

**Fumerist Autoethnography: Developing a New
Relationship between Performer and Audience**

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Ph.D.

2024

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Relationship between Performer and Audience**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of
East London for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

January 2024

Abstract

Fumerist Autoethnography is a new approach to autoethnographic performance making that combines fumerist stand-up comedy and autoethnography into a merged artistic praxis that is feminist, funny, and examines the performer-audience relationship. The term ‘fumerist’, first coined by stand-up comedian Kate Clinton, describes the ‘firebrand humour’ that ‘captures the idea of being funny and wanting to burn the house down all at the same time’ (Willett et al., 2019: 27). In titling this new approach Fumerist Autoethnography I aim to ‘foreground a feminism that does not brood over victimhood or in-advertently perpetuate images of female suffering and sacrifice’ (Willett et al., 2019: 27). This Practice as Research (PaR) investigation seeks to develop a new relationship between autoethnographer and their audience. To develop this new autoethnographic praxis, I adapt Nelson’s Modes of Knowing Praxis model which entails ‘a multi-mode approach to PaR and evidence produced through different modes of knowledge: “know-how; know-what and know-that”’ (Nelson, 2013: 38). For Fumerist Autoethnography Praxis, Know-That I outline the theoretical frameworks of fumerism and stand-up comedy and argue that fumerist stand-up comedy being integrated into autoethnographic practice will develop a stronger feminist autoethnographic practice; Know-How, I demonstrate my embodied knowledge through my autoethnographic and fumerist stand-up comedy practice and illustrate how my blending of the two forms led to the development of *We’re Like Sisters*; Know-What I evaluate the Fumerist Autoethnography process by proposing a set of evaluation criteria to critically reflect on the performances of *We’re Like Sisters* and my relationship with audiences. In the aftermath of a global pandemic, the worrying rise of far-right ideologies, and resurgence in violent misogyny, now is the time for narratives forms and approaches to research that invite us to laugh and mock the patriarchy and to ‘shake up oppressive norms with a good and gutsy belly laugh’ (Willett et al., 2019: 27).

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Acknowledgments

I am incredibly thankful to Dr. Dominic Hingorani, Dr. Lynne McCarthy, and Dr. Tom Drayton for being the best advisory team. I thank them for their insightful feedback and for remaining deeply supportive through the many, many, many versions of this research investigation.

Thank you to Carrie Mueller and Juliet Knight for inviting me to play and experiment in Project on a Bus. Without this programme to sustain me over lockdown I would have burnt out creatively and who knows what lockdown would have looked like without a creative outlet.

I'd also like to thank the various stand-up comedy venues, bookers, and comedians which I've been able to work with on the London comedy circuit. I am especially grateful to all the wonderful acts who opened *We're Like Sisters*: Lizzie Simpson, Helen K., Ben Winter, Dora Flowers, Fin Jacobs, Rosie Yadid, Annabel Edmonds, Candace Bryan, Orion Lewis, Ben Target, and Leslie Gold. Thank you for making me laugh until I ache.

Finally, I would not have gotten this far in my academic or theatrical journey without my incredible circle of powerhouse women supporting me and cheering me on. Huge and heartfelt thank you to Mom, Kelsey, Kelsey, Joslyn, Carly, Victoria, and Annie for constantly making me laugh and for supporting my wild ideas.

A Note

Before reading the written element of this thesis submission, I recommend that you first watch the main practical element of this practice-as-research based doctoral project, a stand-up comedy performance entitled *We're Like Sisters*, [here](#) as this provides essential context on me and my practice that will be beneficial to know prior to continuing. Alongside this performance, the additional practice-based elements of this submission can be found in Appendix A: Stand-Up Comedy Gigs and Workshops, Appendix B: Project on a Bus, and Appendix C: We're Like Sisters.

Preface

This Practice as Research investigation initially stemmed from a desire to spend time developing my previous professional practice which focused on combining autoethnography and theatre for and by young people. My initial research proposal aimed to develop an autoethnographic toolkit for young people aged 16-25 to develop their own autoethnographic performance pieces. However, with the onset of Covid-19 and a series of lockdowns in 2020, facilitating autoethnographic driven workshops for young people was not possible under those conditions. To adapt to the ever-changing conditions of the pandemic, I decided to use my own practice to develop the first iteration of the Youthquake Autoethnography toolkit. I joined Project on a Bus (2020), an artistic mentorship scheme run by Carrie Mueller and Juliet Knight of University of East London in its Research and Development stage, to create the toolkit and to begin development of a show that would evolve into *We're Like Sisters*. In shifting the research to focus on my own solo work, I found myself drawn to stand-up comedy. Once lockdown lifted, I signed up to take the *Beginner's Stand-Up Comedy Course* at Angel Comedy, in introductory workshop that 'look[s] at the very basics of stand-up, from learning how to write a "pull back and reveal" joke to applying for gigs on the London circuit' at 'one of London's most popular comedy clubs' (Angel Comedy Club, 2023), to jump start my creativity outside of the pressures of my doctoral studies. This was around the time that Bo Burnham's Netflix special *Inside* (2021) was released which first appears to be 'a creative and industrious romp through the artistic process during a period of unusual restrictions, instead [Burnham] cleverly and intentionally manipulates its structural components to provide criticism of artistic exchange and the modern world' (Moriarty, 2023). Through comedy songs, scenes, and behind the scenes style footage, Burnham waves together a comedy special 'that speaks to the careening and difficult thoughts that I think haunted a particular kind of person for well over a year' (Holmes, 2021) and captured how I felt during lockdown trying to develop an autoethnographic show and do my practicebased research when the world was working against me. He captured the depression and mania I had been feeling for over a year *and* he was able to make it *funny*! A few weeks later, I performed my first stand-up comedy gig as the opening act of the Angel Comedy showcase for that cohort of emerging comedians. While my set was far from perfect, during my performance, I became aware that I was the most connected to an audience I had ever felt. Everything had finally clicked into place. I began to realise that, through stand-up comedy, I was able to connect to an audience in a way that at least *felt* authentic and not forced. I discovered that the unique, historical, and essential performer-audience

connection that stand-up alone enabled was missing from my autoethnographic performance practice. Stand-up comedy and autoethnography needed to be merged, and I completely rehailed my entire research investigation to make that happen.

0. Introduction

This thesis will propose a new approach to autoethnographic performance – Fumerist Autoethnography Praxis – which combines autoethnography, stand-up comedy, and feminist humour to develop a new approach to performance making centred on the performer-audience relationship within autoethnographic performance. This approach has been developed through a Practice as Research (PaR) framework centred around enriching my autoethnographic practice with stand-up comedy techniques and integrating feminist humour, aka fumerism. The term ‘fumerist’ was first coined by stand-up comedian Kate Clinton to describe the ‘firebrand humour’ that ‘captures the idea of being funny and wanting to burn the house down all at the same time’ (Willett et al., 2020: 27). In titling this new approach Fumerist Autoethnography I aim to ‘foreground a feminism that does not brood over victimhood or in-advertently perpetuate images of female suffering and sacrifice’ (Willett et al., 2020: 27) within my autoethnographic practice and develop performances that ‘shake up oppressive norms with a good and gutsy belly laugh’ (Willett et al., 2020: 27).

My main rationale for using fumerist stand-up comedy for this project lies in how audiences engage with stand-up comedy and how comedians in turn connect to their audiences. One of the key challenges I have had with autoethnographic performance is around how autoethnographers engage and connect with their audiences and readers. As an autobiographical form, autoethnographic performance is inherently intimate as we autoethnographers share our deeply personal experiences with others. This is one of autoethnography’s greatest strength as it allows researchers and performers to build connections with audiences through personal experiences. However, due to the often triggering subject matter of autoethnographic narratives, I believe that autoethnographers have an ethical obligation to their audiences and readers in how those audiences interact with said personal narrative. How can autoethnographers mediate any potential harmful impact that their traumatic personal narratives could have on an audience? Through this project I have chosen to explore how stand-up comedy can be a form to mediate between my autoethnographic narrative and an audience. Stand-up comedy as a form promises a clear performer-audience dynamic where the performer delivers their personal narrative in a manner that, hopefully, elicits laughter from the audience. This laughter in turn frees the performer from burdening their audience with their personal trauma by finding levity in the situation. This makes stand-up comedy an ideal form to engage with audiences

while resolving some of the problems that come with typical autoethnographic performances.

On a more personal note, for whatever reason, I have been more successful in engaging with audiences as a feminist comedian than I did as a feminist theatre maker. Is that because a female comedian is still considered novel, or is it that comedy softens one's hard feminist edges? Whatever the reasons may be, I have found comedy, and feminist comedy in particular, to be an effective package for my feminism while still being accessible to audiences. It allows me to be angry without alienating an audience. It allows for social and cultural critique without being dismissed. It allows for an exploration of traumatic events without retraumatizing the performer or the audience. Comedy can lower an audience's defences and open themselves up to new ideas. Also, it is incredibly empowering to take on a form dominated by the straight white cis man and do it better than he can. While stand-up comedy is typically thought of as a form for the straight, white, cis males, 'scholars of women's humour and feminist humour believe that women identifying with each other through humour are taking the first step towards the solidarity feminists have so often sought'(Gilbert, 2004: 29) which makes feminist and Feminist Autoethnography a vital addition to performance making approaches as it aims to bring more diverse narratives to the forefront in order to create solidarity between performer and audience without brooding over victimhood.

I am proposing Feminist Autoethnography as a novel approach to developing autoethnographic performance practice. This new approach explores the performer-audience relationship, how that relationship is mediated through a (comedic) persona, and how a strong performer-audience relationship allows for the exploration of taboo and charged topics through performance. Feminist Autoethnography also seeks to create an additional performance pathway for autoethnographic material through a performance persona that is authentic to the performer/maker by using *humitas*; 'a blend of humour and *gravitas*, the light and the heavy' and '[acknowledges] that seriousness and humour can exist in the same moment' (Fox, 2017: 20).

0.1 Key Terms

0.1.1 Autoethnography

Autoethnography is 'a way of researching and writing that seeks to connect the personal to the cultural, placing the self at all times within a social context' (Freeman, 2010: 181).

The autoethnographer draws upon their ‘personal experience to examine and/or critique cultural experience’ (Holman Jones et al., 2016: 22). In other words, autoethnography adds the ‘so what?’ to the autobiographical account, connecting personal experiences to the wider social, political, and cultural systems that have influenced and shaped those experiences. By connecting the personal to wider systematic contexts autoethnographic research, writing, and performance explicitly critiques the systems that impact us all, making autoethnographic accounts all the more relatable and impactful. In *Handbook of Autoethnography* (2016), Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis distinguish autoethnographic writing from other forms of personal writing, stating that,

While all personal writing could be considered examinations of culture, not all personal writing is autoethnographic; there are additional characteristics that distinguish auto ethnography from other kinds of personal work period these include (1) *purposefully commenting on critiquing of culture and cultural practises*, (2) *making contributions to existing research*, (3) *embracing vulnerability with purpose*, and (4) *creating a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response* (Holman Jones et al., 2016: 22).

Within this research investigation I am exploring the fourth characteristic of autoethnography as I believe that relationship should be developed more mindfully. While there is an array of autoethnographic research within the fields of anthropology, sociology, education, history, and identity studies, for the purposes of this thesis autoethnography refers to performance-based autoethnography. As such, much of my autoethnographic practice is based on the work of fellow autoethnographic performance maker Tami Spry. Like Spry, I use autoethnography as a performance making methodology. My main goal in creating autoethnographic performance is to foster dialogue between audiences around often overlooked stories and experiences that many of us share. In my performance work, I am interested in exploring my experiences of growing up in a blended family.

0.1.2 Feminism and Feminist Autoethnography

In *Feminism is for Everybody* (2000), bell hooks defines feminism as ‘a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression’ (hooks, 2000:1). This definition makes clear that feminism is not anti-male as it emphasises that ‘sexist thinking and action is the problem’ (hooks, 2000: 1) that feminism seeks to confront. This definition of feminism by hooks centres sexism as the problem and while there are more specific definitions of feminism and varying feminist frameworks, for this thesis I have intentionally selected hooks’ introductory definition and approach to feminism to keep Feminism Autoethnography open as a methodology to many different types of feminist performance makers. Feminists aim to dismantle the ‘systemic institutionalised sexism’ (hooks, 2000:1), aka the patriarchy, which

perpetuates ideals of white male superiority. There are many ways to fight the patriarchy and many ways to be a feminist therefore my specific feminist approach is not the feminism that Fumerist Autoethnography is based on; instead, Fumerist Autoethnography uses hooks' definition of feminism to remain open and accessible to many different types of feminist performers.

Within my Fumerist Autoethnographic practice, however, I aim to take my feminist rage and transform it into something funny. Through my practice I seek to dispel patriarchal ideals of what it means to be a working-class, neurodiverse woman from a rural community. I am a 4th wave, intersectional, trans inclusive, anti-capitalist feminist. I recognise my privilege as a white cis female and acknowledge that in order to end sexism and sexist exploitation, dismantling the patriarchy is not enough, white supremacy and the exploitative capitalist system must also be dismantled. I use my performance practice as one way to engage others in my feminist beliefs. Through my practice, I aim to create comedic autoethnographic performances that will challenge the patriarchy and patriarchal views, that address and condemn the rise of far right politics, and that are intersectional in their feminist approach.

In *Autoethnography as Feminist Method* (2019), Elizabeth Etorre outlines how autoethnography is an inherently feminist practice by building on Allen and Piecay's definition of feminist autoethnography, 'a method of being, knowing, and doing that combines two concerns: telling the stories of those who are marginalized and making good use of our experience' (Etorre, 2019: 4), and then expands on Allen and Piercry's two concerns and extends the definition by identifying the four ways in which autoethnography is a feminist method: (1) autoethnography creates transitional, intermediate spaces, inhabiting the crossroads or borderlands of embodied emotions; (2) autoethnography is an active demonstration of the

'personal is political': (3) autoethnography is feminist critical writing which is performative, that is committed to the future of women and (4) autoethnography helps to raise oppositional consciousness by exposing precarity (Etorre, 2019: 4).

These four ways in which Etorre has defined autoethnography as a feminist method serve as a critical framework for this research investigation as it clearly identifies how autoethnographic practice functions as a feminist method. Etorre's definition has offered a grounded and thorough examination of the relationship between autoethnography and feminist practice which I further explore throughout this investigation by integrating and exploring the impact stand-up comedy has on autoethnographic and feminist performance making.

In examining the first tenant of Ettore's definition, one of the main lines of inquiry for this research investigation lays in examining how autoethnographers and their audience members interact within the 'transitional, intermediate spaces,' (Ettore, 2019: 4) that autoethnography creates as well as how stand-up comedy and humour impact and transform these spaces. Fumerist Autoethnography engages with second tenant of Ettore's definition by placing personal experiences into a wider socio-political context as autoethnographers transform their personal experiences into the basis for socio-political critique. Additionally 'the very act of standing on a stage and expressing your opinions as a woman could be considered a feminist act' (Tomsett, 2023: 1) and this is even more true in a stand-up comedy context as stand-up is still a male dominated form. By taking my personal experiences and turning them into autoethnographic comedy material, Fumerist Autoethnography allows me to turn my personal experiences into political critiques that are then performed in a way that disrupts a male-centric form. This brings me to Ettore's third tenant; a Fumerist Autoethnography performance requires critical writing that is performative, yes, but that is also grounded in a strong comedic point of view. By grounding critical feminist writing through a comedic lens, the resulting feminist critique offered in the performance is often specific, rooted in personal experience, and, hopefully, funny. Through comedy writing, Fumerist Autoethnography requires a clear target for the jokes to function (i.e., punching up) which in turn allows the performer to offer their utopian version for the world, one that is committed to gender equality and the future of women. This brings me to the final tenant of Ettore's definition of autoethnography as a feminist method. Both autoethnography and stand-up comedy expose precarity in our daily lives, however stand-up comedy offers a more active approach to raising consciousness through how the comedian uses jokes, punching up, and invites their audience's active participation in the comedy making process. Ettore clearly argues how autoethnography is in fact a feminist method and I use this argument as a base line for my inquiry into how stand-up comedy can be used as both an autoethnographic and feminist performance making method.

0.1.3 The Power of Fumerism

Fumerism is an effective feminist communication tool as it combines feminist anger, feminist politics, and humour's connective power to 'shake up oppressive norms with a good and gutsy belly laugh,' (Willett & Willett, 2020: 27). The term 'fumerist' was first coined by stand-up comedian Kate Clinton to describe 'this firebrand humour' that 'captures the idea of being funny and wanting to burn the house down all at the same time' (Willett & Willett, 2020:26). Fumerism is an avenue that feminist use to

communicate their anger towards patriarchal systems as they ‘work to provoke and prod, to share, to display and (together with an appreciative audience) to overcome the traumata, inconsistencies and glitches that make up experience of the everyday world’ (MacRury, 2012:193) and therefore should be integrated into feminist autoethnographic work. In recent years ‘women’s comedy has become a primary site in mainstream pop culture where feminism speaks, talks back, and is contested,’ (Mizejewski, 2015: 6) therefore feminism is more relevant than ever. Although feminists, women, and their bodies have long been the butt of male and misogynistic humour, ‘feminism, however, turns the tables and mocks the mocker with a release of female libido that eroticizes its own sources of power and joy’ (Willett & Willett, 2020: 28). Throughout this thesis, I will argue the many benefits that feminism brings to feminist discourse. There are several benefits that come from implementing a feminist approach to communicating feminist ideals to others; these benefits are the humanising quality of humour, the subversion, challenging, and mockery of patriarchal ideals through performing anger, and the bonding quality humour creates within a group.

One such benefit is the humanising quality that humour brings to social and political topics as ‘denying a person or group a sense of humour is profoundly dehumanising and debilitating, particularly in societies that value humour as a positive personality trait,’ (Leng, 2020: 110) therefore it is vital that feminists use their humour to directly combat the dehumanising attempts that the patriarchy levels against feminist politics. In *Uproarious: How Feminists and Other Subversive Comics Speak Truth* (2020), Willett & Willett analyse the subversive power that feminism holds and argue how comedy and feminism work in tandem to challenge patriarchal values:

Feminist politics requires a utopic vision, be it implicit or explicit, and such a vision is what the meaning-making genre of comedy is designed to offer. When feminists joke, mock, and critique the micro practices of everyday life, their humour often generates joyous glimpses of a better world. This anger-fuelled humour challenges conventional morality and the underlying codes of normalization, patriarchal oppression, and social exclusion that this morality sustains via an ethical stance and a social vision. (Willett & Willett, 2020: 36)

Through their use of humour, irony, and other comedy techniques, feminists are able to offer their utopic visions for a better, patriarchy-free world. It is worth noting that humour is a double-edged sword when it comes to offering social critique ‘as ridicule and humour provide an arsenal of tools that can reinforce these norms and practices, so too can this arsenal tear those conventions down’ (Willett & Willett, 2020: 36).

