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“THINGS ARE GOING TO GET A LOT WORSE BEFORE THEY GET WORSE”

HUMOR IN THE FACE OF DISASTER, POLITICS, AND PAIN

by

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of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
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ABSTRACT

From the Holocaust and slavery victims to medical professionals to firefighters, coping humor has been used throughout history even in the darkest of times. While it is common among victims of unfavorable situations, it is also utilized by late-night television shows to package the news of the day in a format that both addresses the issues and eases the emotions surrounding them. This thesis critically analyzes selected clips from late night shows and sketch comedy surrounding three different news events: Brett Kavanaugh's Senate Confirmation Hearings, the Boston Marathon bombing, and Hurricane Sandy. By studying a political event, a domestic terrorist attack, and a natural disaster, this research examines the use and effects of coping humor across different types of events. In each chapter, the comedians studied employ humor tactics that respond to the needs and emotions of the audience. Whether used to distract, to vent, or to build connections, coping humor helps viewers grapple with current events. By easing the negativity surrounding the event, the comedians provide viewers with a space to safely digest and understand the news, acknowledge painful absurdities, and foster a feeling of community and connection.

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INTRODUCTION

HUMOR THEORY

When a series of coordinated terrorist attacks occurred in the United States of America on September 11, 2001, the country was left in a state of shock and grief. With nearly 3,000 fatalities, over 25,000 injured, and the skyline of New York City missing two of its tallest monuments, Americans had a range of emotions to process. In the following days and weeks, news revolved around the country's recovery, and newspapers, news programs, and even late-night comedy were all taking a serious, somber tone. Comedians like David Letterman discussed their uncertainty about whether they should even be doing a show in the days following, and the shows that did occur were far from comedy. (Gournelos & Greene, 2011) As Americans processed and digested what had just occurred, the conversation around the events remained serious, a reflection on our limited ability to discuss tragedy in popular venues (Gournelos & Greene, 2011).

According to Giseline Kuipers (2011), a humor scholar who came to America a year after 9/11 to study American humor, "Most Americans felt that after these events, humor and laughter had become inappropriate" (1). The lack of laughter became so notable that New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani addressed it publicly at a charity event, literally announcing that he was giving New Yorkers permission to laugh again (Lieberman, 2001). But in her study, Kuipers (2011) discovered three specific ways in which the tragic event affected American humor: the initial suspension of humor, then the

call for humor as a coping mechanism, and finally, the jokes that emerged from the event as a form of commentary on the tone of public discourse following the event. In the post 9/11 America, the importance of coping humor was clear. Americans needed a release, whether it came from bitter internet jokes, a risky *SNL* skit, or a satirical piece from *The Onion*, and when they found it, the country's ability to discuss serious events shifted.

Nearly two decades later, the world is facing an unprecedented pandemic as Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has rapidly spread, shutting down entire cities and countries. From the beginning, however, for nearly every serious discourse regarding COVID-19, there has been a humorous one parallel to it. People have taken to social media to post jokes about the pandemic, from relating the name to Corona, a popular Mexican beer brand, to cracking jokes about depression while self-quarantining. Though the shock factor of an event like 9/11 was much greater, as the COVID-19 pandemic was a gradual but consistent buildup, the effects of the events have been compared to each other, and even to Pearl Harbor. (Branch, 2020) Yet for each event, the humor surrounding it, the ability to joke or not to joke, has been different. Different types of monumental events have different issues at play—including race, class, and gender—and therefore they have different responses with humor.

This thesis examines humorous responses to a range of different events by analyzing late night comedy coverage of the Brett Kavanaugh's Senate Judiciary Committee hearing, the Boston Marathon Bombing, and Hurricane Sandy as case studies. These three events give rise to discussions of humor as it relates to gender, politics, terrorism, tragedy, damage, death, and more. Late-night comedy brings its own significant dose of coping humor to the table, as comedians are expected to discuss the

news of the day, but have to do so in a way that doesn't simply repeat what viewers can find on major news outlets. Throughout history, from the early days of *Saturday Night Live* to Trevor Noah's verbal battle with Tomi Lahren on *The Daily Show* in 2016, late-night comedians have used coping humor to battle and buffer the wide range of emotions evoked from current events, and have done so with numerous styles and tactics. The coping humor used by late night comedians is unique in that the jokes are not for the comedians themselves, but for the audience, for the public. It displays the importance of coping humor for the masses, shows how a well-put, well-informed joke about a tragedy can ease the fears of an entire nation, and how endearing humor about a city can bolster patriotism when it's needed most. And just as post-9/11 humor differs greatly from COVID-19 humor, the humor from late-night comedians surrounding these events has an equally broad range, while still helping audiences cope with upsetting events. Sometimes coping humor is used to assuage fears surrounding a terrifying event; sometimes it eases anger about things we can't change; and sometimes it simply allows us to laugh when we don't know what else to do. Ultimately, however, it shows how discussing serious events with humor allows us to approach the topics from a new angle. And while sometimes this angle affords us some distraction from our fears, guilt, or anxiety, it also gives us the opportunity us to make important, emotionally-charged social critique, to directly address what needs to be changed, and to hang on to that emotion rather than turn away from it.

Humor has been a topic of discussion since the birth of Western philosophy. Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero all had ideas about laughter and humor and how it all ties together, what it all means (Morreall, 1987). According to Morreall (1987), Plato originally determined that we laugh at vice in others, and that humor arises from malice

towards relatively powerless people. Aristotle agreed that to find someone amusing is to find them inferior to us in some way, but while Plato considered amusement a negative thing, Aristotle did not necessarily express that it was something we should repress. Instead, Aristotle hinted at the concept of finding humor in incongruity and that we may find humor in things other than just human shortcomings. Cicero supported incongruity theory as well, but stressed the idea of humor as something that arises from how something is said in contrast to the humor in a topic itself. (Morreall, 1987) The list of philosophers and ideas goes on, eventually accumulating into a collection that can be called, in general, humor theory.

Three commonly-cited theories have arisen from the centuries of philosophies and studies of humor: incongruity theory, superiority theory, and relief theory. Each approach examines the experience of humor. A good starting point is incongruity theory, as it examines the cognitive-process that creates amusement, while superiority theory and relief theory can be seen as results or effects of this amusement.

Incongruity Theory

Incongruity theory suggests that laughter comes from contradictions, from our perception of incongruity. When we recognize something as incongruous, we recognize the surprising, unusual or unexpected aspects of it, and our laughter is our expression of this recognition (Martin, 2006; Morreal, 1987; Gournelos & Greene, 2011). In simple words, we laugh when something is out of place, when our expectations are not realized, when we are surprised, or when we find something absurd – as long as it is non-threatening (Meyer, 2000). These challenges to our expectations are small enough to

evoke amusement; they are close enough to normal and mild enough to be non-threatening to us, and therefore instead of causing discomfort or insecurity, they may elicit laughter as a reaction (Sandberg & Tutenges, 2019).

Incongruity theory focuses on the creation of amusement, rather than the effects of it. For amusement to be elicited, an individual must already have an understanding and awareness of normal patterns of reality that will be the basis of one's expectations. With this understanding and awareness comes expectations about how things are supposed to transpire, and with the violation of these expectations comes amusement.

Superiority Theory

In contrast, superiority theory, often associated with the work of Thomas Hobbes, represents a more social approach to humor theory. Early Christian thinkers had negative assessments of laughter that arose from both Greek and biblical sources, and much of these negative assessments were centered around the idea that the pleasure that laughter creates is mixed with malice towards the target of the laughter an idea that Plato stressed. (Morreall, 2009) In both the Bible and in ancient Greek philosophy, rejection of laughter and humor is clear.

In his vision of where laughter comes from, Hobbes had a rather bleak approach to humanity, stressing the constant human struggle for power and our natural individualistic and competitive qualities. Hobbes suggests that we are constantly waiting and watching for others' failures, because the failures of our competitors equate to our own success. If our competitors are failing, they are inferior to us, and our laughter

occurs as an expression of sudden delight, as Hobbes views it, upon the realization that we are superior to someone else. (Morreall, 1987)

Of the main three theories, the incongruity theory is the only one that addresses the cognitive process that creates amusement, while superiority theory and relief theory address why we laugh. It's also important to note that while these are three of the most well-known humor theories, they certainly don't account for all types of humor, particularly in modern humor. (Snow, 2014) For example, the superiority theory can't explain why a knock-knock joke is funny, nor does it tell us much about why some people laugh at absurdist humor. The theories are old and commonly studied and cited, but they aren't undisputed.

Relief Theory

In taking a psychological approach, two of the leading names in this aspect of humor theory were Sigmund Freud and Herbert Spencer. Both viewed laughter as a release of excess nervous energy. Freud's theory maintains that humor is present in stressful or negative situations when an incongruity occurs that allows one to avoid experiencing the adverse effects of the situation (Margin, 2006). In a situation where sadness, fear, anger, or some sort of anticipated emotion has built up, it is then diffused because the results do not equate to what was expected, and the pleasure of humor is what arises instead with the release of this energy. (Martin, 2006; Morreall, 1987; Shurcliff, 1968)

Approaching the topic of laughter with aims to use scientific methodology, Spencer acknowledged the incongruity theory as a cognitive approach to what makes

things amusing, but wanted to understand how this perceived incongruity resulted in physical laughter. He explained that when tensed, the nervous system essentially releases itself onto the muscular system, resulting in a physical effect (Morreall, 1987; Shurcliff, 1968). This can serve as a more physical view of Freud's explanation.

Building off this, the relief theory maintains that humans have an occasional need to reduce nervous energy and built up tensions, and it views laughter as the result of this release of nervous energy (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2005; Meyer, 2000; Sandberg & Tutenges, 2019). It is in many ways a combination of the views of Freud and Spencer, and provides a type of explanation for how laughter arises when we perceive something as incongruous.

Humor as a Coping Mechanism

Coping Humor and its Offspring

While there are a range of different types of humor, coping humor specifically has been studied throughout history as scholars have examined its causes and effects on both the joker and the audience. Coping humor is defined as the use of humor to regulate and cope with emotions by adopting a humorous cognitive perspective on a situation. (Sun, Chen, & Jiang, 2017) It is used to address serious, painful, traumatic, stressful, or frightening topics, and it often employs a positive reappraisal of the situation as a coping mechanism. In contrast, gallows humor, a specific type of coping humor, takes a different approach and uses a darker, more satirical style to address the same topics and create similar benefits. (Watson, 2011; Garrick, 2006). Gallows humor has been utilized throughout history, notably during the Holocaust and in the U.S. during

slavery (Feinstein, 2008; Garrick, 2006), and it often occurs in the context of “joking up,” which Watson explains as the idea that it’s acceptable to make fun of more powerful individuals and groups, even though the reverse would be frowned upon (Watson, 2011).

Martin et al.’s (2003) Humor Styles Questionnaire identified four styles of humor: affiliative, aggressive, self-enhancing, and self-defeating. Of these four, the affiliative style and the self-enhancing style are identified as having potentially beneficial effects on those who use them, and coping humor falls in line with the self-enhancing style, which uses humor to preserve an optimistic outlook on life by reinterpreting stressors in a more positive manner (Martin et al., 2003; Cann et al., 2010).

As a “self-enhancing style” of humor, coping humor has benefits that have been examined in numerous contexts. According to a 2014 study focusing on how coping humor affects traumatic stressors in firefighters, there are three main reasons for why coping humor works as a buffer against the effects of the stressors. Positive reinterpretation, social bonding and physiological effects are listed as the drivers behind this effect (Sliter et al., 2014).

The concept of positive reinterpretation comes from Folkman & Lazarus’s transactional theory of emotion and coping. This theory states that a stressor, which comes from the environment, produces a response that is evaluated by a primary and secondary appraisal (Folkman and Lazarus, 1998). First, the primary appraisal assesses the level of harm or threat that the stressor presents; then, the secondary appraisal allows the individual to evaluate his or her coping options. Coping humor is what comes in during this secondary appraisal and allows individuals to interpret and react to the stressor in a more positive manner (Sliter et al., 2014). Individuals high in coping humor

are more likely to have a positive reinterpretation of events in the secondary appraisal, thus altering the emotions that the stressor has elicited and serving as a buffer against the effects of the stressor. When employing the gallows humor brand of coping humor, individuals may achieve this secondary appraisal in one of two ways: they may utilize aloofness and avoid the associated negative emotions, or confront the situation head-on, acknowledging the painful absurdities of the situation using satirical or sarcastic humor (Watson, 2011). When people feel at risk and feelings of susceptibility increase, the likelihood that one will joke about it may also increase as a tactic for fear control and avoidance (Carcioppo et al. 2017). Whether it comes in the form of a positive reinterpretation of a stressor, an avoidance strategy, or an opportunity to acknowledge the stressor with humor, coping humor provides individuals with a buffer against the effects of an environmental stressor.

Social bonding acts as a buffering effect of coping humor as well, as the use of this coping humor can increase likeability in individuals, allowing them to be perceived as more socially attractive than those who use less humor (Martin, 2001; A. Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 2005). With this, rapport is built between people in stressful or unfavorable situations, and studies show that perceived social support is an important factor that affects how an individual copes with stress (Sliter et al., 2014). Studies of gallows humor also list social bonding as a benefit, as it can increase intimacy, connection, and community (Watson, 2011).

Finally, the physiological effects of humor have also been viewed as a buffer to the effects of stressors. Studies have shown that the physiological effects of humor and laughter have similarities to those of exercise, creating a relaxation effect in the body and

acting as a stress reliever (Martin, 2004; Garrick, 2006). Additionally, Watson's (2011) study of gallows humor examines the vulnerability and power that come with humor; when someone laughs, he or she is physically vulnerable, even if just for a moment. If you're the person creating the humor, doing so gives you power, allowing you to control the emotional state of another person. In an unfavorable situation, having any semblance of power or control creates a calming and relaxing effect. (Watson, 2011)

Another widely-studied concept within coping humor is the transfer of excitation. When a transfer of excitation occurs, heightened emotions that occur as a reaction to one stimulus are channeled elsewhere and appear in a different form. (Zillman, 2008). When applied to humor, studies have shown that when people are exposed to heightened emotions, either positive or negative (in the case of coping humor, it could be fear, grief, and anger, among others), they are likely to find humor stimuli significantly funnier and more enjoyable (Martin, 2006; Cantor et al., 1974; Shurcliff, 1968). The heightened emotion, upon release of tension, comes out as laughter, and negative feelings are often translated to feelings of mirth (Martin, 2006). This concept provides insight into why people joke about controversial and potentially upsetting material, as it has the potential to create heightened positive reactions.

The combined results of positive reinterpretation, social bonding, and physiological effects create the buffering effect of humor on environmental stressors. The use of coping humor allows individuals to moderate the mood disturbances caused by stressors better than those who do not employ coping humor.

Humor and Offense

As many studies have shown, humor has a plethora of emotional and physiological and even physical benefits. Yet the powerful force of humor can have negative effects as well, and when not executed correctly, it can be harmful to individuals, relationships, and societies. If we assume that the goal of a comedy performance is to elicit laughter, then there are many examples when performance failure occurs, and instead of laughter, there is offense.

Yet in looking at the wide range of studies on humor, much of the work done has focused on the performer and the humor being used, rather than the audience and the reception of it (Smith, 2009). But in looking at the times when humor fails, when it doesn't elicit the anticipated response of laughter and enjoyment, one must understand unlaughter and the benign violation theory.

Unlaughter

Coined by Michael Billig in 2005, the term "unlaughter" refers to much more than just the absence of laughter. Rather, it is the rhetorical opposite of laughter, an intentional display of not laughing in a situation when laughter would be expected or even demanded (Billig, 2005; Smith, 2009).

Unlaughter can make a very powerful point. Politicians have used it to avoid political repercussions when faced with risky humor, and entire cultures, religions, or groups have used it to show that a line has been crossed from humor to offense (Dodds & Kirby, 2013). It requires an appreciation of the role of the audience, as they have the ability to give the response that comedy requires, thus setting the boundaries of humor at

any particular event with their laughter and reception of it. A nearly identical concept to unlaughter is the anti-joke response, coined by Paul Lewis in 1987, which involves resistance to humor as an intentional sign of disapproval. The two concepts are often applied to the same situations by different scholars.

As the existence of unlaughter and the anti-joke response suggest, is not always benign. Scholars discuss the fine line between humor and offense, and the potential it has to reinforce damaging ideas and heighten social boundaries (Billig, 2005; Lockyer & Pickering, 2008). For example, disparagement humor, a type of humor that uses denigration of a social group in order to amuse, has been studied by psychologists and linked to discrimination against marginalized groups. (Ford, 2016) In the conversation surrounding humor and offense, the concept of joking up, which was mentioned in the work surrounding gallows humor, is crucial (Watson, 2011; Das & Graefer, 2017). In many situations, a specific joke is only acceptable because it kicks socially upwards, such as when the butt of the joke is of a higher social status than the teller and audience of the joke. Yet on the other side of the conversation, many view aggressive humor as a vital part of comedy, even using tactics like self-deprecating humor as a green light to make offensive jokes towards others (Lockyer, 2011; Gilbert, 2004).

