

# Comedy Has Issues

Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai

## Permanent Carnival

Comedy's pleasure comes in part from its ability to dispel anxiety, as so many of its theoreticians have noted, but it doesn't simply do that.<sup>1</sup> As both an aesthetic mode and a form of life, its action just as likely produces anxiety: risking transgression, flirting with displeasure, or just confusing things in a way that both intensifies and impedes the pleasure. Comedy has issues.

One worry comedy engages is formal or technical in a way that leads to the social: the problem of figuring out distinctions between things, including people, whose relation is mutually disruptive of definition. Classic

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1. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith and Nicholas Walker (Oxford, 2007), p. 161. William Hazlitt, "Lecture I—Introductory: On Wit and Humour," *Lectures on the Comic Writers, Etc. of Great Britain* (London, 1819); Ted Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (Chicago, 1999); Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, vol. 8 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological of the Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (1905; New York, 1960); and John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or Abjection in America* (Durham, N.C., 2000).

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comedy theory points to rapid frame breaking, including scalar shifts, as central to comedic pleasure. Scenes, bodies, and words dissolve into surprising component parts; objects violate physics or, worse, insist on its laws against all obstacles.

In this view comedy is always a pleasure-spectacle of form's self-violation. From Sigmund Freud's model of wit as transgression to Alenka Zupančič's definition of comedy as the expression of the universal in the concrete, comedic events take place with such rapidity or illogicity that we can't believe, for a moment, what's in front of us or what we've heard.<sup>2</sup> Henri Bergson's classic location of comic laughter at the spectacle of "something mechanical encrusted upon the living" is itself disrupted by Zupančič's revision, which is that the *question* of what's living, what's mechanical, and who needs to know is what really haunts the comedic and makes it an uncanny scene of aesthetic, moral, and political judgment.<sup>3</sup>

Comedy's propensity to get in trouble—sometimes greater even than genres like horror or porn—gets thrown into sharper relief when we think of it as a vernacular form. What we find comedic (or just funny) is sensitive to changing contexts. It is sensitive because the funny is always tripping over the not funny, sometimes appearing identical to it. The contexts that incite these issues of how to manage disruptive difference do not just emerge through cultural comparisons, either: a laugh in one world causing sheer shame in another, say. The culture concept can presume too much homogeneity in any given locality even when there's agreement on antagonisms and norms, as Judith Farquhar's essay demonstrates. Consider, too, the ongoing debates in the US over rape and race jokes, new normative constraints that are inciting comedians to make sadface statements and avoid youthful audiences who used to seem to be in on the joke.<sup>4</sup> It is as though in the current moment of social claims-making

2. See Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, 2008).

3. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (1900; New York, 1911), p. 18; see Zupančič, *Odd One In*, pp. 113–20.

4. See Caitlin Flanagan, "That's Not Funny!" *Atlantic Monthly* (Sept. 2015): [www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/thats-not-funny/399335/](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/thats-not-funny/399335/), and Anna Silman, "10 Famous Comedians on How Political Correctness Is Killing Comedy: 'We Are Addicted to the Rush of Being Offended,'" *Salon.com*, 10 June 2015, [www.salon.com/2015/06/10/10\\_famous\\_comedians](http://www.salon.com/2015/06/10/10_famous_comedians)

LAUREN BERLANT is coeditor of *Critical Inquiry*, George M. Pullman Professor of English, and director of the Lesbian and Gay Studies Project of the Center for Gender Studies at the University of Chicago. SIANNNE NGAI is the author of *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012), winner of the MLA James Russell Lowell Prize, and *Ugly Feelings* (2005).

some comedians have become the butts of their own jokes, exiled to the outside of where they used to feel sovereign. It is as though comedy is freshly dangerous.

Thus comedy isn't just an anxiogenic tableau of objects disrupted by status shifting, collapse and persistence, the disruption by difference, or a veering between the tiny and the large.<sup>5</sup> Nor is it just a field of narrative expectation punctuated by the surprise of laughter or vertiginous enjoyment. It is also epistemologically troubling, drawing insecure boundaries as though it were possible to secure confidence about object ontology or the value of an "us" versus all its others.<sup>6</sup> Political cartoons, religious iconoclasm, matters of the risible are sometimes ordinary and, in some places, matters of life and death.<sup>7</sup> Anthony Ashley-Cooper (the Earl of Shaftesbury) and Simon Critchley point to an analogy between the experience of humor and aesthetic judgment as such; both remind us of forms of intersubjectivity we usually don't think about but that we rediscover as presupposed by our very compulsion to make jokes and judgments in the first place.<sup>8</sup> Comedy helps us test or figure out what it means to say "us." Always crossing lines, it helps us figure out what lines we desire or can bear.<sup>9</sup> Precisely through the potential disagreement they inevitably pro-

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[\\_on\\_how\\_political\\_correctness\\_is\\_killing\\_comedy\\_we\\_are\\_addicted\\_to\\_the\\_rush\\_of\\_being\\_offended/](#)