Another benefit of fumerism is it provides feminists an avenue in which to express their anger in constructive, safe, effective ways as ‘not holding in anger is what feminist comedy does best’ (Willett & Willett, 2020: 29). By exploring their anger, fumerists expose injustices by breaking their silence through jokes, as ‘[Gray] contends that most feminist activity has been centrally concerned with silence, and its breaking’ (Tomsett, 2023: 11). By transforming their lived experiences and anger into jokes fumerists are empowered as they break away from patriarchal scripts and use their humour to ‘transform a politics of anger and resentment into a politics of joy’ (Willett & Willett, 2020: 35).

The final benefit of fumerism lies in how it connects audiences, lowering their defences through laughter to open them up to new ideas and differing perspectives. A core aim of this research investigation is to examine the relationship between performer and audience and within fumerism, the dynamic between fumerist and audience is distinct. ‘The joy of fumerist comedy is not in having one’s preconceived identity and views confirmed, but in being startled out of one’s customary alignments toward a more promising future’ (Willett & Willett, 2020: 35); fumerism is not concerned with preaching to the converted, instead it aims to challenge and unsettle patriarchal ideals by making people laugh, that laughter then startles them out of their preconceived notions leaving them open to new ideas and point of view.

0.1.4 What’s the Deal with Stand-up Comedy?!

The terms stand-up, humour, comedy, and laughter will be used throughout this thesis and while these terms are related to one another they are all distinct and have specific uses when discussing stand-up comedy. Marra (2019: 6) outlined that humour is the umbrella that all these terms would fall under. Comedy is performative humour where laughter is the desired reaction from the audience, and stand-up is a genre of comedy performance that ‘implies a level of performed autobiography’ (Brodie, 2009: 174) by the comedian and ‘implies a context that allows for reaction, participation, and engagement on the part of those to whom the stand-up comedian is speaking’ (Brodie, 2009: 153). Typically, all the stand-up comedian has is a microphone and a captive audience. A good stand-up comedian will create humorous dialogue between themselves and their audiences as ‘at its best, [stand-up] evokes reciprocity and dialogue, hinting as much towards a sociality of the gift as towards the entertainment-commodity’ (MacRury, 2012: 186). All the standup comedian needs are jokes, an audience, and for the audience to agree with the comedian on what part of their performance is funny.

0.1.5 Performer-audience relationship

For the context of this research investigation, when referring to audience, I am referring to the stand-up comedy audience rather than a traditional theatre audience and it is the stand-up comedian-audience relationship that I aim to emulate throughout this research investigation.

I am differentiating between these two types of audiences for several reasons. Firstly, I believe that to fully connect with an autoethnographic audience, I should emulate the comedian-audience relationship with my audiences, therefore I must analyse the stand-up comedy audience in order to accurately replicate the comedian-audience relationship within my autoethnographic practice. Audiences are a crucial element to stand-up comedy as audience members play a vital role in making humour work; ‘take the audience away from stand-up comedy and it starts to look weird[...]stand-up comedy without an audience is only half way there’ (Double, 2014: 187). Second, the stand-up comedy audience has different expectations of the live event than that of the theatre audience. While both theatre and stand-up ‘audiences seek to learn more about themselves and society from attendance’ (Radbourne, Glow and Johanson, 2014: 9), the stand-up comedy audience also expects a certain type of emotional release, laughter, while their counterparts do not consistently have that expectation. Thirdly, to establish the sense of play required in order to facilitate this desired laughter response, a comedian must ‘win over’ their audiences in ways that theatre performers do not. To win over an audience the performer ‘requires attentiveness to both the critical/aggressive and rapport-seeking elements that exist in varying proportions within most audiences’ (DeCamp, 2015: 2). The final, and most crucial, distinction between a stand-up comedy audience and theatre audience is that the stand-up comedy audience lies in the ‘understanding of audience members as active participants in performance interaction who look for and respond to rhetorical techniques when making decisions about laughing’ (Rutter, 2001: 19). As active participants in the live event, the stand-up comedy audience has the ‘tendency to act as a collective as the stand-up interaction’ where they ‘accept the responses of other members of the audience as appropriate and then to react appropriately to them [...] group laughter in audiences is as much a product of mutual trust as a reaction to a humorous event’ (Rutter, 2001: 4). By being aware of both the performer(s) and ‘the actions of those around them’ (Rutter, 2001: 5), the stand-up comedy audience becomes a much more active participant in the live event than their theatrical counterparts. ‘Audience members pick up on cues such as the raising of hands to begin applause or the beginning of the applause

itself [...]and it is this that firmly reconceptualizes the audience as active, as a group which not only responds to suggestive cues in the developing performance but demonstrates a self-awareness' (Rutter, 2001: 5).

In *The Self in Performance: Autobiographical, Self-Revelatory, and Autoethnographic Forms of Therapeutic Theatre*, editors Pendzik, Emunah, and Read Johnson summarise the claims made authors by of the essays within the book in regards to audiences and their role within autoethnographic performances, explaining than many of the essays 'imply that in these types of intimate, personal performances, the role of the audience is subtly different than that of standard theatre, linked to the fact that many in the audience are friends, colleagues, or family of the performer' (Pendzik et al., 2016: 13). However, while the audience and their role within autoethnographic performance are touched on 'several authors hint at the ethical nature of this special relationship, though details are lacking' (Pendzik et al., 2016: 13).

0.1.6 Catharsis and Trauma

Through a comedy persona, utilising various humour theories, and by developing a mindful connection with my audience, I aim to illicit laughter from the audience which in turn opens the possibility for catharsis. 'From the Greek word katharsis, which, literally translated, means "a cleansing or purging"' (Baumeister and Vohs, 2007: 2), catharsis in the context of this project follows the Aristotelian 'notion of purpose in performance by discussing the emotional response a tragedy should produce in the audience' (Brockett and Hildy, 2008: 34). Creating laughter as an emotional response/release for an audience is achieved through the creation and resolution of tension and by breaking the tensions with the unexpected; in other words, through jokes (Target, 2021). By using jokes, I will lower audiences' defences, opening them up to my feminist perspective.

By using humour and emulating the stand-up comedian-audience relationship, I am able to draw upon some of my traumatic familial experiences to develop performance without alienating my audience. For the context of this thesis, when discussing trauma, I am referring to personal experiences which have left a lasting and negative impact. However, in my discussion of traumatic experiences I never want to trigger myself or audience members, therefore stand-up comedy and fumerism are ideal approaches to performing this sensitive material without rendering it inaccessible.

0.2 *Found Family* and the Challenges of Autoethnographic Practice

Found Family (2018) was an autoethnographic one-woman show that challenged the patriarchal idea of the family unit while examining what makes relationships loving and meaningful. This piece explored the themes of chosen family, otherness, and the process of leaving one's biological family to find a new network of loved ones. Staged in a living room, this intimate performance examined how the institutionalised beliefs surrounding family that society holds do not always match up to the reality that many of us live. *Found Family* was developed in two parts; the first examining the fractures within my biological and blended family, the second focusing on my chosen family - explaining how my friends and mentors have played an integral part in my support system where my family has failed me. During the development and performances of *Found Family*, a key challenge with the autoethnographic form and process emerged which was the relationship between me and the audience. Without the theatrical boundary of the fourth wall or a clearly established dynamic between myself and the audience, I felt too exposed and vulnerable at times during *Found Family*. Additionally, when I saw that audience members had begun to cry while watching the performance, I felt ill-equipped to properly care for my audience's emotional needs with the autoethnographic tools I had at the time. The challenge around the performer-audience relationship that *Found Family* raised has become the driving force for this research investigation.

The two most challenges aspects of *Found Family* were (1) in my relationship to the audience and (2) in defining what the audience's role was during the performance. Much of the text for the first part of *Found Family* was lifted directly from my teenage diary. One of these specific entries was written after I got into a screaming argument with several family members over Trump's election in 2016. I was using my diary as a place to put all my anger, grief, and frustration over my familial situation; it was not just a difference in politics that frustrated me, but the lack of respect a few family members had towards me. In this entry I wrote about how I felt like I was treated as a 'second class citizen in this family' (Kasselder, 2018), how I saw my sisters getting support from that family that was not extended to me, how I felt like I was the scapegoat for family arguments, and how my emotional reactions were often dismissed because I'm 'too sensitive' but if I upset one of my siblings I then had to 'make it right' even though that same courtesy was rarely extended to me. I performed that diary entry as it was written,

re-creating this emotionally heightened and charged moment for audiences and myself as performer. If I had concluded that section of the piece there, I would have dumped a traumatic family event unto an audience without providing them with opportunity for cathartic release. I did not conclude the scene there, however. Instead, I ripped up old family photos as I broke down and cried. By including this section of in the piece, I aimed to create a space that I hoped would allow audience members to a chance to pause and release any emotions that came up for them as they watched me reach my own catharsis as I ripped up these familial symbols. By including this photo-ripping sequence in *Found Family*, I was able to discuss a traumatic personal event while providing my audience with an opportunity for catharsis before the piece continued. By including a beat where I did not speak, I just ripped up photo after photo, the audience was able to focus on how the performance impacted them and gave them space to empathise with the anger, frustration, and sadness this photo ripping segment of the show signified for me. Audience members and I cried together, sharing a cathartic release. This shared moment of pause and catharsis was vital to the piece; as an autoethnographic performer I have a responsibility not only to express my personal narrative in ways that are driven by authenticity and honesty, but I also have a responsibility to my audiences and their reactions to my personal narrative. One of the greatest elements of performance autoethnography lies in how it invites performer and audience to interrogate how their personal narratives fit together as ‘opening up to the ways in which we are all connected to one another causes us to become aware of our own social conditioning and a system of power relations that we are a part of due to race, gender, size, etc., and which cause us to experience the world differently’ (Spry, 2016: 121). Because of this, there is the very likely case that many audience members could recognize themselves in my performances. Therefore, the question arises: how do I as a solo performer take care of audiences who see themselves within my autoethnographic work? One possible solution to this question is through a performance form such as stand-up comedy.

Although discussing trauma within autoethnography ‘isn’t an issue in itself [...] a problem arises when serious information is “shared without permission, in an inappropriate place and time, and to someone who may not have had the capacity to take in this information”’ (Ryu, 2021). I believe we must analyse how autoethnographers engage with our audiences and closely examine the autoethnographer-audience relationship to lessen the risk of trauma dumping within autoethnographic performance. In ‘Implicated Audience Member Seeks Understanding: Re-examining the “Gift” of Autoethnography’ (2006), Berry asks ‘how might we more openly and conscientiously

re-examine the gift of autoethnography as communication from within the interaction between autoethnographers and audience members?’ (Berry, 2006: 96). One of autoethnography’s strength lies ‘in representing thoughts and feelings about cultural phenomena enable audience members to think and feel’ (Berry, 2006: 104) yet the autoethnographer-audience relationship is still underexplored despite the audience being an important element of the work. This creates a lack of clarity in the autoethnographer-audience relationship which in turn enables trauma dumping. This trauma dumping phenomenon caused me to critically reflect upon how autoethnographers interact with their audiences and the ethics of those interactions. There is currently no widespread ethical discussion within autoethnography in relation to audiences and their role within autoethnographic performance. While there is some mention and consideration of audiences within autoethnographic research (Berry 2006), this discussion needs to be deepened. I believe performance autoethnographers must consider their audiences and how they interact with those audiences as thoughtfully as they consider self representation and the representation of others within their autoethnographic work. Without clear rules of engagement, audiences are potentially left worrying about the performer’s wellbeing while the solo performer potentially lacks the necessary tools to see to audience needs without the necessary tools to see to those needs. In the case of *Found Family* (2018), I relied on the intimacy that a site-specific performance in my home created to see to the emotional needs of my audiences.



Figure 1 Production image of Found Family (2018) of photo ripping sequence.

When examining this relational gap between autoethnographer and audience, it is important to ask why we even make autoethnographic performances? Is the work motivated by self-interest? Is autoethnography a mode of therapy? Or is making autoethnographic performances a way to connect to others who might have had similar experiences? Whatever the reasons for making this work are, be they selfish, altruistic, or anything in between, I believe there is value in exploring the autoethnographer-audience relationship and in bringing that relationship into the forefront of developing new autoethnographic performances. For my own autoethnographic work I aim to use my performances to connect with and build connections amongst my audience members therefore I need an approach to autoethnographic performance that is driven by audience connection. If autoethnographers developed pieces around their audiences, what would those performances look like? What would the autoethnographer-audience relationship evolve into? Stand-up comedy requires a specific rapport and trust to be built with an audience. Through the creation and alleviation of tension through laughter, comedians can provide their audiences with cathartic opportunities throughout the performance which allows comedians to portray darker, edgier, or more taboo material without negatively impacting their audiences. Comedian Susan Calman, for example, discusses her depression throughout her comedy but does not alienate or burden her audiences while doing so;

I love it when you get a connection, a genuine connection [...] That's why I do this job, it's to actually make people feel better when they leave than when they come in. That's ultimately, I think a comedian's job [...] we're there to make you feel better than when you came in, not worse, certainly not worse. That is the worst-case scenario. (Goldsmith, 2014)

The other challenge that surfaced during *Found Family* was the disconnect between the tone of autoethnographic work I was creating compared to my general disposition. While *Found Family* was an honest portrayal of the thoughts and feelings captured by my diary entry, I believe that replicating this approach to develop a new performance piece would not have the same effect as the piece would feel inauthentic. Over the years since *Found Family*, my anger has softened, my boundaries with my family have become healthier, and if I were to continue to create autoethnographic performance from my diaries they would not have the same level of authenticity as *Found Family*. Additionally, in the aftermath of a global pandemic, I feel we all desperately need a good laugh.

0.3 Research Methodology: Developing Praxis

Fumerist Autoethnography is a new autoethnographic approach that integrates fumerist stand-up comedy into autoethnographic practice to create performances that have a clearly defined performer-audience relationship. This new autoethnographic approach will allow the performer to explore their past experiences with a sense of humitas as ‘seriousness and humour can occur at the same moment’ (Fox, 2017: 50). Throughout this thesis, I will propose Fumerist Autoethnography as new autoethnographic performance praxis, informed by Robert Nelson’s Practice as Research Modes of Knowing Praxis model (2013).

Early on in my research journey, I set out to develop a new autoethnographic praxis model that young people could follow to develop their own autoethnographic performances and while, through lockdown and Covid restrictions, the project evolved to Fumerist Autoethnography, the practical work of this thesis has adhered to the Practice as Research Modes of Knowing Praxis Model (See Figure 1) proposed by Robin Nelson (2013). Praxis is ‘theory imbricated within practice’ (Nelson, 2013: 5) and as a Practice as Research (PaR) model it ‘it allows a broader range of people to engage in scholarly activity once the possibility of practical knowing is recognised’ (Nelson, 2013: 114). PaR recognises that ‘many insights emerge in the process of making and doing’ (Nelson, 2013: 27), therefore it is a wonderful research methodology for artistic driven research. PaR places value on various types of knowledge and Nelson breaks these various ways of knowing into three categories: know-how, know-what, know-that. As shown in the Arts Praxis model below, each way of knowing informs and is informed by the other two to create a balanced and rigorous academic inquiry.

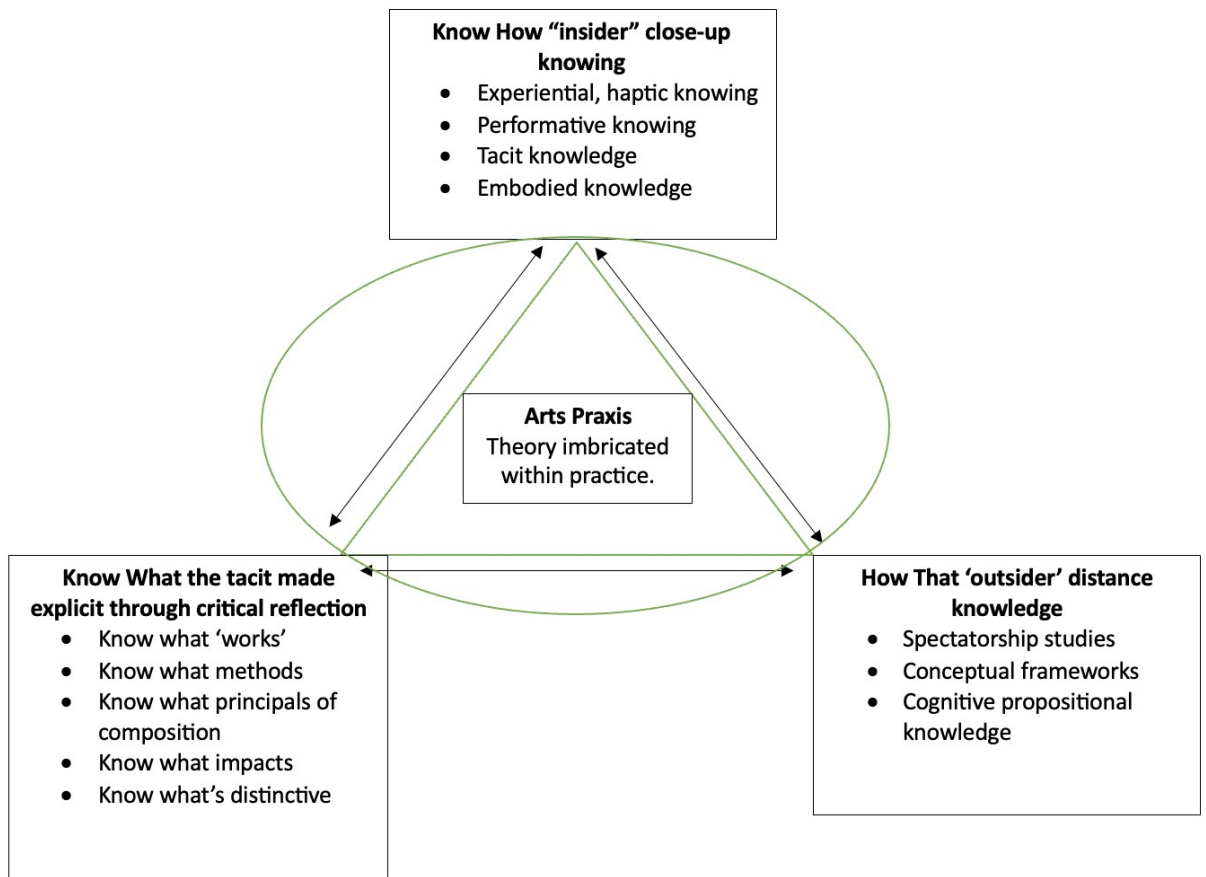


Figure 2 Robert Nelson's Modes of Knowing Praxis Model (2013: 37) illustrating the relationship between each mode of knowing within praxis.

