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Book review

Bhargava, Rashi and Richa Chilana (Eds.) (2023). *Punching Up in Stand-Up Comedy: Speaking Truth to Power*. Taylor and Francis.

Punching Up in Stand-up Comedy: Speaking Truth to Power is a world-wide exploration of stand-up comedy that illustrates the power stand-up comedy holds throughout various contexts across the world. Punching up refers to the "informal comedic code of ethics wherein a comedian should direct her/his comedy at those who are in a privileged position in the social hierarchy. Simply put, the comedy is aimed at those who are more powerful" (p. 54). Through the practice of punching up, comedians challenge, subvert, and critique the power of the privileged in humorous ways, often with the comedian using their own lived experiences of the various power systems to shape their comedy, "[t]hus, comedy, particularly stand-up, by its very definition can transgress boundaries like no other, thereby imbuing it with an inherent political potential" (p. 2). In addition to punching up, this volume also explores how various stand-up comedians engage with charged humour:

> The intention to drive home a particular (read: radical) worldview/ideology is certainly there in some forms of humour, especially in what Krefting calls, 'charged humour'. Krefting argues that all forms of humour locate itself in a particular social, cultural, political context but 'charged humour' does it self-consciously with the intention to create a more equitable world by challenging its divisions and cultural exclusion (p. 6).

This ambitious volume outlines the context and application of charged humour and punching up in stand-up comedy "and its potential role as a counterhegemonic tool for satire, commentary and expression of identity especially for the disempowered or marginalised" (p. 1). This volume is notable in the geographical berth of its chapters and contributors and offers an extensive survey of stand-up comedy scenes outside of the US and UK, where most stand-up comedy scholarship currently sits. Due to the scope of this book, the chapters can be used as stand-alone case studies into particular stand-up comedy scenes making it a useful text for anyone looking to diversify their comedy studies outside of the US and UK context.

"Part 1: Punching in and punching up: Origins, limits and possibilities" opens the broad application of charged humour in various stand-up comedy contexts from Moracco, Indonesia, France, and India. The chapters in Part 1 outline the powerful and wide-reaching possibilities of charged humour, demonstrating the power that charged humour lends to stand-up comedy in that it "is a form of comedy that targets social injustices and seeks to empower the disenfranchised by offering solutions, albeit silly and preposterous at times" (p. 35). Chapter 1 "The history of Moroccan stand-up comedy: From storytelling to charged humour" by Mohamed Bassou and Rebecca Krefting analyses comic performance traditions to establish the cultural history of stand-up comedy in Morocco and examines six prolific comedians and their application of charged humour.

Chapter 2 "Standing up for speaking up: Stand-up comedy in the Indonesian context" by Nina Setyaningsih and Anisa Larassati illustrates how stand-up comedians throughout

Indonesian history have used comedy to critique the various social and political issues. During the New Order political era of the 1980s-1990s comedy group Warkop DKI's critiques of the government resulted in interrogation and censorship with several of their performances being cancelled as "it was suspected that they would criticise the government in their performance. Laughing and making people laugh became a 'crime' back then […] '*Tertawalah, sebelum tertawa itu dilarang*' (do laugh, before laughing is banned)" (p. 50).

Chapter 3 "The Jamel Comedy Club: (Mis)understanding stand-up comedy's relationship with urban culture in France" by Jonathan Ervine examines the influence of *The Jamel Comedy Club* in popularising stand-up comedy in France and provides a "broader discussion of the way in which stand-up comedians in France evoke socio-political issues on stage" (p. 75). Ervine examines "the stigmatisation and othering of the 'visible minority' groups or *banlieues*" (p. 11, italics in the original) who perform stand-up comedy and rightly points out issues that many marginalised comedians face within the comedy industry. Within the context of France many of these comedians have had their humour deemed as un-French and instead have their humour categorised with their ethnic identity rather than their French identity and, while "the Jamel Comedy Club encourages audiences to re-consider a wide range of social, racial and ethnic stereotypes, it has perhaps not been entirely successful when it comes to changing mentalities in France" (p. 87).

Chapter 4 "Stand-up comedy as escape: Caste and media infrastructure in Mumbai" by Aju James examines the stand-up comedy scene in Mumbai and highlights "Indian stand up comedians' silences on caste structures, worldviews and identities in their performances and their privileged access to the structures of stand-up comedy in India" (p. 11). James argues that Mumbai's dependence on dominant media industries "enables the Mumbai comedy scene to construct difference and position itself as a niche entertainment industry that offers a different form of social belonging to its producers and consumers" from which the

> new identity that emerges from the Mumbai scene aims to position the new middle class as sufficiently global, and hence capable of taking up favourable positions in transnational flows of media and capital […] the cultivation of this difference is manifested as a desire to escape from the social mores, members in the scene consider regressive or inappropriate to the image of 'global Indian-ness' (p. 106).

