe this performance as “very tentative” (Carlin 2007), which is a fair assessment. At one point he looks exceptionally nervous, holding his hand to his chin, as he struggles to remember or think of what to say next, and soon thereafter, when a technician interrupts as his microphone needs to be replaced, it takes him a moment to regroup and return to his routine.

Most of the concert is comprised of either old material or subtle variations thereon. There are a few new routines, but the value in watching the performance stems from being able to see him. Although the albums suggested a certain amount of gestures and facial expressions, and his earlier television performances made use of them, a segment on “walking” would be one of his first opportunities to do an unexpurgated recording of a visual routine. Furthermore, during a version of “How’s Your Dog?” that is remarkably similar to the version from *On the Road*, he spends more time on (or, just as likely, does not edit out) the non-verbal reactions of guests at a dinner party sharing a room with a dog licking himself. A rendition of “Headlines” shows that he uses cue cards, although whether it is as a prop or genuinely as a mnemonic is unclear.

Prior to his most recent incarnation of “Seven Words,” the screen freeze frames and a message appears: “The final segment of Mr. Carlin’s performance includes

especially controversial language. Please consider whether you wish to continue viewing.” As the screen unfreezes, he begins “There is left that word ... that group of words that we uh...” He stops to finish his glass of water, and the crowd begins to applaud and cheer loudly. The documentary feel of the special appears to suggest that they are creating something more like an artifact rather than a unique creation unto itself. There seems to be little impetus for new material despite that it would be broadcast so widely (albeit HBO’s subscription base at the time was still very small). In fact there is something of a “greatest hits” feel about the piece, and the applause which met the introduction to the “Seven Words” material – like an opening guitar riff to a well-known song – obviously meant that it had excited the crowd. Lastly, Carlin’s nervousness might have been more a consequence of him having limited control over the final product, unlike the albums over which he would have much control. He is not listed in the show’s credits.

He is more confident in his next special, *On Location: George Carlin at Phoenix* (1978*), over which he had greater control: his wife was associate producer. It varies little from *At USC*: it begins with a strong language warning, albeit without the additional apologia of a trusted third party; much of the material had already been released on album; he ends once again with a variation on “Seven Words” which rouses the audiences to cheers. The special had yet to become a forum for new material.

Carlin returned from a self-imposed exile in 1981 with the album *A Place for My Stuff* (1981*). What is most striking is how it is the only album that contains studio material as well as live performance. This allows for some strange dissonance to the tracks. For example, the first track of the second side, “Abortion,” is essentially a one-

liner. "Have you noticed that *most* of the women who are *against* abortion are women you wouldn't want to fuck in the first place man [L:A (17 seconds)] there's such *balance* in nature [L]." The track following is a studio piece, so "Abortion" sits outside of a regular flow of performance. In previous albums, even when the tracks faded to silence in between, one was never taken out of the performance per se. Although the intrusion of non-performance material would reemerge in specials such as *Carlin on Campus* (1984a*), it was an experiment not repeated on album again.

Carlin at Carnegie (1982*) was the last special not to be an album as well: it is also the first that was released as a home video, and the first to be a product of his own production company, Cable Stuff Productions. At that point the home video market was almost exclusively perceived in terms of video rentals: the tapes themselves were often prohibitively expensive, as they were not meant to be purchased by the regular consumer. The alignment of video with sound recording as equivalently consumable products had yet to take place.

That started, more or less, with *Carlin on Campus*, which produced both an album (1984b*) and a concert special (1984a*). The special incorporated some additional material, including a filmed vignette revisiting of "Class Clown" and three animated shorts. Although there are discrepancies between the album and special suggesting certain performances were better for one medium over the other, what is clear is that a new strategy had emerged: to not view the albums and the specials as distinct avenues of performance, but rather to have two products emerge from the same performance. The *Playin' With Your Head* concert are more closely aligned on the special and album (1986a*; 1986b*). In the closing credits, it is noted that the "soundtrack" is available on

Eardrum Records, implicitly suggesting the album is a derivative product: it may be at this point that we begin to see the special become the primary medium and the album secondary.

In January of 1990 he recorded his seventh special, *Doin' It Again*, and his performance continues the more strident political elements that began with 1988's *What Am I Doing in New Jersey?*: his comments are frequently met with applause rather than laughter. He has also started to perform using an angry, New York Irish "accent" rather than the non-inflected neutral voice of his earlier work, from which he would occasionally venture into accent. The album it produced is the only album with a name different from the special: *Parental Advisory – Explicit Lyrics* (1990b*).

Jammin' in New York (1992a*) is the first special to be broadcast live: two were recorded, but the April 25th show went out live to air. With the exception of a thirty-second stretch in the last routine, the album (1992b*) uses the same performance version as the special. It is also the last time that a concession is made to an LP having two sides: although there was no break in the broadcast performance, "Airline Announcements" fades out, and "Golf Courses for the Homeless" fades back in.

Back in Town, from 1996, is the first time that there was no LP release: the CD (1996b*) was the principal audio medium, which meant that the performance could be presented uninterrupted. This relationship between special and CD continued to his final special, *It's Bad For Ya!* (2008a*, 2008b*).

If we take his early specials as an indication of what his live performances were like at the time, new material could always be supplemented and complemented by a return to his filthy language routines. His break from performance in the late 1970s

engendered a creative realignment towards a “third career”:

By the time this interview appears, my first album in seven years will be out. I'm also working on a series of Home Box Office specials, a book, and a motion picture. [...] I hope I'm now beginning a new cycle of energy and creativity. If so, it'll really be my third career. The first was as a straight comic in the Sixties. The second was as a counterculture performer in the Seventies. The third will be ... well, that's for others to judge. (Carlin 1982)

This realignment meant in part the embracing of the special as an impetus for new creativity, not an incidental snapshot of a career. This only emerges with the advent of home video, which allows for the special to be revisited at the whim of the viewer much like the album did for the listener. Although the early days of video were largely rental driven, the market for personal video libraries soon meant that there was also created a market for a tangible product, and thus another revenue stream. Although he started experimenting with the special as a form, his new material was lacking either the counter-cultural credibility or the language play of his earlier work. By the later 1980s, just as he was at risk of becoming stale, he began to move away from the random one-liners on a goofy theme and began longer routines, linked together less with narrative and more with a sense of arguing a particular viewpoint.

