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"So, Are We Good?" the Emerging Sensitive New Man Movement in the Boys' Club of Stand-up Comedy

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“SO, ARE WE GOOD?”

THE EMERGING SENSITIVE NEW MAN MOVEMENT IN THE BOYS’ CLUB
OF STAND-UP COMEDY

by

Stephen Kohlmann

A Thesis Submitted in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

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December 2014

ABSTRACT

“SO, ARE WE GOOD?”
THE EMERGING SENSITIVE NEW MAN MOVEMENT IN THE BOYS’ CLUB
OF STAND-UP COMEDY

by
Stephen Kohlmann

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2014
Under the Supervision of Professor Michael Z. Newman

This thesis discusses the emerging new man comedic persona in contemporary stand-up comedy. The new man comedian eschews the hypermasculine and heteronormative traits that were common among male stand-up comedians during the boom era (1980s-1990s). The new trend of a feminized and feminist comedic persona will be analyzed through case studies of two comedians: Louis C.K. and Marc Maron. Their comedic personae transcend their on-stage comedic routines and are augmented through transmedia texts. In the case of Louis C.K., he challenges the audience’s perception of his persona through his semi-autobiographical and sometimes surrealistic television series, *Louie*. Maron’s comedic persona is amplified through his podcast, *WTF*, as well as his appearances in other media where he is portraying a version of himself. Each comedian’s relationship with their audience and their contemporaries will be discussed, both in fictional and non-fictional texts. The emergence of new man comedy through these two comedians also leads to a new theory of stand-up comedy as media genre: That the end goal of stand-up comedy is more than just making the audience laugh.

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Chapter 1: *Introduction*

American stand-up comedy is a boys' club. For decades, men and masculine influence have dominated the comedy scene. Take, for example, *Comic Insights: The Art of Stand-up Comedy*, an oral history that features lengthy interviews with 17 popular comedians, discussing their craft.¹ Of the 17 featured comics, only 3 are women: Elayne Boosler, Ellen DeGeneres, and Roseanne. Those 3 women came of age in the stand-up comedy boom of the 1980s, where hyper-masculine comedy dominated the mainstream. Highly popular acts such as Sam Kinison and Andrew Dice Clay were known for their aggressively masculine style and for perpetuating a stereotypical alpha male persona. Their popularity paved the way for comedians Tim Allen, Drew Carey and Jeff Foxworthy in the 1990s, who all achieved mainstream success with stage acts that revolved exclusively around archetypical male tropes. In the case of Allen and Carey (and to a lesser extent Foxworthy), their comedy also translated to the small screen via highly successful sitcoms.

Although stand-up comedy culture still reads overwhelmingly masculine, the ratio of male comics to female comics is still askew. However, many contemporary male comics have largely abandoned hyper-masculine comedic persona archetypical tropes in favor one that is more sensitive and thoughtful. The current trend for many male comedians has been to adapt to a performance style and act that is outside of the traditional, more mainstream style of stand-up comedy that preceded

¹ Franklyn Ajaye, *Comic Insights: The Art of Stand-up Comedy*, (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 2001).

them in the comedy boom of the 1980s and 1990s. Their goal is to challenge—and sometimes reject—the more traditional aspects of the stand-up comedy art form. As John Wenzel describes in *Mock Stars: Indie Comedy and the Dangerously Funny*, current era comedians play to an audience that has grown tired of mainstream comedy’s “passively ingesting cultural hegemony, via flaccid, middle-of-the road [political] jokes on late night talk shows, or who have grown numb to the litany of ways in which white people are not like black people, or women like men, or husband like wives, etc.”²

During the last several decades, a movement among many popular male stand-up comedians has increasingly given way to a movement of a feminized style of comedic performance, who I will refer to as the “new man” comedians. Firstly, references to certain characteristics as being feminized in this thesis will not imply that they are always feminine qualities. In other words, feminized characteristics are not meant to define, or suggest, that they are wholly representative of women. Rather, in the context of this thesis, feminized archetypes are considered feminine through the narrow lens of social constructs. More importantly, though, they are simply traits that are considered the opposite of masculine and they are not necessarily gender specific.

The new man comedians exhibit sensitive and highly expressive qualities that lack much of the bravado and machismo of their predecessors. Many new man comedians are more likely to be pro-feminist and not preoccupied with projecting a

² John Wenzel, *Mock Stars: Indie Comedy and the Dangerously Funny*, (Golden, CO: Speck Press, 2008), 2.

purely heteronormative and hypermasculine character through both their stage acts and their supplemental texts (TV shows, public interviews, etc.). Beyond feminism, these comedians are also aware of their own privilege. This is because new man comedians are overwhelming white, heterosexual men (like the majority comedians in general). This does not mean that non-white comedians should not be considered part of the new man movement. The comedic personae of non-white male comedians such as Ron Funches, Hannibal Burrell and Aziz Ansari inhabit the characteristics of the new man movement—sensitivity, vulnerability and a social conscience that attempts to address the oppressed members of society. The goal here is not to ignore racial dichotomy in stand-up comedy, but rather to address gender dichotomy.

Certainly, within the broader realm of media texts, the attitude of the new man is represented beyond stand-up comedy. The rejection of alpha male characteristics in male characters is a current trend that is apparent in other contemporary media texts, particularly in television sitcoms (i.e. ABC's *Modern Family*) and film (i.e. Spike Jonze's *Her* [2013]). While this trend is not specific to stand-up comedy, the changes are affecting this industry far more than any other. It not only opens dialogue on gender politics, it also changes the relationship between the comedians and the audience.

This style of comedy also eschews the more traditional joke telling strategy of a set-up followed by a punchline in favor of a confessional storytelling style. While classic and simple joke telling in stand-up comedy has always been subject to slight diversions, particularly in the observational style of humor made famous by comedians like Jerry Seinfeld and Dane Cook, the confessional storytelling style

breaks proverbial boundaries between the audience and the performer, in addition to paving the way for a far more expressive and sensitive comic. This movement has become highly influential on popular comics of the current era, and while the style itself is nothing completely new, the confessional aspect has recently become heightened through representations of comedians' personae in texts off-stage, along with the rise of new media formats, particularly the podcast. Comedians who participate in interview-style podcasts do not perform their stage personae, but rather enter into full confessional mode, revealing even more about themselves than they would on stage. Since majority of the comedy podcasts are offered weekly for free, comedians are now more far accessible to their audience.

This thesis will analyze the emerging trend of the new man comedian in and explore how it is changing the relationship between comedians and their audience. My interests revolve around contemporary stand-up comedians who present themselves in opposition to the styles synonymous with mainstream comedy. It primarily includes comedians who have experienced significant success in their careers in the post-comedy boom era. However, for context, my thesis will examine the contemporary trends of male comedians adopting feminized characteristics in their comedic personae. This will relate to American comedy's perceived lack of femininity—both with the deficit of popular women comedians in the scene and the blatant sexism found in male comedic performances.

Moreover, stand-up comedy, specifically the stage act of a comedian, is simply one text in an array of transmedia representations for comedians. While this has always been the case-- comedians have often appeared in interviews on late night

chat shows, released recorded albums, and further explored their stand-up routines through sitcoms—contemporary comedians are taking advantage of media outside of the aforementioned, more traditional, comedic texts. Though all comedians have traditionally use stage performance as a forum to exaggerate their personal lives for laughs, there is a current trend for comedians to cultivate a more intimate relationship with their audience by projecting more of their own personal lives through cross-platform media. Because of this, comedians' personal lives, now more than ever, act as a paratext to their comedic persona.

These shifts and representations of the sensitive new man stand-up comedian will be analyzed in two case studies, the first of which will focus on Louis C.K. Revered by audiences, critics, and comedians alike as the current king of comedy. This is due to his incredible work rate—he writes 1-2 new hours of stand-up material every year—and the quality of his work, along with his highly successful FX semi-autobiographical TV series, *Louie*. Louis C.K. has found success by eschewing many of the old-fashioned male comic archetypal tropes. However, there are elements of Louis C.K.'s comedic and public persona that raise questions on whether or not he truly defies the misogynistic comedic archetypes of old, or, especially in the case of *Louie*, if they he sometimes perpetuates them. I will analyze his representations of women in his comedy and discuss whether he successfully defies the boys' club mentality of the pre-new man comedy movement.

The second case study will focus on a comedian whose career has often intersected with Louis C.K.'s, Marc Maron. Maron's case features an important example of comedic transmedia representation that comes in the form of what Kelli

Marshall has dubbed, rather simply, “comedian conversations.”³ Specifically, a comedian conversation refers to a genre of shows that have emerged in the last five years. They feature comedians engaging in casual, interview-style conversations with fellow comedians. These shows are then released, typically free of charge, for audience consumption through both online and television media platforms.

Maron is at the forefront of this genre and has inspired this trend through new media, specifically, his *What the Fuck? (WTF)* podcast. Each episode of Maron’s podcast features a 1-2 hour interview,⁴ which is always preceded by a 10-15 monologue-type address from Maron himself. Maron’s *WTF* podcast has had a major influence on the contemporary comedy scene by presenting comedians’ confessional, storytelling style through in-depth and highly personal interviews. In turn, comedians who are both extremely popular (Chelsea Handler, Robin Williams, Chris Rock, to name but a few) and lesser-known (Bob Golub, Killer Beaz, Billy Braver) are intimately introduced, or sometimes re-introduced, to a larger audience, with each episode acquiring downloads in the millions. This has had the effect of significantly changing the audience’s relationship with comedians, as well as several non-comedian artists who have been interviewed on the podcast.

Maron is a leading representative of the changing relationship between comedians and audiences. For comedians, the relationship between them and the audience transcends their act. Maron often remarks on an obligation to inform his

³ Kelli Marshall, “Comic Conversations and Jerry Seinfeld’s Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee,” *Flow TV* (blog), 18.03, Vol. 18, July 29, 2013, <http://flowtv.org/2013/07/comic-conversations/>.

⁴ It is rare, but some episodes are split into 2-parts, such as when an interview runs long (as with Louis C.K.) or if Maron chooses to do a follow-up interview (as was the case with Carlos Mencia).

audience of what is happening in his personal life. This is often demonstrated through his blog posts, such as this one from October 14th, 2013, where he discusses the recent break-up of his engagement:

On the show this week, I'll fill you in a bit on what has been a couple of the most difficult weeks of my life. It's weird to have the relationship with you that I do. I can't keep things hidden because I would feel like I was being disingenuous or dishonest. I don't think most entertainers have the same problem.⁵

I will be analyzing the impact of Maron's podcast on the contemporary comedy scene. In particular, I will focus on how it has influenced a new style of masculinity in contemporary comedy, with discussion focusing on several interviews he has conducted with male comedians on his podcast. The new style of masculinity features male comedians who, both through media texts and personal testimonials, are far more comfortable presenting a feminized side of their persona. The success of Maron's new media text has completely transformed his formerly floundering comedic career, as he recently published his second book (*Attempting Normal*) and completed the first season of his eponymous IFC television series, *Maron*.

In both case studies, apart from textual analyses, I will also analyze discourses surrounding their careers. Specifically, I will consider how each comedian is critiqued in media texts that focus on their comedy, in addition to analyzing how they are discussed through gender discourse. I will examine how their words and actions off-stage contribute to their existence as multi-media texts, as well as to the narrowing of gender politics in

⁵ Marc Maron, "I Have To Do Work On Myself," *Dispatches from the Head* (blog), *WTF with Marc Maron Podcast*, October 14th, 2013, http://www.wtfpod.com/dispatches/entries/i_have_work_to_do_on_myself.

contemporary comedy. This will include discussion on pieces written about both comedians in various media blogs and publications.

In this thesis, I will argue that both Maron and Louis C.K.—both currently experiencing the highest profile successes of their careers—are representative of male comedians shifting the identity of the male in comedy, and they do this through transmedia storytelling in both traditional and new media. In a broader sense, Maron and Louis C.K. are two major players who are highly influential to the stand-up comedy community, but they are part of a wider phenomenon of the changing relationship between comedians and their audiences. Ultimately, this changing relationship alters how a comedian is viewed as a media text.

Furthermore, these comedians separately represent the two sides of new man comedy. Louis C.K. represents the socially conscious, feminist and civil rights advocating portion of the new man comedian. The new man movement is, again, overwhelmingly white and male, but it transcends the attitudes and ignorance of the previous generation of stand-up comedians. Louis C.K. begins important social conversations through his comedy. Maron represents the sensitive and highly expressive comedian who fully rejects hypermasculine tropes in favor of fully expressing his feelings. Not only is this attitude present in his stage act, it influences the comedians who stop in for an interview on his podcast. The main differences between the two lie in Louis C.K.'s outwardly social conscience and Maron's self-serving neuroses. Also, through transmedia representation, Maron always projects a very raw image of himself, leaving audiences to believe that he is consistently genuine. We are led to believe that the public Maron is the same man as the private

Maron. That distinction is not always clear in the comedic persona of Louis C.K., who deliberately plays games with his audience through his transmedia representations—we do not always know when we are getting the real or fictional Louis C.K. They are at opposite ends of the new man comedians’ proverbial scale, whereas most other new man comedians fall somewhere in the middle.⁶ Combined, they both fully represent the trends that define the new man comedian.

Literature Review

Comedy & Culture

Stand-up comedy has been largely overlooked by media scholarship. Studies that do focus on comedy and humor often feature some sort of disclaimer or acknowledgement of how comedy is neglected in theoretical work. It is often addressed in the introduction or on the back of a textbook that the subject of comedy is too light or simply not worthy of study.⁷ Which begs the question: Why?

Lawrence Mintz proposes that the lack of a “comprehensive history of standup comedy in America,” is a major contributor to comedy’s deficit of critical, scholarly evaluations.⁸ But Mintz also points to a general underwhelming acceptance on how stand-up comedy is routinely defined:

A strict, limiting definition of standup comedy would describe an encounter between a single, standing performer behaving comically and/or saying funny things directly to an audience, unsupported by very much in the way of costume, prop, setting, or dramatic

⁶ Other, selected contemporary new man comedians: Pete Holmes, Mike Birbiglia, Demitri Martin, Eugene Mirman, Bo Burnham, John Mulaney, Patton Oswalt, David Cross, Eddie Pepitone, Kumail Nanjiani, Jonah Ray.

⁷ Frank Krutnik & Steve Neale, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, (New York: Routledge), 1990, Back Cover.

⁸ Lawrence Mintz, “Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Spring 1985): 72.

vehicle. Yet standup comedy's roots are...entwined with rites, rituals, and dramatic experiences that are richer, more complex than this simple definition can embrace.⁹

Comedy's lack of presence in media studies can be traced to how it is not typically viewed as "art." Rebecca Emilinger Roberts explores this in her article "Standup Comedy and the Prerogative of Art," claiming that we do not view stand-up comedy as art, but rather its value lies simply in the function of entertainment.¹⁰ Her case study examines the comedy of Tim Allen (who seems to be the select few comedy scholars' prototype for a stand-up comedian worthy of study, showing how desperate the field is for new studies). Roberts does well in addressing the struggle to define stand-up comedy as art, and not simply as pure entertainment that is unworthy of artistic merit:

Art's prerogative lies within that circle between the watcher and the watched. Tim Allen and others who make their living from human response are only distant from the poet, the artist, by a consensual body of thought that defines what art is.¹¹

John Limon's studies in stand-up comedy have been proclaimed as the first of their kind, in that nobody had ever studied stand-up comedy as an art form. While this is a rather boastful claim, presented on the back cover of Limon's book *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, might be a bit hyperbolic. His studies provide a jumping-off point on how to study comedians and their comedy theoretically, rather than just historically. However, Limon's discussion on the history of stand-up comedy's modern culture provides a framework from which we

⁹ Ibid, 71.

¹⁰ Rebecca Emilinger Roberts, "Standup Comedy and the Prerogative of Art," *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Summer, 2000), 151.

