

“THROUGH THE *HAHA* DOOR”: THE SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY OF LOUIS C.K.

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I dedicate this work to my parents, for whom I am endlessly thankful,

And to Dr. David Lavery, in loving memory

## ABSTRACT

Following a line of comedians including Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor, and George Carlin, Louis C.K. has become an influential personality not only in the world of comedy, but in society, as well. This thesis examines Louie's techniques of black humor and deadpan expression, and how those techniques serve as a tool for his social commentary. Following his comedic elements, this work also uses various theories to show that Louie is not only a comedian whom we laugh with, but a comic site onto which our own thoughts can be projected. This work then turns to Louis C.K.'s social commentary and how it connects to French philosopher Albert Camus' philosophy of the absurd. C.K.'s commentary leads to deeper critical reflection in which he struggles with notions of eternal life, the issue of suicide, and finally, the choice to revolt rather than to succumb to life's unanswered mysteries. Following, these comedic elements and philosophical explorations can be applied to C.K.'s feminist values. By first understanding his humor and more serious reflections, his approach to feminist topics such as power relationships, body image, and the issue of rape humor can be further explored. In this way, we can view Louis C.K. as one of the most successful comedians of our day as well as a social philosopher who encourages his audience to maintain moral soundness amidst an uncertain and chaotic world.

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## INTRODUCTION

*[It's] an amazing gift when you think about it... what you get with a basic life. Not even a particularly lucky life, or a healthy life... basic cable is what you get, when you get life.*

—Louis C.K., *Oh My God*

Growing up, Louis C.K. had always dreamed of being a comic. A new wave of obscene stand-up comedy was on the rise among small, underground nightclubs scattered across the country, and as an aspiring teen, Louis (referred to as Louie throughout this work) described himself as “annoying” with his many questions for the established performers that surrounded him. As a young creative growing up in Boston, the opportunity of comedy hardly landed in his lap. “I probably would have stayed just a kid with a yearning and grown into a man with no skills and would have had no choice but to rob old ladies to make my living,” he admits on his website after introducing old friend and partial reason for his success, Barry Crimmins. Crimmins fathered a stand-up scene in Boston that opened the door for young Louie, who one day hesitantly traipsed to Stitches Comedy Club with a five-minute window on stage. But the bar was set high: he found himself amidst a wave of energetic new comedians, and open mic nights at the club were taken rather seriously.

This seriousness is part of the rich history of comedy. The genre has always had a certain connection to social commentary as one of its major roles is to acknowledge and confirm society’s values and norms as well as to challenge them. Henri Bergson concurs in “The Comic in General,” “For the comic spirit has a logic of its own... can it then fail to throw light for us on the way that human imagination works, and more particularly social, collective, and popular

imagination?”<sup>1</sup> The first and foremost intent of comedy is to provoke laughter but also to interrogate society in its prescribed traditions and outlook on the world. In this way, comedy is capable (if even for the duration of the set) of transforming the mindsets of the audience. As for Louie, it seems he wants to challenge his audience because he doesn't believe society is challenged *enough*. Yet he does not exist outside this societal realm, even as performer; in an interview with Charlie Rose, Louie acknowledged his ability to identify with the normal, “[We] talk like other people talk.” Louie's often grounding reflections when on stage follow a long line of comedians who liked to find social truths in their audience's hysterical laughter.

Louie's influence derives from many comic-commentator pioneers. Although America saw the rise of comedy through nineteenth-century vaudeville and circus acts, it wasn't until the fifties that club comedians began popping up in major cities. Among Louie's early favorites in the mid-1980s were Steve Martin, Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, George Carlin, and Steven Wright.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most similar to his humor are Pryor and Carlin, both of whom incorporated brash and offensive content into their sets. This brusque style also echoes that of Lenny Bruce, the resurrector of comedy in the early sixties who was famous for “edgy stand-up routines based on race, religion, and sexual hypocrisy” and whose humor hinged on shocking and offensive stories rather than jokes. “I'm not a comedian,” Bruce once said, “The world is sick and I'm the doctor. I'm a surgeon with a scalpel for false values. I don't have an act. I just talk.”<sup>3</sup> Although politics were not the central subject of their work, Bruce and Pryor often incorporated an air of sobering verisimilitude—including their personal outlook on social issues—in their stand-up comedy sets. Pryor once opened an act with the statement “White folks take everything from you.” Although the audience erupted in laughter, Pryor then gave a disclaimer: “I'm not [going

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<sup>1</sup> Bergson, “The Comic in General,” in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), 62.

<sup>2</sup> C.K., Louis. “News and Updates.” *Louis C.K.*, 24 Dec. 2016., accessed 14 Jan. 2017, <https://louisck.net/news>.

<sup>3</sup> Scott Weems, *Ha! The Science of When We Laugh and Why* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), ix-x.

to edit]... so a lot of people here might be offended,” after which he lists off a string of foul language as a warning that his show would not be censored.<sup>4</sup> Like Bruce, who often cared little about his audience’s reactions to his coarseness, Pryor set up a realm in which anything could be said, including vulgar language and unapologetic social commentary.

Comedy has indeed come a long way since the days of Bruce’s arrests for obscenity. America would witness an evolution of acceptance regarding censorship and obscenity in the following decades. Following Bruce, Carlin and Pryor would later continue the raunchy comedy fad that proved an undying power (for example, Carlin’s notorious “Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television” still prevails today), but Louie has received widespread fame as a result of the obscenity for which Bruce was arrested. His fame as compared to Bruce’s exclusion is likely due to the acceptance of real-life untraditional situations and higher volume of offensive content and language in the media. It is interesting to note the ways he transforms the odd and makes it funny; this perpetual oddness separates Louie from other comedians of his day. His personal stories connect to his audience on a number of levels, but most of all, they force listeners to think beyond their laughter.

Louie’s background perhaps accounts for part of his oddness and the clarity with which he views society. He was born in Washington D.C. under the name Louis Székely, shortly after which he moved to his father’s home of Mexico and then back to the United States at age seven. The experience of coming back to America left Louie “[an] observing person,” his pale skin and red hair making the transition all the easier, Louie relates in various interviews, comparing himself to comedian George Lopez (who, though born in California, may stereotypically be treated as “an immigrant” due to his Mexican-American roots). He adds, “I had the help of a

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<sup>4</sup> *Richard Pryor: Omit the Logic*, directed by Marina Zenovich. (2013; USA: Fresh One Productions), DVD.

whole nation of people just accepting that I'm white.”<sup>5</sup> Louie's unique family history is in part due to his paternal grandfather's Hungarian Jewish descent and paternal grandmother's Catholic, Indigenous Mexican descent, as Louie himself still holds a Mexican citizenship. In another interview, Louie retells his experience of coming to America as a young boy as compared to his awareness of his family heritage, "... [the idea of] democracy and free speech was, just... an incredible thing to me.”<sup>6</sup> This free speech is a point from which Louie would flourish; while his early comedy hardly disrupted boundaries, his later work would define him as an inquisitor to his audience, deconstructing their traditions and beliefs through humor. His removal as a newcomer to the United States, although at a young age, likely gave Louie the well-rounded distance from which his social critique could move forward.

While his escape from outsider status proved advantageous, his beginnings, like that of the majority of middle-class American youth, were challenging—the traditional path of going to college, finding a job, and establishing oneself in the adult world appeared to be an ideal in which Louie did not readily fit—but his uniqueness did not begin with that single trip to the comedy club. A promising start at N.Y.U.'s film school resulted in a blank college application – “I just couldn't fill out the thing” – and Louie tried his hand at typical beginning jobs: "... [an] auto mechanic, a cook at KFC, and, eventually, a stand-up comic, which offered less job security but... [as it turned out], more opportunities for career advancement.”<sup>7</sup> Unlike many celebrities who are born into fame, Louie's maze through life experiences play into his unique outlook toward the world. More so, these experiences give him a humbling background from which his projected ho-hum normalcy can be celebrated. These prospects of comedy eventually resulted in

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<sup>5</sup> This specific information derives from the interview “Louis C.K.: I'm an Accidental White Person.” *Rolling Stone*. 11 April 2013. <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/louis-c-k-im-an-accidental-white-person-20130411>

<sup>6</sup> Louis C.K., Interview by Charlie Rose. 25 April 2016. <https://charlierose.com/videos/27296>

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Marantz, “Louis C.K.'s Motivating Anxiety.” *The New Yorker*. February 7, 2014. <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/louis-c-k-s-motivating-anxiety>.



Louie's rise to success as he is now considered a "comic powerhouse."<sup>8</sup> The outsider's perspective that distanced Louie at age seven likely plays a part in how he critiques American society today.

In addition to his unique perspective, Louie stands out as a comedian in many ways. While a number of contributors and bloggers have written about his comedy routines, these critics likewise appear to be distracted by Louie's humor techniques themselves. Louie's brutal honesty in part makes up what he stands for: healthy realism amidst a nonstop stream of sugarcoated media. Through both the real Louie and his fictionalized version of himself, humor is used to challenge our traditions. Some of the major issues revolving around Louie's content are more deserving than brief articles and are thus necessary for academic discussion. Praise and criticism found in countless articles on Louie weave a common thread: he remains an important figure in today's society. For example, many consider Louie the "undisputed king of comedy," as an interview by *GQ* considers his genius: "... [it's] all about how he forcefully accesses that psychic marrow of ours... [There is] nothing he can't and won't demystify or de-sentimentalize."<sup>9</sup> It is this unapologetic demeanor that "[ruffles] feathers,"<sup>10</sup> as certain distaste has been expressed on popular media sites such as *The Daily Beast* and *Big Think*.<sup>11</sup> His brash jokes told through minimal expression, alongside their unsettling scope into reality, indeed throw his audience into perhaps an unexpected moral questioning. However, this effect must be further examined to understand Louie's challenges to his audiences—challenges that insist that

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<sup>8</sup> Louis C.K., Interview by Terry Gross. "Louis C.K. On Life And Stand-Up: 'I Live In Service For My Kids.'" *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio, 28 April 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Coresello, "Louis C.K. is America's Undisputed King of Comedy." *GQ*. May 13, 2014. <http://www.gq.com/story/louis-ck-cover-story-may-2014>.

<sup>10</sup> Pamela Haag, "A Misogyny Double Standard? Louis C.K. and the Correspondents' Dinner," *Big Think*, <http://bigthink.com/harpys-review/a-misogyny-double-standard-louis-ck-and-the-correspondents-dinner>.

<sup>11</sup> Amy Zimmerman, "Donald Trump, Louis C.K., and Sexual Consent," *The Daily Beast*, 11 October 2016. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/10/11/donald-trump-louis-c-k-and-sexual-consent.html>.

philosophical reflection must not end when the show is over. Louie's lasting success represents his intellectual explorations and ultimately encourages critical thinking among his fans beyond the point of a comedy special.

It is likely that Louie is often misunderstood because of his offensive controversies. Louie *is*, above all else, funny—yet the comedian likely did not begin his path to comedy with his social philosophy in mind. Different from other philosophers, he has his own comedic way of going about his social critique. His uncanniness in bringing to attention topics such as masturbation create an immediate intimacy with his audience, while also throwing in witty comments on the system in which he lives. In the realm of unforgiving American media, Louie exposes his deepest fears, regrets, and ambitions without a flinch to criticism—an especially vulnerable approach for a comedian. Louie's commentary on current issues reflects his resistance to blindly accepting widely held beliefs, yet he blatantly critiques such notions while simultaneously maintaining a moral balance. Louie's social criticisms hint at his discontent toward a growing anti-intellectualism and overly placed trust in social systems in America, echoing historian Richard Hofstadter's musings on “widespread social attitudes... [and] political behavior... [which] gravely inhibit or impoverish intellectual and cultural life.”<sup>12</sup> Louie comments upon the characteristics of society's behavior, whether in a positive or negative light; this challenging of traditions and beliefs through the encouragement to critically engage is a pivotal point throughout this work. Neither an activist nor politician, Louie nevertheless holds major influence in the fast-paced, demanding society in which he lives.

Louie deconstructs authoritative roles by asking straightforward questions—a matter societally attached to vulnerability and ignorance. Yet his cynical inquisitiveness does not suggest he is above us; rather, he is at his audience's level (or even, at times, below it). In a

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Random House, 1962), 9.

mass fan email he gives a rare, straightforward critique on the 2016 presidential race: “[Trump] is not a good candidate. He’s an insane bigot. He’s dangerous.” Later in the email, he concluded, “Trump is not one of you. He is one of him.” This blunt warning to his fans does not place Louie in a celebratory ivory tower. Instead, his American normalcy despite his Mexican roots implies that perhaps all of us are capable of critically interrogating the system in which we live.

In the aforementioned interview with Charlie Rose, Louie’s political comments and his ability to serve as an influential platform is furthered: “[I think I’ve] said everything I need to say about Donald Trump... [and] I don’t tell anybody what to think... but, I *did* come into their lives through the funny *haha* door, and then I took a big political serious shit on their table.”<sup>13</sup> Louie’s access through the “haha door” can be translated into his methodology itself—an unexpected questioning of the human condition embedded within the act of laughter. Louie’s public political involvement does not tend to go beyond short bits directed at Trump and his politics, nor does he commit to any specific political party, but this scenario does imply that he believes in critical thinking and individual choice—a speculation that exists far from social monotony. Calling Trump “a symptom to a problem that is very real,”<sup>14</sup> he breaks through the boundary which most celebrities do not cross and asks his fans to think more deeply than the idealistic, surface-level appeal that Trump’s “Make America Great Again” slogan suggests. Louie utilizes this “haha door” and subtly opens it to comment upon popularly unquestioned beliefs and values of American ways.

Since his setting foot into the world of stand-up comedy in 1985, Louie has since become writer, actor, director and producer of his semi-autobiographical show, *Louie*, as well as having appeared on numerous talk shows such as *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* and *The Late Show with David*

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<sup>13</sup> Louis C.K., Interview by Charlie Rose. 25 April 2016. <https://charlierose.com/videos/27296>

<sup>14</sup> Louis C.K., “Re: Horace and Pete episode 6.” Received by Rachel Brooks, 5 March 2016.

*Letterman*. He's played the lead voicing role in the children's animation *Secret Life of Pets*, a humorous endeavor in itself for the ordinarily foul-mouthed comedian. In addition to his comedic achievements of live tours and a string of prestigious awards, he released HBO sitcom *Lucky Louie*, which ran one season in 2006, five critically acclaimed seasons of *Louie*, and most recently a webseries entitled *Horace and Pete*, which quickly claimed success. Such achievements show that, while a controversial public figure, Louie stands as a strong representation of free thinking in his dicey topics that invoke critical reflection, especially wherein one is pushed out of their comfort zones. His broad success has reached fans of all ages, races, backgrounds, and beliefs, and through a subtle but eccentric window he asks his audience to become not only interested but *engaged* in their realities. Although *Lucky Louie* and *Horace and Pete* are important works deserving of focus, for the purpose of this thesis I remain within the boundaries of *Louie* and various stand-up sets. While Louie does hold a significant amount of social power, he hints through his comedic routines that all human beings are both equal and capable of making positive change.

Opposed to more passive entertainment in which funniness exists as an isolated act, Louie's humor bridges into an absurdist philosophical discussion. Take, for instance, his popular clip "Why?," wherein he muses upon and grows frustrated with the persistent, innocent wonder and inquisitiveness of his daughter:

[Children] just keep coming... [with] more questions, "Why? Why? Why?" 'til you don't even know who the fuck you are anymore at the end of the conversation. It's an insane deconstruction...

And again, when his daughter continuously asks "Why?" after Louie tells her they can't go outside because of the weather, eventually leading to an endless spiral of "whys," Louie exasperatedly explains,

... ‘Cause fuck it, we’re alone in the universe; nobody gives a shit about us!  
 ... [This questioning] goes on for hours and *hours* and it gets so weird and abstract [that] at the end it’s like, “Why?” ... Well, because *some* things are, and some things are *not*. “Why?” Well, because things that are *not* can’t *be*. “Why?” ... Because then nothing wouldn’t *be*! You can’t have fucking nothing that *isn’t*! Everything *is*!

The exhausting discussion concludes as Louie boosts his pitch to exude insanity. The conversation he had with his daughter, on the one hand, depicts a typical father-child relationship in which a child’s questions sometimes reach a certain pointlessness, but it is this very absence of a point that Louie extracts and uses with purpose. His daughter’s questions reached the level of absurdity, but Louie does not patronize the actual asking of the question “Why?” He maddeningly trails into the series of questions until he reaches the conclusion of delirium—also the rut experienced in an existential crisis (though he does so with humor in this case). While society largely repels the questioning of many customs and ideals, Louie questions life as a whole. This situation is important to grasp when considering his style of humor in its connection to real life thought processes. Louie’s humor, then, is also his philosophy. To be absurd in humor is, in this instance, to be absurd in one’s understanding of life itself.

Much like his comic influences, Louie’s content largely involves vulgarity (it is rare to hear him speak without the use of foul language). However, his crudeness goes beyond mockery and into social commentary. First, Chapter One breaks down the comic theories of late twentieth century English and French thinkers George Meredith (1828-1909) and the aforementioned Henri Bergson (1859-1941), and applies them to Louie’s deadpan delivery and black humor. Louie’s humor is further examined through the lens of John Limon’s *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, Or, Abjection in America*, wherein Limon stresses the importance of the “abject” in comedy.<sup>15</sup> The fact that such crudeness—particularly in terms of the body—is nevertheless part

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<sup>15</sup> John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, Or, Abjection in America* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2000), 4.

of one's self becomes a vital aspect and obsession within Louie's comedy, and Limon's use of the abject can aid in the understanding of this enthrallment in art forms as well as aid in the positioning of Louie as "comic site." By better understanding Louie's elements of deadpan style and black humor, along with his self-debasing use of the abject, one can then move on to his larger philosophical observations.

Chapter Two covers Louie and the philosophy of absurdism, a term coined by Albert Camus in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his works *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus's focus revolves around the search for life's ultimate meaning, and the inability to find such meaning. First, this chapter breaks down Camus's philosophy, then addressing the issue of eternal meaning that is raised within his work. Then, I consider Camus's absurdist solution to *revolt*, wherein one chooses to construct their own meaning rather than to fall to despair. Louie, echoing the philosophy of Camus, revolts against the meaninglessness of life raised by the philosophy of the absurd in his many skits and stand-up acts. Throughout this chapter examples of Louie's comedy are used to reveal the comedian as an important philosopher of our time.

