

Critical Essay

Stand-up Comedy and Trans Subjectivity: An Analysis of the Work of Dave Chappelle and Ricky Gervais

Hazal Goktas, Trent University

Abstract

In the context of growing trans visibility in the Anglo-American world, recent works of stand-up comedy have taken an interest in trans subjectivity. This article analyzes the discursive strategies used to discuss transgender subjectivity within the recent Netflix stand-up specials of two of the most famous stand-up performers on both sides of the Atlantic: The American comedian Dave Chappelle and the British comedian Ricky Gervais. The article observes that as opposed to older forms of comedy in which the comedic element about transness was created through the trope of deception, or the rowdy revelation about supposed bodily incongruity, the new stand-up comedy uses a more 'refined' approach in an era in which trans justice movement has become a legitimate part of the socio-political scene. I argue that contemporary trans subjectivity, as it is employed by these two comedians, is used to make social and political commentary about 'the West,' positioning transgender rights as the proof of declining Euro-American values such as freedom of speech, reason, and rationality. Although the article does not advocate for the de-platforming of anti-trans jokes, by examining the harmful rhetoric deployed within the recent stand-up comedy, I suggest that we need to approach more critically comedy's legacy as a tool for social commentary and the comedian's position as a public intellectual.

Keywords: transgender, stand-up, comedy, humor, Chappelle, Gervais.

Introduction: “He’s a master at his craft.”

“He is a master at his craft.” This is how Dave Chappelle described the way his late friend, trans woman and comedian Daphne Dorman, defended him on Twitter (Lathan, 2021). Daphne Dorman was a trans woman and a comedian who was fond of Chappelle’s work (Lathan, 2021). According to Chappelle’s account on his latest Netflix special *The Closer* (2021), they met through comedy, and Chappelle even let Dorman do the opening act for his show. Even though her opening act “stank,” the “master” found something special in the apprentice—she could take a joke (Lathan, 2021, 58:20-58:45). Dave Chappelle, as he humorously states in some of his appearances, is one of the most famous and richest comedians in the USA, reaching large audiences (Gillota, 2019, p.5). Chappelle proudly expresses three claims about his latest special, *The Closer*: 1. It was the most-watched special in the world; 2. It was a masterpiece; and 3. He is a once-in-a-lifetime comedian (Hughes, 2022, 34:58-35:41). However, it is not the sheer size of his audience and the popularity of his Netflix specials that are at stake in this essay. He is by no means the only stand-up comedian who jokes about the supposed absurdities and inconsistencies of “the alphabet people” by which he means LGBTQ+ people (Lathan, 2019, 21:15-21:20). What makes Chappelle’s “craft” particularly concerning is his anti-trans rhetoric under the guise of racial critique. Chappelle’s racially charged anti-trans rhetoric is misinformed, historically and contemporarily inaccurate, and willingly overlooks the intersection of trans, Black, and lower-class subjectivities¹. Yet, Chappelle is not the only contender in the game. The theme of trans subjectivity as a symptom of deterioration of the “woke” West is also treasured by his British counterpart, Ricky Gervais, who, ironically, despite being a staunch atheist, appears like a secular messianic figure to reinstate reason and

¹ It is often noted that Chappelle does not treat societal issues that remain beyond (or do not seem to immediately and visibly intersect with) racism with the same level of care and commitment to justice (Guerrero, 2021, p. 52). Still, his contradictions, conflicts, outright uninformed utterances, and “recklessness” are treated with a fair bit of benefit of the doubt (Gillota, 2019, p. 4). At this juncture, one might bring up the issue of on-stage versus off-stage persona, claiming that Chappelle might just be ‘performing’ a particular role for the sake of pushing his audience out of their comfort zones. As Brodie states, “As the audience increasingly knows the stand-up comedian through cumulative reputation, the more “performance” aspects of the persona can be dropped, and the potential disjuncture between on- and offstage personality becomes lessened” (2014, p. 128). Moreover, the specials discussed in this essay are broadcasted between 2016 and 2022; therefore, Chappelle’s transphobic diatribes can easily be located within a pattern and not as isolated incidents.

Enlightenment values back into our brains. By looking at the work of two (in)famous stand-up comedians on both sides of the Atlantic, the American comedian Dave Chappelle and the British comedian Ricky Gervais, this work aims to explore the vexed relationship between stand-up comedy and trans people². I argue that against the backdrop of growing transgender visibility and acceptance, stand-up comedy is used to perpetuate anti-trans rhetoric: ironically, it does so under the guise of critical thinking, social and racial commentary, freedom of speech, and art.

Comedian as a Social Critic

Chappelle and Gervais are both renowned figures within large swathes of the English-speaking world. They are not only applauded as comedians, but they are lauded as social commentators. Comedy is traditionally valued for its supposed quality of questioning norms, and comedians are regarded as social critics (Bingham and Hernandez, 2009). Dave Chappelle, in particular, has a special place for many; he is lauded as a “masterful storyteller,” a “Grasmic organic intellectual,” “an expert purveyor of racial satire” and “a necessary starting point in thinking about . . . contemporary black satire” (Di Palacido, 2021; Amarasingam, 2009, p. 116; Bruce, 2021, p. 172; Guerrero, 2021, p. 21). Similarly, Gervais is appreciated as “the satirical spokesperson for Enlightenment values” via his comedy performed with an “academic might,” and references to science and philosophy (Ellis, 2018, 170, 173). He is thought to be a member of “the barrier-breaking school of contemporary comedy” and credited as performing an “acutely uncomfortable satire of multiculturalism” (Heaney, 2015, p. 165; Brassett, 2021, p. 94). In fact, neither Chappelle nor Gervais have been the first comedians who are appreciated as public critics. In his chapter about the conservative comedian Daniel Lawrence Whitney, more popularly known as Larry the Cable Guy, David R. Dewberry argues that Larry the Cable Guy is a postmodern intellectual, and an interpreter who focused on perceived limitations of political correctness on freedom of speech (2021). Talking about the late Texan stand-up comedian Bill Hicks, Rob King challenges the perspective that sees the comedian as a public intellectual and the comedy club as some sort of Enlightenment era salons or

² Even though trans men are subjected to vicious accusations by the so-called gender critical activists and academics and degrading representations on media, as Clarence Harlan Orsi (2019) states the entertainment/film industry mostly focused on trans women, and the current stand-up comedy still follows this trend by predominantly targeting trans women.

