**Trust and Humour**

1. Introduction

Stand-up comedy is usually about the comedian getting the audience to laugh. For that to work, the comedian has to bring the audience on-side. My focus in this paper is on that process: how the comedian gains the trust of the audience. My aim in this paper is to establish that the language of trust can be applied to comedy, and to show the dimensions through which it works. I discuss this mainly through talking about trust and humour, since stand-up comedy is mainly an art of humour. Accordingly the first half of this paper—sections two through four—will establish how I am talking about humour, how I am talking about trust, and how the two are combined. In the second half of the paper—sections five through eight—I run through what I consider to be the most significant implications of looking at comedy through the lens of trust. I begin by establishing a level of indeterminacy in humour owing to the fact that trust is often partially but not totally merited. I expand this to establish the category of ethically dubious humour: humour which is ethically-valanced and may be suspected of being ethically vicious without definitely being ethically vicious. In the final section I draw to the ultimate implication, which is that one of the tasks of the comedian is making themselves clearly trustworthy to the audience. This is the ultimate domain of skill in stand-up comedy: getting the audience to trust and accept the comedian.

1. How I’m talking about humour

In this paper, I will be discussing humour as a social practice, which is different from how humour is usually discussed in analytic philosophy. Humour is standardly presented as an emotion or something emotion-like, where it is defined by a certain sort of cognitive reaction and attendant phenomenology. Such an account is not useful for discussing trust and humour, so I will instead use what I call a social account of humour. By this account, humour is understood as a social practice centred around provoking laughter. The unit of humour is the humour act (such as a joke, a gag, or a prank) and comprises up to three roles: that of the humourist, the audience, and the target of the humour (what is being “laughed at”). The roles are non-exclusive, so one person may play two or even all three roles. All three roles are also not necessarily present in all cases. For example, humour centred around puns or other wordplay does not necessarily feature anything being laughed at. There is also “found humour,” which is humour without a humourist. An example of this could be seeing someone on the street slip, fall down, and have their novelty-sized ice cream land squarely on their head.

 One important distinction that I will be making use of is that between “affiliative” and “disaffiliative” laughter. This is the distinction that is colloquially understood as being between “laughing with” and “laughing at.” Since laughter is a social signal, it can be used to exercise power in a group by either including or excluding individuals or groups. People who are being invited to laugh affiliatively are either being invited into a group or affirmed as a member of the group doing the laughing. People who are being targeted with disaffiliative laughter, who are being laughed at, are being excluded from the group that includes the laughers. Since humour trades in laughter, and laughter may be affiliative or disaffiliative, I will refer to affiliative and disaffiliative humour based on whether the laughter the humour pursues is primarily affiliative or disaffiliative.

For a humour act to succeed, two things are necessary. The first criterion is that it must be sufficiently comprehensible to the audience. If it is not clear what the point of an attempted joke is, or if it is not clear that it is a joke at all, then the joke will suffer and possibly fail completely. The second criterion is that it must engender participation. Participation standardly means getting the audience to laugh, though there are humour practices that have developed to pursue other reactions like groaning or disgust.[[1]](#footnote-1) When a humour act is being evaluated, the audience is being thought of as a normative audience, whether or not the audience actually exists. This means that the question is not “Is there a real group of people who would laugh at this?” but rather “Does this humour merit laughter?”

Using participation as the standard of success is also particularly apt for stand-up comedy. This is because that while stand-up standardly pursues the laughter of the audience, it does not do so exclusively. This is not only because there is stand-up that pursues other sorts of humour reactions, like the previously mentioned groaning and disgust reactions, but there is also stand-up that pursues reactions that are non-humourous altogether. Think of all the times a comedian insults a local politician, to the riotous applause of the audience. While I will be discussing comedy as pursuing humour, I believe that much of what I will write applies to comedy in general. By using the language of participation, what I write may be easily applied to stand-up as a whole, including that which pursues non-humourous aims.

1. The basics of trust

If I am going to be talking about the role of trust in the success of stand-up comedy, then I must provide an account of trust. What follows is an attempt to give a basic account of trust, which is to say an account that is copacetic with the most prominent accounts of trust without forcing a choice between them.

Trust is standardly understood as being in terms of “places.” This is to say that there is one-place trust (where person A is generally trusting), two-place trust (where person A trusts person B), and three-place trust (where person A trusts person B in some domain P). Since I must show that an analysis of trust can be applied to humour my discussion will tend towards the three places analysis; it is by the third place that it can be established that comedy uses trust.

