License to Laugh

The Stand-Up Comedian in Relation to American Normative Values

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Abstract

Humor is considered an essential feature of human culture and has always held up a mirror to society. One form of humor that has gained momentum in recent decades is American stand-up comedy. This thesis sets out to locate the function of the stand-up comedian in relation to American normative values. It does so in three steps. First, the three leading theories of humor are reviewed in relation to stand-up, which leads to an amalgamated version of the superiority theory and the incongruity theory based on the notion of incongruous superiority. Next, this notion paves the way for theorizing the construction of the comedian's license, which is a crucial concept in relation to normative values. The license is argued to depend specifically on self-deprecatory humor and performed marginality. Finally, the set out theoretical framework is applied to the case studies of Louis C.K. and Chris Rock. The first affirms the theory of the license and the second shows the complexity of its construction. In both cases, stand-up comedy serves as critique and a social corrective to established norms – it is itself a normative aspect of American society.

Key Words: Humor; Stand-Up Comedy; Self-Deprecation; Incongruous Superiority; The Comedian's License; Performed Marginality; Louis C.K.; Chris Rock

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Acknowledgments

Lawrence Mintz has observed that quite a number of studies on humor begin with a somewhat half-hearted apology for taking such a light subject so seriously or for not being able to reproduce onto paper the spirit and tone intended by the object of examination. Though I agree with the last point for it appears that nothing could be further at the opposite end of humor than academic writing, I shall not apologize for taking on this subject. In fact, the topic is anything but light, let alone the study thereof. Nothing distracts more from academic research than the comic I would say, for going through hours and hours of hilarious stand-up comedy material – of course, all under the guise of academic analysis – lures even the most focused of researchers into the pure entertainment of it.

Therefore, it would only seem appropriate that I devote a few non-academic words here to thanking those who have managed to pull me away from the delights of stand-up comedy and pushed me back towards the tedious but extremely satisfying task of finishing this thesis. First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor Professor Frank Mehring, who managed to muster a great deal of patients on his part and gave crucial and invaluable feedback to wild ideas for and early drafts of this thesis. In addition, I say thank you to Dr. László Munteán for letting me teach a class on humor as his teaching assistant in the course American Popular Culture and bounce ideas off himself and his students, who together offered me incremental insights into the subject of humor.

I would also like to thank three unknown and therefore unnamed ladies who sat across from me in the university cafeteria during my "analysis process" and reminded me of how much fun I was having working on my thesis – and how silly I looked laughing all by myself with my little smart phone in front of me showing me yet another true witticism by Louis C.K. Him I would also like to thank as well as Chris Rock, for existing. And my parents for creating me so that I may partake in the delightful enjoyment of comic amusement. Last but certainly not least, I thank my partner Eloy Weterings, who I hold personally accountable for my profound interest in stand-up comedy. This leaves me with nothing but to wish my reader a relatively pleasant time reading this thesis and I bid them good day. (If they do not "get" the incongruity implied here they should quickly move on to chapter I.)

Introduction

Nothing ruins a joke more than the attempt to explain it. Although it is not my intention to deconstruct and explain to my reader a myriad of jokes, it is the goal of this thesis to take the reader on an exploratory journey of comic amusement and, to be more specific, of stand-up comedy. One could ask: why attempt such a venture of explaining the comic? Why take such a light-hearted subject so seriously? It is my belief that humor has received too little attention in academic discourse and that it remains an understudied field. Yet, why it has received so little attention remains a mystery to me, for humor is one of the most prevalent aspects of every known human culture. It performs many social functions, such as to provide a setting for social criticism, to construct a community among a group of strangers – be it imagined or not – to exhibit intelligence, or to relieve stress, to name but a few. Humor that combines and executes these different functions well attains value and performs a fundamental role in social life (Carroll, *Humour: Short Introduction* 76).

One form of humor that may do so effectively is American stand-up comedy. Among different forms of humor, stand-up comedy is gaining steady momentum, not only in the United States but also in other parts of the world (Lockyer 586). The art of stand-up may be defined as the performance by a comedian of oral narratives, usually monologues, in which they *appear* to express themselves rather than take on a theatrical role. The definitive feature of stand-up is an absolute directness of communication between comedian and audience (Marc, qtd. in Lee 4). The essence of stand-up comedy is captured well by Judith Yaross Lee, who maintains that "[s]tand-up comedians purport to speak autobiographically and in their own voice while engaging in apparently authentic, if not convincingly spontaneous, communication with the audience and their punchlines typically cap extended anecdotes and observations instead of one-line jokes" (4). Stand-up comedy in this sense much resembles oral narratives that take place in common social relationships. However, it does rely upon the evidently artificial rules of theatrical performance, where an audience pays money to yield the floor to the comedian. As such, it is not an equal conversation where speaker and listener take turns, for the audience has agreed to restrict its communications to laughter, applause, boos, and so forth.

This provides the stand-up comedian with a unique setting for critiquing, disseminating, or reinforcing social norms. Stand-up comedians may pose themselves as the outsider, critiquing and challenging dominant ideology (Gillota 103), they may take on the role of community spokesperson, reinforcing social norms (Mintz 197), or their humor may

even serve as a corrective factor of social norms (Bergson 86; Ziv 16). In any case, the stand-up comedian is given what Lawrence Mintz calls a "traditional *license* for deviate behavior and expression" that allows for turning the normally unacceptable into something comic, stretching and re-molding normative values (Mintz 196; Cohen and Richards n.p.; Durham 509). This license is best defined as a contract between comedian and audience based on a power relation unique to the art of stand-up. The comedian gains the license by using self-deprecatory humor based on a his or her rhetorically constructed category of marginality for an audience that incongruously perceives their superiority to the comedian. This allows the comedian to vacillate between community stand-in and critiquing outsider in relation to American normative values. The analysis of these claims will be guided by the following research question: What is the *function* of the stand-up comedian in relation to American normative values?

In order to answer this question as meticulously as possible, a number of subquestions bolster the main research question and these provide the chapter outline for the thesis. Firstly, how effective are established theories of humor in making sense of stand-up comedy? How might they be redefined to make them more effective in this task? What elements are missing from these theories that are critical to explaining the nature of humor in stand-up comedy? Secondly, how are the missing elements devised or constructed by the comedian? How does the comedian, using these elements, influence existing social norms, especially in times of excessive cries for political correctness? Finally, the detailed theoretical framework set out based on the license of the comedian is supported by two close readings of stand-up performances.

The two case studies I have selected are works of stand-up comedians Louis C.K. and Chris Rock. The humor of these comedians provides fitting case studies as they not only take on a wide variety of topics that cross racial, sexual, gender, and class boundaries, but are also filled with self-deprecatory humor. Each of them uses one of two different types of performed marginality that I set forth in the second chapter, making them fitting case studies for my research. I analyze not only the textual content of the comedian's comic routines but also their paralanguage. Specific gestures, comments by the comedian, articulation, intonation, and facial expressions may reveal more about their comic routines. I limit my research to the analysis of *recorded* stand-up shows by the two mentioned comedians. Analysis of audiences and their reactions is therefore problematic as they are not generally in focus in these recorded shows. Moments of laughter, applause, and boos are an informative but limited object of analysis, so the analysis of audiences is additionally based on reviewing communication

studies that focus on the mediation of humor. The research questions are answered by using literary research on theories of humor, stand-up comedy, political correctness, and American normative values, among others, and the close readings of the case studies.

Current academic discourse on humor mainly revolves around three leading theories, namely the superiority theory, the release theory, and the incongruity theory. This thesis borrows the insights from these theories but it also attempts to do something different. Rather than use examples of stand-up comedy to support claims about the performance of these theories in explaining humor in general, this thesis places stand-up comedy at the center of its analysis and attempts to begin constructing a framework that makes sense of stand-up comedy in relation to these theories. More particularly, this thesis attempts to rescue the superiority theory from being pushed into the academic background by combining it with the incongruity theory, using the notions of "incongruous superiority" and the comedian's "license" based on self-deprecatory humor as a defense against political correctness. Though scholars have paid plenty of attention to the use of irony and satire in American humor, self-deprecatory humor has received minimal attention, particularly in relation to stand-up comedy and American normative values. Few studies have focused on how this form of humor may be an effective tool for influencing social norms even though it is a form of humor frequently resorted to in stand-up comedy (Gilbert 19). This thesis attempts to fill this gap by putting forward a hypothesis of the license of the comedian based on this form of humor.

Chapter 1 – Funny in Theory

Humor is considered an essential feature of human culture and has been studied for over 2300 years. Philosophers as early as Plato and Aristotle discussed the nature of humor in their works, believing that humor is actually associated with malice and abuse targeted at people marked as deficient. Plato even went as far as fearing humor to lead to what Homer calls "unquenchable laughter" and discouraged the cultivation of laughter among his students (Schulten 69). Especially heavy laughter could, according to Plato, make us lose our rational control of ourselves and thus make us less fully human. Theorizing humor has come a long way since the time of Plato and Aristotle and different theoretical frameworks now exist that attempt to explain the nature of humor. The three dominant theories are discussed in this chapter, one of which will be dismissed as insufficient for explaining stand-up comedy. The other two, or rather a combination thereof, seem much more promising in providing an informative approach to understanding stand-up comedy.

