

ship, making the theorizing of the LCSWG working group central to this analysis. It is not just about illuminating social justice issues and prompting action or attacking individuals and institutions that stand in the way of social justice; it functions to create community and validate identities among the culturally and legally disenfranchised.

### Defining Charged Humor

I propose to accomplish two things: establish a genre of comedic production—charged humor—and chart its pathways from production to exchange to consumption. To be clear from the outset, examining charged humor provides one lens through which to examine humor, though certainly not the only lens through which we can understand the economy of humor. The term charged humor is a suitable descriptor for a number of reasons. One, it is a metaphor calling upon basic energetic principles of attraction and repulsion that mimic audience response to charged humor. Two, charged humor is self-locating, presenting viewers with (usually personal) examples of feeling like a second-class citizen that on one hand charges audience members with complicity toward social inequities, and on the other offers solutions for redressing the balance by conveying strategies for challenging inequality. Third, charged humor springs from a social and political consciousness desiring to address social justice issues. The humorist in question seeks to bring new worldviews that eschew inequality into public consciousness and discourse. It is humor deployed in the service of creating cultural citizenship, which is especially important for communities whose legal citizenship still feels like an economy class seat while everyone else flies first class. This kind of humor is intentional, meaning the humorist has designs on an outcome, specific or general—a change in attitudes or beliefs or action taken on behalf of social inequality. Finally, charged humor can limit the commercial potential of a comic persona, meaning that there may be a charge, a cost imposed upon those comics incorporating such humor into their performances.

Terms such as satire, political humor, or biting humor do not quite capture the proactive qualities of charged humor, a metaphor I use to describe humor intending to incite social change, develop community, and lobby for civil rights and acknowledgment. Why a metaphor? “Charged” signals the active quality and loaded potential of this humor. Chemistry class taught us that in order for an atom to be charged there must be some sort of disturbance or environmental shift causing the removal or addition of electrons or protons. Similarly, a performer produces charged humor when she foregrounds her marginality in order to call into question and *disrupt* the terms of her subordination; *charged humor both repels and attracts*. This disturbance can be welcome and resonate with audience members, particularly with those sharing

similar experiences of marginalization, but it can also elicit feelings of distancing, alienation, apathy, or anger.

Consider a joke by Louis C.K. in his special *Hilarious*, filmed live at the Pabst Theater in Milwaukee, Wisconsin:

We have White people problems. That's what we have, White people problems. You know what that is? It's where your life is amazing so you just make shit up to be upset about [*laughter*]. People in other countries have real problems, like, "Oh shit, they're cutting off all our heads today" [*laughter*] . . . We make up shit to be upset about like [*in a sullen voice*]: "How come I have to choose a language on the ATM machine—this is bullshit" [*loud laughter and applause*].<sup>23</sup>

C.K. trivializes the plights of White folks (i.e., bilingual ATM machines, wonky cell phones, and flight delays) for being contrived, globally myopic, and self-centered, urging viewers to consider their woes in a larger social context. Doing so may generate a happier White populous grateful for the privileges and access to resources we have. He targets not just those privileges bestowed by living in the United States, but those accorded to White people in particular. In this instance, charged humor repels viewers who either disagree with the joke's premise or lack awareness of privileged social locations and attracts viewers who know all too well the validity of his critique.

Charged humor asks viewers to think critically. According to communications studies scholar and humor expert Judith Yaross Lee, "American humor reveals the state of the nation."<sup>24</sup> In the case of charged humor, it locates the humorist in the national imagination and shows us where there is trouble. It is intended to be self-situating and a call for viewers to refigure dominant beliefs and stereotypes about minorities and their respective communities. Moreover, it is not simply resistant; it can unite, edify, and rally on behalf of minority communities. Charged humor reveals one's immediate experience of second-class citizenship and gives us proactive means of addressing inequality. Moreover, charged humor can reveal how a person belongs and conversely how and where they do not belong, showing us how they fit into the national body politic. In the concert film, *Chris Rock: Kill the Messenger*, Rock happily reports:

