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# Inventing Laughter: Comedic Writing Practices and the Limits of Pedagogical Power

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INVENTING LAUGHTER: COMEDIC WRITING PRACTICES AND THE LIMITS  
OF PEDAGOGICAL POWER

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
Professional Communication

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by  
Daniel Joseph Liddle  
August 2012

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Accepted by:  
Dr. Scot Barnett, Committee Chair  
Dr. Cynthia Haynes  
Dr. Jan Holmevik

## ABSTRACT

This thesis conducts an examination of the writing methods used by stand-up comedians using the lens of the rhetorical canon of invention. The study applies the theories of Thomas Rickert, Diane Davis, Ann Berthoff, and Janice Lauer in order to define the relationship between humor and epistemology, and to consider how this comedic-epistemic perspective can inform pedagogical practices in the composition classroom. This study relies mainly on the rhetorical analysis of “How To...” books on writing comedy, the methodologies of schools of comedy, as well as biographies by/about comedians in order to discuss the relationship between comedians and their “material.” The research also focuses primarily on stand-up comedy as a middle ground between the organized chaos of improvisation and the written calcification of sketch comedy. The findings of this research point to the productive capacity of laughter to physically and epistemologically exceed our will to conceive of the world, and ourselves, through a rational, controllable set of processes.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my dad and mom, Rod Liddle and Chris Prior, for always supporting me in everything I do.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is with great pride that I acknowledge those who have contributed to this work. Knowingly and unknowingly, each had a critical influence on the ideas within.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### EPIC FAIL: THE PROBLEM OF CYNICISM AND THE TASTY “NUGGET” OF THE REAL

In many ways, how we define ideology becomes a key factor for how we are able to argue for the function of rhetoric and composition in the lives of students. Ideology, as it was considered in its earliest incarnations, was described as a form of “false consciousness,” in which subjects cannot see (and/or seize) the opportunities for social or political change that are in their best interests. Rhetoric, under this definition of ideology, functions as an aid to the opposing, *correct* form of consciousness. One example would be in current-traditional rhetoric where the role of rhetoric in the composition classroom is to support academic discourse as “correct,” insofar as it is a neutral and objective way of describing reality (*Contemporary Composition* 769). The argument for rhetoric then aligns with Richard Lanham’s “weak defense” in his essay, “The Q Question,” wherein rhetoric is only an ethical tool as long as it is dedicated to disrupting “false consciousness” and promotes what has been established as universally good or true (155).

This view of ideology, at least in the minds of many scholars in rhetoric and composition, has been supplanted by a more postmodern view of ideological dissemination. There *are* dominant ideologies, which can be held by the majority and/or reinforced by the state, but these ideologies are less implicated in a dichotomy of the true or false positions. Göran Therbon, as quoted in James Berlin’s “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” explains ideology as “the constitution and patterning of how human beings live their lives as conscious, reflecting initiators of acts in a structured, meaningful world. Ideology

operates as discourse, addressing, or, as Althusser puts it, interpellating human beings as subjects” (479). Therbon’s description differs from the “false consciousness” definition in two important ways. First, ideology is a given property of conscious thought, so that while we can change from one ideological perspective to another, we can never get outside of ideology.

The second important aspect of Therbon’s definition, and the reason for its application via Berlin, is that it defines the expression of ideology within discourse. Language is always ideological; it presents a viewpoint of reality in terms of what exists, what is good, and what is possible. The composition classroom thus becomes a significant location for helping students to understand the implications of ideology, but also must necessarily take a more complicated stance toward ideology than in its previous definition as a sort of “false consciousness.” Unlike the paradigm of current-traditional rhetoric, pedagogy that considers ideology to be a part of any “meaningful world” lacks a claim to any objective ideological position from which to discount another ideological position as false. The question becomes: How can the composition classroom function as a place for students to realize both their ideological construction *and* their agency within that construction, instead of simply reifying the strength of the students’ already fortified ideological positions?

To this end, James Berlin developed the idea of social-epistemic rhetoric, a model of rhetoric which is still central to cultural studies pedagogy today. Social-epistemic rhetoric, to some extent, aims to take on the admirable task of accepting the ever-present nature of ideology by accepting that the, “...perceiving subject, the discourse communities to which

the subject is part, and the material world itself are all the constructions of a historical discourse, of the ideological formulations inscribed in the language-mediated practical activity of a particular time and place” (489). Berlin is careful to separate this perspective from mere relativism, however, claiming that, through a social-epistemic rhetoric, each ideological perspective must be interrogated for the kinds of persons, ideas, and actions that it privileges, as well as for those that it disregards. Human actions, Berlin claims, “...are always already interpretations that must be constantly revised in the interests of greater participation for all, for the greater good of all” (490).

This criticism also follows for students to criticize their own ideological construction, actively acknowledging the way their discourse empowers certain forms of knowledge or subjectivity over others. Through understanding the ways that their subjectivity is constructed out of social and historical factors, the logic goes, the students will understand their constructed-ness as something which can and should actively be changed over time (491). This ideal student subjectivity, one that understands their own ideology as inescapably partial but also effectively malleable, is considered to be liberated from the threat of reified ideological thinking, and is the ultimate goal of social-epistemic rhetoric. Indeed, Berlin has stated that “To succeed at anything else is no success at all” (492).

Berlin’s theory of social-epistemic rhetoric has played a valuable role in the evolution of rhetoric and composition. For one, it attempts to reconnect the study of rhetoric with an ethical pedagogy immersed in an epistemological foundation. Certainly, this treatment of ideology as a complex factor in human actions can be seen as an improvement

over the sense of ideologies as illusions hiding some form of monolithic truth. It is also to the student's benefit to consider the influence of rhetoric as more than just advertisements and political cartoons, as the stuff that makes up their individual perspective in the world. But, as others have argued (Vitanza, Rickert, Levy), the case for social-epistemic rhetoric has not been substantiated, even while being used as a key theory for cultural studies pedagogy.

### The Inescapable Nugget of Ideology

For the purpose of drawing out the fundamental problem at the heart of social-epistemic rhetoric, I would like to point to a specific incident through which we might consider the difference between the supposed objective stance of current-traditional pedagogy and the liberated subject at work in Berlin's social-epistemic rhetoric. This incident took place on the second episode of an ABC reality series entitled *Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution*, on which Jamie Oliver, a British celebrity chef, attempts to reform the eating habits of school children in the city of Huntington, West Virginia.

In the episode, Oliver struggles with the fact that the elementary students continue to choose processed food over home-cooked meals, and thus brings the kids into the kitchen for a lesson which he emphatically proclaims to the audience "works every time!" Despite his confidence, Oliver sets up the scene in the form of a question, describing the lesson as an "experiment to see: Will our kids, if they know something is hideous and disgusting, still eat it if it's in the shape and form of something that they love?"

To start, Oliver pulls out a whole chicken, and with an expert hand quickly slices off the breast, wings, legs, and thighs. He sets these pieces apart, and conveys that they are the most valuable elements of the bird. Then, Oliver points to the remainder of the carcass. “Anyone want to eat some?” he asks, picking up the carcass and shaking it to the moans (and giggles) of the students. Having reasonably established their disgust, Oliver chops up the flesh and bone into smaller chunks and proceeds to blend it with chicken skin, stabilizers, and artificial flavoring in the food processor until it resembles the consistency of pink, chunky cake batter. After a bit more pomp and circumstance, Oliver throws two breaded patties of the concoction into a frying pan and assuredly proclaims “Now who would still eat *this*?”

With little hesitation, all of the students raise their hands.<sup>1</sup>

Now, to frame this example in light of the concept of ideology, Oliver believes, in alignment with the premise of the show, that the children are guided to prefer processed foods under a veil of false consciousness. This is supported by the Marxist adage, ‘They do not know it, but they are doing it.’ In visualizing the *process* behind processed meat products, Oliver expects the students to be able to act as critics of their own eating practices, if not at the level of eating what’s healthy, then at least at the level of seeing processed meat products as unnatural, cheap, and gross. In essence, Oliver’s method situates the problem of

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<sup>1</sup> To some, the situation might be discounted on the claim that grade-school students are not old enough to make substantive claims about their eating habits. They might claim that high school or college age students would be able to make the rational choice not to eat the processed food. To this I contend that any such act would be purely performative in order to get the established correct answer, and that the opposite performance on the grade-school children signifies something much more interesting. Either the students were ignorant of the “right” answer, and answered authentically, or the children fully understood the correct answer, thought the nuggets were disgusting, and raised their hands only to improve their chances of becoming a highly viewed clip on YouTube (which they did).

poor dieting in the realm of rationality, under the assumption that knowing more about the food means making better decisions about the food.

So how would a pedagogy based in social-epistemic rhetoric handle the situation differently? In “Rhetoric and Ideology” Berlin actually gives us a (more or less) concrete example of implementing social epistemic rhetoric in Ira Shor’s lesson for analyzing the ideology of a fast-food hamburger, which, for all intents and purposes, is driven by the same motivation as Oliver’s chicken nugget lesson. Schor’s study, “...not only involved English and philosophy in [the] use of writing, reading, and conceptual analysis, but it also included economics in the study of commodity relations which bring the hamburgers to market, history and sociology in an assessment of what the everyday diet was like prior to the rise of the hamburger, and health science in terms of the nutritional value of the ruling hamburger” (491). In short, Shor’s pedagogical implementation of social-epistemic rhetoric expands on Oliver’s culinary performance by helping students understand the vast network of social, historical, and economic factors that go into the prevalence of fast-food.

This change, it seems, is less a change in method than a change in scope. Instead of describing fast food in terms of its nutritional content and material construction alone, Oliver should have brought in the discussion of the varied and contradictory ways that the chicken nuggets become culturally and socially imbued with their perceived deliciousness. If the student’s *only knew* of the various ways their diet is socially constructed, the logic runs, perhaps they would be equipped to override their desire for this delicious token of their childhood in exchange for foodstuffs that are better for themselves, their community, and the system at large. Inevitably, the logic here is the same as Oliver’s: the students simply are

not *aware* of why they make the decisions they do, and if they were only made *aware* of their own discursive construction, they could achieve the critical distance to think through their choices, nugget related and otherwise, in a rational, constructive manner.

However, as some have pointed out, this mode of “critical distance” from ideology, from which students are able to critique and change their practices, quickly becomes implicated in the same nod toward an objective point of view as ideology in terms of true and false consciousness. Implicit in Berlin’s claim that social-epistemic rhetoric allows students to become empowered “...agents of social change rather than victims” is the idea that students are, in some capacity, able to think and act outside of their ideological constructedness.

In his plenary address at the 1998 CCCC Research Network Forum, Victor Vitanza famously picked at the fabric of this faith in rationality in his claim that cultural studies, as it had grown out of social-epistemic rhetoric, overlooked the various ways the composition classroom had been unable to produce students who demonstrate the characteristics of Berlin’s liberated consciousness. Indeed, during the speech Vitanza recounts a story of Berlin’s which questioned the effectiveness of the liberated classroom:

He reported on a student who fully understood how he was being manipulated by the media machine, understood how he had become an object in the mediascape, but nonetheless continued cynically to purchase the products that were the object of his media-driven desire. Yes, the student was but an object purchasing objects! After all, when everything was said and undone, the student desired some thing to believe in and to believe for him! (Wasteland).

To this end, cultural studies pedagogy might solve the first clause of Marx's situation ('they do not know it') but still fail to address the second clause ('they are doing it'). Such is the claim of Peter Sloterdijk in *The Critique of Cynical Reason*. A rational approach to political and ethical concerns, Sloterdijk claims, leads to a sense of *enlightened* false consciousness, in which the subject is thought to have achieved a position of objective distance from ideology. This objective position is then undercut by cynicism, wherein the subject becomes disillusioned by the failure of their objective distance and abandons any drive to resist the dominant ideologies. In the eyes of Sloterdijk, and later Slovenian Žižek, the fundamental problem becomes, "they know very well what they doing, but still, they are doing it." Or, "they know that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still they are doing it" (Žižek 33).

#### Alternatives to Pedagogies of Liberation

Thomas Rickert, in *Acts of Enjoyment*, utilizes psychoanalytic theory via Žižek in order to discuss the problem of cynical students for the teaching of writing, and in doing so explores, among other things, Vitanza's claim that cultural studies could be producing a more adamant generation of cynics. One of the Rickert's most poignant claims is that in pedagogies of liberation or empowerment, the student is frequently told that they are free to critique the institutional controls that render them powerless while simultaneously being forced to write within the boundaries of what will promote their grade in the class (193). Rickert defines this as the "forced choice" of liberatory pedagogy, and one that can easily develop into a cynical affect whereby the student *plays out* the signs of enjoying their

ideological liberation as a very function of their adherence to the classroom practices. This performed liberation then manifests positively in the mind of the teacher, who takes great pride in his/her ability to empower the students.

Turning back to the chicken nugget example, we can easily imagine a group of older American students who play up their disgust at the processed nuggets in order to challenge the stereotypes of their town, their state, and their country. These students, having spent enough time in school to have experience with such forms of pedagogical desire, would know that their “choice” is pre-determined by the purposes of the show. The students can only demonstrate their freedom by picking the chicken breast over the chicken nugget. Forced choice is further revealed in the fact that Oliver believes the demonstration to be “an experiment” (and therefore contain the possibility of failure), while simultaneously operating on infallible logic (he emphatically proclaims, “Works every time!”). In the case of the young children on the show, Oliver thus both challenges the students to make a choice, and is defeated when they actually make one.

But while Rickert delivers harsh criticism to the foundations of cultural studies pedagogy, neither he nor Victor Vitanza are advocates of abandoning the practice of cultural studies in the classroom altogether. Instead, their points might be better understood as the attempt to define the limitations of ideology critique in the classroom, and the danger of reifying pedagogical authority under the pretense of liberation. To rephrase, if we overlook the way the teacher gains a sense of enjoyment out of sensing a liberated consciousness in their students, then this “liberated consciousness” will only lead to increasingly confident teachers and increasingly cynical students.

There are consequently two approaches I find helpful in moving forward from the adherence to rational, liberatory pedagogies. The first is Ricket's own appeal to the presence of "acts" which arise out of the risk of students to abandon their teacher's accommodation of their work. This kind of act, as highlighted by Rickert, uncovers the impossibility of empowerment in the writing classroom, and refuses to be included in their teacher's enjoyment in creating liberated subjects (195). In terms of pedagogy, these acts cannot be brought about in terms of normal modes of teacher-approved resistance, as such an opposition between the student and the teacher, as we have seen, is always already slanted in favor of the teacher's evaluation. Instead, Rickert describes this pedagogy as, "...less a body of rules, a set of codifiable classroom strategies, than a willingness to give recognition and value to unorthodox, unexpected, or troublesome work" (196). To many, I realize (as does Rickert), this undermines the very definition of what pedagogy is designed to do, and gives teachers an indeterminate model for implementing such a pedagogy. Still, I find it to be a useful model for articulating a version of student subjectivity where resistance is still possible.

The second approach I find useful is Lisa Langstraat's argument for a more sophisticated concern for the impact of affect in the composition classroom. "To theorize the difference between a cynical action, an empathetic action, a fearful action, and angry action—or any combination of such emotional actions--," Langstraat argues, "is to theorize the ways in which our actions are not only *tempered* by affect, but are rhetorically and communally *constructed* through affect" ("The Point Is" 315). While Langstraat's eventual gesture is back to the primacy of rationality and to an "authentic" sense of subjectivity in

service of feminist rhetorics, her discussion of emotions as an epistemologically discursive element *can* help us to locate the kind of “risky acts” that Rickert suggests.

Using these two methods of working through the cynical leftovers of enlightenment, the important elements of Jamie Oliver’s chicken nugget “experiment” are no longer about how to best historicize the process behind “processed chicken.” Instead, we might review the interplay of *desire* at work in the students and in the host, and the way this desire inhabits the emotions of those involved. Oliver’s desire plays out in the fantasy that he is the knowing pedagogue whose job is to reveal the error of eating fast food. The students become a function of this desire, as (from Oliver’s perspective) they groan where Oliver imagines they should groan and giggle where he believes they should giggle. The students consequently matter to Oliver less as individuals and more as a function of his political project.

The children’s desire, unlike Oliver’s, arrives in a decidedly more ambiguous way, since the incident is narrated from Oliver’s perspective. Still, we can see the student’s desire for their own sense of coherent reality in the excitement with which they answer Oliver’s questions. Indeed, when Oliver puts the chicken on the table and asks the students “Now who knows what this is?” several of students eagerly proclaim the answer. One even jumps up and down with enthusiasm. Later, when Oliver waves bits of the chopped carcass at the students, the students mix reactions of disgust with smiles and giggles. As Oliver spends time making the nugget patties, the children watch with mild interest. At each of these junctures the children’s emotional energies structure their perspective of the lesson.

