

Tufts University

Woke Comedy in the Age of Trump:

A survey of current liberal humor, and the intersection of woke culture and comedy

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT'S NEW ABOUT CONTEMPORARY COMEDY SINCE NOVEMBER 2016?

“Hello Ladies, Gentlemen, and gender nonconforming individuals!”

This is how the comedy podcast, “2 Dope Queens”, opens most of their episodes. The podcast hosted by two successful black women comedians, Phebe Robinson and Jessica Williams, deliberately aims to feature comedians who are people of color, women of color, white women, and LGBTQ+ identifying. The jokes can be about anything from sex toys, to U2’s Bono, to systemic racism, but there is always a central tone of liberalism and social justice running throughout. The opening line is said confidently and without missing a beat. It progressively corrects an extremely common introduction phrase in show business, “Ladies and gentleman...”, to become a stamp of acceptance and of political correctness in this comedic space. This line, and this show in general, embody the concept of “wokeness”.

A person described as “woke”, most likely by a millennial, is a person who understands and engages with modern day social issues. This person refuses to comply with a white washed, heteronormative, patriarchal, xenophobic narrative about society. The woke person has woken up to the issues of today is respected for it. There is an entire language and culture surrounding “woke-ness” that one might need to be “in the know” to understand, a language that works to unite modern social justice fighters through the internet and through media.

While there are a myriad of social issues in the world that someone could be “woke” to, there are a few that come up frequently in media and in conversations with millennial social justice warriors. An example would be institutional racism and how that relates to cultural appropriation and the Black Lives Matter movement. Another is the danger of gentrification and how gentrification especially targets communities of color. Sexual harassment and assault in the

workplace, in the streets, and on college campuses is another. A woke person is also concerned with the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals in public spaces, and is cognizant of people's preferred pronouns. A woke person understands gender and sexuality on a spectrum rather than as a binary choice.

The reason that these particular issues are connected to the term "woke" is highly correlated with the particular political atmosphere following the election of President Donald Trump. Urban Dictionary, which defines "woke" as "a reference to how people should be aware in current affairs" shows that this term was used and searched for minimally starting in May 2015, and that its usage spiked significantly in December 2016, the month after the election. The term is largely linked to the resistance against Trump, and the ideologies that he stood for throughout the election. Another dimension of social justice ushered in along side "wokeness" is an increased attention to identity, and to the way that different identities possess different privileges and marginalizations. Many attribute this awareness to be part of President Barack Obama's legacy.

Just as we see the increased pervasiveness of progressive "woke-ness" in general culture, it is clearly emerging in various genres of comedy. The podcast, "2 Dope Queens", displays dozens of social justice stand-ups. New late night shows of the last two to three years such as "Full Frontal with Samantha Bee", "Last Week Tonight with John Oliver", "The Run Down with Robin Thede" all have outspoken social justice narratives and focuses. Existing late night shows such as "The Daily Show" with Trevor Noah and "Saturday Night Live" have become increasingly progressive and focused on identity and liberal issues. TV shows such as "Dear White People", have begun producing content that is hyper focused around millennial woke

culture. A significant number of the most high profile comedians have become decidedly more progressive and on the side of the woke, and comedic projects have sprung up that work primarily towards a social justice end with comedy as the medium.

This wave of what I will refer to as “woke comedy” is emerging alongside a pervasive narrative from the right that these wimpy social justice “snowflakes” cannot take a joke, and do not understand the meaning of free speech. The conservative millennial blogger, Allie Beth Stuckey, spoke with the hosts of “Fox & Friends” in a segment aired on July 10, 2017 titled “Conservative Millennial: ‘Snowflake’ Media has Embraced Victimhood.” In that segment, Stuckey said, “[a] ‘snowflake’ is defined [as] someone who has the inability to engage in productive intellectual dialogue. And that’s what we’re seeing in the mainstream media right now.” Stuckey posits that this pattern on the part of liberals is in response to Trump, our president who “puts America first”, and that “for some reason it’s become a trend to not put America first.” The hosts of the show then project a slide that reads “Signs of ‘snowflakery’: Perpetually offended, In need of ‘safe spaces’, Apt to shut down speech, Embrace culture of victimhood.”

However, in the wake of a clearly identifiable influx of progressive comedy, it is evident that not only can these “snowflakes” take a joke; they’re avidly creating an entire new genre of aggressively political comedy. Snowflakes might be easily offended, but they aren’t easily silenced, and they are certainly not humorless. It is often those on the margins, who view society’s flaws from the outside and who are excluded from its power, who are the most likely to create satirical cultural commentary. This new energy might be also be propelled by the fact that it comes on the tail end of a nation-wide identity search. As a February 2016 National Public

Radio segment, “America is Obsessed with Identity. Thanks, Obama?” describes it, “[D]id having a black president in the White House — one with his own, complicated story of identity — change the rules about who belongs where in our society?”

Many of these “woke” issues are not especially new in terms of liberal advocacy. Nor is satire about powerful institutions and social equality. As Glenda R. Carpio points out in her book, *Laughing Fit to Kill*, comedy has long been a tool of black people in America to confront racism, representation, and oppression (to note just one example). Moreover, many generations of young people have been forces of advocacy for change on these issues. However, this new wave of activism has created a subculture (in a loose sense of the sociological term) and a language surrounding it that are unique to its mission and to its participants. This paper will examine woke comedy both as a uniquely effective social justice tool, and as an evolving (and still flawed) art. I will try to demonstrate how woke comedy exposes certain holes in current liberal thinking, namely the conflation of naivety with bigotry to the point of extreme exclusion. However, I will also illustrate how comedy is an ideal tool to combat this exclusion. Last, I will show that not only is comedy changing the landscape of social justice, wokeness is changing the foundation of comedy.

SECTION I: EXAMINING WOKENESS AND CURRENT LIBERALISM IN THE CONTEXT OF COMEDY

To start with a couple of definitions, punching down in comedy is to joke about someone less well off than you are (aka to punch at someone on a lower social tier). To punch up in comedy is to punch at a person or institution with more social power than you have. Example: a

white woman might punch up at a white male CEO and she might punch down at a poor immigrant who works at the same company.

Jordan Klepper's new show, "The Opposition", includes a segment titled "Who Says Conservatives Can't Do Comedy?" It is essentially a satire on this common narrative expressed by the Fox & Friends hosts, that liberals have an "inability to engage" with offensive material. Klepper's show is similar to Stephen Colbert's "Colbert Report", in that Klepper (a former liberal correspondent on "The Daily Show") employs a schtick parodying conservatism by adopting a conservative mien. In one of his sketches, he discusses the difference between conservative comedy and liberal comedy from the perspective of a conservative comedian. Two of his correspondents, Josh Sharp and Aaron Jackson, describe the "rules of conservative comedy" as follows:

"There's a few rules of conservative comedy. If you're going to tell a joke, first you choose a victim. The weaker the victim, the funnier the joke. Are they overweight? Do they speak broken English? Does their family own fewer than three boats? Instant laughter. The whole point of comedy is to find someone who's less well off than you, and punch down. And here's the thing. When you're the president, you have to punch down because there is no one above you. ... Good comedy comes from singling someone out for their differences and then punishing them for it."

Klepper defines conservative comedy as a genre that revels in punching down and conservative comics as essentially bullies with media platforms. While there may be endless evidence to back this point, Klepper and his correspondents list just a few, including the video of Trump mocking a physically disabled reporter, Trump calling Maxine Waters (a black female politician) a "low IQ individual", Fox News correspondents mocking immigrants on the street, and Milo Yiannopoulos saying that "being Muslim...is almost as stupid as being fat". Trump's humour is the absolute antithesis of what woke comedians set out to do when they punch up at

power systems, avoid offending someone based on social status or identity, and protect marginalized identities.

In “The New Yorker” piece published on January 23, 2017, “How Jokes Won the Election”, Emily Nussbaum explores how Trump regularly uses slapstick and offensive comedy to create some of the most politically effective moments of his campaign and presidency. She contrasts this with Obama, the ever-cool intellectual, who is almost the exact opposite of this slapstick showboat. Obama embodied a chill deadpan, especially when joking about Trump’s birther movement. Trump is the perfect foil for conservative comedy’s efforts to attack political correctness, and well as the perfect punching bag for liberals’ long vendetta against everything Trump stands for. To quote Klepper again: “Sure the left can’t take a joke, but this proves that our side [Republicans] can take a joke all the way to the White House.”

