"Support Live Comedy"
The Public Discourse of Amateur Stand-Up in Montreal

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A Thesis
in
The Department
of
Sociology and Anthropology

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Social and Cultural Anthopology) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

March 2016

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

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Entitled: "Support Live Comedy: The Public Discourse of Amateur Stand-Up in Montreal"

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of :

Master of Arts in Social and Cultural Anthropology

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

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Abstract

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This thesis represents an interpretive ethnography of amateur stand-up comedians in Montreal. The main themes explored include the performance of identity, the formation of community and the creation of public discourse. The stand-up comedians in question are predominantly young people living in a liminal state between university and "real life". In this world without the responsibility of a career or a family, these comics are free to create and present an identity of their choosing through their material. In doing so, they not only create a new persona, but also earn entry into a community of peers, and create an emergent, public social space. In this social world outside of the general public, they enjoy a state of *communitas* with reduced social restrictions and boundaries between individuals. Attaining a place in this liminal space is seen as an end unto itself, and even comics with "bad" material will return to the stage again and again for the sake of belonging there. The amateur comics of Montreal push the temporal boundaries of their liminal state, refusing re-entry and "aggregation" to the general public. In doing so, they create new parallel publics- operating beyond the expectations of their society, but refusing to actively rebel against them.

Acknowledgements

With enormous gratitude to the following people:

To Dr. Anna Woodrow, who taught me everything I needed to know about comedy, and knew all the right people to talk to.

To Dr. Sally Cole, who was ready with the fastest comments ever written by a human being, and with kind words and advice at every step.

Above all to Katy Pflanz, who reminded me of the difference between a wink, a twitch and a mock sheep raid. For bottomless and unconditional support. Without a doubt, my favorite person.

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Introduction

This thesis is an ethnographic portrait of the amateur English-language standup comedy scene in Montreal. In the following pages, I will explore the ways in which young men and women build careers for themselves in a vocation that combines artistic expression with the economic demands of the entertainment industry. Rather than analyzing jokes, I will focus on the performers, and specifically the ways in which their performances and personal interactions serve to create a public discourse and social space. Additionally, I will discuss the relationship between performers, their audience and the general public outside of their scene; which will itself demand a discussion of what makes an amateur, a professional or an audience; what are their intentions, their obligations, and their desires?

My work is not a general survey of comedy or comedians. I work exclusively on amateur comics, working in Montreal, in the English language, during a period of study from early spring 2015 to winter of the same year. By localizing the study to a narrow spatial and temporal area, I believe that I will be able to give a more complete and thorough portrait of the people in question.

Given that this study is intended to be primarily ethnographic in nature, I have opted to follow an interpretive framework based on the main objective of building personal understanding. The primary tools that I employ in my field work are participant observation and interview. Over the course of several months, I observe comedy shows in various venues, coming to understand the practices of comedy and simultaneously watch the comics in their element. Next, I identify individuals to seek out and interview. Finally, by email or in person I

conduct several ethnographic interviews in order to compliment my observations from the field, and add local knowledge to my own outsider perspective.

Theoretically, my work is rooted in a few major concepts. The most important one, is the literature of publics and counter publics. In this area I have relied most heavily on Michael Warner, for his concise yet thorough explanation of how publics are formed and sustained, and how they are given meaning by their authors. In my observation of comedians I have searched out ways in which they create publics and police their boundaries. I have also found several ways in which they challenge the very definitions of public and counter-public which my study was founded on.

Secondly, I am also concerned with the question of what it means to be an amateur. Robert Stebbins (1979, 1990) has made a career of writing about amateurism, its participants, and the way it is understood-from within and without. The question of what it means to be amateur is highly multidimensional, touching on the economic, social and even spatial arrangement of the comedy scene. I have written extensively about the aspirations and inspirations involved in living as an amateur in a field where professional status is out of the reach of most.

The connecting thread that runs between these core theoretical concepts-publics and amateurism- is the performance itself. I have localized my study almost entirely to the rooms where comedy is performed- even most of my interviews were conducted in the bars and clubs where the shows take place. The home lives of comics are undoubtedly relevant to the study, but my research emphasizes the persona that they bring to the scene of fellow comedians- which is

not exclusive to the time they spend on stage. Comedians perform an identity for one another even when they are not under the spot light.

The thesis is organized in such a way as to emphasize the ethnography as its centerpiece. The chapters leading up should equip any reader with the appropriate theoretical/historical background to contextualize the interviews and observations that make up my work's core.

Chapter One: historical background

We begin, in chapter two, with a very brief history of comedy in Montreal. I draw largely from contemporary news articles, as well as the present day testimony of insiders who were there from the beginning. This chapter is largely devoted to the legacy of Ernie Butler, the undeniable father of comedy in Montreal, whose work still shapes the scene today, even years after his own untimely death. From the earliest days of Montreal comedy under Ernie, I have traced the genealogy of the two surviving institutions that remain in the city. This long, rocky and often sordid story informs the relationships that underpin the scene today.

Chapter Two: field site, data, ethics

In the second chapter, we begin setting the stage for the ethnographic material. I describe the venues in which the field work was conducted, and the ways in which I explored them. There follows a brief summary of the data I was able to source from my informants, my observation and my historical research. Despite a disappointingly small crop of interviews, I was able to establish a good number of email correspondences, and a considerable amount of first-hand observation, which turned out to yield a bounty of ethnographic data. Finally, there is a brief

exploration of the ethical nature of my work, including an examination of my own presence in the scene, how I affected the space, and how it affected me.

Chapter Three: literature review/theoretical framework

In chapter three I review the literature that informs my thesis, and the framework which I was able to build by incorporating these various sources. As previously stated, my chief theoretical influence was Michael Warner, and in particular his 2002 *Publics and Counter-Publics*. I explore other writers who compliment (or contradict) Warner, including Susan Dewey (2009), Donna Goldstein (2003) and Phillips and Cole of *Contesting Publics* (2013). The literature of amateurism is primarily the domain of Robert Stebbins, but I have also included nods to such theoreticians as Erving Goffman, the father of the modern discourse of talk.

Other theoretical landmarks include the work of Michel Foucault (1990) on "self-writing", and an exploration of what role self-creation and self-improvement play in the career of a comic. I address what it means to 'succeed' as an amateur comic- which also calls back the literature of amateurism and the professional-amateur dynamic that underpins the scene.

Chapter Four: Cast of characters

The first chapter of ethnography is devoted to laying out the major players in the world of amateur standup. The reader will meet the comics first, whom I have tried to describe both as individual actors and as a group. Their ambitions, their strategies for success and the relationships that bind them to one another are on display. The audience (often made up of comics) is described, with particular attention to the way in which the performer and the crowd share power in a comedy room. I also address the more peripheral members of the scene who are

nonetheless crucial to understanding the overall picture: the bartenders, the managers and the hosts who enable the shows.

Chapter Five: Marginal voices, standards and taboo

The next ethnographic chapter is devoted to a more nuanced exploration of the comics. In this chapter, we explore the comedians from marginalized backgrounds- women, ethnic minorities and LGBT people- and the ways in which they choose to integrate into or separate from the public discourse of comedy. This chapter touches on taboo language, networking between individual comics and between performers and management. By questioning the material that is acceptable or not within the professional standards of this amateur scene, we begin to understand the intentions that underlie the whole practice of comedy.

Chapter Six: Failure, self-writing and "why stand-up?"

Chapter seven, being the final ethnographic section, starts to tie up loose theoretical ends. We finally address the question- "why standup?" through the unlikely medium of failure. This chapter focuses on the phenomenon of comics bombing on stage as a microcosmic representation of the whole scene- with an eye towards explaining the goals of a comic, the intention of the public they create and the "voice" of this multi-faceted public. Here I argue that standup performance is used as an entrée to a parallel public, where individuals engage in a ritualized form of self-creation in order to claim membership in a welcoming public outside of their "real life" worlds.

Chapter 1: Historical Background

English-language comedy in Montreal had no permanent home until 1979. Up to this point, there were only comedy shows hosted in bars and clubs, typically set up by promoters. One of those promoters, Ernie Butler, was in the business of liaising between comics and club owners to set up single-night shows. After several successful years in this line of work (and holding a day job in restaurant management) Ernie decided to open a full-time comedy club, which he christened 'Stitches'. Although it has changed location many times, and changed its name as well, Stitches' descendants have watched several other competitors open and close over the years.

Within a few years, Stitches, though highly popular, had closed its doors. Relocating from Crescent Street, already choked with bars, clubs and music venues, it found a new home on Bishop. This was the first incarnation of the Comedy Nest, later to relocate several more times before arriving at the Forum, (then the Pepsi Forum) where it resides today.

In Anna Woodrow's 2001 doctoral dissertation, ("Why are they Laughing?") she referenced an unspoken, but unbreakable boundary between comics who performed at chain venues, such as Yuk Yuk's (a Canadian chain of comedy clubs, based in Toronto but now operating in multiple provinces) and comics who worked at locally owned venues. In present-day Montreal, there is no such conflict, because the comedy chain franchises that have appeared have all died swift and painful deaths. The first Yuk Yuk's in Montreal opened in 1980, in direct competition with the original Stitches.

A former comedian and local business owner named Dean Borok (whose main claim to stardom is being the illegitimate nephew of Nobel Prize winner Saul Bellow) published a colorful account of this conflict on a website for amateur authors known as Hackwriters. He claims credit for closing down both the original Stitches and the fresh-faced newcomer Yuk Yuk's. His account describes biased reporting, threats of armed violence, and revoked liquor licenses- although it must be said that I can find no corroboration of this story today. To the point, though, Stitches was closed shortly after Yuk Yuk's arrival. Within the year, however, Yuk Yuk's had gone the same way; closed in the face of bad local press, and left in retreat in Toronto. A news article referred to Yuk Yuk's founder Mark Breslin as a "friend' of Ernie Butler's, who never wanted to compete with him for business. Friends they may have been, but when opening a club in such proximity to an existing comedy venue, Breslin could only have wanted a competition.

Since 2013, there have been two further attempts to plant a Yuk Yuk's franchise here. The first, a high-end space in the Rialto theatre complex was announced in the Montreal Gazette in late 2013. Boasting ticket prices of $25 for a show (compare $15 at the Nest, or $10 for students) and valet parking, the club lasted just a few months before closing in ignominious defeat. A second location opened some time later on Mackay street- mere blocks from the Works and still less than a ten-minute walk from the Nest. Despite making a brazen bid for the business of the two more-established venues, this Yuk Yuk's was soon dead and buried as well. An unforeseen outcome, however- the Comedy Works was gone along with it.

In Spring of 1990, Jimbo Skomorowski opened the Comedy Works. Located upstairs from a full-time bar, (then christened Jimbo's, now known as the John Doe) Comedy Works is today staffed by veterans of Ernie Butler's original establishment. He is remembered with

fondness there, as is his daughter Silver, who inherited his business after his untimely death of cancer in 2007. The Comedy Works, which is today alive and well, was driven into temporary closure in 2014 by slow business. At the time, Jimbo cited a lack of parking as the main cause- the nearest municipal parking lot was taken over by a block of condos at an inopportune moment. He stated in interviews that he had lost the business of all his suburban customers. Let us not forget, however, that the 2013 Yuk Yuk's franchise had ample parking and lasted not even 3 months, as compared to the first Comedy Works' 24 years. Other informants have indicated that Jimbo closed his business shortly after his own mother passed away, indicating that he may have had reasons other than purely financial ones for the closing.

The temporary closure (much lamented in the English-language press at the time) meant that for a brief period, the Comedy Nest was the *only* full-time Anglo comedy venue in Montreal. In February 2015, new management revived the Works, in the same building though heavily renovated. Jimbo, described to me as being "embittered" on the comedy scene, no longer has any association.

While the tumultuous competition between full-time locations has been underway for nearly 40 years, there are numerous part-time locations that have been quietly sustaining Anglophone comedy for even longer. While these businesses are very much a background concern in any press coverage (normally not even warranting a mention), many of my informants will identify them as their favorites if prompted. Locations like Burritoville (also on Bishop Street), the Blue Dog Motel and the Shaika Café (both located in NDG) host weekly, monthly or other irregular shows- often with a specific theme. Maclean's, my main venue of study, is one such location.

Macsimum Comedy is the name of the weekly show hosted at MacLean's. This low-key event hosted by an amateur comic every Sunday night was launched in late 2013. Interestingly, it was the brainchild of a bartender at Maclean's, who later became my friend and informant. Since fall of 2013, she has organized the shows and booked the hosts. Macsimum comedy showcases between 10 and 15 amateur comedians in a night, and it has become both well-known and well-loved among young performers today. It is not uncommon for Mac's to host roasts of comedians by their peers- sometimes as a surprise for the roast-ee. These are popular with the talent, and serve as a microcosmic example of the kind of group bonding that happens at this venue.

There is a certain contradictory nature to the way people talk about English comedy venues in Montreal. When the Gazette announced the opening of the 2013 Yuk Yuk's, the headline was "Yuk Yuk's joins Montreal's Busy Comedy Scene". The article also referred to the Works and Nest as "going strong" in this "busy" industry- while the Works was soon to close. Montreal is a city of nearly 4 million, of which roughly one fifth are predominantly Anglophone. There is also a staggering number of foreign students and transplants from other provinces, most of them English-speaking, to feed into the audiences of comedy clubs. Only, the struggle to fill 100-250 seats is brutal.

The Just for Laughs festival has contributed to the image of Montreal as a city with a thriving comedy scene. But it is important to note that this perception does not translate into easy work for the comics, promoters, or other professionals who make their money, or their careers in comedy. In fact, many of the amateurs I met would tell me how difficult they found it to get time on stage.

Just for Laughs, which on its own web page calls Montreal "The Funniest City in the World", evokes few warm feelings from the amateur comics who live here year-round. The festival, which launched here in 1983, was originally a French-language event. The following year, the first Anglo comedians were added to the roster, chosen with the assistance of Ernie Butler himself. It now attracts thousands of tourists every year and routinely hosts A-list comedians. Most of the events under the JFL umbrella are located in theaters across the city, including the Theatre St Denis, located in the predominantly francophone Plateau neighborhood. Several of my informants went out of their way to point out that *none* of the featured acts are locals. It had crossed my mind, early in my study, that appearing in a JFL event might be an ambition of some of the young performers I spoke to. There is a perception among them that JFL is interested only in attracting American tourists and does little or nothing for the people who are working hard in the city's home-grown venues. Not a single one of my informants cited performing in JFL as an ambition.

Chapter 2: Field Site, Data, Ethics

In this chapter, I will explore the methods used to gather data during the course of my study. It is important in this case to describe both the original plan for data collection and the eventual outcome. I will describe the changing nature and objectives of the study as it progressed from a coursework assignment in early 2015 to the completion of fieldwork in the first days of 2016.

2.1 Research Plan and Data Collection

The original plan for field work was a two-stage process. In stage one, I would attend performances at different venues. I would be observing the comics and the behavior of their audiences. Mostly, though, this stage was intended to provide me with a list of potential informants, whom I could later interview. In the second stage, I would contact the comedians I had observed, and arrange to meet with them for hour-long face-to-face interviews. This was intended to be the primary phase of the research project, and to take up the majority of my time. In practice, it was almost the complete opposite.

This format was adopted after the project's haphazard birth during a 600-level course in winter of 2015. The project came into being as a result of a participant observation exercise followed by an interview exercise, which were thematically similar. I found that merely by observing a show in a very small, under-attended comedy venue, I had granted myself a measure of access to the comedians who were performing. Attending a show that typically sees few or no

non-comedians in the audience invited a certain level of appreciation (from the comedians and the organizing bartender), bordering on outright gratitude. It gave me both an "in" for introducing conversations with the comics (i.e. I saw your show last week) and also status as someone who was essentially *on the side* of the comedians. It is not uncommon to hear the phrase "support live comedy" from a show's MC, and without ever intending to do so, I had aligned myself directly with the comedians' interests in this regard.

Thus, my two-step model was born. I saw a show, I noted the names of comics, I reached out for an interview and attained one. Once I adopted this topic as the subject of my thesis, I (initially) saw no need to revise this model, since it had been effective thus far. So, this became my formalized plan of action.

