The Evolution of Mediatized Stand-Up Comedy: Investigating Para-Performances on Television, Film, and YouTube

by

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ABSTRACT

THE EVOLUTION OF MEDIATIZED STAND-UP COMEDY:
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Although the majority of today’s performances are accessible on multiple platforms, performance analysis often continues to focus on the live event or to discuss the recorded event as if it were live. This thesis explores the influence of various mediatizations on a performance form. In order to better understand changes in power, control, and authority that are produced on differing mediums, it develops a form of analysis that views the performance event as comprised of two aspects. It argues that a performance event is comprised of the performance proper, which is a performance that is identifiable as being for entertainment purposes, and the para-performance, which arises due to the intention and/or execution of the performance proper. For example, the performance text of a theatrical work is the performance proper whereas the audience’s reactions, the architecture of the performance space, and the promotional materials and reviews are part of the para-performance. A para-performance analysis thus reads both the performance proper and the para-performance “as” performance.

This thesis is an investigation of the process of adapting live performance to
media platforms. That process, referred to as mediatization, is explored through the evolution of contemporary stand-up comedy in Anglophone North America. Specifically, the dissertation focuses on the development of the content, form, and audiences of contemporary stand-up comedy across live, televised, filmic (i.e. VHS, DVD, and Netflix), and YouTube mediatizations of the performance form.

Moreover, a performance analysis approach to the objects of study is used to understand the relationship between power and platform. The dissertation examines how marginalized performers negotiate power through their para-performances and performances. Analysis of the objects of study reveals that manipulating elements of the para-performance can align performers with power and invest their voices with authority. The dissertation demonstrates that media platforms that offer performers control over various para-performance elements, access to accidental audiences, and positions alongside those in power provide the performer with the greatest opportunity to challenge dominant ideologies and positively reconfigure existing hegemonic structures.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother: Dharmika Jayendra Saraiya. She once told me she dreamed of getting her doctorate in Hindi and Gujarati literature but because of the times and her circumstances she could only complete her MA. She told me to study what I loved while I could because life is filled with responsibilities and later may not be an option. For a woman to get her MA in India at the time was no small feat; it is a mark of her passion. Her deep love for literature inspires me to this day. Although the language barrier means that she will never read nor understand this dissertation, it exists because of her, and she is behind every word.
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Chapter One: The Emergence of Mediatized Stand-Up Comedy

& Introductions

The dissertation concentrates on how various mediatizations of stand-up comedy negotiate dominant power structures. There is also a significant focus on a concept I call the para-performance. Consider that a performance event is divided into two aspects: the para-performance and the performance proper. The para-performance refers to that which surrounds and arises out of the intention and/or execution of the performance proper. I will build on the concept of the para-performance through this introductory chapter and through the dissertation as a whole. In short, I concentrate my analysis on different aspects of the para-performance in contemporary stand-up comedy in order to better understand how performers negotiate power structures that determine their representation in popular culture.

This dissertation explores TV, film, and YouTube mediatizations of contemporary stand-up comedy in Anglophone North America. VHS, DVD, and Netflix versions of stand-up comedy are considered under the term “film” because of the similarities in the mediums, and because Netflix is the evolved version of the VHS and DVD platforms. Furthermore, the development of stand-up comedy specials for VHS, DVD, and Netflix are very similar in form and content. The VHS/DVD and Netflix platforms differ however in audience-performance interaction and DVD and Netflix are therefore referred to distinctly in those discussions.

In order to set up the exploration of TV, film, and YouTube mediatizations of stand-up comedy, this chapter addresses six points. Firstly, it distinguishes stand-up
comedy from other similar comedic performance forms. Secondly, it traces the emergence of both live and mediatized versions of stand-up comedy in North America. Thirdly, it explains the dissertation’s focus on mediatized stand-up comedy. Fourthly, it shares my subject position and provides my reasons for writing on this topic. Fifthly, it positions the discipline within the field of performance studies, introduces the theoretical approaches that inform each chapter, and explains the methodological approach that determined the dissertation’s objects of study. Finally, it provides a chapter overview.

**Defining Stand-Up Comedy**

Given that scholarly work on stand-up comedy is limited, the area offers countless opportunities for investigation. Despite that, the existing scholarly work often focuses on other comedic performance forms alongside the study of stand-up comedy. In my personal experience, upon sharing that the topic of my dissertation is stand-up comedy, I have been asked if I am looking at: *Saturday Night Live, The Kids in the Hall*, *Chappelle’s Show*, and the *Rick Mercer Report*. All the while feeling awful for disappointing the person asking the question, I awkwardly answer: “No. Sorry. It’s just on stand-up comedy. And, those shows aren’t actually stand-up comedy.” So, although it may be clear to some, I feel it necessary to establish a basic understanding of contemporary stand-up comedy by explaining what distinguishes it from other similar forms of comedic performance.

For the purposes of this dissertation, stand-up comedy may be understood as a performance form in which a single performer stands on a stage and speaks to an audience. For the most part, the monologue is a one-sided, rehearsed conversation that seems improvised and is spoken in a casual manner. Stand-up comedians usually present
a stage persona, most often performing an extension of their own personality, and seek to share their perspectives on topics of their choice. Most stand-up comedians perform original material that they have developed for themselves. The majority of stand-up comedy content aims to be humorous and evoke laughter from the audience.

Live stand-up comedy is performed in a wide range of venues: from historic theatres and sports arenas to small restaurants, coffee shops, and comedy clubs. Based on the range of performance spaces, the identifying feature of stand-up comedy is not the location of performance but its specific attributes that make it a subgenre of solo performance. Having acknowledged that, the term stand-up comedy is often considered the same as comedic theatrical solo performance, vaudeville performance, sketch comedy, and sit-down comedy. The following discusses stand-up comedy in relation to each of those forms. Additionally, it introduces the idea of “post-stand-up comedy,” which has emerged in the form of YouTube comedy.

**Stand-Up Comedy vs. Comedic Theatrical Solo Performance**

Theatrical solo performance that belongs to the comedy genre and stand-up comedy differ in a number of ways. A solo performance usually includes the design elements of sound, costume, and lighting throughout the performance. Conversely, in a performance of stand-up comedy: music is played when the stand-up comedian enters and exits, stand-up comedians usually wear their own clothes, and the lighting design serves the practical purpose of illuminating the stand-up comedian on the stage. Of course all of these aspects can be read “as performance” since they seek to promote the idea of the improvised and un rehearsed. In the theatre, all aspects of design ideally aim to communicate something to the audience or to promote the director’s conception of the
work. In other words, in theatre, more complex ideas are being communicated through design than the general promotion of the illusions of improvisation and the signs of the live performance.

A solo performer in theatre also frequently plays a character (even if that character is autobiographical) or several characters and “becomes” those characters. A stand-up comedian, on the other hand, will imitate or mimic the accents of others, or what other people in their stories said or did, in a very Brechtian fashion. By Brechtian, I mean that the stand-up comedian remains in his or her primary stage persona – usually an extension of his or her own personality and individual identity – and “quotes” the other characters rather than “becoming” them.

Moreover, a solo performance in theatre often has a fixed written text that remains consistent across performances. There is a degree of re-writing when a new show is developed but once the workshop stage is complete the written text is established and, usually, it is not intentionally altered. In contrast, the emphasis in stand-up comedy is placed on the performance text, which actively promotes the feeling of improvisation by including improvised bits between and during rehearsed bits. A stand-up comedian’s routine is comprised of bits or short monologues focused on a particular topic; these can be rearranged, cut, or extended depending on both audience composition and audience reception. Often, improvised bits occur during the stand-up comedian’s interactions with the audience. Due to the use of improvisation, there is usually a lack of consistency across longer performances of live stand-up comedy even though rehearsed bits do become rather fixed once perfected.
Another difference is that, in the theatre, the same material is frequently performed by different actors because of the primacy of the written text and the publication of scripts. A contemporary stand-up comedy routine is not reproduced in writing for the purpose of distribution by the performer and is usually only performed by the stand-up comedian who created or first performed the material. This distinction is furthered since solo plays are published and available for purchase. Playwrights profit when actors perform their work since royalties must be paid.

Alternately, sales of stand-up comedy material are always tied to the stand-up comedian performing that material. The idea of stand-up comedians performing the material of other stand-up comedians is completely unacceptable and those who have done so are considered thieves (e.g. Milton Berle was known as “The Thief of Bad Gags” (Berger 7)). Stand-up comedy material can be stolen due to the lack of a written text, which means that live stand-up comedy performances cannot be copyrighted: “A performance that exists for no more than a transitory period is neither a publication nor protectable under copyright, and therefore cannot be owned as intellectual property” (Auslander 133). Stand-up comedy further differs from solo performance in theatre since it is not possible for stand-up comedians to protect or profit from the reproduction of their work as a written text in the manner that playwrights do.

The concept-driven design, the varied character depictions, and the production and circulation of a written text combine to construct a frame of theatricality, which is present in comedic solo performances created for the theatre. The frame of theatricality produced by these elements is most often observed in theatre spaces and, for that reason, stand-up comedy performances can borrow the frame of theatricality simply by taking
place in the theatre. Borrowing the frame of theatricality is advantageous because it allows the cultural economy of stand-up comedy to align with the cultural economy of the theatre. The overlapping of location allows stand-up comedy to borrow the theatre’s expectations regarding: audience etiquette, audience participation, ticket prices, and performance length.

Furthermore, performances of stand-up comedy that use the frame of theatricality can professionalize and institutionalize stand-up comedy, which contributes to stand-up comedy being elevated socially as it is regarded as an art form. Ultimately, while the occasional overlap in location can cause stand-up comedy and comedic theatrical solo performance to be viewed as interchangeable, the difference between the two is based on the elements that construct the frame of theatricality. Therefore, the difference between stand-up comedy and theatrical comedic solo performance is in practice, despite similarities in their venues, their use of a single performer on stage speaking to an audience, and their aims to make audiences laugh.

**Stand-Up Comedy vs. Vaudeville**

The jokes of contemporary stand-up comedians differ from the jokes of nineteenth-century vaudeville (or variety show) performers on the level of content and the importance placed on originality. Vaudeville performers’ jokes were generic since material was often bought, borrowed, or stolen rather than created (Clark 39). Regarding the lack of originality, jokes told by vaudevillians were usually not specific to the performer and could be told by any performer. Vaudeville emphasized how the performer told a joke rather than the joke’s content or originality. In contrast, stand-up comedians’ monologues are very specific to their stage personas, an extension of their own
personalities, grounded in their own experiences, and therefore often only “work” when
the stand-up comedian performs his or her own jokes.

Considering form, telling jokes was not the sole focus of the vaudeville or variety
show since jokes were told between magic tricks, juggling, singing, and so on. The
vaudeville performance was not focused on presenting one’s own perspectives in the
format of a one-sided conversation. Having said that, vaudeville performers, such as
Jackie “Moms” Mabley and Redd Foxx, were precursors to contemporary stand-up
comedians. Mabley introduced her views and opinions to her audiences through a stage
persona, which marks a difference between her work and the work of the majority of
contemporary stand-up comedians. She did not play an amplification of her own self but
built a character called “Moms,” based on her grandmother (Bonney 9). Although the
performer shared her worldview, it was through the character of Moms and not the
person behind Jackie Mabley: Loretta Mary Aiken. Moreover, Moms also sang so her
performances were not limited to the style of stand-up comedy.

Stand-Up Comedy vs. Sketch Comedy

Sketch comedy and stand-up comedy are often confused but are the two most
distinct comedic performance forms considered here. In sketch comedy, the performers
put on a scene in which there are usually two or more actors playing distinct characters.
Furthermore, the characters are not necessarily extensions of the performers’
personalities or draw on their lives, experiences, or personal views. There is some variety
within sketch comedy as well since it is sometimes improvised (e.g. Whose Line Is It
Anyway?), rehearsed and performed live (e.g. Saturday Night Live), or, it is filmed,
edited, and presented to a studio audience (e.g. Chappelle’s Show). Despite the varying
nature of the form, performers consistently play characters in short scenes that aim to produce laughter. Furthermore, the audience is usually unacknowledged during the scene (i.e. the fourth wall is maintained) in sketch comedy. Sketch comedy and stand-up comedy may be confused so often because many sketch comedians also perform stand-up comedy and because both forms have a strong presence on television.

**Stand-Up Comedy vs. Sit-Down Comedy**

“Sit-down comedy” refers to the form of comedy that adopts the style of the televised news in order to satirize current events. The performer is often seated behind a desk as if he or she is a newscaster. Sit-down comedy and stand-up comedy differ in two major ways. Firstly, sit-down comedy is primarily made for television audiences since its focus is usually satirizing the televised news (e.g. *Rick Mercer Report*, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, and *The Colbert Report*). Stand-up comedians work to the audience whereas sit-down comedians work to the camera. Stand-up comedy is primarily performed for a live audience; televised stand-up comedy always includes a studio audience that the performer engages with. Even though sit-down comedy often includes a studio audience as well, the performer does not directly engage with studio audiences and is really performing for television audiences. Secondly, stand-up comedians become known on a personal level: their personal views and often their personal lives. Stand-up comedy is often viewed as therapeutic and cathartic due to this sharing of the private within the public sphere. Sit-down comedy critiques society but does not offer much in the way of the personal, private, and autobiographical. Sit-down comedians, like news anchors, remain strangers or acquaintances to their audiences while stand-up comedians reveal enough to be thought of as friends.
Comedic Vlogs/Direct YouTube Comedy/Post-Stand-Up Comedy

In addition to these performance forms, comedy on YouTube has developed into what I perceive as post-stand-up comedy. The content and casual style of delivery in these vlogs (i.e. video blogs) is in keeping with the performance of stand-up comedy but YouTube’s mediatization alters other identifying features of stand-up comedy. The reason for this is that YouTube’s para-performance reproduces features of live performance so that the vlog style (later referred to as direct YouTube stand-up comedy) eliminates the signs of live performance. Signs of live performance such as stages, curtains, and studio audiences, which are consistently present in stand-up comedy on TV and film are unnecessary on YouTube. Since audience impact, ephemerality, and dialogue are the most significant features of live stand-up comedy, and are reproduced on YouTube, the signs of live performance can be eliminated. Because the illusion of live performance is unnecessary in the face of the features of live performance, these YouTube videos include elements that differ from stand-up comedy on other platforms.

YouTube personality Jenna Marbles exemplifies the YouTube comedian. Although she has professionalized herself as a YouTube performer, amateur performers often use the vlog style of comedy. Jenna Marbles’ videos consist of her delivering a casual talk to the camera (and therefore to cyber-audiences) in a comedic way. Her content is very much in keeping with the content of stand-up comedy but she also deviates from its form through her use of make-up, costume, and video editing. For example, in “What Nicki Minaj Wants In A Man,” Jenna Marbles uses costume and make-up as she wears a pink wig, heavy make-up, butt padding, and a fake tan. The use of props isn’t unheard of in traditional stand-up comedy (i.e. prop comedians) but it is
thought of as a less pure version of the form. Moreover, the prop is usually used in the punchline in stand-up comedy whereas Jenna Marbles uses her costume throughout her performance. Jenna Marbles deviates from stand-up comedy as her videos include the following non-traditional elements: a sitting posture, obvious editing, costumes, multiple locations, and a second performer. With all of the differing elements found in vlogs it may seem that a new performance form has emerged altogether but when the content of these videos is considered, the individual videos are strikingly similar to the bits that make up a stand-up comedy performance. Of the forms considered above, the vlog is most like stand-up comedy in its content and therefore will be discussed in this dissertation.

**The Emergence of Live Stand-Up Comedy in North America**

The history of contemporary stand-up comedy can be thought of as two, overlapping strains: live stand-up comedy and mediatized stand-up comedy. Historically, live stand-up comedy can be traced back, in its most basic definition as an oral form of entertainment, to the second century AD. According to Joanne R. Gilbert, “The tradition of professional fools, which dates back to ancient Greek and Egyptian civilizations and flowered in the persona of the medieval court jester, ultimately spawned the contemporary stand-up comic” (44). Gilbert concisely traces the path of the comedic performer through ancient Greece; “Italy during the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance” (45) (where comedians were elevated from buffoons to fools who gained patrons); and then to eighteenth-century vaudeville prototypes in the form of British music hall, which “influenced burlesque and early American minstrel shows” (46).
The minstrel show, which emerged in the 1830s, used a standard three-act format by the late-1850s: the walk-around, the olio or variety segment, and the slapstick plantation sketch (Watkins, *Real Side* 89). The variety segment included a stump speech in which a lone comic stood up and “delivered a discourse that ranged from pure nonsense to supposedly serious lectures on some social or philosophical issue” (Watkins, *Real Side* 92). As Mel Watkins describes it, the stump speech is very similar to contemporary stand-up comedy, however it can’t be considered what Robert A. Stebbins dubs “pure stand-up” (4). The first pure stand-up comedian, according to Stebbins, was Charlie Case who began the unusual practice of “telling jokes and funny stories onstage without props” from the 1880s to the 1890s on the vaudeville stage (7). Both the minstrel show and vaudeville entertainment declined and were widely considered dead in terms of stage performance by the 1930s, at which time they migrated to radio and film. Thus, the decline of the vaudeville stage coincided with the technological advances of commercially licensed radio in 1920, network radio in 1926, and sound films in 1929.

The 1930s marked the rise of nightclubs and the Borscht Belt resort area located in the Catskills; “ninety miles from Manhattan, [the Catskills] prospered, aided by its overworked comics” (Berger 11). Phil Berger writes, “The Catskill comic went all day long. He jumped fully-clothed into swimming pools, kibbitzed card games, led social nights and occasionally did jokes. … For this, he got two hundred and fifty dollars for the summer, sweatshop wages that kept old pros from working there,” and resulted in the Catskills of the 1930s being a training ground for amateur performers (11). These performers were known as “toomlers,” from the English word “tumulting” (Berger 11),
or, as *tummlers*, “a Yiddish word for the manic, all-purpose entertainers who were the mainsprings of these resorts” (Kanfer 6).

In the 1940s, coffee houses in “bohemian sectors like Greenwich Village” became contemporary comedy club prototypes (Gilbert 46). According to Gilbert, these coffeehouses “began the tradition we know today as stand-up comedy” (46). That tradition was further cultivated in the 1950s with the emergence of New Wave Comedy, in which comedians strived to develop their own material in longer and more connected units (Stebbins 9). According to Watkins, contemporary stand-up comedy in North America emerged in 1953 with Mort Sahl\(^1\) at San Francisco’s the hungry i (*Real Side* 481). Sahl broke from his vaudevillian precursors as he adopted “the stand-up comedy model for his entire act” (Daube 6), and shifted the focus from the model of a clearly rehearsed performance to a seemingly improvised and casual talk as he shared “his interior monologue” riddled with colloquialisms (7). Although he is rightfully considered the pioneer of contemporary stand-up comedy, it is my contention that the changes Sahl adopted were the result of an inevitable adaptation in response to changing material conditions in the form of technological advances.

**The Emergence of Mediatized Stand-Up Comedy in North America**

Respectively, radio and television were the first mediums to host stand-up comedy. The rising popularity of commercially licensed radio, introduced in 1920 (Watkins, *Real Side* 267), and television, which “eclipse[d] radio” and “became a national phenomenon in the mid-fifties” (300) resulted in vaudeville comedy (i.e. the

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\(^1\) Sahl is considered to be the first contemporary stand-up comedian but he alone is not responsible for the form and content of contemporary stand-up comedy. Lenny Bruce, Dick Gregory, Bill Cosby, Richard Pryor, and many others also contributed to its development and established the form’s popularity. See Daube (2009) and Zoglin (2008).
precursor to live stand-up comedy) becoming unsustainable. The wide reach and accessibility of radio and television resulted in a constant demand for new material (Clark 38). Due to the national reach of radio and television, stand-up comedians were compelled to engage with topics that were familiar and relevant to North American audiences and not limited to local communities. The need for universal topics that were consistently original resulted in stand-up comedians using personal experiences to make points about broader issues that could be related to by their audiences.

There are two streams of production, distribution, and reception in relation to the mediatization of stand-up comedy: the audio-visual and the audio. The progress of the audio stream is radio, long-playing records, compact discs, satellite radio, and podcasts. The progress of the audio-visual stream is TV, VHS, DVD, YouTube, and Netflix. Of course, these two streams are not clearly divided and overlap does exist (e.g. a YouTube video that is only audio). This dissertation examines the audio-visual stream because stand-up comedy, as traced back to Mort Sahl, was live and therefore contained a visual component. Stand-up comedy is also impacted by this visual component so rather than focusing on verbal content alone, one’s image complicates the content, which leads to comedy that concentrates on the individual and his or her community. The underlying discussion of race throughout the dissertation also makes audio-visual mediatizations of stand-up comedy more suitable than audio-only mediatizations of stand-up comedy since racial markers are primarily visual. For those reasons, the following discusses the emergence of audio-visual mediatizations of stand-up comedy.

The popularity of mediatized stand-up comedy was developed on the late-night talk show: *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* (1962-1992). *The Tonight Show*
provided a platform for stand-up comedians to reach national audiences of twenty million
viewers while Carson’s approval helped establish some of the biggest names in comedy:
Eddie Murphy, Jerry Seinfeld, Ellen Degeneres, Joan Rivers, Jay Leno, David Letterman,
Jim Carrey, and countless more (*American Masters*). Carson’s opening monologues
demonstrated his comedic ability and thus lent his opinion, his laughter, and his
acceptance – in the form of a thumbs up or a wave over to his couch – a certain weight
and validity. Talking about Carson, Jay Leno states:

> I learned from Johnny, just from watching him, that putting a monologue together is a bit like putting a newspaper together. You open with the big story of the day. Everybody’s talking about “X,” so your opening joke is about “X.” And then as you move through the newspaper, you get into politics, sports, weather. (*American Masters*)

The late-night talk show thus introduced stand-up comedians in an audio-visual medium
to national audiences and provided stand-up comedy with consistency in terms of form
and topics on the television platform.

Following the late-night talk show, “In December 1975, HBO broadcast its first
live concert-length performance of stand-up comedy, featuring Robert Klein at Haverford
College” (Stebbins 11). Televised concerts were also produced as serialized television
shows that are usually only half an hour in length. An important example of this is the
Canadian TV series *Comedy Now!*, which is broadcast by The Comedy Network and
CTV in Canada, and Comedy Central in the United States. Created by Sandra Faire,
*Comedy Now!* debuted in 1997 and has currently completed fifteen seasons. The show
introduces stand-up comedians, who generally have a wealth of experience performing
live but are new to TV. *Comedy Now!* offers professional amateurs, often called Pro-Am’s, experience performing on a mediatized platform that reaches North American
home audiences. The national exposure, accessed through the late-night talk show and televised comedy concerts, impacted stand-up comedy’s development and resulted in a clear idea of the form and content of mediatized stand-up comedy that appealed to Anglophone North American audiences.

Following the mediatization of stand-up comedy on TV, the form was mediatized on film. According to Zoglin, the comedy concert film was refined in 1979 with “Richard Pryor: Live in Concert [which] cost almost nothing to make and grossed fifteen million dollars at the box office, becoming the model for virtually every comedy concert film to follow” (60). The film medium showcases professional stand-up comedians whereas television shows, such as Comedy Now!, capitalize on amateur stand-up comedians who are still honing their craft in exchange for a platform that reaches a wider audience and potential fan base. Films perform for, what Elizabeth Ludwig refers to as, a “constituency audience” (71). In my understanding of Ludwig’s term, such an audience is comprised of fans of the stand-up comedian, his or her type of comedy, or his or her views on taboo issues such as race relations, sexuality, and politics. In a sense, stand-up comedians and their constituency audiences form an interpretive community. Stand-up comedians use their familiarity with that community to communicate with their audiences fluently and thereby produce comedy. The differences between audiences cause stand-up comedy on film to be more specialized and use more specific frames of reference than stand-up comedy on TV. Finally, the emergence of YouTube allowed amateur stand-up comedians an opportunity to reach even wider audiences than TV and film allow for. Stand-up comedy on YouTube has evolved to a degree that it possesses its own characteristics and therefore may be referred to as post-stand-up comedy.
An Argument for Mediatized Stand-Up Comedy

My dissertation considers mediatized stand-up comedy in particular because these adaptations of the live performance form are often overlooked. The existing critical study of stand-up comedy frequently considers live and mediatized versions as if they are the same. The lack of distinction between the two, coupled with the lack of investigation into mediatized performances of a traditionally live form, is problematic given our society’s increasingly complex and extensive relationship with technology. We are living in a moment when the boundaries between real space and mediated space are increasingly blurred. For example, a friend recently told me a story of a two-year-old child who was attempting to zoom in on the pages of a magazine, as if she were looking at the magazine on an iPad. I feel that we have fundamentally changed, in the span of a generation, not just how we understand liveness but how we interact with each other and the world.

When something so fundamental has altered I believe it is essential to investigate and comprehend those changes and what they mean for us as a society. Considering these changes by exploring the mediatization of stand-up comedy makes it possible to comprehend an exceedingly complex matter through accessible objects of study that have a dominant presence in our popular culture.

Furthermore, focusing on audio-visual mediatizations of stand-up comedy offers a number of advantages. Firstly, it allows for consistency between the objects of study and live stand-up comedy since they include both visual and audio elements. Secondly, studying mediatized stand-up comedy provides insight into technology’s impact on audiences’ responses due to various kinds of liveness rather than to live performance (or, “classic liveness”) alone. Thirdly, considering elements of the para-performance in
mediatized stand-up comedy offers comprehensive coverage of the various aspects that comprise a mediatization, and influence audience perception, beyond the performance proper. Finally, mediatized versions of stand-up comedy, unlike live stand-up comedy, perform from the same positions of power as that which upholds current hegemonic power structures. While a degree of cultural capital is attached to live stand-up comedy, the stand-up comedians who are most critical of society continue to find ways to access media platforms that reach wider audiences. Thus, I argue that stand-up comedians mediatize their work for reasons of power rather than reasons of economic capital alone.

**My Subject Position & My Reasons For Studying Stand-Up Comedy**

Despite the many forms of stand-up comedy, both live and mediatized, the critical exploration of stand-up comedy often couples it with other comedic forms. These associations to other forms make it seem that stand-up comedy is insufficiently complex or important enough to discuss alone, which is a perspective that I don’t share. I contend that stand-up comedy has yet to gain critical attention because its mediatization has branded it as “popular culture” and that in itself functions to dissipate and obscure its power. Stand-up comedy’s power is dissipated because many working stand-up comedians do not treat the performance form as a stage for marginalized voices to perform politically charged discourse. Stand-up comedians use the performance form for diverse purposes (e.g. a means to an acting career, therapy, a hobby, etc.), which means the form isn’t immediately thought of as having influence over audiences. Meanwhile, stand-up comedy’s power is obscured as stand-up comedians who are organic intellectuals (i.e. they treat the performance form as a stage for marginalized voices to perform politically charged discourse) are aligned with stand-up comedians who are not
organic intellectuals. Such an alignment makes stand-up comedians who are organic intellectuals appear unthreatening to the status quo. Stand-up comedy’s apparent lack of threat – evident in its improvised aesthetic, its casual delivery, and the resounding proclamation that “it’s just jokes” – is essential to its function to critique society, its function to challenge dominant ideologies, and its function to enact dissidence. Thus, stand-up comedy’s branding as “popular culture” helpfully distracts from its ability to perform dissidence, its power, and its potential to incite change.

Perhaps it is inappropriate, or decidedly non-academic, to be overly personal when it comes to the choice of topic for one’s dissertation. It would, however, be dishonest of me to state that my focus on stand-up comedy was a stroke of academic brilliance, in which I saw a scholarly gap that I could fill, on a topic that was gaining attention in academia, and thereby position myself strategically to gain a tenure-track position. I am uncertain that the scholarly investigation of stand-up comedy in particular, the performance form itself, or the field of performance studies in general will be impacted by my words. What I am certain of is that my exploration of stand-up comedy is the product of a compulsion. A compulsion that was based on a desire to study what the people I know, people like me, actually watch. A compulsion that was based on a desire to see performers who look like me and like my friends – all of my friends. A compulsion that was based on a desire to hear stories that my friends and I could relate to through laughter because there is a great deal of power in laughter.

In laughter, I see the kind of power that could topple imaginary empires. The following quote has resonated with me throughout my writing:

We conventionally consider comedy a gay and light-hearted form of art, …. I am proposing instead, to regard misery as
the basis of comedy and gaiety as an ever-recurring transcendence. Seen in this way, comedy, like tragedy, is a way of trying to cope with despair, mental suffering, guilt, and anxiety. But not the same way. (Eric Bentley qtd. in Rozik 194)

I interpret Bentley’s words to mean that laughter both signifies that something is wrong and offers a way to carry on despite all that is wrong. Moreover, as Henri Bergson writes, “In laughter we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate, and consequently to correct our neighbour, if not in his will, at least in his deed” (n.p.). Thus, viewing laughter as performing the function of a social corrective leads me to believe that it is a very powerful weapon, which has the potential to correct power imbalances that result in oppression by revealing their existence.

Stand-up comedy gives marginalized performers a position in the mainstream where they can be individuals in ways that feel authentic to them as performers. Stand-up comedy provides mainstream audiences with complex representations of individuals who are so rarely represented in popular culture and, when they are, they are so often represented in stereotypical and negative ways. Aziz Ansari puts the issue of racial representation concisely and humorously in his comedy special, *Intimate Moments for a Sensual Evening* (2009), in which he states:

> I was doing an interview once, and this guy goes, “So you must be pretty psyched about all this *Slumdog Millionaire* stuff?” And I was like, “Um, yeah, I am. I have no idea why though. I had nothing to do with that movie. It’s just some people that kind of look like me are in this movie that everyone loves and winning Oscars and stuff.” And then I was like, “Whoa, whoa, whoa. Are White people just psyched all the time?” It’s like, “*Back to the Future!* That’s us! *Godfather!* That’s us! *Godfather Part II!* That’s us! *Departed!* That’s us! *Sunset Boulevard!* That’s us! *Citizen Kane!* That’s us! *Jaws!* That’s us! *Every fucking movie BUT Slumdog Millionaire and Boyz n the Hood* is US! WE ARE
WHITE PEOPLE! SUCK OUR DICKS!”

The bit comments on racial inequalities in popular culture representations and the exclusionary affect of that inequality on racially marginalized people. Moreover, it demonstrates the normalization of that inequality, which obscures those feelings of exclusion until a paradigm shift is experienced that allows the individual to feel inclusion. There is also something to be said about the specific film that Ansari picks here since *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) was popular amongst global and mainstream audiences and was not limited to constituency audiences or an Indian diasporic community.

The discussion of race throughout this dissertation necessitates an explanation of my subject position. As someone who immigrated to Canada from India at the age of three, I identify myself as a 1.5 generation immigrant. As Rubén Rumbaut explains, “The term ‘one-and-a-half’ or ‘1.5 generation’ distinguishes those who immigrate as children from the ‘first’ generation of immigrants who migrate as adults and the ‘second’ generation of native-born persons of foreign parentage” (1). While I have encountered racism it is often in the form of comments I receive and the kinds of questions I am asked rather than denials of opportunity or acts of violence. I have clearly been able to do my doctoral studies on a topic of my choice despite my race and gender (perhaps those aspects even worked in my favour). Regardless, I consider myself in a position of some privilege given my education and socioeconomic status. I do not view the privilege that I have as a free pass that allows me to talk about a variety of marginalized voices and the majority voice. I view the privilege that I have as a responsibility to write about marginalized voices, the majority voice, and the power structures that continue to perform the dominant narratives of oppression in ever subtler forms in our popular
representations. And, in my attempt to meet my responsibility, I can only hope to add my voice in a way that reveals the important dissident function that stand-up comedy can perform when it is at its best.

It is imperative to place scholarly attention on performance forms that exist in popular culture and that both minority groups as well as the majority group access and are represented on. Critically viewing such materials across groups of race and gender as well as across media platforms can expose how power is negotiated, reveal the landscape of existing power structures, and offer opportunities to alter inequalities in representation that bolster oppressive power structures.

**Positioning the Dissertation within Performance Studies**

This dissertation draws on many disciplines (primarily theatre studies, cultural studies, and media studies), and therefore would be best categorized under performance studies since the field is interdisciplinary. As Richard Schechner writes: “Performance studies draws on and synthesizes approaches from a wide variety of disciplines in the social sciences, feminist studies, gender studies, history, psychoanalysis, queer theory, semiotics, ethology, cybernetics, area studies, media and popular culture theory, and cultural studies” (2). My exploration of stand-up comedy certainly uses many of these approaches but not because I was attempting to produce a “performance studies” dissertation and check off as many disciplines as possible. Rather, my employment of any approach or disciplinary focus was a result of what arose during my close reading of my objects of study. Of course, that which arose in my close readings was most certainly a result of my subject position, which produced a focus on race and gender.
While the breadth of performance studies may be viewed as problematic, I believe it made my dissertation possible. Fundamentally, while the desire to categorize and separate kinds of performance might increase the depth of analysis, it also confines exploration. For example, my dissertation does not neatly fall under theatre studies or media studies. Moreover, being able to look at stand-up comedy through a performance lens makes other aspects of the performance (i.e. the para-performance) equal in importance to the performance proper. Considering the performance of stand-up comedy from the perspective that “any everyday process … can be staged as a theatrical event” (Bennett 10), elevates all aspects of the performance, which allows for the close reading of several factors of performance that are tied to its contextualization; such an approach offers a more complete understanding of underlying power structures. The view of performance as everyday and context-dependent evokes Schechner’s view of performance: “any action that is framed, presented, highlighted, or displayed is a performance” (2). Looking beyond the vast purview of that definition of performance, which can regard all action as performance depending on the context, it is important to note that the term “performance studies” carries certain meanings.

The field of performance studies is so large that attempting to address how all of its core concepts relate to stand-up comedy in general or my dissertation in particular is beyond the scope of this introduction. Still, the view of performance as ritual and performativity are concepts worth mentioning here. Schechner’s focus on performance is grounded in the idea of “ritualized gestures and sounds” (45). Schechner’s initial work was with Victor Turner, which resulted in performance studies being influenced by anthropology. Schechner’s development of performance studies viewed performance as
sacred or secular rituals (although the line between them is permeable). Rituals extend beyond the religious rituals that are likely to first spring to mind. Schechner explains, “There are religious rituals, the rituals of everyday life, the rituals of life roles, the rituals of each profession, the rituals of politics, business, and the judicial system” (45). Thus, when it comes to my dissertation, I concentrate on the rituals of stand-up comedy, of theatrical and media practices, and of audiences.

While Schechner’s concentration is on performance as ritual, J.L. Austin and Judith Butler introduce the concepts of the performative and performativity. A performative describes utterances that perform acts (e.g. promises, bets, curses, contracts, and judgments) (Schechner 110). Performatives thus produce social constructs, such as gender and race (Schechner 142). Performativity is a very broad term, which includes performatives within it, and can be applied to most anything that is viewed “as performance” (Schechner 142). The focus on performance as ritual, the concept of performatives, and the concept of performativity are relevant to my study of stand-up comedy, which considers the ritualized gestures of stand-up comedy, the significance of race and gender, and views aspects of the para-performance “as performance.”

I consider performance through the ritualized actions associated with live stand-up comedy but I also view the performance of various aspects that arise from the mediatization of stand-up comedy. These aspects include: interviews, grouping, titles, cover images, architecture, and audiences. After all, “Performance studies does not study texts, architecture, visual arts, or any other item or artifact of art or culture as such. When texts, architecture, visual arts, or anything else are looked at, they are studied ‘as’ performances” (Schechner 2). If stand-up comedy is the performance proper then all that
arises due to the intention and/or execution of that performance exists within the para-performance and can be studied as performance.

I use the term “performance proper” to acknowledge that the stand-up comedy routine in itself has certain rituals of structure and function attached to it that make it fit into the category of that performance form properly. Moreover, I use the term “para-performance” since, according to the OED, “para” means “‘by the side of, beside’, hence ‘alongside of, by, past, beyond’,” (“para-”). Thus, the term does not position that which belongs to the para-performance as subordinate to the performance proper. The para-performance moves away from the intention to entertain that exists in the performance proper of stand-up comedy. The performance proper is the routine while the para-performance is all that results from the intention of producing and/or the actual production of the performance proper. In short, I investigate how the performance proper and various aspects of the para-performance negotiate power. Those power negotiations ultimately make it possible for stand-up comedians to enact dissidence that has the potential to produce social change. Social change arises from changes made in popular representation as well as changes made to the perspectives of audiences.

**Theoretical Approaches**

The dissertation is in conversation with a number of theorists. It draws most strongly on the following: Gerrard Genette’s paratext, Pierre Bourdieu’s forms of capital, Margaret M. Russell’s dominant gaze, and Philip Auslander’s liveness. Moreover, it discusses power as defined by Antonio Gramsci as well as Michel Foucault. These concepts are briefly introduced below.
Introducing the Paratext & the Para-Performance

The para-performance can be understood through Genette’s idea of the paratext. Genette views the paratext as comprised of features such as “an author’s name, a title, a preface, [and] illustrations” (1). The paratext is comprised of that which surrounds and adorns the main text (Genette 1). Similarly, the para-performance refers to all that arises as a result of the intention and/or execution of a performance. Examples of para-performance elements include but are not limited to the following: interviews with the performers; the grouping of performers; the titling of shows, episodes, or specials; the cover images of film specials; the architecture of the performance space; and, finally, the audiences’ impact, reception, and interaction with other audience members, the performance, and the performer. A para-performance analysis reads such elements “as performance” specifically when those elements arise out of the intention and/or execution of the performance proper. The performance proper refers to what may be viewed as performance in a more traditional sense (e.g. presentations for the purpose of entertaining an audience).

Introducing the Forms of Capital

Bourdieu’s work on the forms of capital is employed to assess the advantages of each media platform. He explains that there are three forms of capital: economic, social, and cultural. Economic capital occurs as property rights and liquid assets; social capital occurs in the form of connections; and cultural capital occurs as institutionalized (i.e. education and skills), objectified (i.e. cultural products), or embodied (i.e. social conditioning) (Bourdieu 47). Considering social capital and cultural capital in addition to economic capital allows for better comprehension of the power to be gained on each
media platform. Using the forms of capital in this way provides a deeper understanding of the choices made by amateur and professional stand-up comedians in regards to the platforms they choose to perform on.

**Introducing the Dominant Gaze**

In Russell’s discussion of racial representation in film, she develops the concept of the dominant gaze to explain the stereotypical representations of racialized characters. Russell builds on feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze. Mulvey argues that classical Hollywood filmmakers have the action on screen appeal to the masculinized spectator in two ways: scopophilia and ego libido (187); the first is “pleasure in looking” (186) while the second is a form of narcissism in which the masculinized spectator identifies with the male hero. The male gaze thus positions men as active spectators with power while it positions women as passive objects that connote “to-be-looked-at-ness” (188). Russell moves from a feminist lens to a critical race lens in relation to the gaze. She defines the dominant gaze as “the tendency of mainstream culture to replicate, through narrative and imagery, racial inequalities and biases which exist throughout society” (244). The dissertation argues that familiarity with the dominant gaze can allow stand-up comedians to expose the gaze and thereby positively reconfigure racial stereotypes.

**Introducing Liveness**

Auslander’s concept of liveness replaces the binary understanding of a performance event as either live or recorded with a spectrum of liveness. Auslander’s work focuses on the live event that has been overtaken by media technology. In contrast, I consider how mediatized events reproduce either the signs or the features of the live
event. I also explore why mediatized events do this in relation to power. As a result of the para-performance analysis of liveness, I develop the concept of the unlive, which furthers Auslander’s engagement with liveness by engaging in a more extensive consideration of the performance event in cyberspace.