Chapter Three serves as an exploration of Louie's feminist values, and although in the past he has presented discord with such labels, his content both on the stage and in the semi-autobiographical *Louie* depicts otherwise. Despite being criticized for misogyny, Louie instills feministic values into his comedic performances. This chapter examines Louie's incorporation of power relationships, especially that of the female mentor, discusses the tension regarding body image and expectations, and finally addresses the issue of rape in our culture. Much of Louie's content deals with social commentary on feminist values and the examples of gender equality in *Louie* and in his stand-up involve strong themes of feminism. Throughout these examples, one

can better understand that Louie's content is not directed toward the villainizing of women but instead speaks to an inversion of masochism, domesticity and female subordination.

Where this investigation parts from previous criticisms is the point at which the analyzing of comedy does not end at the genre's limits but wherein humor serves as a vital component in understanding the human condition. As further analyzed in this essay, Louie projects a mood toward society that does not harm or mock but attempts to make better and encourages his audience to strive for the "good life"—one of philosophy's greatest quests. With his staple elements of comedy, Louie carries his viewers into his realm of worldly understanding, a social philosophy that echoes that of Camus's absurd. Through these comedic characteristics, Louie highlights the importance of women with his strong feminist undercurrents. Divided among these main attractions of Louie's content are these philosophical pockets of advice, viewed, of course, through the lens of his contagious, raucous comedy.

## CHAPTER ONE: ELEMENTS OF COMEDY: LOUIE AS COMIC SITE

*What do you think... I have integrity? I'm buying a Cinnabon.*

—Louis C.K., *Chewed Up*

In his stand-up comedy special *Oh My God*, Louie reflects to his audience,

Everybody has a competition in their brain of good thoughts and bad thoughts... hopefully [the good thoughts] win. For me, I always have both... [I have], like, the thing I believe... and then there's *this* thing, and I don't believe it, but it *is* there... [It's] become a category in my brain that I call "of course" [and] "but maybe."

He then gives an example, which raises the issue of nut allergies among children,

Of course [children with nut allergies] need to be protected. *Of course!* [We] have to segregate their food from nuts, have their medication available at all times... but maybe... *maybe* if touching a nut kills you, you're supposed to die.

A few moments of silence ensue, after which the audience explodes with laughter, and Louie scrunches his nose, wearing a "So what?" expression. He shows no sign of emotional concern in his deadpan delivery, after which he reassures his audience, "Of *course* not... *Jesus*." This conversation waffles back and forth between "of course not" and "maybe" until Louie admits that "maybe" if society turned a blind eye to the allergy "... for one year, [we'd be] done with nut allergies forever."<sup>1</sup> To a degree, such an immoral solution to a critical issue echoes the humor of Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*. Louie's deadpan delivery and black humor are scattered throughout his skits and stand-up acts and are two elements that are analyzed in the first section of this chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> Louis C.K., *Oh My God*, directed by Louis C.K. (2013; Phoenix: Pig Newton, Inc.), DVD.



As a whole, this chapter investigates the many ways that select theories can apply to Louie's comedy, particularly concerning these two elements. The above example from Louie's stand-up is humorous but also societally reflective in his interrogation regarding our thoughts and actions as human beings. Louie seems to acknowledge that although deadly allergies are a reality, they also reveal our fragility as a human species. With little to no expression (deadpan delivery), he raises a taboo solution (black humor). Although Louie uses these elements interchangeably, I will analyze them separately for proper academic discussion.

Later in this chapter, I will also explore the ways in which Louie's self-debasing behavior and use of the abject allow his audience to get an even closer look at his philosophical musings. Admitting his perpetual state of self-loathing, Louie critically bashes his own body and in turn attempts to normalize its idiosyncrasies to his audience, as shown in this moment from his special *Chewed Up*, "[A meal] is not over when I'm full. The meal is over when I hate myself... [I'm] always just uncomfortable, just sweaty and just, like, I—[uh] this is such a bummer. [Like] it's my nightmare. It's my whole life."<sup>2</sup> Relating not only his body but his existence in such a grotesque fashion reveals Louie's state of abjection.

In this skit, Louie accomplishes the issue of bodily expectations in society and how they become instilled in our psyches. It is important to identify this technique not only for the sake of comedy but to better understand the ways his revealing of bodily monstrosities helps us come to terms with our own personal discomforts. By placing his own body at the center of ridicule, his audience can project their honest opinions and dissatisfactions onto Louie himself. This poses Louie as a comic site, where he serves as not only a comedian but a place of humor. While Louie's style indeed makes millions of fans double over with laughter, a clearer understanding of his comedic elements must first occur before an analysis of his social philosophy is made.

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<sup>2</sup> Louis C.K., *Chewed Up*, directed by Louis C.K. and Shannon Hartman (2008; Boston: Image Entertainment), DVD.

Ultimately, this chapter will show that techniques in Louie's comedy serve as tools through which his bigger ideas can emerge—revealing his role as both comedian and social philosopher.

### **Louie's Deadpan Style**

Deadpan delivery is perhaps the most consistent comedic element that Louie exercises. Throughout the course of his television series *Louie* and his stand-up monologues, Louie can often be found responding to a variety of stimuli with little more than a smug expression. One might suppose this reaction is a well-planned conversational tactic or simply his way of making us laugh. While both of these assumptions are true, this deadpan style also allows his audiences to go through a complex set of experiences: we laugh and then we *think*. Discussing the issue of deadly health allergies with a deadpan expression forces us to construct our own thoughts about the issue. By removing himself from emotion, Louie presents comedy as an exiled safe zone where his audience can assess topics without direct, society-driven answers. Much of Louie's content is expressed through this style in order to get his larger points across, including issues that send his content in the direction of social commentary.

As seen in the peanut allergy joke, Louie's often expressionless style of humor is capable of turning into a conversation about more serious matters regarding the human condition. Yet how can a dangerous illness be publicly talked about while sharing no clear signs of expression? English novelist George Meredith and French philosopher Henri Bergson are two thinkers who give routes to clarifying this question and its answer. Similar to Louie's interests, Meredith and Bergson wrote upon comedy's relevance in the realm of social commentary. Alternately applied to Louie's humor in this section, both the reflections of Meredith and Bergson help expose Louie

as a king of deadpan delivery by his using this technique to both entertain and morally question his audience. The often lifeless looks Louie portrays in his comedy mocks humanity in its complex network of more serious feelings, even though he appears devoid of concern. His deadpan comedy free of polite filters allow for the human race to become critiqued in full, allowing us to both laugh at others while simultaneously laughing at ourselves.

Each of Louie's jokes is set up for his audience to respond—the ways they will react is entirely dependent on the listener of the joke. His expression does not direct them in that Louie has no particular guidance; thus, the burden of reaction is on his audience. He bluntly reminds his audience in a stand-up skit,

[You] need to know that you're boring a little bit. It's important. Self-love is a good thing, but self-*awareness* is more important. You need to, once in a while, go "Uhh, I'm kind of an asshole."<sup>3</sup>

Louie's straight-faced demeanor creates a blank canvas which his audience's own expressions may fill and perhaps even reconsider their own inward thoughts. In this way, this skit asks us to perhaps consider our own confidence and how our self-love might affect those around us. Although his focal intent is likely not to invoke serious discussion, his effects on viewers create a lasting impression in which they continually self-assess their actions with others and with the world. This social reflection exemplifies Louie's underlying element of deadpan delivery; his blank expressions force us to paint them with our own meaning. Louie's expressionlessness is the exact opposite of how it suggests we behave: while on its own it creates an atmosphere lacking in care, its underlying message encourages us to maintain self-awareness without stooping to pretentiousness. His distancing of himself from heavy feelings help pose him as a neutral figure on stage, giving the emotional responsibilities to his audience to contemplate. To

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<sup>3</sup> Louis C.K., *Live at the Comedy Store*, directed by Louis C.K. (2015; West Hollywood: FX), DVD.

understand his deeper social reflections that are discussed in the next chapter, one must first see the ways his comic elements are used in his jokes about humanity.

Bergson's "The Comic in General" argues that "Begotten of real life and akin to art, should [the comic spirit] not also have something of its own to tell us about art and life?"<sup>4</sup> The nature of Louie's jokes constructs an invitation for discussion; while Louie does not have the answers to life's deepest questions, his commentary asks us to become more inquisitive and intellectually engaged. From that process—fueled by Louie's deadpan expression—we may construct our own answers. This resistance to blindly accept widely held beliefs runs current through most of Louie's work. It appears that amidst America's trending anti-intellectualism, Louie offers disruptive, unsettling, and thought-evoking content to purposely throw us out of our mental comfort zones. Connecting to Louie's removal from emotions, Bergson notes that to be humorous, something must be detached from human feeling, "... [an absence of feeling] usually accompanies laughter."<sup>5</sup> Louie's lack of sentimentality as he temporarily replaces emotion with laughter is a prime example of his deadpan style. His lack of direction concerning response to his jokes offer an open critique regarding life itself. The detachment of human emotion, while in many cases dangerous, is at other times advantageous in rationally seeing the world without the often hindering cloudiness of emotions—suggesting that Louie wants his audience to be rational through their own response to his deadpan delivery. It is clear that Bergson and his intellectual predecessors saw the potential of humor amongst other humanistic features; comedy goes beyond serving the purpose of mere entertainment.

Told with minimum expression aside from leaked grins, Louie gives his audience a glimpse of laughing through misfortune during his stand-up special *Live at the Beacon Theater*,

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<sup>4</sup> Bergson, "The Comic in General," in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), 62-63.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

I fly first class. I'm not [like you]... [First class] is *so* crazily better... You get to sit before anybody else does. They sit you down and you get to just sit there with champagne and watch all the sweaty, miserable... all the single moms hefting their stroller and the kid, [thinking] 'That looks heavy and nobody's helping you. That's a drag.'<sup>6</sup>

Louie's emotional detachment in both his expression and his described physical reaction points out our often selfish habits, whether or not we fly first class. While society often tends to look the other way when help is in need, Louie acknowledges that all of us (including himself) have been selfish in some situations. Neglecting care in this situation, while he makes it humorous also exposes the reality that many of us do not always exercise altruism, if at all. Calling out his audience for greedy pretentiousness is comical but also might encourage us to simply think about our surroundings more deeply—including those struggling amidst our luxuries. Similar to the peanut allergy skit, Louie reveals truths about society which at times we might otherwise resist or ignore. This social jabbing transports Louie's deadpan delivery into more serious conversation in which the next section of this chapter also plays a part.

### **The Element of Black Comedy**

Perpetually a two-sided coin, deadpan delivery and black comedy connect in such a way that induces thinking on a deeper level (as opposed to, for instance, slapstick humor wherein humor exists as an isolated act between performer and viewer). Oftentimes, Louie's dark humor disturbs, accessing an uncomfortable, perhaps unvisited section of the mind that many viewers typically shut out. At the same time, his discussions are *funny*, despite their dim underlying message. His critics likely become offended by the bleak humor itself, mistaking comedy for cruelty. Yet the purpose of Louie's jokes is not to merely offend (although that may be part of

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<sup>6</sup> Louis C.K., *Live at the Beacon Theater*, directed by Louis C.K. (2011; Manhattan: Pig Newton, Inc.), DVD.

the joke process) but to reveal truths otherwise hidden in a polite public setting. Whether we like to hear it or prefer to shut it out, Louie's obsession with the darker sides of life sheds light on the ways we interact as a society.

Dovetailing fluidly from such examples of deadpan style in Louie's comedic approach, the element of dark comedy (or black comedy), helps define and position Louie in his infamous realm of offensive humor. In the *Anthology of Black Humor*, Surrealist founder André Breton notes that "[black humor] is always a little green around the edges, for... [it is] the opposite of joviality, wit, or sarcasm. Rather, it is a partly macabre, partly ironic, often absurd turn of spirit that constitutes the 'mortal enemy of sentimentality' and a 'superior revolt of the mind.'"<sup>7</sup> Breton saw in this strange humor "the bitter guffaw over which the bellicose folly of his times had little hold."<sup>8</sup> Just as Louie presented his audience with the ugly reminder that we are often selfish, his turning away from sentimentality gives a raw account of society. We enjoy considering ourselves collectively good in human nature, but Louie's commentary permeates that polite boundary and exposes innate feelings and actions.

Louie's offensive topics are seen as too shocking to be openly discussed in a typical public setting, yet his fans seem to identify with his raw depiction of humanity. Although the use of black comedy is an element that the public has witnessed for epochs, Louie's approach to the more offensive aspects of life (including that of bodily functions and mortality) propel him as both comedian and philosopher. Take his stand-up monologue in which he admits to feeling hatred toward a child in his daughter's class, whom he gives the temporary name "Jizanthapus." Jizanthapus is a spoiled terror of a child, according to Louie, who finally finds reason to reprimand him when the child bullies his daughter:

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<sup>7</sup> André Breton, *Anthology of Black Humor*, ed. Mark Polizzotti. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997), vi.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, vii.

... I wanna get [Jizanthapus] on a flight to Venezuela with an envelope on his head... [You] future ditch-digging piece of shit. Oh, I'm going to love watching you grow up into nothing, motherfucker.<sup>9</sup>

Then imagining the father of Jizanthapus, whom Louie predicts has walked out on his son, the story unfolds into Louie splitting up the child's family and ruining their lives—all as a result of disliking Jizanthapus. Yet he claims this is only an effect of parenthood in which he must do everything in his power to protect his daughter. His audience uproars in laughter, even after Louie imagines plotting the little boy's death. This effect takes place in part by Louie's complete deconstruction of our politeness as he once again revisits black humor. Even though the horrible act of sending a child off to be executed is clearly hypothetical, Louie pushes us into a realm in which we question public decency and the boundaries of language. While the idea of murdering a child is indeed sinister, Louie shows that such dark thoughts are more common than we might initially presume; by throwing our sense of ethics into question, he asks us how far we would really go to protect those we love. He brings dark comedy and social philosophy together by commenting upon the ways often detachedly ridicule those unfamiliar to us, and such distancing might indicate otherwise ignored aspects about ourselves. Verbalizing the murder of a child is taboo, but in the case of Jizanthapus and his misbehavior, Louie invites us to ridicule *him* in the acceptable realm of comedy. By unapologetically posing an uncomfortable situation, Louie mimics philosophical queries by forcing us to think about our moral constructs. Black comedy sheds all politeness, and Louie's invitation allows us to cathartically release our social tensions with others—and in this case, Jizanthapus—into his microcosm of a social circle.

Like the aforementioned Jonathan Swift, who “more than anyone despised the human race [was] no less possessed by a frantic need for justice,”<sup>10</sup> Louie brings to the surface his

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<sup>9</sup> Louis C.K., *Live at the Beacon Theater*, directed by Louis C.K. (2011; Manhattan: Pig Newton, Inc.), DVD.

frustrations with society—searching for life’s advantages despite its frequent darkness. His comedy shows his evident discord with politeness and strips many social constructs to show that we are all only human; therefore, many of our taboos are hollowly formulated. Yet his critique on such matters does not stop at mere complaints; he points out a need for change and begs his audience to actively pursue that change. His observation of politics and currently-sticky social issues can connect fluidly with this general feeling of skepticism and disbelief toward social constructs, having what appears to be a “superior revolt of the mind.” Louie uses the tool of black humor to crush social etiquette and question our constructs. In doing so, his status doubles as comedian and philosopher while he influences his audiences beyond the realm of the comedy venue.

In addition to deadpan, Louie utilizes the vehicle of black humor to attract and maintain his audience’s attention, at last arriving to his social commentary. Much of Louie’s black humor derives from offensive conversations around serious societal issues, as he recognizes the vulnerability and mental flexibility of the individuals in that society. Meredith acknowledges the relationship between seriousness and humor:

The comic poet is in the narrow field, or enclosed square, of the society he depicts... The aim and business of the comic poet are misunderstood, his meaning is not seized nor his point of view taken, when he is accused of dishonoring our nature and being hostile to sentiment, tending to spitefulness and making an unfair use of laughter. Those who detect irony in comedy do so because they choose to see it in life.<sup>11</sup>

Louie’s black humor is certainly not mindful of sentimentality. Meredith touches upon other techniques found within Louie’s element of black humor, including the shaming of society and

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<sup>10</sup> Breton, 4.

<sup>11</sup> George Meredith, “An Essay on Comedy,” ed. Wylie Sypher. *Comedy* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), 46.



“tending to spitefulness.” Many critics of Louie’s humor claim that his content is depressing or even “dishonoring” of our nature in its offensiveness—yet it unearths many truths that society might not readily accept.

In the aforementioned instance of Louie’s skit on boringness, he reveals the notion that although we are societally pressured to constantly appear lively and interesting, sometimes it is acceptable to admit that you do not always pique others’ interests. Louie goes on to say that being perpetually entertaining is simply not realistic, nor altruistic. When calling out a hypothetical friend for being “an asshole” and disagreement erupts, he responds to the fictional situation, “Well it’s not *up* to you! [if you’re an asshole or not]... that’s up to everybody else.” In this scenario, Louie paints the image that we are all familiar with: selfish, egotistical habits and the societally established notion that vulnerability equates to being inferior. By giving this unapologetic skit through his racy commentary, Louie warns us of becoming too self-absorbed to the point at which we ignore other’s feelings. Louie’s raunchy style criticizes us as audience without arrogant superiority (in fact, he may even place himself *below* us). The humor found in these dark jokes is challenging because Louie supposes that society isn’t challenged *enough*. Although he can’t purge negativity and evil from the world completely, he can certainly attempt to make light of our society’s mishaps, while simultaneously crafting compassion for society and a search for justice in his humorous opinions.