¹¹ Ibid, 160.

can trace its evolution. He claims the stand-up comedy culture we are contemporarily familiar with, the one in which I will be discussing throughout this thesis, began with stand-up comedians from the 1960s (Lenny Bruce, Woody Allen, Mort Sahl), with the ascension of Johnny Carson and the post-Kennedy assassination.¹² More than providing historical context, though, Limon's studies provide stand-up comedy with an actual theoretical framework. Limon ascertains that there are "three theorems" that "survey stand-up comedy as an absolute or ideal genre."¹³ His theorems, summarized, are the following:

1. If an audience thinks something is funny, it is. Limon states that "individual reservations [towards a comedian's joke or material] are irrelevant," as long as the material is generally well received. "Individual recantations are invalid" and, as long as the joke is intended as funny (as all jokes are), and the audience thinks it is funny, it is impervious to valid criticism.
2. "A joke is funny, and only funny, is [the audience] laughs at it." The laughter signifies that the stand-up comedian's material is funny, and a "joke cannot be funny without [laughter]." Individually, even if a member of the audience does not think a joke is funny, as long as he or she laughs, it is considered funny.
3. Laughter is the "single end of stand-up."¹⁴

Limon's theorems are quite limiting to what stand-up comedy as not only a genre, but as a culture onto itself. Limon's theorems limit stand-up comedian's stage

¹² John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 3.

¹³ Ibid, 11

¹⁴ Ibid, 12-13

performances. The goal of a stand-up comedian, and their relationship with their audience, is not always rooted simply in the ability to make something funny and/or to make an audience laugh. Analyses of both Marc Maron and Louis C.K.'s will work to create a new theory for stand-up comedy.

Because of the subversive nature of comedy, it can be difficult to know how to read comedians and their material as media texts. A comedian's persona transcends their performances and enters into a third act of sorts—that of their public perception. A comedian is always thought of as performing, even when they are not actually performing. Andrea Greenbaum explains comedy as a culture onto itself, in that it is more than entertainment, and comics are creating a relationship with their audience that goes beyond the typical para-social relationships that other types of entertainers maintain with their fans:

Stand-up comedy is an inherently rhetorical discourse; it strives not only to entertain, but to persuade, and stand-up comics can only be successful in their craft when they can convince an audience to look at the world through their comic vision¹⁵.

A comedian's persona follows their every move, beyond the comedy club stage and into other media, most notably television sitcoms. Their "comedic vision" can be translated into an entirely new text, where they are longer alone in their act, but physically interacting with the material they have created, connecting their act to a real life image.

¹⁵ Andrea Greenbaum, "Stand-up Comedy as a Rhetorical Argument: An Investigation of Comic Culture," *Humor* 12-1 (1999): 34

Masculinity/Femininity in Comedy Culture

Since this project will focus on gender dichotomy in modern stand-up comedy, previous studies on masculinity and femininity in comedy provide important context to discuss what is happening in the culture contemporarily. Robert Hanke analyzed the hyper-masculinity of comedian Tim Allen's stand-up routine and the subsequent sitcom based on his act, *Home Improvement*. The show was a major success, both as an adaptation of Allen's act and as a commercial hit, notably rated as the number one show in the U.S. in 1994.¹⁶ Hanke describes Allen's work as "mock macho," which he defines as:

...A parodic mode of discourse...deployed to address white, middle class, middle-aged men's anxieties about a feminized ideal for manhood they may not want to live up to, as well as changes in work and family life that continue to dissolve separate gender spheres within white, professional-managerial, class life.¹⁷

The concept of mock macho was a very popular amongst many male comedians through comedy boom of the 1980s up until the alternative comedy wave of the 1990s. Although the concept of mock macho comedy is subversive and satirically challenging to the archetypical tropes of masculinity, it still fully supports the white, patriarchal and heteronormative culture that has dominated the comedy scene. Other notable examples of mock macho personae used in both stand-up comedy acts and television shows included Drew Carey and his *The Drew Carey Show* (which ran on ABC from 1995-2004) and Comedy Central's *The Man Show*, featuring comedians Jimmy Kimmel and Adam Carolla, the latter being an example

¹⁶ Barry Koltnow, "Tim Allen Bites Back at the Critics," *Rome News-Tribune*, November 14, 1994, 1.

¹⁷ Robert Hanke, "The 'Mock Macho' Situation Comedy: Hegemonic Masculinity and its Reiteration," *Western Journal of Communication*, 62-1 (Winter 1998): 76.

of both a mock macho aesthetic and blatant sexism. Ann Johnson connects *The Man Show*'s use of stand-up comedy to "weave together the various segments of the program...(which) resemble consciousness-raising because personal and private topic are discussed in a public context...(with) the hosts (joking) about how difficult women make men's lives, while the men in the audience laugh and express agreement."¹⁸

Outside of scripted television starring comedians, M. Alison Kibler discussed blatant sexism in comedy, as she researched the relationship between comedians and the audience in the A&E stand-up comedy showcase series, *An Evening at the Improv*:

In their interpretation of gender differences and heterosexual relationships, male performers rarely risk losing the approval and allegiance of men, often creating alliances of 'we' (the comedian and the men in the audience) and 'they' (women in audience). Although these gender 'bits' may be part of stand-up comedians' efforts to address a mixed-sex crowd, they address women and discuss women's experiences mainly as a means of bonding with men, against women.¹⁹

Discussion of mock macho-ism and blatant sexism in American comedy has the effect of ignoring the historical contributions of women. Comedy's boys' club image traditionally views being pretty and effeminate as being unfunny. However, the comedy scene has not been completely void of the contributions of women or, at the very least, a feminine touch. That being said, women's contributions to American comedy have been virtually ignored.

¹⁸ Ann Johnson, "The Subtleties of Blatant Sexism," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* Vol. 4, No. 2 (June 2007): 177.

¹⁹ M. Alison Kibler, "Gender Conflict and Coercion on A&E's *An Evening at the Improv*," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 32:4 (1999): 49.

Joyce Antler notes a discrepancy, in relation to the fact that “while the predominance of Jews in American comedy is well-known (one frequently cited statistic is that the minute proportion of Jews in the United States made up 80% of the comedy industry), Jewish women's comedy has largely gone unnoticed.”²⁰ Certainly, the impact of male Jewish comedians has been well-documented- a history that has and would provide entire curriculum to be based around- with an seemingly endless list existing of highly influential men (Woody Allen, Shecky Greene, Larry David, Jerry Seinfeld, Richard Lewis, just to name the first few that come to mind, but those names are certainly nowhere near the scratching of the surface). This issue points to the larger issue that female comics have traditionally had to fight very hard to break through comedy’s proverbial glass ceiling.

Of course, there have been exceptions where women comics have found success, particularly in the aforementioned comedy boom period that was dominated by patriarchal and heteronormative comedians. In particular, Roseanne acted as a counterpoint to many of her male contemporaries in the late 80s and early 90s. In *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, Kathleen Rowe provides an extensive case study of Roseanne, discussing the public and tabloid discourse that surrounded her on-stage (and screen) and off-stage personae during her most high profile period. More than just a study on gender politics in stand-up comedy, however, Rowe’s examination of Roseanne bridges the gap between general representation of comedians in the media and the gendered lines that exist in comedy.

²⁰ Joyce Antler, “One Clove Away from a Pomander Ball: The Subversive Tradition of Jewish Female Comedians.” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 29 (2010): 123.

When discussing Roseanne’s humor-laced (and poorly received) performance of the “Star Spangled Banner” at a 1990 San Diego Padres game, she notes how Roseanne had the “opportunity to claim the kind of public space” that women rarely get and “her experience offers abundant lessons about the relation between social power and public visibility.”²¹ It is important to note here that while I will discuss how new man comedy opens discussion on women’s representation in stand-up comedy, male comedians still have the privilege of being more feminist than their female contemporaries. It is socially far more acceptable for a male comic to address feminist issues than it is for a woman comic to do the same. Roseanne works as an example of a feminist comic who still fell under the scrutiny of a patriarchal society not yet ready to fully embrace feminist comedy from a woman. The backlash against her masculinized performance of the “Star Spangled Banner” contributes to this discourse: On stage, she could not always be accepted as a woman, but off-stage, she is ridiculed for acting masculine—regardless of the mocking nature of her performance.

Comedians off stage

The bridge between the comedian and the audience is now seemingly shorter than ever before, mostly as a result of new media formats. While comedians have always been publicly visible, contemporary culture anticipates a more intimate relationship. Kelli Marshall has explored this phenomenon of “comic conversations” (in particular, podcasts) and discussed why they are so popular:

²¹ Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, (Austin: University of Texas Press), 1995,

Many comedians' personal lives, often destructive, resemble that of "punk rockers," which creepily attract audiences. Marc Maron, for example, has battled addictions to alcohol, cocaine, and nicotine; he's twice-divorced, was twice-cancelled by the radio network Air America, and has openly struggled with jealousy toward other comics, his old friend Louis CK in particular. All of this I've learned from listening to his podcasts. Comic conversations are popular because most of them are cheap, easy to distribute, and (somewhat) free from censorship.²²

In a broader sense, though, comedians' podcasts—those that are either hosted by comedians or feature comedians as guests/participants—form a larger phenomenon of new media in the form of user-generated content.²³ Moreover, these comic conversations extend the persona of the stand-up comedian and transcend the theory that stand-up comedy culture is simply rooted in the practice of always being funny.

With podcasting, Marc Maron in particular has been at the forefront of this new interpersonal relationship between comedians and their audiences. Scholarship on podcasting is relatively scarce, most likely to due to it being a very recent development in new media. Podcasts first became a media phenomenon around the year 2004.²⁴ Kris M. Markman's study from 2012 was one of the first to explore and discuss podcasting culture. He notes that so much of podcasting relies on "familiar tropes from commercial radio, particularly talk radio, in their production styles."²⁵ In the case of Maron, this would not be surprising considering that before he started his *WTF* podcast, he was an on-air personality for the talk radio station Air America.

²² Kelli Marshall, "Comic Conversations and Jerry Seinfeld's Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee," *Flow TV* (blog), 18.03, Vol. 18, July 29, 2013, <http://flowtv.org/2013/07/comic-conversations/>.

²³ Kris M. Markman, "Doing Radio, Making Friends, and Having Fun: Exploring the Motivations of Independent Audio Podcasters," *New Media & Society* 14 (2012): 548.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 547.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 555.

Furthermore, Maron has frequently admitted through various interviews and on his own podcast that he is highly influenced by the interview style of National Public Radio's *Fresh Air* host Terry Gross.

While podcasts share many similarities with commercial talk radio, the format has a much different relationship with its listeners. In Markman's study, he notes that audience appreciation and listeners' feedback are the most common reasons many podcasters continue to podcast:

Listener emails, submissions, discussion [forums], and phone calls were used regularly, and the feedback podcasters received from these channels helped sustain their interest. The knowledge that the [podcasters] had an audience that appreciated their work, or the anticipation of a growing audience, were recurring motives [for producing podcasts].²⁶

Indeed, Maron's on-line interaction with his audience is the proverbial engine that drives the podcast. He will take suggestions for future guests through e-mail and discussion forums and he has even called fans and played their conversations during episodes of *WTF*. The community that exists for podcasters, even before comedians like Maron entered the scene, provides an interpersonal and interactive experience that is virtually tailor-made for comedians. Not only can they explore their own personae through a new form of media, they can also engage with their audiences like they never have been able to before.

Meanwhile, other forms of media are still important in extending a comedian's persona across various texts. In particular, this is true of television. In the post-network era, stand-up comedians have more opportunities to explore their

²⁶ Ibid, 557.

personae off-stage and present it in a different package. Louis C.K. does this through his semi-autobiographical FX series, *Louie*. As Ethan Thompson notes in *Parody and Taste in Postwar American Television Culture*, though, an opportunity like this may not have existed on traditional network television. While Louis C.K. is very popular, his style of comedy is highly critical of contemporary culture. This is a style of comedy that still “remains a minority taste.”²⁷ However, much like Maron is able to reach his audience through his podcast, Louis C.K. can do this through a “television industry [that] does a better job of marketing to that taste than it did, or could do, in the network era.”²⁸ The advent of cable television channels makes it easier to reach niche audiences with programming that is more central to their entertainment tastes, as opposed to the more mainstream fare that is available to everybody for free on network television. More importantly, shows on featured exclusively on cable channels are often budgeted lower than network shows. Because of this, along with cable channels’ ability to narrowcast and heavily promote to a smaller, but more desirable audience, the shows have a higher chance of succeeding.

In the case of *Louie*, Louis C.K. can still reach his target audience while cultivating a more intimate relationship with them as he presents a highly sensitive and less funny version of himself on *Louie*. The success of Louis C.K.’s cable series and Maron’s podcast have a common link in that their primary media representations attract alternative, niche audiences. At the same time, these audiences are large and

²⁷ Ethan Thompson, *Parody and Taste in Postwar American Television Culture*, (New York: Routledge), 2011: 150.

²⁸ Ibid.

diverse and these texts are integral in pushing the new man comedy movement forward.

Chapter Descriptions

Chapter 2: “Your Feelings Are Wrong!” Louis CK and The Feminist Agenda of New Man Comedy

The second chapter of this thesis will be a case study on Louis C.K. Through textual analysis, I will discuss how C.K.’s comedic message transcends his stand-up routines and crosses into other media platforms, specifically through his FX television series, *Louie*. He represents a feminist new man style of comedian through his frequent discussions of the women in his life, most notably his daughters, and men’s historical mistreatment of women. Some of this analysis will come in the form of discussing various interviews he conducts off-stage, most notably on the *Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and from his two-part interview on Marc Maron’s *WTF*.

I will analyze *Louie* as an integral portion of the cross-platform media that represents Louis C.K. beyond his stand-up comedy routines. My analysis will pay close attention to several episodes throughout the four-season run of *Louie*, particularly episodes that aired during the show’s recently wrapped fourth season. They have challenged his role as a feminist comedian, as well as enhanced his image as a progressive white male.

His discussion of women both in his stage act, on his television series and through interviews avoids the previous male comedic trope of considering both sexes as being completely non-understanding of each other. There is no “Battle of the

Sexes” tone to Louis C.K.’s comedic material—it is void of misogyny and mock machoism. He frequently discusses his relationship with daughters, for example, without any hint of the typical “I don’t understand girls!” rhetoric that was popular with most other male comedians that preceded him in popularity. What is even more intriguing about his new man comedic persona is that, on the surface, he appears to be a very average, heterosexual white man, far from being feminized in any sort of way. He uses his influential power in comedy to interrogate power and challenge the traditionally masculine tropes of the white heterosexual man. This will be examined through some of his stand-up routines, which are featured in his stage act, as well as on his television series *Louie*.

Because of C.K.’s stature in the world of stand-up comedy, both as a figure of influence for current and aspiring comedians, and as a highly popular stand-up comedian with a mainstream audience, his ideas and views on the world are highly scrutinized when he is not on-stage or appearing on his own television series. The consequences of his transmedia representation spill over into discourse on what audiences expect of him not only as a comedian, but also as a cultural critic. In line with his new man style of comedic rhetoric, it will be important to analyze and discuss why sometimes his role can be problematic. Specifically, this becomes an issue when he behaves in an atypical manner through any text. Any deviation from his comedic persona can betray what audiences have come to expect from him. This was the case when he found himself having to discuss the implications of comedians making rape jokes following his public support of controversial comedian Daniel Tosh, who had targeted a woman audience member with offensive jokes about rape.

Audiences expected a level of progressive social leadership from Louis C.K. and through a discourse analysis from feminist media publications (*Bitch* and *Jezebel*) that feature articles and posts on him post-Tosh controversy, I will examine how there is potential for conflict between his audience and his feminist comedic persona. This will provide evidence to the theory that comedians always function as a text, even in their personal lives, as there is no separation between who they are to their audience and who they are privately. Their private is always public and part of the textual consumption.

Chapter 3: “Sensitive Man”- Marc Maron’s Interpersonal Relationships and Transmedia Representations in New Man Comedy

The third chapter will be a case study of comedian Marc Maron. Maron represents a feminized, new man style of comedian through his frequent over-sharing of his personal life. He is prone to discussing his failed romantic relationships, which he publicly takes the blame for their dissolving. He is also known for being tremendously sensitive both in his stage act, his blog posts, and the monologues that open his *WTF* podcasts. He is always extremely open with his feelings, publicly sharing very personal anecdotes and projecting his insecurities onto his audiences and his guests on *WTF*.