Between the various styles and types of humor, from positive coping humor to disparagement humor, there are a handful of effects that the use of humor in general can have. Viewed universally as a desired personality trait and a social asset, a sense of humor can be wielded in many ways, but not all of them are beneficial to fostering a just and equal society. Watson's study examines the various ways that humor can give a person power, and the social consequences that individuals could endure if they choose to

disagree with offensive humor. As the joker, an individual is able to frame opinions, thoughts, and arguments as jokes, and the audience is expected not to be in a critical mode. If you disagree and want to respond seriously, then you're violating the playspace created by comedy, and you're socially unattractive to others. (Watson, 2011) Positions shared through humor and jokes often appear stronger than those supported by actual, sound arguments, as an audience's laughter, though it's part of the expectations of humor, may reinforce these positions. (Watson, 2011)

The conversation surrounding offense, unlaughter, and the anti-joke response is yet to reach its conclusion, but scholars maintain that it is not only the content of the jokes that must be analyzed, but also the audience's reception and the context. Regarding both of these facets, the benign violation theory and the theory of humor audience have been proposed.

Benign Violation Theory (BVN)

The benign violation theory was accounted in 1998 by Thomas Veatch and is a newer addition to the three humor theories mentioned previously. Unlike the previous theories, this was developed to answer the question of why some things are perceived as funny while others are not (Kant & Norman, 2019). This theory states that humor occurs when a person recognizes something as a violation, recognizes the violation as benign, and both of these recognitions happen simultaneously (Warren & McGraw, 2014; Kant & Norman, 2019). The theory implies that violations that are not benign will not be regarded as humorous. Within the boundaries of this theory, there are three reasons humor may fail. The first is that a person may not perceive a violation at all (a violation

may be similar to an incongruity) and instead see the situation as normal, therefore missing the opportunity for humor. The second is that a person might recognize the violation, but not perceive it as benign; in this case, the violation's nature is unambiguously bad, wrong, disturbing, or at the very least confusing in a way that prevents it from being benign. The third possibility is that even if a person both sees the violation and recognizes it as benign, these appraisals may not occur at the same time; for example, the explaining of a joke to someone who doesn't get it immediately. Typically, the laughter and amusement does not occur to the same extent under these conditions, because the violation and the recognition of it as benign did not occur simultaneously (Veatch, 1998; Warren & McGraw, 2014). A 2019 study analyzed how the perceptions of which violations may be considered "benign" are influenced by social factors. It argued that different perspectives, power asymmetries, and cultural differences between the joke teller and joke listener need to be taken into account, as each can influence the reception of the violation and how it is perceived (Kant & Norman, 2019).

In Moira Smith's 2009 study, "Humor, Unlaughter, and Boundary Maintenance," she brings together the ideas from both unlaughter and benign violation theory to comment on the negative effects humor can have and to examine the role of the audience, calling for a new theory regarding humor audiences. In examining the role that unlaughter plays, as well as using unique humor such as practical jokes as examples, Smith cites these negative effects, particularly noting instances when humor heightens social boundaries rather than uniting groups (Smith, 2009; Graefer & Das, 2017).

Why Does it Matter?

Humor has a range of power in our world, from the ability to create important cultural critique to the ability to heighten boundaries with disparaging humor towards marginalized groups, and it's crucial to understand its numerous uses and effects, both positive and negative. Widely considered to be a desirable trait, a sense of humor can have a large effect on individuals and groups in building community, rapport, and positive reappraisal in negative situations (Carcioppolo et al., 2017; Feinstein, 2008; Garrick, 2006; Gournelos & Greene, 2011; Sliter et al., 2014). And on a broader scale, it's also used as a marketing strategy and driver of content, as well as its important role as a medium for cultural critique (Gournelos & Greene, 2011; Ge & Gretzel, 2017).

In the world of marketing, humor has been named as an important force in customer engagement and has been found to strengthen marketing communication efforts (Ge & Gretzel, 2017). It has been found to positively affect attention and recognition, and decrease negative cognitive responses (Eisend, 2008). In marketing, it can be used to help disclose difficult information and establish rapport, assist in developing a well-regarded image, and help initiate interactions with audiences (Ge & Gretzel, 2017).

In and out of the marketing world, humor is a widely-used tactic to drive content and engagement. With this being said, it's a tool loaded with power to create change. Studies have shown humor and comedy to be culturally-resonant vehicles for effective communications regarding serious topics, such as climate change and politics (Boykoff & Osnes, 2019; Gournelos & Greene, 2011). Particularly, studies of the humor that occurred after 9/11 in the United States highlight it as an important agent for change. While some considered 9/11 and the war on terror to be the death of irony, others may observe that

humor tools such as irony and satire were not only shaped by 9/11, but were actually vital to shaping the country's and world's subsequent responses to the events (Gournelos & Greene, 2011).

In the modern political sphere, politics have become incredibly media-saturated, where every step a politician takes is choreographed meticulously. With this political atmosphere, humor does not need to directly comment on policies or political structure; instead, making the political *style* of politicians and parties the butt of the joke is as meaningful a political act as attacking the policies themselves (Boskin, 1990; Jones, 2009, Gournelos & Greene, 2011). With this, comedy shows such as *Saturday Night Live* and *The Colbert Report* have a specific kind of influence: as they use humor to attack the constructed brands of politicians, they put our culture's sites of power on display for the world to see, forcing it into the spotlight from a new angle (Gurney, 2011).

David Gurney's analysis of post 9/11 comedy sheds light on the functions of stand-up comedians at such a crucial time. Gurney describes their ability to comment upon the potential failings of American society and individuals in positions of power, their unique role in holding the powerful accountable by exposing and critiquing them through cutting jokes, and their function as potential gatekeepers and framers in the media's agenda-setting work (Gurney, 2011). Tina Fey's impersonations of Sarah Palin on *Saturday Night Live* serve as an example of the ways comedy can influence the media; after Fey's performance in the second Palin skit, major media outlets were not only eager to, but *forced* to address Palin's shortcomings as a politician, because they were discussing how Fey's performance had illustrated them (Gournelos & Greene, 2011). By

addressing these comedy performances, the media is addressing the politics that drive them.

With its unique style of commentary and social critique, humor allows us to explore social structure, culture, institutions, inequality, and power (Boykoff & Osnes, 2019). But humor can have negative effects as well, such as heightening social boundaries or furthering a humorous discourse on subjects that aren't a laughing matter, such as racial discrimination or sexual assault (Smith & Saltzman, 1995). The study of humor allows us to better understand how it can be used to break boundaries rather than raise them, how it can "help us test and figure out what it means to say 'us'", and how comedy can be used for social good, as an agent for change rather than a mere distraction. (Berlant & Ngai, 2017, p. 235)

This thesis is guided by the following research questions: 1) which topics comedians are able to joke about without repercussions and which have resulted in consequences? 2) when do comedians tackle the topic in a joking manner and when do they take a serious approach? 3) what forms of humor are used and does the gender of the performer affect what types of humor are used? and 4) regarding each event, how is the humor that *is* present functioning as a coping mechanism – or is it not?

In order to explore this topic and these questions, this thesis analyzes late night comedy coverage of three events: Brett Kavanaugh's Senate Judiciary Committee hearing, the Boston Marathon Bombing, and Hurricane Sandy. The research was conducted using close readings of selected clips from late night hosts. For each event, I collected a range of comedy coverage of the event from popular late-night comedians. The clips were gathered from magazine articles that discussed the comedy coverage of

specific events, some that compared comedians, some that were “best of” lists for that year in comedy, and some that were simply BuzzFeed lists of funny videos. Finally, I conducted a thorough search for responses to the comedy present, from comments to reactions in each clip. From there, I selected a collection of comedians to focus on for each chapter. For the Boston Marathon Bombing chapter and the Hurricane Sandy chapter, the comedians studied were the only comedians that covered the topic in depth. For the Kavanaugh Senate Judiciary Committee Meeting section, the most recent event of the three, there was more coverage by more comedians, as it continuously provided material and dominated the news for a span of time. Thus, for the chapter covering Kavanaugh, the comedians selected include the only female comedian who hosted her own late-night show at the time and four male comedians, chosen due to their prominence in the comedysphere, who provided a different style to compare and contrast. While viewing each clip or segment, I coded the videos for different humor tactics, emotions present, topics of humor, and responses from the audience, viewing each video multiple times in the process. These codes were then examined for emerging patterns, which were then compared to the literature on humor studies to draw conclusions about late night coverage of these events.

Chapter one discusses the humor surrounding political issues about gender equality and harassment, confronting the emotions that come with it. In 2018 Brett Kavanaugh was announced as President Trump’s pick for the U.S. Supreme Court, then subsequently accused by three different women of sexual assault or harassment before eventually, after a Senate Judiciary hearing and an FBI investigation, being confirmed. This chapter examines the humor styles of comedians Samantha Bee, Trevor Noah,

Stephen Colbert, Seth Meyers, and John Oliver as they covered the news with a comedic flair, beginning with Samantha Bee's show just before the committee meeting and extending throughout the week of the meeting, with the last shows analyzed being those that occurred in the days following it, before Kavanaugh was confirmed. As a gender-based issue, this topic was heavy for Samantha Bee, the only female comedian at the time with a late-night news show to cover the issue, and the contrast between her and her male counterparts suggested not only a different emotional connection to the topic, but also a different goal for the coverage. While Noah, Colbert, Meyers, and Oliver used humor that uplifted and distracted, employing tactics like ridicule and keeping a slight emotional distance from the issue, Bee took a different approach. Her humor came largely from exaggerated emotions like anger and sadness, and her aggressive style deviated from the expectations for female comedians, as women have typically employed self-deprecating comedy while men use a more take-charge attitude. (Lockyer, 2011) She used her emotionally-charged comedy not to distract, but to allow viewers to hold onto the emotions present throughout the confirmation process. While the uplifting style of her male counterparts had the typical coping properties, Bee's humor afforded her audience a moment to acknowledge that the issues of power imbalance, gender, and sexual assault are not by any means over, and that for some, aloofness is not the answer.

In chapter two, this thesis examines the unique humor that arose from the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombing, a domestic terrorist attack that killed three and injured hundreds. The process of identifying and catching the suspects spanned four days, giving comedians multiple chances to cover the event as it unfolded. Stephen Colbert, Craig Ferguson, and Jon Stewart were among a handful of comedians that discussed the event

in one way or another, but these three in particular adhered to a narrow set of strategies for coping humor: 1) avoid topics that threaten the perceived safety of viewers, 2) find alternate targets at which to direct the fears and anxieties of viewers, and 3) and utilize the concept of transfer of excitation to turn these emotions into heightened amusement. The coverage from these three comedians displayed the importance of comedy for building community and assuaging, yet also showed how thin the line between humor and offense is. Their coverage is compared to examples of Boston Marathon humor that drew criticism in order to clarify what types of humor are off limits for this topic and why. With discussions of humor theories such as transfer of excitation and benign violation theory, this chapter illustrates how comedians can present taboo topics to Americans in a manner that can channel the heightened emotions to a more manageable release.

Finally, chapter three utilizes the comedy coverage of Hurricane Sandy, which hit the east coast of the United States in the fall of 2012, killing over two hundred people in total and causing billions of dollars in damage. While this event caused a huge amount of casualties and damage, jokes about it appeared to be fair game, a stark contrast to domestic terrorist attacks like the Boston bombing. Despite the weather conditions, a few New York comedians decided to do shows during the hurricane, and once it was over, the hurricane-related humor continued well into the cleanup effort. This chapter examines the seemingly random, giddy humor of David Letterman, Jimmy Fallon, and Stephen Colbert as the hurricane hit New York and in the days following, as well as *Saturday Night Live* parody skits in the aftermath. The humor surrounding the event requires a consideration of the imagined audience for these shows, which excluded those most affected by the

storm. With this in mind, the chapter examines why such a catastrophic event produced so much light, mocking humor, and why a subject like natural disasters is less taboo than others. It illustrates a different use of coping humor that addresses survivors' guilt rather than fear or anxiety. By exaggerating their privileged positions of safety and mocking the storm itself, the comedians created humor that harnessed the giddy energy surrounding the weather emergency and kept it light, non-threatening, and guilt-free.

Taken together, these chapters examine various strategies employed by comedians to create coping humor. With each event, the comedians create a version of coping humor that falls in line with the needs of the audience. While sometimes, the humor addresses the underlying issues head-on to critique society, other times it serves to divert unwanted emotions elsewhere to preserve the sanity of viewers. In both situations, the coping humor used shows the power that a well-timed, well-informed joke can have when responding to our own emotions. With a continuous flow of news occurring every minute of every day, late-night comedy's unique take on both positive and negative events provides a buffer to this constant onslaught of information. And while that 24-hour news cycle feeds us the information, late-night comedy gives us the tools we need to process it, understand it, and move forward.

CHAPTER I

BRETT KAVANAUGH'S SENATE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE MEETING: A DIFFERENCE OF GENDER, EMOTION, AND COPING STYLES

Reclining sideways on a couch, donning a bathrobe, late-night comedy host Samantha Bee welcomes viewers to the “*Not Full Frontal*” show. Surrounding her are no fewer than 10 bottles of various liquors—many of them nearly empty, some nestled in with her on the couch, some on the end table next to her, some on the windowsill behind her. On her lap is a partially eaten store-bought cake, one of five in the shot, with two more on the end table in between the liquor bottles and two on the windowsill. Immediately, it’s clear that she’s going through something.

This episode of “*Not Full Frontal*” was filmed on September 28, 2018, the day after Brett Kavanaugh and Christine Blasey Ford testified in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee about Ford’s allegation that Kavanaugh had sexually assaulted her about 36 years prior. After welcoming us to her “sadness den,” Bee goes on to discuss the hearing and the issues surrounding it in a three-minute rant that live-streamed on Youtube that day. Due to the timing of the hearing, there were no scheduled episodes of *Full Frontal* in the days immediately following the hearing, but Bee chose to address it anyways, deeming one of the “most heartbreaking days [she’s] experienced since doing the show” (Bee, Sept. 28, 2018). She did so in a short rant that utilized vulgarity, ridicule, insults, and exaggeration, among other things. Bee’s performance is notable because its style departs from most late night coverage of the hearing, and indeed, most expectations about

how women should perform comedy. In what follows I compare Bee's coverage of the hearings to her male counterparts to explore the role of gender in addressing issues of sexual assault in comedy.

In the summer of 2018, President Donald Trump named Brett Kavanaugh as his pick for the Supreme Court of the United States of America. On September 16, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford went public with her accusation against Kavanaugh in a story run by the Washington Post. In this story, Ford stated that Kavanaugh sexually assaulted her at a high school party, and Kavanaugh denied the allegation. Over the course of the next ten days, two more women came forward accusing Kavanaugh of sexual assault, and on September 27, 2018, Ford and Kavanaugh appeared before the Senate Judiciary Committee to be questioned by senators and prosecutors regarding Ford's claims..

While many aspects of the hearing were significant, there was one that not many late night hosts wanted to tackle: the question of gender and power. Opinion pages, news sites, and personal blogs, and social media like Twitter and Reddit exploded in the wake of the hearing and the confirmation that followed, from articles like *Time* magazine's "How Christine Blasey Ford's Testimony Changed America," (Edwards, 2018) to BBC'S "Kavanaugh hearing: A moment of reckoning for American women." (Rannard, 2018) While they all covered the impact of what had just occurred in America, many of them were centered around a common point: what it meant for women. What message did this series of events send to women in America and around the world?

Ford's accusations, the contrast in behavior during the hearing between Ford and Kavanaugh, and the confirmation of Kavanaugh that ensued resulted largely in anger and sadness, but it seemed to send a specific message to victims and survivors of sexual

assault, saying that these experiences are still not taken seriously by much of the country—and the people in charge. The hearing connected to the #MeToo movement and to the ongoing question of whether it is worth it to speak up about these horrific experiences—particularly when the situation involves powerful men.

In the days after Kavanaugh’s confirmation to the Supreme Court, just over a week after the Senate Judiciary Committee meeting, the *New York Times* asked women what the Kavanaugh vote means for the next generation and received 40,000 responses, providing a sample of how women in America felt at this time. (Virella, 2018) Not all women sided with Ford—NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist poll results showed statistically that Kavanaugh still had plenty of supporters (NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist poll, 2018) — but the responses of those who believed Ford, or simply did not find Kavanaugh fit for the Supreme Court due to these allegations, were telling. Women were devastated, disappointed, furious; many were also inspired by Ford, and hopeful when comparing the issue to how it would’ve been treated decades ago.

Humor and Gender

Because this event was so fraught with gender politics, understanding the late night coverage of it requires an exploration of the relationship between gender and humor. With humor, not only does the identity of those making the jokes affect the humor used, but the identities of those receiving the jokes affects how it’s received. Gender, specifically, is a facet of identity that has much to do with the style and reception of humor.