Individual openness and frank exposure of society’s less appealing features are essential ingredients in many forms of comedy, but black comedy perhaps calls for it in high demand. Regardless of the critique, black humor will stay fashionable in that it always deals with current situations—and those current issues always leak into Louie’s stand-up routines. “Absolute stand-up,” John Limon of *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, Or, Abjection in America* entails, “... is

akin to Clausewitz's 'absolute war': the shared object is perfect devastation."<sup>12</sup> Louie sparks devastation of our politeness that is normally practiced in social settings. In a way that provides relief from accepted etiquette, Louie's jokes ground us by giving us tolerable space to critique our world.

Amongst Louie's stand-up (which appears in scaffolding vignettes throughout *Louie*) one example in particular shows Louie's devastations. In this monologue, he addresses the issue of the media's perpetuating pressure on viewers to find a lifelong mate. In a frank statement, he scolds society in its utopian expectations that are actually more derogatory than helpful,

There are people out there who there's just nobody for them.  
 People like to say things like, 'There's someone for everyone'...  
 NOPE. Not at all true. And stop sayin' it 'cause it's mean to people  
 who never find anybody.

Louie then hypothetically regards the people who might feel bad about the unfortunate individuals that never find a soulmate, stating that if they feel bad, *they* should "go fuck [one]." He continues by saying that because no one really wants to be with these ugly people, there are a plethora of single individuals in the world.<sup>13</sup> The raw and unbearably truthful observation that society is judgmental in regards to appearances could be seen as disrespectful, but for this particular comedian, there is no humanitarian filter. In this joke, Louie attacks his audience for their hypocrisy and their sentimental notions of human connectivity. This instance can serve as a model for Louie's frequent use of dark humor and also reveals that his offensiveness is not a hollow act; rather, he turns the mirror upon his audience to show that life may not be the milk and honey that we choose to perceive. The raw remarks embedded in Louie's jokes may be

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<sup>12</sup> John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, Or, Abjection in America* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2000), 13.

<sup>13</sup> Louis C.K., *Live at the Beacon Theater*, directed by Louis C.K. (2011; Manhattan: Pig Newton, Inc.), DVD.

repulsive to some but is capable of offending us into self-consciousness that leads to an open conversation about society.

In another instance of black humor, Louie exercises his elements by considering the paths of drug and alcohol addiction as well as society's negative treatment of the issue. Rather than condemn, he takes a moment to admire alcoholics, "... [I] love romantically the idea of being a real drunk, in my bathroom all day... Everybody who loves me is always crying, '[He's] destroying himself, I can't watch it anymore!'"<sup>14</sup> Momentarily idealizing self-destructive behavior, Louie asks his audience to imagine how liberating it might be to lose control of one's vices despite potential repercussions. A dark topic indeed, Louie's audience nevertheless responds with positive reception. By mocking the life of an alcoholic, he places us into the shoes of mental and physical destruction, revealing how damaging addiction can be in reality—perhaps leading us to think more deeply about those suffering from addiction. Using the vehicle of black comedy, this joke reaches into real life scenarios that we might otherwise avoid, especially in the case of addict behavior and its potential of destroying relationships. Scott Weems relates, "Obscene humor challenges accepted norms and makes us laugh not *despite* its depravity but *because* of it."<sup>15</sup> In a way that boldly examines one of humanity's most tragic aspects (the spiral of addiction), Louie outwardly muses upon the lack of responsibility of addicts, poking fun at how easily the fragile human being can lose self-control.

His masterful deadpan delivery and his black humor are interchangeable when in action, but these sections have divided them to analyze the importance of each in regards to his ability to connect to a wide audience. Louie's above scenarios again echo comedy's social reflection and emotional detachment as described by Meredith and Bergson. Louie's darkness, while exposing

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Scott Weems, *Ha! The Science of When We Laugh and Why* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 8.

many taboos, is capable of bringing us into serious conversation that we otherwise might resist. By better understanding Louie's elements of humor, including his grim discussions, one can view him as both provocative interrogator and comic creative.

### **Louie and the Abject**

Another analysis of comedy from which this chapter derives great significance is the aforementioned John Limon's *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, Or, Abjection in America*, the first of its kind on stand-up comedy that can also further explain Louie's significance as social commentator. Limon states that stand-up comedy involves the "abstract repudiation of the body (which is mechanized)," a trait also in Louie's vulgar and often nonchalant comedic content. Limon's cultural theory states that "what is stood up in stand-up comedy is abjection" and, using Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, clarifies a large aspect of Louie's dark humor. Kristeva defines the abject as "psychic worrying of those aspects of oneself that one cannot be rid of, that seem, but are not quite, alienable, for example, blood, urine, feces, nails, and the corpse."<sup>16</sup> This breaking down of the physical leaves quite a raw observation when connected to comedy, especially in regards to Louie's self-deprecating onstage tendencies. Limon's description of "abasement" can help us better understand Louie's motives when it comes to self-loathing, explaining that such routes in comedy always contain a social connection.

Louie's revulsion toward himself—or sense of the abject—creates an atmosphere in which his audience becomes intimately immersed. The *abject* becomes the very unacceptable or unwanted aspect that comedians "cast off," as Kristeva helps clarify, "... [within abjection]... repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself." In a constant state of rotation,

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<sup>16</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon Samuel Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1-2.

Louie relays the most unappealing features of himself while simultaneously attempting to normalize them to his audience. Kristeva's theory connects in this fashion: "...[It is a] brutish suffering that 'I' puts up with, sublime and devastated... A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me... There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture."<sup>17</sup> Yet Louie's abject appears to be his way of connecting rather than shielding his culture as he reveals to his audience the shameless acknowledgement that our judgements of the body serve no real purpose. While a microcosm of his larger philosophy, this sense of meaninglessness applicable to bodily repulsions also ties into Louie's absurdist outlook.

The verticality, or publicity, of bodily repulsion that is "stood up" remains one of Louie's—and any stand-up comic's—most successful tools. By placing his body in a literal standing position, Louie is able to exploit his own repulsion where normally it remains a social taboo. Also echoing Plato's notion of comedic catharsis, Louie's revolting humor has the capability of ridding his audience's stresses regarding their own bodies—placing that stress in the unashamed and inviting Louie. His discussions of social taboos such as sex mishaps and masturbation coincide with these physical obsessions wherein the physical becomes separated from the biological and becomes the foci for crude jokes.

Gritty topics such as death and repulsive functions of the body permeate Louie's comedy but do so with the purpose of making a social point and perhaps even to cope with the darker aspects of life. In a stand-up skit, he comments upon the topic of aging:

[Like this] is something that happens to me a lot... I'll be sitting watching TV, or doing nothing, and all of a sudden I'll realize, "I need to wipe my ass right now." ... I make trips to the bathroom just to wipe my ass. How did this happen *already*?<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon Samuel Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1-2.

<sup>18</sup> Louis C.K., *Oh My God*, directed by Louis C.K. (2013; Phoenix: Pig Newton, Inc.), DVD.

Allowing his audience to participate in both the woes and the comical aspects of existence, Louie provides an intimate platform on which he may find space to critically reflect on the conventions of society. Young or old, his audience relates to Louie in that all are subject to mortality and thus natural aging processes; in this particular skit, the societal convention is the taboo act of speaking about bodily functions. This display of the abject seems to aid in his breaking free of language taboos while simultaneously giving him wide accessibility in his representation of unappealing yet popular imagination. Louie's exposure of his physical discomforts simultaneously purges societally-induced pressures regarding the aging body and relieves our fears (and even makes humorous) repulsive aspects of growing old.

Laughing with Louie *is* to laugh at Louie and, in turn, to laugh at ourselves rather than to complain or stoop to egotism. In a similar vein, Bergson relates, "Several have defined man as 'an animal which laughs.' They might equally well have defined him as an animal which is laughed at; for if any other animal, or some lifeless object, produces the same effect, it is always because of some resemblance to man, of the stamp he gives it or the use he puts it to."<sup>19</sup> Louie's sense of the abject gives way to the bodily realities of his audience; in turn, his offensiveness resembles ourselves when out of the public eye. Kristeva's phrase, "those aspects of oneself that one cannot be rid of" is also echoed through Louie's constant disdainfulness toward himself. In this way, Louie becomes a *comic site*: becoming the embodiment of our social inadequacies, he makes his situations universal and allows his audience to unite over the often crudeness of private life in general. Becoming a site wherein our societally-induced pressures may become released, Louie sacrifices himself for our greater good.

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<sup>19</sup> Henri Bergson, "The Comic in General," ed. Wylie Sypher, *Comedy* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), 62-63.

Louie's ability to laugh when discussing, for instance, the fact that he fits the "fat guy" stereotype as a Cinnabon customer transports his platform as comic site: "A Cinnabon... [is a cake] made for one sad fat man." The fact that Louie is slightly overweight compared to thinner celebrities is not what causes the humor; rather, it is the truth found within the context of being unhappy with one's own body. Whichever the case, Louie's joke reaches his audience by his ceasing to care about his body size and his ability to laugh about the body image ideals perpetuated by American culture. He is the "one sad fat man" and, even if only for the duration of his special, Louie invites us to become uncomfortable by using his body as a vehicle to our own self-realizations. Much like Louie insists that he has no power over others' decisions, his authority dissipates as he becomes another person in the room, only standing up and on stage. While Louie is not an alienated figure nor a member of a subordinate group in his status as white male, his outcast beginnings by moving to America at a young age enables him to view society on a blank slate. His condescending humor that lashes back upon himself also gives him the space to criticize his own (as well as everyone's) existence. He can be viewed in this self-deprecatory sort of way, and while deadpan delivery and black humor are his focal elements, an underlying theme of personal dissatisfaction helps propel his comedy from sheer amusement to societal importance and reflection. Louie's abject allows us to make connections between his comedy and his real life commentary.

He appears, much like Kristeva's comments of the abject, to separate himself (funny commentator) with his grotesque body (site of humor), all of which make up his comedic acts and reflect social tensions. Louie's self-criticizing habits onstage both haunt him in their grotesqueness but also remain inevitably a part of himself. Kristeva's abject enhances this verisimilitude, "And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its

master.”<sup>20</sup> Limon relates, “All a stand-up’s life feels abject to him or her, and stand-ups try to escape it by living it as an act.”<sup>21</sup> Louie seems to want to escape his own bodily dissatisfactions, but finds himself helping us escape our discomforts, instead. It is in this transfer that Louie allows his own body to become our literal site of humor. Limon’s fascination with “the beautiful abstract geometry of stand-up” aids in the illustrating of Louie as a disturbed individual who momentarily escapes his physical burdens and simultaneously stands for social acceptance and change. This projection of the abject represents a form of self-promoted defining of *site*, where Louie’s audiences can unite over general discontent within themselves, in the socially acceptable realm of comedy.

Examples of Louie’s abject are scattered throughout his comedy: “I don’t care,” he admits in a stand-up skit, “... I’m old and sweaty... I ate too much and masturbated too recently.”<sup>22</sup> This self-loathing style continues in season two of *Louie*, where he goes through a personal example of how “sick” he gets when getting intimate with a woman and becoming aware of his physical self: “... [I just] gross myself out.” With abs that “hang” and resemble a “mother dog’s fourteen-nipple belly,”<sup>23</sup> Louie’s description of himself could not get more hideous in this moment. His self-degradation meshes with Limon’s abasement and Kristeva’s “psychic worrying of oneself,” and although Louie clearly does not have an issue confiding in his audience his discontent toward his own repulsive qualities, they nevertheless are the basis for predicaments featured in many of his skits. While Louie makes himself a figure of abasement in his self-titled show, he is nevertheless in character but that character is not himself. Rather, it is a projection of society that his audience often mistakes for the real-life Louie. Purging otherwise

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<sup>20</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon Samuel Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1-2.

<sup>21</sup> John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, Or, Abjection in America* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2000), 6.

<sup>22</sup> Louis C.K., *Chewed Up*, directed by Louis C.K. and Shannon Hartman (2008; Boston: Image Entertainment), DVD.

<sup>23</sup> Louis C.K., *Louie*, directed by Louis C.K. (2011; FX, 2012), DVD.



disguised bodily functions and aspects, Louie elevates his fears to which his shocked audience may also connect, allowing his own body to become a site of humor.

By describing himself in a self-debasing manner and allowing his own body to become a site of humor, Louie connects with us in such a way that exposes societal pressures regarding the body image. His state of abjection reminds his audience that none are exempt from the repulsiveness of bodily functions and challenges traditional taboos that forbid the discussion of such matters. While his social philosophy is further analyzed in the following chapter, one can better understand Louie's social commentary by seeing the ways he gives up his own body for the sake of laughter, as well as allows the cathartic release of social pressure.

### **Comedy and Commentary**

Louie's humor flips conventional thought in many ways and, as George Meredith and Henri Bergson found new social truths in comedy, reveals just as much about his audience as he does himself. Taking the crudeness of Lenny Bruce to a new level, he shares with his audiences his own bodily experiences, disclosing otherwise bedroom-only conversation to the public. Through his black humor (his open discussion of socially taboo topics) and deadpan performance (his often expressionless reaction to life's ridiculousness), Louie challenges his audience by forcing them into uncomfortable but nevertheless serious social reflection. Using Limon's theory of stand-up comedy, Louie can be viewed as not only an individual with whom his audience can relate; he becomes a personified place where all social habits, traditions and relations are interrogated publicly without sentimental distraction.

Louie, a widely accessible inversion of the American prince charming and chortling “curmudgeon,” (as Nicholas Mancusi described him), is a painstakingly honest individual but not merely a human being who makes us laugh; he is one in whom we can openly place our deepest secrets and ugly societal thoughts. What, then, in such a context, does this description make Louie himself? In this light, Louie transcends from humanness to comic site, wherein he stands both as a figure of comical power but also a place of social reflection. By better understanding Louie’s main elements of humor, one can view him as both comedian and social philosopher—the latter of which is analyzed and discussed in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER TWO: LOUIS C.K. AS SOCIAL PHILOSOPHER

*Louie Louie Louie Louie  
Louie Louis Louie Loueye  
Louie Louie Louie Louie  
Louie Louie you're gonna die.*

—Ian Lloyd, “Brother Louie”  
(cover of *The Stories*, 1973)

When Dr. Ben (Ricky Gervais) calls Louie after a physical appointment in season one of *Louie* to tell him that he has AIDS, but “not to worry” because his cancer will kill the AIDS before it kills him, Louie’s response is to hang up the phone and continue monotonously eating Twizzlers.<sup>1</sup> He is familiar with his friend-doctor’s perverse humor and decides to take nothing he says literally. Yet *Louie*’s making light of situations that unfortunately do occur in reality speaks for his own absurdist outlook on life. Of course, there are those who *do* get calls from their doctor notifying them of a terminal illness, yet Louie decides to take that truth into his own hands and deconstruct its sentimentality with embellishment and self-debasement. For reasons beyond the sake of comedy, Louie’s dismissal in this situation serves the purpose of his overall philosophy—in life there are always unfortunate situations, but Louie chooses to look at the way one deals with life’s devastations. As his deadpan style, black comedy, and ignominy towards the self were explored in the last part of this work, this chapter analyzes what such grim humor might point toward in connection to Louie’s societal outlook.

I am not the first to compare Louie’s comedy to absurdist philosophy. Marc Maron’s *WTF* podcast interview with Louie skims over Louie’s interesting early absurdist videos (some of which were made with Louie’s ex-wife) and refers to the comedian as “a uniquely poetic

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<sup>1</sup> Louis C.K., *Louie*, directed by Louis C.K. (2010; New York City: FX Productions, 2011), DVD.

absurdist comic.”<sup>2</sup> Zak Kiritsy draws basic comparisons between Louie and 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Albert Camus, stating that “the scenarios [Louie] depicts and the societal nuances he ridicules through outrageous hyperbole force the audience to look at the absurdity of the mundane.”<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Mancusi brings to light the similarities between Louie and the existentialist work (to which absurdism is connected) of Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher who wrote on the anxieties of mortality.<sup>4</sup> Popular YouTube personality Evan Puschak of *Nerdwriter* uploaded a video that analyzes Louie’s crude humor, calling the comedian a “moral detective.”<sup>5</sup> Each of these brief analyses have indeed helped clarify philosophical inquiries regarding Louie, as comedy often reflects its culture. This chapter delves further into the details of Louie’s absurdist scenes, what those absurdist values might point toward, and how they have potential of positively affecting his audience. Much like the notion of comic catharsis, a rewarding emotional distance, or “emotional purgation,”<sup>6</sup> Louie offers a window of relief in the public world where casual talk on life’s bleakest aspects is usually discouraged and even sometimes taboo.

Louie’s perpetual misfortune as portrayed in his semi-autobiographical show allows us to place our emotions into the comedian himself—after all, he is the one who helps bring laughter out of many hapless situations. Even the theme song of *Louie* (although changed from the song’s original, “you’re gonna cry”) opens with the shocking phrase “Louie, Louie you’re gonna die”—certainly not a typical way of inviting viewers to watch a television series. Similar to the

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<sup>2</sup> Marc Maron, *Louis C.K. Episode 111*, podcast audio, WTF with Marc Maron, accessed January 30, 2017, [http://www.wtfpod.com/podcast/episodes/episode\\_111\\_-\\_louis\\_ck\\_part\\_1?rq=louis%20ck](http://www.wtfpod.com/podcast/episodes/episode_111_-_louis_ck_part_1?rq=louis%20ck).

<sup>3</sup> Zak Kiritsy, “Albert Camus, Louis C.K. and the Absurdities of Modern Life,” *Intercultured*, September 8, 2011. <http://www.intercultured.com/archives/art-society/albert-camus-louis-c-k-and-the-absurdities-of-modern-life/>

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Mancusi, “The Philosophy of Louis C.K.,” *Splitsider*, August 10, 2011. <http://splitsider.com/2011/08/the-philosophy-of-louis-ck/>.

<sup>5</sup> “Louis C.K. is a Moral Detective,” *YouTube*, uploaded by Nerdwriter, July 22, 2015. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pOO1AX7\\_jXw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pOO1AX7_jXw).

<sup>6</sup> Masahiro Kitano, “Aristotle’s Theory of Comedy,” *Bulletin of Gunma Prefectural Women's University* 22 (2001): 193-201. Accessed December 15, 2016.

