Female Voices of Comic Resistance in Arab-American Stand-up Comedy

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By

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Abstract

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This thesis will explore the implications of performances by female Arab-American stand-up comics in the United States since the beginning of the 21st century. By examining the subversive ways in which these comics tackle issues of identity through their art, this exploration draws conclusions on how this performance platform creates unique challenges and opportunities for female comics that are not experienced by their male counterparts. It will identify the cultural and sociological sources of challenge for female agency, whether internal or external and theorize ways in which they are overcome. This thesis utilizes qualitative analysis of live and recorded performances through the theoretical lens of social interaction. The analysis is supplemented by in person and documentary film interviews with Arab-American female comics as well as research on reviews, articles and archives of performances. While previous scholarship on the subject of Arab-American stand-up comedy has mostly taken into account the male voices, this thesis focuses exclusively on female comics and the significance of their performance of comic resistance to their agency.
Introduction

Stand-up comics don’t just tell jokes, they tell stories. They are artists of an oral tradition that aims to speak to the truth of the human condition. While their primary aim is to entertain and amuse their listeners, comics also probe serious subjects using rhetorical skill and wit. Some of the comic’s best tools are sarcasm, absurdity, and exaggeration. However, behind all that is an honesty that can only be exposed through such unconventional interactions and expression. The comic has special license to speak what is on everyone’s mind, what everyone is too afraid to speak about for fear of injury or retaliation. The comic is also today's popular philosopher, reflecting critically on the world and sharing alternative views that counter those of mainstream belief. She is objective, offensive, entertaining and influential all within the same performance. Most importantly, she is a conversationalist and not simply a joker. The conceptualization of stand-up performance as dialectic social interaction is the foundation of this thesis, which aims to understand how comics can probe controversial issues while avoiding inflaming hypersensitivity to subjects such as politics, gender and ethnicity.

In particular, this thesis will examine stand-up performances by Arab-American female comics with the goal of exploring the subversive ways in which they tackle issues of identity through their art. By dissecting aspects of their performances in terms of social interaction, this thesis will elucidate unique cultural and sociological obstacles that are faced by these performers. My hypothesis is that at the root of these challenges is self-censorship and that by overcoming it in order to perform their comedy, these comics are participating in a form of social resistance which I term comic resistance.
In studying this particular group of comics, it is necessary to clarify certain terminology and acknowledge the risks of such an exploration. First, I would like to outline the parameters of the term "Arab" as used in this thesis. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines "Arab" as "a member of the people who are originally from the Arabian Peninsula and who now live mostly in the Middle East and northern Africa" ("Arab"). In this thesis, "Arab" refers to that particular population who are generally Arabic-speaking peoples and live in one of the 22 Arabic speaking countries. By extension, the term "Arab-American" in this thesis refers to native or naturalized American citizens whose lineage originates from the Arab world and who self-identify as Arab-American. Additionally, this thesis employs the term "Muslim" to describe followers of the Islamic faith. Quite often in public [mis]understanding, the term is equated with "Arab" or "Middle Eastern" but it is in fact by its dictionary definition a religious rather than ethnic or cultural label ("Muslim"). The risk of this conflation is one that this thesis tries to avoid.

The second risk this thesis will try to avoid is that of reducing the analysis to a cultural study aimed solely at debunking Arab and Arab-American stereotypes. While it may come as a by-product of analysis, this is not the ultimate goal of this thesis. Instead, it will focus on the implications and significance of Arab-American female comic performance from multiple cultural and sociological dimensions. These women are not only defying stereotypes but they are creating community and dialogue through comic performance. With these clarifications in mind, this introduction can move forward to the heart of the thesis.
Arab-American stand-up comedy flourished in the twenty-first century while the Arab-American community was enveloped in a curious yet critical atmosphere. Amidst the rise of anti-Arab sentiments in the years following 9/11, Arab-American stand-up comics found a way to remedy the bigotry they faced and address their current as well as past frustrations directly to American audiences. They introduced non-Arab Americans to the diversity of Arab people and culture while debunking the stereotypes that have become so deeply embedded in the American psyche. The popular performance form of stand-up provides the safe space for the negotiation of ideas, correction of misperceptions and expression of identity.

Stand-up comedy since the beginning of its current American form has succeeded as a platform for agency among underrepresented ethnic minorities but continues to be a male-dominated performance form. Only one side of the story is being told when expressions of political, social and cultural identity are being made overwhelmingly by men. Additionally, women in stand-up comedy are far less reported on, and studies of their gendered experience are rare. Therefore, this thesis is one small yet significant step in the direction of increasing understanding of not just Arab-American stand-up comedy as minority performance but also of female Arab-American stand-up comedy as an expression of intersectional identity.

Academic research on the stand-up comedy performance form is scarce and research on Arab-American comics specifically is rare. However, there has been an increasing number of research done on Arab theater and performance in recent years. Yasser Fouad Selim, professor of language and literature at Sohag University in Egypt, has written several articles about Arab-American theater and recently published a chapter
on Arab-American stand-up comedy titled “The Making of Identity in Arab American Stand-up Comedy.” In it he explores the fluid concept of a transnational Arab-American identity created through stand-up performance. Selim argues that “authenticity and comic license” are the two unique devices that permit Arab-American comics to negotiate and define their relationship to both sides of their hyphenated identity (23-24). This supports my approach to examining Arab-American stand-up comedy as dialectic social interaction because “authenticity and comic license” come as a result of a comic as an individual conversing with an audience within a specific social interactive frame. It further supports the idea that Arab-American identity is hyphenated and fluid, negotiated in the exchanges between performer and audience.

However, Selim’s conclusion is questionable. It states that

In creating their identity, Arab American stand-up comedians try to carve an Arab American identity devoid of the Western stereotypes of Arabs. However, in doing so, they do not demolish the stereotype; rather, they validate it for Arabs who are portrayed as distant and different from Arab Americans. This intra-ethnocolonialism is more assimilative than postcolonial (29-30).

This conclusion is arguable because the Othering of the self is essential to the stand-up comedy performance form no matter what the comic’s ethnic heritage. For example, self-deprecating jokes employing stereotypes are common to the performance form and rely on a separation of the self into multiples: the performer, the individual, the cultural representative, the stereotype and so on. Selim assumes that Arab-American comics intend to dissociate themselves from their Arab heritage by lampooning the stereotypes when in fact they are practicing a tactic that is essential to the stand-up performance form. As I will explain in the following chapters, the dramaturgical perspective to social interaction helps us understand how the interactive framing of stand-up comedy
transforms criticism and self-deprecation into humorous subversion of mainstream misconceptions.

Nevertheless, while stereotypes and the dangers of performing them are major components of Arab-American stand-up comedy research, some writings point to the positive effects of their performance. In *A Rabbi and a Sheikh Walk into a Bar....: Arab-American Stand-up Comedians in the Twenty-First Century*, performance scholar Richard Tabor outlines the historical trajectory of Arab immigration and its influence in shaping the Arab stereotype in America as well as Arab-American stand-up. According to Tabor, throughout the five waves of immigration he examines, the image of the Arab transformed from the poor, Syrian peddler to the hook-nosed, oil sheikh and finally to the terrorist villain. These images were perpetuated by Hollywood and became entrenched in public opinion by the media coverage of Middle East crises over the past half century. By the events of 9/11, the multigenerational and multicultural Arab community in the United States already had many negative stereotypes to contend with. The backlash against the community in the years to follow was inevitably hostile.

Tabor writes that 9/11 "did not create Islamophobic stereotypes, but it increased their prevalence and volume, forcing these comedians to respond the only way they knew how: on stage" (Tabor 13). He claims that the roots of Arab-American comedy were embedded in this intensification of Islamophobia in addition to the Arab community’s diversity and the tradition of modern American ethnic stand-up comedy. Tabor asserts that comedy was the outlet that Arab-Americans needed to respond to exacerbated misunderstandings, and he compares this need historically to the rise of African-American stand-up as an outlet for that community's frustrations with racism in the
1970's. According to Tabor, Richard Pryor was to African-American comedy what 9/11 was to Arab-American comedy: a catalyst (Tabor 6, 73).

His historical research and exploration of stand-up as a tool of defense and acculturation is supplemented by accounts from five contemporary Arab-American comedians. All five comedians interviewed by Tabor were male. While they provided insight into the immigrant Arab identity and the development of twenty-first century Arab-American stand-up comedy, they do not address the female voice in it.

On the other hand, in *The Lighter Side of Evil: Arab American Artists in New York*, cultural anthropologist Maysoun Freij devotes a chapter of her dissertation to addressing the stereotype of the virgin and how the topic of sexuality manifests itself in Arab-American theater in New York city between 2003 and 2006. Freij’s research delves into the personal lives of Arab-American female artists to explore the difficulty they face in balancing a need to disrupt the dominant narrative surrounding them and a desire to uphold the Arab values of femininity which they still respect. Her findings directly apply to my inquiries on female comedians and will deeply inform my research.

Almost every source I have come across on the subject of Arab-American stand-up comedy seems to revolve around political, cultural and social identity. However, very few take into account the female perspective in particular and address gender and sexuality as Freij has in her research on Arab-American theater artists. There is clearly opportunity to expand our knowledge in this field and explore how Arab-American women combat misperceptions surrounding them (such as stereotypes of repression and victimization) as well as assert their marginalized identity within both their own ethnic community and the broader American audience. Research needs to include women’s
voices in order to better understand the contemporary Arab-American stand-up comedy movement and its efficacy as a platform for social commentary and resistance.

This thesis begins to explore Arab-American women’s stand-up comedy as it has not been explored before. Employing the theoretical framework of social interaction as outlined by sociologist Erving Goffman in his seminal work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, it examines stand-up comedy performance as a dialectic exchange between actor and audience in which the self, the other and power relations interplay in the formation of identity and the creation of discourse. In addition, this thesis will draw on Goffman’s theories on “face-work” and interactive frames.

In his work, Goffman examines the basic expressive and impressive qualities of social interaction as power plays within a “performance,” which he defines as “all the activing of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (*Presentation* 15). His dramaturgical perspective implicitly separates an individual into two basic parts: a performed self and a true self. “The performed self [is] seen as some kind of image, usually creditable, which the individual on stage and in character effectively attempts to induce others to hold in regard to him” (Goffman, *Presentation* 252). Meanwhile, the self as performer is attributed with “tactful considerateness” as the aspect of the individual participant responsible for delivering the character self and maintaining the performance interaction.

Furthermore, Goffman concludes that performances “have consequences at three levels of abstraction: personality, interaction, and social structure,” which implies an individual as an identity, as a performer, and as a representative of a whole or group (*Presentation* 242-243). This perspective indicates an additional three-tiered level of
awareness within the performer: self as individual (self-conceived identity/expression), self as observed performer (character/impression), and self as active observer and actor. Of course, this perspective can be applied to the audience which is an equal participant in the performance interaction. What we can conclude by this framework, is that the performance of stand-up comedy as a dialectic social interaction is a power play between actor and audience aimed at controlling perceptions. Throughout the cyclical encounter, the comic expresses herself by attempting to replace the audience’s preconceptions with her desired impression while the audience, as recipients, project their own identity and their impression of her through their response. For both participants, the goal remains to lead the other to act in accordance with their motives and align with their ideology.