*Introducing Power*

Gramsci’s and Foucault’s notions of power contend “that power can be manipulated by everyone – even those most socially and economically disadvantaged” (Kazubowski-Houston 179). For Gramsci, “power – which he refers to as hegemony – achieves and sustains structures of domination in society by means of various ideologies and practices that make a certain social order seem inevitable. The ideology and practices of the dominant group usually support hegemony and are accepted by subordinate groups as common sense” (Kazubowski-Houston 24). For Foucault, power is “a complex network of domination supported by a multitude of processes, institutions, and organizations in which we are all bound. For Foucault, hegemonic discourses in society – dominant ideologies – are truisms accepted by the majority as infallible” (Kazubowski-Houston 24).

These theorists see the potential for resistance through the ability to challenge common sense. In Gramsci’s view, such “popular knowledge” is “accepted by ordinary people unconsciously through socialization” as a result of “coercion, consent, and force” (Kazubowski-Houston 24). In Foucault’s view, common sense is “ingrained in individuals’ actions and attitudes” (Kazubowski-Houston 180). Gramsci also explains that “people can subvert hegemony through public debate and social action that contest common sense knowledge” (Kazubowski-Houston 24) while Foucault explains that
“resistance depends not only on organized acts of rebellion but also on people’s everyday acts of subversion and manipulation of power” (24). The dissertation is founded on the belief that when it is at its best, stand-up comedy can perform resistance due to the stand-up comedian’s role as an organic intellectual. The stand-up comedian assists audiences in challenging common sense, and by altering popular knowledge the stand-up comedian can alter individuals’ actions and attitudes.

Organic intellectuals differ from traditional intellectuals because they “are distinguished less by their profession, which may be any job characteristic of their class, than by their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong” (Gramsci 131). In relation to stand-up comedy:

The comedian is particularly well positioned to serve as an organic intellectual, capable of satirically challenging the hegemonic common sense that exists around issues of race, gender, religion, etc. Comedians like Chris Rock, Paul Mooney, Russell Peters, Margaret Cho, and Dean Obeidallah are a few examples of organic intellectuals who challenge the stereotypes and common sense beliefs held about their respective ethnic groups. At the same time, they communicate to their own communities the worldviews expressed by the ruling class in order to achieve, through parody and satire, a relational equilibrium between both sectors of influence. (Amarasingam 120)

The dissertation explores how the figure of the stand-up comedian manipulates power in their performances in order to challenge dominant and oppressive ideologies (i.e. systems of belief and maps of meaning that make sense of the world). If successful, the stand-up comedian performs dissidence and resistance as their performances make fallible that which was once infallible common sense.
Methodological Approaches

The performers that are concentrated on in this dissertation share certain characteristics. Those that are the main focus of analysis are popular and established professionals. The reason for this is that these professionals appear on various media platforms and have the means to access many different media platforms. Thus, their presence or absence is a matter of choice rather than circumstance. When performers can choose their avenues of performance, I view it as a negotiation of power. In turn, those who are unable to choose their platforms are not in a position to negotiate power structures but are being contained by them. The performers I focus on are what I view as rebel commodities. A rebel commodity must be inducted into the very structures he or she seeks to overthrow. Professional stand-up comedians thus perform two contradictory roles: that of a commodity, who works within the ideological apparatus and supports it, and that of a rebel, who critiques and seeks to overthrow it.

The works of the performers chosen have also influenced or innovated the mediatization of stand-up comedy either within the performance proper or within the para-performance. For example, George Carlin influenced the censorship of stand-up comedy through the mediatization of his comedy specials for HBO. Likewise, even though it is limited to his own work, Russell Peters innovated the para-performance element of audience representation through the mediatization of his comedy specials for film. In addition to individual performers, Comedy Now! is an object of study. It is a popular Canadian stand-up comedy TV shows that has been running since 1997. Comedy Now! adapts the style of HBO specials to television in terms of both content and form. It
therefore offers a broad sample of mediatized stand-up comedy in Canada over a significant period of time, which can be analyzed through the lenses of race and gender.

One performer that I regret is not explored and analyzed more closely here is Chris Rock. I perceive Rock to be one of the most interesting and influential stand-up comedians of our time. His discussions of race relations in America are deeply insightful and his stand-up comedy special *Kill The Messenger* (2008) is highly innovative in its mediatization. Rock’s HBO special edits together performances from three live shows: London, England; Gauteng, South Africa; and New York, USA. Moreover, Rock wears different clothes in each one and edits the raw material to show the consistency (i.e. the repetition) of his live performances. His approach assaults the illusion of liveness that stand-up comedy performances so often aim to foster. I do not expand on Rock here because while this instance is fascinating in and of itself, I have not yet observed a repetition of this in other mediatizations of stand-up comedy, including Rock’s own work. For that reason, I view the performance as something to focus on more closely in a future article rather than one that I could fit within the parameters of this dissertation.

It was my aim that my dissertation should, in the end, include the many voices that are present in stand-up comedy. The majority of performances are by those who are marginalized, not necessarily based on their physical characteristics (though this is the case at times), but on their perspectives. I aimed for a multiracial approach to my objects of study. Although, given my own subject position and the relevance of his work to my dissertation, there is a significant focus on Russell Peters throughout the dissertation.

**Chapter Overview**

In this dissertation I focus on TV, film, and YouTube mediatizations of
Anglophone North American stand-up comedy. The aim of this project is to understand how the process of mediatization relates to the negotiation and performance of power in the resulting cultural products. This project provides insight into the direction performance is moving as our society develops an increasingly complex relationship with technology in the areas of work, entertainment, and communications. In order to conduct this exploration I closely analyze popular stand-up comedians on TV, film, and YouTube. The objects of study are investigated through close reading analyses that consider several aspects of the para-performance. Thus, in each chapter, a distinct part of the para-performance is investigated in relation to power. The following section expands on each chapter’s investigation into the performance of stand-up comedy and the negotiation of power that occurs through the para-performances of the objects of study. Moreover, power negotiations in stand-up comedy are examined through the critical lens of race.

Chapter Two considers the commodification of stand-up comedy as it has moved from its live performance to its mediatizations on TV, film, and YouTube through a close look at censorship across those platforms. Power is explored through control over the stand-up comedian’s representation in TV, film, and YouTube mediatizations of stand-up comedy. Power is also considered in relation to the forms of capital in each commodification. The aspects of the para-performance analyzed here are the introduction, interviews, and the disclaimer HBO inserts into George Carlin’s TV special *On Location* (1977). Chapter Two discusses race through the issue of censorship, particularly in relation to the use of the “N”-word by both Black and White stand-up comedians. The discussion of the “N”-word concentrates on the Michael Richards incident at The Laugh Factory, during which he used the word to address members of the
audience during a performance. Chapter Two concludes that TV is the most powerful media platform from which to perform stand-up comedy because performances of televised stand-up comedy directly influenced the form’s relationship to censorship even though film and YouTube allow for a greater degree of uncensored content to be produced.

Chapter Three takes a more direct and in-depth exploration of the para-performance. Here, the focus is on three para-performance aspects: the grouping of performers, the titles of performances, and the images used on the covers of specials. These elements are considered in TV, film, and YouTube mediatizations of stand-up comedy in order to determine how the para-performance can empower or disempower marginalized performers based on the power associations made through citation. The chapter considers the following objects of study: the TV show *Comedy Now!*, the DVDs of Russell Peters and Margaret Cho, as well as the YouTube presence of Jenna Marbles. Chapter Three considers race in conjunction with gender as it focuses on women as well as racially marginalized men. It concludes that although women are disempowered through the associations made in the para-performances of televised stand-up comedy, its access to accidental audiences make it preferable to film and YouTube even though those platforms represent women and racially marginalized men more positively and as individuals. TV is preferable because it positions marginalized voices alongside dominant voices and offers control over representation and audiences, which invests marginalized stand-up comedians with greater power.

Chapter Four discusses the para-performance element of audience representation. It studies how stand-up comedians strategically represent their audiences and use
knowledge of the dominant gaze in order to positively reconfigure racial stereotypes. It argues that control over audience representation, specifically constructing the studio audience as the image of multiracial utopia, allows stand-up comedians to discuss race-based material that surpasses the constraints of the performer’s subject position. Strategic control over the audience’s representation allows the stand-up comedian to construct various groups as superior; manipulating power relations in this way allows one to perform race-based material that most audiences do not perceive as racist. The objects of study are: Russell Peters’ *Comedy Now!* TV specials and his film special *Red, White and Brown*. Chapter Four concludes that although film offers the greatest degree of control over audience representation, the positive reconfiguration of racial stereotypes would be most effective when performed for accidental audiences rather than constituency audiences.

Chapter Five explores the para-performance element of audience-performance interaction in relation to Auslander’s concept of liveness. It also considers the audience-performance interaction through an investigation of live space and cyberspace. Through the discussion of audience-performance interactions in cyberspace, the chapter develops the concept of the unlive space. Power is understood here as the performer’s authority over his or her audiences. The chapter also touches on how race discourse can arise in the para-performance of YouTube in more complex ways than on other platforms but that the performer’s lack of authority also makes the outcome of such discussions uncertain and often results in perpetuating oppressive and harmful narratives. The objects of study are comprised of Russell Peters’ body of work, the Michael Richards incident, and Jenna Marbles’ YouTube video “White Girls At The Club.” TV and film are preferable to
YouTube because they reproduce the signs of liveness while YouTube reproduces the features of liveness, which diminishes the performer’s control over audience impact, authority, and power.

Finally, Chapter Six offers a detailed account of a performance of live stand-up comedy by myself in Guelph. It explores how the concept of the unlive can be applied to the performance of live stand-up comedy. Finally, it provides a brief look into the future of stand-up comedy, performance studies, and performance.

The dissertation investigates the complex power relations that occur as a result of mediatized stand-up comedy being present on multiple media platforms. The dissertation examines power relations through close analysis of various para-performance aspects of mediatized stand-up comedy. I explore those power relations by focusing on stand-up comedians that are enacting dissidence and are, in that sense, marginalized voices. Ultimately, by focusing on stand-up comedians who introduce a marginalized perspective into popular representation, we can observe how they consciously and subconsciously increase or decrease their power through their performances.
Chapter Two: Uncensored:
The Commodification of Stand-Up Comedy

This chapter concentrates on TV, film, and YouTube mediatizations of stand-up comedy. It explores differences in the processes of commodification that each mediatization of stand-up comedy has undergone, and discusses those processes in relation to control over representation. The chapter investigates commodification and representation in relation to the issue of censorship, which was a significant issue in the 1970s when television networks commodified stand-up comedy. In recent years, the issue of censorship has arisen again as a result of stand-up comedy’s commodification on YouTube. This chapter considers the mediatization of stand-up comedy through its commodification and control over representation by concentrating on the issue of censorship on TV, film, and YouTube.

In the mediatization of stand-up comedy for TV, film, and YouTube, the type of commodification influences what or who controls representation, which is manifested here as free speech. Firstly, the commodification of stand-up comedy for TV provides the television network more control over the stand-up comedian’s representation than the stand-up comedian. The networks’ commodification of stand-up comedy for TV provides stand-up comedians with a powerful position from which to reconfigure dominant views, such as those on censorship. Thus, TV’s commodification of stand-up comedy increased free speech for mediatized stand-up comedy in general.

Secondly, the commodification of stand-up comedy for film provides stand-up comedians with more control over their representation than the commodification of
stand-up comedy for TV. The stand-up comedian’s control over self-representation on film is due to the degree of self-commodification that occurs in the medium. Thus, commodification of stand-up comedy on film increased free speech for mediatized stand-up comedy even more than TV since it allowed performances to be highly uncensored or self-censored.

Thirdly, the commodification of stand-up comedy for YouTube provides both the performers as well as the audiences control over the performer’s representation. Although the commodification of stand-up comedy for YouTube is similar to film, there are also instances of censorship on YouTube. In cases of censorship on YouTube, the censors are either the performers themselves (since self-censorship allows performers to reach a broader audience), or the censors are both YouTube users and various media that hold the performers accountable for using what they deem to be obscene language. The influence of the audiences and media have therefore led to stand-up comedians feeling they must censor themselves, even on the live stage. Thus, although it seems that YouTube’s commodification of stand-up comedy should increase free speech, it has actually reintroduced censorship to the performances of both live and mediatized stand-up comedy.

In summation, TV, film, and YouTube stand-up comedy is primarily commodified and controlled by the networks, the performers, and the audiences, respectively. This chapter argues that despite the control that commodification of stand-up comedy for film offers performers over representation, TV still offers stand-up comedians the most powerful position from which to challenge dominant narratives, a point that is exemplified by George Carlin’s challenging of censorship on televised stand-
up comedy. Additionally, while YouTube offers a seemingly uncensored platform to its performers, the medium also transfers a great deal of control to its audiences, which has led to stand-up comedians censoring themselves on the live stage.

My use of “commodification” is based on a Marxist understanding of commodity. Marx describes the commodity as “an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another” (41). Moreover, the OED defines commodification as: “The action of turning something into, or treating something as, a (mere) commodity; commercialization of an activity, etc., that is not by nature commercial” (‘Commodification’). These definitions seem to indicate that live stand-up comedy is a commodity since it “satisfies human wants” for entertainment and social critique, but this is not the case. As Auslander explains, “because live performance cannot be copyrighted, it escapes ownership, commodification, and other processes of regulation within a reproductive capitalist economy” (150-151). Thus, it is through live stand-up comedy’s commercialization through mass mediatization that stand-up comedy is commodified.

The term “representation” refers to the performance’s form and content, and is most often used in relation to determining the individual or institutional control exerted over a performance’s representation. In this chapter, representation refers to censorship in particular. “Censorship” is defined by the OED as: “The office or function of a censor …; official supervision. [And] … control of dramatic production and films” (“Censorship”). The OED explains that a censor is responsible for “inspect[ing] all books, journals, dramatic pieces, etc., before publication, to secure that they shall contain nothing immoral, heretical, or offensive to the government” (“Censor”). This chapter focuses on
censorship that has directly impacted the performance of stand-up comedy, such as the Federal Communications Commission (i.e. in relation to George Carlin) and The Laugh Factory (i.e. in relation to Michael Richards).

Stand-up comedy will also be considered through Pierre Bourdieu’s forms of capital. While the mediatization of stand-up comedy can simplistically be explained as a business strategy, since it generates greater economic revenue, viewing the mediatization of stand-up comedy through Bourdieu’s forms of capital offers a deeper understanding of the complexities underlying decisions related to mediatization. For example, although YouTube offers a means of economic capital the majority of professional stand-up comedians do not use YouTube. This indicates that other forms of capital also influence the mediatization of stand-up comedy. Bourdieu explains that capital can present itself in three fundamental guises: as economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the forms of property rights; as cultural capital, which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications; and as social capital, made up of social obligations (‘connection’), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of a title of nobility. (243)

This chapter examines how the forms of capital function in relation to stand-up comedy on YouTube and explains why professionals choose to perform on TV and film rather than YouTube.

The commodification of stand-up comedy on TV, film, and YouTube, and control over representation in each medium, will be investigated through close reading various case studies in relation to censorship. The TV case study close reads George Carlin’s first HBO special: On Location (1977). The film case study considers the first full-length
feature film containing only stand-up comedy, *Live in Concert* (1979), released by Richard Pryor. And, in regards to YouTube, three cases are studied in relation to censorship: Michael Richards’ performance at The Laugh Factory in 2006; a video of Carlin posted on YouTube by user KuKlutsKat in 2012; as well as the work of YouTube sensation Jenna Marbles. Each case discusses who is in control over the performance’s commodification and representation through the issue of censorship.

The commodification of stand-up comedy impacts its performance in each medium. Moreover, control over representation is directly related to the process of commodification on TV, film, and YouTube. On TV, the networks commodify the live performance so the stand-up comedian must adhere to the network’s models and restrictions rather than his or her creative vision or artistic integrity. The TV networks that commodify stand-up comedy maintain control over the performance’s representation. On film, stand-up comedians commodify the live performance, which makes the stand-up comedian the source of any restrictions. In the commodification of stand-up comedy for film the stand-up comedian is in control of the performance’s representation. On YouTube, commodification is more complex because there are three major commodified forms of stand-up comedy: “live,” “recorded,” and “direct.” Firstly, “Live” YouTube versions of stand-up comedy are commodified by live studio audience members and are later uploaded to YouTube. Secondly, recorded YouTube versions are commodified by YouTube users who take recordings produced for other mediums, such as TV or DVD, and upload them to YouTube. Thirdly, direct YouTube versions of stand-up comedy are commodified by YouTube users who produce, record, and upload their own materials. Therefore, on YouTube, live and cyber-audiences are in control in YouTube’s “live” and
recorded versions (i.e. usually professional stand-up comedy) while YouTube comedians and cyber-audiences are in control in regards to direct versions (i.e. usually amateur stand-up comedy).

The stand-up comedian’s control over the commodification and the representation of mediatized performances is significant because commercialization is often thought to strip a performance of its potential rebellion or dissidence (i.e. the idea of “selling out” holds a clear negative connotation). The control over representation afforded by each form of commodification offers insight into how dissidence can function. Comparison of the three forms of audio-visual stand-up comedy in relation to a specific issue, such as censorship, produces greater understanding of the influence each context has on performance. Understanding the role context plays on the function of stand-up comedy is especially relevant given the hyper-mediatized environment inhabited by contemporary audiences; therefore, it is important to know how the media platform impacts the meanings produced by the performance.

**Censorship in Live & Televised Stand-Up Comedy**

The commodification of stand-up comedy that occurred through its mediatizations on TV, film, and YouTube impacted control over its representation; one manifestation of this control is censorship. Censorship is particularly relevant because it has had, and continues to have, a great influence on the performance of stand-up comedy. The relevance of censorship to stand-up comedy will be explored by focusing on three particular instances.

Firstly, in 1964 Lenny Bruce faced obscenity charges that were instigated by the state in The Cafe au Go Go case, which is also known as *People v. Bruce*. Bruce died in
1966 and was pardoned in 2003 by Governor George Pataki. According to Matthew Daube, “Bruce’s work developed what the performance mode could achieve in terms of articulating heterodox identities and established stand-up as a central free speech zone in the United States” (18-19).

Secondly, in 1973 a radio broadcast aired George Carlin’s “Seven Dirty Words” routine, which includes the following words: “shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, tits” (On Location). This resulted in the Federal Communications Commission v. Pacifica Foundation case, which impacted Carlin’s first HBO television special in 1978. The Pacifica Foundation, HBO, and Carlin ultimately introduced free speech into mediatized performances of stand-up comedy.

And thirdly, in 2006 Michael Richards’ utterance of the word “nigger” resulted in The Laugh Factory banning the use of the word on their stage. The Laugh Factory fines and bans those who use the “N”-word; the first example of this is Damon Wayans, a popular comedian who is Black. Wayans was banned from The Laugh Factory for three months and “fined $320 ($20 for each offence)” (“The History”). The Richards incident demonstrates a reintroduction of censorship to live performances due to the inability to censor Internet communications and an inability to prevent live performances from entering into the economy of repetition.

On TV, networks commodify stand-up comedy and control its representation so that stand-up comedians must conform to those restrictions. The decreased control on TV problematizes the move from live performance to televised performance. Granted, the

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2 This word will be referred to hereafter as the “N”-word except in the case of direct quotations. I do not feel I should use this word regardless of my intentions or the context in which I use it. My use of it here is for the purpose of clarity; specifically, to indicate that Richards uses the word “nigger” and not the variations “nigga” or “N”-word.
economic revenue that inevitably results from exposure on TV is an obvious reason for stand-up comedians to aspire to that platform. Beyond the accrual of economic capital, the underlying reason of control over representation does not dissuade stand-up comedians from performing on TV due to the power the platform offers performers.

Investigating the censorship cases of Lenny Bruce and George Carlin offers insight into stand-up comedy’s mediatization and commodification for TV. The following will concentrate on Bruce’s obscenity trials, as well as the censorship case that resulted from a radio broadcast of Carlin’s “Seven Dirty Words” (i.e. Federal Communications Commission v. Pacifica Foundation). In light of these cases, the section will closely explore the issue of censorship, as an indicator of control over representation, through discussion of Carlin’s first televised HBO special from 1977. Ultimately, the chapter seeks to answer the following question: Why did stand-up comedians choose to sacrifice the freedom of the stage for the constraints and censors of the television screen?

**Under the Influence: Lenny Bruce & Censorship**

To understand why stand-up comedians moved from the live stage to the television screen, beyond reasons of economic capital, I look first to the life of Lenny Bruce, one of the most influential stand-up comedians to date. Richard Zoglin concisely writes:

> Beginning in the late 1960s, … stand-up comedy began to change. It became somehow more essential. It seemed smarter and more current, and it connected more directly with my generation and the things we talked and cared about. And much of that change was inspired … by a comedian whom most middle-American kids … didn’t have in their record collection: Lenny Bruce. (2)

Bruce’s influence was due to his impact on both the form and content of stand-up
comedy. His style shared the unrehearsed approach introduced by Mort Sahl’s conversational and casual style; Sahl discussed politics and “reject[ed] the fifties’ insistent conformity” (Watkins, Real Side 482). In terms of content, Bruce engaged with taboo subject matter such as religion, race relations, and sex while using “obscene” language. In terms of form, Bruce’s style was influenced by his experience performing “in strip joints and dives,” (Watkins, Real Side 481) as well as the jazz scene, as he “adopted aspects of the style and language of black hipsters and musicians” (485). Bruce thus reconfigured the form as “he broke down the old setup-punch line structure of stand-up comedy” (Zoglin 12) and introduced an improvised, stream-of-consciousness, style of delivery.

That style, combined with his engagement with taboo subject matter and use of profane language reconfigured the stand-up comedian as an individual. As Gilbert states:

> Considered by many the ‘driving force behind the shift from schpritz to reality,’ (Borns 1987, 238), Lenny Bruce is generally viewed as a catalyst in the genre of stand-up comedy. More than any other performer, Bruce is responsible for resurrecting the wise fool persona and establishing the sociopolitical humor often performed by comics today. Before Bruce’s emergence in the 1950s, audiences focused on a comic’s act. After Bruce, the rhetorical focus of stand-up comedy shifted from act to performer. (48)

The emphasis on the individual, performing material in a style of his or her choice, marked the introduction of an individual’s perspective into mainstream culture. As Zoglin explains:

> Bruce showed that stand-up comedy could be the expression of an engaged, thinking, neurotic, impassioned human being in all his raw, crazy complexity. It was this – and not simply the dirty words, or the First Amendment battles, or any of his particular routines or satiric insights – that made him the revelatory comedian for a new generation. (14-15)
Bruce’s introduction of the critically engaged individual, for whom nothing is sacred, marks his importance to contemporary stand-up comedy. Although his influence cannot be reduced to his use of dirty words, the very fact that he was performing those words, at that time, in his own style was revolutionary.

Daube writes, “The state-instigated obscenity trials of Bruce shock in retrospect largely because of the success of his legacy, which was the creation of stand-up as a free speech zone, in which flirtation with the obscene is not only tolerated but expected” (iv). Bruce’s influence on the content of stand-up comedy is not limited to the introduction of obscene words but includes the introduction of obscene ideas. As Daube explains: “The conflation of obscenity and blasphemy is a clear example of how Bruce’s critiques of the American mainstream were taken in large part as an affront to Christianity. There was additional anger that these attacks came from a non-Christian” (94). In addition to the censors working against the performance of certain ideas rather than the words themselves (a point that becomes especially clear in light of Carlin’s use of obscene words on radio and television not long after) there is also the fact that Bruce had gained access to broadcast television.

Bruce’s importance and influence, as well as the number of obscenity trials he faced, is particularly striking considering that his television presence is limited to just six appearances. Bruce’s TV appearances are as follows: *Arthur Godfrey and Friends* (1949), *Broadway Open House* (1950), *The Steve Allen Show* (1959), *Playboy’s Penthouse* (1959), *One Night Stand: “The World of Lenny Bruce”* (1959), *The Steve Allen Show* (1964), and *Close-Up!* (1964) (“The Museum”). In *Arthur Godfrey and Friends* (1949) as well as *Broadway Open House* (1950), “Bruce is still ‘clean,’ not yet having developed
his socially conscious humor” (“The Museum”). Bruce’s obscenity trials followed “his first nationally broadcast television appearance” on The Steve Allen Show on April 9, 1959 and an arrest for possession of narcotics in Philadelphia on September 29, 1961 (“The Trials of Lenny Bruce”). After The Steve Allen Show in 1959, One Night Stand (1959) was aired only once, and another segment of The Steve Allen Show in 1964 was unaired.

The process of censorship on TV differed from that on the live stage due to issues of authority. On The Steve Allen Show (1959), “Bruce was forced to submit a typed script of his routine to Standards & Practices before the appearance” (“The Museum”). The show’s actions to control the stand-up comedian’s speech on TV differ from the legal authorities’ actions to control the stand-up comedian’s speech on the live stage. On TV, control was asserted prior to the performance, which is observable in the demand for a script. On the stage, control was asserted following the performance, which is observable in the numerous obscenity charges that Bruce faced in the early 1960s. The difference in how censorship functions on the live stage versus TV reveals the anxiety surrounding cultural products that will be entered into the economy of repetition. To explain, a live show has a limited audience and discrediting the performer’s image after the show can alter the performance in that audience’s memory. Prosecution of a live performance also hinges on witness testimony making it a subjective issue, which is more easily manipulated (i.e. evident in how police officers included highly biased excerpts of Bruce’s work in their testimonies but Bruce was not allowed to perform his actual set in court). A recorded show, especially one that is aired, is more objective and has been approved by the network, which would make the case against the network rather than
Bruce as an individual. A recording also becomes official and thus carries authority, which is problematic given Bruce’s discussion of and opinions on sex, race, and religion. Based on the chronology, I hypothesize that Bruce’s access to TV contributed to his persecution by the legal authorities.

Bruce’s trouble with the law was such that the term “persecution” is appropriate. Bruce’s obscenity trials began with an arrest on October 4, 1961 “after performing at the Jazz Workshop in San Francisco” (“The Trials of Lenny Bruce”). After this first arrest, Bruce was arrested on obscenity charges on: October 24, 1962 “for a performance the night before at The Troubadour in West Hollywood, California;” December 5, 1962 “in Chicago after a week of performances at The Gate of Horn;” February 12, 1963 “following a performance at The Unicorn in Los Angeles;” March 19, 1964 “for performances given over the previous three weeks at the Talley Ho in Los Angeles;” and on both April 3 and 7, 1964 at “the Cafe Au Go Go” in New York (“The Trials of Lenny Bruce”). The Cafe au Go Go case, since Bruce died before his appeal, was not pardoned until December of 2003 when New York Governor George Pataki offered a posthumous pardon (“The Trials of Lenny Bruce”). In the other cases, Bruce was often acquitted due to the Supreme Court case, Roth v. United States (“The Trials of Lenny Bruce”); the precedent and its previous use make Bruce’s multiple arrests for obscenity suspicious.

In Roth v. United States, “Roth operated a book-selling business in New York and was convicted of mailing obscene circulars and an obscene book in violation of a federal obscenity statute” (ROTH). The outcome of the case was as follows:

In a 6-to-3 decision … the Court held that obscenity was not “within the area of constitutionally protected speech or press.” The Court noted that the First Amendment was not intended to protect every utterance or form of expression,
such as materials that were “utterly without redeeming social importance.” The Court held that the test to determine obscenity was “whether to the average person, applying contemporary community standards, the dominant theme of the material taken as a whole appeals to prurient interest.” The Court held that such a definition of obscenity gave sufficient fair warning and satisfied the demands of Due Process. (ROTH)

Thus, it is a matter of great significance that the average person interprets materials with obscene language as having social importance.

The words cited in People v. Bruce, or the Cafe au Go Go case, are: “‘ass,’ ‘balls,’ ‘cock-sucker,’ ‘cunt,’ ‘fuck,’ ‘mother-fucker,’ ‘piss,’ ‘screw,’ ‘shit,’ and ‘tits’” (Murtagh). The bits or monologues that were considered obscene are: “To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb,” “Thank you, Mask Man,” and “Pissing in a Sink” (“The Trials of Lenny Bruce”). The first monologue is about heterosexual sex, the second about homosexual sex or an “unnatural act,” and the third about the desire to urinate being mistaken first for masturbation and then for suicide. Bruce’s material and its presence in the legal proceedings demonstrate that beyond the use of the obscene words, Bruce’s topics were also considered taboo; this choice marked a dangerous combination in the 1960s. In fact, it can be seen that the combination of obscene language and taboo topics were still an issue in the late 1970s, based on Carlin’s first HBO special.

**Uncensored: George Carlin**

career took off in the 1970s following a change in appearance that coincided with the introduction of his controversial content, which is best reflected in his most famous monologue: “Seven Words You Can Never Say On Television,” or simply, “Seven Dirty Words.” He performed this routine in his first HBO television special.

Prior to the HBO special, Carlin faced legal issues, which resulted from using essentially the same “obscene” words Lenny Bruce uttered at the Cafe au Go Go in 1964. In 1973, the New York radio station WBAI broadcast Carlin’s monologue. The “Seven Dirty Words” broadcast launched a trial following a complaint made by a father who was listening to the radio station with his son during the mid-afternoon (FCC). In Federal Communications Commission v. Pacifica Foundation, the question was: “Does the First Amendment deny government any power to restrict the public broadcast of indecent language under any circumstances?” (FCC). The resulting decision, five votes for the FCC and four votes against, was:

No. The Court held that limited civil sanctions could constitutionally be invoked against a radio broadcast of patently offensive words dealing with sex and execration. The words need not be obscene to warrant sanctions. Audience, medium, time of day, and method of transmission are relevant factors in determining whether to invoke sanctions. (FCC)

This meant that Carlin, and all stand-up comedians who followed, could appear on television but not during early primetime. As Zoglin explains: “[I]n 1978 the Supreme Court upheld the FCC’s right to ban ‘patently offensive’ language during hours when children are in the audience. That decision led to the creation of TV’s ‘family hour’ – a requirement that the first hour of prime time, from eight to nine P.M. eastern time, be reserved for family-friendly programming” (34). The factors cited by the Court all work
to control which audiences will access a performance. The reason offered is to prevent children from experiencing the performance but, as I will discuss later, the potential of accessing accidental audiences, a category in which children might be included, is limited by the Supreme Court’s factors of audience, medium, time of day, and method of transmission.

There are several contributing factors that explain why Carlin was not persecuted by the legal authorities to the same extent as Bruce. Firstly, Carlin was not at fault for WBAI’s broadcast of his comedy album in the afternoon. This point is clear since the case was against Pacifica Foundation and WBAI rather than Carlin. Secondly, the passage of time is significant since Bruce’s performance at the Cafe au Go Go was in 1964 while the Carlin broadcast was in 1973. Thirdly, Carlin had established himself in the mainstream in the 1960s before he changed his style and content in the 1970s. Fourthly, Carlin was Catholic, and as Daube points out, with Bruce, “[t]here was additional anger that these attacks came from a non-Christian” (94). Thus, Carlin was an insider unlike Bruce, which may have afforded Carlin some advantages. These factors were clearly in Carlin’s favour, however I contend that the most significant contribution to his successful use of obscenities on TV was Carlin’s strategic decision to focus on the words themselves, and produce a context with HBO through which he could critique language. Carlin’s avoidance of combining obscene language and taboo subject matter allowed him to utter the same words on radio and television that had landed Bruce in prison for performing in private clubs.

The statement regarding the Court’s decision ends with the following: “[W]hen the Commission finds that a pig has entered the parlor, the exercise of its regulatory
power does not depend on proof that the pig is obscene” (FCC). That statement constructs the stand-up comedian as a pig and the medium (i.e. television or radio) as the parlor. Given the outcome of FCC v. Pacifica, in which the Court favours the FCC, Carlin’s first HBO special’s inclusion of “Seven Dirty Words” is remarkable. I contend that Carlin and HBO were able to perform this material because they successfully manipulated the para-performance. The para-performance strategically contextualized Carlin so that he was not “a pig,” he was not obscene, and he was not performing for general audiences but for HBO subscribers. HBO strategically frames Carlin so that he can utter obscenities both on stage, in terms of the studio audiences, and on TV without being considered obscene.

In keeping with Genette’s concept of the paratext, the Carlin-HBO para-performance is critical in ensuring the performance’s presence in the world in the form of a television special. Carlin’s role in the para-performance also supports the claim that the para-text is “always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author” (Genette 2). Although the para-performance is unlike the para-text because it is not always authorial, in Carlin’s case it does perform an authorizing function. In Carlin’s case, it was the influence of a legitimating para-performance, and HBO’s stringent control over all the factors (i.e. audience, medium, time of day, and method of transmission) cited by the Court, that allowed Carlin to speak, “All I could think of was shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker and tits, man. Seven,” (On Location) without legal consequences, on TV in 1977.

Carlin’s first HBO special offers great insight into how a stand-up comedian navigated this new medium and maintained control over his representation in terms of
TV censors. Carlin’s 1977 performance was broadcast between HBO’s first live stand-up comedy concert broadcast in 1975, performed by Robert Klein at Haverford College (Stebbins 11), and the stabilization of the form that followed in 1979, with the model provided by Richard Pryor’s release of the first stand-up comedy film (Zoglin 60). In addition to the significance of the moment in which Carlin performed, it is his success in performing his “Seven Dirty Words” routine on cable television that makes this performance important. After all, Carlin freely spoke on TV the words Bruce couldn’t speak on stage without being arrested. If Bruce established live stand-up comedy as a free speech zone then Carlin’s first HBO special established mediatized stand-up comedy as a free speech zone, even if that zone exists with limitations. Close analysis of Carlin’s first HBO performance offers valuable information on how the move to TV influenced mediatized stand-up comedy and altered live stand-up comedy.

The advantage of a television network with subscriber audiences is that they have chosen to experience the programming that the channel airs. Despite this advantage, HBO and Carlin trod very carefully. On Location (1977) provides an example of the caution used by a network and a stand-up comedian in negotiating the use of “everyday” language on cable television. On Location opens with Shana Alexander, a representative of HBO, who explains that performances by George Carlin can usually only be experienced at nightclubs, theatres, and on college campuses. Her introductory statements communicate Carlin’s presence at live venues and his popularity with live audiences; in this case, “live” refers to being co-present in space and time. Alexander states, “A portion of Mr. Carlin’s performance needs special introduction, at least for television,” later stating, “It contains language you hear every day on the street, though rarely on TV.”
Alexander reasons that because Carlin’s performance is suitable for live performance venues it should also be acceptable on television.

The requirement of the HBO introduction indicates two possibilities. The first possibility is that television audiences of the late 1970s were actually unprepared for street language. The second possibility is that HBO felt that television audiences of the late 1970s were unprepared for street language. In either case, HBO had to guard against potential complaints and legal issues. The reason for these safeguards is due to a major difference between live audiences and television audiences, which is the lack of control over who is viewing the performance. In Carlin’s case, audiences that HBO seems to be trying to control against are young children and/or those who are sensitive to vulgar language. The introduction of an audience that is not the target or constituency audience is positive, since it allows for the audience to grow, which leads to higher ratings and increased profit, as well as negative, since it invites those who do not want to be in the audience to complain and, during Carlin’s time, take legal action. Thus, the mediatization of stand-up comedy on television creates accidental or unintended audiences, something much less likely to occur in any of the live venues that Carlin performed in.

Alexander then concedes that different people will have different reactions to the language Carlin uses in the performance: “Some would simply say that tonight’s language is very strong,” and, “Others would say it goes beyond this, and would find it vulgar.” This constructs language as subjective and thus indemnifies HBO due to an inability to know for certain what all audiences consider acceptable language for television. She then compares Carlin’s vulgarity to that of Aristophanes, Chaucer, and Shakespeare. HBO’s placement of Carlin alongside famous literary figures further
demonstrates his importance as it groups stand-up comedy with “high art” while establishing Carlin’s work as a relevant, significant, cultural product of the times. It also implies that those who disagree with his content are incapable of appreciating avant-garde art.

Next, Alexander reveals that the routine “provoked a legal proceeding at the Federal Communications Commission” and that “a federal court of appeals ruled in favour of Mr. Carlin’s right to freedom of speech.” This statement, in itself, is a highly strategic interpretation of the Court’s ruling in FCC v. Pacifica. After all, the court ruled the case in favour of the FCC, and not Carlin or the radio station. Yet, HBO’s statement suggests that regardless of whether audiences disagree with Carlin’s language or refuse to acknowledge stand-up comedy as an important performance form, Carlin is still legally able to perform as he does; and by extension, HBO is allowed to broadcast Carlin’s performances because Carlin’s work has social importance. Alexander’s final explanation for Carlin’s language is that HBO is bringing their audiences the best of contemporary comedy, which in 1977 includes George Carlin, but HBO understands if they decide not to view the program. This forces television audiences to be actively responsible for what they choose to view and positions HBO to play what it believes its audiences want.

Shana Alexander’s introduction is not the only explanation for the content of Carlin’s performance provided to television audiences. Following the title sequence, HBO includes an interview with Carlin that begins with his early influences but abruptly moves to the issue of censorship:

INTERVIEWER. What are the most dramatic ways you’re forced to alter your performances for television?
CARLIN. Well … the most important alteration is that you can’t use the body of language that’s generally called
“dirty” or “bad” or “filthy” language. … [T]hat’s not a big 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 like to suspend it for two hours on the stage, ’cause I think it would take something away from-- Although I could do two hours without it I just feel that I’d miss a lot of important emphases, if I didn’t have access to the whole language, you know. … So, that’s all I can tell you, but you don’t go in there to try and change their system, usually. You go in there to fit within it because it’s for your own narrow purposes, you know. (On Location)

Carlin’s response makes a case for promoting realism in the interest of quality. Stand-up comedy is a performance form that recreates natural contemporary speech that uses colloquialisms; its quality is directly connected to this illusion of the real and everyday. Carlin’s statement regarding six minutes versus two hours points to the differing influences of the form of the late-night talk show, where stand-up comedians were given short spots, and the form of the concert-length performance produced by HBO. It is the combination of the medium (i.e. television) and the format of the performance (i.e. the full-length comedy concert) that results in most stand-up comedians using “street terms” in their TV performances. These terms establish the stand-up comedian’s speech as natural, even though Carlin’s performances do not share the seemingly improvised and unrehearsed style with which stand-up comedy is now associated.

For all the warnings and disclaimers most of the language in On Location is tame, especially for today’s stand-up comedy audiences. Beyond vulgar language, the routine’s content is not as political as one would expect from the stand-up comedian who required
such an introduction. Carlin’s jokes are mostly about belching and puking, shaking hands, supermarkets, smoking pot, people walking, dog jokes, cat jokes, and fart jokes. Cannabis could be considered political but his approach to the topic is not from a legalization or decriminalization perspective; instead, he discusses the cookie aisle in supermarkets located in neighbourhoods where many people smoke pot. He performs stand-up comedy without taking a stand so that the topics under discussion are trivial as he begins dissecting the meaning of certain words: “hot water heaters,” “flammable” versus “inflammable” versus “non-inflammable,” and “jumbo shrimp.” The audience is briefly given a hint of his underlying dissidence, a foreshadowing of his later work, with “military intelligence” and “business ethics.” It is after this point that the vulgar language begins to heighten (i.e. around the fifty-minute mark of this 85-minute special). One hour into the performance, the action is paused and the following disclaimer appears: “THE FINAL SEGMENT OF MR. CARLIN’S PERFORMANCE INCLUDES ESPECIALLY CONTROVERSIAL LANGUAGE. PLEASE CONSIDER WHETHER YOU WISH TO CONTINUE VIEWING” (On Location). HBO has made the audience actively responsible for its television experience or, at the very least, indicated that HBO certainly isn’t responsible if audiences find Carlin offensive.