When the students are finally given the “choice” of eating or not eating the nuggets, and all of the students raise their hands, they smile; seemingly aware they have just given the wrong answer. Asked about why they chose the nuggets, the students frankly state, “because we were hungry!” One perspective is that an expert chef just spent fifteen minutes making chicken nuggets *from scratch* in front of the students, and just when he throws them into a hot, sizzling frying pan he asks who wants one?! From the student’s perspective it’s difficult to answer any other way.

While some might understand the student’s behavior as a sign of ignorance, very few would call their knowing smiles a sign of cynicism. Instead, the students seem to sympathize with Oliver, who is visibly shaken by the encounter. Indeed, Langstraat’s description of the cynical attitudes as characterized by a “skeptical distrust and anxious pessimism” does not seem to be the affective mode undercutting the students’ decisions (293). This is not to say the incident is incredibly productive, after all the students *do* continue to eat the chicken nuggets, but that their refusal (or inability) to see themselves as Oliver’s politicized objects should not be immediately disregarded as a worthless pedagogical moment.

Moreover, there is one more level of affect at work in this example, an affect which, I argue, is largely under theorized in the turn to affective pedagogical methods: that of humor. In terms of the emotional power of the show, the episode itself has spawned far less of a reaction than the clip entitled “Jamie Oliver – Nugget Experiment Epic Fail” which has gained over one million views on YouTube. The term “epic fail” has to do not only with the Oliver’s failure, but is a popular label for a specific genre of humorous production. These

epic fail jokes, in distinction from other forms of ridicule-based humor, usually locate the “failure” as the very claim to empower the audience. Thus, the humor in the chicken nugget story comes from Oliver’s fundamental misrecognition that his students are being enlightened. If this misrecognition is always present in the hope of pedagogy, which is to say, if the teacher downplays the always already ideological classroom, then there is room for the teacher’s desire to be returned in the form of this epic fail joke structure.

On the surface, both Langstraat and Rickert show distrust for humorous affect in the classroom. Rickert cautions against how “we are all in on the joke, we acknowledge the simulacrum with the knowing wink, and we hunker down to necessity and work with the suspicion there is little to be done” (184). Likewise, Langstraat rejects a stance she describes as “responding in kind—cynically agreeing (with a wide grin) that it’s all farcical business...” (294). These concerns point to the way cynicism and humor often work in tandem, where humor can become just another mechanism for coordinating the performance of the teacher and the performance of the student.

But these sentiments look past the humor that isn’t always produced by the students or the teacher, the humor that comes from the situation itself at the very point of misrecognition. This humor, akin to what makes the epic failure “epic,” is a product of the classroom situation itself. Taking a form that is neither rational nor oppositional, an increased sensitivity to humor might reveal the kind of “acts” Rickert describes in terms of the momentary breakdown of the classroom claim to critical distance.

Through the chapters that follow, I suggest that a humorous affect in the classroom can be a productive way of working through the problems of cynicism which

have been discussed here at length. This discussion begins not at a reconsideration of humor, but at a reconsideration of what we mean by a “productive” classroom environment. To this end, the first major chapter is devoted to major scholarly arguments over how the rhetorical canon of invention defines the rhetorical process. Discussions of invention have long dealt with the way our epistemological assumptions come to bear on the implementation and evaluation of pedagogy, and thus provide us with a helpful framework for situating both a theory and method of considering humor in the classroom.

Next, I apply this framework of inventional pedagogy onto the actual techniques used by professional stand-up comedians to learn how to “do” comedy. I am here most interested in the phrase “truth in comedy” as it plays out in the writing, revision, and performance of stand-up comedy. By tracing the various definitions of this comic “truth,” we are able to see the extent to which existing theories of rhetorical invention line up with comedic methods. In essence, I attempt to move from a theory of how comedians create their material to how this material works at the level of epistemology, which is to ask: how does humor impact our desire to conceive of reality as a consistent, rational concept?

From exploring the comedic strategies for invention I finally return to the question of how we might best conceive of the humor that is always already at work in the composition classroom. The point of this chapter is less to outline a specific assignment or pedagogical position than to better understand the slips and fissures in the performance of pedagogy. This will ultimately *not* get us to the “great good place” where we as teachers are no longer implicated in the reproduction of institutional power, nor will it alleviate the sense

of disciplinary anxiety over the matter. All the same, it will provide needed clarification of the intersection between pedagogy, subjectivity, and emotional culture.

This chapter concludes with a section which points to further areas for research, primarily with respect to the other canons of rhetoric. The arc of this project focuses on the canon of invention because of its importance to the field and its direct relation to epistemology, but the same kind of turn to humorous affects in the other canons could lead to a more dynamic understanding of the discipline as a whole. We have only just begun to explore the wide expanses beyond/within rational consciousness.

What should become clear by the end of this project is that, in our humorous affect, we do not have to laugh as one. Not as one unified subject, laughing himself above/below all ideologies. Not as one unified group, laughing at being “in” on the joke. Instead we might imagine that jokes are only ever a rational *recovery from* laughter as we try to retroactively recall whatever was so inescapably hilarious in the first place.

## CHAPTER TWO

### A FRAMEWORK FOR ALIGNING EMOTIONS WITH THEORIES OF INVENTION

The release of atomic energy has not created a new problem. It has merely made more urgent the necessity of solving an existing one.

--Albert Einstein

X, to whom I say that his manuscript (a weighty tome attacking television) is too dissertative, insufficiently protected *aesthetically*, gives a start at this word and immediately gives me back as good as I gave: he has had many discussions of *The Pleasure of the Text* with his friends; my book, he says, “keeps brushing up against catastrophe.” No doubt catastrophe, in his eyes, is to fall into the aesthetic.

--Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes* 104

One of the more curious metaphors in Langstraat’s call for an increased attention to emotion culture comes in the form of “emotional energy.” For example she argues that “cynicism is so pervasive, so naturalized in our everyday interactions and discourse, that even recognizing it as a cause and effect of social marginality requires enormous *emotional and pedagogical energy*” (320 my emphasis). This metaphor extends to Langstraat’s characterization of emotions as something to be “tapped into” when we are able to find a serviceable “emotional outlet” (319, 318). Likewise, Langstraat warns us that cynicism “depletes our affective energies” to the extent that we may arrive at a point “when cynicism can no longer emotionally sustain us” (300).

To this end, the question becomes: if affect is to be considered as a form of energy, where does this energy come from? How is it created?<sup>2</sup> If our emotional energy

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<sup>2</sup> And, outside of the purview of this chapter, but endlessly fascinating nonetheless, is the question of how this definition of energy works in parallel to the laws of physics, particularly in the case of thermodynamics and/or the theory of special relativity. In this respect I think it is no mistake that David Harvey critiques a mass-media driven, postmodern culture in that it creates “an emotional ground tone of *time-space* compression” (291).

can be “depleted,” how then do we become reenergized beyond the solution of a solid meal and a good night’s sleep? Is the energy used to produce humor the same kind of energy used to found other emotions? And most importantly, how does this consideration of “emotional energy” manifest itself in the composition classroom? What impact can emotion have on the ideologies that necessarily underwrite the goals of pedagogy, and increasingly lead to cynical student attitudes? These questions point to the need for us to clarify the implications of defining emotional states as having a *productive* quality. The question of how a teacher might encourage certain emotions, in other words, is just as important as the form of subjectivity those emotions, in turn, produce.

It is directly out of these types of questions that we might ground this idea of emotional energy using the rhetorical canon of invention. Invention, as defined by Richard Young in “Invention: A Topographical Survey,” is the “rhetorical art concerned with dis-covering the subject matter of discourse” (1). More than the other four canons of rhetoric, a focus on invention provides a bridge between *content* of communication as well as the *process* of creating that very content. In theory, the move toward invention should help define how we (and also *if* we) might “tap” the emotional energy in the composition classroom as well as what that energy would look like if it were to be accessed.

To this end, the focus throughout this chapter on the histories and theories of invention will provide a framework for identifying how comedians conceive of their own writing processes. Comedy provides a fitting situation for this application in several respects, not the least of which is the fundamental anxiety comedians place on the writing

process. Much like the variety of debates over whether rhetoric can be taught, how it should be taught, and the effects of certain methods of teaching, comedians are generally obsessed with the problem of whether comedy can be taught, how it should be taught, and how teaching methods influence the purpose of their craft. This obsession results in the contemporary practice of comedy coursework, “how-to” guides to comedy, and other educational guides that will provide a concrete set of examples for the perceptions of invention outlined in this chapter. The outlining of the history of invention, then, provides a method for categorizing the diverse assortment of comedic invention strategies and to consequently make claims about how we might better understand the consequences for producing different types of emotion in the composition classroom.

However, we should not take the canon of invention to be a universal solvent, offering us a clear, unmitigated perspective of affective production. Situating invention epistemologically, and likewise situating affect in the process of invention, is far from being considered unproblematic in the field of rhetoric and composition. Indeed, it is less that affective classroom engagement poses a set of new problems that might be solved using the lens of invention, and more that any consideration of affect in the classroom leads to the same set of questions that are inevitably asked of inventional pedagogy, namely: how do we get from nothing (or at least the *perceived* state of having no writing or no emotional energy) to something? As we will see in the following chapter, the answer to this question hearkens back to the even deeper issue of how we define rhetoric itself.

## The Sophists and the Inventive Capacity of Kairos

Looking historically at the definition of invention we might best start with the sophists, who were a group of ancient Greeks considered “the first to infuse rhetoric with life” (Poulakos 36). Learning to speak well was very important in Greek culture, both because of the social significance of eloquent speech and the political significance of having an impact on the democracy. Therefore rhetoric was one of the most important subjects for a man’s education, and the rhetorician was considered to be one of the top professions of the day (Ijsseling 10). For the sophists truth was created through language, as “things appear[ed] through virtue of language and convictions [were] the result of being convinced” (Ijsseling 11). In other words, using language effectively meant the ability to construct reality; rhetoric was considered to have epistemological power.

Though rhetoric had not yet been aligned with the five canons, and consequently with no formal theory of invention, the sophists understood language to be brought about by the urgency of the moment, known as *kairos*. While the sophists were always “permeated and enveloped” by language, the decision was not “whether to speak but whether to speak right now; more precisely, it is whether now is the time to speak” (Poulakos 40). For some scholars, this sophistic sense of *kairos* can be related to the time, place, and audience of a speech, since these factors had a significant impact the form that the “truth” would take in that particular moment. The invention of language, then, would come from the urgency to take control over the rhetorical situation at the correct time, or else “miss their chance to satisfy situationally shared voids within a particular audience” (Poulakos 39). To teach this kairotic impulse would have required a systematic

evaluation of the values of the audience and the best way to utilize the circumstances at hand.

However, another group of scholars, notably Bernard Miller, connected the idea of *kairos* to Heidegger's idea of an ontological dimension of language that possesses humankind: *kairos* is the *augenblick* in which Being is nearest to humans (Lauer 14). What is so radical about this notion of *kairos* is that it is not an element of the situation that can be evaluated and controlled. Instead, this form of *kairos* comes from outside of the speaker's control, in which the speaker is irrationally driven to speak and becomes a subject to the desire of making meaning. Invention within this paradigm consists less of a structured system of rules to follow than an exigency that takes over the speaker who is enabled under the right circumstances. This inventive power is not a function of the conscious mind and therefore is less concerned about being explicitly taught; however, some scholars suggest that it can be learned through "the kind of situation that inspires imagination and creativity" (Worsham 199).

The sophists' view of epistemology and in turn their definition of invention includes a productive emotional capacity. Since, for the sophists, reality was constructed by the language of the speaker, one of the most important models for sophistic thinking came from the emotional arts of the ancient poets whose deemed language a gift from the gods (de Romilly 6). Indeed, it is no coincidence that Gorgias, one of the most (in)famous sophists, is defined by both Untersteiner and Jaqueline de Romilly through his appeal to a tragic aesthetic in *Ecomium of Helen* (Lauer 15, Romilly 5). For the sophists, the invention of speech and the circulation of emotions were implicitly integrated into the

idea of a *kairos*, as a force that brings about meaning from beyond the range of rational apparatuses. Kairos, then, is one way to align the epistemological function of invention in rhetoric with a possible treatment of what we might call emotional energy, as emotions as implicated in the fundamental non-rational kairotic presence.

### Platonic Invention Strategies

But while these less formal approaches to invention worked well for sophistic teachers, the philosophers and rhetoricians who followed required increasingly more pragmatic modes of invention to support their differing epistemological perspectives. Particularly critical of the sophistic method was Plato, who considered reality to exist independent of language and rhetoric. Where the sophists saw a divine or magical quality in language, Plato saw a fundamental ambiguity that enabled orators to conceal a false proposition with a persuasive style of speaking (Ijsseling 14). For Plato, rhetoric dealt only with opinion (*doxa*), and had no say in the realm of the true essence or knowledge (*episteme*) of a given situation.

Because Plato's epistemology differed greatly from that of the sophists, his strategies for invention involved the notion of dialectic as opposed to the sophistic dependence on *kairos*, which put the emphasis on dialogue to help a speaker find the truth within him in order to speak. Through the "inner word and its binding command" Plato credited the philosopher with the ability to access a grounded idea of ethics, and thus argued that rhetoric was only considered morally justified if it was used to defend what was found to be the Truth in the course of dialectic. According to Plato, "A man must

first know the truth about every single subject on which he speaks or writes” (Plato 277b). Thus, the proper course of invention for Plato came less from the audience or the rhetorical situation than from the truths mastered and understood internally.

Plato’s internalized epistemology suggests two different relationships between emotion and invention. The first runs parallel to Plato’s characterization of rhetoric in that the consideration of how to integrate emotion ultimately came after the truth had been discovered through the course of dialectic. Within a platonic epistemology there are ethical ways to use emotion (to persuade others of the truth), and unethical ways to use emotion (to persuade others of what is not true), but in both cases the use of emotion did not help the speaker to *find* truth. In other words, emotion had no part in the creation of meaning or the starting point of writing, but instead was merely seen as an ornamental addition that might be better fitted to the role of style.

In the *Phaedrus*, which some consider to represent Plato’s most “mature” description of invention, Plato locates a more complicated relationship of the emotions to epistemology. In one of several noteworthy metaphors in the text, Socrates divided the soul into three parts--two horses and a charioteer. The charioteer, easily enough, stands for the role of reason or intellect which is used to guide the soul to truth, but the horses serve their own function within the narrative. One of the horses Socrates describes as “a follower of the true reknown; it needs no whip, but is driven by the command of word alone” while the other horse is described as “a great jumble of a creature...the mate for insolence and knavery...hardly heeding whip or spur” (38). The first horse, we might say, stands for a rational order, obedient to the charioteer. The second horse, “a dreadful,

lawless thing,” is more akin to the irrational drive of passion, challenging the authority of the charioteer, but still necessary for the discovery of truth.

This definition of emotional energy, or what might be better described as “passion,” performs a remarkably different role for Plato than more ornamental considerations of emotion. The wild horse of passion is not only present in the process of discovering truth, but is *necessary* to it. As Elizabeth Belfiore notes in “Dancing with the Gods: The Myth of the Chariot in Plato’s ‘Phaedrus,’” the black horse’s “tendencies to leap about have positive aspects, for it is always the black horse who pulls the chariot toward the beloved” (189). Though this passion is constrained by the power of the charioteer (aka intellect), it still presents a form of emotional energy separate from the merely ornamental. Consequently, Plato’s epistemology presents us with both a second and third measure for coordinating invention with epistemology and emotional capacity; in the first sense invention has little to do with emotion, and in second sense the process of invention involves restraining one’s passion to the point of submission. Importantly, both of these models are distinctively different from the sophistic model, which involves allowing the irrational passion to make meaning take hold of the speaker instead of imagining that those forces can be displaced or considered internally.

#### Invention in Post-Sophistic Rhetoric

One of the characteristic features of the post-sophistic teachers of rhetoric was (and in many ways still is) the focus on the *techniques* of employing rhetoric, and thus to outline a set of tools that would turn both the teaching and learning of rhetoric into a

clearer, more rational process. Of these sets of tools, some of the most resilient have come from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, which is in many ways the theoretical engine that puts rhetoric in motion within composition textbooks today. Though Aristotle respected the sophists, he worked to clear up the "state of confusion and incoherence" that marked the state of rhetoric at the time (Poulakos 151), and in doing so attempted to clearly define the epistemological capacity and available tools for rhetorical practice.

One of the key tasks for Aristotle was to situate the position of rhetoric in context with philosophy, and toward this task Aristotle posited the concept of the enthymeme. As a particular species of syllogistic reasoning, the enthymeme is constructed like a syllogism in most senses, but is distinguished by the fact that one of the premises is left to be filled in by the audience. The significance of the enthymeme had a major impact for the way rhetoricians made epistemological claims, for the difference between philosophy and rhetoric became centered on philosophy's interest in "the actual form of things" while rhetoric became centered on "the way things partake in these forms" (Poulakos 154). In essence, the philosopher might consider the question of what it means to be ethical, and the rhetorician would then consider the question of whether a specific person had acted ethically in a specific situation.