In “On Face-work,” Goffman defines “face” as the “positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken” (299). The “line” is a pattern of verbal and non-verbal acts of expression which determine a person’s view of an interactive situation. Presenting a good face is the goal of every person in a social interaction, and “saving face” is the act of tactfully protecting the actor’s own as well as the audience’s face out of a desire to maintain social decorum. Joking and laughter are purposely engineered to save and maintain face for all participants because they are mutually understood by actor and audience in an unserious “frame,” an analytical term used in various fields which Goffman elaborated sociologically. It describes how people make sense of events or constructs. “The interactive notion of frame, then, refers to a sense of what activity is being engaged in, how speakers mean what they say” (Tannen and Wallat 334). The actor and audience’s understanding of what’s going on is therefore determined by the interactive frame of a stand-up performance.
Stand-up comedy is an intriguing performance form to apply social interaction theory to because in a sense the performer is not acting as a character but is acting as herself, or at least a desired version of herself. Furthermore, the actor addresses the audience directly just as participants address each other in face-to-face conversation. Awareness of the dramaturgical perspective of social interaction is thus essential to the work of the stand-up comic. Comics are highly attuned to the power of verbal and non-verbal expressions and as a result can manipulate the audience by showing them their own absurdity and the absurdity of the world in which they exist. In the process of undermining institutions, authority, or even themselves (in the case of self-deprecating jokes), comics teach audiences to think critically about their perceptions and the way in which they acquire information and process knowledge.

The comic arguably has the upper hand in a performance interaction because she is the only participant singled out on stage with microphone in hand. However, this also means that within the interaction, she bears the bulk of the responsibility of face-work. The comic manipulates her rhetorical or physical performance in order to deliver effective social and political commentary in the form of tendentious jokes which may criticize or attack the audience while “saving face.” This framework allows us to understand how comics succeed in performing controversial and often condescending material without offending their audiences.

Using this framework, this thesis will dissect Arab-American women’s stand-up performance as a social interaction and analyze it as a power play between audience and performer. The scope of performance that will be examined in following chapters will include live and recorded stand-up comedy from 2006 to 2014. Live shows include
individual performances by Los Angeles based Arab-American comic Maria Shehata as well as performances by fellow comics Maysoon Zayid, Nour Hadidi and others at the 11th annual New York Arab-American Comedy Festival which I attended in 2014. In addition, I will examine recorded performances of comic Maysoon Zayid in the Arab American Comedy Tour DVD as well as The Muslims Are Coming! documentary. The focus of analysis will be on the rhetorical and physical performance of female Arab-American identity and its significance in terms of power as performance of marginality.
Chapter 1: Stand-up Sociology and 21st Century

Arab-American Performance

It does not take a philosopher to acknowledge what most people already know by natural instinct, the fact that our behavior affects others. From infancy we learn that our actions provoke reactions from others-- and with maturity we learn to manipulate others’ reactions and attitudes towards us by carefully designing our own behavior. We think, say and do things that are motivated by an objective and we influence others with our words and gestures. Just like actors on a stage, we put on a calculated show for our audience in everyday life, building our desired character and achieving a particular outcome from our relationships and exchanges with others.

Through our social interactions, we not only communicate desires and achieve immediate goals, but more importantly we negotiate ideas between conceptual social reality and actual social reality. These negotiations produce webs of information which affect our perception of the world and of others. On the one hand, they determine our social identity, or the way we view ourselves and others view us. On the other hand, they also cause us to fall into traps of misconception, creating a perceived reality incongruous with actual reality. Of course, this exchange of social information in our society revolves mainly around conversation involving individuals as well as groups.

Stand-up comedy is one such form of social interaction involving an actor and an audience that are both expressive and receptive participants in a dialectic exchange. Comics understand and utilize the dramaturgical perspective in their interaction with their audience. They gauge their audiences in order to improvise a performance that
“maintains face” while attacking their webs of information, whether that includes their sense of self or their perceptions of the world. Comics use the sociological frame of comedy to mask abject aggression often aimed at the audience in particular and society as a whole.

Humor scholar Lawrence E. Mintz writes that “standup comedy is arguably the oldest, most universal, basic, and deeply significant form of humorous expression” (71). In his article “Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation,” Mintz traces the evolution of stand-up comedy from ancient rituals and storytelling through early American variety, clown and minstrel shows to twentieth century vaudeville and burlesque shows (72). However, American stand-up comedy as we know it today is a fairly recent tradition which began taking shape in the 1960s at the hands of comedians like Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor. They and other comics altered the old tradition of joke-telling into what performance scholar Matthew Daube described as “an extended direct conversation with the audience, creating a space of extraordinary intimacy” (qtd in Selim 20). This intimacy gave stand-up the license to probe sensitive topics between individuals and mass audiences while maintaining the peace and decorum of a personal conversational interaction.

Gaining momentum in the midst of the Civil Rights era, the stand-up comedy movement and form became inextricably connected to issues of race, ethnicity and marginalization. The comedy boom was heralded, according to comedy scholar John Limon in Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or Abjection in America, by comics who lampooned aspects of their identity and used comedy as “a way of avowing and disavowing abjection.” “When you feel abject,” he explains, “you feel as if there were
something miring your life…some role (because “abject” always, in a way, describes how you act) that has become your only character. Abjection is self-typecasting” (Limon 4). Mort Stahl, Lenny Bruce, Dick Gregory, and others became controversial because they commodified social and cultural difference. Richard Pryor’s racially charged comedy, according to ethnic performance scholar Michael Daube, was unprecedented in front of multiracial audiences and served as “the source of his electric relationship with the audience” which continues to be sought by comics (67). Today, stand-up comedy is arguably the most prominent form of American popular entertainment which provides a platform for popular expressions of difference.

The performance form can be linked to the need for the expression of marginal identity within hegemonic society as it provides a space and social frame for such expression that is safe from offense or injury. Any study of stand-up comedy cannot be complete without understanding this link and the cyclical historical trajectory of the performance form. It repeatedly arises out of a need to define one marginalized community’s relationship to hegemonic society and its place in the world at a moment in history in which that community’s identity comes into question and mainstream opinion spews with abject hostility towards it. For Jewish-Americans, the historical opportunity arose after World War II and the devastation of the Holocaust, while for African-Americans, the Civil Rights Movement and decades following it provided a favorable historical window.

As such, acknowledging the current historical context in relation to Arab-American comic performance is essential to understanding the social significance of the phenomenon. Stand-up comedy performed by Arab-Americans is another rotation in the
cycle of this American tradition and emerges from a similar need to address issues of race, ethnicity and identity at a time when the Arab-American is under heavy scrutiny. Anthropological scholar Steven Salaita claims that an “ambivalent atmosphere” follows when a once invisible community suddenly finds itself the center of unceasing attention (Salaita 78). This forces the community to define and redefine itself as frequently as its patriotism is questioned. Thus, the Arab-American community came under pressure to re-define its relationship to mainstream American culture due to exacerbated hostility resulting from the tragedy of 9/11.

However, 9/11 was not a direct cause of this hostility. According to Jack Shaheen, author of several books on racial stereotyping in American media, Arab identity has been historically maligned by Hollywood and continues to be so by American media. In his book *Reel Bad Arabs*, Shaheen writes

> Seen through Hollywood’s distorted lenses, Arabs look different and threatening. Projected along racial and religious lines, the stereotypes are deeply ingrained in American cinema. From 1896 until today, filmmakers have collectively indicted all Arabs as Public Enemy #1—brutal, heartless, uncivilized religious fanatics and money-mad cultural “others” bent on terrorizing civilized Westerners, especially Christians and Jews (2).

Meanwhile, Arab women in particular were portrayed as exotic, hypersexualized, passive victims of an oppressive foreign culture. In the over 900 films Shaheen reviewed, women were continuously portrayed as erotic bellydancers and harem girls; slave-like “Beasts of Burden” who serve the men; shapeless and faceless “Bundles of Black” cloaked in mystery; serpents and vampires; and bombers intent on terrorizing Westerners (22-23).

These Western colonialist stereotypes deformed the identity of Arabs in the eyes of the American public. They also caused Arab-Americans to be misunderstood. “It must
be trying for young Arab-Americans to openly express pride in their heritage when they realize that their peers know only Hollywood’s reel Arabs—billionaires, bombers and bellydancers” (Shaheen 7). Hollywood also contributed to the conflation of Muslim and Arab identities in the mainstream American psyche. “Only 12 percent of the world’s Muslims are Arab. Yet, moviemakers ignore this reality, depicting Arabs and Muslims as one and the same people. Repeatedly, they falsely project all Arabs as Muslims and all Muslims as Arabs. As a result, viewers, too tend to link the same attributes to both peoples” (Shaheen 4). The classic scholarship of theorist Edward Said explains how these sweeping generalizations and false representations are evolved from thousands of years of Western misperceptions of the Eastern peoples. According to Said’s theory of Orientalism, the West had an inherent interest in portraying Arabs as backwards and volatile in order to justify its superiority and authority over them (Stockton 126).

Arab-Americans were not only hindered from coalescing a coherent identity by their effort to distance themselves from these misconceptions but also by their diverse heterogeneity, which made it difficult to organize politically or socially under one banner of identity. Steven Salaita writes in Anti-Arab Racism in the USA, “Although no single form of consciousness- or conception of Arab American- can be said to have existed… scholars were on the verge of critical breakthroughs in the years directly preceding 9/11” (Salaita 76). Diverse groups of Arab-Americans were beginning to rally together on common grounds such as the Gulf War and the Palestinian cause. They were beginning to contribute positively to the discourse surrounding Arab identity and Arab-American relations when the tragedy of 9/11 suddenly brought about a resurgence of distrust and hostility towards the minority.
After 9/11, hate crimes against Arabs, and those mistaken for Arabs, rose tremendously, reflecting the unwillingness of much of the mainstream population to accept Americans of Arab heritage as part of American society. According to the FBI, anti-Islamic crimes went from being the second least reported to the second most reported, seeing a rise of 1600% (“Statistics”). This increase comes as no surprise, as negative portrayals of Muslims and Arabs saturated mainstream media. A Gallup study of media content in the years following 9/11 found that 57% of Muslim or Arab people in US media were portrayed as militants (*Inside Islam*).

Despite the negative impact of 9/11 on conceptions of Arabs, the tragic event also sparked curiosity about the misunderstood minority. This provided the opportunity for exploration of a real Arab-American identity by journalists, scholars and activists alike. But it most importantly galvanized Arab-American artists to create and perform *as* Arab-Americans for the first time, giving rise to a movement that would flourish in the first decade of the new century.

*Arab-American Performance*

In terms of performance practices, Arab-Americans in the latter half of the last century had an isolated tradition of theatrical performance that mimicked that of their countries of origin. For example, most of early Arab-American theater productions in the 1980s were farces mimicking Egyptian style plays. They reflected the values and ideals of a group that aspired to a sense of community and served the purpose of helping to deal with social and political concerns of Arab immigrants assimilating into American society (Fa’ik 109). However, this conventional form did not suit the urgency of post 9/11 self-identification and expression. Stand-up comedy was a much better acculturating tool
because it had a farther reach into mainstream American society via popular
entertainment than conventional plays. It also had the ability to push the limits of
expression and tolerance while maintaining authenticity of identity.

Arab-American stand-up comedy allows the performance and development of a
fluid concept of identity that is more accommodating of the multiple and diverse facets of
the Arab-American self. Embedded in the form is an improvised negotiation of
expressions and impressions that mirror those of conversational interaction, allowing for
a flexible exchange between audience and comic. The authenticity of the stand-up form
results from its personal, dialectic nature and is a strong weapon with which to combat
hostilities and misconceptions. The Arab-American comic becomes, according to Selim,
the “live negation” of his or her stereotype by performing its opposite (Selim 24). Comics
thus became among the most influential spokespeople of their community.

*New York Arab-American Comedy Festival*

One of greatest achievements of twenty-first century Arab-American comedy is
the establishment and growth of the New York Arab-American Comedy Festival
(NYAACF), the largest and longest running of its kind. Founded in 2003 by comics Dean
Obeidallah and Maysoon Zayid, the festival began as a showcase of Arab-American
talent and grew into a haven for artists looking to freely express their Arab-American
identity. It allowed those who previously passed as white performers or shied from
performing their ethnic identity to finally perform as Arab-Americans together.