Before I move on to explaining what these theories are and what they entail, however, the term "humor" needs some consideration. It is necessary to clarify my definition of humor in order not to confuse it with any of its half-evolved etymological forms. The term is derived from the Latin word "humor," which means fluids, including bodily fluids. Ancient physicians believed that one's general well-being depended upon the right balance of four bodily fluids: blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile. When the balance of these fluids is distorted, specific personality traits become emphasized, depending on which fluid is most out of proportion. An excess of blood, for example, would result in sanguinity or hopefulness. In this fashion, humor came to be associated with a person whose personality deviated from the norm. These people were regarded as eccentric and became a fitting subject for actors around the sixteenth century to mock. Such mockery, much in line with Plato's and Aristotle's conception of humor, is at the base of what is today called the superiority theory of humor, which will be discussed in the first subchapter of this chapter.

The term humor has acquired a very different meaning in today's society. Humor is a broad term and to narrow it down would be futile unless I first provide a contextual framework for humor to define in. This contextual framework is dependent on the theoretical framework I chose to work with, so at this point I wish to make clear that the theories I selected are the superiority theory and the incongruity theory. Why I chose these and not any other theory, I explain in the following subchapters. But acknowledging these theories here prevents me from having to define humor within multiple different frameworks.

The working definition that both the superiority theory and the incongruity theory adopt is that humor is *that* which is intended to induce laughter or amusement, so it is the *object* of comic amusement. This object is what constitutes human comic expression, which presents itself in various disguised forms. Many different forms of humor exist, some more commonly known and used such as irony, satire – be it political or not – and caricature. Others, however, are more subjective to individual taste, such as blue humor, which contains explicit, sexual, or scatological humor. In addition, some forms that are certainly categorized as humor are not generally associated with humor due to the altered connotation they have obtained in popular culture, such as burlesque. The mocking skits of this form of humor were often performed in the same venues as ecdysiastic displays, which in the nineteenth century led to it being perceived as "nude drama" of "cultural indecency, impudence, and suggestive sexual display" instead of being perceived as innocuous nonsense (Allen 16).

All of these forms of humor are examples of objects that *may* cause comic amusement. I use the word "may" here because all of these forms are subjective to personal taste. These forms of humor may also result in laughter, which again is subjective. The terms "comic amusement" and "laughter," should, however, not be confused with one another. Though the two surely are causally related in many cases, much laughter also occurs without comic amusement, like triumphant laughter, laughter from winning the lottery or from being tickled, or laughter from lovemaking or nervousness. Laughter, as John Morreall maintains, refers to a piece of behavior, though a very peculiar one (3). It is not like yawning or coughing purely physiologically explicable, but rather is connected to emotions. Comic amusement is defined as a paradigmatic emotional state, which is directed towards an object, much like fear (Carroll, *Humour: Short Introduction* 5). Whereas fear is directed towards a situation that is *perceived* as threatening, comic amusement is directed towards a situation that is *perceived* as humorous. In cases where laughter results from a state of comic amusement, it can be interpreted as the bodily expression of comic amusement directed at humor.

For stand-up comedy, needless to say, I focus solely on the type of laughter that results from comic amusement. As such, it seems futile to offer a theory of laughter to explain comic amusement, for such a theory would be too all-encompassing. It is more informative to turn to theories that deal with the nature of humor. Though the three main theories that I discuss are often used interchangeably as theories for laughter and for humor (Shaw 113), I follow what I take to be the current consensus position and treat them as theories of humor as they then offer a more illuminating approach to stand-up comedy.

1.1 – Superiority Theory

Some 2000 years after Plato and Aristotle contemplated the nature of humor, Thomas Hobbes laid solid foundation for our contemporary definition of the superiority theory of humor. In his *Leviathan*, he defines humor as a "*Sudden Glory*," a "passion which maketh those Grimaces called Laughter," that results from perceiving infirmities in others that reinforce our own sense of superiority (43). The most apparent example I can give to illustrate this notion of superiority are "moron jokes," such as jokes as told by the Dutch about Belgians. Let me illustrate this with an example:

> A Dutchman and a Belgian together wash ashore on an island full of cannibals and are immediately taken prisoner. Right before the Dutchman and the Belgian are eaten, a voodoo cannibal walks in and says: "Our gods want to give you an opportunity to stay alive. Go to the jungle, collect 100 pieces of fruit, and put them all in our butt. If you can do this without laughing even once, you will be a free man once more."
>
> The Dutchman and the Belgian are released and together they storm off into the jungle to find 100 pieces of fruit. The Dutchman returns first with 100 berries and immediately starts stuffing his butt. At number 100, he all of a sudden roars with laughter and thus failed in his task. Before the cannibals throw him in their cooking pot, their leaders asks: "How could you fail? You were almost a free man and then you burst into laughter." The Dutchman, still laughing, replies: "Well, I was about to put in the last berry and then I saw that ridiculous Belgian guy arriving with 100 coconuts."

If the reader finds this sort of joke funny, then they are in a state of comic amusement caused by the feeling of superiority most likely over the Belgian moron character. (There is also an interpretation that causes laughter directed towards the idiocy of the Dutchman to be influenced by the sight of the Belgian with 100 coconuts). If I replace the nationalities of this joke, and retell it, for instance, as an Irish American laughing at a Polish or Italian American, this does not change the fundamental structure of the joke. There is still a feeling of superiority over the moron characters. This is also the case with the popular variants of lawyer jokes and blonde jokes. These are all instances of moron jokes, where characters are made fun of who are particularly stupid, vain, greedy, cruel, dirty, or deficient in any other form, both physically (e.g. stuttering) and culturally (e.g. illiteracy).

The superiority theory, however, has over the years slowly been pushed off the academic stage, simply because its explanatory reach suffers notable limitations. Take, for instance, a simple joke like "what day does an egg fear the most?" "Friday." Here it is unclear who to feel superior to. In fact, the receiver of the joke might actually feel inferior to the teller if they cannot immediately think of the answer, which may then increase implicit social pressure and make them feel uncomfortable.

In addition, people often find themselves comically amused when they are in the process of doing something stupid or foolish, like putting salt in their coffee instead of sugar. They are comically amused at their own *inferiority* and in these instances no feelings of *superiority* come into play. So, it would seem that the superiority theory is difficult to square with self-deprecatory humor. Of course, a suggestion here would be that the listener laughs because they feel superior to the person debasing themselves, but that is not the riddle here. The real mystery is the question of why the perpetrator of self-deprecatory humor finds it funny or useful.

One answer to this question would be that jokesters using this sort of humor feel themselves superior in relation to their audience, because their self-deprecation actually demonstrates their cleverness (Carroll, *Humour: Short Introduction* 12). This form of self-deprecation is one often found in stand-up comedy, where stand-up comedians deprecate themselves in their comic routines to evoke an emotional state of comic amusement from the audience (Gilbert 19). According to this logic, the stand-up comedian would feel superior to the audience due to his or her cleverness. Yet, this is where proponents of the superiority theory will find themselves in a dilemma. If the audience's laughter correlates with the stand-up comedian's recognition of his or her own cleverness, the audience surely must be aware of their own inferiority to the comedian standing before them. And, if the laughter corresponds to the audience's feeling of superiority towards the comedian, why then does a comedian enjoy his or her own humorous deprecation? Moreover, as 18th century philosopher Francis Hutcheson, one of the fiercest critics of the superiority theory, noted, there are many things in this world humans find inferior to themselves, like for instance oysters, but they never laugh at them ("Comic Amusement" 77). Superiority, then, is not a necessary qualification for comic amusement.

After this assessment of the superiority theory, it would seem natural to explore other options, particularly in relation to stand-up comedy, that may provide a more informative solution. In the following two subchapters, I discuss two other theories, but I wish to make note here that I return to the superiority theory afterwards as I feel that it has already given an

important explanation as to the power relation between the comedian and the audience that is unique to stand-up comedy.

1.2 – Relief Theory

Relief theories tend to define humor along the lines of a tension-release model. The most prominent relief theorist is Sigmund Freud, who in his *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* distinguishes three sources of laughter, namely joking, the comic, and humor. Each different source involves the saving of some form of psychic energy that is then discharged through laughter. In joking, energy is released through laughter that was saved for the use of repressing sexual and hostile feelings. The comic involves a saving of cognitive energy that would have been used to solve intellectual challenges. The unused energy is released through laughter. In the humorous, emotional energy is released. This energy would have been saved for an emotional reaction in an emotion-provoking situation, but when such a situation turns out to be non-serious, the energy is discharged through laughter (Carroll, "On Jokes" 318).

Rather than defining humor as an object of comic amusement, this theory discusses the essential structures and psychological processes that produce laughter. It is linked to Freud's psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious containing sexual instincts and aggressive drives that are expressed through the conscious in a reworked, acceptable, and yet ambiguous fashion. In the case of the comic, this is done through the structuring of the joke. The structuring enables the ambiguity or the "trick" that simultaneously and irrationally presents the joke to be unconscious as well as conscious in content and creates the release of laughter. Because the theory mainly focusses on laughter, it does not furnish a way to distinguish the humorous from the non-humorous and thus becomes too vacuous.

