

**ENGLISH CANADIAN STAND-UP COMEDY AS A FIELD OF  
CULTURAL PRODUCTION**

by

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation offers an application of field theory to humour studies and Canadian cultural industries studies. In applying field theory to Canadian stand-up comedy, I am able to map the structures, tensions, and trajectories found within the contemporary industry. This is achieved primarily through a discourse analysis of media and industry texts which frame the field and serve to reinforce dominant norms. Not surprisingly, the discourses perpetuated by the major gatekeepers in the industry tend to reinforce their own positions in the field. While stand-up is frequently framed as a potentially subversive force, especially by comedians themselves, I find that overall it is actually quite conservative in its content. As cultural entrepreneurs, comedians tend to be highly individualistic; while the content of their routines may speak critically of external political issues, internal discourses about their own work lives tend to be much more ambivalent. Understanding the humour that is popularly produced and consumed today, often in a global marketplace, entails not only a nuanced reading of the comic content, but also a consideration of the neoliberal/global conditions of its production, the cultural workers that write and perform the material, the gatekeepers that dictate how and when audiences will receive this material, and the social and cultural competencies and hierarchies that frame receptivity to the humorous discourse.

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## Chapter 1: The Field of Canadian Comedy Studies

*What makes Canadians so funny? Would these people all have the same sense of humour if they were, uh, Latvian? – Michael J. Fox*

*... a culture considered one of the funniest in the world; a country without which, it could be argued, there would be no Austin Powers, no Ace Ventura, no “Saturday Night Live,” no “SCTV,” no “Kids in the Hall.”  
– Geoff Pevere*

*Why are Canadians so good at being funny? – Andrew Clark*

Given the popular discourses that circulate boasting about the vitality of the English Canadian comedy field, it is indeed curious that it has not, as of yet, been established as an academic concentration within the fields of Canadian studies, communication studies, or cultural studies. Perhaps more curiously, when comedy is discussed, the statement of Canadian humour as successful, vital, and thriving is seldom, if ever interrogated by the speaker. The question—*what is it that makes Canadians so funny?*—has been invoked seemingly without ever actually establishing if Canadians (or at least Canadian cultural producers) are especially or uniquely funny. Not surprisingly, this belief in the inherent funniness of Canadians, and its relation to their supposedly disproportionate success in the US entertainment industry is frequently reiterated and reinforced by popular media and industry insiders, that is, the very people who stand to benefit from such a discourse. It is, in effect, an industry discourse about itself. However, this is not the only place that this apparent belief rears its head. Throughout my research for this dissertation, friends, family, colleagues and even high-ranking University administrators encountered at public lectures and related social events frequently reiterated the question. *What makes Canadians so*

*funny?*, then, is not only a rhetorical question used by industry insiders to reinforce the vitality of their own field, but also a discourse that is disseminated at a much broader, more general, popular level. That Canadians are funny, and that Canadian comedians are disproportionately successful in their chosen work, is the dominant and defining mythology of the comedy field in Canada.

The idea that Canadians are *known* as being funny is curious when considered in relation to the international academic field of humour studies. Quite simply, Canadian humour does not appear to be a particularly well-trod subject. Between 1988 and mid-2012, *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, which was until 2010 the only English-language scholarly journal of humour/comedy studies, has published four articles pertaining broadly (very broadly) to Canadian humour. Christopher Leeds (1992) discusses bilingual Anglo-French humour for which he uses a French-Canadian example; Christie Davies (1997) offers an international perspective on the Newfoundland joke as a form of ethnic humour; Guo-Hai Chen and Rod A. Martin offer a discussion of humor as a coping mechanism related to mental health, comparing Chinese and Canadian university students; and, more recently, Erica Artiles (2010), discusses portrayals of stereotypical Canadian identity in the Bob and Doug Mckenzie (SCTV) film *Strange Brew* (1983), as well the film's uneven and loose parody of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. This last article is the only one which deals with professional humorists working in the cultural industries, but other than an acknowledgement of the role of Canadian content in shaping production on the CBC, it does not delve deep into the particularities of humour production in Canadian film and television. None of these articles engage in a discussion of Canadian humour generally, and they certainly do not take up this subject as a field of study. In terms of international academic humour scholarship,

then, it would seem that “a culture considered one of the funniest in the world” hardly registers as a significant object of study (Pevere 2002, 126-127).

Indeed, even within our own borders, Canadian comedy studies has yet to be established as a major concentration. While scholarship related to comedy programming increasingly exists, it infrequently takes up Canadian humour as a subject unto itself. Canadian comedy programming is often discussed in relation to film and television studies through the analysis of specific programs such as news parodies (Druick 2008; Rukszto 2005; Tinic 2005; Tinic 2009) and mock reality programming (Druick 2010; Hughes-Fuller 2009; McCullough 2009). These authors often note the success of comedy programming, especially in relation to other types of cultural production such as drama; however, these pieces of academic work have yet to be brought together in any substantive way. A handful of scholars have offered discussions of Canadian humour more generally (Keohane 1997; Rasporich 1996; Rasporich 2006), or the stand-up comedy industry more specifically (Deveau 2010; Motapanyane 2011; Stebbins 1990; Woodrow 2001) but as of yet none of this work has been taken up by other scholars as the foundation of an academic field. Linda Hutcheon’s work on irony and parody forms part of a field of literary studies related to these forms in Canadian literature and art, but this remains quite separate from the fields of popular culture and media studies (cf. Hutcheon 1990).

The study of popular humour in Canada occupies an odd position. On the one hand, Canadian comedy is praised as one of few cultural products that is genuinely successful and about which we, as Canadians, can be proud. On the other hand, despite one-off studies and the occasional article or chapter, no scholar has developed a clear field of study around this supposedly thriving and important area of cultural production. A particularly good example

of this ambivalence is from the *Canadian Journal of Communication*. In an article offering recommendations for improved programming on the CBC, economists Colin Hoskins, Stuart McFadyen and Adam Finn praise the broadcaster's sketch comedy tradition as a rare example of quality programming that is both critical and popular with audiences.

CBC has pioneered this [the comedy/variety] genre with successful shows, often involving political satire, such as *The Royal Air Farce*, *Boys in the Hall*, and *This Week has 22 Minutes*. Again, private broadcasters' reluctance to air controversial programs makes it unlikely they would fill the void if there were no CBC. (Hoskins, McFadyen, and Finn 2001, 23)

Notably, the authors did not get the name of a single program right. They ought to be *The Royal Canadian Air Fare*, *Kids in the Hall*, and *This Hour has 22 Minutes*. While the scholars praise comedy programming, they also betray their own disinterest in the genre by only including it in their article in as much as they state that this is the type of success that drama programming on the CBC should aspire to. We have on the one hand an acknowledgement of comedy programming as vital, and on the other a fairly clear indication that the authors do not, in fact, consume this programming. They believe that it is profoundly important and should continue to exist, and yet evidently have very little interest in this popular media as part of the narrative of their everyday lives.

With the critical success of US satirical comedy programming such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*, both academic and popular belief in the political potential of humour is widespread. Humour offers an indication of the social and cultural setting in which it is formed and can illuminate both dominant norms and critical tensions. In the case of these popular parodic news programs, it has been argued that through humour the comedians are able to fill a critical void left by a commercial media, and that this commentary offers a viable articulation of political opposition (cf Gray, Jones, and

Thompson 2009). In discussions praising the politics of humour, the focus is generally on the external interests of the comic text. This is the comedian as cultural anthropologist perspective in which the comedian is taken up as an expert observer of the world around them, and is able to offer humorous, critical observations about this world, often focusing in on its banal absurdities (Koziski 1997). Given the acceptance of comic texts as critical discourses, it is remarkable that they are seldom taken to tell us something about the more direct social world from which they are derived—that of the professional comedy industry itself. For example, academic studies of popular comedy do not tend to address issues related to comic labour in the creative economy. This is remarkable given the growing focus on creative labour in cultural industries studies (cf Beck 2003; Deuze 2007; Léger 2010). On the other hand, cultural and media industries studies, focused as they are on production and ownership, have too readily dispensed with critical textual analysis, arguing that the “‘textualist paradigm’ does not account for external shifts, correspondences, and dissonances in other fields, nor for the historicity and materiality of the fields themselves” (Stabile 1995, 406). As humour is such a rich source of critical commentary, production analyses which exclude the text tend to be unsatisfactory, as are purely textual readings which do not account for the conditions under which stand-up comedy has developed and is produced. As a corrective to these shortcomings, I argue that field theory is a useful approach to the study of the contemporary comedy industry and this interdisciplinary approach draws an important link between humour studies and cultural industries studies.

My theoretical approach to this study draws upon Pierre Bourdieu’s *The Field of Cultural Production*. The Canadian comedy industry is relatively small. As such, it is conducive to being imagined as a field of production, making evident “the structural relations

[...] between social positions that are both occupied and manipulated by social agents which may be isolated individuals, groups or institutions” (Bourdieu 1993, 29). Bourdieu’s theory of cultural production offers an orienting perspective and a useful conceptual vocabulary for this study. This is especially important in the study of stand-up comedy as it crosses a number of related entertainment industries, and is thus a challenge to nail down. Take for example the Just for Laughs Festival/Festival Juste pour Rire (JFL/JPR<sup>1</sup>). It is a street festival, a comedy festival, an industry gathering, a television production, and a global entertainment brand; no one theory of culture can adequately predict or explain every aspect of this object of research. Quite simply, the policies, behaviours and political justifications at work in the street festival are quite distinct from those at work in the production of a television program. Bourdieu’s theorization of cultural production as a field that is rife with struggles, tensions, and ambiguities allows for this diversity in a way that straight ethnography, audience studies, or textual analysis might not. Pekka Sulkunen describes Bourdieu’s approach to sociology as one in which

the meanings that people attach to their practices are not always objectively correct, however, [...] it is the (critical) task of sociology to reveal the contradictions between the subjective meanings (which usually are those professed by the ‘official’ society) and the implicit objective meanings that structure the life-style of different social groups and explain their inherent ‘logic’. In other words, Bourdieu takes seriously the notion of culture [...]. (Sulkunen 1982, 104)

The structure in which these processes take place is the “field.” However, Bourdieu makes clear that the field is not only a structure, but also a field of *action*. So, while stand-up comedy is structured according to the demands of the dominant field of power, currently neoliberalization and the growth of the creative economy, agents also move through this field, sometimes unpredictably. This is evident in the apparent arbitrariness through which certain comic clips go viral over the internet, and others are largely ignored. While

experience, formulas and advertising can produce a certain degree of stability within the cultural marketplace, creative work carries with it the potential to defy the logic of the field. The biggest “pay-offs” tend to be those in which a new perspective, genre or approach gains rapid popularity.

In relation to Canadian studies, the Canadian comedy industry offers an illustration of the ebb and flow of tensions between official and popular Canadian culture. At times, stand-up has been excluded from the system of official cultural development. At others, its popularity has made it an ideal space for the dissemination of a national culture. However, the potential vulgarity of stand-up as a performance art makes this relation to official culture precarious and at times undesirable for those with a stake in the legitimacy of official systems of cultural production/reproduction. At the same time, however, comedy plays a pivotal role in the construction of national identity as a means of establishing “insiders” via shared knowledge sets, as well as the way that citizens imagine their national identities (Medhurst 2007). This cultural specificity can be problematic at a time of globalization and within the contexts of supposed multiculturalism; as Simon Critchley argues in his book *On Humour*,

as an eager cosmopolitan, I would rather not be reminded of national differences and national styles, yet our sense of humor can often unconsciously pull us up short in front of ourselves, showing how prejudices that one would rather not hold can continue to have a grip on one’s sense of who one is. (Critchley 2002, 74)

Humor, according to Critchley, is culturally relative. It acts as a self-defining discourse, and can produce discomfort when one is faced with the knowledge that our sense of humour—the things we find funny—might in some way contradict the type of person that we imagine ourselves to be. This *sense of humour* can establish links with others; as British humour scholar Andy Medhurst remarks, “comedy is a shortcut to community” (Medhurst 2007, 21).

The cultural specificity of humour makes it an ideal text for the explication of national distinctiveness. Medhurst further suggests, “to inhabit a nation state is to live amongst countless, daily, unavoidable images of that nation’s ideas of itself” (Medhurst 2007, 27). While it is the case that, as Benedict Anderson has illustrated, nations are *imagined*, we must also remember that they are not *fictions* (Anderson 2006, 6; Medhurst 2007, 27). National imaginings have very real, lived implications. National humour has a stake in this, providing the everyday, unnoticed illustrations of nation that fuel calls to political participation, war, civil obedience, tax-paying, and so on. For example, *The Mercer Report*, one of Canada’s most popular comedies, creates a sense of celebratory belonging that is strongly associated with the value of quotidian life in Canada including hockey, humour, Tim Horton’s, political officials, the military and the RCMP.

This dissertation begins the work of establishing a field of Canadian comedy studies by mapping the current stand-up comedy industry and defining an approach to the study of stand-up that engages in culturalist discourse analysis. I define culturalist discourse analysis as a sociological approach to understanding cultural production and reproduction through an investigation of symbolic power in public discourses and circuits of representation in media and popular culture. According to Reiner Keller, such an approach is “closely related to questions of knowledge production, circulation, and transformation, or in more general terms [...] related to questions of symbolic structuring or meaning and the generation of symbolic order including their material groundings and effects” (Keller 2005, np). In particular this project considers the *discursive production* of stand-up comedy and the ways in which performers navigate this field. Drawing upon Bourdieu, I take up the concept of the *field* as constituted by objective relations between social agents, individuals and institutions. I draw

upon the discourses that circulate within this space in order to illustrate the forces, tensions, and struggles that define the relations between social agents and institutions. By discourse, I mean “the production of knowledge through language” (Hall 1992, 291). Through discourse analysis of documentary sources such as news media, documentaries, and published interviews, as well as critical textual analysis of stand-up comedy routines, I establish the field of Canadian stand-up comedy according to the dominant and subversive discourses that bind and frame it. In doing this, I seek to reformulate humour studies and cultural industries studies through an application of field theory to each of these fields. On its own, humour studies offer valuable textual criticism, but frequently overlooks the conditions of humour production, such as the characteristics of cultural labour or the impact of gatekeepers on defining acceptable humour forms. Cultural industries studies provide valuable political economic insights into the conditions of production, but do not always account for cultural reception or agency in their analyses. In combining these approaches with field theory, where the field is taken up both as a field of forces and as a field of struggle, we obtain a much richer understanding of how Canadian comedians are produced, and how dominant discourses as well as social, cultural and economic conditions of their production might structure their career opportunities or shape their creative choices.

The Canadian comedy field is heavily controlled by a number of very prominent gatekeepers; organizations such as Just for Laughs and Yuk Yuk’s have held a longstanding monopoly on career trajectories and cultural consecration in Canadian stand-up comedy. However, while stand-up comics appear to buy in to this system through their acceptance of the authority of these organizations and their willing reinforcement of dominant industry discourses in publicity (such as interviews), performers also express ambivalence about their

labour conditions, especially via their creative work where they can wage critiques as jokes. That is, performers offer critical discourses in their comedy routines where they mock their own career aspirations, work lives, or creative constraints. In part, this dissertation seeks to unearth the ways in which certain performers or career trajectories are consecrated, as well as the ways that performers mock or resist the authority of this consecration. Indeed, at times in their careers, performers seem to strategically render up much of their creative autonomy in order to advance into the cultural industries, with the end goal of regaining this autonomy once they reach sufficient levels of celebrity and/or consecration. Between 2008 and 2012 I compiled a range of data related to the Canadian comedy industry, which will be used to map and interpret the field of Canadian comedy production. I attend JFL/JPR between 2008-2010. During this time, I also attended the annual industry conference Just Comedy (offered as part of the industry programming at JFL). I visited the CBC reference library and analyzed news reporting, documentaries, and articles in trade publications related to the festival and the specific performers that I have chosen to study. With this work, I hope to offer a mapping of English Canadian stand-up comedy as a field of cultural production.

According to Fligstein and McAdam (1995), fields “are born of the concerted efforts of collective actors to fashion a stable consensus regarding rules of conduct and membership criteria that routinize action in pursuit of collective interests. If the initial consensus should prove effective in creating an arena advantageous to those who fashioned it, then it is likely to prove highly resistant to internal change” (cited in Benson 2004, 283). These rules are not imposed, but negotiated; however, once set in place they become more difficult to alter and through normalization, often difficult for participants to perceive as constructed. This normalization occurs through discourse. According to Reiner Keller,

The “social construction of knowledge” is not conceived as an ongoing activity, performance and process; it is *not* the intentional outcome of any individual effort, but rather an effect of everyday action and interaction. The collective stocks of knowledge appear as institutions (like language itself), theories and other socio-cognitive devices, organizations, archives, texts and all kinds of materialities (e.g. practices, artifacts). Together, they constitute a historical *Apriori* for embedded individual actors. These actors’ minds constitute the world not as transcendental subjects, but by using the knowledge devices at hand or, if routine (inter)action and interpretation is disturbed, by “creating” new ones in extended processes of interaction. (2005, np)

According to Norman Fairclough, discourse “signals the particular view of language [...] as an element of social life which is closely interconnected with other elements” (2003, 3). In applying these concepts to the study of Canadian comedy, I consider discourses as statements made in relation to the field that structure or contradict expectations, norms, assumptions, and knowledge within it. That is, discourses *do* something within the field and therefore enable us, through their analysis, to better understand how the field is constructed, reinforced, and experienced.

In Chapter Two: An Approach to the Study of Complex Culture, I lay out the theoretical and methodological groundwork for this dissertation. In particular, I elaborate on how field theory contributes to the study of the Canadian comedy industry, and makes up for some important oversights in both humour studies and cultural industries studies. This chapter also applies field theory to the delimitation of the field of Canadian comedy under consideration in this dissertation, as well as the practices and products that fall outside of the parameters of this research.

Chapter Three: A History of Stand-Up Performance provides an historical contextualization of the field through a consideration of its global, national, and local development. I provide a history of the development of stand-up comedy out of variety theatre such as Vaudeville, Burlesque, and Minstrel shows. I address the specific point at

which stand-up forms into a commercially viable, organized, performance style in Canada and how it fits into the overall framework of the Canadian cultural industries. This chapter introduces the concept of cultural intermediaries, Bourdieu's terminology for the "gatekeepers" in cultural production and consecration.

Chapter Four: Mapping of the Field of Cultural Intermediaries offers a "mapping" of the contemporary Canadian comedy field including dominant gatekeepers such as comedy clubs, comedy festivals, and broadcast media. I discuss the role of these gatekeepers in the development of the field and the maintenance of position takings within it. This chapter also illustrates the field of comedy production in Canada by tracing one performer through it. Debra DiGiovanni is a good case for this as she is currently one of the country's more recognizable performers; she appears regularly on television and in 2011 she was awarded 'Female Stand-Up Comic of the Year' at the Canadian Comedy Awards in Toronto—a prize that she has won 3 times since 2007. By tracking this performer's career, as well as the media discourses that circulate around it, I provide an illustration of how a performer moves through, and between, dominant cultural intermediaries, and how intermediaries and related media reinforce this system of production.

Chapter Five: Comic Labour and the Creative Economy explores some of the critical narratives that performers offer about this system of production through a consideration of interviews and creative material. I argue that the comedy routine itself offers critical discourses on cultural labour and that through their performances, comedians divulge criticisms of their own work lives. I relate this data to discussions of cultural labour already established in other fields, as well as the growing body of research on the status of the artist and the characteristics of cultural labour in the neoliberal creative economy.

Finally, in Chapter Six: Humouring the Nation and Going Global, I argue that the national content of the Canadian cultural industries studies is in tension with the global career trajectories of cultural workers. I place stand-up comedy into the narrative of global flows of cultural products and cultural labour. I argue that many of the most pervasive narratives that surround Canadian comedy are in fact strategic discourses that serve the interests of established industry insiders, such as cultural intermediaries. Within this structure, performers internalize dominant discourses in order to move into more favorable position takings, as well as cultivate new trajectories through the integration of new media technologies.

This dissertation offers an application of field theory to humour studies and Canadian cultural industries studies. In applying field theory to Canadian stand-up comedy, I am able to map the structures, tensions, and trajectories found within the contemporary industry. This is achieved primarily through a discourse analysis of media and industry texts which frame the field and serve to reinforce dominant norms. Not surprisingly, the discourses perpetuated by the major gatekeepers in the industry tend to reinforce their own positions in the field. While stand-up is frequently framed as a potentially subversive force, especially by comedians themselves, I find that overall it is actually quite conservative in its content. This conservatism is an element of their successful participation in the field. The structures laid out by previous participants and gatekeepers do not change rapidly, and it is difficult for newcomers to alter these structures for their own purposes. As such, emulation can at times be a more effective creative strategy than subversion. While the growth of the field requires innovation, performers must also balance the preconceived career expectations of dominant gatekeepers. As cultural entrepreneurs, comedians are encouraged to be highly

individualistic. As we will discuss later in this dissertation, this renders rapid change, critical comedy, and labour organization very difficult. While the content of their routines may speak critically of external political issues, performers tend to be much more playful with internal discourses about their own work lives. These tend to be somewhat more ambivalent, with routines offering subtle critiques of the system through which they produce their work. Such discourses are not effective at subverting the labour dynamics of the field, but do offer an insight into the demands and expectations of their work lives. This will be elaborated upon further through my application of field theory to the study of stand-up comedy.

## Chapter 2: An Approach to the Study of Complex Culture

In an introductory excerpt from his essay “Performing Media: Toward an Ethnography of Intertextuality,” Mark Allen Peterson offers a humorous anecdote to illustrate his observation that intertextual references to mass culture provide vital means of producing social bonds. In the anecdote, a group of male spectators (Peterson among them) are watching their daughters’ softball practice:

The scene is a baseball field in Midwestern Pennsylvania. The first practice for the Teal Tigers Girls’ Softball Team has just ended. The coach is playing a game with the girls to test their knowledge of baseball rules, asking them questions and tossing them candies when they answer correctly. The parents, mostly fathers, stand awkwardly in a circle watching. We are waiting to collect our daughters and take them home. We do not know one another yet.

The coach runs out of questions. She still has two girls who have not earned a candy and she does not want them to go home empty handed. She looks up at the parents, hopefully. “Can anybody think of another question?”

“Who’s on first?” says one of the fathers. Several of us grin.

“What’s on second?” asks another.

“I don’t know,” says the first man.

“Third base!” I offer. Two other men say it simultaneously with me. We are all grinning at each other now. The ice has been broken. We still do not know one another, yet some kind of connection has been made. The coach rolls her eyes. Our children gaze at us in perplexity. (Peterson 2005, 129)

With this anecdote, Peterson intended merely to illustrate the way in which intertextual knowledge of mass media is used to form social bonds. This is as far as his analysis went, and no doubt as much as the author expected could be gleaned from his story. However, this excerpt clearly does much more than illustrate the use of intertextuality in everyday life. To begin with, it was not merely an intertextual reference to mass media, but a *humorous* reference. Intertextuality in contemporary media, as well as its re-use by social actors, is

largely one of reference humour. It was the humorous and playful nature of the intertextual exchange that allowed the participants to enter into a social relationship, not merely the performance of a shared cultural knowledge. Reading a little deeper into the description, it is evident that Peterson's anecdote is heavily gendered. The male spectators enjoy a joke, while the female coach responds humorlessly, perhaps even with passive annoyance. In fairness to Peterson, it is entirely coincidental that the coach happened to be a woman, and that a majority of parents present at that particular practice happened to be men. However, Peterson is very careful in his description of the scenario, noting that it is a *girls'* softball team, that the coach is in fact *female*, and that the majority of parent spectators are *male*; such specificity would suggest that gender must have something to do with it.

The softball dads did not simply use intertextuality to produce a social bond. They used intertextual humour to produce a social bond by creating an in-group who participated in the joke, and two distinct out-groups who did not. Their group was constituted as much by exclusion as it was by inclusion. The separation between the coach and the fathers is made more notable because she had asked them for help. She attempted to construct a different group, one in which the fathers participated in the coaching of the team by coming up with other questions for their daughters. If mere cultural knowledge were the main factor in forming a social bond, the fathers could have exchanged their softball knowledge including regulations, statistics, and beer-league triumphs. Instead, the fathers rejected the coach's group invitation, using humour to enter into an alternative group formation. The daughters are also excluded, being too young to understand the joke. While the coach may well have understood the reference, in the given context she does not choose to participate in the shared

performance of referential humour. It is unlikely that she was an intended participant to begin with.

Humour has a knack for extending beyond its intended context. In this instance, the joke (and its retelling) includes a social meaning through the production of a relationship between the fathers, a cultural meaning through the use of shared references and signifiers, and a political meaning through the (in this case, gendered) production of an exclusionary group. Peterson did not offer his anecdote as a critical discourse on the exclusionary consequences of joking, and yet this is precisely what this anecdote has done. Humour in this case is clearly ambivalent. While for Peterson the use of humour had a very positive outcome, specifically the formation of a social relationship with other fathers at the softball practice, this outcome also resulted in the alienation of the softball coach from any such bond. Worse, her attempt to form a bond through a request for aid was unambiguously, however humorously, rejected. Humour does not only produce social groups, but it produces groups with specific common interests. In the case of the softball dads, this commonality was based in gender, age, and a collective boredom with softball spectatorship. In all likelihood the participants did not *intend* to use humour in an exclusionary manner, nor, I suspect, did they intend to constitute such a relatively homogenous group. It simply occurred, seemingly on its own, “naturally,” as if it were an inevitable social progression.

Humour produces in-groups and out-groups, defines social and cultural bonds and hierarchies, and renders evident shared cultural competencies. As I will explore further in this chapter, these competencies must be understood in relation to the social, cultural, political, and economic spaces in which they are produced and reproduced. I link Bourdieu’s theories of cultural production with theories of humour in order to define an approach to the

study of humour that takes account of the nuanced processes according to which cultural knowledge and social boundaries are reproduced. This is particularly useful in the study of humour, where so much of a participant's enjoyment (or discomfort; or ambivalence) is related to their positioning vis-à-vis group laughter. I find a consideration of cultural production to be a useful contribution to the study of humour, and can more accurately account for the social complexities of the humour field.

Amongst scholars of humour, there are no shortage of claims decrying the challenges, pitfalls, and impossibilities of rendering acceptable academic analyses of comic texts. Like the study of humour, Bourdieu deemed the study of literary works problematic as much of their meaning is dependent upon the unsaid; he notes, "there is something vulgar about bringing to the surface of a literary work its underlying theories" (Bourdieu 1993, 160). In particular, the scholarly act of systematic deconstruction, description, and interpretation are destined to, at the very least, destroy the very humour that their work is intended to explain. For example, Simon Critchley notes "a theory of humour is not humorous. A joke explained is a joke misunderstood. In this case, what might make one laugh – albeit as dramatic irony – the audacity or arrogance of the attempt to write a philosophy of humour" (2002, 2). Indeed, introductory paragraphs very much like this one, delimiting the ways in which scholars of humour have hummed and hawed over the challenges of their object of study are a regular feature of academic publications on the topic (Fox 1990). To study humour is to render it up to seriousness. Its efficacy as producer of laughter is deadened by academic pursuit.

At the same time, however, humour is also offered up as a valuable explanatory tool for the understanding of the culture that produces it (cf Chapter 6). The jokes that groups tell their members, and the ways in which individuals respond to humour offers the social

science scholar valuable information about social codes, political perspectives, hierarchies, and experiences of everyday life of relevance to the context of the comedic utterance.

Humour offers a means of identifying social groups and cultural norms. As Umberto Eco argues,

What remains compulsory, in order to produce a comic effect, is the prohibition of spelling out the norm. It must be presupposed both by the utterer and by the audience. If the speaker spells it out, he is a fool, or a jerk; if the audience does not know it, there is no comic effect. (Eco 1984, 6)

These norms are rooted in a shared cultural knowledge, popular codes and practices that the speaker assumes their audience will be familiar with. In his discussion of cultural citizenship, Karim H. Karim links the ability to perceive and engage in joking with the learned competencies of citizenship, arguing along with Freud that all jokes are inside jokes, “their nuances can only be truly appreciated by the in-group familiar with their cultural context [...]. Humour is an essential part of social bonding, and those who are left out of the circle of laughter also find themselves excluded from the vital occasions for societal participation” (Karim 2005, 151). Not only can the newcomer not fully participate in the nation’s public institutions, but at a more basic level, they don’t even get “our” jokes—and this marks them profoundly as Other.

This is precisely how British humour scholar Simon Critchley characterizes such joking:

humour is what returns us to our locale, to a specific *ethos* which is often identified with a particular people possessing a shared set of customs and characteristics. A sense of humour is often what is felt to be best shared with people who are from the same place as us, and it is that aspect of social life which is perhaps the most difficult to explain to people from somewhere else. (2002, 73-74)

This explanatory potential of humour became a key theme in Donna Goldstein's ethnography of poverty-stricken *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro. Goldstein (2003) found that the taboo subjects of violence, poverty, and oppression were not open to serious discussion, but were primary subjects of joking amongst the women that she was shadowing. Goldstein inadvertently became a humour scholar when her ethnographic study could not unearth the types of everyday details that she expected to access through traditional ethnographic research. Her study illustrates the capabilities of humour research as a means of understanding complex and challenging social, cultural and political issues. More closely related to this study, Edward Brennan argues that "humour can provide researchers with a unique access point into the professional cultures of media producers" (2011, 819). Like Goldstein, Brennan did not set out to study humour, but stumbled upon it inadvertently when he found that the jokes his research subjects told offered important clues to aspects of their daily lives that they did not render up in interviews. These jokes raised ambivalent discourses about occupational culture and the emotional labour of media production. The importance of joking as a critical text can be taken to another level when the research subject's job is to produce humour, as is the case with the stand-up comedians that I consider in this dissertation. However, the humour that I consider is also part of a larger, globally focused comedy industry. The cultural competencies with which humorists engage are often global in nature. The cultural citizenship to which Karim refers above is also increasingly "global" in scope.

In attempting to develop a greater understanding of stand-up comedy, perhaps the greatest challenge faced by the researcher is in establishing a reasonable approach to their study. In humour studies, some of the dominant approaches have variously emphasized textual and genre analysis (media studies), discourse analysis (in anthropological and

sociological studies), or psychoanalysis and discourses of the therapeutic (film studies). As will be evident, many investigators in this area have found the issue of methodology a challenging one. Dealing with complexity, contradiction, plurality, and ambivalence has the potential to make the implementation of carefully structured research design a trying affair. The cultural spaces under analysis can be complex and unpredictable, and this requires a certain degree of fluidity on the part of the investigator. In reaction to such challenges, Jim McGuigan argues convincingly for methodological pluralism in his book *Cultural Analysis*:

Cultural analysis is methodologically pluralist as far as this book is concerned, drawing freely on methods as and when appropriate to the analytical problem under investigation. In this sense, it is parasitic on a wide range of disciplines and a bit of a pest, rather like a magpie. It also offends against a disciplinary Methodism whereby correctly prescribed technique is reified over and above the subject matter of the enquiry. To a considerable extent, cultural analysis remains insufficiently serious according to pristine disciplinarity and, at the same time, it is deemed an impractical and unrealistic sideshow to the serious business of solving research problems defined and funded by capital and State. (McGuigan 2010, 3)

Here, McGuigan predicts that his choice to draw upon a variety of methods will be heavily criticized. However, analyzing a complex site can require a variety of approaches in order to develop an accurate account of a social practice. He is additionally cynical about the motivations of research “funded by capital and State.” For Bourdieu, the field of power is comprised of the economic and political spheres; these spheres can impinge upon the autonomy or fields such as art and literature which have, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, defined themselves in opposition to the field of power. Implicit to McGuigan’s theory of cultural analysis is a critique of the increased sway that economic and political interests have over the academic field. Bourdieu is similarly critical of the expansion of the influence of the economic field into art and culture through neoliberalisation. He expresses fear for the future of Europe as hard won autonomy is chipped away under the auspices of the “new economy”

and globalization. Notably, he offers Canada as an example of the worst case scenario—the future that awaits Europe should they, like Canada, prove incapable of protecting themselves from the gradual erosion of cultural independence from the homogenizing and corporatizing influence of US economic and political power (Bourdieu 2003).

Like McGuigan, Andy Medhurst also makes a plea for methodological interdisciplinarity in his study of English comedy, *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities* (2007). The author claims to “poach” from many disciplines related to the study of culture. Both McGuigan and Medhurst rely heavily on non-academic sources. McGuigan speaks to the challenges of using journalistic source material, noting that, “such material has to be treated with the kind of caution that historians apply to archival documentation—that is, being cognizant of textual features, the author-reader relation, the political context and the time-space conjuncture in which the evidence is produced” (McGuigan 2010, 4). Fortner and Christians (1989) make similar calls for contextualization when drawing upon secondary sources, arguing that we must find ways to verify or corroborate such material by using it in relation to other sources from other locations. When relying on journalism, autobiographies, interviews and other popular writing that do not require the rigorous citation that academic work must uphold, Medhurst endorses the exercise of caution, pointing out that such material may be “flagrantly unreliable in terms of testable hypotheses or verifiable truth.” However, the insights of these sources in terms of “flavour” and “feel”, and their ability to provide a picture of dominant interpretations of an artifact or cultural field at a specific point in time should not be underestimated (Medhurst 2007, 2). Medhurst is particularly ambivalent about the use of academic methods for understanding comedy. For example, he is skeptical about textual analysis, noting “comedy

is never only textual – it is performed, enacted, an event, a transaction, lived out in a shared moment by its producers and consumers” (Medhurst 2007, 4). This is a significant challenge when studying any kind of performance art. Medhurst’s ambivalence suggests that there is a fundamental incompatibility between established academic methods and the study of performances such as stand-up comedy. This perhaps explains why comedy, especially non-literary comedy, has tended to be an overlooked and undervalued area of study.

Medhurst is not alone in his ambivalence towards the academic study of humour. John Carty and Yasmine Musharbask (2008) point to a tension in the field of anthropology where the study of humour and laughter might be considered a side-project, but seldom features as a defining research area in an academic’s biography. The challenge that these scholars address relates in part to the larger difficulty in qualitative research of providing accurate representations of complex social and cultural phenomena vital to the production of meaning and the reproduction of norms and value-systems.

Qualitative studies start from the assumption that in studying humans we are examining a creative process whereby people produce and maintain forms of life and society and systems of meaning and value. This creative activity is grounded in the ability to build cultural forms from symbols that express this will to live and assert meaning. To study this creative process is our first obligation, and our methodology must not reduce and dehumanize it in the very act of studying it. (Christians and Carey 1989, 358-359)

Field theory, which accounts for both the reproduction of social structures, and the positioning of participants within it, provides a useful model for the analysis of complex cultural spaces and behaviours. In fact, such an approach to the study of humour has the potential to alleviate some of the challenges raised by Medhurst. Notably, in studying professional comedy, ethnographic approaches can be problematic. Indeed, the dominant approach for the study of the comedy industry has been one of textual analysis which draws

upon journalistic interviews, documentaries, and biographies in order to fill in the details of the performer's personal and professional life. In conducting close, interview-based, ethnographic study, the scholar enters an ethical relationship with the research subject, one in which the scholar is obligated to ensure a heightened responsibility for the protection of that subject. We care profoundly about the safety, comfort, and security of our research participants, and rightly so. This relationship of care and concern is in many respects at odds with the type of critical perspective required in textual analysis. It is distance from the research subject which allows the scholar to offer critical interpretations of comedic work. For example, in her analysis of Russell Peters, Motapanyane draws entirely on previously published interviews with the comedian in her critical analysis. Had she been engaged in a much more direct and personal research relationship with the comedian, her valid claims about the problematic, even racist, connotations of his work might have been softened. Indeed the argument that a performer contributes carelessly to racism and racist society could very well violate the ethical obligation of the scholar to protect their research subject from harm. Not only this, but by the mere fact of our humanness, the scholar might be less inclined to wage honest, critical interpretations of an individual with whom they have developed a professional affinity or even friendship. As the former television critic for the *Observer*, Clive James, argues of those in his line of work, "if he goes to official previews, he will meet producers and directors, start understanding their problems, and find himself paying the inevitable price for the free sandwiches" (cited in Wolfe 1985, 2-3).

In researching this topic, I have drawn widely upon critical textual analysis of popular media, industry publications, and comic performances in order to get at the discourses that circulate within and frame the field of stand-up comedy in Canada. This multidisciplinary

approach is not only useful when considering comedy but also in the study of culture and cultural policy more generally. Jim McGuigan argues that cultural analysis must be more than the simple following of a set of already prescribed rules, stating “It is as much art as science” (McGuigan 2010, 5). This approach is useful in understanding a complex field such as contemporary comedy production, and addresses some of the challenges of conducting cultural research laid out by Bourdieu in *The Field of Cultural Production*:

One of the major difficulties of the social history of philosophy, art or literature is that it has to reconstruct these spaces of original possibles which, because they were part of the self-evident givens of the situations, remained unremarked and are therefore unlikely to be mentioned in contemporary accounts, chronicles or memoirs. It is difficult to conceive of the vast amount of information which is linked to membership of a field and which all contemporaries immediately invest in their reading of works: *information about institutions [...] and about persons, their relationships, liaisons and quarrels, information about the ideas and problems which are ‘in the air’ and circulate orally in gossip and rumour.* [emphasis mine] (Bourdieu 1993, 31-32)

Even with a contemporary research topic, these unofficial information sources and internal knowledge sets are difficult to obtain. Even if an ethnographer succeeds in unearthing such details, ethical considerations can render their use problematic. Beyond this, rumours, gossip, and other ideas that are simply “in the air” can be academically inadmissible due to the methodological fluidity with which they are often acquired. The exclusion of these sources however, presents serious challenges to the scholar of popular culture because, as Pannekoek, Hemmings and Clark argue in relation to museums, “popular culture has been marginalized in memory institutions because society views it as transient and disposable. Popular culture is seen as a tasteless, fleeting, and disposable commodity” (Pannekoek, Hemmings, and Clarke 2010, 201). Official, academically admissible sources for the cultural practices relevant to popular culture are therefore difficult to acquire. This poses obvious challenges to the researcher who would like to return to these popular texts or practices.

My approach is inspired in part by Michael Billig's call for a return to "traditional scholarship." Billig (1988) is critical of a tendency in the social sciences for methodological rigour to be emphasized at the expense of traditional skills of scholarship which are reliant upon critical reading and interpretation. For Billig, these latter skills are better suited to respond to the complex questions posed in social scientific research, noting that "interpretation cannot be achieved by handing over the whole business of scholarship to a programme of computation" (207). He argues that such reliance upon systematic methodology prescribed from the outset of a research project limits a scholar's ability to follow clues and hunches which might nudge the scholarship in new directions. The scholar must "feel their way around their library and archival sources," seeking out new evidence as their research project evolves (207). Billig's main critique of the methodologist is that such a programme of research removes the individual scholar from the research, as anyone should be able to follow the same method and therefore reproduce the results. He argues,

The main drawback of ... traditional scholarship is that it places the burden of responsibility upon the scholar. The procedures of methodology make the individual expert anonymous, in the hope of reducing the vagaries of individual bias. Yet this abolition of bias also involves abolishing judgement. The traditional scholar cannot avoid the task of judging whether a piece of evidence is important or not. Moreover, the scholar cannot avoid responsibility for making judgements which can be criticized by other scholars with different views about the essential features of the issue in question. (214)

While this approach might be more dangerous, as the scholar is always vulnerable to criticism, and must be capable of articulating a defense of their work which goes beyond whether data was compiled and counted appropriately, such traditional scholarship also has the potential to offer rich analyses and complex social theories. While Billig's rhetorical positioning of his "traditional scholarship" may be needlessly controversial, and his dismissal of methodologies wholesale is perhaps problematic, his suggestion that critical scholarship

ought to be situated in discourse analyses of historical and social patterns is very much relevant to this project. The field theory deployed in this dissertation, in particular Bourdieu's work on the literary field of 19<sup>th</sup> century France, is also rooted in historical and social patterns. Indeed, I find field theory to be entirely compatible with the kind of methodological scepticism and analytic breadth called for by Billig, McGuigan, and Medhurst.

This historical and social grounding is a vital aspect of any textual criticism which hopes to avoid the pitfalls of the "textualist paradigm" which has been widely criticized for a lack of "historicized understanding of the relationship between economic and ideological shifts," and worse, in cases where resistance is read into popular culture, reinforce "the very rhetoric used by the media industry to promote and market its commodities" (Stabile 1995, 418). As a corrective to this, Carol Stabile argues that field theory provides an important historical context for media production which allows scholars to see beyond the embedded political messages of the media text. She suggests that, "Bourdieu's reflexive sociology forces us to theorize agency—be it our own, or that attributed to consumers of mass media—within the constraints exercised by structuring structures" (418). She provides the example of popular American television sitcom *Roseanne* which, on the surface, can be read as resistant, oppositional, and progressive. However, Stabile argues that this resistance reading is too simple, and upholds many of the industry discourses presented about the program by both television critics and the show's creators—that is, part of the "sell" of the show is its supposed opposition to normative gender roles and the traditional portrayal of women in sitcoms. The text cannot be considered in isolation according to its own logic, but must instead be situated with the larger field of media production. Stabile notes that readings of resistance ignore, for example, the relation between sitcoms and the advertising industry. In

the case of *Rosanne*, the series was specifically targeting “the growing ranks of working-class women,” a demographic that their advertisers were also chasing (411). Gender relations were already changing, and any series that wanted to attract a desired audience demographic (for delivery to advertisers) would need to accommodate these cultural changes.

