Hysterical: Comedy, Comebacks and #metoo

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Abstract

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"Louis C.K. Is Done," declared critic Matt Zoller Seitz on November 9, 2017, the same day a *New York Times* investigation revealed that C.K. had masturbated in front of or on the phone with women in workplace contexts. Three months later, another auteur comedian, Aziz Ansari, faced accusations of pressuring an anonymous woman, Grace, into sexual acts. This thesis looks at the heated public response to both cases and how they came to symbolize aspects of #metoo, a feminist social movement targeting sexual violence that unfolded in the fall of 2017. The thesis conducts a discourse analysis of commentaries on C.K. and Ansari's cases—when the allegations first became public and when the comedians later embarked on "comebacks"—in major media outlets as well as fringe feminist and right-wing publications in order to identify the ideological assumptions underpinning these responses. Through these responses, #metoo is constituted as a cultural clash wherein dominant norms of sexual violence as bounded and binary and comedy as a protected artistic sphere are challenged by counter-hegemonic feminist positions. At the same time, an anti-feminist backlash works to close down these challenges. The thesis situates this dialectical tension within the "warring, constantly moving contexts" of what Sarah Banet-Weiser calls popular feminism and popular misogyny (*Empowered* 13). Sexual violence, comedy, and #metoo become discursively linked as they are mobilized in relation to broader cultural contestations between feminism, misogyny, leftism, and anti-progressivism or "anti-wokeism." Though the radical challenges of #metoo fade, their ripple effects continue.

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Dedication

For Ann Decter, who taught me about feminism when it was not popular, and Gene Long, who taught me about fascism when it seemed like old news.

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Introduction: What Happens Now?

"Louis C.K. Is Done," declared *Vulture.com* on November 9, 2017. Earlier that same day, the *New York Times* had published an investigation into the popular comedian and TV auteur, in which multiple women accused him of masturbating in front of or on the phone with them in workplace contexts (Ryzick et al.). The women explain in the investigation that they went along with C.K.'s actions and largely kept quiet about them because of C.K.'s industry power (Ryzick et al.). The *Vulture* headline accompanied an article by Matt Zoller Seitz, the site's film and TV critic, who argued that audiences should have no qualms about labeling C.K.'s work as "of archival interest only." The next day, *Vulture* published another article by comedy critic Jesse David Fox, with a less conclusive tone. His headline read: "Louis C.K. Influenced a Generation of Comedians. What Happens Now?" Fox wasn't the only one asking this question. In the wake of the *Times* investigation, cultural critics and opinion writers grappled with the allegations against C.K. and their implications for C.K.'s comedic legacy, as well as workplace safety and abuses of power within entertainment more generally. The *Times* investigation into C.K. came on the heels of the newspaper's bombshell October 5 exposé of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, which included multiple allegations of rape that have since landed Weinstein in prison (Kantor and Twohey). The Weinstein investigation inspired actress Alyssa Milano to call for women and survivors to share their experiences of sexual violence using the hashtag "#metoo," a phrase first coined in 2006 by activist Tarana Burke (Patil and Puri 689). Milano, in invoking Burke's phrase of solidarity, ignited what is now known as the #metoo movement.

As a movement, #metoo is defined more by an outpouring of online testimonials than activists in the streets, though it has also inspired in-person protests and organized action against sexual violence across the globe (Wang et al.). Perhaps the movement's clearest impact has been an increase in media attention to and investigation of sexual violence; media outlets like *The Hollywood Reporter* have opened specific investigative units dedicated to sexual violence (Theixos 268). In the years since the Weinstein investigation, #metoo has prompted intense public debates about what constitutes sexual violence, when and how can perpetrators make amends, and which cultural norms and institutional processes enable violence in the first place. In the case of a comedian and auteur like C.K., these debates also engage aesthetic issues. Critics like Zoller Seitz and Fox have been publicly thinking through the seriousness of sexual violence in relation to artistic impact and comedic legacy. What do we do with art made by perpetrators of sexual violence? What do we do with the public personas and prestige of the artists themselves? In January 2018, just three months after the C.K. exposé, digital media site *Babe.net* published an article about comedian and TV auteur Aziz Ansari, in which an anonymous woman accused him of sexual misconduct (Way). The woman, using the pseudonym Grace, describes a date with Ansari during which he pressured her for sex and ignored verbal and non-verbal cues of discomfort. The *Babe* article prompted an intense public response and seemed to mark a turning point in the #metoo movement. Popular media outlets published articles claiming that this time, #metoo had gone too far. Writers like Bari Weiss at *The New York Times* argued that Ansari's alleged actions did not constitute sexual violence, while Caitlin Flanagan at *The Atlantic* suggested that Ansari had proved his progressive credentials through his art. "The Humiliation of Aziz Ansari," read Flanagan's headline, indicating a brewing anti-feminist backlash to the widespread traction of #metoo's feminist work.

This backlash, however, had been baked into the movement from the start. In October 2017, as #metoo was gaining popularity, Joanna Williams wrote in UK magazine *The Spectator* that the movement "reveals feminism's obsession with victimhood." "Blurring the boundaries between rape and ever-broader definitions of sexual harassment doesn't just trivialise serious offences," Williams wrote, "it further inflames a climate of hysteria in which the sexual harassment of women comes to be presented as a routine part of life." Williams' language invokes age-old anti-feminist tropes of hysteria, victimhood and false claims of abuse, applying them to a new context. Though she was in the minority in October 2017, with Ansari's case, this approach to #metoo became more and more popular. Both C.K. and Ansari's #metoo cases, then, raised the relationship between comedians' off-stage actions and on-stage (or on-screen) personas. In considering the allegations against the comedians, critics and writers mobilized their work and their comedic selves in relation to sexual violence and #metoo as a movement. Though the discourse around C.K. and Ansari raised different themes and perspectives, in both cases, critics at least seemed to agree that Ansari and C.K.'s careers could not and would not be the same. This would prove true, though not to the extent that Zoller Seitz predicted. Both comedians disappeared from the public eye, C.K. for nine months and Ansari for five, before re-emerging via performances at stand-up clubs and eventually releasing new stand-up comedy specials. These career comebacks prompted another round of re-consideration from critics and writers and further public debate around redemption and restitution.

These public debates reveal a host of ideological assumptions about sexual violence, art and comedy, and the place of feminism within popular culture. Feminist scholarship has long identified the dominant conceptualization of sexual violence as a binary, where a particular experience is either violent or not, with no grey areas or spectrums in between (Hindes and Fileborn 652). Within the entertainment industry and dominant critical apparatuses, art is treated as separate from reality and comedians in particular are protected by expectations of transgression from having to answer morally or ethically for their art (Marghitu, Oppliger and Mears). The combination of these norms around sexual violence and artistic consumption means that artists in general and comedians in particular have not historically been likely to face consequences for sexual violence, especially if their actions did not fit within the rigid dominant definitions of violence as extreme and monstrous. With the #metoo cases of Louis C.K. and Aziz Ansari, the norms of sexual violence as bounded and comedy as a protected, autonomous sphere of artistry came up for public debate. In their responses, some critics and writers took up explicitly counter-hegemonic positions, arguing for an expanded, feminist conception of sexual violence as well as a more contextualized and politicized approach to the creation and consumption of art, which sees comedy as inextricable and inseparable from the conditions in which it is created. Other writers were less clear and less consistent in their approaches to the allegations against C.K. and Ansari and their respective comebacks, and several were outright defensive of the dominant norms facing contestation, especially with regard to hegemonic understandings of sexual violence. But taken together, the public response to these cases reveals a series of ideological negotiations wherein such understandings were no longer guaranteed.

At the same time, these cases also came to symbolize the feminist aims, successes and failures of #metoo as a movement and are now intertwined with a series of broader cultural contestations around feminism, anti-racism, misogyny and Trumpism. As an anti-feminist backlash to #metoo picked up steam, fuelled by writers like Williams, Weiss and Flanagan, the movement was narrativized and mobilized by right-wing commentators as part of their efforts to

propagate a culture war, marked by political polarization, the rise of reactionary anti-progressivism and normalization of fascist rhetoric. Scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser characterizes this cultural polarization through a feminist lens, arguing in her 2018 book *Empowered* that we are living in an era marked by the "warring, constantly moving contexts" of what she calls popular feminism and popular misogyny (13). These two cases, then, are instructive in what they reveal about #metoo's impact on normative approaches to sexual violence, art, and comedy, but also for the role they have played in constituting #metoo as a publicly imagined and contested social phenomenon within these warring contexts. This thesis explores #metoo's impacts as well as the narrative construction of #metoo itself and what this narrative indicates about the interactions between feminism and misogyny as competing ideologies in a mainstream media context. I ask: how did the public engage with the #metoo exposés of Louis C.K. and Aziz Ansari and their respective returns to comedy? What ideological assumptions underpin these responses, and what do these assumptions tell us about the cultural negotiations unfolding through this discourse?

I focus my analysis on C.K. and Ansari because of the particular interactions between sexual violence, feminism, and comedy that emerged in their cases. While plenty of #metoo investigations centred on Hollywood moguls, C.K. and Ansari are both stand-up comedians, a position that comes with its own set of generic norms as well as specific industry conditions and conventions. Humour and stand-up are intertwined with the rise of anti-progressivism and popular misogyny. C.K. and Ansari's comebacks found them both positioning themselves in relation to these increasingly popular rhetorics and drawing on such rhetoric in their comeback routines. Focusing on C.K. and Ansari enables an analysis of #metoo's impacts on and interactions with comedy as an art form and industry, as well as comedy's role in the cultural contestations between feminism and misogyny.

C.K. and Ansari also lend themselves well to comparison as they occupied similar public positions prior to their #metoo cases. Both began their careers as stand-up comics and elevated themselves to the level of auteur through their prestige TV comedies, *Louie* and *Master of None*, respectively. Through these shows, they became what Stefania Marghitu describes as "the male genius-artist" whose work, as art, must be separated from the actions of the "genius-artist" himself (492). Both have also positioned themselves historically as progressive and feminist allies, using sexism as fodder for their comedic and televisual material. C.K. was the relatable asshole, a friend who told you the worst things he was thinking, while twisting those disturbed thoughts into a form of social commentary and self-critique. Ansari was the fun and freewheeling bon vivant and then, in *Master of None*, the perennial nice guy, who called out his friends' sexism and sexual harassment. The allegations against both comedians ruptured their public personas and prompted considerations in both cases of the slippery space between art, celebrity, and civilian. Taking their #metoo cases together enables an analysis of the different criteria critics have been mobilizing in their engagements with #metoo as well as when and where certain themes take priority.

In looking at two separate time periods for both cases—the response to the initial allegations and the response to their subsequent comebacks—I also identify the ways in which these critical criteria have shifted and evolved over time. This comparison understands #metoo as a phenomenon that is still ongoing, rather than a single moment or turning point limited to October 2017. My corpus of critical and opinion writing covers a total time period of five years and provides a window into the #metoo's evolving "discursive arc," a term used by feminist

scholars Nickie Phillips, Nicholas Chagnon, and Bianca Fileborn to describe the temporal relationship between #metoo's feminist discourse and its backlash (Phillips and Chagnon, 414; Fileborn and Phillips, 100). This thesis understands #metoo and its cultural implications as processes that continue to unfold and C.K. and Ansari's stories as a window into #metoo's impacts and public positioning. In chapter one, I outline the scholarly literature informing my analysis, drawing on research from the domains of feminist media studies, comedy studies, and the growing feminist scholarship on #metoo. Chapter two establishes the industrial and cultural context in which C.K. and Ansari's #metoo cases have been playing out: firstly, the second comedy boom, a period of economic and cultural significance for the comedy industry which enabled C.K. and Ansari's stardom, and, secondly, the cultural polarization between popular feminism and popular misogyny and the rise of contemporary anti-progressivism. In chapter three, I undertake my analysis of the mainstream media response to the allegations against C.K. and Ansari, looking at how their cases were considered differently and what kinds of ideas about art and violence emerge from these considerations. Finally, chapter four looks at the critical reception of their comebacks, wherein critics assessed C.K. and Ansari based on their perceived moral and political growth or lack thereof and positioned C.K.'s return as a symbol of #metoo's ineffectiveness.

Indeed, C.K. was not "done," as Zoller Seitz and *Vulture* had so confidently declared. But C.K.'s comeback—culminating in a Grammy win in 2022 for best comedy album—cannot be equated with #metoo as a failure. Instead, what these engagements with C.K. and Ansari's cases reveal is that while the initial radical challenge of #metoo may have faded, the movement continues to exist in dialectical tension with anti-feminism. Both forces manifest discursively, as attempts to reshape the ideological terms of the contemporary media landscape and as part of the broader struggles between leftism and anti-progressivism. If #metoo didn't overhaul patriarchal definitions of sexual violence, it demonstrated the power of discursive action, shrinking the mainstream space available to abusive men like C.K., prompting the performed growth of men like Ansari, and energizing a misogynistic backlash that, while influential today, has yet to win the culture war about which it is constantly whining. This backlash is so invested in fearmongering about feminism and leftism that you would be forgiven for wondering whether the anti-feminists weren't the ones in hysterics all along.

Chapter 1: What's So Funny

"One of the quintessential assumptions of cultural studies," writes Elfriede Fursich, is that "popular culture is a site of struggle over meaning" (244). The #metoo cases of Louis C.K. and Aziz Ansari have unfolded in public with intense popular attention. The public discourses around C.K. and Ansari mobilize these comedians, their on-stage personas and their off-stage actions as symbols within broader debates. When opinion writers and cultural critics comment on C.K. and Ansari's #metoo events, they invoke a host of assumptions about comedy, art, sexual violence, celebrity, power, and more. As Stuart Hall writes, in cultural studies "meaning is thought to be *produced* — constructed — rather than simply 'found'" (*Representation* 5). This thesis examines the production and construction of the *Times* exposé of C.K. and the *Babe* article about Ansari as events whose ideological meaning is publicly contested. "It is the shared cultural 'space' in which the production of meaning through language—that is, representation—takes place," Hall explains (10). In the following chapters, I examine the "shared cultural space" in which the #metoo allegations against C.K. and Ansari have played out.

Fursich describes "cultural sensibilities" as forces that can "involve everything from seemingly calm states of agreed upon dominant ideologies to active clashes between emerging new structures of feeling" (247). I approach #metoo as one such "active clash" where dominant norms are publicly contested and hegemonic ideologies contend with counter-hegemonic and, in this case, explicitly feminist alternatives in the "shared cultural space" of online media commentary, which is one site of meaning production within popular culture. Hall characterizes popular culture as "a sort of constant battlefield…where no once-for-all victories are obtained but where there are always strategic positions to be won and lost" ("Notes" 187). I understand popular culture thus as a space where the dominant and the periphery interact and reconstitute each other, engaged in a battle to determine the cultural norms of our lived realities. My project here is to identify the ideological assumptions underpinning the public discourse around C.K. and Ansari so as to elucidate how #metoo is publicly imagined as an "active clash" and on what terms C.K. and Ansari's specific public events have become part of #metoo's discursive arc.

I undertake this project by analyzing cultural criticism and opinion pieces published in response to the allegations against C.K. and Ansari as well as their comebacks. I conduct a critical discourse analysis of these articles, in order to identify "the strategies with which the spectrum of what can be said is extended on the one hand, but also restricted on the other" (Jager 35). Siegfried Jager understands discourse as "the flow of knowledge" (34) engaged in the "production of reality" (36). Critical discourse analysis has as its task the de-mystification of this production. In contributing to the production of reality, discourse is not reality itself, but rather creates the "conditions for the formation of subjects and the structuring and shaping of societies" (Jager 35). Following Jager, I locate the "object[s] to be investigated," which are the dominant norms around sexual violence and comedy evaluation and consumption, as well as meta-narratives about #metoo as a movement (52). I focus on what Jager describes as a "fine analysis of one or several articles" (53) through which I isolate particular rhetorical strategies and identify the ways in which these strategies reveal the "discourse positions" ("a specific ideological location of a person or a medium") on display in these texts (49).

I look at texts published by traditionally mainstream media outlets, such as *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, as well as smaller fringe and alternative publications such as feminist

magazine *Bitch Media.* At the same time, I understand the binary between "mainstream" and "alternative" as outdated in the digital age, where the Internet makes all kinds of texts easily accessible and audiences are more likely to fragment than coalesce into a mass culture (Marx, *Bits to Bytes* 11). While a large gap in resources and popularity between "mainstream" and "alternative" sites remains, both exist within a shared networked context that shapes the discursive production of reality. As Fursich writes, the question discourse analysis should ask is: "what version of reality is normalized?" by a particular text (249). What versions of reality come up for debate in the #metoo cases of C.K. and Ansari? Their #metoo call outs and comebacks operate as cultural flashpoints, wherein the normalization of reality is more obviously a process, as writers and critics work to explicitly denounce certain norms while others vigorously defend them. At stake in these processes are the shared understandings of sex and sexual violence, art and comedy, and #metoo itself as a cultural event. Structuring my analysis around two temporal events—the initial allegations against C.K. and Ansari and their subsequent comebacks—enables a fluid approach to these negotiations, which sees them as continuously in flux and which takes into account how C.K. and Ansari position themselves in response to an evolving public discourse. In analyzing the public discourses around C.K. and Ansari alongside the realities of their careers over the last five years, I approach discourse and reality as dialectically constituted and always already in motion.

Feminist media studies

I organize the scholarship related to my project into three broad categories of literature, each of which is informed by cultural studies, communications studies, and the popular: feminist media studies, comedy studies, and feminist #metoo scholarship. Feminist media studies builds on the work of cultural studies scholars like Hall to analyze the ways in which media work to reproduce and challenge patriarchy as a social and economic system. "Feminist media critique," Alison Harvey writes, "is premised on the idea that our social realities are shaped by our experiences and contexts within an unequal system of power based on gender and other axes of oppression" (33). This media critique is informed by poststructuralism, wherein reality is understood as discursive—constituted via the interaction of discourses and "given meaning through social forces" (9). Feminist discursive approaches to media examine how gender and sexuality are constructed through regimes of representation (Harvey 9). The feminist approach "refutes ideas of 'natural' gender norms and sexual relations, understanding expectations about masculinity and femininity to be social constructs that maintain male dominance" (9). Feminist scholars Sophie Hindes and Bianca Fileborn write that critical discourse analysis seeks to "interrogate and illuminate the complex workings of power and ideology in discourse that contributes to sustaining a hierarchical, gendered social order" (644). The public responses to C.K. and Ansari's #metoo events provide a site for interrogating these complex workings.

My project, then, employs a feminist mode of critical discourse analysis, which is interested in how the discourses around Louis C.K. and Aziz Ansari work to both challenge and reproduce patriarchal cultural norms around sexual violence and comedy creation and consumption. A feminist approach to media analysis also requires an intersectional lens that "addresses the interconnected and inseparable character of oppression based on gender, race, class, sexuality, age, ability, religion, nationality, and other social stratifications" (Harvey 8). I approach the discourse around C.K. and Ansari with particular attention to the roles race and

white supremacy play in structuring public perceptions of C.K. and Ansari. In examining how these axes of oppression manifest through media representations, feminist media studies also works towards change: not just identifying harmful norms, but intervening in their reproduction (Harvey 32).

Feminist media critique often takes media texts as a primary site of analysis, as these texts convey "messages about the expected social and cultural roles" (Harvey 9). Banks et al. write in *Feminist Media Histories* that the "fundamental questions of feminist media studies" have been: "who represents? And who is represented?" (3). In answering these questions, feminist media critique has sought to understand the ways in which "a text contributes to ideological notions" (Harvey 39). Textual analysis is often paired with other forms of analysis in feminist critique, particularly industry and reception studies. As Harvey explains, media are both discursive and social, "constituted of text, symbols and images," as well as "taking an important role in a variety of interpersonal, community, and institutional contexts" (32). The popular, meanwhile, is not just a representational space, but an economic one, shaped by the industrial structures of media and culture industries and the forms of capital—economic, social, cultural—that circulate within them (Harvey 39).

Comedy and TV critics, then, are influential not just because they produce texts that "contribute to ideological notions" (Harvey 39) but also because they wield cultural capital within the entertainment industry. Critics perform a curatorial function as well as an ideological one, affording prestige and legitimacy to artists whose work they deem worthy (Debenedetti 36). Auteurs like C.K. and Ansari can convert this prestige into economic capital in the form of production and distribution deals. The question of what to do with C.K., Ansari, and their art has both ideological and economic implications, with potential consequences for who and what gets funded in Hollywood going forward as well as how comedians choose to share their art and which kinds of audiences they share it with. As such, this thesis looks at the industrial context informing the discursive responses to C.K. and Ansari, as well as the interplay between discourse and industry in shaping not just the "spectrum of what can be said" (Jager 35) but where and how jokes are distributed, received, and rejected. I incorporate industrial analysis in order to understand how the economic structures of the comedy and culture industries shaped a public debate around sexual violence, artistic consumption, and #metoo, and vice versa: what impact does such a debate have on how art is created and circulated within these industries? C.K. and Ansari's #metoo events simultaneously constitute a cultural contestation around sexual violence and artistic norms and an internal reformulation of the terms on which legitimacy is afforded.

In addition to this industrial context, a critical discourse analysis of these #metoo events requires understanding them within the history of feminist activism and scholarship on sexual violence. Sexual violence has long been a significant focus within feminist work, stretching back at least to the consciousness-raising groups of second-wave feminism that encouraged women to name the violence they experienced privately and to understand it as a matter of political concern (Kitzinger 16). Sexual violence is a feminist issue because, as Karen Boyle writes, it is "disproportionately experienced by women and perpetrated by men," though it can and does affect all genders (51). "Feminist analysis is first and foremost about seeing these as gendered patterns," Boyle explains (51). Liz Kelly's concept of the continuum of sexual violence has been particularly significant to feminist scholarship and is especially relevant to #metoo as a movement that not only raised awareness of sexual violence, but challenged dominant definitions of violence. The continuum "is intended to highlight the fact that sexual violence exists in most

women's lives," Kelly writes, "whilst the form it takes, how women define events, and its impact on them at the time and over time varies" (48). This framework "explores the range of sexual violence," connecting quotidian experiences like catcalling with severe instances of rape, and situating them within continuums of experience and incidence (51). Where hegemonic norms frame sexual violence as clearly defined and invariably extreme, Kelly's continuums link the individual, multifaceted experiences of women together into patterns of patriarchal life (48).

The more recent work of Lena Gunnarsson suggests that sexual violence can be understood as a dialectic between discourse and experience. Gunnarsson explains that the "poststructuralist turn" in feminist research generated a debate within feminist sexual violence studies over whether a focus on discourse devalued the importance of lived reality (5). She proposes that there is a "dialectical relationship between discourse and experiences" which "denotes a relationship of mutual co-enfoldment (inseparability) and distinction (separability)," such that discourses help us name our experiences but do not over-determine them (5). Hindes and Fileborn similarly view sexual violence as constructed through the "nexus of discourse, corporeal experience, and institutional processes of recognition" (641). During #metoo, survivors, activists and feminist commentators mobilized and employed these counter-hegemonic frameworks for sexual violence in their public testimonials and commentaries. Boyle describes #metoo's outspoken survivors as engaging in "continuum thinking" and expanding the discursive frameworks around where sex and violence overlap (65). "Continuum thinking remains a radical feminist project precisely because it is so unsettling to binary, himpathetic ways of thinking which dominate in contemporary Western cultures," Boyle writes (65), invoking the term "himpathy" in reference to the dominant norm of sympathizing with perpetrators, usually men, over survivors, usually women (Kitzinger 24, Fileborn and Phillips 110). #Metoo as cultural contestation, then, is an event wherein the dominant modes of conceptualizing sexual violence open up and the alternatives that have been conceptualized through feminist research and praxis vie for space within the mainstream.

This clash between dominant and alternative frameworks for sexual violence plays out within media representations, which have historically functioned to circulate stereotypes and myths about sexual violence. Feminist media studies scholars have for decades documented and conceptualized the ways in which media representations normalize and perpetuate sexual and gendered violence (Kitzinger 18). Martha Burt defines rape stereotypes and myths as "prejudicial, stereotyped or false beliefs about rape, rapists, and rape victims" (217). Rape myths include suggestions that victims are inviting rape through their behaviours or sexual histories, that racialized men are more likely to commit rape, and that women lie about having experienced assault for attention (O'Hara 248). As Shannon O'Hara writes, media dissemination of these myths, as well as coverage that focuses on the most sensational kinds of rape, helps to propagate reductive understandings of sexual violence as individualized and uncommon, turning "rape into a random act of violence, rather than a societal problem" (256). For as long as feminists have identified these tropes, they have also worked to change media representations of sexual violence (Kitzinger 24). While there have been improvements, as Jennifer Kitzinger writes, there has also been a backlash in the form of "himpathy" (Kitzinger 24, Fileborn and Phillips 110). Gunnarsson notes that in popular discourse, there is still a clear separation between sex and sexual violence as phenomena (7). This separation only acknowledges particular experiences of violence and "works to silence others from coming forward" (Fileborn and Phillips 106).

Gunnarsson emphasises the importance of conceptualizing "sexual grey areas" and the need "to talk about experiences at the murky interface of consent and coercion" (6). The over-determination of sexual experiences by patriarchal norms can make the difference between consent and coercion hard to articulate (7). These grey areas are historically absent from media discourses on sexual assault. Gunnarsson refers to them as "an experiential reality that is marginalized" in dominant discourses (7). Studying the 2010 Swedish social media movement #talkaboutit, Gunnarsson emphasizes how the movement sought to broaden the discourses of sexual assault to include these experiences. "One of the key purposes of #talkaboutit was the need for 'a new language'," Gunnarsson writes, "that can better do justice to the complexities of sex, sexual violence, and the grey area in between" (6). #Talkaboutit is a precursor to #metoo, a movement similarly interested in expanding the discursive frameworks for sexual violence and challenging media circulation of rape myths and stereotypes. #Talkaboutit and #metoo are movements that unfold not in the streets but on media platforms themselves. They turn the consciousness-raising meetings of the 70s into something that is simultaneously more individualized and more popular, as individual tweets and posts and articles gather into a tidal wave of voices and data online. They employ the lessons of feminist scholarship and feminist media studies—that violence is partially constituted via discourse, that patriarchal norms are produced and perpetuated via media representations—and use discourse as their means of enacting change. Like feminist scholarship itself, these movements aim to intervene in the reproduction of social reality via discourse and utter a new world into existence.

Comedy studies

What does this new world have to do with comedy? Through the cases of Louis C.K. and Aziz Ansari, the cultural goals of the #metoo movement become intertwined with the dominant norms of comedy as an industry and an artform, as critics and opinion writers weigh concerns about sexual violence and workplace safety alongside their criteria for assessing art. To understand how these concerns have been taken up and how critics are making sense of C.K. and Ansari's significance within a #metoo context requires an understanding of comedy's generic and industrial structures. While feminist media studies has a long scholarly tradition, comedy studies is a relatively new field. Throughout history, philosophers have devoted comparatively little space to the phenomenon of humour (Morreall). From amongst those who have studied it, John Morreall identifies four major theories of humour: superiority theory, which suggests that humour exists to demean others; incongruity theory, which argues that humour emerges from the transgression of expectations; relief theory, wherein humour provides a release from tension; and play theory, which links humour to the play of children. Across disagreements about the purpose or function of humour, common themes begin to emerge that help to position comedy as a form. Henri Bergson's *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, one of the first major modern works on humour, argues that humour arises from something "mechanical encrusted upon the living" (43). Through this argument, Bergson positions humour as a property of both the daily experiences of life and the autonomous world of aesthetics (22). For Bergson, "the comic oscillates between life and art" (22). Laughter, he writes, "does not belong to the province of esthetics alone…it pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement" (20). Where novels are enjoyed through a solitary reading practice, "our laughter is always the laughter of a group" (6). Humour thus has aesthetic properties—it provides pleasure, requires craft, and invites

individuals "to regard themselves as works of art" (20)—and is also invested in the popular, performing the social work of constituting collectives and issuing critique.

In this way, comedy occupies a lowbrow position in the hierarchy of culture. To be sure, many forms of art are embedded in the social, but humour is ontologically dependent on its audience: the presence of laughter determines the presence of humour itself (Gilbert 57). Three of the four major theories of humour attribute a social function to laughter, the exception being incongruity theory, which analyzes the ways in which the generic conventions of comedy set up expectations and violate them. But even these expectations are socially informed. As Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik write, comedy is interested in transgression, and "plays on deviations from both socio-cultural norms, and from the rules that govern other genres and aesthetic regimes" (3). Due to this social function, comedy is often understood as a tool of inclusion, exclusion, and identification. "Comedy helps us test or figure out what it means to say "us"," write Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai (235). Public debates about comedy, then, are debates about both aesthetics and identities: who counts as part of the collective, who gets to make us laugh, and who gets laughed at?

The emerging field of feminist comedy studies is particularly interested in these questions. Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett in their book *Uproarious* characterize humour as "a nuanced play of exclusion and inclusion, a dialectic of hostility (laughing at) and joyful solidarity (laughing with), riding an emotional roller coaster of shame and pride" (17). They reassess the four major theories of humour through a feminist lens and emphasize the importance of humour as a potential tool for positive social change. "Humour from below can serve as a source of empowerment," they write, "a strategy for outrage and truth telling, a counter to fear, a source of joy and friendship, a cathartic treatment against unmerited shame, and even a means of empathetic connection and alliance" (2). Following Willett and Willett, I understand the discourse about C.K. and Ansari and the positioning of these comedians in relation to #metoo as part of a broader negotiation around the social work of humour and the multiple functions of the comedian. Furthermore, given that humour depends on its audience, the question of whether a joke is funny is also deeply intertwined with shared understandings and dominant norms. Humour thus becomes a key site for the analysis of discursive contestations within the space of the popular.

When C.K. and Ansari were first publicly accused of sexual misconduct, they were both busy at work on film and TV projects. When they embarked on their returns to entertainment, however, they did so via stand-up comedy. Through these comebacks, the conventions of humour and the space of the stand-up stage became a site of evaluation for how well or poorly these comics handled their accusations and what they mean to #metoo more broadly. Within humour and comedy studies, stand-up comedy has recently emerged as a distinct form in need of analysis. According to Joanne Gilbert, stand-up's distinguishing features are that it is a solo form that is also in dialogue with an audience, it is a self-correcting genre, and it features simple aesthetics or a "lack of aesthetic distance" (56). In the American context, stand-up emerged in the early 20th century out of vaudeville and the Lyceum circuit (46). Gilbert argues that stand-up comics are "the contemporary analogues of fools—marginalized individuals who perform social critique with impunity" (44). Stand-ups are then both entertainers and satirists, oscillating between life and art, providing pleasure and transgression (47).

Gilbert argues that Lenny Bruce catalyzed the contemporary form of stand-up through his "congruence between 'real' and 'stage' selves" (51). Where previous comics were clearly

performing a character on stage, Bruce was both himself and not (51). In this sense, stand-up is perhaps most distinguished by this performance of what Gilbert calls "the autobiographical self": "a multifaceted, protean entity that encompasses both onstage and offstage personae" (51). Eric Shouse similarly points out the importance of the persona to stand-up as a form. "There is a belief among many working comedians that a comic's persona should accurately reflect his or her essential personhood," he writes (31). The sparse aesthetics of comedy help emphasize this autobiographical self. The comedian on stage is not in costume or surrounded by a set (34). They simply speak into a microphone, creating a sense of familiarity that is further heightened through the use of swearing and colloquial speech (Shouse 34). These features make stand-up what Phillip Deen calls a "structurally intimate art form" (291).