The field of professional comedy is widely regarded to be male-dominated, which is reflected in the sheer number of male comedians (Lockyer, 2011). Many of the features of humor itself are regarded as traditionally masculine and some go so far to argue stand-up comedy is defined in part by testosterone due to its nature as a take-charge form of art (Zoglin, 2009). The field is competitive and studies suggest that male stand-up comedians have even further perpetuated the field's status as a masculine one by endeavoring to preserve separate stand-up blocs for men and women (Lockyer, 2011; Nilsen & Nilsen, 2000). Many view strength, loudness, and aggression as key factors that enable a comedian to successfully perform, and some comedy promoters consider females to lack these qualities, making them inferior as comedians. Yet buried within these ideas is the knowledge that humor affords power. Many studies of humor suggest, from the superiority theory to the use of gallows humor, the role of a comedian gives a person a certain amount of power over their audience. (Watson, 2011; Morreall, 1987) Nilsen & Nilsen (2000) suggest that in looking at the history of gender and comedy, that some audiences are not ready to give this position of power to a woman, and this may partially explain the male-domination of the field throughout history.

In examining humor as a male-dominated field, one will find that throughout history, women have been regarded as people who lack not only appreciation for others' humor but also the desire or ability to create their own (Crawford & Gressley, 1991). Yet studies on gender-specific humor styles suggest otherwise. Rather than lacking humor, women employ different styles. According to *Psychology Today*, women use humor that is:

cooperative instead of competitive; relies on caring concern rather than distrust, hostility, envy, or jealousy; brings people together rather than singles out victims;

lets everyone feel good instead of making some people feel good at the expense of others; uses kidding instead of sarcasm; focuses on what any of us might do instead of what one of us did; spotlights issues rather than relies on rhetorical one-upmanship; and targets the powerful rather than the weak. (qtd. in Nilsen & Nilsen, 2000, p. 138)

This description of women's humor relates to the genderlect theory of communication, which maintains that men and women communicate with different dialects and that women, in general, are more prone to sharing personal information, emotions, and stories, while men are more concerned with competition, assertiveness, and control (Mairescu, 2016). Though this theory seems to go hand-in-hand with the description of the female style of humor provided by *Psychology Today's* 1993 column, both may be a little outdated, and the genderlect theory is one that has been criticized as concepts of gender and identity evolve, and the differences in how men and women communicate becomes more context-dependent. (Motschenbacher, 2007) In general, the ideas presented by the genderlect theory and the proposed female style of humor serve to limit women's attainment of power through humor, suggesting that they must be supportive, never threatening, and that the female comic operates largely on self-deprecating humor to keep the power in the hands of the audience. (Lockyer, 2011)

As women have navigated the comedy-sphere, they have certainly had to adopt a different style to gain acceptance into this position of power. As Lockyer (2011) notes, there have been common negative stereotypes that surround funny women (such as hefty, dykey, or Jewish, according to Lockyer), but the successful ones have found strategies that lead to acceptance and, eventually, appreciation. A common strategy employed by women in comedy is the use of self-deprecation (Holmes, 2006; Lockyer, 2011; Gilbert, 2004). Self-deprecating comedy can be used as a rhetorical strategy, a green-light to

make jokes about others once you've made fun of yourself, as well as a tool to ease the audience's resistance to the idea of a female comic. (Lockyer, 2011) In this way, the concept of humor and power comes back into play, as the use of self-deprecating comedy can serve to reduce the power distance between the performer and the audience (Lockyer, 2011; Crawford & Gressley, 1991). An audience might be more accepting of a female comic if she is the butt of her own jokes, as it shifts the power from the woman back to the audience.

Self-deprecating comedy can also be viewed as a performance of marginality. Female comics are known to use self-deprecating comedy to reconstruct their marginality rhetorically on stage for laughs (Gilbert, 2004). According to Gilbert (2004) female comics perform their marginality by mixing self-deprecating comedy with strategies such as their own version of aggressive humor, which is oppressive in its use of demeaning stereotypes about women (Gilbert, 2004; Lockyer, 2011). With this aggression, female comics buy into these stereotypes, often exaggerating them, and speak about topics that may be deemed unspeakable—all while performing through a self-deprecating lens to make it humorous. Female comics might address uncomfortable topics such as aging and female biology, but by confronting the topics head-on by use of self-deprecation, they make them acceptable for use in jokes. (Lockyer, 2011)

While one use of self-deprecating comedy enables women to take on an aggressive tone that may otherwise be deemed too masculine, another use allows them to critique the society and culture that requires them to use this tactic of humor. Humor can influence social norms by violating them or creating unconventional perspectives (Kotthoff, 2006). Women can violate norms by making self-deprecating jokes that hint at

the boundaries society has set for them, such as the stress on physical appearance and the expectation of women being proper and ladylike. Self-deprecating humor gives women a medium with which to address issues with society's view of women, and by doing so, women comedians have the opportunity to critique society and influence norms in ways that otherwise may be viewed as a violation (Kotthoff, 2006; Gilbert, 2004). For example, Gilbert (2004) highlights female comedian Phyllis Diller's mocking of her domestic routines and her use of herself as the butt of the joke to ridicule the society that has created these norms.

Depending on the situation, joking styles can differ greatly, and how male and female comedians address specific topics can alter our view of their style of comedy. Yet despite changing dynamics in the modern era, the field is still relatively male-dominated, and the gender of the performer affects the style and content of what is performed.

The Wrath of a Woman: Samantha Bee and All of America's Emotions

As Samantha Bee begins her September 26 episode of *Full Frontal*, the words "This Week" on the backdrop burst into flames, daunting music plays as if from a horror film, and the entire scene lights up red. Bee coins this attitude "Carrie-ing," and as the episode unfolds, she continues to use these visuals to exaggerate her anger, creating humor out of it. This particular episode of *Full Frontal* aired the day before the Senate Committee meeting in which Brett Kavanaugh and Christine Blasey-Ford testified, two days before the aforementioned episode of *Not Full Frontal*. The overwhelming emotion throughout the show, which Bee does not hold back, is anger.

Bee is known for her often angry tone. *Vanity Fair* calls her onscreen persona “wry, witty, filled above all with righteous anger” (Bradley, 2019), and *Time* points out that while Bee may very well exaggerate her angry tone for her persona, “such scathing humor could only ... come from a genuine place” (Berman, 2018). Thus, the episode of *Full Frontal* that took place before the hearing was not unique in the fact that Bee was angry—it was unique in the *extent* of her anger, the emphasis she placed throughout the show on this anger, and the techniques she used to both show the audience what the target of her anger was and to bring the audience under this umbrella of anger with her, creating a space to unite those who felt the same.

Throughout the show, using various nicknames and allusions, Bee showed the audience that the anger she displays is directed at men who are in the wrong and get away with it, and the way society has enabled this behavior throughout history. With numerous nicknames for men, physical appearance insults, allusions to imbalance of power, and uses of vulgarity, Bee points a finger directly at her numerous targets without naming them specifically. Referring to Donald Trump as the “Sexual Assaulter in Chief” (Bee, Sept. 26, 2018), she creates an incongruity by varying from what is typically paired with the role of “in chief.” Bee also proves her fluency in vulgarity to be just as impressive as that of any man; she frequently uses crude language and examples that violate gender expectations, such as referring to the current events as a “shit-tornado of terrible news” and comparing the accelerated speed of the confirmation process to “finding out you have diarrhea and rushing *away* from the bathroom” (Bee, Sept. 26, 2018). Her tone throughout the Sept. 26 episode is aggressive, with the pitch and variation of someone who is holding back a scream, and there are hints of bitterness that come out with use of

allusion, analogy, and a knack for stating the painfully obvious in such a clear manner that it becomes amusing. When talking about sexual assault allegations, she compares them to rat tails, announcing that “one is too many, and *absolutely* disqualifies you from the Supreme Court” (Bee, Sept. 26, 2018). At one point, she slows her speech as if she’s chastising a group of children, taking on a slightly condescending tone that showcases her frustration, and exclaims, “we, as a nation, *can do better*” (Bee, Sept. 26, 2018), annunciating each word and acting out her message with hand motions as though her audience (our nation) might be slow in understanding, her exaggeration eliciting laughter from the audience. She continues to use overstated gestures throughout the episode that turn her inner anger at the issue to something visible, and her facial expressions often feature a phony, irritated-looking smile, fueled by the same rage that powers her strong commentary.

Throughout the segment, Bee’s use of humor is targeted at the broader topics, and she spends less time than her male counterparts picking apart smaller moments in the week of news, instead aiming her jokes at the big picture. When going over the allegations against Kavanaugh, she does not shy away from vulgarity (typical of Bee’s style), which serves to emphasize the message she’s sending, rather than soften it. “We should want a supreme court justice who definitely never shoved his penis in someone’s face” (Bee, Sept. 26, 2018) she says, delivering an unfiltered statement that shows an obvious right from wrong, and she follows it up with a punch: “... we should also want one who doesn’t have baby corn for teeth, but that’s a separate thing,” (Bee, Sept. 26, 2018) flashing an unflattering picture of Kavanaugh smiling. In this example, her use of a physical appearance insult for humor does not stand alone; instead, she pairs it with a

statement that addresses the broader issue, and then hones in on a small detail to create amusement. This is a common tactic for Bee throughout the segment; rather than delivering off-topic jokes or punchlines for the sake of a laugh, she nearly always pairs them with a sharp comment on the broader issue. At the end of the segment, speaking about the future if Kavanaugh is confirmed, Bee says, “Americans are going to have to live for decades knowing that there is an accused sexual predator on the Supreme Court,” before correcting herself with, “well, you know, *more* decades—at least Clarence Thomas will have a friend on the court who he can share a Coke with” (Bee, Sept. 26, 2018). With this allusion to Anita Hill’s testimony in the 1991 Clarence Thomas hearings, Bee zooms out once again and reminds viewers that this is not an isolated issue, but rather another instance in America’s ongoing habit to shrug off the horrific stories of women when powerful men are involved.

Bee’s overall demeanor in this episode is angry, remaining on par with her persona - but the extent of her anger and the intentional exaggeration of it is noteworthy, even for Bee. Her style, while pouncing on any opportunity for a joke targeting the men involved (Kavanaugh, Trump, Lindsey Graham, and more), focuses more on the big picture and the broader issue at hand than it does on the minutia. With this episode airing the day before the committee meeting, Bee approaches the topic from a slightly different standpoint; she shows anger at the situation in general, but at this point, the specific issues that frequently came up after the hearing, such as Kavanaugh’s demeanor and Dr. Ford’s bravery and credibility, have not yet occurred. She spends little time picking apart clips from the news, as the her male counterparts do in the episodes leading up to the

committee meeting, and instead pairs most of her jokes with a sharp comment intended to make the issues at hand even more clear, even more obvious.

Bee's aggressive style and performance in this pre-meeting show differ greatly from the common expectations Lockyer (2011) laid out regarding female humor styles. Rather than pairing her critique with self-deprecating humor to make it more acceptable, the jokes she uses don't serve to water-down her serious sentiments. Instead, her humor consists of tactics like various insults and allusions to other controversial issues, and her style doesn't ask for acceptance from the audience, but instead exudes confidence, with no shame in her emotions or opinions.

And in terms of coping humor, her style and its effects stray from the typical categories that Sliter (2014) laid out. It doesn't foster positive reinterpretation of the event; if anything, it focuses heavily on the negative aspects, and builds the anger and emotions that the event evokes. And her style and content is not relaxing, lighthearted, or distracting. But Bee's exaggerated, angry performance still functions as coping humor – just in a different manner, one that doesn't allow the audience to simply laugh and forget about the issue at hand. Instead, her coping humor allows the audience to sit with the emotions drawn out from the event and her reaction to it; it provides a space for people to be angry, upset, and frustrated, and it shows the audience that this is an acceptable way to feel. Instead of focusing her style on the comfort of the audience and lightening the conversation surrounding the event, Bee crosses the boundaries of gendered communication and comedy in a way that is cathartic to the audience. The topic she covers is gender-related, with issues of power intertwined with inequality, and for a woman to address these issues with such unfiltered emotion makes a statement about how

to move forward from the event. Rather than trying to forget about the negative event, Bee shows the audience that coping doesn't have to mean letting it go. Instead, she gives viewers a place to vent, to sit with their emotions, and to feel like part of a majority while they do so.

The Senate Judiciary Committee hearing featuring Kavanaugh and Dr. Ford unleashed a wave of raw and powerful emotion throughout the country, and Samantha Bee, in both her *Full Frontal* episode prior to the hearing and her Not *Full Frontal* episode after it, jumped on this wave. The importance of a female comedian addressing this issue was crucial and became obvious in the differences in style that Bee's male counterparts employed. While Bee's emphasis was on her anger, comedians Trevor Noah, Seth Meyers, Stephen Colbert, and John Oliver placed more emphasis on exasperation. Where Bee utilized her emotions to create charged-humor that speaks to the broader issue, Noah, Meyers, Colbert, and Oliver picked apart the minutiae of the hearing, creating laughter at the expense of Kavanaugh and the Republicans and distracting viewers, if for a moment, from the full story. Both styles serve their purpose, but in the face of Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation, Bee provided the angry, bonding and coping humor that her male counterparts avoided, and in doing so, was able to confront the topic of sexual assault and male power with the raw emotion that allowed women and survivors to commiserate and move forward.

The Men of the Hour

While Bee was not the only late night host with a platform to address Kavanaugh, she was one of the only women. (Berman 2018) Trevor Noah, Stephen Colbert, Seth Meyers, and John Oliver were some of the most popular shows that addressed the Kavanaugh hearing, and they all were able to have a show the day of the hearing itself. In analyzing clips for specific types of humor and points of comparison, these four men in particular were consistent examples of the differences between how men and women approached the topic. While Bee's approach to Kavanaugh was fueled mainly by anger, followed by a level of understanding, empathy, and sadness that echoed the emotions of many regarding the larger issue at hand, her male counterparts approached the topic with a different set of emotions, honing in on the minutia and taking a less personal approach.

In the same *Time* article that noted the root of Bee's humor, Bradley (2019) suggested that the men who took on Kavanaugh did so "from a certain emotional remove," (para. 4) a tactic often found in coping humor to move past a tragic or traumatic event. There was emotion present in the work of Noah, Colbert, Meyers, and Oliver regarding the topic, but it was almost a completely different set of emotions than were present in Bee's segment, and the degree to which these emotions were felt and displayed was significantly less. The coverage from these four men presented a more light-hearted view of the hearing and the news surrounding it, allowing viewers to laugh at the dissected absurdities and ridiculous moments of the day by shying away from the larger issues. The men's lack of connection to the topic allowed them to focus more specifically on just that day's news, that specific instance of believing women in their accusations against powerful men, and with each mistake they unpacked and exaggerated, they

created a place for momentary distraction from the negative and stressful events of the day.

“Let’s get straight to the *only* story anybody was talking about today,” Trevor Noah begins on his September 27 episode of *The Daily Show* covering the Kavanaugh–Ford hearing that took place that day. The South-African born successor of John Stewart on *The Daily Show*, Noah brings an international perspective to American late-night comedy hosts and utilizes his knack for imitations as a key strength of his witty, light-hearted style. In covering the Kavanaugh hearing, Noah opens with a statement to unpack: “it was like a sad Superbowl” (Noah, Sept. 27, 2018).

Noah’s comparison of the event to a “sad Superbowl” captures the sentiments of many of the men who covered the hearing in the late-night format, as Noah, Colbert, Meyers, and Oliver keep some emotional distance from the topic. Instead, they approach it with a much more narrowed scope, focusing on the minutia of the hearing to pick it apart for jokes. Due to the frequency of their shows, these men all were able to host in the first days following the hearing, affording them the opportunity to pounce on any mistake made throughout the hearing and show footage of the hearing itself, while Bee’s episode was *before* the hearing, affording her a slightly different perspective. But although the format of Bee’s pre-hearing *Full Frontal* segment is the same as the men’s, the difference comes in their use and extent of emotion and style choice, as the men pick apart individual moments in much more detail than someone whose focus is on the larger issue of gender and power.

These four men use their platform to first and foremost emphasize the importance of the event, as Noah did in his very first line of the segment, but they do so with the

emotional distance a newscaster might have. Noah, for example, dons his normal suit and tie, his backdrop is his typical D.C.-themed collage of images, and his tone mirrors that of nearly any other episode. In the first ten seconds, he makes his first off-topic joke, assuring the audience that his reference to the “only story that anybody was talking about” was not him getting his third dimple (Noah, Sept. 27, 2018). At his most serious, Noah shows intense admiration for Ford, exasperation at many of the figures involved, and disappointment regarding the issue as a whole. When relaying the facts to listeners, his tone is steady and he remains confident and focused on the story. After showing a clip of Ford’s testimony in which she uses scientific terminology to describe brain functions, he exclaims a drawn-out, “oh snap!” (Noah, Sept. 27, 2018), followed by an extended “Ohhhhh!” that one might yell out when watching a player dunk at a basketball game. With his cheers and lighthearted, excitable style, let alone his opening reference to a “sad superbowl” (Noah, Sept. 27, 2018), he likens the hearing to a sports event, putting both himself and the audience in the position of spectators rather than participants. By doing so, he’s able to create humor and relief with his jokes while also creating distance for himself and viewers from the hearing, making it a matter of entertainment rather than personal connection.

