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Why are They Laughing?
The Re-Formulation of Identity in Canadian Stand-up Comedy

Anna Woodrow

A Thesis

in

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ABSTRACT

Why are They Laughing?
The Re-formulation of Identity in Canadian Stand-up Comedy

Anna Woodrow, Ph.D.
Concordia University, 2001

This thesis is an ethnographic account of the world of Canadian stand-up comedy which explores the conflict and congruence between shifting identities, divided loyalties, private and public selves. Comedy is seen as a *dance* between the performers and audience members, symbolizing the everyday communicative experience of identity transmission. These identities are cultural, political, spatial and reflect popular values, beliefs, and shared knowledge. The process of this dance is both inclusive and exclusive – inclusive of those who share the dominant value system and exclusive of those at the margins who are not recognized as a part of the whole. Those who laugh, belong; laughter measures inclusion and exclusion. The sense of belonging resulting from inclusion and is linked to the metaphor of 'home' which ties into the cultural, social and geographical elements of a politicised identity. Paul Ricoeur's three levels of mimesis are used to explain identity formation of self and other. The research uncovers the love/hate duality of performance and mirrors the individual's need to be both who one *is* and whom others expect one to *be*. The comedic experience exposes the constant societal negotiation for control and the exchange of power. In the title 'Why are they laughing' *they* refers to both the performer(s) and the individual audience members which participate in comedy. Some laugh because comedy offers the opportunity to reinvent and express oneself. However, not all laughter is joyful, and not everyone is laughing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Chapter 1: Introduction - A Thesis on Identity

The following text is an exploration of the world of Canadian Stand up comedy which delves into the subculture of the comedians and uncovers the complexities of this particular cultural site. It is an examination of national and regional identity, of individual and communal determination, and of idiosyncratic and collective laughter. This thesis posits that comedy is metaphorically a dance between the performer and the audience and between the inner self and the self one presents to others. This dance involves a series of spatial, political and cultural tensions which occur before, during and after any comedic event. Comedic participation is an exercise during which both the creators and receivers of comedy re-evaluate assumptions about who they are.

To locate this research project contextually, it is necessary to understand the contemporary Canadian comedian; to uncover the value of and attach meaning to live comedic entertainment; and, to seek out the differences among regional performers and audiences across Canada. In doing so, one needs to first clarify the purpose of humour. Humour is defined as a temporally shared pleasurable experience which is transmitted via a mode of expression or form of narrative. It may also be understood as a technique to attract, maintain and/or diffuse attention; accentuate or discount an idea; encourage retention of a concept; and relieve stress. Additionally, humour is an emotional connection between an individual and something else, be it a person, an object or an idea. On the one hand, it may be spontaneous, expected, built upon, and/or surprising, and is most often pleasurable, resulting in laughter. Ironic or dark humour on the other hand, may elicit laughter which stems from discomfort. Found in many forms of productions

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such as a film, theatre, monologues, music, television, radio and advertising, humour is used as a means of attracting attention, alleviating tension, and providing proof of entertainment by emotional release; laughter is one of the measures of the relative success of these techniques. Hence in such productions, humour is mass produced and recorded for the purpose of entertainment. This type of recorded and distributed humour differs considerably from live stand-up comedy which is the focus of this research. At the outset of the research, I had a suspicion that more was going on during a comedy show than simply entertainment. Already witness to the tensions of the performance, the sub-cultural nature of the comedic community and the implication of the audience within each exhibit, I sought an answer to the question: what sets live performance apart from other types of entertainment? Stand-up comedy differs from other forms of enjoyment such as television, film, and live sporting events, due its dependency on the individual and collective participation of an audience.

The Canadian comedic industry is replete with hurdles which both new and seasoned comedians must surmount. When considering the number of challenges each comedian must face, a series of propositions develop: (1) comedic performers are inexplicably attracted to the world of performance, even under dire working conditions because the payoff is so great; (2) when the worlds of the performers and the audience members are brought together, social, cultural, and individual boundaries are challenged; (3) there is a distinct and complex Canadian comedic experience involving multiple layers of individual and performed, as well as local, regional and national, identities; (4) comedy has the ability to comment on society, affect the social conscience, maintain the

dominant ideology and propagate stereotypes; and, (5) consumers are drawn to live comedy because it offers a positive shared experience and a temporary sense of belonging.

To tackle these propositions, five themes were selected to assist in the explanation of the comedic event and the processes surrounding it. The first theme generates a profile of the contemporary Canadian comedian showing the cultural and political aspects of the lifestyle and the realities of learning the trade in Canada. The second develops an understanding of how individual and collective identities are recognised, exposed and changed during a comedy show. The third identifies the marginalisation of ambulatory identities and connections between 'selves' and 'others', especially at the local, regional and national levels. The fourth observes how and why a performer manipulates the character and the material to relate to the audience in different locations and situations. The fifth explains how one's definition of *home* influences character, performance, and audience response. **Table 1** organizes each proposition with its corresponding theme, and locates the sections of the thesis dedicated to responding to the propositions. There is of course much overlap between chapters in relation to the themes as it was neither necessary nor desirable to structure the findings of this thesis simply to prove or disprove the propositions. Table 1 is also useful for determining the rationale behind the investigation, but remains a simplified version of the greater body of work.

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Table 1: Propositions and Themes

Propositions – Why are they Laughing?	Themes – The Re-Formulation of Identity	Chapters of Discussion
Comedic performers are inexplicably drawn to the world of performance, even under dire working conditions because the payoff is so great	Theme one generates a profile of the contemporary Canadian comedian showing the cultural and political aspects of the lifestyle and the realities of learning the trade in Canada	Chapter Two,2.4.1, 2.4.3, 2.4.4, 2.4.5, 2.4.6 Chapter Six, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3
When the worlds of the performers and the audience members are brought together, social, cultural, and individual boundaries are challenged	Theme two develops an understanding of how individual and collective identities are recognised, exposed and changed during a comedic show	Chapter Two Chapter Five, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5, 5.6 Chapter Seven: 7.1, 7.2, 7.3
There is a distinct and complex Canadian comedic experience involving multiple layers of individual and performed as well as local, regional and national identities	Theme three identifies the marginalisation of ambulatory identities and connections between 'selves' and 'others' especially at the local, regional and national levels.	Chapter Three: 3.2, 3.3, 3.5, Chapter Six: 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4
Comedy has the ability to comment on society, affect the social conscience, maintain the dominant ideology and propagate stereotypes.	Theme four observes how and why a performer manipulates the character and the material to relate to the audience in different locations and situations.	Chapter Two: 2.1, 2.2 Chapter Three: 3.1, 3.2, 3.5 Chapter Five: 5.1, 5.2, 5.6 Chapter Six: 6.1 6.2, 6.3
Consumers are drawn to live comedy because it offers a positive shared experience and a temporary sense of belonging.	Theme five explains how one's definition of *home* influences character, performance, and audience response	Chapter Two: 2.1, 2.4 Chapter Three: 3.3, 3.4 Chapter Five: 5.2, 5.4 Chapter Six: 6.3, 6.4 Chapter Seven: 7.1, 7.4, 7.5

The chapters have been organized to address a general overview of comedy; a theoretical literature review of humour, identity and reception; an explanation of the method; the realities of performing for a variety of audiences; the specific nature of the sub-culture of Canadian comedians and some overall general findings.

The second chapter, **Dissecting the Structure of Canadian Comedy**, generates a profile of the contemporary comedy by describing the structure and politics involved in the Canadian scene. It is necessary to outline the elements of performance, the structure of a show, the variety of venues, as well as ethical, political, cultural and spatial issues, to begin to understand how the process of comedy affects identity. This chapter demonstrates that Canadian performers must overcome a number of challenges to create a comfortable space for themselves and their character within the community of comedians. In doing so, they gain enough experience to become competitive with the other performers and competent on stage. After overcoming many obstacles common to the business and persevering, they obtain a new identity of 'comedian'. This brings with it new challenges of negotiating the comedic identity which is driven by the expectations of others and the inclination to be true to oneself. The chapter first looks at where and how the comedic dance takes place: the performance, show structure, and variations in venues. Next it dissects the political, cultural and spatial elements within comedy, exposing a unique Canadian entertainment industry.

The third chapter, **Deriving a Theoretical Model of Identity**, develops the theoretical basis for the research and introduces a *model* which illustrates how different levels of identity interact during a comedic event. Primarily, the philosophy and theories

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of Paul Ricoeur dominate the theoretical framework and Ricoeur's three levels of Mimesis – Imitative, Reconstructive and Transformative – are used to explain how comedy leads the participants through a series of events which eventually may transform and change ideas of themselves and the world around them. This chapter also explores the literature among three theoretical areas of *humour*, *identity* and *reception theory*. Theories about humour and identity serve to clarify the purpose behind humour and the reasons a performer seeks to create a new identity to perform rather than presenting his or her actual self. Reception theory assists in explaining how a group receiving or reading comedic narratives becomes inherently implicated in the event and influences the development of performed identity.

The fourth chapter, **Peeling Back the Layers - Methodologically Speaking**, takes the reader through the decisions of data collection including sampling, interviewing, and observing, and explores the importance of ethnography and reception theory in this inquiry. This chapter expands upon the methodological approach which makes use of triangulation, or multiple techniques, to gather the data necessary for the research. There is a discussion of data collection and management for analysis using NUDIST, and directs readers to the appendices which include analytical notes and classifications. Additionally, the importance of research ethics, and the rights of the subjects by being circumspect of research ethics, author reflexivity and ownership of the data is articulated. Finally, the chapter details what worked methodologically, what did not work, how problems were handled and suggestions for the future.

The fifth chapter, **Performance and the Capricious Audience**, furthers the discussion of how the processes of comedy affect concepts of identity. This chapter analyses the collected ethnographic data and defines the importance of the live show over the recorded shows as a means of affecting the social conscience. A great deal of attention is given to exploring the differences between political, (national and regional) forms of identity: Urban and Rural; West and East; French and English; Canadian and American. This chapter compares the national and regional Canadian experiences and highlights differences between sectoral performers and audiences. Audience observations yielded the following categories: "liberal," "aggressive," "passive," "try-and-impress-me," "indifferent," and, "possessing high or low expectations." These are used to explain the varying types of regional responses and as a means of categorising collective audience behaviour. The Chapter finds that the audience plays an integral role in every comedic event and is highly implicated in each twist the performance takes.

The sixth chapter, **Comedic Community and Identity**, looks more closely at individual comedians and the development of a persona which is acceptable both on stage and by the community of comedians. It discusses and gives examples of how different characteristics become both 'hooks' and 'hindrances'; hooks because the comedian may make use of the obvious to generate humour and hindrances because physical characteristics naturally trigger audience presuppositions. These presuppositions must be overcome before the performer may build trust. On the one hand, through a series of complex interactions during a comedic event, comedians may become or remain marginalised. On the other hand, many comedians, with enough development and the

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right audience, may break down stereotypes. Trusting connections must be made between the performer and the audience before this may occur, but when it does, an opportunity arises to change individual perceptions. Finally, the chapter explores how the performer and audience members identify with the metaphor of *home* as something which provides a structure for inclusion and acceptance. While audience members will more easily trust a performer if the comic narratives appear *familiar* and *comfortable*, an audience member may *become* comfortable with a strange environment. For the performers, the community of comedians becomes in itself 'home' for many comics. Once a part of this community, comedians will find it difficult to leave either the peers or the identity associated with it. Ricoeur's theories of mimesis are applicable here in allowing new identities to be formed through the processes of comedy. Former ideas of home are abandoned and new ones adopted; eventually the steadfast connection with 'home' becomes the nomadic collective of Canadian comedians. At the centre of this chapter lies the argument that the interaction of comedy mimics the everyday experience – that the re-formulation of the self is a continuous process which none may escape.

The final chapter, **Concluding Remarks – Call-backs, Tag-lines, and the Big Finish**, explores the principal findings: a description of who the Canadian comedian is; an explanation of the 'dance' that takes place between the participants in a comedic event; and an explanation about the processes of comedy which can understood through a duality of love/hate. These three elements, who they are, what they do, and the way the world of comedy is organized in Canada, are what secure investment in this form of entertainment which interferes with the individual's sense of self. The chapter suggests

the duality of both loving and hating who one is interferes with a participant's sense of self, shifting it at times, temporarily or even permanently. In addition, the **Model of Comedic Links of Identity (Figure 3)** developed in the third chapter, assists in visualizing the theoretical interface of identity between self and other and may be applied to other forms of live performance and everyday experience. Finally, a discussion of the future of Canadian comedy closes the chapter and thus the thesis.

Following the conclusion are four appendices: Appendix A presents a series of questions that were asked in the various interviews; Appendix B is a full interview, which has been coded and analysed, including the accompanying journal notes; Appendix C is a selection of journal notes with analysis to demonstrate how observations were recorded; and, Appendix D is an example of the consent form signed by the participants in keeping with Concordia's ethical guidelines for doing research with subjects.

The next chapter begins to explain who the contemporary Canadian comedians are, and uncovers why comedic performers are drawn to the world of performance. This will be accomplished by discussing the performance, the structure of a show and the different venues, as well as the political, cultural and spatial elements of the structure of comedy. Once this has been achieved, the reader will have a better knowledge the domain of Canadian comedy and will better understand "Why they are Laughing?"

Chapter 2: Dissecting the Structure of Canadian Comedy

The objective of this chapter is to describe the structure of the world of Canadian stand-up comedy. While there are many types of live performance. this research focuses only on the lone stand-up *live* comedic performance; it will not consider sketch comedy, improvisation, or group comedy.

Comedic performance is not a simple affair but rather an array of processes which attempt to resolve a series of struggles. These struggles are based on politics, self-identity, and recognition. The political nature of Canadian comedy includes the tensions within and between Canadian institutions, the managers and producers of comedy and the actual community of comedians. The struggle for identity (both individual and collective) exists between the actual identity of the performer and his/her assumed stage character including identification with self as 'other' and 'other' as self. The struggle for recognition occurs when the performer attempts to forge meaningful links with each audience. This exercise, if successful, authenticates the performer's character but is dependent upon such phenomena as the venues, the contexts, and the viewers' presuppositions. These challenges are subjectively experienced by all stand-up comedians, and exploring the vitality of this cultural phenomenon helps to explain why a collective identity develops between the community of performers, as well as between the strangers which constitute each audience. Successful management of these elements results in a series of emotional connections between the performer and the audience members; successful bonding builds trust and a sense of belonging. It is in this moment that laughter erupts, even if unlinked to a humorous narrative; it is the pleasure felt in the

moment of letting go. To best understand the struggles each comedian must face, the following sections of this chapter will discuss the experiences in various contexts of the performance and the structural elements which form the Canadian comedic experience.

2.1   The Performance

Successful comedy should be a humorous and pleasurable experience. This pleasure will vary for different people and different reasons. For comedians it is a confirmation of self/character, a signal that they possess talent and have a future in the business. For the audience it is a experience which was worth the effort and the cost to attend the show. For the producers and managers of comedy, it is a successful business venture which opens future profitable possibilities.

Humour acts as a mode of expression or form of story-telling which allows the listeners to lose themselves in the experience, if only temporarily. Like other genres such as horror, suspense or thrillers, comedy builds then releases tension through laughter. How this tension is built and released will depend upon the comic and the context, but can range from a clownish to an aggressive style. Whether the shared experience is the emancipating event of Bakhtin's Carnival[1] or built upon a means to release guilt for contemporary human behaviour (greed, selfishness, narcissism), joining in laughter

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[1]

Bakhtin explains carnival as an inversion of hierarchy and an openness to the grotesque. A true carnival experience liberates the participants of the event, at which contemporary carnivals in Trinidad or Rio de Janeiro are believed to succeed. Bakhtin would probably not consider stand-up comedy as a true experience of carnival. For more on this see Rabelais and His World.

demarcates a shared space and confirms a set of shared values and beliefs. It is impossible

to speak of successful comedy without acknowledging the time and space in which the

live comedic event takes place and this requires a definition of successful

communication. **Figure 1** represents the linear communication model which assumes

messages are unidirectional and receivers (audiences) provide no feedback to the senders

(performers)(Adler,1999 9). In the case with live stand-up performance, it is impossible
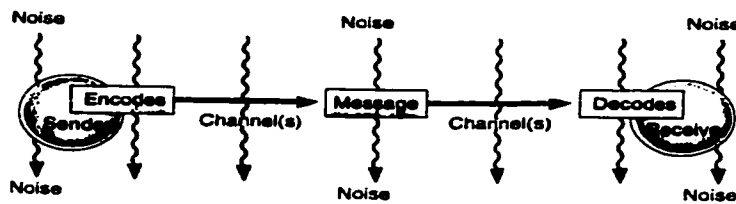
FIGURE 1-1
Linear Communication Model
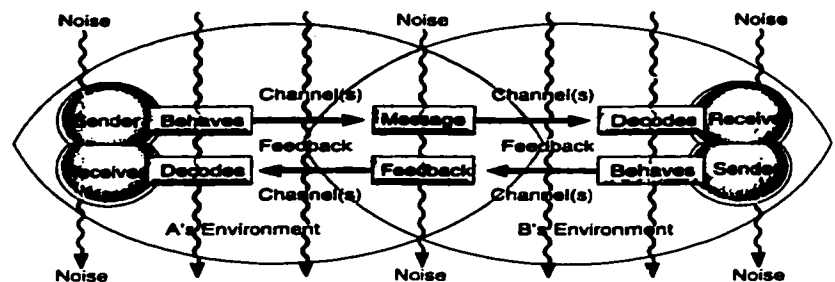
FIGURE 1-2
Transactional Communication
Model

to apply the linear model, unless one is analysing the impact of a televised or recorded

performance on viewers[2]. In **Figure 2**, the transactional model illustrates the feedback

between sender and receiver, as well as the interface of two separate environments

(Adler, 1999, 12).[3] This model is more suitable than the linear model for analysing the

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See section 5.1 for a more detailed discussion of the differences between live and
recorded performances.

[3]Reprinted with the permission of the publisher.

interaction of a live performance. Note that both models include *noise* or interference which can inhibit the successful transmission of a message. During a comedic event any distractions which interrupt the free-flow of a comedic message can be considered *noise*, for example, other people coming and going or carrying on separate conversations, physical fatigue, hunger, discomfort, intoxication, as well as psychological obstructions which interfere with the acceptance of a message (usually when a performer discusses a topic that an audience member does not believe in or agree with). Comedians must learn to be heard through or above the noise if they are to hold the audience's attention.

A successful show brings a series of elements together: the right number of people in the right frame of mind; an affable environment; talented performers; a level of professionalism; and an illusion of control over the event taking place. Comedy can exist in many different environs and contexts but a successful show must create a shared *space* for the audience members as well as a shared experience. It is the goal of the performer to create and maintain this shared space and control the energy moving through it. A good comedian will create connections between strangers and then continue to build and release tension until the audience is responding in unison; as *one*. This 'oneness' achieves the necessary state of belongingness and trust which allows for a more successful event.

Audience members will either not recognize or confuse their participation in the success or failure of the show.[4] The comics, on the other hand, are very aware of how to

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[4]

This is the case with the 'polite smiling audiences' when laughter is the yardstick for success, or the helpful heckler who with the best intentions interrupts the performer.

decipher audience response and constantly attempt to generate a string of positive responses. This requires that the comedian is able to recognize when the energy level and receptivity of an audience is at its prime, but the comedian must also possess the ability to build and *maintain* the rhythm and the energy of the show.

Each comic hopes to have the set of the night, or the strongest audience response, but s/he also recognizes that one's placement in the show's line-up is crucial for success. There is always an optimal position; if performing too early or too late in the line-up the performer will lose the advantage of a primed audience. In a three person show, the opener will usually only perform for 5 - 10 minutes which is not considered adequate time to develop a relationship with the group, but sufficient time to focus attention towards the stage. The next act up, the "middler," will have about 30 minutes to continue to build energy and focus attention. This is ample time to connect with the audience and get them working together, prime them, and leave them ready for the headliner, the final act. Occasionally, the headliner is unable to maintain the room's primed energy, and the show falls flat. Nonetheless, if the comics involved in each show are well placed in the line-up, the final act should be able to ride the waves of energy that have already in place.

The three-act (plus a Master of Ceremonies, MC) show is fairly typical of most Canadian and American comedy clubs. However, there are no formal rules regarding the pre-requisite number of acts per show. A comedic performance can range from one person in a bar working alone for 1.5 hours to 20 acts in a club performing for 5-10

minutes each.[5] The structure of a show has no formally set rules but there is a preferred arrangement generally followed by most producers of Canadian comedy, which includes an MC, "openers," "middlers," and "closers." This format provides a rhythm to which Canadian performers and audience members have become accustomed. The rhythm will change however, depending upon the venue, the audience's expectations and the rigour with which the pattern is followed by producers and performers.

Originally, stand-up comedy in Canada served as an opening act in strip-clubs with the purpose of drawing the focus to the stage. As its popularity grew, comedy moved out into other venues (A.Clark, 1997 63). Humorous narrative performance began much earlier, of course, yet regardless of its form – a monologue, a yarn, a troop performance during the first world war, or on the radio – from the beginning, the principal purpose was to have a humorous narrator to build and maintain momentum and give a sense of structure to otherwise unrelated parts. As comedy developed, it replaced the striptease acts with other comedic acts, and thus the comedy club was born (A. Clark, 1997 63).

2.2   The Structure of a Show

Every comedic performance involves a performer and an audience, yet a series of additional variables must be considered here: the venue; the size of the crowd; the length of the spectacle; the delivery of material; the response of the crowd; and the context for

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[5]

There is a general rule that the opening acts will do less time than the closing acts, although acts at all levels have been known to run longer than their allotted time.

the show. Generally there is a space where the comedian will perform (a stage, a corner) which will be designated and distinguished in some way (usually with a focus of lights, a microphone and/or an elevated platform around which the room will be organized). There are other people involved in managing the crowd (entry and seating of people), serving food or drink, introducing the act(s), controlling the sound equipment, and organizing where the comics will convene (a "green room") before the show, and reconvene after their set. These will vary from venue to venue and from context to context, and many of these elements, properly executed, combine to form a more or less successful show. Additionally, there is an *ideal* show which includes elements of: a paying audience; a large vibrant crowd with a shared cultural knowledge; a well designed stage; good lighting, sound equipment and crew; a darkened room; a good MC; 3-5 experienced performers; and of course a decent salary and fair treatment back-stage (i.e. free food, drinks, a private, comfortable area, respect from the club owners and/or management). Even in a perfect environment a show might still go poorly for any one, or all of the performers, and alternatively, an extremely successful show can occur under the most dire conditions. Nonetheless, the closer the resemblance to an ideal environment the greater the level of comfort for the performers, and the hence, the more likely the success of the show[6]. It is also important to mention that the optimum conditions almost

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[6]

It can also backfire. Being treated well and paid a high salary such as with corporate shows can create a more stressful situation for the performer who does not wish to 'screw it up'.

never exist and there are always difficulties for the individual performer to overcome on each occasion.

A *typical* show may be free or require a low entry fee, possess inadequate sound and lighting, use an inexperienced or poor MC, offer a low wage for the comic, provide a poor setting (i.e. a drunken bar, no accompanying music, lack of professionalism), and hire too few or too many acts. Regardless of the circumstances, each comedian is expected to make the best of the surroundings and ensure a happy crowd at the end of the show. The pressure is high because they might not get the next booking ('gig') if they are unable to pull off the current one. Furthermore, it is important to understand the impact a venue has on the context and success of a show.

The venues which are plausible performance arenas have been broken down into the following categories: colleges, universities, bars, clubs, theatres, corporate businesses and 'other' which includes outdoor parks, private homes and army bases. There are inherent differences between them which are understood and discussed regularly among performers. These conversations form variations of stereotypes and generalizations and based on these, the performer will prepare for a particular outcome of the show. If the show goes well, it confirms the comic's presupposition of the venue (because s/he was *prepared* for that environment). If it goes poorly, it confirms the comic's presupposition of the venue (because the environment was 'out of his/her control' i.e. *nobody can preform well under those conditions*).

2.3 Variation in Venues

2.3.1 Colleges

A college show is usually booked by an agent and has a young crowd (18-19 years of age) which restricts the material a comic may use due to the limited life experience of the audience. For this reason, comedians report that they do not enjoy performing at colleges as much as other venues. However, a college performance is usually well paid and the comedians do not frequently turn an offer down. Some of the principal complaints of the comedians are: the student organizations which bring in the entertainment will select an unsuitable show time such as during lunch; provide the show free of charge to the students, therefore devaluing the performance; and locate the performance in a setting where many other things are happening at the same time such as a cafeteria or in a busy hallway between classes. Shows tend to have a lower success rate because the age of the performer is usually a decade older than the average age of the audience member at a college. This difference in life stages produces an audience which is unable to relate to the material of the performer. Moreover, most comedians' early training takes place in clubs and bars which can produce a more vulgar style of comedy. When a comic attempts to transfer that same performance style to an educational environment, there is a discordance between the audience's expectations of what is appropriate and the material that is delivered.

2.3.2 Universities

A university show is similar to a college performance except there are older students with more life experience, and the organizers usually charge a small entrance fee. Comedians complain about being brought in by the local university pub which invariably includes groups who do not intentionally attend the performance. The attendees concurrently occupy the same venue as the comedic show, but have their own conflicting agendas which contribute to communicative noise. On the one hand, this leads to distractions away from the stage by impromptu movement throughout the space as people come and go, simultaneous conversations which continue throughout the performance, bursts of unconnected laughter, and at times, brawls in the back of the room. On the other hand, the venue might also attract greater numbers because of its broad appeal. Furthermore, as the shows are usually later a night and involve the consumption of alcohol in a relaxed environment, and are removed from the formality of the university environment. These elements may combine to improve conditions rather than impair. Compared with college shows, there is a greater appreciation of the performance and a higher likelihood of success.

2.3.3 Comedy Clubs

Canadian clubs are owned either by the major chain in Canada (YukYuks) or independently. There is an unwritten rule that a comic must demonstrate loyalty to one or the other by refusing to take work from a competitor. Although it is illegal to demand such loyalty, once a comic begins his or her career in either a chain of clubs or the

independent networks, s/he will not work elsewhere for fear of being blacklisted[7].

Comedy clubs are dream venues with their own tortures. On the one hand, they are a desired venue because the crowds attend specifically to see comedy. On the other hand, they are dreadful because the environment pits one comic against another as they compete individually for a limited number of performance opportunities. For example, new club-performing comics must begin work on open-mike-nights which may involve phoning in and begging for a spot; using political manoeuvres to move themselves up the ladder; doing the opening spots on week nights; and waiting the appropriate amount of time before being offered one of the coveted weekend or headliner spots.

In urban centres the crowds usually respond well to a variety of comedians in clubs because of the heterogeneity and liberalism of a city centre.[8] In addition, the paid entrance fee gives value to the form of entertainment, and there is a high turnover of audience members (you will not usually see the same people two weeks in a row in the same club).[9] A Club is a favourite venue for comedians because it is a space that is

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[7]

To clarify, unofficially, YukYuks is the only club which demands loyalty from its performers. Comics complain constantly about the inflexibility of the club owner and managers who will no longer book a performer who works occasionally for the competition.

[8]

Heterogeneity needs to be understood here as varied but still sharing many similar cultural traits. There are two centres which are difficult to play, Las Vegas and Niagara Falls, simply because of the number of tourists which frequent the cities. The comics' material in an urban setting will still possess some amount of general cultural information and such humour is lost on a crowd which does not share such knowledge. The comics do find ways around this however by attempting to address universal topics in these sites.

[9]

According to YukYuks, the average Torontonian, between the ages of 18 and 25 attend a comedy show twice a year, versus once every eight weeks in Sudbury or Ottawa.

created solely for comedy and follows some general rules to ensure consistency between clubs. They have a standard room and show set-up, a good sound and lighting system, and offer regular performances. The club also provides an abode for socialization; comics will drop by the club when they are not performing to see who is there and to watch the show. Less experienced comics will use the space to watch and learn from other comics or try out new material on open-mike nights.

The audiences who attend comedy clubs have expectations of how the show will be organized and the quality to expect from each show. This will differ, depending on the night. There are higher expectations for the weekend shows with a featured headliner, and lower expectations on the open-mike-nights when the entry fee is greatly reduced. Most houses will offer an early (20:00) and late (23:00) choice of shows on weekends and the audiences have the tendency to vary predictably between the two. Earlier shows have more conservative members who drink and smoke less than the later shows. The energy for the second show is found to build more easily than the first, and comedians report that they find later crowds more relaxed. There is a drawback, however, as the earlier show needs to empty in time for the second show to begin, the schedule is kept tighter and extra acts are rarely added as the first show must finish within two hours. The later show will proceed at a slower pace and experienced comics wishing to 'hop onstage' are accommodated. The increased number of acts and the later hour can produce a crowd which tires before the last act. This lessens the potential for a completely successful show and increases the difficulty for the headliner to maintain momentum. Although all comedy clubs are essentially bars with specialized entertainment, the layout of the clubs

falls somewhere between a theatre and a bar. Both a club and a bar hope to make more money from the drinks than the entry fee charged at the door, but the comedy club provides a superior setting for comedy as audience members internalize an appropriate code of behaviour specific to the environment. A bar which has the occasional comedy show maintains its status of bar and is recognised to have a multiplicity of uses or performances which encourages the clients to make use of the space in a way which is most comfortable for them.

2.3.4 Bars

The bar is one of the most common sites for comedic performance across Canada, and is the most frequently used venue in rural areas. Both the Canadian comedy chain and the independent clubs, as well as agents and managers, book short runs through a string of rural bars called 'one-nighters'. The pay is usually meagre and the comics will often have to drive four to six hours to reach the venue. In some cases the performers will be well received with most of a small town turning out for the show however, the reception is usually one of indifference, distrust (what can city folk know of rural life?) or sheer dislike. Bars usually call for the comic to produce a style of humour which can break through the urban/rural disparity and the annoyance of having a stranger in a local haunt trying to attract and maintain the audience's attention. Comedians will complain that in order to succeed in a bar, they need to reduce their comedic standards to the lowest common denominator, sometimes called toilet humour but more frequently called *blue humour*. Many times a an unsuccessful bar show will result from the comedian being

simply ignored by a large portion of the patrons. A larger complaint from the comedians deals with having to manage crowd hostility, including fielding insults, dodging thrown objects and receiving physical threats.[10]

2.3.5 Theatres

The theatre performance is on the other end of the spectrum from all of the other venues. There an air of importance is given to the evening due to the notion that higher cultured events take place at this venue. Hence, the assumption is made by the audience that the comedy show will be of higher quality than what one might see in a bar on the other side of town. Elements such as the marquee, the higher entrance fee (usually double or triple the cost of entry to a comedy club), the plush chairs, ushers to help seat people, and the required intermission, assist in creating an air of formality and legitimate the live comedic performance as a theatrical event. Theatres are usually booked for special events by agents or club owners, are well advertised, and will sell out. Comics enjoy the grand nature of such a show, but struggle sometimes to connect with the older, more conservative crowd which usually attends these events. An experienced comic might work one or two such shows a year.

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There is a story told by one comedian of a person on a motorbike bursting into the bar in the middle of his act and rushing the stage. The comedian left the stage and demanded to see the manager of the bar. The bartender retorted "the guy on the bike *is* the manager!"

2.3.6 The Corporate Show

These are viewed as the true money-makers, but most comics are not even considered for these events. The corporations who book such shows usually do so in conjunction with a conference or work-related social function such as the annual Christmas party. Most are held in hotels or restaurants, or occasionally in an office space. The company will brief the comic on composition of the audience, who is of importance, what topics to avoid or touch upon. Habitually, political topics or social commentary are avoided and companies commonly demand a 'clean' act, free of bad language, which not every comedian is able to easily do. Some comedians complain that the corporate client's requests interfere with the natural flow of a show and feel as if their artistic freedom is not being respected. However, as the pay is generally greater than most other gigs, comedians will comply. Women are infrequently booked for such shows and usually the comedian who is selected has a manager or an agent. Many comedians report a great deal of stress is associated with the performance, due to the higher wage and the knowledge that if things do not go well, they may never be booked again for a corporate gig by their agent.

2.3.7 Other Venues

There are a few other venues occasionally used for comedy such as outdoor parks, private homes and army bases. Fund-raisers will hire (or ask for the voluntary services of) a comic to act as both entertainer and Master of Ceremonies at an outdoor event. The comedian's ease with large unrelated crowds make him/her a positive addition to any

such event, but the comics find such venues challenging for a variety of reasons. First, the crowds tend to vary in age significantly (age 6 months to 96 years) making it difficult to connect with each age group. Second, there are a series of distractions at outdoor events, such as people moving about, talking, looking for a place to sit down and so forth, all of which draw attention away from the stage. Third, because fund-raisers or other outdoor shows happen infrequently, the organizers will frequently provide an unsuitable stage or sound-system, (or fail to supply one at all) creating greater difficultly in attracting and maintaining attention. Finally, as the comedic aspect is only a small part of the big picture, the role the comedian plays can be mis-interpreted by participants who are looking for serious information about the event, not a humorous narrative.

Another less frequent venue is the private home. Comedians report great difficulty in having successful shows in a private home. They explain that a person who books such a private show has usually seen an act in a night club and thinks that a similar performance at their private function such as a Christmas party, a Bar Mitzvah, or a wedding anniversary, will impress their guests. Most experienced comics report having to accept such offers when they were starting out, but later in their careers they refuse such shows, unless they need the money or owe someone a favour. The comics' major grievances revolve around: the broad range of the audience's age and life experience from young children to great-grandparents; the need to keep an act clean by excluding bad language and risqué material; and, the unnatural break in the rhythm of a party, where everyone is abruptly shifted from small intimate groups into a large one, and from interactive behaviour to listening. Normally, the experienced comedians have learned

that home venues do not work for their character and material, and find it difficult to convince an individual who wants to book them for the show of the potential problems.[11]

Finally, Army shows are another infrequent venue. Usually booked by an agent, the comics can find themselves at a military base in city suburbs (a common one for Montreal comedians is Uplands Base in Ottawa), in highly remote areas such as the North Pole in Canada, or internationally in Bosnia, Haiti, or Rwanda. On the upside, the pay is usually quite good, and the reception is strong as the army personnel enjoy seeing someone from "home." On the downside, if the comic is sent out without enough experience and does not have a large reserve of solid material, there is nowhere for him/her to go; s/he is trapped and must keep performing night after night until the contract ends -- two to three weeks later. This has been highly detrimental to the performer who loses the necessary self-confidence that comes from not being able to "pull it off." The Canadian performer may not have to fly to Rwanda to find oneself in this position; being on the road can be just as difficult as being flown overseas. This gruelling rite of passage for every comic involves putting in 'time', working the lousy venues, learning the trade, and slowly inching one's way up to the more respectable positions. Nonetheless, paying one's 'dues' is necessary on the road to becoming a

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There is one story of a comic turning down a bar-mitzvah. The 16 year old who was hoping to book a comedian for his younger brother's event believed that when the comic said no, that it was a question of money. The final offer, which was still turned down by the comic was $5,000 for 1 hour of work. When asked why he still would not accept, the comic explained that no amount of money was worth the anguish of not being able to pull off the show. Even if the show went fine, which was the best possible outcome, the comic would feel guilty taking the money for such a mediocre show. If it went poorly, which is more likely, the comic would feel too guilty to take the money anyway.

member of the Canadian stand-up community. These 'dues' inherently demand some form of respect for the business and those who have come before. A mastery of the politics becomes necessary; an adoption of the lifestyle becomes routine; and, adaption to the unwritten rules and the structure becomes a tactic for survival. The next section of this chapter will address the political, cultural and spatial considerations of the structure of comedy.

2.4 The Political, Cultural and Spatial Structures of Comedy

The structure of Canadian comedy my be understood in terms of political, cultural and spatial domains. Politically, there are a series of rules, alliances and loyalties which are unofficially adhered to by most, there is a particular lifestyle and sub-culture which develops among performers and there are a series of geographical influences on the organisation of Canadian Comedy. Political alliances form between: owners and managers of independent or chain comedy clubs; old and new comedians; male and female comedians; road comics and club comics; and those who have lived and worked in the USA and those who have not. Geographically, the size of Canada and the small population means the comedians need to travel to both develop their character and survive financially. There are extreme differences between urban and rural venues and audiences which the comedians must respond to. Additionally, there is an allegiance to the site where the comedian develops his/her style, even if s/he is originally from somewhere else. When this happens, notions of *home* shift to new spaces and become ephemeral. The next sections will consider each of these elements individually.

2.4.1 Political Elements of the Structure of Comedy

As mentioned above, alliances form between individuals at different levels of involvement in the comedic industry. Those sharing similar roles and characteristics will by default end up within a particular peer group. Internal movement, stage time and respect is difficult and slow to obtain as it is impeded by distrust and the imposed designation of outsidedness. Accepting one's place within the greater structure and capitulating to those above is the encouraged behaviour, although impatience usually interferes with this process as each comedian (regardless of the years of experience) covets more stage time, money and respect. Even when playing by the rules, certain comics will be pushed ahead by the industry while others will be ignored. Some comedians accelerate more quickly than others for a variety of reasons, how saturated the market is with one type of comedian (i.e. a white male comedian whose material is predominantly based on relationships), whether the comic is represented by an agent or manager, or if the comic has managed to alienate or impress peers, club owners, managers or agents with exceptional talent or unprofessional behaviour. Overall, every comedian is aware that the system is designed to have only a few succeed among the many who will try, hence, comedians learn to behave in an individualistic manner. Individual success is measured by a sizable salary and national recognition. With the exception of Mike Bullard, now a national household name with his own CTV talk-show, a Canadian comic only becomes a national figure once recognized by the American audiences. One of the few ways to break into the American market without crossing the border is to be discovered during the Montreal Just For Laughs Festival, an event which

attracts hundreds of American entertainment producers. The next section outlines some of the politics related to this annual affair.

2.4.2. The Politics of a Comedy Festival

It is impossible to discuss the political structure of Canadian comedy without addressing the impact of Just For Laughs (JFL). The festival runs each year for 10 days, usually the last two weeks of July. The first five days promote a majority of French shows and, the final days, English acts. Running parallel with the evening shows is an outdoor public attraction intended to provide light comedic and musical entertainment, as well as a complete 'sensory experience'. It succeeds at creating an environment that is like no other, even in Montreal where outdoor festivals are the norm. However, English and French comics criticize the outdoor event for a lack of focus and its poor orchestration. Too much emphasis is placed on the French acts which are booked, alienating the English-speaking tourists from Montreal comedy. Those who perform complain that 'roaming' acts distract and drown-out their sound system, especially when crowds follow the wandering acts in droves. Generally the outdoor exhibit is a poor venue to play. Many of the stages are tucked away behind walls and alleys, and confusion of finding the correct stage at the appropriate time results in low audience numbers or a full stage-front where there is no scheduled show. In defence of the outdoor display, it is free of charge and provides a sufficient amount of promotion to the other paid shows. Additionally, given that French is the public language in the city of Montreal, it is not surprising that French comedy is booked with greater frequency at the

outdoor venues. The styles of group theatrics, sketch character-playing and props are far more predisposed to the meandering crowds than a standard 'lone-guy-on-stage-with-a-microphone-and-a-spotlight' routine. Nonetheless, when English comedians talk about getting a festival show, they are generally not referring to the outdoor site.