Stand-up's autobiographical self is a performance of authenticity and "truthfulness" (Shouse 34)—not exactly truth itself, but the sense of truth. This authenticity is bound up in the body of the performer, Stephanie Brown explains: "there is an indexicality inherent to the form that inexorably blurs the line between the truth of the *performer* and the truth of the *performance*" (42). Since the rise of comics like Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor, stand-up comedy as an industry and form has been "saturated with truth-telling, relatability, and vulnerability" (42). Brown points out that these norms have functioned to exclude marginalized voices from the industry. Rather than indicating actual truth or facts, authenticity is a criterion that industry authorities such as bookers, agents, and other comics use to legitimize those whose work is the most relatable and the least threatening to straight white men (43). Willett and Willett are more optimistic about the political potential of the stand-up comic, writing that "by the early twentieth-first century across the U.S. cultural and political landscape, the comic, building on a rich legacy, has become our truth teller" (1). Like humour in general, then, stand-up comedy serves both aesthetic and social functions: the comic entertains, offends, speaks truth to power, all while playing a version of themself. The stand-up is someone you know, even if you don't know them. They are impersonally personal: a friend with a microphone, a stool, and a sold-out run at Madison Square Garden.

Truthfulness, relatability, and transgression are all modes of comedy performance, functioning equally as legitimizing criteria. If a comic is authentic, or speaking truth to power, or appropriately offensive, critics and fans deem his work valuable. C.K. and Ansari both gained their cultural status through some mix of these criteria. C.K. was the brutally honest dirtbag, saying what we all think but would never say—or at least, what a certain set of normative straight white men might be thinking and not saying. Ansari was the party guy, and then the feminist ally, critiquing the lack of Asian American representation in film and TV. Crucial to the development of these autobiographical selves is a norm that structures both the performance and consumption of stand-up comedy: stand-up as a protected sphere. Melanie Piper explains that "a comedian's stage persona exists within the framework of comedic performance, a 'marginal safe space' where it is argued that transgressive thoughts can be explored without consequence" ("Time's up" 264). Both performers and fans consider stand-up a "safe" space, where performers have permission to express, play, and transgress. Though the autobiographical self as Gilbert describes it encompasses both offstage and on, the protected sphere of comedy works to separate private lives from public personas. Patrice Oppliger and Kathryn Mears link this safe space to Freud's conceptualization of joke work in humour (162). Freud's analysis of humour identifies two parts of a joke: the "joke work," which is the formal framework of the joke, and the "tendentious" elements of a joke, which refer to "its ability to make socially charged or

controversial statements" (Holm 112). The "joke work" provides aesthetic pleasure, while the "tendentious" content provides social or psychic catharsis—"a purposeful pleasure to the joke beyond enjoyment of its formal properties" (112). In stand-up, "joke work" establishes the space of performance as within the autonomous sphere of art, and thereby not subject to the same political and ethical rules of daily interpersonal interactions.

Here, again, comedy oscillates between life and art: laying claim to the autonomous world of art, while also drawing cultural value from norms of authenticity and truthfulness. As Stefania Marghitu writes, treating art as an entity separate from reality is a norm within the consumption of art. "Separating the art from the artist is a standard practice embedded in the cultural fields," Marghitu explains, "from painting to literature to film and television" (491). This norm extends back to the establishment of Enlightenment ideals of art as an autonomous sphere, separate from the real-world behaviour of the artist and the conditions in which that art was created (Gamboni 38). The consumption of stand-up comedy benefits from a similar kind of cognitive separation, granted by the aesthetic function of joke work, which creates what I refer to as a "protected sphere" rather than a safe space, given that the content of the jokes is not necessarily safe. This norm of the "protected sphere" has arguably intensified as comedy has achieved a higher status within the cultural hierarchy and comedians have attained the cultural position of what Marghitu calls the "genius-artist" (a typically male position) (492). C.K. and Ansari are two notable comedian-auteurs who received immense acclaim for their TV dramedies *Louie* and *Master of None*, with C.K. in particular benefitting from the norm of protection, given that his comedy directly addressed sexually compulsive and violent behaviour. Feminist critics have pointed out how the norm of joke work serves to excuse hateful content. "From "edgy" rape jokes to norm-mongering gag monologues," writes Maggie Hennefeld, "humor has an evident tendency to cloak serial abuse and predation behind the luster of comic license and transgressive subversion" (10).

I consider Louis C.K. and Aziz Ansari's #metoo cases in relation to the social functions of the stand-up comedian as well as the protected sphere of comedy, in order to understand how the figure of the comedian is publicly imagined and the ways in which comedic norms can serve to uphold patriarchal processes. How do the critical engagements with C.K. and Ansari mobilize their comedic personas and aesthetic contributions and how do these considerations bump up against the feminist aims of #metoo? "Audiences often suspend judgment when seemingly "good" comedians tell "dark" jokes," write Oppliger and Mears (162). "When well-liked comedians do bad things in real life, however, it is less clear how far fans are willing to go to support them" (162). The question of how far audiences will go in supporting harmful comics brings up another question: what attaches an audience to a particular comedian in the first place? The ability of a comedian to fulfill a particular aesthetic and social role also depends on the particular attachments, desires, and identifications of a given audience. Funniness is, Neale and Krutnik write, "a property thus subject to negotiation and dispute" (65). Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore enumerates the factors at play: "whether or not we accept this invitation to laugh will depend on our relationships with characters, our understanding of the narrative so far, our comprehension of cultural references, our understanding of cultural discourses around comedy, our tastes, our attitudes towards the themes that are represented, our previous experiences of comedy, our moods, who we are watching it with, and so on" (5). Drawing on the work of Sara Ahmed, she explains that audiences bring their own affective histories to their comedic judgments (5). "My individual experiences of comedy are situated within an 'affective economy'

of wider cultural discourses around what is funny and what isn't," she writes (5). She emphasizes the importance of understanding audience identities as "situated within what we might call discursive environments," which inform their affective responses to comedic works (7). Comedy is, in other words, contextual. Shared humour develops in particular social settings and binds particular groups together or pits them against each other.

If discursive environments shape affective experiences, the reverse is also true. Particular affective responses to a comedian's work inform the language critics use to engage with that work. As Willett and Willett write, the affective power of laughter "alters the images, norms, and habits of affect and cognition that diminish or enhance identities and social positions" (10). Feminist scholars have noted the affective intensities attached to comedic taste. "Audiences tend to have a positive disposition toward someone who brings them joy and laughter," write Oppliger and Mears (166). Berlant and Ngai point out that "people's attachment to their own pleasures" seems to generate debates about comedy that are more heated than those about other artistic forms (242). How do these attachments interact with a feminist movement aimed at exposing gendered violence? In challenging the norms of sexual violence, #metoo also challenges the cultural structures that enable abuses of power, and the norms of comedic consumption that protect comedians and their protean personas from off-stage consequences. While comedy is not entirely separate from reality—the autobiographical self relies on the blurring of this line—the stage is evaluatively shielded from the real world. Comedians are assessed based on their ability to fulfill their multiple comedic functions, rather than the actual actions of their off-stage selves. With the #metoo cases of C.K. and Ansari, these comedic norms are contested alongside the dominant definitions of sexual violence. Some critics call directly for a mode of artistic and comedic consumption that refuses to separate art from artist, drawing on a feminist understanding of art as inseparable from the material conditions in which it is created (Zoller Seitz, "Louis C.K. is Done"). What happens when these norms come up for debate, and what do these debates reveal about the ways in which power and patriarchy manifest in comedy as an art form and industry?

Feminist #metoo scholarship

Neither the initial *Times* investigation of C.K. nor the *Babe* article about Ansari actually use the phrase "#metoo." However, both stories sparked public conversations about sexual violence and separating art from the artist that have been explicitly and implicitly informed by the context of the #metoo movement. Popular response to both cases on social media invoked the #metoo hashtag and, across the five years covered in my corpus, critics mobilize both C.K. and Ansari as symbols of the movement's successes and failures. My analysis considers how the media response to C.K. and Ansari's #metoo events constitutes the movement as an active cultural clash, wherein dominant and alternative approaches to sexual violence and comedy consumption contend for public space and critics negotiate the artistic and ethical responsibilities of comedians and audiences. My findings contribute to a growing body of feminist research dedicated specifically to #metoo.

Within media studies, feminist scholars have analyzed media coverage of #metoo and its international counterparts in order to identify the presence of hegemonic and feminist approaches to sexual violence. Some of these studies suggest that #metoo did indeed mark a shift in media discourses around sexual violence. Baker et al., looking at reporting on #meNOmore—an

Australian offshoot of #metoo focusing on the music industry—find that coverage is "supportive of feminist narrative" (198). They note that this is true of both conservative and liberal media outlets, which frame #meNOmore as "legitimate and worthy" (197). De Benedictis et al. similarly find that U.K. media coverage of #metoo has helped increase public awareness of sexual violence. Other studies, however, find that coverage of #metoo continues to perpetuate the representational regimes typically used for sexual violence in the media. Lisa Cuklanz, looking at mainstream U.S. news coverage of #metoo, finds that the media framing gives priority to the voices of accused men and promulgates their "explanations and denials" (254). Hindes and Fileborn, examining Australian coverage of Ansari's case, find that the majority of media coverage frames sexual violence and non-violence as "binary, mutually-exclusive categories," erasing any grey areas (646). Per Hindes and Fileborn, the media largely understands Ansari's actions as "outside the bounds of sexual violence" and positions sexual encounters that are coercive, or marked by unclear communication and pressure, as standard within heterosexual sex (646). In this way, the coverage of Ansari works to reinforce dominant norms that sexual violence is extreme and individualized, as opposed to existing on continuums of experience and incidence.

Feminist scholarship is also assessing #metoo's impact on cultural forms and industries, specifically with regard to the construction of the auteur in Hollywood. In *Feminist Media Histories*, Banks et al. write that "for feminist media studies scholars, #MeToo should also encourage considerations of the ethics of engaging auteurs and aesthetic work without considering how greatness is defined and who is oppressed in the continued celebration of producers who have abused women" (8). The status of auteur is conferred through sources of cultural legitimacy, such as critical acclaim, industry awards, and cult fan worship, which can translate into economic rewards. Marghitu describes how these processes of cultural valuation serve to protect "genius-artists" from facing consequences for their actions (491). She identifies a "post-Weinstein effect," wherein a slew of powerful abusers in Hollywood faced abuse allegations following the initial Weinstein investigation in the *Times* (492). However, she then notes that in the months following October 2017 "the cultural tide turned toward the status quo of auteur apologism," a cultural norm of accepting abusive or problematic behaviour from auteurs because these behaviours are part of their genius (492). While there hasn't been an extensive analysis of the public discourse around C.K. and Ansari in relation to their status as comedians and auteurs, Melanie Piper has looked at how #metoo impacted C.K.'s autobiographical self, writing that "what once could have been read as the comedic hyperboles of an on-stage persona took on a greater resemblance to the 'real self'" ("Time's Up" 265).

Oppliger and Mears explore reactions from audiences and other comedians to the allegations against comics like C.K. and Ansari, pointing out that these cases may have been treated differently than Weinstein's because these comedians already had warm public personas as allies, feminists, and friends (153). "What happens when the #MeToo movement involves comedians, the individuals charged with making us laugh?" (151) they ask, ultimately concluding with another question: "Can one separate the art from the artist?" (166). Phillip Deen, though not writing from an explicitly feminist perspective, attempts to tackle this question in an essay on C.K. and Bill Cosby. Through a philosophical approach, Deen argues that moral failings in a comedian may impact their ability to create a sense of intimacy and connection with the audience, and thus reduce the aesthetic impact of their work. The extent to which a comedian's abusive behaviour affects their work, then, may depend on how that work positions

their off-stage behaviours. C.K.'s "moral flaws are much more present in his stand-up comedy, and it is therefore more difficult to find him funny once we know of his immorality" Deen writes (291). The critics included in my analysis weigh considerations of sexual violence and #metoo's feminist aims against their aesthetic judgments and personal attachments to the work of C.K. and Ansari. The often contradictory and sometimes explicitly activist positions they take up reveal that while hegemonic norms and processes certainly reconsolidate themselves, Marghitu's "auteur apologism" does not necessarily stretch into the domain of popular critical opinion (492).

Finally, feminist research on #metoo also conceptualizes and criticizes the movement itself. Significant scholarship has identified many of the movement's failures with regard to inclusivity and intersectionality. Nanditha Narayanamoorthy's analysis of #metoo in India reveals that the movement, "not unlike its western counterpart, is invested in uncovering sexism, abuse and rape among the highest echelons of Indian society—the entertainment industry" (16). This focus on entertainment can leave out the experiences of marginalized women and survivors, while the strategy of storytelling via social media platforms can be inaccessible for "participation and representation at all levels" (7). Patricia Davis similarly points out the ways in which the movement is more useful to particular kinds of survivors. She argues that the sex trafficking committed by singer R. Kelly was taken less seriously because his victims were Black girls: "black women are, by definition, unworthy of similar concern" (495).[1] Sarah Banet-Weiser identifies similar tensions at play, citing #metoo as an example of "the struggle between a consenting popular feminism and one that is more resistant" (24). She contrasts #metoo's beginnings in the 2000s, when it was founded by Tarana Burke as a "mechanism for building intersectional feminist community," with its 2017 iteration, in which wealthy white women turned it into a wide-scale visualization of trauma (24). Verity Trott points out the intense costs of participating in a movement unfolding via digital platforms, exposing participants to potential harassment and retribution (2). At the same time, Trott indicates the importance of the hashtag as a tool taken up "to negotiate meaning of our social reality and to discursively define social issues within both the digital realm and the broader public sphere" (6). Stacey Hannem and Christopher Schneider look specifically at C.K. and Ansari's cases in their book *Defining Sexual Misconduct*, and consider the intensity of the public reactions as well as the difference in response to the two cases as indicative of #metoo's varied impacts and shifting cultural norms around violence.

Scholars are also identifying the emergence of a quick and vicious backlash to #metoo. Phillips and Chagnon situate #metoo within ongoing debates about sexual violence, and argue that these debates should be understood as "moral happenings—collective social reactions infused with emotion and energy that disrupt the status quo" (410). They note that #metoo's discursive arc has "bent backward" quickly, facing hostile and reactionary backlash (410). Boyle similarly identifies #metoo as a moment marked by possibility and constraint, identifying that survivors and experiencers are using Kelly's continuums to conceptualize their experiences of violence, at the same time prompting a backlash against the radical "challenge" of continuum thinking (52). Popular discussions employ the phrase "he's no Harvey Weinstein" to separate out incidences of sexual violence, rather than understanding them as existing on the same continuum (60). The backlash turns "a story of consensus-building" amongst women and survivors, Boyle writes, into "a more media-friendly story of conflict in which there are two opposing, and

[1] In October 2021, Kelly was convicted of sex trafficking, four years after #metoo began (Closson).

gendered, "sides"" (66). For Fileborn and Phillips, the backlash represents a shift in #metoo's discursive arc marked by "counterclaims cautioning a moral panic, witch hunt, and mob rule" (100). They note that this was especially true of Ansari's case, and characterize this backlash as "oppositional rhetoric rooted in anti-feminism" (101).

Writing for *Dissent*, Sarah Jaffe insists that in the face of backlash, the movement must remain invested in continuums of experience. "The movement's opponents or even just those made slightly uncomfortable by its breadth keep attempting to narrow its parameters," she writes, "but the wide scope is the point" (81). She writes that the backlash attempts to direct #metoo towards specifically carceral goals, but the movement emerged as "a conversation about norms," (83) and that survivors are predominantly interested in "acknowledgment of what happened," not imprisonment (82). For Jaffe, the movement represented a shift in media coverage towards understanding the structural effects of patriarchy, extending beyond Hollywood: "the media rippled with stories of hotel housekeepers, restaurant workers, domestic workers," she writes (86). "There is a spectrum of abuses of power, some tiny and some huge, that all add up to a world where women's voices, women's work, and women's sexual desires are ignored or devalued," Jaffe continues (84). Heleana Theixos describes #metoo as a "new form of publicly engaged and publicly discussed workplace sexual misconduct activism," highlighting the movement's prioritization of "the heretofore silenced voice" (268). Fileborn and Phillips similarly characterize it as "a long overdue reckoning and watershed moment in sexual violence activism" (99). They highlight in particular the importance of the grey areas between consent and violence as "taken seriously, validated, and believed" within #metoo (99).

What all of these conceptualizations of #metoo have in common is their understanding of #metoo as a "moment of rupture" with both radical and conservative potential (Fileborn and Phillips 100). #Metoo is marked in these understandings by a tension between the feminist outpouring and the reactionary backlash. It becomes a "process through which the boundaries of what constitutes sexual violence are destabilized," both "opened up and pulled back toward more conservative understandings" (Fileborn and Phillips 100). Following these scholars, I understand #metoo as a feminist intervention into the cultural norms around sexual violence, cultural value, and artistic consumption, one with the radical aim of overhauling these norms, rather than merely subverting them. Norms of sexual violence as extreme and bounded, and of cultural value as excusing or existing separately from abuse, perpetuate a patriarchal culture in which men can abuse power and violate boundaries. #Metoo interrupts these processes and invites alternative understandings of sexual violence and alternative modes of cultural valuation, creation and consumption.

At the same time, #metoo is itself indicative of a broader cultural contestation between what Sarah Banet-Weiser calls popular feminism and popular misogyny. In *Empowered*, Banet-Weiser writes that over the last decade, feminism has become "somewhat incredibly" popular (13). Popular feminism "materializes as a kind of *media* that is widely visible and accessible," Banet-Weiser explains (18). It is interested primarily in raising awareness—and then monetizing that awareness via clicks, likes, and shares—of the need for itself (27). Popular feminism is also accompanied by a backlash: popular misogyny, which Banet-Weiser defines as "the instrumentalization of women as objects, where women are a means to an end: a systematic devaluing and dehumanizing of women" (13). #Metoo and its backlash, then, are one manifestation of this negotiation between popular feminism and popular misogyny, "warring, constantly moving contexts" that "battle it out on the contemporary cultural landscape" (13). The

struggle between feminism and misogyny is not new, but its contemporary *popular* iteration is, as Banet-Weiser describes. "We are in a new era of the gender wars," she writes, "an era that is marked by a dramatic increase in the visible expression and acceptance of feminism, and by a similarly vast amount of public vitriol and violence directed toward women" (5). While I elaborate further on these warring contexts in chapter two, the contestation between feminism and misogyny contextually and discursively links the issues of sexual violence, #metoo as discursive event, and comedy as art form and industry.

The cases of Louis C.K. and Aziz Ansari render this contestation especially visible, as debates about violence, comedy, and the goals of #metoo itself serve as specific flashpoints within these warring contexts. Such debates reveal #metoo as an active clash over cultural norms around violence and art as well as broader contestations over the place of feminism, anti-racism, and Trumpism within contemporary American popular culture. "The media and entertainment industries are the first performative trials from which broader cultural understanding is constructed and applied," writes Theixos (272). "The ways in which allies and critics respond to these movements is constantly being interrogated and reinvented, in real-time, as these processes unfold" (272). The response to C.K. and Ansari, then, is a means of understanding #metoo's discursive challenges to comedic and sexual norms, which ideologies are at play in these debates, and how these debates constitute #metoo as an ongoing cultural clash, defined by the dialectical tension between feminist rupture and misogynistic reaction.

Chapter 2: A Small Slice of the Pie

Industrial context: the second comedy boom

The old joke goes: "how do you get to Carnegie Hall?" "Practice, practice, practice." The road to Madison Square Garden is a little less straightforward. As *Vulture*'s Jesse David Fox writes, before 2009, only three comedians had sold out the New York arena ("Comedy Boom"). Since then, the list has grown to double digits, and includes Louis C.K. and Aziz Ansari (Campbell). This increase in comedy ticket sales is just one indicator of a broader industry-wide trend known as the second comedy boom. In chapter one I addressed comedy as an aesthetic form, focusing on the comedian's multiple functions as truth-teller, transgressor, entertainer and autobiographical self. These artistic norms are shaped by a media industrial context that encourages and sanctions them. Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz write, "To struggle with the complexities of the comedic is both to contemplate a core aspect of human nature and to consider a fundamental component of media economics" (*Comedy Studies* 6).

Comedy as an industry encompasses several different sites: live performance (stand-up and sketch), film, TV, and the Internet (which itself is difficult to separate from film and TV). These sites are economically intertwined—comedy specials for Netflix, for example, are usually filmed at live stand-up venues—and provide comedians with multiple avenues for income and exposure. When such avenues experience a surge in growth, comedy writers and historians note the presence of a "comedy boom." The first boom took place from the late 1970s to the early 1990s in the form of an explosion of comedy clubs (Fox, "Comedy Boom"). New York's first comedy club opened in 1962; by the early 90s there were 300 across the country (Double 30-31). These clubs helped position comedy as "the new rock and roll" (Double 32), or, as Richard Zoglin writes, "the place where you could have an up-close-and-personal encounter with big-time show business" now that rock had expanded to stadiums (204). They also became sites of exploitation and cultural gatekeeping, as club bookers had single-handed power to decide who went on stage and who was left waiting on the wings. Mitzi Shore, the owner of L.A.'s infamous Comedy Store, faced a comedian's strike in 1979 when comics demanded pay for their performances (Solomon).

At the same time, comedians started shining bright on the small screen. While comedy variety shows and family programs had always been prominent on TV, the advent of both *Saturday Night Live* and cable, with its raunchier and rowdier programming, helped make TV comedy cool, adding to comedy's status as a rock-and-roll equivalent. HBO (which debuted in 1972, and was eventually followed by Comedy Central in 1991) targeted younger viewers with comedy programs that had the latitude to be more subversive than the network TV fare of the broadcast era (Sienkiewicz and Marx, *That's Not Funny* 16). The rising tide of the boom elevated some comics like Eddie Murphy and Steve Martin to the status of blockbuster movie stars while others like Jerry Seinfeld achieved blockbuster TV ratings. By the early 90s, there was a stand-up-to-sitcom (or sit down) pipeline, with every comic seeking their own *Seinfeld*. The boom started to bust (Double 32). Alternative comics, tired of club models where "comedy was important but the comedian was not," began booking their own shows, bringing a confessional style to less traditional venues like Brooklyn bars and black-box theatres (Brown

52). This heavily autobiographical scene, led by comics like Janeane Garofalo, Marc Maron, and Louis C.K., laid the foundations for a new boom to come (Fox, "Comedy Boom").

In his 2015 article "How the Internet and a New Generation of Superfans Helped Create the Second Comedy Boom," Fox pinpoints 2009 as the beginning of the new boom.[2] In 2009, he points out, Maron began his hugely popular podcast *WTF*, Rob Delaney began using Twitter as a comedic outlet, and Aziz Ansari filmed his first stand-up special. If a surge of clubs heralded the first boom, the industrial markers of the second boom are more diffuse: an increase in television content and filmed stand-up specials (original programming on Comedy Central nearly doubled between 2012 and 2015), as well as a deluge of comedy distributed via mediums like podcasts and social media platforms (Fox, "Comedy Boom"). This boom translated to more traditional sites; according to *Forbes*' Libby Coleman, comedy clubs saw a revenue growth of 16.8% from 2013-2018 ("Major Trends"). "There has never been a better time to be a comedian," writes Fox of the boom. "The talent pool is broad, deep, and more diverse than ever before," he continues, "a new generation of passionate fans is supporting experimental work; and there are countless ways (online, onscreen, in your earbuds, at live shows) for new voices to be heard." He contrasts this with the previous boom, where comedians were vying for superstardom or a few large slices of a "small pie." "Now," he writes, "the pie is bigger and slices more plentiful," which enables more comedians to earn a living from their work, even if that living is not up to the standards of Jerry Seinfeld.

This pie didn't expand of its own accord. More expansive shifts in contemporary media have enabled the second comedy boom to be so diffuse and diverse. The boom emerged out of the advent of digital media and its technological, industrial and cultural impacts. Henry Jenkins describes these changes as "convergence culture," which is defined by a "flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences" (2). Convergence is a "cultural shift," Jenkins asserts (2), defined not just by the technologies used but a whole host of audience and industrial practices. Nick Marx sums up many of these changes in his doctoral dissertation on sketch comedy, *From Bits to Bytes*. "Two major trends have driven changes in the American commercial media industries since the 1980s," he writes, "the increased fragmentation of and active consumption behaviors by audiences, and the conglomeration of media firms into vertically and horizontally-integrated multinational corporations" (11).

In this new era, the boundaries between mediums have dissolved. As Ramon Lobato points out, television is now distributed via the same technology as newspapers and private messages (6). Netflix is an online content distributor that positions itself as akin to television, troubling the very definition of television in the process (20), while online platforms like YouTube and social media sites enable creators to share their work directly with audiences. Amanda Lotz's *Portals* emphasizes that the biggest change here is the means through which content is shared. "The revolutionary impact of new media upon television has not been as a replacement medium, but as a new mechanism of distribution," she writes. She quotes sociologist John B. Thompson's definition of "logics" as "the set of factors that determine the conditions under which individual agents and organizations (that compose media industries)

[2] The second boom was arguably still going strong before COVID-19 hit, though perhaps showing signs of running out of creative gas, if a glut of similar stand-up specials and autobiographical TV shows is any indication.

participate in the field," (Thompson 11) in order to analyze how the logics of television are shifting. Similarly, the logics that govern the comedy industry are changing to incorporate a plethora of new media platforms with different mechanisms of distribution, different incentives for creators, and different relationships to audiences.

The changing logics of comedy are informed by and entwined with the changing logics of television. Marx and Sienkiewicz point out that comedy is often a bridge in times of media transitions: comedy variety shows helped usher in the age of TV in the 50s, and comedy programming has helped TV networks consolidate their brands in the internet era (*Comedy Studies* 8). Where club comedians used to aspire to sitcom roles and stand-up spots on late night television, during the second boom, television comedy has become more experimental and more dramatic, aligned with notions of quality TV. The new logics of digital media have encouraged audience fragmentation, via a proliferation of platforms and, especially, the de-synchronizing of media consumption (Lotz). In other words, audiences are fragmenting because they can choose where, how, and *when* they consume their media. "Contemporary media platforms actively solicit an individualized, fragmented, and empowered media consumer," writes Chuck Tryon (14). Cable TV and streaming services seek out fragmented audiences via niche programming and quality TV, both of which consist of critically acclaimed programs that cultivate loyal viewers. As Fox writes: "Instead of broad network sitcoms, more comedians are getting small, idiosyncratic shows on cable or streaming sites. In the last five years, Comedy Central has seen increased competition from IFC, FX, FXX, Fusion, TBS, Netflix, Amazon, Hulu, Yahoo, and TruTV" ("Comedy Boom"). These smaller cable channels and new streaming sites produce subcultural comedy content as a means of targeting specific audiences. In their 2022 book *That's Not Funny*, Sienkiewicz and Marx refer to audience fragmentation as audience siloing, a term that arguably implies more intentionality on the part of both broadcasters and audiences themselves. The emergence of the digital media landscape, Sienkiewicz and Marx argue, has reduced the barriers to content creation and led to what they metaphorically describe as a "construction boom" where "each unit must be built for a smaller, more tightly defined target audience" (25). Fragmentation thus turns audiences into "easy-to-sell-to segments" (323). The content targeted to these segments encourages the cultivation of rarefied audience identities, which in turn makes these audiences easier to target via personalized advertisements (323).

Within this logic, what Marieke Jenner calls the "quality comedy" emerges: half-hour programs, usually led by a popular alternative comedian, that blend drama, comedy, and "cinematic" aesthetics, often with autobiographical content (146). These programs further distinguish themselves from the broad appeal of classic sitcoms through single-camera filming, the absence of studio audiences and canned laughter, referential humour that avoids explaining itself to every viewer, and complex storylines that forgo neat resolution or interpretation. The most influential of these quality comedies is, arguably, Louis C.K.'s *Louie*, which helped establish the form on FX. The proliferation of niche comedy content on cable and streaming—stand-up specials, sketch shows, and, especially, the quality comedy—is hugely important to the second comedy boom, providing comedians not only with steady incomes but legitimacy. Cultural critics heaped praise on the quality comedy. *Vulture*'s Matt Zoller Seitz compared *Louie* to a Degas painting, implicitly elevating it to the status of high art ("Airing *Louie*"). *Polygon*'s Samit Sarkar hailed Ansari's quality comedy, *Master of None*, as not only "terrific," but "groundbreaking" and "important," locating its value not just in its laughs but in its innovativeness and social significance. Sarkar notably refers to *Master of None* as "auteur-

driven" and calls it "cut from the same cloth" as *Louie* and Lena Dunham's *Girls*, another quality comedy. Writers like Zoller Seitz and Sarkar helped to conceptualize the quality comedy as a particular and cohesive TV genre, one whose creators are not just comics like Seinfeld but artistic auteurs. This legitimacy, distributed by critics within the public sphere, is discursive. Just as it is bestowed, it can be taken away.

Beyond television, comedians have created a host of new opportunities for themselves via the Internet. The new generation of comics relies less on the traditional gatekeepers of clubs, TV network executives, and late-night hosts, instead using internet-based platform services as distribution mechanisms. Lobato defines platforms as "large-scale online systems premised on user interaction and user-generated content" (36). On platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, comedians become users, generating and distributing content as well as interacting directly with fans. Comedians have also been at the forefront of popularizing podcasts as a form as well as developing their own comedy-specific websites with devoted followings, like "Funny or Die." This landscape is especially well suited to the autobiographical alternative comedy developed in the late 90s, which transfers easily to intimate and DIY formats like podcasts. Marx and Sienkiewicz note that cable networks have started using the internet as a kind of content farm, discovering popular web series and offering to turn them into TV shows, as Comedy Central did with *Broad City*. "The innovation and energy of comedy on the internet is being co-opted by a television industry suddenly insecure about its place in the media pecking order," they write (*Comedy Studies* 7). The classic constraints of TV have expanded to absorb the more experimental styles of alternative comedy. Web comedy is especially useful to cable and streaming networks as it performs "a very basic and desirable function long prized by the television industry: organizing the audience" (Marx, "Missing Link" 20).

These industrial shifts have opened up the potential pathways to comedic success. Internet-distributed platforms offer comedians greater creative freedom, enabling those who were previously too niche or alternative to find a bigger audience for their work, while the old gatekeepers are adapting and expanding under new cultural logics. Alex Symons identifies a new generation of "'outsider' comedians," who are "challenging the power of an American television industry which largely excluded them" (104). The comedian as outsider is a long-running comic trope, one that emerges out of the comedic functions of transgression and truth-telling. As transgressors and social commentators, certain comedians have always prided themselves on being unwelcome or unpopular. The comics who were too controversial for network TV, for example, thrived in the underground space of the club. Symons' outsider comedians are part of this lineage and distinguished by the digital mediums that allow them to remain outsiders. Before the second boom began, TV labour for comedians became increasingly precarious and casual (Symons 106), one of the negative effects of the concentration of media ownership. "It is in this industrial context that new media, especially podcasts, now offer American comedians valuable alternatives to produce content and reach audiences," Symons writes (106). Jillian Belanger concurs: "For some comics, transmedia opportunities have provided an avenue to success that had not previously seemed possible" (144). Marc Maron, for example, worked in alternative comedy for decades without successfully breaking through. His podcast, *WTF with Marc Maron*, has allowed him to reach enormous new audiences, which in turn led to TV opportunities that bolstered his career in more traditional outlets. "Maron is recognized as a part of the 'Small Comedy boom' on cable," Symons writes (113), which rejects the broadness of sitcom comedy, challenges the dominance of major networks, and in the process helps cultivate highly niche

audience silos for advertisers. With this increase in control of both aesthetics and production, alternative comics like Maron, particularly those emerging out of the 90s alternative scene, can remain artistically "alt" while increasing their popularity.

