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TOWARDS NEGOTIATING THE ETHICS OF COMEDY THROUGH AFFECTIVE  
PEDAGOGIES OF FEMINIST HUMOR

by

MUGE YUCE

Under the Direction of Megan Sinnott, PhD

ABSTRACT

By calling for negotiating the ethics in the stand-up comedy, this thesis, first, focuses on the discussions around the issue of (in)appropriate comedic language in the stand-up shows that came out after 2017, that are *Nanette* by Hannah Gadsby, *Sticks&Stone* by Dave Chapelle, *Right Now* by Aziz Ansari, and *Rape Jokes* by Cameron Esposito. In doing so, it provides an analysis of how stand-up stages, in the face of Trump era and #metoo movement, have become a space of *metacomedy*, by enabling us to rethink about the form and ethics of comedy. Through its reflection on Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette*, the thesis attempts to contribute to a reconceptualization of our understandings of feminist humor and its theories as well as to rethinking about humor's possibilities and shortcomings in terms of its capacity to bring about teaching/unlearning moments. Finally, the thesis calls for an ethical negotiation towards otherness in comedy by proposing an affective pedagogy of feminist humor.

INDEX WORDS: feminist humor, stand-up, Nanette, humor theories, #MeToo, feminist affective pedagogies

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PEDAGOGIES OF FEMINIST HUMOR

by

MUGE YUCE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts  
in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2019

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2019

TOWARDS NEGOTIATING THE ETHICS OF COMEDY THROUGH AFFECTIVE  
PEDAGOGIES OF FEMINIST HUMOR

by

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December 2019

## **DEDICATION**

To the amazing women in my life; my mom, Aysel, my sisters Gülşah and Şebnem, and my cousin Ebru, who taught me to laugh with others, not at others.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

How many times have you heard people tell you that feminists take things so seriously, or asking, “do you not have a sense of humor?” They say: “You always spoil the joke!”; “Grow a sense of humor!”; “Angry feminists!”; “Feminazis!”; “Killjoys!” Apparently, feminists must be disappointing some folks by not sharing their sense of humor. In his book *On Humor*, Simon Critchley notes that “A sense of humor is often what connects us most strongly to a specific place and leads us to predicate characteristics of that place, assigning certain dispositions and customs to its inhabitants” (Critchley, 2002, 68). So, if sharing a sense of humor requires a connection to and aligning with others through the common values and the culture of that particular place, then what does feminists’ withdrawal from participating in this social bonding inform us about the cultural politics of humor?

Having been used either for social-political critique, irony, satire, or simply for entertainment purposes, humor has been a means to broadcast the worldviews of its performers (Krefting, 2014, p.1). Even though humor has been used in many different avenues, from our daily social interactions to political arenas, comedy stages, media and film productions, simply circulating at every turn in our lives, depending on its mode of production and its context, it has had varied effects on people who are at the receiving end of the humor. Yet, given the dominance of white heteronormative culture in the US, by echoing the codes of this culture, humor often leaves the subjects, who do not fit in this culture, either invisible or offensively uncomfortable. Hence, particular modes of humor can function as a form of violence, by not only evoking negative affects in the nonconforming subjects but also fostering the dehumanization of the very same subjects. Therefore, humor that bears on humiliation of and ridiculing the others—whether it be racist, transphobic, homophobic, sexist, ableist, and/or ageist jokes, not only

informs us a lot about the culture of that place but also explain feminists' withdrawal from participating in kinds of humor that mirror the oppressive values of the white heteronormative culture. Rather than feeling that they belong to *this* or *that* place, feminists may feel displaced and simply do not feel at home in the face of the culture and social order of the place. Thus, feminists become the subjects who trouble the naturalization and taken-for-grantedness of the shared sense of humor.

Therefore, I definitely agree with the people who say that feminists "take things so seriously!"; And YES, feminists are the proud "killjoys" and YES "they do not have a sense of humor" for the jokes that inflict violence and, are used to discredit, humiliate and to dehumanize particular bodies and lives. Yet, even though feminists do not have a sense of humor for the jokes that are made at the expense of *Others*, they have a sense of humor of their own, one that I will call "feminist humor."

The *laughscape* of comedy functions as a mirror that reflects the political climate of its time. As such, feminist humor is too tied to social political conditions of the past and the present. It comes as no surprise that emergence of stand-up comedy as a new genre in the sixties coincides with the Civil Rights Movements. Following Civil Rights Movement, Women's and Gay&Lesbian Liberation Movements played major roles in shapeshifting and influencing the *laughscape* of comedy. With these movements, comedy space, which was always already dominated by white male comedians, was challenged by alternative humor styles and became varied in its offerings. Ethnic, minority and feminist humor were among the emerging styles of stand-up in the US, in which speaking out about and laughing away the injustices simultaneously became possible now.

In this project, I will focus on the current mainstream stand-up shows that came out between the years of 2017-2019 to trace how current politics are amplified in the comedy spaces in the Trump era and since the catalyzation of the #metoo movement. What becomes outstanding in this period is the common thread in the topics of the shows; that are the comments on sexual assault and the (in)appropriateness of jokes in relation to PC Culture. Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette*, Cameron Esposito's *Rape Jokes*, Dave Chapelle's *Stick & Stones*, Aziz Ansari's *Right Now*, Andrea Truscott's *Asking For It*, Whitney Cunnings's *Can I Touch It*, are only some of the shows in question.

While sexual assault is not a new reality or a conversation, the normalization of the language around sexual assault on a presidential level triggered and paved the way for a collective confrontation, enabled by a twitter hashtag #NotOkay in 2016, and then followed by the hashtag #metoo<sup>1</sup> in 2017. By means of the #metoo movement, sexual assault stories surfaced and created waves of disclosures of sexual assault stories by exposing many names. Even though the exposure was not limited to any particular group, Hollywood celebrities, producers, actors, comedians, to sum up, men in power positions made the news, thrusting the topic of sexual assault into a national and global conversation, thus seeping into comedy stages. Some celebrities, such as Bill Cosby, R. Kelly, CK Louis, Harvey Weinstein, and many others became either a topic or the butt of the joke in comedy stages.

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<sup>1</sup> Despite its initial creation as a hashtag #metoo in 2007 by a Black woman, Tarana Burke, who is a sexual assault survivor and activist, its becoming viral after a white woman and actress Alyssa Milano's tweet has been criticized for valuing white women's experiences of violence over Black women. Even though there are many criticisms against metoo, either made by feminists or anti-metoo people; that it is a Western women's movement, particularly that of whites; that it reproduces neo-liberal politics of incarceration; that it is an individualizing concept rather than a collective movement, that it is a backlash against sexual freedom, my purpose in this thesis is not to talk about what metoo is or what its agenda is about, rather I will trace how metoo seeped into comedy stages and what kind of effects it created in the laughscape..

Not only the language of sexual assault but also racist, transphobic, sexist, and homophobic statements have gotten more attention and critique within the same period. The not new yet deepening xenophobic politics and language in the Trump era dovetailed a divisive environment in the states, making the seams between the right or conservatives and the left or liberals more apparent.

With the increasing vocalizations against the more and more normalizing exclusionary practices and language in the Trump era, different and oppositional voices have been attempted to be subsumed under and cast away into categories of PC (politically correct) Culture and snowflakes. Notions of PC culture or snowflakes has served as an easy justificatory tactic of dismissal by the right/conservatives to sweep away any dissident voices and concerns under a general category. Such a dismissal becomes apparent in Sara Ahmed's suggestion of the dismissal of feminist complaints for being oversensitive and naming them "feminist killjoy." Ahmed unravels how feminist complaints in "situations of conflict, violence, and power are read as about the unhappiness of feminists, rather than being what feminists are unhappy about" (Ahmed, 2010, p.67). However, Ahmed reclaims the notion of "feminist killjoy" for it is a necessary position to speak and push back to conflicts and injustices.

Moreover, in order to discredit the oppositional voices, PC culture has been attributed gendered qualities through its association with weakness, over-emotionality, and with being not tough enough and easily offended, all of which refer to qualities attributed to femininity in ahistoricity of heteronormative binarism. Trump gave speeches in which he associated political correctness with the failure and obstacle before the success of American politics and wealth. To say the truth and to protect the country from enemies and failures, from which political

correctness prevent doing so, Trump and his supporters suggest that people of the US should toughen up and stop being ‘politically correct.’

Seeping through the comedy stages, the issue of comedic language come to the fore in the mainstream stand-up comedies, too. What becomes remarkable about the stand-up comedies in the Trump era and since #metoo is that they are not only about delivering jokes to make the audience laugh or entertain, but they are pretty much also on and about comedy and its form and language. The tendency to talk about and on comedy in the comedy space has brought about a catalyzation of *metacomedy*<sup>2</sup>.

By drawing on the issue of language in comedy, even though from different standpoints, recent stand-up shows, particularly three of them that I will look closely in Chapter I, Dave Chapelle’s *Stick&Stones*, Aziz Ansari’s *Right Now*, and Cameron Esposito’s *Rape Jokes*, not only provide a closer understanding of the issue of comedic language in relation to gendered readings of PC culture but also contribute to a rethinking about the ethics of comedy in relation to otherness. In addition to these three shows, Hannah Gadsby’s *Nanette*, which I will discuss in Chapter 2, through her bringing in “out of place” personal stories to the *laughscape* of comedy, such as her sexual and physical violence experiences, not only enables us to rethink about the limits and possibilities of the comedic form in a more ethical way but also makes a new world of stand-up genre that is supported by its feminist modes of affective pedagogies and deconstructing qualities.

Through the feminist modes of affective pedagogies that *Nanette* brings about by triggering uncomfortable emotions and senses, Gadsby not only refuse to laugh away the serious and harsh realities but also suspend the tension in the viewer in a way that tension sticks with the

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term *metacomedy* to refer the comedy shows that are on and about comedy.

audience, by paving the way to teaching and/or (un)learning moments. Therefore, defining *Nanette* as a feminist performance and approaching the affectivities of the show invokes, I would like to imagine feminist humor as a mode of catharsis that is not simply a tension release or relief but that consists of many conflicting emotions in coexistence, such as pain, anger, a sense of connection and a shared feeling. As an alternative to other kinds of humor, feminist humor can break the rules of the mutual exclusivity of being painfully serious and being funny, by bringing in the harsh realities and stories into the *laughscape* of comedy. Feminist humor, thus, may go beyond the usual tenant of comedy, that is the tension release that comes with laughter, by suspending the tension and exposing the audience to harsh realities from within the space of comedy that dovetails an affective pedagogy through triggering uncomfortable affects from the audience.

Moreover, *Nanette*, not only provides a great exemplary for reconsidering feminist humor's potentials and limits, but it also exhibits how the space of humor can be a negotiating space for ethics of otherness. Finally, *Nanette* can be thought of as in conversation with the shows I analyze in the first chapter in the sense of her considerate approach to otherness that goes beyond the debates around the (in)appropriateness of language.

## 1.1 Research Questions

In this thesis, I will base my research essentially on two questions. My first question of “How has the current political climate of the Trump era and #metoo movement affected the *laughscape* of stand-up now?” stems from the salient common thread in the topics of the recent stand-up shows, which are mainly the sexual assault, comedic language, and political correctness, that came out between 2017-2019. My second question of “What shape is feminist humor now?” has arisen due to *Nanette*'s groundbreaking affects in the sense of its undoing

stand-up comedy that brought about an alternative mode of feminist humor/stand-up comedy. Therefore, by reflecting on the narrative, performative and visual qualities in *Nanette*, I will attempt to provide an analysis of the shape the *laughscape* of feminist stand-up comedy has taken currently.

## 1.2 Literature Review

Humor has been one of the most elusive topics that evaded attempts to stabilize it down to certain formulations. While humor theories tried to explain the ontology of humor with regards to its relation to laughter, there is still no one theory that is agreed upon and that achieved this task. Through a glance at the history of the laughter theories, we see that three traditional theories on laughter stand out, namely the “superiority theory,” “incongruity theory,” and the “relief theory.” These three theories do differentiate in their contextualization of laughter. In the first part of this section, I will draw on these three theories, respectively.

Superiority theory explains that “we laugh from feelings of superiority over other people” (Critchley, 2002, 2). Superiority theorists, who were also treated as the haters of laughter or called as “misogelasts,” have written on the negative accounts of laughter (Billig, 2005, 39). This laughter theory is represented by the Ancient Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, the Stoics and the Christian theologians. They approached laughter suspiciously and suggested that certain kinds of laughter should be banned from the official spaces, while they uplifted seriousness for its regulatory and disciplinary possibilities. Laughter, for superiority theorists, was a sign of bodily pleasure, which would threaten the maintenance of the social order, therefore it was to be constrained (ibid, 50). Even though the above-mentioned negative accounts on laughter were regarded under the superiority theory, in fact, it formed as a theory in the modern era, beginning with Thomas Hobbes, who put all kinds of laughter under suspicion regardless of its form and

place (ibid, 50). Hobbes' superiority theory suggests that it is the human nature that makes a cognitive comparison with other's misfortunes and deformities and that produces a feeling of superiority over the ones whom they view as inferior. For Hobbes, this process inevitably incites laughter (ibid, 51). Hobbes views human nature as selfish and believes that human motives need to be disciplined through external political forces, since humans cannot be trusted to control themselves (ibid 54-56). Thus, Hobbes' superiority theory not only does invoke a disciplinary intervention but also recounts laughter as an ultimate negative gesture without leaving any space for other possibilities that laughter can open up.

Another major theory of laughter is known as "incongruity theory," that is, as Morreall notes; "We live in an orderly world, where we have come to expect certain patterns among things, their properties, events, etc. We laugh when we experience something [that] doesn't fit into these patterns" (Morreall, 1983, p.15-16). While Hobbes' superiority theory provided assumptions on human nature, which is, for him, selfish and needs to be controlled by external forces, incongruity theorists moved away from the human element in the comedic element. Rather, they sought to point out the incongruity generated by two mutually exclusive elements in the events of humor in an attempt to disassociate laughter from suspicion (Billig, 2005, p.57). Simon Critchley also articulates that; "[... in order for incongruity of the joke to be seen as such, there has to be a congruence between joke structure and social structure—no social congruity, no comic incongruity]" (Critchley, 2002, 4).

Lastly, the "relief theory" emerges with Herbert Spencer's work in the nineteenth century (ibid, 3). According to Spencer, laughter was rooted in the interlock of the senses and the intellect, which occurred as a result of a physiological experience (Billig, 2005, 91); "[...laughter is explained as a release of pent-up nervous energy]" (Critchley, 2002, 3). In Spencer's theory,

the cognitive and the emotional were at work together in bringing laughter into life (Billig, 2005, 93). Spencer explained laughter as a reaction that was brought about by the stimulating effect of the emotions upon the muscular nervous energy. Even though this account takes on how laughter is intertwined with emotions, it nevertheless approaches laughter through a cognitive scientific perspective.

Moving towards twentieth century, we see the publication of Henri Bergson's *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of The Comic* (1900). In his book, Bergson observes the elements of laughter and notes that the three preliminary conditions are necessary for anything to be comic, first of which is "human"; for there to be comic, its object should be human. Second is the necessity of the "absence of feeling"; if we have any affection towards the object of the comedic event, it becomes impossible to laugh. He claims that we laugh with our intelligence, not with our emotions. Therefore, indifference, and a "momentary anesthesia of heart" is crucial for the laughter to emerge. The last element is the laughter's "social signification"; our laughter is always the laughter of a group. Bergson further explores what other elements might produce the comedic event and notes that the mechanical inelasticity, rigidity, automatism and absentmindedness in the form, acts and gestures are what generate the laughable moment. Bergson points out that the social life requires the members of the society to be alert to present situations and to adapt their mind and body to the social order flexibly. Subjects' inflexibility and rigidity to adapt the social norms, thus, end up producing those as laughable subjects. Thereby, persons who are inflexible and unadaptable to the social life will become the cause of uneasiness in the society and laughter will be the society's response to those who do not fit in. As Bergson remarks, laughter is a social gesture that is invoked by an uneasiness stemming from the inflexible actions of the subjects. And in order to restrain the inflexibility and inadaptability

of manners and to diminish the reason of uneasiness, persons respond with laughter which, consequently, functions as a corrective and disciplinary tool. He further claims; “The rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective” (Bergson, 2003, 18).

Going back to the point where Bergson suggests that laughter demands an absence of feeling, a disinterestedness, and an indifference towards the world in which we inhabit, we see that he also adds that if we have any affection for a person or a situation, such as fear, pity, or sympathy, then it becomes impossible for us to laugh (ibid, 67). Therefore, in order for humor to erupt, it is crucial that people do silence their emotions momentarily and appeal to their intelligence. Then, according to Bergson, it is our intelligence that enables the laughter, yet never our emotions. While providing an analysis on the human motives for laughter and on its relation to the social, Bergson’s laughter theory, for its ultimate isolation between the soul and mind, emotions and intellect, leaves no space for understanding the function of emotions and affective circulations in which different affects may cohabit with laughter simultaneously, and what emotions can do to bodies.

### **1.2.1 Purposes, Potentials, and Doings of Humor**

Another attempt to produce essential or generic theories of humor has been on the basis of its purposes, potentials, and doings. Humor, either it be on stage or in other forms of cultural productions, proved to be multifunctional means; a means of social control, discipline, survival tool, political critique, social change, deconstruction of myths, empowerment, healing, and so on. However, the tendency to define the qualities of humor as to its purposes, potentials, and doings, inevitably created a binary approach, ending up in generalizations of humor as either repressive or transgressive. Additionally, identity positions of the performer attributed meanings to humor’s potentials. In line with the above categorizations, for instance, women’s stand-up performances

have tended to be viewed as transgressive, whereas self-deprecatory humor performances as repressive.

Sean Zwagerman, in his book *Wit's End : Women's Humor As Rhetorical and Performative Strategy* draws on broad categorizations of humor, and quotes Regina Barreca; "Comedy is dangerous. Humor is a weapon. Laughter is refusal and triumph....Women's comedy is 'dangerous' because it refuses to accept the givens and because it refuses to stop at the point where comedy loses its integrative function. This comedy by women is about de-centering, dis-locating and de-stabilizing the world" (Zwagerman, 2010, 5). He continues to exemplify the broad arguments by quoting Ricki Stefanie Tannen: "The male goal in telling jokes is to obtain a rhetorical one-upmanship while women tend to spotlight issues. Men target the weak while women target the powerful. Men tend to use sarcasm while women kid and men use a negative tone in jokes while women use a more positive tone....Women tend to question whether their perceptions are accurate, while men never question whether their perceptions are accurate" (ibid). Danielle Russell in her article, "Self-deprecatory Humour and the Female Comic: Self-destruction or Comedic Construction?," includes another broad observation by reflecting on Emily Toth's analysis that separates women's humor from men's and notes that; "Toth theorizes that most female humorists observe a "humane humor rule"; that is, they do not attack what people cannot change (a handicap, race, physical appearance). Instead female wits "attack or subvert -- the deliberate choices people make: hypocrisies, affectations, mindless following of social expectations"(Russell, 2002, 14).

As an alternative to broad definitions or to binaries of subversive/submissive humor, as neither of them have a general applicability, Zwagerman suggests that we approach humor

contextually based on its performance; and notes that; “To assess, and hopefully actualize, humor’s performative potential, we need to move past vague references to the action of humor as decentering or “opening up space for transgression” (quoted in Rowe, 109) and analyze its goddamn performance” (Zwagerman, 2010, 6).

In parallel but slightly diverging from Zwagerman’s suggestion of performative mode analysis, I will approach to the stand-up shows not only through their contextualities but also through their functionalities to reflect the broader concepts. With this in mind, in the first chapter, I will draw upon the stand-up shows based on their contexts and in relation to their period. In the second chapter, when I analyze *Nanette*, I will pay attention to its feminist modes of humor in order to discuss how feminist affective pedagogies can create new worlds of comedy, yet I will stay attendant to its contextual multilayered and interwoven qualities.

### **1.2.2 Humor as a Spatiotemporal Mirror**

In this section, I will focus on the literature on the historiographical analyses of humor in the US, which hone in particularly on African American humor’s spatiotemporal dynamics in relation to the political climates it moved through. In order to understand the landscape of humor in the US, particularly that of stand-up, it is requisite to look at the trajectory of Black people’s humor for various reasons. First, some forms of humor Black people utilized more often than not harbor political contents given the social conditions they have faced throughout their history in the US, revealing the capabilities of humor to deal with the oppressive regimes. Moreover, the analyses on the periodical shifts in Black people’s humor disclose how emotion has been an integral part of humor, thereby serving as a tool for dealing with and expressing the emotions that were brought up by the social and political conditions of each period. Therefore, every period’s

humor reflects particular emotions; for instance, Daryl Dance Cumber defines the humor in Slavery as a tool that kept Black people from crying and helped them survive, whereas Bambi Haggins defines the humor in Civil Rights movement as angry and *laughing mad*. Another reason is, even though Black people have historically been central to mainstream White American humor as the “objects” of humor to be ridiculed and controlled through stereotypical images of mammies, sambos, coons, matriarchs, welfare queens and so on, some forms of Black people’s humor managed to appeal to the power of humor to turn the white hegemony upside down, to critique, to deconstruct and to unmask the ludicrous yet very real conditions they have had to experience. Last but not the least, as my second chapter seeks for modes of feminist humor, it is not possible to talk about feminist humor without talking about some Black comedians’ influence on the emergence of modes of feminist humor. Rebecca Krefting in her book, *All Joking Aside* offers a rich analysis of the shift in the, what she calls, “*laughscape*” of American humor, by looking at the practice of *charged humor*<sup>3</sup> at its intersection with the emergence of the new genre of stand-up that coincides a political climate of Civil Rights Movements in the fifties. Before delving into her analysis of stand-up as a new cultural form through its association with the acts of *charged humor*, I will reflect on the previous forms of African American humor in the history of the US to discuss the reasons I sorted out previously as well as to illustrate how those forms of Black folks’ humor paved the way for the new cultural form of humor, namely the stand-up.

The anthology edited by Mel Watkins, *African American Humor: The Best Black Comedy from Slavery to Today* follows a trajectory of African American humor in four parts: “1-Slavery;

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<sup>3</sup> With the term “charged humor” Krefting describes the forms of comedy performances that is used by “the comic performers who intentionally produce humor-challenging social inequality and cultural exclusion” (Krefting, 2).

2- Emancipation to the early twentieth century; 3- The Harlem Renaissance to the 1950s; and 4- The civil rights movements to the present” (Watkins, 2002, xxiii).