Beyond the efforts of the free outdoor shows are also the ticket sales of the standard shows and Galas. Galas are the highest priced ticket and the shows are booked with the most popular acts, usually imported from the United States. Almost every English show is at a paying venue and sells out by performance time. Of the many shows which sell out in advance the most popular are: the Nasty Show, the Late Night Danger Zone, and the Montreal Show (featuring former and current Montreal comics). The comedy festival is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting comedy in Canada. Many comedians remark that the comedy that the festival promotes appears to be more American than Canadian. They base their comments on the number of Canadians who are recruited for the highest and most prestigious Gala shows although the festival does support a large number of Canadian acts, it is believed by the festival that the American names draw the crowds, making it a viable event.

One of the inherent differences between Canadian comedy and American comedy is the homogeneous nature of our comedians. We have fewer women, fewer ethnic performers, almost no (out) queer comedians, and even fewer 'alternative' comedic performers. Canadian comedy is primarily comprised of young white males, who talk about politics, relationships, sex, drugs, and bears. The larger population in the United States allows most performers situate their particular style within a 'niche'. This has a

risk of cast-typing the performers who find themselves *only* playing a circuit of clubs to a particular audience. In Canada this does not happen. The small amount of difference that we do have finds itself onto all stages across the country, one at a time.[12] The festival has stylized its roster to suit what the American scouts and agents are accustomed to seeing. This is why one will find 'niche comedy' such as the "Queer Show" (with very few, if any Canadians appearing!), the "Uptown Show" (Afro-American Inner-city humour), and the "Nasty show" (raunchy, blue material, usually a few Canadians on board) only once a year, during the JFL festival. The majority of Canadian performers are found at "Comedy Night in Canada," and the "Montreal Show" and the definition of who is 'Canadian' or from 'Montreal' is fairly flexible. Canadians show up among the big names as well, during "Bubbling with Laughter," the "New Faces of Comedy," and will be inserted among international Gala stars. Gaining a spot during any JFL show is not easy and is an enviable position to be in. There is a hierarchy among the shows, and among the positions within a show; if one is on too early or too late in a line-up, the agents might not be present during the set which limits one's chances of being seen. Furthermore, even if the festival has given a comedian a spot in previous years, that does not guarantee a spot every year thereafter; each comedian auditions for each festival.

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Anyone belonging to one of the 'different' groups will only appear as a 'token' act on a show. A show will rarely have more than one woman, one Afro-Canadian, one 'gay' comic, and yet will boast 4-5 white males nightly. Tokenism causes added conflict between performers. The white males feel as if they have lost a spot to someone who is only on because of his/her 'hook', and the marginalised 'other' comedians resent the ease with which the average white male will be booked for double the number of shows in any given week.

Beyond showcasing Canadians, many American agents will make use of the festival to bring more visibility to the acts on their rosters, or will simply show up to 'schmooze' at the Delta after-hours. The Delta Hotel is the nucleus of all activity between shows; local comics, producers and promoters will book a room at the Delta for the week just to be a part of the scene. This scene includes breakfasts, lunches, dinners and drinks, before, during, and after shows. There are daytime films shown at the JFL's Museum, lectures and readings given by 'experts' (usually journalists), and an annual comedic rant (an American comedian who berates and mocks the 'industry' crowd). This is a highly popular, well attended daytime event which receives a huge response every year. By the end of the final week, there is the lunchtime BBQ (all you can eat and drink next to the fountain in the courtyard on the second floor), Friday's all night party (where they serve breakfast from midnight until last call in the ballroom), and Sunday's wrap-up party, the grande-finale (when most of the important people have flown home).

All one requires for all of the activities is the coveted JFL pass. Along with all the parties, one is also guaranteed access to the Delta bar in the evenings, a free shuttle service to carry you from venue to venue, available seating to any of the regular shows, and a space in the VIP 'tent' at Théâtre St. Denis which allows you to watch the sold-out Galas on the mounted T.V. screens. Canadian comedians complain when they are booked for a show but refused a pass. It is a confusing message which JFL sends to the performers. On the one hand, the festival will book a comedian for a show, thereby signalling his/her apparent worth as a performer. On the other hand, by forbidding the comedian a pass, the festival forces him/her to sit in the wings and watch the entire event

from afar. The comics have over the years found ways of manipulating the system to play a part, passes have been shared around, allowing others to 'enter', but they serve little purpose for schmoozing if one's own name does not appear on it, in fact, it can work against them.

While many comics are grateful to the festival for the opportunities it has provided, many more find the event a farce, put into place to serve the interests of certain producers, managers and agencies, but not the interests of the comedians. One comic expressed it as a huge summer camp for the 'industry.' They get to take a trip together to Montreal, hang out, set-up internal deals for later, if lucky, get a huge bonus for discovering the next Jim Carrey. It is the dream of being discovered that encourages each individual comedian to return year after year, audition for shows, hope for a Gala, even when consistently disappointed. Nonetheless, the comedians' relationship with JFL tends to be one of love/hate and exposes the clash between artistic freedom and market demands. Performers do not like to be treated as commodities, but hope one day to become famous, and hence a commodity. When one becomes a commodity, it is the ultimate sign of legitimation and mass acceptance. Once a part of the American market, the lifestyle (earnings, opportunities, popularity and peers) shifts dramatically from the former lifestyle in Canada. The next section explores the current reality of the Canadian performer.

2.4.3 The Lifestyle of a Canadian Comedian

The structure of Canadian comedy also forms a particular lifestyle for a comic.

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This thesis is primarily concerned with those persons who earn the majority of their income from stand-up performance and/or writing. Because most shows are in the evenings, the day usually starts later for a comedian and ends in the early hours of the morning; comedians become the people of the night. Cigarettes and alcohol are the two best friends of many a comic, and due to the amount of time spent on the road, usually a fast-food, unhealthy diet prevails. After a show, a pizza will be ordered, some beer or scotch pulled out, and hours of card-playing, eating, smoking and television watching will unfold. During this period comics will banter, jokes will be formed, changed, reworked, shared, stolen and given away. When on the road, CNN and the news will be searched for a connection with the urban world back home. Newspapers will be pulled out over a late breakfast, and scoured for new or unusual information which is seen as potentially humorous. There will be chatter about the previous show, what the next show will bring, a re-evaluation of some of the new jokes resulting in a refining or disposal. After breakfast, comedians will pile into the car and off to the next town or venue; a new place; a new audience; more of the same.

This lifestyle creates strong links between comedians and a sense of loyalty. It also results in a lonely, isolated existence which creates a greater dependency upon friends who share similar habits and experiences. The same comradery does not exist for women as it does for men. Furthermore, there is a divide between the male comedians and 'other' comedians (such as female or ethnic comedians) with few allegiances between. The next section comments on this polarisation.

2.4.4 Typical and Non-Typical Performers in Canada

The community of comedians in Canada is primarily white, male and urban. Since women and minority group performers are not as numerous, they do not receive the same opportunities for work. They share all the difficulties of every other performer, face hurdles of tokenism, sexual harassment, and a longer developmental process which comes with reduced stage time. Due to the less audiences exposure when these groups appear on-stage they are unexpected by audience members and therefore are less well received than their counterparts. The effects this has on their performance will be revisited in the Chapter Three and Chapter Six. Historically, male stand-up performers have dominated in this field and continue to occupy some of the highest positions. This results from being at it longer and the audience's ease at yielding power to a male figure on stage. Women and Ethnic performers struggle to gain and maintain a position of power on stage. Males are frustrated by someone getting stage time, not based on merit, but based on the fact that they are different (i.e. female or ethnic) and this causes tension. A sense of injustice prevails on all sides and forms boundaries between 'us' and 'them.' This is problematic in an industry where each person must egotistically look out for his/her best interests or be left behind. Again, the complexity of the political relations may be viewed here along with the cultural and sub-cultural expectations. Many of the cultural rules are internalized over time and stiff penalties imposed internally on those who choose to ignore them.

2.4.5 Ethical Rules and Expectations

Being accepted by the other comedians involves observing and deciphering the politics and unwritten code of ethics which pervade the world of Canadian comedy. These unwritten rules are shared, upheld and passed down by the community; they are revered by most, but are also interpreted and manipulated by many. Many ethical rules revolve around protecting authorship of material and maintaining the hierarchical order of the business. The underlying rules play a greater role in interpersonal interaction between comedians and influence a great portion of the structure of an act.

There are some general rules which seem to apply across North America and, at times, abroad. The unwritten ethical rules may hold severe penalties and are usually implemented by the comics in an informal manner. There are many ways of enforcing the rules. For example, a perpetrator can be given the silent treatment, or cold shoulder; will not be invited to participate in one-nighters or road-trips;[13] will be confronted and rebuked by one or more of the senior comics; and/or, word of mouth will spread knowledge of the infraction within the community inflicting a negative reputation which will be difficult to shed. This can be extremely damaging to any comic's esteem or career since such a story, even untrue, will follow him/her for years.

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It is common (especially outside the control of YukYuks) for a comic to select an opener for a road trip when setting up a tour. It is a means for a younger comic who wants to learn the ropes to get a feel for the type of travel and performing s/he will have to do. The senior comic will select someone who has enough workable material and is thought to be a suitable travel companion. Such an offer is an honour for a junior comic and demonstrates a primary level of respectability has been reached within the community. A successful road trip will usually bring comics closer personally.

Some examples of these ethics or unwritten rules include:

♦ Never use another comic's material, even unintentionally. In the case of similarity between material, the person has been performing the joke longer claims ownership and the other is expected to stop performing it. If the amount of time it has been performed by each is close, equal, or difficult to assess, the person who first gets it to air (T.V./Radio) or published, gets to claim it as his/her own.

♦ Be professional. Show up early, and sober, for gigs and do not start to drink until after one's performance is finished.

♦ Do not go over your time limit and use up another comedian's stage time.

♦ Do not make obvious attempts to better your own career by sucking up to management/club owners.

♦ If you are a new comic, do not try too hard to be accepted by the group, instead allow senior members to come to you, and treat them with respect when they do.

♦ Spend the appropriate amount of time paying one's dues, this means travelling, taking the non-paying gigs, and putting in hours of unpaid stage time. Anyone who rides on the coat-tails of others or progresses too quickly, deserves be snubbed by other comedians who have worked for everything they have achieved.

This is not a complete list of regulations, but it encompasses many common values held by a breadth of performers both nationally and internationally.

Most Canadian comedians referred to the Canadian comedy community as a tiny group of people spread out over a vast distance. Even with the spatial challenges of the country, the group of performers who earn the majority of their living from stand-up share

more than a moral constitution; comedians share cultural beliefs and symbols which through time they have made their own. Being Canadian and performing in Canada provides the basis for this community, yet there are numerous forms of identity within the scope of comedy. These forms are related to physical characteristics, group affiliations, political alignments, cultural values and beliefs, and spatial or regional identifications. One of the significant differences in identification which each comic is concerned with is how to make it work when you are not at home. How one's stage character is received by 'others', whether it is embraced or scorned, influences future performances. If scorned, either the character or material will be changed, or the comedian might simply refuse to perform in that setting again. If the latter is the choice, both parties lose; the performer because a portion of general audience has been eliminated, and the site because it has lost exposure to a particular type of performer. The next section, which is the final section of this chapter, exposes some of the spatial tensions which arise between Canadian urban and rural identities and performances.

2.4.6   The Urban and Rural Divide

Much of identity is formed out of where one calls *home*. For comedians, home is usually a major city centre, even if they were originally born in a non-urban environment. Most Canadian comics base themselves in Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Calgary or Edmonton. There are a few others: Sudbury, Winnipeg, Ottawa, Halifax, London, and Niagara Falls, but most performers find it difficult to base themselves in a town with a single club, and eventually relocate to a busier comedy hub.

The urban comedy scene means trying to find any kind of work that will give a comic stage time without risking repercussions (i.e. being blacklisted). It is characterised by little pay, cut-throat competition for the few performance opportunities available, a tightly-knit community which is not welcoming to newcomers, politics, bitterness and back-stabbing. Because of its size, Toronto has become the major hub of Canadian comedy with television opportunities, a variety of clubs, and headquarters of the major Canadian comedy chain, Mark Breslin's Yuk Yuk's. Eventually, everyone tries a hand at the Toronto experience, many settling there to reap the benefits of working for a comedy chain based across the country. But Toronto is expensive, and working part-time as a comic will not cover the basic living costs. So, eventually, a comic will head out on the road, to rural areas, one-nighters, and the grind. Once a comic has become a road comic, a new identity develops and a new peer group is joined. As was already stated, Canadian comedy tends to be focused around predominately urban clubs and performers. As the findings will show later in Chapter Five, there is a constant discourse among comedians about whether rural Canada is a good or a poor place to perform. Many of these discussions become linked to regional ideas of which rural areas are better than others. Successful urban comics possess an ability to blend into rural areas and report shows working equally well as in urban centres. Not everyone has this prowess, however, and the result is a limitation of which comedians rural Canada is exposed to. Nonetheless, rural Canada continues to support Canadian stand-up as a form of entertainment. Does comedy form links if understanding and belongingness between rural and urban forms of identity? As we will see later in this thesis, the *potential* is there, but it is not often

developed.

The community of Canadian comedians differentiate between those members who travel regularly and those who do not. Those who take to the road feel superior to those who only work in one centre. There is an underlying sense of accomplishment for those comedians who can make their characters work in all venues and regions. While some choose not to go on the road, others are not offered the opportunity if their style of comedy is seen as inappropriate for a rural audience. This undercurrent influences the choices that comedians make about what is an acceptable stage character and what is not and this has negative impacts on both the comedians who are restricted to urban centres and the rural audiences whose comedic exposure remains limited. A similar division exists between those performers who have worked in the United States and those who have not. Cracking into the American market symbolises breaking through the glass ceiling in Canada and legitimates the performers in the eyes of their Canadian peers. Working in New York or Los Angeles is difficult and it is seen as the truest test of one's ability as a performer.

In recent years, many Canadians have been successful in bridging the cultural and geographical gaps: Dan Ackroyd; Pat Bullard (The Pat Bullard Show); Mike Bullard; John Candy; Jim Carrey; Chris Finn (Former Mad TV writer, now with This Hour has 22 Minutes); Dave Foley (Kids in the Hall, News Radio); Stevie Ray Fromstein (Rosanne, writer); Brian Hartt (Mad TV, writer); Jeremy Hotz (Speed 2); Peter Kelamis (X-files, Happy Gilmore); Howie Mandel; Mark McKinney (SNL); Mike Myers (SNL, Austin Powers); Bill Murray; Matthew Perry (Friends); Billy Rieback (executive producer of

Home Improvement); Jeff Rothpan (5 appearances on the Tonight Show); Martin Short,

Ryan Styles (The Drew Carey Show, and, Who's Line is it? British and American

versions); Scott Thompson (Larry Sander's Show); and Harland Williams (Simon, Geena

Davis Show) to name a few. Many of them might never be seen or heard of, yet their

work supports some of the most popular films and television shows.

Overall, the experiences of the stand-up comedian tend to be negative: poor pay,

little respect, difficult shows, and working within a system which pits one against

another. So why continue? Why invest in a lifestyle with so few pay-offs? The comics

report that satisfaction comes from: arriving at a point where most shows go well because

one has the experience and the material to pull it off; knowing which shows to turn down

because they just will not work; and having that one occasional show where everything

clicks. The comedian will not leave a world where there is so much potential; there is

always a slim chance of discovery by Hollywood; the ultimate fame and fortune of

sitcoms, HBO specials, films and high-paying development deals[14].

This chapter has described some of the principal processes of comedic

performance along with the structure and politics involved in the realm of Canadian

Comedy. Canadian performers face particular obstacles which enhance and detract from

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A development or holding deal is offered to an individual whose potential is recognized,
but the studio or producers are unsure of where the comic will best fit, perhaps for a
sitcom, soap-opera, or film. The price-tag will be somewhere around $75,000+ for a year
or two, and the comic may not sign with anyone else in the interim. If and when
something comes available, they are expected to take it, even if it does not interest them.
In recent development deals with Canadian performers, those selected did not have
further success once they had relocated to Los Angeles.

their progress at the same time. In some ways, the individualistic and competitive nature encouraged by the industry drives the performers apart and isolates them. In other ways, the isolation acts as a unifying instrument, which draws them back together and helps to understand, justify their choice of profession. A tightly-knit group that interacts with sporadic frequency emerges; yet this closeness is fraught with varying degrees of absolute trust and categorical suspicion. Each comedian must face the judgmental gaze of a variety of sources: audiences; peers; producers and, worst of all, themselves. The next chapter explores the theoretical model for dealing with the tensions which materialize during any performance between the *self* and the *other* by exploring the literature on humour, identity and reception theory. Moreover, it presents a model which helps explain the complex interactions of different forms of identity and the influences on what the performers and audience members choose to expose and what they do not.

Chapter 3: Deriving a Theoretical Model of Identity

The opportunity for a profound interaction with an audience appears to be the principal lure for most comedians. They will spend the first few years learning how to connect with the audience and then the rest of their careers attempting to connect on a consistent basis. One of the reasons the comedian looks forward to meaningful interactions is because a positive response confirms his/her sense of self. Even if the character that is being presented is not the actual identity of the performer, it is still linked to that self, due to its point of origin -- the author. As we will see later, self-identity is linked to more than just a stage-character, it also becomes the basis though which the comic defines his/herself in relation to others who enter into the realm of the comedic sphere, including peers, agents, managers and audience members.

These links of identity form the basis of this thesis as they are used to explain the actions of the performers and others involved in the process. Comedy provides a series of ways in which people can connect on an individual or collective level. Examples of these audiences are: an aggregate of strangers in an urban club, a large family gathering at an in-home party, a group of co-workers, or any gathering of people with shared cultural knowledge. How an audience member responds to the humorous narratives (whether they are 'funny' or 'not') is tied to his/her level of involvement with the comedic event. People laugh because it is a socially acceptable form of self-expression; because others around them are laughing and it is contagious; because they are able to individually connect with the material; and because it offers an emotional escape.

Figure 3 Comedic Links of Identity
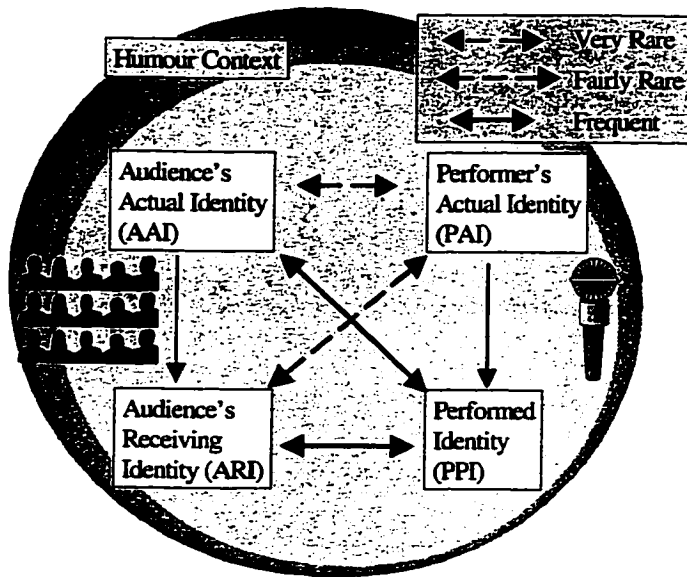
Figure 3, provides a visual aid to understand the possibilities of interaction during a comedic show and the reasons that people laugh. In order to best understand the model, it is necessary to discuss the elements which comprise it: *humour* sets the context, comedic *performance* and narratives create the plot; multiple forms of *identity* connect with the narrative content and with the *reception* of others involved in the event. Humour is the atmosphere which ensconces the performance, and identity forms the interface for interaction between the participants of the event. The *actual* identity of all participants is heavily guarded, while the *presented* identity is comprised of selected characteristics which are displayed during any interactive episode. Theoretically, there is a tension between where the presented or performed identity ends and the actual identity begins. The variety of masks one wears socially, presents a preferred self and protects the inner self from ridicule. However, the action of recognizing (another or one's own) social behaviour as ridiculous evokes laughter. The Canadian comedian provides the opportunity for the audience members to laugh at others and laugh at themselves. When this happens, individual and collective links of identity are formed between performers and the receivers.

The philosophy of Paul Ricoeur is especially helpful in explaining the specific context of self-representation in stand-up comedy due to his specific treatment of narrative identity. A comedian expresses his/her character through various forms of narratives, metaphors and symbols (e.g. oral explanations, body language, clothing, and facial expressions) during any performance. The narrative must be plausible if the audience is going to invest in the interchange, as it must for a fruitful encounter. Each narrative through time is perfected in order to be plausible. However, it is also in the performer's interest to maintain a certain flexibility within each narrative to necessarily respond to each audience's particular expectations.

3.1   Understanding Performance - Paul Ricoeur

Ricoeur offers us a suitable point of departure for understanding how the comedic event evokes laughter through his work on symbol, metaphor and most importantly on narrative. Ricoeur recognises the double intentionality of symbolic language to say more than one thing at a time (Kemp 1989, 7). On the one hand, metaphor describes and re-describes the same phenomenon, exposing the possibilities of multiple understandings. However, language cannot be separated from the actions of the individuals involved in its creation, production and reception. For this reason, Ricoeur develops his theory further to include *narrative*, which is temporally located, has a plot, and makes use of metaphors, symbols and signs to attribute a multiplicity of meanings to everyday phenomena. For Ricoeur, "narrative is the way we finally make sense of the temporality of our experience"(Pellauer, 1997 xiv). Narrative becomes humorous when the content (or plot)

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meets or exceeds the expectations of the reader. The outcome is the recognition of

meaning particular to an individual, a cultural group, a society, or a nation. Although

there are a series of elements involved in the successful production of humour (e.g.

shared cultural knowledge, appropriate setting, emotional state, etc.) a comedian

facilitates the process of creating laughter though the development of narrative plots with

which audience members can identify. The connections between self/other,

actual/performed identity, individual/collective identity, as seen in Figure 3, are the very

processes which allow for a narrative to be interpreted as amusing. Without human

action and interaction, there is no recognition of self through others and no shared

knowledge. Without shared knowledge, there are no expectations and no connections

made between how satire, sarcasm and irony apply directly to oneself.

Ricoeur defines the self in relation to others through narratives with which

individuals identify by addressing the *character* and *boundaries* of identity. The links

created during the humorous event are 'spaces' which open temporarily between the

various forms of identity found in Figure 3. Frequently, the Performer's Performed

Identity connects with the Audience's Responding Identity. During the course of the

event, there is a constant back-and-forth between Performer's Actual Identity (PAI) and

Performer's Performed Identity (PPI), as well as, between the Audience Member's Actual

Identity (AAI) and the Audience Member's Responding Identity (ARI). Additionally,

although very rarely, there is an opening and link created between PAI and the AAI.

These links are speculative and while this research gives cursory attention to the PAI, it is

primarily based on the PPI. I argue that there is always the possibility of fusion between

any of the various forms of identity (of either the performer or the audience member), only the measurement of such connections is challenging as there are multiple signs and forms of language which are presented, received, read and responded to all in the same moment.

In the previous chapter I argued that the comedic performance is not a simple affair but rather a series of processes which attempt to resolve a sequence of struggles. These tensions exist between: the actual identity of the performer and acquired stage character; the politics within the *world* of Canadian comedy (the institutions: YukYuks, CBC etc., and the people: managers, club owners, other comedians etc.); and, the constant challenge for each performer to forge meaningful links with every audience (the venues, the contexts, and the presuppositions of the 'other'). The challenge is to break though the noise and successfully deliver a narrative specifically designed to draw attention to the shared cultural maps (symbols and metaphors) of the participants.

Ricoeur in his early works was concerned with symbols and metaphor. Symbolic language has the ability to say more than one thing at a time, and metaphor for Ricoeur is a means of understanding the semantic core of a symbol. (Pellauer, 1997, xii; Ricoeur, 1998, 25) As Ricoeur's theory developed, language was found to be rearranged creatively through metaphor. It does so, like a symbol, by presenting multiple meanings. Furthermore, by experiencing metaphor, "we are invited to read our own experience in accordance with the new modalities of language. But there was a link missing...the role of the reader." (Ricoeur, 1998, 83) To address this missing link on metaphor, Ricoeur developed the next stage of his philosophy in <u>Time and Narrative</u>. Narrative is delivered

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through language, and time is at the interface of narrative and language. (Pellauer, 1997, xiv) Language is thought to move externally, and holds a potential to navigate within and restructure any experience – shifting our perceived universe. In order to better articulate these ideas, Ricoeur introduces the concept of *mimesis*.

Volumes 1 and 2 of <u>Time and Narrative</u> expose some of the principal features of narrative by contrasting Augustine's *Confessions* with Aristotle's *Poetics*. Ricoeur is bemused by Augustine who "inquires into the nature of time without any apparent concern for grounding his inquiry on the narrative structure of the spiritual autobiography" and by Aristotle who "constructs his theory of dramatic plot without paying any attention to the temporal implications of his analysis"(Ricoeur, 1983, 4). It is his intent in these volumes to bring two worlds together, *plot* and *time*, by building upon some concepts introduced in *Confessions* and *Poetics*, namely Mimesis and plot (or what he terms *emplotment*). In an attempt to bring together Augustine's exploration of time and Aristotle's concept of plot, Ricoeur reworks the Aristotelian concept of Mimesis. He first explains his understanding of the original use of this term in Aristotle's *Poetics*: "(t)his concept is only defined contextually and through one of its uses, the one that interests us here, imitation or representation of action" (Ricoeur, 1983, 33).

This imitating, or representation of action, is the key to Ricoeur's first attempt at explaining the connection between narrative plot and time. The narrator 'acts' when telling. Ricoeur furthers this by expanding Aristotle's Mimesis into three parts, *Mimesis1 (imitative)*, *Mimesis2 (reconstructive)* and *Mimesis3 (transformative)*, which he shows to be interconnected with plot and also defined temporally. Mimesis1 involves the

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presuppositions the narrators/listeners have of their world, their symbols, their language, the order of action all of which is trapped in time (Ricoeur, 1983, 64). Mimesis2 is the moment when one enters the realm of poetic composition, or in other words, the time in which the creative process of emplotment is being undertaken. Finally, Mimesis3 is the point at which the past intersects with the present and there is a new configuration of past understandings of presuppositions (Ricoeur, 1983, 71).

Ricoeur does not leave off here without a note of caution on the *circularity of Mimesis*; a 'Violence of Interpretation' and/or 'Redundance'. When manipulating a narrative over time there is an inherent danger that the re-alignment of a plot or re-telling of a story might cause unforseen, damaging results, or maintain pre-suppositions which need to be replaced, "in the first case we may be tempted to say that narrative puts consonance where there was only dissonance. In this way, narrative gives form to what is unformed. But then this formation by narrative may be suspected of treachery" (Ricoeur, 1983, 72). Beyond this however, Ricoeur states the importance of the reader, or listener, of the plot, "it is the reader who completes the work...(t)he act of reading is thus the operator that joins mimesis3 to mimesis2" (Ricoeur, 1983, 77).

In the later volumes 3 and 4 of <u>Time and Narrative</u>, Ricoeur contrasts Husserl's phenomenology of internal time-consciousness and Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology of temporality. Out of this, his exploration of time is complemented by 'reading', 'rhetoric' and 'identity'. As we have already seen, for Ricoeur, the reader completes the work and enacts this change of pre-suppositions which is central to Mimesis3. This dialectical functioning of the three levels of *mimesis: imitative,*

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reconstructive and *transformative* (Ricoeur, 1998, 83), may be likened to three levels of comedic presentation of character. (1) *imitative*, when comedians use shared cultural knowledge, or what they have seen/heard before, and reproduce it on stage; (2) *reconstructive*, when comedians rework the narratives repeatedly until they are most suitable for the character which has evolved; and, (3) *transformative*, the moment in which the connections the reader has with the narrative touches him/her so deeply it becomes in itself, "a spoken universe" (Ricoeur, 1998, 86). This is the key to the implication of the reader in metaphor *and* to understanding why people laugh. When the reader draws a number of connections within the plot of a narrative which also incorporates symbolic language, signs and metaphors, making such connections is pleasurable and laughter erupts.

The comedic process involves all three of these levels in the development of character, while the third implicates the viewer. These transformative moments provide an opportunity to shift perception and advance society, transposing all involved persons. At this point, individual actual identities become fused together, forming a collective. Each individual (audience member and performer) glimpses a portion of his/her actual identity, and in the euphoric state of shared laughter, permits transposition to occur. This is a temporary fusion which will close after the moment has passed, but once it has been experienced by an individual, s/he will yearn for that connection to be re-opened. I believe this is the true reason comedians are drawn to comedy, they wish to be in control of this mental and emotional state.

It is from here that we begin to uncover narrative identity as it is developed by the comedian within the performance. It is, however, important to also understand the other elements beyond 'self' and 'other' which form the basis for the emancipating event. Ricoeur offers us the hermeneutical tools to understand comedic process. These include a continuous and productive dialectic between exchanged narratives which he believes to be universal (Ricoeur, 1983, 28). It is imperative to look beyond individual identity, towards the collective identity formed out of a narrative comedic exchange. Within the realm of comedy, it is necessary to recognize both the receptor of the narrative – the audience, and the context of the narrative – humour.

The background for this research incorporates literature on *humour*, *identity* and *reception theory*. It is impossible to talk about comedy without discussing the use of satire and irony in society and the possible effects of laughter or reception theory because the audience plays the most significant role in any given comedic spectacle. Furthermore, one cannot discuss the comedic performance without commenting on identity because it is important to understand the shifts that take place for the comedians themselves and the influences that multiple forms of identity have during any public event. The section on humour explores three areas: (1) Carnival, (2) the use of the satirical mask for political and social commentary, and (3) examples of literature on marginalised humour, specifically referring to women in this case. These have been selected as principal bodies of literature because they describe how humour may be used to transform one's self-identity and shift perceptions of what is ordinary. Events resembling Carnival have an impact on collective identity and provide opportunities to turn the status-quo on its head.

The next section of this chapter focusses on Identity and explores specifically the literature on Self/Other as well as how individuals and groups identify with *home* – nationally or locally. Finally, a section on Reception theory has been included to position this thesis in relation to a fairly recent approach to investigating the impact and use of entertainment by audiences known as reception analysis. The literature covers five common approaches to understanding audiences and argues in favour of one approach over the others.

3.2 Humour

There are many different explanations of humour and as many different ways of using the term. For the purpose of clarity, in the context of stand-up comedic performance I define humour as a temporally shared pleasurable experience which is transmitted via a mode of expression or form of narrative. In the case of comedy, humour is the setting within which the interaction takes place, and pleasure is the expected result of the comedic event. Even if all of the messages sent are not humorous, the emotional experience hinges on the expectation that at any moment something amusing *could* occur. Affiliated with humour are usually feelings of joy, hilarity, delight, elation, glee, happiness, euphoria, exhilaration, merriment, and of course, pleasure. One of the most useful and applicable discussions of humour historically stems from the phenomenon of Carnival.

3.2.1 Carnival and the Transformative Experience

Carnival was fundamental in the lives of all classes during the Renaissance; cities devoted up to three months a year to such festivals (K. Clark, 1984, 300). One definition of Carnival includes "(a) temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men and of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life" (Bakhtin, 1984, 16). Carnival is not a spectacle to be watched by people, but something in which everyone participates and experiences universally (Bakhtin, 1984, 7). Laughter is festive and ambivalent; social hierarchies inverted; upper body (face or head) inverted with the lower body (genitals, belly, buttocks); and, degradation is a primary form of regeneration. Carnival metaphorically personifies the collective narrative, as the individual feels a vital part of the Carnival organism during which the individual body ceases to be only itself and becomes incorporated into the collective body. In this instance, by changing costumes or masks, it was possible to temporarily (metaphorically) exchange bodies, renewing oneself in the process. Hence, during carnival people become sensitized to the sensual, the material, the bodily, unity, and community (K. Clark, 1984, 302).

Bakhtin notes that with the rise of Christianity, there also arose Menippean satire. Rabelais and His World explores the intersection and tension between cultural elements, ideologies and patterns of behaviour imposed by the official culture (cultural agents holding positions of power and sharing in the dominant ideology), and the underlying desire for change from members of the unofficial cultural body (K. Clark, 1984, 298). Distinguishing between the official and unofficial (folk) culture of the middle ages, Bakhtin outlines the resulting dialogical conflict between the two. The *official* medieval

culture tried to institute a particular version of 'truth' in a static, unchanging world order, whereas carnival was intent on challenging this 'truth,' and instilling individual and social transformation (Bakhtin, 1984, 275).

During the Renaissance, Cervantes's novels created a change of bodies and objects into commodities. By the time the Romantic period had drawn to a close, carnival had ceased to be the concrete (one might say the bodily) experience of the one, inexhaustible being as it was in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance" (Bakhtin, 1984, 37). Moreover, during this time, laughter became ironic and sarcastic, losing its regenerative qualities. The emancipation and regeneration of the social spirit which was prevalent through early carnival, is no longer typical in modern times however, I do not hold the same opinion as Bakhtin that laughter and Carnival celebration have lost their regenerative qualities. In fact, certain festivals reproduce carnival routinely[15]. After years of watching comedic events, observation has demonstrated repeated (although infrequent) examples of euphoric collective experience which is recollected and reiterated by participants after the show among each other. Therefore, the concept of Carnival may be applied to contemporary comedy. There exists a constant reminder of the material, the body, and exposure of the lower-bodily stratum. Some examples of this may be drawn from comedic narratives:

> Mens' sperm counts have been reduced by 50%.... this information only fuels my Grandfather's fire. "In my day, we blew the tops of their heads

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[15]Some examples include, Trinidad Carnival, The Carnival of Rio de Janeiro, Mardi Gras, Woodstock, as well as contemporary versions in Toronto, Brooklyn, London, Barbados, and New York City's Wigstock which is a Drag-Queen festival and a wonderful example of inversion of gender, and focus on lower bodily stratum.

off; if a girl *wore* my underwear she'd get pregnant!" Grampa would you shut up?! Put your teeth in!. "I'd have teeth, but my sperm ate them" Shut up! (pause) And put your pants on! (David John McCarthy)

Discussions of bodily fluids and creating images of sperm-soaked teeth is a suitable example of the grotesque and inversion of the lower stratum. Another example is: "Mars Bar is a funny name for a chocolate bar eh? It's not the worst planet they could have chosen though... Uranus bar, filled with chocolatey goodness (pause) – now with nuts!" (David Acer) Evoking images of eating faeces demonstrates how order can be inverted. The inversion of order and joyful hilarity *is* proffered by stand-up comedians, yet, accompanying this may also be a mocking, cynical or sardonic form of humour, no longer capable of renewal, no longer universal (Bakhtin, 1984, 51).

Comedians report that once in a while, an audience will act as a whole; laughing together, sharing the same moments with equal zeal. When that happens, it is a different laughter, one which is not pointed at another, but one which is universal and emancipating. It does not happen all the time, but many comics discuss such occurrences with an underlying acknowledgement that universal laughter is one of the reasons why they continue to perform. Carnival may also be explained as a gap in the fabric of society, an opening in space and time in the status-quo (K. Clark, 1984, 301). As the official culture seeks to author the social order as a unified, unchangeable text, carnival remains a threat. (K. Clark, 1984, 301) Contemporary stand-up comedy is capable of deliberately 'blurring' the lines between social commentary and laughter as an end in itself; satire and sarcasm provide a means of *achieving* this.

Support for this position may be drawn from the only academic treatment of Canadian stand-up comedy. The Laughmakers describes the entertainer from the 18th century (the variety artist) as someone who "spoke to and for the common people" (Stebbins, 1990, 6). Using familiar topics, situations and local dialects, the entertainer creates a connection with the audience, and, by "taking the people's view, entertainers sometimes challenged the established society and sometimes got into trouble for doing so" (Stebbins, 1990, 6-7). Stand-up comics continue to play this role by positioning themselves outside of societal norms and values in order to reflect back on them in a mocking, satirical way.

Another contemporary theorist has attempted to make sense of hilarity, carnival and mocking humour. According to Palmer, there are two major categories of comedic theory. The first one refers to ridiculous laughter focussed on something foolish which can be scornful. This may act in a manner of informal social control and provides an instructive or amending societal function. Making fun of someone can mark them as nonconforming, and marginalised, or mocking the latest policy of a government assumes an opposing view and potentially opens a debate. The second type of comic theory is in keeping with the idea of Carnival as "festive rejoicing in which laughter is convivial and fooling is in order" (Palmer, 1994, 9). If we accept these two types of comedy, we should also recognize that people attend comedic performances for a variety of reasons and any combination of the above two types may occur for any period of time during any live interaction. One comedian during a show may perform a set which is replete with social commentary while the next might discuss his/her relationship with a pet. The impact of

either will depend upon context and the deliverability of the narrative. The effect will vary from group to group depending upon a series of unknown variables. Although enjoyed by most, political commentary may offend some audience members.[16]

It would appear that an explanation of carnival and hilarity might be useful in part to explain contemporary comedy as it draws attention to grotesque realism and the lower bodily stratum. Bakhtin would probably be sensitive to the sarcastic delivery of contemporary stand-up comedy and would therefore deny that it possesses the ability to transform the participants. Nonetheless, with technological advances and a movement away from the live performance and towards the recorded and televised, I argue that live stand-up performance provides a suitable space for collective laughter and at the very least, an opportunity for carnival to emerge.

Ricoeur's literature provides support to this position through his three categories of mimesis (Ricoeur, 1998, 83, 86). The first, Imitative represents the re-created, lived values and symbols of expression found in any dominant culture. The second, Reconstructive, is 'turning the ordinary and official on its head' for the purpose of subverting the dominant ideology. The third, is the Transformative moment, the shift. Caught in space and time, it is produced by the regenerative comedic event and provides an opportunity to understand social hierarchies differently and to recognise the self in a

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[16]

At the Comedy Nest in Montreal a few years ago, Joey Elias (a Montreal comic) was on stage. He made an off-hand comment about the political party in power in the province at the time, and a woman immediately stood up during his set and said in a clear and audible voice "You know, it's because of people like *you* that we're having the problems we have in this province!" The performer laughed and said, "Ma'am, did you read the sign above the door before you came into the club tonight? It says C-o-m-e-d-y!"

different domain. This recognition of self can take many people aback in everyday circumstances, but in the realm of humour there is room for unexpected shifts. This element of surprise manifests itself though laughter which catches one off-guard. Stand-up humour uses a set-up-punch routine of creating an atmosphere of trust and apparent truth and then turning it on its head with a shocking punch line. Audience observations noted frequent expressions of surprise when narratives about more serious topics were found to be uncontrollably amusing. Laughing at the unlaughable is an important element of Carnival and unavailable in most other realms of entertainment.

3.2.2 Masking Political and Social Commentary

The use of humour for political and social commentary is not an accident; in fact it remains one of the most effective ways of evoking social change. It is agreed that audiences require shared knowledge to comprehend the humour in a comedic narrative.[17] Commentary on shared socio-political opinions acts as a method for raising questions and challenging value systems. Carrying this out 'comedically' expands the boundaries of freedom of speech, and the use of a character or a satirical mask removes the culpability of the speaker. The humorous statement then becomes narrated by a 'character,' not a comedian, or it was said in 'good humour' which guarantees a certain degree of tolerance.

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[17]
Comics report that when there is a lack of shared cultural, political or social knowledge amongst audience members, it is challenging to write material which will work. For this reason, some of the most difficult clubs to play are in Las Vegas or to the north, Niagara Falls, where the majority of the audience members are international tourists. A joke which crosses most cultural boundaries is heavily desired, but most comedians' collections have only a couple of universal jokes which work well consistently.

