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"I Hear No Men Talking About It"

Male Stand-Up Comedians on Abortion

Tuula Kolehmainen

University of Turku
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0813-4663
Email: tuula.kolehmainen@utu.fi

Abstract

In his 2023 stand-up special, *From Bleak to Dark*, comedian Marc Maron wonders why men do not address the Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which ended the constitutional right to abortion in the United States. The question of who is, or should be, entitled to take a stand on the right to abortion, is up for debate, but so is Maron's claim that there are "no men talking about it." Quite a few male comedians have presented their – fictitious or real – views on reproductive justice on the stand-up stage, not only in their post-*Roe* shows but also over the course of the past few decades. Stand-up comedy is a unique forum for dealing with themes like gendered vulnerability and power relations, even exposing views that would be considered offensive or even unlawful outside of the comedic context. Narratives produced and reproduced in society are popularized in stand-up comedy, and when they reach streaming services like *Netflix*, they reach huge audiences. Seeing stand-up comedians as potential public intellectuals (Kunze and Champion), this article explores how groups and communities are constructed and deployed in stand-up (Brodie; Chesters), focusing on how US male comedians navigate the social debates on the issue of abortion in their stand-up shows. While this article acknowledges that the "definition of reproductive justice goes beyond the pro-choice/pro-life debate" (Ross and Solinger 9), it will focus specifically on abortion for two reasons. First, extending the discussion to parental rights and reproductive justice more generally would require a longer discussion than is possible in the scope of this article, and second, focusing on abortion

reflects more precisely what is found in the comedic material of male stand-up comedians in the United States. Through analyzing a few examples from US comedians, I argue that while stand-up comedy on the theme of abortion by men often reinforces patriarchal norms, attitudes, and stereotypes, it also provides a platform for contesting them. I also argue that this dual function operates through a rhetorical practice that positions men as outsiders. While this rhetoric often deems women responsible for both pregnancies and abortions, as "public intellectuals," stand-up comedians have the potential to deconstruct narratives of unequal gender relations and related social discussions.

KEYWORDS

Stand-up Comedy, Abortion, Gender, Stereotypes, Outsiderhood

Stand-up Comedy and the Issue of Abortion

In his 2023 stand-up special, *From Bleak to Dark*, comedian Marc Maron wonders why men do not address the Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, which ended the constitutional right to abortion in the United States (Maron 11:25-11:45). The question of who is, or should be, entitled to take a stand on the right to abortion, is up for debate, but so is Maron's claim that there are "no men talking about it" (11:43-11:44). Quite a few male comedians have presented their – fictitious or real – views on reproductive justice on the stand-up stage, not only in their *post-Roe* shows but also over the course of the past few decades.[1] Seeing stand-up comedians as potential public intellectuals (Kunze and Champion), this article explores how groups and communities are constructed and deployed in stand-up (Brodie; Chesters), focusing on how US male comedians navigate the social debates on the issue of abortion in their stand-up shows. While this article acknowledges that the "definition of reproductive justice goes beyond the pro-choice/pro-life debate" (Ross and Solinger 9), it will focus specifically on abortion for two reasons. First, extending the discussion to parental rights and

[1] Many stand-up routines on the theme of abortion have been performed by, for example, George Carlin (1996), Bill Hicks (1997), and Doug Stanhope (2004).

reproductive justice more generally would require a longer discussion than is possible in the scope of this article, and second, focusing on abortion reflects more precisely what is found in the comedic material of male stand-up comedians in the United States. While some scholarly attention has been paid to representations of abortion in television comedies (Sisson; Weinstein), research around the theme of abortion in stand-up comedy, particularly performed by male comedians, is lacking. By examining stand-up shows from 2019 to 2024, this article aims to address this lacuna and shed light on how comedic discursive practices respond to and shape social debates about abortion.