This is the first time in the history of the world where White men have to actually watch what they say. White men are getting in trouble for saying the wrong words, man it's unbelievable man. And a lot of White guys [*in a mock "white" voice*]: "Hey man that's not fair. You can say whatever you want. You can say nigger" [*resumes normal voice*]. Yeah, when I last checked that was the only advantage I had to being Black [*laughter*]. You wanna switch places [*laughter*]? You scream nigger and I'll raise interest rates [*huge laughter, clapping, cheers, and whistles*]. . . . Sometimes the people with the most shit have to shut up and let other people talk shit about them [*laughter*]. That's how life works.<sup>25</sup>

Rock's argument in a nutshell: so, you cannot say "nigger" . . . big deal, you still own and plunder the universe. Control of public speech (a censoring not observed privately by many people) pales in comparison to control of a financial system whose history is wrought with myriad means of disenfranchising African Americans and other people of color. Chris Rock's charged humor locates and situates himself as Black and a subordinated subject in the United States, invokes cultural heritage by hearkening a shared history of oppression, reveals the real locus of power as the almighty dollar, and calls for economic restructuring. It is activist humor, even if the speaker may not be a formal activist and is simply using the stage as a platform to advocate on behalf of a political cause or social issue. This humor can be satirical, self-deprecating, shocking, or tendentious; it is *always* political and strives to offer solutions.

Charged humor edifies and instructs so it does not simply point to the trouble, but often conjures creative and humorous means for reconciliation or social change. This means that charged humor is a solution-oriented style of comic performance tapping into personal experience and drawing from cultural analysis and interpretation. Nato Green, a heterosexual White man, spent much of 2011 on the road with Janine Brito and W. Kamau Bell on the comedy tour: *Laughter against the Machine*. From White privilege to xenophobia to the gap between the rich and the poor, Green's wry charged humor deftly points to social inequities *and* supplies possible solutions.

But when they talk about immigrants . . . the right wing always says illegal aliens and they don't mean alien in a good way, like Alf [*laughter*]. The word alien conveys an image of invasion and conquest. But I've actually known a lot of illegal immigrants in my life and my friends are not here to invade and conquer America, in my experience they are here to clean up America's shit, make America's food while America sleeps [*laughter*]. So if we ever talk about groups of people using metaphors we should at least use an accurate metaphor. Not aliens [*pause*] . . . elves [*laughter*]. How would it change the public policy debate if we all said illegal elves [*laughter*]? [*In a mocking voice*] Close the borders for those magically industrial beings [*laughter*].<sup>26</sup>

Language like "alien," "foreigner," and "illegal" immediately establishes an individual as not belonging in a legal and cultural sense. In this joke, he attacks terminology and beliefs circulating about undocumented immigrants in the United States, exposing these as ways to dehumanize them and make it easier to dismiss or justify exploitation, abuse, and belittling. The language he proposes instead—"magically industrial beings"—recharacterizes a denigrated community performing thankless difficult work. If language creates our reality as sociologists and semioticians suggest, a linguistic substitution would be an important step to change the living conditions of undocumented workers in the United States.