5. Scholars of comedy from many disciplines regularly fall down the rabbit hole of taxonomy, trying to control the bursting responses to, orientations toward, and effects of the comedic, often while attempting to justify specific claims about the universality of comic susceptibility. See the extensive charts and explanations of benign variation, incongruity, status shifting, nonsense pressure, aggressive aims, sexual anxiety, seriousness states, and trait cheerfulness as omnipresent social, aesthetic, psychological, and neurological phenomena, for example, in *The Primer of Humor Research*, ed. Victor Raskin (Berlin, 2008), esp. Willibald Ruch, "The Psychology of Comedy," pp. 17–100, and Amy Carrell, "Historical Views of Humor," pp. 303–32. More recently, Scott Weems, *Ha! The Science of When We Laugh and Why* (New York, 2014) articulates current neurological research on humor with social and aesthetic perspectives.

6. For example, producing spot mock-serious analyses of epistemological anxieties at the juncture of sexual, political, and economic desires is the rhetorical purpose of Slavoj Žižek, *Jokes: Did You Hear the One about Hegel and Negation?* ed. Žižek and Audun Mortensen (Cambridge, 2014).

7. Bergson claims additionally that laughter at comedy represents an amoral anesthetic response to the world; arguing against him generally but amplifying this point, Georges Bataille comments on how laughter at and beyond the comedic registers the pressure to know in the space of unknowing, which places the comedic near the sacred. See, for example, Georges Bataille and Annette Michelson, "Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears," *October*, no. 36 (Spring 1986): 89–102. For an extended analysis of the implications of Bataille's view for comedy as a genre, see Lisa Trahair, *The Comedy of Philosophy: Sense and Nonsense in Early Cinematic Slapstick* (Albany, N.Y., 2007).

8. See Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (New York, 2002), p. 85; hereafter abbreviated *OH*.

9. The literature on humor as intragroup adhesive is extensive. We have learned much from Glenda Carpio's comprehensive *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*

voke, both aesthetic judgments and comedy “recall us to what is shared [and not shared] in our everyday practices.” And not “through the clumsiness of a theoretical description, but more quietly, practically and discreetly” (*OH*, p. 18).<sup>10</sup>

But maybe not so discreetly. In this era of proliferating social fractures the presence of comedy as weapon and shield, pedagogy and performance, saturates the most ordinary spaces. Arpad Szakolczai calls this a demand and laments the “commodification” of the public sphere.<sup>11</sup> While the Bakhtinian account of carnival’s permission for the grotesque to disrupt social hierarchy still obtains, the affective labor of the comedic as a socially lubricating mood commandeers comedy to enable the very contradictions and stresses to which it also points.<sup>12</sup> How should we understand comedy differently, and how does comedy stage its own anxiety-producing/alleviating, social-distance-gauging missions differently, if people are increasingly supposed to be funny all the time?

Both the world and comedy change when there’s a demand for permanent carnival. We do not share Szakolczai’s paranoia about the theatricalization of social life (against which he makes a plea for “more specific attention to belongingness in existential communities”) or his view of comedy as a maleficent virus, “infecting” Western Europe to this day, transforming politics into farce and the public sphere into a place of “permanent liminality.”<sup>13</sup> But it is worth stressing the originality of putting *comedy*—as opposed to mass-mediated entertainment, capitalist commercialism, or

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(Oxford, 2008); Joseph Litvak, *The Un-Americans: Jews, the Blacklist, and Stoolpigeon Culture* (Durham, N.C., 2009); and Alexie Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, N.J., 2005).

10. See also Elise Kramer’s rigorous analysis of rape jokes, taste, and social location, which argues that “disagreement becomes a necessary component of humor: those who find a joke funny and those who do not are mutually constitutive groups that cannot exist without each other” (Elise Kramer, “The Playful Is Political: The Metapragmatics of Internet Rape-Joke Arguments,” *Language in Society* 40, no. 2 [2011]: 163).

11. Arpad Szakolczai, *Comedy and the Public Sphere: The Rebirth of Theatre as Comedy and the Genealogy of the Modern Public Arena* (New York, 2013), p. 4. Szakolczai derives the term *commodification* from Martin Green and John Swan, *The Triumph of Pierrot: The Commedia dell’Arte and the Modern Imagination* (New York, 1986), a study of the diffusion of *commedia dell’arte*’s style of nonserious dissent into contemporary aesthetic culture, in part through avant-garde conduits ranging from Wagner to Diaghilev. For a recent study of comedy in/as the United States public sphere, and its influence on concepts of nationalism and citizenship, see Julie Webber, *The Cultural Setup of Comedy: Affective Politics in the United States Post 9/11* (Chicago, 2013).

12. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky (1965; Bloomington, Ind., 1984).

13. Szakolczai, *Comedy and the Public Sphere*, pp. 2, 175.

the performance principle—at the heart and origin of the public sphere.<sup>14</sup> This sets Szakolczai's argument apart from adjacent arguments in Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985), or Jon McKenzie's *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (2001).<sup>15</sup> To say that it is comedy that people increasingly come to expect in the kinds of social interaction that take place in all zones of modern life—politics, education, journalism, even religion—is something different from talking about a mode and mood of hyperenjoyment made by the culture industry, which runs on a great deal of high seriousness as well.