Nelson's Modes of Knowing Praxis Model (2013: 37) shows how various types of knowledge (know-that, know-how, and know-what) inform artistic research. For Nelson, know-that is 'the equivalent of traditional "academic knowledge" articulated in words and numbers (propositional discourse) drawn from reading of all kinds' (Nelson, 2013: 45) and it is in this way of knowing that theoretical and conceptual frameworks shape the academic and artistic inquiry. Know-how, also known as procedural knowledge, 'is gained incrementally... and amounts to a set of actions which facilitate complex tasks' (Nelson, 2013: 41). Within this research investigation there are two main components of know-how utilised throughout: the procedural knowledge of autoethnographic performance practice and the procedural knowledge of stand-up comedy. Know-what, or knowledge of what works, 'covers what can be gleaned through an informed reflexivity about the process of making and its modes of knowing' (Nelson, 2013: 44). In other words, know-what is what is uncovered through taking a step back and critically reflecting to assess what works, what does not, and what is still to be improved.

0.3.1 Fumerist Autoethnography: Praxis Model

To develop Fumerist Autoethnography Praxis, I propose the following model which is an adaption of Nelson’s Modes of Knowing model for PaR (2013: 38). This model demonstrates ‘a multi-mode approach to PaR and evidence produced through different modes of knowledge: “know-how; know-what and know-that”’ (Nelson, 2013: 38) and how it applies to Fumerist Autoethnography.

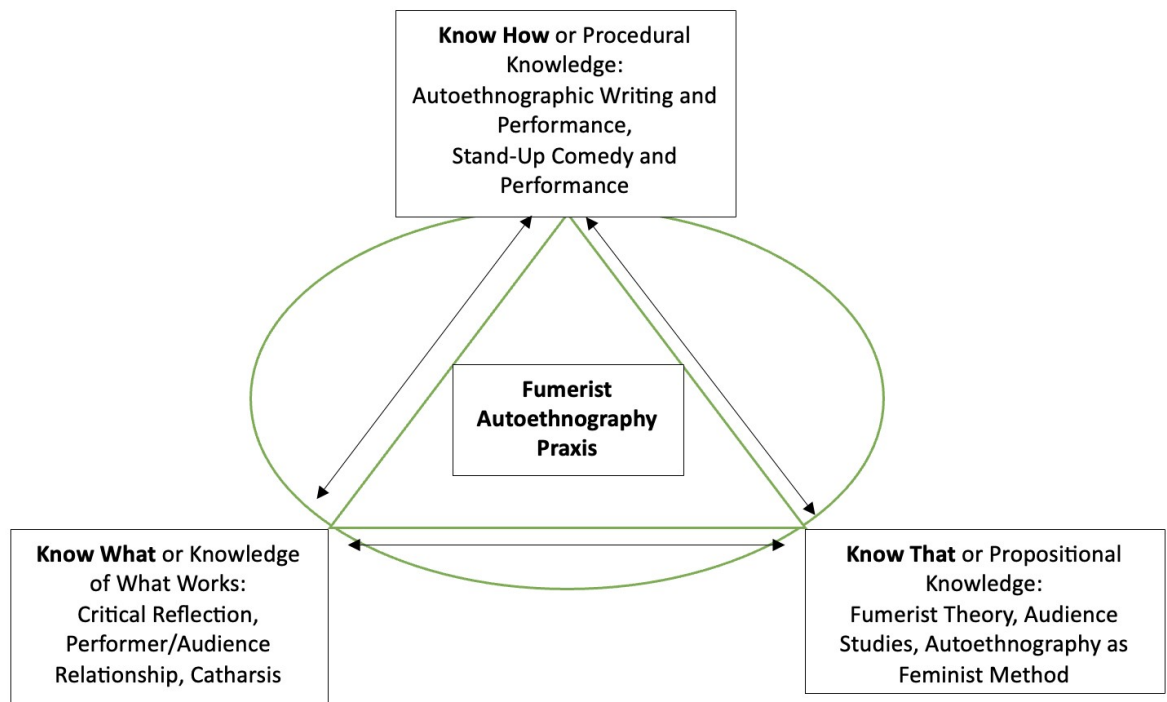


Figure 3 Fumerist Autoethnography Praxis Model. Based on Nelson’s (2013) Modes of Knowing Praxis Model. This model illustrates the know-that, know-how, and know-what of Fumerist Autoethnography

The rest of this thesis will explore each of the Modes of Knowing in the praxis model and their application to Fumerist Autoethnography. In Chapter One: Know-That; Fumerism and the Compositional Elements of Modern Stand-up Comedy, I propose fumerism as a framework in which to approach autoethnographic performance. I argue the value of fumerism by examining the lineage of fumerist activists and stand-up comedians. In Chapter Two: Know-How; Developing Autoethnographic, Fumerist, and Stand-Up Comedy Practice, I demonstrate my embodied knowledge through my autoethnographic and stand-up comedy practice and illustrate how my blending of the two forms led to the development of *We’re Like Sisters*. In Chapter Three: Know-What:

A Critical Reflection and Evaluation of the Fumerist Autoethnographic Approach, I critically reflect on Fumerist Autoethnography as a performance making approach and will outline the criteria evaluating for Fumerist Autoethnography performances. By developing a set of criteria for evaluating Fumerist Autoethnography performances I aim to ‘articulate the tacit’(Nelson, 2013: 38) knowledge of what makes Fumerist Autoethnography as a performance making practice ‘work’ in terms of the performer-audience relationship. These criteria guide the critical reflection process so that the tacit knowledge of practice become easier to articulate.

0.4 Research Questions

Through this research investigation I aim to address the gap in the autoethnographer-audience relationship by integrating fumerism stand-up comedy into my autoethnographic performance practice to develop Fumerist Autoethnography Praxis. Through reflecting on my own autoethnographic practice and the challenges I faced while working on *Found Family*, the following three research questions have emerged.

1. What are the current challenges within autoethnographic performance practices and how can I address this through my practice?

By reflecting on my autoethnographic practice and the relationship gap between autoethnographic performer and their audience, I believe one of the main challenges within autoethnographic performance practice is the lack of clarity in the autoethnographer-audience relationship and how this relationship impacts the performance. In Chapter One: Know-That; Fumerism and the Compositional Elements of Modern Stand-up Comedy I outline the theoretical frameworks of autoethnography, stand-up comedy, and fumerism. I argue that stand-up comedy and fumerism directly address the challenges with the autoethnographer-audience relationship and through the development of praxis, I will merge the forms together to develop a stronger feminist autoethnographic practice.

2. What performance practice emerges when autoethnography and fumerist stand-up comedy methodologies are combined?

When examining performance autoethnography and stand-up comedy practices, there are many similarities between the two forms in that the performer generates performance material based on their past experiences and both autoethnographer and stand-up

comedian offer commentary on social, cultural, and political factors that shaped those experiences. What makes stand-up comedy distinct from autoethnography is the stand-up comedian's dialogical relationship to their audience. With a clear performer-audience relationship, comedians use humour to build trust with their audience and that trust enables the comedian to explore taboo/traumatic topics without alienating or emotionally taxing their audience. By merging autoethnographic and stand-up comedy methodologies I aim to recreate the comedian-audience relationship within my autoethnographic practice to develop performances that are free of trauma dumping. In Chapter Two: Know-How; Developing Autoethnographic, Fumerist, and Stand-Up Comedy Practice, I will define my autoethnographic practice, my fumerist stand-up comedy practice, and will demonstrate how each of these practices informed the development of *We're Like Sisters*, combining autoethnographic and stand-up comedy methodologies into one merged approach to performance making.

3. How does the new merged practice, Fumerist Autoethnography, address the current challenges in autoethnographic performance practices?

I will argue that stand-up comedy directly speaks to the gaps within my autoethnographic practice by providing a clearly defined performer-audience relationship, while autoethnography lends rigor to stand-up comedy (although stand-up comedy on its own should be seen as a rigorous performance practice in its own right). In developing this new merged approach to autoethnographic practice, through critical reflection in Chapter Three: Know-What: A Critical Reflection and Evaluation of the Fumerist Autoethnographic Approach I will examine how practice, process, and approach operates in terms of developing a performance persona and material, what fumerist autoethnographic performances look like, and it means to be a fumerist autoethnographer. I will compare how this practice relates to established feminist autoethnographic practices, existing fumerist stand-up comedy practices, and Stand-Up Autoethnography (Fox, 2017), and will propose the Criteria for Fumerist Autoethnography to evaluate the development and performances of *We're Like Sisters*. In adapting my existing autoethnographic practice into one that is combined with stand-up comedy methodologies will I be able to create performances that are representative of my experiences without alienating my audience? By combining autoethnography and stand-up comedy, I will develop a clearer relationship with my audiences as well as a performance persona to mediate that relationships so that I am better able to provide them with opportunities for

catharsis through my performance. These moments will foster our connection to one another, opening us up to different perspectives.

1. Chapter One: Know-That; Fumerism and Compositional Elements of Modern Stand-up Comedy

The Know-That of Fumerist Autoethnography is informed by several conceptual frameworks and theories. The first element of Know-That for Fumerist Autoethnography comes from its namesake; fumerism and fourth-wave feminism underpin this new performance practice. By using a fumerist approach to humour, I am applying fumerism to autoethnography to develop autoethnographic performance that ‘deals with both feminist politics (on a macro- and micro- scale) and also clearly displays her anger at the injustices an inequality is experienced by women’ (Tomsett, 2023: 157). In this chapter, I outline the history of fumerism, charting how second, third, and now forth wave feminist activists and comedians use fumerism within their work. I will then examine the attempted erasure, exclusion, and dismissal of female comedians work by critically surveying stand-up comedy scholarship and interrogating the myth that women aren’t funny. To close my section on fumerism and fumerist theory I will argue the dangers of funny women and how that danger makes fumerist powerful. In addition to fumerism, Fumerist Autoethnography is informed by stand-up comedy compositional elements and humour theories. In the second half of this chapter, I will dissect the various element of modern stand-up comedy such as persona, type of jokes, and the stand-up comedy audience to establish a framework for what makes stand-up comedy work, which will serve as a foundation of my discussion in Chapter Two: Know-How; Developing Autoethnographic, Fumerist, and Stand-up Comedy Practice.

1.1 Fumerism

Fumerism is the ‘erotic politics of feminist humour’ (Willett et al., 2012, p227) and the namesake for the new autoethnographic approach I developed through this research investigation. I chose to take fumerism as part of the title for this project and for my comedy practice for a few key reasons. Feminism has always been a bedrock in my performance practice so when I decided to integrate stand-up comedy into that practice, I wanted to focus on comedy that was in line with the politics of my existing autoethnographic practice. Additionally, when reflecting on what comedic works I found

myself drawn to, I found myself seeking out the work of funny women and feminist topics. It is my goal to create performances that one day could follow in their silly and ground-breaking footsteps.

Funny women and their tackling of feminist discourse has long been undermined. One way in which female and feminist humour have been undermined has been through the perpetuation of the idea that feminists are humourless. There is the widespread myth that women and feminist are not funny and that is because funny women threaten the 'natural' order of things. The patriarchal order of humour prescribes that the man is funny, the woman laughs at his jokes and then she will sleep with him (according to Christopher Hitchens' 2007 article "Why Women Aren't Funny"). It's simple misogynistic myth: if women are laughing at something other than a man's jokes, how will that man get laid? If a man is no longer in charge of what a woman can laugh at, what's to stop the woman from laughing at the man himself? We can't have that or there will be riots in the streets. A funny woman does more than threaten a man's ability to get laid, she rejects the patriarchal norms of femininity and with that any hope of being considered a 'good' woman for 'as the old saying goes, you can be good or you can be funny, and women were meant to be good. To perform stand-up comedy—to be aggressively funny—is to violate the norms of femininity' (Willett et al., 2012:225 citing Barreca 1991, & Russell 2002).

During the second feminist wave of the 1960s and 1970s there are several examples of feminist activists using fumerism to further their cause. In 1978, Gloria Steinem wrote the essay "If Men Could Menstruate", where she mused on what men's behaviour would be like during their period, a joke premise that would be later used by Margert Cho and on SNL's Weekend Update. This essay was ground-breaking in that it turned the master's tools against them, making men the target of humour rather than feminists. Another example of fumerism during this period can be seen through the development of the chauvinist pig as a response to the creation of the Playboy bunny; 'while the bunny may function as a serious figure for men of male desire, the pig functions for the feminist movement as a figure of comic ridicule and outright disgust' (Willett et al., 2012: 232). This feminist period coincides with stand-up comedy's shift towards persona-based acts. 'As soon as the phrase "the personal is political" was coined, women performers and artists began to turn to their own experiences, using these as primary sources' (Aston & Harris, 2007: 130) and although not all comedians were feminists, we can see stand-up utilising the performers experiences as primary sources for material. With stand-up

comedy now being persona driven and feminist turning their lived experiences into performance, feminist stand-up comedians like Joan Rivers become popular.

During the third wave of feminism in the 1990s, feminist work around the familial unit and female sexuality came to the forefront through the sit-com *Roseanne* and the work of the Lesbian Avengers. Stand-up comedian turned household name through her sit-com *Roseanne Barr*'s 'humour established its potential to empower a demographic of underheard women against the moralizing backdrop of trickle-down Reaganomics, reflecting traces of feminist and working-class angst' (Willett & Willett, 2020: 24). *Barr*'s sitcom challenged a 'particularly invidious form of social power: norms of the family to which she refused to be subjected' (Willett & Willett, 2020: 25) as it portrayed a household with two working parents and showcased *Barr*'s bawdy and un-lady-like demeanour. Meanwhile while *Roseanne* was airing, the feminist activist group the Lesbian Avengers, established in 1992, 'was dedicated to "issues vital to lesbian visibility and survival"'. Tired of serving as the underappreciated labour force for other groups' struggles – most obviously gay men and straight feminists – the Avengers sought to give lesbianspecific issues the spotlight' (Leng, 2020: 108). To confront the myth that lesbians do not have a sense of humour there was 'a commitment to humour was present from the group's beginning' (Leng, 2020: 109), the Lesbian Avengers used feminism as an approach to engage with creative activism. The Lesbian Avengers capitalised on the humanising quality of humour to their advantage during several of their demonstrations and initiatives as 'humour manifested itself in the Avengers' zaps, street theatre, protests, flyers, and fundraisers' (Leng, 2020: 113).

Today in the fourth wave/digital wave of feminism, intersectionality, body positivity, and the politics of the #MeToo era and cancel culture take centre stage. With social media sites like Twitter, TikTok and Instagram, and streaming services like Netflix accessing feminist work has never been easier. There are many feminist comedians working today as 'now, at the time of writing, the idea of women comedians identifying as feminists or talking about women's rights on stage (in the live comedy environment) has become almost clichéd' (Tomsett, 2023: 213). There is Wanka Sykes who explores race during Trump's presidency, Hannah Gadsby and Rosie Jones who discuss sexuality and disability, and Sofie Hagen who explore gender identity and fat activism, and Bridget Christie who 'can be considered a feminist in that her comedy deals with both feminist

politics (on a macro- and micro- scale) and also clearly displays her anger at the injustices an inequality is experienced by women' (Tomsett, 2023: 157).

My fumerism falls into this fourth wave feminism. My feminism is intersectional and trans-inclusive, and embraces fourth wave ideals round intersectionality, body positivity, and empowerment. While it may seem counter to my fumerist aims, my standup comedy persona is self-deprecating despite my body positive goals. While 'often feminist considerations of humour originating prior to the rise of post-feminism and fourth-wave feminisms have focused on the problematic nature of self-deprecation by women' (Tomsett, 2023: 139), I do not see self-deprecation as problematic as it 'can be seen as a positive part of comic performance in that it gives the performer control over the way an audience reacts to her body' (Tomsett, 2023: 144). Through my selfdeprecating persona I can control how the audience reacts to my fat body as use my standup as 'a necessary space for critique of [the pressures put on women], especially in relation to women's bodies,' making my comedy 'inherently linked to wider gender politics, contemporary feminisms and cultural body norms' (Tomsett, 2023: 145).

Fumerism is a powerful feminist tool in that 'the erotic force in feminist humour messes with oppressive networks of power, intensifying and augmenting its own sources of pleasure and joy' (Willett & Willett, 2020 : 22). Through humour, mockery, and irony fumerists create jokes at the patriarchy's expense. By eliciting laughter, fumerist are able to shock audiences out of their normative behaviour and open them up to new and differing feminist perspectives. In *Uproarious: How Feminists and Other Subversive Comics Speak Truth* (2020) Willett & Willett put forth the following call to arms:

We call on feminism to engage openly and playfully with various forms of humour and irony as weapons of choice in tribute to fumerism. After all, across the political spectrum, from left-wing radicals to those alt-right antifeminist extremists in the online "manosphere" know full well, "Ridicule is man's most potent weapon." If well aimed, we insist, it can be feminists' as well. (Willett & Willett, 2020: 27)

Fumerism not only invites feminists to use ridicule as a potent weapon against the patriarchy and misogyny, but it also offers a mode in which to transform one's anger into joy, one's lived experience into primary knowledge, and invites audiences to join us on the feminist soap box for a good hearty laugh.