Engaging as it does with the complexities of force and agency within cultural production, field theory offers a valuable tool for the understanding of contemporary comic performance. According to Nathan Wilson, “humour is not an involuntary reaction to a pre-existing, self-same, inherently funny (and therefore apolitical) subject or discourse. Instead, it is better understood as a complex relation of discourse and power, a discourse formation” (Wilson 2011, 276-277). Such discourse analysis can be extended beyond interpretations of the humour text to the conditions of humour production within which comedians live and work. This is an analysis that constitutes a field of comedy production. This project is particularly interested in performers who engage in stand-up comedy – individual monologue style comic performance – rather than sketch or other types of comic actors. In particular, the participation in humour writing is an important element of my definition of the field. In this case I do not consider comic actors (those who exclusively perform material written by others), but I do consider comedians who no longer write a majority of their own work (that is, performers who were once stand-up comics, but have transitioned into other types of creative work like acting). This differentiation is important as the process for becoming an actor is not the same as the process for becoming a stand-up comic. The formative years of a stand-up comic’s career are an important defining feature of the art form (such as time spent on the road, the experience of adrenalin before an important show, dealing with hecklers, and

feeling frustrated after a bad set), even if many performers hope to someday leave this road warrior career behind.

In the subsequent sections of this chapter I provide the theoretical framework for my study of the Canadian comedy industry and the production of stand-up comedians. In the first section of this chapter, I discuss theories of humour, especially those that consider the role that humour plays in defining social relations. In the second section of this chapter, I consider Pierre Bourdieu's work on cultural production, as well as critiques of this scholarship, and offer some ways in which this approach might be updated for use in the study of contemporary cultural production. I offer a synthesis of theories of cultural production and humour studies, and lay the theoretical framework for my approach to the study of the field of production of Canadian stand-up comedians.

### **Humour Studies**

The study of humour and comedy, while it is a relatively new academic focus in Canada, has garnered steady academic attention elsewhere in many social scientific and humanities disciplines. For the purposes of this dissertation, theories of humour which address the role of power, hierarchy, and social reproduction will be considered. Social norms and power relations often dictate what is funny, when humour is appropriate, and who may be teller, hearer, and butt. As will be seen in the subsequent discussion, there is a case to be made for the *politics* of popular humour. Many of the themes that have accompanied the great comic works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ought to be anything but laughable. The miserable struggles of the working class portrayed by Chaplin, or the ridicule and physical abuse of Laurel and Hardy for their inability to conform to social codes and behavioural standards,

have invoked a humorous discursive mode where one might not expect, or even want, to experience it.

While most can agree that humour and power are related, the debate is ongoing as to how this power operates. Does laughter originate with the powerful as an oppressive tactic? Or, do those at the margins of power have an enhanced capacity for humorous discourse, and a vested interest in using this mode subversively? Any attempt to merge these ideas generally concludes with a theory of comic ambivalence. The current project will be no different, and perceives humour as a communicative mode that is tethered to discursive acts of power. The direction in which humour floats is not always predictable but highly variable, and thus no claim to the general good or bad of comedy and laughter can legitimately be made. In instances of subversion, comedy can be perceived as a method of social critique; in instances of oppression, it might be a method of maintaining order and subordination. Humour is a slippery mode for the understanding of power and inequality. How then can critical, serious responses be formulated when the discourse in question, through its own admission, is not to be taken seriously? This is one of the most significant challenges to the serious study of humour (Mulkay 1988).

In attempting to theorize the politics of popular comedy, M.M. Bakhtin's work on the folk culture of the medieval carnival offers a useful starting point. Here, we can see a clear divergence between the serious and hierarchical official culture of the church and the vulgarity, violence, and hierarchical inversions of the festival season. Carnival offers the participant a brief diversion from the repressed seriousness of daily life, allowing for transgressions, parodic mockery, and laughter at the expense of authority. In the Medieval world, laughter was ejected from the serious discourse of the church and the state; Bakhtin

argues that “this intolerant seriousness of official church ideology made it necessary to legalize the gaiety, laughter, and jest which had been eliminated from the canonized ritual of etiquette. Thus forms of pure laughter were created parallel to the official forms” (in Morris 1994, 208). So, rather than civilize the comic mode, a distinct humorous mode developed at the margin of the serious mode. Laughter and sexual transgression found legitimization in the annual medieval carnival where rebirth and rejuvenation were mingled with fear and death.

Bakhtin refers to the carnival mode as *grotesque realism*; it is symbolized by the communal grotesque body, with an emphasis on excrement, deformity, ridicule and abuse, but also feasting, celebration and rebirth (Morris 1994). The sexual and comic chaos of the uncivilized body is not, however, a bare negation of ritual and hierarchy, as these structures are also revived and reborn in folk humour (Bakhtin in Morris 1994). For this reason, official culture accepted oppositional folk culture, and legitimized the cultural form of the carnival (Palmer 2005). These oppositional cultures were not seen as a threat to social order, but were in fact used by the official culture to maintain order. Bakhtin suggests that modern man no longer perceives the world according to a serious/humorous duality (official/unofficial culture) as there appears to have been a successful imposition of the monologism of seriousness (Palmer 2005).

In discussing the politics of comedy, we are really considering the “serious” functions of humour. While Bakhtin is skeptical of the contemporary applicability of his theory of carnival laughter, other scholars continue to find a discussion of the dialogic nature of serious/official culture and its humorous/unofficial inversion to be a useful approach. According to sociologist Michael Mulkay, we gravitate constantly between the serious and the humorous – two distinct modes of human communication. However, he suggests that

it is precisely the symbolic separation of humour from the realm of serious action that enables social actors to use humour for serious purposes, and that makes humour an essential area for sociological inquiry. Humour is of interest, not only in its own right, but also because its study helps us better to understand our serious social world. (1988, 1)

The “serious purposes” to which humour is put vary according to which theory of humour we address; for example, these purposes might include the maintenance of social structure and dominant world views (Douglas 1968; Mulkay 1988); the linking of social groups and the creation of divisions between insiders and outsiders (Morreall 2005); an attempt to elicit feelings of nonseriousness for the purposes of influencing social contacts (Chafe 2007); a force for subverting and marginalizing social norms (Kellner 1987; Gilbert 2004); an oppressive force which supports the sexist and racist views of dominant society (Howitt and Owusu-Bempah 2005; Billig 2001); or the temporary destabilization of signification through comic ambiguity and ambivalence (Palmer 1987; Morris 1994). These perspectives on humour are overlapping, and converge especially around issues related to the maintenance of social life. For example, Mulkay, a sociologist, sees humour as an adaptation to the complexities of our external social world, and Billig, a social psychologist, sees humour as the socialization process that develops and is internalized in order to learn the codes of the external social world (Billig 2005; Mulkay 1988). For Mulkay, humour is a coping mechanism; for Billig, it is a learning mechanism. For both, it is a means of exerting, supporting and reacting to social control. In both cases, the humour is located at the point of acquisition or contention of group norms and behavioural expectations. In Billig’s analysis, laughter – in particular the laughter of ridicule – is the central method of maintaining social codes. In her anthropological review of joke work, Mary Douglas suggests that “the joke form rarely lies in the utterance alone, but that it can be identified in the total social situation” (1968, 363). This suggests that understanding humour and having knowledge about the

individual who uses it only provides a fragment of the picture; humour is social, as are its origins and consequences.

According to humour scholar Joanne Gilbert, stand-up comedy can be used by marginalized individuals and groups as a means of gaining power in a system structured to work against them. She remarks,

throughout History, talented misfits have used their difference as a means of survival, foregrounding and capitalizing on the very stigma that threatens their existence. Excluded from the power center of society, these individuals have emphasized and relied upon their difference for a living. The artist, the fool, the social critic [...] all stand aside from the center in order to critique it. Although they are not allowed within the ruled lines of society's pages, these 'others' gain a certain freedom, a latitude that can only be experienced in the open space of margins. By 'performing' their marginality, social outcasts call attention to their subordinate status; by commodifying their performance, they ensure that the dominant culture literally pays a price for this disparity. (Gilbert 2004, xi)

For Gilbert, marginality ought not to be considered exclusively in terms of an oppressive and imposed sociological condition, but also as a potentially subversive and radical—sometimes self-selected—rhetorical location and category. While liminal humour frames itself as being from the margins, in even mainstream comedy the subversion of hierarchies is often the source of humour. As such, even comics who are not, in any statistical way, marginalized, benefit from invoking the cultural capital of “marginality”—hence, the popularity of self-deprecation as a comedic technique.

The humour of camp offers a particularly vivid example of the re-negotiations of oppression and marginality. According to Chuck Kleinhans, “camp is an ironic and parodic appreciation of an extravagant form that is out of proportion to its content, especially when that content is banal or trivial” (1994, 186). Camp is historically linked to the gay male performance of hyper-femininity, but has also been used by women as a feminist strategy (Butler 1999). Somewhat more broadly, Moe Meyer posits that “camp refers to strategies and

tactics of queer parody” (1994, 9). These tactics of exaggerated gender performance have been used in the gay rights movement to diffuse potentially violent situations by stimulating laughter. The serious mode of hatred is temporarily displaced as camp situates performer and audience within the humorous mode. It is pure spectacle and, like other forms of humour, it is capable of resisting logical criticism. This method has been used not only as a protective strategy, but also as a means of carving out public space for alternative conceptions of gender and sexuality. It is a transitional, rather than radical, tactic; this is perhaps the reason for its longevity as a comic method.

As humour circulates around social codes, it can also offer an indication of their absurdity, arbitrariness, and social construction. At times, this subversive reading is intentionally supported, and at times it is appropriated. Humour operates by mimicking and inverting serious codes. Often, this is done with the surprise of a punch line or the implausible outcome of a physical sketch. Palmer (1987) has called this the *logic of the absurd*; he suggests that the logic of the absurd operates through the dislocation of known universal laws and the subversion of authority. However, humour is nonetheless dependent upon a knowledge of the laws and hierarchies that are being invoked. Humour operates at the site of dislocation of narrative expectations. A comic situation is made “more implausible than plausible” through its deviation from the norm, placement within an unusual context, and use of surprise (Palmer 1987, 56, 61). However, Palmer notes that this reliance upon the logical implausibility accomplished through the deviant use of the signifying system is prone to becoming conventionalized. This suggests that jokes cannot continue to be funny indefinitely. Even if the social context of the joke remains relevant, if the surprise is removed, the participant no longer falls for the logic of the absurd.

Mulkay's (1988) analysis of the humorous mode seems to question the extent to which surprise is necessarily a defining feature of humour. According to Mulkay, the humorous mode allows the joke teller to sustain a world in which implausible and impossible (incongruous) things can and do happen, and these things go unquestioned by the joke hearer; it exists in contrast to the serious mode of everyday discourse. When listening to a joke, the hearer certainly expects that a humorous inversion will at some point occur. While the content of this inversion generally only has the potential to be humorous if it is unknown, that it will occur is in no way intended to be a secret. In fact, if we do not expect that the humorous inversion will occur, this suggests that we are not aware of our participation in joke work. If, for example, the joke is dependent upon the double-talk of irony, and we are dedicated to a serious, literal understanding of what is being said, we will likely miss the joke entirely and possibly be offended by the speaker. Mulkay suggests that the humorous mode requires that participants signal their willingness to leave the serious mode. As an audience, this would be implied by our decision to watch a comedy, and in everyday conversation this can be signaled through laughter or a change in voice or posture. This signaling is precisely what stand-up comedians are reliant upon when an audience reacts negatively towards a joke. Having alienated the audience in some way, it is a reasonably common rhetorical strategy for the performer to remind the audience that they are at a comedy club. Consequently, they have agreed to place themselves outside of the serious mode and are, on some level, obligated to find the comedian funny.

This is precisely the argument that British comedian Jimmy Carr made in response to publicly expressed outrage at a joke he told about soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan as amputees, joking that the 2012 Paralympic team was going to be very good

(Moss 2009). For Carr, as is the case with many comedians, the primary goal of telling jokes is to make people laugh (preferably people who have paid you to do so). The performer claims that any considerations that go beyond this are secondary, or even irrelevant. Following a massive media backlash to this joke that culminated in official statements of disapproval from military officials, families of wounded soldiers, politicians, and even the British Prime Minister, Carr issued an apology in which he noted that his “intention was only to make people laugh” (cited in Moss 2009). Carr is adamant that his shows are not political. There is no message, he is simply trying to say the funniest things possible. Not to discount the political aspects of humour (some comics are explicitly political), but Carr raises an intriguing point: his *job*, at the end of the night, is to be funny.

The great thing about comedy is it's not accountable. Is there a prefect of comedy that decides what can and can't be said? It [the amputee joke] wasn't broadcast. People came to the gig, and two people out of 9,000 that weekend—and I've told it to 100,000 people so far on the tour— said, “I didn't pay to hear this kind of rubbish,” But they *did* pay to hear that: they paid to be in the room with that group of people. They found one joke offensive because it applied to them, but everything else in the show that was horribly offensive they laughed at. (Carr cited in Moss 2009, np)

The stand-up audience is not shielded from this commercial reality. However, given the reactions to this joke, its social context is entirely evident. That people were offended by this joke says a great deal about current popular sensitivities to the quality of life of wounded servicemen. To begin with, they are *servicemen*. The image of the servicewoman amputee does not gain much popular representation. That individuals were offended by Carr's suggestion that military amputees ought to be part of the paralympic team betrays a popular reluctance to acknowledge the extent to which warfare takes disciplined, able-bodied individuals and breaks them. The war amputee does not return to their old life after battle. They must make a new life, facing a range of new challenges. In many respects, Carr's

paralympic team suggestion is a reasonable one. But accepting this forces the audience to acknowledge the fact of the war amputee as a permanently altered body on a new career trajectory. As is evident from this small example, the social context within which humour functions makes joking not simply a rich text, but also an ambivalent one. This ambivalence can, in some instances, give humour much of its rhetorical bite.

This also illustrates a clear tension in the politics of humour. In any humorous utterance, it seems, there is the potential for subversive and oppressive intentions, interpretations, and uses. This presents itself especially around stereotypes (upon which humour is heavily reliant) and the construction of specific identity/group formations around, for example, issues of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, disability, and class. This relates to the power dynamics present in joking. For example, a study of a formal work situation carried out in the 1960s found evidence that humour acts as a reinforcement of hierarchy, as low ranking individuals tend to be the subjects of higher ranking individuals' jokes:

Whereas senior staff are particularly likely to direct their humour at junior staff, the latter are strongly inclined to focus their humour on themselves. Although four out of every ten jokes by senior members deal with the actions of one or more juniors at the meeting, Coser reports that not once in twenty meetings 'was a senior staff member present a target of a junior member's humor'. Similarly the ancillary staff, who occupied the lowest formal status at the meetings and all of whom were women, virtually never joked. Their contribution to the operation of the humorous mode was to laugh enthusiastically in support of their senior's witticisms. (Coser (1960) findings discussed in Mulkay 1988, 168)

Mulkay notes that within the work environment, even unstructured situations are more conducive to playful or mild, rather than critical or subversive humour. This is the central paradox of the humorous mode: while its semantic form confronts and subverts dominant patterns, "it is used most effectively for serious purposes mainly in structured situations where it works to maintain that pattern" (Mulkay 1988, 177). Psychological studies of

humour from the 1950s until the 1970s often ignored this power dynamic; for example, the role of women in empirical humour experiments was exclusively as object, rather than creator (Gray 1994). This exclusion of women from humour production has had far reaching effects, as can be seen in Christopher Hitchens' 2007 article for *Vanity Fair* in which he discusses the belief that women are not as funny as men. Teasing between sexes remains more acceptable when carried out by boys towards girls than vice versa. While, in boys, teasing is perceived as "cheerful rebelliousness" which is simply a stage in their development as persons of authority, in others, this behaviour is perceived as insubordinate and malevolent (Billig 2005, 107). Notably, in these instances, the category of "boy" is relatively limited. It is in contrast not only to girls, but also boys who are non-white, non-middle class, non-able bodied, et cetera. The right to participate in such teasing humour correlates with the right to take up other positions of authority throughout life.

To be labeled as "insubordinate" really betrays a great deal about hierarchy and oppression; an insubordinate is literally someone who has violated their position of subordination. In chastising this behaviour, bosses, teachers, coaches and other types of authority unapologetically acknowledge the structural inequality of contemporary civil society. The most pervasive form of insubordinate joking today is likely that of irony. Historically, irony has been the preferred humorous mode of educated male elites (Billig 2005). While persons holding authority continue to use ironic speech playfully as part of the maintenance of social order, a subordinate does not have this right (Holmes 2000). An athlete who directs playful double speak towards their coach is generally considered "un-coachable" as they exhibit a clear intent to deconstruct the coach-athlete power imbalance through verbal power renegotiation.

Race, like gender, plays a significant role in humour. Just as women often find that they are the objects of humour, racial minorities in the western world are frequently the subject of supposedly humorous stereotyping. As Billig has suggested, theories of comedy must always be interrogated for their own ideological shortcomings (Billig 2001; Billig 2005). What is considered humorous is socially constructed. As such, our understanding of this humour is also inextricably linked to our own cultural assumptions. Howitt and Owusu-Bempah note that “racism is a social and cultural product, not the product of individual psychology; racist humour is an aspect of racist society and not just an idiosyncratic feature of a particular individual or group” (2005, 45-46). They go on to suggest that we [members of Western culture] inhabit a racist culture, and for this reason we are all vulnerable to acting out, or acting on, racist stereotypes. Even when we do not find racist jokes funny, we often understand why they might be funny to someone else.

In contrast to humour studies that suggest marginalized groups can invert racist jokes as a method of critical subversion, Howitt and Owusu-Bempah argue that this tactic can all too easily be read as a reinforcement of racism. They note:

Even the best intentioned professional will have the greatest difficulty in working effectively with members of the range of cultures to be found in Western communities because of each culture’s sheer complexity. In many ways, the ethnic jokes reduce cultures to the trivial, to be laughed at and not something to be valued. Given this, it is extremely difficult to see how even ethnic jokes contribute positively to the development of understanding relevant to multicultural society or globalization. (2005, 62)

Thus, attempts to invert stereotypes remain reliant upon those very stereotypes for ease of joking formulation, and are therefore equally likely to reinforce as subvert hierarchies. That racist jokes are pervasive within western comedy only worsens this scenario. Billig’s analysis of racist joking by groups sympathetic to the KKK in the United States further characterizes

humour as negative. He notes that jokes function to get around speech restrictions. While hatred and racial violence are officially taboo in contemporary North America, the claim that one is “just joking” enables the racist to express the “unsayable” (Billig 2001, 285). In the case of racist joking, humour is used to violate official social codes, but can also be said to reinforce the implicit norms (i.e. racist culture) which are pervasive yet invisible, and appear to contradict the myth of social equality promoted in the serious mode of official culture.

If humour can be said to reinforce social codes and organization, then it could feasibly play a role in social re-organization. While Billig (2005) and Howitt and Owusu-Bempah (2005) provide compelling arguments against a more positive role for humour, other theorists have left critical space for theories of transition (Kellner 1987). In the study of ethnic stereotype jokes, distinctions are often made between insiders and outsiders. If the “identity” or intent of the joke teller is significant, then one might be led to concede that jokes of similar formats and themes can have oppressive outcomes in some instances, and subversive outcomes in others. Or, more likely, that some hearers will accept an oppressive outcome, some will seek subversive content, and others, or perhaps most, will be sensitive to both potential readings of a humorous text. As Douglas Kellner suggests, a “transitional cultural strategy” that intervenes in existing forms of popular culture is a valid and valuable tactic for the presentation of alternative world-views and political goals at times and in places where radical and revolutionary change is unlikely (1987, 495). To discount the role of the comic method in such “transitions” would be to overlook the social and psychological complexities of cultural communication.

The humorous mode is informed by the restrictions of serious social interaction. It follows that the biases, inequalities and points of contestation within contemporary social

codes would find frequent representation in comic discourses. The greatest point of contention within humour studies, is whether this representation acts to subvert or to reinforce dominant culture. Public debates around controversial comedians often reflect this tension. Russell Peters provides a high profile example of this, with some commentators suggesting that the performer is pandering to racist stereotypes, and others arguing that he has opened up a space to discuss racism and cultural difference. I discuss Peters further in the final chapter of this dissertation where I consider national identity, globalization, and controversial popular culture. Performers like Peters offer a window onto the culture in which they develop and perform their comedy—hence the applicability of theories of identity and cultural production to this popular comic and the analysis of his work. Understanding this requires a consideration not only of the performer and the humour that he produces, but also the production system that structures his labour and the dissemination of his cultural work.

It is important to consider the processes of legitimization at work within the larger framework of the contemporary comedy industry, and the tensions that play out between artistic, commercial, and industrial interests. When considered in relation to the humour scholarship discussed above, theories of cultural production offer a useful framework for the study of the comedy industry. Understanding the humour that is popularly produced and consumed today, often in a global marketplace, entails not only a nuanced reading of the comic content, but also the neoliberal/global conditions of its production, the cultural workers that write and perform the material, the gatekeepers that dictate how and when audiences will receive this material, and the social and cultural competencies and hierarchies that frame receptivity to the humorous discourse.

## Field Theory

Although the cultural world that Bourdieu considers in his now canonic text *The Field of Cultural Production* is long removed from the current realities of the Canadian comedy industry, his approach remains timely. This theory establishes a sociology of art that expands analysis beyond the social history of art production and the individuals that are directly responsible for the material production of the work; the sociology of art must also consider the individuals and institutions that produce and police the social meanings of art. In this sense, the work of art can only be understood “as a manifestation of the field as a whole, in which all the powers of the field, and all the determinisms inherent in its structure and functioning, are concentrated” (Bourdieu 1993, 37). The cultural product is merely an index of the field; it is only a part of the whole and therefore provides only a partial explanation of the social and historic conditions of its production.

The field of cultural production is characterized by the struggle between stakeholders to impose the legitimate form of production (Bourdieu 1993). This includes the struggle over how success is defined, what the legitimate road to this success might be, and who controls access to vital points in the system of production. Within the field, a number of possible position-takings are already delimited by the dominant stakeholders or cultural intermediaries; as such, in many instances, the characteristics of the candidates who have the potential to integrate into the field are pre-determined (Bourdieu 1993). If we return to British comic Jimmy Carr’s question, “is there a prefect of comedy?” we might, in fact, argue that yes, there are comedy prefects—the gatekeepers who decide which performers may enter the field. The maintenance of control over who may enter the field, and how they may negotiate their participation in it, allows the field (and its distribution of gatekeepers) to

reproduce not only itself, but also the power-positions through which it is constituted. Certain behaviours, backgrounds, and knowledge sets are at an advantage (or disadvantage) within the field; this is not an objective occurrence, but simply a result of dominant perceptions and trajectories already privileged by primary stakeholders.

The application of Bourdieu's sociology to the study of art and literature offers a critique of analyses which ascertain the "meanings" of cultural objects through "immanent reading" (Brown and Szeman 2000). This shift allows for the engagement with the social, political, and economic conditions in which cultural objects/practices are produced, and considers how cultural meaning is constructed in relation to the conditions of production. What is notable in the case of comedy, is that there is currently a great popularity in the recognition of the *politics* of humour. However, equally notable is the reading of this politics as external to the conditions of production. That is, politics is something that humour *does*, as when a performer is critical of a political or social practice. The reading of politics in humour is seldom turned back onto the field itself, as in the idea that politics internal to the field might impact how and what type of humour is produced, as well as who may participate in its production.

Bourdieu's field theory offers a useful intervention into the study of humour as it extends the analysis of the politics of humour inward, into the field of production. As John Levi Martin suggests, "field theory elegantly handles [...] two social phenomena usually considered to be antithetical, namely the feeling that there is some social force which constrains individuals externally and the feeling that we act on the basis of our motivations" (2003, 36-37). According to Nicholas Brown and Imre Szeman, Bourdieu's "fieldwork in philosophy" offers "to produce a theory of social life drawn neither from the mental

laboratories of philosophy, nor from the strict empiricism of much of what passes for sociological research, but from a highly theoretical mode of analyses that nevertheless pays careful attention to the complex dynamics of social life itself” (2000, 1). Szeman notes that while concepts such as cultural and symbolic capital have been taken up in Canadian cultural studies, Bourdieu’s notions of habitus and field theory have been remarkably absent. Szeman is critical of uses of Bourdieu that engage with his work primarily on the level of concepts—that is, studies that draw upon Bourdieusian vocabulary, but do not engage carefully with a more in-depth Bourdieusian approach. For Szeman, the true value of Bourdieu’s work is in his approach to theory and practice which developed a mid-level analysis of culture which is both “highly theoretical and speculative” as well as “a committed exploration of social life” (2002, 2). According to Szeman, Bourdieu’s “fieldwork in philosophy” “remained highly conscious of the dangers of an unreflective empiricism, and of the temptations of authenticity offered by an uncritical ethnography” (2002, 2). As Nick Couldry argues,

the media are *both* a production process with specific internal characteristics (possibly a field of such processes) *and* a source of taken-for-granted frameworks for understanding the reality they represent (an influence, potentially, on action in all fields). Accounts of media and media power that concentrate exclusively on either questions of ‘production’ or questions of ideological ‘effects’ are likely, therefore, to be unsatisfactory. (Couldry 2004, 165)

Mid-level analyses, which account for both macro-level structures and micro-level practices, are gaining momentum in cultural analyses and critical media studies, with field theory being one relevant approach (cf Havens, Lotz, and Tinic 2009).

In his detailed history of field theory, John Levi Martin notes that while Bourdieu’s theorization is the best-known application, field theory actually originated in the physical sciences, and has been developed and applied by numerous scholars across many academic disciplines. Field theory posits that forces cannot be “got at” and understood on their own

terms, but only by their effects (for example we do not observe gravity, we observe its effects—falling objects). For this reason, analyses of the field, rather than specific objects, are necessary to understand complex scenarios. Martin argues that field theory “has the potential to yield general but nontrivial insights into questions rightly deemed theoretical and to organize research in a productive fashion” (3). Bourdieu defines a field as “an independent social universe with its own laws of functioning, its specific relations of force, its dominants and its dominated” (1993, 163). A field comprises structures of possible position takings and trajectories. Participants must generally internalize the norms of the field in order to succeed.

Bourdieu uses the analogy of a game, in which the rule or play and the parameters of action are preset, and participants must compete within this structure. However, in discussing the impact of social structures, or the forces present within the field, there is the potential to develop an overly deterministic perspective. It must be noted that saying a participant acts according to pre-defined expectations and position takings does not mean that they lack agency. As Norman Fairclough argues, “social agents are not ‘free’ agents, they are socially constrained, but nor are their actions totally socially determined. Agents have their own ‘causal powers’ which are not reducible to the causal powers of social structures and practices (2003, 22). Rather, given a field of possible actions (some of which might contradict the current norms in the field), those who wish to succeed in the field would be wise to act according to the norms and structures already established. There is a strong incentive for participants to obey the ruling logic of the field; when they do, they stand a stronger likelihood of success. This is how social structures are reproduced, and why despite being a potentially subversive discourse, humour most often serves to reinforce existing hierarchies and norms. Participants must work out what might be the most effective action in

a given field. This is based upon their perception of structures, even if the validity or necessity of these structures is not interrogated but rather taken as obvious, essential, and self-evident.

The application of Bourdieu's theory of cultural production in contemporary media and cultural studies is rendered challenging by the breadth of his theory of the field and his methodological ambiguity in the application of this concept. How Bourdieu defines and uses fields has varied throughout his career; as Martin notes, "at some times he emphasizes an overall social field reducible to dimensions of capital, economic, cultural, social, and symbolic," while at others his focus is on "divisions of actions into self-contained realms of endeavor" including sport, art, photography, literature, and the academy (23). For Bourdieu, the desire for mobility within the field is not a consequence of "ideology," nor is it a deliberate and conscious strategy. Rather, the participant is conditioned by a "cultural unconscious" or habitus into "a matrix of dispositions that serves to affectively organize perceptions" (Martin 23). Although Bourdieu's early conceptualizations of field theory are at times inconsistent, Warde notes that in *Rules of Art*, Bourdieu does offer a clearly developed approach to the use of field theory. For Warde, "field" can be defined as being generally integrated around: "1) some particular stakes and commitment to the value of those stakes 2) a structured set of positions 3) a set of strategic and competitive orientations and 4) a set of agents endowed with resources and dispositions" (Warde 2004, 13). Bourdieu offers a rich vocabulary for the analysis of culture. However, he is not always consistent in his definition of concepts, nor in their deployment; indeed, in relation to the concept of "practice" in particular, Warde notes that it is of "dubious consistency" (Warde 2004, 16). This makes his

contemporary application a challenge. At times, it might seem easiest to simply take his vocabulary off him, define it anew, and carry on from there.

I would like to turn briefly to a consideration of one of Bourdieu's most detailed explanations of field theory in relation to art and literature: his sociological reading of Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* which for non-student's of 19<sup>th</sup> century French literature can be a challenging and mystifying text. Bourdieu provides two basic reasons for his decision to study Flaubert in such detail: the first, is a somewhat arbitrary decision inspired by the area of interest of a friend and colleague to which the scholar wished to pay homage; the second, is Bourdieu's perception that the text in question is exemplary of the theoretical issues that he is interested in discussing. Bourdieu notes, "the novel contains an analysis of the social space in which the author was himself located and thus gives us the instruments we need for an analysis of him" (1993, 145). That is, the work not only gives us some information about the social world in general, but also of the author's own insight, half-hidden in the text, which Bourdieu, as analyst, can read and interpret. In his reading of *Sentimental Education*, Bourdieu considers Flaubert's "*representation* of the structure of the field of power and the writer's position in that structure" (emphasis mine, 161). That is, Bourdieu considers the structure of the social space in which Flaubert produces his text.

In the case of the literary field considered by Bourdieu, the dominant field of power in late-19<sup>th</sup> century France was characterized by an opposition between art and money. "Pure" art was symbolically dominant, but economically dominated, rich in cultural capital, but necessarily poor in economic capital. The inverse was true for more commercial artforms. This distinction between pure and commercial art was reproduced in the literary

field at that time and became a defining characteristic of literary consecration. In studying the literary field, Bourdieu argues that we must ask,

not how a writer comes to be what he is, in a sort of genetic psycho-sociology, but rather how the position or ‘post’ he occupies - that of a writer of a particular type – became constituted. It is only then that we can ask if the knowledge of particular social conditions of the production of what I have termed his habitus permits us to understand that he has succeeded in occupying this position, if only by transforming it. The genetic structuralism I propose is designed to understand both the genesis of social structures - the literary field – and the genesis of the dispositions of the habitus of the agents who are involved in these structures. (Bourdieu 1993, 162)

Here, we are offered an illustration of field theory as “an analytic approach, not a static formal system” (Warde 2004, 24). When drawing upon Bourdieu, there tends to be a general emphasis on rigidly empirical studies. That is, his sociology of art is taken up in methodologically systematic ways. Since I began my doctoral study in 2006, Bourdieu’s theories of culture have increasingly been used in studies of comedy (Friedman 2011; Weaver 2011; Claessens and Dhoest 2010; Kuipers 2006; Smith 2011). In particular, Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and taste have been used in audience reception studies to understand how audiences come to enjoy and interpret certain comic performers. Through audience interviews/surveys, these authors all find quite compellingly that comic taste is structured in relation to social and cultural capital. Smith and Friedman find that while certain cultural goods have diverse audiences whose fandom does not explicitly align with class differences, they find that the ways that performers understand their fandom, or in the case of Smith, the types of fandom products in which the elite fans invest, still offer modes of distinction within fan groups. While I find this work to be a valuable contribution to the study of contemporary professional comedy, they do not offer an indication of *the field* of comedy production. Indeed, the close-up, interview-based work that is often taken up as representative of a Bourdieusian approach is not sufficiently broad to account for the

structuring of agents within the field of possible position takings. This latter kind of analysis is much more amenable to the “traditional scholarship” recommended by Billig. If we consider critiques of Stebbins’ ethnographic account of standup comedy in Canada, insiders felt that he focused on the wrong practices and that had he considered other factors in comedy production, he may have drawn different conclusions (cf. Nulman 1990). That is, critics deemed the research site too complicated for the type of analysis that Stebbins’ undertook. Up-close, in-depth ethnographic work is valuable, but it does not always account for the full complexity of contemporary cultural production. This is a shortcoming of the sociology of culture that field theory can rectify.

In my view, emphasis on Bourdieu’s empiricism overlooks the extensive work that he has done which is historical and theoretical in nature. His study of Flaubert (as historic literary figure) was not based in fieldwork and interviews. Bourdieu engaged in close textual reading of Flaubert’s literary work, as well as historical documents including the author’s personal letters. These documents allowed Bourdieu to analyze how Flaubert positioned himself and his work in relation to the literary field, as interpreted through private conversations with his friends and contemporaries with whom he kept up a correspondence. The scholar of contemporary culture has a somewhat less personal, but infinitely broader source of such communication. Those involved in popular creative work disseminate their thoughts widely, through mainstream interviews, documentaries, biographies, and now social media such as blogs, official websites, and twitter. This offers a much larger, and perhaps more intentional, source for the production of discourses by creative workers pertaining to themselves, their work, and their social field. Bourdieu’s analysis was a sociological one in that he applied sociological thought to a literary figure and his work. This kind of study

offers a useful framework for cultural analysis which for reasons of complexity of access or the desire to maintain critical distance from the object of study, might prefer not to venture far into the field of embedded ethnographic work. The emphasis on empiricism obscures the other critical methods that define much of Bourdieu's later work, especially his theories of cultural production and the field. It is important, then, that we not conflate "field theory" and analyses of cultural production, with fieldwork and interview-based production studies.

According to John Levi Martin,

Field theory is a more or less coherent approach in the social sciences whose essence is the explanation of regularities in individual action by recourse to position vis-à-vis others. Position in the field indicates the potential for a force exerted on the person, but a force that impinges 'from the inside' as opposed to external compulsion. Motivation is accordingly considered to be the paramount example of social structure in action, as opposed to a residue of chance or freedom" (Martin 2003, 1).

This explanation of field theory seems incompatible with interview-based ethnographic methods. If participants are acting according to internal forces (rather than unimpeded freedom of action), one cannot expect that they themselves will offer up, or even accept such an observation. This is especially the case in stand-up comedy which is framed as highly individualistic. This individualism renders structural constraints even less evident to participants, who frequently reinforce a belief in talent and hard work as the most significant factors in success and consecration. Discrimination, when acknowledged, is seen as individual, and can also be overcome with hardwork and talent. This is precisely the issue that Erin Demaiter and Tracey Adams (2009) found in interviews with female Information Technology professionals, which, like comedy, has historically had low female participation rates. Despite the very clear evidence of gender inequality in the I.T. field, informants were highly reluctant to acknowledge gender discrimination as systemic, and instead dismissed

any discrimination that they had experienced as issues of individual psychology, even when the numbers of female senior I.T. professionals indicate a much broader problem than can be accounted for by a few ‘bad apples’. This reinforces John Levi Martin’s reading of participants in the field which suggests, “it seems that people are able to be absolutely sure that they understand the reasons why they are doing something, while being—at least as far as modern neurology can tell—absolutely wrong” (Martin, 14).

In the case of the I.T. informants, Demaiter and Adams found that their informants’ reluctance to acknowledge the impact of embedded social structures in their workplace actually contributed in part to their success in the field, but did not increase the likelihood that other women would also succeed. That is, their success was not an indication of an alteration of the gendered structure of the field, only of their own internalization of this structure and consequent successful navigation of it. By ignoring gender discrimination, and subconsciously altering their behaviour to accommodate it, they ensured the viability of their own career trajectories. What can be gained from pushing informants on issues such as gender discrimination, if only to reinforce the fact of their denial of actually existing consequences to systemic discrimination and inequality? Is this not, in a way, a violation of the researcher/research subject relationship of care and trust?

The reluctance of insiders to address issues of inequality and discrimination, coupled with the clear evidence that such issues factor into available position takings in the field, renders interview-based production study problematic as an approach to analyzing fields of cultural production. For a further illustration of this problem, we can return to the sciences, where field theory got its start. As Martin notes,

While we all must appreciate the robust realism of appealing to the nature of individuals, who certainly do exist, great dangers lurk here for theorizing. This is because social science is the unique case in which the lower level appealed to by mechanistic accounts is ourselves, as we have a great number of prejudices about our own constitutions that we cannot rid ourselves of, because we do not know what all of them are. There might not have been any theory of natural selection if the Galapagos finches were the theoreticians; Galapagos finches may have very different ideas about what it means to be a Galapagos finch. (Martin, 13)

It is somewhat vague whether the individual incapable of ridding himself of his knowledge biases is Darwin, who developed the theory of natural selection, or the Galapagos finch, who does not perceive how external forces might structure his own choices which have subsequently contributed to the evolution of his species. In either case, the perspective taken up by the scholar has an impact on the kind of information obtained and the types of questions that can be answered.

An example more relevant to this study can be gleaned from one of the many “how-to” books that have been published on the subject of stand-up comedy. In his book *Comedy FAQs and Answers: How the stand-up biz really works* (2005), Dave Schwensen offers insider tips on how to succeed in the business. In one FAQ 29, he asks, “Does anyone still believe comedy’s a man’s world?” While he acknowledges the discrepancies in numbers of female to male comics (indeed, in his book just under 20% of featured insider’s are women), he notes that there are clearly very talented female performers out there, and that the surest road to success remains to just “be funny.” There is no acknowledgement of *why* fewer women are in the business, nor a discussion of any discrimination that women might face. In this section, he features comedienne Brett Butler who argues, “OK, look. If you’re funny, it’ll happen. I grew up with a funny mom, four funny sisters, and a bunch of funny aunts. It never occurred to me that I was genetically or comedically deficient due to being born female” (cited in Schwensen 2005, 104). Butler goes on to suggest that female comedians

should never feel disadvantaged, and that other male-dominated activities (such as golf) have far more discrimination. Butler, like Schwensen, argues that funny, hard-working women will be rewarded with success. There is an implicit suggestion here that performers should simply pretend that inequality does not exist. In his advice for how to get on *Letterman* or *Leno*, Schwensen predictably suggests “being funny,”

The most reliable method to get booked for national television is to have the talent coordinator see you perform on a regular basis. When a comic continually has great sets, booking them is almost a no-brainer (2005, 167).

The short advise section following this discussion features then *Letterman* booker Eddie Brill who, like Schwensen, advises performers that the funniest comics will rise to the top. Their interpretation of comedy booking (in which they are heavily embedded) does not acknowledge the very real possibility that those in positions of power may be biased against certain performers. Indeed, Brill was recently and very publicly outed as just that, having been fired from *Letterman* amid controversy stemming from a statement made as part of a *New York Times* profile: “there are a lot less female comics who are authentic” (cited in Molloy 2012, np). The statement taken on its own, even if it is made by a major gatekeeper in the American comedy industry, may not be completely indicting; however, as Molloy notes, it perhaps offers an indication of why, despite 2011 being a break-out year for female performers, only one of 22 stand-ups booked to perform on *Letterman* in 2011 was female.

Part of the reason that internalization and acceptance of systemic inequalities can be effective for a small percentage of disadvantaged participants has to do with the role of cultural capital acquisition for integration into the field. A general definition of cultural capital, a term fundamental to Bourdieu’s theories of cultural production and taste formation, is “a form of knowledge, an internalized code or a cognitive acquisition which equips the

social agent with empathy towards, appreciation for or competence in deciphering cultural relations and cultural artefacts” (Johnson 1993, 7). M. Sharon Jeannotte offers this more detailed summary of the concept:

- 1) embodied capital (or habitus), the system of lasting dispositions that form an individual’s character and guides his or her actions and tastes;
- 2) objectified capital, the means of cultural expression, such as painting, writing, and dance, that are symbolically transmissible to others; and
- 3) institutionalized capital, the academic qualifications that establish the value of the holder of a given qualification. (Jeannotte 2005, 125-126)

Comedians use cultural capital to engage in humorous discourses, working through the system and obtaining symbolic capital, resulting in altered cultural capital as the comic gains access to new media-types, audiences and a more established peer-group. The cultural capital of most obvious importance to understanding the position of the stand-up comic is that of objectified capital—that is the actual cultural object produced by the cultural worker. The comic is really nothing more than his/her body of work. However, the concepts of habitus and institutionalized capital provide clearer insight into the general lack of diversity of performers within the field. A recent study of stand-up comedy in the UK found that objectified cultural capital could not adequately illustrate distinctions between low-brow and high-brow consumers. Many comedians were popular across class categories. The distinction was in their expression of this consumption, that is the embodied cultural capital of their comedy consumption (Friedman 2011).

This cultural capital is not only at work in consumption, but also within the system of production. The “rules” that govern movement within the field are masked by appeals to cultural authority and the notion that comic preferences are justified—that nothing is really a matter of “taste.” This is precisely the reproduction of class interests to which Bourdieu

draws our attention. In presenting aesthetic justifications for valuing one type of cultural good over another, the intermediary is masking the complex structures that confer symbolic value. These codes carry with them, among other things, class, race and gender biases. In uncovering these rules, Hesmondalgh notes, we lay bare “the way that taken-for-granted social practices tend ultimately to serve the interests of the dominant class” (Hesmondalgh 2006, 216). It is precisely this laying bare of social codes and conventions that makes theories of humour and theories of cultural production such complementary approaches. In essence, understanding comedy requires a comprehension of the larger social/cultural/political field through which it is framed, while also offering an index of power relations and cultural habitues through its analysis.