Chapter 5 "Voices from the comedy contact zone: Regarding performative strategies toward race and the transnational body" by Rachel E. Blackburn examines the work of transnational comedians Tehran Von Ghasri, Trevor Noah, Gina Yashere and Aamer Rahman and "the way[s] they adapt their performative strategies when they perform in diverse locations" (p. 12) across the globe. In this chapter, Blackburn defines the *comedy contact zone* as "a sphere in which the meaning, histories, and structures of race are contested through the involuntary, bodily recognition of truth spoken to power – the laugh" (p. 111). It is through this comedy contact zone that comedians use "adaptive behaviour and vocal shifts which allow them to perform around the world while inviting their audiences to read their otherness as not just outside of white, Euro-centric culture, but outside of the nation-state in ways that further complicate their already-othered body" (p. 124).

"Part 2: Gendered experiences and stand-up comedy" examines how various female and femme presenting comedians from Iran, India, and Australia are able to "enable [the] creation of community, celebration of creativity, orality/aurality and performativity in addition to critiquing structural (racist, sexist, ethnic, class, caste), gendered, cishet and (hetero-)sexual politics" (p. 15) by developing stand-up comedy acts that have "deconstructed gendered notions of humour as well as patriarchal structures, worldviews and ideologies" (p. 15). While

the analysis of these comedians is an important step in diversifying the scholarship on female stand-up comedians and in debunking Christopher Hitchens' "why women aren't funny" myth (2007), it is important to note that "[g]ender is not a genre. Comedy performed by women is not 'women's comedy', just as music created and performed by women is not 'women's music'" (Tomsett, 2023, p.18). As gender is not a comedy genre, it is, at times, unhelpful to separate the discussion of women comedians into its own section rather than discussing their work alongside their male counterparts as that perpetuates the incorrect notion of 'women's comedy'.

Chapter 6 "Humour as antihistamine in the discourse of Persian stand-up comedy: Female stand-up comedians in Iran" by Mohammad Ali Heidari-Shahreza examines stand-up comedy as well as comedy cinema within Iran and argues that

> [t]he national popularity and box-office success of Iranian comedies sprout from different sources of which the social functions of humour […] the treatment of stand-up comedy in this chapter may also serve as a case in point for how humour (in its various manifestations) lives and gives life to notions embedded in a given society (see also Heidari-Shahreza, 2021) (p. 132).

This chapter identifies the challenges Iranian comedians face, both politically and culturally, in developing humour in the confines of what is deemed appropriate.

Chapter 7 "Asserting cultural citizenship through situated comedy: Female comedians in India" by Madhavi Shivaprasad proposes the term *situated comedy* "as a possible descriptor for Indian women's comedy" as it "accounts for both the critical and seemingly non-critical narratives by them" (p. 163). Shivaprasad argues that male comedians perform from "a position of power and privilege while making claims of universality" where, on the other hand, "women perform what can be considered 'unauthorised discourse' from a particular location, or what Haraway calls 'situated knowledge'" (p. 17). Through their unauthorised discourse, female comedians such as Aditi Mittal, Agrima Joshua and Sumaira Sheikh use their comedy to "articulate a personal claim of cultural citizenship over the nation which has otherwise been denied to them through legal and formal means through the performance of their jokes" (p. 153).

Chapter 8 "Notes on Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette*, Adorno's *Kulturindutrie and Feminism*" by Christian Berger offers a close analysis of Hannah Gadsby's Netflix special *Nanette.* Berger claims that in the special Gadsby "acts like an intellectual-activist, her performance is mimetic," (p. 175) as she challenges and critiques the norms of stand-up comedy, particularly the use self-deprecating humour and the effect that has on a performer who is already marginalised. Berger argues that *Nanette* is mimetic in that it "involves imitating someone or even social conditions with aesthetic intent and taking them apart and putting them back together again in such a way that individual parts no longer stand in a hierarchical relationship whole" (p. 175); it is in to a this taking apart and putting back together that Gadsby challenges the gendered norms of both stand-up comedy and their own experiences.

There is one key limitation to this section on gender in that transgender and nonbinary comedians are missing from this analysis. It is misleading to label this part of the book "Gendered experiences of stand-up comedy" and then only focus on female presenting comedians and their experiences; without trans and nonbinary perspective this section feels incomplete in discussing gendered experience in stand-up comedy as only a specific section of the gender spectrum has been engaged with. There are many transgender and nonbinary stand-up comedians who explore their gendered experiences through their comedy. For example, in the aftermath of Dave Chappelle's transphobic Netflix special *The Closer* (Lathan, 2021), Hannah Gadsby took to Instagram to call out the head of Netflix for platforming comedians

who punch down to the trans community. That post led to the creation of *Hannah Gadsby's Gender Agenda* (Smith, 2024), a stand-up special which featured a gender diverse line-up of comedians from around the world in a one-night performance at Alexandra Palace in London.