Two-place trust generally comprises two distinct parts. First there is reliance, where A relies on B. “Reliance” is used in a technical sense here: as Katherine Hawley writes, “to rely on someone to *x* is to act on the supposition that she will *x*.” This is somewhat different from the colloquial use of “reliance,” which often has a connotation of some power dynamic, and to say that A relies on B is to say that A is at the mercy of B, and A requires B to perform some task for A that A cannot for herself. Importantly, Hawley notes, under this technical sense of reliance, relying on someone to *x* does not mean believing that she will *x*. Reliance is about acting, not believing; A could act on the supposition that B will do some *x* that A believes B is very unlikely to do, although that would be either foolish or desperate.

Different philosophers delineate the “reliance” part of trust in different ways. For example, Karen Jones writes that the way A relies on B in trust is that she has an “attitude of optimism” towards the “goodwill and competence” of B. She explains this to mean that A anticipates that B will have and display competence and goodwill in their interactions. Hawley, instead of focusing on goodwill and optimism, writes that reliance resides in A’s belief that B has a commitment to doing something or acting in some way. Commitments, to Hawley, are normative expectations that most often (but not necessarily) arise from a combination of convention and mutual expectation. Zac Cogley provides a different approach to Jones’s understanding of reliance, and writes that in trust A believes that B will act with goodwill and competence. Where Jones stresses optimism, Cogley stresses belief. This means that to Jones, trust is an affective attitude, whereas to Cogley, trust is a sort of belief. This distinction, between affective attitude and belief, is the main point of contention in defining trust, but it is not relevant to what I will argue in this paper, and I am confident that nothing that I propose cannot be accepted by a proponent of any one of these approaches.

The second part of trust is largely agreed upon: however the first piece of trust is understood, that first piece will be a direct and compelling but not indefeasible reason for B acting in accordance with A’s attitude or belief. I will call this part the reflexivity condition. The exact form this part takes will depend on how the first part is formulated. So, to Jones, B is “directly and favourably moved by the thought that we are counting on her,” whereas to Hawley, B will take having a relevant commitment to be a reason to fulfill that commitment. The main role of the reflexivity condition is to separate trust from mere reliance, and this is often justified with a comparison to relying on a machine. While one may rely on a machine for many things (for example, I am relying on one right now, to write this paper), the machine does not respond to this reliance. It is neither motivated, nor affected. The same analysis goes for other things or processes that are not agents — the ebb and flow of the tides, the sun coming up in the morning, and so on. While we may talk about trusting in a computer, that is considered to be colloquial talk with no relevance to this discussion.

1. Mapping trust

Trust may affect how a humour act succeeds (or suffers) with respect to both that act’s comprehensibility and its ability to bring about participation. I will begin by focusing on trust and comprehension, where a humour act’s comprehensibility may be affected by trust in two ways. The first way is that the audience must trust that what the would-be humourist is doing is in fact an attempt at humour. For example, when my uncle leans across the table to me and asks, “How do you sell a deaf man a banana?” I am trusting him that he is beginning a joke and not earnestly asking me how to sell a deaf man a banana. The reliance condition is met because I am acting — listening, interpreting, understanding — on the supposition that my uncle is joking. I am playing the role of audience to the joke. The reflexivity condition is met by my uncle taking my acting as audience to tell the joke with me as audience.[[2]](#footnote-2) How much the would-be humourist is trusted depends substantially on how well the audience knows them, and what the audience thinks of them. I know my uncle quite well, I know the sorts of things he talks about, and I know the sorts of jokes he likes to make, so it is easy for me to trust that he is joking when he asks me, “How do you sell a deaf man a banana?” Were I asked the same question, in the same tone of voice, by a stranger on the bus, I would be much less likely to trust that they were joking. The stranger would have to do something to build that trust, like ask “Would you like to hear a joke?” For the joke to be comprehended, the audience must trust that the would-be humourist is joking.