At my supervisor's suggestion, I attended the same show at the same venue eight weeks consecutively. This was a way to acquaint myself intimately with the location, and the performers, and to begin to identify patterns of behavior. Seeing these shows was originally supposed to be a kind of preparation for interviews-meant to provide the bulk of my data- but late in the process it became clear that more information was coming from participant observation that from my informants' direct input.

The questions I composed were founded on my understanding of Robert Stebbins' PAP (performer, audience, public) complex. I wanted to get a better understanding of what an amateur stand-up comic's career trajectory looked like, but contextualized by the relationship between that individual, the people who received their performances, and the broader public that both performer and audience belonged to. I hypothesized at the outset that stand-ups had, at open mic events, created a kind of safe space, internally governed, in which to test material and grow

professionally. What I wanted to understand better was 1) who was active in the creation of that space (i.e. was the venue's management involved, and how closely? Is there a system of seniority or prestige that lends weight to a comic's opinions over time?) and 2)by what means are the space's boundaries created and maintained? In a space that lacks physical boundaries, what are the mechanisms used to police membership and personal conduct?

At every stage, I made an effort to keep my questions simple and straightforward. I also tried to ask questions that were incremental, rather than jumping too quickly to the heart of an issue. This was my mechanism for keeping my interactions as comfortable and conversational as possible, while giving my participants reasonable room to re-direct the question. I did not want to leave my questions completely open-ended, but at the same time I feel that any honest reporting of my observations must be couched in the informants' opinions *in their own words*.

The main objective of my study is to describe the social space in which amateur stand-up careers are built, thickly and accurately, with an emphasis on creating an understanding of how these people work. By understanding the people first, we may hope to better understand the way in which young people self-organize, rank and police themselves in the absence of financial reward or a managerial cadre to direct their efforts. Indeed, there are few forums as clear-cut and transparent for observing the act of self-creation (on a personal and communal level) as performing arts.

2.2 Venues

There was a long hiatus between my initial observation and interview, and the main research phase of my thesis. In July of 2015, I was prepared to start attending shows, taking down names and noting people of interest for potential interviews. It should be noted that at the

beginning of this phase, I still intended to rotate venues every week and draw comparisons. This never materialized, for reasons that will be explained below.

My study deals specifically with open-mic events, and I intended to rotate between and compare several different locations. It is not difficult to find a place that advertises open-mic comedy, however the definition of "open mic", it turns out, is somewhat flexible. So I relied entirely on self-identified "open" events. The difference between understandings of "openness" later became a major feature of my data.

I started in the venue where I had done my initial research, a bar called MacLean's in downtown Montreal. Maclean's is not a dedicated comedy club. It is an Irish pub, located just far enough from the Concordia campus to miss most of the student crowd. Their patrons tend to be middle aged, white, and Anglophonic. The building is divided into a ground floor, which is "MacLean's" proper, and a smaller area upstairs, which is technically known as "Mac's Lounge" and which serves as the venue for music and comedy. I spent very little time downstairs, and Mac's Lounge was the site of the vast majority of my work, both observing and interviewing.

Maclean's is located just around the corner from the busiest shopping on St. Catherine's street. However, it does not occupy a prestigious location. It shares a block with another bar, 3 fast-food restaurants and a small money-changing business. The front door faces a public park diagonally, but straight ahead is only the entrance of a parking garage. In the summer, their narrow sidewalk is taken up with small *Terasse*, but most of the year it is only occupied by a huddled crowd of patrons smoking cigarettes or cannabis. This sidewalk is typically icy and un-maintained in the winter, and during most of my research it was partially or entirely obstructed

by a long-term road construction project and scaffolding on the neighboring building. It is not uncommon for homeless people to panhandle near the front door.

After my main observation phase (which consisted of an 8-week period over Summer of 2015), Mac's Lounge cancelled its open-mic comedy event. Shortly afterward, it was revived in a slightly-updated format, under a new organizer.

After time, I decided to start branching out to other locations in order to draw some comparisons with my main area of study. There is another standup venue which offers an open-mic night weekly, a few blocks west of MacLean's, called Burritoville. However, Burritoville's open mic event was cancelled for most of the time I was conducting fieldwork, precluding me from gathering data there. I had intended at one point to do a great deal of observation at Burritoville, especially because of their self-description as a "Co-op de solidarité". The concept of unorthodox management seemed like a welcome element of a study on self-creating communities of amateurs, but unfortunately I never had the chance to explore it.

Foiled by Burritoville's unavailability, I instead observed shows at the Comedy Works and Comedy Nest. These two venues, once a single entity, are both located downtown. The Nest is on the 4th floor of a major shopping mall, located on the Western edge of Shaughnessy Village, a neighborhood primarily occupied by students in cheap apartments and affordable restaurants. The Works (as they are colloquially known) occupy the upstairs space of a restaurant-lounge called The John Doe. They share a manager and owner, but operate independently. Mac's Lounge, by contrast, has no autonomy from its downstairs neighbor and shares a wait staff and kitchen.

Of all the venues that feature in this study, the Comedy Nest is the only one which does not advertise itself as a restaurant or offer actual meal service. The Works and Mac's Lounge both share a building with a full-service restaurant, and particularly in the case of Maclean's, it is clear that the restaurant's interests take priority over those of the comedy club. MC's, for instance, give warning when the kitchen is closing, and dutifully remind customers of food and drink specials. The Works does not serve food (except for chips or popcorn) but their advertising is typically joint with the John Doe's. This may be because their name and reputation are so well-known (being one of the oldest comedy clubs in Montreal) or it may be a case of the more-profitable restaurant/bar taking priority.

The Comedy Nest is almost invisible from the street. It is located in a large building, which physically dominates its neighborhood, but which gives little hint that it contains a comedy club. Inside, there is signage pointing the way up one elevator, or two escalators, or 4 flights of stairs, to the front entrance. The flyers on the street entrances to the mall advertise upcoming shows, but they make no mention of food (they serve only bar snacks) or drink specials.

It is a very small venue, and the space is carefully managed. New arrivals are greeted by a ticket vendor (typically a manager fills this role) then shown a seat by a host or hostess. The room is carefully arranged to maximize the number of seats available in what is, physically, quite a small space. Notably, the room is rectangular and the stage is on the center of one of the long walls, maximizing the number of seats which could be said to constitute a "front row" and making it so that no one in the room is further than the second row. There is a forced physical intimacy with the performer that the other two locations do not demonstrate. It is also the most evenly-lit location, offering very little opportunity for crowd members to be obscured in an ill-lit

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corner. Some audience members (myself included) take refuge in such places, for fear of being chosen as part of a stand-up's crowd work. The Nest's set-up also offers no privacy in which to scribble notes or discretely email oneself field notes on a smartphone.

The Works has a space roughly the same size, but in a square-shaped room, meaning that only one table is "front row". This table is so close to the stage that a person occupying a chair there is close enough to literally reach out and touch a stand-up giving a performance. Unsurprisingly, I have never seen these seats occupied. The room is darkly lit, with banquettes lining the left and right walls. Waitstaff circulate between the tightly-packed tables, although there is little room to move; it would be extremely difficult to leave discretely during a show.

MacLean's, despite the fact that it is not a dedicated comedy venue, is the largest of the three. The entrance is at the top of a narrow staircase, and immediately at the top there is a jukebox- typically playing loud music, overlapping with the televisions on the walls and mounted behind the bar. Normally the bar is filled, as are the tables at the back of the space. Towards the front of the room, the tables are almost always empty, sometimes even during the show. The tables are long, seating 8 people, but typically occupied by no more than one or two. The omnipresent dread of crowd-work is apparent in this arrangement.

The stage in Maclean's is quite low, less than a foot. In addition, it is located in a corner of the room, and only about 15 feet from the bathrooms. The bathroom doors, perpetually kept open, allow the sound of the hand blower to drown out comics on stage. The room is clearly not designed to accommodate performers.

After the re-launch of the open mic comedy shows at Maclean's, there was a modest re-organization of the room. The tables were re-arranged from a grid into a circle, surrounding the

stage and dressed with small tea candles in mason jars. Certainly not a drastic change, but it was nonetheless a gesture indicating that the room was purposed for performances, not purely to be a bar room. The previous arrangement seemed to show great ambivalence towards the occupants of the stage. While the room's physical organization was clearly not geared towards facilitating the performances, it should be noted that the open mic shows were always paired with an extended happy hour for the duration. Most of the comics who took part made ample use of the discount, and I suspect that Maclean's turned a healthy profit from the event.

2.3 Collaborators, Correspondents, Informants

It is difficult to say, with any accuracy, how many people were involved in my study. Given that most of my time was spent in participant observation, watching shows and hanging around the rooms that host them, I naturally spoke to quite a few people. The majority of my contacts were comedians, although I also became friendly with some staff members at the bars and clubs where I was making myself apparent. The bartender of one venue is still on friendly terms with Kate (my fiancée and constant companion during my research) and myself. This bartender was invaluable in making connections, securing interviews, and better understanding the comedy scene from the inside- given that she has worked inside the scene for many years and been instrumental in organizing some events that are still active today. Besides her, I spoke to a venue manager and 10-12 standup comedians. Of those comedians, I was able to do follow-up interviews with five.

Of the 5 interviews I conducted, two were handled in person and audio recorded. It had been my intention, originally, to have ten such interviews. I later found that it is very difficult to secure them. I believe it is also somewhat illustrative of the individuals, and the spaces which I study. Open mic events rotate between locations constantly, all over the city, and the amateur comics follow them. There was no permanent place to reach my contacts, and the irregular schedules that their work forces them into only complicated things further. Here is the typical process by which I attempted to secure an interview.

First, I would see a show and take down the names of the comics I had watched. From that list, I would weed out anyone whose jokes I had completely forgotten. That typically left me with 4 or 5 names. I would take this short-list and go to Facebook. Typically, most or all of the people I had selected would have publicly visible pages in their own names. Some would represent themselves as "Public Figures" on Facebook- a feature whereby a person can represent themselves more like a business, or other organization's page. It lacks "friends" and instead has individuals attach themselves as "followers". I found that the vast majority of the people whom I sought out used personal Facebook pages, in their own names, with no privacy enabled whatsoever. Most of them also use their pages to promote events where they will be appearing, or else to publicize friends with upcoming shows.

At this point, I would send a message to the stand-up in question, using a form message that I composed. I wanted to seem friendly, conversational and unthreatening. The message follows.

Hi [recipient], my name's John Basile. I've been interviewing Montreal-area standup comics for an anthropology thesis I'm writing at Concordia University. Do you think I could email you a few interview questions some time soon and just get your thoughts on a few things? Very informal type of deal, no hard feelings if you're not interested.

Best, John

In retrospect, it is clear that my own hesitance and self-consciousness had taken priority over my interest in securing an interview. At this stage, I also hoped that an email exchange could transition into face-to-face interviews. This never happened. Once this became clear to me, I removed some of the recrimination from the last few lines of the form message. That is, "Very informal type of deal…" to the end. With those lines deleted, I immediately saw a spike in responses. After this point, I still only had six people who agreed to an email exchange and *actually took part*. The number of people who agreed (often enthusiastically) and then vanished was perhaps twice that number.

Why my numbers were so low is still not entirely clear to me. I attribute it mostly to an overly-timid method. I suspect I would have done better to approach comics directly and pose questions *at shows*. However, there are several complicating factors to doing so. First- alcohol and drugs are omnipresent and heavily used. This is problematic, both in the sense that the interviews may not be fully coherent, and that sitting down and talking to a stranger is highly unappealing compared to the opportunity to sit alone and drink or go outside to the sidewalk to get high. Furthermore, there is a question of informed consent. Interviews hinge on a subject signing away rights by approving a consent form- and their ability to consent while impaired is questionable.

Secondly, there is an enormous amount of noise and activity in a bar holding a show. I would not generally be able to hear my subject without shouting before a show, and during a show, I would be actively disrupting the performance. Also, the Comedy Nest and Works are small, intimate, and open their doors only immediately before a show. That is to say, not an appropriate venue for a conversation.

The end result is six email exchanges and 3 face-to-face interviews, set in an ocean of participant observation notes. That being said, the individuals I (finally) spoke to were extremely forthcoming and open with me and I will be forever grateful for their time and their honesty.

I was pleased that I could contact a fairly diverse array of individuals. The Montreal comedy scene I observed is overwhelmingly white and male. I have no hard data to illustrate this point, due to the constantly revolving door that is an open-mic show, but there are conspicuous notes in my jotting book to the effect of "everyone was white"… "no girls tonight", and so on. Among the people I worked with, I variously spoke to a semi-professional black woman in her early 40s, a recent Concordia graduate who once performed an entire show in the character of "Captain America", a young man from Toronto who had spent a year in the Arctic to finance a career in stand-up. Undoubtedly my most helpful informant is a young woman of about 30, born and raised in Montreal, who is a self-described "geek" about her own Catholicism. In a scene where jokes regarding religion are mostly non-existent, she wears that identity proudly and gets fairly good laughs from it too.

2.4 Ethics and Self-Reflection

The research which eventually grew into this thesis began in the Winter of 2015, using a system of ethical guidelines which I later expanded for use in this thesis. At the time, it seemed to me that the most important rule to follow during observation was to minimize my presence in the room. There was a fear on my part (not entirely invalid) that being too overtly visible could result in a disruption of the show, or an alteration of a comic's material, once they were aware that they were being recorded. A summary of those guidelines follows.

1. My research will remain covert to the greatest degree possible. I will make sure to take notes in such a way that I am unnoticed by the performers and audience. I will make myself inconspicuous to the greatest degree possible, and avoid direct involvement in the performance.
2. I will not record the performers' material in specific terms. This will keep me from mis-representing the jokes (potentially saddling a performer, albeit anonymized with a 'bad joke' that they did not earn).
3. I will not publish the names, or any specific identifying details of the performers or audience members.

I found almost immediately that these guidelines were not practical in the field. Most importantly, I found that the first guideline (remaining covert, unnoticed and inconspicuous) is not only extremely difficult to pursue, but also constitutes a disruption in and of itself. What I did not immediately appreciate is that a person being 'minimized' in a space like Maclean's essentially means sitting in silence and entering notes on a phone. The room is too dark to hand-write, so a phone's memo function is the only alternative. To the outside observer, this does not look like a person blending into the background, so much as ignoring the show and texting.

Another element to this first guideline is that, although it is not printed above, I intended to prevent myself from offering any "pity laughs" when a comic was facing a silent room. This too, proved untenable. Often I found that Kate and I were the only two people in the room whose faces were visible (or semi-visible) to the performer. When a joke didn't land, their eyes would immediately snap to us, and it would be more disruptive (and arguably even cruel) to withhold the pity laugh in the interests of showing impartiality. Silence in a room can stop comics dead in their tracks, cause them to abort a joke halfway in, or fall into a panic. Pity laughs are inauthentic, but they are essentially an act of mercy.

I was able to adhere to the second point much more closely. Even after several months of observation, my notes on jokes typically consists of only a few lines here and there. The jokes that I chose to record were selected based mostly on their effect on a crowd. A particularly icy silence or a warm laugh, or a heckling was typically enough to warrant inclusion. That being said, the purpose of this prohibition was mostly to avoid slipping too far into the deconstruction of jokes. I am not interested in the nature of humor. I worried also, that I might accidentally attribute a bad joke to one comic or another, and thereby tarnish their reputations or impugn their professionalism. In actual practice, I encountered none of the possessive, jealous attitude regarding jokes that I anticipated- nor did I find that these comics considered themselves necessarily 'tarnished' by having told a bad joke. I have made sure to anonymize the people I worked with (as per point 3) as a safety measure against misattribution, but no one I spoke to seemed to share my concerns.

The risks, overall, to my informants were very few. I will point out that in the scene I observed, there is very little money changing hands. Amateur stand-ups, by definition, do not draw their livelihood from this vocation, and the level of comedy I observed was typically done

with no pay at all. Participants in an open-mic show receive no money, and the MC's receive only minimal pay. I know of at least one individual who agreed to host a comedy show in exchange for free beer, *at his own suggestion*, in place of a paycheck.

The main risks, therefore, come from the potential rifts, either personal or professional, that could be opened by comics' unflattering comments about one another. For the most part, this does not seem to be an issue. I found, in fact, that most comedians described each other warmly, at worst with a certain practiced neutrality- 'damning by faint praise', as it were. It has been said, and rightly so, that comedians love to talk about themselves. The flip-side of this truism, I have found, is that they are reluctant to discuss *one another* in any detail. During the course of my interviews and my correspondences, my informants were always reticent when it came to their peers. I could occasionally extract a general statement about comedians, or about the scene as a whole, but any discussion of specific individuals seemed to bring a sudden halt to otherwise casual discussion.