Abortion is an issue that – directly or indirectly – touches upon the lives of most people in the United States,[2] and it is, thus, no surprise that many comedians have chosen to address the topic in their shows. It is important to explore stand-up performances because (of the way) they reflect and reproduce social and political debates, but also have the potential to reshape them. Stand-up is a unique forum for dealing with themes like gendered vulnerability, power relations, and identity (Weaver and Lockyer), exposing views that would be considered offensive or even unlawful outside of the comedic context (Giappone, Francis and MacKenzie 10).[3] In their performances, comedians often assume an outsider position. Kunze and Champion argue that "Like public intellectuals, stand-up comedians benefit from a certain status, wherein they develop an outsider personality that allows them to present themselves as uncompromised individuals who can comment on their society without being tainted by its influence." As public intellectuals, famous American comedians play a central role in popularizing heated social narratives as the recordings of their shows spread globally, but the degree of responsibility for what they say seems to be quite low. This was made evident in comedian Tony Hinchcliffe's performance at one of Donald Trump's October 2024 election campaign rallies, where his racist remarks about Puerto Ricans

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[2] According to Boudreau and Maloy, "one in four people will have an abortion in the United States before the age of 45" (xii).

[3] As discussed by Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt, famous American stand-up comedians have even been arrested for "uttering obscenities" on stage (xxi).

and Black Americans generated a backlash (Gomez and Superville). While Hinchcliffe's material was mostly condemned, this incident demonstrates that comedians can impact the narratives surrounding globally significant events such as the US presidential elections. Thus, harmful narratives may become disseminated through stand-up comedy. When the shows reach streaming services like *Netflix*, platforms like *TikTok* and *YouTube*, and television news, they reach huge audiences very quickly. These narratives are then reproduced in society by audience members around the world as they "feed [...] ideas back into the culture" (Witherington 115). Thus, stand-up comedy is a crucial pathway through which cultural narratives are shaped, even those surrounding sensitive issues like abortion.

In this article, by analyzing a few examples from US comedians, I argue that while stand-up comedy on the theme of abortion by men often reinforces patriarchal norms, attitudes, and stereotypes, it also provides a platform for contesting them. I argue that this dual function operates through a rhetorical practice that positions men as outsiders. While this rhetoric often deems women responsible for both pregnancies and abortions, stand-up comedians have the potential to deconstruct narratives of unequal gender relations and related social discussions. I start by showing how comedians construct themselves as outsiders through binaries in three recurring joke categories. Then, I examine how they blur the boundaries of those divisions to deconstruct the outsider narrative.

Creating Divisions

My analysis draws on Brenda Boudreau's and Kelli Maloy's notion that "popular culture can impact the cultural narrative about the issue of abortion" (xii). Representations in popular culture are a meaningful source of information about the issue because people who have abortions in real life often avoid talking about them due to shame (xii). Moreover, since there is limited data on men's experiences around the theme (Li, Heyrana and Nguyen 115), both additional scientific data and more popular culture stories would help deconstruct taboos and misconceptions related to abortion. The autobiographical nature of stand-up comedy (Brodie 41;

Double; Gilbert) offers a platform where this is possible. From Richard Pryor's accounts of setting himself on fire in the 1980s to Jamie Foxx's 2024 *Netflix* special, *What Had Happened Was...*, male comedians in the United States have told stories about their physical and emotional vulnerabilities. However, while abortion is a sensitive issue to many men as well (Li, Heyrana and Nguyen 113-14), male comedians have not adopted the theme of abortion to discuss parental rights, reproductive justice, and their feelings about their involvement in abortion stories in a sophisticated, empathetic manner.

