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# THE UNMENTIONABLE: VERBAL TABOO AND THE MORAL LIFE OF LANGUAGE

## **On the Uses of Obscenity in Live Stand-Up Comedy**

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### **Abstract**

*This essay explores the use of swear words in stand-up comedy. Employing examples from the performances of two comedians who work the Midwest regional comedy club circuit, I analyze the non-referential pragmatic functions served by employing the register of dirty words. I critique flat-footed readings of the comedic use of obscenity, including that which informs recent Supreme Court censorship rulings, and argue instead for recognition of the communicative artistry displayed in such work. [Keywords: Stand-up comedy, obscenity, censorship, live performance, American working-class culture]*

I do say the word *fuck* a lot, just to make a point, because that's my color red. And if I didn't have the color red then my comedy would be very black and white. And that fuckin' sucks!

*Kristin Key, Comedian*

I am a clean comedian everybody. I have a little bit of language. I hope that doesn't offend you. And if it does, fuck off I guess.

*Stewart Huff, Comedian*

## **Introduction**

This essay explores the use of dirty words in live stand-up comedy. I focus on the wide range of things that swear words do and accomplish in the work of two particular comics, Mr. Stewart Huff and Ms. Kristin Key. My analysis grows out of a larger ethnographic study of *road comedy*, and of those professional comedians who earn their livelihood playing the comedy club circuit across the US. I conduct fieldwork primarily in the Midwest and South-Central states, with a special focus on Kentuckiana, a Central States region spanning northern Kentucky and southern Indiana, where I live and work.

By using swear words in consistently idiomatic, non-denotational, and non-referential ways—for example, using the idiom “holy shit!” to refer not to the excrement of a deity, but rather to express the intensity of the speaker’s own experience of awe, fear, or any other such wonderment—acts such as those I document here provide nightly refutations of what Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, writing for the court in *FCC (Federal Communications Commission) v. Fox Television Stations 2009*, has ruled impossible: to use words like *fuck* and *shit* to do something other than evoke sexual or excretory images.<sup>1</sup>

In keeping with the editors and other contributors to this volume, I see such proscriptions on language use as quite frequently proving inadvertently productive. Not only does the FCC ban on obscenity on the airwaves produce a special class of words by granting them a special, (il)legal status, but it intensifies the performative power of these prohibited utterances: Swear words “count” all the more as heightened, transgressive speech acts in direct proportion to the extent to which they are cordoned off as taboo. That is, such proscriptive action, by the FCC and others, helps make the register transgressive, and thereby attractive to the naughty streak in comics and audiences alike. And here the social life of bad words begins. As this transgressive register becomes a commonplace, “expected” occurrence on the regional stand-up circuit (for a range of reasons both historical, such as that the greats Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor, and George Carlin used it to such powerful effect and acclaim, and pragmatic, such as that it keys intimacy, informality, and accessibility, as I discuss further below), so comics may now be differentiated in terms of how they orient toward this expectation to use bad

language. “Hacks” are those who opt for “dick jokes,” using bad words in ways that *continue* to exploit their referential meanings, while self-styled wordsmiths such as Huff and Key instead exploit these resources for a range of primarily non-referential indexical effects, as in *holy shit!* the aforementioned use of signs to express heightened speaker-affect. A further effect of freeing us from the ploddingly referential is that such non-denotational usage opens up the many poetic pleasures of word-play. Armed with these non-standard signs, comics enlist everything from pun to parable to bring audiences with them into the wilder reaches of their comedic imaginations.

Aided by illustrations from live and recorded performances, I show how the comics’ idiomatic and non-denotational use of swear words helps create a mutually enjoyable, intimate experience for both lay audiences and the road comedy community—that inner circle of bookers, club owners, other standup comics and their friends—who together make the experience of attending local live stand-up so different from that of accessing a nationally marketed and commercially sponsored broadcast show.

### **To Tell, or Not to Tell, “Dick Jokes”**

The road comic’s primary job consists of entertaining audiences who go to a live show expecting a good time. A successful comedian gains the audience’s confidence by quickly demonstrating that he or she can handle the spotlight and deliver the funny, in a register and style that is both accessible and convincing to a roomful of strangers whose tastes and predilections may vary wildly. That is, a comedy club crowd expects to be verbally tickled by original material, and sufficiently surprised, delighted even, into laughing at the comic’s act.

How do road comics navigate this simultaneous call for creative originality and broad accessibility in the context of a 21-and-over venue where many in the audience are likely to be drunk? The register of dirty words, I suggest, plays a large part in orienting audiences to the kind of playful communicative relationship that constitutes live stand-up comedy. This exploitation of dirty words is intimately linked to the fact that the majority of performance venues on the comedy club circuit are also bars, in which one rightly expects to encounter looser-than-usual social behavior, linguistic expressivity included. A bar or a nightclub is precisely the place for such marked language and behavior. Mary Douglas’s (1966) enduring insight that dirt is “matter out of place” clarifies my point: in a bar, dirty language is not out of place at all;

in a bar uttering such words is dirt where dirt belongs. Audiences attending live stand-up in such night spots expect to hear speech onstage that would be otherwise, and elsewhere, unmentionable, and road comics know this.

The easy way for a comic to meet such expectations—and here I employ a phrase commonly used in the business itself—is to tell “dick jokes.” The phrase refers metonymically to a whole category of sex jokes in which “dirty” words are used to refer directly to “dirty” body parts (tits, ass, dick) as well as to acts and sexual functions: “fuck” refers to copulation, “suck” denotes blow jobs, etc. In general, one hears many such jokes on the stand-up stage.<sup>2</sup> Among insiders, comics who tell dick jokes are considered hacks, and the laughs they raise cheap. The self-respecting road comic tries to come up with original material that not only audiences but also their peers—those with whom they work and those who book their work—will appreciate. Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, and Richard Pryor are the shared reference points and touchstones here, each recognized as a creative comic genius who used taboo language to critical effect. Collectively they, along with others less oft-cited in recent literature on stand-up, changed the tenor of what was, and is now, possible on the American stand-up stage since the 1960s and 1970s (Zoglin 2008, Lewis 2006, Nachman 2004, Boskin 1997).