Punching up and mocking those in power has a long tradition in satire. Traditionally, before the recent wave of political correctness, comedians might not have exclusively punched up, and they would not have been so demonized for occasionally punching down. Indeed, comedy has traditionally been an art of rude mockery that breaks the rules of political correctness likely just as often as it breaks the rules of social hierarchy.

We see woke-ness and comedy begin to intersect at the point where we are questioning who is punching what way and who is the butt of the joke. To be politically correct is to never punch down at someone’s identity or lower social status. Woke comedy connects political correctness with the concept of never punching down to produce comedic effect. A woke white comedian would never make fun of a non-white person for his or her race by say, making a generalization about all people of that race, as this would be both punching down and politically

incorrect. Woke comedy (ideally) accomplishes a mission of being thoroughly politically correct, while still having plenty to mock.

The “personal is political” in current liberal thinking. If you think it is acceptable, for instance, to use the word “retarded” to refer to someone's dumb actions, then you don't truly believe in defending the rights of the disabled and you are actively contributing to the cultural atmosphere that marginalizes that group. Ironically, there's clearly a barrier to entry, an exclusiveness, that goes along with this ideology of vigilant acceptance. Those “not in the liberal know” may not understand why political correctness matters, and so to be confronted with this unforgiving and confusing set of rules may be intimidating and exclusionary. Someone who does not know the politically correct lingo is quickly dismissed as being naive or even as being a bigot. For instance, if someone doesn't get why it would be wrong to say the n-word while singing along to a song, and someone scolds that person for being racist, the singer would probably be embarrassed, confused, and might defend their actions as “free speech”.

Those who actively resist political correctness (such as the Fox news anchors) see this trend of political correctness as a very real threat to their freedom of speech. In fact, their hostility towards political correctness implies an assumption that their speech is not going to be politically correct. This is not to absolve political incorrectness or to suggest that political incorrectness is just an accident of speech. Rather, this is to point out how the obsession with political correctness has been so divisive in these debates over social justice and how it rarely leads to productive conversation between the two sides.

In an interview with Chris Rock on “Totally Biased” with W. Kamau Bell in 2012, Rock said:

“I don’t believe in censorship ... I believe comedians especially in comedy clubs ... should be allowed to express themselves and mess up. I believe that a comedian in a comedy club is like a musician in the studio and you can’t judge him by the stuff in the comedy club. You know I’m sure ‘Thriller’ sucked in the studio ... I believe that everybody should get a chance to fail in comedy clubs. And also, let’s stop all this ... fake outrage when people say some shit you don’t agree with, you know what I mean? Like Tracy Morgan said some stuff about gays, and it’s really fucked what he said and I’m not going to defend it at all, but since when did Tracy Morgan become Barbara Walters? Since when did we look to Tracy Morgan for spiritual advice?”

Rock’s comment gets at a point many might make about comedy and its relationship to political correctness. Isn’t it supposed to push the limits? Break norms? Ask the bigger, darker questions? Comedians aren’t reporters or politicians; they are cultural commentators and provocators. However, as we see this growing emphasis on political correctness in many facets of society, and especially in media and a subset of comedy, it is no longer a given that comedians are held to different standards. Many on the left would argue that to joke in a non-politically correct way, in any form, is to support bigotry. Even if Tracy Morgan is not held to the same standard as Barbara Walters, most liberals would argue that he is being homophobic when he makes a joke about gay people, even if it is “just a joke”. Although much of Rock’s comedy focuses on racial injustice and he is generally thought to be on the side of the left, he is coming from a slightly older mindset of left comedy where the personal does not have to be political, and slipping up on your ethics is part of the process. Rock’s comment, in 2012, might be viewed as a difference of opinion, even the start of a debate that would be acceptable on a very progressive tv show. Perhaps this is because Rock’s comment was made under the Obama presidency, where people's identities on the margin didn’t make them feel in peril on a regular basis. Under Trump, nothing can be taken too lightly, because it feels like one poorly worded tweet could start a war,

and one offensive joke can hurt millions. This gets to the key day to day aspect of woke-ness, and the notion that to slip up is to contribute to the problem.

Rock's comment gets at a central theory of stand-up comedy, as discussed by John Limon. A theorem of stand-up noted by Limon is the notion that if something is funny (to the majority of the audience), then it is funny pretty much as a fact. This means that if someone tells a joke that is off color and offensive, but it still gets a laugh, then it is, by this definition, funny. While this doesn't mean that it isn't offensive, it would imply that the critics of Morgan's jokes would be in the wrong about the quality of the joke. It would also put political comedy at an interesting intersection. Political comedy takes a side that automatically splits the audience, and truly is only funny to those who align with it.

Rock's simile comparing a musician in the studio to a comedian at a club is an apt way to describe similar artistic processes and how they relate to the public. However, Tracy Morgan making a joke about gay people will likely offend those who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community. No one in the LGBTQ+ community will care whether or not he was trying out a new routine; a homophobic slur at any stage of Morgan's act is a deal breaker. Just because the line came out in a less formal setting won't alter the impression that this is how he truly feels and thinks. It is central to woke-ness to be rigorously politically correct. However, this ideology gives little wiggle room for a learning curve. If mistakes are unforgivable, then why will people try to identify their bigotry and correct it?

SECTION II: DEAR WHITE PEOPLE & COMEDIC WOKENESS IN ACTION - FLAWED AND UNIQUE

The Netflix show, “Dear White People”, is not just woke in its themes and writing. It shows the inner workings of these woke subculture enclaves. It channels validation and comedic ammo for its social justice warrior audience. This show is entirely centered on what it means to be truly woke and provides ample examples of the way that wokeness and comedy intersect. We see how wokeness and comedy can be most effective progressive tools, and also how even a show that is so wrapped up in wokeness on the right side of history can still make mistakes and violate its own moral standing. This begs the question - can comedy that’s edgy and entertaining never punch down? While many comics prove that this is true, Dear White People gives us an intimate peek into woke culture and how even this social justice centric work can struggle to never punch down.

As Fox news commentators often point out, many hubs of millennial activism and political correctness are housed at elite (mostly coastal) universities. “Dear White People” takes place on such a campus. In the show, Samantha White, a black student at an elite university, creates a radio show, called “Dear White People” where she vents about her frustrations with her white peers. She describes being constantly asked where she’s from and being asked to share her perspective on slavery with an otherwise all white classroom. This theme is explained by the narrator of the show, who opens the first episode with cheery classical music in the background as follows: “The writers of this show are depending on my ethnic but non threatening voice to explain things they are too lazy to set up traditionally.” The very first sentence of the show mocks the media’s tokenization of people of color, and the stereotypes that stay buried in tokenization, while describing the stereotypes and tokenization that Sam is experiencing. This meta narrative asks you, the viewer, to check your own assumptions about what you thought

when you first heard the narrator's voice. Did you find the sound of the narrator's voice comforting, in the same way you do when you hear Morgan Freeman narrate a movie? Is that exactly the sort of stereotyping you're accustomed to, and you didn't even realize it? Did you make the same quick judgements that Sam's peers did about Sam's background? From the get-go, the show's title is an affront to white comfort and an examination of white privilege. The way that the show works to expose white ignorance, effectively provoking self reflection in a white viewer, is ever present and it invokes the way that woke comedy works for a cause more than a laugh.

The first episode begins with a group of male white students who write for a campus comedy magazine, "Pastiche". They are planning a party where guests will be encouraged to attend in black face in order to attack political correctness on campus. Their particular target is a poster Samantha White put up that reads "Missing: Black Culture - Dear White People." To publicize the party, the Pastiche group puts up posters reading, "Missing: Free Speech - Dear Black People". The following monologue by the narrator describes the Pastiche group's reaction to Sam's poster:

Narrator: "[Members of Pastiche] was butt hurt. Keeping with its vow to mock anyone deemed too self-important, Pastiche set out to take down Samantha White by throwing a politically incorrect party (*shows signs where they changed her poster which read 'Missing: Black Culture - Dear White People' with a poster that read 'Missing: Free Speech - Dear Black People'*) for all those burdened by her demands for racial sensitivity... and like most parties the hangover from this one is a motherfucker."