Right around 1990, 1992 the writer took over and the pieces became more thoughtful and more extended and more like essays. [...] I discovered around that time that there was something I could do with an audience that didn't involve getting a laugh every 20-30 seconds, and that was to engage their imaginations and hold their attention with ideas and language. (Carlin 2007)

More importantly, by actively working to have new product available, reissuing older product in more era-appropriate media, and launching an online store where his products

were prominently featured,³ Carlin was able to have his cumulative repertoire accessible to a potential public.

As Cosby did for the LP, George Carlin more or less honed the stand-up comedy special as a type: a long-form performance that was also the opportunity for new material, with an eye for it being redistributed in other media. The special didn't simply become a new medium: it became the primary medium for stand-up comedy.

Starting with *The Road Between My Ears*, Ron James has used the special as his primary medium, and each has been made available as a DVD. Although they are also available through retailers and the CBC online store, he sells the DVDs off of his website and in the lobby at his performances. At the shows I attended the merchandise table saw casual interest before the performance but was swept clean afterwards: in Pictou, where he has also set up an autograph table after the performance, recently purchased DVDs were what got signed.

Digital Distribution

With the advent of performers developing websites as promotional vehicles, stand-up comedians have used the internet to distribute and broadcast their performances. Dane Cook has pioneered this technology: samples from virtually every track of his albums and DVDs, with expletives bleeped out, are available through his website as streaming audio on the home page's media player. He has also produced podcasts with

³ In February of 1990, Carlin purchased the Little David label (save for the name). He now owned the masters to all his albums since *FM & AM*. This allowed for the first spate of CD reissues through Eardrum/Atlantic: *Classic Gold* (1993*) comprises *FM & AM*, *Class Clown*, and *Occupation: Foole*. Since then he oversaw the reissue of all of his Little David albums on CD (starting in 1999) and his HBO specials on DVD (starting in 2000). In 2001 he launched Laugh.com, an online comedy store and label that also produced interviews with comedians on the art of comedy, including *Carlin on Comedy* (2002*).

exclusive content ever since RSS distribution protocols have been in place. HBO and Comedy Central have each started audio and video podcasts of their own, featuring two- to three-minute clips from current specials. Comedy Central and its Canadian counterpart The Comedy Network also have archives of entire comedy performances on streaming video, if they had originally been broadcast on their networks. Video On Demand services feature recently premiered stand-up comedy specials in their offerings.

Carlin's "Seven Words" was the first routine broadcast on XM Satellite Radio's "XM Comedy Channel," which allows for "uninhibited and uncensored standup comedy." The digital radio service maintains two other stand-up comedy channels on both its American and Canadian line-ups: "Laugh USA" (which is marketed as "a good hearty laugh minus the crude or offensive"), and "Laugh Attack," whose "spotlight is on Canada's rich pool of extraordinary comedic talent" (XM Satellite Radio 2001-2008; Canadian Satellite Radio 2005-2008). The other satellite radio service, Sirius, has four channels: the southern comedy themed "Blue Collar Radio," the uncensored and self-professed uninhibited "Raw Dog," Jamie Foxx's "The Foxxhole," and the family-friendly "Laugh Break" (Sirius Canada [n.d.]).

Satellite radio has two advantages over terrestrial radio: it allows for narrowcasting and selectivity, and it is unfettered by broadcast regulations. A channel may choose to restrict content to appeal to a broader audience, but that is both an explicit choice and one made in the context of other channels having unrestricted content. Typically, these channels orient themselves around the routine rather than the entire performance: much like a music radio station, they will cycle through cuts from albums rather than listen to an entire album from beginning to end (there is programming on

several of these stations that is devoted to entire performances, but it is the exception rather than the rule). As such, there is a potential curtailing of pieces that do not operate as “stand-alone” tracks, nor does one have the opportunity to see how a routine works within the context of an entire performance. In exchange for variety, listeners experience the same ephemerality and lack of control as listeners of conventional radio and television. However, as variety is the appeal, even within a framed parameter such as “urban” or “southern,” it seems a fair exchange, and the exposure for comedians, to both their current repertoire and their back catalogue, is useful for reputation building.

As for streaming content and podcasts, the propensity is for short clips: the HBO and Comedy Central podcasts average two to three minutes, and the samples from tracks that Cook and others have on their sites are often under a minute. The draw therefore comes from highlighting the easily isolatable, shorter bits of a comedian’s repertoire. Although I don’t think it harbinger a return to the shorter material of, say, Bill Cosby’s first album, it may have some impact on what is understood as the normative form of stand-up comedy: the bit, the routine, or the performance. Chris Rock was asked a similar question in a *Rolling Stone* interview:

Do you agree with Jerry Seinfeld that an iPod screen is a perfect venue for stand-up?

It depends. Me and Jerry are like Miles and Monk, always arguing about shit. And our internal argument is, Is it the show or the joke? Jerry’s all about the joke and I’m all about the show. And if you’re talking about just seeing a joke or two, the iPod is great. But the show probably needs to be seen on something a little bigger. I don’t really want to watch *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert* on an iPod. (Rock 2007:156)

Websites and digital media have also allowed for labels and artists to sell out-of-print material, whether through sites such as iTunes or through their own websites.

Through dolemite.com, most of Rudy Ray Moore’s back catalogue, none of which was

ever available on a major label and rarely carried in stores, is available uncensored for streaming and for purchase through an affiliation with amazon.com's online music sales, either as a CD or as an mp3 download.

It is perhaps too early to consider the ramifications of this form of distribution, but a few observations can be made.