Similarly, in an episode of *The Late Show* that aired the day of the Senate Judiciary Committee meeting in which Kavanaugh and Dr. Ford testified, Stephen Colbert introduces the topic with a comparison to an argument that went viral online. “If you’re watching the news today, you know that today was the most divisive day in America since Laurel and Yannie” (Colbert, Sept. 27, 2018) he says, alluding to a viral audio clip in which a single word was said that sounded like “Laurel” to some and

“Yannie” to others, sparking arguments over which word was actually being spoken. His comparison, with amusing exaggeration of the importance of the viral video, downplays the greater significance of this issue. Rather than opening with emotion or hard-hitting commentary, both Colbert and Noah open with a joke, keeping the mood light.

Colbert, host of *The Late Show* since 2015, has a commanding style of humor. He keeps his tone serious and enunciates clearly and forcefully, making his knack for pouncing on absurdities even more magnified and amusing, as his dissection of ridiculous moments serves as an incongruity coming from man who often appears serious. Colbert successfully utilizes his strengths to create a space for his audience to laugh at the news, and despite his powerful closing message, this episode is no different. His segment includes seven instances of imitation as he picks apart individual moments of the testimony and makes any mistakes impossible to overlook. Introducing a clip of Kavanaugh coming out “with a well-coiffed head of steam” (Colbert, Sept. 27, 2018), Colbert shows some of Kavanaugh’s opening statement, selecting a segment in which he brings up the Clintons unprompted and gets visibly angrier as he speaks. Colbert then imitates Kavanaugh, robotically stating: “In conclusion, I’ll be a non-biased and impartial judge, just an umpire calling balls and strikes, secretly being thrown by George Soros and Hilary Clinton” (Colbert, Sept. 27, 2018). With his use of imitation, he draws attention to the amusing contrast in what Kavanaugh is arguing (that he is fit to judge) with what his demeanor and words show. This is a common tactic for Colbert throughout the segment.

In the last minute of the segment, however, Colbert veers from his detached persona to deliver a sharp, confrontational message, addressing Kavanaugh directly by first name. “That’s you, Brett. That doesn’t mean you’re guilty, but please, save your

indignation, that finally someone is taking one woman’s accusation of sexual assault seriously” (Colbert, Sept. 27, 2018). With this scathing message, Colbert points his finger directly at the camera, spitting Kavanaugh’s first name rather than merely saying it, and for the first time, displaying personal emotion regarding the events. His single statement both shows emotion and alludes to one of the larger issues at hand—the one that Bee based her entire episode around. With this single statement, he connects his show to the #MeToo movement and brings his jokes and his commentary back down to earth, if just for a moment. But rather than showing emotion throughout, Colbert defaults to relaying the news in his usual dry style and allows his genuine sentiments regarding Kavanaugh to show only in his final message. His message is strong, but brief, and shows a significant contrast to how Bee chooses to display her anger throughout and frequently confront broader issues.

Picking apart the minutia of the hearing and the news, the four men tackled the subject with their usual styles and skills. More than anyone, Seth Meyers showcased his charming skill of imitation nine times in his 10-minute segment covering the hearing. The host of *Late Night* honed these skills during his years as the “Weekend Update” host on *Saturday Night Live*. Caroline Framke (2017) describes Meyers’ style as one of “dissection,” as he is known for his ability to deep-dive into the news of the day with a raised eyebrow, moving at a fast pace and inserting witty punchlines and spot-on imitations as appropriate. During his September 27, 2018 segment of “A Closer Look” Meyers delivered highlights of the committee meeting in his typical speedy, monotone retelling. When he inserts jokes, goes off on tangents, or imitates the players involved, these deviations inspire laughter from not only the audience, but also himself, adding to

their effectiveness. With his nine uses of imitation throughout the segment, Meyers plays his strengths to pick apart any and every moment of the day's news for laughs. His retelling lacks any signs of anger at all, and his dominant emotion comes out as admiration for Ford, as he spends a quarter of the 10-minute clip praising her and ridiculing those who questioned her. "You said you flew to Australia to eat dinner?" he says, imitating the prosecutor. "Um, no, I said I went to an Outback Steakhouse," he replies to himself, acting as Dr. Ford and exaggerating the prosecutor's misinterpretation to the amusement of the audience. The first four minutes of the segment are spent talking about Trump's involvement in the Kavanaugh issue, as Trump publicly defended his choice of Kavanaugh as his nominee, and Meyers brings in any mistakes made and pounces on them with sarcasm, imitation, ridicule, and even some insults. Picking apart a video of Trump explaining China's respect for his "very, very large ... a-brain," he imitates Trump's odd pronunciation of the word "brain" ("I'm... a-sorry?"), he says, before comparing it to the Italian accent of Super Mario characters) and chuckles at the randomness of the tangent (Meyers, Sept. 27, 2018). And like Noah and Colbert, his coverage of the topic lacks any anger, and the general emotion present is dulled and typical of any other day, aside from his expression of admiration for Ford.

With a similar overall message, John Oliver strays slightly from the other men studied in his use of emotion. Sarah Larson (2015) of *The New Yorker* calls Oliver "part news anchor, part gleeful nerd," and comments on the effectiveness of this formula in its ability to "deliver hard-core information with chasers of wit." Oliver excitedly utilizes ridicule, inserting it at any opportunity while he picks apart the news to highlight the most ridiculous moments, and littering it all with expletives. With *Last Week Tonight*

being aired on premium-cable network HBO, Oliver is afforded some freedom with his language, and he utilizes this freedom skillfully. In his 30-minute segment, which aired September 30, three days after the Kavanaugh hearing, he does not stray from this style, using ridicule 11 times on its own, and more mixed with other styles of humor. Referring to the prosecutor's heavy questioning of Ford about who funded her polygraph test, he yells, waving his hands, "she just cracked this case wide open! She found the missing piece of the puzzle, specifically a puzzle that reads, 'who fucking *cares?*'" (Oliver, Sept. 30, 2018).

A contrast to the other three men, Oliver showcases his skills in his usual excited and fairly animated manner, as his persona as a "gleeful nerd" (Larson, 2015) affords him the opportunity to appear excited about the news. As he covers Kavanaugh's hearing, his animated manner exudes excitement, and this excitement is the most frequent emotion that appears. Even when making some serious comments, he doesn't appear angry—simply animated, exasperated, and passionate about the news. At one point he considers the topic of Kavanaugh from a broader scope than the others, even instructing viewers to "pull back and look at the picture of Kavanaugh's character that we now have" (Oliver, Sept. 30, 2018), reviewing the issues with Kavanaugh beyond just his accusations, and he presents a sort of argument for the case, straying from the typical newscaster persona that Noah, Colbert, and Meyers adhere to. With irony, he makes statements such as, "I hate to say it but I'm thinking men might be too emotional for the Supreme Court" (Oliver, Sept. 30, 2018), taking an old argument against women in power and aiming it back in the other direction, and he creates a space on his show that allows people to feel emotion rather than distraction from the news - but it is not the same space for solidarity that Bee

creates with her anger and her “Carrie-ing.” Yet Oliver’s gleeful excitement about the event lends itself to many of the positive effects of coping humor. His use of irony to critique Kavanaugh with a statement that’s typically reserved for women allows viewers some positive reinterpretation by showing that despite the frustrations of the day, there are potential positive takeaways, such as breaking down some of those gendered stereotypes. The gleeful environment he creates also furthers the psychological aspects, as his excitement about the news encourages a light atmosphere, rather than an emotionally-charged one. Overall, the emotions present in Oliver’s segment and style function as they usually do: to bring well-informed humor to viewers and to thoroughly educate his audience on a specific topic, and he utilizes his contagious excitement to do so.

In their own styles, Bee’s male counterparts employ coping humor as well, but they do so using different tactics that create a different outcome from Bee’s. Each of the men dive into the minutia of the hearing and the news; if someone misspeaks or has the wrong information, they pounce on it, showing the clip and following it with imitations, exaggeration, and ridicule. If someone acts in any way out of the ordinary, they drag the joke throughout the show, referencing it multiple times during the segment.

Although Noah, Colbert, Meyers, and Oliver all have their own different styles of humor, there are significant similarities in their dissection of the news. Their lack of emotional connection makes for a less-charged, less dark style of humor that distracts from the issue rather than confronting it. These men employ coping and gallows humor to a different end than Bee; they emphasize the reinterpretation of stressors by taking the news and highlighting the insignificant mistakes and absurdities within it, rather than

focusing on the larger themes. Their dissection alters the emotions that the stressor, in this case the Kavanaugh hearing, elicits, and it buffers the effects. The effect increases social bonding in that it lightens the mood and creates a community atmosphere, but in a very different manner than Bee's use of social bonding tools. Rather than drawing together a specific community that feels targeted, they simply create laughter among an entire side of the larger debate, and at some points both sides, by shedding light on absurdities that could be amusing to anyone. Their narrowed dissection of the news has hints of gallows humor, as they address the serious subject matter in a light manner, but it lacks the darker emotions that Bee's style utilizes. Instead, they tackle the subject by honing in on particular moments but staying emotionally distant. Their style serves as coping humor in its ability to distract from the situation, as well as in its use as a tactic to have some level of control over these external issues. Imitating and ridiculing the main players in such a serious event and drawing attention to the absurdities gives the audience, as well as the comedians, a feeling of power; it enables viewers to laugh at the expense of those in charge, even if these targets have significantly more power in almost any other aspect. They use their dissection and ridicule as a mechanism to feel control, as a tool for avoidance, and as a way to bring people together to share a light-hearted laugh.

Conclusion

Bee's September 28, 2018, episode of *Not Full Frontal* presents her audience with a visual representation of the blend of emotions that much of America, particularly women, were feeling immediately following the Kavanaugh hearing. In a rare moment of vulnerability—deviating from her typical style—the first emotion present in the segment

is not anger, but sadness. She welcomes viewers to her “sadness den” (Bee, Sept. 28, 2018), taking a moment to acknowledge that this is not the typical Samantha Bee. Easing into her monologue, Bee then gradually draws anger into the clip, but continues to show viewers that the varying emotions present after the meeting were intense, significant, and certainly different than her usual. She explains, “I needed to either yell into a camera or eat an entire confetti cake. Honestly, I choose both” (Bee, Sept. 28, 2018). A stark contrast to her show prior to the meeting, Bee is reclined on a couch in a bathrobe, rather than displaying a tense power stance and wearing a black suit. She is surrounded by cakes and bottles of alcohol instead of screens with flames burning. Rather than beginning with feisty, in-your-face commentary, she begins with a mix of raw emotions that she then processes and addresses throughout the live clip.

After calling the hearings “heartbreaking” (Bee, Sept. 28, 2018), Bee moves into a quick message for viewers. Her tone is warm, genuine, understanding; she exudes the kind of all-knowing confidence that a mother might possess when her child is upset about something that is beyond his or her control, such as bullying—the kind of confidence that tells viewers she is with them, feels their pain, and will take them under her wing. Directly addressing survivors of rape and assault, Bee uses her monologue to shed light on the bigger picture, the issues of speaking truth to power and being heard “no matter when you come forward or how many Ivy League degrees your assaulter has” (Bee, Sept. 28, 2018). Bee’s post-hearing rant is geared towards women and survivors of sexual assault, and between the scattered jokes, she delivers a serious message that’s about much more than just this one hearing. Her message speaks to issues of gender and power, arguing for the freedom to come forward about sexual assault without repercussions, and

criticizing a system that enables powerful men to evade the rules of the law. Bee uses her emotions about the topics as a call for women to come together, and the moments of humor she mixes into the clip serve as her tool to send this message.

Beneath the sadness, disappointment, and hopelessness that she confronts head on, Bee finds humor in the occasional insult aimed at key men involved in the meeting. Yet unlike in her pre-meeting show, where her anger frequently targets Kavanaugh specifically, in this clip, she keeps it broad. Bee does not mention Kavanaugh's name a single time throughout the clip, instead using vague nicknames and allusions for other men involved such as "shriveled old scrotums," "Ivy League choads," and a "rancid puff of Drakkar Noir," as well as ridiculing them for their behavior, referring to comments from Lindsey Graham as a "hissy fit" (Bee, Sept. 28, 2018).

And, inching more towards Bee's usual persona, she lists examples of what's been helping her get by, which include "the exquisite rage-contouring on Alyssa Milano's face, meeting new dogs ... and [her] life-sized cardboard cutout of Lindsey Graham" (Bee, Sept. 28, 2018). The specificity and randomness of these examples creates a sense of incongruity with her serious and emotional tone, creating humor.

Coping humor can mean a number of different things; it can be a way for us to flip an environmental stressor into something we can view with a positive outlook, and it can also be a tool that simply increases social bonding and rapport in stressful or unfavorable situations (Martin et al., 2003). And within the genre of coping humor, gallows humor takes on a darker style and confronts these stressors by joking about them in a light or satirical manner. Analyzing the styles of Samantha Bee, Trevor Noah,

Stephen Colbert, Seth Meyers and John Oliver shows the connections between each comedian's work and different kinds of coping humor present.

With her use of emotion, her angry and aggressive style, and her ability to confront stressful and painful subject matter head on, Bee employs a mix of gallows humor and coping humor that serves to increase female bonding and address issues of gender and power. The contrast between her style and that of her male counterparts is clear in their intensive dissection of every piece of news as they pick it apart to find humorous moments, even if the joke is unrelated. Bee tends to remain at a slightly further distance, affording herself the ability to address broader topics and themes from which she creates darker, more emotionally-charged humor. With her frequent use of insults aimed at men, she takes advantage of the ability to "joke up," a concept that allows individuals or groups to joke about those more powerful than them, while if the powerful groups joked down, it would not be accepted. Gallows humor is often found in the context of joking up (Watson, 2011), and Bee's numerous physical appearance insults mixed with her vulgar and explicit language targeting powerful men is an example of her using her position to joke up. While coping humor and gallows humor can be used for self-preservation by avoiding internal and external obstacles (such as fear or powers beyond our control) and allowing us to remain aloof, Bee's style does just the opposite. She uses self-deprecating humor that pokes fun at the stereotype of emotional women by filming the segment with an excessive amount of alcohol and cake, this time utilizing Lockyer's (2011) female style of humor tactics and giving herself a green light to make cultural critique. And throughout the clip, she uses her humor to increase connection and

community, to create a space for those who share her emotions, and to speak truth to power.

The more emotionally-distant styles of Noah, Colbert, Meyers and Oliver focus more on distraction and positive reinterpretation in their use of coping humor, while Bee's charged jokes and content touch on larger social justice issues and provide a space for community bonding in the face of stressors. Though their styles differ, both serve an important purpose: they create laughter and amusement, allowing us to release tension in the face of things beyond our control. From the unique position of one of the few women in late night comedy, Samantha Bee provided viewers with a space to commiserate both before and after the hearings; her scathing humor brings her audience together, allowing them to engage with the news and emotionally process the situation rather than distance themselves from it. And while the methods used by the men provide beneficial coping humor as well, the importance of having a female host cover the Kavanaugh hearing shows when she reclines on her couch, surrounded by bottles of alcohol and cakes, and tackles the coping process head on.

CHAPTER II

THE BOSTON MARATHON BOMBING: SAFE HUMOR AND SAFE TARGETS

“I’ve got to get to the breaking news from... 24 hours ago,” Stephen Colbert says as he opens *The Colbert Report*, on May 2, 2013, 17 days after two bombs exploded near the finish line of the Boston Marathon. “Federal authorities have arrested three accomplices of alleged Boston bomber, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev,” he announces. “The three suspects, aware that the feds were seeking their friend for bombing the marathon, raced to his apartment and urgently... ‘decided to watch a movie,’” Colbert says, quoting an article detailing the arrest. “Although during interrogation, they ‘did not specify which one,’” he continued to laugh, “Although, if it was *John Carter*, they can be arrested for possession of a bomb” (Colbert, May 2, 2013).

This line is met with a different response than the others. First, there are some cheers and laughs, but as they subside, low boos from the crowd come out, a rare occurrence during *The Colbert Report*. With a handful of shows surrounding the Boston bombing, Colbert had opportunities to cover every aspect of the event. With topics as sensitive as death and terrorism, he walked the line between humor and offense skillfully, eliciting cheers and laughs when the country needed it the most. *The Colbert Report* covered the bombing in four shows that aired while the case unfolded in the weeks after the event, and returned to the topic in July of that year, when *Rolling Stone* magazine announced that the surviving bombing suspect would be featured on the magazine’s next cover. But out of the five episodes and numerous jokes made, this single instance, this

quick pun that utilized the word “bomb,” was the only one that, to utilize comedy lingo, bombed. The following chapter explores some of the reasons why this joke stood out to audiences as unacceptable, and the strategies late night comedians used to avoid such negative reactions in the coverage of the event.

For over 120 years, runners and spectators from all over the world crowd the streets on Massachusetts’ Patriot’s Day for the annual Boston Marathon, one of the largest sporting events in the world. On April 15, 2013 at 2:49 p.m., two homemade bombs detonated at the finish line of the marathon, in the Copley Square area of Boston, where thousands of spectators and runners were gathered. Three were killed, 16 lost limbs, and several hundred others were injured. (Markon, Horowitz, & Johnson, 2013)

In the days and weeks following, an intensive, unprecedented manhunt took place as the FBI, policemen, and even the people of Boston teamed up to gather facts and catch the bombers. Beginning with very little information, investigators eventually came up with two suspects: brothers Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev. Images were released, and the press was wildly jumping at any attempt to cover the story as it unraveled. After a stolen car, a murdered MIT policeman, a kidnapping, and a shootout with Watertown policemen, Tamerlan ended up dead after being both shot by the police and run over by his brother, who escaped in the stolen car. This all occurred on April 18.