Space does not allow me here to critique the general architectural design of Freud's psychoanalytical theory. Instead of dismissing this theory on the basis of such critique, I wish to point out that Freud's theory focuses its major part on the joke and the structure of the joke. If I relate this to the main topic of this thesis, stand-up comedy, it would merely provide me with a theory that makes sense of the jokes used by the stand-up comedian. But, as I have already explained, the stand-up comedian uses comic narratives, rather than punch-line jokes. These comic narratives are generally not structured as a simple joke, but contain extensive monologue with several punches. The relief theory, therefore, seems not very promising as a basis for discussing the nature of humor in stand-up comedy. For this reason and on the

account of it being too vacuous, I do not wish to pursue this theory any further, but it being one of three main theories I could not have omitted it altogether.

1.3 – Incongruity Theory

The incongruity theory currently is the dominant theory in academic discourse on humor, because it offers the most informative approach to locating the structure of the *intentional* object of comic amusement. It evolved as a direct antithesis to the superiority theory, based on the comments most notably by Francis Hutcheson as discussed earlier in this chapter. Hutcheson noted in his *Reflections Upon Laughter* that an experience of superiority need not be a prerequisite for laughter. He mentions snails, oysters, and owls, which humans feel superior to but which they do not laugh at on the account of a mere feeling of superiority. The following quotation from Hutcheson's work provides an early incipient of the incongruity theory:

> That then which seems generally the cause of laughter is the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principal idea: this contrast between ideas of grandeur, dignity, sanctity, perfection and ideas of meanness, baseness, profanity, seems to be the very spirit of burlesque; and the greatest part of our raillery and jest are founded upon it (qtd. in McDonald 49).

Hutcheson takes as starting point burlesque and catches the essence of humor as a clash between contradicting connotations that are associated with the skid, laying with this description foundation for later philosophers to build on and form the incongruity theory.

Kant and Schopenhauer developed this idea into the umbrella theory that dominates current discourse on humor. Their conception of the theory led to the explanation now most commonly used to explain humor, which is a state of comic amusement as caused by the perception of something that seems incongruous – something that violates mental patterns and expectations. Kant's conception of the theory is based on the idea that "[i]n everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the Understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction)" and concludes that "*Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing*" (133). Like Kant, Schopenhauer thought laughter arose from the perception of an intellectual incongruity. Unlike Kant, however, Schopenhauer did not see the perception of an incongruity

as an intellectual dilemma. According to Schopenhauer, what is perceived is always right and what is thought is subservient to what is perceived. Moreover, Schopenhauer recognizes in the incongruity a social message that signals how life should be lived. We laugh at behavior that ought to be corrected (Buckley 203).

No doubt influenced by Schopenhauer, Henri Bergson's theory is one of the most influential and sophisticated theories of humor. He argues that humor is the "mechanical encrusted upon the living," meaning that humor involves an incongruous relationship between human intelligence and habitual or mechanical behavior (25). A large source of the comic is recognizing human superiority over the subhuman. As in Schopenhauer's work, there is emphasis on the implication that humor serves as a social corrective, which, according to Bergson, helps people recognize the mechanical behaviors that are considered inhospitable to human flourishing.

As the three variants of the incongruity theory discussed might have already hinted at, "incongruity" is best defined as an umbrella term, for there seems to be no consensus on what exactly constitutes the incongruity. In addition, not all incongruous situations cause comic amusement. As with the other theories discussed, this one also seems vacuous: it seems capable of assimilating anything including that which is not pretheoretically funny. Here, I wish to resort to Noël Carroll, who has argued that by adding specific qualifications to this theory, our current victor is created in the category of theories for explaining humor. The first qualification is that the incongruity should not involve the production of any sort of anxiety. In addition, it should not be annoying or include a genuine problem-solving attitude. It should, however, give rise to enjoyment of precisely the pertinent incongruity and to an experience of levity. Humor, then, is the response-dependent object of comic amusement, characterized thus (Carroll, *Humour: Short Introduction* 49).

The theory framed in this manner seems particularly well-suited to explain stand-up comedy as stand-up comedians use the "technique" of incongruity to bring across their humor. Comic routines in stand-up start with a set-up to create a certain expectation. The punch(line) is the last part that violates that expectation. So, in the language of the incongruity theory, it can be said that the comic routine's ending is incongruous with the beginning. However, as I mentioned earlier, comic routines in stand-up comedy generally do not consist of punchline jokes, but contain extensive narratives. As such, it becomes hard to locate the set-up and the punch, for one comic routine may contain several set-ups and punches or one set-up for a long and extensive comic routine with no punch at all. Though these comic routines may indeed contain many incongruities, be it Kant's intellectual incongruities,

Bergson's social incongruities, or incongruities of any other kind, there appear to be some missing elements in explaining why the audience finds the stand-up comedian comically amusing.

1.4 – Incongruous Superiority

The first step in locating the missing elements that I concluded the previous subchapter with is to revisit a theory I left with a somewhat open ending. Therefore, this subchapter returns to the superiority theory first and from there proceeds to introduce a concept that is essential for explaining the nature of humor in stand-up comedy, namely the concept of "incongruous superiority".

The superiority theory in its existing form leaves unresolved the dilemma of how to explain the nature and function of self-deprecatory humor, a type of humor that stand-up comedians frequently resort to (Gilbert 19). The question remains open as to why the comedian who is debasing themselves would find this sort of humor funny and useful. An initial suggestion was that perpetrators of self-deprecatory humor use this form to demonstrate their own cleverness. However, according to Carroll, self-deprecatory humor and feelings of superiority do not square on the basis of cleverness because they offer no satisfactory explanation for the state of comic amusement that both parties find themselves in simultaneously (*Humour: Short Introduction* 12). The comedian would find themselves in a state of comic amusement because he feels superior to his audience. Yet, if the audience sensed their own inferiority to the comedian, they would not be comically amused, when in fact they are.

It will not suffice to do away with this dilemma by suggesting that the stand-up comedian is not clever. Firstly, the insightfulness of the monologues that stand-up comedians use demonstrates their cleverness. The narratives are deeply analytical and frequently take on topics that are taken for granted by the audience, such as parenting or the use of language, presenting the audience with a thought-provoking viewpoint. Moreover, I wish to refer to the traditional fool or jester, who in medieval times and in folklore served as a *professional* clown in the courts of kings and noblemen (Sherman 172). Jesters mocked the solemnity of the royal court and they alone could express themselves without restriction, often identifying for a king hard truths that only they could articulate. Humor softened the blow for the king and while he was laughing he would ponder over the truths that the jester brought to his attention.

This traditional jester, though often presenting themselves as a fool, was in fact quite the opposite. The intellectualization of folly by the jester was most likely the definitive feature

that got them their profession in the first place. The stand-up comedian serves a similar function in contemporary society with an audience consisting of the today's version of "kings and noblemen" – the general audience that now comes from every walk of life. Like the kings and noblemen of old, this contemporary audience is selective in granting their jester approval and a lack of cleverness would certainly not fit the profile of a stand-up comedian.

How can the notion of superiority, then, be squared with self-deprecatory humor? If the comedian's cleverness is indeed undeniable, then there is but one option left: the answer lies with the audience. Certainly, their part in stand-up comedy is not a passive one. Stand-up's definitive feature of an absolute directness of communication between audience and comedian allows the audience to communicate actively to the comedian. Though it has agreed to limit its communication to laughter, applause, boos, and so forth, this binary flow of communication is in fact quite rich and, as Jason Rutter has argued, "does not flow merely from the comedian to the homogenous audience but rather through all the parties involved as audiences offer feedback to the performer and respond to each other's actions" (290). This feedback makes it possible to determine that the audience laughs when the comedian is debasing him or herself. It is therefore my suggestion that the audience *perceives* themselves to be superior to the comedian, incongruously. This brings me to the next step of defining the missing elements that explain the nature of humor in stand-up comedy.

Let me point out here that there are two missing elements. The first one is defined in this subchapter and the second one is covered in Chapter 2. Both are based on the active role the audience plays in stand-up comedy. Since there is no viable way to determine factual superiority – or inferiority for that matter – of the audience in cleverness or in any other fashion, the safest route to take, then, is to focus on audience *perception* based on their communication. When proceeded in this direction, laughter becomes the primary object of analysis as this is the most informative form of communication on perceived superiority. Whether from a distance watching the performance through various (social) media or from up close as a member of the audience, the laughter during comic routines containing self-deprecatory humor signals that the audience is in a state of comic amusement and that they have *perceived* themselves to be superior to the comedian. This perceived superiority I coin "incongruous superiority."