In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu argues that cultural capital, acquired through class positioning and reproduced by the education system, is manifest through cultural consumption, which acts as a form of class distinction. This is the element of Bourdieu’s theory of cultural reproduction that is most scrutinized in its applicability to contemporary North America. In particular, the lines between high- and low-artforms are increasingly blurred through intertextuality. Furthermore, with this conflation, a public of “cultural omnivores” have emerged; these are cultural consumers that enjoy the pleasures of popular (low) culture, while also having the objectified cultural capital to enjoy and understand high culture (Petersen and Kern 1996). However, two recent studies have applied theories of taste distinction to the consumption of comedy, and both found that, with some updating, Bourdieu offers some useful tools for predicting class-based consumption patterns. Claessens and Dhoest (2010) find that Flemish television comedy viewership correlates strongly with education levels—lower educated viewers tended to prefer physical, low-brow comedy,

while higher educated viewers preferred more complex, high-brow comedy. Sam Friedman (2011) applies Bourdieu to his study of stand-up comedy consumption in the UK and finds, similarly, that class distinctions can be found. However, the Friedman article is unique in that it is not the objectified cultural capital of preferred comedians where this distinction most clearly takes place. His study finds that while a number of comedians are popular across cultural capital levels (which he divides into low, mid, and high), comedy consumers still marked their distinction through the *reasons* for their appreciation of certain performers. In line with Bourdieu's description of high cultural capital holders as being characterized by "disinterestedness," respondents in the high cultural capital (HCC) category devalued laughter as an indication of quality. Challenging subject matter, which allowed them to employ their rarefied cultural capital resources, was considered more relevant to appraisals of quality. So, while lower cultural capital (LCC) fans liked Eddy Izzard for his "energy" and "silliness," HCC fans claimed to appreciate the "challenging" and "surreal" elements of his comedy. This reinforces Claessens and Dhoest's finding that the greatest point of distinction between LCC and HCC consumption was in HCC viewers' inclination to discuss complexities in the comic text, read through multiple layers, and accept difficult or dark subject matter. That is, HCC consumers applied the type of critical reading that is gained in a post-secondary arts and social sciences education to their popular culture.

While audience studies such as those described above are useful, I have opted to consider the production of stand-up comedy, rather than its consumption. However, in considering the field of production, I unearth similar tensions in the objectified, embodied and institutionalized capital of performers and gatekeepers. In applying these theories to contemporary Canadian comedy, production must be understood according to the current

conditions that structure the field. Bourdieu's class-based notion of embodied capital, or habitus, requires certain additions. Specifically, that it is not rooted purely in class-specific positions, but is complex and contradictory. It is dependent upon a range of person formations including not only class, but also characteristics such as race, gender, and sexuality (Bennett et al 2009). Habitus is quite simply a *habitude* towards certain routine practices, resulting in the reproduction of these practices across generations (Bennett et al 2009, 13). This takes place not only at the level of the individual, but also socially. This concept is illustrated within the stand-up comedy community by the fact that certain comic types continue to excel within the system. This is perhaps heightened in a cultural product such as comedy where familiarity and recognition play such a significant role in joke formation and joke recognition. Gatekeepers play a role in this reproduction of comic types as well. For example, discussing the lack of female writers for American television comedy programming, Darnell Hunt notes that the pressure to produce hits makes producers and head writers less likely to take risks when hiring. They therefore "hire teams they feel extremely comfortable with, people who look like them. Nine times out of ten, that means white men are hiring white men. You may have a token woman or a minority, but women and people of colour are having a hard time being welcomed into the club" (Hunt cited in Taylor 2011). In such a system, "those who write the rules, write rules that enable them to continue to write the rules" (Lieberson cited in Martin 2003, 33). These "rule-makers" are gatekeepers in the industry, insiders who act as cultural intermediaries between the comedians and their audiences, as well as other gatekeepers within the performer's potential career trajectory.

In applying field theory to the study of humour, it is possible to gain a clearer picture of the structural biases intrinsic to the comedy field, as well as how participants internalize

and/or resist these structures while moving into, within, and out of the field of comedy production. In the final section of this chapter I take up the English Canadian stand-up comedy industry as a field and elaborate upon how concepts developed by Bourdieu such as “field of power,” “cultural intermediaries,” “capital,” and “consecration” can be applied to (and contribute to our knowledge of) this contemporary Canadian context.

### **English Canadian Stand-up Comedy and the Neoliberal Field of Power**

As I discussed earlier in this chapter, stand-up comedy is a distinct performance type, and as such, can be understood as a field or, “an independent social universe with its own laws of functioning, its specific relations of force, its dominants and its dominated” (Bourdieu 1993, 163). Participants navigate the field of stand-up comedy, especially at the early stages of their careers, differently than other entertainment fields. One of the most significant distinctions between stand-up comedy and comic acting is that the stand-up comedian is responsible for the development of their own material as well as a comic persona, which must fit into the performance opportunities available within the comedy field.

As contemporary stand-up emerged in North American as a distinct art form in the 1970s and 1980s, it developed according to the parameters of a period of political and economic change; this constituted the “field of power,” which Bourdieu defines as the economic and political field. If we return to a scientific description,

The field of power is a field of latent, potential forces which play upon any particle which may venture into it, but it is also a battlefield which can be seen as a game. In this game, the trump cards are the habitus, that is to say, the acquirements, the embodied, assimilated properties [...] and capital as such, that is, the inherited assets which define the possibilities inherent in the field. (Warde 2004, 149-150)

In order to succeed in this field, actors must be determined to succeed. The game is played with agency, and those participants who internalize the dominant field of power are most likely to assimilate into it, and therefore succeed within it. In the case of contemporary stand-up comedy, the dominant field of power is neoliberalization, globalization, and trade liberalization. As I will explore throughout this dissertation, stand-up comics approach their careers with a degree of entrepreneurialism that is characteristic of creative workers in the neoliberal era.

Jamie Peck, Nik Theodore, and Neil Brenner, writing post-2008 financial crisis, offer a succinct definition of the neoliberal political and economic process. They suggest that,

neoliberalization should be conceived as an hegemonic *restructuring ethos*, as a dominant pattern of (incomplete and contradictory) regulatory transformation, and not as a fully coherent system or typological state form. As such, it *necessarily* operates among its others, environments of multiple, heterogeneous, and contradictory governance. (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2009, 104)

For Peck et al, the recent financial crash and subsequent economic recession do not mark the beginning of a post-neoliberal era. This is because neoliberalism as a *thing* cannot really be said to have existed; instead, the world economic system has undergone a process of liberalization that has altered, but not erased, the role of the state in national economies. The *state* continues to be involved in “market making and market-guided regulatory restructuring;” the “solution” to the recession has largely been to support and defer to the expertise of the very institutions that led to the 2008 crisis (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2009, 109). Similarly, Kingfisher and Maskovsky argue that neoliberalism has not been characterized by a “retreat of the state,” but rather by “critical shifts in the ways that governments intervene in markets” (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008, 117). For these authors, “neoliberalism” is a useful descriptive model in as much as it provides a general conceptual

link between the impact of globalization upon national economies and the ideological and political justifications that have been offered for these often dramatic changes. Neoliberalism is not, however, “a unitary, structural force” (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008, 119). It is contradictory, and exists in relation to many other social forces.

Within the neoliberal field of power, culture falls into the new conceptual framework of the “creative economy.” The study of the creative industries combines theories of the creative arts and the cultural industries (Hartley 2005, 6). According to John Hartley, the term creative industries “exploits the fuzziness of the boundaries between ‘creative arts’ and ‘cultural industries,’ freedom and comfort, public and private, state-owned and commercial, citizen and consumer, the political and the personal” (Hartley 2005, 18). Considering New Zealand in particular, Russell Prince attributes the rapid growth of governmental interest in the “creative industries” as an economic fix-all to the particular relation this “product” has to the labour force. He argues that,

The explanation for this rapid diffusion implicit in the policy and its surrounding governmental discourses is that regional and national economies are shifting from a manufacturing base to one of knowledge, innovation, and creativity—resources understood as residing in the heads and bodies of the working population and, therefore, less prone to the capital flight that occurs when natural resources dwindle or labor costs become too high. (Prince 2010, 120)

The *resource* being developed is the cultural competencies of the population. The idea of *culture as resource* is also a characteristic of neoliberalization. George Yúdice argues in *The Expediency of Culture* that, “the question of culture in our period, characterized as one of accelerated globalization” must be approached as a question of culture “as a *resource*” (Yúdice 2005, 13). Yúdice points to the “culturalization of the economy” as part of a shift toward endorsing cultural development as a component of economic growth (Yúdice 2005, 17). The culture that *counts* in this context is literally that which can be *counted* in a way

meaningful to dominant stakeholders; the creative industries exist as statistical mappings including “contribution to GDP, the number of people they employ, the export dollars they earn, and so on” (Prince 2010, 122). This mapping often erases the extent to which the creative industries are contested, contradictory, and, at times, highly exploitative.

Within the framework of the creative industries, investment in culture is legitimized through instrumentalization; it must be linked to improvements in social conditions, multicultural tolerance, the promotions of cultural citizenship, economic growth, urban renewal, or some other utility (Yúdice 2005). Yúdice suggests that the current cultural turn is reliant upon the operationalization of “cultural capital.” In contrast to Bourdieu’s more figurative use of this concept, here, cultural capital is meant literally. In relation to festival and events management, Jane Ali-Knight and Martin Robertson take up Bourdieu’s concept in this entirely literal way, speaking enthusiastically of the French sociologist who “championed [...] the economic significance of the arts and cultural sector,” an area of great market potential that had previously been overlooked (Ali-Knight and Robertson 2004, 6). Within the creative economy, the idea of culture for culture’s sake is irrelevant. The provision of, at the very least, an indirect form of return is required in order for culture to be seriously considered by policy-makers, investors, and even audiences.

In Canada, the industrialization of cultural production and the shift to the creative economy has been taken up by artists and related cultural producers in many sectors. An engagement with global trends in neoliberalization in the field of cultural production roots discourses around Canadian culture in industrial and economic, rather than protectionist and nationalist, terms. This shift in cultural framing mirrors the shift towards an open economy brought about by globalization and the implementation of trade liberalization. According to

Rowland Lorimer, even in the immediate aftermath of NAFTA, the Canadian approach to culture still differed from that which dominated in the US at the time:

Canada's position starts with culture, acknowledges the industrial nature of cultural production in our modern information economy, and ends with cultural goals which may be achieved in part by industrial means. The U.S. position starts with markets, speaks in the language of free trade, property rights in copyright, free speech, free flows of information, consumer rights, and entertainment products, and ends with markets. (Lorimer 1994, 267)

Arguably this has been the case in theory, but not always in practice, with both countries deviating from this framework when it has suited their political and/or economic interests.

While culture was rhetorically protected in the early years of the FTA and NAFTA, today's governing bodies are significantly less concerned about the protection of a distinctive cultural heritage through subsidization of the arts. The acknowledgement of the industrial nature of cultural production has delimited this field in the neoliberal age.

In Canada, the onset of neoliberalism as a dominant economic process is marked primarily by the pursuit of trade liberalization via the Free Trade Agreement (1988) with the US, and the North American Free Trade Agreement (1994) that incorporated Mexico into this economic continental integration. Culture was a hotly contested issue in each of these agreements, with Canada arguing that the protection of national sovereignty required the exemption of cultural goods from free trade. This cultural exemption is intended to protect "Canada's media industries by allowing them to create various economic incentives, namely industry subsidies and tax credits, to encourage development and distribution of commercially competitive and culturally unique Canadian media products" (Johnson-Yale 2008, 115). Critics of these protections point out that such measures merely offer monopolies to Canadian-owned corporations who offer little in the way of quality Canadian content—instead using their broadcast monopoly to earn high profits distributing American

programming (Beaty and Sullivan 2006). However, through the neoliberalization of culture from a political to an economic good, audiences for these goods were decreasingly characterized as citizens in favour of their re-characterization as consumers. As citizens, the right to national, non-commercial culture is privileged; as consumers the right to a diverse marketplace and free-choice becomes paramount. In the case of intervention into Canadian culture, this shift was a gradual one, with culture initially excluded from the Free Trade Agreement (1988) with the US—although, this exclusion can be seen as primarily a rhetorical one, with very limited actual protections (Maxwell 2007).

Although in theory the cultural exemption was based on the notion that culture was not a commodity, in practice this is precisely how culture is treated. The turn to “cultural industrialism” started as early as the 1970s when government intervention in culture came through an “industrial backdoor” in which culture was treated as a commodity (Edwardson 2008, 242). This period saw the promotion of Canadian content shift from being a key political component of nation-building, into a key economic component of the *production* of national culture via the cultural industries. As historian Ryan Edwardson has argued,

Canadian content needed to not only be produced but also sold, its saleability enhanced through commodification and its vibrancy measured in terms of economic tallies. Much of the content coming out of cultural industrialism, then, was made as similar as possible to foreign works in order to make it of interest to distributors. (Edwardson 2008, 242)

Although this process was not without critics, tensions, and resisters, in general the cultural industries in Canada of the past thirty years have developed according to the principles of neoliberalization being applied to all sectors of the economy.

For communication scholars Jan Marontate and Catherine Murray, neoliberalism in Canada has been characterized by “a series of retractions of social spending, programs and

social welfare support that spill over to other domains such as culture, education, or the environment” (Marontate and Murray 2010, 326). In culture, this can be seen in the transition of grants and patronage to loans and investment. Artists are increasingly expected to play the role of cultural entrepreneur, predicting audience trends, building a portfolio, and most importantly, earning enough money through contractual work to remain outside of what little social welfare system remains. As Léger finds in his study of Canadian cultural workers,

we can imagine a future wherein the Canada Council will operate as a corporation, artists will be awarded loans instead of grants, conservative bureaucrats will wait out and starve dissenting voices, and statistics and market indicators will rule the day as instruments to be used to determine the kind of work that should be made, and indeed who we are and what we are to become. (Léger 2010, 563)

The extension of the creative economy under neoliberalization has had far-reaching effects. As Léger notes, for better or for worse, “economic growth is today associated with creativity” (Léger 2010, 559). Evidence of the breadth of the creative economy could be seen in reactions to Prime Minister Harper’s 2008 attacks on artists and cultural producers, in which he argued that “ordinary Canadians” did not feel any affinity for the excesses of such work (TheStar.com 2008). His dismissal of cultural workers was met with much popular censure. Harper clearly underestimated the extent to which the expansion of the creative economy has led to “ordinary Canadians” from all walks of life being employed in this sector. Harper’s characterization of cultural workers as spoiled, over-paid, and a burden to tax payers was additionally ill-conceived given the disparity between this image and the realities of much creative work which is often low paying and highly unstable. As has been argued by Simon Brault, Vice-Chair of the Canada Council for the Arts, even while spending on arts and culture is at an all-time high, artists are, in general, poorly remunerated and devalued (Brault 2010).

A variety of artistic fields are increasingly experiencing the effects of neoliberalization on funding models (now considered “investment”) as discussed by Léger. In Alberta, for example, arts organizations have been required to implement stringent business practices as a requirement for the receipt of funding from the Alberta Foundation for the Arts (Knecht 2010). The amount of funding available has also decreased steadily in this province over the past twenty years, forcing arts organizations to look elsewhere for financial support. As such, Brigit Knecht argues that artistic programming in Alberta “is clearly directed toward attracting patrons and subscribers rather than exclusively satisfying the artistic wishes of the organization’s programming committees and performers, and organizations operate with clear governance and effective administration” (Knecht 2010, 30). That is to say, a market and commodification model for sustaining the artistic and cultural sectors has long replaced the patronage model of arts funding in Alberta.

Similar shifts occurred in the cultural sector in other provinces over the same period. Although less aggressive in their fiscal conservatism, Saskatchewan and Manitoba have both turned to investment in the culture industries as an area for economic growth. In Manitoba, cultural policy was implemented to better position the cultural industries in relation to national and international markets, and Winnipeg was, and indeed continues to be, promoted as a cultural hub. Saskatchewan meanwhile pursued the cultural industries as a growth economy that could aid community development in rural areas where access to art and culture was formerly limited (Jeannotte 2010). While this interest in the creative economy has grown alongside neoliberalization, M. Sharon Jeannotte argues that the implementation of neoliberal approaches to cultural policy in each of these provinces has been uneven. Jan Marontate and Catherine Murray make similar claims in relation to cultural policy in Nova

Scotia and British Columbia, two provinces which on the surface uphold the characteristics of neoliberal convergence, but also engage in more traditional forms of state support for art and culture (Marontate and Murray 2010). As Simon Brault has argued,

undeniably, there would be no cultural sector worthy of that name in Canada were it not for the conscious, deliberate, and sustained action of governments. This applies to the stream of arts and letters, which could not survive in the same conditions without government grants, and it applies, perhaps even more, to cultural industries that benefit from a set of rules, control mechanisms, and tools put in place by governments, such as the [...] CRTC, Canadian content quota, tariff policies, public funding corporations, tax credits, and regulations on the exportation of Canadian cultural property. (Brault 2010, 31-32)

In relation to cultural policy in Canada, then, the argument can be made that neoliberalization has not been “a unitary structural force” (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008, 119). The implementation of the creative economy has been uneven and contradictory, taken up strategically by both policy-makers and artists/arts organizations. In Canadian cultural policy, neoliberalization is clearly not characterized by a “retreat of the state,” but rather, “critical shifts in the ways that governments intervene in markets” (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008, 117). What has perhaps changed, is the relation of culture to the market and the way that fiscal sustainability increasingly trumps all other considerations such as artistic quality and contribution to a regional and/or national sense of self.

The strategic engagement with a neoliberal mandate has also been pursued across regions in specific industries, most notably in Canadian television production. In fact, Canada’s small domestic market for cultural goods has forced Canadian television to develop “global program sales and productions strategies [...] a situation that has marked Canada as a model of the contemporary television industry in a global media arena” (Tinic 2010, 98). Serra Tinic has found that, through heavy involvement in co-productions, Canadian television has grown into a transnational industry (Tinic 2010). However, Canadian

television networks favour US programs, despite the availability of Canadian co-productions that circulate internationally. For example, the made in Ottawa children's show, *You Can't Do That on Television* was highly successful on US cable, but did not have a long run in Canada. Kyle Conway notes that early in US cable history Canadian programming had a competitive edge due to, among other things, a weak Canadian dollar, subsidization of production, and tax incentives. As such, in the early 1990s, 30% of original programming aired on US cable was imported from Canada (Conway 2005).

According to Serra Tinic, the current context of Canadian television production is one in which “global, neo-liberal strategies” are increasingly subsuming “political, social, and cultural spheres into economic decision making models” (Tinic 2010, 96-97). That is, Canadian television is not primarily important for its nation building potential, but rather its role as a commodity that can be exported. John McCullough, in his discussion of television production in the Atlantic Provinces has also argued that this industry has adapted well to the requirements of the global market. In fact, he suggests that the reflection of regional identities is not simply part of a nationalist project, but more a part of global market logic (McCullough 2009). In the past ten years, Canadian television has increasingly drawn upon “humanist narratives, and multicultural marketing” in order to sell television programmes to broad national and international audiences; hence the international appeal of the regionally specific program *Trailer Park Boys* (McCullough 2009, 166). This global success renders the mythology of Canadian cultural marginality—invoked in relation to the protection of Canadian content and the need for cultural exemption from free trade—somewhat difficult to sustain. In his study of the restructuring of the global communications system since the onset of neoliberalism, Dal Yong Jin has found that, far from being on the margins of the cultural

economy, Canada ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in global communications broadcasting mergers and acquisitions (the US and the UK predictably ranked 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> respectively) (Jin 2008). It would seem that Canadian cultural producers and Canadian media conglomerates are heavily involved in the global creative economy.

While cultural policy discourses continue to make the case for the protection of Canadian culture, in practice, Canadian cultural production has generally had to engage with global markets in order to survive. In the case of Canadian television, the nationalism of the broadcasting tradition, and the post-nationalism of the export economy offer conflicting narratives. This is especially evident in the continued production of the myth of Canadian marginality vis-à-vis cultural production. As Léger argues:

The sustaining myths of this colonial dilemma [...] have been apologetic narratives of a properly Canadian and/or Québécois experience, supplemented with postmodern attention to First Nations as part of a broader agenda of tolerance toward cultural diversity. Our response to the contradictions of culture should therefore begin by recognizing Canada's privileged place among the G7 nations and within the Quad of the World Trade Organization. In this conjuncture, the protection of identity (through both high art and popular culture) and the privatization agenda (culture and creativity as a new area for investment) can be seen to work in tandem. (Léger 2010, 560)

Here, Léger points to the myth of Canadian cultural and economic weakness, a thesis that can be undermined by considering Canada's actual role as a G7 nation. Under global neoliberalism, Canada is a relatively wealthy country, a major destination for immigrants, refugees and migrant workers, and an exporter of cultural products and cultural workers. However, Canada's position on the world stage remains a complicated one. While Canada's role as a G7 nation precludes any discussion of cultural "marginality," it is unclear how the global cultural economy acts to counter-act the vulnerability of Canadian national identity. As Mookerjea, Szeman, and Faurschou (2009, 5) argue,

Like any number of middle powers, Canada participates actively in the capitalist world economy [...]. At the same time, despite its geographic size and because of its small population, its status in the geopolitical imaginary is more akin to Belgium or the Scandinavian countries than France or Germany: modern, democratic, left-leaning, safe and unremarkable enough to not usually be an object of realpolitik anxieties. And yet, even here there is a key feature of Canadian cultural history that is now more widely instructive. Like many small- or mid-power countries, Canada's national identity has always been intensely contested in ways that have had a determinate impact on the character of social, political, and cultural life in the country.

This complex positioning, at once privileged and marginalized, can be seen represented in academic discourses related to the Canadian cultural industries.

Within the Canadian cultural industries, not all creative sectors have been deemed worthy of State intervention. Like stand-up comedy, commercially successful artists have been excluded from cultural funding, not because of artistic merit, but simply because the market offers sufficient financial rewards for these individuals (Lorimer 1994). However, these boundaries are not clear-cut, and many artists and cultural organizations are reliant on a combination of State sponsored and market driven models for funding. JFL/JPR is a useful example in this regard as certain components of the events, such as the street festival, broadcasting, and global development are eligible for government funding, whereas, outside of the festival environment, club comedy remains a commercial enterprise.

Whereas academic work in literary and artistic fields considered by Bourdieu has tended to privilege only restricted production, the new academic focus on popular cultures makes popularity (often through commercial success) the defining factor in the selection of an object of analysis. In the case of Canadian stand-up comedy as we know it today, I argue that neoliberalisation offers the dominant field of power under which this artform developed in Canada. Within this system, the global market is the primary arbiter of creative success, and other concerns are marginalized to this economically motivated structure. In this field,

industrial art such as mass media and popular culture dominate. However this is not a complete inversion of the field of power as considered by Bourdieu. Even within this industrialized system, discourses of disinterestedness, a disdain for commercialism, and rhetorical affiliations with non-market performance forms continue to circulate. While Bourdieu was able to map the distinctions between economic and cultural capital onto a grid with opposing poles, this cannot so easily be done in the case of contemporary popular culture where oppositions to the privileging of economic gain are often rhetorical (rather than the consequence of an objective relation), aimed at securing a position of enhanced cultural capital. Unlike the artistic field considered by Bourdieu, stand-up does not aspire to autonomy from the economy. Posthumous returns on creative work are not adequate means of consecration for this popular performance art. Stand-up is a commercial activity and requires financial consecration as much any other kind of consecration such as respect from peers, positive media coverage, and professional awards. The strategies of authors “owe their form and content to the interests associated with the positions which they occupy in the structure of a very specific game” (Bourdieu 1993, 190). In stand-up comedy, the rule of laughter (that is, everything is framed around making the audience laugh) is a false interest which masks the other, more profound interests related to certain positions (such as being discovered or being promoted).

Unlike the literary field discussed by Bourdieu, the Canadian comedy field is not characterized by a radical transformation between eras. While it is true that certain styles or subject matters come in and out of style, stand-up has not been marked by radical shifts. Still in its early years of development, it does not have a long history of structural change associated with changes in fashion and the shifting of gatekeepers (as is the case in the

literary field). Most institutions have been able to maintain and build on their roles of intermediaries over the past 30-40 years. The CBC is perhaps the only exception to this, as it has gone from being one of the only employers of comic talent, to being a relatively small player in comedy production. In the following chapter, I discuss the history of stand-up comedy as it developed in the US and in Canada, including a consideration of some of the dominant gatekeepers in the field of English-Canadian comedy production.

### Chapter 3: A History of Stand-Up Performance in Canada

If we take Benedict Anderson's definition of a nation as "an imagined community" (Anderson 2006, 6), it has always been difficult to define Canada as a nation. Some kind of modifier is usually required: English Canada, French Canada, rural Canada, etc. The lack of cultural cohesion in the Canadian nation-state has historically been attributed to the relative youth of the country. Canada was for the first half of the twentieth century in the process of "becoming." However, dissent from regional diasporas, the influx of diverse ethnic populations, and the turn to official multiculturalism in the 1970s problematized the definition of Canadian nationhood. It is in popular culture that signs of the nation are increasingly sought out. In Pevere and Dymond's *Mondo Canuck*, the authors assert that if we are to genuinely understand what it means to be Canadian, we need to look outside of high culture. For them, popular culture is key to understanding Canadian identity, and importantly, being produced *in* Canada ought not to be a deciding factor in the objects included in analysis (Pevere and Dymond 1996, x).

The global flow of Canadians producing internationally consumed cultural products is especially important. Canadian obsessions with what other countries think and know about *us* (in particular the US) is in many respects absurd, with the popularity of Rick Mercer's *Talking To Americans* (2001) offering a significant public manifestation of this concern—the programme, drawing 2.7 million viewers, remains one of the highest rated shows in Canadian television history (Druick 2008). In this show, a lack of cultural knowledge about Canadian culture allows Americans to be tricked into saying ridiculous things—like congratulating

Prime Minister Jean Poutine on his Double-Double award (as *everyone* knows, Poutine is a French-Canadian meal consisting of fries with gravy and cheese curds, and a double-double is a coffee with two creams and two sugars). The CBC is heavily implicated in this discourse and in 2006 the broadcaster produced the unapologetically celebratory television special *Comedy Gold* which chronicled Canadian comedic success both at home and abroad. In general, it is in popular culture that this identity obsession is most apparent—in the obsession with supremacy in international sporting events, in the knowledge that this or that pop/rock/country singer is actually from Anywhere, Ontario, and in the mythology that Canadians are particularly funny and make disproportionate contributions to the American entertainment system. Canadian cultural policy is inextricably linked to the larger production and flow of a North American entertainment industry, based primarily in the US. Canadian popular culture emerged alongside and in dialogue with the cultural production of the United States. This is evident in the long history of referential humour in Canada that has taken, as its primary referent, American culture, especially American popular culture.

The study of stand-up comedy offers a unique perspective onto larger trends in cultural industrialization and the creative economy. In many ways, stand-up comedy offers an exemplary case study for the development of the creative economy in Canada, the globalization of cultural production, and the role of national identities in the post-national moment. Through an ambivalent relationship to both industry and the state, the field of Canadian stand-up comedy reflects the marginality, contradiction, and self-deprecation that is also associated with that much mocked topic: Canadian cultural identity.

Within the literature, there is precedent for the use of humour as an explanatory discourse. Irony in particular has provided a reference point for discussions of Canadian

cultural identity. As a slightly cynical humorous stance in which the speaker never needs to say what he/she *really* means, irony works well with anxieties of Canadian cultural weakness and vulnerability. Serra Tinic argues that ours is a marginalized, negative, and complaining humour (Tinic 2005). Our marginalization as the poor neighbour of a cultural, political, economic and militaristic superpower has led to a compensatory model of television production. Beaty and Sullivan note that our inability to compete with American television has led to the indigenous production of “a tasteful, low-key version of television better suited to the genteel mentality of Canada” (Beaty and Sullivan 2006, 18). Through comedy, weakness and marginality can be re-imagined as valuable. In many ways, this is reflective of other discourses around Canadian culture. For John Ralston Saul, the Canadian “failure” to become a nation-state with a monolithic cultural perspective is, in fact, proof of our cultural originality and strength (Saul 1997). The prevalence of self-deprecating humour, for Keohane, points to the politeness of Canadian humour: we do not laugh at the Other, we laugh at ourselves (Keohane 1997).

Irony is an appealing theme for the explanation of Canadian cultural identity because it offers an easy “out.” Irony is ambivalent; the benefit of this disposition being that either side is just as good (or just as inadequate) as the other, and loyalties can be switched if fortunes change. As Linda Hutcheon suggests:

Irony has become one way of working within prevailing discourses, while still finding a way to articulate doubts, insecurities, questionings, and perhaps even alternatives. I suppose it is, in a sense, a way to have your cake and eat it too, to launch a challenge but also to admit a loss. (Hutcheon 1990, 22)

It is not surprising then that indirection, the deferral of meaning, and ambivalence towards contradiction would become attractive approaches in Canadian culture. It is a means of saving face. Having imagined Canadian culture as inhabiting a borderland between two

competing global powers (the US and the UK), such performative techniques have been necessary for our continued national survival. Despite being a relatively wealthy country, Canadian culture is still imagined as the underdog. Canada is popularly imagined (by its own citizenry—especially those invested in the preservation of Canadian culture) as weak. As Serra Tinic suggests, “tensions between [Canada and the US are] akin to a sibling rivalry where the younger’s resentment remained from the feeling of being overwhelmed by the bigger, stronger, overachieving older brother or sister” (Tinic 2009, 177). Whether Canada is the nerdy under-dog, the younger sibling, or simply a little man with a big Napoleon complex, the fact remains that the psychosis of Canadian cultural identity is clearly one of feelings of inferiority. Such a defeatist narrative leaves very little room for a cultural identity that does not frame itself around American cultural hegemony. This crisis of national identity parallels the neurotic self-presentation and insecurity embodied by the stand-up comic. Self-deprecation and the performance of self-doubt are both characteristic of the Canadianist and the Canadian comic. As such, comedy offers a point of entry for a discussion of Canadian identity and Canadian cultural production.

The comic figure, whose primary role is to lighten the mood or entertain patrons and revelers, has existed in one form or another in most cultures throughout known history. The clown, court jester, town fool, trickster all serve important symbolic roles for the cultures in which they are situated. The stand-up comic can be seen as a continuation of this lineage, turning the serious world on its head through the production of levity and the humorous critique of social norms, cultural codes, and political events. This idea of the stand-up comic as purveyor of powerful social symbolism is one that comedians themselves often read into their own work. As comedy writer Larry Gelbert writes,

Comics are journalists; they are the correspondents of our common experiences, the cruise directors of the same boat we're all in together. They goad us with truths we would often rather ignore or deny. They update us on the human and all-too-often inhuman condition. That stand-up spot is a soapbox, a pulpit, or a confessional. The best comedians hold up a mirror to themselves, wherein we see our own captured reflection. They address our fears, our dreams; they examine our secret bits and parts—the ones under our clothes, the ones under our hats. Using comedy as anesthesia allows them to deal with the dark, underbelly laughs we employ as a defense against life's pains, its embarrassments, and its frustrations. (Gelbert 1996, 11)

The particular performance style that is most associated with stand-up today—that of the individual in a darkened club, on a stage, with a microphone, performing a comedic monologue—emerged in the United States during the 1970s. Centering as it does around individualism (comedians generally perform alone) and freedom of speech (performers are highly resistant to being told that certain topics, terms, and opinions are off limits), stand-up has grown to be framed as the quintessential manifestation of American culture. According to journalist Richard Zoglin, the stand-up comedian's point of view, “ironic, skeptical, media savvy, challenging authority, punctuating pretension, telling uncomfortable truths—is the lens through which we view everything from presidential politics and celebrity scandal to the little trials of our everyday lives” (2008, 3). The act of stand-up, according to these readings, is always already politicized.

In emphasizing individual comedians, and the politics of their creative work, it is easy to overlook the organizations and institutions without which stand-up as we know it would not exist. Perhaps the most important innovation in comedy production was the formation of comedy clubs—purpose designed venues with audiences who were specifically interested in seeing comedy performances. Even today, with stand-up well established as a popular performance art, comedians dread performing in spaces that are not designed for stand-up, especially when they are performing to audiences who did not necessarily choose to attend a

comedy event, but are in the space for another reason. The comedy clubs that emerged in the 1970s in the US (and the late 1970s/early 1980s in Canada) became important gatekeepers in the production of comedians, providing not only a space for them to hone their craft, but also the opportunity to be seen and heard by film and television scouts.

This chapter provides a historical contextualization of stand-up performance in Canada through a consideration of its global, national, and local development. I consider the development of stand-up in the US and how it influenced the Canadian comedy field. In particular, I provide a brief history of the development of stand-up comedy clubs in the US, as well as a discussion of two of the dominant institutions in Canadian stand-up comedy: YukYuk's (founded by Mark Breslin in Toronto, 1976) and Just for Laughs/Juste pour rire (founded by Gilbert Rozon in Montreal, 1983). These institutions were the first to feature American-style stand-up in Canada and contributed substantially to the comedy boom of the 1980s (during which time both organizations expanded rapidly).

### **An Artform is Born: Stand-up in Post-War United States**

Prior to the establishment of comedy clubs in the US stand-up occupied a peripheral space in popular culture, emerging primarily out of the Master of Ceremonies routines found at casinos and burlesque clubs, with even more distant origins in Vaudeville and Minstrel shows (Marc 1989). In these productions, the comedian would perform in between or following other types of performance, like song, dance, and acrobatics. This tradition of the comical MC carried on into 20<sup>th</sup> century Gentlemen's Clubs where patrons were often entertained by funny men in the dead space between dance numbers. In the book *Stand-Up Comedians on Television*, produced for The Museum of Television & Radio, Larry Gelbert provides this colourful description of the comedian prior to the advent of comedy clubs:

There was a time when, if I wanted to catch the work of a stand-up comic, or a monologist as they were called then, I would have to go through the trouble and expense of traveling to a nightclub, a vaudeville house, or a house of burlesque. I would have to sit through endless hours of acrobats and ecdysiasts, or hearing G chords and ogling G-strings, until the band finally hit “fine and Dandy,” and the guy with the padded shoulders and the porkpie hat came on to stand in the spotlight and tell the audience all about the funny thing that happened to him on his way to the theater that night. (Gelbert 1996, 10)

During the early 1940s in New York, small saloons featured a variety of performers, including amateur stand-up comics who would tell one-liners or do impersonations. These were not ideal venues for stand-up, and the more physical, grotesque, and bazaar acts tended to please the audiences more than the comic punchlines. At this time, established performers also got work on Broadway, entertaining the movie going crowd at the studio-owned cinemas prior to the feature film (Berger 1985). By the late 40s, well-known professionals like Milton Berle could expect to earn \$23,000 for one week at the Roxy. In the emerging club scene, performers could earn \$150 a week, and \$125 a week at the stripclubs (Berger 1985). This was a significant improvement over the previous decade when Catskills comics were full-time clowns expected to entertain resort patrons at all times of the day and night for a mere \$250 for the summer. Even once Catskills employment shifted from a fulltime summer job to a one-night or weekend engagement, it was still exploitative work and most performers who came up through this system were happy to move on into regular comedy clubs in New York (Marc 1989). In these early days, stand-up was a minor extension of the larger entertainment industry. Performers worked in unpleasant conditions hoping to break into bigger and better things.

The opening of The Improv in 1963 was a turning point in the New York comedy scene (Knoedelseder 2009). By the 1970s, it was the hippest comedy room in town. At this venue, comedians could experiment with cutting edge material; the only caveat was that The

Improv didn't pay any of the performers: "The Improv was considered a 'showcase club' where performers could get up on a professionally equipped stage, create without interference, and potentially be seen by agents, talent scouts, and other very important people in show business" (Knoedelseder 2009, 23). The main reason to play for free at The Improv was the possibility that you might be cast for a spot on *The Tonight Show*; when the popular television program moved from New York to Los Angeles in 1972, the comedy scene moved west as well, starting with the opening of The Comedy Store that same year (which also didn't pay its performers). Even working paying clubs at this time, performers were lucky to stitch together \$10-20 a night. Comedians at this time were "rebel artists," saying the unsayable, expressing social commentary, representing the counterculture, mocking society, the establishment, consumerism, and, importantly, for the most part living below the poverty line. Unlike the one-liner performers that came before them, they did not employ others to write their jokes. The performer and the material became inseparable and highly individualized, with their work reflecting their own personalities, psychoses, and perspectives (Zoglin 2008). Comedy became more clearly associated with creative practice. Even in these formative, artistically charged, years, the stand-up comedian was preoccupied with being discovered (usually through a performance on *The Tonight Show*), and subsequently moving into film and television. Then, as now, "stand-up comedy may be the only major artform whose greatest practitioners, at any given time, want to be doing something else" (Zoglin 2008, 5). To this day, getting a network television gig remains a primary goal for many stand-up comics. With *The Tonight Show* acting as a major gatekeeper, many performers were excluded indefinitely from the television trajectory as host

Johnny Carson's very particular expectations about what made a good comic notoriously excluded many performers, most notably female comics (cf Zinoman 2011).

The 1970s in the US was a period beset with political tensions (Stebbins 1990). At this time, a new type of comedy – satirical, critical, and monologue-based – emerged. This was a departure from the Vaudeville inspired performers, proficient in one-liners, that characterized the comedy around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to critic and journalist William Knoedelseder, “as the 1970s dawned, the baby boom generation was turning to comedy as a favorite form of entertainment. The boomers had stood the music business on its ear in the late 1960s with their embrace of progressive rock ‘n’ roll. Now they were looking for their own countercultural heroes of humor” (Knoedelseder 2009, 19). This new comedy age was characterized by performers like George Carlin and Richard Pryor. The 1970s became a golden age of comedy in which strong community bonds were formed between performers. Those who worked primarily for free at the Comedy Store and the Improv could count on their more successful friends to help them out. This sympathetic relationship is what led then successful comics like Jay Leno and Tom Dreesen to question the ethics of unpaid comic work. Perceiving the commerciality of their artform, in particular the profits being made at the clubs where they had been performing for free, the Comedy Store comedians eventually went on strike. Comic Richard Lewis was skeptical of the motivations for such an action, and felt that when comedians focused on club owners like Mitzi Shore (The Comedy Store) and Budd Friedman (The Improv), they gave them too much power:

I'm not working for Mitzi or Budd. I'm working for me and the audience. I'm using their clubs for my purposes. I don't want their \$5 or \$10 or \$15, I want their stage. I don't want that price tag put on my set. I'm better than that. Yes, it's humiliating to work for nothing. But is it less humiliating to work for *almost*

nothing? Would I feel better using their stage to get ahead or having my work priced at \$15? (Lewis cited in Knoedelseder 2009, 170)

This entrepreneurial attitude is now a dominant characteristic of stand-up comedy culture. Performers are independent contractors and must be adept at negotiating the value of their work. Overall, the main issue at the heart of the comedy strike was the idea of “fairness.” Comedians did not, necessarily, have an issue with performing for free if it was to their benefit (for example, if they could test out new material or be seen by network TV casting agents). However, in the case of the Comedy Store, which they had made very successful with their unremunerated talent, the proprietor was clearly profiting at the expense of the performers, many of whom were living well below the poverty line. The sense of community that existed pre-strike would be replaced post strike with a sense of personal responsibility for your own financial wellbeing. Performers would need to be adept at business and able to negotiate performance contracts that suited their needs, both creative and financial.

Immediately following the strike of the late 1970s, both the Comedy Store and the Improv needed to start paying their performers. At the Comedy Store, comics could now earn \$10 per set. The age of working for free at “showcase” clubs was over, but much of the camaraderie between comics was also lost. In coming together and taking action against the exploitative conditions of the unpaid club (the Comedy Store owner Mitzi Shore was very clearly capitalizing on their unpaid labour), comedians also disrupted their own community, which had been characterized by generosity between comics (the haves often gave back to the have-nots in the form of joints, booze, or a fiver for breakfast). This shift from close-knit community to individualized creative entrepreneurs coincided with the comedy boom of the 1980s. With this greater demand for comedians, performers were able to negotiate better pay and working conditions; in this system, the fearless entrepreneur had the upper hand.

Although there was a comedy recession in the 1990s, stand-up has re-emerged as a popular performance art in the US. By the mid-2000s, LA clubs were paying their comics: The Laugh Factory \$60 per set, The Improv \$17.50, and the Comedy Store \$12.50 (Knoedelseder 2009).

Critic Richard Zoglin is somewhat cynical about this current system. He notes that

the sense of adventure [of the 1970s] has been replaced by the programmed predictability of a General Motors assembly plant. The comics all sound pretty much alike these days, with the same patter to loosen up the crowd, the same recyclable loop of stand-up topics. On weekend evenings, the clubs typically squeeze in three shows, spaced an unforgiving two hours apart: four or five comics, two drinks and the check, and you're out the door in ninety minutes flat. (Zoglin 2008, 2)

This commercial organization has produced a stable and even predictable work environment for professional comedians. While it may lack much of the youthful abandon that characterized the comedy community of the 1970s, it is also much more conducive to providing performers with a livelihood.

By the 1980s, the ways that comedians used comedy clubs and organized their careers had shifted. Clubs needed to make a profit, and comedians needed to strike a balance between fair remuneration and building their career trajectories. Clubs were not only gatekeepers, but also an important base for a touring comedian economy. Performers needed to be adept at negotiating wages and quality stage time. Even today, performers must sometimes forgo payment in exchange for a great opportunity to be seen by the right people (Schwensen 2005). This selective exploitation is a significant characteristic of all creative work, and one that comics are encouraged to internalize. The role of gatekeepers to the industry, such as popular comedy clubs, is a significant factor in the comedian's career trajectory. Participants in the field are given a *space of possibles* which define potential career trajectories, as well as "all that one must have in the back of one's mind in order to be

in the game” (Bourdieu 1993, 176). Such knowledge differentiates professionals from amateurs, and dates cultural producers and products of a particular period (as the space of possibles invariably changes over time). It is part of the professional trajectory of all comedians to learn the unwritten codes of their trade. Often, these codes are picked up as the performer navigates through the institutions that dominate the industry. Institutions such as comedy clubs, then, have a major impact upon the development of the comedy subculture which is then passed on to new generations of performers. These gatekeepers are therefore a vital point of analysis in understanding the comedy field.