These operations of comedy as judgment about aesthetic and social form have also morphed into an overarching tone of late capitalist sociability, affecting how people self-consciously play as well as work together and the spaces where they do so (including Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and YouTube). This does not mean that all affective labor is comedic; affective labor is caring labor, and caring labor absorbs a range of moods. But the demand for play and fun as good and necessary for social membership is everywhere inflecting what was once called alienation.<sup>16</sup>

Often said to be a genre unusually sensitive to timing, comedy in the United States has arguably saturated the Just in Time (JIT), logistics-enabled workplace in particular, organizing and informing the informal affective cultures that lubricate production, circulation, and consumption. From *Cathy* and *Dilbert* to the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Taxi*, *WKRP in Cincinnati*, *The Office*, and *Silicon Valley*, comedy that appears in the workplace, as if designed explicitly for display or discussion there, tends to be *about* the workplace, reterritorializing it as a space of comedy. What

14. Szakolczai is talking about comedy as artistic form here, as opposed to comedy as an existential perspective or form of life. He specifically attributes the emergence of the modern public arena (and the rebirth of theatre in Europe) to the historical practice of Byzantium mimes (and sophists), who not only performed in stadiums and courts but also followed and mocked ordinary people on the street. Absorbed eventually into the tradition of *commedia dell'arte*, mimes were therefore feared as well as enjoyed and in courts functioned as agents of political intimidation.

15. See Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (1944; Stanford, Calif., 2002); Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York, 1985); and Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (London, 2001).

16. See Leo Charney, "Television Sitcoms," for a summary of the tradition of workplace comedy, in *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*, ed. Maurice Charney, 2 vols. (Westport, Conn., 2005), 2:586–600. On affective labor and the pressures to be a "good sport" in the workplace, see Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley, 2012); Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (New York, 2007); and Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, 2012).

results is a reflexive mirroring familiar to denizens of what Mark Seltzer calls “the official world,” where we find everything doubled by its own description.<sup>17</sup> Timing and mimesis: these are of course internal features of comedy, and we will see them taken up more directly as both formal and political issues in virtually all of the essays to follow and especially those by Mladen Dolar and Roger Grant.

All of this is to say that comedic situations are not only in art but in the world. The questions are not only how do they get enmeshed but how does comedy, now referring specifically to the artistic form or practice, respond to that enmeshment in turn? Does it bear down harder on traditional markers—more slapstick, more sexual difference, more grotesque conventional-ity—as well as dissolving more dramatically into the unfunny? This volume not only attends to these matters at the personal scale of *schadenfreude* or mimicking, as in David Simon’s and Dolar’s essays, but also turns to the spaces of capital’s movement and demands to track the structural pervasiveness and impersonality of comedic situations. So, what’s machinic in the capitalist-comedic scene, what relies on relentless value-making mechanisms of repetition, insistence, and productivity appears not only in Joshua Clover’s analysis of the tragedy/farce problematic in capitalist reproduction but also in Anca Parvulescu’s analysis of the Laff Box as a figure for contemporary compelled subjectivity and in Sianne Ngai’s work on the gimmick, which at once standardizes labor-related subjectivity and produces spontaneous aesthetic judgments against standardization, as though we can ever be outside of it, now.

Related to this interpenetration of comedy as art and as life is a sense we have that it is no longer clear what the “opposite” of comedy is. The go-to foil used to be tragedy. Whether this is or ever was true or just a useful heuristic, the setting of comedy against tragedy has been undeniably generative for centuries of comedy theory, from ancient Greece onward, making a mountain of memorable sound bites: “The world is a comedy to those that think, and tragedy to those that feel” (Horace Walpole); “Tragedy is the image of Fate, as comedy is of Fortune” (Susanne Langer); “Take a tragedy, accelerate the movement, and you will have a comic play” (Eugene Ionesco); “Tragedy + time = comedy,” (attributed to Mark Twain), and so on. But is this still the case? Note how the next three sayings, and the final one in particular, suggest that the opposition between comedy and tragedy has itself come to seem theoretically mechanical and thus good fodder for joking. “Tragedy + time - comedy = German comedy” (Eric Jarosinski); “Napoleon, who was a psychologist when he wished to

17. See Mark Seltzer, *The Official World* (Durham, N.C., 2016).

be so, had noticed that the transition from tragedy to comedy is effected simply by sitting down" (Simon Critchley); "Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die" (Mel Brooks).<sup>18</sup>

If it can sometimes be hard to tell if or how comedy is comedy, this might be because some people think a comedy without pleasure or laughter violates itself more extremely than, say, porn that does not produce a desired arousal or a weepie that doesn't make us cry. It might also be that contemporary comedy suffuses so many genres that are not comedy it is hard to draw lines: porn, horror, melodrama (the classic body genres identified by Linda Williams) along with westerns, kung fu, and, of course, romance.<sup>19</sup> Glenda Carpio's essay here, "'Am I Dead?'" argues too that migrant suffering has newly developed a genre of gallows humor about the psycho-physiological consequences of capitalist modernity, geopolitical displacement, and varieties of social death.