Incongruous superiority may be defined as a *perceived* superiority by the audience, while the de facto superiority remains with the comedian. The type of incongruity implied in this notion lies close to Bergson's version of social incongruity. His conception was derived from the "mechanical encrusted upon the living," meaning that a large portion of humor is

based on the incongruity between an expected act of our subconscious and our subsequent failure to comply with the expected act (20). Much like an automatism that suddenly falters or, as Bergson calls it, a "mechanical inelasticity," the audience is unaware that their sense of superiority is based upon their subconscious automatic response to a person debasing themselves, no doubt amplified by the comic theater setting they find themselves in (8).

As has already been established, stand-up comedy is bound by the artificial rules of theater, thus providing an effective setting for the audience to be fooled in – willingly or not. Once the audience enters the comic arena, they not only agree to yield the floor to the comedian but they also agree to a temporary suspension of reality, much like in theater and film. The audience momentarily suspends the belief that the comedian is clever and superior, incongruously perceiving themselves to be the superior one. In other words, the kings *allow* themselves to be fooled by their jester.

The notion of incongruous superiority resolves the dilemma of why the perpetrator of self-deprecatory humor finds it funny. It leaves them the de facto superior one that finds comic amusement in the audience letting itself be fooled. The second part of the dilemma – why they find it useful – is yet to be resolved and I set out to do so in the next chapter.

Chapter 2 – License to Laugh

The second missing link is located and defined in this chapter. It is not only crucial to explaining the nature of humor in stand-up comedy, but it is also the linking element that, based on the idea of incongruous superiority, amalgamates the superiority theory and its antithesis as conceived by Hutcheson and its subsequent advocates. The term I use for this missing element I borrow from Lawrence Mintz, who in his essay "Stand-Up Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation" introduces the notion of the license (196).

2.1 – A Comedian's License

As I mentioned in the concluding paragraph of the subchapter on the superiority theory, I belief that this theory has already revealed important implications about the power relation between the comedian and the audience. The power of the comedian does not solely exist on the fact that the audience paid money to watch a performance. On the sole premise of that, a comedian would be allowed to say anything. Yet, as intervals of silence and, if the comedian is very unfortunate, shouts of boos may indicate, this is not the case. The comedian is not permitted to say just anything for the audience expects that he or she "will be able to deliver a high-quality *humorous* performance" (Lockyer 593, my emphasis).

To determine how the audience selects the humorous, the power relation between the two actors requires a close scrutiny. This power relation between comedian and audience in stand-up comedy is unique to its art form and differs from other theatrical forms of entertainment, like plays or cinema, in that it requires an active participatory role from the audience. The feedback that the audience gives constructs a form of approval or disapproval on the basis of which the comedian is allowed to carry on the show or, in worst-case scenario, is booed off stage and forced to end it. More so than in any other theatrical art form, the audience has a direct power in influencing the continuation of the show. They might sit through a badly performed play or film or they might leave, but the show goes on nevertheless. Due to the binary power relation of direct communication between comedian and audience, it can be said that if the comedian is allowed to perform, they are given a *license* for comic expression and deviate behavior.

Traditionally, the license for comic expression is granted to those in society who deviate from the norm in a negative way. As Mintz argues, these people are mentally or physically defective and are cruelly ridiculed because of their defectiveness (196). The license they are granted based on feelings of superiority towards them exempts defective people from

normal behavior on account of their marginality as they lack the capability of proper conduct. Paradoxically, as humans condone improper behavior by defectives and laugh at them, they are also held up a mirror in which they "secretly recognize it as reflecting natural tendencies in human activity if not socially approved ones" (Mintz 197). Mintz maintains that in this sense, the comedian can become our public spokesperson, a shaman, celebrating shared cultural values and reinforcing them together with the audience (197).

Whereas the license of the traditional defective is based on their actual marginality, the license of contemporary stand-up comedians is based on their theatrical performance (Gilbert 169). They *perform* their marginality through self-deprecatory humor, presenting themselves as defective in some way and leading the audience to incongruously perceive themselves as superior to the comedian. This function of self-deprecatory humor resolves the second part of the dilemma as to why the comedian finds this sort of humor useful in their comic routines. Yet, the construction of the license could not be as straightforward as resorting to self-deprecatory humor, for then again the comedian would be allowed to say just anything after having debased themselves. The construction of the license involves a second factor that determines the *extent* to which the license is valid, so therefore the process of the construction of the license needs a closer examination.

2.2 – Constructing the License

The process of constructing the license through self-deprecatory humor is based on the comedian's performance of his or her marginality. Each comedian's performance may be based on a different type of marginality, which determines the *extent* of the license. To explain this properly, I will first consider the context for marginality to define in. Marginality is frequently discussed as a social category of a group of people occurring in a society coping with cultural transitions and cultural conflicts (Gilbert 3). The marginalized either assimilate into the dominant group or into the subordinate group, or they oscillate between the two. In the case of oscillation, the individual benefits from a unique perspective. They hold a combination of insights from both groups, the marginalized one as well as the dominant group, and with these insights they have the ability to take on the role of the critiquing outsider with the knowledge and insights of an insider.

Gilbert maintains that the marginal have made their presence known in every existing human culture (4). These marginal individuals most frequently lacked membership to the dominant culture based on class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or creed. Individuals who lack membership based on these criteria are "modern strangers" who seek a paradox – "to

accomplish distance through membership and membership through distance" (Gilbert 4). Hence, marginality becomes a two-edged sword: marginal individuals who fall between the cracks may be alienated, whereas those who rise above the cracks serve as synthesizers (Willie qtd. in Gilbert 4).

Regardless of whether they rise or fall, the marginal perform a fundamental function in society, for without margins, the existence of a center would not be possible. It is precisely this function of marginality that is significant to our cause, for marginality that is defined solely as a sociological condition fails to facilitate discussion on the position of the marginal within society. Marginality as a rhetorically constructed category, however, produces social and psychological effects that open up dialogue on the power relations within a culture – in our case American culture. Marginality in this sense serves as a means for subverting or reaffirming the status quo, which, according to Mintz, is precisely what the stand-up comedian's license allows them to do (196). So, the comedian gains a license by performing self-deprecatory humor based on a his or her rhetorically constructed category of marginality.

The rhetorically constructed marginality of the comedian can either be based on actual marginality or on fictional marginality. Fictional marginality can only be based on topics that cut across actual marginality and stand-up comedy in this sense results in an epideictic performance. One very fitting example of this is one of the case study discussed in Chapter 3, in which Louis C.K., a white, middle-class, heterosexual male – a person who for quite some time would have been part of the dominant culture in America, or at least part of the group that controlled the discourse (Gillota 103) – deprecates himself on the basis of bad parenting. The subject of parenting cuts across actual marginality as individuals from every cultural group, whether dominant or subordinate, can identify with this topic. Another example is the opening monologue to George Carlin's recorded stand-up special *Life Is Worth Losing*. Carlin, a member of the same dominant culture as our former example, opens his act by not only speaking extremely rapid but also rapidly switching from self-deprecation to irony to sarcasm to satire and so forth. The monologue literally becomes an epideictic display in which his use of language is the factor that cuts across cultures.

The other form of marginality, performed marginality based on actual marginality, is emphasized by its rhetorically constructed version, as becomes visible in the second case study of Chapter 3. This comedian, Chris Rock, an African-American male, positions himself with a certain marginalized group that corresponds with his own actual marginality and from this position is able to oscillate between his marginal culture and the dominant one. By deprecating himself and his marginal culture as a whole, he is in the unique position of

critiquing the dominant culture, positioning himself as the public community spokesperson or shaman that Mintz referred to (197). A second example of this type of performed marginality is that of Chris Tucker, also an African-American male. Whereas Chris Rock is well aware of his social position as synthesizer, Chris Tucker as a comedian welcomes the stereotype and exploits it to its fullest to gain his license. In the opening act to his stand-up performance *Chris Tucker: Live*, for example, the audience sees him appearing on stage, dancing to sexually charged music that displays what Carroll calls the stereotype of "voracious sexual appetites" of African Americans (*Humour: Short Introduction* 88).

This type of marginality based on stereotyping as well as on self-deprecation serves two contradictory functions. One the one hand, they reinforce what often are negative and reduced images of a certain minority group, while on the other hand, if the stereotypes are used in an absurd fashion, they may subvert the stereotype as a whole. As Jaclyn Michael maintains in her study of Muslim American stand-up comedy, "stereotyped minorities respond to and engage with their comedic relevance in public settings. These acts and these spaces – such as vaudeville plays, minstrel shows, and comedy clubs – are also important sites for *observers* of social life to index the cultural integration of minorities" (Michael 131, my emphasis).

Whether fictional or actual, the performance of marginality as a target for self-deprecation is at the core of the construction process of the comedian's license. This performance may in fact be so crucial to a comedian's license that some have "branded" their entire stage identity based on it. In line with Lee's portrayal of Mark Twain as a branded stand-up comedian, I use the marketing term "branding" instead of the social term "reputation" to emphasize the commercial value of a comedian's stage identity. One striking example of this type of branding is the nickname "Fluffy" used by stand-up comedian Gabriel Iglesias. His comic routines are for the largest portion based on deprecating his own obesity, which he calls "fluffiness" – hence the nickname the "fluffy guy." At the start of his performances, even before he appears on stage, the audience often yells "fluffy" as an early sign of approval (Iglesias [6:10]). Iglesias is branding this nickname not only by his stage performances, but also by selling commodities to fans in the form of merchandise. According to Lockyer, the "collective fan status" of the audience amplifies the comedian's approval, so branding serves as an effective magnifier for the extent of the comedian's license (596).