My case study on Marc Maron will feature a textual analysis of his appearances in other texts, where he is not officially playing himself but is clearly appearing as a version of himself. An example of this will be analyzed in his starring role in the 2012 music video for Nick Lowe’s song, “Sensitive Man.” Maron, essentially, plays a version of himself in the video, which is a send-up of breaking

down traditional masculine archetypical tropes. The music video works as an introduction for how Maron has cultivated a more feminized comedic character—one that is constantly challenging his own masculinity. The methodology will be similar to the Louis C.K. case study, however, much of the analyses on Maron will focus on his highly personal relationship with his audience and how his new man comedic persona is represented through podcasting. Not only has Maron's podcast elevated his own status as a highly expressive and sensitive comedian, it has influenced other comedians to take on the new man persona. Since his interviews are so revealing and personal, any comedian who is a guest on his podcast is prone to being viewed as different and more sensitive to their audience. It is becoming a rite of passage for comedians to appear on Maron's podcast, or other similar comedian conversation podcasts and it is changing the culture of stand-up comedy. There is a growing expectation for stand-up comedians to do intimate and revealing interviews on podcasts such as Maron's *WTF*, which is the gold standard of comedian conversations. Jon Stewart, Daniel Tosh and Jerry Seinfeld are rare and notable exceptions, as they are only comedians to have snubbed Maron for an appearance on *WTF*. An appearance on *WTF* has the effect of legitimating a comedian's stock, both with their fans and within the comedy community.

In addition, I will analyze the relationships Maron has with other comedians, which are sometimes volatile and filled with jealousy. He uses his podcast and blog to therapeutically clear the air with former friends and colleagues. Oftentimes, the interviews bring the comedians, mostly men, to tears. Other times, his interviews simply bring out vulnerability from the comedians, which reveals a softer, more

sensitive persona unfamiliar to audiences accustomed to their typical comedic persona. In particular, I will be discussing interviews from *WTF* featuring Louis C.K., Patton Oswalt, and Dane Cook.²⁹

The analysis of Maron's career will be an exploration of how his persona functions as a multi-media text and how those types of representations make him a leader of the new man comedy persona movement. Through transmedia representations, there is a long-running narrative that features Maron as the prototypical contemporary new man comedian. While his comedy may not be as mainstream and popular as Louis C.K.'s, his influence is far greater in changing the culture of comedy and it is at the forefront of the new man comedian movement.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

The final chapter of this thesis will bring closure to the two case studies. I will discuss how they are related and what the bigger implications are of the new man comedic persona. The conclusion will also address other areas worthy of study in the theory of the new man comedic persona. This will give me the opportunity to discuss more of the gender dichotomy of stand-up comedy culture, as well as discuss how racial politics play a role in new man comedy.

²⁹ Maron discusses some of these interviews as being his favorite episodes of *WTF* in an interview with the A.V. Club: Nathan Rabin, "Bestcasts: Marc Maron Picks His Favorite *WTF* Episodes," *A.V. Club*, January 10, 2013, <http://www.avclub.com/article/marc-maron-picks-his-favorite-iwtf-iepisodes-90698>.

Chapter 2:
“Your Feelings Are Wrong!”
Louis CK and The Feminist Agenda of New Man Comedy

Pudgy, bald and not particularly fashionable, comedian Louis C.K. is not a conventionally attractive man. What his physical appearance says about his success as a comedian is perhaps something that alludes to the implicit sexism in comedy. It is perhaps easier for the audience to laugh at a more sympathetic-looking figure than it is to laugh at, say, a statuesque and supermodel-thin person. Louis C.K. is a prototype of the non-oppressed member of society, in that his physical appearance is typical of many middle-class white men.³⁰ His status as a straight, white male gives him power, but it is through his comedy that he does not abuse that power. Instead, Louis C.K. questions it, giving a voice to the oppressed. In that regard, he is not only a symbol of the new man comedy movement, but he is one of the leaders.

Louis C.K. is by all accounts one of the top comedians in the industry, both critically and commercially. Beyond the quality of his work, Louis C.K.'s massive success can be attributed to how accessible he makes his media to his fans. For example, his stand-up special *Live at the Beacon Theater* was produced and released independently on-line for the low price of \$5. This model proved so successful that for his 2012-2013 tour, he independently sold tickets to all of his shows through his website, where fans were charged a reasonably flat rate of \$45 per ticket. As a

³⁰ Louis C.K. did live in Mexico for the first seven years of his life. He is Hungarian-Jewish and Mexican on his paternal side.

businessman, Louis C.K. gives off the perception that his business is about the fans first and his financial interests second.

That type of business with the consumers of his products already makes for a more intimate relationship. However, it is the actual art of Louis C.K.'s comedy that really invites the audience in, with his storytelling approach to comedy. A good portion of his stand-up material revolves around his role as a doting father to his daughters. Far from the mock macho approach that was (and sometimes still is) popular amongst other male comedians, Louis C.K.'s approach is more humanistic and sympathetic. He is not fighting to be a man's man in a woman's world and he is not fazed or grossly confused by the actions of daughters. It is his goal to provide for them and be the best father possible, even if he sometimes fails at it miserably.

Beyond expounding the virtues of fatherhood, though, Louis C.K.'s comedic persona is feminist. He is highly critical of the patriarchal society and recognizes his own privileges as a white, heterosexual male. His stage act is often very skewering, where he takes himself and all other heteronormative white men to task for society's ills. His lack of machismo and seemingly constant struggle to always do what is right is what defines his stand-up persona, despite his frequent cynicism. And certainly, Louis C.K. is not the first comedian to discuss fatherhood in their stand-up routines. A large part of Bill Cosby's stand-up, for example, focused on raising his children. Louis C.K.'s comedy differs, though, in that he is critical of his responsibilities and he uses his stage act and off-stage antics to question the role he has as a male in a male-dominated world. This attitude is key to the new man comedy movement.

That being said, Louis C.K. has the tendency to be a very brash in the delivery of his comedic material. He is certainly vulgar and often, in a very subversive way, politically incorrect. In the rare instances when he deviates from the storytelling approach of his comedy to simple, observational quips, he holds nothing back. An example of this was witnessed firsthand, when I attended his October 10th, 2012 show at Milwaukee's Riverside Theater:

Of course, the Make-a-Wish Foundation for terminally ill children is a wonderful thing. Of course! But maybe...maybe giving a beautiful memory to a kid who's going to be dead in a week is a waste of time and money.³¹

He is not apologetic about his comedy, but rather, dares to be controversial. For him, comedy sometimes involves being offensive. This nature of offending the audience and the potential consequences are something that can put his comedic persona in danger. This chapter will discuss the relation between Louis C.K.'s stand-up act, his personal life (off-stage appearances, where he is not playing the role of a comedian), and his semi-autobiographical character on *Louie*. For new man comedians, every text matters in how they are perceived and for Louis C.K. this is especially true. All of his off-stage texts are components of his comedic persona. He presents himself as a feminist and, therefore, his audience expects that identity to be accurately represented in all of his texts.

Louis C.K.'s stage persona directly relates to the semi-autobiographical character he portrays on his FX sitcom, *Louie*, which recently finished airing its fourth season. The term "sitcom" here is used loosely, as *Louie* often functions as

³¹ Other "Of course...But maybe" bits included riffing on letting those with peanut allergies simply die out and, more controversially, supporting troops, but understanding they are putting themselves in harm's way and maybe deserve to get shot. All of these premises were met with loud laughter and applause.

more of a dark comedy, incongruous to the more traditional sitcom-type of comedy. *Louie* borrows from Louis C.K.'s stand-up act, specifically when Louie performs actual stand-up routines, which segue into the narratives of each episode, much in the way *Seinfeld* attempted to weave parts of Jerry Seinfeld's stand-up act into the plot of an episode for the first few seasons.³² The scenes of stand-up performances in *Louie* offer continuity, in that we see Louie in his vocation. Sometimes the material does not necessarily relate directly to the narrative, but often it is related thematically, as will be discussed later on in this chapter. Though Louis C.K. had received big money offers from major networks to create his own sitcom, cable network F/X offered him far more creative freedom:

(Louis C.K.) took far less money up front from FX than he would have gotten from NBC or Fox so that he could maintain more control. The resultant product feels like it comes from a much more personal place than a writers' room tasked with shoehorning the stand-up's persona into the jolly patriarch mold AND penning sassy quips for his kids.³³

More broadly, *Louie* continually plays down the masculine qualities of not only himself, but also middle-aged white men in general. *Louie* is a backlash against the traditional mock macho sitcoms of yesterday and today. An example of the latter is Tim Allen's classic *Home Improvement*, along with his current ABC vehicle *Last Man Standing*. Masculinity is constantly threatened in these shows and the male protagonist is often made out to be a fool. But by the end of the episode, his masculinity has still triumphed over all and he is a hero as a result of his manly wisdom. *Louie* differs greatly from that model. When Louie is required to be macho

³² Particularly in *Louie*'s first two seasons, many episodes contain two "mini-episodes" with separate narratives, sometimes directly connected to one another, sometimes not.

³³ Nick Marx, "Louie, Luckily," *Antenna*, July 2, 2010, <http://blog.commarks.wisc.edu/2010/07/02/louie-luckily/>

or heroic, he rises to the occasion, transcending the traditional buffoonish archetypes of many sitcom dads. An example of this occurs in the season 4 episode “Elevator Pt. 6,” when he risks his life driving through a hurricane in New York City to rescue his daughters and ex-wife from their apartment. Louis C.K. also avoids the hegemonic hyperbole of the mock macho tradition. With *Louie*, he addresses the problems of modern masculinity in a more feminized way, as Ethan Thompson argues:

Louis C.K. uses his authorial control as writer/director/performer and his relative freedom from network standards to explore and exploit ‘man problems.’ *Louie*’s emasculation is typified by an episode in the first season in which a high school-aged bully humiliates him in front of his date. He won’t stand up to the boy and is forced to beg him, “Please don’t kick my ass”—a major turnoff. *Louie* also makes choices in other episodes which maternalize him. He decides to measure ‘success’ through having breakfast at 5am with his daughters after his failures womanizing with the boys, for example.³⁴

Louie is also perennially humiliated throughout the series, whether it be through awkward dates and sexual experiences or, like in the season 3 episode “Looking for Liz/Lilly Changes”, calling the cops to his apartment to help find his daughter, who has been missing for several hours, only to discover that she has in fact been in her bedroom the whole time. Much like in his stand-up act, he is confident enough to reveal himself to be far less than savvy and far off the mark of hitting some sort of alpha male archetype.

Both Louis C.K.’s stand-up and sitcom persona follow him when he is not performing within his own media texts. This is not different compared to most

³⁴ Ethan Thompson, “Men Reveal Themselves: *Louie/Louie* and Masculine Confession,” *Swigzine Blog*, October 26, 2012, <http://swigzine.blogspot.com/2012/10/men-reveal-themselves-louielouie-and.html>

comedians, especially considering that a comedian's persona is expected to be an exaggerated version of their private selves. There is no real way to prove that, but he has revealed a great deal of himself in non-stage or television performance texts, which act as a reflection of the Louis C.K. audiences experience in performance texts.

Much of the revealing of himself has to do with his relationship with his daughters. During an appearance on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, he fondly reminisces about a joke told by his youngest daughter:

She tells jokes a lot and I love her jokes. She invents them...(and they're) great because I don't know what's going to happen... You know jokes after a while. Someone starts a joke, you know what's going to happen, but not hers. Here's a joke she told me the other day: "Who told the gorilla that he couldn't go to the ballet?" Right away I love this...a great joke...I said, "Who?" And she said, "Just the people in charge of that decision."³⁵

The awkward encounters he describes both in his stand-up and shows in *Louie* also follow him in non-performance media texts. His intense, two-part interview in October of 2010 on comedian Marc Maron's *WTF* podcast is a good example of this. Maron and Louis C.K. both got started in stand-up comedy around the same time in the late-1980s and at one point they were very close friends. Maron himself has a highly neurotic comedic persona that hardly seems like much an exaggeration of his personal character, as his podcasts often open with highly confessional monologues (or ramblings, rather). Maron introduces the first part of the interview by discussing the current relationship he has with Louis C.K.:

³⁵ "Louis C.K." *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, NBC (June 25th, 2012)

(He is) a guy who is my friend. He was my friend and he IS my friend. He was at both of my weddings. He's been there for me in moments of crisis. And something went wrong along the way, something strained our friendship...because of me...I'm a guy who, if I have one good friend, I lean on that person...quite honestly I expect too much out of them...Friendship(s) have been tainted by me because I'm an emotionally needy person.³⁶

Although Maron does not reveal any specific details, he is expressing himself in a very sensitive way in regards to admitting his own foibles and addressing how good of a man he thinks Louis C.K. is. Civilly, they are able to work through some of what strained their friendship in recent years (mainly, it comes down to the fact that Maron accidentally ignored messages from him). Here are two very emotional men opening up to each other not as comedians, but as friends. At one point in the second part of the interview, Louis C.K. begins to cry when describing the birth of his first daughter to Maron:

Kids are supposed to cry when they're born, but she seemed angry to me...When a kid's crying in the delivery room, everyone's smiling, "Aww, look at her cry!" But I was really upset for her. And (then) they put her on this little table and they're putting stuff around her...and, huh...sorry...I'm unexpectedly emotional. It's not a story that I tell a lot, so...*sighing* let me just have some water. Water's good because it washes away your love for your children.

Though Louis C.K. often speaks fondly of his children, whether joking on stage or simply talking during an interview, hearing him become audibly emotional is an entirely different experience for his audience. Though Maron treats it as a private conversation between two old friends, it is in fact produced for mass consumption.

³⁶ Marc Maron, interview with Louis C.K., Pt.1, *WTF*, podcast audio, October 4, 2010, http://www.wtfpod.com/podcast/episodes/episode_111_-_louis_ck_part_1

However, this does not come at the expense of his emotions. Rather, it is a conscious effort to maintain the persona Louis C.K. has as a text, beyond being a comedian. Maron assists Louis C.K. in letting people in. By getting to know him on a more personal level, the audience may find it easier to laugh at his performances, even if he would be having an “off” night.

This intimate relationship with the audience can, however, be sometimes problematic. In 2012, Louis C.K. came under fire for defending comedian Daniel Tosh. Tosh had been heckled during a performance at the Laugh Factory in Los Angeles, specifically for offending at least one member of the audience by telling rape jokes. Controversy surrounded Tosh in how he retaliated against the heckler, responding to her comment, “Rape jokes are never funny,” by saying, “Wouldn’t it be funny if that girl got raped by like, 5 guys right now? Like right now? What if a bunch of guys just raped her?”³⁷ Many comedians took to social media to defend both Tosh’s comedy and the craft of comedy itself, Louie obviously among them.