Habermassian coffee houses (2021). Instead, he suggests that Hicks' comedy provides us with an alternative framework in which the comedian can be likened to a preacher in a church sermon, rather than a Habermassian public intellectual in a coffee house (2021). Sacha Cohen (2016) argues that stand-up comedy, especially the politically incorrect, offensive stand-up comedy that is now mostly appropriated by privileged "straight white guys" was a critical tool used by minority comedians such as Black comedian Richard Pryor and Jewish comedian Lenny Bruce to target dominant ideologies. Similarly, in "Mocking the Weak? Contexts, Theories, Politics" Helen Davies and Sarah Illott claim that comedy can be read as "a diagnosis of a particular society, revealing the boundaries, rules, and taboos that must be already in existence for the humor to work" (2019, p. 10). Therefore, they believe that comedy has a power to influence societal change (Davies and Illott, 2019, p. 12). The comedian, too, emerges as someone who diagnoses societal problems in a unique way, and potentially mobilizes masses. In *A Comedian and an Activist Walk Into a Bar: The Serious Role of Comedy in Social Justice*, the authors Caty Borum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman talk about comedy's power as a tool for mobilization, arguing that the era of digital and streaming entertainment is characterized by networked social justice struggles, and that therefore comedy has gained a new potential to influence public engagement with social justice issues (2020, pp. 6-8). In that juncture, comedians, and particularly those who practice stand-up comedy, emerge as social figures who adopt the roles of influencers, pundits, critics, and community leaders. Rebecca Krefting, by focusing on the comic Maria Bamford, claims that some politically charged humorists can convey the message that "social standards need to be revised to account for diverse identities and experiences, and we are all complicit in national/global wealth disparities," positioning some comedians as agents of social change (Krefting, 2021, p. 63). In short, scholarship on humour has long underlined the potential of comedy and comedians in influencing public attitudes on existing societal problems.

However, other scholars were more suspicious about humour's perceived status and function in society. In *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, Michael Billig argues that

"humour is central to social life, but not in the way that we might wish for; nor in the way that much popular academic writing on the topic suggests. It is easy to praise humour for bringing people together in moments of pure, creative

enjoyment. But it is not those sorts of moments that constitute the social core of humour, but instead, it is the darker, less easily admired practice of ridicule.” (2005, p. 2)

Billig contends that humour’s function is to protect norms through ridicule and embarrassment (2005, pp. 2, 201). Feminist scholar and self-confessed killjoy Sara Ahmed is also skeptical about the social status of humour. She believes that humour is “a crucial technique for reproducing inequality and injustice,” “reducing whatever we do as “not white men” to identity politics” (2017, p. 261). While Ahmed is right about humour’s weaponization, her criticism is limited to a threadbare “white men” discourse, and it fails to incorporate how large demographics that are not “white men” conjure up a social critique out of transness. Sienkiewicz and Marx (2022) also critically approach humour through its relation to a right-wing ideological complex. They explain comedy’s role within that complex by “contend[ing] that 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” (10). Therefore, Sienkiewicz and Marx (2022) break the illusion that comedy is inherently or at least predominantly liberal. In *Strange Bedfellows: How Late-Night Comedy Turns Democracy into a Joke*, Russel Leslie Peterson (2008) presents a historical analysis of late-night comedy shows and argues that what he calls pseudo-satire or topical comedy is indeed dismissive and has no real intention to change anything (25). By the same token, in *Taking Comedy Seriously: Stand-Up’s Dissident Potential in Mass Culture*, building upon Freud's relief theory, Jennalee Donian (2019) asserts that humour functions as an escape mechanism from the problems created by neoliberal capitalism, and is devoid of any real subversive potential in its current state.

Is it Just a Joke?

While comedians keep uttering bromides like “it’s just a joke,” (Krefting, 2019, p. 256) at least a significant number of their audience receive their takes on social issues as some sort of cracker-barrel philosophy, posting bits from their favorite comedians’ specials on social media conversations to “own” their opponents³. An important

³ This is particularly visible in trans-related debates in which one can see a flow of clips from the shows and performances of Chappelle, Gervais, along with right-wing proselytizers such as Matt Walsh, Ben Shapiro, Steven Crowder who also heavily use humour in their work, especially in the form of trolling.

instance in which Chappelle reveals how he positions his comedy comes at his speech at his former school, Duke Ellington School of the Arts. The school decided to name a theatre after Chappelle, as the comedian is one of its famous graduates. This decision came in the midst of the controversy surrounding *The Closer*, and unsurprisingly, many students challenged this decision and confronted Chappelle about his transphobic remarks. In this speech which is published in the form of a Netflix special called *What's in a Name?*, Chappelle explains what is at stake in comedy, and complains about the children who challenged him: “The more you say I can’t say something, the more urgent it is for me to say it. And it has nothing to do with what you’re saying I can’t say. It has everything to do with my right, my freedom of artistic expression. That is valuable to me. That is not separate from me. It’s worth protecting for me, and it’s worth protecting for everyone else who endeavours in our noble, noble professions. And these kids. And these kids didn’t understand that they were instruments, instruments of oppression” (Hughes, 32:20-33:01). Davies and Ilott claim that “satire is all-too-often collapsed into polarising debates around free speech, intentionality, and offence, in which the artist’s right to free speech is often held sacred above even the sacred as conventionally understood” (2019, p. 15). Chappelle is certainly one of the comedians who insists on exercising his right to freedom of speech and crafting his art. As Sarah Balkin (2023) explains, it is clear that Chappelle wants us to take his performance as a particular genre of speech –a type of speech that needs to be treated with “latitude conventionally afforded by comic licence” (p. 155). The problem is, as Chappelle experienced himself well before his trans-related controversies, comedic licence is not a magic elixir that shields from unwanted outcomes.