Instead, in most of the material analyzed for this article, humor on the issue of abortion is created through binaries. The setups often introduce two divisions: "Women," who are assumed to be pro-choice, and "men," who are assumed to be pro-life. The binary conservative/liberal is often aligned with this division, so that women are constructed as liberal (and, thus, assumed to be pro-choice) and men as conservative (and, thus, assumed to be pro-life). These binaries transcend racial barriers in the sense that no race or ethnicity is inherently associated with any of the divisions. When it comes to the comedians' backgrounds, except for Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock, who are African American, all the comedians analyzed in this article are white. As I will try to show, there is no clear distinction between the comedic materials that would directly depend on the comedian's background. However, the issue itself does affect people in diverse ways and in different contexts. For example, Black women face heightened vulnerability (Boudreau and Maloy xiv; Ross and Solinger 5), which is related to the fact that, as Choi argues, "abortion regulations have been a political tool for the maintenance of white superiority and supremacy" (145). Through creating these gendered and political divisions, the comedians foster the illusion that the question is basically a women-versus-men controversy. As Diana Fuss argues, "'conventional binaries,' such as men/women, are based on another related opposition: the couple 'inside' and 'outside'" (1), and here, too, the comedians construct themselves (and other men) as outsiders in the issue through these binaries.

Of course, the in-groups and out-groups created by comedians are fluid, and both the audience and the comedian may shift between them – even within a single joke. In fact, as Ian Brodie argues, "vacillating between

an insider and outsider identity" (103) is a common strategy of stand-up comedians, who must maintain a certain duality in their persona to succeed in their performance (114). In the material I analyzed, the comedians play with the groups to create incongruity. The comedian, for example, assumes the role of a man who is "on the women's side" on the abortion issue and, thus, apparently "licensed" to take a stand on it. After getting praise from female audience members, the comedian then resumes the role of an outsider. In this way, the comedian may first align himself with women (assumed to be pro-choice) and men who support them. In the punchline, the comedian often repositions himself as an outsider, often including a misogynistic remark to reinforce patriarchal gender divisions.

There is a real lack of data and stories from men about abortion, which may perpetuate gendered stereotypes and reinforce the narrative that men bear no responsibility in the issue. While terminating unwanted pregnancies benefits men, the data available on men's experiences is insufficient to get a clear picture of them (Li, Heyrana and Nguyen 115). Removed from these stories, men's experiences become invisible, distorted, or stereotypical (Choi) and their responsibility remains obscure. This exclusion has the potential to reinforce inequality between men and women (Li, Heyrana and Nguyen 115). More stories from men are needed if we want to avoid reproducing only the stereotypical ones. As argued at the beginning of this article, stand-up material on this issue may either reinforce or challenge hegemonic narratives of gender roles. In what follows, I will discuss some of the narratives that reinforce both gendered stereotypes and position men as invisible in abortion stories by constructing a community of outsiders.

Fabricating Communities

As discussed by Kunze and Champion, it is typical of stand-up comedians to create worlds where they are outsiders – whether of a broader society, a specific community, or smaller discourse communities they construct during their performances (Chesters; Swales). While outsiderhood usually denotes a negative state (implying unbelonging, disparity, and powerless-

ness), in many of the selected stand-up routines about abortion, it both offers men power and liberates them from responsibility. In their jokes, the comedians create a sense of community among men, both in general and with male audience members. Through humor, they persuade their audiences to laugh "as an expression of shared values" (Mintz 78), and in doing so, they often invite the audiences to join them in making moral judgments of women. As a result, these shows rely on stereotypical and hollow, even fatuous, humor – more bleak than dark – which reveals the comedians' detachment from real abortion stories. These jokes often fall into at least one of these three categories: the "Payer," "I'm Pro-choice, but…," and "Slogan reuse."

The first category, the "Payer," is a recurring punchline that connects men to abortions only as the ones paying for them. In the joke mentioned at the beginning of this article, upon wondering why men are not talking about abortion rights, Maron ends the joke with, "if you're a guy with any game at all, you've paid for at least two of those" (11:46-11:50), meaning abortions. The joke creates a division not only between men and women but also between men who have sexual success and men who do not. According to Maron's comedic logic, men who have "any game" also have economic power, which is an idea that ignores the fact that around half of the people who have abortions live in poverty (Boudreau and Maloy xiv). Thus, Maron constructs a homosocial community of those men who impregnate women and can afford to provide the means for abortion. Notwithstanding the fact that Maron's routine is most likely ironic, he performs here what Michael Kimmel defines as "*homosocial competition*," which is "a relationship among men in which the sexual victimization of women is a currency among men" (107; emphasis original). While plagiarism is not allowed in stand-up either, similar punchlines can be found in the material of countless male comedians. For example, Mark Normand has an almost identical punchline: "I love abortions. I paid for two last week" (0:23-0:25). Re-articulating men's real or imagined economic power over women is not only "used as a way to facilitate upward mobility in a masculine hierarchy" (Kimmel 107) but also consistently induces a positive reaction from the audience: laughter. This reaction, whether its source is relief, a feeling of