In the local club context, those who now choose to avoid vulgarity had better have a good strategy for dealing with any potential audience disappointment that may ensue or else pay for it in a chilly reception throughout the night. It matters, of course, what kind of crowd one has for any given show. A common *sotto voce* one-line exchange between comics, as they shake hands while crossing the stage to cede or take the mike, is “How drunk are they?”<sup>3</sup> Drunk audiences are generally much less discerning, and more prone to unpredictable outbursts, than sober audiences.<sup>4</sup>

In the stand-up business, “dirty” and “clean” are treated as polar opposites. Swearing is the difference between the two, and bookings are based on the distinction. Club owners, event sponsors, and media executives let comics know, usually through bookers or agents, whether they will hire someone who works blue or whether they are only interested in those who will refrain from uttering obscenities.

Stewart Huff, one of the comics whose work I consider here, finds the binary itself bogus: a “clean comic” can make the most vulgar of gestures, can gyrate, parry, and thrust all he wants with impunity, yet if he whispers a swear word even reverentially he’s off the list of TV-ready primetime comics. That this is unjust *and* ridiculous is a matter of some principle to Huff, with

real consequences for his professional life. One of his main bookers nags him about losing the language, promising him so many more gigs: “if you would just work clean...”, and higher-paying ones at that, as these different *kinds* of gigs include corporate affairs, cruise ships, and Christian rallies. Huff’s principled retort is his repeated, passionate use of obscenity in performances like those I detail below, in which he rarely suggests sex, but avidly embraces language in all its potency.

Kristin Key, the other comic whose work I consider here, has an equally strong sense that swear words are critical to giving her onstage speech the right rhythms and cadences to punctuate her points, and to convey her own sensibilities to the audience. She knows that her stage persona is not “nice” in the family-friendly way that has proven so strategically successful for those female comics who have recently made it big on television with their own daytime talk shows, including Ellen DeGeneres and Rosie O’Donnell. Key foregoes the nice girl she is offstage to explore the bossy bitch that the club circuit frees her to be onstage, and cussing is a big part of creating that liberated character.

Concern over the clean/dirty distinction holds the power it does in the world of road comedy precisely because a framing condition of the genre is that comedic speech *will* deviate from the norms and standards of other forms of public speech.<sup>5</sup> As a live audience on this circuit, we hope that a comic’s act will carry us, laughing, beyond polite formality and into the idiosyncratic realities of adult life, conveyed as they are through speech that is markedly self-referential and exaggeratedly frank, and often intimate to the point of being confessional. Indeed, stand-up is not so much public speech as it is talk. Though it may be “heavily one-sided,” it is nevertheless a dialogic form “that allows for reaction, participation, and engagement on the part of those to whom the stand-up comedian is speaking” (Brodie 2009:4). The genre fundamentally requires an audience; all broadcasts and recordings of stand-up comedy, without exception, are made in front of a live audience (Brodie 2009).

The tone of stand-up talk too is generally as direct as that of any face-to-face talk, with comics speaking in the first person to an audience they address in the second person. Such choices are motivated and utterly appropriate; as Karin Barber describes the effect, “Discourse in the first and second persons [...] tends to evoke a response from the hearer, sucking the discourse into the here-and-now” (Barber 2003:326). It is in this communicative context that comics share their shame, embarrassment

and failures, as well as their attempts at cleverness. To such discourse they add all they communicate through use of several of the other social codes that speak through behavior—dress, posture, gesture, spatial organization—which they frequently mix up in playfully inconsistent ways that add to that sense of *informality* born of code inconsistency (Irvine 1979:777). For example, they stand on stage at a microphone, positioned as the person in charge of the show, yet they wear markedly casual attire, clothes to hang out in, really; Huff's are often so rumpled it appears he might have slept in them. Key wears tight low jeans and slings on her acoustic guitar to sing a few original songs at the end of her set, risking that folksy vulnerability too. Indeed, these comics stand all lit up and exposed on an otherwise empty stage, talking to people they mostly can't see, eager to make eye contact with anyone sitting in a spill of stage light. They pull us to them, into the here and now; whenever a comic takes a step back to comment on his or her own behavior, we too start to feel caught between being ourselves and seeing ourselves.

I am suggesting that peppering their speech with obscenity is likewise a technique through which comics communicate an "off the record" attitude. This may make us feel, somewhat paradoxically, that the comedian speaks to us "from the heart." What does obscenity contribute to creating this sense of informality and intimacy in the comic's address? Several things. First, the majority of obscene words come from the source domain of sex and sex talk, and are born and reborn in that realm of intimacy. Taking these words out of the realm of the senses to use them in public address collapses the expected barrier between these experiential arenas, an incongruity that surprises. Likewise for those obscenities that are not explicitly sexual, but nonetheless refer to bodily functions and the stripped-naked basics of being human. Obscenities from both originary domains retain their power as big, bodily, experiential words used to convey basic human needs and feelings. In using them to creatively express their own feelings, comics combine self-exposure and intimate address with those critical "distances appropriate to humor" that allow for comment on our collective human condition (Bakhtin 1981, Seizer 1997).

Part of the trickiness of the colloquial affect in stand-up is that we know that words uttered for a laugh often exaggerate and play loose with "the truth," yet we are nevertheless seduced by the comic's vulnerable intimacies and directly confessional tone (Freud 1960). Richard Schechner captures the theatrical crux of the matter well when he writes:

the technical mastery of performing is knowing how to do certain things, achieve levels of skills, pull off tricks. But no matter how phony the show, an audience responds to sincerity, and there is as much sincerity involved in tricking as there is in so-called truth-telling. To perform excellently is to master whatever the craft is: telling the truth, telling lies. This amorality is one of the main things that makes theater dangerous. (Schechner 1981:41)

Suspicion and distrust are indeed common reactions to theatricality, and the anti-theatrical prejudice—the notion that there is not only a fundamental amorality to the craft of theater but also a polymorphous perversity at its core—has a western pedigree traceable to Plato (Barish 1981, Seizer 2005). As if designed specifically to offset such apprehensions, stand-up keeps theatrical stagecraft to a bare minimum: the comedian stands and speaks alone on a barren stage, his only prop a microphone.