To begin with, Watkins suggests that the African tradition of humor in the forms of griots and oral storytelling shaped the ways enslaved Black people produced humor after their forced arrival to America (ibid, xvii). In the period of slavery, which prepared the new— violent, inhuman and horrific— social conditions that the captive Black people found themselves in, Watkins notes that the stylistic of the humor appeared in the forms of “the animal stories, rhymes, work songs, riddles, plantation sayings, jokes, and tall tales” (ibid, xvii) which can be interpreted as a trajectory of the African oral culture that highly valued the clever speech (ibid, 1). While this period humor weighed in the modes of satire that often “denounced bondage and ridiculed slave masters”(ibid, xvii), given the circumstances that would leave no place for rebellious acts, it nevertheless had to be displayed in indirect and subtle ways, in Watkins’ words, “tongue- in- cheek fashion,” and “happy-go-lucky” attitude (ibid, xvii-1). “Playin’ the fool” or “puttin’ on massa” were the techniques used in the slavery humor that appeared in trickster tales, John and ole Massa tales, by which enslaved people outsmarted and bamboozled the master, provided with the enslaved people with the means for reclaiming back their humanity, as Watkins notes, “surviving and even maintaining some semblance of self- respect” (ibid, 1). Also, some scholars interpreted the figures of Sambo and Uncle Tom, which depict the captive Black men as loyal, contented, ignorant, lazy and subservient, as a social mask used by captive Black men for survival, a “veil to hide their emotions of rage and discontent” even though these caricatures were fabricated by whites to justify the maintenance of the inhumane system of slavery (Watkins, 1995, 50). Yet, Watkins offers another reading of this behavior as in fact a “resistance to efficiency, discipline, work, and productivity” (ibid, 50).

Watkins suggests that Black folks' humor in the period from emancipation to the twenties shifted and became more assertive, "more openly reflecting sentiments and attitudes that had been carefully masked in plantation setting" (Watkins, 2002, 55). Therefore, the Black folks' humor of this era was not anymore in, as he notes, "happy-go-lucky" attitude, rather it reflected the period's aggravating conditions that displayed the resentment and anger of both the past centuries of slavery and the present.

The institutional segregation of Jim Crow laws, which set the scene for anti-black violence enacted through which, to name a few, the emergence of Ku Klux Klan and the lynching of Black people along with their displacement from their homes in the South, marked the beginning of their mass immigration to the North and the Midwest. As Watkins reflects on the '20s, he notes that along with this spatial change, the cultural shift in the American urban lifestyle in the making that defied traditional values and upheld rebellion, grew an interest in Black lifestyle in intellectual whites (Watkins, 1995, 204). And Harlem was the center of that interest, where a new Black cultural movement was growing and where the Black intelligentsia was working on redefining Blackness through producing expanding numbers of literary works and other forms of artistic expression (ibid, 205). This period is known as Harlem Renaissance, and the Black intellectuals of this time aimed to provide alternative representations of Black lives that would reflect their realities in more equitable and proper contexts, which had been defined by whites hitherto in only disparaging ways to justify their anti-black violence (ibid, 205).

The same period also introduced significant literary works of folk tales, poetry, satirical novels, produced by many Black writers and humorists, such as Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes whose works also known for their humorous qualities. Also, by the 40s', in Black Circuit

stages, pioneer Black comedians made their appearance, such as Redd Foxx and Moms Mabley. Moms Mable was a precursor of and an inspiring figure for the next generations of women, particularly Black women stand-up comedians to come. As Watkins notes: “The early efforts of Foxx and Mabley were crucial in bringing the elements of authentic folk wit and satire to a wider audience. ...to bring black folk humor to the stage, to enliven its exuberant celebration of life, as well as to unmask its darker, clandestine satire” (ibid, 478).

The period from the 1920s’ to 1950s’ revitalized and reshaped the Black folks’ comedy towards becoming more bitter compared to the previous periods and laid the foundations for a more uproarious humor starting from the Civil Rights Movements until today. Nevertheless, Bambi Haggins defines this period as non-threatening to white audiences; “In the years prior to the civil rights movement, the black comic persona occupied clearly delineated spaces for black and white audiences. Crossing over, while possible for a few, required strict adherence to codes of conduct that did not transparently challenge the race relations of the day” (Haggins, 2007, 2). Haggins views this period’s perception of Black comedy as the reflection of the African American condition which “were diffused and often distorted in mainstream popular consciousness” (ibid, 3). Moreover, the central characteristic of the comedy from Slavery to Civil Right Movements was defined as being a tool of survival or a tool that keeps from crying, which is a reflective of the political and social conditions in which the Black peoples humor could only be displayed through “articulating suffering in muted tones” (ibid, 4).

With the Civil Rights Movements, as with the political insurgence of the time, Black people’s humor took a turn towards being unapologetically outrageous and explicitly critical of the racist cultural, political, institutional conditions. As Haggins notes; “the civil rights movement

marked the beginning of black humor's potential power as an unabashed tool for social change, for the unfiltered venting of cultural and political anger." In other words, the humor reshaping with the Civil Rights Movement was no longer to keep from crying, but was, in Haggins' metaphorical description, "howling about oppression and subjugation, as well as the victories in survival and amidst strife. Comics and audiences were *laughing mad*" (ibid, 4). However, it is necessary to note here that Black people's humor, in Watkin's words "was not created out of whole cloth" and it already "had a tradition of caustic wit and biting social commentary...that edge had been present since slavery... The emerging humor of the late sixties was not really new at all. It was simply that when the gate to equal opportunity was cracked just a bit, the truth slipped out" (Watkins, 1994, 399).

Here I turn to Krefting's analysis that addresses the shift in the *laughscape* by the fifties. Krefting marks this period as the emergence of the stand-up as a new cultural form and suggests that stand-up performances that utilized *charged humor* saw an increasing interest by both the public and the performers at this very juncture of political upheavals. (Krefting, 2014, 37-38). In order to understand the time's political climate, I will digress here and talk briefly about particularly the Civil Rights Movements and second wave feminism respectively.

With the end of WWII, while white America was enjoying the freedom (even though Black soldiers fought in the same war), Black Americans were still facing segregation and disenfranchisement at home, especially in the South under the Jim Crow laws system, despite the Civil Rights Act of 1866 through which Black people, under law, were promised a full citizenship and equal treatment. Segregation's inhumane forces were manifested and dissipated in every aspect of Black people's lives, from workplaces, schools, to public transportation and so on. In

Alabama, in 1955, Rosa Park's legendary refusal to not move to the back of the bus reserved for Black people, which ended with her arrest, helped the initiation of Civil Rights Movements. This boycott was followed by other boycotts, marches, sit-ins through which Black people demanded an end to social and institutional racist practices, inspiring other marginalized groups, who were oppressed by and opposing America's white racist imperialist heteronormative politics and practices, to create their own identity based movements to seek social justice, such as Women's Rights Movement, Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement,—both of which went along with the second wave feminism— Chicano Movement, and Indigenous People's Movement (Anti-war movement against the war in Vietnam).

Following the sixties and seventies through the eighties, a new force of feminist organizing was growing following the political climate of social justice movements, that is known as “second wave feminism.” Women were calling out the sexist practices that were dissipated at every turn in their lives, and demanding change and transformation that would liberate women from traditional gender roles that have long confined them to domestic/private spaces, by imposing certain roles of “appropriate” and ideal femininity, such as mothers, wives, caretakers. Among the agenda of “second wave feminists” were issues of workplace, through which they demanded “equality” in job opportunities that are not based on traditional gender roles and in pay; reproductive rights (legalizing abortion); domestic violence (including rape and other forms of violence). (Kesselmon & Booth & Rolhslein, Weisstein,1982; Kirk & Okazawa-Rey,1998). In the meanwhile, another feminist force was forming, known as radical feminism, which focused on men's power over women's bodies and lives, such as their reproduction, sexuality, education, work and so on. The radical feminists, among whom White lesbians are known to be the most influential, demanded an end to patriarchy and appraised creating new forms of livings that would place women and

women's experiences in the center. "Second wave feminism" contributed to feminist politics and theory greatly, through utilizing lived experiences in theorizing the patriarchy as a system and "creating alternative women's institutions, including women's health centers, publishing projects, bookstores, coffee houses, reading circles, poetry readings, recording studios, music festivals, and women-owned land projects" (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 1998, 12). However, second wave feminists have been criticized for not only providing an essentialist understanding of "women" by centering and generalizing white middle class cis women as the neutral position but also ignoring the differences among the women who were facing oppression because of their race, gender, class, sexuality, nationality, and dis/ability. Therefore, this essentialist approach inevitably overlooked the lived experiences and contributions of Black women, Women of Color, trans women, working class women and *Others* along with the interlocking oppressions they faced.

By taking into account the political agendas of the Civil Rights movements along with feminist movements from the sixties to eighties, I would like to examine how the racial, sexual and gendered aspects of the *laughscape* in the US was influenced and acquired new shapes with respect to the political conditions of the period in question. When we move to the 1960s and 1970s stand-up scenes, we see a few women stand-up comedians performing, among whom were Moms Mabley, Phyllis Diller, Joan Rivers, Rusty Warren, Totie Fields and Lily Tomlin (Krefting, 2014, p. 47). As a Black woman comedian and a veteran of the black venues of the Chitlin' Circuit, Moms Mabley, while maintaining a tradition of folk tales, still incorporated the sexual and racial aspects of her lived experiences in her humor (Haggins, 2007, p.147). Bambi Haggins interprets the comic persona of Moms Mabley "as revisionist mammy, presented one of the few iterations of black female sexual agency in mainstream comedy that was seen as acceptable because her artifice made it impossible for her to be seen as a sex object" (ibid, p. 48). However, given that the mammy

image symbolizes the docile, selfless, and de-sexualized “good mother,” Moms Mabley’s humor that manifests her sexual agency might be read as disruptive to the stereotypical definitions of the mammy. White women stand-ups were using their humor to criticize the normative gender roles, simultaneously echoing the “second wave” feminist’s agendas. (Willett&Willett&Sherman, 2012, 226).

Despite challenging and criticizing the White capitalist patriarchy, as Krefting notes, the style of the US women stand-up comedians’ humor remained within the confines of “safe space” or the white mainstream audiences, constrained by the normative discourses of race, gender, sexuality and so on (Krefting, 2014, p.47). To maintain this “safe space,” the women comedians were appealing to self-deprecating humor (ibid). However, despite the assumed non-threatening nature of self-deprecating humor, it is noted that, these women played with it as a tool of social critique, thereby provided a subversive approach to patriarchy’s impositions (Willett&Willett&Sherman, 2012, p. 226; Krefting, 2014, p.48).

Moreover, with the increasing literary works produced by Black women as well as with the academic works by Black feminist scholars and women of color in the eighties, it became possible to have a deeper and more complicated understanding of the variety of the experiences of black women and women of color. From the eighties onwards, women of color comedians, Whoopi Goldberg, Wanda Sykes, Margaret Cho, Luenell, Leslie Jones, Amanda Seales, and many others continued to talk about their lived experiences with respect to the reshaping yet persistent conditions of the systems of oppressions.

In line with the reflections above on how the political climates affected comedy and brought about certain affective and emotional modes in the face of its spatiotemporality, I will

adopt an approach to my case studies of stand-up comedy shows in the first chapter, one which attempts to foreground humor's function as a mirror of its time and place in the Trump era and #metoo movement. Also, in the second chapter on *Nanette*, I will talk about the affective qualities of the show, which were enabled by not only the show's performative qualities but also were undergirded by the spirit of its time in relation to the #metoo movement.

### 1.2.3 The Advent of Stand-up Comedy

As I previously mentioned, the comedy stages in the United States saw a surge with the Civil Rights Movements. Rebecca Krefting notes that stand-up as a cultural form of comedy emerged in the 1950s (Krefting, 2014, 37). In the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, vaudeilles and variety shows were popular forms of comedic performances. However, as Krefting articulates "comedy acts were sandwiched between a motley crew of entertainers: jugglers, contortionists, regurgitators, tumblers, ventriloquists, animal acts, minstrels, sketch artists, and musicians" (ibid, 38). Krefting suggests that humorous orators and vaudevillian comics like Mark Twain were the precursors of the stand-up comedy today. By reflecting on the cultural-political shifts happening in the 1950s in the US, Krefting draws attention to the significant role that spontaneity and improvisation played in the devices of cultural productions. Improvisation and breaking away with the old manifested in the 1950s in the Bebop music, catalyzation of experimental theaters, the Beat generation's breaking the literary rules. As such, comedic performances, too, began utilizing improvisation, thereby moving away from the old tradition of formula and content of jokes.

John Limon, in his book *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* informs that, in the sixties, it was the Jewish heterosexual men who populated most the American Stand-up comedy (Limon, 2000). Even though stand-up comedy had already been performed for over a

decade, Limon's note on the term of stand-up comedy's coming into existence shows that it was used in 1966 for the first time around the year of Lenny Bruce's death (ibid, 7, 126).

While having shared the venues with other entertainers, such as magicians, jugglers, contortionists, comedians began looking for spaces that would primarily showcase their performances. Hence, in the metropolitan areas, comedic acts got to be performed in venues where folk music artists were also staged. Along with the spatial shift in the production of comedy, the surge of a new kind of comedy that reflected the time's political unrest were the early signs of breaking away with the tradition and of the birth of the stand-up as a genre.

#### **1.2.4 Self-deprecating Humor**

Self-deprecating humor has been considered as the bad apple of comedy on account of its reinforcing qualities. By being subsumed into a broad category, without much attending to its context and variations, it has been tended to be dismissed as if all self-deprecatory modes of humor have the same affects. For instance, performance studies scholar Philip Auslander defines self-deprecatory humor as a "chief" strategy of female comic "to render herself apparently unthreatening to male dominance by making herself the object of her own comic derision" (Auslander, 1993, p. 326). By referring to the performative modes of both Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers, Auslander defines them as self-deprecatory on accounts of their self-ridiculing of their physical appearances in a way that would reproduce ideals of patriarchal beauty standards.

However, some feminist humor scholars, rather than dismissing the self-deprecating comedic performances ultimately, they tend to take into account the potentials that women's humor could allow. As Krefting suggests, self-deprecatory humor has been a tactic for women comedians "for overcoming audience opposition to a funny lady commanding the stage, and

diminished the threat of a female comic asking a coed crowd to give her audience, to listen to her, to value what she says, her point of view” (Krefting, 2014, p.47). However, despite the assumed non-threatening nature of self-deprecating humor, these women played with it as a tool of social critique, thereby provided a subversive approach to patriarchy’s impositions (Willett & Willett & Sherman, 2012, p. 226; Krefting, 2014, p.48).

It was mostly women’s humor which was considered to be self-deprecatory. Danielle Russell in her article, “Self-deprecatory Humour and the Female Comic: Self-destruction or Comedic Construction?” despite providing a data analysis that proves women use self-deprecatory humor the most, challenges the understandings that see self-deprecating humor as women comedy’s staple. Russell not only draws attention to the differences between self-deprecating humor performances through appealing to contextual analysis, but also regards the potentials of self-deprecating on accounts of its “exposing the incongruities of the dominant culture” (Russell, 2002, p.12), its “capacity for laughing at oneself -- a healthy self-criticism which bubbles up from confidence and self-respect”(ibid, p.13), and finally its self-disclosure capacity that allows for “describing one’s mistakes or foibles... to discover a common ground between women; drawing on shared experiences, performer and audience connect in a kind of process of inclusion” (ibid, p.14).

In the second chapter of my thesis, I will reflect on self-deprecating humor, as it is also a topic brought up by the comedian Hannah Gadsby, when she describes her previous performances. Gadsby defines her previous self-deprecating performances as a humiliation that not only puts herself down but also people who identifies with her. Moreover, in the first half of her show, Gadsby makes jokes that rely on self-mockery, that may be viewed as self-deprecating, those jokes

nevertheless shed light on to homophobia as well as the violence of heteronormative gender binary system on “not gender normals.” In line with the arguments above with respect to self-deprecatory humor’s risks and potentials, I will approach Hannah Gadsby’s performance through a lens that takes into account the limits and possibilities of her self-mockery contextually, rather than dismissing or appraising it entirely.

#### **1.2.4 Rape Jokes**

While self-deprecating humor has been, for some, staple of women’s comedy, rape jokes have been regarded as a staple of men’s comedy. While it’s true to a certain extent, women comedians too utilized rape jokes in their comedies. As it has been a long tradition in masculine performances making rape jokes, in their article “Rape is the New Black”: Humor’s Potential for Reinforcing and Subverting Rape Culture,” Megan L. Strain, Amanda L. Martens, Donald A. Saucier observe that there has been an increase in the utilization of rape jokes in the American popular culture beginning from 2000s. Examining the historic and current manifestations of rape jokes, they claim that rape jokes either can function as a mechanism of reinforcing the rape culture, by normalizing it or can subvert the rape culture by upsetting it. They reflect on the topic of rape in relation to its shock value for it is seen as an untouchable topic and taboo, through which they explain why so many comedians drawn to rape jokes rather than being concerned about their potential to perpetuate rape culture.

In her article, “Standing Up Against the Rape Joke: Irony and its Vicissitudes,” Lara Cox takes on the question of “Can rape jokes be funny?” and suggests that the key variables of “who utters the joke” and “where irony is targeted” lead either to upsetting or reinforcing the rape culture. Such an elaboration helps us to interpret rape jokes as to their distinctive qualities, rather

than dismissing all rape jokes through an assumption that they only contribute to the rape culture. In the first chapter, when I further reflect on the discussions around the (in)appropriateness of rape jokes, I will adopt a similar approach as to Cox's by examining the contexts and angles of rape jokes to understand their doings.

When looking closely at the debates around rape jokes, topics that comes up very often is the notion of free speech along with a zeal for off-limits comedy. The claim underlies the arguments around the off-limits comedy made by comedians is that the intention of subverting and challenging the unwritten moral rules. It is in this context that the comedians insistently appealed to kind of jokes, such as rape jokes, as if those jokes challenge the conservative and moral constraints that are imposed upon them that which determine what is allowed or not allowed to speak. However, I will argue that, while some of the jokes might subvert the social moral codes, they may nevertheless perpetuate misogyny, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and so on. Therefore, transgressing taboos that are imposed by the morality at the expense of *others* unravels an ethical dilemma that being against morality is not necessarily or may not be for ethics of *others*.

### **1.2.5 Political Correctness and Comedy**

Approaches to meaning of "political correctness" vary to a great degree. Some view it as a basic decency to maintain respect for diversity; some read it as a dustbin used by states for throwing away the oppositional voices and dissent; some consider it to be a patch, a cover in the way of facing and overcoming the realities of oppressive regimes.

Linguist Robin Tolmach Lakoff, in her book *Language War* (2000) provides an expansive analysis on the notion of political correctness. Lakoff defines it as; "'Political correctness,"

“politically correct,” and the common abbreviation for both, “p.c.,” cover a broad spectrum of new ways of using and seeing language and its products, all of which share one property: they are forms of language devised by and for, and to represent the worldview and experience of, groups formerly without the power to create language, make interpretations, or control meaning. Therein lies their terror and hatefulness to those who formerly possessed these rights unilaterally, who gave p.c. its current meaning and made it endemic in our conversation.” (Lakoff, 2000, 91). By looking at the shifts in its usage and meanings, Lakoff notes that the word changed ownership from left (Leninists) to right; and articulates that; “Something important had changed in the translation from left to right. In the left’s ironic use p.c. was just teasing, “all in the family,” and so, “for your own good.” But in the mouths of the right it became a term of abuse leveled at outsiders, us versus them, a humorless and vitriolic sneer.” Lakoff’s approach to right-wing’s usage of the term not only aligns with the opinions that view it as a dustbin used by the state for dismissing the dissent but also reveals how the same tactic of the right still persist today in the politics as well as in comedy.

Philosopher Slavoj Zizek, as opposed to the approaches that see political correctness as a basic decency and politeness, views it as a cloak that prevents to face and overcome hegemonies. Political correctness for him sugar coats the words and masks the reality behind the words. He says; “I’m well aware that we should not just walk around and humiliate each other... yet, there is something so fake about political correctness. That’s my problem with political correctness. It’s just a form of self-discipline which doesn’t really allow you to overcome racism. It’s just oppressed, controlled racism.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://qz.com/398723/slavoj-zizek-thinks-political-correctness-is-exactly-what-perpetuates-prejudice-and-racism/>

In the light of the analyses on the concept of political correctness above, my thinking aligns with Lakoff's suggestion that the term has become defined as a term by the right or some comedians to invalidate dissent. In addition, I will provide a gendered reading of the usage of the term in politics and in comedy spaces. Diverging from Žižek's judgement on political correctness, my research will not make a judgement about political correctness' philosophy by claiming that it is either beneficial or detrimental for having further debates or conversations. Rather, my research focuses on how the term gets to function as a cover for offensive modes of jokes and falls in line with masculinist and nationalist discourses. All in all, neither do I argue for political correctness nor vilify it. It is a long debate and a project that is outside of this project's intentions. Instead, I trace the echoes of political rhetoric based on political correctness in comedy spaces to discuss its underlying gendered meanings.

### **1.2.6 Ethical Dilemma of Humor**

To further reflect on the paradoxicality of morality and ethics, I will follow Jacques Derrida's approach in his book *Gift of Death*. Derrida, through the notion of (ir)responsibility, articulates the impossibility of absolute responsibility. By elucidating Abraham's sacrifice of his son to God, Derrida claims that Abraham, while being responsible towards God, is irresponsible towards every other (Anderson, 2014, p. 54-55). Differing from Levinas's call for ethics of others, in which Levinas seeks for "a nonviolent relationship to.. the Other" (ibid, p.53), Derrida suggests that "we are all situated in an 'economy of violence,' and that means that there is never non-violent ethics or responsibility (ibid, quoted (WD:313n.21). Yet, it does not mean that Derrida refuses or neglects ethical responsibility, rather he argues for "a patient, attentive, negotiating relationship with the ways in which we inevitably fail the other (Deutscher, 2006, p.82).

Following from Derridean philosophy of ethics, while I will acknowledge that there can be no absolute ethics of responsibility, I still will continue to call for more attentive ways of making jokes that would take into account the others in more negotiating ways towards otherness. Thus, I view the discussions around (in)appropriates of comedic language, or language in general that the shows bring up in the first chapter as an opportunity to rethink about ethical negotiations for a different kind of comedy. But also, by focusing on *Nanette*'s affective pedagogies of feminist humor, I would like to think about how feminist humor can provide an alternative mode for negotiating the ethics of comedy.

Moreover, I will put under erasure the claims of comedians' zeal about being against the morality and claim that jokes that transgress the taboos imposed by the morality do not necessarily dovetail an ethicality. Rather, under the notion of "they are just jokes," they may function as an excuse, cover, or justification for their violence.