20<sup>th</sup> century musings of Meredith and Bergson, the latter of whom claimed that “laughter [has] no greater foe than emotion,” Louie’s jokes give space to laugh at otherwise serious, and even tragic, aspects of life. He gives no solution to life’s deepest mysteries yet nevertheless asks direct questions that may open our minds in the process.

Such deeply expressed thoughts on life’s most tragic situations inevitably brings Louie to a level of philosophical investigation. As aforementioned, his social mores echo that of Albert Camus, father of absurdism in 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. Camus, author of notable works *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, focuses on two themes that stands as the basis for his philosophy: the absurdist idea of the search for life’s ultimate purpose and the inability to find a purpose (or truth). When the inability to find truth results in perhaps the greatest philosophical problem of all, that of suicide, Camus offers a resolution: one “without the aid of eternal values.” Louie’s outburst in his skit “Why?” encompasses the mania expressed in Camus work: “Cause fuck it, we’re alone in the universe; nobody gives a shit about us!” Yet just as Camus proposed that one must not cave to such meaninglessness in an unsuccessful search for truth, he invites his readers to *rebel* against that hopelessness: “[That revolt] is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it... [revolt] gives life its value. Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life.”<sup>7</sup> Louie offers positive reflection in the darkest of situations. While it is unlikely that he set out to become a comedian also influential on the philosophical level, his humor transcends beyond laughter and into deeper reflection.

It is important to view Louie in this light as not merely an echo of philosophical predecessors but as unique, interrogative voice amidst an often uncertain and fast-paced society. Through the absurd, one can better understand Louie’s stance as a vital social philosopher of our

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<sup>7</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1955), 54-55.

time. In a world in which the origin of morals remains a mystery, a comedian, nonetheless, has given not an answer but a route of clarity, if not solace: an invitation to revolt against society's prescribed meanings and reconstructing it for one's self. Louie appears to convey that, in the case of absurdism, one must accept life's meaninglessness in order to rationalize life and craft individual meaning. In this way, Louie can be seen as an advocate for social vulnerability, questioning, and honesty despite established popular thought, echoing Camus's description of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which the author claims is "a lucid invitation to live and to create."<sup>8</sup> Despite life's frequent dark situations, Louie, too, invites his audience to live and create their own meanings.

Louie's brash societal criticisms, or imitation of those with "inferior moral bent"<sup>9</sup> is a veil covering his actual, lackluster life as portrayed in *Louie*. How, then, does Louie (along with other obscene comedians) get away with his gutter talk on the most sensitive of subjects? Underneath much of his witticisms and dirty jokes exist a level of seriousness that points toward Louie's literal perception of reality. This chapter first connects Louie's absurdist values to those of Albert Camus, presents examples of the absurdist philosophical struggle found within Louie's comedy including that of eternal life, and finally reveals examples of how Louie chooses to revolt rather than surrender to a life devoid of human meaning.

### **The *Haha* Door**

As Louie is known for his offensive and often bleak look at life's realities, he flips comedic conventions by dedicating sections of his humor to real situations that simply demand the

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<sup>8</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1955), v.

<sup>9</sup> Masahiro Kitano, "Aristotle's Theory of Comedy," *Bulletin of Gunma Prefectural Women's University* 22 (2001): 193-201. Accessed December 15, 2016.

public's attention. Realistic examples such as the Dr. Ben scenario are scattered heavily throughout *Louie*, the most frequent being Louie's status as a divorced father of two young girls. His ability to reach wide audiences perhaps in part accounts for his autobiographical setup in the show. By lassoing audiences in with brash humor, he then often arrives to more serious matters such as the value of education and drug addiction. These situations are embedded within his comical skits and are frequently ridiculous in nature. Although his perpetuated dull appearance and nearly expressionless reenactments while mocking others indeed give the impression that he has been conquered by life, Louie's underlying political and social themes suppose otherwise. His elements of black humor, defined by the aforementioned André Breton as "[an] often absurd turn of spirit that constitutes the 'mortal enemy of sentimentality,'" as well as his deadpan delivery, aid in the legitimacy of his critique on social issues.

In an interview with Charlie Rose that explores some of these more serious thoughts, Louie muses upon his ability to obtain access through the realm of general media, despite his often abrasive personality: "I *did* come into their lives through the funny *haha* door, and then I took a big political serious shit on their table."<sup>10</sup> Louie's methodology can be viewed as this access through the "haha door" in its unexpected interrogation of human trivialities embedded within the act of laughter. In a way that does not pamper the delicateness of the pretentious ego, Louie points out narcissistic tendencies and other societal flaws that largely make up his culture—expressing what Breton described as a "bitter guffaw" towards the tense situations of his time. In this interview, Louie admits, "[saying] that something is too terrible to joke about is like saying that a disease is too terrible to try to cure [it]." As his aforementioned skit suggests, he subtly and explicitly begs the question, "Why?" in each of his fictionalized and real scenarios, pointing out the absurdity found within worldly issues.

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<sup>10</sup> Louis C.K., interview by Charlie Rose. *Charlie Rose*, April 25, 2016. <https://charlierose.com/videos/27296>.

The absurdity Louie raises in his skits mesh with the philosophy of the absurd. In *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, Albert Camus presents one of philosophy's greatest questions: "judging whether life is or is not worth living." He regards life's other "ultimate" mysteries only after this problem is introduced. "Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined,"<sup>11</sup> he claims, and such observations coincide fluidly with Louie's content, where no topic is exempt from deconstruction nor repercussion; Louie's effects of making his audience think also lead to their inclusion into his often spiraling critical reflections. Continual questioning of life's mysteries and phenomena is one of Louie's favorite pastimes, and while he clearly puts a humorous twist on this bleakness more so than Camus, it is an aspect of his comedy that is worth considering. For to muse upon the absurd is to also muse upon the reason for living, as described in Camus's philosophy. He points out that to reach the point of the absurd, one must first arrive at the conclusion that life is devoid of all meaning. As a result, he contemplates the act of suicide,

... Living, naturally, is never easy. You continue making the gestures commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is habit. Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering.<sup>12</sup>

Habit and "daily agitation" make up much of *Louie*; many episodes result in an unenthused protagonist who has given up on the challenges of which his complex life has thrown at him. Nevertheless, we laugh at this character, who (whether or not we admit) often mirrors us in our struggles. In this light, Louie's deadpan delivery and black comedy can bridge into absurdism. When he targets life's taboos and comes to the conclusion that they are meaningless and that

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<sup>11</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1955), 5.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, 6.



emotions are only elements of the human condition, then he begins to make meaning and, thus, truth for himself.

In an episode of *Louie* entitled “Eddie,” a character struggles with Camus’s fully considered reflection regarding suicide. The ways *Louie* depicts his troubled friend also gives audiences hints of the abject as it crystallizes a moment in which the grotesque can be witnessed. The complexities of Camus’s excerpt are embodied through *Louie*’s relationship with his long-lost friend and lackluster comedian Eddie (Doug Stanhope), who, after a night of reconnecting with *Louie* and dropping into a comedy club for a drunken spur-of-the-moment set and becoming increasingly aggressive, begins to disturb *Louie* with his self-inflicting behavior. Eddie’s pessimistic actions escalate as their night together wears on, and *Louie*’s reactions become more perplexed. At the beginning of the night, Eddie tells *Louie* that “[he’s] done,” after the night’s show, belting out offensive racial slurs at the liquor store cashier and binge-drinking an entire bottle of Vodka. Throughout the episode, small vignettes of flashbacks reveal Eddie’s growing jealousy and discontent with *Louie* and his achievements, one of which led to *Louie*’s collaboration with David Letterman, after which Eddie blurts, “... I thought we did this shit... to find truth, not to become famous glamor monkeys.” This incident appears to serve as a theme of *Louie*’s thoughts throughout the night, as he witnesses Eddie’s escalating destructive behavior as a magnified version of his friend’s past.

As Eddie’s drunken behavior begins to test *Louie*’s patience, the scene escalates further to the subject of his friend’s issues. Eddie admits that he’s burned all of his bridges, and he’s “got no bridges left.” When *Louie* asks for clarification, Eddie says that he’s “cashing in... [I’m] forty-shit years old, I got nothing, nobody. I don’t *want* anything. I don’t *want* anybody. And that’s... the worst part: when the *want* goes... that’s, that’s *bad*.” He claims that “suffering is

one thing,” [but] “when you just don’t care anymore...” and his voice trails off, quietly confessing that nothing in the world can interest him any longer and that perhaps it’s time to end himself. He gives a detailed description of his plan: to travel to Maine, finish his comedy show, perhaps eat a lobster roll, and overdose on his prescription. Louie interjects, demanding why Eddie has taken the night to this point, to which Eddie responds, “I just wanted to say goodbye to someone.” Louie retorts angrily, “Eddie, you *can’t* kill yourself.” Eddie then asks Louie to “look [me] in the eye, and tell me one good reason to live.” After an excruciating few moments of silence and perplexed expression, Louie replies,

No... No, I’m not playin’ that. I’m not doing it... [Fuck] you, man. I’ve got my reasons to live; I worked hard to figure out what they are. I’m not just handing them to you. Okay? You want a reason to live? Have a drink of water and get some sleep, wake up in the morning and try again like everybody else does.

Eddie responds flatly, “[Yeah, yeah], tough love,” and Louie goes on,

No, *no* love. [More like] tough, not giving a shit anymore, Eddie... If you wanna tap out ‘cause your life is shit... You know what? It’s not *your* life, it’s *life*. Life is bigger than you, [and] if you could imagine that, life isn’t something that you possess, it’s something that you take *part* in, and you witness.

Again, Eddie scoffs, “[You] are so excited right now... that you get to give the ‘big speech,’” claiming Louie’s intention on helping “the big loser out of suicide” is only egocentric and self-fulfilling. When Louie interjects that Eddie is simply casting his personal baggage off onto him, an arguing couple storms past them. Eddie and Louie exchange glances and resort to laughter at the ridiculous situation at hand. Louie finalizes the conversation as well as the evening by saying that Eddie is right in accusing Louie of never thinking of him and that he “really hopes”

Eddie doesn't kill himself but that he has to go home. The two part ways, with the episode never revealing what happens to Eddie.<sup>13</sup>

The monologue at the end of “Eddie” reveals yet another dark side to *Louie*: the argument of life's meaning and the concept of suicide. Blending with Louie's perspective on mortality and its inevitability, Louie enforces comedy's ties to cultural relevance, relating the abject as a comic's obsession—especially in this case, wherein Eddie views his own existence as sickening. It is not suicide itself at which Louie pokes fun but instead the absurd situation he was caught in when only expecting an enjoyable reunion with an old friend. The heaviness of this episode, if relieved whatsoever, lies in the harsh reality that the shock of suicide exists in the world, and while there is no clear remedy, anxieties such as Eddie's can attempt to be managed. Louie's face-to-face conversations with some of life's more grotesque experiences do not purge its verisimilitude but distract and, lastly, make them appeal in the only possible form which can appeal in such circumstances: by making them humorous.

Eddie appears to echo Camus's assertion that “[In] a sense... killing yourself amounts to confessing. It is confessing that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it.”<sup>14</sup> Similar to Camus's musings on suicide, this episode exposes humanity's general resistance to truth itself as well as the complications often found when seeking such truth. Louie veers the emphasis of the situation toward absurdism—“It's not *your* life. It's *life*”—performing once again as comic site as he represents societal anxieties. Yet Louie is less comic relief in this situation and more a beacon of light, offering a route of escape from self-destruction. Camus touches on these complexities later on in *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

Consciousness and revolt, these rejections are the contrary of renunciation...  
It is essential to die unreconciled and not of one's own free will. Suicide

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<sup>13</sup> Louis C.K., *Louie*, directed by Louis C.K. (2011; New York City: FX Productions, 2012), DVD.

<sup>14</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1955), 5.

is a repudiation. The absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself. The absurd is his extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance.<sup>15</sup>

Just as Camus urges his readers to “revolt,” Louie offers an alternative to submitting oneself to one’s own darkness: to continue in perseverance and solitary effort. In this episode of grotesqueness, he manages to convert one of life’s bleakest aspects into a humorous skit without dismissing suicide’s harsh realities. James Poniewozik of *TIME* describes the episode as “[another] reminder that Louie has evolved from a surreal comedy about one comic’s take on life, to a funny show about the serious subject of how to live.”<sup>16</sup> When Louie tells Eddie that life is something “[you] take part in,” he is echoing similar notions of Camus, especially in his essays on absurdism,

There is thus a metaphysical honor in enduring the world’s absurdity... It is merely a matter of being faithful to the rule of the battle. That thought may suffice to sustain a mind; it has supported and still supports whole civilizations. War cannot be negated. One must live it or die of it.<sup>17</sup>

Camus then relates, “... So it is with the absurd: it is a question of breathing with it, of recognizing its lessons and recovering their flesh,” then quoting Nietzsche, “Art and nothing but art... we have art in order not to die of the truth.” Louie stresses this importance to Eddie and ultimately to his audience in this short sketch-gone-heart-to-heart. Paralleling with the theme song of *Louie*, Camus describes the inevitability of life’s obstacles. Louie recognizes his own mortality but continues to head down the concrete stairs of the Comedy Cellar in the introduction

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<sup>15</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1955), 55.

<sup>16</sup> James Poniewozik, “Louie Watch: Self, Love,” *TIME*, August 12, 2011. <http://entertainment.time.com/2011/08/12/louie-watch-self-love/>.

<sup>17</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1955), 93.

of each show, defying the challenges of life's uncertainties and transforming them into his own constructed reality.

### **Conflict with the Eternal**

While Louie fits into neither religious nor irreligious institutions, much of his content centers around metaphysical reflections. Like Camus, he does not commit to any sort of afterlife, and as some of the following examples show, he appears to remain content with such a worldview. For even though Camus professed that it is possible for one to be “Christian and absurd” (he claims there are “examples of” Christians who do not believe in immortality), the conflict that the absurd runs into is not necessarily religious practices but the announcing of a “future life.”<sup>18</sup> Because the central focus of absurdism is that of life's search for truth and meaning, one cannot discuss this leg of philosophy without arriving to the topic of religion. As shown in the examples in this section, Louie may exude uneasiness in the idea of a higher power yet maintains a moral balance in his comedic interrogations.

Stemming from Camus's doubt of immortal life, Louie appears to identify with the problem of evil, as seen in the first season of *Louie*, wherein he admits to his selfishness and exposes worldly economic imbalance,

There are people starving in the world and I drive an Infinity. There are people who just starve to death, that's all they ever did. [There's] people who, are like, born, and they go, 'uhh, I'm hungry,' then they just die. And that's all they ever got to do. And meanwhile, I'm in my car, like, 'boom boom brrrrmm' like, having a great time, and I sleep like a baby.

Louie contemplates that he *could* trade in his Infinity and get a Ford Focus with “no miles on it,” and he'd get back “like, twenty thousand dollars.” He admits he could save “hundreds of people

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<sup>18</sup>Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1955), 112.

from dying of starvation with that money” and that “everyday [I] don’t do it. Every day I make them die with my car.”<sup>19</sup> Such a realistic glance toward the world’s engulfing issues of poverty are not posed as mere subjects of comedic shenanigans; they are offered in Louie’s content as an invitation of personal reflection—a strange musing in which one can weigh the moral implications of charity and personal luxury. In other words, his skit tells his audience that he *could* save some of these people, but he doesn’t. Yet his crudeness suggests that society behaves very similarly; Louie is not calling himself nor society out for being evil, necessarily, but for being *human*. Like countless other skits, Louie ends his short piece with a quirky grimace, an emotion that both acknowledges the gravity of the situation at hand—the inevitable occurrence of sickness and mortality—and reveals the absurdity-driven laughter that emerges as a result.

Skits such as Louie’s Infinity discussion can also allude to the comedian’s complex way of looking at the world and asking questions about its issues that inevitably exist. On one hand, he presents himself as culturally aware, acknowledging the fact that there are millions of people in the world who suffer beyond the imagination of the predominantly privileged American society. On the other, Louie also acknowledges his inner greed of living a privileged life in which he has the option to drive a nice car or even trade it for a cheaper but nevertheless *nice* car—the latter of which he does not do. He then reflects on these choices and admits that he still owns the Infinity and, by doing so, closes the door of hope on countless starving people. Yet the effect of this acknowledgement results in laughter; is it because Louie’s audience, knowing this is a bluntly honest depiction of reality, join in the admitting that they are self-centered, too? This complex dilemma of human altruism in which one *does* care about others, but only after first looking after themselves, is a common human trait. Louie exposes this societal issue by condemning both himself as well as his audience.

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<sup>19</sup> Louis C.K., *Louie*, directed by Louis C.K. (2010; New York City: FX Productions, 2011), DVD.

While a deep-rooted issue, Louie appears to ask what—or whom—can account for tragedies such as poverty and malnourishment in the world, ultimately questioning the component of meaninglessness found in absurdism. He scoffs at the notion that, if a higher power existed, divine intervention has not spared these innocent people from death. An ancient leg of philosophy aids in the understanding of Louie’s deepest philosophical quests, that of Epicurus’s “paradox,”

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent.  
Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.  
Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil?  
Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?<sup>20</sup>

*The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* further defines this paradox proposed by Epicurus:

“‘The Problem of Evil’ ... [is] the epistemic question posed by evil being whether the world contains undesirable states of affairs that provide the basis for an argument that makes it unreasonable to believe in the existence of God.”<sup>21</sup> The skit on poverty-stricken communities connects to the Epicurean paradox in that we are aware of the existence of evil such as malnourishment and death; the moral dilemma is raised when we are given the choices to intervene and remedy such external issues or continue to live a comfortable life without attempting to intervene. Camus, too, reflects on this philosophical conundrum by stating that “all the scholastic subtleties have neither added anything to nor subtracted anything from the acuteness of [this paradox].”<sup>22</sup> It is clear that Louie muses upon the possibility of the existence of a higher power throughout his content; while never coming to a true answer, he leaves his audience with the impression that these questions are insignificant amidst a vast and indifferent

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<sup>20</sup> Though there are no clear traces of this quote deriving directly from Epicurus, references of the “Epicurean Paradox,” were first found in *The Works of Lactantius: A treatise on the anger of God*, translated by William Fletcher, D.D. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1871), 119.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Tooley, “The Problem of Evil,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified March 3, 2015. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evil/>.