Whereas the LP, CD, video and DVD were tangible marketable goods, digital distribution has removed the tangibility: there is a distribution network that does not require the infrastructure of handling actual physical content. Although there is the need for some form of intermediary like amazon.com or iTunes, there are no costs associated with storage, freight, or reproduction when supply runs out. But it would be unlikely for the tangible recording to disappear completely: like musicians, many comedians bring their physical recordings with them to concerts and sell them at merchandise tables, and the recording becomes a souvenir of the event (albeit not a recording of the particular performance the purchaser had just seen). Such considerations are not particular to comedy, but tangible reissues of comedy albums have proven difficult: much of Cosby's back catalogue after the Warner Brothers albums is not available on CD; Carlin had to purchase the Little David label to get his reissues started; and many other comedians, whose works were never on major labels or imprints to begin with, will likely never have the option of physical reissue.

Print

One further form of mediation, and one which a number of comedians have embraced, is print. In the last twenty-years there have been several books written by stand-up comedians which, essentially, transliterate their onstage performances to print.

This is not a wholly disingenuous exercise, as most comedians profess to writing routines prior to testing them in performance rather than have them emerge in performance contexts. But these efforts are often largely unsatisfactory in that, on the page, despite whatever insights they may contain, the routines lack a certain rhetorical flourish. The distance and unidirectionality of printed text creates a relationship with the reader that is literally less engaging and more authoritative: the comedian is speaking *to*, not *with*, the reader.

As the oldest recording medium, there is a tradition of jestbooks and mass-printed texts of humorous narratives that extends back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (see, *inter alia*, Hutchinson 1963; Speroni 1965; Zall 1963), and similar anthologies dating back to Roman times. Jim Holt notes that only one from that era has survived:

Philogelos, or “Laughter-Lover,” [is] a collection in Greek that was probably put together in the fourth or fifth century A.D. It contains 264 items, several of which appear twice, in slightly different form. This suggests that the volume is not one jokebook but two combined, a hunch borne out by the fact that it is attributed to two authors, Hierocles and Philagrius, although joint authorship was rare at the time. (Holt 2008:8-11)

These jestbooks were often associated with or attributed to particular characters, such as Italy’s Poggio Bracciolini or England’s Joe Miller. However, although they may have been texts that were also part of oral tradition, and although they may have been deliberate and performed creations of the person to whom they were attributed at the time of printing, we can only speculate as to what transformation they may have undergone between orality and literary manifestations. With the stand-up comedians of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, practiced in a mode of talk that implied broadcast and recorded mediation of their spoken performances in front of audiences, we need not resort to speculation on the form of their “natural” oral performances.

After his death, many of Lenny Bruce's performances were transcribed and published as *The Essential Lenny Bruce* (1967): edited and compiled by John Cohen, the emphasis was on Bruce's social commentary, so much so that it makes for a rather torpid and solemn read. Although Woody Allen and Steve Martin had each written comedy, they did not make a habit of translating their routines from the stage to the page.⁴

In 1986, at the height of his *Cosby Show* success, Bill Cosby released *Fatherhood*. It was written in part as a guide to parenting, and it incorporated many of his routines on parents and children. This opened the floodgates, and successful comedians were offered book deals.

What is found funny in performance does not necessarily translate well to the page. It needs to be reworked to accommodate the absence of an audience. This is a transcription of a Chris Rock performance from his 1994 HBO episode of *HBO Comedy Half Hour*, "Big Ass Jokes":

Alright
things are going *alright*
I can not *complain*
doing my *special*
doing a new *movie*
got a new *TV show*
successful black man [A:C]
so you know you know what's next right
white girl [L→B]
got to get a white girl
can *not* be a successful black man without a white girl [L]
they won't even let you buy a mansion without a white girl
| here's a million dollars | | {nasal} "where's your white girl [L]
we have *zoning restrictions*" | [L]
you know what's funny

⁴ Woody Allen's "A Twenties Memory" (1972) is similar to his "Lost Generation" routine (available on *Woody Allen Vol. 2* (1965*)), while Steve Martin's "Cruel Shoes" (1979) is explicitly contiguous with his routine of the same name on *Comedy Is Not Pretty* (1979*). These, however, are the exceptions.

you know what's funny
 if you're black and you go out with a white girl
 everything that goes wrong in your life
 people blame it on the white girl [L]
 everything
 it's like | yo man I heard Chris got hit by a bus |
 fucking around with them white girls | [L]
 | yeah I hear Chris broke his leg | | white girl [L]
 that's what he gets |
 people are bugged man
 there's like you know
 there's white girls who only go out with black guys
 there's black girls who only go out with white guys
 I met a black girl like that
 did not date black men
 I said girl how come you don't date no black men
 she said | no reason
 no reason |
 no reason
 so I punched her in the face [L]
 now she got a reason [L] (Rock 1994*)

It is the first bit of the performance. Rock anticipates and builds into the text the interaction with the audience, and the audience not only recognises his "successful black man" claim but praises it and reaffirms it. Note also how the laughter following the "got to get a white girl" turns to (good-natured) dissent, in that the audience actively boos him.

This is the corresponding section from his book *Rock This!*:

Yes, things are going great. I do comedy specials. Movies. Albums. Got a new TV show.
 You know what's next?
 Right. White Girls.
 Got to get a white girl. You're not a successful black man without a white girl. They won't even let you buy a mansion without a white girl.
 Black Man: Here's your million dollars.
 Real Estate Agent: Where's your white girl? We have zoning restrictions.
 You know what's funny? If you're black and you go out with a white girl, everything that goes wrong in your life gets blamed on the white girl.
 "Hey man, I hear Chris got hit by a bus."
 "Going out with a white girl."
 "Yeah, I hear Chris broke his leg."

“White girl. That’s what he gets.”

[...]

People should date who they like. I believe in chemistry. If it works, go for it. But there are white girls who only go out with black guys. And there are black girls who only go out with white guys.

[...]

I once asked out a fine sister: she turned me down.

Her: Sorry. I don’t date black men.