Another factor that affects the extent of the license of the comedian is audience homogeneity. Mintz, for example, maintains that the audience of a stand-up comedy performance is reduced to a homogeneous group. He argues that "[t]he comedian must

establish *for the audience* that the group is homogeneous, a community, if the laughter is to come easily" as this "loosens the audience and allows for laughter as an expression of shared values rather than as personal predilection" (200). Lockyer extrapolates Mintz's argument to performances in large arenas (592). Her argument is founded on the premise that venues such as "arenas, stadiums, churches, and theaters promote social solidarity more than any other venue" based on a collective purpose for visiting these venues (Lockyer 596). Such solidarity in stand-up comedy audiences, Lockyer maintains, significantly benefits not only individual audience members as they share the same comic experience but also the stand-up comedian in the attempt "to create a collective unified audience" (596). If during a comic routine an especially controversial topic or taboo is joked about and only a small number of audience members laughs, the audience in its entirety is presumably significant enough to produce enough laughter to justify the incorporation of the joke. So, the larger the audience, the more easily the license is obtained.

       The notion of incongruous superiority as described in the previous chapter has squared self-deprecatory humor as a frequent feature of American stand-up comedy with the superiority theory. The notion of superiority in stand-up comedy is essential to constructing the comedian's license, so this latter traditional concept has been scrutinized and redefined to fit contemporary stand-up comedy. By doing so, I located two missing elements needed to amalgamate the superiority theory with the incongruity theory of humor, which in their combined form now provide an informative and effective theory that explains the nature of humor in stand-up comedy. It may be summarized thusly: the audience is comically amused when humor based on an incongruity does not involve the production of anxiety of any sort, when it is not annoying, when it does not involve a genuine problem solving attitude, when it gives rise to enjoyment of precisely the pertinent incongruity, and to an experience of levity (Carroll, *Humour: Short Introduction* 49). In addition, the *extent* to which humor can arouse a state of comic amusement in stand-up comedy is limited by the license the comedian is authorized to construct in a unique power relation between themselves and the audience, in which perceived incongruous superiority, self-deprecatory humor, and performed marginality determine the reach of the license. This leaves me with one last question: what if the comedian breaks the contract implied in the notion of the license?

2.3 The Context of the License

The initial function of the license is to allow the comedian to procede with his show. Yet, the very fact that a performer needs *additional* permission by his audience to perform – their

presence in the comedy venue or their payment to the comedian for performing is the initial permission – suggests that the fundamental essence of the license goes beyond the mere consent to continue the show. A fundamental influence on the license is the *context* in which it is constructed, or in other words, the social norms that govern American culture.

American society, like any human society, is governed by normative values that serve as a source for cooperation as well as for conflict. One of the most fundamental values that has pervaded American society since the nation's inception is the belief that everyone should have a right to self-determination, not only political self-determination but also that they are free in pursuing their economic, social, and cultural development. What is perhaps the most often quoted passage from the Declaration of Independence affirms this right: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Yet, this right has been interpreted and implemented in a myriad of ways throughout American history with the result that it is hard, if not impossible, to pinpoint what *being American* actually means.

In a letter entitled "What Is an American?" from 1782, J. Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur infamously claimed that in America "all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world" (Crèvecoeur n.p.). This answer to the question as to what an American is, given only a few years after the Declaration of Independence was drafted, is an early version of a concept that would for the dominant part of the twentieth century describe American society: the melting pot. Immigrants from virtually every part of the globe and from every walk of like have added to this melting pot, each bringing with them their own normative values, in effect adding to the collective identity of a people now called American.

To prevent myself from having to take on the seemingly impossible task of identifying all of the normative values that govern American culture today, it is a more fruitful approach to recognize the multiplicity of normative values in American society. This multiplicity of normative values is inextricably linked to the "multiplicity of ethnocentrisms" that David Hollinger uses to describe American society, creating identity movements that each struggled for their own rights (107). Women's movements, the civil rights movement, the gay rights struggle and the New Left of the 1960s, for instance, are all examples of how ethnocentrisms have attempted to influence their right to self-determination based on their normative values. As such, *being American* has not one single meaning, but in fact has many.

To this purpose, the formulation of marginality as discussed in the previous subchapter connects to the formation of social identity. In the same fashion as the way marginality is defined by cultural transitions and cultural conflicts, social identity is defined along lines of relational and mutable identifications created by conflicting positions occupied simultaneously within society (Gilbert 3). In this regard, social identity and American identity are seen "as a constellation of different and often competing identifications or "cultural negotiations" (Kaplan 124). One famous example of this is how W.E.B. Du Bois defined his American identity as a "double consciousness" in which "one ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro" (qtd. in Kaplan 124). American social identity as such is always constructed in relation to other identities, be it personal identity or other social identities, and "should be viewed not as a stable entity, but rather as a fluid practice" (Gillota 107).

Struggles to deal with the multiplicity of ethnocentrisms have given rise to an identity politics in the United States that "offered new conceptualizations of the importance of recognizing – and valuing – previously denigrated or devalued identities" (Kaplan 124). As Charles Taylor puts it, "a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a conflicting or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves" (qtd. in Kaplan 124). Taylor's words imply an increased sensitivity towards identity politics and the inevitable stereotyping that accompanies the formation of groups based on a collective social identity. This heightened sensitivity has called for the respectful and equal treatment of ethnic minorities in daily conduct and in the use of language and has set the stage for the upsurge of political correctness that pervades American culture today.

The stage of heightened sensitivity has since the rise of identity politics called for a "politically correct" treatment of ethnic minorities and reverberates increasingly excessive cries for political correctness in American society today. The term "political correctness" – or in short, PC – first emerged in American Universities in the 1980s, "with the aim to enforce a set of ideologies and views on gender, race and other minorities" (Nguyen 5). It refers to language and ideas that may offend marginalized identity groups such as women or ethnic minorities and aims at giving preferential treatment to members of those social groups. It implies language reformation to undermine sexist or racist expressions either by speech codes or by replacing certain loaded terms with new ones. Consequently, not only a number of words have been taken into use that may be just as or even more offensive, but also the replacement of certain words with euphemisms have loaded these euphemisms with the exact same offensive connotations that the original words were embedded with. Think, for instance,

of euphemisms such as the "n-word" or the "c-word" that effectively put the terms they euphemize into the mind of the listener.

The topics of political correctness and its inevitable reverberation of micro-aggressions – seemingly insignificant actions or words that are meant harmlessly but are thought of as violent nonetheless – in relation to the settings of their origins – college campuses – have been covered extensively in *The Atlantic*, one of America's oldest and most respectable magazines (see for instance Friedersdorf; Lukianoff and Haidt; and Prior). In a piece for the September 2015 issue titled "That's Not Funny!" Caitlin Flanagan, in line with both Kaplan and Taylor, suggests that cries for political correctness originate from over five decades of fierce identity politics. She specifically discusses the effects of political correctness for the performance of stand-up comedy. One of the effects she identifies is that mainstream comedians increasingly refuse to perform on college campuses. Jerry Seinfeld, for example, no longer performs at college campuses after having received warnings from fellow comedians to steer clear from colleges because "they're so PC" (Flanagan n.p.). In addition, Chris Rock refuses to perform on college campuses because students are "too conservative," meaning not politically conservative, but far too eager "not to offend anybody" (Flanagan n.p.). Flanagan connects these refusals to how college campuses have infantilized and coddled the American student, "promoting the importance" of "eliminating" any language that is "discriminatory or culturally insensitive" (n.p.).

However, student attitudes are not the only explanation for a culture of political correctness. Up-and-coming comedians who are in need of the well-paying jobs that college campuses offer are accommodating the cries for political correctness by limiting their material to include only politically correct routines. This raises their competitiveness on an already competitive job-market, but at the same time accommodates the students' wishes for not being exposed to insulting material. Though comedians save their morally challenged material for comedy clubs, "the realpolitik of the college market" certainly adds to the culture of political correctness in stand-up comedy in general (Flanagan n.p.).

Moreover, not only college campuses are prone to political correctness. In an episode of Jerry Seinfeld's Web Series called *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*, comedian Bill Burr identifies the increasing sensitivity of audiences in comedy clubs, describing exactly the breaking of the contract implied in the license:

> There's this new level of, like, selfishness when you go to a comedy club –
> where they'll watch you for forty minutes and take everything as a joke, and

then all of a sudden you'll hit a topic that's sensitive to them, and then all of a

sudden you're making statements […] If I'm saying something and I'm joking,

then I'm joking" ("Smoking Past the Band" n.p.).

