

CRITICAL LAUGHTER: THE STANDUP COMEDIAN'S CRITIQUE OF CULTURE AT HOME

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ABSTRACT

One of the main mandates of cultural anthropology is the study of assumptions within a given culture. This analysis is echoed by contemporary standup comedians, who perform ethnographic cultural critiques within their own cultures. Although both anthropologists and comedians practice participant observation, I will argue that the comedian's use of hyperbole and humour creates a safe space in which sensitive socio-political topics can be explored, and that the comedian presents a dynamic oral narrative that allows for interactions with current events and the audience. Drawing from contemporary ethnographic and comedic works I will analyze both representational forms, suggesting ways in which anthropologists can look to comedians for new ways of dealing with issues of representation, subjectivity, and accessibility.

... We want to evoke a combined sense of familiarity and strangeness in US-university educated readers by selecting subjects that share something of a frame of reference and experience with them, but then differ in often radical and startling ways from them. - Marcus and Fischer (1993:3).

I think it's the duty of the comedian to find out where the line is drawn and cross it deliberately. - George Carlin (1974).

It has become clear throughout the history of anthropology that objectivity is impossible, and that within the crisis of representation rests an essential need for reflexivity on the part of the ethnographer. Focusing on anthropology-at-home as social commentary and a critique of the researcher's own surroundings, I will explore the idea of the stand-up comedian-as-ethnographer and how the deployment of hyperbole, reflexivity, and the de- and re-mystification of normative aspects of culture make comedians excellent native critics. Humour facilitates the comedian's dealings with thematic elements in ways that are unavailable to anthropologists; taboo topics and sensitive socio-political themes can be explored within the safe spaces created by the comedic context. The standup comedian's portrayal of culture is delivered verbally, creating an interesting alternative to the standard textual, and recently implemented filmic forms of representing the Other. As contemporary anthropology continues to struggle with the static quality of textual ethnographic data, the comedian presents a dynamic oral narrative that allows the audience to interact with current events. Drawing from ethnographic and comedic works I will analyze both forms of representation. I will argue that the comedian can be seen as both a native anthropologist and an ethnographic subject, and will suggest ways in which contemporary anthropologists can engage with comedians. Not only are comedians rich anthropological subjects, due to their active engagement with their own cultural norms, but also innovative agents of ethnography, offering new insight into ways of dealing with the issues of representation that the discipline continually faces.

De-familiarization can lead to the self-critical realization that the world in which we feel comfortable is just as constructed and non-natural as the exotic realms inhabited by the Other (Marcus and Fischer 1986:138). The standup comedian uses humour forged from the seemingly banal within their own cultures to highlight the Otherness found within their cultures, as well as alternative ways of experiencing that same world (Marcus and Fischer 1986:135). Participant observation has become foundational within anthropological discourse, and in regards to anthropology-at-home, the standup comedian relates common sense knowledge and ways

of acting in such a way that conscious reflection can occur (Koziski 1984). Anthropology-at-home, or native anthropology, is the act of engaging ethnographically with one's own culture. And despite the difficulties associated with defining the boundaries of one's culture at home, the anthropologist works to make the normative strange (Spiro 1992). As a social commentator the standup comedian evokes altered understandings of the seemingly common sense, thus creating a space in which they verbally reflect on certain aspects of culture while their engaged listeners simultaneously begin to contemplate the previously invisible and taken-for-granted elements of their lives (Koziski 1984:57-60). As Victor Turner (1997:63) so eloquently put it, the anthropologist "cut[s] out a piece of society for the inspection of [their] audience [and] set[s] up a frame within which image and symbols of what has been sectioned off can be scrutinized, assessed, and perhaps remodeled." This process furthers societal reflection on the part of the audience in regards to that specific section of culture, its implications, and its worth. This also resonates with the performance of the comedian, seen in the exceptional example given by Ellen DeGeneres (2003) as she takes something as normative as modern yogurt packaging, and places it within a framework of Western values and temporal understandings:

We're lazy. We're on the go. We've got Goghurt. Yoghurt for people on the go. Was there a big mobility problem with yoghurt before? How time consuming was it, really? "Hello? Oh hi Tom. Oh-I've been dying to see that movie! Mmm... no... I just opened up some yoghurt... I am in for the night... Not even later, it's the kind with the fruit on the bottom. Oh well... have fun." [Mimes hanging up phone, shaking head]... That's a shame.