As individuals who are marginalized by both sides of their hyphenated identity,
Arab-American comics are perfectly situated to perform what it means to be neither Arab
nor American. Their blend of personal and political comedy successfully communicates
the Arab-American community’s fears and challenges in finding a sense of belonging. Comedy makes their experience more accessible to non-Arab audiences. Positive media coverage of the NYAACF over the years has reflected this effect (Louie; Kaylan; Stadtmiller; Toosi). As theater journalist and artist Dalia Basiouny writes, the festival succeeds in making Arab and Arab-American culture “less intimidating” and “more approachable” to mainstream America (Basiouny 330).

According to the festival organizers Dean Obeidallah and Maysoon Zayid (both comics), the festival and its performances were necessary for self-identification “as opposed to others who don’t know us, or don’t want to know us, doing so” (Basiouny 328). A platform for this purpose is exactly what this festival has become, and self-identification hand in hand with self-criticism is what continues the momentum of Arab-American stand-up comedy’s efficacy both within the community and within greater American society. The festival gives Arab-American comics a unique agency. By blending aspects of Arab culture with those of hegemonic American culture and performing the mix for the mainstream audience, they are contributing to mainstream culture and bridging the gap that segregates and misunderstands them as un-American. Meanwhile, they are fulfilling the internal needs of the Arab-American community by openly negotiating what it means to identify as individuals living in the margins.

In addition to showcasing the talents of Arab-American comedians, the festival aims to garner positive attention for the Arab-American community. It has certainly achieved this as, according to its website, it has continuously received positive media coverage since its establishment through various local and national outlets, including
ABC News, The New York Times and Entertainment Weekly. This positive exposure has helped Arab-American comics make their way into more mainstream venues and has increased their visibility in television and digital media.

The NYAACF to date has showcased the talents of over 130 different artists from diverse Arab backgrounds, and it shows no signs of slowing down as the festival grows year after year. In 2010, the NYAACF line-up featured Arab comics from the Middle East in addition to American and Canadian Arabs. This was significant in that it brought a different perspective and exposed American audiences to comics that they would otherwise not have access to on this side of the world. NYAACF co-founder and comic Dean Obeidallah asserts in an interview that above all the festival has made comedians of Arab heritage more confident, saying that it allows Arabs as well as Arab-Americans to celebrate their culture unapologetically (*New York*).

*Female Comics*

The fact that Arab-American women are performing stand-up is not an anomaly, since Arab female artists have been performing comic monologues and scenes in Arab cinema and theater since the 1940s (Sabry 208). But the significance of their performance today has to be examined in light of its current historical and social context. Anti-Arab racism reached an all-time high in the United States following the tragedy of 9/11 and created an atmosphere of fear and resentment among the public which affected even the most assimilated Arab-Americans.

Women are particularly affected by anti-Arab prejudice because they are seen through ethnocentric Western eyes as the symbolic figures of oppression and progenitors of terrorists. A survey of photos in the US press found that 73% of passive portrayals of
Arabs and Muslims were women, supporting the public conception of the inferior, oppressed Arab woman and often associating that image with the *hijab*, or head cover (*Inside Islam*). Women were thus used as justification for the so-called liberation of “backwards” Arabo-Islamic countries. Meanwhile, Arab-American women, especially those who wear the *hijab*, became easily identifiable targets of prejudice and hate crimes. For example, one study of hate incidents in post-9/11 Chicago suburbs found that “women reported experiencing hate acts at a rate more than double that of men” and the majority of them wore the *hijab* (Cainkar, *Homeland* 234-35).

The misconceptions surrounding them put added pressure on Arab-American women to be vocal in their self-definition. The circumstances forced them to speak out because the alternative would only work against them. Remaining silent would prove the misconception that they have no voice; allowing the men to represent them would prove that they are oppressed. Female artists, therefore, became among the first at the front lines of the identity cause, leading the way in productions of plays and solo performances. Not only did they want to assert their Arab-American identity to mainstream American society but they also had the creative and artistic license to negotiate it within their communities as well.

Female Arab-American stand-up comics are few and fairly unknown. Maysoon Zayid is the most visible female Arab-American comic today. She is the co-founder of the annual NYAACF and a veteran actress and comedian. She has appeared in numerous television programs and films as well as toured nationally and internationally performing her stand-up. In addition to her performance work, she is an outspoken advocate for disabled and wounded Palestinian children. She founded a scholarship and wellness
program in Palestine called Maysoon’s Kids, which teaches stand-up comedy to children living in refugee camps, employing the performance form as therapy (*Maysoon Zayid*).

Being a disabled woman with cerebral palsy is a significant aspect of her identity which almost always plays into her comedy. She often introduces herself as “a disabled Palestinian Muslim woman from New Jersey” at the beginning of her performances. In one sentence, she manages to highlight many of the intersecting facets of her complex identity, shocking her audience with her autobiographical candor. Maysoon’s edgy comedic style and politically sharp commentary has earned her the reputation of “the listened to voice of the Palestinian people” as she equally criticizes leaders on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Brown). It’s safe to say that her highly opinionated and politically fearless comedy has paved the way for other female comics to join the ranks of Arab-American stand-up comedy.

One such comic is Maria Shehata, an Egyptian-American from Columbus, Ohio. Aside from performing the regular Los Angeles club circuit, Maria tours extensively throughout the United States, Europe and the Middle East. Her comedy has also been featured on various television shows as well as in several documentary films on Middle Eastern stand-up. Her universal comedic style is accessible to a wide range of audiences, and while it is generally apolitical, her comedy is still deeply personal.

Much of her comedy centers on issues of family and female identity, although the two sometimes intersect with the topic of her ethnic heritage. In a recent interview, Maria revealed that after ten years in her comedy career, she still gets anxious about putting herself “out there” for people to see and hear. She discussed feeling conflicted about her choice to become a professional comic, wishing so much to pursue her dreams but
worrying that her family would disapprove. But whatever reservations she may have encountered did not hinder her success or her positive attitude towards comedy. Maria expressed hope as she discussed her 2007 comedy tour in Egypt that the increased enthusiasm for and acceptance of comedy in the Middle East will make it easier for the younger generation to step up to this newly popularized performance form.

Maysoon Zayid and Maria Shehata are by far the most nationally and internationally visible Arab-American female stand-up comics. They both were featured in the 2014 NYAACF along with five other female comics of Arab heritage, some American and some Canadian: Amanda Baramki, Eman, Nour Hadidi, Eileen Kallo, and Atheer Yacoub. These ladies have roots across the Arab world, from Palestine to Jordan to Syria. Their comedy is as diverse as their heritage, touching on subjects from cousin marriage and career choices to strip clubs and political conflicts. No matter what they are joking about, these female comics bring a unique critical perspective to the Arab-American stand-up comedy canon.
Chapter 2: Performing Arab-American Female Identity

As stated in the earlier chapter, it is not unusual or unprecedented that Arab-American women are performing stand-up comedy today since Arab female artists have had a long history of comedic performance in theater and film. However, their performance is significant in the current historical and social context due to the heightened sentiments that surround the Arab-American community. Anti-Arab racism and the atmosphere of hostility it creates in post-9/11 United States places Arab-Americans in a conflicting position as they are forced to affirm their American identity, usually at the expense of their Arab one. They are constantly under scrutiny as their identity and loyalty comes into question in every aspect of society.

In such a time of widespread animosity, Arab-American female comics find themselves in a position of activism with the power of agency provided them by their performance form. The stand-up form allows them to take the stage individually and speak for themselves frankly. It allows them to get as political and aggressive as they wish while limiting the fear of retaliation which often exists offstage. In doing stand-up, they challenge and debunk the stereotype of the passive and silent Arab woman, and begin to self-define their cultural identity.

However, that is not to say that there are not difficulties which this revealing performance form presents. Along with the liberation comes the responsibility of representation of and, to a certain degree, conformity to Arab cultural identity in order to maintain its integrity. This is a fine line to walk for female comics, especially considering two things: how influential entertainers are on public opinion, and how vulnerable and
volatile the current public opinion is on Arabs. This translates to limitations on the performance choices made by Arab-American female comics.

These limitations can be categorized into the rhetorical and the physical. Rhetorically, Arab-American female comics have to struggle with addressing taboo topics which may be incendiary to their audiences, whether Arab, American or both. The risk of irresponsibly representing and reinforcing misconceptions runs parallel to the risk of overstepping cultural boundaries internally dictated within the Arab community. Meanwhile, the physical limitations of performance can be viewed similarly and relate to the issue of modesty surrounding the female body.

Cultural anthropologist and Arab-American women’s studies expert Nadine Naber’s scholarship supports that the taboo topics of Arab-American female comedy are linked to gender and sexuality as they are the main symbolic indicators of difference between the American (bad) and the Arab (good) in the eyes of the Arab community (Naber, *Arab America* 6-7). Performing the female body on stage alone is an outright challenge to the gendered norms of Arab culture which dictate that a woman must be modest in her physical expression. Add to the mix the egregious rhetorical abjection performed by these comics, and the result is a combustible performance tradition for Arab-American women to partake in. However, Arab-American female comics still find ways to broach the sensitive topics, whether aggressively and unapologetically or subtly and diplomatically.

It is important to note that the biggest risk of joking about female Arab-American identity, even as a female, is falling into the trap of essentialism, or worse yet Orientalized reductionism. Self-deprecating jokes, for example, have the risk of
backfiring and reinforcing or commodifying singular facets of identification, which can
cement the existing misconceptions and feelings of hostility towards the Arab community.
Other jokes may run the risk of playing to versus against the exoticization of the Arab
woman.

The comic’s goal is to successfully navigate through the misconceptions and
address race, gender and culture critically so as to make clear to the audience the
multiplicity of her identity. This is why most Arab-American comics weave political,
cultural and social narratives together, and females particularly do so within the
framework of gendered experience. In doing so, they demonstrate that the power of the
dialectic performance in challenging the centrality and virility of textual information (or
misinformation).

In the following sections, I will examine some examples of rhetorical and
physical performances of identity as expressive and impressive aspects of stand-up
comedy in the frame of social interaction. I will also attempt to outline examples of
strategic self-presentation in the form of distinct personas created by varying
combinations of rhetorical and physical expression. These examples were drawn
primarily from the 11th annual New York Arab American Comedy Festival which I
attended in 2014. Meanwhile, some other examples were drawn from documentary film
or other recorded performances. The selected jokes will demonstrate the various facets of
Arab-American female comic performance.

Performing Personas

What the social interaction framework allows us to understand about the stand-up
comedy performance form is that a performer may overcome their rhetorical and physical
limitations by means of strategic self-presentation. The comic is simultaneously aware of three perspectives: her own image of expressive self, her audience’s perception of her, and her perspective of self as observer and actor. In sociological terms, she is aware of expression and impression as well as her agency in controlling them all at once, and she utilizes this to manipulate the variables of self-presentation. She therefore controls the chain reaction of the dialectic performance by creating and altering personas which aid her in achieving the desired ideological or psychological influence.

Many comics regardless of gender impress certain performance personas, each with distinct expression styles. According to Joanne Gilbert, gender and humor performance scholar and expert, the common female personas among American stand-up comics are: the bawd (sexual), the bitch (aggressive), the kid (innocent), the whiner (self-deprecating) and the reporter (the observer) (96). The kid, whiner and reporter personas, drawing from Gilbert's analysis, seem to be the least threatening because they appease the audience without directly attacking them. They employ strategies of supplication and ingratiation because their aim, though it may be secondarily to deliver critical commentary, is primarily to please the audience without offense. Hence, they are the safest of the personas. On the other hand, the bawd and bitch personas are the most intimidating to an audience due to the power of sexuality and aggression employed in their styles of expression. While the bawd uses her sexuality to exhibit power and exercise influence, the bitch is unapologetically critical and angry in her expression. Therefore, both types are a threat to the audience. They directly and overtly challenge the status quo regarding femininity and social power.
By confronting the audience with their respective strengths, these personas create an uncomfortable and potentially volatile environment for dialogue surrounding sensitive topics. However, due to the frame of comic performance, safety is restored to the exchange between actor and audience. It allows the threatening personas to “save face” despite their aggressive and offensive nature.