Chappelle allegedly left his successful sketch show because he started to think that his method of using racial stereotypes to criticize those very stereotypes might have had counterproductive effects (Cobb, 2021; Guerrero, 2021). Chappelle asserts his moral superiority, claiming that he walked away from \$50 million and had a 12-year hiatus for which he was called crazy (Lathan, 2017). Here he refers to the fact that he quit his popular Chappelle’s Show in 2005, and “simply walked away” (Amarasingam, 2009, p. 115). Although comedians tend to dodge any criticism by saying “it’s just a joke,” it is apparent from this remark that comedy is not simply comedy for Chappelle. He portrays himself as a morally superior being who finally realized comedy can hurt and left an immensely lucrative business to do the right thing. Though he seems to be rather recalcitrant in understanding why and how his comedy might matter for the

trans justice movement – perhaps trans people are not yet worth a \$50 million deal. In “A Special Freedom: Regulating Comedy Offence” Brett Mills, analyzing the complaints received by the British show *Top Gear*, discusses how comedy is perceived to have social and cultural power for which it is supposed to be given freedom, yet this vaguely defined discourse of freedom for comedy cannot be invoked successfully for every topic (2016, p. 224). Moreover, some comics need to be reminded of that fact that even though they like to call it ‘cancelling,’ the critique they receive can also be considered free speech (Wolfink, 2022, p. 939).

Comedians like to ensure that their in-person audience is about to hear some edgy⁴ jokes which might not be aired on Netflix (or any other platform), yet we, as the streaming-audience, always hear these jokes in the specials (Spencer, 2022). This might potentially be used to create a bond between the comedian and their audience by making the audience feel like they are part of a smaller, unique community strong enough to participate in conversations that mainstream audiences are not ready for. In *Vulgar Art: A New Approach to Stand-Up Comedy*, Ian Brodie talks about how stand-up comedian navigates intimacy. According to Brodie, “Stand-up comedian is a social identity to which the individual comedian actively and continually lays claim” (2014, p. 81). They perform this identity by simultaneously showing that they conform to audience’s beliefs while creating the illusion that they also have a special ability to transcend that worldview –that is to say, the stand-up comedian embraces the insider and outsider positions at the same time (Brodie, 2014, p.103-104). In the context of comedy created out of trans people, this “rapport,” or “you [audience] and I [the comic] are equally distinguishable from someone else” type of strategy works by positioning trans people as delusional, irrational beings who stand in stark contrasts to Chappelle (or Gervais) and his audience (Brodie, 2014, pp.102-105, 132). For example, when Chappelle talks about the rumors regarding Caitlyn Jenner posing nude for *Sports Illustrated*, he exemplifies this position in which the comedian is seen as the brave voice of the intimidated masses: “It’s not politically correct to say these things, so I just figured, “Fuck it, I’ll say it for everybody: Yuck” (Equanimity, 2017, 20:45-20:56). However, as Champion and Kunze stress, “stand-up comedy is a commercial endeavour⁵ that requires participants to satisfy their customers in order to achieve a

⁴ This also happens when Chappelle makes the “Space Jews” jokes in *The Closer*, and tells his audience that it is going to get worse than that (Lathan, 2021, 7:43-7:47)

⁵ Hence, not just a “noble, noble endeavour” as Chappelle would like to put it.

liveable income, let alone popularity and prestige” (Champion and Kunze, 2021, p. 7). Therefore, more than being a voice of the *silent* masses or *rational* majority⁶, the comedian is usually *just* a voice of the masses. Burgis (2021) acknowledges that a comedian is not inherently a good, insightful commentator on social and political issues. I second that view: indeed, I would go as far as to claim that many comedians have purposefully palatable analyses on stage. That is not to say that they are intellectually inferior – absolutely not. To be able to make thousands of people laugh at once, at the very moment of the utterance of the joke, the joke/commentary needs to have recognizable tropes that are easily absorbable. That is to say, per MJ Robinson (2022), humour derived through satire requires a shared reality, so that out of that shared reality the comedian can point out absurdity or incongruity –the comedic revelation.

This is also in line with the genre of outrage which Dannagal Goldtwaite Young (2020) associates with right-wing and conservative commentators and comedians. In *Irony and Outrage: The Polarized Landscape of Rage, Fear, and Laughter in the United States* Young (2020) makes the argument that left and right demonstrate psychologically different traits, and therefore produce and enjoy distinct genres of comedy. While left leaning people have a predilection for irony and satire which are characterized by ambiguity and novelty, right wing and conservative people are more in need for closure and “mental shortcuts,” favoring more “in-your-face,” straight-to-point performances or rhetoric with contours and edges that are clearly defined (Young, 2020, pp. 101, 108, 165). As I pointed out, Dave Chappelle and Ricky Gervais have enjoyed their position as masterful satirists –a genre usually associated with leftists and liberals as opposed to right wingers and conservatives. In fact, Young (2020) locates Chappelle alongside Sarah Silverman and Louis C.K. as one of the comedians appreciated more by liberals. Young’s casting of Chappelle as an ironist is based on his materials on race –the book does not mention Chappelle’s trans-related materials. This is one of the troubling aspects of Chappelle’s and Gervais’ comedy: they are able to repackage conservative ideas about trans people as a critique of identity and progressive politics, relying on their former credibility for targeting racism and bigotry. Their ambiguous satires (a quality Young describes as being part of the liberal humor

⁶ For instance, conservative Texan comedian Bill Hicks “had defined his act as an expression of the “Voice of Reason”” (King, 2021, p. 263).

aesthetic) do not *always* directly state what is wrong with trans people but herd the audience into drawing *their own* conclusions. Chappelle's rhetorical questions like "Do you see where I am going with this?" makes more sense when we take such rhetoric as the adaptation of a liberal aesthetic in the service of neo-conservative ideas.