### **The Two Solitudes: Yuk Yuk’s – Toronto and Just for Laughs – Montreal**

In the early 1970s, when comedy clubs were taking off in the US, no such venues existed in Canada and Canadian stand-up as a performance art was left to develop at the very margins of cultural production. As Andrew Clark explains, in the early 1970s in Toronto,

there were no comedy clubs. There were folk bars where people sang and the occasional hip young singer/comedian did a set, and there were theatres where headliners like Red Buttons played. Full-time comedy clubs, featuring a stream of comedians and a headline act, were not even a dream. They were still a little under a decade away. Stand-up comedy did, however, have a home, although not a particularly welcoming one. If you wanted to earn a living as a comic, you could do so by telling jokes during the dead air left between the performances of exotic dancers. In 1973, stand-up comedy did not mean adoring audiences and television deals, it meant naked women and unruly crowds. (Clark 1997, 63)

Stand-up developed on the margins, as part of a crass, popular culture. Given this “seedy” past, this form of performance was not a highly prized space for the development of a national sense of self, and not the sort of venture that could expect funding from the Canada Council for the Arts.

In the absence of any institutions directly related to the performance of live stand-up comedy, and given the rapid success of this performance art in the US, a market vacuum

existed in Canada which would inevitably be developed. However, with no clear examples of business models for such production, it would take a particularly brave, creative and perhaps reckless individual to launch Canadian stand-up comedy. The two founding institutions of live stand-up comedy in Canada are most certainly Yuk Yuk's founded in Toronto in 1976 by a 24 year old Mark Breslin, and Montreal's Just for Laughs/Juste pour rire, founded in 1983 by Gilbert Rozon, aged 28. The youth, and frankly, inexperience of these two founding fathers of comedy allowed them to create organizations that were genuinely innovative at the time. Even today, these organizations serve as dominant gatekeepers in the Canadian comedy industry, and have launched many successful comedy careers. In the following two sections, I discuss the development of these organizations and their impact upon the Canadian comedy field in greater detail.

### ***Yuk Yuk's***

That stand-up comedy should be a commercial enterprise not regulated as part of the cultural industries or funded by grants like other performing arts was not a foregone conclusion. Although stand-up comedy's initial links with burlesque and stripping made it a strictly commercial activity, the early development of Yuk Yuk's had a great deal of credibility within Toronto's artistic community. It therefore stands to reason that an artistic, rather than distinctly commercial, model could have been developed. According to Robert Stebbins, the early days of Yuk Yuk's in the basement of Toronto's Church Street Community centre were highly experimental and antiestablishment:

The experimental atmosphere attracted many artists, painters, and writers, among them Margaret Atwood. Polish, standardization, predictability – in short, the routinization of the art – would eventually disperse the huddle of intellectuals. Commercial appeal would significantly erode the level of spontaneity and originality they valued most in art. (Stebbins 1990, 20)

The counter-cultural legitimacy of such localized, underground artistic practice weaves stand-up into the narrative of Toronto as creative city. This early version of Yuk Yuk's, which rejected authority and economic gain, was rich in cultural capital. These early ventures were therefore defined by the changing commercial realities of the city as a cultural marketplace. In essence, this artistic development was fairly typical. As Mary Gluck, notes of Bohemians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, "Bohemia was [...] not a permanent way of life but rather a period of apprenticeship, a transitional phase in the young artist's life that, like any business venture, could lead to financial success and social recognition but also ruin and bankruptcy" (Gluck 2000, 352). This continues to characterize artistic life today. Where the stand-up comic may differ, is in the explicit acknowledgement of this commercial mandate. There are no stand-up hobbyists; amateurs—with very few exceptions—are intent on moving into the professional ranks, and expect to make a living out of comedy (Stebbins 1990).

In spite of the Yuk Yuk's organizers' general disdain for business and mainstream cultural production, it quickly became evident that stand-up comedy could be an economic success. As Clark describes it, "Yuk Yuk's became an instant hip ticket. Toronto's upper class was into slumming, and the mink-coat crowd lined up every Wednesday" (Clark 1997, 85). Yuk Yuk's cultural legitimacy rested on its disdain for the very patrons whose money the venture depended on. Breslin would intentionally insult the audience, even chase offended spectators out of the building. The abuse simply gave the event more credibility, and continued to attract a "hip" crowd. This dedication to creativity, even at the expense of the audience, has, for all his controversy, endeared Breslin to many stand-up comics. Inasmuch as Breslin is engaged in commercial activity with the intent to make money, he continues to have an avant-garde soft-spot for any comic that can push the boundaries of

acceptable public performance. He has even provided financial bonuses to comics whose offense of the audience was so intense that they cleared the room (cf. Clark 1997, 105-106).

Founded as the only club of its kind in Canada, Breslin's YukYuk's expanded rapidly throughout the 1980s. Journalist Andrew Clark provides this description of Mark Breslin:

His image for his critics in the stand-up community is that of inhuman tyrant. To them, Breslin has no feelings and no weak moments. He is a machine obsessed with his vision and his empire. He is constantly maneuvering to amass more power so he can use it to impose his will. Breslin is the godfather of comedy. Yet there is no comic in the country who did not once feel tremendous attachment to Breslin. He has moments of extreme generosity. He looks out for his brood. If it weren't for him, they would all be out of work, or worse. (Clark 1997, 80)

In addition to his well-documented narcissism, quick temper, and expectations of loyalty, Breslin's (near) monopoly over the flow of Canadian stand-up comedy has been the cause of much controversy over the years. Breslin controversially controlled competition with other clubs by demanding that Yuk Yuk's comics only work for his organization. The Yuk Yuk's clubs show majority Canadian comics and have staved off American comedy chains that have attempted to get a foothold in the Canadian market. This gives Breslin's company a great degree of control over Canadian performers. As Andrew Clark suggests, Yuk Yuk's is a paradoxical organization:

Ironically, despite its dedication to capitalist business practices, Yuk Yuk's operates on the inside as a very socialist institution. Yuk Yuk's does the comedian's thinking for them. The company plays mother and takes care of the grimy details. Comedians are told where to work, and when they are on the road they're told where to stay and where to eat. Their lives are laid out for them. All the stand-up has to do is show up at his gig. In exchange for this stability, comedians trade a slice of their independence. (Clark 1997, 101-102)

Through a near monopoly, Breslin has managed to control the growth of stand-up comedy in Canada. Although independent clubs exist today, for much of the '70s and '80s Yuk Yuk's was the only game in town. Comics that break Breslin's rules have allegedly been blacklisted

by his organization, and in 1990 the club was investigated by the Bureau of Competition (Clark 1997). Those who do well by Breslin's system tend to love him, those who struggle, tend to find it difficult to cultivate a stand-up career in Canada. However, it is notable that, when considered in relation to other cultural industries in Canada, such a monopoly over the control of cultural production is not particularly remarkable. The careful regulation of broadcasting and telecommunications in Canada has diminished competition in the name of cultural protection. In a sense, Breslin was simply getting for his organization the same protections that governmental policy gave to regulated cultural producers such as television networks. Both the CBC and Yuk Yuk's have at times held monopolies on cultural work in their respective fields, and both promote Canadian cultural sovereignty; the difference between these organizations is simply that Yuk Yuk's exists on the commercial peripheries of the cultural industries. Its monopoly is not mandated by cultural policy, but instead serves commercial purposes. While it is true that Yuk Yuk's uses majority Canadian talent (a good thing in cultural nationalist terms), this labour pool is also cheaper and easier to control than comparable talent from the US (a good thing in commercial terms) (Clark 1997).

Stand-up comedy never received the kind of government financial support that other art forms did. As an art form which emerged out of strip clubs and burlesque shows, stand-up was not an ideal candidate for government funding aimed at promoting a flourishing—and nationally oriented—artistic community. As Clark notes:

Comedy was absent from the list of arts considered socially redeeming enough to warrant a squeeze of cash. All comedy — by its very nature ugly, overtly sexual, offensive, and politically explosive — was left out in the cold. Comedians criticize society but offer no solutions. This makes them dangerous. Politically, funding comedy would have been suicidal because it risks offending too many constituents. [...] At the entry level, where so much funding was being given out in other arts fields, comedians were excluded, their trade considered low-rent and sleazy. (Clark 1997, 64-65)

This exclusion from patronage ironically offered stand-up a counter-cultural legitimacy. Lack of government intervention left stand-up comedy alone to develop according to its own principles. However, as the art form grew in popularity, it became increasingly evident to Mark Breslin and others that stand-up need not be an exclusively creative endeavour, it could also be a commercial success. Though stand-up avoided the potential artistic pitfalls of seeking legitimacy through government funding, the market—with a supply controlled carefully by Mark Breslin—became the final arbiter of comedic success.

With a string of comedy clubs across the country, Yuk Yuk's comedians were able to string together a living wage working as touring comics, as well as spend extended periods in their home regions. The ability to make a living as a comedian in Canada contributed to the development of a professional comedy culture. However, with so few large cities, a limited number of performers could be supported by this system. Some comedians needed to continue to move up and out of the touring club circuit. As with the comedians working in the US at the Improv and the Comedy Store, Yuk Yuk's comedians would eventually chase other types of comedy industry opportunities, often in the US. The link between Canadian comedy and US industry gatekeepers would be made by another institution emerging at the same time—JFL in Montreal.

### ***JFL/JPR***

JFL/JPR did not initially emerge as an American-style stand-up comedy festival. It was instead influenced by the variety tradition, with music, comedy, and other spectacular entertainments. The first French-language *Juste pour rire* was held over four days in 1983 with a budget of \$750,000. One year before, in 1982, Rozon produced a rock festival which was rained out and consequently a massive financial failure. He was forced to change

direction and decided to expand from a music only event, to a variety festival which included comedic acts. In the end, Rozon's festival became a humour festival because such an international festival did not exist; he wanted his event to be utterly unique (Beaunoyer 2007). Rozon realized early on that simply selling out Theatre Saint-Denis (where his headline act was to be staged) would not cover the full costs of the festival, so he sold television rights and records in order to maximize profits from his Gala shows (Beaunoyer 2007). Rozon was careful to maintain the rights to broadcast and/or otherwise reproduce and distribute the shows at his festival. This has turned out to be a very astute business decision, and has allowed him to sell the festival worldwide. Indeed, while studying *Just for Laughs*, I attempted to gain access to the CBC's video archives in order to view productions from previous years. However, it turned out that this catalogue is very incomplete. As the CBC does not retain the broadcast rights to the programmes beyond their original airing contract, copies of productions have not been carefully maintained by the broadcaster. Maintaining the broadcast rights to JFL/JPR performances has proven to be a very lucrative strategy and an important element of brand maintenance for the festival and Rozon's spin-off initiatives.

According to journalist and JFL biographer Jean Beaunoyer, Rozon sought out new, undiscovered talent. This was a gamble that paid off as some of these performers were then "discovered" at the festival and went on to stardom. This contributed a degree of symbolic capital to the festival as a hotbed for undiscovered talent. "Risk" became a dominant philosophy at *Juste pour rire*. Beaunoyer notes that the spectators at the first humour gala in 1983 were remarkably patient, generous, and good-humoured. They put up with the television cameras, the frequent breaks required of television production, and the oppressive

heat of the theatre in July with no air-conditioning—such public enthusiasm and support leads Beaunoyer to assert that the festival could not have been born anywhere but Montreal.

In 1985, the English language portion of *Juste pour rire* was launched. Rozon hired two inexpensive but promising American comedians to headline the English language galas: Jerry Seinfeld and Jay Leno. However, it was André-Phillipe Gagnon's rendition of "We are the World" and subsequent catapult to superstardom that marked the festival as a place where new talent could meet overnight mega-success. On November 8, 1985, Gagnon performed his song in front of millions of Americans on the *Tonight Show*. This cemented the festival's reputation as a great place to scout talent. Rozon was good at capitalizing on the industry interest that such success stories garnered. As journalist Laurie Stone notes of the festival in the late-1980s,

Three Canadian men, festival president Gilbert Rozon, thirty-three, Andy Nulman, twenty-eight, who books the acts, and Bruce Hills, twenty-six, who handles public relations, make all decisions concerning Just for Laughs. According to Glenn Schwartz, the festival's press agent, Just for Laughs, now in its sixth year, gathers performers from all over the world, acts chosen because they're the best and brightest available. Even before I arrive, I know this isn't true. Although the festival is nonprofit, supports a comedy school that pays and trains twelve students per year, and stages a number of free outdoor shows, its focus is commercial—it's the biggest supermarket for acts in the comedy circuit. (Stone 1997, 203)

As Stone notes, in 1988 HBO paid \$600,000 to shoot and broadcast the Galas, and the festival was supported by a \$6 million dollar budget made up with government grants, private sponsorship, ticket sales, and TV rights. While the Festival is non-profit, Rozon's side-venture Les Films Rozon, Inc allows him to profit from the event through television productions with festival content which are broadcast in Canada, as well as exported all over the world. Today le Groupe *Juste pour rire* holds annual festivals in Montreal, Toronto, and Chicago, produces television specials as well as live comedy shows, and has a talent

management company. Montreal remains the most important industry hotspot, and every year an industry conference, Just Comedy, is held in order to discuss trends in the comedy industry and create an environment where deals can be made and new talent discovered. According the festival's press office, JFL/JPR regularly attracts 2 million visitors, and the 2012 programme included over 250 artists and 400 shows.

How JFL came to command such a prominent position in the industry, like the creation of the festival itself, was in part a matter of having the good fortune to be in the right place at the right time. As Andy Nulman recalls:

In 1989, following Just for Laughs' increased media attention in 1988, someone from Disney sent a development executive to Montreal to poke around. The exec was impressed by an old buddy of mine, Lenny Clarke, a Boston native. Disney quickly signed him to a "holding deal" (that's showbizese for, "We'll pay you a bunch of money to prevent you from working for anyone else for a period of time, and we hope that someone in our employ can come up with a TV show concept for you before this period ends"). While most of these holding deals send talent on a long journey to oblivion, Lenny's deal miraculously led to an immediate, eponymous CBS sitcom. (Nulman 2001, 41)

This was the "tipping point" that started the comedy gold rush. This early industry presence was aided by a federal government grant that paid the expenses of American producers who made the trip to Montréal. As Andrew Clark notes, "it is particularly ironic that one of the few times the Canadian government has funded comedy, it was to help bring Americans up to Canada—especially since the express purpose of these Americans is to take the best back down south with them" (Clark 1997, 134). While this is ironic in cultural nationalist terms, such international promotion is entirely in keeping with the neoliberal, global focus of the creative economy. The growth of JFL paralleled general trends in post-industrial Montreal towards the development of a thriving cultural centre now framed as *the creative city*.

Industry presence at the event has continued to increase, and today, JFL hosts an annual

industry conference during the last week of the festival and includes a New Faces of Comedy showcase at Kola Noté which draws industry agents looking to stake their claim on a young up and comer. Similarly, young comedians are brought to JFL by their agents ready to schmooze and sell. Being seen and heard by the right people is a major preoccupation for early career comics looking for the brief financial stability of a holding deal. For all the talk of stand-up being subversive and counter-cultural, more often than not what these young comics really want is their shot at that banal prime-time genre—the television sitcom (Brownstein 1996). As Bill Brownstein, entertainment columnist with *The Montreal Gazette*, is fond of noting, “the featured comedians are well aware that everything is on the line at the Just for Laughs festival” (Brownstein 1995, C8). The most notorious success story in this regard is Tim Allen who in 1990 was a relatively unknown stand-up whose grunt-filled routine about absurd power tool upgrades and male domestic inadequacy were parlayed into ABC’s hit series *Home Improvement* just one year later (Nulman 2001).

Citing the hordes of executives, managers and talent scouts who make their presence known at the festival each year, Brownstein asks, “is the Just for Laughs festival designed to amuse local audiences, or is it essentially a talent showcase for the industry?” (Brownstein 1995, C8). Not surprisingly, the consensus appears to be that it does both. The industry executives need to see the audience reaction to the comics, and locals like being reminded that the American entertainment industry thinks their festival is important. Since 1990, no JFL reporting season has been complete without its share of articles about the importance of the festival to the American entertainment industry. Over the years, articles from *The Montreal Gazette* have included: “In search of sitcom stars”; “The art of the DEAL: Why le tout Hollywood is in Montreal for the Just for Laughs Festival”; “Fest is ‘Cannes of

comedy’: Montreal gig often make-or-break chance for stand-up”; “Checking out the talent: Top agents, managers and scouts from the world of comedy share some insights over lunch at Swartz’s”; “Just for Laughs festival now a must for international comedy scouts” (Lamey 2003; Kelly 2001; Brownstein 1995; Brownstein 1993; Brownstein 1992). In these articles, the local is valued in direct relation to the approval that it seeks from global, largely American, industry players. In this sense, it is a fairly familiar discourse, valuing Canadian comedic success in relation to the acknowledgement that it gets from the US.

In order to be invited to audition for JFL, comics must be scouted by the festival. This scouting occurs in comedy clubs across the country. Comics are then invited to audition for the festival, and those that ‘fit’ with the type of programming that JFL showcases are offered spots with varying degrees of prestige (ranging from small venue shows up to Galas). In order to be considered for JFL, comics must already be circulating within the field. Comedy clubs therefore act as gatekeepers to JFL, just as JFL acts as a gatekeeper to the entertainment industry in the US. These cultural intermediaries support and legitimize one another, as well as the dominant practices within the field. Most of JFL’s cultural capital has been bestowed upon it by industry presence, or at least festival and media discourses about this presence. As such, in order to maintain its position within the field, JFL must continue to pander to industry interests. This can alienate other festival attendees, such as comics who feel mistreated or audiences whose viewing experience is ruined by noisy industry members at the back of the club who have lost interest in a performer (Cass 2001; Woodrow 2001).

Like Breslin, Rozon made some enemies in the industry early on. In particular, Rozon’s dealings with the cut-throat US entertainment industry taught him an aggressive talent seeking style that many agents in Québec found off-putting. Rozon was in the habit of

approaching performers directly, rather than going through their agents. In an entertainment culture as small as Quebec's, this transgression was noted and resented. In hindsight, Rozon admits to the arrogance of his approach, one which unnecessarily caused tension and resentment with other industry players. Today, the festival is a major hub for both Canadian and International gatekeepers in the industry. The festival appears much more conscious of the management of these ties, and much of its cultural legitimacy is rooted in the continued presence of agents and executives. The ability to link Canadian performers with the international comedy industry remains a major draw for the festival and has made it an essential institution for Canadian comedians.

I have considered Yuk Yuk's and JFL/JPR in detail because these institutions were the earliest to take advantage of the US comedy boom, were the first of their kind in Canada, and have grown rapidly to become founding institutions in the Canadian comedy field. These organizations were active in creating links with the US entertainment industry and have contributed to the continental flow of performers. Emerging in the late-1970s and the early-1980s, Yuk Yuk's and JFL/JPR were also part of an emerging creative economy which formed under neoliberalism, and contributed to the commercialization and industrialization of art and culture.

Although they emerged at the same time, the distinct urban contexts in which these institutions formed ensured that in some respect they would be very different from one another. JFL/JPR took advantage of government grants and tapped into the well-funded, Québec system of cultural production. Meanwhile, Yuk Yuk's developed as a purely commercial enterprise, separate from the state-subsidized cultural industries. Yuk Yuk's, based in Toronto at the centre of Canadian cultural industries, was primarily national in

focus. Although Breslin did attempt to break the US market as Joan Rivers' talent booker on her short-lived late-night talk show, for the most part his focus was in developing and controlling a national comedy club circuit in Canada. In contrast, JFL/JPR was always internationally focused, and Rozon has always booked a significant percentage of his talent from France and the US. The underlying anti-Americanism of much of English-Canadian culture is not found in Québec, where it is English-Canada that is the cultural imperialist to be feared.

Both organizations, however distinct, have led the way for others like them, and have branched out into related endeavours elsewhere in the comedy field. For example, both Rozon and Breslin have been heavily involved in the development and governance of comedy schools. Both have launched talent management companies attached to their primary comedy brands. Both have, through their strong wills and uncompromising visions, alienated other industry participants at one time or another. Perhaps most importantly, the Canadian comedy industry as we know it today has very much been shaped by these two organizations, and they continue to be defining pillars of the stand-up field.

### **Founding of the Field of Canadian Stand-up Comedy**

The field of Canadian comedy production, although relatively small, is a challenge to define in part because it often operates on the peripheries of other, more structured, cultural fields. The performance of stand-up comedy—club comedy—has affinities with, and often bleeds into other performance types like theatre or music. On the other hand, recorded stand-up is sometimes incorporated into the more heavily regulated cultural industries of film and television production. Stand-up performance flows constantly between these disparate types of creative performance, while the bulk of performance inhabits neither of these spaces (club

stand-up being a fairly distinct performative practice). This inconsistent over-lapping complicates the framing of the social space that stand-up comedy inhabits. The stakeholders within the field include: comedians (performers and writers), agents, festivals, and clubs/theatres. Slightly less directly implicated in the daily production of stand-up are radio, television, news media and publishers. Politicians, policy makers, public intellectuals and academics also play a peripheral role in the production and reception of stand-up. All of these agents act as cultural intermediaries, dictating the flow of cultural goods within the field and delimiting how cultural capital is acquired. This type of performance art is unique in that, through their routines, comics are constantly bringing the conditions of their work lives to the surface. Comedians let their audiences in on the “tricks of the trade,” the banality of constant flights and regular hotel use, and the performative nature of their jobs. However, while production and labour processes are not hidden in stand-up as they are in other types of work, this does not mean that the structure of the field is transparent. In fact, this demystification of comic labour gives the impression that production is more transparent than it actually is.

Similarly, the role of cultural intermediaries such as JFL are frequently acknowledged by comics on stage and in media, but the actual impact that such institutions have on the structure of the comedy field is often obscured by the dominant discourses that they themselves reinforce. According to Keith Negus,

cultural intermediaries shape both use values and exchange values, and seek to manage how these values are connected with people’s lives through various techniques of persuasion and marketing and through the construction of markets. (Negus 2002, 504)

In the comedy industry, intermediaries control the dominant discourses about Canadian humour in order to control the flow of product. Comics are convinced that they must act through these intermediaries in order to reach their career goals, which are framed by those

who control the system. Comics who attempt to circumvent these intermediaries can face chastisement, ostracization and even expulsion from the comic community (Stebbins 1990; Woodrow 2001). Although the internet is increasingly being used to circumvent cultural intermediaries such as television network executives and talent agents, it is often still geared at connecting comics with other cultural intermediaries further up the line. When considering the gatekeeping function of intermediaries, it is important to avoid “the assumption that cultural items simply appear at the ‘gates’ of media or culture producing corporations where they are either admitted or excluded” (Negus 2002, 510). The field is already structured in such a way that certain types of individuals will arrive at these gates, many having been sent there via other intermediaries. In the next chapter, I delimit some of the major cultural intermediaries in the English-Canadian comedy field. I also offer a brief counter-example of the Québec comedy system, in order to illustrate some of the ways in which the cultural industries can thrive in small markets. Finally, I provide the example of comic Debra DiGiovanni as an illustration of media discourses about, and comedian movement through, the stand-up comedy field.

## **Chapter 4: Mapping of the Field of Cultural Intermediaries**

As a relatively small field, movement and production within Canadian stand-up comedy is controlled by a restricted and predictable group of intermediaries. In particular, opportunities within comedy clubs, training institutions, festivals and media are tightly controlled due in part to the limited comedy market, and in part to the tastes and expectations of the gatekeepers within each of these areas. These gatekeepers, or agents, help structure the field and compete for legitimacy within it. Stand-up comedians must learn to work within this system, often according to predetermined career trajectories. This can be a source of frustration amongst comedians as they develop strategies to navigate the field. As Harland Williams suggests, “my attitude is that I’m going to operate in the system and not give in to it. I’ll play the rules but not give in to them” (cited in Clark 1997, 242). Comics must learn to balance their own creative, personal and financial expectations with those laid out by intermediaries in the field. Although a certain degree of entrepreneurialism is expected of this creative workforce, too much independence can lead to career setbacks, or even derailments, if the comic burns bridges with important intermediaries. Like professional stand-up comics, intermediaries in this field earn their livings from the production of comedy. However, many of the established gatekeepers, or individuals with high ranking positions in major institutions related to comedy production, have much more stable and predictable careers than the average stand-up comic. Additionally, in the cultural industries, certain intermediaries are much better paid than the artists whose careers they have a hand in

controlling (Brault 2010). These unequal conditions create obvious power imbalances between artists and industry.

As Bourdieu (1984) suggests, taste is not an innate or essential qualification, but rather it emerges from social conditions and works to differentiate groups and reinforce cultural hierarchies. In the contemporary comedy industry, the individuals who decide who will get stage-time at clubs and festivals are essentially the arbiters of comedic taste. The comedy that audiences see has been prescreened according to the tastes, expectations and requirements of these arbiters, and the institutional cultures in which they work. This has resulted in, for example, CBC television's noted privileging of news parodists, or Yuk Yuk's' favouring comedians with a penchant for blue material (Clark 1997). While the advent of DIY cultures that utilize new media technologies to disseminate creative work is gradually changing the rules of the game, the system of comedy production in Canada has not been radically restructured by the capabilities of the World Wide Web. Comedians must still work through traditional gatekeepers in order to establish themselves within the field. Many of Canada's most established stand-up comics live and work out of Toronto, the primary Canadian hub for stand-up, sketch, and theatre.

Stand-up comedy is sufficiently specialized to ensure that the number of individuals and institutions involved in the field remains relatively small. As such, those who have attained the authority to mediate movement within the field exercise a great deal of power over the career trajectories of performers. Additionally, like many creative workforces, a large labour-pool of amateurs hoping to break-into the industry helps regulate wage expectations. Broadcast media, festivals, clubs, and training institutions control movement into and through the system of comedy production in Canada. They are dependent upon the

dominant discourses that structure the field, but also work to construct and reinforce these discourses. The constraints of the system of comedy production, while limiting in terms of innovation and career opportunities, are also often deemed necessary in order to protect Canada's relatively small market for cultural goods. Constrained as they are, opportunities for comics to perform in Canada exist largely because of the very institutions that also limit growth and movement. This paradox is considered in greater detail below. Following a detailed outline of the major intermediaries in the Canadian comedy field, I follow Toronto-based performer Debra DiGiovanni's career through its media representations in order to illustrate how a performer might move through the field and how their career is shaped according to the requirements of cultural intermediaries.

### **Mapping the Field of Cultural Intermediaries**

Stakeholders, or "cultural intermediaries," act as a link between the production and consumption of cultural artifacts (Negus 2002). For Bourdieu, this was the space occupied by the commentator or critic, the individual with sufficient cultural authority to dictate which objects ought to be accepted by the audience, and on what conditions. However, recent work in the field of the creative industries analyzing the spaces between producers and consumers has expanded this term to include any intermediary, including those who are engaged in framing the conditions in which artistic production takes place. David Hesmondalgh is critical of this conflation of Bourdieu's term with all intermediaries, arguing that:

the confusing array of uses to which the term has been put makes it a very poor starting point for an enquiry into the relationship between media and cultural production and consumption. We need a better specification of the division of labour involved in mediating production and consumption in culture-making organizations than that offered by Bourdieu and by those who have adopted the term 'cultural intermediaries' from him in these many different ways. (Hesmondalgh 2006, 227)

For Hesmondalgh, a more suitable approach would incorporate organizational sociology, historical sociology of culture, and a critical political economy of the media. This approach considers creative, technical and managerial workers and their roles in producing and framing cultural products. In my opinion, however, this approach is just as complex and far-reaching as contemporary uses of the concept ‘cultural intermediaries’ which remains useful for conceptualizing mediating forces within the cultural field. While I take Hesmondalgh’s criticism, I agree with other commentators that Bourdieu’s theoretical approach remains relevant in contemporary studies of culture (cf. Claessens and Dhoest 2010; Friedman 2011; Woo 2012).

That Bourdieu’s term did not consider mediating forces in the production of cultural artifacts can perhaps be attributed to his general lack of consideration of commercial cultural production, in particular the cultural industries (Hesmondalgh 2006). In much of his work, Bourdieu emphasized restricted production. Application of this work to large-scale production, such as that characteristic of the cultural industries, poses certain challenges, especially in relation to the market and financial legitimization. In Bourdieu’s theorization of the field of cultural production, internal discourses of legitimacy often correlate with product scarcity. However, in the internet age, there is simply no way of maintaining “scarcity” over creative work—especially in sketch and stand-up comedy which have thrived in this medium. How then does the comic produce legitimacy in the absence of scarcity? How might Bourdieu’s theory, in which cultural capital is inversely proportional to economic gain be applied to a contemporary practice that has, in a sense, always been commercial?

Within the context of the creative industries, the relation of cultural capital to economic capital is ambivalent and nuanced. In the cultural economy, canonic work can also

be a market success. New ways of defining cultural capital must be cultivated, and often, cultural intermediaries have a role in dictating legitimate culture. The contemporary field of cultural production is a complicated one. As Hesmondalgh argues, “there is now a huge amount of cultural production taking place on the boundaries between sub-fields of mass and restricted production or perhaps better still, that restricted production has become introduced *into* the field of mass production” (Hesmondalgh 2006, 222). In a sense, the division between restricted and mass production so instrumental to Bourdieu’s theory of artistic production is not easily demarcated in contemporary cultural production. In today’s cultural economy, it is simply expected that working artists will find some way of earning a living from their craft (although, given the number of artists living below the poverty line, this expectation is often not met) (cf. Brault 2010; Gregg 2005; Léger 2010). Cultural capital is no longer attributed simply to those whose work meets some non-market related artistic standard. Cultural capital is closely linked to *where* this income comes from and *who* the audience is. Certain demographics, approaches, and subjects within the market remain more legitimate than others; the definition of “selling-out” is not merely making money, but making money with a particular type of cultural product, geared at a particular audience. There are culturally *legitimate* ways to be a financial success in the creative economy. Cultural intermediaries are the individuals and institutions that implicitly and explicitly dictate these rules and norms. These may include passing through the right gatekeepers, such as The Humber College Comedy Program and Yuk Yuk’s, or adapting to unwritten “insider” expectations through unofficial apprenticeship within the comedy club system. These expectations speak to the acquisition of embodied and institutionalized cultural capital.

### *Comedy Clubs*

The live comedy venue remains the primary base of the stand-up comedy field. Most stand-up comics must enter the field via the comedy clubs, and they are generally expected to work the clubs for a period of time in order to gain experience and legitimacy within the field. Most talented comics are expected to leave the club touring circuit at some point in order to reap the rewards of more stable and lucrative work in the larger entertainment industry. Comics that wish to remain in live-stand-up can also be expected to attempt to break into the US where there are more opportunities to tour quality, urban comedy venues. Robert Stebbins' ethnography of Canadian stand-up provides this overview of the comedy club:

The comedy club is the heart of stand-up comedy, while the comics are its soul. It is in the comedy club that the majority of [comics] started their careers. Here they learned about the occupational subculture of stand-up comics. Here they discovered the highs and lows in their chosen line of work – what it is like to “kill” [...] and to “bomb.” (Stebbins 1990, 35)

The role of the club for both policing entry into the system, and reproducing occupational subcultures is substantial. Essentially, what it means to be a stand-up comedian in Canada is decided in the clubs. In her 2001 dissertation on Canadian stand-up, Anna Woodrow emphasized live performance, noting that even with the growth in mediated comedy, live performance will never be replaced because the interaction between comic and audience is absolutely vital to this comedic form (Woodrow 2001).

In the Canadian market, with few large urban centres and a great deal of sparsely populated space between them, the comedy club is a highly problematic form of comedy development and provision. Comics must spend a majority of their performance time on the road, often in unpleasant living conditions (Stebbins 1990). Furthermore, the cost of life on

the road often means that young comics spend more money than they earn. Toronto-based comic Jason Rouse in the documentary *The Next Big Thing* provides an example of such a problem. While looking over a notebook in which the comedian keeps meticulous records of his shows, he explains,

When I went out West, that was hell. I went on tour for over four weeks. I don't drink or use drugs. Alls I spent my money [sic] was on food and transportation. I was in the hole three-hundred bucks when I got home. Yeehaw Saskatoon. (*The Next Big Thing* 2003)

The touring-based club comedy system is an emulation of the American model. However, the sparse Canadian population makes this system very difficult to sustain. A national tour in Canada, consisting of a small number of major and minor cities in each province simply cannot compare with the hundreds of shows comedians can play across the US. Much like film box-office reporting where Canada is simply counted as part of the American domestic market, Canadian comedy tour dates for successful comics become an undifferentiated part of the North American flow of live stand-up comedy.

The relatively small Canadian market for comedy is essentially supported by the low-wage expectations of young comics. This is a general characteristic of workers within the creative economy where youth, entrepreneurialism and independence contribute to a labour force that is willing and able to accept low pay, long working hours, and often volatile or unpredictable working conditions (McRobbie 2002). A young comic's perseverance within such a system can be explained by their willingness to "pay their dues" while learning the business. The expectation is that the job will improve, becoming more stable and lucrative. However, the extent to which live stand-up in Canada can *ever* be a comfortable career is at best unclear, and at worst unimaginable.

Despite the fact that professional stand-up comedians often identify as “stand-ups” there is a remarkable tendency for these workers to seek out opportunities which will remove them from this system. The very creative freedom and lifestyle that draws amateurs through the open-mic screening process also repels them. From the moment many comics enter the world of professional stand-up comedy, their sights are set on obtaining non-stand-up related employment somewhere else in the comedy industry. Even in countries with much larger urban populations, the attitude that stand-up is a temporary employment on the way to greater things persists. UK comic Jimmy Carr complains,

The question I really dread in interviews is, ‘Well, what next? What about the sitcom?’ You don’t say that to anyone else with a job. You don’t meet a fireman and go, ‘Right, you’ve been a fireman for a few years. What next?’ I’m happy, I like this life. I like traveling round the country and writing my jokes. (cited in Moss 2009, np)

When Carr left public relations, his goal was to work in stand-up, not television or film. While he does supplement this work with hosting game-shows and award specials, he is adamant that stand-up remains his primary occupation. The difference between Carr and Canadian comics, of course, is that in the UK there is a sufficient urban population to sustain a primarily live performance based career. For comedians working in Canada, the comparably dreaded question is likely “when are you going to the US.” Passage into the US or film and television is part of the “pay-off” that years of working in clubs are supposedly geared towards. For many comics, this pay-off is simply never there. This delayed gratification discourse suppresses wages and encourages performers to engage in self-exploitation.

The comedy clubs control comedian access to live audiences. In Canada there have generally been two types of clubs: Yuk Yuk’s and everything else. Breslin’s influence is far-

reaching, and he has probably been the greatest gatekeeper to participation in the field of Canadian stand-up comedy. In Ontario, where Yuk Yuk's started, there are currently 12 Yuk Yuk's clubs. In contrast, there are only 8 non-Yuk Yuk's clubs, 4 of which are in Toronto (in contrast to only 1 Toronto-based Yuk Yuk's). Additionally, some of these "other" clubs, such as The Second City and The Rivoli, feature significant improv and sketch comedy components, as such they are not *primarily* dedicated to stand-up. There are also a number of alternative venues such as pubs and theatres that comedians can use. Often these spaces allow new "types" of comedians to enter the field. While the mainstream, comedy club audience (as well as comedy club talent bookers) might be slow to accept alternative performers and performance styles, some of these other venues can act as rich training grounds for edgy material. Notably, the Rivoli, now an important cultural intermediary in the Toronto comedy scene, was a fringe venue in the 1980s with great countercultural legitimacy (but marginal mainstream appeal).

Independent clubs and performance spaces also exist across the country. While Breslin remains a prominent gatekeeper in the industry, many comedians today are also able to succeed outside of the Yuk Yuk's system. In Toronto, where there are plenty of alternative comedy spaces, multi-purpose rooms such as those at Clinton's Pub and The Rivoli accommodate stand-up comedy once or several times a week. However, the role of these independent clubs within the system is not remarkably different from that of Yuk Yuk's. Stand-up comedians must tour, gain club experience, and engage in unofficial apprenticeships with veteran comedians before they can move up in the industry. As Anna Woodrow suggests,

This grueling right of passage for every comic involves putting in 'time', working lousy venues, learning the trade, and slowly inching one's way up to the more

respectable positions. Nonetheless, paying one's 'dues' is necessary on the road to becoming a member of the Canadian stand-up community. These 'dues' inherently demand some form of respect for the business and those who have come before. A mastery of the politics becomes necessary; an adoption of the lifestyle becomes routine; and adaptation to the unwritten rules and the structure becomes a tactic for survival. (Woodrow 2001, 26-27)

The social and community-based requirements of stand-up aid in the reproduction of certain individual characteristics within the field. Those who do not adopt the lifestyle—for example, smoking and drinking—will have greater difficulty engaging with their peers offstage (although, young, business-minded comedians increasingly eschew heavy alcohol consumption). Additionally, inexperienced comics must often wait for an established comic to draw them into their social network or offer career advice. These informal, socially based apprenticeships can, though do not exclusively, privilege comics whose backgrounds match those already working in the field. Audience expectations also impact the types of performers that will be featured in stand-up. Women have found it difficult to succeed in large numbers. Some suggest this relates to the power-position of the comedian relative to their audience. Mark Breslin has argued that “stand-up comedy is one of the last bastions of male heterosexual machismo in show business” (Breslin cited in Stebbins 1990, 105). Audiences can therefore be unreceptive to the aggressiveness required of female performers. This is, however, changing slowly. While comedians and other insiders are quick to blame “audience expectations” on the lack of accommodation of diversity in stand-up, there is a notable absence of acknowledgement of any kind of internal, structural biases that might also contribute to low levels of women and minorities in the field. Evidence of this can be found in the almost complete absence of discussions related to this issue in the many how-to books published on stand-up comedy (cf. Ajaye 2002; Murray 2010; Schwensen 2005). When the

absence of, for example, women in comedy is raised, it is often equated with societal or audience biases, but biases internal to the comedy industry itself are seldom acknowledged.

In the current system for producing stand-up comics, comedians must act as “cultural entrepreneurs,” responsible for controlling their performance brand, developing a portfolio, and, if possible, finding related comic work in other creative industries such as film, television, and advertising. In English Canadian stand-up, performers are non-unionized. Pay is negotiated individually. Early in the history of YukYuk’s, this produced high payscale variance, with performers skilled in negotiating contracts and/or favoured by Breslin obtaining higher remuneration. Newcomers are particularly vulnerable in such a system, as early-career creative workers tend to jump at the opportunity to engage in paid work, and don’t feel empowered to negotiate for better wages (Clark 1997).

The comedy club system is a major force in the development and maintenance of live stand-up in Canada. The comedy clubs enable performers to initially obtain regular employment, and offer a space to develop their acts. Performers develop material and work primarily in their own regions, but also leave home for extended tours in other regions. This provides access to a range of audiences. This is essentially the same club model that developed in the US in the late 1960s and early 1970s and continues to define the US comedy industry today. However, this system of talent development is not without flaws. Touring is exhausting, and often not lucrative. As such, eventually most comics attempt to either focus touring only on the most lucrative markets, or move into other work in the related cultural industries. As entry into the field generally must occur via comedy clubs, these organizations act as significant initial arbiters of taste, dictating the types of performers who are permitted to launch Canadian stand-up comedy careers.

### *Schools*

For most of the formative years of stand-up comedy in Canada, comedians were not “trained” in a related field in any official capacity. The choice to move into the field of stand-up comedy was often a diversion from university or some other unrelated career trajectory (Stebbins 1990). Although performing arts programs share certain characteristics with stand-up, and therefore offer a potentially relevant training space, most apprenticeship within the field has been unofficial, occurring in the green room and at the back of the comedy club during and after the show. The Second City in Toronto offers a multi-level training program for improv-based comedy, but this is more akin to sketch-troupe or fringe-style performance than it is to stand-up. In 1999, English-speaking comics were given the first institutionalized opportunity to train as stand-up comedians and comedy writers at Humber College in Toronto. According to the school’s website:

Humber’s two-year Comedy Writing & Performance Program is the only one of its kind in North America – in fact, the only one of its kind anywhere. With well-established working relationships with both Yuk Yuk’s International and Second City, the program is aimed at those who are serious about funny business and the business of being funny. Currently there are 111 students enrolled in the program. (Humber College 2007)

A far cry from the anti-establishment chaos of the Yuk Yuk’s shows in the basement of the Church Street Community Centre in the mid-70s, this new form of legitimization requires that comics bring entrepreneurialism and business savvy to the art of being funny; it requires organization, discipline and ambition. In addition to courses related to stand-up comedy performance, improv, and acting, students also learn business writing, video production, and scriptwriting, and are required to enroll in a number of general humanities and education courses.

According to Bourdieu, educational institutions monopolize discourses of legitimacy, in particular, they exercise “the power to grant cultural consecration” as well as offer “a system for reproducing producers of a determinate type of cultural goods” (Bourdieu 1993, 121). While all intermediaries engage in such reproduction, educational institutions do so explicitly. At the Humber comedy school, comedians are given both creative and business training. They learn about the comedy field, and how to work effectively within this established system. Through this institution, comedians can access other points within the comedy system, such as Yuk Yuk’s or Second City. A relationship with the comedy school confers legitimacy onto the comedian. Cultural intermediaries also overlap at this point, with many of the school’s faculty being part of other institutions, for example, Yuk Yuk’s founder Mark Breslin is on the school’s advisory board, and critic Andrew Clark is currently the school’s director. In a sense, the school further centralizes control of the Canadian comedy industry into the hands of a few. At multiple points within the system, the same people are deciding who is funny, what constitutes Canadian humour, and what career opportunities are viable.