To this end, in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defines rhetoric as "not to persuade but to see the available means of persuasion in each case," and goes on to outline a number of rhetorical strategies that a rhetor might "see" (1355a). These strategies include 28 common topics for general argumentation as well as three special topics to help the rhetor conceive of their speech through three purposes of discourse (epideictic, deliberative, and

judicial). Using these sets of tools, the rhetor was able to adapt his message to his audience in a logical, coherent way. In so doing, Aristotle hoped to turn rhetoric from its origin in informal oratory practice into a disciplined field of study (Poulakos 181).

Another one of Aristotle's major classifications came to bear on the kinds of artistic proofs or *pisteis* that could be employed to persuade the audience. From Aristotle's perspective, one of the major weaknesses of sophistic thinking was the way it "emphasized inordinately emotional appeals, personal appearances, and stylistic techniques of delivery" (159). Addressing this weakness, Aristotle divided the sophistic notion of *logos*, which, for the sophists, meant control of language, into three parts: *ethos* (the appeal to one's character), *pathos* (the appeal to emotion) and *logos* (redefined as the appeal to reason) (170). Through these categories, Aristotle worked to redefine rhetorical invention from an irrational force that takes hold of the speaker into a rational force that the speaker could more consciously utilize.

*Pathos*, as a concept split off from the concept of *logos*, became a tenuous concept for Aristotle, since in some ways he was preserving a connection to the irrational modes of persuasion exercised by the sophists. Thus, in order to completely systematize rhetoric as a field of study, Aristotle depicted the presence of emotions in language as part of a rational communicative procedure. In other words, Aristotle argued that there are reasons why an audience will feel the emotions that they do, and that the audience will therefore not only be able to sense the presence of emotions within themselves, but will also be able to consciously integrate those emotions as a kind of proposition in the rhetor's

argument (175). In this model, emotional appeals could be methodically employed and evaluated for their usefulness, much the same as one might do for a logical appeal.

In some ways, this Aristotelian model provided what might be considered one of the most *useful* methods for inventing discourse, since the topics presented a speaker with a concrete set of strategies for any argument. Is the opponent of the argument questioning your character for taking the only possible choice in the argument? Then try topic number seven and ask the opponent if he would not have made the same choice in the same situation (194). Does the speech need to inspire the audience that one particular course of action in the future will be to their greatest benefit? Then follow the rules for the special topic of deliberative rhetoric in order to best persuade the audience. While some could argue that the employment of the topics was less mathematical than these two examples, the appeal of the topics was tied to this straightforward nature and it allowed a rhetor to easily situate discourse within a specific time period and toward a fixed goal.

Even as he painted this rational picture of emotion as communication, however, Aristotle still warned that "...it is wrong to warp the jury by leading them into anger or envy or pity: that is the same as if someone made a straightedge rule crooked before using it" (1354a). In this light we can see that even though Aristotle makes reference to the power of emotions to influence perceptions, he does so with the caveat that emotions are, at times, a disruptive influence, especially when inciting a dissonance toward logical reasoning. But while Aristotle points to the possibility of improper use of the emotional appeals, it remains unclear as to how one might distinguish between the necessary pathetic appeals and those that "warp" the audience. Indeed, this nod to the warping of an

audience signals that, despite attempts to classify rhetoric as a rational procedure, there will always be some kernel of emotional force that exceeds the limits of codification.

At this point we can see how Aristotle's program starts to fracture under the pressure of the very classification I hope to create in this chapter, namely the correlation between epistemology, rhetorical invention, and emotional energy. After the sophists, emotions were still seen to provide an important function for rhetoric, yet this power was always subservient to the power of logic. The emotions retained their role as a means of persuasion, but always contained the possibility for deception.

This troubled relationship between logic and emotion, however, is less the product of Aristotle's method in particular, and more the product of answering one of the foundational questions of rhetorical theory: what does it mean to call rhetoric an "art"? Such is the issue at hand in Lynn Worsham's "The Question Concerning Invention: Hermeneutics and the Genesis of Writing," in which Worsham traces how the definition of invention through one of two meanings of art has had a drastic implications for the way we understand the function of rhetoric today.

On the one hand, Worsham points to an understanding of art as a teachable practice, one that can be passed on from person to person in spite of their talent or natural propensity for it. This definition of art, which Worsham terms "art-as-knowledge," reinforces the importance of teacher and student roles for the study of rhetoric, since it implies not only that rhetoric *can* be taught, but that by attending the lessons of a strong teacher or by being a diligent student a person could potentially learn to employ rhetoric in more persuasive ways. To define rhetoric in any other way, especially as a kind of

knack or natural ability, would lead to the critique of the very concept of a school devoted to teaching rhetoric, and consequently discrediting the role of sophist teachers in ancient Greek life.

The other artistic dimension of rhetoric focuses on rhetoric as an intuitive process, distinguishing rhetoric from being seen as a mere “craft.” Whereas employing a craft only requires the knowledge of a rote set of skills or techniques, a work of art depends on the role of the artist’s imagination, of a moment of genesis where the work in some way transcends the materials that were used to create it. To think of rhetoric as an art in this sense relates the epistemological dynamics of rhetoric, as this imaginative quality enables rhetoric to discover new knowledge, instead of the application of the same techniques to every situation. Thus, this definition, which Worsham defines as “art-as-magic,” becomes just as important to the function of rhetoric as the definition of “art-as-knowledge.” But even to ask the question, “what does it mean to call rhetoric an art?” forces us to foreclose on these two perspectives and privilege one of these two important functions.

Referencing Jacqueline de Romilly’s *Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*, Worsham attends to the same historical moment in which rhetoric was forced to define itself as an art, a choice which ultimately guided the use of rhetoric in a more orderly direction. “The development of classical rhetoric can be read,” according to Worsham, “as an attempt to purge rhetoric of its long association with magic and provide a systematic treatment of these techniques, a treatment that gives the technical aspect of rhetoric a proper philosophical and ethical foundation” (200). This systematic treatment, both in Aristotle’s organizational scheme and in Worsham’s description of rhetoric as

indebted to an “art-as-knowledge” will be my fourth final frame for situating epistemology, invention, and emotional energy. Within a perspective that considers rhetoric to construct reality through an ordered system of topics and species, emotions become less embodied reactions than one more useful tool in employing purposeful communicative acts.

### Refrain

This digression from the specifics of Aristotle to generalities of the *art* of rhetoric, while it may seem to belabor the point, serves two critical purposes for my discussion. First, while Aristotle’s configuration of inventive strategies provides a classic privileging of rational argumentation, Aristotle’s topics are essentially part of a larger trend that not only shaped a contemporary idea of rhetoric, but shaped it in the name of certainty and pragmatism. This foundation has enabled rhetoric to maintain a particular resilience despite attempts to repress and malign it over the course of history. Aristotle is a valuable example for my discussion, especially in terms of the uneasy relationship between pathos and logos, but to limit the discussion to his specific method is to miss the larger picture of how a definition of rhetoric steeped in rationality attempts to solve a fundamental disciplinary tension between the epistemological and practical considerations.

Second, the relationship between the Aristotle and the “art” at the core of rhetoric advances a nuanced perspective of rationality that becomes necessary for considering how the four major frames of invention relate back to the discussion of ideology from the first chapter. This applies somewhat less to Plato who, considering his epistemology,

would probably agree with Marx's definition of ideology as a form of "false consciousness." In this same vein, both of Plato's inventive treatments correspond with Marx's concern that "they do not know it, but they are doing it." In one sense Plato thought that the invention stage occurs only after we're aware of how to conform our discourse to the "correct" ideological position. In another sense, Plato's model does afford some inentional capacity to the ability of an individual to apprehend a transcendent truth, or the seemingly "correct" ideological position. Thus in the next chapter I will point out two different inentional strategies that relate comedy to the expression of a transcendent truth, one that positions comedy as a way to find the truth via an internalized dialectic process, and the other to communicate a truth conceived prior to the turn to comedy.

The sophistic and post-sophistic attitudes toward invention, however, differ less in their definition of ideology than in the implications of their methodologies for agency as shaped by ideological production. By this I mean that both Aristotle and the Sophists could agree with Therbon's description of ideology as "...the constitution and patterning of how human beings live their lives as conscious, reflecting initiators of acts in a structured, meaningful world" (Berlin 479). Yet, while Aristotle would argue that this patterning occurs because of a rhetor's successful employment of rational communicative action, the sophists would argue that this same pattern develops out of powers which, in part, come from beyond the limits of linguistic construction.

On this basis, the appropriate match for Aristotelian inventive strategies is Berlin's cultural studies pedagogy, which asserts that by employing the seemingly

rational tool of cultural critique students will gain distance and agency in relation to their own ideological orientation. Likewise, the sophistic notion of invention I've defined in this chapter, an opening up to what lies beyond rational models of communication, suggests a correlation with Rickert's turn to a risky pedagogy that questions the very underlying empowerment that Aristotle and Berlin hope to imbue. To sense these two veins in the invention strategies of comedians I will consequently ask questions about the way comedians see their own power to define reality. Is comedy, in the eyes of comedians, a controlled communicative act using the signal of laughter to demonstrate that the joke has produced the desired epistemological outcome? Or do comedians, similar to the sophists, find the power of their jokes to function beyond the role of practical argumentation?

### Beyond Berlin

Given the four frames that I've described in this chapter, some might argue that I'm simply using the same taxonomy employed by Berlin in his essay "Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories." Why can we not simply apply the titles of Current-Traditional Rhetoric, Expressivist Rhetoric, Classical Rhetoric, and New Rhetoric to these models of invention? The answer lies in Rickert's treatment of Berlin in *Acts of Enjoyment*, in which Rickert traces the foundation of Berlin's taxonomy to the communications triangle, a tool that divides the operation of communication into the speaker, the listener, the message, and reality, and moreover implies that how the rhetor focuses on these four aspects will define the shared aims of a particular discourse.

Though Rickert cites a number of underlying problems with widespread application of the communications triangle, his main critique eventually comes to land on Berlin's belief that his four epistemological positions were appropriate for mapping the relationship between pedagogy and reality. "Even redefined or reconceptualized," argues Rickert, "the trace of Kinneavy's original Neo-Aristotelian categorization remains" (42). In the end, the same reliance on the rational subject that I have attributed to Berlin up to this point leads Rickert to conclude that Berlin's four pedagogies "produce a particular and troubling epistemological orientation" (42). As long as Berlin adhered to a model of discourse that was constructed on a valuing of rational communication, his theory for New Rhetoric, no matter how aware of epistemological nuances, was bound to limit discourse to a mode of production.

Consequently, it is vital for my framework of invention, especially in the case of sophistic and post-sophistic perspectives, to maintain some distance from Berlin's taxonomy, and furthermore from the concept of the communications triangle. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, to apply a model of communication to humor is to sterilize what is arguably its most powerful component: laughter. Without laughter, humor fits rather easily into a number of productive communicative systems, but it also loses the feature that defines it *as* humor in the first place. Such is the essential paradox that confounded Aristotle's ability to discuss emotion epistemologically; such is the problem of Berlin's liberated subject-turned cynic; such is the trouble of defining rhetoric as an instrument to be employed. These over-determinations, made in the name of empowering the individual subject, actually end up achieving quite the opposite effect,

closing off the possibility for ideological change to occur as language is used to facilitate the fantasy that we control the environment around us.

I have subsequently aimed to achieve some level of theoretical distance from Berlin's taxonomy by resisting the urge to base my framework on the features of communicative models, and instead put emphasis on the epistemological assumptions that founded various perspectives of invention. This is not to say that my characterization completely abandons Berlin's scheme, as a reader who is familiar with "Major Pedagogical Theories" will be able to feel the influence of his theories both in this chapter and those to come. Instead, it is my goal to expand Berlin's taxonomy by applying pressure to its limitations, morphing the uniformity of the triangle into a slightly more nebulous conceptualization.

In this same turn, the categories here should not be read as an exhaustive taxonomy or that in these four veins we gain access to a comprehensive description of all modes of making meaning in the world. As Rickert claims, "a different theory of discourse would necessarily produce a different map of the field," (42) and we should likewise leave open the possibility that an alternate theory of discourse would lead to a different valuation of inventive strategies than what I have presented in this chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE

### SELECTED METHODS OF COMEDIC INVENTION: KEEPING LAUGHTER ALIVE

Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process  
and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.

E.B. White, *A Sub-Treasury of American Humor*

In search of a way of working through ideology in the composition classroom I have poked at the root of two complementary frustrations. The first is that ideology continuously circumvents an attempt to escape from it, or even to reach a safe vantage point from which to wrangle it into regulation. Second is the troubled relationship between logic and emotion when applied to an epistemology built on argumentation. At the junction of these two frustrations it becomes necessary to look to modes of writing that not only *allow* for the play of extra-rational forces, but require their presence. This is to say that modes of discourse that are commonly assumed to be unemotional or emotionally neutral do not engender the kind of attitude I am after, as these forms of discourse would be less likely to exhibit tension between their epistemological goals and their emotional leanings. Such modes of discourse *do* contain this tension, as even the most neutral discourse relates emotional energy in its very call to seriousness; however, common assumptions about the anesthetic quality of serious discourse provide an arbitrary resistance to the framework of invention I propose, and thus is less useful for my purposes than modes of writing that readily acknowledge emotional complexity.

Therefore, through the following chapter I turn to accounts of comedic writing practices as suitable territory for exploring the relationship between ideology and the limits of rationality. Unlike modes of writing that lay claim to emotional neutrality,

comedic writing practices are geared toward (what we will call for now) an emotional response at their very core (laughter). Likewise, the epistemological role of comedy is often debated both in popular culture and by comedians themselves, advancing some comedians to the role of social critics while reducing others to be devoid of any cognitive impact outside of the basest form of entertainment. The intersection between emotion and epistemology, which in self-consciously “serious” discourse is subdued at all costs, is openly expressed in discussions of comedic discourse, and thus comedy presents a fertile environment for considering the matters at hand. Yet, a critical appraisal of comedy comes with a different set of disciplinary intricacies and methodological stumbling blocks than those described to this point, so before I render comedy through various approaches to invention, I must first frame my methodology in relation to what I will call the dead frog paradox.

### Reducing the Amphibian Death Toll

There are a number of possible scholarly approaches to humor, from the sociological, to the psycholinguistic, to the literary. But no matter the field of analysis, many navigations of humor come back to the E.B. White quote mentioned in the epigraph to this chapter, which is often used to discount or hedge critical analyses of humor. Using White’s dead frog metaphor, critics of humor analyses claim that no matter how carefully one investigates the underlying process of humor, the results will always come to an incomplete model of how humor is created and deployed. This is to say that while an analysis of humor might be able to point to a set of reliable patterns in joke structures or

comedic practice, something critical to the study of humor is lost in the very process of analysis which cannot be recovered from the material of a series of joke-corpses.

One answer to White's concern commonly taken by empirical studies of humor is to acknowledge and simply ignore it, as does Debra Aarons in *Jokes and the Linguistic Mind*. Aarons admits early in the book, "I have been obliged, for reasons of pure science, scholarship, and professionalism to do my best to kill the jokes. Commentary and analysis are inevitable companions to jokes, in a book of this sort, and, for this discouragement, I apologize" (18). Indeed, the nature of the linguistic approach gives Aarons little other choice than to dissect humor in order to describe its semantic structure, thus her admittance to (and apology over) studying only the dead jokes. Studies like these are necessary, as it is better to gain some knowledge of the mechanical principles of jokes than nothing at all; however, studies with this disposition present an inadequate method of addressing the epistemological concerns I hope to consider.

Other scholars have come at this question via Wittgenstein's statement that "a serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes" (Dribble 87). In such a methodology scholars assume that the jokes do not have to die in the course of analysis, especially in cases where they are appropriately incorporated into the analysis itself. Such is the underlying idea in Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klein's *Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar: Understanding Philosophy through Jokes*, which uses jokes to explain complex philosophical theories. However, while the book does bring together humor and philosophy, humor is only used as an instrument directed

towards theory with little attempt to advance a particular theory of humor. The humor can remain “living” in so far as there is no analytical pressure.

Due to the dead frog paradox, this chapter is not devoted to the analysis of specific jokes, but instead turns to the tools used by professional comedians to bring their comedic material to life, thus building an account of what that very “life” might mean, and how it functions in comedic practice. To this end I turn to comedians as experts not because comedians have a clear methodology or system that we might tap into, but because they have seen the most jokes—good jokes, bad jokes, and whatever else—die in their hands. In effect, this methodology should enable a presentation of humor that can make claims beyond dissected joke-corpses, while neither ignoring the dead frog issue nor supposing that the joke-in-life can simply be incorporated into the analysis itself.