The biggest issue in Louis C.K. defending Tosh was that there was almost immediate backlash from his feminist fans. He made an attempt at damage control, appearing on the July 16, 2012 episode of *The Daily Show* claiming he was unaware of the severity of Tosh’s counter-heckle and also claiming ignorance on his own part when it comes to issues surrounding rape:

I’ve read some blogs during this whole thing that enlightened me about some things I didn’t know. This woman said how rape is something that polices women’s lives. They have a

³⁷ Kelsey Wallace, “Douchebag Decree: Daniel Tosh and the ‘Comedy’ of Rape Culture,” *Bitch Media Blog*, July 12, 2012, <http://bitchmagazine.org/post/douchebag-decree-daniel-tosh-rape-culture-feminist-magazine-comedy-jokes-women>

narrow corridor that they can't go out late, they can't go to certain neighborhoods, they can't dress a certain way, cause they might get... so that's now part of me...³⁸

Now, granted, Louis C.K. is a comedian and separating his comedic persona with his true self can still be a tricky proposition, but further comments in that same interview seemed to complicate matters even further, regardless if they were made in the context of a joke:

The women are saying, "here's how I feel about this" but they're also saying "my feelings should be everyone's primary concern." Now the men are making this mistake, they're saying, "your feelings don't matter. Your feelings are wrong. Your feelings are stupid." If you've ever lived with a woman you can't step in shit worse than that, then to tell a woman that her feelings don't matter. To the men I say listen to what the women are saying about this. To the women I say now that we've heard you, you know, shut the fuck up for a minute. And let's all get back together and, you know, kill the Jews.³⁹

The implications of this controversy certainly did not derail Louis C.K.'s, or for that matter, Tosh's career. While Louis C.K. exhibits a feminist identity as a comedian, he still speaks from a position of power due to his masculine privilege. He is never in denial of his status as a white, upper-class, heterosexual male and he expresses a feminist sensibility. That feminist sensibility was threatened by his public behavior (which is a paratext) in this situation, and it also has been in his subsequent texts during the aftermath. Furthermore, it eliminates definitive line between Louis C.K. the comedian and Louis C.K. the person, which complicates the relationship he has with audience.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

This gets complicated in Louis C.K.'s texts off-stage and off of the late night interview couch. Recent controversies have erupted based on the fallout of the fourth season of *Louie*. Throughout the season, Louis C.K.'s Louie consistently has consistent struggles with the women in his life, while still defending women's right and acting very much in the role of a feminist comedian. An intense discourse on Louis's C.K.'s feminist agenda began shortly following episode 2 ("Model") of season 4, where Louie has a one-night stand with a model and, as she tickles him, he flails about and winds up punching her out. Not much was made of the violent behavior Louie exhibited—particularly since the punch was an accident. The episode ends with Louie agreeing to a settlement, where he must pay the model \$5,000 a month until he reaches the \$5 million mark. Most of the initial discussion focused on whether or not the incident actually occurred in Louis' C.K.'s real life:

Did the events in episode 2 even happen or were they all a dream? This could, of course, be asked in almost any episode of *Louie*, and that gives Louis C.K. extremely unusual freedom. Rarely does one episode affect the next. This can, at times, be frustrating, but it also allows us to see unusual things that we wouldn't get to if C.K. was forced to stick to a more traditional show format.⁴⁰

Two episodes in and Louis C.K. was already under a microscope for the portrayal of himself in *Louie*. It did set-up the close examination by popular culture critics of Louis C.K.'s feminist agenda that occurs throughout the remainder of the season, where Louie's actions in *Louie* are more closely scrutinized. The audience-

⁴⁰ Louie Schuth, "'Louie' Season 4, Episode 2 Recap: Did That Even Happen?," *Hypable*, (May 5th, 2014): <http://www.hypable.com/2014/05/05/louie-season-4-episode-2-recap-review/>

particularly media critics—attempts to find answers for Louie’s actions in *Louie* throughout his stand-up comedy.

By the third episode, “So Did The Fat Lady,” Louis C.K. became the centerpiece for an important discussion on the difficulties overweight women face in contemporary American society. In the episode, Vanessa, a charismatic waitress at the Comedy Cellar, asks Louie out on a date. He initially rejects her request, the implication being that he is not interested in her because she is overweight. The irony of Louie being a stocky male, but often seen dating thin women on *Louie* (particularly with this episode airing a week after “Model”) is certainly not lost on the audience. Eventually, Louie winds up asking Vanessa out for coffee under the guise that he just wants to thank her for providing him with free tickets to a hockey game. The non-date, as Louie views it, turns into an all-day affair, where they find themselves walking along a pier and Vanessa begins to tell Louie how difficult it is to be a “fat girl” in New York City. Louie instantly rebuffs her claim, telling her “You’re not fat!” Vanessa then launches into a monologue:

Vanessa: Louie, you know what the meanest thing is you can say to a fat girl? "You're not fat." I mean, come on, buddy. It just sucks. It really really sucks. You have no idea. And the worst part is, I'm not even supposed to do this. Tell anyone how bad it sucks, because it's too much for people. I mean, you, you can talk into the microphone and say you can't get a date, you're overweight. It's adorable. But if I say it, they call the suicide hotline on me.

I mean, can I just say it? I'm fat. It sucks to be a fat girl. Can people just let me say it? It sucks. It really sucks. And I'm going to go ahead and say it. It's your fault. Look, I really like you, you're truly a good guy, I think. I'm so sorry. I'm picking you. On behalf of all the fat girls, I'm making you represent all the guys. Why do you hate us so much? What is it about the basics of human

happiness, feeling attractive, feeling loved, having guys chase after us, that's just not in the cards for us? Nope. Not for us.

How is that fair? And why am I supposed to just accept it?

Louie: You know, Vanessa, you're a very, really beautiful—

Vanessa: If I was a very, really beautiful, then you would have said yes when I asked you out. I mean, come on, Louie, be honest here. You know what's funny? I flirt with guys all the time. And I mean the great looking ones, the really high-caliber studs? They flirt right back, no problem. Because they know their status will never be questioned. But guys like you never flirt with me, because you get scared that maybe you should be with a girl like me.

And why not? You know, if you were standing over there looking at us, you know what you'd see? That we totally match. We're actually a great couple together. And yet, you would never date a girl like me. Have you ever dated a girl that was heavier than you? Have you?

Louie: Yes I have, yes I have.

Vanessa: No no no, I didn't say have you ever fucked a fat girl, Louie. I'm sure you have. Every guy has. I mean, when I met you, if I had said, "Hey, do you want to go to the bathroom and screw on a big can of peaches?" you would have gone for it. No, I'm saying, have you ever dated a fat girl. Have you ever kissed a fat girl? Have you ever wooed a fat girl? Have you ever held hands with a fat girl? Have you ever walked down the street in the light of day, holding hands, with a big girl like me? Go ahead. Hold my hand. What do you think is going to happen? You think your dick is going to fall off if you hold hands with a fat girl? You know what the sad thing is? It's all I want. I mean, I can get laid. Any woman who is willing can get laid. I don't want that. I don't even need a boyfriend or a husband. All I want is to hold hands with a nice guy, and walk and talk.⁴¹

⁴¹ Gilbert Cruz, "Read *Louie*'s Memorable Speech About 'Fat Girls'," *Vulture*, (5/12/2014): <http://www.vulture.com/2014/05/read-louies-memorable-speech-about-fat-girls.html>.

This very quickly not only became one of the most discussed scenes during the entire run of *Louie*, but it became a major point of discussion on Louis C.K.'s comedic persona and his feminist agenda. Considering Louis C.K. as a leader in the new man movement in stand-up comedy culture, he is one of the first male comedians to ever tackle a completely feminist topic. And while the character of Vanessa is responsible for speaking the dialogue of the monologue, Louis C.K. wrote all the words. In many circles of discourse, he was praised for his work, labeled as something of a trailblazer of male comedians. The *Daily Beast's* Amy Zimmerman praised him for having done "something extraordinary—namely, made some really powerful points about gender, media, and American standards of beauty, all while avoiding the common traps of stereotyping or mansplaining."⁴²

Meanwhile, *The A.V. Club's* Libby Hill acknowledges that Louis C.K. is "starting a conversation. No matter how sad it may be that the only way many will start to understand this maligned populace is if a white guy explains it to them, the fact remains that through the platform of his critically acclaimed show, Louis C.K. has given voice to the fat girl."⁴³ Both Zimmerman and Hill are generally praiseworthy in their discussion of *Louie's* efforts, citing him as an important figure in the discussion.

More critical, however, is *Slate's* Willa Paxon:

("So Did The Fat Lady" is more a) male *mea culpa*.
Louis C.K.'s insights into why a man might not want to

⁴² Amy Zimmerman, "Louis C.K. Apologizes to the 'Fat Girls'," *The Daily Beast*, (5/13/2014): <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/05/13/louis-c-k-apologizes-to-the-fat-girls.html>.

⁴³ Libby Hill, "Fat Woman Talking: Louie Starts a Necessary Conversation," *The A.V. Club*, (5/12/2014): <http://www.avclub.com/article/fat-woman-talking-louie-starts-necessary-conversat-204504>.

be seen with a woman like Vanessa are unimpeachable: His concern about double standards and casual male cruelty seem deeply felt. But his characterization of Vanessa is less unerring. A woman as confident and comfortable as Vanessa would not, I don't think, imagine herself as the victim of her weight and blame guys like Louie as entirely as her speech suggests. As a guilt trip, her speech is perfect; as a character exploration, it's a little bit too much of a guilt trip. Vanessa's teachable moment, and the episode more largely, is as scathing to Louie as possible. But it's also condescending to Vanessa.⁴⁴

Paxton, along with Zimmerman and Hill, bring a discourse to the monologue, no matter the negative or positive tone, which illustrates that Louis C.K. has pushed for a conversation about the social plight of heavy women in contemporary society. The monologue is also a rather vitriolic attack on himself and men like him. *Vulture's* Danielle Henderson also, while critical of Louis C.K.'s work here, offers more evidence of his ultimate goal:

(Louis C.K.'s written monologue) started to lose me when, after she becomes hugely disappointed in his refusal to admit she's fat, Vanessa starts to talk about weight with the bottom line is that "it sucks to be a fat girl," and she suddenly needs to turn Louie into a stand-in for all men, ...I'm uncomfortable because I'm not sure if C.K. is using this monologue to reveal something about himself, or if he's actually trying to get inside the heads of fat women and take a stand on our behalf... The entire monologue was heavy-handed and aimless, relying too much on tropes of fat girl-ness (we can't tell anyone how bad it sucks, but all we want to do is scream at men about how bad it sucks) instead of the usual curiosity into the weird complexity of the human condition that we've come to expect from *Louie*. This didn't feel like a joke — it felt like a plea, a plea I'm not sure he's qualified to make.

⁴⁴ Willa Paxton, "Louie Has No Idea What It's Like To Be A 'Fat Girl.' Neither Does Louis C.K.," *Slate*, (5/12/2014): http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2014/05/12/louie_so_did_the_fat_lady_louis_ck_writes_a_fat_girl_to_apologize_for_men.html

It is indeed not a joke, as new man comedy does not require the traditional constructs of comedy to work. Henderson is correct in that it is a plea: It is a plea from Louis C.K. to himself and men like him to at recognize their shortcomings. Louis C.K. wrote the speech for the character of Vanessa to deliver to him, wherein he—and all men—are berated and put in their place. It is his own message of criticism and complaint to himself and other men who would maybe be threatened by this type of confrontational speech. It plays into fears that many average men may have when confronted by a woman that is not part of society's constructed ideal of beauty. Here, he calls men to task for their behavior. This meta self-examination is a huge characteristic of what makes Louis C.K. and other comedians part of the new man comedic movement. It is a desire for them to pick themselves apart in public, whether it is on stage, off stage, in reality, or in fiction. All texts involving the comedian contain a message that is both feminized and feminist.

Because he is notorious for not interacting with critics and contributing to any discourse about his work (a major part of what separates him from his new man contemporary, Marc Maron), the discussion does not really go any further other than critics praising him on one side of the aisle, while others question his motives. However, these critics are talking about Louis C.K. in ways they have never been able to talk about a male comedian before. Louis C.K. is the first of his kind to begin a dialogue like this.

Yet, while the issues that surround Louie and the Vanessa confrontation well-represent the feminist comedy from Louis C.K., the goodwill he seemed to establish was nearly destroyed by what Louie did in the episode "Pamela Pt.1," which aired

mere weeks after “Vanessa.” The episode centers on the complicated relationship Louie has with his friend Pamela—it is complicated because the situation involves unrequited love. Throughout the series, Louie is in love with Pamela, however, she does not reciprocate those feelings. If anything, she often will call Louie to task for his lack of manliness in any given situation. For example, in a scene from “Pamela Pt. 1,” after another failed attempt to ask Pamela out, Louie receives a phone call, to which Pamela reacts, “Are those your balls calling you?”

Pamela is a very strong character, who often challenges Louie’s masculinity throughout the series. However, in “Pamela Pt. 1,” Louie does something that challenges not only the perception of Louie the television character, but Louis C.K. the comedian and man. This challenge begins midway through the episode, where an extended bit of Louie performing a set of stand-up comedy is featured. The bit Louie that performs is taken word for word from a genuine stand-up routine that Louis C.K. has performed on stage, most notably during a monologue from when he hosted *Saturday Night Live* on March 14th, 2014. It begins with a discussion on the existence of God, specifically, how the Biblical God is referred to as “The Father,” which prompts him to ponder, “Where's our Mother? What happened to our Mom? What did he *do* to our Mom?! Something happened. Somewhere in Heaven, there's a porch with a dead lady under it and I want this story!”

The routine then transitions into a discussion on the role of the mother in society and he works his way into examining why men are in charge of society:

I think that we made God a man because we wanted men to be in charge, so it made sense. Because it doesn't make sense that men are in charge. It makes

sense that women would be in charge, because your mom is the first person who takes care of you. So...it would just make sense that mothers would run the world, and they don't-it's the opposite. So we have this weird system of men being (being in charge). It's kind of upside down. I think the reason is 'cause women were in charge long time ago and they were really mean. They were horrible. And they would-- you had to walk around naked and they'd flick your penis and laugh at you. So we're so scared of them. And then finally, one guy punched a woman and she was like, "Whaa!" And he's like, "We can hit them!" And then that was it.

This bit plays into the latent fear men have of women in a patriarchal society.

Although his theory on why women are not in charge of society is an absurd premise in his comedy bit, it still sparks discussion and gives him agency in the discourse of gender dichotomy. He continues, “Now we're so afraid of women, (because) women are really kept down, uh, even today. A lot of people like to argue that things are equal, but they're really not. And American history hasn't been kind to women.” He is using his white, male privilege to speak up for oppressed members of society again, as did with the character of Vanessa, only here he is using his own comedy routine as a meta-text in his television series. While these are jokes, his social commentary is something that is taken seriously. When Louis C.K. performed the same routine on the aforementioned episode of *Saturday Night Live*, Katia McGlynn of *Huffington Post* claimed his jokes on women’s rights were “poignant.”⁴⁵ While that poignancy was initially vital when he performed the same bit in “Pamela, Pt. 1” on *Louie*, what

⁴⁵ Katia McGlynn, “Louis C.K.’s ‘SNL’ Monologue Gets Real About God, Heaven, and Women Calling Shirts ‘Wifebeaters’,” *Huffington Post*, (3/30/2014): http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/29/louis-ck-snl-monologue_n_5057239.html.

happened next in the context of the show altered the perception of Louis C.K. overnight.

In the scene that immediately follows Louie's poignant set about men keeping women down in society, we see him returning home from the comedy club. Pamela, who had been babysitting his kids, is asleep on his couch. As she attempts to leave his apartment, he stops and tries to kiss her. She refuses, but then Louie grabs her and forces himself upon her, dragging her around his apartment trying to at least get her to kiss him and, possibly, more. At one point, Pamela breaks free and screams, "You can't even rape well!" He then crowds her into the corner by the door, where she acquiesces to his request for a kiss, though she does this out of fear and she does not enjoy it. After she exits the apartment, Louie shakes his fist triumphantly: He got what he wanted.

This attempted rape scene is in complete juxtaposition with the pro-feminist stance Louis C.K. takes in his stage act in the prior scene. It also reflects the experience when Louis C.K. found himself acknowledging rape culture in the wake of the Daniel Tosh controversy. *Louie* plays like an autobiographical television series, beyond the fact that Louie performs some of his actual stand-up routines in most episodes. Although the show is fictional, and its tone varies between absurdity and reality, the audience is led to believe that the writing is rooted and based on Louis C.K.'s actual life. Therefore, for whatever happens in the show, Louie the character is not always held accountable, but rather Louis C.K. the man is. The distance between the man and the character is not entirely clear for the audience. A day after the episode aired, Louis C.K. received a lot of backlash for this scene, much of it based

on the fact that outside the *Louie* universe, he had been praised for his recent pro-feminist material, particularly a stand-up routine seen in his 2013 special, *Oh My God*, where he decrees, “How do women still go out with guys, when you consider that there is no greater threat to women than men? We’re the number one threat to women! Globally and historically, we’re the number one cause of injury and mayhem to women.”