-Excerpt from *Here and Now* (2003).

Reading this excerpt, the seemingly passive yogurt tube in the fridge enters into the audience's critical attention, becoming an

active signifier of cultural values, made effective through DeGeneres' humorous positioning of the object.

Both the cultural anthropologist and the standup comedian study living cultures to distinguish significance within cultural understandings, doing so to reveal hierarchies of power and critically engage with normative ideologies within their worlds (Marcus and Fischer 1986:144). Koziski (1984:63) posits that the anthropologist, "by training" is a "sympathetic outsider," and suggests that, in contrast, the standup comedian is, "by temperament, a cynical insider". This positions the anthropologist and the standup comedian as very different, even opposite. Yet, while the anthropologist is trained to remain reflexive and aware of their biases, the intense subjectivity of the comedian can lead to altered perceptions of reality and changed behaviours amongst the audience. Furthermore, since the comedian performs what is generally assumed to be their own opinion, intense use of humorous cynicism deflects some of the critical response that their vulgarity and subject matter may garner. In a sense, cynicism allows the comedian to speak bluntly to other members of their own culture, requiring no ethical review or academic qualification. It is also important to note that although the anthropologist is *trained* to be sympathetic and objective, subjective emotions are impossible to divorce from one's own research, and the overt subjectivity of the comedian can be seen in a refreshing light. Academia as an ivory tower can be used within anthropology, and other disciplines, to glaze over a researcher's biased voice. However, the level of accessibility between the anthropologist and the comedian, and their respective audiences, must be considered when understanding comedians as being overly subjective.

Anthropologists do use humour, as demonstrated in Clifford Geertz's (1973) recounting of a Balinese cockfight, which ended with him hiding, with his wife, from law enforcement in a courtyard under the guise of drinking tea. The humour in the situation is clear, especially once they are removed from potential jeopardy, and it gives anecdotal evidence to the use of humour in anthropology as an infrequent explanatory tool, as opposed to humour as the

quintessential method of analysis within comedy (Koziski 1984:62). I argue that the standup comedian's use of cynical humour offers an avenue for reflection that is more accessible than many offered through ethnographic studies. As Rusty Warren (1977), a comedian, explains: "if we can open them up and make laughs with them, or see them in picture form, people are bound to loosen up," and while Warren was specifically discussing her overtly sexual humour, I posit that humour is therapeutic as well as an effective agent for change. An interview with contemporary comedian Louis C. K. (2008) on Conan O'Brien's late-night talk show offers a window into the change that humour can inspire within the audience:

Flying is the worst one... because people come back from flights and they tell you their story, their horror story. They act like their flight was like a cattle car in the 40s in Germany, that's how bad they make it sound! They're like: "It was the *worst* day of my life!... First of all - we didn't board! For *twenty* minutes. And *then* we got on the plane and they *made us sit there!* On the runway! For *forty minutes!* We had to sit there!" Oh really, what happened next, did you *fly* through the *air*... incredibly?! Like a bird?! Did you partake in the *miracle* of human flight? You non-contributing zero?... that you got to fly - YOU'RE FLYING!!! IT'S AMAZING! Everybody on every plane should just constantly be going: "OH MY GOD!" [Leans back in his seat, eyes wide open, in awe and terrified], "WOW!"... Here's the thing, people say there's delays on flights, delays! Really? New York to California in five hours. That used to take *thirty years*... to do that. And a bunch of you would die, on the way there, and have a baby... you'd be with a whole different group of people by the time you got there! Now you watch a movie and you take a dump and you're home.