In the course of this process I have tried to include insights from stand-up comedy, improvisational comedy, and sketch writing in order to illuminate the tension between comedic writing and comedic performance. In sketch comedy there is a clear separation between the writing and the performance, as in this mode a joke might be written anytime, from minutes before a show to months ahead of schedule. The written joke will often culminate in a short-lived presentation on television, on Youtube, or in stage performances. In these formats, the sketch is designed to live beyond the moment of its creation. The writing of improvisational comedy lies at the other end of the spectrum, with the majority of the content being “written” during the course of the performance itself. Consequently, improvisational comedy is considered to present “new material”

every performance, so that no matter how funny a show might be, the performers throw out all their material at the end of the night to start anew the next day.

Stand-up, on the other hand, is written prior to the performance, like sketch comedy, but also contains some of the ephemeral qualities of improv because of the speaker's ability to change the trajectory of the show at any given moment. This leads to a necessary balance in stand-up comedy between the writing and performance. For this reason, while there are considerations of sketch writing and improvisational training included in this chapter, the main focus is on the writing process behind stand-up comedy. I appreciate the fact that this method is by no means a comprehensive account of all forms of humor, as we all use humor in one way or another, and what I deem "professional" comedians are only those who are trained to incite laughter in certain situations.

I also recognize the fact that this methodology is not faithful to all the disciplinary tensions that are put to work on humor scholarship. There are strong contingents of academic researchers such as psychologists, sociologists, and literary researchers working on the study of humor, as well as a number of non-academics such as therapists, comedians, and paid speakers. However, these interdisciplinary methods have not come to a consensus on one theory of humor, either between or within the individual disciplines. While this discordant nature does not discount the value of such work, especially as these disciplines continue to share their findings, it does raise concerns over

whether the well-established theories<sup>3</sup> can support all approaches to humor writing, especially within the framework from the previous chapter. This is yet another reason for my attempt to approach the relationship between humor and invention from the comedian's perspective, as it is rare to see the popular accounts of comedy align with scholarly theories of humor.

What proceeds from this point is an overview of some of the origins for writing comedy as suggested by professionals in the field. The methods are largely organized via the four inventional schemes considered in chapter two, so that through this chapter we will begin to draw connections between the comedian's writing process and the problem of cynicism in the composition classroom.

### Platonic Approaches to Comedic Invention Part One: Crafting Comedy

One of the widely proliferated inventive methods for writing comedy, or at least those that are widely touted through various "how-to" comedy books, is the comedic formula. Comedic formulas can range from a general theory (try to list things in a list of 3 at a time) to the specific practice (Try incorporating inherently funny words like "bazinga"). But no matter the set of tools, these formulas are meant to be applied to serious language in order to imbue it with humorous qualities regardless of the situation.

Of all the rule-based inventive methods, the most pervasive is the "Rule of Three." The rule of three states that jokes are best told in three part increments, where the

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<sup>3</sup> By "major theories" I am referring to superiority theory, incongruity theory, and relief theory, each of which having a partial hold on humor scholarship today. Also notable in this regard is Victor Raskin's general theory of verbal humor which attempts to remain neutral to all three theories by defining verbal humor through a progression of semantic scripts, but even this sense of neutrality is contested in the field.

first two parts create a standard or an assumption for the reader (the setup and anticipation), and the third part breaks the pattern (the punchline). Some claim that this pattern works because three elements is the lowest number of items that still can achieve some level of incongruity, and accordingly advocate that comedians try as much as possible to pare down the parts of a joke to only three ideas (Jasheway 47). Others take a less strict approach, such as Mel Helitzer in *Comedy Writing Secrets* who claims that “although most series-based jokes are most effective when they contain three elements, the number of introductory elements, the number of setups in the series can be two, three, four, or as many as you wish—whatever it takes to build anticipation and a climax” (153). In any case, the rule of three, whether in terms of “setup-setup-payoff” or “setup-anticipation-punchline,” is presented in nearly every rules-based methods book for how to write with/in humor (Vorhaus 105; Helitzer 152; Mendrinis 53; Sedita 27-33).

As a way of writing humor, the rule of three solidifies humor as stable, simple concept, so much so that John Vorhaus in *The Comic Toolbox* describes the rule of three in terms of geometric minimalism. He explains, “Two points define a line. A line presents a direction. Direction implies expectation: ‘If I continue in this direction, I’ll move farther along the same line.’ Well, it turns out we can craft a joke just by creating and then defeating that specific expectation” (Vorhaus 103-104). This rare composite of humor and geometry makes for an intensely persuasive generalization, leading some writers to apply the rule of three to a wide range of comedic phenomena. For example Helitzer defines three rules for writing comedy that hearken back to the rule of three (the redundancy of which Helitzer believes to only bolster the power of his claim): “1) Never

use more than **three** jokes about one subject in a monologue. 2) **Three** minutes is the ideal length for a skit. 3) Don't exceed **three** themes in an article"<sup>4</sup> (Heiltzer 154, my emphasis). The rule of threes is so simple, so flexible, that it has enabled many comedians to make claims similar to those of Heiltzer, broadly directing the need for a triplet *something* in comedic writing and performance.

An even more basic but equally prevalent tool in formulaic approaches to writing comedic material comes from what I will call "the consonant principle." This rule states that words with a hard k sound (such as Cadillac) or with a hard g sound (such as guacamole) are *inherently* funnier than words without hard consonants. For example, comedian Fred Allen once stated that "an egg is funny, an orange is not" (Dean 54). Greg Dean in *Step by Step to Stand-Up Comedy* cites that this is because the hard consonants add more "punch" due to the "harsh consonant sound" (53). No matter what type of humor, or, according to some accounts, no matter what type of writing, the addition of extra hard consonant sounds will automatically add humor to the situation or joke.

An important permutation of this principle comes in the article "Laughing Matters" by Leigh Ann Jasheway, which is designed to help creative non-fiction writers learn the basics of writing with humor. In the article, Jasheway presents five main rules for incorporating humor, and among the usual suspects such as "The Rule of Three" she presents what she calls "The K Rule." The function of the K rule begins much like what I have described thus far as the consonant principle, that words with a hard k or a hard g are inherently funny. But where Dean spends a fair amount of time demonstrating the

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<sup>4</sup> This third rule in the rule of three connects eerily here to the limitation of writing to three body paragraphs in the implementation of the five paragraph essay.

principle with jokes, Jasheway attempts to explain the origins of what makes consonants funny through the nature of the English language. Jasheway claims that “much of what makes Americans laugh today has roots in Yiddish humor, the language of which includes many guttural sounds—and the k and hard g are as close as English comes” (47). In this sense, the consonant principle is inscribed with the logic of cultural difference—the hard consonants are only funny because of the history of Jewish people who have been funny.

The cultural rationale doesn't stop there, however, as it critically inflects upon one of Jasheway's most reductive approaches to comedic invention (if it can even be called invention) highlighted in a chart at the end of the article conspicuously titled “How to Add Humor Without Really Trying” (Appendix A). The chart features a bevy of words that “just make us laugh,” many of which clearly emerge from tensions between standard English and other languages, including “didgeridoo,” “knickers,” and “Shih Tzu” (49). The list is meant to enable writers to include comedy by simply exchanging the words on the list with the more serious words in an original text. Implied by this characterization of writing humor is the idea that there are sets of words that are considered automatically serious and sets of words that are considered automatically funny, and this distinction aligns, consciously or unconsciously, with whether a word is included in standardized models of the English language.

Though there are differences between the consonant principle and the rule of three, both methods bear the markings of Plato's disposition toward rhetoric as no more than an ornament to logical discourse. This is never more clear than in the introduction to

Jasheway's article, which frames the purpose of including humor in the idea that "a smiling reader is one who's paying attention and eager to read on" (47). Framed as a mechanism for holding the reader's interest, humor doesn't impact the information in a story, it doesn't develop an argument, and it certainly doesn't impact any kind of underlying truth. Instead, these kinds of goals are accomplished by the seriousness of the text, and the presence of humor functions *only after* the serious discourse has been established. The rule of threes only works in so far as the first two items in the list or elements in a story are serious enough to setup the turn in the third element. Likewise the consonant principle imagines that the natural state of writing is in serious language, and that the addition of humor only enhances what was already there. It is used to decorate the main ideas in order to "make sure we lasso our readers and keep them in the corral" (Jasheway 49).

One of the consequences of this approach to invention is that writing with humor becomes so mechanically driven that it can seem absurdly simplistic, hence the title of Jasheway's chart: "How to Add Humor Without Really Trying." Like the geometric metaphor for the rule of three, the seemingly effortless nature of the consonant principle allows it to germinate in the world of comedy, proposed as a basic way of adding humor to *any* given situation. And while I have only focused on two of these formulas, there are a variety of comedy rules that work to this end, from commandments like "no whispering" (Sedita 220) to more complicated propositions like "if you're tagging all your setups with multiple punches you will increase your LPMs (laughs per minute)" (Dean 62). What defines this style of invention is that these rules are clear, teachable, and

utterly removed from the creation of meaning itself. Reduced to a routine set of principles with little epistemological value, these inventive strategies fall on the craft side of the art vs. craft dichotomy.

However, it is important to note that this method of writing comedy rarely functions as the *only* inventional approach that stand-up comedians use to define their writing process. Jasheway's article, which I have used to frame a representative model of comedic writing isolated as formulaic invention strategies, is configured by distancing comic writing from comic performance. For example, the article draws a clear distinction between suggestions for attracting the reader to a piece of non-fiction and "confus[ing] the reader by coming across as a comedian" (49). This divisiveness is even reciprocated by Vorhaus in his evaluation of the rule of three. Even though Vorhaus's geometric description of the rule seems clear and useful, he admits that "The rule of three is not my favorite tool. It often appears to me, as I'm sure it seems to you, that this rote repetition of setup, setup, payoff routinely comes out feeling forced and, well, unfunny... but [it] is a handy little item to have in your back pocket" (106).

It is thus between Jasheway's caution against becoming a "comedian" and Vorhaus's relegation of the formulaic approach to the status of a back-pocket tool, that we can start to sense the delicate relationship between defining comedy as an art (as Vorhaus aims to do) and comedy as a craft (as Jasheway aims to do). This tension is situated on the same considerations highlighted by Worsham in the previous chapter with regard to rhetoric, wherein a craft-based rhetoric both enables rhetoric to be teachable and hampers claims to epistemic status. We should therefore be wary of both hasty

endorsements and hasty rejections of formulaic models of comedic invention, and instead look to ways that this question of art/craft plays an important role in the discourse on comedy. To this end, I turn to the debates surrounding one of the more contentious predicaments for the comedy community in the past few years: the emergence of the Comedy Evaluator Pro.

### The Comedy Evaluator Pro

Publicized as “the ultimate online software for comedy performance benchmarking and improvement” the Comedy Evaluator Pro, created in 2003, claims to objectively measure the abilities of any comedian based on a ratio of time the comedian spends speaking to time the audience spends laughing. According to Steve Roye, the creator of the software, “For a comedian, they are either performing, or the audience is responding. Each of those are measurable events. You can take a ratio of one to the other, and the higher the ratio, the funnier you are” (*I Am Comic*). The basic operation of the program requires a person watching live or recorded comedy to hold down the space bar on the keyboard when the audience is laughing, and to release it when the audience stops laughing, thus recording Roye’s proposed ratio. After some simple math, the program gives the performer a “Positive Audience Response” score, or PAR score, which represents the percentage of each minute of the set that the audience spent laughing (comedyevaluatorpro.com).

This model of laughter is conceived on precisely the same logic as formulaic strategies for comedic invention. The PAR score is in no way related to why the audience

is laughing, or whether the laughter came at the intended points in the comedian's set. Rather, the PAR score represents a form of laughter that ignores epistemology in favor of universal applicability. Inherent in the Comedy Evaluator Pro is the idea that the sound of laughter, disconnected from all social and temporal contingencies, is an appropriate identifier of effective comedy, that is, if a comedian's definition of "effective" has nothing to do with what that laughter might mean.

The comedy community initially took no notice of Roye's software, either because they immediately dismissed it or never heard of it to begin with. But in 2010, comedian-turned-director Jordan Brady released a documentary called *I Am Comic*, which featured, among interviews with working comedians such as Tim Allen, Jeff Foxworthy, and Jim Gaffigan, a demonstration of the Comedy Evaluator Pro by Roye himself. By juxtaposing the software with the insights of famous comedians, the film not only brought attention to the software, but validated its measurement of a PAR score as an objective measurement of how funny a comedian could be on stage.

Though the director of the movie later slammed the Comedy Evaluator Pro, claiming that it was only included in *I Am Comic* for the sake of dramatic tension (Cransnick), the incident spurred comedians and comedy fans to discuss the validity of the PAR score. Some worried that the PAR score would become the main evaluation for being promoted from an opener to a headliner. Others attacked the ethos of the PAR score by calling attention to Roye's long line of specious comedy tools, such as [mybestmaterial.com](http://mybestmaterial.com), [killerstandup.com](http://killerstandup.com), and [realfirststeps.com](http://realfirststeps.com). Still others pointed out the way that the tool could be manipulated by a "generous" audience or by a large

audience. But the clearest critique came in the form of a post on the forums of [aspecialthing.com](http://aspecialthing.com), arguably the most important online forum for comedy discussions, by user JayRunner:

Using this software I could go up on stage with a stun gun and blast myself in the thigh, UPROARIOUS LAUGHTER. Then I can pull a petite girl from the audience to kick me in my testicles, really hard, ROOM EXPLODES. My PAR score for my 5 minute open mic is 80 and I go home, think about my set, open a few veins and die as the world's funniest comedian. Here's the problem, I don't want to just make people laugh, I want to make them laugh at what I think is funny. (JayRunner)

Through this statement, JayRunner illustrates the dominant resistance to the formulaic approach to rhetorical invention. Repeatable methods and measurable results, when considered in isolation, can easily seem like a preposterous way to write comedy. The missing component of comedy as an *art*, which JayRunner starts to get at in the clause “what I think is funny,” is what renders this approach not as a set of absolute laws for writing jokes as Heiltzer suggests, but instead as a limited instrument and “a handy little item to have in your back pocket” (Vorhaus 106).

But while it is easy to belittle this first mode of invention, comedy as a craft, we must not forget that, in some ways, comedy *is* a craft. This became abundantly clear in the forum discussion about the Comedy Evaluator Pro referenced earlier, as notable comedian Chris Hardwick attempted to diffuse the aggravation toward Roye’s product with the following post:

Look, young comics, if something gets you to be critical and evaluate your set, GREAT. You don't have to live and die by the numbers in this program, but if it gets you to think about what you're doing and how you can improve then it can't be all that bad... I'm sorry to break this to you, but stand-up is not more art than science. It's both. Equally. The art is how you express your ideas but the science is in the crafting of it. To consistently sustain your art you need the structure of science to hold it in place and re-calibrate it often. At least, that's what I've found in the 11 years I've been doing it. I commend this guy for trying to nerdify stand-up, whether or not it works for everyone. As someone who likes putting systems in place, I appreciate where it's coming from. Would I use it? I'd probably try it just out of curiosity and in a spirit of fun, but I certainly wouldn't live my comedy life by it. As was previously stated in this thread, there are too many organic factors that a program can't account for... But for me, and to be redundant redundant [sic], I would only use it as a guideline. (Hardwick)

Thus the relationship between art and craft, even for comedians, is a tenuous one. Comedians *must* craft their work at some level. They must get the crowd to laugh at their jokes in order to get booked for other shows. The economics of this fact cannot be ignored. The art of comedy, as Hardwick contends, only makes sense in a balance with some kind of system to understand it, whether that be in a quantifiable idea of laughter or in a universal formula for joke structure. Likewise, in moving forward to consider how these comedic strategies can inform the way we think about the composition classroom

we should be wary of strategies that declare allegiance to either comedy as purely art or comedy as purely craft. This is to say a formula for comedy, similar to the kind of formulaic rules for academic writing, ultimately provide a deficient model for invention on their own while still maintaining a necessary function in the larger scheme of the comedic/writing process.

### Platonic Approaches to Comedic Invention Part Two: Developing a Point of View

In a separate but complementary approach to comedic writing, the genesis of humor is thought to come from a person's individual insights and the distillation of those insights in order to gain perspective of some essential truth that they can use to develop their set. Sometimes this model is described in terms of a character, in that the comedian needs to work on finding their true inner "comedian" in order to find the material for comedy. Other times this insight is described through references to a universal truth, such as in popular adages such as "comedy is truth and pain" or "truth in comedy." In any case, these approaches to writing comedy direct the writer to look for some inner origin through which they might employ comedy as a way to express their authentic message.