Me: Girl, how come you don’t date black men?

Her: No reason.

Me: No reason?

So I punched her in the face. Now she’s got a reason.

Okay, I didn’t really do that. I’m not really violent or intolerant.

(1997:107-108)⁵

Contrasting the performance with the version from the book highlights the absence of the qualifying “people should do what they like” preface to the seeming diatribe against miscegenation, and the need to qualify his most outrageous claim – the punching of the woman in the face – as an explicit fiction. In other words, the text requires the resolution, the return to equilibrium that – in performance – the audience provides with its laughter. The audience determines the alleged truth of the punching incident to be false, or, rather, fiction.

Ellen DeGeneres has also transliterated her routines into book form. One example appears in *My Point... And I Do Have One* (1995):

I went camping recently for the first time. It was a fantastic experience. I went to an amazing place: Montana. I don’t know if you’ve ever been there, but it is gorgeous. I’ve never seen any place so spectacularly beautiful as Montana. Or was it Maine? It *was* Maine. Anyway, it is beautiful, and I’ve never seen any place like it. It is so special.

The important thing is that I went camping. Now, I normally don’t wake up that early, but I woke up to watch the sun set. I was sitting in front of my tent, and eating breakfast – some type of Mueslix, or some other outdoorsy stuff, just eating it right from my hand. I didn’t even have a bowl. I just had milk and the Mueslix and my hand.

⁵ I have rearranged the sections from the book to correspond with the order of the performance.

Anyway, so I'm enjoying my Mueslix (That may be an exaggeration – let's just say I was *eating* my Mueslix), when suddenly I hear some kind of noise. Since I'm alone in the middle of the woods, I'm a little bit scared. But I gather my courage, look up, and ... Awww, how cute! Only ten feet away from where I'm sitting there's a family of deer drinking from a little, babbling brook thing (I'm not sure of the technical outdoorsy term). Just the mother, father, and two little baby deer lit by the reddish glow of the setting sun. It was so beautiful, so perfect, so wonderful, and I thought "Oh, I wish I had a gun." I could've just ... BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG! I could have shot 'em, gutted 'em, skinned 'em, then sprinkled 'em on my cereal.

Actually, none of that story is true. Well, some of it is true. I did go camping in Maine.

No, that's not true either. The closest I've come to camping in Maine is spending a few nights at the Hilton in Maui (come to think of it, that's not very close). My point ... and I do have one, is that I was being sarcastic. I don't understand hunting at all. (1995:145-46)

But this is how it was performed in a 1994 concert recording, released in 1996 on her

Taste This CD:

So and you know I'm back on tour which is *fun*
but I took a little time off between shooting the show and then coming out
on tour I went um
camping which was I hadn't ever done that
which was an *amazing* experience
I went to an *amazing* place which
Montana I don't know if anyone has been to *Montana* but... [C:A]
it is gorgeous I have never seen anything like it
and um...
[bashful chuckle] I'm sorry
Maine I was in *Maine* [L]
it is beautiful and I've never seen any place like it
it is so
special
anyways the story still applies I'm camping and... [L]
I woke up
and I never wake up this early
but I woke up to watch the sunset I'm sitting in front of my tent... [L]
and uh...
eating some just *breakfast* some type of *Mueslix* or some kind of *outdoorsy*
just healthy and...
just from my *hand* I didn't even have a *bowl* I had *milk*... [L]
and the Mueslix and just a spoon made from wood anyways so I'm [L]
I'm having my Mueslix

and I hear some kind of *noise*
 and of course I'm kind of *scared*
 and I look and I'm *telling you*
 like *right*
 well like ten feet away from where I'm standing there is a family of *deer*
 drinking from a little babbling brook thing that was there
 just a mother father *two little* baby deer and I thought
 | oh I *wish* I had a gun | cause it's right... [L]
BANGBANGBANGBANGBANG! I could have just *shot 'em*
 and *killed 'em*
gutted 'em
skinned 'em
sprinkled 'em on my cereal
 I just had them... [L]
so close... to be able to...
 just *no gun*
 I had a *spoon* so I *hit 'em* just as hard as I... [L]
 just over their little *head*... cause the baby can't run as fast
 so I had that, just [L]
ungh ungh ungh [sounds of intense rhythmic effort] like that
 and it *cracked* but I was just...
 cause the baby is so *tender* and *juicy* they're *little* so... [L]
 and he just *looked* and *scurried* away he just... [L]
got away
 that's sarcasm I don't understand hunting at all. (1996*)

In both instances, DeGeneres negates the episode by framing it as sarcasm, and each is a prelude to a bit about hunting. In the live performance, however, it is framed in the very recent and specific past (just before going on tour); Montana is affirmed as a place of beauty through cheers; the seemingly incidental spoon returns later as a club; the clubbing interlude is not only present but fairly gruesome; and the negation, when it comes, is sotto voce. Conversely, the back-pedaling of the printed version is quite elaborated and prolonged, even though it is retreating – re-establishing equilibrium – from a claim not nearly as brutal as that of the performance. DeGeneres, whose persona is nice and optimistic, plays against type to such an extent that the audience can easily make the truth/fiction judgement. Rock, on the other hand, walks a thinner line, knowing

the successful black man persona still carries the perceived threatening presence of the violent black man (Bryant 2003). By building a bit around it he, in collusion with a sympathetic audience, inverts it.

Text is absent an audience: to quote Riesman again, "People go to movies in groups... People do not read in groups" (1970:256). But stand-up comedy recordings have groups "built-in," as it were: books do not. The sound and occasional sight of an audience is integral to a stand-up comedy performance not only because stand-up comedy is a dialogic form, a dialogue between performer and audience, where one half shapes the responses of the other and vice versa, but the related reason that it reaffirms, by and large, what an authentic response to a performer's efforts *ought* to be. For text, comedians do not have at their disposal the collective audience actively engaged in the realm of play, and the judgements and frameworks for interpretation of their words that can best be left to a discerning audience needs to be articulated.