In the following section, I review key texts in stand-up comedy literature and demonstrate the gap in representing female comedians and feminist comedy in academic

writing. Then, I discuss how gender impacts comedy for both performer and audience. I discuss the often-overlooked legacy of feminism in comedy, and address the adage that women are not, or rather, should not be funny. Through this section, I argue that feminist humour is a powerful communication tool and that feminist comedians who wield this tool should not be overlooked by audiences, the comedy industry, or by comedy scholars.

1.1.1 Stand-up Comedy Scholarship and the Forgotten Female Comedian

In 2000, John Limon published *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (2000) which is the first book to ‘attempt [...] to provide [stand-up comedy] with a theory- or a first approximation of one’ (Limon, 2000: 1). Limon analyses the work of several comedians throughout the 1960s through to the 1990s and examines their work and American stand-up comedy in general through a cultural and literary lens. Prior to this publication there was no widespread academic discourse around stand-up comedy specifically as ‘attention to stand-up comedy itself been scarce across disciplines, despite its rise and overwhelming cultural significance in the 1980’s and its continuing relevance today’ (Marra, 2017: 1). Part of the scarce attention paid to stand-up comedy can be attributed to the lack of humour and comedy scholars due to ‘the non-serious nature of humour [...] humour, while infiltrating every space and culture in human history, has often been dismissed or overlooked, regarded as either invisible or unworthy of rigorous examination’ (Marra, 2019: 1). Stand-up, and comedy in general, is often underestimated by scholars due to its jovial nature and while ‘stand-up comedy may deal with lighthearted topics... it can also serve other purposes, including social criticism and cultural awareness’ (Tsakona et al., 2018: 20) wherein lies its importance.

Limon’s book served as an initial survey of the field in distinguishing stand-up comedy as a separate form that is worthy of its own discourse. Marra (2019: 6) states:

Humour is the broad category under which all methods of humour (like comedy) fall. Comedy is a performative event aimed to incite laughter. Laughter is a physiological event that has no necessary connection to either humour or comedy – we laugh often without the presence of humorous stimuli.

These components of humour, laughter and comedy have all been studied in depth for centuries, yet the study of stand-up is still emerging, and that is especially true for *feminist* stand-up comedy.

While Limon’s (2000) book was the first of its kind and influences the continuing scholarship of stand-up today, there is a stark exclusion of female stand-up comedians in

Limon's analysis of the form. These female comedians, contemporaries to their oft-discussed male counterparts, have had just as much of an impact on the form as these male comics. Unfortunately, female comedians continue to face barriers both in the comedy industry and in how their work is considered within academic discourse as 'sexism around comedy and humour is still very much alive and well, and that there is significant ignorance of the diversity of talented women comics in the UK' (Tomsett, 2023: 1). Lenny Bruce was paving the way for modern stand-up alongside Joan Rivers and Phyllis Diller yet these women are treated as footnotes to Bruce rather than as his contemporaries. The first female comedian Limon discusses at length is Elaine May of Nichols and May, and even then, she is only discussed as part of an improv comedy double act with her male counterpart Mike Nichols. In the chapter entitled "Skirting" (a demeaning title for the section of the book focused on female comedians), Limon finally focuses his analysis on exclusively female comedians. But before his analysis of these women's work and contribution to the form, Limon states that female stand-up comedians 'had only earned from me a grudging laugh- which, from the point of view of a purist, is equal to an easy laugh' (2000: 105). It is not lost on me that the first major text theorising stand-up comedy – upon which contemporary stand-up scholarship has inevitably been built – degrades and erases the impact of female comedians. While this book was published over 20 years ago, the dismissal and diminishing of female comedians and their work can still be seen in comedy clubs and contemporary culture today as 'women have long struggled to claim their places in stand-up; female comics are still heavily marginalized from nightclub rosters' (Hennefeld, 2017:11).

Since the publication of Limon's book, there have been a handful of other standup comedy scholars who have acknowledged the work of female comedians in more meaningful ways, some of which have focused their research solely on feminism and female stand-up comedy. Most recently, Ellie Tomsett has published *Stand-up Comedy and Contemporary Feminisms: Sexism, Stereotypes, and Structural Inequalities* (2023) which examines the history of female comedy in the UK, acknowledges the challenges women face with the comedy industry and online spaces, and analyses feminist comedy in a post- Me-Too era. In addition to this book, Tomsett, along with Fox and Moore, has founded Mixed Bill, a 'comedy and gender research network currently made up of interdisciplinary researchers' which was created 'to explore under-researched aspects of comedy and humour and the way this intersects with gender identities' (*Mixed Bill*, 2021). This research project shares Mixed Bill's ethos as it explores the under-researched

application of comedy and humour in autoethnographic performance making and how comedy can be utilised in feminist autoethnographic practice.

1.1.2 The Comedy Gap: How Gender Impacts Female Comedians

Are women *actually* funny? Are women funny in general or are they only funny to other women? Throughout the decades there have been numerous claims that women are simply not funny or that they are not as funny as men. Take the *Vanity Fair* article “Why Women Aren’t Funny” (Hitchens, 2007) for example; it claims that women are not as funny as men because ‘women have no corresponding need to appeal to men in this way [through being funny]’ whereas men need to be funny to attract women. Then there’s Limon who agrees that women *can* be funny, but he caveats that statement by admitting that ‘female stand-up comedians[...] had only earned from me a grudging laugh- which, from the point of view of this pursuit, is equal to an easy laugh’ (Limon, 2000: 105). Both (male) authors’ claims about women’s humour highlight that there is a gender related gap when it comes to female comedians and feminist humour. There are a two key reasons for this gap, (1) the erasure and trivialisation of female stand-up’s contribution to comedy and (2) the behaviours of audiences which reinforce the stereotype that women are not funny.

The exclusion of female contributions to a field is nothing new and ‘scholars of women's humour commonly believed that, as in other areas such as literature, women have traditionally been excluded from the “canon” of great humour’ (Gilbert, 2004: 26). In addition to this exclusion, feminist humour and female comedians have been trivialised by media and audiences to further discredit their comedic contributions. One way this has been done was through ‘the ways in which the news media has transformed feminism into a dirty word through its depiction of the typical feminist as a woman with “the complete inability to smile—let alone laugh”,’ (Douglas 1995, 165; see also Douglas 2010, cited by Willett et al., 2012) giving way to the unsmiling and humourless feminist stereotype.

Another way of undermining the work of female comedians has been through using the body of female comedians as a metric for their comic work to be measure against. By focusing on what a woman looks like rather than what she has to say places another barrier in the way of female comedians. If she is considered unattractive by conventional beauty standards, she is deemed one of the guys and her comedy is considered masculine and ‘thus does not actually fall into the category of women’s comedy’ (Mizejewski, 2015: 1). If she is considered attractive, on the other hand, her comedic skills take a backseat to her

beauty which can be seen in how society values comedic actresses ‘from Claudette Colbert and Lucille Ball to Meg Ryan and Debra Messing’ (Mizejewski, 2015; 1). By evaluating the merit of female comedians in this way, the misogynistic idea that women are not funny is able to flourish but only because the evaluation system is rigged. With this line of thinking, if a woman is funny, she must hold mostly masculine traits which means comedy is no longer considered female comedy. If a woman is funny and conventionally attractive, the commentary on their performances can shift away from their jokes and towards conventional beauty standards. This seems like a lot of mental gymnastics to do to convince oneself that funny women do not exist. There is a misogynistic drive to undermine the power of funny women as ‘women's comedy has become a primary site in mainstream pop culture where feminism speaks, talks back, and is contested’ (Mizejewski, 2015: 6), therefore, to uphold patriarchal values female comedy must be discredited. In other words, ‘men are afraid of allowing women the access to power represented by humour (or of acknowledging that women in fact have such success) because a humorous woman threatens the central icon of the mythology that supports male dominance’ (Auslander, 2009: 110).

When evaluating if women are in fact funny or not, we must also examine the behaviour of audiences, specifically looking at the differences between male and female audience members. Firstly, ‘many sociological and psychological studies note laughter’s gendered trends’ (Douglas, 2015: 147) which would influence how funny a comedian is perceived to be. These studies found that ‘women laugh more often than men, and more often at men’s jokes, though rarely *at* men’ (Douglas, 2015: 147). Men, on the other hand, are less inclined to laugh at a woman’s jokes not because the joke is not funny but because they do not relate to the material as ‘there is a woman's culture that men just don't know about so when they say “hey, that jokes not funny,” it's sometimes because they don't understand the vocabulary’ (Auslander, 2009: 109). If there is a gap in what men will laugh at verse what women will laugh at, measuring a comedian’s skill set on laughs alone without factoring in audience demographics will produce skewed findings favouring male comedians, which is a consideration missing from the ‘are women funny’ debate.

1.1.3 History of Fumerism and Fumerist Stand-Up Comedians

In this section I will outline the history of fumerism by examining how feminist and stand-up comedians alike have utilised this ‘firebrand humour’ (Willett & Willett, 2020:26) to express and further their feminist ideals throughout the second, third, and fourth waves of

feminism, highlighting both the work of stand-up comedians and activist to show that fumerism has validity as a feminist method both in and out of performance. Fumerism has long been a tool of feminists as ‘both the amusing joke and the shock of the obscene can under certain conditions function within a social movement to effect egalitarian social change’(Willett & Willett, 2020: 34), but the uses of fumerism have been overlooked and ‘this common failure to recognize the importance of humour for feminisms might be expected, given that all too often feminists themselves have been treated as a joke while humour has seemed to be an exclusively male terrain’ (Willett & Willett, 2020: 21). Despite humour being levied against feminists and the feminist movement ‘women's ability, or licence, to be the creators of humour is inextricably linked to feminism and the women's rights movement’ (Tomsett, 2023: 10). Fumerism has been used in many other comedic forms such as sitcoms, music, and activism as ‘feminism has often employed the playful, subversive tactics of humour’ (Willett et al., 2012; 219). For this investigation, my focus lies on the examination of fumerist stand-up comedians ‘all of whom used the comic stage to add voices that complicate our understanding of distinct linear feminist waves’ (Willett et al., 2012: 222). The comedians I discuss are by no means the only fumerist comedians of note, there are many out there, but I am focusing my discussion to comedians who have impacted my comedy.

My investigation of fumerist stand-ups begins with the second wave of feminism during the 1960-1970s. During the second feminist wave of the 1960s and 1970s there are several examples of feminist activists using fumerism to further their cause. In 1978, Gloria Steinem wrote the essay “If Men Could Menstruate”, where she mused on what men’s behaviour would be like during their period, a joke premise that would be later used by Margert Cho and on SNL’s Weekend Update. This essay was ground-breaking in that it turned the master’s tools against them, making men the target of humour rather than feminists. Another example of fumerism during this period can be seen through the development of the chauvinist pig as a response to the creation of the playboy bunny ‘while the bunny may function as a serious figure for men of male desire, the pig functions for the feminist movement as a figure of comic ridicule and outright disgust’ (Willett et al., 2012: 232). This feminist period coincides with stand-up comedy’s shift towards persona-based acts. ‘As soon as the phrase “the personal is political” was coined, women performers and artists began to turn to their own experiences, using these as primary sources’ (Aston & Harris, 2007: 130) and although not all comedians were feminists, we can see stand-up utilising the performers experiences as primary sources for material. With stand-up comedy now being persona driven and feminist turning their lived experiences into performance and fumerist stand-up comedians began to emerge. During this period, two of the biggest female

stand-up comedians were Joan Rivers and Phyllis Diller ‘who are often yoked together as pioneers or veterans who paved thy way for other women stand-ups to break into the mainstream’ (Mock, 2012: 12). Joan Rivers used fumerism through her vulgar stream of consciousness delivery while Phyllis Diller used ‘fright-wigged sexless appearance and highly crafted’ (Mock, 2012: 12) gags. Both women used their comedy to comment on their aging bodies and critic both themselves and society’s obsession with aging women through their commentary. Growing up in America in the 1990s and early 2000s, I watched Rivers on every red-carpet event and her brash and vulgar commentary has shaped the harsher aspects of my comedic persona, which will be discussed in more detail in section 2.4.3.

During the third wave of feminism in the 1990s, fumerist work around the familial unit and female sexuality came to the forefront through the sit-com *Rosanne* and the work of the Lesbian Avengers. Stand-up comedian turned household name through her sit-com *Rosanne* Barr’s ‘humour established its potential to empower a demographic of underheard women against the moralizing backdrop of trickle-down Reaganomics, reflecting traces of feminist and working-class angst’ (Willett & Willett, 2020: 24). Barr’s sit-com challenge a ‘particularly invidious form of social power: norms of the family to which she refused to be subjected’ (Willett & Willett, 2020: 25) as it portrayed a household with two working parents and showcased Barr’s bawdy and un-lady-like demeanour. Meanwhile while *Rosanne* was airing the feminist activist group the Lesbian Avengers, established in 1992, ‘was dedicated to “issues vital to lesbian visibility and survival” (Leng, 2020:108) . Tired of serving as the underappreciated labour force for other groups’ struggles – most obviously gay men and straight feminists – the Avengers sought to give lesbian-specific issues the spotlight’ (Leng, 2020: 108). ‘Humour was central to the “imagination and vision” offered by the Avengers. A commitment to humour was present from the group’s beginning. Co-founder and veteran activist Wolfe recalled: “People are always saying that lesbians don’t have a sense of humour. [. . .]We wanted to prove them wrong”. According to the Avengers’ 1993 “Dyke Manifesto”, “Lesbian Avengers believe in creative activism: loud, bold, sexy, silly, fierce, tasty, and dramatic. Arrest optional”’ (Leng, 2020: 109). The Lesbian Avengers capitalised on the humanising quality of humour to their advantage during several of their demonstrations and initiatives as ‘humour manifested itself in the Avengers’ zaps, street theatre, protests, flyers, and fundraisers’ (Leng, 2020: 113).

Today in the 4th wave/digital wave of feminism, intersectionality, body positivity, and the politics of the #MeToo era and cancel culture take centre stage. With social media sites like Twitter, TikTok and Instagram, and streaming services like Netflix accessing fumerist work has never been easier, providing platforms to fumerist comedians from a variety of backgrounds. There are many fumerist comedians working today as ‘now, at the time of writing, the idea of women comedians identifying as feminists or talking about women's rights on stage (in the live comedy environment) has become almost cliched’ (Tomsett, 2023: 213). There is Wanka Sykes who explores race during Trump’s presidency, Hannah Gadsby and Rosie Jones who discuss sexuality and disability, and Sofie Hagen who explore gender identity and fat activism, and Bridget Christie who ‘can be considered a fumerist in that her comedy deals with both feminist politics (on a macro- and micro- scale) and also clearly displays her anger at the injustices an inequality is experienced by women’ (Tomsett, 2023: 157). Stand-up comedy specials like Iliza Shlesinger’s *Elder Millennial* (2018) and Ali Wong’s *Baby Cobra* (2016) address the exhaustion that most women feel in pursuit of ‘having it all,’ while comedians like Chelsea Peretti mock male comedians and their privilege (*One of the Greats*, 2014). Rosie Jones describes herself as a triple threat, ‘A lesbian, disabled and a prick’ (*Rosie Jones: Triple Threat*, 2023). Sofie Hagen has material around their non-binary gender identity, saying that they are reluctant to go by they/them pronouns as they don’t want anyone to feel good about themselves for getting the pronouns right, they don’t want anyone to feel good when referring to them (Hagen, 2023b). Hannah Gadsby and Bridget Christie use their comedy to point out the absurdity of patriarchy - from men naming everything (*Douglas*, 2021), to products such as lady pens being sold (*Stand Up for Her*, 2016). In this current digital wave of feminism (forth wave feminism), it would be remiss of me not to mention the role that social media has played in furthering fumerist expression. With these new social media platforms, a new brand of fumerism content is being created and explored as creating, publishing, and consuming content has never been easier. One of the social media forms that brings me the most joy is the humorous take down of an ‘alpha male’, men who embody toxic masculinity and misogyny. TikTok based internet personality Drew Afualo ‘has amassed 8 million followers on TikTok by giving misogynistic men a taste of their own medicine’ (Mendez II, 2023). Her fumerist formula for developing social media content is as follows, ‘a guy with an alpha-male demeanour uploads a video degrading women, Afualo’s followers alert her to its presence, and she posts a video in response’ (Mendez II, 2023) using the same ridicule the so-called alpha-male used to

degrade women, flipping that degradation on its head, and pointing that energy back at the original poster. She'll mock these men's receding hairlines, heights, teeth, bone structure, age, and the setting of wherever the original video was filmed (a lot of time it's being filmed in a gym which is an odd place to voice one's horribly backwards world views). She often films her take downs of these 'men' while sitting on her toilet, blowing raspberries, and giving them a thumbs down and openly laughing at them and their misogynistic 'hot takes'. She is a wonderful example of a social media fumerist. She turns the master's tools against them and takes men's greatest fear, a woman laughing at them, into a reality.

With video sharing exploding across social media and the rise in dominance over terrestrial television by streaming services such as Netflix, YouTube, and Amazon Prime, the work of stand-up comedians has been able to reach new, global audiences, who now have access to a wide array of comedy from all around the world, exposing them to new ideas and points of view through humour. The 2018 special *Nanette*, for example, exposed a global audience to Hannah Gadsby's experiences as a queer woman from Tasmania, the hate crimes she experienced as a result, her mental health, and her complex relationship with comedy. Several clips from this special 'grew viral almost overnight' (Sundén & Paasonen, 2019: 3), exposing new audiences to both her work as the feminist message of her show is 'disseminated widely' (Krefting, 2019: 166) through Netflix's audiences. This special, along with Gadsby's 2021 special *Douglas* will be discussed further in the Case Studies section of Chapter Two.

My fumerism falls into this 4th wave feminism. My feminism is intersectional and trans-inclusive, and embraces 4th wave ideals round intersectionality, body positivity, and empowerment. While it may seem counter to my fumerist aims, my stand-up comedy persona is self-deprecating despite my body positive goals. While 'often feminist considerations of humour originating prior to the rise of post-feminism and fourth-wave feminisms have focused on the problematic nature of self-deprecation by women' (Tomsett, 2023: 139) I do not see self-deprecation as problematic as it 'can be seen as a positive part of comic performance in that it gives the performer control over the way an audience reacts to her body' (Tomsett, 2023: 144). Through my self-deprecating persona I can control how the audience reacts to my fat body as use my stand-up as 'a necessary space for critique of [the pressures put on women], especially in relation to women's bodies,' making my comedy 'inherently linked to wider gender politics, contemporary feminisms and cultural body norms' (Tomsett, 2023: 145).