<sup>22</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1955), 56.

universe. Similar to existentialist thought, Louie does not have a set morality; rather, he must conquer the daily challenge of setting his own.

While Louie doesn't wholly commit to atheism, he has claimed that he likely doesn't believe in the God portrayed in the Bible, calling it "[a] weird story" during a stand-up show on *Saturday Night Live*. This vocalization on religious challenging is similar to Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor, who also vocalized a certain irrationality found in placing an unquestioned confidence in religion. Both focused on controversial topics, or "ills," that in the framework of typical television may otherwise be deemed offensive and taboo. Louie's fearless comments on religion, for example, echo that of Pryor, who in a skit once mused that "[Jesus] saves... [but] I don't know who... [He] couldn't save his own ass," and Bruce, who wrote in an autobiography, "... if the bedroom is dirty to you, then you are a true atheist, because if you have any of the mores, superstitions, if anyone in this audience believes that God made his body, and your body is dirty, the fault lies with the manufacturer." Carlin's criticisms on politics and religion are relevant, here, as well: "... religion is just mind control." Each of these comics, including Louie, unite in their status as doubters interested in a morality without the need for faith.

Similarly, Louie expresses open questioning in another stand-up performance, "I'm not religious. I don't know if there's a God. That's all I can say, honestly, is 'I don't know.'"<sup>23</sup> In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus relates, "I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it." He goes on to muse that if he were anything but human, he would have avoided this issue altogether, to which he claims: "This ridiculous reason is what sets me in opposition to all creation... [At this moment] the absurd, so obvious and yet so hard to win, returns to a man's life and finds its home there."<sup>24</sup> There are many instances in which Louie questions religious

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<sup>23</sup> Louis C.K., *Monologue*, Saturday Night Live, May 16, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzh7RtIJKZk>.

<sup>24</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1955), 51-52.



beliefs. In an episode entitled “God,” Louie confesses his ills with religion off and on throughout an autobiographical series of vignettes in which a young, freckled Louie becomes mentally scarred after witnessing a “forensic” reenactment of the crucifixion at his strict Catholic school. Part of his stand-up act on a *Saturday Night Live* appearance consisted of his making fun of a young woman who claimed she was going to heaven. In the skit, Louie reflects that he “doesn’t believe there’s a heaven. [I think] maybe there’s a god, but there’s no heaven. I think that’s the best news you’re gonna get. [You] die, and you’re like, ‘Hey, God!’ and he’s like, ‘Yep,’ and you’re like, ‘where’s heaven?’ and he’s like, ‘I dunno who’s *telling* people that!’” Still playing the voice of God, he exclaims the preposterousness of believing that [God] would create the universe and then an entirely separate “amazing place” to which humans get to go upon dying, exclaiming that “[You guys] are greedy dicks down there.”<sup>25</sup>

While many comedians skip over the dicey subject of religion (in which a certain amount of tension is often the end result), Louie bares it for complete critique. Such a jab would usually be considered offensive, yet he managed to playfully converse with the woman in the *SNL* audience about her viewpoints, even though his differed greatly. Louie seems to argue that we have to search for our own answers rather than have them given to us by an established faith. Christianity is not a tradition for Louie, but he levels his graphic imagery with equal consideration. Although Louie’s public display of confusion is not as severe as Camus’s, the religious enquiries of “Absurd Creation” comes to mind, “If God exists, all depends on him and we can do nothing against his will. If he does not exist, everything depends on us.” Drawing in Nietzsche’s notorious *Übermensch*, he continues, “to kill God is to become god oneself.”

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<sup>25</sup> Louis C.K., *God, Men, and Hunger*, Saturday Night Live, March 21, 2013. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3\\_QvyPFVjvM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3_QvyPFVjvM).

Through raucous jokes, Louie asks us whether we have truly thought about the institutions in which we operate, including those of divine worship.

On the same note, Louie points out that atheists take bold stances, as well, remarking that “that’s a weird thing to think you can know,” mocking this certainty wherein some skeptics attribute their reasoning to the fact that they can’t see [God]. A flabbergasted Louie responds to his own hypothetical conversation, “There’s a vast universe; you can see for maybe a hundred yards when there’s not a building in the way. How could [you] possibly know? Did you look everywhere? Did you look in the downstairs bathroom? ... I haven’t seen *12 Years a Slave* yet, it doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. I’m just waiting until it comes on cable.” While Louie’s viewpoints fit mostly into an atheistic category, his equal playing field in deduction—even if comedic—resonates that of a philosopher’s attempts to solve a humanistic puzzle.

In his societal commentary and philosophical reflection, Louie oscillates between the statuses of funny guy and social commentator. In the case of the Infinity skit, he represents his audience by merely *speaking* about a subject that no one feigns ignorance over nor do they take full responsibility for such evils in the world. Such ignorance would be deemed socially taboo and egotistical, yet interference and change nevertheless remains largely within cultural fads and short-lived remediation.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Louie sheds the burdens of life’s uncertainties by identifying as an average individual attempting to live his life without the pains of struggling—again offering himself as a platform on which his audience can momentarily place worldly anxieties. Just as Louie resorts to an apathetic “I don’t know [if there is a God]” and continues living his life, Camus responds to his own queries with the reflection: “It [now] becomes clear...

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<sup>26</sup> For example, the short documentary *Kony 2012* was highly successful, but its sequel failed in the shadow of the success of the original, thus ultimately losing traction. See *NPR’s The 'Kony 2012' Effect: Recovering From A Viral Sensation.* 14 June 2014. <http://www.npr.org/2014/06/14/321853244/the-kony-2012-effect-recovering-from-a-viral-sensation>

that [life] will be lived all the better if it has no meaning. Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully.”<sup>27</sup>

### **Louie’s Revolt**

Revealing society’s tendency to readily accept given facts as truth, Louie’s audiences nevertheless fill the scene with laughter, evidently including those who strongly believe heaven is a part of their afterlives’ agenda. The ability to appeal to a wide audience when regarding such a controversial topic capable of dividing the population is one to be acknowledged and celebrated. Such moral grounding, in the instances of these religiously-charged scenarios, suggest that despite his harsh demeanor Louie advocates for free-thinking and open, honest questioning toward life’s trickier subjects. While dogmatic behavior exists among many thought systems, Louie exposes the absurdity in one’s sureness, brilliantly bringing his audience to a level of *unity* rather than separation. After all, his overarching motive appears to maintain that ridiculousness is simply part of life—and in the instances of non-belief, one should revolt rather than succumb to the uncertainty of the afterlife.

The absurd scenarios presented in Louie’s comedy usually peel back another layer of his societal commentary. Often gritty topics such as human suffering are derived from inevitable life events, such as the disastrous night out with Eddie. Yet despite his many downfalls, Louie’s reactions to these stressful events remain the focal point of his strangely positive philosophy.

Camus coincides:

For me, the sole datum is the absurd. The first and, after all, the only condition of my inquiry is to preserve the very thing that crushes me, consequently to respect what I consider essential in it. I have just defined

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<sup>27</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1955), 53.

it as a confrontation and an uneasy struggle... There exists an obvious fact that seems utterly moral: namely, that a man is always prey to his truths.<sup>28</sup>

Louie illustrates Camus's uncomfortable position in which all of humanity is held: that of the realization of existence and its limitations. Similar to the inevitable abject, the absurd is the very aspect that crushes Louie in each of his anxiety-ridden scenarios. Yet in identifying his worries, he is simultaneously able to let them go.

Pertaining to Camus's outlook on meaning, Louie concludes much of his humorous accounts with the grave observation that [our pursuits] are probably pointless—thus we shouldn't take them too seriously in the first place. In his stand-up special *Live at the Comedy Store* (2015), he bluntly remarks, "I don't know how long I'm gonna live; I have no idea. You never really get to find out... You never get to go, 'Okay, I'm dead, so [eighty].' Instead you get to say, '[this] is probably it [right here]...' Yeah, we're all gonna die at some point, it's true, man." He bridges from the more humorous aspects of the ambiguity of death to social commentary, "... It's an interesting thing about human beings that we live with the knowledge that we're going to die."<sup>29</sup> This runs parallel, again, with the Camus's outlook, especially when he announces that "... Death [is the] only reality... What freedom can exist in the fullest sense without assurance of eternity?"<sup>30</sup> Where some seek refuge from these graver aspects of life in their religions, Louie, like Camus, places them in the sheer observation that life is short; therefore, one must make it matter, resulting in his own revolt. Louie does not claim to hold the answers but suggests that we should make our own lives meaningful to ourselves, regardless of prescribed purpose.

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<sup>28</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1955), 31.

<sup>29</sup> Louis C.K., *Live at the Comedy Store*, directed by Louis C.K. (2015; West Hollywood: FX), DVD.

<sup>30</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1955), 57.

In season three of *Louie*, in the episode “Daddy’s Girlfriend Pt. 2,” Louie goes on a date with his latest love interest (Parker Posey). Having yet discovered her name, Louie’s date redirects their course for the night. As the two meander down the New York streets, she reveals that she was diagnosed with carcinoma as a teenager and thought she was going to die. The entire scene is drastic as her sporadic movements coincide with her cancer story and the difficulties that her family experienced during the situation. The last scene of the episode involves breaking into a building and the winded flight of stairs to its roof, where Louie’s date (whom we learn has fooled Louie into thinking her name is “Tape Recorder”) insists on sitting on the edge of the rooftop building. Louie falls into a phobia-like panic: “please come away from there, [that’s] upsetting me right now.” The woman’s response is “Do you know why you’re scared?” to which Louie sputters his fears of her dying, again warning her to move from the ledge. His date replies, “[But] the only way I’ll fall [is if] I jumped... That’s why you’re afraid to come over here... because a tiny part of you wants to jump... because it would be so easy.” Louie looks on in disbelief, maintaining a deadpan expression, as she continues, “But I don’t want to jump, so I’m not afraid.” Suddenly, amidst the ominous vocals emanating in the background, Louie’s date stands up, telling him they should go home, and that her name is Liz.

The episode ends with a short pan of the New York skyline, giving no message to the viewer aside from the vastness of space and the questions that loom within. Liz, whom we come to know almost personally by the end of the episode, gives Louie a glimpse at her life through their adventures that represent her unusual path to happiness. Camus continues,

At the same time, it has no more significance than the continual and imperceptible creation in which the actor, the conqueror, and all absurd men indulge every day of their lives. All try their hands at miming, at repeating, and at re-creating the reality that is theirs. We always end up by having the appearance of our truths. All existence for a man turned away from the eternal is but a vast mime under the mask of the absurd. Creation is the great mime.

Louie's date stresses the importance of knowing one's self; if Louie doesn't want to commit suicide, he shouldn't be afraid to literally live life on the edge. This instance comes at Louie's excruciating period wherein Liz insists on perching at the rooftop's edge, telling him that she isn't afraid of impending death. By putting death in her control, Liz encourages Louie to do the same: to revolt against the inevitable constraints against oneself by maintaining complete control. Liz's "great mime" is conventional living; such chaotic *Louie* situations can allude to the mapping of one's own lifestyle, in a form that is one's own choosing.

In "Daddy's Girlfriend Pt. 2," Liz shows Louie that traditional behavior need not always apply to one's lifestyle. In fact, Camus relates, "[For] the absurd man is not a matter of explaining and solving, but of experiencing and describing. Everything begins with lucid indifference."<sup>31</sup> This "lucid indifference" is displayed by the flabbergasted Louie, who often responds to erratic behavior such as Liz's by simply ingesting it. Similar to other episodes in which Louie experiences absurd situations, "Daddy's Girlfriend Pt. 2" reveals the potential lessons learned through spontaneous action and discourse. Aligning with the philosophy of Camus, this notion is furthered, "... [Such men who re-create the reality that is theirs] know to begin with, and then their whole effort is to examine, to enlarge, and to enrich the ephemeral island on which they have just landed."<sup>32</sup> Louie's deadpan expressions, tied with Liz's dark behavior, alludes to the search for oneself and the alignment in which one must place him or herself to continue living a successful and happy life.

While mortality inevitably looms above any living being, Louie chooses to take that fact and mold it into something of which he has control: humor. Through his overcoming of

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<sup>31</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1955), 94.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

absurdism's greatest obstacle, that of suicide, his discussions of conflict with eternal life, and finally, his choice to revolt to such meaningless found in the world coincides with that of Albert Camus. Through his comedic acts, Louie acknowledges that although there may never exist an absolute truth, one can take that responsibility into their own hands and make a life of their own—and thus revolt. Louie just so happens to do so with hilarity.

**CHAPTER THREE: “WE’RE THE NUMBER ONE THREAT TO WOMEN!”: LOUIE  
C.K.’S FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY**

*“Comedy is masculine. You’re out there and you’ve gotta be in charge. I’m a lion tamer: snap, snap, snap, snap! Now we can all be friends because you know I’m in charge.”*

– Joan Rivers, *MAKERS: Women in Comedy*

On Halloween night in an early episode of *Louie*, Louie’s daughters Lilly and Jane beg their father to stay out trick-or-treating past dark. After a short hesitation and the heckling from his daughters (the elder of whom has decided to dress up as Frederick Douglass), Louie finally agrees. The family make their last rounds and are on their way home, as older Halloween pranksters begin to emerge onto the New York streets. When Louie sees the girls are scared, he assures them that “it’s just pretend!” However, when two men dressed in frightening attire begin to follow them, Louie clearly becomes distressed, picking up their pace as both daughters cling to his sides. A background cello creeps ominously into the scene with quickening paces to match their footsteps, along with split screens quickly flashing by portraying an increasingly distraught Louie.

As Louie rounds the corner believing they’ve finally escaped the creepy pair, the two men pop out from behind a dumpster, backing them into a corner. After a few nervous chuckles from Louie fail to assure his daughters that “they’re just playing, [too],” the men refuse to back down, as “Giant,” the looming sidekick to the creep team wails childishly, “I think I’m about to do something bad [to these people]...” Suddenly, Jane, bedecked in all her fairy princess glory, steps out from behind Louie and lectures the two by slapping at them with her plastic wand and scolding, “Stop it! [Being scary], it’s not nice! ... It’s not nice to scare people. And you shouldn’t scare my daddy, either. [So] STOP IT. RIGHT. NOW!” The two begin to stumble



backwards as Louie grabs a large scrap of metal out of the dumpster and throws it into the store window behind him to trigger the alarm, scaring off the dopey predators.<sup>1</sup>

This scene in Season Two of *Louie* does nothing new in terms of the show's content; at this point, audiences can expect that with each episode at least *something* unfortunate and even absurd might happen. Yet posing his elementary-aged daughter as the hero of a potentially dangerous incident provides more than a few lighthearted chuckles. The fact that Jane is the hero, and not Louie, embodies Louie's admiration of not only his own daughters but all women: not only does he acknowledge them as independent and powerful; they are also *capable*. Such social stances regarding women are not casually incorporated into Louie's content; rather, he often expresses his social commentary concerning the female population. "I like women, women, *women*," Louie reflects in his stand-up special *Chewed Up*, "... to me you're not a woman 'til you've had a couple of kids and your life is in the toilet... [when] you become a woman is when people come out of your vagina and step on your dreams."<sup>2</sup> Although bolstered with hyperbole, Louie's joke reflects his clear opinion that women are defiant, resilient, and most of all, important in society, regardless of age or status. He appears to ask for reasons behind our general mistreatment of women in society and points out that the female body is not a place of weakness but a pillar of strength and power.

From his stand-up comedy to the critically acclaimed *Louie*, Louie's content has without a doubt created both receptive and critical societal waves—there certainly exists a mixed reaction to his treatment of feminist issues. On the surface, his blunt comments and sneering imitations regarding women can appear offensive and even hateful; it is easy to take one glance at his work and walk away with this perception. Various feminists have made the connection of

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<sup>1</sup> Louis C.K., *Louie*, directed by Louis C.K. (2011; New York City: FX Productions, 2012), DVD.

<sup>2</sup> Louis C.K., *Chewed Up*, directed by Louis C.K. and Shannon Hartman (2008; Boston: Image Entertainment), DVD.

Louie's deep musings and his societal impressions, giving differing opinions on the comedian. Kelsey Wallace of *Bitch Magazine* comments upon Louie's dicey, feminist topics, and a trail of seething feminist bloggers criticize Louie's attitudes towards women. Maddie Palmer of *Junkee* considers "[Narcissism to inform] the style of *Louie*, as well as perhaps being its central theme."<sup>3</sup> As mentioned in previous chapters, many critics of Louie's comedy mistake the fictional Louie for the real-life Louie, perhaps distracted by the comedic elements themselves. While each of these articles provide insight on the impressions Louie's comedy can make, extensive research on Louie and his feminism must be made in order to understand his social commentary as a whole. Much like Louie's perpetual self-debasement and ridicule can lead to assessments regarding our personal lives, it is important to analyze Louie's content concerning females in order to connect his feminist values to his philosophy. He persistently challenges society's prescribed traditions and attitudes that often constrain intellectual freedom and asks us to do so, as well. As with his absurdist views, Louie may not hold the answers to feminist issues but gives us the space in which serious interrogation and reflection can be made. Current issues such as unequal gender attitudes and expectations are frequently discussed in his work and offer a unique lens through which we may view and consider ourselves and our communities.

While there is not a social category exempt from Louie's humor, he carefully balances his cultural critique in order to convey his reflections to his audience. On a critical level, and as the previous chapters of this work have discussed, Louie maintains moral grounding and encourages his audience to rethink their societal habits and traditions. In regards to his feminist values, these morals include the treating of any gender with respect. Louie does not explicitly carry the label of feminist, although the instances in which he reveals such social views are

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<sup>3</sup> Maddie Palmer, "After Season Five Of 'Louie', I'm Even More Uncomfortable With Calling Louis CK A Feminist," *Junkee*, June 17, 2015. <http://junkee.com/why-im-uncomfortable-calling-louis-ck-a-feminist/59432>.

countless. Examples of those instances extend far beyond the limitations of one study, but the following sections first discuss his exploration in power relationships, including that of the female mentor and gender role reversals. Then, I analyze the ways Louie portrays body image and how those portrayals differ according to gendered expectations. Amidst the unhealthy bodily expectations infiltrated through popular media, Louie offers an inclusive attitude toward body image, especially among women. Lastly, I delve into the issue of rape humor and feminism, showing that despite misogynist criticism, Louie maintains moral grounding in his jokes and shows that the topic of rape should be discussed openly in order to make a change—a change in which we are more aware of our actions and the ways we view issues such as rape.