Perhaps, in addition to its swarming effect or external action on other genres, there is something internal to comedy—maybe its capacity to hold together a greater variety of manifestly clashing or ambiguous affects—that makes its boundaries so uniquely ambiguous. This last proposition mirrors Mikhail Bakhtin's claims about the novel: its capacity to absorb other aesthetic forms into modes, representational and aesthetic logics. Funnily, Mark McGurl's argument, in this issue, is that the novel achieved this absorption at the cost of comedy, exiling whatever's out of scale and inconvenient to realist causality.

Norbert Elias's "Essay on Laughter"—published for the first time in this issue—takes up the scene of judgment comedy always calls into being about what it means to be out of control, more body than mind, more awkward than graceful, more ridiculous than sublime, and in a way that confuses desire and aggression. These concerns appear throughout *Comedy, an Issue*, which takes up the question of genre not just as an aesthetic topic but also as a scene of affective mediation and expectation. This set of collapses, clashes, and boundary disputes is exactly what enables us to have such spirited debates about comedy and in a way we don't feel as compelled to do for other genres.

18. Horace Walpole quoted in Matthew Bevis, *Comedy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2012), p. 95; Eugene Ionesco quoted in Jan Kott, *The Theater of Essence* (Evanston, Ill., 1986), p. 99; Susanne Langer, "The Comic Feeling" in *Feeling and Form* (London, 1953), p. 333; Eric Jarosinski@NeinQuarterly, Twitter, 10 Nov. 2012; Napoleon Bonaparte quoted in *OH*, p. 61; and Mel Brooks quoted in Bevis, *Comedy*, p. 95. As Bevis notes, "Perhaps tragedy and comedy are more alike than they are supposed to be. Indeed, we might wonder why people have so often felt the need to keep them separate" (Bevis, *Comedy*, p. 96).

19. See Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44 (Summer 1991): 2–13.

### Rising Humorlessness

But how do we stack up these observations about comedy's transformation from interruption into expectation, its infiltration of other genres, and the "commodification" of modern social life, against another claim that seems equally true, which is that humorlessness is on the rise? If the comedic is pervasive even in traditionally serious occupations like politics and law (see Peter Goodrich in this issue on the repeated assertion and disavowal of wit in legal judgment), why is comedy still always getting itself and its practitioners into trouble?

"Only comedy can still get to us," said postwar dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt ("Uns kommt nur noch die Komodie bei"); events like the Charlie Hebdo massacre prove him still right (but then who was the us there and what social fractures were revealed?).<sup>20</sup> So many recent events testify to an intensification of humorlessness that seems to run counter to, but may be actually compatible with, the becoming permanent of comedy.<sup>21</sup> As Lauren Berlant's essay brings out in particular, humorlessness and humor are as inextricably linked as, well, inextricably and linked. The mirthless are an especial object of ridicule, even intolerable—but as such, essential for comedy to happen—and perhaps because, as Friedrich Nietzsche suggests, mirthlessness threatens to consume the world. "A single joyless person is enough to create constant discouragement and cloudy skies for an entire household. . . . Happiness is not nearly so contagious a disease. Why?"<sup>22</sup>

Comedy's frequent failure to induce the pleasure that magnetizes us to it not only incites the policing of intimate others but also reveals philosophical and personal uncertainty about the implications of aesthetic judgment. One response, seen in critical theories of comedy, is to maintain and amplify distinctions between true and false comedy. This protects the desire for aesthetic experience of any kind to be elevating, self-developing, or worthy of idealization. It also often involves the mistaking of an aesthetic judgment for an ontological judgment about the artwork. The critic attributes her or his response entirely to the object, excluding her or his own investments in judgment's pleasures and elevations. The second response to comic failure involves bad feelings when comedy fails to be funny. This

20. Friedrich Dürrenmatt quoted in Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London, 2006), p. 54.

21. Szakolczai raises the same possibility as well, evoking anthropologist Gregory Bateson's theory of schismogenesis (a theory of conflict in which the behavior of each party involved elicits symmetrical behavior for the other). See Szakolczai, *Comedy and the Public Sphere*, pp. 77–78.

22. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1974), pp. 214–239.



points not just to the conventional thud after a bad pun, which is its own genre of fun, but an aggrieved sense of having been denied laughter or having had one's pleasures disrespected or devalued. This also explains some of the rage at feminism and other forms of subaltern political correctness that get into the wheelhouse of people's pleasures and spontaneity.