But that mike is a powerful tool. It is the comic's medium for transforming from a shy or quiet individual into a stand-up comedian whose amplified voice suddenly carries the room. Recent anthropological attention to the way western philosophical discourse casts "voice" as the metaphorical location of self, agency, and authenticity helps explain the powerful tug on audience members to *believe* stand-up comics (Taylor 2009, Weidman 2006, Bauman and Briggs 2003). Indeed, with the mike as its only prop, the stand-up stage is marked most by its unmarked quality. It is not a set, but not *not* a set (to paraphrase Schechner).<sup>6</sup> It is both the back corner of a bar, and a blank slate rife with the potential for imaginative projection. Most comedy clubs today use an exposed brick wall (or fake exposed brick wall) as the stage's backdrop, a minimal *mise-en-scene* that suggests the urban street-corner with all its attendant tough, "real world" associations of men angling to out-perform each other. A notable exception proves the rule: across the back wall of the back room in the Bloomington bar where I often watch stand-up, there hangs a dusty maroon curtain printed with vague cream-colored birds, a sub-standard look upon which comics frequently comment in the course of their set precisely because it threatens to recast the whole enterprise as dingy-homey or even—gasp!—theatrical, rather than either tough-talking street or industry-ready sleek, the two reality-show-style semi-stagings that comedy clubs these days most eagerly embrace.

Another key feature of the minimal set up of stand-up is that it allows virtually anyone to do it. You don't need "gear:" special shoes, a racket, clubs.

Neither do you need “proof:” a license, a training certificate, an academic degree. This democratic character allows live regional stand-up to showcase homegrown and working-class talent. Indeed as a primarily working-class art form performed for a primarily working-class audience, road comedy in middle America offers many who otherwise have little opportunity to take center stage—or to hear voices like theirs in the dominant discourse broadcast from the two coastal media hubs of New York and LA—a forum built on reflexive attention to themselves and their own experiences.

In these ways, the minimal set-up of stand-up contributes to making it compelling to regional road comics and opens up the magic of theater to a different demographic than urban theater-goers. Comics tell me that the stand-up stage provides them an opportunity to explore sides of themselves they otherwise couldn’t express: “Offstage I’m pretty polite, I’m a nice person. Onstage I’m a bitch, and I like getting to be that” (Key 2009). Just as often, comics tell me that they are drawn to the form for reasons they still don’t fully understand. Huff and Key share the same story: “One day I went up onstage at an open mike, the next day I dropped out of college, sold everything, and started living for stage time.” Key elaborates: “I grabbed the mike and did a few minutes and absolutely fell in love with it, quit college, quit my job, gave up my apartment and then just completely ate, slept, and breathed comedy for the next eight months, to eight years” (Key 2008). Many comics, including these two, are able to perform themselves, or some version of themselves, onstage in ways that give them more satisfaction, it turns out, than almost anything else in life.<sup>7</sup>

I’ve selected Huff and Key as examples of road comics who successfully manage to regularly entertain audiences without resorting to dick jokes. Both are white and working class, and originally from the South, but what defines them most in the world of road comedy is their style of humor and their commitment to the life.<sup>8</sup> Both are now at the top of the ranked hierarchy of performers on the road comedy circuit, meaning that they “headline” the night’s show. On this circuit, shows generally consist of three to four comics: Headliner, Feature act, Opener and/or Emcee (i.e., MC, Master of Ceremonies). The Headliner does roughly an hour of original material. The Feature act does 25-30 minutes. The Opener has a ten minute slot, and the Emcee squeezes in a joke or two between acts (if the Opener is not also acting as the Emcee). Moving up through these ranks, comics gain the stage time and experience necessary to build up and hone their acts; transitioning between ranks is usually a matter of years of practice at each stage.

Huff and Key have each risen through these ranks by performing stand-up for over a decade, Huff since 1997, Key since 1999.

### **The Comics**

Let me now properly introduce these two comics before analyzing select portions of their performances. They are 37-year-old Stewart Huff, originally from Campbellsville, Kentucky, and 29-year-old Kristin Key, originally from Amarillo, Texas. Their professional achievement in moving up the ranks of the road comedy circuit notwithstanding, neither is famous. I would be surprised if you had heard of either, unless you happened to have tuned in to Season 4 of *Last Comic Standing*, a reality television talent show broadcast on the cable-TV network Comedy Central from 2003-2008 (and re-booted summer 2010 with a seventh season after a year's hiatus), in which Key placed as a semi-finalist. Apart from this lucky break into national TV for a few weeks in 2006, a credit on which she still successfully trades, the fame-making machine of American broadcast media speeds along without either of these gifted, hard-working comics on board. Instead, like most road comics I've met, they keep working in spite of the industry's disregard.<sup>9</sup>

I began following Huff and Key in 2007-2008. My understanding of their work grows out of watching them perform in multiple venues. My own videotaped recordings make it possible to present the reader with verbatim transcriptions of their sets, while informal conversations and formal interviews allow me to attempt to contextualize their onstage work within their offstage lives.<sup>10</sup>

Huff and Key both swear a blue streak in their acts, but apart from this shared proclivity, their personal and comedic styles couldn't be further apart. Huff is a remarkably prolific story teller, a self-proclaimed "long-winded bastard."<sup>11</sup> Offstage he is an unprepossessing figure. Small-framed, he wears his brown hair long. His standard-issue button-down shirts hang untucked over his jeans. His voice is kind and he speaks with a Southern accent. After a show, he likes to go back to his hotel room and watch re-runs of *The Golden Girls*; after a particularly good show, he'll celebrate by treating himself to a bowl of sherbet. All of which is to say that Mr. Huff is not, as he is quick to point out, "in it for the party side" of the stand-up comedy life.<sup>12</sup>