In stand-up this model often manifests in terms of the comedian's point of view, the comedic "essence" that keeps their work from becoming contrived. Since stand-up comedy in particular puts so much emphasis on the lone performer on stage, this essential truth is often thought to reside in the comedian's essential self. In a sub-section of Paul Ryan's *The Art of Comedy* entitled "How Do I Find the Funny in Me?" Ryan explains,

I believe that every comedy actor has his or her own *comedic core*. . . . In my philosophy, the process of finding your comedic core is like peeling an onion.

Deep inside each of us is a sweet, juicy, innocent core, but over the years we've added a bunch of additional layers to protect us. As a result, when you study comedy acting, you need to open and peel back the layers, one by one, to reveal your playful, funny core. (Ryan xviii-xix)

As hokey as Ryan's onion metaphor might seem, this idea of removing the false "outer" consciousness in order to reveal some kind of transcendent "inner" core is pervasive in the discourse on comedy. Dean's previously referenced *Step by Step Guide to Stand-Up Comedy*, for example, uses the metaphor of comedians as "joke prospectors" who require a "joke map" to navigate their inner "joke mine" before they use another set of tools to "polish [their] gems" (Dean v). And when asked about how to avoid merely imitating one's comedic influences, Jerry Seinfeld has stated that "It's pretty hard to avoid when you're just starting, but if you stay with it long enough, that will fall away and *you* will emerge out of it. That's the goal—to become *yourself*" (Ajaye 199, my emphasis). In this same vein, Ellen Degeneres describes the difficulty of writing early on in her career as directly related to her self-knowledge: "in the beginning, you buy bleach at the store, you go, What's funny about cleaning solvents? You're going crazy with anything. That's how I wrote constantly...I'm nothing like that now. I had no idea who I was yet" (Ajaye 93-94).

In *Comic Insights: The Art of Stand Up Comedy*, author and comedian Franklin Ajaye builds a case for finding and maintaining a true point of view as the foundational strategy for comedic invention. Early in the text, Ajaye describes the base of comedy as "the voice you hear when you talk to yourself" and goes on to say that "As a stand-up,

tapping into how you really feel or think is the key to tapping into your true sense of humor. That is, if you have one” (Ajaye 11). He proceeds by describing his personal method of “listening to himself” and outlines a set of usable tools for the prospective comedian to “unlock his or her true comedic essence” (Ajaye xv).

In this formation, comedy is not only *able* to deal with what is true, but the audience laughs precisely *because* it has hit upon some underlying truth that exists in the comedian. This truth is characterized by its transcendence of any particular situation or historical moment. Consequently Ajaye advises comedians writing “from within” to “be resolute. Originality is never embraced as quickly as the commonplace” (12). In other words, humor does not come from a relationship between the comedian and the audience, but between the comedian and his/her self. A comedian adopting this model would use the same comedic “essence” for writing a joke about the latest celebrity gossip as writing a joke about the holocaust. If the audience doesn’t laugh, it’s either because the comedian hasn’t explored their essential “funny bone” to the necessary extent, or because the audience is resistant to the comedian’s “original” form of truth.

Thinking back to the various models of invention, this internalized approach contains a strong likeness to the other aspect of Plato’s inventional paradigm, wherein the speaker finds the truth by steering the two inner forces of passion and reason. Essentially, just like in Plato’s ideal method, the comedian is meant to sense the truth within him/herself in terms of laughter, and then rationally contemplate how to best portray that truth and consequently make an audience laugh. To this end, Ajaye offers what he calls the “third eye” technique, which represents the same kind of objective distance as the

driver of the chariot in Plato's chariot metaphor. Ajaye describes the technique as "a strange combination of detachment and heightened awareness that keeps you somewhat removed from a situation so that you can observe and record your thoughts and reactions" (23). This kind of "heightened awareness" frames comedy as a rational process of not only noting one's emotions, but understanding them to the point where they can transcend any one time or place.

Implicit in this idea of internalized comedic invention is that this comedic essence is an innate ability, something that already exists within the comedian before s/he starts to write a joke. From the perspective of Scott Sedita's *The Eight Characters of Comedy*, "It's like any other skill or craft. You need to have a physical gift to play basketball, a good ear to play the violin or a keen mind to be a mathematician. You need to have a *Funny Gene* in order to do a half hour of comedy" (2). In this light there are some people who are naturally gifted to be funny, and there are those who are not. This "Funny Gene" we should notice, is not only internalized, but is packaged in a biological metaphor, and this internalized mode of comedic invention often bears the mark of naturalized metaphors such as the concept of a person's "funny bone" or their individual "sense" of humor. This kernel can be grown and developed over time, but it is not something that an aspiring comedian can manufacture for himself or herself. It must exist prior to the start of comedic writing.

This approach to invention therefore leads to the depiction of the comedian writing in solitude, trying to get away from the distractions of the everyday in order to develop their "comedic core." For instance Seinfeld describes his writing process as

follows: “I sit there and I don’t allow my mind to have any distractions—no phone, no music, no television—my mind will eventually start to work on its own...I isolate myself—‘cause this is my ‘sit’ time” (Ajaye 197). The truth that the comedian is meant to find is thus specifically *his* or *her* truth and no one else’s, which serves two major functions for the individual comedian. First, it seemingly makes it far more difficult to steal jokes, as “The hacks can steal your joke, but they can’t steal the way you look at life” (Ajaye 11). Second, this model privileges the power of the individual comedian through the idea that all good comedic material is originally produced.

The difficulty of this inventional mode is that comedians are quick to admit that they were inspired by the work of other comedians, which is a fact that would directly contradict a self-centered comedic practice. In the logic of internalized comedic invention the comedian would seem to be forced to either purge their comedic influences or elude them, neither of which mesh with a reasonable definition of the comedic process. Ajaye accordingly devotes a fair share of *Comic Insights* to a discussion of the difference between being influenced and being inspired, and this delineation, I argue, can help situate the relationship between the process of internalized comedic invention and the formulaic strategies presented earlier.

In order to get around the logic that comedians learn by watching other comedians, Ajaye delineates between the operation of comedic *influence* and comedic *inspiration*. While Ajaye attributes a certain kind of power to the way a comedian is influenced, he stresses the need “to coolly appraise a comedian’s techniques, strengths, and weaknesses to notice what works and doesn’t work so that you can dispel any sense

of awe and be more objective” (3). In the division between awe and objectivity and especially in his use of the word technique, we can begin to sense what Ajaye is up to here, but the distinction is even clearer when he talks about the influence of his idols on his own career. Ajaye states, “The greatest gift that I received from my main comedic influences (Richard Pryor, Robert Klein, and George Carlin) was their excellence in their *craft*” (5, my emphasis). The difference between being influenced and being inspired, we can see, hinges on the relationship between comedy as an art and comedy as a craft. The skills learned from watching other comedians are recognized as the *craft* of comedy, or in other words the kinds of formulaic strategies described earlier. But while Ajaye might contend that these influences can help a comedian hone their craft, it takes true inspiration, in the expression of a point of view, which enables comedy as *art*.

Formulaic and internalized methods of invention are therefore not surprisingly conceived to complement one another. The internalized strategies can be considered epistemological, but have no relation to an audience, and the formulaic strategies have a relationship to an (exceedingly decontextualized) audience, but not are not epistemological. The two methods are essentially constructed to work in tandem as two stages of one platonic process; the comedian finds the “truth” of some facet of life, and then develops it into a joke by brushing that truth up against a set of rote joke structures and comedic principles.

Jay Leno, Janeane Garofalo, and the Spectrum of Platonic Comedic Processes

Considering that the formulaic approaches and internalized approaches to

invention work so well in tandem, it would not be prudent to characterize any one comedian as a holistic representation of either method in isolation. Even a comedian with the most formulaic approach will recognize that laughter has to have some cognitive impact on the audience, and even the comedian that works off access to the truth must write that truth in a way that the audience will understand. It is to this end I present the cases of Jay Leno and Janeane Garofalo, more as a way to identify extreme cases of the two platonic inventional modes than to claim that either can be fully characterized within either mode. Moreover, their cases represent a key defect in using platonic inventional schemes to describe comedic practice, as the majority of comedians tend to avoid the archetypes of public pawn and politicized prophet that Leno and Garofalo come to represent.

Jay Leno, given the moniker of “the mechanic” by other comedians, provides a suitable model for the formulaic approach to comedic invention. This is not because Leno lives by the rule of three, or blindly incorporates random sets of words into his set in order to get a laugh, but because of his unique perspective on the purpose of stand-up comedy. For Leno, the act of writing comedy functions as a way to embellish on the general beliefs of the audience. “The trick” claims Leno “is not to know more than everybody else knows, it’s to know *exactly* what everybody else knows” (Dion and Provenza 108, author’s emphasis). Leno then uses this form of generally accepted knowledge as both the starting point and ending point of his jokes. For example in explaining the comic effect of a particular joke Leno professes, “It worked because it took them one way, then brought them back to what they sort of already knew or

believed” (Dion and Provenza 108). This adheres to the model of formulaic approaches to comedic invention in that the laughter of the audience is a minor embellishment on the way people normally see the world.

On the other side of the spectrum, Janeane Garofalo’s approach to comedy represents an inextinguishable fealty to transcendent truth, and thus sufficiently corresponds to the internalized mode of invention. This relation is exhibited in the fact that, more than other comedians, Garofalo claims that her comedic perspective is not just one way of understanding the world among many, but the correct perspective in all cases. For Garofalo, this correct perspective is rooted in the ideals of liberal politics, in that “without liberals and liberal thinking, we would still own slaves and women wouldn’t vote” (Dion and Provenza 117). Taking this line of thinking to the extreme, Garofalo even goes so far as to claim “if you look up ‘liberal’ in the dictionary, it means tolerant and open and progressive. ‘Conservative’ means an adherence to tradition, and—I would add to that—fear of change....you have to be a certain type of person to be on the Right.” (Dion and Provenza 117).

For Garofalo, this ideological perspective acts not only as byproduct of her comic work, but as the driving force behind it. Garofalo thus takes every available opportunity to defend liberal politics, to the extent that her role as a comedian often blurs with her role as a political pundit. In this logic, Garofalo has appeared as a political pundit on CNN and Fox News to represent the liberal position on subjects such as the war in Iraq, often as a straw (wo)man to be mocked and marginalized. But even when accused of playing right into the conservative’s hands, Garofalo argued, “I didn’t know what else to

do. I didn't know what else to do. I could see this freight train headed toward a wall. And I don't say that from a position of arrogance. Any thoughtful idiot could see the war was a bad idea" (Dion and Provenza 114). Her access to the "truth" about the Iraq war is thus both universal, since she supposes it to be such a plain realization, and personal, since this insight is what gave her the impetus to act. This is Garofalo's "comedic core," the essential quality that she writes material from in order to build a set of material.

Initially, there seems to be little to no connection between the invention strategies of Leno and Garofalo. Whereas Leno's comedic aims are to challenge the audience's views as little as possible, Garofalo's goals are to advance the correct perception of the world at all costs. However, both approaches have been critiqued by others in the comedy community in recent years. For Leno, the rift between himself and the comedy community was made most public during the conflict over *The Tonight Show* with then host Conan O'Brien. "Comedians who don't like Jay Leno now, and I'm one of them," described notable comedian Patton Oswalt, "we're not like, 'Jay Leno sucks;' it's that we're so hurt and disappointed that one of the best comedians of our generation... willfully has shut the switch off" ("Like Nixon").

The controversy surrounding Garofalo, meanwhile, came as a result of her depiction as a "self-important leftie liberal drone" (Kettle) in Matt Stone and Trey Parker's *Team America: World Police*. Garofalo took great offense to the movie claiming that she should not be made into the subject of ridicule based on the fact that her comedic targets were morally justified. According to Garofalo in one interview, "I was mocked for saying 'I don't believe there are weapons of mass destruction. We're being lied to.' And then I

had my head blown off to cheers in the audience...how else would I say it? Everything I said turned out to be exactly correct” (Provenza and Dion 115).

Essentially what these criticisms arrive at is the connection between the invention of comedy and its epistemological capacity. Based on the resistance to Leno’s disposition of “preaching to the converted” it is clear that comedians want comedy to achieve more than to simply reinforce what the audience already believes. However, through the caricature of Garofalo’s strict liberal agenda, the comedy community demonstrates the need to ridicule not just objectively false truths, but *any* stable truth. The question remains, if comedy is neither a completely vacuous ornament to serious discourse, nor the window to some deeply embedded transcendent truth, how else can comedians conceive of their epistemological direction? To this end, it is necessary to transition to a third sense of comedic invention.

#### The Satirical Imperative: An Aristotelian Approach to Comedic Invention

Between the artistically empty gesture of comedic formulas and the pretentious defense of the political truth is the inventional strategy that uses comedy as an argument. All forms of comedy, one could say, make an argument for a different way to understand the world, whether they call for an understanding of the absurdity of everyday life or a flaw in the logic of the latest political campaign. This method puts the audience at the center of the discussion of how to write material, as a good argument is one that effectively persuades the audience to laugh. Laughter then functions as a sign of the audience’s agreement with the comedian, that audience both comprehends the argument

and realizes its validity. There is thus much at stake in the concept of humor as an argument, as it not only provides the role of the comedian with some level of epistemological power, but also describes chaos of comedic interaction in a systematic, useful procedure.

The concept of satire proves to be a common way for comedians to think about their writing within this argumentative framework, as the goal of satire has much to do with some kind of objective. For example, in one interview Bob Odenkirk, widely respected in the comedy community for his work on the HBO series *Mr. Show*, explains the difference between satire and parody through the idea that “satire makes a point. It exaggerates to make a point or illuminate something. And ‘parody’ merely exaggerates—usually just a form—and it doesn’t really have anything to say about it except to point to the building blocks of whatever form that is” (Provenza and Dion 285). The phrase “making a point” situates satire argumentatively, as the goals for writing material are to communicate the “point” to the audience as effectively as possible.

As the interview continues, Odenkirk stresses the importance of this argumentative style in the writing process for the HBO series: “On *Mr. Show* we *always* had a point to make. We always asked ourselves, ‘What is the point of this sketch? Who is this going after? What are we saying here? How does it work on a person?’” (286). This kind of thinking also weaves its way into Vorhaus’s text, as he explains “the key to making your parodies and satires work, then, is to make sure that your target is well understood by your audience” (73). In these sentiments, Odenkirk and Vorhaus reveal

how the writing process for this argumentative approach to invention is based on carefully setting the trajectory of the joke so that the audience will “get it.”

Already this system differs radically from the previous two modes of invention, since Odenkirk’s jokes are not empty vessels for delivering a pre-set message, but are carefully designed in order to help the audience to understand “the point.” Whereas Ajaye’s internalized method implored the comedian/writer to hold true to their comedic essence no matter what how the audience reacts, the argumentative jokes are constructed with the audience in mind so as to aid the transmission of the message. According to Vorhaus, “The difference between a class clown and a class nerd is that the class clown tells jokes everyone gets while the class nerd tells jokes only he gets” (Vorhaus 7). There is thus not only an emphasis on the comedian making a point, but on the audience understanding that point. Jokes in this light are judged for their communicative capacity, for what the comedian’s “point” to line up as closely as possible to the audiences laughter.

In this emphasis on the audience, the argumentative approach works in a similar way to Aristotle’s conception of rhetorical invention. The kind of knowledge produced by this inventional mode is neither solely located in the common sense of the audience nor in the exclusive awareness of the lone comedian. Instead, the epistemology of the argumentative approach is conceived through the relationship *between* the audience and speaker, a notion that bears similarity to the Aristotelian enthymeme. What’s more, Odenkirk’s process, in its questions of “What is the point of this sketch?” and “What are we saying here?” reveal the same privileging of rationality that the Aristotelian system.

Humor is meant to have a logical, understandable “point.” The emotional content of a sketch or a joke, or in other words the questions of what the audience is supposed to feel, relegated to an accessory of what the audience is supposed to think.

Odenkirk makes another important distinction between this mode of invention and Ajaye’s in discussing the message his satire attempts to convey. “I think that political points are not really worthwhile. To say, ‘Our side is right, their side is wrong’ is not really worth much. The real point is to try to get *behind* the story” (287, author’s emphasis). Recalling Garofalo, the internalized method of invention resulted in the very right/wrong binary that Odenkirk is distancing himself from, instead trying to gain a new perspective of the usual conflicts.

Patton Oswalt, in his own description of satire, helps frame what Odenkirk might have meant by claiming to get “behind” the story. Oswalt claims, “I like it better when you embrace what you can’t stand to the point where you strangle it: ‘Let’s let this horrible thing flourish. Let’s see what would happen if this thing grew with no boundaries and no restrictions, and see where this takes us.’ That’s what the best satire does” (Dion and Provenza 143). Read through this discussion, satire can be said to be “behind” the story in two senses. First, the goal is to illuminate some perspective that the audience had not previously considered, thus being more “behind the scenes” if you will. Secondly, Odenkirk might say that he is “behind” the story in terms of supporting it to the role of idiocy, following the propositions to the logical conclusion to demonstrate their ridiculous quality.