 Just as it can be unclear whether a putative humourist is actually joking, it can also be clear that the humourist is joking but unclear what the joke is about. Consider an example where my uncle is making fun of someone for how they dress, with me as his audience. His target is a woman wearing an extremely large and oddly coloured designer hat. The content of the joke depends on whether or not my uncle is trusted to know that the hat is specifically a designer hat. If my uncle does not know that it is a designer hat, then the joke may just turn on its odd size and colour. If he does know, however, then the joke may instead turn on any number of things, from the hat’s high price to the reputation of the designer. The reliance and reflexivity conditions are met in this example in the same way that they were in the previous one: I listen, interpret, and understand my uncle’s joke on the supposition that he has some knowledge about fashion designers, and my uncle takes me as his audience because I make that supposition. Something worth drawing out is that how much I trust my uncle in this regard will depend on what sort of person I consider him to be. I may not know precisely just what he knows about fashion, but I may consider him to be the sort of person who knows something about fashion. This sort of judgement about what sort of person the humourist may be thought to be will be important when discussing ethically dubious humour.

 These examples suggest two domains in which the humourist is trusted: competence and intent. Competence just means the would-be humourist’s ability to construct and enact the humour act. Intent has to do with what the humourist means, and what she is attempting to convey. For the sake of this paper, I will talk about meaning in the sense of Gricean reflexive intentions (for A to mean something is to say that A intends for B to understand what A means by way of B recognizing that A intends for B to understand what A means) since that offers a clear way of talking about meaning, but I do not believe that anything I write substantively depends on adopting the Gricean approach to reflexive intentions.

It is important to recognize that trust is not absolute. I can trust my uncle more or less with respect to both his competence and his intent. Since humans have a lot of experience with basic forms of humour — jokes and mocking being prime examples — it is rare for people to be totally incompetent in humour. Most people can construct a joke where it is reasonably clear that they are joking and it is reasonably clear what they mean. At the same time, very few people are expert enough to be perfectly competent and clear in intent all the time. Accordingly, with respect to humour, there will often be some trust of the humourist, but not total trust. Similarly, one of the goals of the humourist is often to build the trust of the audience. In a casual setting, this could be as simple as the earlier example of “Would you like to hear a joke?”

1. Trust, Intentions, and Examples from the Stage

Focusing on intentions through the lens of trust brings forward an important fact about humour: what is important is not just what the humourist intends, but what the audience understands the humourist to intend. In turn, what the audience can understand the humourist to intend is limited by what they believe the humourist to be capable of intending. It is at this point that the stand-up comedian begins to be evaluated substantially differently than the average stranger or acquaintance trying to tell a joke, albeit only in degree. The stand-up comedian will, by default, have more trust with respect to whether or not they are joking. This is because the comedian’s performance takes place in the context of a show, which is an institutionalized performance. “Would you like to hear a joke” has been implied by the advertising, the stage, the microphone, and the introduction.

Even though the comedian is more readily accepted as trying to be joking, there are still further questions about what they intend, and what they might be trusted to intend. There is not just whether the comedian intends to tell a joke, but whether he intends to treat that joke’s target affiliatively or disaffiliatively, and also how he conceives of his target. These issues are most readily brought out in the case of jokes that use marginalized groups. Consider the work of Russell Peters, an Indo-Canadian stand-up comedian who deals in ethnic humour. He makes jokes concerning the behaviour of ethnic minorities, immigrants, and people of colour. (These groups are often coextensive in his comedy.) Peters is also extremely popular with people of colour. For example, in his shows he will ask if there are any Mexicans in the audience. He will then single out the respondents and make jokes concerning Mexican stereotypes and affect a stereotypical Mexican accent. This sort of humour could easily be considered unacceptably racist, but it is accepted and specifically accepted by members of the target communities. Peters succeeds, I suggest, because he often focuses on his own upbringing as a racialized immigrant and how that sets him apart in Canadian society. His most famous line concerns his heavily-accented father threatening to beat him, often in relation to Peters trying to follow the lead of a white friend. Peters gains the audience’s trust by showing deep familiarity with the experience of being marginalized for being a racialized immigrant. He is trusted not only be joking affiliatively about Mexican immigrants, but he is also trusted to have a positive conception of Mexicanness.

While the Peters example highlights the sort of humour that is usually ethically evaluated, the dynamics of trust hold in more basic cases of stand-up too. The comedian has to gain the trust of the audience with respect to her competence and her character. If the comedian is trying to joke affiliatively, then audience has to be willing to be part of the group of the comedian, and that means the comedian demonstrating that they are trustworthy: that they have good intentions, and that they are capable of having good intentions. I want to turn now to two examples that show how stand-up comedians manage the trust of the audience.