Cultural citizenship helps distinguish charged humor from satire as its own style of humor production; there are similarities but also important distinctions. Like satire, charged humor passes judgment, targeting individuals and institutions with overt critiques. And while charged humor and satire “mean it” and want it to do something beyond eliciting a chuckle, charged humor invokes cultural citizenship. When George Lopez uses the stage to celebrate Latino/a cultural practices and identity—sprinkling jokes with Spanish, castigating anti-immigration sentiments and policies, and openly mocking the superciliousness of dominant (White) culture—he kindles cultural citizenship through charged humor. While charged humor struggles in the economy of comedy, satirical performances abound in twenty-first-century popular culture demonstrating that satire may or may not be charged humor. The popularity of infotainment or news shows using humor to impart information like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* attests to the public’s desire to consume political and social satire, some of which *is* charged humor. More often than not though, the comedy performed by late-night television talk show hosts (excluding the hosts of the shows just mentioned) is more aptly defined as pseudo-satirical, a brand of humor that caricatures celebrities and well-known political figures without actually being critical or taking a stand on salient issues.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps dismissed as an innocuous form of entertainment, comic performances, whether charged, satirical or pseudo-satirical, communicate messages. For charged humor but not necessarily for satire, these messages privilege agency, community, and redress. Like shock comedy, self-deprecating humor, minstrelsy, or performing marginality, charged humor can be satirical. In fact, by evoking aggression, judgment, play, laughter (all key elements of satire) as well as relying on a knowledge base and offering strategies and solutions for change, you could argue that charged humor and satire are one and the same. While these blur in definition and performance at times, both foisting judgment and making an attack, charged humor seeks to remedy experiences of second-class citizenship by celebrating and developing cultural citizenship among minorities—be they sexual, racial, ethnic, corporeal, material, or otherwise—and their allies. In 1962, when Mort Sahl quipped: “Here we are at the new frontier—Cuba,” he attacked the US government’s global imperialist practices that would threaten the autonomy and independence of Cuba, criticized America’s foreign policy, and simultaneously drew attention to the Space Race beginning in 1957 between the Soviet Union and United States (also called the “new frontier” and the title of Sahl’s album).<sup>28</sup> The joke functions as satire but not as charged humor. If he had gone on to make a connection between domination of “inferior” people domestically and abroad, uniting folks based on shared disenfranchisement and considering possible solutions for such disparities—that would have made it both satirical *and* charged. Comics

wield charged humor on behalf of social justice, seeking to remedy inequality and, importantly, doing so by creating community, fostering cultural citizenship, and generating solutions.

Of equal importance, here, is comic intentionality. Part of what makes this humor charged is that it is done so consciously—the performer is in one regard *charging* her audience with social crimes, indictments of a stratified and prejudicial America. This is not necessarily conducted in a hostile manner. In fact, humor offers gentle rebuke, like a mama bear cuffing her cub. I reserve the designation of charged humor for the material of jokesters whose counterhegemonic material aligns with their artistic objectives. In other words, it is important to examine what a comic says onstage as well as offstage. In this way, I attempt to avoid specious recuperations or readings for resistance of comic material that may be many things, including satirical, but does not intend to be resistant or effect social change. In an interview published in the *New York Post*, Adam Carolla, stand-up comic and creator of *The Man Show*, says, “The reason why you know more funny dudes than funny chicks is that dudes are funnier than chicks.” He goes on: “If Joy Behar or Sherri Shepherd was a dude, they’d be off TV. They’re not funny enough for dudes. What if Roseanne Barr was a dude? Think we’d know who she was? Honestly.”<sup>29</sup> His opinions offstage clearly express male superiority and he corroborates these sexist views in comic material on stage and in the television shows in which he has a hand. Any analysis of his comedy as subversive, antisexist, or feminist would be shortsighted and ignore the evidence available. It is important to examine the comic material circulating and the intentions and values of the jokester in question. Doing so can reveal that while sometimes comics make jokes that at face-value are racist or sexist or homophobic, these are not necessarily world-views they believe or to which they adhere. Such a disconnect might instead point toward what audiences *want* to hear. An aggressively sexual shock comic, Lisa Lampanelli may bash people of color and gays fondly in her sets, but in her interviews, public life (she donated \$50,000 to gay rights organizations in 2011), and moments in her performance reveal sympathies toward communities experiencing second-class citizenship by virtue of race, gender, sexuality, etc. These moments belie what might otherwise appear to be virulent bigotry. Investigating Lampanelli onstage and offstage reveals the divide between her personal politics and the comic persona she portrays. It is worth noting that Lampanelli’s style of shock comedy proves lucrative for her and others performing similar material; there is a reason she employs this style instead of performing charged humor, which she certainly could do given what we know about her worldviews.