When Carlin begins his “Seven Dirty Words You Can Never Say On Television” monologue, it is clear that the studio audience members are familiar with this routine based on their cheers after Carlin says, “There is that group of words.” This shows that Carlin’s routine is rehearsed and familiar, which eliminates the illusion of improvisation that many stand-up comedians aim to cultivate while also acting as an indicator of his

\footnote{Carlin becomes more political in his later televised concerts but his first two HBO specials are primarily comprised of observational comedy.}
popularity. It also illustrates that Carlin is performing for a particular audience comprised of those who are either familiar with his work and like it, or, would like to be familiar with him. Perhaps it is with this potential constituency audience in mind that Carlin eases into the routine with those part-time dirty words (“Sometimes, yes, sometimes, but not all the time”); and through these part-time words, he relates the arbitrary nature of language as experienced by children, who are scolded for saying dirty words but are not told what those words are in the first place. He performs his desire for a list from a position of innocence as he connects the citizenry with the child and the government censors with the scolding parent, who refuses to reveal what is acceptable and never explains who made these decisions or why these decisions were ever made.

The special also offers some insight into why television and radio are censored according to Carlin:

Now, I wanted my list to reflect an area I was interested in … I picked … radio and television time. That’s one of the places where we can’t use them, and I guess that’s largely because television is paid for by private industry and regulated by the government. So, whew, you know, you think of what, … those two groups are doing even to each other, you know? And … so you can imagine what they did to radio and television, right? They turned it into a billboard and it belongs to the Brillo and biscuit folks, and that’s all it’ll ever be. And so, as a result, they want to restrict your language some of the time. *(On Location)*

He attributes the censorship of content and the restrictions placed on language used for artistic reasons in televised performances to the business of advertising, which Carlin explains has transformed a medium that could function as a platform for creativity into a purveyor of commodities controlled by White, upper-class businessmen.
Carlin quantifies dirty words and compares that to the number of adjectives for the kind of language that should be censored:

I started running into all the categories of dirty words, started to realize there were more ways to describe filthy words than there are filthy words. Seemed curious to me. Someone was awfully interested in them. They found an awful lot of ways to refer to them, and I did too, called them bad language, dirty, filthy, foul, vile, vulgar, coarse, unseemly, in poor taste, street language, locker room talk, gutter talk, barracks language, naughty, saucy, bawdy, raunchy, rude, lewd, lascivious, indecent, profane, obscene, blue, off-color, risqué, suggestive, cursing, cussing, swearing. All I could think of was shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker and tits, man. Seven. (On Location)

These comparative lists express the small number of words that are considered unacceptable for television audiences. Carlin’s delivery of the two lists differs; the descriptors are spoken slowly and with varying emphases whereas the list of seven dirty words is rattled off quickly. There is a sense that the descriptors are exciting and the dirty words are somewhat mundane, which constructs the process of censorship as undue obsession. The juxtaposition of the lists also reinforces the arbitrary nature of language that underlies this routine as it questions what makes the dirty words obscene and the descriptors clean.

This lack of clarity regarding what exactly makes a word dirty or clean is made more complex as Carlin goes on to discuss part-time dirty words, such as “ass,” in which the word, or the signifier, remains consistent but the meaning, or the signified, changes. Carlin emphasizes this point as he explains that words can mean what society decides through his confusion over and conflation of “sex” and “violence”:

You got “fucking” and “killing,” I say let’s change the words around. If language is our servant… let’s put the son of a bitch to work. Let’s call “fucking” “killing,” and “killing”
“fucking” for about a month and a half, just long enough to confuse us a little about which one we really fear and want, all right? “Fucking” and “killing,” tok, tok, just anywhere you see them. Movies, the movies would be great. “Better get down off the horse, Sheriff, we’re fixing to fuck you now.” “What’s this? Mass fucker still on the loose.” “Man fucks three, self.” “No, I think we got him now. He made his first big mistake… he fucked a cop. Yeah, he’s a cop fucker now. Every cop in the state will be looking for him.” … “Hey guys, uh, my horse broke his leg, I’m gonna fuck him.” … “Shamu, the fucker whale.” So all I’m saying I guess really is that “fuck you” is a positive phrase, it’s just a way of making, you know, direct verbal love from across the street. Next time you hear it, feel that way. Fuck you! Okay, hey. Thanks for being here tonight and being part of this. I hope we all get to see it. I love you, fuck you, see you later, bye-bye. (On Location)

Carlin’s work demonstrates the imprecise nature of language and the expectation that audiences should be critical thinkers who have control over the meaning of words (i.e. the signified), regardless of the words themselves (i.e. the signifiers); he places emphasis on context and reinforces his ideas through reason.

Carlin’s first HBO special eases television audiences into the language of live stand-up comedy through reason and innocence. The introduction from the HBO host, the interview with Carlin about language, the disclaimer included within the performance, and Carlin’s “Seven Dirty Words” routine combine to reinforce the idea that language is arbitrary, that different audiences have different thresholds, and that this language is part of live contemporary stand-up comedy and should not be condemned because of the change in medium. On Location thus forges a path for televised stand-up comedy to use the language of live stand-up comedy.

Carlin’s early HBO special demonstrates the impact of television on the content of stand-up comedy. On Location’s initial and direct engagement with censorship, Carlin
and HBO’s strategic handling of the situation, and Carlin’s ability to offer explanations allowed for the language of stand-up comedy to enter mainstream media. Perhaps, more than anything, it was the time during which Carlin began performing, in that he followed Lenny Bruce and had a specialized media outlet available to him in the form of televised HBO comedy concerts. These factors made it possible for Carlin to use the same language on late-1970’s television that Bruce was relentlessly persecuted for by the legal authorities for performing live in the early-1960s.

Carlin’s early work provided a platform for marginalized voices within popular culture to perform from the same positions of power and authority as the master narrative, albeit on its borders. A position that fits well with stand-up comedy since a stand-up comedian can be thought of as “a cynical insider,” whose “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” (Koziski 63). As Stephanie Koziski points out, these revelations are for a select public or constituency audience. It stands to reasons that stand-up comedy is not truly rebellious or counter-culture if the stand-up comedian is preaching to the converted, however, it is unlikely that the marginalized would be permitted to perform from the same (but not quite) positions of power and authority if they could dismantle the current hegemonic structures that establish White, heterosexual patriarchy as normative.

The fact of the matter is that “the avenues that an organic intellectual … must follow are owned by the very forces that make the organic intellectual necessary” (Amarasingam 122). The act of rebellion is in maintaining a presence on television and thereby providing marginalized perspectives a platform on which to present their
counternarratives alongside those perpetuating the master narrative for the consumption of home audiences. In trying not to change their system but to fit within it for his own narrow purposes (or so he claimed), Carlin profoundly impacted the future content of mediatized stand-up comedy.

The Stand-Up Comedy Film: Richard Pryor

There are important distinctions between VHS, DVD, and Netflix on the levels of para-performance (e.g. the extra features on DVDs) and audience impact (e.g. Netflix’s user reviews). Having acknowledged that, the terms VHS, DVD, and Netflix are discussed together here due to the similarities in terms of commodification, control over representation, and constraints regarding censored content. The focus on censorship as a manifestation of the stand-up comedian’s control over commodification leads to a natural grouping of these three media platforms. This grouping is especially fitting when considering these three platforms in comparison to television and YouTube, which both offer significantly different impacts on censorship and, ultimately, on control over commodification and representation. VHS, DVD and Netflix all offer the stand-up comedian a great deal of control over commodification and self-representation. Thus, the following continues to use the term “film” to refer to stand-up comedy performances produced for VHS, DVD, and Netflix.

Richard Pryor released the first feature-length film consisting only of stand-up comedy (Zoglin 59). Richard Pryor: Live in Concert was recorded live at the Terrace Theatre in Long Beach, California and released in 1979. According to Zoglin, “Richard Pryor: Live in Concert cost almost nothing to make [that is, $750,000] and grossed fifteen million dollars at the box office, becoming the model for virtually every comedy
concert film to follow – often copied, but never equaled” (60). The following section looks closely at Pryor’s seminal work in order to understand the control a stand-up comedian possesses over representation on film by analysing the 1979 film with a focus on censorship.

Richard Pryor’s *Live in Concert* (1979) is the first full-length film release that contains only stand-up comedy. Pryor recorded another stand-up comedy video in 1971 called *Live and Smokin’* but it was not released on VHS until 1985. Following these two videos Pryor also released *Richard Pryor: Live on the Sunset Strip* (1982) as well as *Richard Pryor: Here and Now* (1983). The following discussion will focus on *Live in Concert* but will also consider *Live on the Sunset Strip* since its content is relevant to the discussion of censorship. Filming his performances for VHS allowed Pryor to work without the influence of external censors or any legal issues. Any censorship in Pryor’s work is self-imposed. Pryor’s content is more similar to Bruce’s than to Carlin’s because Pryor’s performances engage with taboo subject matter and use “obscene” language. For the most part, Pryor does not focus on the words themselves as Carlin does. The notable exception is in *Live on the Sunset Strip* where he discusses his decision to no longer use the “N”-word.

Pryor’s film performances do not engage with censorship in the ways that Bruce’s live or Carlin’s early television performances do. Pryor’s ability to engage with taboo topics and use obscene language is similar to Bruce but his style differs from Bruce’s jazz-influenced stream-of-consciousness delivery. In addition to his unique style, Pryor’s content also differs from the content of other stand-up comedians. For example, in comparison to Carlin’s focus on scrutinizing language itself it is clear that Pryor’s focus
is storytelling and the creation of characters; especially characters who are often without a voice, like animals. Pryor’s performances do not have to engage directly with the issue of censorship for two major reasons: the medium and the racialized body. Although the focus of this chapter is censorship rather than race, it is important to note that Pryor’s ability to go uncensored and uncontextualized is not simply because his film chronologically followed Bruce and Carlin. Pryor’s free speech is also related to his performing through both the context of a film as well as the context of his racialized body.

The manner in which Pryor engages with obscene language is a product of his performing, racialized body. Pryor’s body always already contextualizes his performances in a way that a White, unmarked body (such as Carlin’s body) does not. Pryor’s performances demonstrate a keen insight into the complex system of signs at work in stand-up comedy. In relation to this, John Limon writes, “Pryor cannot humor abjection, in the stand-up way, because he belongs to an abjected race” (98). In *Live in Concert*, Pryor constructs his body as a character by providing his heart with a voice; although it appears that Pryor has no control over his body as his heart “attacks” him, on the level of performance, the stand-up comedian is in control. Considering the heart attack bit from *Live in Concert*, Limon concentrates on Pryor’s posture being a result of his race:

Pryor’s refusal of the usual stand-up posture … is the result … of his self-identification in an abjected race. He is not the sufferer of abjection, he is the abjection, the body repudiated yet keeps returning. He allows the body to speak regardless of his own self-interest; when it returns in the form of a heart attack, he falls to the floor, sacrificing the stand-up posture literally. (5)
This analysis offers race, through a psychoanalytic framework that concentrates on abjection, as an explanation for the use of this prone posture. The idea of Pryor allowing “the body to speak” is also important in relation to censorship. Unlike both Bruce and Carlin, Pryor’s body acts as a context in its own right. The body as context exists beyond Pryor’s intentional construction of a body part (i.e. the heart) as a character and exists in the uncontrollable and unintentionally signifying body.

Three Stand-Up Comedy Legends & The “N”-Word

Pryor’s body’s signified Blackness has written in it certain rights to language. These rights are signifying to such an extent that Pryor must speak to them and explain why he is censoring himself. He does this in his epiphany monologue in Live on the Sunset Strip, as he tells the story about his re-evaluation of the “N”-word after a visit to Africa:

PRYOR. One thing I got out of it was magic I’d like to share with you. I was leaving and I was sitting 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.” And the voice said, “Do you see any niggas?” And I said, “No.” And it said, “You know why? ’Cause there ain’t any,” and it hit me like a shot man. I started crying and shit. I was sitting there and I said, “I’ve been here three weeks and I haven’t even said it, I haven’t even thought it.” And it made me say, “Oh my god, I’ve been wrong, I’ve been wrong, I’ve got to regroup my shit. I ain’t never gonna call another Black man a nigga.” You know ’cause we never was no niggas. That’s a word that’s used to describe our own wretchedness, and we perpetuate it now, ’cause it’s dead, that word is dead.

The “N”-word monologue from Live on the Sunset Strip thus indicates that Pryor does not have control over the body’s voice, on the level of signification, because the body’s voice is a product of its context and the audience’s interpretation of the signifying body.
Hence, Pryor uses his voice to reconfigure how the body signifies which, in turn, alters how the audience interprets the signifying body.

Pryor understands that certain words can lose their ability to have multiple meanings regardless of context and determines that the only way to control their meaning is to cease using them. This differs from Carlin whose focus is on the arbitrary nature of language. Therefore, Carlin’s work places the dominant influence on the production of meaning on context; Carlin places importance on the signified (meaning) over the signifier (the word). Evidence of this is present in the following bit Carlin performs in *Doin’ It Again* (1992):

CARLIN. It’s the context that counts. It’s the user. It’s the intention behind the words that makes them good or bad. The words are completely neutral. The words are innocent. I get tired of people talking about bad words and bad language. Bullshit! It’s the context that makes them good or bad. The context that makes them good or bad. For instance… you take the word “nigger.” There is absolutely nothing wrong with the word “nigger” in and of itself. It’s the racist asshole that’s using it that you ought to be concerned about. We don’t care when Richard Pryor or Eddie Murphy say it. Why? Because we know they’re not racists. They’re niggers! Context! Context. We don’t mind their context because we know they’re Black. Hey, I know I’m Whitey, the blue-eyed devil patio, fake gray boy, honky, motherfucker myself. Don’t bother my ass. They’re only words. You can’t be afraid of words that speak the truth, even if it’s an unpleasant truth. Like the fact that there’s a bigot and a racist in every living room on every street corner in this country. I don’t like words that hide the truth. I don’t like words that conceal reality.

Carlin’s reasoning for such words shows that not only is the signified (i.e. the meaning) more important than the signifier (i.e. the word) but that the context created through both the speaker and the content are more significant than the word itself. He views the use of politically correct language as political since it obscures certain truths about those who
would use these words if they did not have a politically correct alternative to use instead.

Carlin is not alone in his views regarding words in general and the “N”-word in particular. Many contemporary stand-up comedians, ranging from Katt Williams to Louis CK, mirror Carlin’s approach. Bruce’s work also resembles Carlin’s, for example, Bruce performed a famous bit on the “N”-word in the early 1960s:

BRUCE. Are there any niggers here tonight? Can you turn on the house lights, and could the waiters and waitresses just stop serving for a second? And turn off the spot. Now what did he say? “Are there any niggers here tonight?” There’s one nigger here. I see him back there working. Let’s see. There’s two niggers. And between those two niggers sits a kike. And there’s another kike. That’s two kikes and three niggers. And there’s a spic, right? Hm? There’s another spic. Ooh, there’s a wop. There’s a Polack. And then, oh, a couple of greaseballs. There’s three lace-curtain Irish Micks. And there’s one hip, thick, hunky, funky boogie. Boogie, boogie. Mm-mm. I got three kikes. Do I hear five kikes? I got five kikes. Do I hear six spics? Six spics. Do I hear seven niggers? I got seven niggers. Sold American! I’ll pass with seven niggers, six spics, five Micks, four kikes, three guineas, and one wop. You almost punched me out, didn’t ya? I was trying to make a point, that it’s the suppression of the word that gives it the power, the violence, the viciousness. Dig. If President Kennedy would just go on television and say, “I’d like to introduce you to all the niggers in my cabinet.” And if he’d just say, “nigger, nigger” to every nigger he saw, “Boogie, boogie, boogie, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger,” till it didn’t mean anything any more! Then you’d never be able to make a Black kid cry because somebody called him a nigger in school. (Snoop Stock)

Bruce is referring to what is known as “semantic satiation” or “semantic saturation,” a psychological phenomenon, in which repetition of a word causes it to lose meaning. Or, as Leon Jakobovits James writes: “the reduction in the meaningfulness of symbols through their repeated presentation affects thinking” (19). Although this may be the case on a psychological basis the effects of this dissociation are highly short term and what
Bruce is suggesting, although idealistic and well intentioned, overlooks what Pryor realized in Africa.

Pryor’s stance differs from both Carlin’s and Bruce’s because Pryor realizes that there is a limit to the arbitrary nature of language. The “N”-word’s meaning is so entrenched that even expert contextualization is often insufficient in influencing its meaning. In a sense, the “N”-word’s primary meaning ends up influencing the context. Pryor’s stance is clear in his assessment of the word as “dead.” As Simon Weaver states: “Pryor’s description of the word as ‘dead’ matches Roland Barthes’ comments on denotive signification… that it is the truly traumatic signs that become fixed and deny connotation. If words are ‘alive’ to connotation, it is the purely denotive sign that is ‘dead’, that no longer moves” (“Other” 13). Thus, Pryor states that it was a change in context, being in Africa, that allowed him to realize that the “N”-word, as a sign, was no longer in flux and thus could not have its meaning changed based on negotiating its context.

Pryor’s epiphany suggests that a sign that determines context can cease to exist in one’s mind when outside of that context; this is supported when he states: “I haven’t even thought it” (Live on the Sunset Strip). Similarly, Carlin points out: “Government wants to control information and control language, because that’s the way you control thought” (Doin’ It Again). Despite Carlin’s opposing position, his insightful statement supports Pryor’s point since it implies that the only way to control the thought behind the words is to control our own usage of those words. This conclusion does not advocate the idea that an external institution should determine what one can or cannot say. Instead, what should be aspired to is the conscious decision of the individual to control his or her own speech.
in order to eliminate the violence of hate speech.

Unlike the extensive para-performance interview and disclaimers in Carlin’s first HBO special, which specifically engaged with the issue of obscene language, the para-performance in Pryor’s 1979 film does not engage with the issue of obscenity at all. This lack of engagement is because of Carlin and HBO’s construction of cable television as a free-speech zone in 1977. It is clear that the kind of para-performance created by Carlin and HBO was no longer necessary after the first HBO television special. This conclusion is further supported by the para-performance in Carlin’s second HBO special, *George Carlin Again!* (1978), which also does not engage with the issue of censorship despite Carlin’s performance of a version of “Seven Dirty Words.” Instead, in the para-performance, Carlin provides humorous commentary on various photographs from his childhood. Although Carlin’s focus on language is maintained there is no longer a need to contextualize “obscene” language for television.

Both Carlin’s HBO special and Pryor’s film use the same technique, in which the stand-up comedian is shown walking from backstage to onstage and beginning the performance. This model is still used by many stand-up comedians for their films. The para-performance in Pryor’s film offers information about where the concert was recorded, that it was recorded live, the film’s title, and the names of those involved in the making of the film (very much like the start of any movie). Pryor then walks off the street, onto the stage, and begins his routine. He uses the words “shit,” “motherfucker,” “nigga,” and the phrase, “Fuck it, I don’t give a shit;” all of this language is used while the audience is still being seated. Pryor gives no explanation of the words and makes no excuse for using them. Moreover, he imitates White audience members and comments on
their actions. Film thus allows for the stand-up comedian to use language as he or she decides. While Carlin’s second HBO special is still focused on words it becomes clear, by considering Carlin’s work over time, that this is because of Carlin’s comedic choices and artistic interest; it can no longer be read as a strategy of contextualization used to introduce obscene language into popular representation via mass mediatization.

Early in the performance, Pryor juxtaposes how White people and Black people swear in a manner that constructs Pryor’s “obscene” language as natural. The imitation of a White man swearing is contrasted to Pryor’s own casual use of swear words: “Y’all are some funny muthafuckas when you cuss. They be saying shit like, ‘Yeah, e’mon peckerhead’” (Live in Concert). His imitation of White men swearing communicates that it is awkward for White men to swear; his impression implies that it sounds “uncool” because it is unnatural, and it is this association that results in constructing certain words as obscene. Thus, in a more subtle and concise way than Carlin’s “Seven Dirty Words,” Pryor avoids being the “pig in the parlor” by changing the parlor (i.e. the medium) itself. After all, the issues cited by the Court in FCC v. Pacifica (i.e. audience, medium, time of day, and method of transmission) all become irrelevant when the only audiences that would access this performance are ones who have chosen to purchase it, ones who are already fans of Pryor, and are therefore unlikely to find its contents obscene.

Pryor does not otherwise engage with the issue of censorship in Live in Concert. The commodification of stand-up comedy in the format of the feature film offers a great deal of freedom for the stand-up comedian. Film allows the stand-up comedian to perform the material he or she wants in the form they choose. The stand-up comedian maintains a much greater degree of control over his or her self-representation on film
than on TV. The levels of control in these mediums can be understood in more depth by exploring the commodification of stand-up comedy on the Internet, specifically on the online video-sharing website YouTube.

**Stand-Up Comedy on YouTube**

YouTube is a website, on which users can upload, watch, comment on, and share videos. Launched on February 14, 2005 by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim, YouTube was acquired by Google on October 9, 2006 (Snickars and Vonderau 9). On April 23, 2005, “Me at the zoo,” became the first video uploaded to YouTube; directed by Yakov Lapitsky, it is nineteen seconds in length. It features Karim describing elephants that can be seen behind him: “Alright, so here we are, in front of the elephants. The cool thing about these guys is that they have really, really, really long trunks. And that’s cool. And that’s pretty much all there is to say” (jawed’s channel). Approaching a modest (by today’s standards) sixteen million views, “Me at the zoo” encapsulates YouTube’s ability to provide a platform for anyone, to speak about anything, and reach a large audience, or, as YouTube’s slogan puts it, “Broadcast Yourself.” The first video also contains the element of comedy that is present in several of YouTube’s current top-subscribed channels (e.g. Jenna Marbles, PewDiePie, and nigahiga).

Based on the postings that could be accessed through a filtered search on Google, the earliest stand-up comedy videos on YouTube feature stand-up comedians who were recorded while performing a live show. Specifically, YouTube user thedigitalreporter uploaded “Ty Barnett – Comedy Routine” on July 25, 2005 and user sandurs shared “Finesse Mitchell - Maury” on September 3, 2005. Both stand-up comedians are performing for a live studio audience and have had a part of their routine uploaded to
YouTube. As of August 2014, the former has received 31,545 views while the latter has received 44,402 views. These numbers are very low in comparison to the views received by Jenna Marbles’ videos, which are frequently in the millions. Another early video related to stand-up comedy on YouTube is comprised of an audio clip, which is a bit by Dane Cook about Nesquick, and an animated short film, which enacts what Cook describes in his bit. This video, uploaded by user Cameron Gianfala on September 3, 2005, has received over a million views. Even though it seems to have received more attention than the other 2005 stand-up comedy videos, it is not one of the common forms of stand-up comedy on YouTube today.

Stand-up comedy on YouTube occurs in three main forms. Firstly, there is “live” YouTube stand-up comedy, in which live performances are recorded and placed on the site; usually without the stand-up comedian’s knowledge and permission. Secondly, there is recorded YouTube stand-up comedy, in which recorded performances from other audio-visual media are uploaded to YouTube, again usually without the stand-up comedian’s knowledge and permission. And thirdly, there is direct YouTube stand-up comedy, in which amateur or “post-stand-up comedians” are developing material for YouTube itself.

While television versions of stand-up comedy give control over self-representation to networks, and film versions give control to stand-up comedians, YouTube versions transfer control over commodification and representation to YouTube’s users and audiences. YouTube does not censor its performances, like film, and reaches audiences beyond the established fan-base, like TV. Moreover, YouTube makes it possible to profit financially from the performance of stand-up comedy. Despite
the benefits of control, access, and profit professional stand-up comedians do not use YouTube intentionally or extensively.

The following explores why YouTube does not attract professional stand-up comedians in relation to issues of control over representation and censorship by discussing the three common forms of YouTube stand-up comedy through three cases. Firstly, I will consider Jenna Marbles’ comedic YouTube videos through Pierre Bourdieu’s forms of capital; Jenna Marbles’ videos are a form of direct YouTube stand-up comedy or post-stand-up comedy. Secondly, I will discuss a George Carlin YouTube video in relation to the issue of recontextualization; this is an example of recorded YouTube stand-up comedy. And thirdly, I will consider the Michael Richards incident through the issue of censorship; the Richards incident is an example of “live” YouTube stand-up comedy. These objects of study will demonstrate that control over both commodification and self-representation determines which medium professional stand-up comedians use to showcase their work.

**Direct YouTube Stand-Up Comedy: Introducing Jenna Marbles**

Jenna N. Mourey, better known as Jenna Marbles, is a comedian, vlogger, and YouTube sensation. Mourey joined YouTube on February 16, 2010 and her channel currently has 201 videos on it; she releases one new video per week. As of January of 2014, Mourey runs the fifth most subscribed-to channel on YouTube. Her YouTube videos are free of external censors and she has control over every aspect of her production and representation prior to her video being posted online.

It is important to note that Mourey is not a stand-up comedian in the traditional sense; she is what I consider a “post-stand-up comedian.” Post-stand-up comedy falls
under the direct YouTube stand-up comedy category, in which stand-up comedians perform directly for YouTube audiences and are actively and intentionally using YouTube as a platform for their performances. Post-stand-up comedians perform for YouTube audiences and are not using YouTube in order to gain entry to other media outlets. Those who are using YouTube to gain access to TV, DVD, and Netflix are what I consider “amateur stand-up comedians.” Amateur stand-up comedians are similar to post-stand-up comedians in performance but differ in their purpose for using YouTube; an example of an amateur who has successfully used YouTube to enter Netflix is Bo Burnham. Post-stand-up comedians, like Mourey, remain focused on YouTube and thus cater to Internet audiences, which allows them a great deal of control over their representation. Although the work of more traditional amateur stand-up comedians is easily accessible on YouTube, the dissertation concentrates on Mourey because her work is decidedly limited to YouTube and provides insight into the benefits and shortcomings of intentional professionalization on YouTube.

The benefits, in relation to censorship, are quickly noticeable in Jenna Marbles’ videos, which are completely free of any external constraints. Any issues regarding her language or the topics she discusses does not seem to damage her popularity with her fan-base, “75 percent of whom are young women and girls, mostly ages of 13 to 17” (O’Leary). In fact, any detractors, usually parents of fans, concerned with her language are given a response by Mourey’s fans with statements such as, “Seriously, I’m 13. You need to understand we watch Jenna Marbles, we swear, we think wrong, we act insane,” and, “She swears a lot, but she’s funny” (Allee Hamilton qtd. in O’Leary). The lack of censorship and constraints on the levels of form and content clearly contribute to
Mourey’s decision to turn down opportunities to transition to “old” media: “I’m not completely sold that you ever have to transition to mainstream media” (Jenna Mourey qtd. in O’Leary). TV, DVD, and Netflix cannot match the creative freedom that YouTube affords the performer in terms of both content and form as it allows the performer to establish an entirely new genre, “post-stand-up comedy.” Despite this creative freedom, YouTube is avoided by the majority of professional stand-up comedians, who view the platform as one that results in a loss of creative material as well as a loss of economic profit.

As explained earlier, Bourdieu outlines three forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social. Moreover, both cultural capital and social capital can be converted into economic capital. Thus, YouTube’s democratic approach to production and distribution provides those with access to the Internet and the means of production the potential to succeed and profit due to the relationship between the forms of capital as well as the potential of convertibility. To explain, the YouTube performer uses economic capital (i.e. in the form of purchasing a camera, computer, and Internet access) in order to gain cultural capital (i.e. in the form of getting hits on YouTube). This can lead to social capital, in the form of membership within the group through the YouTube Partner Program. This, in turn, leads to increased economic capital as the performers gain a percentage of the advertising revenue. Gaining membership to the Partner Program is no longer elite; thus giving anyone with access to the means of production an equal chance to gain views and convert that cultural capital into economic capital.

Mourey’s economic success demonstrates the relationship between the forms of capital on YouTube. As of March 2014, JennaMarbles’ YouTube channel has over 13
million subscribers and is approaching 1.5 billion views (JennaMarbles); these statistics can be viewed as cultural capital. That cultural capital has been converted to economic capital since Jenna Mourey’s net worth is an estimated 2.5 million dollars (CelebrityNetworth.com) and “she could have earned as much as $346,827.12 in 2012” (O’Leary). The figures demonstrate that there is a strong positive correlation between subscribers and monetary gains. Therefore, the data reveal that most professional stand-up comedians use TV and film rather than YouTube due to reasons more complex than the simple loss of economic capital.

The practical reasons for avoiding YouTube, shared by most professional stand-up comedians, are stated by Russell Peters as follows:

It’s impossible for some people to understand what it’s like to have material that you didn’t authorize distributed without your permission. Let’s say I’m having an off night or I’m still working on new material and it gets uploaded on the Web. There’s a couple of things that can happen:
1) People see it and say it’s shit, which kills my business.
2) People see it and expect to see new material from me when they see me live shortly thereafter. (147)

Peters’ first argument against YouTube addresses economic capital but is a weak argument since the opposite is true for Peters himself, who writes, “After the special hit YouTube, I started getting more and more gigs and making more and more money – more than I could have ever imagined” (70). His remark illustrates how YouTube leads to cultural capital that is then converted into economic capital. The second argument against YouTube addresses the audiences’ expectations but is also unsatisfactory because the prevalence of the economy of repetition in which these performances operate has shifted the audiences’ expectations. Auslander explains why audiences do not expect, or even want, new material:
From the advent of television until the 1980s, the conventional wisdom was always that television used up in a few minutes of broadcast time material it might have taken the comic years to hone. With the stand-up comedy boom of the 1980s, however, comics and comedy club owners discovered that audiences were only too happy to come to a club and hear the same jokes they had already heard on a comic’s cable television special. (Indeed, they may have been disappointed not to hear them.) In these cases, the traditional privileging of the “original,” live performance over its elaborations and adaptations is undermined and reversed…. (31)

The economy of repetition is unavoidably linked to professional success and YouTube offers a point of access. For these reasons, the monetary and creative losses that are often cited by professionals to avoid YouTube are superficial and there is a more complex underlying issue. Rather than economic reasons, the underlying issue in Peters’ statement is the lack of control over one’s self-representation.

Jenna Marbles and other YouTube personalities exercise a great deal of control over their representation. This control exists within the video itself as well as regarding their preferences in terms of production values. For example, “Unlike other YouTube personalities who invest in better cameras, lighting, and production values, Ms. Mourey has stuck with her original lo-fi operation” and “still operates the camera by herself” (O’Leary). Mourey’s approach qualifies these video performances as being comedic solo performances and thereby connects them to the performance of live stand-up comedy.

One of the significant differences that the video format introduces is the loss of control over representation that the performer has once the video is posted to YouTube. After the video is posted to YouTube, the audience is given control over the video. The audience’s control over the video is a result of their ability to manipulate the YouTube video’s para-performance. The audience’s performance impacts the para-performance,
which is the context framing the primary performance that is the posted video. Videos that are more popular, specifically those performed by professional stand-up comedians and are forms of “live” or recorded YouTube stand-up comedy, tend to be recontextualized more often than amateur or post-stand-up comedy videos. One’s amateur status seems to detract from blatant recontextualization. On YouTube, professional stand-up comedians have little to no control over their representation, which negatively impacts their cultural capital. Whereas amateurs, like Bo Burnham, or post-stand-up comedians, like Jenna Marbles, can use YouTube to gain cultural capital, those who are already established in other media pay a price since their strongest work can be recontextualized and as a consequence is often bastardized beyond their intentions.

**Recorded YouTube Stand-Up Comedy: Carlin & the KKK**

Unwanted recontextualization and the lack of control over representation that it signifies is evident in an example of recorded YouTube stand-up comedy featuring George Carlin. In this video, Carlin is performing a bit about the arbitrary nature of language and the use of the “N”-word, in which he communicates that people should look at the issues underlying the use of the racial slur rather than focusing on censoring the word itself. The original recording is from Carlin’s 1992 HBO television special, *Doin’ It Again*. Carlin’s reasoning for such taboo words shows that not only is the signified more important than the signifier but that the speaker and the context in which the word is being used are more important than the word itself. He views the use of politically correct language as political since it obscures certain truths about those who would use these words if they did not have a politically correct alternative to fall back on. While Carlin’s point may remain valid to this day in theory, the change in control that has been
introduced by media forms like YouTube complicates how the use of such words works in practice.

Carlin’s perspective is complicated due to the great degree of recontextualization that can occur on platforms such as YouTube. For example, Carlin’s “N”-word monologue, from *Doin’ It Again*, has been uploaded to YouTube by a user called “KuKlutsKat” under the following title: “George Carlin explains why you should say nigger” (KuKlutsKat). This recontextualization illustrates Carlin’s point in that very video clip: “It’s the context that counts. It’s the user. It’s the intention behind the words that makes them good or bad” (Carlin qtd. in KuKlutsKat). On YouTube, Carlin’s lack of control over his representation compromises the context that he establishes as being of the utmost significance to the construction of meaning.

The stand-up comedians’ lack of control over their representations puts them at a disadvantage, which is exacerbated by the highly active involvement and potential impact of YouTube audiences. The ability of YouTube audiences to recontextualize in direct opposition to the professional stand-up comedian’s intentions demonstrates that the audiences’ agency goes beyond that of other audiences. Clearly, anyone who watches or reads the content of the routine could see that this is not what Carlin is advocating. Despite that, it seems difficult to accept that what is significant is the meaning, the context, the speaker, and the audience rather than the word itself when the very performance that attempts to explain these important differences is being re-contextualized to produce the opposite meaning of the source text by YouTube users and for YouTube audiences.
“Live” YouTube Stand-Up Comedy: The Michael Richards Incident

In addition to the difficulty regarding the control over recontextualization of recorded YouTube stand-up comedy, there is also the issue of control in relation to “live” YouTube stand-up comedy. Back in 2006, an audience member recorded Michael Richards, better known as Kramer from Seinfeld, performing a “racist tirade.” This video was released on the Internet by TMZ. Although it is unclear where this video first surfaced, it was posted by TMZ and made available on YouTube through TMZ’s YouTube channel. In this incident, a large group arrived to the Laugh Factory after Richards had already taken the stage. Richards then proceeded to make a number of racist comments about individuals in the group. He particularly focused on the race of two men in the group: Kyle Doss and Frank McBride. During the performance, Richards used the “N”-word multiple times and made references to lynching:

RICHARDS. Shut up! Fifty years ago we’d have you upside down with a fucking fork up your ass. You can talk, you can talk, you can talk! You’re brave now motherfucker! Throw his ass out, he’s a nigger. He’s a nigger! He’s a nigger.
AUDIENCE MEMBER/RECORDER. Oh my god…
RICHARDS. A nigger! Look there’s a nigger! Oooh! Ooh! Alright, you see? This shocks you, it shocks you… to see what’s buried beneath you stupid motherfuckers.
AUDIENCE MEMBER. That was uncalled for.
RICHARDS. What was uncalled for? It’s uncalled for you to interrupt my ass, you cheap motherfucker! You guys have been talkin’ and talkin’ and talkin’. I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know!
AUDIENCE MEMBER/RECORDER. This guy is going nuts.
RICHARDS. What’s the matter? Is this too much for you to handle? They’re going to arrest me for calling a Black man a nigger?

[^4]: I use “Audience Member” to indicate various individuals speaking since it is unclear how many speakers there are and who to attribute lines to based on the video.
AUDIENCE MEMBERS. (*Making unclear comments and leaving the venue.*)
RICHARDS. Wait a minute, where’s he going?
AUDIENCE MEMBER. That was uncalled for, you fucking cracker-ass motherfucker.
RICHARDS. Cracker-ass? You calling me cracker-ass, nigga?!
AUDIENCE MEMBER. Fucking White boy.
RICHARDS. Are you threatening me?
AUDIENCE MEMBER. We’ll see what’s up.
RICHARDS. Oh, it’s a big threat. That’s how you get back at the man.
AUDIENCE MEMBER. That was real uncalled for.
RICHARDS. Wait a minute, he’s not going, is he?
AUDIENCE MEMBER. It’s not funny, that’s why you’re a reject, never had no shows, never had no movies, *Seinfeld* that’s it.
RICHARDS. Oh I guess you got me there. You’re absolutely right. I’m just a wash up. Gotta stand on the stage.
AUDIENCE MEMBER. That’s unfucking called for. That ain’t necessary.
RICHARDS. Well, you interrupted me, pal. That’s what happens when you interrupt the White man, don’t you know?
AUDIENCE MEMBER. Uncalled for. That was uncalled for.
RICHARDS. You see? You see, there’s still those words, those words, those words. (TMZ)

Indeed, there still are those words and Richards’ use of the “N”-word is an instance of hate speech. In relation to hate speech, Judith Butler writes:

> [S]peech does not merely reflect a relation of social domination; speech *enacts* domination, becoming the vehicle through which that social structure is reinstated. According to this illocutionary model, hate speech *constitutes* its addressee at the moment of its utterance; it does not describe an injury or produce one as a consequence; it is, in the very speaking of such speech, the performance of the injury itself, where the injury is understood as social subordination. What hate speech does, then, is to constitute the subject in a subordinate position. (19)

Richards’ use of the “N”-word constructed his audience members as subordinate. His reaction is clearly disproportionate to the situation and that juxtaposition reveals his
disturbing use of the “N”-word. He not only fails to meet the appropriate requirements in terms of meaning, audience, context, and speaker he explains that his use of the word is “what happen[ed]” to the listeners because they “interrupt[ed]” him. He thereby contextualizes the utterance of the “N”-word as an action that he performed due to a perceived interruption.

Richards’ use of the word is in stark contrast to stand-up comedians like Bruce, Pryor, and Carlin. In terms of intention, other stand-up comedians are focused on understanding or deconstructing the word. They discuss whether or not the “N”-word should be selectively banned, completely banned, or overused through reappropriation by Black stand-up comedians in order to reclaim and de-power the “N”-word. Richards’ usage is not in keeping with these goals. When other stand-up comedians use the “N”-word the meaning is different (i.e. Black stand-up comedians using it to refer to other Black men) or it is being used to show the significance of context over the word itself in a critique of the growing dominance of politically correct language in our culture. It is clear in these other cases that the context, the signified, the speaker, and the listener must be appropriate when using the “N”-word. Moreover, the stand-up comedians that use the word in a comedic manner that is successful in producing laughter are sure to exert a great degree of control over all of the aforementioned facets of the performance. Richards’ use of the word was especially problematic because the context, the signified, the speaker, and the listeners were all inappropriate.