superiority, or incongruity,[4] from the comedian's point of view, is always a positive response. As Brodie states, "The purpose of stand-up comedy is entertainment and its aim is laughter" (6).

In addition to generating laughter, one reason for these recurring punchlines could be the volatile nature of the issue. While a comedian who can make audiences laugh with controversial material and escape criticism is more likely to be popular (Brodie 21), creating such material is a challenging task. In an *Entertainment Weekly* interview with Josh Wolk, Chris Rock commented on writing jokes on sensitive topics thus, "You do some weird abortion joke, that thing's gotta be worded just . . . right. . . You're literally dealing with nitroglycerine. One drop and the whole place goes up" (Haggins 88). A heated social topic of debate such as reproductive justice would certainly require meticulous writing on the comic's part, as Rock argues. However, rather than writing jokes that acknowledge the complexity of the issue, the comedians merely repeat the narrative of men as outsiders and reinforce sexist and classist stereotypes in their abortion jokes. More specifically, the narrative seems to be that "real" men make both pregnancies and abortions happen but are situated outside the problem. In another example, Andrew Schulz (2022) envisages meeting God with his wife who has had an abortion, emphasizing the fact that it was *her* choice: "Looks like you need to pay for your sins, babe. Even though *I* paid for your sins" (0:48-0:55). Implying that terminating an unwanted pregnancy is the woman's choice and, thus, the woman's responsibility, these jokes, however, entail the need for a man's intervention. Here, again, all women are assumed to be pro-choice and men, by default, pro-life, even though they can switch groups.

In the "I'm Pro-choice, but…" category, the comedians emphasize abortion as a choice that women make, apparently acknowledging their agency and right to choose. As mentioned earlier, incongruity is established when a change of direction comes in the punchline, and the comedians end up vilifying women for their potential choice to have abortions. Coming back to Schultz's skit about meeting God, he starts it with "Ladies, I am with you, I think it's your body, your choice [...] when we all go up to

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[4] The most well-known humor theories are relief theory, superiority theory, and incongruity theory (see, e.g., Carpio 5-7).

heaven and God's like why are we all killing babies, we're gonna be like 'Y'all? I think they were very clear whose decision this was, God'" (0:15-0:47). In this way, the disclaimer is used against women while at the same time aligning with the "men as outsiders" rhetoric. With "we" referring to men and "they" referring to women, the two juxtaposed groups are re-created and the division between them reinforced.

The comedians often reinforce the moral judgment of women by equating abortion with killing. For example, Anthony Jeselnik introduces a little less misogynistic but even more disturbing joke in his 2019 special, *Fire in the Maternity Ward*: "Yes, I did just say that I am pro-choice. That does not mean I am pro-abortion. You have other options" (48:47-48:53). Hearing about Jeselnik's "other option" – terminating the pregnancy after the baby is born – is likely to disturb some audience members, but, as it does provoke laughter, this imagery is made even more explicit by Chris Rock in 2023: "I am absolutely pro-choice, okay? I believe women should have the right to kill babies [. . .] I think women should have the right to kill a baby until it's four years old" (31:21-32:22). While all jokes are primarily designed to elicit laughter, they might directly or indirectly reflect the comics' political ideologies as well. Whether the comics have intended to reflect their own pro-life stances in the analyzed material is difficult to determine, but in these cases, pro-life narratives are used as comedic tools to generate laughter. At the same time, a pro-choice position – and along with it, women's rights, agency, and bodily autonomy – becomes the target of ridicule. As a result of this recurring pattern, audience members may come to expect a misogynistic remark or vilification of women whenever a comedian (or anyone) claims to be pro-choice, which also applies to the next category.