Figure 4 Performance photo of Funny Women Stage Awards (2022) virtual heat where I qualified as a quarter-finalist.

Fumerism is a powerful feminist tool in that ‘the erotic force in feminist humour messes with oppressive networks of power, intensifying and augmenting its own sources of pleasure and joy’ (Willett & Willett, 2020 : 22). Through humour, mockery, and irony fumerist comedians and activists create jokes at the patriarchy’s expense. Through laughter, fumerist are able to shock audiences out of their normative behaviour and open them up to new and differing feminist perspectives. In *Uproarious: How Feminists and Other Subversive Comics Speak Truth* (2020) Willett & Willett put forth the following call to arms:

We call on feminism to engage openly and playfully with various forms of humour and irony as weapons of choice in tribute to fumerism. After all, across the political spectrum, from left-wing radicals to those alt-right antifeminist extremists in the online “manosphere” know full well, “Ridicule is man’s most potent weapon.” If well aimed, we insist, it can be feminists’ as well. (Willett & Willett, 2020: 27)

Fumerism not only invites feminists to use ridicule as a potent weapon against the patriarchy and misogyny, but it also offers a mode in which to transform one’s anger into joy, one’s lived experience into primary knowledge, and invites audiences to join us on the feminist soap box for a good hearty laugh.

1.1.4 Why Funny Women are Dangerous

Despite the many attempts made by misogynists to validate the claim that women are not funny, female comedians and feminist humour endures. Although, given the number of tactics the patriarchy has employed to perpetuate the women aren't funny myth I makes me wonder why have people (i.e. misogynists) fought so hard to develop the narrative that women are not funny? A funny woman can be emasculating while a funny feminist is downright dangerous. In this section I will examine the power that funny women and feminist comedians hold and how that power can be used to challenge, critique, and smash patriarchal ideals.

It is not just those who uphold the patriarchy that reject feminist humour. Many feminists themselves avoid using comedy as humour has been used against the feminism movement 'to diffuse and dismiss serious political charges rather than confront the enemy directly as so-called manly men claim to do is guaranteed to kindle smouldering resentment, a general distrust of humour, and righteous outrage' (Willett et al., 2012: 220). For some feminists, the use of humour trivialises the seriousness of the movement, while others shy away from humour as it has long been a tool used against us, as feminist comedian 'Kate Clinton notes: "Men have used humour against women so long—we know implicitly whose butt is the butt of their jokes—that we do not trust humour"' (Willett et al., 2012: 220 citing Barreca 1991). The distrust some feminists might hold for humour and comedy is well founded but humour can and should be used by feminists as a tool for social critique and to turn the tables on misogynists making them into the butt of our jokes. In addition to not feeling as though they can trust humour, humour itself might seem to undermine the seriousness of the feminist movement as 'the effort to be taken seriously has often been the aim of feminist theory' (Billingsley, 2013:7). However, feminist comedians have proven that humour can be used to communicate serious feminist issues while also making the patriarchy the butt of the joke rather than the feminist cause.

If the biggest argument against women and feminists using humour is that it upsets and encroaches on the fragile patriarchal ego, isn't that even more a reason to do it? In the 1976 essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" Hélène Cixous argues the importance of feminist and female writing 'she must write herself, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history, first at two levels that cannot be separated' (Cixous et al., 1976: 880). I agree with Cixous that through writing one can

find feminist liberation. I argue that feminist writing must now turn to stand-up comedy, a space that still caters heavily to patriarchal comedians, and we must write ourselves through fumerism. It is there that we will transform our histories while mocking the very system that has disenfranchised us; this combination is what makes funny women so dangerous to patriarchal order and that is the power of fumerism. To put it another way if reason as a persuasive tool is at best only indirectly effective, and a weak tool on its own, might not the sting of ridicule or the contagion of joyous laughter prove to be more effective weapons for social change? Or, to turn the question around, what devices are more explosive in the social sphere, more discomforting to our conventional modes of thought, more invasive of our quasi-private store of associations, than the well-placed joke, the display of wit, or the well-honed use of irony? (Willett et al., 2020: 22).

1.2 Compositional Elements of Modern Stand-up Comedy

1.2.1 Humour Theories

Philosophers, psychologists, and comedy practitioners have been exploring why people laugh for as long as laughter has existed and ‘while many theories hypothesize why people laugh, three major theories of humour predominate: incongruity, relief/release, and superiority’ (Friedman & Friedman, 2019: 5). These three humour theories provide the foundation that comedy and jokes are built upon.

In the theory of incongruity, humour comes from ‘a question with a surprise answer’ (Gadsby, 2018). The comedian sets up a premise, aka the question, leading the audience down a logical train of thought until they pivot from that train of thought unexpectedly to get a laugh. In other words, humour emerges from the unexpected; instead of following to a logical conclusion, jokes and humour arise from the surprise of breaking away from the logical pattern. An example of an incongruity joke is a ‘rule-of-3’ joke where a comedian lists three things; the first two entries of the list establish a pattern then the third disrupts that pattern to create surprise and, hopefully, a laugh. For example, I have a ‘rule-of-3’ joke about my dad not believing in therapy as he is a very old school cowboy from small town rural America (picture a combination John Wayne and Ron Swanson from *Parks and Recreation*, a meat loving, gun slinging, libertarian: that’s Dad). Given his background, he does not see how talk therapy would be more helpful than pulling oneself up by their bootstraps and solving their problems themselves. For my rule-

of-3 joke, I start by laying out Dad's aversion to therapy. 'My Dad is very old school; he doesn't believe in therapy he thinks it's some mythical concept like Tinkerbell or Big Foot or women's reproductive rights [audience laughter/groan]' (watch [here](#)). In this joke, I establish a pattern the first two things I list are common things that people do not believe in then I break the pattern by bringing up the resurgence of reproductive rights debate currently taking place in the US. This sudden pivot away from fantasy and mythical characters into contemporary politics surprises the audience and gets a laugh and/or a groan at the current state of gender politics.

The next humour theory is the theory of relief/release which 'focuses on laughter's role as a socially acceptable way to release pent-up tension and nervous energy, and therefore relieve stress' (Friedman & Friedman, 2019: 5). Relief / release is linked to catharsis, the various psychologic theories of laughter such as those proposed by Lord Shaftesbury (1709), John Locke (1690), Herbert Spencer (1911) and Sigmund Freud (1905) summarised in *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Philosophy of Humour* (Morreall, 2020), and the role humour plays in healing (Scheff, 1979). Relief / Release is a 'hydraulic explanation in which laughter does in the nervous system what a pressurerelease valve does in a steam boiler' (Morreall, 2020: section 3), and best describes how humour is used as a coping mechanism, as jokes and humour can alleviate our tension. I will discuss the use of this theory in the Hannah Gadsby Case Studies section of Chapter Two, as her special *Nanette* (2018) is an insightful example of the interplay between humour and tension.

The final humour theory, according to Friedman & Friedman is that of superiority which 'suggests that the purpose of humour is to demonstrate one's superiority, dominance, or power over others' (Friedman & Friedman, 2019: 6). This humour theory has the comedian using mockery or insult humour to alienate the 'other' while boosting their own ego, enhancing their sense of superiority, or to put it another way 'our laughter expresses feelings of superiority over other people or over a former state of ourselves' (Morreall, 2020: section 2). It is under this humour theory that we find racist, sexist, ableist, homophobic, and transphobic jokes and where so-called 'edge-lord' comedians cut their teeth. 'Edge-lord' comedy is a genre of far-right comedy where comedians view 'causing as much offense as possible' (Brown, 2022: 590) as the best way to 'own libs' as well as their audiences. However, this theory can be more than 'belittling and denigrating' (Friedman & Friedman, 2019: 6).

Charles R. Gruner (2000), for example, ‘believes that humour should be seen as a type of game in which there is a winner and a loser. The winners are the parties doing the laughing, and the losers are the ones being laughed about’ (Friedman & Friedman, 2019: 6). It is through this version of superiority we can see the concept of ‘punching up’ in play. Punching up is how ‘comedy has always poked fun at the rich and powerful, holding them accountable’ (Carter, 2020: 4). In the case of superiority theory, a comedian punches up towards those who have more power and privilege to transform them into the ‘losers’ of the joke, while the comedian and the one who agree with the joke become the ‘winners’.

1.2.2 Persona based Stand-up Comedy

Since the 1960s, stand-up comedy has shifted away from straight up joke telling and towards persona driven acts such as Joan Rivers and Lenny Bruce. While joke smithing is still a vital component to stand-up, in persona-driven stand-up, ‘the point of view itself presented by the comedian onstage constitutes the humour’ (Tsakona et al., 2018: 4). The ‘whimsical, sometimes aloof, sometimes bracingly honest’ (Carson, 2022) personas of James Acaster, or Ali Wong’s ‘jaunty stand-up alter ego [that] has the strutting charisma of a rock star’ (Zinoman, 2018), or Bo Burnham’s pretentious white saviour persona in ‘From God’s Perspective’ (2013) and ‘Comedy’ (2021) are all strong examples of how comedians use their personas to strengthen their comedic point of view and the point of view itself becomes the driving force behind the joke telling. The comedic persona is often described as a few aspects of one’s personality being ‘blown up to 200%’ (Target, 2021). Comedy scholar Oliver Double identifies persona as one of the defining aspects of stand-up comedy ‘besides the fact of it being funny: *personality* it puts a person on display in front of an audience whether that person is an exaggerated comic character or a version of the performer performer's own self’ (Double, 2014: 19) that a stand-up comedian’s personality is ‘absolutely crucial to his or her act’ as ‘it provides a context for the material, it gives the audience something to identify with, and it's what distinguishes one comic from the next’ (Double, 2014: 97).

In stand-up workshop ‘Everything but the Gags’ (2021), G&B Comedy’s Kyle Wallace recommended that regardless of what type of stand-up one performs, the writing should always be approached as if you are a character act. In looking at one’s comedic persona as a character rather than an extension of oneself, the comedy writer is freed from self-consciousness and can critically examine what the audience will see, hear, and think

about this ‘character’. To write a clear comedy character act, a comedy writer must first identify which genres and subgenres of comedy their character will explore. In stand-up comedy, a comedian’s primary genre is often what an audience first connects with, whilst the subgenres are the means through which the comedian deepens that connection (Wallace, 2021). In my stand-up, for example, the audience first notices and connects with my gender, something that my male counterparts do not experience. Because of this, my primary genre of comedy is ‘female’. Before I say a word, my primary genre is chosen for me. While I believe that ‘gender is not a genre’ (Tomsett, 2023: 18), unfortunately for female stand-up comedians ‘the right to be considered a comedian (rather than a female comedian) is central to current debates around women and comedy’ (Tomsett, 2017: 58) and we will continue to be lumped together under the banner of lady comics until audiences and the comedy industry begin viewing us the same way they view our male counterparts. After I step onstage and am instantly branded a lady comic my primary genre is set. Then, once I do start to speak to the London audiences they notice my American accent - and I am instantly placed into a cultural box making one of my subgenre’s ‘heritages/cultural’ – focussing on my ‘Americanness’. Kyle Wallace advises that within each set, a comedian should only explore 2-3 subgenres to create a strong point of view and develop a tight 5-minute set. By separating the personal from one’s comedic persona, a comedian can ground their persona in a handful of traits which in turn will result in a stronger point of view for their writing and performance to go through. The comedic persona acts as a filter where the personal is transformed into something absurd, specific, and/or universal which an audience will find amusing. I continue this discussion on persona in Chapter Two when discussing my fumerist stand-up comedy practice. There, I argue the value of the comedy persona as it mediated the performer- audience relationship without tarnishing the relatability and authenticity of the performer.

1.2.3 Types of Jokes

Despite the shift towards persona-based stand-up, jokes are obviously still vital to the form of stand-up comedy. So, what is a joke? While there are many types of jokes, at its core a joke can be broken down into; a set-up followed by a punchline and all broadly fit into one of seven categories: puns and wordplay (1), misdirection (2) observational humour (3) *reductio ad absurdum* (4), Analogy (5), rule-of-3 (6), and non sequitur (7).

One category, puns and wordplay (1) can be seen in the witty language-based work of Tim Vine and Milton Jones, or in Mae West’s use of double entendre. These jokes

develop humour through the ambiguity of language. For example, in her special *Douglas Hannah Gadsby* delivers a bit about men calling women hormonal ‘as if men don’t have hormones...because newsflash fella, you’ve got hormones and sometimes you get *testy*’ (2021). By exploiting the double meaning of the word ‘testy’ Gadsby gets a laugh by pointing out how society validates male emotional responses while dismissing women’s (men are testy while women are hormonal) and conjures up the idea of a testicle in the process.

Misdirection (2) is a joke in which the comedian leads the audience down a clear thought process to suddenly flip the thought in a surprising way to get a laugh. In misdirection jokes we can see incongruity theory of humour in action, where funny is created out of surprise. For example, Bo Burnham’s astrology joke: ‘I believe in the Zodiac, and this is morbidly ironic: my grandmother was a Cancer, and she was actually killed by a giant crab’ (Burnham, 2010). Here, Burnham misleads the audience to think that his grandmother died from cancer the disease. Burnham then uses that misdirection to the second part of the joke; his grandmother being killed by a giant crab which is the creature depicted in the Cancer constellation.

Observational humour (3) has the comedian examining the everyday in order to extract new meaning. Jerry Seinfeld’s observations on airline food and lampshades are perfect examples of observational jokes. Another example of an observational joke comes from Bridget Christie’s show *Stand Up for Her* (2016) where she recounts the moment where she realised that she was a feminist after witnessing a man move to the women’s studies section of a bookshop to fart. Christie explains that in observing this man farting in front of feminist text that she was ‘catapulted from a position of utter uneducated ignorance of even the tiniest aspect of feminism right into the epicentre of modern British feminist discourse by this single smelly smell’ (Christie, 2016).

Reductio ad absurdum (4) is a joke that pushes logic to the extreme until the train of thought becomes ridiculous. In *Elder Millennial* (2018), Iliza Shlesinger describes what it is like inviting a man that you’ve just started dating to your home in your 20s and the juxtaposition between wanting to have your home clean and welcoming and inviting while trying to hide that ‘women are secretly filthy’. Shlesinger follows the logic of women trying to conceal their chaos from a potential partner the morning after a date, pushing it to the extreme with the idea that ‘under the hair and the makeup and the lashes and the

shelf and the bras, for every woman lies the beating heart of hungry, exhausted, annoyed SHE-DRAGON!’

Analogy (5) is a comedic device that I use within my stand-up practice frequently. By comparing two unlikely things I create a humorous link for audiences. In my set about my dating life I use analogy to create funny imagery about how dating feels: ‘Dating in London feels like living in the Wild West’ (see Appendix A.2).

I then continue with a rule-of-3 joke (6) there I establish a pattern of old west imagery with the first two things I list off, ‘everyone is lawless, and grizzled, and there’s a lone tumbleweed blowing around in my vagina [audience laughter]’ (see Appendix A.2) and break that pattern with the idea that a tumbleweed could be blowing around inside me.

The final category of joke is the non sequitur (7), a conclusion that does not follow what has come before and the surprise conclusion is where the funny lies, just as incongruity theory of humour states. For example, James Acaster’s analogy/non sequitur bit about Brexit and a cup of tea from *Mock the Week*; ‘If you leave the [tea] bag in then overtime the cup of tea itself as a whole becomes stronger, and it might appear that the bag is getting weaker but it’s now part of a strong cup of tea’ (James Acaster, 2021). After setting out this fitting analogy Acaster continues the bit, ‘whereas if you take the bag out, the tea’s now quite weak and the bag itself goes directly in the bin’ (James Acaster, 2021). Acaster gets a laugh by switching out of the pattern of his analogy part way through the joke ‘a breaking of expectation in a random way’ (Target, 2021) which creates surprise and causes the laugh.

There are two additional comedy techniques worth mentioning that work alongside these types of jokes to illicit additional laughs: the topper and the call back. A topper is an additional line, an add on to a punchline - a comedic semi colon. A topper is not a joke on its own as it is not funny as a stand-alone line, but when delivered after the punchline of a joke, it adds an additional laugh from the audience. A call back is when a comedian refers to something from earlier in their set. A great example of a call back can be found in Hannah Gadsby’s special *Douglas* (2021). The show opens with Gadsby giving the audience a run-down of what they can expect in the show. ‘You also need to expect one Louis C. K. joke...it happens very late in the show, so late that you will have

forgotten that I told you to expect a Louis C.K. joke...which means you'll laugh like this 'ha, ha, ha—oh!'” (Gadsby, 2021). Then, when Gadsby does deliver the Louis C.K. joke the audience laughs at the joke, then laughs again as they remember Gadsby set up the joke earlier in the show. Call backs and toppers take already established jokes to the next level.

1.2.4 Stand-up Comedy Audience

The final element of contemporary stand-up comedy to examine is the stand-up comedy audience. In the context of this research investigation, it is important to note how the stand-up comedy audience differs from their theatrical counterpart. I am particularly interested in how the stand-up comedy audiences' participation in the performance impacts and shapes the performer-audience relationship, a relationship that is central to the comedian's performance and one should be central in the autoethnographer's performance as well.

In the traditional theatre audience, there is an 'unspoken "theatre contract"' (Suvin, 1985: 9) where 'in return for practitioners' physical, imaginative, and emotional labour, theatregoers implicitly agree to assist in the creation of the onstage world' (Sedgman, 2018: 12). With this traditional contract audiences are expected to sit back and watch the work of the performers, suspending their disbelief to support the performance happening onstage. In *The Audience Experience: A Critical Analysis of Audiences in the Performing Arts* (Radbourne et al., 2013), researchers conduct focus groups and surveys with audiences to measure their engagement and attributes of the audience experience across a variety of performance types such as live music, dance, and theatre for young audiences. The attributes used to measure the audiences' experiences are (a) knowledge transfer or learning, (b) risk management, (c) authenticity, and (d) collective engagement (Radbourne et al., 2013: 10). When discussing risk management, one respondent's statement highlighted a key difference between stand-up comedy and theatre and the collect risk each audience undertakes that the respective performances. They commented that

[In stand-up comedy...] there's a lot of interaction and... the performer is trying to get... audience participation and feedback. But in theatre I think it's more like art on the wall in that it's about how the audience perceive it without much interaction... you can't get any information from the performer as to whether he wants you to laugh or be silent so I find that quite difficult which may be well one of the main reasons why I don't go and see a lot of live theatre.(Radbourne et al., 2013:8)

For this audience member, the interaction and relationship to the comedian lessen their feeling of risk taking as they are given cues by the stand-up performer on how to respond, whereas in traditional theatre the performer cannot provide such cues without breaking the fourth wall. This dialogical aspect of the stand-up comedian-audience relationship is at the heart of what sets a stand-up comedy audience apart from its theatrical counterpart.