There is a slogan, often heard in the opening remarks of a show's MC- "Support live comedy." I suspect that this reticence I encountered, when it comes to identifying specific colleagues (especially as regards misbehavior) is an outgrowth of this sentiment. One does not "support live comedy" by sacrificing fellow live comedians to an acquaintance with a notebook and a microphone. I was never able to penetrate this boundary, but I suspect, looking back, that I was never going to- nor should I have. The resultant commentary, therefore, is more reliant on my own observations as an outsider than I had originally anticipated. I feel that I have still made an honest accounting of my informants' voices- but in a study about people building community, and organizing themselves around displays of artistic talent and merit, this is a major limitation. The community is made of individual performers, and merit is difficult to gauge when most

individuals focus single-mindedly on positive commentary. This is not to say that these things were impossible to ascertain through personal investigation, only that this unspoken taboo should be acknowledged as a limitation of the work that follows, and an ethical obstacle.

There were a few instances during my observation that I came across material that was either overtly sexist or racist, that would reflect very negatively on the performer behind it. This was comparatively rare, and almost always met with a cold, unamused audience. Still, despite the appeal of "naming and shaming" said comics for their behavior, anonymity applies universally in this study. This was, I found, one of the few areas wherein comics were willing to call one another out. Speaking to a venue manager later on in the project, I was told that it had been decades since "offensive" humor had much traction here. Therefore, there is some doubt in my mind whether this willingness is based on a defense of anti-racist/sexist values, or a backlash against hack comedy. It might be both at once.

As one can imagine, in an open mic setting, there is no shortage of incompetent comedians. From the aforementioned few who attempt shock humor (roughly 30 years after that particular subgenre's prime) to the woefully under-prepared or overly-drunk, there is bad comedy to be found every night. It is an integral part of the open stage. I find it is a natural reaction to take more note of bad acts and failures, than of the mediocre majority or even the upper echelon who are able to truly command a room. However, the understanding of what makes a 'bad' is highly individualized- and seems to depend on personal emotional reaction, as much as any standard of professionalism.

I willingly acknowledge that there are some comics, whom I observed for months in their element, that I simply came to dislike. The repetition of seeing the same set, 8 weeks

consecutively, coupled with my own mounting frustrations- with a failure to secure interviews, among other things, resolved into a visceral reaction against several individuals who make up part of the group I studied. As my investment of time and effort mounted, I increasingly began to feel that comics who took the stage unprepared, unrehearsed or simply without the raw talent to carry a 5-minute set were wasting my time. I had come to study comedy, and much of my time was being spent watching newcomers wallow through painful episodes of easily-preventable awkwardness on stage. Of course, in hindsight, these experiences become valuable data. In the moment, I often experienced them only as a drain of valuable time and money. I suspect that other audience members may have had a similar reaction, but I feel compelled, ethically, to account for my own emotional disposition.

Wherever possible, in following chapters, I have limited myself to labelling an act as 'bad', 'cringe-inducing', or otherwise negative, as based on a generalized audience reaction. I acknowledge that, as a part of the audience, my reaction is an integral part of any moment I describe. However, I also acknowledge that I am a *single* member of that audience, and I should not color the reception of a comic's performance too heavily with my own personal sentiments. To do so would be the same kind of ethical faux-pas as misattributing a 'bad joke'. After all, comedy performance is a highly emotional act, and the emotions of dozens of people are in play, not just my own or the comedian's. I have tried, therefore, to account for as much of the room as possible at any given time.

Chapter 3: The Literature of Comedy, Publics and Performance

Before I review the literature that informs my work, let me briefly address the literature that *does not* inform it. I have chosen not to engage with the question of what is funny, and what constitutes a "good" or "bad" joke. The literature on comedy is old and abundant but ultimately not the subject of the study which I performed. The psychological process by which jokes are written, heard and understood is beyond my scope. Instead, I have chosen to address the experience of stand-up comedy in several ways: First, as a kind of social interaction comprised of talk; Second, as an exercise in self-writing, and third as a means of building a social space in emergent publics.

3.1- Interaction, Talk, Amateurism

From the outside, a standup performance can appear to be a solitary experience. There is typically one person on stage, and the room (ideally) will be silent except for the sound of their voice. It is crucial, then, to establish that comedy is indeed an interaction, and then to define the parties involved and what roles they play.

The central figure of any stand-up act is of course the stand-up comedian. For the purposes of this study, I have focused specifically on amateur stand-ups, working in Montreal, in the English language. To help identify the amateur stand-up, one should first explore the nature of amateurism. I have relied heavily on the work of Robert Stebbins (1979, 1990, 1992), who has devoted his career to an impressive literature of amateurism. At the crux of this phenomenon, however, lies a very simple distinction. According to 'common sense definitions', an *amateur* is

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someone who performs a vocation, and receives 50% or less of their total income from doing so (Stebbins 1979: 23). Stebbins himself has developed a more in-depth set of criteria for what makes an individual 'professional' based on 7 categories-Producing an unstandardized product, holding a wide knowledge of a specialized technique, having a sense of identity with their colleagues, having mastered a generalized cultural tradition, having an institutionalized standard of quality, emphasizing standards over material reward, and being recognized by clients for their expertise. (Stebbins 1979: 24) Given these qualities an amateur, he writes, is able to measure his or her own success against the standards of a professional in the same field.

An amateur is distinguished from a *hobbyist* by the fact that an amateur performs work which can also be a career, whereas a hobbyist's vocation is not typically found as paid work. (Ibid 34) Therefore, a stamp collector is a hobbyist, whereas a subway busker is an amateur-since there are many career musicians, but there are no job listings for people who acquire stamps.

This distinction, which may look like a piece of minutia at first glance, is of vital importance to my work. Stand-up comedy requires a great deal of preparation, including time and effort spent composing jokes, and lobbying for stage time, even before arriving at a show. In my experience, shows that welcome amateur performers (open mic events and similar low-level events) typically involve a great deal of sitting and waiting punctuated with 5 to 7 minutes of fear and intense scrutiny by a roomful of strangers. There is more unpleasant work, to be sure, but the people I study have chosen to give their time to this vocation despite the fact that they do not make a living at it- and the fact that they almost certainly never will. Naturally this raises important ethnographic questions ("why standup?" being the obvious one) but there are theoretical concerns here too.

The most common scholarly answer to "why standup?" in recent years seems to focus on resistance or the subversion of social values. In a 2009 paper titled "The interactional Context of Humor in Stand-Up Comedy Venues", psychologists Scarpetta and Spagnoli identified standup performance primarily as a kind of social interaction between individuals which is more functional than artistic in nature. This rather clinical paper takes the view that comedy performance is a way for a performer to "maintain a positive identity" relative to others while simultaneously availing themselves of a kind of safety valve for "unsafe" speech that they are compelled to express (Scarpetta and Spagnoli 2009:210). Comedy, in this model, is used as a shield of plausible deniability for ideas that are socially unacceptable. There is a focus, also, on shaping one's act to accommodate an audience's real or imagined prejudices and expectations. The study was conducted in Los Angeles and focused on predominantly-white and predominantly-black audiences, which are treated as fixed, permanent publics which receive jokes with a set of predetermined reactions.

This patterned behavior which characterizes interaction between audience and performer was also the subject of Kathe Managan's "Words to Make You Laugh?" (2012). This paper is a sociolinguistic analysis of sketch comedy in Guadeloupe, a French overseas territory with an ethnically diverse population of natives, European transplants, immigrants from neighboring islands and Afro-Carribeans. Rather than dealing with the one-to-one exchanges between the people on stage and the people in the crowd (or at home watching a sketch on DVD), Managan cast the performance of comedy as a kind of exercise in group solidarity. She identified the sketches as reaching out to Guadeloupe-born people of African extraction, to the intentional exclusion of other ethnic groups. The comedians perform formulaic sketches, using stock characters to appeal to a sense of shared social normality that their listeners hold. Managan

describes her listeners at home, remarking to each other about a sketch they enjoyed, and discussing the characters by name as if they were old friends. In short, the experience of comedy was themed just as much on the sense of belonging to an in-group as it was on outright laughter. I later observed this exact phenomenon in my own work.

To Scarpetta and Spagnoli, though, the comedian is the main beneficiary of the interaction. They model their material to be "acceptable" to the audience, but ultimately their motives are personal and their performance is a kind of individualized self-expression. The desire to express personal ideas and opinions that are stifled in the general public is undeniably a part of a comedian's experience, but to my mind this study omits a very important side of the experience. While comedians *are* performing material for personal reasons, the medium of that performance- talk- binds them to their listeners; the experience of speaking, I argue, is not fully understood without accounting for the person listening.

Susan Seizer's 2011 *The Unmentionable: Verbal Taboo and the Moral Life of Language* is a similar look at the performative effects of a joke. Seizer, who specifically addresses road comics and the use of obscene language, seems to share the view of stand-up as an experience that is primarily resistant to outside forces. Whereas Scarpetta and Spagnoli treated social expectations in a more general sense, Seizer has localized the object of resistance as the FCC (Federal Communications Commission); the broadcasting authority in the United States responsible for 'bleeping' bad language on television.

The state's restriction on obscenity, she argues, has elevated swear words to a new and special status, outside of normal speech. The legal implications of swearing on U.S. television have created a division between "clean" and "dirty" comics- based exclusively on the use of a

list of arbitrarily- chosen words. She points out that a comic's physical gestures are rarely policed in the same way, and the various sexual and scatological concepts that are connoted by the FCC's banned words can be intimated transparently without provoking any official response. Therefore, the comic who elects to "work dirty" and use his or her full vocabulary is in fact performing an act of resistance against state interference. There follow several transcripts to illustrate this point, which give the reader a good grasp of the words used and precisely none of the social/emotional context of the scene.

There is a tantalizing moment of humanity in the article that comes when Seizer addresses why her informants chose to do standup comedy. She says that despite being passionate about their work, many of them still "can't fully explain" what it is that gives their work its appeal (Seizer 2011: 8). She leaves an open door to a broader literature here, regarding the careers of standups and how they understand their work- but it is foregone here in favor of a rather 2-dimensional assessment of comedy's performative effects.

This is precisely the thread I have followed in my own research. My intention has been to break with the general trend of 20th-century research in identifying comedy performance as literary, i.e. primarily composed of text (and subtext) expressed aloud as jokes. This is undeniably an important element of stand-up, but perhaps one that is reaching the point of redundancy in our contemporary literature. Furthermore, an overly-minute examination of the text of jokes seems neglectful of the wider social context being created. James Thomas (2015) quotes Deleuze and Guattari's 1987 work *A Thousand Plateaus* in arguing that there can be no permanent, well-defined boundary between joke and joke-teller, audience and performer. That is to say, a study of one without another is inherently incomplete, since they are all part of the same, "rhizomatic" assemblage of social forces, bodies and ideals. (Thomas 2015:2) When a

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comic is performing jokes, he or she is also performing the social context of their scene. What other authors have identified as a sense of community to be modified, reinforced, or even mobilized, I argue, is not a discrete entity from the performances or the act of watching those performances. I performed my fieldwork according to this principle, and it seems to stand up well to the scrutiny that comes with lived experience.

The entanglement of artists and their audiences is described by Stebbins (1972) as a P-A-P, or Professional-Amateur-Public complex. Stebbins' formulation is based on a more literary understanding of amateurism than one based on lived experience and emotional reality. He says early in his work *Amateurs* that his relational definition of amateurs vs professionals comes from a comparison of several dictionary definitions. He composed this model and carried it into his fieldwork, rather than observing and building a model from his own data.

The Professional-Amateur-Public complex, however, is his own creation which defines the balance of power in the standup scene. Stebbins identified 5 relationships; first, professionals and amateurs alike serve publics and receive monetary rewards. Publics also provide artistic feedback, "role support", and sometimes participate actively in the performance- for instance when a hapless audience member is the victim of crowd work (being chosen by a comic to participate in a joke). Finally, the audience's limitations help to shape the content of a performer's act, a by-product of the artistic and monetary feedback which they offer. (Stebbins 1972: 25) These relationships define how the public influences professionals and amateurs. But there is also a complex interplay between the two categories of performer.

In Stebbins' scheme, professionals offer an ideal type of vocational excellence, and thereby set the standards for their amateur subordinates. The amateurs, in return, maintain a more

generalized knowledge of what appeals to publics, and keep the professionals- who are primarily concerned with earning their income-in touch with their demands.

These ideal-typical relationships were in the back of my mind throughout my research, and I found that many of them were confirmed. However, the group I study seems to have far less contact with professionals than in the ideal version of Stebbins' model-and far less reverence as well. There is a certain assumption in Stebbins' work that amateurs enter a field on their way to becoming professionals- and similarly that professionals who are in a state of decline can backslide into a state of amateurism. This supposed directionality was at the very heart of my ethnography, and I was surprised to find that it actually has little resemblance to the way my informants see themselves today. Nevertheless it was an important framework to have as part of my work, if only to see the various ways in which it conflicted with lived experience in the field.

3.2- Self-writing, Success, Ambition

An understanding of "success" in the field of stand-up comedy was one of the main objectives of this study. However, it has proven very difficult to define with any degree of authority. I can, however, give a brief outline of the theoretical concepts which informed my inquiry. Amateur pursuits, at least in the sense that Stebbins describes them, are generally unpaid or low-paid. This is not to say, however, that they lack a sense of progression, of hierarchy and personal advancement. There are, after all, a tiny handful of performers who rise up from the rank of amateur to professional (both in terms of income, and public recognition). Undoubtedly, this fleeting chance at financial reward is a motivating factor for many of the people involved. However, all signs indicate that there is a much higher value placed on personal fulfillment and artistic reward.

My first informant described her time on stage in highly personal terms, as a way of bettering her own routine and finding new ways to express her own ideas. Whereas I went looking for an account of dialogue between her and her audience, what I found was in fact a kind of monologue with the audience's laughter offering modest reinforcement, but never rising to the level of central concern. The emphasis on personal betterment calls to mind Foucault's discourse on "work on the self" (Foucault 1990). I propose that amateur performing arts constitute a kind of public presentation of Foucaultian "ethos".

Ethos, to Foucault simultaneously refers to a set of personal standards and the work done to attain them. I propose, therefore, that the act of performing stand-up strongly resembles the Foucaultian model of "self-writing", wherein one engages in ritual acts of discourse as a way of embodying ethical standards. More specifically, then, I propose that stand-up performance

closely resembles Foucault's pre-Christian (i.e. Greco-Roman) model of self-improvement through self-reflection. (Fornet-Bettancounrt et al. 1987: 117) Meditation, writing and training (*Meletan*, *graphein* and *gumnazein*) are the three main practices that define this approach, and all three are present in the daily practice of amateur stand-ups. Meditation, (which more literally refers in the Greek to preparation against future trials) and writing are present in the act of composing new material. Performance, night after night, in the face of indifference or discouragement is a form of self-training. The reward of these practices is the attainment of freedom, the expression of truth and a more equitable balance of power between oneself and one's peers.

These terms sound a little overwrought or even a little melodramatic when referring to half-empty bar rooms and college students telling jokes, but the theory itself is undeniably relevant. To return to Robert Stebbins, I entered into my study with the expectation that newcomers would want to emulate, then surpass their predecessors. I did come across several interviewees with high expectations, who anticipated a step up from Montreal to the national, continental and even global stage. But they were very much the exception. Far more often, I would hear that a person wanted to fit in with their peers in comedy, to match their level of skill. It should be made clear that these people were not talking about financially matching more experienced comics- indeed the desire for a paid gig seemed low to non-existent. Furthermore, I heard very little mention of surpassing anyone else. Finally, and in direct contradiction to Robert Stebbins' P-A-P complex, there was no pretense of imitating professional comedians. The young amateurs I met who were just starting out understood themselves as belonging to a complex made up entirely of other amateurs. Professionals were remote figures, with no direct relationship to themselves or their immediate peers.