Jokes in the third category are sample slogans and phrases concerning reproductive justice, most commonly the feminist slogan "my body, my choice." A common strategy is to refer to the comedic material as the "body of work." For example, Mark Normand orders, "Don't tell me what to do with my body of work" (0:41-0:42) and Steve Hofstetter tells the audience "It's your right to choose whether or not you laugh. It's, yeah, it's my body of work, your choice" (5:34-5:42). While seemingly harmless wordplay, this kind of slogan repetition does have real-life implications. For example, at the re-election of President Donald Trump in November 2024, the far-

right activist Nick Fuentes posted online the text, "Your body, my choice. Forever," resulting in an explosion of mentions of the terms to support him on the social media platform *X* (Tolentino). Using the slogan to resist the very rights that it was originally created to defend, like in Fuentes' case, can be seen as "hostile mnemonic appropriation" (Blom). Slogan reuse in stand-up is an example of how humor can be used to negotiate ideological boundaries, potentially obscuring the original message.

As I mentioned earlier, some routines combine these three categories. In *Sticks & Stones* (2019), Dave Chappelle starts with the "I'm pro-choice, but…" disclaimer by saying to the men in the audience, "This is theirs. The right to choose is their unequivocal right" (34:49-34:56). Constructing a group of himself and male audience members by talking directly to the "gentlemen" and calling women "them," Chappelle, in a deceptively polite manner, removes all men from the discussion of abortion rights (except the one he is having with them). Then, changing direction and talking to the women instead, Chappelle combines the payer trope with a slogan: "If you can kill this motherfucker, I can at least abandon 'em. It's my money, my choice" (35:26-35:31). Suggesting that men should not have to pay for abortions or take part in raising the child, Chappelle reinforces "the physicalist mindset rooted in a long-standing dualistic tradition of the Western philosophy and culture" discussed by Choi:

> once men are "done" with the physical sexual activity, he can "walk away" from the interconnected and multiple responsibilities of that act and treat it as if it is an isolated physical incident. Moreover, the dualistic categorization is related, if not directly, to heteronormative and (toxic white) masculine maintenance of power. (128-29)

According to Choi, this mentality underpins the cultural narrative that frames men as outsiders in issues related to reproductive justice. To uphold this duality, Chappelle ends up using the racist stereotype of the "Deadbeat [Black] dad" (Carpio 4) to justify his misogynistic remarks.

The joke categories – the Payer, the I'm Pro-choice, but…, and Slogan reuse – work to create a sense of community among men, while making moral judgments about women. By "punching down" – targeting less

powerful individuals and groups in their jokes – comedians may reinforce oppressive stereotypes and attitudes even beyond the comedic context. Reproducing stereotypical narratives about gender roles, women's rights, and masculinity in abortion jokes not only risks upholding patriarchal structures, but also oversimplifies men's role in abortion stories. While many abortion jokes popularize misogynistic attitudes, thus deepening inequality between genders, others subvert them. In the following section, I will explore how comedy can be used to challenge these dynamics.

Blurring Boundaries

As I have tried to show above, stand-up comedy can perpetuate gender inequalities and distort the ways in which men's role is seen in social discussions on reproductive justice. Jokes that construct men as outsiders often maintain men's invisibility in abortion stories, potentially reducing men's sense of accountability in real life. However, some male comedians work to challenge those same power structures, either intentionally or not, and their material could potentially have the opposite effect. Even though this material deconstructs patriarchal norms, attitudes, and stereotypes, it is also produced using the outsider rhetoric.