The comedy school at Humber produces entrepreneurial comics who know the system and are prepared to work within it. They are part of the creative workforce whose positive associations with, as well as passion for, their work can allow exploitative working conditions to be overlooked (Holt and Lapenta 2010). As an instructor, Mark Breslin reinforces this emphasis on creativity at the expense of labour conditions:

I let the students know that comedy isn’t something you do, it’s something you *are*. If you do it right, with passion and commitment, you do it every time you order coffee in a restaurant, chat with a stranger on a bus or wait for death by lethal injection. You don’t need a stage, or even an act, to be a comedian – the opportunities are in each and every moment. Never mind the paycheck, I tell

them. Real comedy is more than entertainment. It's a calling, a religion, and you are one of its apostles. (Breslin 2000, 202)

Breslin's argument for artistic legitimacy to the exclusion of economic concerns taps into a dominant myth circulating in discourses on stand-up comedy, specifically that this type of performance is somehow more honest and pure than other performance types. Such a myth is reinforced by the perception that, "there are no perceptible differences in the personae of [...] stand-ups when they are 'speaking candidly' in interview situations, as opposed to when they are 'performing'" (Marc 1989, 17). That is, the stage personae cannot be easily separated from the individual. Instilling this all-encompassing artistic passion in young comics may produce the conditions for high quality, autonomous artistic work, but it also results in an easily exploitable workforce. The tension between, on the one hand, the need for legitimization through creative practice and, on the other hand, the need for a living-wage is characteristic of stand-up as it is for most creative work. This tension is particularly explicit in discourses about internet content, with some emphasizing the use of digital technologies to produce cheap, freely available content outside of the confines of commercialism and the market, and others concerned that the use of unpaid artists in online content is exploitative. Control over the production of French comedians in Quebec is similarly concentrated in the hands of a few. The Groupe Juste pour Rire wields the most control over young talent. An absence of amateur nights and the existence of a strong artist's union make breaking into comedy difficult. However, once a comedian breaks in, they have a much more secure career trajectory. Since 1988, L'École Nationale de L'Humour (founded by Gilbert Rozon in association with JPR) has been the primary route to a career in comedy for Quebec comedians. L'École nationale de l'humour was acknowledged by the Education minister in

1992-1993, and gained the right to provide college certifications to its graduates. In 1993, the school became autonomous from the festival.

For Bourdieu, educational institutions provide an important means of consecrating legitimate cultural knowledge and goods, as well as a critical space for the acquisition of cultural capital. With the creation of officially recognized post-secondary institutions and programs for the training of stand-up comedians, this creative practice gains cultural legitimacy. Stand-up comedy and comedy writing is no longer a deviation from some other educational trajectory. Although students in these programs generally must enter capable of being funny, the development of a curriculum around the profession of humour making suggests very clearly that there is much more to it than a natural ability to make people laugh. Certain skills and competencies can be learned, and students who undertake this education gain not only important insider contacts and an advanced knowledge of their field, but also the additional cultural consecration that such institutions are capable of conferring.

### ***Festivals***

Many Canadian cities feature comedy festivals which provide important opportunities for Canadian comics to obtain work and exposure, and which also act as a means of consecrating talent. In this respect, the annual Just for Laughs is by far the most significant festival for the comic's career. JFL/JPR was the first festival of its kind in Canada. Festivals launched since have been a response to its success, as well as the growth of festivals generally as part of the urban pursuit of the creative economy. Halifax and Winnipeg have popular and relatively visible festivals (as both are also filmed and broadcast on CBC), but JFL remains *the* place to be seen. For Canadian comics, JFL acts as one of the only opportunities to access American network executives and agents without crossing the border

(Woodrow 2001). Although JFL has always featured innovative sketch, fringe, and variety performers, the stand-up comedy featured at the festival is in many ways more normative than that found in comedy clubs throughout the year. The broad audience appeal of the festival, its focus on developing an internationally consumable entertainment brand, and its engagement with popular media require the humour at the festival to be much more far-reaching than an average night at a comedy club. To begin with, Gala shows are always recorded for TV; material must require minimal editing in order to meet the primetime decency requirements of broadcasters such as the CBC. Additionally, JFL attracts regular festival attendees – discerning patrons who have seen a lot of comedy and who have high expectations. The bar is higher at JFL, where only the most promising, talented, successful and/or innovative performers make the cut.

Media discourses about the international importance of JFL focus mainly on its role as a cultural intermediary and its ability to link artists to other cultural intermediaries rather than an emphasis on the quality of work, audience, and performance venues. It is all about exposure. Comics are well paid and get a relatively large quantity of stage-time in a short period of time. However, comics are under a great deal of pressure to hangout in the Hyatt lobby in order to schmooze with industry. This tension is voiced by comedian Shaun Majumder in his discussion of the Delta Lobby (a former base of operations for the festival):

The Delta Bar...it's really intense. [...] It gets a bit much sometimes, but ah, it's great. It's a great little place where you can meet people and hang out and have your face seen and from a networking point of view it's perfect. [...] If you spend too much time in there, it's gonna eat you up and get you all crazy. So you gotta know how to pace yourself in that space. And, ah, there's a lot of desperation in that space, ya know. A lot of, [...] it's just a lot of people trying [...] and if you don't meet the standard [...] if you don't drop the right bomb in there then it fills your insecurity even more than it already is.... (*The Next Big Thing* 2003).

The cost of drinking in the Hyatt Lobby (which has now replaced the Delta Bar as the main industry hang-out) is a point of great contention amongst performers. Cocktails and beer cost around ten dollars a drink, which is pricy by most standards, and positively exorbitant in relation to other Montreal venues. However, as the base of operations for the festival is here, it is an important social space to frequent. I did, on one occasion, see a young performer pull a couple of bottles of beer out of his pants, so clearly there are ways to participate in the party, without paying the price.

Comics spend much of their non-performance time attempting to be seen and heard by the right people. Because the career stakes are so high at JFL, comics can be distracted by the industry presence. American comedian Orny Adams is a good example of this. In 2001 he was so intent on impressing industry, that he disregarded the audiences at his club shows. He did not succeed in making them laugh but hardly took note of this, as he was too busy trying to sell himself to agents and producers (Cass 2001). The obvious irony of this is that by not performing well, he all but guaranteed that industry would not be interested in him. In an interview with journalist Dennis Cass, Adams admitted to spending much of the money he was going to earn at the festival prior to arriving, having bought three thousand dollars worth of new clothes to project the best possible image. In the end, he did not get the big break he was expecting. He left the festival no further ahead in his career, with his wages already spent (Cass 2001). For Canadian comedians, attempts by festival organizers to produce value by playing to industry interests can be alienating. The opportunities that the festival provides are valuable, but the emphasis on pleasing industry can leave the talent feeling marginalized. As Anna Woodrow has found, many comedians,

find the event a farce, put into place to serve the interests of certain producers, managers and agencies, but not the interests of the comedians. One comic

expressed it as a huge summer camp for the ‘industry.’ They get to take a trip together to Montreal, hang out, set-up internal deals for later, if lucky, get a huge bonus for discovering the next Jim Carrey. It is the dream of being discovered that encourages each individual comedian to return year after year, audition for shows, hope for a Gala, even when consistently disappointed. Nonetheless, the comedians’ relationships with JFL tends to be one of love/hate and exposes the clash between artistic freedom and market demands. Performers do not like to be treated as commodities, but hope one day to become famous, and hence a commodity. When one becomes a commodity, it is the ultimate sign of legitimation and mass acceptance. Once a part of the American market, the lifestyle (earnings, opportunities, popularity and peers) shifts dramatically from the former lifestyle in Canada. (Woodrow 2001, 33)

The paradoxical relationship between creativity and the market is a defining tension in cultural production. In the case of stand-up, this contradiction follows comedians throughout their careers. Stand-up comedy is something that is done for pay. The amateur system of open-mics and community theatres that support one-man shows act as training grounds for future professional comics. As a general rule, there are no lifelong amateur comedians—amateurs are usually actively engaged in making comedy their full-time career (Stebbins 1990). Even if the business of comedy can be off-putting, it is impossible to avoid for any comic who is serious about establishing a career. With the length of a typical comedy set being a mere seven to thirty minutes, a majority of work-time is spent on promotion and networking. The type of legitimation that comes with commercial success feeds the same need for validation that the laughing audience provides, and both act as markers of achievement.

JFL is currently a mandatory stop for any comic hoping to launch a comedy career both in Canada and abroad. Canadian stand-up comedians generally move to a major city such as Toronto or Vancouver, then attempt to get a spot at JFL. If they succeed here, they can be expected to make inroads into the US market. This is the very narrative set out by the NFB documentary *The Next Big Thing* written by cultural intermediary—comedy critic and

current director at Humber's Comedy School—Andrew Clark. JFL is supported by this validation system, and upholds its end of the bargain by continuing to draw a high industry presence to Montréal every summer. One potential pitfall of this situation is the extent to which JFL's brand image is linked to the American market. During 2010, industry interest in the festival appeared to be in decline, perhaps due to the sputtering US economy. Selling "fan" passes bolstered attendance at the otherwise under attended industry conference. Those interested in gaining access to industry insiders could purchase these passes, allowing them to attend many of the conference proceedings (though excluding them from industry "perks" such as club shows, networking events, and catered lunches). Having staked so much of its cultural legitimacy on industry interest, the loss of this interest is a substantial threat to the festival's self-image. This is an issue for cultural production in Canada generally, where careers, media, artifacts, consumption, import and export are all framed in relation to a global creative economy, especially the US entertainment industry.

Comedy festivals now occur in a number of major cities across the country, most notably JFL in Toronto, Halifax ComedyFest, Winnipeg Comedy Festival, and the Canadian Comedy Awards in Toronto. All of these events now have components recorded for television and offer an important opportunity for performers to gain national notoriety. Although none of these festivals offer the same opportunity to be discovered by the US entertainment industry as the Montreal event, they do draw large and diverse crowds and can greatly increase a performers audience base. Also, festivals are more likely to include multiple shows, so performers are able to get more experience, and possibly a larger paycheque for multiple performances. Festivals also offer an important social networking opportunity for Canadian comedians who might like to plan tours or other projects with other

members of the comedy community. Non-JFL festivals are probably more conducive to this kind of camaraderie as they are less industry focused and have slightly lower professional stakes.

### ***Broadcast Media***

Most Canadians who consume stand-up comedy do so via media, rather than by attending live performances. Mediated versions of stand-up comedy are therefore vital to the positioning of this performance type in relation to both audiences and future participants within the field. Ian Brodie argues that, in essence, all stand-up is mediated, being at the very least dependent upon a microphone for voice amplification (Brodie 2008). This makes approaching the study of stand-up comedy through a media studies perspective very relevant. Furthermore, as Robert Stebbins points out, even “the future comic does not become enamoured of his or her art through contact with live performances. The fact that nearly all comedy is presented in places that sell liquor prevents most youngsters from hearing it live until age eighteen or nineteen” (Stebbins 1990, 63). It is therefore via popular media that most become familiar with both the craft of stand-up comedy and some of the major performers in the field. Increasingly, it is the internet rather than radio and television that serves this function, but a number of notable programs continue to thrive in the digital age.

The CBC has a history of supporting specific types of comedic work. The formative years of CBC television programming were dominated by variety shows that gave funnymen like Wayne & Shuster stable employment. The role of the CBC during the 1970s as a training ground for creative workers hoping to someday make it big south of the border is emphasized throughout the CBC documentary *Comedy Gold*. As Alan Thicke reminisces,

those of us who came to the States in the '70s would be asked "well, what do you do?" And I said, "well I write special musical material and sketches and monologues, on the . . . ." "No, no, no, what do you do, in particular?" And the answer was, in fact, yes we did everything 'cause there'd be one or two on a staff [at the CBC]. (*Comedy Gold* 2005)

The Canadian comedic variety show produced a valuable commodity: the multi-talented writer/producer/performer who could be easily exported to the United States. Most people, when given the opportunity to leave, did. This resulted in a situation where Canadians were performing American culture to Americans. For example, Lorne Michaels created *Saturday Night Live* (1975-), a topical sketch humour showcase that has come to be symbolic of the New York comedy scene. Similarly, *Hee Haw* (1969-1993), popular with Americans for decades, was created by Frank Peppiatt, a former writer for *The Big Revue* (1952-1953). But what made them Canadian? The debate is ongoing as to whether or not being born and/or raised within a particular national context, especially one so diverse as Canada, can really constitute an essential and inalienable cultural perspective. In *Comedy Gold*, Martin Short, Lorne Michaels and Steve Smith discuss some of their first memories of television – American variety shows being broadcast out of Buffalo. What it means to be Canadian, or rather, what cultural experiences produce a Canadian, seems difficult to pin down, even within the context of Canadian comedy. The success of these performers has in part fed the mythology that Canadian comedians have made disproportionate contributions to the US entertainment industry.

The role that the CBC has played in the Canadian comedy industry is an ambivalent one. On the one hand, some of the most popular Canadian television programs have been sketch comedies aired on the CBC such as *The Mercer Report* and *This Hour has 22 Minutes*. On the other hand, this programming has been limited to satirists, parodists, and relatively mainstream or uncontroversial performers. This has been a source of great

frustration for stand-up comics that do not fit the CBC brand, but would nonetheless like to forge a television career in Canada. Harland Williams has expressed frustration at not being given the opportunity to create a more stable career in Canada:

I wanted nothing more than to advance my career with my people, so to speak. The CBC had a casting office that was across the street from Yuk Yuk's Downtown club. I never heard of anyone from that office calling to tap into the new talent. In the six years I was at Yuk Yuk's no one came to see what was going on. No agents, no one. So I never got invited to the dance. (Clark 1997, 244)

Williams, like many other stand-up comics who do not fit the institutional culture of the national public broadcaster, is excluded from a significant artery for the development of a career as a nationally recognizable performer.

Today, the CBC operates as a hybrid public/commercial broadcaster. It must compete with private broadcasters for advertising revenue, but has not generally been able to use cheap and popular American programming to do this. The expectation that the CBC produce high-quality, culturally relevant programming, but without adequate financial support to ensure this “has placed unique structural constraints on cultural production at the national public network” (Tinic 2010, 98). These “structural constraints” have led to the privileging of certain cheaply produced genres, such as sketch comedy (especially news parody), which tend to draw high ratings, and also fulfill the broadcaster's mandate to provide distinctively Canadian programming that reflects regional and cultural diversity. The privileging of news parody over other forms of comedy excludes many Canadian comedians from a prime-time spot at the CBC.

As a dominant gatekeeper, the CBC excludes (and excludes itself from) a large portion of the comedy field. As illustrated in the Harland Williams quotation discussed above, this is frustrating for comics as, in many instances, the CBC remains the most

important space for the production of distinctly Canadian television. This exclusion perhaps relates back to the danger of comedy noted by Clark. Stand-up comedy continues to have the potential to be vulgar and offensive. In order to be made suitable for a national audience it must be screened. Carefully orchestrated stand-up programming, such as that offered by JFL, does fit well with the CBC's history of variety comedy provision. However, even the carefully screened Gala productions warrant caution on the part of the broadcaster. An undated briefing note distributed internally at the CBC prior to the airing of *Just for Laughs* and *CODCO* warns that viewers may find some of the comedy-programming offensive. However, it also notes that,

Although the CBC realizes there may be some who find this material offensive, the majority is expected to find the material irreverent, contemporary and funny. [...]

It has been historically proven there is a large audience out there for this type of programming – as evidenced by the success of programs like SCTV, Monty Python, Saturday Night Live – and CBC is attempting to offer the best in Canadian humor. (CBC Network Public Relations nd)

While concern about the acceptability of comedy programming is evident, the broadcaster has also been a long-time supporter of JFL. Initially filmed as one-off specials, *Just for Laughs* became a six-week mini-series in 1988, described in a CBC Communications document as, “Hardly censored, kinda raw and sometimes mean, JUST FOR LAUGHS will change your life! Well, not really. But it will make you laugh. We promise” (CBC 1988). Here, the broadcaster specifically courts the potential offensiveness of the programming, and the pleasure that such material offers viewers. In many respects, JFL is an obvious program for the broadcaster as it is strong variety programming that is cheap to produce, and by its very nature addresses issues of contemporary national interest.

The relevance of the program to the Canadian content mandate of the broadcaster is evident in CBC press releases, including one that exclaims, “More than CANCON, it’s canned com! (CBC 1993). The broadcaster shows a vested interest in the conflation of comedy with national identity: “The world may think of Canadians on skates, snowshoes and snowmobiles, but we know better. Our proudest traditions are two-fold: our excellence on ice and our ability to make people laugh” (CBC 1994). Such a conflation of hockey and humour with national identity plays very much into the broadcaster’s interest, given the fact that the CBC is the primary purveyor of both of these programming genres in Canada. Comedy is now a significant component of the CBC’s branding strategy. Slightly controversial programming, such as *Just for Laughs*, can even offer the broadcaster an “edge” and open up a younger viewership—a strategy that has also resulted in the production of *The Hour*, hosted by a former *Much Music VJ* and a rare example of successful late-night talk show programming in Canada. The partnership between CBC and JFL is long-standing. Over the three years that I attended JFL, CBC TV Comedy head Anton Leo always attended, and always sat on a Just Comedy panel. Notably, in 2011, JFL hired Leo as VP of Television Development and Production (CNW 2011).

Programming such as *Just for Laughs* has offered Canadians broad, television-friendly comedic themes, as well as national exposure for Canadian performers. However, in terms of variety programming with the CBC, comedians are more likely to find work on radio than on television. CBC radio features a number of shows with comedian hosts and guests, *The Debaters* and *Laugh Out Loud* being obvious examples. The former is hosted by Montréal based comedian Steve Patterson who famously declined the opportunity to participate in NBC’s *Last Comic Standing* because the show conflicted with a headlining

performance at Ernie Butler's Comedy Nest in Montreal. He chose Canadian stand-up over American television, a decision that shocked many. Working for a popular program at CBC radio gives Patterson a degree of national notoriety and career stability that continues to be rare in Canadian stand-up. *The Debaters* itself is a program that features stand-up comics debating (humorously) pertinent current issues. It is, again, the type of comedic programming most privileged by the CBC, being a comedy/current affairs hybrid. *Laugh Out Loud* provides a national digest of current directions in stand-up comedy. It features excerpts from performances recorded at festivals and major cities across the country. It works on similar grounds as the televised recordings of JFL. That is, content that is already being produced for a live audience is recorded and converted into content that is suitable for another medium. The initial production of the content has essentially already been planned, staged and, most importantly, paid for by the tickets sold for the live show. Purchasing broadcast rights and recording live events is cheaper than developing original programming to be produced exclusively for radio or television.

The broadcast channels held by the media conglomerate Bell Media (formerly CTV Globemedia) currently offer a range of opportunities for comedians to work in variety programming and now rival the CBC as purveyors of national humour. CHUM/City, part of the CTV conglomerate since 2006, has been successful at using young, comic talent in order to attract a youthful, urban audience for channels such as Much Music. The Comedy Network, also controlled by CTV, carries *Comedy Now*, which features lengthy sets by Canadian stand-up comedians and is an important career milestone for comics in terms of establishing a national career and showcasing their TV friendly material. CTV also carried *Corner Gas* from 2004-2009. This sitcom, developed by comedian Brent Butt, was a surprise

hit for the broadcaster. As a genre, the sitcom has not generally been successful in Canadian television production. *Corner Gas* succeeds specifically because it is not an emulation of an American sitcom; it wears its “Canadianness” on its sleeve (Beaty and Sullivan 2006, 80-81). However, one way in which it does draw upon the American model is in the development of a television programme around the personae of a stand-up comedian. This has proven very successful in the US and is perhaps a good way for Canadian broadcasters to take greater advantage of the wealth of comic talent dwelling in clubs across the country. CBC’s program *Mr. D*, featuring comedian Gerry Dee, is another example of this programming strategy. While a majority of prime-time content on CTV remains American, supporting a show like *Corner Gas* helps the network meet its Canadian content requirements, while also gaining symbolic capital for supporting domestic comedy production. Since 1997, the Comedy Network has featured comedy programming in Canada. Although comedians and comedy actors were initially optimistic that a channel dedicated to comedy programming would increase the amount of comedy television production in Canada, Comedy Network proved to be another venue for the rebroadcast of American programming. Although some original programmes have been developed, a majority of broadcast time continues to be dedicated to reruns of popular American programmes such as *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, *The Daily Show*, and *Big Bang Theory*.

When these channels do feature Canadian programming, like the CBC they benefit from the relatively cheap production value of comedy, especially variety comedy like sketch and stand-up, as well as its relative popularity with viewers. Other than news and sports, variety comedy is one of few Canadian television genres that succeed in the ratings-game. Comedians whose style fits with the institutional cultures of these broadcasters are able to

supplement their work in the comedy clubs with work in radio and television. This in turn increases the comedian's national notoriety and allows them to draw larger crowds to their live shows. If a comedian is working in radio, television or film, this information is often used to introduce them to the audience. The more impressive their mediated accomplishments, the more respect they receive from audiences and peers. Comedians whose cache is "distinctly Canadian," like Ron James, fit well within this system. However, performers at this level often desire, or face a great deal of pressure, to move on to more lucrative work in the US. We see this with a comedian like Shaun Majumder, whose role on *22 Minutes* puts him at the pinnacle of Canadian television comedy. Despite this success, his focus remains resolutely on breaking into the US. In the 1950s, Alan Young, got his break in the US playing Wilbur Post alongside a horse named Mister Ed. Prior to attempting to break the US market, Young had a successful radio programme with the CBC. When asked why someone with his talent was working in Canada and not the States, Young reportedly responded: "Aren't I good enough to stay in Canada?" (Clark 1997, 48-50). While opportunities for work in the Canadian comedy industry have grown steadily since the 1970s, comedians, audiences, and intermediaries continue to perpetuate this southward trajectory. As an economy of scale, such a move remains an obvious one. Performers that are able to remain in Canada must find a way to insert themselves into the institutional culture of networks such as the CBC and CTV.

Broadcasting plays a vital role in the dissemination of Canadian comedy to a national audience. However, the Canadian broadcasting system has not made particularly strong use of the comedic talent being developed in the comedy club system. In *Canadian Television Today*, Beaty and Sullivan argue that the dream of a single national broadcaster able to

represent and speak to a diverse Canadian culture is a self-delusion. In fact, this imagining has been used to the general detriment of Canadian cultural production. For example, the authors point out that rather than strengthen Canadian content, private broadcasters have used nationalist and protectionist rhetoric to diminish competition by pressuring the CRTC to deny broadcast licenses to certain international networks. However, on the flip side, these same broadcasters have used the rhetoric of individualism to justify the provision of cheap American programming (Beaty and Sullivan 2006, 40-47).

According to Beaty and Sullivan, the relative health of Canadian culture can be measured according to two main “yardsticks”:

The first, the economic yardstick, favours competitiveness, an open marketplace, and technological innovation. The profitability of the broadcasting sector is the key metric here. The second, the cultural yardstick, clings to a belief that culture can be somehow contained and artificially propped up under the guise of authentic national experience. The ‘quality,’ however defined, of the Canadian cultural experience is the gauge in this instance. *The central issue is that both of these yardsticks take as their point of comparison the American cultural experience. In that sense, then, Canada is automatically set up for failure in the eyes of its own cultural mavens.* (Beaty and Sullivan 2006, 33-34)

As we will see in other cultural production models, such as those in Quebec, it is possible to construct a field that does not take as its primary guide the example of the US entertainment industry. While arguably all cultural production exists in dialogue with the globally dominant American field, this is not exclusively a relation of emulation as has often been the case in English Canada. Beaty and Sullivan make the rather controversial claim that, as cultural protection has only made it easier for broadcasters to import American programming, the solution might in fact be to open the broadcast system up more widely, allowing international programming to serve an increasingly diverse population. That less cultural protection might not necessarily lead to increased Americanization is difficult to accept, especially for cultural

nationalists dedicated to the use of regulation in the (losing) battle against the influx of American popular culture. The close cultural relationship between Canada and the US has contributed to the integration of the comedy fields, with the much smaller Canadian field highly dependent upon the US economy, production, and labour flows. When great comedy is produced domestically, it seems almost to exist despite the chronic lack of opportunities for our cultural workers. Miraculously, some persevere and even succeed in the very precarious Canadian broadcasting system. When film and television produced in Canada are national and/or international successes, they are generally framed as exceptional. Shows such as *The Kids in the Hall*, *The Red Green Show*, and more recently, *Kenny vs Spenny* and *The Trailer Park Boys* have all hit a popular nerve, speak to a specific Canadian imagining, and succeed internationally. This is a challenge for media production in small markets, but one that Canadian broadcasters are occasionally successful in meeting.

### ***Internet***

Advances in global communications technologies are also having an impact upon the balance of forces between dominant cultural intermediaries in the field. In the three years that I attended Just Comedy (2008-10), an industry conference held as part of the industry programming at JFL/JPR, one topic dominated conversation and worked its way onto every panel regardless of intended theme: the Internet. Of particular concern is the question, will the Internet kill network television? If not, how can networks make money off of Internet content? Increasingly, it would seem, the standard sitcom model on network television is coming under scrutiny. Content producers have been able to circumvent the risky process of pitching pilot concepts to the major networks, opting instead to make low-production value videos that can be posted to the Internet. Once a video goes viral, creators can expect it to be

picked up by a network, or more likely a specialty cable channel. It seems unreasonable to continue investing resources in the production of pilots when new comedic content is constantly being made available free of charge. Furthermore, entrepreneurial comics can surpass many established cultural intermediaries such as comedy clubs and festivals through online content, linking them directly with a mass audience. Currently, their chances of “making-it” as a successful internet content producer are not necessarily better than if they moved through the established system of gatekeepers. The internet is full of content that receives little or no attention. However, content that does make it into high circulation on sites such as FunnyOrDie or YouTube will access audience numbers that many networks—since the growth of cable-TV splintered the mass audience—no longer attain. This is not to exaggerate the impact that internet comedy has had on television consumption. Many of the traditional gatekeepers have grown to take advantage of this new form of content dissemination. Although panelists at Just Comedy often emphasized the changes in content provision brought about by the internet, they were also quick to point out that the TV sitcom can still thrive, as has been shown by the success of *Two and a Half Men*, a fairly prototypical prime-time comedy.

Humorous internet content often fills a different niche than the traditional sitcom. Internet content has low production value and limited narrative development. It is based upon unique characters in humorous situations. The most successful videos are those that are only a few minutes or even seconds long. This type of internet content has essentially become “waste time at work” content. The emphasis on high production value that is generally characteristic of network-TV simply does not apply for internet content where high-definition media files can be difficult to view depending upon internet speed. The internet

generation has shown that quality comedy is important to them, but production value can be sacrificed in exchange for ease of access and circulation. The genres of stand-up and sketch comedy are particularly well suited to internet programming as they tend to be consumed in short “clips” and their enjoyment is not heavily dependent upon high production value or the quality of the image.

In the US, successful comedy website FunnyOrDie was founded by a number of commercially successful comics that wanted to open up a partially non-commercial space for comedy production. The financial rewards are limited, but writers for the site praise the creative potential of such a production framework, and rue the day that money can be made from, and therefore will interfere with, online content production (“Funny or Die Panel” 2009). However, it should be noted that the site itself is supported by the larger entertainment industry in as much as the actors, directors, and writers who participate in free content production are able to do so because they also earn money as actors, directors, and writers on other projects unrelated to the site. FunnyOrDie acts both as creative outlet and as self-promotion, with celebrities who successfully engage in humorous or parodic representations of celebrity or popular culture also gaining legitimacy as artists who are willing to work for little financial gain on a good project and who are able to laugh at themselves. This participation in unpaid comic labour contributes to enhanced cultural legitimacy for the performer.

Even in the US where the number of large cities make a touring stand-up career relatively sustainable, most comics continue to attempt to break into film or television. While attending Just Comedy at JFL/JPR, however, I was astonished to find that statements made by industry representatives participating in the three-day conference did not support many of

the dominant narratives about scouting and development that I had seen represented in media prior to attending the event. Scouting certainly occurs at JFL, but very few undiscovered comedians generate major industry buzz with a successful run at the festival. According to Andrew Clark, a “herd mentality” dictates industry behaviour. The two or three comedian’s whose style or material is “hot” are pursued aggressively, while all other types of comedians are largely ignored (Clark 1997, 138). Bruce Hills, Director of programming, notes that agents and producers are constantly looking over their shoulders to see what their competitors are doing, suggesting: “they’re more concerned about missing than finding” (Clark 1995, 48). Canadian comedians ready to move up in the comedy food chain must pass through the festival. The pressure that comics place on themselves, as well as that exerted by their agents and the media is immense, and comedians who fail to capitalize on the networking opportunities available to them at JFL can set their careers back. The elephant in the room is that the cultural and symbolic capital of the festival, and the justification for repeated, regular industry attendance is implicitly under siege. If networks now seek stars and content from the comfort of their homes and offices by scouting the internet, the entire system of recruitment via holding deals and pilot seasons (the very methods that justify industry presence at JFL) is increasingly an outdated one.

Notably, however, many participants in the field continue to use the internet as a complement to broadcasting. In fact, I would argue that performers primarily use the internet in order to build a fan base and get scouted by cultural intermediaries higher up in the production chain. So, a performer no longer needs to perform at Yuk Yuk’s or be seen at JFL to get a network deal, but can be scouted online through self-produced webisodes. A good example of this in the Canadian sketch comedy troop Picnicface. This groups consists of 8

members and is based out of Halifax. All are sketch comedians, comedy writers, and stand-up comics. Group member Mark Little won the JFL Homegrown Comic Competition in 2009. In 2007, the group uploaded a video to online comedy site FunnyOrDie. After receiving the nod from site founder Will Ferrell, the video eventually went viral and landed the group a television deal with the Comedy Network in 2011. However, after only one season, the program, *Picnicface*, was cancelled reportedly due to disappointing ratings. In a *Globe and Mail* article following the cancellation, *Picnicface* member Scott Vrooman said, “We’ve created a show that works better on television than anywhere else. We spent years building this thing, and if nobody wants it then it will die” (cited in Molotkov 2012, R1). Despite having an active online fanbase, the group appear reluctant to return to online video production. Their goal in uploading video content to the web was primarily to acquire a television deal. If Vrooman’s suggestion that the program “will die” without a TV deal is to be believed, then this remains their primary goal. This illustrates the extent to which online comedy is an extension of the pre-existing comedy field, and while it has altered some of the ways in which performers reach their audiences and gatekeepers seek out talent, it has not succeeded in restructuring the field. Traditional gatekeepers continue to be important to the development of comic careers.

### ***The Francophone Comedy Industry in Québec***

Although this dissertation focuses primarily upon English-Canadian stand-up, it should be noted that things work quite differently in Québec. The cultural industries are significantly more developed in this province than in the rest of Canada; as such Québec offers a unique example of cultural production in a small market. The performance of stand-up comedy itself emerged relatively late in French Québec. Although other types of variety

performance were popular, the American-style stand-up that dominates the comedy field today was not widespread until the late 1980s when performers reached a level of English language proficiency that enabled them to watch and imitate US performers (Stebbins 1990). Unlike in the rest of Canada, these performers were not relegated to the peripheries of the cultural industries, but developed within the larger framework of state intervention into francophone culture. While JPR and its related institutions (such as the national humour school and the humour museum) were initially developed with limited state intervention, the performers that pass through the festival system are generally well integrated into the larger field of cultural production within Québec. Even in the context of cultural events that draw mainly on private sponsorship, government support for the arts and culture in Québec plays a significant role in maintaining high-quality, regular programming through festivals, institutions, film and television. As Simon Brault notes in his essay arguing for the inherent value of supporting art and culture: “Québec grants more money by far to culture in Canada than any other province: its expenses per capita are three times greater than those of Ontario or British Columbia” (Brault 2010, 31). Notably, this investment was initially supported by federal institutions such as Conseil des arts, l’ONF, and Radio-Canada (Paré 2010).

That the work of stand-up comedy in (French) Québec is better integrated into the larger system of cultural production is evident at the most basic professional level. As Patricia Bailey, writing for CBC.ca notes, “Standup comics are simply another shining constellation in the thriving Quebec star system. Although there are only a few hundred comedians in the province, they take up a great deal of space, because there are so many outlets for them” (Bailey 2007, np). In Quebec, stand-up comedians are eligible to join L’Union des artistes (UDA) (Stebbins 1990). Their craft is therefore included in the

performance arts in a way that Anglophone comedians have not experienced. While it is certainly the case that comedians working in Canada can be unionized as actors, the Canadian comedy club system has so far succeeded in preventing large-scale unionization of their workforce. In the early 1980s, comedians attempted to organize a strike against YukYuk's, however, unionization did not gain momentum. Stebbins notes that the independence and individuality of the art of stand-up might make this kind of formal organization difficult to realize. This was also evident in the US comedy industry of the late 1970s where, despite a relatively successful comedian strike in LA, unionization of the stand-up workforce was not seriously considered or even perceived as viable. In effect, stand-up comedians have always been the type of entrepreneurial cultural producers currently characteristic of workers in the creative industries. Why then have performers in Québec been able to organize so effectively? Unionization has long been strong in Québec's film and television industries. I would argue that given the significant integration of francophone humorists into this production system, it is reasonable that the benefits accorded to performers by the UDA were extended into the field of stand-up performance.

These basic differences between cultural production in French Quebec and the rest of Canada render discussions of both systems challenging. As Beaty and Sullivan suggest in their study of television in [English] Canada:

it should be stated quite clearly that it is difficult if not altogether impossible to discuss the situation of Canadian television without separating out the Quebec experience. Unlike the rest of Canada, where audiences for indigenous Canadian programming are consistently small and where the debates about identity are usually framed around the question of whether one exists at all much less how it would be defined, Québécois television is a vibrant but somewhat insulated cultural industry. (Beaty and Sullivan 2006, 7)

Quebec's cultural isolation (due mainly to being a francophone population in an anglophone environment) has rendered its inclusion into discourses about Canadian culture problematic and challenging. Many scholars of Canadian popular culture simply acknowledge the cultural distinctiveness of Quebec, and then remove their own analyses from it, opting to surrender such a study to specialists of Québec culture. In all fairness, cultural production in Québec is different. Quebec, more so than any other province, provides financial support to cultural production, cultural workers and cultural infrastructure (Brault 2010). In 1961, at the start of the Quiet Revolution, Quebec was the first province to appoint a minister of cultural affairs (Paré 2010). Quebec also has a long history of supporting economic internationalization. This focus has been part of a strategy for cultural sovereignty whereby Quebec pursues its cultural and economic interests directly with other nation-states (Paquin and Chaloux 2010).

While recent shifts in notions of global citizenship and the “creative economy” have led many other provinces and large urban areas to pursue greater support of culture, this investment has often been undertaken with primarily financial objectives in mind. Cultural production in Quebec has not been an exclusively economic pursuit. However, in the minds of many, there remains a clear distinction between the public function of grant-based artists and the investment function of commercially successful entertainers. Simon Brault, CEO of the National Theatre School of Canada, was criticized for including both grant-based and commercially successful performers in his editorial calling for an acknowledgement of the intrinsic value of artistic work, especially in times of economic crisis. For Brault, the humorist is an artist “able to make us think with intelligence and talent,” and is deserving of respect and praise on this basis, regardless of the commerciality of his/her work (Brault 2010, 68-69). Although the ideological divide between high art and mass culture remains

entrenched in some fields, the support of cultural production in Quebec has generally engaged with popular culture just as it has with high culture. In spaces where governments are intervening to sustain a national culture under threat from external forces, it is popular culture and mass media that are of foremost concern, hence the Canadian policy obsession with broadcasting and communications technology, and the support of French language television and film production in Quebec.

Francophone humoristes are well served by the thriving system of cultural industries in Quebec. In her discussion of the vitality of Quebec's comedy tradition, journalist Patricia Bailey remarks, "Comedians are the hottest commodities in the Quebec entertainment industry: they host awards galas, write and star in movies and sitcoms and peddle cars, cellphones and print media." In relation to other types of performance, such as dance, theatre and singing, standup comedy has also grown rapidly. Between 1997-2001, stand-up grew by 260%, while other types of performance grew by only 40% (Bailey 2007, np). Public interest in standup is also evident from the notoriety of *Les Olivier*, the Quebec equivalent of the Canadian humour awards. Unlike their English Canadian counterparts, however, *Les Olivier* are not handed out in obscurity at an industry event little known to the public, but are awarded at a televised gala, which in 2007 drew 1.5 million viewers (Bailey 2007, np). Humoristes in Québec are part of a well-integrated cultural production system that combines live performance, variety television, and film. We can see signs of this type of integration forming in English Canadian comedy as well. However, within the Canadian system, opportunities for established comics are limited. This is not the case in Quebec where humorists are able to work across a range of well-established industries. Comedians certainly

leave Quebec, but this is generally to tour other francophone countries, then return to the province to continue working within the field of variety comedy.

As in the English Canadian comedy field, cultural intermediaries in Québec dictate the scope and direction of comedy and comedians. *Juste pour Rire* (JPR) is the most significant gatekeeper in this regard. While the Canadian system developed US-style comedy clubs, live comedic performance in Québec developed mainly as one-nighters held in bars, theatres, and colleges. That is, rather than impose a new system of comedy provision, intermediaries in Quebec drew upon cultural consumption practices already established in related fields. Woven into the larger fabric of summer festivals that are an unmistakable part of summer life in the province, the comedy festival has thrived in both English and French comedy worlds. However, because this system does not support amateur nights, initial entry into the field is difficult. Comedians must generally pass through the National Comedy School (Woodrow 2001). Although JPR has removed itself from the administration of this institution, it remains the most significant means of obtaining widespread exposure. Not only a summer festival, JPR supports tours and one-nighters throughout the year. JPR is the base of a star system that produces comic talent for television and film. That comedians are highly recognizable and have such a range of work opportunities spread across several industries makes comedy a relatively stable career when considered in relation to other types of cultural work. The utility of comedians for advertising contributes to this stability as many performers act in commercials and host corporate events (Bailey 2007, np).

This is not to say that the system of production in Québec's cultural industries is without shortcomings. As is the case for most work in the cultural economy, professional comedy can be a precarious career. Like any other cultural field, the system of comedy

production in Québec includes cultural intermediaries whose interests and expectations may have a disproportionate impact upon movement within the field, and the comedic products available to spectators. Humorists in Quebec are even less diverse than those in the rest of Canada. As journalist Patricia Bailey observes, there is a certain ubiquity of comedians who “are white males with the same maniacal grin and women-are-from-Mars-men-are-from-Venus world view” (Bailey 2007, np). Quebecois filmmaker Jacob Tierney has criticized a similar lack of diversity in cinéma québécois, remarking that it is too nostalgic, insufficiently multicultural, and excludes too many groups from *le rêve québécois*. Put more bluntly, his argument is that young Haitians living in Montréal are not likely to see themselves and their lives reflected in the films of Luc Picard; he suggests that it is the responsibility of artists and cultural producers to re-imagine and reengage with Québec society (Coulombe 2010, np). The strength of the Quebec cultural industries is linked to a dedication to cultural production that has its roots in a nationalist project. As such, certain types of production and performers have been privileged. This portrayal of Quebec culture is increasingly rendered problematic as subsequent waves of immigration diversify urban populations.

With a population of just under 8 million, Quebec is at a disadvantage in the production of popular culture. Film and television, expensive to produce, generally have very short shelf lives and new products must be constantly churned out. According to Robert Aird, a teacher at the École nationale de l’humour, the production of popular culture in Quebec operates extremely efficiently (Bailey 2007, np). As such, there is no shortage of work for Quebec comedians. As critic Patricia Bailey suggests,

Quebec’s film, TV and advertising industries are voracious consumers of comic talent [...]. Unlike in the United States and English Canada, budding Quebec *humorists* don’t have to duke it out for years in seedy clubs before getting a break; the school’s [École nationale de l’humour] year-end show does a province wide

tour, including a stop at Just for Laughs. Gilbert Rozon, the founder of the festival and one of the most powerful men in Quebec entertainment, is on *L'École*'s board of directors. (Bailey 2007, np)

Despite the fact that the Quebec market for popular culture is smaller than the rest of Canada, a unionized comedy industry thrives. Comedians can expect to remain in province and earn a living-wage while also balancing film and television comedy careers.

### **Mapping the Field: A Consideration of Debra DiGiovanni**

As an illustration of how a performer moves through, and between, dominant cultural intermediaries, in this section, I consider Toronto-based comedian Debra DiGiovanni. This performer has won 'Female Stand-Up Comic of the Year' at the Canadian comedy awards three times since 2007, most recently in 2011. She appears regularly on Canadian television, maintains a busy touring schedule as a headliner, and has made inroads into live and televised comedy performance in the US. I consider DiGiovanni in order to offer a basic sketch of the field as a performer moves through it. The delimitation of the field, in this case stand-up comedy, can be approached through the in-depth consideration of a performer. Taking up a particular case offers deeper insight and detail, and begins the work of mapping the field—their movements between gatekeepers and related media providing the outline of the field in which they are situated.

In order to provide a basic mapping of DiGiovanni's career, I draw upon the comedy listings and articles of major Canadian newspapers for the first ten years of her career, from 2000-2009. This includes the publications *Toronto Star*, *Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, *Ottawa Citizen*, *Montreal Gazette*, *Winnipeg Free Press*, *Province*, *Vancouver Sun*, *Calgary Herald*, and *Edmonton Journal*. The analysis includes any references to "Debra DiGiovanni" in entertainment listings as well as articles. I analyzed this data qualitatively, using

interpretation rather than an analysis software. This data is not an exhaustive listing of all of DiGiovanni's performances and media coverage over the first ten years of her career, but rather a snapshot of work in major cities which garnered some form of mainstream newsprint coverage, either in simple comedy listings, or more involved features and interviews. My goal with this analysis is to show how the cultural intermediaries with which the performer is engaged change overtime, as well as the impact that some of these intermediaries have on her level of media coverage. It is a sketch of a performer at work within the field of Canadian comedy.

DiGiovanni's comedy career began in 2000 in Toronto. At this time, she was working in pubs and small entertainment spaces such as Tim Sims Playhouse, the cabaret room at the back of Second City. Over the next four years, she was a regular feature of the Toronto comedy scene, gradually moving into larger and more prestigious venues. She was part of a recurring show at Clinton's, a pub with a separate multiuse performance space in the back, and later at Alt.COMedy Lounge in the back room at the Rivoli. The Rivoli Theatre brings with it a degree of symbolic capital as it was, for a time, the centre of countercultural comedy and music. Most notably, the Kids in the Hall frequented the Rivoli stage prior to being scouted by Lorne Michaels and being given their television show. In 2002, DiGiovanni won Best New Standup at the Canadian Comedy Awards. In 2005, DiGiovanni landed a spot as an opener for Russell Peters on his cross-Canada tour. This allowed her to quit her day job and pursue comedy full-time. This also meant that her name was appearing more regularly in the Canadian media, as it was attached to the tour.