While a discussion of transgender and nonbinary stand-up comedians is missing from the book's discussion of gender, I do recognise the challenges that come with such discussions. Firstly, the stand-up comedy special mentioned above was produced after the publication of this book showing that the discussion of gender-diverse comedians is relatively new. Additionally, it would be difficult to find a various examples of gender diverse comedians outside of the UK, North America, and Australia, therefore a chapter focused on gender diversity in stand-up comedy would have to break the parameters set out by the book which aim to boarded comedy scholarship outside of those countries. These challenges aside, I believe it is vital to recognise the work of gender diverse stand-up comedians when discussing gendered experiences of stand-up comedy. Despite the lack of transgender and nonbinary comedians, this section is an important addition to comedy scholarship on female comedians and demonstration of how "humour from the margins can be 'a source of empowerment, a strategy for outrage and truth telling, a counter to fear, a source of joy and friendship, a cathartic treatment against unmerited shame, and even a means of empathetic connection and alliance' (Willett and Willett 2019: 2)" (p. 15).

"Part 3: Comic and the audience: Connections, ethics and efficacy?" opens discussions around comedians and their audiences: how the dynamic between them enables charged humour and punching up to take place. While the other parts of the book focus on the comedians and their application of charged humour, this part focuses the discussion on the audiences as when one "take[s] the audience away from stand-up comedy and it starts to look weird […] stand-up comedy without an audience is only halfway there" (Double, 2014, p. 187). It is the audiences and their engagement with charged humour that makes punching up in stand-up comedy in particular powerful.

Chapter 9 "Awkward connections: Stand-up comedy as affective arrangement" by Antti Lindfors examines the emerging stand-up comedy scene in Finland and argues that "stand-up as goal-driven phatic labour that rests on forging and manipulating provisional affective relations – connection for short – between performer and audience" (p. 191) and views "stand-up comedians as specialists of the space and affect of social interaction, who wilfully expose themselves to the looming awkwardness that lies beneath every social encounter in their quest to win over groups of strangers and make them laugh" (p. 181). Through the development of a fitting comic persona, stand-up comedians can expertly navigate any looming awkwardness between them and their audience.

Chapter 10 "The revolution will be a joke: Semiotic ideologies of ethics and efficacy in stand-up comedy" by Marianna Keisalo continues the discussion on Finnish comedy as Keisalo examines the efficacy and ethics of comedy and opens up "complicated questions of how we understand the fundamental elements of communication, including ideas of personhood and agency" (p. 210) arguing that "stand-up comedy has become socially engaged and politically charged" (p. 20).

In Chapter 11 "Standing up for a cause: The cathartic and persuasive power of stand-up comedy", Margharita Dore uses the comedy of Italian-American stand-up comedian Marsha De Salvatore and her 2013 stand-up show *DM55,* which explores her experience with Beta-Thalassemia Major, as a case study to illustrate how stand-up comedy can be utilised to challenge stereotypes of chronic illness by humanising them through humour. Dore's chapter demonstrates the transformative power of comedy as "De Salvatore's routine has proven successful in encouraging many people to donate blood, and these small, incremental changes testify to the persuasive power of stand-up" (p. 231).

Chapter 12 "Which direction do we punch? The powers and perils of humour against the new conspiracism" by Chris A. Kramer poses important questions around who and what we laugh at in the post-truth era and rightly points out that laughter is the only sane response as we navigate these uncertain and unprecedented times. Kramer's chapter outlines how bullshit, propaganda, and conspiracy are utilised by MAGA and Trumpism, and reminds us that "[i]f humour is to succeed against the propagandising Trumps of the world, it has to reveal the differences, and there are lots of them, between him and those who follow him" (p. 243). Kramer argues that comedy is well placed to reveal these differences as "humour straddles the line between pure emotional appeals and pure reason, without eschewing either", and that humour "has been a tool in the resistors' arsenal for centuries in the fight against oppression and the bullshit and propaganda that is used to sustain injustice" (p. 249).

Punching Up in Stand-up Comedy: Speaking Truth to Power is a much-needed addition to stand-up comedy scholarship and makes good on its promise to deliver a wide-reaching and diverse examination of charged humour across various comedy contexts throughout the world. The book and its contributors illustrate how stand-up comedy can speak truth to various political powers and audiences, proving that stand-up comedy is a vitally important and influential form socially, culturally, and politically.

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