Kate Fox, in "Standing Up to False Binaries in Humour and Autism: A Dialogue" proposes a term called "humitas" which is a "word for when comic and serious modes of discourse operate in the same frame at the same time" (2018, p.171). Humitas refers "to the way that informal and entertaining registers of speech are being used in parts of the public sphere where only official, authoritative and monologic discourses used to hold sway" (Fox, 2018, p. 172). Though I believe "humitas" is not necessarily a trailblazing concept, since comedy has always been meshed with serious discourses (as demonstrated in this piece), I agree with Fox in her claim that comedy has now become a tool used by non-comic actors and outside the traditional venues of comedy clubs to engage with serious issues (2018, p. 185).

This corresponds to a new political environment in which comedy lends itself well to discussions of socio-political matters. In "The Rise of Advocacy Satire" Don J. Waisanen calls this new juncture the rise of "advocacy satire" which refers to "the use of political humor to take action on behalf of disadvantaged individuals or groups, lending force to their voices by making a direct intervention into public affairs" (2018, p. 11). This argument was extended by Caty Borum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman who claim in *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar* that "(b)oth the activism and cultural expression empowered by digital media converge to position comedy as a source of influence on today's social justice issues" (2020, p. 5). Both Waisanen's and Chattoo & Feldman's arguments extend beyond stand-up comedy, and in our contemporary world we have not come to a point where non-transgender identities need to be salvaged from transgender oppression through this new melange of comedy-fuelled entertainment-activism. However, Gervais and Chappelle, by creating a false portrayal in which (cis) women's and Black people's rights and struggles are trampled on by transgender people, give their comedy a sense of advocacy.

Dave Chappelle

As it is popular among a wide demographic –from random anonymous profiles on Twitter to actual war criminals like Putin⁷– Chappelle, too, dips his toes in the J. K. Rowling controversy in his latest special (Siad, 2022). He bemoans that the famous children’s book author was attacked by trans people for asserting gender was real. He says that: “Yeah man, gender is real” and for that reason he is “team TERF” (Lathan, 2021, 53:50-53:55). This is one of the instances in which Chappelle purveys misleading information to appeal to larger masses while simultaneously portraying himself as if he is defending unpopular opinions. The “TERFs” (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist) Chappelle proudly sides with historically disapprove the term gender, let alone endorsing the idea that it is real. For example, in one of the earliest examples of trans exclusionary feminist literature, *The Transsexual Empire: Making of the She-Male*, Janice Raymond (1994) proposes the idea that transsexuals are medically created sex stereotypes who impersonate women. By the same token, one of the prominent trans exclusionary scholars, Sheila Jeffreys (2014), claims that the idea of gender “creates the nest bed for acceptance of transgenderism” (p. 187). Another trans-exclusionary scholar, also unsurprisingly hailing from the UK, Kathleen Stock (2021), believes that current gender ideology is harmful and needs to be opposed. According to this view, the concept of gender, as opposed to sex, is one of the ways in which this *conspiracy* takes hold linguistically and socially.

TERF arguments suggest that gender obscures the reality of sex and sex-based oppression (Jeffreys, 2014). I, as a trans woman, do not necessarily think that “gender” is the greatest conceptual tool for trans people. Neither am I seeking a “gotcha” moment just because Chappelle confounded the terms sex and gender which are, to be fair, used interchangeably by many people. However, his “team TERF” joke is one of the reflections which show that Chappelle is capitalizing on a very serious social phenomenon without being invested in and informed about the topic. Chappelle attempts to be the defender of women’s rights; however, this supposed women’s advocacy move is motivated by the desire to make anti-trans commentary rather than by an informed approach towards the arguments and historical stance of the group to

⁷ Russian President Vladimir Putin, in a televised speech shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, referred to the J.K Rowling controversy, in an attempt to criticize the West for its supposedly corrupt gender ideology (Siad 2022).

whom he pays allegiance. After all, while Chappelle says gender is real, the people he advocates for (team TERF) are euphemistically called *gender-critical*.

Even though someone who wants his “art” to be seen as cultural critique needs to have a basic understanding of the arguments proposed by each side of a conflict, Chappelle is obviously not an expert on the issue --to the chagrin of his fans who applauded him as the master critic of racial inequality in USA. This is one of the glaring problems with Chappelle: As David Gillota puts it, “Chappelle uses his knowledge and experience of racism as a lens through which to view all other forms of discrimination and as a licence to allow him to talk about any form of discrimination that he pleases” (2019, p. 14). While it is understandable for *someone* not to know the historical lineage of a current social issue, he seems oblivious to the fact that contemporary trans exclusionary feminists flamboyantly express their opinion on gender, such as #sexnotgender on Twitter, and “sex-based rights” discourses everywhere else. The problem is, Chappelle does not accept that he is *someone* to an issue –that his legacy in pointing to the dynamics of white supremacy does not automatically confer upon him an understanding of trans people’s struggles. The great master of comedy who has been skillfully confronting Americans with the ongoing, everyday mechanisms of anti-Black racism for decades cannot simply be a *somebody* to one of the most pressing social issues of our time. However tempting it may be, especially in the entertainment sector, our oppression in one area of life does not automatically give us a fully-fledged understanding of other types of marginalization and suffering.