I can personally testify, as an individual who flies frequently, that the humour surrounding the technology and Western notions of patience has impacted the way in which I interpret my personal experiences within airports and planes. My previous behaviours were brought to mind while listening to C. K. speak, causing unintentional self-reflection about the way in which I had previously interacted with the world. Cultural relativism is completely abandoned by most standup comedians, yet I propose that humour offers a non-threatening tool that can be used to alter perceptions and release social tensions. The objectivity sought after by most anthropologists can lead to inapplicability, with real-world problems and struggles analyzed merely for the purposes of theoretical discussion. As the cover liner for the DVD set *The Golden Age of Comedy* (2010) explains: “in [comedy] clubs these days you get group therapy, prayer meetings and sociological community. You get thinking . . . you know your mind is doing something, and, you know you’re enjoying it, but it isn’t until later than you realize that you’ve been thinking.” The standup comedian’s relationship with their own subjective, and typically brusque opinions allows for easier accessibility to the issues discussed, allowing a wide audience to formulate their own reactions to the comedian’s perspectives.

It is clear that the stand-up comedian does not offer scientific nor literal representation, that embellishment and truth are integrated and distorted. But these manipulations of truth are used to reflect understandings back in such a way that confronts their audience with themselves, and in many cases touches on topics that would seem too sensitive to discuss, but which situate the comedian, and their audience, along the boundaries of normative morality within their culture (Koziski 1984:65). Dick Gregory (1964), an African American comedian, positions morality within a humorous framework in relating how he had never believed in Santa Claus because he knew “no white dude would come into [his] neighbourhood after dark.” Anthropologists aim to give accurate accounts in which every contextual perspective is explored, and the reader reaches judgment as they move between the text and their own personal assumptions and biases. By contrast, the standup

comedian positions his opinion and personality as central, through which the cultural norms he explores and the humour of the situation reveal themselves. As George Carlin (1975) shows in his highly subjective view of football:

Football is weird anyway, man. Football is... what is football? Our national pastime game now. And what is it really, except: eleven guys line up and beat the shit out of the other guys and take their land. It's a land acquisition game. Except we take it ten yards at a time. That's what we did to the Indians - work them a little at a time. First Pennsylvania, the Midwest is next to go...

Humour not only positions guilt and morality into a discussion of something that is commonly seen as morally neutral (football), it is also used to bring up historical events in such a way that, although not wholly accurate, sheds light on contemporary ethical trends and normative views of a shared past.

This discussion of historical events leads us into an unpacking of oral tradition within this context. Oral traditions encompass all accountings of the past, transmitted by individuals through the use of verbal language (Vansina 1961:19-20). Not all standup comedy deals with the past, yet the transmission of the narrative anecdote, from the comedian to the audience, and from the audience outward, through any number of nexuses of social connections, creates a tradition. The controlled transmission of the act, which is repeated, altered, and specialized by the comedian throughout his or her career also adds to its orality. Vansina (1961) categorizes two types of oral traditions, the referent (testimony) which is transmitted verbatim, and those which are more fluid, and are altered by the informant how and whenever he or she sees fit. In both cases the testimony is in some way altered by the subjectivity of the informant (Vasina 1961:72). A significant link between the classical oral tradition in the anthropological discourse and the verbal transmissions of the stand-up comedian is the stock phrase,

also referred to as a stereotype, which carries latent meanings within that specific culture (Vansina 1961:72). An example of a stereotype expressed through a stock phrase in American culture, as explained by ethnographer Sherry Ortner (2003), is the unconscious assumption that *success* as a term implicitly references material wealth within her peer group. In comedy, these stock phrases create similar links with commonly held beliefs, so that, like ethnography, one must have a firm understanding of the language and culture of the informant, anthropological or comical, to fully understand the reference, and in the case of the comedian, the joke. Informants, the transmitters of the referent in oral tradition, have been enculturated since birth and are expected to draw connections between past and present within culturally acceptable frameworks (Vansina 1961). To illustrate the importance of knowing the cultural language, far surpassing a simple understanding of the linguistic codes of a people, a skit by Indian-Canadian comedian Russell Peters (2006) integrates cultural norms, so that an outsider might not grasp the ironic twist he delivers, while also highlighting the power dynamics implicit within the intersection of cultures:

My Dad's been in this country for forty years now, *forty* years! And you know what's scary; I think my Dad's turning into a redneck now. I swear to god he's starting to say stuff that scares me, you know? I walked into my parent's house a couple weeks ago, my Dad was sitting there on the phone, he had the newspaper open in front of him... he had an ad circled. Somebody was selling a couch, right? So my Dad's on the phone, he calls the ad, and on the other end of the phone some Eastern European lady answers, and she couldn't speak any English. And all I hear is: [in a thick Indian accent]:

"Hello, I'm calling about your couch."

[Speaking with an Eastern European accent]: "Uh-hello."

“Hello. I- uh, I want to know about your couch.”

“Hello?”

“Okay. I’ve said hello twice. I would like to purchase your couch.”

“Ahno English.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Ahno English.”

“Then WHY THE HELL DID YOU ANSWER THE PHONE? YOU DON’T COME TO MY COUNTRY IF YOU CAN’T SPEAK THE LANGUAGE!”
[Mimes slamming down phone].

My Dad looks at me and goes [shaking his head in frustration and with a heavy accent]: “Immigrants!”

I go, Dad! You’re an immigrant!

[In Indian accent]: “Hey, you watch what you say to me!”

-Excerpt taken from *Outsources* (2006).

Another essential aspect of the standup comedian is the use of body language. The comedian typically uses the entire stage, creating dynamic positions with their body, facial expressions, and in some cases, props. The vocal tone of the comedian is also significant in their delivery. An excellent example of this is a skit done by Maria Bamford (2008) in which she relates the trials and tribulations of being a female comedian. In the skit, she describes how difficult it can be to get an audience to like her. This entire section is related in her trademark low and raspy voice. She then explains that she has a back-up skit, in case the crowd is not responding: the quintessentially typical female comedian skit. At this point her voice switches to a

high, bubbly, and obnoxiously giggling tone; “Ladies! Okay! Guys [giggling endlessly], don’t listen!...” from which point she continues to systematically go through the tropes of the female comedian: dating stories, menstrual mood swings, chocolate cravings, and sexual misadventures. The verbal transmission of this joke creates a palimpsest of meaning, allowing the audience to become integrated into the familiar web of cultural meaning, twisted about for them, by the comedian-as-catalyst, to analyze from new angles. Bamford’s skit allows us to see the ways in which orality can alter the thematic content of a message, as well as offering insight into the ways in which comedians deal with issues surrounding gender and representation. Spindler and Spindler (1983:68) elucidate how, due to the majority of anthropologists being male, they focused on male-dominated portions of any given society, including their own. This led to an assumption within the discourse that since American men had held greater cultural status and were thus easily noticeable, that men could, and should, stand in for all American people, including women (Spindler and Spindler 1983:68). The flux of female anthropologists in the mid-twentieth century is paralleled within the standup comedian community, although, as Bamford references, the role of the female comedian is by and large limited to feminized thematic tropes, with the singular alternative being that of the lesbian comedian, as evidenced by the earlier quotation from Ellen DeGeneres’s work. Discourse within comedy is gendered by a patriarchal framework and is far behind anthropology in terms of equality of voice and gendered content; still, there are comedians, both male and female, making important statements surrounding these assumed gender roles. Jennifer Kober (2009), as a large woman, discusses the bias of the ideal female form in the West, stating that: “I don’t like the word fat, I think it’s harsh. I prefer the phrase: ‘hard to kidnap’. You are not throwing my fat ass into a moving vehicle anytime soon.” Tim Allen (1990) highlights the foundational issue of male hegemony ever so gently, announcing that: “Men are pigs. Too bad we own everything!” I argue that the use of humour allows for more explicit critiques of patriarchy and defuses tensions that can easily arise in academic discussions on parallel themes. Perhaps

men confronted with anti-patriarchal comments contextualized within a comedy club would react better to those same sentiments elucidated within an academic context.