In 2006, DiGiovanni was increasingly becoming a recognizable performer, not only from her work with Peters, but also due to her role in the popular Much Music television

programme *Video on Trial*. At this time, some of her comedy listings go from simply her name, to more detailed descriptions of her career milestones and her comedy style. Bill Brownstein, long time comedy critic for the *Montreal Gazette*, declares her as his “critic’s choice” in a comedy listing for her show at Ernie Butler’s Comedy Nest. As an important cultural intermediary in the Montreal comedy scene, this critic’s consecration suggests that DiGiovanni’s upward career trajectory should be expected to carry on. In Toronto at this time, she continues to play at the Rivoli, but also has shows at the Laugh Resort and larger venue theatres. She now tours comedy clubs regularly including Ernie Butler’s and Bourbon Street West in Montreal and Absolute Comedy in Ottawa. Her media roles also increase during this time. In 2007 she begins appearing more regularly in TV listings for the Comedy Network and CBC television. She plays a range of venues, from comedy clubs to theatres. She also participates in a number of charity shows each year, not only in her hometown of Toronto, but in other cities such as Winnipeg and Edmonton. At this time, she begins to be a feature of news stories (in contrast to being a minor mention in stories about someone else). After been cut from NBC’s *Last Comic Standing*, she is interviewed by the *Toronto Star*. This is the first time in her career that her career in and of itself becomes a newsworthy story. Working for NBC also got her a two-year visa which she can use to work in the US, an opportunity that many comedians hope for, and that she took advantage of with increased US touring. The amount that DiGiovanni is featured in the Canadian press has increased regularly over the first ten years of her career, with 2009 being a non-stop year for the performer as she crisscrossed the country with headliner stints at some of the top comedy clubs in the country, played regular shows at the Rivoli and a number of other theatre and bar-style venues in Toronto, was featured at a number of JFL shows, garnered a Gemini

nomination for individual comedy performance, and was featured on Canadian television on Much Music, as well as the *Halifax Comedy Festival* on CBC and *Plastic Makes Perfect* on Slice. In addition to regular shows advertised in local comedy listings, she is also gaining press coverage for television specials, Just for Laughs appearances, and awards nominations. The more prestigious the cultural intermediary, the more extensive and frequent the media coverage, and her television appearances, such as on NBC's *Last Comic Standing* or Much Music's *Video on Trial* are often included in her show description.

With this brief sketch of the development of DiGiovanni's career, I hope to illustrate the extent to which the dominant intermediaries discussed throughout this chapter form a field which enables talent identification, development, and consecration. The field is at times highly localized, in DiGiovanni's case this is southern Ontario (mainly Toronto), but also stretches out to include major cities throughout Canada. The flow of comedians is also, necessarily, continental, with DiGiovanni dropping into the US when opportunities present themselves and intent on cultivating a greater presence in this market. Notably, her 2012 DVD *Single Awkward Female* was recorded at a live show in the US, not in Canada. This is likely an attempt to position herself more clearly as a comedian with a US fan following and a burgeoning US career. In the case of the Canadian comedy field, dominant discourses, expectations, norms, and notions of 'common-sense' push certain individuals along certain trajectories. Additionally gatekeepers feed one another and reinforce the system of gatekeeping by obeying its rules and logic. Hence, agents continue to push their comics through the club system towards JFL, which in turn produces the conditions for talented performers to integrate into global (albeit mainly US) cultural labour flows. DiGiovanni succeeded in navigating the comedy field and internalizing its career trajectory expectations.

She has trained at both Second City Improv and Humber College. She has headlined in comedy clubs across Canada and the US, although a majority of her shows are in Ontario. CBC, CTV/Comedy Network, and Much Music comprise the bulk of DiGiovanni's television work. She is a regular correspondent on MuchMusic and Much More Music, including a series lead on *Video on Trial*. She has starred in two *Comedy Now* specials aired on the Comedy Network, and has been featured on the CBC as part of *Just for Laughs* and *Halifax Comedy Festival*.

As a Canadian comedian, Deb DiGiovanni has made-it. She is a popular live comic as well as a well-known variety television personality. Yet, as her participation in NBC's *Last Comic Standing* suggests, she is attempting to penetrate the American market beyond the comedy club circuit. While debating American comic Judy Gold about the need to "make-it" in the US, DiGiovanni said the following about her own, distinctly Canadian career:

I'm Deborah DiGiovanni, an award-winning comedian. I'm on Canadian TV almost an annoying amount—I know it. And yet I can almost guarantee that my opponent had to google me. Now this is not a slight against Ms. Gold. But instead it's a depiction of how you haven't made it in the entertainment industry until America says you have. And of course when I say make it, I mean, the kind of success that allows you, like, to shop without sales... (*The Debaters* 2009)

DiGiovanni's understatement of her own expectations for fame and fortune in the US, specifically that success to her means the ability to buy regular-priced consumer goods, paints a rather dreary picture of the position of Canadian performers. A similar sentiment is expressed by Laurie Elliot in the documentary *the Next Big Thing*. Standing in her cramped apartment kitchen she looks into the camera and mopes, "I just wanna make a living, man. I don't wanna live in a box." In terms of the financial rewards expected by Canadian performers, it would seem that the bar is not that high.

After ten years in the industry, DiGiovanni has risen to be one of the top comics working in the country. She is a recognizable headliner, host, and TV personality, and has been well received by comedy critics. However, like most mid-career comics, it is unclear how much further upward the trajectory can go. Consider this backhanded compliment for DiGiovanni from National Post writer Kevin Baker in 2007 following her stint on *Last Comic Standing*,

The great thing about Deb's appearance on Last Comic Standing was seeing someone escape Canadian TV's culture of parasitism. Before winning a spot on LCS, Deb was a fixture on MuchMusic's Video on Trial. On that show, wisecrackers mock music videos, which is sad instead of funny, because what young entertainer dreams of getting on TV to hack on Beyonce's latest hump-and-holla? Not one.

Video on Trial is just one of a bunch of Canadian shows that feed off American shows: Canadian shows such as eTalk, Star Daily, and ET Canada, where dazzling personalities like Kim D'Eon and Rosie Edeh are required to act excited about Grey's Anatomy, Tom and Katie, and Josh Groban. To watch is to gape at the vast waste of talent. (Baker 2007, WP2)

So, for Baker, it is exciting for a Canadian to break onto American television, but not to be featured on a Canadian television programme that seeks to emulate American television.

Notably, however, *Last Comic Standing* did not remain the most prestigious element of DiGiovanni's bio for long. Her media tagline quickly returned to Much Music's *Video on Trial*. The more recent and more widely viewed Canadian programme makes her much more recognizable to potential audiences than a brief appearance on a US reality television show, despite this US work possibly rendering greater symbolic capital. While Baker is skeptical of the quality of Canadian television work that DiGiovanni has succeeded in landing, it is important to acknowledge that the coverage of her career found in comedy listings and newsprint articles increases with this work. As a comedian, your name is your brand, and the more recognizable that name becomes, the greater your audience draw can be. DiGiovanni is

now a go to commentator for a number of newspapers including *Toronto Star* and *National Post*, she maintains a blog and tweets regularly on topics both banal and professional. In short, she has been very effective at inserting herself into a broad range of media. This has brought her to the point of being a successful mid-career comic in Canada. Although she was a series finalist on *Last Comic Standing*, and has played a number of live shows in the US, she has yet to break the American comedy market in any major way.

Although opportunities for stand-up comedians to work in Canada have steadily improved since the introduction of comedy clubs in urban centres in the late 1970s, the field remains constrained. The relatively sparse population density of most regions makes touring, club-based comedy difficult to sustain. Most movement within the field continues to be modeled upon the assumption that skilled comedians will eventually be exported to the US. Canadian comedy, in this sense, acts as a training ground and feeder system for another, larger, more lucrative market. Innovation within the field can be risky and challenging, as it requires the ability to imagine new audiences and changing preferences that may occur in the future. This is obviously a challenge to cultural intermediaries whose positions within the field are often protected through reproduction rather than innovation.

This chapter has outlined the primary cultural intermediaries in the English Canadian comedy industry. I have offered the example of Debra DiGiovanni's career as an illustration of how performers move between gatekeepers, how success is defined according to certain milestones (such as performing at JFL, getting a part on a Canadian television programme, or getting a break in the US), and how media reinforce this system of consecration through their coverage. In essence, I have laid out the field as I see it, and against which the subsequent analyses take place. As was the case in Bourdieu's theorization of the literary field, the

Canadian comedy field is both a field of forces and a field of struggle. Although my analysis has emphasized the structural elements that frame career trajectories through particular gatekeepers, this should not be taken as a dismissal of the agency that creative workers also exercise in the development and promotion of their creative material, professional persona, and ultimate career outcomes. In chapter five I consider the relations of force and struggle further as I discuss comic labour and the growth of the creative economy. Drawing upon theories of humour, cultural production, and cultural labour, I offer a new perspective on the field of stand-up comedy in Canada, as well as larger issues related to the creative economy and popular culture in Canada.

## Chapter 5: Comic Labour in the Creative Economy

In *Cultural Work: Understanding the Cultural Industries* (2003), editor Andrew Beck bemoans the lack of scholarly attention paid to the labour conditions of the creative workforce. In particular, he notes that while the sociology of work is a growing field of interest, this focus has not moved rapidly into current considerations of the creative economy. Beck's collection includes essays on labour in such cultural industries as popular music, film and television, but does not address stand-up comedy or any related comic performance. The absence of a comedy chapter from this text is notable as, in his introduction, Beck draws upon a comic performance by the late Bill Hicks in order to illustrate the evils of marketing, in essence reinforcing, and even substituting, his own arguments with lines from the humorous routine. So, while humour is deemed a rich explanatory text, the conditions of its production do not merit further analysis in the edited collection. This exclusion is unfortunate, as stand-up offers unique insight into cultural labour in the creative economy. Comedians discuss the conditions of their work constantly, on and off stage; their comedic material often contains references to the *work* of stand-up comedy. Not infrequently, routines start with: *on the plane ride over here; last night at the hotel; the club/town I was working last week...* as the comic text revolves around the comedian's real-life as a working comic on the road and in strange cities. Their experiences, ambitions, disappointments, frustrations, and achievements are re-worked into performance material that offers insight into the preoccupations of the working comedian. In short, stand-up comedy is a unique form of creative work because so much of the comedian's persona and

routine revolves around the disclosure of their working conditions. The *work* of stand-up is thematically significant to many comedians, and offers a critical perspective through which to consider cultural labour in Canada.

Additionally stand-up in English Canada occupies an ambivalent position in relation to artistic practice and industrialization. That is, the club scene is not really a part of the regulated cultural industries, nor is it an artifact of grant-based, artistic production. It is a commercial entertainment monopolized in most cities by one or two clubs. Comedians have little control over their own performance conditions, yet also lack the protections and financial stability that come with heavily regulated, and sometimes unionized, work in film and television. This tension is generally characteristic of creative work. As Léger argues,

The work of the vast majority of artists, sustained by the desire for social mobility, economic reward and cultural consecrations, is alienated by the symbolic authority of demand. The realization of this means to treat oneself as an object of technocratic administration, a condition in which the supply of creative services, information, affect and experience addresses producers as rational, self-regulating and entrepreneurial individuals who condition themselves according to norms of production that minimize risk and maximize self-interest. (Léger 2010, 564)

The working conditions and career expectations of the stand-up comic illustrate these same tensions. Definitions of success are clearly correlated to the celebrity of the performer, and their being appreciated by *paying* fans. Although artistic parameters such as respect amongst peers also play a role in defining “success,” the relation between stand-up as a creative practice, and stand-up as cultural labour is an ambivalent one.

Because much of the style of stand-up comedy is conversational (despite being a monologue) and observational, the line between performance and lived experience is blurred. Additionally, most interviews in the popular press focus as much on the comic’s ethnic/national origins, career trajectory, and future projects as they do on the actual material

that the comic is promoting. While most comedians have a “stage-character,” this persona often draws heavily on the actual personality, demeanor and lived experiences of the comic (Woodrow 2001). In Canadian stand-up comedy, there are two thematic areas that are particularly useful in delimiting the field. These are discourses related to the *work* of stand-up and discourses about ethnic/national/cultural/class origins of the performers. These two subject areas are not specific to Canadian comedy (they are also common in both American and UK comedy), nor are they the only discourses that circulate on and off of the stage. They are, however, useful foci for the study of the Canadian comedy field and offer insight into the framing of comedians and their comedic work, as well as the relation of comedy to discourses on identity. I consider these areas in detail below to provide a clearer picture of how stand-up comedy blurs the lines between personal and professional, often foregrounding “backstage” details like work conditions and personal information such as family background—disclosures that are often reliant upon generalizations about gender, race, and class. In the subsequent examples, I draw primarily upon observations made at JFL between 2008-2010, as well as re-broadcast versions of JFL performances, and interviews appearing in popular press.

One aspect of comic labour that I hope to make evident is that, like any other entrepreneurial endeavour, it is at times banal, predictable, and repetitive. Comedians on the road will stay in the same types of hotels, eat at the same generic restaurants, and regurgitate the same sets with minor locale-specific adjustments. It is a job like any other. This mundanity conflicts with romanticized visions of stand-up comics as manic clowns onstage, and depressed, embittered recluses off-stage. This is precisely the image of the comedian that Mikita Brottman presents in her discussion of the “psychopathology of humour.” Her book,

*Funny Peculiar: Gershorn Legman and the Psychopathology of Humour* (2004), even includes a second-hand account of JFL which characterizes the participants as desperate, naïve, and depressed:

A journalist friend of mine who regularly covers “Jest for Laughs,” [sic] the Annual Comedy Festival in Montreal, describes the atmosphere there as one of great bitterness, generated in part by nightly stand-up performances notable for their barely repressed anger and jealousy. Sitcom producers and club organizers will often attend the festival on the lookout for new television stars or regular acts for their clubs. Inevitably, this search leads to all kinds of dark envy and backstabbing, enhancing the general feeling of psychopathy in the air. The morning seminars, according to my friend, are sparsely attended, since most people seem to be sleeping off hangovers caused by evenings of binge drinking. Every night the clubs are packed with miserable, hostile comedians drowning their sorrows in booze and repeating the same jokes and stories every few hours to any sucker who will listen. In the early hours of the morning, wherever you go, you can spot a lineup of once-almost famous, aged Borscht Belt comics leaning drunkenly against the bar, their toupees askew, still high from their moment in the spotlight, sharing age-old showbiz tales with young comedians naïve enough to be impressed. (Brottman 2004, 109-110)

Such a depiction offers a romanticized, tragic portrait of the comedian. While it is psychoanalytically satisfying, it is not particularly fair to generalize that *all* comedians exhibit such “psychopathology.” This oversimplification ignores the professionalism and congeniality found within the field. Many comedians now attend educational institutions in order to learn their craft, picking up professional skills and entrepreneurial attitudes along the way. The “morning seminars” to which the author refers are the morning sessions of the comedy conference. While I would agree that they tend to be sparsely attended, in all honestly the same could be said of many academic conferences. It would seem that this does not offer a clue to the unique psychopathology of humorists, only that morning panels at conferences tend to have thin audiences. Alcohol consumption is absolutely a factor in a stand-up comic’s career, and certainly the industry has had a bad history of drug abuse and related deaths. The work shift for a comic can run well into the morning; at JFL I was able to

attend shows until after 2am, and comics would congregate following these late shows to talk shop, socialize, and network. However, not all comedians drink, and the social atmosphere of the festival is not *essentially* a destructive one. Many performers appear to cope very well with the social pressures of their chosen trade, and the sex, drugs, and rock n' roll atmosphere of the stand-up comedy field in the 1970s and 1980s is very much in opposition to the kind of creative entrepreneurialism and business savvy that performers are currently expected to bring to their careers. Evidence of this new attitude towards the professional comedian can be seen in the Humber College comedy school curriculum, which includes business writing and portfolio development courses.

Irregular hours and the blurring of social and professional time is characteristic of creative work, and is not an adequate habitude for the elaboration of a theory of psychopathology in professional joke-tellers. It is against such exaggerated analyses of humour and humorists that I consider the actual conditions of comedy production, through creative and professional discourses, offering sobering insight into the cultural norms and labour conditions that are acknowledged and negotiated by professional comics in their work lives. In contrast to Brottman's analysis, I found comics at JFL to be very mindful of the professional requirements of their participation in the festival. In the afterhours party spaces of the festival, networking was always evident, and I often observed young performers half-engaged in conversations with peers, while their eyes darted around the room, checking who was present, and who might be watching them joke and socialize. They were conscious of being seen and heard by the right people in these "backstage" spaces. In the following section, I elaborate on the neoliberal field of power which frames the contemporary comedy industry. I then expand upon my suggestion that comic performances offer insightful labour

discourses, drawing primarily upon observations made at JFL. Finally, this chapter considers comedian Shaun Majumder as a case study illustrating identity and labour discourses in comic work and in the framing of the professional comedian's media persona.

### **Creative Economy, Stand-Up and the Neoliberal Field of Power**

The field of power in which stand-up comedy emerged is framed according to a neoliberal cultural and economic perspective. As such, neo-liberalism has shaped much of the production of this performance art. The impact that neoliberalization has had on the production of art and culture has been considered by Bourdieu in some of his more recent work. In *Firing Back* (2003), Pierre Bourdieu laments the impacts of neoliberalization on social, political, and cultural life. He argues that under neoliberalism,

the new mode of production maximizes profit by reducing payroll through layoffs and the compression of wages, the shareholder being concerned only with stock market value, on which his nominal income depends, and with price stability, necessary to keep his real income as close as possible to the nominal. Thus has come into being an economic regime that is inseparable from a political regime, a mode of production that entails a mode of domination based on the *institutions of insecurity*, domination through precariousness: a deregulated financial market fosters a deregulated labor market and thereby the casualization of labor that cows workers into submission. (Bourdieu 2003, 29)

This insecure and deregulated labour market is characteristic of the work that takes place in the creative economy that has emerged under neoliberal globalization. Notably, the alignment of creative work with the process of neoliberalization was not a great stretch. Creative work has long been unstable. The artist, with a work life characterized by financial uncertainty, is already accustomed to navigating the terrains of casual, temporary, and contractual work. This has only intensified as the creative industries have moved to the centre of neoliberal policy initiatives that celebrate culture and creativity as the driving forces of economic regeneration and urban renewal (Léger 2010; Murdoch 2003).

In his study of creative work, Léger points out that a defining fantasy of neoliberalism is the expectation that the cultural economy will “make up for” the economic declines of other sectors such as manufacturing and agriculture (cf. Miller et al 2005). Léger argues that,

For good and bad, cultural production, associated with creative thinking and innovation, has been conflated with new industries, mostly in the area of communications technology, and deemed a catalyst for economic growth. The name that neoliberal policy-makers have given to this new approach to cultural administration is the creative industries. (Léger 2010, 559)

Léger points to the irony of cultural work being framed as a driving force in the economy when so many cultural workers experience such economically precarious lives (Léger 2010). Far from being a lucrative and prestigious career trajectory, most artistic work is characteristic of the marginality and instability of the service sector (and in many cases, artists unable to earn a living wage from their craft work in the service sector). If creative work is replacing other industries such as manufacturing, it is not being conferred the same level of stability and predictability that these other industries offered their workforces. The cultural worker is a creative entrepreneur, whose precarious movement within the industry is difficult to identify and track. Jan Marontate and Catherine Murray have argued that this characteristic of creative work makes policy formulation for the support of workers particularly challenging:

This is no small part due to the very nature of entrepreneurial ventures in these fields, marked by rapidly changing tastes, fluctuating seasonal demand, and career patterns that involve intermittent and concomitant part-time employment and the participation of substantial voluntary workforce [...]. (Marontate and Murray 2010, 333)

Cultural workers have therefore found themselves in a curious position, with their field increasingly promoted as the key to a thriving economy, but their labour conditions very much as precarious as they have ever been (Brault 2010; Hesmondalgh and Baker 2010; Léger 2010). In the past, this has been the primary incentive for stand-up comics to move out

of live performance and into “cultural industries” such as film and television; however, this work is increasingly also contractual and unpredictable.

If we consider comic labour in particular, there is a great disparity between expected career outcomes and actually existing opportunities. Comics accept precarious working conditions as part of their “right of passage” into the industry. This acceptance is based upon the expectation that these early sacrifices will “pay-off” with the improved working conditions and significantly better pay that accompany being a respected and well-known performer. However, most never achieve this. At the entry level, the creative labour force is flooded with passionate, young people willing to engage in “self-exploitation” and willing to work for pleasure rather than adequate compensation (Hesmondalgh and Baker 2010). The creative industries are therefore “built upon workers being motivated by the promise of one Big Job being right around the corner” (Neff et al cited in Hesmondalgh and Baker 2010, 12). The risk of unemployment and poverty is justified as an “investment” in the creative worker’s long-term career. In this scenario, there is a blurring between pleasure and work, with the maintenance of boundaries between work life and private life eroded as socializing becomes social networking. This is also why creative people are drawn to “cultural centres” such as Toronto and Montreal.

When considering stand-up comedy in relation to discourses about the creative industries, there is indeed a tension between the creative practice of humour making (doing what one loves) and the notion of cultural labour (the need to be paid for your work). In this field, the boundaries between culture and the economy, producer and consumer are often blurred (Deuze 2007). Additionally troubling is what Mark Deuze considers the inherent “masochism” of cultural work such as that related to the media industries which

paradoxically feed on both innovation and the formulaic reproduction of products known to have mass appeal and please advertisers. For those who do not achieve market success, it is difficult to achieve a living wage, and many cultural producers are forced through economic circumstances to leave the field. The notion of “art for art’s sake” does not adequately consider the necessities of human survival. In their study of creative work in Canada, Gollmitzer and Murray note that in recent years, many governments have rushed to consider the potential windfalls of investing in the creative economy:

policy-makers seem to be, most of all, concerned with the questions of how to profit from the creative industries economically and how [sic] do so fast. Such an approach often seems very abstract. It conceptualizes the creative economy as if it was a thing in itself, a collection of creative products and services detached from the human beings who create, produce, distribute and consume them. (Gollmitzer and Murray 2008, 2)

Gollmitzer and Murray argue that current policy frameworks related to the creative economy are insufficient and that a survey of the creative labour force is urgently needed in order to better understand this rapidly growing and constantly changing field. As Léger suggests about artistic labour in the new economy:

creativity, channeled in the direction of entrepreneurial activity and freelance work, provides a framework for the model individual of the new economy – an independent businessperson who can free him/herself from social welfare support and who can be left to his/her own devices in terms of job creation. [...] [This perspective] completely ignores the job insecurity, unemployment and bankruptcies that characterise the working conditions of the large mass of excluded practices that exist in the shadows of the institutionalised artworld. (Léger 2010, 568)

The breadth of creative work poses serious challenges to both governments and academics that might seek to compile data on this diverse field. With a shift in cultural studies towards considerations of audiences and consumption in the 1980s and 1990s, labour and production became overlooked as sites of analysis (Murdoch 2003). This absence of consideration has negative impacts upon the working conditions of artists. As Hesmondalgh and Baker have

argued, the rapid development of the creative industries under neoliberalization “without attention to the conditions of creative labour, risk generating labour markets marked by irregular, insecure and unprotected work” (Hesmondalgh and Baker 2010, 5).

Specific data on the working conditions of comedians in Canada is somewhat limited, although a general impression of wages and labour participation can be derived from Statistics Canada and their Culture Statistics Program. In StatsCan data, comic performance is included under category FO35: Actors and Comedians. This category is defined:

Actors and comedians perform roles in motion picture, television, theatre and radio productions to entertain a variety of audiences. They are employed by motion picture, television, theatre and other production companies. This unit includes acting teachers employed by private acting schools. (Hill 2010)

This category is obviously quite broad, and does not offer a clear picture of comedians on their own, but rather as part of a larger, more general performance trade. In contrast to most other occupations in Canada, where earnings tend to peak between the ages of 45-64, actors, dancers, and other performance artists on average earn the most between the ages of 25-44. That is, these occupations “peak” earlier than most other types of employment, and workers have diminished earning potential later in their careers (Luffman 2000). In 2000, the average earnings for this category of worker was \$21, 597 (Singh 2005). Quebec is the only province in which earnings of cultural workers equal the average earnings of the overall provincial workforce, in all other provinces, cultural workers earn below the provincial average (Government of Canada 2004). A report released by Hill Strategies Research in 2010 using Statistics Canada data found that artists living in Toronto and Montreal earned 36% and 37% (respectively) less than the average of all other occupations in these cities; Calgary and Ottawa have an earnings gap of over 50% (Hill 2010). Although these statistics do now allow us to single out comedians in particular, they do give us a general indication of the earnings

trajectories of this type of work. However, as Murray and Gollmitzer (2012) note, this data does not reflect the extent to which many cultural workers are employed full-time in other fields, and only part-time and contractually in the creative economy. This makes complete data in this area difficult to accumulate. It is particularly notable that earning potential in this field declines at the very moment that most Canadians are entering their highest earnings period. This has clear implications for the long-term security of performers, as saving for retirement, investing in a home, and raising a family are rendered challenging under such anomalous financial conditions.

The story of the late-career comic unable to make ends meet, or who is forced to leave comedy and find other work, is a relatively common one. Following Windsor, Ontario native Eric Tunney's sudden death in 2010 the *Globe and Mail* published a story about his life and career titled, "He could laugh at anything – except not making it big in Hollywood" (Langan 2010). The article discusses the performer's career in which Tunney almost made it big a number of times, but promising projects always seemed to fall apart just before his big break. Finally, Tunney moved back to Windsor, took a job as a telemarketer, and did comedy occasionally in small venues (like church basements) until his death. The journalist concludes, "in spite of being funny, he was depressed. He never got over not making it to the big time" (Langan 2010, S8). Some performers do make it, but still fall on hard times late in their careers. Comedian Mike MacDonald was, for a time, one of the most recognizable Canadian stand-up comics on the circuit. At the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of JFL, he hosted a special because he was the only comedian to have performed at the festival every year since its English-language launch. A few years ago, he publicly disclosed a bipolar disorder diagnosis, and became an advocate for those coping with mental illness. Stigma about his bipolar

disorder, as well as other ongoing health problems (including a recent diagnosis of Hepatitis C which has led to liver and kidney failure) have made it difficult for the performer to book work. Unable to support his family and pay for his growing medical expenses, a crowd sourcing campaign was launched in May 2012 to raise money for MacDonald. In addition to soliciting funds, the performer is seeking a living liver donor ([www.gofundme.com/mikemacdonald](http://www.gofundme.com/mikemacdonald)). As of mid-August 2012, the campaign had raised just over \$40, 000.

With these examples, it is not my intention to offer a romantic reading of the plight of the struggling artist. These scenarios merely point to the challenges that participants in this competitive industry face and the lack of stability and protections for creative workers. Increasingly, this individualist, entrepreneurial, model of employment is the norm for many careers and not only a model of work for a small minority of self-employed individuals. The frustrations faced by comedian like Tunney and MacDonald are not clues to the “psychopathology” of comedians (as Brottman might argue), but a more general characteristic of workers in the new economy. The late-career experiences of both Tunney and MacDonald speak to the precariousness of comic labour for performers who never break out of the touring club circuit. For the majority of comedians, there are no huge payoffs just around the corner, and living well/retiring comfortably remains an insurmountable goal for many. Comedy is not “big business” for most club comics, but rather entails a challenging work schedule, often living paycheque to paycheque, in which opportunities can dry up quickly. In their recent article on cultural labour policy in Canada, Catherine Murray and Mirjam Gollmitzer note that the creative economy in general is characterized by precarity, and would benefit from greater implementation of comprehensive social security measures.

They argue that discussions and policies related to cultural labour would benefit from a more careful consideration and incorporation of social and labour policies; labour regulation in the knowledge economy must be modernized to better reflect the flexible working conditions of the many creative workers. National statistics have not kept up with labour force changes within the creative economy, which makes it difficult to obtain empirical data related to the material circumstances of creative work, such as wages, security, and employment history (Murray and Gollmitzer 2012). In particular, Statistics Canada data considers fulltime employment, which for many creative workers means they are being counted in non-creative work that they hold in order to support their part-time, short-term, contract and portfolio based participation in the creative economy. However, the individualism and entrepreneurialism which characterizes the field of stand-up comedy makes such data collection, as well as the implementation of social security measures a significant challenge.

### **Reading the Comic Performance as Labour Discourse**

While the accumulation of statistical data related to earnings and labour participation remains an important project, there are also other ways to conceive of cultural labour in relation to the creative economy. In particular, the interpretation of labour discourses is a useful point of entry for understanding the field of cultural work. For example, in “Not Seeing the Joke: The Overlooked Role of Humour in Research Involving Television Production,” Edward Brennan argues that,

humour can provide researchers with a unique access point into the professional cultures of media producers.... Importantly, humour is a central means of performing ‘emotional labour’ that increasingly precarious media work demands.” (Brennan 2011, 819)

The relevance of humour to Brennan's study was not initially worked into his research design as a sensitizing concept, but emerged during his ethnography as an evident and vital tool for the interpretation of occupational culture. As was the case with Goldstein's study of women in Brazilian shantytowns, Brennan found humour to be a useful tool for the disclosure of serious complaints that could not ordinarily be expressed. He notes that media jobs are highly competitive, increasingly casual, and often have large pools of inexpensive reserve labour due to the increased popularity of media programs in universities and colleges. With so many potential participants in the field, cultural workers are often highly dependent upon "formal and informal networks" for employment (820). Complaints about labour conditions or creative conflicts have the potential to alienate workers from this network, decreasing potential career trajectories. As such, Brennan finds that humour offers an important outlet for frustrations or small rebellions. He suggests, "humour offers a relatively low-risk means of voicing criticism and objection in an environment like television production where a trenchant stance or angry objection is likely to damage one's work, reputation and career prospects" (824-825). Stand-up comedy offers a more accessible source of data for the study of humour discourses as such disclosures can be part of the comedians routine.

While attending JFL, I was particularly taken-aback by the extent to which the "production" of comedy was brought into the spotlight during club shows. Because performers often have many sets over the course of the festival, they can rehearse at the smaller club venues as part of their preparation for the more important shows that they will play at larger venues later in the week. American comics use these club shows to test their material on Montréalers/Canadians, and many of the comics will work through timing and cleanup their sets for the Gala shows which are recorded for TV. Some comedians are not

shy about disclosing the administrative side of the festival to their audience. At a *Comedy Night in Canada* show in 2009, host Steve Patterson reminded the audience that the comics were working on their material for big shows later in the festival, and requested that the audience be supportive. During a *Bubbling with Laughter* set in 2009, Canadian performer Mike Wilmot followed up on an unsuccessful joke with the line, “That went nowhere, so it won’t be in the gala.” This joke illustrates the repetitive nature of stand-up and reminds audience members of the hierarchy that exists between venues at the festival – the Gala shows are the most prestigious and expensive, and are recorded and broadcast on television as comedy specials. During another 2009 *Bubbling with Laughter* set, American comic Bobby Slayton admitted to the crowd at Club Soda that he was testing his Gala material. At one point he even turned to stage right and started a one-sided conversation with an unseen JFL authority. He queried whether or not he could say “lick his crotch” at the Gala, remarking that he would ordinarily say “lick his balls.” He then turned back to the laughing audience and continued his act. Slayton is also the long-time host of *The Nasty Show* which runs at the same venue. This is the type of comedy he clearly prefers as he made his disdain for the cleaner, “bubbly” comedy of his earlier shows known to both the *Bubbling* and *Nasty Show* audiences. That is to say, the conditions surrounding his work—what he could and could not say; how his audiences might differ in comedic taste—were not kept “backstage,” but worked into his show. Similarly, on his recent tour, another American comedian, Louis C.K., began some of his shows with the convoluted qualification that he is happy to be here, but only because he is also being paid to be here, and if he were not being paid, he would surely be someplace else where he was being paid. He points out to the audience that he is only performing because he is being paid to perform; it is a simple question of economics. In

2009 at a show in Vancouver (presented by Just for Laughs), he explained to the audience that, despite having already been paid, he would still do a good show – pointing out (comically) that he didn't really have to do much of anything as he already had the audience's money. His claim is that he is providing a good show only out of a sense of professional ethics.

For a more elaborate example of the disclosure of work life details through comic performance, I provide an extended analysis of Ottawa comedian Jon Dore's 2009 Just for Laughs set, which was heavily reliant upon showing the audience the "backstage" of paid comedy. In fact, a majority of his routine was dependent upon references to the craft of stand-up. It is considered in detail below and I draw mainly upon the broadcast version of the routine. A methodological note on audience laughter is required at this point. The televised episodes of JFL cut audience shots into the stand-up routines. These shots are of laughing audience members, but they are not necessarily from the same performance (or even Gala). In fact, there is one shot of a couple of laughing women that I have seen used in more than one different episode. That said, I do feel that the laughter is an accurate representation of the laughing audience. Having seen many of the performances that I analyze in both Gala and club show scenarios, I do not feel that the position or intensity of laughter has been edited in anyway that impacts my discourse analysis. In particular, with the Dore joke, the place of laughter given in square brackets is intended merely to give the reader an idea of the pacing of the joke. Ellipsis marks are used to indicate pauses in delivery, often for comic effect – as in to delay/signal the punchline or to build anticipation/suspense.

A few minutes into his Gala performance, Dore launched into a stereotypical relationship joke:

Well, I used to live with a girl but I had to end the relationship because ... I hated her. [audience laughs].

Even at the outset, the joke does not fully uphold audience expectations. “I had to end the relationship” usually segues into a story about some annoying (“feminine”) character flaw. Dore’s explanation is much simpler—he hated her. Logically the relationship ended. He continues:

I had to end that relationship anyway. We let ourselves go, we got too comfortable. You know, we didn’t care what we looked like. You know. Like I think it’s okay when I let myself go, but I don’t think it’s okay when she let’s herself go . . .

[pause] Oh, I am totally blanking. Um, wow, it got tense in here real quick didn’t it? [audience laughs]. [Speaking rapidly to himself] It’s okay if I let myself go, it’s not okay if she lets herself go . . . [to audience] how you guys doing? You guys doing good? [audience cheers and claps].

Notably, the audience is generally supportive and sympathetic. Their clapping is encouraging to the green comic who is, presumably, under duress having blown a punch-line at one of the most important shows of his young career. Having “forgotten” the punch-line to his joke, Dore spends the next minute of his short set discussing how this came to be. He asks the audience “You guys ever forget anything at work?” Then explains:

I have not done this joke in a long time and I thought, oh it’s the big TV taping, you used to love doing it, um, so I thought oh I’ll do it. So I was going to listen to the joke on my tape recorder before the show—I should probably explain that, stand-up comics will tape their sets on a tape recorder so they can listen to their jokes and improve on them . . . clearly I didn’t do that, ah—and I was honestly, I cued it up and I was about to listen to it and I thought ah like riding a bike you’ll never forget and HERE WE ARE!

Dore is playing to the audience’s perception of itself in this segment. To begin with, they are part of “the big TV taping.” The galas are recorded and the Gala host (generally a big name like Whoopi Goldberg or John Cleese) is responsible for ensuring that there is sufficient clapping for comedian entrances and big laughs throughout. The audience’s participation is therefore required to ensure that the final comedy product—the Gala TV special—is

successful. Dore also reminds us that he has told this joke before. This will not come as a surprise to the audience. A stand-up comedy fan would be hard pressed to maintain their unwavering belief in the spontaneity of the act. Many of the sets have already circulated on youtube long before the performer sets foot on stage at the St. Denis Theatre. By forgetting the punch-line, Dore takes the audience through a pleasureable process of disclosure. We are getting something fresh; it is happening before our eyes. He is disclosing all kinds of industry secrets, like the use of a tape recorder and the re-use of old material.

Finally, Dore lets the audience listen to the tape-recorded joke. He is taking us further “backstage.” We get to hear his personal copy of a past performance. We are learning, with him, the correct telling of his own joke:

[Holding tape recorder to microphone; taped voice in italics] *So anyway, I think its okay when I let myself go, but I don't think it's okay when she lets herself go . . .* [audible breath on tape] *uh, uh, uh, shit* [Dore covers face with hand; audience laughs] *I think it's okay when I let myself go . . . Oh my god I'm totally blanking. Do you know what? I have a tape recorder here* [Dore gives audience the thumbs up; audience laughs] *Let me just play the tape recorder, see if I can remember how the joke goes. Lemme try right here.* [2<sup>nd</sup> level of taped voice] *So anyway, I used to be in a comfortable relationship, and I think it's okay when I let myself go but it's not okay when she lets herself go. Like the other night we're lying in bed* [Dore looks up excitedly at audience, points to tape smiling and nodding] *and she rolls over and she* [voice on tape is cut off abruptly by rock music recording; Dore drops hands, turns back to audience, and walks away from mic; audience laughs, claps and cheers]

Minutes have passed from the time the audience realizes that Dore has forgotten his initial punch-line to the moment the rock music provides the real punch-line to the joke—he has “forgotten” this joke before, he has “inadvertently” recorded over his own material, and the punch-line to the hypothetical joke is lost. In a stand-up set, this is a very long time for a comedian to allow the audience to believe that he is bombing. In a sense, we've been had. What we thought to be authentic experience—Dore's live improvisation of amusing insider

information after he fumbles the joke—is actually just part of the act. He’s done it before, and he’ll do it again.

The key to those two minutes is the “backstage” of professional comedy that Dore shows his audience. People forget jokes on stage all the time, but usually the audience does not stay with the act while the comic tries to get back on track. By disclosing insider details, Dore is offering us something special by playing off of audience desires to know more about his job—the need to remember large quantities of material, the technologies that aid in joke retention and improvement (the tape recorder), and the importance of the show that they are attending (the big TV taping, the big JFL show) to this comic’s career trajectory. In the end, perhaps the audience’s ego is the real punch-line. The self-referential nature of Dore’s work, discussing his job as part of his job, is a unique feature of the comedy industry—other types of creative work do not do this to the same extent. While the Dore example is perhaps more extensive than other instances of this type of comic “disclosure,” it still offers a good illustration of the ways in which labour discourses are used in comic material. Often these discourses are less extensive, as for example when Barry Sobel (1992) launched into an airline joke with a backhanded apology to the JFL audience for the predictability of this topic, “I gotta tell you what happened. I don’t mean to be like the 80<sup>th</sup> comedian coming off of an airline to get here ... but we don’t live here.” He is not offering a critical discourse of comic labour, but a more gentle reminder about the general conditions of their work day, which entails time spent travelling, staying in hotels, and long periods away from family while on the road. Sobel followed this joke with the claim that he did not fly Air Canada, because that would have taken him through Toronto. Mocking Montreal’s rival city is a common strategy to win over the JFL audience; however, following the audience applause

and laughter, Sobel admitted that he did not know what that meant, only that “someone” had told him to say it. This is an admission of the superficiality of his knowledge of local culture. He must glean basic details about the locale between the airport and the stage; just enough to win over a new and unknown audience before launching into his usual material. This local priming is a significant strategy in stand-up performance.

If we return to Dore, we have a fairly typical example of the kind of stand-up comic that has dominated the Canadian comedy scene—an average heterosexual, white, male from the Windsor-Ottawa corridor (Dore hails from Ottawa). Prior to the proliferation of comedy clubs, Toronto stand-up comics worked in stripclubs; such a venue was, for obvious reasons, not conducive to the development of female comedians. The sub-culture that developed amongst comedians in the early clubs produced inhospitable conditions for female performers—this was the case not only in Canada, but also the US and the UK (Carr and Greeves 2006; Gilbert 2004). Yet, as noted by Joanne Gilbert, marginality is an important source of humour and can offer performers legitimacy, cultural capital, and a uniquely comical outsider perspective. This marginality works in contrast to the act of stand-up comedy, which requires a performer to control the room, act as an authority, monopolize space as well as the audience’s attention, and expect that their thoughts are worth listening to. This offers a complicated performative tension wherein the comic is privileged enough to take the microphone, stand on stage, and command respect, but also marginalized enough to feel *compelled* to engage in such an activity, to offer humour—often in the form of self-deprecation—in exchange for money and the satisfaction of being laughed at. In the set discussed above, Dore engages with the “men are from Mars, women are from Venus” trope of relationship humour wherein the performer offers one-sided complaints about the other

sex (as a majority of comics are men, women are disproportionately the butt of this type of humour). Dore, however, places himself in the subordinated, marginalized position—having forgotten the punchline he cannot complete the joke-act. This plays into a thematic of failing masculinity that, as I have argued elsewhere, is common in Canadian popular culture, especially sketch comedy (Deveau 2011; cf. Druick 2010).

As stand-up comedy has grown in popularity, and comedians take up a prominent role in contemporary popular culture, interest in the “work” of stand-up has also grown. Notably, this is not particular to Canada. In a “day in the life” piece written by UK comedian Jimmy Carr for *The Sunday Independent* in 2001, the comic remarks, “I’m not quite sure how interested people are in my day. A comedian tells jokes. Surely that’s what you’re good for” (Carr 2007, np). And yet, the article is remarkably unfunny, and focuses very clearly upon Carr’s hectic work schedule:

One of the main reasons I got into comedy was that I said it won’t be a proper job where I have to get up in the morning, but weirdly, because of the busy-ness of it, I’m always up in the morning, trying to do something. It’s like I do two jobs—I work nights but during the day there is writing and TV shows. I’m not a morning person in any way, shape or form. I’ll get up begrudgingly and drink a load of coffee, more coffee than you could imagine.