This character or 'mask' has been used by Canadian performers since the inception of stand-up comedy. Historically, Canadian Michael Magee used such a satiric mask and was seen as "the most vicious satirist Canada has ever produced." (A. Clark, 1997, 25) During a performance,

> Michael Magee does not criticize as Michael Magee. When he appeared on stage or television or wrote books...he appeared as the old curmudgeon Fred. C. Dobbs. I (A.Clark) realized that was the single thread that linked Magee to his peers. In Canadian comedy from the 1940s to the 1970s, everyone wore a mask. (A. Clark, 1997, 25)

This mask is still used, although less through satire and more as a character development for delivery of alternative social messages. The multiple forms of identity that each performer possesses are selectively uncovered or concealed depending upon the context, venue and performer. Some forms of identity which are easily concealed include: national, regional, ethnic, racial, sexual, and political. Multiple masks have appeared due to the complexity of a modern, globalized, transnational society which has shifted social definitions and boundaries. Where the lines are drawn between the performer and the listener(s) demarcates boundaries of identity. Ricoeur would also concur that the 'who am I?' links with 'what am I?' and he describes this as *character*. The character is the satirical mask which the performer creates and portrays, and which the listeners may or may not connect with;

> (t)o a large extent, in fact, the identity of a person or a community is made up of these identifications with values, norms, ideals, models and heroes, *in* which the person or the community recognizes itself. Recognizing oneself *in* contributes to recognizing oneself *by* (Ricoeur, 1992, 121).

For those who use characters or masks, there is a tension between the need to comment on their social reality, and the desire for foolery and fun (sometimes at a price

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of suggesting stereotypical images of the group with which they identify). There is also

the risk for comics of being accused of using one's ethnic/racial positioning as a 'hook'

(Stebbins, 1990, 45). This is when the performers depend upon an obvious trait and build

an entire routine around it. People who are thought to use 'hooks' will gain less respect

from fellow comedians, and this further marginalises those who are 'different.' Such

groups in comedy include women, visual minorities, youth, elderly, homosexuals, and in

Canada, Francophone performers. The fastest growing group of Canadian alternative

performers is women, although my data demonstrates they still make up less than 15% of

full time comedic performers in Canada.

3.2.3   Humorous Women

There are many Canadian female performers who forged a place for women

within the world of comedic performance. May Irwin and Marie Dressler (Unterbrink,

1987, 8-9) were early performers. Bea Little was a successful vaudeville actor

(Unterbrink, 1987, 41). Mary Livingstone worked in radio and Catherine O'Hara who

started out with SCTV, has continued as a popular comedic actor in film (Unterbrink,

1987, 62,166).[18] In previous times however, attention was drawn to the *differences* of

women's comedy from more traditional male forms. As recently as the late 1950s,

women have been described as incapable of possessing a sense of humour,

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[18]

Other non-Canadian female performers who have continued to inspire women stand-ups
are Mary Tyler Moore, Lily Tomlin, Bette Midler, Judy Carter, Lucille Ball, and Carol
Burnett.

The truth is... that women have not only no humour in themselves but are the cause of the extinction of humour in others. This is almost too cruel to be true, but in every way women correspond to and are representative of nature. Is there any humour in nature? A glance at a zoo will answer this question...[w]omen are the undifferentiated mass of nature from which the contradictions of real and ideal arose, and they are unlaughing at which men laugh (Blyth, 1959, 14).

Women are hence, "the unofficial discussing the insignificant"[19] (Barreca, 1988, 6). They do not possess the ability to understand and discuss universal subjects; they are a part of the private realm, not the public. They are explained away as incapable of generating useful comedic narratives, yet these claims are refuted by the explanation that women are mis-read since they are not writing from a position of male privilege. It is not that women are not funny, but rather that women are breaking the rules of comedy - writing beyond the happy endings and shattering the universal (Barreca, 1988, 8-9).

(W)ithout subverting the authority of her own writing by breaking down convention completely, the woman comic writer displays a different code of subversive thematics than her male counterparts. Her writing is characterised by the breaking of cultural and ideological frames. Her use of comedy is dislocating, anarchic and, paradoxically unconventional (Barreca, 1988, 9-10).

In Canadian comedy, the status of Gender has begun to shift; the very presence of successful female comedians on stage breaks down barriers and brings the gender inequalities more in-line. The presence of female performers is an important move, yet stereotypes prevail and the performed self needs to find a suitable character which the crowd will accept since the female face remains uncommon. One major complaint of female performers is that they are objectified on stage and must manage the power

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[19]Barreca is borrowing from Bakhtin here.

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relations which occur naturally between performers and crowds. If the audience is comprised mainly of males, cat-calls ("take your clothes off") and whistling are a common response which diminishes the power of the positioned performer. If the crowd demographic is primarily couples, the couples might like/dislike different aspects of the female's stage character. Some comedians explain that a 'sleazy' female character is preferred by the males but not the females. Alternately, an aggressive female is appreciated by the women in the audience, but found threatening by the men.

Female performers tend to fall on one side or the other of this polemic, and given that the historical discourse surrounding comedy has been predominantly male, they are also at risk of mis-reading a female character. Canadian female comedians are faced with either playing up their sexuality, or playing it down; either way, however, the strategy they select is open to (mis)interpretation by the audience.

The other groups mentioned previously, also face similar problems when developing a suitable character. If the expectations of the onstage personality do not meet presupposed expectations of the audience, the show could fail. This failure is based upon the myriad of ways in which a character, a joke, a tone or a signal may be 'read' or interpreted. While mis-readings are problematic, they are also uncontrollable. Reception theories have tried to make sense of the different ways in which an individual applies meaning to any message; these theories will be addressed later in this chapter. The irony is that all comedians hope to be different in some way from all of the other comedians. However, any performers possessing different characteristics risk tokenism; may only present a character which is *believable* to the audience; must not rely too heavily on the

trait or jeopardize respect of other comedians; and, will battle against previously held assumptions by audience members about the limitations of their character. As the audiences remain unaccustomed to a plurality of performers, the 'other' performers remain marginalised. This slows down the development of a performer who will receive less stage time and a diminished audience response. Furthermore, because of the increased number of hurdles, connections between the AAI and the PAI become extremely rare.

3.3 Identity

The theoretical underpinnings of identity in this thesis will explain how Canadian stand-up performers manage, maintain and manipulate their different identities to ensure a successful show (short-term) and a successful career (long-term). As mentioned previously, Paul Ricoeur has developed theories of the self and identity which are useful in understanding the process of narrative self-identity which takes place during each comedic performance. The concept of identity is used in a practical sense, as it may be applied communally as well as individually. Both the individual and groups create their identity by taking on narratives which become for them, their actual history (Ricoeur, 1992). The concept of the 'self' is a part of this theme, largely because the self may be determined within the dialectical realm of narrative. He correlates this with the general themes behind the hermeneutics of the self, which include the correlation between the self and the other than self (Ricoeur, 1992). Language is the medium which transmits the self to the other than self. Narrative is a labyrinth of broad discourse intersecting and weaving

with other forms of discourse such as political, philosophical, and lyrical (Pellauer, 1997, xiii). In Volume Three of <u>Time and Narrative</u>, configuration and refiguration are the principal tools used to explain the realities of Narrative. Configuration looks at narrative itself, how it operates and 'emplots' (all narratives have a plot, and the telling of a narrative 'emplot' characters and events), and refiguration is the change that occurs within one's own experience resulting from exposure to a narrative (Pellauer, 1997, xiv).

Language connects the ideas, beliefs, events and content of the text with the individual. When a message is sent, it is received, decoded, and links the receivers' concepts of the narrative with what they recognise as true in the world around them. If the transmission does not strike a chord with the receiver, transformative possibilities diminish. Each reader, according to Ricoeur, responds to questions of "Who is in the text", and "Who am I as the reader"(Ricoeur, 1992)? Each reader is implicated in the reading by recognising elements of 'self' in elements of an 'other';

> we may relate to the notion of disposition the set of *acquired
> identifications* by which the other enters into the composition of the same.
> To a large extent, in fact, the identity of a person or a community is made
> up of these identifications with values, norms, ideals, models and heroes,
> *in* which the person or the community recognizes itself. Recognizing
> oneself *in* contributes to recognizing oneself *by* (121).

This may be contrasted with a comedic performance and audience reception. Recognition of the self is neither definite, nor immutable, and as Ricoeur explains, different possibilities of self portrayal may occur in any given instance. In the case of the live performance, narrative identity is neither seamless nor stable. It is a complex weave of several plots which fluctuate between history and fiction, "(i)n this sense, narrative identity continues to make and unmake itself"(Ricoeur, 1983, 249). The stand up

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comedian presents a narrative which s/he knows the audience *must* connect with in order to have a successful show. If the experiences being described by the narrative alienate the audience or deal with content which has no real meaning, the comedian must adapt the material to form some connection with the audience members. This is the process whereby the re-formulation of identity on the part of the comedian, becomes a necessary facet of every performance. After a period of time, if enough of these connections are made with a group and sufficient trust builds, the audience members become more willing to re-define their own sense of self, temporarily. In this sense, the narrative of the performer may be internalised by the receiver, and this is what causes shifts in the self. After some time, the performer finds an appropriate narrative which works for most audiences, and this will become the narrative of choice. However, there is always a flexibility in the presentation which allows for differences between contexts and crowds.

The stand-up comedy routine is generally developed around a comedic character. Everything from appearance, clothing, tone of voice, and type of material used, will be studied for credibility before stepping on stage. As the performer becomes more experienced in the presentation of the character, subtle or drastic changes in style, rhythm or script are worked into the routine. This character is composed of the history and orientation of each individual comic and is governed by the (perceived and actual) audience of any given event. This character (the performed identity) may be pre-ordained but is never fixed; it constantly adapts to time, place and audience.

The performer's performed identity' (PPI) is the link between the performer and the audience. The PPI changes over time, but is always in constant flux with every new

audience as the performer tries to seek out the identity which the audience will find most favourable. Again, assumptions are made based on ideas about political, cultural and geographical regions in Canada. Neither the 'actual identity'(PAI) of the performer, tucked away behind the PPI, nor that of the audience, will remain untouched by each performance. The comic makes assumptions about the audience (and hence the region in which they are performing) predicated on the type of material they 'appreciate', and on how they respond to the PPI. The audience on the other hand, will also make assumptions about the Toronto comic, or the Halifax comic, which in turn may influence their understanding of regional identity in Canada. Hence, the comic becomes a human link between multi-regional Canadian identities, as well as a connection linking transnational identities between Canada and the U.S. These assumptions are primarily political and must be treated as such; the idea of a politicised identity has also been covered in the literature (Bhabha, 1990, 1990a; Hall, 1991, 1992; Hooks, 1992).

Research on identity involves the development of the 'self' through the 'other' and must also be considered from the perspectives of: collective, national, transnational, regional, and transregional forms. The complexity of self-identity is directly related to the emotional connections and reactions between 'self' and 'others'. This thesis is concerned with the way in which self-identity is politicised and positioned between regional/national and transregional/national belongingness as well as those who are located at the margins of such identity (Bhabha, 1990, 1990a; Hall, 1991). This investigation of the world of comedy will try to understand and give meaning to the tactics employed by those comedians who find themselves with a double-identity, to

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either rid their self-identity of negatively imposed characteristics, or, to refute the

political definition entirely (Babad, Birnbaum and Benne, 1986; Hooks, 1992).

3.3.1 Self/Other

The literature presupposes that we define and influence 'others' as we are

concurrently being transformed and defined by 'others' (Bakhtin, 1990, 41; Hall 1991;

Ricoeur, 1992). Exploring who we are for ourselves and who we are for 'others' is

problematic as we are unable to understand ourselves corporeally in the way 'others'

around us can (Bakhtin, 1993, 46). Moreover, we recognise shifts and changes in

ourselves through emotional triggers and responses provoked by how 'others' respond to

us individually. These emotions (such as pleasure, shame, joy, fear, embarrassment, envy

etc.) measure the level of approval emitted by those around the 'self' towards it.

Reflection on these responses results in a 'self' which is constantly being refashioned; it

is an endless rough draft (Bakhtin, 1993, 46; Ricoeur 1984, 1988, 1992). These 'others'

serve then as the reflection in which we find our selves, whether or not we are happy with

that reflection requires close scrutiny. 'Other' can also be understood as something

which defines and separates; something which is found outside of a particular set of

parameters (a group or society, an expectation, a culture, a geographical boundary). In

this instance, the 'other' represents not a reflection of who the individual is, but an

example of who the individual is *not*. Ricoeur, in keeping with this second definition,

explains that identity articulates who and what we are (or think we are), and

simultaneously demarcates that which we are not (Ricoeur, 1992, 16).

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A comedian straddles the boundary between the two definitions of 'other'. On the one hand a comic *reflects* the cultural realm in which s/he lives; discussing current topics, responding to the values and expectations of the audience members, and mirroring individual 'selves' in the audience. On the other hand, a comedian is usually from 'somewhere else,' represents difference, inverts stereotypes and challenges cultural perceptions. Comedy, like most cultural products, both threatens and propagates the dominant order.

In society, once a dominant ideological system has been established and institutionalised, individual identity becomes fused with the collective or shared identity which reinforces the individual's idea of who they are through confirmation and recognition of the 'others' around them. This is further complicated by the desire to live in a familiar and predictable environment where political and historical narratives and symbols are used to assess those who belong and those who do not. The individual combines with the collective to situate the site of one's identity as either a part of the dominant group or not. Once in place, members of a society define themselves in relation to what they are not and create *established* 'others'. This is carried out in two ways. The first is when a segment of the dominant culture creates rules to maintain a particular hegemonic order, and in doing so, protects the dominant 'self' identity. The second, resulting from the first, establishes an 'other' as a contradiction to the dominant identity, locating difference outside of the realm of belongingness. This belongingness, defined politically, is manifested through categories of nationality, race and ethnicity (Bhabha, 1990a; Hall, 1990). It opens a paradoxical space where individuals who find themselves

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labelled 'other' must recognise who they are as a 'self' and an 'other', and to which group

of 'others' they belong (Taylor, 1995). The political nature and consequences of these

categories are difficult to escape (Hall, 1991, 1992). One 'space' which provides links

between the political nature of any established identity, and the emotional connection to

belongingness is the concept of 'home'.

3.3.2   Home: Inclusion and Belonging

The dominant order makes use of political boundaries, and a rhetoric of nation, as

well as the concept of *home*, to fortify a sense of belongingness for those who share a

nationality. Nation-states are politically organised on the basis of similarity and

homogeneity, and it is through ethnicity and nationalism that particular national

identities are incited. Individual identities are hence directly tied to national ideologies

and national ideologies are protected and maintained by those who identify with the

nation-state (Cohen, 1996; Taylor, 1995). Therefore, those who identify fully with a

nation, politically expand their definition of 'home' to encompass the realm of a country

and state.

For those who feel they belong or those who do not, the imagined site of 'home'

becomes an emotional space where the 'self' (truly) belongs and a temporary refuge from

the imposed categorisation or threat of 'other'. It is this 'home' which the dominant

culture wishes to protect and 'home' is a space where the 'established other' can

temporarily escape the feeling of exclusion. Nonetheless, how one identifies with

'home', in a transnational era, has become increasingly complex. In contemporary times

with frequent movement between nation-states, the ethereal and contradictory effects of migration and relocation on the 'self' become more apparent (Taylor, 1995).

Those 'selves' who arrive in a (new)nation-state with an established order, seek to belong in a space where they are neither recognised nor wanted. In order to manage competing self-identities (those pre-existing ones they brought with them and those new ones forced upon them by the established order) they must negotiate the political rhetoric of recognition which formulates, in part, their identity as outsiders. Consequently, another collective identity - a marginalised one - is formed out of a diasporic position, and race and ethnicity become primary, if temporary, indicators of identity. This dislocation is a consequence of a contemporary era, where people are constantly traversing geographic boundaries, and difference becomes a means of categorising both the 'self' from the 'other', and 'us' from 'them'. Nation, race and ethnicity become the points of reference to delineate these divisions and 'established others' find themselves located at the margins (Bhabha, 1990, 1990a; Hall, 1991, 1992; Hooks, 1992).

As mentioned previously, comedians are by default 'established others.' Much comedy is based on observational humour and offers alternate ways of seeing or understanding the everyday; the mundane. Nonetheless, there is a constant exchange of messages between performers and audience members or groups at a variety of levels. A result of a successful show may be simply a shift in perception of the 'other.' In many ways, flexing the muscle of tolerance is a helpful exercise for societal members. A comic is marginalised naturally by lifestyle or otherness, yet there are comedians who are located on periphery of the marginalised (e.g. women, ethnics etc). Implicated in the

exercise of identifying the marginalised and the marginal-marginalised, is the audience.

To return briefly to Ricoeur's three elements of mimesis, comedians first *imitate* who

they believe they should be on stage; next, repeatedly *reconstruct* the PPI until the best

character evolves; and finally, yearn to *transform* and connect completely and

unforgettably with an audience. The transformation involves not only the performer but

also the audience members on all four levels of identity: PPI, PAI, ARI, AAI. The

transformation dissolves clear boundaries between the known and presented 'self' and the

unknown and harboured 'self.' To best understand the impact of collective identity on

this process, it is important to explore the literature on audience behaviour, or reception

theory.

3.4   How the Audience Receives

Reception theory has itself undergone a series of changes as it has evolved

through the past few decades. Besides having to face the ongoing quantitative vs.

qualitative debate of methodology found within the social sciences (Lindlof, 1991;

Livingstone, 1993); the controversy surrounding whether a study should be theory

generating (Hernadi, 1976; Livingstone, 1993; McHoul, 1982; Wright, 1959); or

investigate the differing versions of text and textual form (Eco, 1979; Hernadi, 1976),

most deliberation has centred around the active or passive role assumed by the 'reader'.

The following section of this chapter will explore the principal approaches and usefulness

of reception theory for ethnographic and observational methods. One approach is

favoured over the other for application to this research.

3.4.1 Reception Theory Approaches

A review of the literature has produced five distinct categories of the perceived audience, and three approaches for dealing with each type of audience or a combination of audience types. The approaches possess different presuppositions about the nature and behaviour of individuals and occupy divergent research objectives. The first is the 'mass audience.' Literature surrounding this group includes discussion of its possible existence, profile, patterns or lack of patterns of behaviour and predictability (Gans, 1980; Hartley, 1989; Hurwitz, 1988; Palmer, 1994; Wright, 1959). Linked to this is *Effects Research* which assumes a passive viewer and studies the effects that a text has on its viewing audience. In stand-up comedy, the viewer is too highly involved in the process for a researcher to disregard the impact the viewers have on the performer as well as the spectacle. Therefore, Effects Research is an unsuitable method.

One of the original means of understanding the receiver as a valuable resource, the 'commodified audience' emerged with the advent of radio and the need to capture use-value of technology[20]. *Uses and Gratifications Research*, arose with this type of investigation with the intent to find out what "gratifications radio listeners might derive from daytime serials, (or) quiz programmes" (Jensen, 1990, 210). Primarily, the initial stages of this included demographic and prima-facie descriptions linked to classifications of central variables as a means to measure the audience's collective 'tastes' and 'preferences.'[21] This information would be used to encourage consumption of different

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[20]See for example: P.F. Lazarsfeld and F.N. Stanton (eds.) 1944.

[21]For examples of this see Lowery and DeFleur 1988, and Herzog 1944.

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products including textual products and commodities (Jensen, 1990, 210). This approach could be applied to comedy in a convoluted way as there is usually an intention to promote further consumption of comedy during every live performance. However, the meaning is being stretched when the comedians are not seeking future and continued investment in their texts or narratives, but instead, are they themselves the product which has been purchased by the audience.

An 'external audience' is one that is measured at the site of viewing, in the moment of viewing. In light of earlier research a confluence develops between Effects Research and Uses and Gratifications Research, which assumes the receptor is actively receiving information and possibly using it in a different manner than was intended by the creator. The new name given to this convergence is *Uses and Effects Research*, which uses humanistic forms of inquiry (Jensen, 1990, 210). This approach is interesting for observing the audience's responses to a performer during a show, however, it does not expose any previously held presumptions the participants may have had about the other, before the show began.

The 'internal audience,' includes studies which look at the audience through the eyes of the creator (the sender/author/producer). This research approach considers the particular contexts in which these audiences are assumed and the presuppositions of the producer which influences his/her creations. For example, Feminist film theorists have brought to the fore the need for the 'male gaze' to be exposed and the female subject to be expressed in means other than conventional patriarchal ones (Walkerdine, 1986). Reader Response Theory (Sueilman and Crosman, 1980; Tompkins, 1980), investigates the use

of literary approaches which focus on the text and reader associations. Psychological and sociological empirical analysis has concentrated on the effects of text upon the reader, supporting the general trends in literary criticism to address structural effects, in place of readers' agency (Jensen, 1990, 212).

Cultural studies plays a slightly different role in reception theory, raising political and theoretical issues which concern the audience.[22] This approach deconstructs the media messages, from the perspective of the creative process, and in doing so exposes the political intent of the creator. This approach is suitable for understanding the stand-up performer's assumptions about the imagined audience, but does not consider the immediate feedback from the audience *to* the performer nor the immediate re-formulation of material to address the feedback.

Finally, there is the 'linked audience.' This is the necessary combination of the internal and the external audience which looks at the influence between the active and the passive realms and attempts to understand the effects upon both realms as a result of interaction. *Reader-Response Research* is most commonly applied to this project which combines the encapsulates the complex relations between the different forms of identity, the different reasons for performing and consuming comedy, and offers a means of gaining a greater understanding of what is happening during a comedic exchange. Furthermore, elements of *Uses and Effects Research* are helpful in placing the readers in a position of power where they may make use of the material however they see fit. The combination of the Linked Audience, Reader-Response research and elements of Uses

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[22]For more on this see: Ang, 1991; Morley, 1980; Radway, 1988; and Fiske, 1987.

and Effects research, proves useful in understanding the importance of the role of the audience for Ricoeur (Ricoeur, 1998, 83).

3.5   Conclusion: Ricoeur and Comedy

Earlier works of Ricoeur shift from discussions of symbols, to speculation on narrative because of the reconstructive nature and effects of narrative on individual experience. His philosophy is extremely useful for understanding and explaining comedy in a variety of ways as he recognises the subject is involved in the processes of language and understands its power to act upon the narrative. Stand-up comedy is a collection of narratives involved in the process of self-identification, both for the performer and for the viewer(s). This acknowledges that the linked (internal and external) audience exists before it is formed, in the imagination of the performer. Ricoeur's theory also considers the formulation of identity as an actively created and narrated process. There are four modes of our power to act: (1) language and the necessity for the utterer to speak; (2) ordinary, everyday action and its impact on concurrent events; (3) individual or collective identity which is found within the function of narrative; and (4) the need to recognize oneself not only as responsible for one's acts but accountable for the consequences of one's actions (Pellauer, 1997, xix). The comedic performance embodies all four of these. First, the stage and show creates a context in which the comic may utter (but does not fully control that which s/he will say); second, the context of the performance as an event, which intersects with the lives of others, effects all involved in the event; third, the formation and/or confirmation of multiple identities is contingent upon which groups an

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individual align his/herself with; and finally, fourth, the recognition of an ethic which places a burden upon the narrator to be responsible for that which s/he emplots resulting today in a greater move toward 'politically correct' comedy.

Home has also become a core component in the theoretical explanation of self and the formulation of identity. While Ricoeur does not directly make use of this concept, his earlier works on symbol and metaphor are highly applicable here. Ricoeur uses "(s)symbol (as)a double intentionality wherein one meaning is transgressed or transcended by another" (Kearney, 1989, 7). Three forms of symbols are considered: *cosmic* which understands aspects of the world or environment as signs of some ultimate meaning (e.g. the sun, the moon etc.); *oneric*, dream image which must be close to words since we are able to describe them; and, *poetic*, the creation of symbols through the use (a welling up) of language (Kearney, 1989 7-9). As Ricoeur discussed in The Symbolism of Evil, these same three forms are applicable to any symbolic representation we might choose. With the example of *home*, it serves as a cosmic sign (biblical references to Christ preparing a 'home' for his followers in heaven); an oneric sign, dreaming of home (mental image of hearth memories, and emotions of warmth and safety); and a poetic sign, writing, recollecting or speaking of *home* ("I remember when..."). Cultural representations of home are symbolic, but may also serve as metaphors for 'other places and other times.'

As previously mentioned, Ricoeur understands metaphor as offering a means of "treating the semantic core of the symbol" (Ricoeur, 1998, 25). Metaphor re-describes reality and says more than one thing at a time. Home is a symbolic link between the past,

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the present and the future. Metaphorically in relation to identity, home is an imagined

space which provides room for and encompasses the multiple identities we all possess.

Home is the place where we are truly comfortable in our own skin. Comedians, after a

period of time, become comfortable in their characters, and the PPI and the AAI begin to

merge naturally. Home is also a dream, something we yearn for; the perfect setting. And

for most, like knowing oneself completely, the perfect home is unachievable.

Ricoeur's work also ties into the model from earlier in this chapter (see Figure 3)

as it explains the configuration of performance and the refiguration or transformation

which occurs after a narrative has been uttered and received. The PAI and AAI are

multiple forms of identity, not all of which are displayed or disclosed. They include

identities which link them to the culture or society in which they live, and position them

as either a part of, or separate from the dominant group. At times this identity will

connect with the plot of the performer's narrative and at other times with the collective

identity of the audience (ARI). Both actual identities (of the viewer or the performer)

may try to *pass* as someone they are not (or not fully) in order to suppress feelings of

marginalisation and encourage a sense of belonging.

The PPI is the presented self for the viewer. The comic will use a character or

mask to shield his/her true self from the audience members, yet also attempt to forge links

between who the audience members are imagined to be and who they become

(collectively) during the course of the show. The most frequent connections happen

between the collective identity of the audience members, which is fairly superficial as the

members play off each other, responding in unison, acting collectively rather than

individually. As the audience spends more time with the performer and each other, they become more comfortable within this new group; trust builds. When enough trust is built, a special connection is made between the performer and the individual audience members – it is at this point that the barriers which conceal hidden identities begin to drop away. In order to collectively control the group, the performer must to some degree individually reach the AAI of each member. Once a comfortable power structure has been put in place and an equal exchange set up, the opportunity arises for the comedic event to have a transformative impact on all involved.

The philosophy of Ricoeur has also been useful in this chapter to explain why comedy is *funny*, or why the participants are laughing. Comedians play upon common forms of cultural knowledge and everyday events, and not only present them in narrative form, but reconstruct them in a new or different fashion. Each dense narrative is heavy with plot, symbol and metaphor, satire, sarcasm and irony. As the plot unfolds, both the performer and the receiver is conceptually able to situate his/herself within the narrative, making themselves the focal point of the plot. Therefore, any critique of society or individual group through humour, positions both the speaker and the listener as external or internal to the criticism. The grand-narrative, or general social behaviour of everyday life becomes deconstructed and represented as mini-dramas. This exercise, coupled with a sarcastic tone, irony or satire, diminishes the importance of everyday events and comments that most of what humans do, is ridiculous. What makes us laugh then is a combination of the three levels of Ricoeur's mimesis and particular shared cultural knowledge within the framework of the 'comedic links of identity' as outlined above.

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This chapter has examined the principal literature available to date on the key elements of the model of interaction: Humour, Identity and Reception. It has presented a model which outlines how different forms of identity influence experience. In subsequent chapters, the particular experiences of comedians and observations of the audience members during performances will be further analysed to expose the underlying meaning and value of live comedic events. The next chapter will reveal the method for uncovering the answers to the propositions and address the themes from chapter one. Beyond the approach, it will also discuss ethnography as the most suitable approach for this research, and explore the challenges and accomplishments of the data collection. The methodological technique was intrinsic to gaining the information necessary for successful research. Any attempt to uncover an extremely private sub-culture is a delicate matter. The following pages assists the reader in understanding the rationale behind the decisions and the relative success or failure of each aspect of the assigned method.

Chapter 4: Peeling Back the Layers - Methodologically Speaking

The purpose of this chapter is to describe how the theoretical underpinnings of the thesis directed the research methodology. The model, outlined in the previous chapter, provides a structure for investigation. The researcher needed to seek a means of recognising and understanding the possible connections between the performer(s) and the audience members, and between the Performed Identities (PI) and Actual Identities (AI), as well as individual and collective identities. Furthermore, the characteristics of the marginalised 'other' had to be identified and meaning applied to any differences in interactions which appeared.

The aim of this analysis was to locate the identity of the comedian contextually within the different locales s/he performs. In working through this process, there were many considerations which had to be addressed: the feasibility of such a project; the validity of the findings; any hidden intent of the investigator; and the ensuing consequences such a project will have on the subjects. These enigmatic considerations are no longer novel to the humanities, and most researchers have at least paid them lip-service. However, with time, a standard of reflexivity in ethnography has developed. The result implies that the researcher becomes incorporated into the subjective research design rather than playing a peripheral, objective role.

4.1   The Plan

A series of stages were conceived involving an investigation of three different levels. The first considered who the performers appeared to be on-stage, a categorization

of the character development and a presentation of each. The second was to discover the person behind the characters, or the actual identity of each. Finally, the third was about the audiences which formed spontaneously at each site, but from two perspectives. On the one hand, I wanted to understand how any audience received any performer and influenced the show. On the other hand, I was curious about how the performers themselves interpreted the response of the crowds and how they adapted to each situation based on that deduction. Additionally, the five propositions and five themes of investigation (See Table 1), from the first chapter were the basis for the approach, design and the style of investigation.

For the stage character it would be necessary to observe the same comedian in a series of different environments, venues, contexts and with a number of different audiences. I achieved this by working in a comedy club in Montreal and also travelling with other comedians to a variety of cities and venues and observing their performances in alternate locations. In order to measure the performer's actual identity and the (perceived) performed identity on stage, the method would also include: the history of each comic (and life-history of the professional career); the influences and experiences they have had which formed their actual identity and performed identities; the successes and failures, the hurdles and politics which they need to negotiate outside of their stage performance; as well as, how the local regional and national forms of identity played a part in this process.[23] All of these were explored through an informal, less structured

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This was due to the fact that I believed these different forms of identity would have a great influence on both who the comic was, pretended to be, and how s/he would be received by various regional audiences.

interview. Finally, from the perspective of the audience, I wanted to become familiar

with: the different types of audiences (these will be explained more fully in the Chapter

Five); the general demographic of any particular audience; the collective response to an

individual performer ; and, the general processes of comedic interaction in different

venues and contexts. This final collection of data was achieved through observations,

journal notes and informal discussions with a few key informants.

4.2   The Process

For over nine years, my own informal social network was closely connected to the

Canadian comedy community. My familiarity with both the production and presentation

of humour placed me in a fortunate position where I had access not only to the comedians

themselves, but also to the venues, the audiences, and the support staff which form the

current Canadian comedic industry. With almost unlimited access to Montreal and

Toronto Comedy clubs, as well as the Just For Laugh's festival, I was able to observe a

great number of shows over four years. My calculations confirm over 700 live stand-up

comedy shows (approximately 2 hours each) were observed over four years.

Observations, note-taking and informal discussions with the comedians attending the

shows allowed for a greater understanding of 'typical" interactions with audiences in the

same environment. This proved to be very useful in determining the immediate

differences between who the comics were on stage and who they were in real life.

Personal interviews delved further into this domain, but it was the exposure to the world

of comedy over an extended period of time, that proved invaluable in understanding the

PI and AI. By travelling with comedians (I would give some of them lifts out to shows in suburban Montreal, Kingston, Ottawa and Toronto), I became a small participant in the event. Therefore, I was welcomed backstage, in the green-room, and invited out to pre- and post-show meals, offering candid glimpses into the secluded world of comics. After becoming familiar with a certain group of comedians' styles in different contexts, and acquainted with a particular venue (a Montreal club where I worked as a waitress and bartender), I began to recognize patterns in the formation and confirmation of, and interaction between, different identities. All the while, my exposure to complaints and stresses of the individual comics, aided in developing a sensitivity to the politics of the industry and further developed an understanding how the business and sub-culture were organized. This proved to be useful later in my analysis of the marginalisation of comics and the political realities of the Canadian national and regional identities. While observation proved to be a useful tool for understanding the comedians and members of audiences, it was financially unrealistic and methodologically taxing to formally interview or survey individual audience members for the 700+ shows that I attended over four years. Furthermore, I saw problems of validity and reliability with audience members who could participate together only once for any show as each show is an unrepeatable event, and was not certain at the outset if the findings would be comparable. To solve this dilemma, I decided useful information could be gleaned from observation of certain comedians in front of a number of different audiences in varied contexts. Moreover, It was necessary to appreciate how the individuals I interviewed formally, or informally (including comics, support staff, producers and managers), recognized any

patterns in audiences, performers and venues as they travelled and performed across the country.

My own personal links with the community in Montreal and Toronto led to some important influences in the gathering of my data. Most of the literature surrounding humour and comedy in Canada has a tendency to either ignore the form of stand-up, or focus primarily on Toronto-based phenomena.[24] To counterbalance the Toronto-centric research, I decided to base the majority of my research on English-Speaking performance in Montreal, a very particular environment to consider. English comedy in Montreal is like an Island of Anglo-humour in a sea of French performance; both geographically and politically removed from the rest of the Canadian comedic scene. Additionally, factors such as: proximity to the US border; expanded cultural knowledge of Britain, Canada and France; a void of YukYuks politics as there is not a chain club in the city of Montreal; and, a famous annual comedy festival, regularly draw some of Canada's finest comedians.

To best represent the Canadian comedic population it was necessary to speak with a broad selection of people from across the country; including a sizeable proportion of marginalised performers, as well as a few individuals who could influence the careers of the performers. I also needed to become familiar with the top players in the industry and the future torch bearers of Canadian comedy. At the outset, I was already in a unique

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[24] It is thought by many that Toronto serves as a focal point for comedy in Canada due to its large population and number of performance venues as well as the influence of YukYuks, and the CBC. Ironically, the majority of non-club performances occur outside the Toronto area. Stebbins book The Laughmakers is an exception to this rule as it covered a cross-section of the Canadian comedic community in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

position as I knew a large number of performers and already worked as a waitress in a Montreal club which provided me a distinct advantage as an observer, both of the performances and the comedians. This role allowed me to form networks, make contacts and be considered a part of the scene without becoming too involved in the politics. One benefit of working in the club was the opportunity to interact directly with audience members before, during and after any show. By doing so, I was able to establish a feel for the number of tourists, the purpose behind the gathering of a large group, discuss with them when they had been there last, which comics they liked, and what they were expecting from the show. It also placed me as the observer in a unique physical space. Most observation would be positioned at the back of the room, or in a corner, or behind glass or a camera. Service staff however, are permitted to move invisibly through a crowd during the entire course of a performance. I was able to monitor facial expressions of audience members, overhear personal comments, and at times, I was used as a sounding board for direct feedback on their enjoyment (or lack of) during and following a show. Service staff act as a link between the performance and the establishment - they possess information (washrooms, parking, length of show, and quality of acts), they patiently allow audience members to befriend them, impress them, try out jokes on them; they hear complaints and solve problems; and, are then simply ignored the rest of the time. This particular style of observation was limited to one club in which I was employed, but it also allowed for many different acts (from across Canada and the US) to be observed (multiple times over four years) in a similar environment. For the research,

this permitted a means of differentiating between local and foreign audiences, and their varied responses to local and foreign acts.

My interviews were sampled in a convenient way. I attended the JFLs festival during the years of 1994-1998. In 1997 I managed through my contacts, to secure a badge of entry for the festival which legitimated me and increased my status from waitress to researcher. During the final three years I made use of the festival to: review acts I had not seen in a while, or not at all; become familiar with the processes of performing at an international festival and playing for an audience comprised of *industry*; learn the politics surrounding the festival; and, make contacts, form networks and secure interviews with my respondents. Beyond the Montreal scene, it was also necessary to understand the other regions of Canadian comedy. In some cases I followed certain comics around or, in others, I caught up with a performer I was already familiar with in another city or venue. Finally, I travelled across Canada visiting clubs/venues in St. John's NF, outskirts of Montreal, Ottawa, Kingston, Toronto, Hamilton, Brampton, Sudbury, London, and Calgary. In 1998, I visited New York, and Los Angeles, and caught up with Canadian acts performing at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August.

4.3   The Sample

For this research forty-two Comics were interviewed, nine of whom were women, three were American, and twelve were living and working primarily in the US. Additionally, I spoke with six producers /managers of comedy, four working in Canada and two in the US. As most performers are used to seeing their names in print, it was not

a major issue if the interviews were confidential or not. Following the ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects, I decided to adopt a policy of confidentiality on all interviews to ensure each individual was comfortable responding truthfully. Not a single respondent requested his/her name to be used, and all agreed to a confidential interview as long as their names appeared after any reproduction of their stand-up material. As mentioned, at first most comics were ambivalent to whether or not their names were used, but after the interview began, they would check on the confidentiality before giving personal opinions, stories, anecdotes or mentioning names. Hence, I was pleased with this decision on privacy as some of the material which was uncovered was quite sensitive in nature. As another safeguard, I was careful in selecting the alias names and in one case I chose to use two alias names for one individual to protect his/her identity from other comedians who might have been able to pinpoint an identity based on shared knowledge of performers in a relatively small community.

For reasons of confidentiality, I cannot list the names here, but at the time that I was scouting for interviews, I was frequently asked by the interviewees for the list of names of those I had already spoken to. Anyone hearing the list and knowing the names, appeared suitably impressed that I had spoken to almost all of the principal performers in the current Canadian scene. They were equally impressed (I believed) to be included among some of the top names in Canadian comedy. As I neared the end, a few comics approached me inquiring why I had not yet contacted them for an interview. There were some comics who felt snubbed so I tried to make sure they understood that my sample was based on the criteria I had developed earlier, and they simply did not fit the

previously designed specifications. I found it quite difficult to turn down potential interviewees, but I knew I could not speak with everyone, and I was happy to have some limits defined at the outset. In May 1999 I held my last interview and decided it was time to stop collecting data, to begin analysis and to write up findings. At this point in time, there were still five or six performers that I had been unable to reach conveniently for an interview who remained on my wish list, and I regrettably proceeded without their participation. Funding, schedules and time limitations played a major part in these omissions, nonetheless, I was very pleased with the number of individuals who did grant me an interview.

My sample included English performing Canadian comics who: possessed a certain level of performing experience; had travelled and were familiar with Canada's different regions; earned the majority of their income from comedy or comedy-related performances and/or writing; worked at least as a *middler* (possessing 25-30 minutes of solid material) but usually as a *headliner* (45-60 minutes minimum of solid 'A' – tried and true – material); and, had a relatively extensive résumé which included festivals, radio and television performances, and predominant club work across Canada. I also spoke with those who were currently working or had worked and lived in the United States. This included those performers who moved frequently between the two countries depending upon cycles in the entertainment industry and their own personal goals. Finally, I spoke with club owners, managers, agents and producers of comedy to better understand the structure of North American comedy/entertainment scene and the similarities and differences between the producers of shows and the creators of comedy.