### **1.2.7 Trigger Warnings and 'Safe Space'**

Contemporary debates around trigger warnings have seeped into pedagogical negotiations. As Ramzi Fawaz suggests that trigger warnings not only align with the liberal feminist understanding of providing a 'safe space' for some to 'protect' them from any possible uncomfortable feelings but also prevents any possible public discussion that those difficult feelings may open up (Fawaz, 2016). As Jackie Wang in her article "Against Innocence: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Safety" articulates that the language of safe space has been used by white people as a shield against the political emotions expressed by their racial others; and notes that "They do this by silencing the criticisms of POC under the pretense that it makes them feel 'unsafe' (Wang, 2012, p.8).

Both Fawaz and Wang argue for disrupting the ‘safe space,’ as it is designed to make only centered subjects (white heterosexual middle-class and so on) comfortable. So, Fawaz’s critique for trigger warnings and both their suggestion for adopting strategies to trigger centered subjects to disorient their grounds or perceptions of the world to open up for debate and discussion can be viewed as feminist affective pedagogies.

In case my critique for the offensive jokes and call for more negotiation for a not ultimate, but a more ethical comedy might sound like a call for creating ‘safe space’ for others or protecting them from being triggered, I would like to clarify some nuances in my approach. I do believe that safe space is an impossibility as well as trigger warnings, as we can never presume others’ feelings and know what makes who (un)comfortable. Therefore, while we attempt to create a safe space for one, it will eventually become unsafe for the other. My thought of line aligns with Wang’s and Fawaz’s suggestions of disrupting the ‘safe spaces,’ as the notion of safe space operates as a wall to stop dissident voices of racial, sexual, gendered others. Therefore, intentionally triggering difficult affects from not only centered subjects but also from other *others* might invoke a deconstructive environment to face and deal with the hegemonic orders. Yet, I believe that an intentional triggering through exposing people to the realities of violent acts to set the stage for a debate to resituate our understandings or to unlearn is one thing. Triggering the emotions of *others* through punching down or humiliating them in a way to perpetuate rape culture and any kind of violence against people at margins under the guise of ‘just joking,’ is another thing. It is in this context that I argue for an affective pedagogy of feminist humor to disrupt the safe spaces and to disorient people’s, either ‘centered subjects’ or others’, senses and perceptions of the world, however, I refuse to come to terms with the hypocrisy that appeals either to the right to free speech

(who gets the right to free speech and whom it gets to disturb?) or “just jokes’ justifications to mask the violence in their language.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

By pushing back against Bergson's suggestion of the necessity of the absence of feelings for laughter, I will, rather, look at how laughter and humor are in correlation with our emotions and affects, emerging from our emotions and producing emotions and affects simultaneously. Also, I will explore the political effects that the interrelationship of emotions, affects with laughter and humor can bring about.

As an antidote to some modes of humor— transphobic, racist, homophobic, sexist and son on— I will propose *an affective pedagogy of feminist humor* through which I will explore what possibilities humor can open up towards furthering feminist politics. By taking on the topics that concern feminist politics and theories, I will discuss that feminist humor as an affective pedagogy not only can offer a reorientation and deconstruction of the Western knowledges and social norms by intentionally eliciting or triggering disorienting affects from the audience but can also forge affective collectivities among others.

In “How to Make a Queer Scene, or Notes toward a Practice of Affective Curation,” Ramzi Fawaz offers a pedagogical model of “affective curation,” saying that this model “[...centralizes the value of intentionally eliciting, or “triggering,” uncomfortable affective responses from students in the class-room in order to develop new strategies for retuning, rerouting, or altogether altering students’ sense perceptions of the world]” (Fawaz, 2016, p.760). Following Fawaz’s ‘affective curation’ pedagogical model, I will also try to seek ways in which feminist humor can trigger affects that may lead not only to a reorientation of people’s “sense of perceptions of the world” but also to forming affective connections between the *Others*. Sara Ahmed also sheds light onto the effects of emotions in terms of their function of generating a concurrence, a collectivity and a sociable network, by seeking to include others into the

affectivity of that particular emotion. Therefore, as an affective pedagogy, feminist humor, while questioning the interplay between the cultural politics of humor and affectivities, simultaneously attempts to trigger affectivities in the search for creating affective connections.

By taking into consideration of Fawaz's and Ahmed's approaches to affect's capabilities as pedagogy and to create connections, in my second chapter on *Nanette*, I will discuss how the affects that are invoked by the visual, narrative, and performative qualities of the show enable teaching and/or (un)learning moments as well as creating connections between the others.

My theorization of a pedagogy of feminist humor does not claim an invention of a new theory of a feminist humor that had not existed before. Rather, I will seek to draw attention to a pedagogy of feminist humor that, by means of creating affective connections among *Others*, offers strategies to not only fight against the hegemonic regimes but also find cathartic affects in the midst of those violent regimes. However, while searching for affective modes of feminist humor can bring about, I will be wary of not fostering and reproducing the "happiness project" that aims to produce good neoliberal subjects (Ahmed, 2010). Rather, feminist humor is that what emerges despite and in the midst of the pain and violence but does not obscure the violent realities for the sake of "cute" laughter.

Moreover, the feminist humor I will propose is not a fixed one that attempts to stabilize the humor and laughter in certain formulations. Rather, it's mobile, mostly unarchivable—circulating in the moments of our daily experiences; it sometimes comes into contact with others, sometimes remains as one person's laughter. Yet, this paper's analyses will be limited to that of "archived" moments, namely visual and performative culture productions, and therefore will undesirably prioritize the "recorded" humor.

With respect to my affinity with feminism, I acknowledge that neither is there a one version of feminism nor feminist politics and theories are exempt from criticism. Looking at the history of feminist movements, some variances of them have had close affinities with racism, transphobia, classism, and so on. I am still negotiating towards feminism by keeping on questioning about the idealizations of one kind of feminism over another or idealization of feminisms in general. However, as a student of transnational, Black, transfeminist, de-colonial feminisms, I keep imagining ways to deconstruct the white western colonialist regimes and knowledge productions.

## **2.1 Laughter, Humor, and Visuality**

Visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff, while drawing on the visual culture in the western contemporary life, notes that “human experience is now more visual and visualized than ever before.... In the swirl of imagery, seeing is much more than believing. It is not just part of everyday life, its everyday life” (Mirzoeff, 1999, p. 1). He also discusses that the visual not only is a medium of mass culture and information but also is a means for generating immediate sensual experiences in the viewer (Mirzoeff, 1998, p.9). Mirzoeff goes on arguing that the immediacy of the sensual experience offered by the visual outstands when compared to written text. By looking at movies, theatrical productions, political satire programs, stand-up shows, drag shows, comic books, internet visuals—memes, gifs, mashups— and visual art images, I believe that humor takes up a large portion in the contemporary western visual culture productions. Through looking at the visual productions of humor, I would like to explore the interaction between the visual, humor and, emotions and affects. I will reflect on Bore, Graefer and Kilby’s piece “This Pussy Grabs back: Humour, Digital Affects and Women’s Protest” in which they reflect on the images from social movements along with the interaction of images with humor and affects. As they say; “[Humorous

images lend themselves to such an emotive and sensory examination because humor is a highly affective practice: humour can move us in emotional and physical ways, for instance when we shake with laughter, smile with amusement, or frown and turn away with feelings of hurt or shame. These contradictory feelings may even coexist.]” (Bore, Graefer, Kilby, 2017, p.530).

Moreover, I would like to utilize a methodology of critical visual analysis that examines the relation between visual culture productions of humor and, affects and emotions. Therefore, in order to understand how images (moving images, photographic and non-photographic still images) trigger forms of affects in the viewer, I will explore the forms of humor in the visual and narrative that can generate affective feminist pedagogies. Moreover, the critical visual analysis I will offer will not be based on one-way relation between the humor and, affects and emotions; rather, it will analyze the ways that not only humor in the visual are generated by emotions and affects, but also generate affects and emotions simultaneously.

In this research, when I will talk about the relation between the performative, narrative and visual qualities of the stand-up show and the affects evoked by these qualities, even though I will quote other viewer’s notes on their affective experiences, I will significantly rely on and account for my personal affective experience as a viewer.

## **2.2 Disidentification Process of Feminist Humor**

José Esteban Muñoz, with his concept of *disidentifications* offers an alternative politics that open up possibilities of negotiating the oppressive regimes of racism, homophobia, and class differences. For Muñoz, *disidentifications* is not only a tactical working on, with, and against cultural constructions, but also a survival strategy through which disidentifying subjects find a way to survive the hostile homophobic and heteronormative public spheres. Muñoz remarks that;

*“disidentifications is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a*

*cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture"* (Muñoz, 1999, p.31).

In the same vein, pedagogy of feminist humor can utilize the tactics of Muñoz's *disidentifications*, to negotiate and reuse elements of the hegemonic regimes, in a way that generate defamiliarization and demystification of what has been presented us as natural and familiar. Simon Critchley describes this effect of humor as "[...]jokes are further descriptions of phenomena that show them in new light. They are acts of 'everyday anamnesis', that remind us what we already know in a new way" (Critchley, 2002, p.86). Adding on Critchley's note, feminist humor that I try to explore is interested in going beyond merely showing the everyday phenomena. Rather, feminist humor aims to give us a distance on the hegemonic US nationalist, white supremacist heteronormative knowledge productions and, by manipulating, demystifying, and transfiguring these knowledges, and shows those in new light. Feminist humor, therefore, focuses on displacing and demystifying the given knowledge and, showing them in new and different ways.

### **2.3 Feminist Remirroring Humor**

I will call "showing things in new light" function of the feminist humor "remirroring"<sup>5</sup> effect." Feminist humor, by turning the mirror back to the society, critiques and exposes the arbitrariness of the hegemonic social order in a fashion that manipulates the picture in the mirror and lets us see what is taken for granted, natural and universal that are in fact arbitrary and "non-

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<sup>5</sup> My inspiration in using this term is in debt to Dawn Rae Davis's article, "Unmirroring Pedagogies: Teaching with Intersectional and Transnational Methods in the Women and Gender Studies Classroom." Davis, in this article offers a feminist pedagogy that would displace the White Western male subject from the syllabus and, centralize the experiences and histories of women of color to expose students to the knowledges of transnational and intersectional feminisms.

naturally” constructed. What we see in the mirror after all is never the same picture anymore; it does not match up what we knew before. Rather, the through remirroring effect, this form of feminist humor provides us with a new social and cultural imagination in which we see the world in a new light. Therefore, I will call this form of feminist humor “remirroring humor.”

## 2.4 Feminist Reparative Humor

Another mode of feminist humor that I will utilize in my research is the sense of reparation and healing it generates. I will call this mode of feminist humor “reparative humor.” I will claim that the reparative humor enables an affective shift through turning the subject positions in the matrix of power upside down. In the occasions where the subject exerts power as some kind of force upon particular subjects, whether it be by means of laughter or other ways, to discipline, punish, and/or oppress others, reparative humor, by mocking with and laughing (back) at the (laughing) subject of power, evokes a sense of empowerment in the *Others*. In the end of this manipulation of the power dynamics, the subject of power is not powerful anymore; rather, is placed into the position of the object of the laughter. Through this displacement in the power matrix, feminist humor can give a sense of reparation and healing. I will attempt to exemplify reparative humor by juxtaposing two footages that surround the same event.

First is from Dr. Christine Blasey Ford’s testimony that she gave on the account of her being sexually assaulted by Brett Kavanaugh and Mark Judge in the 1980s, at the confirmation hearing for Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. As a response to a question, “What is the strongest memory you have?” asked by U.S. Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt), Dr. Ford said, “Indelible in the hippocampus is the laughter, the uproarious laughter between the two, and their having fun at my expense.” In the second footage, we see Pulp Fiction-Kavanaugh mashup<sup>6</sup> that

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<sup>6</sup> <https://twitter.com/ohboyson/status/1045604378370027520/video/1>

went viral a day after the hearing. The mashup blends scenes from the film *Pulp Fiction*, in which Jules Winnfield (Samuel L. Jackson) swoops in a frat boy, Brett's (Frank Whaley) house, intimidating and threatening him, with those from Kavanaugh's testimony. Yet this time, it is the Kavanaugh himself, who is mocked and ridiculed. In the video, Kavanaugh sputters, "I got into Yale Law School," as he did billion times in his testimony, and Jules makes fun of him by saying "Check out the big brain on Brett!" Brett goes on about liking beer, still liking beer, and never sexually assaulting anyone, to which Jules yells in his face, saying; "YES YOU DID. YES, YOU DID, BRETT!" Jules, in the mashup, also shouts at Senator Lindsey Graham while he was uttering words in Kavanaugh's defense, "I don't remember asking you a goddamn thing!" following which we see Graham shut up with a blank facial expression.

In the first incident, witnessing Dr. Ford's testimony may have incited various affective responses in the viewer: who believes in her story; who experienced sexual assault and were/are not believed in; who relates to the trauma, pain, humiliation, and violence that sexual assault can cause; who are attached to the realities that sexual assault survivors easily are dismissed. And it was happening once again that a woman's sexual assault claim was being invalidated and disavowed for the sake of a man's ascent to power and, for protecting the respectability of a white man. Looking at women's reactions to this event on social media, one can notice that their emotions included anger, despair, outrage, solidarity, exhaustion and so on. And, the *Pulp Fiction* mashup arrived right in the midst of these emotions, offering an alternative imagination in which power dynamics were turned upside down. Through this humor, we can see a powerless, threatened and scared frat boy Brett, who is yelled at by Jules "YES YOU DID. YES, YOU DID, BRETT!" as if he is voicing the exact words we would love to say to Brett

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Kavanaugh and the likes of him. Now we are the ones who are laughing at Kavanaugh, who laughed at Dr. Ford while he was sexually assaulting her. And this laughing back at the violent laughter and back at the subject of power may invoke a sense of empowerment and reparation, a pleasure and joy. This becomes explicit in one twitter user's comment under the mashup post;



The humor in this mashup, regardless of its creator's attachment to feminism, can be considered as a mode of feminist humor, namely reparative humor. As the user says; "it came at me like medicine."

In the end of reparative humor, we are left with a sense of catharsis, pleasure and empowerment, even in the midst of and despite the injustices. This affective mode, I believe, can function as an affective connecting point; a moment of laughing *with* Others but not *at* Others, a moment of healing. Therefore, reparative humor can work as a survival tactic, as a strategy to keep imagining that another world is possible. But, this mode of humor will be wary of not working in the service of a happiness project that aims to produce good neoliberal subjects; rather, it comes into being without obscuring the pain and trauma.

While I discuss my methodological choices, my reasons to choose these methodologies, and the effects I aim to generate, I would also like to mention the limitations and ethical issues I bumped against. By focusing on particular shows, which are mainly mainstream shows, I had to eventually omit others from the scope of this thesis. This bears a risk to create hierarchies between the shows as if to say only some are worth to analyze. However, my reasons to choose those particular shows are not about their success, worth or so on; rather, I explore their

relevance to my arguments and the easiness of the accessibility they enable. Also, while quoting some jokes of the comedians' performances, I had to leave out the rest of their jokes for the scope of my argument as well as the limited space of this thesis. Therefore, by questioning my position and location as the author of this thesis and keeping myself accountable for the content of this paper, I aim to open up a space for a critique of my methodological choices that would generate a constructive dialogue for avoiding the possible ethical and political problems that this research might produce.

### 3 METHODS

In the first chapter, I will draw on three stand-up comedy shows, Dave Chapelle's *Stick&Stones*, Aziz Ansari's *Right Now*, and Cameron Esposito's *Rape Jokes* to provide an analysis to discuss how the comedy scenes in the Trump era and after #metoo, reflecting the political climate and discourses of its time, has formed a thread of *metacomedy*. Through a juxtaposition of the three shows and, *Nanette* that I will be analyzing in the second chapter, it becomes possible to notice how they all reflect on the form and limits of comedy from different perspectives. Therefore, referring to comedy's tenants in comedy brings about a form of *metacomedy*. I will argue that such a tendency to reflect on comedy's ontology and form with respect to the issue of (in)appropriate comedic language, even though from different stances, from within a comedy space can open up possibilities to rethink about and negotiate for a more ethically responsible comedic future.

In the first chapter, I will focus on the narrative and performative qualities in the shows, by quoting their jokes and describing some of their performative choices. Also, I will trace other commonalities in the topics they tackle, such as #metoo, sexual assault cases surfaced after #metoo, the issue of sexual assault, the issue of (in)appropriateness of comedic language, and PC

Culture. In that sense, they all appear to be in conversation with one another. However, in their approaches to PC culture in relation to the (in)appropriateness of language, they stand different grounds in their definitions of who consist of the PC culture as well as the gendered meanings they attribute to PC Culture. For instance, Chapelle's pointing out women and LGBTQ people as PC culture unravels the gendered meanings underlying the attribution of femininity to PC culture, aligning with the current political rhetoric of the Trump administration in which political correctness is vilified for being weak, and over-emotional that requires a toughening up. So, according to such argument, it is not the comedian whose jokes and language are problematic, but it is the audience who needs to toughen up and take jokes. Hence, vilifying the PC culture allows not just a relief from an accountability for making offensive jokes but also a justification for making the same old offensive jokes.

Furthermore, I will argue that the seeping of the issue of sexual assault into the comedy stages not only may contribute to the discussions around the prevalence of rape culture but also may bring about a not new but a different mode of comedy. In such a comedy, rape jokes and/or jokes that are made at the expense of reinforcing rape culture or oppression are not funny anymore and cannot be laughed away.

In addition to the three shows in the first chapter, in the second chapter, by honing in on an analysis Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette*, I will continue to trace the impact of #metoo on her performance. The show not only emerges after #metoo movement but also reflects the #metoo spirit<sup>7</sup> which becomes apparent in the topics she refers to. Moreover, I will claim that with the impact of #metoo, Gadsby's performance in *Nanette* intentionally brings about an affective pedagogy by means of speaking out against sexual violence and bringing in "out of place"

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<sup>7</sup> By #metoo spirit, I mean the sense of encouragement to speak out about sexual assault that was promoted through the sense of 'collectivity' of the hashtag.

personal stories of her sexual and physical violence experiences to the *laughscape* of comedy in a way that intentionally makes the audience triggered and uncomfortable. However, in order to maintain the form of comedy, Gadsby utilizes narrative, visual and performative tactics through which she gradually disentangles and tears down the form of comedy. Gadsby adopts dark audio-visual aesthetics, reversal and repetitive narrative strategies and mood changes in her bodily gestures. Moreover, by conducting a visual, narrative, and performative analyses of *Nanette*, through looking at Gadsby's performance and the show's choices of visibility, I will discuss how these elements play a role in invoking affectivities.

Gadsby, an Australian comedian, tackles the stigmas around being lesbian woman in Tasmania through her own experiences. Gadsby makes jokes about coming out to her mom, being misgendered because of her butchness, and being threatened by a guy at a bus stop, who saw Gadsby hitting on his girlfriend and who then apologized when he noticed she was not a he. By mocking with heteronormative reactions to gayness, Gadsby keeps receiving laughter from the audience. Then, Gadsby takes a turn through which they criticize the self-deprecating humor, that which she claims to have utilized throughout their career, for it contributes to further marginalization of non-normative sexualities. In this turn, Gadsby reveals what really happened with that guy at the bar, and the horrific violence she had to go through. Hearing Gadsby's traumatic experience is not funny anymore. While laughing at her jokes a minute ago, the storyline is getting painful and uncomfortable for the audience now. By looking at Gadsby's stand-up show, I would like to talk about how the ways Gadsby uses humor can function as a remirroring humor, since she turns the mirror back to society and reveals the ways heteronormativity operate and inflict violence over sexualities-in-difference. Also, since Gadsby's humor triggers mixtures of affects, I want to discuss the cultural-political implications

underlying these sensations and what possible affective connections her humor can bring about. In the end, I will ask where these affects lead us, and how they can be put in a political push against the oppressions.

In the end, I will claim that Gadsby's unpacking and deconstructing the comedy's limits, through which she addresses that humor can be possible in so far as it omits the real stories behind it, not only enable us to rethink about the limits and possibilities of the comedic form in a more ethical way but also make a new world of stand-up genre that is supported by its feminist modes of affective pedagogies and deconstructing qualities. Thus, I will try to point out how the forms of feminist humor generate and are generated by affects and emotions that may lead to affective connections between the *Others* as well as invoking teaching or (un)learning moments that would contribute to feminist politics.

### **POSSIBLE SIGNIFICANCE**

- (1) By tracing how humor has been affected by the current political climate of the Trump era and #metoo movement, my research attempts to provide a closer analysis of how jokes at the expense of others are usurped under a justification of toughening up, aligning with the masculinist and nationalist discourses of the politicians, particularly that of the conservatives and the right wing.
- (2) Through reflecting on the issue of comedic language, my research aims to contribute to feminist politics in its emphasis on differentiating the so-called transgression of the morality claims made by pro-free speech comedians from the ethical concerns for others, and calls for an ongoing negotiation for a mode of comedy that consistently attends to otherness.
- (3) By looking at Hannah Gadsby's show *Nanette*, I would like to suggest that feminist humor can bring in the comedy what has been omitted, what has been silenced so far for the sake of laughter. Through feminist humor, comedy spaces can provide more than just

a mere laughter, which allows the serious issues being laughed away, by exposing the audience to the stories and lived experiences that was harmed by the patriarchy.

- (4) My research's emphasis on the need of feminist humor relies on its capabilities to bring about affective pedagogies in its intentional eliciting of uncomfortable, contracting affects from the audience that would function as a tool of reorienting and resituating people's sense and perceptions of the world towards the care for otherness.

## 4 CHAPTER I

### **METACOMEDY AND ITS GENDERED IMPLICATIONS IN THE STAND-UP COMEDY IN THE TRUMP AND #METOO ERA**

*“We need to respond to this attack on America as one united people, with force, purpose, and determination. But the current politically correct response cripples our ability to talk and to think and act clearly... If we don’t get tough, and if we don’t get smart, and fast, we’re not going to have our country anymore. They have put political correctness above common sense, above your safety, and above all else... The killer, whose name I will not use, or ever say, was born in Afghan, of Afghan parents, who immigrated to the United States. His father published support for the Afghan Taliban, a regime which murders those who don’t share its radical views, and they murdered plenty. The father even said he was running for president of Afghanistan. The bottom line is that the only reason the killer was in America in the first place, was because we allowed his family to come here. That is a fact, and it’s a fact we need to talk about. We have a dysfunctional immigration system, which does not permit us to know who we let into our country, and it does not permit us to protect our citizens properly... They have put political correctness above common sense, above your safety, and above all else. I refuse to be politically correct.”<sup>8</sup>*

The excerpt above is from Donald Trump’s speech during his presidential campaign, in response to the attack at a gay club in Orlando by an Afghan Muslim gunman who killed 49 people in 2016. A Guardian article<sup>9</sup>, titled “Political correctness: how the right invented a phantom enemy,” it is noted that during the first debate of the Republican primaries, Trump was asked a question about the charge about him that he was ‘part of the war on women’ by Fox News host Megyn Kelly. Kelly addresses that "You've called women you don't like 'fat pigs,' 'dogs,' 'slobs,' and 'disgusting animals.' You once told a contestant on *Celebrity Apprentice* it would be a pretty picture to see her on her knees ..." Trump responds, "I think the big problem this country has is being politically correct," Trump answered, to audience applause. "I've been challenged by so many people, I don’t frankly have time for total political correctness. And to be honest with you, this country doesn’t have time either.”