A similar article appears in the December 2008 publication of British Airways’ *Business Life*. This story, also written by Carr, offers readers a peek inside one-week in the life of a comedian. There are no smoke and mirrors here. The life of the working comic is for the most part banal. It’s not nine-to-five, but then cultural labour seldom is. The point is Carr does have a *workday*—even if it often doesn’t end until after 2 a.m. While Carr jokes that he once told his mother he wanted to “grow up and be a comedian,” to which she replies, “You can’t do both,” in reality, professional comedy is a serious career choice. Carr, like many comedians in the UK, has in fact grown up to be a comedian. In general, the entertainment

celebrity is dependent upon a certain amount of publicized spillage between the performers' private and professional life. For comedians, this blurring between private and professional life is even more notable as their performances frequently draw upon their daily experiences—talking about girlfriends, travel, and absurd/banal comings and goings.

### **Shaun Majumder and Contested Cultural Capital**

In addition to offering disclosures of labour discourses, stand-up is also heavily reliant on the descriptive shortcuts that stereotypes offer both comics and audiences. Even at a very basic level, characteristics like nationality, sex, and race serve to frame the production and reception of live performances. In the particular case of comedy in Canada, cultural distinctions between Canada and the US are particularly well-trod subjects. At JFL, American and Canadian comedians alike play on national stereotypes, as well as the audience's desire to have their difference legitimized through official (comic) discourses. Lewis Black is a master at this, winning Canadian audiences over by complaining about the idiocy of his countrymen and the sophistication of their northern neighbours. While discourses of difference dominate the stage, this national obsession is very much abandoned in the "backstage" spaces of the festival. American comics are the majority, and festival organizers cater to the desires of American industry insiders. Canadian stand-up comedians hoping to impress network executives attempt to downplay their "difference" in order to sell themselves to an American comedy market.

Such tensions are illustrated well in the onstage and offstage material of popular comic Shaun Majumder. In his career as a sketch and stand-up comic in Canada, Majumder has developed a humorous mode around the immigrant experience while displacing his identity as one of Canada's most joked about minorities—the "Newfie." Son of a born-and-

bred Newfoundlander and a South Asian immigrant, Majumder's early comic career frequently played off of the familial and childhood tensions that such a lineage could impose. During his 2001 participation in club shows at JFL, Majumder started many of his performances with "I'm from Newfoundland! Do you believe me?" At the time, he had made some headway in LA and was hoping to break into the American market. Backstage, after one of his shows he confessed to a friend that "I don't want to do all that Newfoundland stuff. Because its American . . . this is the festival . . . I've got to take it to another level now. That's gonna work in Canada, that's not gonna work down in the States" (*The Next Big Thing* 2003). Following his stint at JFL, Majumder returned to LA with a Green Card and landed a pilot shoot for a variety comedy show. *Cedric the Entertainer* was picked up by Fox and in the fall of 2002 the show was promising to be a prime-time hit (Boshra 2002). Shaun went from being a relatively unknown Canadian comedian to hosting JFL in 2002.

While Shaun's role on *Cedric the Entertainer* only lasted one year, he returned to Canada with new comedic capital. This is a fairly typical bind for Canadian comics. As journalist Andrew Clark has noted about another recent host of JFL:

From the moment Harland Williams had taken that first step towards being a Canadian comedian, he was on the path taken by everyone else who had made that uphill climb. He'd done the one thing without which all the money, power, fame, and opportunity was impossible. He'd done the one thing you had to do to become a great Canadian comedian: He'd left. (Clark 1997, 248-249)

For Clark this is, and always has been, the key to a successful comedic career 'in' Canada. In *Stand and Deliver*, Clark's 1997 study of Canadian comedy, Williams is pegged as "the next big thing." Clark imagines he could be the next Canadian star of Jim Carrey-like proportions. Currently, Williams gets steady work—mostly voice—but by no means is he a household name. Several years later, Clark wrote the NFB/TVO three part series *The Next Big Thing*.

This production followed six aspiring comedians over 18 months. The first episode covered each of the six comedians in the clubs. Those who did not make the 2001 JFL festival were all but eliminated from the second episode, and those who did not travel to LA to meet network executives or audition for pilots were, for the most part, ignored in the third and final episode of the series. The documentary ends at the after-party for the filming of *Cedric the Entertainer*. Majumder has made it to Hollywood. In Clark's estimation, he is "the next big thing."

For Majumder, JFL is the key to linking Canadian talent with the American market. In 2005 while hosting a 20-city JFL tour, Majumder is quoted as saying: "Internationally [JFL] is a really big thing. It has a reputation around the world as one of the most prestigious comedy festivals. All the big executives down in Los Angeles and New York, they always get up to the festival every summer. They know there's such a big crop of talent at the festival" (Paulson 2005, C1). In his promotion of the festival, Majumder clearly toes the party line, acknowledging the importance of the festival for which he works. His adherence to such a standard, even privileged, career trajectory illustrates the extent to which the codes and expectations within the comedy production system are successfully reproduced. In the comedy community, the established hierarchies between gatekeepers and the appropriate means of moving between them, are reinforced by such "buy-in" on the part of comedians.

However, comedians also express their feelings of ambivalence towards this system through their comic performances. Tensions are evident in the way career expectations are mocked by comics for their audiences. After this first foray in LA, Majumder returned to Canada to wait for his Green Card. During this time he was living with his father in Mississauga and doing stand-up locally (Boshra 2002). During a show at the Rivoli in

Toronto, he mocked his own attempts to sell himself in Canada based upon his meager work experience in LA. Standing in front of a projector screen, Majumder interviews a video version of himself (*The Next Big Thing* 2003). The two begin to argue when live Majumder asks video Majumder what he has been up to. Video Majumder brings up a couple of failed projects and forces live Majumder to admit that, far from being an LA big-shot, his next show is in Ajax, Ontario. Video Majumder finally interjects, “why don’t you get off your high horse, okay, when you’re done your show, why don’t you go out, get in your car, okay, and drive here to home, where you live with your dad.” The camera then pans left and focuses on Majumder’s actual father who is sitting reading the newspaper. He looks up and says, “Hi Shaun.” Live Majumder responds, “hey dad,” then berates the video Majumder for embarrassing him during his show before finally demanding that the video feed be cut. While Majumder’s official career trajectory conforms to the narrative laid out by major gatekeepers in the field, his experience of this trajectory, as reflected in his creative work, is ambivalent. He did get a holding deal with a network in the US, but all the same, he is living with his dad, and working the Ontario comedy club scene, awaiting his big break.

In 2003, Majumder joined the cast of *This Hour has 22 Minutes*. In many ways, Canada’s sketch comedy tradition serves a similar function as late-night comedy in the US. That is, comedians who work on Canada’s major sketch comedy shows enjoy a greatly enhanced level of notoriety and exposure for their material. Since 2002, Majumder has probably been the ideal Canadian comedian. He continues to get work in the US, but he’s not too big for the Canadian small screen. He plays JFL regularly and his *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* character Raj Binder has made appearances at major sporting and cultural events across the country. As he describes it during a comedy set at JFL: “Here’s my deal. I’m

Canadian, I live in the United States, and I look Mexican. Yep. Ladies and Gentlemen, I am the North American Free Trade Agreement” (Majumder 2008). He also appears to have embraced the popular tactic of playing up Canadian nationalism while at JFL. This is in stark contrast to his previously stated concerns about the limitations that Canada-specific subject matter might put on his work in the US. During his 2008 Gala, he engaged very clearly with national themes:

I was in the States not long ago . . . doing stand-up. And I was onstage and I said “Hey everybody, I’m from Canada.” And this woman in the back she’s like “Booooo!” Really? For Canada? You’re booing? How can you even think about booing Canada. We’re your friendly neighbour to the . . . How dare you boo Canada? We gave you Alan Thicke! Excuse me, you’re welcome very much.

This joke discusses previous, presumably hypothetical, audience interactions that the comic has had, as well as alluding to other Canadian performers that have ventured into the US entertainment market. It reminds us that not all Canadian exports (or is it ex-pats?) reach the same heights. When the Canadian comedy export prototype is discussed, it is usually in relation to the likes of Jim Carrey or Mike Meyers. It is easy to forget that “making it” in the US can mean a lot of things. Although he is no longer a household name, Alan Thicke has also “made it.” The potential pitfalls of a career in the US, and the reality that many Canadian performers don’t really “make-it,” are rendered evident in Majumder’s joke. While he continues to get pilots and small parts on American network TV, he hasn’t really broken the market in any major way. The ambivalence of this position feeds his comedic work in the Canadian market, where he can joke about his exploits south of the border.

### **Ambivalence and Comic Labour**

The uneasy relationship with moving between work in Canada and the US is a topic of mockery amongst other Canadian comedians as well. An episode of *The Debaters*

recorded at the 2009 Just for Laughs Comedy Festival provides an effective illustration of this very issue. The debate featured Canadian comedian Deb DiGiovanni arguing that Canadians haven't really *made it* until they've *made it in the US*. Conversely, American comedian Judy Gold was tasked with arguing that fame in the US is not necessary. Gold's arguments were generally ones pertaining to artistic quality wherein she remarked that, "saying Hollywood is the only standard of fame is like saying ketchup is the only sauce for food" (*The Debaters* 2009). DiGiovanni frequently countered with financial arguments, such as how exciting it would be if she and *Debaters* host Steve Patterson could give up their day jobs to pursue professional stand-up full-time. DiGiovanni noted that Patterson drove the public transit bus that she had to take to get to the show. It was of course a joke as both DiGiovanni and Patterson have managed to quit their "regular" jobs. They entertain for a living. In the vote by audience applause, Gold won the debate. DiGiovanni acknowledged her defeat, congratulated Gold, then proclaimed to the audience:

If there are any American producers or agents listening [...] I'm a headliner, I do voice work, and I have no gag reflex. Please contact me at [iloveamerica@hotmail.com](mailto:iloveamerica@hotmail.com). (*The Debaters* 2009)

This points to that charming paradox of Canadian cultural production. In theory, we can cherish and support our distinct cultural industries here in Canada and argue that no talent need ever leave. But in practice such an arrangement would prove financially and culturally inadequate. American acceptance, American cultural goods, American money and American respect are all so tempting. However, the desire for success in the US is also being framed as dirty and problematic, with DiGiovanni's joke (above) linking success in the US with a willingness to prostitute oneself (however, the broadcast version of the show does not include the gag-reflex reference made during the live show taping at JFL 2009).

This tension plays out as a compromise between creatively principled work in Canada and the pursuit of wealth through the mass entertainment system in the US. This is a tension that works its way through many of Canada's cultural industries. For example, in 2009, Canadian Musician Matthew Good complained that the Junos inappropriately privileged musicians who had garnered international commercial success, at the expense of lesser-known Canadian-based musicians. Comic Nikki Payne, in a guest appearance on *The Hour*, criticized this position, remarking sarcastically:

What? Show business isn't fair? Canadian entertainers have to succeed in the United States before we're recognized in our own country? Noooooo! Fairy tales! You lie, Mathew Good.

To quote multiple Juno award winner Anne Murray, "spread your tiny wings and suck it up princess!" (*The Hour* 2009)

The pursuit of an international career, especially vis-à-vis the US, is the dominant narrative of cultural work in Canada, and one that, in Payne's view, hardly merits complaining about. This is the absurdity that Payne's joke points to. It is neither new, nor unique, and has simply become an unquestioned part of any entertainer's ideal career trajectory. However, the deeply entrenched nationalist narratives of the Canadian cultural industries offer artists and audiences conflicting signals in this regard. There is an inherent contradiction in the explicitly nationalist framing of the Juno awards, despite its privileging of performers whose careers, by and large, take place outside of the country. This is a contradiction that musician Matthew Good is highly critical of, but that comedian Nikki Payne accepts. To succeed as a comedian, in a complex and rapidly changing market, requires a heightened tolerance of contradiction and ambiguity. As a comic enters the field of cultural labour, their working conditions are generally characterized by unpredictability and low wages. Performers expect to move up in the field, increasingly engaging in more lucrative work, hopefully with

increased control of the conditions of this work. The career of a stand-up comedian in Canada is not an easy one. Life on the road, characterized by late nights and heavy drinking, appeals to younger performers, but rapidly loses its appeal as comics tire of being away from family and constantly teetering on the edge of financial ruin (Woodrow 2001). A lack of opportunities for mid- and late-career comics, as well as the constant pressure to “make-it” in the US leaves many comedians ambivalent about their Canada-based careers.

The Canadian comedians discussed in this dissertation offer hints about their work lives through comic discourses in their routines. These discourses frequently address issues such as expectation about making it in the US, a relative lack of financial stability, and frustration with life as a road warrior. The pressure to break the US entertainment market, like the increased interest in the work life of the stand-up comic, is not particular to the Canadian field. British performers, like their Canadian counterparts, face pressure to crack the American market. As one of the world’s largest producers of popular culture, the US remains an important destination for creative workers. The money that can be made in the US is often difficult to match in other industries. According to James Parker, writing for *The Atlantic* in 2009, a new “British invasion” is occurring, this time with comedians such as Sacha Baron Cohen, Eddie Izzard, Craig Ferguson, Simon Pegg, Ricky Gervais and Russell Brand (Parker 2009, 42). The celebratory discourses that surround these UK successes are similar to ones put forward about Canadian comedians, further evidence that there is nothing *particularly* notable about the southward flow of Canuck comics. Where the UK differs from Canada, however, is in the opportunities that exist for artists that opt not to pursue a career in Hollywood. The US is a career destination, but it is not the *only* career destination. “Making-it” in the UK can just as easily entail a sold-out domestic tour and a hit television program on

the BBC. The UK star system includes many personalities and performers that remain unrecognizable in the North American market. Unlike in Canada, then, success in the UK is not solely based upon a comedian's ability to break the US market. The field of comedy production in the UK is more diverse, and allows for multiple career trajectories.

Notably, some high-profile American comics also exhibit deep ambivalence towards the industry in which they work. For example at the Just Comedy Conference in 2010, Lewis Black delivered a scathing keynote address about the US entertainment industry. In his estimation, American television, especially network, has no talent to speak of. So far as Black is concerned, idiots with no sense of humour run the industry. This at the very festival so many young and mid-career comics attend hoping to be discovered and pulled into the network-TV comedy pool. Like Black, Judy Gold offered discourses of contempt towards the US entertainment industry. In her *The Debaters* performance, she argued that "Hollywood, as I know, is where stupid, untalented people become world famous for being stupid and untalented" (*The Debaters* 2009). Her argument as to why performers should not set their sights on Hollywood is quite simply that "Hollywood sucks." Although both individuals were joking, they also touch on some very prevalent discourses that surround production in the cultural industries. One of the best-attended industry events at JFL is the annual "State of the Industry Address" given by American comedian Andy Kindler. Each year he strings together a loose list of comedy industry criticisms. Comedians young and old, JFL staff, agents, writers, media and network executives make themselves seen and heard by laughing at the inside jokes. To laugh is to show that you belong.

It is an ambivalent laughter to be sure. After all, the jokes are aimed at the very industry that the laughing spectators are attempting to enter, succeed in, promote, and/or

control. For all of the criticisms circulating about network-TV, it remains a powerful determinant in the careers of most US-based comics. Writing for the *Vancouver Courier* in 2004, Shawn Conner suggests:

much has changed in comedy since the early '90s boom in stand-up. Across the land, Laff Shacks and Chuckle Hutts have fallen prey to dwindling audiences as a result of the glut, while the Comedy Network in Canada and Comedy Central in the U.S. have opened other opportunities for aspiring comics. One thing remains constant, however—for today's practicing stand-up comics, the sitcom is still the Holy Grail. (Conner 2004, 29)

Notably, much of Black's performance of frustration during his keynote was based upon his experiences attempting to pursue projects for network-TV. Amongst comedians, certain types of film and television production are disparaged on artistic grounds as they are intended to have broad appeal. They are the projects that make money, but are not generally well thought of by critics and even many performers themselves. They are the stereotypical industry projects in which artists and producers "sell-out," but make a great deal of money in the process. Comedian attitudes towards this work are ambivalent. Most continue to participate in the mainstream film, television and advertising industry, while also readily mocking this participation. Paradoxically, comedians devalue mainstream work due to its lack of creative freedom, but also pursue this work aggressively, hoping to reap the financial rewards available in the globally dominant US entertainment system. This incongruity is simply an accepted part of the job. The live stand-up performance is valued in relation to more mainstream work such as television because it is perceived to have fewer creative constraints (Oliver and Zaltzman 2005).

In this chapter, I have presented examples of the ways that stand-up comedians disclose details about comic labour through their creative work. It is evident from the discussion above that comedians are often ambivalent about their Canadian careers.

Performers are engaged (or hope to become engaged) in international labour flows that are characteristic of creative work, however, this movement can be hindered by a number of factors. The first, and most obvious, is the difficulty of attaining permission to work in other countries. Through neoliberalization and the growth of communications technologies, cultural products can cross borders with relative ease. Workers, however, must move through the relevant cultural intermediaries in order to make this global jump. Additionally, the ways that Canadian performers must position themselves in Canada, for Canadian gatekeepers and audiences, can negatively impact their desirability to international gatekeepers. The expectations that performers will engage in humour that reflects “Canadian” identity or related national issues (as is the case, for example, on the CBC) can be very restricting for performers. Examples of entertainers that have chosen to stay at home, and who are celebrated do exist—Rick Mercer and most of the *22 Minutes* cast being the obvious examples; these performers are well-suited to a national broadcasting system because their main site of parody is the nation-state. In order to remain a Canadian comedian, Mercer has engaged aggressively with Canadian content. However, comics whose work falls outside of the news parody genre that is so popular with the CBC have complained that there is little support for them. Unfortunately, the support of Canadian popular culture is often geared towards the most obvious examples of “Canadian” to the exclusion of other narratives and styles. So, while a hotbed of Canadian comedic talent toils in the comedy club system, very little innovation is taking place to utilize this talent in creative new ways. As Harland Williams suggests in relation to a lack of interest from the CBC, “I never got invited to the dance” (Clark 1997, 244).

In serious interviews about their work, comedians tend to “toe the party line” vis-à-vis the Canadian comedy industry. This is well suited to the promotional aspects of popular media. However, implicit critiques and expressions of ambivalence with the system are manifest through the comedic material of many performers. While official complaints are seldom waged, humorous critiques are worked into comedy sets, offering audiences a window onto the frustrations, challenges, and contradictory career trajectories of the Canadian stand-up comic. When comedians break with the narrative of official culture, we are forced—through laughter, or discomfort, or having taken offense—to confront the shortcomings of this narrative. It is important, however, not to mistake these small acts of resistance for a larger critical project related to labour conditions. As Brennan notes of the media workers who he studied,

Humour that is apparently resistive may unintentionally act to reinforce the structures it attacks.... The jocular gripes, self-deprecation, slagging and banter of media workers may also be a gift that facilitates an efficient, non-confrontational and self-regulating working environment” (Brennan 2011, 828)

This humour does not disrupt, but rather seeks to conserve the conditions that it readily mocks. It represents the reproduction of cultural norms and social codes within the field, rather than offer a salient critique. The gentle mockery of comedy production offered in the acts of performers like Dore, DiGiovanni, Payne, and Majumder are distinctly non-transformative. The performers do not offer a project for the alteration of their labour conditions, only a humorous interjection which exploits some of the shortcomings and contradictions inherent in the field of stand-up comedy work in Canada.

## **Chapter 6: Humouring the Nation and Going Global**

This chapter considers stand-up comedy as both national discourse and global cultural product. I argue that the national content of Canadian cultural industries is in tension with the global career trajectories of cultural workers. In placing stand-up into the narrative of global flows of cultural projects, I draw attention to some of the ambivalent manifestations of cultural nationalism that still frame much of the comedy field. Many of the most pervasive discourses that surround Canadian comedy are in fact strategic discourses that serve the interests of established industry insiders, such as cultural intermediaries. Within this structure, performers internalize dominant discourses in order to move into more favorable position takings, as well as cultivate new trajectories through the integration of new media technologies. In the discussion that follows, I outline further theories of Canadian humour in relation to citizenship and national identity, as well as some approaches to Canadian cultural theory. I then provide a case study of comedian Russell Peters, whose controversial comedy provides an example of the growth of the global comedy field and the challenges of framing identity through popular culture.

Bourdieu's theory of cultural production offers a framework for understanding how systems reproduce themselves across generations. However, neoliberalism has altered the terms of this discussion. If we consider the extent to which a sense of national popular culture is reproduced through mega-events such as Olympic hockey, it becomes difficult to make an argument for the existence of objectified cultural capital as a mode of distinction; this is precisely the issue that contemporary comedy audience studies have found in analyses

of comic taste (see discussion in Chapter 2). However, clearly class divides and disparities in cultural competencies continue to exist in Canada today, so some understanding of cultural capital must still be applicable to contemporary Canadian culture. For example, Karim H. Karim finds that Bourdieu's notion of "cultural capital" is useful in considering the relationship between popular culture and citizenship. As Karim argues, popular texts and practices, such as a shared humour, draw individuals into social networks and illustrate shared cultural competencies. According to Karim, "cultural capital is to be found in the cultural knowledge and competencies that an individual holds, but which are not necessarily articulated by society in formal manners" (Karim 2005, 147). The citizen must pick-up these competencies "naturally" through social interaction, lived-experience, and a shared sense of cultural belonging, often encountered in popular culture and media. However, in a rapidly globalizing world, the ideal Canadian citizen is not socialized only for the successful navigation of local cultures and economies, but must also obtain national and international cultural capital.

The international direction of Canadian cultural production is reflective of this expanded cultural citizenship. Global cultural citizenship and the growth of the creative economy under neoliberalization delimit the field of power in which contemporary Canadian stand-up comedy has developed. The nationalist framework imposed upon certain segments of the comedy field—especially in relation to broadcasting—are in tension with these other, globalizing forces. One of the great ironies of the Canadian creative economy is that, due to advances in global communications technologies and the realities of the market economy, Canadian audiences have *greater* access to the work of Canadian artists who choose to live and work in the US than they do to the work of performers whose careers are based primarily

or exclusively in Canada. This has proven difficult to reconcile in cultural policy which seeks to protect domestic access to Canadian cultural products against imported cultural goods, even when these externally produced goods include Canadian artists or themes (cf. Ryan Edwardson's discussion of the controversy that followed Bryan Adams being denied Canadian Content status: Edwardson 2008, 3-5).

In many ways, the privileged stand-up audience is also the privileged citizen. It is therefore not surprising that the nation invests symbolically in the idea of a national sense of humour (as our politicians do each time they agree to engage in joke work on a national television program like *22 Minutes* or *Air Farce*). Consider Karim H. Karim's definition of citizenship drawing upon Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital:

The citizen involves a range of forms of tacit knowledge, competence and taken-for-granted assumptions. Citizens must know how to engage in citizenship activities. They require basic working knowledge of the political system and skills in assessing and processing information, interpreting political talk, and debating public issues. All of this must be contained in the taken for granted knowledge which comprises their [...] lifeworld. (Karim 2005, 147)

The stand-up audience, like the "ideal" citizen, must be adept at "learning implicit knowledge and skills." In the performance of stand-up, the comedian assumes that his audience has certain cultural competences. These are often implicit, or perceived as "obvious" to the cultural insider. Citizenship, like humour, both includes and excludes individuals based upon similar assumptions. Additionally, humour becomes a means of acquiring this knowledge and refining citizens. Comedians construct their comic persona, and as such define the types of audiences that they attract (Woodrow 2001). For example, political, misogynist, and race-based joking can each speak to divergent social, cultural and class interests, and as such they may attract dramatically different audiences. In a sense, comedians *choose* the cultural competencies of their audience by playing to specific markets.

The rewards are few for the comic that chooses to play to a minority audience (one that falls outside the standard comedy demographic). However, in order to succeed commercially, comedians must also be capable of speaking to more generalized interests. At festivals like JFL, this is evident in the differences between thematic club shows and the Gala shows that are filmed to be broadcast on the CBC. Comics perform in both, but must make small alterations to their sets in order to meet the expectations of their audiences.

This current manifestation of the obsession with producing a Canadian national identity has a long history of development which can be traced through Canadian cultural policy and cultural theory. That Canadian culture is a contested issue can be seen in the sheer quantity of policy that has gone into its protection, definition, and development. Throughout the early twentieth century, the federal government invested in culture via the development of cultural infrastructure which included the establishment of a number of key institutions such as the National Gallery of Ontario (incorporated in 1913), the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation/Radio-Canada (1936), and the National Film Board (1939). The CBC/Radio-Canada was developed in response to the Report on the Royal Commission on Radio Broadcasting (1929), better known as the Aird Commission, which called for a national broadcaster that could act as an instrument of education and entertainment, geared towards informing the public on issues of national importance. Graham Spry was perhaps the most significant figure in the establishment of this national media institution deemed vital to the protection of Canadian cultural sovereignty. Spry popularized the expression “the state or the United States,” arguing that in the open market Canadian culture could not compete with the mass entertainments imported from the US. The state would need to intervene in order to ensure that cultural sovereignty was maintained (Smith 2000).

Anxieties about the development of a strong and unified national culture, distinct from the United States, emerged early in Canadian cultural history. Even prior to the establishment of an independent Canada, the protection of British North America from American expansion was a dominant pre-occupation. In the 1900s, as Canada continued to transition from colony to nation, the first generation of Canadian born cultural elites were developing a nationalist consciousness, and calling for increased protections of Canada's cultural sovereignty. The formulation of a national culture was particularly challenging in the Canadian context. As Ryan Edwardson (2008, 10) finds in his extensive study of Canadian content regulation:

Canadian post-colonialism was all the more complex because it coincided with modernity, a rapid series of technological, scientific, and social changes occurring in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. New systems of mass communication, fuelled in large part by advertisers seeking markets for the goods of expanding manufacturing industries, provided Canadians with an abundance of advertising-funded entertainment drawn largely from (or inspired by) American producers.

This supposedly American inspired consumerism drove anxieties about Canadian cultural sovereignty. Popular culture was associated with mass entertainment from the US, and as such was delegitimized as a source of national identity. Canadian culture was to be a highbrow counter-weight to popular Americanizing forces. When a Canadian popular culture was included in this framework, it was not part of a mass culture that was legitimately, statistically popular, rather it was a form of folk culture deemed by cultural elites to reflect an essential historic identity. As Richard Gruneau argues, this notion of Canadian popular culture offered "a highly romanticized, almost mystical, yearning for an 'identity' variously rooted in regional popular cultures or in abstract conceptions of a civilized European 'Western Tradition'" (1988, 15). Early calls for the production of a national culture were suspicious of the mass communication systems that enabled the widespread dissemination of

American popular culture, opting instead to emphasize the production of high artforms such as art, theatre, dance, and cinema (Edwardson 2008). In pursuing this agenda, cultural nationalists missed an opportunity to produce “a truly universal culture—a popular culture which recognizes human differences and provides resources, opportunities, and forms of empowerment necessary for the widest possible realization and expansion of human capacities” (Gruneau 1988, 16). While cultural nationalists dreamt of a widely consumed national culture, this culture was not intended to be a “popular” culture, as this was associated with American mass entertainment. Ironically, this approach to state-funded cultural production contributed to the continued vitality of American popular culture in Canada.

The pressure from building fears of Americanization eventually resulted in the formation of The Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences. The Massey commission developed in response to elite fears that Americanization and populism were interfering in the development of a distinct and prosperous Dominion of Canada. As Ira Wagman describes it, the Massey Report “provided the basis for state support of the arts and cultural industries—and did so in a language shot through with Arnoldian notions of high culture, anti-Americanism, latent magic bullet theories of media effects, and blatant cultural nationalism” (2010, 622). In the area of broadcasting, the Massey Report (1951) called for the CBC to act as a public service that would support national unity and foster understanding and enlightenment. The report claimed that without such a service, Canada risked cultural annexation by the United States. In practice, this vague dedication to a national culture proved difficult to carry out, especially given the shortage of financial resources that the CBC often faced. Initial programming consisted mainly of sporting events

and variety shows, both relatively cheap to produce, but not exactly the type of high culture that the Massey Report and its supporters had initially called for. However, this type of programming did begin the process of associating popular cultures with national identity formation. Since its inception, CBC television has struggled to balance a mandate for the production of high quality, intelligent programming of national significance, and the necessity of commercial viability in a competitive broadcasting environment. As the CRTC observed in its research paper, *CBC Television: Programming and the English Language Service*, “the CBC is caught between its mandate and its commerciality” (1977, 36). What became increasingly apparent over the course of the latter half of the twentieth century, was that the fulfillment of a mandate to produce and preserve a national sense of self could be achieved most effectively through genuinely popular cultural forms such as sport and comedy.

One way in which the popular genres of sport and variety comedy were linked to a national sense of self was through the construction of an emergent Canadian celebrity culture. This celebrity culture was further fed by the production of Canadian-born Hollywood stars. In contrast to the stated goal of using broadcasting to construct a culturally distinctive sense of Canadian identity, these media actually brought Canadian popular culture into closer contact with the American entertainment market. Work in Canadian radio and television offered performers, writers, and directors a vital training ground and allowed them to develop the skills necessary to move into the larger American entertainment market, which had greater room for career advancement. This natural flow of cultural workers from a small to large market led John Aylesworth, the Canadian born creator of American prime-time hit *Hee Haw*, to proclaim the golden rule of Canadian comedy: “In Canada you reach a point

where you have nowhere to go but down, to the States, which is up” (cited in Clark 1997, 60). Canadian performers who succeeded in the US gained cultural capital in Canada, and achieved major celebrity status. Additionally, the widespread consumption of American popular culture, in contrast to the meager consumption of the Canadian equivalent, meant (and continues to mean) that cultural workers had greater access to Canadian audiences through the US entertainment industry than they would have had performers opted to remain in Canada.

Canadian cultural sovereignty as a policy issue has often been addressed via regulation of communications technologies such as radio and television. However, as Paul Audley finds in his review of cultural policy studies in Canada, there is a long running tension between policies to reinforce Canadian cultural sovereignty and the economic imperatives of globalization (Audley 1994). This tension runs throughout the cultural industries, not only in broadcasting but also film, publishing, and music (Edwardson 2008).

The premise that there is an inherent conflict between cultural development and an open economy is not new. The term “globalization” refers to a series of market pressures familiar to anyone with a knowledge of the development of public policy in Canada. Historically, the focus in Canada has been on resisting “continentalization” and, in culture and communications, the principal tension continues to be between Canadian cultural development and the incorporation of Canada into a single Canada – U.S. cultural communications market. (Audley 1994, 318)

Audley finds that the principles of broadcasting as a public service intended to unite and benefit Canadians from coast to coast continue to frame policy debate in this area, citing the 1991 Broadcasting Act as evidence of the continued desirability of a non-commercial broadcasting system. Audley (1994, 320) further argues that “there was no search in this strategy for a ‘niche’ category or categories of programming which Canada might specialize

in providing to the global TV market.” The value of cultural development in the form of national broadcasting was therefore inward in its focus; intended to produce a sense of self amongst Canadians, not export Canadian values into the global cultural marketplace. However, in “International Cultural Relations as a Factor in Postwar Canadian Cultural Policy: The Relevance of UNESCO for the Massey Commission,” Druick (2006) finds that the relation of Canadian cultural production to internationalization and trade was actually underwritten into the nationalist-seeming Massey Report due to the influence of UNESCO’s liberal internationalism. While it appeared that the Massey Report, and its supporters were primarily “Canadian Nation-builders,” Druick notes that they were also heavily involved in international affairs at a time when culture was being put forward by UNESCO as a potential peace-sustaining initiative in the face of the Cold War and potential threats of nuclear holocaust. In the US, public diplomacy of this period also used investment in art as a Cold War strategy, with cultural producers such as artists and writers deemed “the most fitting ambassadors to send abroad to promote freedom, as they embodied the ideal of democratic societies, that being, freedom of speech” (Maxwell 2007, 8). Federal involvement in the production of a national culture fell clearly in line with strategies of liberal internationalism.

Further evidence of this is found in the promotion of Canadian Studies as a feature of foreign policy, rather than a subject area of domestic relevance (Maxwell 2007). While domestic Canadian Studies programs were established, the primary intent of this Canadian studies initiative was to develop Canada’s international reputation through the promotion of Canadian topics and publications. Remarkably, the first Canadian Studies program was established, not in Canada, but at the University of Edinburgh in 1975. Such international centres of Canadian studies continue to receive funds from Foreign Affairs and International

Trade Canada (DFAIT), while domestic programmes have been the site of regular cutbacks, including the cancellation of Canadian studies programs at a number of Universities, most recently at Simon Fraser in 2009. Notably, funding for doctoral students available from the International Council for Canadian Studies (funded through DFAIT), is officially open to students from “all countries” with but one notable exception—Canada.

State intervention in Canadian cultural identity formation has clearly been somewhat conflicted, at times operating as a protectionist economic policy, and at others following trends in liberal internationalism. As is evident from this history of cultural policy, the development of the cultural industries in Canada has been profoundly linked to issues of national identity. As Michael Dorland argues, nowhere have the many problems and anxieties around communications technology,

appeared more seemingly self-evident than in the realm of cultural industries policy, as attested by the now-classic litany of statistics that document Canada’s cultural domination by the media output of the United States [...]. Indeed, until only recently, the term *Canadianization* was, in the vocabulary of international media analysts, a synonym for the dire fate that awaited other nations if they were to prove as unprotective of their cultural industries as Canada. (Dorland 1996, 348)

This feeling of being constantly under-threat of cultural eradication has produced a wealth of policy related to the protection of cultural sovereignty. Moreover, the desire to produce scholarship effective at combating this cultural erosion has resulted in, what Ira Wagman has called the “policy reflex” of Canadian communication scholarship. According to Wagman, the inclination towards policy scholarship in Canadian communication studies acts as a “middle-ground” that is neither critical nor administrative, and often does not actually influence policy or accurately account for how policy-making takes place. This combined with the challenge of working in a field with few archival records or historical lineages

results in “a turn to policy [that] in many cases represents a scholarly case of making lemonade out of lemons” (Wagman 2010, 620). This is “policy by default,” in which scholars “see the need to make policy recommendations in the conclusions of scholarly monographs” (622). Although Wagman is critical of this apparent policy bias, the fact remains that cultural policy provides a major framework for the historical trajectory of Canadian cultural studies. This produces a self-fulfilling prophesy of sorts in which the most consistent literature in this field is policy literature, thus reinforcing an inclination to engage in policy debates.

In the anthology *Canadian Cultural Studies—A Reader*, editors Sourayan Mookerjea, Imre Szeman, and Gail Faurschou argue,

cultural studies in Canada has become heterogeneous in a way that precludes the easy establishment of direct intellectual lineages. Those working in cultural studies in Canada since the 1980s draw as much (if not more) on work in critical race theory, feminist and queer theory, postcolonial studies, the work of the Birmingham Centre or the Frankfurt school, and the whole panoply of contemporary theory—from Jacques Derrida to Judith Butler, from Fredric Jameson to Gilles Deleuze—as on earlier Canadian theorists. (Mookerjea, Szeman, and Faurschou 2009, 11)

There is, therefore, an “internationalism” that influences academic discussions of Canadian culture, but which until recently has been conspicuously absent from academic considerations of Canadian cultural industries, which have historically been highly nationalist and protectionist. The introduction to this anthology includes a forward by Fredric Jameson in which he praises the field of Canadian cultural studies. He is optimistic about the vitality of both Canadian culture and cultural theory, particularly in contrast to what he describes as the “blindness of the centre”—a characteristic that he feels afflicts US culture. Canadian cultural theorists have drawn heavily upon American, British, and continental scholars of culture. This has led to a diversity of interdisciplinary considerations in the study

of Canadian culture, one that has had fleeting and disparate academic affiliations. Notably, these are precisely the characteristics that Jameson praises:

I would argue that the strength of Canadian theory lies precisely in its vulnerability, and in particular its openness to a variety of influences, not only from the United States, but also from Britain and, in the context of Quebec, from France. Immigration—from the Ukraine to Haiti, from Spain to Hong Kong—has created a remarkable cultural coexistence, whose varied components have a vested interest in the survival of the Canadian experiment, periodically threatened by Americanization. (Jameson 2009, XII)

Jameson's characterization of the development of a Canadian nation-state as an "experiment" is an intriguing one. The act of experimentation implies an openness to unexpected or unpredictable outcomes, and even the possibility of experimental failure, through any number of factors including design flaws or inadequate hypotheses. An openness to outcome, rooted in a reluctance to finalize definitions is characteristic of contemporary approaches to cultural studies.

What both the policy and cultural theory literatures discussed above show is a very clear association between Canadian identity and discourses of marginality. For example, Jameson touches on the idea of "vulnerability," another pervasive cultural theme. This is the type of perspective characterized by, for example, Margaret Atwood's declaration of *survival* as a central cultural theme in the Canadian literary tradition, or the idea of the failing masculinity of Canadian film protagonists (Atwood 2004; Fothergill 1977; Waugh 2006). However, the idea of Canada as a weak (Angus, 1997; Lipset 1990), humble (Berton 1982; Massey 1948; Resnick 1994), or polite nation has come under popular and academic scrutiny in recent years. While cultural elites may worry for the state of Canadian cultural identity, expressions of nationalism can be easily located in the everyday culture of popular media, advertising, and sporting fandom (cf. Gruneau and Whitson 1993; Sugars 2006). Writing for

the *American Review of Canadian Studies*, Millard, Riegel and Wright (2002) argue that the “myth of diffidence” formerly used to characterize Canadian nationalism has been replaced by a “loud nationalism.” A recent manifestation of this loud nationalism could be seen at Vancouver’s 2010 Olympics. Having become accustomed to the characterization of Canadians as polite and humble, certain members of the international press were shocked by the manifestations of aggressive Canadian pride that flooded the streets and media throughout the games. For example, Lawrence Donegan of the *Guardian* wrote that Canadians, “in pursuit of their own Olympic dream... appear to have forgotten that national characteristic for which they are best known: politeness” (cited in *CBC News* 2010). This is in stark contrast to an NBC clip that went viral prior to the games in which Tom Brokaw explains Canada to his American viewers. In the six-minute clip which boasts that the Canada-US relationship is one of the closest in the world Brokaw notes,

Of course, there are some distinct differences in the culture. The American fans at these games will be unfurling their stars and stripes at every opportunity and chanting “USA, USA!”. The Canadian Prime Minister had to go before Parliament yesterday and urge Canadians to engage in what he called “an uncharacteristic outburst of Patriotism,” saying “Don’t be afraid to wave those flags, we’ll apologize to the world for our immodesty later.” (NBC 2010)

This is a further example of the perpetuation of the “myth of diffidence” that Millard, Riegel and Wright discuss. They argue that mythologies about Canadian humility actually serve “as a justificatory device allowing Canadians to differentiate themselves from American nationalists, even as they deploy a suspiciously ‘American’ style of patriotism” (2002, 11).

The desire for cultural distinction represented in early Canadian cultural policy plays into the construction of this mythology. Yet, for all the academic uncertainties about the definition of Canada and Canadian identity, a genuinely popular sense of self has been

carefully developed, with much intervention on the part of the State. In 1967, an official version of fun, entertaining, popular national identity was launched with Expo and via the mass media, in what Pevere describes as “state-supported pop nationalism” (Pevere 2002b, np). Pevere is cynical about the linking of branding with empty nationalist discourses that is currently a feature of Canadian commercial culture. He notes that

this flattening of pop cultural identity, its rendering as a kind of iron-on label, has had a curious effect on the role played by national identity in the mainstream media, which is to say, in pop culture itself. While it is now commonplace to encounter the Canadian label proudly, loudly, and ubiquitously slapped on anything with even the most dubious connection to Canada [...], the label only adheres the way most do – it sticks only to the surface, peels off easily, and curls when subjected to heat. (2002b, np)

Stephen Brooks (2002, 36) argues that such “loud nationalism” or “flag waving” generally involves “either corporate manipulation of this national symbol or state action.” As such, Brooks argues that no genuine shift in general attitudes towards nationalism has occurred, merely the official representations of National pride. For example, it is notable that despite surface expressions of nationalism, most Canadians support the expansion of export opportunities and trade liberalization, even if these may be at the expense of cultural protectionism (Brooks 2002). As Millar, Riegel, and Wright, as well as Brooks, suggest, this paradoxical celebration of Canadian distinctiveness (in a style often associated with American patriotism), while also accepting of trade liberalization makes for a rather complicated cultural scenario (for a further example of the link between commercial culture and Canadian nationalism see Wagman 2002). This raises the issue of Canadian cultural distinction, in that there may not actually be anything distinctive about the Canadian example of culture. Through a longstanding dedication to liberal internationalism, Canadian cultural production is more exemplar than exception to global trends.

In the introduction to *How Canadians Communicate III: Contexts of Canadian Popular Culture*, editors Bart Beaty and Rebecca Sullivan discuss the changing field of cultural production and consumption at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Consecutive conservative federal governments have altered the way culture is regulated and promoted, accelerated industrialization, and added a moralistic component to artist funding:

we are increasingly presented with an economic imperative that values big industry, corporate ownership, and technological control over audience and artist innovation. However, there has also seeped into contemporary debates a return to a moral imperative that views alternative, critical, or marginalized voices as suspiciously un-Canadian. Furthermore, sociological and technological transformations in the way culture is produced and consumed have blurred the boundaries between art, media, and culture, making it increasingly difficult for stakeholders to define what qualifies as appropriate Canadian culture to be supported by public policies and, more crucially, public funding. (Beaty and Sullivan 2010, 12)

Under these conditions, the narrative of cultural distinctiveness and the need for the protection of cultural sovereignty is being eroded. Canadian cultural production is increasingly linked to the creative economy and the global market for creative work. This is the area of Canadian cultural studies that is most relevant to an understanding of the production of stand-up comedy and the global reach of this field.