4.4   The Approach

Ethnography resulted from the phenomenological understanding that all knowledge is socially constructed and oriented toward practical problems (Berger, 1966). 'Facts' are therefore never neutral but are always a reflection of why they are acquired. Hegel referred to phenomenology as the descriptive study of our experiences (Hegel, 1949) and more recently, Husserl, argued that our understanding of the world is based on assumptions which are not universal but culturally based and that philosophical thought is understood to rest fundamentally on the astute contemplation of one's own intellectual processes in experiencing phenomena (Husserl, 1964). Husserl, acknowledged the inter-subjective phenomenal realm and the social realm. From this inter-subjective perspective one understands identity and knowledge as stemming from the dialectic which is believed to exist between two or more individuals in society. As an assumed identity is produced in the social realm, it becomes personified in human action or through behaviour. "Phenomenology concerns itself with the relationship between the perceiving individual and the world of things, people, and actions that might be perceived...involv(ing) mutually dependent subjects and objects." (Allen, 1987, 103) This argument is supported by Schutz's idea of multiple realities, Wittgenstein's philosophy that language use and language games set the limits of our world, and Winch's view that it is impossible to attach meaning to others behaviour without working through our own modes of thinking (Hammersley, 1992, 47). Yet what can one do with the idea that all knowledge is culturally relative? If it is true it applies to itself; if it is only true relative to one perspective then it is false from the perspectives of other cultures (Hammersley, 1992,

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49). These questions expose weaknesses of the ethnographic process, but do not render it without purpose. In defence of ethnographic activity, it is proposed that the relativism adopted by ethnographers is somewhat 'softer' than the hard definition. Also coined 'subtle realism', this approach encourages a more sensitive ethnographic process which acknowledges that people's accounts are not necessarily ever true or false, merely remembered. Problems arising from memory and the re-telling of events are recognised then as not only occurring in ethnographic investigation, but as a gamble of any investigation, regardless of the method. As Harold I. Brown points out, there are three options when dealing with (social) scientific knowledge which some consider worthless due to the contextual entrapment of the research: (1) scrap it all and find a new way to think about it or develop a new epistemology, which he sees as a difficult if even impossible task; (2) continue as it is, ignoring the challenges; or (3) take on the charges of relativism and historicism and use them instead as a basis for new research by building upon previous research. In fact in doing so, "the charge of relativism loses its force if one does not accept an absolutist epistemology" (Brown, 1977, 152).

4.4.1 Triangulation

Sociologist have for decades been concerned with the 'reliability' or 'validity' of any given research, in an attempt to produce forms of knowledge which will 'legitimate' not only the researcher, but also the discipline. This effort at objective research has encouraged a distrust of reflexive language, subjective viewpoints and lack of statistical significance. Nonetheless, there are factions of the discipline which reject the necessity

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to substantiate knowledge with empirical confirmation, and as a result, have embraced the technique of ethnography with only a few reservations. This tension between 'legitimate' and 'relative' research is not yet over, and can be seen more as a symptom of the times than as a debasement of the discipline as both sides have continued to apply methods in support of their own viewpoints. Objective or positivistic methods of inquiry, although useful, do not provide detailed *enough* representations of social events. For this project, it was necessary to achieve a great deal of elaboration in order to uncover the multiple layers of experience and meaning. Therefore, I chose a triangulation of approaches for gathering reliable data on such an ephemeral event such as the comedic performance. Triangulation involves the use of more than one research technique leading to the greatest chance of validity (Denzin, 1970). For this endeavour, the following methods were selected: Participant Observation with journal notes; informal, unstructured, ethnographic interviews; and, reception analysis.

I needed to be very aware of my own biases which could influence the direction of the research, theoretically and methodologically. Some of my own personal concerns included: time constraints (my own, as well as the schedules of my informants); ideological restraints (cultural assumptions, sympathy to one group over another); personal history (my familiarity with the Toronto and Montreal comedy clubs and comedians including where my access was easiest); and, choices (my arbitrary decisions on sample frame and selection). Some safeguards were considered to ensure a fair representation of the narrative 'truths' of each subject. These included reflexivity, and acknowledgment of ownership.

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4.4.2 Ethnography

Ethnography occurs in natural settings and observes ordinary behaviour, offering contextually sensitive and persuasive insights into the meaning of that behaviour, not only from the perspective of the researcher, but also from that of the respondent. Researchers need to break from the deconstruction of the object and instead need to discover the essence of a routine and, subsequently, its possibilities (Intintoli, 1984, 246, 249). In doing so, scholars "must take a phenomenon already so familiar that it disappears into the background of daily life and make it 'strange' so that its peculiarities and subtleties are objectified and rendered invisible"(Allen, 1987, 129). This was very real for me. From the moment I decided I would develop a dissertation on a subject with which I was so familiar, it was necessary to redefine my understanding of events and processes; to step back and observe new layers of 'strangeness' and 'normalcy'. This process itself results in a shift from the perceived experience to the communicated event. Ethnography then, may also be seen as "discursive sabotage consist(ing) of the unexamined aesthetic distance between the ethnographer, subject and audience - all of whom switch...positions and dialogical roles during the creation of an ethnographic account"(Bellman, 1977, 53). The ethnographic account, or the interaction between interviewer and respondent, resembles the cavorting between the performer and the audience during any show. However, the roles are slightly reversed. As the performer usually acts as in a seductive manner, drawing the audience members in to his/her space and controlling (as much as is possible) the flow of information and level of response, during the interview, the researcher 'charms' or seduces the respondent into sharing

stories and exposing themselves. Nonetheless, one must also acknowledge that there is a switching of roles, an exchange of information that takes place. As frequently as possible, I made special efforts to share my own personal experiences with the respondent, (as long as I though it would not influence a particular response). After each interview, when I turned off the tape, I had an informal discussion with each interviewee which at times gave a great deal of additional information. This allowed for them to review, clarify any thoughts, ask questions and discuss other relevant events. It also provided an opportunity for the comedian to say something 'off the record', and most of them found something to add. A few times the tape was turned back on and the interview continued when both parties agreed.

4.4.3 Safeguards: Reflexivity and Ownership

Determining a reflexive approach at the outset, provides a flexibility for the researcher to position herself within this dialogical process of ethnographic interviewing. This approach also assumes a location of the researcher within the final written text, fulfilling a requirement to understand the multiple contexts of the research and the possible effects on the data. Another way to address some the concerns emanating from qualitative research practices includes the admission to ownership of information. Indeed, the contents of this thesis have been gathered by myself, at my own cost; nonetheless, I view each interview as the absolute property of the respondent.

The stories told are not the researcher's stories and never become the property of the researcher. Instead, these stories are borrowed and then returned to the subjects; all

final control of content remains in the hands of the subjects. All the interviews were taped, fully transcribed, and copies promised to the subjects as a means of having a record of the history of their careers, once the data was analysed. The interviews were taped and transcribed, but the observations were recorded by hand rather than with electronic devices as comics do not usually like to have anyone other than themselves taping their material. Over the course of a few years, many of the Interviewees were watched in other settings (cities or venues), and notes on character, style, material and audience response were added to the initial set. It was discovered that there are distinct differences between performers' overall styles depending upon where they learned the trade. Montreal English performers have a much different experience than those who live in other major cities due to the restriction of English venues and audiences. In order to account for structural differences such as these, the interviews also included speaking with a few of Canada's major club owners, managers and agents and a selection of comedians who work predominantly in the U.S. This added depth to the understanding of the political world of agents and managers, and how they monopolize upon the 'Canadianess' of those they represent. Interviewing Canadians who now work out of the U.S. exposed elements of national identity in discussion of how they see themselves as a part of, or separate from, Canadian or American Culture. Finally, by interviewing a few American comics who had worked in Canada, and worked with Canadians in the U.S., the different communities of Canadian and American stand-up comics can now be more clearly demarcated.

The interview itself is a telling of a comic's life in comedy: the earliest memory of making someone laugh; the first performance; the first joke. Furthermore, the combination of what level the stand-up's career was currently at; the hopes and dreams of past and future; the amount of travelling necessary; the compromises that had been made; and the comedian's understanding of the place s/he occupies in the comedic community, are only a few of the elements which will combine to form in a life-history caught in a moment in time. The subjectivity of the researcher creates the context in which a narrative will emerge and the text is partially written by who is asking for a story. The parameters include the presuppositions held by both parties, and the ability to move beyond them onto common ground. I needed to be cautious of pre-judging people before I met or interviewed them, based on the opinions others shared of them. I became quite aware of who liked or did not like whom; who was respected and who was not; who had been stabbed in the back and who had done the stabbing, and so forth. Access to this level of information meant that I was able to situate the context of what a respondent said but needed to be cautious afterwards that I did not adopt other people's opinions of certain situations. Being completely enmeshed in the world for such a length of time made this extremely difficult at times and I was constantly checking my notes for clues of such behaviour.

Observation of comedic performances brought together 'who' the comic is on stage, 'what' they do during their performance, and 'how' they deal with audience response in different locations and regions. The interviews clarified the performers perceptions of themselves and their behaviour. I discovered that comedians' Performed

Identity (PPI), constantly undergoes changes, is constantly reconstructed (Ricoeur, 1998, 86). As years pass, the PI is influenced by the structure of the Canadian comedy world, gradually becomes closer to the AI, *and*, the AI is also influenced by the constant performances of the PI and actually changes the inner-self. As the old saying goes, if you pretend to be something long enough, you become it; so too with the comedian. The two identities no longer exist at opposite poles but rather, through time, become merged.

4.4   Data Management

Once the data had been gathered and transcribed, I used NUDIST to manage the interviews and my personal observations in my journal notes. As it was difficult to keep a notebook open at all times, the notes would be written after leaving the company of the comedians so they would not be self-conscious of their behaviour around me. There were different sets of questions for the different groups: the Canadians working in Canada; the Canadians working in the US; the Americans working in Canada; the club-owners, managers and producers of comedy. The questions posed to the different groups in my sample, are found in Appendix A. An example of a complete interview with the marked codes and personal notes on the analysis follow in Appendix B. Finally, a selection of journal notes with codes and comments are found in Appendix C.

4.5   Research Ethics

The final methodological consideration for the thesis deals with the ethical approach of the researcher towards the participants regarding their rights to information

about the interviewing, observations and use of data after the fact. A standard Ethics form was prepared and almost every individual approached for an interview agreed to the conditions and signed the form (an example of the form can be found in Appendix D). People who perform for a living are not used to giving permission to use their stories or ideas, and are keen for any type of positive publicity. All respondents agreed wholeheartedly to the interview including the taping, except for one American manager of a NYC club who would not allow me to tape our discussion nor would he sign on the form. I had instead, an informal discussion with the individual who preferred to interview me about my knowledge of the North American comedy industry, (with which I believe I sufficiently impressed him) and wrote the interview off. Afterwards I recorded personal notes about the conversation and observations I had made.

I was received very well by the community. In some cases because I was at the time dating a comic, I was admitted to the group on a level not afforded most researchers. Comedians, I discovered, feel as if their opinions are never taken seriously. I provided an opportunity, not only for the individuals to reflect and state ideas or views about their experiences, but as it was for a Doctoral thesis, it confirmed their work as something important and worth investigation. This, along with my continual presence allowed for a great deal of trust and amicability to build between many comics, but especially the Montreal comics.

4.6   Challenges and Accomplishments

In the spring of 1999 I had an interview published in a national newspaper which stemmed from a two-hour conversation discussed nine months earlier. I was extremely disappointed in the way my information was presented as I was mis-quoted on a number of things, some of which I feared might alienate my contact with those I had interviewed. I contacted all of my respondents, whether or not they had read the article, and explained that I had not mis-represented them, the journalist had. Afterwards I was glad that my ethical agreement had not allowed me to use any names of my respondents, as this might have caused further grief for particular individuals. It was only after that event however, that I truly came to appreciate the need for protecting the stories of those who had shared information with me. The newspaper article brought nothing positive to the world of comedy, and it was a sharp reminder that the interests of the marginalised are not usually considered by those with the power to influence ideas and shift perception.

The appendices mentioned earlier include: lists of the series of questions I took to the interview depending upon who I was going to be speaking with; an example of an interview and how it was analysed; an extract of my personal observation notes, and how they were analysed; and an example of the letter of consent, signed by each respondent. The questions were used only as a guideline to ensure comparability between interviews. How the questions were asked or the order in which they were approached, differed from interview to interview. Some questions developed and evolved over time, and some remained standard from beginning to end. Every interview was done face to face, and I would complete 4-5 interviews per day during the JFL festival when I had access to a

large number of comics who were in town. This created somewhat of a rhythm. At first I was afraid that having to interview so many in a short period of time would detract from the experience, and that the timetable would interfere with the collection of data. This was not the case however, firstly, because the respondents were all individually fascinating and at no point did I become bored with either the questions or their responses to them, and secondly, constantly being around the Delta Hotel (where everyone stays or hangs out during the festival), tucked away in corners conducting interviews created such a buzz around my work that it facilitated the recruitment of respondents.

Again, to return to the model, it was in the interest of my research that I observe the context of the venues, some performers over time and in different locations, a representative sample from across the country, the different audiences styles of reception, and the performers' perceptions of events. I feel comfortable that the multiple methods I used, the number of respondents who participated, and the period of time over which I completed the majority of the research, assisted in measuring the propositions that comedy is a complex set of interactions which draws both performers and viewers; when it works well, individual and social transformations can happen; there is a distinct Canadian experience involving multiple levels of identity; and comedy offers a space for people to confirm identities and share experiences, together. The next three chapters of this thesis will uncover some answers to these propositions by analytically discussing the themes (see Table 1) related to each proposition. In doing so, it will explore comedic performance, observations of audiences, the community of comedians in Canada, marginalised voices, various types of identities and the major findings of this research.

Chapter 5: Performance and The Capricious Audience

The purpose of this chapter is to better understand, from the perspective of the performers, the significance of moving among the different regions of Canada and between Canada and the United States. As previously discussed in Chapter Two, difficulties arise for all comedians as they become marginalised as entertainers, but some will face more barriers than others. As this thesis is concerned with the live show, it was necessary to understand the impact of this style of performance on an audience, compared to the recorded version. The data taken from the informal interviews and observations concerning live shows signals differences between rural and urban; between four regions: the east coast (Maritimes), the west (Alberta/BC and the prairies), Ontario and Quebec; as well as, between Canada and the United States. Variations exist both with the performers and their material who are understood as products of where they have learned the trade, and of the different types of audiences which are encountered. Audiences[25] observed were classified under any combination of the following: "liberal," "aggressive," "passive," "try and impress me," "indifferent," "with high expectations," and/or "with low expectations." These categories will be used to describe the types of audiences in the different areas. The first area to look at however, is the impact of technology which had the ability to change the face of comedy.

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These categories are my own which I developed to assist in classifying the patterns of typical audiences which I observed over the course of my research. This is not to be confused with the types of audiences discussed under the earlier section on Reception Theory (Mass, Commodified, Internal, External, and Linked).

5.1   Why Live Comedy has a Greater Effect

There are extreme differences between the live show and the recorded spectacle. Although this thesis is primarily concerned with the live show, the impact of technology and the availability of recording must also be recognised. Comics agree that powerful things happen between individuals when lives intersect in real time. The irony is recorded material can proffer live stage time, as live stage time is recorded and used to generate more live shows. For example, if a comedian has been on TV, there is a greater opportunity to get more stage time and vice versa. There are a few principal forms of recording comedy: television and radio broadcasts[26] (video and audio taped shows), and Internet broadcasts.

Comedians are driven towards achieving as much televised time as possible even though it offers none of the instant gratification a comic craves.[27] The model outlined in Chapter Two cannot be applied to recorded shows. Reasons for this include: it removes the audiences ability impact back upon the performer; the performer cannot *read* the audience an alter the material to better suit it, as the performer can no longer measure the reaction, s/he has no power to improve upon it; and, the performer cannot deepen the interaction by building trust, or further transforming or exposing the PAI, thereby unable to benefit personally.

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It is recognised that television and radio have the propensity to air live broadcasts, but due to costs for live TV and the inability to perform in a small radio booth without an audience, makes live broadcasts very infrequent.

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70% of my sample discussed television to varying degrees even though it was not one of my questions.

The performer has little control over how his/her act will be edited or cut into segments by the producers of broadcasted shows. Although shows are recorded in front of a live audience, the sequence of jokes can be inverted, or shots of the audience's reaction inserted into a section which requires focus on the body language of the comic, and so forth. Many comedians are extremely unhappy with the final presentation of sets which are cut and pasted together afterwards, without consultation. Nonetheless, each time a show is recorded, the comedians hope for a decent quality tape they will be able to send around for promotion. Comics tape their own shows. However, even a great set can result in a poor tape as the rooms are dark, people walk back and forth in front of the camera, talk nearby, and most importantly, do not adequately capture the audience's reaction.

Almost all comedians audiotape their sets at some point during their careers. Although much information is lost using this method (the visual, the gestures and expressions), it is useful to pinpoint an audience's reaction to the entire set, as well as signalling subtle changes in a narrative and the results. Audio tape is used frequently by comedians who are trying out new material, as an inexpensive means of monitoring one's material and recalling events on stage, through time. Recorded material raises particular questions: does the use of recording however, threaten the live show to some degree; did television cause of the end of the comedy boom; do televised comedy shows, along with new Internet simulcasts, indicate a shift in how people will see comedy?

The comedy boom of the mid 1980s has ended, and as a result there are fewer and fewer clubs. Yet the popularity is increasing as many comics hope to use stand-up as a

springboard into acting and as a result, the number of comedians continues to rise. If they

are to have access to the coveted stage time, they need television. If they want televison

or stage time they must secure an agent and manager, usually with the help of a video

tape. They have internalized the rules and the need for television and embrace it even

with the personal costs associated with it. They will audio-tape their sets to improve their

material, and in the back of their minds, with every joke, no matter how appropriate for

the character, they will wonder if it will work on television. But it is the general

consensus of the community that television and the rise the Internet will never replace the

live performance;

> There is no substitute for live shows because they are interactive,
> uncensored and communal. There's a big difference between watching
> someone on tv rather than live. You've got the light on, someone comes
> in and interrupts a joke, there's only 3 of you in the room. TV comedy is
> always always cut (edited). They say it on cable, on cable you can say
> fuck five times in an hour, but you can't say it 50 times in an hour. And
> you still cannot advocate the use of drugs on TV, you cannot advocate the
> overthrow the government, you can't make fun of minorities, there's all
> kinds of things you can't do on TV even if it's cable. So the whole point
> of what you find on TV is someone who has nothing to say in the first
> place...laugh and the world laughs with you, cry and you cry alone. There
> is a special experience of sitting in a place with strangers and sharing the
> critical mass of something that releases you from your daily burdens, it's
> an incredible experience and you can't get that by watching it on TV. On
> TV it becomes cold, distant and especially in a presentational instead of
> representational kind of comedy. You can watch sketch (comedy) on TV
> and the comics are relating to each other, but when you watch stand-ups,
> they're taking to you. Oh, do you want to talk to me, or do you want to
> talk to me through a pane of glass. So for all those reasons, I think live
> comedy will never really die. A lot of people said, I think mistakenly, that
> comedy on television, stand-up on TV, killed the comedy clubs, or killed
> their big growth. I don't think its true at all. (Jim, 1999)

Although it is not live, television reaches a greater audience. It provides a link for

viewers of different age groups, different geographies, and different cultures, yet the link

remains metaphorical as at no point is the collective audience brought together. On the one hand, televised comedy is primarily urban, liberal, and political. On the other hand, a television audience incorporates individuals from all categories. Therefore, the values of the cosmopolitan comic are presented to a regional, if not national audience. But the potential problems associated with television (listed above), reduce the *impact* of the comedy on the viewers. Furthermore, the interactive process which links the performer to the audience, (thereby linking the values and history of the performer to the community), is not transferred through the television medium, and therefore the performers are more easily cast as 'other'. With improvements in technology including the Internet, satellite dishes and cable, there is a greater exposure to American comedy for the Canadian audience than vice-versa. This raises the concern of the impact of American values on Canadian society via televised comedy.

Reception theorists and others acknowledge that audiences will make use of performed material (live or recorded) for their own purposes (de Certeau, 1984; Gans, 1980; Fiske 1994; Hall, 1994; Hartley, 1982; Hurwitz, 1988; Morley 1980; Palmer, 1994; Wright; 1959). This thesis suggests there are fewer opportunities for an audience to make use of a live performance than a recorded one; primarily for the reason of answerability. Recorded performances reduce the level of investment on the part of the viewer, and hence, the positioning of the 'self' within the narrative is diminished. All three levels of mimesis suffer and there is no shared sense of belonging with the viewer and the *actual* audience who attended the live show. There is a risk in these cases that the material and the comedian will seem less funny and there are no demands made on the

viewers of a recorded show to respond to the performance. Part of the social contract of attending a performance, especially in a theatre or comedy club, is an understood agreement about who performs and who observes[28]. Hence, a greater impression is made on the audience during the live performance than the televised, and as the majority of performers in Canada are Canadian, what are the values that are transmitted in the live stand-up setting?

5.2   The National Canadian Experience

Is there a distinct Canadian experience? A distinct Canadian sense of humour? Is it formed around popular icons of contemporary times, or does it exist within and beyond *wilderness, beer* and *maple syrup*? Literature on Canadian popular culture and its impact on those it reaches, remains underdeveloped, even with the legacy of Marshall McLuhan. Furthermore, very little has been written on the distinct style of Canadian humour; on understanding why we are drawn to it, and how we identify with it. Andrew Clark, a journalist for the Toronto Star, attempts to explain in his book Stand and Deliver, the complexity of the Canadian identity formed through a collective and individual sense of history and biography, but also contemplates 'space' on three levels: geographical, historical, and political;

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[28]

Hecklers break this contract and are chastised by the comedians for the interruption. Yet because of the less formal nature of the comedy club it will happen more frequently than in a theatre setting. The frequency increases each time the formality of the venue decreases - right down to a rowdy bar, where everyone ends up competing with the performer for air-space and time.

(t)hey say geography is destiny. No matter what we do, we will always have to deal with the consequences of living in the shadow of a colossus. We will always have to struggle for survival in a vast and largely uninhabitable land. And we have been left to sort out the volatile legacy of eighteenth-century Franco-British colonialism on a continent that Europe abandoned centuries ago. What can we do but laugh? Laughter helps us fend off the cold, fight off the Americans, and excuse the increasing irrelevancy of two solitudes (144).

Although his approach is somewhat Torontocentric, omitting the distinct identities held by other regions in Canada, he does succeed in exposing many truths about the Canadian comedic system. In Canada humour is generated in each region and in opposition to the perceived differences of other regions. Everyone has a rival. As one comic explained to me,

...everybody loves to hate Toronto, Toronto loves to hate Montreal, every other province loves to hate Québec, everyone likes to feel superior to Manitoba and Newfoundland, and Anglo-Montrealers can be treated as being from *outside* Québec (Phil, Montreal, 1997).

Regional differences aside, references to a shared Canadian experience in comedic themes confirms a collective, shared, national, Canadian identity. These references act as emotional triggers, used to link strangers in an audience to a collective. Canadian icons include the maple leaf, the toque, and winter scenes of ice hockey, curling, and skiing; maple sugar, Mounties, the expression 'eh', the Hudson's Bay Co.; wilderness, fur, moose, beavers, loons, water, bears; the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation; and historical and political figures such as a current Prime Minister, or a former Québec hero. A large segment of Canadian national and Canadian regional identity is formed negatively or in relation to that which it is not. But what does it mean to be Canadian? Comedians will play on the fact that many Canadians identify as 'not American,'

> Canadians still have the cover of Maclean's saying what is a Canadian?
> On the streets, on the news: What do you think Canadian is? You know
> and the best definition is always what, we're not Americans. That's what
> a Canadian is. Something that's not American . It's not true but we don't
> have it fixed... we don't know what to say. We also don't want to make a
> big deal out of ourselves. (Bryan, L.A., 1998)

Canadians identify with who they are, by focussing on that which they are not. Common 'stock' jokes refer to Americans as 'our violent neighbours', who need to be 'put up with' because we ultimately are in need of US protection due to Canada's insignificant military force. Canada may be described as a peaceful country; whose inhabitants are soft spoken and polite, beer drinking, good-natured beings. Or, we are the unemployed, unmotivated, riding on the back of the social system, because we CAN. All of these stereotypes are tackled by Canadian comics in one form or another and "the most frequently addressed topic in Canadian stand-up is bears" (Joe Bodelai, 1998, CBC Comics). The reality is that most Canadians will grow up never having the opportunity to see a bear outside of a local zoo. Shared cultural knowledge does not demand first hand experience in order to identify with the plot, in fact, it appears to be irrelevant; urban Canadians identify with the wilderness and will drink Wild Cat beer from their biologically barren, urban balconies.

As they move through Canadian territory, Canadian comedians learn to be sensitive to the local forms of identity. Although comics have life experiences from where they have grown up, they gain most of their opinions about the country, as they work and travel across it. A joke works best if it is about somewhere or someone *else*, as the audience will connect around a joke positioning them as different from this 'other'. For example, eastern-Canadian audiences delighted in the late, great, Gary David's

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accidental tourist style of comedy, which commented on one of the prairie provinces

which is extremely flat: "Saskatchewan is the only place in the world where you can sit

on your porch and watch your dog run away for three days!" Jokes about Québec or

Toronto also work very well outside of the city/provincial limits.

Being aware of how an audience will relate to information on being Canadian, or

Torontonian, or from 'down east', is an intuition which most full time performers must

develop quickly. By moving through Canadian space, the stand-up performer creates,

builds and maintains a narrative (humorous, hopefully) of who and what Canadians are as

individuals; as regional residents; and as a nation. A good portion of comedians' road

trips take them to small rural communities where the comics will either play in rooms not

designed for performance[29], or to an audience which is not expecting to be entertained in

such a manner. In order to have a show succeed, the performer will take on, or shed

various identities to create a connection with any given audience. Comedians will use the

tactic of 'impersonation', by trying to look and sound like their audience. The comics I

spoke to discussed speaking slower, swearing more, and wearing casual clothing such as

T-shirts, jeans and flannel when performing in rural areas. For cities, they would upscale

the look to include a sports jacket and pull in their more intellectually stimulating

material in the anticipation of a more highly educated audience.

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[29]There are many examples of this, one Montreal comedian tells a story of performing in a Diner, where people were being served food and eating at separate tables. As there was no stage, and no microphone, the owners placed a couple of wooden planks across the top of a table with banquette seating. He was expected to climb up on top, maintain his balance and yell out his material over the din for forty five minutes.

The next section of this chapter explores the perceived differences between rural and urban, the different regions of Canada and the differences and similarities between Canada and the United States. Each will be approached in two ways, the performers who are from a particular site or who perform in a particular site, and the perceptions of the audiences in each area.

5.3   Differences in Urban and Rural Canada

5.3.1   Urban and Rural Performers

Comedic performers in Canada learn comedy in urban settings and therefore either start out as or become products of urban centres. Many comedians originate from smaller cities, towns or rural areas such as Sudbury or Timmins in Northern Ontario; Candiac, Québec; London, Ontario, and Kelowna. BC; but many more are raised in Urban centres. For all, the primary training grounds are Vancouver, Edmonton, Toronto, Ottawa, or Montreal. This fact raised questions of how a comic who has never lived rurally, adapts to rural audiences, and how urbanites are received by rural communities? How does a comedian adapt?

Comedians prefer performing in a city because they view it to be a more natural place for them to perform. Again, the symbolic image of home appears as they also become territorial over the club(s) in which they perform with the greatest frequency. These 'home' venues are where they are on familiar ground and in control. At the same time, they recognize that urban audiences are jaded, have higher expectations and have a

greater choice between entertainment options. Occasionally, comics will define themselves as Urban Comics and insist on working strictly in urban centres. When asked, a large portion of my sample reported their least favoured rural areas were Northern Alberta, Northern BC, and parts of the Prairies. Hardly anyone even mentioned New Brunswick (shows are less frequent there with no official clubs), but the Maritimes were described as extremely friendly, generous crowds "who are just happy to have you there." To clarify, there were no performers in my sample who considered themselves to be 'ruralites' although many performed regularly in rural areas. Comedians identify with the centre of training and where they are most comfortable – which is invariably urban.

5.3.3 Urban and Rural Audiences

How are the audiences different in Rural/Urban areas across Canada? My findings show that there are mixed feelings about rural areas. The generalizations will include tales of 'uneducated, drunk, backwards, homophobic, racist, idiots.' In the words of one comic,

> I'm a little cynical towards rural areas. And it's funny cause I would often not do too well in front of a rural crowd and played in front of all of them, everywhere. And I started to dislike my own country as a result. I was travelling to every town around the whole country and experiencing the same problem. People that were homophobic...(and) I saw what they did enjoy. They were drunkards, morons you know. I can guarantee you that it would be a racist joke that someone came up to me after the show and said you want to hear a joke? So I started to think this was a cross- section, a good example of what Canada is. And it all sort of seemed, like, they were the same and negative. You know when people would try to correct me and say no these are the salt of the earth these people you're performing to. This is the real Canadian, because he's wearing blue jeans and...doing manual labour, I disagree that this makes the person somehow...more valid than others. But I really have, I've seen the worst of

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Canadians, that sounds like an awful thing to say, I've seen the worst of Canadians from coast to coast. And it really brought me down. There was nothing, they had no interest in their own country other than to dislike another part (of the country) (Bryan, 1998).

This was not the only viewpoint held by comedians about rural areas, some reported being very happy with where they had played. They reported the audiences were receptive, pleased to see you, generous, forgiving, and honest. As one comic explains,

> (w)hen you leave the (urban) core, they're more impressed with live performance, They're less jaded and you'll find many pockets that are thrilled to see a person on stage, it's a rarity. But on the same token, if there's any sense that you're, sort of, putting on an act, in any way, you'll lose them. Because, sort of like children, they're really interested and respectful of live performance, but if they sense something contrived... they won't go along (Will, 1998).

But stories circulate, opinions form, and the result is a resistance of comics to participate in the rural runs. Other comics see working in rural areas as a part of growth in comedy; it is more than just earning your stripes and putting in your time. This is where the comics learn about themselves and their abilities outside of a comfortable territory. If a comedian can make a show go well under dire conditions, s/he is developing a broader range and becoming more universal.

One of the tactics used by comedians to succeed at this is to fit in with the audience by looking and sounding like *them*. It is believed that Rural people wear flannel and blue jeans and that they work in the mines or they're lumberjacks, farmers or fishermen. It is also assumed that they swear more. "Well, in rural areas and small towns the first thing you do is swear a bit more. It makes you sound like them. And they really, for whatever reason, they really respond to that."(Tony, 1997) After forming an opinion

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about a site, the comics did not report familiarizing themselves (beyond finding out any information which helps to personalize their material) with a rural area or town. While they might learn the name of main street or the mayor, they will not know if it is struggling economically, or if they've recently had any major crisis or political issues. This is the direct result of the *one-nighter* tour structure; comedians come in for a night and leave the next morning, hardly stopping to notice the differences between the previous night or the next night's gigs. Many will see little more than their motel room, and the four walls of the bar or room in which they perform.

This structure of travel and performance limits the understanding of the communities in which the shows take place. In many ways, this style has fostered and propagated a mutual misunderstanding between urban and rural participants of comedy which has been further complicated by the impacts of globalization on how comedians from other regions or countries are received. These days, with the greater exposure on television, there is a possibility that before stepping foot in a remote setting, someone there might have already heard of, or even seen the performer. However, even if they have not heard of the performer specifically, they may have already formed an opinion about who s/he is, based on where s/he is from (broadly defined to include many different types of groups). Being presented to an audience before meeting them can work both for and against a performer. In some ways, it will prime the audience to be more receptive, yet may also cause problems of eliminating previously held opinions and expectations. Not only are the audiences beginning to change, but the comedic styles of the performers

are as well, due to the increased frequency of available, recorded comedy. In the words

of one comic involved in Canadian comedy for over 20 years,

> We (now) live in a world where even in Europe they know Larry Sanders.
> We are living in a true global village. Especially in this country, it doesn't
> matter where you're from...we have comics from Vancouver living in
> Toronto, comics from Montreal living in Toronto, they will still talk about
> how in Montreal this is going on, in Vancouver this is going on, in terms
> of their style, it's really influenced by television than by anything else.
> You can watch a guy and notice his influence is based on what national
> television comedies he has seen, that's where his style has come from.
> And now it's reached the point where a lot of the Canadian comics, a lot of
> my contemporaries, myself included, are seen nationwide on a regular
> basis, because of (CBC) *Comics*, because of *Comedy Now*, because of the
> *Just For Laughs Festival*, because of *Comedy Club 54*, these are shows
> that are seen nationwide and feature heavily Canadian comics. It's a good
> time to be an established Canadian comic; I don't know if it's a great time
> to start up (Richard, 1997).

The global shifts that are taking place currently in comedy affect both audience members

and comedians. The impacts of the recorded performance on the formulation of the live

performance, as well as the consequences of live performance on the reception of the

recorded performance remain an enigma. Many impacts of globalization have been

explored in Canadian stand-up[30], and will be discussed in the next chapter. Nonetheless,

the research is embryonic and should be developed further.

At the outset, I believed I would be able to separate the discussion of different

regions and venues, but I have since discovered they are compounded and must be treated

as a unit. The major urban centres have an array of performance areas including

universities, bars, colleges, private functions and corporate shows. Given the choice for

attending a show however, the majority of urban people choose to attend comedy in a

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[30]See Woodrow, 2000.

comedy-club setting. Rural areas have bars, some university/college sites, community centres and perhaps a small theatre. This affects which audience members attend and for what purposes as gathering at the town theatre is different than dropping by the local bar. Nonetheless, comics must be prepared for whichever audience awaits them and the information is shared among comedians to assist in building this knowledge base. It is not all positive and may be misrepresentations of who audience members are, but the stereotypes exist and are slow to disappear.

5.4   Regional Identities and Presuppositions in Canada

5.4.1   Western Performers

When comics describe other comics as coming from out west, they are usually referring to Vancouver. Nonetheless, this research considers 'west' to include BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Stereotypes of Vancouver comics among the Canadian community includes a perception of tree-hugging, politically correct, weed-smoking, laid-back individuals. The comics which come from there have over the past ten years witnessed two of the three comedy clubs in Vancouver close down. This has had a strong impact on the availability of stage-time for performers and the majority of shows have been made up in one-nighters along the Vancouver coastline, primarily in bars. The result has been a higher proportion of sex and drug-related humour in the material of Vancouver comics.

> There are certain joke triggers, like the fact that you could smoke dope
> freely in Vancouver, the skateboarders' culture, so the guys that often

come from Vancouver talk about that. The "Hi, I'm from Vancouver" and they'll go off on a riff, they'll talk about the hash-cafes, that not everybody has experiences, but everybody knows (Jim, 1999).

Performers in Alberta and Edmonton, have more choice with a club in each city, although the dreaded 'Northern Alberta Tour' is on their doorstep. In Alberta, there is a law which compels bar-owners to offer one hour of live entertainment per week, in order to maintain a liquor license. This creates a series of problems;

> I think the promoters there don't care, they just want to keep their cheques coming, and a liquor license in Alberta is like an entertainment license. And you have to have some type of entertainment in order to keep their license for the bar. All right, so...comedy is like the cheapest thing possible to put in there. Like a spotlight and the sound equipment, whatever. You know, so sometimes you end up in these rooms where the bar owner doesn't care what you're doing . You're lucky to get a microphone. There's no cover charge. The people are going to be there anyway. You know, you're really more of a disruption than a show (Bruce, 1997).

It is these types of rooms which foster the most dislike for performing in Northern Alberta and generate stories of futile performance situations. Comics report it next to impossible to gain the attention and focus of a room, and are usually just ignored. There appears to be no benefit in these shows, either for the performers or for the audience. But if somehow they are able to gain the room's attention and approval, they feel they have done it by selling out and going for the lowest common denominator style of humour and are unable to enjoy the positive response in the end because they have not been able to be themselves, or their regular character for the duration of the performance.

On another topic, comics and producers report a different ethic of professionalism in Western comics.

> I notice the guys that come from the west-coast or Vancouver have a really non-business-like approach to the business, which works against them for

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the first while until they get into it. Everywhere else, they pretty well know what to expect, but when they come from Vancouver they have this really sort of hippy-sub-text that they have to get rid of if they're gonna really work hard in the business and become who they want to be (Jim, 1999).

5.4.2 Western Audiences

As stated previously, the Western audiences are seen as politically correct, and laid back; as liberal, passive, and with high expectations. " Vancouver in particular, they have a sense that the PC revolution going on...but they haven't decided what in particular they find offensive, so they say ooh and aah at anything other than knock-knock jokes. They're very picky"(Will, 1998). A bit further to the east, urban Alberta comedy clubs are cited as some of the favourite places for comedians to play,

> So I was a little bit uneasy to go out west, where the crowds are going to be a) smaller, b) smaller minded, cowboy wearing, straw spitting, idiots. And they weren't . They were magnanimous, smart, easy laughing crowds. I mean Edmonton is legendary laughing room. But Calgary was even better than Edmonton. It was beautiful out west. Um, I thought that people in Toronto were friendly, but out west, you just can't beat it. The hospitality, the weed, the laid back life style. They're just so much more relaxed out there (Susan, 1998).

In the words of another comedian, the differences between urban and rural are more apparent,

> They are very generous out west. Edmonton, Calgary, great audiences, surprisingly sophisticated, they're not all rednecks. No, that's interior BC, they're rednecks, they're in-bred. I've said, the West was very hospitable, just good folk, you know, out to have a good time (Kathy, 1998).

Between the rural and urban areas of the province, Alberta has proven itself as the best and the worst province to play. As one comic explains, "the best and the worst (shows of my life) are both in Alberta"(Jack, 1998). The best show for Jack was in

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Edmonton, and the worst, in a Northern rural town. Jack, along with a few other comics draw attention to the 'binge' drinking that happens in the West. The difference between a drunk, Edmonton crowd, "out west Edmonton was very big and huge laughs...Edmonton (has) pretty drunk audiences, they get drunk pretty fast, and like to party" (Eddie, 1998), and a drunk rural Alberta town crowd, is you get huge laughs at the former, and your life threatened on stage at the latter. There is also a frustration with playing rooms which are not amenable to this particular form of entertainment, or where it is unwelcome and unexpected, "(I performed in) a Country and Western night club, (where) once a week they would have comedy, much to the discomfort of the people who liked the line-dancing, and the strippers from the club next door, as we were competition for the men like that"(Linda, 1998). At times, the crowds simply do not show up, but the show must still continue,

> (It is difficult) performing in western Canada, in a small town where truckers come and there's a show. About 9:00 and you're supposed to do an hour and there's three people in the audience. (And you're) telling the guy 'look, I'll do half-an-hour.' But if you don't go on and do the full hour you don't get paid. So you're just talking to yourself, you know. I think probably not being respected, that's the biggest thing. When it does happen it hurts sometimes (Victor, 1998).

The prairie provinces receive fewer bookings for one nighters than British Columbia and Alberta. Saskatchewan is thought by many performers, to have incredibly hip audiences, especially Saskatoon; and Winnipeg boasts a popular independent club for Canadian performers to play at, although neither town wins many votes as a place to visit long-term.

5.4.3 Maritime Performers and Audiences

Not much is reported during the interviews about Eastern performers. Most have relocated to central Canada as there are very few places to learn the trade in the Maritimes. A story-telling or musical style more typical of the Maritime comedian. The Maritime audiences tend to be passive, friendly, and with low expectations and high response levels.

> I think a Maritime audience, these are the people I played for in Newfoundland specifically, were comparable to the all...club audiences in Toronto, in that they are there to laugh, and have a wicked time, and if you make them laugh, they will respond so huge. There's no pretense (Eddie, 1998).

The Maritime provinces have faced economic and social struggles over the past few decades and their audiences' characteristics resemble the enthusiasm of audiences who receive entertainment during wars or times of crisis. In part, these war-time audiences had no where else to go for entertainment, but mostly, the merriment provided distraction from the difficulties of war. The Maritimes have little work, little money and a bleak outlook on the future. Local governments have been struggling to stimulate the economy, while the federal government continues to limit access to natural resources. Out-migration has become such a reality for the Maritimes, that those who remain look westward to other parts of Canada that attract their young. For this reason, I believe the audience members make connections with visiting comics from other parts of Canada, as the person who can provide a glimpse of life on the other side of New Brunswick.