The move to overwrite the distinction between funny and not funny as a distinction between true and false comedy is especially interesting in the work of Critchley and Zupančič. For in spite of the playful tone of their writing, here the true/false comedy distinction mirrors the genuine art/nonart distinction made in high seriousness by Adorno and Michael Fried, among others; what is clearly a distinction between art the critic admires and art he or she doesn't gets rewritten as a distinction between what is and what simply isn't art but rather entertainment or objecthood.<sup>23</sup>

For Critchley, inauthenticity is precisely what makes humor humor and what makes it aesthetically and philosophically attractive in the first place: "I would argue that humour recalls us to the modesty and limitedness of the human condition, a limitedness that calls not for tragic-heroic affirmation but comic acknowledgement, not Promethean authenticity but a laughable inauthenticity" (*OH*, p. 102). Still, for him, when comedy fails a moral test in the guise of an aesthetic failure (what he calls "reactionary" or derogatory humor) it is stripped of its status as comedy. It is said to not be "true" comedy (*OH*, p. 11).<sup>24</sup> Similarly, for Zupančič the distinction between true and false comedy or, broadly, "subversive and conservative comedy" preserves a difference between comedy that undermines ego ideals and comedy that only purports to be anti-idealist by celebrating the embodied and particular, while actually preserving, in this very celebration, an "abstract idealism of the concrete and universal."<sup>25</sup> For the latter presumes a false separation of body and concepts when the truth is that they are contaminating each other all the time.

In both cases, Zupančič and Critchley assert that what they think of as bad or unfunny, reactionary or conservative humor is not really humor at all. Pointing this out does not mean we disagree with Zupančič or Critchley's preferences, but rather that we think that is what they are. What interests us is thus not the move's illogical conflation of taste with

23. See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, 1998), and Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago, 1998).

24. Critchley writes more explicitly about humor, not comedy, but often conflates them as we also do here.

25. Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, pp. 33, 31. On the distinction between true and false comedies, see *ibid.*, pp. 30–35.

ontology as such but what might compel a philosopher of comedy, or anyone, to make it.

Other genres—tragedy, horror, melodrama—do not seem as likely to lead to the temptation to separate the true from the false instance of the genre, though to be sure they always can.<sup>26</sup> Take Todd Haynes's affectively ambiguous film *Safe* (1995); one can have an interesting debate about whether or not the film is a tragedy or a satire, especially if one has, say, no empathy for the white, upper middle-class female protagonist's failure to thrive. But we propose that debates about whether tragedies are tragedies or westerns westerns don't usually produce the same affective intensity, fierceness, or sense of urgency to determine correct identification of their borders. Specific, irreducibly subjective feelings are as defining and central to horror and melodrama as the feeling of the funny is to comedy. What is it about the finding of something *funny*, then, as opposed to scary or sad, that generates more conflict at a higher intensity?

This brings us to the second type of response mentioned above: people's attachment to their own pleasures, which may be different than their attachment to taste and judgment and intellectual sensibility as such. People seem to get more upset when their capacities for enjoyment are questioned or pressured by the comedic than when their capacities for empathy are tested. If we have conflicting views of what should produce empathy, if we don't finally feel it for the same things, we can find each other shallow and prefer ourselves—but it's different to disrespect what gives someone pleasure as funny. It's experienced as shaming; as condescending; as diminishing. It may be that we hold our pleasures closer than our ethics. Or it may be that we understand that, mirror neurons aside, empathy's objects are the effects of training whereas comedic pleasure involves surprise and spontaneity and therefore we take its contestation more personally, as an interference with a core freedom.

Enjoyment, as the psychoanalytic tradition has always told us, is a serious thing. This is why comedy creates critical rigidity in a way specific to comedy. But of course that very critical rigidity is great material for comedy, as we are about to see.

### **Take Our Wife, Please**

We felt that we would be remiss if we didn't tell a joke or two. In part this is to test how jokes test us; in part to explore whether explaining a

26. Pornography is an exception to this general claim. Just as the very difficulty of discerning comedy seems to force critics to bear down on what's true and what's false comedy, so too the Supreme Court has been forced to judge what's porn and what's art, and what needs regulation.

joke does kill the pleasure in it, as so many people insist; and in part to ask some political questions about the pedagogies of comedic convention, especially in the confusion they reveal about what's personal about intention and what isn't.

Stewart Lee's comedy concert *Stand-up Comedian* (2005) provides the material for this analysis.<sup>27</sup> Lee emerged in the wake of the British alt-comedy scene of the late 1970s and is himself a great conceptualizer of the comedic.<sup>28</sup> He uses his whiteness, Britishness, heterosexuality, and cultural capital ambivalently, for and against political correctness. Stylizing extended narrative reflexivity into intimate audience repartee, he asks more from the audience than the usual fare of jokey bits or the hygienic distance of much observational stand-up comedy. *Stand-up Comedian* is an extended reflection on post-9/11 sociality and the rise of global racism, plus the potential for using the body's insistent bodiliness (farts) as a resource for bonding the world.