Yet, how do these types apply to Arab-American female comics, if at all? I discern from their performances that Arab-American female comics have their own distinct types which are sometimes culturally and nationally specific among the diverse Arab population. The first is the virgin, equivalent to the kid persona that Gilbert suggests. This persona is non-threatening and often naive, joking about family expectations and sexual inexperience.

The second is a slightly more hostile figure, the spinster. The spinster persona tends to be more mature and aggressive, perhaps a cross between the bitch and whiner that Gilbert suggests. She complains about not being able to find a husband and laments the fact that her child-bearing years are far behind her. Often utilizing self-deprecating jokes, she jokes about being a disappointment to her family for not fulfilling their domestic hopes for her. By putting herself down on stage, she draws not just sympathy from the audience but also attention to Arab cultural norms and the troubling shame associated with failure to maintain them.

The third persona is the sharmouta, or whore. This is the polar opposite of the virgin/spinster personas and an equivalent of the bawd. She unabashedly speaks out about her sexual experiences and voices her objections to conventional gender roles. She is by far the most rhetorically and physically unrestrained. The fourth is the patriot,
political figure. She usually rallies the audience for causes such as Palestinian rights and criticizes Arab political corruption. This persona often intersects with the final one, the matriarch. She is usually embodied in the character of mother or grandmother, the highly revered female figures of the Arab family. This persona usually expresses disapproval at the “American” generation, laments the loss of Arabness and the lack of desire for domesticity in their daughters and granddaughters. Subjects this persona usually broaches revolve around matter of the home, including food, housework and childrearing.

These personas are not mutually exclusive as they often appear together within the same performance and in hybridized form. Once the comic gauges her audience, she strategically can weave the multiple personas to maximize her appeal or the appeal of her ideology. She may approach the same topic from different angles or through different personas, whichever might be more effectively used towards the demographic of her audience.

For example, the outspoken bitch persona is a powerful choice and a favorite of Arab-American comic Maysoon Zayid. Her oft repeated introduction is “I’m a 30-year-old Palestinian Muslim virgin from New Jersey… if you don’t feel better about yourself by now, you should” (Arab American Comedy Tour). Clearly she is invoking the bitchy spinster persona who flaunts her bitter humor. She often interweaves the patriot persona with the spinster, as she has several jokes about her desire to marry only a Palestinian man so she can preserve Palestine. Using this combination, she is free to comment daringly on gender expectations on one hand as well as the hot topic of the Palestinian cause on the other.
This concept of personas will be revisited in the next sections within specific examples. It will inform the following examinations of rhetorical and physical performance by Arab-American female comics.

*Rhetorical Obstacles*

The rhetorical challenges faced by Arab-American female comics are twofold. First, they are challenged by delivery. The stand-up comedy form itself defies certain behavioral expectations of women in Arab culture and therefore carries with it significant social resistance. Second, Arab-American female comics are challenged by the implications of their topical choices. Taboo topics which may be inappropriate for public discussion (by both males and females in some instances) are all the more controversial when broached by female comics. This particular factor will be discussed in more depth in the next section.

I will first address the subject of delivery and why it is inherently problematic for Arab-American women within the stand-up performance form. The expectation of women within Arab society is that they conduct themselves in a socially acceptable way. This dictates their behavior in public and private social interactions both as actors and audience. From a dramaturgical perspective, Arab women are more strongly aware of self as *observed* rather than *observer* in social interaction, which places their priority on the impressions they make rather than the expressions. Expression is therefore often curbed in order to fulfill social expectations of femininity and propriety.

According to Arab studies scholar Louise Cainkar, a respectable Arab woman is expected to behave in a manner that maintains Arab standards of femininity (“Palestinian” 94-95, 98-99). She should speak softly and kindly—certainly not loudly, offensively and
unabashedly while on stage in front of an audience of strangers. This would be considered shameful behavior for an Arab woman. In addition, a woman who is too personally outspoken is looked down upon as a deviant in Arab society. Having a mind of your own, especially one filled with unconventional opinions that set you apart from family, tradition and community, is grounds for ostracization. These are the hurdles that Arab-American female comics must overcome in order to perform and be heard.

However, the very nature of the stand-up comedy performance form is inherently oppositional to these expectations. It is problematic because it calls upon women to single themselves out from the crowd first and foremost. By doing so, they are distancing themselves from family and community to be viewed as individuals on stage. It further calls on them to publically and inappropriately (by Arab societal standards) voice controversial opinions, observations and ideologies which may garner a negative impression not only of the individual woman but also of the family and community which she comes from. So the shame that is associated with such behavior is not limited to the woman herself but extends to the family and community as a reflection of their collective values, which burdens a female performer with a heavier weight as she carries the responsibility of honorable representation on her shoulders.

Expressions made by an Arab-American female comic are, therefore, not only expressions of self as an individual but self as a family or community. As a result, her dramaturgical perspective to the performance interaction shifts. The three-tiered perspective (self as expressive individual, other’s impression of self, and self as observer and actor) doubles. The comic then must be aware of the following: self as individual; self as family/community; other’s impression of individual; other’s impression of
family/community; self as observer and actor; and self as a representative and symbol.

This poses an obstacle for a female comic because implications of her individual expression carry twice the risk of offense and her responsibility to “save face” is doubled.

There is no way for an Arab-American female comic to circumscribe this obstacle other than to face it head on and assert her individuality by standing up, so to speak, for her autonomy. She takes the stage as an individual knowing full well that her reputation and that of her family and community are at stake. A certain psychological (and perhaps emotional) liberation from this type of conditioning is required before an Arab-American woman can take the stage to perform solo. However, when she does, she is faced with rhetorical obstacle number two: the taboos.

*Taboo Topics*

The second challenge to face is that of topical selection. Arab-American comics rely on several major themes in their performance including satirizing Arabophobia, parodying institutionalized prejudice in government agencies, and mocking their own hypocritical customs and cultural traditions. Female comics approach these topics from the perspective of their own gendered experience. To reiterate, due to the sensitivity of the current social and political atmosphere and their position in Arab society, Arab-American female comics must be attentive to what they say and how they say it.

Of course, taboo topics are not limited to Arab-American women or, as a matter of fact, to women at all. Nevertheless, there are certain topics that are most often addressed by women and among them some that are particularly taboo. Joanne Gilbert lists eleven topics commonly performed by female comics: sex, relationships, weight/body image, fashion, religion/ethnicity/region, family, gynecology, domestic
activities, politics, pop culture and random observations. She points out that while gynecological humor is the only one exclusive to women (which I disagree with because many male comics make period jokes, albeit derogatorily), the rest of the topics are not exclusive to women but simply performed from the female point of view (Gilbert 90-93). Meanwhile, gynecological humor performed by women is “feminist taboo breaking” because it allows them and their audience to overcome the shame associated with the topic.

The conclusion drawn from Gilbert’s analysis is that no humor can be branded as particularly “female” humor. There is nothing inherently gendered about comedy but the gender of the comic performing it gives it the label “female” implying it is “female point of view comedy.” This analytical framework helps identify uniquely “female” comedic approaches within Arab-American comedy in particular. The topics addressed by female Arab-American comics, such as marriage, family and tradition, are not exclusive to them. However, I will attempt to highlight their specifically female angle and later define their feminist significance.

Among the Arab-American community in particular, the topics of gender and sexuality are the most controversial because they are the two most powerful symbols which consolidate a difference between Arab (good) and American (bad) (Naber, Arab America 6-7). Cultural preservation in the Arab-American community is sought through female sexual purity and the maintenance of traditional gender expectations, which places the burden disproportionately on the shoulders of females versus males. It also means that females may only selectively assimilate into American culture, creating a double standard
of assimilation within the hybridized Arab-American culture. Therefore, gender and sexuality are the most controversial for Arab-American female comics to speak out about.

Gender

Gender expectations among Arab-Americans correspond to “nationalist separation of social space” (American/Arab, public/private) and a woman’s conduct within those spaces (Naber, Arab America 82). Arab women’s sense of self-hood is expected to come from the family first and foremost, and her role as a daughter or sister primarily and then eventually as a wife and mother. Thus the topic of family with all of its expectations offers Arab-American female comics plenty to talk about.

The female Arab-American comics who performed at the 11th annual New York Arab-American Comedy Festival in 2014 range in age from mid-twenties to early forties. In a culture where a woman is normally expected to marry in her early 20s and start a family before her 30s, these female performers are generally outliers in their Arab communities and express their detachment in their comedy. By choosing careers in performance, arguably one of the most demanding and often unprofitable careers, they struggle with the consequences of that choice. In researching the lives of Arab-American female artists in New York, cultural anthropologist Maysoon Freij found that they “often struggle with what they should have been both in their professional and personal lives” (Freij 226). She writes that the decision to become an artist involves “a commitment to a lifestyle that socially sanctioned single life and a sexual experience,” which by Arab cultural standards signifies a break with family values and convention, resulting in estrangement (Freij 224). As a result, they often have trouble finding mates among Arab-
Americans because they are perceived as having misplaced priorities and are deemed unmarriageable.

Therefore, the topics of marriage and marriageability are commonly addressed by Arab-American female comics from this unique perspective. For example, comic Maria Shehata criticizes marriage expectations by relating the story of her Egyptian grandmother who was a mother of thirteen by the time she was a young adult. She jokes that her grandmother had so many children and was so preoccupied with feeding them that when Shehata's father left Egypt for the United States, her grandmother didn't notice his absence until one day she had leftovers for dinner and proceeded to take a head count of her children.

She juxtaposes this anecdote with her own personal experience, being at an age where she is expected to be raising children yet finding herself not wanting to because she is barely capable of taking care of herself and her belongings. She jokes, “I can't have kids, I'd lose them! Like I bought a sweater and lost it in the same day!” This self-deprecating joke invokes the spinster persona and juxtaposes her lack of responsibility with her grandmother’s expert child rearing capabilities. Shehata goes on to say that her friends tell her “it’s different” when it’s your child because love will make you more attached and responsible. Her response: “That's not true... I loved that sweater!” (11th Annual).

Jokes like these are playful and seemingly harmless anecdotes of the comic's life experiences. They may be interpreted as non-tendentious articulations of the comic's family history, but one can also hear the comic's frank opinions about the subjects of marriage and children. She mockingly impersonates her grandmother doing a head count
of thirteen rambunctious kids and belittles the protective feelings of motherhood by comparing her love of a sweater to the love of a child. The discourse she creates around them expresses to the audience a de-romanticized alternate reality of marriage in which raising a family is viewed as a chore with loose emotional involvement.

This point of view is quite oppositional to that of Arab culture which places the utmost importance on marriage and children. By performing a joke such as this, Shehata is making a statement that not all Arab women desire a traditional domestic life. It further shatters the image of the idealized Arab woman by demonstrating that not all of them are even capable of raising a family. Like Shehata, several female comics approach this topic from a similar perspective, challenging the conventional expectation that females must conform to the roles that Arab society dictates to them instead of choosing their own.

In addition to marriage and family life, Arab-American female comics also address the related topic of marriageability. I believe this topic is commonly chosen due to the comics’ position and experience as social outliers. As mentioned earlier, the career choices along with age, ideology and candidness place them on the periphery and make them less desirable wives within the Arab society.

Maysoon Zayid is among the comics who have been vocal about the subject. Prior to getting married in 2010, she often invoked the spinster persona to talk about being single at age 30, which according to her is actually 67 in "Arab years." She joked about not being able to find a husband because, she said, "I'm a 30-year-old disabled Muslim woman, who refuses to marry a non-Palestinian, and no Palestinian is going to marry me. And I'm a comic! So yeah, I'm never going to get married" (Bobrow). However, despite
these claims, Maysoon did in fact marry and her marriage gave her a different angle from which to approach the subject.