In *The Closer*, Chappelle states that “number one streaming artist” DaBaby the rapper was cancelled by LGBTI people for making homophobic statements during a performance. He does not use the DaBaby controversy just to wax eloquent on cancel culture. Chappelle aims higher. He brings up the controversy to do what he does masterfully—to incite comparative suffering. Chappelle claims that the rapper killed a person in a Walmart—a 19-year-old Black man named Jalyn Domonique Craig. What he insinuates is that a young Black man’s killing was less of a reason for LGBTI people to cancel the rapper, than the rapper’s homophobic remarks. This is an incredibly sinister tactic and an utterly dangerous path. In addition to the fact that the case was considered a self-defence under the law and not a murder (Resnikoff, 2021), Chappelle’s sneaky comparison creates an equation in which backlash against homophobia and transphobia must have always been informed by White supremacy,

or at best, anti-Black sentiments. This distorted and pernicious rhetoric somehow resonates in certain demographics given America's appalling history of anti-Black violence. However palatable it might be in the current anti-trans climate, pinning centuries old sufferings of Black people on other marginalized groups does not repair historical injustices. It does, however, make a hit Netflix special. As Chappelle himself would say "Do you see where I am going with this?" (Lathan, 2021, 11:51-11:56).

This was not the only time Chappelle resorted to this tactic. In fact, Chappelle's comedy has always been characterized by "pedagogical impulses" (Haggins, 2007, pp. 204, 234). In the era of rising trans visibility, Chappelle flaunts his pedagogical skills by comparing any and every form oppression, suffering, and identity/community claim by contrasting them to racial suffering⁸ (Gillota, 2019; Balkin 2023). In *Equanimity*, he said: "And I cannot make this awful suspicion that the only reason everybody is talking about transgender is because white men want to do it. If it was just women that felt that way or black dudes and Mexican dudes being like "Hey y'all, we feel like girls inside." They'd be like "Shut up n****. No one asked how you felt. Come on everybody, we have strawberries to pick." It reeks of white privilege. You never asked yourself why it was easier for Bruce Jenner to change his gender than it was for Cassious Clay [Muhammad Ali] to change his fucking name? (2017, 24:20-24:57)" Jenner and her entire family are for sure very lucrative materials for the entertainment sector, and her antics and problematic behaviour can be subjects of endless jokes. In other words, due to her former athlete status, age, body, and political views, Jenner might be a good "sandpaper" which gives a much needed "friction" the comedians need (Orsi, 2019, pp. 70-71). However, comparing itinerant agricultural workers from Mexico who subsist by picking strawberries in the U.S.A. to one of the richest celebrities in the country is not art, nor is it craft. It is a grift peppered with pseudo-intellectual analogy, one that erases the existence of poor or working-class trans people of color and their agency.

⁸ BIPOC trans people present excellent critiques on how racial inequality informs the way we navigate in societies as gendered/sexual beings. The problem with Chappelle's pseudo critique is that trans subject is always already White which is, needless to say, not only incredibly convenient for Chappelle's pedagogical show-off, but also incredibly wrong.

Ricky Gervais: A Bloke Talking

Ricky Gervais is, as he claims, “a White, heterosexual, multimillionaire” (Spencer, 2022, 10:41-10:44). Like his American counterpart, Gervais also proudly tells his audience in *SuperNature* that his previous special, *Humanity*, was bought by Netflix for a record amount and it was the most watched special of the year” (2:38-2:45). Although we are yet to see whether his current special, *SuperNature*, will be the most watched stand-up comedy of 2022, one thing we could surely say is that the “new women” section from this special went viral as soon as the show aired on Netflix on May 24, 2022. It was one of most zealously applauded jokes by the in-person audience, and the bit was shared on TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube as a brilliant demonstration of the great comedian’s skills in addressing what is wrong in our society. In this section, Gervais voices a hypothetical dialogue between a concerned “old woman,” “a dinosaur,” and a trans ally:

I love the new women. They’re great, aren’t they? You know the new ones we’ve been seeing lately. The ones with beards and cocks. They are as good as... They’re as good as gold. I love them. Now it’s the old fashioned, they go like:

A: Oh, they wanna use our toilet!

B: Why shouldn’t they use your toilets?

A: For ladies!

B: They are ladies, look at their pronouns! What about this person isn’t a lady?

A: Well, his penis.

B: Her penis, you fucking bigot!

A: What if he rapes me?

B: What if *she* rapes you! You fucking TERF whore! (Spencer, 2022, 4:27-5:15)

Though he does not make this connection immediately after the “new woman” sketch, when he explains why he named his special *SuperNature*, we’re provided with an answer as to why Gervais talks about these new women: “I wanna debunk the supernatural. I don’t believe in anything supernatural (Spencer, 2022, 12:12-12:25).” It would not be implausible to say that the unwavering critic of religion, Gervais, believes gender identity to be a metaphysical conviction that needs to be debunked, along with the notion of God, heaven, ghosts, reincarnation, unicorns, or angels about which he also jokes. Just like the great thinkers of the Enlightenment did before him, he is here, on the stage, to reclaim one of our long-lost Western values –rationality. As

Iain Ellis explains, Gervais ardently defends humanism, animal rights, and secularism, he joins organizations which advance these causes and “anyone who has seen his “Animals,” “Science,” “Politics,” or “Humanity” tours will surely recognize a rhetorical application of humor firmly rooted in a passion for both philosophy and science” (2018, p. 170). Gervais also prolifically expresses his opinions on Twitter, establishing a fanbase who enjoys his rationality-infused takes on a variety of issues (Ellis, 2018, pp. 171-172).