Key, on the other hand, is a barfly. She is a tall thin blonde who wears her hair short. Her style is jaunty—she occasionally wears a tweed cap—

and her voice commanding, unmarked by any regional accent. The only make-up she wears is black eyeliner and a touch of lip-gloss. Her set includes a bit about why she prefers drinking buddies to real friends: while real friends will come out at 2 a.m. to pick you up at the bar so you don't have to drive home drunk, drinking buddies will remind you that "you've been *way* more fucked up than this before and made it home just fine!" and then lend you their car—which, she adds, is especially fun to drive as it has cruise control *and* a drink holder!

Both comics use the register of dirty words in a nightlife setting to draw audiences in to their spoken art in ways that quite pleasurably disavow the referential and denotational ideology used by Scalia et al. to naturalize the taboo-ness of dirty words as essentialized in their semantic sense, rather than as a function of the pragmatic patterning of their avoidance and occurrence. I have selected samples of their work, interspersed with my own analytic observations, to demonstrate this point. The billing is: Huff's use of *Shit*; Key's use of *Fuck*; Huff's use of *Fuck*; and finally, Key's use of *Shit*. Welcome!

## Huff Opens

How Huff opens his set has everything to do with his expectations of the audience and what he imagines are their expectations of him. To begin, Huff usually performs a quick re-orienting address (he calls it a "reset") aimed at staunching audience expectations that his show will contain explicitly sexual material. And yet it is his use of dirty words, as I aim to show, that goes a long way toward making this clean act fly. With each utterance of a swear word, Huff opens up the possibility of putting adult language to work in the service of other pleasures.

Let's take a look at two different twenty-second bits Huff uses to open shows. In the first, he directs the audience to consider the body standing before them in all its abject glory. This establishes a performance persona he holds constant throughout his set:

Hello everybody, how are ya	<i>said while lowering the mike stand significantly; he is short</i>
Yeah? You guys look disappointed	<i>a chuckle cracks the third syllable, "disap-poin-ted"; 1 second pause fills with audience laughter</i>

This is it, right here!	<i>gestures at his body, shrugs; 1 second pause for laughter</i>
Sorry, huhn huhn. I'm not too happy about this shit myself	<i>indicating his face and head with a loose flap of his hand</i>
to be honest with ya	<i>3 second pause filled with laughter</i>
If I had any more I woulda brought it	<i>final words elongated: "ba-rouw-ght it"</i>

Here Huff presents the limitations of his own body as cause for a shared libidinal disappointment. The certainty he claims regarding this mutuality of affect is endearingly pathetic, as he invites the audience to map their own somatic displeasure onto his: “*You guys look disappointed.*” Offered in the first person present—“*This is it, right here! [I’m] Sorry*”—his preemptive apology extends to any and every potential audience disappointment to follow; his statement is a temporally unbounded performative. His abnegation is the foundation on which an attitudinal bond between himself and the audience is built, based on a shared evaluation of his falling short, an assumed mutuality of dashed hopes: “*I’m not too happy about this shit myself to be honest with ya.*” It’s a good set up, as things can only go up from here.

Huff can pretty much now play the archetypal role of asexual fool residing “on the fringes of the social world and of the human image” with impunity (Willeford 1969:174-175). In a second opening bit, Huff makes this connection between his comedic act and his bodily experience even more overtly meta-discursive:

I have no sex jokes. None. Sorry! You write what you know...	<i>Wiggles hips and pulls up jeans, shrugs shoulders; 5 second pause filled with laughter</i>
I don’t drink. And I don’t do drugs. Nothing against any of that stuff. I just talk about some shit	<i>smiles</i>

Here again the narrator apologizes—“*Sorry!*”—in the present tense of the narrating text for an insufficiency in his past experience. On this, he forms the body of the narrated texts to follow: “*you write what you know.*” Aided by the wriggling gesture of pulling up his jeans, a quietly emphatic visual reminder that these jeans stay *on*, the line gets an easy laugh. It is just such informality that helps relieve the tension palpable in the serious turf Huff just entered by admitting, in a bar and to a bar crowd, that he doesn’t play their game: no sex, no drinking, no drugs. It is a risky move that threatens to pull the plush rug of camaraderie out from under everyone, himself included.

How to redress this social breach? The phrase *I just talk about some shit* packs two well-placed punches. First, uttering a profanity on the heels of his tee-totaling pronouncement offsets it, deflating the specter of a set too clean for the crowd’s pleasure. He smiles as he says it—*I just talk about some shit*—and the audience breathes a boozy sigh of relief. For just as important as slipping in the touch of profanity right here is the pride with which Huff owns his ability to “talk about some shit.” Using this idiom signals acknowledgement of everyday genres of bar talk that would be familiar to a working class audience, such as “talking shit” and a willingness to be a guy who can talk some shit. This appreciative move trumps those behaviors in which he might appear lacking; if he can talk shit, it doesn’t really matter whether he’s drinking or not.<sup>13</sup>

Huff’s success with these concise introductory bits impresses me every time I see him perform. In opening with such openness, he exposes how he feels about himself as he stands before us. This bid at vulnerability wins audiences over in under a minute. Then for the next hour, we laugh at quirky, character-filled stories of Huff’s encounters with people (and animals) he loves because they “follow their passion,” a notion he imbues with awe rather than lust.