Instead of focusing on her personal marriageability, Zayid shifted focus to her inability to find a husband. A repeated joke of hers became one where she claims the best place to hunt for a husband is Gaza, because the eligible bachelors there have nowhere to run. In this way, she blends marriage humor with politics, bringing to light the troubling siege on the Gaza strip and the inhabitants' entrapment. She implies that the desperate situation there is what finally landed this unlikely bachelorette a husband. She adds, in some routines, that the only reason she succeeded in luring a husband is because she had a green card, implying that this was the only hope for Gaza's Palestinians to escape their prison.

At the 2014 annual New York Arab-American Comedy Festival, Zayid even took a jab at the flipside of marriage-- divorce. As she gauged her audience, asking how many were single, married, or divorced, she cheered for the divorced crowd saying that "they are always the happiest; they got the gifts, they got the sex and they got out" (11th Annual). Zayid's snarky comment still carries the unpleasant “bitchy” tone of the spinster persona despite the change in her marital status. In addition, she touches on the subject of sex and sexuality, the other major taboo for women.

Sexuality

The topic of sexuality is a challenging one for Arab-American female comics for two main reasons. First, the subject itself is taboo, not just for women but across Arab and Islamic society. It is neither easily nor openly discussed in the public realm because it is deemed inappropriate, and sometimes the discomfort of broaching the topic extends
into the private realm as well. Even women amongst themselves may encounter a difficulty in finding the proper language to discuss the topic. Maysoon Freij states in her dissertation that “the issue with language is not one about translation from one language to another- rather it is about the translation of the morality of language from one tongue to another, namely the type of language appropriate for a woman to use” (244).

However, awkward discussions of sex and sexuality make for great comedy material. For example, Negin Farsad, an Iranian-American comic, jokes in The Muslims Are Coming! documentary that she never could talk to her mother about sex because she did not think the word existed in the Farsi language. She joked that her mother would refer to sex as “inter-gender flesh relations” because there was no direct way to talk about it. This demonstrates that the difficulty is rooted in spoken language as much as it is in cultural standards of propriety, and it is the same in Arab culture and language as it is in the Iranian one.

The second reason for the challenge this topic poses is the expectation that women, especially unmarried women of any age, refrain from expressing sexual thoughts, needs or desires because this poses a threat to Arab cultural identity. “Cultural authenticity articulates Arab cultural identity and community through the triangulated ideal of the good Arab family, good Arab girls, and compulsory heterosexuality-all in opposition to an imagined America and its apparent sexual promiscuity, broken families and bad women” (Naber, Arab America 65). This means that for Arab-American women, discussion or expression of sexuality may cause them to be viewed as “bad women” with loose morals. The dichotomous conceptualization of the sexually pure Arab and sexually promiscuous American leaves no room for hybridity.
This does not hinder some Arab-American comics from taking a stab at the topic. Comics like Maysoon Zayid are not afraid to rock the boat with their comments on sex and sexuality. In one joke, Zayid directly criticizes modern Arab hypocrisy when it comes to the female body and the use of the hijab (head cover). She refers to women who cover up as hijabis, claiming that the worst of them are the hojabis who wear skin tight clothing from head to toe, exposing all the alluring curves of their feminine bodies, and yet still claim modesty because their head is covered. "They have a bra, a panty and a body stocking and they're like, 'I'm covered! I'm covered!'" (11th Annual). Zayid makes it clear how negatively she regards those types of women, encouraging the audience to give a round of applause for the "normal hijabis who we love and respect" while bashing the hypocritical, sexualized hojabis for their false claims of decency.

What’s interesting about this bit is that with it Zayid contradicts the cultural standards of social interaction. Her daring verbal expression ironically parallels certain Arab women’s daring physical expression. Through her unapologetic criticism, she harshly judges the physical expressions of others as immodest while her own verbal expression of disapproval can be viewed as similarly immodest and offensive. However, due to the interactive frame of joking, her harsh criticism can be received by the audience as entertainment rather than offense. From this perspective, it is the audience that saves face for the actor by accepting the offensive commentary as benign entertainment.

Another interesting aspect of the joke is that in it Zayid creates new language fashioned specifically for her intended commentary and audience. She hybridizes English and Arabic terminology to communicate her specific critique to a uniquely hybridized audience. By blending variations of the words “whore” and “hijab” she invites both Arab
and non-Arab audiences to enjoy the joke equally and without feeling alienated by language. She creates in these words vessels for communicating about sexuality indirectly and avoiding potentially more controversial terminology.

This novelty is the defensive tactic in which the actor saves face for the audience in order to maintain decorum in the social interaction of performance. Instead of slandering her subjects outright by referring to them as whores, Zayid masks the social and rhetorical severity with the comically hybridized terminology she has created. This tactic of expression on part of the actor is essential to the audience receiving an unproblematic impression, again aided by the interactive frame of joking which filters its offense.

In terms of Arab-American perceptions of identity, a woman is either a “good Arab girl” or a “bad American(-ized) girl”- the two cultural aspects cannot coexist (Naber, Arab America 6-7). Similarly, the oppositional virgin/whore paradigm by which women are judged in Arab society does not have a grey area between the two extremes. Sexual identity is inextricably connected to national and cultural identity, and the Arab virgin/American whore labels are mutually exclusive. Zayid’s blending of words symbolically contrasts the inability of Arab society to allow either of the concepts to mix. Zayid’s novel terminology defies this exclusivity by implicitly drawing attention to the possibility of hybridization.

Through this tendentious play on words, Zayid utilizes her comic advantage to criticize hypocritical practices in her own culture. Her expression simultaneously scrutinizes the absurdity of the virgin/whore paradigm of thought and its absolutism which is prevalent and perpetuated in the Arab-American community. Meantime, she
also lauds the honest practitioners of the *hijab* who she refers to as “normal,” paying her respect to a tradition which she clearly values in her own culture. The values of modesty and the *hijab* are simultaneously affirmed and interrogated between the actor and the audience through this performance interaction.

Another NYAACF female comic who addresses sexuality is Eman, and she does so also in the context of women’s physical modesty. She sets up one of her jokes by asking the audience if they’ve ever imagined what a strip club in the Arab world was like. Then she proceeds to think out loud, theorizing that they are the reverse of American strip clubs, where women start out naked on stage and slowly get dressed in layers of clothing. As she paints this absurd alternate reality, she whispers seductive phrases into the microphone as she mimes putting on layers of clothing.

What does this joke express in terms of social commentary? Clearly it is an absurd fantasy that simply inverts American strip clubs and claims that Arab sexual desire lies in the covering of the body rather than in revealing it. Eman’s expression in this social interaction seems to be aimed solely at entertaining. She establishes a benign relationship between actor and observer, entertainer and audience.

However non-tendentious this joke may seem, I believe it is still a reflection of the comic's impression of her audience's ignorance. She is, in a sense, insulting her audience's intellect by suggesting that they would believe or be entertained by such an absurd scenario. While the content of her expression is aimed at culture, the real target of her commentary is the easily impressed audience whose submissiveness she takes advantage of. Yet due to the interactive framing of the joke, the audience receives an impression that is not insulting but simply entertaining.
While speaking out about sexuality may come easily to some, others may give in to self-censorship when it comes to this topic. In Arab culture, the topic of sexuality is one that is reserved for the private realm and even then, is heavily limited. Women are constantly self-conscious of their conversations surrounding the topic as they are of their conduct in public. Freij asserts in her study of Arab-American female artists that the conventionalized genre of theater affords female stand-up comics the opportunity to “express their sexualized subjectivities in ways that may otherwise be inconceivable in the public realm as Arab Americans” (Freij 222).

Yet comics such as Maria Shehata still opt out of broaching sexuality in their stand-up. She claimed in her interview that although she is aware and vocal about the subject outside of her comedy, she chooses to leave it out of performances due to the lingering fear in the back of her mind that her parents might disapprove. Shehata may be progressive, successful and daring as an Arab-American comic, but it's interesting to note how she still takes her family's judgement into consideration in choosing her material. Evidently, the impressions that she makes on her family (as her audience) and of her family (as their representative) dictate her expressions in the performance interaction. Personal or revealing lines of expression, as in regards to sexuality, are thus censored by the actor in order to save face for herself and her family. She does so out of duty to maintaining family honor and to fulfilling gendered expectations. This demonstrates how social and cultural upbringing can have tremendous influence on Arab-American female comic performance, and it suggests that a personal sense of betrayal may be a contributing factor to comics filtering their rhetorical expressions in a stand-up comedy interaction.
Performing the Female Body

Arab-American female comics are not only defying rhetorical limitations but also physical restrictions imposed by cultural expectations. In Arab society, a woman is expected to maintain physical modesty while in public and carefully conduct herself, especially around strangers. Her behavior is viewed as a direct product of her upbringing and therefore reflects on the family’s respectability and social status. This requirement may include dressing in modest attire, covering the head or body, not being seen alone in male company, or not socially interacting with unrelated males. In many cases these standards are culturally codified and not religious requirements, as many in the West might misunderstand them.

Take, for example, the West's impression of the hijab, or head cover. The misperception is that it is a tool of female oppression imposed on women by patriarchal Arabo-Islamic society. However, hijab in Islam is not compulsory. There are varying interpretations both in the Quran and Sunna (traditions and sayings of the prophet) as to what extent women should cover their bodies to meet standards of modesty. This variation extends to individual persons, families and groups of people within society. Some interpretations require hijab in the presence of strangers, some only with age/religious maturity, and others believe in no requirement at all (Cainkar, Homeland Insecurity 250). This is likely the biggest stereotype that Arab-American females must contend with.

Female Arab-American comics therefore have two sets of physical and behavioral expectations to grapple with as performers: the Arab and the American. On one hand, they must either conform to or defy Arab standards of physical and behavioral modesty.
On the other, they must work twice as hard to correct Western misconceptions before they even begin the dialogue of self-identification. This is a fine line to walk in physical performance of stand-up comedy.

For the most part, the female comics that I observed were in fact modest on stage. While none wore the *hijab*, they all dressed fairly conservatively without revealing too much skin. They generally avoided raunchy or suggestive behaviors with the exception of a few strategic gestures. With such strategic physical self-presentation, the comics made a non-provocative impression on their audience, even when they were rhetorically expressing sexual content during their performance interaction.

There was, of course, plenty of performed innuendo. Some comics incorporated gestures and facial expressions of sexual desire, pleasure and sensual femininity. For example, in the “reverse strip club” joke mentioned earlier, comic Eman performed suggestive behavior, sensually swaying her hips and shoulders and seductively miming a reverse striptease. Such behavior, while shameful by Arab social standards, is admissible on stage because of the sanctioned safety of the performance frame.

The performer is nevertheless vulnerable because, as Joanne Gilbert explains in her vital book *Performing Marginality*, she is subject to the objectification that is inherent in stand-up comedy (138). They are objectified from both sides of the cultural borders which they inhabit. However, what these female comics do is commodify this objectification and use it invertedly in their comedy to comment on it. The most direct example I’ve seen of this is a bit by comic Maria Shehata. She often utilizes this reversal technique in the beginning of her set just after introducing herself. As she relates to the audience her Egyptian heritage, she points out the physical features of her body which
often cause people to mistake her ethnic heritage. She tells them that everyone assumes she is Latina because of her “brown skin, dark hair and big ass.” By doing this, she is actively drawing attention to her body as a physical performance of her ethnic and feminine identity. She simultaneously raises the audience’s awareness of their misconceptions of ethnicity, criticizes the negative objectification of females, and challenges the mainstream images of femininity she is expected to fit.