In *SuperNature*, Gervais describes stand-up comedy as “a bloke talking,” “which is essentially what stand-up comedy is” (Spencer, 2022, 1:06-1:16). Maybe there is indeed merit to Gervais’ statement that standup comedy is “a *bloke* talking”. In “Gender and Humor in Everyday Conversation” Jennifer Coates (2014) claims that there are significant differences in how men and women practice and consume humor⁹. Coates (2014) argues that while both men and women utilize humour for gender construction, men’s humour tends to involve exertion of dominance and the humorous stories they tell each other tend to “focus on non-present others who do idiotic things” (p. 163). In that logic, Gervais’ jokes can be perceived as an attempt to assert his own rational, heterosexual, (financially) successful maleness in juxtaposition to comedic other such as the ridiculous, irrational trans folks, and the pathetic, irresponsible fat people. For example, Gervais says that one cannot find a 10-year-old tweet that reads “women don’t have penises” because we did not have to discuss the subject (Spencer, 2022, 7:32-7:54). Gervais attempts to use this situation to argue that we have come to a ridiculous point, a collective psychosis, when we have to discuss an outrageous/irrational idea that women might have penises. I suggest that such jokes locate transness in opposition and detrimental to a vaguely defined and romanticized Western culture--a culture built upon Enlightenment, materiality/science (as opposed to the *supernatural*), rationality, and freedom of speech and artistic expression. Transness, according to this positioning, symbolizes a decline in these Western values.

⁹ On YouTube, there is a genre of videos usually titled as Trying to Laugh at Female Comedians in which right-wing, conservative, or reactionary men watch clips from female comedians in an attempt to prove that their jokes are not worthy of male laughter which positions the male sense of humor as the arbiter of good comedy. These female comedians usually include Amy Schumer, Ali Wong, Lilly Singh, Chelsea Handler, and Hannah Gadsby.

In *Comedy and Social Science: Towards a Methodology of Funny*, Cate Watson explains that according to the superiority theory of humor, we laugh at the misfortunes of others (2020). Richard Smith (2013) explores this idea in *The Joy of Pain: Schadenfreude and the Dark Side of Human Nature* through the German term “*schadenfreude*” which denotes finding joy in another’s demise (pp. xi, 2). By analyzing incidents on popular reality TV programmes, he elaborates on aspects of human nature, arguing that if we can convince ourselves that the butt of the joke deserves to be humiliated, we can laugh at them “free of moral clutter” (Smith, 2013, p. 102). Building on this argument, I contend that the arbitration of deservingness is shaped by privileges we hold, as our racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, and financial positionalities in life color the glasses through which we see another’s pain, or “human experience” (Lathan, 2021, 1:01:35-1:02:14). Therefore, if one can successfully paint a picture wherein a nebulously defined ‘trans ideology’ reigns supreme in Western culture by stifling free speech, medically transitioning confused kids into transness, and forcing people to use specific pronouns, then one can sell their hackneyed jokes as punching up. If one can prove that progressive-liberal ideology has allowed a culture space in which we have to refer to people with penises as women, age-old jokes can suddenly become something more meaningful--not burlesque comedy but a cultural critique. Therefore, Gervais’ much-admired jokes, with their pattern of “a particular existential focus, a guiding thesis, and a methodological approach”, need to be considered within this context (Ellis, 2018, p. 173).

Gervais, as opposed to Chappelle, more conspicuously flaunts a rich, spoiled, nonchalant White guy identity (Brassett, 2021, p. 93). His jokes target not only trans people but also fat people, people with disabilities, food allergies, religions, environmentalism, African children and so on (Brassett, 2021, 89). Gervais is fittingly described as “unmistakably British in identity” and having a “devil-may-care attitude” (Ellis pp. 170, 171). As opposed to Chappelle, Gervais does not justify anti-trans jokes by comparing it to other forms of discrimination and revealing the transgender movement’s perceived whiteness. Though Gervais jokes about everything, he draws a line between what can be changed and what cannot be changed in a person’s identity. For example, he believes that fat people are fat because they are lazy, they simply intake more calories than they burn—a simple scientific *fact* (Spencer, 2022, 41:12-41:23). However, research shows that there is a strong relationship between poverty and obesity, and fatness is not simply due the laziness and lack of bodily control (Lee.

H, et al., 2009; Lippert, 2016; Harjunen, 2017). As opposed to this, according to Gervais, homosexuality is innate. He says in his 2010 special, *Science*, that “For being gay to be the same thing as being fat, you’d have to be born straight, grow up knowing you’re straight, but gradually consciously wean yourself on to cock” (*Universal Comedy* 3:25-4:00). A born-this-way rhetoric does not deter Gervais from joking, however. What is important here is that joking is justified through a neoliberal responsabilization perspective. Either for fatness or transness, bodily *choices* bring repercussions with them. One’s supposed laziness (fatness) and delusions (transness) are deliberate actions of which ramifications the subjects should be willing to face¹⁰.

In “Savage New Media” Krefting (2019) argues that our conversation about political correctness and comedy need to involve neoliberalism. Krefting (2019) claims that “Central to the outcomes of neoliberalism and most important to the current debate on political correctness is the belief that social equality has been achieved and thus any failing on the part of individuals to succeed or obtain the American Dream signals a personal failure rather than impugning institutions that favor certain identity categories like whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, able-bodiedness, and so on” (p. 249). That is to say, if a fat person intentionally chooses to eat junk food instead of healthy food, and eat more than they could burn through exercise, they are undeserving. Unsurprisingly, this logic ignores the class aspects of beauty and body politics, as a significant portion of people (regardless of their size) cannot access to healthy food, exercising tools/facilities, and a life that allows for dieting culture. Needless to say, many fat people do not have problem with their size, nor do they see fatness as something to be reversed. Similarly, if a *man* chooses to transition after a certain age with more pronounced masculine features and mannerism, their *irrational* decision to call themselves as woman might be mocked in the lack of matching appearance. Just like the fatness jokes, this logic neglects who can access gender affirming care surgeries and services, as well as racially designated beauty standard which positions certain races as more masculine than others. In other words, Gervais’ arbitration of who deserves sympathy and who deserves cruelty is based on his own

¹⁰ For instance, Gervais presents a dialogue between a doctor and a fat person. The doctor warns the fat person if he carries on with eating too much, his leg will be amputated, and the patient will die of a stroke or a respiratory failure. Even faced with possible outcomes of his eating habits and presented with a solution to stop them happening (working out and eating healthy) the fat person actively chooses to be fat –hence they become underserving subjects (Spencer, 2022, 43:03-43:40).