After narrating a few cases where the comedic delivers or points to justice and establishing the ordinary of contemporary political and social life as the obscenity against which comedic obscenity provides playful, acerbic realism, Lee tells a story on himself. "But it is easy, Glasgow, right, in the current climate of paranoia to make a kind of race-based error, right" (*H*, p. 88). Lee had been working as an arts journalist, the story goes. He was excited to interview the director Ang Lee because Ang Lee had just directed *The Hulk* (2003), and he, Stewart Lee, had since childhood followed the Stan Lee and Jack Kirby comic character. The Hulk is a monster into whom mild-mannered, black-haired scientist Bruce Banner automatically turns when he gets angry, often from being bullied by alpha-male jerks and of course by injustice in general.<sup>29</sup> In his act, Stewart Lee first establishes himself as a pedantic expert on the Hulk, knowing details about his color (usually green but sometimes grey) that only a true fan would know.

27. See Stewart Lee, *Stand-up Comedian: Live from the Stand*, Glasgow, Mar. 2005, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxN8PhKzZgY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxN8PhKzZgY) and *How I Escaped My Certain Fate: The Life and Deaths of a Stand-up Comedian* (London, 2011), pp. 41–109; hereafter abbreviated *H*.

28. Stewart Lee's conceptual work on comedy includes the 2013 lecture, "On Not Writing," [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrXVayvtjtQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrXVayvtjtQ) and the commentary throughout *How I Escaped My Certain Fate*. The book includes documentation of this bit. It reveals the phone call to be a fiction whose fictionality was not announced in his recorded performance; see *H*, p. 88n. Both Stewart Lee, as he presents himself in the Hulk joke, and Ang Lee, as he is presented there, are characters. Lee comments that there was a real phone call, but it was staticky and uneventful.

29. On the new Asian Hulk or the recently announced, forthcoming Marvel Comics transfer of Hulk's character and powers from Bruce Banner to Banner's "former sidekick, Korean-American teenager Amadeus Cho," see [www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/05/the-passion-of-asian-hulk-a-generation-of-keyboard-warriors-assumes-power-and-responsibility.html](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/05/the-passion-of-asian-hulk-a-generation-of-keyboard-warriors-assumes-power-and-responsibility.html)

To “put [an interviewee] at ease” at an interview’s start, Stewart Lee says, he often tells a joke (*H*, p. 91). On this occasion—a telephone call between the comedian in London and the director in New York—the joke is this: “And I said, ‘I said, Ang Lee . . . you have . . . you’ve directed the Hulk film. You must be very excited and proud. But, erm, don’t make me anglee. You wouldn’t like me when I’m anglee.’” Ang Lee’s response to this is: “I’m sorry, can you repeat that?” (*H*, p. 92). Multiple variations on this exchange—the comedian’s joke plus the director’s aggressively flat request for its repetition—reprise in this seven-minute bit. The awkward reluctance with which the Stewart Lee character is forced by Ang Lee to repeat the initial joke—a performance of foot-dragging shame that provides hilarious affective counterpoint to the repetition of the words “very excited and proud”—leads to demands for explanation that veer between Stewart Lee’s insistence that he’s punning on the Hulk’s tagline, “You wouldn’t like me when I’m angry” and Ang Lee’s insistence that his name doesn’t sound a bit like the word *angry*. Ang Lee tortures Stewart Lee by refusing to accept the alibi that “it was just a stupid joke” (*H*, p. 92).

But because of the toggle between *r* and *l* that English speakers parody as a stereotypical feature of East Asian English, when Ang Lee asserts his view in Stewart Lee’s monolog he demonstrates Stewart Lee’s claim, pronouncing *angry* as *Ang Lee*, which to Stewart Lee establishes the justness of his pun and also Lee’s racial innocence or cluelessness, take your pick: “My own surname is Lee, I’ve had thirty-six years of fun with that syllable” to which Ang Lee insists that, in collapsing *angry* onto *Ang Lee*, Stewart Lee is “anti-Taiwanese.”<sup>30</sup> “And then in the end he went, ‘Don’t make me anglee, you wouldn’t like me when I’m anglee!’ And I said, ‘You’ve proved my point, you fucking Taiwanese idiot!’” (*H*, p. 94).

It is as if the white Lee character’s repeated refusals to recognize anything racial or imperial in the joke, his repeated professions of being blind to difference, push the Asian Lee into enacting the stereotype the white Lee denies, in an echo of Bruce Banner’s anger-based transformation into the Hulk. One could say that in the performance, or according to its logic, it is exactly the white character’s denial of racialization, his claim to the innocence of his white obtuseness, that racializes/angers the director. The anger of the racialized person that turns him into this cartoon then immediately triggers and seems to license the explosive release of the racism-denier’s racially inflected expression of anger, “proving the point” in more ways than one.