At the point where the comedian breaks the contract, they are recognized by their audience as the "outlaw" in the traditional sense, no longer safeguarded by the protection of the law implied in the license. The repercussion of "I'm only joking" is not accepted by the audience who does not hold humor to be amoral, so beyond good and evil and beyond moral accountability. Paradoxically, however, this also provides the comedian with a unique setting for critiquing American social norms.

If audiences take Bill Burr's suggestion of "I'm only joking" to heart and consider humor to be amoral, then humor loses much of its social function. First of all, humor may excite a higher level of comic amusement precisely *because* it is morally flawed. Martin Shuster has provided a convincing argument in maintaining that "if we take a different view of ethics, where one displays moral sensibilities in areas beyond the application of moral concepts and judgments, then a person's sense of humor is itself morally expressive" (619). In this sense, "moral flaws in individuals serve to connect them, by means of humor, to morally flawed subject matter" (Shuster 626). Cries for politically correct comic routines may, according to this logic, serve for the audience as prevention from being exposed to *their* moral flaws. In effect, the use of morally flawed or politically incorrect material in comic routines provides the comedian with a unique enhanced setting to hold up a mirror to the politically correct audience and challenge, subvert, reinforce, or influence social norms.

Moreover, because some topics are sensitive and others not, I have explicitly traced the comedian's license to the use of self-deprecatory humor. The use of self-deprecatory humor has two functions (Lee, Slater, and Tchernev 1186). The first one is that self-deprecatory humor reduces reactions to a message that may be perceived as threatening by the intended audience. The rhetorically constructed marginality of the comedian based on self-deprecation can then be considered an effective remedy to cries for political correctness. Though these routines may contain vulgar language, the comedian is not verbally abusing anyone but themselves. Any micro-aggressions that may be present in their comic routines are directed towards themselves. They use their own performed corporeal or psychological marginalities as an *allegory* for the social norms that they are critiquing or reinforcing. Effectively only insulting themselves, a politically correct audience is less inclined to take the humor as offensive or is indeed more inclined to give the comedian a pass. The notion of

incongruous superiority reinforces the comedian's effectiveness as a stand-in by allowing them to push the license to the furthest limit.

This leads to a second effect of increased intentions about a behavior advocated in the message. Self-deprecatory humor may serve as a courtship behavior that leads to audiences feeling a sense of affiliation with the speaker as an in-group member. This, according to Lee, Slater, and Tchernev results in submissive intentions to the humorous message (1186). The combination of this effect with the former provides the comedian with a unique position to influence social norms, even in settings where audiences are sensitive to morally flawed subject matters and where they want their comedian to stay within the boundaries of political correctness.

Humor has always served as a mirror to society. The constructed license serves as an approval for influencing social norms. Thus, humor in itself has become normative in the sense that it is a *violation* of the norms that constitute other normative concepts (Kotzen 396). A violation of political correctness, condoned because of self-deprecatory humor, becomes normative when the license of the comedian allows them to reduce the audience's reaction and persuade them to act according to the humorous message. In this sense, the analytical, critical, and extensive monologues of the stand-up comedian function either as reinforcements or as subversions of social norms, or as Bergson's has informed us, they may serve as a "corrective" (41). How the comedian puts these profound powers into effect, I analyze in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 – Theory in Effect

The theoretical chapters of this thesis set out a framework for explaining the nature of humor in stand-up comedy based on the comedian's license. Several arguments have been illustrated with examples of stand-up comedians but an extensive analysis of stand-up performances is yet to be provided. Such an analysis strengthens my argument that stand-up performances are based on a constructed license. Moreover, it also examines the specific techniques a comedian employs to construct their license. Paralanguage in terms of gestures, articulation, intonation, hesitation noises, and facial expressions are important tools in constructing the license and influence how far the comedian can push the boundaries of the setting described in the previous chapter.

I have extensively discussed the performance of marginality in stand-up comedy and the two identified types of marginality – one based on fictional marginality and the other based on actual marginality – serve as qualification for the selected case studies. I delve deeper into these two types using the stand-up comedy of Louis C.K. to substantiate the former and that of Chris Rock to substantiate the latter. I have selected a single performance from both to analyze the construction of the license throughout one performance. Instead of selecting fragments from different performances that might only show the construction of the license, the analysis of a single performance allows me to trace where and how the license is reinforced or where it falters.

3.1 – Case Study of Louis C.K.
The first case study this chapter takes on is the stand-up comedy of Louis C.K. He has already been briefly mentioned in the previous chapter but certainly deserve a more proper introduction here. Louis Székely (pronounced [ˈseːkɛj]), professionally know as Louis C.K., is an American comedian, actor, write, producer, and director who, apart from stand-up comedy, is known for the semi-autobiographical comedy-drama *Louie* (2010-2015) and the web series called *Horace and Pete* (2016). He has won a Peabody Award and two Emmy Awards for *Louie* and an additional four Emmy's for his stand-up specials. He lives in New York City as a divorced father, sharing custody of his two girls with his ex-wife – a topic he more than frequently resorts to in his stand-up comedy and that has set the main story line for *Louie*. His unique focus on parenting as a source of humor has earned him the nickname of "America's new dad" (Gordon, n.p.).

The rhetorically constructed marginality of Louis C.K. as a failing parent, the stand-up performances filled with self-deprecatory humor, and the subjects of parenting, marriage, and divorce that cut across cultures within American society make Louis C.K. a fitting case study for the category of performed fictional marginality. The stand-up performance that best adheres to this description is *Hilarious* (2010), which as C.K.'s longest recorded stand-up performance devotes about one third to the subjects of marriage, divorce, and parenting. It therefore serves as the source of analysis for this subchapter.

In the opening act of the performance, Louis C.K. draws our attention to the binary divide between the individual and the community. In his costume of jeans and a black t-shirt, supported by nothing but his microphone and an iconic bar stool in terms of props, he welcomes "everybody" to the show but then immediately corrects himself (2:00). He does not welcome everybody, just the people of the audience, because "most people are not here by a pretty *huge* majority" (2:03). He continues by setting the audience apart from people in China and then from people who are dead. In doing so, he creates a sense of community among the audience, contributing to their perception of homogeneity that reinforces the license he is constructing.

C.K.'s paralanguage in the opening act contributes to the construction of his license as it contains many hesitation noises in the form of "uhh." While he utters these hesitation noises, his head is tilted down somewhat and his eyes frequently look downwards, suggesting that he is genuinely puzzled as to what the reason is for him to address his audience. The low intonation of the "uhh" contributes to a sense of awkwardness of his appearance on stage. The punch is delivered when C.K. confirms that he does not "know how to start shows" and that this "is just a problem" that he has (4:03). Ironically, the opening act has effectively initiated the construction of the license with C.K. deprecating himself for being a defective comedian who does not know how to start a show. He recognizes the importance of this action as he notes, "the first thing you say on a stage always feels stupid because there's no real reason for me to talk to you. It just doesn't exist […] so I just have to blehh" (4:18; 4:30). The flapping hand gesture accompanying the utterance "blehh" is used paradoxically to indicate his awareness of the emptiness of the word "blehh," while simultaneously implying a sense of pressure to gain a license to talk beyond the mere consent given by the purchase of a ticket.

Only a few minutes into the show, C.K. arrives at the topics of marriage and divorce. These topics cut across actual marginality in the sense that nearly every subculture in American society can identify with these topics and as such partly form the basis of C.K.'s fictional marginality. At the start of the routine on "happy divorces," he constructs his license

by explicitly referring to his own divorce, demonstrating his "inside" insights into this demographic. The audience, who until this point has resorted only to laughter, expresses their compassion for C.K with cries of "ahhhh" (5:19), sympathizing with him as a divorced man. In effect, they not only recognize but also reinforce his constructed marginality with their reaction of "ahhhh," granting him the license to critique the current norm on marital dissolution.

The license to critique marital dissolution becomes normative in itself when C.K. takes it upon himself to educate his audience on how they ought to react. C.K. firmly commands the audience to "cut the shit. Don't even start with that noise like a puppy died" (5:20). As he reasons, "divorce is always good news because no good marriage has ever ended in divorce" (5:57). His intonation and style reflect that of someone lecturing in a determinate manner, pointing his index finger towards the audience and keeping his face in a tight expression. Not until the mentioned reasoning does his expression break into a smile, letting go of the seriousness of the lesson and mirroring the audience's laughter. This latter technique is one C.K. frequently resorts to at the ending of certain comic routines, especially of those involving self-deprecatory humor. It affirms the notion of incongruous superiority as C.K. seems to react to the audience laughter based on their perceived superiority.

The routine continues with another spur of self-deprecation, this time directed towards the corporeal marginality that he inhabits in his status as a divorced father. C.K. describes being single at the age of 41 after ten years of marriage and having two kids as "having a bunch of money in the currency of a country that doesn't exist anymore (6:55). He did not expect to be single again, so he "didn't keep this shit up" (7:15). He did not "maintain any of this... at presentation condition… it's function only," referencing his cosmetically overweight body (7:18). The paralanguage of this routine is significant as his hand moves over his body to indicate the parts that he failed to maintain. The dots I used in the transcription indicate short pauses for dramatic effect and coincide with the hand gesture. The gesture pulls focus to these body parts and emphasizes his self-deprecation as the defective in the "single world" based on what he considers corporeal marginality.