In his 2019 special, *Fire in the Maternity Ward*, Anthony Jeselnik deconstructs traditional narratives described in the earlier section by ridiculing the self-absorbed male outsider. In a fifteen-minute routine, he recounts escorting his friend to have an abortion. More than forty-five minutes into the special, Jeselnik prepares the audience for a "very long, very true story" (47:45-47:50), which will most likely be interpreted as irony, because Jeselnik's jokes are usually absurd one-liners – very short, very untrue stories. Moreover, both Jeselnik's trademark dark style of humor and the themes he has covered earlier in the special – touching on violence, mental illness, and murder-suicide – have probably prepared the audience to expect a fully ironic story. Jeselnik constructs himself as the ultimate outsider, emotionally and physically detached from the abortion story: waiting alone in the clinic and unsure of how to act. To emphasize the distance between the sensitive issue and his self-centered persona, he

says, "It was boring. I don't know why I thought it was gonna be fun and exciting" (51:13-51:21). Jeselnik tells the story completely from his point of view, ridiculing himself – the outsider who somehow always turns the focus on himself: "I'm so bored that after a while, my mind just starts to wander, and I start to think about my friend and what she's going through behind those doors. And then almost immediately, I bring it back to myself" (52:40-52:57). In this way, Jeselnik ridicules male self-centeredness around sensitive issues rather than making abortion the target of the joke.

However, Jeselnik upsets audience expectations by blurring the boundaries of groups throughout the routine. First, he creates a group of himself and (apparently) male audience members (which he aptly calls "guys"), saying, "Don't worry, guys, wasn't my baby, wasn't important" (47:54-47:59). Apparently ignoring female members of the audience, he re-emphasizes the egotism of his stage persona. However, as Jeselnik consistently uses "guys" when addressing the entire audience, he diverges from the pattern followed by Chappelle and Schultz. Here "guys" operates on two levels: first, it is a reference to male members of the audience, and second, used to address audience members of all genders. With the latter case, Jeselnik does not create divisions between men and women but instead creates an in-group including him and his fans, who match his self-absorption. There is another level of complexity here, however. Since only caring for your own children is a stereotypically male attitude to have, it looks like Jeselnik is speaking to the male audience members. This assumption forces the female members of the audience to question whether they are included in the group to which Jeselnik is speaking throughout the show.

While Jeselnik's routine contains glimpses of bias against women, it does not fit the three categories because he creates a sense of personal connection to the issue, despite his outsider position.

> I blew it when she walked in there. I didn't have anything nice prepared, I didn't have a plan. The doctor called her name, she stood up, turned around to look at me one last time and I panicked. I just went, "Um…kill 'em in there." I'm not proud of that, you know? I consider that to be a total failure. The worst part for sure was the

> fist bump, I know that now. And, yeah, she looked at me like I'm an asshole, but…who is she to judge? (53:13-54:03)

Jeselnik uses the theme of killing, common in abortion jokes, but the moral judgment ("who is she to judge?") is more subtle and softened by a personal reflection. Rather than performing "masculinity [as] a homosocial enactment," Jeselnik shows his audience his confusion and fear, what Kimmel calls "its overriding emotion" (34). If the stand-up's job is "to have something interesting to say" (Brodie 152), Jeselnik's routine is successful precisely because he reflects on his own feelings. Even though telling the story from his perspective reinforces his arrogant and mean stage persona, it also connects him to the story. Unsure of how to act in such a sensitive case, he admits that he "panicked" and said a stupid thing, an experience many of us can relate to. Jeselnik also blurs boundaries between true/autobiographical and fictionalized material. After telling horrible jokes about extremely sensitive issues, an audience member would expect him to lie, but he insists, "I'm not going to lie to you guys" (53:11-53:12). Before the long routine, Jeselnik foreshadows this ambiguity by saying, "You guys seem like you don't believe me" (42:52-42:56). Thus, audience members must reconsider their assumptions on the sincerity of his material.