White, rich, “unmistakably British” identity (Ellis, 2018, p. 170). That being said, unlike Chappelle, Gervais does not care about any of that, nor does he have to pretend to do so. Racial privilege still informs the comedy of arguably two equally famous, powerful, rich men. While Chappelle has to find excuses for making trans people subjects of his punches and differentiate himself from the other Black male celebrities (such as DaBaby) that utter homophobic/transphobic slurs *for no reason*, and disassociate himself from the stereotypes about Black males, Gervais has no such problem. There is already an established convention for the White mockery of gender non-normativity and gender variance which does not need a pseudo-critical justification. After all, Whiteness *is* intertwined in gender norms. This is why we need to continuously remind each other (as well as Chappelle) Audre Lorde’s famous quote: Yes, indeed “The master’s tool will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde & Browne, p. 224).

A New Direction

In *Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Politics of Illusion* Talia Bettcher (2007) explains how trans women are often portrayed to be deceivers and pretenders, genitalia being the focus of their concealed sex. In that rhetoric, the supposed incongruity between trans person’s sexed body (which is almost always the genitalia with which they are born) and their gender presentation (as a woman) creates deception. Julia Serano (2016) also names this stereotype as “deceptive transsexuals,” a media trope in which trans characters are revealed to be fake women at the end of a plot. While this narrative persists as a comedic element in the specials of the said comedians (for example, Chappelle’s bit about dancing in LA with a trans woman¹¹), the contemporary stand-up comedy seems to be going in a different direction. Comedy through deceivers and make-believers definitely remains on the stage; however, comedians started to take issue with those who do not *even* “deceive” anyone or “conceal” anything. These new generation of (trans) “ladies” are the ones to whom Gervais kindly offers the invitation to “lose the cock” (Spencer, 2022, 48:05-48:07). What is happening here is not heavily drawn from the age-old trope of a man who successfully tricks others into believing that he is a woman. Compared to 1990s or early

¹¹ In *Equanimity* (2017), Chappelle tells a story of having danced with someone in a dark LA club, only to realize that the person was a transgender woman after the lights were on. Although comparatively more lighthearted in tone, the story pays homage to the traditional trickster-deceiver trans woman and unsuspecting heterosexual man trope (Lathan, 25:10-26:35).

2000s when this archetype was more popularly used in Hollywood movies or on reality TV, in today's world, this stereotypical figure is more likely to receive a backlash when aired on a network or streaming platform. Polls and surveys suggest that a growing number of Americans identify as transgender (particularly Gen Z) or support transgender rights (Schmidt, 2021; Migdon, 2022). What is replacing this declining deception trope as the comedic element is the figure of a man who demands to be recognized as a woman, without visually presenting as one. As opposed to the deceptive transgender woman who was seamlessly made "possible" through medicines, surgeries, cosmetics, and sartorial fashioning, the "new (trans)women" stand-up comedy takes issue with what is made possible through identity politics and left-liberal progressive values. Gervais' bit in *SuperNature* in which he hypothetically envisions himself to be a woman named Vicky Gervais is illustrative of this situation: "I'd come out, I'd emerge. I'd be a real woman. I'd be Vicky Gervais. I'd be Vicky Gervais, right? No, I'd be a real woman, right? And you can't change your sexuality, so I find women attractive, so I'd be, I'd be a lesbian. I'd be a little lesbian fella called, um, Vicky Gervais, right? Right? And I'd probably be a butch lesbian 'cause of all the testosterone till then. Also, I like the fashion. Jeans, black T-shirt, short hair, beard! No, I'd be, I'd be a real lesbian called Vicky Gervais, lesbian about town, right?" (Spencer, 2022, 49:38-50:13). He has a similar joke in his 2018 special *Humanity*, in which, right after talking about Caitlyn Jenner's transition, he jokes about identifying as a pre-op chimp named Bobo, alluding to the outrageousness of identifying as another gender (Spencer, 2018). I suggest that this new type of comedy fused with social commentary lends itself better for the stand-up comedians' perceived role as a public intellectual, effectively elevating stand-up comedians' status to a higher position compared to that of Jim Carrey and his Ace Ventura—a morally reprehensible form of transphobia outdated for Chappelle's or Gervais' supposedly liberal-leaning demographic.

Conclusion

Andrew Schulz, who is another "edgy" comedian, reacts to Gervais' viral *SuperNature* clips on his YouTube podcast, and echoes my argument that pontification is more of a prominent element in Chappelle's comedy: "This [Gervais' trans jokes] is also silly. There's a difference when you're just being silly. Silly, absurdist, ridiculous. I felt like Chappelle was like "I'm gonna teach these trans women once and for all they're not women. That was like the conversation. It was almost like this is how you know... Or

“you might have a struggle but it’s not like black people struggle. Not only do I not believe you’re a woman, I also don’t believe your struggle is that big of a deal” (FLAGRANT, 2022, 58:37-59:04). In short, while Chappelle embraces a more didactic, preachy style of stand-up comedy in which the ‘mastery’ over jokes comes from how it can be juxtaposed with Black racial suffering, Gervais adopts Whiteness as the unmarked norm via his performance of a rational, straight-to-point “bloke.” However, I argued that what brings these two comedians together despite the stylistic and identity differences, is how both comedians increasingly use trans subjectivity as a symptom of progressive-values-went-wrong.