Through each of these sections, Louie's familiar elements of humor carry his humorous skits into a feminist focus deserving of academic discussion. It is important to view Louie's feminist values in order to understand the ways he deconstructs predisposed meaning and encourages us to create that meaning for ourselves—the primary method found in absurdism. Similar to Louie's interrogating the idea of eternal life, he also questions the traditions of our society regarding gender and views them without the hindering constraints of gender roles and expectations. Ultimately, Louie's tackling of female issues in his work reveals his own feminist values and also helps us appreciate his importance as a social philosopher who challenges our societal views and urges us to pave our own social paths.

### **The Female Mentor**

Not only does Louie show young girls as heroes in his work, but also women of all ages share that vital role. Louie incorporates powerful females into his content in many ways, exposing his

progressive social values and calling for serious discussion on women and power relationships. This argument, while holding no absolute conclusion, criticizes the ways we compartmentalize men and women by dismissing females as submissive and males as dominant. Although American culture is experiencing a progressive shift in social attitudes, we nevertheless see such regressive positioning surface. In his show, Louie's young daughters Lily and Jane are often seen correcting their frumpy and often bewildered father in his daily life of ridiculous obstacles, oftentimes finding simple answers to his complex adult issues. His interactions with romantic interests in *Louie* commonly involve Louie fumbling to win the affection of his dates and failing, bizarre scenarios resulting in the questioning of Louie's intelligence, or a date simply resulting in Louie getting the boot. While some of these tropes are not uncommon in popular culture, Louie consistently places women in powerful roles despite their age or the comic situation. This section analyzes Louie's comedy and how it often depicts untraditional male and female roles, many of which address the issue of inequality between genders in popular media portrayals. Louie's social commentary certainly takes the topic of women seriously as he exposes the power imbalance between women and men in popular culture.

Similar to Louie's appreciation for women of all types despite their age, Sarah Silverman responds to the topics of feminism today and a common double standard held by men in society, "[We live in a country] that is so youth-obsessed... As soon as a woman becomes old enough to have opinions and be vital, and have something to say and be outspoken and not have any fear about speaking out, she's systematically encouraged to crawl under a rock and die."<sup>4</sup> Silverman's aim is to expose this cultural system and aid in its dissolution, much like Louie points out that the ability to bear children makes a woman incredibly strong, despite society's

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<sup>4</sup> Here's What Sarah Silverman Has to Say About Feminism and Comedy's Boys' Club," *Makers*. October 15, 2015, <http://www.makers.com/blog/sarah-silverman-feminism-comedys-boys-club>.

general underestimating of the physical strengths of women. Surely Silverman's statement can bring to light to some degree the issue of bold women, or the societally-positioned hostile ties between feminism and comedy in general, wherein to be funny, one must sacrifice her effeminate characteristics. Louie becomes relevant in this regard through his frequent discussion of women, especially with respect to issues of power relationships and unusual portrayals of gender roles. Louie's social philosophy, a continuous questioning of truth and meaning in the world, applies to his feminism in that he interrogates our society that often blindly succumbs to traditionalized practices.

Many examples in Louie's work portray genders in a nontraditional manner, but his interactions with the late comedian Joan Rivers reveal a relevant social issue that he challenges: that of power relationships and control. In a similar vein as Silverman's aforementioned statement concerning age, Louie also tackles the double standard that many men are given compared to the often harsh judgement toward older women. After quitting a gig due to strict censorship at an Atlantic City casino in Season Two of *Louie*, Louie finds himself reflecting on his purpose as a comedian and the hardships one faces when dealing with struggle for success. Brooding over his recent censorship debacle and in apparent need for guidance, Louie finds himself in the audience at a Joan Rivers stand-up show at the same casino. Her set vulgarly considers the aging processes between men and women, condemning society's flaws in its shallow beauty standards in regards to the female body—perhaps a space that allowed for Rivers to directly address the issues Louie raises later in the episode. When Louie congratulates her after her show and Joan invites him to have a drink, Louie's night changes for the better.

Upon Louie's arrival to Rivers' suite, they immediately jump into discourse regarding the often grueling world of performers and success, and Joan mentors her crestfallen fellow

comedian: “I am a million years old. Do you know what I’ve been through? I’ve been in this business for a million and two years and I’m a woman. I’m a *woman!*” After a heated comedic exchange wherein Joan smacks Louie and explains to him that she refused to stoop to sexual favors to push her fame, she continues, “[You] listen to me. I have done it all... and the only thing I’ve learned... [is that] you don’t quit.” When Louie replies that Joan is right, she responds, “Of course I’m right.” Joan’s appearance in this episode saves Louie as he is lost in himself and cannot seem to find purpose in his role as comedian—reversing the traditional depictions of male mentor and damsel in distress. She has suffered due to gender inequality but pushes on, making her life and career an example itself.

The end of the episode “Joan” also insinuates sexual relations between Louie and Rivers; Rivers directs Louie, “don’t you *dare* tell anybody [about it],” and a groveling Louie promises that the act will remain a secret. This swapping of typical gender roles places Rivers in a state of control and Louie in that of submission, exposing popular television’s problematic depictions in which women are consistently seen as submissive characters. By incorporating Rivers in this way, Louie turns to us as audience and appears to ask why we dismiss women after a certain age and why females in power are such an intimidating image in our society. When Rivers casually invites Louie to bed with her, she subverts the typical male role in which men dominate the space between themselves and women, control the sexual agenda, and are also stereotypically the ones to break off a relationship when the female becomes too clingy. Louie tears down this societally built wall in which females are constantly viewed in a negative light, and positions himself at the center of ridicule and humiliation. By forcing us to view him as groveling lover and admirer and Rivers in a total state of control, we inadvertently consider why males and females are separated

in societal categories. Rivers' age and mentor-like portrayal deconstructs these unequal attitudes between men and women.

The fact that Louie takes advice from Joan Rivers, and not another male comedian, reveals his deep respect for not only Rivers but for women in general in regards to career paths, success, and power. His feminist views are exercised in this episode as his character radiates deep gratitude and admiration toward a female comedian that, as a result of the largely misogynistic world of stand-up comedy (and stardom in general), had to work doubly hard in order to raise herself to success. By placing himself in a state of submission and Rivers in that of domination, Louie allows himself to remain a comic site as we laugh at his childlike gratitude for Rivers' advice but also encourages deeper thought about the traditional ways that males and females are depicted in society. In contrast to the episode "Joan," women in reality are often dismissed as the lesser educated and experienced, weaker in intellect, and generally needful of aid and mentoring from the opposite sex. Louie flips these power relationships and puts himself at not only a point of awkwardness and humor but part of an intellectual arrangement in which we are forced to critically assess this imbalance in typical depictions. It seems that, echoing Rivers' commentary on women in charge at the beginning of this chapter, Louie is anything *but* in control of the women around him—an aspect of his comedy that enforces the empowerment of women and levels the playing field between genders.

Louie continues to target gender stereotyping in the *Louie* episode entitled "Bobby's House," further separating his work from typical media conventions. In this episode, Louie attempts to rescue a woman from a dilemma on the street, wherein the woman has accused a bystander for "looking at [her]." When Louie tries to interject and ease the situation, the situation only worsens when she beats him up in a maniacal upheaval. Placing himself at the

center of ridicule, Louie challenges gender stereotyping in his weak and submissive physical state. Common media portrayals pose women as generally delicate, while men are expressed as having grit and physical dominance; Louie flips this normativity and gives his audience an example of the uncommon in terms of gendered expectations and shows that *normal* is a subjective and often unhealthy ideal.

Louie's feminization of his fictional self can also be witnessed when he goes to Pamela to request that she cover up his bruises, only to discover that Pamela, after hearing his story, wants to do an experiment with Louie by suggesting they swap traditional gender roles. Pamela ends up giving Louie a makeover, black eyeliner and all, to mirror her own looks—positioning him a site of humor in his passive response. His expressionless response gives not only his viewers but Pamela a blank slate on which her own feelings are placed. In turn, Pamela adopts a hat, deep voice, and the name Peter, noticing that Louie has accepted his new identity with little emotion to express. Taking part in the role play, Louie tells the disguised Pamela in a gravelly, womanlike voice: “My name is... Jornatha.” The scene then switches to a post-coital discussion in which Louie seeks deeper conversation and Pamela abandons his hopes for an official relationship—serving as another example of role reversal in “Bobby’s House” in which Louie is emotionally unstable and Pamela the sentimentally detached sexual partner.<sup>5</sup> Such role reversals again show Louie's distaste for society's gender norms and the message to his audience that such traditions are in need of reexamination. He appears to ask why we accept given meanings when we are capable of creating our own—a question that applies to much of his social philosophy.

The feminist aspects of this situation in particular show that the unusual replaces the usual when it comes to *Louie*. In this episode, all stereotypical male roles are given to Pamela, as she breaks up with an emotionally charged Louie who is seen with mascara-streaked tears

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<sup>5</sup> Louis C.K., *Louie*, directed by Louis C.K. (2015; New York City: FX Productions, 2016), DVD.



running down his face—indeed a formulaic (and problematic) depiction of females. Authors Paige W. Toller, Elizabeth A. Suter, and Todd C. Trautman add to this notion, “In the United States, a successful man’s performance of high masculinity requires that the man be tough, in control, and aggressive, sometimes even violent. At the other extreme, a successful woman’s performance of high femininity requires that the woman be nurturing, physically attractive, and passive.”<sup>6</sup> Louie battles with these gender role expectations in his subversion of a typical heterosexual relationship. He expresses his frustration with the ways that society often accepts given roles without question; the perpetuated awkwardness of the scene reflects our society’s fear of disruption in gender norms.

By posing himself as the victim who is emotionally unstable and Pamela as the nonchalant male devoid of sentimentality, Louie gives us a space to laugh at the rigid compartmentalization in which society places gender. His expressionless reactions to Pamela’s primping form a blank canvas on which projected meaning can be made. The tension experienced when watching “Bobby’s House” gives way to Louie’s interrogation of societal categories, and his deconstruction of traditional roles can be applied to his overall philosophy in which he persistently questions given meanings. Author and feminist bell hooks elaborates on this frustration with the politics of gender roles:

Imagine living in a world where there is no domination, where females and males are not alike or even always equal, but where a vision of mutuality is the ethos shaping our interaction. Imagine living in a world where we can all be who we are, a world of peace and possibility.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Paige W. Toller, Elizabeth A. Suter, and Todd C. Trautman. “Gender Role Identity and Attitudes Toward Feminism,” *Sex Roles* 51, no. 1-2 (2004): 85-90, accessed February 26, 2017, <http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=63c0007f-8dd8-4351-b343-982898e098ad%40sessionmgr4007&vid=29&hid=4205>.

<sup>7</sup> bell hooks, *Feminism is For Everybody: Passionate Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), x.

Similar to hooks' argument, Louie places a clear focus on the ways we view gender in society and applies them to his overall philosophy—while he may not hold the secrets to the good life, he poses thoughtful commentary that urges us to critically engage with our surroundings while maintaining individuality. Generalizing male attitudes and making light of a serious situation in which gender expectations cause disruption in relationships, Louie points out that we should avoid blindly committing to our societally assigned roles. His monologue on *Saturday Night Live* represents an ideal example of his careful considerations regarding gender expectations,

[I] don't think women are better than men, but I do think that men are worse than women... [Like] I was talking to my friend, and he said his girlfriend is mad at him, [so I said] 'What happened?' [and he goes], 'Well, I guess I, uh, I guess I said something and then, uh, she got her feelings hurt.' ... Such a weird way to phrase it: 'She got *her* feelings hurt.' ... Could you more remove yourself from responsibility? ... It's like saying, 'Yeah, I shot this guy in the face and then I guess he got himself murdered.'<sup>8</sup>

Louie's acknowledgement of male distance and detachment from responsibility in terms of emotions points to an unfortunately common attitude between sexes in America: that men must be apathetically resilient and that women are soft and emotionally unstable. His comparisons in this monologue are embellished (his reasoning simply points out that neither gender is better than the other) yet warns of the complications that prescribed societal expectations can cause. While giving no clear answer to this issue, Louie nevertheless subjects it to criticism and exposes its unfairness, asking the question of why we hold certain attitudes toward those around us. Louie portrays genders in many humorous and unusual ways, but this section analyzes his intent to create equality among the sexes in his content.

Louie continues to place the women in his content on higher pedestals than himself, inferring that, while genders should be treated equally, subverting typical roles can cause us to reassess the ways we treat men and women. Louie's relationship with Amia, his neighbor's

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<sup>8</sup> Louis C.K., *Monologue*, *Saturday Night Live*, May 16, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzh7RtIJKZk>.

Hungarian niece, is perhaps one of the most commonly disputed topics of Louie's content, especially pertaining to Amia's "silence issue" or her lack of experience with the English language. This silence has indeed caused a ruckus in the world of media criticism; on the surface, it appears that Amia's character is a typical example of female submission. Claire Lobenfield of the cancelled news site *Gawker* stated of Louie's relationship with Amia in *Louie*, "[It is a] six-episode arc where Louie has a dopey romance with his Hungarian neighbor's non-English speaking niece Amia is consummated via coercion."<sup>9</sup> However, this "silence" holds its place as another factor of Louie's feminist values. In earlier episodes, the silence is portrayed as a mere language barrier, not maintaining silence for the mere fact that Amia is a woman. The sake of comedy is likely the reason for the lack of subtitles in these episodes, yet as Louie's humor proves, there is a deeper social reflection found within this situation. Minority groups in America—including women and those of diverse racial backgrounds—experience a more concrete version of the silence dilemma that Amia portrays.

Although expressed with uncomfortable humor in *Louie*, the issue of unheard voices, especially those of women, is subtly addressed. The situations in which Amia's silence creates a boundary often occur out of her choice to remain enigmatic; in reality, Louie appears to point out that this silence is not always by privileged choice. Amia's language is portrayed as complex to a dumbfounded Louie, thus placing her character as a symbol of intelligence over Louie's lack of understanding. This arrangement of character features subverts common stereotypes of unintelligent women, again reinforcing Louie's equal platform between men and women. Reflecting the patriarchal society in which Louie lives, this episode provides critical discourse on

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<sup>9</sup> Claire Lobenfield, "When *Louie* Stopped Being Funny." *Gawker*. June 17, 2014. <http://gawker.com/when-louie-stopped-being-funny-1592069970>.

current issues such as the unequal distribution of power among sexes not only in our culture but in others, as well.

Louie's fling with Amia does not degrade women, nor does it degrade non-native English speakers. Instead, Louie's choice in Amia's character opens the door for conversation on gender roles and the issue of the dominant female—portraying a silent woman who actually holds the powerful role of choosing to leave Louie in a casual and emotionally coherent manner. After a series of stressful episodes in which Louie vies for Amia's affection, the relationship comes to a close when the two go to dinner and their waiter translates a letter Amia has written to her befuddled love interest. In the letter, Amia explains why they cannot be together, as translated for the first time in the show, “[Louie], you are kind and so fun. I love our time together. But we [cannot be together]. I always remember you.”<sup>10</sup> Amia's character is quiet and agreeable on the surface, yet the power complex lies in her ability to woo Louie in her foreign demeanor as well as leave him when she chooses.

The silence issue is addressed throughout the many scenes prior to Louie's and Amia's breakup. As Louie and Jane make their way upstairs to their apartment one afternoon, they coincidentally run into Amia taking out the trash. Jane immediately exclaims “Szervusz!” and Amia exchanges her greeting. Louie then asks, “What's that?” to which Jane replies matter-of-factly, “It's *hello* in Hungarian.” Then, without missing a beat, Amia sees Jane's violin in tow and rushes back to her aunt's apartment to grab her own. The two then delve into a beautiful harmony in the hallway, through which a dumbfounded Louie stands back and listens. Although no words are spoken, the exchange between Amia and Jane is unbreakable. With their language barrier, Louie assumes the only way he can communicate with Amia is through flirtation and sex, but this flipping of subordination and power in this scene furthers Amia's enigmatic

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<sup>10</sup> Louis C.K., *Louie*, directed by Louis C.K. (2014; New York City: FX Productions, 2015), DVD.

demeanor: a mysterious shell that exudes not embarrassment but confidence and intelligence. By giving Amia's character control in the rocky relationship, Louie presents his audience with a confident female and a vulnerable male—a depiction that is only recently gaining traction in our predominantly male-driven society.

The character construction of Amia as the focus of his love interest is no mistake; to place a strong woman in the center of his world only to become broken by her alludes to not only masochistic attitudes that infiltrate western society but to Louie's feminist values. George Meredith would likely agree with Louie's attitude toward women,

The heroines of comedy are like women of the world, not necessarily heartless from being clear-sighted; they seem so to the sentimentally reared, only for the reason that they use their wits, and are not wandering vessels crying for a captain or a pilot.<sup>11</sup>

Popular misogynist attitude holds that women must be reserved and have heart; to be a woman in this light is to forever become prone to emotional rupture, for sentiment is the key to her existence. Meredith, and Louie, tear down this wall by pointing out that because women are viewed in this way, it is all the more important to transcend negative attitudes and celebrate heroines, whether that be of a comedic nature or simply in one's way of living. While Amia's language barrier is certainly used in part for comedic purposes, she is also an important female in Louie's life who ends up teaching him a lesson in other cultures as well as in romance—fulfilling her subverted role as female mentor. Amia's comedic qualities consist of both her witty inquisitiveness and mocking of the English language as Louie fails to give her his anticipated expertise as a native speaker.

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<sup>11</sup> George Meredith, "An Essay on Comedy," ed. Wylie Sypher. *Comedy* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), 15.