Kevin Hart, *Laugh at My Pain,* 2011 — The centrepiece joke of this set is about Kevin Hart making excuses for not having enough money. He recurs it several times through the set, and returns to it for the closing line. In 2011, Kevin Hart was not short of money. Even though he had yet to have his own starring role in a major movie, he was already famous and a millionaire several times over from sales of his previous comedy sets. A joke about being short of money could easily come across as condescending from a millionaire. The majority of the audience of the show, even for the particular recorded show in Los Angeles, will never has as much money as Hart had even then. In this context, what is interesting about *Laugh at My Pain* is that it begins with a 15-minute video introduction of Hart leading a tour through the working class North Philadelphia neighbourhood where he grew up. He intones “come home with me” as the camera shows not just images of Philadelphia, but his Philadelphia: running shoes hung over a telephone wire, and a book store advertising that it ships to prisons. He identifies the corner he would be dropped off for school, across from a boarded up and presumably abandoned house. He sits on the steps to where he used to live and talks about his mom kicking his dad out of the house. All of this is intercut with Hart’s childhood friends talking about how he had to learn to be honest, tough, and embrace who he was. All of this works, I contend, to garner the audience’s trust for when Hart talks about being short of money. It not only shows that he is joking affiliatively, but he conceives of being short of money in a way that they can accept. He knows what it is like to be poor. They can trust him.

Mo’Nique, *I Coulda Been Your Cellmate*, 2007 — The set is delivered to the people imprisoned in Ohio Reformatory for Women. Some of the humour succeeds strongly, especially when Mo’Nique displays familiarity with the dynamics of prison life — for one bit she looks for the “baddest bitch here” and playfully dismisses one woman for not being a maximum security concern — or talks about common experiences like masturbation and trying to find sexual pleasure without a partner. Some of the humour also fails completely. When Mo’Nique tries to offer life advance — on how to act morally and how to succeed — the audience grows quiet and there is even a slight feeling of hostility. The spots highlight Mo’Nique’s position as highly successful comedien and actress, and so set her against the audience. The humour alienates the audience. That they, prisoners and performer, share some background may even make the alienation more acute as the humour, far from encouraging the audience, underlines to them that their lot in life is determined as much by luck as just desserts. The audience has not been won over, and so the humour fails.

1. Implications: Indeterminacy

I believe that looking at humour through the lens of trust has a number of implications. I will begin with indeterminacy, which I believe is the most important result of this approach, before moving on to discuss ethically dubious humour and the importance of clarity.

Two of the points I have presented in this paper are that humour may succeed or fail based on whether the audience trusts the comedian, and that trust is not necessarily absolute. If you put these two points together, you get the result that there is a level of indeterminacy in engaging with humour: the audience may not have sufficient knowledge of the comedian’s knowledge, competence, or intentions to completely trust her. There is also the fact that, as I have argued, comedy makes use of trust in multiple domains. A comedian may be trustworthy in some domains, but not others. A comedian whose competence is trustworthy might be untrustworthy in her intent, and vice versa. If trust is often partial, and the success of humour depends on that trust, then the success of a comedian’s humour will often be partial. The audience will react as desired, usually by laughing, but the reaction will not be completely wholehearted and unrestrained.

If acts of humour are often partial successes, then this allows approaches to evaluating humour to be finessed. Standardly, humour is evaluated to be either funny or not funny. Either it merits participation, or it does not. The qualified or reticent participation that trust suggests points to the fact that humour will most often succeed in degrees. Rather than simply funny or unfunny, humour is best evaluated along a gradation of more or less funny. While this result sounds obvious, and almost platitudinous, it would suggest a revision to most analytic philosophical literature on humour. Standard accounts of humour, such as those given by Noel Carroll or John Morreall, focus on spelling out what humour is. Consequently, they provide for an evaluation that something either is or is not funny; an object either is or is not a proper object for amusement. The approach of trust allows for a second way of evaluating humour, and one that I suspect is more fruitful since it fits more readily with evaluations not only of something being more or less funny, but with the evaluator being unsure of how to react. One area where the evaluation of humour gets more detailed attention is the ethical evaluation of humour, and I turn to that presently.

1. Implications: Ethically Dubious Humour

One of the most prominent debates within the philosophy of humour is over the ethical evaluation of humour, where the question is usually taken to be something like the lines of “can the funniness of a joke be affected by the ethical dimensions of its content?” Authors such as Carroll, Aaron Smuts, and Berys Gaut present arguments over whether or not humour can be ethically meritorious or ethically vicious. The argument I have provided suggests another ethical category for humour, which is humour that is ethically dubious. To say that humour is ethically dubious is to say that the ethical dimensions of its content, however that content may be understood, is suspect. There is a level of ambiguity or indeterminacy as to that joke’s ethicality.