Comics report the Maritime audiences are the friendliest audiences in Canada and that it is the only place left in Canada with any real regional cultural identity. They are

more open to accepting outsiders, and are generous with their laughter. They are not precocious and they arrive at the show ready for a good time. They do not mind politely waiting for the comic to 'get funny', and if one manages to make them laugh, they roar. This generosity reflects their low expectations. Comics report that these audiences just seem happy to have someone stopping by. However, the level of sophistication is underestimated, and the Maritime audiences are described as a mixture of everything and everyone in the same room. If the comedian chooses not to adapt, the show will be less successful. As one experienced comic told me, "according to the YukYuks formulation...this is Toronto, and this is the right formula (for comedy), and we don't *want* to adapt it to the regions! – (if you take that approach) you're going to have problems in the Maritimes" (Charles, 1997). They'll go with you only so far, but you have to be willing to acknowledge that they are not the uncomplicated beings as the rest of Canada likes to believe.

5.2.4   Quebec Performers and Audiences

Quebec really means Montreal. There is no 'Quebec' scene in English comedy. The only sites possible to perform regularly in English outside of the city are all within an hour's drive. The Anglophone performers in Montreal work primarily out of two clubs, the Comedy Nest and the ComedyWorks. One-nighters are available at Bourbon Street on the West-Island, Scotty's on the South Shore, and occasional sites in the Eastern Townships. Anglo-comics also work the seven English colleges (CEGEPS) and the three English Universities.   Bilingual Francophones also attend the English shows, but the

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majority of the audience is Anglophone. There is a higher proportion of tourists and festivals during the summer months, and this changes the number and population of audience members in a predictable way[31]. The majority of regular performers are Montreal born, and have an appreciation for the specific nature of Québécois culture. They are also very familiar with how outsiders view the province, as they themselves feel as if they live in, but are not a part of Québec.

The material is highly political in nature because of this, and because of the bilingual nature of the crowds, the Montreal comics will 'codeswitch' – use French words instead of the English equivalent, or alter the pronunciation to make a stronger point. Many of the jokes do not carry to English parts of Canada because they are so specific to Montreal culture. Not everyone in Canada knows what Poutine is for example, or may not know the equivalent of Shoppers Drug Mart is Pharmaprix. However, drawing attention to the differences in culture, work especially well with local audiences and observant tourists.

One comic noted a distinct difference about Montreal. Because the local comics critically comment on Québec politics they are immediately identified by audiences and other comics as 'Federalist'. They do not try to reach the French audience, and do not worry about offending them. For this reason they are seen to be more 'Canadian' than performers in the rest of Canada. There are very distinct differences between French and

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[31]
June is fairly busy, early July is very quiet due to the Jazz Festival, late July is extremely packed due to the comedy festival and August is a mixed-bag.

English comedy. This thesis will not be able to fully address the structure and realities of the French system, but my research provided some insight into the differences between the two worlds.

The audiences are liberal, passive/aggressive and with high expectations. The demographic is 18 - 35 year old, students or professionals, who come in couples, triples, quads, large groups and occasionally singles, usually older business men. The majority of any audience has some working knowledge of French, signalling they are from Montreal. Additionally, while the comedy club was completely in English, over 30% of my patrons on average preferred to be served drinks in French.

5.2.5 French Comedy in Canada

The differences between French and English comedy happen on a number of levels: the venues, how new comics get started in comedy, the number of performers, structure of a show, the structure of the industry, the amount of money paid to performers, and a star system.

The venues in English comedy were outlined earlier in Chapter One. In French comedy, comedy clubs do not exist. There are no regular venues where Francophones may go on a nightly or weekly basis to watch comedy. Therefore, there are no open-mike nights, no stage-time to learn the trade, and no place to watch and form a community with other comics. There are plenty of French shows, but they are usually one-nighters, which also does not give a performer a number of opportunities over a weekend to test out new versions of material on crowds. Comedy venues are usually bars, theatres or community

centres. There is also a great deal of corporate work for company dinners, conferences and special events.

> There's no comedy club in French, there's no seven-nights-a-week comedy club, there's only one nighters, and a lot of comics, so if you want to get stage time, you have to know people, you have to be kind of established, and the only way to achieve that when you are setting out is to go through a comedy school. Then you can say I was at the comedy school, and they will try you for 7 minutes. If you are nobody, forget it. So what I did was I started doing comedy in English (Paul, 1998).

There are a series of implications in this structure. First, how does a young comic get started? Primarily, they must attend the National Comedy School in French. It was started about 12 years ago by Juste Pour Rire, and it was seen as a great opportunity for young unemployed Québécois to learn how to perform and write comedy. It provided a tour for the graduates at the end of the year, and was a very affordable at $500/year. However, eventually Juste Pour Rire relinquished control and it became privatized. Now it costs over $7,000 per year, but the students qualify for Quebec loans and bursaries to attend. The final grand tour is no longer sponsored by JPR, so it has been scaled down. Approximately 12-20 graduate per year, most are men. Afterwards, one can enter contests and try to get representation from an agent or a manager through that. Two or three might continue to work in comedy in some way after they graduate, but most carry other full time jobs. A second implication is the style these new comics are taught is character performance, not set-up-punch joke writing. The students are encouraged to write and perform a series of different characters, in a more European style, or theatrical style. The development of only one style is discouraged, as it does not provide a broad enough base for the trade. As the Québec market is extremely small (just over five million),

performers need to tour the province and will return to rooms every few months. One character would expire quickly in a community which saw the same act only 12 weeks before. Furthermore, the French market is fairly detached from the Anglophone world of comedy[32], and one comic reported that when asked by teachers at the comedy school to describe former comedic influences, they had never heard of Dennis Miller or Sandra Bernhardt. Therefore, any comedy show in French is expected to be a variety show, with a series of characters, props, costumes and activities. This was the style of English comedy back in the sixties and early seventies. In the late seventies, Canadian English stand-up came out of the strip-clubs and moved into the Comedy clubs. The French audiences are just beginning to become acclimatized to one-person shows with a microphone, a single character and a series of jokes; it only started to become a more frequently used style in the mid-nineties.

Once you have secured representation in French, if you work hard you might earn enough money to live on. Most English comedians do not have a manager or an agent for a large portion of their Canadian career although Toronto comics tend to have more representation than comics from other parts of the county. The French system is unionized, so the comics are protected from working in undesirable conditions and for insufficient pay. It is not unreasonable for a French comic to receive close to $1,000 per show and more for corporate work. English performers only dream of that kind of money. In Montreal opening acts on the weekend get somewhere between $20 - $50, and

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[32] Case in point, the new Comedy Cable channel in Canada does not appear in Quebec due to its lack of French content.

top head liners will get $700-$900 for five to six shows over a weekend. There is no union in English comedy. The industry is happy to pit one comic against another; if one will not do it for the pay regardless of the conditions, someone else will. There is a comradery between long-time performers, and there are unwritten rules of seniority, but the establishment holds the reigns behaves in the interest of profit. Québec comics are amazed to hear how little an English comic will work for, and I believe it is one of the reasons that so few French comedians attempt to cross over to the English side. They would need to start over, accept unpaid work, and be at the mercy of the producers of comedy.

Finally, unlike English Canada, Québec has a star-system. The French audiences support their cultural entertainers fully and will come out in droves to see a favourite comedian two or three times per year. Those who are popular win prominent positions on television and continue to build their exposure and fame within the Québec market. They can also participate in European comedic contests as well as work in a series of French speaking countries. Because of their *overexposure*, French performers must be able to churn out new material regularly and this affects their ability to produce solid material for a single character over a period of years, which is what happens in English Canada. An English comic can expect to be seen by an audience member (while on tour) at most, once a year. Performing at home, it might be twice a year, depending upon how often s/he is on the road. Therefore, material will not usually be recalled by the audience members. There are major cultural differences between French and English Canada, especially in relation to popular culture. French television does not show the same ads or shows as

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English TV for example. French comics who work in French and English find it difficult to simply translate their material and use it for both audiences. There is too much risk involved in either side 'not understanding' a joke, or finding it upsetting.

> French Canadians have no real identity, they don't consider themselves to be Canadians, and they don't have their own country, and they're French, but they are surrounded by English, I think that if the French Canadian population was 1 person, that person would be no self confidence, scared, a scared child. They are very easily hurt, paranoid. So you can't laugh at French Canadians, and it is very hard to make them laugh at themselves. That's why certain jokes I do in English, I can't do in French (Paul, 1998).

5.2.6   Toronto Performers

Toronto is the hub of Canadian Stand-up because it is the most like LA of all the Canadian cities. The CBC is there, YukYuks is there, casting and talent agencies abound. Performers come from all over Canada hoping to build a career which will eventually take them over the border and onto success. There are two principal clubs in Town, Mark Breslin's YukYuks and the Laugh Resort. The former is thought to be somewhat a meat factory, churning out the same product over and over, as one comic stated, "we got to know that he was sausage A and I was sausage B" (Bryan, 1998). YukYuks claims that it provides about 90% of the paid comedic work in Canada and provides over 90% of that paid work to Canadian comics. Whether or not these figures remain constant, it is acknowledged that YukYuks controls many aspects of Canadian comedy, including who gets stage time, and who goes on the road. The particular YukYuks approach brings young comics up within the system and then presents them across the country in

YukYuks rooms. The club is committed to free-speech, sexualized and taboo-breaking comedy (Jim, 1999). When asked if he could define a Toronto comic, one comic replied:

> (a) Toronto comic is harder to define because everybody is from all different parts of Canada. So it would be easier to define the difference between a YukYuks comic and one playing the independent circuit. If its from YukYuks, it won't be cutting edge, it won't be unbelievably original, it's like the McDonald's of stand-up. We're selling a product, don't deviate from the norm, stay with what we know is funny, and if you see a YukYuks act tomorrow or in five years, a lot of the time it will be the same material, there are a lot of exceptions to the rule, some of the funniest stand-up comics in Canada work at YukYuks, but the generic YukYuks comic you can pick out in a room (Victor, 1998).

YukYuks has downsized over the past ten years and does not have any comedy clubs in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Québec, nor anywhere in the Maritimes. In the past, it did try to open clubs in the eighties in Winnipeg, Québec and Halifax, but all of them have now closed. Today, YukYuks will run occasional shows through areas of the Maritimes and the Prairies and it rarely ventures into Winnipeg and Quebec. What is the price a comic will pay to be a part of the YukYuks scene? They must be loyal to YukYuks. This means they are not allowed to play any independent clubs (with the exception of Québec), and if they do, they will be removed from the YukYuks roster. This is an illegal practice in Canada, and YukYuks will deny that its comics are restricted, but every comic in my sample confirmed that these rules exist, and as a result there was a revolt in the early 90s when YukYuks lost a number of its best upcoming triple-A acts to the independent clubs. I even had a manager in a New York comedy club who had a great deal of knowledge about YukYuks, call the Canadian system fascist. One comic stated,

When I talk to French comedians about the wages that Yuk-Yuk's are paying, they can't believe it...I think Yuk-Yuk's is just a meat market, it's gross, it's a rape of artists. Literally. They are raping comics left and right. I think so. Comics are not considered as artists any more, they're just a disposable product (Andrew, 1998).

5.2.7 Toronto Audiences

Toronto audiences are loved by Toronto-based comics. They are described as

liberal, bright, willing to go with you all the way, even with unusual material (Will,

1998). They are found by non-Toronto comics however to be "liberal", "aggressive", "try

and impress me", groups with high expectations. YukYuks has carried out a great deal of

marketing research to pinpoint the demographics of their audiences. They were found to

be in Toronto, "18 – 26, upper blue-collar, lower white collar, either in dates or in packs.

About equal male to female – slightly higher female customers than male" (Jim, 1999).

The majority of audience members reported attending a show about twice per year, but as

you go farther out into smaller towns in Ontario, "might come as frequently as once every

6 weeks" (Jim, 1999). Interestingly, another comedian pointed out the internal

differences between audiences in different parts of Toronto; "there are regions within

Toronto that are distinct in their audiences, like Queen Street audiences are different from

the Uptown audiences" (Eddie, 1998). Even urban comedians must be prepared to

present a slightly different approach between clubs, even within the same chain. Another

important fact to recognize, is smaller cities and towns have fewer options and therefore

provide an important entertainment service to the residents. What the residents do not

realise however, is that the range of performers are limited by the restraints placed on the

comics by the YukYuks system. Greater exposure to recorded comedy might generate a greater awareness of this fact.

5.5   Canada and the USA

Comics who are familiar with the American system, enjoy talking about the similarities between Canada and the US based on regional location. West-coasters are seen as laid back, wholesome and politically correct whether they are in Vancouver or San Francisco. The Mid-west is so cold they can barely laugh, but you are able to find incredibly 'hip' pockets such as Minneapolis and Saskatoon. The East -- NYC and Toronto-- are faster paced and more demanding. The Maritimes are compared to the deep south, possessing a strong sense of culture, friendly crowds, and are looked down upon by the rest of the country. Many performers venture into Canada from the US simply by paying a small fee at the border. The Canadians do not cross with the same ease however. Without a green-card they are not permitted to work in the US. This is a double edge sword, as the Canadian performers cannot expand their stage time to include the US market, yet, when they eventually do cross the border, they are more fully developed as comedians and possess a great deal of comedic depth should they get noticed. Nonetheless, the result of this imbalance is a feeling of exclusion or marginalisation for Canadian performers. As one experienced comedian explains,

> I have felt a number of times that (working in the U.S.) had given me an insight into what the woman's problem is. Because I feel sometimes that I have to be twice as good as an American to be hired. Because why should they hire me when they have all these American guys there? And that's true. And that's what a woman has to go through. Women have to go

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through that all the time. Why should you hire the woman when you can hire all these guys (Lee, 1997)?

Canadian comics are attracted to either New York or Los Angeles; those who start out in NYC usually end up moving out to LA within a few years. The two cities are extremely different, but New York provided more opportunity to develop one's style in the American market than LA does. In NY, one finds very aggressive comedians who "tell you what's funny" (Helen, 1997). Canadian comics have to adapt from a different style of "you know, I kinda found this funny, do you think its funny too?" (Helen, 1997) Another comedian explains that beyond the aggressive nature of the American performers, one can even pinpoint visual difference between performance styles of Canadians and Americans. These styles are based on the assumptions made about the intellect and personality of the members of the audience;

> I find you can undersell jokes in Canada...and in a way it makes it funnier by underselling it. You know, you can do understatement in Canada. Whereas in the States they tend to expect sell sell sell....but it's not to do with energy , it's not that you *have* to be in-your-face in the States. But there's a salesmanship that they expect...It's a way of pitching your voice up and down. And a way of gesturing, saying here's the punch line. You've got to...stretch out your voice and your mannerisms a little more. Whereas in Canada, you can just stand there and talk. It's like there's less ego involved in Canada, which is not necessarily a good thing, that sounds like a compliment to a Canadian. (laughter) You know what I mean. No ego, no presumption, no sense of self importance is a good thing to a Canadian. But in the States it's an advantage to have that. To have that ego, to have a bit of cockiness with yourself, and to have no shame in slightly overselling something to get a laugh. It's just a difference in culture (Jack, 1998).

The style of the shows in the U.S. vary from Canadian shows as well as the performance styles. In fact, the performance styles might be attributed to the fact that

many American shows will last for hours, with twenty or more performers on the roster. The shows continue while the audience turns over, coming and going as they please. There is the freedom to work any club you want, but unlike the Canadian shows where the number of acts is kept down and a head liner does an hour at the end of a two hour show, NY is more of a showcase style which bombards the audience with a string of unlinked comedic performances, mediated only by an MC that arrives between acts simply to introduce the next one. There is plenty of stage time to be had, but the quality of the venue and audiences can vary. One Canadian, now living and working in NYC, reported doing stand-up seven nights a week, and two shows per night on weekends. Canadian comedians drool at the thought of having that much stage-time within the same city. Showcasing is a frequent event; all a comic needs to do, is bring five friends who will purchase two drinks apiece, and s/he will get five minutes on stage.

Not all Canadians make the move to the states, although almost all of them dream of it happening. Those who have successfully crossed the border talk about opportunities abounding, while many others return home unable to spark any interest. In the words of one successful comedian,

> Within months of moving I had the Letterman audition and all kinds of stuff and this and that. Since I've been there over the past 8 months. I mean I've done three television spots and what not. I've gotten more there (NYC) in 8 months than I'd get down here (Canada) in 10 years. So it doesn't even compare...(In Canada) it's a road mentality. Here you have to make a living on the road because Canada is so fucking big. You know you got to travel man if you're going to make a living at this, and you got to travel a long way because the cities are a province apart for Christ sake! Twelve hours to each gig. So, you've got be a road comic. Whereas in New York you don't want to be that. There's two distinctions. You're either a city comic or you're a road comic. So and you set yourself up in the city you become a showcase mentality. You know what I mean, you

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develop your seven, your five minute; your eight minute set; ten minute set; you know? And whereas in Canada, you develop your hunger set which is like, I gotta get a half hour of material together in a club otherwise I don't eat a sandwich today, you know what I mean? So it's completely different...You don't know because ...you're just not aware. So you're training for something completely different out here and you get in that mind set. How do I keep people enthralled for half an hour to forty-five minutes to one hour . Whereas (in NYC) it's like, I got to go up there after, it doesn't matter what were before me, some guy went up before me and destroyed for like eight minutes, bang bang bang bang bang. So I have to cut the shit out of my act, I gotta get every piece of fat out and make every word golden (Al, 1997).

Like New York, Los Angeles shows are longer and will have up to 20 comics doing 5-7 minutes each. A comic needs representation if s/he ever wants any serious stage time, and even then you will be bumped if anyone famous comes in and wants to do a set. I saw this happen at the Comedy Spot one night, Drew Carey's improvisation crew was on stage and other comics did not get on because they ran too long.

The principal LA clubs are the Improv on Melrose, the Laughfactory, and the Comic Strip. There are plenty of other smaller theme night cafés, bars and restaurants which offer stage time to local performers. Here however, the audience receives more of a variety show, including bands, stand-up comics, monologists, poetry readers etc. One particular show I attended to see a Canadian perform, was in a fairly up-scale restaurant. People were sitting at booths or tables eating pasta and seafood, while the show carried on in front of them. The act that played just before the comic went on stage was a band who did a song called *Beat the Bitch*, and mimed beating a woman to death on stage with a bar-stool. The song ended and the next act was immediately introduced to the stunned audience. The comic told me later that LA comics had to get used to that kind of environment if they wanted to work. They just had to deal the cards that were dealt at

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each show and make the best of it. The audiences are usually a combination of passive/aggressive, and with high expectations. If the audience is comprised of 'Industry' however (talent scouts, agents and so forth), there is also a "try-and-make-me-laugh", "I've seen it all before attitude".

5.6   Different Comedy Audiences

It is useful to return to the model here to explain what happens when a live performance intersects with any live audience. The previous section of this chapter has outlined the differences between the various regions in Canada and with the two major centres of New York and Los Angeles. In each site, a group of strangers form briefly, a sounding board for a set of performers. Depending upon how formalised the setting is, the comedian will find it easy or more difficult to establish a power structure where s/he is able to control the room. The ability to establish a power relation is dependent on the experience of the comedian, the level of comfort s/he has with the material, the familiarity of the venue, and the proximity to home. These will make it easier or more difficult to establish a successful power structure resulting in a successful show. There is a large amount of stress of 'performance' that is downloaded to the individual audience members to varying degrees, along with certain physical and mental demands.

In a club or theatre, having paid for entry, the audience members play an attentive and responsive role which should be carried out in *unison*. If everyone else around is laughing, but an individual is not, the individual will begin to feel different, or outside of the others. The same will occur if one laughs out of sync with the others and one's voice

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suddenly singles a person out. There is a certain pressure to conform - even if a joke has not been understood, or if the crowd has laughed over a punch line. Observations of crowds show confused looks, even smiles on audience members faces, and attempts to get the attention of someone nearby to fill in the missing information. The individuals queries are met with shrugs of shoulders; their friends have not understood or heard either.

At the beginning, the individual will act collectively; sitting back, sizing up the performer, returning laughter in small doses, camouflaged by the group. As they individually begin to trust and identify with the performer, they open a direct channel with the comic and the collective voice becomes background noise. Once this has happened, the individuals will be more likely to laugh aloud when others are not, double over, and continue laughing after the others have stopped. They will turn to their companions to verify if they are enjoying the event *as much as they are*. At the end, the individuals return to a collective voice when they applaud. Now again, they are one of many, and as many are able to show more appreciation than if they were alone.

Observation shows that an audience member will reject or interfere with the establishment of the necessary power structure of a show. Because of this, women and ethnic groups will have to work harder at bringing a room under their control as this action is uncommon in our culture. If an audience member wishes to disrupt the power relation s/he is able to maintain a power balance through heckling. There are passive and aggressive forms of disruptions but any disturbance is considered an affront by the performer that must be squelched. The comic must either address it and challenge the

heckler or forfeit the power position and lose the audience. As heckling is an anticipated

event, the crowd will laugh heartily at hecklers, encouraging them further. The comic

will try to embarrass the heckler to control further outbursts which is sometimes accepted

heartily by the individual but at other times creates a conflict[33]. Comedians must be

careful to not alienate the entire crowd, but subdue the individual; they are not always

successful in this.

Other venues with specialized audiences including bars, college cafeterias,

corporate shows and private functions, have a different set of power relations. Here the

audience has the upper hand, due to different circumstances of a show occurring in an

impromptu and unusual setting. Comedians must intuitively know how to handle each

situation and gain the greatest amount of control possible over each group; weaker shows

may also be measured by the comedians' inability to take control of the room. If the trust

does not build, then the ensuing benefits do not emerge. Furthermore, once a power

structure has been established, the comedian must maintain it, even with a series of

naturally occurring disruptions. Audiences are easily, but usually only temporarily,

distracted. This will happen as part of the entire event, ordering drinks, moving to allow

people to come and go, and exchanging information and laughter amongst their group.

The audiences will most times come and go (for washroom breaks, drinks, cigarettes, or

phone calls) at the end of an act or while the MC is on stage; occasionally, someone will

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There are endless stories about male comics being met after a show by an insulted
audience member which must be diffused by one or the other. A comment such as "all in
good fun sir! No hard feelings?" will do the trick, but the occasional comedian is met in
the parking lot after the show when the diffusion has not been successful. All the stories I
was told involved male comedians and male audience members.

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not be able to wait and will stand up and leave in the middle of an act. Some comics address it, others ignore it. Frequently a cell phone will go off in a club. Many comics will work it into the show by taking the call themselves on stage, or making a phone call to someone else. While maintaining the overarching focus of the majority, the comic must know how to allow audience members to individually wander (physically and mentally) as they need to, and then how to bring them back.

These two elements, the physical and the mental, are separate, but greatly influence each other in this setting. Most performance rooms are uncomfortable, cramped, smoky, un-elevated and have poor sight lines. People will be seated in very close proximity to strangers and as clubs are also bars, smoking is permitted and many are bothered by poor air circulation. In the U.S. many rooms are non-smoking rooms but this has not yet happened in Canada. Some clubs have addressed this issue by providing smoke-free shows (usually the earlier show on a weekend night) or non-smoking sections and not permitting pipe or cigar smoke. Generally, the crowds are closely seated to maximize the number of bodies, and hence the profit for a single show. This comes at the cost of the clients' comfort.

Cigarette smoke is not the only issue for comedy clubs, the temperature in the rooms, along with the number of bodies and the spotlights, create conditions that are hot in the winter and stifling in the summer. Ironically, the stage needs to be lit as a means of maintaining a focal point, yet both the comics and the audience suffer from the heat produced by the spotlights. Spotlights blind the performer and reduce most of the audience members to a black void. Comics must rely on sound for feedback, where eye

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contact is next to impossible, and will use the front row as a basis for measuring how things are going.[34] Moreover, the chairs and tables will become uncomfortable considering that the average show is between 2 - 2 1/2 hours long. The comic must realize and overcome the fact that while they are trying to watch and enjoy the show, audience members are simultaneously negotiating space, sight lines, others who compete for their attention, effects of alcohol, and general discomfort.

Even with all of the physical discomfort, that the audience members will also be subject to a certain degree of emotional discomfort as comedians will build and release stress to attain laughter. To ensure the audience members do not feel emotionally overexposed, they need to be provided both the safety of the anonymous audience, and a focal point. A dark room with a bright stage provides this. Laughter is infectious and liberating. Many audience members are surprised by the content at which they laugh, yet seem to enjoy the opportunity. Observations of audience members indicated different facial expressions attached to different reactions to humour – astonishment, surprise, recognition, concurrence, confirming, trepidation, disbelief, and delight, to name some of the most commonly observed ones.

These emotional responses may be likened to Carnival, where participants are free to revel in the hilarity of what they do not normally do. Even with the different motivations for laughter, the response remains a shared phenomenon. The reasons or emotions generating the laughter are moot; once an eruption of laughter has happened it

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The result is an inordinate amount of attention is paid to the front row audience members and this is the most difficult section of a room to seat. If the front row is empty, the comedians' ability to read the room is greatly reduced and the shows are less successful.

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will be interpreted positively -- even in the cases where it is merely a shock reflex. And what happens on stage when laughter is a result? The comedians are able to relax, a dialectic of trust builds, and they are more likely to take more risks and expose their actual identity. This is positive reinforcement for them, as they are legitimated not only as individuals, but also as comedians. If they can expose who they really are, they are able to give more to the audience in the form of truth and honesty, and have more of their core self legitimated. This has an effect: it creates a genuine feeling of shared experience, national identity and regional harmony. It does not happen at once, it happens slowly without clear boundaries, therefore it is not always measurable. After a successful show, there is a feeling of energy exuding from the audience and the performers as they make their way out. Almost immediately, groups begin to de-construct and re-structure of the event, sharing comments of who and what jokes they liked and disliked. Many continue to laugh, but this time without the protection of the darkness. Many linger, finishing drinks, trying to prolong the evening.

Audience members must not only filter all the information delivered by the performer during a show, but also their own personal links to the material and the physical environment. After a successful show where the comedians have 'zoned' and connected individually with the mass, the audience has been depleted of energy - and if you check the green room, the comics now possess the energy the audience entered with. Journal notes confirm the frequent exhaustion of the audience members compared to the 'wired' and energetic post-performance comedians. The act of comedy, the dance, is an exchange of energy. The comic's inner self will feed the energy which s/he extends to

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the audience. The audience, in return, sends equivalent amounts of enthusiasm back at the performer, until they can give no more. Beyond this exchange of momentum however, more is happening beneath the surface. Individuals are internalizing narratives and messages from other individuals. In that moment they also ignore elements or characteristics that they might have previously defined as 'other'.

The different regions across Canada (and the US) have their own regional identity which is often defined in relation to not being a part of other regions. The intuitive processes which the comics develop to undermine these differences, forge bridges by creating a shared experience. For example, a Toronto comic who performs well in Vancouver using a more politically correct character, may, for a moment, change a viewer's perception that Eastern comedians are less P.C. A Francophone comedian who performs in Ontario, but is not a separatist, may change a perception that all Québécoise want to separate from Canada. This is part of the transformative process of Mimesis3, where the reader is able to retrieve multiple-meanings from character and plot, in time. In addition to laughter and all if its benefits, comedy also shifts or maintains perceptions. It is appropriate here to revisit Ricoeur's circularity of Mimesis. Live stand-up shows in rural areas, performed by 'others' is a means of breaking down presuppositions that need to be replaced. Humorous narrative "gives form to what is unformed" (Ricoeur, 1983, 72). Unfortunately, exposure of rural areas to different types of performers is limited, due to urban presuppositions of what rural Canadians will connect with, or find amusing. This will be further explored in Chapter Six.

Comedy serves many purposes: it provides an opportunity for social commentary, political or otherwise; it creates a positive atmosphere for the viewers to be critical of the state, the system and themselves; it distracts from the mundane (sometimes by simply re-producing the mundane); it relieves tension; and, it reinforces and invalidates presuppositions and stereotypes. It is this final purpose which proves the most useful in shifting perceptions of who we are and who belongs to our group. Individuals form different levels of identity based on assumptions about that which they are not. Ignorance promotes self-definition and inclusion and exclusion based on those definitions. Comedians make use of this knowledge (or lack of it) to form connections between themselves and the audience; in doing so they deliver an enigmatic message, of the similarities and differences between 'others'. Whether the live performer comes from a different city, region, or country, they are able to position themselves as analogous with the audience and therefore break down previously held opinions about who they, and others like them, might be. They achieve this by blurring lines, crossing boundaries, and formulating new ideas of identity. By divulging multiple identities, they are able to bridge gaps between geographical and symbolic boundaries and at times, they can both succeed and fail at this task.

Comedians hide parts of themselves, fearing that certain characteristics could interfere with having a successful show. In many cases, possessing a marginalised identity, whether, biologically, socially, culturally, or geographically driven, will cause an anxiety of failure. In some instances, this trepidation will be translated into humorous narratives calling attention to the obvious, and at other times, intentionally eclipsed

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within another, more mainstream, form of identity. When the true, multiple selves are exposed, there is allowance for alternate readings of the narratives building a greater sense of national, regional and local collective identity, and providing a voice for the marginalised other. This analysis will continue in the next chapter which explores the need to continuously re-create who we are, for ourselves and for others. Comedy merely reflects this social condition.

Chapter 6: The Re-Formulation of Identity

This chapter will address the point of intersection between the comedians' Actual Identities (AI) and Performed Identities (PI). The model of Comedic Links of Identity (see Figure 3) demonstrates the AI to be hidden from view and only rarely uncloaked. The purpose of this is usually self-protection. Most comics do not, at the beginning of their careers, view their 'selves' as interesting enough to be successful on stage. They invent a character and present that personality to the audience in place of themselves. If a show does not go well, then it is the character that needs improvement, not the comic.

In everyday life, we all make use of several characters or identities, and present a selection of 'selves' suitable to particular contexts. Comedy mirrors this everyday event of communicating a 'self', waiting for a response and then adapting the presented self to improve the opportunities for acceptance. The identity will either be singular or collective. In the previous chapter, it was explained that the collective identity of the audience was quite separate from the individual identities of each audience member, yet the individual participates in the collective. If this is unsuccessful, an audience member loses the sense of belonging and feels alienated from the crowd. The comic, upon taking the stage, is separate from the audience, occupying the role of 'other' and must both recognize that this is how s/he is being viewed and work from that position. Most will attempt to align themselves with the crowd by appealing to ideas familiar to them; codes of dress or speech will be adopted to aid in this process.

As demonstrated in Figure 3, the interactions that take place during a comedic event are highly complex. The audience members are struggling to identify collectively

with strangers, and their inner selves are also driven to connect with the 'other' on stage. It is easier to connect with someone familiar (someone who is 'like' them) and from a cultural group the audience is accustomed to seeing perform. If the audience members are unable to relate to the content because it is being delivered by a performer they do not connect with, the necessary trust for a successful show will not build. In addition to not being what the audience expects, there are already many presuppositions about the group with which the performer must contend. Finally, because of tokenism, audiences rarely see the marginalised groups as 'natural' on stage. All of these elements together mean that marginalised comedians and their material are seen as 'less funny' than comedians from the dominant group. To deal with this, comedians will attempt to 'shed' any identities which will make acceptance more difficult. All of these previous elements interfere with mimesis3, transformation, as content is limited to what is thought to be suitable for a dominant audience. This is a good example of Ricoeur's circularity of mimesis, where the material becomes redundant at the cost of social transformation.

6.1 The Re-Formulation of the Self

During a comedy show, both the audience (the community) and the comic (the individual) re-formulate a sense of identity by attending to each other's utterances and sending clear messages - I am like you, you are like me, we are the same. Audience laughter signals approval (even though it might mean something other than approval at its base), groans imply disapproval, and silence denotes an uncomfortable struggle among audience members. No audience member wants to see a performer do poorly, and will

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feel guilty for not laughing. Sometimes material will not work because the PI on stage is not a suitable one for a particular group. A difficult, "try to make me laugh" audience, with "high expectations," will be more work for the comedian, but more satisfying to win over. If the barriers are too great and the individual on stage is not able to find his/her alignment with the group in front of him/her, it can be very frustrating for both the performer and the audience.

As the comic speaks, there are multiple voices - the PPI and the PAI - as well as various other forms of identity such as political (national, regional, local), ethnic, gender and, rumbling somewhere underneath, is a sexual identity[35]. Different possibilities of self-portrayal may occur in any given instance. An average person does not invest much time considering how a regional or national Canadian identity effects one's everyday experience. Comedy then, can be said to replicate the process of identity formation with which all humans struggle. Humour plays on the very same emotions which measure the level of approval. Some jokes which may offend are a means of measuring how connected and trusting the audience is; they are designed to build tension and release it. It becomes a constant negotiation with the audience: *accept me, we are the same*, even in the face of extreme dissimilarity.

Canadian audiences are accustomed to a particular type of comedian on stage, the young, Caucasian male. Canadian society, even in contemporary times with affirmative

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[35]If the performer's SI is an alternative one - it will most likely not surface onstage in Canadian performance. Of the many acts who work at comedy full time, by 1999 there were only two gay male comedians in Canada who were 'out' on stage; when my research ended there were still no women who were 'out' on stage.

action, continues to support a structure of patriarchal dominance. Therefore the audiences are comfortable with a young, white, male on stage, and struggle with granting control to a performer when s/he does not come from the dominant when group. In part this is due to the audience's demographic which even in urban centres remains predominantly 'white'; hence there is a categorisation of a different performer as 'other' by the audience members, making acceptance more difficult. Moreover, because the number of 'different' comedians appear only as a token in a show, the audiences do not develop a familiarity with 'other' (i.e. non-white/male) comedians. One of these groups is, of course, women. As outlined in Chapter One, women are supposed to be the receivers of humour not the creators. Furthermore, they are added to shows to spice them up, but must compete for the one spot available per show, for the 'other' comic, and this also creates tensions amongst the community of comedians. In the words of one female respondent, when asked what it was like to be a woman in comedy:

> ...how good is it in any business being a woman? It sucks. 9 times out of 10 and when you ask me about another woman I don't know her because they never put us on the same show. Of course not! I'm a woman, I'll never meet her or we'll never work together. So that just sucks. You know and other stuff sucks, sometimes women treat you bad(ly)...but on the other hand, there are things that are afforded to me because I'm a woman. You know, I stood out almost immediately as a great comic among women. Still kind of sucks, but for a chick I'm really good (laughing). So there was a little bit of that. But I don't think we're all bad or anything there's just not as many of us and, I wish that I was a tall white man because I think they are afforded the most respect (Julie, 1998).

This perception is shared by many others, and is acknowledged by both male and female performers. Another female comedian commented that it was not as terrible being a female comedian these days because of greater opportunities.

> What's it like being a woman in comedy? You don't really have role
> models. I think being a woman comic is good right now, I mean there's all
> these opportunities for women, and because there's none of these ten year
> veterans, it trickles down to me, and people just ahead of me and just
> behind me, because there's no one else, so we sort of get like say a guy's
> been doing it for three years, I would get more TV things or opportunities,
> or maybe a better chance of getting on (CBC) "Comics"(Mayra, 1998).

Yet with the scarcity of stage time, women may run into disgruntled male performers

who feel that these opportunities have been made available at a cost to the male

community; resentment builds. Furthermore, because only one female will be booked

per show, the competition among women is fierce.

> (E)ach show you go to especially the big shows, you always have only one
> woman comic. And never two, like they can't put two. And most of the
> time some women are much better comics than some of the guys they put
> in those shows (Claire, 1997).

Female comedians complain that there is less likelihood of improving at the same rate as

a male, due to the limitations on available stage time and travel opportunities. American

comedians complain about the influx of Canadian talent into their domain. Canadian

male performers complain that being a 'road' comic does not prepare them for the future,

for the style of comedy needed to secure television spots. Canada, nonetheless, is

posited as an excellent training ground because of its structure, and the slower pace at

which one is trained. As with all attempts in society to coordinate greater equality

between groups, there is a benefit for some, but always at a cost to another group.

Practically, it is the extent to which one feels isolated and marginalised; this actuality

goes beyond the sharp boundaries of gender and crosses over into multifarious groups.

6.2   Marginalised 'Others'

Each time a comedian prepares a narrative, s/he must consider the repercussions of the account. Just as we all do in everyday life, comics struggle with who they are (in real life and on stage), how they *fit*, if they will feel accepted, and at what cost?

'Self' development includes not only the adoption of others' attitudes, but also the "organisation of the social attitudes of the generalised other, or the social group as a whole to which [s]he belongs" (Mead, 1934, 158). How one perceives the generalised (or dominant) 'other's' impression of the 'self', confirms or transforms one's self-cognisance. Feelings of belonging are articulated through discourses on the shared experiences at local, regional and national levels. Based on imagined geographical, racial, and cultural borders, selves act in relation to their proclaimed nationality - one is typically born to a single nation and receives a national identity as a birth-right. National identity is something which, because of its discursive logic (the way our societal discourse classifies inside/outside, us/them, self/other, individual/society, subject/object) gives us a sense of austerity and reconfirm that our lives are fixed. Meanwhile, around us, "history is constantly breaking up in unpredictable ways but we, somehow, go on being the same"(Hall, 1991, 43). If we did not experience the sameness and familiarity of the everyday, the social world would be chaotic; without form or predictability. Form and predictability are the results of time; borders are protected and closed, passports become identity hallmarks and dual-citizenships allow for multiple, national identities. Any identity, national or otherwise, is labyrinthine, historically created and positioned (Hall, 1992, 57). National identity is directly linked with nation-states, and nation states

are those which organise themselves globally in relation to other nation-states. Although, less formalised and institutionalised, local and regional identities operate in much the same manner. Moreover, even though they do not receive the same attention as national forms of identity, regional and local forms of identity also locate a dominant category of 'us' and a marginalised category of 'them'.

Comedy makes use of the us/them dichotomy as shared responsive laughter confirms and legitimizes the performer, the material, and the audience, as part of a collective identity. Nonetheless, when a comic first takes the stage, s/he immediately occupies the space of an 'other' as they are usually unknown to the viewers and must break down the multiple impediments of the audiences' presuppositions in their quest for acceptance. Ironically, the audience members themselves are strangers who randomly come together and act as 'one' for a short period of time. They must first feel comfortable within their new collective identity, before they can begin to extend joint approval to the performer. Part of the difficulty that arises are the tensions between what the audience perceives the comic to be (as an 'other'), what the comic presents to the audience on stage (as a *version* of 'self'), and who the comic truly is behind the satirical 'mask'.

Urban Canadian centers are filled with a culturally heterogeneous mix of Canadians who have begun to permeate the world of Canadian stand up comedy. They bring with them an alternative identity, formed both outside and within the Canadian cultural experience. Those 'selves' who arrive in a new nation-state must negotiate the political rhetoric of recognition which formulates, in part, their identity as outsiders.

Consequently another collective identity – a marginalised one – is formed out of a diasporic position, and race and ethnicity become primary, if temporary, indicators of identity. In comedy, diasporic identities are adopted by individuals who cannot hide obvious differences, even though some of the performers are second and third generation Canadian. Moreover, 'other' identities will be adopted if there is a perceived benefit - directly connecting with the demographic of the audience, or suitability for a 'hook' or means of appearing sufficiently different from the rest (Stebbins, 1990, 45). Even with the benefits which a hook might bring, the number of hurdles increases exponentially, the more definitive the determination of the character as 'other'. If the candidate chooses to ignore the obvious categories his/her character generates, it can lead to some confusion for the audience members. As one comic explains, his audiences struggled to situate him within an appropriate category because, although he is black, he does not make reference to it when performing,

> (t)he only thing I cannot pretend to be is from the inner city. I cannot do that, it's very different for me. I can't write about that, I can't talk about that, and it's a big whammy for a lot of black artists, because they don't know how to relate to me because they are seeing this artist, he looks black, pretty sure he's black, but he's so articulate. I've had people come up after the show and go "you're so articulate, we (could) understand everything that you said"(Geoff, 1998).