In one scene, a language barrier leads to Amia playing a comedic guessing game with Louie so that he can help her find a hair dryer in a drugstore; the scene ends with Amia's staple "Bye" expression to abruptly and casually conclude their date. In typical media portrayals, one might expect Amia to express vulnerability as a female and in her foreign status. However, her character is positioned in such a way that deconstructs gender stereotypes as well as Louie's emotional stability. Louie, again the laughingstock of the situation, shows us in this sequence of events that we need to question our given roles. As much of Louie's comedy maintains, the answer to what that role should be is up to the individual, leaving us in charge of our own realities as well as our identities.

By placing himself in the societally enforced position of the submissive and emotionally weak woman in specific episodes of *Louie*, Louie offers his own body not only as a site of laughter but as a place of social interrogation. In this way, he engages in the abject by showing that the traditional role of women *is* often the state of abjection: the degradation of the female body in popular culture. Louie reverses this role by taking up that position and trying it out for himself, thus giving his audience a projection of subverted gender roles. When Joan Rivers takes Louie under her wing and teaches him a life lesson, we view a male in a typical female's submissive role, and a female in a generally male dominant role. In his interactions with Rivers, Pamela, and Amia, gender roles are reversed in order to criticize how they are viewed in society.

Given Louie's noncommittal labels in terms of political issues, it comes as no surprise that he would not explicitly identify as a feminist. Yet given his responses to misogynistic criticism, his equal platforms in regards to male and female roles that are portrayed in his comedy and his own feminist discussions reveal that he stands as a feminist:

It's funny—in life, [gender roles] have all changed. There's a lot of fathers who take care of their kids, there's a lot of mothers who have careers. But in culture,

those roles are still the same. When I take my kids out for dinner or lunch, people smile at us. A waitress said to my kids the other day, “Isn’t that nice that you’re getting to have a little lunch with your daddy?”

Louie then admits that these comments are insulting, relating that he’s simply a father “taking them to lunch”; he also cares for each of his daughter’s needs when they stay with him. The societal expectation that pressures women to rear children and men to be the sole breadwinners is Louie’s frustration; in his experience, when one tries to step outside of their given role, judgement is quick to follow. He continues to exude discontent toward society’s uneven gender roles:

If I do something for my kids, I get a medal, because most fathers don’t.  
If a mother makes a tremendous effort for her kids and does incredible things,  
no one gives a shit, because she’s a mom, and that’s what she’s supposed to do.  
It’s like giving a bus driver a medal for driving straight ahead. Nobody’s interested.  
And that’s really not fair, but it is the way it is.<sup>12</sup>

Louie’s comedy, however, attempts to resolve this fault in the way society views genders in his calling to view them equally and opens the door for interrogation. An individual like Louie, with enough of a social platform to be influential, can make this idea soar and reach wide audiences.

By deconstructing gender roles, Louie encourages us to reconsider traditional gender stereotypes that society has deeply established and even encourages us to reassess our own ideologies and traditions. Giving no direct answer to the issue of gender stereotyping, Louie follows his social philosophy that because there is no absolute meaning, those labels that are attached to genders are rendered meaningless, as well. As with Louie’s often preposterous depictions of society, his message is clear: one not only need apply the philosophy of the absurd to life itself, but also to our interactions and identities. Through this philosophical lens, Louie

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<sup>12</sup> Jessica Grose, “‘Louie’ Defines His Manhood Through Being a Good Father,” *Slate*, June 30, 2010, [http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx\\_factor/2010/06/30/the\\_comedian\\_louie\\_cks\\_new\\_show\\_on\\_fx\\_offers\\_a\\_new\\_model\\_of\\_masculinity.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2010/06/30/the_comedian_louie_cks_new_show_on_fx_offers_a_new_model_of_masculinity.html).

presents his audience with his progressive feminist values in that we should construct our own meanings of gender rather than to submit to pre-established standards.

## **Body Image**

Louie's feminist stance is better understood when viewed through his absurdist philosophy— hinting that we should not blindly accept our given roles in society but form them on our own, instead. The issue of body image has plagued American society through the decades, as self-image is matter of priority for most while our perception of others is a frequent source of tension. bell hooks comments on the realities of body image expectations, “[Before women’s liberation] all females young and old were socialized by sexist thinking to believe that our value rested solely on appearance and whether or not we were perceived to be good looking, especially by men.”<sup>13</sup> Although Louie does not explicitly identify under the feminist label nor give statements as straightforward as hooks’, his skits and jokes infer that society as a whole does not think critically enough about the ways we view gender, body image, and rape. His brash humor forces us to think about the taboo and his expressionlessness allows us to paint our own social picture; whichever the case, his comedic elements are capable of sending us into deep philosophical inquiry. This section analyzes and explores the issue of body image in connection with Louie’s feminist viewpoints, showing Louie’s argument that we need to openly discuss the issue rather than dismiss and only further its negative effects.

An episode in season four of *Louie* called “So Did the Fat Lady” deals with the ongoing inequity with society’s body image expectations among genders. In this episode, Louie finds himself at the peak of white-male-privilege-self-realization, an awareness that Amy Zimmerman

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<sup>13</sup> bell hooks, *Feminism is For Everybody: Passionate Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 31.



calls “the realization that, despite his inability to date every gorgeous woman he lusts after, or successfully start a diet, he actually has it pretty good.”<sup>14</sup> Louie’s fictional character deals with gender stereotyping and expectations among sexes in his own encounter with a waitress named Vanessa (Sarah Baker) at the Comedy Cellar in “So Did the Fat Lady.” Witty Vanessa fails multiple times in her attempts to get Louie to go on a date with her—despite Louie’s positive reception to her jokes—and only succeeds in a coffee date when she offers him expensive tickets to a sports event. In this instance, Louie is certainly playing a typical male role. However, this specific role is not to chase but to *be* chased by the opposite sex—Louie feminizes himself by becoming the pursued. Dovetailing from the previous section on role reversal, Zimmerman adds of this portrayal, “[What] accounts for this gender role reversal, in which Vanessa pursues and Louie demurs? The simple fact that Vanessa is a ‘fat girl.’ She’s more similar in size to Louie than to the thin women he’s accustomed to dating.”<sup>15</sup> In a way that successfully avoids cruelty and patronization, Louie points out the flaws found in popular media that praise model body types in women and considers others who do not fit this type devoid of sexual and personal appeals. While Louie hooks up with a model in the episode directly prior to “So Did the Fat Lady,” all of his sexual escapades are nonetheless in “Louie’s world,” a place where he takes the stage on a regular basis, makes his life appear fabulous, and immediately tears it down and critiques its societally-charged flaws.

In an interview with Sarah Baker, who was aware of the casting call requirement of “[being] comfortable in your own skin,” she reveals the double-standard among men and women in the dating realm, “People think women shouldn’t be fat. I think it just comes back to that. Some people might see this episode and feel bad for [my character]. But some people might be

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<sup>14</sup> Amy Zimmerman, “Louis C.K. Apologizes to the ‘Fat Girls,’” *The Daily Beast*, May 13, 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/05/13/louis-c-k-apologizes-to-the-fat-girls.html>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

like, “Oh, she’s a cool chick. He’s the one who’s got the issue.”<sup>16</sup> Baker reaffirms the unevenness of feminine expectations, adding that Louie was simply exposing the harsh realities that the entertainment realm both instills and perpetuates,

Just because I look the way I do, I’m not Vanessa. That’s not my experience. They’re Louis C.K.’s words. You wouldn’t ask Halle Berry, “Do you feel bad representing cats in that way, when you played Catwoman?” But it’s obviously an episode that’s resonating with people. *Louie* is a beautiful show. I think it’s art on television. And for me, this was so worth it.<sup>17</sup>

Louie, all the while partly mystified from his own character’s stereotyping blindness, reveals in this episode the issue that heavysset men are given more tolerable expectations when it comes to media depictions. Baker’s emphasis on representation points out the unfairness with which society views individuals of varying body types, showing Louie’s innovative breaking free of societal norms and encouraging unrestrained thought.

As Louie’s choice to joke about his body illustrates his state of abjection, Vanessa’s discomforts regarding her appearance are publicly discouraged, as she admits, “[It sucks to be a fat girl]... and the worst part is... I’m not even supposed to [tell anyone how bad it sucks]!” She then explains to a dumbfounded Louie that *he* can joke about his fatness, and it’s “adorable,” yet if she were to do the same, “they’d call the suicide hotline on [me].”<sup>18</sup> Louie’s self-debasement and crudeness are evident in this episode, yet his autobiographical character exposes the double-standard that bodily humor might not be as highly praised when told by a woman. Susan Bordo clarifies cultural attitudes toward the body,

[Preoccupation with fat, diet, and slenderness] may function as one of the most powerful normalizing mechanisms of our century, insuring the production of self-monitoring and self-disciplining ‘docile bodies’

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<sup>16</sup> Melissa Maerz, “*Louie*: Sarah Baker breaks down starring in the ‘Fat Lady’ episode,” *Entertainment Weekly*, May 12, 2014, <http://www.ew.com/article/2014/05/12/louie-louis-ck-fat-lady-sarah-baker>.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Louis C.K., *Louie*, directed by Louis C.K. (2014; New York City: FX Productions, 2015), DVD.

sensitive to any departure from social norms and habituated to self-improvement and self-transformation in the service of those norms. [Women are] subject to such controls more profoundly and... more ubiquitously than men.”<sup>19</sup>

Although body image issues can be found among any gender, Louie appears to argue that women do not have the privilege of being accepted for having the different body types for which many men are accepted. Vanessa’s character calls us out for our societal predispositions, as Louie poses as a clueless male to mimic the reality that many men receive the benefit of a double standard with respect to acceptance of body type, while most women do not.

“So Did the Fat Lady” reveals the imbalance between body expectations among genders not only through Vanessa’s discussion with Louie, but Louie’s interactions with his brother, Bobby. In the same episode, Louie can be seen addressing the body image issue directly. Upon seeing stereotypically beautiful women on the street, Louie and Bobby agree that they need to lose some weight to successfully attract the opposite sex. First, however, Bobby decides that they should say one last goodbye to eating out; he suggests they go on a “Bang Bang,” an apparent tradition in which the brothers eat at two restaurants in a row. Jazzy music keeps the mood light as Louie and Bobby eat a smorgasbord at an Indian restaurant and then at a diner, causing a spectacle with their audible burps and messy eating but nevertheless welcomed by restaurant staff. The waitress at the diner asks if they are celebrating, and when Bobby explains that they are only having a “Bang Bang” in which they eat endlessly, the waitress gives an understanding nod and tells them to enjoy themselves. Louie presents this grotesque situation to back up Vanessa’s previous point: that it is societally acceptable and even masculine for a large man to eat a hearty meal (or two), but if an overweight woman were to do so, she is more likely to be judged and viewed in a negative light.

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<sup>19</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 186.

The “Bang Bang” scene ends when, after their outrageous meals, Bobby asks Louie if he is interested in going to the gym the next day. Louie responds with an expressionless tone, “[You know]... I, uh, I’ve got stuff to do... [It’s] not a good day [for that].” Bobby concludes flatly, “Cool.” The scene is comical in that Bobby and Louie eat a nearly inhuman amount of food with minimal reactions, after which they go about their days having ditched their initial plan to better their physical selves—another instance in which Louie is seen in a state of abjection. Yet what if, Louie appears to ask, Vanessa had been in this situation? Society has given males the benefit of the body image double standard for decades, but Bordo explains further, “[It has been documented that] women in our culture are more tyrannized by the contemporary slenderness ideal than men are, as they typically have been by beauty ideals in general.”<sup>20</sup> While Louie cannot necessarily halt body normativity, he can expose his dissatisfaction with the issue by portraying honest, often wincingly realistic interpretations of societal ideals. In this way, “So Did the Fat Lady” exposes the inequity of body expectations among genders—also an issue which feminism strives to resolve.

By centering the focus on the issue of body expectations and gender in “So Did the Fat Lady,” Louie applies his social philosophy to a relevant feminist issue. Rather than to reinforce typical, often sexist portrayals of women as seen in popular media, he places himself at many instances of ridicule; in the instance of “So Did the Fat Lady,” Louie’s character exudes stereotypical male tendencies of obliviousness to female body image constraints enforced by our culture. By placing himself rather than Vanessa as the focal point of laughter, Louie turns the spotlight on his audience; in this way, we may begin to follow his philosophical queries and construct our own meanings and even solutions to the issue of gender imbalances. By criticizing

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<sup>20</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 204.

his audience for blindly accepting body image ideals, Louie forces us to reconsider the ways we view genders as a whole.

Louie's presenting the issue of body image has much to say about the ways we interact in society, pushing us into an uncomfortable realization that we might otherwise dismiss as dark comedy. Susan Bordo acknowledges the inevitable cultural influence on gender, connecting the phenomenon to the desire for power: "[Power works as] ... women associate slenderness with self-management, by way of the experience of newfound freedom (from a domestic destiny) and empowerment in the public arena."<sup>21</sup> While this empowerment in the public sphere is perpetuated by popular television, Louie combats body expectation issues by interrogating their meaning, coming to the conclusion that no absolute purpose exists. Thus, he urges us through his comedic elements to also interrogate the societal structures we adhere to and take part in, and reminds us that critical thinking can serve as a tool to form our own philosophies.

## **The Rape Issue**

Much like the traditional, and predominantly male, directive that females should settle down and let men take control is an all-too-general mindset that the woman is the weaker of the human species in mind, body and spirit. Although these outdated ideals are indeed losing traction and falling to their well-beloved wayside, themes of misogyny still run current in popular entertainment, regardless of the genre at hand. This section explores the ways Louie challenges the taboo aspects of rape jokes and analyzes his encouragement to rethink the ways we deal with rape in popular culture. Although rape jokes are not a common topic of Louie's comedy, he has

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<sup>21</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 212.

inadvertently been thrown into the issue by others' interpretations of his work, including instances discussed in this section. Louie appears to tackle this major issue in the media through the mode of his trademark comedic elements but also maintains moral consideration when discussing one of the most forbidden topics in society—tying together societal issues and comedy in such a way that critically engages with the feminist movement.

By venturing to the taboo zone of rape jokes, Louie shows that such topics are in need of discussion in order to promote awareness and even more considerate and ethical judgements within ourselves. Louie's incorporation of topics as dark as rape suggests that this subject explicates his feminist values more so than other subjects. In a culture where shock value has heightened our tolerance for graphic content, the topic of rape is used to alert his audience that we need to discuss this largely avoided issue. He gives no direct route to solving the issue of rape culture in America but gives his own humorous twist on the subject to open an otherwise closed door for taboo discussion. With his trademark comic elements, Louie offends his audience into serious contemplation about rape. Whether we express positive or negative reactions to Louie's brash comedy, we are nonetheless contemplating his raised societal issue.

In *Louie's* six episodes wherein his failed love affair with Amia unfolds, Amia's reciprocated feelings are explicit: her expressions when they walk through the New York streets late at night, her baking Louie a pie, and even in the infamous so-called "rape scene," where Amia takes off her own scarf in a heated encounter with Louie after a date. The perpetuated awkwardness of the scene begins when Louie invites Amia into his apartment after their pleasant evening out. Amia is hesitant, but agrees to come inside after she and Louie exchange a few short English phrases, "Hello... No, bye." The scene unfolds into kissing, which leads to more intimacy—all of which show equal consent from both parties, wherein the elementary phrases of

“Bye” become less of a function and more an act of playfulness. The next morning, Louie awakens to Amia staring back at him with a disappointed expression. Louie becomes confused, after which Amia gives short explanations in Hungarian that are not translated. Then, in a sneakily mysterious gesture that concludes the episode, she leaves Louie’s apartment. However, *Slate Magazine* translates Amia’s response: “That was a big mistake... We’ve ruined what was good, understand?” When Louie clearly does not understand, Amia responds, “[It’s okay]... We’ll fix it somehow... Everything is in order.”<sup>22</sup> This episode reaches a conclusion that portrays realistic situations in which both male and female display stereotypical gender habits in which sex is often detached from sentimentality. In an ambiguous way, Louie points out that we are desensitized to sex in our culture, and this sticky situation illustrates our uneasiness but nevertheless incorporation of power imbalances into our system.

Lobenfield of *Gawker* criticizes this scene, “In the context of Louie’s world, I am sure many viewers took [the morning after] as a tragically funny comment on Louie’s sexual prowess. I took her to be expressing her discomfort by how the situation shook out.”<sup>23</sup> Contrary to this observation, Louie’s playful discourse with Amia and his reaction to her often bluntness due to her broken English gives yet another Louie romance story in which the woman leaves him behind in the dust—once again posing himself at the center of ridicule. A rape scene would have never been deemed permissible nor appealing in any way; much like John Limon’s assertion that comedy is audience-driven, this series of scenes between Amia and Louie were purposed toward evoking laughter and exposing power imbalances. In addition to this humor, the episode also

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<sup>22</sup> Balint Zsako and Ayana Morali, “Everything Louie’s Hungarian Girlfriend Said to Him, Translated.” *Slate*. 3 June 2014.

[http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2014/06/03/louie\\_s\\_hungarian\\_girlfriend\\_s\\_lines\\_translated\\_into\\_english\\_video.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2014/06/03/louie_s_hungarian_girlfriend_s_lines_translated_into_english_video.html)

<sup>23</sup> Claire Lobenfield, “When *Louie* Stopped Being Funny.” *Gawker*. 17 June 2014. <http://gawker.com/when-louie-stopped-being-funny-1592069970>

nods toward Louie's discontent with the ways men and women are portrayed in society—showing that even when silence replaces dialogue, an underlying message that subverts male domination can be seen. Many critics have projected a negative view on Louie, especially concerning the issue of rape; however, Louie explicitly takes on the complicated subject to ask provocative questions to his audience. Because the topic makes us uneasy, it becomes an ideal point at which serious discussion can be made, perhaps even providing a better understanding of both feminist critics and Louie's commentary.