Furthermore, stand-up comedy, as it is performed and as that performance appears on recordings, is a homeostatic phenomenon: the listener experiences it at a set pace, unlike the reader of a text who proceeds at his or her own pace. There are performative qualities extrinsic of – albeit determined by – the audience's reaction, like timing. Johnny Carson made this same observation, building on the role of timing in performance versus text.

Yes, it's all in the timing, as far as I'm concerned. Humor is so much timing, and that's why, as we talk here for reproduction in print, I know that you can never make that transference from the audio sound of a joke or delivery, with all the nuances, to paper. That's why some funny people who can write very well – for example, S.J. Perelman's a good writer; H. Allen Smith had a brief flurry where he was funny – never fared too well when they tried to do it in person. (Carson 1979)

Recordings as Resource and "Canon"

One of the offshoots of recorded stand-up comedy is how it fixes the performance, for good or ill.

On the one hand, what is recorded is but one version of a routine: the version that gets committed to a medium becomes privileged and elevated, much as particular versions of other folklore types become the de facto canon. One may lament about what never made it to record, that the act of canonisation excludes performances equally if not more vibrant and interesting. In a review of the inaugural CD releases from the Canadian comedy chain Yuk-Yuks, Andrew Clark writes how "Ideally comedy CDs should offer the live experience that fans missed, such as seeing Mike MacDonald circa 1982" (1996a). However, recordings are not accidental or incidental to performance: they are not (typically) documents of a random evening in the performance life of a comedian. They are deliberate creations, with care taken to produce the best performance from the perspective of the performer and producer. The liner notes for Bill Cosby's *To Russell, My Brother, Whom I Slept With* (1968a*) indicate that the performance was two and a half hours long, but the resultant album is just over forty minutes. In Jeff Rougvie's liner notes for Bill Hicks' *Love Laughter and Truth* (2002*) – which is a compilation culled from Hicks' personal recordings for self-study – he notes

In 1997, Bill's *Arizona Boy* and *Rant in E-Minor* were posthumously released by Rykodisc. Although completed after his death, Bill had both meticulously plotted out and left detailed instructions on how to edit and sequence them. Those four albums [*Dangerous* and *Relentless* were released prior to his death] are the official Hicks canon; the releases that he oversaw, were created to his specifications, and released as he envisioned them. [...] When Bill stepped out on stage the nights of those performances the mics were prepared and the levels were set. Bill knew he was recording an album and performed accordingly.

Even when the performance is also a live broadcast (as in the case of George Carlin's final releases), it comes at the end of a long process of honing material into a routine precisely to culminate as that broadcast and recording.

On the other hand, there is now a "canon," as there is an available body of work that can be revisited and learned from. Audiences can listen to them, but so too can other performers. In this way, recorded comedy fuels and perpetuates the art form.

In his study, Robert Stebbins noted how "A large proportion of the respondents said they were fascinated as children and adolescents with either recorded comedy or televised comedy or both" (Stebbins 1990:62). Biographies, autobiographies, and even performed autobiographies are rife with comedians telling of the importance of recording:

Herb [Gart, an early manager] encouraged [Cosby] by playing him some Lord Buckley records. Buckley was an underground legend, well known for his cool storytelling. Buckley's "hispomatic" rendition of "Jonah and the Whale" was a classic back in 1950 and audiences were with him when he'd spin away from one-liners and riff through five- and ten-minute tales. The joy was as much in Buckley's delivery and characterizations as in any jokes along the way. (Smith 1997:39)

A friend lent me some comedy records. There were three by Nichols and May, several by Lenny Bruce, and one by Tom Lehrer, the great song parodist. [...] Some people fall asleep at night listening to music: I fell asleep to Lenny, Tom, and Mike and Elaine. These albums broke ground and led me to a Darwinian discovery: Comedy could evolve. (Martin 2007:71-72)

Richard [Pryor] is the *rawest* motherfucker in show business
 Richard's the one that *made me* want to do *comedy*
 when I was little I wanted to be Richard Pryor *so bad*
 I used to *read lips* with... listen to... *sneak into*
 remember you'd *sneak into* the basement
 put his *albums* on
 and just *listen*
 your mother ain't supposed to hear
 so you'd *listen* | {stifled giggle} |

and *listen* to this shit
 and I *turned* into ...
 I wanted to be Richard so *bad*
 I used to go out on stage
 when I was *fifteen*
 and *talk* and *act* and *walk* and do *everything* like Richard Pryor. (Murphy
 1987*)

The most artfully rendered illustration of this understanding of canonicity and the role of recordings might well be the opening footage of Chris Rock's *Bring the Pain* concert (1996*). As the camera follows his feet as he walks from his dressing room to the stage, the covers of comedy albums are flashed in time to the music: Bill Cosby's *To Russell, My Brother, Whom I Slept With* (1968a*), Dick Gregory's *In Living Black and White* (1961*), Flip Wilson's *Geraldine: Don't Fight the Feeling* (1972*), Richard Pryor's ... *Is it Something I Said?* (1975*), Steve Martin's *Comedy is Not Pretty* (1979*), Pigmeat Markham's *Tune Me In* (1968[?]*), and both Woody Allen's (1964*) and Eddie Murphy's (1982*) eponymous albums. In this manner, he identifies influences both obvious and surprising, and locates himself not only within an ethno-social group – African American – but also within the occupational group of stand-up comedian, by placing himself at the confluence of his predecessors.