In addition, Arab-American female comic’s physical performance can be understood as embodiments of their rhetorical personas. These can be completely fabricated physicalities or culturally imprinted habits that only certain audiences might recognize. In the earlier example, Eman parodies the physicality of the sharmouta persona, a totally exaggerated and stereotypical physicalization of a stripper. This type of physicality can be recognized by both Arab and American cultural codes as comically sensual. Meanwhile, Maria Shehata parodies the matriarch persona when she relates the anecdote about her grandmother’s thirteen children, performing stereotypical Arab physical habits such as threatening hand gestures and “death stares” aimed at misbehaving children. These types of behaviors might not be recognized as comical by non-Arab audiences at first, but they are immediately identifiable codes to culturally conditioned Arab audiences, most of whom have likely experienced these physicalities first hand as children.

By taking the stage to perform stand-up comedy, Arab-American female comics are openly displaying and performing their bodies to the public. This physical act along with the rhetorical performance are the two lenses by which comic performance and resistance can be explored. In the following chapter, I will theorize this resistance in an
attempt to understand the power that it affords Arab-American female comics as well as the disadvantages that might hinder the agency in stand-up.
Chapter 3: Theorizing Comic Resistance

Arab-American female comics are just like any other comic: their main goal is to make their audience laugh. There is a power in that objective which I would like to elucidate in this chapter. One need only to look at the phrase “make their audience laugh” to see the subliminal power of stand-up embedded in the language itself. The phrase implies that the audience is forced into laughter by the performer. Thus the comic exercises a certain level of control in the stand-up interaction that calls to attention the multiplicity and diversity of their motives for performance.

There definitely is an ulterior motive to stand-up comedy. Comics do not simply wish to entertain but also to instruct and create dialogue around the subjects that matter to them. Several theorists, from Henri Bergson to Sigmund Freud, have alluded to comedy and wit as moral tools that correct man’s shortcomings, vent repressed hostility, and re-humanize the ridiculed (Morreall 8-18). Thus comedy can be seen as a platform for expressing healthy criticism in a society which leads to reflection upon and eventual (hopeful) resolution of its social ailments. I would like to suggest that stand-up comedy is comic resistance, the stage on which popular resistance can be practiced and social change can be inspired among the masses.

I do believe that the cognitive shift sparked in the audience by a comic extends beyond the limits of the stand-up interaction, just as a stimulating conversation between two people can have lasting effects on the participants' perspectives. Humor philosopher and scholar John Morreall supports this in his analysis of humor as interaction. He theorizes in his book Comic Relief that comedy’s end goal is to bring participants to a
higher frame of thought, saying, "The sudden 'Aha!' of enlightenment is close to the 'Ha-ha!' of getting a joke" (135). He further states that "in playing with thoughts, we develop our rationality, part of which is processing our perceptions, memories and imagined ideas in a way that is free from our here and now, and our individual perspective" (Morreall 66).

Morreall’s concept of cognitive shift corresponds with that of Goffman’s concept of interactive frame. It is the same frame that allows us to see the humorous in the serious and to accept offense as playfulness in a social interaction. The end result is the same: in the negotiation of expressions and impressions, the participants in the social interaction arrive at a higher frame of thought whose permanence extends beyond the limits of the interaction. When something in our mind clicks, our frame of thought shifts into a new perspective that cannot be unseen once it's been discovered. Even if it is forgotten, the next time we are reminded of it through real life experience, the cognitive shift returns to alert us that this is just one of many ways of looking at this experience.

At this point, thought has the potential to translate into action which can send us in the direction of real social, political, and cultural change. From this vantage point, the artist becomes an activist, using the platform for agency that stand-up provides to affect change in society, albeit gradually. This supports the conclusion that the power of the dialectic performance is in challenging the centrality and virility of textual misinformation (institutionalized stereotypes upheld by mainstream status quo and accepted as true). It causes the audience to readjust their conceptions which resulted from reiterated misperceptions that somehow got cemented as “truths” through repetition.

In regards to Arab-Americans, misperceptions are so commonly and maliciously perpetuated that they have become textual “truths.” There is a real urgency among Arab-
Americans to voice their experiences and correct misconceptions because of recent historical events that have exacerbated feelings towards them in the U.S. By criticizing race-based paradigms, Arab-American comics move the mainstream community towards challenging and changing that mentality. The Arab-American comic's audiences learn to think critically by realizing that there cannot be one single truth about a group of people but a multiplicity of narratives that define who they are culturally, politically and socially.

Through the social interaction that is stand-up comedy, Arab-American women benefit themselves and their communities by building solidarity, shifting people's cognitive modes, and freeing themselves and their audience from the shackles of social repression, even if momentarily. It may or may not result in tangible change eventually. However, just the act of expressing resistant ideologies or alternate realities plants a seed of possibility in the mainstream audience.

By freely expressing themselves, female comics in the Arab-American community are actively reshaping modes of cultural production. They are blazing new territory with their distinctly American form of performance, one that Arab female performance scholar Somaya Sabry feel is inviting the old tradition of orality back into the Arab-American identity discourse (Sabry 208-216). Orality, in the Arab tradition, equals influence, and stand-up certainly invites influence over the masses by articulating multiple and simultaneous cultural identities which challenge widely accepted misconceptions, replacing them with re-imagined realities created through self-identification. The dialectic performance helps engage an American society which prioritizes textual “truths” over real human narratives.
Orality invokes traditional, inter-personal interaction and places the comic at the center of the philosophical dialectic circle. She is able to take her audience on a journey through conversation which demonstrates new possibilities of perception. The Arab-American female comic is most successfully subversive when she pins conceptions against perception to demonstrate faults in the cognitive process. Cognitive flexibility is thus the key outcome of stand-up comedy performance. The comic already possesses this frame of thinking and is sharing her observations humorously with her audience in the performance interaction. Because she does this in a comic frame, she disguises serious underpinnings of the conversation as mere entertainment.

An aspect of orality that can be attributed to a comic’s success is its personal nature. Emphasizing personal stories make the comic's jokes and commentary more relatable to the audience regardless of cultural difference by drawing parallels between what is on stage and what is in the audience’s real life. Personalizing jokes is necessary for stand-up comics in order for them to self-criticize or, to use John Limon’s term, “abject” themselves. I would like to suggest that self-criticism is the underhanded method of criticizing the audience while “saving face.” Once a comic successfully makes the audience identify with them, every self-deprecating joke becomes an indirect criticism of the audience themselves. The audience might only recognize it as a direct, self-inflicted attack performed by the comic, but in reality it is a balance of aggression and appeasement.

Thus far, I’ve theorized the sociological power of stand-up comedy performance using the frame of social interaction. This is the ground on which I equate comic resistance with social resistance and activism. The next section will further theorize
comic resistance as a source of power for minorities, specifically examining its advantage and disadvantages to Arab-Americans and females. It will also explore the ways in which comic resistance does or does not prevail when meeting resistance itself.

*Performance as Minority Power*

By now we understand that stand-up comedy veils subversive, critical commentary as entertainment while it attacks institutions, deconstructs stereotypes, and changes dogmas. It makes no attempt at political correctness and in fact almost all comics thrive on offensive put-down jokes which procure laughter at the expense of others. It is this sanctioned aggression which makes stand-up comedy such a potent form of subversive activism, and the reason why it has historically been popular among marginalized minority groups in the United States. I should clarify that “minority” as I will use it in this chapter encompasses every underrepresented group in US society that mainstream American culture defines as Other. “Marginal” is the term I choose to use to refer to the state of inhabiting the borderland between the mainstream and the Other.

Minority groups enjoy a special agency in stand-up comedy which allows them to freely express marginality within the hegemonic American culture. American stand-up comedy in its modern dialectic form was first born out of the Jewish-American community and found its way into other minority groups because comedy provides the safe space for expression of marginal identity (Daube 59). In this space, the roles of powerful and powerless are temporarily reversed so that by performing their marginality, minority comics are empowering themselves as the shapers of the discourse of difference. Stand-up comedy turns the hegemonic norms upside down and places the microphone literally and figuratively in the hands of the repressed minority. This, of course, comes at
the expense of the powerful majority, who become the butt of jokes and surrender their superiority to the comic performer.

The stealth of stand-up comedy’s subversive resistance is due to the fact that it is often performed in a self-reflective way that indirectly criticizes dominant popular culture under the guise of self-deprecation. So it is only natural that underrepresented minority groups find agency within the form. It turns oppression or repression into expression. The common use of self-deprecatory jokes is a safe vessel for criticism because it is sanctioned social abuse. From the perspective of social interaction, self-deprecation is effective because only the self has license to abuse the self (Goffman, *Interaction Ritual* 32). It is sanctioned, therefore, it is an acceptable form of social resistance. Audiences find self-deprecating humor inherently and pathetically funny, paying less attention to its offensive aggression against dominant culture.

However, as Gilbert explains in *Performing Marginality*, the reasons why something is funny is not as important as the questions it raises about who is truly in control of the discourse and who the real butt of the joke is in its subversive commentary (Gilbert xi). Is the comic the main actor controlling the discourse? Or is it the audience controlling the actor by virtue of its response? Certainly the comic has a significant advantage with a microphone in hand, but is she not manipulating her performance to cater to her particular audience?

The sociological frame of analysis helps us understand the stand-up performance as a power play. The goal of the game is to influence the other's disposition by employing various self-presentation strategies, such as ingratiating, intimidation or supplication (Gilbert 128-131). Techniques such as self-deprecation, for example, have the advantage
of "saving face" for the audience, whose appeasement allows the comic to continue delivering her subversive comedy without interruption. On the other hand, self-deprecation also has a parallel disadvantage, which is the risk of reinforcing instead of correcting misconceptions. The key difference between the two outcomes is in striking an apparent balance of power between comic and audience, while maintaining control of the performance and its discourse.

Power over discourse is at the center of stand-up comedy’s popularity among minority groups. At first, it began as a defensive strategy to resist misrepresentation. It later transformed into a tool for acculturation into mainstream American society. Consider, for example, how Richard Pryor and his successors were catalysts for African-American acculturation in the 1970s and 80s. In A Rabbi and a Sheikh Walk into a Bar…, performance scholar Richard Tabor suggests that

Arab American stand-up comedy serves as an example of acculturation more closely akin to African American stand-up comedy and American society. Pryor made African American life more accessible to all Americans via his performances, and Arab American stand-up comedy did the same for Arab Americans. Many Americans were unfamiliar with Arab American culture, and Arab American stand-up comedy was a way to bridge that cultural gap (17).

Stand-up in this way has the power to break down misconceptions and blaze channels of understanding between hegemonic society and the Othered minority.

This reversal of power not only serves the purpose of a minority’s acculturation, but also, in a twisted way, of vengeance over their marginalization by hegemonic culture. "By 'performing' their marginality, social outcasts call attention to their subordinate status; by commodifying this performance, they ensure that the dominant culture literally pays a price for this disparity" (Gilbert xi). The reversal of power can thus be viewed as
advantaging the minority group both socially and economically, helping them capitalize on culture and profit simultaneously.

However, within the margins there exist many degrees of marginalization. Arab-American comics prior to 9/11 experienced a level of what Gilbert refers to as rhetorical marginality, which is the challenge of expressing the marginal voice within the mainstream while physically “passing” as mainstream (Gilbert 6). In a field that is dominated by men, the challenges that Arab-American female comics face are twofold: Arab identity and female identity. The challenges are of both rhetorical and sociological marginality, a far more apparent and rigid disadvantage. It’s physically apparent in the female body and socially rigid in the accepted gendered behavior expected of women in Arab (or American) culture. In the next section, I will explore the various levels of marginalization that are resisted by Arab-American female comics.

Dis/Advantages for Arab-Americans

While Arab-American comics enjoyed careers in comedy prior to 9/11, few of them performed under the Arab label. Most of them performed mainstream American comedy, hardly bringing issues of identity or Arab culture into question. This was the case for two reasons: 1) they mostly "passed" for white, and 2) there was a lack of cohesiveness about Arab-American identity. Due to the diversity of the Arab people (religiously, nationally and linguistically, for example) and the diversity of Arab-Americans' immigrant experiences, there was little common ground to stand on and be represented. However, during the 1990s, political issues such as the Gulf War and Palestinian-Israeli peace talks gave Arab-Americans a unifying cause to rally behind.
This quickly developed into a social and cultural banner under which they could find collective identification.