The phrase, "a very long, very true story" (47:45-47:50) becomes the most compelling aspect of Jeselnik's abortion clinic routine when analyzed with the help of Chesters's concept of "comic synchrony." As Chesters explains, audience expectations guide how a joke is interpreted: "A single sentiment can operate both ironically and sincerely simultaneously, and that it is the expectations of those in the discourse community that ultimately colour the interpretation of any utterance" (66). Jeselnik's fans, most likely used to short, ironic, and (hopefully) untrue jokes, may initially assume irony; that the story is neither "very long," nor "very true." However, as Jeselnik says at five minutes into the story that he is "only halfway done" (52:33-52:35), audience members will have to reconsider any presumptions. Of course, whether fifteen minutes is a "very long" time is subjective, but in the context of Jeselnik's material in general, it is quite long. In this way, audience expectations both shape and are shaped by this utterance: invoking Chesters's concept of "comic synchrony," this routine can be considered very long and not very long at the same time.

The same applies to the phrase "very true." It is only towards the end of the routine that Jeselnik calls his friend "Jessica" (59:50) subtly implying that she is, in fact, a real person. In the next joke, however, Jeselnik subverts that impression, reminding the audience of the creative process the routine is based on. Saying that "the worst gift you could get someone after they've just had an abortion would be a to-go box" (58:37-58:45), and apparently getting some bad looks from the audience, Jeselnik responds with an annoyed "Think of something worse and I'll change the fucking joke" (58:47-58:51). In this way, he reminds us that the whole story has been "just" stand-up, leaving the live audience to the safety of irony and thinking that all his material is ironic and un-autobiographical. However, there is a last twist on *Netflix*, as the words "For Jessica, with Love" (1:02:29) appear on the screen before the credits. In this way, the audience becomes an out-group, and the real-life Jeselnik and "Jessica" form an in-group others cannot reach. The story remains both "very true" and "not very true," especially when audience members learn that the story is based on a true event, but completely fictionalized (Mays). Even though Jeselnik says in an interview with Theo Von that he does not "have a message, just, you know, nihilism" (15:49-15:52) this routine works to deconstruct the narrative constructed in the three joke categories discussed earlier.

Another exception to the recurring categories of abortion jokes is Steve Hofstetter, who has criticized the decisions states have made concerning reproductive justice. A self-proclaimed "pro-choice comedian," Hofstetter took the outsider perspective when he performed in Texas immediately after the state had passed an anti-abortion bill, a few months before the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*. This is important because, in 2022, Texas became one of the states with the strictest legislation concerning the right to abortion.[5] Austin, Texas, is also where comedian and podcast host Joe Rogan opened his "anti-woke" comedy club, Comedy Mothership, in 2023 (Seipp). Instead of boycotting the state, as other people had advised him to do, Hofstetter "decided to do things [his] way" (0:04-0:06). This

[5] In the early 2025, "abortion is banned [in Texas] in almost all circumstances. Private citizens can sue abortion providers and those who assist patients who are seeking an abortion after about six weeks of pregnancy" (McCann and Walker).

means he traveled to perform his pro-choice comedy in Austin and Dallas, Texas, ridiculing Texan politicians, policies, and residents in quite a literal way, laughing at them: "I'm sorry to laugh, I'm allowed to leave, so I… To me, it's funny" (5:10-5:15). Hofstetter's outsider position differs from the others in that it is geographical and used to support abortion rights. In this way, he first establishes himself as a physical outsider, not as a *male* outsider.

Hofstetter challenges the idea of men as outsiders in the issue of abortion by revealing some inconsistencies. He says to a crowd in Austin, Texas: "I understand that, that law wouldn't affect me if I lived here, you know, because I'm a guy, and guys don't have anything to do with pregnancy, apparently" (1:15-1:22). Highlighting the fact that "men are involved in *all* unwanted pregnancies" (Choi 136; emphasis original), he adds, "We need to stop these babies. We need to stop these women from having babies by themselves" (2:46-2:50). First, by making men more visible in the issue of abortion, he creates a sense of connection with the audience. Implying that men are, in fact, insiders, he reminds the audience of a shared responsibility: "I actually have a genetic history of women in my family […] Yeah, my mother was a woman and…my grandmother was a woman and…I'm not, it skipped a generation with me, which is weird. But I bet if I have a daughter, she'd be a carrier" (3:21-3:38). Making the issue as relatable as possible (most people have mothers, grandmothers, or daughters), he persuades men to understand that defending women's rights concerns them, too.