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<sup>8</sup> <https://time.com/4367120/orlando-shooting-donald-trump-transcript/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/30/political-correctness-how-the-right-invented-phantom-enemy-donald-trump>

Moreover, in the article it is stated that, in 2015, in response to NBC's announcement of ending Trump's reality show, *The Apprentice*, for his reference to Mexicans as rapists to endorse his anti-immigration politics, Trump said that; "NBC is weak, and like everybody else is trying to be politically correct."

In the light of the above statements made by Trump, it becomes evident that political correctness is associated with weakness, whereas the opposite, the political incorrectness, exhibits toughness, and shows the strength and braveness to talk the 'truth' that others cannot dare to say as they are weak. The gendered references that political incorrectness gains reveal that it is a very masculine trait, which makes it possible to protect others from the damages and risks of hiding the 'truth' that political correctness would cause. His refusal against political correctness found support by his fans, as the Guardian article informs; "time and again, Trump supporters made it clear that they liked him because he wasn't afraid to say what he thought. Fans praised the *way* Trump talked much more often than they mentioned his policy proposals. He tells it like it is, they said. He speaks his mind. He is not politically correct." Or, has political incorrectness become to serve as a mask for "sameness" regimes?

Trump's take on 'toughness,' which necessitates defying political correctness, gains gendered attributes, resembling the masculinist rhetorics used in the politics after 9/11 in which being tough and protecting people have been central slogans. By looking at 9/11 attacks, Iris Marion Young, in her article, "The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflection on the Current Security State" analyzes the gendered qualities in the US leaders' roles in relation to the US citizens and Afghan people with an analogy to father's masculinist protector role in the household (Young, 2003). Jack Halberstam also reflects on the nationalist discourses and their relation to gender through his analysis of the rhetoric, "end of men," that surfaced after the 9/11

attacks. Halberstam notes that; “ In the decade following the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, the United States, in policies begun under George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, has fought military and cultural wars at home and abroad and has managed to scare people back into conventional sex/gender arrangements that no longer work and that do not correspond well to the economic climate that disaster capitalism has left in its wake. One small symptom of the impact of economic collapse on social relations can be identified as the reappearance of liberal feminist polemics announcing the "end of men" (Halberstam, 2012, p.45). Halberstam goes on to articulate that, "Horried by the attacks on US buildings on US soil, many Americans retreated to a frontier mentality that showed itself in the form of cowboy masculinities and “mission accomplished” tactics. At the same time, there was a general feeling that America had become “soft,” that we needed to toughen up, say good-bye to feminism, and, basically, get back to traditional gender roles” (ibid, p.45-46).

In a similar vein, the period after 9/11, in their article "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots" Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai eloquently elaborate on how the depictions of "monster terrorist," namely Osama bin Laden, manifested the technologies of punishing the terrorist through its emasculation by virtue of the American patriotism's heteronormative character (Puar&Rai, 2002). They reflect on the circulations of 'monster terrorist' images by discussing their meanings with respect to gender and sexuality;

*“Posters that appeared in midtown Manhattan only days after the attacks show a turbaned caricature of bin Laden being anally penetrated by the Empire State Building. The legend beneath reads, “The Empire Strikes Back” or “So you like skyscrapers, huh, bitch?” Or think of the Web site where, with a series of weapons at your disposal, you can torture Osama bin Laden to death, the last torture being sodomy; or another Web site that shows two pictures, one of bin Laden with a beard, and the other without—and the photo of him shaven turns out to be O. J. Simpson. What these representations show, we believe, is that queerness as sexual deviancy is tied to the monstrous figure of the terrorist as a way to otherize and quarantine subjects classified as “terrorists,” but also to normalize and discipline a population through these very monstrous figures” (ibid, p.126)*

While the enemy in the period of Bush administration outside the home was the monster terrorist, which was the emasculate fag, at home, it was feminism, both of which were a threat to American masculine patriotism. Trump's administration's and his supporters' takes on political correctness echo the discourse of 'toughening up' used after the 9/11 attacks, which blamed feminism for softening and the failure in the American economy and foreign policy. In the debates surrounding political correctness, while the actors of political correctness have not precisely been defined or named, they often are generalized as PC Culture, which has become a common outcry made by the right-wing recently. To my understanding, PC culture refers to people who support 'progressive,' liberal politics, or feminist politics. I read the increasing visibility of 'progressive' politics and vocalization of feminism, especially after #metoo movement, all of which are known as PC culture, as a reaction and response to Trump's unfiltered language, his masculinist, and conservative politics, (war on women, anti-immigration politics, and so on), and his defiance for political correctness for its association to weakness.

Another name used to define the left, liberals or feminists is the "snowflake." Implication of snowflake is defined in an article on *USA Today*<sup>10</sup>, that "lately the term has been used as a slang insult, often used in a derogatory way to suggest that people -- often, but not always, young people -- who take offense to anything from political policy changes to offensive comments are as weak and vulnerable as a speck of snow." Another description<sup>11</sup> is that; "they have an inflated sense of uniqueness, an unwarranted sense of entitlement, or are overly-emotional, easily offended, and unable to deal with opposing opinions." The article on GQ "Why Trump Supporters Love Calling People "Snowflakes"<sup>12</sup> traces the origins of how the word "snowflake"

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/college/2017/02/01/been-called-a-snowflake-the-it-new-insult/37427267/>

<sup>11</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snowflake\\_\(slang\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snowflake_(slang))

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.gq.com/story/why-trump-supporters-love-calling-people-snowflakes>

got to be used as an insult by alt-right. In another article on Boston Globe, “Some ‘snowflakes’ can take the heat” discusses the word’s connotation to sensitivity. By citing from the book “In Praise of Profanity that defines snowflake as representing “ultimate, universal diversity,” the article suggests that ‘calling people snowflake is, ironically, a politically correct way to attack diversity.’ It is noted in the GQ article that ‘“There is not a single political point a liberal can make on the Internet for which “You triggered, snowflake?” cannot be the comeback. Its purpose is dismissing liberalism as something effeminate, and also infantile, an outgrowth of the lessons you were taught in kindergarten. “Sharing is caring”? Communism. “Feelings are good”? Facts over feelings. “Everyone is special and unique”? Shut up, snowflake.” Then, PC culture and ‘snowflakes’ get overlapped as popular derogatory terms to refer the left, liberals, or feminists. Moreover, it's connotation to emotionality and sensitivity reveals its gendered meanings; that is the femininization of the people who oppose the right or conservative politics, and who are for diversity.

However, discussions surrounding PC culture go beyond state politics, slipping into the scenes of *laughscape* of stand-up comedy produced after 2016. Even though it has become an easy and popular definition today to define any critique on the language of jokes, which is claimed to be a ‘suppression’ by the opponents of PC culture, political correctness debate in comedy goes back to the 1990s. Yet, the word for it was censorship at that time. Rape jokes were at the center of the debates around the use of (in)appropriate language or political correctness in comedy. In the following section, I will provide a trajectory of the censorship discussions around the rape jokes.

## “Should We Joke About Rape?”

Rape jokes have long been a staple of many stand-up comics' performances, which almost give the impression that US stand-up comedy has produced a rape joke culture.

Here is an example of a rape joke by Louis CK, a stand-up comedian;

“I'm not condoning rape, obviously. You should never rape anyone. Unless you have a reason like you want to fuck somebody and they won't let you, in which case what other option do you have? How else are you supposed to have an orgasm in their body if you don't rape them, like what the fuck?”

Another joke by Louis C.K in his *Shameless* (2007) routine, C.K. says: “I wouldn't have killed Hitler. I would have raped him.” Cox's interprets this joke as “a discourse of masculine aggression and rape as a punitive measure” (Cox, 2015, p.968).

George Carlin, a male stand-up comedian, who is known for pushing the envelope on taboo topics, among which rape jokes were the most notorious. In his 1990 show, Carlin makes a rape joke to challenge the censorship in comedy and prove that nothing is off-limits in comedy.

“Ohh, some people don't like you to talk like that. Ohh, some people like to shut you up for saying those things. You know that. Lots of people. Lots of groups in this country want to tell you how to talk. Tell you what you can't talk about. Well, sometimes they'll say, well you can talk about something but you can't joke about it. Say you can't joke about something because it's not funny. Comedians run into that shit all the time. They'll say, "You can't joke about rape. Rape's not funny." I say, "Fuck you, I think it's hilarious. How do you like that?" I can prove to you that rape is funny. Picture Porky Pig raping Elmer Fudd. See? Hey, why do you think they call him "Porky," eh? I know what you're going to say. "Elmer was asking for it. Elmer was coming on to Porky. Porky couldn't help himself, he got a hard-on, he got horny, he lost control, he went out of his mind<sup>13</sup>."

In addition to his description of cartoonish rape scenario in which “Porky Pig raping Elmer Fudd,” he continued to make more rape jokes; one is about a robber's rape of an 81 year old woman, in which he says; “And I'm thinking to myself: Why? What the fuck kind of a social

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<sup>13</sup> <https://genius.com/George-carlin-rape-can-be-funny-annotated>

life does this guy have?... I say: ‘Jesus Christ, be a little fucking selective next time, will you?’ other one is about the comparison of the rape rates at the Equator versus at the North Pole. He asks; “I wonder, is there more rape at the Equator or the North Pole?” Then he answers; “People think it’s the Equator, because it’s hot down there. That’s exactly why there’s less rape at the Equator.’cause there’s a lot of fucking going on!..Take a look at the population figures: billions of people live near the Equator!”( Cox, 2015, p.4).

In the track “Feminist Blowjob” of the comedy album, *Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics*, George Carlin comments on feminists’ attempts to control comedic language, and says;

“Now I've probably got the feminists all pissed off at me because I'm joking about rape. Feminists want to control your language. Feminists want to tell you how to talk. And they're not alone, they're not alone. I'm not picking on the feminists. They got a lot of company in this country. There's a lot of groups, a lot of institutions in this country want to control your language. Tell you what you can say and what you can't say.”

George Carlin is also known for pushing back against the boundaries of free speech in comedy. Like Lenny Bruce, who got arrested in the 1966 for his use of obscene language (nine words; ass, balls, cocksucker, cunt, fuck, motherfucker, piss, shit, tits), Carlin, too, used words that are known as ‘Seven Dirty Words’ (shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, and tits) in his “12-minute recording of a Carlin monologue entitled “Filthy Words,” a sequel to an earlier routine called “Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television<sup>14</sup>” which aired on radio and was heard by a father and son while driving and listening to the radio. The father was a member of Morality in Media, and he filed a complaint with the Federal Communication Committee.

Concerning the regulation of obscene and sexual language as a result of moral concerns, I will turn to Foucault’s analysis of *repressive hypothesis*. In “We “Other” Victorians,” Foucault reflects on the period between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in which a rupture in

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1432/george-carlin>

freedom of sexuality occurred (Foucault, 1990). While sex was something freely existed in public life in the sixteenth century, as Foucault argues, with the emergence of modern industrial society, sexuality transformed into something to be hidden away and something must exist only under heterosexual marriages and for the purposes of reproduction, which reinforced the proliferation of discourses on sex and induced an incitement to talk about it constantly. What Foucault attempts to do is a conduct of a genealogical analysis of sexual repression in order to find answers to the concerns in relation to his term "repressive hypothesis." He draws on three questions concerning "repressive hypothesis:" Is sexual repression a historical factuality?; What is the degree of relationship of the power systems to the category of repression? (Is power repressive?); Is resisting repression liberatory? While seeking answers to these questions, he focuses on locating the discursive facts of power techniques applied as repression of sexuality and how they are put into discourse. In so doing, he explores the relationship among language, confession, and power.

Foucault suggests that the regulation of language was the first stage of repression. He argues that language changed shape, and a prudish language emerged within the society by saying that; "calling sex by its name thereafter became more difficult and more costly. As if in order to gain mastery over it in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present." (ibid, p.301) However, repression on speaking about sex reinforced the proliferation of discourses, which is apparent in his argument; "What peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting as the secret" (ibid, p.316). He explains the incitement to speak about sex through multiple discourses in the literature and in the form of confession; Foucault points out that the literature in the same epoch,

contrarily to the efforts to suppress the language, was extremely sexual and perverse, and reflects on the works by Marquis de Sade, from whose name sadism is derived for his works that are erotic and violently sexual. Then, he focuses on the form of confession, through which speech on sexuality is confined in institutions, namely church, and psychiatry.

Alcoff and Gray, in their piece "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?" follows Foucault's account on speech in which he suggests "confessional speech is not liberatory but is instead powerful instrument of domination" (Alcoff&Gray, 1993, p.263) and, "speech is not a medium or tool through which power struggles occur but itself an important site and object of conflict" (Ibid, 260). With respect to Foucault's critiques regarding speech's character above, Alcoff and Gray apply his argument to survivor discourse and investigates the dynamics of speaking out within two folds: Does survivor discourse transgress the dominant discourses or recuperate them? Therefore, they interrogate not only how the survivor speech becomes transgressive and resists dominant discourses but also how it is transformed into dominant discourses through recuperation mechanisms. For the latter account, they look at the TV talk shows in the US in which sexual assault survivors are hosted. Despite the taboo against speaking about the topics of rape and incest, they claim that, on the one hand, their proliferation via media functions as a recuperative tactic, breaking silence enables the transgression of the dominant discourses, on the other.

In line with Foucault's analysis of repressive hypothesis, and Alcoff & Gray's analysis on the discourse of sexual assault, it is possible to read the comedians', likes of George Carlin, insistent use of 'dirty words' as a form of repressive hypothesis; that is the fostering the proliferation of speaking the unspeakable and a push back against the institutional control and regulation, which are the tenants of conservatism and morality. However, I believe that two

things get easily confused with one another, that is the morality, on the one hand, and the ethics of other, on the other. While the former is about conservative attempts to regulate language to restore an order of moral and homogenous unity in the society, the latter is concerned with our ethical responsibilities towards others, which reveals a massive gap in between two. Therefore, Carlin and others appear to be transgressive towards the puritanism and the morality, but they nevertheless reproduce sexist ideologies.

The zeal for and insistence on making rape jokes cannot be explained simply as a resistance to institutional regulation and repression on language in the name of free speech. As Cox draws on George Carlin's three rape jokes mentioned previously, she articulates that; "Fueling this possibility is an element of rape culture that remains resolutely untouched by ironic destabilization: the hapless victim in this type of humor, the survivor of rape. Notably, in two out of the three instances imagined by Carlin, the survivor is a female "the octogenarian and the infertile woman at the North Pole" who is placed at the mercy of the "albeit mocked" male aggressor's desires. Considered from this angle, Parental Advisory does not disturb a central tenet of rape culture" (Cox, 2015, p.968). Rape jokes, when made in offensive ways that trivialize the experiences of survivors or the pervasive reality of rape culture, rather, reinforce dominant ideologies in a way that does not do justice to or respect otherness. Therefore, rape jokes or jokes in general that use the others' experiences that were not felt as funny at all by those as the butt of a joke have nothing to do with free speech. On the contrary, insistence on rape jokes not only may contribute to the reproduction of hegemonic knowledges that always already seek to justify rape culture by trivializing the survivors' experiences but also may itself become repression on others.

Moreover, the overzealousness for and insistence for an off-limits comedy echo the liberal understanding of the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution, under which the freedom of speech is protected. The discourse of free speech raises questions; such as who gets to have the freedom of speech, and in one's free speech, whose voices, experiences or rights get omitted or masked or excluded. In that sense, on some occasions, free speech while giving some the right to 'speak their mind' as it is, it inevitably silences/excludes/represses others. Therefore, free speech is an impossibility from an ethical perspective.

'Censorship' outcries and discussions around the ethics of comedic language got elevated in 2012 among comedians, academics, and sexual assault survivors, with the male stand-up comic Daniel Tosh's notorious reaction to a woman in the audience, who confronted him for his rape jokes in the show not being funny, "Wouldn't it be funny if that girl [referring to an audience member who "heckled" him about rape jokes not being funny earlier in his set] got raped by, like, five guys right now? Like right now?"<sup>15</sup> (Strain& Martens& Saucier, 2016). As with George Carlin, one camp has argued against the censorship in comedy and claimed that no topic should be off-limits in comedy. As opposed to the former point, some survivors have stood against the utilization of all kinds of rape jokes, for they perpetuate and normalize the rape culture and, for their traumatizing and trivializing effects. Another camp noted that a rape joke, depending on its context and its doer, can be healing and therapeutic on the condition that it is made to exchange lived experiences, to point out the absurdity of a situation, or to critique the rape culture.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.thedailybeast.com/why-daniel-tosh-s-rape-joke-at-the-laugh-factory-wasnt-funny>

The main argument underlying the desire for an off-limits comedy appears to imply that words or the language used in comedy do not have any power, because they are “just jokes.” “People should not be that sensitive!” “They are taking it too seriously!” In line with such understanding, the *laughscape* of comedy is viewed as a space where comedians can “say the unsayable, laugh at the unlaughable, without actually openly doing anything that might be socially unacceptable (Chiaro&Balirano, 2016, pg.3). In other words, comedy, according to the off-limits camp, should be a place where “serious discourse takes a break and goes on to holiday” (ibid).

The approach that views comedy as a break from serious discourse appears to be echoing the Bakhtinian carnivalesque theory. According to Bakhtin, carnivals ensure a temporal break away from the authority and power, the rules and norms (Bakhtin, 1984). Yet, Bakhtin does not ignore the fact that the order eventually gets re-established when the carnival ends. In response to Bakhtin's carnivalesque, there have been several push backs for the reasons that carnivals create an illusion of a temporary release, therefore does not challenge the authority and power; that the carnivals enable discharge of the energy that otherwise would pose a threat to the power. In other words, carnivals function to soothe and ease the society’s charged feelings that would otherwise be threatening for the state. Yet, given that Bakhtin wrote Rabelais under the Stalinist regime, for Bakhtin, festive laughter could serve collective defiance to the power. In the light of these arguments, while the off-limits comedy gives way to an illusion of uncontrolled, unfiltered freedom, it nevertheless differs from the carnivalesque in the sense that the freedom of comedic speech in question does not specifically intend to target the ones in power. Instead, the demand arises from a place of the discomfort of not being able to freely make jokes about people or

situations that could be considered as ethically problematic on the grounds that they do not respect the otherness.

### ***Metacomedy in the US Stand-up in the Trump era and #Metoo***

Debates around the appropriate language in comedy still persist today, as a matter of fact, even more so. With a quick look at the mainstream stand-up comedy scenes since the catalyzation of the #metoo movement, a common thread in the topics of the shows catches the eye; that are the comments on sexual assault and the (in)appropriateness of jokes. Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette*, Cameron Esposito's *Rape Jokes*, Dave Chapelle's *Stick& Stones*, Aziz Ansari's *Right Now*, Whitney Cuning's *Can I Touch It*, are only some of the stand-up shows in question. What becomes remarkable about the stand-up comedies after #metoo is that they are not only about delivering jokes to make the audience laugh, but they are pretty much also on comedy itself in terms of their ontological and ethical judgments. In this chapter, I will talk about how the #metoo movement and Trump administration invigorated discussions around political correctness and appropriate language in comedy, paving the way for the emergence of metacomedy in stand-up performances.

In this section, I will focus on three stand-up show Dave Chapelle's *Stick& Stones*, Aziz Ansari's *Right Now*, and Cameron Esposito's *Rape Jokes*, all of which explicitly take on PC culture, to discuss how #metoo along with the current political climate of Trump administration have affected the stand-up comedy in the US. I will draw on how the issue of political correctness has come to the fore in the comedic performances, and attempt to deconstruct gendered meanings underlying the comedians' different positioning towards PC culture.

Even though the three shows are in conversation with one another through the common topics they comment on, such as #metoo, sexual assault, PC culture, and the language issue, each has a different take on concerning these subjects. Chapelle performs his show proudly as a politically incorrect comedian and pick on and targets the PC culture for their complaints about his comedy, and his PC culture target is #metoo supporters, particularly women, and LGBTQ people that he defines as 'alphabet people.' Ansari, in his show, positions himself in a middle ground by, on the one hand, supporting the necessity for a transformation in comedic language, one which would not offend others, critiquing the PC culture for being too much and aggressive, on the other. Ansari explicitly defines the PC Culture as the "newly woke white people," whereas #metoo supporters as PC remain as an implication in his jokes. Lastly, Cameron Esposito mocks the comedians who are annoyed with the PC culture's complaints about their comedic language and, who gripe about being 'censored.' Esposito takes stand against rape jokes and other other-deprecating jokes.

### **Dave Chapelle, *Sticks & Stones***

A Black male comedian, known well for his pushing boundaries of comedic language and "revealing the racial and ethnic dynamics at work in America" (Wisniewski, 2009, p.10). Even though he tackles and mocks the white privilege and racism against Black people in the US, he has been criticized for his speech on gender and sexuality. He came under fire, especially after *Stick&Stones* for being transphobic, anti-metoo, and racist for his Chinese impersonation in the show. A Buzzfeed article asks, "In his occasionally funny new Netflix special, Chappelle continues to make anti-trans and victim-blaming jokes. Why can't he strive to be more

thoughtful?"<sup>16</sup> In an article, titled "Dave Chappelle Is Stuck in the '80s" on Wall Street Journal,<sup>17</sup> it is discussed that Chappelle cannot keep up with the changes in the comedy world, especially the change in comedic language; "Mr. Chappelle has made a career out of pushing the envelope, but his Michael Jackson pedophile bits aren't edgy. They're just icky." Another article on Vice<sup>18</sup>, "The special takes the comic's anti-wokeness schtick to a new level, and the whole thing is repetitive and exhausting enough that it's a slog to even make it to the Q&A."

Chappelle's show *Sticks & Stones* (2019) is a proudly "unfiltered" comedy. Chappelle begins his show by making impersonations. In the second impersonation, he goes;

"Uh, duh. Hey! Durr! If you do anything wrong in your life, duh, and I find out about it, I'm gonna try to take everything away from you, and I don't care when I find out. Could be today, tomorrow, 15, 20 years from now. If I find out, you're fucking-duh-finished."