One of the most distinct characteristics of the stand-up comedy audience is the role they play in the performance. The comedian and audience are in constant dialogue with one another. The audiences' lines in this dialogue take the form of either laughter or heckles if the comedian warrants that treatment. John Limon refers to this comedian-audience relationship as a comedy circle, in that the 'audience turns [the comedian's] jokes into jokes' (Limon, 2000: 13) meaning that it is through the successful creation of a comedy circle – and a reciprocal relationship – that a comedian can illicit laughter from their audiences, hence turning their speech into jokes. The comedy circle is one way in which the comedian provides cues to their audiences in terms of how they want the audience to respond. Once the comedy circle is formed 'the audience- by means of its laughter, by means of its meta laughter- comes together as a community' (Limon, 2000: 23) and this community is part of what draws audiences to live stand-up comedy along with 'sharing the comic experience; expecting the unexpected; respecting the stand-up comedian; opportunities for interaction; and proximity and intimacy' (Hattingh, 2018: 3). The comedy circle is a vital part of stand-up comedy and 'however difficult it is to handle the exchange of energy between performer and audience, [...] it's one of the things that make direct address so important' (Double, 2014: 190), therefore stand-up comedy cannot function if there is the fourth wall between comedian and audience as there is in traditional theatre performances.

1.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have established that fumerism, fourth-wave feminism, and the compositional elements of modern stand-up comedy serve as the conceptual frameworks and theories that underpin the Know-That, or propositional knowledge, of Fumerist Autoethnography Praxis. I have illustrated that by using a fumerist approach to humour and by applying fumerism to autoethnography, I will be able to develop autoethnographic performance that 'deals with both feminist politics (on a macro- and micro- scale) and

also clearly displays her anger at the injustices an inequality is experienced by women' (Tomsett, 2023: 157).

In the first half of this chapter, I examined fumerism and feminist humour within academic and performance spaces. I argued that fumerist comedians and their contributions to the stand-up comedy field have been erased, dismissed, and demeaned as 'scholars of women's humour commonly believed that, as in other areas such as literature, women have traditionally been excluded from the "canon" of great humour' (Gilbert, 2004: 26). To prove this point, I examined *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (2000) by John Limon which is the first book to 'attempt [...] to provide [stand-up comedy] with a theory- or a first approximation of one' (Limon, 2000: 1). In his evaluation of stand-up comedy in America, he diminished the accomplishments of great fumerist comedians like Joan Rivers and Phyllis Diller, treating their accomplishments as footnotes to the legacy of Lenny Bruce instead of examining these women as Bruce's contemporaries. When Limon does discourse the contributions made by female comedians, he heavily caveats their work by stating that female stand-up comedians examined in his book 'had only earned from me a grudging laugh- which, from the point of view of a purist, is equal to an easy laugh' (2000: 105). This demeaning statement points to a larger problem within stand-up comedy and stand-up comedy scholarship and that is the attempted erasure, diminishment, and denial of fumerist comedy. Although there are comedy scholars, like Ellie Tomsett who's book *Stand-up Comedy and Contemporary Feminisms: Sexism, Stereotypes, and Structural Inequalities* (2023) examines the history of female comedy in the UK and the barriers that are still part of the comedy industry, the myth that women aren't funny still permeates the comedy circuit and academia.

I further interrogate the myth that women and feminist aren't funny by examining how this myth has been perpetuated through the undermining fumerist humour the behaviour of audiences. I have identified that through the erasure of feminist humour from 'canon' and by focusing on the body of the female comedian rather than the content, misogynist's have been able to build a case against fumerist humour. By evaluating the merit of female comedians through the lens of their appearance, the misogynistic idea that women are not funny has able to flourish but only because the evaluation system is rigged. With this line of thinking, if a woman is funny, she must hold mostly masculine traits which means comedy is no longer considered female comedy. If a woman is funny and conventionally attractive, the commentary on their performances can shift away from their

jokes and towards conventional beauty standards. Additionally, the behaviour of audiences has been used as evidence to prove that women are not funny, however I argue that this evidence is flawed. There are ‘many sociological and psychological studies note laughter’s gendered trends’ (Douglas, 2015: 147) which would influence how funny a comedian is perceived to be. Women tend to laugh more whereas men do not laugh as much a woman’s jokes not because the joke is not funny but because they do not relate to the material as ‘there is a woman's culture that men just don't know about so when they say “hey, that jokes not funny,” it's sometimes because they don't understand the vocabulary’ (Auslander, 2009: 109). I argue that is an important phenomenon to consider when evaluating the comedic skill of a performer. Without factoring in audience demographics and the gendered trends of laughter the data will be skewed in favour of male comedians. To close this section of the chapter, I examined the history of feminism and argued that funny women are dangerous and how that danger makes feminism powerful. By examining the work of activist and comedians I charted how feminism was utilised throughout the second, third, and now fourth waves of feminism. I have demonstrated that despite misogynists’ best efforts feminist humour is alive and well.

In the second part of this chapter, I laid out the various compositional elements that make up modern stand-up comedy and that will be explored throughout this thesis. I identified three major humour theories, incongruity, relief/release, and superiority, and examined how each theory explains how humour functions. I then discuss stand-up comedy shift away from straight joke telling to the more personality driven acts we see today, thus the comedy persona was born. I argue that the comedy persona has unified my comedy writing behind one clear point of view. I then discuss the various types of jokes which all broadly fit into one of seven categories: puns and wordplay (1), misdirection (2) observational humour (3) *reductio ad absurdum* (4), Analogy (5), rule-of-3 (6), and non sequitur (7). For each of these types of jokes I explain how they function and provide an example demonstrating how they each work in context.

The final element of modern stand-up comedy that I examined was the stand-up comedy audience where I outlined the differences between a stand-up comedy audience and the more traditional theatre audience. One of the key differences between these two types of audiences lies in how the stand-up comedy audience functions in the performance event. Unlike a traditional theatre show with the presence of a fourth wall, in stand-up comedy the comedian and audience are in constant dialogue with one another. John Limon refers to this comedian-audience relationship as a comedy circle, in that the ‘audience

turns [the comedian's] jokes into jokes' (Limon, 2000: 13) meaning that it is through the successful creation of a comedy circle – and a reciprocal relationship – that a comedian can illicit laughter from their audiences, hence turning their speech into jokes. Through this reciprocal relationship, stand-up comedy audience are transformed from passive spectators into active participants in the stand-up comedy event. The audience's active role and the reciprocal relationship that exists within stand-up comedy is something I intend to incorporate into my autoethnographic performance practice.

In Chapter Two: Know-How; Developing Autoethnographic, Fumerist, and Stand-up Comedy Practice I will build upon the conceptual framework of fumerism as I discuss my fumerist stand-up comedy practice. Through examining my autoethnographic practice, case studies, and my emerging fumerist stand-up comedy practices, I will discuss the development of Fumerist Autoethnography as an approach to developing autoethnographic performance. I will discuss how this new autoethnographic approach has informed the development of *We're Like Sisters*, a Fumerist Autoethnography standup comedy show.

2. Chapter Two: Know-How; Developing Autoethnographic, Fumerist, and Stand-up Comedy Practice

There are two elements of procedural knowledge within Fumerist Autoethnography: how to write, develop, and perform an autoethnographic performance, and how to write, develop, and perform fumerist stand-up comedy. In this chapter, I will demonstrate my embodied knowledge through my autoethnographic and fumerist stand-up comedy practice and illustrate how my blending of the two forms led to the development of *We're Like Sisters*, a Fumerist Autoethnography stand-up comedy show.

2.1 Autoethnography

Autoethnography is 'a way of researching and writing that seeks to connect the personal to the cultural, placing the self at all times within a social context' (Freeman, 2010: 181). In this section I will examine the defining characteristics of autoethnography and autoethnographic performance, address the value of autoethnographic research, identify the various types of lenses and analytical methods of creating autoethnography and discuss the limitations and ethics of the field. I argue that the main limitation in performance autoethnography is the lack of clarity with what the audience's role is within autoethnographic performance and the impact that has on the autoethnographer-audience relationship. I will outline my autoethnographic methodology, which is informed by autoethnographers Denzin and Spry, as well as live artist Bryony Kimmings.

2.1.1 The Field of Performance Autoethnography

According to Tami Spry, in the broadest of terms, 'autoethnography can be defined as a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts' (Spry, 2001: 710). Autoethnographic writing combines the objective role of the researcher with subjective personal experiences and places those experiences within socio-political contexts. In *Encyclopaedia of Case Study Research*, Marechal (2010) speaks of the value of autoethnographic research as:

operationalis[ing] three different conceptions of self: self as representative subject (as a member of a community or group) self as autonomous subject (as itself the object of inquiry, depicted in 'tales of the self') and other as

autonomous self (the other as both object and subject of inquiry, speaking with their own voice). It displays three main intersecting qualitative research traditions: analytic, subjectivist experiential and poststructuralist / postmodern (2010: 2).

In today's post-globalised society, the desire to 're-establish and re-state individual and societal identities is possibly stronger than ever' (Freeman, 2010: 182), therefore, research and artistic practices should reflect that reclamation, emancipation, and desire for social justice. In *Performance Autoethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* (2018), Denzin puts forth a manifesto for 'rethinking performance autoethnography' (preface) and 'what this form of [autoethnographic] writing means for writers who want to perform work that leads to social justice' (preface). In the book Denzin outlines pedagogic models, lenses of analysis, and the cultural and political structures that influence autoethnographic writing. Denzin also argues the role of researcher, performer, writer, and the self are all interwoven and active at all times; autoethnography is a research practice that reflects the multi-faceted nature of performance practice-based research. All of the roles we play are shaped by how society has cast us and, therefore, our research methodologies should reflect that. In *Blood Sweat Theory* (2010), Freeman discusses heuristic research, a research process of trial and error that values the errors as much as the successes. Freeman (2010) identifies autoethnography as one such research method as he advocates using autoethnography as a research method as it values finding a research process rather than a result like traditional forms of research.

As a heuristic research method, autoethnography relies on the 'researcher's inner feelings and thoughts' (Méndez, 2014: 282) to produce autoethnographic text. Whilst recent 'critiques [...] of autoethnography have mostly emphasized their lack of ethnographic relevance as a result of being too personal' (Marechal, 2010: 4), it is through the 'too personal' that autoethnography is able to connect to others while showing 'social justice, critical reflexivity, interpretation, and ethnically responsible inquiry' (Denzin, 2018: 19). According to Freeman (2010) the merit of heuristic research lies in that heuristic research values the research process over the results of the research and recognizes that in any sort of artistic research practice there will be a process of trial and error; that process often leading to new knowledge even if the results of the research are unsuccessful. Heuristic research allows researcher's ideas and personal feelings to be present within and even drive the research process. Denzin (2018) has pointed out the interwoven roles of the autoethnographic researcher and a heuristic research process

allows each of those roles to influence and guide the research which gives way to more diverse research voices and narratives. Autoethnography does, however, ‘require honesty and willingness to self-disclose’ (Méndez, 2014: 282) on the part of the researcher, ‘making autoethnographies a complicated method to follow’ (Méndez, 2014: 282). Additionally, there is a limited amount of academic writing focusing solely on autoethnographic performance practice as most of the scholarly work on autoethnography and personal narrative as a research tool relates to the field of anthropology and sociology. Norman Denzin, for example makes autoethnographic performance but he is not a theatre maker but rather is a performance anthropologist. This thesis seeks to contribute to the academic writing on the process of developing an autoethnographic performance from a theatre studies perspective.

Autoethnographic performance, also known as performative autoethnography, can be defined as ‘the dramaturgical or story-like rendering of a point, theme, or issue that is directly made known or confirmed to the audience’ (Sughrua, 2019: 1). The autoethnographic performer’s ‘primary interests are showing, not telling, social justice, critical reflexivity, interpretation, and ethnically responsible inquiry’ (Denzin, 2018: 19).

2.1.2 Models of Ethnographic Performance

Fumerist Autoethnography has been informed by various models of Ethnographic Performances. In *Performance Autoethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture*, Denzin (2018) summaries the six main models of ethnographic performance as

- (1) Conquergood’s notion of fieldwork as performance...(2)
- Goffman’s mimetic all the world’s a stage model... (3) Turner’s
- performance as kinesis...(4) Schechner’s notion of performance as
- restored, or twice-behaved behaviours... (5) Madison’s critical
- ethnography which is based on a dialogical performance model...
- (6) Saldana’s ethnotheatre performances (Denzin, 2018: 49)

Each of these models ‘rest on distinctly different [auto] ethnographic materials and lead to distinctly different forms of performance’ (Denzin, 2018: 50), therefore the integration of ethnographic performance into stand-up comedy will fit some models better than others. I argue, however, that in each of these models there is a *possible* link to stand-up comedy practice. By identifying these links, I will begin to form the basis of Fumerist Autoethnography Praxis model, drawing from each of the autoethnographic models listed above.

Conquergood's model of fieldwork as performance outlines a 'dialogical relationship based on co-witnessing between the researcher and the researched' (Denzin, 2018: 49) which directly correlates the dialogical model of stand-up comedy as described by Double:

stand-up comedy is built on the model of a conversation, albeit a very one-sided one. The comedian does most of the talking, and the audience's side of things mostly consists of laughter and applause, but it feels very conversational because of the direct interaction. (Double, 2014: 339)

The comedian/researcher invites the audience to co-witness and co-author their performance through their responses to the material. One of stand-up comedy's defining traits is that 'it is firmly and conspicuously rooted in the present tense' (Double, 2014: 325) which allows the performer to comment what is happening live in the room through things like crowd work. In these moments of live commentary, the audience can witness the comedians' writing process in real time. The comedian acts as researcher through their observations and subsequent jokes about their audience. Within the realm of stand-up comedy, Conquergood's model of fieldwork as performance is transformed into fieldwork as crowd-work.

Goffman's model states that 'all social interaction is staged and a performance' (Denzin, 2018: 50). This model most closely links to the comedian persona and the roles that comedian, audience, and MC play while at a stand-up gig. Stand-up comedy, like performance studies, examines the performance of everyday life as comedians make observations about how we go through life performing various rituals. For example, John Mulaney's observation on how us normal people sheepishly ask for a laptop charger while Mick Jagger has the power to summon Diet Coke simply by shouting 'Diet Coke!' (Mulaney, 2018). The comedian re-enacts and quotes directly from their lived experiences while autoethnographers examine the reasons behind those experiences. In order to best mediate and stage interactions with an audience, even if those interactions are improvisational, a stand-up comedian develops a comedic persona. By developing a comedic persona, stand-up comedians can write and develop material from a clear point of view as a comedy persona 'provides the performer a consistent comic perspective on the world' (Keisalo, 2018: 123). Like the comedian onstage, the audience also has a role to play within stand-up comedy. As co-authors of the comedic material, audiences interact with the comedian through laughter, heckles, or silence. Each of these responses is staged as is 'shaped by ritual rules' of the stand-up comedy space. The final actor in this model

is the MC/comperere. Like the comedian, they utilise a persona to facilitate their interactions with an audience and mediate the social interactions between performer and audience through their own performance. Additionally, the compere facilitates the comedian audience relationship as they establish the ‘joking frame’ (Rutter, 2000: 464) for a stand-up comedy performance by providing continuity and ‘encourage the audience’s participation in the proceedings on stage’ (Rutter, 2000: 464).

Turner’s performance as kinesis, on the other hand, does away with staged interaction and is based on the idea of ‘making, not faking’ (Denzin, 2018: 50) performances. Within a stand-up comedy context ‘making, not faking’ most closely relates to authenticity and winning over an audience, ‘this is the ultimate domain of skill in stand-up comedy: getting the audience to trust and accept the comedian’ (Abrahams, 2020: 492). To gain the audience’s trust a comedian must appear authentic as audiences are seeking performances ‘which offer possibilities of truth intimacy, hapticity’ (Schulze, 2018: 252). One avenue for authentic expression in stand-up comedy lies in the development of a comedic persona as a ‘heightened persona presented onstage [...] actually derived from an authentic part of the self’ (Double, 2014: 130) will have more success in winning over an audience than a persona that is not linked to the performer when they are off stage.

Performance as kinesis views ‘performance as moral events that move through the four phases [of breach, crisis, redress, reintegration]’ (Denzin, 2018: 50). In looking at a stand-up comedy routine as a moral event we can see parallels between these four phases and the phases of joke making. In creating a joke for stand-up comedy, the breach of the joke is the observation or event in the comedian’s life, crisis is how they set it out for an audience, redress is the punchline or how this breach has been refashioned into something humorous, and reintegration is the audiences’ reaction as their either accept or reject the comedian’s joke, and if the jokes is accepted by the audience through their laughter, the comedian’s reality which was offered in joke is then integrated into the real world. For example, let’s examine *We’re Like Sisters* as performance as kinesis. In the first phase of breach, I recall and observe my relationships with my family members. Then in the crisis phase I share these observations with an audience setting up the crisis that I am facing in how I navigate these relationships. Through jokes I redress my initial observations, turning them on their head to create punchlines. Finally, in the reintegration phase the audience either accepts my redressed versions of events by laughing or rejects my redressing by heckling, or worse, not responding at all.

Madison's performance model that forms the basis of their critical ethnography is centred around the idea that performance is dialogical where 'the performative I is a vehicle for enacting a radical politics of resistance' (Denzin, 2018: 50). Stand-up has a long history of enacting politics of resistance. From Lenny Bruce's exploration of free speech and censorship to the memes used to ridicule the far-right as a means of resistance through mockery (looking at you Liz Truss vs the decaying head of lettuce), comedy and the politics of resistance go hand in hand as 'nothing speaks more eloquently of the power and potency of comedy and the reactions of those who are the butts of the joke' (Double, 2014: 299).