JFL/JPR offers a useful illustration of the relation of globalization and neoliberalism to the Canadian comedy industry. The festival has had a major role in the development of comedy as a globally marketable commodity, as well as the positioning of Canadian performers in relation to this international flow of cultural goods and workers. While for the most part, Canadian comedy has been framed in relation to the nation or regional identities, Just for Laughs has tended to group humorists according to diasporic as well as national identities. This organization of performers helps frame the shows for audiences, a gesture that is additionally helpful for members of international entertainment industries who are

often looking for specific “types” or characters. Examples of such thematic indicators include club shows such as: *Brit-Com*; *O’Comics*; *Comedy Down Under*; and *Comedy Night in Canada* (featuring British, Irish, Australian, and Canadian comics respectively). Ethnically defined shows have included: *Wise Guys*; *Asian Invasion*; and *Best of the Uptown Comics* (featuring Italian, Asian, and African-American comics) This last category, referring to African-American comics, is of course not always self-evident to customers unfamiliar with the connotations of the word “Uptown.” During my field research I was informed by a JFL employee that customers occasionally call asking what kind of acts are featured at the Uptown Comics show. The customer service representative would then have to dance awkwardly around the issue, explaining that it is an “urban” show, not wanting to state the problematically obvious—it is a show for black comics. At JFL Toronto (2009), George Strombolopolous hosted *The Ethnic Show* which was framed as a celebration of Toronto’s diversity and included “ethnic” acts like the Italian-Canadian musical comedy troop The Doo-Wops. The naming of the show as ambiguously “ethnic” is not only critically problematic, but also shows the extent to which the North American comedy industry is heavily reliant upon stereotypes. Under these circumstances, comics draw heavily upon experiences of “ethnicity,” which is precisely what their audience has come to hear. That Just for Laughs frames comics in this way may in part be due to its intentional pursuit of industry attendance, as well as its interest in growing the comedy festival internationally.

The cultivation of a global humour market is a complicated initiative, given the cultural specificity of humour and joking. This explains the tendency for shows at JFL to draw upon the explanatory shorthand of culturally specific stereotypes. This specificity is also precisely why the linking of national identity with discussions of humour has been so

appealing. Humour seems to be an obvious subject for the discussion of cultural distinctiveness. The very function of joking makes social identification and collective cultural knowledge bases essential to its reception. But, with humour defined by cultural specificity, how then can we understand the growth of a global humour market? Through neoliberal globalization and the acceleration of intercultural exchange there is, arguably, some ground for a shared, global sense of humour. As an elaboration of these issues, I turn to a discussion of Russell Peters, a performer who is attaining new heights as a globally successful Canadian comedian.

### **Russell Peters and the Development of the Global Comedy Field**

On July 24, 2009, Russell Peters performed a solo show at Montréal's Bell Centre to over 11,000 spectators. A venue ordinarily used for major sporting events and rock concerts, the success of this show cemented Peters's reputation as Canada's best-selling funny man. In an industry that is ordinarily focused on success in the American market, Peters has broken new ground by becoming a globally recognized performer. The key to this success, according to freelance journalist Robert Lepage, is that Peters is not *Everyman* but the *Every Other Person*, "the representative voice of every ethnic group that doesn't fall under the heading of 'white'" (Lepage 1999, A8). Making racial stereotypes, diversity, and multiculturalism key themes in his acts, Peters uses his own racial identity to create a universal humorous discourse around globalization, cultural change, and confrontation with the Other. Although officially part of the 2009 JFL/JPR festival program, Peters's performance at this venue set him apart from the rest of the festival. This show dwarfed the Galas recorded at the St. Denis Theatre, which are ordinarily the most prestigious shows. Too popular for such a venue,

Peters's return to Montréal stood as a reminder that, as a global comedy icon, he had in many ways outgrown the comedy festival that had been so instrumental in his early career.

Across town, at the Cabaret Juste Pour Rire, nine young Canadian comedians performed to a much more modest audience as part of the *Homegrown Comic Competition*. These comics were handpicked by festival scouts through auditions held at comedy clubs across the country. The annual event gives promising young comics exposure to industry and established performers. Notably, the 2009 lineup bore little resemblance to the face of Canadian comedy that drew so many spectators to the Bell Centre. Of the nine young comics, eight were white (additionally, only one competitor was female). In short, the line-up was hardly reflective of Canada as a multicultural, diverse country, and suggests that stand-up comedy is as male-dominated as ever. However, with the international success of Russell Peters, the case can be made for Canada's unique role in the development of a globally consumable humour product—a significant development in humour production, which is generally considered culturally specific (and therefore difficult to export). The *Home Grown* example suggests that, if indeed cultural diversity has led to a distinct, globally consumable, Canadian humour, it is not at the level of club comedy that this perspective is being cultivated. In fact, for the most part, the Canadian stand-up comedy circuit has been remarkable in its lack of diversity. In her 2001 ethnography of stand-up comedy in Canada, Anna Woodrow found that, in comparison with the American industry, Canadian club comedy has “fewer women, fewer ethnic performers, almost no (out) queer comedians, and even fewer ‘alternative’ comedic performers” (Woodrow 2001, 30). Admittedly, this has changed gradually over the past ten years, with some of Canada's most recognizable comics today being drawn from these “other” categories—such performers include: Debra

DiGiovanni, Nikki Payne, and Shaun Majumder (all discussed previously in this dissertation). Notably, all of the above listed performers have based their stand-up careers out of Toronto where diversity is strongly associated with the city's image as a hip, creative hub.

Peters relies heavily on stereotypes and racism in the construction of his globally consumed comic voice. While humour is often culturally specific, racism, it would seem, is universal. The development of a humorous discourse around issues of marginality and difference is also rooted in an engagement with taboo and self-deprecation. For a standup comic marginalized by racist, sexist, or otherwise oppressive social structures, self-mockery rooted in such an identity allows the comic to "capitalize on their marginality," quite simply, exchanging humorous self-deprecation for fame and fortune (though, many comics do not actually achieve this level of success) (Gilbert 2004, 140-141). This, it has been argued, is precisely the reason that individuals from the Atlantic Provinces, especially Newfoundland, dominate Canadian comedy; coming to Canadian humour from the margins, these comics are already the objects of popular mockery and offer a unique perspective from which to mock themselves and the rest of the country (Tinic 2009).

Russell Peters is currently one of Canada's most successful performers. In 2009 and 2010, he made the top ten on the Forbes' list of highest earning comedians. Peters is unique in that he remains, primarily, a stand-up comedian. This is in contrast to performers such as Jim Carrey who moved out of live performance into film or television as their careers took off. Peters is also unique because his international career has not been primarily US-bound. He has a genuinely international career; including sold-out tours in not only Canada and the US, but also Australia, England, The United Arab Emirates, Sweden, Singapore, South Africa, Norway, India, and The Philippines (www.russellpeters.com 2011). Peters'

popularity speaks both to his engagement with universal themes (in particular, intercultural exchange in everyday life) and the global reach of South Asian diasporas. His creative work is sustained by success in the market, and his humour has succeeded in capturing massive international audiences.

Peters, through his popularity, is also a controversial figure. While most media discourses about the performer are celebratory, not everyone finds the humorist's race-based comedy amusing. Maki Motapanyane (2011) links Peters's use of racism with, as she describes it, the Canadian "fable" of tolerance and multiculturalism, which actually masks significant ethnocentric biases. Motapanyane argues that his comedy is racially essentialist, and betrays a troubling lack of concern about the ethics of humour and structures of inequality. The author concludes:

One of the apologies made for Peters's style of race-based humour is that it is a light form of anecdotal entertainment; as such, it channels no currents of power and operates apart from structures of inequality in society. This apology is a gross underestimation of the role of popular culture as a channel for the dissemination and reinforcement of dominant ideologies. Peters's Canadian popularity demonstrates in this case that were we not so easily amused, we might note with greater clarity the well-worn hegemonic scripts that contextualize our varied locations and points of affinity in the nation. (2011, 110)

In asking what *Canadians* in particular find so funny about Peters's comedy, and equating Peters's humour with "the ideology of multiculturalism" that "has worked to mask structural and material inequality among Canadian residents," Motapanyane fails to adequately account for Peters's *global* success (98-99). The relation of Peters's comedy to an unsettling version of multiculturalism, reliant as it is upon racial stereotypes, is not simply characteristic of Canadian culture, but also general trends in globalization and the growth of liberal internationalism.

Motapanyane is frustrated by Peters's dismissal of the politics of humour in favour of monetary goals; she refutes arguments that Peters's humour is critical and subversive by asking, "Is a comedian who measures his success based on his progress in conspicuous consumption a reliable conduit of anti-racist subversion?" (2011, 105). In questioning Peters' motivations, Motapanyane is seeking a valuation of comedy that is not reliant upon market indicators, but it must be acknowledged that professional comedy is, and has always been, a commercial enterprise. While humour might at times carry out a serious, ethical function, the field of stand-up comedy must still be understood as a market driven practice, however politically problematic the results of this focus may prove. This can be a challenging prospect for the theorist of humour, as the commercial justifications of stand-up (that the performer is merely giving the audience what they have paid for) are useful tools in its exemption from cultural critique.

Motapanyane's critique of Peters's race-based humour aligns with other critiques of ethnic humour such as those offered by Billig (2001; 2005) and Howitt and Owusu-Bempah (2005). Howitt and Owusu-Bempah argue that, "ethnic jokes reduce cultures to the trivial, to be laughed at and not something to be valued" (62). The authors claim that even a well-intentioned comedian could not wield such humour as a positive contribution "to the development of understanding relevant to multicultural society or globalization" (ibid). Similarly, Simon Critchley suggests that ethnic humour is always a means of in-group formation, and used to define closed relations of 'us' and 'them':

In ethnic humour, the *ethos* of a place is expressed by laughing at people who are not like us, and usually believed to be either excessively stupid or peculiarly canny. In England, the Irish are traditionally described as stupid and the Scots as canny; in Canada, the Newfies and the Nova Scotians assume these roles; in Finland, the Karelians are deemed stupid and the Laihians clever; in India, the Sikhs and the Gujaratis occupy these places. Either way, the belief is that 'they'

are inferior to ‘us’ or at least somehow disadvantaged *because* ‘they’ are not like ‘us’. (Critchley 2002, 69)

This is a reflection of humour as a creator of social bonds through inclusion, and more importantly, exclusion. According to Critchley, humour draws most directly upon the aspects of social life that we share with our most immediate communities. This roots it in locality, and renders difficult the explanation of humour to outsiders.

In taking up Critchley’s definition, I would like to offer an alternative means of reading humorists like Peters, one that draws upon a larger discussion of the field of production, reflects the complexities and contradictions inherent in the contemporary stand-up industry, and moves away from the analysis of individual performers and their bodies of work. This is precisely the approach that I advocated in Chapter 2, where in I argued that field theory offers a useful addition to humour theories which tend to be overly focused on individual comedians and the textual analysis of their routines. I argue here that Motapanyane’s critique of Peters is overly focused on his individual motivations. It is easy to imagine stand-up in this very individuated way—performers tend to be alone on stage, their work is highly self-referential, and they give the impression that they are primarily self-guided. However, as we saw in Chapter 4, humorists are actually reproduced through a highly social system of gatekeepers and their creative work is heavily influenced by their everyday surroundings.

In particular, Russell Peters’s emergence as a global comedy celebrity should be understood through a consideration of the *field of power* within which the performer learnt his craft and developed his career trajectory. For Canadian stand-up comedy, this field of power is the growth of the creative economy alongside neoliberalisation and the development of a global cultural citizenship through discourses of multiculturalism. Peters offers a

particularly salient example of comedy developed in relation to the larger field of power, because his career is the most far-reaching of any Canadian performer today. Peters's global career has been made possible by the spread of English as a second-language, the dominance of American popular culture, and the international reach of the South Asian diaspora. Furthermore, his race-based humour works on audiences the world-over because globalization and migration have brought about increased intercultural interactions and tensions. While the equation of race with a nation or an essential cultural identity is problematic and uncomfortable under the official tenets of a critical and non-essentialist approach to multiculturalism, in practice such equations still occur; Peters's humour reflects this.

The relation of Peters's comedy to the Canadian 'fable' of multiculturalism is a significant point of contention for Motapanyane. Critics of Canadian multiculturalism note that it is too easily co-opted by commercial interests, specifically the interests of a globalized, rather than localized, marketplace (Mitchell 2009). Multiculturalism is used as part of a justificatory discourse for neoliberal, transnational economic strategies, while masking the tensions and shortcomings of such economic trajectories. To oppose transnationalism is conflated with an opposition to a multicultural, open, global society. Peters, on the other hand, does not mask these tensions and shortcomings, rather he exposes them. Like other *languages of resistance* (such as, for example, Hip Hop), humour draws upon the language and symbols of the dominant culture; as I discussed in relation to humour theory in Chapter 2, humour mimics and inverts serious codes. Peters' race-based (racist?) humour betrays the mythology of multiculturalism, pointing to the inadequacies of this framework, and illustrating the extent to which people still *experience* race in their daily lives. Through

humour, we are shown a problematic and challenging manifestation of diversity that does not reflect the official, enlightened sterilized versions of multiculturalism put forward by the State, but the crude, essentialist, popular uptake of this concept. Peters, through the presentation of racial stereotypes, forces the audience to perceive the fissures in official discourses of tolerant multiculturalism. These are problematic discourses, and there is a certain discomfort in knowing that a popular audience exists for such work (a discomfort illustrated well in Motapanyane's critique of the performer). However, while Motapanyane points to the flaws in Canadian cultural discourses that make Peters so popular here, it must be acknowledged that Peters is *globally* popular. In fact, like many Canadian performers, he did not really make-it in Canada until he had made-it internationally. If Peters is a manifestation of multiculturalism "gone bad," then his popularity suggests that Canada is not alone in this regard.

In an article discussing American comedian Stephen Colbert, Jonathan Rossing makes similar claims about the critical potential of race-based comedy. Specifically, Rossing argues that Colbert's satirical rhetoric of reactionary color-blindness and white, male victimhood offers a critical humorous discourse that draws attention to the irrationalism and historic revision required to sustain the problematic "logic of postracialism" (Rossing 2012, 57). Academic criticisms of such race-based humour argue that regardless of intent on behalf of the performer, such humour can be read uncritically, and therefore has the potential to act as a reinforcement of racist perspectives (cf. Howitt and Owusu-Bempah 2005). Rossing takes this criticism seriously, noting that caution is indeed necessary when treading "into the realm of racial humor" (Rossing 2012, 53). However, the critical potential of such work remains, for Rossing, a vital area of consideration. He notes,

Racial humor will not cure the evils of racism alone. Its ambiguous blend of implicit and explicit messages results in tricky terrain to travel. Humor, however, provides a starting point to provoke reflection and action and a compelling complement to “serious” discourse. (Rossing 2012, 57).

Humour offers an anthropological function, illustrating serious debates, inequalities, and prejudices through the popular comedy of a social group or historic period (Critchley 2002).

When removed from its social context, a creative work undergoes a process of “derealisation” in which it is stripped of the meanings, debates, and processes that were self-evident in the time and space of its production (Bourdieu 1993, 32). Humour experiences this derealisation more completely and more aggressively than other creative forms; it seldom stands the test of time, being rooted to the conditions of its production. This spatial and temporal specificity means that what our humorists joke about, and indeed, what their audiences find laughable, offers a critical illustration of attitudes and values. However, such a critical illustration does not necessarily offer a transitional discourse, that is social critique and social change can not automatically be correlated, and humour can be said to offer the former more forcefully than the latter.

This illustrative rather than transformative humour can be seen quite clearly in the comic personae of Russell Peters. Peters, born in 1970 and raised in Hamilton, Ontario adjacent to Canada’s largest and most diverse city, developed his comedic consciousness within processes of neoliberalization, official multiculturalism, and the shift from a manufacturing to an information-based economy. Multiculturalism in Canada emerged in the 1980s alongside neoliberalism. It is part of a global identity discourse that positions Canada as exemplary of the diversity, tolerance, and understanding required for a peaceful, global society. That multiculturalism has been taken up as essentialist and easily commercialized can be seen in Peters’s engagement with race and diversity in his comedy. Peters provides a

genuinely popular, marketable, Canadian-content driven cultural product. This is the cultural policy dream made real. The downside is that this cultural product is flawed, challenging, offensive, easily swayed by monetary interests, and intensely reluctant to act as policy-makers, academics, and critics might want it to. Peters offers a new narrative of the successful Canadian comedian. Prior to Peters, the dominant narrative of Canadian comedic success was rooted in an outdated list of performers that have made it big in the US film and television industry, most recently Jim Carrey and Mike Meyers. This association continues to be made in Canadian popular culture, as for example, in the song “Oh Canada” by rapper Classified which shot to popularity during the Vancouver Olympics,

O-o-o Canada  
Oh you're no fan of us?  
Cause our movie and TV shows are so amateur?  
Yeah, we laugh it off, that don't really bother me  
Look, we ain't serious unless you really gotta be  
Humourous attitude like Kids in the Hall  
Like Jim Carrey, Mike Myers,  
Yeah we claiming them all  
It's the great white north  
Home of the funniest actors  
The front of the joke  
With an abundance of laughter (Classified 2009)

Importantly, the Kids in the Hall, Jim Carrey, and Mike Meyers all succeeded in the US market during the late 1980s and early 1990s. This narrative is therefore one that is dated by at least 20 years. When boasting about the success of Canadian performers in the US, this datedness is seldom acknowledged. Peters's rise to global stardom is therefore significant because he offers a new example of a successful Canadian comedian. However, his success has not been primarily in the US, and certainly has not been a consequence of stardom found

in film and television. Peters is primarily a stand-up comedian. While he has made small forays into film and television, this has not generally garnered critical or even popular acclaim. Peters's comedic coming of age and current global success illustrates well trends in globalization and the creative economy, and charts a new trajectory for Canadian cultural producers in a global comedy market.

In my discussion of stand-up comedy, I have grappled with the divergence between the study of cultural labour/production and the study of texts/social factors in humour reception. This is precisely the issue that I have shown in my discussion of Russell Peters whose global success as a stand-up comedian has broken new ground for this popular performance art. While some may be critical of his focus on wealth accumulation and lack of attention to the potential consequences of his race-based humour, this study shows that the production of stand-up comedy and the development of stand-up careers work according to a complex system of professionalization. The romanticization of stand-up as spontaneous, honest, and unencumbered is very much undercut by evidence of the field's heavily constructed, predictable, and repetitive nature. Furthermore, academic readings of the politics inherent in the comic text do not always take adequate account of the conditions of production through which these performers work.

I began this analysis with a comparison between Russell Peters as a global comedy celebrity, and the up-and-coming comedians selected to participate in JFL's *Home Grown Talent Competition*. While many of Canada's most successful and recognizable comedians working in stand-up comedy and related fields today are reflective of a range of subjectivities and identity formations, this diversity is not being reflected in the participants selected from across the country to compete in *Home Grown*. This shows a disparity between the types of

participants that gain access to the comedy field early on, and the types of performers that can capitalize on the larger urban, multicultural, and increasingly global, performance opportunities that exist higher up the chain in the field of comedy production. That is, at the entry level, the types of performers drawn into the system continue to be weighted in favour of heterosexual, white-males with limited (or no) family commitments, who can successfully tour a broad range of venues across the country, especially outside of the major urban markets of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. Here we see tensions between the immediate commerciality of stand-up and larger industrial and global entertainment trends. That is, the need to support a touring based stand-up field as a commercially viable popular performance art, and a desire by larger gatekeepers, such as JFL/JPR, to tap into global entertainment flows. These can be divergent interests, and do not always privilege the same types of talent.

### **Popular Controversies and Vulgar Identities**

In this chapter I have considered the role of popular culture in the production of a national sense of self. Humour is a particularly significant example of this as it is currently imagined to be a factor not only in defining national identity domestically, but also as a cultural export which defines Canada's position on the global stage. Many of the discourses related to Canadian cultural production in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been framed around marginality and anxieties about American cultural imperialism. While discourses of marginality persist, it must also be acknowledged that much of this positioning of Canadian culture as weak and subordinate can actually be read as a rhetorical strategy, ensuring cultural protection in order to advance nationally framed commercial interests. A particularly significant manifestation of this could be seen in the aggressive nationalism of athletes and spectators at the Vancouver Winter Olympics. In the case of comedy, performers often frame

themselves as marginal in their routines, even when they are not. For example, at a comedy show in Halifax that I attended in the summer of 2010, the opener, middler, and headliner all appeared to be the fairly predictable breed of white, male, heterosexual stand-up comic that the club circuits are so adept at producing. Despite this monopolization of stage time, both the middler and headliner complained to the audience that, as white, heterosexual men, they are now a marginalized minority. These performers, as road warriors, may be increasingly frustrated by the lack of upward opportunities for the bulk of Canadian mid-career comics who have not broken into the US entertainment industry or the Canadian broadcasting circuit. That they could go the way of performers like Eric Tunney or Mike MacDonald is no doubt a legitimate fear. Equally likely is that these performers frame themselves as “marginalized” as part of a strategy of self-deprecation. This mirrors more general uses of self-deprecation in Canadian popular culture, as well as the strategic discourse of cultural marginality used to bolster support of cultural industries.

This chapter has also illustrated some of the tensions inherent in drawing upon popular culture in the production of national identity. As the producers of popular culture have alternative, often commercial, motives, the content of popular culture can at times be vulgar, inappropriate, or offensive. In critiquing Peters, Motapanyane (2011) argues that the comedian is not sufficiently concerned about the morality of his comedy, noting that its negative impacts are a moral question that the comedian must take responsibility for. There is no consensus amongst comedians as to whether or not performers have a moral obligation to self-censor, although performers tend to suggest that stand-up ought not to be subject to such constraints (Deveau 2012). Comedians John Oliver and Andy Zaltzman suggest that live stand-up is a particularly vital form of comedy because “you really can say whatever you

want. You are restricted only by your conscience and by whether or not there's a stag party in the crowd that would like you to make fun of one of their ties" (Oliver and Zaltzman 2005, 31). They contrast this with broadcast comedy where decency requirements and the pursuit of a mass audience put restrictions on comic material. While Oliver and Zaltzman downplay the impact that self-censorship and the comedy club audience can have on what is deemed humorous, I argue that even at this level of production, factors such as habitus, the structures of the comedy field, and social conventions have a profound impact upon the type of comedy that is performed. As the authors themselves note, the presence of certain types of spectators also disrupts the creative freedom of the performer. The comic's *job* is to make the audience laugh—this must be done regardless of the perceived quality of the audience. This can be a particular issue early in a comic's career when he/she has very little control over performance conditions. Unknown performers are booked to play at clubs all over the country, and audiences arrive in order to experience stand-up, with little knowledge of the types of performers that they will see. For the most part, this encourages a certain homogeneity within the system, as club audience preconceptions about what stand-up looks- and sounds-like limit diversification within the field. Following a particularly excruciating set in Ajax, Ontario, comedian Dave Martin projected his own failure to procure laughter onto the audience, pointing out that they were not really "his audience," and that his material plays better with the more intellectual crowds of the Toronto comedy scene (*The Next Big Thing* 2003).

This speaks to the tensions inherent in stand-up comedy between its commercial and artistic natures, mirroring Bourdieu's consideration of the tensions between bourgeois art, social art, and art for art's sake in France (Bourdieu 1993). The conditions for the production of stand-up differ from the artistic practices considered by Bourdieu in that contemporary

stand-up comedy developed almost exclusively as a commercial activity performed by individuals for pay. Despite this early commerciality, tensions between the overlapping fields of art and business are still evident in contemporary discussions of Canadian stand-up. Robert Stebbins was particularly interested in this element of standup performance in Canada, remarking that comics are “entertainment entrepreneurs” (Stebbins 1990, 132). A majority of stand-up comedy production occurs within the overlapping space between art and business. Although certain performers (notably those with theatre or sketch backgrounds) might come to stand-up comedy from a more artistic or grass-roots background, many enter the field as a commercial endeavour. It is not unusual for individuals employed elsewhere in the creative industries (often advertising or journalism) to cross-over into club comedy via open-mic nights.

The idea of the market as arbiter of taste poses serious challenges to Canadian cultural policy in that the type of programming that is popular is not necessarily that which is preferred for the construction of a stable national culture and a proficient citizenry. While contemporary stand-up is heavily administered through national comedy chains, festivals, and broadcasters, stand-up emerged as culture from below. As such, it can be vulgar and controversial. Performances of marginality can be uncomfortable, self-hating, and offensive (Deveau 2010). By performing ethnicity, gender or other identity characteristics, performers pre-empt oppressive attitudes by engaging in self-deprecatory humour. When Russell Peters or Shaun Majumder perform discourses related to multiculturalism, they are not engaging with these issues on the terms set out by the policy makers. They are not held up to the demands of equality, sensitivity and political correctness that the national culture of an

officially multicultural nation is expected to uphold. What is popular and what is palatable have no necessary correlation.

Considering the field of production of stand-up comedy as well as comic performances offers a rich object of study that can be applied to broader contemporary trends in cultural production. According to Lawrence Mintz, American stand-up comedy, “confronts just about all of the profoundly important aspects of our culture and our society, and [...] it seems to have an important role allowing for expression of shared beliefs and behavior, changing social roles and expectations” (Mintz 1985, 80). However, this practice also answers to demands of the neoliberal marketplace. It is, therefore, not an autonomous cultural critic, but heavily implicated in the reproduction of the dominant field of power through which it is produced, distributed, and consumed. This is made evident in the comedy and comedians studied in this dissertation that both reflect regional and national cultural identifications, as well as the outward focus of product and labour flows required in the neoliberal economy. At times these emphases can conflict, such as when performers engage in regionally specific humour to please a local audience at JFL/JPR, despite the fact that their more general career goal is to be recognized by agents and executives seeking talent for a US or international market.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

In this dissertation, I have argued that field theory offers a useful approach to the study of the Canadian comedy industry, as well as the more general studies of cultural production, the creative economy, and the Canadian cultural industries. I have worked to establish Canadian comedy as a field of academic study which engages in culturalist discourse analysis. To this end, I have considered the field through the representations and discourses that it produces and reproduces. In particular, I have found that the field is reinforced by a number of industry (insider) discourses and that much of the discursive production of stand-up comedy reinforces the position of dominant cultural intermediaries as well as the characteristics of participants and their career trajectories. This is an approach that is in keeping with the sociology of art that Bourdieu applied in his work on the field of cultural production, especially his studies of the French literary field of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In order to complete this study, I have drawn upon and synthesized a number of theoretical approaches and literatures including Canadian cultural studies, humour studies, Canadian cultural policy and industry studies, creative economy and cultural labour studies, and approaches to field theory. I have attempted to replicate the methodological interdisciplinarity recommended by such theorists of culture as Jim McGuigan (cultural analysis), Andy Medhurst (national humour), and Michael Billig (traditional scholarship), all of whom call for a pluralist and fluid approach to the analysis of complex cultural practices and artifacts.

In many respects, the comedy industry in Canada is not distinct, but rather *exemplary* of trends in global cultural production. Comedians are socialized into being creative entrepreneurs and learn to pursue a range of commercial outlets for their work. Performers are encouraged to engage in international comic careers, as well as work in advertising, film, television, and radio in order to supplement, or indeed eventually replace, their work in comedy clubs. In the early years of standup clubs in Toronto, most performers did not really imagine that it was possible to earn a living doing comedy; they simply did it because they enjoyed it. Lorne Michaels, one of the most influential people in the American comedy industry, confirms that, even in the larger American market, comedy was not something someone did for money:

Steve Martin and I were talking not too long ago, and we were reflecting on the money that's come. It's funny, because if you told us back then [the seventies] that we'd never make more than fifty thousand dollars a year doing what we were doing, we would have been happy to keep doing it. The money that came later was unfathomable. (cited in Clark 1997, 131-132)

The financial instability and recklessness initially associated with creative work of this kind gives it a very narrow demographic appeal. As Graham Murdock has suggested in relation to the British cultural industries, creative work is structured in such a way that those over the age of 35, especially those who would like to have a family, find it very difficult to pursue as a long-term career (Murdock 2003). Certain types of comic careers are similarly difficult to align with a stable family life. This limits the type of performers that are able to reasonably pursue a life-long career in stand-up, and consequently diminishes diversity within the field. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that earning potential in performance careers tends to decline after the age of 40.

As with all creative work, young people are particularly attracted to work in the comedy industry. Throughout most of the 20th century, cultural production in Canada was deemed in need of support and protection from Americanization. Remarkably, however, cultural nationalist fears that Canadian cultural production could not survive without state intervention were generally absent from the early development of stand-up comedy. The vulgarity of this performance art made it incompatible with the higher cultural pursuits that were deemed worthy of artistic grants and national institutions. Additionally, stand-up at both JFL and Yuk Yuk's proved early on that this genre of performance was popular enough to be commercially viable. Although stand-up was initially an American artform, this style of comic performance has proven highly adaptable to other cultural contexts (Stebbins 1990). JFL is a particularly notable example of a complex cultural producer that mediates a range of state, industry, and public interests. The cultural specificity required of humour means that it ought not to have international appeal, yet JFL is internationally successful. Additionally, Canada has produced a number of internationally successful stand-up comics (both English and French speaking). This is indicative not only of an industrialization of humour (which must pursue a large audience market), but also of the globalization of citizenship.

How comedy and comedians come to be consecrated as successful or popular is not a straightforward process. As I have discussed throughout this dissertation, cultural intermediaries such as broadcasters and festivals have the ability to consecrate certain performers. The institutional cultures of these organizations can lead to certain types of performers being celebrated, while others remain largely ignored. In Canada, comedians who do not engage in news parody, or take up "Canadian culture" as their main site of humour, have found it difficult to break into Canadian television production. These performers have

had to look elsewhere for employment opportunities. Not all gatekeepers privilege the same comic types, but comedians do need to break into the field by being consecrated by a prominent cultural intermediary at some point in order to be taken seriously as a professional comedian. Specific gatekeepers that I have addressed in this dissertation include comedy clubs, schools, festivals, and broadcast media. These are the cultural intermediaries that make up the official field of comedy production. Performers are expected to work their way through these various institutions in order to build their local, national, and international careers. However, it is not an easy shift from the local and regional club comedy scene into the much larger cultural industries. The late-night, bar-scene element of stand-up has accommodated a great deal of creative freedom. Performers can generally be as vulgar as audiences allow. On certain nights, with certain crowds, there may be “no-go” areas, but for the most part, the stand-up comic can push the boundaries of acceptable humour and engage freely with taboo subjects. Most film and television programming is more constrained, and certainly comics have less independent control over their work in these media as they must accommodate other writers, producers, directors, not to mention the expectations of audiences, advertisers, and networks/production companies. Comedians can occasionally perform vulgar, profane, and aggressive humour in the cultural industries, but only if there is a mass market for it. While the internet offers a temporary way around some of these dominant intermediaries, online comedy content must still receive some form of consecration (often the number of “hits” or views). The end-goal for online content producers often remains to be incorporated into the cultural industries (generally film or television).

Often times, a comedian’s persona and body of work can conflict with the creative expectations of the gatekeepers through which he or she is expected to pass, and these

expectations can conflict with the requirement of other gatekeepers and ideal career trajectories. For example, Shaun Majumder at JFL expressed frustration with telling Canada-specific jokes to his Canadian audience because he felt this would not help him impress the US agents whose attention he was actually courting. This incongruity has been a central challenge for stand-up comics attempting to transition from localized stand-up comedy into national and international work in the cultural industries. Additionally, the idea of success and popularity is perhaps out of place in a field rooted in self-deprecation, cynicism, and irony. Discourses about Canadian identity (comic and otherwise), especially in relation to the US, emphasize weakness and marginality. As Ian Angus has remarked, “English Canada is a weak nation, and a certain weakness may open the door to wisdom” (Angus 1997, 208). The outsider perspective, characterized by weakness, contributes to the framing of Canadian comics working in the US as successful due to their innovative comedic insights into American culture. This is part of a more general myth of Canadian marginality which feeds cultural protectionism and also serves to justify celebratory nationalist attitudes and expressions. In the case of the comedy industry, discourses of marginality offer an additional social advantage (Gilbert 2004). In the cases that Gilbert outlines, this marginality is usually a minority group such as women or African-Americans. In the context of Canadian humour, Canadianness itself has been constructed as the marginal identity. This framing, until recently, has left little room for “other” Canadian performers to capitalize on their difference. Today, many of Canada’s most recognizable comedic performers are able to speak to multiple, humorous marginalities. For example, Shaun Majumder’s references to ethnicity are often balanced with allusions to his real “ethnic” identity, that of the much mocked Newfoundlander.

During an episode of *The Debaters* featuring American comedian Judy Gold (and discussed elsewhere in this dissertation), Steve Patterson attempted to outline the “vitality” of the Canadian entertainment industry for his guest:

We actually have a Canadian Walk of Fame and as a CBC media personality I may actually get my own star etched on that pavement and by process of elimination so might every other Canadian in this room right now. At some point, they just give it to you, so that people can walk all over you, much like they did during your Canadian entertainment career. True story. (*The Debaters* 2009)

Gold reacted with an appropriately sarcastic expression of admiration. Bemoaning the lack of domestic opportunities for Canadian comedians is itself a significant theme in Canadian comedy. Though Patterson mocks the Canadian Walk of Fame and the very notion of a Canadian entertainment *career*, the debate between DiGiovanni and Gold about the merits (or lack thereof) of succeeding in the US serves well to illustrate that there is something distinctly pleasurable about humour that speaks to norms based in nationally-specific cultural knowledge. When responding to the question “Hollywood heartthrob Johnny Depp shuns LA preferring to live where?” Gold is shocked that DiGiovanni’s answer “Winnipeg,” a city the American comic evidently knows nothing about, received a significantly bigger laugh than Gold’s answer “North Korea.” The idea that an American movie star would choose to live in Winnipeg is funny, and few non-Canadians could really be expected to fully understand why (though American comedians who have attempted to perform stand-up there might have an idea). As a punchline, Winnipeg is the underdog. North Korea is very clearly a worse place for a Hollywood star to live. It is being the underdog, and finding the humour in this marginal, weak position that defines Canadian comedy in relation to national identity and global entertainment flows.

Because the field of stand-up comedy reaches across so many creative and media sectors, with comedians working in theatre, radio, film and television, the vitality of this field offers a good indication of the health of the cultural industries overall. That comedians have been left out of most cultural studies analyses to date is perhaps related to the problematic nature of their work. Comedy can be racist, sexist, and homophobic. It forces the cultural theorist to deal with the “ugly” aspects of Canadian culture, and illustrates well that Canada is not all majestic landscapes and social tolerance. This is a complex nation with multiple, conflicting identities that are often contradictory and irresolvable. Drifting as they do between artistic, commercial and industrial practice, the stand-up comic can, under certain productive conditions, illustrate these conflicts in humour. This unapologetic version of identity is not an “ideal” candidate for the framing of a nationalist identity discourse. Yet, Canadian stand-up, as fleeting, popular, ambivalent and irreconcilably complex offers a compelling and nuanced illustration of Canadian cultural identity, the cultural industries, and the unique labour challenges faced by workers in the rapidly growing creative economy.

While Canadian cultural identity has been imagined as marginal, especially in relation to the US, the global flows of Canadian popular culture increasingly render this idea problematic. I have argued this in relation to stand-up and sketch comics who have developed international careers. The emergence of stand-up as a popular performance art at a time of rapid neoliberalization ensured that this field would carry with it the individualism, internationalism, and entrepreneurialism required to succeed within this field of power. The comedy field, and consequently the comedy careers and labour conditions of participants in this field, have been shaped by the political and economic perspectives of the culture in which they developed. Notably, one of the dominant tensions in Canadian cultural production

relates to the role of the nation in a postnationalist era. Increased global connectivity means that workers, products, and capital cross borders—particularly those of democratic, post-industrial nations. While certain humorists point to the Canadian ‘outside’ perspective as being instrumental in their success in the US, it must be pointed out that the establishment of an international career can only come from a position of relative privilege. Not all individuals are able to access and take advantage of the experience of global cultural citizenship. That a performer like Russell Peters can travel throughout the world performing comedy depends upon his Canadian passport, which allows him to travel most places with relative ease. While Canada may be economically marginal in relation to the US or the UK, it is not marginal in relation to most other nations. English Canada, and the crisis of identity that this population feels so acutely, is not unique in its position of weakness. The global success of a comedian like Russell Peters illustrates the extent to which certain experiences can be universalized. While academics, policy-makers and average Canadians alike imagine the Canadian experience in relation to the US is a special one, in reality there is nothing unique about fears over American cultural hegemony. It is a global phenomenon. Canada, however, has been resisting, mocking and secretly coveting this hegemony longer than most. In a sense, Canada is uniquely positioned to develop global humour. This can be seen in, for example, the international success of Russell Peters’ stand-up, the global growth of JFL/JPR, and the export of television programs such as the CBC’s *Little Mosque on the Prairie* which has been aired in France, Switzerland, Israel, the West Bank, Gaza, Dubai, Finland and Turkey (CBC News 2007).

In my study of the Canadian field of stand-up comedy, I have combined theories of humour and theories of cultural production, in order to take account of the complexity of this

object of study. Understanding stand-up comedy requires a comprehension of the larger social/cultural/political fields through which it is framed. Notably, the comedians often offer clues to the conditions of the production of their work through their acts, referencing their work lives onstage. As a source of information on cultural labour, stand-up offers a rich research space. These “insider details” illustrate the extent to which comics can be ambivalent with their careers. As I have tried to show, performers are often frustrated with the structure of the field and the ways that gatekeepers influence their movement through it, but they also reinforce this field by working within it, often setting their career goals according to the trajectories set out by these same gatekeepers. For example, while performers express frustration with the control that JFL exercises over the comedy industry and the extent to which the festival panders to industry (largely American) interests, they also pursue inclusion in the festival aggressively, primarily because it offers access to the US entertainment industry. Such tensions between the artistic, commercial and industrial elements of the stand-up field have been evident throughout my analysis.

The field of stand-up comedy has a markedly ambivalent relation to industry and the state. Although it initially emerged as a commercial activity, outside of the more structured entertainment industry and beyond the purview of state investment in culture, it has since become better integrated into the larger system of cultural industries, especially as a talent development site for the film and television industries in Canada and the US. Engaging as it does with identity, stereotypes, and current events, stand-up produces popular discourses on “Canadianness,” especially as a reflection of the marginality, contradiction, and self-deprecation so often associated with Canadian culture. It also offers critical reflections on current trends in creative work and culture related to changes brought about through

globalization. While not always wielded subversively, stand-up comedy does nonetheless open up a space for critical discourses, allowing performers and audiences to opt out of the “serious mode” in favour of a humorous one in which performers can violate serious codes. This can include joking about their working conditions or using stereotypes to undermine privileged cultural perspectives.

Although the individualism and penchant for the taboo that characterizes stand-up comedy gives it the appearance of a radical performance, in actuality this field is generally quite conservative. The production of group laughter is dependent upon social consensus, and as such comedy often acts as a reinforcement of normative values and expectations. Additionally, performers are engaged in a commercial activity, and are required on some level to pursue popular appeal. This dissertation has considered the ways that these requirements are represented in both comic performances and the media discourses which help to frame this field. Although it is a highly competitive field, internal discourses often de-emphasize this, focusing instead on the willingness of gatekeepers to *help* performers to succeed. In delimiting the ways in which stand-up is a field of cultural production, I have shown how participants operate within a relational logic which gives them a sense of what should be done, such as what career trajectories ought to be pursued and how their comic persona are best framed in relation to these possible position takings.

The field of comedy production in Canada is a complex and under-studied area. That it has to date received so little academic consideration is indeed remarkable given its persistent presence in popular discourses related to the success of Canadian cultural commodities. Additionally, stand-up comedy, having emerged at a time of economic neoliberalization and growth in global communication technologies, offers an exemplary

perspective on the development of the creative economy in Canada. In considering stand-up comedy in Canada, I have argued that field theory allows for a more complex analysis of this popular performance art and takes into consideration larger trends in cultural industrialization, neo-liberalization, and the growth of the creative economy. This approach stands in contrast to the focus on texts and individual performers that currently dominates comedy studies, as well as the emphasis on embedded, at times uncritical, ethnographic work that dominates production studies. Comedians do not operate in a vacuum; rather their work is part of a larger production system that influences their creative material and defines their expected career trajectories. I have found aspects of humour theory such as the delimitation of in-groups and out-groups, the politics of humorous discourses, and the role of humour in social construction to be compatible with field theory which considers the field of forces and struggles which define these same issues and tensions. Consider, again, Bourdieu's definition of the field as "the structural relations [...] between social positions that are both occupied and manipulated by social agents which may be isolated individuals, groups or institutions" (1993, 29). This seems to me a highly relevant perspective for the study of the cultural industries in the creative economy. The terms that Bourdieu offers allow for the discussion of complex cultural artifacts and processes, as well as the consideration of a broad range of stakeholders, participants, institutions, and the discourses that they engage with and reproduce. Although the breadth of Bourdieu's theories, and the complexity (and at times contradictory nature) of their application make the use of field theory in contemporary cultural studies a challenge, this approach has proven highly applicable to the study of Canadian comedy and Canadian cultural production.

In applying field theory to the study of humour, it is possible to gain a clearer picture of the structural biases intrinsic to the comedy field, as well as how participants internalize and/or resist these structures while moving into, within, and out of the field of comedy production. Analyses of complex cultural production stand to benefit from the breadth of field theory. Importantly, however, this study is primarily engaged with discourses that circulate within the field under question. While such discourses often indicate actual experiences and perceptions, it is important not to conflate such findings with fundamental truths at work within the field. A critical, constructivist perspective is vital to the contemporary use of field theory, which seeks to unearth how participants socially construct knowledge about the field as well as the parameters of the field itself.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> When referring to both the English- and French-language portions of Just for Laughs/Juste pour Rire, I use the abbreviation JFL/JPR. When discussing only the English-language parts of the festival, I use JFL, and when discussing the French-language portions of the festival, I use JPR.

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