30. On the *r/l* toggle, see the Dialect Blog, “An Accent Myth? The East Asian L/R Mix-Up,” [dialectblog.com/2011/12/30/the-east-asian-l-r-mixup/](http://dialectblog.com/2011/12/30/the-east-asian-l-r-mixup/)

In this manner, we are tempted to describe what Stewart Lee ultimately creates here as an antiracist racist joke: one that collapses the difference between cathexis and catharsis, investment in the joke and the relief of release from it.<sup>31</sup> The comedian seems to be suggesting that in a post-9/11 England whose claim to humor against PC humorlessness he is well known for mocking—complaining, in another concert, that “political correctness has gone mad” and now dourly prevents people from the fun of writing racist slurs in excrement on neighbors’ cars—anger about racialization is often itself racializing or coded racially, whether as group X’s pernicky oversensitivity or group Y’s hair-triggered rage (*H*, p. 296).<sup>32</sup> In keeping with the exquisitely dialectical nature of racism and antiracism in the Hulk bit overall, it seems worth noting that Ang Lee also never explicitly calls Stewart Lee a racist. His refusal to name this, to actually make the hovering and implicit accusation explicit, interestingly mirrors, almost seems to play along or temporarily go along with the white Lee’s refusal to admit its presence as well.

After the outburst of “anglee” and the immediate, almost instantaneous rejoinder of “fucking Taiwanese idiot,” Stewart Lee’s bit expands, escalates, spirals, and intensifies further into political and rhetorical slapstick. Lawyers and agents are said to get involved on the phone call, and then six people are there debating the question and extending the dynamic repetition of Stewart Lee’s joke and Ang Lee’s refusal to be a compliant audience for the joke, and it all gets wilder and more ridiculous until Stewart Lee excitedly bursts out:

In the end, we argued for so long that Ang Lee missed his 2.30 dentist’s appointment. [getting faster and louder] That’s the time that he goes to the dentist, Glasgow! Don’t let him tell you any different! He doesn’t even need to write it down! [raises voice even louder]. They offer him an appointment card, he rejects it! [crowing] He says, ‘I’ll remember it by thinking about my own pain!’ [*H*, pp. 94–95]

The audience laugh at this starts small, then cascades. What does this cathartic closure entail? In his book *How I Escaped My Certain Fate*, Stewart Lee points out that his concluding joke is a standard white British street pun about Chinese English: the homophone 2:30, “tooth-hurty” (*H*, p. 94n). Stewart Lee ends on a bad joke, an unoriginal joke, a political insider’s joke. He ends revenging Ang Lee’s refusal of his other joke by pasting onto the

31. See Weems, *Ha!* p. 64.

32. The concert is *41st Best Stand-up Ever*, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=99s19HBs-6A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99s19HBs-6A) and is also documented in *H*, pp. 251–308.

situation a joke that writes itself from the collective archive of supremacist pleasure, a revenant from white British memory that hangs in the air as a thing one might say while pretending it is just a thing “people” say.

Of course, as a narrative event, both racist jokes were there the whole time, despite the white Lee character’s initial profession of unawareness about the r/l toggle. The tension involved in maintaining its suppression creates the pressure that bursts through the culminating joke about time, memory, and bodily pain, releasing and revealing racism as exactly that which has gone without saying, which remains implied while revealed by the audience’s aroused hilarity as a thing collectively held.

Stewart Lee the comedian knows that some of the laughs at the end of his Hulk number might very well be, indeed probably are, straight-up laughs at the racist joke qua racist joke, not antiracist laughter at the met-situation of the explosive release of racism that was in bad faith denied or unacknowledged with the alibi of white obliviousness. But he also knows, we think, that there is no way to make his antiracist humor at a safe distance from racist humor. Reenactment, whatever else it is, is reenactment.

Yet one of the things that makes this joke so formally satisfying is the way Stewart Lee ends up refuting the old saw that explaining comedy kills it not by proving it wrong but by proving it right. Instead of showing us that explanation is graceful, easy, funny, and enlightening he exaggerates explanation’s lumberousness by turning his explanation of the joke into something stretched out and painful. Live explanation is always unwieldy. And so is comedy.<sup>33</sup>

In this sense Stewart Lee finally refuses what William Cheng refers to in his essay as the “comic alibi.” Borne out by the euphoric rush or gush that happens right after the turn to “tooth-hurty,” the comedy plays on the fact, and uses the arousal of audience laughter to reveal, that the racist joke cannot be unsaid, cannot be neutralized by individual intentions, because it is public property. Without actually unifying or bringing the different kinds of laughers together into a consensus about racism or political correctness, without even trying to do this or needing to, the unleashing of the racist joke ends up being enjoyed by the entire audience, including those who enjoy it exclusively because it destroys the white person’s alibi. In this manner, the comic event addresses what adds pleasure to privilege

33. We can’t help but think about pedagogy here. Just as explaining the joke doesn’t necessarily kill it, to attach concepts to pleasure through explanation does not necessarily diminish pleasure but can extend the benefits of intensified perception. At the same time knowing how things work can shake things up, threatening established and anchoring satisfactions. This is partly why teaching is so close to slapstick; language is always on the edge of fumbling, as real-time improvisation takes place in the land of the awkward.

while admitting something abstract to knowledge about how supremacies are reproduced, preserved in the aspic and aspect of pleasure.