At the outset, hearing the words "butt hurt" and "motherfucker" spoken by this very dignified voice accompanied by classical music, is funny in its unexpected juxtaposition. The improper immaturity of the word "butt" is immediately goofy and sort of dumb. Few other genres of cultural commentary could take such an informal approach and achieve the same jolting snapback at obnoxious white men. An online opinion blog would sound like a very

illegitimate trolling comment if it used this kind of slur. The juxtaposition of the elegant and improper embodies the type of dissonance that is often at the root of a joke. Thing A doesn't match at all with Thing B, and that poses a bigger question about what we think about both. This is the kind of outlandish, even immature, liberty that comedy can take to prove a point. However, it does not come without risk to the comedian's progressive integrity.

The vaguely homophobic slur, "butt hurt," suggests something very problematic, that asks one of the initial questions about woke comedy: can it truly stick to its moral high ground when sometimes all it wants to do is to take that easy low blow? "Butt hurt" sounds like something a cruel fraternity brother might say, yet it is being used to mock the white men who intended to throw the black face party. The joke acts as a 'give them a dose of their own medicine' revenge tactic, and asks the question, who's being overly sensitive now? However, the term's ambiguity renders it potentially quite politically incorrect. Does it refer to a spanking, or is it mocking anal sex between two men, or does it refer to something much more serious such as anal rape? The joke prioritizes revenge humor over the problematic associations raised by use of this term. It is an example of how woke humorists will make hypocritical concessions if they can get away with it or justify it.

In many ways, "Dear White People" has its finger on the pulse of current youth liberal activism, capturing many of the tensions and excitements within that movement. The premise of the black face party described in this episode of "Dear White People" derives from arguments about cultural appropriation that exploded over college campuses in the last two years. Much of this controversy stemmed from debates over Halloween costumes, with people advising others not to wear costumes that culturally appropriate or that promote negative racial stereotypes (for

instance, dressing like a Native American or a terrorist). In October 2015, there was a widely publicized incident involving a Yale faculty member who was nearly fired (as demanded by students) for an email he sent out that defended students' freedom to wear what they choose. Many students were outraged by this defense of cultural offenders, and felt that the faculty member should leave the community for being on the side of the non-woke. The incident triggered similar debates across campuses about what constitutes free speech and how free speech fits into a more modern and expansive definition of cultural appropriation.

Sam's reaction to the black face party illustrates this tension between political correctness and freedom of speech from the side of the liberal students, ultimately providing validation and comic relief for the liberal side. Her radical activism (baiting the white students to follow through with their outrageous act of racism) is about exposing the racism while making the point that when you wear or say things that are racist you are being racist - not just innocently exercising your right to free speech. This episode asks the question: when does a party in black face stop being a party and starts being a Klan get-together? This is the validation that, say, the Yale students, who were widely criticized across the country for their extreme actions, needed at the time.

"Dear White People" sets up a fictional scenario, but it does a good job of illustrating this tension between political correctness and free speech. Because the show is fiction, it has the freedom to set up hypotheticals that mirror real life in order to comment on reality in an engaging but still legitimate way. In many ways, the ability of fiction to foster sympathy and to create heroes and enemies is what makes this piece a powerful and unique tool of resistance. You're automatically on the side of the smart, beautiful, cool protagonist Sam, and you're

enraged by the obnoxious white jerks who would throw such a disgusting party. The character depth and emotion that can be cultivated in a longer fictional series work builds the progressive case in a way that late night shows and stand up comedy can't quite match, and demonstrates how woke comedy adds tools to the activist scene beyond just commentary.

Someone overhearing the show, but not really paying attention, might say it sounds like *Gossip Girl* (people gossiping, love interests flitting in and out, friendship tension), and stylistically, this may be an apt comparison. However, the majority of the drama in "Dear White People" is over racial tensions and activist ideologies. There is plenty of romance and interpersonal drama to go around, but much of the central plot stems out of Sam's ideas about radical activism and the result of her actions to prove how racist white people on her campus really are. The stylistic similarity to *Gossip Girl* does suggest that liberal twenty-something people relate to a different type of drama in their TV choices. Their tensions are not just about relationships; they are also about navigating different methods of advocacy, difficult conversations about race, and current liberal activism. We might relate this back to the liberal idea that the personal is political, and wonder if the *Gossip Girl* style is less about romance and interpersonal drama than it is about committing to social causes in every aspect of your life (even when you're just relaxing and watching your guilty pleasure TV). There's a catharsis and a pride that comes out of watching a tale where you're on the side of the hero. Furthermore, this fictional comedy is an effective medium for expressing the ideals of wokeness. For instance, the party that Sam throws to expose the white students' racism is a hypothetical scenario that aptly outlines the very real consequences of this real world issue.

Each episode of “Dear White People” shifts to a new protagonist whose side of the story you are then privy to. In the second episode, we are in the mind of Lionel, a timid, nerdy black boy who is realizing his homosexual orientation but isn’t ready to share this knowledge publically. Lionel is on the side of the other black students who are fighting for change on campus. He is also working on the school newspaper, operating as more of an observer to all of the events unfolding, and less as an active instigator. When Lionel is telling the editor of the school newspaper (for whom he works) that he doesn’t feel the need to put a label on his sexuality, the editor responds: “Labels keep people in Florida from drinking Windex. Personally, I’m a Mexican-Italian gay verse top otter pup.”

At the onset, this joke hints at a key theme of wokeness: identity matters. In fact, it makes the further point that being proud of your identity, especially if that identity is a marginalized one, is important on not only a personal, but also on a political, level. Lionel responds, “Individually I know what those words mean” which pokes fun at the extremes to which this labeling may go with terms such as “top otter pup”. The editor is making a point about the importance of labels at the same time that he is suggesting that maybe this label business can get a little silly sometimes.

One facet of woke culture, and progressive culture in general, that this show examines is the different roles of the activist. Because the show changes protagonists with every episode, the audience is exposed to different voices of the liberal side: the radical more performative activist (Sam), the mostly honest reporter (Lionel), the white ally (Gabe), and the activist who works within the system (Troy).

Troy is an attractive, smart, smooth talking black student who is the son of a higher up in the school's administration. Troy is running for student body president. Troy attends every club event to smooth talk students from every corner of the campus. He is on the side of whoever he is talking to if it will support his candidacy. Ultimately, Troy schmoozes frat bros and rich school donors for the greater good, to achieve a progressive end, working within the system to create change.

At one point, Troy is pandering to various groups around campus (the Black Student Union, the feminists, the fraternity brothers, and the Hispanic student group, to name a few). We see how Troy can adjust his platform to fit whatever group he is speaking with to the point of absurdity. Troy promises the fraternity brothers that he will get to work on "getting [them] more pussy" once he's in office, clearly an outrageous reference to the lengths politicians will go to to get votes (regardless of how liberal they may seem). When Troy reaches the Hispanic student group, he speaks to the members in Spanish. Two grounds keepers looking on from the sidelines comment that they "wish they could vote". In this moment, we see the show pointing to the flaws in the woke college campus activism as a whole. Even while Troy may be defending the rights of his fellow privileged private school students, those who serve the students daily are not truly full members of this elite community. The show is actively acknowledging the blinders of leftist identity politics that ignores blatant inequality in front of its nose, namely this drastic class based divide. We see how the character of Troy (the system entwined activist) is flawed in seeing labels as voting check boxes, and how one sided these labels can be. Intersectionality is about understanding the ways that people's identifiers interact with each other, and perhaps this label obsession is actually creating far more barriers to inclusion than it is breaking down. There is a

slipperiness that comes with getting so hung up on labels, where one loses one's grasp on how to actually progress to equality within progressive politics.

In another example of woke humor from "Dear White People", Troy is talking to a rich donors at a university administration event and says: "If you were a cat owner and only all the cats were dying in America, and someone said to you, 'All pets matter,' you'd be upset too." Troy's line is an eye roll moment for everyone who has had to explain why black lives do in fact matter, and in that way it is cathartic and validating. The dark humor lies in the disturbing idea that Troy has to use cats as a metaphor for black people to get across his point that this movement against police brutality is not about excluding white people. There is an ongoing joke that liberals, and specifically liberal white women, care more about animal rights than they do about human rights, and the joke works to expose that mentality on top of the validating dark humor. In the labeling quip about Floridians and the pet lives matter jab, we see the characters teaching about their issues through metaphors and effectively creating references to social activism. The next time someone asks why identity labels are so important, or why black lives matter, the viewer may have a quick metaphor up his or her social justice warrior sleeve to throw back.