At the same time, Richards is represented in the media as passive since he later portrays himself as unaware of what he was saying or why he was saying it:

For this to happen, for me to be at a comedy club and flip out and say this crap… I’m deeply, deeply, sorry. And I’ll get to
the force field of this hostility. Why it’s there – why the rage is in any of us. … The rage did go all over the place. It went to everyone in the room. … I’m not a racist. That’s what’s so insane about this! Yet it’s said. It comes through. It fires out of me. (HecklerBlog)

Setting aside whether or not Richards is being honest, the statement that entered media discourse of the incident offers insight into power relations. Specifically, Richards’ statement show’s a lack of control over what he said, which resonates with Charles B. Davis’ writing on ventriloquism: “Foucault’s conception of the author as ‘ideological product’ suggests that all speaking subjects are mouthpieces for a master discourse produced by power structures” (151). Significantly, the increased control YouTube gives its audiences in the commodification of “live” YouTube stand-up comedy also allows for the number of “speaking subjects” to multiply. Those speaking subjects on YouTube went on to challenge the master discourse, and, in some ways reconfigured it. While there is something democratic about this situation, The Laugh Factory’s ban of the “N”-word is an issue that limits the performer’s freedom of speech. The prevalence of the economy of repetition in our culture has made the entry of the products of representation into that economy inevitable. Since it is highly unlikely that control can be exerted over the audience’s ability to commodify live performances by creating copies and uploading them to websites like YouTube the response has been the censorship of the live stage. The Laugh Factory’s ban is indicative of the strong influence audiences have on the performance of both live and mediatized stand-up comedy.

**Conclusion & Connection to Chapter Three**

When considering which audio-visual form of stand-up comedy best allows stand-up comedians to exert control over both their commodification and their self-
representation, it is clear that the answer is film. However, relating this topic to the issue of censorship reveals that TV versions have had a greater influence on stand-up comedy’s form and content. Stand-up comedians give up some control to the television networks and stations in exchange for a position that reaches broader audiences. At the same time, the networks and stations give up some of their control, in terms of censorship, because the stand-up comedian is profitable.

Although YouTube also introduces broader audiences, the platform gives those audiences more control over commodification and representation than the stand-up comedian. This is one of the reasons professional stand-up comedians avoid using YouTube but still aim to appear on TV, DVD, and Netflix. Moreover, in regards to censorship, YouTube has actually led to reducing free speech in the performance of live stand-up comedy by reintroducing censorship to the live stage. Professional stand-up comedians censor themselves on the live stage (e.g. The Laugh Factory’s ban of the “N”-word) or stop performing entirely if they see audience members recording their work (e.g. Dave Chappelle). Thus, despite YouTube’s democratic approach to production and distribution it is not the best medium for the performance of stand-up comedy by professionals. Television offers the stand-up comedian the greatest degree of control over commodification and representation as well as a platform that reaches new audiences; this platform gives stand-up comedy the best potential to influence its audiences’ perspectives, which in turn contributes to the form’s dissident function.

Chapter Three will expand Chapter Two’s concentration on commodification, control over representation, and power by focusing on the para-performances of TV, film, and YouTube stand-up comedy. The para-performance has a significant influence on
power associations since the para-performance elements of title and imagery are often first impressions that heavily determine whether new audiences will be gained or lost. In order for stand-up comedy to fulfill its potential for dissidence it is essential to reach new audiences and to perform counternarratives for them with an authoritative voice and from a position of power. Thus, Chapter Three investigates how the para-performance associates the stand-up comedian with power by exploring how those without power, as exemplified by those marginalized on the basis of gender and race,⁵ are empowered or disempowered through key para-performance elements on TV, film, and YouTube.

⁵ The minority groups that are underrepresented move beyond racial and ethnic minoritization and include other groups such as queer and differently-abled stand-up comedians but given the scope of this dissertation and my subject position, I will limit my discussion to gender and race.
Chapter Three: Judge a Book By Its Cover:
Gender Representation in Stand-Up Comedy

Chapter Two’s discussion of the performance event closely examined the performance proper aspect of content as well as the para-performance aspects of interviews and disclaimers regarding censorship. The chapter argued that the para-performance recontextualized George Carlin’s use of obscene language so that “Seven Dirty Words” could be broadcast on TV. In Carlin’s case, the para-performance was used to gain authority in order to legitimatize his use of uncensored speech, which resulted in uncensored performances of stand-up comedy on certain TV stations or at certain times of day becoming the norm.

As stated previously, the para-performance can be understood through Genette’s para-text, which is comprised of the following features: “an author’s name, a title, a preface, [and] illustrations” (Genette 1). Drawing on those features, this chapter discusses aspects of the para-performance that occur prior to watching the main stand-up comedy performance. Specifically, it explores: the grouping of performers in the work, the title of the work, and the images associated with the work. The ways in which stand-up comedians are represented in the para-performances of their work reveal attempts to negotiate underlying power inequalities. Chapter Three investigates how power is negotiated in the para-performance in order to attract certain audiences, and what those negotiations communicate about the stand-up comedians’ power. Power is essential to the performance of stand-up comedy because it invests stand-up comedians with the authority required to change their audiences’ perspectives.
My focus on the para-performance showcases the importance of all that happens as a result of a performance. Rather than viewing the surrounding elements of a performance as separate and subordinate to the performance proper, the following para-performance analysis raises those elements to the same level of importance as the performance proper. Closely analyzing elements of the para-performance provides insight into how societal power structures result in adding positive or negative value to the representation of marginalized performers. In a sense, the performance and para-performance are inextricable but separating them allows for deeper analysis of para-performance elements, which offers greater understanding of how those elements serve marginalized performers as they attempt to negotiate existing power structures.

This chapter argues that the grouping of performers, the work’s title, and the use of imagery in the para-performance go deeper than marketing choices and relate to the empowerment or disempowerment of marginalized voices in popular representation. It considers the para-performance in relation to power associations in TV, film, and YouTube since control over performer grouping, the work’s title, and the work’s imagery shifts significantly from one medium to the next. On TV, the network or the show controls the para-performance; on film, the stand-up comedian controls the para-performance; and on YouTube, even though the performer has the greatest degree of control over the title and imagery of all three mediums, these aspects are simplistic and merely descriptive. TV’s attempts to disempower marginalized voices reveals an anxiety that indicates that TV might offer the most influential position from which to effectively introduce counternarratives told by marginalized voices into popular representation and thereby impact existing power structures.
Power associations in the para-performance are analyzed through the critical lenses of gender and race. Focus on these critical lenses is a result of three observations. Firstly, on TV, the show uses the para-performance to disempower women stand-up comedians by creating negative associations. Secondly, on film, women and racially marginalized men use the para-performance to empower themselves by creating positive power associations. And thirdly, on YouTube, performers use the para-performance to create both positive and negative power associations. Ultimately, considering marginalized performers on the levels of gender and race through their para-performances provides insight into how marginalized performers attempt to position themselves within popular representation in a manner that attracts audiences. That, in turn, offers understanding into existing power structures on a broader cultural level since such associations are manifestations of subconscious and conscious attempts to negotiate dominant ideologies pertaining to gender and race.

**Stand-Up Comedy & Women**

Within the already limited scholarship on stand-up comedy, women occupy a marginal position. Scholarly work on women in stand-up comedy consists primarily of single chapters in books on stand-up comedy, one in-depth book, and several articles. For the most part, these writings are on live stand-up comedy while discussion of media is limited to the inclusion of women in televised stand-up comedy. Moreover, such discussion takes the form of factual historical information rather than critical analysis of the significance of that representation let alone analysis that takes into consideration representational practices across multiple media platforms. The following provides an overview of the existing scholarship on women in stand-up comedy.
Scholarly work on stand-up comedy often includes a section on women within a larger work on the topic. That trend is evident in the following works: Andrew Clark’s *Stand and Deliver* (1997); John Limon’s *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (2000); Richard Zoglin’s *Comedy at the Edge* (2008), and Anna Woodrow’s *Why are they laughing? The Re-Formulation of Identity in Canadian Stand-up Comedy* (2012).

Clark and Limon both explain that the lack of women in stand-up comedy relates to the challenge of overcoming societal expectations of women, which are in contrast to the typical characteristics of the stand-up comedian. In *Stand and Deliver*, Clark argues that: “women in comedy have characteristics that society considers male. They are independent, assertive, occasionally profane, and don’t shy away from confrontation” (182-183). Clark also attributes the statistic that women make up “10 per cent of working stand-up comedians” to “the stigma of being a woman in comedy” (184) and the road work stand-up comedians “must do to earn a living” (185). He explains that, in the 1990s, women strategized by cutting “the road work out of the picture” by taking part-time jobs and concentrating on in-town gigs (185). While that strategy may have increased the number of women in stand-up comedy, Clark explains a deeper reason for why the form continues to attract more men and the challenge women face: “women don’t generally get approval for publicly displaying their anger. … We’ll accept an angry man because in traditional Western society, men are doers. Women are the mothers and muses. … If the muse takes the stage and begins to expose her discontent, all hell could break loose” (191). Clark’s notion of women in the role of stand-up comedian being viewed as threatening to the patriarchy is echoed in Limon’s *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory*. Limon
points out the threat of a woman, who is not self-deprecating or grotesque, performing comedy: “one could not chart the direction of laughter: are we laughing at her or is she laughing at us, when we seem to be laughing together?” (57). Thus, both writers shed light on how women’s voices on the stand-up comedy stage evoke anxiety. That anxiety has further resulted in an observable absence or the negative representation of women in mediatized versions of stand-up comedy.

In *Comedy at the Edge*, Zoglin remarks, “Of the forty-three specials aired between the first one, on New Year’s Eve in 1975, and the end of 1980, exactly one was headlined by a woman: that old stalwart Phyllis Diller” (182). In addition, “Showtime finally aired [Elayne Boosler’s special] in 1986. The following year HBO began its series of *Women of the Night* specials, devoted to female comics. Boosler was proud of the breakthrough – even if the name, typically, made the women sound like hookers” (Zoglin 190). This chapter expands on the negative representation of women in stand-up comedy, which has continued seemingly unaltered from 1987 to the present. Similarly, Woodrow notes the difficulty women in comedy face: “As recently as the late 1950s, women have been described as incapable of possessing a sense of humour” (60) since “[t]hey do not possess the ability to understand and discuss universal subjects; they are of the private realm, not the public” (61). The point about lacking a sense of humour makes it especially difficult for women to discuss, critique, and thereby alter oppressive regimes of representation since any objection is viewed as a problem with those who critique the representation rather than the representation itself. Chapter Three critiques the representation of women in stand-up comedy by analyzing how representations of
women enter the public realm through para-performances of stand-up comedy in TV, film, and YouTube.

While her exploration of women in stand-up comedy concentrates on live performances, Joanne R. Gilbert’s *Performing Marginality* (2004) offers a unique in-depth look at how “contemporary American female comics perform their marginality onstage” (169). Gilbert contemplates the meaning of “feminist” stand-up comedy, which she explains as follows: “To some, the very fact that women got up onstage alone and took up time and space makes this a ‘feminist’ act. To others, only humor in which patriarchal norms are overtly attacked qualifies as ‘feminist’” (32). This dissertation adopts the first interpretation of comedy as a ‘feminist’ act since, in relation to media representations, an increased presence of women can create equality in representation between the genders albeit quantitatively rather than qualitatively. Finally, Gilbert writes that performing marginality “reveals [knowledge] about power relations in a broader cultural context” (Gilbert 169). Gilbert’s focus, on performing marginality and power relations, is in keeping with this chapter’s deliberation of the para-performances of mediatized versions of stand-up comedy. Chapter Three argues that mediatized stand-up comedy’s para-performances reveal power relations at work in representations of not only women but in representations of racially marginalized men as well.

In addition to the scholarship discussed above, there are also scholarly works that focus on one woman: Margaret Cho. Cho identifies as a Korean-American bisexual woman and is a prominent stand-up comedian. Cho is the focus of the following works: Rachel C. Lee’s “‘Where’s my Parade?’: Margaret Cho and the Asian American Body in Space” (2004); Susan Pelle’s “The ‘Grotesque’ Pussy: ‘Transformational Shame’ in
Margaret Cho’s Stand-up Performances” (2010); and, Elizabeth Ludwig’s American Stand-Up and Sketch Comedy: Between Race and Gender: The Works of Dave Chappelle and Margaret Cho (2008).

The scholarship’s focus on Cho’s work is not only due to her popularity but her subject position and the content of her comedy, which embraces and engages with her marginalization on the levels of race, gender, and sexuality. In keeping with that marginalization, Pelle’s essay discusses Cho’s work through “an intersectional approach to gender, sexuality, race, and nation” (21). Specifically, she explores Cho’s performances in relation to bodily boundaries as “metaphoric for any boundary the nation feels is threatened or susceptible to invasion” (Pelle 21). Such bodily boundaries relate to race and abjection, which can be seen in the work of Lee and Ludwig, respectively.

Lee’s work relates to race as she explores Cho’s theatricalization of “white civility … by Orientalizing it, exaggerating the colored person’s response toward such civility, and finally holding that civility suspect” (108). She also “inquire[s] how the Asian American performer, Margaret Cho, intervenes in public space through the stand-up comedy concert” (Lee 109). While Lee focuses on Cho’s performance of Whiteness, Ludwig returns to Limon’s focus on abjection in stand-up comedy. Ludwig writes that Cho expresses her own abjection and “then turns her anger towards the media, domestic relationships and the expectations of motherhood” (61). Ludwig then explores the mechanisms of Cho’s humour in relation to abjection as follows: Cho uses “self-deprecation (which acts as a mechanism for the audience to purge their own abjection) and ‘active anger’ … , which points to the social conditions that create this feeling of abjection)” (61). I contend that women’s use of self-deprecation in their content is
reproduced in their para-performance representations, which portray women as inferior or align them with masculinity.

Finally, other works discuss women’s absence from stand-up comedy, such as: Robert A. Stebbins’ *The Laugh-Makers* (1990), Simi Horwitz’s “Comedy Tonight!” (1996), and Susan Seizer’s “On the Uses of Obscenity in Live Stand-Up Comedy” (2011). Stebbins quotes Mark Breslin, founder of the Canadian comedy club chain Yuk Yuk’s, who explains why few women perform stand-up comedy:

[S]tand-up comedy is one of the last bastions of male heterosexual machismo in show business. … Women are not becoming successful by and large as stand-up comics because it’s a very direct affront to some people’s notion of what women are all about. In other words, to stand on stage is de facto an aggressive act and women are not supposed to be aggressive. People are not comfortable with that, so right away a woman’s got something going against her. (105)

Breslin’s observations are in keeping with Clark’s reasons, as outlined above. Similarly, Horwitz echoes Breslin’s view of women in stand-up comedy writing that they are often perceived as “stridently aggressive or unpleasantly self-demeaning.” Horwitz provides an example of how this view perpetuates gender inequality in stand-up comedy: “Stand-Up New York’s Cary Hoffman admits frankly that he does not hire women as often as he does men.” In relation to gender and power relations, Hoffman explains, “Stand-up comedy has a lot to do with control and power. And most men still seem to exercise it more easily than women” (qtd. in Horwitz). Horwitz thus points to a cultural anxiety associated with gender and power relations that can be viewed as the heterosexual man losing power to women. Stand-up comedy’s para-performances attempt to appease that anxiety through their representation of women.
The cultural anxiety associated with losing power to women in live stand-up comedy is intriguing given the increased number of women represented in mediatized stand-up comedy. Seizer shows that significantly more women perform mediatized stand-up comedy than live stand-up comedy: “24 percent of the comedians featured in fifty-two broadcasts of Comedy Central’s ‘Premium Blend’ half-hour comedy showcase in 2002 were women—in the trenches on the club circuit, women account for only between two to five percent of working comics” (221). While there may be practical reasons for the difference (such as the lifestyle of the road warrior stand-up comedian), I contend that more women are represented in mediatized performance of stand-up comedy because it is profitable to include women — to a certain extent and in certain ways. By representing more women on TV, the networks project an image of equality, which deflects criticism of exclusion while broadening target audiences to include more women. Comparably, including more women on film results in fewer women being represented on TV. Women’s representation on film fosters the appearance of inclusion but actually functions as a release-valve, which ultimately maintains the status quo since film audiences are more likely to be constituency audiences rather than accidental audiences.

In summation, the discussions above attribute the lack of women stand-up comedians to a gender bias that causes women who perform stand-up comedy to be viewed as overly aggressive. Funny men are applauded whereas funny women seem to evoke anxiety that takes the form of perceived aggression. The perceived aggression of women is a consequence of the anxiety evoked by the renegotiation of the underlying structures of power and control in stand-up comedy. Existing power structures deny women in stand-up comedy the ability to perform social criticism in a public space and
evoke laughter without being represented negatively or grouped together and thereby deindividuated. Women who attempt to perform stand-up comedy tend to pay a price, which often takes the form of negative representation, grouping, or exclusion.

There is a gap in the existing work, which does not investigate how women are represented across multiple mediatized versions of stand-up comedy. The work also does not clarify differences in power between media platforms and how marginalized performers create power associations in order to invest their work with power. At this point, it is important to draw attention to the fact that the majority of women that are represented in mediatized versions of contemporary North American stand-up comedy are White. The prominence of White women in stand-up comedy demonstrates that any discussion of gender should not be done in isolation. While there are many other factors (e.g., sexual orientation, class, education, etc.) that might also be considered in conjunction with gender, the focus here will be on race. Gender is explored in relation to race because while both White and non-White women are represented problematically, the same grouping tactics are reflected in racially marginalized men. Furthermore, race is focused on due to both its visibility as a signifier and, on a more pragmatic level, its continuation of the discussion on race that is the underlying focus of this dissertation.

In order to have a more rounded understanding of gender and race, the chapter focuses on the representation of women as well as racially marginalized men in the para-performances of stand-up comedy. Exploring the para-performances of stand-up comedy through gender and race allows for greater understanding of how marginalized performers are represented in popular culture in relation to underlying structures of power. Given the popularity of stand-up comedy and its simplicity in terms of
representation, this form clarifies how current regimes of representation are oppressive for marginalized performers. Finally, studying para-performances reveals which platform offers marginalized performers the best position from which to influence dominant ideologies, which I argue is the function of stand-up comedy when it is at its best.

Televised stand-up comedy provides women and racially marginalized men access to national audiences from a popular media platform. This platform allows for marginalized voices to be presented alongside dominant ones. Despite gaining access to the same platform as dominant voices, women and racial minorities continue to be marginalized on TV. That marginalization is evident in the data from fifteen seasons of *Comedy Now!* Specifically, of the approximately 223 stand-up comedians who have performed in the first fifteen seasons: 155 are White men, 44 are White women, 21 are non-White men, and three are non-White women. Therefore, White and non-White women make up 21% of performers on *Comedy Now!* while White and non-White men make up 79% of performers on *Comedy Now!* On the other hand, White men and White women make up 89% of performers on *Comedy Now!* while non-White men and non-White women make up 11% of performers on *Comedy Now!* These numbers demonstrate that although stand-up comedy offers marginalized voices access to platforms of power, White men continue to dominate those platforms on the level of representation.

The following analysis aims to provide insight into “how ‘difference’ and ‘otherness’ is being represented” in our culture at a particular moment, which then allows us to “see similar representational practices and figures being repeated, with variations, from one text or site of representation to another” (Hall, “Spectacle” 232). Understanding these patterns and connections exposes underlying structures of power that continue to
influence the representation of marginalized performers in popular representation. Hall refers to “the whole repertoire of imagery and visual effects through which ‘difference’ is represented at any one historical moment as a regime of representation” (“Spectacle” 232). Consequently, the following investigates the regime of representation as it pertains to stand-up comedians who are marginalized, based on gender and/or race, in relation to how stand-up comedy’s para-performances are associated to power (through positive citation) or disassociated from power (through negative citation).

The Para-Performance of Comedy Now!: The Marginalization of Women

Seizer points out that more women are represented on TV than there are working in comedy clubs (221). Given that significantly fewer women are working the comedy club circuit, the increased representation of women on TV could be viewed positively. From that perspective, the lack of women on TV shows, like Comedy Now!, can be attributed to the lack of women stand-up comedians. It is the representation of the women that are included that reveals that there is more at work here. While there are fewer women performing stand-up comedy than men, it doesn’t follow that the women that are working stand-up comedians lack material in comparison to men. Thus, it is unclear why TV shows and networks group women together based on gender and deny women the same amount of stage time as men. In the case of Comedy Now!, some women are denied their own showcase special and grouped together as “Women of the Night.” The reasoning for the grouping approach is unclear. The grouping approach may be an attempt to include women who do not have enough material for a special. Alternately, the grouping approach may be an attempt to attract a wider constituency audience through variety in order to ensure that ratings don’t suffer when women are represented since
women in stand-up comedy are considered aggressive and are thought to make people uncomfortable.

While the representation of women and men on *Comedy Now!* is unequal in total (i.e., men outnumber women in the earlier seasons), the representation of women and men was equal in time (i.e., one half-hour special per stand-up comedian). Taking into consideration that each season is comprised of sixteen episodes, on average, in the show’s first four seasons, each stand-up comedian is given her own showcase episode: seasons one and two include two women each; season three includes three women; and season four includes six women. Although *Comedy Now!* initially includes women and men in the same way, the show later segregates women, and decreases their performance time, through the introduction of the “Women of the Night” special. The increase in women stand-up comedians in the fourth season (i.e., six women and ten men) was followed by the segregating and limiting “Women of the Night” specials. These specials are implemented in seasons five, seven, and fifteen; most of the women showcased in each season are included in this special rather than given their own episodes.\(^6\)

The argument that the specials promote women in stand-up comedy is weakened by the decreased representation of women that follows the specials. The average number of women performing decreases from 3.25 women per season (during the first four seasons) to 1.75 women per season (in the seasons that do not include a “Women of the Night” special). Given the number of women performing stand-up comedy on other media platforms, the decreased representation of women on *Comedy Now!* is not easily explained by a lack of women in stand-up comedy. Rather, the name of the special and

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\(^6\) This is with the exception of the following: Miller Crosby in season five, Laurie Elliott and Anne Marie Scheffler in season seven, and Lori Gibbs and Eman in season fifteen.
the grouping of women demonstrate a regime of representation that ghettoizes, deindividualizes, and negatively portrays women in stand-up comedy.

The exclusion of women through the use of such specials is challenging given that they appear to be inclusive. The title of the specials is also subtle in the negative association it creates for the women performing. After all, the specials are not called “Prostitutes;”7 the specials still showcase women stand-up comedians; and the title seems a small price to pay in order for women to be included. The association between women stand-up comedians and prostitutes becomes more difficult to overlook when the specials have actually led to a decrease in the number of women being included on the show. Moreover, the amount of time given to each woman in these specials is decreased. A normal episode of Comedy Now!, which features one performer is approximately 22 minutes in length. In comparison, the “Women of the Night” special, featuring four women, is 44 minutes in length. Essentially, the specials decrease the time given to a woman performing stand-up comedy by half. In addition to decreasing performance time, the grouping of performers and the title of the special all combine to demonstrate the exclusionary function of the special.

Luce Irigaray explains that the roles of women in patriarchal societies are limited to the “social roles” of “mother, virgin, [or] prostitute” (186). The roles of mother, virgin, and prostitute are evident in women’s stand-up comedy personas. For example, Jackie “Moms” Mabley took on the role of the mother while others, such as Ellen Degeneres, take on the role of the virgin as they play the posture Gilbert calls “the kid” (96).

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7 My use of the term “prostitutes” in a discussion about negative associations is not my personal opinion about prostitution. My usage of “prostitutes” and determination of a negative association that results in disempowerment is based on the term being forced on women who are not prostitutes due to patriarchal power structures that cast prostitutes as inferior and lacking in power.
Currently, women in stand-up comedy are most often seen in the role of the prostitute. The casting of women as prostitutes is signified through the name of the special, “Women of the Night,” and is further enforced through Comedy Now!’s segregation and deindividualization of women. Women in comedy discuss their sex lives for the purposes of monetary gain but they are vocalizing their experiences and their opinions, both sexual and non-sexual, in the public sphere rather than exchanging their bodies in the private sphere. It is necessary for women to voice their opinions in public in order to break free from the roles that Irigaray identifies:

For women to undertake tactical strikes […] especially through speech […] to forge for themselves a social status that compels recognition, to earn their living in order to escape from the condition of prostitute … these are certainly indispensable stages in the escape from their proletarization on the exchange market. (33)

Stand-up comedy offers women the opportunity to construct themselves as individuals and to earn a living based on verbalizing their opinions rather than being commodified based on their bodies. The opportunity to move away from commodification is essential in order for women to escape their limiting social roles in a patriarchal society.

Unfortunately, Comedy Now!’s representation of women denies them the opportunity to forge a social status beyond the roles of virgin, mother, or prostitute. The segregation of women obscures their individuality while their representation as prostitutes forces them into the oppressive social roles that stand-up comedy offers a means of escape from. Upon closer scrutiny, performing within the context of a TV show ultimately constructs stand-up comedians, both women and men, as commodities. Moreover, they are commodified by the TV network and therefore still trapped by proletarization. Women are marginalized within the cultural proletariat in terms of solo
performance time. By grouping women together in these specials the opportunity to construct an individual persona is lost. The lack of the woman’s name in the title of the episode works towards obscuring her individuality and results in audiences viewing a group of women rather than an individual woman.

While it may seem that *Comedy Now!*’s choice to entitle their specials “Women of the Night” only impacts perception and power relations on the level of the para-performance, this is not the case. The power associations constructed in the para-performance, which align women with prostitutes, are evident in the content of the main performances. The impact of the special’s name on content is observable in the performances of the four women in season fifteen’s “Women of the Night” special: Larke Miller, Lori Ferguson-Ford, Dawn Whitwell, and Diana Love. Miller begins her set by stating: “I’m not really a comic. I’m just trying this until my pimp gets out.” Miller also utilizes the dumb blonde stereotype: “A lot of people think I’m blonde, just because I’m dumb.” Ferguson-Ford calls herself a cougar and represents herself as a divorced slut. Whitwell mentions her wife but also constructs herself as a woman of the night: “There are gay women of the night, as well. Okay? Alright. We’re mostly there just to make sure that the straight women of the night don’t have their civil rights violated in any way. But we are there. We walk the beat. We walk the street.” Finally, Love’s set discusses genitalia and porn; she also personifies her vagina as the fun neighbour and her asshole as the neighbour who is never allowed to have people over. Thus, each woman’s routine aligns the stand-up comedian with the “woman of the night” archetype. The title’s signification is so powerful that it compels the women performing to address it, which
directs content to the discussion of women as prostitutes and strengthens the archetypal role that perpetuates oppression.

The special’s title confines women to the limiting role of prostitute. In order to challenge stereotypical roles, the women in season fifteen’s special take advantage of the stereotypes associated with women (e.g. being a blonde, cougar, slut, stripper, prostitute, lesbian, or promiscuous). For example, the following joke challenges cultural norms subtly as the stand-up comedian draws attention to how a woman on stage still signifies. Ferguson-Ford portrays her impression of a man in the audience: “Oh great, a chick comic. This is the first time I’ve seen a woman on stage with her clothes on.” Ferguson-Ford thus draws attention to the scopophilic male gaze while demonstrating how performing within a patriarchal society impacts interpretation for male and female audience members alike. Despite many women being seen on stage for many purposes, associating women on stage with the pleasure of the heterosexual male gaze persists in our present cultural imaginary. If the associations of women on stage to strippers were sufficiently out-dated then the joke would produce confusion rather than laughter. Therefore, on one hand, the stereotypes are challenged as they are contrasted with more complex representations of individual women. On the other hand, the para-performance’s grouping of women emphasizes what they have in common (i.e. their gender performance and their role as “Women of the Night”) rather than their individual characteristics, critiques, and worldviews. For these reasons it is unclear whether such material, for all its subtle strength and comedic value, can positively reconfigure stereotypes and dominant views in spite of the associations made in the show’s para-performance.
The pervasive nature of the social roles available to women in contemporary society is reflected in their performances. Women may escape these limiting social roles through stand-up comedy because the form offers the opportunity to construct women as individuals in the public sphere and to earn a living based on verbalizing their opinions. Unfortunately, the opportunity that stand-up comedy offers is compromised by the para-performance’s representation of women. The use of the title, “Women of the Night,” which is not limited to the show *Comedy Now!*, reveals the challenge of escaping the social roles identified by Irigaray. Combining the oppression of the para-performance with the grouping of women in a show that gives men individual episodes connotes a negative value judgement in terms of performance ability and profitability. The para-performance’s treatment of women on *Comedy Now!* exposes the continuing power imbalance between men and women in Western media representations. In short, representing women together in a setting that is meant for individual representation demonstrates a move away from the individualization that stand-up comedy can and (ideally) should offer marginalized performers.

Although TV offers stand-up comedians power since it positions marginalized voices alongside dominant voices, this does not imply that all those represented on TV are equally empowered. It is clear that marginalized groups, such as women, are not positioned to make positive power associations in the same ways as the majority group. While the disempowering associations faced by women are disappointing, it may well be that the dominant presence of those who are associated with power and authority in patriarchal North American society (i.e. White heterosexual men) actually invests
marginalized performers appearing on the TV platform with a measure of that same power and authority.

From such a perspective, the disempowerment of women in the para-performances of televised stand-up comedy may be interpreted as a manifestation of denial and anxiety, which is enacted through attempts to force women into out-dated traditional roles that reduce them to commodities controlled and exchanged by men. Regardless of the reason, when marginalized performers are segregated on TV, as women are on *Comedy Now!* , it reduces their power because their grouped representation indicates that they are somehow lacking in merit as individuals, which in turn decreases their ability to reconfigure dominant power structures through performance. Unfortunately, these are the same structures that continue to group women in stand-up comedy and represent them as prostitutes. Thus, Breslin’s observation about women in stand-up comedy from the early-1990s is still relevant and the performance form continues to be dominated by White heterosexual men.

Any critique of the specials can quickly be interpreted as evidence that women lack a sense of humour or are oversensitive and emotional, however, the close reading and the data combine to reveal that the title of the special and the way in which it functions can also be interpreted as an out-dated means of exclusion. Furthermore, it reveals a problematic and persistent cultural anxiety about women speaking in public and being positively represented as individuals. By grouping women together in these specials the opportunity to construct an individual persona is lost. This is evident in the lack of the woman stand-up comedian’s name in the title of the episode. Thus, audiences are left with a group of women rather than an individual woman. In my opinion, the
inability to view members of a marginalized group as individuals and, by extension, the lack of individual representation of a marginalized group in popular culture, is the basis of all forms of discrimination. A point I will return to in my discussion of racial stereotyping in Chapter Four.

**The Para-Performances of Film: The Marginalization of Racialized Men & Women**

The elimination of individuality in the representation of women continues in the representation of racially marginalized men. Men belonging to a racial minority group are marginalized in the para-performances of numerous film specials through race and gender-based grouping. The observable gendered and raced grouping trend began with the stand-up comedy special *The Original Kings of Comedy*, which was released in 2000. The special was directed by Spike Lee and features four Black stand-up comedians: Steve Harvey, D. L. Hughley, Cedric the Entertainer, and Bernie Mac. Each performer was known well prior to the special but, following the special, all of them achieved even more success in the form of television shows, movies, and, in the case of Harvey, as host of the long-running *Family Feud*.

Furthermore, *The Original Kings of Comedy* inspired a number of spin-offs, which demonstrate that marginalized performers use the grouping strategy. Examples that are currently on Netflix include: *The Original Latin Kings of Comedy* (2003), *The Three Amigos* (2003), and *Chocolate Sundaes Presents: Live on Sunset Strip!* (2008). In these cases, grouping functions as a marketing strategy that ensures that the racially marginalized performers can draw in the largest constituency audience possible. It is both practical and reasonable that grouping performers whose comedy relies on similar frames
of reference, and therefore appeals to a specific interpretive community, would attract a larger constituency audience. For this reason the “self-segregation” of marginalized voices is a common practice in film specials.

The difference between marginalized performers choosing to group themselves and Comedy Now!’s grouping of women is that the TV show only groups women together and it does so in a negative way. The grouping of racially marginalized men in film specials represents men as kings while the grouping of women in numerous TV specials represents them as prostitutes. Racially marginalized women are sometimes grouped together positively on film, as in The Queens of Comedy (2001), but they are also grouped together negatively on film, as in Snoop Dogg Presents The Bad Girls of Comedy (2012). Film specials that star mostly White women also continue to portray women in a questionable manner, as in Women Who Kill (2013). While “killing” refers to performing a set very well in stand-up comedy it also associates women to the femme fatale stock character, which identifies them as threatening towards men. The often negative or questionable representations of White women and their grouping in mediatized versions of stand-up comedy are indicative of the plight of being a marginalized majority. The negative representations of White women are a result of the cultural anxiety associated with the most immediate threat (based on the numbers gathered from Comedy Now!) to the dominant narrative of the White, heterosexual, patriarchal voice. Combining this anxiety with the pervasive nature of the social roles patriarchal societies force on women, results in the negative representations of women in the para-performances of stand-up comedy.
The negative representation of women in the para-performances of stand-up comedy can also be related to the extensive use of self-deprecation in the content of their performances. By using self-deprecation women position themselves in a lower position, which alleviates the anxiety evoked through their performances. The use of such humour allows women to perform from platforms of power and access national and global audiences all the while obscuring the very real threat their presence and voices pose to existing patriarchal power structures. In order for existing patriarchal power structures to be challenged, women must perform from platforms that access accidental audiences, such as TV, rather than constituency audiences, as in film. The film platform appeals to constituency audiences and provides individual women who perform stand-up comedy with the opportunity to take control over the para-performance. Film specials target constituency audiences; such an audience-performer dynamic does not strongly challenge existing power structures because constituency audiences are comprised of those who already share the performer’s views. When performers and audiences share views then the relief-valve theory of humour is a likely outcome.

The relief-valve theory of humour determines that addressing an issue releases the tension and pressure associated with it, which then allows for things to return to the status quo (Seizer 229). As Seizer puts it: “Such a view strips expressive behavior of its potential to effect more lasting change, and downplays the potential of speech acts to actually change the consciousness of participants and affect their further actions” (229).

While I agree with Seizer’s view, I acknowledge that relief-valve theories of humour can negatively impact the potential of speech acts to affect audiences’ future thoughts and

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8 Audiences will be the focus in Chapters Four and Five of this dissertation. The terms “accidental audiences” and “constituency audiences” will be explored in relation to the para-performance in more depth later.
actions. One way to combat the relief-valve effect is for performers to manipulate their para-performance in ways that associate their speech acts with enough power to push their audience beyond relief so that dominant structures are challenged for audiences. By challenging those dominant structures, affecting the audiences’ further actions becomes inevitable. As stated above, to affect change, stand-up comedians must reach audiences that do not already share the worldviews of the stand-up comedians. The para-performance is therefore highly important because it draws non-constituency, or accidental, audiences to film performances of stand-up comedy.

Consequently, creating power associations through representation in the para-performance is of vital importance. Creating power associations is significant on film since these mediums do not have the latent power of broadcast television, on which performers gain power by performing alongside those who already have power and authority (e.g. the news, celebrities, and various representatives of the majority group). The following sections examine para-performances in the films of Russell Peters and Margaret Cho on the levels of titles and cover imagery. Their para-performances demonstrate how these popular racially marginalized stand-up comedians use citation to forge connections that draw in highly diverse global constituency audiences and associate the performer with power.

Marginalized performers must work against “the dominant pictures, images, narratives, plots, roles, and stories ascribed to, and constituting, the public perception of minorities [since they] are always dominantly negative” (Delgado & Stefancic 231); and, they must also overcome the common occurrence that minorities are given little credibility on the occasions when they do speak in dominant narratives (231). That lack
of credibility makes the para-performance’s ability to make power associations especially important in performances of stand-up comedy by marginalized voices. The significance of power associations in representation is fundamentally intertwined with the potential influence of counternarratives on dominant narratives. Performing from a power platform allows for reconfiguration of dominant ideology on a material level as the images and stories that comprise counternarratives are entered into the archive of popular representation. The para-performance elements of titling and imagery create positive power associations in Peters and Cho’s performances of stand-up comedy.

Moreover, they accomplish this through their negotiation of both para-performance elements. Considering imagery, Hall writes that “the same photo can carry several, quite different, sometimes diametrically opposite meanings”, so instead of concentrating on “a ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ meaning, what we need to ask is, ‘Which of the many meanings in this image does the magazine [or text] mean to privilege? Which is the preferred meaning?’” (“Spectacle” 228). Hall provides the answer to that by citing Roland Barthes, “who argues that, frequently, it is the caption which selects one out of the many possible meanings from the image, and anchors it with words. The ‘meaning’ of the photograph, then, does not lie exclusively in the image, but in the conjunction of image and text” (“Spectacle” 228). Therefore, in my close reading of stand-up comedy para-performances, titles are read in relation to the images cited on the cover art of film specials in order to arrive at the preferred meaning and, by extension, power associations produced by the para-performance.

Furthermore, the following sections on Peters and Cho make extensive use of the *Oxford English Dictionary* in the semiotic analysis of the para-performance element of
titling. The reasoning for this is to reflect how everyday audience members would interpret the para-performance elements of title and imagery. Similarly, the semiotic analysis of images is based on their commonly known meaning or popular culture meaning rather than scholarly or historical significance. It is important to shift focus to how everyday audience members interpret these covers because performers negotiate power structures in order to gain these audiences, and performers are altering power structures for these audiences as per the role of the organic intellectual.

**The Para-Performances of a Racially Marginalized Man: The Films of Peters**

In 2006 Russell Peters released his first film special, *Outsourced*. On the cover, the word “outsourced” is depicted using a stamped aesthetic. The stamping aesthetic of this particular word furthers the idea of official business evoked by the word “outsourced,” which the *OED* defines as follows: “Obtained by contract from an outside source; externally contracted.” Moreover, in popular culture media representations related to this concept, people in India are often depicted as working in a call center assisting customers in North America (e.g. *Outsourced* (2006) and *The Other End of the Line* (2008)). The Indian workers are depicted in two opposing ways. On one hand, Indians are negatively represented since they are “deceptively” portraying themselves as Americans while “stealing” jobs away from Americans. On the other hand, their work at the call center is romanticized as bringing much needed help to an impoverished country. At the same time, Indian women are romantically positioned with American men and the narrative of love conquering difference and crossing borders is repeated. Problematically, such a narrative overlooks a history of colonialism in which Indian women were prostituted to British soldiers.
Returning to the significance of “outsourced,” associating Peters, who identifies as an Anglo-Indian, to the concept of outsourcing conveys the idea that he arrived from elsewhere. The location of “elsewhere” is unclear because, based on racial markers, elsewhere is out of India but, based on Peters’ nation of birth, elsewhere is out of Canada. The lack of clarity is furthered through the cover, which depicts Peters on top of a large globe featuring India and China thus making it unclear whether North America brought Peters in to perform for them, or, if India has brought Peters in to perform for them. Perhaps it is that very confusion that encapsulates the complexity of our current time, in which boundaries have become so traversed and fluid that a source is nearly impossible (and potentially pointless) to decipher. Rather than attempting to decipher the source and direction of migratory patterns, Peters’ cover associates him with a global community that exists across borders. The cover makes that association by aligning Peters with the two most populated countries in the world, China and India, which also have communities around the world. In short, Peters’ *Outsourced* cover associates his work with power through the official title, his alignment with two of the world’s largest populations, and through the positioning of his image on top of the world. Peters’ cover thus taps into a huge niche market that positions him as a diasporic-community comedian, one who appeals to a multiracial constituency audience on a global scale.

After the release of *Outsourced* Peters’ released *Red, White and Brown* (2008). This film features Peters’ image citing the United States’ national personification, Uncle Sam. Citing the iconic wartime enlistment poster image of Uncle Sam associates Peters’ work with the governmental power and authority symbolized by the poster. The watercolour aesthetic of the cover differs from the source image. Also, Peters’ image is
without the hat in the source image; rather, on top of his head, are the words “red, white and brown.” The title of the special itself cites the colours of the American flag while replacing the blue with “brown.” Through these modifications Peters’ cover indicates the belonging of the immigrant in America, an immigrant who is not only wanted by America but who has become part of the very fabric that symbolizes the nation. The Canadian performer of Anglo-Indian descent thus uses American imagery in order to draw in American audiences.