2.1.3 Value of Autoethnographic Research and Performance

In 'Now is the Time for Autoethnography' (2017), Lockford identifies autoethnographic research as a tool that 'connects us across differences, through desires, in spite of oppressions, and within our experiences' (31). I believe this to be autoethnography's greatest strength as autoethnographic writing and performance uses personal experiences to forge connections between the researcher and the reader, the performer and the audience, making it an accessible way to do research. In addition to the academic value, autoethnography and the autoethnographic process are extremely valuable to the autoethnographer. Tami Spry in 'Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis' (2001) speaks to the transformative power of creating autoethnographic work:

This work has literally saved my life by providing me the means to claim reflexive agency in my interactions with others in contexts. In autoethnographic performance, the body is like a cultural billboard for people to read and interpret in the context of their own experience. Performing autoethnography provides a space for the emancipation of the voice and body in academic discourse through breaking the boundaries of stylistic form, and by reintroducing the body to the mind in the process of living research. (719)

Through breaking the boundaries of academic discourse, Spry has identified the power that autoethnography can bring through emancipation, reflexive agency, and in creating space for new voices. Like Spry, I have discovered that autoethnographic performance has 'been a vehicle of emancipation from cultural and familial identity scripts that have structured my identity personally and professionally' (Spry, 2001: 708). I have been able to share my underrepresented experiences with academics and audiences and have been able to have my working-class, neurodiverse, expat voice find a space within academic discourse. In *Found Family* (2018) for example, I was able to share the positives and

negatives of growing up in a blended family in the late 1990s-early 2000s when divorce was still considered taboo.

2.1.4 Limits Within the of Autoethnographic Field

While there is great value in autoethnographic research, writing, and performance, there are limitations to the form. Firstly, ‘autoethnography has no specific rules or criteria to adhere to since it can be approached using diverse types of genres’ (Méndez, 2014: 284), which makes analysis of autoethnography and validity of data difficult to prove. Due to the diverse nature of autoethnography, it can also be difficult to distinguish autoethnography from autobiography or personal narrative. While there are shared traits between these forms, Freeman argues that:

autobiography starts to morph into ethnography at the point where the researcher/writers understand their personal histories to be implicated in larger socio-cultural frameworks and take steps in order to make their own experiences a lens through which other experiences can be pulled into focus. (2010: 181)

Although the forms of autoethnography, autobiography, and personal narrative share the history of the writer/performer/researcher, what separates an autoethnographer from the others is their explicit examination of how *their* experiences have been shaped, impacted, and influenced by social, cultural, and political frameworks. By identifying these sociocultural-political factors, autoethnography pulls the collective experience into the performance/writing by ‘transform[ing] the authorial “I” to an existential “we” (Spry, 2001: 711). While the lack of clear rules and set form for autoethnographic writing and performance makes autoethnography challenging, there is a sense of freedom within the form that creates spaces in which personal experiences can be understood through personal and socio-cultural lenses. It is through that freedom that I have been able to integrate stand-up comedy into my autoethnographic practice in order to develop *We’re Like Sisters*.

One of the main criticisms of autoethnography is based on objective research versus subjective research, with some critics rejecting subjective research forms by ‘question[ing] their validity on grounds of unrepresentativeness and lack of objectivity’ (Marechal, 2010:4). To evaluate subjective autoethnographic performance, Denzin outlines ‘six intersecting lenses in which we can analyse the practice’ (Denzin, 2018: 52) that provide ‘a model of inquiry that is simultaneously political, reflexive, rhetorical and performative’ (Denzin, 2018: 52). The lenses are ‘performance, pedagogy, and rhetorical

reflexivity, performance and cultural process, performance and ethnographic praxis, performance and hermeneutics, performance and the act of scholarly representation, performance after the affective (new materialism) turn' (Denzin, 2018: 52). These various lenses allow the researcher to analyse their relationship to politics, ethnography and society, methodologies and pedagogy, and their relationship to the performative 'I'. These intersecting planes allow autoethnographers to thoroughly dissect their experiences which in turn leads to the creation of new artistic works and knowledge.

2.1.5 Ethics of Autoethnography

There are several ethical questions that pertain to autoethnographic research; What is the ethical responsibility to the self when sharing personal narratives and experiences? What is the ethical responsibility to the representation of others? And what are the ethical responsibilities of the autoethnographic performer in relation to their audience? Ethnographers and autoethnographers each consider the ethics of this type of research differently however we each do our best to avoid falling into the ethical pitfalls first identified by Dwight Conquergood in 1985. 'Performance ethnographers worry about four ethical pitfalls identified by Dwight Conquergood[...] each of Dwight 's ethical dilemmas pits the researcher as an outsider often a stranger against the other' (Denzin, 2018: 256), and these ethical pitfalls address how ethnographers and autoethnographer write and perform others who are impacted as part of the ethnographic narrative. In this section, I discuss the role ethics plays in autoethnography, particularly the ethics of portraying other in autoethnographic writing and performance. I will then argue that in addition to the ethical consideration of who we portray and how, there also need to be ethical consideration of who experiences autoethnographic writing and performance, aka the audience.

In the article 'Easier Said than Done: Writing Autoethnography' (2008), Sarah Wall describes her first experience with an autoethnographic writing process, discussing the anxieties and ethical questions that autoethnographic research brings up. In the article Wall reflects on the challenges she faced when creating a piece of autoethnographic writing about her experience with motherhood, particularly how to best approach discussing being an adoptive mother while best representing her child and the child's birth mother. Due to its very nature, autoethnographers cannot write about themselves without writing about those around them as 'it is the intricate connection between the personal

and the social that made it impossible for me to speak of myself without also speaking of others, thereby creating my ethical conundrum' (Wall, 2008: 49). In *Performance Autoethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* (2018), Denzin proposes an ethical code that 'turns inquiry into practice, and praxis into critical consciousness' (Denzin, 2018: 244). Autoethnography relies on the vulnerability, honesty, and openness on the part of the autoethnographer, which creates an ethical obligation to the self and to the research, writing, and performance. Wall's 'ethical conundrum' examines how the ethical obligation to the self is in direct conflict with 'the ethics of representing those who are unable to represent themselves' (Wall, 2008: 49). Denzin (2018) acknowledges this complicated ethical dynamic and proposes autoethnographers 'have an honest relationship with those we engage in critical inquiry' (Denzin, 2018: 256).

In addition to considering the ethical considerations above, within my own practice I have stumbled upon my own ethical conundrum. In my practice I take time and care to consider how I portray others within my autoethnographic performance, but I have also become acutely aware of the ethical obligation I have to my audience. As ethical ethnographers our honest relationship with those we engage in critical inquiry should extend to our readers and audiences as well as to those portrayed in our ethnographic narratives. There is a lack of widespread writing and research into the ethics around an autoethnographic audience and Fumerist Autoethnography seeks to address this gap in the field. I argue that there needs to be a more far-reaching ethical discussion around autoethnography's audience as autoethnographic writers and makers need to clarify what the role of the audience is within their work. In clarifying the audience's role, the relationship between autoethnographer and audience will become clearer, lessening the risk of trauma dumping or creating performances that are self-victimising.

2.2 My Autoethnographic Practice

My autoethnographic practice primarily pulls from interpretive autoethnography and mystory autoethnography. My interpretive autoethnographic method follows the process laid out by Spry in *Body, Paper, Stage* (2011) which includes automatic and prompted writing exercises that are focused in 'putting the body on the page, lifting it to the stage, and then understanding that body and paper and stage *are* one another, that there is no purity of text or hierarchy of embodiment' (Spry, 2011: 26). I find this approach to writing autoethnographic text accessible as journaling is a tool that I have always used to

make sense of my private life, so Spry's autoethnographic method is one that closely mirrors one of the main tools I use to process charged and formative life events. It was through Spry's warm-up writing prompts that I was able to adapt my teenage diary in order to develop *Found Family* (2018).

The other autoethnographic methodology that informs my practice is mystory autoethnography. Mystory autoethnography 'begins with those moments that define a crisis, a turning point in the person's life' (Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis, 2013: 128) while interpretive autoethnography 'begins with the biography of the writer and moves outward to culture, discourse, history and ideology' (Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis, 2013: 124). Mystory autoethnography is 'simultaneously a personal mythology, a public story, a personal narrative, and a performance that critiques' (Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis, 2013: 33) and closely resembles the artistic process of autobiographical performance artist Bryony Kimmings. Both mystory autoethnography and Kimmings ask artists to 'pick an event that changed you, an event where there were challenges, an event that you can write from the heart' (Kimmings, 2021). This approach to autobiographical work focuses on experiences that change us, to look for moments of transformation within our past. Coming to autoethnography from a theatre directing background, I found performing as myself on stage daunting. Kimmings' approach to developing autobiographical performance, however, allowed me to view my past experiences as a theatre director might view a script, looking for characters' arcs, the point of no return, etc. By looking for the past experiences that I was most changed by, I was able to view myself as a character within those previous experiences and dramaturgically it became easier to look for my polar attitude, a playscript analysis term to describe a character's shift in ideals or circumstances through the action of a play. Hodge and McLain argue that 'in the course of a play, a principal character *does not change in character, but his attitudes change* under pressures from forces beyond his control' (Hodge and McLain, 2010:19). Within my autoethnographic practice I incorporate polar attitudes into my writing and performance; while I myself have not changed, between the beginning of an autoethnographic performance and the end of the performance there is a shift in attitude, ideas, or outlooks and mystory autoethnography's method of selecting a turning point in ones life to create autoethnographic performance from makes the process of identifying potential polar attitudes straightforward.

Bryony Kimmings is a performance artist, screenwriter, and autobiographical theatre maker. In *Sex Idiot* (2010) Kimmings recounts 'how she tracked down her exboyfriends

after discovering she had chlamydia' (Dessau, 2015: 1). *7 Day Drunk* (2011) follows Kimmings as she spent a week drunk and aimed to see if being intoxicated 'improved her creativity'(Dessau, 2015: 1). In *Credible Likeable Superstar Role Model* (2013) Kimmings examined 'the sexualisation of childhood and co-starred her nine-year-old niece' (Dessau, 2015: 1). *Fake It Til You Make It* (2015) explores Kimmings, along with her then partner, the subject of clinical depression and men's mental health. In *I'm a Phoenix, Bitch* (2018) Kimmings recounts her pregnancy, postpartum depression, the challenges of having a sick child, and finding inner strength.

I was drawn to Kimmings work as her performances are equal part comical and poignant while exploring challenging themes, which balance I strive to achieve in my own performance work. During the second Covid-19 lockdown I was able to take part in Kimmings' *Deluxe Devising Day* workshop (2021) over Zoom. In this workshop Kimmings led participants through the beginning stages of her devising process. This workshop focused on selecting a story and using performance briefs to ground the devising process. It was through doing Kimmings' *Deluxe Devising Day* (2021) online workshop that I realised one of the biggest challenges I had when it came to creating autoethnographic performance, and that is how the audience fits into my performance work. During this devising workshop, Kimmings introduced scene briefs to use. These briefs help you break down and brainstorm a moment of performance. The performance brief prompts are as follows:

Performance Brief

I would like to talk to you about _____.

I want to use _____. (what performance conventions is being used? A song, a poem, a dance, etc)

I want to reveal_____.

I want the audience to feel_____.

Figure 5 Example of a performance brief, introduced to me through Bryony Kimmings' *Deluxe Devising Day* online workshop (2021).

Kimblings outlined how by using briefs she has been able to ground and organise her devising process. For me and my autoethnographic practice the ‘I want the audience to feel’ box was revolutionary as it forced me to consider my relationship with an audience. I realised I did not have a clear relationship or grasp of how my work could impact and audience and I knew I needed to resolve that within my practice immediately.

While both interpretive and mystory autoethnography provide me with performing making methods, the lack of clarity within my relationship to an audience makes it difficult for me to convey the complexities of my family dynamics and to give myself space to directly discuss my mental health within autoethnographic performance without trauma dumping. Trauma dumping is ‘an instant in which someone is abruptly oversharing their traumatic experiences in a manner that may feel toxic and selfvictimizing’ (Garrido, 2021); if I were to directly address my struggles with mental health through autoethnographic performance I feel that I could trauma dump and overburden an audience. With the lack of clarity within the autoethnographer-audience relationship, I did not feel safe sharing details of my anxiety and depression as I feared sharing those details could turn into self-victimisation. I felt in my previous autoethnographic practice that I could not honestly depict the nuances of my experiences through autoethnographic performance while also looking after audience wellbeing. However, by integrating standup into my autoethnographic practice I will be able to clarify my relationship to an audience, which will make me feel safer in sharing these experiences, and I will provide my audiences with opportunities for laughter and, ideally, moments of catharsis, which will improve the audience’s wellbeing during the performance.

2.3 Fumerist Stand Up comedians: Case Studies

In this section, I examine the work of two predominate femme comedians as case studies for fumerist comedy. These comedians are Hannah Gadsby and Sofie Hagen and each explore feminism through their work in a variety of ways. Through these case studies, I outline how each performer uses humour theories and their comedic personas to create fumerist narratives. I then build on these case studies and the methods used by Gadsby and Hagen as I discuss my comedy practice and how I utilise fumerism within my own comedy.

2.3.1 Hannah Gadsby: *Nanette* (2018) and *Douglas* (2021)

Hannah Gadsby is an Australian comedian who rose to international fame with her standup show turned Netflix special *Nanette* (2018). Gadsby's comedic persona is selfdeprecating and full of act outs of various characters, or 'instant character' (Double, 2014: 393). *Nanette* explores Gadsby's experiences growing up in Tasmania as a lesbian and the violence she's experiences because of her identity. This show had several clips go viral on social media for Gadsby's open and vulnerable discussion of mental health, the link between mental health and creativity, and how self-medication could be the reason why Van Gogh created *The Sunflowers*. Continuing from her success from *Nanette*, in Gadsby's follow up special *Douglas* (2021) Gadsby tells several stories that all relate to her recent later in life autism diagnosis while also setting out to '[needle] the patriarchy' and 'tear [her] haters a new arsehole'. For this case study I will examine both comedy specials to illustrate how Gadsby's work is a masterclass in fumerism.

While *Nanette* contains many fumerist themes, such as the romanticisation of mental illness and patriarchy's obsession with maintaining a (man's) reputation, one of the most fumerist segments of the show when Gadsby claims she will quit stand-up comedy as she can no longer act in a career reliant on her self-deprecation. Gadsby prompts the audience asking 'do you understand what self-deprecation means when it comes from somebody who already exists in the margins? It's not humility. It's humiliation' (Gadsby, 2018). In section 0.1.3 The Power of Fumerism of the Introduction, I discussed the role self-deprecation and how I use it to control how audiences respond to my performing body. Gadsby, however, finds self-deprecation to negate her humanity as she distils her lived experiences into jokes. Having been a comedian for many years Gadsby had distilled her experience coming out to her mother into the two-part joke structure of a set up followed by a punchline. By capturing and reperforming her coming out story in this two-part structure, it had frozen that experience in time as the two-part joke did not have room for the third part of the story. At this point in the show Gadsby abandons the typical joke-rate of a stand-up special and tells the third part of her coming out story and the three-part story of her being assaulted at a bus stop due to her gender and sexuality. At the end of that story, she exclaims she will not make a joke about what happened to her at that bus stop to relieve the tension in the room 'this tension, it's yours. I am not helping you anymore' (Gadsby, 2018). *Nanette* is a prime example for how fumerist stand-up comedy is effective in engaging audience even when it's not funny throughout the performance. After multiple views of *Nanette* over lockdown, I was struck with the possibility of using

stand-up comedy as a forum to explore autoethnographic performance. Gadsby had given herself permission to break stand-up comedy conventions to serve what I claim is a version of autoethnographic performance, as Gadsby places all her experiences within a socio-cultural context.

Douglas (2021), which Gadsby describes as her ‘difficult second album, that is also my tenth, and some people’s first’ (Gadsby, 2021) showcases their mastery of fumerism; she explores topics of neurodiversity, the anti-vax movement, female health care, and art history through a fumerist lens to give us ‘a big ol lecture’ on how absurd patriarchal society can be at time. In this special, Gadsby masterfully uses humour and anger to critic a wide array of subjects, from male doctors ignoring women’s medical wishes by dismissing them as hormonal, to The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles for excluding Titian from the street gang because ‘the target demographic of that television show could not handle a name that begins with “tit” because of their fucking hormones!’ (Gadsby, 2021). Where *Nanette* (2018) serves as an example of autoethnographic standup comedy, *Douglas* (2021) is a textbook example of fumerism in performance.

2.3.2 Sofie Hagen: Boybands and Body Politics

Sofie Hagen is a London based, non-binary, Danish stand-up comedian, fat activist, and podcast host. Their comedic persona one based in ‘self-professed superiority [which] is made charming due to a combination of their assured stage presence and the not-so-wise but understandable decisions they’ve made in the past’ (Misra, 2023). Their overly competitive nature makes for hilariously petty situations in their offstage life that Hagen mines for comedy gold (Noble, 2019). For example, their most recent show *Banglord* (2023) takes audiences on ‘a whistle-stop tour through seemingly disconnected topics – relationship and sexual trauma, wanting to eat hot pizza by oneself in Italy, accidentally hiring a sex worker, and celebrity gossip – to arrive at the crux of the show: that Hagen would make for a great dictator, or “banglord”’ (Misra, 2023). For this case study, I will discuss Hagen’s show *Generation Boyband Fan* (2021) which recounts how a teenage Hagen was the ‘best’ Westlife fan. I will also discuss Hagen’s use of persona in their most recent show *Banglord* (2023). Outside of their stand-up comedy, Hagen is active in the fat activism space; their book *Happy Fat: Taking Up Space in a World That Wants to Shrink You* (2019) showcases their humour, their feminism, and their activism in an approachable and affirming text calling for fat-liberation, self-love, and for dismantling the capitalist, patriarchal systems that foster fatphobia and discrimination.

Generation Boyband Fan (2021) opens with Hagen describing a hook-up in which a man bet Hagen that they wouldn't pee on him, and Hagen's competitive nature meant they would not refuse the challenge. Hagen notes that this competitive spirit has been a driving force in their life and it is what drove them to become the best Westlife fan. As Hagen weaves stories of their youth amongst reading their 13-year-old-self's Westlife fanfiction, they utilise both incongruity and superiority humour theories.