Going back to the question of whether woke humor always punches up, these are not all victimless jokes. We are still laughing at Floridians for being dumb in the joke about labeling and we are laughing at white women for having misplaced priorities (and also for being dumb) in the pet lives matter bit. In these jokes, the woke are the wise, and those who don't understand are idiots. On the other hand, mocking liberal white women for caring more about cats than they do about black people is a clear example of punching up at white ignorance (if down at liberal

women). The joke about Floridians is punching at the common comedic image of Florida as a terrible swampy place filled with beach variety rednecks and old people. Florida is an easy punching bag because of its long history of being mocked although this might seem more like a downward/sideways punch given that Florida is home to 20 million pretty diverse people. We do see woke comedy making at least mild concessions about its resistance to punching down in order to prove a point about inclusion.

Going back to the initial question, can comedy be effective if it only ever punches up, and can it be truly politically correct at the same time? Even in “Dear White People”, a show truly centered on what it means to be woke, we see the rules of acceptance that are the basis of political correctness being broken. In many ways, there is a sort of woke math problem going on with many of these jokes, prioritizing certain marginalized identities over others and picking and choosing to cause minimal hypocritical damage while still hitting high punchlines. So is woke comedy, or any comedy for that matter, able to be thoroughly politically correct? Could the line “Labels keep people in Florida from drinking Windex” work at all without mocking some group? For instance, if one replaces “people in Florida” with “kids” the line would certainly lose its edge and its layers. It’s not funny to suggest that kids might drink poison and it falls flat on every level. No one expects kids to know not to drink poison, and so there is also no insult here. However, the long standing tradition of mocking stupid people may never die or lose its appeal. Everyone wants to be smarter than the fool, and laughing at the jokes about the fool is the way to be on that higher ground. No one wants to be the butt of the joke, but every joke may need a butt. The underlying butt of every “Dear White People” joke is undoubtedly those who don’t agree with these politics, including whites heterosexual men and conservatives. Throughout the show,

the villains are predominantly the jerk white fraternity brothers who defend free speech and who don't understand the nuances of cultural appropriation or microaggressions. Conservatives comment on this liberal obsession with labels and identity politics bitterly, accusing the left of dividing the country further and of promoting extremism comparable to that of racist hate groups, as seen in a December 2017 video by Fox News titled "What are identity politics?". It is highly doubtful that someone on the Fox News end of the conservative spectrum would willingly select a show called "Dear White People" when they sit down to flip through the Netflix collection. The directed title would read less like an invitation to engage with a commentary on white privilege, and more like a personal attack. So we can safely assume that the audience for "Dear White People" is made up of those who relate to its liberal values. To this point, the metaphors in Dear White People are directed at an audience who understand them, and thus they might not be illustrating the points as much as they are mocking those on the outside and nurturing the activist spirit of those on the inside.

SECTION II: EXAMINING EFFECTIVE WOKE COMEDY

"Dear White People" is intentionally centered on woke culture and demonstrates the effectiveness as well as the flaws in making woke jokes in a fictional medium. "Saturday Night Live" ("SNL"), on the other hand, is a show that seemingly slid into wokeness at full force. SNL has been America's late night sketch show for over 40 years, and while it is based in New York and has always had some liberally skewed political content, the show has become especially progressive and adamantly anti-Trump since the start of the 2016 presidential campaigns. For

instance, Alec Baldwin, a frequent host on SNL, gained a new found popularity on the show with his Donald Trump impersonations that now appear in nearly every episode, regardless of who the star host is. Baldwin's impersonations have been persistently scathing. They certainly caught the attention of President Trump who has tweeted his disdain for Baldwin's routines. Baldwin's bits have garnered millions of views online, as reported by "The Atlantic" magazine in "Alec Baldwin Gets Under Trump's Skin", published in May, 2017. Baldwin, slathered in orange foundation makeup, affecting the bizarre wispy blonde hairstyle of Trump, plays up the most ridiculous aspects of Trump's image including the tense pursed lips, the scowl, the flimsy hand waving, and the whiny New Yorker voice. Every second of his impersonation is filled with obnoxiousness, rudeness, and an evil ignorance. Baldwin's character is a constant foil to every moment of the Trump Presidency. Baldwin is truly filling the role of the repulsive jester to this detestable ruler. There is a mission in Baldwin's work as SNL takes on an active role in the left's vendetta against this President. A show that was previously full of goofy, mostly aimless sketch comedy has become a notable cultural commentator in current politics.

This Trump bit isn't the only way that SNL is embracing liberalism in a new way. The show also has more and more sketches that are not just politically oriented, but also social justice oriented. This shift represents the larger moment of mainstream comedy towards liberalism, and more specifically towards woke politics (i.e., avoiding punching down at those with less privilege and talking about current issues such as the "Me Too" movement and immigration laws). SNL's freedom to combine stand-up, song parodies, commercial parodies, and fictional sketches affords the show's writers extra freedom in how they choose to push these liberal messages. A song sketch, "Welcome to Hell" that aired on the December 2, 2017 episode of

SNL, opens with several of the women stars on a platform in short poofy pink dresses, with high pigtails, sucking on lollipops, with brightly colored flowers and bubbles all around them. The sketch is in the style of music video pop singer, Katy Perry: girly, hot, flouncy, and colorful. The song begins with the stars singing the following in baby voices while sucking on lollipops:

“Hey there, boys. We know the last couple months have been frickin' insane
 All these big, cool, powerful guys are turning out to be, what's the word? Habitual predators?
 Cat's out of the bag, women get harassed all the time!
 And it's, like, dang, is this the world now?
 But here's a little secret that every girl knows
 Oh, this been the damn world!
 It's freaky, it's narsty
 It's button-under-the-desk bad
 But this is our hometown, we'll show you around
 Welcome to hell
 ...
 “Now *House of Cards* is ruined, and that really sucks
 Well, here's a list of stuff that's ruined for us
 Parking, And walking, And Uber, And ponytails, Bathrobes, And nighttime, And drinking, And hotels,
 And vans
 Nothing good happens in a van.”

This sketch came in the wake of the “Me Too” movement that called out the many powerful sexual predators in Hollywood and other industries who have attacked an endless number of victims. Thousands of (mostly) women posted about their own experiences with sexual assault and harassment following the waves of accusations, working to demonstrate how widespread and systemic this kind of abuse is. Amidst this bravery, there were plenty of naysayers talking about how these men's careers were ruined (e.g. Kevin Spacey's career as the lead on “House of Cards”) and how surprised people were that these issues were so pervasive in society. However, as most women knew, sexual predation is universal and not even remotely a new phenomenon.

The girly play-dumb act makes the entire sketch thickly sarcastic, as the women push back at this patriarchal naivety with their own play-dumb act, as though it were cute that all these

men are just now learning about what women endure every day. It is riddled with blatant, patronizing sarcasm. Clearly these women could care less that a TV show was “ruined” given that they can’t walk home from work without mace in their purses. This flashy, sarcastic schtick speaks to the many exhausted women who have been trying to explain these issues and the legitimacy of this movement for a very long time. The girliness (short pink and purple dresses, high pigtails, childish voices) asks the question, ‘Is this how you see us? Well guess what these little girls are sick of this and they’re smart.’ This validating, flamboyant, “No shit!”, over the top song might play in a woman’s head as she reads what feels like the hundredth tweet about how someone is “shocked” by the revelations of the “Me Too” movement. While the theme takes on the kind of work that many op-eds and blogs are also doing, a popular, fairly mainstream, sketch comedy show has the freedom to literally sing and dance through this mess of stress and conflict. There is a great release that comes from seeing these women drive this point home in this grand way on a major broadcast station. It is a release that niche feminist blogs might not be able to fully provide.