About twenty minutes into the show, the first test occurs as to how far the constructed license reaches. C.K. starts this routine by deprecating his own intelligence, articulating that he *really* is stupid and that it bothers him. He explains how his brain works: "It's stupidity, followed by self-hatred, and then further analysis. It is not a very efficient system of thought" (18:07). He demonstrates this system of thought with an example including a "string of bad dumb thoughts" (19:11). Before he elaborates on the example, however, he deprecates himself

further by commenting on his eccentric eating habits, posing himself as the deviation from the norm and reinforcing the license in place by now.

C.K. then moves to illustrate his stupidity by describing himself standing outside his hotel room and seeing a beautiful couple with a child walking on the sidewalk across from him. He cannot completely see the child because a dumpster is in front of it and he is curious what the child looks like because the couple is so beautiful. He builds up this routine using straightforward descriptions of the parents and place, but then shocks the audience with his punch by saying: "I'm curious what their kid looks like because they're so beautiful, maybe I wanna fuck their kid. I don't know" (22:37). The audience reacts as one solely with laughter and no appalled shouts of non-acceptance are audible.

C.K. does acknowledge the grotesqueness of this comic routine by admitting that "that's just me saying something terrible because it makes me laugh that it upsets you," acknowledging the perceived superiority on his part (22:45). Yet, he then takes it one step further to test the absolute limits of his license by saying: "I wouldn't fuck a kid. Maybe a dead kid […] Who are you hurting?" (22:58). Apart from a slight echo of "boo" that is barely audible, the audience bursts into the loudest response of laughter thus far. As C.K. continues the routine for another ten seconds, the laughter continues and is met with additional applause. C.K. retorts with a cruel outburst of laughter directed towards the audience that indicates his superiority over them. In effect, he recognizes that the license is still in place. He nevertheless reinforces it by ending the routine with admitting that the child is in fact an elderly Chinese woman completely separate from the couple, emphasizing his own stupidity: "*That's* how dumb I am" (24:43).

Having tested his license, C.K. continues the show commenting on hyperbolic use of language, the apathetic attitude towards the privileged position of his generation regarding high technological improvements to life quality, and the absurdity of airport security, among other topics. All these routines are repetitions of the process I analyzed above, constructing, testing, and reinforcing the license. Then, about two thirds into the show, C.K. explicitly introduces himself as a parent, which he does in nearly every show, interview, and other performance. Whether deliberately or not, he has branded himself as "America's new dad," having an extended license in place on this topic. Therefore, this routine differs somewhat from all previous routines of this performance as he immediately resorts to his normative powers.

C.K. states boldly that he does not like parents, for, as he reasons:

> Nobody gives a shit about how they raise their kids. People put minimal effort into it. They have – their kids – They're like consumers of their kids. Like, they wanna call customer service: *Why does he play video games all day? I don't understand why he plays video...* Maybe it's because you bought him a fucking video game, you idiot. Throw it away. Who told you that was a good idea? A developing mind, *deihhh deihhh deihhh deihhh*. Fucking idiots (52:58).

The first part transcribed in italics indicates C.K. imitating the annoyed and demanding voice of a parent calling customer service. The paralanguage in terms of gestures significantly contributes to the routine by mocking the physical appearance of such a parent, deliberately raising and shaping his eyebrows into a setting generally associated with a devious manner. The second part in italics indicates C.K. imitating a child playing a videogame intensely, illustrating the addictive effect video games may have on developing minds. Again, paralanguage is an effective magnifier as he imitates a child with raised eyebrows and eyes that bulge out from intense focus. The routine is received with loud laughter and other non-verbal endorsements, showing how strong the license is to critique and shape the norm on this topic.

C.K. continues by critiquing the diet Americans force upon their children, the defenselessness of children against domestic violence, and the impatience that pervades parenting. Yet, the question arises as to how he would have constructed the extensive license on parenting in the first place. I need not look far, for C.K. answers this question with a detailed routine on his failing parenting skills further into the performance. He begins by putting himself beneath his oldest daughter, who according to his logic is better, smarter, more decent, and cleaner than him. He imitates her saying "good morning, daddy" in a solemn yet happy voice and juxtaposes her to his own unkempt appearance. The social incongruity perceived here – surely, C.K. should be an adult who sets an example for his daughter, at least according to the norm – is again accompanied by fitting paralanguage. C.K. deprecates himself by pretending to fix his hair upon being greeted with such solemnity, indeed appearing to be beneath his daughter in social manner.

The routine then continues with several instances of C.K. "screwing up" (1:00:03). He managed to bestow upon his seven-year-old within a matter of twelve seconds the cumulative information that she will die, everyone she knows will die, they will be dead for a long time, and the sun will explode. Information, as he recognizes, not particularly well-suited for a child that age. In addition, his bad judgment skills as a parent led the same daughter to be bitten by

a pony. Moreover, he is not capable of avoiding an argument with his three-year-old over the proper name of their favorite cookie. His self-deprecation in these routines serve as an allegory for bad parenting in American society in general. Not only does C.K. frequently and explicitly mention this, he also implicitly shapes the norm by deprecating his own failings.

The "argument-with-my-three-year-old" routine deserves more attention for it shows C.K.'s recognition of the importance of the extended license he is constructing based on failing parenting skills. He allows himself to be engaged in an argument with his daughter over Fig Newtons. She is three, he is forty-one, so he reasons it is always his fault. During this routine, he frequently imitates the three-year-old with a high-pitched voiced that cannot yet articulate eloquent sentences – or words, for that matter, because she calls the cookies Pig Newtons. Even as C.K. engages her, he asks himself: "What are you doing? Why? What is to be gained? What do you care?" (1:08:45). The angry articulation of his part in the imitated dialogue encourages the audience to view him as the inferior parent who cannot raise his children properly. In fact, the comic routine was so successful, that C.K. branded himself based on it, naming his production company Pig Newton with the slogan "We make television that almost doesn't stink."

The performed fictional marginality of Louis C.K. based on his failing parenting skills provides him with the license needed not only to perform his stand-up comedy but also to critique and challenge social norms that govern American culture. Especially parenting receives significant attention, for the license he constructs on this topic is not only based on insight knowledge but more so on his self-deprecation and the branding of his personality as America's new dad. The solidly constructed license allows his humor to influence American normative values and has consequently become normative in itself.

3.1 – Case Study Chris Rock

Whereas the case study of Louis C.K. mostly focused on constructing a license based on fictional marginality, the case study this subchapter takes on focusses more on the license in relation to actual marginality. I selected African-American comedian Chris Rock for two reasons. Firstly, as an African-American, Rock is part of a marginal subculture of American society. His membership to this community has been an inspirational source for plenty of his stand-up material. Secondly, and related to the first, Rock serves as a spokesperson for the African-American community as he regularly addresses American race relations. Yet, he does not generally address these race relations in a simplistic manner and is well-known for also critiquing African-American culture and undermining black leaders (Gillota 110).

Rock, similar to C.K., has a prestigious track record. Apart from stand-up, Rock also acts and appeared in major Hollywood blockbusters such as *Head of State* (2003), *Grown Ups* (2010), and the *Madagascar* film series (2005-2012). He developed, wrote, and narrated the sitcom *Everybody Hates Chris* (2005-2012) and has won four Emmy awards, among other awards. Rock is, also similar to C.K., a divorced father of two girls, but unlike C.K. does not use this as a main source of inspiration for his stand-up material. He does, however, regularly address gender relations in addition to race-related issues.

One performance of Rock that explicitly takes on race relations is the 2016 Academy Awards. This performance was Rock's second hosting of the award ceremony, yet it was an exceptional hosting. When nominees for the awards turned out to be predominantly white and lacking in African-American nominees altogether for the second year in a row, Rock was called upon by fellow African-Americans to boycott the show. However, Rock refused and used the lack of African-American nominees as a main inspiration for his performance. In addition, the setting of the performance, including the setting for constructing the license, differs significantly from regular stand-up performances in that the Academy Awards provided an audience that had not given an initial license based on the purchase of a ticket to attend a stand-up performance. The audience mostly consisted of celebrities who attended the award ceremony to celebrate the cinematic achievements of the United States film industry, not to be indulged in a lament of inequality. Moreover, the show itself is not recorded in the same manner as regular stand-up performances. Reactions of the audience, who as celebrities are as important to the award ceremony as the host, are very frequently in focus. These reasons make Rock's performance as host of the 88th Academy Awards a uniquely suitable piece of stand-up comedy for analysis.

The ceremony starts with a montage showcasing filmic achievement of the past year shown on large screens to the audience attending the ceremony. Rock appears on stage, wearing a white tuxedo echoing the "#OscarSoWhite" controversy that had resurged on Twitter as well as other various social media. The intonation and tone of Rock's opening remarks cannot be reproduced on paper here, yet it is significant to note the influence of his South-Carolinian accent that is in a stereotypical manner frequently associated with the African-American demographic in general. Rock draws attention to the lack of ethnic diversity of the nominees from the very start. He points out that he "counted at least fifteen black people on that montage" before welcoming his audience and the viewers to the Academy Awards, "otherwise known as the White People's Choice Awards" (3:38),

signifying a first attack on institutional racism. Shots of the audience show polite smiles mixed with laughter, indicating their acceptance of the comments thus far.