### **Key on Words**

Key’s experiential knowledge differs widely from that of Huff. Accordingly, her onstage persona differs too. Interviewing her in the wee hours of the morning after she had performed two sets and been drinking for six hours, she was concise: “I talk about what I know: drinking, travel, and how to be non-confrontational.” Each of these domains of knowledge is part of the essential terrain of Key’s life as a road comic, but the last is particularly

germane here as it speaks to being female in what remains the unremittingly male world of live standup comedy in middle America. In clarifying for me what she meant by knowing how to be non-confrontational, Key explained that she's generally "a good girl" offstage. The bossy bitch she becomes onstage surprises and delights her as much as her audiences, the transformative power of the stage working to foil dominant gender role expectations (Key 2009). Unfortunately very few women get the chance to play this way onstage because the road in road comedy is that much rougher on female comics than it is on men. I'll let numbers speak here for what I haven't the space to spell out: while the gender profile of stand-up comedy in the broadcast media may have changed—for example, 24 percent of the comedians featured in fifty two broadcasts of Comedy Central's "Premium Blend" half-hour comedy showcase in 2002 were women—in the trenches on the club circuit, women account for only between two to five percent of working comics.<sup>14</sup>

Key is a perfect example of a comedian whose voice might not be heard publicly had she not stepped onto the comedy stage. She is a preacher's daughter in a family of preachers whose religion does not allow women to speak in church. Her father, her maternal uncle, and both her grandfathers are ministers. She has no doubt that had she been a boy, she too would now be a preacher. But, as she put it, "I'm not, so I do this instead" (Key 2009). Though stand-up represents a huge step away from the church, through it Key nonetheless carries on the family tradition of live direct delivery of the spoken word.<sup>15</sup>

Onstage Key is confident. There is nothing of Huff's apologetic abnegation here. Her use of swear words is not so much a counter-weight to a clean act, but rather the splash of red on an already colorful canvas. In her words:

I use language to bring color to my act. I mean sometimes I don't think you can say anything *but* the word FUCK when you're trying to express a point. As a comic, it's kind of like poetry. You have beats, and you have rhythms, and you have cadences. And sometimes you need the perfect word to explain what you are talking about, or the perfect word to make a sentence sound the way it's supposed to sound. So if you take away the word FUCK, it's like, for a painter, if you took away the color red. They need every color available to make a picture, and I need every word available to make a good joke. So, I don't know, I don't say it to be dirty, I don't think that FUCK is a dirty

word to me. I don't usually talk about "fucking" or sex. I don't think I ever talk about sex in my act. But I do say the word FUCK a lot, just to make a point, because that's my color red. And if I didn't have the color red then my comedy would be very black and white. And that FUCKIN' SUCKS! (Key 2009)

The performative demonstration offered in the last line of this passage interests me not only for how well it demonstrates precisely what Key is saying about using the word "fuck" to make a point, but also because of its effectiveness as a speech act addressed to me, a college professor (this aspect of my social identity tends to loom large for the comics with whom I work since none of them have a college degree). That is, after daring to compare the "low brow" art of standup comedy to the "high brow" arts of poetry and painting, by adding this colloquial coda Key effectively pulls back from the brink of what might be interpreted as an audacious reassessment of these arts. Using her knowledge of "how to be non-confrontational," Key's coda reassuringly returns us to the language expected of a standup comic. It's an interesting moment in which her offstage and onstage personae act as one: to ensure that she will be read as non-confrontationally feminine in the off-stage context she employs a stage trick, using swear words to downshift her register and thereby defuse any potential, unintended pretentiousness. *That fuckin' sucks!* both asserts her comfort with the colloquial register of her trade AND deflates any threat that might still cling to a woman's demonstration of intellectual competency.<sup>16</sup> Key's self-consciousness in crafting such register-shifts and downgrades are thus as tactical as Huff's, though born of a differently-gendered experience.

Let's look now at a few onstage examples of Key's strategic artfulness in using obscenity. Having moved to California to try her luck in Hollywood, Key has now added her experiences in LA to her onstage repertoire. Her current set includes several bits on how southern Californians see her—or don't, as the case may be—and how she in turn sees them. An original song succinctly captures her resilient stage persona and the integral role swear words play in the controlled vulnerability she brings to the stage. Performing this song in Louisville, Kentucky, she introduced it in the following way:

Who likes the environment? Yea-hah!

*Audience stage  
left claps*

Couple a people over there? A few of  
you don't give a shit?

*Looks at audience  
stage right*

Um, the only reason I mention it is 'cause  
when I moved out to Southern California,  
everyone out there's very green, very earth-  
friendly, they take that shit *very* seriously. I'm  
from Amarillo, Texas, where we used to throw  
cans at 'Don't Mess with Texas' signs. I'm not  
saying it's right, but it's just what we did. So in  
California they all convince me, "We've got the  
recycling bins, just fuckin' do it" and I said  
"okay." And last week I was braggin' to my  
neighbors that I recycle more than anybody  
else I know! They were like,

"Well Kristin, you drink more than anyone  
else we know."

*dropping her voice  
an octave*

I had all these bottles and cans, I'm thinkin'  
I'm earth-friendly, they think I'm a fuckin'  
alcoholic!

*5 seconds of audience  
laughter*

So I wrote a song about how I'm earth-friendly  
*and* an alcoholic.

*3 seconds of audience  
laughter*

She picks up her guitar and plays, singing:

We've only got one planet for us all to live on  
And at the rate that things are goin' it'll soon be gone  
It'll only take a little to help out if everybody pitches in.  
I like to do my part by drinkin', for starters  
I like wine and beer and Everclear  
But when I'm done I always put the bottles in the recyclin' bin.

CHORUS:

I think I'm drinkin' my way tryin' to save tomorrow  
I'm savin' the earth while I'm drownin' my sorrow  
So drink one down for me  
Don't waste energy  
And fuckin' hug a tree!