Another sketch on SNL delivers a fake advertisement for a parody of the classic board game, “Life.” Life is a board game that many Americans likely remember playing in their youth. It is all about measuring one’s imaginary two hour life by following a colorful board game path while reaching exciting goals such as college, marriage, parenthood, and retirement. The SNL parody (aired on April 7, 2018) advertises a game called “The Game of Life: DACA Edition,” featuring a tiny plastic border wall, doll-sized barbed wire, and catapults that fling the little board game playing pieces over the wall. While one player (revealed to have been taken to America from Honduras as a baby) is navigating the baffling paperwork of naturalization and jumping

through bureaucratic hoops to gain citizenship, the other players are buying imaginary mansions and having kids in the “real” game of Life. The fake advertisement format of the sketch is an extremely appropriate satirical tool, featuring the chipper music and smiling faces of a genuine board game commercial juxtaposed against the terrifying prospect of navigating immigration law in America and deportation. It vividly demonstrates how dreams of college, a family, and financial stability can be destroyed in a second by a president’s tweet and a maze of xenophobic legal traps. The nostalgic comfort a viewer may take from recalling this child’s game is in sharp contrast to the jolting political violence. It is an attack on the privilege of being able to plan exciting life accomplishments, and an acknowledgement of those who do not have that privilege as a direct result of a bigoted political agenda. SNL is not only producing ample liberal fodder for the resistance. It has moved beyond that to create effective social justice commentary in this greater movement.

Another notably effective woke piece comes from Nore Davis, a stand up comic and writer featured on the 41st episode of the podcast, “2 Dope Queens”, aired on October 10, 2017. Davis’ bit on the show provides what may be a more advanced example of how woke humor can be edgy, funny, and activist without making any concessions to punching down:

“I’m woke now, I’m conscious. I can’t even enjoy hip hop anymore, cuz you know like it’s my culture, like, it raised me, but like we know it’s misogynistic. I don’t like the male ego, I don’t like that whole, like, ‘Yeah I stole your bitch.’ Like no you didn’t, I was wack and she went to you. ... They take away women’s choice, there was this video online... and the tag was like, ‘I’m sucking your bitch’s pussy in Dubai.’ Good for her. ... And why is she your bitch? Look, if I was getting my pussy a free trip to Dubai, I would go through. She knows what she wants. She ain’t no bitch. ‘What’s wrong Nore?’ ‘My girl’s in Dubai getting her pussy eaten by Rick Ross.’ ‘Ah man she’s a bitch.’ ‘No she’s not... She made the right choice.’ ”

Nore Davis’ topic, misogyny, is immediately a social justice joke, as he directly talks about what it means to be woke to gender inequality. He demonstrates his actual wokeness by

sincerely validating this hypothetical woman's choice about who she wants to be, and who she wants to be with. We also see him criticizing a male power structure he sees in music that perpetuates misogyny. He's clearly punching sideways in this instance at other men, and in this light, we see that the butt of the joke is a man who doesn't understand women's agency. Davis' joke is a little raunchy and pretty casually strung together. At the outset, it is hard to believe that a man using the words "bitch" and "pussy" this often in a joke could not be offensive. However, the only times he uses these words in derogatory ways is when quoting other men.

The highest hitting punchline of this joke is the, "Good for her." He delivers this note with a calm encouraging tone after a pause, just when you're waiting for him to say something negative about the woman or the situation. This is one way that this joke lands in such a refreshing way. It is a shock to discover that he is using these words and talking about this subject in an earnest, non-sexist way. By doing this, he completely flips the script, and the listener's surprise demonstrates the sad truth of how often we are prepared for misogyny. This example of woke comedy takes the comedic tool of subverting expectations and uses it to question the norms or tropes you unconsciously expect in society.

Davis' self-deprecation is also a refreshing anecdote to hyper masculinity and proves another point about the dominating male ego. Not only does a man think that he is entitled to any woman who leaves a man; he also can't give the woman any credit for leaving. He assumes he must have done the stealing, as though a woman only operates as the property of whichever man has laid claim to her. Self-deprecation is a common tool among comedians, and here we see its power to challenge a greater power, i.e., the male ego. When people share their humiliation and insecurities, it is often the most genuine and relatable content. In this instance, when it is used by

a person who has power in the patriarchy to dismantle his own “male ego” and those of the men around him, it has a genuine and progressive effect. Perhaps the ego dissection that occurs on a stand-up stage can be applied to egos in society at large, thus acting as a powerful tool of subversion to systems such as the patriarchy.

While these other comedians on SNL and on “2 Dope Queens” demonstrate successful woke comedy but don’t necessarily proclaim their social justice allegiance, Negin Farsad is a self-proclaimed “social justice comedian”. While not many other comedians have proactively labeled themselves this way, there is clearly a movement afoot among comedians to not just joke about social issues, but to advance the discussion. In response to a frightening wave of Islamophobia following 9/11, Farsad worked on a comedy tour with other comedians called “The Muslims Are Coming!” in which they used their comedic talent to shift perspectives about Muslims across the country. Following the tour, a hate group responded with a bigoted Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) poster campaign, and in response to that hate, Farsad worked with Dean Obeidallah to create a response campaign, called “fighting-bigotry-with-delightful-posters campaign” (which was banned by the MTA as political content). Farsad’s response campaign was a series of posters that included messages such as, “The ugly truth about Muslims: they have great frittata recipes” and similar lines. Farsad’s argument against the MTA’s censorship was that their campaign was not political; it was about justice.

In her Ted Talk, “A highly scientific taxonomy of haters”, Farsad says:

“Now, the question is: Why does social justice comedy work? Because, first off, it makes you laugh. And when you're laughing, you enter into a state of openness. And in that moment of openness, a good social justice comedian can stick in a whole bunch of information, and if they're really skilled, a rectal exam. Here are some ground rules for social justice comedy: first off, it's not partisan. This isn't political comedy, this is about justice, and no one is against justice. Two, it's inviting and warm, it makes you feel like you're sitting inside of a burrito. Three, it's funny but sneaky, like you could be hearing an interesting treatise on income inequality, that's encased in a really sophisticated poop joke.”

Farsad sets up a clear formula for her genre, social justice comedy: funny + informative + inviting = effective social justice comedy. Farsad illustrates this tactic in her Ted Talk by inserting bodily function jokes into an otherwise intellectual platform and talk. The line about the rectal exam is superfluous and doesn't really make any sense. Why would a comedian, or most people frankly, ever slip a rectal exam into anything, much less their point about social inequality? In this way, it is silly, and silly is the opposite of threatening. Islamophobia is no joke. However, Farsad is working to demonstrate how serious topics can be breached in silly ways that don't detract from the original intent. Her point is a serious one about making social justice digestible, and to prove the very point she is making, she peppers it with a bodily function shout out.

Ultimately, while Farsad is setting out on an extremely admirable mission, her work begins to expose the difficulty of mastering this complex field of social justice comedy. Perhaps a poop joke is the perfect way to offend no one while defending someone. On the other hand, maybe it just proves that crafting comedy that is smart, funny, and progressive is an uniquely difficult pursuit. The phrase, "sophisticated poop joke", is itself a paradox, illustrating how this tactic, while effective at fostering receptiveness, may lack a depth and complexity. However, Farsad's point about openness is well taken, and well proven. If much of the social justice culture is about being in the know, or being woke, then there's clearly an exclusionary line being drawn. While poop jokes may not be the most enlightened form of comedy, they demonstrate the power of comedy to be dumb, sloppy, and gross. In these exclusive social justice narratives there is rarely a space where people are allowed to mess up or to be naive. Perhaps the most open thing about a poop joke is that it undeniably applies to everyone regardless of privilege. It is a highly

inclusive, humbling, and human catalyst for progressive discourse that really cannot be found outside of comedy. In this way, we can see how comedy is a uniquely fit genre for social justice in that its natural sloppiness and silliness are ideal vessels for education and for inclusion.

Another comedian who uses projects beyond his show to make social change while having a laugh, is John Oliver. On his March 18, 2018 episode, “Mike Pence: Last Week Tonight”, he found a very entertaining and effective way to ridicule Mike Pence who is notorious for his anti-gay agenda, usually thinly veiled with pro-family propaganda. In March 2018, Pence published a children’s book about his family’s pet bunny, Marlon Bundo, called *Marlon Bundo’s Day in the Life of the Vice President*. Oliver parodied Pence’s book with his own children’s book, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver Presents a Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo*. Oliver’s book describes how Marlon Bundo falls in love with another boy bunny in the face of a heteronormative power structure. Not only that, proceeds from Oliver’s book go to the Trevor Project and to Aids United to support the LGBTQ+ community. It is noteworthy that while the Pence family’s book was the 15th best selling book on Amazon.com, Oliver’s ranked as the number one best selling book on Amazon.com the same month that both were released.