In maintaining their creative freedom, either on their own podcasts and social media pages or via quality TV comedies, the comedians leading the new boom have also increased the popularity of their particular comedy style: the confessional mode. Symons' 'outsider' comedians, typified by Doug Stanhope, Marc Maron and Louis CK, "each stand out for producing provocative and esoteric comedy" via their own popular podcasts (107). These comedians are 'outsiders' because their styles are perceived as being incommensurable with "mainstream form and content" (107). Prior to *WTF*, Maron's comedy was prone to personal monologues; now, he engages in intensely vulnerable dialogues with his podcast guests (Freeman). C.K., meanwhile, merged comedy's autobiographical tradition with transgression by referring to his kids as assholes. Though neither of these styles led to immense popularity in the 90s, when Seinfeld's squeaky clean observational humour dominated, the second comedy boom has paradoxically allowed many of these outsider comedians—C.K. in particular—to achieve mainstream success. Fox notes that the comedy of the second boom is "more conversational and experimental," thanks to the influence of comedians like Maron and C.K. This conversational approach, especially in podcast form, contributes to the manufacturing of intimacy with the audience. Podcasts have extremely simple aesthetics, which "suggests less 'fakery' or less mediated separation" Symons writes (107). These aesthetics contribute to the perceived authenticity of the performer's autobiographical self. "When Maron, Stanhope and CK share intimate and often awful details about their sexual shortcomings, abortions, family illness and death, personal anxiety and career struggles presented in a podcast," Symons writes, "these are framed as 'real' evidence" of their performed selves (108). While the autobiographical self has been an element of stand-up since Lenny Bruce was onstage, the mediums and styles of the second boom have led to an intensification of this performance. Part of the appeal of comedy, now, is not to laugh at a good punchline, but to feel like you're hanging out with your friends.

Melanie Piper links this intensification to social media, where the "persona of the comedian" is both "promoter and product" ("Louie, Louis" 16). Piper highlights podcasts as a space in which hosts "perform their off-stage selves," discussing their personal lives with friends, "in what will eventually become a front stage venue before an audience once the podcast is released online" (15). Quality comedies are similar, in that these shows often follow the backstage lives of a comedian protagonist modelled after the creator. Piper points out that these shows have a heightened sense of realism due to their cinematic aesthetics, which renders them more autobiographical than the classic sitcoms starring club comics. She contrasts *Seinfeld* with a show like *Louie*, arguing that the public personas of comedians like C.K. become a "metapresence" in their quality comedies (16). The confessional style and intimate forms preferred by these second boom comedians, then, serve to blur the line between on-stage personas and off-stage actions.

Notably, all of the outsider comedians highlighted by Symons are men. Stephanie Brown argues that the "dual cultural logics of embodiment and authenticity" which govern stand-up are gendered (43). Authenticity, for Brown, is not an actual indication of truth, but rather "a floating signifier that is wielded by those with power, most often straight white men, in ways that sustain masculine dominance within the industry" (43). Authenticity is conferred by gatekeepers, critics, and fans, all of whom have been predominantly men throughout comedy's history. While women

have always performed and worked in comedy, from Moms Mabley to Mitzi Shore, men have by and large held the positions of power that shaped the genre's conventions. Women were prominent in the alternative comedy scene of the 90s, and many women have seen success during the second boom, including the astronomically popular Amy Schumer. That said, Schumer also remains the only woman comic to have sold out Madison Square Garden. The confessional style has enabled comics like Maria Bamford and Tig Notaro to share their experiences with mental health and cancer, respectively. It also gives license to C.K. to confess his inappropriate sexual desires, while simultaneously providing moral cover for these desires under the guise of humour. C.K. was just joking, until he wasn't.

When it comes to sustaining a career, perhaps the most important affordance of these contemporary comedy forms is the direct links they create with fans. The intensity of comedy fandom is a defining feature of the second boom. Indeed, Andrew Clark, writing in the *New York Times*, claims that the comedy nerd is to blame for the boom. As Fox explains, today's comedy fans were primed for fandom by TV. Many of them were raised on the comedian-driven sitcoms of the 90s and grew up with a working knowledge of comedy as a form. This prior knowledge, combined with the direct connection provided by social media and the intimacy constructed through podcasts and quality TV, creates what Fox calls the comedy "superfan." Superfans are "now the norm at comedy shows around the country," according to Fox ("Comedy Boom"). New media have created "blurred lines between amateurs and professionals" (Belanger 143) while also turning intense fandoms into industry imperatives. Rebecca Krefting and Rebecca Baruc, in a study of social media's impacts on comedy, note that media distributors, in turn, are "interested in backing comics who can demonstrate a strong online fan base" (131). They write that comedians face pressure to have a "fierce, visible following," (132).

In a fragmented media landscape, intensive attachment from a small audience silo is more valuable than ambivalent attachment from the general population. Comedians cultivate this following via social media, where "their relentless communications with fans are trivial, esoteric and even mundane," writes Symons (108). These fan bases further enable comedians to bypass traditional gatekeepers. In the words of Doug Stanhope, "Once you have direct access to your fan base you can fucking play anywhere" (Symons 110). Thanks to his fan base, C.K. has been able to control the distribution of his comedy albums, making them available to his fans to download directly online (Symons 114). This further entrenches his perception as an authentic alternative comedian, garnering increased loyalty from fans, despite his status as one of the most popular comedians in the country. Comedians with loyal fans don't need mass appeal. Instead, they benefit from and contribute to the process of audience fragmentation encouraged by the new media landscape. "Platforms offer fans a way to find comics with similar comic sensibilities, creating tribes based on emotional and ideological congruence," write Krefting and Baruc (130). These emotionally and ideologically congruent audiences function as "relatively homogenous, easy-to-advertise-to" groups for media conglomerates and their sponsors (Sienkiewicz and Marx 27). The logics of new media, then, have produced a comedy boom where comedians can assert increased creative and economic control to garner critical prestige and cultish fan bases.

Within this paradigm, C.K. and Ansari emerged as leaders: C.K. as the edgy influencer paving the way with an FX dramedy, Ansari as the feminist ally helping to build Netflix's brand. Indeed, Fox writes that "the ultimate goal for a comedian in 2015…[is] having their own *Louie*." Through the merging of popular and critical acclaim, C.K. and Ansari both became auteurs of the comedy boom, respected not just for their ability to entertain, but as authentic artists, bolstered

by cultural as well as economic capital. C.K.'s stature came from his creative decisions and the industrial control he maintained over his work. "C.K. is recognised for contributing towards the wider transformation of American comedy," Symons writes, "moving towards more creative structures, niche tastes and reaching increasingly narrow audience groups through new media" (115). Krefting and Baruc note that C.K. negotiated a deal with HBO allowing him to sell his HBO special *Oh My God* directly to fans online. "Already having the $250,000 needed to produce the show," they write, "C.K. had the upper hand in this arrangement. HBO needed him, more than he needed them" (135).

Ansari, while perhaps less associated with directly popularizing the boom, is one of its biggest stars. He first achieved recognition via the network sitcom *Parks and Recreation*, a quality network broadcast comedy loved by critics and audiences (Jenner 148). At the same time, Ansari began to position himself as a relatable millennial figure. In 2015, he published *Modern Romance*, a book written with a New York University sociologist and marketed as a semi-scientific investigation of the contemporary conditions of love and loneliness. The book was a *New York Times* bestseller. Through *Modern Romance*, Ansari established himself as someone who is silly *and* serious. The book set Ansari up for his most successful project to date: the Netflix series *Master of None*. Netflix gave Ansari his own show at a time when the network was competing with HBO to brand itself as a home for prestige TV and quality comedy (145). *Master of None* contributed to this goal, extensively aligning itself with quality cinematic aesthetics (via episodes that paid tribute to Italian neorealist cinema) and winning an Emmy in 2016 for Outstanding Writing. Ansari and C.K.'s auteur-entertainer careers were also industrially linked; the comics shared a manager, Dave Becky, and a booking agent, Mike Berkowitz, both powerful players in the second comedy boom.

Ansari and C.K. both accumulated their cultural status in part by positioning themselves as progressive, associated with the alternative comedy movement's interest in confessional material and creating space for unusual or unheard voices. In C.K.'s 2013 special *Oh My God*, C.K. marvelled at the courage women have to date men. "How do women still go out with guys, when you consider that there is no greater threat to women than men?" he asked the audience. "You know what our number one threat is? Heart disease," he followed up. In Ansari's 2015 special *Live at Madison Square Garden*, he asked the women in the audience to raise their hand if they had ever been followed around by a "creepy dude." "If you're a creepy dude doing that, what's your dream scenario at that point? What's your best case situation?" Ansari asked to a round of laughter.[3] Jokes like these earned both men the label of feminist (Haglund, Balcazar). Stephen Kohlmann, meanwhile, cites C.K. and Ansari as examples of what he calls comedy's "new man" (3), marked by "sensitivity, vulnerability, and a social conscience that attempts to address the oppressed members of society" (3). Ansari further confirmed this role via *Master of None*, which dedicated a whole episode to teaching men the importance of paying attention to gender dynamics, as well as including a later storyline about workplace sexual harassment. Ansari also explored the barriers facing Indian-American actors in the episode "Indians on TV," and the complexities of immigration in the episode "Parents." Jaclyn Michael figures him as part of a "New Brown America," alongside comedians like Hasan Minhaj and Kumail Nanjiani, who

[3] In 2015, when *The Daily Beast* asked Ansari to comment on the rumours about C.K.'s misconduct that had circulated in the comedy scene for years, Ansari replied: "I'm not talking about that" (Stern).

contribute to more nuanced—though often still hegemonic—representations of South Asian identity in comedy. C.K.'s position prior to #metoo was slightly more fraught. He aligned himself with progressive politics via stand-up material that pointed out sexism and racism in American culture while at the same time adopting a transgressive style. Symons notes that his podcast often featured "topical humour that was designed to shock," including use of the n-word (113). C.K.'s persona depended on this offending behaviour, while the protected sphere of comedy "permit[ted] him to say the unsayable and to make confessions about his private self that would not otherwise be appropriate to air in public" (Piper, "Louie, Louis" 14). By also supporting the careers of women in comedy, like Tig Notaro and Pamela Adlon, C.K. positioned himself as simultaneously transgressive and progressive.

These contradictions came to a head in the fourth season of *Louie*, when his character forcibly kissed Adlon's. The episode, Piper argues, worked to criticize the onscreen Louie while reasserting C.K.'s "public persona as the self-examining and self-critical observer" ("Louie, Louis," 23). At the same time, though, it made clear the extent to which C.K.'s off-stage self was enmeshed with his performances. Both C.K. and Ansari were exemplars of the second boom's intensification of the autobiographical self. "[The character of] Louie is a persona that viewers are encouraged to accept as authentic," writes Piper, extrapolating from the show to argue that "comedians with a personal, confessional style, like C.K., make the argument for their front-stage persona as being their authentic selves" ("Louie, Louie" 14). Piper examines a *GQ* cover story about C.K. as an example of the ways in which his performances were publicly received as presentations of the self. The magazine profile "describes the ways that C.K. attempts to defy the boundaries between the front-and back-stage spaces of performance and artifice," citing "the fact that many of the actors on *Louie* (including C.K.) wear their own clothes on screen or perform without makeup" ("Louie, Louis" 17). Ali Na, examining the ways in which race informed Ansari's #metoo event, argues that Ansari's self is similarly embedded in his performances. "Ansari's career frequently operates by creating a slippage between performance (of characters) and performativity (of personhood)" writes Na (317). "This slippage sutures Ansari's characters to himself," Na continues, "marking the repetition of his identity as reality" (317). Both C.K. and Ansari successfully positioned themselves as authentic artists and truth-tellers, progressive and honest—positions enabled by the industrial structures of the second comedy boom and the critical and popular attention that came with it. What happens, then, when the economic and cultural capital amassed during the boom encounters the force of a new social movement, sweeping across digital media?

Cultural context: polarization, popular feminism, popular misogyny

In addition to creating niche audiences for comedians and advertisers, the fragmentation of consumer habits under new media also shapes the cultural context in which #metoo is received. Specifically, this fragmentation is reflected in trends of ideological fragmentation and political polarization within American culture. Whitney Phillips, drawing on Eli Pariser, explains the formation and function of these cultural bubbles:

> the web is, and is designed to be, a portal for what Eli Pariser calls "online filter bubbles"— personalized monads fortified not just by individual choice (frequenting only those blogs you agree with, hiding the posts of Facebook friends you hate, blocking undesirable followers on Twitter or Tumblr) but also by algorithmic interventions by

> superplatforms such as Google and Facebook, whose robots note the things you seem to like and the things you seem to avoid, and quietly begin stacking the deck with the former (120).

The same fragmentation that enables the intensive fandoms of the second comedy boom can also be linked to the polarization of media consumption and political affiliation, particularly within the North American and, especially, American context (Savitsky). Sienkiewicz and Marx explain that with the proliferation of cable TV channels and digital media outlets, "audiences have increasingly taken up residence in ideologically divided cable news outlets like Fox News and MSNBC" (*That's Not Funny* 25). Audience fragmentation and siloing is not just motivated by audience tastes and advertising targets, but by partisan political affiliations (26). The intensity of this polarization and siloing, Sienkiewicz and Marx argue, means there is a chance "your real-life next-door neighbor spends their time in a media zone full of opinions and facts you barely recognize" (26). If discourse is engaged in the production of reality, then a polarized media landscape marked by drastically different discourses means that audiences are experiencing different versions of reality. This is not to say that these different realities are equally accurate; misinformation contributes to a misperception of the world as it exists. Misinformation in the 2016 US election, for example, via both TV and the Internet, contributed to a fever pitch of partisan polarization (Marcetic, Drutman). Outright lies from the outgoing president of the United States in 2020 contributed to a fringe belief that the election had been stolen and a perception that Trump's supporters needed to use force to take it back (Rash).

The 2016 and 2020 US elections are evidence both of wide-scale polarization and also the particular influence of right-wing extremism within this polarized American landscape. Sienkiewicz and Marx explain that in a mediasphere marked by siloed audiences, reactionary and extremist ideologies can gain popularity without mainstream attention or pushback, until of course they enter the mainstream themselves (*That's Not Funny* 26). The Trump era, they argue, emphasizes the growing relationship between more moderate conservatism—which fuses patriarchal, heteronormative social values with free-market economics—and "more intensely reactionary politics steeped in extreme nationalism and overt prejudice against minority groups" (31). Digital and social media have enabled the latter to develop and thrive in siloed spaces *as well as* interacting with and gaining footholds in the former, both online and on cable TV. Sociopolitical bubbles on the Internet in particular have become a breeding ground for right-wing hate, fascism, and Nazism, known commonly as the alt-right. In his book *Antisocial* Andrew Marantz details the outgrowths of this breeding ground: "smart, well-meaning people unable to distinguish simple truth from viral misinformation; a pop-culture punch line ascending to the presidency; neo-Nazis marching, unmasked, through several American cities" (19). White supremacists and their nominally less extreme counterparts, the alt-lite, very explicitly take advantage of popular internet platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Reddit to promote their agendas. Marantz distinguishes the alt-lite—made up of pundits like Milo Yiannopolous, Ann Coulter, and Mike Cernovitch—as having "no coherent vision" for a new world, but rather aiming to "catalyze cultural conflict" (41). They do so by invoking the image of an extremist left that is obsessed with political correctness and infringes on free speech (Hawley 141).

Bart Cammaerts, looking at British media, describes the rise of this reactionary right-wing discourse. Much like the alt-lite in the American context, the British pundits and commentators included in Cammaerts' analysis don't explicitly identify as Nazis or fascists, but Cammaerts traces the ways in which their rhetorical strategies serve to normalize fascist politics

and abnormalize social justice activism. Cammaerts links this process back to post-May 1968 politics in France, when "the French extreme right…picked up the notion of 'metapolitics' to denote a culture war aimed at changing hearts and minds in the long-term" (732). This war has been successful, Cammaerts writes, noting the "gradual but consistent return to prominence of extreme right, authoritarian and fascist views" around the world (731). Cammaerts explains that in the contemporary UK context, the "culture war" strategy manifests as a "war on woke discourse," which has "increasingly come to define mainstream public discourse" (731).

"Stay woke" is a phrase that originates in Black activism and consciousness, referring to the need to be vigilant against the threats of white supremacy in America (734). Though dating back to the 30s, the phrase was popularly used on social media in conjunction with the Black Lives Matter activism of the 2010s (734). It has since been appropriated by right-wing commentators in both North American and British contexts, "deturning it from its initial meaning in the struggle for civil rights into an insult used against anyone who fights fascism, racism and other forms of injustices" (735). "Woke" is now a pejorative term used by conservatives across the right-wing spectrum, from moderates to actual fascists, in order to other the work of social justice activism and "signify a supposed progressive over-reaction" (735). Anti-woke discourse is a strategy within what Cammaerts calls the "counter-hegemonic war" that works to position progressive movements outside the boundaries of rational action, in turn "naturalizing fascist ideas and ideology" by situating them *within* the realm of the acceptable (732).

In addition to positioning progressive activism as abnormal, anti-woke discourse uses the threat of "cancel culture" to situate right-wing figures as the victims of such activism (737). "Cancelling," much like "staying woke," originated within racialized communities as "an expression of agency, a choice to withdraw one's attention from someone or something," writes Meredith D. Clark (88). Sienkiewicz and Marx describe cancel culture as when "social justice–oriented progressives call out the problematic racial, gendered, or otherwise biased nature of a cultural artifact" or, I would add, a cultural figure (106). For Clark, it is a form of activism, "a last-ditch appeal for justice" used to hold powerful figures to account (89). Today, however, right-wing appropriations of the term use it to frame progressive movements as threatening free speech (Cammaerts 734). Cancel culture, Ligaya Mishan writes in the *New York Times*, is "persistently attributed to the extremes of a political left and a fear-mongering specter of wokeness" (though she points out that the right is just as prone to public shaming). While online harassment of public figures is certainly a real and harmful phenomenon, the right mobilizes cancel culture and "wokeness" as discursive strategies for constructing a culture war in which the right represents freedom and the left represents a hysterical threat. Cancel culture and wokeness, rather than accurate descriptions of left-wing tactics and beliefs, are rhetorical tools in the reactionary right's attempt to "catalyze cultural conflict" (Marantz, *Antisocial* 41). Marantz quotes a post on the Nazi blog *The Right Stuff* that tells its readers: "the culture war is being fought daily from your smartphone" (24).

The contemporary right claims to be responding to an over-reaching left, setting up two sides of a polarized culture. This rhetorical strategy, while popularized in its current form by "alt-lite" figures like Yiannopolous, exists across the spectrum of contemporary conservatism, linking traditional conservatives, the alt-lite and actual Nazis. I refer to it as reactionary anti-progressivism, in order to emphasize that it works to unite conservatives and fascists against progressive movements. Though not motivated by a "coherent vision," (Marantz, *Antisocial* 41) the alt-lite is also only several ideological steps removed from overt Nazism, and both exist

within a networked mediasphere that connects them to more mainstream conservative outlets. As Sienkiewicz and Marx detail, Fox News hosts like Greg Gutfield are "quite happy to play along with right-wing trolls like Michael Malice and Gavin McInnes [founder of fascist group the Proud Boys], who, in turn, gleefully introduce the Fox News viewership to online comedy based in fascist ideologies and employed by extremist groups such as the Proud Boys" (110). Through the widespread use of anti-progressive discourse, Marantz argues, right-wing reactionaries have succeeded in making oppression socially acceptable again. "Jocular contempt for women has been brought back into fashion, as have overt Islamophobia, raw nativism, and the theory of human biodiversity," he writes (*Antisocial* 620). As Cammaerts points out, this culture war also claims its victories in the legislative realm. In Florida, governor Ron DeSantis has launched a legal attack on anti-racism education (Alfonseca), while the UK government recently passed a "Freedom of Speech Bill" aimed at countering "growing intolerance"—code for social justice activism—on university campuses (Lewis).

This polarization provides a framework in which ongoing cultural clashes play out. There is no fixed "right" or "left" wing but a series of contestations unfolding within the public sphere, and a media landscape that is increasingly open to extremist right-wing discourses as well as watered-down leftist politics and progressive social movements. This paradigm is essential to understanding how #metoo and its backlash emerged and to situating comedy in relation to #metoo. Banet-Weiser's *Empowered* examines polarization through a feminist lens and the contexts of popular feminism and popular misogyny. Banet-Weiser writes that the "digital affordances" of new media "partly enable media to hyperbolize and bifurcate political positions, thus helping to generate a discursive climate of extreme views (such as misogyny)" (25). Within this landscape, a corporate-friendly neoliberal version of feminism has become a popular trend while a fascist-friendly networked version of misogyny developed in response. Banet-Weiser explains that the "popular" in popular feminism has multiple meanings: that feminism manifests "in popular and commercial media," that it is widely liked or admired, and that there are "many different feminisms" which circulate in popular media (13). She situates popular feminism within a North American and European context, while noting that there are versions of it across the globe (1). The dominant version of these many different feminisms is primarily concerned with superficial, market-based choices and corporate inclusivity, rather than challenging the systems that enable sexism. "Feminist ideology is now sartorial—and just a click away," she writes (17).

Contemporary popular feminism—as distinct from the second wave feminism of the 70s or the third wave of the 90s—emerges in part from the late 2000s blogosphere, where feminist Tumblr pages and sites like *Everyday Feminism* circulated an aesthetically-driven mode of politics. This mode is useful for building a brand or a public platform and folds easily into liberal political agendas focused on representation. Popular feminism then burst into the mainstream mediasphere with Beyoncé's 2013 self-titled album, which featured excerpts from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's essay "Why We Should All Be Feminists," as well as her 2014 performance at the MTV Video Music Awards, which found the global superstar literally standing in front of a glaring "FEMINIST" sign (17). It is in this sense that popular feminism "generally materializes as a kind of *media*," something that can be circulated, shared, and commented on (18). While popular feminism lends itself well to surface level aesthetics and liberal politics, Banet-Weiser also notes that there are more "resistant" forms of feminism within popular feminism's sphere (24). "The popular feminism that is most visible," Banet-Weiser writes, "is white, middle-class,

cis-gendered and heterosexual" (13). At the same time, social media and independent blogs like *Black Girl Dangerous* have also "enabled a visibility of feminisms that have long struggled for a broader space and place in culture" and which are more critical of the corporate subsumption of social movements (8). She cites #metoo as a moment when the more agreeable, digestible versions of feminism struggled with and against more radical and threatening manifestations (23). #Metoo's initial outpourings on social media possessed a rage and harnessed a collectivism that pushed back on popular feminism's individualizing tendencies, though these tendencies also manifested in the movement's focus on "very visible public figures" (17). This context of popular networked feminism, then, helped set the stage for #metoo as a massive, messy, and contradictory online movement aimed at changing patriarchal norms (23).

At the same time, it energized the activity of popular misogyny. "Popular misogyny responds to, reacts against, and challenges popular feminism," Banet-Weiser writes, "precisely because it is so visible" (8). Where popular feminism remains in the realm of "visibility," popular misogyny works to reinforce "state and national structures with terrible efficiency" (6). Given that misogyny has "long existed as a norm, built into our structures, laws, policies and normative behaviour," it is perhaps unsurprising that popular misogyny would have such efficient successes (32). In the same way that anti-progressivism works towards legal victories in the name of "free speech," popular misogyny ultimately shores up support for patriarchy's institutional structures. It declares itself via online forums devoted to dehumanizing women and legislative agendas that aim to strip women of their bodily autonomy. The online manifestation is sometimes called the "manosphere," which Winnie Chang describes as "a network of online communities populated by antifeminist men" (2). Online and offline, popular misogyny as ideology and structure coheres via a desire to restore male privilege and a perception of injury caused by feminism (Banet-Weiser 38). This rhetoric is especially prominent amongst "incels," who blame the women's movement for their lack of sexual activity (Chang). Banet-Weiser describes this as a "funhouse mirror" logic, wherein "politics and bodies are distorted and transfigured so that men—heterosexual, white men—are the ones who appear to be injured by widespread inequities and structural disparities" (45). Like the right-wing reactionaries who claim to be the victims of social justice, men here are figured as the victims of women's rights.

Popular feminism exists in relation to and interaction with other popular leftist movements—Black Lives Matter, democratic socialism—while popular misogyny overlaps with the alt-right and alt-lite (Hawley 17). "The broader political context," Banet-Weiser writes, "symbolized by the election of Trump, as well as other extreme-right successes around the world, endorses an aggressive, defensive popular misogyny" (32). Popular misogynist language is a preferred tool of the reactionary right; indeed, Yiannopolous famously adopted the slogan "feminism is cancer" (Nagle 115). This rhetoric is not new; both popular feminism and popular misogyny are "simultaneously residual and emergent," relying on the discourses of previous movements but shaped by the logics of networked communication (Banet-Weiser 4). Popular feminism, popular misogyny, and the anti-progressive right are all informed by historical discourses and enabled by the new cultural logics of the digital media age. They have all developed within online subcultural spaces and grown to interact with and emerge into a more mainstream sphere, whether in the form of a Fox News segment or a Beyoncé music video. As Banet-Weiser writes, "our very means of expression…are radically different from the [gender] wars of generations past" (15). Popular feminism and misogyny operate in an "economy of visibility," which Banet-Weiser explains as: "a technological and economic context devoted to

the accumulation of views, clicks, "likes," etcetera; a backdrop for popular feminism and popular misogyny; the battlefield for the struggles between them" (13). Both ideologies seek to create space for themselves *as discourses* in the dominant popular culture. In this way, they constitute one of the ongoing cultural clashes of the polarized American media. "Popular feminism and popular misogyny battle it out on the contemporary cultural landscape," writes Banet-Weiser (13). #Metoo, as a popular feminist movement faced with a vicious backlash, is one of these battles.

Often, these battles play out through humour. Humour has played a significant role in the rise of the alt-right and the manosphere through the practice of trolling. Trolls are online antagonists who adopt an ironic pose to harass their targets. This antagonism is "meant to disrupt, offend, and exasperate," (Aspray 155) a style that emerged out of subcultures on forums like 4Chan. Benjamin Aspray claims in his article "On Trolling as Comedic Method" that the vanguard of the alt-right "originated within the proudly antisocial internet subculture of trolling" (155). Indeed, the *Right Stuff* article that described a culture war "being fought daily from your smart phone" also boasted the headline "Right Wing Trolls Can Win" (Marantz, *Antisocial* 24). Trolling is both comedic method, then, and right-wing political strategy, employed to provoke and embarrass opponents. Marantz calls Trump "perhaps the world's most skilled troll" ("Reddit"). The slipperiness with trolling is that trolls claim they are simply doing it all for laughs and are thus difficult to take seriously. Trolls, like comedians, use the guise of humour to excuse their offensiveness or deflect from it. According to Aspray, online troll "weev" "describes trolling as "satirical performance art" in the tradition of Jonathan Swift, Lenny Bruce, Andy Kaufman, and the Situationists," (156). He also eventually emerged as a neo-Nazi (157). Popular misogyny often manifests as trolling. Chang, in her study of discourse used on incel Reddit forum /r/Braincels, cites three major factors in the rise of incel culture and the term 'femoid' (used on the forum to dehumanize women): the rise of popular feminism, the rise of "global Trumpism," and the explosion of trolling as a subcultural practice (6). Trolling, Chang explains, is "compelling to the growing demographic of young men who feel alienated and victimised by mainstream liberal society's "political correctness" (3).

Right-wing commentators like Proud Boys-founder Gavin McInnes helped export trolling beyond the message boards, introducing it to contemporary conservative politics and inspiring the styles of alt-lite figures like Yiannopolous. McInnes, as a regular guest on Fox News, often adopted the ironic stance of the troll, provoking other panellists with blatantly false misogynistic statements like "Equality sucks. By every metric, men have it worse off" (Sienkiewicz and Marx 387). "By the dawn of the Trump era," Sienkiewicz and Marx write, "the trolling comedy that McInnes helped mainstream had become a favoured tactic of several high-profile right-wing performers fighting culture wars" (390). Fifteen percent of survey respondents, meanwhile, credited McInnes as having influenced them on their "path to white nationalism" (395). As Whitney Phillips writes, trolls should not be understood as exceptions to the cultural logics of social media, but rather "the grimacing poster children for the socially networked world" (8). "Trolling might be more conspicuously outrageous, offensive, and damaging than traditional discursive modes," she writes, "but what does it say about the cloth if misogyny can so easily be cut from it?" (128). The prevalence of anti-progressivism, neo-Nazism, and popular misogyny are intertwined with humour as a cultural practice. Misogynistic discourses manifest formally as jokes that are also deeply serious.

The overlap between humour, popular misogyny and right-wing politics is perhaps clearest within the comedy industry itself. Sienkiewicz and Marx's *That's Not Funny* is dedicated to chronicling the rise of right-wing comedy as a profitable segment of the comedy industry with significant cultural influence. They explain that while political satire in America has traditionally been the province of liberal late-night TV, there is now a "constellation of right-wing comedy that goes well beyond the confines of Fox News and wields considerable cultural and economic power" (13). At the same time, because the media landscape is so fragmented, Sienkiewicz and Marx argue that this constellation has been ignored or underestimated by liberal cultural critics, scholars, and commentators (14). This right-wing comedy ecosystem, like popular misogyny and the broader right-wing mediasphere of which it is a part, is built on discourses of the past and networked via digital media of the present. They liken this ecosystem to a suburban shopping and entertainment complex, where Fox News is a big box store, libertarian podcasts like the *Joe Rogan Experience* represent popular bars, and neo-Nazi shows like the Holocaust-denying *Daily Shoah* represent the murky basement (32-36).

Because of the fragmented nature of the media landscape, Nazi commentators don't have to literally appear on Fox News to have influence. Sienkiewicz and Marx explain that, "the ways in which people discover new comedy today—algorithmic suggestions on YouTube, retweets on Twitter, cross-promotions on podcasts—provide a set of pathways that connect more banal right-wing humor to the truly evil stuff, up to and including actual neo-Nazi comedy spaces" (15). Figures like McInnes connect these seemingly disparate spaces within the comedy complex, enabling the "right-wing-curious" to travel from the "seemingly innocuous world of online lulz to serious harassment to, occasionally, brutal street violence," (395) such as the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. Even without McInnes' literal presence, neo-Nazi comedy spaces are algorithmically and discursively linked to shows like *Joe Rogan*, connected via the ideological tissue of anti-progressivism and the aesthetic markers of trolling. Comedians like Rogan, Louis Gomez and Big Jay Oakerson, much like alt-lite Yiannopolous and extreme troll McInnes, position comedy as a bastion of free speech and a tool in the fight against the terrors of woke culture. Rogan has built a comedy empire via his podcast, onto which he invites smaller right-wing comics who espouse transphobic and racist views under the guise of having open, honest dialogues (in this vein, Rogan could reasonably be considered one of Symons' "authentic outsiders"). As Sienkiewicz and Marx write, comedians like Rogan use the cover of free speech to "turn anti-Black slurs…into the exercise of personal rights and acts of political self-actualization," contributing in turn to the fascist goal of normalizing anti-Blackness (433). Anti-progressivism's obsession with cancel culture and free speech combines with comedy's protected sphere to legitimize hateful content. Though sexism and transgression have always been staples of comedy, these comedians distinguish themselves by positioning their right to be offensive not just as the province of comedy, but as a push back against a generalized woke culture or cancel culture that threatens them. Cammaerts writes that anti-woke discourse positions social justice activists as "lacking a sense of humour" (735). In American popular culture, right-wing comedians expand on this strategy to position humour itself as inherently anti-woke.