Let me set one thing straight: I do not defend limitations or cancellation of jokes, nor do I want to sanctify transness as a taboo certain people cannot talk about. If Chappelle, Gervais, or any other comedian wants to make the most transphobic jokes, they should be able to make them –however boring and banal those jokes might seem to me personally. Admittedly, this is not a position shared by large swathes of LGBTI community. I am not clarifying my position to portray myself as “one of the good ones” who will take a joke. (You cannot *perfectly* be one of the good ones even post-mortem, as we can see from Chappelle’s jokes about Daphne Dorman.) My stance on this issue is very much shaped by two things, the first of which is being a citizen of Turkey where speech and expression are extremely constricted by vaguely defined national, religious, and moral values. Limiting speech and expression can get to extremely dangerous areas and I simply do not support creating another sphere of morality in the name of protecting trans people. The second trend which cements my position on the issue is a set of discourses particular to North American LGBTI, in which the legitimacy or illegitimacy of speech regarding a particular topic is bound by one’s identity--though, ironically, identity is often reduced to speech itself. While one’s opinion on transness only matters if one is trans, transness itself is merely and ever-so-popularly defined as *identifying* outside of one’s assigned sex/gender at birth -- *uttering* that one is or is not something. A trans(gender) person is defined as someone whose gender identity does not match the sex assigned at their birth. While this definition is inclusive of people who do not prefer or have the means to transition from one conventionally understood gender to another, it makes the category of trans(gender) practically a non-identity and a non-category, following the suit of “queer.” Reducing transness to an inner feeling of gender in the name of broadening the scope of a social justice struggle also brings with it questions regarding social class,

visibility/materiality, race, cultural capital, or the ironing out of such matters. Trans activist and thinker Emi Koyama who famously wrote *Transgender Manifesto*, expresses the problem with trans vs. cis definitions:

Gender is not just individual preferences. It is a site of social stratification, and violence, as well as of resistance and liberation. . . . People define somebody as trans who is born with a body that is different from how they identify. . . . People often define cis mean that you are born with a body and you're fine with the gender that you're assigned with. And if the being fine with the gender you're assigned with was what makes you cis, then feminists are not cis. (Harvard University, 2018, 1:07:50-1:08:35)

That is to say, a mere utterance of and/or identification with a gender does not dole out the same degree of life chances or immunity from discrimination. In this ever-expanding non-definition of transness, anyone who raises concerns about the viability of this conceptualization (of trans/gender) is deemed a gatekeeper, truscum, or transmedicalist. Therefore, if we return to Ricky Gervais' hypothetical "Vicky Gervais" scenario, yes, in our ever-expanding scope of transness, he or anyone can *identify* as a woman, and their womanhood would not require anything but the very *utterance* of that womanhood. Although I value the importance of 'lived experience' especially in fields in which the first-person accounts of the subjects have historically been relegated to lower positions (if given any platform at all), I do share the opinion that 'lived experience' is not a guarantee for a better perspective especially, as stated previously, when the subjectivity is relegated to the *utterance* of a said subjectivity (Burgis, 2021). Therefore, the aim of this work was not to argue that anti-trans comedians and jokes, made by cisgender performers, should not be platformed. Rather, my aim throughout this piece was to point out a disquieting trend –one in which racial inequality and women's oppression are used to uncover the supposedly seamy underbelly of trans existence.

I do not claim that comedy, and stand-up comedy in particular, is inherently regressive or progressive; I simply aim to destabilize the de facto status of contemporary stand-up comedy as a subversive truth-telling practice, and the image of the stand-up comedian as a cracker-barrel philosopher who pushes people out of their comfort zone. However, there is a small number of trans and non-trans humorists who do joke about transness –to name a few, trans comedians Robin Tran, Jen Ives,

Stacy Cay, Brandy Bryant, and cis comedians Marc Jennings and Sam Morril. Though their fame and sphere of influence cannot match those of Chappelle or Gervais, they have growing fan bases, and clips from their performances occasionally go viral, drawing in the attention of new audiences who had never heard their name before--like myself. Not only do they share clips of their performances from comedy clubs and Netflix appearances on Twitter, but they also react to other people's tweets, blurring the line of consumer and producer in the age of convergence culture as predicted by the media scholar Henry Jenkins (Thompson, 2016, p. 156). By "embrac[ing] online participatory practices" they expand their influence (Thompson, 2016, p. 158). In "Taking Liberties? Free Speech, Multiculturalism and the Ethics of Satire" Anshuman A. Mondal asserts that "offensiveness is not the property of particular forms of discourse; rather, it is produced by the *relationship* between the speaker, the manner of the speech, the recipient, and the power relations that govern this relationship within the context of a given situation" (2019, p. 28). Therefore, the offensiveness of a joke is partly dependent upon how a comedian positions themselves in relation to the subject/butt of the joke. In the case of Chappelle, the positioning is that of a teacher, preacher, and arbiter of pain and suffering, and in the case of Gervais, this positioning is that of a secular, white Enlightenment figure--a beacon of reason. As opposed to this, the trans comedians mentioned above can have all the positions that constitute the components of a joke: teller, audience, and butt (Davies and Ilott, 2019, p. 8). For example, Robin Tran, who gained a significant following through roast battles in comedy clubs, makes quite hard-hitting jokes that have to do with trans embodiment. However, she is the target of all the jokes she makes--as a trans comedian (teller) who makes jokes about trans women (butt) which finds resonance in a larger trans community (audience). As I previously stated, I do not believe that a joke needs to be only made by someone from a group that the joke targets (i.e. by "the subject"). However, as demonstrated by the cases of Chappelle and Gervais, when the comedian positions himself as the source of society's collected and collective wisdom and the arbiter of pain and suffering, the joke that targets minorities or the disadvantaged stops short of merely being a matter of artistic freedom of expression.

In this essay, I presented a discussion of why stand-up comedy matters as cultural critique, particularly for debates around trans rights. Second, I explained why I take issue with Chappelle's and Gervais, and what makes these two particular comedians' work dangerous if taken as legitimate social commentary. I contend that

while stand-up comedy allows for socially charged conversations to be had in ways that cannot be had in other mediums, we need to approach stand-up's legacy as a social critique with greater circumspection.

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