In Oliver’s book, Marlon Bundo and his boy bunny partner get married even though the evil stink bug who’s in charge (and who has an identical hair cut to that of Mike Pence along with a red necktie) won’t allow their union. All the animal characters, played by notable liberal and LGBTQ+ identifying actors such as Jim Parsons, Jesse Tyler Ferguson, and RuPaul, talk about how it is ok to be different and to love whomever you want to love. The animals also express their disgust with the powerful stink bug and eventually vote the evil ruler out of power. The book ends with a liberal rally cry : “Because it doesn’t matter if you love a girl bunny or a

boy bunny, or if you eat your sandwich backwards or forwards, stink bugs are temporary - love is forever.”

On his show Oliver says, “Please buy it for your children, buy it for any child you know, or just buy it because you know it would annoy Mike Pence. You’d be doing a nice thing in a really dickish way, and isn’t that the dream at the end of the day?” Like Farsad’s poster project and comedy tour, Oliver’s book is an active campaign that starts with a joke and continues with a movement. Oliver’s show often engages in projects that go beyond just comedy routines. A recurring sequence on “Last Week Tonight” is the Catheter Cowboy who makes public service announcements about policy through fake catheter ads on “Fox and Friends” in the Washington D.C. area (with the hope that President Trump will watch it by accident and learn something Oliver would like him to know). While it is clear that part of Oliver’s projects are jokes in essence, they’re often ridiculous and part of the joke lies in the idea that anyone has actually carried out these wacky projects. Part of the power of the projects is the notion that Oliver is not just another late night host complaining about these issues; he’s doing silly things to actually address them in the real world. Spending so much time and money on these efforts to move his gags beyond the show into the real world adds a layer of authenticity to Oliver’s arguments and turns his efforts into something more than a joke. At the same time, the “dickish-ness” of it all is quite tongue-in-cheek and entertaining. Liberal parents get the chance to call Mike Pence stinky over and over, while knowing that money spent on Oliver’s book was well spent, and their kids are getting a delightful, and even educational experience. In this way the rudeness of comedy is valuable in mocking this cruel and powerful figure, even when it is delivered in almost the tamest form imaginable, a children’s book. This initiative work like a public relations campaign

and a fundraising push could be common non-profit methods of supporting causes. However, with the work of Farsad and Oliver, we see how comedy can make this kind of organizing work entertaining, engaging, and accessible in a way that an organization or even a politician can't accomplish.

III. THE AWAKENING OF THE COMEDIC LANDSCAPE

So far I have explored the ways that wokeness and comedy interact together, and how comedy can be an important and unique contributor to the social justice cause. The next question is how has comedy as a genre been changed by this culture of wokeness that exploded in reaction to the Trump presidency. Late night comedy, a staple of American life, has seen a dramatic shift towards progressive politics since the 2016 election. Since then, late night shows including “Full Frontal with Samantha Bee”, “This Week Tonight with John Oliver”, “The Rundown” with Robin Thede, “The Daily Show” with Trevor Noah, and “I Love You, America” with Sarah Silverman, are devoted almost exclusively to social justice and anti-Trump broadsides. Many of these shows work to actively break down the old standard comedic devices for late night comedy, as the comedians rigorously poke holes in a dangerous administration and in the unjust ideologies that surround it. Unlike other comedy genres such as stand up or sitcoms, the material is quite up to date, allowing the content to add to current political movements in real time, rather than commenting on political trends months later. Late night tends to have a reliable recurring viewership, giving these shows the feel of a night school in political thought. Roughly the same group of people tune in repeatedly at the same time each week, allowing their hosts to impart lessons to their audience in a cumulative way. Rather than just getting a laugh over a joke about

a bad president, the hosts of these late night shows work to train their audience in resistance tactics through their comedy. It will be interesting to see whether the persistent work of these hosts adds up, creating a contemporary comedic pedagogy of liberal resistance. Commenting on Trump's actions and views in these late night shows appears to be synonymous with being complicit with Trump's bigotry, whereas actively attacking his administration is viewed as necessary for survival, especially for those on the margins of society.

Samantha Bee's show demonstrates this rejection of standard late night comedy, in its adamant insistence that Trump is no ordinary president to mock. Instead, he is a threat to people's lives, and he must be stopped. Following the 2016 election, Bee reacted to the notion that under a Trump Presidency 'the jokes will write themselves':

"Jokes don't write themselves, Jews write jokes and they are scared shitless. Believe it or not this isn't a great day to be one of the most diverse staffs in late night. They're not in a very jokey mood. (projects picture of a script that reads 'AAAAA....Goddamn shit f**kin c**t ass shit....) You know I don't say this very often, but I should have hired more white dudes. I mean look at Mavin [a man of color] - best case scenario he gets stopped and frisked daily, worst case scenario he gets erroneously deported".

On one hand, Bee is pointing to the fact that her liberal comedy is not about capitalizing on a Republican president. Instead, it is about standing up for the people who need social justice, including the diverse and marginalized writers on her own staff. Indeed, Bee noted in an interview with "The Cut" that her writing staff is made up of 50% women and 30% people of color (2016). Her original quip, "Jews write jokes", harkens back to the resounding prominence of straight Jewish white male comedians in the 1960s that John Limon describes, in *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*. The make up of her staff actually tells the story of a tidal wave of liberal comedy that is diverse, and that mocks Trump's terrifying politics as a strategy for survival.

Bee is one of at least four prominent women hosts of late night shows that includes Robin Thede (currently the only black woman late night host), Sarah Silverman, and Chelsea Handler. Bee made a meaningful, and funny gesture to commemorate this fact by sending each of these women a silver varsity letter jacket marking their membership in a small, but mighty clan. While these four women may not look like the vanguard of a huge cultural shift in late night comedy, this can be viewed as the beginning of the rebuilding of late night comedy. On Silverman's first episode of her new show, "I Love You, America with Sarah Silverman", she introduces her avant garde take on late night as follows:

"[The show is] not necessarily going to be what you're used to. So what we're gonna do is have a white man at a desk, just your average, run-of-the-mill late-night talk show host to go to whenever things get a little uncomfortable... Um can we cut over to the white guy at the desk?"

As noted by John Limon, following (and overlapping with) the era of male Jewish stand up comedy came the era of a late night host attired in a tailored suit sitting at a news desk with a mug, a guest chair, and a show backdrop. There is usually a band that plays the host in. The host fits an American archetype of a white collar businessman at work, or at least the classy showman version of this figure. Think Johnny Carson, David Letterman, Jay Leno, Jon Stewart, Conan O'Brien.

Samantha Bee's show tackles this format both in its aesthetic, and in its very name, "Full Frontal". Bee's style establishes a powerful foil to the classic late night genre. She speaks quickly, sarcastically, and with an air of manic happiness. She stands close to the camera for the entire show, and never sits at the classic late night desk. She does not come off as cocky and self centered, her name is not projected in shining lights behind her, there's no spotlight curtain entrance, and no jaunty band background. She is confident and down to business; she has real

world concerns to tackle on her show. While Jimmy Fallon (initially) found great success with his mild jokes about people who walk too slowly on the sidewalk, Bee is solely concerned with the politics of the day and the injustices all around her. Bee tends to wear a variety of brightly colored, sparkly, bow adorned blazers, and other showy business wear that alludes to the traditional male comedy host, but she represents a new female voice in comedy, truly down to very real business and breaking the male workplace standards.

Additionally, the title, “Full Frontal”, strikes its own ironic note. One might expect a video titled “Full Frontal”, as in “full frontal nudity,” to lure the average heterosexual man into watching a show with the expectation that it will egregiously objectify women. Instead of exposing women, Bee’s show exposes the bigotry of those in power, and the need for rigorous social activism. What you get instead of bare flesh, is bare knuckled comedic journalism and the flip side of heterosexual male scripts. Forget the endearing, smiling, suited up male late night host delivering goofy jokes that calm you to sleep. This is a strong woman’s battle cry to man the barricades against a Trump America.

What’s more, Bee is not just here to be a cheerleader for liberal activism. She is here to push her audience to actually make a difference, even at the risk of scolding her own base. In a post election episode of “Full Frontal”, Bee shows videos of the many liberal protests in response to Trump’s win, and chastises her audience for being so enthusiastic on the streets and yet so absent from the polls. She compares the pathetic 12% turnout in a local Los Angeles election to a post-election Women’s March in LA that drew upwards of half a million marchers. She then jokes, “Maybe they didn’t get the memo because it wasn’t not pinned on a beautiful celebrity’s pelvic bone” (referring to the celebrities wearing ACLU ribbons on their red carpet outfits). Bee

is driving to get a message across that is worth more than a laugh. She is scolding her own audience demographic of liberal young women viewers, at the risk of alienating them, by putting the priority on educating them. This education is a common thread throughout this new wave of late night comedy.