Much like the progressive quality comedies of the second comedy boom, right-wing comedy programs serve to court and develop ideologically-bonded audiences. Krefting and Baruc note the ways in which comedy fans are prone to existing in small bubbles: "performances competing for our attention online ensure that our focus is increasingly diffused into small but

scrappy homophilic tribes" (136). They quote comedian Paul Provenza as stating that the Internet, in removing geographic distance, creates like-minded groups that are organized around politics and culture (137). This siloing around identities and allegiances is particularly prevalent in comedy, Krefting and Baruc write, because "comedy is such an identity-based cultural form," making it "easy to use shared social categories as the foundation for appreciating a comic" (137). Sienkiewicz and Marx describe right-wing comedy as "an integrated structure of TV shows, podcasts, streaming media, and websites that work together, developing a shared audience" (27). This integrated structure can both generate profit via targeted ads and link various conservative and reactionary ideologies together. As Sienkiewicz and Marx write, "comedy serves as a lubricant that helps audiences slide among these disparate aspects of right-wing ideology, with a certain gravity pulling them down into the lower, dirtier depths of the complex" (32). Marc Maron himself agrees that such a process of polarization is taking place in comedy ("After 9/11"). Maron traces the contemporary polarization back to a post-9/11 moment in which comedians either became openly pro-war and Islamophobic or openly critical of the Bush regime.

The second comedy boom has accelerated this polarization, by enabling comedians with more fringe views to connect with their fan bases and receive direct financial support from them. On the one hand, this means more comedians from marginalized backgrounds are able to breakthrough in less traditional spaces. It also means that comedians who espouse hate speech and flirt with the alt-right are similarly able to sustain careers, by establishing their own media platforms and networks, cultivating cultish fanbases, and tapping into existing right-wing media networks. Comedian Ryan Long first attracted major attention from the right-wing comedy complex by posting a video titled "When Wokes and Racists Actually Agree on Everything," which got him a retweet from anti-progressive comedian Bill Burr and eventually an invite onto Oakerson and Gomez's Legion of Skanks podcast, which bills itself as "the most offensive podcast on Earth" and regularly traffics in racism, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia. At the same time as these comedians make use of new networked platforms, mainstream outlets have begun embracing them. Oakerson has a Netflix special, while *Saturday Night Live* hired—and then fired—Shane Gillis, a regular on Legion of Skanks.

Erika Thorkelson in *The Walrus* describes this phenomenon of polarization and creeping right-wing influence in comedy. While "many of the most exciting new performers are women, people of colour, LGBTQ people, or some combination thereof, bringing with them a raft of underexplored experiences," Thorkelson writes, "this shift has also meant a growing divide." She continues:

> "On one side, new faces have meant less tolerance for the flippant bigotry that has long been a part of stand-up—Shane Gillis, for example, recently lost a spot on *Saturday Night Live* after people called out his history of using homophobic and racist slurs. On the other side—which includes some of the biggest names in the business, like Dave Chappelle, Bill Burr, and Ricky Gervais—comedians complain that people can no longer take a joke and that the art is losing its edge because of what they dismiss as "cancel culture.""

I argue this "growing divide" is symptomatic of the broader battles between popular feminism and popular misogyny specifically and leftism and (alt-)rightism more generally. Dave Chappelle, for example, has faced growing criticism over the vocal transphobia present in his recent Netflix stand-up specials. Netflix's Ted Sarandos, defending Chappelle, invoked Hannah Gadsby's feminist special *Nanette* as an example of the work Netflix is doing to support women

and LGBTQ voices. Gadsby then publicly denounced Sarandos for having invoked her in the name of defending transphobia (Simons, "Big Picture"). The gap between Gadsby and Chappelle is indicative of the broader divide within the comedy industry, between comics who promote an anti-oppressive or at the very least inclusive politic, and comics who are building a brand around freedom of speech, anti-progressivism, and the spectre of cancel culture. "During woke culture," Rogan says on his podcast, "there's a lot of challenges, but I think those challenges are ultimately gonna lead to stronger comedy. Better comedy… Guys who are just bucking the system during Covid, during the pandemic, during the woke culture and getting buck wild" (Simons, "Rogan's Vision"). Mishan points out that "for all the fear cancel culture elicits, it hasn't succeeded in toppling any major figures… disgraced high profile comedians who've returned to the stand-up circuit, not always repentant, have been rewarded with sold-out shows." Mishan is referring, of course, to Louis C.K.

When #metoo first caught fire, these polarizations were already present in comedy and the broader public sphere. The speed with which #metoo spread through social media, as women and survivors began sharing thousands of stories about sexual assault, was made possible by the networked nature of popular feminism, which had both technologically and culturally set the stage for this movement. At the same time, the backlash to #metoo was powered by popular misogyny. In their article "From 'Me Too' to Too Far?" Fileborn and Phillips describe the emergence of this backlash as swift: "the discursive arc of #MeToo began to shift almost immediately" (100). They characterize the backlash as such: "A focus on survivor claims shifted toward the plight of the accused, confusion around consent and 'flirtation', consequences of informal social sanctions, alarms around the erosion of due process, and warnings of false allegations" (101). The discourses of the backlash intertwined with the reactionary right's fearmongering about leftist political correctness, with a specifically misogynistic character. They invoked "feminist overreach, hysteria, and irrationality" (Fileborn and Phillips 101). The rhetoric that women who campaign for their rights are hysterical or disturbed, Chang argues, feeds the violence of online manosphere communities: they "lend power to "incels' representation of "femoids" as maniacal" (9). These incel forums frame feminist movements as dictatorial, invoking the anti-progressivist rhetoric that leftist agendas impinge on freedom (13). Verity Trott, analyzing #metoo tweets, finds "evidence of misogynistic alt-right and men's rights activist (MRA) attempts to disrupt #MeToo," which indicate "a broader assault and an attempt to delegitimise feminist mobilisations against sexual violence" (14). Specifically, these online misogynists used misinformation to discredit the #metoo movement "by creating and posting fake or disingenuous #metoo testimonials" (14).

Humour emerged again in the backlash as a tool for spreading antifeminism. Chang notes the presence on Reddit of memes that work to paint "all claims of #metoo with the same hysteria" (9). Ryan Long created a sketch called "Comedians Against Comedy," which made fun of #metoo advocacy and implied that social movements like #metoo are silencing comedians and ruining comedy (Sienkiewicz and Marx 468). Within right-wing comedy, sexual violence, anti-progressivism and freedom of speech are discursively linked. Indeed, Phillips and Chagnon argue that the mainstream emergence of these right-wing discourses about political correctness and freedom of speech can be traced back to the irony-laden humour of digital cultures. "It was in the domain of low culture that counter-culture nihilism thrived and later gained traction in mainstream media," they write. "In other words, condemnation of political correctness, identity politics, infantilizing, coddling, trigger warnings, and safe spaces emerged to shape the narratives

around sexual violence" (418). There may not be a direct line from 4chan trolling and the alt-right to Louis C.K.'s comeback from cancellation. But what Sienkiewicz and Marx's book illustrates is that right-wing comedy and ideologies, much like popular misogyny, circulate within a network, rather than along a straight line. Subcultural online bubbles became a space of incubation for the white supremacy of the alt-right as well as less extreme versions of backlash against contemporary social movements. The discourses of the #metoo backlash, while rooted in specifically misogynistic accusations of hysteria, are also embedded in a broader antagonism towards cultural efforts to improve the structural living conditions for marginalized peoples, an antagonism that is promoted and profited off-of by right-wing comedians.

Again, I stress that these polarizations between left and right are not fixed positions: individual actors can and do take up multiple contradictory positions within these cultural contestations, while much of the American public occupies a malleable middle. What matters, for this project, is that this cultural atmosphere creates the context in which #metoo arose as a popular feminist movement of "consensus-building" amongst women and survivors and was then quickly re-narrativized as a "more media-friendly story of conflict in which there are two opposing, and gendered, "sides"" (Boyle 66). C.K. and Ansari's #metoo events became polarizing moments, wherein comedians, critics, fans, and the general public weighed the aims and threats of a popular feminist movement alongside the value of acclaimed comedians and their art. The public responses to C.K. and Ansari were shaped by the artistic norms established through the second comedy boom, as well as the ongoing contestations of political, cultural, and comedic polarization. These contestations simultaneously opened up the possibility for a reckoning with sexual violence as well as a reactionary backlash to such a reckoning, a backlash marked by cries of overreach and cancel culture—voices that scream, "stop silencing me!"

Chapter 3: Backlash Beginning

While audience fragmentation and the logics of digital media have undermined the concept of a "mainstream" in media, it remains true that certain outlets have significantly higher readership or viewership and wider distribution networks than others. These household names still wield influence within the sphere of public discourse, though they compete for attention with new digital publications, fringe and alternative sites, as well as social media platforms, all of which are just as easily accessible. That said, the *New York Times* website has over half a million monthly visits,[4] while far-right site *The Federalist* has roughly four million. As outlined in chapter two, the networked nature of media means that *The Federalist* doesn't need the same readership as the *Times* to have an out-sized influence on American political discourse. The fringes of American media have dedicated online followings as well as channels into what remains of the mainstream. The rise in popularity of both leftist social movements and right-wing anti-progressivism means that proponents of both can find elements of their beliefs in more widely-read publications. Analyzing the public discourse around #metoo and comedy, then, means taking together the perspectives found in popular publications (in the sense of readership size) as well as smaller left and right publications, in order to better understand the slippage of rhetoric across the mediasphere and the increasing blurring of mainstream and alternative. Within the category of more popular publications, I consider legacy liberal outlets—newspapers and magazines whose circulation and reputation date back to before the digital age—and new digital publications that are staking out ground within the online media landscape, to see if there is any marked ideological difference between the two.

As I undertake my analysis of the public discourse around C.K. and Ansari over the next two chapters, my corpus includes articles from eight outlets I identify as arguably mainstream in terms of their reach and their political positioning. Three of these are legacy media outlets (*The New York Times*, *The Atlantic, The Guardian*), three are new media outlets (*BuzzFeed News, HuffPost*, *Vox*), and two are digital media verticals of a legacy magazine (*The Cut* and *Vulture*, which belong to *New York Magazine*). I've selected publications and critics that were influential in supporting the rise of comedy auteurs during the second comedy boom as well as particular articles that were widely circulated upon their publication in an attempt to provide a sense of the range in media responses to these cases. The corpus also includes articles from two smaller publications: the leftist, feminist media outlet *Bitch* and the right-wing, pro-Trump publication *The Federalist*.[5] Including *Bitch* and *The Federalist* allows me to investigate the ways in which rhetoric at popular publications overlaps with and differs from more explicitly politicized outlets. Critics at *The Times, Vulture, The Atlantic* and *Vox* have all produced discourse that legitimized the auteur status of C.K. and Ansari. These critics hold discursive power with potential symbolic and economic consequences in terms of what kinds of art we value and which comedians get funding for their projects. My discourse analysis of the responses to C.K. and Ansari's #metoo events and comebacks explores the ways in which processes of legitimation may or may not be

[4] All site numbers obtained using similarweb.com. Traffic includes both desktop and mobile web usage.

[5] *Bitch* was shuttered in June 2022, which makes web traffic difficult to estimate, though the magazine's publisher estimated it had roughly 5 million visitors in 2017 (Clarke). All of the mainstream publications included here have at least twice as many.

shifting, as comedy norms come into contact with the rhetorical power of a feminist social movement and a culture shaped by popular feminism and popular misogyny.

In the following chapters, looking first at the moments of initial allegations and then the subsequent comebacks, I identify the ideological assumptions underpinning the critical responses to these events as they unfold in the public sphere. To do so, I look closely at the language and criteria used by each writer to assess the allegations against and comebacks of C.K. and Ansari. The specific terms and phrases the writers use, the tones they adopt, and the contextual details they include or leave out bring with them particular ideological associations and discourse positions. Taking these rhetorical choices together enables a broader understanding of the ways in which these responses mobilize feminist and/or patriarchal understandings of sexual violence and dominant and/or alternative approaches to comedy evaluation and consumption. When I refer to C.K. and Ansari's actions as "allegations," it is not because I don't believe the women's stories—indeed, C.K. himself confirmed they were true—but because I am examining the public response to the act of allegation, which occurs in a specific media context. It is the choice to tell the story that incites public discourse around them. Similarly, I use the terms "#metoo case" and "#metoo event" to indicate both the allegations against C.K. and Ansari as well as the rippling discourse around those allegations. While "case" and "allegation" both imply a kind of carceral logic, I am not litigating the culpability of these men nor am I endorsing a carceral response to sexual violence. I use these terms not to obfuscate or abstract from the actions themselves, but rather to point to their significance as publicly-debated phenomena. These stories—and the difficulty I have in choosing language to describe them!—highlight the importance of continuum thinking. "Sexual violence exists in most women's lives," wrote Liz Kelly in 1987 "whilst the form it takes, how women define events, and its impact on them at the time and over time varies" (48). The public responses to allegations against C.K. and Ansari provide a specific site for examining how these variations in definition are playing out during #metoo, and how #metoo may have impacted the things we laugh about and the people we laugh with.

Louis C.K.: personal betrayal, systemic failure

The New York Times published its Louis C.K. investigation on November 9, 2017. The exposé confirmed rumours that had circulated about C.K. for years: that he was taking advantage of his status in comedy and exposing himself to less powerful female comedians. The critical reevaluations of C.K. were swift and plentiful, likely in part because these allegations were not, in fact, news to many who followed the comedy industry closely. The allegations also arrived shortly after the *Times*' October Weinstein exposé, amidst a sudden flurry of media interest in allegations of abuse as well as the ongoing sharing of #metoo stories on social media. In this analysis, I examine five articles published in popular liberal media outlets about C.K. by cultural critics. These articles are: Manohla Dargis, "Louis C.K. and Hollywood's Canon of Creeps," *The New York Times*; David Sims, "How Louis C.K. Used Comedy as a Smokescreen," *The Atlantic*; Emily St. James, "The Most Controversial Episode of Louis C.K.'s TV Show Now Plays as a Veiled Confession," *Vox*; Scaachi Khoul, "Louis C.K. Told Us Who He Was, But That Doesn't Make it Better," *BuzzFeed News*; Matt Zoller Seitz, "Louis C.K. Is Done," *Vulture/New York Magazine*. From the explicitly feminist publication *Bitch*, I look at the piece "Louis C.K. Is Cancelled," by Dahlia Balcazar, and from the Trumpist *Federalist*, I examine Robert Tracinski's article "Sex Assault Claims Don't Prove Male Toxicity, but the Absence of Masculinity." All of

these articles were published within five days of the *Times* exposé on November 9, with the exception of Tracinski's *Federalist* article, published November 30.

To conduct my analysis, I qualitatively assessed each article with three areas of questions in mind. 1. What stance do the writers take on the allegations? Do they defend, justify, or condemn C.K.'s actions? How do they frame these allegations in relation to sexual violence? 2. How do the writers contextualize these allegations and why is this a matter of public interest? Do they relate these allegations to #metoo as a movement? 3. How do the writers frame these allegations in relation to his persona and career? Do they take a stance on what to do with his work? As will be elaborated, in conducting this analysis, one consensus was immediately clear. All the writers agree that C.K.'s actions are indefensible. The strength of language used to condemn him varies. St. James at *Vox*, for example, avoids naming his actions as anything other than "the revelations," but still refuses to defend them in any sense. Balcazar at *Bitch* and Tracinski at *The Federalist*, meanwhile, both refer to C.K. as a sexual predator, indicating common ground amongst even the writers who are politically the farthest apart. Because the harm of C.K.'s actions requires no debate, these writers (with the exception of Tracinski, to whom I will return later) move on to reassessing C.K. from an artistic perspective. The discourse around sexual violence, then, takes a backseat to the discourse on responsible consumption of art. For these writers, C.K.'s actions fall within the dominant definition of sexual violence.

In focusing on C.K. as an artist, the critics largely emphasize a sense of personal betrayal. They survey C.K.'s career, explaining the ways in which he constructed a persona based on authenticity. "He built up a relationship of genuine trust with his audience," Sims at *The Atlantic* explains, and did so by claiming to be sharing his darkest thoughts—his inner truths—with his audience. In light of the *Times* investigation, Sims writes, these truths now feel "less truthful," a "smokescreen" designed to both position C.K. as authentic and conceal his actual harmful behaviour. Scaachi Khoul at *BuzzFeed* agrees, writing that now "C.K.'s work seems grotesque, a performance drawing on his own ventures into inappropriate behavior in order to create comedy that really felt sincere." Khoul emphasizes that much of the "inappropriate behaviour" dramatized in C.K.'s work focused on transgressions around women and sexuality, which makes the revelations of his actual transgressions all the more upsetting. As Phillip Deen writes, this "sense of betrayal" is likely heightened by C.K.'s position as a comedian, as opposed to an actor or director, because of "the intimacy cultivated by comedians as they talk directly to us seemingly as themselves" (292). When the fourth season of C.K.'s *Louie* first aired, many critics gave C.K. the benefit of the doubt, despite the episode in which C.K.'s autobiographical character forces himself on his friend Pamela (played by frequent C.K. collaborator Pamela Adlon). "Stand-up comedy asks the audience to take up comedians' point of view," writes Deen (289). Critics, used to identifying with C.K., saw this episode as a self-aware critique of male aggression by C.K. "I read it as an attempt by C.K. to grapple with how easy it is for many men to suddenly turn a nice evening with a woman into a nightmare from which she can't escape," writes St. James at *Vox*. Melanie Piper notes that these readings worked to reassert C.K.'s real-world persona as a "self-critical observer" ("Louie, Louis" 23). Through this episode, then, C.K. could have it both ways, "deliberately illustrating his own self-awareness as an auteur by criticising the actions of his self-proxy character" (21).

Now, though, St. James perceives this episode as a "veiled confession." This is what makes C.K.'s betrayal particularly slippery. The issue is not that he claimed to be one way and turned out to be another, like Bill Cosby. C.K. *did* reveal himself in his work, while he was at the

same time protected by it. In this sense, these critics highlight the paradox of the confessional in comedy. Supposedly authentic truths are sheltered from the ethical standards of actual behaviour by the protected sphere of comedy. C.K., as a confessional comic, both was and wasn't confessing. His onstage transgressions served as testaments to his comedic authenticity without condemning his offstage morality. The *Times* investigation revealed how precarious this position was: the impossibility of claiming both truthfulness and performance at once. As Piper writes, C.K.'s comedic frame enabled him "to say the unsayable and to make confessions about his private self that would not otherwise be appropriate to air in public" ("Louie, Louis" 14). Deen describes this problem from a philosophical perspective: "The ethical flaws of the comedian constitute aesthetic flaws in C.K.'s comedy" (303). But these flaws are not simply C.K.'s. They point to broader inconsistencies with the norms of comedy as an art form and an industry. The critical reappraisals undertaken in these articles call into question the norms of authenticity and joke work in confessional comedy. Sims is explicit about the ways in which C.K.'s perceived authenticity gave him protection for these "veiled confessions," writing that "C.K.'s onscreen persona had its own incredible power, helping him to get away with things in even plainer sight."

Matt Zoller Seitz at *Vulture* positions this as a betrayal of the audience, because comedy audiences trust artists to "make edgy, even unlikable work" ("C.K. is Done"). Audiences grant comedians the license of protection, the freedom from taking their truthfulness as exact representations of their offstage selves. C.K. provides evidence for how this artistic and comedic license can be used as a cover for harm. Zoller Seitz, like St. James, writes that he supported the Pamela episodes of *Louie* when it aired "because, as far as I knew at the time, they were a storytelling gambit that juxtaposed the self-aware, self-questioning public entertainer "Louie"…against the private version of the character." To portray these abuses artistically without owning up to them, Zoller Seitz writes, is "a power move, rooted in the thrill of subterfuge and shock." It is also an abuse of comedy as a protected sphere and the legitimacy provided by the autobiographical self. Patrick Reilly, studying the norm of authenticity in comedy, finds that status in comedy is signified by authenticity, and an accumulation of status protects community members from facing consequences for their actions (953). "My ethnographic data suggest that Louis CK's perceived authenticity contributed to the community's substantial delay in sanctioning his sexual harassment of female comics," Reilly writes (954). He continues: "[C.K.'s] peers' respect for his authenticity normalized his behavior and delayed publicity concerning his malfeasance and sanctioning" (954). While C.K.'s comedian colleagues certainly enabled his legitimacy, so did critics, who hailed C.K. as a confessional auteur. For these critics, the *Times* exposé calls into question not only C.K.'s work, but the norms of authenticity and comedic license that structure comedy as a form and industry.

At the same time, several of these critics avoid explicitly questioning these norms, or taking a stance on C.K.'s work. Two general approaches to C.K.'s work emerge from the seven articles: an individual and theoretical approach, which considers C.K.'s work on a personal level without considering the material context in which it emerges, and a contextual and systemic approach, which takes an explicit stance on removing C.K. from the industry. Sims, Dargis, and St. James take the former approach, using the C.K. exposé as an opportunity to reconsider his work on an aesthetic and thematic level. Knowing that Louis C.K., the person, has committed sexual misconduct becomes a piece of contextual information helpful in conducting their critical analysis of his texts. Dargis at *The Times*, for example, reappraises C.K.'s brand new movie *I*

Love You Daddy, a film about a man whose teenage daughter develops a close relationship with a Woody Allen-type auteur. *I Love You Daddy* premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2017. Distribution company The Orchard cancelled the film's planned November 17 release on November 10, the day after the *Times* exposé came out (Reed). Where Dargis had initially appreciated this movie as a critique of female exploitation in Hollywood, she now finds its jokes "uglier, cruder." Yet, she also finds some value in its ironic critique of misogyny in the film industry. For her, the C.K. allegations are important because of his immense influence as an artist and because of cinema's long history of misogynistic artists, what she calls a "canon of creeps." She still frames C.K. as a significant artist—one whose work matters both aesthetically and socially—and avoids taking a stance on what to do with that work, other than to say it cannot be evaluated "objectively."

Sims and St. James take a similar approach. Sims (*Atlantic*) positions C.K. as both an artist—again highlighting his artistic influence—and a public figure managing his image. He argues that C.K.'s work can't be analyzed in the same way as before, writing that "it's been jarring to see how quickly much of the art he made has taken on a different, more disturbing, animus." Interestingly, it is the art itself that has "taken on" a different tone, as opposed to critics or fans themselves perceiving this work differently. In this way, Sims subtly shifts the burden of deciding what to do with this work off of the audience. The properties of the work have simply changed. "Tougher will be separating out his undeniable impact on the comedy world at large," he continues, raising the question of separating art and artist in order to attest to its difficulty. St. James is a bit clearer, writing that "to *demand* that art and artist be kept separate is a monstrous idea." At the same time, she does not denounce the work of C.K., aside from acknowledging that she has adjusted her own perception of *Louie* since finding out about the "revelations."

Dargis, Sims, and St. James thus approach the issue of art evaluation and consumption as an individual one. They consider their own relationships to the work and how those relationships must change. They situate C.K. in the context of abusive Hollywood power players like Weinstein and Allen but also in the context of his artistic genius and legacy. They don't engage in Stefania Marghitu's "auteur apologism," a rhetoric that excuses harmful behaviours because they come from troubled "genius-artists" (492). Auteur apologism, Marghitu suggests, is a manifestation of the dominant norm of separating art from artist, "a standard practice embedded in the cultural fields" (491). These critics instead suggest art and artist cannot fully be separated and context matters. But by considering this context only with regard to the relationship between viewer and auteur, they arguably reinforce some of that very separation they seem to denounce, invoking a mode of artistic consumption that stays on the level of personal feeling. Dargis writes that she does not "feel bad for [C.K.] or mourn a career that may be over," but her reappraisal of this work indicates a continued investment in the significance of this career. This approach is contradictory in that it acknowledges art is not a hermetically sealed sphere—real world events will imbue the artistic content, and for Sims, even cause its properties to change—but it also ignores the questions of labour and prestige that enable artistic production. By examining art on the level of its themes, these critics ignore their role in awarding legitimacy to art and artists who might use this legitimacy as a cover for abuse. They avoid thornier issues like: what about the women who lost their careers to C.K.'s actions? What about the prestige C.K. enjoys from his status as an auteur? How safe will his future workplaces be?

The second approach to C.K.'s work understands it within a particular industry context and takes a more explicit stance on what to do with it going forward. Khoul at *BuzzFeed*, for

example, situates C.K. in a broader context of patriarchal abuses of power. While Sims, Dargis and St. James all mention either Harvey Weinstein or Woody Allen, Khoul's article includes a range of abusive filmmakers and entertainers, and expands beyond Hollywood to mention politicians and writers like George H.W. Bush and Mark Halperin. In this way, though Khoul acknowledges C.K.'s artistic influence as, in her words, "the Great American Comedian," she also emphasizes that his industry position is what enables his abuses. "C.K. has incredible power," she writes, specifying that "he owns a production company, shares management with comedians like Aziz Ansari and Kevin Hart, and has had significant influence on the careers of other comedians." Ultimately, for Khoul, this is still a personal betrayal. She writes about her reluctance to believe the rumours about C.K., "I didn't want to have one more person be a disappointment to me." But she also takes a position that extends beyond personal choice, writing that "you can't separate him from his work." Khoul uses the imperative here: *you can't separate him*. In this way, she begins to approach the much stronger tone adopted by Zoller Seitz at *Vulture*, who boldly declares: "Louis C.K. is Done."

Zoller Seitz's article is markedly different from the pieces by Sims, Dargis, St. James and even Khoul. He explicitly states that C.K. and his work should no longer matter in the entertainment industry. Like Khoul, he uses a much broader range of abusive men to contextualize C.K. Crucially, Zoller Seitz also focuses on the women these men harmed, mentioning not just C.K.'s accusers, but actors Rose McGowan and Mira Sorvino and television writer Kater Gordon, as well as others who have shared their #metoo stories. In doing so, Zoller Seitz broadens the analytical frame beyond just C.K.'s work and our necessary reappraisal of it. He situates his response to the C.K. allegations as an issue of workplace safety and industry economics. He is the only critic to identify that what makes C.K.'s accusations different from other hypothetical scenarios of separating art from the artist is that they are contemporary. "[Current] revelations hit us differently because we share the same world as the artist," he writes, "breathe the same air, feed the same economy." Because of this real-world context, Zoller Seitz argues that C.K.'s work should no longer be revered in the entertainment industry. With regard to C.K.'s influence on comedy, Zoller Seitz believes "other shows will have to be cited as comparison points for the time being, or going forward." Zoller Seitz is also the only mainstream critic to explicitly state that this is a systemic issue and that C.K. is not just a bad apple. "It's the fault of the artists for being secret creeps or criminals," he writes, "and the fault of the system for making it possible for them to act this way for years without being punished." He believes we should label C.K.'s work "Of Archival Interest Only" and move on to "something new— not just new work, but a new paradigm for relationships in show business, and all business." Where Sims finds it complicated to separate out C.K.'s comedic legacy, for Zoller Seitz, the matter is simple: "some other shows will have to be cited as comparison points for the time being, or going forward." In this way, Zoller Seitz acknowledges that continuing to laud C.K.'s work helps to legitimize him as an artist and feeds a cultural economy off of which he profits. Addressing a systemic issue means changing the system of cultural valuation, too.

Bitch Media's Balcazar is similarly ready to dispense with C.K. Her headline is reminiscent of Zoller Seitz's: "Louis C.K. is Cancelled." Cancellation, for Balcazar, means the end of C.K.'s career and stature. She situates him in a lineage of predatory men whose misconduct is documented in their own works and understands these men as enabled by Hollywood's systemic misogyny. "We're not here for predation made into art," she states, matter-of-factly, devaluing C.K.'s work of its supposed-genius, framing it as predation, plain and

simple. Her impression of *I Love You Daddy* is markedly different from Dargis, who finds it both disturbing and compelling, while Balcazar sees it as a thin veneer for predatory behaviour. "This is what happens when the artistic work of predatory men is protected by fame and fanfare," she writes of the film. "Their violence is an open secret that when ignored, breeds more of the same." Unlike every other writer, Balcazar makes no mention of C.K.'s influence as an artist. She is not interested in his impact on comedy outside of the way he used this impact as a cover for abusive behaviour. She draws on a similar concept to Marghitu's "genius artist," (491) referring to C.K. as a "tortured genius," whose work "seeks to humanize predation." "Confessing is not the same as apologizing or atoning," she writes, taking aim at C.K. specifically but also the confessional mode in general, which allows comedians to unload their desires as a sign of authenticity without having to account for their real-world selves.

Balcazar's piece is much shorter than the others analyzed here, perhaps indicative of the consideration she believes C.K. should merit. Her tone is also far angrier; she calls C.K. a "motherfucker." Where Dargis uses a personal "I," and Khoul an imperative "you," Balcazar adopts a collective "we" at the end of her article. "Institutions are listening to public outrage and the more we push back, the stronger our message is," she writes. Balcazar thus refuses to write from a position of critical distance or personal reflection. Rather, she positions her job as a writer as being engaged in a collective struggle for art that refuses to romanticize abusive actions. This stance undoubtedly emerges from her position at a feminist magazine, rather than a more mainstream publication. But it's interesting how much overlap there is between Zoller Seitz and Balcazar, indicating that a feminist mode of engaging with art—a mode that views art as embedded in the material and ideological contexts which produce it—is not out of question within more liberal discourse.

Indeed, in analyzing these five articles from mainstream media in relation to Balcazar's *Bitch* piece, what stands out is the general uncertainty of their authors. Zoller Seitz aside, they are clearly unclear on what exactly to do with C.K.'s art and how these revelations should affect their artistic consumption. Ultimately, Dargis, St. James and Sims, by largely avoiding the industry context of C.K.'s work, continue to see art as its own sphere, where individuals have private relationships to work. Zoller Seitz and Balcazar, and, to a lesser extent Khoul, insist on a more fluid relationship between art and reality. Their discourse positions more explicitly challenge the norms of the male "genius artist" (Marghitu 491), the authentic autobiographical self and comedy as a protected sphere. Taking all of these articles together, they offer a snapshot of a moment when these norms are no longer necessarily dominant. Reilly describes authenticity as a comedic norm that prevented C.K. from facing consequences for his sexual harassment, even when rumours of his actions circulated for years (954). For Brown, authenticity is a "floating signifier" (43) that enables the boys' club of comedy to self-perpetuate and self-legitimize. Dargis, Sims, and St. James, in their uncertain and contradictory approaches, indicate a general recognition that authenticity may not be worth its value, pointing toward the malleability of these comedic norms and #metoo as a moment engaged in contesting them. Their uncertainty indicates a possible openness to the brash assertions of Zoller Seitz and Balcazar. These discourses may not have been ready to dispense with C.K. entirely, but they acknowledge that something about the standard critical mode is no longer appropriate.