Edward Hall (1973:30) felt that a “culture hides much more than it reveals,” and that what is hidden is hidden “most effectively from its own participants.” While a textual ethnography does offer insights, the layered meaning and significance in the vocal range, kinesics, proxemics, and facial expressions of performance allows for a multitude of entryways into reflexivity for the viewer. This ‘silent language’ of objects, ways of acting and speaking, can be used as a means to understand the unconscious yet vital components of human life and action (Hall 1990:3). Stand-up comedians use this silent language to explore and analyze the seemingly inconsequential normative qualities of their culture.

The orality of delivery also helps the referent to escape, what Clifford Geertz (1973) calls inscription. The ethnographic interpretation, the fictitious creation is written down, and is therefore robbed of its dynamism, thus leading cultural analysis into the dangerous territory of becoming out of touch with the “hard surfaces of life - with the political, economic, stratificatory realities within which men are everywhere contained” (Geertz 1973:27). However, the comedian creates transformative spaces and refocuses cultural frameworks against the backdrop of the home, the most easily relatable arena of human life (Koziski 1984:66-67). The comedian uses verbal timing and the multiple levels of context available in orality to create spaces of self-reflexivity (Hall 1990:2-20). It is through “the flow of behaviour - or, more precisely, social action - that cultural forms find articulation” (Geertz 1973:18). I argue that cultural critics, such as comedians, who take dynamic cultural elements and represent them within a theater of fluid and uninhibited interaction, are engaging with this cultural flow in a more dynamic way; they inscribe less and reassess more.

The standup comedian fills the role of the storyteller in our contemporary culture, of the conveyor of cultural consciousness

(Koziski 1984:73). Like the ethnography, the comedian's anecdotes "are not privileged, just particular" (Geertz 1973:23). Similar to the anthropologist, the comedian performs many roles within our globally connected world. Through their comedy they draw from various sources, some familiar, some strange, but all align together to create conversations and question assumptions, all the while directing their skits towards other members with shared understandings, using humour which is completely contextually placed (Peirano 1998:123). Yet, the dialogues of the comedian remain more accessible to the everyday individual within their collectivity.

The crisis of representation which Marcus and Fischer (1986) explored, and which continues to be relevant within the discipline today, calls for anthropology to engage with audiences outside the walls of academia through a cultural critique that pays attention to both the differences inherent across and within peoples, as well as the homogeneous realities of globalization. I have argued that the comedian, who speaks the truth through comedy, holding up a mirror for the audience to see themselves as they are, offers an interesting alternative to the systematic ways in which ethnographic inquiry is being done (Warren 1977). Although the utter subjectivity of the comedian makes their craft far from academic, anthropologists can learn to create new levels of accessibility and begin to engage with wider populations through a similar use of personal opinion. The potential to increase dialogues within the discourse could lead to new ideas, methods, and increased applicability to real-world problems and questions. Although the theoretical aspect of anthropology is both fascinating and essential, given the world's current socio-political climate, academia must make strides toward applied problem solving. The use of humour offers a means to deal with situations in more blunt and accessible terms. Anthropology, the discipline of quotation marks, can learn from the comedian's lack of tact and use of humour to open doors to more straightforward inquiries. Stand-up comedians not only offer humorous release from the everyday, but also do so in such a way that confronts the very notion of *everyday* and creates spaces of change. Furthermore, the comedian can offer anthropologists interesting subjects of analysis,

since the comedian both exists within, and critically engages with, their own cultures. Anthropologists can find comedians to be fascinating subjects of inquiry, as pioneers of ethnography who influence cultural understandings and ask the important questions, such as: why it is that “when we talk to God we’re said to be praying, but when God talks to us we’re schizophrenic” (Lily Tomlin 1976).

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