After Tamerlan’s death and Dzhokhar’s escape, the manhunt escalated. With a single killer on the loose, thousands of law enforcement officers teamed up to search a 20-block area of Watertown while the town was put on lockdown. Residents were asked to stay indoors, businesses closed, and by 6 p.m. that night, Dzhokhar was found hiding in a boat in a resident’s backyard. He was shot, wounded, and taken into custody.

The attack on the Boston Marathon was monumental. As one of America's most beloved, oldest cities, Boston was a significant target. The bombers were eventually identified as Chechen Kyrgyzstani-Americans, giving them a foreign origin to pair with the name, and therefore providing Americans with something unknown to point a finger at. Dzhokhar revealed in questioning that the pair was motivated by extremist Islamic beliefs and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, once again giving the people more foreign names and places to connect the violence to and a direction at which they could aim their anger and grief.

Because the event unfolded over time—with the bombing itself followed by the search for suspects, the shooting, the manhunt, the questioning of Dzhokhar, and the eventual identification of accomplices—the bombing had a large presence in the media for a span of weeks. While hard news sources attempted to relay the most updated information to the public, comedians Stephen Colbert, Craig Ferguson, and Jon Stewart tackled the information as it came in, unpacking it for opportunities to crack a joke. But unlike the average news cycle, this one was centered around very taboo topics: death and terrorism. Colbert, Ferguson, and Stewart focused on finding jokes in the coverage, the foreignness of the culprits, and even in America's lack of knowledge when it comes to these long, confusing names and words from countries overseas—"places synonymous with political unrest *and* high word scores in Scrabble," (Colbert, April 22, 2013) as Colbert called them.

The comedians adhered to a very narrow category of humor, attempting to keep violations benign enough to elicit laughs rather than boos. Jokes could reference the bombing and the event, but had to do so carefully as to not shut people down. The

heightened emotion in America presented comedians with the opportunity to utilize “transfer of excitation” (Martin, 2006) to take the anxiousness and tenseness and use it to create bigger laughs; but the unwritten rules with a topic like this are strict, and if the humor threatened people’s perceived safety, the joke would fail. A close study of the comedy that succeeded, the topics that elicited laughs, and the jokes that—for lack of a better word—bombed, shows that comedians can tackle these taboo topics with coping humor, as long as they adhere closely to the benign violation theory. In the face of a tragedy, metaphors, puns, and plays on words can be dangerous ground, and these comedians attempted to walk the line between humor and offense to present the news without bringing it too close to home.

The First Show Back

In a special cold open to the first episode of *Saturday Night Live* after the 9/11 attacks, *SNL* creator asked then-New York City mayor Rudi Giuliani, “can we be funny?” to which Giuliani famously responded, “Why start now?” (Guerrasio, 2015) This exchange gave the country a chance to finally exhale, gave Americans a joke and a target, something to laugh at for the first time in what felt like ages. On April 16, 2013, in his first episode of *The Late Late Show* after the Boston Marathon Bombing, Craig Ferguson was dealing with a similar tenseness. Though years had passed, another beloved American city was attacked and the country, once again, was holding its breath. Ferguson acknowledges this tension in his opening lines, pausing after the low chuckles at his first joke and asking himself, for the sake of the audience, “Craig, is it okay to laugh?” (Ferguson, April 16, 2013). He responds with a smile, his hands out in front of him,

waving downwards as if reassuring a child, saying, “yes, it’s okay to laugh!” (Ferguson, April 16, 2013), and with that, the tension in the room is expelled. His reassurance is met with relieved laughter, and he continues with his opening monologue.

Between Craig Ferguson, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, Conan O’Brien, and Jimmy Kimmel, late-night news shows saw their fair share of serious opening monologues in the nights following the Boston bombing. While Kimmel and O’Brien remained mainly solemn in their acknowledgement of the news, Ferguson, Stewart, and Colbert stood out as the comedians that chose to tackle the topic with a bit more humor in their first episode back. Stewart and Colbert stuck with the subject in the weeks following, wielding their comedic powers and personas to find jokes in the intense, tragic news.

Famous writers, thinkers, and comedians throughout history have said, in some form, that “humor is tragedy plus time.” But, in a 1957 *Cosmopolitan* interview, television personality and actor Steve Allen may have said it best:

When I explained to a friend that the subject matter of most comedy is tragic (drunkenness, overweight, financial problems, accidents, etc.), he said, “Do you mean to tell me that the dreadful events of the day are a fit subject for humorous comment?” The answer is, “No, but they will be pretty soon” (*Cosmopolitan*, Volume 142, February 1957)

Allen’s explanation of the tragedy-plus-time formula relates to the reactions of late night comedians and their initial coverage of the Boston bombing. While in the weeks and episodes after the bombing, the comedians found ways to joke about the topic and take a little more risks, they kept a slight distance from this type of humorous comment in their first episodes back, showing that “pretty soon” wasn’t quite there yet and staying far away from any sarcasm or gallows-humor commentary. But the first

episodes back, while playing it safe, also provided hints of coping humor that simply fostered patriotism and social bonding.

In the first episodes after the bombing, Colbert, Ferguson, and Stewart focus on uplifting humor. They play it safe, each beginning with some serious sentiment that gradually leads into jokes throughout. Colbert, taking on his persona for *The Colbert Report* the day after the bombing, utilizes Boston's history and reputation to boost up the people of Boston and bolster patriotism in general, and his first joke comes half a minute in when he exclaims, "for Pete's sake, Boston was founded by the pilgrims, a people so tough they had to buckle their goddamn hats on!" and flashes a picture of a typical pilgrim donning a hat with a huge buckle on it (Colbert, April 16, 2013). From there, he begins a humorous list of Boston's qualities and feats, calling it "a city that withstood an 86 year losing streak" and "a city that made it through the Big Dig, a construction project that backed up traffic for 16 years. I mean, there are commuters who are just getting home now!" (Colbert, April 16, 2013). Colbert sprinkles in safe jokes that give the audience something seemingly unrelated to the news to chuckle at, and they do just that. In doing so, he breaks his typical *Colbert Report* character, for once not relating the news to himself or politicizing it. His opening monologue is met with laughter throughout as he builds up the city's reputation and history, making jokes about its most endearing qualities.

Ferguson, after he addresses the tension in the room, does something similar. Spending a little more time to express his emotions towards the tragedy, he transitions after about two minutes to a few similar comments that make fun of Boston and Bostonians as if the city and its people are close friends of his. "In 2008, I spoke at

Faneuil Hall in July at the invitation of Tommy Menino, who is the Mayor of Boston, and one of the more colorful characters in American politics.... Who would have thought that the city of Boston would rise up with an interesting and colorful politician?! But it happens from time to time!” (Ferguson, April 15, 2013). He details his fond feelings towards the city, and uses these comments as a vessel for good-hearted humor, adding that “every cop in Boston looks like I’m his brother!” (Ferguson, April 15, 2013).

And with the shortest opening monologue of all that day, Jon Stewart tackles the topic concisely, taking only a moment to lighten the mood during his comments before moving forward with the show. In the same vein as the others, Stewart touches on the rivalry between Boston and New York, fondly commenting that “New Yorkers and Boston obviously have a little of a competition, oftentimes the two cities accusing each other of various levels of suckitude” (Stewart, April 16, 2013).

In each of their first episodes back, the three comedians take no risks. They keep their comments brief, not attempting to make jokes about the event itself. The humor they *do* use is safe, endearing, and uplifting. They connect the city and the tragedy to all Americans, creating a space where viewers can finally exhale. Studies of coping humor note its ability to foster community and connection rather than distance in the face of a tragic or stressful event (Watson, 2011; Sliter, 2013). This increased sense of belonging, beginning with community-building humor, aids in coping with stress (Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1996). In these initial episodes, Colbert, Ferguson, and Stewart kept the content light and focused on the social-support aspect, providing viewers with a safe space to laugh.

It's in the following shows, once a little time has passed, where Stewart and Colbert really let loose.

What Works: Distractions and Safe Targets

After the initial post-bombing show, Colbert returns to the issue on April 18, 22, and May 2, as news from the manhunt and information about the bombers trickles in. Stewart spends a large portion of his April 22 show picking apart the updates on the news. In analyzing these four episodes, patterns emerge in the strategies used and topics covered. By far the most prevalent butt of the joke is the news coverage of the drama. Media outlets, from the *New York Post* to CNN, were mentioned and ridiculed 21 times in the four episodes between Colbert and Stewart, with Stewart spending nearly the entirety of his April 22 intro expertly using the news itself to find humor in the bombing.

“As much as we criticize the media here on our show—and we *are* dicks—it’s important to give credit where credit is due,” Stewart begins on his April 22 show, using a tone that’s much lighter and more sarcastic than his last opening (Stewart, April 22, 2013). With this, not only does he establish that the show is back on track, but he also sets a target with his first words, showing the audience that today, the media is the joke. Continuing, he eases into the topic, noting the importance of giving credit to the media during this time and pulling up a photo first of reporter Pete Williams, then Brian Williams, both of whom work for NBC. Without missing a beat, he then flashes a photo of tennis player Serena Williams and continues, “*Serena* Williams, I thought was very good. Robin Williams, Will.i.am - everyone in the entire NBC Williams family!” (Stewart, April 22, 2013). With this violation of logic, Stewart creates an absurdity,

adding in characters that clearly do not belong. He goes on to poke fun at “accuracy aficionado Rupert Murdoch” and the *New York Post* for their misidentification of two young men as terrorists, before diving into the main target of his segment: CNN (Stewart, April 22, 2013).

In the midst of the manhunt, CNN falsely reported that an arrest had been made, resulting in much criticism and ridicule. But Stewart takes it to the next level, jumping on every opportunity to expose their mishaps in reporting and style during the news giant’s coverage. He expertly directs the audience’s attention, emotions, and stress towards something related to the bombing only on the surface level, and his efforts are a complete success: his commentary is met with roaring laughter from the audience.

“For the remainder of the manhunt, [CNN] took extra care to not misreport again,” he begins (Stewart, April 22, 2013). Following this comment, he shows a series of CNN clips that emphasize the network’s lack of knowledge during their coverage, catching them at their most unprofessional moments, showing one reporter craning her neck, looking behind her while talking to the camera, and other reporters announcing repeatedly that they have no idea what’s going on—a strange admission from a major news outlet. When the series of clips closes, Stewart asks the audience, “See?! Is that so hard!” before mimicking the reporters and exaggerating their lack of knowledge, squinting around and mumbling noncommittally, “Eh, what’s going on over there? Eh, who the f**k knows? I don’t know!” (Stewart, April 22, 2013). Stewart’s exaggerated mimicry sheds light on just *how* bizarre this style of coverage is for a major news outlet, something that many viewers may have been too distracted to notice when watching the news live. He continues to pick apart their unconventional coverage with ridicule and

sarcasm, calling the style “sandlot football, EVERYONE GO LONG!, forcing the reporters to let the control room know when they were open for an on-camera pass,” while the other networks chose to have “a, uh, what do you call it there—an anchor?” (Stewart, April 22, 2013).

In perhaps the most absurd series of clips, CNN reporters are heard stumbling over their words and repeatedly describing dogs barking and an interesting smell.

“We hear, um, one of the K-9 dogs barking.”

“Interesting, that dog is barking.”

“We can smell, um... there was--there was something in the air”

“That’s at least the third K-9 dog that began barking, barking very, very loudly, so, they... may be smelling what uh, we allegedly--uh, what we thought *we* smelled...” (Stewart, April 22, 2013)

When the clips come to a close, Stewart is waiting and ready, glancing up from awkwardly drawing squares on his notes to give the camera a very unimpressed, skeptical look. “Let me tell you a little something about K-9 dogs: I got one of them. And uh. They bark a lot,” he begins smugly. “Sometimes lil f**ker just stares out the window and barks even when there’s nothing out there. Sometimes he licks his own genitals,” he continues to roars of laughter from the audience. “Ya know, you can’t always read a lot into what they do. News-wise” (Stewart, April 22, 2013). With this, he has successfully made CNN and the media the butt of the joke, highlighting every mistake, every fumble, mimicking and ridiculing them. His choice of target disparages the media, making them fools and placing some amount of blame on them for the confusion and chaos that followed the bombing. Though this tactic has the potential to decrease trust in the media, at this time,

it gave viewers a much needed target to laugh at, one that is related to the unusual circumstances but stays safely away from the triggering topics.

In a period of chaos and confusion, with suspects on the loose and a section of Boston on complete lockdown, Stewart provided his audience with a target for the resulting fear and disempowerment. While no one knew exactly what was going on, he diverted viewers' emotions to the media's reporting foibles, making them partially to blame for the confusion. With his focus on the media, he avoids the topics of terrorism, terrorists, death, and injury. He hovers above the serious matter, creating a segment that is safe and benign.

In the episodes of *The Colbert Report* that aired after the bombing, Colbert likewise poked fun at the media coverage. He also daringly touched on a topic that gets a little closer to the tragedy itself: the terrorists. In ten separate instances, Colbert jumps on opportunities to turn the foreignness of the terrorists into a joke, from the pronunciation of their names to the confusion about their origin. In doing so, he also creates multiple targets for the jokes: not only is he making fun of the terrorists, but he is also making fun of the U.S., and Americans' general lack of knowledge about anything outside of Western culture—particularly Muslims, the Middle East, and, of course, Chechnya, where the terrorists are from. This creates an undercurrent of self-deprecating humor that, similarly to Stewart's show, gives the audience a safe target to laugh at. In this vein, Lockyer (2011) discusses the use of self-deprecating comedy as a rhetorical strategy: when comedians use self-deprecation, they get a bit of a green light to “go on and lay into someone else” (Lockyer, 2011). Here, though the self-deprecating humor is less blatant and more a hint of American ignorance, Colbert opens doors to express underlying

xenophobia, an outlet for some of the residual emotion created by the bombing. In addition to his self-deprecating humor, Colbert's conservative persona adds to his ability to make these jokes. His character's reputation as xenophobic allows him to include these hints of xenophobia in his coverage of the event, giving Americans an outlet for emotion and anger by allowing his audience to both buy into this xenophobia and also mock American ignorance.

Colbert begins this theme of foreign jokes in his April 22 show, just after the bombers were caught. After showing news clips of five very different pronunciations of "Dzhokhar Tsarnaev," he declares, "I'm gonna go with ... white hat guy," receiving laughs from the audience (Colbert, April 22, 2013). His exaggerated inability to pronounce any of the foreign names is frequent throughout his coverage of the bombers, and two weeks later on his May 2 show, he makes a point to show that he still cannot pronounce any of the names, including the two new accomplices that were arrested around this time. "Diaz Kad... Katy Perry," he says, switching the terrorist's foreign last name, Kadyrbayev, to a familiar American pop icon, poking fun at American's knowledge about foreigners in comparison to our willingness to focus more on pop culture within our own borders. "Damn, you terrorists!" he continues after another failed attempt. "With your weaponized consonants! Why can't you have regular names, like Rick or Alan?!" (Colbert, May 2, 2013). By adding in stereotypical Euro American male names, Colbert adds a layer of self-deprecation to the joke that applies to Americans in general, and by doing so, he once again gives himself the green light to make commentary with xenophobic undertones.

In his April 22 episode, when the suspects are first caught, Colbert relays information about them by continuing to utilize self-deprecating humor that keeps the mood light. Drawing exaggeratedly ignorant conclusions, he lays out the facts for the audience: “They are Muslims. They are brothers, ok? Which makes them the Muslim Brotherhood, ok? That means: Egypt,” he confidently, condescendingly—and wrongly—explains. “Then again, they are from Chechnya, a Russian federation located in the Caucasus mountains... which makes these terrorists: Caucasians. So be on the lookout for Caucasian males with dark hair and anger issues,” he warns the audience before closing by showing a photo of himself as a “computer deposit” of what he described (Colbert, April 22, 2013). With this punchline, he safely expels tensions by creating literal comic relief. He gently approaches a topic—terrorism—that would violate the benign space he has built. He skillfully dances around it, laying down facts but pairing each fact with a joke that lightly makes fun of Americans, allowing him to build tension in a safe manner until finally, he closes it with a joke that’s completely unrelated to the bombing or terrorism and instead makes fun of himself. By flashing the photo of himself as an example of the described terrorists, he uses the heightened fear, anxiety, and confusion from the manhunt for the transfer of excitation (Zillmann, 2008) as he makes a joke of it all; together, this tactic expels tension in a benign manner to create relief-induced laughter.

Colbert continues with this tactic throughout his coverage. When explaining a message from the ambassador of Czech Republic that made a point to announce that Chechnya is *not* the same place, Colbert announces with dumb confidence, “Nice try,

your ambassadorship. I'm watching you, Czech Republic. You too, Chex Mix" (Colbert, April 22, 2013).