Key's adverbial use of "*fuckin'*" in the last line of the song's chorus partakes of a broader trend in idiomatic American speech to exploit the wonderful morphological flexibility of the word *fuck*. As applied linguist Ruth Wajnryb notes, the truly odd thing about *fuck* (a word she argues "has no other exact synonym") is the extent to which "its referential sense is today one of its less frequent uses." Instead, "Today FUCK is known and used more for its emotional meaning," and is most effective as a general intensifier, as in "it's fucking hot in here!" or "no fucking way!" (Wajnryb 2005:45).<sup>17</sup>

Key uses obscenity quite deliberately to intensify the experience she aims to convey. Each time she drops the f-word while singing this chorus a frisson of recognition at the smugness of middle-class green discourse ripples through the audience. Her insertion of this one word concisely expresses the emotional conflicts of LA life for this feisty Texan, and she smiles each time she sings it.

A similarly impish *fuck you* spirit informs a bit that Key does about the Waffle House. It's one of her favorite restaurants, and she describes it onstage as "the place where the cab just takes you at 3:00 in the morning when they can't FUCKING understand you!" Here's Key talking about the ubiquitous Waffle House waitress with a few too many teeth in her mouth:

This woman spends the majority of her day trying to hide those teeth with her lips. Okay this is my favorite waitress, because when she does that it creates a speech impediment very similar to a lateral lisp, makes it real hard for her to say S's. That's awesome, because everything on a Waffle House menu has a <i>fucking "S"</i> in it!	<i>5 seconds of audience laughter</i>
Right! So I like to find snaggle-tooth, sit in her section,	<i>4 seconds of audience laughter</i>
and start ordering creatively. "Um, today I think I'm gonna have some sausage and some hash browns, scattered, smothered—go on!"	<i>Audience claps</i>

In blatantly acting out her bratty impulse to make fun of a person with a speech impediment (and a hard-working waitress at that) Key seems to be

launching a *fuck you* at middle-class values, another assertion of her difference from the politically-correct crowd. After her joyous exclamation, “*That’s awesome, because everything on the Waffle House menu has a FUCKING ‘S’ in it!*” the bar erupts with a laughter that is anything but censorious. The crowd is with her and suddenly completely focused on hunting down every word with a *FUCKING S* in it. As a participant I have been chilled by these moments where the crowd suddenly acts as one. My goosebumps arise primarily, I think, from the experience of collective susceptibility to a charismatic leader before we know exactly where she is taking us. Led by Key’s round-up of “Ss,” the fervor in which we find ourselves suddenly participating feels like it could easily veer to places I might later regret. Mindful of precisely such dangers, Freud notes that a joke can “bribe the hearer with its yield of pleasure into taking sides with us without any very close investigation” (Freud 1960 [1905]:123)

Indeed, as Freud well knew, would-be comics must be willing to kick off their inhibitory self-censors and give free rein to their ability to spin associative streams of thought into powerful kinetic performances. The stand-up stage offers a place where one can do this; if not here, then where? Working through and from their own out-of-control states is something both Huff and Key do exceedingly well. Swear words play an integral role in this effort by allowing them not only to capture, characterize, and convey such heightened states, but also to trigger them. That is, swear words can be both cause and effect: they both facilitate the moment of spiraling out, and represent the traces of that spiral.

Two final examples illustrate my point.

### **Nature Should Just Be Called FUCK**

Huff performed the following paean to the expressive virtuosity of the word *fuck* at Bear’s Place Eatery & Brewery in Bloomington, Indiana. Rather than denoting any sexual act, the word *fuck* here characterizes a state of mind. Beginning with an appreciative nod to “language” itself as an apt euphemism for precisely those powerful words from which the Court would have us shy away, Huff proceeds to demonstrate their range by decoupling such erstwhile vulgar words from the vulgar acts with which they are normally associated.

I am a clean comedian everybody. I have a little bit of language. I hope that doesn't offend you, uh, sorry, and if it does, *fuck off* I guess, I dunno.

*2 seconds of audience laughter*

Little bit o'language, you know. I think every word in the English dictionary has a place, a usage, you know? I really do. And I like the word "fuck," it's such a *good* word.

*2 seconds of audience laughter*

It's a *powerful* word, idnnt? It's just got so many different places that you could use it effectively, you know? Like you ever watch the nature programs? And, yeah. Nature should just be called FUCK. There's just so much stuff goin' on in nature that's just, y'know...like you ever watch those salmon that swim upstream? Idnt that amazing? They're like, driven. Against the current, they're like, "Igottamate. Igottamate. Igottamate. Igottamate. Igottamate."

*shaking his hips very fast while remaining rigidly vertical; 8 seconds of audience laughter*

There's just somethin'...I mean they have a brain the size of a bb! And that dunnit stop 'em. They're like, "Igottamate. Igottamate. Igottamate. Igottamate."

*shaking hips fast while remaining rigidly vertical; 5 seconds of audience laughter*

Then they get to the waterfall. *HOLY SHIT* that must suck! They get to that waterfall

*Whole posture shoots up vertically above mike stand; next 16 seconds are non-stop audience laughter*

(I think I need to take this out)

*(removes mike from stand); audience still laughing*

Y'know what I'm talking about?

*Repeats hip-shaking movement into postural, vertical shooting up; audience still laughing*

And it's like, try after try after try.	<i>Shooting up, up, up</i>
And then that grizzly bear goes, HAARUMPH	<i>grabs an imaginary fish, chews; 4 seconds audience laughter</i>
FUCK.	
I mean, 'Aw shucks' just donnit git it, y' know?	<i>11 seconds of audience clapping and laughing</i>

The audience basically goes nuts laughing at this act, their loss of control matching perfectly the full-body shakes and quakes that Huff performs. Note that these are *not*, as I hope my attempt at movement transliteration conveys, *sexy* in any human hip-thrust-and-grind sort of way, but rather are uncannily salmon-like, or at least, uncannily other-species-like. This otherness, though, is simultaneously wrapped round and intertwined with idiomatic and very human verbal commentary, from “*Y’know what I’m talking about?*” to *fuck off, holy shit!* and *that must SUCK!*

Perhaps most impressive amidst the hilarity that greets this act is how Huff manages to return to the framing meta-commentary of his claim to use “a little bit of language.” As noted above, the phrase is an understated euphemism for taboo words, those marked in everyday parlance, as well as in the comedy business, as dirty. The touchstone here is of course Carlin’s infamous and still relevant litany of “Seven Words You Can’t Say on Television.”<sup>18</sup> I love that Huff proclaims his use of such language while asserting in the same breath that he is a clean comedian; it strikes me as the perfect *fuck you* to the FCC. Again, Huff’s principled retort to such flat-footed censorship is his repeated, passionate use of obscenity in performances like this one, where the primary referent of the obscenity uttered is awe: *Nature should just be called FUCK*, it turns out, because it is both awesome and a little awful: you can practically hear bones crunch as the big bear munches the little fish.