Charged humor occurs in a country divided, whether by political affiliation or ideological differences. Some folks are going to love prochoice material and

others will take umbrage, just as some viewers may agree with gay marriage and others will not. One night in 2003 as I was leaving a live performance by Margaret Cho at Ohio State University, I ran into some acquaintances also leaving the show. They raved about the performance, except one White man who remained quiet. When he did speak up, he wondered aloud if comedy was a place for politics. He had enjoyed the show up until Cho rebuked the Don't Ask Don't Tell policy (which was reversed in 2010). Cho was indignant that someone who was willing to die for their country was not even allowed to be honest about their sexuality, as if that had any bearing on their aptitude in the military, as if being gay somehow conflicts with patriotism or the ability to do one's job. "She was funny until she got political," he said. In other words, she was doing her job as a comic until she made political or social commentary contradicting his own worldview. During those same bits, many members of the audience were laughing, cheering, and applauding, demonstrating an ideological divide at play: proponents of gay civil rights signaled agreement while opponents stiffened in their seats.

In general, comics performing charged humor have a harder time becoming mainstream because their material calls into question social hierarchies, builds community, and lobbies for social change. Communications scholar Linda Jean Kenix compares mainstream media to alternative media, arguing that "mainstream media have been traditionally viewed as maximizing audiences through pack journalism that is conventional and formulaic, relying on content that would appeal to the most number of readers and therefore ignoring the issues that are perhaps more important to smaller, minority groups;" whereas alternative media "advocate programs of social change through the framework of politicized and in-depth social commentary."<sup>30</sup> The simplest barometer for classifying a comic as mainstream is to assess whether or not they have name cachet or recognition with a significant portion of the public. Can they pull off their own half-hour Comedy Central special or a full-length concert comedy film; are they invited to perform on late-night television talk shows on the major networks; are they headlining in comedy clubs in major urban centers or better yet a larger performance venue like the Apollo in Harlem or DAR Constitution Hall in Washington, DC; are they offered comedic film roles or can they carry a sitcom or reality show? If you can answer yes to more than a couple of these about any comic, then most likely they are mainstream.

Perhaps it is most accurate to say that charged humor does not help your chances of achieving mainstream recognition, status, and fame. But, it does not preclude those chances—some charged comics like Richard Pryor, Dave Chappelle, Wanda Sykes, Chris Rock, Margaret Cho, and Kathy Griffin are household names in spite of the odds. But many other practitioners of charged

humor struggle at the regional level, traveling the national circuit of comedy clubs as forever a feature comic or “road dog,” or are making a living cobbling together corporate, cruise line, and college gigs along with special performances for human rights organizations, freelance writing work, and online web projects. How one circumvents an unwelcoming market and an audience potentially at odds with one’s agenda varies based on the comic’s response to and navigation of said obstacles, political and social conditions, and the technologies used to enable and enhance self-promotion, for example, independent recording labels and social media.

While advertisers and network executives can be fairly indifferent to political worldviews—they support whatever programming is most likely to generate profit within the confines of Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulations—they are incredibly attuned to the consumptive proclivities of target demographics. An entertainment industry executive put it this way: “You know, getting Latino shows in English on TV is a mathematical formula. When there is enough money to justify it, it will happen.”<sup>31</sup> He was referring specifically to Hispanic programming but his point is generalizable. Similarly, in an interview, Lily Tomlin said:

The bottom line is the dollar. It’s just a reflection of the culture. . . . why do they make big blockbuster, you know, action adventure movies? Because they make the biggest box office. There are more people in the culture who want to see that kind of a film. . . . And you’re right, every now and then they’ll be a blip on the screen and something comes along that just happens to make money, happens to catch on and do well. But by and large, they can count on it [action adventure movies]. They can count on bringing in the dollars with that kind of film, generally. So there are more of those produced. . . . It’s not like they’re anti-anything, they’re just pro-dollar.<sup>32</sup>

Charged humor can be divisive, eliciting strong reactions, both positive and negative, which makes it a risky commercial venture when its material can alienate a good portion of a target demographic. Late-night television talk show hosts like Jay Leno and David Letterman take potshots at Democrats and Republicans, but only usually to target a personality quirk or flaw, rather than to spur reform. Such apolitical material ensures talk show hosts are well-loved and able to transcend and appeal to a nation divided on political issues and candidates.