In this way, these writers are much closer to a feminist lens than a conservative one. Tracinski at *The Federalist* stands alone in his response to C.K., which is uninterested in discussing C.K.'s work. He agrees with the other writers that C.K.'s behaviour was abusive,

referring to it as "sexual misconduct" and "sexual predation," but his focus is on C.K.'s behaviour as symptomatic of what he calls "a crisis of masculinity." Tracinski situates C.K. in relation to the accusations of abuse against other high-profile figures like Matt Lauer and Garrison Keillor. He's specifically interested in pushing back on the rhetoric describing these abuses as manifestations of "toxic masculinity." "Sexual Assault Claims Don't Prove Male Toxicity, but the Absence of Masculinity," reads his headline, above a photo of C.K. Tracinski is concerned that these cases are all feeding an "ideological agenda" that "masculinity as such is to blame." Without specifically naming feminism, then, Tracinski is pushing back on feminist understandings of sexual violence as emerging from patriarchal masculinities. His approach to sexual violence is anti-continuum. Liz Kelly's continuum framework is intended to help women connect "everyday male behaviour" with extreme violence, so as to see all of these behaviours as emerging from patriarchal structures (51). "The concept of the continuum of sexual violence enables women to specify the links between typical and aberrant behaviour and therefore enables women to locate and name their own experiences," writes Kelly (51). For Tracinski, sexual violence is not emblematic of masculinity but rather of a cultural crisis of masculinity. "The compulsion to commit extreme, illegal, and potentially career-ending acts just to gain a fleeting sense of power is a confession of how worthless and powerless [the man] normally feels," Tracinski writes.

Though Tracinski doesn't reject the specific accusations of abuse emerging during #metoo, he uses the rhetorical tools of popular misogyny and anti-progressivism to counter the feminist analysis undergirding these abuses. Indeed, Tracinski re-frames the C.K. narrative so as to re-centre men and their needs. Banet-Weiser writes that popular misogyny is invested in the "restoration of male privilege" (38), a task Tracinski undertakes by lamenting the plight of masculinity-in-crisis. In raising the spectre of this crisis, Tracinski enacts what Banet-Weiser describes as the "funhouse mirror" logic of popular misogyny, which inverts the dynamics of domination to position men as victims who are in danger (45). "A key logic of the extreme right is recuperation," Banet-Weiser writes (35). "Men's rights organizations in digital culture are filled with proclamations about how women and feminists have not only destroyed society but emasculated it," she continues (35). These proclamations overlap with the hateful rhetoric of incels who blame feminism for their sexual inactivity. Tracinski also engages in the anti-woke strategy of othering the enemy, as described by Cammaerts (734). He not only disregards feminist critiques of C.K., but positions these critiques as hysterical and abnormal, writing, "I always suspected the cultural left would circle back to Puritanism in the end."

Here, the beginnings of #metoo as a two-sided contestation start to emerge, with Tracinski blaming the "cultural left" for their incorrect analysis of sexual abuse. As of November 2017, popular right-wing commentators like Tracinski (and Matt Walsh, who takes a similar position at *The Daily Wire*) were just starting to situate #metoo within a culture war framework, while still concerned with the cases of assault themselves. Tracinski doesn't actually use the phrases "woke," "cancel culture," or even #metoo. Indeed, *none* of the writers included here refer to #metoo explicitly. The hashtag had already been popular online for nearly a month, following Alyssa Milano's inciting tweet on October 17. Yet by early November, these critics were not positioning the outing of high-powered men and the outpouring of stories online as part of the same narrative. Or, they didn't find the latter to be significant enough as context for the former, though it was the Weinstein exposé that prompted Milano's tweet and opened the floodgates. For now, the story of powerful men abusing their power remained discursively

separate from the stories of thousands of women online. By January 13 2018, when *Babe.net* published their Ansari story, this was not the case.

Aziz Ansari: #metoo as threat and opportunity

The *Babe.net* article detailing Grace's date with Ansari went viral almost immediately. Media outlets quickly began publishing responses to the story. The seven responses I analyze here are almost all from the same publications as the articles about Louis C.K., with *BuzzFeed News* swapped for *HuffPost*, another digital media venture. I asked the same questions of the responses to Ansari as I asked of the articles about C.K. The articles are: Bari Weiss, "Aziz Ansari is Guilty. Of Not Being a Mind Reader," *The New York Times*; Caitlin Flanagan, "The Humiliation of Aziz Ansari," *The Atlantic*; Anna North, "The Aziz Ansari Story is Ordinary. That's Why We Have to Talk About it," *Vox*; Anna Silman, "Aziz Ansari, Cat Person, and the #MeToo Backlash," *The Cut* (*The Cut*, like *Vulture*, is an online vertical of *NYMag*); Nadya Agrawal, "It's Time to Talk About Race and the Aziz Story," *HuffPost*; Rae Gray, "White Feminism Won't Save Aziz Ansari From Himself," *Bitch*; and Robert Tracinski, "Aziz Ansari Illustrates How #Metoo Turned Into a Neo-Victorian Sex Panic," *The Federalist*. Only Tracinski wrote about both C.K. and Ansari. Indeed, the most notable difference between these articles and those about C.K. is that these are predominantly by opinion writers, not cultural critics. Dargis, Sims, Zoller Seitz, and St. James are all professional critics. Weiss, Flanagan, Silman and North, though their work touches on culture, are not full-time critics. It was difficult in general to find any articles written by critics about Ansari in the immediate aftermath of the *Babe* story.

Where nearly all the C.K. articles in my corpus were published within days of the *Times* exposé, only the articles that forcefully reject the *Babe* story, by Weiss (*NYT*, January 15) and Flanagan (*Atlantic*, January 14), were published right after the *Babe* article. Silman (*The Cut*) and North (*Vox*) followed with their articles on January 16, which are more nuanced defences of the importance of the *Babe* article in starting a necessary conversation about the grey areas of sexual violence. Gray's *Bitch* article and Agrawal's *HuffPost* piece, both of which focus on how race is mobilized in the Ansari story, followed a week later, on January 23 and 25 respectively. Where the Louis C.K. articles directly responded to the *Times* investigation, then, the discourse around Ansari unfolds in waves: an initial backlash to the *Babe* piece, followed by a pushback to the backlash, followed by an attempt to highlight overlooked dimensions of the story. These articles are not just responding to Grace's story, but are self-consciously engaged in the shaping of a meta-discourse about *how* Grace's story should be received and, by extension, what kind of movement #metoo is actually allowed to be.

These writers were interested in Ansari not because he's an influential artist, though he is, but because Grace's story resonated widely on social media, receiving a mass of shares—over 14,000 on Facebook only—and engagement upon publication (Patil and Puri, 696). Twitter debates erupted over the story, with many women expressing that they related to the grey area described in the article and others calling it a detraction from #metoo.[6] These writers, then,

[6] A tweet from Britni Danielle reads, "I've been there, and didn't always leave," (https://twitter.com/BritniDWrites/status/952578320910057472). Another from Christina Sommers calls the article a "#witchhunt" (https://twitter.com/CHSommers/status/952434283725148160).

approach the allegations against Ansari as a matter of public interest because the public is already vocally interested in it. They frame the Ansari story and its virality as a symbol for #metoo as a movement, both its strengths and its dangers. While the writers all agree that Ansari did not behave admirably, they are intensely divided over how to think about his actions and what discursive framework is appropriate for them. Even Tracinski at *The Federalist*, who explicitly positions the *Babe* story as a #metoo failure*,* refers to Ansari as "sexually aggressive in a way that is both clumsy and boorish." There is no question about whether Ansari's actions were inappropriate. Rather the debate is over whether they constituted violence, whether they deserve to be discussed publicly, and who should bear the burden of preventing sexual aggression. Through these debates, Ansari's actions and the response to them become a stand-in for the #metoo movement as a whole.

Vrushali Patil and Jyoti Puri in their article "Colorblind Feminisms" note that Ansari's case marked a shift in the public discourse around #metoo. "Although this case retained the focus on male celebrities, it shifted attention from cases of sexual harassment to power imbalances in heterosexual dating and hook-ups," they write (690). In doing so, it expanded "#MeToo's scope to routine sexual encounters," and may have resonated "with many more heterosexually identified women," explaining why the viral response was so intense (690). At the same time, though, the metoo hashtag was always interested in everyday encounters. Milano's initial tweet called on women to share their experiences with both sexual assault and sexual harassment, employing a mode of continuum thinking that links both severe and casual incidents of sexual violence within the same discursive framework. The Ansari case, then, rather than expanding #metoo to include "routine sexual encounters," served to join the two related manifestations of #metoo as a popular movement: the outing of powerful men in media articles and the online outpouring of stories from women and survivors. It is because of this more "routine" nature of the Ansari story, Patil and Puri suggest, that "it generated a range of contentious positions and ambivalences among #MeToo's counterpublics" (690).

Bari Weiss at *The Times* and Caitlin Flanagan at *The Atlantic* take up several of these contentious positions. Both Weiss and Flanagan adopt explicit stances in defense of Ansari. Weiss' headline reads: "Aziz Ansari Is Guilty. Of Not Being a Mind Reader," framing the case in a carceral mode and implicitly blaming Grace for not having sufficiently communicated her distress to Ansari. Flanagan not only exonerates Ansari, but positions him as under attack in her headline, "The Humiliation of Aziz Ansari." Both writers note that Ansari behaved aggressively, but they place the burden of blame for Grace's pain on Grace herself. In this way, they explicitly adopt the victim-blaming trope of media reporting on sexual violence, playing into the rape myth that survivors must have been asking for it (O'Hara 248). Flanagan highlights details that indicate Grace's enthusiasm for Ansari, writing "she was so excited, she spent a lot of time choosing her outfit and texting pictures of it to friends." Weiss also highlights the outfit detail and points out that Grace attended the party at which she met Ansari with someone else, suggesting that she's sexually promiscuous and hinting at the rape myth that only chaste women can be violated. While acknowledging that Ansari may have behaved poorly, both Weiss and Flanagan assert that it was Grace's responsibility to exit the situation. "If he pressures you to do something you don't want to do, use a four-letter word, stand up on your two legs and walk out his door," Weiss writes. This attitude reflects what Nancy Worthington identifies as a neoliberal version of feminism, which assumes that "feminist advocacy has made sufficient progress eradicating gender inequity that women can now engage fearlessly with men" (55). Worthington,

analyzing the comments section of Weiss' article, notes that "a majority appeared to reassert Weiss's critique of Grace and her support for Ansari" (53), specifically critiquing Grace for her "misguided" expectations about Ansari's behaviour and "admonishing her for not speaking up clearly" (53). Patil and Puri, writing about the reaction to Ansari's case on Facebook, note that there were fewer shared articles critiquing Grace but those that did critique her, like Weiss and Flanagan's pieces, were shared more frequently (700). According to Patil and Puri, Weiss and Flanagan's articles in fact were the most Facebook-shared pieces about Ansari, suggesting that their victim-blaming discourse held significant sway in the public imagination (698).

Weiss and Flanagan vehemently refuse to consider Ansari's aggression as sexual violence. Flanagan does implicitly refer to Ansari's actions as a form of "male sexual misconduct," but only in the context of arguing that his reputation should not be tarnished. She's more interested in labelling Grace's actions, which she calls "3000 words of revenge porn." In this framing, Grace is the aggressor. Weiss, meanwhile, is concerned that labelling Ansari's actions as sexual violence will set a problematic precedent. "It is worth carefully studying this story," she writes. "Encoded in it are new yet deeply retrograde ideas about what constitutes consent — and what constitutes sexual violence." Weiss thus reinforces the notion that sexual violence is "bounded and binary" (Hindes and Fileborn 652). She rejects continuum thinking, which enables women's experiences to "shade into and out of a given category" like sexual harassment or violence by suggesting Ansari's actions are bad sex, not sexual assault (Kelly 48). Ironically, while Weiss suggests that Grace's behaviour is retrograde, because any modern woman should be able to stand up and walk out, Flanagan laments her youth, when women knew it was their job to stand up for themselves against men who got "fresh." Grace is both too modern and not modern enough. Either way, her pain is her fault. Hindes and Fileborn refer to these expectations as the "double-bind" of "appropriate femininities," where a woman must be passive in order to not court aggression, and yet aggressive in order to protect herself from assault (650). This rhetoric also falls in line with the reporting Hindes and Fileborn notice in Australian media, which frames ""bad" (or coerced) sex [as] a failure of individual communication, rather than situating Grace's encounter within a broader context of gendered norms and power relations" (647). Sexual violence is conceptualized as an isolated problem and the burden of the individual woman, as opposed to a systemic and pervasive manifestation of patriarchy. Weiss and Flanagan thus reinforce dominant ideologies of sexual violence as bounded, binary, and a woman's burden to bear.

For Weiss and Flanagan, the problems with the *Babe* article are not isolated. Rather, they become an indication of broader issues with the #metoo movement as a whole. Both writers contextualize Ansari's actions and the viral response to them within #metoo. Flanagan also highlights the December 2017 viral response to a *New Yorker* short story, "Cat Person," which details a tense and eventually upsetting hook-up between a girl in her 20s and a man in his 30s. For Flanagan, the fact that the *Babe* story and "Cat Person" resonated with so many young women is a sign that something is wrong with the modern woman, not the patriarchal dating culture. Flanagan's line of thinking here recalls Tracinski's effort to blame Louis C.K.'s abuses on a crisis of masculinity, rather than a manifestation of patriarchy. She positions these women as threatening and violent, subjecting Ansari to "humiliation" and "revenge porn." "Women are angry, temporarily powerful—and very, very dangerous," her sub-heading claims. Here, Flanagan adopts the language of popular misogyny found in Reddit and 4chan forums, which frames feminism as a threat to male power. "Positioning men as victims of feminism has

surfaced with every new iteration of the feminist movement as a tactic to reinforce patriarchal hegemony," writes Winnie Chang (3).

Banet-Weiser notes that popular feminism has worked hard to draw attention to rape culture and "reveal its pervasive and normative presence," in turn producing a "reaction by popular misogyny" (55). Popular misogyny responds to this heightened awareness of rape culture through a funhouse mirror logic that positions women as threatening because they have achieved sexual agency, that source of power men that had long refused them (55). "Women (and especially feminists) pose a threat to men within the logics of popular misogyny," Banet-Weiser writes, "precisely because of the perceived *power* that women have" (64). She cites an ad campaign by a men's rights organization in Edmonton that invokes this inverted logic. "Just Because You Regret a One Night Stand . . . Doesn't Mean It Wasn't Consensual," the campaign text reads (58). Banet-Weiser explains that "in the context of rape culture, it is *women's* sexual agency that is the problem, not the fact that men rape women" (55). Flanagan, in positioning women as threatening, invokes this inverted logic to frame women's sexual agency and, through #metoo, our discursive power, as the real danger. Her logic calls to mind a Gavin McInnes headline in *Taki's* magazine: "Feminist Witch Hunts Are Rape" (382).

The only time Flanagan brings up Ansari's work is as reason to defend him from this threat. She writes in the past tense, as if Ansari no longer exists, "Aziz Ansari was a man whom many people admired and whose work, although very well paid, also performed a social good." She mobilizes his progressive credentials and, later, his race, to deem him unworthy of public humiliation. "I thought it would take a little longer for the hit squad of privileged young white women to open fire on brown-skinned men," she continues, invoking excessively violent imagery that likens feminism to a militia. Weiss also only briefly addresses Ansari's work and persona, in order to call out his hypocrisy. "Isn't it heartbreaking and depressing that men — especially ones who present themselves publicly as feminists — so often act this way in private?" She thusly positions herself as a feminist too, and in general a supporter of #metoo, who believes that the *Babe* story is "arguably the worst thing that has happened to the #MeToo movement since it began in October."

Weiss takes an anti-continuum stance, writing that "lumping [Ansari] in with the same movement that brought down men who ran movie studios and forced themselves on actresses…trivializes what #MeToo first stood for." Rather than understanding casual sexual aggression as a symptom of the same culture that produces Weinstein, Weiss insists on separating the two out. She writes that the *Babe* story "transforms what ought to be a movement for women's empowerment into an emblem for female helplessness." Here, instead of positioning women as a threat, Weiss suggests that the Ansari story is undermining #metoo's popular feminist purpose as a means of individual empowerment. If Flanagan employs a popular misogynist argument, Weiss employs a neoliberal conception of popular feminism, which suggests that social movements like #metoo should empower individuals rather than dismantle oppressive structures (Banet-Weiser 4). In both articles, though, the beginnings of a mainstream backlash to #metoo are evident. Where once the movement was useful, they suggest, it is now, for Weiss, holding women back from empowerment, and, for Flanagan, an active danger to men. If the response to C.K. was focused on what to do with his work, these responses to Ansari are focused on what to do with #metoo and how to rein it in.

In doing so, they provide fodder for more explicitly misogynistic backlash from the right. Tracinski at the *Federalist* employs very similar rhetoric to Weiss and Flanagan, victim-blaming

Grace for her experiences and positioning these experiences outside the boundaries of sexual violence. Echoing Weiss and Flanagan's perception of Grace as weak, he writes: "the modern woman is a dishrag, unable to express her preferences in anything louder than a mumble." This language is extremely reminiscent of the derogatory language used to dehumanize women on Reddit forum r/braincels. Grace is not a person, for Tracinski, but a dishrag, good only for housework. Tracinski also explicitly situates this case within what he perceives as a necessary backlash against #metoo, citing comments from Margaret Atwood and a letter signed by French actresses in critique of #metoo. His argument is in his headline: "Aziz Ansari Illustrates How #Metoo Turned Into a Neo-Victorian Sex Panic." His rhetoric invokes the popular misogyny strategy of framing feminist claims as examples of hysteria or "panic." He blames #metoo's popularity on a "culture where victimhood is a kind of moral currency." As Phillips and Chagnon describe, the "demonization of the 'culture of victimhood'" (410) is a popular anti-progressivist rhetoric which claims that liberals are prone to positioning themselves as victims in need of protection (ironic, given the reactionary right's tendency to claim that white men are under attack from the left). In this way, Tracinksi's rhetoric discursively links the popular misogynist dismissals of feminism as hysteria with anti-progressivist dismissals of leftism as opportunistic self-victimization.

Tracinski claims that #metoo is a vehicle for a "new kind of sex panic," which is ultimately the result of the failures of the sexual revolution, which "threw out all the old rules…including any expectations about chivalrous behaviour on the part of men." This diagnosis echoes Flanagan's nostalgia for her youth, when women knew how to treat men who were too "fresh." He also adopts an us-or-them position, framing #metoo as a threat from the left. "Faced with the need to rebuild a code of sexual morality and etiquette in the aftermath of the sexual revolution," he writes, "these are the only terms on which the Left can do it." He continues: "There is 'sexual assault,' and then there is 'anything goes,' so anything you don't like had better be redefined into the category of 'sexual assault.'" Tracinski, like Weiss, understands #metoo as a cultural contestation engaged in redefining the conceptual framework for sexual violence and is virulently opposed to opening up this paradigm. He claims that feminists seek a binary between assault and everything else, ignoring the nuanced discussions amongst feminists about sexual violence as a product of patriarchy and a continuum of experiences. Tracinski also quotes from both Weiss and Flanagan in his article, demonstrating the ways in which their pieces serve to bolster #metoo's right-wing backlash.

For Anna Silman at *The Cut* and Anna North at *Vox*, Ansari's case is again important because of the ways in which it has resonated with women. Rather than condemn Grace's behaviour, though, they view the incident as an opportunity to shift cultural norms around sex, consent, and sexual violence. They re-tell the story of Grace and Ansari's night together very differently from Weiss and Flanagan. Where Flanagan highlights Grace's enthusiasm, North devotes far more space in her article to detailing the ways in which Ansari ignored Grace's indications. "At one point, she says she told him, "I don't want to feel forced because then I'll hate you, and I'd rather not hate you," North writes, quoting Katie Way's original *Babe* story. "At first, he responded well, saying, "Let's just chill over here on the couch," North continues, "But then, she says, he pointed to his penis with the expectation of oral sex." North views this story as worth discussing because "what [Grace] describes — a man repeatedly pushing sex without noticing (or without caring about) what she wants — is something many, many women have experienced in encounters with men." Silman agrees. Like Flanagan, Silman situates the

story in relation to the *New Yorker*'s "Cat Person," arguing that both stories are important because of how they speak to the experiences of young women. But for Silman, this resonance indicates that our current norms around sex and sexual violence are failing young women, not that young women have become too weak to articulate themselves. "These are stories about how young women — having internalized society's messages about how it is their responsibility to please men, to be compliant, to be down for anything," she writes, "end up acquiescing to something that makes them feel rotten inside."

Rather than insisting on a binary conceptualization of sexual violence that situates this encounter as just bad sex, North and Silman position Ansari's actions within what Lena Gunnarsson calls the "grey area," and insist that these actions have prompted a necessary conversation. Gunnarsson refers to the "grey area" as "personal experiences of sexual/violent interactions that, in one way or another, involved difficulties with boundary-drawing in terms of whether to label an experience as sex or sexual assault" (6). North describes Ansari's actions as follows: "a man repeatedly pushing sex without noticing (or without caring about) what she wants." While she does not explicitly call this violence, she also avoids dismissing it, positioning it as within the grey area of experiences that are neither wholly sex or sexual violence. Silman similarly refers to Grace's story as "a more complicated conversation, because the boundaries transgressed are less clear, the villains less outsized." Where this lack of clarity is what prompts Weiss, Flanagan and Tracinski to position #metoo as going too far, for Silman and North, #metoo becomes in this moment an opportunity to change broader cultural norms. "A lot of women are being more vocal about articulating a connection — if not an equivalence — between the kind of commonplace misogynist behavior that Ansari reportedly displayed," Silman writes, "and the more heinous offenses committed by men like Weinstein and his ilk." This is an explicitly feminist understanding of sexual violence, where less severe, everyday occurrences can be conceptualized as normatively patriarchal. Jenny Kitzinger writes that "feminist analysis re-envisaged rape and sexual abuse as a symptom of a culture of violence against and disrespect for women" (17). Silman is both advocating for this approach and articulating that an increasing number of women are adopting such a view of violence. #Metoo, then, is already shifting the discursive framework for violence.

Silman argues that further change can be achieved through continued discourse. For her, Grace's story opens up the possibility for a new conversation about sex, one in which these kinds of "grey area" experiences are no longer treated as normal and coercion is understood as harmful. She notes that public opinion is divided which, for her, is a positive thing: "we're all thinking out loud, together, in real time." North takes a similar approach, situating the Ansari story within broader patriarchal norms and the systems that perpetuate them. She addresses cultural myths and misinformation about sexuality, such as the myth that men have a higher sex drive. "Boys learn at a young age, from pop culture, their elders, and their peers, that it's normal to have to convince a woman to have sex," she writes. She cites coercion plotlines in romantic comedies as well as the victim-blaming messages taught by abstinence-only education curricula. North's feminist cultural analysis understands that individual moments are shaped by institutions and discourses. Unlike Flanagan and Weiss, North puts the burden of change on the institutions. Her solution is both discursive and policy-oriented, as she advocates both for nuanced conversations and better sex education.

Silman and North thus take the Ansari allegations as a chance to push against the #metoo backlash. Recognizing that a backlash is already underway, Silman writes, "instead of seeing the

Ansari story as the moment #MeToo jumped the shark, why can't we see it as the moment that the conversation took on more nuance, and with a more nuanced public response, too?" North notes that the backlash wasn't incited by the *Babe* article; rather, anti-feminist backlashers use the Ansari allegations to fuel their rhetoric. "The backlash against the supposed excesses of #MeToo has been roiling for some time now," she writes, "and Grace's story has been quickly incorporated into the narrative that women, in their zeal to expose harassers, are now going too far." Both Silman and North acknowledge what Karen Boyle describes as #metoo's re-narrativization from a project of "consensus-building" to a "more media-friendly story of conflict in which there are two opposing, and gendered, "sides"" (66). Weiss, Flanagan, and especially Tracinski are all part of this re-narrativization, while Silman and North attempt to promote the project of consensus. "What has really changed is that women are speaking out about sexual misconduct," North writes, "more publicly and in greater numbers than before — and, more than before, they are being heard."

This conversation, Silman asserts, far from constituting a "hit squad," has plenty of space for nuance. "Women are eager to discuss and change expectations around sexual manners more generally, not just to litigate right and wrong," she writes, suggesting that #metoo discourses don't need to operate within a carceral logic. Silman and North position Grace's story and #metoo more broadly as representative of a discursive change, a moment when women feel increasingly comfortable sharing their stories of sexual assault and misconduct. Rosemary Clark-Parsons, in her work on #metoo, acknowledges similar strengths of the hashtag movement. "Feminist politics of visibility are performative politics," she writes, "with the potential to produce change by destabilizing the dominant discourses shaping everyday actions and modeling alternative ways of being" (365). Silman and North refuse to see sexual violence as binary or individualized, understanding it instead as structured by gender, power, and policy. In doing so, they contribute to the work of #metoo's politics of visibility, intervening in the public discourse around sexual violence in the hope of changing it.

Silman and North's articles are examples of the kinds of discourse enabled by popular feminism. Banet-Weiser describes popular feminism as existing in an economy of visibility, which is different from the politics of visibility in that "visibility becomes *the end* rather than a means to an end" (27). In this case, though, #metoo is both a "spectacularly" visible social media event (6), generating attention and clicks for profit-generating platforms, as well as a discursive movement working to shift cultural norms. Silman and North, drawing on feminist cultural concepts and modes of analysis, write for digital media outlets (*The Cut*, *Vox*) with progressive, millennial target audiences. Their articles are products—or, in digital media-speak, "content"—at the same time as they engage in #metoo's discursive work. Indeed, the *Babe* article itself is a product of popular feminism and its contradictions. *Babe*, before it shut down in 2019, was a new digital media site focused on young women that married the individualistic, sartorial versions of popular feminism at sites like *Bustle* with the rowdy college content of millennial media like *Barstool Sports* (A. Davis). The site faced intense criticism for running the Ansari story and for the "amateurish" way the story was handled, including unnecessary details like Grace's outfit choice (Escobedo Shepherd). For North and Silman, despite arguable flaws in the article, the story was worth telling because of its popular resonance and its implications for #metoo as a movement aimed at changing sexual norms. In this way, North and Silman imagine and engage in a version of popular feminism that goes beyond neoliberal empowerment.

At the same time, the *Babe* story perpetuates a version of #metoo that largely avoids talking about race. Patil and Puri, in their analysis of the public discourse around Ansari, find that "there was little open discussion about how race, along with gender and heterosexuality, not to say anything about class, were shaping this case or, for that matter, #MeToo's itineraries" (690). In looking at 84 articles shared on Facebook about Ansari, they find that none examined race in any depth. While taking care to stress that they don't condone Ansari's behaviour, they also emphasize that "in societies with white supremacist histories such as the United States, men of color have all too frequently been at the center of public discussions or, more accurately, public inflammations on discussions on sexual violence …leaving deep traces in terms of who is considered a perpetrator and who is considered a legitimate victim" (703). They express concern that the lack of explicit discussion about race assumes the presence of a "post-racial moment" and risks reproducing "the myth of the Black or Brown or Muslim rapist" (704).

Ali Na makes a similar argument in *Feminist Media Studies*, analyzing the reaction to the Ansari allegations through the lens of his performances, particularly his performance of Desi masculinity and what she calls "funny cute" (310). Ansari, as a prominent Desi actor, "combines humor with cuteness in his characters in a manner that sutures these representations to his public reception as sexed and racialized identity" she writes (310). His public persona is thus framed through his representations of Desi masculinity and performance of funny cute, which produce him as "simultaneously desexualized as sexually undesirable and sexually deviant in his noncompliance with white normative masculinity" (310). Na stresses even if there is no explicit racism in the public discourses about Ansari, race is still structuring these responses, "infiltrat[ing] social conceptions of guilt and innocence" (311). Ansari is more likely to be perceived as having a deviant sexuality and thus the responses to sexually aggressive behaviour on his part are more likely to be charged with a tone of repulsion or disgust. Na also suggests that Flanagan's response evinces the flip side of this disgust. Flanagan condescendingly positions Ansari as under attack, publicly humiliated, and in need of paternalism (321). Both responses, for Na, display a perception of Ansari's sexuality as deviant from the "white masculine norm" (323). "It is precisely the fervor of response to Ansari that is informed, forecast, and culturally authorized by performing funny cute," she writes (323).

Keeping in mind these critiques, I analyze two articles written by South Asian American women that deliberately deal with Ansari's race in order to avoid reproducing the presumption of a post-racial moment and to consider the relationship between race and public performance more explicitly. There was certainly a charged, visceral outpouring of angry responses to Ansari on social media, as Na describes. Rae Gray at *Bitch* and Nadya Agrawal at *HuffPost*, however, are concerned with the way race and representation are mobilized in defense of Ansari. Gray, instead of focusing on consent like the other writers included here, uses her article to unpack Ansari's public persona as a South Asian role model and male feminist. Like the critics writing about C.K., she takes the allegations as an opportunity to reconsider Ansari's public persona and artistic work, and argues that his image has been false all along. She writes that he "market[ed] himself publicly as a male feminist," while in reality his work rarely featured Asian women and positioned white women as thinly-developed objects of desire for Ansari's characters. His feminism, for Gray, was largely self-serving and not helpful to South Asian women, positioning women of colour as "afterthoughts, gags, and obstacles to protagonist's goal of dating white women." In Gray's intersectional analysis, Ansari has already failed women of colour.

Where other writers bring up Ansari's work as evidence of his feminism or "social good," in Flanagan's words, Gray uses it as evidence for why his misconduct is unsurprising. Gray points out that these feminist credentials have been used to defend Ansari, writing that "apologist Asian men and opportunistic white women quickly jumped to his defense by crying foul and playing down Ansari's coercive behavior." While it is important to acknowledge "the ugly history of white women's sexual exploitation of men of color," she writes, this "doesn't excuse Ansari's treatment of Grace," nor does it "prevent him from levying the sexual upper hand" due to his wealth and prominence. Gray situates Ansari's public persona within a broader context of popular misogyny and popular feminism, positioning his feminist allyship as an example of the failure of popular feminism more generally. As Banet-Weiser writes, popular feminism invests in the attention economy, manifesting through neoliberal practices and strategies that become visible "precisely because they do not challenge deep structures of inequities" (20). "There is a market for feminism," Banet-Weiser explains (21). Gray critiques this market. "Reducing feminism to bite-sized phrases that fit on mugs and tees has made it comically easy for men to say or do the "right" thing," she writes. This is the feminism on which Ansari has built has reputation, she argues, and "it's a feminism that lacks substance, focuses only on self-promotion, and is utterly uninterested in advocating for the vulnerable, like women of color, queer women, and poor women."

Interestingly, Gray suggests that Ansari is *also* an example of popular misogyny. "Ansari's ability to market himself publicly as a male feminist while privately disregarding a woman's personal boundaries is endemic of a much larger trend among Asian men," she writes, "who have developed an online movement shockingly reminiscent of white men's-rights advocates, or MRAs." She highlights websites like Next Shark, which "frequently vilify and demonize Asian women, trans people, and nonbinary people for "oppressing Asian men," even as misogyny and queer-antagonism run rampant." Communities on these sites criticize Asian women for dating white men while also positioning white women as the ultimate goal, in a pattern that Gray argues is reminiscent of Ansari's work. This sexual entitlement to women is part of an anti-feminist backlash, Gray argues. "Pressing for sex and access to women's bodies without consequences is the fundamental right that men wish to safeguard and secure, and we are in the throes of a movement that pushes back against the normalization of that behaviour," she writes. The Ansari allegations matter for Gray because they both reveal the limitations of popular feminism's politics of visibility as well as highlighting the inability of men to challenge their internalized misogyny and entitlement to women's bodies. Gray concludes that while Ansari may have provided important representation for Asian Americans, this work should not protect him or erase his off-stage behaviour. "If 'losing'…a voice like Ansari's constitutes a huge blow to representation," she writes, "then the answer is *more representation of even more marginalized voices*" (emphasis hers). Gray refuses to separate art from the artist, challenging the notion that artists who provide a "social good" are more important than women's safety.