Peters’ third film special, *The Green Card Tour: Live From the O2 Arena*, was released in 2011. A “Green Card” is the informal name for a permanent resident card in the United States. The permanent resident card allows an immigrant to the United States to live and work in the country legally. The use of this name is fitting on a personal level given that Peters was born in Toronto, Ontario and now resides in Los Angeles, California. Having said that, many entertainers move to LA and do not make explicit reference to the documentation involved. The use of the term “Green Card” is strategic because it appeals to the immigrant experience, not only on the level of migrating but on the level of doing so in order to work and build a better life. The use of this title draws in audiences who connect with crossing national boundaries, especially for reasons related to economic opportunity. At the same time, it also appeals to those who are aware of national boundaries and weary of illegal immigrants. By placing the image of the card prominently on the cover, the performance aligns itself with government approval, which further associates the performance’s form and content with power. If the government has approved Peters’ presence in the United States and his ability to work there then the government’s approval cultivates the assumption that the government also approves of
what he is performing. Thus, the very title and image of the “Green Card” give Peters’ performances a significant level of authority.

Peters’ fourth special, *Notorious* (2013), was released via Netflix on October 14th, 2013 along with his four-episode documentary series, *Russell Peters vs. the World* (2013), which follows him as he tours. *Notorious* is significant because it marks Netflix’s first venture into producing and distributing an original comedy special. Peters’ *Notorious* was followed by Aziz Ansari’s *Buried Alive* (2013), which Netflix released on November 1st, 2013. Since these specials, there have been numerous Netflix originals. Peters’ release still stands apart from others because it transfers the DVD extras, in the form of the docu-series, to Netflix; an element that is often lost entirely as works are produced specifically for Netflix.

In terms of the title, it is clear that the para-performance of *Notorious* has stepped away from the referencing of the global and immigrant audiences that were targeted with the titles: *Outsourced* (2006), *Red, White and Brown* (2008), and *The Green Card Tour* (2011). Rather, “notorious” is defined in the *OED* as: “Of a person, place, etc.: well or widely known; famous.” Using this title demonstrates that Peters’ popularity has reached a level that allows him to reference his own positioning in order to invest his para-performance with power. While the title moves away from associating Peters’ performance with the government (i.e. an institution of power), Peters associates his work with Netflix through the use of its logo, the heading “A Netflix Comedy Special,” and the release date. Netflix also functions as an institution of power given its economic value and audience reach. Associating Peters’ special with Netflix invests Peters’ performance with power. Moreover, Peters’ para-performance attracts global Netflix audiences and
therefore reaches and maintains the global constituency audiences that were targets of Peters’ previous para-performances.

The appeal to the global is intentional, and is furthered by the image of the globe on Peters’ face. While in *Outsourced* Peters is positioned on top of a large globe, in *Notorious* the globe occupies only part of Peters’ face. Because Peters has established his own brand and associated his image with that of a global community comedian he neither requires the overtly obvious references to the immigrant experience nor the blatant citation of governmental endorsement. The plain white background leaves the audience with only Peters’ face to focus on, which is further reinforced by placing text on his face. The white background, in association with the title, can also be read as a move to reposition Peters’ fame to reach the North American racial majority.

The promotional materials of his current *Almost Famous* tour portray Peters in a white T-shirt wearing a nametag and white text is placed against a plain sky-blue background. The choices seen in *Almost Famous* reflect *Notorious*’s attempts to reposition Peters’ image in order to gain fame among mainstream (non-constituency) audiences. Peters’ para-performance in *Notorious*, and his other filmic comedy specials, market Peters globally from the very beginning of his career. His association with the global community on the level of his para-performances, his global touring, and within the content of his routines contributes to establishing his power and authority as a performer. Peters’ targeting of a diasporic Indian global community as a base, which he expands through his inclusion of other groups as he encounters them in his experiences and in his live and studio audiences, has produced a global constituency audience of unprecedented numbers. Despite his phenomenal success, his more recent para-
performances reveal the difficulties faced by racially marginalized performers as they try to expand beyond their constituency audiences.

**The Para-Performances of a Racially Marginalized Woman: The Films of Cho**

Margaret Cho’s constituency audiences, while not reaching the numbers of Russell Peters’, are highly diverse on the levels of race, ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Cho’s para-performances differ from Peters’ para-performances since they align her image with masculinity and rebellion rather than global audiences and governmental approval. Her para-performances also coincide with her concentration on gender and sexuality in the content of her stand-up comedy. In addition, analysis of Cho’s work must be conducted with attention to citation because inter-textuality causes images to “gain in meaning when they are read in context against or in connection with one another. This is another way of saying that images do not carry meaning or ‘signify’ on their own. They accumulate meanings, or play off their meanings against one another, across a variety of texts and media” (Hall, “Spectacle” 232). As those images gain meaning through citation, power associations are forged between the stand-up comedian and the cited.

The cover of Cho’s first film special differs from the covers that follow it. The first cover’s para-performance does not make power associations by aligning Cho’s image with masculinity and rebellion through intertextual referencing, while the covers that follow do. Instead, *I’m the One That I Want* (2000) portrays Cho’s entire body, costumed in traditionally feminine pink, against a yellow background. In the specials that follow, her entire body is not represented. Additionally, Cho references popular images
explicitly in the specials that follow, making it clear that she is wearing a costume and posing. Conversely, in *I’m the One That I Want*, the choice to show her whole body, without overt referencing on the level of image, resonates with the special’s concentration on body image issues resulting from unrealistic portrayals of women in popular culture representations. The title of the special furthers Cho’s concentration on body image since it references her book by the same name, in which she shares her struggles with body image throughout her life as well as during her TV show *All-American Girl* (1994), which portrayed the first Asian-American family on TV. Cho’s para-performance on the levels of image and title in *I’m the One That I Want* thus appeals to audiences that differ from traditional Western conceptions of beauty that dictate popular representation. The para-performance thereby attracts a diverse constituency audience as it attracts those who do not conform to popular culture representations and are therefore positioned on the margins due to differences signified by the body (e.g. race, ethnicity, and gender).

Cho’s second film special, entitled *Notorious C.H.O.*, was released in 2001. While Peters’ *Notorious* focuses on fame, Cho’s title is actually referencing the deceased rapper, The Notorious B.I.G., who is also known as Biggie and Biggie Smalls. Cho’s para-performance’s title thus aligns her with an influential and well-known Black male performer. Moreover, the title’s association to body image is continued in this para-performance through the absence of the “B.I.G.” The elimination of the term combined with the sexualized image of Cho indicates the idea of body image. The para-performance image juxtaposes the masculinity, marginalization, and body size signified by the rapper with a sexualized cat-woman pose. That juxtaposition of images and title
relate to: audiences that identify with various positions on the gender spectrum; audiences that are racially marginalized; and audiences that do not conform to contemporary Western standards of beauty. Hence, Cho’s para-performances strive to include anyone on the margins of White heterosexual male society but, at the same time, she exploits society’s male-dominance by citing masculinity in order to align her performances with power.

In addition, the para-performance image’s construction of women as sexualized felines actually relates to a bit included in the special that follows Notorious C.H.O. Pelle writes on the bit as follows:

In her full-length feature film Cho Revolution (2004), Cho speaks of the limited and stereotypical Asian role models that she has to choose from as she concentrates on the image of “Hello Kitty.” Cho details the importance of a voice as she says, “I don’t want to model myself after Hello Kitty ’cause she has no mouth. She cannot even say hi back to you after you say, ‘hello kitty.’ She can’t speak, she can’t eat, she’s just a pussy with a bow on it.” Cho refuses to be the silent, submissive, and well-behaved pussy who stays within the boundaries of traditional femininity. Instead, because “‘pussy is not supposed to speak’” (Cho, I Have Chosen 9), Cho defies the Law and makes a bold decision to use her stand-up as a social and political tool to challenge the restrictive ways she has been categorized. (Pelle 22)

In Notorious C.H.O., Cho’s open mouth, her bared teeth, and her hand positioned to claw all emphasize her view about women speaking up, and standing up, in order to break away from the roles of traditional femininity.

Cho’s move away from traditional femininity and her alignment with both masculinity and rebellion are strongly evident in her use of citation in Cho Revolution (2003). The cover references the iconic image of Che Guevara, which is signified by Cho’s hair, beret, and facial expression. The special’s title also evokes Che’s name
through its similarity to Cho’s; that evocation also points to his role as a revolutionary. Through Cho’s referencing, the rebellion symbolized by Che’s image is brought to the forefront for her audiences and her work is invested with a spirit of rebellion. After all, “revolution” is defined by the OED as: “Overthrow of an established government or social order by those previously subject to it; forcible substitution of a new form of government. In early use also: rebellion.” In Cho’s case, her work aims to overthrow the patriarchy, in general, and the traditional roles of femininity that it enforces, in particular. The imagery and title in her cover art attempts to attract audiences who are tired of restrictive roles based on biological sex. Cho’s para-performance shows audiences the power that can be achieved through understanding the performativity of gender, and then using that knowledge to perform gender in order to gain power.

The para-performance in Cho Revolution thus invests the work with a spirit of rebellion that allows Cho to break away from limiting and oppressive roles that women are subjected to in a patriarchal society. Still, the necessity to align her image with the masculine rather than the feminine reveals that masculinity continues to wield power in performances of stand-up comedy. Continuing male dominance requires women in stand-up comedy to associate themselves with masculine imagery in order for their work to be associated with power, appeal to audiences, or be viewed as important discourse. As discussed previously, the alternative to aligning one’s self with masculinity is to be represented as prostitutes, hyper-sexualized, or in a self-deprecatory manner that signals women as inferior to and/or pleasure objects for men.

It is no coincidence that Cho’s following two covers, Assassin (2005) and Beautiful (2009), continue to represent Cho in a masculine manner. Assassin portrays
Cho holding the microphone like a large gun while dressed in plain grey coveralls. Her ability “to kill” on stage is aligned with her ability to evoke an oversized symbolic phallus for her audiences. Similarly, in *Beautiful* (2009) Cho’s image, while quite feminine, is still masculinized by its citation of Alex through the iconic combination of eyelash extensions on one eye and a bowler hat. Alex is the sociopathic protagonist who rapes women from Stanley Kubrick’s 1971 film adaptation of Anthony Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange*. The referencing of Alex is troubling in terms of what Cho is being aligned with; it is no longer masculinity but a hyper-masculinity that is deeply intertwined with misogyny. Cho’s para-performance citations of masculine imagery all serve to connect her with the masculine in order to associate her work with the dominant group in her field. By aligning herself with men in her para-performances she avoids being grouped as a prostitute and retains individuality, even if that individuality may not be authentically her (i.e. in keeping with how she represents herself in her performances of stand-up comedy).

In addition to the para-performance elements of titles and citation through imagery, Cho’s covers also associate her work with power through a more direct means of citation: quotation in the form of blurbs. Cho’s covers all include reviews from critics that serve a validating function. Firstly, *I’m the One That I Want* depicts four blurbs, the first of which is a “Thumbs Up!” from Roger Ebert. Secondly, *Notorious C.H.O.* features the following blurb by Stephen Holden of *The New York Times*: “Brilliant. Over the edge. One of the funniest comedians in America.” Thirdly, *Cho Revolution* cites *The New York Times* again, this time without naming the critic: “One of the funniest comedians in America.” Clearly, it’s making use of the blurb by Holden again. Fourthly, in *Assassin,*
the para-performance includes two blurbs that serve to convey Cho’s aggression as a 
performer, again in a somewhat traditionally masculine fashion. The first blurb, from the 
*Chicago Tribune*, states, “Packs passion into each punch,” while the second blurb, from 
*The New York Times*, reads, “Murderously funny!” Finally, in *Beautiful*, the para-
performance includes two blurbs, where Cho cites Holden for the third time: “One of the 
funniest comedians in America – *The New York Times*,” and, finally referencing women, 
the blurb reads, “The woman is fearless. – *The Boston Globe*.” Even though it includes 
the word “woman” the font size of the words “funniest” and “fearless” appears to be 
twice that of the rest. The overall trend in these blurbs is to provide Cho’s work with a 
stamp of approval from certain institutions, primarily *The New York Times*. So, while 
Cho’s para-performances attempt to overthrow establishments and associate her image 
with rebellion, they also demonstrate that validation from certain institutions is a 
requirement of any revolution. 

The combination of blurbs by critics, titles, and citation of masculinity through 
imagery in the para-performances of Cho’s body of work indicate the importance these 
covers play in aligning the stand-up comedian with power. Cho’s gender performances 
specifically lead to her ability to access a particular constituency audience that shares 
similar frames of reference in regards to blurring boundaries associated with traditional 
gender roles. The control over the para-performance in film mediatizations of stand-up 
comedy thus offers marginalized comedians the ability to associate their work with 
power. In the case of Margaret Cho, that power is on the levels of gender, popular culture 
icons, and media institutions. While aligning her work with masculinity may be viewed 
as problematic it seems to be the better option when compared to TV’s negative
representation of women. At the same time, because films cater to constituency audiences there is a trade-off for being positively represented as an individual. That trade-off is to be confined to the borders of society, which essentially denies the revolutionary stand-up comedian persona a voice in the mainstream market. To gain a more rounded understanding of the impact of the para-performance on the representation of marginalized voices, specifically women, the following section will consider para-performances on YouTube by discussing Jenna Marbles.

The Para-Performances of a Woman: The YouTube Videos of Jenna Marbles

The para-performances of TV mediatizations of stand-up comedy are beyond the stand-up comedians’ control. Para-performances on filmic mediatizations of stand-up comedy offer stand-up comedians a much greater degree of control, but the many people it takes to produce a feature film also influence such a para-performance (e.g. the director). YouTube differs from TV and film mediatizations of stand-up comedy because its para-performances, on the levels of video titles and cover imagery, can be under the complete control of the performer. For example, in many of the videos made by YouTube personality Jenna Marbles, it is clear that she does not have any assistance and that many of her videos are performed, recorded, and directed by her alone. While YouTube offers performers the opportunity to associate their images with power through their para-performances’ titles and imagery, the platform’s lack of power and authority negate any such associations. YouTube’s very slogan, “Broadcast Yourself,” demonstrates that the platform’s high degree of accessibility is precisely what results in its lack of prestige, which translates to its lack of power and authority. YouTube offers a voice to everyone
who has access to a computer, recording equipment, and the Internet, which makes it so that all voices represented on YouTube are, at least initially, equal. YouTube users and cyber-audience\textsuperscript{9} members play an important function in determining what videos gain prestige.

YouTube videos and performers gain prestige and power through the para-performance element of the view count, specifically: accruing views and “going viral.” Going viral does not necessarily mean that the performer gains authority but it does mean that the video gains authority. Consider, for example, the viral video of the Michael Richards incident that was discussed in Chapter Two. The viral video did not invest Richards with authority but the video itself gained in authority and thus demanded responses. The video led to his being criticized by the media and greatly diminished his authority as a performer. Alternately, success on YouTube, as seen with Bo Burnham, usually means giving the performer access to other media platforms (e.g. DVD, Netflix, and TV) in the future. In other words, access to TV and film invests the performer’s voice with authority while YouTube just offers the opportunity to access more powerful platforms. Viral videos reveal that the aspect of the para-performance that is significant in gaining prestige on YouTube (i.e. the para-performance element of view count) is outside the control of the performer. For that reason, manipulating YouTube’s para-performances on the levels of title and imagery in order to associate the performer with power is ultimately ineffective.

The purpose of the titles and imagery of YouTube videos is to get the viewer to watch the video rather than to make power associations with particular groups or

\textsuperscript{9} The role of the cyber-audience will be explored more closely in Chapter Four, which focuses on audiences. In short, the cyber-audience refers to online audiences.
institutions; that purpose is reflected in the titles and thumbnail imagery of YouTube videos. The para-performance therefore states the subject matter of the video (i.e. done through the title) and shows who will be discussing that subject matter (i.e. done through the thumbnail, which is a still image from the video itself). Jenna Marbles follows this trend, which is evident in her most popular YouTube video: “How to trick people into thinking you’re good looking.” The title is descriptive of the video, in which she puts on make-up and does her hair while explaining to her viewers how they too can do what she is doing in order to trick people into thinking they are good-looking even though they aren’t. Similarly, most of her thumbnails portray her face and are stills taken from the video. It is clear that the intentional citation that aims to create power associations in the para-performances of Peters and Cho is not evident in the titles or imagery of Jenna Marbles.

While YouTube’s para-performances do not associate performers with power in the same ways as other mediums, Jenna Marbles’ YouTube videos do share some similarities to Cho’s para-performances in terms of citing masculinity. To elaborate, Jenna Marbles has added an introduction to most of her videos, which is comparable to a preface. Although this prefacing image does not make power associations or attract specific audiences prior to audiences making the decision to watch the video, it is one of the first images presented and so influences the decision to continue watching. The left side of the image portrays the name “Jenna Marbles” with the subtitle “Blogger and Entertainer,” on top of which is a picture of Mr. Marbles’ head (Mr. Marbles is her dog). The right side of the image portrays Jenna Marbles from the navel up, with long blonde hair, taped wrists, and eye black, while appearing to wear nothing but football shoulder
pads. Considering these characteristics of the image, Jenna Marbles is simultaneously sexualized and aligned with masculinity, which can be interpreted as an attempt to align her voice with the dominant gender without evoking anxiety. Finally, a squeeze toy sound effect accompanies the image. Using the sound effect, her dog’s image, as well as his name also indicates an alignment with the masculine but in a manner that ultimately negates her authority. That is not to say that this is a poor use of the para-performance. In fact, the strategy to appear non-authoritative may be beneficial to YouTube comedians like Jenna Marbles since it allows them to determine their own censorship. When YouTube personalities represent themselves as performing for entertainment purposes, they do not face external censorship on the Internet because they aren’t taken seriously or thought to have any lasting influence on their audiences.

It is not to say that Jenna Marbles is completely lacking in authority or does not align herself with power in other, albeit unintentional, ways. For example, in “How to trick people into thinking you’re good-looking,” Jenna Marbles says: “The next step is, go out and get a job that’s super degrading. I picked dancing in my underwear. Before I go to work I like to pump myself up by crying over my Master’s degree.” The video then cuts to her crying over her framed degree. The moment juxtaposes the ease with which women can occupy the social role of a “whore” and the difficulty to escape that oppressive role, despite gaining cultural capital in the form of education. The video as a whole demonstrates how women represent themselves as “human optical illusion[s]” (Jenna Marbles) in order to meet unrealistic standards of beauty, which ultimately cause women to be categorized as whores. While presenting this content in a comedic manner seems to convey that projecting such an image is ridiculous, the majority of her other
videos show her in similar make-up and hair. That choice demonstrates that her look is necessary to her brand and, in turn, her continued success on YouTube.

The para-performances of Jenna Marbles demonstrate that YouTube is not free from the constraints present in other mediums because performers must still negotiate the same hegemonic structures. Beyond the para-performance elements of titles and imagery, YouTube offers performers very little control over the para-performance (e.g. on the level the audience-performer dynamic). YouTube’s lack of prestige as well as the lack of control it offers performers over audiences makes it especially challenging to reconfigure power structures and effectively introduce counternarratives with authority.

**Conclusion & Connection to Chapter Four**

Investigating mediatizations of stand-up comedy on TV, film, and YouTube alongside one another is essential to understanding the difference in power between these mediatizations. It is especially necessary for marginalized stand-up comedians to be aware of these power relations in order to invest their work with authority. As explored in this chapter, investing one’s work with authority occurs as associations are forged through both the medium and the para-performance. In order for stand-up comedy’s audiences to view the performance as significant and the performer as authoritative the platform must position performers alongside those in power (as is the case with TV); the performers must align themselves with those in power (as is the case with film); or, the performers must gain power through their audiences (as is the case with YouTube).

Empowering representations on film may not have as much impact on the performer’s ability to influence dominant ideologies for their audiences as disempowering representations on TV; this is because film attracts constituency
audiences, who are more likely to share the performer’s views, while TV attracts accidental audiences, who are less likely to share the performer’s views. Similarly, avoiding being disempowered on YouTube does not help marginalized voices gain authority because the medium itself lacks prestige. Therefore, in terms of gaining power that invests the performer’s views with authority that can be used to challenge oppressive narratives, it may be preferable to be negatively represented on TV rather than positively represented on film and YouTube.

TV continues to surpass film and YouTube in its abilities to align professional stand-up comedians with power and provide access to accidental audiences. Analysis of the para-performance shows that TV produces complex power structures that both passively and actively reproduce discrimination that exists in society. Power structures are passively reproduced in the lack of marginalized voices represented and actively reproduced in the negative value that is added through the representation of marginalized performers. The active efforts to add negative value are indicative of an anxiety over representation that is not present in film and YouTube representations. There is an increase in anxiety with TV because it is the more power platform, the result of that anxiety is that TV continues to position marginalized voices as subordinate to dominant voices. Specifically, women and/or racially marginalized stand-up comedians are not represented as individuals or as equals in the para-performances of stand-up comedy on TV, which is highly problematic because the representation of individuals is necessary to positively reconfiguring stereotypes. The importance of individual representation of marginalized performers will be expanded on in Chapter Four through a discussion on racial stereotyping.
Chapter Four: The Importance of Being an Individual:

Racial Stereotyping in Stand-Up Comedy

Initially, in my work on this dissertation, I planned to demonstrate how Comedy Now! illustrates increased diversity in mediatized stand-up comedy on the levels of race and gender. Moreover, I wanted to show how that increased diversity reflects the current state of live stand-up comedy. The data, however, did not support this hypothesis. Data from fifteen seasons of Comedy Now! reveal that out of the 223 stand-up comedians who performed on the show 155 are White men, 44 are White women, 21 are non-White men, and three are non-White women. Thus, only 10.8% of stand-up comedians on Comedy Now! are non-White. Furthermore, it is not as if there is a gradual increase of racially marginalized performers over time. Rather, the highest number of racially marginalized performers is four out of sixteen and there are three seasons that do not include any non-White performers. There is clearly an unequal representation of race on Comedy Now! that challenges the belief that there has been a significant change in the composition of mediatized stand-up comedy over the last couple of decades.

Although there is an increase in the diversity of voices in live stand-up comedy, I believe that the immense popularity of individual performers on various media platforms makes it appear as if there is much more diversity than actually exists. The few performers that reach stand-up comedy super stardom thus obscure the continued ghettoization or exclusion, albeit to a lesser degree than in the past, of marginalized stand-up comedians that persists on TV. While it appears that there is an increase in marginalized voices, in actuality they have remained fairly consistent on televised stand-
up comedy for many years. There is a rich history of both White and Black stand-up comedy but racial diversity in mediatized stand-up comedy is in the early stages of its historical development. Given that there are not as many racially marginalized, non-Black, voices in stand-up comedy as I first believed, it is especially important to focus on what may be the loudest of those voices: the voice of Russell Peters.

Peters’ rise to fame marked the entry of the first Indian stand-up comedian into super stardom. He is especially relevant to this dissertation because his fame was a product of multi-platform mediatizations of stand-up comedy, which demonstrates the importance of understanding the differences between these platforms. Specifically, his success resulted from his *Comedy Now!* TV specials being uploaded to YouTube, where his special went viral and led to him being discovered. Peters now chooses to maintain his popularity through TV and film specials as well as global touring, which produces the raw material for his mediatized specials.

Not only is Peters the first Indian stand-up comedian to be popularized, he has accomplished this on a global scale and performed for record-breaking audiences around the world. Peters’ influence on stand-up comedy’s diversity is not only in his presence in popular representation but also in his innovation in the mediatization of stand-up comedy’s audiences combined with his discussion of race, all of which is consistent across his body of work. In Peters’ *Comedy Now!* and film specials, he represents his multiracial studio audiences in ways that allow him to perform race-based material beyond the limitations of his own background and subject position. The prominence of such a stand-up comedian, combined with the images of extensive racial diversity within
his audiences, promotes the idea that there is a great deal of racial diversity in contemporary stand-up comedy.

His extensive representation of his audiences translates to Peters’ choice in media platforms. It is evident from his current body of work that Peters has a clear preference for TV and film over YouTube. Given YouTube’s role in his success, his preference for other mediatized versions of stand-up comedy is striking. Although Peters acknowledges that he owes a lot to YouTube (Peters 70), he expresses that YouTube is not the right medium for stand-up comedy due to the lack of authority and control it offers performers over the mediatization of their work (147). I contend that Peters avoids YouTube because the form offers performers neither the control over their audiences nor the ability to represent their audiences that is required to positively reconfigure racial stereotypes.

YouTube is not discussed in this chapter because Peters himself chooses not to use this media platform. His presence on YouTube is primarily in the form of recorded YouTube stand-up comedy (i.e. whole or partial TV or film specials that have been uploaded to YouTube without Peters’ knowledge or consent). Another reason YouTube is not discussed here is that the medium does not give performers the opportunity to control the representation of their cyber-audiences. The lack of control over cyber-audiences will be investigated more closely through the concept of liveness in Chapter Five of this dissertation.

Control is especially important for Peters’ performances since his content deals with the sensitive topics of race and racial stereotyping. In this chapter, I argue that Peters’ success is due to his awareness of the dominant gaze, his superior ability to use popular racial stereotypes as a global reference frame, and his expert control over
audience representation in TV and film mediatizations of stand-up comedy. Specifically, Peters constructs his studio audiences as representatives of a multiracial utopia, which allows him to successfully perform race-based material beyond his subject position. Peters’ race-based material and audience representation allow him to reconfigure racial stereotypes.

While the reason for Peters’ representation of the multiracial audience is so he can more effectively perform a range of race-based material without being racist, these choices also impact the dominant gaze as positive and incongruent images of racial minorities are entered into popular representation. This chapter analyzes Peters’ TV and film specials for how he constructs the multiracial audience as utopian and how his attempts to positively reconfigure racial stereotypes for his audiences contribute to challenging and altering the dominant gaze. The discussion closely reads the para-performance element of audience representation on TV and Netflix as well as the performance proper element of content in Peters’ two Comedy Now! specials and his film special Red, White and Brown (2008).

Each object of study offers insight into the topic of reconfiguring racial stereotyping, audience representation, and control. Although the majority of performers on Comedy Now! are White, heterosexual males, the TV show also features some racially and ethnically marginalized Canadian stand-up comedians. The show offers an excellent case study since it reflects the diversity of stand-up comedy in Anglophone North America. Therefore, two objects of study are Comedy Now! specials, which are referred to in this chapter as the “red shirt” and “white shirt” specials. These TV specials are analyzed for how Peters’ content and his control over audience representation function to
positively reconfigure racial stereotypes. Also, Peters’ *Red, White and Brown* is investigated since its content concentrates on racial stereotyping and its form exemplifies how the studio audience is represented as a multiracial utopian audience through editing choices. Moreover, Netflix reviews of *Red, White and Brown* demonstrate how giving cyber-audiences increased agency in the para-performance can diminish the performer’s control over audience representation and, in turn, decrease the performer’s authority.

**Reconfiguring Stereotypes through the Dominant Gaze & Blanks**

The stand-up comedian’s ability to reconfigure racial stereotypes depends on being able to reveal and disempower the authority of the dominant gaze from within a system of representation that is determined by the dominant gaze. The dominant gaze refers to “the tendency of mainstream culture to replicate, through narrative and imagery, racial inequalities and biases which exist throughout society” (Russell 244). It “subtly invites the viewer to empathize and identify with its viewpoint as natural, universal, and beyond challenge” and therefore gains its power by “projecting stereotypes and biases as essential ‘truths’” (Russell 244). Because stand-up comedians must perform within a system that is the product of the dominant gaze, it is an incredible challenge to alter the dominant gaze.

The matter is further complicated as the prominence of marginalized stand-up comedians on film and YouTube may actually reinforce the dominant gaze’s power by obscuring its very presence. The presence of marginalized performers on those mediums releases the tension that emerges from the possibility of inequality or racism in popular representation, which obscures the power and the presence of the dominant gaze. By obscuring the dominant gaze on those mediums, it can continue to influence
representations of the marginalized on TV. Through analyzing the work of Russell Peters, this chapter explores the various facets a stand-up comedian must control in order to make dissonant the oppressive imagery of the dominant gaze.

Peters’ stand-up comedy creates dissonance in the dominant gaze through his use of positive racial stereotypes. A stereotype is “a crude set of mental representations of the world. … They perpetuate a needed sense of difference between the ‘self’ and the ‘object’, which becomes the ‘Other’” (Hall, “Spectacle” 284). The stereotype is therefore a mental construction, which provides a simplistic way to understand racial differences. Positive stereotypes are often viewed as acceptable, which overlooks the harmful limiting effect of this form of prejudice. In the “red shirt” special Peters cites the following positive stereotypes: Black men having large penises; Jewish people having enough money for retirement; Japanese people being smart; Gay people being good with fashion; and French people being good lovers. Peters then suggests creating positive stereotypes, such as: Irish people having good breath, and East Indians being really good at board games. Peters’ bit on positive stereotypes reveals that stereotypes (both positive and negative ones) are social constructs, which can be altered. It explains that if audiences have the ability to create stereotypes then they cannot be “universal truths,” which in turn produces dissonance in the dominant gaze.

Therefore, the success of a comedic performer’s use of racial stereotyping partly relies on his or her ability to combine and effectively utilize Russell’s dominant gaze and Iser’s concept of the interactive spectator. If a performance exists somewhere between the artistic pole (i.e. the author’s text) and the aesthetic pole (i.e. the reader’s interpretation of the text) (Iser 179-180) and communication between the text and reader
is to be successful then the reader’s activity must be controlled in some way by the text; this control is exercised by blanks (181). As readers fill in the blanks they complete one possible version of the work.

Readers fill in blanks similarly because similarities in social, economic, temporal, historical, and cultural background produce audiences that share similar frames of reference. Those audiences belong to what Stanley Fish refers to as an “interpretive community” (Bennett 40). Members of the same interpretive community are highly likely to fill in the blanks of text to produce similar readings. The stand-up comedian’s humour relies on his or her audiences sharing frames of reference in order to produce comedy. Those shared frames of reference are also necessary in order to challenge and potentially reconfigure stereotypes. Thus, if stand-up comedians can predict how certain audiences fill in blanks then they can draw the audiences’ attention to how those blanks were filled, alienate how the blanks were filled through ridicule, and thereby reconfigure racial stereotypes.

Another reason that Peters’ material is more likely to be interpreted as critical of racial stereotypes is that he is explicit about his intentions for using them. In the “red shirt” Comedy Now! special, Peters comments on negative stereotypes and explains his position to the audience: “I’m not making fun of us [Indians]. I’m bringing us out here. I’m making people look at our stereotypes and go, ‘Oh, I guess they are pretty silly.’” He offers this explanation because Indians have criticized him for making fun of them in front of non-Indians. Peters’ statement about stereotypes controls reader competence and reduces the possibility of misinterpreting his use of stereotypes, which in turn reduces the possibility of reinforcing those stereotypes. Stand-up comedians use racial stereotypes to
quickly evoke mental representations of the world and then play with them in an attempt to produce laughter at the stereotype’s simplicity rather than at the members of the racial group.

Effective negotiation of the dominant gaze, blanks, and comedy enables stand-up comedians to make their audiences doubt the notion of “universal truth” that underlies racial stereotypes. The dominant gaze ensures that when the racial stereotype is cited, audiences are likely to fill in the blanks in a certain manner. Once the audiences fill in the blanks the stand-up comedian draws attention to how those blanks are being filled. If the stand-up comedian does this effectively then the stereotype is interpreted as ridiculous and its validity is drawn into question. Peters does exactly this in the curry bit, in which he uses his knowledge of the dominant gaze to draw the audience’s attention to how blanks are filled:

People have that stereotype about Indian people. I’m trying to tear that one down. You know that one. (Uses a voice with a generic North American accent.) “Oh they all smell. It’s that food they eat. They eat that spicy food and when they sweat it comes out of their pores.” It’s like, I’m swea—“Jesus! Is that curry running down my arms? What is that?! It’s goat curry coming right out of my—” (Puts finger in ear and licks it.) “Spicy!”

The stereotype is based on the idea that Indians smell badly because of the ingredients used during the preparation of Indian food. Peters alters the idea by making the reason eating the food, which is obviously flawed because many people eat Indian food and no one sweats curry. The stereotype is made ridiculous since it has been associated with the image of goat curry running down Peters’ arm. The flawed logic Peters presents forces the audience to realize that they have shared the stereotype that resulted from the dominant gaze. The act of drawing attention to the inaccuracy of the dominant gaze
enacts dissonance when audiences are made aware of their adherence to the dominant gaze.

Ideally, associating Peters’ intentionally ridiculous logic to the stereotype should have the audience questioning the validity of the stereotype and, by extension, make dissonant the dominant gaze. The dissonance introduced contains the possibility of reconfiguring the stereotype. As with any stereotype, there exists the possibility that the reconfiguration could be positive or negative. Peters’ framing of the joke makes it more likely that the reconfiguration will be positive for two reasons. Firstly, Peters’ frame explicitly states that the stereotype is inaccurate. And secondly, he strategically references “all” Indian people in the joke. His use of the term “all” combines with his individual presence to produce incongruence. That incongruence demonstrates the stereotype’s inaccuracy, which makes it more likely that the stereotype will be reconfigured positively, if not deconstructed altogether for his audiences.

In order to ensure that the reconfiguration is positive rather than negative, and that it moves towards deconstruction rather than reinforcement, the stand-up comedian must maintain a great deal of control. Control is necessary because the potential of reconfiguration occurs in the moment of reading and the critical self-reflection that immediately follows. If external factors are outside of the stand-up comedian’s control they could negatively influence the reconfiguration of the stereotype, ideology, or map of meaning. Thus, a live studio audience provides a sense of liveness without sacrificing the stand-up comedian’s control. When the studio audiences’ laughter is represented in a controlled manner it contributes to the positive reconfiguration of racial stereotypes since those who are laughing belong to the group referenced.
Laughter & Dissonance

While the superiority and relief theories of humour constitute an explanation for laughter (i.e. individuals laugh because they feel relief or superiority), the incongruity theory is more complex since it forms the basis of the other two forms of humour (e.g. the incongruence of a superior to an inferior or the incongruence of tension and relief); moreover, incongruity theory explains how laughter is produced beyond reasons of affect (Weaver, *Rhetoric* 17). Ultimately, humour is produced when the audience is able to understand and accurately interpret a performance by drawing on maps of meaning that each individual has developed over a lifetime.

A basic example of the theories of humour occurs when an infant laughs at a funny face; the infant has learned that a face should look a certain way and he or she will laugh when the face does not look the way the infant has become accustomed to. The infant’s laughter at the funny face can be explained in terms of: incongruity (i.e. the face as it should look is incongruent with how it does look); superiority (i.e. the infant recognizes the incongruence, or, if an infant had the aptitude to do so, he or she feels superior because his or her face is not funny); and relief (i.e. when the face returns to its original state, or, he or she feels relieved because his or her face is not funny). The example of the infant laughing at the funny face demonstrates how most instances of laughter can be explained with all three theories of humour. Building on these theories of humour, I assert that hysteria underlies superiority, relief, and incongruity.

Hysteria differs from incongruity because it is not as simple as two incongruent elements being brought together. Instead, hysteria is the product of incongruency that causes dissonance within an individual’s maps of meaning. Hysterical laughter is an urge
to laugh at something that is without humour (e.g. at a funeral, when a pet runs away, etc.) and it is caused when an individual’s maps of meaning are impacted so that the ways in which the world is understood are disrupted. In the context of stand-up comedy, laughter is a kind of coping mechanism, which kicks in when maps of meaning, or ideologies are destabilized. The destabilizing impact of laughter introduces the possibilities of reconfiguration and reinforcement.

Hysterical laughter, the kind where an individual might laugh so hard he or she is in tears, is something powerful and violent. Violence is evident in the use of the following terms: “punchlines;” “killing,” “slaughtering,” and “murdering” the audience; and “bombing.” Stand-up comedy’s rhetoric is highly violent because it reflects an underlying battle between a stand-up comedian’s performance and an individual’s maps of meaning. The most effective of stand-up comedians “destroy” because they can alter those maps of meaning with which audiences understand the world and in effect destroy one world and create another out of the ruins. The best stand-up comedians “kill” because in altering the maps of meaning one “kills” who audiences were when they perceived things differently.

Importantly, the performance of laughter from other audience members contributes to whether individuals will interpret a performance as positively or negatively reconfiguring the maps of meaning. Considering the use of racial stereotypes in stand-up comedy, stand-up comedians who are able to impact their audiences’ maps of meaning cause hysteria by drawing attention to how audiences fill in the blanks. If the racial stereotype is successfully evoked then the outcome of that hysteria will produce relief, superiority, or incongruity. If the racial stereotype is unsuccessfully evoked then the
outcome of that hysteria will fail to produce relief, superiority, or incongruity. Ultimately, the performer’s ability to successfully convert hysteria into relief, superiority, or incongruity is determined by the context of the performance and an audience’s existing maps of meaning, both of which differentiate the racist joke from the race-based joke. All the control the stand-up comedian exerts to ensure this differentiation is meaningless if the audiences being represented respond to the material negatively.

**Constructing the Multiracial Audience in Peters’ Comedy Now! Specials**

Peters controls the studio audiences’ representations through a method of questioning and controlled improvisation. His work is superficially in dialogue with the studio audience, as he asks them questions like, “Any [insert a particular group of people] in the audience?” (which is a catchphrase of sorts), and then improvises shorter bits that lead him into extended rehearsed bits. In the “red shirt” Comedy Now! special, he addresses individual racial groups in the audience before beginning his joke about that group. Examples of this include the following: “Brown folks in the audience,” “White folks, can I tell you something?,” and, “Are you Native, man? No? Any Native people here by chance tonight?” The jokes that follow include: building a roti stand; telling “White folks” that the East Indian accent is fake; and Columbus mistaking the First Nations for Indians. Peters’ use of controlled improvisation functions as consent from a particular group, which allows him to perform race-based material that is not limited to his racial background. The group’s presence and positive reactions give the rest of the audience permission to laugh. Since the racial or ethnic group that is targeted in the joke finds it humorous it makes it acceptable for Peters to tell the joke and for both studio and home audience members to laugh at the joke regardless of their race or ethnicity.
Peters relates his routine to the information that arises from his questioning of the studio audience but he often only appears to build his routine around that information. Even when he is unable to find an audience member of the correct ethnic background he uses his conversation with the audience member as a bridge to the racial group that his joke engages with. For example, in the “red shirt” special Peters states: “Are you Chinese, man? What are you, Korean? Japanese? … And I know you’re not Chinese sir, but, you know the generalization with Oriental people that people make, you know?” He then tells a joke based on the stereotype about Chinese people being bad drivers. This demonstrates that Peters uses this method to heighten the appearance of improvisation despite the interaction being highly controlled by the performer since he manipulates the answers to direct the routine exactly as he desires. Thus, Peters’ ability to make his performances appear improvised and unrehearsed allows him to perform content beyond his racial and ethnic background due to his strategic representation of the multiracial studio audience.