In the end, Chappelle asks the audience to take a guess of whom he just impersonated. And he responds by saying,

"That's YOU!... Ugh. I'm goddamn sick of it. This is the worst time ever to be a celebrity. You're gonna be finished. Everyone's doomed. Michael Jackson has been dead for ten years and this nigga has two new cases."

In the rest of the show, Chappelle revisits sexual assault cases of R. Kelly, Michael Jackson, and Louis CK. Concerning Michael Jackson's child molesting cases, he says,

"I don't think he did it. But you know what? Even if he did do it... You know what I mean? You know what I mean? Eh... I mean, it's Michael Jackson." Then Chappelle jumps to R. Kelly's cases; "Well, okay. R. Kelly is different. I mean, you know, if I'm a bettin' man, I'm gonna put my money on "He probably did that shit." I'm pretty sure he did that shit."

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/tomiobaro/dave-chappelle-transphobic-netflix-special-sticks-and-stones>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/dave-chappelle-is-stuck-in-the-80s-11567551481>

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/59ngpb/you-can-definitely-skip-dave-chappelles-new-netflix-special-sticks-and-stones](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/59ngpb/you-can-definitely-skip-dave-chappelles-new-netflix-special-sticks-and-stones)

After making fun of R. Kelly's sex tapes of underage women, he defines #metoo as "Celebrity hunting season," and continues;

"Doesn't matter what I say, they're going to get everybody eventually. Like, look, I don't think I did anything wrong, but... but we'll see. They even got poor Kevin Hart." After describing how Kevin Hart had to quit hosting the Oscars for the homophobic tweet he posted in 2011, he launches into the topic of "breaking an unwritten and unspoken rule of show business" which means, for him; "The rule is that no matter what you do in your artistic expression, you are never, ever, allowed to upset... the alphabet people. You know who I mean. Those people that took 20% of the alphabet for themselves. I'd say the letters, but I don't want to conjure their anger. Ah, it's too late now. I'm talking about them L's and them B's and them G's and the T's." Then, he takes on the issue of gender equality by making a joke; "What does it actually mean to be equal? You know what I mean? Like, if women are actually equal to men, then there would be no WNBA, would there? You would just be good enough to play in the NBA with us. Or, here's another idea that's going to be very controversial, you could... shut the fuck up."

He justifies this former joke by complaining about #metoo; "I'm sorry, ladies, I've got a fucking #MeToo headache. Y'all is killing me right now. It's really fuckin' tough to watch what's going on," which follows a comment on Louis CK case;

"You know, ladies, I said it in my last special, and I got in a lot of trouble for this. I told you, you were right. But the way you're going about it is not going to work. But I'm biased. I said it. Louis C.K. was a very good friend of mine before he died in that terrible masturbation accident."

Admitting his bias, Chapelle defends Louis C.K. by depicting him as a victim of #metoo and his masturbation act as an unthreatening event;

"Have any women ever seen a guy that just came on his own stomach? This is the least threatening motherfucker the Earth has ever seen. All you see is shame in their face and... cum dripping down like pancake butter. He didn't do anything that you can call the police for... They ruined this nigga's life, and now he's coming back playing comedy clubs, and they acting like if he's able to do that, that's gonna hurt women."

The title of Chapelle's show, *Stick & Stones*, is adopted from a children's rhyme whose lyrics are; "Sticks and stones may break my bones. But words can never hurt me." The rhyme is

said, “in order to show that people cannot be hurt by unpleasant things that are said to them.”<sup>19</sup>

The title, then, may indicate that words have no power over Chapelle; the words that are of the criticisms and of the push backs against Chapelle’s comedic language. In that sense, not only the title but also the content of Chapelle’s show appear as if to say; “I don’t care your criticisms, I will make whatever joke I please to,” in a way that challenges the current discussions around the appropriate language and the power attributed to words. Thus, Chapelle follows the convention of the camp that advocates for absolute free speech in comedy, and that claims nothing in comedy can be off-limits.

Chapelle's apparent discomfort for PC culture or the general refusal for any critique on his comedic language due to "censorship" resonate with the masculine discourse of toughening up. His targeting of LGBTQ people and women for their “censoring” the comedic language, who becomes read as PC culture in that sense, expose the gendered meanings that parallels Trump’s and the right wing’s definitions of PC culture as weak and not tough enough. Being tough and being weak are gendered definitions that define the former as masculine and the latter as failures of masculinity. Unsurprisingly, LGBTQ community and women, for their supposedly political correctness, get to be defined as weak and sensitive, who cannot take a joke. As Chapelle refuses to change his language by keeping on making rape jokes or jokes that trivialize the LGBTQ community and sexual assault, it becomes apparent that it should be them, women, and 'alphabet people' who need to toughen up.

Moreover, his mimicking of LGBTQ people or women through effeminizing his voice and bodily moves while trivializes those, it also unmask the connotation between the weakness

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<sup>19</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sticks-and-stones-may-break-my-bones-but-words-can-never-hurt-me>

and femininity underlying his understanding. At the end of the day, his show is stick and stones, so his words and jokes cannot or should not have any power or effect over them. No need to be snowflakes! Why are they being so sensitive!

Moreover, another contradiction surfaces in Chapelle's critiques for people who complain about his language. He explicitly demonstrates his annoyance for LGBTQ people and #metoo supporters, for they are upset with his comedic language. What becomes contradictory is that, on the one hand, Chapelle and his fellow comedians argue for free speech, then get uncomfortable and annoyed when others speak up and critique their language, on the other. Then, might they want to reserve free speech only for themselves, since they are comedians and they 'only' joke? Also, if words do not have any power on Chapelle, why bother with PC culture's criticisms? If one is a supporter of free speech, why gets uncomfortable with other's right to criticize the other's free speech?

Looking at Chapelle's 'politically incorrect,' 'unfiltered,' free speech in his show, in which he gets to declare that Michael Jackson is not guilty and his accusers are liars, in which he gets to make comments on women's biology as weaker compared to men's as well as on abortion bans, overall, he speaks about *others* and make judgments about *others'* experiences and bodies. The ethical dilemma of 'free speech,' once again and naturally, shows its hypocrisy in Chapelle's overtalking about others, over and above, with an advantage to reach out to the world by way of Netflix, and of his position of power as a famous comedian. If free speech or political incorrectness is used to suppress others' voices or to talk over their realities, then one cannot help and asks; Is free speech is a guise for being unethical to others and a justification for disrespecting others?

Despite all the controversial qualities in his jokes, there's common quality in his attitude; that is the cautiousness he takes on right before he starts such jokes: such as; before he says he does not believe people who accused Michael Jackson of molestation; "I'm gonna say something that I'm not allowed to say. But I gotta be real. Uh... I don't believe these motherfuckers." Or, he goes before paraphrasing Kevin Hart's homophobic tweet; "All right, I'll tell you what he said. But just remember, these are not my words. These were Kevin's words." Or, before he says women to "Shut up" about their gender equality demands, he says, "Or, here's another idea that's going to be very controversial." In that sense, even though Chapelle appears to intentionally provoke and cross over the "unspoken and unwritten rules that control the language of comedy," through his stance against #metoo, his support for abusers or his jokes about trans people, the softening quality of such pre-statements undermine his "unfiltered" comedy.

The topics Chapelle tackles in his special not only reflect the discussions around the sexual politics in the face of #metoo climate, but also they are in conversation with the discussions that elevated after #metoo on the basis of the appropriateness of certain jokes and statements that should or should not be made in the *laughscape* of stand-up comedy. While Chapelle seeks to refuse such a control in his language and jokes, he nevertheless does not look like he can do it carelessly anymore.

No comedian has a responsibility to reinforce the social change, nor does Chapelle. Chapelle has no claim to do so and already confessed that; "[he] was doing sketches that were funny but socially irresponsible." But making jokes by virtue of your right to free speech in the *laughscape* in a way to offend others is not subversive, transgressive, or taboo-breaking, anymore. It rather reproduces dominant ideologies under the guise of 'free speech.' Overall, even though Chapelle justifies his offensive jokes about LGBTQ community or women under the

guise of comedians' right to be politically incorrect, the end, such jokes align with the dominant and conservative ideologies of masculinity.

### **Aziz Ansari, *Right Now***

Like Dave Chapelle's *Stick & Stones*, Netflix stand-up special *Right Now* is a come-back show by Aziz Ansari, who took a break for a year after the sexual misconduct case surfaced against him in the light of #metoo events. The show starts with a joke about an imaginary event of cultural appropriation of a white student who dressed up in Chinese costume, and the punchline is the people who aggressively attacked the student, rather than having a constructive conversation. This joke is most probably an analogy to how Ansari felt and wanted to happen after he came under fire upon the surfacing of his sexual misconduct case. He sets the stage with a joke to ease into a conversation about his notorious case;

“Um, I just got back to New York, uh, my home, uh, a few days ago, and, uh, yeah. I, uh... I was walking around the other day, and this guy, uh, came up to me on the street, and he was like, uh, “Hey, man. Love the Netflix show!” And I was like, “Oh, thanks so much.” He was like, “Yeah, yeah, I really liked the episode you did on Supreme!” I was like, “What? I didn’t do no episode on Supreme.” And then I quickly realized he’s talking about Hasan Minhaj. Patriot Act. Different show. Different guy. And he felt horrible, right? He immediately realized his mistake, and he was trying to buy it back. He was like, “Oh, no, no, Aziz, right?” I was like, “Yeah, yeah. That’s me.” “Master of None!” “Yeah, yeah. That’s me.” “Parks and Rec.” “Yeah, yeah. That’s me.” “Treat yo’ self.” “Yeah, yeah. That’s me.” “And, uh, you had that whole thing last year, sexual misconduct?” “No, no, no, no, no! That was Hasan.”

While the joke reflects on how the Western gaze sees the non-western others as fungible, it sets the stage for a redemption speech that is about to come. He remarks on “that whole thing” which is the sexual misconduct case against him, because “[he] is sure that some of the [audience] is curious about how [he] feels about the whole situation.” And he goes;

“I’ve felt so many things in the last year, so... There’s times I felt scared. There’s times I felt humiliated. There’s times I felt embarrassed. And ultimately, I just felt terrible that this person felt this way. And after a year or so, I just hope it was a step

forward. It moved things forward for me and made me think about a lot. I hope I've become a better person. And I always think about a conversation I had with one of my friends where he was like, "You know what, man? That whole thing made me think about every date I've ever been on." And I thought, "Wow. Well, that's pretty incredible. It's made not just me, but other people be more thoughtful, and that's a good thing." And that's how I feel about it. And I know... this isn't the most hilarious way to begin a comedy show."

In the same vein as the above redemption remark, in the rest of the show, Ansari emphasizes how he changed and grew after the sexual misconduct case and says, "Old Aziz is dead." Yet, not only does he foreground his recent personal transformation but also that of the American society by comparing the cultural contexts of the past and right now.

Ansari draws attention to the current 'progressive' politics through making fun of 'newly woke white people'; "Yeah! I'm aware. I'm aware, Candice. I saw it 30 years ago. It's a white guy doing an Indian voice. I appreciate the support, but things don't just become racist when white people figure it out." At the same time, he acknowledges their effort to treat their non-white counterparts with dignity, yet in a satirical way; "Interesting times for, uh, white people. Uh... I've been observing you. I see what's going on. You're trying really hard to be nice to minorities... in a way I've never seen before. Putting in the time, putting in the effort. Getting out there. Watching *Crazy Rich Asians*." Then, he categorizes the changes in the society, "Oh. But, look, I'll give credit where credit's due. I've been around 36 years. I've never seen white people trying this hard be nice to minorities. I know there's some people that are not trying at all, and some people going a bit aggressively the other direction..."

Ansari criticizes PC culture for the ways they react to particular jokes and the language.

"It's a weird time to be working on jokes. Gotta be very careful about what you say, right? I've seen people in regular jobs getting in trouble these days, you know? I recently saw some people got in trouble for, uh, saying the word "niggardly." Which, take it easy, has nothing to do with race. It just means cheap or stingy. You can look up the etymology, it's a completely innocent word. And people are getting in trouble for it. Which is crazy."

Ansari multiplies the examples of the change in the “appropriate language” by reflecting on the comedy movies made in the past but whose language is considered by “PC Culture” as inappropriate in the right now.

“Is like... you ever just watch very popular mainstream stuff from not that long ago? Uh, there’s stuff in there, guys! I was watching *The Hangover* the other day. This is one of the biggest movies ever, right? It’s not that old. There’s a scene in that movie where Bradley Cooper goes, “Paging Dr. Faggot!” That’s in the movie! Did you guys write a letter? I didn’t write a letter.”

He, then, continues to make fun of the reactions against the topic of sexual harassment in the workplace that got even more heated and more vocalized after #metoo,

“You can watch stuff that’s not that old with 2019 eyes and things can seem weird now. Like... like, I was watching a... a rerun of *The Office*. What’s the biggest story? “Jim and Pam. Oh, I hope they get together!” You watch it now, though, it’s like, “Mmh, I don’t know. This lady’s engaged. He’s been hitting on her for, like, four seasons. I don’t know if this is cool in the workplace. If they rebooted *The Office* now, it’d end with Pam winning a landmark sexual harassment case. And then, in the series finale, you’d find out that’s what the documentary was, they were just gathering evidence against Jim!”

Ansari explains the (in)appropriateness of particular language and behavior in relation to both their time and cultural context. Like Chapelle, he, too, tackles the R. Kelly case;

“You can’t judge everything by 2019 standards. Sure, some things, of course, but not everything.... Cultural context, right, could change everything. Look at all this R. Kelly stuff. All this information was out there in the past, right? There was the Aaliyah thing, there were the tapes, and everyone just kind of looked the other way, right? But now, the culture has reached a breaking point....A lot of people putting out statements and stuff now. People that used to work with him. People like Lady Gaga, Chance the Rapper...”

Ansari comments on his jokes and language in his first stand-up special from ten years ago, and says that “...there was jokes on there, like, I wouldn’t do that now, you know?” He also does not skip bringing up Michael Jackson’s sexual abuse cases. R. Kelly’s and Michael Jackson’s sexual violence cases become the common topics in Chapelle’s and Ansari’s comedic performances.

Ansari is nervous about his past actions', jokes, words, on the basis of the possibility of them being used against him today. This becomes more apparent when he mentions he expressed a fondness for R. Kelly's music in his first special stand-up, for which he states;

"I'm watching this [R. Kelly] documentary, I'm terrified! I'm like, "Man, they'd better not pull up them clips! I've had a tricky year as it is." ... Like, all the wording I used is the worst possible wording. And I'm imagining Wendy Williams or whoever going to one of these clubs where I'm on stage like, "You know, guys, my favorite musician I've ever met is R. Kelly!" "His favorite musician he's ever met... is R. Kelly. And it doesn't end there. Let's look at a clip from Aziz's second stand-up special, which came out just two years later."

While Ansari looks like supporting a change in the language, one that would not offend others, he still appears to be against PC Culture's reactions towards 'faulty' language and attitudes. As his target of PC culture consists of the "newly woke white people, and 'aggressive' #metoo supporters" resembles Chapelle's stance in the sense that they both find it aggressive and controlling, and 'a bit too much.' Who might be the "newly woke white people" then? Most likely, they are the white people who have been vocal towards a 'progressive' and for a diverse society in the face of Trump's administration's totalitarian politics. Therefore, they are the people whom Trump and his supporters blame for weakness, and people who need to toughen up. Despite his self-acclaimed feminist stance and support for 'progressive' politics, Ansari's approach to PC culture aligns with the conservative's claims. However, unlike pro-off-limits comedians, Ansari does not hide under the notion of free speech to justify ethically problematic speeches.

### **Can Rape Jokes be transformative?**

Before drawing on Esposito's stand-up show, *Rape Jokes*, I will reflect on the other ways that rape jokes have been used, differing in the context and angle. Some female stand-up comedians have utilized rape jokes in line with the discussions that claimed rape jokes to be helpful for survivors and for pointing out the pervasiveness of rape culture in a critical way.

As such, in her stand-up show, *Sick and Tired* (2006), Wanda Sykes tackles the issue of rape and women's vulnerability to it. Sykes delivers a joke in which she imagines a world where women get detachable vaginas to protect themselves from a potential rape.

“We have something everybody wants. You gotta protect it! You gotta be careful! You gotta cherish it! That’s a lot of fuckin’ pressure! And I would like a break! You know what would make my life so much easier? Ladies, wouldn’t you love this? Wouldn’t it be wonderful if our pussies were detachable? Just think about it. Wouldn’t it be great if you could leave your pussy at home sometimes? Just think of the freedom you would have! You get home from work, it’s getting a little dark outside, and you’re like, ‘I’d like to go for a jog, but it’s getting too dark, oh! I’ll just leave it at home!’ You out jogging. Yeah! It could be pitch black, you still out there jogging! Enjoying yourself! You know? If some crazy guy jumps out of bushes like “AAH!” You like “I left it at home” Sorry! I have absolutely nothing on me. I’m pussy-less. Just so much freedom! You could do anything. You could go visit a professional ball player’s hotel room at two in the morning. Sex? My pussy’s not even in the building!”<sup>20</sup>

Wanda Syke’s rape joke differs from the offensive ones in the sense that it sheds light on the prevalence of rape that affects and threatens women on a daily basis. In that regard, it functions as a critique of rape culture. Another feminist comedian, in 2013, Adrienne Truscott, put up a provocative performance through her stand-up show, *Asking For It: A One-Lady Rape About Comedy Starring Her Pussy and Little Else!* devoting her entire show to the topic of rape. Truscott’s show is a satire of the notions that legitimize rape culture. In the show, Truscott strikes back the male comedy world in which rape jokes are made at the expense of survivors and calls out the comedians such as Daniel Tosh, Bill Cosby, George Carlin, whose rape jokes are notoriously well known. In an interview, she emphasizes that even though her show is about rape, “in her heart, it is also very much about comedy.” Truscott enters the stage wearing no pants, dressed only from waist up with a bra. As Danielle Russell argues that dressing for the stage has been a complicated issue for female comedians, as they need to eliminate any possible distraction that the audience would experience by playing down their attractiveness (Danielle

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<sup>20</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=2&v=R8FfFwtL91Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=R8FfFwtL91Q)

Russell, 8). In that sense, Truscott's choice of wearing a bra and no pants is extraordinarily unconventional and transgressive. Moreover, she drinks beer on the stage, dances, and flirts with the audience. In doing so, Truscott draws attention to the myths that justify the act of rape, myths that avoid accountability by claiming that the survivor "asked for it." The ways the survivor dresses up or behaves (drink/flirt/dance) that do not fall under ideal femininity norms, then, become the grounds for "asking for it." Truscott's enacting all of the "justifiers" by means of her body, a site for rape, she challenges all the myths as if saying, "Here I am, but you cannot touch me."

*Rape is Real and Everywhere* is another stand-up comedy tour devoted to the topic of rape. Organized by two sexual assault survivors, Emma Cooper and Heather Jordan Ross, in Canada in 2017, the show creates a space where survivors tell stories of and make jokes about their sexual violence experiences. On its website, the show is described as; "Rape jokes are everywhere. But who are the people telling them? Are they ever OK, let alone funny? What if the people telling rape jokes were survivors? Rape is Real and Everywhere is what happens when comedians who have survived rape share their experience and joke it out. Prepare yourself for hilarity, cathartic honesty and old-fashioned vulnerability<sup>21</sup>." In an interview<sup>22</sup>, the co-producer Cooper describes RIR&E as; "a comedy show about rape, jokes by survivors. We want to take back the narrative." And Ross adds, "As co-producers, our intent is to have multiple narratives, to have catharsis, and to have a really good laugh. To even talk about it is still taboo; that's part of what's exciting." By featuring sexual assault survivors, the show renders a space where rape jokes, which are made by and for survivors, bring about catharsis in a way that would incite a collective affectivity permeating among the survivors.

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<sup>21</sup> <http://rapeisreal.com/#about>

<sup>22</sup> <https://ricochet.media/en/865/joking-about-rape-survivors-aim-to-take-back-the-narrative-at-comedy-show>

In the meanwhile, in his presidential campaign trail in 2016, in response to Ivana Trump's accusation of rape during her marriage with Donald Trump, his lawyer defended him by saying; "You can't rape your spouse." In 2016, the *Washington Post* published a video<sup>23</sup> from 2005, in which then-presidential candidate Donald Trump and *Access Hollywood* host Billy Bush are having a "locker room" talk on a bus on their way to film the show. In the video, Trump brags about how to make sexual advances on women, and Bush is laughing along. Trump describes his attempt to seduce a woman and says, "I moved on her, and I failed, I'll admit it. I did try and fuck her, she was married." And indicating the woman they are about to meet, Trump says, "I gotta use some tictacs just in case I start kissing her. You know, I'm automatically attracted to beautiful. I just start kissing them, it's like a magnet. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab'em by the pussy. You can do anything." The video brought back sexual assault memories of many survivors. In the following days of the leakage of the video, Kelly Stone, for one, started a twitter hashtag, #NotOkay,<sup>24</sup> and wrote, "Women: tweet me your first assaults. they aren't just stats. I'll go first: Old man on city bus grabs my "pussy" and smiles at me, I'm 12." It got millions of views and responses in which women shared their sexual assault stories.

Moving fast forward to October 2017, in the anniversary of the publishing Trump's "grab'em pussy" video, sexual assault accusations against the Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein surfaced and followed which the hashtag #metoo<sup>25</sup> emerged with the tweet posted by

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<sup>23</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eed4\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eed4_story.html)

<sup>24</sup> Even though this hashtag is considered as a precursor to #metoo, in fact, it goes back to 2006 when first #metoo hashtag was started by Tawana Burke, a black women, activist, and organizer.

<sup>25</sup> [https://twitter.com/Alyssa\\_Milano](https://twitter.com/Alyssa_Milano)

the actor Allysa Milano; “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted, write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet.” With the turbulence it created across the globe, #metoo made a wave about the prevalence of sexual violence, thrusting the topic into global attention and turning it into a widespread dialogue about sexual violence.

### **Cameron Esposito, *Rape Jokes***

Esposito’s 2018 stand-up show, *Rape Jokes* tackles the topics of #metoo, PC Culture, and the language of jokes, particularly that of rape jokes, in comedy. She begins her show, commenting on how it feels like a nightmare under Trump administration and performs a mimicry of Nosferatu to impersonate Trump. She says, “He lives in a tower. Who lives in a tower? He lives in a tower with his name on it. Every word out of his mouth is something I would punish a child for saying.” And then she links Trump’s speeches to her being a survivor of sexual assault and notes that “I don’t love that he brags about assaulting people,” which refers to the incident in which Trump talked about his attempts of making sexual advances on women, which was revealed in the video<sup>26</sup> published by the *Washington Post*. The video brought back sexual assault memories of many survivors, like Esposito’s, paving the way for the hashtags #NotOkay<sup>27</sup> and #metoo.