Impersonal cultural comedic aggression is a thing. It is the material of truisms, clichés, and conventions. It is the material of stereotype; it represents group cohesion, here appearing as the pleasure of structural privilege at its most banal. It produces supremacist discomfort in the ordinary encounter. See, as another example, Claudia Rankine's meditation in *Citizen* on the joking lob of "nappy-headed ho" by a white friend. The narrative voice responds in disbelief to a friend's application of that phrase to her the way fictional Ang Lee did: "What did you say?"<sup>34</sup> Disbelief is a political emotion when it refuses to admit something in the world as real.<sup>35</sup> Rankine writes,

Maybe the content of her statement is irrelevant and she only means to signal the stereotype of "black people time" by employing what she perceives to be "black people language." Maybe she is jealous of whoever kept you and wants to suggest you are nothing or everything to her. Maybe she wants to have a belated conversation about Don Imus and the women's basketball team he insulted with this language. You don't know. You don't know what she means. You don't know what response she expects from you nor do you care. For all your previous understandings, suddenly incoherence feels violent. You both experience this cut, which she keeps insisting is a joke, a joke stuck in her throat, and like any other injury, you watch it rupture along its suddenly exposed suture.<sup>36</sup>

Here the anecdote is about a racist joke made by a person clearly not intending to make one but whose generic intentions are explicitly rejected as irrelevant to establishing the event as one of supremacist pleasure. In a way what is happening here is the opposite to what happens in the Ang Lee bit. There, what created the rupture was the white character's claim to unknowingness, his plea of cluelessness to legitimate his joke; here it is the white person's claim to knowingness, to being an insider or somehow close enough. But in both cases, what we might call "the claim to humor" reveals the copresence of the supremacist startle, the physicality of racialized pain, the enormous creativity-suck that speculation about other people's diminishing gestures involves, and the inutility of explanation in

34. Claudia Rankine, *Citizen* (New York, 2014), p. 42.

35. On disbelief as a political emotion, see Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, N.C., 2011), p. 211 and, with a greater emphasis on the Other's constitution as the guarantor of the Real, Zupančič, *Odd One In*, p. 85.

36. Rankine, *Citizen*, p. 42.

explaining away the delight in comedic aggression—all in response not just to violence that feels like violence but to pleasure that enjoys itself. It also points to the proximity of the painful and comic effects of disbelief.

But we want to emphasize that these kinds of processes operate even in the most reparative, therapeutic, spontaneous, and enlightening of comedic situations. There *is* such a thing as “light” comedy! Bodies run into each other, and the world runs into beings! Love happens and the objects become weird! The political unconscious extracts its pleasures, as does subjectivity expressed in practices! It’s just that no one can determine in advance how comedic freedom will travel.

We began by noting how comedies help us figure out distances and differences. Comedy theory has tended to foreground detachment, but we think proximity deserves particular attention. In the comedic scene things are always closer to each other than they appear. They are near each other in a way that prompts a disturbance in the air. People can enjoy that disturbance, and one thing they can enjoy in it is that it feels automatic, spontaneous, freed-up. Pressed a little, the enjoyment is not always, hardly ever, unmixed; but in the moment, the feeling of freedom exists with its costliness. There’s a relation between the grin and chagrin; there’s the fatigue from feeling vulnerable because pleasure’s bad objects are not always in one’s control.

Getting how comedy has the power to disturb without moralizing for or against it is key to getting the trouble of the comedic. It’s one thing to grin at a boss, a baby, a cat picture, or a shot of some drunk who might on another day be you, and it’s another thing to hit an unexpected edge in proximity to what felt innocuous. It’s not a spectrum; there’s no continuum between the cute and the intractable, between the unintended pleasure and the sudden appearance of an uncomfortable joke that seems to write itself, thanks to the autonomy of mind, the conventions of culture, or plain old aggression. Maybe the fantasy of a spectrum alleviates the anxiety at the boundary where comedy enmeshes with all its others. That’s an aesthetic judgment.

The essays to follow extend many of these issues of the comedic: cultural norms and aesthetic forms (Farquhar, Grant, Carpio, Elias, McGurl); vertiginous scalar movement as historical event (Clover, McGurl); capitalism and work (Ngai, Berlant, Clover, Farquhar, Parvulescu); unfunniness (Goodrich, Berlant, Parvulescu, Simon); the pleasures and dangers of spontaneity (Elias, Berlant, Parvulescu, Simon, Cheng); identification and self-doubt (Simon, Carpio); bodies in slapstick and political pain (Cheng,



Parvulescu, Carpio, Ngai, Berlant, Simon, Dolar, Farquhar); sexuality as symptom and goad (Goodrich, Ngai, Carpio); and mimesis and doubling (Dolar, Grant, Carpio, Simon). We especially encourage you to experience the performance of all of these toggles and breaches in the original comic by Gary Sullivan, "You, Again?" Sullivan's historical and tropological archive of comedic tropes absorbs so many registers of their pleasure-pain that as we read we can, in truth, barely take in what's in front of our eyes.