Peters opens both of his Comedy Now! specials by commenting on the racially distinct audience members present. Even when Peters or the cameras are unable to visually locate a certain group he uses the tactic from his Comedy Now! special, and asks if a certain group is present so that he can establish their presence orally. In the “white shirt” Comedy Now! special, Peters taps into Canada’s narrative of multiculturalism as he constructs the image of an ideal multiracial audience. Observable across Peters’ body of work, the strategy of constructing a utopian multiracial audience facilitates his engagement with race-based material that extends beyond his own racial, ethnic, and cultural background. Peters constructs the audience as a portrait of multiracial utopia in
moments such as the following: “Look at this audience, man. It’s like a Benetton ad, man, this is good! This is a lot of different kinds of people here tonight!” By quickly representing the audience as multiracial, and expressing his positivity about diverse audience composition, Peters includes many different groups in his performance from the beginning. Thus, when he hails different groups throughout the performance, he constructs them as subjects within a conversation, which positions the group as the in-group. Since the in-group is often the superior group it becomes acceptable for Peters to humorously discuss that group.

Peters includes each group in the conversation so that the group is “in on the joke;” this differs from telling racial jokes in which the teller excludes a group by making it the butt of the joke. A race-based joke avoids being racist by negotiating the power relations underlying the joke (i.e. the jokes one can tell without causing offence are determined by the teller’s subject position). In other words, one can tell jokes that critique those in positions of power, such as the police or the government, but if one tells a joke about a group that has less power then that group should be favourably represented in the joke. Peters circumvents this by constructing the image of the multiracial audience, which represents all groups as equal and emphasizes that equality by including those groups in the joke. In other words, his inclusion of a group in his performance is viewed as confirmation of the group possessing equal power in society. Thus, the strategic representation of approval from the multiracial studio audience allows Peters to discuss many groups without offending studio or home audiences.

Peters’ representation of his audiences as a microcosm of racial equality demonstrates how the pervasiveness of the multicultural ideology in North America can
be employed to perform race-based material that does not cause offense but promotes the affect of inclusion. The intentional construction of the multiracial audience as both inevitable and positive is exemplified in the following bit about miscegenation and reproduction, which is performed in Peters’ “white shirt” Comedy Now! special:

This is a nice room tonight, you know. There’s all kinds of different people here. I love that. When I look out in the audience I see: Black, White, Asian. Just everybody, having a good time, hanging out. (Addresses an audience member.) Brown! We fall under Asian as well. South! (Addresses entire audience again.) It’s nice, you know, different mix of audience like this. And people at home, different kinds of people, enjoying this in their living room or wherever. This type of thing is not gonna be able to happen in about 300 years from now. Do you realize that? If we make it, to 300 years from now, do you realize there’s not gonna be any more White people? There’s not gonna be any more Black people? Everybody’s gonna be beige. And I don’t care. I’m already beige. You know what I mean? Not gonna affect me, you know. But it’s true, the whole world’s mixing. There’s nothing you can do about it. Eventually, we’re all gonna become some kinda hybrid mix of Chinese or Indian. It’s inevitable. They’re the two largest populations in the world. So you can run from us now, but sooner or later, we’re gonna hump you! And I’m thinking, if we’re already gonna mix anyway, we should start now, you know?! […] Let’s start mixing people now that would never normally mix. Just to see what we’d get. You know, hook up a Jamaican with an Italian; they could have little Pastafarians, you know. I’m Indian. I could hook up with Jewish girl. We could have little Hin-Jews. Get a woman from the Philippines, a guy from Holland: Little Hollapinos. A guy from Cuba, a woman from Iceland: little IceCube. A French and a Greek: Freak. A German and a Newfie: little Gewfies.

The bit emphasizes Peters’ perspective on the multiracial society as positive. This idea is also promoted in the opening sequence of The Green Card Tour (2011) as audiences are shown images of Peters transforming between himself and the characters he has imitated.
in his stand-up comedy; a tactic that presents Peters himself as a symbol of multiracial utopia who not only evokes differences but embodies those differences. By taking a strong positive stand on this topic it allows him to engage with race-based material without having the majority of his audiences question whether what he is saying is negative or racist.

In his Comedy Now! specials, Peters’ studio audiences are (for the most part) orally represented but the construction of the multiracial audience as utopian extends beyond the content of his performances. Film specials of stand-up comedy facilitate the stand-up comedian’s careful and strategic control over the live studio audience’s visual representation. In his film specials, Peters’ studio audiences are visually represented in an attempt to convey the image of multiracial utopia. The studio audience’s visual representation is integral to the successful performance of Peters’ race-based material in Red, White and Brown. Peters uses his control over representation to display multiracial studio audience members who are reacting to his material positively and therefore with approval.

**Constructing the Multiracial Audience in Peters’ Red, White and Brown**

In Red, White and Brown, audience members are strategically represented based on whether their visible race or ethnicity matches the race or ethnicity focused on in the material being performed. For example, Peters begins the special by commenting on the diversity in the audience: he highlights mixed-race couples, comments on the range of ages by pointing out a kid in the audience, and points out the Asians. Each comment is followed by footage of the audience members’ reactions. Similarly, the first bit is about how Asians love Dance Dance Revolution. Peters explains the game for a White male
audience member while positive reactions of various Asians in the audience are provided during the bit. Therefore, the stand-up comedy film provides the stand-up comedian with control over the studio audience’s visual representation, which is used strategically in the performance of race-based material.

In his film specials, Peters’ studio audiences are strategically represented as the image of multiracial utopia. In *Red, White and Brown*, the studio audience is represented over 67 times. That number is indicative of an intentional strategy based on visual representation because some stand-up comedy specials (e.g. Carlin’s early work) represent the audience only a handful of times, if at all. In addition to aligning the audience members with the material on a racial level, the special represents the same individual audience members multiple times during a bit. Representing individual studio audience members lead to the performance appearing as a dialogue between Peters and the audience member. As a result, the audience members taking part in the dialogue become characters in the special. Representing live dialogue between audience and performer prevents the joke from being interpreted as offensive because the group is present. Therefore, if the group found the material offensive it is assumed that its representatives would voice disapproval. Their positive reactions dissuade other group members, as well as the multiracial audience as a whole, from interpreting the material as offensive.

*Red, White and Brown*’s representation of the studio audience reflects the Canadian dream of multiculturalism. A multicultural and global constituency audience is accessed through Peters’ use of global and multiracial frames of reference. These frames

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of reference are coupled with visual representation of the multiracial studio audience and various racial and ethnic groups. The racial and ethnic groups’ positive reactions provide studio and home audience members, who do not belong to the in-group constructed by the joke, permission to laugh as well as the security that they will not be judged a racist for their laughter. Laughter is significant because it indicates that the out-group is being constructed as the in-group, which shifts power to the marginalized. Laughter also demonstrates that using multiracial frames of reference in comedy can lead to blurring the boundaries between groups and produce a multiracial community that uses humour to learn about different groups, which also contributes to reconfiguring stereotypes. After all, the more exposure a group receives the less convincing its stereotypes become.

The stereotypes’ validity is further questioned by representing marginalized individuals laughing at the stereotypical representations of their ethnic or racial groups. Representing an out-group’s laughter communicates that the out-group’s laughter at their stereotypes is comparable to the in-group’s laughter at their stereotypes. Therefore, it follows that all stereotypes are equally oversimplified and inaccurate. By emphasizing its inaccuracy the stereotype can be understood as a social construct, and that realization is essential to the stereotype’s positive reconfiguration. Thus, incongruity of the individual and the stereotype, alongside the studio audience members’ laughter, promotes the view that Peters is positively reconfiguring stereotypes and not telling racist jokes.

Furthermore, entering individuals belonging to the out-group into popular representation reduces the power of the dominant gaze and the stereotypes it perpetuates.
It’s Not Offensive: Negotiating Superiority

In addition to content and visual cues, audiences interpret race-based material as humorous rather than offensive through the stand-up comedian’s ability to shift superiority from one group to the next. As Weaver writes: “The superiority theory argues that humour and laughter are created from, and convey, a sense of superiority over the object of laughter” (Rhetoric 14). Peters’ work uses superiority but, in making many racial groups the object of laughter, no one group is represented as consistently superior throughout the special. Or, as one Netflix reviewer puts it, the special is: “Really funny - definitely worth watching you’ll laugh so hard. You can’t even get offended because he’s making fun of everyone. Lol” (Netflix, “Russell Peters: Red, White and Brown,” 17 November 2014).\(^{11}\) The reason “you can’t even get offended” is that Peters strategically uses his marginalized subject position between his discussions of other groups, and does not place his racial group in the superior position.

Peters is able to discuss groups outside of his own because of his expert ability to mimic accents combined with his strategic ordering and emphasis of those accents. When Peters uses accents in the “white shirt” special he begins with the Indian accent and this choice opens the way for him to mimic many other ethnic groups. In that special, he mimics groups in the following order: paternal Indian, gay Indian, maternal Indian, a White woman doing a Jamaican accent, South African male, White male, Indian male, Jewish male, Indian male, paternal Indian, Chinese male, paternal Indian, South African male, Italian male, Chinese male, Indian male, White Canadian male, paternal Indian,

\(^{11}\) The current edition of MLA does not include guidelines for the citation of Netflix reviews. These reviews do not include usernames or publication dates and therefore cannot be cited as YouTube comments or Tweets. For these reasons, I have opted to include that the review is from Netflix, the name of the show, and the date of access in the in-text citation and to only cite the specific film (e.g. Russell Peters: Red, White and Brown) within my Works Cited.
Eastern European elderly female, Chinese male, paternal Indian, Jamaican male, White female, White male child, paternal Indian, White male child, and paternal Indian. Tracking Peters’ use of accents reveals that he uses the Indian accent as a kind of touchstone throughout the performance. He uses the Indian accent almost as much as he uses all non-Indian accents combined. Because he targets his own group the most, and does not focus on any other group for too long, it promotes the idea that he makes fun of everyone equally rather than targeting one group (even though he is actually targeting the Indian group more).

Peters also couples his consistent use of the Indian accent with a deliberate choice in terms of ordering his material. That is, he discusses his own group before moving to another group. For example, in the “white shirt” special, he starts his race-based material by discussing Indians in a bit about watching the Gay Pride Parade on TV and his father’s disapproval of gay Indian men on TV. He challenges his father by citing the benefits of gay relationships on population control in India. By beginning with ridiculing his father’s prejudices, Peters includes Indians in his critique, which allows him to critique other racial groups and their prejudices without seeming as if he views himself or his racial group as above these flaws. He returns to this point in other sections of his routine as he demonstrates that his racial group also possesses the prejudices he cites. This is evident in a bit about his father on the phone with an Eastern European woman who does not speak English. Imitating his father, Peters states: “‘You don’t come to my country if you can’t speak the language!’ Click. My dad looks at me and goes, ‘Immigrants!’” The joke ridicules the statement often made by White North Americans, who overlook their immigrant status, by playing with the power relation. Since a racially minoritized
character makes the statement, Peters acknowledges that prejudice occurs within all racial
groups and prevents his comedy from casting the Indian group as superior.

Peters negotiates individual and group superiority in order to maintain authority
as well as retain his marginalized position. On an individual level, Peters positions his
father in the inferior position so that Peters can maintain his own authority as a
performer. On a group level, non-Indian groups are positioned above Indian groups in his
jokes so that Peters can maintain his racial marginalization, which positions him to talk
about other racial groups. For example, in his Comedy Now! specials he makes
comparisons about cheapness between Jewish and Indian people as well as between
Chinese and Indian people but, in both cases, Indians are “the cheapest.” Also, he
represents Jamaicans as “cool” and compares them to Indians, who are not cool. By
keeping Indians as the primary focus of the critique and positioning other groups as
“better,” Peters is able to perform his material without causing offence. Indians are more
likely to view the material positively because of the inclusive element while non-Indians
are more likely to view the material positively because the performer is making fun of his
own group more than the non-Indian group.

Rather than the object of the joke itself (i.e. the racial group) being viewed as
inferior, Peters positions his audiences as superior over other audiences. The sense of
superiority is derived from Peters’ audiences being able to recognize racial stereotypes,
view them as inaccurate, and to believe themselves above those prejudices because they
are part of the multiracial audience. Even home audience members of the multiracial
utopian audience perform their superiority. That superiority is evident in their critique of
those who view Peters’ work as reinforcing stereotypes. The home audiences’ critique
and superiority are present in the form of Netflix reviews. For example, one Netflix reviewer writes,

I think Russell is one of the best comedians of our time. All those people out there that are calling him “racist” really need to get their head out of their @ss [sic]. Every racial group has traits or habits that are funny and if you are so anal that you cant [sic] enjoy laughing at them and those of others than you really need to not watch stand up period. At least he tells jokes from a global view and not just a bunch of curse words thrown together about getting drunk, having sex, or whatever. Get a clue people! (Netflix, “Russell Peters: Red, White and Brown,” 17 November 2014)

Another Netflix reviewer echoes this statement:

People really need to get over this “racist” thing. We’re all humans from one world, he just happens to make fun of the way people act from around the world. It would be racist to AVOID talking about a particular country for any reason. Can’t we just come together and laugh at another country’s expense as well as your own? Oh and if your [sic] not butthurt about the whole race thing, this stand up will have you on the ground laughing. (I’m Latino) “Hola Senor, I’m here to shave your lawn” hahaha love this guy :) (Netflix, “Russell Peters: Red, White and Brown,” 17 November 2014)

The inclusion of the Netflix reviewer’s background invests the statement with credibility despite the lack of reasoning. The Netflix reviewer is performing the role of the ideal audience member. Moreover, the reviewer’s inclusion of exactly what he or she finds funny is presented as evidence of possessing the right sense of humour.

A third Netflix reviewer writes:

One of the best of Russell Peters. In terms of portraying stereotypes of culture, he makes fun of everybody. If you are a “political correctness” nazi, and can’t handle some level of potty mouth talk, please don’t bother watching RP. It doesn’t mean he’s not good or excellent at what he does (which he is), it just means that you have a different sense of humor or a perhaps a bad one. Otherwise, lighten up,
laugh at yourself, your culture, at the social ego’s/identity [sic] of humanity, which cause so much senseless violence...why? because [sic] we don’t have the capacity to laugh at ourselves. (Netflix, “Russell Peters: Red, White and Brown,” 17 November 2014)

The reviewer thus states that he or she has a good sense of humour and that if people dislike the material then it’s because there’s something wrong with them, and not the material. Furthermore, the reviewer aligns political correctness with fascism and intolerance and concludes that all the violence in the world is a direct result of not being able to laugh at groups different from our own. The Netflix reviewers that favour Peters’ work perform their superiority over those who dislike Peters’ work by casting them in the role of humourless fascists who cause all of the world’s problems. The Netflix reviewer exemplifies the superiority theory of humour.

Originating from Plato and Aristotle, superiority theory explains laughter as a result of feelings of superiority or dominance over others or our own former position (Weaver, Rhetoric 14); such feelings of superiority are often related to knowledge and therefore power. In the case of stand-up comedians who take a political stand regarding issues of marginalization, knowledge takes the form of the utopian narrative, in which differences in race, gender, creed, and sexuality should be accepted positively and not just tolerated. Those who do not share this vision become the subordinate group. It is an ideal of inclusion that excludes those who do not share the ideal. As Weaver writes: “The idea that humour and mockery can form resistance is a popular theme in humour studies. Early superiority theorists acknowledged it and sought to control the subversive potential of ridicule and mockery when it was directed at those in power” (Rhetoric 122). Through the globalization of popular culture, stand-up comedy that champions the utopian
narrative attracts global audiences whereas stand-up comedy that appeals to one or two specific demographics alone is limited in its global appeal. For this reason, those who develop routines that are in dialogue with the marginalized are able to form a new majority in the form of the global audience.

The use of superiority in Peters’ work thus constructs a new in-group (i.e. the multiracial group with a good sense of humour), and a new out-group (i.e. the monoracial and/or humourless group). Stand-up comedians who discuss race often have constituency audiences mostly comprised of one or two visible racial groups. Black stand-up comedians, for example, often focus their material on the Black/White dichotomy and their audiences are often represented as being mostly Black with some White audience members. In contrast, Peters has cultivated a multiracial, multicultural, global constituency audience, which contributes to his ability to fill large arenas around the world. That constituency audience is a result of his choices in audience representation and his content, which doesn’t allow any racial group to remain consistently superior but casts his audiences as consistently superior.

**It’s Not Offensive: Negotiating Relief**

In addition to superiority, Peters’ discussion of racial stereotypes is perceived as positive due to the relief theory of humour. The traditional understanding of relief theory regarded humour as an expenditure of excess psychic energy: “Sigmund Freud’s theory of joking argues that humour results from a nervous release of energy, and that jokes often have a similar function to dreams or slips of the tongue because they represent the expression of repressed thoughts, or thoughts that are not socially acceptable as serious discourse” (Weaver, *Rhetoric* 27). Contemporary relief theory regards laughter as based
in physiology, it “explains how laughter releases endorphins …, which provides the basis for humour being able to reduce stress …, and assist in the healing process” (Weaver, Rhetoric 26). In stand-up comedy, audiences experience relief as marginalized stand-up comedians engage with the issues of their marginalization through comedic discourse. While serious discourse and entertainment are often irreconcilable, the comedic treatment of taboo issues offers audiences relief as issues that cause tension between groups are acknowledged in a light-hearted manner.

Furthermore, counternarratives told by the marginalized offer relief to both the marginalized groups and the majority group. For marginalized groups, tension is further relieved since their stories are acknowledged in popular culture. And, for the majority group, tension is further relieved since that which may have been unknown previously becomes more familiar and therefore less threatening. The relief theory of humour states, “laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift” (Morreall qtd. in Weaver, Rhetoric 26). Audiences experiencing a psychological shift may feel relieved as they experience the joke and their maps of meaning are restructured. The restructuring also produces relief because it eliminates feelings of guilt associated with knowledge of the racial stereotype. Instead of feeling guilty, one feels relieved that he or she is aware of the racial stereotype but does not view it as accurate.

Stereotypes can therefore still be used to organize and comprehend the world without being used as absolute truths. Rather than absolute truths, stereotypes become templates on which new information can be overlaid. The utility of the stereotype in understanding groups one does not belong to eliminates the need to repress the stereotype or to feel guilt over it. The audiences’ laughter allows their repressed thoughts about
racial stereotypes to be expressed without judgement, which in turn releases nervous energy associated with the pressures of political correctness. Audiences feel relief when they experience racial stereotypes in a comedic setting because it becomes acceptable to be aware of the stereotypes and to utilize those stereotypes in order to build understanding across differences.

**It’s Not Offensive: Negotiating Incongruity**

Peters’ audiences also interpret his race-based material as comedic rather than offensive because of the incongruity theory of humour. Weaver writes: “Incongruity theory explains that humour is experienced when we perceive incongruous elements … or two objects being placed together in an unusual way, and so represents an explanation of the generation rather than the effect or function of humour” (Rhetoric 18). Incongruity is relied on in Peters’ mimicry of various racial groups. When Peters mimics Indians, the contrast with his stage persona (who he has identified as Indian) indicates that the Indians he mimics are caricatures and are obviously not indicative of real people. The incongruity of the stand-up comedian as an individual character versus the caricatures he portrays is humorous. And, the incongruity furthers the view of the stereotype as an oversimplification. Similarly, individual audience members belonging to the racial group that is the object of the joke are also incongruent to the mimicked caricature portrayed on stage.

Peters’ work is in keeping with one of Hall’s strategies “for contesting the racialized regime of representation” (“Spectacle” 272). That strategy “makes elaborate play with ‘looking’, hoping by its very attention, to ‘make it strange’ … It is not afraid to deploy humour” (Hall, “Spectacle” 274). Peters’ ability to mimic various accents and
stereotypical behaviours and then return to his performance persona shows a stark contrast between what one Indian in Canada is like and how all Indians are represented. It defamiliarizes the stereotypical accents and behaviours and makes strange the oversimplifying and reductive nature of racial stereotypes.

Another of Hall’s strategies is “to substitute a range of ‘positive’ images” for “the ‘negative’ imagery which continues to dominate popular representation” (“Spectacle” 272). Peters’ presence, in addition to his tackling of these stereotypes, further functions to include those who are traditionally members of the out-group to comprise the in-group. The in-group is exposed to images that conflict with, and therefore challenge, racial stereotypes that may have been the extent of the in-group’s interaction with the out-group prior to this exposure. The representation of ethnically or racially minoritized individuals on TV can reveal the problematic nature of viewing people with similar physical characteristics as a group that also shares behavioural characteristics. In short, the more individuals represented, the less accurate the stereotypes appear. Representing individuals belonging to marginalized ethnic and racial groups inserts their images into popular representation and, by extension, alters the dominant gaze.

The Importance of Individuality in Creating Dissonance

Mainstream representations of the marginalized individual contribute to the reconfiguration of the dominant gaze on a material level since the dominant gaze specifically functions through media representation. Individuality ultimately offers a signifier that is dominant to signifiers comprised of racial characteristics. Thus, the national community connects to the individual first and the ethnic group second. Promoting individuality through the representation of marginalized individuals in popular
culture displays difference within members of the same racial group. The television presence of an individual who belongs to an ethnic or racial minority group introduces an image of individuality within the media, in which such groups are stereotypically represented or are altogether absent.

The inability to see individuals belonging to a racial group as individuals is furthered by the “cross race effect,” which is a psychological phenomenon that strengthens stereotypes. The cross race effect is explained as follows: “[O]ther things being equal, individuals of a given race are distinguishable from each other in proportion to our familiarity, to our contact with the race as a whole. Thus to the uninitiated American, all Asiatics look alike, while to the Asiatic all white men look alike” (Feingold 50). In other words, the cross race effect is a psychological phenomenon in which all the members of a racial group look “the same” to those who are not members of that racial group or are otherwise unfamiliar with that racial group. It is important to combat the cross race effect by exposing audiences to numerous marginalized individuals whose represented identities are the same as their actual identities. Such a move would weaken stereotypes by increasing the audiences’ familiarity with a racial group, which in turn increases the audiences’ ability to view members of the group as individuals.

The cross race effect emerged in a 1914 article by Gustave A. Feingold, which makes its continued relevance somewhat puzzling. If overcoming the cross race effect requires familiarity with a racial group then the multiracialism of certain North American cities should have made this phenomenon out-dated by 2015. Feingold’s concept continues to be relevant because, despite multiracialism, our popular representations of marginalized individuals take advantage of the cross race effect rather than attempt to
break free of it. Audiences continue to experience the cross race effect because it is rare for racially and ethnically marginalized individuals to be accurately represented in popular culture. Performers are cast based on race (i.e. Brown) rather than ethnicity (i.e. Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, etc.), and that decision strengthens the categories of race on which racial stereotyping and racism rely.

The importance of the accurate representation of racially and ethnically marginalized individuals in popular representation indicates a shift in emphasis regarding the basis of discrimination from the civilization/nature binary to the individual/group dichotomy. The civilization/nature binary is proposed to be “the central dichotomy of embodied racism from which all others are derived, and connects very closely with notions of superiority and inferiority, and forms a key transferable, but not necessarily constitutive, component of other racisms” (Weaver, Rhetoric 74). The civilization/nature binary, as it carries a relation of power, has traditionally been matched to the White/Black binary that connects White to civilization (i.e. dominant) and Black to nature (i.e. subordinate). The binary is quickly complicated when racism occurs within the same racial group. If a secondary factor such as class is added to the factor of race then the civilization/nature dichotomy is not clearly applicable. For example, within the White racial group, the inclusion of class results in a racialization of Whiteness, for example, “White trash” or “rednecks.”

The individual/group dichotomy, on the other hand, applies across compound binaries. If an Indian stand-up comedian, such as Russell Peters, becomes wealthy and popular then his individual identity is dominant over his membership within his racial group. Popular representation focuses on reproducing the dominant gaze, which denies
the marginalized individual non-stereotypical representation in popular culture. In fact, the individual/group binary is not limited to the representation of race; it functions at the basis of all forms of discrimination. Thus, it is highly important for the in-group to have access to non-stereotypical representations of individuals belonging to the out-group.

Despite the representation of the individual over the stereotype and the great deal of control the stand-up comedy film offers, there can be no guarantee that the stereotype, once represented, will be reconfigured positively or reinforced. Stereotypes always pose the risk of reinforcement during any attempt to reconfigure them. It is not what is represented on the level of content in regards to the stereotype that is significant but the success of the form – specifically, the para-performance that matters. In Peters’ case, the para-performance is the strategic representation of his studio audience as multiracial. If the para-performance is successful in leading audiences to believe that stereotypes are being positively reconfigured then, regardless of what is represented in the content, reinforcement of the stereotype will seem unlikely to audiences.

**It’s Not Offensive?: Netflix Reviews of *Red, White and Brown***

Providing marginalized performers with the opportunity to work against the dominant narrative by voicing their own stories, in their own words, and associating those stories with their bodies portrays a shift in power that produces a reality in which the marginalized voice is authorial. Authorizing the marginalized voice within the in-group has a community-building function; and, when counternarratives gain access to the in-group, they have a destructive function because existing power structures are altered. When counternarratives performed by marginalized voices reach the out-group, dominant narratives that represent marginalized performers negatively or exclude them altogether
are countered. In order for counternarratives to effectively challenge dominant narratives they must be performed from the same positions of power as dominant narratives.

Dominant narratives espouse dominant ideologies and since ideologies exist within material apparatuses any reconfiguration in one will subsequently impact the other. In relation to mediatization, Stuart Hall writes that those with the greatest access to the broadcasting apparatus are professional elites (“Encoding/Decoding” 171). Thus, when marginalized voices gain access to the broadcasting apparatus they reconfigure the apparatus through their very presence within the apparatus. Likewise, as marginalized voices and counternarratives are associated with elite voices and dominant narratives they reconfigure dominant ideologies by altering the dominant narratives. This association repositions marginalized voices and those particular counternarratives into a new elite, regardless of its continued subordinate position to the old elite. As a result of the new marginalized elite, other voices, with their own counternarratives, will seek to challenge the new elite. Negative Netflix reviews to Russell Peters’ *Red, White and Brown* are indicative of a new counternarrative.

Peters begins the section that is negatively reviewed on Netflix by asking his usual question to the studio audience: “Any Arabs in the house tonight?” Peters then evokes two negative stereotypes of Arabic people: one is that they lack a sense of humour and the other is that they are violent. Although Peters does not deny the stereotypes outright, and even acts as if he believes the stereotypes, the para-performance should function so that it is unlikely that the stereotype will be reinforced. It is unlikely because the very presence of this group at Peters’ show negates the humourless stereotype, which in turn draws the violent stereotype into question. In fact, Peters uses his evocation of
negative stereotypes to transition into how negative stereotypes are perpetuated as he sets out to critique the media.

Peters even discusses the media’s misrepresentation of Arabic peoples and the media’s perpetuation of negative stereotypes in general in the following bit:

I kind of blame the media for what’s going wrong in the world right now, ’cause they kind of just perpetuate stereotypes about people. They don’t tell you that’s what they’re doing, they don’t go, “Hey, this is what you need to think.” But they know how people’s brains work. What they do, they enforce all this shit, you know? What they do, is they’ll show you an image of somebody… of a different racial background and then they’ll show you an alternate image like right away, of something completely different. They don’t say the two images are together, they kind of present it like, “What do you think?” Like, what they’ll do is they’ll show you like, an Asian guy and then a car accident. They’ll show you an Arab guy and then an explosion. I knew it! You know… But that’s what they do, they convince us that things aren’t what we think, you know? And all they do is keep showing you different Arabs in the world and all they show you is like all this violence. They never show you normal Arab people just doing regular Arab things like the same shit we do: go to work, have some coffee, go see your family. ’Cause those guys are boring. You don’t want to see them. You want to see the crazies.

Peters’ critique of media representation and his clear engagement with racial stereotyping in this bit demonstrate that his work aims to recognize and thereby reconfigure stereotypes. Placing this bit early in the special also helps influence how audiences will interpret the rest of the performance. The bit indicates that audiences should view his whole performance as having the intention to reconfigure and challenge stereotypes rather than reinforce them. The bit and its placement make audiences more likely to view Peters’ observations and use of negative stereotypes as critique rather than reinforcement.
Peters’ style of basing jokes on stereotypes positively reconfigures them since the audiences’ laughter questions the validity of the stereotypes. Ultimately, the dominant gaze is influenced as doubt is introduced to the stereotype, which presents the potential of positively reconfiguring it.

The Netflix reviewer in this case is still unconvinced by Peters’ manipulation of the para-performance element of audience representation, his explicit critique of stereotypes, and even his positioning of this joke early in this special. The Netflix reviewer criticizes Peters’ use of racial stereotypes:

> Just because he is Indian, it doesn’t give him carte blanche to be racist. While I appreciate his childhood experiences (the first reason I was attracted to his humor), he is now just using it as an excuse to open the racist floodgates. He [sic] had an opportunity to underline the medias’ reinforcement of negative stereotypes (Arabic cultures) but ended up reverting back to it for comedic value with his impression of Arabic in sign language. Poor taste. His [sic] portrayal of people with disabilities was downright offensive. I’m very disappointed that this is a representative of Canadian culture. (Netflix, “Russell Peters: Red, White and Brown,” 17 November 2014)

The review criticizes Peters’ approach to comedy, which makes many different marginalized groups the object of the joke. Having acknowledged that, the review overlooks that the sign language bit is based on the premise that each race is represented in a stereotypical and offensive manner in sign language and his signs for “Arabic” and “Colombian” are used to demonstrate that such reductive representations of groups are problematic. The sign language bit shows the deeply engrained nature of racial stereotypes that are as prevalent in our everyday lives as they are in sign language. The use of sign language defamiliarizes our use of stereotypes.
This reviewer is not alone in his or her interpretation of Peters’ work. Another reviewer writes: “He’s likeable, funny and a master with audiences. Still, it doesn’t hide the simmering anger (and bigotry) under the surface of the humour” (Netflix, “Russell Peters: Red, White and Brown,” 17 November 2014). Again, Peters’ anger at racism is interpreted as his being an angry racist. A third reviewer writes: “I would this give [sic] zero starts [sic], if possible. To all comedians out there: Bigotry isn’t funny. Racism, Chauvinism and Homophobia are the traits of a jerk, not the virtues of a great comedian” (Netflix, “Russell Peters: Red, White and Brown,” 17 November 2014). These reviews express that regardless of the careful control over the para-performance element of audience representation, which encourages those audiences to positively interpret the stand-up comedian’s use of stereotypes, some audiences will view the engagement with stereotypes as a reinforcement rather than a challenge. Such reviews question the stand-up comedian’s motives and function and introduce the possibility that the stand-up comedian is exploiting the multiracial audience’s desires for racial equality, moral superiority, and cultural belonging all the while reinforcing existing stereotypes rather than reconfiguring those stereotypes.

The end result of such counternarratives is unclear. Will they continue until existing oppressive and negative regimes of representation are altered in order to produce a society that moves ever closer to a utopian equality? Or, as counternarratives give way to counter-counternarratives ad infinitum, will dominant ideologies and narratives be reinforced in increasingly undecipherable ways, as society believes that they no longer exist? Perhaps, as is most often the case with such things, the answer is both options: while images and narratives of the marginalized will be altered positively in popular
representation, the dominant narrative will continue to perform in ways that are more and more difficult to recognize and reconfigure.

**Conclusion & Connection to Chapter Five**

The divide in responses to Peters’ work is attributable to one’s perspective about racial stereotyping. Specifically, whether using racial stereotypes is negative because they are always already racist, or, if using racial stereotypes is positive because they are tools used to comprehend different groups. In the latter case, that comprehension can lead to deeper understanding of different groups and thereby ultimately reduce racism.

Unfortunately, it remains unclear whether it is worth engaging with racial stereotypes in stand-up comedy at all if it is inevitable that some audience members will interpret the work as strengthening the very stereotypes the performer seeks to weaken. As Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic write: “we simply do not see many forms of discrimination, bias, and prejudice as wrong at the time” because there exists a “time-warp aspect of racism” (228). They further state that

[r]acism is woven into the warp and woof of the way we see and organize the world – it is one of the many preconceptions we bring to experience and use to construct and make sense of our social world. Racism forms part of the dominant narrative, the group of received understandings and basic principles that form the baseline from which we reason. (228)

Still, I believe that the use of racial stereotyping is not always the same as racism. Racial stereotypes are used as foundations on which more complex understandings are built by stand-up comedians and their audiences alike.

Only time will tell but I remain cautiously optimistic that stand-up comedy offers marginalized voices the ability to perform for mainstream audiences and to deconstruct
racial and ethnic stereotypes for them. It is often said that any use of a stereotype risks reinforcing that stereotype; I would argue that every use of a stereotype does reinforce a stereotype. But, within that reinforcement is contained the possibility of positive or negative reconfiguration. After all, for something to be reconfigured it must persist in some way. If positive reconfiguration occurs consistently then the stereotype will eventually be deconstructed and cast out from the dominant gaze and the cultural imagination. The stereotype will then be a remnant of the dominant gaze; an artefact that provides the present generation a feeling of superiority over past generations that were blind to their racism and crudeness, even as we remain unable to decipher our own. Perhaps there is a level of comfort and relief in the ability to criticize past generations for their racism and remain ignorant to our own.

The role of the racially and ethnically marginalized stand-up comedian is important in producing dissonance within the dominant gaze. Not only do stand-up comedians challenge limiting stereotypes in their performances but the very presence of marginalized performers in mediatizations of stand-up comedy alter the landscape of popular representation. For this reason, I argue that marginalized stand-up comedians, simply by performing for non-constituency audiences, are actively challenging hegemonic structures and reordering oppressive power imbalances. My perspective is not always agreed with; for example, Andrew Clark writes: “Comedy is the art of the impotent. Comedians are valiant cowards who love a lost cause. If they thought things could change, they’d be activists or politicians, not comedians. But in their heart of hearts they know the world will always be out of order, so they remind us that Rome is burning but never reach for a bucket of water” (106). In contrast, I believe that the function of the
stand-up comedian is actually to alert us of the fires, to show us what is out of order so that we may fix it. I suggest that the stand-up comedian, through alerting us of what is in disorder, sets those fires to ways of thinking that are “out of order.”

Additionally, the stand-up comedian understands the great power of being able to make audiences listen, and surely, history has proven the great impact this power can have on the world. By manipulating the para-performance element of audience representation, utilizing knowledge of the dominant gaze, and determining how audiences will fill the blanks the stand-up comedian can perform race-based material beyond his or her own subject position. Through these efforts the performance of race-based stand-up comedy can positively reconfigure racial stereotypes for audiences. In order for the performer to positively reconfigure stereotypes rather than reinforce them, a great deal of control over the para-performance element of audience representation is necessary.

The control the stand-up comedian requires over the audience makes TV and film mediatizations of stand-up comedy preferable to YouTube mediatizations. YouTube moves control over representation away from the performer and to the audience. Furthermore, the control that the stand-up comedian requires is closely intertwined to the liveness of each medium. The following chapter explores Auslander’s concept of liveness in relation to the maintenance of power, control, and authority in mediatized versions of stand-up comedy. It argues that even though YouTube most closely reproduces the features of live stand-up comedy TV and film are preferable because they allow for control over the features of live performance. Control is essential in investing the stand-up comedian’s voice with authority, which in turn is necessary to effectively challenge dominant ideologies.
Chapter Five: The Rise of the Unlive:
The Audiences & Spaces of Stand-Up Comedy

This chapter focuses on TV, film, and YouTube mediatizations of stand-up comedy in relation to Philip Auslander’s concept of liveness. Auslander’s *Liveness* focuses on how various media have infiltrated the domain of the live performance. *Liveness* “shows that media technology has encroached on live events to the point where many, like the sports events and concerts that feature huge video screens, are hardly live at all” (Auslander i). Auslander focuses primarily on live performances while I focus on how and why the signs of live performance haunt mediatized performances of stand-up comedy. Additionally, Auslander’s work challenges the “reductive binary opposition of the live and the mediatized” (Auslander 3) as he views performances as being on a spectrum of “liveness,” that has specific variations, rather than viewing performances as either live or recorded.

Expanding on Liveness

Auslander’s categorizations of the various forms of liveness inform this chapter’s discussion. Those variations are as follows: “classic” liveness, live broadcast, live recording, Internet liveness, social liveness, and when a website “goes live” (61). Classic liveness is characterized by “[p]hysical co-presence of performers and audience; temporal simultaneity of production and reception; [and] experience in the moment” (Auslander 61). Classic liveness is found in live stand-up comedy performances. On the other hand, a live broadcast is characterized by “[t]emporal simultaneity of production and reception [and] experience of [an] event as it occurs” (Auslander 61). Live broadcasts are highly
uncommon in mediatized stand-up comedy. Live recording occurs when there is a “[t]emporal gap between production and reception [and there exists the] possibility of infinite repetition” (Auslander 61). Live recording is common in TV, film, and YouTube versions of stand-up comedy. As noted by Auslander, internet liveness and social liveness are terms introduced by critic Nick Couldry and they occur when there is a “[s]ense of co-presence among users” and when there is a “[s]ense of connection to others,” respectively (Auslander 61). Internet and social liveness are marginally present in Netflix versions of stand-up comedy and strongly present in YouTube versions of stand-up comedy. Finally, when a website “goes live” it means that there is “feedback between technology and user” (Auslander 61). Again, this is most common in YouTube versions of stand-up comedy.

The categories of liveness are helpful in examining the audience-performance relationship. The various forms of liveness reveal how the Internet has introduced new complexities to the concept of liveness. In response to these complexities I have developed two concepts that build on Auslander’s liveness: the unlive and the para-performance. The unlive emerges out of a focus on the audience’s role in live performance and the para-performance is similar in that regard. Specifically, the important role of audiences in performances that occur within the unlive space of the Internet results in the production of the para-performance. As discussed in previous chapters, the idea of the para-performance builds on Genette’s paratext, which frames the main text. Genette views the paratext as “always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author” (2). In contrast, the para-performance is not always authorial since it sometimes arises out of the audience’s performance.
this chapter, the para-performance is mainly concerned with the performance produced by audiences as they interact with the performance proper.

    Liveness is an especially significant concept given the increasingly complex relationships and interactions between people and technology. This chapter shifts the concentration of liveness from performances to audiences because the audience’s presence or absence is fundamental to the determination of whether a performance is or is not live. The shift from performances to audiences is briefly presented in Martin Barker’s *Live To Your Local Cinema*. I aim to develop what he presents in the following anecdote about an outdoor concert performance put on by City Hall in Madison, Wisconsin:

    Those arriving later can still hear the performance through loudspeakers all round the hall, but of course they can neither see nor hear the music directly. … One might argue that people at different points around City Hall were on a gradient of liveness – the more they could see the performers, and the closer they were to the un-amplified sound, the extra liveness they were getting. On the other hand, the further away they were, a different kind of liveness seemed to kick in – one in which people were primarily enjoying the *occasion*. … But what was being celebrated, I sensed, was in some senses *themselves*… Thinking about the liveness of such events in this way would entail a wholesale re-theorisation of what we mean and intend by the concept. (71-72, original emphases)

    While Barker, like Auslander, is still focused on a live event, I concentrate on the liveness of audiences in mediatized forms. This chapter contributes to the discussion of liveness by investigating audience impact as a para-performance element; and, by viewing audience-performer interactions in media performances as existing in an unlive space. Liveness is explored through the audience-performance relationship and performance space in the following: Russell Peters’ TV and film specials, the Michael Richards incident, and Jenna Marbles’ YouTube videos.
Stand-Up Comedy’s Audiences

Audiences have been long considered essential to live performance. Jerzy Grotowski writes: “Can the theatre exist without an audience? At least one spectator is needed to make it a performance. So we are left with the actor and the spectator. We can thus define the theatre as ‘what takes place between spectator and actor’” (32). Certainly, the inclusion of the studio audience in stand-up comedy on TV, film, live YouTube, and recorded YouTube illustrates the audience’s continued significance in live performances.