Comedians who refute the general presuppositions about who they *should* be, by choosing a less common character to present, take bigger risks on stage, but offer a greater challenge to the audience members' world views. When this happens, a temporary space opens between who 'others' are supposed to be, and how they are 'read' by the viewers.

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Comedians must be perceptive of the 'identities' (political or otherwise) which are provided for them by the audiences. Although members of the dominant societal group do not question their 'ethnic essence', we are all ethnically located and we individually and collectively need to recognise that we all speak from an ethnic position which influences our subjective identity (Hall, 1992, 258). This dislocation is a consequence of a contemporary era, when people are constantly traversing geographic boundaries, and difference becomes a means of categorising both the 'self' from the 'other', and 'us' from 'them'. Nation, race and ethnicity become the points of reference to delineate these divisions and 'established others' find themselves located at the margins (Bhabha, 1990, 1990a; Hall, 1991,1992; Hooks, 1992). As a result of migration, the 'self' becomes altered by this categorisation, as well as by the physical relocation. Responding to this, the 'established others' act contrary to this definition in an attempt to open a space between who they are, and, who they are as defined by the dominant culture. Belonging or not belonging to a dominant group influences the essential 'self', yet, these 'selves' continue to obfuscate the borders of the dominant group which shift under the pressure of new groups seeking an place within those boundaries (Basch, Glick, Shiller & Szanton-Blanc, 1994; Bhabha, 1990; Hall, 1992; Mead, 1934). Comedy also advocates distinctiveness and difference, although it rewards its performers for congruence and conservativeness. Hence, the challenges in acceptance and legitimation experienced by diasporic, marginalised or politically excluded comedic selves, are far more extreme, than those who culturally correspond with the dominant world view.

From the Canadian experience, I have selected examples of three marginalised

groups, the political/cultural French-Canadian, the Ethnic, and the Female performer. All

three are based on characteristics which cannot be hidden such as an accent when

speaking or physical features. As they cannot be concealed, the performer must

acknowledge the impact that these characteristics will have on the developing character

and on the audience's initial response. These groups have begun to form a voice within

the comedy community, although they continue to struggle with who they appear to be on

stage. It is also difficult for Francophone performers to camouflage their regional identity

if they speak with a French accent. This is the case with one particular French-Canadian

performer who has successfully crossed over from French comedy into the English

market.

6.2.1   A French Canadian Performer

Sylvain Larocque remains the only Canadian performer who works successfully in

both English and French. Performing for a French audience, he is one of them; but when

in front of an English audience, he has to deal with what his name and accent represent

politically for the viewers. Some factions within Québec have sought independence from

Canada for decades. In 1995, there was a referendum held in Québec to decide upon

secession from Canada. Canadians outside of Québec are not fully informed of the

political reasons for the issue of sovereignty, rather, they interpret the Québécois as

troublesome for the Canadian nation.[36] English-speaking comics perpetuate this

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[36] For more information on this see Kenneth McRoberts, 1980, 1995, 1997.

ignorance of the Québec experience by poking fun at the province. As the only French performer to cross over in language of performance, Sylvain pioneers a movement to share the Québécois experience with English-Canada. Upon introduction, an Anglophone audience positioning the comedian as 'other' will in this case assume "he is French, he is from Québec, therefore *he* is the cause of all the problems!" Because of this, Sylvain must attempt to diffuse this tension which exists automatically in the minds of Anglophones inside and outside of Québec. He harmonizes his character with the English presuppositions of the French, yet appears amicable, non-threatening, and uninterested in the sovereignty issue. He aligns himself with the English audiences in a particular joke that explains when he was a kid, he and his friends in their small Québec town used to pretend they knew how to speak English. The only problem was their entire scope of the English language was gathered from various forms of popular culture and grouped into a series of non-sequiturs which he delivers in an English accent: "Heeyyyyyy (pause while searching for a name) Bill! Hmmm 2 out of 3 dentists recommend, de do do do de da da da,... he shoots and he scores!" He then adds the tag, "Everyone thought we were English, I used to get beat up all the time!" This narrative connects the French performer to the audience by confessing to be like them (even while suffering beatings, *liked* to be like them) in his childhood.

Using a historical political narrative, Sylvain also pokes fun at the ironic annual celebration of St. Jean Baptiste, which is celebrated every year by French-Canadians on the Plains of Abraham. His joke for English speaking audiences is: "(d)on't get me wrong folks, but isn't this where the English kicked our asses in 1759? You have all

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these French people falling down drunk and tourists walking by saying 'hey, nice historical re-enactment!"[37] His material also confirms the dominant Canadian stereotype that the province of Québec regarding its consumption of beer. He does so by explaining that he can't drive after dark -- "because I'm usually drunk by 6:00." The example of Sylvain's material demonstrates how one individual can breakdown and maintain stereotypes within the same communicative episode. Yet there are so few Francophone stand-up comedians who perform in English that there is no common Francophone voice travelling through English Canada. If we are to build strong national ties between factions of Canada, then there is a need to continue breaking down the barriers of difference between contemporary English and French Canada, and stand-up provides a means for tackling the problem of ignorance. There are no English speaking performers who journey into rural Québec in the hopes of promoting a singular shared identity and experience. Regardless of the reasons for this scarcity on English performers in French territory and vice versa, greater efforts must be made to bridge these gaps if Canada is to repair the political impairments now enmeshed in its national identity. Beyond the internal struggles of a Canadian national identity, one finds the impacts of globalization and diasporic identities on the community of Canadian comedy. The next section explores the performance experience on an ethnic identity.

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Sylvain explains that the joke does not work with a French audience. "I never got a laugh with that one, never. It's a good line, it's a good joke, it's a joke, but they don't laugh."

6.2.2 An Ethnic Performer

In comedy, slowly, more and more alternative voices are being heard. But to what degree? Do auxiliary forms of self have a positive impact on inter-racial relations? To demonstrate the realities of the ethnic performer, I have selected Allistar McAllistar, an Afro-Canadian. This section will identify how performers manage the identities provided for them by the dominant culture along with their own personal identities.

Allistar McAllistar is one of Montreal's two black comedians who regularly plays upon the black stereotype. His style includes telling long stories in a very loud voice. He links himself to his Trinidadian roots by occasionally adopting a Caribbean *patois* when he imitates his grandmother. This works because Canadians, through popular culture, have been sufficiently exposed to this accent to easily recognize it. This provides an opportunity for audience members (although they are not the primary demographic) who are from the West-Indies to be able to identify more closely with the comedian and the PI. Allistar also has frequent commentary about the treatment of Blacks in Montreal and the disadvantages which result from being associated with any minority group. In a sardonic way, his material covers the unfair treatment that his community receives from the police, including police brutality and unfair treatment leading to arrest. For example, in one riff, he states that he hopes his last words will not be: 'What was that officer?'

One of the remaining stereotypes imposed on ethnic groups is that they lack education. He challenges this stereotype by informing the audience that he is a university graduate. He does, however, take special care to inform the audience of which particular Montreal university he has graduated from – Concordia, known as the people's

university, which is very heterogeneous and liberal. He postulates Concordia as the *obvious* choice over McGill (a more conservative, 'ivy-league-style' university) which, playing on a stereotype, is more homogeneous than Concordia. His comments reflect a view that he would have been less welcome at the 'other' more prestigious university which caters to a different class level than his own.

Like Sylvain, Allistar must struggle with the obvious characteristics which set him apart. He chooses to acknowledge these differences, and is able to remind the viewers of the social difficulties which exist for his community. However, as his material is heavily dependent on stereotypes, he does not bring the audience closer to accepting him and he remains on the margins with which the majority of the audience members do not identify. The next section will continue on the theme of ethnic performers and identity but also explore another marginalised group -- women. The section begins with Martha Chaves, a comedian who is not only an 'immigrant', but also a woman.

6.2.3 Female Performers

In Canadian comedy, the status of Gender has begun to shift. The very presence of a women on stage making an audience laugh breaks down barriers, and naturalises her presence on stage. Yet it is a common complaint of female performers that they are objectified on stage and usually have to deal with varied sets of power relations which exists between different members of any crowd. This is the departure point for Martha (pronounced "Marta") Chaves.

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Originally from Nicaragua, Martha sports a thick accent which she uses to play up the character of a landed immigrant trying to get by in French Canadian society. She greets the audience with 'Ola!' playing upon their limited knowledge of the Spanish language but knowing that almost everyone will understand the greeting. This creates an initial link between her native tongue and the audience's and it also allows her to appraise the level of response from the audience. A hearty 'ola' in return, signals an openness and acceptance. She continues and discusses Québec politics including the 1995 referendum. One of the comments made by a prominent Québec political figure on the night the separatists lost the referendum by 2%, blamed the loss on the Federalist Québec inhabitants who were "ethnic" and those who had "money." Martha tells the primarily English audiences in the clubs where she performs that they have her to thank for the *No* side winning. "Well I'm ethnic and I have money!" She also informs them about her recent Canadian citizenship and dating a guy who wanted to marry her only for her health care. This plays on the dominant culture's fears that 'outsiders' infringe on the benefits of Canadianism (such as the social system) once inside the country. In another joke, she comments on the cost of living in Canada by discussing an agency which was asking for people to sponsor children in a third world country for only $5 a day. "For that price, I put my two kids on a plane back to Nicaragua!" In these two narratives she has positioned herself as no longer the outsider, but a member of the dominant culture who struggles to maintain a decent life and who must be wary of external vultures wanting to benefit from her good fortune.

Martha addresses her gender onstage, by commenting on her weight and her understanding of societal demands on women. Additionally, she discusses similarities between men from different cultures. Her narratives comment on the cross cultural expectations of women to be beautiful, young looking, a provider, and sexually available to men. But she does not give in to them, she is not a victim, she is wise to their ways and warns others. Beyond her stage character, Martha also created an all-women's show called the Revolutionary Muses, which tours between Toronto and Montreal. Martha wanted to provide additional stage time for female artists, not just stand-up comedians. Occasionally an audience has an opportunity to spend an evening with an all-woman cast, doing a variety show of various forms of humour and monologues. The audiences are usually primarily female and fully appreciate the spectacle. For my final example, I have selected another female performer whose character specifically draws attention to her gender identity, Janine Ducharme.

Janine originally began her career in Vancouver, British Columbia. Some describe her PI as angry, disappointed in men, and easily victimized. Her character also seems to be powerless, to move beyond its situation, and has reverted to drugs and alcohol to survive. This character is in part a product of comedic style from Western Canada. There is not enough stage time in Vancouver to sustain the plethora of developing west-coast comedians, so Vancouver comics find work in local bars and will work long road trips through Vancouver Island and up the BC coast. As a result of this, Western Canadian comedians tend to have a bit of an edge, which is fostered in their developmental stages as they perform for the 'bar audience'. This usually entails having

to gain and keep the attention of bar clients, usually with 'raunchy' (sexual or drug-oriented) material.

It is understandable, then, that Janine's material depicts a bitter PI because of the unfair treatment in a victimized life slowly spinning out of control. In one of her narratives, her character "finally gets a date with this guy she really likes... and then his *wife* walks in on them at the restaurant and starts screaming at her! As if it isn't bad enough to have the whole Burger King staring at them...(pauses)... now her break is over and she has to return to the fry pit." The unfolding of an increasingly deplorable situation defines the character as someone who finds affection in the arms of a married man...who spends time with her at Burger King... which is where she works. The intention is to surprise the audience with the lamentable existence of this character. In another narrative, the character walks in on her boyfriend who is in bed with another woman. The boyfriend tries to get out of it by saying, "It was an accident." She retorts, "Well aren't you the clumsy one!" Finally, again playing the victim she discusses how she lost her job stating: don't ever reply to 'good morning' with 'lick me!', and I was a damn fine teacher too... except for the kids all the time (mimicking) 'Ms. Ducharme, this is a non-smoking building!' (pauses) as if a little second-hand crack ever hurt anyone" (J. Ducharme, 1997)! Janine fits the role of an objectified, powerless, victim. She usually gets a favourable response from a variety of audiences.

This example demonstrates the choices that this comedian has made to create an acceptable stage character for a woman. Audiences are able to associate with some characters, but not with others. In this particular case, the audience will not associate

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themselves with a crack-smoking, public school teacher. The humour lies in the pathetic nature of the character, but the audience positions the character as something they are not - she is the 'low, down, dirty other' which they must avoid becoming (Schultz, 1993, 16). This character, then, perpetuates misunderstandings about what women are, and should be, yet is extremely familiar to, and accepted by the viewers. These three examples have been based on elements which cannot be obscured. The next section of this chapter looks at different forms of identity which are more easily hidden and only revealed by the comedian if s/he so chooses.

6.3   Alternate Identities

Alternate identities include any performed identities which are not a part of the mainstream (e.g. political affiliations, national, regional, and local identities, and sexual identities). Each person embodies a multiplicity of identities, although most of them will never be performed. As discussed in the previous chapters, *home* is the place where all of these identities are permitted to emerge. It is extremely difficult to identify how one relates to a variety of 'homes.' Home can be a space, a place, an environment, a feeling, and a symbolic means of representing a collective identity or belongingness. Home is,

> (t)he elision between hearth and heath, inside and outside...is produced through a succession of homely images, the fond memories of happy childhoods blurring into the nostalgic reminiscences of old age, an organic image of life and landscape now threatened by the alien presence (Cohen, 1996, 69).

In Canadian comedy, performance carries with it both the challenge to create an on-stage home, and an opportunity to return to the home-stage that has been created. The

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comedians in my sample used home to mean a variety of things: a favourite place to perform, "Ottawa is my favourite 'cause I'm *home*"(Bruce, 1997); a former place of residence, "Well, it's just, I still I think of it as my old *home* but I doubt I'll ever live there [again], but you never know" (Paul, 1998); a comfortable place, "I'm on stage and I am so at *home*"(Dennis, 1998); and, a territorial space, "in a stand up club, they're on your territory, they're in your *home*, your land, everywhere [else], you're in their land. So that's the difference. I think stags, business meetings, bars, one nighters, all of that shit is all *their* land... [the comedy club] now you're in *my* lounge" (Murray, 1998).

For comedians home becomes on stage at a comedy club; on the road with other comedians; or, off stage after a bad set. Home is linked to where they are comfortable. It is where a comic enjoys performing and has done so with enough regularity that s/he knows what to expect, regardless of its location. Nonetheless, the city or town where one has performed the most, or where one started out in the trade, is called home. Other ties to home that the research shows include: where the comics were born and still have networks or kinship ties which bind them to that site; the community of comedians with which they feel they belong; a feeling they have on stage, when they're in the *zone*; and, any comedic 'space' (i.e. a home-stage) which is constantly under threat of 'infiltration' by outsiders[38].

The emotions which are linked with home go beyond Cohen's definition of happy childhoods, grandparents, warm cookies and cold milk, and should be expanded to

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[38]
The outsiders are non-comedians, new comedians, comedians from different regions of Canada or the U.S., producers of comedy, and/or aggressive audience members.

include the frustration of youthful powerlessness, pain and dark secrets. Not everyone has fond memories of home. In my research I discovered that comedy is created by individuals who are very sensitive to the events which take place in the world around them. The ability to find humour in unhappy situations emerges from a particular awareness and reflection, possibly brought on by suffering. While in groups, comedians do not speak of this pain; they like to be thought of as fun to be around and will constantly try to keep each other amused. But on the road, in hour six of an eight hour car ride, on the third week of a tour, hidden identities become exposed.

Comedians understand the importance of stage time and the time and effort required get on stage three to four nights a week. Local comedians spend inordinate amounts of time together and are able to intuitively tell when someone is having an 'off' show or night. My research showed that many comedians are very introverted and spend much of their time away from social situations. They rarely take vacations, unless to work. They do not easily welcome people socially into their group and will arrange their seating in bars to physically exclude those who might like to drop by. They are protective of those close to them, and rarely have a *really* close friend who is not also a comic.

The ways in which the comedians relate to each other stems from the fact that who one is on stage, and who one is in the community are linked. Until a comic has generated a suitable and accepted character onstage, s/he will neither be welcomed by, nor comfortable being around the comedic community. The PI provides a means of categorization, identifies to the other comedians who the comic is, and his/her

capabilities. If the material is new, and the individual behaves ethically, through time s/he will begin to be accepted. It is at this point that the AI of the comic is on trial, but most comedians at the beginning feel less comfortable dropping the mask, and will continue to relate to the others, as if they were still on stage. This will go on for years. Once ensconced in the life of comedy, the influences of others and the environment slowly changes the habits and lifestyle of the individual. This has become apparent in my research. As one of my respondents from Montreal explained;

> (w)ho you are on stage and who you are in real life is like a 12inch ruler. At point 0, what is who you really are, at point 12, that is who you are on stage when you begin comedy. As time passes, the two different forms of identity move towards each other; after years of performing, who you really are, and who your are on stage, become increasingly the same. The person behind the character affects its nature, and will continue through out the evolving process. However, being involved in the world comedy and going on stage changes who you are as well (Victor, 1998).

Not only does the individual change personally, but the knowledge of the business and those involved is freely shared amongst friends. However, due to the individualistic nature of the Canadian comedic structure, most comics are happier to discuss the difficulties and problems other comedians have, such as "bombing"an important show, rather than the successes others might have had. This will be further explored in the Chapter Seven.

When working on the road, Canadian comedians have the opportunity to drop in on other clubs, watch other acts and catch up with comedians whom they do not see often. Yet, because the community remains fairly small, information travels very quickly, even at the national level. One comedian described his version of the community,

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I think it's small, a little bit incestuous, everybody knows what everybody else is up to. If you're anybody, in Canada then anybody else who is anyone knows, 'cause it's a small country there's not that many comics in Canada...not that many people to know. So, anybody who is doing anything that's at all worthwhile, knows... I think every comic in Canada knows every comic who's headlining. So that's really, as far as you have to get to achieve notoriety in the community, to just be a headliner (Jack, 1998).

Although almost all comedians are based in urban locations, the community has formed a small village with boundaries which cross national borders, but with very high protective walls. Even the comedians living and working is the U.S. report tight networks with comedians at home and maintain their ties with other Canadian comedians who have also relocated. Canadian comedians would all like the opportunity to work in the States, and there is a great deal of respect for those who are able to relocate successfully, meaning that they do not move back after 6 months. Moving back to the Canadian comedic lifestyle is seen as regressing.

Notoriety in Canadian comedy is based on competition. As previously mentioned, once a comic begins to headline regularly, the rest of the community becomes acquainted with him/her. Comedians alway have an opinion on the quality of another comedian's writing, his/her consistency on stage, whether s/he gets too much or too little work, and so forth. Competition among head liners increases because there are a finite number of shows that must be shared amongst the top head liners in Canada. If someone leaves Canada for the U.S. s/he leaves a space that can be filled. However, if fewer people are leaving there is fear of a glut of comics forming at the top, further reducing the value of a performer. Head liners receive the greatest amount of stage time in a typical show, and

are paid the most money. They enter the stage with a prepared crowd, spend the longest

amount of time with them, get the last word, and receive the final applause for the entire

show. These reasons maintain the coveted position, but another reason for wanting 45

minutes or more on stage is that it is during the longer sets that a comedian is more likely

to reach the *zone*. It is in the zone where the comics replenish themselves, and feast in

preparation for the possibility of a famine that could follow.

6.3.1   The Perfect Performance

Comedians speak of being able to control the audience when they are in the *zone*.

This 'zone' is a special place where they can do no wrong. Every look, every word,

every gesture fits. There is a sharpness, a clarity, to the act;

> sometimes you're in the zone when you're performing -- like your timing
> is perfect, you're having fun, you're relaxed just enough, you're nervous
> just enough. The right energy...Like one time in I was really right on it
> (finger snap), during the festival. Those shows make me really happy
> (Claire, 1998).

The performer is able to ride the waves of energy that the audience sends towards them,

control the ebb and flow, and continue to build to a climax, just like any given narrative.

This zone is a rare space, but once it is experienced by a performer, s/he will seek it in

each subsequent performance. It is here that trust builds, this time on the part of the

performer; here the PAI can begin to surface.

Sometimes, in the zone, the PAI will begin to leak through. The audience does

not always have the sophistication to know when it is happening, but it has a definite

effect on the events which follow; the shoulders and facial expressions relax and smiles

and looks of surprise leak through. The performer will slow the pace down, recline back into the space they occupy, and move more between self and character than relying on character alone. This is the reason, I believe, that comics stay in the business. Each time they go on stage they risk failure. Each time they succeed (no one succeeds 100% of the time) they learn how much more of their true selves they are able to expose, and having been loved by strangers, they in turn, love their 'selves'.

Comedians are not offered much in Canada. There is no star system, no fame, no money, no future. The industry pits them against their friends, earns a great deal of money off their labour, and offers them little in return. It is no wonder that bitterness ensues. In the meantime, many of those who have ventured South have become well-known (e.g. Jim Carrey, John Candy, Matthew Perry, and Ryan Styles). Back home, Canadians audiences will not know the names of performers who have been working for 15-20 years on the Canadian circuit. This is due to a lack of exposure outside of clubs/one nighters, such as on television. America has become the temptress offering fame, fortune, and power. When faced with the choice, many Canadians do not want to be Canadian, because in the long run, it limits their ability to work legally in the States. The next section will investigate Canadian comedians' different viewpoints on regional and national identities of home.

6.4   Identifying Home

This research with the Canadian comics uncovered that their loyalty lies with their friends and not a particular idea of space, region or country. Comedians who create

artificial identities and perform them regularly are comfortable with relocation. Their

Performed Identities and Actual Identities adapt quickly to *new* homes because their

actual home is the nomadic, oscillating polymorphic community of comedians. Canadian

comedic identity is nomadic because the transient lifestyle on the road and the

anticipation of eventual relocation to the U.S. weakens the link with a former home.

Next, it is oscillating because the community is in a constant state of flux, crossing

boundaries and borders, moving back and forth between the same sites, spiralling

outwards, around and then back, returning to the 'current' home. Finally, Canadian

comedic identity is polymorphic because as the individual becomes permanently

ensconced in this world by giving up day jobs and working almost solely on writing and

performing. As one Montreal comic phrased it, "you can take a comedian out of comedy,

but you can't take the comedy out of a comedian"(Victor, 1998).

This research demonstrates that Canadians are less likely to hold onto their

national identities in the U.S. and more likely when performing in the U.K. and Australia.

They explained the desire to shed their Canadian identity in the U.S. because the

audiences were distracted by the 'strangeness' of the comedian onstage. When asked if

he introduced himself as a Canadian when performing it the states, one comedian stated,

> no, I don't because the reaction that gets is kind of Huh? And people...in
> the States they can't get over it. I have people introduce me as Canadian,
> and it's a hurdle, a huge hurdle that I have to climb, I cannot get over it.
> It's very difficult for me, they go Canadian? He can't be that good.
> Canada? They have to think about where that is... even if I tell people
> after the show, they say where are you from originally?... (S)o I just
> pretend I am from somewhere else, and they don't know. Most people
> think that I am from the Mid West. They listen to me and they don't know.
> I drop the Oots in your boots, and I flatten my vowels, and they don't
> know (Don, 1998).

American audiences are less impressed to watch an act from 'elsewhere', and identifying

oneself as such, slows the speed of acceptance by the audience. Yet, overseas, in

commonwealth countries, historical similarities still connect the Canadian with the

British or Australian. Therefore, announcing oneself as Canadian draws on similarities

rather than differences. Personal interviews and observations showed that Canadian

audiences do not respond to 'difference' in the same way as American audiences do. In

Canada outsiders are valued and therefore, it is more interesting if you introduce yourself

as either an American or from America (not really lying, but not disclosing either), than

being introduced as a Canadian. Canadian audiences assume that if a performer is from

the States, then s/he must be good. Even if Canadian, there is a certain amount of status

if one lives in L.A. and just returns to Canada occasionally for a performance.

6.4.1   National. Regional and Local Identification

Comedians rarely mention where they are originally from, unless it is part of the

act. Instead, they ask to be introduced using their list of accomplishments (The Tonight

Show, CBC's Comics, Just For Laughs, and so forth), rather than where they are from.

When their birthplace is mentioned, it is either for a specific reason (i.e. to be used as part

of the act), or it is unexpected. For example, if a performer is originally from a rural area,

when performing rurally s/he will use it as a way of connecting with the audience.

There are differences between how comedians will affiliate themselves with the

provinces. English speaking performers are from Montreal (not Quebec), and French

speaking performers are from Quebec, not Montreal. Ontario comedians do not report

being from Ontario, they are from a particular city such as Toronto or Ottawa. Maritime performers will discuss the name of their hometown and province, most likely in an attempt to break out of the Maritime category and position themselves specifically. Westerners will be more specific about where they are from, but usually identify with their city as part of their province, especially in Alberta. Nonetheless, there is a hesitation to form one's character around a specific site, as the material would then have to suit an individual who is *from there*. The longer a comedian stays in comedy, the less likely s/he is to identify clearly with a regional or local *home*.

One of the concerns that this thesis has raised, however, is that because the structure of Canadian comedy, comedians are forced to relocate across regional divides and into urban centres. There are certain gaps that have formed due to the magnitude and direction of the flow of performers, humorous material (recorded comedy) coming in and out of regions and nations. There are disparities which form due to the structures (number of comedy clubs in region, number of shows per year, who books the shows, what they pay, the laws prohibiting Canadians from working in the U.S. and encouraging American performers to work in Canada). In addition, in Canada there are areas which do not receive the live English comedic experience in regular doses, if at all, such as Quebec, the Maritimes, the North and the Eastern prairie provinces.

There is an assumption that the live performance can benefit the viewers by building community, broadening perspectives and chipping away at misconceptions of other regions of Canada and their people. The independent clubs provide an alternative style of comedy, but in Western Canada, only YukYuks style of humour is available.

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Yuk Yuks does not have a club in Montreal, and the independent, English clubs are forging an English identity in a sea of French, without venturing deeper into Quebec. Finally, there is a talent-drain from the Maritimes and rural areas, into urban centres, and, of course, from Canada into the U.S.

Once a comic has left home, s/he is not only unlikely to return, but even more likely to ignore any contributions that home might have made to his/her development. Because of the bitterness that ensues from a system which restricts them (where they can work, when and for what pay), when they leave Canada, they leave their Canadian identity with it, as it will not help them succeed. If we to support our performers more consistently with access to venues, audiences, and regular media features, the talent drain into the US, where it is 'discovered' and packaged for resale back to us, will decrease, and development of our own distinctive voices for global recognition will begin.

6.5   Ricoeur and the Re-formulation of Identity

This chapter has covered a variety of types of Canadian comedians who are usually located at the margins. Ricoeur's circularity of mimesis clearly explains that in narrative there can be a violence of interpretation which interferes with the transformative nature of mimesis. However this is not always negative as alternative readings of a narrative may cause a stronger connection between speaker and listener. Because the producers of comedy tend to book shows of predominantly urban-white-males, the audiences learn to expect those types of performers.

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The importance of the links of identity (as shown in Figure 3), has already been stated earlier in this thesis. The opportunity for transformation is greater when connections are made between the PAI and the AAI. The conditions which favour these bonds include trust, shared cultural knowledge and narratives. When marginal identities are impossible to hide (e.g. skin colour, accent, body shape, gender) a presumption is made by the audience that there is less shared cultural knowledge than with someone who is 'more like them'. The performers must work harder to bridge those gaps in order to have a successful show. If a marginal identity is easily disguised (e.g. religious belief, regional or national identity, sexual preference), it is most often 'shed' by the performer, which moves them away from exposing the PAI, but is sees as a worthwhile tradeoff.

There is a possibility of these hidden identities to be exposed to audience members who are sensitive to particular signals. Jewellery, Tattoos, 'codeswitching', body language, and style of dress are some of the techniques used to 'signal' particular hidden identities. For those who do receive and decode the signals, the possibility of the PAI linking with the AAI, intensifies, but not for the collective audience, rather, only particular individuals within it.

The next and final chapter summarises the findings of the previous pages and this research. It is here that we return to the question "why are they laughing" and attempt to reposition it in relation to identity, which is the title of this thesis. The chapter also echoes the 'dance' known as comedy and examines not only who Canadian comedians are, but who they *become* after involvement with this form of entertainment. Finally, the social, cultural and spatial processes, which are responsible for attributing meaning to self

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identity are explored through the conflict which arises between who one is for oneself and who one is for others.

Chapter 7: Concluding Remarks - Call-backs, Tag-lines, and the Big Finish.

Looking back on the development of this thesis, I can recollect the grey winter morning, while I was out for a run in Montreal, that changed the topic of my dissertation. While I had been at work at the comedy club the night before, I was amazed by the differences between the two shows of the evening. The acts were identical for both shows, but the contrast between audience response for each show was astounding. I had observed that the second show of a night was more successful than the first and I wondered which variables could be responsible for the variation between them. How was it that the same comedian could die in one show and kill during the next? I had already observed that a later crowd, which arrived about 11:00pm for an 11:30 show, seemed to be more boisterous, drank and smoked more, and appeared to respond more favourably to *all* acts compared with the crowd arriving for the early show. Furthermore, regardless of the hour, it appeared that comedians were nervous and excited before *every* show. If the crowd seemed affable, they were eager to get on stage and build the energy; if the crowd was more challenging, the comedians were eager to win them over. I began to see the comedic event as a 'dance' that engaged the performer and the audience member. The research would uncover the steps, routines, and repercussions of each particular dance and the overarching meta-dance of comedy. This dance or exchange between participants was found to fix the roles and behaviour for both sides as well as negotiate power and control, different forms of identity, and a sense of belonging. The strength of this negotiation lies in the expectations and atmosphere surrounding the event – humour

requires and builds trust. Successful comedy provides an opportunity for unfixing set ideas and providing alternate explanations of the world around us.

While considering comedy a series of questions arose: why are people attracted to comedy; is there any value in the cultural form of comedic entertainment; are there differences between audiences across Canada; what happens when people become involved in a comedic event; and, how do performers achieve success and avoid failure? All of these questions may be represented in part by the principal title of this thesis "why are they laughing?" Why are comedians laughing? The research demonstrates that the structure of the Canadian system devalues their comedic ability and social impact making them feel lucky to earn anything at all for providing this necessary service. Why are the producers of comedy laughing? The research shows that owners and managers hold the reins to an incredibly profitable industry with very little overhead costs. Why are the audiences laughing? The findings confirm that audience members are provided a rare opportunity to participate in a live event, examine who they are, and feel a part of something, all in an enjoyable way.

This thesis has been concerned with a complex arrangement of regional forms of identity set within the context of humour. I define humour as a temporary pleasant emotional connection which is transmitted via a mode of expression or form of narrative. In order for humour to be shared it must be understood by the participants indicating some common cultural knowledge. I also understand humour as a technique used to attract, maintain or diffuse attention; accentuate or abate an idea; encourage retention or recollection of a concept; and, relieve stress. It is for these reasons that humour is a part

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of many productions such as a film, theatre, monologues, music, television, radio and advertising. Humour is found in every facet of society: between strangers, acquaintances, friends and family; at work or social events; and is found in relation to elements of surprise and awkward moments. Its emotional product and barometer of success is laughter – and *shared* laughter connects individuals and promotes a sense of inclusion. Laughter, however, may also be cruel and exclusionary – laughing *at* someone excludes him or her from the group and accentuates the 'otherness' of a subject. Nonetheless, whether laughing with, or laughing at, the instigator or creator of humour occupies a powerful social position in Western society.

Stand-up comedy is a formalisation of the humorous process, ensconced in an acceptable entertaining design – the performance. Yet, as a form of entertainment, comedy remains distinct from other forms of enjoyment such as television, film, and sporting events. As a live event, compared with other forms of live performance such as theatre, music, improvisation, and live sport, it stands alone. In the other examples, the audiences' attention is diffused among multiple performers who simultaneously occupy the stage. However, the lone stand-up performer must write, direct, produce, edit and perform each show, on his or her own. In the end, s/he is singularly responsible for the success or failure of each spectacle.

Generally, the research has disclosed a few general findings: the first involves a descriptive account of the contemporary Canadian comedian; the second, explores the processes, participants and structures involved in the 'dance' known as a comedic event; and the third argues that the multifarious processes of stand-up comedy cause tension or

conflict between who the individual is, or would like to be, and the expectations that are placed on the individual by others around. This research holds that this conflict may be reduced to a duality of love/hate, which interferes with a performer's and/or an audience member's sense of self, shifting it at times, temporarily or even permanently. Finally, the model discussed in the second chapter, developed to assist in visualizing the theoretical interface of identity between self and other, may be applied to other forms of live performance and everyday experience. The next sections of this chapter will explain in greater detail the findings and conclusions of this thesis. The first section looks at the specific Canadian experience: who the comedians need to be, why they are drawn to comedy, why they stay or leave, who they become and what it means to them. The second section explores the spatial, political and cultural processes, and uncovers the individual, social and cultural impacts of the comedic event. The third section of this chapter exposes the tensions which result from the challenges of comedy and explains the conflict as a duality of love/hate. This duality is applicable to almost every aspect of comedy yet also reflects everyday social experiences between interacting individuals. The fourth section suggest where some of these applications may be made in other areas of performance or everyday life while the fifth section predicts and comments on the future of Canadian comedy.

7.1   Who are the Canadian Comedians?

I was amazed by the level of personal risk that each performer subjects his/herself to onstage and wondered if there were traceable patterns in the personality type that was

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drawn to this profession. There is a stereotype that comedians are unhappy individuals who derive humour from previous painful experiences. While this research has discussed the difficulties encountered by comedians who wish to succeed at comedy, most comedians eventually adapt to the lifestyle or leave. There is a great deal of variation between the personalities of the individual performers and this research does not support the premise that comedians are 'unhappy' individuals.[39] Rather, it concludes that the individuals who are drawn to comedy are generally *sensitive* to phenomena around them. This sensitivity recognises how individuals and groups respond directly to the performer and evokes a desire to generate a favourable response. Laughter is the measure of positive feedback. Comedians possess a curiosity about the world around them and a tendency to be cognisant of events which impact society. Awareness of current issues is beneficial to developing new material, and consequently, imperative for a performer to respond to what is popular. This need increases as a comedian begins to age and must continue to relate to younger crowds. Most audience members are between the ages of 18-35 (Jim, 1999).

Nonetheless, simply breaking down a stereotype about comedians does not explain the complexities of who they are publically or privately. The performer is drawn to the world of comedy and may stay (stay in the business, stay in Canada, stay Canadian) or may leave (leave home, leave comedy, leave Canada). Staying and leaving are

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As the method did not provide a reasonable means of measuring this proposition, these findings are speculative. The application of psychological theories would be useful for investigating a relationship between personality type and field of work.

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sometimes physical manifestations of choices, and other times are ephemeral, imagined

concepts of belonging. Either way, participating in the event of comedy, even for a short

while, forever changes all the individuals involved. The next section explores this shift in

identity for the Canadian performer.

7.1.1 Shifting Identities

Many comedians revealed that they had little control over whether or not they

stayed in comedy; for some, their choice of occupation was even unexplainable. Some

invested so much in the early stages of their career, that they could not imagine giving it

all up, especially after struggling for so long,

> ...comedy is a cycle, you start doing it for fun, then you get excited, you
> know you can do it, so you want to be good at it, and you become involved
> in it, and then at a certain point, Boom! You've been doing it for a couple
> of years, you look back, and you say it's too late to give up, I've got to
> keep going. You still like it, not like I want to give up or anything, but I'm
> 31 now, I don't want to start a new career, this is going well, and I just
> want to keep doing it for the rest of my life. It's a great job (Paul, 1998).

Comedy begins as a pleasurable pastime to delve into occasionally, and when things go

well the reward is immediate adoration. Then, one day, someone offers a comedian a

small sum of money for a short performance and suddenly s/he realises the monetary

value of comedic narrative and becomes a legitimate entertainer. Concurrently there is an

awareness that many other people are paid great sums of money to produce humour, and

the hope builds that one day, s/he too will make it. Nonetheless, most comedians report

that if there were no money involved, they would still perform (to some degree), and even

if they moved on into other careers, they would want to continue doing stand-up. Many

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felt fortunate that they were able to earn a living (even a meagre one) doing what they loved,

> the basic fundamental reason for staying in comedy is that there's nothing
> like making a hundred or three hundred or a thousand people laugh.
> There's nothing like that and that will always be a good enough
> reason...(to) keep me doing it. Even if I stop getting booked for corporate
> gigs or booked for anything that makes me any kind of money, that will be
> the reason why I continue to go down to the clubs and do 5 minute sets
> every week. Regardless of the money, I will always do that (Jack, 1998).

Most comedians reported a similar viewpoint. They loved what they did and could not

believe they were able to earn a living at it, however, comedians are used to their work

being undervalued and unappreciated. Nonetheless, even though they receive little for

their line of work in the form of respect or remuneration, comedians still report feeling

fortunate to earn a living doing what they love. In fact, it explains in part why they are

laughing,

> one of the appeals of comedy (was that) I could live in an alternate
> universe of sorts, or parallel I should say. You know I could live amongst
> the people but I didn't have to do what they did, I could drink in the
> afternoon if I wanted...I felt I was having a laugh on the rest of the world,
> and that helped me feel better – that fact that I was so clever at figuring out
> a different way to live (Bryan, 1998).

While Canadian comedians enjoyed escaping the mundane nine-to-five lifestyle, most did

not reflect on the benefits comedy has for society although they did agree that laughter

was a necessary part of life. While they were frustrated by the financial struggle and the

amount of time on the road, there was a common report that they could no longer imagine

doing anything else for a living. This ambivalence towards money suggests that there are

additional benefits to being a comedian: they are the centre of attention before, during and

following the show; they gain respect from peers and producers; and, they absorb the approving energy of the audience members as they respond favourably to the material and the performer. Moreover, outside of the sphere of performance, when they tell people what they do for a living, peoples eyes light up. The profession is rife with positive energy from everyone around. "Go on, tell us a joke!" is the first thing a comedian hears when introduced.

Yet not all attention is positive. As with other specialized professions (e.g. doctors, lawyers, etc.) others continue to have an expectation of a comedian's personality and behaviour even off-stage. I observed the 'gaze' of others who looked to comedians with anticipation, keenly hanging onto every word – waiting to be entertained. Post-show audience members would crowd around the performers, hoping to continue the exchange on an individual level with any one performer. Comedians were almost always gracious and would politely listen to suggestions for new jokes or tag-lines, but felt uncomfortable during these off-stage exchanges. Nonetheless, the attention and admiration confirmed for the performers that they had indeed made an impression and they appreciated the effort when an audience member took a moment to politely comment on how much they had enjoyed the show. The instant gratification and recognition is one of the principal reasons for staying in the business, but one of the greater pulls comes from the certainty of success, or the emotional and psychological effects of a successful show. Comedians yearn for the highly addictive feeling of elation which follows an extremely *focussed* comedic event, known as the *zone*.

The *zone* was acknowledged by all respondents but was not well articulated. The research shows that it is a highly personal and subjective experience which does not happen with any regularity. When the performer has an extremely successful show and possibly enters the zone, depending upon the intensity, s/he can ride the waves of the success, for days, weeks or even months following. Due to the continual risk of rejection by any audience, *any* positive response acts as a confirmation that the performer is a capable writer, performer and director of comedy. If the comedian is able to please a group of strangers quickly, it confirms that s/he is good; if this is achieved in a consistent fashion, then s/he is great. Nonetheless, there are unsuccessful shows, and unsuccessful comedians. The performer needs to make peace with the former and accept that some things do not work in all cases; yet it is the fear of the latter which maintains a continued sense of insecurity (which must be repeatedly beaten back with successful shows), as no comedian wishes to wake up one morning to discover that they are simply not good *enough* at what they do.