This phenomenon does not exist in isolation. Kenneth Goldstein (1982) has noted how a folksong revival seems to have followed each technological innovation (printing press, phonograph, radios, etc.), making the observation that, rather than “[freezing] its form and content so that it ceases to be folksong [...] each successive communication revolution has speeded up its circulation through space and time” (1982:4). As to the role the tape recorder and phonograph played in the folksong revival:

Now the tools existed, not only for the recording of the much needed new repertoire of the burgeoning revival, but also for the issuance of those

recordings in a compact and relatively inexpensive form. Instead of being heard only on radio programs, performances could be copied on tape recorders from those programs or could be issued on records. The would-be folksinger could then learn songs at leisure through repeated playbacks of the tapes or records. (1982:6)

Goldstein also notes, almost in passing, how the songs also served as models for the inspiration of song writers (1982:8). When one speaks of the canon of stand-up comedy, one is primarily speaking of those routines of particular comedians which serve as exemplary executions of the comedian's art. To not know them is to not know the tradition in which one is operating. But stand-up comedy, being a contemporary, popular genre – which implies a model of a specific creator and “ownership” of material, as opposed to a folk genre which, loosely, implies a model of communal creation and “proprietaryship” of material – is a genre of novelty. One does not learn the canon so much as learn *from* it. One locates oneself within a tradition not simply to continue it but to develop and add to it.

What the stand-up comedian is doing for professional development, the fan does in a less deliberate but equally focussed way: contemplating comedy as craft, developing a sense of connoisseurship. Furthermore, through recordings creations by particular performers can enter the vernacular tradition: routines by the African-American vaudevillian Bert Williams were in active circulation in the white folklore about blacks thanks to his consenting to be recorded for phonograph records (Rosenberg 1972:148).

Lastly, it should be noted that, without making live performance peripheral, the exigencies of live performance – and the restrictions placed upon recording these performances by performers who wish to retain control of their output – make recordings the de facto primary data for anyone studying stand-up comedy.

Listening Again: Three possibilities

One of the seemingly self-evident features of humour and comedy is that there is an element of surprise: a situation is set up and there is an outcome which is unanticipated, although it “makes sense” in retrospect. (This is Oring’s concept of the “appropriate incongruity,” vastly oversimplified.) When folklorists study joke tellers, they may hear the same joke again and again, especially those jokes firmly ensconced in the teller’s repertoire. But with each retelling, the context of performance means a new version, however practiced and deliberate the performance may be. With a recording, however, the text is fixed: surely, if the “value” of comedy is the unanticipated resolution, there is little need to hear it more than once. Why then is there a viable market for comedy recordings, going on fifty years, in the case of major labels? I would suggest three possibilities, which are non-exclusionary.

Firstly, we must distinguish between first and subsequent listenings. In his article “When is a Legend?” (1989) Bill Ellis suggests that a legend is, principally, a narrative which does not return to a stable situation: it ends at disequilibrium. The legend process continues after the narrative is ostensibly over, however, as participants in the telling – performer and audience – engage in negotiating the possibility, credibility, and viability of the underlying propositions. (“That couldn’t happen.” “Yes it could.” “Well you know how people from there are.”) In his phrasing, “a legend is a narrative that challenges accepted definitions of the real world and leaves itself suspended, relying for closure on each individual’s response.” (34) But when the legend is told again to the same audience, “the narrative now becomes in re-performance an aesthetic event, during which we appreciate the methods of narration instead of falling under its spell.” (35) Ellis is

grounding this approach in the work of Tzvetan Todorov and his work on the fantastic novel, which held that for any reading subsequent to the first reading, it “inevitably becomes a metareading, in the course of which we note the methods of the fantastic.”

So too is it with stand-up comedy: on its first listening, we react with surprise at the appropriate incongruity. “Getting it” is the more or less spontaneous act of retroactively reinterpreting the narrative now that we can grasp it as a whole, discerning the process by which the conclusion was inevitable yet obscured. On subsequent listenings, our reaction is more one of delight, as we retrace (in real time, as it were) that same process. In this manner, what the fan listener is doing is, to some extent, what the professional comedian is doing when they listen to canonical recordings: it is an appreciation of technique.

For my March 2003 interview with Kelly Roubo (discussed above, 278ff), my goal had been to determine the place of Cosby’s stand-up comedy in the ludic life of her family. She didn’t consider herself a “fan” per se, certainly not an active Cosby fan anymore and not as much a fan as she currently was of other cultural products. For the interview, I recorded our conversation while we listened to two Cosby albums, *Why Is There Air?* (1965*) and *Bill Cosby at His Best* (1992*) a compilation album, neither of which she had heard before. But she was able to recognise the technique and anticipate approximations of how a routine would progress. She was engaging the album by vocalising anticipated themes: in one section, on “idiot mittens,” she said the word “string” immediately after Cosby did, as if to affirm the familiarity of the concept. During a reflection on being taught that one and one made two, with the follow-up question “What’s a two?,” Kelly noted the similarity between “What’s a two?” and “What’s a

cubit?,” one of the key phrases of the “Noah” routines from *Bill Cosby is a Very Funny Fellow Right!* (1963*). Later, she recognised a parallel between a shop teacher talking with toothpicks in his mouth and “The Dentist” routine from *Bill Cosby: Himself* (1982*). This active engagement became quite confusing for her:

KR: This is funny ‘cause I’m listening to it in a totally different way.

IB: How do you mean?

KR: Like, when we used to listen to it as kids, we were anticipating. We knew every word. And because I haven’t heard this before, I’m listening for those same words and I’m not hearing them, so when he said “[harrumph] I’m going to do this” I’m remembering the “Hoof and Mouth” [track 8 of *Funny Fellow*] thing where he’s “[harrumph]” y’know? So I’m hearing the same tones and the same delivery with new material. So it’s really kind of strange (Roubo 2003)

An appreciation and an understanding of Cosby’s technique allowed for something akin to a Todorovian “subsequent reading” even for material that was new to her, but this disjuncture of the familiar with the strange – evidenced by my asking her “Is this familiar at all?” and her reply of “Well, it’s all similar to everything he does, y’know?” – made for a perplexing experience.

My second possibility as to the “re-listening” of comedy performances is borne out more by ethnography than by any theoretical perspective. In my fieldwork, and in my own experience, I have been surprised to note how the listening to (or watching of) comedy performances is done as often in groups as it is done singly. Kelly Roubo told me how, in rural Maine in the 1970s, her family would regularly sit together and listen to Cosby’s *Funny Fellow* album: it was a family activity, not something she ever did by herself.