Although Amia expresses an intent to leave (some of her only English phrases in this scene are “Bye” and “It's okay”) and reflects on their night together as “no good,” she does so with flirtatious devices (such as smiling, giving the “shh” expression upon leaving) that Louie only reads as ambiguous. Amia's choice to speak predominantly in Hungarian in this scene also reflects a playful attitude as she is well aware that Louie has no clue what she is saying. The fictionalized Louie's actions are partially carried out in a stereotypically male manner—he remains persistent even when Amia shows interest in leaving—yet Louie positions the characters in this episode in a vague fashion in order to reflect society's attitudes towards sex in general. The issues of victim blaming, increased violence, and the policing of sexuality among women—are only furthered when not openly addressed. While his complicated vagueness presents a need for discussion, Louie encourages us to place this issue in the forefront of social priority and take a proactive stance in our attitudes toward rape culture by allowing us to place our own meaning into his awkward fictional situations. This interpretation of the scene is not to say that flirtation alludes to consent, by any means; it is clear in this episode that Amia kisses Louie back, and her dissatisfaction with the overall experience the next morning could be read as an alluding to Louie's failure at pleasing the opposite sex—a humorous theme running concurrently through



the entirety of *Louie*. The power complex appears to lie in the hands of Amia, but Louie's behavior sends the message that control among genders is unnecessary, whether in a relationship or in society as a whole.

Louie's relationship with Amia addresses a non-rape moment to show the complexities behind our culture's attitudes toward sexual relationships; in a more direct manner, his real-life affiliations also grapple with the issue. With his expressionless delivery to preposterous events and dark humor in nearly every corner of his work, it comes as no surprise that Louie would find himself affiliated with society's most unmentionable issues in some way. In 2012, fellow raunchy comedian Daniel Tosh reportedly told an objecting fan at the Laugh Factory in Hollywood that it would be funny if "like, five guys" raped [her] right that second.<sup>24</sup> The woman chastised by Tosh later blogged, "... I felt that sitting there and saying nothing, or leaving quietly, would have been against my values as a person and as a woman. I don't sit there while someone tells me how I should feel about something as profound and damaging as rape."<sup>25</sup> Louie, unaware of the event, later tweeted Tosh, "your show makes me laugh every time I watch it. And you have pretty eyes." Inevitably an uproar ensued, now with Tosh and Louie under the scrutiny of the public sphere.

Louie immediately revised his statement, assuring his audience on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* that he had no idea the rape-joke at Tosh's show had occurred, having taken some sort of internet hiatus.<sup>26</sup> As a guest on Stewart's show, he described feminists and comics as "natural enemies," since "stereotypically speaking, feminists can't take a joke" and "comedians

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<sup>24</sup> Raúl Pérez and Viveca S. Greene, "Debating rape jokes vs. rape culture: framing and counter-framing misogynistic comedy," *Social Semiotics* 26.3 (2016): 265-66.

<sup>25</sup> Kate Harding, *Asking for It: Slut-shaming, Victim-blaming, and How We Can Change America's Rape Culture* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2015), 42.

<sup>26</sup> David Haglund, "'We're the No. 1 Threat to Women!' The feminist comedy of Louis C.K." *Slate*. April 16, 2013. [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2013/04/louis\\_c\\_k\\_feminism\\_oh\\_my\\_god\\_on\\_hbo\\_proves\\_comic\\_a\\_feminist.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2013/04/louis_c_k_feminism_oh_my_god_on_hbo_proves_comic_a_feminist.html).

can't take criticism."<sup>27</sup> Although this description seemed to both calm and anger the public, apparently pitting comedians against feminists, the sarcasm is clear in that Louie has backed feminist values in his many years as a comic. While no traces exist of Louie himself identifying with the term "feminist," and although he has not been labeled a feminist, his comedic social commentary repeatedly indicates his support of the feminist cause. In an interview with *Vulture*, Louie is asked if he is a feminist, to which he responds,

I don't feel strongly enough about anything to give myself a label. My daughter is a feminist and I identify with her, with her rights and her feelings, and I'm listening to her. I'm learning from her. But I think the second you say "I am this," you've stopped listening and learning.<sup>28</sup>

Kelsey Wallace contradicts Louie's discussion of feminism in her *Bitch Media* article by arguing that Louie has yet to "make up" for his soreness between comedy and feminism and has fallen to the "gender mistake." She follows: "On the one hand, we have yet another white male comedian making tired jokes about women and women's issues. Snooze. On the other hand, we have an influential comedian discussing feminism and rape culture on [*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*]. Yay!" Wallace concludes with an ambiguous tone towards Louie's approach to gender,

Do we treat this interview as a small feminist victory, or should we expect more? And can we ignore Louis C.K.'s use of the word "pussy" as an insult? Because that kinda undermines the whole "enlightenment" thing.<sup>29</sup>

It appears that feminists like Wallace would rather see a complete turnaround from Louie in this regard—a severe distancing from comedians such as Tosh with complete backing up of feminist values, especially concerning rape. While her statement about Tosh's slipup on stage is

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> David Marchese, "In Conversation: Louis C.K." *Vulture*. June 13, 2016. <http://www.vulture.com/2016/06/louis-ck-horace-and-pete-c-v-r.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Kelsey Wallace, "Louis C.K. thinks 'feminists can't take a joke,' but his *Daily Show* Interview Wasn't all that Bad," *Bitch Media*, July 17, 2012. <https://bitchmedia.org/post/louis-ck-talks-tosh-the-daily-show-feminist-magazine-rape-jokes-comedy-women-television>.

wholeheartedly accurate (that gang raping an individual is simply wrong and shouldn't be enticed even jokingly), her direct criticism on Louie's foul mouthing is merely displaced. Of course, all of these raunchy words belong in a specific context (just like other offensive content); only viewing them from one side of the picture does nothing to solve the issue of misogyny.

Feminist author Kate Harding diverges from the *Bitch Media* blogger in this regard, while bringing much-needed attention to rape (and misogynistic) issues in America. She criticizes both Tosh for “[failing] as a comic and a human being” as well as the woman who protested over Tosh's racy comment,

Although I love [her] politics and her moxie, I disagree with that woman about rape jokes being uniformly unfunny. I believe it depends entirely on the joke in question, and specifically, on who the butt of that joke is. Satire that shines a light on rape culture, or wisecracks that release some of the tension that women live with all the time, are not making fun of survivors. They aren't built on the premise that victims of sexual violence are a powerful group that deserves to be lampooned.<sup>30</sup>

Just as Harding promotes “morally sound” laughter, John Limon presses that “if you [the audience] think something is funny, it is. You may be (collectively) puzzled by your amusement or disapprove of it, but you cannot be wrong about it.” While this interpretation may seem an exclusionary perspective on dicey humor, Limon poses it in such a way that, with a general audience, moral grounding has already been laid as a distancing between action and thought. To laugh at a rape joke, again, does not insinuate laughter directed at victims of rape, nor does it condone the horrific action of rape; it encapsulates a collective opinion on a culturally-hushed topic and in turn makes that topic cathartically humorous. Regardless of the type of joke, according to Limon, the joke teller must go about it in a *morally acceptable* way. While Louie's humor is indeed ugly, he maintains moral balance without dismissing vital societal issues—his

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<sup>30</sup> Kate Harding, *Asking for It: Slut-shaming, Victim-blaming, and How We Can Change America's Rape Culture* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2015), 42.

offensiveness persistently cycles back to serious commentary in which we are urged to think for ourselves rather than accept societally established interpretations.

Harding concludes her section on rape jokes with Lindy West's comment that "the world is full of terrible things, including rape, and it *is* okay to joke about them. But the best comics use their art to call bullshit on those terrible parts of life and make them better, not worse."<sup>31</sup> An instance where Louie "calls bullshit" on the horrific events of rape could be his previously discussed relationship with Amia. Yet rather than to explicitly identify with the feminist label, Louie presents these sticky situations for us to ponder over and form meanings on our own.

When asked about his misogynist criticism and whether those discussions "make [him] think about how different types of people might hear [his] material," Louie responds, "No. Why would I do that?" This response is not an ethical misstep, but a portrayal of confidence in regards to the plethora of media repercussion that accompanies any popular public debut. Louie continues,

Everybody's point of view is legitimate. The goal of the things I say onstage or in my shows isn't to please everyone. My goal is not to have everyone say, "This was an excellent indictment of this bad thing." I'm confounded by people who want that from art. "Boy, that sure showed that woman to be strong! That means that was good!" It's so much more interesting to shed light on these things that we all argue about. We don't have to agree on everything, and that's okay.<sup>32</sup>

The fact that Louie neither subscribes to absolute feminism nor pledges to change world issues such as third world poverty plays a part in his public enigma that nevertheless strengthens his influential status as comedian. Just as his deadpan expression and offensiveness make us laugh, they also urge us to *think* about his straightforward comments on issues and how we might perceive them. Louie's major two elements of comedy force us to interrogate his topics on a

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<sup>31</sup> Kate Harding, *Asking for It: Slut-shaming, Victim-blaming, and How We Can Change America's Rape Culture* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2015), 44.

<sup>32</sup> David Marchese, "In Conversation: Louis C.K." *Vulture*. 13 June 2016. <http://www.vulture.com/2016/06/louis-ck-horace-and-pete-c-v-r.html>

deeper level than we might initially contemplate. Regarding the issue of rape, Louie's jokes tell us that we should not avoid contemplation of such events; rather, we should bring them into discussion in order to move forward and even make change. Louie's comedy forces his audience to reconsider taboo situations in order to remove us from the comfort zone of prescribed societal views and move us into deeper philosophical discussion.

The comedic portrayals in *Louie* and Louie's real-life actions and commentary deal with women in realistic ways that neither support misogyny, nor do they speak some form of activist message. They simply portray reality for what it is, according to a straight, white male individual working his way through life's obstacles. Louie's general treatment of women in episodes of *Louie* do not stoop to mistreatment of the opposite sex; rather, they wrestle with the realities of serious issues such as rape and offer them as open topics for discussion. Giving a neutral platform on which realistic situations happen, Louie encourages his audience to contemplate the ways they form their own realities. At the core of these blunt musings about the world, during which Louie (rather than the female gender) is the center of ridicule in his self-imposed role of comic site, Louie challenges us as a society by pointing out that topics such as rape should be discussed rather than repressed in our culture.

### **Louie as Feminist Social Philosopher**

Many critics disapprove of the nature of Louie's work regarding women, but this chapter has shown that despite lacking a label, Louie stands as a feminist voice in our society. A crucial aspect of understanding his general philosophy, Louie's feminist stance helps his audience develop the method of interrogating societally established meanings and constructing purpose of

our own. Uprooting the underlying logic of gender based repression, his jokes delve into a conversation that we otherwise might avoid. In a famous stand-up skit, Louie scolds his audience:

How do [women] still go out with guys, when you consider that there is no greater threat to women than men? We're the *number one* threat to women! Globally and historically, we're the number one 'cause of injury and mayhem to women... [You know] what *our* number one threat is? Heart disease.<sup>33</sup>

After his fans break out in laughter, Louie's lack of clear countenance allows for the joke to settle and serious thinking to take place. His mentioning of the high crimes done to women by men is indeed dark, yet he asks us to observe societal issues such as these, even if only for the duration of his set. Why, he appears to ask, do they occur? By immediately opening up the conversation with the stark acknowledgement that these issues are part of reality, Louie points out that the treatment of genders themselves is not equal. Social attitudes suggest that we are not exposed to the ugly truth of gendered crime in such a way that we are educated and aware. Existing not above us as performer but below us as the platform for our humor, Louie addresses taboo topics in society that demand our attention. Forcing us to imagine dicey situations in a personal manner, Louie positions himself in the role of females in order to deconstruct societally imposed attitudes. In doing so, we assess not only current feminist issues but aspects of life that are otherwise deemed unimportant or, even worse, predefined.

In his process of joke-turned-critical analysis, Louie transcends prescribed societal meanings and roles and maps them for himself. This inclusive take on comedy creates an awakening of social consciousness not only in other comedians but among wide audiences of all types. His humor urges us to reassess the ways in which we view sex, gender, and social

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<sup>33</sup> Louis C.K., *Oh My God*, directed by Louis C.K. (2013; Phoenix: Pig Newton, Inc.), DVD.

practices as a whole. Louie's absurdist philosophy holds that because there is no absolute truth, one should construct his or her own life purpose. Similarly, Louie focuses largely on feminist issues and urges us to form our own meanings rather than to accept societal categories, including how to think and behave in regards to gender roles, the issue of rape, and body image expectations. In his discussion on women and power relationships in society, the inequity of physical beauty standards between men and women, and the issue of rape and rape culture, Louie asks the question of *why* such issues exist amidst otherwise established societal attitudes and traditions. Louie's skits and stand-up comedy may not hold the answers to that complex question, but may have routes to helping us assess our thoughts and actions on our own.

## CONCLUSION

The world of comedy has seen its share of offensive comedians, but Louie's approach to stand-up sketches and scenes from *Louie* suggest that he has a unique type of humor to offer: that of serious social commentary and philosophy. With his keen and witty remarks on our society, Louie blends effortlessly into popular culture studies in that, like the late Richard Pryor who boldly spoke on "societal ills,"<sup>1</sup> his reflections go beyond the purpose of making us laugh. Louie focuses on the ways we behave and invites us to question our own thoughts and actions, often on an ethical level. He maintains a moral balance by considering individuals of all types and questions the categories that separate rather than unite us as a society. An outsider to America during his childhood, Louie's unique perspective bridges into his unusual ways of questioning the system in which we live. From the Boston comedy clubs of his youth to sold out shows at Madison Square Garden later in his career, Louie has established himself as both a comic mirror of ourselves as well as an important social philosopher of our era.

A certain amount of debate will always revolve around Louie's comedy; his brash humor and seemingly emotionless delivery when discussing crucial topics are often highly controversial. Whether it is humor for the sake of humor or more serious commentary, Louie rarely turns to mindless comedy—there is usually a clear message found within each of his jokes. Giving more questions than answers, Louie sends us into an unexpected societal reflection each time we experience his work. His bluntness can be compared to the social commentary of Pryor, whose raunchy jokes offended many but also contained truths, and George Carlin, whose famous "seven deadly words" seized America with their unexpected crassness. I am in the hopes that this work will further identify Louie as situated among these kings of comedy, who not only

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Rhymes, "Ode to Richard Pryor," *The Black Commentator*. Last modified 2002.  
[http://www.blackcommentator.com/163/163\\_rhymes\\_richard\\_pryor.html](http://www.blackcommentator.com/163/163_rhymes_richard_pryor.html)



makes us laugh but urges us to critically engage with our surroundings. Louie likely did not set out to become a social philosopher, but through his preposterous comedy, a certain clear-sightedness prevails.

By critically examining Louie's comedy, we can better understand his ability to connect to his audience on a more serious level. In this way, Louie's interchanging comedic elements can be seen as gateways to his societal commentary; his expressionless demeanor and brash style urge us to visit the uncomfortable aspects of life and assess our own meanings to his ludicrous comedic situations. Often placing himself at the center of ridicule, Louie can be seen as a comic site onto which his audiences may project their less appealing thoughts and question the unquestionable, even if only for the duration of his sets.

This encouragement to approach tradition with skepticism and critically think about our own responses is the key to understanding Louie's social philosophy. Camus' absurdism applies fluidly to Louie's work, especially in regards to his life outlook. A mode of thinking that digs at perhaps one of philosophy's greatest problems of all, that of suicide, absurdism grapples with the mind that seeks for meaning beyond eternal promises—an idea woven throughout Louie's questions about relationships, growing older, raising children, and countless other aspects of life. Constructing his own path of purpose, Louie urges us to make a conscious effort to construct our lives without the aid of given meaning. Louie fits into this philosophical category, as much of his humor revolves around the questioning of truth, human existence, and the search for life's purpose. The skits in *Louie* are certainly strange on a lighthearted level, but they are also absurd in the philosophical sense as they consistently deconstruct traditions and institutions of thought. Preexisting articles on Louie and philosophy make interesting connections, yet a critical analysis of his work in connection to absurdism was the central part of this work. While Louie might not

directly give answers to life's mysteries, he pushes his audience to the point in which they develop their own meanings, echoing Camus' urging to revolt rather than to succumb to life's uncertainties. Going to places which many would fear to venture, Louie propels us into serious discussion in addition to a wildly raucous comedy show.

While avoiding any type of label, Louie's absurdist philosophy can also be used to explore his strong support for women in his work—a topic only briefly explored in previous criticism. Through his comedy, Louie urges his audience to rethink social stereotypes and conventional portrayals of gender, thereby establishing himself as both feminist and social philosopher. His fictional character champions the strengths of women, subverts gender stereotypes, and confronts taboo subjects such as rape and body image. Louie's unusual portrayals of gender, power, and expectations reveal his critical engagement with society; his innovative approaches to discussing complex subjects such as rape allow him to question the logic behind predisposed meanings in our culture.

Contrary to criticism on Louie in regards to women, his feminist views promote active, individual thinking amidst established gender traditions. His incorporation of women of all types encourages his fans to maintain a level of societal awareness, thus opening the door for continual critique and improvement concerning our attitudes toward and treatment of women. Through a method similar to the deconstruction of meaning in absurdism, Louie interrogates the social system in which we live as he challenges predisposed categories. Breaking free from gender stereotypes, both Louie's autobiographical show and his stand-up comedy offer a refreshing look at women portrayed in the media—offering an equal platform among all genders.

By analyzing his elements of humor and viewing him as a comic site, comparing his social commentary with Albert Camus' philosophy of the absurd, and applying his humor and

philosophy to his feminist views, this work has revealed Louie's vital role as a social philosopher of our era. His humor is certainly brash and offensive, often appearing apathetic toward otherwise shocking material, but under the surface forces us to critically engage with society and challenges the ways we think about our surroundings. I hope that this work has provided meaningful research and reflection on one of the most influential comedians of our time, during a period where critical thinking is more important than ever before. While Louie's humor is uncomfortable to many, he encourages us to step outside of our comfort zones and begin thinking critically. No type of comedy is exempt from criticism, but it is important to understand Louie's motives behind his work and the societal messages he sends through his humor. Louie's awakening of consciousness is in part due to his brash commentary and often shocking material; in turn, this work has provided a stepping stone in understanding his comedy and its effects. One's choices and meanings regarding human life differ depending on the individual, as Louie reminds us that we are capable of finding our own purpose. Louie makes us laugh, but he also invites us to *think*—an act where we can all become creators.

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