True, there is also a kind of running *double entendre* at play in making such a statement about nature and then proceeding to enact the frantic urge with which salmon “gottamate.” One might even assume, at first, that species reproduction is the source of Huff’s wonderment at nature. But note that he never uses the word FUCH to refer to the business of upstream swimming for purposes of species reproduction. For this he consistently uses only the appropriately science-y word “mate” (as in *Igottamate*), the same referential word used in the televised nature shows on which he comments. FUCH

he reserves instead for how we humans feel about the grizzly who grabs a meal right out of the stream.. That's how it is: Nature stops us in our tracks. "FUCK. I mean, 'Aw, shucks!' just donnit git it."

### **Holy Shit, Ms. Key!**

Ms. Key is in the congregation while her father is preaching (Key 2006):

So here I sit, all bored. I kind of lean  
my head back like...I fell asleep, right?  
No big deal. But I didn't wake up 'til the  
prayer was over, when the guy next to  
me stands up and drops his song book  
right on top of my foot. Folks, I don't  
know what you say when you drop  
something kinda heavy right on top of  
your foot?

*4 seconds of audience  
laughter*

I said, "SHIT." Do you know what  
happens when you stand up and say  
"SHIT" in church? You can never really  
back-track that moment. No, it quickly  
turns into

*loud THUMP on mike to  
imitate sound of book  
dropping*

"Ow SHIT! Oh FUCK! O GOD DAMMIT!  
Jeee-sus, it's my FUCKIN'—Awwwwww,  
SHIT!

*6 seconds of audience  
laughter; begins singing in  
wavering, high pitch*

Hole-ey Sheee-yiiit. AWWWW!  
Hi Daddy."

*Sung in wavering, high  
pitch*

Laughing simultaneously at ourselves and her—"Folks, I don't know what you say...I said, SHIT"—we find in this narrated text a classic example of the cathartic function of swearing, where invective is an "almost instinctive, visceral means of releasing excessive nervous energy.... If life is a pressure cooker, stub-your-toe swearing allows steam out in measured, manageable bursts" (Wajnryb 2005:25-26). But in retelling her experience Key does more than simply let off steam. The problem with relief-valve theories of humor (laid out well in Morreall 1987), as with relief-valve theories of ritual or reli-

gion (discussed in Turner 1982 and Douglas 1966), is that they blow off steam only to return to the status quo. Such a view strips expressive behavior of its potential to effect more lasting change, and downplays the potential of speech acts to actually change the consciousness of participants and affect their further actions. One of my favorite examples of the power of words to effect such shifts is Bourdieu's celebration of "the evocative power of an utterance which puts things in a different light (as happens, for example, when a single word, such as 'paternalism,' changes the whole experience of a social relationship)" (Bourdieu 1984:479).

In the case under consideration here, Key's narrating text critically reframes the narrated text of her own actions as they unfolded in Daddy's church. Do we begin to see this as a situation to somehow avoid in future? What is the role of religion in our lives anyway? While no concrete suggestions are offered here, our reflexivity is prodded. In her frantic attempt to cover one slip, we witness Key sliding headlong down a slope of failed corrections that mixes humor with pathos. The joke is on the slipperiness of frames themselves, really: the very same word can be part of praise or prayer one instant, and a blasphemy the next. Her retrospective introspection becomes tragi-comic resignation when she admits, "*You can never really back-track that moment.*"

No, but we *can* laugh about such moments together, which is, finally, one of the most valuable things a comedy club has to offer. Laughing collectively at ourselves, we recognize our common inability to button our cursing lips. What do we do with such recognition? Does it prompt us to accept our own weaknesses? Or to perhaps reconsider ever again putting ourselves in situations where such weakness is not welcome? We can't back-track that moment, but we can take ourselves forward differently into the next. I think the effect of Key's act is not to staunch the flow of expressive cursing, but rather to help us feel otherwise about it, neither so wretchedly alone in it, nor so shamed by our capacity for it. That is, we all know that shit like this isn't about excrement, and comedy clubs are places where we don't have to feel shitty about that knowledge.

## Conclusion

The examples I've considered here all demonstrate the comedic use of dirty words in non-denotational ways on the stand-up stage. I've shown how comics like Huff and Key treat bad words as big words: protean,

expansive, and ripe with performative possibility. By using obscenity in this way, they shift audience expectations away from sex and the potty, leaving that proscribed register to the hacks. Instead their non-standard use of these signs opens up less expected discourse topics, and activates other sorts of pleasures.

In discussing both comics' work, I looked at their artistic uses of *fuck* and their inspired riffs on *shit*. Obscenity in these performances serves to heighten and intensify the expression of the speaker's perspective, affect, and experience. I've suggested that such use puts audiences at ease and makes this dialogic performance event feel like colloquial, quotidian talk. In addition, their use of swear words signals to the audience that any formality associated with public speech acts need not hold here, that just as strictures on the audience's behavior are relaxed in the club setting, the comic too is hereby letting him or herself loose. Such free play allows comics to activate, in themselves as in us, heightened states of hilarity, spiraling in and out of control and laughing at our ability to lose it.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The 2009 federal Supreme Court ruling upheld a fickle change by the FCC in its policies regulating obscenity on the airwaves (their jurisdiction being broadcast television and radio, between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m.). After 31 years of allowing for the "fleeting expletive" to go virtually unenforced (i.e., since the 1978 FCC v. PACIFICA ruling in which the court, prompted by complaints over a daytime radio broadcast of George Carlin's satiric mono-

logue “Filthy Words,” found a power to regulate indecent broadcasting), the 2009 decision ruled that “curse words referring to sex and excrement are always indecent” (Sherman 2009).