An ideal audience, often the live studio audience in TV and film performances of stand-up comedy, is usually akin to what Elizabeth Ludwig refers to as a “constituency audience” (71). My understanding of a constituency audience is: an audience comprised of those who are already fans of the stand-up comedian, his or her type of comedy, or his or her views on controversial issues (e.g. race, sexuality, politics, etc.). Constituency audiences generally share the performers’ views so that there is an air of “preaching to the choir” about this performer-audience dynamic. For these reasons, the performer and constituency audience members form an interpretive community.

Stand-up comedians use their familiarity with that interpretive community to fluently communicate with their audiences with little potential of misreading, which in turn assists the production of comedy. Ludwig writes that the constituency audience offers reader competence and allows the performer to carefully control his or her audience so that the performance is not easily misunderstood (71). The constituency audience is at its height in filmic stand-up comedy, which is highly specialized, since it uses a more specific frame of reference than TV stand-up comedy. Moreover, TV stand-up comedy often draws audiences in for free tapings of a TV show in general whereas
stand-up comedy films often sell tickets to audiences who are fans of the stand-up comedian in particular. TV thus opens up the potential for non-constituency audiences.

In stark contrast to constituency audiences are accidental audiences. Accidental audiences (e.g. home audiences) may or may not share the perspectives of the stand-up comedian. Accidental audiences are unfamiliar with the performer and have unintentionally come across the performance. Accessing these audiences offers the stand-up comedian the opportunity to reconfigure ideologies (e.g. race and the racial stereotypes discussed in the previous chapter). TV and Internet performances both provide the performer with access to accidental audiences while film performances provide the performer with access to constituency audiences. TV, as a platform, differs from and arguably surpasses film and the Internet, since TV is a mainstream or elite medium that offers accessibility to accidental audiences.

While other comedic performance forms may be recorded without a live studio audience, TV and film versions of stand-up comedy always include one. One reason for including a studio audience is that in live stand-up comedy, the feedback mechanism between audience and performer is of the utmost importance in establishing the conversational style that is a defining feature of stand-up comedy, and this carries over to TV and film. In TV and film, however, the audience’s feedback mechanism is manipulated for the sake of the recording, and the audience takes part in that manipulation. Studio audience members appear to be performers, or extras, from the perspective of home audiences due to their commodification. As Auslander writes:

The small audience that participated in the taping and for whom … [the performance] was a “real” event was similarly packaged for repetition and became another exploitable sign of the event’s liveness and authenticity. The experience of the
Thus, home audience members view studio audience members as performers in their experience of the show. In a sense, studio audience members become stand-ins for home audience members, which in turn heightens the sense of liveness.

**Liveness: Features vs. Signs**

Live performances are often celebrated for two main characteristics that cannot be replicated in mediatized performances: ephemerality and the audience’s ability to impact the performance. TV does not reproduce these two features of live performance. Instead, TV uses the stand-up comedian’s interaction with the live studio audience, strategic representation of the studio audience, and live performance spaces to promote the idea of ephemerality for home audiences of the mediatized performance. Televised stand-up comedy chooses to represent the illusion of live performance rather than taking advantage of the live broadcast feature that could be used to more closely reproduce the ephemerality of the live stage. For this reason, I view the production of illusory mediatized ephemerality as a strategic choice. It ultimately reveals that the representation of ephemerality is preferable to actual ephemerality in mediatized versions of stand-up comedy.

The manner in which TV fosters the illusion of ephemerality is evident in *Comedy Now!* For instance, the TV show represents itself as ephemeral through its title. “Now,” according to the *OED*, is: “In the time directly following on the present moment; immediately, at once” (“Now”). The title thus evokes the current nature of stand-up
comedy material while also signifying that the performance is in the present. Of course, the performance isn’t in the present, since the show is never broadcast live. Rather, the show is recorded in front of a live studio audience. Auslander outlines the function for live performance in an economy of repetition; one is that live performances constitute the raw material for mediatization and the other is the promotion of “mass-produced cultural objects” (27). Comedy Now! tapings are a result of the former reason since these live performances are always produced with the intention of producing a mediatized version.

In Peters’ Comedy Now! specials, the illusion of ephemerality is furthered through his use of controlled improvisation. Peters controls the improvisation, which is based on input from the live studio audience, through his performance choices in the form of questions and responses. In the “red shirt” special there are two major moments of improvisation. In the first moment, Peters asks an audience member: “What’s your name, man?” And chooses to respond to this by adding: “Bert? And is that Ernie with you?” In the second moment, a cell phone rings and Peters chooses to respond to it with the following:

Yeah it’s after 6 – go ahead! I hate you people with cellular phones, man. I have a cellular phone. But you can always tell the guys that have the cellular phones, because they’ll never turn it on until after 6, when it’s free, you know. “Yeah, here’s my cell number. Call me! In an hour!”

This improvised bit isn’t that funny but it does very well with the audience because it is done “on the spot.” The audience laughs with relief and appreciation because the performer dealt with a potential interruption well. In both instances, the opportunity to improvise is presented and Peters takes it.
Considering the questions Peters’ asks reveals that any influence the studio audiences have is orchestrated and controlled by Peters so that home audiences and studio audiences are not so different in their ability to impact performance as they may first appear. Peters uses controlled improvisation in his interactions with the studio audience members as he closely adheres to one of the rules of stand-up comedy, which is to only ask audiences questions that the performer already knows the answers to. In addition to these “known questions,” Peters often asks unknown questions that he knows he is skilled at answering and riffing on, such as audience members’ names and their ethnic backgrounds.

In the “white shirt” special Peters asks a Chinese audience member his name, then asks for his “Chinese name.” He interprets the pronunciation as “Tap Some Bong” and improvises a bit about getting high and another bit about a super hero called China-Man. Instances of improvisation, used sparingly, cause the rest of the performance to seem equally unrehearsed. The improvised material itself isn’t very strong but it gets laughs because audiences appreciate the quickness with which the connections are made and the thrill of the bidirectional flow of dialogue between performer and audience.

The bidirectionality between performer and audiences, in itself, also furthers the illusion of liveness by drawing attention to the audiences’ impact on the performance. The bidirectionality is somewhat illusory since Peters maintains control over the bidirectional discourse. He maintains control because the studio audiences’ active participation is mostly comprised of replying to Peters’ questions. Thus, studio audiences only influence Peters’ performances through their participation in Peters’ improvisation.
Peters’ performances on Comedy Now! reveal that he interacts with his audiences differently than other stand-up comedians on the show. Specifically, he performs with home audiences in mind and ultimately is able to make them feel part of his performances because his awareness of them impacts his performances. For example, in the “red shirt” special, he performs a bit that relates to shoveling the driveway and states he was doing so a couple of weeks ago” but quickly adds, “Unless this is being seen in the summer. In the wintertime I was shoveling the driveway.” Peters thus negotiates a balance between performing for studio audiences and home audiences. The performance is therefore comprised of a bidirectional dialogue, between performer and studio audience, as well as a unidirectional dialogue, between performer and home audience, rather than a monologue performed in front of a studio audience for the entertainment of home audiences.

The illusion of ephemerality in mediatized performances of stand-up comedy is further emphasized by the performance space, which signals a live performance. The Comedy Now! specials, for example, were produced in the Masonic Temple on Yonge Street in Toronto (Peters 69). The Masonic Temple is theatrical in comparison to comedy club venues, such as Absolute or Yuk Yuk’s, that host live stand-up comedy. Reasons for this theatricality include the Masonic Temple’s size as a theatre as well as the size of its stage, which are both in contrast to the typical comedy club. Comedy clubs are smaller spaces that seat a couple hundred people whereas the Masonic Temple seats “1200 people” (Taylor n.p.). While the Masonic Temple has a proper proscenium stage, comedy club stages are often only large enough to host the stand-up comedian, a microphone stand, and a stool. Thus, in choosing a live performance space, like a theatre, the intimacy
of the comedy club is exchanged in favour of hosting a large audience. The presence of
the large audience in a theatrical space reinforces the ephemerality of the mediatized
stand-up comedy performance. Large audiences emphasize the bidirectional
communication between the live studio audience and the performer, which evoke the
fleeting and unique audience interactions of a live performance.

Using performance space to enhance the illusion of liveness is not limited to TV
mediatizations of stand-up comedy. Although most specials are performed across
multiple media platforms there is a difference in the style and content of a special that is
made for film versus a special made for TV. The following section focuses on Russell
Peters’ film performances in relation to liveness, through analyzing his performance
spaces and audience representation. Peters’ stand-up comedy films have greatly increased
his popularity, and the record-breaking audiences he performs for play a significant role
in maintaining control, power, and authority. Peters has released the following film
from the O2 Arena* (2011), and *Notorious* (2014).

**Russell Peters’ Films & The Significance of Performance Space**

The majority of film specials appropriate the signs of live performance forms
(especially theatre). The classic liveness of the event is actually lessened in film specials,
in comparison to TV specials, due to the size of the performance spaces used to record
film specials. Peters’ performance spaces consistently increase in size with each film
special that he releases, which indicates that the size of the venue contributes to the
liveness of the event. Peters’ *Comedy Now!* TV specials – later released as a film entitled
*Two Concerts, One Ticket* (2006) – were recorded at the Masonic Temple in Toronto,
which seats 1,200. The theatre space used by Comedy Now! for its recordings is small and plain in comparison to the spaces used for Peters’ film specials.

The TV specials were followed by the film special Outsourced (2006), which was filmed at The Warfield Theatre in San Francisco. The Warfield has a capacity of 2,250, is architecturally impressive, and is historically significant; it opened in 1922 and was originally built as a vaudeville and movie palace (The Warfield). Next, Peters recorded Red, White and Brown (2008) at the WaMu Theatre at Madison Square Garden in New York City, which has a capacity of 5,500. These performance spaces are significantly larger than a comedy club and therefore require media elements to ensure that studio audience members see the performance. For instance, in Red, White and Brown, Peters’ image is displayed on either side of the stage, without which, Peters’ facial expressions would be indiscernible to the majority of the live studio audience of 5,500.

The theatres used in these specials are often grand, historic, and large while the arenas are massive. And Peters is not alone in using opulent theatrical spaces or arenas to record stand-up comedy specials. The use of such spaces reveals that the difference between stand-up comedy and other similar performance forms is not the performance space. Similar forms, such as sketch comedy or comedic solo performance, do not commonly use arenas for recordings. One reason is that similar forms are not usually recorded and disseminated as films. Also, professional stand-up comedians, of a certain calibre, possess the ability to fill arenas. Following the filming of Red, White and Brown at the WaMu, Peters moves to arenas for his next two comedy special recordings.

In addition to moving away from theatres and into arenas, Peters represents the size of the audience and the date at the conclusion of his following two specials. In The
Green Card Tour: Live from the O2 Arena (2011), which was recorded in London, England, the following statement is shown at the conclusion of the film: “Recorded Live at the O2 Arena in London, England on September 23rd and 24th 2010, in front of over 30,000 fans.” Similarly, at the conclusion of Notorious (2013) the following statement is shown: “Recorded live at the Allphones Arena in Sydney, Australia on March 15, 2013 in front of over 14,000 fans.” Of course, theatrical performances that run for a couple weeks could also reach such numbers of audience attendance but there is something formidable about a cultural event that can bring out an audience of that size in one or two nights alone.

Notorious is particularly interesting because not only is it the first stand-up comedy special made for Netflix, the recording is limited to the raw material of just one live performance. These two choices introduce two elements of live performance. Firstly, recording on only one night means that the performance experienced by home audience members is closer to the performance experienced by the studio audience members. And secondly, representation on Netflix allows home audiences to interact, to some degree, with the performance through comments, which also reproduces the studio audience members’ experience in regards to audience impact and ephemerality. The aspects of audience impact and ephemerality will be expanded on in the discussion of YouTube and liveness later in this chapter.

Theatres and arenas are used for the performance of stand-up comedy because hosting large audiences translates into increased economic and cultural capital. Economic capital is simply produced due to increased ticket sales to the live studio audience. More important than economic capital, the use of theatres and arenas also produces cultural
capital. Cultural capital is associated with live performance and since both theatres and arenas signal the live performance event, cultural capital is generated for the stand-up comedian.

**Performance Space & Capital**

The stand-up comedian’s association with the theatre in particular aligns him or her with “high culture.” The association with “high culture” is also made with arena performances since they are designed to resemble a theatre space. Aligning the stand-up comedian with the high culture of theatre lends the stand-up comedian authority in the form of cultural capital. The large studio audience also contributes to increased cultural capital because its size demonstrates the stand-up comedian’s popularity, which provides the stand-up comedian with credibility. Thus, the stand-up comedian uses theatres and arenas to emphasize the liveness of the event and to represent his or her large audiences. Both the space and the audience increase cultural capital, which increases the stand-up comedian’s authority and credibility. Authority and credibility are both essential to the stand-up comedian’s success in maintaining control over the audience, producing humour, and introducing his or her perspective in a manner that challenges dominant ideologies.

Dissidence is facilitated through the appropriation of the signs of liveness because by appearing live, improvised, and unrehearsed the stand-up comedian is able to engage with sensitive subject matter. Furthermore, these qualities of improvisation bolster the impression that stand-up comedy performances are “just jokes” told “just for laughs” and that they possess neither subtext nor hidden agenda nor space for rebellion. The signs of live theatre in particular increase the stand-up comedian’s cultural capital. Increased
cultural capital aligns the performer with “high culture” and lends greater authority to his or her views. The preference for TV is also attributable to the greater degree of control it offers the stand-up comedian over commodification and self-representation, as discussed in Chapter Two. Ultimately, TV appropriates the signs of liveness (i.e. that which signifies a live event such as the presence of an audience) while avoiding the features of liveness (i.e. that which occurs during a live event such as audience impact). Avoiding the features of liveness gives stand-up comedians control over their audiences while emphasizing the performer’s authority, which is a combination that translates to power.

The signs of theatre provide the stand-up comedian with the cultural capital of “high art.” That cultural capital is significant because it provides performers with authority over their audiences. The signs of the theatre, such as the large stage and the ornate auditorium, also help differentiate the performer from the audience. Such signs are necessary in establishing authority because, unlike other performance forms, the style of delivery and costume design do not provide a clear division or indication of dominance between audience and performer. Stand-up comedians aim to deliver material in an improvised style, despite the material being highly rehearsed, and contemporary stand-up comedians generally wear everyday nice clothes. The signs of the theatrical stage therefore encourage the audience to view the performer as authoritative, which in turn allows the stand-up comedian to control the bidirectionality of the performer-audience relationship. Therefore, even though the relationship continues to be bidirectional, the likelihood that the audience reacts negatively or disruptively is significantly diminished.
Performance-Audience Interactions

TV has had a significant impact on the power dynamic of the audience-performer binary. In his discussion of binaries, Hall writes:

What is more, as the philosopher Jacques Derrida has argued, there are very few neutral binary oppositions. One pole of the binary, he argues, is usually the dominant one, the one which includes the other within its field of operations. There is always a relation of power between the poles of a binary opposition (Derrida, 1974). We should really write, white/black, men/women, masculine/feminine, upper class/lower class, British/alien to capture this power dimension in discourse. (“Spectacle” 235)

Unlike these examples, in live stand-up comedy, the dominance does not always remain with the audience members or the performer. In instances of heckling, for example, the power shifts from the stand-up comedian to the heckler and a struggle ensues as the stand-up comedian attempts to reclaim that power. In contrast, the performer’s dominance over the audience is very consistent in televised stand-up comedy; DVD and Netflix also reflect this power relation. The stand-up comedian’s consistent dominance on the media platforms of TV and film is further reflected in the absence of the heckler figure. The absence of the heckler is supported across fifteen seasons of Comedy Now! The authority the performer gains from the cultural capital associated with live theatrical performance contributes to the lack of hecklers found in televised stand-up comedy.

The heckler is absent from these forms because televised stand-up comedy’s live studio audience performs a dual function of both audience members and performers, who are playing the role of an ideal audience. An ideal audience provides a natural laugh track, participates when asked questions, and reacts positively. For example, Comedy Now!’s studio audiences respond appropriately as they answer questions when they are
asked and pay attention to the performer, which is not usually the case in comedy clubs. An ideal audience is expected in the majority of TV and film recordings because audience members often provide their positive behaviour in exchange for a free show. In other words, the heckler has been paid off. Even if an instance of heckling occurs during the recording of TV and film comedy specials, the ability to edit those performances leads to the heckling being cut from the final product. TV performances of stand-up comedy seem only to include unsolicited participation or interruptions when the stand-up comedian has a quick-witted retort. Live stand-up comedy accepts both positive and negative feedback from its audiences whereas TV and film versions of stand-up comedy seek to eliminate or closely control negative feedback.

Peters’ ability to carefully control performer-audience interaction, combined with his representation of the large live studio audience, and his use of large live spaces lends him authority as he engages with the sensitive topic of race. While his performances appear live, studio audiences play the role of ideal audiences and are not actually positioned to voice any disagreement during performances. After all, it’s a taping and no one wants to ruin the recording. Having acknowledged that, home audiences, due to the review function on Netflix, are provided with a platform to voice their honest opinions about the show. Audience members, and not just professional critics, can thus be heard by other audience members and, potentially, even the performer.

While this function is available on Netflix it lacks in liveness because audience members are not able to respond to one another directly and do not engage in direct conversation with one another. Since there is currently no response function on Netflix, others can choose one of three options to respond to the review: “Helpful,” “Not
Helpful,” and “Inappropriate.” Netflix, in keeping with the movie reviewer mode that is appropriate for its medium, does not reflect the audience-performance dynamic of live stand-up comedy. YouTube, on the other hand, more closely reproduces that interactive dynamic. Therefore, the focus of the following section is on YouTube, liveness, and audiences.

Professional stand-up comedians foster the illusion of liveness in their media performances just as they foster the illusion of improvisation in their live performances. The illusion of liveness, in both mediatized and live performances, offers the performer control over the audience-performance dynamic while investing the performance with the essence of liveness that is essential to the dissident function of stand-up comedy. The stand-up comedian’s control over the audience-performer dialogue is to such an extent that it may well be thought of as a monologue with the occasional ventriloquist’s trick of throwing a voice. On YouTube, the performance and cyber-audience are placed in a dialogue that has a greater balance in power, regardless of whether the performer is or is not aware of his or her audiences. The following section argues that YouTube reproduces the features of live stand-up comedy performances more closely than TV, DVD, and Netflix even though direct YouTube comedy lacks a live studio audience.

**YouTube Stand-Up Comedy**

Unlike TV, DVD, and Netflix performances of stand-up comedy, YouTube performances do not appropriate the signs of liveness but reproduce the features of liveness instead. YouTube offers the closest reproduction of the following three features of live stand-up comedy: audience impact, ephemerality, and dialogue. Despite these benefits, most professional stand-up comedians don’t use YouTube intentionally or
extensively because YouTube is too successful at reproducing the features of live performance. The trend of professionals avoiding YouTube is evident in the three main forms of YouTube stand-up comedy, which are: “live,” recorded, and direct.

Considering the three forms alongside audiences reveals that professional stand-up comedians do not choose to be represented performing stand-up comedy on YouTube. Firstly, there is the “live” form; an example of “live” YouTube stand-up comedy is the YouTube video “Michael Richards Spews Racial Hate – Kramer Racist Rant.” In “live” YouTube stand-up comedy, live performances are recorded and placed on the website without the stand-up comedian’s knowledge and permission. These stand-up comedians perform for live audiences and are unaware of their cyberspace audiences.

Secondly, there is the recorded form; an example of recorded YouTube stand-up comedy is Peters’ Comedy Now! special, which was uploaded under the title “Russell Peters Video.” In recorded YouTube stand-up comedy, recorded performances from other audio-visual media are uploaded to YouTube, again usually without the stand-up comedian’s knowledge and permission. Stand-up comedians are aware of both their studio audiences and home audiences but unaware of their cyber-audiences. “Live” and recorded YouTube stand-up comedy performances exhibit the loss of control over representation that is experienced by professional stand-up comedians.

Thirdly, there is the direct form; examples of direct YouTube stand-up comedy are Jenna Marbles’ YouTube videos (e.g. “White Girls At The Club,” and, “What Nicki Minaj Wants In A Man”). In direct YouTube stand-up comedy, amateur or YouTube comedians perform directly for YouTube’s cyber-audiences and do not include live studio audiences in the recording of their performances. The exception to the audience’s
essentiality and the requirement of at least one spectator is introduced in the direct
YouTube comedy format. Direct YouTube comedy introduces a new kind of
performance, in a new space, in which the live and non-live collide and elide to produce
the unlive. These examples of “live,” recorded, and direct YouTube stand-up comedy
videos support the argument that professional stand-up comedians do not choose to be
represented on YouTube.

While professionals avoid performing their stand-up comedy on YouTube due to
the audience’s highly active role, amateurs thrive under YouTube’s democratic approach
to production. This is because YouTube audiences have access to the means of
production in a variety of ways, which help amateur stand-up comedians mediatize and
distribute their performances. For example, YouTube audiences assist mediatization and
distribution through: their presence at and ability to record a live show; their access to
and reproduction of recorded shows; as well as their ability to record and distribute their
own work. The ease of distribution gives the audience control over the representation of
these works so that the unlive cyber-audience is more active than live studio audiences
whose impact is limited. Amateurs thrive on YouTube because they rely on the activity
of cyber-audience members to impact their performances, because that keeps the
performances dynamic and worth re-watching, and to distribute their performances,
because that allows them to reach larger audiences. The three forms of YouTube stand-up
comedy demonstrate that changing media require a re-evaluation of our understandings
of liveness and presence as well as time and space.
The Unlive Space: Cyberspace as Performance Space

The balanced audience-performer dialogue is possible on YouTube because cyberspace is an unlive space, in which aspects of live performance and non-live performance are hybridized. Cyberspace is defined by the OED as: “The space of virtual reality; the notional environment within which electronic communication (esp. via the Internet) occurs” (“Cyberspace”). Within this virtual reality, understandings of time and space are altered. Thus, Auslander’s definition of “classic liveness,” which is based on the “physical [and temporal] co-presence of the performers and audience” (61), is no longer sufficient.

If the live performance and the non-live performance were black and white binary pole distinctions then I view Auslander’s concept of liveness as the grey space that turns those binaries into a spectrum. Auslander explains the new liveness introduced by the Internet as follows:

It may be that we are at a point at which liveness can no longer be defined in terms of either the presence of living human beings before each other or physical and temporal relationships. The emerging definition of liveness may be built primarily around the audience’s affective experience. To the extent that websites and other virtual entities respond to us in real time, they feel live to us, and this may be the kind of liveness we now value. (62)

This new view is in keeping with the unlive space but the unlive space builds on the spectrum of liveness in the form of an additional dimension. That additional dimension results from the combined influence of the audiences’ affect and effect on liveness. Auslander’s view of new liveness differs from the unlive space since Auslander refers to how something that is mediated feels live while I argue that performances on YouTube feel live and non-live simultaneously. The unlive concentrates on effect in addition to
affect: the cyber-audience both does and does not impact the performance and feels likewise.

Mediatized stand-up comedy audiences are often unlive audiences. Such audiences are often live but because they are a live studio audience, the agency of a live non-studio audience (e.g. a live comedy club audience that is not being recorded for a special) is lacking. Due to the live studio audiences’ mediatization, they are often commodified: “The experience of the audience present at a live musical event that has been designed for repetition is … to become part of a simulated, commodified audience” (Auslander 122). Based on this, the live studio audiences’ roles in mediatized performances are often active. At the height of activity, audiences take on the role of a co-performer, and, in the most passive instances, live studio audiences play the role of an ideal audience for the purposes of the mediatization.

**YouTube & The Features of Liveness**

Cyber-audiences are highly active and often take on the role of a co-performer, which is evident in YouTube stand-up comedy. YouTube can closely reproduce features of live, immediate performance within a mediated context, which gives cyber-audiences a great deal of control over performances. The particularities of YouTube and its audiences thus mark the rise of the unlive cyber-audience. The control of such an audience over performances explains why professional stand-up comedians avoid YouTube despite the features of liveness it reproduces. Since YouTube stand-up comedy is performed within unlive space, with and by unlive cyber-audiences, it reproduces three significant aspects of live performance.
Firstly, the cyber-audience impacts performances due to the production of the para-performances that surround the YouTube video. The YouTube video loops in repetition while the cyber-audience and performer alter its surroundings in a linear fashion; these surroundings are the para-performance. The para-performance mirrors the aspect of live performance that is in flux (i.e. the performance text) while the YouTube video mirrors the aspect of the live performance that is fixed (i.e. the written text).

Secondly, the para-performance and the YouTube video reproduce ephemerality because they are inseparable. Each new viewer impacts the para-performance and therefore contributes to the creation of a unique performance. The impact may be as simple as adding to the number of views or as complex as engaging in dialogue with the performer and other cyber-audience members. Since audience feedback is constantly changed and recorded, each audience member experiences a different viewing. Once a YouTube video is experienced it is lost. The para-performance evolves with each viewing so that a particular version of a YouTube video can be returned to only through memory. In this way, the ephemerality of the live performance is reproduced in cyberspace on YouTube.

Thirdly, unwanted dialogue between cyber-audience and performance occurs through comments and response videos. The power balance between audience and performer on YouTube more closely echoes that of live performances than that of mediatized performances on TV, DVD, and Netflix because unwanted dialogue marks the return of the heckler. The heckler is “one who tries to embarrass [sic], harass and/or annoy someone speaking or performing in public with gibes, questions and objections” (Heckler). A well-known feature of live stand-up comedy, the heckler almost disappears
in specials made for TV and film. Since TV, DVD, and Netflix performances are recorded in front of live studio audiences, who are playing the role of ideal audiences, the heckler generally does not surface. If he or she does, and the stand-up comedian does not deal with the heckler effectively, then the show can be edited. The absence of the heckler is clear in Peters’ work, from his *Comedy Now!* TV specials to his latest film special *Notorious*.

**The Heckler & The Troll**

Conversely, on YouTube the heckler returns in two ways. The first way in which the heckler returns is within the YouTube video. An example of the heckler’s presence can be found in “live” YouTube stand-up comedy in general but the Michael Richards video is interesting in particular for its deviation from clear examples of heckling. Based on the Richards video, it is unclear if the audience members he accuses of heckling actually heckle him. Rather, Richards provides the implication of heckling in his apology on *The Late Show with David Letterman*, on which he states: “I got heckled and I took it badly and went into a rage” (quas101). In “Michael Richards Spews Racial Hate – Kramer Racist Rant,” it seems as if the audience members are talking amongst themselves and not paying attention to the performance rather than actually heckling Richards. In other words, the audience members are more engaged with the para-performance than the performance on stage.

Further evidence that indicates that Richards is not being heckled in the normal way is found in the audience as a whole siding with the audience members rather than Richards. The audience’s response to Richards and the lack of heckling from the audience members reveals that the issue is not heckling but an anxious reaction to the
shift in importance from the performance to the para-performance. That anxiety is dealt with as if it were heckling because heckling relates to the performer losing power and control over the audience-performer dynamic and so does the shift in importance from performance to para-performance. That shift in importance, power, and control contributes to the choice professional stand-up comedians make to avoid YouTube.

Therefore, the heckler disrupts the power relation between the performer and the audience. When the performer restores the power dynamic, so that he or she is dominant and regains authority over the performance, the audience responds positively to the restoration of power. The majority of live YouTube stand-up comedy videos are much clearer regarding the role of the heckler than the Richards incident, since they place the audience clearly on the side of the performer. Steve Hofstetter, a stand-up comedian who uses YouTube intentionally and extensively, consistently posts videos that deal with hecklers; in fact, he is even called “The Heckler Destroyer.” Hofstetter’s videos are more in keeping with the general audience-performer dynamic during a heckling than that of the Richards video. Neither the audience nor the stand-up comedian welcome the heckler’s interruption; after all people purchase tickets to see a stand-up comedy performance and the heckler prevents or interrupts the performance from happening. For that reason, the continued presence of the heckler in stand-up comedy is intriguing.

The second way in which the heckler returns on YouTube is in the para-performances of YouTube stand-up comedy. The heckler returns on YouTube in the form of the Internet “troll:”

This person deliberately posts inflammatory remarks in an attempt to incite irritated responses. When a troll posts a negative comment that engages other members to respond,
it can create a flurry of angry comments, called a flame war or flaming. (Safko 125)

Gabriella E. Coleman writes that “Trolls work to remind the ‘masses’ that have lapped onto the shores of the Internet that there is still a class of geeks who, as their name suggests, will cause Internet grief, hell, and misery; examples of trolling are legion” (110). On YouTube, trolls can be found in the comment section of the page, under the minimized video. Trolls make comments that are particularly inflammatory and aim to start a flame war.

Evidence of a troll is present in Jenna Marbles’ video, “White Girls At The Club.” The flaming is instigated by YouTube user NoahOfTruth(No_Troll) who, in response to the video, writes: “I agree TOTALY! [sic] I fkin [sic] hate white girls, [sic] Undeserved privilege!” (JennaMarbles). As of October 24th, 2014 this comment has resulted in 130 replies, which form a conversation that spans five months. The ongoing conversation between the cyber-audience and troll exemplifies how time and liveness function in an unlive space. Reading over the comments, it seems the conversation is occurring in the present and lasts for several minutes rather than the five months over which it has taken place. In this sense, the conversation feels live in its reading and non-live in its context, which is the affective conflict that characterizes the unlive space. Despite the video’s fixed and non-live performance, the conversation in the para-performance emphasizes the live performance aspect of YouTube stand-up comedy.

The power of the troll in directing the conversation away from the critical and toward the flame war makes the role an important one to reconcile with stand-up comedy. To begin, it is important to understand the troll as a figure. Coleman provides the

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12 This user’s name has been changed to “Noah.”
Encyclopedia Dramatica’s definition of a “troll,” in which “some trolls act as historical archivists and informal ethnographers” (111). Adding:

A troll is more than the embodiment of the internet hate machine, trolls are the ultimate anti-hero, trolls fuck shit up. Trolls exist to fuck with people, they fuck with people on every level, from their deepest held beliefs, to the trivial. They do this for many reasons, from boredom, to making people think, but most do it for the lulz.

Lulz is laughter at someone else’s expense. … This makes it inherently superior to lesser forms of humor. (qtd. in Coleman 111)

There is a clear parallel between the troll and laughter at the very least that encourages further comparison between the figure and stand-up comedy. In the case of the troll in the para-performance of “White Girls At The Club,” the troll may start off as an informal ethnographer but quickly moves to flaming. While that troll is successful in sucking people into the conversation, the troll also functions as a common enemy for other cyber-audience members participating in the para-performance. From the perspective of the troll as an enemy the figure can be likened to that of the heckler in stand-up comedy.

The troll’s disruptive function, which results in improvised, unrehearsed dialogue, is in keeping with the definition of the heckler. The troll differs from the heckler because the troll goes on to heckle the cyber-audience rather than focus on the performer and the performance. The troll’s focus on the cyber-audience supports the idea of cyber-audience members as co-performers. YouTube’s ability to promote equal dialogue thus re-introduces an uncensored heckler to a platform of mediatized stand-up comedy.

The idea of the troll as the heckler is all the more interesting due to Coleman’s assertion, in which the Internet troll is likened to the trickster:

If we dare consider these informational prankers in light of the trickster, then perhaps there may be some ethical
substance to some, although certainly not all, of their actions. … Sometimes they do this to quell their insatiable appetite, to prove a point, at times just to cause hell, and in other instances to do good in the world. Tricksters are much like trolls: provocateurs and saboteurs. And according to Lewis Hyde, tricksters help to renew the world, in fact, to renew culture, insofar as their mythological force has worked to “disturb the established categories of truth and property and, by so doing, open the road to possible new worlds.” (115)

The troll and the heckler both challenge the performer’s authority by disrupting the audience-performer’s power relationship. Contemplating the roles of the troll and the heckler through the lens of the trickster evokes three possible scenarios. In the first scenario, the stand-up comedian is the trickster since he or she challenges established or universal truths and thereby introduces the possibility of new worlds. In the second scenario, the heckler is the trickster since he or she sabotages the performance and often “causes hell.” In the third scenario, the trickster is both the stand-up comedian and the heckler combined. In this scenario, while the stand-up comedian gains authority and challenges dominant views, the heckler ensures that the stand-up comedian’s perspectives are not represented or interpreted as absolute. The combination of the stand-up comedian and heckler contained within the trickster prevents the stand-up comedian’s views from becoming authoritative in the absolute manner of the dominant views that the stand-up comedian is challenging. The heckler represents the potential to disrupt power structures by ensuring that audience members have a voice in the performance.

The occasional inclusion of the unauthorized voice in the form of the heckler is heightened on YouTube in the form of the troll. In addition to the cyber-audience taking on the role of the troll, audience members take on many other roles on YouTube. Studio audience members, for example, take on the role of cameraperson. YouTube users also
take on the roles of producers and distributors as they upload videos to YouTube. Even cyber-audience members who do not take on the role of co-performer through direct contribution to the para-performance still influence the performance. Cyber-audience members choose which comments to read, whether or not to skip the commercial, which video(s) to watch, and what order to play the videos in if multiple videos are being viewed. These actions, especially the last two, can be viewed as audience members taking on the role of a director. Therefore, the roles audience members adopt on YouTube mirrors the roles that exist in other mediatized versions of stand-up comedy.

Beyond the individual roles that cyber-audience members can take on, YouTube also produces a group dynamic in which cyber-audience members take on the role of studio audience members, without having to play the roles of ideal audience members. I call that group dynamic the “YouTube party;” this refers to a common occurrence, during which two or more people watch various YouTube videos together and, often, each cyber-audience member offers suggestions and the videos are viewed by the group. If one particular channel is focused on, such as Jenna Marbles’ YouTube channel, then the choices essentially result in the production of a full-length comedy special that has been arranged by the cyber-audience. In this sense, the cyber-audience members take on the roles of video editors and directors. YouTube thus offers a dynamic two-way audience-performer relationship, which places the audience in the dominant position.

**The Reason Professionals are Anti-YouTube**

The choice of professionals to avoid YouTube indicates that reproducing the features of live stand-up comedy is less important than producing the *illusion* of liveness. This is because the illusion of liveness offers greater control over audience impact than
actually reproducing the features of liveness. Reproducing the features of liveness results in a shift in the performer-audience power dynamic. As a result of the power shift, YouTube audiences actually have more control over performances than live studio audiences, who must play the role of an ideal audience in TV and film performances, as well as the stand-up comedian, who cannot maintain control over what audiences do with their performances on the Internet.

The cyber-audience’s agency accounts for why professional stand-up comedians do not use YouTube intentionally, even though it reproduces features of live performance more closely than TV, DVD, and Netflix. The strength of stand-up comedy is in the stand-up comedian’s ability to introduce a perspective that reveals and critiques ideology for his or her audiences from a position of power and authority. The signs of live performance, specifically the representation of a live audience in live performance spaces that are large or historic, are tools the stand-up comedian uses to gain power and authority. The rise of the unlive cyber-audience in YouTube stand-up comedy translates to the signs of live performance ceasing to be illusory. Cyber-audiences are authorized to speak and act, which diminishes the stand-up comedian’s credibility and the strength of his or her perspective as it falls under the scrutiny of critique and this, in turn, undermines stand-up comedy’s ability to enact dissidence.

For example, in Jenna Marbles’ YouTube video, “What Nicki Minaj Wants In A Man,” she uses a fake tan along with a costume consisting of a padded butt, which causes many cyber-audience members to criticize her for performing blackface. YouTube’s cyber-audiences move beyond the basic audience interactions in live and other mediatized forms of stand-up comedy as they critique the performance and engage in a
debate about race and representation. There are also those who do not view her performance as blackface and provide the following reasoning for their perspectives: she discusses one celebrity in particular rather than stereotypically representing an entire racial group. The content has also led cyber-audience members to criticize her lack of sensitivity towards people with dissociative identity disorder (more commonly known as multiple personality disorder). Thus, Jenna Marbles cannot maintain control or authority over her audiences on YouTube since her voice is presented from the same position of power as the voices of her cyber-audience members.

Unlive cyber-audiences do more than impact the performance; they contribute to its creation. This level of impact works in opposition to the function of a certain kind of stand-up comedy. In these performances, the stand-up comedian’s worldview is used to defamiliarize audiences from their own worldviews so that a paradigm shift occurs. The stand-up comedian has the potential to reveal ideology as a construct and to introduce a new mode of thinking in a way that audiences cannot accomplish alone. It is necessary for the stand-up comedian to perform from a position dominant to the audiences’ in order to produce a paradigm shift. Thus, when stand-up comedians lose control over the audience’s participation, and in turn the para-performance, it decreases their ability to positively reconfigure ideological products (e.g. the racial stereotypes that were the topic of discussion in Chapter Four).

The presence of audience impact, ephemerality, and dialogue in YouTube stand-up comedy illustrates how the platform reproduces the supposed strengths of live stand-up comedy. If these features were essential to the function of live stand-up comedy then it would follow that professional stand-up comedians use YouTube intentionally and
extensively. The choice professionals make to avoid YouTube therefore indicates that there is a factor more important in the performance of stand-up comedy than liveness: control. In stand-up comedy on TV and film, the stand-up comedian maintains control over the degree to which the audience impacts the performance. On YouTube, the stand-up comedian no longer maintains control over the degree to which the audience impacts the performance; control is transferred from the stand-up comedian to the YouTube audience. The transfer of control decreases the professional stand-up comedian’s ability to perform dissidence because his or her control, authority, and power are diminished.

The unlive space reveals the importance of power in the performance of stand-up comedy. YouTube videos reach global audiences that may well be accidental audiences; YouTube reproduces important features of live stand-up comedy; YouTube generates both cultural and economic capital; and YouTube content is most often only self-censored. For all these benefits YouTube does not give its performers power over their self-representation or control over their audiences. The use of theatrical signs, in conjunction with control over the audience, make TV and film better choices for professional stand-up comedians because those platforms allow the stand-up comedian to retain control, authority, and power.

Despite the seemingly unanimous claim amongst professional stand-up comedians that live stand-up comedy is the most important, the majority of them aspire to be represented on TV and film specials even though those platforms only use the signs of live performance rather than reproduce its features as YouTube does. Furthermore, professionals avoid choices that would reproduce the features of live stand-up comedy. This is evident on TV, where the live broadcast is avoided, and with YouTube, which is
avoided even though the platform most strongly reproduces the features of live performance. On the other hand, stand-up comedians aspire to the film platform, even though DVD least closely reproduces the features of live performance, and often includes various media within the live performance.

**The Reason Professionals are Pro-Film & TV**

The popularity of film among professionals is not only due to the high level of control it offers over both liveness and audiences. Another reason for the film’s popularity is that stand-up comedy material is time-dependent, which means that certain material will only work for a finite period of time. For example, jokes about government officials lose their comedic potential if no one recalls the individual or the situation being referenced. The film therefore possesses an important archival function. Another reason to produce film specials is profitability. Such specials attract an infinitely increasing audience base, which contributes to immediate gains in profit as well as future gains in profit in the form of new fans. Despite the archival and monetary reasons to use film, these specials continue to use the signs of live performance rather than embrace the signs of fixed performance, which are appropriate to those mediums.

(2010-present). TV clearly offers something that film does not. Even stand-up comedy specials made for film are often aired on HBO.