Listening to the radio and listening to albums was something we did a lot more when I was young. We had a black and white TV and three channels, two of which came in, so it wasn't like now where you've got so many choices and so many media. It was fun on Saturday night, they'd have fifties music and we'd all sit around and, y'know ... it sounds really like, Happy Days kind of crap but ...
We were too rural, so there wasn't neighbour kids to play with: there was just us four kids. (Roubo 2003)

Another colleague told me how, when living in an Atlantic Canadian university residence in the mid 1990s, bootleg copies of Adam Sandler's first album *They're All Gonna Laugh At You!* (1993*) were made and circulated throughout the resident population. As an adolescent in Ottawa I would go to friends' houses and would often be told "You have to listen to this": they would often watch me in my surprise (my Todorovian "first reading") while they were simultaneously experiencing their own delight (their Todorovian "subsequent reading"). My own students at Cape Breton University have sent me comedy mp3s that they wish to share with me. This is less an explanation so much as it is the articulation of a phenomenon, which somehow speaks to a level of commensality involved in listening to comedy. Toronto Star columnist Andrew Clark noted the same phenomenon:

Those who wished to enjoy the live comedy experience in the comfort of their very own polyester decorated basements listened to comedy albums. Records, such as the *Button Down World of Bob Newhart*, George Carlin's *Class Clown* and Steve Martin's *Wild and Crazy Guy*, got played until their grooves wore out. More often than not, listening to a comedy album was a group activity, you, your friends, some mood-altering substances. In the 1980s, this breed of comedic entertainment began to go extinct. A new beast loomed on the horizon. Someone you knew [...] purchased a newfangled invention called a Video Cassette Recorder (VCR). [...] Then, in 1984, you watched purple-leather-clad Eddie Murphy's standup concert *Delirious*. It was excellent. Watching comedy videos was just like listening to an album, only better. Your friends came over, you partook in mood-modifiers. Who knew, maybe something cool would come of it, man. (Clark 1996b)

Moreover, without wishing to push the didactic function of stand-up comedy too hard, watching a performance that covers certain topics can lead in to a discussion on that topic. At one “Boy’s Night,” in St. John’s, friends and I watched Chris Rock’s *Never Scared* DVD (2004*), which culminates in a long routine on marriage. This led – awkwardly for the rest of us – to a rumination by one of our lot on his significant other and to the question both rhetorical and desperate “What does she want?” James Lull (1990) has written on the social uses of television as it promotes conversation within families or among strangers, providing “conversational props”:

To turn on the set when guests arrive is to introduce instant common ground. Strangers in the home may then engage in ‘television talk’ – verbal responses to television programs which allow audience members to discuss topics of common experience which probably have little personal importance. (Lull 1990:37-38)

My third possibility is closely related to the second. With the recorded comedy performance, we not only have a performer and his or her funny text: we also have the reactions of an audience. As I have written above, the comedian performs to the specific and finite audience in front of them but cultivates the indistinct and (potentially) infinitely vast audience at home. The former act as the latter’s surrogate, and each time we listen to a recording we experience their surprise, a reaction as fresh and absent of any meta-reading as it was the time prior. Through a form of psychic contagion, we participate in their surprise.

This appears to merge two approaches: the idea of listening to comedy as ritual and the notion of “vicarious audience play” (Sutton-Smith 2001). On the one hand as an audience member listens or watches recorded stand-up comedy, space and time are transcended, and they are at the original performance. On the other hand, the audience is participating in the original performance, experiencing it anew through the reactions of

the crowd.

In all instances, there is a sense of familiarity – with technique, with the topic matter, with the vicarious thrill of hearing it anew. One listens to it again in much the same manner as, in folk societies, one listens to the same stories time and again. They become part of the audience's collective experience: they are something that now informs their worldview, not simply interpreted through it. They are part of a shared experience, and the stand-up comedian is part of that experience, as an intimate.

Summary Conclusions

These two chapters, in effect following from where Chapter 3 left off, have traced the various mediations of stand-up comedy: from the intimacy of face-to-face encounter; through the distancing of performer from audience through the stage and the complementary tools of restoring intimacy; through the physical absencing of the performer from the audience and the use of those tools alone in live broadcast and the recognition of the need for audience surrogacy; through the temporal distance of performer from audience that transmission of recorded broadcasts allows; to the fixity of performance, the opportunity for repeated experiences of performance, the development of canons and the beginnings of a repertoire appreciation that recordings allow.

In this final chapter, four themes have emerged. First of all, any medium will change the nature of performance as the limitations and possibilities of that medium emerge: the LP allowed for length; the special allowed for physicality; the CD and DVD allow for uninterruptedness. Secondly, by having recordings which are listened to and relisted to, a performer develops a critical mass of material that eventually allows for a more wholly personal and idiosyncratic comedy repertoire. Third, recordings are

marketable products that constitute an additional revenue stream for a comedian: they also act as tangible items that can be collected, shared, traded, and venerated as any product of popular culture can, and their dissemination allows for further cultivation of their reputation. Finally, listening to a comedy recording again is not merely a reviewing of humorous material for which the appropriate incongruity is a known quantity, but is instead an active re-engagement with a performance that constitutes a new performance context in and of itself.

Conclusion: The Validation of Laughter

I have no *ending* for this
so I take a small *bow*

George Carlin

Throughout this work I have been making the argument that the form of talk that occurs on the stage at a stand-up comedy performance is coincident with the forms of talk that occur in informal, day-to-day, face-to-face conversation among intimates, which is the object at the heart of folklore studies. Stand-up comedy is an intimate genre. However, the realities of stand-up performance – a stage introducing an explicit distinction between performer and audience, an itinerancy which brings the stand-up comedian in front of groups outside of his or her own, and the realities of broadcasting and recording which separate in space and time the performer from the audience – define it as a form of talk different from informal talk. How does one reconcile the distance of stand-up with the intimacy it requires and implies?