Esposito juxtaposes the two current situations; that are the Trump administration and the #metoo movement, noting that;

“I have been buoyed in the last year by watching people step forward and tell their stories of harassment and sexual assault, hasn’t that been beautiful to see that? Just like, just human grace, just strength like that. It’s not like those are new stories, but people standing in their truth and telling them, that’s fucking new and I think it’s really

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<sup>26</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eed4\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eed4_story.html)

<sup>27</sup> In the following days of the leakage of the video, Kelly Stone, for one, started a twitter hashtag, #NotOkay,<sup>27</sup> and wrote; “Women: tweet me your first assaults. they aren’t just stats. I’ll go first: Old man on city bus grabs my “pussy” and smiles at me, I’m 12.” It got millions of views and responses in which women shared their sexual assault stories.

cool. That's happening. And then right next to that, there's just like a shriveling Nosferatu (starts mimicking Nosferatu with her hands and pose). "What am I supposed to do at work, if I can't talk about her sweater?"

In order to demonstrate the overlap between the people who "make sweater comments" and ant-PC culture people, Esposito says that;

"Yeah, ugh, sweater comments, right. That person falls in the same category. It's a person I feel like I have heard a lot from. A person who's like uh... (yells) "PC Culture! Yeah, PC culture coming at me trying to take all my favorite words. PC culture coming at me telling me that I can't use the same words Christopher Columbus used when he stole this place!" Oh god! What's wrong with you, PC culture hating assholes! Because here's the thing. PC Culture is the words we use now to talk about other people. It's literally like updated terminology. I don't understand having a problem with using words for other people that they want to be used, right? Don't understand. It's not like these people rail against updated terminology elsewhere in their lives. I've never heard one of those people be like "No, I don't use today's words about technology; I don't. I'm just an old school guy. "Tell you what; you go home, I'll send you a phone telegram. And then we can see if you wanna come over and watch the talkies on my blockbuster machine and chill. That's just how I talk." I guess what I am advocating is that we afford human beings the same respect we afford Netflix."

Her equating the harassers to anti-PC people, who refuse to change their language towards respecting the others' choices of being defined, reveals the commonality of the roots of toxic masculinity prevalent within these two groups of people. Esposito does not stop there and keeps unpacking a similar attitude and inclination apparent in the field of comedy with respect to some comedians' problem with criticisms on their language. She notes that;

"There's people that, I mean, I hear a lot, I don't know how familiar you are with stand-up comedy, but I'm pretty familiar with it. There are a lot of folks in my field who have a problem with PC culture, because they'll say things like, "Oh, how can I tell jokes? How can I tell jokes without all those words? I need them." And, I'll just say if there's any particular word that you need to use to do this job, I am a better stand-up comic than you. You think I'm just coasting through using old words? Nah man. I used different words yesterday than I used today. (yelling) I am constantly evolving. I'm a fish swimming up the stream. Commit yourself to something in your lives, give a shit, get on my level!"

Esposito mocks the anti-PC culture comedians for their rigidity and conservatism of using the same old language. Now, in her hands, like her fellow female comedians, such as Andrea Truscott and Hannah Gadsby, they are the butt of jokes for their ignorance and for their

refusal to keep up with the change the cultural context of the time necessitates. Esposito, then, narrows down the issue of (in)appropriate language to rape jokes;

“Because it's not like me. I'm trying to talk about sexual assault, it's not like that it's a new topic in comedy, we've rape jokes forever, but it's just like those jokes have usually been like (yells and makes a face of wide-open eyes) " RAPE." That's the full joke. And the audience, because that's a taboo word, will have a response; (mimicking the audience by laughing and abruptly stopping). And then the comic will hear the response, “Ooo, I have done a good joke.” And then they'll tell you that joke for two decades.”

Drawing attention to the long tradition of rape jokes, Esposito keeps mocking the comedians who have been making rape jokes. Not only does her mockery point out the unfunniness of rape jokes but also to the comedians' goofiness to not to be able to read the signs that the old joke does not have a shock value anymore. Moreover, she goes on to tackle the outcries of rape jokers about being censored;

“And one day at a show, somebody will be like, "Do you know what, I wouldn't refer that joke...because it didn't have a punchline. And, uh, it wasn't funny. And I paid to be here" And then that comic will go; "This is censorship! I am being censored.” And that's the wrong word. Feedback. You've gotten feedback. I know how to identify feedback because I have been getting it for the entirety of my career. Sorry that it happened to you twice, but my tombstone is just gonna say, "We got it, she was gay." I say that, but I understand how painful it can feel to get a feedback.”

Her example of audience's confrontation with the rape joke, while reminding us of the event in which an audience reacted to Daniel Tosh's rape jokes during his show, it also goes beyond that moment for it is not rare that an audience dislikes the rape jokes that a comedian makes. By pointing out the comedian's offensiveness upon the criticisms about their rape jokes, Esposito reverses the discourse that defines PC culture as easily offended and triggered. It is, in Esposito's joke, indeed the comedians, who overreact to and get easily triggered by criticisms.

In the rest of the show, Esposito tells the story of her sexual assault experience, and not through jokes. In doing so, Esposito contributes to the growing archive of incorporating sexual

assault stories into comedy or stand-up space, as Hannah Gadsby does in her *Nanette*, or the collaboration of comedians, who perform *Rape is Real and Everywhere*.

Differing from Dave Chapelle's and Aziz Ansari's approaches to PC culture, Esposito, in her aligning with the PC culture's demands for the change in comedic language, she unpacks how being anti-PC culture gets overlapped with the group of people who are the 'sweater commenters.' Then, in Esposito's jokes, it is the anti-PC culture people, who contradictorily want to cancel out the criticisms expressed by, what they call, 'PC culture.'

## Conclusion

I have attempted in this chapter to take a picture of some of the US stand-up comedy scenes since 2017 to discuss how the current political events, mainly the discourses of Trump administration and #metoo movement, affected the conversation in comedy in a way that puts the comedians into conversation with one another through the common topics they tackle in their performances. Not only did the stand-up shows I looked at in this chapter tackle common topics but also they used stand-up stages as a space to talk about the form of comedy itself. Therefore, I claim that stand-up in this period has taken a form of "metacomedy," in other words, comedy about comedy. I have tried to trace how the rhetorics of PC culture and snowflake echoed itself in the comedy space in a way that reveals the gendered meanings underlying the comedians' outcries against PC culture. In the protests of comedians against the PC culture and for off-limits comedic language, it becomes apparent that they imply that PC culture should toughen up and learn to take a joke without getting offensive, because they are 'just' jokes.

By providing a trajectory of rape jokes and its relation to the claims of 'censorship', I discussed how demand for free speech and off-limits comedy can function as a guise of justifying the comedians' alignment with and reinforcing the conservative and dominant

ideologies, rather than being subversive to the puritan suppression. Rape jokes that are made under cover of free speech, pose itself as a transgression to the moral and conservative regulatory concerns. However, such claims quickly get confused with the ethics of others. As I reflected on the difference between the morality and ethics of other, I tried to show that being against the morality does not dovetail with an ethics of the other. In that sense, the comedians' claims for free speech, while might look like subverting the moral norms, nevertheless avoid the ethics of others.

By tracing the current terms of 'PC culture,' and 'snowflakes,' both of which have been utilized by the Trump administration and his supporters to define people who are against their ideologies and politics, I attempted to show how this tactic is echoed in the stand-up comedy stages, and how they overlap in their implications of gendering the PC culture. While using these terms to invalidate or cancel out the criticisms posed against the anti-PC people, they associate those with effeminacy and weakness, who need to toughen up, take jokes or deal with the 'truths' imposed upon them. In that sense, the demand for absolute 'free speech' that is performed at the expense of others and under the guise of joking is treated as if a transgression to the puritan institutional suppressions or as a liberating act, which inevitably becomes read as a demand for canceling out different voices and opinions, functioning as a demand for sameness. Thus, outcries of 'censorship' can itself serve as censorship to suppress others' voices.

In drawing on the three stand-up shows that were produced during the Trump administration and after #metoo movement, I wanted to discuss how the collectivity of #metoo movement and increasing vocalization of feminists' or the left's towards more diverse language and politics, reflected in the comedy space. Looking at Chappelle's show, *Stick & Stones*, I discussed how his position as anti-PC culture and his discomfort with the need for a change in

comedic language as well as his effeminate style of mimicking of LGBTQ people and #metoo supporters not only reveal the masculine character of the off-limits comedy but also show how being for free speech, but anti-PC, is itself can be a form of censorship for different voices. By analyzing Ansari's *Right Now*, I discussed how his show, like Chapelle's, tackles the common topics of #metoo, and debates around (in)appropriate language, and how his critique of 'newly woke white people' and #metoo supporters becomes read as a PC culture critique, aligning with the Trump's and his supporters' target of liberals and feminists. Finally, reflecting on Esposito's *Rape Jokes*, I tried to provide an example of a different approach to the debates around language and #metoo, which are also the topics that Esposito tackles in her show like the other two. While people who are associated with PC culture are used as the butt of jokes in Chapelle's and Ansari's show, in Esposito's performance, it is reversed. In her mockery of anti-PC people for their rigidity in changing their comedic language and showing their commonality with the sexual harassers unpack the toxic masculine traits underlying their positionings. Moreover, Esposito's speaking out about her experience of sexual violence contributes to reshaping the stand-up comedy as a space into which 'serious' stories that are not to be laughed away are incorporated, like her fellow comedians do, like Hannah Gadsby whose revolutionary performance I will analyze in the next chapter.

## 5 CHAPTER II

### ***NANETTE: AFFECTIVE PEDAGOGY OF FEMINIST HUMOR***

On the official website of the stand-up comedian Hannah Gadsby, it reads that, "Hannah found her voice with *Nanette*." Even though Gadsby has performed on the stand-up stage for more than a decade, one cannot help but ask what conditions might have contributed to Gadsby's finding her voice with *Nanette*?" By looking at the spatiotemporal events that were shaping the political climate of 2018, it does not come as coincidental that *Nanette* emerged at a time when speaking up against sexual assault/harassment, therefore against misogyny and male power, has become a collective movement beginning with a twitter hashtag #metoo. As such, Gadsby in *Nanette* uses the stand-up stage to speak up and out against the forms of violence -psychological, physical, and sexual- that have been the by-products of heteronormative system that perpetuates misogyny and homophobia.

Even though it is not the first time that stand-up stage is used as a space to speak out against or protest the injustices through humor (as I discussed in the first chapter), *Nanette* revolutionizes the *laughscape*, by adopting unsettling affective pedagogies and deconstructive methods in attempts to intentionally provoke and reorient the moral perceptions of the viewer.

While there is no place for telling personal stories that involve psychological, physical and sexual violence in a stand-up comedy show, Gadsby achieves to plant such stories into her comedy with help of her narrative and performative choices through which Gadsby crosses over the boundaries and conventions of comedy and deconstructs the foundations of the genre from within. Throughout her performance, Gadsby invokes affects and emotions, such as laughter, pain, anguish, sadness that would otherwise seem impossible to come together in a comedy,

thereby bringing about an affective pedagogy that may lead to a reorientation of the viewer's "sense of perceptions of the world" (Fawaz, 2016, p.760).

Gadsby begins her performance with jokes about funny stories, such as her coming out as a lesbian, her interpellation by an imaginary authority via a letter and, people's weird reactions when they misgender her. Everything is funny, though still critical of the patriarchal system, up until the point where she takes a turn and begins to disentangle the funny stories told previously and reveals the harsh realities lay behind them. In this phase, her performance gets darker, harsher, angrier, and her voice changes and shakes. In that sense, *Nanette* can be read in two parts, first of which functions as a set-up for the latter part in which Gadsby tears down the foundations of the comedy. Thus, *Nanette* allows us to reconceptualize our understandings of feminist humor theories and to rethink about humor's possibilities and shortcomings.

I have organized this chapter into three sections; I offer analyses of the visual, narrative, and performative qualities of *Nanette* that account for generating affective pedagogies in the first section. In the second section, I analyze how Gadsby deconstructs the comedy from within and look at how the deconstruction of comedy may allow us to refresh our reservations about humor's possibilities and shortcomings as well as to reconceptualize our understandings of feminist humor theories. In the third section, I approach the question of "Is feminist humor im/possible?" in the light of *Nanette*'s revolutionary contributions to comedy in general, to feminist humor in particular.

### **Affective pedagogies in *Nanette***

Feminist humor theories have focused on either the repressive or empowering, subversive potentials of the comedic performances. While foregrounding how female stand-up comedies pose a critique, a challenge to patriarchy, or produce therapeutic, healing effects on the viewer,

feminist humor theories have critiqued humor's demeaning and repressive qualities for they reproduce oppression through sexist, racist, homophobic and transphobic jokes. While inquiring for the subversive potential of feminist humor, feminist humor theorists have sought not only for an alternative to restore the effects of demeaning humor but also for empowerment of women's position in stand-up comedy space which has long dominated by male comedians. Yet, with Gadsby's performance in *Nanette*, it became possible to reconceptualize our understanding of feminist humor theories that go beyond the binaries of subversive versus repressive. Though Gadsby draws our attention to the limits of the comedy in *Nanette*, I am interested in exploring the manifestations of feminist humor that exhibit not only its limits but also potentials simultaneously. To account for this dual play, in this section, I delve into analyses of the elements that compose the stand-up comedy, revealing both its limits and potentials.

Gadsby points out the limits of comedy on the basis of what it has to leave out to incite laughter through which she deconstructs its foundations. Therefore, Gadsby brings "out-of-place" stories into her stand-up show, which she had omitted previously to maintain the comedy structure. However, Hannah's very attempt to point out the limits of the comedy rather turns into a potential that allows for the reorientation of the viewer's sense of perception of the world. In that regard, *Nanette* leads to a conversation of humor's pedagogical capabilities to invoke affects to retune the viewer's emotions and worldviews. In inciting affects and emotions in the viewer, Hannah plays with the components of stand-up show that speak to the senses of sight and sound. As viewing and hearing are sensory experiences, then it is necessary to account for the ways that contribute to the sensuous/ affective. As Bore, Graefer, and Kilby, in their piece "This Pussy Grabs back: Humour, Digital Affects and Women's Protest" say; "[Humorous images lend themselves to such an emotive and sensory examination because humor is a highly affective

practice: humour can move us in emotional and physical ways, for instance when we shake with laughter, smile with amusement, or frown and turn away with feelings of hurt or shame. These contradictory feelings may even coexist.]” (Bore& Graefer& Kilby, 2017, p.530). Humor's affective capability to move us to this or that direction bears pedagogical potential that would lead to, as Fawaz notes, "retuning, rerouting, or altogether altering" people's "sense of perceptions of the world" (Fawaz, 2016, p.760). In my exploration for the affective pedagogical possibilities in *Nanette*, I will look at the audio-visual, narrative and performative components that are at work in acting upon the viewer's sensory experiences in a way that would manifest pedagogical effects.

However, before honing in on analyzing the audio-visual, narrative and performative qualities of *Nanette*, it is necessary that I acknowledge the difference of viewer's affective experience between an off-screen, live stand-up show that is viewed in theatre in its raw form and a filmed stand-show that is considered through the mediation of television in its filmed and processed form. While the former allows for participation in a sociable network that may generate a shared affective experience, opening up to possibilities to be affected by others' affective responses, such as laughing, cackling, howling, sobbing, crying. As the latter is subjected to the interventions of filming technologies, such as edits, cuts, close-ups, imposition of sound effects and music, and so on, it inevitably produces a different kind of sensory experience. Yet, thinking with Lauren Berlant's approach to the pros and cons of the separation of feminist culture from the dominant/mainstream as a strategy may be helpful to acknowledge the Netflix version's potential. Berlant, on the one hand, notes on the value in practices of creating a feminist public sphere that allows for "theatrical space in which women might see, experience, live and rebel against their oppression en masse, freed from the oppressors'

forbidding or disapproving gaze” (Female Complaint, 1988, p.238). On the other hand, Berlant suggests that reaching a broader audience might be more valuable in the sense that “engagement of female culture industry with the patriarchal public sphere, the place where significant or momentous exchanges of power are perceived to take place.” Therefore, I approach the audio-visual qualities of *Nanette* Netflix Special by taking into consideration its mediated style, its potentials, and its limits.

### **Audio-visual Aesthetics in *Nanette***

*Nanette* Netflix Special opens with a short clip filmed at her house. Along with a song playing in the background, we see the interior entrance of Hannah's house, where the door opens through which Hannah enters. Two dogs welcome her immediately at the door, Hannah pats them and walks up towards the kitchen. The song playing background is titled “Bobby Reid, Won’t you Cut Me Down,” and has dark, sad tones and lyrics, rather than having pumping up, energizing, happy, or feel-good treats, which comes as quite an unconventional and unexpected feeling that would be seeded into a stand-up comedy. The camera then cuts to the crowd of an audience getting ready for *Nanette* at the Sydney Opera House, where the Netflix Special was filmed. The camera then cuts back to Hannah's kitchen and quickly pans from an image of Hannah's fridge door and sunflowers right by the fridge to Hannah at the counter, preparing herself tea, putting a teacup and a saucer on the counter. In between these shots, by pausing the film, I got a chance to look at her fridge door, which displays four photographs: One of them is an image of *Nanette*’s poster, other is presumably Hannah's childhood picture, next is a photo of her dogs, and lastly a black and white photograph of two people. These images call for the question of “What do these pictures want?” as the visual theorist W.J.T. Mitchell explored in his same-titled book. In order to displace the power of its creator by giving agency to pictures

themselves, Mitchell inquires an alternative way of attending to images. For Mitchell, such a reading could be possible by asking what the images desire themselves rather than reading images in relation to its producer's desire and artistic expression (Mitchell, 2005). Along these lines, I try to analyze the images and sound not based on the question of what *Nanette*'s producer's artistic intentions would be in presenting these audiovisual choices. Instead, I try to see and the images and sound in their own rights. Then, I ask what the moving images and the music in *Nanette*'s opening clip want and how they contribute to the show's overall affective doings. To begin with, the display of the pictures on her fridge door can be thought of as rather plain, and the plainness or maybe loneliness becomes a point of departure in the interpretation. In cultural studies, photographs and magnets on fridge doors are viewed as representative of a cultural phenomenon, usually reflecting one's personal relationships, friendships, family, vacations, and memories (Jedrzejowski, 2009). It is a way of expressing and exhibiting one's personality. As we perceive comedians to be extraverted, flamboyant personalities, our cultural imagination about a comedian's lifestyle outside the stage, especially if the comedian is a queer person, tends to be one of that is surrounded with people.

Moreover, when feminist humor studies focus on the female comic persona, they often tend to foreground how stand-up performance require commandment and control over the audience, therefore draw attention to female comic's strong, confident personality. In the article "The Seriously Erotic Politics of Feminist Laughter" written by Cynthia Willett, Julie Willett, and Yael D Sherman such an understanding becomes manifest in their quotation of female comic Lilly Tomlin's remark; "that was an incredible frame of mind that society had—that a woman couldn't tell jokes because it was too powerful; that to make an audience laugh meant that you had control over them in some way" (Willett&Willett&Sherman, 2012, p.226). In his piece

“Brought to You by Fem-Rage’: Stand-up Comedy and the Politics of Gender,” Paul Auslander tackles the issue of comic’s relation to Seinfeld, who said, respectively : “ holding a microphone is like holding a penis” and “”To laugh is to be dominated” (Auslander, 1993, p.318). However, with the impression of *Nanette's* opening clip, there occurs a split between the powerful, badass female comic persona and Hannah's off-stage persona. In contrast to our expectations for a stand-up comic’s persona, Hannah's fridge door displays not much of a wide social network, only her dog friends and two people from an old photograph. Moreover, the sunflowers right by her fridge, appear to be a reference to Van Gogh's painting, *Sunflowers.*, which is revealed later in the show, when Hannah talks about *Sunflowers* with respect to Van Gogh's mental illness due to which he suffered social exclusion and led a lonely life. Then, sunflowers and the pictures on the fridge door altogether may be read as an implication of loneliness and not fitting in the social.

Since domestic space has been a highly discussed topic of feminism with respect to the binary division of public versus private, the choice of filming at and including a domestic space in the opening clip calls for a reflection, These binary spaces have also gained gendered meanings; while private and domestic has been allocated to women, the social and public spaces have become men's arena, thereby associating women with domesticity. Beginning from the 1950s, women stand-up comics, such as Phyllis Diller and Joan River, tackled the issues of being confined to domestic space and constraints of being housewives. The stand-up comic, Roseanne Barr, also treated the subject of domesticity, yet not in self-deprecatory ways this time, unlike Diller and River; rather, Barr performed an angry feminist persona and, snapped the patriarchy by revealing its ludicrousness through her jokes. Barr used a set décor of domestic space in her stand-up act, "The Roseanne Barr Show" by creating a hybrid of a situation comedy and stand-up, to deconstruct the ideals imposed on housewives. While domestic space has been viewed as a

constraint for women, the house we are invited to see in *Nanette*'s opening clip appears to be more like a sanctuary space, devoid of the constraints imposed by the social.

It feels like that the audiovisual qualities in the opening clip prepares the viewer to an experience which exhausts expectations usually held for a comedy show and for a comic's persona. The clip moves forward, and we finally see Hannah walk up to the mic, and the show begins. Hannah appears on the stage that is dimly lighted, looks almost dark. Thinking along with the theatrical lighting's effects on the viewer's emotions and affects, *Nanette*'s dark stage aligns with the show's dark tones. Behind Hannah, we see seven pieces of panels placed next to one another on the back of the stage, composed of white and dark blue colors. The forms and shapes of the images on the panels are not distinguishable yet spectrally resemble trees and branches in a forest. In close up shots, Hannah, with her dark blue suit, looks as if the background colors and Hannah blends into one another. Yet, the dim-lighted, almost dark stage achieves to keep Hannah as the focus of the stage. In that sense, the visual aesthetics of the stage allow for manipulating the viewing mode in a way that affects the viewer's mood. Hannah is emerging out of darkness, which aligns with the dominant sensuous quality of the show.