In 2001, Anna Woodrow wrote that young comedians in Canada start out full of optimism and ambition, only to be constrained by the relatively low ceiling of success here, as compared to the United States. (Woodrow 2001: 180) These new upstarts fell into places of subordination to more experienced comedians, out of a desire to not make enemies- and 15 years later this desire is still in place, and overwhelmingly so. My informants consistently had positive things to say about their peers; at a bare minimum they avoided open negativity. I have also observed a homogenizing effect in the content of the jokes performed on stage. Individuals whose personal lives I'm familiar with will take the stage and do a set in a persona that is totally contradictory to the actual nature of their day to day lives. There is a strong gravitational pull towards material that is self-deprecating, self-effacing, minimizing any potential social or professional advantage that could be inferred by one's colleagues. I have seen gainfully employed staffer at a TV production company take the stage and do jokes mostly about sitting at home spending the afternoon eating Pringles. Other comedians open their sets by poking fun at the less-than-prime time of the show (I observed many Sunday-night shows) as a way of diminishing the fact that they are early in the lineup. This is an important distinction, since a show on a Sunday night is never full to capacity, and one can imagine how the audience has dwindled by the time the last performer takes the stage at 1 AM. An informant told me once, self-deprecation is the "easiest way to get a laugh" in Montreal. I submit as evidence that I was one of *perhaps* five non-comedians in the room that night.

Danielle Russell's excellent 2002 paper addresses self-deprecating humor as an instrument for female comedians. The article addresses the ways in which women comedians negotiate a stage persona. Comedy, Russell finds, is inherently aggressive. It requires that one person stand alone and dominate the attention of a room full of strangers and maintain control for

the duration of their set. Audiences, on the other hand, can feel threatened or off-put by a woman failing to perform her gender role in the manner they expect. Traditionally, she writes, "Male space is public, female space is private" (Russell 2002: 5). The mere act of taking the stage is already a violation of designated male territory. Therefore, the female comic is faced with a dilemma to either lean into the aggression inherent in the performance, or to present a non-threatening persona as if to soften the blow of taking the stage that is normally held my men.

The approach favoring overt aggression is a dangerous one, since audiences typically want to be made to feel at ease. Russell quotes late night talk show host, Johnny Carson, wherein he says he was willing to "take it" from a harsh, outspoken man but that a woman doing the same just seemed to be "too much" (Russell 2002: 7).In my experience, I have seen far more women opt for a self-deprecatory persona on stage. Despite the fact that this has been a traditional defense mechanism of female comics against gendered social pressure, my participant observation revealed that intense self-deprecation has now become prevalent among men as well; at least among the people I study.

3.3- The space, the public

Public discourse says not only 'let a public exist', but: Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world this way. (Warner, 2002:82)

Recalling Deleuze and Guattari, I submit that the elements of the English-language comedy scene, its comics, audiences, venues, and even the jokes and gestures that the performers employ are inseparable. I could not have studied what it is to be a comedian without also coming to an understanding of the rooms where comedians perform, or the crowds that receive their material. It has been my job, accordingly, to try and explain (after Michael Warner) what the comedy scene's character is- how it speaks, and how it has been made to see the world.

This has been a particular challenge because of the nature of the scene's physical spaces. Montreal has 2 full-time comedy venues (sometimes ballooning to 3 when a Yuk Yuk's location has its doors open) but over a dozen part-time rooms. I observed 3 such spaces as part of my study, but within each space there can be a variety of shows. Just as an audience can limit the boundaries of a comedian's act- so can the nature of a show dictate the make-up of the audience. The Comedy Nest offers a "Newbie" show every Tuesday- an open mic intended to showcase new talent. Every Wednesday is "Comedy Lab", a different open mic show where all the participants have to tell jokes around a pre-determined theme, and a monthly show called "Open Michelle" which is intended to have an all-female line-up. Having attended all of these shows, I can attest that there are three very different audiences. The day of the week, the anticipated quality of the comedians, and the gender-makeup of the acts will attract a very different group of people.

Beyond these social factors, there are also material concerns to address. Some shows require a door fee, whereas others are free of charge. Many clubs employ bouncers or doormen to control the entrance of patrons. There may be drink minimums other encouragements to dispense money once inside the venue. Any of these would introduce an element of physical control to the space in question. In the spaces I study, however, all of these are essentially absent. MacLean's, the room I spent the most time in, does not even charge a door fee. Whereas the Comedy Nest and Works charge around $10 for a show (still a very modest sum), Maclean's is literally open to the general public. There is no system for reservations (available at the Nest but rarely necessary) and no one on hand to physically eject a disruptive customer. The minimal wait staff (which varies between 0 and 1 depending on the night) is not insistent about the purchase of food or drink, and I've been able to nurse a single beer for the duration of an open mic show in the past.

Lastly, we should consider the ways in which the comedians secure their stage time. Full-time rooms have a sign-up system that requires a performer to email ahead and request time on a given night. [12] A staffer at the venue has to read, review and vet the applications before calling back the individuals selected to take the stage. The Works, which gauges crowd reactions to crown a winner of open mic events, even has a system in place that precludes previous winners from performing the following week. By contrast, the sign-up system at Maclean's consists of a clipboard with a sheet of ruled paper on it. Starting 2 hours before a show, anyone can write their

[1] http://comedynest.com/newbie-tuesday-pro-am-wednesday/ The Comedy Nest's Open Mic policy, retrieved February 2016.

[2] http://www.comedyworksmtl.ca/pages/open-mic-night The Comedy Works' Open Mic policy, retrieved February 2016.

name on the list and when the lights go down at 10:00 or so, the MC will start calling names, no questions asked.

Together, all of these factors will influence not just the "voice" of the public discourse being performed, but also what Warner has termed its "circulation". (Warner, 2002: 20) Circulation, in this context, describes the pattern by which a discourse finds publics. A periodical that is released every week will be distributed to its subscribers, and form a new public with every one of them who chooses to actually open it and read it. However, those same readers will then be empowered to re-create a version of that same public if they re-tell a story they read, lend the periodical to a friend, or cite a passage from it in a research paper. A venue with no reserved tables, no door man, no door fee, no booking agent or vetting process for applicants has a far more erratic circulation.

A public is created in the instant that a discourse is presented to a person, and that person volunteers their attention. In this moment, speaker and spoken-to become co-equal participants in a social space. When the speaker stops speaking or the listener stops listening, that same public will vanish as quickly as it appeared. A listener, to enter into the space of a given public, only needs to turn his head and look at a street preacher, or glance at the headline of an open newspaper on the Metro. In this way, the role of audience has always been more easily entered than that of performer. Performers think, compose a discourse, find a venue and speak (or print, or dance, or find some other way of expressing themselves). In the case of part-time venues like MacLean's, however, the bar for speakers is extremely low. Show up, write your name, say your piece.

Who, then, is in control of a given public? After all to create a space is an exercise in power. Making *a* public requires a person to tear off a piece of *the* public (which comprises "a kind of social totality…the people in general" and all their space) (Warner, 2002: 2) and using it as one's own. In the case of the publics I study, the answer is often highly ambiguous. Nominally, the venue's management maintains control. They have the power to ban patrons, to withhold the space, to forbid an act to take the stage, etc. But in the actual experience, management is mostly invisible and rarely demonstrates any such authority. Control of a public is therefore negotiated between audience and performer directly.

As I have said, it is unusually easy to enter the role of "speaker" in this public, but it should also be noted that the parties who "listen" enjoy an unusual amount of power. A public dissolves when there is no attention being given to the speaker, but in this case there is more at stake than mere dissolution. As Warner writes, a public is made out of discourse- but in this case the discourse is not only used to convey a message (although this is definitely an important element) it is also an artistic outlet for the person on stage. When a listener withdraws their attention, or worse still leverages their position into heckling, or other disruptions, they have not only damaged the integrity of that public, but also devalued the artistic work of the performer. A comedy act is successful if it holds an audience's attention and draws laughs; informants talk about the joy and satisfaction that comes from pulling off such an act. But they also talk about the fear inherent in taking the stage, and the anguish that is caused by the inability to hold a crowd's focus. What Russell identified as an "aggressive" position on stage is also a position of extreme vulnerability.

Is this to say that the relationship between audience and performer is inherently adversarial? Not quite. Although there is fear involved in taking the stage, and a struggle for

power in the room, the relationship is far more complex. Let's return to the question of a public's "speech". A public, being made out of discourse, has a natural kind of intentionality to it. What these intentions are can be difficult to pinpoint. Let us also not forget that the stand-up scene in question in this study is not a single public, since publics appear and disappear at the time of performance. Rather, we are considering a complex of co-related but independent publics which are created under similar-but not identical-conditions.

It has been suggested by some of the theorists who inform this study, that laughter is primarily a force for sheltering the jokers and the laughers from some hostile outside forces- a harmful economy, an oppressive state, etc. (Goldstein, 2003; Seizer 2011)I do not contest that this is often the case. But I cannot find any evidence that the Montreal stand-up scene necessarily fits this category.

In favor of this idea, however, we must remember that the people who perform in this scene all have one major demographic quality in common. They are English-speakers in a sea of *Francophonie*. Montreal, despite being more linguistically mixed- and home to a large body of students and young professionals from English-speaking provinces and from the United States- is still often a hostile climate for people whose mother tongue is English. The OQLF, (Office Québécois de la Langue Française) a state apparatus used to drive English-speakers into subaltern status in Quebec, is frequently cited by English-language publications such as the Montreal Gazette for menacing English business owners for minor infractions of the Province's language code, Bill 101.

However, if this linguistic pressure is a driving force behind the desire to take part in the process of comedy, it is not readily apparent when one is actually at a show. Jokes about

linguistic issues are rare, bordering non-existent. I suspect that the potential feelings of solidarity produced by English performance are drowned out by two major factors- the fact that standup comedy, in a global sense, skews heavily towards English speakers. Second, the Just for Laughs festival has become a majority English-language event. The face of Montreal comedy, to the outside world, is English. Locals may complain about under-representation in JFL, but that doesn't change the fact that outsiders see a fertile English comedy scene when they flock to the city every July. Good comedy punches up, not down, and I believe that the comics I study see themselves as part of a global English-language art form which is currently dominant. They may be a *local* linguistic minority, but in this vocation, they belong to a strong majority.

Beyond their linguistic status, there is a credible case to be made that the average comic typically has an unstable economic situation. The people I have seen on stage fall overwhelmingly into what I would term the peri-university. That is to say, many are full-time students, many more are part-time, or taking time off from a course of study. Still more are recent graduates and drop-outs; people who are no longer formally part of the university, but who have not settled into careers and still live on the physical and social margins of the University.

There is not just a social link, but also an economic one inherent in peri-university life. In this era of student debt, many of the people who take the stage are in excess of 30 years old, and still in the process of paying off undergraduate loans. Large, long-term debts both indicate financial instability and serve to perpetuate that state of affairs. They are a very common topic of jokes at open-mic shows.

Donna Goldstein's 2003 *Laughter out of Place* may be the best recent example of how comedy is used to create a safe space for dissent. Her informants are the women of a Brazilian shantytown, and following James Scott (1985) she understands their discourse of mockery as a "weapon of the weak", used against an uncaring and violent society. Phillips and Cole deal with a similar topic in 2013's *Contesting Publics*. More specifically they write about feminist movements in South America, and the ways in which social and political space, what Warner would term a counter-public, can be formed from and defended against the broader public. Across these two examples, however, I find a major point of difference between the discourse of these groups of informants and the people I have studied. I recall Michael Warner's distinction between public and counter-public. A public is inherently normative, that is to say that it operates on a system of social normality (he terms this "pragmatics") which is both imagined to be in line with the normality of *the* public and which is offered to the listener. By this I mean that the speaker seeks to pull his listener into a system of normativity. A counter-public, by contrast, does just the opposite. The speech of a counter-public is predicated on the assumption that its norms are contrary to the values of *the* public. Under this assumption, a counter-public identifies and seeks to change one or more values of that presumed set of norms.

I contend that the discourse of the stand-up scene which I have witnessed cannot possibly be claimed as a counter-public. I concede that the discourse is often used to identify social flaws-for instance paralyzing student debt, a stagnant job market, or a lack of space for people educated in liberal arts rather than business or STEM fields. However, the jokes that ensue from this awareness are not typically aimed at a broader system (*the* public) but rather turned inward; a product of the widespread culture of self-deprecation. A joke's topic may be subversive on its surface, but generally by the time the punchline arrives, the audience is not laughing at the

absurdity of the system, but the (self-ascribed) stupidity of the comic who took part in it. Therefore, I can only conclude that this line of humor serves to reinforce the ideal of the imagined social norms of the public, not to attack them.

Referring back to Phillips and Cole, I believe that there is a more specific category which we may apply to understand the standup scene. They cite Susan Dewey's 2009 "Dear Dr. Kothari…" an article which coined the concept of "parallel publics". Dewey takes as a case study the advice column "Prescription" from a popular women's magazine in India called *Femina*. Desperate readers write letters asking for personal advice, often concerning issues of domestic abuse and other forms of gendered violence. The advice column is used as a way to address the problems that women face in their home lives (relegated to the Habermasian "private" sphere) without ever turning its attention to attacking the foundations of those problems. In this way, the discourse of this column denies itself status as a counter-public, but Dewey marks it out as still a separate entity from the discourse of the general public of India, which was at the time of her writing deeply unsympathetic to women who suffered from domestic abuse.

The category that emerges, therefore, is the parallel public. It is therapeutic to women abandoned by their society's public discourse to have an outlet and a source of advice. This care runs contrary to the uncaring trend of the larger society, but does not fundamentally undermine it. Consider also that the reader of the magazine and writer of the column never meet, and typically the writers are anonymous. Their discussion is circulated to thousands of readers who may feel emotionally connected but never see the faces of the people involved. In this way, the relationship defies categorization as a "private" one, or as a one-to-one social interaction. I

believe this is the best description of the social spaces which I have observed: individualistic, but observed by many. Anonymous, yet intimate. Contrarian, perhaps, but never rebellious.

This curious position that my informants occupy closely matches Victor Turner's description of the liminal state in *The Ritual Process* (1969).The condition that I have termed "peri-university" can be understood as a kind of liminality between the life of a student and the imagined life of an adult. I specify *imagined* here, because I hesitate to apply a single, blanket definition of adulthood. The adulthood I refer to is the one made up of the elements that my informants shun in their sets: stable careers, marriage and parenthood. Many adults live without these things, but these are the trappings of collectively-understood adulthood as it exists in the standup scene.

A liminal individual is a person outside of their own society. They have abandoned the attributes of their pre-liminal identity, and they will not gain a new set until they re-enter the general social order. This means the social expectations, the rights, privileges and obligations of their pre-liminal lives are stripped away all at once. Thus people who exist in a liminal condition are both highly vulnerable (lacking social protection) and also unrestrained (lacking social demands). It is what Turner calls "a blend of lowliness and sacredness" (Turner, 1969: 95). In practical terms, the people I study, in the spaces of the comedy scene, are not bound by a fixed social identity. I know people who are, in a literal sense, bankers, husbands, mothers of teenagers, or fathers of newborns. In their performed social identities in the marginal space of comedy, they do not bring any of these attributes with them.

On one level, this is a necessary part of comedy. One's performed identity must be less complex than their day-to-day identity because one cannot express the entirety of their lived

experience in a 5-minute session. On the other hand, the stripping away of identifying

characteristics is freeing on a personal level as well, and may be desirable beyond its usefulness

as a stage persona. Given that these personas are seemingly necessary to function in the comedy

scene, they could even be understood as a kind of *habitus*, after Bourdieu (1990). This

assemblage of attitudes, patterns of speech and behavior is useful when it comes to getting

laughs- but it is also the key to social integration with the other members of the scene; something

which my informants consistently refer to as a major objective within their careers.

What makes this arrangement interesting is not merely that my subjects seem to live in a

liminal space between youth and "adulthood." Rather, what interests me is the apparent effort to

strain the boundaries of traditional liminality. I have said that liminality excludes people from

social expectations. This is true, except of course for the expectation that one will emerge from

their liminal condition. In the original context in which the concept of liminality was used,

describing rites of passage, a person either emerges successfully at a higher social standing than

before, or fails and returns in shame to their lower rank. I posit that the pattern of behavior I

observe in the comedy scene represents a kind of rebellion against the directional nature of

liminality.