In Part One, I looked at various approaches, starting in Chapter 1 with a survey of stand-up comedy scholarship. In general, although they all emphasise the audience as central to the enterprise, studies tend to stress what I would consider secondary aspects, focussing either on content (the text) or function (the purpose other than entertainment). I turned to folkloristics in Chapter 2, which places this face-to-face interaction and the mediating relationship between a group and its expressive forms at the centre of its approach, and tried to demonstrate how a reading of stand-up comedy alternate to a focus on text and/or function make better sense of it. I also looked at frameworks for how other vernacular traditions are affected when transposed to popular culture.

In Part Two I examined the consequences of the initial distancing of comedian from audience through the formality of the stage and the exigency of touring, and the strategies for reconciling that distance. Chapter 3 looked at the distancing mechanisms of the formal context of professional performance, principally the stage and the microphone, that are present in all further mediations and come to represent the act of stand-up comedy itself. I showed how the microphone actually allows for intimate talk between performer and audience as amplification allows for the stand-up comedian to speak with the normal tones, opportunities for false starts and going off on tangents, and lack of theatricality that occurs in face-to-face interaction without risking a loss of control over the flow of performance. Chapter 4 looked at the popular understanding of the social identity of “stand-up comedian,” examining not so much what function the stand-up comedian serves as what function he or she is perceived as serving, and how the performer prepares to make a claim to that identity and the audience prepares to accept that claim. Chapter 5 developed this point by examining how the stand-up comedian complements this initial social identity claim through the development of an ever-increasingly nuanced comic persona, where they are known not for what they are but who they are. Chapter 6 looked at what the stand-up comedian actually says, the focus not only on spotting difference but its concomitant notion of being different. The comedian ironically fulfills the vernacular theory concept of being an “outsider” by professionally keeping him- or herself removed from the group, however much or however often the group identifies him or her as an intimate. All of this is enacted through a talk performance with content which straddles the line between the absolute truths of the group and the areas for negotiation, between insider and outsider, and – occasionally –

between safety and risk.

In Part Three I turned to the greater distancing of broadcasts and recordings. Chapter 7 looked at live and recorded broadcasts: how broadcasting required the minimising of the local over the national in order to have an impact on the largest audience (and how the idea of “national” was conceived); how stand-up comedy on the public- and corporately-sponsored airwaves required an innocuousness of content for fear of legal or economic retribution; and how the brief time allowed the stand-up comedian made for shorter routines that were immediately comprehensible, and the eschewal of longer, more complex forms. Although conventional broadcasting provides stand-up comedy with its widest spread dissemination, it is at its least intimate as the effort to connect to so many in some way means it connects to virtually none in any meaningful way. It also examines how cable television began to reverse some of these limitations and became the medium that gave stand-up comedy its “boom” period in the early 1980s.

Chapter 8 looked at recordings, and how the freedom of the long-play record, and subsequently the CD, allowed for longer, more languorous routines. More importantly, it discussed how, with a product that can be listened to over and over again, a comedian can build both a reputation and a cumulative repertoire that is called upon for the next performance (in addition to a revenue stream), and how a member of the audience can create a deeper connection with the performer, assimilating the performer’s repertoire and worldview into their own. Finally, it turns to how these recordings inform the next generation of comedians, and how they start to constitute a canon of content and of style, upon which (or against which) a newer comedian frames his or her own persona, style, content, and delivery.

How do we know when the stand-up comedian is successful in bridging the distance and establishing a connection between him- or herself and the audience? Laughter. By virtue of taking up the mantle "stand-up comedian," the presence or absence of laughter is the standard by which you measure a comedian's success or failure. He or she may bring a place and a time to life through his or her evocative descriptions, or share brilliant insights into the nature of the culture, or make startling, unsettling, yet profound critiques on a state of affairs and how that state of affairs ought to be, but if his or her talk is not met with laughter it is not, as it were, "good." The audience expects to laugh, and the comedian has a professional obligation to effect that laughter. Conversely, if the stand-up comedian is interpreted as funny, he or she has a right to hear laughter in response and the audience has the obligation to laugh.

Rock:	Dane Cook's funny.
Friedman:	I can say this because I'm not you, but he's not funny.
Rock:	Anyone who can keep an audience is funny. Dane Cook's for college girls. So if you find college girls who don't think he's funny, then he's not funny. (Rock and Rickles 2008:130)

Laughter demonstrates that whatever has been said on stage has been interpreted as simply an intimate momentarily interrupting the flow of conversation with a startling observation that is immediately judged as playfully testing the group's worldview. We are all friends here: I not only permit you to say that but I encourage it, because I know at heart you are talking with me on our own terms, with an understanding of my group and my concerns as I understand them. Whatever other identities we share or do not share, at this moment we are close to each other. It does not matter that you cannot hear my nuanced response; it does not matter that you cannot see me because I am not in front of you; it even does not matter that you are long deceased. This is a new moment of

performance, and I appreciate your talk, and laugh.

In the introduction I asked the question of whether this dissertation was or was not “not folklore.” I suggested that it was not “not folklore,” in the sense of “as opposed to a popular study,” as it was grounded in a disciplinary perspective with attendant theoretical and methodological concerns, and that it was also not “not folklore,” in the sense of “as opposed to anthropology, sociology, history, communications, etc.,” as the disciplinary perspective it was (at times conservatively) grounded in is folklore. I would not go so far as to suggest that it was definitively not “not folklore” in the sense of its focus being small-group, informal, interpersonal, artistic communication, although neither would I suggest that it was definitively “not folklore,” as this same small-group, informal, interpersonal, artistic communication is omnipresent in stand-up comedy.

The folklorist would be interested in the study of stand-up comedy – whether he or she is engaged or amused by the content of any particular performance or not – because it is always an interaction between a performer and an audience. At its core is this face-to-face interaction, the same encounter which is at the core of folkloristic study. No other popular cultural product emerging from vernacular practices retains that tie to its originating performance context as strongly or as necessarily.

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