The tragedy of 9/11 increased attention on Arabs and brought the "invisible" Arab-American community into the spotlight. Louise Cainkar argues in *Homeland Insecurity* that the tragic event only solidified the pre-existing views already held on Arabs and Muslims in the US which, as other scholars support, were perpetuated in American news media, print, and entertainment (Cainkar 65; *Reel Bad*). These strongly held misconceptions, which often conflated “Arab” and “Muslim” labels, became harder to shake off because of the intensified hostility of public attitudes towards Arabs. As a result of this increased hostility, Arab-Americans became “symbolic foreigners” after 9/11 because the public viewed their cultural values as oppositional and threatening to “American way of life” (Cainkar, *Homeland* 237). This put pressure on Arab-Americans to at once self-define and distance themselves from the demonized conception of “Arab” already prevalent in American mainstream thought.

While 9/11 spiked the urgency for crystallizing Arab identity, it also galvanized Arab-American comics to perform as Arab-Americans for the first time, and this brought about the more cohesive performance movement in existence today. Later, with the election of Barack Obama in 2008, the discourse surrounding Islam and Arabs was exacerbated again when the president’s alleged Muslim identity became an accusation against him and the label became one of denigration. This continued the momentum of the comedy movement into the current decade.

The undeniable disadvantage to the minority group is that negative attention further damaged public perceptions of Muslims and Arabs among the majority of
Americans. It aggravated the hostility felt towards Arabs already built on cultural Othering, political exclusion and social denigration. In terms of comedy, this meant that performing Arab identity became a dangerous tightrope walk. Arab-American comics have to honestly represent themselves and at the same time contradict the mainstream “truths” which demonize them. It’s difficult to do so without offending the American public and mainstream culture in some way or another, especially considering stand-up’s aggressive form and the sensitivity of mainstream opinion that is exacerbated by the media. This disadvantages Arab-American comics by putting them at a high risk of further antagonizing the public towards them.

But this increased attention is also, in my view, an advantage for Arab-Americans. It inspired as much curiosity about Arabs as it did hostility, and this gave Arab-American comics a powerful advantage. As cultural critics and reporters, Arab comics' jokes about their marginality and current political events now enjoy added strength and legitimacy. Like many minorities before them, Arab comics got the opportunity to utilize their minority status and mine it for laughs. As mentioned earlier, Tabor compares this opportune historical moment to that which African-Americans had following the Civil Rights Movement. Richard Pryor, the father of African-American stand-up, seized that chance to fulfill the need for expression and paved the way for comics like Eddie Murphy, Whoopi Goldberg, and Chris Rock to shift black culture from the margins to the mainstream. The same is being done today by comics like Dean Obeidallah, Maysoon Zayid, and Ahmed Ahmed, who are utilizing their opportune historical moment to change the negative discourse surrounding Arabs and make Arab culture more accessible to the American mainstream. This follows the cycle of defense and acculturation which will
eventually humanize the minority in the eyes of hegemonic society and stop Arab-Americans from being Othered as un-American.

Thanks to the comic interactive frame, volatile issues such as race, ethnicity, politics and the like can still be turned upside down and laughed at. No matter what the reason is for the audience’s laughter, whether it be agreeable or disagreeable, the important thing to note is that the efficacy of stand-up is in its power to allow the mind to triumph over psychological repression caused by social or political conditioning without creating conflict. There is a safety advantage in the frame of a stand-up comedy performance that excuses and masks any hostility resulting from abjection on either side of the dialogue.

In the case of Arab-American comedy, an interactive and progressive dialogue may be more possible on stage than off. As comparative literature scholar Margaret Litvin suggests, “the expanded American market for Arab-themed performance is a positive development. It has created new spaces in which Arab artists and American audience members can have conversations enabled and framed but not directly mediated by journalistic and academic US-based ‘experts’ on the Middle East” (Litvin 161). Arabs are the silenced minority in mainstream American culture, demonized by the media in the minds of many Americans. Stand-up offers a platform for Arab-American comics to tell it like it is in a thought-provoking manner and self-represent to the American public.

Arab-American comics have certainly taken advantage of their unique historical position to make their voices heard. Since 2003, the New York Arab-American Comedy Festival has proven to be a success story, garnering numerous positive media stories on Arab-Americans and establishing itself as the safe space in which artists and audiences
alike can celebrate Arab identity (*New York*). Comic Maria Shehata says in her interview that what draws her to the festival is the excitement of being around and performing with other Arab artists (“Maria Shehata”). The festival has bettered the careers of numerous comics and actors by giving them exposure and a supportive sense of community. Meanwhile, it continues to build a more positive image for Arab-Americans in the mainstream media.

*Dis/Advantages for Women*

Stand-up comedy provides a platform for the powerless to voice their urgent observations and self-identify. This much we already have established. However, what is different about Arab-American *female* performance of comedy? Performance scholar Somaya Sabry points to the significance of the form of stand-up and the comedic monologue among Arab-American female comics as a vehicle of agency that revives the oral tradition of the *hakawati*, or storyteller (Sabry 211). This traditional social figure would spin stories for intimate audiences in coffee-shops, and similarly the stand-up comic usually narrates her own stories and observations to audiences in comedy clubs.

The key concept in Sabry's comparison is the common thread of the narrative form. The narratives shared by Arab-American female comics reflect the diversity of their identities within the margins in which they exist. Arab-American female comics are doubly marginalized: first culturally as Arab-American minorities and second socially as females. They contend with double the disadvantages but, I would argue, also enjoy twice the advantages of marginal performance.

As Nadine Naber explains in her article “Arab American Femininities,” the burden of cultural preservation in Arab-American communities is disproportionately
The deeply entrenched and idealized concept of a proper Arab woman or “good Arab girl” is often juxtaposed in the minds of the community with the image of the “bad American(-ized) whore” (“Arab American Femininities” 88). These oppositional gender constructs create multiple challenges for female comics trying to assert their identity both within and outside their Arab-American communities. While being perfectly positioned between two cultures to offer a unique comedic perspective, they rhetorically and sociologically have to walk a fine line in performance so as not to upset the progressive discourse they are hoping to create.

On one hand, Arab-American female comics risk antagonizing non-Arab audiences and this risk is twofold. First, they challenge mainstream conceptions of the victimized Arab woman and disprove the stereotype of oppression through their rhetorical and physical performance. An audience that is too willing to believe this misconception feels altruistic in their sympathy for Arab women, performers especially. Therefore, an assertive performance of Arab-American female identity that is unlike their expectation unseats the mainstream audience from their altruistic throne. This may cause them to disregard her self-defined identity as “defensive” or discredit it as fabricated propaganda because their accepted reality is under attack.

Second, highlighting her Arab identity and contrasting it with her American one can give the impression that she is un-American, or more Other than American. This further distances the comic culturally from the mainstream audience and adds to her marginalization rather than bridging it. The comic is thus disadvantaged because she has to overcome not just the stereotypes themselves but also a potentially unreceptive or unaccepting audience.
On the other hand, Arab-American female comics run the risk of antagonizing Arab audiences as well with their performance. They risk ostracization by highlighting their American identity at the expense of their Arab one, voicing values or opinions that don’t conform to Arab culture. Many of these comics utilize self-reflective or self-deprecating jokes for social commentary. They simply cannot be critically honest about their cultural identity and at the same time appease Arab audiences by fulfilling idealized cultural concepts of womanhood. A comic’s goal is to highlight difference and subvert the norm, not reinforce unrealistic expectations and gender constructs.

In addition, a woman’s choice to become a comic among the Arab-American community is a difficult one for several reasons. For one, it is unconventional and will therefore likely be faced with disapproval from family and community. In addition, on a personal level, it signifies a commitment to a lifestyle that requires much sacrifice on behalf of the performer, sacrifice which probably jeopardizes what aspirations she may have for a family life. The career demands that the comic be unattached, able to tour for performances and enjoy a freedom that steers them away from traditional expectations of marriage. For these reasons, in addition to those previously mentioned, the Arab-American female comic may find that Arab audiences are just as unreceptive to her comedy as mainstream American ones.

Consequently, Arab-American female comics are doubly disadvantaged by Arab and non-Arab audiences on rhetorical as well as sociological grounds. However, each disadvantage gives the comic a unique edge so that in being doubly marginalized she is also doubly empowered through performance. The first advantage is that Arab-American female comic performances enjoy an added strength which allows them to highlight and
fight sexual and gender inequality. The very fact that they perform their physical, rhetorical and intellectual identity on stage means that they are in a position of control which is not afforded them by society—whether Arab, American or both. Therefore what they have to say while in the spotlight will resonate loudly due to the attention they otherwise would not garner.

Through the stand-up comedy form, Arab-American female comics have the power to defy expectations and challenge the status quo of audiences from both the dominant American culture and their own Arab culture. Examining the comics’ performances in the frame of social interaction, we can understand their content not as packaged entertainment ready for consumption, but as an active negotiation of perceived and conceived reality between the participants engaged in the exchange. Both the audience and the comic are expressive actors and impressed-upon audience. The cues they pick up from each other determine the direction of the performance just as social cues shape a face-to-face conversation. Therefore, there is an inherent degree of influence on both sides of the exchange.

However, the comic arguably has more influence due to her spatial and social positioning. For instance, she physically towers over her audience. Limon writes that the comic “works from above [her] audience,” her powerful position allowing her to subject her seated audience to her aggression (26). Meanwhile, she is in fact the seated one from a social standpoint, in the sense that she is the individual versus the collective, the minority versus the majority, the underrepresented female versus the overrepresented male. This power reversal allowed by the interactive framing of the stand-up performance gives the comic’s expressions and impressions an added influence, making her critical
commentary more subversive to the status quo, especially when it surrounds issues of marginality.

Thus, Arab-American female comic performances can be viewed as performative activism. First, they inadvertently advance the feminist cause by creating and shaping a dialogue from a position of power not afforded to women in conventional social interaction and discourse. They are expressing the “self as woman” directly without submitting to the mainstream “male” perspective. So instead of being defined, women self-define through interaction. Furthermore, these comics advance the agency of Arab-American women in particular. By expressing and impressing Arab-American female identity as distinct and independent of a homogenized “Arab-American” conception, they create a social space which that identity can occupy on its own, uninfluenced by either mainstream American or intra-ethnic Arab misconception.

This leads to the second activist advantage to Arab-American female comedic performance: solidarity. By performing subversive and empowering comedy, they are building women's solidarity, not just among themselves but even among females across cultural lines. Arab-American feminists, according to Middle East diaspora expert Sarah Gaultieri, are among the greatest advocates within the community of identification with other people of color with whom they share the experience of marginalization and objectification by mainstream American culture (Jamal, Race and AA 167). In addition, they are similarly subjugated to idealized cultural expectations of female identity within their respective communities.

Like other female comics of color, Arab-American female comics are standing up to perform resistance to these expectations. In doing so, they inherently advance the
feminist cause and implore audiences to re-examine power relations and gender inequality in addition to misconceptions about their ethnic identity. This is the third advantage of their performance. By comically performing marginal identity, they make their version of reality accessible to the audience and aggressively insert their observations and objections into the discourse surrounding their marginality or difference. Their aggression is subversive even just by virtue of the awareness and questions it raises about sexual and gender inequality. The cognitive shift they create through their performance interaction has the advantage of inspiring feminist audiences (both men and women) to translate their "Aha!" moment into activism outside the liminal confines of the performance.