Comedians explain that due to the lifestyle one has to adopt in order to succeed in the business (road touring, late nights, little money), comedy interferes with a typical lifestyle including jobs and scholastic goals;

> This is all I do, that this is all I am. I'm now at the point where I'm 33, and I've been doing comedy longer for than half my life and it's the only thing I have ever done. I've never had a job of any sort that was not related to show business or comedy; I've never done anything else. It's almost like I have no choice (Bryan, 1998).

According to my sample, Canadian comedians are a collection of specialised artists who are unable to fully enjoy working in any other occupation. If they do not achieve their

dreams, they have little else to fall back on. I asked the 'what-if things don't work out?' question of comedians, and the response disclosed a philosophical work ethic held by many: if a comedian does not put everything s/he has into comedy, then the chance of success diminishes. A comedian must be vulnerable and committed to comedy it in order to be creative. This catch-22 forms a circular trap and further marginalises the comic; s/he must seek eventual success, but can never truly know it will happen. Canadian comedians internalize the argument, that because so few 'make it 'in the business, the chances of their own success are slim. The result is an industry which takes advantage of what each individual is willing to sacrifice, and profits greatly from their cheap labour.[40] At the outset of a career, a Canadian comic is eager to please but a great deal of comedians become bitter when they recognise that their efforts are for naught. Observation from this research produced a profile of a performer of comedy. A Canadian comedian is: eager; cynical; sharp; transient; loyal; daring; a seducer; a conqueror; a struggling artist; an unsatisfied labourer; and, at odds with humanity. I will elaborate on each one of these characteristics which connote the disposition of the contemporary Canadian stand up comic.

7.1.2   Who Do Comedians Become?

Eagerness is found in young comics who enjoy performing, dream of succeeding, and wish to become accepted by the other comedians. Craving stage-time, comics in the early stages of a career will work for free, have lower expectations, capitulate to more

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[40] This is true of many other types of performance: art, drama, music, etc.

experienced comedians and avoid making enemies. As experience is gained, comedians become increasingly disappointed with the politics of the business, the audiences and the travel. They grow to understand the limitations which are imposed on them in Canada, including the lack of performance opportunities, the low wages, the 'ceiling' and the lack of a star-system. They fatigue from the lack of respect they receive, and become drained from the constant need to be better than the next guy. The more experienced comedian has a greater likelihood of suffering from cynicism, frustration, depression and self-doubt. A question forms: is an individual attracted to comedy because s/he is unhappy, or does the organisation of comedy make comedians unhappy? This research demonstrates that the structure of Canadian comedy plays an important role in the level of happiness or bitterness of the individual but cannot make a certain claim one way or the other. As previously stated, comedians were found to be more sensitive, which sometimes affected mood, but there was no evidence that comedians are unhappy people by nature. There is, however, plenty of evidence that the working conditions, the individualistic nature of the business, and the lack of respect may cause unhappiness for comedians. Nonetheless, the research at this stage is insufficient for any certainty. One way of the comedians cope with the marginalised lifestyle and the obstacles presented by the industry is to bond together in an 'us' (the performers) against 'them' (the producers of comedy) fashion.

Once a part of the world of comedy, comedians tend to spend a greater amount of time with comedians than with non-comedians. This over exposure to their peers, consistently exercises one's 'wit' as material is truly funny if it makes another comedian laugh. Loyalty is a byproduct of the transient lifestyle as Comedians are either coming

from and going to somewhere else. Canadian comics constantly revise a personal sense of home which directly linked to the community of comedians with which they associate. For comedians working in Canada 'home' is defined regionally or locally; for those working in the U.S. it is demarcated by national identification with others. Fidelity is not only associated with other members of the community, but it is also tied to a comedian's stage character and jokes. Most comedians discuss the pain and disgust they feel when they find themselves in positions where, in order to make a show work, they need to be unfaithful to who they are - onstage or off. They refer to these situations as 'selling out'.[41]

The temerity of a comedic performer is visible every time s/he performs; comedians are risk-takers and thrill seekers. Once they have chosen to work full-time at comedy and given up secure income, many facets of their lives become a gamble. They do not seem to mind this, however, as they develop tools through time to seduce audiences, slowly win over their trust, and then once established, move in for the 'kill'.[42] Everything about the comedic performance involves a power struggle between the entertainer and the audience. In short, the audiences want to be entertained and the performers want to be appreciated, but neither want to lose control over the situation. The comedian's device is the joke, and the audience's instrument is laughter. The joke begins with a premise and then, over time and by an iterative process, becomes a standard

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The most frequent example is playing in bars or difficult gigs, where they need to pull out the *blue* material because that is what the audience will respond to.
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The language the comedians use to describe success or failure pertains to an ultimate defeat: Comics *kill, slay, destroy, bring the roof down* and, *die.*

part of a set. Eventually, most jokes get retired and replaced with new ones, but even then, they remain in reserve and can be called upon at any suitable moment to fill a gap. The comedic creator is indeed a struggling artist, as appreciation for their form of art is limited. Yet, like a dance performance, each joke is but one movement within the entire creation, and, if chosen, may be repeated with precision each time, or, revised and altered depending upon the context. In the case of comedic performance, the dance is adapted to the demands and expectations of the audience.

7.1.3   Why do Comedians Leave?

Leaving in comedy rarely means leaving the performance, and usually means leaving home to work in another city, leaving on road trips frequently, or leaving Canada to work in the U.S. Performing is like a drug and comedians are left unsatisfied, craving more. In Canada the comedians seek their stage experience in all venues and regions. On the road, the drive is long, accommodations and pay deplorable, and audiences unappreciative. They are drawn to the American market because the average comedian can work twice nightly, six or seven nights a week without having to drive for more than two hours. Only those with the working papers for the U.S. have access to this lifestyle, and once the skills have been acquired, many move on from New York, to L.A., where the stage-time diminishes in frequency but increases in importance (for being *seen*). This exclusion from the American market leaves the majority of Canadians working in and across Canada, seeking performance space, and trying to scrape together enough of a living to make it to the next show. They will continue in this fashion for years. Most of

my respondents had been working solely at stand-up for at least 8 years, and before successfully moving down to the states, most comics have ten years experience or more. Many Canadian comedians who cannot break into the American system end up feeling underpaid and unappreciated, and the political nature of the industry and the need to fight for every achievement germinates frustration and enmity.

The Canadian comedic community is comprised primarily of urban, white, English speaking males, although this is starting to slowly change. Different voices are beginning to take the stage and expand the range of humour. Regardless of the cultural background, comedians are at odds with humanity. Whether it is a characteristic they arrive with or develop after is unknown, but their need to find humorous material requires looking at the world in a different light. There is a constant re-evaluation of the common, seeking the humour within. In doing so, comedians form opinions about the absurdity of humanity and society, and then attempt to relate the humour back to their stage characters (or the character of someone they know). Furthermore, people around them constantly expect them to be funny, creating a tension between who they are in real life, and who 'others' are expecting them to be (their stage persona). This research has demonstrated that the longer comedians spend in the world of comedy, the less likely they are to see themselves as a part of the social realm.

The audiences they perform to represent 'society,' as well as those that need to be seduced and then conquered. The experiences and values of the audience constitute the platform upon which humour is developed. There is a need for comedians to understand society, seduce and conquer its members, but no desire to become either a greater part of

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society or like the audience members. What results is the 'dance' between the performer and the audience, one role does not exist without the presence of the other, but at the conclusion of the performance, one or the other will have surrendered. By definition, the successful event finds the audience capitulating to the performer. However, every time a performer steps on stage, s/he must be ready to adapt to the expectations of each audience in order to succeed.

7.2   The Spatial, Political and Cultural Processes of Comedy

Comedy is a dance between the performer and the audience; between the sense of self and the sense of how others perceive the self, and this dance has spatial, political and cultural components. Spatial components include the physical set-up of the comedic event with the performer placed front and centre, on stage with bright lights. The audience remains in the dark, unable to be seen by the performer, and yet is a full participant in the experience. Also, on a broader scale, geographical location implies spatial arrangement and acknowledgment around sense of home and belongingness. Political elements embody the formal or informal rules which govern the opportunities of each comedian. These consist of loyalties to organisations, managers and agents; informally imposed ethics between peers; and, national roadblocks. Loyalties to organisations is the acknowledgement that exclusion from some production bodies can greatly limit a career. They will also attempt to form alliances with production agencies in the U.S. who might sponsor them and maintain ties with comedians now living to the south who might also provide connections. Culturally, the event requires shared cultural

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knowledge, values, and norms. Without this base, there is no collective laughter. Comedians struggle between humour which appeals at 'home' and that which is more universal. Universal humour is possible, but does not achieve the same stomach-grabbing doubled-over result that local humour can provide. The comedians must negotiate with each audience on a cultural level.

What happens when these worlds are brought together – socially; culturally; individually? My observations confirmed that there are social benefits to comedic entertainment. Some of these include a sense of belonging, sharing, and building of communal identity at local, regional and national levels. Laughter through entertainment relieves stress and distracts from the banal. Shared laughter confirms collective beliefs and value systems, and/or at times, calls shared systems of belief into question. Individual audience members will unconsciously mimic the response of the crowd although s/he might occasionally resist laughing at something they find personally unamusing. Alternately, an audience member may laugh uncontrollably, when no one around is laughing. Trust plays a key role here and if trust has been sufficiently built between the performers and the audience members, the audience may laugh at material which normally it might not. Either way, the comedic event has an impact on the participants, if only temporarily. In the case of the performer, the Performer's Performed (or public) Identity (PPI) is the only offered self, but in a case where trust has built, the Performer's Actual Identity (PAI) might become exposed. This can be seen as a form of 'leakage', where the performer briefly steps out of character by losing control of his/her expression – smiling, smirking, grimacing, laughing – and then regains control of

expression and returns to character. If some part of this leakage works positively, that area of the PAI is deemed acceptable within the confines of the character by the audience and the exposed element may be added to the persona of the stage character. This is how the stage character becomes closer to who the individual performer actually is; the audiences coax out the PAI slowly, but definitely, over the years.

The Audience's Actual Identity (AAI) is also tucked away behind the Audience's Response (or collective) Identity (ARI). The response identity is a collective one, but occasionally, a connection will be made between the audience member's actual identity and the material being delivered by the performer. It is in these moments that the individual audience member may begin to challenge his/her own ideological positions, by taking things less seriously, or by recognising the narrowness of a viewpoint. This interaction between audiences and performers has a direct implication on the individual's sense of self. This may be progressive (i.e. breaking down a stereotype) or bromidic (i.e. confirming a stereotype) by changing or maintaining the status-quo, but the fascinating element is the insidious nature of this event. Because it happens within a humorous context and because people are not expected to take anything seriously, alternative viewpoints are heard and confirmed. It is simply the matter of degree to which one is influenced and changed by the process.

7.2.1 The Canadian Dance

Is there a distinct Canadian 'dance'? Yes, it is comprised of the structure of comedy, the politics of the system, the venue, the individual style of performance, the

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differences between regions, and the conservative nature of Canadian audiences. Canadian comedians see all aspects of their identity as malleable. Just as they will take on a characteristic for stage, they will also freely drop distinguishing elements if they feel it is necessary. If they possess a national, regional or local identity which is viewed as beneficial, they will expose it. If it is not advantageous, they will shed it. Nonetheless, there are differences between the performance styles of Canadian comedians compared to American styles. The American performance tends to be aggressive, physical, and (over)confident. Canadian performance tends to be low-key, odd, interactive, and insecure. As one comedian stated, an American approach insinuates a tone of: "You wanna know what's funny? I'll tell you what's funny!" versus the Canadian approach of: "You know what? I think this is kind of funny, do you think its funny to" (Helen, 1997)? The Canadian style is necessarily different because Canadians identify with not being American. This view is articulated by one comedian who had been performing for almost twenty years,

> Well, I think Canada is a great place to live, and I think that it's a free country, so you have access to all forms of art and communications, and we do have the advantage of being not in the States. The States is a real melting pot, a real rat race, we are sort of on the sidelines looking in...Sometimes it amazes Americans, and I hang out with American comics, that we know so much about America, that always freaks them out. They, are enamoured of our laid-back style. We're laid back and we're not kind of California laid-back, we've got a real easy-going sense about ourselves, we're very unaffected by what we do, for the most part we don't have the kind of egos that dictate that we must be noticed and acknowledged and pampered, and that always takes them a little by surprise. It charms them for the most part, and that's the Canadian way...Canadians have a perception, not only about the States, but of themselves, their relationship with the States, so that's why the punch line always works, because we can laugh at the Americans and ourselves. There are certain ones where we are the punch line, certain ones where the

Americans are the punch line, and you know, one always works (Richard, 1998).

The relationship between the two countries for comedians is a continual source of frustration. They want to share the benefits of a large market for comedy, yet they do not want to buy into the identity of being American. The humour based around America includes brash, out-of-control, violent neighbours to the south, that Canadians love to feel superior to, feel threatened by, and yet, remain in awe of. On the one hand Canadians love the protection they receive by bordering on a world superpower, and love to contrast themselves with Americans. On the other had, Canadians recognise that in reality, there are few differences between the two countries and fear becoming that which they make fun of. This is further complicated as Canadians share a cultural love/hate of Americans and want to feel superior to them, yet recognise that their own national identity is poorly formed and extremely fragile in relation to a robust American national identity. Making fun of Americans separates the two countries, creating feelings of a shared identity which includes some and excludes others. Canadian national identity is in part based on this love/hate relationship with the U.S. Comedians share this identity and must rationalise why they are drawn to the south, to Hollywood, and the ultimate fame which it promises. This analogy can be stretched much further in explaining the regional identities in Canada and stand-up comedy acts as a measure of our cultural barometer. If laughter relieves tension, it is because there is a tension or conflict in the first place. Comedic content is written to play upon such tensions and offers an alternate vision of society – a lighter, more playful vision. Regional tensions between Canada are built upon similar assumptions of who 'others' are in relations to the 'self'. The need to live in a predictable

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social milieu predicates divisive behaviour – separation of 'us' from 'them'. Canadian comedy also fosters an atmosphere which demarcates clear boundaries between different levels and types of comedians, and a variety of non-comedians (including audience members, the general public and producers of comedy). A natural tension exists between those who are included and those who do not fit.

7.3   Tension and Conflict in Identity

7.3.1   Love and Hate

Comedy brings together a series of elements which are also reflective of everyday life. As with the tension between Canadian and American national identities, adopting an identity or playing a particular role has its own benefits and drawbacks. Comedians both love and hate all the general elements of comedy: going on stage, peers, material, travelling, audiences, lifestyle, and characters. Comedians simultaneously love going onstage and dread it; they are fiercely loyal to their friends and want them to succeed but do not like others to succeed before they do themselves. Many comedians maintain friendly exchanges with other comedians or producers of comedy even if they neither respect nor like them, because it is politically advantageous. Comedians are extremely proud of most of their material, the tried and true jokes, but at the same time, they tire of performing the same material over and over, and feel that their character limits the material they can use. Comedians like to travel and know going on the road provides opportunities to refine their set, gather new experiences which may relate to material,

spend time with comedians and audiences outside of their usual performance area, and reduces the chance of overexposure at home. However, the gruelling nature of road trips including long journeys to venues, poor reception from audiences, unfriendly local comedians, and just enough money to break even, detracts from the benefits. The lifestyle of comedy, the late nights, drinking, smoking, rising late, having just enough to get by has a certain appeal to the younger comedians, but it loses its appeal as the years pass. The schedule and the road trips make regular life (relationships and families) difficult to fit in. Comedians who have to go on the road, resent the time away from their children and partners. Nonetheless, some of the stress of being away from loved ones and home is relieved by the positive energy received from an encouraging audience. When the comedian is able to win over an audience, s/he experiences a sense of fulfilment and receives instant love. When things do not go as well, the comedians only have each other, as their family and friends are neither nearby, nor really even capable of understanding the complexity of emotions they experience in relation to their work. For this reason, comedians both love and hate audiences, because they understand the ultimate power the group of strangers hold over the performance. Finally, comedians both love and hate their characters. This includes the PPI and the PAI which are in constant opposition and combine to form the complete identity of the performer. The sole performer is fully responsible for every show. If s/he is unable to pull something off that should have been easily done, the result is feelings of self-doubt, confusion and frustration. If s/he is able to make something happen when they need to, this results in feelings of elation, empowerment, and assurance. This constant struggle between love and hate challenges a

comedian's reasons for staying and reaffirms the desire to continue. It is through performing and re-presenting material that they have written for a chosen character, that changes over time, who they are off-stage.

This is in keeping with Ricoeur's explanation that the narrative *makes* the individual. The choices of which elements to portray to the audience is both related to who the comedian actually is, and who the audience expects him/her to be. Audience members act collectively during a performance, but in doing so may also stretch the boundaries of who they are, to feel included in the experience. There is a great deal of stress at this moment, as the natural tensions that exist between who we are and who we are perceived by others, is called to attention during the live show, and released by laughter. Comedy is useful, but it can also be meaningful. Ricoeur has offered us the hermeneutical tools to explain the dance between exchanged universal narratives (Ricoeur, 1984 28). However, it is necessary to look beyond the individual 'self' and towards the collective 'selves' which form out of a comedic exchange. Comedy has a positive and negative impact on society. On the one hand, it takes risks which could be ultimately damaging to groups or individuals it addresses by maintaining stereotypes or even creating new negative representations of the marginalised. On the other hand, comedy creates a positive atmosphere for viewers to be critical of the state, the system and themselves; distracts from the mediocrity (sometimes by simply re-producing the mundane); relieves tension; and, concurrently reinforces and invalidates presuppositions and stereotypes.

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7.3.2 The Comedically Deprived

Canadian comedic demographics influences the type of comedy that is performed and the underlying ideology driving the humour. Cultural and Political forms of identity create various levels of inclusion and exclusion. Beyond the national identity, perceptions of regional differences affect how persons from other places are received; in some instances, not too kindly. Furthermore, there are regions in Canada which see much less live comedy than others, and therefore have less exposure to a different vision than others. We may call this the comedic divide. In Canada, the comedic divide is split between urban and rural and the progressive and regressive impacts of live comedic performance are restricted to those areas which receive regular exposure. This research uncovered some of the comedically deprived areas of English comedy in Canada: the Maritimes, French Quebec, the Prairies and the North. This means that Ontario and the West not only produce the majority of comedians who perform, but are exposed to the performances in greater numbers and more appropriate settings. Therefore the statement that Canadian comedy is a complex set of interactions, moving across space, involving cultural knowledge, and impacting on all parties who participate in any comedic event, is a greater truth for urban centres than rural, and for certain provinces. Comedy on television does reach these other provinces, but has been shown through the course of this research to lack the necessary elements of communication which evoke social change. Other forms of social interaction influence individual and collective identity, but it is the live event which has the greatest and most immediate impact on behaviour. Because laughter is seen as pleasurable and positive, the participants arrive with a greater

openness to alternative world views – partly because it is simply 'entertainment' and partly because they may seek refuge within a performed identity or a response identity, without needing to expose the true self. The next section suggests other areas of study which may be applied to this research.

7.4   Suggested Approaches and Applications.

This project was limited to stand-up in order to simplify the approach, yet the model may be uses to discuss not only other forms of comedic performance, but many other types of live performances. The model of identity in Chapter Two uses humour as the context but any event involving a performer and an audience might be substituted. In fact there is a great deal of similarity between different styles of performance. Performance requires building and maintaining attention, presenting selective elements of oneself, pleasing the crowd, and impressing the producers of the event. Some examples are sport players, musicians, ministers, and teachers. Each of these has series of expectations attached to the role being played. A baseball player cannot be chatting with the outfield fans when a fly ball is launched in his direction, and a musician cannot follow a separate score during a performance. However, once the behaviour has matched the expectations of the audience, and has even exceeded expectations, a space opens for variation between expectations and actual behaviour, and it is here that change takes place.

The comedic model of identity demonstrates the importance of human interaction, charisma, trust and vulnerability. The love/hate duality which exists within self-identity

may be applied to social individuals who struggle between what is expected of them by those around and what they would prefer to be or do outside of those expectations. Comedic performance reflects the tension between public and private identities, and the live comedic event represents an exchange of information about these identities based upon relations of trust and power. Ricoeur's theory provides a means of understanding how the narrative identity, caught in time, has a lasting impact on who the individual becomes. Political, cultural and spatial processes influence the impact and outcome of the live performance. In the case of Canadian stand-up these processes are responsible not only for shifting identities and dividing loyalties, but also for defining and redefining the expectations of the event. Nonetheless, other areas or techniques could further the analysis of the performance. For example, the discipline of psychology might also be useful in furthering analysis of the type of person who is drawn to performance, and expanded knowledge of the audiences could be gained by surveying crowds and observing the same audience members in different contexts. Subsequent investigation on the comedic divide on a greater scale would enable mapping of inclusion and exclusion of cultural performance. Finally, a detailed content analysis of Canadian comedian's material with American or British, would be invaluable in tracing the patterns of similarity and difference between regions or nations. These later suggestions were not possible for this work, but are suitable starting points in future research. The final section of this chapter informs the reader of the future of comedy in Canada based on the knowledge that was gained through this investigation.

7.5 The Future of Comedy

What is the future of Canadian comedy? If the Canadian government does not recognise the social and economic value of humorous intervention Canadian talent will continue to drain to the US, where it will be re-packaged and sold back to the Canadian audiences at an increased cost and with a different cultural value. The increase in televised comedy will continue to grow, at the expense of the live shows, but will never replace the live event completely due to the allure of human interaction. Popularity of televised comedy does remain a threat because it works against comedic processes and decreases audience involvement.

In order for comedy to impact on society, the audience must be able to link with the performer and accept him/her as one of them before the audience members will 'see things through the eyes' of the performer. Previously it has been demonstrated that television is better understood by a linear model of communication which neither acknowledges the dual sender/receiver role played by all persons involved in the exchange, nor builds the necessary trust (see Figure 1). Instead, the transactional model of communication assumes a responding and influencing body of receivers who participate fully in the humorous dance known as comedy (see Figure 2). Yet television and technology will continue to shift attitudes toward entertainment, and the future of comedy must be ready for change. As one producer explains,

> We've been making the same shirt for years, we're retailers of comedy
> (and wholesalers, producers) and the store still looks the same. You have
> to recreate yourself. I think someone, somewhere down the road is going
> to find a way of doing this to change the context of the live performance. I
> have my thoughts on what it might be but I could be wrong it could be
> totally the opposite. Some elements of the mixed media culture, rave,

glamour, swingers, element is going to creep in and someone's going to do a club in some hyper-urban place -- it can't be Niagara, or Calgary but it might be Toronto or New York or LA, that's gonna kind of re-frame the game a bit...because the experience of going out would be so wonderful that the fact that there's comedy there would almost be an extra plus... But here's the bad news, I don't think I'd do it in Canada (Jim, 1999).

Recognition of technology and its integration will become increasingly necessary but the impacts on the performance will need to be controlled. More importantly, the value of Canadian performers and their craft must be acknowledged as a part of the cultural heritage, and the benefits of this form of entertainment must be applauded and promoted. Nonetheless, Canada continues to build a group of extremely talented stand-up comedians which are successful performers across the country, and internationally. This returns us to the original question of the thesis? Why are they laughing?

This thesis outlined the multiplicity of elements which interact for any successful show. At the core of these are the participants in the live event, with all of their social baggage, dreams, hopes, fears, likes, dislikes, pet-peeves, grudges, memories, and most importantly, their many different forms of identity (hidden or exposed) including their awareness of 'others' around them and the desire to escape it all.

Ricoeur's theories on Time and Narrative, assists us in understanding that it is the processes of imitating and reconstructing which lead to transformation. Yet it is the socially relevant content combined with the imitated and reconstructed narratives which makes us laugh. It is through this laugher, that the transformation takes place. If a comedian unexpectedly forges links with audience members, this encourages further trust with the next comedian. What needs to be tackled now in Canada is closing the gaps

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between those who have access to live stand-up performance and those who do not. The regional disparity needs to be lessened and access to marginalised groups expanded.

Why are they laughing? American producers are laughing at their access to the high quality of comedic material being developed in Canada. American comedians are laughing because of the ease of access they have to Canadian audiences. Audiences are laughing because live performance offers an inexpensive opportunity to reinvent themselves and express who they are. Performers are laughing because they too can reinvent and express themselves, but additionally are able to remain at the margins of society and benefit from a unique site of observation. Why do we laugh? Because it is the outlet for us when we see the societal imperfections around us; to take ourselves less seriously and feel a sense of belonging; to escape the monotony of the everyday and return to it refreshed. Humour allows us, in the face of everything, to go on.

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APPENDIX A - The Questions

A.1   Questions (Comedians in Canada)

How did you get into the life of comedy?

What were your reasons for staying?

How have those reasons changed?

How would you describe your stage character?

What limits does this character place on your performance or creativity?

How has this character changed over time?

How have 'others' described your character? Do you agree with them?

How much do you travel, where and when?

What is the difference between a performance in a club, bar, university, private party etc?

What is the difference between performing in the different regions in Canada?

What are the audiences like in different regions/cities?

What are the differences in comics that come from different regions/cities?

What are the differences you have noticed between Canada and the US (or any other

place outside of Canada they have performed if applicable).

Describe for me the Canadian comedy community. How/where do you fit into it?

How has the community helped and/or hindered your career?

What is Canada for you now?

Where do you consider yourself to be from? Where is home?

What is comedy?

Whom did/do you admire?

What was one thing you would have done differently in your career?

What is the best thing that has happened to you in comedy so far?

A.2   Questions to Producers of Comedy

How did you get into the business?

What do you think of the business?

What is the protocol for deciding who will be on a show?

How much freedom do you have with shows (e.g. CBC's comics)? What impedes this

freedom?

Why work in Canada instead of the US?

What kinds of opportunities/networks has work in Canada provided for you?

Why have you stayed in the business?

Describe for me the Canadian comedy scene?

What role do you play in it?

What differences have you noticed about comics from different regions of Canada? From

the US?

Does your organization help or hinder the careers of comics?

What is Canadian comedy?

What do you think about comedy festivals in Canada?

Where would you like to see a club or venue in Canada that you haven't already ventured

into?

Would you like to eventually work, own clubs or represent comics in the US?

What is the difference between Canadian and American comics? Canadian and American

Audiences?

What does it take to make it in comedy in Canada?

How has comedy changed over the years?

A.3   Questions for Canadians Comedians Working in the U.S.

How did you get into the life of comedy?

What were your reasons for staying?

How have those reasons changed?

How would you describe your stage character?

What limits does this character place on your performance or creativity?

How has this character changed over time?

How have 'others' described your character? Do you agree with them?

How much do you travel, where and when?

What is the difference between a performance in a club, bar, university, private party etc?

What is the difference between performing in the different regions in Canada?

What are the audiences like in different regions/cities?

What are the differences in comics that come from different regions/cities?

What are the differences you have noticed between Canada and the US (or any other

place outside of Canada they have performed if applicable).

Describe for me the Canadian comedy community. How/where do you fit into it?

How has the community helped and/or hindered your career?

What is Canada for you now?

Where do you consider yourself to be from? Where is home?

What is comedy?

Whom did/do you admire?

What was one thing you would have done differently in your career?

What is the best thing that has happened to you in comedy so far?

Why did you come to the US (LA or NYC)

What happened when you came down?

Describe the local comedy community? How do you fit into the local scene?

What are the differences you have noticed between the different regions of the US?

APPENDIX B - Analysis of Interviews

The following interview was selected to demonstrate how the data was analysed. The respondent was Canadian born, but had been living and working in LA for a number of years. All the interviews were fed into NUDIST and coded into theoretical tree which would allow me to compare, Men to Women; Canadians to Non-Canadians; and Comics to producers. The nodes on the tree included for each, how they got into comedy and a description of who they were on stage. I then also set up a series of free nodes to help organize the Interviewees comments on the following concepts:

1)Comedic Community

2)Ideas about Canada

3) Differences/Similarities between Regional Audiences

4) Differences/Similarities between Regional Performers

5) Road Stories

6) Urban/Rural differences

7) Differences/Similarities between National (US/Canada) Audiences

8) Differences/Similarities between National (US/Canada) Performers

9) Changes in the Comedians Performed Identity (PPI) over time

10) Definitions of Comedy

11) Favourite Performance site.

12) Why the comic stayed in Comedy

Free Nodes allow the researcher to integrate information into the tree after the fact, or compare across nodes, without being theoretically 'locked' into a framework.

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This allowed for a deductive approach. Below is an example of a brief NUDIST report which locates the text units with the appropriate coding. Each interview was read after being introduced into the management system, and coded where applicable. Occasionally, there would be a piece of interesting information that did not fit into the selected nodes but that I did not want to lose. Those 'gems' were pulled out and put into a separate file for perusal afterwards. Although it was not a very long file in the end, it helped to describe events, coin phrases, or raised questions for further research.

Following the report is the interview text itself, with the pseudonym of Bryan for confidentiality. Some other information has been edited to protect the respondent's privacy. Sections which were useful have been bolded and any information which appears in CAPITAL letters are my comments of analysis inserted afterwards. Finally, at the very end are my journal notes on the interview along with some comments.

Q.S.R. NUD.IST Power version, revision 4.0.

+++ ON-LINE DOCUMENT: Bryan.

Tree Nodes

Node Address (1 1 1)	/comicM/canadianM/got into ++ Units:4-4	
(1 1 2)	/comicM/canadianM/PPI ++ Units:6-6	10-10

Free Nodes

Node number (F 3)	//Free Nodes/regionalA ++ Units:22-22
(F 6)	//Free Nodes/urbrur ++ Units:22-22
(F 7)	//Free Nodes/nationalA ++ Units:48-48

(F 8)	//Free Nodes/nationalP ++ Units:50-50
(F 9)	//Free Nodes/change ++ Units:16-16
(F12)	//Free Nodes/why stay ++ Units: 8-8

Interview with Bryan - Farmers Market, Los Angeles

February 27, 1998

B: How'd I get into it? Um, that would be a (unclear) When, I picked up the same from a lot of people you know, whatever you enjoy you'd like to pursue some things seem sort of like they'd be an impossibility. So, I was one of those kids who believed the after school special sort of – you can do whatever you want to do.

A: Okay.

B: (unclear).... And at the same time a club opened in Detroit Michigan. And I saw, who was it, it was David, David, not but David Brunner, in a local morning show. He was talking about starting out in comedy and the host show, as a matter fact they were opening a club where young comics start out. Right here in Detroit and I was all excited I did not know there was such a thing. Cause The Tonight Show was all there was for me in terms of an outlet for viewing comedy. And So I, I went over to Detroit or I got my parents to take me over – I was15 at the time. My mother had to get on the phone, "do you realise he's young, is he allowed to get in there?" and that kind of thing. And I did 4 minutes, I think you're allowed 10 and I did 4. Something like that. The biggest surprise was that people were swearing I thought the show was going to get stopped or something like that cause I thought it was like the Tonight Show it had to be squeaky clean. There

was rules and from that moment on I did well enough that I was just enamored with it. It's funny cause **there's just, typical or corny thing that the sensation of receiving laughter is just very intoxicating**. [THIS WAS NOT CODED OFFICIALLY BUT WAS USEFUL FOR KNOWING WHY A COMIC STAYS IN COMEDY] And it sounds it almost shouldn't be expressed in some ways, when you talk about comedy it sounds, it can sound uh, it can sound so unfunny but those emotions are true. **The problem is that we are usually very sarcastic usually and cynical so therefore true emotion and if you notice, there's very few, <u>few true emotions in comedy</u>.** [FASCINATING - I CAN THINK OF A LOT OF EXAMPLES OF THIS - I THINK ITS TRUE, BUT I'VE NEVER THOUGHT OF IT THIS WAY BEFORE - WILL WATCH FOR THIS FROM NOW ON] You can see it there but it's not said in a sincere way. It's usually hedged with a non-commitment to, even if it's a joke about what their parents had done to them in the past, for humour's sake can never be really expressed in sincere terms. But it is, was an unbelievable sensation for a kid.

A: Okay at 15 on an American stage. Americans who you were performing for. Is that where you basically performed for a while?

B: Yes for quite a while actually. **I'd say I was age 22 when I moved up to Toronto. I would go up to Toronto and I would tour out, you know I've been from sea to shining sea, in Canada. Other then the territories I've performed in every province. But yeah but my introduction was very American and it's funny because in in Detroit I sound like a Canadian. And when I go to Toronto I sound like an American to people. So I've never really felt a tremendous attachment to Canadian**

comedy. As in not being Canadian enough. I went to Montreal and it was funny, the province in turmoil but it felt more like Canada. We spoke about Canadian things. [CODED FOR WHO HE IS ON STAGE AND ALSO FOR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN REGIONS. INTERESTING COMMENT ABOUT QUEBEC FEELING MORE LIKE CANADA BECAUSE IT IS SO POLITICAL] I grew up in a small border town that was so American in it's uh, I mean people were it seemed like more people were rooting for American sporting teams than they were for the Canadian teams... I had an affection for Canada but I also was overwhelmed and excited by the United States.

A: Okay. Why did you stay in comedy? What were your reasons for staying?

B: Sustaining me through difficult times? Um, that's an interesting question because you know what, honestly, different times, different reasons. I remember one time, this was after I left YukYuks or was going to leave YukYuks, I was thinking leaving comedy while at YukYuks being unhappy with what I thought was the world of comedy and YukYuks is not the world of comedy it is its own world. When you're stuck in something like a bad relationship you think this is the world. Um, I wouldn't allow myself to quit comedy because of reasons other than my own abilities or um outside influences shouldn't stop you from doing things. This is what I thought, I can't, I mean years from now I think, wow Mark Breslin is the reason I don't do comedy, and that would be horrible. That would give him, that would mean that he owned comedy or something. That I left because I didn't agree with his philosophy, I had to find out that I could do my own thing. **And then since then I thought that this is all I do , that this is all I am. I'm now at the point where...I've been doing comedy longer for than half my life. And**

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it's the only thing I have ever done, I've never had a job of any sort that was not related to show business or comedy, I've never done anything else. I it's almost like I have no choice, is what it's like. [CODED FOR WHY STAYED IN COMEDY] You know, which I really respect, a friend of mine, he had a gotten married, he bought a house. Couldn't get the work he wanted to do and get close to a couple of things and then couldn't couldn't...get the jobs he thought he would. And he took a job at a chicken delivery place, like a you know, not Kentucky Fried Chicken but a place like that, as a manager and my stomach just turned because I put my place in his position. And at the time, I was tight for money or whatever it might have been. But I have such respect for ****, that he wouldn't, and this is also the best reason that I do it. He wouldn't compromise what he did so therefore he took a job that was just good honest work. Which you can respect more that a person that, you know, he didn't quit comedy, he did it in small increments on his own terms and instead, instead instead of just whoring himself, I guess, to be crass. And I respected that I thought that was great. He was(unclear) I was very impressed by that.

A: Um can you tell me who you are on stage after you (unclear)

B: Certainly. (pause) **Who am I on stage**, it's funny because I think that I'm, and it took me a lot of years to do this to find some, you obviously need a gimmick or need to be different, you got to be different these old show business hacks. You know you got to have, what's your shtick? And um, I realised that after a while it's (unclear) especially if you want to be a (unclear) you're not extremely physical. Um if that's not your way of separating yourself from the pack then it's your language, the way you speak. And likely

nobody speaks in the manner you do, but sounds like a normal thing to do but I have a friend of mine who is one of the funniest guys I ever meet, a guy from Detroit, A guy ****. **** would make us laugh all the time, he was around having coffee, talking about his father. His father would come home, a hard working Italian man delivering bread and he would come home and there would be **** watching some kind of game show on TV. Or something like that. He'd say what is going on here, stupidity. "Do you have enough deodorant on Mr. Showbusiness?" that was our favorite thing. And we'd say **** you got to do these kind of stories on stage talk about Dad and he would tell us all these stories. And he felt that wasn't comedy, that's not what people want. And on stage he would be much slicker he would act like a comedian. As opposed to telling those great stories. He would he would, he would experiment with those suggestion because when you know you have 10 people complimenting you and such you think maybe you would. But if it didn't go well he would retreat and go away from that. And that's what I discovered if you, **I think I'm very much like myself on stage and also so when I'm happiest how I am on stage it's just an extension of the way I view the world. And also the way I view um, the way I'm at odds with the world. I don't find I'm really part of society.** [CODED FOR WHO HE IS ON STAGE] It's funny, 'cause I like a lot of things that are from society. My tastes are seemingly mainstream but not. So I, I like the, **my dream would be where I could force my opinion on the public.** (laughing)

A: Um earlier on in your career where you different on stage? And if so, how?

B: The first while I had nothing to comment on because I was a 15 16 year old kid. So I commented on what I do or I'd make up, imagine things I'd get involved in. **Spoke in**

question mark when there wasn't a question. You know that sort of (unclear) A bit if a

Canadianism? Some people talk like that? So does my Mom? So I had a sort of youthful ,

(unclear) style and the question was how had I changed or...[CODED FOR CHANGES]

A: Yeah.

B: Um,

A: How did you end up here?

B: You know what it was an unbelievable amount of times on stage so therefore you

become relaxed and you sometimes, cause of your boredom you experimented. I went

through a period of time when I thought I should talk about what had happened that day.

Very hit and miss that day. But also made me realise that anything could be a topic and I

thought that was interesting. Cause some comics you watch and they do their acts based

on what they'd seen other comics do, not stealing but there are a certain amount of

subjects that we tackle. So people come up to you and go so what's your OJ joke as if

you had to have one.

A: Right.

B: You know and um in fact that would almost be a reason to avoid that you know. To

stand out so I have interests, even if I have interests that are the same as everybody else I

have a different reason for wanting to do it. There's a different reason why I like baseball,

I do, I love baseball, but as opposed to other people who like baseball. And it's funny

when you realise that um, cause I guess I can still figure I can convince people of certain

reasons why they should like a movie or why some music is just preferred. You know ,

because I would look and it's interesting for me to realise why some people prefer things

what their thoughts are you know. I Have a friend of mine who is a musician and we often argue about music because his music has taken a different direction than what we used to have in common. And I I said to him how can you bear that audience in front of you that's that's young, dumb kids? Well he said, who do you think is sitting next to you at a ballpark? There's morons there as well. ...This is besides the point but it's... The Simpsons is one of the best shows of all time. And one of the most clever, it's a compromise but it's not. Some people think that it's , the show is about a young little rotten boy that says eat my shorts. But, other people it's unbelievably inside satire. And that' exactly what it is. If you sit and watch All in the Family, the father was ...the were laughing at the guy talking like a pig. Other people were enjoying it another level and that's the way you satisfy a lot of needs and get the eyes of the world on you and that's very clever. That' s the trick I'm still trying to figure out, how not to how to be appeal to a wider mass but filtering exactly what I want. And I don't know what that is yet. (laughing)

A: What is your experience as a Canadian comic?

B: My experience in what regards?

A: In Canada.