This ethic away from polemics serves an important function not only for Odenkirk, but for the majority of the comedy community, especially for those who regard their work as satirical. The idea is not to defend a single position, but to actively dislodge whatever position happens to play the dominant role in society. Todd Hanson, a long-time writer for the satirical publication *The Onion*, puts it this way: “it’s not that you ridicule things that are deserving of ridicule. It’s broader than that...no matter what you’re talking about, if it involves the human condition, there’s something in there that deserves to be ridiculed” (Dion and Provenza 279). Here we see the epistemological goals of this particular mode of comedic invention at their clearest all things being constantly ridiculed, all things being constantly subverted.

This mode for comedic invention, then, bears an uncanny resemblance to Berlin’s goals for social epistemic rhetoric. The disposition of the satirist is to begin writing from the point of view of revealing some sense of ideology in the audience through laughter. Though the discussion on comedy is less slanted toward pedagogy than Berlin’s model, it is clear that there is some kind of underlying ethic or at very least an altruistic tone in this comedic outlook similar to Berlin’s hope for liberated student subjectivity. Dan Dion and Paul Provenza claim as much in the introduction to their book *Satiristas*, saying “[comedians] use their powers for good, not evil. They will trick you, but only into thinking things you may not want to. They will surprise you, but with realizations. They may lure you into ideological territories you didn’t expect to be in” (xvi). Like Berlin’s cultural studies model, we can clearly see that Dion and Provenza’s attempt to justify satire falls prey to the very right/wrong polemics that the comedians themselves stay

away from, as the hope that comedians only use their “powers” for “good” implies that that sense of “good” is not itself open to satirical breakdown.

The most blatant connection between satire and social epistemic rhetoric, however, arrives later in the same paragraph, when Dion and Provenza claim that “[Comedians] may lie to the audience, but not to hide anything. If they lie, it is to reveal some greater truth about us all and the world we live in” (xvi). Like cultural studies, the recognition of ideology through satire is thought here to give the comedian objective mental powers, the ability to reveal the “greater truth” for the powers of “good.”

In subtle ways, many comedians have picked up on this logical progression, and become reluctant to label themselves as satirists or likewise make claims to actively inciting social change. When asked if their ideas were able to accomplish more than just being funny, these comedians often speak of satire as a by-product of their act, rather than as a foundational impetus for invention. For example, Kevin McDonald, member of the notable comedy group The Kids in the Hall, states, “It’s usually bad if we think ‘Oh, we wanna blow this up.’ But if we come up with an idea, and later someone tells us what we were blowing up, then we go ‘Oh, I guess that’s what it was!’ But the comedy idea comes first” (Dion and Provenza 247). This case for comedy without an argument finds another advocate in the words of Conan O’Brien: “I think comedy needs to be *natural*. It needs to come from the desire to just make people laugh. The biggest danger in comedy is trying to inflate it or give it an importance of any kind” (55, author’s emphasis).

Yet the most surprising voice urging distance from a satirical imperative to constantly undermine solidified value systems is that of Steven Colbert. Colbert’s show,

*The Colbert Report*, is often considered to be the paramount example of modern American satire, and Colbert's character might easily be deemed a perfect caricature of the right-wing political pundit. Colbert's show and character represent an incredible amount of cultural influence in the United States, with *Time* going as far as to call Colbert's performance at the White House Correspondent's Dinner as "the political-cultural touchstone issue of 2006" (Poniewozik). But despite Colbert's widespread characterization as the satirist of our time, his opinion, like O'Brien's, is that comedy begins with laughter and nothing else. Colbert claims:

I think when we do the show well, or when I do my job well, on some level it reflects honest, passionately held beliefs. Now, could those influence people?

They could. But I'm not doing it to do so, and I'm not expecting it to. I don't feel like it's a failure if it doesn't. If somebody tells me that I influenced them, it's not for me to say they're wrong, but that's not my goal and it's not the definition of my success. I'm out for laughs. When people came up to me after the White House Correspondent's Dinner and said 'Fuck those people, man. What does it matter if they laugh?' I was, like, 'No, it kind of *matters* to me. (Dion and Provenza 27)

Clearly, the concept of satire (and by extension the inventional strategy of rational argument) plays an important role in comedy, in that unlike the platonic modes of invention, it offers a way of conceiving humor that directly impacts epistemology. Satire also provides a kind of loose ethical motivation for humor, as the tool of argumentation allows comedians to reveal what goes on "behind" the usual polemics. However, despite

these features, we can see that a model of humor conceived as an argument tends to attribute comedians with the power to disrupt any kind of ideological structure *at will*, which both exaggerates the cultural power of satire and imposes a kind of responsibility on the comedian to produce critical perspectives in their audience. To put it another way, in establishing one's self as a satirist, a comedian ties his or her material to a literary tradition of great minds, including the likes of Jonathan Swift and Mark Twain, but the very act of being included in this tradition limits the primary goal of the comedian, that of laughter. To this end, the fourth and final mode of comedic invention regards laughter as the irreplaceable starting point and end goal for comedic practice.

#### Jokes without Punchlines: Toward a Sophistic Model of Comedic Invention

Comedian Steve Martin's first "real" performance was at a music club called The Prison of Socrates. Martin had been performing regularly for a stage show at Knott's Berry Farm for the past three years, but the act had largely consisted of "juggling, a few standard magic routines, a banjo song, and some very old jokes" (*Born Standing Up* 65). These short performances wouldn't fill the twenty minute time slot that Martin was scheduled to do at The Prison of Socrates, and so, for the first time in his life, Martin was forced to create original material. According to Martin, "This realization mortified me. I did not know how to write comedy—at all...after several years of working up my weak twenty minutes, I was now starting from almost zero" (73).

And so Martin began his search for comedic inspiration, trying out a set of inventional methods for comedy vaguely similar to those described thus far. He looked at conventional methods of building jokes in terms of setups and punchlines, but ultimately

could not bring himself to write that way. Martin claims, “What bothered me about this formula was the nature of the laugh it inspired, a vocal acknowledgement that a joke had been told, like automatic applause at the end of a song” (“Being Funny”). Martin subsequently tried a range of other techniques in order to develop material. He tried to develop his individual “sense” of humor. He started listening to comedy records in order to get a feel for the rhythms of comedy. He even tried, rather unsuccessfully, to employ radical tactics like reading poetry on stage, e.e. cummings or T.S. Eliot, in order to awaken some sense of comedy that achieved what he was looking for.

But where Martin professes to have first felt the pangs of “comic inspiration” was not some activity devoted to finding his “inner funny,” or to targeting some source of power to be subverted, but in a class on semantics he took while studying philosophy at California State University, Long Beach. Specifically, Martin remembers being particularly struck by the syllogisms of Lewis Carroll, one being:

- 1) Babies are illogical
- 2) No one is despised who can manage a crocodile
- 3) Illogical persons are despised

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Therefore: Babies cannot manage crocodiles

Martin claims that “these word games bothered and intrigued me. Appearing to be silly nonsense, on examination they were *absolutely logical* –yet they were still funny” (*Born Standing Up* 75). Though Martin had been trained as a performer in his time at Knott’s Berry Farm, and trained as a philosopher in his classes on ethics and metaphysics, it was this moment that galvanized Martin’s approach to comedy for the rest of his career. The appeal wasn’t that Carroll’s logical system could be subverted, or that

the absurdity of the proof was something to be questioned, but that the absurdity of truth itself should be celebrated as an origin of comedic practice. To put this into practice, Martin tried to develop a set of jokes without punchlines, jokes that allowed the comedic tension to build, but never any kind of comedic release. “If I kept denying them the formality of a punchline,” Martin claims “the audience would eventually pick their own place to laugh, essentially out of desperation. This type of laugh seemed stronger to me, as they would be laughing at something *they chose*, rather than being told exactly when to laugh” (“Being Funny,” author’s emphasis).

I argue that this sense of laughter, the laughter as activated in the audience, is what makes this mode of invention so redemptive in the face of ideological tensions. In the previous invention strategies, the conversation on laughter was focused on the comedian’s sense of agency, that they could force the audience to laugh at specific times, and for specific reasons. Because of that sense of control, the comedian in those frameworks is essentially given a choice between reinforcing and challenging the audience’s perspective. The audience’s laughter, in turn, became only a mechanism for demonstrating how well these perspectives were being reinforced or challenged. But in Martin’s method of jokes without punchlines he refuses a sense of comedic agency, and thus allows laughter to become a function of the situation itself. The comedian isn’t charged with writing jokes, but instead with creating a situation with enough tension for the audience to break down into laughter.

This laughter via the situation hearkens back to the sophistic appraisal of *kairos*, the sort of extra-logical force that acts on a person to speak. *Kairos*, we should recall,

works beyond the distinction between emotional and logical appeals, since the subject does not control but is rather *controlled* by the situation. While Martin's jokes without punchlines allude to this to a certain extent in the audience's essentially "desperate" laughter, a more compelling connection is found in Diane Davis' *Breaking Up [at] Totality: A Rhetoric of Laughter*. In the book, Davis situates laughter both epistemologically and physiologically within the field of rhetoric and composition, and turns specifically to a sense of kairotic laughter. For Davis, "the force of *kairos* can dance across the body, can instantly possess the subject and explode its boundaries/binaries of identity" and that "these *kairotic* moments manifest themselves physiologically in spontaneous generations of laughter, which, by the way, are anything but situationally correct" (29).

To this end, there is a clear connection between the kind of kairotic laughter suggested by Davis and the source of tension created by Martin. By refusing to deliver the audience a punchline, Martin establishes a tension where no reaction is technically "correct" because both an affirmative laughter (I laugh because I get the joke) or a negative response (I get the joke but do not find it funny) are derailed in their search for a logical "point" in the first place. When to laugh and what to laugh about are moot points within this inventional strategy, as the audience surrenders their mind, body, and for a moment their subjectivity to uncontrollable laughter. In Davis's terms, "this is not the controllable chuckle but the co(s)mic rhythm that laughs you" (29).

Nevertheless, we should not suppose that this convulsive laughter is limited to Martin, or even to his comedic procedure of denying the audience a punchline. To do so

would be a disservice to the long history of comedians who have encouraged epistemological change *and also* used conventional joke structures, which, as I have demonstrated, serve a vital purpose for the economic constraints of a working comedian. Instead, this inventional strategy should be read as the tension that functions between the setup and the punchline regardless of how long that tension may be left to germinate. It is the tension brought on by the overflow of meaning that is rendered always already incomplete by the retroactive desires of rational consciousness. This, we might say, is the lifeblood of E.B. White's ex-frog. The possibility for kairotic laughter is thus inscribed in the practices of a multitude of comedians, even those I have used to represent the other modes of invention; however, this laughter is not brought on by their formulaic, internal, and argumentative process, but as a radical excess to their active intentions and effects. Martin's method of jokes without punchlines, then, should be understood as a particularly fitting example of this inventional strategy, rather than as the exclusive model for its employment.

Another consequence of this sense of inventive tension is the way it alters the relationship between comedian and audience. In the previous modes of invention, laughter functioned unidirectionally from the comedian to the audience. The comedian speaks; the audience laughs. But in a non-rational inventive mode laughter is let loose to function through the situation, leaving the possibility that the comedian on stage might break down into laughter, unable to resist the non-rational force. In these circumstances, the very performance of comedian *as a comedian* ruptures to display the entertainer's own inadequacy to make meaning. Though such a scene might not satisfy an audience, it

represents the way kairotic laughter is instigated less by one individual than by the situation itself.

I recognize that the very mention of the word **tension** might persuade some readers to expect this inventional strategy to fall safely within the boundaries of the relief theory of humor, wherein laughter is understood as the release of some source of built up cognitive, emotional, or cultural tension. But, as is usually the case with theories of humor as relief, the question becomes: a relief from what? Without reference to the comedian's guiding punchline to direct laughter to a specific time and toward a specific meaning, the audience's response proves too fragmented to constitute a relief from any particular cultural or political tension. If we can say that this style of invention is to relieve the audience of anything, it is to relieve them from the very catharsis of the comedian's punchline, from a satiric and platonic possibility of eliminating tension in the first place; it is the relief, so to speak, from relief itself. It is this kind of laughter that takes a different approach to cynicism, and thus becomes the key consideration of comedy that will help us to return to the issue of cynicism in the composition classroom in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PEDAGOGY AND LAUGHTER: AUDITING THE LIMITS OF MEANING

There is a substantial fear, or perhaps skepticism, that thrives at the intersection of pedagogy and humor. In part, this fear is bred out of the lack of theoretical guidelines for thinking about the comedic process as a writing process. Accordingly, my goal thus far has been to illustrate some of the connective tissue between models of writing and models of comedy through the canon of invention. From these illustrations it should be clear that comedians can and will describe their process using a variety of classical approaches to invention, from Plato, to Aristotle, to the Sophists, and even combinations of all three. But while all of the inventional approaches I've described *can* correspond to comedic practice, the sophistic concept of inventive *kairos* is the only approach that can reasonably account for laughter as the non-rational physiological seizure that it is, and is therefore the most generative point of contact between pedagogy and humor. These connections thus enable us to move back to the composition classroom in order to discuss the issue of cynical student subjectivities, and to proceed from descriptions of comedic practice to implications of those practices in an ideologically-minded classroom.

#### Comedic Pedagogy through Formulas: The Limitations of Clarity

A pedagogical scheme based on formulaic approaches to comedic invention would be structured around teaching students to demonstrate the proper knowledge of a well-defined set of comedic rules. The *form* of the jokes would take precedent, as students would replicate classic joke structures such as the rule of three as a kind of

universal technique for writing comedy. The goal of this use of humor in the classroom, however, would be less about writing independent jokes than to learn the techniques of humor in order to apply them to academic writing. Humor would be put to the task of “attention getters” such as topic sentences and titles, but would rarely be designed as anything more than a decoration of the serious writing within.

In order to set up this humor in service to seriousness, the teacher would need to make a clear distinction between a kind of humor designed to bring the audience to convulsive laughter and the kind of humor designed to amuse the reader with a knowing smile. Laughter is inherently disruptive, shaking the reader mentally and physically, and such a distraction would not be welcome in the highly structured writing in this pedagogy. Instead, the teacher would advise students to disrupt the tone and style of the writing as little as possible, and would frame humor as a way to raise the reader’s level of interest. The teacher might even echo the words of the aforementioned Jasheway, claiming that the “purpose is to grab the reader’s attention and help you make points in creative ways. Don’t confuse the reader by coming across as a comedian” (49). The class would privilege humor only in service to a clear, concise academic prose, in order to more efficiently transmit the written message.

In the wake of appeals to amusement and clarity, it is no coincidence that this classroom would also purport itself to be ideologically neutral. In order to cause the least distraction possible from the (serious) text, humor would have to match seemingly universal joke structures with seemingly universal content. Students would be forced to abandon all but the most generalized cultural and political references in the interest of

allowing for the largest possible audience to be “in” on the joke. In line with Leno’s approach to invention, students would be asked “not to know more than everybody else knows, it’s to know *exactly* what everybody else knows” (Dion and Provenza 108, author’s emphasis). This kind of knowing would therefore align with the dominant way of speaking, writing, and thinking about the world: the dominant ideology.

It is important to note that from the teacher’s perspective the class would not be ideological at all, as the explicit goal of the class would be to teach a set of comedic principles which could be applied to any set of content. However, this contention is built on the assumption that ideological neutrality is possible in the first place, an assumption which conflicts with Therbon’s definition of ideology as a function of conscious thought itself. The kind of depoliticized clarity that would be celebrated by the teacher would therefore camouflage its ideological construction under the auspices of simple common sense. Politicians are corrupt. Coursework is tedious. Hitler was evil. These forms of common ground would give student-writers the content to insert into these comic formulas, remaining ever-mindful of the commitment to clarity. Such is the content of Leno’s late-night monologues, and such is the dynamic of a classroom devoted to humor through a formulaic approach to invention.

There are a number of limitations to this pedagogical system, the most obvious being that the dominant perspective, either in terms of the structure or content of a joke, isn’t always the most desirable to use in the classroom. No matter how generalized a topic or premise might seem, it is always grounded in cultural and historical contingencies that render the universal premise or the universal comedic structure utterly

impossible. Even the most generalized subject matter, say, airline travel, will relate to a reader in different ways depending on whether s/he has flown on a plane, how often, and other social and cultural factors. Moreover, subject matter built on “common sense” gives way to humor based on broad stereotypes and insensitivity. It is no coincidence that some of the most ignorant and gruesome forms of humor are combined with the most innocuous joke structures (for example: blonde jokes, dead baby jokes). Supposing the form or content of a joke to be ideologically neutral is not only to marginalize other ways of seeing the world, but to naturalize that marginalization as a celebration of a clearer way of constructing reality.