While it is certainly not new for comedians, especially late night comedians, to joke about presidents, this new trend is notably about resistance and not just mockery, and about living this fight, as opposed to simply commenting on it. To understand how different Bee's work is in comparison to, say, "The Daily Show" during the Bush era, we can look at a 2008 interview with The Paley Center for Media and the writers of "The Daily Show". Even at first glance, the difference is quite visually clear. Almost all of the 10 Daily Show writers (including John Oliver), are white men. The moderator, David Remnick of "The New Yorker" begins, "George Bush has been a gift to you...not to the world, but to "The Daily Show." Several of the writers note that they will not miss him, but then when asked if "they're bored with him", one of the writers agrees, and says they would like "some new challenges". They banter about how Bush does not work much, and how his administration does not watch their show because "they definitely watch Blue Collar Comedy Tour". This notably undiverse, male writing team does not view Bush's presidency as a threat to their very survival. Instead, they view him as a highly mockable politician who, in addition to being a bad leader for the country is, more important, a topic they are tired of writing jokes about.

This pedagogical approach to liberal comedy is different for each late night host. While we see Bee putting a fire under liberals to take action, we see other hosts using metaphors and similes to draw instructional comparisons between Trump and social issues. While as a political

comedian on The Daily Show, John Oliver might have casually dismissed Bush as a silly president, his show is now utterly social justice oriented and adamantly anti-Trump. In discussing Trump's factually absurd insistence that there was rampant voter fraud during the 2016 election, John Oliver commented, "faith and facts aren't like Bill Pullman and Bill Paxton; when you confuse them, it actually matters." Many of Oliver's jokes are outlandish similes, which take a contemporary issue and prove its absurdity through a ridiculous, yet apt, comparison. Similes are a common teaching tool: 'this is like this, just as this is like this', because they help to cement a more complicated concept, or to contextualize it, with a more simple one. It does not matter if you mix up two rather obscure celebrities, and that unimportance is the exact opposite of a situation where the president of the United States is lying about important facts. This simile provides a laugh because it's irrelevant and silly, yet provides a lesson that is true and memorable. Oliver is not always funny, as when he continues, "We all need to commit to defending the reality of facts." He asks his viewers to not share unreliable news sources and to question the validity of their sentiments. He walks through the steps of fact checking, recognizing reliable sources, tracing facts to their primary sources, and then comparing those original sources with the sources they are sharing. This instructional injection does not even pretend to be humor as most of Oliver's messages are. It is purely a lesson about organized resistance to hints of a fascist regime. Oliver's comedy sounds more like the recent flood of classes and online platforms that teach young people about reliable news sources than late night comedy.

Like most current TV hosts, comedians and reporters, John Oliver uses images projected next to his head to illustrate his points. In his piece, "Trump vs. Truth," the episode title is

projected with Trump's name graphically rendered in gold placard lettering, imitating the manner in which his name is emblazoned on his many hotels and buildings. Underneath that, "Truth" is carved into a grey stone background. This makes the visual point that while much of what Trump says may look shiny, gold, and important, it is at odds with what is actually written in stone. Just as a teacher might illustrate a point on a blackboard, Oliver uses this common news tool to illustrate this vital lesson.

Commenting on U.S. Senate candidate Roy Moore's remarks responding to numerous accusations of sexual harassment and assaults on women and girls, Noah says:

"It's pretty much the 'Trump Playbook'. Alright, you blame your accusers, you claim sabotage, and then you shit on Mitch McConnell. That'll work forever. Like 2,000 years from now, alien politicians will be like [alien sounds]... Mitch McConnell."

While Noah's joke is much more of a quick quip than methodical training, it works to the same end as Oliver's segment. Both bits are codifying a pattern in Trump's actions. They both pick apart the rhetorical devices Trump uses to escape tough questions and damaging accusations. Furthermore, they both cushion this insightful exposure with goofy irreverent jokes that make the points stickier in the mind. The next time Trump dodges blame, or points a finger at McConnell, you may hear the alien politician in your head and understand just how ridiculous and empty these recurring excuses are.

Robin Thede, host of "The Rundown", demonstrated a technique similar to Oliver's when she used a metaphor comparing a current issue on the liberal radar with a current popular TV show to illustrate the gravity of the issue at hand. Thede is discussing an emerging form of gentrification that results from climate change in which poor people are being pushed out of their coastal, inner city homes by wealthier people who no longer want to live on natural disaster

prone sea front property. Thede compares this phenomenon to the way that white walkers (zombies from the North in the series, “Game of Thrones”) are migrating into human territory because the harsh winter is coming. Again, we see the effective teaching tool of using absurd comparisons to prove a point about a liberal issue. More than that, we see her inject a current (mostly) millennial popular TV show to really drive home her point. She needs it to be understood that there are threats in our real lives comparable to the terrifying fantasy threats we choose to watch on TV. Furthermore, she needs these young progressive audience members to be as scared as their beloved heros who ride dragons and slaughter zombies. And finally, she needs her audience members to become as powerful as their fantasy heroes in fighting back against this very real beast.

Political late night comedy is not just a trend for a subsection of liberal hosts. It has become a necessity for survival in a divisive political climate where a “red line” is being drawn to exclude those who try to stay on middle ground. In May of 2017, Dave Itzkoff wrote an article for “The New York Times” titled, “Jimmy Fallon Was on Top of the World. Then Came Trump.” The article describes how Fallon’s avoidance of partisan politics as host of the “The Tonight Show” was met with a drastic decrease in ratings. Evidently Fallon’s notion that the show should be a non-alienating, cheerful place for mild, quirky humor was a miss with his audiences, especially amidst numerous liberal late night voices. Fallon is discovering that sticking with the late night status quo is itself viewed as a statement that has perhaps lost its place in TV. Fallon was specifically criticized for his interview with candidate Trump, which was amicable and much like any other interview Fallon might have had with a presidential candidate. However, many apparently feel that being even neutral about Trump is the same as

being complicit with his bigotry. The fact that Fallon is a straight rich white man adds to the feeling that Fallon can afford to ignore Trump's actions and beliefs. Trump's America is not a threat to Fallon but simply a phase in Fallon's unobjectionable subject matter. Besides feeling let down by Fallon's political apathy, people seem to crave something more than a corny late night host right now. They are angry about what is happening in the news, and to hear someone joke around, ignoring the context of our turbulent current events, strikes them as perhaps naive. People don't just want to let loose from the stress of the headlines; they want to hear someone go into combat for them.

Indeed, we see two of the most prominent four female late night hosts working hard to be as political as they can be in the wake of Trump, shifting significantly from their more mainstream, and even more politically incorrect, comedic careers. In October 2017, CBS reported that Chelsea Handler ended her show on Netflix (after just two seasons) to spend more concentrated time on her advocacy in wake of the election. Sarah Silverman was previously known for her raunchy stand up comedy full of racist and offensive epithets, delivered maniacally with a cutesy high pitched voice and a beaming smile. Silverman has taken a radically more political stance during and following the 2016 election. As an early outspoken celebrity backer of Bernie Sanders, she made videos in support of his social justice oriented platform, including "Bernie Sanders is the One for Me: Sarah Silverman Explains" in March of 2016, and went on to speak at the July 2016 Democratic National Convention about the importance of voting democratic in the election.

Following the election, a common narrative in post mortem analysis was that the liberal half of America was shocked by the outcome because they did not know the other side well

enough to understand Trump's supporters. Liberals had written Trump supporters off as a racist, bigoted minority. Liberals refused to leave their bubble long enough to understand the other side. Silverman said that her show was intended to pop her personal liberal bubble, to talk to those whom she had failed to understand, and to broadcast that aisle crossing is necessary to communicate with people across this great socio-political divide. In the opening segment of the first episode of her new show, "I love you, America with Sarah Silverman," Silverman revisits a routine from her former career involving overly dramatic parody music videos that discuss everything from racism to Jesus:

"I mean, I can walk into any encounter with the police assuming they're gonna serve and protect me. That's my luxury. That's called white privilege. You know, a few years ago, I was sitting around, and I go, 'Wow, there's a real epidemic of cops murdering unarmed black teenagers.' And then I realized that's not an epidemic. That's how it's always been. I'm just aware of it now because of social media. And I was so fucking ashamed. And fuck! I just wanna be a good ally. How can I be a good ally?"