Nadya Agrawal at *HuffPost* is similarly concerned with Ansari's work and the representation he provided for Asian communities, though her evaluation of that work is quite different from Gray's. For Agrawal, Ansari's show *Master of None* was groundbreaking.[7] "Never had the brown immigrant experience been delivered to a mainstream audience in such a fresh and funny way," she writes. "I felt like I was watching a show that valued and respected

[7] The second season of *Master of None* aired in 2017.

me…But I don't feel like that anymore." Agrawal writes that she sees herself in Grace's story and that she now views Ansari as a stranger. Whatever intimacy Ansari had built up with Agrawal via his comedic authenticity and truth-telling has now vanished. Gray perceives Ansari's work as flawed, which makes it easier to dispense with. Agrawal's re-evaluation of his work is reminiscent of the critics writing about C.K. She feels betrayed by a personal hero and as such her personal feelings about the work have shifted. Like Gray, though, she refuses to defend Ansari or to let the significance of his work detract from his off-stage actions. Agrawal is concerned with the ways in which Flanagan has mobilized Ansari's race and the "social good" of his work in order to discredit the #metoo movement and the allegations against him. "White women, Flanagan said, are just trying to destroy a good brown man," she writes.

Agrawal is appalled by Flanagan's use of Ansari's race, writing that it forces her to choose between her race and her gender in deciding how to respond to Grace's story. In bringing up Ansari's race, Agrawal argues, Flanagan has turned him into a representative for all Asian Americans. "By writing about Ansari's "aspirational" qualities, [Flanagan] is invoking society's stereotypes about dark-skinned and Muslim men being sexually deviant and misogynistic," she writes, "while also trying to subvert those same stereotypes. She can't have it both ways." In other words, in positioning Ansari as a "good" Muslim man, Flanagan also invokes the image of the sexually deviant other. Agrawal's critique is similar to Na's, who writes that "Ansari is made to perform the exemplative function of Desi masculinity, illustrated by how many responses felt dismayed by what Ansari's actions mean for Indian American role models" (312). For Agrawal, it is Flanagan's mobilization of race that makes this a racialized issue. She argues that Flanagan is cynically mobilizing Ansari's race in order to shut down difficult conversations about sexual violence. "An analysis like Flanagan's distracts from real conversations about consent," she writes. Gray and Agrawal, then, are concerned with race insofar as it is mobilized to defend Ansari. They are both supportive of Grace's story and see it as an important conversation within the #metoo context, one that should not be closed off by accusations of racism. In considering the representation Ansari provided for Asian American communities, Gray and Agrawal agree that whether or not his work was useful, it doesn't negate or excuse his real-world actions.

A fallen auteur; a #metoo symbol

The responses to these cases are strikingly different. Firstly, virtually no arts critics wrote about Ansari, while it was relatively easy to find responses from critics to C.K. This indicates general approaches to the two sets of allegations. C.K.'s misconduct is perceived by these writers as a form of harm within normative understandings of sexual violence and requires no debating, while Ansari's misconduct is agreed-on as being inappropriate, but not necessarily violent. In C.K.'s case, his work is discussed far more than his misconduct; the discourses about comedy consumption and artistic value take precedence over sexual violence. This is partly because the critics all *agree* on C.K.'s harm, and because of the high personal and artistic stake they placed in his work. Here, C.K.'s misconduct becomes an inciting incident for these critics to re-evaluate the norms of separating art from artist and comedy as an authentic and protected sphere. Two general approaches to C.K.'s work emerge: first, personal reevaluations which avoid calling for the separation of art and artist and, secondly, more activist-informed analyses that call for the delegitimizing of C.K. and his work. While these approaches differ, they all evince a refusal to engage in Marghitu's auteur apologism (492) and position the exposé as a moment where the

dominant norms for engaging with art and comedy are no longer relevant or appropriate. These reevaluations implicitly call into question the norms of comedy as a protected sphere, wherein transgressive jokes—like, say, a comedian chasing his friend until she kisses him—are understood as not representative of the person delivering them. Dahlia Balcazar at *Bitch* explicitly calls out the ways in which comedy's confessional mode acts as a protective mechanism for comedians. Though the other critics are not quite as vocal, their ambivalences about authenticity and occasional overlaps with Balcazar's rhetoric indicate that separating art from artist—or the comedian from consequences—might not be as firmly "embedded in the cultural fields" as Marghitu suggests (491).

For Ansari, because his actions fell into the "grey area," (Hindes and Fileborn 640) the discourse that emerges in these responses is focused on sexual violence. The journalists writing about Ansari disagree directly with each other over whether Ansari's actions merit public discussion within the discursive framework of sexual violence. If the critics responding to C.K. seem to exist along a spectrum of opinions, the writers responding to Ansari are on opposing sides, debating whether Ansari's actions should be included within the scope of #metoo as a movement. One Tweet even jokingly acknowledged the influence of media outlets in shaping public opinion around the article: "So where do you align on the Aziz situation? *NY Times*? *The Atlantic*? Or *Vox*?"[8] Here, Ansari is approached less as an auteur than as a symbol for a cultural clash. His race and his work are mobilized in relation to his status as a symbol of this clash. The fact that race never emerges in the discourse around C.K., meanwhile, supports Patil and Puri's argument that the public discourses around sexual violence often assume a "post-racial moment" (704). Indeed, C.K.'s industry power was bolstered by his status as a white auteur: he was the norm against which all other comedy auteurs, including Brown men like Ansari, Black women like Issa Rae, and white women like Pamela Adlon, were measured.

Taking these cases together, two related contestations emerge: how to engage with art and how to think about sexual violence. These contestations emerge because of differences in the cases themselves and the public statures of C.K. and Ansari, but also because of where dominant norms already lie. C.K.'s actions challenge the norms of separating art from artist and authenticity in comedy while Ansari's challenge the definition of sexual violence itself. Looking at these cases side by side also provides a glimpse at how the narrativization of #metoo is evolving. When the C.K. exposé is published, the hashtag is entirely absent from the contextualizations of C.K. amidst long lists of abusive men. Only the explicitly right-wing publication *The Federalist* positions the C.K. allegations as part of a specifically left-wing cultural movement (a movement which may need to be stopped at some point in the future). Ansari's case, on the other hand, becomes a referendum on #metoo, a moment where the movement is understood as both feminist opportunity and a threat to male privilege. Here, the "re-narrativization" of #metoo as a conflict between feminists and reactionaries is on full display (Boyle 66), with the rhetoric used by moderate conservatives like Weiss and Flanagan fueling the more fervent anti-feminist sites like *The Federalist.* "Everytime feminism gains traction," Banet-Weiser writes, "the forces of the status quo position it as a peril, and skirmishes ensue" (14). Tracinski begins this positioning in his response to C.K., arguing that leftism is akin to Puritanism, and Flanagan and Weiss take up this strategy in full force in their articles about Ansari. Their rhetoric employs the tactics of popular misogyny and reactionary anti-

[8] https://twitter.com/dababybel_/status/953426046044471296.

progressivism, framing a progressive social movement as antithetical to personal freedom and feminism as a threat. Flanagan in particular employs popular misogyny's "funhouse mirror" logic to position feminism as the real threat, rather than gendered sexual violence (45).

Writers at liberal digital media outlets *The Cut, Vox*, and *HuffPost* as well as the leftist *Bitch Media* then take up the concepts and rhetoric of feminism in order to rebuff the backlash. The discourse unfolds in waves but also spreads, from peripheral publications to more mainstream outlets and back again. As Banet-Weiser explains, misogyny is understood as a backlash to feminism, but this backlash isn't linear: "popular misogyny lashes out in all directions" (36). This chapter traces some of these directions, the interactions between popular feminism and misogyny, and the ways in which #metoo grew into a flashpoint for such interactions. Across both cases, the writers and critics included here make aspirational and foreboding predictions for the futures of art, feminism, and #metoo. They actively insert themselves into ongoing cultural negotiations, advocating for their ideological positions. Notably, amongst the mainstream media outlets included here, the writers at the two legacy media sites, *The New York Times* and *The Atlantic*, take the more ideologically conservative and normative positions in both cases. With regard to C.K., Dargis and Sims are hesitant to explicitly condemn the separation of art from artist, while in Ansari's case, Weiss and Flanagan vehemently blame Grace for her pain. Explicitly and implicitly, these commentators stake out their positions on comedic norms and "grey area" sexual encounters, and in doing so help to constitute #metoo as a moment of potential change—for better or worse—in the popular imagination. As for their predictions, only time would tell whether C.K. was indeed "done" as Zoller Seitz claimed, whether women were indeed as "dangerous" as Flanagan suspected, and where the push and pull of #metoo's discursive arc would lead.

Chapter 4: Don't Call it a Comeback

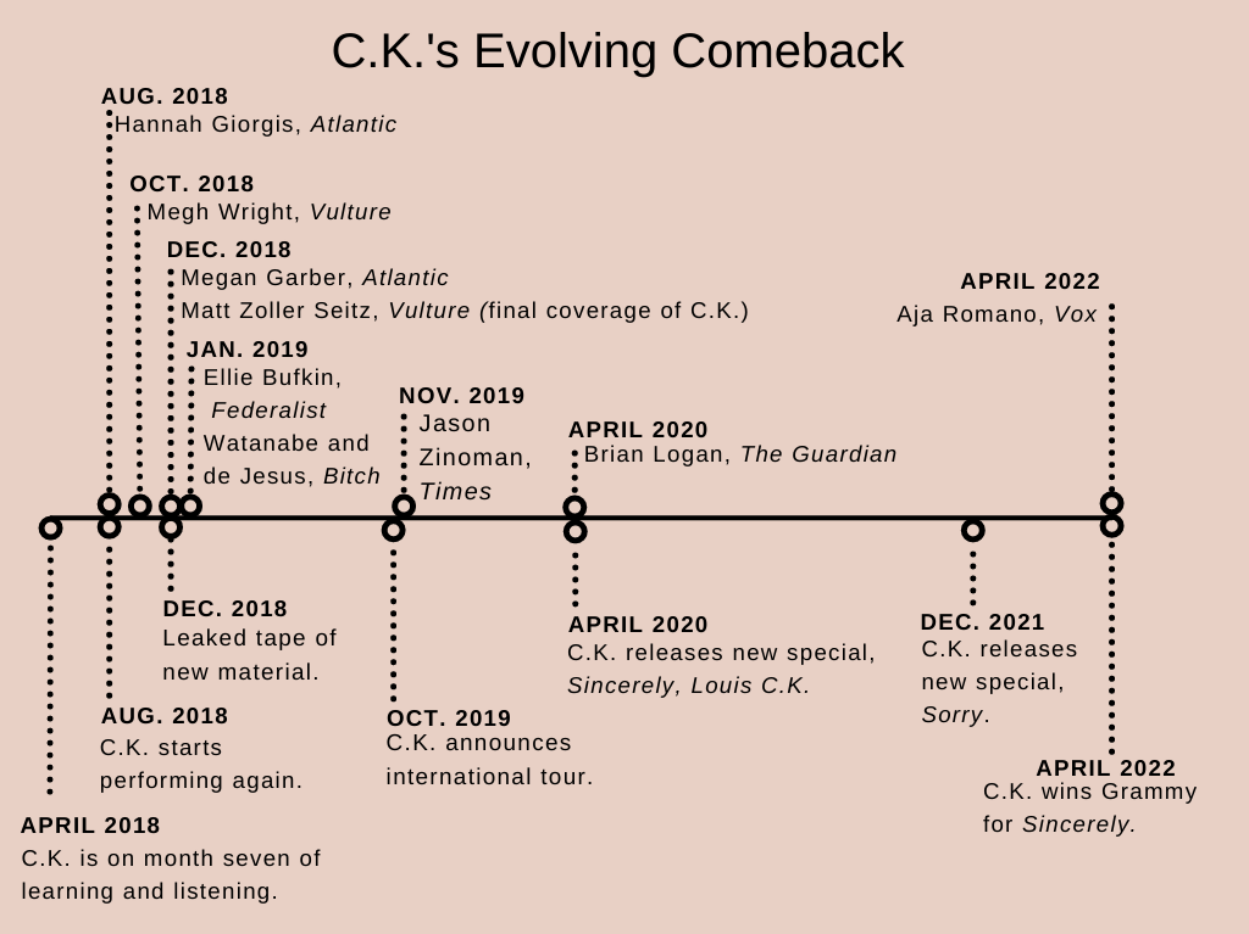

Figure 4.1: A timeline of Louis C.K.'s comeback

Louis C.K.: sincerity, transgression and the anti-woke

If there seemed to be one clear consensus amongst the reactions to the allegations against C.K., it was that his career would not be the same. Zoller Seitz's declaration may have been the most direct, but a host of other media outlets echoed the sentiment. *Salon.com* surmised that "Apology or No Apology, Louis C.K. is Screwed," (Anderson) while *Vice* summarized the situation as such: "Louis C.K. Cancelled by Everyone" (Bluestone). *Vice* was referring not to public opinion, but to distribution company The Orchard's decision to pull the release of *I Love You Daddy* and FX's cancellation of its overall deal with C.K's production company, Pig Newton (Bluestone). These pronouncements of finality seemed reasonable at the time. The industry was cutting ties with C.K., and while unsure of what exactly to do with his work, critics, as documented in the previous chapter, were united in their assessment that his actions were indefensible. Nearly five years later, in April 2022, C.K. won the Grammy for Best Comedy Album for his 2020 stand-up special *Sincerely, Louis C.K.* In the interim, C.K. made an

incremental return to comedy that laid the groundwork for this win. He began performing shows again in August 2018, just nine months after he admitted to masturbating in front of women without their consent and promised to "step back and take a long time to listen" (Garber). In 2019, C.K. upgraded from comedy clubs to a theatre tour and recorded *Sincerely, Louis C.K.,* which he released for direct purchase on his website in 2020 (Zinoman, "Louis C.K."). C.K. followed up this special with another in 2021, *Sorry*, and his return to feature filmmaking in 2022 with *Fourth of July*. I analyze here articles published at different points along this return, in order to understand how the public response may have shifted alongside C.K.'s approach to his comeback. The big picture question is: did anything really change? I ask this with C.K. specifically in mind, but also with a view to broader discourses around comedy consumption and sexual assault. What narrative of #metoo is developing over the course of this five-year period?

I look at articles from the same publications as the previous chapter: *Vulture*/*New York Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Vox, Bitch* and *The Federalist*, as well as the UK newspaper *The Guardian,* so as to include another perspective from a large legacy outlet. I ask the following more specific analytical questions of each article: Why are they covering C.K.'s new work? On what terms do they assess the new work? How do they position the work, and C.K.'s return more generally, in relation to cultural narratives around #metoo, "wokeness" and "cancel culture"? Though "wokeness" and "cancel culture" were nowhere to be found in the articles about the initial allegations, between 2017 and 2022, these terms became integral to the reactionary right's anti-progressive rhetoric. At the same time as C.K. was testing out his comeback, public figures like Ben Shapiro and Joe Rogan were building their brands around cancel culture fearmongering and anti-woke shaming, as outlined in chapter two. This question, then, is interested in how the development of #metoo's narrative intertwines with the evolution of this right-wing rhetoric. What emerges from my analysis is that some things do change. There is decidedly less space for C.K. in traditional media spaces post-#metoo and some outlets flat out refuse to engage with him on an artistic level. At the same time, the fact that C.K. is able to comeback at all is taken by some writers as evidence of patriarchy rearticulating itself. In this way, C.K.'s comeback becomes a symbol for both #metoo as a whole and the influence of right-wing comedy, as well as an example of the ways in which social movements are never wholly won or lost but processes that exist in tension with already at-work hegemonic structures.

When C.K. began appearing at clubs in August 2018, it was as a surprise to the audiences present and to the general public. Writers and online commentators discussed the ethics of C.K.'s sudden return, asking whether it was too soon, whether it was fair to the audiences in the room, and what it meant for redemption and atonement post-#metoo. *Vulture*, the publication in which Zoller Seitz had declared C.K. "of archival interest only" and called for a new, more contextualized mode of engaging with artists going forward, held fast to Zoller Seitz's pronouncement. The *New York Magazine* vertical has not reviewed either of C.K.'s new specials, suggesting an editorial guideline around not legitimizing C.K. Zoller Seitz did review C.K.'s new material when he started performing again, but concluded his overwhelmingly negative assessment with a statement that this would mark the last time he would write about C.K., unless C.K. was sentenced in a court or had died ("The Real Louis C.K."). This lack of coverage is especially significant as *Vulture* is one of few pop culture sites with dedicated comedy critics. Instead of engaging artistically with C.K., the site has focused on emphasizing the industry structures enabling his comeback. In response to C.K.'s surprise performances, *Vulture* ran an article on October 21, 2018 by the publication's Senior Comedy Editor Megh Wright, titled "We

Always Knew Louis C.K.'s Comeback Would Be Easy." The article looks at the social and economic structures in comedy encouraging C.K.'s return. Wright highlights that C.K. has returned not via Hollywood but via New York comedy clubs, which have a different set of industry protocols and social norms than TV and movie sets. "The New York comedy-club community has welcomed C.K. back into the fold, which shouldn't be surprising to those familiar with the scene," she writes. Wright quotes queer comedian Guy Branum's description of clubs like the ones C.K. is performing at as having a "boys' club mentality." "[This mentality] is the only real structure that exists in stand-up," according Branum, and men who speak out about such a structure are more likely to be ejected from it than to succeed in changing it.

Wright's analysis echoes Patrick Reilly's work on comedy scenes. "Comics' careers are currently based around networks of venues and social cliques," Reilly writes (938). Authenticity functions as legitimacy in these cliques. Comedians who are perceived as authentic have a higher status within them (Reilly 953). As Stephanie Brown writes, though, authenticity in comedy communities is gendered, and does not "signify actual truth or validity" but "is wielded by those with power, most often straight white men," as a means of preserving the boys' club (43). Wright's article, in highlighting these dynamics, insists on a mode of engaging with comedy that emphasizes the flow of social and economic capital within the comedy industry, and the way that authentic status translates into power that can be abused. She also highlights the voices of the women who spoke out against C.K., rather than C.K. himself, quoting Rebecca Corry as having experienced a "vicious and swift backlash from women and men, in and out of the comedy community," after going on record in the *New York Times* investigation. Wright also includes the voices of comedians who have allied themselves with the women who spoke up and risked their own status and careers by doing so. She quotes Ian Karmel as saying, "this entire fucking discussion has hinged on, 'When does Louis get to come back?' and almost never on, 'How do we make our scene safer?'" This quote positions C.K.'s comeback as an issue of community safety rather than artistic expression or freedom of speech (which is how it will be positioned by media on the right). In examining the way that comedy as an industry has facilitated C.K.'s return to the stage, Wright anticipates the contours of the rest of his comeback, which will depend much more on niche comedy audiences and clubs than on Hollywood-funded film and TV platforms. At the same time, she also evinces a commitment on behalf of *Vulture* to following through on the feminist principles of #metoo: highlighting the voices of survivors and victims, understanding art as inextricable from the contexts in which it is produced, and refusing to legitimize someone who abused their power to cause harm.

When C.K. began performing again, digital media vertical *Vulture* wasn't his only detractor. Legacy magazine *The Atlantic*, in which David Sims had mostly avoided taking an explicit stance on what to do with C.K.'s work after the allegations, published an article by staff writer Hannah Giorgis in August 2018 arguing that C.K. had failed to atone for his actions. Like Wright, Giorgis refused to put art or comedy ahead of real-world harm, writing that "no one deserves to perform" and C.K. "has not, as far as it is known, taken part in any sort of restorative- or transformative-justice process." Her article frames C.K.'s return as an issue of public and workplace safety, and, like Wright's, avoids engaging with C.K. as an artist or auteur. The lack of engagement with C.K.'s artistry at this point is also because none of his new material was publicly available as of yet. This changed in December 2018, when a leaked set from one of his performances shared an hour of material with the public. The leaked set became the subject of much online backlash due to its hateful content, directing attention back towards the

transgressions of C.K.'s onstage persona, and, ironically, away from C.K.'s offstage misconduct. The set included jokes at the expensive of trans people, Asian people, Black men and school shooting survivors and prompted a news cycle of articles and Tweets wondering whether #metoo had turned C.K. into a reactionary and if he was courting a right wing audience (Zinoman, "Louis C.K."). Amidst this cycle, on December 31, 2018, *The Atlantic* published another appraisal of C.K.'s return to the stage. Written by cultural critic Megan Garber, this piece analyzes C.K.'s new material and indicates the beginning of a widespread re-engagement with C.K. as an artist. "The Leaked Louis C.K. Set is Tragedy Masked as Comedy," states the headline, introducing an analysis that treats C.K.'s comedy and his misconduct as intertwined. Garber writes that C.K.'s new jokes are "so lacking in depth or insight" that they don't merit detailed examination, but rather serve as evidence that C.K. has not taken the previous year to atone. Garber argues that C.K.'s comedy, while always transgressive, previously had a "truth-telling" element that is absent from this new set. His work used to be about "interrogating himself as a means of interrogating American culture," while this new "brand of comedy" is self-pitying and self-justifying. "My life is over, I don't give a shit…you can be offended," C.K. says in the leaked set, using his misconduct as an excuse for cruel comedy.

Garber's analysis contains an underlying assumption that comedy itself should perform some kind of social good and that C.K.'s previous work was valuable because of its commitment to truth and sociopolitical analysis. His new work, Garber writes, "doesn't merely punch down; it stomps, pettily," evincing an expectation that comedy should in fact punch up. Garber's approach to C.K.'s new material recalls Willett and Willett's feminist theorizations of comedy as a force for social good, wherein "humour from below can serve as a source of empowerment," (2). For Garber, C.K. has also revealed himself to be inauthentic. His "promise to listen and learn, it seems, was itself a lie," Garber writes. He is thus not only failing to provide a social good but also betraying the norm of authenticity in comedy, and instead embracing the role of the comedian as transgressor. Garber's criticism reveals that in a post-#metoo landscape, transgression is not enough, particularly for a comedian who has undercut his "autobiographical self" (Gilbert 51). Melanie Piper writes that "a comedian's stage persona exists within the framework of comedic performance, a 'marginal safe space' where it is argued that transgressive thoughts can be explored without consequence" ("Time's Up" 264). C.K.'s misconduct allegations contradicted the persona he had built for himself as the relatable dirtbag, the self-aware transgressor who shocked but never appalled. C.K. broke the contract of the "marginal safe space" on stage by actually acting out his transgressions offstage. In doing so, he punctured his persona and lost the protected sphere.

By December 2018, C.K.'s reputation for authenticity had been so thoroughly destroyed that Garber suggests—though avoids explicitly stating—that his "new brand" may be an attempt to court a reactionary, misogynistic "red-pill crowd, with humour that is marketed accordingly." For Garber, then, C.K.'s art cannot be separated from his real world actions: the persona is inextricable from the person, and both of them are proving themselves unworthy of redemption. C.K.'s failure, for Garber, also serves as an example of the failures of #metoo more broadly. She contextualizes him alongside other men who issued semi-apologies for harmful behaviour and have failed to follow through. "The *he saids* that followed the *she saids* have been revealing themselves," Garber writes, "to have been little more than empty performances." #Metoo becomes a promise unfulfilled and C.K.'s comeback an example of patriarchy's unshakeable hegemony, rather than feminism's impact. "The status quo," she writes, is "reassembling to its

familiar, fusty order." The missed opportunity of #metoo is also a missed opportunity for comedy to create change. Louis C.K. is punching down and the patriarchy is safer for it.

In January 2019, to mark one year after the *Babe.net* article about Aziz Ansari, *Bitch* published an article listing the men in media who were doing "just fine" post-#metoo call outs. The article features C.K. alongside Ansari, James Franco, John Lasseter and more, and notes that C.K. has been "welcomed back into comedy clubs with open arms." Following *Vulture*'s lead, *Bitch*'s Marina Watanabe and Jessica de Jesus avoid engaging with C.K.'s comedy itself, including him only as a symbol of patriarchy's strength post-#metoo. This would be the last article *Bitch* published about C.K. before the site's demise in 2022. Meanwhile, undeterred by the public reaction to his new material, C.K. expanded his return into a 2019 theatre tour, performing to larger audiences and generating bigger revenues. Jason Zinoman, comedy critic at the *New York Times*, reviewed C.K.'s theatre tour, with a piece that demonstrates a marked difference in approach from writers at *Vulture* and *The Atlantic*. "Over the past decade, no comic had a greater impact on me than Louis C.K.," Zinoman writes, indicating that he is covering C.K. because of the comedian's artistic importance, not his status as a symbol for #metoo. Zinoman goes on to engage much more thoroughly with the comedic merits of C.K.'s work than Wright, Giorgis or even Garber. He writes that C.K.'s new set has some "characteristically ingenious riffs," thus reinforcing C.K.'s status as a "genius artist" (Marghitu 491). Rather than measuring C.K.'s comedy against expectations of truth-telling or transgression, Zinoman values its cleverness. For Zinoman, here, the comedian's job is to provide wit. Zinoman addresses the reactions to the leaked set, noting that "many concluded that Louis C.K. had rebranded himself a cranky right-wing comic." In this set, though, Zinoman writes that C.K. avoided "the now cliché comedian complaints about generational sensitivities or snowflakes." Interestingly, Zinoman doesn't engage with C.K.'s right-wing material as harmful or offensive, but rather calls it "cliché." The comic failure in that material was its lack of surprise and insight, not its lack of empathy or morality. In this sense, Zinoman demonstrates a different set of expectations for comedy; comedy has value based on its intellectual prowess, rather than its capacity for good.

Zinoman does, however, feel the need to couch this assessment in subjective language. Halfway through his review, he switches to first person, writing: "comedy criticism is never objective, but there is nothing more subjective than how funny you find Louis C.K. in 2019." Zinoman writes that he agrees with critics who "have rejected the idea that we must separate the art from the artist." Yet, he adds, "I have a high tolerance for art from morally suspect places." Zinoman's mode of analysis, then, is somewhat confused. The review jumps between third and first person; he criticizes C.K.'s material about sexual deviance, but also perceives his new offensive material as a "cathartic release of transgression." In a post-#metoo context, Zinoman aims for a more subjective mode of evaluating art, but struggles to identify where and when the harm done off stage should impact the evaluation of what happens on stage. Interestingly, he slips back into third person when discussing what he perceives as the set's polarizing material. "This defiantly perverse new set, whose jokes come with so much baggage they threaten to obscure the performer, will inspire heated, divisive reactions," Zinoman writes. In anticipating a polarized response from the public, Zinoman positions himself apart from that divided public.

There is a two-sided culture war taking place, Zinoman seems to say, and I am the objective observer on the outside. C.K. is rendered here as a symbol of this culture war, and his return is narrativized as a flashpoint for popular feminism versus popular misogyny—a battle in which Zinoman remains an onlooker. In this way, Zinoman is implicitly accepting the right-wing

strategy of framing polarization as the natural state of contemporary life. Cammaerts writes that through anti-woke discourse, "hate speech, discrimination, and racism are positioned as legitimate 'opinions' as any other, worthy of 'democratic' debate, and therefore the pushback against it is illegitimate and 'sinister'" (737). In Zinoman's C.K. review, hateful speech is something that *may* offend you, but is not inherently offensive. "A moral equivalence between a variety of opinions is being constructed, thereby completely disregarding the inherent ethical dimension of the fight against fascism, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination and related hate speech," Cammaerts continues (737). In gesturing vaguely to the "divisive" reactions C.K. is likely to inspire, Zinoman implicitly accepts this moral equivalence. My point here is not to accuse Zinoman of singularly enabling hate speech, but rather to demonstrate the extent to which these right-wing rhetorical strategies have been successful in fostering public perceptions of an ongoing culture war where the content of the war is less relevant than polarization itself.

"Those looking for any apologetic notes or reckoning with the damage he has done will be disappointed," Zinoman notes, again avoiding taking a stance on this lack of apology himself. "If anything, he's doubling down on the comedic value of saying the wrong thing," he continues. C.K.'s lack of apology thus becomes a comedic choice, not a moral one. It is transgressive, surprising, and perhaps even funny for C.K. to fail to apologize. Whether or not Zinoman agrees with this decision (he avoids saying as much) his analysis of C.K. prioritizes C.K.'s comedic artistry over his sexual misconduct and what it might mean for #metoo, sexual violence and workplace safety had C.K. chosen to actually atone. While Garber argues that C.K. has regressed, Zinoman argues that "the comedy of Louis C.K. hasn't changed as much as the context surrounding it." According to Zinoman, then, C.K. has always been offensive, but there are higher expectations for comedy in general and Louis in particular post #metoo. And yet, Zinoman also identifies certain offensive bits in the new material that seem "intended to bait." Zinoman's complicated and contradictory blend of third and first person in his review suggests that the context has indeed changed. High-profile critics no longer feel they can comment positively on C.K. without at least including some kind of personalized caveat.

In 2020, Louis C.K. released a filmed version of his theatre tour as a new stand-up special, *Sincerely*, *Louis C.K.* Fans could purchase the special directly from C.K on his website. This method of distribution indicates that C.K. had not yet been welcomed back by large film and TV production and distribution companies. It is also, however, in keeping with C.K.'s practices prior to #metoo. Alex Symons notes that C.K. had long cultivated his fanbase and built a persona as an authentic comedian by taking control of his distribution methods. "When selling his audio record *Live at Madison Square Garden* (2015) on his own website, CK has allowed his fans to buy the record as a download at a selectable cost" (Symons 114). This disposition for direct releases helps reaffirm his outsider status and adds to fans' perception of C.K. as empathetic towards them, as he is supposedly protecting them from corporate exploitation (Symons 114). In this sense, while C.K.'s decision to release *Sincerely* himself may indicate a lack of industry support, it also works to shore up the reputation he had built prior to #metoo and to gain further support from the community that is the most essential to his comeback: his fans, who are still active on C.K.'s subreddit and on YouTube[9]. Up to this point, C.K.'s comeback had

[9] As of writing, a video uploaded five days ago on YouTube of an interview between C.K. and comedian Theo Von, "Louis C.K. This Past Weekend w/ Theo Von #425," has 1.3 million views and over five thousand comments (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41DHmRZy28E).

been facilitated largely by those within the comedy industry—club owners, bookers, theatre managers—and the cult of fans excited to see him. Zinoman's *Times* review was a rare example of legitimation from cultural spaces that exist outside of, and carry more prestige than, the clubs, bars, and online forums of the comedy world.

With the release of his special online, there was more opportunity for C.K. to reach a broader audience once again. Legacy UK newspaper *The Guardian* reviewed the new special on April 7, 2020, giving it three out of five stars. Brian Logan, *The Guardian*'s comedy critic, takes an approach reminiscent of Zinoman in that he identifies a polarized culture and suggests that the special will act as a Rorschach test for your stance on sexual violence or "how reprehensible you considered CK." Like Zinoman, Logan addresses C.K.'s failure to apologize or atone without actually criticizing that failure. "His not-quite apology – heavier on self-pity than concern for the women involved – won't be enough for those outraged by CK's behaviour," Logan writes. Again, it is up to "those outraged" to push for the men of #metoo to actually do the work of redemption, rather than comedy critics like Zinoman or Logan, or perhaps even the men themselves. He writes that this non-apology is "consistent with C.K.'s unsentimental worldview, which sees us all as amoral screw-ups." In this way, C.K.'s comedic work actually serves as an excuse for his real world behaviour. C.K.'s on-stage persona is cynical and dark and so it's only natural he would cause harm off stage too.