Similarly, the proposed universal structures for humor, such as the consonant principle and the rule of three, are also laden with cultural and political value. This is easy to locate in the consonant principle, as the list of “automatically” funny words includes the likes of “didgeridoo,” “Shih Tzu,” and other terms that signify cultural difference (Appendix A). It is clear that these terms are only funny inasmuch as they are positioned as the strange other to the “normal” words. Though initially less obvious, the rule of three is also driven by a set of contingent value systems. At the heart of the triplet structure of the rule of three is a kind of comedic efficiency, the will to develop as many punchlines as possible in the shortest amount of time. As a consequence, humor developed through the three part formula marginalizes alternate ways of thinking about joke structures, such as a kind of long-form narrative that could be said to blend setup and anticipation, or which builds a punchline as the setup for another joke.

As the applications of the humor become increasingly complex, the rule of three loses its value as a universal descriptive device. Much like the common structure of the five paragraph essay in contemporary composition, the three part joke structure has only a limited function as a pedagogical tool, and any attempt at using humor in an authentic context requires an understanding of not only how to use that tool to write comically, but an understanding of the appropriate situation for the tool to be used. However, the tendency toward abstract clarity would discourage situated knowledge in the name of repeatable, universal formulas. This would prove limiting because it would disable students from being able adapt humor, with respect to either form or content, to new concepts and situations.

All of this is not to say that the mere presence of comedic formulas inspires students to become mindless cogs to the dominant culture, but that the denial of any ideological substance in humor naturalizes whatever ideological structures *are* at work in the classroom. Furthermore, while the teacher would claim to evaluate writing as an objective evaluation of the correct use of comedic formulas, appeals to ideological neutrality would obscure the teacher's role in establishing what "clarity" means with respect to writing with humor. The teacher decides whether certain jokes are broad enough to reach a general audience, or if the perspective of the joke adequately adheres to common sense reasoning. No matter how objectively a teacher might try to think about broad jokes, his or her mental library of references will only be able to cover a limited number of perspectives, meaning that the definition of "clarity" would change from year to year and from teacher to teacher. To this end, the structure and content of student

comedy would be limited to the teacher's knowledge and beliefs as each student would try to appeal to the abstract idea of the clear, attention-inducing joke.

#### Comedic Pedagogy of Self Expression: The Limitations of Authentic(ated) Humor

While formula-based pedagogies rely on strict adherence to comedic structures in order to teach and evaluate humor, those formulas marginalize students whose perspectives do not reflect those of the teacher. The internalized approach to comedic invention seeks to overcome this limitation by framing the concept of humor around each student's individual voice. In this classroom, students would be encouraged to look for their independent comedic perspective, some kind of internal core from which they could express their individual sense of humor. The course would be devoted to helping students understand the difference between being influenced by others and being inspired by tapping into their comedic core.

In class, students would read, watch, and listen to the work of famous comedians in order to separate derivative comedic techniques from the expression of a comedic core. Students would then be advised to develop an internal comedic essence based on true, original comedic premises rather than false, derivative ones. This distinction would come from students reflecting independently on moments of their own laughter, regarding those moments to have hit upon some essential truth. Once in-focus, students would then concentrate on their essence to the point where it would transcend any particular audience or situation. Following the mindset of Ajaye, the student-comedian would focus on his or

her own laughter until the point where “the joy and vividness is communicated to the audience, and enjoyment becomes infectious” (16).

The goal of this pedagogical system would be to empower individual students by giving them a sense of agency independent of social pressure. Proponents of teaching comedy this way would claim that since the classroom is focused on the individual, students would be free to challenge the dominant ideology if their laughter pointed them to do so. This pedagogy would still put emphasize a sense of clarity, but the primary concern would shift to an appeal to authenticity, to the student’s presentation of their “real” comedic essence. Unlike a formulaic approach to comedic pedagogy, the students would be urged to express this comedic essence regardless of how those views might conflict with the values of a general audience. The teacher, again calling on the same logic as Ajaye, would tell the students to “be resolute. Originality is never embraced as quickly as the commonplace” (12). In this move, it would appear that the student views that were marginalized by the formulaic approach would be allowed to flourish by addressing the individual student’s voice. Students would also be invited to write this material through a wider array of comedic formats, from the aforementioned three part joke structure, to long-form narratives, or even forms of visual humor. As long as the student could connect their humor to an authentic voice, s/he would be given freedom to work with content and structure.

Ultimately, however, the internalized mode of comedic invention exchanges fealty to a transcendent “common sense” with fealty to a transcendent, personalized “sense” of humor. Just as a strict set of comedic forms give way to the dominant ideology

as defined by an abstract appeal to clarity, an internally focused pedagogical system gives way to a solidified ideological perspective though individualized authenticity. Students would be assured that if they can only recognize the false premises in their beliefs, and shed those premises, they will come closer to their true comedic perspective and thus the correct ideology. Similar to a pedagogy based on comedic formulas, this internalized comedic essence is also conceived prior to an audience, and develops into a set of comedic material meant to be function in any situation.

This appeal to authenticity, however, conceals how the teacher's authority disables any real form of student empowerment in this pedagogy. Lester Faigley claims as much in "Judging Writing, Judging Selves," in which he considers how composition teachers have historically equated good writing with the presence of an authentic voice. Through the course of the essay, Faigley inspects a number of writing samples that teachers have deemed "authentic," and highlights the ways that these examples are built upon the assumption that the internal "self" of the student can be communicated. Moreover, Faigley contends that an appeal to authentic voice "hides the fact that these same students will be judged by the teacher's unstated cultural definitions of the self" (410). These "unstated cultural definitions of the self" could materialize in any number of ways in comedic invention. The teacher might see long-form anecdotal comedy like Patton Oswalt to represent the best "true" voice, or instead favor the self-deprecating one-liners of Rodney Dangerfield. The teacher might see a Seinfeld-ian comedic "essence" as a wonderful example of a quirky voice, or see that same style as too distant from the material to be labeled authentic. Just as the teacher's definition of clarity determines how

students conceive of comedic formulas, the definition of an authentic comedic essence is ultimately a reflection of the teacher's desire for a specific production of the student as independent and empowered. Therefore, not only would this pedagogy fail to produce an independent student subject, but its failure would be drowned out by clamor of its own victory march.

Such is the risk of approaches like Bev Hogue's "I'm Not Making This Up: Taking Humor Seriously in the Creative Nonfiction Classroom," which attempts to "overcome student's reluctance to take humor seriously" through emphasis on "the use of humor as a tool for making arguments and conveying information" (202). Students in Hogue's classroom read formative pieces of nonfiction humor and perform rhetorical analysis on those pieces, "examining style, structure, content, purpose, and audience appeal and drawing conclusions about specific ingredients from which the author cooks up humor" (203). Hogue assigns the students to write constantly using humor, culminating in a handful of polished samples to be turned in as a final portfolio of their work (204). The most important of these assignments is a research-driven piece of non-fiction, meant to remind students of the seriousness of humor and "requiring the ability to play around with words, form, and content without leaving behind the world of hard, cold fact" (204).

Hogue's method assumes a number of benefits for incorporating humor into the classroom, from the role of humor in the literary canon, to helping students to deal with traumatic events, to helping students to pay attention to audience response during peer review. There are also moments where Hogue, in accordance with an internalized

pedagogical scheme, exhibits the hope for originality and individuality in student humor. Despite much of the student writing emerging as little more than the conventional research paper, Hogue excitedly points to the work of a few students who “were more adventurous, taking the sorts of risks they had observed in other authors, coloring outside the lines to create their own new and effective forms of expression” (204). But while Hogue’s method probably has helped her students to become better writers in some sense, it fails to account for how that model of better writing is still dependent on her individual preferences as the teacher, whether those preferences are aimed toward the construction of a sentence or the construction of a joke. “Good writing” in this environment is limited to nonfiction writing, and “good humor” is limited to the writing of Dave Barry, Barbara Ehrenreich and David Foster Wallace.

Hogue never addresses the possibility that students might not be learning how to write “new” or “effective” forms of humor so much as reflect her idea of what humor is supposed to look like. After all, Hogue cannot remove herself from the power of deciding the students’ grades, which gives the students all the more reason to design their jokes to fit Hogue’s sense of humor. Since Hogue provides the students with a variety of examples of what she finds to be funny, the students would simply have to draw from those models in order to act out Hogue’s pedagogical fantasy to imbue the power of humor upon them. From Hogue’s perspective, the students would seem to be mastering the comic form. From the student’s perspective, the task of writing humorous nonfiction would take on a farcical quality akin to the 1989 cult classic *Weekend at Bernie’s*, as they attempt to animate the lifeless structures of humor with enough motion as to fool the

teacher into believing their performance. The students Hogue saw as taking risks were, in reality, the best at playing it safe, as they successfully identified and reflected the teacher's value of "effective" humor. I argue that this oversight represents the typical pratfall of conflating humor and pedagogy, as it forgets both the unruly nature of humor and the role of pedagogical desire in the classroom.

What's more, the more that the teacher would claim to empower the students as individual comedians, the less the students would be willing to take risks in their writing. Students would come to associate the idea of empowerment with a sly form of further subjugation, and would become suspicious of future calls to action as well. In essence, it would produce a cynical student subject whose distrust of any appeal to social change would result in an apathetic acceptance of the dominant ideology. Thinking back to the first chapter, this sense of subjectivity would result in Žižek's definition of cynicism of "they know very well what they doing, but still, they are doing it" (33), and would accordingly produce the same problematic public disinterest as described previously. This pedagogy therefore not only fails to enable students to take ownership over their own thoughts and feelings, but it stifles the will to resist the dominant ideology after the students leave the classroom.

There are thus few benefits of a humor driven pedagogy that overlooks the way the classroom inherently limits student subjectivity. If humor is to have a positive effect on the composition classroom, it must achieve something more than to simply support to the needs of academic writing (as found in the sole directive of comedic formulas), and more than the symbolic gesture to an idealized independent student-comedian (as found

in the internalized approach to comedic writing). All too often teachers incorporate humor to this effect, only to create an atmosphere that replaces the productive risk and tension of humor with the directive to produce comedy correctly. A composition pedagogy that turns to humor, then, must at least acknowledge the problem of pedagogical power, and overcome the way the classroom itself limits the possibilities for students to explore the possibilities of comedy.

#### Comedic Pedagogy of Criticism: The Limitations of Satire

In light of the way the teacher's power can translate into students performing subjectivity, the logical turn would be to the seemingly neutral position of satire as a way of dismantling ideology in any form. The goal of the class would be for the teacher to induce the students to become skeptical agents of the world around them, always aware of the ideological processes that influence their decisions. Where the previous two pedagogical methods would depend on a stable set of techniques or a stable comedic voice as the starting point of comedic practice, a classroom based in satire would seek stability only in order to challenge it. Student-comedians would idealize the comedic models found in *Satiristas* in which comedians "see the absurdity in everything, everywhere, all the time. They can't help it; it's a curse. And when you see enough of that, you start to get pretty skeptical about things" (Dion and Provenza xiii). By adopting a consistently skeptical attitude, the teacher would claim that the students would be given the agency to criticize all claims to authenticity and clarity.

Like the other pedagogical directions, a pedagogy of satire would include an examination of the great works of comedy, however, students would look for situated reasons for effective comedy instead of universal ones. Through the logic of Odenkirk, students would be taught the difference between parody and satire, and would be constantly on the lookout for humor that only reinforces the dominant beliefs and practices. As students would write their own humorous pieces, they would be required to explain how their use of humor works to disrupt the dominant ideology, or in other words how they have called the reader's attention to the underlying assumptions that inform his or her everyday life. Laughter would be put to work, used as a way for students to interrupt their own social historical construction and similar constructions in others.

Part of the excitement for this pedagogy would inevitably come from the idea that students would be made resistant to ideology in any capacity. Students could look at the way Chris Rock's infamous "Niggas vs. Black People" criticized dominant racial stereotypes while simultaneously reinforcing those stereotypes. They could examine the cultural assumptions challenged by *The Daily Show*, while also discussing the way the show contains its own set of ideological assumptions. And most importantly, students would be directed to highlight the ideology of the university, the classroom, and the teacher, in order to subsequently use the assumptions produced by that ideology as their own satirical fodder. Students might be asked to draw caricatures of the teacher, or to write satirically on the tedium of general education courses like freshman composition. This pedagogy would therefore look at humor as a consequence of the rhetorical

situation, attempting to empower the student subject to carry the lessons of humor outside the classroom as a method of challenging the status quo.

In putting humor to work, laughter would need to be defined in terms of a rational response to a specific stimulus. It would not be enough to claim that the audience laughs, as this laughter would need to be deconstructed for its ideological content. Laughter could work as a reification of the dominant social views, as the audience laughs as if to say “that is what I have always believed!” Likewise, laughter could also function as a resistant uprising to the dominant social views, as if to say “I never thought about it that way!” But in either case, the meaning of laughter would need to be strictly defined in order to divide the laughter that calls the auditor to action from the laughter that solidifies the auditor’s preexistent perspective of the world. Only with this distinction clearly established would students be able to consult humor as a tool for exposing, rather than reinforcing, the dominant ideology.

In a similar way, Langstraat’s pedagogy works to help students to constantly situate the play of their emotional constructedness in order to bring about an active, critical student subject. Recalling Zizek’s “they know very well what they doing, but still, they are doing it” we might imagine that Langstraat would add a clause to the end: “because they do not *feel* it.” The goal of pedagogy, in this light, is to identify emotions and situate them culturally and historically in order to be more aware of the emotions at play in a given situation. For example, Langstraat briefly outlines the transformation of emotion culture from the 1920s to the 1950s, at which time “the culture grew suspicious of any intense emotional expression that threatened self control, ‘American cool,’ an

affective stance of restraint and containment of emotional expressivity, was born” (307). This kind of historical account of emotions is vital to Langstraat’s paradigm.

Through these kinds of accounts about the historical trajectory of certain emotions, as well as a (rather familiar) awareness of the play of those emotions on one’s own subjectivity, Langstraat starts to conceive of emotions as something to be shaped and focused in order to bring oneself to action. In fact, Langstraat advocates that we consider emotions *as* actions in order to “theorize the ways in which our actions are not only *tempered* by affect, but are communally and rhetorically *constructed* through affect” (315). In essence, Langstraat advocates for the composition classroom to become riddled with discussions about how students are feeling, how those feelings are socially constructed, and the appropriate feelings for a given situation. Even cynicism, the veritable scourge of cultural studies pedagogy, is given the possibility of being the “valuable or appropriate affective response” for certain situations (306).

While the concept of emotional energy does not perfectly correspond with a concept of laughter, a pedagogically driven satirical imperative would produce the same kind of relationship between rationality and action. The ideals of satire, like Langstraat’s considerations of emotional energy, convert feelings into a matrix of appropriate responses. Students are to be given the power to evaluate their feelings, their laughter, and to then be given the responsibility to enable the appropriate emotions/laughter in their audience. Rather than one emotion or satirical perspective, students would be able to modify their perspective to each situation, enabling the tools for critical subjectivity even once students have left the classroom.

Langstraat's approach, adapted for my discussion, presents a number of valuable advances in thinking through the intersection of humor and pedagogy. By discussing affect outside of what she calls the "privatized individual mind," Langstraat provides a way to discuss laughter as an/other method to the branding and limitation of expressivist pedagogy (305). This is to say that laughter does not give way to a pure form of truth outside of social construction, but is instead fundamentally dependent on social and historical factors. Likewise, in discussing the framework for these emotion-actions, Langstraat declines to limit her theory of affect to the likes of pathetic appeals (308). This distinction enables a similar consideration of humor which, as previously stated, yields a problematic disposition when configured within the rhetorical triangle. These theoretical turns have made room for greater dialogue on the effects of emotions on the public sphere, and in those respects should be admired. However, the move to connect emotions, and consequently laughter, to critical actions seems to simply build upon the same idealized set of objective mental powers as other considerations of social epistemic rhetoric, and in doing so subscribes to the same hopeful pedagogy as well.