Vulture’s Danielle Henderson in particular felt that Louis C.K.’s pro-feminist stance on rape culture made the scene that much more problematic, for his comedic persona gives off the perception of him not being a threat to women:

How can Louie be a creep when he’s so ineffective? Which is, of course, part of the larger problem. Men who think they are immune to sexual violence often don’t see their behavior as threatening. This was fucking rapey, no questions asked. Where is he going with this?⁴⁶

There is a sense that because of what happened in the episode, Louis C.K. has let down his audience and all of the people he has stood-up for. In a way, it wipes away all of the goodwill he has done on and off stage. Ashley Hoffman of *Styleite* went as far to say that the attempted rape scene destroyed his feminist agenda:

He had us going, for a while. You think you know a guy, and then he rapes the hell out of someone’s face. Stand-up set after stand-up set, Louis C.K.’s been championing women on *Louie*, but now that he straight-up sexually assaulted Pamela (Pamela Adlon), all that feminism disappears. Up until this point, his character was passive, tongue-tied, and powerless while all the kickass women ran shit. You knew his sad sack routine was building in support of an outburst, but this was

⁴⁶ Danielle Henderson, “*Louie* Recap: You Can’t Even Rape Well,” *Vulture*, (6/3/2014): <http://www.vulture.com/2014/06/louie-recap-season-4-attempted-rape.html>.

scary. In one episode, he managed to slide that male power structure right back in place.⁴⁷

These criticisms point to a certain danger in comedians functioning as transmedia texts, because audiences cannot separate a fictional character from the real person. Here specifically, Louis C.K. cannot escape the meta-textual world he has created through his comedic persona. He is held to task with every movement, be it fictional or not.

While Louis C.K.'s feminine and feminist reputation took a hit, there were some critics who felt that the scene was, in fact, a subversive way of confronting people with a serious issue that needs to be discussed. As Joanna Robinson notes her recap of "Pamela, Pt. 1":

Obviously, just because Louie the character sees his Pamela interaction as a triumph, doesn't mean Louis C.K., the creator, approves of it. Louis C.K. is a man who tells "feminist rape jokes" and Louie is a character who did a lengthy stand-up bit on male physical brutality toward women in this very episode. Does that make all of this more complicated? Certainly. But that seems to be the way Louis C.K. likes it.⁴⁸

While the scene is very uncomfortable and certainly has the effect of making the audience wonder, "What the hell is he doing?" it still leaves Louis C.K.'s comedic persona intact, for he is furthering the discussion and bringing up a topic such as rape that goes beyond telling jokes. It also separates him from the legions of male comics who either ignore—or celebrate—the patriarchal structure of society. In the wake of

⁴⁷ Ashley Hoffman, "Louie's Rape Scene Just Destroyed His Feminist Agenda," *Styleite*, (6/4/2014): <http://www.styleite.com/features/opinion/louies-rape-scene-just-destroyed-his-feminist-agenda/>

⁴⁸ Joanna Robinson, "Unlucky Louie: What On Earth is Louis C.K. Trying To Say About Rape?" *Vanity Fair Hollywood*, (6/3/2014): <http://www.vanityfair.com/vf-hollywood/louis-ck-rape-scene-pamela-part-one>

“Pamela, Pt. 1,” *Crave Online* presented a discourse between two of its writers (Paul Tamburro and Melissa Stetten) on whether Louis C.K. is a misogynist. Stetten claims:

When Louis writes a 5-minute scene where an overweight girl complains about being treated unfairly, it’s brilliant. And you know what – it is. I don’t think Louis is trying to offend anyone or be misogynistic. He’s addressing male stereotypes in a very blunt way, and nobody else on television (or in stand-up comedy) has the balls to do it.⁴⁹

Tamburro, more bluntly, states that *Louie* is “not a sexist show... it's a show about a sexist.”⁵⁰ This civil discourse speaks to how it is best to perceive a comedian and their paratexts. While there may not be a complete separation between the comedian and their character, there needs to be a fine line between how a comedian is able to get their message across. As troubling as Louie’s attempted rape in “Pamela, Pt. 1” is, it demonstrates a subversive aspect of Louis C.K.’s comedic persona. Much like how he opens a new dialogue via the speech from Vanessa in “So Does The Fat Lady,” he has challenged the notion that sensitive man is not always necessarily a good man. Throughout 4 seasons of *Louie*, he has been pushed around and made to look like the butt of the joke. His assault on Pamela raises awareness and starts a conversation that both lifts the veil off of unchecked masculinity and forces the audience to draw a line between Louis C.K. and his paratextual representations. Additionally, Louie’s aggravated assault on Pamela both reflects a commentary that Louis C.K. is making on the legitimate threat of sexual violence towards women, but

⁴⁹ Paul Tamburro, “What He/She Thinks...Louis CK and Sexism,” *Crave Online*, (July 3, 2014): http://www.craveonline.com/lifestyle/sex-relationships/718621-what-heshe-thinks-louis-ck-and-sexism?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=what-heshe-thinks-louis-ck-and-sexism

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Louie's clumsy attempt to force himself upon Pamela—which is accentuated by her telling him he can't even “rape well”—also makes him the butt of a long joke. Even when he is threatening, he poses no threat. It is up to the audience to be able to separate Louis C.K. from Louie in this situation.

Moreover, “Pamela, Pt. 1” was not the end of the story arc. “Pamela, Pt. 2” sees Louie and Pamela go on a successful date, which ends with a kiss under the stars in Central Park. The mood shifts from Louie being a sexually threatening buffoon to Louie being a triumphant romantic. “Pamela, Pt. 3” shows Louie and Pamela in a pseudo-relationship, where the feelings Louie has for her remain unrequited, but she is still able to reciprocate them on some level: she will not fall love him or make herself totally available to him emotionally, but she will accept an exclusive relationship with him physically. The situation is completely incongruous to what was witnessed in “Pamela, Pt. 1,” but in the end, she still has the power in their relationship. Through the character of Louie, Louis C.K. maintains the idea that women have power over men. It is a feminist presentation, but Louis C.K. presents himself as a feminized character here through Louie, in that he longs for what he cannot have with Pamela.

Louis C.K. presents a pro-feminist comedic persona, even though his flawed alter-ego (the one we see on *Louie* and in his stage act) does not always seem rise to the occasion when absolutely necessary. It is a challenge that Louis C.K. brings to his audience and critics. To a larger degree, it leads to a discourse on sexism in comedy and society. These issues are progressively brought into the spotlight through his comedic persona. The lines that separate Louis C.K. and his various

textual representations are deliberately blurry. This brings about a different type relationship between a comedian and their audience. With Louis C.K., the relationship is less traditional through the various changes and challenges presented in his off-stage texts. His feminist agenda and feminized persona on-stage make him a new man comedian, in addition to his subversive way of manipulating his image off-stage. For example, we hear him discuss and ridicule rape culture in a stand-up routine, but then we see his semi-autobiographical character attempt to sexually assault a woman in *Louie*. Not only does Louis C.K. question society at large—he questions himself and his role as a white, heterosexual male. He is a sensitive man, much like his contemporary Marc Maron, although Louis C.K. is more deliberately masculine (e.g., discussing his role as a father both on and off-stage). His comedic persona transcends the stage and gets the audience participating in his stand-up comedy routines—even if it is not always funny. These new attitudes and expressions are changing the culture of stand-up comedy and bringing forth the age of the new man comedian.

Chapter 3:
“Sensitive Man”
Marc Maron’s Interpersonal Relationships and Transmedia Representations in New Man Comedy

The new man movement in stand-up comedy starts with Marc Maron. There are two halves to the new man movement: The comedian who still exudes masculine qualities, but addresses his masculinity in a subversive fashion and takes on a pro-feminist stance. Then there is the comedian whose soul is laid bare in every aspect of their career, which is where we find Marc Maron. His involvement in the latter half of the new man comedy movement is the true hallmark of his comedic persona. In both cases, each of the comedians’ neuroses is certainly not new to stand-up comedy, particularly in the tradition of Maron’s fellow Jewish comedic predecessors, like Woody Allen. However, as Kathleen Collins notes in “The Barest of Them All: The Personal Politics of Maron”:

Unlike progenitor Woody Allen, a convincing neurotic Jew but whose shtick was his shtick, Maron is blatantly acting out his personal demons—and it serves him and others. Exposing his weaknesses fosters empathy, camaraderie, solace, and forgiveness. It’s deeply human. Hitting the wide range of notes of human experience allows Maron to hit his stride and compels him to grab the mic.⁵¹

The new man theory does not just simply refer to a male comedian’s neurotic behavior in their persona. It transcends what the comedian does outside of traditional comedic texts. In the stand-up comedian community, audiences are now being taken

⁵¹ Kathleen Collins, “The Barest of Them All: The Personal Politics of *Maron*,” *Flow* Vol. 18 (August 13th, 2013): 4, <http://flowtv.org/2013/08/the-barest-of-them-all/>.

behind-the-scenes, particularly through podcast interviews and the meta-fiction of television series and comedians' appearances in various media. There is a burgeoning sensitivity to male comedians in the current comedy scene. The new man comedian is cultivating relationships with his audience and fellow comedians that run deeper than they ever have before because of transmedia representations. Particularly in the case of the latter, professional and personal jealousy between comedians often bubble to the surface. Comedians reveal themselves to be more competitive with one another, which emphasizes the insecurity of their own status in the industry. There is no masculine, hyper-confidence in the new man comedian. Marc Maron is a prototypical example of this new type of comedian.

While Maron is currently in the midst of a renaissance in his stand-up comedy career, it follows a period of relative obscurity. Maron got his start in stand-up comedy in the early 1980s, splitting his time between popular comedy hubs Boston, San Francisco, and New York. He also befriended many fellow struggling comics of the time, most notably David Cross and Louis C.K. At one point he was even known to hang out with comedic rockstar Sam Kinison. However, Maron was never quite the household name that many of his peers became. Despite frequent appearances on *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* throughout the 1990s and early 2000s and the occasional Hollywood cameo (most notably as a concert promoter in Cameron Crowe's 2000 film *Almost Famous*), Maron was a post-comedy boom comedian who was on the fringes of the industry. Far from being a celebrity, he was hardly a draw

on the national comedy club circuit.⁵² Much of this can be owed to the fact that he had issues with substance abuse, which made him difficult to work with.

A stint as a radio talk show host on Air America ended for Maron in 2009, and while initially seen as yet another professional setback, it set in motion not only a career revival (or career beginning), but also a major change in the medium of stand-up comedy. With limited resources, Maron began *What The Fuck? (WTF)*, a twice-weekly podcast where he conducts in-depth and highly personal interviews with comedians, along with the occasional actor, musician, or artist.

This chapter will explore the various aspects of Maron's comedic persona through transmedia representation. Transmedia representation specifically refers to how Maron is represented through various media texts. The analyses will include texts that are both non-fiction and fiction. In non-fiction, we are obviously dealing with the real Marc Maron, and those non-fiction texts will include his *WTF* podcast, his stand-up routines, and his interpersonal interactions with his fans. I will discuss how the persona that Maron cultivates through his non-fictional texts directly influences his representation through fiction, thereby discussing how a fictional Maron is actually a transmedia representation of Maron, rather than being a non-related supplement to his comedic persona. More broadly, Maron's transmedia representations speak to the process of how audiences now view stand-up comedians. These representations are integral to the new man comedian persona. Here, we will

⁵² The titles of his first 3 comedy albums were hardly "tongue-in-cheek": *Not Sold Out* (2002), *Tickets Still Available* (2006) & *Final Engagement* (2009).

begin with a discussion of Maron's most influential text, and the medium that is significant launching the new man comedic persona: the podcast.

“Show business has changed...for the better. Whatever is happening to me now started, and remains, in my garage? The future is here.” – Marc Maron, 6/13/2011⁵³

A typical episode of Maron's *WTF* follows a perennial formula. An example of that formula will be analyzed here through episode 144, which features an interview with Patton Oswalt. At the top of the episode, Maron gives a brief, 10-second plug for the show's sponsor (Audible.com for this edition), which is immediately followed by an audio clip of Maron shouting, “Look the gates!” from his cameo in the Cameron Crowe film, *Almost Famous* (2000). The show's theme song starts up, a hybrid of a jangly blues and garage rock guitar riff that gives way to choppy drums. The quality of the recorded song has a very independently produced sound to it, as if the song were recorded in one take without any post-production engineering. The recording is rather raw, much like the approaching monologue Maron will be sharing at the beginning of the show, and no doubt like the interview he will be conducting with the guest in his garage (hence the garage rock quality of the theme song). Interspersed throughout the song are sound clips of Maron anxiously asking, “Are we doing this? Are we doing this, really?!” which sets an exasperated, intense tone to the podcast. It is almost as if Maron is already in an argument—either with himself or his guest—before the show officially begins. Adding to that tone, following a few samples of Maron saying “What the fuck?!” there is one more soundbite of him decreeing, “What's WRONG with me?!” This

⁵³ Marc Maron, “The Future is Here,” *Dispatches From The Head*, (June 13, 2011): <http://wtfpod.com/dispatches/P390/>.

also establishes how *WTF* and the interviews are equally as much about him as they are about his guests.

As the theme fades out, Maron begins his familiar intro: “Okay, let’s do this! How are you what-the-fuckers? What-the-fuck-niks? What-the-fuck-onauts? What-the-fuck-skies? What-the-fuck-aricans? What-the-fuck-anadians?” Each *WTF* episode begins with Maron addressing his listeners with a list of variations on “what-the-fuck-a...” Sometimes they come to him by way of fan suggestions through Twitter or through the comments sections on his web site’s message board, which assists in establishing a close connection between himself and his audience. He then goes on to tell the audience what to expect from this edition of the show, stating, “Patton Oswalt will be here, in the garage. I’ve had my problems with Patton in the past, but deep down, I love the guy...I gotta admit to being a little resentful at times, I don’t think you’ll find that surprising, but he’s gonna be here, we’re gonna talk, he’s got a new book out, but he’s not here to plug the book, he’s here to talk to me. That’s the way I see it.” Immediately, the audience is set-up to expect an intense interview, or rather an intimate and personal conversation, free of the obligatory promotion that accompanies most celebrity interviews. Maron has established the fact that he might be slightly jealous of Oswalt’s success as a comedian—a common premise that emerges whenever Maron is about to interview one of his peers from the comedy scene who have gone on to have great amounts of success.

Jealousy of his colleagues’ successes is a recurring theme in Maron’s comedic persona, which itself is a reflection of Maron’s own private personality. He is obsessed with the success of others and his own lack of success. Moreover, it points

to what would initially be viewed as a masculine quality of competitiveness. However, Maron rarely ever seems to be in competition with his peers. Rather, his frequent professional—and personal—jealously establishes feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. He is very open about his feelings of jealousy, rather than confrontational and aggressively angry. The communication of his jealousy is a feminized characteristic—clearly he is in touch with his feelings and expressive, rather than regressive and vitriolic. He does not want to exert physical retaliation towards his competition or write them off in a passive aggressive way—he would rather talk to them directly. This trope is central to Maron being a definitive presence in the new man comedy scene. While certainly resentful of other comedians’ successes, he concedes to them, as will be discussed later with the example of his actual interview with Patton Oswalt.

Following some plugs for *WTF* apps and asking for donations from his listeners, he dives into his personal monologue, neurotically screaming that he is “Wearing (his) fat pants, if anyone is interested in that!” He also reveals that he is back in therapy with a new therapist. He goes on to reveal that, in order to see this new therapist, he was required to do an evaluation on his past relationships and sexual history. Soon, the story about his new therapist spirals into a personal rant about on his personal demons, particularly his willingness to work with the therapist to fix his urges to enter toxic relationships and go “on the road (to) sleep with strangers.” He then begins to defend himself by screaming, “I can’t help that stuff! I’ve earned that! I tried the marriage thing, twice! It didn’t work!” He also reveals calling the cops on his latest ex-girlfriend, who (allegedly) tried to break into his house. This over-

sharing of his personal life off-stage gives Maron more of a feminized character. While he is perhaps a bit volatile and cranky about certain aspects of his life, which are more masculine qualities, he is very in-tune and self-aware. In a way, Maron is gossiping about himself, which can be read as self-indulgent, but it also points to his own insecurities, making him more vulnerable in his own gender identity.