Once Logan has addressed C.K.'s misconduct, he moves on to analyzing the comedy, treating the latter as separate from the former. He finds the special occasionally too cynical, but that it also features good "high-minded" humour. Like Zinoman, he analyzes the comedy for its cleverness rather than its social work. Logan agrees with Zinoman that what Garber calls C.K.'s "new brand" is not all that different from the transgressions in C.K.'s previous work. *Sincerely* is also less hateful that the leaked set from 2018: it doesn't mention school shooting survivors or gendered pronouns. Nonetheless, Logan identifies some "straightforward baiting of liberal pieties" in an extended section on using the word "retarded." Logan concludes that both "the context's changed" and this new context "doesn't seem to be bringing out C.K.'s best instincts," suggesting that there are new expectations for comedians post-#metoo and that C.K. himself is resisting these expectations by leaning into transgression rather than insight. Whether Louis C.K. the person has become a right-wing reactionary or not, Garber, Zinoman and Logan are all in agreement that the comic has decided *not* to grow from his #metoo experience, developing new material that aims to affront liberal sensibilities amidst a context that is less hospitable to this kind of humour. As Zinoman writes, "Instead of adjusting, or offering a more reflective, soul-searching show, as some had hoped, Louis C.K. has stuck to his old tactics. And as such, some of his jokes will fall flat with a huge part of his former audience and will strike others as blows against political correctness." These reviews outline the shape of a comedic landscape where expectations for comedy that provides a social good and comedians who make good on their authentic personas bump up against appetites for hate, transgression, and regression.

The comeback continued and was, by many accounts, institutionalized with C.K.'s Grammy win in 2022 for *Sincerely, Louis C.K* (he won the award again in 2023). This win prompted a news cycle of articles about the failures of #metoo and the non-existence of cancel culture. "As his name trended on Twitter, many comedians, comedy fans and others wondered how the Recording Academy saw fit to bestow an award to someone with an admitted history of sexual misconduct," wrote Melena Ryzick in the *Times* of the reaction to C.K.'s win. But if his Grammy win seemed to prove that #metoo was over, then the reaction to the win provided

evidence that the contestation continues. While C.K. has crept back into mainstream spaces like *The Times* and *The Guardian*, there is still a public discourse arguing that he does not deserve to return, a discourse sizable enough for Ryzick to write about it in the very paper that is already re-legitimizing C.K. At *Vox*, meanwhile, Aja Romano took the opportunity of C.K.'s Grammy win to compare *Sincerely* to another contemporary special, Jerrod Carmichael's *Rothaniel.* Both comedians are working in the confessional mode, Romano argues, but they use this mode quite differently. In *Rothaniel*, Carmichael crafts a quiet, intimate atmosphere with his audience, inviting them to talk back to him as he confesses his deepest secret: his queerness. Rather than demonstrate vulnerability like Carmichael, Romano writes, C.K. "seems to armor himself against a world he's decided to battle." While C.K. was once a leader in the confessional comedy movement, Romano argues that both he and his work have become uglier since #metoo, taking "a pronounced turn toward the reactionary." "There's no longer a collective wish for something higher," Romano writes. Romano thus agrees with Garber that C.K.'s work has regressed and she positions this as a failure of the confessional mode. She adds that the moments of "realness" when C.K. addresses his misconduct are "unsettlingly superficial, framing his behavior as an unfortunate miscommunication about a weird sexual kink."

For Romano, then, C.K.'s refusal to own up to and reflect on the harm he caused is not just a failure to grow, but a failure of comedic authenticity. C.K.'s confessions ring false because they now lack empathy; confession for confession's sake isn't enough. Confession must *create* something: safety, community, insight into the experiences of the vulnerable and the marginalized. Carmichael's comedy, Romano writes, demonstrates a radical vulnerability that goes hand in hand with marginalized experience. "Carmichael's comedic honesty is born," she argues, "from the kind of desperate need for freedom and self-expression that C.K.'s revamped comedy now seems to denigrate." This is a reformulation of the role of authenticity in comedy. When C.K. ushered in the era of confessional comedy in the 90s, confessional did not necessarily mean confessing towards a higher purpose. The goal was authenticity or the crafting of an autobiographical self, developing a sense of shared realness between performer and audience member. As Symons writes, podcast hosts like C.K. would "share intimate and often awful details about their [lives]" which could then be "framed as 'real' evidence" of their "mediated identity" (108). Eric Shouse similarly explains that comedians believe their persona should "reflect his or her essential personhood" (51). For Romano, though, authenticity should not just reflect the self, but serve a "collective wish for something higher." Romano's conceptualization of authenticity is closer to Willett and Willett's feminist argument that comedy can be "a cathartic treatment against unmerited shame, and even a means of empathetic connection and alliance" (2). In a post-#metoo landscape, the old criteria for authenticity no longer hold up, at least for some. Like Garber, Romano analyzes C.K.'s failure to reckon with his actions as both moral and artistic failure. These moral, political and feminist expectations are now built into the criteria for artistic achievement. There is no clean separation.

By the end of 2022, C.K. had released two new specials and won a Grammy. Along the way, he lost some old fans and gained some new ones, including that modern champion of high-minded humour, Ben Shapiro. In December 2021, Shapiro tweeted: "Louis CK is hilarious. Thus he will continue to survive and thrive. Your whining will change none of this" (Loofbourow). Shapiro's embrace of C.K. reflects a wider adoption of the comic as a symbol on the right. As Sienkiewicz and Marx detail in *That's Not Funny*, one of Shapiro's favourite arguments is that comedy is dead on the left and thriving on the right, due to the left's fear of transgression and the

right's supposed embrace of freedom (214). In hailing C.K.'s humour, Shapiro is also claiming him as part of the right-wing comedy ecosystem and a symbol of right-wing comedic success. Ironically, C.K.'s continued success also works to undermine another of Shapiro's favourite talking points—the threat of cancel culture. This adoption of C.K. as a symbol is part of the increasing polarization within comedy as an industry, fuelled by a right-wing comedy ecosystem that targets progressive social movements under the guise of "anti-wokeness." As detailed in chapter two, this eco-system is a contemporary manifestation of popular misogyny and its investment in the "restoration of male privilege" (Banet-Weiser 38). Whether or not C.K.'s material is crafted in order to pander to this audience, his comeback has made use of the right-wing comedy ecosystem. He received a standing ovation for his surprise appearance at Skankfest 2019, a festival organized by Louis Gomez, Big Jay Oakerson and Dave Smith's Legion of Skanks podcast; he performed unannounced at a benefit organized by Bill Burr in 2020; he appeared on the *Joe Rogan Experience* in August 2022 (Sienkiewicz and Marx 337, Coleman "Standing Ovation").

Conservative commentators are happy to have him. "Louis C.K. Remains Brilliant," writes Kyle Smith at the conservative *National Review* about C.K.'s *Sincerely.* "His new special, wild and acidic, is characteristic of how he has been doing comedy his entire career," Smith continues. *The Federalist* has been all in on his comeback. "He will always be the guy who masturbated in front of a bunch of women. That shouldn't mean he doesn't get to be a comedian anymore," wrote culture editor Ellie Bufkin in October 2018, after C.K. started performing again. To promote C.K., Bufkin highlights the importance of his transgressive comedy. "He has never yielded to the idea that 'you can't say that,'" she writes ("Not Too Early"). This matters, Bufkin argues, because comedy has "become a beacon of free speech." "You would be hard-pressed to find a comedy club that wants to be considered a 'safe space,' free from triggering topics and people." Here, Bufkin is not only turning C.K. into a symbol of libertarian free speech, but comedy itself more broadly. She invokes the generic conventions of comedy—transgression, comedic license—to argue that comedy, and especially the physical space of the comedy club, is in line with right-wing values. Comedy clubs "give their customers a space that is free from insufferable wokeness and censorship," Bufkin continues. The classic transgressive function of comedy is thus converted into an anti-woke function, instrumentalized as part of the reactionary right's "weaponisation of free speech" (Cammaerts 734).

Comedy clubs, and, by extensions, comedians themselves, are now narrativized by the right as bastions of libertarian freedom, and the right must rally to defend them. Bufkin promotes the image of a villainous left-wing culture that is a threat to personal freedom, rather than social movements that are aiming to create a more just world and, in the case of #metoo, a world free from sexual violence. Cammaerts writes that the anti-woke right works to abnormalize leftism and normalize fascism through "the instigation of moral panics, fear and the production of crisis" (737). "Insufferable wokeness" and its censorship practices, as described by Bufkin, is a crisis produced by right-wing rhetoric. Her language is part of a concerted right-wing effort to reframe #metoo as part of a broader hysterical leftist threat and to subsume the actual goals and demands of #metoo within the vague threats of wokeness and cancel culture. In January 2019, she writes of C.K.'s leaked set: "C.K. proved he has zero intention of editing himself to please an outrage mob that demands all public people follow their groupthink and fit into their non-triggering "safe spaces."" The number of right-wing buzzwords in this sentence is staggering on its own without the added consideration that C.K., the person, is not actually using this language. But all this is

bigger than C.K.'s hateful comedy. The spectre of Louis C.K.—transgressive hero, cancelled unjustly—is now a symbol in the culture war.

Across these responses, there is a consensus amongst the writers that *something* has changed in the post-#metoo cultural landscape. The critics disagree over whether it was Louis who changed or the world around him. Within this disagreement there is also a further conflict over what C.K.'s work actually was before #metoo. Was he always an offensive transgressor? Or did that transgression serve some social good? In this sense, #metoo becomes a lens through which past, present, and future are publicly considered. The *New York Times* exposé of C.K. is an inflection point for not just his status in the industry but his previous and forthcoming work. In the end, Matt Zoller Seitz was wrong, and C.K. was not done. But he would have to position himself differently in order to rebuild a career. In chapter two, I write that C.K.'s persona pre-#metoo was a fraught combination of progressivism and transgression, which hinged on what Melanie Piper's calls his "public persona as the self-examining and self-critical observer" ("Louie, Louis" 23). In abandoning this hinge—the self-examination and self-criticism—C.K. forgoes the progressivism and leans into the transgression, though writers like Bufkin and Zinoman call this a mere change of context. It's hard to know, had C.K. chosen progressivism instead, whether the reception of his return would have been different. As it is, his comeback and the articles published alongside it reveal a lack of space for C.K. in mainstream media. Though some mainstream outlets like *The Times* and the *Guardian* reviewed his new work, *Sincerely, Louis C.K.* has just five reviews on Rotten Tomatoes from professional critics, while his 2017 special had 21 reviews.

These differences are not just quantitative. There is a general consensus, right-wing media aside, that his actions cannot be entirely ignored in considering his new work. Giorgis (*Atlantic*) and Wright (*Vulture*) refuse outright to engage with his artistry, demonstrating a feminist mode of analysis that prioritizes real world harm over artistic genius. Garber (*Atlantic*) and Romano (*Vox*), in considering C.K.'s comedy, take a more contextualized approach that understands art as inseparable from the material conditions which produce it. They consider C.K.'s return a failure because of his inability to grapple with the severity of his actions, which becomes both a moral and comedic flaw. The comedian as truth-teller and social critic, here, is more valuable than the comedian as transgressor. The confessions of the autobiographical self must serve some kind of collective enlightenment, not just a personal catharsis. While Zinoman (*Times*) and Logan (*Guardian*) take a more classic approach to reviewing C.K., valuing the cleverness of his jokes and (sometimes confusingly) separating out his off-stage harm from his comedic persona, Zinoman at least acknowledges he cannot do so objectively. Though they suggest that C.K. was merely a transgressor all along, they seem to understand that there is a new set of expectations—growth, atonement, restitution—which the formerly authentic comedian is failing to meet.

At the same time, there is a recurring sentiment amongst these writers—especially the women—that C.K.'s comeback is evidence of #metoo's failure. Wright's scepticism is on display in her headline: "We Always Knew A Louis C.K. Comeback Would Be Easy." Garber refers to the status quo reassembling, while *Bitch*'s Watanabe and de Jesus include C.K. in a list of men who are doing "just fine." There is a pervasive sense of disappointment in these pieces. For these women, C.K. is a symbol of the strength of patriarchy and its ability to reassert itself in record time. In some senses, this cynicism is apt. C.K. has indeed been creeping back into the mainstream. Recent articles about him are less likely to mention the details of his misconduct,

less likely to emphasize #metoo as a movement and the systems that enabled C.K. to abuse his power, and less likely to centre the voices of the women he hurt, all of which Wright's *Vulture* piece does so clearly. This nebulous mainstream is also less essential for C.K. to maintain a career. In the words of outsider comedian Doug Stanhope, "Once you have direct access to your fan base you can fucking play anywhere" (Symons 110). At the same time, though, C.K. is far from the same kind of cultural and economic capital he once had. His 2022 film *Fourth of July* was self-financed and opened to terrible reception. His Grammy wins might seem to be a sign that Hollywood is welcoming him back, but Grammys are voted on by members of the Recording Arts Academy and members vote in their area of expertise (McKinney). C.K. was voted for by his peers, not the public.

While feminist writers have adopted C.K. as a symbol of #metoo's failure, and mainstream critics like Zinoman avoid taking hard stances on a polarized culture, the right lionizes C.K. as a hero because of his failure to listen and atone. Whether or not Louis himself has adopted more reactionary views and jokes in order to court a new audience—which, for my part, I believe he has—what matters is that he has been subsumed into the right-wing lexicon of anti-woke warriors, something that would not or could not have happened in a pre-#metoo context. C.K. can only be taken up by the right precisely because mainstream, feminist, and leftist critics have so thoroughly examined his post-#metoo moral and artistic failings. The backlash to C.K.'s 2022 Grammy win—and the fact that this backlash was covered in a huge outlet like *The Times*—shows that C.K.'s popular status remains very much up for debate. "For those women, seeing their stories reappropriated by the man who assaulted them, and then stamped with approval by the Recording Academy, no less, must be the ultimate confirmation that nothing really changes," writes Romano in *Vox* of C.K.'s Grammy win. But in publishing this article, she is part of an ongoing effort towards change. The discourses around C.K.'s comeback are not evidence that "nothing really changes," but that cultural change generally and the aims of #metoo specifically must be constantly re-articulated. The status quo may reassemble, but the terms of this new formation will continue to be contested, until they aren't.

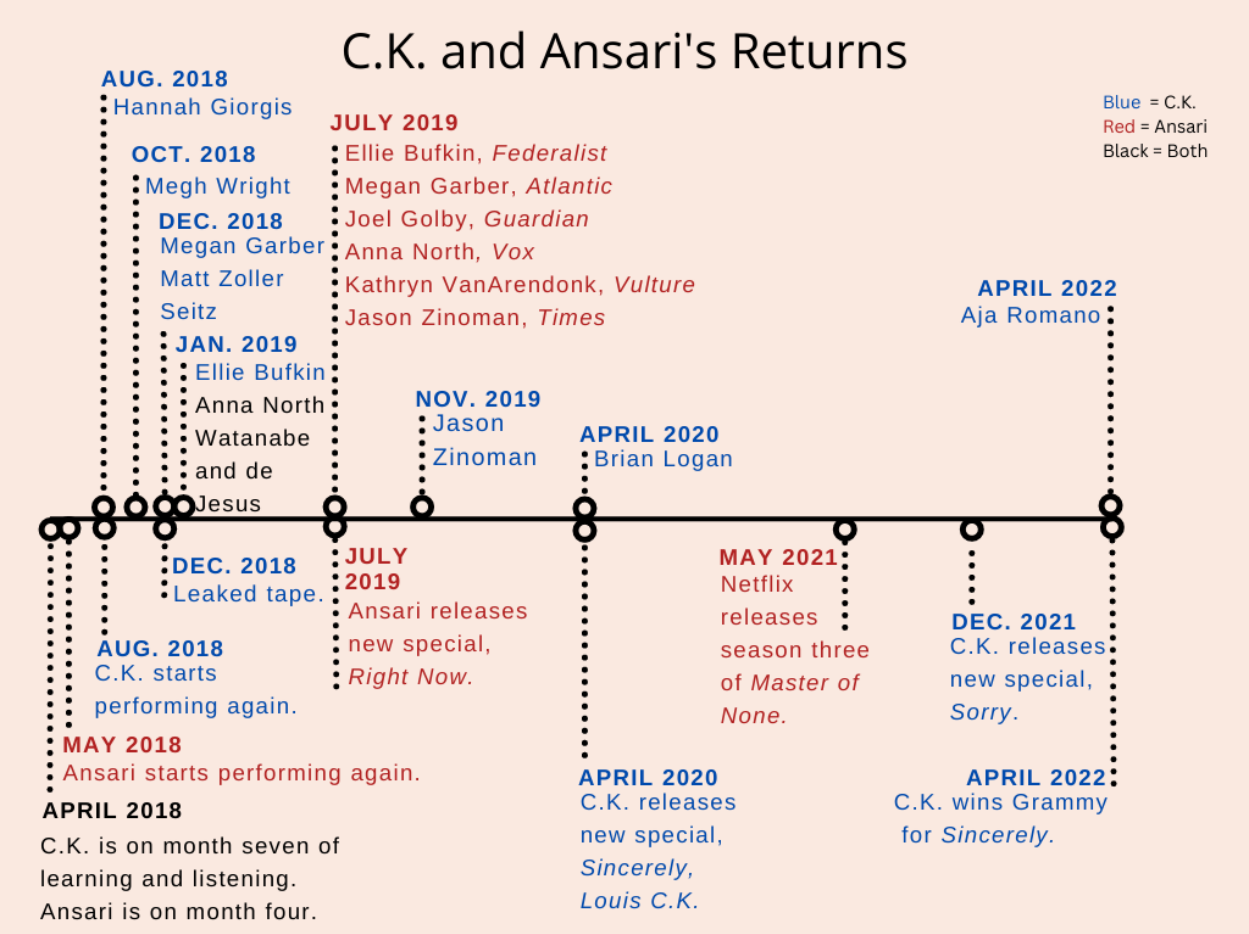

Figure 4.2: A timeline of both comebacks

Ansari's comeback is more straightforward than C.K.'s, and with regard to the critical response, more successful. The *Babe* article was published in January 2018; the comedian started performing again that August, before expanding into a bigger tour in January 2019. Netflix released his next special, *Right Now*, in July 2019. In 2021, Netflix also released a new season of *Master of None*, though this time the show centred on Lena Waithe's character Denise, with Ansari directing and playing a supporting character. It's difficult to even call this a comeback as Ansari was out of the public eye for such a short amount of time. It feels more like a continuation or perhaps a next chapter in his career, one in which Ansari might opt for a less prominent role in prestige productions like *Master of None*, while maintaining his stand-up career. That Ansari would have an easier career path post-#metoo than C.K. makes sense, given C.K. harmed multiple women and his actions were more clearly identifiable as sexual violence. What's interesting about this new iteration of Ansari's career, though, is just how quickly his relevance to #metoo has disappeared. While C.K. is now a symbol of the movement for both its supporters and detractors, Ansari's public narrative has gone from #metoo flashpoint to that of a maturing

artist. I analyze the same publications here as those that wrote about C.K.—including several of the same writers—and ask the same questions of their reviews published about Ansari's special *Right Now*. With the exception of Anna North's January 2019 *Vox* article comparing Ansari to C.K., the following pieces were all published upon the release of *Right Now* in July 2019 and respond directly to the special. Where critics and writers contextualized C.K.'s comeback differently, nearly all of these critics approach Ansari as an artist first and foremost. These writers also consider how he handles his #metoo allegation, but they do so within the mode of analyzing Ansari's artistry. Through this mode of analysis, a narrative emerges that Ansari is worth considering as a serious artist because his new material demonstrates that, unlike C.K., he has grown as a person and an artist. In this sense, Ansari's comeback is smoother because he satisfies the new norms of authenticity expected from comedians post-#metoo.

At *The New York Times*, Jason Zinoman calls *Right Now* Ansari's "finest work," analyzing the special as an example of Ansari's newfound maturity. Zinoman refers to Ansari as one of the "most popular comics in America," highlighting Ansari's influence as a comedian as opposed to his status as a #metoo symbol. When the *Babe* article first came out, the opposite was true. Bari Weiss' article in *The Times* barely registered his work as a comedian, except insofar as it was relevant to his misconduct. Ansari opens *Right Now* with a monologue about how the *Babe* article affected him, during which he avoids apologizing for hurting Grace but acknowledges that the conversation Grace started was important. He mentions a friend who told him that Grace's story caused him to reflect on his own behaviour, and for Ansari, this means the whole ordeal was "a good thing." Zinoman says this is a marked improvement from when he saw Ansari on tour the previous December and Ansari failed to address the allegation. "I argued that avoiding his scandal was an artistic mistake," Zinoman writes, "particularly because his show criticized a culture of online outrage in a way that felt informed by his experiences." Zinoman thus distinguishes between the moral implications and artistic implications of Ansari's return while simultaneously acknowledging that the two are intertwined.

For Zinoman, Ansari's choice to include the monologue is emblematic of his growth as a person and comedian. Zinoman mentions that Ansari delivers the monologue in a serious whisper, a marked change from his loud and rambunctious pre-#metoo stage persona. The rest of Ansari's show following the monologue features material about the polarized cultural climate, including attempts to acknowledge failures of the past (for example, Ansari's professed love of R Kelly) as well as Ansari's assessments that some progressives have gone too far. Zinoman appreciates Ansari's opening monologue because he perceives it as strengthening the authenticity of the rest of his material. "[Ansari] weaves personal material into a critique of the culture that reveals a new, deeply felt passion," he writes. Zinoman again highlights how different this introspection is from Ansari's old persona, known for his catchphrase "treat yo self." "The Aziz of this new special sounds a lot different from that carefree up-and-comer," Zinoman writes. "He understands that his ability to talk his way out of things or to control how people see him is limited. And he wants us to know that he feels terrible and that he's changed," he continues. Zinoman's positive review suggests that he accepts and appreciates Ansari's message.

Comedy and TV critic Kathryn VanArendonk at *Vulture* agrees with Zinoman. She too assesses Ansari's artistry based on how he addresses his misconduct allegations. She is impressed by his apparent sincerity and even more impressed that he "doesn't use that sincere opening as way to get the story out of the way." VanArendonk, like Zinoman, finds the

monologue artistically valuable because of how it sets up the themes of Ansari's special. She argues that the special is an attempt to reckon with #metoo and ask important questions, such as, "what should we do about good art made by bad men?" In this sense, Ansari's ability to reflect on his misconduct proves his personal maturity and depth, which become the credentials that give Ansari the right to comment on significant cultural questions. VanArendonk similarly highlights Ansari's whispered tone and appreciates the emphasis his show places on growth. She quotes Ansari's assertion that it's ok to have past mistakes—like supporting R Kelly—because "you're *supposed* to change." VanArendonk singles out other artistic choices that emphasize Ansari's sincerity and legitimacy, such as directorial decisions by auteur Spike Jonze. "[The special is] sparse and close and intimate and bare," she writes.

As Eric Shouse points out, stand-up comedy lends itself to intimacy because of its minimal aesthetics, elements which "combine to give stand-up a unique aura of truthfulness" (34). In emphasizing this minimalism, Ansari is positioning himself to be received by writers like VanArendonk as particularly truthful and authentic. Ansari's decision to include "moments of vulnerability that he has no interest in rendering hilarious," per VanArendonk, proves that he understands sexual misconduct isn't funny and that he has taken his own failures seriously. While VanArendonk acknowledges that Ansari's analysis of contemporary culture is contradictory—we must change, but not *too* much, he seems to say—these contradictions are for her indicative of artistic complexity. They are intentional, "and Ansari has no interest in trying to resolve them," she writes. VanArendonk thus invokes the function of the comedian as social critic and truth-teller as well as validating Ansari's use of the confessional to do so. Ansari, she writes, is trying to "distance himself from the comedian he used to be," and in performing growth and sincerity, he achieves artistry. This coverage is markedly different from *Vulture*'s refusal to engage with C.K.'s new specials. Had C.K. performed sincerity so well, would he have been re-considered?

Ellie Bufkin at *The Federalist*, too, is impressed by Ansari's growth. Her review highlights similar artistic elements and mentions Ansari's choice to don a Metallica t-shirt and jeans, rather than a suit, as evidence that he has been humbled. *Right Now*, she writes, demonstrates a "previously unseen side of maturity and humility" in Ansari, which suits him well. For Bufkin, Ansari has not grown because he had to reckon with causing harm, but because he has undergone a harrowing experience. Where Zinoman mentions Ansari's misbehaviour and VanArendonk is grateful that Ansari hopes to be a better person, Bufkin positions him as an unequivocal victim, writing that "everything he had worked for in his entire young life nearly vanished in an instant." Appreciating Ansari's maturity, then, is not even a clear acknowledgment that he had done something wrong in the first place.

Bufkin also embraces the material in Ansari's set that VanArendonk and Zinoman dance around: his position that progressivism has gone too far. "Ansari's new edge took immediate whacks at the overly woke public mentality he constantly experiences," Bufkin writes, linking his anti-wokeness to his #metoo call out. VanArendonk and Zinoman are less clear about what Ansari is doing when he makes fun of online hysteria and claims that progressives are out of control. Zinoman writes that while Ansari's 2018 tour "broke the world down into woke people, Trump people and everyone else," he is now wisely narrowing his analysis "to the warfare between performative progressives and their antagonists bellowing about the PC police." Zinoman calls the special Ansari's "finest, boldest and probably most polarizing work," in language reminiscent of his prediction that C.K.'s *Sincerely* would inspire divisive reactions.

Zinoman identifies that both C.K. and Ansari are engaging in provocative, relatively reactionary material, but in both cases is careful to situate himself as an objective listener outside of the polarized audience. He does however note that Ansari's analysis of the changing culture fails to mention #metoo, "the real revolutionary shift that led to not just more scrutiny of [R] Kelly but of Ansari as well." VanArendonk, meanwhile, argues that Ansari's criticism of "performative progressives" is part of a broader analysis of the "conundrums that follow from a culture that has, somewhat abruptly, shifted into a different frame of expectations about sexual misconduct and 'wokeness'." She acknowledges that in making fun of this culture of wokeness, Ansari "could easily come off as defensive" but her assessment is that the special is "not a defensive screed."

Both Zinoman and VanArendonk display a kind of uncertainty over what to do with Ansari's anti-woke material, assessing it as both somewhat insightful and potentially self-serving. They avoid pointing out that in making fun of the culture of wokeness, Ansari uses *Right Now* to position himself as an authority on what is and isn't reasonable and what is and isn't harmful. He also engages in a moderate version of reactionary rhetoric, borrowing the most palatable right-wing talking points to fortify his brand as a cultural commentator. He is commenting on the times, rather than a flashpoint for them. As Sienkiewicz and Marx detail in *That's Not Funny*, such rhetoric circulates within the same conservative mediasphere as full-blown Nazism and vicious misogyny. Ansari's anti-PC routine calls to mind another Gavin McInnes headline: "Taking Back Our Country From the PC Police" (Sienkiewicz and Marx 382). Cammaerts writes that right-wing media is "actively propagating the culture war discourse with a view of undermining and reneging social justice struggles" (741). Ansari, by situating himself within a supposed rational middle ground between "performative progressives" and the "PC police" performs a normalizing function that suggests an equivalency between hate speech on the right and the social justice activism of the left. While there are considered critiques to be made of online activism and the corporate cooptation of leftist language, setting up a two-sided narrative of political polarization serves the right-wing goal of abnormalizing social justice work (Cammaerts 737). Polarization is a reality, but it is also a right-wing narrative that *becomes* reality through reactionary fearmongering and "the instigation of moral panics" (Cammaerts 733). Taken together, there is an emerging sense in these reviews that "wokeness" is a real phenomenon and comedy is a tool for countering or curtailing it.

Other critics perceive *Right Now* not as evidence of Ansari's growth, but a performance of that growth. Writer Joel Golby at *The Guardian* looks for Ansari's previous persona, the carefree commentator. He claims that *Right Now* shows "a glimmer of the old Ansari" while also allowing that "Aziz 2.0 still has plenty left to say." Golby opens his article with an assessment of Ansari's apology, comparing it favourably to C.K.'s: "it's not perfect—and it's not a whole apology—but it does at least acknowledge the elephant in the room, without shooting it to death with a high-calibre rifle." Golby deals with this apology as a separate matter from the rest of Ansari's art, addressing it at the start so he can go on to critique the rest of the show. While he agrees this is a new Aziz, he places much more emphasis than VanArendonk and Zinoman on the carefully crafted aesthetics of this growth. "I simply hate every production decision made around this standup special," he writes, criticizing Jonze's handheld camera and liberal use of close-ups. He highlights Ansari's dressed-down outfit, too, and summarizes that the aesthetic here is deliberately "lo-fi," depicting a "humbled aesthetic for a humbled man." Golby repeatedly states that he finds this aesthetic irritating and "annoying," perhaps because the

choices are so obviously crafted to create a sense of authenticity. In their obviousness, these choices risk accomplishing the opposite of what they set out to do. Rather than collapsing the gap between person and persona, the lo-fi aesthetics can serve to accentuate it, emphasizing that authenticity is itself an aesthetic choice. Where VanArendonk and Zinoman largely perceive these choices as emerging from some interior shift in Ansari, Golby identifies the opposite: that these exterior signs signify that an interior change has definitely, absolutely taken place.

Megan Garber at *The Atlantic* is more explicit in her criticism of Ansari's performed authenticity and the contradictions it entails. Garber suggests *Right Now* is important not just because of Ansari's artistry but because of his significance to #metoo. She writes that the *Babe* article became a "#metoo Rorschach test," reflecting individual opinions on whether or not #metoo should extend to include the grey areas of sexual violence and violence outside of the workplace. "While other #MeToo stories implicated men of obvious monstrosity, the menace of Grace's was its revealing banality," Garber explains. *Right Now* matters not just in terms of Ansari's comedic importance or even as a test of his moral growth, then, but because it can still tell us about the #metoo movement more generally. She writes that the *Babe* article "quickly transformed into an allegory: about consent and its gray areas, about sexual scripts that play out without dialogues," and that Ansari's lack of public discussion of the article helped the "story to trail off, its controversies punctuated with unsatisfying ellipses." In positioning the special this way, Garber is also directly intervening in a fading dialogue about cultural norms around sex and sexuality and trying to keep this conversation alive. While other critics emphasize the sincerity in Ansari's monologue about his misconduct allegations, Garber highlights the moment right after the monologue, when his tone shifts to one of relief. "What else should we talk about?" Ansari asks, and Garber writes that he seems to be saying "the awkward part is over. We're moving on." Like VanArendonk, Garber notes Ansari's emphasis on change and growth, but she also points out that Ansari frequently undercuts this emphasis on change throughout his special. "We're all shitty people!" Ansari exclaims at one point. The special is thus simultaneously earnest and cynical, Garber assesses. "It is rare to see the dynamics of progress and backlash on such flagrant display. Are we shitty, or are we fixable?" she asks.