The benign violation theory touches on the idea of a comedy "sweet spot," one in which a joke violates expectations but remains benign while doing so (Kant & Norman, 2019). In the humor and jokes relayed above, Stewart and Colbert expertly hit this spot over and over again. In analyzing the late-night coverage of the bombing, the narrow boundaries and unwritten rules begin to appear. The bombing is a taboo subject. Humor can approach the subject and can revolve around related topics, but the punchline itself must direct the tension elsewhere for release, as Colbert does in his jokes about the bombers' foreign identities. Stewart, seemingly recognizing this as well, keeps a safe distance from the danger the entire time, sticking to jokes about something that's already one step back from the attack: the media coverage of it. Self-deprecating humor, uplifting jokes about the city and people of Boston, respectful and admiring jokes about people who run marathons, and jokes about the media's numerous mistakes are all safe; these strategies utilize things like social detachment and cultural differences to keep the violations benign as they approach the taboo subject.

These examples of humor commonly utilize the concept of transfer of excitation (Martin, 2006; Cantor et al., 1974; Shurcliff, 1968). Colbert in particular uses this tactic throughout his segments; when he ignorantly explains foreign concepts to the audience, he's also utilizing their eagerness for information, their fear, their need for a target and their general ultra-present blend of emotions to build tension. When the punchline finally arrives—a safe, distracting, and relatively unrelated punchline—the audience's already heightened emotions are immediately translated into laughter. This transfer of excitation,

the release of pent-up nervous energy, also falls right into Freud and Spencer's Relief Theory (Morreal, 1987; Meyer, 2000).

The comedians, throughout their coverage, utilize the audience's emotions for their own good, delivering comic relief in the face of a tragedy that left Americans feeling angry and unsafe. They remained in this narrow sweet spot for nearly the entirety of their coverage, and they use humor to create a safe space for the public to digest the news.

What *Doesn't* Work: The Importance of Language and Intent

"CNN's Susan Candiotti I think captured the feeling best," prefaces Colbert in his April 22 episode after the manhunt that caught the bombers (Colbert, April 22, 2013). Covering the same clip, Stewart begins, "[CNN's coverage] was a noble effort, and uh, ya know - keep -- keep goin, it'll get better. Any final thoughts?" Stewart, April 22, 2013). Following these sentiments, both comedians showed the same clip: a CNN reporter on the streets of Boston during the manhunt, while residents were instructed to stay inside and businesses were closed. She describes the scene to the camera, explaining, "The streets are *empty*. It's *eerie*. It's as though... a bomb had dropped somewhere..." (Colbert, April 22, 2013; Stewart, April 22, 2013). Following this clip, Colbert and Stewart both make similar comments, keeping it simple as the clip speaks for itself. And both times, there are no boos from the audience, but instead long bouts of laughter. Even Stewart cracks, chuckling as he responds, "Yes ... it-it does seem like that sometimes ..." (Stewart, April 22, 2013).

Yet unlike the rest of the episodes from both comedians, this clip directly mentions a triggering subject: a bomb. It addresses by name a word and topic that is otherwise almost completely avoided throughout all other coverage from Stewart and Colbert, and yet, it's still received with laughter. In this clip, the word is harmless and does not trigger the audience because it remains metaphorical to both the CNN reporter and the audience. The reporter's metaphorical use of the word reminds us that the concept of bomb is so distant to us that the word has another meaning entirely. This reminder actually reinforces the feeling of safety, enabling the audience to, despite the accidental mention of a bomb in the face of an actual bombing, laugh at her mistake. It's unintentional, it's embarrassing, and it once again gives the audience a harmless target. Although it uses a word that in the other late-night segments is nearly completely avoided, the humor here is so unintentional that the target is the reporters slip-up, rather than anything related to the event itself—and this keeps it benign.

This example provides a contrast to Colbert's "bomb" joke described in the introduction of this chapter. In that clip Colbert sets the scene well, building up tension as he describes how the accomplices were involved. He relays the news dramatically and slowly, then finishes with the quote from the report that the two friends "*urgently ... decided to watch a movie*" (Colbert, April 22, 2013). This elicits laughter as he releases the tension. He continues to ridicule the news report by relaying the seemingly insignificant details that it contains. The audience continues to laugh with each release of tension, as he is still operating well within the boundaries of benign humor. But when he says "If it was *John Carter*, they can be arrested for possession of a bomb," he violates expectations in a negative way (Colbert, April 22, 2013).

In one instance, the word “bomb” is used and is greeted with laughter and cheers; in another, the audience reacts with boos. To make an original joke out of the word bomb, the weapon that had just killed three and injured hundreds, was too specific and concrete to be benign. While the reporter’s slip-up was innocent, with no intent to directly connect the word “bomb” to the event for humor, Colbert’s joke was not, and its use brought the topic of the bombing back into news, rather than approaching it and dancing away as he does with his other jokes. He builds the tension, but the punchline is a reminder of a tragedy and therefore it provides no release of the tension through humor. The difference lies in the intent of joke and the use of the language. In one case, the intent is to poke fun at an innocent slip of words; in the other, it is to make a joke of a group of murderers, almost normalizing their actions by bringing humor into them. The language in the first case shows the harmlessness of the word “bomb” as a metaphor, unrelated to the event itself, abstract rather than concrete. The second case shows the word as a bad pun, one that is pointedly related to the event and the people involved. The word bomb is safe when we use it as something that illustrates our distance from the object itself—the word bomb is safe until it’s *not*.

Within Colbert and Stewart’s coverage of the bombing, and the late-night coverage in general, this was the only instance of a joke that violated audiences’ expectations in a not-benign way. With this joke, the care that must be taken when it comes to the intent of the joke and the language used becomes two clear aspects of what defines safe and unsafe humor about this event.

Offensive Humor: The Jokes that Failed

Over a year later, on Nov. 2, 2014, comedian Chris Rock delivered an eight-minute opening monologue for that week's episode of *Saturday Night Live*. Within the monologue, he touched on a handful of topics, but at one point, he brought up the New York City Marathon, which was taking place the next day, and connected it to the Boston Marathon by cracking a few jokes about the bombing the previous year.

"Tomorrow's the New York City Marathon! Yeah, scary - what could go wrong there, right?" he asks sarcastically. Then he continues:

Nah, it'll be alright, it'll be alright, New York's gonna be fine. Just like Boston's fine after the marathon, you know. Man, that Boston marathon was *scary* man, that was scary man, cause you know, I love Boston. I love the people there, but *that* was probably the most frightening, sadistic terrorist attack EVER. Just think about it: 26 miles. 26 miles! 26 miles is a long *drive*. If you call up one of your friends, "hey man, I need you to pick me up, where you at?" "about 26 miles away," well you better get Uber! 26 miles! People joggin for 26 miles, man—26. Their knees are hurtin,' their feet are killin' them, if you're a woman, there's blood comin' out your titties! 26 miles! You been training for a year, you finally get to the finish line, and somebody screams, "RUN!" Wow, that is horrible. (Rock, Nov. 2, 2014)

Rock's comments throughout are received with laughter. His emphasis on the distance creates laughter each time it is mentioned, and when he reaches the punchline ("you finally get to the finish line, and somebody screams, 'RUN!'"), it, too, is met in the moment with chuckles. But reactions afterwards, in various articles and on social media, are much more critical of his comments. Many tweets that night with the hashtag #SNL called it "offensive," "awful," and "uncomfortable," among other things. Later in the skit, Rock danced around the topic of 9/11, prompting responses on Twitter such as, "No Chris Rock, neither Boston Marathon jokes nor 9/11 jokes never have and never will be funny. Just stop" (Jennifer, 11/2/14), among other similar sentiments.

Two days later, Bryanna Cappadona published an article in *Boston Magazine* about Rock's monologue with the headline, "On *SNL*, Chris Rock demonstrates how *not* to joke about the Boston Marathon." Cappadona asks, "Is anyone ever 'fine' after a terrorist attack?" and states that "the punchline about 26 miles being a long way to run seemed hardly worth the marathon bombing references" (Cappadona, 2014). Her diagnosis of the jokes as offensive stem from the target of his punchline: the victims. While the successful jokes of Stewart and Colbert dance around the topic but ultimately target just about anything and anyone else, Rock's punchline hits too close to home, attempting to elicit laughter at the expense of those who had experienced the tragedy. The topic of the bombing can be approached if done so gently and benignly and the targeting of victims certainly will not be received well.

Along the lines of Rock's targeting of victims are other jokes found online about the bombing. Comedian Anthony Jeselnik tweeted, "There are some lines that just shouldn't be crossed today. Especially the finish line" (Jeselnik, April 15, 2013), inciting rage in many, some even demanding that Comedy Central fire him. This joke is related to Rock's in that they have a common target: the runners, the potential victims. Regardless of the setup of a joke, the build up of tension, and the heightened emotions, the violation will not be benign if it targets the victims and potential victims. More often than not, the jokes that fail are too concrete to be benign; they may mention a location, person, or detail from a tragic event that is too specific for humor and instead brings the audience back to the tragedy of the event.

On April 27, 2013, the *New York Times* published a satirical Op-Ed by Larry David titled "My Son, The Terrorist." In the piece, David uses Jewish-mother stereotypes

in an attempt at humor, detailing what it would be like if his mother found out that he was the one responsible for the marathon bombing. The humor is aimed at the reaction of Zubeidat Tsarnaeva, the mother of the two bombers, as she defended their innocence despite all evidence to the contrary. The piece was not received well. People responded angrily, some demanding that the *Times* apologize to the people of Boston for publishing it. The comments connected it to the danger of mothers who cannot see their children realistically, and in general, the reactions were mainly those of people offended that David and the *Times* had made a joke out of a family that had just caused so much grief and anger in America. Though the Op-Ed was lighthearted and meant to poke fun at Tsarnaeva's stubborn belief in her sons, it hit a little too close to home. Published 12 days after the bombing, the article may have come too soon to joke about the events themselves; even Colbert and Stewart were still avoiding anything too closely related to the bombing in order to keep the humor benign.

In looking at angry responses to these jokes, from comments on social media and on news articles to Op-Eds and letters to the editor devoted to these harmful punchlines, many cite aspects of their own lives that connect them to the bombing: people mention family and friends in Boston, their own love for running and marathons, past visits to the city, and more. This line of thought illustrates the safety aspect that can be traced throughout this chapter: the audience receiving these jokes expects them to be safe or else they will not be amused. If the jokes connect the audience to the event, whether it be to the runners or to the city of Boston, in a way that shows them that these attacks could happen to them, too, then the jokes are not benign. One man, Bill Coffin, wrote a column for the *National Underwriter* about his anger regarding Boston bombing-related humor;

explaining his reaction, he stated, “For me, these bombings were personal. I have friends and family who live in Boston within short walking distance of the bomb site. One person I know stood directly in front of the second bomb a mere 15 minutes before it detonated. My whole family runs. My wife is a marathoner” (Coffin, 2013). The list continues with more statements that connect Coffin to the bombing, justifying his anger at any humor aimed towards the event. With this list, Coffin gives us a perfect example of the breach in safety that the marathon bombing created, as it was something that so many people could easily connect to. These connections tell people that it could have been them, or their wife or their daughter, therefore a joke that uses the bombing, the bombers, or anything that reminds people of this danger is likely to fail.

Humor in dark situations has been studied extensively, from humor used in the Holocaust to jokes cracked in hospitals. Watson (2011) argues that gallows humor is used as a form of acceptance for people working in a field where death and pain is common. To the doctors and nurses that see death frequently, a joke is not threatening their perceived feeling of safety; instead, it is a form of self-preservation, a way to acknowledge the painful world they live in and create connections with the people they share it with (Watson, 2011). In contrast, when the country is exposed to a threat that’s uncommon and abnormal to them, jokes that directly address this threat make it real. With the Boston bombing, any gallows humor used did not have the effect that it does in a hospital, because the crowd receiving the humor was already afraid, their perceived feeling of safety had already been violated. In order for the humor to be successful, the comic had to be mindful of the heightened emotions of the audience and the fact that their security had already been breached; in the case of Colbert and Stewart, the comedians

had to approach the topic carefully and playfully, and then steer clear of it when the punchline came. Colbert danced this dance expertly, while Stewart kept his distance from the most threatening topics altogether.

With these tactics, both comedians ultimately found success in covering a tragedy. Though gallows humor was avoided with this topic, as jokes about death or bombings or anything too closely related to the incident would have been too threatening to be benign, there was certainly coping humor present. Colbert and Stewart picked apart the news coverage for mistakes, made fun of both the foreignness of the bombers and America's ignorance about the rest of the world, and lovingly poked fun at the city of Boston. The humor used gave the audience a safe space to get away from the terrifying, threatening news, and instead gave viewers something safe to laugh at. With the exception of a handful of jokes that brought the threat into the spotlight, the humor surrounding the Boston marathon bombing was skillfully benign, and in the face of an event meant to wipe the smiles off the faces of Americans, it was able to provide the country with a little comic relief.

CHAPTER III

HURRICANE SANDY: CATERING TO THE IMAGINED AUDIENCE

When Hurricane Sandy ravaged the eastern seaboard of the United States in October of 2012, it quickly became known as one of the most impactful hurricanes that the country had seen in years. The hurricane affected 24 states, with particularly severe damage in New Jersey and New York. The death toll hit 285 total, including those killed when the storm made its way through the Caribbean, and over 650,000 homes were damaged or destroyed. The New York Stock Exchange even closed for the first storm-related reason in 27 years. (Sharp, 2012; “Hurricane Sandy,” 2019)

David Letterman, who was host of the *Late Show* on CBS, made his way into work on October 29, 2012, to perform what he pretended—intentionally poorly—was a typical show. Yet unlike most days, there was no audience to receive his jokes. Sitting on stage in front of a room full of empty seats, Letterman and his crew frequently acknowledge the slight awkwardness of performing for no one while trying to act as if all was normal. “I uh, don’t know what I’m doing here. Michael Phelps couldn’t get to work today,” Letterman says, looking down at the stack of joke cards in his hand, reading one-liners from each in an emotionless, intentionally bored tone (Letterman, Oct. 29, 2012). His monotone reading of the jokes exaggerates the awkwardness of the episode, making each bad joke more amusing than if he’d given it some life. “Michael Phelps the uh, Olympic Champion, Michael Phelps,” he explains, in case anybody somehow missed the humor. Next comes, “I feel like Clint Eastwood, an old guy talking to empty chairs,”

followed by some nagging of Anton, Letterman’s band’s drummer, for not helping him out with a “ba-dum-tiss” on the drums after each bad joke. “Let’s try that again,” Letterman says, before reading the exact same Clint Eastwood joke again so that Anton can follow it up with a quick sting on the drums to punctuate the joke. For minutes, Letterman continues like this, with one bad one-liner after another (Letterman, Oct. 29, 2012). Each bad joke is centered around one topic: Hurricane Sandy.

The hurricane hit on October 29, the day this show aired. Dubbed “Frankenstorm” by the National Weather Service, the storm reached land around Halloween in 2012. A combination of a hurricane, a cold front, and a second storm, all three forces reached landfall at the same time—which happened to also be right in time for a full moon. The conditions added together perfectly, creating a monster that reached 900 miles in diameter and boasted 150-mph winds. When the damage was done, there were 72 casualties from the hurricane itself. In the days and weeks after, 87 more deaths were indirect results of the hurricane—from power outages to carbon monoxide issues to accidents during cleanup.

Yet for an event that caused so much hype and so much damage, there was plenty of humor about it on the popular late night shows at the time, particularly *Late Show with David Letterman*, *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Saturday Night Live*. The jokes varied in style, but in the midst of the hurricane, there was a theme. Unlike with other tragic events, such as the Boston Marathon bombing covered in the previous chapter, comedians did not shy away from addressing the event itself. While the word “bomb” seemed to be taboo after the marathon bombing, nearly all jokes about the hurricane seemed to be fair game, from corny one-liners to references about Sandy from

the movie *Grease*. With approximately 117 deaths in America reported by the Red Cross, and millions of dollars of damage, the devastating storm still was fair game for jokes—which is a stark contrast to other deadly events, such as terrorist attacks.

The reason for this appears to lie in the demographics of New York City's Evacuation Zone A, the section of the city that accounted for the largest percentage of deaths in New York. According to various data sources, the residents of Zone A are of a significantly different demographic than those who typically watch these types of late-night shows. Many residents of Zone A are immigrants, unemployed, or low educated, (Center for Disease Control, 2013; "Hurricane Sandy," 2013) while the largest percentage of viewers of shows like *Colbert Report* are typically educated and middle to high class (Pew Research Center, 2010). With viewers relatively safe from the storm, comedy was fair game, despite the sheer amount of damage done. Hurricane Sandy became the target of jokes for late night hosts as they utilized a different style of coping humor that aimed to get over the slight guilt at feeling safe while so many others in the country were not. The hosts used corny, self-referential humor to address this lingering feeling of guilt. This humor was specifically targeted to their general audience, a group that was likely more secure in comparison to many others during the storm.

This new brand of coping humor—this giddy, cheesy, and slightly random style of jokes—says a lot more about coping humor itself than it does about the comedians or the audience. It highlights an unexpected need for coping humor, one that is present when danger is not.