The license for Rock to utter these initial comments on the lack of diversity of the Academy Awards was constructed by two preexisting conditions. Firstly, he is a member of the ethnic minority that is marginalized, not only as nominees but in American society in general. Secondly, his previous performances have acquired him a reputation for being a fierce critic of American institutional racism. This reputation relates to the practice of branding that I have resorted to in my analysis of Louis C.K., though here I prefer to use the term reputation as Rock has not actively commodified this reputation. In constructing the license, however, both serve the same function of extending the license beyond a single performances and unifying the audience in their collective recognition of the shared values (or in case of branding, a collective "fan status").

Yet, as mentioned the audience differs from the typical audience of stand-up performances in the sense that they are not primarily attending a comedy show, but rather are attending an award ceremony. As such, the license needs constructing for this specific audience based on their expectations of the show for, as I show below, it is not valid indefinitely in such a setting. The routine therefore also includes instances of Rock deprecating himself as well as deprecating the community he stands for. Rock refers to the pressure he was under to boycott the award ceremony. He recites some of the comments he received: "Chris, you should boycott. Chris, you should quite" (4:25). Next, he deprecates them with his response:

> You know, how come there's only unemployed people that tell you to quite something? No one with a job ever tells you to quite. So I thought about quitting. I thought about it real hard, but I realized they gonna have the Oscars anyway. They're not gonna cancel the Oscars because I quit. You know, and the last thing I need is to lose another job to Kevin Hart, okay? (4:30).

This first part may seem an innocent jest towards a backward attitude of unemployed people, but it implies a direct link between unemployment and African-Americans as it were his fellow African-Americans who urged Rock to quite. It is an implicit comment on the disproportionate unemployment rate and unequal economic opportunities for the African-American community. Yet, by presenting this comment in a deprecating fashion and adding that he would not lose another job to a fellow comedian whose popularity and job

opportunities are soaring, the audience grants their approval with a display of laughter, confirmed by a shot of a sea of laughing faces – including that of Kevin Hart.

The license is then tested to the limited when Rock continues his routine. He asks, "why *this* Oscars?" (5:13). As he reasons, "it's the 88th Academy Awards, which means this whole no black nominees thing has happened at least 71 other times" (5:18). According to Rock, boycotting the Oscars is such an issue now, "because we had *real* things to protest at the time" (5:51). This answer implies that the African-American community has little justification for boycotting the Oscars compared to reasons of five decades ago. The answer he provides is met by the audience not so much with laughter but with applause and shouts of "whooo" as a token of approval. However, when Rock continues, this approval quickly fades: "You know, we were too busing being raped and *lynched* to care 'bout who won best cinematographer. You know, when your grandmother's swinging from a tree, it's really hard to care about best documentary foreign short" (6:04). At the mentioning of the grandmother swinging from a tree, apprehensive and mixed feedback arises from the audience. Rock does not linger or pause for their reaction, but finishes the routine almost forcefully.

Though he makes a stance in favor of not boycotting the Oscars, he takes it upon himself raise awareness of the hardships African-Americans have faced in a shocking manner. In routines like these, Rock speaks as an insider of the African American community, emphasized by his usage of "we." His status as the insider, enforced by the paralanguage of this entire routine mainly in the form of intonation and high pitches, allow Rock to critique institutional racism and equality as well as other comparably insignificant issues, such as women's clothing. Rock vacillates between community stand-in and critiquing outsider in relation to social norms on race issues.

An additional testing of the license takes place when Rock perpetuates a stereotype of Asian-Americans. Presumably, the license to critique stereotyping in a satirical fashion is constructed upon his own marginality. However, as he introduces an award sponsor's "most dedicated, accurate, and hardworking representatives," three Asian-American children appear on stage, dressed in tuxedo's and carrying brief cases. Rock comments to the audience: "If anybody is upset about that joke just tweet about it on your phone that was also made by these kids." These comments appear well-posed for Rock afterwards via social media received negative replies from Asian-Americans who felt disparaged by the joke (Liu, n.p.). As Liu maintains, Rock shows "the very misapprehension that undergirds every stereotype about Asians: that they are all the same" (n.p.). The license based on marginalization appears not to

cross subcultures, for being a member of one marginality excludes membership from another, at least based on race.

The negative replies to this comic routine require three comments to my purpose here. Firstly, the reactions were posted *after* the show and therefore have no direct influence on the stand-up performance. They do, however, influence the extended license based on reputation or branding. Secondly, the reactions demonstrate the general audience's sensitivity to political correctness. The perpetuation of the stereotype of Asian-Americans as hard-working child laborers, though satirized in a comic performance, is received negatively not only because no license was granted based on a rhetorically performed marginality – for Rock is not able to perform marginality on the premise of being Asian, he clearly is not – but also because this has the effect of not reducing audience reactions to sensitive material. Thirdly, the negative comments paradoxically also extend the reach of the social messages engrained in Rock's performance. The negative comments facilitate discussion and reactions, effectively opening up dialogue on issues of race and stereotyping, as is demonstrated by the explosion of reactions on social media.

The analysis of the performance of Chris Rock at the ceremony of the 88th Academy Awards has demonstrated how complicated the construction of a comedian's license may be. A license based on self-deprecation and performed marginality allows for only a limited reach and does not necessarily cut across subcultures on issues that are sensitive to society. Although the construction of a license allows the comedian to critique society, the faltering of the license facilitates a society critiquing itself by its perpetuating dissent, a fortiori holding up the mirror of humor.

Conclusion

I have set out to take my reader on an exploratory venture in search of the humorous nature of American stand-up comedy. More specifically, the function of the comedian was studied in order to gain insights into how stand-up may influence American normative values. Minimal attention in scholarly discourse had been paid to the function of self-deprecatory humor, though this form is more than frequently resorted to in stand-up comedy. This thesis has filled this gap by forwarding a hypothesis on the comedian's license based on the performance of self-deprecatory humor.

In order to forward this hypothesis, I have offered a review of the current discourse on humor and examined the explanatory reach of the three leading theories in relation to stand-up. The relief theory seemed least promising, so focus was allocated to the other two: the superiority and incongruity theories. Each theory separately could not fully account for the nature of humor in stand-up, but their amalgamated version based on the notions of incongruous superiority and the comedian's license offered a solid theoretical approach.

Moreover, the notion of incongruous superiority squared self-deprecatory humor with the superiority theory, based on the idea of perceived superiority by the audience while the de facto superiority remained with the comedian. The explanatory reach of the superiority theory was expanded in an attempt to prevent it from being pushed off the academic stage. The notion also paved the way for theorizing the construction of the comedian's license, which has been argued to be a crucial concept in relation to normative values. Traditionally, the license was granted to those who deviated from the norm, mostly in a negative way. The contemporary stand-up comedian constructs his license based on the same idea, though with one pivotal adjustment – his deviation from the norm is *performed*.

The license specifically depends on the performance of self-deprecatory humor. The performed rhetorically constructed marginality, whether based on fictional marginality or actual marginality, accounts for the *extent* of the license of the comedian. Self-deprecatory humor serves the double function of being a cornerstone for the license as well as being an allegorical comment on specific social norms that coincide with the corresponding (albeit performed) corporeal or psychological marginalities of the comedian. Moreover, by only deprecating themselves and resorting to allegory, the comedian offers an effective remedy to cries for political correctness.

Humor has always held up a mirror to society. The stand-up comedian performs this same mirroring function with the added effect of the audience granting them an explicit

license to do so. The function of the stand-up comedian is not only to entertain but also to shape, stretch, and remold normative values. As such, the humor of stand-up comedy is normative in itself. The case study of Louis C.K. showed how he was licensed to educate his audience on marital dissolution and parenting, and affirmed the theoretical framework set out in the first two chapters. The case study of Chris Rock painted a critiquing picture of the pervading inequality that still haunts American society today and at the same time demonstrated how complex the construction of the license can be. In both cases, stand-up comedy serves as a mirror and a social corrective to the established norm.

   Though this thesis has extensively researched American-stand-up comedy, it is not without its limitations. American stand-up is nowadays accessible to nearly every human culture through various (social) media. As such, the absolute directness of stand-up is eliminated for the audiences watching via different media, but the global mediation of American social norms as well as its critique is ever increasing. Large venues are sold out by American comedians, notably venues in countries where the native language is not English and that may be governed by very different cultures and norms. The presence of American stand-up in these cultures may affect local norms and normative values in a new disguised form of Americanization. Therefore, future research should focus on the effect of transnational mediation of stand-up comedy for non-American audiences. One method of approach may be a comparative analysis between American stand-up comedy and its Dutch equivalent of cabaret. Such analysis may provide insights into cultural differences and the function of humor in divergent cultures, for who knows what the license to laugh in these different cultures may reveal.

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