Given my argument that trust is rarely absolute, most ethically-valanced humour will be dubious to some degree. A comedian’s intentions, and how she conceives of the groups she’s joking about, will often be to some degree opaque to the audience. What is inside her head is still inside her head, no matter how good she is at externalizing her thinking. The point about how a group is conceived of is particularly relevant: while a comedian can insist that her intentions are positive (or at least aim towards affiliative or disaffiliative humour as appropriate), making clear how she perceives of a group is more difficult.[[3]](#footnote-3) Consider the Peters example given above: I can easily imagine a reader of this paper accepting it but still harbouring a little bit of doubt. The sort of doubt that says “I accept what is being said, but nevertheless…”

1. Implications: Clarity and Difficulty

The persistent dubiety of ethically-valanced humour points to a particular value of good comedy, which I will call clarity. Clarity is not simply straightforwardly saying what one means, but rather constructing and executing a set in such a way that the comedian’s intentions are as clear as they can be. As clear as can be with respect to what is the target of a joke, as clear as can be with respect to whether a joke is meant affiliatively or disaffiliatively, and as clear as can be with respect to how the comedian conceives of the various parties within the joke. With stand-up comedy this can be accomplished a few ways beyond the scope of the show itself, such as advertising, themed shows, or a comedian’s reputed approach. All else equal, a woman performing the same set about gender roles on a special show for women in comedy will be more readily trusted than if she performed that same set in a non-specialized context. A comedian advertised as “A Jewish comedian” will be more readily trusted to have a positive conception of Jewishness. The Peters example suggests that his reputation at the very least gives him leeway to make fun of Mexican stereotypes. Often, however, the comedian has to build trust within her set. She has to convince her audience to come along with her, believe her, and, critically, participate by laughing along as appropriate. Presumably this is how someone like Peters got started: before he was trusted to make ethnic jokes about all and sundry he had to earn that trust. He earned it in various ways, notably using his own sets to focus on his experience as a racialized immigrant, and how that set him apart from mainstream Canadian society. In joking about his own experiences he allows the audience to trust that when he jokes about the racialization of other ethnic groups he is joking affiliatively, because he has had those experiences himself. The audience can trust his conception of other ethnic groups, because they trust that Peters conceives of distance from the Canadian mainstream in a non-pejorative way.

The contrast between the reception of how Peters talks about his own experiences and those of others can be further instructive. When he talks about his own experiences as an Indo-Canadian he is afforded a default level of trust because he has the experiential expertise of being an Indo-Canadian. When he talks about the experiences of Mexican-Canadians (or Mexican-Americans), that default level of trust is lower because, while he has the expertise of being racialized, he does not have the experiential expertise of being racialized *as Mexican*. He has to further earn the trust of the audience through his sets. Earning the trust of the audience takes skill. The more the audience’s trust needs to be earned, the more skill is required of the comedian. I suspect that many hold some version of this point intuitively: particular comedians like Peters (or Dave Chappelle or John Stewart) gain praise for being able to make jokes about difficult material. Consider this evidence of an explanatory virtue of the account I have given of the role of trust in comedy (and humour more broadly): trust explains why ethically complicated topics are more difficult to joke about but also why nevertheless there are skilled comedians who can reliably do so.

This point about difficulty suggests but does not confirm a further point about the topics of humour: that the issue with humour about certain ethically-valanced topics like race and gender is not that these topics are out of bounds for humour but that they are simply more difficult. The comedian must do more work to prove herself trustworthy. I should note that this means that topics are not necessarily precluded to anyone, so a man could succeed in making fun of feminine stereotypes, or a white person could succeed in making fun of racialized blackness, but the degree of difficulty would be very high. I say this point is suggested but not confirmed because there could be further reasons that mean the degree of difficulty could simply never be met. However, at least in principle any person may succeed in joking about any topic if they are sufficiently skilled at earning the audience’s trust.