<sup>2</sup>For example: “Viagra says if you have erection that lasts longer than four hours call your doctor....CALL the DOCTOR???? I’m not calling the doctor....I’m calling my girlfriend, my ex-girlfriend, her mother, and any other female name in my phonebook.” Huff’s comment: “The Viagra joke is really a good example of a total hack dick joke. So many bad comics tell the stupid thing nobody even knows who wrote it to begin with” (6/13/10, *personal communication*).

<sup>3</sup>I’ve both heard this exchange myself when I’ve miked a comic and am wearing the headset, and I’ve confirmed with comics that this is something they frequently ask the previous performer, since rather than sitting through the set before their own many would rather spend that time mentally preparing for their turn onstage.

<sup>4</sup>While most audience members out for a good time are able to sit inebriated for a two-hour show without making a mess, it takes just one out-of-control patron to topple the mood of a room. The fact that club audiences are often drunk is a structuring feature of comics’ working lives. Those who deal with it best do so by finding creative ways to handle hecklers. Many first-person accounts of the stand-up life speak of this as a key survival skill; my favorite such account is found in Gregory (1964:133-135).

<sup>5</sup>For an introduction to deviation and incongruity in humor theory, see Mandel 1970 and Morreall 1987.

<sup>6</sup>Schechner argues that the theater actor inhabits just such a double negative in taking on theatrical roles in which he becomes both “not me, and not not me.” To characterize such a liminal zone, Schechner draws on Gregory Bateson’s theories of the play frame, Victor Turner’s theories of lifestage ritual, and Winnicott’s understanding of the transitional object in the baby-mother relationship (1981:39-40).

<sup>7</sup>To hear a range of stand-up comedians testify to the pull of the stage high, see “I Am Comic” (dir. Jordan Brady, 2010, 1 hour 27 min.)

<sup>8</sup>While in this essay I discuss some dynamics of class and gender in road comedy, I do not discuss how race, ethnicity, or physical ability affect its onstage or offstage realities. They do, of course, and their effects bear on performers, audiences, bookers, and club owners alike. I plan to address these topics directly, and in relation to the particularities of venue, when and where space permits.

<sup>9</sup>Most road comics I’ve met go to several auditions a year for spots on TV and cable network comedy showcases, do their seven minutes, and never get a call back. The industry seems to want something quite particular (read, young hipster) to fit their already-existing stand-up comedy broadcast box.

<sup>10</sup>I am currently producing and directing a documentary film on the relationship between the on- and off-stage lives of road comics. This has meant that many of my conversations with comics about their work have been videotaped.

<sup>11</sup>Huff often proclaims this both onstage as part of his act and in the interview context (Huff 2008).

<sup>12</sup>Again, Huff presents himself and his proclivities using this example both onstage and in the interview context (Huff 2008).

<sup>13</sup>Thanks to Susan Lepselter for encouraging me to develop this point. See Fox 2004 for an extended discussion of working class speech genres among bar patrons.

<sup>14</sup>This low figure for female road comics is a composite of educated guesstimates provided to me by informants active in these trenches, road comics as well as two club owners who have each been booking comics for several decades, Tom Sobel of the Comedy

Caravan in Louisville, KY and Chris Dipetta of the Punchline Comedy Club in Atlanta, GA. The surprisingly high 24 percent figure for women showcased on “Premium Blend” in 2002 comes from Jeffers 2006, appendix 1.

<sup>15</sup>Fisher and Fisher (1981:xii) note that in their own way, comics “preach a series of minisermos” when they go up in front of an audience and “bombard them with their own perspectives” on how “the world is in a fairly absurd state.” The similarities between the two callings has been treated humorously by road comic Cathryn Michon (Shydner and Schiff 2006:41-42) in a passage that bears repeating, not least because it serves as a further demonstration of the use standup comics make of the humor that accrues to making an unexpected shift in registers by using swear words while discussing erudite subjects that are usually treated with reverence:

“The brilliant writer Samuel Johnson said, ‘A woman preaching is like a dog walking on his hind legs; it is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all.’

Clearly, what this teaches us is that Samuel Johnson was a dick.

His point is well taken, however. Standup’s a lot like preaching, and there are very few people, men or women, who enjoy being preached at by a woman. This is because, for most people, the first person who ever preached at them was a woman. Most likely that woman was the one who made them feel bad about crapping their pants, which, up until her bossy interference, had been rather a convenient system. And they still resent it, and her, and anyone who reminds them of her.”

<sup>16</sup>See Joan Riviere (1966), “Womanliness as a Masquerade,” for its recognition of the gender role dysphoria that can affect women who are competent thinkers and public speakers after a performance.

<sup>17</sup>The recognition of the centrality of emotion in the communications made possible by swearing is argued succinctly by Supreme Court Justice Brennan in his dissenting opinion in the 1978 FCC vs. Pacifica case over Carlin’s “Filthy Words” broadcast. He writes, “even if an alternative phrasing may communicate a speaker’s abstract ideas as effectively as those words he is forbidden to use, it is doubtful that the sterilized message will convey the emotion that is an essential part of so many communications.” (Dissent of Mr. Justice Brennan, section II, US Supreme Court FCC v. PACIFICA FOUNDATION, 438 U.S. 726 [1978]).

<sup>18</sup>The unforgiveable seven are: Shit, Piss, Fuck, Cunt, CockSucker, MotherFucker, and Tits. It’s worth hearing Carlin say them to get the rhythm right (footage of Carlin performing “Seven Words” exists and is readily found).

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