Evacuation Zone A: The Demographics of Victims and Viewers

As Halloween of 2012 approached, with Hurricane Sandy inching towards landfall in New York City, late night hosts took the stage both before, during, and after the hurricane to turn the energy in the air into laughs. The humor from each comedian had different styles depending on who was delivering the jokes, but there was a common denominator present across the board. From the buildup as Sandy approached land, and particularly in the episodes that aired during it and in the few days following, the comedians worked with the giddy, nervous excitement and attempted to find a target for jokes when there was not a clear one present.

When politics are in the headlines, politicians are likely to become the butt of the joke, as seen in chapter one of this thesis, as comedians play into the frustrations of viewers, mocking policies and people to ease the tensions. When there is a tragedy, comedians may dance around the topic as they did with the Boston Marathon bombing, utilizing the transfer of excitation to generate greater laughs and create a sense of community. In both of those situations, there are emotions—often anger or frustration or fear—and there is typically someone to blame. Whether it be a person, a group, or a company, there is a target for the jokes somewhere. But when a natural disaster occurs, the stakes are different. There is often no one to blame, therefore it's difficult to identify an appropriate target at which to direct humor.

Media scholars have discussed the concept of an “imagined audience,” defining it as “a person’s mental conceptualization of the people with whom he or she is communicating” (Litt, 2012, p. 1). The imagined audience is often discussed in the context of social media, (Marwick & Boyd, 2010) but for late night hosts who base their

shows on jokes about the news, the imagined audience plays a large part in the humor used. The jokes in most late-night shows suggest an imagined audience that pays attention to the news, has a steady job, and is at least middle class. While the actual demographics of the audience do not precisely match up with these assumptions, the jokes and humor used do.

In the coverage of Hurricane Sandy, the hosts made the basic assumptions that the viewers were watching from their homes, not a shelter. The jokes also assumed that the audience was treating the storm as an interesting and unusual vacation from work, rather than a life-threatening situation that may leave them unsafe or unstable. For example, in Stephen Colbert's October 31 episode of *The Colbert Report*, he announces: "full disclosure, this isn't actually my audience. We're actually running a shelter here. Most of these people are just here to recharge their iPhones and to take a bum shower in the bathroom sink. Lil' gamey" (Colbert, Oct. 31, 2012). This statement, while clearly a joke, is based off of the underlying assumption that his audience does not consist of people who have actually been displaced and *are* living in a shelter. His "this isn't actually my audience" statement places his imagined audience in a safe household that has not been seriously affected by the storm.

While the jokes suggest a relatively well-off imagined audience for late night comedy news shows, data suggests that the earnings and education levels of the real audience are not too far off. A 2012 poll by Pew Research Center details the demographics of news and media viewers, noting that, in general, viewers of *Colbert Report* and *Daily Show* are typically higher earners than viewers of CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, and other news channels. The poll also showed that when splitting viewers of the

Colbert Report by income, the smallest percentage of viewers (29 percent) make less than \$30,000. The results were even more pronounced for the *Daily Show*: only 25 percent make less than \$30,000, while 37 percent make more than \$75,000. And an extensive data collection effort in 2019 by the *Morning Consult* paired with *Hollywood Reporter* showed that 65% of unemployed people don't watch late night talk shows at all. The numbers continue to suggest that while the audience of late night television is more diverse than the imagined audience may suggest, it is reasonable for the hosts to use the middle and upper classes as the target audience for their jokes. And throughout the late night coverage of Hurricane Sandy, the jokes continue to cater to this imagined audience, suggesting that the audience is safe at home, simply enjoying a few interesting days off. *SNL*'s November 3 sketch entitled *Fox and Friends: Hurricane Sandy* contains jokes about donating food to charity, suggesting that the audience has food to donate, while Letterman cracks jokes about the concept of working from home that suggests his imagined audience has that luxury. (SNL, Nov. 3, 2012; Letterman, Oct. 29, 2012)

According to FEMA data from Hurricane Sandy, the people that the storm hit worst were located in Evacuation Zone A, a portion of New York that contains areas like Brighton Beach, Chinatown, Coney Island, Breezy Point, and Rockaway Park. The FEMA report announced that "few people (or families) displaced by Sandy could afford rents at market price. Estimates show that 75 percent of households that applied [for temporary housing] had annual income inferior to the estimated USD 25,800 needed to qualify" (Delavelle, 2013 p. 22). The report also stated that "Low-income people constituted a particularly vulnerable group to Sandy's impact" and that those with the least means often ignored the evacuation orders due to the cost of taking this action when

the subway and trains closed the morning before the hurricane hit (Delavelle, 2013, p22). And, showing that many of the middle class and higher were much better off during the storm, the report also stated that “home-owners who lost their house surely suffered, but usually had savings or resources to draw upon, in contrast with poorer renters who sometimes lost everything they owned” (Delavelle, 2013, p22). And with nearly half of all FEMA registrants after the storm making less than \$30,000 annually, the data suggests that those who were affected the most seriously by the storm are not the same people who make up the imagined audiences of Stephen Colbert, Jimmy Fallon, David Letterman, and *SNL*.

In Hurricane Sandy particularly, but also for many natural disasters, the ones most affected are lower-income individuals and families. In contrast, those affected by the Boston Marathon bombing were of a very different demographic; running marathons is a choice, a hobby, and an expensive one at that. Entering the Boston Marathon can cost anywhere between \$180 out of pocket to \$5,000 in donation money raised, (Champion, 2016) and the demographics of runners from the National Runners Survey show that 73 percent of runners have a household income of over \$75,000 (Runner Demographics, n.d.). While the bombing had fewer victims, it hit closer to home demographically, thus forcing comedians to be more careful with their humor to avoid upsetting the audience.

Nervous, Giddy Excitement: Coping Humor for the Non-Coping

With an audience that consisted largely of less-affected Americans than the residents of Zone A, comedians David Letterman, Jimmy Fallon, Stephen Colbert, and the cast of *Saturday Night Live* had significantly more room for jokes than they do for other deadly events, such as a terrorist attack. Instead of fear and anger being prevalent among viewers, there was more of a giddy excitement that comes with non-threatening, out-of-the-ordinary situations, like a big snow storm. Without a real perceived threat of danger from the storm, the audience was able to view Sandy as more of an exciting vacation from work than a tragedy; instead of it being a taboo subject, the hurricane itself was the topic of jokes. Upon initial analysis, coping humor covering this topic did not appear to have a large presence, because there was not a need for it; the emotions that typically require coping humor were not present, and in their place was giddy excitement. But there was also some guilt, and *this* was where a specific form of coping humor came into play.

The excitement of the storm created the impression that everyone unaffected was on some sort of holiday, when in reality, it was a natural disaster that resulted in death and mass destruction, with homes destroyed and loved ones lost. Comedians took the underlying—possibly even subconscious—guilt of those who were unaffected by the storm and ran with it, crafting a self-referential, corny style of humor. This style created a diversion from the fact that those laughing at these jokes were unaffected by the storm, while in the rest of the city, people were drowning and trapped, and homes, buildings, and businesses were destroyed. Key tactics used were self-deprecating and self-referential humor, humor that targeted other wealthy people, humor that poked fun at the

media, and a style of humor that came off as bored so as to exaggerate the lack of concern about the storm. With these styles, the comedians widened the distance in the hierarchy of the unaffected, showing that the class difference between the ultra-wealthy and the victims is greater than that of the viewers and the victims. They used corny jokes and one-liners that downplayed the storm and displayed how unaffected they were. And using these tactics, they eased the underlying guilt of the audience and created humor consistent with the relief theory and transfer of excitation, as they turned the anxious energy into laughs.

Self-Referential Humor

“First of all—I’m ok,” Colbert opens in his October 31 show with an exaggerated and slightly absurd reassurance, immediately establishing his obvious position of safety and displaying that he, clearly, is not worried about the storm’s effect on his life (Colbert, Oct. 31, 2012). Comparing this initial reaction to the case of the Boston Marathon bombing, it is crucial to remember the touchy, dance-around-the-subject comedy that Colbert and others employed. Nearly any mention of what had actually happened—the bombing, the injuries, references to the bomber’s mother, etc.—was received with anger and even boos. But despite the many victims of Sandy who were *actually* in shelters while this show was on air, the crowd, safe from all of this, laughed as an expression of relief and excitement. Colbert is able to almost poke fun at the severity of the hurricane, as he knows the people in the room were clearly unaffected.

As Colbert continues his show, he builds on the fact that he was never worried or truly affected by the storm. He takes a serious minute in the intro to display damage,

relay facts, and show that while he himself is unaffected, he is aware of the destruction that the storm caused. But once he moves past that, he builds the distance between the victims of the storm and himself. Colbert makes himself the target of humor while also turning the positive attention of the audience to those who were actually involved in the storm, firmly placing himself in the comically unaffected category in comparison. When he enthusiastically praises the nurses at NYU General Hospital for carrying newborn babies down nine flights of stairs when their generator failed, he pairs it with a self-deprecating joke by following the praise with “I can’t even walk down nine flights of stairs without a spotter” (Colbert, Oct. 31, 2012). Continuing to review the damage, he explains, “Sandy flooded seven subway tunnels under the east river, which means it could be *weeks* before they’re able to restore the scent of urine” (Colbert, Oct. 31, 2012), using the joke and critique of the scent to set himself apart from people who use public transportation and reinforce his privileged position.

Later, he finishes his coverage of Sandy by poking fun at just how incapable he, in his position of safety, would be if he were truly affected. “But before the storm hit, I hope you all followed my storm-prep instructions: duct taped the windows, filled your bath tubs with fresh water, and built an ark... one of every animal, only females. Then, add one very random poodle. They can make anything! That way we repopulate the earth with a hypoallergenic animal kingdom” (Colbert, Oct. 31, 2012). With this finish, he both downplays the storm preparation required for those who were actually in danger and creates a distinction between the affected group and those who were unaffected due to their wealth. His self-referential humor draws attention to the wealth gap, poking fun at designer dog breeds with his poodle comment while exaggerating the crisis by suggesting

to build an arc. Viewers may feel slightly guilty about being unaffected, but Colbert's exaggeration of privilege lets them redirect that emotion at him, making him the butt of the joke rather than themselves.

Who Cares about the Storm?

On October 29, David Letterman sat down for his second show in a row with no audience due to Hurricane Sandy. Airing the day the storm reached land, *Late Night with David Letterman* was one of the few live-audience shows that did not cancel and instead decided to create an alternative viewing experience by performing for an empty room. A 2012 *Vulture* article about this specific episode describes the vibe perfectly, as writer Jesse David Fox calls it an “impromptu, mischievous feel.” Fox also explains how the show's tone was set from the beginning as “dumb and silly,” full of “cheesy” and “knowingly lame monologue jokes” (Fox, 2012, n.p.). With incredibly corny, scripted jokes to an empty room, Letterman displayed something similar to boredom regarding the storm. He showed that he had the resources and ability to perform a show while the rest of New York was experiencing the storm, and for the viewers that were bundled up at home treating Hurricane Sandy like a holiday, he displayed that he was ten steps ahead of them in terms of safety and privilege. Similarly to Colbert, Letterman went through a handful of hurricane-related jokes that downplayed the severity of the storm.

In the beginning of his October 29 monologue, he reads over facts about the storm, communicating the damage done while appearing unconcerned by it all. “Economic losses could reach 20 billion dollars... and most of that is in paper towels,” he jokes (Letterman, Oct. 29, 2012). Letterman cruises through the first half of his

monologue reading many of the jokes from notecards, making no attempt at an animated delivery. His monotone, bland style as he reads through the jokes is one that Fox (2012) describes as “anti humor,” as Letterman creates an intentional distance between the jokes and himself. He keeps the notecards visible, follows some jokes with “I don’t get that,” or “I don’t understand what that means,” making it clear that the jokes were written for him (Letterman, Oct. 29, 2012). This delivery choice further emphasizes his position of privilege, reminding viewers that he has a crew of people doing much of his job for him.

“Do we pretend there’s an audience?” Paul Shaffer asks Letterman as they begin the round of jokes. “No, no, believe me, just like any other night we pretend the audience isn’t here,” Letterman responds with a laugh, this joke not from his notes. “We pretend they care,” he says, “but we know they’re just looking for a place to sit down” (Letterman, Oct. 29, 2012). Here, Letterman’s unconcerned attitude about the lack of audience once again plays into his exaggerated calmness about the storm, one that borders on arrogance and boredom. By noting that they “pretend the audience isn’t here,” he displays hints of apathy towards the audience, widening the gap between himself and the average person once again with this act. With his monotone reading of the jokes, Letterman gives off an incredibly undisturbed attitude towards the storm, elevating himself so far from the storm’s reach by poking fun at its severity and the obstacles it has caused others. He uses the show to display that he is going about his life as normal, and that while the storm has ravaged a portion of New York and kept his audience at home that night, he is unfazed and possibly even bored.

Finally, taking a break from the jokes, Letterman uses a personal anecdote that directly illustrates that this storm was not much more than a walk in the park for him and

his family. Before he begins, he announces that he does not know whether or not to include his “trivial problems” considering the destruction done. But Shaffer reminds him that they are on TV, and they have got to do something, so he continues. Letterman goes on to tell a long story about how he lost power, he made his way up to 23rd street and spent the night in his work building, where there was electricity and hot water and everything was normal. “So I’m like, how ‘bout that? Cause I’m only ever really interested in my own wellbeing,” he jokes. He continues the story in his casual conversational tone, further showing that the storm had almost no real effect on him whatsoever. He explains how he had spent the night with everything he needed, congratulating himself on his minor success of evading the storm, and he closes the story with a phone call he received from his wife. Their dog had killed a deer (Letterman, Oct. 29, 2012). The story is longer than it needs to be, not really funny, but serves the purpose of displaying how unaffected he and his family are in the storm, as their big issue at hand is a dead deer.

In the midst of Hurricane Sandy’s rampage that would leave New York City with 117 casualties, thousands of homes destroyed, and half of the city without power, Letterman uses his show to clearly relay his you-can’t-touch-me attitude towards the hurricane to his audience. By acknowledging the triviality of his own issues during the storm, he gives off a hint of arrogance that once again sets him far above his viewers. His corny, scripted jokes targeted at the storm itself and his arrogance towards the storm’s power make it impossible to watch Letterman’s performance and feel guilty about one’s own position of safety, as he places himself in a higher position than anyone.

Joking Up: Bullying a Hurricane

Throughout the coverage of Sandy, the comedians also employ a common gallows humor tactic: they joke up. (Watson, 2011). By making fun of the hurricane itself, the comedians are joking about something more powerful than they are, something they have no control over. Gallows humor is often used as a deployment of power. Just as bullies use jokes as weapons, and victims use humor to level the playing field, the comedians use their jokes to mock the storm and give some semblance of power back to viewers in the face of something they cannot control.

In Letterman's segment, he uses this tactic many times. He uses his bored tone to relay jokes that show that the hurricane isn't really that bad, because he can still have a show. Letterman reads card that announces Kate Hudson's cancellation that night, clarifying that it is not due to the storm, but rather, "it's just me," (Letterman, Oct. 29, 2012) taking the power away from the hurricane, sending the message that it isn't actually stopping anyone. He details the 13-foot waves that hit Manhattan, adding that anything above 16 oz. is illegal, a reference to New York City's 2013 "portion cap rule" that limited the size of sugary beverages to 16 oz., and then announces that the subways aren't running—at least that's what his chauffeur tells him (Letterman, Oct. 29, 2012). In addition to his jokes downplaying the storm, his arrogant delivery mocks the storm as well, all of it together sending a message that says the hurricane is not even worth worrying about, is not even enough of a threat.

In a similar vein, Jimmy Fallon aired a show on October 29, also during the hurricane and therefore with no audience. Fallon's show is an even more pronounced example of joking up, as nearly all of his jokes mock the hurricane with an exaggerated

lack of seriousness. He begins the show cracking jokes, making fun of the empty seats, asking them to “please keep it down” and thanking them “for being here tonight” (Fallon, Oct. 29, 2012). After acknowledging the hurricane raging outside, he brings up its effect on the movie industry, mocking it for a weekend failure. “The weekend box office took a major hit because of preparation for Sandy ... and because no one knows what the hell a ‘Cloud Atlas’ is” (Fallon, Oct. 29, 2012), Fallon says, turning the subject of the joke to the movie that had come out that weekend, as if the storm was not powerful enough to be the main factor.

Continuing with this tactic, he later directly makes fun of the storm, making it the target as if it is a person and he is a schoolyard bully. “President Obama said Americans should take warnings about Hurricane Sandy seriously... so uh, step one, give it a name other than *Sandy*, I mean, come on,” he says before diving into a few *Grease* related parody songs about the storm (“stranded at the drive-in,” “*wind* chills are multiplyin’”) (Fallon, Oct. 29, 2012). By joking about the hurricane’s name, Fallon turns the hurricane into the butt of the joke, placing himself and his viewers in a position of power over it. He cracks jokes about an entity that, unlike a person, cannot defend itself. In reality, a hurricane is impossible to gain power over. But with his joking attitude, his clear lack of seriousness, and his comments that undermine the hurricane’s seriousness and make fun of it with clear lack of concern, he utilizes the coping humor tactic of joking up to regain a feeling of power.