A virtue of this point is that it makes sense of two data points concerning group-related humour. The first is that in the sort of group-related humour that is usually considered in some way proprietary for the in-group, there are members of the in-group who would not be well-received telling such jokes. So, for example, there are jokes about Jewish conspiracism or kvetchiness that I would accept from my family but not from Stephen Miller. Miller may be Jewish, but owing to his role in implementing racist violence backed by an antisemitic logic, I do not trust him to have a non-pejorative conception of Jewishness. Similarly, as the Peters case shows, there are people who are readily accepted in making the sorts of jokes that are normally reserved for members of an in-group. Peters, Indo-Canadian, is accepted in making jokes about Mexicanness. My account of trust makes sense not only of both cases, but why we hold the intuitions that make these cases noteworthy. Experiential expertise of group members creates a basic level of trust, and this trust is necessary for the joke to succeed. It is necessary to trust that the comedian has appropriately affiliative or disaffiliative intentions, and conceives of the relevant groups in acceptable terms. Trust, however, may be earned or lost. Miller, through his evil, loses trust. Peters, through his skill earns trust.

1. Conclusion and Coda: Authenticity, But Not

I have given an account of how humour and comedy depends on building a trusting relationship between comedian and audience, and I have elaborated on the account’s implications. Comedy depends on building a relationship between comedian and audience, and the best comedians are the best at building this relationship. They demonstrate not only their competence in joke-crafting, but in getting the audience to trust that they have the right sort of intentions, and that they are capable of having the right sort of intentions. What comedy demands, then, is the presentation not just of jokes but of a joke-teller. A human being to which the audience can relate, and can participate with.

This conclusion suggests a further conclusion, but one which I want to deflate. If a comedian goes up on stage to garner the trust of the audience then, it follows, the comedian should be themselves. Be authentic. In the introduction to *Laugh at My Pain*, one of Hart’s childhood teacher’s recalls giving Hart this advice. Comedian Andrew Schultz offers similar advice in a TED Talk.[[4]](#footnote-4) If the comedian is to be trusted by the audience, she has to be herself, put herself out there so the audience can trust her. This is, however, inaccurate. As Yasmin Nair points out in her broadside against Hannah Gadsby’s stand-up show *Nanette*, audiences have expectations for what counts as authentic. In the case of being a lesbian, Nair notes, that means being traumatized. If the audience understands the essential experience of being a lesbian as being traumatized — as Nair makes the case — then earning the audience’s trust requires incorporating that trauma into your show, authentic or not. Even authentic trauma has to be given an elevated place, so that it can define the comedian. The audience has a say in the trusting relationship, and their expectations determine how the comedian has to respond to earn that trust. The comedian must be seen as authentic, but that is not the same as being authentic. This can leave the comedian in a precarious position: either their authentic self just so happens to line up with what the audience expects, or she is caught having to fabricate an inauthentic stage persona just to be accepted as authentic.

The question of authenticity in comedy is a large topic and deserves its own treatment, but discussing trust helps frame one dilemma clearly. For the purposes of this paper it is too much to solve this dilemma; rather, I present its framing as an explanatory virtue of engaging comedy through the lens of trust. The comedian, for her set to succeed to its fullest, must be trusted by the audience. To be trusted by the audience requires being seen as authentic. However, to be seen as authentic can mean meeting the audience’s preconceptions, and those preconceptions deviate from the comedian’s authentic self. Accordingly, the comedian must act inauthentically to be perceived as authentic.

Perhaps there is a rejoinder here: in the first section I wrote that I was considering humour normatively. It could be countered that the real audience, with their prejudices, is not giving a normatively sound reaction. For real comedians in real contexts, authenticity is not enough. But for the analysis of humour and comedy, the normatively superior set is the one where the comedian gets up on stage and is themselves. I am willing to accept this point, but I think that Nair’s analysis still holds and is the proper end point for this article. Stand-up comedy is not just a practice but an industry, too. The industrial pressures on comedy — to be popular, to be successful, to be marketable — are understood by both the comedian and the audience. Such that they are understood by the audience, they are another challenge for the comedian to overcome in proving herself trustworthy: to give the impression that the audience is seeing the comedian’s authentic self rather than a conspicuously false stage persona. The variables multiply but the comedian’s challenge remains the same: to win over the audience.

1. There is a level of finesse to be added here to do with humour that is not meant to be consumed in social settings, like the humour in novels. While the humour is meant to be enjoyed as humour, the reader is not expected to openly laugh. This is because laughter is, at its root, a social signal and so occurs much less often in non-social situations. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Trust is also considered to entail risk. In this case, I take on the risk that my uncle is not actually joking, and is genuinely asking me how to sell a deaf man a banana. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is also hard to imagine a comedy set being better for a comedian stopping a show and carefully explaining how she understands Mexicanness or Jewishness. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The talk was shared on Facebook by my cousin, a comedian, who endorsed its message. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)