In brief, liminality is bounded both socially and temporally. Socially, a liminal person is

neither the person they were when they stepped out of society, nor the person they are intended

to become when they return. Temporally, liminality begins when the person leaves, but by

definition they are scheduled to return at some point in the future. One cannot enter a state of

passage (and indeed Turner calls such people "passengers") without a destination. The 35-year

old banker with stable employment and a young family, who performs jokes about smoking pot

and meandering aimlessly through life is performing a kind of liminality without normal

temporal boundaries. They enter at will, from a life in the post-liminal, aggregate world, and they occupy the space of liminality- which is typically directional and oriented towards adopting a new identity- with no conclusion intended.

This is not so much a question of prolonged adolescence as it is a kind of experiment in re-ordering social space. The university grads who have not adopted careers enter liminal space with an ending in sight. That person will re-emerge not as a youth and a member of the university, but as an adult with a career on the other end of this directionless time. However, a combination of infertile economic conditions and personal reluctance lead many individuals into a condition where they are not working towards an emergence from liminal space and into aggregation, but rather towards the indefinite occupation of the margins. The effect I have noted above, wherein comedians adopt a homogenous stage persona that shuns displays of responsibility, the accumulated outcome of numerous individuals trying to carve out a living space in the liminal world.

Chapter 4: Cast of Characters

The story of this project is the story of me sitting in a darkened room drinking beer and scribbling in a notebook. I conducted 8 weeks of research at the same show, sitting for between 1 and 4 hours watching amateur stand-ups rotate across a small, over-lit stage. Then I moved into a stage of comparative research, attending shows at full-time venues, with more experienced comics and more stringent rules about who got stage time. Different space, different table, same dim lights and same pint of beer in front of me. All comedy venues serve Shocktop beer. I never learned why.

It is my intention to conjure the other occupants of these darkened rooms for you, in the most honest and complete way possible. I hope that in doing so I will be able to build a greater understanding of this community of people, who might otherwise only be seen as the personas they present on stage. The following sections will explore the lived experience of the amateur comics- both new and experienced- as well as the staff and management who surround them in their element. The bartenders, busboys, bookers and managers don't conceive of themselves as belonging to the same social group as the comics, nor vice versa, but their symbiotic relationship was immediately made clear in my first few hours of observation. I will begin with a description of these various characters, before moving on to deeper cuts.

The Comic

"I'm turning into a joke I tell about myself. So I'm quite comfortable."

These are the individuals with whom I spent the most time. At one point, I intended to study comics exclusively- before I realized how crucial the other members of the scene are. After all, a comic without an audience is just a person talking to themself. The comics I understand best are the amateurs who ply their trade at MacLean's. These were the people I set out to study. Most of them are in the very early stages of their career. Of my informants, only a few had been in the business longer than 2 years, and some of the accounting when it comes to the duration of a career can be slightly fuzzy.

To be clear, when I refer to a comic's "career" I am referring to the time during which they are regularly seeking out and obtaining stage time. Some of my informants reckon their careers as beginning when they started *writing* material. I do not mean to de-value this stage of the comedy process- since there is no performance without written preparation-but until the written jokes are performed on stage, I see their creator as only a kind of potential comic. Stebbins writes that an amateur may attain professional status through hard work and self-improvement, but that it is the fate of most professionals to eventually slide back into amateurism. There seems to be a similar revolving door for the comics I study. I don't believe that the short careers of my informants are outliers, or that they are indicative of a sudden upswell in the number of young people adopting standup comedy. Rather, I think it constitutes a pattern of early burn-out for many amateur comedians.

Anna Woodrow's 2001 thesis contains numerous references to the emotional negativity associated with the maturation of young comedians in Canada. After an initial rush of

excitement, there is a natural slide into a kind of stagnation as the low ceiling of Canadian comedy becomes apparent. None of my informants seemed to have an estimate on the average 'lifespan' of a comedian, but over the course of my study I encountered only one individual with a claimed career of over 10 years. He was 31 years old, and had employment on the side as a model.

Indeed, there are moments when it seems as though a career in comedy and personal maturity are contradictory values. If one judged exclusively from performed stage personas, it would be safe to assume that the entire community of amateur standups consists of unemployed university drop-outs with collapsing personal lives and estranged families. However, if one scratches a little below the surface, it becomes apparent that there are actually much more diverse lifestyles behind the 2-dimensional caricatures on stage.

Most of my informants hovered between 25 and 31 years old. As previously stated, most are university-educated, although a surprising number of those are drop-outs or "taking time away" from a degree in progress. I have seen at least 3 different comics with Master's degrees, and two with PhDs. I can count only those comics who perform jokes about post-secondary education, but I suspect there are actually several more with higher degrees. Of the university students, Concordia has produced the most amateur comics, followed closely by McGill. Announcing one's alma mater on stage typically draws a smattering of applause, either indicating support or in mock admiration. One comic would start his set by asking if there were any fellow Concordia social science students in the audience and, hearing some modest applause (including my own) snap "Why are you applauding that? *Stop it*!"

A wide, but not overwhelming majority of the comics one sees are white and male. There is a healthy-sized contingent of women who are, I believe, increasing in number every year. In Montreal, there are quite a few Middle Eastern, South-Asian and Black Canadian comics currently active. Notably, I have only seen a single native francophone take the stage in all my months of observation. He took the stage with supreme confidence but may have lacked the English aptitude to carry off 5 minutes on stage. I recorded his first joke in my field notes. "How many Christmas dwarves it takes to screw a lightbulb?" He paused for effect. "As always, the exact number which Santa Claus dictate." I don't know whether this joke carries some different significance in French, but the room I was in went wild for it.

It is almost impossible to accurately quantify the demographic makeup of these comics, because of the nature of open-mic shows. There is no permanent membership in a community that forms every Sunday at 8 PM when you put your name the sheet of notebook paper containing the sign-up list, and dissolves at 2 AM when the last person wanders out of the bar. Thus, I am reduced to relativistic terms, but in context these terms may be the most honest.

` Although we have established in previous chapters that, on theoretical grounds, the publics created by the discourse of comedy are temporary, I still came into the ethnographic element of this project with the idea that there must be a kind of more permanent social network that lives behind the scenes. What I have found is that, contrary to my original beliefs, most of the amateur comics I studied do not socialize with other comics away from the actual shows. In fact, most of them had divided, internally, their 'life friends' from their 'comedy friends' (that being the verbiage that two of my informants had chosen to use,independently of one another).

One of the main questions I posed to all of my informants, both interviewees and correspondents, was whether they ever met with other comics to workshop their material. Not a single one of them does. One emphatically wrote to me that there is " …nothing worse for a comedian than another comedian trying material on us…once in a while is OK, but all the time just becomes annoying. At that point it's 'dude, that's what an open mic is for. Try it there.'" This comment illustrates both the non-existence of my imagined, behind-the-scenes social gatherings and the social importance of the open mic show. I had pictured comics gathering at each other's homes, or cafes, or other bars, to do their sets in a more controlled environment. It turned out that the open mic was the closed environment for testing material. And yet, for many of my informants this was also their *only* outlet for performance. Comedy for them was something performed exclusively for one's peers, in a room where the main objective was to "try something out."

Here is an important addendum to the statement that comics don't meet up outside of their venues. I have found that most of the performers in any given night at MacLean's *are* Facebook friends. After I observed a show, I would search for names I recognized on Facebook in hopes of finding a new interviewee. In the course of doing so, I found that there is a network of young comics who are all connected through social media- and who use that relationship to promote themselves and their peers. A frequent post that one sees consists of a message to the effect: "I can't make it, but check out this great show!" with a link to an event's Facebook page. Some comics will tag friends in these posts- both fellow comedians and outsiders, encouraging them to attend. Implicit in these messages, one can detect a certain sense of obligation, or even duty to attend. I cannot comment on the efficacy of these posts, but I can say that they serve as a public announcement of the digital relationships that bind comics.

As I have said, many of the comics I study act out a persona of perpetual unemployment or underemployment. While many of them are indeed in this position, I have found that many more have adopted it as a part of their act. The standups I know work in a variety of fields. There is a grocery store manager, a quality-assurance specialist, two teachers, and a busboy. Several other people acknowledged they had day-jobs but didn't elaborate, or gave vague indications (such as "science and technology"). I believe the reason behind this pretense of professional failure is, in very brief, that the audiences in small, part-time venues are so frequently made up of other amateur comics, sometimes exclusively. What began as a token bid to get a laugh at one's own expense seems to have spiraled into a self-sustaining complex. Conventional wisdom in the scene is that comedy is supposed to target someone more powerful than the teller of the joke. By putting oneself in a position of power (gainful employment in this case) one has distanced themselves from any fellow comics who sustain their act with humor about economic hardship. What's more, they have limited their own range of targets for jokes, and painted themselves as potential targets for their peers. None of these is conducive to a cordial relationship with one's colleagues- and let us not forget that these are people whose colleagues are sometimes their only audience.

Similar to failed professional careers, comics also love to paint themselves as the victims of failed relationships. Mercifully, it seems that the general standard of comedy has moved up from "take my wife, please"-style jokes at the expense of spouses and other partners, but settled comfortably on the ledge that is sexual inadequacy. Jokes about poor sexual performance and failure to get dates, sustain long relationships, or perform to the expectations of a spouse have taken the place of the 20th-century's jokes about nagging wives and unfaithful girlfriends. I know for certain that there are several comics working in the rooms I observe who perform these jokes,

and go home to stable marriages and other relatively happy relationships. One informant was married during the course of my fieldwork. He was gainfully employed and booking more paid gigs than almost anyone else in the room. His material centered mostly on how his rampant over-use of marijuana led him into various comical jams.

Dealing only with my informants' comedy careers, and not their day jobs, I was able to talk with people at many different stages of professional advancement. I saw several comedians take the stage for the very first time, and another one of my informants has (since the end of my fieldwork) transitioned to working in comedy full time at relatively high-caliber bookings. In accordance with Robert Stebbins' model, everyone who becomes a professional comic is an amateur first. Many of the amateurs I observed were starting to test the line between those two worlds. One correspondent wrote that he had moved from all open-mic shows to "50 to 70 percent paid gigs" with that number steadily increasing. Another young woman, who had been in the business less than a year, had just taken on her first job hosting a show, and shortly after was booked for several more (including at a full-time venue.) This move from unpaid to paid work was generally understood to be desirable, but when asked about what they got out of their work in comedy, it was far more common to hear informants talk about personal or artistic fulfillment than financial reward.

The Host

"This is the highlight of my week, but let's be honest, almost definitely the low point of my life. Am I right?"

Hosting is a thankless job; especially in a part-time venue. An open-mic show can run nearly 4 hours, and the host may be responsible for managing the sign-up sheet, which adds another 2 hours to their shift. Every five to seven minutes, the host is responsible for taking the stage, drumming up applause for the outgoing comedian, and introducing the next act. During this time they are additionally responsible for maintaining the crowd's enthusiasm (which becomes difficult as the night wears on), pronouncing a stranger's name correctly, and thinking of a short joke or a line to bring them on stage with. This may happen twenty times or more in a given evening and this is all in addition to the extra-long set the host is typically expected to deliver at the top of the show. Performing seven to ten minutes of material is a reward, but also a great responsibility that requires planning and confidence. Hosts do that, and then take over managing the flow of comics for the entire evening.

This management mostly takes the form of showing "the light". In a full-time venue, there may be a lighting booth from which a small light can be flipped on to signal the comic that his time is running short. At Maclean's this takes the form of an iPhone, with a timer counting down, being waved from the back of the room. Typically a comic, seeing the light, nods or gestures to indicate he or she has received and understood the message. Almost universally, comics respect their time limit and tailor their act accordingly. More than once, however, I have

seen hosts standing in the crowd helplessly flapping their arms at a comedian too absorbed in his act, too drunk or too stoned to comply.

Once a comedian leaves the stage, the host sees them off, typically with a hug or a handshake, and invites the crowd to give them some appreciation. This is not only an opportunity for awkwardness- missed handshakes are common and cringe-inducing- but also the crucial moment in which audiences are won or lost. Most people, even when irritated or unamused by a comic, will not stand up and leave while the stage is occupied by someone in the middle of their act. As the host is overseeing a transition, chairs are discretely vacated and the room can empty quickly. If the host commands enough attention, the audience members will remain in place, bound by their collective sense of politeness, or of obligation, or indeed both. Michael Warner (2002: 14) writes that a public requires its audience's attention to come into existence, but also that it must continually predicate fresh attention to sustain itself. The host, in this moment of transition, lives out that obligation in the most literal sense possible.

For all the trouble inherent in this job, obtaining hosting gigs is still seen as desirable. The host of a show functions as a kind of management within the performers' community, even if only for a few hours at a time. The word prestige may be too strong for how comics look at hosting gigs, but there is definitely the sense that one rises to that rank by being approved of by their peers- and by venue management. Venues hire the hosts of their events, but they have to do so with the understanding that they will be introducing their peers, and collaborating to keep an audience engaged in a show. A comic who wants to host must therefore be visible in the scene and demonstrate self-control and command of the stage to management. But they must also have the trust of their colleagues.

The Management

"Talk to Jimbo. He knows everything."

My understanding of management cannot compare to what I know about comics. I have read about them more than I've spoken to them. In a way this is representative of how their presence is felt in a comedy room- always invisible, but never forgotten. In professional venues, there are managers, who may employ assistants, as well as booking agents and promoters. Part-time venues have none of these. Indeed at MacLean's I have never seen any representative of management in the building. A small show late on a Sunday night may not warrant the attention of any managers.

Despite the fact that management is physically absent much of the time, we must not forget that they have a monopoly in several crucial areas. First of all, and most elementally, management is responsible for allowing the use of the venue for a given show. Part-time venues may host a show once a week, or even less- and the nature, and frequency of these shows depends on managers giving up space for the comics' use. In the 1970's, Ernie Butler would coax bar owners and managers into allowing him to stage shows in their spaces based on the guarantee of increased alcohol sales. However, in the case of MacLean's at least, holding a show means paying employees to staff it, when the space used (Mac's Lounge) might otherwise be closed altogether. They wager 4 hours of bartender/busboy wages against the promise of several dozen comedians at their tables- hopefully drinking excessively.

Full-time venues, naturally, do not face this dilemma, but there is still a question of how to apportion time and space for the various shows that use their stages. The Nest and the Works both host open mic shows and headline shows, with talent that is sought out and booked.

Headline shows are often themed, with comics booked who occupy some special niche- local acts, "clean" comics or "dirty" comics, etc. Open mics, by their nature, cannot be themed, and also cannot be advertised. When you don't know who is going to apply (or simply show up) you cannot print a poster.

Faced with this problem, there are a few remaining avenues to drum up business for open mics. The most straightforward approach is simply to offer a drink special. This is the case at Maclean's, which offers happy hour pricing late into the night. They also sell chicken wings and other bar snacks at reduced rates, perhaps with the thought that a cheap dinner will encourage people to come early. The Nest and the Works do not offer specials on open mic nights. They also do not open during the day or sell food, so their options for specials are limited by the brevity of their hours and selection. Their drink prices are not egregious- roughly equal with any sports bar in the same neighborhood; but neither are they an attraction in themselves.

The Nest (at least during my period of observation) was offering vouchers to anyone who attended an open mic. The one I have grants "1 Free Admission to Any Thursday or Friday 10:30 Show in 2015 or 2016!" Thursday and Friday are the nights on which they host professional comics. This flyer essentially lays bare the business plan of a full-time comedy club, when paired with the lack of discounted alcohol. Admission fees can be dispensed with (and they are, frequently) as long as full-priced alcohol is still being purchased. Much like a movie theatre, which draws its entire profit margin from concessions, the full-time clubs use the comedians as a form of advertising for liquor. It also keeps patrons in their seats for a guaranteed stretch of time, pressed too closely against other customers and the comedians on stage to make a stealthy exit.

Why, then, have the admission fee in the first place? It must only scratch the surface of the payroll expenses incurred by a show. I contend that charging admission establishes a kind of pay wall around the performances, which has several beneficial effects. First of all, it wards off customers who are not serious- which is a major boon to maintaining a modicum of respect at a show. If anyone can enter, then by definition, not everyone will be interested in the show, or in maintaining the decorum surrounding the show. Secondly, it establishes the prestige of the event in comparison to other competing shows. In what has proven to be a relatively infertile market, there is a constant need to establish premium status over competitors. Why should one choose Pro-Am Wednesday at the Comedy Nest over the Open mic show at the Burritoville co-op? Only one has comedians good enough to charge for. Will this line work on every potential customer? Certainly not. But it often works on enough people to fill 100 seats.