As we can see, Arab-American female comics enjoy advantages to their performance beyond those of simply addressing cultural marginality and mainstream misconceptions. However, the challenge remains in walking the fine line of aggression and appeasement in their comedy. The strategies employed by doubly marginalized ethnic female comics must at once confront and accommodate the dominant discourse. It is essential that they recognize their performance as a two-way social interaction and use its potential to promote alternative viewpoints. Should they choose to simply confront the mainstream discourse, they displace themselves from the potential conversation and risk not making an impression at all through the interactive performance. On the other hand, should they choose to only accommodate the mainstream discourse, they place themselves in the position of the powerless and only perpetuate the silencing of women by the status quo.
Meeting Resistance with Resistance

Not surprisingly, female performers find resistance, whether among Arab or non-Arab audiences, to the very idea of a female comic. Historically, women have been the unfunny ones because they were always subjects of or audience to a joke and not the creators of them (Gilbert 26-27). In a recent comedy documentary, comic Bonnie McFarlane explores the stereotype claiming that women are not funny by interviewing countless American comics, comedy club owners, and random audience members. Nearly every male comic interviewed stated that female comics are not funny, and nearly every female comic interviewed asserted that this view is ingrained in American mainstream opinion and that they feel its repercussions as working professionals in a highly competitive and male-dominated field.

The conclusion that Women Aren’t Funny seems to come to is that the odds are stacked against women in several ways, including the need to balance motherhood with a career, the disrespect and objectification they face, and the lack of support and demand from audiences. Adding to that list the challenge presented by cultural marginalization, we find Arab-American female comics facing severe resistance. However, it’s clear that regardless of ethnicity, women are subject to many of the same gendered social expectations which resist them as comics.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, gender expectations among Arab-Americans generally correspond to the separation of social spaces (public/private) and a woman’s conduct within those spaces (Naber, Arab America 82). Arab women’s sense of self-hood is expected to come from the family, and her priorities toward family precede those of personal or career goals. In addition, cultural preservation in the Arab-American
community is sought through female sexual purity and the maintenance of those traditional gender roles, which places the burden disproportionately on the shoulders of females.

Arab-American female comics resist these expectations in a single sweep. They are public performers who display their bodies and speak their minds (loudly) with little to no sensitivity to rhetorical or physical modesty. The community gossip and social stigmatization which would normally follow such public social behavior does not repel female comics from expressing their identities freely, and as such, their disregard for *kalam el nas* (the talk of the people) is essential to their ability to practice their craft. These women resist the public’s own resistance by carving out a space for themselves on the stand-up comedy stage.

Resistance to Arab-American female comics does not necessarily come from men but the very women they aim to represent. This is not limited to Arab women, as Iranian-American comic Negin Farsad explains in the documentary *The Muslims Are Coming!* In the documentary, which features a diverse group of Muslim comics, we witness first hand a group of women in *hijab* walking out on one of Negin’s performances when she starts to joke about her sexual practices and comment about how difficult it is to talk about with her traditional mother. “Does it hurt my feelings? Absolutely! You don’t know how that feels. That feels awful,” she comments in a follow-up interview (*Muslims Are Coming!*). It becomes clear that she has received this response before, particularly from the subset of the community whose support and solidarity she most desires. However, as the documentary evidences, there is also a subset of female audiences who support this type of outspoken performance and commend Negin on her courage. There is clearly a rift
among female audiences when it comes to the limits of sensitivity regarding the topics of female sexuality in stand-up comedy.

In addition to female comics finding resistance to their comedy, they also find resistance to their visibility. They rarely headline shows at comedy clubs and receive far less media coverage than their male counterparts. Not to mention, there simply are much fewer women than men performing comedy full time which further explains the disparity in mainstream representation. This disparity is especially pronounced when examining the Arab-American pool of comics. Take for example the 2014 New York Arab-American Comedy Festival, which ran five shows over three consecutive nights at Gotham Comedy Club in New York. Of the 24 performers that took to the stage that weekend, 7 were female and 17 were male. Not only was the ratio of females to males low (less than a third), but the ratio of performances was even lower. The female comics totaled 15 performances while the male comics totaled 39, which means that the female comics averaged only two performances each that weekend while the male comics averaged three performances each. Therefore, in addition to being fewer in number, the women were given less stage time.

Many variables factor into the lack of visibility, from the dispositions of club managers to ticket sales. It’s therefore difficult to assess exactly why female comics in general and Arab-American female comics in particular are not given more stage time. This question is not for this study to answer. However, I suspect that the reasons are just as much economic as they are social. In the end, the number of female performers is not as important as their social commentary and the efficacy of their comic resistance.
As long as they are being heard, in person, through the media, or by self-broadcasting online, Arab-American female comics are resisting censorship as well as judgement by both sides of their hyphenated identity. When asked about performing as an Arab-American, comic Maria Shehata said, “I try not to censor too much, because in the end I’d like them to know and understand who I am, rather than being on my best behavior as not to offend anyone. Growth comes from stepping outside of our comfort zone” (“Maria Shehata”). The “them” in this statement clearly encompasses both non-Arab and Arab-American audiences, and her pursuit of honesty is the noblest goal a comic can aspire to.
Conclusion

To reiterate, the Arab-American stand-up comedy movement grew out of a pressing need for the community to self-identify and express its identity in a way that is accessible to popular American audiences. As the events of 9/11 thrust the “invisible” minority into the spotlight, Arab-American comedians combated anti-Arab hostility in the only way they knew how—by laughing at it. They took advantage of the opportune historical moment to turn negative ignorance into positive (humorous) enlightenment.

The movement coalesced in large part through the establishment of the annual New York Arab-American Comedy Festival and was amplified by consequent film and television exposure that it garnered the comics. It began the long and arduous process of mainstreaming Arab-American culture, continuing the cycle of comedic acculturation that benefitted other minority groups in the previous century. While comics performing as Arab-Americans for the first time faced some resistance, their expressions of marginal identity were still able to reach a wide American audience and insert Arab-American voices directly into the public dialogue without mediation.

Within those margins, Arab-American female comics in particular face twice the resistance, both from the mainstream and the margins. On the one hand, their performances of identity subversively challenge Arab cultural norms. Concern over the behavior of women in the public realm is prevalent across the board in Arab culture, regardless of religious, class or social difference (Cainkar, “Palestinian” 94-95, 98-99). Arab women, and by extension Arab-American women, are expected to behave in a subdued manner while in public and are expected to maintain physical modesty. Women who defy these standards are subject to scrutiny and judged as having “loose morals” by
the community. As a result, they are often ostracized and deemed unmarriageable by community standards.

Throughout this thesis, exploration of the implications of these socio-cultural expectations point to the existence of internalized pressures felt by Arab-American female comics to censor themselves. Their performance is influenced by these expectations which must be fulfilled in order for them to be recognized and accepted by their family and community. It is evident by interviews and performance choices that family and community perceptions carry a heavy weight and are therefore taken into serious consideration by comics when determining the strategies and boundaries of their critiques.

Through their performances, both physically and verbally, Arab-American female comics subvert not only the patriarchal norms and stable values of the culture which they represent but also that within which they perform, the hegemonic host culture. From the perspective of mainstream American society, female comics are Othered both as Arab and as female, which means their performances contend against considerably greater public misconceptions. This makes it more challenging for female Arab-American comics to deliver social critique and combat stereotypes effectively. As doubly marginalized individuals, they must carefully toe the line between appeasing and resisting mainstream audiences, and this conclusion further supports the hypothesis of self-censorship.

Therefore, Arab-American female comics are doubly disadvantaged. They are under pressure to simultaneously self-identity and self-censor. Meanwhile, they must remain true to the form of stand-up and “tell it like it is” without apology. This
combination is, by my analysis, the double edged sword of comic resistance whose social and political benefit Arab-American female comics must utilize in this historical window of opportunity.

The advantage they have is this: the influence of stand-up comedy’s critique extends beyond the liminal boundaries of a performance. Once the status quo is threatened or put down, even in the social interaction frame of joking, it cannot be undone. Arab-American comedy in current times is threatening because it is poking fun at- and seriously critiquing- the deep-seated traditions of a culture transplanted into a new, often hostile, environment which rejects that minority group as backwards and un-American. Women’s humor makes it additionally threatening because its subversiveness merges cultural criticism with gender politics, an equally sensitive issue in both the dominant and marginal cultures. The advantage, then, is in the comic's use of the influential power of that threat to inspire or set into motion her activist agenda.

The only way for Arab-American female comics to foster agency and progressively influence mainstream American culture is continue to empower themselves through comic resistance. Comic resistance is both a concept and a phenomenon by which marginalized performers can surpass censorship as well as censure. When actively pursued as a goal, it helps them overcome the personal inhibitions which cause them to self-censor as well as the external obstacles which limit their reach and visibility. In the end, the opportunity as well as the challenge in combating misconceptions lies within each individual comic and her willingness to push herself while pushing the envelope.

Stand-up comedy, that aggressive yet deceptively innocent performance form, is the greatest tool of comic resistance. It does not magically or radically change the lived
reality of its performers and audience. Performing jokes with serious social critique does not directly or immediately translate to political action. It is not the function of stand-up comedy. However, it definitely is a form of popular activism. As Morreall asserts, the temporary function of comedy is to cognitively and practically disengage the audience while helping create a cognitive shift that increases the flexibility of perception and critical thought (101). At the very least, comedy prepares its audience to question themselves, their society and their role in shaping the status quo. The realization that they are active participants in the social process and in shaping mainstream discourse is the best take-away that an audience can get from a stand-up performance.

In a Boalian sense, the subversion of a stand-up comedy performance is a rehearsal of revolution achieved through steady resistance. Thus, comic resistance via stand-up comedy creates a ripple effect that may gradually transform into an ideological or cultural shift. In the case of Arab-American female comics, the journey of those steady waves is twice as long because they are doubly marginalized members of American society. There does not need to be a major revolt resulting from Arab-American female comedy, but a gradual questioning which will evolve into a new lived reality for Arab-American women and a more positive outlook on Arabs from mainstream America.

I wonder what’s next for Arab-American female comics. How can the concept of comic resistance help them advance their position in society? The answer is sustainability. Now that they have established their distinct brand of Arab-American comedy, these comics can continue to hone their craft in order to grow their influence. It is necessary at this crucial historical point to work to remain visible and build solidarity, both intra- and inter-culturally, as these comics are more effective as a group than as individuals. This is
just one of the lessons Arab-American comics can learn from marginalized performers who came before them.

Female Arab-American comics should ride the wave of the historical stand-up comedy cycle and maximize their efficacy as cultural interlocutors poised at the intersections of hugely different worlds and identities. As minority comics before them have done, they must fight their way into mainstream media and let their voices be an integral part of the discourse surrounding Arab-Americans. Increased coverage, such as documentary films, television appearances and tours, that highlights the female wing of Arab-American comedy is lacking and would greatly benefit this particular subset of comics. In addition, self-broadcasting through social media outlets is a relatively new and highly effective strategy whose advantage was not available to groups that came before them in the previous century. Anything that could widen their reach would make Arab-American female comics instrumental agents in shaping mainstream American culture.

Even within the Arab-American community itself, female comics have the potential power to determine the future of the culture. For example, returning to the NYAACF platform and championing more performance opportunities for women would help gain visibility within the Arab-American community. Perhaps something along the lines of a “Ladies’ Night” of comedy at the festival would succeed in highlighting their unique perspectives and help foster community and audience support for the female brand of Arab-American comedy. The possibilities of success for these women are greater now than ever given the opportune historical context in which they perform.

That’s not to say that resistance against these comics will not continue. However, that’s the inherent nature of performing subversive or even, at the risk of essentializing it,
different comedy. Arab-American female comics take up the cause of comic resistance whether they intend to or not, because what they stand up for in stand-up comedy is the freedom to speak honestly and without fear or conflict. Comedy in marginal groups is ultimately about making a funny statement about the painful truth and not apologizing for it. By continuing to perform, these women are slowly but surely giving life to a revolution that will alter perceptions across the United States and even across the world.
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