While VanArendonk claims that these contradictions are the evidence of complex art, for Garber they are evidence of a kind of regression in his comedy. She describes Ansari's style as a "comedy of empathy" as well as a "comedy of morality," which had previously exhibited an optimistic perspective. Historically, she writes, his art has operated under the premise that "*we*…can always be better tomorrow than we are today." *Right Now* both re-asserts and undermines this premise, Garber argues. At one point, Ansari jokes about his misconduct, claiming he can't afford to get in more trouble because "I've had a tricky year as it is," a joke that bumps against his "carefully crafted, strategically sensitive monologue." Garber thus finds Ansari's authenticity to be both constructed and at least somewhat insincere. This insincerity, while sometimes good for laughs, disrupts the work that Ansari's "comedy of morality" claims to be doing. *Right Now*, Garber writes, is a work of "winkily manufactured authenticity." She identifies this insincerity in his cultural analysis, too, writing that he pokes fun at "call-out culture" while simultaneously trying to call out his own past transgressions and position himself for redemption. In this sense, Ansari's authentic, confessional mode clashes with his transgressive and, arguably, anti-woke comedy. The modes sit uncomfortably together in his performance, as Ansari situates himself outside of the culture of hysterical progressives while still wanting to be thought of as authentic, empathetic, and progressive himself. What for

VanArendonk is artistic complexity, a success of the comedian as social critic, for Garber is a failure of the confessional mode and the comedian as truth-teller or progressive optimist. At the end of *Right Now*, Ansari tells his audience that during the aftermath of the *Babe* article, he felt like he had died. Death, Garber writes, is a common metaphor used by the men of #metoo, including Louis C.K. Far from deceased, Ansari is on the contrary "a celebrity still, taking part in a comeback tour that at this point has the feel of ritual and inevitability—with a personal cameraman, an eager audience, and a voice that is loud even when it whispers." Ansari's manufactured authenticity is not just artistically flawed, then, but a symbol of powerful men reasserting themselves in authoritative positions, while at the same time presenting themselves as smaller, humbled, sincerely changed.

Vox's Anna North, who also covered the original *Babe* story, has a similar approach to Garber. Unlike most other publications, North wrote about Ansari before *Right Now*, in a January 2019 article reflecting on the similarities between Ansari and C.K.'s returns to the stage ("Opportunity for Redemption"). In this article, North bases her assessment of Ansari's return off of a *New Yorker* report on his new material, rather than the release of a new special. Based on the *New Yorker* report, she argues that Ansari seems to be following a similar trajectory of regression as C.K. "In a fall 2018 appearance," she writes, "he made fun of online debates about cultural appropriation and complained that nowadays, 'everyone weighs in on everything." Like Garber, North sees this material as contradicting Ansari's earlier, more pointedly progressive and optimistic cultural analysis. She suggests that in adopting a more reactionary cultural lens, both C.K. and Ansari may be "playing to those who never thought they did anything wrong." For North, this new material is also evidence that Ansari, the person, has not reflected on his actions or taken his alleged misconduct seriously. North argues that this is both an artistic loss and a loss for #metoo as a movement. Audiences are, North writes, "missing out on the art C.K. and Ansari might have created if they'd been willing to really face their accusations." At the same time, "it's hard to hold out much hope…when two men who seemed like they, of all people, might be able to look deeply at their own behaviour have instead chosen to pander to those who would excuse them." North, like Garber, positions Ansari as a symbol of #metoo and evaluates his comedy based on its potential for social or moral good. She is also the only writer here to actually describe the details of the *Babe* article and Grace's allegations against Ansari. In this way, while evaluating Ansari's art, North attempts to keep the focus on Ansari's actions and their real-world implications. When *Right Now* was released, North published a follow-up piece at *Vox* expressing her appreciation of Ansari's opening monologue, but wondering what #metoo as a movement might continue to look like if the rhetorical focus wasn't entirely on men, their feelings and their redemptions or lack thereof ("Ansari Has Addressed").

North's emphasis on Grace and her attempt to highlight the conversations started by #metoo is the closest mainstream perspective to the only article *Bitch Media* published on Ansari and C.K. post-#metoo: their January 2019 list of men whose careers had not suffered from sexual violence allegations. Marina Watanabe and Jessica de Jesus at *Bitch* are the only writers to assert that Ansari's return should not be happening and the only writers to outright refuse to engage with his art. They focus on the *Babe* article, writing that it "stood as a testament to how far men will go to ignore the discomfort of women and proved that even the most vocal supporters of women's bodily autonomy are willing to disregard consent." Watanabe and de Jesus display an explicitly feminist understanding of sexual violence and consent in their article. "Since Grace's experience was in the "gray area" of consent, the subsequent cultural conversation was messy

and largely unsympathetic," they write. They point out that Ansari and C.K.'s actions were taken less seriously because they weren't "easily identifiable villains," drawing on knowledge of the rape myths that violence must be extreme and abusers must be monstrous others (O'Hara). "Framing sexual assault in this way assumes that sexual coercion is binary rather than a spectrum of experiences," they write, using the same language as Hindes and Fileborn in their study of Australian reporting on #metoo (646). In order to push back on this framing, Watanabe and de Jesus highlight "the lack of accountability that most men in Hollywood face," contextualizing the continued career success of C.K. and Ansari. Watanabe and de Jesus thus exclusively situate Ansari's return within the context of #metoo and seek to reaffirm the movement as an attempt to change cultural norms, while also criticizing the ways in which those norms persist in a post-#metoo landscape.

The activist position of Watanabe and de Jesus throws into relief just how welcoming the rest of *Right Now*'s critical reception has been. Where C.K.'s comeback is marked by a clear division amongst critics over how to receive him or whether he is worth receiving, each of these outlets aside from *Bitch* treats Ansari as a serious artist worth critical consideration. They disagree over the content of his artistry, with VanArendonk (*Vulture*), Zinoman (*Times*) and Bufkin (*Federalist*) perceiving Ansari's performance of authenticity as genuine, while Golby (*Guardian*), Garber (*Atlantic*) and North (*Vox*) are more sceptical, but they accept the basic premise of what Garber describes as a "comeback tour that has the feel of ritual and inevitability." If C.K.'s Rotten Tomatoes profile took a #metoo downturn, Ansari's has only risen. His previous special, 2015's *Live at Madison Square Garden*, has only eight Rotten Tomatoes critics' reviews, while *Right Now* has 32.[10]

It's interesting just how different this reception is from that of the *Babe* story, which was largely commented upon by opinion writers, not critics, and in which Ansari's artistry was second to his #metoo symbolic status. While Garber and North highlight this symbolic status, Golby, VanArendonk and Zinoman largely ignore it, addressing Ansari's #metoo misconduct and comeback in relation to his individual morality and artistry. If the *Babe* article was part of a shift in #metoo towards addressing the banality of sexual violence and the grey areas of sexual experience (Fileborn and Phillips 105), the lack of division over Ansari's return indicates the limitations of just how far the definition of sexual violence could be expanded. Or perhaps it indicates the success of a vicious backlash, aided by Bari Weiss (*Times*), Caitlin Flanagan (*Atlantic*) and their descriptions of Grace's story as "the worst thing to happen to #metoo" and "revenge porn," respectively. As with C.K., there is a sense that this was always going to be the case. But my analysis in chapter three elucidates a conversation that was very much in full swing, with feminist writers like North and Anna Silman (*The Cut*) publicly contesting the patriarchal rhetoric of writers like Flanagan and Bari Weiss.

Regardless of how successful Ansari's comeback has been, it was never inevitable. Here, it is possible to temporally and conceptually locate what Phillips and Chagnon describe as the backwards bend of #metoo's "discursive arc" (410). In January 2018, the discursive framework for sexual violence opened up and the possibilities for "continuum thinking" flooded social media feeds (Boyle 65). Somewhere between January 2018 and July 2019, this framework reconstituted itself, shaped by the language of feminism gone too far and men under attack, and

[10] His previous special also premiered before *Master of None*'s first season, which significantly rasied his profile.

the image of Ansari as a man whose career was surely ruined. In their article "From 'Me Too' to Too Far?" Fileborn and Phillips provide a scholarly argument for why #metoo had not, in fact, gone far enough. Rather, they argue, Ansari's case was important in that it helped undermine dominant conceptualizations of sex and violence as "dualistic" (104). "As some of the commentary surrounding the Ansari incident illustrates," they write, "attempting to construct very firm boundaries around what sexual violence 'is' suggests that sexual violence can be easily delineated from non-violence" (103). The public debate around a case like Ansari's, which involved "pressured sex" (as opposed to rape allegations) (104) indicates "a moment in which dominant understandings of sexual violence were contested, the boundaries of inclusion shifting, perhaps ever so slightly," they write (105).

Fileborn and Phillips don't provide evidence that these boundaries have actually shifted; they make this claim amidst a theoretical argument, rather than a detailed discourse analysis. In these two chapters, I have attempted to uncover whether such boundaries around sexual violence did indeed shift. The answer is yes and no. Ansari's case shifted the "boundaries of inclusion" by prompting a heated public debate about those boundaries, wherein writers like North and Silman made the case for understanding grey area experiences as products of patriarchal educational systems and cultural norms. The reception of *Right Now*, and Ansari's successful repositioning of himself as an artist and not a #metoo symbol indicates that the grey areas of sexual violence are no longer ripe for heated cultural debate. In this way, the public response to Ansari's case proves Fileborn and Phillips' assertion that during #metoo, "our ways of understanding sexual violence" have been "simultaneously expanding and contracting" (106).

Sarah Jaffe describes the backlash to #metoo as an attempt to "narrow its parameters" (81). But, she insists, "the wide scope is the point" (81). In including grey areas within its purview, #metoo is a more radical and resistant popular feminist movement, one whose aims are a complete overhaul of the patriarchal system that enables routine gendered violence. "It is a rejection of a core piece of patriarchal power," Jaffe writes, "and the beginnings of imagining what a society without that power looks like" (82). One of the strategies of the backlash, Jaffe elaborates, is to "persist in using legal definitions" (83) as opposed to approaching #metoo the way Silman and North do—as a discussion about norms and systems. Ansari's allegations, in falling outside the legal definitions of violence, eventually fall out of the conversation about what #metoo was, is, and should be. If popular feminism and popular misogyny live "side by side as warring, constantly moving contexts in an economy of visibility" (Banet-Weiser 13), *Right Now*'s release and reception mark a kind of retreat in visibility for popular feminism, or at least a battle it is no longer vociferously fighting.

But if Ansari's return has been largely uncontested, the context in which Ansari is returning does not go unacknowledged. Every mainstream critic here pays heed to Ansari's apology, remarking on its apparent sincerity or lack thereof. Only Golby seems to fully consider this apology separately from Ansari's art itself. For the rest, Ansari's art and his morality are intertwined. His jokes must be considered in relation to both his offstage self and the internal character of that self, whether onstage or off. Ansari, then, in performing growth and authenticity, has successfully reconstructed his autobiographical self (Gilbert 51). But this autobiographical self is not evaluated separately from real-world actions; indeed, as Gilbert initially defines it, this self is a "multifaceted, protean entity that encompasses both onstage and offstage personae," all of which Ansari must account for in his art (Gilbert 51). Zinoman is explicit that earlier versions of Ansari's new material were worse because they failed to mention

the allegation ("Aziz Ansari"). North, writing before *Right Now*'s release, argues that Ansari's return is akin to C.K.'s in its reactionary and regressive approach ("Opportunity for Redemption"). After Ansari's inclusion of the serious monologue, though, Golby favourably compares him to C.K. for his ability to reflect seriously on his actions.

What emerges in both C.K. and Ansari's returns is a critical criterion wherein art and morality are intertwined and authenticity is expected to serve a kind of moral or social good. For A.J. Romano at *Vox*, C.K.'s confessional comedy is no longer successful, though it may indeed be reflective of his interiority, because it fails to aim for a broader good. For Zinoman at *The Times* and VanArendonk at *Vulture*, Ansari's performance of sincerity, seriousness, and maturity makes him a better person and by extension makes his cultural commentary more effective. At the same time, Garber at *The Atlantic* questions whether this performance is authentic *enough*, particularly because Ansari continuously undermines it with transgressive and cynical interjections. If authenticity in comedy has traditionally been a "floating signifier that is wielded by those with power" (Brown 43), in the post-#metoo context, it seems to signify some kind of attempt to better oneself. This is not necessarily a feminist reconstitution of the autobiographical self or an insistence on Willett and Willett's "humour from below," (2) but it does indicate a critical consensus that the artist cannot be extradited from their context. These reviews value Ansari based on several different roles he performs as comic: truth-teller, social critic, progressive optimist, vulnerable confessor. His ability to grow, though, is what gives him the legitimacy to perform these other functions.

Where C.K. ruptured his persona and left himself with little benefit of the doubt, Ansari's *Right Now* works to suture that persona back together via "Aziz 2.0," who will earn back his comedic license (Golby). He does this through a contradictory performance of growth and regression, cynicism and earnestness, and optimist progressivism and patronizing anti-wokeism. Ansari's attempt to position himself as an objective observer outside of these tensions belies the fact that his misconduct allegations served as a flashpoint in a social movement defined by the warring contexts of popular feminism and popular misogyny (Banet-Weiser 13). Meanwhile, his post-#metoo career has been adopted and championed by a right-wing mediasphere that uses a more extreme version of his rhetoric to mobilize #metoo as an example of the dangers of feminism and wokeness. His embrace of maturity suggests that the synthesis of these tensions on display in his work ought to be personal growth, rather than social and cultural upheaval, individualizing a social movement that spread by turning individual experience into collective outpouring. Furthermore, his impulse to undercut that maturity—by lamenting the difficulties of change and the unruliness of PC culture—suggests that perhaps no synthesis is needed. *Right Now* as a cultural artefact reveals the ways in which #metoo's radicalism has been curbed (or perhaps rerouted) by an anti-progressive popular misogynist backlash. As a work of truth-telling, it implies that maybe #metoo *was* just asking for too much, all along.

Conclusion: After Popular Feminism

The new HBO Max show, *Velma*, has a curious joke in its second episode. The show is a *Scooby Doo* spinoff told from the perspective of Velma, the nerdiest member of the original Scooby Doo gang. In this version, Velma, voiced by Mindy Kaling, is a bisexual South Asian teenage outsider who solves mysteries in her spare time. During the second episode, while fighting with Daphne, Velma tells her former best friend, "I spit truth without a filter, like every comedian before hashtag metoo." It's hard to know how the joke is meant to land. Is it satirizing right-wing humour by putting a Ben Shapiro line in Velma's mouth to make her seem full of herself? Is it genuinely intended as a snappy one-liner? The line circulated on Twitter after the episode aired, generating Tweets that were both critical of the joke and confused by it. "Who is Velma FOR?" asked one Tweet. "It's a bunch of cringey reactionary jokes about MeToo but its [sic] advertised as progressive. No one is interested in that combo."[11] The mysterious case of *Velma*'s target audience could perhaps only be solved by Scooby Doo himself. What the joke indicates, though, is that in the five years since the *Times* first published its C.K. investigation, comedy and #metoo have become discursively linked. What may seem like two distinct spheres of sociocultural activity—a feminist movement with earnest social goals and a segment of the entertainment industry known for irreverence—are woven together in the public imagination.

In the previous chapters, I have traced the emergence of this discursive linkage, which really erupts with the *Babe* article about Ansari in January 2018 and then expands and evolves to encompass both C.K. and Ansari's comebacks, though Ansari's less so, ironically. The public discourse around these cases has positioned #metoo as a threat to comedians (Flanagan at *The Atlantic* and Weiss at *The Times*). In turn, writers like Anna North at *Vox* have argued for comedy's potential use as a social tool in responding to #metoo. For North, when C.K. and, initially, Ansari, refused to address their #metoo allegations via comedy, it was both an artistic and moral failure. C.K.'s return to the comedy stage and the hateful material he brought with him became a symbol of #metoo's failure (Garber). At the same time, right-wing media outlets have hailed comedians and comedy as a defense mechanism against the danger of "woke" social movements like #metoo (Bufkin), and both C.K. and Ansari have borrowed from this anti-progressivist rhetoric to win crowds back onto their side.

C.K. and Ansari have had different receptions to their returns; Ansari has been largely welcomed back into the mainstream, while C.K.'s path has been slower. While he did eventually win his Grammys, he has relied on the support of comedy bookers, his colleagues, and his fans, instead of the critical apparatus or Hollywood companies. Ansari secured his path by performing growth and re-constructing his autobiographical self, while C.K. abandoned any pretentions towards a "collective wish for something higher" in his work and leaned into hateful material (Romano). What their returns share, though, is a common anti-progressivist rhetoric that overlaps with and arguably promotes reactionary right-wing conservatism. Kyle Smith at the conservative *The National Review* hails C.K. and Ansari as "anti-woke comedians" who are fighting the culture war on behalf of conservatives everywhere. "Some of the biggest names in comedy are saying much the same things conservative columnists say, only in joke form," Smith writes, quoting Ansari's joke about how exhausting "newly woke white people are." "The standing ovation Ansari gets at the beginning of his show," Smith continues, "and the hearty

[11] https://twitter.com/SailorHaumea/status/1614049487122472962.

reaction to his anti-woke new material, are heartening." That two comedians who built their careers on feminist, progressive personas could end up heartening a *National Review* writer shows just how much can change in five years. In the end, the story here becomes less about how #metoo impacted comedy as a form and industry and more about how #metoo and comedy are narrativized through each other.

Let's return to the original question, then: how did the public engage with the #metoo cases of Louis C.K. and Aziz Ansari and their respective returns to comedy? I have analyzed the media responses to these allegations and comebacks with a view to three general areas of discourse: the consumption and valuation of comedy, the definition of sexual violence, and meta-narratives about #metoo. With regard to the consumption of comedy, it would seem as though #metoo in general and these cases in particular did encourage a broad critical re-evaluation of the norm of separating art from artist. Marghitu describes this norm as "embedded in the cultural fields" (491). In comedy, it is accompanied by the protection provided by joke work, which gives comedians freedom to be transgressive without having these transgressions evaluated on ethical terms (Hennefeld 10). In their responses to the *Times* exposé of C.K., none of the critics included here felt comfortable advocating for the separation of art and artist. Some positioned this as a personal issue (Sims at *The Atlantic*, Dargis at *The Times*) while others were adamant that we should have no qualms about dispensing with the work of an abusive man like C.K (Zoller Seitz at *Vulture*). This critical re-evaluation carried forward into the assessments of C.K. and Ansari's returns. *Vulture* didn't even cover C.K.'s new specials, and the outlets that did felt the need to couch their assessments in subjective language (Zinoman at *The Times*). Others, like Megh Wright at *Vulture*, took the opportunity of C.K.'s return to look at the comedy industry structures that enable abuse of power, putting into practice a feminist mode of cultural analysis that one might have only expected from *Bitch Media*. In this sense, these #metoo cases seem to have encouraged some adoption of feminist principles—that art cannot be separated from the patriarchal contexts in which it is created—within more mainstream critical spaces.

The response to Ansari's return also indicates a more subtle and arguably more complex change within the norms for evaluating comedy. Where authenticity has long been a comedic norm, authenticity post-#metoo seems to require some attempt at self or social improvement. The critics evaluating Ansari's new work do so largely from the standpoint that his moral behaviour and his artistic value cannot be separated. His new special is made artistically stronger by the fact that he opens it with a long, serious monologue about his behaviour. C.K., meanwhile, fails to atone or evolve, and is now perceived as insincere (Romano). If Louis C.K. was the hero of confessional comedy, his #metoo misconduct served to put the confessional mode itself in jeopardy. Virtually every mainstream critic decried C.K.'s betrayal, in which C.K. used his confessional persona as a cover for his off-stage misconduct (Khoul, St. James, Zoller Seitz). In the post-#metoo landscape, there is no guarantee of the protected sphere of comedy. Comedians have to earn their authenticity not just by confessing dirty thoughts, but by aiming for something a little higher. While social criticism has long been one of comedy's many functions, this reformulation of the confessional mode prioritizes this function over transgression and punching down. These expectations may apply more strictly to C.K. and Ansari because their authentic personas were called into question in the first place, but given the way Romano praises Jerrod Carmichael's comedic honesty, it seems to extend beyond them too, as a critical criterion for a post-#metoo landscape.

At the same time that #metoo may have prompted a (sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit) critical re-evaluation of comedic norms and conventions, these cases also reveal that critics themselves are less and less essential to a comedian's success. Though C.K.'s return was greeted with a critical shrug, he has still maintained a successful comedy career by relying on direct distribution networks, his fellow comedians and comedy bookers—all of whom seem to have forgiven him—and his highly invested fanbase. C.K.'s story, then, is also a story about the changing paths available to entertainers under the cultural logics of digital media. Rather than relying on traditional means of legitimation, C.K. has continued to build following through a combination of old and new—comedy clubs and online distribution—while simultaneously tapping into the right-wing comedy complex to reach new audiences. His Grammy wins are less a pronouncement that he's back on TV than an assertion that doesn't really need a fancy production deal after all. If #metoo helped to undermine the separation of art from artist and comedy as a protected sphere, the misogynistic backlash, which discursively positioned #metoo as a threat to men in general and comedians in particular, served to fuel the thriving right-wing comedy complex, whose doors are always open to men like C.K.

The responses to these cases similarly show that #metoo did have a significant impact on dominant conceptions of sexual violence. The fact that the debate around the *Babe* article was so intense reveals Grace's story as a serious challenge to the norm that sexual violence is "bounded and binary" (Hindes and Fileborn 652). As Fileborn and Phillips write, "#MeToo provided a context in which, for at least some survivors," disclosures of grey area experiences, "were taken seriously, validated, and believed" (99). Silman in *The Cut* and North in *Vox* used their discursive power to advocate for the importance of taking grey areas seriously and for the Ansari story and #metoo as opportunities to reconsider the sexual norms promoted by popular culture and educational systems. Gray at *Bitch* and Agrawal at *HuffPost* considered the complexities of Ansari's position as an Indian-American actor while also rejecting cynical mobilizations of race as an excuse for his behaviour. At the same time as the definitions of sexual violence were opening up, the anti-feminist backlash was working hard to close them back down, and to re-narrativize #metoo as threatening and "dangerous" (Flanagan). The Ansari allegations served as a flashpoint for this simultaneous opening up and closing down, the radical possibilities of #metoo bumping up against the reactionary force of the backlash. This backlash was rooted in popular misogynist discourse—"the modern woman is a dishrag," Tracinski wrote, simultaneously complaining that women were both too feeble and too hysterical—which works to figure feminism as "a set of risks" (Banet-Weiser 14). The response to Grace's story bears out Fileborn and Phillips' description of the backlash as "often hyperbolic and gendered, invoking feminist overreach, hysteria, and irrationality" (101). Boyle describes the opening and closing of #metoo as such: "#MeToo has both exemplified continuum thinking in practice and, simultaneously, generated a backlash against the challenges this poses" (52). The backlash has worked hard to limit #metoo's scope to the most extreme examples of violence, reiterating patriarchal conceptualizations of violence as extraordinary, rather than quotidian. "Variations on the phrase "he's no Harvey Weinstein" permeate popular discussions of the reach of #MeToo," Boyle writes, "as though being investigated for rape and sexual assault in multiple jurisdictions is the benchmark against which men's behaviour should be judged" (60).

When Ansari and, especially, C.K. made their returns, there was a sense amongst progressive commentators that these efforts at limiting #metoo had been wholly successful. "The status quo is reassembling," wrote Garber of C.K.'s comeback. This may have been true in a

certain sense, but the status quo did not reassemble on exactly the same terms. For one thing, C.K. himself was far less welcome. While the warm reception of Ansari shows the limits of #metoo's radical challenge, in that the grey areas of sexual violence have all but faded from public discourse, the pushback on C.K.'s 2022 Grammy win indicates that #metoo's discursive impacts are still rippling outwards. The movement is no longer the social media tsunami that it was in November 2017, and its radical impulses have been tempered by focuses on extreme cases and individual abuses, as opposed to an overhaul of cultural norms. C.K.'s 2023 Grammy win, meanwhile, went relatively unnoticed. But tsunamis leave long-term consequences (or earthquakes, or flash floods, or whatever environmental metaphor you prefer). They reshape the environment on which they land. The status quo may reassemble, but the ground itself—the terms on which power is consolidated—has shifted. The collectivist project of #metoo promoted the idea that sexual violence is routine, complex, and systemic, ideas which continue to resonate with many women and survivors. In a post-#metoo landscape, sexual violence is a liability, if not yet a dealbreaker, in the entertainment industry.

If the potentially radical challenge of #metoo has lost its force, the backlash has succeeded in permeating popular culture with anti-feminist and anti-progressivist discourse. Phillips and Chagnon trace the origins of the backlash in "counter-culture nihilism" on message boards and forums (418) but today it exists in Netflix specials and *The Wall Street Journal.*[12] In the *New York Times*, Tressie McMillan Cottom writes that right-wing media is thriving, while left-wing media is in decline. "Americans don't want to share a living room with one another," she writes. "We prefer to live and be entertained in ideological encampments." She notes that Joe Rogan has no left-wing counterpart, Fox News beats MSNBC and CNN in ratings, and liberal late night hosts all seem to be resigning. "We are heading into a dangerous election cycle," McMillan Cottom writes, "with a contracting liberal media ecosystem and a conservative media machine optimized for outrage." What Sienkiewicz and Marx go to such pains to point out, though, is that the conservative machine doesn't just trade on outrage. It has become so successful by embracing humour—and especially anti-progressive, anti-woke humour—as a means of linking together conservative ideologies, from the more moderate to the extreme. To be sure, the comedy industry has always provided a space for hateful laughter, but the contemporary iteration of these jokes engages a specific right-wing strategy of abnormalizing leftism through anti-woke discourse, fearmongering about cancel culture, and the "weaponization of free speech" (Cammaerts 734).

Ansari and C.K.'s returns exemplify the success of this rhetorical strategy. C.K. has leaned directly into it, embracing offensiveness and relying on direct distribution methods and classic comedy clubs to develop his career. Ansari has embraced the mainstream version of anti-progressivism, one that claims to stake out space between "wokes" and the right but still regurgitates right-wing rhetoric. As Phillips and Chagnon write, "claims of moral panic and witch hunts—what David Altheide referred to as oppositional rhetoric—pair well with other popular discourses such as demonization of the "culture of victimhood" and "politics of fear"" (410). In outlets like *The Federalist*, as well as more mainstream publications like *The Times* and *The Atlantic*, perceptions of #metoo as a witch hunt position it as part of the broader progressivist "culture of victimhood" which threatens men and against which comedy must fortify itself (Tracinski, Weiss, Flanagan, Bufkin). Mainstream publications also display a

[12] Google "*Wall Street Journal* woke," if you're bored.

tendency to identify a polarized culture without analyzing it, describing it as something that exists elsewhere, not within the very reviews they are writing (Zinoman at *The Times*, Logan at *The Guardian*). The right-wing media and comedy ecosystems have effectively framed #metoo as a flashpoint in a broader culture war, creating a sense of polarization and a false moral equivalency between social justice activism and right-wing reactionary politics that critics like Zinoman accept as true. Comedians like Ansari can position themselves as truth-tellers about woke culture and progressive critics like VanArendonk at *Vulture* receive these commentaries as complex considerations of "conundrums that follow from a culture that has, somewhat abruptly, shifted into a different frame of expectations about sexual misconduct and 'wokeness'." There is a market, in other words, in getting on stage—or in front of a podcast mic—and proselytizing about wokeness.

All of this suggests that we are perhaps no longer in the era of popular feminism. Over the last five years, popular misogyny has re-asserted patriarchal dominance, while popular feminism has faced increasing criticism for its sartorial politics. In 2018, Banet-Weiser wrote that "it feels as if everywhere you turn, there is an expression of feminism—on a T-shirt, in a movie, in the lyrics of a pop song, in an inspirational Instagram post, in an awards ceremony speech" (1). In 2023, this is no longer true. The kids are not wearing "feminist" t-shirts. At the 2021 Met Gala, Cara DeLevigne's "Peg the Patriarchy" shirt felt out of touch, like a holdover from an era that had already passed. There has been a critical re-appraisal of popular feminism from the left, of which Banet-Weiser's *Empowered* is one example. Much of the progressive digital media landscape which lay the groundwork for popular feminism, meanwhile, has struggled with funding and venture capital acquisitions in the last five years. Publications like millennial feminist site *Jezebel* have suffered mass layoffs and staff exoduses; anti-racist sites like *Black Girl Dangerous* have gone quiet; *Bitch Media*, one of the most radical voices for young women and genderqueer people, shut down last year. *Vox*'s Constance Grady declared in 2022 that the #metoo backlash had arrived. "After five years of anticipation, it's now clear: The long-awaited and much-dreaded backlash to the Me Too movement is here." She made this declaration based on two things. First, Johnny Depp's successful defamation lawsuit against his ex-partner Amber Heard, who wrote an article about being a victim of abuse, without naming Depp as the abuser. Second, the overturning of Roe v Wade. If #metoo was a movement aimed at changing cultural norms, the misogynistic backlash has had both cultural and legal success. This follows Banet-Weiser's definition of popular misogyny as "not only expressed in an economy of visibility" but "reified into institutions and structures" (36).

The #metoo backlash didn't get here all on its own. It was incorporated into an already-on-the-rise right-wing mediasphere that successfully blended the rhetorical strategies of misogyny and anti-progressivism in order to achieve this "restoration of male privilege" both culturally and legally (Banet-Weiser 38). But the backlash also didn't just arrive; it has been built in from the start. Banet-Weiser describes the case studies in *Empowered* as "a lens through which we can see the active response and reactive call of popular feminism and popular misogyny operating" (6). Similarly, the discursive arc that I've traced in this thesis goes something like this: 1. #Metoo emerges as a moment of radical possibility and cultural critics try their best to reformulate their critical modes and adapt in real time. 2. Popular misogyny successfully re-narrativizes #metoo as a polarizing cultural clash, in a backlash led by writers at mainstream legacy publications. 3. The popular remains a space of contestation, where #metoo's most radical challenges have retreated but the movement is still a symbol of feminist efforts to

challenge patriarchy, and some writers—usually at new digital publications—are still trying to keep the conversations #metoo started alive.

"If you have any memory of the 2000s or 90s," tweeted @escargotpro_ on January 10, 2023, "it's just indisputably better we all got more 'woke.'"[13] A reply to the Tweet concurs: "It's nice that comedies don't use sexual assault as a joke these days." Another reply links the disappearance of assault jokes to the watershed moment of #metoo. So the conversation continues. "This does not end with one round," Banet-Weiser writes, "both feminism and misogyny are continually restructured through this dynamic" (37). #Metoo and its backlash, like feminism and misogyny more generally, exist in dialectical tension. If misogyny has re-consolidated, then a new kind of feminism, and a new challenge to sexual violence, will gather, picking up the residue from previous rounds, like sand into a storm. Cammaerts writes that anti-woke discourse works by "creating a false sense of crisis with a view of bedevilling social justice struggles" (740). But, of course, the most radical social movements *do* seek to create a crisis in the systems of oppression they aim to dismantle. #Metoo generated such a vicious backlash because it posed a real threat—not to free speech, but to patriarchal violence. When the right successfully villainizes this threat, feminists can either temper their arguments toward the right's terms of engagement or refuse our consent. At the end of *Empowered*, Banet-Weiser calls for a lasting feminist rage. Rage, much like laughter, is a galvanizing force. In the face of misogynistic vitriol that likens women to dish rags, or trolls who claim that men have it worse than women by every measure, or comedians who compare a loss of opportunity and income to death, perhaps the best thing to do is laugh.

[13] https://twitter.com/escargotpro_/status/1612805384372191235.

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