In addition to establishing a scale of more prestigious and less prestigious shows for consumers, the paywall also has the effect of dividing professional comics from amateurs. Most of the comics on Thursdays and Fridays- the "headline" shows- are not locals. They are full-time comics imported from Ontario, the Prairies, the West Coast, or (often) the United States. These are individuals who are known outside the circle of comedians that makes up the amateurs' world. The difference between them and an amateur can be quantified, at the Nest, to about $5.

This is not an indictment of comedy club management. Their profits come from alcohol, and the comedians are means to that end; but it would be short-sighted to say that there is something inherently callous or disinterested about the way they work. The corps of managers at the Nest and the Works today are local industry stalwarts- men who came up in the days of Ernie Butler, and weathered repeated closings, relocations and re-brandings, but stayed in the business nonetheless. One manager who sat down with me said he had been in the business more than 25

years in this city, and could name a long list of locals that he had seen come and go- business people and comedians alike. There was even a legal dispute over the naming rights to the Comedy Works before its 2015 re-opening. To me, this shows a kind of loyalty to comedy that many other industries do not enjoy. My friend the bartender who was promoted into management still used her social media presence (over 4,000 friends on Facebook alone) to promote shows every single day- even ones that are not hosted by her new employers.

The Bartender

"Shhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

A bartender's relationship to the room seems to be spatially oriented more than anything. At the Comedy Nest, for instance, the bartender is not much of a presence. One passes the bar on the way in to be seated, but during the show they are partitioned behind a black curtain. The Comedy Works does not separate their bar from the performance space, but most of the orders are taken and distributed by a small and efficient wait staff. The bartender never leaves a small prep area behind a counter, and cannot mingle with the crowd. In both of these venues, a person could go the entire night never speaking to the bartender directly, or else only in passing. At Maclean's the entire room revolves around her.

Physically speaking, Maclean's is the largest room I've been in for a show. "Mac's Lounge", as the space upstairs is called, is divided between a rear area dominated by a long wooden bar, and a forward area where the stage is located. The bar can seat perhaps 10 or 12 people side by side and on a typical Sunday night it is completely filled. If you want a seat, you have to arrive early, potentially even before sign-ups start at 8:00. Across from the bar, the other half of the rear area is dominated by a jukebox (never used as far as I can tell) and two pool tables- occasionally used for pool, but more often as a place to set a beer. Two small booths take up the rear wall and several TV's with their volume set at 0 hang above.

In this area, where the comic is too far away to hear without a microphone, the bartender has absolute authority. I should introduce a specific character here, an informant and a good friend of mine who was instrumental in this study. I have anonymized her as K, although she is almost impossible to make anonymous, with the huge impact she has on amateur comedy. The

show I observed at Maclean's, titled Macsimum Comedy, was her brainchild- and when she left Maclean's for a management job, the show was closed down. It became a truism as part of my research that if there was something I didn't know, she always would. My notebook is full of scrawled notes from shows ending with a question to myself and the note "Ask K."

K was able to command the back of the house mostly because of her good relationship with the community. There is a revolving door of people who cycle through- comics from out of town, newcomers taking the stage for the first time, students who come and go seasonally; but no one can pass within ten feet of her bar without being greeted warmly- generally with a hug if you're anyone important. There is a strong spirit of boozy cordiality in the back of the house, and more than once Kate and I were greeted with a row of shots on the house- for being return customers who were not just there to perform. Kate hates taking shots, so I was often compelled to discretely drink hers myself. It would have been rude to do otherwise.

This is the atmosphere into which comics are all welcomed when they enter the room, and most of them linger in this area for the duration of the evening. There is an ongoing struggle to bring audience members into the seats bordering the stage. Indeed the buildup of people in the rear often leads to excessive noise. From the front of the house you can hear it swell gradually, only to be cut short with a loud, sharp *Shh!* from K. Her ability to shush a crowd is so absolute it borders on the preternatural. This may sound like a comic anecdote, or a bit of hyperbole thrown in for color, but consider that in a situation where a performer's confidence and self-worth as an artist is largely founded on his audience's attention, a guaranteed defense against distracting noise is nothing short of miraculous. The crowds always respected K's authority in the back of the house, because of the mutual respect she fostered with all the regulars, and with newcomers alike.

The front of the room does not enjoy the bartender's protection, though, even when the bartender is as commanding as K. The front of the room has chairs angled directly toward the stage and away from the bar. This is done to focus the attention of these audience members on the performer and away from any distractions in the back of the house. It has the double effect, however, of protecting them from any stern glances they might otherwise have incurred from the barkeep. A *Shh!* heard from behind is more easily ignored, and generally anyone misbehaving in the front few rows of chairs is accountable to the performer or the host, not the staff.

It should be noted that an ineffective floor staff- bartenders, bussers, and waiters included- can be more harmful than no staff at all. After K left Maclean's, (to continue bartending but with a title bump to manager) there were several weeks with no comedy shows. Then I was alerted out of the blue by one of my comic informants that the show had been revived. It was back at the same time, in the same venue, but with no mention of who had taken the reins. Naturally I showed up to the revival show, and found that a busboy from Mac's Lounge- now in training to be a bartender- had decided to revive the show himself. The new show was similar to the old one; less spirited maybe, less friendly. Noise in the back of the house went more or less unchecked now.

When K arrived to show her support, Kate and I were already on our way out the door. We stood out in the cold with her for a few minutes while she had a smoke, catching up on what we all had been up to in the intervening weeks. I tried to think of a way to remark on the new show without making her absence seem insignificant. "Still a pretty good show, I guess" was the awkward compromise I settled on. She nodded without conviction. I added "It got pretty loud tonight", intending a compliment. I believe she understood my point, because she smiled when she replied "Yeah, pretty loud up there."

The Audience

"Who here isn't a comedian?...Give it up for those two people!"

Whether they come in for $15 or for free, the people who fill up the seats are the reason that comedy shows happen. This is not to say that their actual entertainment is necessarily paramount. Most of my informants talk about the audience as a kind of machine for providing feedback. Getting a big laugh is not satisfying because of strangers' approval- it's the mark of your own good work on a joke.

The Comedy Works can seat 100 people. The Nest can seat a comparable number. Mac's Lounge may have a seating capacity that is higher still, but it has never contained more than 60 or 70 as far as I can tell. These are modest-sized venues, serving a city of nearly 4 million. But there is a struggle to fill those seats. Cheap booze, vouchers, radio, TV and print advertising are all deployed, and in force, to bring people in. Even still, whenever I was at Mac's Lounge watching a show, I could tell that most of the people there were comics just waiting to take the stage. I cannot account for all the social forces or market influences that keep comedy shows ill-attended, but it is the reality of the situation.

I personally have never sought out live performing arts of any kind- music, theater, comedy or anything else. I find myself sympathetically cringing when I watch a live show, anticipating failures from the performer even when they never come. My most deeply-held dread is that of crowd work. A comic who is "working the crowd" is either calling from the stage, or going among the audience with their microphone, asking questions of audience members, from which to improvise a joke. It is deeply embarrassing on several levels. It involves bringing attention and scrutiny to someone in the room who had no intention of being observed in that

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way. It indicates a lack of preparation on the part of the comic. It also offers fresh opportunities to falter for the person working the crowd if they cannot instantly devise and perform a joke based on their subject's responses.

Not to let my personal feelings color the account too much, I should note that crowd work is seen as a legitimate tool in the comic's repertoire. It is referred to in the same sense as timing as an aspect of performance that can be trained and improved through repetition. Crowd work is also an effective way of claiming power over an audience. The audience is on the spot now, required to react to the comic coming into their physical space, making direct, individual contact with single audience members. There is no comfort of anonymity to be had when a comedian is looking an audience member in the eye and asking "so where are you from?" At that moment, all defenses have failed and the selected audience member is now giving direct input to the show's discourse regardless of how he or she reacts. Saying nothing, or waving the comedian off, will almost certainly be mocked and draw even more attention. In this way, the comic is able to step outside the typical social boundaries of the performance and to momentarily break the group identity of the audience.

So what is this group identity that the audience shares? It runs deeper than merely sharing the public which is co-created by themselves and the comedian. Rather, the audience is bonded by its spatial and social arrangement *within* the social space of the public discourse. This is one of the many cases in this field of study where seemingly mundane details have an important impact on the lived reality of the moment.

Consider the audience's physical orientation: backs to the entrance and to the bar, eyes forward at the stage. Their seats are at tables, arranged in a semi-circle around the stage, the closest of

which are pressed so close they may be able to physically touch (or be touched by) the comedian without standing up. They are also pressed extremely close to one another. In the Comedy Nest in particular, there is no room even to extend one's arms to the side if the tables are occupied. The result is a kind of enforced intimacy with the individual on stage. Eye contact is easily made by the comic and difficult to avoid by the audience member, without looking *purposefully* evasive. The closeness to one's neighbors also makes conversations with table-mates more or less impossible at anything above a whisper, without drawing attention to oneself. Whether you will be shushed for talking during a show depends entirely on the disposition of the people next to you, but you will absolutely not escape notice. The room is organized very carefully and very purposefully to facilitate this social experience.

In an environment where the success or failure of an act is dependent upon attention, arrangements like these seem like common sense. At Mac's Lounge, there is a constant push to move people from the back of the room, where they sit at the bar, or in a booth, away from the stage- and make as much noise as they please. These efforts range from enticement- "Come support the people on stage!" "Show some love", to challenges "What, are you scared to get picked on?" This drive to pull people from the (more comfortable) back of the room into the more socially-regimented front is one of the many unenviable tasks of the host. Sometimes a motivated bartender will urge their customers to go get seats closer to the stage- "best seats in the house are still open! You should grab 'em before someone else comes in."

Why, then, is there such an urge to create this sub-group within the public that is "the audience"? Let's return to Robert Stebbins for an explanation. In *Amateurs*, we read that audiences (which he terms "publics", not to be confused with Warner's definition which I rely on) provide monetary rewards, role support and direct feedback on the artistic merit of a performer's act.

The monetary rewards are mostly available to professionals, and only occasionally to amateurs-
and the lion's share belongs to the venue. Role support and feedback are the two major resources
that an audience is able to provide. It has been my experience that although audiences give
feedback readily and enthusiastically- through their laughter and their silence, their smiles or
their cringes- it is rarely accepted.

Chapter 5: Performing Marginality

Although the majority of the stand-up scene is white, male and 20-30 years old, there are still a significant number of more marginal voices represented. All in all, the stage has proven itself to be a relatively welcoming place for ethnic and sexual minorities- with a few notable exceptions. One thing is absolutely for sure- the days of getting easy laughs from ethnic jokes are over. In previous decades, a comic has been able to trade on then-prevailing ethnic stereotypes to draw a laugh from a crowd without having to bother establishing an emotional connection, or actually crafting a joke with a setup and punchline.

Jokes at the expense of ethnicity and sexuality are still around, only they have turned inward. It is almost unheard of to hear a white comic performing a joke about any other ethnic group, and similarly straight comics seem to have abandoned jokes mocking minority sexualities. This may be a product of the fact that the performers tend to be young and progressive, and many of them- being local Montrealers - grew up in a comparatively cosmopolitan environment. One manager that I spoke to indicated to me that jokes of that nature have been passé here for a long time. "Decades" was the term he chose, and interestingly he classes ethnicity/sexuality jokes with what he calls "lowbrow" material, not "offensive" in a moral sense.

To the manager, called GH in my notebook, the death of low-quality jokes was a matter of audience demand. "Hey we paid for it! We don't want to hear another fart joke, or dick joke!" The idea, to him, was that Montreal audiences had come to expect a higher grade of material, and jokes that overstep the boundaries of political correctness had simply gone the way of the fart joke- cheap, artless, rote and now forgotten. The actual morality of telling jokes that exploit

marginalized people seems to have been bypassed, in this case, by the simple fact that no one wants to hear tired material.

Maybe it is telling that the one comic I can think of today that still openly relishes jokes of this kind is over 80 years old. Billing himself as the oldest comedian working today, he works the stage from his perch on a stool. His act consists of a series of one-liners that appear to have been lifted from a joke book of some sort. His particular choice for comic victimization was "the queers" but he had several ethnic jokes mixed in as well. I personally felt included when he detoured to tell us his feelings on "the polacks", especially since I thought that jokes targeting Polish people died out some time in the mid-late 70's. The 40 intervening years of continued assimilation did nothing to deter the 80-year-old comic, though.

Truth be told, comics like him are a dying breed. But this is not to say that the humor of ethnicity and sexual expression is dead; rather it has turned inward. The best place in Montreal to hear a joke stereotyping Arabs is from an Arab comedian. There are several working today and they relish the opportunity to have fun at their own expense by trading on social prejudices. This holds true across various minority ethnicities and people of various LGBT stripes. There is a young Chinese-Canadian comic who begins his sets by taking the stage and poking fun at his own WASP-like name. "You all thought I was gonna be white when he introduced me! WRONG. Anyway, *herro*!" He adopts the most broad, burlesqued, Chinese accent he can manage and typically draws a huge laugh when he does so.

It seems to me that the adoption of racial jokes by people of the race in question constitutes a similar phenomenon to the overall trend of self-effacing humor. The overwhelming trend currently is toward jokes that look inward and trade on social stereotypes to build

understanding between comic and audience. An easy joke to get away with right now is one that centers around the teller's supposed unemployability because they chose the wrong college degree. Liberal arts majors are making meals out of this joke every night that comedy is performed in Montreal. It doesn't hurt that many (perhaps most) of the people watching are students, recent grads, dropouts etc. When a young comic tells a story about being passed over for a job as an apple-picker because of his own educational choices, it resonates with the crowd.

It has been said that adopting and mobilizing humor based on racial stereotypes can constitute a kind of empowerment for the person telling the joke. I do not necessarily disagree, but I insist on pointing out an important point of nuance. A black comic may be able to get a laugh by doing self-effacing jokes that trade on cultural stereotypes of black people. They would also be applying the joke in a "safe" way where it cannot be used to assert personal superiority on the part of the teller over the object. But jokes are built on the audience's understanding, and jokes that deal in black stereotypes get laughs because the crowd understands the values beneath. This is an example of Dewey's "'parallel public sphere'" (2009) discussed in Chapter three- it is a kind of humor that operates outside of a harmful, prevalent norm but does not specifically run counter to it.

By contrast, LGBT comedians seem to have a remarkably safe space in which to discuss issues relevant to their own sexual expression, without having to resort to stereotype. I was surprised when I started going to shows how matter-of-fact queer sexuality is in the general discourse here. The gay, lesbian and trans comics I have seen on stage typically use an idiom to discuss their relationships that is identical to that of their straight counterparts. A few switched gender pronouns seem to constitute the main difference. By eschewing the campy, flamboyant

persona that straight audiences have demanded of gay performers in past, LGBT comics are not just operating *outside* of a social norm, they are acting to publicly erase it.

It is a curious crossover between the function of public and counter-public. A public, being a normative force, invites listeners into its social standards. A counter-public attacks existing norms based on self-assumed difference. When an LGBT comic describes a same-sex relationship without digressing to identify their own sexuality they are essentially pulling their own sexual expression into the discourse of normative sexuality. It resembles a public in one sense, (appealing to a sense of normality) but a counter-public in form (challenging a social standard seen as unjust, i.e. the exclusion of LGBT sexualities from public discussion). There may not be a neat way to characterize this kind of subtle re-mapping of public discourse.

Taking a subtle approach has been effective in bringing LGBT comics into the mainstream of the rooms I observe. There was hardly a night without at least one performer alluding to a queer sexual expression. However, there were several nights when an entire show would elapse and not a single woman would cross the stage. Women are noticeably under-represented in the scene, although the few that have entered tend to do very well for themselves.

The first comedy show I ever observed was hosted by a young woman who later became one of my most valuable interviewees. There was a comic on stage who-like me- was from the United States, and I was excited to see someone from home. Surprisingly few Americans ever wind up on stage here, despite the large number who come for university. A 30-something white male from New Jersey, as soon as he takes the microphone he is giving off the impression that he is too drunk to be where he is. Before he can deliver his first joke, an audience member inches

past the stage making his way to the men's room. The comic looks over, sees him passing and yelps "Ahh! A black guy!" in mock horror. The act was off to a bad start.