Colbert, Letterman, and Fallon all use their performances during and immediately after the hurricane to point a finger and laugh at the storm, but also to point one back at themselves and make fun of their own privilege. In analyzing all of the jokes present in

these episodes, there are three main types that appear: 1) self-referential humor 2) corny, scripted jokes that display arrogance, and 3) jokes that make fun of the storm. The self-referential humor serves to create a distance between the comedians and their audience, displaying their privilege and intentionally showing their ignorance about what to do if the storm actually *did* affect them. Their ignorance and helplessness create humor that connects to the superiority theory, (Morreall, 1987) and their display of privilege ease the guilt of the audience watching safely while the storm ravaged the city. Letterman's corny, scripted jokes serve to further this display of unaffectedness and broaden the distance between himself and his audience. And the jokes that make fun of the hurricane itself serve to give the audience and all of New York City some power in the face of a more powerful target. In a situation where there's no tangible target, no real person or organization to blame, the audience needs something to laugh at. Fallon and Letterman's tactic of joking up gives some semblance of control back to the people with use of mocking humor. Between the exaggerated ignorance of the privileged and the jokes poking fun at the storm, the comedians created a butt of the joke and allowed the audience, full of giddy excitement and potentially subconscious guilt, to laugh.

The Cleanup Coverage: *Saturday Night Live's* Time to Shine

In the days and weeks following the hurricane, once the storm itself was over and people could return to work, the affected states quickly began to get back to their typical fast-paced realities. With residents of New York and New Jersey no longer huddled up at home, and with the storm no longer a presence on weather channel radars, the giddy excitement dissipated and was replaced by a post-storm comedown, the realization that it

was time to get back to normal. And certainly *not* aiding this comedown was the cleanup process required in New York and New Jersey after the storm.

In NYC and New Jersey particularly, thousands of homes had lost power, and streets and businesses were destroyed, impeding the ability of many to simply return to life as usual. Many of the homes that made it through the storm were damaged, and the homes that did not had residents that were left trying to find shelter in the meantime. Quickly, the excitement about the impending storm turned to irritation and frustration at the cleanup that the city needed and the lack of normalcy in the following days and weeks when it was expected.

On November 3, 2012, *Saturday Night Live* aired an episode that had multiple skits centered around Sandy. With the storm, the event that created the random, giddy emotion, come and gone, viewers now had a target and a defined emotion to feel. While also continuing the trend that Colbert, Letterman and Fallon had started and playing into the ignorance of those who were most safe from the storm (celebrities, politicians, TV hosts), *SNL* added a new element by expertly harnessing the newly present frustration and directing it at officials, politicians and anybody who could be connected to the cleanup effort.

The November 3 episode's "Weekend Update" and "Fox and Friends" skits, while still fresh after the storm, particularly uses the ignorance of celebrities and TV hosts in comparison to those who were actually affected by the storm. The "Weekend Update" begins with politician Mitt Romney, played by Jason Sudeikis, appearing as a guest and using his news appearance to announce, "in these trying times, I think there's something very important that *a lot* of people are forgetting ... I'm Mitt Romney, and I'm *still*

running for president” (Weekend Update, Nov. 3, 2012). The skit continues through a conversation between news anchor Seth Meyers and Romney, and makes fun of Romney by playing up his lack of concern about Sandy and victims as he uses the opportunity to advertise for himself and his campaign. At the end, he even announces to Meyers, “I got ya something. Hold on. I got ya a canned good!” and, as he pulls it out of his bag and hands it to Meyers, he pauses with the can in mid-air, label out, for a photo of him doing a good deed. When Meyers accepts the gift and attempts to take the can of food, Romney takes it back, saying “ah, wait. Need this back. This is my picture can,” (Weekend Update, Nov. 3, 2012), and the skit ends. Romney’s appearance on the “Weekend Update” criticizes the opportunism and ineffectiveness of politicians in the clean-up effort, giving viewers a target.

Also in the November 3 episode, the skit “Fox and Friends” continues to make fun of public figures and takes particular care to display their ignorance about a storm that did not really affect them. In this segment, the Fox News hosts, played by Vanessa Bayer, Taran Killam, and Bobby Moynihan, discuss the hurricane with the typical Fox News slant, implying that the Obama administration is to blame for the storm as then-president Barack Obama “knew about the storm days in advance, and he did nothing to stop it” and covering the topic with exaggerated ignorance. After “putting all of your minds at ease” by announcing that “Hurricane Sandy has in no way affected the shooting of this year’s Celebrity Apprentice All-Star,” the hosts bring on a FEMA worker, played by that night’s host, Louis CK, to give some post-hurricane tips. Each tip that the FEMA worker gives is paired with an interjection from one of the “Fox” hosts that displays their extreme ignorance regarding the storm: when Louis CK warns not to stand in flood

waters due to contamination, the hosts add that sharks or AIDS could be in the water as well; when he says to keep a flashlight and water handy, they put the two together and announce not to put the flashlight *in* that water, due to a bathtub incident that one of the hosts had had; and when Louis CK advises to throw away perishable foods if you've lost power, the hosts suggest giving it to charity, explaining with a cheesy smile at the camera, "well you know what they say: it's better to drink spoiled milk than no milk at all!" to which the FEMA worker, getting slightly irritated, responds, "no, nobody says that at all ... that's a terrible ... irresponsible..." and trails off. The cast continues like this throughout a handful of tips (Fox and Friends, Nov. 3, 2012).

With each display of ignorance, *SNL* creates a greater and greater distance between celebrities or public figures, and a more average, down-to-earth person. Again, the comedians joke up, this time not at the storm, but at the rich, unaffected people. In these skits, the "powerful"—those who were unaffected by the storm—are so exaggerated that it allows most viewers to feel average. The ignorance displayed in these parody skits paired with the pure incompetence of the "public figures" once again serves as coping humor, easing any resonating guilt and creating a target for the jokes.

Aside from the "Fox and Friends" and "Weekend Update" skits from the November 3 show, *SNL* had a few other skits that tackled the topic of Hurricane Sandy, these ones specifically aiming to ease frustrations about the cleanup process. In the November 3 Cold Open, *SNL* parodied a press conference in which Michael Bloomberg and Chris Christie spoke, with the figures played by Bobby Moynihan and Fred Armisen. In this skit, the politician's speeches and styles are both mocked, giving the audience a human target to laugh at in the wake of the storm. Bloomberg speaks first, with an

overly-animated sign language interpreter at his side, creating humor by exaggerating her interpretations of everything Bloomberg says while as he runs through the facts of the hurricane's damage and the thanks to those working to repair it. After Bloomberg speaks, Chris Christie comes onto the "press conference." Christie's appearances uses exaggerations of New Jersey stereotypes as Christie threatens specific people on live TV in an aggressive manner, calling it "the Jersey way." (Cold Open, Nov. 3, 2012) The contrast between Bloomberg and Christie creates humor as Bloomberg's address to the public is unanimated and boring, exaggerating his lack of emotion towards the event while Christie's is over-the-top aggressive in a manner that's inappropriate for a governor. These skits both provide viewers with a face and a name, someone specific to laugh at in the aftermath of the hurricane.

Finally, nearly three weeks after the hurricane reached land, *SNL* tackled the topic again, this time with a slightly different angle. After weeks of slow repairs from the storm and people still living in shelters, the audience certainly had more targeted emotion regarding hurricane Sandy than they did in the beginning, with frustration and irritation at anybody in charge of returning the damaged cities to normal. Once again, *SNL* harnessed these emotions, giving viewers an outlet in the November 17 episode, what the *Wall Street Journal* called a "lighthearted update on the Sandy clean-up effort" ("Gov. Chris Christie," 2012).

Here, the cast once again created a parody skit featuring Chris Christie on "Weekend Update," with Moynihan playing Christie and employing a wildly-exaggerated New Jersey attitude. In this skit, he addresses the frustrations of New Jersians in the post-storm cleanup, explaining that "New Jersians are known for their patience," and pairing it

with an exaggerated display of impatience when Meyers, the news anchor, questions this. “Yes, they are! How many times do I have to say it to you?” he snaps at Meyers, the first time of many throughout the skit, despite his description of himself and his people as “patient” (Weekend Update, Nov. 17, 2012).

The skit turns to mock his fleece jacket, which had been a topic of jokes on more than one late-night show, as it has “Governor Chris Christie” embroidered on the front, as if his mother had labeled it for him. “It’s basically fused to my skin at this point,” Christie proudly announces, then explains that when he’s seen wearing suits, he “[wears] them over the fleece. I’m gonna die in this fleece.” The skit continues with absurdities coming from Christie, as Meyers eggs him on just slightly in his usual “Weekend Update” style, keeping the audience focused on laughing at the governor (Weekend Update, Nov. 17, 2012). Overall, it serves to ease frustrations and anxiety about the irregularity of life post-hurricane and the delay in the cities’ return to normal speed. The exaggerated style utilized in Moynihan’s impression of Christie displays use of both joking up and the superiority theory, as it allows the audience to laugh at a public figure, for his foibles and inferior moments, and make them feel superior instead. It addresses the issue, the lasting damages caused by the storm, but also provides the audience with an outlet and a face to pair with the issue and target their laughter at. And overall, the stereotypes used are inoffensive, even points of pride for New Jersey residents, such as references to Bruce Springsteen as a “famous New Jersey poet” and a “saint” (Weekend Update, Nov. 17, 2012). The jokes shed an endearing spotlight on New Jersey and provide a chance for the residents to laugh at their own widely-known qualities while the rest of the country laughs along.

An unstoppable event with no one specific person or decision truly to blame, Hurricane Sandy created a whirlpool of emotions with nowhere for them to land. There was no real target: no public figure to be angry at initially, and no specific person or group who had directly caused the event. Without anything to point fingers at, the emotions often present in a deadly human-caused event or government decision were absent from the situation. In the place of those emotions, coming from anybody who was not truly at risk of being badly affected by the storm, was a giddy, snow-day type of excitement. For this reason, there was little coping humor necessary for the audiences of late night television. But with this perceived feeling of unthreatened safety came an underlying, potentially subconscious guilt from those who were privileged enough to consider the storm a type of holiday rather than a real threat. The comedians harnessed this whirlpool of emotions and utilized self-referential, self-deprecating humor, making fun of their own privilege in the face of the storm, allowing the audiences to feel that excitement without the guilt. They used exaggeration and took advantage of the concepts of joking up and transfer of excitation, illustrating extreme ignorance about how to actually handle a threatening situation; with this, they placed themselves so far above the average person on a scale of privilege that the giddy, random excitement could remain as just that, and the audience could enjoy it despite the destruction and lives lost.

CONCLUSION

When there is comedy about a subject, people talk about it. And when people are talking about humor—whether that humor addresses policy, politicians, religion, gender, hurricanes, or terrorism—they are often talking about the event or circumstances that created the humor. For example, Gournelos and Greene (2011) discuss how Tina Fey’s impersonation of Sarah Palin in a series of *SNL* skits prior to the 2008 presidential election forced major news outlets to address Palin’s shortcomings as a politician. Quickly, outlets like CBS, NBC, CNN, and Fox News were eager to discuss the skits, using it as “a frame through which they could discuss Palin’s (un)suitability for the White House” (Gournelos & Greene, 2011, p. xiv). Fey’s performances are just a single example of the power and importance of comedy and how it can be used. Conversations surrounding humor point to its importance during and following significant events, ones that bring out a range of emotions in people. From fear to frustration, humor has the power to address these emotions in a roundabout way, forcing us to confront and cope with them without necessarily realizing it.

Using the guidelines of Sliter’s 2014 study as a framework for coping humor, the conclusions of this thesis illustrate how humor strategies of late night comedy hosts change with different types of news events. Sliter cited positive reappraisal, social bonding, and physiological effects as the driving force behind coping humor’s buffering effect. The analysis of these three chapters applies these guidelines to the specific styles and uses of coping humor from the comedians studied, analyzing how the humor present fits into Sliter’s reasoning and how it adds to it.

Each chapter of this thesis studied a very different type of event that evoked a range of different emotions. Chapter one deals with politics and gender, and the differences in humor between those who utilize emotional reactions and those who avoid it. With a female comedian in the mix, there was a range of coping humor styles to address Brett Kavanaugh's hearing and later confirmation as Supreme Court Justice. Samantha Bee's angry, emotion-heavy humor coincided with the social bonding aspect of Sliter's research, as it has potential to build rapport between people in unfavorable situations – but it also suggested another benefit to using coping humor that allows people to hold onto their negative emotions, even if just for a little. The range of coping humor addressing politics displayed options to the audience; you may want to just laugh at the players involved and move on, or you may want to sit with your anger, your emotion, making bitter jokes in order to let it subside. This bitter, emotional style of coping humor adds to Sliter's list.

Chapter two displays the styles of coping humor utilized when the line between humor and offense is thin. With a positive reinterpretation nearly impossible, and uncertain coverage of the Boston bombing dominating the news, this coping humor took a different angle: it redirected the emotions from the event to other targets. The humor here utilizes bad media coverage to create positive reinterpretations of the news, but it also displays just how on edge the audience is when their perceived position of safety is threatened. As a response, the comedians crafted jokes that provide an outlet for xenophobia, confusion, and fear, and the audience accepts the humor, as long as it's just benign enough.

And with a natural disaster affecting much of the nation, Hurricane Sandy shows the need for a different kind of coping humor, one that addresses a different set of emotions and elucidates who, exactly, these shows are for. With an imagined audience that differs from the victims of a natural disaster, the comedians use humor to ease the guilt of the audience, utilizing social bonding and the joking up technique of gallows humor. Instead of being relatable, the comedians place themselves above the audience, creating social bonding between their audience rather than with them by poking fun at their own privilege. And by joking up at the storm, a force more powerful than them, the audience was able to retrieve a sense of power in the face of a force they can't control.

Through the three situations studied, Bee's coverage of a political event strays the most from typical coping humor uses, rather than the coverage of events that may pose a physical, more immediate threat to the audience. While a terrorist attack and a natural disaster require humor that can channel the elicited emotions elsewhere, a triggering political event requires, for some, a different type of coping humor. Some events, those that may have more long-term, continuous effects, don't necessarily require a distraction, but instead, a reminder—a reminder of solidarity, of the emotions that are present, and of the need for change.

Coping humor has a wide range of uses, from its popularity in high-stress occupations to its use by victims throughout history (Sliter, 2013). It helps us in the moments following traumatic or difficult events, but it also helps us create a cultural memory of significant events, ones we should not necessarily rush to move on from, and allows us to remember them with a new feature present: humor. As Gournelos and Greene write:

When we look back on the moments in media that characterize the past decade, therefore, it is not 9/11 alone that we remember, nor is it the staged moments of the Bush administration ... it is also the moment when Jon Stewart broke the back of CNN's *crossfire* by appearing on the show, the moment Stephen Colbert spoke at the White House Correspondents' Dinner, the moment Dave Chappelle inhabited George W. Bush in his sketch "Black Bush," and in the subsequent media viruses each of those moments engendered. (p. xvii)

The authors point out these moments of humor from 2001 to 2011 in their book. And from the past decade, we have our own. We have Melissa McCarthy's Emmy-winning performance as Sean Spicer. (Schwartz, 2017) We have *SNL*'s 2016 Presidential Debate skits, (Easley, 2016) and we have their 2018 post-Kavanaugh hearing skit, with Matt Damon aggressively chugging water and crying over a calendar. (Doubek & McMahon, 2018) We also have John Oliver's fifth-ever episode of *Last Week Tonight* in June of 2014, in which he discussed the issue of Net Neutrality with such a convincing argument that his viewers bombarded the FCC with comments. (Wilstein, 2019) We also have Oliver's early 2016 episode in which he encouraged viewers to "Make Donald Drumpf Again," prompting the creation of red hats with this slogan. (Zorthian, 2016) With each important event in the news, late-night comedy has a response, one that allows viewers to reprocess the story in a new way, a way that is easier to look back on in our collective memory.

In the face of pivotal events, coping humor responds to the audience's needs in real-time by creating a distraction, a bonding opportunity, and a space in which people who want to hold onto the elicited emotions for a little can do so in a less harmful way. But it also creates cultural memories, ones that are shared over and over, ones that are discussed in person, watched with friends, and ones that go viral online. In the face of a

constantly changing news cycle, coping humor provides moments to remember once the story has gotten old. These findings illustrate not only the need for coping humor, but the need for continued research on humor as it continues to affect the public and the world around us.

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Sierra Semmel was born in Blue Hill, Maine on November 17, 1996. She was raised in the small town of Dedham, Maine, attending the local Dedham School through eighth grade before heading to Connecticut to attend the Loomis Chaffee School for high school. After graduating high school in 2015, she spent a summer traveling in Israel and Europe, followed by a year playing hockey and living in Washington, D.C. In 2016, Sierra began her time at the University of Maine in Orono. She is a member of the Honors College, Lambda Pi Eta National Honors Society and National Society of Collegiate Scholars. She also played on the women's ice hockey team at the University of Maine for her first three semesters.

After graduation, Sierra plans to travel to South Africa with Project TEN, a service-learning program that allows young Jews to live in other countries and both volunteer and immerse themselves in the local communities there. She plans to eventually work in media with a focus on Israeli issues and foreign relations.