Television and film are subject to censorship not just by the Federal Communications Commission; a film’s or show’s content is also subject to network standards that are in turn supported by advertisers. If the content is polarizing, advertisers may lose out on a portion of a desirable market. Networks choose content carefully to avoid objectionable material that could cost them advertisers.

Writing of satire's place in 1950s and '60s television, Gerald Nachman reports that the "networks declared that hip satirical humor was beyond the grasp of The People" and describes television in the mid-twentieth century as a "medium not known for playing to the box seats . . . in those days of white-bread TV."<sup>33</sup> Not a whole lot has changed. Sometimes satirical, but always politicized, charged humor, especially coming from an unknown comic, is not conducive to prime time television, historically or today. Musing on mainstream media in the twenty-first century, career funny lady Maria Bamford makes similar, though more humorous, observations about the restrictions put in place by the gatekeepers of the entertainment industry:

But you know how it goes—you need health benefits so you start working for the man. You know, I was just typing out what he had to say. I felt like I was taking back the night from *inside* the machine, because it makes a difference to *this* starfish. And then you get a promotion. And my ego says uh, I wanna be on TV and it turns out the man owns that. He just wants to make you do a couple changes to your jokes so as not to upset his buddies/corporate entities. And I made those changes. And then the man says, "I'll give you a big bag of money if you just say what I want you to say." And I took that big bag of money and I said exactly what he wanted me to say. And now I'm re-decorating my house in shades of gray! [*Feigns maniacal laughter*] HA, HA, HA, HA [*laughter*] (emphasis hers).<sup>34</sup>

According to Bamford, to be successfully mainstreamed, comics must either compromise or eliminate polarizing material or find alternative means of building a fan base—both are strategies with which she is familiar. The latter strategy can pay off over time when a comic has enough name recognition to compel advertisers, network executives, and producers to hire her. The former strategy often proves a more clear and expeditious route, which is to perform apolitical material until a solid fan base has been established. Anticipating marketing difficulties, George Lopez elected to perform safe comedy until becoming well-established, after which he had more freedom (read: commercial power) to insert more charged humor.

I think I kind of compromised myself a little bit in some of the material coming up because you gotta get in. I don't think I was as hard-edged in the beginning, as I would have liked to be now. I've been in meetings with Warner Brothers where I wasn't particularly happy with what I was hearing. And the Chicano would say, "You know what, fuck this! Fuck you guys, I'm leaving." When you leave, you're out. So, I'd make myself stay. Probably a lot of people would say that's selling out but it isn't selling out, it's the way the business is set up.<sup>35</sup>

The arc of Lopez's comedy is testament to this with early work consisting of mainly noncharged family-friendly humor, whereas his later comedy specials,

*America's Mexican* (2007) and *Tall, Dark and Chicano* (2009) are chock full of charged humor celebrating Mexican culture and heritage and lobbing acerbic critiques at dominant White culture. The same observation can be made of the careers of Wanda Sykes and Margaret Cho, both well-known charged comics but whose early, attention-grabbing comedy incorporated fewer instances of charged humor or trafficked in other comedy styles consumers found appealing, like Cho's use of yellowface minstrelsy. This appears to be a solid strategy for getting a foot in the door.

In sum, charged humor is not as economically viable as noncharged humor. Karen Ripley, a White lesbian comic who started performing in 1977, performs a bit that captures the monetary toll placed on stand-up comics whose comedy draws attention to social identities as marginalized: "I wanted to tell some gay and lesbian jokes because I don't ever want to be rich and famous [*laughter; pause*]; and it's working [*laughter*]."<sup>36</sup> However, the potential charged humor has to be economically viable is contingent on historical context (e.g., different moments in history allow for some charged comics to emerge as national icons) and the individual comic in terms of her identity, stage persona, or point of view, and the frequency, style, and critique of her charged humor. If a comic headlines at Carolines on Broadway, a club in Times Square known for pulling in tourists from across the nation and around the world, she must have either a modicum of notoriety (in that case she could include charged humor) or the jokes must appeal to the majority assembled there. A sure-fire way of garnering said appeal, is to steer clear of polarizing content—a tall order for a kind of humor whose task it is to politicize, edify, and confront audiences about social inequalities. While market gatekeepers may hold the purse strings and seem to dictate what is made available to us, they continually look to us to decide what or who will be featured next on America's "It" list. The public supports comics whose personae reflect their worldviews and ideologies. Noting who is popular in any period of time will in turn indicate popular consensus about what is funny and whose points of view are worthy of support. In the next chapter, I argue that some mid-twentieth century charged humor found favor with audiences, allowing a few charged comics to emerge as cultural spokespersons even, at times, in mainstream media. The popularity of charged humor during this era, relative to the latter twentieth century, reflects a significant enough portion of the population willing to "buy" into the worldviews of charged comics. This coincided with the social rebellion fueling a number of civil rights movements and the (then) emergent technologies granting access to charged comedy beyond television—like the long-playing record.