As his 5 minutes were elapsing, he chose to close his act with a few jokes about an ex-girlfriend. "I can't remember what her name was…some dumb cunt." This line did not receive a warm reaction. None of his material did, really, but he was unperturbed. He left the stage to modest, polite applause and handed the microphone back to the host. She did what good hosts do and entreated the audience to send him off with another round of applause- "give it up for that guy, ladies and gentlemen. I can't remember his name, some dumb cunt." The room exploded in laughter; in that instant the dense layer of negative sentiment that had lowered over the crowd simply evaporated. The comic wasn't happy. He stomped to the back of the room, threw on his coat and immediately left the bar. Hours later, walking home, I would stand behind him in line at a McDonald's. I chose not to ask him for an interview, he seemed to be in no mood.

The host of the show, who came to be called TN for purposes of anonymity, displayed a fantastic command of comic timing, and an understanding of her audience. She pushed just the right button to simultaneously break the hack from New Jersey and re-energize the entire crowd in the room. There are very few remaining verbal taboos in local standup, but the word "cunt" is guaranteed to bring uncomfortable silence. There is a similarly queasy air surrounding the word "faggot", even when self-applied by a gay comic. I do not know how it came to be that these two words now stand alone as the last bastions of "bad language", but in this environment where the word "fuck" is a treasured stand-by, they still hold that power.

TN was able to harness that piece of taboo language and direct it to get a laugh and send off an unfunny comedian. Are we to understand that this was a victory for anti-sexism in the

comedy scene? I contend that it was, even though its success was not necessarily rooted in anti-sexist sentiment. Bad comics invite bad will from their audiences. Certainly, he caused a great deal of discomfort by casually using the word "cunt" to demean his ex-girlfriend. But had he chosen a more mild word, or a funnier joke, he may still have invited a great deal of audience scorn simply by the fact that he showed up drunk and unprepared. For the audience, his material was bad before gender politics even entered the discussion.

One of the shows I observed at the comedy nest was an "Open Michelle". This is an event that allows female amateur comedians to practice their material once a month, in a line-up made only of other women. I saw many familiar faces on that night, given the overall scarcity of women in the larger scene. The show was good, professionally produced and managed, and all the comics seemed well-prepared and confident. None of these things can be taken for granted. On this particular night, I expected to start hearing more explicitly feminist material, only it never quite arrived. Several women would integrate throwaway lines into their jokes, (i.e. "I'm a feminist, but…" "The feminist in me wanted this, but the rest of me wanted that…") but there was a comparative lack of material that actually relied on what Michael Warner calls the "pragmatics" of a feminist "lifeworld". This is to say, feminism was addressed only tangentially I the same way that a comic might reference that they voted for Trudeau or that they prefer Pepsi over Coke.

In the middle of the show, there was an interruption for a 6 minute short film, which purported to parody the movie *Mad Max: Fury Road*. The movie in question had been widely praised by critics for presenting a feminist message and having many positive female characters. There was a minor flare-up of internet misogynists at the time, enraged by a traditionally masculine franchise hosting an even parenthetically-feminist theme. The parody movie traded on

this supposed outrage and flogged its premise to death in the first 90 seconds, then continued to blast an inexpertly-mixed 30-second clip of the theme music for the remaining run time, over a cringe-inducingly unfunny spoof. The audience's discomfort was palpable; not just with the inept filmmaking but also, I believe with the ham-handed political message. Where a woman calling an unfunny man a "cunt" had been so bitingly effective, this blunt presentation of feminist identity failed to connect in any meaningful sense.

This is, of course, not to say that the audience was anti-feminist or misogynist in any way. I think most of the people attending Montreal comedy shows are progressive-minded individuals who would, in their private lives, endorse the message of that heinous 6-minute disaster. But participation in a public, as created by comedy is not reliant purely on understanding. Sociologist Alice Rayner, (2012) wrote a compelling description of how a comedy audience comes together in a moment of spontaneous laughter. Laughing at a joke, Rayner tells us, is a response that exists outside of all structures of understanding. *Sustained* laughter, applause, appreciation for a comic- these are things that exist in an intellectual/social space where the joke that has been told can be assessed, and approved or denied as something that is understood as "funny". A great joke, though, bypasses the realm of cultural understanding and simply sparks a reaction. Audiences "explode" into being this way, incited into a shared physical experience by a comic's joke, suspended- even for the briefest of moments, in a space where their individual boundaries, and their standards of comedy, of politics and even personal identity have evaporated. An audience can be lead to a political experience that way- as TN did when she sent off the hack, but a political statement cannot spark someone into that moment out of time that we experience when we laugh together with strangers.

There are many women who have been able to write feminist messages into the discourse of standup comedy, and many more women who seem to practice a kind of apolitical comedy more similar to the LGBT comics who adopt the idiom of traditionally-straight relationship jokes; conscious, always, that they are minorities, but intent on belonging. I've seen both approaches kill on stage.

Belonging can be quite a loaded term when it comes to women in standup. Women have been telling jokes more or less as long as men have, but since the beginning, they have always been vastly outnumbered. Events like Open Michelle would seem to establish a kind of parallel public writ-physical in which women can be in one another's company and practice their art independent of male colleagues. To a certain extent, this is exactly what happens- but it should also be noted that such events are a vanishing rarity (once a month ideally, but in practice far more irregular) and also that the desire for separate space seems to be dim at best.

The Open Michelle event I attended showcased many talented female comics (approved by a booking agent of course) but to my surprise- it was not an exclusively female event. One of the acts was a middle-aged man from the Prairies. Introduced with a sardonic "before we booked your next act, we had to really ask ourselves- can men even *be* funny?", he was a walking, talking incongruity in the line-up. His act was good enough; he provoked a certain collective cringe every time he called himself a "faggot" or referred to someone as "a retard" but his reception was overall warm. To this day I have never had it explained to me why this man was included in the act, only that it was never acknowledged. None of the women who were there seem to know either. I suspect he may have been a last-minute fill-in, but I couldn't verify that assumption.

No one seemed bothered. No one I spoke to afterward even remarked on a man being in the all-women show. The female space that is Open Michelle is not made to be impermeable, it seems. Indeed, the women I was able to interview had wildly different approaches to their personal relationships with other comics and to comedy writing itself, but both were interested in ways of integrating themselves into the male-dominated space, not existing in parallel to it.

TN, my first interviewee, can only be called *passionately* feminist. She described herself as a feminist within the first several minutes of our interview and returned to it as a self-descriptor frequently. More often, even, than 'comedian'. TN was raised in a Catholic household with strict social and sexual mores that she chafed against and now works consciously to subvert. Through various forms of performance- theatre, radio, comedy and even burlesque, she has struggled to repair her own body image and self-concept. She jokes joyfully about what she calls her own "misshapen body" and takes particular relish in a joke about her childhood horror over the sight of her own vulva. In this way, TN is practicing a kind of self-writing on the stage, by acknowledging her own struggles and converting them into laughter. This act of confession allows her to literally write her troubles into personal strengths- instruments in her comic repertoire, not vulnerabilities.

At the same time, I believe TN intends to take issues that are conventionally seen as feminine- concern about weight, appearance and sexual desirability- and introduce them into a traditionally masculine space. The jokes are completely honest to her own experience, and merely carrying them into the male-dominated public discourse of standup would be a brave self-assertion. The fact that her jokes are so specifically gendered only adds to the effect. She is not only writing herself but writing herself into the discourse of comedy.

Whereas TN has patterned her act on self-assertion at every turn, I found that my other informant, LS, had taken an opposite approach. LS describes herself as a "geek" about Catholicism- she is devout in her religious convictions, but still able to treat them as an object of laughter. Much of her material centers around self-directed ethnic humor (Italian jokes have a long shelf-life) and ribbing about her own almost adolescent enthusiasm over her religion. Also a self-described "cat lady", LS displays none of the same bravado in penetrating a male-dominated space.

During the course of our interview, she told me almost immediately that she had tried from her first entrée into comedy, to make herself a part of the community. It was of extraordinary importance to her that she be friendly with her peers, and she has indeed established a wide and active social network of comedians. One of the main pleasures of going to a show, she says, is being able to sit with other comics and just be together in good company- regardless of how well or how badly the actual jokes go over. None of this is to undersell her actual prowess as a comedienne. On the contrary, LS is among my favorites, and she consistently gets good laughs from any audience she is in front of.

It has been LS's strategy to integrate into the existing social world of comedians, both through her stage persona and her interactions with peers. As a result, she was able to make herself known as an agreeable and professional comic, who quickly found herself getting hosting gigs from full-time venues.

Chapter 6: What I Talk About When I Talk About Bombing

No other art, performing or nonperforming, offers artists so quick and clear a measure of their quality. Moreover, there is, under adequate performance conditions, no one to whom to pass the responsibility for killing and bombing.

Stebbins, The Laugh-Makers, 1990

Most comedians who perform at open mic shows will identify them as a place to "'try out new material'". In this comparatively low-stakes environment, one can bring untested jokes and assess the audience's feedback. Professionals and amateurs alike use this approach to build their repertoire, and anyone who attends an open mic show has to anticipate that they will be used as someone's guinea pig. In this spirit, it was no shock to me that I saw many performances that could be described as unprepared, unpolished or (uncharitably) unprofessional. What came to fascinate me was the phenomenon of comedians coming to a show, trying a set of jokes, receiving an icy cold reaction, and then returning the next week to perform the *exact same material*.

In order to explore this phenomenon of repeat bombing further, we should first address what it means to bomb. Bombing on stage is the worst kind of failure a comic can endure. It is distinct from simply having jokes not land, or getting a bad reception. Bombing describes a performance with no redeeming quality, that results in intense embarrassment for the performer. Robert Stebbins (1990) at one point likes it to suddenly being stripped naked on stage.

Once a set is underway, a comic is able to gauge from the amount of laughs he receives, roughly how the audience likes his act. It should also be said that the laughs (or lack thereof) that a comic receives indicate not only approval of the jokes that have been told but also of the jokes to come. The reason why is twofold. Most obviously, it is because comics have a personal style-

and if several jokes in their own idiom fail to land, it is reasonable to assume that the next several might meet a similar reception. The second reason is that failed jokes build a certain negativity in the crowd. It is difficult to describe this feeling in precise terms- *scorn* seems slightly too harsh, but it might be the closest relative to the emotion one experiences. To say the least, failed jokes- in the absence of a quick and competent response-build an oppositional feeling between audience and performer. Once this feeling has taken hold, a negative feedback loop develops, wherein the performer is battling not only for the audience's continued attention, but against an increasingly negative personal sentiment.

When a bad joke lands, a comic is faced with several options.

1. Move on, and act as if the bad joke never happened. Continue smoothly into the next joke, in the hope that it will be received more warmly and the failed joke will become irrelevant to the audience's overall assessment of your act.

2. Acknowledge the failed joke in a display of self-awareness. This sacrifices the momentum of a performance, but depending on the comic's style and persona it may be preferable.

3. Quit entirely.

There are differing risks and rewards associated with each of these responses, and as far as I can tell most comics are forced to choose one on the fly.

Option 1, wherein one simply disavows a failed joke, is perhaps the safest approach. However, doing so will certainly give the impression that the jokes being performed are recorded, not done off the cuff. Of course, almost all standup comedy is done from recorded

material- whether written or memorized, but the performance of a conversational style is central to traditional standup comedy. By the same token, a comic who moves past failed jokes without acknowledgment also risks sacrificing a certain feeling of intimacy with the audience. A failed joke bothers people; a bad enough one can even feel like a personal insult ("you demanded my time and my rapt attention to tell me *that*?") therefore it follows that when offense is offered in this way, that some act of contrition should follow.

Option 2 demands a certain degree of improvisational skill from the person on stage. Sometimes a joke falls flat and the comic had not anticipated it doing so. In that moment, he is forced to compose a new, secondary joke- typically at his own expense-to cover for the previous failure. Joking about oneself smooths over the ill-will that failure creates and eases the tension of awkwardness left by an unacknowledged failure. Some more daring comics will instead take the opportunity to turn the cover-up joke against the audience. One comic I used to see regularly had a stand-by line ready: "My genius is wasted on you fucking people!" Whenever he had to use this joke, he got a warm reaction from the crowd- perhaps a bigger laugh than his original joke could ever have hoped for. The secret, of course, is that this relies on an audience that is on the comic's side- and ready to laugh at themselves. If the person on stage hasn't built sufficient goodwill going in, this is an absolutely disastrous idea.

Finally, one has the choice of simply leaving the stage and giving up. This is a rare occurrence but not unheard of. When handled gracefully, it takes the form of a premature "that's my time, folks!" In a more dire outcome, this can literally involve a person running from the stage. Mercifully I have never witnessed that happening, I have only heard it described to me by witnesses. I have seen more than my share of comics abandoning the stage with time left on the clock, and there is a certain sense of familiarity by now, when an amateur looks at their feet, says

"oh fuck it" and offers the microphone in the direction of the host. It's hard to watch, but a person in that position is typically sent off with some conciliatory applause from the audience.

Bombing, then, requires not only primary failure- i.e. the initial joke not landing, but also secondary (or even tertiary) failure in the attempt to salvage the act afterwards. I have to write somewhat delicately about the topic of failure, because I do not mean to imply that comics *choose* to fail. There are factors that are out of one's control- the audience being a major one. You cannot anticipate who will attend a show beyond general broad strokes. Part-time venues attract students and other directionless 20-somethings. Full-time venues attract 40-somethings with jobs. All-female acts attract more women than men. These are safe bets. But there comes a time when one has simply miscalculated the crowd. There is a terrible thing that a person can witness at a comedy show. If you are close enough to the stage to read the performer's face, you can sometimes see the moment when they realize that they have no jokes prepared that this audience will like. It is an almost-imperceptible shift, but something behind the person's eyes changes, and you know in that instant that they know they are doomed.

Failure of this kind, as I have said, can often breed a very negative, even hostile reaction from a crowd. There are also refreshing displays of mercy to be had. This is one opportunity for the show's host to shine- and I have seen some truly admirable displays of magnanimity towards acts that crashed and burned, but were seemingly well-intentioned. Intentions are often obscure in this industry, and sometimes hard to read. The one thing I assumed about every comic's intention was that self-improvement, the urge not just to write material but, following Foucault, to write *oneself* would be apparent. Based on this assumption, it seemed to me an absolute paradox that I could watch a comedian bomb one week, then return the next week and bomb with the exact same jokes.

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Thus far I have tried to steer away from analysis of what makes a "good joke" or a "bad joke" or dissecting text, but I will beg the reader's indulgence to offer a piece of advice. The bar-going public of downtown Montreal does not like jokes themed on incest. This became apparent to me after watching a young man fail catastrophically on stage one Sunday night at Maclean's. An uncomfortable amount of his 5-minute set was devoted to a line of jokes centering around a feigned incestuous relationship with his brother. Let me offer a brief disclaimer: I'm not immune to humor deemed politically incorrect or in bad taste, and I respect that it is a valid comedic strategy to shock your audience with a joke. When I critique this act I am not doing so because the subject matter bothers me, but to illustrate that the subject matter was in total opposition to the audience's taste- not just my own.

His first joke landed, no laughs. Second joke, no laughs. He wasn't taking time to acknowledge his failures, but rather charging blindly ahead with more of the painfully unfunny incest material. He left the stage to mild applause invited by a good-hearted host. It was an unpleasant experience, and the tension in the room was palpable. He retreated to the back of the room for a drink, which is the standard procedure for comics in this venue. No particular acknowledgement that the set went badly, no attempt to surreptitiously escape the scene of his crime against comedy writing.

Seven days later, I was in the same seat, watching the same young man do the exact same set in absolute disbelief. "My parents don't approve of the guy I'm dating, but I don't care. I have the cutest nickname for him. I call him my older brother." No laughs. Not even the kind of paper-thin, pity laugh that often accompanies this kind of abject failure. He plowed on through an almost tangible wall of silence. Mild applause, host takes the stage, "your next act is…"

All in all, I believe I saw this act four times. With so little alteration it may have been an identical, word-for-word repetition. This alone would have been strange to me. But at the same time, slightly de-synchronized from this four-week marathon, there were two other young men doing the exact same thing. Failed jokes, icy reception, back again next week for more of the same. It was baffling.