Such personal revelations are expected on Maron's twice-weekly podcast. *WTF*, and in particular his weekly "Dispatches from the Head" blog posts, function as his own public diary, and often function as a way for him to work through new stand-up material. For his blog posts, Maron directly addresses his fans, updating them not only with what to expect from the week's episodes of *WTF*, but also with what is happening in his personal life. The *WTF* monologues, while deeply personal and non-withholding, function as texts that further Maron's comedic persona. They are rarely ever joke-based, but they form an act of catharsis for the audience. Rather than laughter being the end-all of stand-up comedy, which John Limon asserts in his theory on stand-up comedy, Maron leads a new trend letting out raw emotions that elicit thought and provocation. New man comedy is meant to be revealing and thoughtful, not just funny and entertaining.

On *WTF*, an (often) hour-long interview follows Maron's monologue. The interviews can be just as revealing about Maron's character as they are about the interview subjects. With Patton Oswalt, the interview begins rather smoothly, as they transition from certain topics—mainly, Oswalt's new book—with relative fluidity and no personal animosity is revealed, regardless of Maron addressing his own issues with Oswalt during the preceding monologue. Halfway through the interview,

though, Oswald brings up a time when Maron made fun of him when he was younger and starting comedy, bringing into light the larger issue between the two of them.

The interview deviates from being a formal discourse to an intense discussion about their misunderstood relationship with one another:

Maron: I tried to figure out today what annoys me about you...You're undeniably funny, smart, you're a charming guy, you're socially adept...I just think there's a confidence, that uh...

Oswalt: Really? I've never been accused of having confidence.

Maron: You walk with an air of...it's not snobbery, but there's an air of confidence about you.

Oswalt: There might have been some false confidence when I was young, just because I was putting that front on.

Maron: But you were always intelligent, so you could get away with it.

It is revealed that Maron dismissed Oswald in the earlier days because of his perceived snobbery. Oswald is quick to defend that criticism, claiming he was never snobby, but self-conscious. Through this interview, they are able to talk out what bothered each other about themselves. Maron does reveal that he is envious of Oswald's career opportunities—particularly the frequent gigs Oswald gets to punch-up Hollywood scripts—but he grows less jealous as the interview wears on and their bond comes back together before the audience's ears. As Maron closes the show, he acknowledges, "That was the lovely Patton Oswald, who I get along with now. Pretty soon I'll get along with everybody!" Maron's interviews, like the one with Oswald, are often just as much for himself as they are for the subject. Opening old wounds is common in interviews where Maron interviews comedians he has known for years and they always end with him and the comedian making up.

His interview with Dane Cook (*WTF* Episode 85) is especially noteworthy, considering how different of a comedian Cook is compared to Maron—and other new man comedians, for that matter. Considering Maron is a prototypical new man comedian, Cook would be considered the exact opposite, in that his persona is brimming with an air of hypermasculine cockiness. Cook often appears unflappable, both on and off stage, and he is wildly popular, especially with the younger college-aged male demographic. To put it bluntly, he is a comedian for the frat boy set, rather than the sensitive, comedy nerd set (Maron's target demographic). Yet, when Cook appears on *WTF*, he appears vulnerable and sometimes even seems intimidated by Maron and his frequently cranky demeanor. Breaking character from his overly-confident stand-up comedian persona, Cook discusses the death of his parents, breaking the barrier and entering into the new man comedy scene by revealing his genuine sensitivity.

Some of Maron's ill mood during the course of the interview can be attributed to his jealousy of Cook's massive success as a comedian. Maron's envy comes through passive-aggressively, in that he is not confrontational with Cook. In fact, while Maron may feel intellectually superior to Cook, he concedes to feeling professionally inferior to him since he is a more successful comedian. There is a moment where, after Cook addresses the accusations that he has stolen material from comedians like Louis C.K. (he emphatically denies those claim), he talks about having confronted fellow comedian Steve Byrne for "stealing (his) essence." The use of the term "essence" prompts laughter from Maron, who uncharacteristically starts to make fun of Cook's feelings of self-importance. Cook is aware of this and addresses

Maron by saying, “I know you want me to be ‘Darth Vader,’” meaning he feels that Maron almost does not want Cook to reveal his true self and that he still wants him and his audience to view Cook as a conceited jerk. “The mask is off,” he tells Maron, to which Maron responds, “(Laughing) I know the mask isn’t completely off!” Maron does a little bit of damage control here, though, claiming he is not “attacking (Cook) here,” but that he understands, even if the use of the word essence seems a bit hyperbolic. Even with this deviation in behavior from Maron, he still maintains an upper hand in sensitivity. He acts as a surrogate for his audience, who likely are not fans of Cook’s broad comedy, and it is an opportunity for them to bully the bullies of society. Certainly not a sensitive characteristic, but Maron never resorts to petty or vile name-calling, nor are there any threats of violence. It falls out in a very subtle and cerebral way. In the end, Maron tells Cook, “We’re good,” which comes as a relief to Cook. Even he seeks the approval of Maron and his *WTF* interview is an important benchmark for his already successful and established comedy career.

Through *WTF*, Maron “wants his subjects to let it all hang out, and they do. As a *Rolling Stone* article described, ‘It’s that after all his years of living that life—the touring, the drugging, the ex-wives, the failure—he’s reached a point of brutal self-candor that makes people open up to him in a way they never would otherwise.’”⁵⁴ ⁵⁵

It transcends Maron’s past indiscretions. Surely, they matter, but if he were not so

⁵⁴ Kathleen Collins, “The Barest of Them All: The Personal Politics of *Maron*,” *Flow* Vol. 18 (August 13th, 2013): 4, <http://flowtv.org/2013/08/the-barest-of-them-all/>.

⁵⁵ Josh Eeels, “Marc Maron Regrets and Whines and Kvetches and Complains,” *Rolling Stone* (Online), (October 12th, 2012): <http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/news/marc-maron-regrets-and-whines-and-kvetches-and-complains-20121012>

incredibly open about his past and his present in a brutally honest way, his interview subjects would be less inclined to be as revealing as they are.

Because Maron is constantly and consistently willing to reveal so much of himself through his work, particularly through his podcast monologues, he is able to get the truth out of his *WTF* interview subjects. His interviews have created a new culture of stand-up comedy, wherein comedians are now volunteering to reveal much more of their personal lives than ever before off-stage (“not funny” material). Whereas audiences have always questioned what makes comedians tick or what experiences comedians have gone through to get them to produce their material, the questions were more often than not rhetorical. With the exception of tell-all autobiographies and the occasional television interview, the psyche of a comedian existed in a world separate from the audience. Granted, comedians sharing personal anecdotes as part of their stage act have always existed. However, in the public forum of a podcast, comedians now share personal revelations about themselves off-stage for no charge. Much like the guarded instructions behind old carnival tricks, comedians were reluctant in the past to reveal the secrets to their comedic material, whether they be anything from childhood traumas to just simply having quirky sensibilities. To reveal oneself to the audience would have, perhaps, made the illusion of comedy disappear. That bygone era of stand-up comedy no longer exists. Fans of stand-up comedians now expect to know what makes their favorite comedians tick. To a larger extent, this is reflected through social media and contemporary celebrity culture, where reality shows give “behind-the-scenes” peaks at the lives of people who are already in the public eye. In fact, it is frowned upon to reject an

invitation to appear on Maron's *WTF*, with Jon Stewart and Daniel Tosh being the most high-profile rejections.

For all comedians, considering that these interviews are now part of comedy culture, it brings up the issue of what exactly a comedian is, if not just somebody whose job it is to make us laugh. Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik have discussed this in their study on the comic:

All instances of the comic involve a deviation from some kind of norm, rule, convention, or type, whether culturally general or aesthetically specific. However, since this is the basis of comedy as a genre, since it is what we expect of the comic, neither comedy nor the comic can be regarded as inherently subversive or progressive...the comic involves a "transgression of the familiar."⁵⁶

So for the audience of a comedian, there are expectations of how the comedian is supposed to be beyond the jokes. With new man comedy and the advent of the podcast, these expectations transcend the stage and screen. We still expect them to deviate from the normal, even when they are in a scenario where they are supposed to be completely raw and real. In the case of Maron, it brings to light an entirely new concept and a new way for audiences to view comedians.

While the podcast has been important in establishing Maron as a comedic voice, years removed from what was supposed to be his prime, *WTF* has become the quintessential vehicle for comedians to reveal themselves to their audiences, particularly for male comedians. *WTF* is where veteran comic Todd Glass publicly

⁵⁶ Frank Krutnik and Steve Neale, *Popular Film & Television Comedy*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 93.

came out of the closet.⁵⁷ In episode 190, the editor of the satirical newspaper *The Onion*, Todd Hanson, revealed his history with mental illness and his suicide attempt.⁵⁸

Maron's influence on the other comics' podcast community is also apparent, most notably comedian Pete Holmes's *You Made It Weird*, which follows the *WTF* format almost identically. The only real differences are that Holmes's interviews can run up to over 2 hours long (Maron's rarely exceed the 1-hour mark) and his opening monologues usually just consist of him plugging his tour dates and television appearances, rather than giving listeners a Maron-esque lament about the current trials and tribulations of his personal life.⁵⁹ Holmes freely admitted on an episode of *WTF* that he "stole" the concept of his *You Made It Weird* podcast from Maron.⁶⁰

New man comedy has now become more than just what the comedian does or says on stage. Collins notes this trend in her August 2013 *Flow* article, addressing the changing style of modern stand-up comedy where the emphasis on style rejects classic slapstick routines. It finds comedians, Maron chief among them, revealing their true selves to their audiences:

Comedian Marc Maron is emblematic of this souls-on-the-line vintage and can take some credit for shepherding hyper-verbal comedy—his own but especially others'—to the hip fore and with it a desirable

⁵⁷ Marc Maron, "Episode 245: Todd Glass" *WTF*, podcast audio, January 16, 2012.

⁵⁸ Nathan Rabin, "Bestcasts: Marc Maron Picks His Favorite WTF Episodes," *The A.V. Club*, (January 10th, 2013): <http://www.avclub.com/article/marc-maron-picks-his-favorite-iwtf-iepisodes-90698>

⁵⁹ Holmes does reveal much about his personal life during his interviews, however, often projecting his own life experiences onto his interview subjects. Sometimes this is done to simply relate to his subject's own experiences, but the interviews have a tendency to reveal more about Holmes himself than the subject being interviewed.

⁶⁰ Marc Maron, "Episode 300," *WTF*, podcast audio, July 29, 2012.

incursion of real life to the Internet and now television.⁶¹

Therefore, a comedian's persona follows them into projects they are not even directly related to. Thus begins the cross-platform representation of Maron in other media texts. When Maron appeared on the *Comedy Bang! Bang!* (*CBB*) podcast, host Scott Aukerman deliberately altered the entire format of his show to reflect Maron's *WTF*.⁶² The *CBB* podcast, as described on its official web site, is Aukerman's "high-spirited weekly get-together" between himself "and his funny friends! A heady mixture of characters, games, and interviews with famous celebrities like Zach Galifianakis, 'Weird Al' Yankovic, Sarah Silverman and Andy Richter."⁶³ Essentially, the weekly show is less an interview-format chat show than it is an improv extravaganza featuring many of Aukerman's comedian friends and colleagues (much more akin to early radio shows). A normal episode of *CBB* will feature the week's main guest (usually a comedian, sometimes a musician or actor, who is sometimes referred to by Aukerman as the "guest co-host") chatting with Aukerman in a hybrid of an interview and a joke-riffing session. After the first 20+ minutes, Aukerman will read ad copy from one of the podcast's sponsors, which is then followed by the second segment of the show. The second segment will often introduce another comedian who is portraying a character, which is usually a fictional character created by the comedian or an impression of a celebrity. Sometimes, there may be several comedians who join the episode, each portraying a different character.

⁶¹ Kathleen Collins, "The Barest of Them All: The Personal Politics of *Maron*," *Flow* Vol. 18 (August 13th, 2013): 4, <http://flowtv.org/2013/08/the-barest-of-them-all/>.

⁶² Scott Aukerman, "The WTF Hour," Episode #217, *Comedy Bang! Bang!*, podcast audio, <http://www.earwolf.com/episode/the-wtf-hour/>.

⁶³ <http://www.comedybangbang.com/>

There is never any on-air acknowledgment of who the comedians actually are, although their names are revealed in the episodes' titles that are displayed online. The remainder of the episode then turns into an improvised performance between Auckerman, the official guest of the episode, and the comedian(s). It straddles the line between straightforward interview and absurdity. In other words, *CBB* is very non-Marón-esque, since it toes the line between fiction and non-fiction (which is something Marón's podcast never does—we are always aware that it is brutally ingrained in reality).

This makes Marón's appearance on *CBB* very unique. It reveals the influence that Marón has on the comedy scene, in that Auckerman is not only willing to drop some of the traditional silliness of his popular podcast, but Marón is also the only guest for the entire duration of the episode. In this *CBB* episode, no other comedians stop by to play characters and there is no improv performance, just a one-on-one interview between Auckerman and Marón. Granted, Auckerman's interview style does make a few slight detours into absurdity and silliness. There are meta-references to *WTF* throughout the episode, with Auckerman introducing the episode by saying, "Lock the gates!" and claiming at the beginning of the that it is his intention to "Out-Marón Marón," half-jokingly stating he was going to be conducting a "getting-into-the-actor's-pain-interview with the original man who does that, Marc Marón!" This points to the influence that Marón's comedic persona has on another text. Marón, in a sense, cannot play a character, so this entirely different text (from *WTF*) has to accommodate its format based solely on the fact that Marón is the guest and is known by crossover audiences to be a certain type of personality.

The first half of the interview is fairly straightforward. Maron tells behind-the-scenes stories of his IFC television series, *Maron*, and revisits a rejected network pilot he almost starred in during the late-1990s—the concept revolved around him being a disgruntled professional chef forced to work in a corporate kitchen. Ultimately, it is a sincere interview for the typically joke-heavy *CBB*. Even Auckerman’s characteristically absurdist, smarmy host appears to be genuinely interviewing Maron, discussing the surprise success of *WTF* (Maron: “I was out of options and I just needed something to do.”), as well as his past stumbles in the entertainment industry (before he was a “name”). In this episode of *CBB*, Auckerman assumes the role of Maron in *WTF*, giving the podcast a sense of reality as opposed to its frequent absurdity. Because Maron is involved, the tone of the podcast changes dramatically from its typical weekly format.

When Maron discusses how the success of *WTF* has gained him acceptance as a personality, Auckerman comments, “Well, we’re getting deep here! I still haven’t made you cry, (but) this is a more deep, more serious episode of *Comedy Bang! Bang!*” before cutting to a commercial break, which precedes the final interview segment of the show. When they return, the interview slowly becomes something of a satire of Maron’s podcast, with Auckerman begging Maron, “You gotta help me out, man. You gotta give me a subject that’s very painful for you to talk about...C’mon, we gotta get the tears welling-up in you.” There’s a bit of a back-and-forth, with Auckerman reminding Maron of his two divorces, to which Maron admits he is now content with. They even briefly discuss committing suicide (“It’s comforting when things get bad to know that you can be dead...it’s relief!” jokes

Maron). Auckerman continues to try and push Maron to the brink of tears, mentioning his strained relationship with his father, but Maron dodges that issue begins to reflect on his relationships with his peers in the stand-up comedy community:

We're getting at this weird age, now, where we have a lot of history with our peers. It's very touching to me...we may not hang out all of time, but guys I started out with...when I see David Cross, or when I hang out with Louis (C.K.), or I see you (Auckerman)...I mean we've all known each other for 25 years or more. There's something interesting or bittersweet and kind of touching about the fact that we're still doing what we want to do and we sort of made it through what seemed to be some harrowing times. And sometimes I get very moved by that. If I hear from a friend I haven't heard from in 20 years...you know, at this point in our lives where you have to accept that we made it over the hump and I don't know how much longer we have, but it's good to see you! It's very touching [*Maron audibly gets choked-up*]...It's just life stuff.