The use of close-ups gets more frequent in the second half of the show as Hannah gets more vulnerable and talks about her sexual trauma. When looking at the TV talks show in which sexual violence survivors are hosted, Alcoff and Gray read the use of close up as a way to sensationalize and titillate the viewer; "The media often use the presence of survivors for shock value and to pander to a sadistic voyeurism among focusing on the details of the violations with close-ups of survivors' anguished expressions" (Alcoff&Gray, 1993, p.262). However, close-ups in *Nanette* has a different effect. It feels more like a call for a different way of listening.

Katherine Fusco reflects on close up through linking Levinasian ethical treatment of the Other in

face-to-face encounter to Massumi's affect theory and approaches close-ups as both an ethical and an affective opportunity enabled by cinema technologies (Fusco, 2018). The close-up shots that zoom into Hannah's face in the moments of her speaking out the physical and sexual violence stories, in that sense, call for both an affective and ethical listening/viewing at once. As Hannah calls for in the last moments of the show, "I just needed my story heard, my story felt and understood by individuals with minds of their own. Because, like it or not, your story... is my story. And my story... is your story."

In contrast with the opening music, the show ends with the hopeful lyrics of a song titled "Better son or daughter" by Rilo Kiley. It's a song about "deeply wounded speaker who eventually finds strength [with the help of the love of her friends] and determination in the midst of her depression,"<sup>28</sup> whose lyrics resonate with Hannah's last words before the show ends "Do you know why we have the sunflowers? It's not because Vincent van Gogh suffered. It's because Vincent van Gogh had a brother who loved him. Through all the pain, he had a tether, a connection to the world. And that... is the focus of the story we need. Connection."

The last clip of the show is a sequel to the opening clip, in which Hannah situates on her couch with her two dogs, putting her teacup on her coffee table. The song keeps playing in the background. To the left of her couch, there are sunflowers in a vase. And right before the end credits starts, we get the last joke of the show through a close up shot of the image of three mock books placed on top of each other on Hannah's coffee table; Pablo Picasshole, by Hannah Gadsby, #MeToo by Marie- Thérèse Walter, and Castration by Frank Parry.

### **On Gadsby's Performance**

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<sup>28</sup> <https://genius.com/Rilo-kiley-a-better-son-daughter-lyrics>

Hannah performed *Nanette* more than two hundred fifty times, and only one of them became a Netflix show. She says "As I was touring that show, I was going through grief, I think. It wasn't a performance. It was lived. I could feel it in my body."<sup>29</sup> Moreover, in one of her interviews, she mentions how traumatic it was for her to go on to the stage and to speak about her trauma of physical and sexual assault over and over again. She says: "When I think about things, I see them .. *Nanette* was excruciating to perform. It nearly killed me."<sup>30</sup> She also talks about at times it felt scary to perform; "It felt like a risk every time she stood in front of an audience. "I was breaking the contract," she says. "They were there for comedy and then I didn't give it to them. That tension in the room, there's no guarantee that I can hold it. There's a fear every time I go onstage. Every show was alive and dangerous."<sup>31</sup> Even once Hannah had to back out of the show because she was afraid of the audience. Despite her above-mentioned emotional state when performing, Hannah does not show any signs of vulnerability as a performer in the first half of her show. Rather, she makes jokes with a grin on her face; she is laughing with the audience when she mocks masculinity, overall, she looks energetic. However, in the latter half of her show, her gestures, mimics, and her voice get angrier, darker, and heavier. The tone of her voice rises when she gets angry, and sometimes she yells at the men in the audience. It is possible to hear her rage and frustration in her voice. Also, she gets vulnerable when speaking out about her physical and sexual traumas. Her voice shakes when she talks about her trauma, and she tears up. It is not only her voice that shakes but also the emotional state of the viewer. Her emotional state passes on to the audience creating an affective connection with the viewer.

### **Narrative Style**

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.news.com.au/entertainment/tv/i-got-scared-nanette-moment-audiences-didnt-see/news-story/640b0b48d668c3f70402324ecbacbb31>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/hannah-gadsby-interview-796863/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/hannah-gadsby-interview-796863/>

Hannah's narrative style in her comedy performance bears a resemblance to the pattern of a woven piece that is formed through interlacing two or more threads at the angles to one another. In that regard, Hannah's jokes are not one-off or segmental ones; rather, they link one another in a recurring pattern in which her jokes become metajokes that reference one another through her repetitions of words and utterances. Hannah's repeats function as a means of revisiting a concept over and over again and manifest itself in two fashion: that are the reversal of jokes and revealing the omitted stories. In return, such a narrative style plays a significant role in moving the viewer's emotions and altering worldviews towards this or that direction.

Hannah's performance style of repeating words over and over again resonates with Sara Ahmed's remark on the style of repeating words as "the scene of a feminist instruction;" that is "turning a word this way and that, like an object that catches a light every time it is turned; attending to the same words across different contexts, allowing them to create ripples or new patterns on a ground" (Ahmed, 2017, p12). Performance Studies scholar Rebecca Schneider approaches repetitions as an act of counter-memory, and in citing Foucault's translator Donald F. Bouchard, she quotes the definition of counter-memory as an "action that defines itself, that recognizes itself in words—in the multiplication of meaning through the practice of vigilant repetitions (Schneider, 1993, p.243). As such, Hannah's narrative style of repeating words brings about repetition with a difference that enables her to touch, reveal, and reverse multiple contexts and realities underlying the same utterance. Thus, Hannah challenges the power of knowledge-production by posing counter-narratives against them. Her repetitive style, then, can be seen as a pedagogical method, therefore, as a feminist instruction, one that not only exposes the viewer to the multiplicity of the contexts around the same utterance but also resists the omissions of hegemonic epistemologies.

## Reversing Jokes

Hannah sets the stage for a joke through which she will reverse the situation against straight white men who made fun of lesbians and women for not having a sense of humor.

“I reckon I’ve been slacking off in recent years with my lesbian content. I don’t think I’ve been representing my people as much as I should be..... I should quit. I’m a disgrace. What sort of comedian can’t even make the lesbians laugh? Every comedian ever. That’s a good joke, isn’t it? Classic. It’s bulletproof, too. Very clever, because it’s funny... because it’s true. The only people who don’t think it’s funny... are us lezzers... But we’ve got to laugh... because if we don’t... proves the point. Checkmate. Very clever joke. I didn’t write that. That is not my joke. It’s an old... An oldie. Oldie but a goldie. A classic. It was written, you know, well before even women were funny. And back then, in the good old days, lesbian meant something different than it does now. Back then, lesbian wasn’t about sexuality, a lesbian was just any woman not laughing at a man. “Why aren’t you laughing? What are you? Some kind of lesbian?” Classic. “Go on. You gotta laugh. Lighten up. Stop taking everything so seriously! Fucking learn to take a joke. You need to lighten up. I’ll tell you what you need to lighten up. You need a good fucking. Get a cock up you! Drink some jizz! You know?” Actual advice? It’s counterproductive.”

Then again, Hannah twists this joke towards a new direction in line with the recent rhetoric of "Scary time for Boys" which began circulating after the US President Donald Trump's comment: "it's a very scary time for young men in America" with respect to the surfacing sexual assault cases against Brett Kavanaugh, his Supreme Court nominee at the time. Even though white straight men have long been the subject of feminist critique concerning their significant role in upholding the system of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, which has been designed by and in favor of them, with #metoo movement white man resentment has increasingly surfaced. And Hannah continues from where she left off;

“Just jokes, though. Clearly... just jokes. Just jokes. I wouldn’t want to be a straight white man. Not... right now. This is... Not at this moment in history. It is not a good time to be a straight white man. I wouldn’t want to be a straight white man. Not if you paid me. Although the pay would be substantially better. But, no... I don’t think it’s an easy time for you fellas, I do feel for you. Very difficult, very confusing time. Because— And you’re not coping. Because, for the first time ever, you’re suddenly a sub-category of human. Right? “No, we invented the categories. We’re not supposed to play!

We're human-neutral." Not anymore. I've always been judged by what I am. Always been a fat, ugly dyke. I'm dead inside. I can cope. But you fellas... Bit soft in the belly? You hear "straight white man," you're like, "No. No, that's reverse sexism." No, it's not. You wrote the rules. Read them. Just jokes. Banter. Don't feel intimidated. It's just locker room talk. [audience cheers] Just jokes, though. Just jokes."

While Hannah unfolds how white straight men's position of power has been increasingly challenged, Hannah is setting the stage to reverse her previous meta-joke on men's mockery of lesbians' not having a sense of humor and being resentful. It is another example of her style of weaving her jokes into one another. Yet, this time, reversal of the previous joke functions as reconciliation and reparation of the long sexist humor used against women and lesbians. Here she says;

"Do you know why I love picking on, telling jokes about straight white men? 'Cause they're such good sports. They're like, "Oh, good joke about me. That's a refreshing perspective. If you hate men so much, why do you try so fucking hard to look like one?" 'Cause you need a good role model right now, fellas. [audience cheers] Dropping like flies. Jokes aside, if I may just give you a little human-to-human advice. Because I do understand it is a difficult and confusing time for you now. You know, it's changing, it's shifting, and I understand that. But... may I just, you know, suggest that you learn to, sort of, move beyond your defensiveness. Right? That's your first point, you're stuck on it, but you need to get some space around it, learn to develop... try and develop a sense of humor about it, or you need to lighten up, learn to laugh. Tell you what might help. How about a good fucking? Get a cock up ya, drink some jizz! You gotta laugh! That's weird advice, isn't it? It's weird. It doesn't... It's not good, is it? It doesn't feel very nice, does it?"

Hannah, with this joke, reverses the objects of the same joke; in the previous version, it was the lesbians who were laughed at by men for taking everything seriously. Yet this time, Hannah, as a lesbian, brings men in as the butt of the joke. I call this mode of feminist humor "reparative humor." With reparative humor, an affective shift becomes possible through turning the subject positions in the matrix of power upside down. In the occasions where the subject exerts power as some kind of force upon particular subjects, whether it be by means of laughter or other ways, to discipline, punish, and/or oppress others, reparative humor, by mocking with

and laughing (back) at the (laughing) subject of power, evokes a sense of empowerment in the Others. At the end of this manipulation of the power dynamics, the subject of power is not powerful anymore; rather, is placed into the position of the object of the laughter. Through this displacement in the power matrix, feminist humor emerges kinds of affects that can give a sense of reparation and healing.

When Hannah begins snapping at the gender-normals, particularly white cis heterosexual men, with regards to their hysteria around gender and sexuality, she visits the topic of gendering babies through colors pink and blue and asks the audience “How about we stop separating the children into opposing teams from day dot? How about we give them, I dunno, seven to ten years to consider themselves... on the same side?” Gadsby goes on to talk about how we focus on the differences between genders rather than seeing the commonalities between them. Throughout her commentary on the hysteria around gender, Hannah's comedy show resembles a lecture given in an Intro to Gender Studies course. That being said, Hannah is invoking teaching and/or (un)learning moments through her comedy in ways in which she adopts various pedagogies.

Hannah goes on to make fun of the hysteria around gender by narrating her experiences in which people get confused and apologetic when they misgender her as a man. She recounts one of those moments in which she was mistaken for a man on a flight, and says;

“I said, “Don’t apologize. In fact, I should thank you. I enjoyed it. Thank you. Never apologize. Don’t apologize. Look, I don’t identify as transgender, but I’m partial to a holiday. I love being mistaken for a man, ’cause just for a few moments, life gets a hell of a lot easier. I’m top-shelf normal, king of the humans. I’m a straight white man. I’m about... I’m about to get good service for no fucking effort! Do not apologize. I was going to take my assigned seat and both the armrests. Your knee space? No.”

Hannah is twisting the expectations by showing her enjoyment of being misgendered as a man. Here, we do not get what we were expecting, that is one of the basic rules of a joke, yet this joke not only does turn upside down the expectations but also unfolds a reality that being a

straight white man has the most privileged position in this patriarchal world. Though Hannah points to the top position that white man occupies within the power relations, she nevertheless ends up caricaturing him into a foolish, ignorant, selfish person who believes his entitlement to take up the most significant portion in the spatial economies. Hannah's point in this joke resonates with the feminist analysis of the effect of gendering on feminine and masculine phenomenologies. In citing Iris Marion Young's "Throwing Like a Girl; A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality," Sara Ahmed argues how the manners of girls and boys manifest themselves differently in their ways of inhabiting space through gendering. Ahmed notes that "Gendering operates in how bodies take up space; think of the intense sociality of subway or train, how some men typically lounge around, with their legs wide, taking up not only space in front of their own seat but the space in front of other seats. Women might end up not even having much space in front of their own seats; that space has been taken up" (Ahmed, 2017, p.25).

Hannah shows the ludicrousness of the ways heteronormativity operate, by turning the mirror back to society. Hannah, by turning the mirror back to the society, critiques and exposes the arbitrariness of the hegemonic social order in a fashion that manipulates the picture in the mirror and lets us see what is taken for granted, natural and universal that are in fact arbitrary and "non-naturally" constructed. In that sense, Hannah's humor functions as a remirroring humor. I call "showing things in new light" function of the feminist humor "remirroring effect." What we see in the mirror, after all, is never the same picture anymore; it does not match up what we knew before. Rather, through remirroring effect, this form of feminist humor provides us with a new social and cultural imagination in which we see the world in a new light.

### **Repetition as Feminist Instruction**

### **" I should quit comedy."**

Hannah's legendary utterance, "I should quit comedy" that is an out of place declaration to be made in the middle of a comedy show, is neither a "joke" nor a slip of the tongue. Hannah deliberately repeats it multiple times, yet each time uses it to shed light on, to resist, to reveal, and to draw attention to the constraints within the comedy by unfolding its limitations of who gets to have a voice and be heard; what the voices get to tell and leave out; and what the untold stories do when they are told and vice versa. Thus, Hannah suspends the relief that comes after comedy at a point where the laughter becomes inappropriate now. Rather, the audience is exposed to unsettling perspectives that should hitherto be masked for the sake of comedy. Yet Hannah, by repeating, "I should quit comedy" does not let those realities to be omitted or concealed anymore.

The first time Hannah says that she should quit comedy, she draws attention to her discomfort within the industry and, says:

"I do think I have to quit comedy, though. And seriously. I know it's probably not the forum... to make such an announcement, is it? In the middle of a comedy show. But I have been questioning... you know, this whole comedy thing. I don't feel very comfortable in it anymore. You know... over the past year, I've been questioning it, and reassessing. And I think it's healthy for an adult human to take stock, pause and reassess. And when I first started doing the comedy, over a decade ago, my favorite comedian was Bill Cosby. There you go. It's very healthy to reassess, isn't it?"

Without further explication, by uttering just Bill Cosby's name, Hannah illustrates her reason for her decision to quit comedy. Her choice of not filling the audience in on what she means by Bill Cosby, Hannah relies on the public knowledge of the audience on the sexual offenses done by Cosby. And now Hannah uses his name as not only synonymous with sexual offender but also as the butt of her joke. Moreover, by uttering his name, Hannah draws attention to what Bill Cosby represents, which is more than his individual sexual offenses.

Rather, like an indexical sign, Hannah hints at how Bill Cosby denotes the sexist history of comedy whose male performers not only have used rape as a punchline but also abused their position of power to make sexual advances on women and other female comedians.

Hannah repeats and says she wants to quit comedy. Because she thinks she lost her voice in self-deprecating humor in a tradition of comedy that has had no place for hearing marginalized voices and stories; that she;

“built a career out of self-deprecating humor. That’s what I’ve built my career on. And... I don’t want to do that anymore. Because, do you understand... [audience applauds] ...do you understand what self-deprecation means when it comes from somebody who already exists in the margins? It’s not humility. It’s humiliation. I put myself down in order to speak, in order to seek permission... to speak. And I simply will not do that anymore. Not to myself or anybody who identifies with me. [audience cheers] And if that means that my comedy career is over, then so be it.”

Performance studies scholar Philip Auslander defines self-deprecatory humor as a strategy of female comic “to render herself apparently unthreatening to male dominance by making herself the object of her own comic derision” (Auslander, 1993, p.326). This definition resonates with Sara Ahmed’s remark on the gendered spatial economies of bodies in which Ahmed notes that women grow up to learn to be accommodating, and unthreatening to male space by taking up less space through limiting their acts and behaviors. In that sense, Hannah, like many other women, lesbian, queer comic appealed to self-deprecatory humor to negotiate the restrictions within the male-dominated area of comedy “that reflected the social stigma attached to aggressively funny women” (ibid, 326). Hannah, too, elucidates gendered attributes of self-deprecatory humor by revisiting the same topic later in her show: “It’s not my place to be angry on a comedy stage. I’m meant to be doing... self-deprecating humor. People feel safer when men do the angry comedy. They’re the kings of the genre. When I do it, I’m a miserable lesbian, ruining all the fun and the banter. When men do it, heroes of free speech. I love... angry

white man comedy.” Hannah here unmasks the gendered asymmetries within comedy that control not only who gets to have a voice and be heard but also who gets to say what.

Now, I will reflect on Hannah’s other repetitive statement, “I need to tell my story properly” to discuss how it functions as a tool to deconstruct the comedy within.

### **Dismantling Comedy**

#### **“I need to tell my story properly”**

Even though Gadsby is adopting a set-up-punchline formula in her comedic performance in the first part of the show until where she takes a turning point, she gradually distorts the conventional comedy structure in the second part. By breaking down the foundations of humor, Gadsby reveals that humor is only possible as long as it avoids and omits the real story lays behind it. She says; “The way I’ve been telling that story is through jokes. And stories... unlike jokes, need three parts. A beginning, a middle, and an end. Jokes... only need two parts. A beginning and a middle.”

In the beginning moments of her show, Hannah delivers a story in which she notices that she had forgotten to come out to her grandmother when she asked Hannah if she had a boyfriend.

“You know, last year, my grandma asked me if I had a boyfriend. And I realized, in that moment, that I’d... quite forgotten... to come out to Grandma. I thought I’d... I remember it being on my to-do list. I thought, “I’ll wait till it comes up in conversation.” But it never does. But finally it did. But I did not take the opportunity! No... No, Grandma. No, I don’t have time for boyfriends.” Plural. Confident, wasn’t I? But if I had time, heaps! And she said, “Ah, well, you never know. One day you might walk around the corner, and there he’ll be!” “Mr. Right,” she called him. And I have been approaching every corner with caution since then.”

The anecdote starts with Hannah's realization of forgetting to come out to her grandmother, continues with their dialogue, and ends with Hannah's self-mockery. While we expect that the story would proceed along with Hannah's coming out, we get what we did not expect. Instead, Hannah quickly and skillfully slides around this question and dodges the

opportunity to come out to her grandmother. The incongruity gets even more accentuated with Hannah's responses to her grandma, in which she maintains acting as if she were a straight woman. It is getting more absurd with Hannah's grandmother insistence on her finding the "Mr. Right" eventually, which comes as indeed a scary thing to say to a lesbian. While this was a story Hannah told in the first minutes of her show, it was funny until Hannah revisits it and reveals the real story behind why she had not come out to her grandmother to make a point about how the structure of comedy does not leave room for telling the painful or sad parts in the story.

“I didn’t come out to my grandma last year because I’m still ashamed of who I am. Not intellectually. But, right there, I still have shame. You learn from the part of the story you focus on. I need to tell my story properly. Because the closet, for me, was no easy thing... to come out of. From the years 1989 to 1997, right? This is ten years. Effectively my adolescence. Tasmania was at the center of a very toxic national debate about homosexuality and whether or not it should be legalized. And I’m from the northwest coast of Tasmania, the Bible Belt. Seventy percent of the people... I lived amongst... believe that homosexuality should be... a criminal act. Seventy percent of the people who raised me, who loved me, who I trusted, believed that homosexuality was a sin, that homosexuals were heinous, sub-human pedophiles. Seventy percent. By the time I identified as being gay, it was too late. I was already homophobic, and you do not get to just flick a switch on that. No, what you do is you internalize that homophobia and you learn to hate yourself. Hate yourself to the core. I sat soaking in shame... in the closet, for ten years. Because the closet can only stop you from being seen. It is not shame-proof. When you soak a child in shame, they cannot develop the neurological pathways that carry thought... you know, carry thoughts of self-worth. They can’t do that. Self-hatred is only ever a seed planted from outside in. But when you do that to a child, it becomes a weed so thick, and it grows so fast, the child doesn’t know any different. It becomes... as natural as gravity. When I came out of the closet, I didn’t have any jokes. The only thing I knew how to do was to be invisible and hate myself. It took me ten years to understand I was allowed to take up space in the world. But, by then, I’d sealed it off into jokes like it was no big deal. I need to tell my story properly.”

In that regard, Hannah's internalized homophobia, therefore, self-hatred as a result of growing up in a homophobic community, planted her with shame and self-hatred, leading her to internalize its homophobic moral values. Her internalized homophobia was the underlying reason why she had not come out to her grandmother. Hannah talks about shame repeatedly, being

ashamed of who she was, a lesbian. Studies on affect and emotions have reflected on shame exclusively. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in "Queer Performativity Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*," reflects on the relation between shame and identity constitution. Sedgwick draws attention to shame's identity formative possibilities by noting that; "Shame floods into being as a moment, a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication. Indeed, like a stigma, shame is itself a form of communication... But in interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity. In fact shame and identity remain in very dynamic relation to one another, at once deconstituting and foundational, because shame is both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating" (Sedgwick, 1993, p.5). In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sarah Ahmed also approaches shame as a feeling of negation, and describes it as an "intense and painful sensation that is bound up with how the self feels about itself, a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body" (Ahmed, 2004, p.103) Ahmed goes on to relate shame with guilt as a sign of the subject's own failure, follows as "I have done something that I feel is bad" (ibid). In that sense, Ahmed notes, shame has a bilateral effect on subjects that manifest itself both in concealment and exposure; "Shame certainly involves an impulse to 'take cover' and 'to cover oneself.' But the desire to take cover and to be covered presupposes the failure of cover; in shame, one desires cover precisely because one has already been exposed to others. Hence the word 'shame' is associated as much with cover and concealment, as it is with exposure, vulnerability and wounding (quoted in Lynd 1958; Wurmser 1981)" (ibid, p104). Here cover and exposure link to the notions of closet and coming out. Closet, in queer vocabulary, has been used as a metaphor of a cover, of hiding from being exposed, which is also manifest in Hannah's words; "the closet can only stop you from being seen." While closet functions as a cover and a space of hiding from and concealment against exposure of the non-normative sexual

orientations, coming out (of closet) refers to an intentional process of exposure, which can be read as a reclamation of shame. Hannah's exposure of her experience of feeling of shame aligns with the theoretical accounts with respect to the harms done in her identity formation and the pain it caused. While Hannah draws attention to shame's debilitating effects, she does something more by reclaiming her shame despite being a byproduct of homophobia. And now, since the truth revealed, that previous joke fades away into a story of a lesbian whose life has been damaged by the violence of homophobia.