I use these three young men as a case study in the phenomenon of repeated bombing, but I want to make it clear that this is not an isolated pattern of behavior. Regardless, these are the three that I was able to investigate to some degree of satisfaction. The first, I found out, was a McGill graduate who had never left town after getting a degree in pre-law. All indications were that his family may have had some money to spare, and I suspect that he had very little at stake financially when he chose to invest time and effort in a comedy career. What fascinated me was that one of the others was not only from out of town, but was actually from the West Coast. He had driven cross-country his ancient car, with barely enough money on hand to pay for gas. He was in town for the summer and early Fall, before making the trek back to British Columbia. The whole time that he was in Montreal, he spent sleeping in his beat-up old car.

This young man, anonymized in my notes as BC in honor of his awe-inspiring journey, took the stage every Sunday and told the most bizarre string of absurdist, non-sequitur jokes I have ever heard. In a reversal of the normal order of things, I was often the only person in the room laughing when he launched into his magnum opus, which is a joke about teaching a baby raccoon to prepare produce. It starts with no set-up and ends with no punchline, and I love it without reservation. BC has a very slow and plodding delivery, which is hampered by frequent pauses to remember his material, even to the extent of literally opening his notebook and leafing through several pages.

I do not pretend to know his schedule in any detail, but from knowing the venues that are open in Montreal over the summer, I can say that he was performing no more than 3 nights per week. He had neither the skill nor the recognition to make it past a booking agent at the Works or the Nest. This means that even if he was showing up early and leaving late, he spent a maximum of 12 hours "at work" in comedy rooms. Of that time, he would be on stage for a maximum of 21 minutes. The rest of his life, with no job and no school to take up his time was his to write and memorize material. But every single Sunday, BC would take the stage and look out into the crowd like the proverbial deer in the headlights and give every sign that he had not learned his own jokes. Having driven the entire breadth of Canada, and enduring considerable discomfort living in the back seat of a car, he still invested so little effort in his routine that a bomb performance was guaranteed.

These individuals shattered the two assumptions one could make regarding intent. The first, my own, was that comics take the stage as a way of writing an identity. The idea being that the performance of a persona, which is itself intertwined with the discipline of writing and the art of delivering jokes, constituted a kind of self-improvement. If nothing else, it serves as a gesture of self-determination. Despite the case studies at hand, I contend that some comics in the Montreal scene are indeed doing exactly this. To the matter at hand, though, one might also assume that if the comics are not on stage for themselves, that they are there for the other party present in their public, the audience. A performer who takes the stage with no self-confidence, with no preparation, and no apparent concern when their jokes fail shatters both of these assumptions. These young men were there neither to make people laugh, nor to work on themselves.

Clifford Geertz has been one of the chief influences on my writing, both as a theoretician and an ethnographer. I find that when I have reached an impasse in my own process, I often open one of his books in the hopes of finding some inspiration. In this case I went back all the way to the beginning. In *The Interpretation of Culture*, Geertz lays out a dichotomy that is by now well-known to all anthropologists. When a person rapidly contracts their eye, an untrained ad uninformed observer may be unclear on whether that person has winked, or twitched. That is to say, was this a performative action, such as winking to send a message, or was it an involuntary response, such as twitching when a speck of dust contacts the eye? Looking at the case of the two aforementioned young men, I asked myself was I looking at a twitch? Were they walking blindly into failure every week not understanding what was happening? Or, rather, was I party to a wink, some meaningful course of action which I did not yet fully understand?

The answer came to me in the light of a third case study. This third young man, anonymized CE, followed a similar pattern of constant and unceasing failure on stage. He was a victim of stage fright it seems, because under the spotlight, he often faltered, stammered, and recriminated for missed attempts. "I don't know where that was going…" was his familiar refrain when he would start a joke, fail to draw a laugh and then summarily abort it. Unlike the other two examples I have mentioned, he was often met with supportive applause during these low moments. The crowd (being mostly fellow stand-ups who knew him personally) would re-energize him as best they could by clapping through his moments of forgetfulness or panic, and he would quickly be re-oriented and onto his next joke. Sometimes he would draw genuine laughs, he was not on quite the same level of failure as the other comics we have examined- but on an essential level he was telling bomb-grade jokes every night, and receiving a warm response, despite failing to deliver successful jokes.

As I was puzzling over these three case studies with Kate one morning, she offered me an angle that I had not previously considered. These comedians were neither twitching nor winking, nothing so simple as all that. What we had witnessed all those nights in the comedy club was in fact a mock sheep raid. Geertz uses this term to refer metonymously to an action which is performed seemingly for one end (winking to convey a silent message) but really done for a second, obscure one building on an understanding of the first- such as making a broad, "burlesque" wink to mock the original winker.

A person tells a joke to get a laugh. Even if they don't get a laugh, they can at least say that they took the time to write the joke and had the drive and will to memorize it and deliver it confidently to strangers. If neither one of those things are left, what then remains? To return to the most important question at hand: what does all this mean? Well, any public discourse is made up of multiple voices and multiple actors, and when the comics that I had been focusing on so intently left the stage, they melted back into that anonymous mass, the audience. After weeks upon weeks of failure, a person can still fade to the back of the room and find a seat at the bar, surrounded by a dozen other comedians, all of whom are either coming from or on their way to that same place under the spotlights.

This is not to say that the audience has no part in the "burlesque" performance of comedy. After all, a public is more than just a speaker. One night at Mac's, I was sitting with an informant at a table in the front row, just a few feet from the stage. Even at this extreme proximity, I could barely hear the jokes for all the noise coming from the back of the house. In the darkened area surrounding the bar, people were conversing in normal tones of voice, occasionally whistling or shouting. It was a night when the room was populated almost entirely by comics. "I told them to move up to the front row, and be in the audience" my informant

explained. "They just said 'we're fine, we can hear'". Any comic who has been to more than one show before knows the old refrain that every host includes in their opening monologue: "support live comedy". To be part of an audience is to take part in this collective action of supporting live comedy. I argue that to attend a show, to applaud that line, then to resume one's conversation at full volume until it is time for your set is the exact same kind of *performed* participation in the scene as a comic who never learns his own jokes by heart. The visible elements are there- coming to the venue, shaking hands with people you recognize, slapping backs as comics go to or come from their sets; but the general apathy towards the stage that these same spectators show qualifies their performance as a kind of faux-attendance, being in the crowd without being, after Warner's definition at least, an *audience*.

This is my argument: as an environment with a low bar to entry and an equally low ceiling of success, young people are drawn into the stand-up scene as a public space in which to exist with little competition and a guarantee of supportive peers. The accumulation of people who live on the margins of university, I believe is not coincidental. Graduating a school but lingering in physical and social proximity indicates a certain reluctance to face the dangers of "real life" as people in my age group have classed the world of work, family and obligation. I also believe that in this context, the strangely homogenous jokes about low-key lives without responsibility are not cheap bids at easy laughs (at least not exclusively) but rather practiced gestures of solidarity.

Conclusion: No, Seriously, Why Comedy?

It has been said that comics have to live in hope of success to be successful. It seems that in my work, I have discovered a small enclave of young people who have abandoned this trajectory. The comedy scene I observe is populated by a cadre of amateurs with diverse hopes, desires and ambitions. Traditionally, amateurs have been thought of as individuals on the path to professionalism, but in this case the people I work with have no such image of themselves. None of my informants ever named a professional when I would ask who their favorite comic was. Indicating both their insular nature and their immense mutual respect, everyone asked named one of their colleagues in the Montreal scene.

"…public discourse says not only 'let a public exist', but: Let it have this character, speak this way, see the world this way."(Warner, 2002:82) Every public has a voice, and that voice has a perspective and a set of intentions. Yet, after months of observation, when faced with the task of interpreting what the intentions of the amateur comedy scene are, I was at a loss. There is a general lack of ambition; most comics never see themselves booking shows nationally or internationally. Virtually none believe that they will become rich or famous, even locally. The general tone of jokes skews heavily towards this kind of practiced non-ambition, in fact. What does this mean?

Well, it is important to remember that the scene I describe is not a public. Publics are momentary things, fleeting and easily dissoluble. The scene is a complex of countless publics, which appear and then melt away every time one of these people takes the stage. The comics are entangled by definition with a number of physical spaces, both permanent and part-time, and all

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the individuals who staff those places- tending bar, bussing tables, managing venues. The scene is also characterized by its low barrier of entry and equally low ceiling of success.

My first reaction to this accumulation of data was that the scene represents a kind of purposeful non-participation in "real life", indicating resistance against prevailing social and economics norms, as they are understood by the 20-30 year olds reacting to them. But the comedy scene is made not just of spaces and bodies, but of *talk*. The acts that are performed in this scene may lack a unified message, but they follow several trends closely. First, they are self-referential and self-deprecating. Secondly, they skew away from overt politics or ideology. Third, they are not modelled on the broader comedy scene, but on localized paradigms of excellence. Note carefully that the scene may exist outside a purely capitalist standard of production (there is little emphasis on financial gain or personal ambition), and it may generally conflict with the imagined values of "*the* public". But I will ask you to note also that there is no coordinated effort to subvert these values, and in fact many of the self-effacing jokes trade heavily on *the* public's (real or imagined) scorn for the underemployed, over-educated people who overwhelmingly populate the scene.

To play Devil's advocate for a moment, I will assume that some readers may see this evidence and draw the opposite conclusion from myself. That is to say, that reader may assume that the comics mobilize the norms of *the* public in the spirit of ironic mockery- adopting the position of an uncaring society heaping scorn on a university drop-out as a way to underscore the cruelty of the prevailing social-economic system. To this imaginary reader, I say that in a situation where talk makes up the very fabric of lived experience, that supposed intent is actually irrelevant. Merely by mobilizing the idea that the prevailing society's norms *as* norms, they serve to integrate those standards into the discourse.

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The preceding imaginary debate is essentially one between the idea that the amateur comics create publics against the idea that they create counter-publics. But at the essential level, these two concepts are differentiated by conceptions of normality, and when a 30-year old man who lives at home with his parents jokes from the perspective that his situation is laughable, he disqualifies the social space he creates from counter-public status. However, I believe that the question of the comedy scene's nature runs somewhat deeper than public or counter-public.

The intent may not be the same as a counter-public's, that is to say, affecting social change in a broader society. This is not the end of the discussion, however. Another attribute of the counter-public is the idea of enclosing and insulating its participants from outside social conditions. Even if the participants in this scene are not in active rebellion against the socioeconomic realities of life in 2015 Canada, they are still involved in a project of isolating themselves from the outside world- even if only for a few hours at a time. The reader may recall from Chapter three the example of the advice column in *Femina* magazine, devoted to helping women suffering abuse in the home. The effect was therapeutic- helping women through personal difficulties-but the overall effect was neutral in regard to the broader trends regarding the division public/private life and the practice of domestic violence.

Therapeutic may indeed be an apt word to choose in this case, because one of my prime informants repeatedly referred to her time on stage as "therapy". Another one, unprompted, chose to refer to the act of performing as "work on herself"- unknowingly borrowing Foucault's phrase. The people who practice this art do so looking inward, it seems. The tendency to self-effacing humor is not merely due to the fact that self-deprecation is easy, or that standards of political correctness have driven comics away from cheap ethnic/religious/gendered jokes. Rather, I believe it is an honest indication of the comic's intent- to make something out of

themself that they were not before. The identities that comics write for themselves seem to be dependent on the individual- although paradoxically many of the individuals performing try to write their lives of stability or prosperity into the kind of genteel squalor that thy imagine the majority of their peers live in.

This homogenizing tendency is indicative of a parallel process at work. I stand by the idea that merely by taking the stage and performing at all, one is performing a kind of self-creation, but this may not always be the primary objective of the comedian. By studying comics who repeatedly take the stage and give a bomb performance, I believe I have stumbled across a process whereby a minimal investment of discipline and self-reflection can be mobilized simply to pass the threshold into membership in this remarkably warm and mutually-supportive community. Such comics perform a kind of burlesque of comedy, jettisoning the writing, memorization, practice and confidence-building that are traditional elements of the craft. A comic who performs jokes that are clearly incompatible with his audience's sense of humor again and again is making a statement that the audience's enjoyment is not their objective. At the same time, the refusal to revise their material indicates that artistry is not their concern either. All that remains, in this case, is participation. If we ask, plain and simple, what does such a performance say, I contend that it says merely: "I am here. I have paid my dues by taking the stage and I belong to this group."

In this way, we can see that membership in the group which I term "the amateur comedy scene" does not require any serious practice of comedy. Rather, it requires only the performed gestures thereof. This is the inherent paradox that I have come to understand as the heart of the scene. It is made of publics- things with voices- which seem to say nothing. It is a place for writing identities, where the identity written may consist only of presence in the place. It is a

group outside of social standards and economic demands- whose physical space depends on business, and whose discourse is derived from prevailing ideas of normativity.

Somewhere in one of my field notebooks, there is a scribbled line: "Come for the beer, stay because you have nowhere else to be." This represented an early attempt on my part so summarize why people choose to participate in this space of prolonged liminality. In retrospect, it seems overly bleak, but not entirely off-point. To occupy the comedy scene is to assume a certain directionless quality; although not necessarily because you have no other options. Professionals and penniless university drop-outs alike are cooperating to re-define the boundaries of this marginal space outside of the prevailing social order. Of course, I now have the benefit of hindsight, and notes arranged in front of me color-coded and heavily noted, having been read and re-read for months. The experience of this place- this space with no physical home and this discourse with no permanent voice- is almost too complex to summarize in one statement. What I can try to do is answer that simple question, "why standup?"

The amateur, English-language comedy scene of Montreal is a liminal space that allows individuals to perform (with varying degrees of sincerity) acts of self-creation for audiences of peers and strangers. This performance of individual identity serves as an entrée to a shared cultural space. The scene encloses its members in a sense of belonging, without demanding s surrender of individuality. It is a place where these individuals can live outside, but not necessarily against their day-to-day lives.

I would argue that the complete answer to this question is actually as long as this thesis itself, and even longer still. After all, the meaning of the standup scene is constantly being written and re-written on the stages where it lives. But I have done my best to interpret the things

I saw, and to foster an understanding of the scene as I knew it, for those months in 2015 when I had the chance to share in it.

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CONSENT FORM

Research: Producing Publics on Stage: An Ethnography of Amateur Comedians in Montreal (Working Title)

Researcher: John Basile

Researcher Contact: john.m.basile@gmail.com

Supervisor: Sally Cole

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You are being invited to participate in the research study mentioned above. This form provides information about what participating would mean. Please read it carefully before deciding if you want to participate or not. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

This study is an ethnographic account of the lives of amateur stand-up performers in Montreal. As part of your participation, you may be asked questions regarding your personal background, your employment, your history performing comedy and your personal opinions on topics including professional standards, community identity, and success/failure in your field- among others.

A. PURPOSE

The purpose of the research is to establish an understanding of the amateur stand-up scene in Montreal, both through participant observation and interviews, to be published as a M.A. thesis.

B. PROCEDURES

If you participate, you will be asked to answer some questions on an informal basis.

In total, participating in this study will take around 1 hour per interview session. (Participating in any interview does not oblige you to take part in subsequent interviews).

C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

Participation in this study will not put you at any risk. Your participation is strictly voluntary. You will be anonymized with a pseudonym, and you may withdraw at any time.

D. CONFIDENTIALITY

Only the researcher will have access to the data gathered in the course of this research. The data will be used only to fill the requirements of an M.A. Thesis.

The information gathered will be anonymous. That means that it will not be possible to make a link between you and the information you provide.

This research may later be published.

F. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

You do not have to participate in this research. It is purely your decision. If you do participate, you can stop at any time. You can also ask that the information you provided not be used, and your choice will be respected. If you decide that you don't want us to use your information, you must tell the researcher before April 1, 2016.

G. PARTICIPANT'S DECLARATION

I have read and understood this form. I have had the chance to ask questions and any questions have been answered. I agree to participate in this research under the conditions described.

NAME (please print) _____

SIGNATURE _____

DATE _____

If you have questions about the scientific or scholarly aspects of this research, please contact the researcher. Their contact information is on page 1. You may also contact their faculty supervisor.

If you have concerns about ethical issues in this research, please contact the Manager, Research Ethics, Concordia University, 514.848.2424 ex. 7481 or oor.ethics@concordia.ca.