Choi argues that engaging men in discussions of reproductive justice could have a positive impact on gender equality around the issue:

> To invite and convince men to join the difficult conversation of RJ and to learn from women about their experiences and bodies from women's vantage points, I propose that we take the approach of "contact hypothesis," according to which, intergroup contact or interaction under appropriate conditions can reduce prejudice between members especially if one recognizes the common humanity as an "in-group." Through this approach, men may be more open to conversation and quicker to respond when the issues are perceived as *their* issues. (130-31; emphasis original)

Keeping men completely outside reproductive justice discussions, as Choi suggests, "conveniently hides men's decisions, actions, and accountability" (123-24). However, creating communities across all genders and hearing all experiences could foster greater equality. This idea also applies to stand-up comedy, even though male comedians often construct themselves as outsiders. However, as Fuss argues, "Every outside is also an alongside" (5-6). Positioned both outside and alongside, Jeselnik upsets the gender divisions constructed in abortion jokes and real life. Whereas Jeselnik swears by nihilism, Hofstetter is an "activist comic" (Krefting), using not only stand-up but also his social media platforms like Instagram to take a stand on political debates. Their work is a form of public intellectualism (Kunze and Champion), which is antithetical to the three categories that mostly work to police and ridicule women's choices.

I Hear Men Talking About It: Conclusion

In his response to the backlash following his performance at the Trump rally, Tony Hinchcliffe stated that the people calling him out on the blatantly racist jokes "have no sense of humor" (Yang). As I have tried to show in this article, the rhetoric used in stand-up comedy is interconnected with serious public debates, even potentially contributing to the resurgence and dissemination of sexist and racist social commentary. My key takeaway is that male comedians frequently engage with reproductive justice in their stand-up material. By reusing the same themes, setups, and punchlines, they risk reinforcing patriarchal attitudes and stereotypes even in broader cultural narratives. However, as exceptions like Steve Hofstetter show, there is great potential in stand-up comedy – even when performed by men – to deconstruct divisions and create new communities.

As the discussions grow more heated, rather than dismissing harmful narratives, scholars should pay close attention to what comedians say, and at the same time, see how comedy can be used to deconstruct exclusionary rhetoric. While not all abortion jokes performed in the US between 2019 and 2024 are included in my analysis, there is still much to explore, particularly regarding how the ethnicity of the comedian affects

the delivery or reception of the comedic material. In addition, a wider examination of how male comedians engage with reproductive justice, which refers to a host of other things than abortion, ranging from personal and cultural values and norms to "sexual autonomy and gender freedom for every human being" (Ross and Solinger 9; Choi 123), is still needed. Future research would also benefit from exploring how female comedians, such as Sarah Silverman, Beth Stelling, and Brittany Ross use comedy to navigate the norms, attitudes, and stereotypes related to this issue.

Author's bionote

Dr. Tuula Kolehmainen won the 2023 Rob Kroes award for her Ph.D. dissertation, *"Like Men They Stood": Black Male Vulnerability as Resistance to Stereotypes in Fiction Written by African American Women* (2022). Her dissertation, which is to be published with Brill, focuses on fiction written by African American female authors from the late 1960s to the late 1990s. In addition, she has published essays and articles on representations of masculinities in fiction written by African American and Asian American women. Kolehmainen has been working on her postdoctoral project, "Playing with Power and Vulnerability in Autobiographical Works of African American Stand-Up Comedians," at the John Morton Center for North American Studies at the University of Turku, Finland, with the support of the Turku University Foundation. Currently she teaches English at Tampere University, Finland, and is a board member of the Finnish American Studies Association (FASA).

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