Previously, her go-to subject matter was anything taboo and anything deliberately offensive. Essentially she acted as the antidote to political correctness under the guise that she didn't completely mean what she said. Since there is nothing humorous in her being outright racist (or so one would hope), this persona needed to operate under the guise of satire, parodying someone who would actually say these things. However, the fact that she said these things put her work very much at odds with politically correct comedy which generally would not condone racist punching down from a white woman, regardless of intent.

In the bit above, taken from an October 2017 segment, we see Silverman acknowledging her white privilege, highlighting the terrifying realities of racialized police brutality in America, the importance of intentional white alliances, and the fact that she only "realized" these things through social media because it has not been part of her own lived experience as a white woman. We might assume that this admission is indicative of other realizations that have led her to

becoming so politically active, shifting her work away from taboo spewing routines. Certainly, it marks a departure from her naive, self-serving comedy of the past.

However, it might be overly idealistic to attribute her change of heart to a pure socially conscious revelation, and not to a deliberate career move. At the same time we see Fallon's success dwindle as a result of its adamantly neutral stance, we see Silverman's new show about social justice and pushing liberals to be better listeners succeeding. Her new show scored a 92% rating on Rotten Tomatoes when it was published online, an popular internet stamp of approval from the public. While her work moves along the spectrum from controversial to a more palatable form of satire, she is still finding a new balance and her place in this body of politically correct comedy.

Like many of the other late night shows that are increasingly political and intertwined with social justice, Silverman's show is on a mission to not just satirize the politics of the day, but to have an actual effect on the political climate. Her effort to have across-the-aisle conversations is a comedic endeavor that is more ambitious than simply getting a laugh, similar to Bee's promotion of voter engagement.

I love you, America But not everything you do You know, sometimes I just-- I get really, really mad at you and the stupid shit that you do and how you vote for these rich fucks that lie to your faces and then systematically rape you of your rights and your job and your health care, and then you call me Hollywood elite? Dude, I'm from fucking New Hampshire. And you're mad at me for wanting the best for you and for getting pissed when you vote against your own best interests? I'm caring about you. I'm condescending to you.

Samantha Bee slips in her plea for voter engagement in a very calculated way. She delivers a a small slap on the wrist to her viewer demographic, while not working too hard to instill them with guilt. Her admonition is calculated, not alienating, but still taking a risk in order to get her message across. Silverman takes a more aggressive approach to scold America's

unengaged, crossing a potentially alienating line by saying she's "really, really mad at you [America] and the stupid shit that you do", but then following this elitist critique with a short quip: "I'm caring about you. I'm condescending to you." While this turn from scolding makes the piece feel much more honest, it still comes off as obnoxiously condescending. This works on a more meta level as well by being seemingly self aware while still being rude. While Silverman seems to be rethinking her cutesy bigoted schtick, this turn of attitude still parallels her original craft of getting away with mean or inappropriate things, and it furthers the exclusionary mentality of the progressive Left.

Silverman is still raunchy for the sake of being raunchy. In the first ten minutes of her pilot episode, she films two uncensored naked people planted in the audience, talking about the way that bodies are sexualized and how this kind of shocking departure will set her show apart in its absurdity and its ability to break the boundaries of not just late night, but of television. However, this new raunchiness is breaking a taboo that is seemingly inoffensive to anyone's identity or politics, unlike her previous work.

Ultimately, Silverman's new show feels like it falls short of achieving the woke stamp of approval, and demonstrates more the line separating this genre from previous liberal comedy. Silverman's punching down feels more condescending than enlightening (even though she acknowledges it). It is hard to feel that she is completely genuine about her intentions or her shift in allegiances. In many ways, she still feels like the white woman who evades blame for what her privilege affords her, and who masks taboo and controversy with a cutesy act and winky show(wo)manship.

If satire has long been used as a tool to dismantle power, what makes this body of late night “woke” comedy different? We can see this genre as being new in two major respects. First, we see a shift from traditional political commentary to taking an active role in liberal social justice. Second, we see a new relationship to identity politics in this evolving comedic form.

To the first point, the politics of this body of work is not just Democrats vs. Republicans, and it is not just jokes about a Republican president. These shows tackle much more radically liberal ideas and they are actually engaging in social justice movements. There is a sense that too much is at stake to just be making political jokes for the sake of making political jokes. There is a new urgent need to attack the power base and dismantle Trump’s administration by getting out the vote and instructing viewers on Trump’s evasive rhetoric. These comics are working to build a platform for social issues that is part of a millennial liberal movement and that has no mercy for people who appropriate other people’s cultures or who ignore global warming, or who don’t understand that there are few nuances of sexual harassment and assault. These social issues are beyond a traditional Democratic platform that focuses on healthcare or taxes. The effort is focused on sideline activism that is largely coming out of millennial advocacy. Furthermore, the aspect of woke comedy that late night embraces most enthusiastically is on instruction in how to participate in these movements, even at the risk of sounding too professorial. These recurring weekly or daily shows serve as resistance school for liberals, educating on tactics to dismantle a Trump regime and to fight against social injustice.

We see a new relationship between this new comic wave and identity politics not only in the way that the hosts personally embrace identity, but even more so in the boundaries that they set up in an effort to be rigorously politically correct. We see these hosts diversifying what was a

very homogenous late night field, speaking about topics from their individual vantage points and discussing how the issues affect them. The notion that there is too much at stake to just be joking around for the sake of joking around, derives in part from the fact that these comedians are not relating to current politics merely as commentators but as potential victims of bigotry and other social ills. They will (for the most part) only go as far as punching sideways, poking fun at people who share their identity, and they will only punch down when it is at people who have more powerful identities than they do. For instance, Noah, a mixed race man who grew up in Apartheid South Africa, jokes “White people are having a good time in America” when commenting on a March 2017 clip of a white man juggling to get out of a DUI ticket. It is fine to make fun of white men, and its acceptable for Noah to make a generalization about black people because he is staying within the limits of identity based political correctness. Much of the social justice commentary is about the issues that marginalized groups face, and this also makes identity a central facet of woke comedy.

CONCLUSION

While comedy has always been for the powerless as a weapon against the powerful, the last two years has seen a new phase to this dynamic. A Trump presidency constitutes a daily threat to liberals and to people with marginalized identities. Wokeness has become a dominant narrative of progressive politics and youth culture. It has brought identity and rigorous social justice to the forefront of liberalism. Amidst these shifts, a wealth of comedy that is anti-Trump

and that has woke themes is emerging, and has proven itself to be a highly effective tool to the Resistance.

Woke comedy speaks the language of social justice warriors and provides them with a validating and unifying voice. While much of this progressive language can quickly slip into exclusionary bubbles and echo chambers, woke comedy provides the silliness and the grossness that create inclusion and accessibility to an important issue. More than that, woke comedy is engaging and uses its entertainment value to draw people in and to instruct its viewers on social justice issues and resistance tools. Ultimately, woke comedy is an uniquely well fit communication tool for progressives, and it is one that is being used more and more often in both liberal entertainment and in mainstream media.

The emphasis on political correctness, referring to the notion of rigorously not offending someone because of their identity, intersects with the comedic notion of only ever punching up or sideways with jokes. A perfectly woke piece of comedy would only ever punch up or sideways, and the concessions being made by some woke comedians when they punch down demonstrates that it may be difficult to stay edgy and hard hitting while remaining politically correct. However, this does not detract from all the woke work that does stay within this framework, and that is adding up to create a body of comedy that can stick to its moral high ground, further a cause, and get a laugh. Furthermore, the resistance against Trump and the corresponding influx of wokeness have changed the landscape of comedy. Late night shows that were once dominated by straight white men telling mild goofy jokes and irreverent SNL sketches have become diverse, have incorporated numerous progressive topics, and have become extremely conscious of their impact on these social justice issues. If nothing else, liberal

comedians are constantly proving that these social justice warrior snowflakes can certainly take a joke. In fact, they can write thousands of them, a majority of which prove that comedy is not simply an art of offensive finger pointing and name calling.

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