While the moment is sincere and Maron is clearly moved by the emotions he is sharing on *CBB*, Auckerman notices the crack in Maron's voice and celebrates the fact that he was able to "out-Maron Maron" by getting him to cry during the interview. Maron takes the joke in stride, but the moment is actually quite revealing to comedy audiences, in that both Maron and Auckerman here are sharing the fact that the comedy community is close-knit, particularly in the generation that Maron and the aforementioned comedians are a part of- the underground, indie comedy scene that emerged in the late-80s and early-90s, which now finds those comedians in the mainstream of stand-up comedy. This interview also solidifies the persona of Maron's multi-media text.

Maron's persona also transcends the fictional universe when he is not appearing or acting as "himself." One of Maron's most notable acting roles is in fellow comedian Mike Birbiglia's semi-auto-biopic, *Sleepwalk With Me* (2012).⁶⁴ The film is based on Birbiglia's real-life experiences as a struggling stand-up comedian (playing "Mike Pandamiglio" in the film), trying to balance his failing relationship and sleepwalking disorder with his comedy career. In the film, one of Birbiglia's first big breaks in show business is opening for comedian "Marc Mulheren," played by Maron. Apart from the phonetic similarities between Maron and Mulheren, Maron appears, essentially, as himself. In one scene, Birbiglia's Pandamiglio is talking to his girlfriend on the phone to tell her the news of his big gig, while he looks at an advertisement for that same show on-line, which features a popular and legitimate Maron headshot.



Figure 5- A popular and legitimate headshot of Marc Maron is featured in a scene advertising Maron's "Mulheren" character in Mike Birbiglia's *Sleepwalk With Me*.

⁶⁴ The film itself is an adaptation of Birbiglia's 2008 off-Broadway, one-man show, which is also titled *Sleepwalk With Me*.

The advertisement for the “Mulheren” show is shown just a few brief seconds, but the bio that is written for Mulheren is very close to a bio that could have been

legitimately written for Maron:

Marc Mulheren has been performing raw, honest, and though-provoking comedy for print, stage, radio, and television. A legend in the stand-up community,⁶⁵ he has appeared on HBO, Letterman, and almost every show that allows comics to perform. His book based on his solo show, *The Bayou Conundrum: My Life Down in the Swamp*,⁶⁶ is out of print and overpriced by vendors who think it might have some collectors’ value.⁶⁶ His three CDs, *Next Please, Will Call*, and *Last Chance* are cult comedy classics.⁶⁷

While Maron’s screentime in *Sleepwalk With Me* is brief, his character is responsible for helping Birbigilia’s Pandamigilio get out of a rut and discover his true comedic voice. After a disastrous set, Mulheren encourages Pandamigilio to discuss his relationship with his girlfriend—and his reluctance to get married until he’s sure “nothing else good can happen (in his life)” —on stage. “That wouldn’t go over so well at home,” says Pandamigilio, to which Mulheren replies, “We’re not at home!” As the veteran comic Mulheren, he has just offered sage advice to the struggling new comedian—something that echoes what Maron has been doing with struggling comedians for years. It should be noted that Mulheren also has this discussion with Pandamigilio while sipping a beer and making advances towards the comedy club’s bartender. Towards the end of their conversation, the bartender walks by and whispers something (inaudibly) into Mulheren’s ear. Pandamigilio then asks

⁶⁵ When a comedian is considered a “legend in the stand-up community” or a “comedian’s comic,” it often means they are respected by fellow comedians, but they are not particularly successful or popular with audiences.

⁶⁶ Similar title to Maron’s actual book 2001, *The Jerusalem Syndrome: My Life as a Reluctant Messiah*, which also was based on a one-man show and went out of print.

⁶⁷ Again, similar titles to Maron’s three comedy albums, see footnote #3.

Mulheren if he is married, to which Mulheren replies, “Kind of,” as he walks away with the bartender. This entire scene is full of meta-reference to Maron’s boozy, womanizing past, as well as to his status as a stand-up comedian who fulfills the role of advisor to younger comedians.⁶⁸

Elsewhere, (the now-sober) Maron has traded on his comedic persona in other texts, most notably in the music video for Nick Lowe’s song “Sensitive Man,” which was the legendary British rock musician’s first music video in 18 years.⁶⁹ While the music video does feature tropes familiar to the medium, like quick shots of Lowe strumming his guitar and lip-synching the song’s lyrics, the main narrative revolves around a sensitive male character played by Maron, who attends some sort of bizarre group therapy session. The role is not a stretch for Maron, for he essentially is acting as himself in the music video—a paratext to the character he has become well known for in his comedic career. Even though he is not credited as playing the role of “Marc Maron,” the music video is an extension of Maron’s comedic persona.

The first shot of the music video is a close-up of an exasperated-looking Maron—a typical “look” for the comedian in any text ranging from his stand-up routines to publicity photos (an often pained expression). It is not immediately clear what is happening in this scene, but he clearly looks uncomfortable until he utters the line, “What?!” As a viewer, we have entered an in-progress conversation, or argument, on a Los Angeles street corner between Maron and his girlfriend, played

⁶⁸ Comedian Pete Holmes often refers to Maron as the “angry comedy dad” of all young stand-up comedians, particularly in his own *You Made It Weird* podcast where he interviews Maron.

⁶⁹ Tom Breihan, “Nick Lowe- ‘Sensitive Man’ Video (Feat. Wilco, Tim Heidecker, Robyn Hitchcock, Marc Maron),” *Stereogum*, March 1st, 2012, <http://www.stereogum.com/965761/nick-lowe-sensitive-man-video-feat-wilco-tim-heidecker-robyn-hitchcock-marc-maron/video/>.

by Maria Thayer. “Did you hear what I just said, about your sister?” she replies. Maron makes an attempt at damage control by explaining that he knows she “has a problem,” but it is clear that he has not been paying attention to whatever issue she had presumably been explaining to him for the last few minutes. Maron continues: “Listen, I gotta do this thing (group therapy), can we not argue on the street, because that guy’s (points to sad-looking man standing on the corner) uncomfortable now...”

Thayer: “That guy over there? (She points to the same man) Who cares?!”

Maron: “I care, I worry about people, I’m a sensitive guy!”

Thayer: “That’s not sensitive, that’s self-conscious!”

Maron: “Ok, well, that’s why I’m going to this thing (group therapy). I need help and we talked about that...I heard THAT!”

Thayer: “Yes, you’re right, you need to work on yourself.”

Maron: “Yeah, I’m doing it for us.”



Figure 6: Maria Thayer & Marc Maron have a quarrel on an L.A. street corner at the beginning of Nick Lowe's "Sensitive Man" music video.

Especially considering this music video premiered over a year before Maron’s eponymous IFC television series (2013-), this marked the first occasion where fans of

Maron were visually revealed to a scene that is a frequent topic of discussion through his “Dispatches from the Head” blog posts and *WTF* monologues. Although he is playing the role a fictional character (Thayer, of course, has never been a real-life partner of Maron’s), the implication is that Maron is playing a version of himself in “Sensitive Man,” and the audience is seeing what a real Maron-relationship argument is like.

Maron then kisses Thayer good-bye as he heads for a nearby door, where he enters the group therapy session with a frustrated sigh of “Oh, Christ...” as the Lowe song becomes the sole audio of the music video, non-diegetically (with the exception of the aforementioned brief shots that feature Lowe lip-synching and strumming his guitar). That opening sequence is a familiar scene in Marc Maron’s textual universe.

“Sensitive Man’s” main narrative features Maron participating in an all-male group therapy session lead by a guru-type instructor (absurdist comedian Tim Heidecker), who presents the patients with several “exercises” to bring out their “sensitive man” qualities. In the first scene that follows the public domestic dispute between Maron and Thayer, Heidecker greets an uncomfortable-looking Maron, while several patients are seen beating pillows with tennis racquets. Immediately, there is a sense of alienation that surrounds Maron. A near-constant feeling of disaffection and being uncomfortable in social situations is typical of a Maron text. Therefore, this scene blurs the line of reality between the character he plays in the music video and Maron the actual man.

Maron is then reluctantly forced to participate in Heidecker's bizarre exercises, the first of which is called "The Smile Pile," as indicated by the music video's title card. All of the patients are then seen laying in a pile on top of one another, each of them displaying an exaggerated grin, with the exception of Maron, who is standing next to the pile of men, refusing to participate until a flute-playing Heidecker gives him a hand signal of encouragement.



Figure 7- Marc Maron [standing] reluctantly prepares to join the "Smile Pile" in the Nick Lowe music video, "Sensitive Man."

Maron's eventual participation in the "Smile Pile," as well as the overcoming of his reluctance to participate in the other exercises in the music video ("Rollover Whispers," for example, where all of the men take turns rolling over each other to whisper a secret to their neighbor), can be viewed as a meta-reference to his years of feeling uncomfortable in the comedy community. It also references his eventual acceptance by both other comedians and himself. His role in comedy is in a state of comfort and it has impacted his influence on the scene as well.

In the *Louie* season three episode titled “IKEA/Piano Lesson,” C.K. sits down in his apartment to watch television. He proceeds to channel surf for a bit and soon lands on The Comedy Channel, which is airing a “Retro Comedy Showcase” that features stand-up sets from the 1980s. The first clip that is shown is from “Louie C.K.”⁷⁰ What follows is a genuine clip of a young Louis C.K. performing material in front of a brick wall before a comedy club audience. Modern day Louie initially looks uncomfortable seeing his young-self on television, audibly groaning and using his laptop’s camera to compare and contrast the looks of young Louie (full head of hair, slender, sans facial hair) with modern-day Louie (bald, pudgy, goatee). However, Louie instantly smiles when the next clip is introduced, which features a young Sarah Silverman. As Louie enjoys her televised routine, he calls Silverman to tell her to tune into the Comedy Channel. They both laugh with each other over the phone, with Silverman critiquing her appearance (Silverman: “I think I look better now.” Louie; “Yeah, you do!”) and her vintage performance (Silverman [self-mocking tone]: “I was so cute and didn’t know I said something!”).

Immediately following Silverman’s clip, a vintage clip of Maron comes on the television. Silverman is gleefully excited at the appearance of the Maron clip, excitedly screaming and smiling. Louie, however, appears sad and pained at the moment he sees Maron on the television and grows silent over the phone with Silverman.

Silverman: “Are you still watching?!”

Louie: “Yeah.”

⁷⁰ It is interesting to note that, since *Louie* is a fictional re-imagining of Louis C.K.’s life, the title card in the “Retro Comedy Showcase” spells his name as “Louie.”

Silverman: “Are you ok?”

Louie: “It’s weird to see him right now...I haven’t talked to Marc in 10 years...”

Silverman: “That’s crazy! What?! You guys never made up? You guys were best friends for years!”

Louie: “I know, and then we had that thing happen and it was really bad.”

Silverman: “What even happened?”

That “thing” is never made explicitly clear to the audience, both in the semi-fictional world of *Louie* and in the real world of Maron’s garage during Louis C.K.’s *WTF* two-part interview. In *Louie*, though, Louie had written Maron off for something that was his own fault. Stunned, Louie feels bad when he realizes their falling out from 10 years ago was not Maron’s fault. Silverman then convinces Louie to call Maron, even providing him with Maron’s number. In the next scene, the audience is introduced to Maron’s apartment.

In the *Louie* universe, Maron lives in an efficiency walk-up in New York City, where he is seen hanging out in a plaid shirt and boxer shorts, removed from the reality of his actual two-bedroom home and garage in Los Angeles, although here he is still unmistakably “Marc Maron.” He opens the door to let Louie in and they both take a seat in Maron’s tiny, ramshackle living room. On the wall, almost out of focus from the camera’s lens, there hangs a legitimate picture of a young Maron and C.K. No particular attention is drawn to it, but fans of both comedians would likely recognize the photo.



Figure 8: Louis C.K. & Marc Maron in an early, undated photo. This photo makes a small appearance in the *Louie* episode that features a guest appearance by Maron.

Very quickly, Louie begins his apology to Maron:

You know, we had that fight 10 years ago? I've held that against you for 10 years...I thought you did something really wrong to me and refused to (apologize)...but I realize that it was my fault completely. I was a complete asshole to you and stopped being your friend...I don't know if this has any meaning to you...maybe this is me being selfish, but I'm sorry.

Through the duration of Louie's apology, Maron sits cross-legged and cross-armed in the chair across from him. He nods frequently, seeming impatient throughout the apology, even giving Louie the "wrap-it up" hand signal at one point. At the end of Louie's speech, Maron casually says, "Is that it?" Louie seems a little disheartened at Maron's cold response (although, Maron "appreciates" the apology). Maron then reveals that Louie had come over to his apartment 5 years ago and gave him the exact same apology ("I mean, you cried last time, you didn't cry this time so I guess that's something"). Louie feels embarrassed, although Maron, out of sheer impatience,

assures him that it is not a big deal and, in a meta reference to his trademark ending of most *WTF* interviews, Maron asks, “So, are we good?”

Hurriedly, Maron practically shoves Louie out of the door as they exchange a few more words, with Maron requesting, “Maybe you call me up, you ask me for coffee, we go out to dinner...or we can do THIS again in 5 years!” They shake hands and just before the door is being shut, Louie finally asks Maron, “How’ve you been?” establishing the one-sided relationship that he comedians have had for over ten years (Louis is selfish, Maron is pitiful).

This fictional exchange between Maron and C.K. reflects the relationship that the two comedians have in real life. Louis C.K., on the surface, is a much more successful stand-up comedian compared to Maron, with more specials and larger scale tours to his credit. As has been discussed earlier in this chapter, Maron’s envy of the successes of fellow comedians is one of the defining traits of his comedic persona. This knowledge of Maron’s personality already adds an air of tension to the Louis C.K. interview. They were indeed friends for a very long time, but at some point within the last 20 years, they had had a falling-out. Whereas Louis C.K. explored this tattered relationship through the meta-fiction of his television series, Maron explored it through the ultra-reality of his *WTF* podcast, where he interviewed Louis C.K. in a two-part edition.

Much like the situation that is played out in *Louie*, Maron prefaces his podcast’s episode by discussing how he had been trying to get Louis to come on to *WTF* for quite some time. The first of the two-part Louis C.K. interview was released

on October 11, 2010, a little over a year after Maron had begun the *WTF* podcast. Considering Louis C.K. was a personal friend of Maron's, the interview seems to appear rather late in the vast collection of interviews Maron has conducted. By this point, Maron's career as a podcaster has taken off, having already interviewed major comedic celebrities he had never even met before like Robin Williams and Ben Stiller, along with popular comedians he has had personal tension with such as the aforementioned Dane Cook.

When Louis C.K. shows up for *WTF* episodes 111 and 112, Maron's interview style has been well established. Considering his newfound success, Maron is likely a very different person compared to the man Louis C.K. knew so many years ago. More than an interview show, *WTF* often functions as a public, therapeutic healing session between Maron and certain guests, as seen in the examples with Louis C.K. and Patton Oswalt. It adds to a culture of comedy that has not been seen before and is currently on the trend to be the norm. The behind-the-scenes relationships between fellow comedians have never been a focal point of a stand-up comedy culture until now. Audiences are now invited into the world of the stand-up comedian's life. Fans can get involved with the comedians' lives and the relationships between the comedians become a part of the comedic text. The ability to learn and understand comedians' relationships with other comedians informs the comedic personae.