The critical work of Americanists continues to be the intellectual engagement with "how American national identity has been produced precisely in opposition to, and therefore in relationship with, that which it excludes or

subordinates.”<sup>37</sup> Citizenship has long promised inclusiveness while remaining hierarchical in practice. An examination of the production and consumption of charged comedy through the lens of cultural citizenship offers a proactive means of identifying those on the fringes of the national imaginary and the methods they employ to feel like they belong. Because I focus on comics who produce charged humor, they range wildly in success in the entertainment industry and hail from every social group imaginable—from household names like Richard Pryor and Louis C.K. to those like Janine Brito, Gloria Bigelow, and Hari Kondabolu, who are recognizable only among a base of loyal fans. Part of the attraction of cultural citizenship as framing mechanism for analysis of charged humor rests on its inclusiveness and ability to encompass such a diverse range of comic practitioners. I focus on the content of their humor, namely on how they reveal their social positioning in the United States and what we can learn and know from them. The strategies they devise to achieve visibility (and even fame) while deploying charged humor has implications for entertainers in many other cultural forms who seek to produce substantive popular entertainment. Humor production is just one cultural form of many having the capacity to reveal who we are, as individuals and as a nation.

But [Black writers and film-makers] insist that others recognize that what they have to say comes out of particular histories and cultures and that everyone speaks from positions within the global distribution of power. . . . And the question of ethnicity reminds us that everybody comes from some place—even if it is only an “imagined community”—and needs some sense of identification and belonging. A politics which neglects that moment of identity and identification—without, of course, thinking of it as something permanent, fixed or essential—is not likely to be able to command the new times.<sup>38</sup>

This book echoes the clarion call made decades ago by Stuart Hall, a call for a politics recognizing every person’s need to connect, identify, and belong. Charged humor is predicated on those needs. Indeed, the impetus for theorizing cultural citizenship grew out of a desire to build community and secure rights among those experiencing exclusion from the larger national body.

It is not a foregone conclusion that second-class citizens will take up arms or rhetorically combat the system or groups maintaining their subordination. While many minority comics perform charged humor, they do not have to and we should not assume that they do or will; they are under no obligation to use humor to engender community or speak out against bigotry. In fact, minority comics seeking a professional career in comedy face extraordinary commercial and social pressures to perform in ways that corroborate stereotypes and satisfy audience expectations about “otherness,” for example, a gay man who ratchets up the gay to gain audience approval (think: Jack from *Will and*

*Grace*) or a Black comic who acts gangsta' although she has never set foot in a ghetto. Whether an exaggerated performance of identity or a form of minstrelsy, the pressure to gay it up, Black it up, or don a raced or queered affect to make fun of your own or another minority group comes primarily from watching other comics do it successfully, which means they are meeting the demands of the public, the people . . . us. Public desire to support social parity can be a game changer in the field of stand-up comedy, shifting how and who we constitute as mainstream, thereby making charged comedy more readily available and accessible. Americanist T. J. Jackson Lears writes that it "is part of our task as well, to listen to those voices (however dissonant and confused) and try to reconstruct the human experience of history."<sup>39</sup> Comedy is telling and there is much we can learn from these cultural critics in jester's clothing. Charged comics are thinking hard and talking harder. They perform charged humor for a variety of reasons, though they do have one thing in common . . . to them, it is not just a joke.