In both TV and film, control over liveness allows the stand-up comedian to foster the illusion of liveness that is essential to the function of dissidence. Meanwhile, control over the audience-performance relationship results in the stand-up comedian’s perspective being represented as relevant, significant, and dominant (in other words, authoritative). Giving the stand-up comedian’s perspective this importance makes it possible for the stand-up comedian to challenge the audiences’ perspectives. The challenge is only effective however if the audiences’ views differ from those of the performer and therein thrives the strength of TV. Thus, the stand-up comedian manipulates both liveness and the audience-performance relationship in order to perform dissidence, and can best do this on TV despite the control offered by film and the unlive space (that allows for the reproduction of the features of live performance) offered by YouTube.

TV, in particular, offers the balance between reaching accidental audiences, and using the signs of liveness that allow the stand-up comedian to maintain control over his or her representation. These factors contribute to TV’s power, which positions the stand-up comedian ideally to reconfigure dominant ideologies. Accidental audiences, which can be thought of as non-target or non-constituency audiences, are highly important to stand-up comedy’s dissident function. Accessing these accidental audiences introduces the greatest potential to reconfigure dominant views by exposing them to marginalized perspectives presented by stand-up comedians. In mediatizations of stand-up comedy the studio audience is commodified, and constituency home and studio audiences are already
likely to share, understand, or empathize with the perspectives of the marginalized. Ultimately, it is unlikely that a stand-up comedian would significantly alter the live studio audience’s views since constituency audiences are often already in agreement with the stand-up comedian’s worldview. Accidental audiences, on the other hand, may not share the marginalized stand-up comedian’s perspectives. Thus, revealing dominant ideologies for accidental audiences offers the greatest potential for significantly reconfiguring audiences’ perspectives.

The strength of the TV special is accessing accidental audiences but the film special that is broadcast on TV does not share this strength. This is because the film special aired on TV is still likely to attract constituency audiences instead of accidental audiences. Constituency audiences are more likely to be accessed because the special is presented under a stand-up comedian’s name rather a familiar show’s name, such as *Comedy Now!*, which is likely to attract accidental audiences. As it is, the comedy specials broadcast on TV are already popular or performed by a popular stand-up comedian. Thus, such specials promote the illusion of diversity and produce capital for the networks without much risk because those audiences are already accessing the performer’s views anyway.

**Conclusion & Connection to Chapter Six**

Various forms of liveness are at work in mediatized versions of stand-up comedy. It is my contention that stand-up comedy can most effectively perform dissidence through its negotiation of liveness in the form of the live recording; and, the live recording form usually occurs in TV, DVD, Netflix, recorded YouTube, and “live” YouTube. Specifically, live recording may enact dissidence if the performance negotiates a balance
between appropriating the signs of live performance and accessing accidental audiences from a platform of power. While all three platforms use live recording they are not all equal in their negotiation of liveness, their power as a platform, or the audiences they attract. TV versions of stand-up comedy are more likely to attract accidental audiences that are likely to be national audiences as well as home and studio audiences. Film versions of stand-up comedy are more likely to attract constituency audiences that may be local, national, or global as well as home and studio audiences. YouTube versions of stand-up comedy attract cyber-audiences that may be global audiences, constituency audiences, or accidental audiences. Thus, although TV and YouTube both attract accidental audiences, TV is best positioned to enact dissidence in stand-up comedy because it is the more powerful platform and it appropriates the signs of live performance rather than reproducing its features.

Considering stand-up comedy through the focuses on audiences and liveness I have determined that the preference for TV is due to the platform’s ability to access accidental audiences. Although YouTube also offers that possibility, the control that audiences possess on YouTube reveals that the choice of medium has much to do with the control that is maintained by the stand-up comedian rather than affinity to the live performance experience. If not for the significant role that power plays in this matter, the Internet clearly offers the greatest opportunity to access accidental audiences on a global-scale in an unlive space. This potential means that there is a strong bidirectional audience-performance relationship that resembles the dynamic of live stand-up comedy performances. Ultimately, we are moving towards a moment in which the audience-performer binary is dissolved into a spectrum. In such a moment the unlive cyber-
audience would be so thoroughly entrenched as a co-performer that the boundary between performers and audiences becomes permeable to the extent that participants play the role of performer and audience member simultaneously. Thus, the hierarchy considered inherent to any binary will dissolve so that participants are equally creator and consumer of a work.

Similarly, it is clear that Auslander’s concept of liveness continues to be relevant in live performances of stand-up comedy. Stand-up comedians, professionals and amateurs alike, use social media extensively in the promotion and distribution of their performances. I’m uncertain if audiences in the age of the smartphone can ever really be live audiences. In a world where so much of our social interaction occurs in cyberspace and the boundaries of the live and non-live have blurred perhaps irrevocably, even the live performance of stand-up comedy seems unlive to me. The concluding chapter of this dissertation will explore the concepts of the unlive space and the para-performance through a live stand-up comedy event.
Chapter Six: Comedy At The Cornerstone:

Inside a Live Stand-Up Comedy Event & Conclusions

The dissertation’s focus on TV, film, and YouTube versions of stand-up comedy emerged from the observation that these platforms produce complex audience-performance interactions. These interactions resulted in another kind of performance; that performance both was and was not distinct from the performance of stand-up comedy. In an attempt to better understand this observation I divided the performance event into the para-performance and the performance proper. The investigation thus moved away from the performance proper and towards the para-performance. As various aspects of the para-performance were closely explored, analyses revealed how power is negotiated through the many elements that surround the performance proper.

Studying the para-performance is increasingly important since para-performance elements influence audience perception both before and after the performance proper. In order for a performer to maintain authority and influence audience perception, it is vital that the performer control and manipulate aspects of the para-performance. Since the para-performance is altered when a performance proper moves from one media platform to another, the same performance proper can result in empowering or disempowering the stand-up comedian. For this reason, the dissertation aimed to understand the power of stand-up comedy across multiple media platforms by closely reading para-performance elements in conjunction with the form and content of the performance proper.

Chapter One traced the emergence of mediatized stand-up comedy in Anglophone North America and established the features of the performance form. It also explained
that this performance form was important to study because it was a popular culture product, which occurred across various media platforms. Studying mediatized stand-up comedy offers understanding into how differences in platform alter the performer’s power. The performer’s power is significant since it determines whether the performance proper will be successful in challenging dominant perspectives. Changes in power across platforms also determine the amount of control over various aspects of representation. For this reason, each of the following chapters explored control in relation to the para-performance.

Chapter Two focused on the control over the commodification of stand-up comedy as well as the control over self-representation within the performance of stand-up comedy. It considered how the para-performance could be used to contextualize the performance proper in ways that allowed stand-up comedians to use the language they wanted in order to discuss the topics they wanted without being prosecuted. Thus, control over the para-performance allowed stand-up comedians to overcome external censorship and commodify live performances for mediatization.

Chapter Three concentrated on the control over representation on the para-performance elements of visual imagery, titling, and grouping. It discussed how control over these para-performance elements could be used to empower or disempower performers who are marginalized on the basis of gender and/or race. Having greater control over the para-performance allows marginalized voices to be empowered but that control also usually means that performers have less access to accidental audiences.

Chapter Four argued that control over the para-performance element of audience representation allows stand-up comedians to discuss race-based material beyond
performers’ subject positions. It demonstrated that racial stereotyping and the dominant
gaze could be altered through introducing marginalized individuals into popular
representation. Controlling the para-performance therefore allows stand-up comedians to
discuss taboo subject matter while challenging dominant perspectives.

Chapter Five explored the importance of maintaining control over the para-
performance element of audience impact and expanded on the concept of the unlive
space. It revealed that control over audience impact is essential to the stand-up
comedian’s maintenance of authority, which is necessary in order for the performer to
challenge the audience’s perspectives and dominant ideologies. Controlling the para-
performance so that liveness is more illusion than reality allows stand-up comedians to
maintain their authority and to exercise their power in order to influence their audiences.

In the following conclusion, I provide a description of a live stand-up comedy
event. The purpose of this description is to showcase how “unlive” live stand-up comedy
is today and, in doing so, to demonstrate the complexity of the para-performance as it
functions in live stand-up comedy. The following description is informed by the notion of
the “thick description,” which aims “to draw large conclusions from small, but very
densely textured facts” (Geertz 28). I have written a description based on my experience
of performing stand-up comedy. Specifically, the show at The Cornerstone in Guelph on
Wednesday, June 17th, 2015 has been used as a case study and touches on points made
about mediatized stand-up comedy throughout the dissertation as they arise within this
particular live event.
How I Started Performing Stand-Up Comedy

One day, my dissertation supervisor Alan Filewod asked me, “Have you thought about doing any stand-up comedy?” I felt immediately terrified. He said that The Second City in Toronto offers courses. I looked into it and agreed that it would be beneficial to take the classes in order to gain more practical insight into the performance of stand-up comedy. It would be for research purposes. I enrolled in level one and then in level two of the stand-up comedy classes offered by The Second City. Each class met once a week for seven sessions, and each session ran for three hours.

The level one class, taught by Jim McAleese, focused on stagecraft (i.e. how to sweep the microphone stand, hold the microphone, and walk on stage) and how to write material. The material developed through the class was used to perform a five-minute set at a recital for family and friends, which took place at Absolute Comedy Club in Toronto. The level two class, taught by Joel Buxton, focused on learning to tackle the open mic circuit in Toronto. We were given tips on how to find open mics around Toronto and given the opportunity to practice an open mic in our class each week. We were also given feedback on our new material, which we were expected to write during the week and then perform in class.

At the class show that followed the first class, a cameraman was brought in and the students were told that, for twenty bucks, we could have a video made of our five-minute set. We each had our sets recorded. When I received my video, I posted it on Facebook for my friends because some of them had wanted to come to the recital show but couldn’t make it.
The video received more attention than anything else I’ve posted on Facebook (it currently has 92 likes and 73 comments). Facebook friends I hadn’t spoken to in years liked the video; a couple even shared it, urging their friends to watch. A friend who lives in Calgary told me that her aunt wanted me to know that she thinks I’m funny. My dad sent the video to family and friends in India, many of whom I’ve never met, over WhatsApp. And, while my parents were on a road trip across Eastern Canada, they called me using FaceTime to tell me they showed my video to people they met at their campsite. I am still amazed by the distance that single performance proper has gone, and the countless para-performances it has spawned, when I have done so few live performances.

Since I’ve been working on my dissertation, and living in Guelph (i.e. a two-and-a-half hour GO bus ride from Toronto), I’ve only managed to do a handful of open mics since I took the classes and posted the video. Two of the open mics I did over the last couple months were actually in Guelph. Those open mics led me to perform an opening spot at a show put on by The Making-Box.

Introducing The Making-Box

On June 5th, 2015, Jay Reid messages me on Facebook to ask me to do an opening spot at a show organized by The Making-Box. The Making-Box, co-founded by Jay Reid and Ric Mattingley, offers classes and workshops in improv and organizes comedy shows in Guelph. The Making-Box is located at 40 Baker Street and puts comedy shows on at that location every other Friday.

One of the comedy shows that The Making-Box runs is called Head Liners. The format for the Head Liners show is to have five openers followed by a headliner. The opening spots are five to seven minutes in length and usually performed by local amateur
stand-up comedians. The headliner spot is usually 25 to 30 minutes in length and is performed by a professional stand-up comedian (who is usually from Toronto). Often, the headliner has had some success on TV, at the Just For Laughs festival, or has won comedy contests or awards (i.e. headliners have cultural capital).

The comedy shows usually sell out since the space holds an audience of eighty. Tickets are sold online for ten dollars plus tax and a processing fee. Those who do not purchase advance tickets may be able to get in if there is standing room. In addition to ticket sales, the following are usually sold at the shows: beer, wine, a feature drink, and popcorn.

The show that took place on June 17th was The Making-Box’s 41st show in Guelph. It differed from their other comedy shows in a number of ways. Firstly, the show took place on a Wednesday night rather than Friday. Secondly, there was a change in location; the show was performed at The Cornerstone, which is a vegetarian restaurant located at 1 Wyndham Street North. Since the show was at a restaurant, it was planned for a Wednesday night instead of a Thursday or Friday in order to avoid interfering with restaurant patrons and to generate business on a slower night. Thirdly, since the show was at the restaurant, they served the restaurant’s food and drinks. Finally, rather than five openers, there were four openers, and rather than one headliner, the supporting act and headliner were each given 25 to 30 minutes, which made it seem as if there were two headliners.

The Making-Box makes extensive use of social media in their promotion of events. Specifically, Facebook is used to spread the word about shows. One practical reason for having local stand-up comedians do the opening spots is that it helps bring out
an audience since those performers will invite friends that they know will be in town for the event. Once an event is created on Facebook, the organizers invite all of their Guelph-based Facebook friends to the event. Facebook, combined with word of mouth, is enough to sell out the room. A lot of communication takes place through the Facebook event; those online interactions mark the online aspect of the para-performance, which takes place before the live show.

**The Para-Performance: Before The Cornerstone**

Like the shows before it, Comedy at the Cornerstone begins as a Facebook event. The organizers invite their friends and ask the performers to invite people as well. The para-performance begins on June 2nd with a post that includes a promotional poster, which features The Cornerstone. Then, a post on June 8th tells the Facebook audience about the supporting act (or other headliner) that has been added to the show. The post explains that she has just recorded a TV special on CBC’s Winnipeg Comedy Festival, performed at Just For Laughs 42, and won Sirius XM’s Next Top Comic. On June 10th, another post explains that The Cornerstone seats fewer people than The Making-Box and to buy tickets soon. A post on June 14th warns that tickets are half gone; this post is followed by another post on June 16th that states that only fifteen tickets are left. A post on June 17th from an audience member asks if anyone wants to get rid of a ticket for that night, which means the show has sold out. A post on June 17th explains that advance tickets are gone and begins promoting the next show. Besides Facebook, The Making-Box also uses Twitter to promote its shows. The Tweets regarding The Cornerstone Show were similar to those on Facebook but Twitter can reach a broader audience.

The Cornerstone show’s para-performance online continues on The Making-
Box’s Facebook page, which is outside of the Facebook event, as well as Twitter. The organizers introduce a gag, which is a picture of James Franco with the following caption: “Hey James Franco! We heard you’re in Guelph so we reserved a 7 minute slot for you at our stand-up show on Wednesday at The Cornerstone. Hope you show up! Please email: talkbox@themakingbox.ca to confirm or we’ll give your spot to Seth Rogen” (The Making-Box). The posts on Facebook and Twitter tag James Franco, who is in Guelph making a movie. The organizers request that the local performers for the evening share the James Franco gag on Facebook, which results in the post getting 21 shares and 134 likes. The James Franco gag will continue out of the para-performance and into the performance proper.

On Wednesday, June 17\textsuperscript{th}, 2015 I post the following update on Facebook: “Tonight I tell jokes at The Cornerstone. Excitement. Terror-filled excitement.” The post receives forty likes. Before the show, I’m asked when the show starts and I am wished good luck on Facebook. A friend sends me a Facebook message: “Good luck! Will anyone record it for me?” I respond: “Thanks. I might do an audio recording if I can manage to.”

**The Performance Proper: The Cornerstone Show**

At 7:30PM, on Wednesday, June 17\textsuperscript{th}, 2015 the organizers begin to set the space. The restaurant tables and chairs are rearranged to face the entrance of the space. The seating resembles that of a Yuk Yuk’s comedy club but the big windows that make up two walls mean that it is still significantly brighter than Toronto’s Yuk Yuk’s and Absolute, which are both in basements.
It is difficult to tell at this early time who is here for the comedy and who just wants to finish their dinner and leave. As 8PM approaches the majority of seats are already filled. It seems as if people are eager for comedy in Guelph. The space feels packed even though only fifty tickets were sold. This is because with the addition of the performers, The Cornerstone staff, and The Making-Box organizers, there are actually around 65 people in the space.

The performers are put just to the right of the restaurant’s entrance while the stage is set up just to the left. This means I can’t really see the performers but I’m okay with that since I got in for free. I order some food and then see that one of my advisors, Paul Salmon, has arrived for the show. He has brought his wife, his son, and his son’s friend. We talk about the space and how the seats have been arranged. I let them find seats as they are filling up quickly.

As I’m eating, one of my roommates arrives. After saying hello, she sits in the back. A while later my other two roommates arrive. One couldn’t get a ticket and they won’t let her stay because it would be a fire code violation. I continue to eat and watch the space fill up. I think about how the space sold fifty tickets and how six people showed up because I was telling people about the show. Interestingly, the people I knew who showed up were all people I told in person and not over Facebook.

I finish eating. Jay comes over to tell me that I’m going on second. He asks me how to pronounce my last name. I say it and he repeats it back incorrectly. This goes on for a couple tries and then I say it’s okay, and that he can just use my first name. He then explains that the first comedian is going to pretend he’s Seth Rogen to play off of the Facebook gag.
The show begins at around 8:30 PM. Jay warms the crowd up by talking about Guelph and how exciting it is that comedy is thriving in Guelph. He talks about what an amazing place it is with its sense of community, and how tightknit that community is because everyone in the room probably knows a few other people or recognizes a few people. He says that people are happy in Guelph and that he actually witnessed a bunch of senior citizens having a high-kick contest.

I look towards the back of the restaurant and notice that a video camera is set up and someone seems to be filming the show. I’m not sure if the comedians are being recorded. And, if we are being recorded, I’m not sure what those recordings will be used for. Just having the camera there makes everything seem suddenly less live; as if this is all for later rather than now.

Jay reminds the audience about James Franco and then introduces the first comedian as Seth Rogen, who has shown up in place of James Franco. The first comedian, a local performer, goes on and pretends to be Seth Rogen. He has researched the actor and based his set around facts about him. I wonder how many in the audience are in on the joke and how many are a little lost.

I hit record on my voice memo app on my iPhone 4s just before Jay introduces me. My second stand-up comedy instructor told me that it’s good to do audio recordings to listen to later and improve on things. I’m planning to do the same set the following week so I think of this as a rehearsal. And, since someone had asked me to record it anyway, I do. I leave my phone in the comedian’s corner and head to the stage.

As I begin my set, I’m a little worried that my jokes may be inappropriate for the venue (I use the C-word a couple times). I’m also nervous because one of my advisors is
there and a lot of my set has information in it that one should probably keep out of her professional life. I contemplate censoring myself but decide to risk it and just pay close attention to The Cornerstone staff’s reaction.

I also feel uneasy doing impressions of my mom using an Indian accent. I wonder if they’ll know that I’m doing an impression of my mom and not just using a stereotypical accent. I wonder if they’ll even know if it’s an Indian accent, if it’s clear that I’m Indian, and if I should tell them that I am. And of course I’m in a constant state of fear that I’ll forget what I’m supposed to say, fall flat on my face, and somehow die.

I think the presence of a racially and ethnically marginalized woman stand-up comedian in Guelph, which is less multicultural than larger cities, is comparable in effect to the presence of marginalized stand-up comedians on media platforms that reach accidental audiences. The majority of the Guelph audience didn’t come out to see me but having watched my performance they are introduced to my perspectives and my experience through my own voice. It feels like a powerful position to be in and I wonder whether I am doing it justice or if I am perpetuating some stereotype or another.

I think about the encouragement and support I receive from the Indian community; my parents, every so often, tell me how happy their friends are that I am doing this. They feel “we” need to get out there more. Those in my parents’ generation are happy that I’m doing something different while those in my generation are happy that their experience is being put out there. I think about a message I received on Facebook from a girl I hadn’t spoken to since the eighth grade: “Hey Mirali!! Good Luck on the show tonight. I found out about this event too late otherwise, I would be there in person to cheer you on! Break a leg sister!”
My set goes surprisingly well, the other comedians compliment me. I quickly stop recording and take my phone back to my seat. I talk to the comedians for a while as they are asking me questions like, “How long have you done this?” and “How did you get so good so fast?” It’s flattering but I feel bad that we’re not paying attention to the other performer. I watch the comedian do his set; I can’t really hear him but I watch as he pulls out his phone to take a picture of the audience. Jay stands on a chair behind the local comedian and takes a picture as well.

After my set (but still during the show), I respond to some comments on Facebook, thank people, and tell them it went well. My dad, in Brampton, asked, “Videoclip please love u.” Another comment from a friend in Calgary: “Do you have a video?” From Guelph, I replied, “Not of tonight. Sorry!” Another request, this one from India: “Awesome! Send us a recording.” I apologized again for not having a video. And then, another Facebook friend: “AWWW NO VIDEO??!! Whatyyyy!!” I think about how these people are part of a performance they will never see. The need to divide the performance event into the para-performance and performance proper has never felt more necessary.

The next comedian is another woman, she also lives in Guelph, and she does very well with the audience. I think back on what my mother said to me when I was worried about telling jokes about her: Russell Peters talks about his father, we need to hear women talking about their mothers, mothers are important too. There seem to always be more women performing in Guelph than in Toronto.

After this point there is a brief intermission. I go to thank my roommates for coming. Then I go to speak to Paul and he introduces me to his wife. I’m a little uncertain
if she has found my material to be vulgar but she is very kind and complimentary. Paul and I speak about this thick description, for which I’m making notes. Paul tells me to include the feeling of community, the praise for Guelph, and to mention the age group of the audience. He says he’s probably one of the oldest of the bunch and I notice that many seem to be in their twenties or early thirties. I thank him for pointing this out to me and go back to the comedians’ corner since the headliners will be going on shortly.

The first headliner goes on and does very well. She is the third woman for the night. It’s odd to see so many women in comedy in a place like Guelph when all the shows I’ve been to in Toronto still seem to be dominated by men. The headliner goes on and he does well also but I don’t laugh as much as I did with the first headliner. Perhaps it isn’t about how good the performer is, it’s more about whether the audience can relate to the material.

The show begins to wrap up. People start to settle their bills and head out. I’m pleasantly surprised when someone who seems to be the owner or manager takes care of my bill. I thank him for his kindness. I talk to Jay for a while and explain more about what I’m doing. He provides me with a lot of useful information about what he does and The Making-Box. It strikes me that people are very open and happy to chat about comedy in Guelph. There is a sense of community as everyone wraps up for the evening. Spirits are high.

As I walk to my car I reflect on what Alan said about writing this description of the evening. There are comedy nights like this happening all over the country, from the smallest towns, to the biggest cities. If a smaller event like “Comedy at The Cornerstone” has such a complex para-performance as a result of the use of media, and it also uses
media within the event itself, then the concept of the unlive applies to live stand-up comedy and not just to mediatized stand-up comedy.

**The Para-Performance: After The Cornerstone**

When I saw my friend on Friday, we sat together and listened to the audio recording from Wednesday night. To me, it felt like the show was still going at that point. In fact, as I sit at my computer writing about it now, I think maybe that the show is still happening and this chapter is part of the show’s para-performance as well. In fact, all my performances of stand-up comedy have arisen out of my work on this dissertation and as such are all part of my dissertation’s para-performance.

Furthermore, the Facebook interactions regarding the event at The Cornerstone really emphasized to me the complexity and the extensiveness of the para-performance. From my perspective, the para-performance began with my being asked to do an opening spot on the show and the para-performance continues even now, a week later, as I write about the show. The para-performance audience that was created on Facebook through my posts and others’ comments differed from the performance proper audience that attended the show at The Cornerstone. But, in some cases, my Facebook friends who came to see the show were in both audiences. It is striking that my description above is only a partial account of my own para-performance experience, and each audience member (cyber and live alike) will have an equally complex para-performance experience of his or her own. Therefore, even now, I feel as if I am only just beginning to comprehend the expansive concept of the para-performance.

The Facebook interactions also emphasized my understanding of liveness and expanded the idea of the unlive for me. In discussing mediatized versions of stand-up
comedy, the unlive space refers to how a performance feels both live and non-live. As well, the unlive space refers to how the audience both does and does not impact a performance. The Cornerstone show emphasized that the unlive space is not limited to mediatized versions of stand-up comedy. In mediatizations of stand-up comedy, the live aspect is found in the para-performance (i.e. audience comments) that surrounds the performance proper (i.e. the video). In live stand-up comedy, the live aspect is the performance proper (i.e. the show at The Cornerstone); some elements of the para-performance are fixed and feel non-live (i.e. my audio recording and the photographs taken) while other elements of the para-performance are in flux and feel live (i.e. the Facebook comments).

Following the show at The Cornerstone, I was tagged in some pictures on Facebook and I had my audio recording but the quality wasn’t good enough to share on Facebook and the content was not appropriate to post on Facebook. The jokes about my mother, the language I used, and aspects of my personal life were things I didn’t want to share on Facebook. For some reason, all of it seemed okay to perform live but not okay to post online. I was worried the recording would make its way to my parents or to my parents’ friends and this material was more personal and vulgar than the last set people had seen on Facebook.

I would also be doing the same set again the following week in Toronto in a comedy contest. I really understood why stand-up comedians don’t like to put their work on YouTube. It took me a year to develop the material and hone the delivery for this set and if it got out there too much then I wouldn’t be able to perform it anymore. I think that professionals who have their work mediatized can still perform the same material live.
because they are like a really good band; people don’t mind seeing the greatest hits played live. Amateurs, on the other hand, require the element of surprise and audiences don’t see the point in paying money to see someone like me do something live that they just saw on YouTube for free. At the same time, it makes sense that professionals want to mediatize their own work, when it’s ready to be mediatized, and not have others do it for them. And, for amateurs, it’s less likely that people besides one’s close friends will see one perform online and live.

**The Future of Stand-Up Comedy**

This dissertation has demonstrated that live and mediatized forms of stand-up comedy have influenced one another since the emergence of stand-up comedy in the 1950s. It is a difficult task to analyze a performance form that is rife with innovation and constantly changing due to its dependence on the present zeitgeist. Therefore, determining the future of stand-up comedy is a challenge. The incorporation of new media platforms and the continued use of old media platforms means that any changes in existing platforms or the introduction of a new platform produces a ripple effect, which can alter the performance form across all platforms.

As audiences become more involved in the process of commodification, mediatized versions of stand-up comedy on YouTube will continue to appeal to amateurs and YouTube comedians rather than professional stand-up comedians. When audiences are provided with the ability to mediatize the work of performers, then those performers will continue to censor themselves in order to prevent their material from being entered into the economy of repetition without the opportunity to profit from it, and to prevent their material from being recontextualized without their authorization. Thus, YouTube
will continue to see amateurs producing stand-up comedy material for YouTube while professional stand-up comedians will use YouTube for other kinds of performances. For example, stand-up comedian Russell Brand launched a YouTube web series called *The Trews* (i.e. the true news) in February of 2014. The political-comedy critiques media coverage by close reading various current events. Brand’s presence on YouTube through *The Trews* has given him a presence on television; often on the very shows he critiques.

The emergence of new media platforms and the innovations in existing platforms make it impossible to absolutely determine that TV is the most powerful platform from which to perform dissidence through stand-up comedy. The power of various media platforms is observable through the goals stand-up comedians have to access certain platforms while the power of individual performers is evident in the para-performance aspects of visual imagery, grouping, and titling. It is clear that the medium that is the most powerful will always be the one that is the most difficult to access, has the ability to reach the largest accidental audiences, and aligns marginalized voices with the elite. Therefore, the power of the medium is a product of the platform’s features in conjunction with the performer’s ability to control the para-performance in order to appear as an individual and to create positive power associations.

Currently, both professionals (e.g. Brand) and amateurs (e.g. Bo Burnham) use other platforms, like YouTube, which can result in a presence on TV or Netflix. I argue that TV is powerful because acts consistently move from other platforms to TV, as if it is the end goal. For example, a show called *Joke or Choke* was developed by CTV as part of its CTV Extend digital series in the summer of 2014. *Joke or Choke* is a stand-up comedy competition that features professional amateur stand-up comedians (similar to
Comedy Now!). These stand-up comedians would have to develop new material based on a topic given to them. The show was judged by Mark Forward and hosted by Jonny Harris. In order for the show to move from its online home on Extend to television on CTV, the pilot episode on Extend had to receive a certain amount of attention on Facebook and Twitter. The performers were asked to promote the show themselves and since the show failed to receive enough attention on the pilot, it did not continue. The case of Joke or Choke indicates that focus groups have been replaced with cyber-audiences. That replacement gives the viewership a great deal of control over the landscape of popular culture. Therefore, live stand-up comedy performances may be thought of as rehearsals for the purposes of mediatization whereas mediatizations of stand-up comedy on less powerful media platforms may be thought of as auditions for more powerful media platforms.

For marginalized voices, it may be a blessing that audiences are being given control over the production of cultural products that are entered into popular representation. Marginalized voices may do better with the cyber-audience focus-group-esque decision makers than they do with the mainstream networks. For example, Fox recently cancelled the situation romantic comedy The Mindy Project (2012-2015), which stars Indian-American comedic actress, writer, and producer Mindy Kaling. The show’s popularity has resulted in Hulu, an online streaming service, picking it up for its fourth season and in CTV agreeing to still air the show in Canada. While audiences cannot keep marginalized performers on TV, their ability to keep shows like this in production is promising. The audiences’ increasing impact on performances means that professional stand-up comedians may continue to move away from online platforms until the unlive
space can resemble the live space in terms of control over audience impact, which would allow performers to maintain their authority.

Although it is not comedic, CTV’s digital series *Interference* offers some insight into the changing relationship between performance and cyber-audiences. *Interference* is an interactive web series in which the cyber-audience member takes on the role of the performer. The show is explained to audiences in the “About” section of the episode on the CTV website as follows:

System hacked. Covers blown. CIU is offline.

With the team deep undercover investigating the notorious Titan Syndicate, Khali discovers a massive security breach in the CIU (Covert Investigations Unit) network. The entire team’s identities are out in the open and a mysterious hacker is interfering with the CIU’s surveillance and communications, preventing Khali and Rebecca from warning the undercovers.

Oblivious to the threat, Moreland, Jesse, Daniel, and Maria carry out their covert “plays,” while Khali and Rebecca resort to extreme measures and enlist the help of an outsider to steer the team out of deadly circumstances. That outsider is you.

“Interference” is your chance to dive into the world of “Played” and help the CIU agents on a series of high-stakes plays. Each episode follows a member of the undercover team into the criminal underworld as they look to bring down the Titan Syndicate, and when things go sideways it’s up to you to intervene. Interact using your phone, computer and Facebook account, connecting the team members and warning them of the impending danger.

But as each team member is brought to safety, Khali and Rebecca come to realize that the Syndicate’s reach goes deeper than they ever expected, and that interfering with them has dangerous consequences for everyone involved.

*Interference*’s first episode is comprised of four videos that the cyber-audience member must interact with to complete the performance. As I attempted to experience *Interference* I was able to complete two of the four videos, which relied on clicking
various symbols and typing in a code, but was unable to complete the other two videos, which relied on texting and calling a phone number that seems to no longer work. I could not see how the episode concluded because it is assumed that the cyber-audience member will carry out the actions and must do so for the performance to conclude. Interactive shows thus offer the illusion of control to cyber-audiences while actually maintaining control over both the performance proper, which has fixed outcomes, and the para-performance, which eliminates audience interaction by excluding the comments section.

In the future, perhaps media platforms such as YouTube will find ways to make cyber-audiences of stand-up comedy feel as if they are impacting performances while allowing the performer to maintain authority and control. Thus, stand-up comedians could respond to audience feedback, such as heckling, in the moment. At the same time, performers could choose what they respond to and eliminate that which would diminish their power. The heckler that resurfaced in the unlive space of YouTube’s para-performances would disappear once again in such a format. This format would therefore reproduce the liveness of TV, DVD, and Netflix rather than live stand-up comedy.

As I envision it, such a platform would function more closely to Netflix than to TV or DVD since it would need to occur in cyberspace. It would also function more closely to Netflix than to YouTube because it would prevent the cyber-audience members from interacting with one another and having actual control over the performance or reproducing the features of liveness. Rather, the cyber-audience would appear to interact with the performance itself.

While performances in the future may move towards an interactive style in other genres, when it comes to stand-up comedy, such a style seems gimmicky and ultimately
goes against the function of stand-up comedy, which is the performance of dissidence. The performance of dissidence in stand-up comedy is achieved through the performer challenging audiences’ perspectives by offering the performer’s perspective as a contrast. The incongruity that humour relies on in the aim of producing dissidence could not function if audiences are choosing their own adventures. Therefore, I do not see stand-up comedy becoming interactive in the future but I do see the para-performances of live stand-up comedy becoming increasingly mediatized and the para-performances of mediatized stand-up comedy becoming increasingly live.

**The Future of Performance Studies**

I see the future of mediatized stand-up comedy evolving its para-performance more strikingly than its performance proper. This evolution is inevitable due to the existence of a single performance proper across multiple media platforms. New importance has therefore been placed on many para-performance elements. It will be through investigating the para-performance that the performance proper can be clearly studied for power relations.

The use of para-performance analysis alongside performance proper analysis allows for the basis of performance studies to move beyond interpreting various actions, audiences, and artefacts “as performance.” Instead, such analyses emphasize how power relations are manifested in the actions, audiences, and artefacts that are relevant to the performance event. Analyzing the para-performance therefore offers a more rounded understanding of the potential impact of the performance proper. Considering para-performance elements in as much depth as the performance proper aspects of content and form allows for greater focus on the context created through mediatization as well as the
role of the audience. In our current cultural moment, the same performances occur on various media platforms, which make reading the significance of these contexts essential to understanding power.

Furthermore, mediatization of the performance proper has resulted in increasing the role of the audience by moving the audience well beyond the position of passive receptors and to the position of active co-creators. The new audiences are creators whose roles begin before the performance proper and carry on after it. The audience’s performances are entered into the digital archive. Thus, audience responses are simultaneously more fixed, in the written text, and more in flux, since there may be no end to these online conversations, than ever before.

**The Future of Performance**

The field of performance studies has already seen an increase in the role of audience as actor and creator due to the prevalence of social media. With the rise of the unlive cyber-audience it is vital that we view audience interactions as performance in order to comprehend how these interactions reflect current power structures. As audiences are increasingly able to influence the para-performance they will be able to reconfigure or reinforce ideologies for others from positions of power that rival those of performers proper. Thus, concentrating on the audience’s agency should be viewed as a key factor to comprehending performance impact.

Performance analysis needs to include a component on the para-performance element of audiences because this provides insight into performance impact on everyday audience members. The focus on the everyday audience member is essential to analyzing how performances are interpreted in practice. Using data such as Netflix reviews and
YouTube comments will also allow for feedback that has not been influenced by the knowledge of an audience response form or by only using audience responses that are written by critics or scholars.

If the aim of performance is to evoke something in the spectator, to ask the hard questions, and to challenge dominant ways of thinking and acting then there is no better way to know the impact of a performance than to see what everyday audiences can make of it. The focus on the everyday audience member is essential because the audiences’ ability to impact a performance will only increase over the years. The approach of the para-performance should work for the time being but new approaches will need to be developed as the audience’s agency increases to the point where audiences and performers are practically indistinguishable. I foresee that moment to be the collapse of the audience-performer dichotomy.

Such a moment marks the rise of a new kind of audience; one that not only impacts the performance but is actually essential to the performance’s very existence. The collapse of the audience-performer dichotomy is already occurring. It is evident in the following: the production of interactive online shows; having audience members’ Tweets read on a show; using audience members’ votes to determine the winner of a competition and sharing that data during the show; and having audience members offer suggestions during an improvised performance of sketch comedy. These examples are only just the beginning. When the dichotomy truly dissolves, it will no longer be immediately clear how to divide participants into performers and audiences.

While cyber-audiences have agency over the para-performance, these new audiences will have agency over the performance proper as well. These new audiences
will not be given limited agency but will contribute to the creation of the performance at every turn – from conception to execution. It is imperative that we view para-performances as significant and that we develop our analysis of para-performance elements because they will eventually have much greater influence on audiences’ perspectives than the performance proper. And, as discussed throughout this dissertation, the ability to influence audiences is essential to creating dissidence in oppressive structures of power.
Works Cited


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13 This DVD contains the *Comedy Now!* TV specials.


Appendix A

Please note that the following list is qualitative, partial, and highly subjective; it is not factual and I have not researched any of the audience members’ actual racial or ethnic backgrounds. I have noted the ethnicity of the audience member when it was revealed through the content of the performance. When ethnic information was not readily available I used the apparent race from my perspective. While this may be viewed as racial profiling, which is of course troubling and unfair in real-world situations, my reasoning is that it reflects the practice used in the editing of this work. The images are anchored by Peters’ content that have led to my interpretation of the audience member’s racial background.

The following is a partial list of the audience members represented in Russell Peters: Red, White and Brown (2008):

1. Asian woman with a Black man
2. Brown father with his young son
3. Asian woman with an Asian man
4. Asian man
5. White man
6. Asian woman with an Asian man
7. Asian woman
8. Two Asian women
9. Asian man next to a Brown woman (when Peters uses a Chinese accent while stating a stereotype about Indian people – “Go play the taxi game”)
10. Brown father with his young son
11. 2 Asian men – open your eyes really wide
12. 1 Asian man
13. 1 Asian man “I’m an asshole” – agreeing
14. Arabs – represented vocally
15. Brown woman and Brown man
16. Wider audience shots that are multiracial
17. Indian (Punjabi) man in a turban
18. Indian audience members
19. Indian man wearing a turban x2
20. Wider audience shots that are multiracial
21. White male audience members – joke about being cheap/White guys “Fuck you, I’m cheap”
22. Black male audience member – “skim milk” Black people being cheap
23. Indian woman audience member
24. Asian man audience member
25. Indian audience members
26. Italian man audience member x2
27. Indian woman
28. Man who may be Italian
29. Wider multiracial audience shots
30. Two Indian men
31. Wider multiracial audience shots
32. Brown (?) woman
33. Wider multiracial audience shots
34. Brown man
35. 2 Brown women
36. Brown woman and Brown man
37. Wider multiracial audience shot
38. Brown man
39. 2 West Indian couples x 3
40. Black man
41. West Indian audience members
42. Wider multiracial audience shots
43. Woman who went to the washroom returning
44. Italian man and woman
45. Italian man x 2
46. Brown man x 3
47. Brown woman
48. Brown man x 2
49. Black men
50. Black woman
51. Brown woman
52. Wider multiracial audience shot
53. Brown man
54. Russell Peters’ mom
55. White man

56. Asian man

57. Brown man with son x 2

58. Wider multiracial audience shots

59. Asian man

60. Wider multiracial audience shots

61. Colombian man and Colombian woman – couple

62. Wider multiracial audience shots

63. Colombian couple

64. Black man

65. White couple

66. 2 Jewish women

67. Wider multiracial audience shots
Appendix B

The following contains the messages from the Facebook event “Comedy At The Cornerstone.”

The Making-Box. “We think Emily Upper knocked this poster out of the park!” 2 June 2015. Facebook.

The Making-Box. “WHOA! Ashley Moffatt (Winnipeg Comedy Festival CBC, JLF42, Sirius XM Next Top Comic) has been added to this show! We suggest grabbing your tickets 5 minutes ago.” 8 June 2015. Facebook.

The Making-Box. “One week away! FYI: Cornerstone seats half the people that fit at The Making-Box and the last show sold out in advance. We don't want to see you crying outside the venue, grab a spot for this incredible show:” 10 June 2015. Facebook.

The Making-Box. “Tickets are more than half gone! Got yours?” 14 June 2015. Facebook.

The Making-Box. “Hey James Franco! We heard you're in Guelph so we reserved a 7 minute slot for you at our stand-up show on Wednesday at The Cornerstone. Hope you show up! Please email: talkbox@themakingbox.ca to confirm or we'll give your spot to Seth Rogen.” 15 June 2015. Facebook.


The Making-Box. “Advance tickets are sold out! At 9pm we will see if it is possible to add any standing room. No guarantees. However, what we can guarantee is that our next show will feature someone who has done stand-up on Conan!” 17 June 2015. Facebook.