The *WTF* conversations between Louis C.K. and Maron provided them with the opportunity to publicly "rebuild (their) strained friendship." Again, much like in the semi-fictional *Louie* universe where what caused the falling-out between Louie

and Maron is never specifically addressed, we only know that the two used to be close friends and somewhere along the line their friendship suffered. There is no exact moment that points to when the two friends stopped talking to each other, but before the interview begins in Part 1, Maron admits to not “taking responsibility” for his “resentment towards Louis.” He never makes it explicitly clear, but it is apparent that Maron became jealous of Louis’s success in comedy and Maron does admit that he felt Louis had been “blowing (him) off.” As the interview begins, it turns out that Louis felt that Maron had been the one blowing him off. Essentially, their years of bitterness towards each other stemmed from a miscommunication, in that Louis did not respond to a few e-mail messages Maron had sent him (Louis: “I’m so busy that, unless I have something constructive to say, I won’t respond to an e-mail.”)

The interview also differs from most *WTF* interviews in that there is no discussion about what makes Louis C.K. tick or what made him choose to do comedy. It is mostly 2-hours of the comedians reminiscing about their past together and discussing what each of them has been up to in the ensuing years since they last spoke—at one point Louis C.K. becomes emotional when discussing the birth of his daughter, which was discussed in the previous chapter.

The bond between Maron and Louis C.K. is an unfamiliar and new trend in viewing stand-up comedy culture: Through podcasts, comedians now have a public forum to air their grievances with each other and it becomes part of how the audiences view comedians as a text. It also eschews the heteronormative and hypermasculine comedic tropes of previous generations of comics. Maron’s influence has greatly changed the landscape of standup comedy, particularly for the type of

male comedian previous generations have become accustomed to. While neuroses and confessional comedy have always existed, audiences have never expected more than what comedians present of themselves during their stand-up routines. Now, the audiences expect comedians to reveal more of themselves beyond the stage. Maron's podcast has opened the door for comedians to go through beyond-the-stage confessionals, and his transmedia comedic persona has proven the rule, rather than the exception.

While I have mostly discussed Maron as a comedic text through media off-stage, one aspect of Maron's persona that I would like to end on is a discussion of how it also translates to personal interactions with his audience. I attended his stand-up show in Milwaukee, WI at the Pabst Theater on May 2, 2013. Maron performed over 2 hours worth of material to a near capacity crowd. His act was full of self-deprecation and self-doubt, as he spent the first two minutes of the set recalling how he had spilled Diet Coke all over his shoe moments before taking the stage. He was nervous that the audience would notice that his soft-drink-drenched shoe was darker than his other shoe. Towards the end of his set, he told an impromptu story about meeting Mel Brooks. Midway through the story, an audience member sitting towards the front of the stage began photographing Maron with their cell phone. Maron, clearly distracted, initially shrugged it off by admonishing the patron for being so rude as to take a photo of him while telling a meaningful story. The situation is played for laughs, until the fan continues to operate the camera on their phone, the bright light illuminating the stage enough for Maron to interrupt his own story to finally point to the fan and say, "Put it away! Right now! It's bugging me!" The

scene went from being rather funny to quite uncomfortable for all of the members of the audience. Like much of Maron's oeuvre, the moment was so raw and real; it was no longer a joke. By legitimately bearing impulsive emotions upon his audience during his act, he maintains the open relationship he has with his fans that is so integral to his comedic persona, while also demonstrating the sensitive, feminized qualities of the new man comic.

Following his set, Maron announced that he would be hanging out in the front lobby of the theater after the show. Roughly two-thirds of the audience promptly lined-up, with a fair estimate of 500 people waiting to meet and greet Maron. Although Maron maintains a very personal and revealing textual relationship with his fans, it would have been difficult to know if there was to be a separation between the Maron the comedian and Maron the actual person. For many, it seems that there is no separation. I was in line to meet Maron and noticed that he appeared very at-ease as he graciously greeted every single fan that stayed to meet him. There was a couple in front of me, one of whom was actually responsible for interrupting Maron's story about Mel Brooks. I sensed a potentially contentious altercation between them, however, Maron wound up apologizing to the fan for "singling (them) out," although admitting that "those flashes of light can be really disruptive and I didn't know how else to get you put it away without being a little aggressive." He then hugged the couple and posed for a photograph.

My own interaction with Maron was quite Maron-esque. His Milwaukee performance came exactly one day after his television show *Maron* premiered on IFC. He had described being very nervous about the show's launch through *WTF* and

various interviews he had conducted with radio show hosts, TV talk show hosts and print publications. Neurotic behavior in the public is something fans of Maron would have expected. After I congratulated him on the new show, telling him I thought it was good, Maron paused from signing an autograph for me, looked-up and said, “Wow, really man?! Thanks, you know, that means a lot, because you never know how these things are gonna go over. You work on these things so hard and then they’re just out there...Thanks, that means a lot, man!” He then gave me a hug. The new man, comedic persona follows Maron even in personal interactions with his fans. Whether in his garage, on stage, in a fictional universe, or interacting with people in real life, Marc Maron is a “Sensitive Man.”

Chapter 4: ***Conclusion***

Discussing the careers of Louis C.K. and Marc Maron is meant to bring about discussion on stand-up comedy in media studies. Both comedians are responsible for big changes in the scene, challenging traditional masculine identity and creating a more intimate relationship with their audience. Feminized styles and direct feminist agendas are new for men in stand-up comedy. Moreover, the expression of these ideas through transmedia make the experience of comedy much more intense. The content can travel across different media and comedians now can reach broader audiences by having their comedic personae represented through off-stage texts.

One of the main points I wanted to make through both case studies is that new man comedy proves that stand-up comedy is not required to always be funny. Stand-up comedy transcends jokes. John Limon's three-part theory on stand-up comedy does not address this essential component of the comedian. This theoretical framework can be expanded upon. This is particularly true of new man comedy, where the importance of the message behind the comedy is explored through transmedia texts. To ascertain through Limon that laughter is the single end of stand-up is problematic and it constricts the message of the medium.⁷¹

The case studies of Louis C.K. and Marc Maron also inform us on how much the culture of stand-up comedy is evolving. What is still undeniable is that there remains a dichotomy between male and female stand-up comedians. Regardless of

⁷¹ John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 3.

the progression in style we see from Louis C.K. and Marc Maron, they are still part of the rule: Like many comedians, they are the majority in that they are white, heterosexual men. Despite the current emerging trends of new man comedy, stand-up comedy remains a boys' club. Hypermachismo still exists in stand-up comedy. There is still a proverbial glass ceiling in the industry and the expectations of women in stand-up comedy are scrutinized more than that of men. More importantly, the progression of gender equality in stand-up comedy can be held-up when there is a lack of support from comedians who have a semblance of power in the industry.

Chelsea Handler, whose “slutty, boozy, party girl persona (has managed to turn) into a blockbuster comedy career,”⁷² has gone on record to deny the existence of sexism not only in comedy, but the entertainment business in general, explicitly stating, “Sexism is bull shit to me. I don’t even buy into that anymore. Men and women are equal and that’s that, in my mind.”⁷³ Handler’s denial of sexism in the profession is less just her opinion than it is more of a contributor to the discourse of masculinity in comedy that has existed in the profession for decades and is still prevalent today. Handler belongs to a current wave of women comedians who, based on physical appearance, exude very feminine qualities, but whose comedic personae display more traditionally masculine qualities. Women comics whose acts primarily consist of a post-feminist discourse are certainly not new to the American comedy scene. During the stand-up comedy boom of the 1980s, clubs around the country were eager for talent of all ages, shapes, sizes, and genders. As Yael Kohen notes:

⁷² Yael Kohen, *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy*, (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2012), 283.

⁷³ Marc Maron, interview with Chelsea Handler, *WTF*, podcast audio, April 30, 2012, http://www.wtfpod.com/podcast/episodes/episode_275_-_chelsea_handler

The most successful female comics (of the boom years) tended to be tough, husky, or androgynous...Part of the brashness of the women was a response to the rough-and-tumble atmosphere of the comedy clubs. Part of the asexuality was likely a result of the 1980s 'Dress for Success' spirit that favored women in men's clothing. But there is a deeper, more culturally ingrained explanation: joke telling...is, as they say, "doing comedy like a guy."⁷⁴

Many of the most popular female comedians of that era fit the bill that Kohen speaks of, most notably the aforementioned Roseanne, Rosie O'Donnell, Paula Poundstone and Ellen DeGeneres. All of those comedians found immense success based on their acts, particularly Roseanne, whose eponymous sitcom was one of the biggest hits of the 1990s. Their successes, arguably, were a result of them being allowed to be funny because they were not conventionally beautiful and their personas were often loud and more anarchistic. To be accepted as more legitimate comics, they had to dress-down their prettiness and play-up their aggression.

There was a bit of retaliation against the more androgynous appearance of many of the female comics in the boom years that began in the 1990s. First came a deviation in appearance—mainly, the shoulder-padded blazers, bolo ties, and mullets of the previous decade were replaced with flannels, skirts, and dark make-up. There was still an anarchistic aesthetic amongst female comedians like Jeanene Garofalo and Margaret Cho, but the style of comedy had also changed. If the women of the 1980s resembled meat-and-potatoes pub rock aesthetic, the women of the 1990s resembled alternative grunge rock, thus ushering in an alternative comedy movement.

⁷⁴ Kohen, *We Killed*, 155.

The style also reflected 1990s Generation X subculture, maintaining a cool edge that was eager to defy the comedy of the 1980s, where the yuppie-business-casual-male was the mode. Women comics on the scene were feminine, but not girly, for lack of a better term. Many of their appearances resembled a hybrid of the “pretty” comedians like Elayne Boosler and the more masculinized comedians like Sandra Bernhard. More importantly, though, nobody had to shout out his or her jokes to get noticed. As Kohen notes:

(In the 1990s) comedy transitioned from aggressive, joke-based stand-up to more fluid and oblique storytelling... (the latter of which) is considered to be a feminine form of comedy, and without a need for the balls-out, brassy-broad persona seemingly required to carry a joke, ladies in shoulder-padded power suits gave way to softer-looking women in corduroys.⁷⁵

It should be noted that this transition of club-style comedy from the boom era to alternative comedy not only applied to women. Male comedians such as David Cross, Patton Oswalt, Marc Maron, and Louis C.K. to name but only a few, were also at the helm of this sort of “changing of the guard” in comedic style that began in the 1990s. In a sense, these comedians, along with others regardless of gender, were becoming more and more feminized, as they were eschewing the classic joke telling strategy of a set-up followed by a punchline in favor of a confessional storytelling style. This style has continued to define popular comics of the current era, but the confessional aspect has recently become heightened with the rise of other media such as podcasts. Comedians’ stage personas now more than ever act as a paratext to their own personal lives that they put on display through other media.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 209.

That wave of alternative 1990s female comedians, with their hybridity in style, paved the way for another wave of post-feminist comedians who were conventionally pretty, including the aforementioned Handler, Natasha Leggero, Sarah Silverman (initially part of the 1990s alternative comedy scene), and Whitney Cummings. Their comedic personas hearken back to the masculinized material popular amongst women comedians in the 1980s, but their physical appearances are very feminized. For example, Leggero always performs her often raunchy routines in glamorous dresses and gowns, complete with a perfectly coiffed hairdo and evening gloves. This generation of women comedians is out to prove that pretty can be funny. Also, they are trying to appeal to the often-ignored females in comedy audience, as Cummings explains:

I used to think that looking pretty or sexy would alienate women, (but) now it's the opposite...I feel like when I embrace my femininity, it makes women relate to me more, because they go, "Oh, she's just like me, she puts on makeup and tries to look cute, and she wears Spanx and she wears heels."⁷⁶

While that wave of women comedians is popular, it is still not the rule as there are several other women comedians who still shun the "pretty" aesthetic and rely on a more alternative style of comedy that often deviates from more of a storytelling-style of comedy. Comedian Maria Bamford has a stage act that is character driven and heavily relies on absurdity, her persona being that of a mentally unstable eccentric. Kristen Schaal is another example of a comedian who is less commercially viable and odd, who apart from performing standup comedy might be best known as a creepy stalker character-fan of the New Zealand novelty band Flight of the Conchords in

⁷⁶ Ibid, 296.

their eponymous HBO television series. Because these comedians are not classically pretty, they get by on their unique, character actor-like physical appearances, which get coupled with an almost avant-garde stage persona.

Which brings us back to the new man comedians. The dichotomy of women's stand-up personae is not lost on male comics currently working in the American comedy scene. Beyond Louis C.K. and Maron, many younger male comics have been engaging in a discourse surrounding sexism and the imbalance of gender dynamics in comedy. Bo Burnham discussed his own frustrations with this topic on comedian Pete Holmes' podcast, *You Made It Weird*:

I've been resenting comedy for sort of being a boys' club. For being inherently very, very sexist...towards the female...towards the idea of being a woman or being feminine is very unfunny...The spectrum of comedy now is very masculine, which is very funny, but the spectrum is much wider when you see very feminine women being very funny.⁷⁷

There is plenty of room for more discussion on gender politics in stand-up comedy and how the landscape is changing. The purpose of this project, though, was to focus on how male comedians are changing their style. New man comedy acknowledges the great divide between genders in stand-up comedy, both directly (see above Burnham quote) and indirectly by presenting a more understanding and progressive male comic. The sensitive, feminized performance style of the new man comedian is not entirely open to women comics. That this is slowly being acknowledged in the stand-up comedy community is promising. Audiences will

⁷⁷ Pete Holmes, interview with Bo Burnham, *You Made It Weird*, podcast audio, May 26, 2012, <http://www.nerdist.com/2012/05/you-made-it-weird-49-bo-burnham/>

hopefully begin to accept women comics who adopt a feminine rhetorical style of comedy. They will then be taken as seriously as their male contemporaries.

One aspect that I did not address in this project was racial politics in stand-up comedy. Both Maron and especially Louis C.K. have addressed the topic of race in their comedic texts. Historically, it has been easier to breakthrough as a non-white comedian than it has been for any women comics. For example, comedians, critics, and fans of stand-up comedy often cite African-American comedian Richard Pryor as the greatest of all time. This statement is not meant to deny the very real struggles that non-white comedians face in the industry. Simply put, there was just not enough space to explore the aspects of racial politics in stand-up comedy. It is a topic that is worthy of its own project. Within this project, though, white male privilege is frequently addressed in the new man comedy persona, particularly with Louis C.K. The acknowledgment of knowing where their place is in society is equal to the more feminist stance the new man comedic persona inhabits.

Over the course of this project, I expected to analyze more texts than I wound up discussing. In the case of Louis C.K., I could have had a lengthy discussion about his HBO sitcom *Lucky Louie*. The decision to not include analysis of that series was a deliberate move. It was as simple as it not being an example of a transmedia text for Louis C.K.'s comedic persona. In *Lucky Louie* there is a clear separation between Louis C.K. and the character of Louie. Louis C.K. is playing the role of somebody else entirely: a part-time mechanic, whose wife is the breadwinner in their one child household. It does not function as a meta-text in the comedic persona of Louis C.K. and, therefore, does not represent him in the fashion of a new man comedian. There

were also several episodes that I had intended to analyze throughout the entire four-season run of *Louie*, however, so much of what had happened in the most recent season spoke volumes on what Louis C.K.'s comedic persona means to his audience and it opened the discourse on his feminist agenda far more than any previous seasons' episodes.

In the case of Maron, my focus shifted away from his eponymous IFC television series and his books in favor of seeing how his persona functions within the world of podcasting and through other texts that are not necessarily about him. Unlike Louis C.K., who can act as a different character in other texts, Maron's comedic persona transcends any character that he is playing. Therefore, apart from discussing his role as a podcaster, I felt it more important to discuss his role as a comedian appearing as themselves when they are not necessarily appearing as themselves.

For both Maron and Louis C.K., the texts that were analyzed are their major contributions to the new man comedic persona. Because of them, audiences are expecting more from comedians, beyond jokes. The veils of their personal lives are lifted beyond the stage and a more intimate relationship with comedians exists, compared with any other type of performer. Their discussions on social issues are part of their persona, too, and we expect more from them because of it. They are held to task for all of their views across different media. The danger there is that we expect consistency and comedians still have the ability to challenge our views by remaining subversive in their various media representations. For audiences, it is a very interesting and important time to be a fan of their favorite comedians. The

influence of comedians on media culture is rising steadily and has not yet peaked.

We are getting to know them better, but they are also opening up a new way of thinking about comedy and its importance in media culture.

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