The spirit of this hopeful pedagogy of cultural studies, either through emotional energy or laughter, is best defined by Ann Berthoff's *Forming, Thinking, Writing: The Composing Imagination*. In the book, Berthoff explains the relationship between words and thoughts as a dialectical process via I.A. Richard's definition of dialectic as "an **audit** of meaning." Berthoff clarifies,

Just as a bookkeeper has to account for income and expenditures in order to balance credits and debits, an audit of meanings would have to balance what one

sentence has to say against what others seem to say...of course, *audit* also has to do with listening. In composing, you have to be an auditor in both senses: you have to listen on the inner dialogue, which is thinking, and you have to be able to balance the account of what you've been hearing against what is set down on paper. (47)

The ideals of pedagogy based on satire, then, bear similarity to Berlin's model of social epistemic rhetoric, as they put a significant emphasis on this kind of continuous audit of meaning. By constantly auditing their ideological underpinnings, students would be able to make a *conscious decision* to change their ideological perspective. A humor-based pedagogy would seek to engage this constant audit through satire, whereas Langstraat's model would audit a conceivably broader range of emotional energies. But regardless of what factors are audited through these pedagogical schemes, each remains pious to the idea that through realizing their ideological constructedness, students will be given the power to consciously decide their ideological disposition based on the situation. In terms of humor, student's audit of laughter would supposedly enable them to control their own laughter, as well as to incite appropriate moments of laughter from a given audience.

I believe that students can be made to understand humor as a product of history, and that, given pop-quiz of a situation and a set of responses, students would be able to choose the appropriate social situations to engage in humorous discourse. But ultimately I find it unrealistic to extend this sense of agency to laughter, and I believe that doing so reflects an overemphasis on a rational, auditing mindset that laughter can be codified into

a set of stable, useful meanings. Struck with postmodern cynicism, we cannot simply manufacture laughter to disable the dominant perspective, as these intentions overlook the difficulty of translating laughter into either the audience's tacit agreement or active realization. Likewise, the presence of laughter does not enable us to take a greater sense of control over the body in order to change to a more appropriate affective regime in order to resist some sense of emotional hegemony. And to give students such a division, between appropriate and inappropriate laughter, or authentic and inauthentic affective capacities, functions to open the door to the pedagogical fantasy that a conscious decision *is* possible, and that the rational subject will triumph.

A consideration of humor through Langstraat's paradigm draws attention to the inherent dysfunction in applying an audit of meaning to humor. We can historicize humor. We can discuss the ways that certain jokes work rhetorically to enable certain ideologies and to displace others. We can build a system of provisional ethics around comedy, where the humor is finally evaluated for its productive capacities and judged on whether it enables resistance or docility. But none of these rational approaches could ever adequately account for laughter, for the body's spastic upheaval of agency and control. Humor cannot simply be enrolled into pedagogical service.<sup>5</sup> Such an approach would

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<sup>5</sup> It is accordingly no surprise that practicing comedians display significant discomfort with either the ability to bestow social change on their audience, or to have access to some objective critical distance through their role as comedians. As both Colbert and O'Brien demonstrated in the previous chapter, some of the most influential comedians relegate their influence to an accidental fluke of their drive to simply make the audience laugh. Other influential figures in comedy, such as Bill Maher and George Carlin, have also sought to avoid the responsibility of influence by claiming that their comedy *has* resulted in a formative change for their audience members, but only because those audience members attest to this change long after the show was over (Dion and Provenza 299, 344).

violate the very foundation of what makes laughter possible, and the consideration of humor would be, as with Hogue, the animation of lifeless material.

Again, this is **not** to say that the project of pointing out the rhetorical constructedness of ideas and emotions and ideologies should be abandoned. Cultural studies is a more valuable project than that. My critique is that cultural studies and social epistemic rhetoric applied to humor would force students to think of the laughing body as a rational body, which is to say that laughter is a conscious decision that can be made and changed at will. This definition overlooks the way laughter acts outside the auditor/reader's active control, from the unintended outburst to a painful, continuous case of the giggles. We are laughed more than we laugh. To think otherwise, that laughter is a controlled, rational process, can be a gratifying pedagogical perspective, as students would seem to be using humor to actively laugh away the stranglehold of their ideological construction, but this perspective results in the same cynical production student-performance as the call to empowerment through comedic self-expression.

The problem lies in the very conception of students as “auditors of meaning,” as it implies that the goal of understanding the world is, metaphorically, to balance the books. Students are thus charged with not only developing an understanding of the complex meanings that circulate around them, but to re-present those meanings to the class or the teacher in a balanced, rational account of the world. So what happens when, in the course of the audit, the student laughs at the “inappropriate” jokes, or when the audience member laughs before the comedian arrives at the punchline? They cook the books! They point to a clear reason for laughter, even if no such reason exists. They have to, or else

face charges of being unable to successfully perform their role of auditor, losing credibility in the eyes of the teacher and their fellow students.

Such is the case with an audit of emotional energy, and especially an audit of laughter. Students faced with a question of “What does this sadness *mean*?” or “why did I laugh at *that* moment?” would be faced with a tension that exceeds the symbolic, and thus exceeds their ability to responsibly perform any sensible audit of meaning. If the classroom is a place where emotions always “mean” and where the will to provide a sensible audit of meanings is not only enforced through the grading policy, but through the pressure of even the most provisional ethics, a student faced with an excessive reality will be forced to efface all records of additional meanings and meaninglessness in order to be rewarded for their audit.

In light of this inadequacy, I propose that the only substantial arrangement of pedagogy and humor is one that includes laughter in the audit of meaning as the very object that cannot productively mean. To this end, I point to a pedagogical system that provides the space for students to account for the breakdown of meaning. This is not the only system that can account for laughter in a non-meaningful way, and certainly we should not take laughter as the only signal that we have reached the limitations of meaning.

### Laughing the Limits of Representation

In order to conceive of a pedagogy that might account for humor without reducing it to a set of rational, discrete operations, it is important not to frame this turn in

opposition to the previous pedagogical modes. To begin with this assumption is to expect the problem of pedagogical power to be solved by yet another pedagogy, and runs the risk of a new set of classroom standards and practices leading to the same cynical student performance. Rickert adds that “given the institutional and cultural fetishization of thesis statements, grades, and grammar, [a complete pedagogical shift] would be nearly impossible anyway. Instead, we might infuse our own particular pedagogies with this insight into education’s general culpability, to the extent that we grant students the possibilities for a writing that would be...their own ‘act’” (165). Likewise, the turn to humor and pedagogy through non-rational laughter would be infused into the previous descriptions of comic pedagogy, but as an addition to, not replacement for, concepts like the rule of three or the comedic voice.

But while teachers would still give assignments to help students develop continuity in their style or clarity in their word choice, the difference between this form of pedagogy and the previous three would be that in this classroom the teacher, like many comedians, would refuse the responsibility for creating any specific student-subject through humor. I have already established the inherent problems in the teacher’s hope to create critical student subjects, and how these problems are in many ways an inescapable function of pedagogy itself. Classroom rituals such as the creation of the syllabus, the moderation of discussion, the ultimate power to decide a grade, force students to conform to the teacher’s perspective no matter how much freedom the students would be given. Diane Davis situates this dilemma as a symptom of the way pedagogical rituals position the teacher at the center of the classroom as the “subject supposed to know,” which is to

say that the teacher is supposed to know the correct form(s) of humor, and by extension the correct form of student-subjectivity that humor produces. (224). Davis's solution, and the one achieved through this last pedagogical model, calls for the teacher to perform as the "subject supposed to know" only as an impostor that *cannot* actually *know* (226). As the students look to the teacher for some authoritative direction to perform, they find that the teacher's performance is that of an imposter, lacking a set of steadfast beliefs for the students to reflect.

This outwardly fraudulent performance, which Davis calls "turning teaching arse upwards" (226), serves a vital purpose in the way comedians configure their sense of agency in relation to convulsive laughter, and consequently how comedians so often refuse to connect their comedic practices to any significant form of social change. When Colbert states "I don't accept responsibility because I don't accept *any* responsibility for anything I do." (Dion and Provenza 26) some might claim that he is being humble about his success as a social critic, while others might characterize his statement as a cop-out from any negative perceptions he might inspire. But thinking through Davis's approach to pedagogical power, could we not take Colbert's refusal of responsibility as a genuine refusal to position himself as a "subject supposed to know"? Surely Colbert's comedic perspective has had a significant impact on the American political landscape, but to claim ownership of that impact, to claim that he can aim his comedy at an idealized form of social influence, would undermine the impact of the show as something under his control. Colbert is thus not only unwilling but *unable* to claim responsibility for inspiring critical

thoughts in his audience, as any such inspiration had to have been the product of forces laughter, forces beyond his control.

In a similar way, the teacher in a laughter-infused pedagogy would refuse to believe in his or her own agency in inspiring the class to laugh. This shift would not rid the classroom of the pedagogical imperative, no matter how the teacher might perform as an imposter (“acting the fool” if you will). There would still be ample opportunities for students to perform their laughter, to laugh at the teacher’s humor in order to improve their grade. Students would also have the opportunity to resign themselves to an apathetic perspective, refusing to engage in the classroom performance.

By opening the classroom to the language-play inherent in humor, however, the students would also inevitably stumble upon some form of humor that exceeds the course requirements. A student might break into laughter at an incomplete joke, unable to complete the three part structure with a valid punchline, but still swept into laughter by his or her own comedic tension. A student might find his or her humor on a set of social and cultural values incompatible with the rest of the class, sending the individual student into a fit of laughter that cannot be converted to meet the class standards for clarity. The teacher would look for these kinds of moments as a kind of generative unproductiveness, a signal that the students would have not only learned to audit for controlled, productive meaning, but for the radical excesses of meaning that cannot be returned as a coherent product for the teacher/auditor to enjoy.

The inherent challenge of this pedagogy would be for both the teacher and the student to resist the urge to infringe on the excessiveness of these moments. The teacher

would need to resist the urge to funnel this laughter into a teachable moment, as the support for a teachable moment on joke construction or social criticism. Like Colbert's refusal of responsibility, the teacher would need to allow for the student's laughter to function beyond his or her desire to grade it, to make it responsible for anything beyond its own recognition. Davis explains that this move "does not suggest that the pedagogue is unqualified or that nothing is happening in the classroom. It only suggests that something *else* is happening, *an/Other* something: it is not, could not be, *true* knowledge—universal nor socially constructed—that is being passed here..." (226). Recognizing laughter in the classroom is recognition of the presence of this other as it forms at the intersection of pedagogy and humor.

The kind of pedagogical attitude I am after, then, is suitably compatible with the Linda Bergmann's attitudes toward humor in "Funny Papers: Initiation and Subversion in First Year Writing," which discusses the possibility of writing jokes as a way of helping students to understand the political underpinnings of academic discourse. Bergmann begins the essay by referencing the scholarship supporting the role of humor in building discourse communities, and her hope that by bringing humor into the classroom she would be able to strengthen the student's ties to the idea of academic writing as a similar type of community.

In her classroom, Bergmann assigns what she calls "oppositional discourse," which is to say the comedic invention strategies of parody and satire. Some of Bergmann's assignments direct this oppositional discourse at the point of literary forms, such as in her assignment to compose a satirical version of *The Odyssey* or Dante's

*Inferno*. Other assignments try to bring oppositional discourse to reflect on the lives of the students themselves, such as assigning the students to write a “sarcastic how-to paper for next year’s students, based on the survival skills they have picked up in their first semester at the university” (30). From Bergmann’s perspective, students’ ability to resist academic discourse in these assignments signals knowledge of how to navigate academic discourse in a deeper, more intimate way than approaching it as an abstract set of rules to be uncritically learned and employed. But only a few pages into the essay Bergmann admits that, upon reflection, she has been forced to revise her hypothesis on humor due to the fact that “humor is just not that controllable; in their play with words and forms, students can display a satiric, even subversive edge and at least hint at the possibility of anarchy...it is the possibility that humor may get out of control that makes it interesting” (23).

Unlike Hogue or Langstraat, Bergmann situates her role as a teacher as fundamentally shaped by the flow of humor in the classroom. “I see the ambiguity (perhaps absurdity) of my own institutional position as ‘permitter,’ ‘director,’ and ‘judge’ of this work.” Bergmann claims, “I run the danger of seeing my hard work in the course reduced to foolishness...and my students run the risk of so offending me that I will lower their grades” (31). Indeed, Bergmann’s pedagogy walks the fine line between intervention and anarchy, to the point where her presence becomes the very tension that holds students back from the possibility of laughter. To this end, Bergmann’s pedagogy, insofar as it is represented by her agency as a teacher, does little more than Hogue or Langstraat’s pedagogical schemes. She cannot detach from the pedagogical fantasy.

But importantly, Bergmann does not consider the assignments or in class activities to be the center of knowledge for the students, rather she hopes (and in some ways fears) that these assignments will lead to a more revolutionary form of humor. “I try to generate humor in my classes,” she claims “with the anticipation that assigned oppositional discourse may lead to the unassigned sort” (29). This hope for the “unassigned sort” of humor is what is so redemptive about Bergmann’s pedagogical approach, as students are given the opportunity for work that explores the limitations of the classroom itself. It enables the kind of “risky acts” that Rickert suggests in that it is a “willingness to give recognition and value to unorthodox, unexpected, or troublesome work” (Rickert 196). Truly, we cannot say that this line of thinking escapes pedagogical fantasy, as Bergmann transfers the hope for student obedience to the hope for student disobedience. However, this kind of classroom environment *would* provide the space where a student-auditor, in coming across an excess of meaning, might feel less of a need to translate that excess into rational discourse.

## Conclusion

Regardless of how we might attend to humor along the lines of invention, pedagogy, and epistemology, we should remember—in line with Burke’s endlessly cited metaphor of an endless conversation—that we arrive late. Humor is already at work in the composition classroom, whether or not teachers choose to acknowledge its presence. At a time when students are as likely to watch *CNN* as *The Daily Show*, and more likely to scroll through a long string of memes than closely examine a professional photograph,

our students need a more complex understanding of humor. At its most basic level, the previous discussion has worked to legitimize humor writing *as writing*, and to establish a body of pedagogical directions that a humor-based composition class might employ. By distinguishing these pedagogies via their particular inventive capacities, I have worked to outline the limitations of initiating the comic through a rational process of comedic formulas, universal truths, or critical sensibilities. While these limitations are supported by theories of the inescapable power of ideology, they are also evidenced in the practices of professional comedians in their consistent refusal to characterize themselves as pawns of public opinion, representatives of the public good, or the masters of objective critical consciousness.

The pedagogical turn to laughter, the last of my pedagogical considerations, does not guarantee freedom from these limitations, at least as far as that freedom represents a set of objective mental powers which “free” students from their ideological situation. But what laughter *can* guarantee is disruption, and in this disruption a glimpse of the unthinkable, of what might lie just beyond the limitations of our desire for a coherent, rational relation to reality. This laughter would appear at the micro-levels of resistance that already take place in the composition classroom, “making classroom practices a forum for lighting up the thousand tiny resistances that irrepressibly emerge” (Rickert 198). Undoubtedly, there are other ways of accounting for these points of resistance, and we should not take laughter to be the best signifier of non-meaning in all cases. However, laughter’s ties to a concrete set of writing practices (via the comedic profession), and capacity to give unsanctioned visibility to pedagogical insufficiency demonstrates the

incredible value for humor in the composition classroom. At the very least, my discussion of humor should deter those who wish to generalize comedy solely as a mechanism for public detachment.

My discussion also suggests the need for more expansive research into the tension between the canon of invention and subjectivity, especially with respect to the practical considerations of composition. Invention, concerned with the origins of discourse, can easily be made to accommodate the notion of the independent, critical student subject. This makes it all the more important to consider invention through the sophist's definition of *kairos*, wherein students not only write, but are also written into a complex network of social and cultural values. Furthermore, we should measure the play of invention against the other four canons of rhetoric, with regard to both the broad goal of negotiating classroom power dynamics and the limited scope of comedic practices. Just as comedians are currently engaged with a number of arguments over the inventive capacities of comedy, they are equally (and in some ways more directly) invested in discussions of arrangement, delivery, memory, and style, to the extent that each of these other canons could potentially lead to a more complex understanding of how comedic practice could come to bear on composition pedagogy.

While I have attempted to frame laughter as a kind of generative unproductiveness, I realize that my own discussion is partially belied by the very investment in rationality that I argue is so problematic. I have delivered the conclusion—the punchline—so as to release the communicative tension between myself and the reader, allowing us both to leave this essay under the impression that “I know.” In

response to this necessary dissonance, I refer once again to E.B. White who, a page after the dead frog quote, writes “humorous writing, like poetical writing, has an extra content. It plays, like an active child, close to the big hot fire which is the Truth. And sometimes the reader feels the heat” (xviii). Perhaps this stimulation via extra-rational heat expresses the most we can expect out of laughter in the composition classroom, and also the most I can expect out of my writing here. To this end, I can suppress my own cringe at the meanings I have made in exchange for the hope that, by this point, my reader has been in some way “warmed” by a breakdown of meanings; it is the warmth of language in-life.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### How to Add Humor Without Really Trying



Figure A: A chart of words that can be added into serious sentences in order to create humor found in Anne Jasheway's "Laughing Matters" (49).

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