Hannah's revisiting of her funny conversation with her grandma and then laying down the harsh realities behind the joke provides a full picture of the story, which leaves the audience in a state where they cannot laugh anymore. Rather, with the turning point by which she revisits the previous jokes, she made in the first part and unfolds the stories behind them, tension release is suspended and never fully arrives. Instead, it ends up leaving the audience with tension and contracting affects that in no way do resemble relief that comes with laughter. As Hannah says at the end of her show, "And this tension, it's yours. I am not helping you anymore. You need to learn what this feels like because this... this tension is what not-normals carry inside of them all of the time because it is dangerous to be different!"

Hannah's move incites other kinds of affective response from the audience. In one of her interviews, she says, "I'm getting responses from India and Europe and all these places. And to think that my little story that's so idiosyncratic can find resonance in places that I honestly would have thought that I would be an alien. ... When people come up to me, I'm reminded of what it is I put out into the world, and I'm touched that it has resonance with so many different people."

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<sup>32</sup> <https://variety.com/2019/tv/news/hannah-gadsby-nanette-netflix-1203214047/>

In an New York Times article, it is noted that “Josh Thomas, a young Australian star who hired Gadsby as a writer and performer on his TV series, *Please Like Me* said that “I see storytelling like Hannah’s, where she rages about the homophobia in the world, and I cry and I realise that I grew up with so much shame. “*Nanette*,” he added, “made me question if I could have made more space for people that are different, as well as empowering me to stop people from taking space away from me because I’m different. I feel like it’s permanently changed my point of view.”<sup>33</sup>

*Nanette*, with her move of dismantling comedy by inserting stories that were omitted before, incites a mixture of affects in the audience. I would like to reflect on another example of her woven structure of comedy in which she revisits a joke she made in the first part of the show to reveal the real story behind it, in other words, to dismantle the comedy.

In response to the feedback she received from lesbians regarding the lack of lesbian content in her comedy, Hannah says that “Perhaps I’ve been slacking off a bit. When I first started... the comedy, over a decade ago, always, nothing but. Nothing but lesbian content. Wall to wall. My first ever show... was classic new gay comic 101. My coming out story. I told lots of cool jokes about homophobia.” And she begins to tell a joke about one of her experiences in which she was misgendered as a man.

“I told... a story about the time this young man had almost beaten me up because he thought... I mean, he thought I was cracking on to his girlfriend. Actually, that bit was true, got that right, but... there was a twist. It happened late at night, it was at the bus stop. The pub had closed, it was the last bus home, and I was waiting at the bus stop. And I was talking to a girl, and... you know, you could say flirting. I don’t know. And... out of nowhere, he just comes up and starts shoving me, going, “Fuck off, you fucking faggot!” And he goes, “Keep away from my girlfriend, you fucking freak!” And she’s just stepped in, going, “Whoa, stop it! It’s a girl!” And he’s gone, “Oh, sorry.” He said, “Oh, I’m so sorry. I don’t hit women,” he said. What a guy! “I don’t hit women.” How

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/comedy/features/hannah-gadsby-interview-nanette-netflix-quitting-comedy-louis-ck-a8464691.html>

about you don't hit anyone? Good rule of thumb. And he goes, "Sorry, I got confused. I thought you were a fucking faggot... trying to crack on to my girlfriend." Now I understand I have a responsibility to help lead people out of ignorance at every opportunity I can, but I left him there, people. Safety first."

This joke is funny because everything in it is true. From the beginning, that guy got it right, that Hannah was hitting on his girlfriend, and yes, she was a "(sic)faggot." Only, when he realized that Hannah was not a man, he felt sorry for his confusion. Yet, the part he overlooked was that heterosexuality is not the only sexual orientation; lesbians and "gender-not-normals" do exist, and they could flirt women, too. His ignorance suddenly turns this aggressive, "manly" guy into a foolish person in the eyes of the audience in Hannah's hands. Hannah not only does make fun of the ignorance of this young man but also reveals the ludicrousness of toxic masculinity, homophobia, and gender binarism all in one joke. In the second part of the show where Hannah takes on dismantling comedy, she revisits that joke, but this time to show the limits of comedy. She goes;

"Do you remember that story about that young man who almost beat me up? It was a very funny story. It was very funny, I made a lot of people laugh about his ignorance, and the reason I could do that is because I'm very good at this job. I actually am pretty good at controlling the tension. And I know how to balance that to get the laugh at the right place. But in order to balance the tension in the room with that story, I couldn't tell that story as it actually happened. Because I couldn't tell the part of the story where that man realized his mistake. And he came back. And he said, "Oh, no, I get it. You're a lady faggot. I'm allowed to beat the shit out of you," and he did! He beat the shit out of me and nobody stopped him. And I didn't... report that to the police, and I did not take myself to hospital, and I should have. And you know why I didn't? It's because I thought that was all I was worth. And that is what happens when you soak one child in shame and give permission to another to hate. And that was not homophobia, pure and simple, people. That was gendered. If I'd been feminine, that would not have happened. I am incorrectly female. I am incorrect, and that is a punishable offense. And this tension, it's yours. I am not helping you anymore."

The effect is both unsettling and dauntingly intense. Not only her words but also her voice and the visual delivery of her speech in a close-up shot throughout endorse the affective

intensity of viewing experience. Hannah is shouting out rather than speaking. Her voice escalates, cracks, and shakes. Her bodily movements are sharp and fast. Conflicting affects arise and pass body to body. It is not only her voice that shakes but also the audience's state of feeling. Nothing is funny anymore; laughing is inappropriate at this moment of this stand-up comedy show. Hearing this anguishing story lays behind her previous joke (which we laughed at a bit ago), and seeing her face closely incite affects that pave the way for an ethical listening. And the affects that emerged from this viewing experience passes to the viewers' body. Tension is intensifying. But Hannah goes on and doubles down persecuting the men in the audience. Her above speech is immediately followed by;

“You need to learn what this feels like because this... this tension is what not-normals carry inside of them all of the time because it is dangerous to be different! To the men... to the men in the room, I speak to you now, particularly the white men, especially the straight white men. Pull your fucking socks up! How humiliating! Fashion advice from a lesbian. That is your last joke.”

Hannah calls out white men in the audience for they uphold the gender binary system, which harms and exerts violence upon non-normative gender people. An interlude of a joke at the end of this speech functions as a tension release amid a highly tension loaded speech. Yet, it does not slow Hannah down. Rather, Hannah intensifies the affects and emotions in the viewer by taking on a difficult conversation about the sexual violence events that she went through.

“I’m not a man-hater. But I’m afraid of men. If I’m the only woman in a room full of men, I am afraid. And if you think that’s unusual, you’re not speaking to the women in your life. I don’t hate men, but I wonder how a man would feel if they’d lived my life. Because it was a man who sexually abused me when I was a child. It was a man who beat the shit out of me when I was 17, my prime. It was two men who raped me when I was barely in my twenties. Tell me why is that okay. Why was it okay to pick me off the pack like that and do that to me? It would have been more humane to just take me out to the back paddock and put a bullet in my head if it is that much of a crime to be different! I don’t tell you this... so you think of me as a victim. I am not a victim. I tell you this because my story has value. My story has value. I tell you this ’cause I want you to know, I need you to know what I know. Because, like it or not, your story... is my story. And my story is your story. I just don't have the strength to take care of my story anymore.

I don't want my story defined by anger. All I can ask is just please help me take care of my story.”

Before talking about Hannah’s speaking out about her personal experience of sexual violence, I would like to talk about “survivor speech” by reflecting on the piece “Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?” written by Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray. In this piece, Alcoff and Gray elucidate on repercussions and potentials of survivor speech may generate. As they approach "speech" as a discursive act, following Foucault, they view “speech” as always already a discursive act, and they draw attention to the double play of "speech" that manifest in repressive or resistive forms depending on the conditions it is externalized and interpreted. On the one hand, they note that: “Speaking out serves to educate the society at large about the dimensions of sexual violence and misogyny, to reposition the problem from the individual psyche to the social sphere where it rightfully belongs, and to empower victims to act constructively on our own behalf and thus make the transition from passive victim to active survivor” (Alcoff&Gray, 1993, p.261-262). On the other hand, they warn against the situations where survivor discourse may further marginalize and victimize the survivors in the event of its co-optation into dominant discourses. By looking at the hierarchical structuring in listening and telling historically, they critique how the expert position in religious and psychiatric models have normalized survivor speech in the service of dominant discourses, and that how survivor speech was depended on the position of the expert to be credible. In the same vein, they observe TV talk shows in which, although survivors found a space to speak out about their stories of sexual violence, their stories were subsumed into dominant discourses through media’s tactics of sensationalization, titillation, and exploitation, diminishing any possible intervention in hegemonic discourses. As they note; “survivor discourse has paradoxically appeared to have

empowering effects even while it has in some cases unwittingly facilitated the recuperation of dominant” (ibid, p.263). As opposed to this model, they seek for modes of storytelling in which personal narratives would generate political transformation of the epidemic, and in which survivors gain autonomy of their own stories and expert position is eliminated. Alcoff and Gray suggest a way of listening and telling in which “What we need is not to confess, but to witness, which Ziegenmeyer defines as “to speak out, to name the unnameable, to turn and face it down” ... A witness is not someone who confesses, but someone who knows the truth and has the courage to” (ibid, p.287). They foreground that we need to give “witness to sexual violence in a way that cannot be contained, recuperated, or ignored” (ibid, p.288).

Looking at the conditions that Hannah delivers her speech, it is possible to say that she neither depended on an expert to be validated nor is in need of recuperation. She also refuses to be seen as victim. She has the control over the space of the stage and the audience to voice her story of sexual violence. Hannah brings her story out to collective consciousness to be heard and understood. Thus, Hannah’s survivor speech comes as a call for witnesses who help her “take care of her story.” Hannah not only does draw attention to the pervasiveness of sexual violence as a systemic issue but also links her individual experience to the social and political. In the end, Hannah seeks a collective witnessing when she goes on, saying “I will not allow my story... to be destroyed. What I would have done to have heard a story like mine. Not for blame. Not for reputation, not for money, not for power. But to feel less alone. To feel connected. I want my story... heard.”

### **Is Feminist Humor (Im)Possible?**

Feminists have a long reputation of “taking everything so seriously.” Most of us heard these many times: “Do you not have a sense of humor?” “You always spoil the joke!”; “Grow a

sense of humor!"; "Angry feminists!"; "Killjoys!" If seriousness and humor are two mutually exclusive concepts, and if feminists do take everything seriously, then, is feminist humor an im/possibility?

With *Nanette*, this question becomes more pressing after Hannah's dismantling comedy structure and showing us its limits. As Hannah revealed, humor is not possible unless it omits stories lay behind for the sake of inciting laughter, stories that have value and need to be heard, stories that are laughed away until the truth behind it unmasked. Such as Hannah's omitting her internalized homophobia and shame of her non-normative sexuality behind the story in which she did not come out to her grandmother, her having been beaten by that guy whom we laughed for his ignorance. In that sense, humor lets the serious issues being laughed away through releasing tension, thereby creating an illusion of release and recuperation. As Hannah says, "Laughter is just the honey that sweetens the bitter medicine." With eliminating the omittance, how would it be possible to do feminist humor, one that does neither appeal to self-deprecating humor in order to speak about serious issues nor lets those issues be laughed away? If feminist humor has leaned on self-deprecating modes of humor just to be able to talk about "serious" matters in the *laughscape* in accommodating or unthreatening ways, then how would this contribute to further marginalization of the people who identify with the comic? How can feminist humor go beyond its self-deprecatory modes and bring in difficult conversations that are both individual and connected to broader hegemonic structures into the *laughscape* at the same time? Can the *laughscape* of feminist humor open up a space for more storytelling?

Responses to *Nanette* from other women and lesbian stand-up comedians indicate that feminist humor in the *laughscape* of the stand-up world will be changing. Tig Notario says that "Gadsby was disrupting comedy. "It's going to be very interesting to see what comedians do

post-*Nanette*. It's a dividing line. She cleared the table for necessary regrowth.”<sup>34</sup> Fellow comedian Kathy Griffin tweeted, “I’ve been a professional comic for 30 years. I’ve been studying comedy for even longer. I thought I had seen everything ... until I watched *Nanette*, I was blown away. I urge you to watch it ASAP – one hour and it’ll change your life.” Aparna Nancherla also tweeted, “This is one of the most incredible, powerful, wrenching pieces of comedy and art I have ever seen.” Another tweet about *Nanette* came from comedian Jenny Yang; “This one’s gonna linger for a while and will influence a whole generation of comedians. If I don’t change how I do comedy after seeing her special, why even?”<sup>35</sup>

### **Storytelling as a Feminist Strategy**

By turning to Shari Stone Mediatore’s analysis of storytelling’s affinities to feminism, I will demonstrate why storytelling has been such a valuable feminist practice against dominant knowledge productions. Stone Mediatore, in her chapter of “Storytelling/Narrative” in the Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory, provides a genealogical trajectory of feminist storytelling (Mediatore, 2016). Not only does she look at the conditions that paved the way for its catalyzation but also reflects on the perspectives that foregrounded its potentials and risks. Even though storytelling as part of women's movement accentuated with consciousness-raising groups’ (mostly white, middle-class women) of the 1960s and 1970s' exchanging their stories of struggling under patriarchy, it has also been utilized by women of color in the states and the global South. However, the latter as Stone Mediatore notes “generated new perspectives on their identities and histories by pursuing testimonies, creative memoirs, and other experience-based

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/comedy/features/hannah-gadsby-interview-nanette-netflix-quitting-comedy-louis-ck-a8464691.html>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2018/07/03/why-hannah-gadsbys-netflix-special-nanette-is-so-remarkable/>

texts. These stories ventured further than white, middle-class women's stories insofar as they mixed languages and genres to explore simultaneous oppression and "the politics of multiple identities" ((quoted Torres 1991), *ibid*, p.272); however, analogously to white women's story sharing, these stories also used "the politics of everyday life" to cultivate new historical knowledge and political consciousness" (quoted Mohanty 1991a, 39. *Ibid*, p.935). Despite storytelling's contributions, it nevertheless was criticized by other feminists on two accounts; the first account was for its focus on the individual problems, which either ignored "the concern for struggles of differently located people or the broader sociohistorical mechanisms of oppression" (*ibid*, p.935). The second point of criticism was on the basis of personal narratives' treatments of experience "as if it were an internal truth, a prediscursive "hidden truth of women's existence" (949), whereas experience is, as much as any other linguistic event, constructed discursively. In response to the latter criticism, Stone Mediatore notes that this approach is fraught with the danger of "throwing out the baby with the bathwater" in a way that erases potentials of the personal narratives that can open up (*ibid*, p.935). Stone Mediatore elucidates on the achievements attributed to storytelling by noting its potentials of "turning of everyday experiences of discontent into critical insight, the disruption of practices of domination, the promotion of more inclusive democracies, and the encouragement of more rigorous and community-accountable knowledge practices" (*ibid*, p.936). Therefore, feminist storytelling can function as a strategy of resistance through the utilization of our stories into critical feminist knowledge that enables "drawing connections between the experiences of the women and the powers exerted upon them" (*ibid*, p.938).

With Hannah's pose for bringing storytelling that has affinities with feminist storytelling to the *laughscape* of humor, we are provided with an exemplary, one that resituates and

challenges the dominant knowledges and that renders affective connections with the audience. At the end of the day, Hannah's performance in *Nanette* makes a new world of stand-up comedy that goes beyond centering laughter as the prioritized affective expectation. In that sense, *Nanette* shows us that feminist stand-up comedy is more than just laughter and tension release by stretching and reshaping the limits of what comedy has been and can be. Through suspending tension release and telling stories that are tense, *Nanette* brings about different kinds of affects and emotions which are cathartic in their own ways: Catharsis that comes with connecting others through hearing and feeling their stories; catharsis through sensations, affects and emotions, such as anger, rage, pain, sadness, that are felt collectively through their passing from body to body. It becomes apparent in Hannah's words that how the affective connection may open up for healing affects; "Performing it wasn't therapeutic, exactly, because it's so hard to do, she said<sup>36</sup>. But overall, it began to hold – some other people were holding my pain, and I've never had that. I've never had that. And that has done a lot of healing, I think."<sup>37</sup>

As opposed Gadsby's stance towards avoiding spreading anger (even though her performance exhibits anger), anger may serve as a constructive affective pedagogy to stimulate the viewer, as Ramzi Fawaz suggests with their affective curation pedagogical model which; "[...centralizes the value of intentionally eliciting, or "triggering," uncomfortable affective responses from students in the classroom in order to develop new strategies for retuning, rerouting, or altogether altering students' sense perceptions of the world]" (Fawaz, 2016, p.760). Through

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<sup>36</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/comedy/features/hannah-gadsby-interview-nanette-netflix-quitting-comedy-louis-ck-a8464691.html>

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

the constant negotiation between storytelling and humor, and between various affective pedagogies, feminist humor will continue to make new worlds in different modes.

As Hannah Gadsby says, “Then I think about people saying, “Oh, it’s not stand-up comedy,” I say, “Let’s not define what comedy is. Let’s define what the purpose of comedy is.” And that’s, I believe, to laugh. And what’s the purpose of laughter? Catharsis. To feel better about something. Laughter is not the only way to reach catharsis. One of the ways I get it is to finally understand something or someone says something in a way that crystallizes what’s been worrying me — though I didn’t know it was worrying me. So maybe I do stand-up catharsis.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/la-en-st-hannah-gadsby-nanette-20190610-story.html>

## 6 CONCLUSION

In 2017, in the morning show "The Breakfast Club," comedian Lil Duval joked made a joke that if he finds out if his partner were trans, he would murder them; and said; *"This might sound messed up. and I don't care: She dying,"* and continued; *"I can't deal with that... You manipulated me to believe in this thing, my mind, I can't... I'm gay now!"* Laverne Cox, who is a black trans woman, actor and trans rights activist, responded to this event on Twitter; *"Some folks think it's ok to joke about wanting to kill us. We have free speech but that speech has consequences and trans folks are experiencing the negative consequences with our lives. It hurts my spirit cause this isn't funny. Our lives matter. Trans murder isn't a joke<sup>39</sup>."*

In Cox's response pretty much summarizes my point of how free speech and off-limits comedy can function as a cloak for verbal violence through jokes that are made at the expense of others or that use people who are at the margins as the butt of the joke. While this joke was not made on a stand-up comedy stage,

Calling out offensive jokes such as above, or like the rape jokes I briefly reflected on my first chapter, has been usurped under political correctness to dismiss or invalidate the experiences, emotions of others by calling them weak and suggesting them to toughen up.

In order to trace how the ongoing masculinist discourse of 'toughing up' in US politics in the period after 9/11 and in the Trump era amplifies in comedians' insistence on an off-limits comedy. By particularly focusing on the stand-up comedy shows that came out between the years of 2017-2019, I have attempted to discuss how PC culture has been used as a target to gaslight, invalidate the critiques of comedic language through underlying gendered meanings. In Chapelle's performance *Stick&Stones*, which is a proud "politically incorrect" show, PC culture

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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2017/07/165898/laverne-cox-lil-duval-transgender-partner-joke>

appears to be women and LGBTQ people; in Ansari's show, *Right Now*, it is "newly woke white people" and #metoo supporters; in Esposito's *Rape Jokes* the target is not PC Culture, rather the target is the anti-PC Culture people or comedians by which Esposito attempts to unmask their masculinist tendencies. Therefore, while dissident voices that are usurped under and labeled as PC culture gain gendered meanings, that is the femininity, weakness, over-sensitivity, easily-triggered, over-emotional and so on. On the flipside, as Esposito points out, it is the masculinity that benefits from creating the enemy of PC culture to justify their ideologies. Secondly, I have aimed to challenge the claims of pro-off-limits comedians to be transgressive to the morality, by making 'taboo' jokes, does not entail subversion to dominant ideologies. Rather, like rape jokes when made in a way to normalize rape culture, it reinforces the sexual violence. In trying to point out the mutual exclusivity of transgressing moral values and negotiating for ethics of others, I do not call for a censorship of comedy, instead, what I attempted to do was to reveal the hypocrisy in hiding behind some 'taboo' jokes as if it is transgressive.

Moreover, by juxtaposing the commonalities in the topics of the three shows I analyzed in the first chapter, such as sexual violence and sexual assault cases surfaced with #metoo movement, I intended to trace the impact of the increasing vocalizations with #metoo against sexual violence in terms of shaping the comedic language and performative styles. Each show exhibits varying takes on the issue of sexual assault; Even though Chappelle continues to make rape jokes, by keeping his ground as the taboo breaker comedian, however he no more seems to be able to do such jokes carelessly; Ansari appears to be conscious of his jokes in his emphasis for a need to change in comedic language; Esposito not only makes fun of the rape jokers but also brings in her sexual assault story in the comedy space, contributing to the thread of performances of her fellow comedians who bring survivor speech into comedy.

In the second chapter on *Nanette*, keeping the lineage between how #metoo accelerated the meshing of survivor speech with humor, I tackled the #metoo impact on the show's groundbreaking and revolutionary qualities. Gadsby, in line with #metoo spirit, speaks out about her experiences of sexual and physical violence. However, Gadsby adopts a unique strategy, through visual, narrative and performative tools, in which she intentionally mobilizes difficult affects in the audience, which have been 'out of place' affects in the *laughscape* of comedy. Gadsby deconstructs the comedic form by pointing out how jokes can be funny insofar as they omit the harsh realities behind it, and she refuses to omit her experiences that are harmed by homophobia and sexism. Gadsby does not let her stories be laughed away, rather she leaves the audience tense and unsettled as opposed to the tension release and relief that comes with laughter. Her intentional use of affectivity, as I suggested before, can be thought as an affective pedagogy of feminist humor that can be used, following Fawaz's affective curation model, in the service of disorienting people's perceptions of the world, and following Ahmed's suggestion, of creating connections between others.

Gadsby's tearing down the same old comedy format through unraveling the ontology of comedy, in which the stories that are not funny have been omitted for the sake of laughter, is an ethical call for bringing in the stories that have been silenced and dismissed so far. *Nanette*'s incorporating feminist storytelling into the space of comedy through unsettling and triggering affective pedagogies offers new ways of making comedy which does not prioritize the relief that comes with laughter but a different kind of catharsis that may lead to (un)learning, connecting moments. Gadsby, with *Nanette*, provides us a great opportunity to rethink about the ethics of comedy in terms of what it leaves out, whose voices and stories are allowed in comedy spaces. As such, the discussions around the comedic language in comedy spaces that I reflected in the

first chapter, I believe, may pave the way for rethinking about the ethics of comedy in more negotiating ways.

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