B: In Canada. Here's one thing. **I'm a little cynical towards rural areas, and it's funny cause I would often not to do well in front of a rural crowd and played in front of all of them, everywhere. And I started to become, I started to dislike my own country as a result. I was traveling to every town around the whole country and experiencing the same problem. People that were homophobic. People that wanted nothing but**

(unclear) I saw what they did enjoy. They They were drunkards, morons you know. I can guarantee you that it would be a racist joke that someone came up to me after the show and said you want to here a joke? So I started to think this was a cross section, a good example of what Canada is.   And then I thought these people look a lot like the people I sit next to in hockey games, so they're morons. And it all sorted of seemed like they were the same and negative. And I (Unclear) this negatively. You know when people would try to correct me and say no these are the salt of the earth these people you're performing to. This is the - this is the real Canadian. Just because he's wearing blue jeans and and um, doing manual labour I disagree that this makes the person somehow a a um, a you know a more valid than others. I found it to be, culture was not important to them. And also this is not the salt of the earth, the salt of the earth are at home getting ready to work their hard day on the farm tomorrow. And that was a good realisation to me. That, these people just just they they were different versions of the same person. These people were not out drunk in a nightclub, on a Tuesday night they were home with their family getting ready to work the farm. And whatever they may be doing in rural Canada. (laughing) But I really have, I've seen the worst of Canadians, that sounds like an awful thing to say, I've seen the worst of Canadians from coast to coast. And and it really really brought me down.[CODED FOR RURAL AND URBAN] There was nothing, they had no interest in their own country other than to dislike other parts. I would that in Montreal *the club owner in Montreal he said you know what why don't you introduce yourself as being from Detroit to make it easier on yourself being from*

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Toronto. So I did and that was fine, that was more interesting for them than being from Toronto.[CODED FOR WHO HE IS ON STAGE, VERY INTERESTING TO EXCHANGE THE TORONTO/CANADIAN IDENTITY FOR AN AMERICAN ONE - IN QUEBEC SPECIFICALLY]. I had to apologise and say how come, how come this rivalry exists and say some jokes, that was the (unclear) And say Montreal was obviously more cosmopolitan, (unclear) but but **I went out to the Western part of Canada and they dislike people from Ontario, and responded tremendously to jokes about Quebec.** [CODED FOR REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN AUDIENCES] Their, when **their entire take on a political subject, can be if they want to go let them go.** [COMMENTARY ON WESTERN AUDIENCES] If I heard that one more time I was going to scream....and it's funny, I think of myself as someone who's opinionated and how come I'm so ambivalent about this. See I see pros and cons I see why Quebecers would feel the way they do. And and whether the rest of the country can (Unclear) some of their tactics. But I can't imagine how you can just feel like let them go and screw the rest of Canada. I couldn't believe that could be a singular attitude. There's a lot of that out there. And that, that felt no kinship with the province. **It's funny I I had these wonderful moments mixed in with that but as a general rule I found that everything was backwards to me, and it affected my life tremendously, you ended up wasting a lot of time, or you just drank or you'd gamble, and so then you were had two reasons to be upset with yourself. You felt like hell you were wasting your money you were losing the money that was hard earned on the road, and the shows weren't satisfying your needs, plus tremendous amounts of driving.** [CODED FOR ROAD

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STORIES] **So it was, it was awful in that well and the guys that would do well I didn't respect what they were doing well, generally, generally, 'cause it was mindless stuff. And their definition of comedy, that is comedy, doing dirty jokes and making people laugh, that is comedy. But, you know Buddy Hackett has a line, I can agree with it, and and at the same time not agree with.** He was often accused of being a dirty comic and he is. You know, by definition, I'm not a big fan of his stuff. It's not my style it's not what I do or what I listen to. **His line was is if they laugh it's not dirty., 'cause dirty means that people are offended. So if a group of people in the room are laughing that they're not offended. And that's actually quite a good argument I guess I'm just sorry that it's so.**[CODED FOR CANADIAN COMEDY COMMUNITY AND DEFINITION - ALTHOUGH ITS NOT HIS DEFINITION, HE POSITIONS HIMSELF AS DEFINING IT AS THE OPPOSITE].

A: Right.

B: I have a lot of feelings for it myself (Unclear) Canada.

A: And at that time you were working for Yuks?

B: YukYuks yes. For many many years from like age 18 to mid 20's.

A: And what sort of relationship was that with Yuks?

B: Very up and down. I was a darling with them when I first arrived. Then there was lots of comics who were much more obliging they , it's amazing when people don't realise that that owners of businesses, taking away things is one of the worst things you can do for employee morale. Meaning , if you ever if you start flying people some place you have to continue to fly them there. Oh by the way next time we're not flying you or the

money is going to be less than last time. Cause people thought than when things go forward or at least status quo and they would do stuff like, they used to give 2, 3 free drinks but now they wouldn't. And they would, they would, things that weren't logical people were abusing that. Who would abuse two free drinks, you know, you can only have two. You can abuse more than you're allowed to have but it was done in a very bureaucratic way they were using the same tactics that the Bank of Montreal would use. You're very angry with the Bank of Montreal. They'll put somebody between management, the head management and the owners and you and that would be a poor sap that worked in the office who just knew what they knew. The didn't know how to start a show one time because they had a pre-taped thing that introduces the show, well I'll just go to the off stage mic and say Good Evening, welcome to YukYuks please welcome your host. And they were terrified because they thought, this isn't what we've been told, that there will be no thinking, there will be following. People actually and this sounds like one of those urban myths, people have been fired for answering the phones and not saying Mark Breslin's YukYuks cause Mark has called and heard Hamilton say "Hello YukYuks, good afternoon," Tuesday you know, in the morning at 10 o'clock. Somebody just forgets to include the Mark Breslin and it's true. There's there's there's and I'm sure you'll hear lots of stories, like this and they're true. Is used to be an exciting time being around YukYuks, he would he would actually bring in, a number of...as a you know, as an unfamous person on the edge of being famous... But uh, he would bring people like that in and...and experiment. And then he realised, and it wasn't just him, to maximize profit they would just choose the cheapest and that would be, which doesn't have to be

the worst but excludes ever bringing in anybody of any worth. And then, he would on the odd occasion I think there were a few, to make themselves feel, they can claim to be cutting edge. But it's, you **know we refer to ourselves as sausage a and b, and they would never – I would often say could I work with certain people because I know that it will compliment my show. That was always treated like a bit of weakness, like any comic should be able to follow any comic.** [CODED FOR THE COMMUNITY AND SPECIAL MENTION ON YUKS] And obviously you don't put a a you wouldn't put country music and jazz on the same program because you would just end up alienating people. The show wouldn't work properly, it wouldn't it would make it difficult for somebody. If county music was being enjoyed, the jazz would have a problem and vice versa, And I thought well this makes sense, I would do well, and that would irritate them more then ...you would end up with somebody, it's almost as if you didn't want to work with this guy, they'll give you somebody you *really* don't want to work with. The worst comic you can imagine.

A: Right.

B: In that regard I've actually had to part ways with it, I hated it that much. And a lot of guys did, a lot of my pals did.

A: What year was that?

B: What would that be now? Uh,......5 years, 5 years ago I would imagine.

A: Okay and then you stayed in Canada and you were working-

B: I was working independently-

A: The other side? [THE INDEPENDENT SCENE]

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B: I worked the other side, yeah . I didn't work as much. I worked a lot less since then. I found my own type of venues. I started to do, one man shows which was funny because in a sense I was asked once by **** I was on a radio show promoting it. And he said what are you going to see in your show, your one man show at this alternative venue that we wouldn't get at t a comedy club from you ? Would it just be wordier and more self-indulgent? (laughing) Slower paced, you won't believe how slow it is. And that's that's generally what we would end up doing. We would, we were comedy club acts for the most part, but we would make them more self-indulgent. Which something about that can be good. But it can also be alienating to the crowd. We that's that's generally what it was. I heard a lot of different, and not as much because it wasn't the circuit.

A: Was it mostly in urban centers after that as well?

B: Yes, almost exclusively. Exclusively. I went to **** my home town, a few times to do private gigs, but no almost exclusively big cities where I feel most comfortable anyway. You know.

A: Um, why did you come to LA?

B: Um, I I it's funny because in the last three years I have spent, I'm in the United States but out of Toronto, all my work was done in Toronto or outside of Toronto and the United States. I did , an HBO special, the young comics special in 95. Then I did, the following year I did a pilot for Kingworld, they do Oprah Winfrey they're a morning show. And then I did a , what else did I , oh then I did the Later, for NBC and everything I was doing ended up being in the United States. And I and what amazes me they usually tell you, you can't do this stuff from Canada, and that's generally true, you have to be

here. They don't really like when you come here and say I'm here for a week what can I accomplish? Who can I meet? And the first thing they say is well give us a call when you're living here. **So I with with my partnership with my manager I've done pretty well in Canada. But I reached a point where it wasn't going to, nothing else was going to happen for me. I couldn't get anything to go in Canada either.** [CODED FOR CANADA COMMENTARY] I Had done a pilot for CBC and they picked it up they were going to do a half hour talk show nightly. But the budget came down, this was 94, 95 early 95, the big big budget crunch happened. It was the first time I realised, 'cause I thought being a comic I lived independent of all these things. I'd feel bad if a factory closed but it didn't effect me. Recession, all these things I used to think, it was **one of the appeals of comedy, I could live in an alternate universe of sorts or parallel** I should say. **You know I could live amongst the people but I didn't have to do what they did, I could drink in the afternoon if I wanted all these things that I thought allowed me to, cause in some ways they're very selfish and not very social is that I felt I was having a laugh on the rest of the world. And that helped me feel better that fact that I was so clever at figuring out a different way to live.** Anyways that was a shock it was a very awful feeling, to lose this job and it also illustrated the impossibility of making a living in Canada. This was my only opportunity, they came back with, they decided not to produce it, after 11:00 anymore. No more, original programming after 11. They might show an old movie, or repeat the news but there would be no shows after 11. **And that was and then of course I couldn't stand to be around Canada because it was just a reminder. Every time they would put any show**

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on TV it was my money being used for something else cause I had already been promised it it was literally on the board. I was getting congratulatory calls from friends at work I've seen your name there, 11:00 on Monday to Thursday or whatever. And then I realised that that's strange business anyway and that you actually take something back.[CODED FOR COMMENTARY ON CANADA] And I realised that things were very different there and the idea of a manager who was even offensive seeming to (unclear) my manager would ask potential employers or acting jobs call me. Call me. But they would call me instead they would call me at home. Give ****

a call. Well, it's too (unclear) manager was equated with being screwed over. No no she just organizes my life and we are part of a play it's not like this scam that we've put together.

A: Right, right.

B: And whenever we'd come to the States it's not that it makes it a better a world, it's just that through how we were kind of operating seemed to work. You know I've never applied for any grants. My, **my style of operating has never been Canadian** I had friends of mine who would be galled if they didn't get a grant. But no that's, that's very strange. And a friend of mine, her mother applied for a grant and she's wealthy. And I thought that missed the entire point of a grant any way, and she and her daughter couldn't be more proud. I mean be proud your mother is pursuing her art but don't be proud that she's applied for a grant. I was horrified by that. **Um, there's a lot of benefits in Canada, it was almost as if you had to be ashamed of doing a show that was "hi come down pay five bucks to see me, 'cause that's what I do for a living." It's**

always it was a show for this purpose. It was almost an attitude, that you want to go see comedy you should go see a comedy show that's actually benefitting whatever cause it is. That's very Canadian, very rare you'll see a show such as that. People will do shows you know there's comic (unclear) but on a weekly basis? Often times shows in Toronto were benefits (unclear) Interrupts the motivation for all these people. They would do a benefit and call and just demand that an article be done this is for a good cause.[COMMENTARY ON CANADA] But these are also people trying to promote their name at the same time. People would people would take benefits (unclear) people would take benefits without even knowing what it was for. And I've been asked that, would you do a benefit? As if that was a thing onto itself, for what? **And I actually saw a reggae band once that was actually an anti-apartheid thing and the guy was, these were these were Jamaican, Jamaican descent and they appeared to be totally not understanding what they were doing. "Let's hear it for Apartheid everybody." They weren't even grasping it, so the sincerity sometimes (unclear) cause I often wonder. So what's so Canadian about Canada? What's so different? There's an example.** [COMMENTARY ON CANADA] There's on the surface seems like a very caring, and malevolent sorry benevolent type of action. But it's self serving in a lot ways. A lot of these benefits people want to get on them, 'cause they' ll know there'll be a list in the paper. And also it's it's and everything we do is for selfish reasons but (tape stops and starts)

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A: Okay can you tell me the difference then, between performing in LA and say Toronto cause I consider LA to be the center of American comedy the center, and Toronto the same thing.

B: Yes. Yeah Toronto is uh, **Toronto is the Los Angeles of comedy for for Canada. I mean even though Montreal has a festival, everybody goes to Toronto because they get (unclear) for the majority of productions.** [COMMENTARY ON CANADA] Um the difference the States, **the States are very different. You know um there's there's a palpable feeling here that something could happen for you. Which can be depressing on some days and inspiring on others depending on how how things are going for you.** [COMMENTARY ON DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE US AND CANADA] Um, Toronto can have that same sensation if you're on much lower level meaning if you're not hoping to develop yourself into a guy that is able to do longer periods of time on stage. Or have an article done on you describing your talent. **Toronto is good for that because you get lots of stage time, it's a smaller community unlike here, you can rise through the ranks you know, and have people notice you. Here is a very bad place to come, to develop your act. It it's a much better situation for me cause when I got my HBO special, I was unknown to these people from HBO. They saw me, in Toronto then I came down here to do a second show case and they brought a lot more people from HBO to look at me. And I was a finished product but at the same time a brand new finished product. It was even more exciting to them because they think, you look even more funnier to them** [COMMENTARY ON US EXPERIENCE AS DIFFERENT FROM CANADA] when you're when you're, sort of like someone says

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listen to this band from Ireland and they've been in Ireland for ten years and they're really developed and they're on top of their game, they sound even better to you. You're talking about surprise and polish and that's, I know comics that have lived here for a long time that I knew , I was down here briefly when I was 20, for about 9 months to see what I could see. And that was a very, a learning experience cause I discovered about pecking orders and that sort of thing. Um, and I discovered that, this is a bad place to develop. Because people will think they know about you but because they do that 5 years from they say well how about seeing Joe Johnson? Well we know Joe he's around and it's hard for them to see improvement. It's sort of like when you see something everyday. When people say you've lost weight or something you didn't even notice it or your spouse didn't notice it. Where not being seen helps when you are seen. It's definitely a place to come polished because the time you get on stage is extremely short sets. Even leisurely sets are 10 to 15 minutes. I'm used to doing, you know back in Toronto I would do, you know do a show of my own and do an hour half. Which was great for me to develop but here it is an impossibility. Plus if you were doing more of a one man show, that's the latest way to showcase yourself, you're realising it's difficult sometimes . What I find difficult is to do what I do in 5 minutes. I know comics that are perfectly suited to that. Steven Wright there's a perfect guy for 5 minutes, You know everything about him, I take 5 minutes to get started.

A: Um the differences between the regions of Canada and the regions of the States , do you see a difference between Canada and the US? Or do you see east coasters as east coasters and west coaster like west coasters?

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B: Oh in Canada or-

A: I'm curious if the border really is a border? Are there differences between Canadians as audiences and Americans as audiences?

B: **Well you know what it's part of the way we're we're perceived, the stereotype we're you know, more subdued and quieter and we are, generally as audiences. But versus an American audiences when they really liked you, they were very demonstrative and very exciting because they laugh it up and they let you know, when they're not shy to tell you so. Canadian audiences can be great and wonderful but they can smile and I was always saying the smiling to your ears sounds like silence.** [CODED FOR DIFFERENCES IN NATIONAL AUDIENCES] It doesn't sound like anything and that to me is a very big difference. They like to talk about the United States more than Canadians like to hear people talk about Canada. **Canadians don't really like to hear about Canada although they do more in Montreal than they do in Toronto. There's more political comedy even even Quebec issues aside there's more political comedy in Quebec. It's it's more Canadian in certain ways than Toronto. Toronto is, and they say it too much and it is a world city and in some ways in negative ways it's not part of Canada it's like Geneva is more of a world city than it is a Swiss city.**[CODED FOR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN REGIONS] Although New York city is America and a world city at the same time in that way. And Los Angeles is a world city its also, its funny, in Europe, Los Angeles California would be a different country than New York is as Mississippi would be. I mean I've never heard stranger to my ear accents than Southern accents, if you watch the national network and

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I'm a country music fan, traditional country music and if you want them being interviewed, them talking leisurely, **hearing them talk personally you'd think they were from a different country from the people in New York city. And they have their own kind of comedy, country comedy, I always loved that term. Country comedy and it's completely different and what they're reference points and what they think of as universal is so different than somebody from New York, they're forced to face all these different cultures and attitudes and sexual orientations.** [CODED FOR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN REGIONAL PERFORMERS/ USA] Um, whereas it's funny **it's much more youth oriented here New York and Los Angeles, and down south it's older types.**[CODED FOR DIFFERENCE BETWEEN REGIONS/ USA] The old country stars stay stars their whole lives. Willy Nelson is as big as he was 30 years ago. Johnny Cash and that's a different world. They're a different country. Who's (unclear) I think it's a cult, the United States of America it is a cult.

A: Okay

B: There are people that you think of as very liberal and it's sort of like only they can, sort of like only I can make fun of my mother. They're still Americans they still believe in certain things regarding American, the pomp and circumstance, whereas Canadians don't mind that. Canadians actually can you imagine America having a special about what is American? They see everyday what America is and they have tremendous poetry and are tremendous by being long winded if not entertaining. **Canadians still have the cover of Macleans saying what is a Canadian? On the streets on the news: What do you think Canadian is? You know and the best definition is always what, we're not**

Americans. That's what a Canadian is. Something that's not American . It's not

true but we don't have it fixed we don't have it we don't know what to say we also

don't want to make a big deal out of ourselves. That's that's why being a star in

Canada is difficult. You noticed there was never any kind of controversy or gossip

about the Kids in the Hall? They were huge stars in Canadian terms and they even

went away and came back. [CODED FOR CANADIAN COMMENTARY] Its almost

provocative journalism in that regard is looked down upon in Canada. It has to be pretty

blatant stuff for them to pounce on it which means it has to be very true, I guess in some

sense. There's a positive there but it's also hard to get people really excited about you.

Rita MacNeil is a huge star in Canada yet, what do we hear about her in day to day. We

don't see her much. A friend of mine was on a talk show in Toronto and he promoted

himself being on CBC's comics. He told me CBC's comics Monday, and you know

what? He said I can't recall this ever happening, that a comic on a television show doing

his act telling you you can see him 3 days later performing again. This guy had not been

on TV for 15 years at this point. **** He's a friend of mine. He had not done television

in 15 years, since the Alan Thicke show had left Canada. Isn't that unbelievable? If you

think about it the idea that you couldn't be on TV promoting another, you're on and then

you're missing for long long periods of time. And I did a show on CBC called

Switchback, its a morning teenage talk show. It was about 10 years ago now. And when

the show finished the budget cut back there was not even an attempt to find someplace

else for it to go or any any place for me. And here it would spin into something else. And

in Canada there's a small amount of people, you can't, you can't achieve, only a few

people can achieve these statuses. Al Waxman or whatever, you can count them on one hand.

A: Right. How do you see yourself as fitting into the LA scene?

B: **Well I don't don't seem to fit into the LA scene so much** as I hope to get a program that I can perform in and and then shut myself into my own little world. And that's literally what I want to do . I mean it's funny I picture myself becoming more insulated as my life goes on. Um, because my interests because I feel my interests are so at odds with what popular culture if for the most part. Um, meaning **I have my clique of pals, like minded obviously who we like being around** [COMMENTARY ON COMMUNITY]. And I would insulate myself. I don't see myself as being part of, I'm amazed at people who can be part of the scene, like Jack Nicholson, forever. Or Frank Sinatra that sounds like fatiguing to me, but the difference is and this is why you can generalise, if you think you're in charge or if you think they're in charge. So I think they're in charge. You know all that powers that be not me, If I were Frank Sinatra or Jack Nicholson I would feel like I'm running the show and that would be very exciting. And that's that's when you feel your best anyway you feel like you're controlling the situation. So, and that right now in my 'what I hope for in the near future' is that I have a program where I can get my opinions out in the manner I want to. Or, at least partially get them out, if it's not my ideal job, so I can claim a little piece and that will satisfy me I can go home in the evenings a lot happy. Right now, it's funny I've had some decent luck and I feel that I am on an upswing, things (unclear) 'til you achieve it you feel like no one would notice if you stopped doing it tomorrow. Other than some friends and that's a very sad feeling

when you know you've been doing it for very long. You can stop very easily. And one time it's funny when you laugh at old stars that are no longer starts anymore. And when you juxtapose yourself into that situation all of a sudden it's not that funny all of a sudden. It's not as funny I don't want to be, I obviously don't want to be in that category. But through no fault of their own a lot of those people just went out of vogue or they happened to and this is on a different subject, when you become defined as something people complain of being pigeon holed or or type-casted, **there's a price to pay for the tremendous pay you get in this city.**[COMMENTARY ON LA] Like meaning, if if Kramer didn't like being known as Kramer, *he's Kramer.* He's made a ton of money being Kramer. And people think that would be wonderful. Even if people didn't like the character Kramer was an annoying guy who just got famous, that's a tremendous price to pay if you don't want to be that.

A: Right.

B: So he he gets wealthy but maybe he might envy if he didn't like his character he might envy the young guy who works in community play house and performs the things that he's dreamed of. Or performs his own little plays, there's a price to pay for whatever you achieve. I mean Jay Leno has had to sacrifice being a humorous comic to be a famous wealthy person. He's compromised tremendously for that. I mean the pros and the cons are there.

A: Do you think you could ever give up comedy for something?

B: Um, no it would only have to be, it would have to be fantasy things, things I'm not qualified to do. It would have to be, to do play by play of baseball on the radio or

something like that. That's that's the only thing I can do. **I felt like I can't quit just because I have a point to prove, I have to prove that I was in some ways right.** It's funny this is not a world where things are always right and wrong. And there's no declaration all of a sudden yes, you were right after all. That rarely ever happens. By saying that, I mean that if I have to I have to do well to the degree that what I try to do is valid or somehow has been validated.

A: Would any of that, even a little piece of it, be directed back at Canada or Yuks or anybody who-

B: Revenge?

A: Not revenge but -

B: That has been a motivation of mine .

A: Yeah?

B: **I have to prove to the people I consider to be rotten people and and untalented and the killers of comedy, I you know, I have some friends that are doing well now and they experience the same problems being on the road.** This is the United States, they are now in movies, um, directors, directing, stuff like that, and they ran into the same kind of problems as me in that the filthy comics would do better than them. And they couldn't get a one-nighter in a club sometimes, but they kind of proved it. Those club owners are still back in Michigan booking those stupid little rooms and they're out here with critical acclaim and wealth as well. So, that kind of stuff can consume you and it's negative but it's it can be in there sometimes, and and as juvenile as it may seem

everybody has that aspect of proving somebody wrong. So. I have to check the time cause

I have to go get my -

A: It's 10 after 5.

B: I have to go very, unfortunately I do (tape ends)

JOURNAL NOTES:

I met with Bryan around 3:30 in the afternoon at a cool outdoor market. I grabbed a coffee and he explained a bit what the 'market' was - kind of an indoor/outdoor fresh food court with a Kensington Market (Toronto) or Atwater market (Montreal) feel at times - without quite as many 'farmers' as in the two comparative examples. LA is the only place where you can find soy milk everywhere. It turned out to be quite a nice afternoon and we sat in the sun while people milled around us getting ice cream cones. Some older guys had gathered not too far away, and appeared most interested in the interview. I knew Bryan from before, but not too well, although it didn't matter as he must be the most charming individual in LA! We had a bit of a chat before the tape went on - especially about the show I had seen him at on Tuesday night at the bar/restaurant. **Apparently, alternative cafes and restaurants provide the underground stage-time for the not-yet-famous. What they turn into however are variety shows rather than comedy shows. The 'headliner' will be a band in the end, and the opening acts will vary from stand-ups, other musical acts, poetry readings, etc. Its just so strange compared to the Canadian scene. [CODED FOR NATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN INDUSTRY]** Bryan didn't seem to mind it however. And I was in good company that

night as there were about seven Canadians in the audience. I could have spoken to him forever, he's so interesting, but alas he had to go pick up his partner from work. I wished I could have gotten a definitive definition on what Comedy is for him rather than having to select his view from the reverse of what he though comedy was not.

JOURNAL NOTES FROM TUESDAY NIGHT

I just had THE weirdest experience. I drove to a Los Angeles (near Beverly Hills) bar/restaurant to meet up with a couple of U.S.-dwelling Canadian comics, one of whom was to be performing that evening. **Unlike any Canadian show, this one took place in a variety-night format and featured everything from poetry readings, monologues, live music acts, to stand-up. It was all very pleasant, and we were seated in the restaurant side (there were no tables to sit at in the adjoining bar) at a table that was fully decked out with wine glasses and fancy folded napkins, flowers, candles and linen-look table cloths. I had already eaten so I just ordered a Perrier, but I felt so guilty for occupying a table without ordering food, but since the room wasn't packed I eventually relaxed.** I was sitting with another comedian who I wanted to hook up with anyway to arrange an interview, so we were chatting when three other Canadian comedians turned up with other Canadian actor friends (one woman who I recognized from the Second-City (mainstage) troop in Toronto from 92), so there were about 8 of us among the 25 or so other people at the show. **So the show starts, and there's an MC, and a few acts do there thing, and I think I'm starting to get a feel for the alternative comedy culture in L.A. I couldn't wait to see this other comic perform, as I hadn't seen him in years, but the company was good, so I was patient. Then, finally, he was**

only one act away. The act before him was a band and I figured it might even be a good lead into his act (you know, the band that opens for you...). But the band played this song called 'Beat the Bitch' and had a woman on stage who was miming being beaten by various band members as they took swings at her (sometimes with a barstool). [CODED FOR NATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN INDUSTRY AND AUDIENCES] Okaaaaay. I was watching the people in the audience, and they seemed as confused as I was and all the women were beginning to look extremely uncomfortable. Then, the song suddenly ended, and the comedian was immediately introduced. It was hilarious! What was he supposed to do with that? He handled it so professionally as he greeted a stunned audience by asking "Maybe its just me, but was anyone else extremely bothered by that?" It was perfect. It gave everyone in the audience an opportunity to expel some of the necessary tension which had just been built up. I also found it strange to see how some of the comics who were there were only interested in 'networking' with the other, more established Canadian comedians to further their own careers. It was funny because one of the comics who recognized this behaviour rolled her eyes and pointed it out to me. [CODED FOR CANADIAN COMEDY COMMUNITY - EXTERNAL TO CANADA]

Comments on the Interview

Bryan seems to have a typical view on his Canadian past and is getting by in LA without too many problems. It seems that almost everyone talks about Canada's glass ceiling and a need to move south eventually. He was lucky enough to have a green card, and

representation. He is also, in the opinion of many comics, an excellent writer and well respected. He was one of the crew that had a falling out with YUKs and went over to the other side some years ago. Again, not a surprise as his style is more cultivated and intelligent than some of the scurrilous material encouraged by Yuks. Nonetheless, he also recognises the price one pays to live in LA and have a stab at opportunities which abound - unlike in Canada.

He has a negative take on rural areas, but again, this is not surprising, as he looks and sounds urban on stage. Everything about his act is slick, ruralites would have difficulty seeing him as one of them, which is what needs to happen during the live event. If he ever makes television, he will probably be loved by the same ruralites that didn't respond to him in live shows earlier. His negative experiences in Canada lead me to believe that he will avoid discussing his Canadian heritage in the US setting. No need to. His comments on Canadian's going on and on about who they are, was most amusing. And his comment about the lack of any true emotion in a stand up act is going to be something I will want to address. And, as I suspected, he too is a part of this Island of Canadian Comics in a sea of Americans which has begun to form as a support group/network in LA. They offer places for people to stay if they want to come down and test out the market for a while. They go to each other's shows, they hang out occasionally. Few comics who move down there are single, most have girlfriends or wives, so they are able to make do with fewer friends. It seems however that they continue to stick together even after leaving Canada. When he refers to his Pals, many of them are still working and living up in Canada. He had an interesting take on Quebec

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feeling more like Canada than the rest of it, although he was referring to English speaking

Canada.

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APPENDIX C - Analysis of Journal Notes

The following appendix includes a selection of journal/observational notes taken over the years of observing comedy in various venues. I have removed the exact dates to avoid recognition of particular events or individuals and have tried to be sensitive in cases where an identity might be known to portray only neutral material.

Summer 1995

The festival is on and the Nest is packed. Packed. I could barely get though with my tray and eventually gave up trying to get to the front. We put seats in for 200 and there must have been another 150 standing in the back. The club owner set up this special deal with an American Producer from NYC after the Festival snubbed him and wouldn't include him in one of the venues. The American really did his promotion well because all the industry/agents showed up on our doorstep (those were the ones standing in the back). I kept popping out to the green-room just to get some air - it was also very crowded, but had a more relaxed atmosphere than in the club. There were lots of comics there who weren't on, catching up, chatting amongst themselves. I knew a couple of them from Toronto. **The buzz was that the JFL people were pissed because they had tried to block the Nest from participating in the Festival, and here it was with sold-out shows every night and showcasing acts from NYC, so all the industry that was supposed to be at Festival shows were at the Nest.** [CODED FOR JFL] We did two shows, each one just as packed. Some of the American acts went over time and the local guys were a bit put out. **Weird energy on stage the Americans have. They're very aggressive. The crowds got into it but were 'worn out' faster by the dominating**

energy. [CODED FOR NATIONAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PERFORMERS] I think there were too many acts on, there must have been 15 on the roster and then the club-owner added a couple more at the end. Comedy overkill!

COMMENTS: This was my first comedy festival and I had no idea what to expect. I was (and continue to be) amazed by how much power the comedians grant to the producers of Just for Laughs. It was also my first true exposure to a large number of New York comics who were up here performing. I started to notice extreme differences between the aggression on stage and my interviews supported my suspicions on this afterwards.

Fall 1996

Two Vancouver comics were on the show tonight. It was very interesting - neither one had a very strong set and how they handled it was bizarre. **They both started saying stuff like, that was the punchline there... You see, before when I said such and such, and it led to this and therefore, that makes it funny... The crowd did not get into it at all. They just sat there an stared. I was trying to see if people seemed to mind the condescension - but it appeared as if they didn't - it was just part of the act - but neither did they find it funny.** [CODED FOR REGIONAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PERFORMERS - WESTCOAST] **Montreal comics don't tend to do this I've noticed, therefore I don't think the crowds know how to respond to it.** [CODED FOR REGIONAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PERFORMERS - QUEBEC AND REGIONAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AUDIENCE MEMBERS] I've noticed there are a few standard reactions when the audience is not responding: get angry with them

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and lash out at them individually or collectively (attitude - of you guys suck!), break down the fourth wall and start to explain the process behind the joke - in a sense belittling them (attitude of you guys need some help to be brought up to speed here - so you can appreciate what I'm doing), and digging in, trying other stuff, trying to meet the audience rather than vice versa. I'm beginning to wonder if there are patterns of this - it just happened that these two did that this time around - but they also spend a lot of time together and it might just be a result of that. **Toronto comics seem to get angry and frustrated with crowds more easily - except they are the older more bitter comics not the young ones. Perhaps its not a regional thing but who you're exposed to and the amount of time you've been in the business.** [CODED FOR REGIONAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PERFORMERS] I'll need to keep a closer watch on what happens when a comic is not doing well and how they handle it...

COMMENTS: *I did notice in the research that followed that there was a difference by region/city - but amount of time spent in the business did also have an effect on how patient the performers are with the audiences and how they respond to them when things aren't going well.*

Spring 1997

We ran into one of the comics in the bookstore today, its spring and there's all kind of talk about auditions and the Festival and who got what already (without an audition). **Some familiar names came up - basically if you were represented by one of the JFL guys, opportunities seemed abundant. It reminded me that at this time of year,**

every year the tension rises, there's more gossip, and more back biting. [CODED FOR COMEDY COMMUNITY - COMPETITION]

Summer 1997

The Night Nobody Laughed. The crowd was pretty big for a Friday night these days. There was a large group of guys for a stag party. One comic, now living in Toronto had recommended a sketch group from Hamilton to headline. The club owner apparently booked them without seeing them first. I didn't work last night, but I had heard they were pretty unbearable to watch. Turns out, they were actually impossible to watch. **We went from 80+ in the room to two before the show even ended! I've never seen anything like this before. The openers were good, the crowd seemed into it, they were drinking. And then it all went very very bad. They opened with a couple of chuckles from the crowd who were still riding the waves of the previous acts... but then, silence. SILENCE. People had expressions of disbelief on their faces, then anger, then sheepishness as they went out to the 'bathroom' with their coats in hand.** [CODED FOR UNSUCCESSFUL SHOWS] The worst was when the guy in charge of the stag called me over for a forth time asking me what the hell was going on? That someone on the phone had assured him that they'd be funny (The clubowner), and now their night was ruined. One of the senior comics stepped in and gave the guy a free pass for 20 to any other show. That made him pretty happy, but when the party stood up in the middle of the performance to leave, that was the kiss of death... I hear the club owner is going to make the comic who had recommended them (who was just supposed

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to MC), headline the rest of the weekend and the 'sketch team' will open the rest of the weekend.

COMMENTS: This story was not about an unsuccessful show for a lone stand-up comic, but rather how a sketch troop didn't work (for various reasons). However, it made me begin to wonder about the audiences' expectations at a comedy club. Sketch acts can tend to have a longer build with fewer funny bits in between; more of what one would find in a theatre. This is actually quite British where the audiences will wait for the punchline(s). But Canadian audiences seem to have less patience in the clubs for getting to the funny bits - perhaps this is due to exposure the speedier American version of set-up-punch, set-up-punch.

Summer 1997

The nest wasn't busy for the first show tonight so I took off and went up to see the first part of the Montreal show at Club Soda. I ended up standing in the back next to one of the producers from Canadian Televison. One comic kept cruising past, making small talk. I could tell she just wanted to speak with him. **I guess he saw me as neutral, and I ended up chatting with him about each act as they came on. Come to think of it he didn't say anything negative the entire night about anyone really. I wonder if that was a political move or if its just his nature. [CODED FOR PRODUCERS] Some of the LA people who I'd met at the Delta spotted me in the club and was amazed that I was also a waitress. Its weird having a badge because you're supposed to be a**

'somebody' but then they find out you're 'just a waitress'.[CODED FOR

METHODOLOGY]

FALL 1997

One of the comics went WAY over time again tonight on the second show - everyone

was pissed-off. I went up to the front pretending to be serving a table, made eye

contact and pointed to my watch - he wrapped it up five minutes later... It's a shame

because he wasn't doing that well - it was almost as if he wasn't going to get off stage

until he won the crowd over. Not only was it painful to watch but it added another

20 mins to the show! The comics get really angry about this, but their respect for

the show means that they won't interrupt the performer by turning off the lights etc.

Everyone was really sarcastic with him after, or wouldn't even talk to him. He left

early. [CODED FOR ETHICS AND COMMUNITY]

Spring 1998

I drove the guys to a show in Brampton. It was in a theatre. The drive out was fun, but

one comic wanted to stop every hour or so for a smoke, since I wouldn't let him smoke in

my car. He was bouncing off the walls (literally, I was afraid we were going to veer off

the road). Lots of laughter on the way out. The theatre was sold out - we were backstage,

and as we came in, one comic made a comment that it 'smelled' like every other dressing

room he'd ever been in. I didn't 'smell' anything... I decided to stay backstage rather

than watch from the room. The crowd wasn't into the opening act off the top and we were

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wondering what was going on. Then he said his line about "I'm from Quebec, but I'm not a separatist -" The crowd went nuts - complete applause break BEFORE he delivered the punchline " Yes - I'm the one" After that moment he had them. The others went on to DESTROY. **The majority of the crowd were caucasion, middle-aged plus, with the occasional 18 - 30 year-old.** [CODED FOR DEIFFERENCES IN REGIONAL (VENUE) AUDIENCES] Afterwards, we went for a bit to eat (at Kelsey's) and they had a bit of a post-show revelry. They were on top of the world. One of the comics made a special effort to include me in the discussion - made me feel really welcome.

Sudbury

I've never been so cold in my life. Drove up with some comics for the weekend, -50c. Lovely. The hotel has the club located right in it and there's a mall attached as well. We borrowed a laptop for the weekend and I'm working on transcribing some interviews. One of the comics knows some guys from the Canadians (hockey team) up here and keeps going out to meet them each night after the show. He doesn't make breakfast a lot. The shows are going really well - **Another comic spends a lot of time talking with the club manager about other acts - apparently this guy really knows what he's doing,** [CODED FOR PRODUCERS] **the club physically reminds me a bit of the old Hamilton club.**[CODED FOR VENUES] All the shows were very full - the audiences are 'eager' and definitely out for a good time (they'd better be because I'm sure its too cold for their cars to start after they leave, so their in for the long-haul!) **I didn't notice a huge change in the material that the guys were presenting. There was a laid-**

backness to them and no one used any French references, except in Quebec bashing, the crowd got into it somewhat but didn't seem to care all that much about it. [CODED FOR REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN AUDIENCES AND PERFORMERS] One comic was under the impression that some rules had been broken because two of the comics had not booked through Yuks, The headliner just asked if he could book his own openers and the manager said ok. Apparently, this might cause problems down the line with Yuks. [CODED FOR PRODUCERS]

Ottawa

I was going to meet my partner and some other comics who were finishing a tour in Ontario at Carleton University. He was with two other comics whose girlfriends I knew, I arranged to bring them along. So off we went the three of us - it was very strange and the first time I'd really entered into some weird 'culture' of the comics' girlfriends circle.[CODED FOR COMMUNITY] The show, as usual at Carleton was in the University bar. The place was fairly packed but by the time of the show, the first few pitchers of beer had already been consumed. The first two acts really struggled to get the crowds attention - the back of the room was completely uninterested and the front of the room moved between a level of mild and medium interest all the way through. Ahhhh well, they still got paid. One comic looked extremely disappointed, they just weren't into him at all. I think he was looking forward to some intelligent audience members and ended up with drunks instead. Afterwards, we all got an upgrade to executive suite at the hotel - it was massive, with two toilets, a full

kitchen etc. Grabbed a bite to eat at Nickels. The mood was somewhat subdued. None of them were happy with how it went. [CODED FOR UNSUCCESSFUL SHOWS AND DIFFERENCES IN VENUES]

1997

One of the comic's girlfriends went onstage for the first time tonight. Her material was actually quite good. Apparently the comic had real issues with his girlfriend entering his territory.[CODED FOR COMMUNITY] She's quite clever, trained to be a lawyer but never did her bar exam. Her material was quite masculine, making no references really to being a woman much at all. However, when she got offstage, one comic said to her (jokingly) "hey sweetie, lower the shirt and hike the skirt!" I should have asked her what she thought of that comment. [CODED FOR GENDER DIFFERENCES]

Consent Form

This is to state that I agree to participate in a program of research being conducted by <u>Anna Woodrow</u> as a part of her Doctoral Dissertation, under the supervision of <u>Professor John Jackson</u>, Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Concordia University.

I have been informed that the purpose of the research is concerned with Canadian comics' experiences in different locations across Canada and the U.S., looking specifically at how they act as 'links' between the various audiences they encounter. The research is an informal, taped interview, which will take approximately 40 minutes to an hour depending upon the interview.

~I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time without negative consequences.

~I understand my participation in this study is CONFIDENTIAL, the researcher will know, but will not reveal my identity *but that all my comedic material will be accredited*

~I understand that the data from this study will be published.

~I understand the purpose of this study and know that there is no hidden motive of which I have not been informed.

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

NAME (please print)_____

SIGNATURE_____

WITNESS SIGNATURE_____

DATE_____

I would like to have my copy of the transcript mailed to:

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