Generation Boyband Fan (2021) showcases Hagen's masterful use of the incongruity humour theory. Through the homoerotic fanfiction written by 13-year-old Hagen who 'had no idea how sex worked...had no idea how two people with penises had sex' (Hagen, 2021), the story of how they stole a horse as a child, their experience in a high-speed taxi car chase, or the constant returning and continuation of the peeing on a man story that opened the show, Hagen expertly delivers comedic twists that's 'got us eating out of their hands' (Misra, 2023). This constant element of surprise keeps the audience laughing and alert, ready for another surprise twist.

Hagen also uses superiority-based humour to both paint themselves as the best Westlife fan and to further assert that they'll 'obviously be a good dictator right?' (Richardson, 2023). Hagen's constant insistence in both Westlife's superiority and their own as an elite level fan create another layer for humour for the audience as they lean into the absurdity of being a fangirl and the idea that there is such a thing as a good dictator. Through Hagen's earnestness, they create comedy around the ideas of fandom and obsession without making either topic the butt of the joke. Hagen takes the obsessive boyband fan troupe and shares that being this obsessive fan very well might have saved their life which is a big claim, but a true claim none the less as 'a central idea of stand-up comedy: that is about telling the truth' (Double, 2014:160). Through their honesty on how important Westlife was and still is to them, we see Hagen's fumerism emerge more fully near the end of the show in their critique of the crazy teenage boyband fan troupe:

We're not crazy...we're doing what we're meant to do. At one point there's been a meeting where some men had sat and they've been like "Hey, there's a lot of girls out there who hate themselves. How can we make money off of that?" And someone's been like "Ooh! We get like five sort of neutrally handsome men and then we make them sing things like you have pretty eyes and then all the girls will be like oh my God, I have eyes! And they'll buy all the CDs! And then we'll just keep making them feel horrible about themselves and then keep offering them expensive things that will make it up to them. Isn't that genius? (Hagen, 2021)

This humorous act out highlights the patriarchal and capitalist system that both created the boyband and trivialises the boyband fan and illustrates how ‘everything that is the interest of teenage girls and thus, is deemed to be largely, a "feminine and superficial" enthusiasm. This trivialisation is primarily rooted in sexism’ (Nushba, 2022). Without painting the young, devoted boyband fan as crazy or weird, that fan won’t feel badly enough about themselves to keep purchasing CDs, concert ticket, boyband merch, etc. so the sexist and capitalist system works hard to make young girls feel badly about themselves so they can sell them a solution.

2.4 My Fumerist Stand-up Comedy Practice

Developed through this research investigation, my stand-up comedy practice has been informed through both theory and practice. In this section, I will outline my stand-up comedy mantra and will define my comedic persona through my use of Gilbert’s standup comedy postures (2004). I will also illustrate how I use the three humour theories discussed earlier in Chapter One in my own comedy. Finally, I will discuss how, like the comedians analysed as case studies, I use fumerism within my stand-up comedy practice.

2.4.1 Action Research and Developing Fumerist Practice Know-How

To create a Fumerist Autoethnography Praxis I needed to develop my stand-up comedy practice to establish the know-how (procedural knowledge) of stand-up comedy. In standup comedy ‘there is also a methodology at work which has been learned by experience’ (Double, 2014: 414) therefore the best way for me to research the form was to get up and practice stand-up myself. By immersing myself in stand-up comedy practice, I found myself using Action Research as a model to develop my comedic persona and stand-up material.

Traditionally used in education research, Action Research is ‘a process of systematic reflection, enquiry and action carried out by individuals about their own professional practice’ (Frost, 2002, cited in Costello, 2003: 3). In the context of stand-up comedy, Action Research can be applied to testing material for jokes, experimenting with persona, and used to aid in the development of an hour-long show. The process of Action Research closely mirrors the process of developing a stand-up act. Action Research ‘involves deciding on a particular focus for research, planning to implement an activity[...] implementing these activities, observing the outcomes, reflecting on what has happened

and then planning a future series of activities if necessary' (Costello, 2003: 7). The pattern of plan, implement (or act), observe, and reflect is a process most stand-up comedians are familiar with. You plan a joke, you perform the joke, you observe the audience's reaction, and you reflect on how you can refine the joke to get the desired reaction which leads you to the planning stage again. This cycle of plan, act, observe, and reflect has been a framework with my stand-up comedy practice as it enabled me to write, perform, and develop material for *We're Like Sisters*. Below is an adapted model of the Action Research I undertook to develop my stand-up comedy material and my stand-up comedy practice.

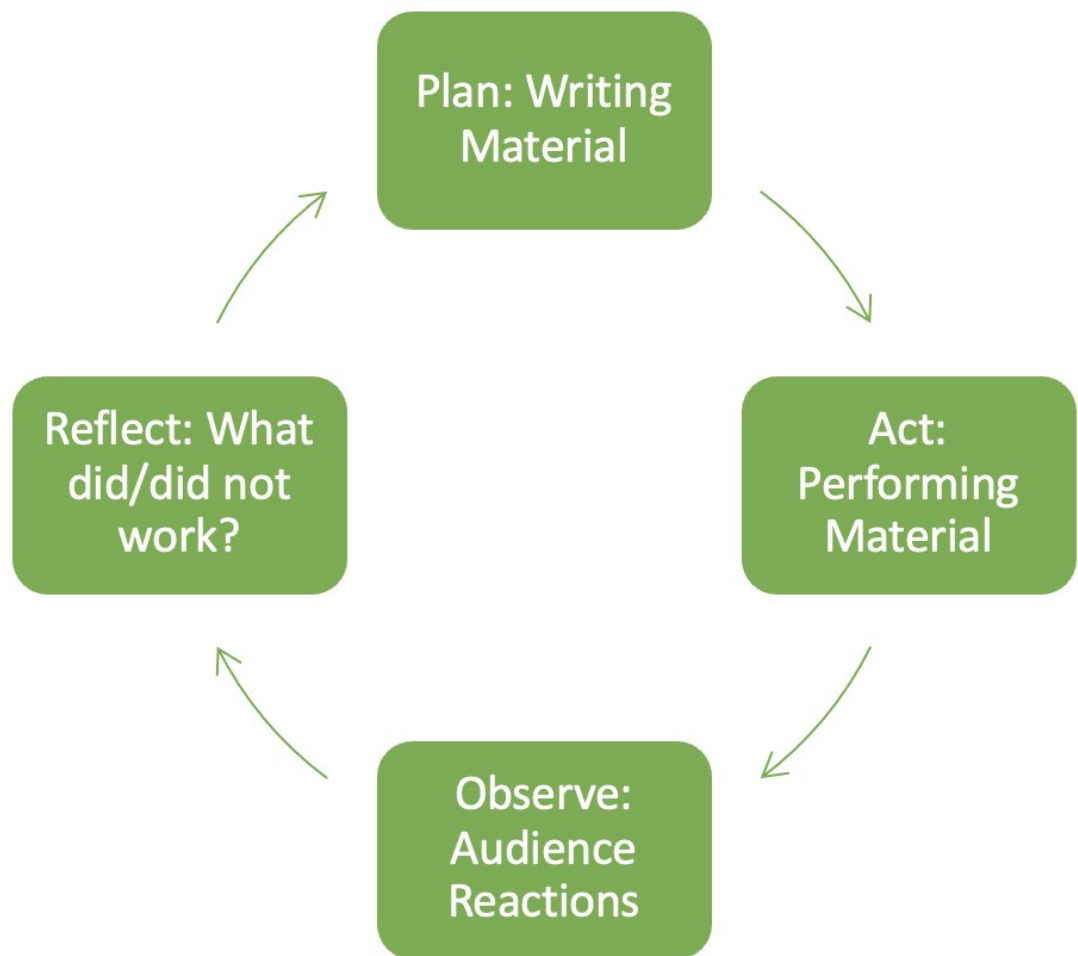


Figure 6 Process of Stand-Up Comedy Action Research, based on Costello (2003) Action Research Model.

Within my comedy practice, the plan stage of Action Research is where I write new jokes and plan my future performances, the act stage is my performing the prepared material at a gig. During my performance and by recording my stand-up comedy sets I am able to observe the audiences' reactions to my jokes, which I then use along with my reflections on how the gig went to develop my set plan, and thus the cycle starts again. Through my use of Action Research, I have been able to develop my own stand-up comedy practice and have developed the procedural knowledge required to develop the know-how aspect of Fumerist Autoethnography Praxis.

2.4.2 My Stand-up Comedy Mantra

While my stand-up comedy methodology is still evolving, I have developed a stand-up comedy mantra (Target, 2021) for all of my sets to be measured against. If they did not adhere to this mantra, then the set is not ready to be performed and/or workshopped with an audience. This comedy mantra was developed through the *Angel Comedy Beginner's*

Stand-Up Course and built from the ethos of my autoethnographic practice. My comedy mantra has the following main tenets:

1. My comedy will always punch up, will be inclusive, and have an intersectional feminist approach. This means that my comedy will condemn the rise of far-right politics, criticise late-stage capitalism and the patriarchy as these systems oppress and inform not only my experiences, but everyone's. My comedy discusses how these systems colour my experiences as an expat, as a woman, as a child from a 'broken home', as someone with a neurodiverse brain, etc. In my stand-up, the patriarchy is enemy 'numero uno'.
2. My comedy will spark a dialogue between myself and audience members or between audience members and each other; this drive to spark dialogue is born out of my autoethnographic mantra as to why I make performance work in general. These dialogues can only be sparked by developing a clear and strong relationship between myself and the audience.
3. I will only put things into my comedy that serve the story and/or joke as a whole. By looking at my comedy through the lens of what information serves the joke and story as a whole, I will ensure that the audience only has access to what they need in order to understand and enjoy the performance and nothing more. This distilled approach to writing and performing focuses how I explore my past experiences which allows me to streamline my thoughts into a tight 5-minute fumerist set.

If a joke or set does not satisfy these tenants, I rewrite until it fits the mantra. This mantra along with my comedic persona, and the use of humour theories and fumerism form the basis of my stand-up comedy practice.

2.4.3 My Stand-up Comedy Persona

One vital element of my stand-up comedy practice has been the discovery and refinement of my comedy persona. By developing a stand-up comedy persona which 'provides a context for the material, it gives the audience something to identify with' (Double, 2014: 97), I have been able to unify my various sets under one comedic point of view. Additionally, by applying my stand-up comedy persona to my autoethnographic work, I have been able to directly address and interact with audiences in a meditated yet meaningful way. Through this investigation I discovered the positive impact utilising a

comedy persona had on autoethnographic performance as it mediates the performer-audience relationship without tarnishing the relatability and connection that the audience feels towards the performer.

The process of discovering my comedy persona is still unfolding and this account is by no means conclusive as my stand-up comedy practice continues to evolve, and my persona along with it, as ‘the personas which comedians inhabit in their acts don't necessarily spring into life fully formed the first time they walk onto the stage. There's skill involved in presenting the self to a live audience, and it's a skill which can take time to learn. Comedians tend to call this process “finding your voice” (Double, 2014: 144). The process of finding my voice took place over my three years on the London comedy circuit, countless gigs, and various comedy workshops. The first stage of discovering my comedy persona took place during the *Angel Comedy Beginner's Stand-Up Course* where I identified the traits and qualities I hold that would be quickly perceived by an audience, my ‘qualia’ (Target, 2021). One of the defining aspects of my comedy persona early on was my warm demeanour coupled with my tendency towards self-deprecation, which led me towards The Kid posture (Gilbert, 2004: 96) of female comedy performance.

In *Performing Marginality: Humour, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (2004), Gilbert establishes five comic performance postures available to the female comedian. These comic performance postures are The Kid, The Bawd, The Bitch, The Whiner, and The Reporter (Gilbert, 2004: 96). The first performance posture I connected with was that of The Kid who is ‘playful and observant offering honest assessment of people in situations’ (Gilbert, 2004: 97). The Kid felt like a natural fit for my comedy persona as it mirrors my warmth, my playfulness, and the noncombative relationship I usually have with an audience. The Kid also fit my tendency to make myself the butt of the joke through self-deprecation, making my comedy persona ‘mischievous but imminently likeable’ (Gilbert, 2004: 99). While The Kid posture is a large part of my comedy persona, it does not allow for a more aggressive point of view where The Bitch posture does.

The Bitch ‘is the angriest female comic persona[...]this posture uses “put down” humour as a form of social critique lampooning and lambasting individuals and groups’ (Gilbert, 2004: 108) which I use to critique patriarchal ideas and values on dating, the family unit, and what my role in society should be as a woman. Typically, The Bitch is ‘not interested in pleasing her audience; rather, she frequently insults and offends them or rails out against social mores and cultural norms’ (Gilbert, 2004: 108) and while I do not

seek to insult or offend my audience I do rail against social norms, particularly in my set about using metaphors to police female sexuality, which is innocently named The Flower Set (watch set [here](#)). Through The Bitch posture I can get on my feminist soap box and ‘be strong, assertive, even overtly aggressive and intimidating’ (Gilbert, 2004: 114), and is one of the few ways places in which I can express my female rage. By combining The Kid and The Bitch postures in my comedy person I can explore the interplay of my warm and sunny demeanour (The Kid) with my feminist rage and sexual frustrations (The Bitch) to create a comedy persona that allows for nuance in longer form performances. My Bitchy Kid comedy persona uses ‘humour [to disarm] audiences, entertaining and even relaxing them’ (Gilbert, 2004: 164) which potentially will open them up to new perspectives.



Figure 7 Stand-up performance at BFF Comedy (2023) where my judgement ‘bitch’ comedy persona was clearly on display.

While the comedic persona is a defining characteristic of stand-up comedy, sometimes that persona can be ‘reductive [and] reinforces [one’s] social marginalization’ (Balkin, 2020: 74). This reductive quality of the comedic persona means that it does not directly translate into autoethnographic performance, but by breaking persona as Gadsby does in *Nanette* a performer can shift out of the reductive framework for a moment to make a point. The concept of breaking out of persona to make a dramatic point is something that I explored in *We’re Like Sisters* and discuss in Chapter Three.

2.4.4 Humour Theories in Practice

Through three years of experience as a stand-up comedian, I have utilised each of the humour theories discussed earlier in Chapter One. For example, I use the theory of incongruity in my analogy and rule-of-3 joke about the London dating scene being like the Wild West. I establish a logical train of thought by setting up my old west analogy then set up a pattern of examples, a pattern which I break by mentioning a tumbleweed blowing out of my vagina. This break in pattern and logic creates surprise in the audience that results in their laughing. Within the 5- and 7-minute sets of the typical open mic slot I have not fully utilised the theory of relief/release as it would be difficult to build enough tension that needs to be released in that short amount of time. I have, however, used this theory in *We’re Like Sisters*. After a particularly emotional and unfunny retelling of my first body shaming experience, I sit on a stool clutching a baby doll for comfort and I tell the audience of the pain that experience cause me and the hurdles that it created in my relationship with one of my sisters. I nearly breakdown in tears until I notice the audience and acknowledge that this was supposed to be a comedy show and I have unpacked a bit too much of my childhood trauma. I quickly get off the stool and carelessly toss the baby doll behind me. The doll bouncing on the stage floor gave the audience something to laugh at to relieve the tension that I had built during the retelling of that story. To further relieve the tension the room created by the body shaming story, I launch into a set of rapid fire jokes.

I use the superiority theory of humour to position myself and my comedy as feminist. Like Gadsby I use my sets to ‘needle the patriarchy’ (Gadsby, 2021), those who laugh at these needling bits become the winners of my set, and, within the context of the set, the patriarchy becomes the loser. In all these bits, however, I always follow it up with a bit or joke that is at my expense. I do this both to win over audience members who

might not be as keen to join me on my feminist soap box (yet) and to illustrate that there is still work to be done in getting everyone to join in the dismantling the patriarchy. For example, in one of my sets I tell a story about how a toddler I am acquainted with never calls me by my name instead referring to me simply as ‘No.’ I ask the audience if they know what it feels like to be negged by a toddler (negging is ‘the act of insulting, deriding, or otherwise putting down of an individual... in an attempt to shake, crack, and eventually crumble their inherent confidence’ (Urban Dictionary, 2020) often used in dating as a pick up/flirting method). I then pick a random man in the crowd and ‘mansplain’ to him what negging is and explain what a horrible and sexist dating tactic it is. I then soften the blow of my mini lecture and my picking on an audience member by turning around and alluding to the fact that negging is an effective strategy to use when flirting with me as I have daddy issues and do stand-up comedy for fun.

2.5 Fumerist Autoethnography: The Writing Process of *We’re Like Sisters*

The writing process of *We’re Like Sisters* was informed by autoethnographic and stand-up comedy writing techniques. I began writing the piece that would evolve into *We’re Like Sisters* before I integrated stand-up comedy into this research investigation and into my artistic practice. In this section I outline the writing process of *We’re Like Sisters*, first developing an autoethnographic text that served as the backbone for the piece then moving outwards to the funny. I will discuss specific writing exercises, prompts, and techniques that I used throughout the writing process (full responses to writing exercises, prompts, and techniques can be found in Appendix C: *We’re Like Sisters*).

Before discussing the writing process of *We’re Like Sisters*, however, I will discuss how a show about dysfunctional and fighting sisters is a piece of feminist performance. While on the surface the show can be viewed as justification for the stereotype that women just can’t get along with each other, that is not the point that the show is making. Throughout the writing process and subsequent performances of *We’re Like Sisters* I deliberately focused how patriarchal values that were enforced by the adults around us are what sowed the seeds of the rift between my sisters and me. In one of the first lines of the show I call the audiences’ attention to this, ‘as women we have been pitted against each other since birth and that competition doesn’t stop just because we have a sit at the same family dinner table. It actually kicks that competition into high gear’ (Appendix

C.1). Take my relationships with my stepsister and stepmother for example. On the surface, the scene about our relationship can be interpreted as Holly versus the stepfamily. If we examine the scene on a deeper level, however, we can see that patriarchal beauty standards are the main conflict of that scene, rather than the interpersonal relationships between my stepmother, stepsister, and I. My stepmother, stepsister, and I have each confronted this patriarchal standard in different ways; my stepsister works hard to keep herself in what the Euro-centric patriarchal while my stepmother tried to encourage me to do the same as her heart was in the right place and she did not want to see me get bullied for being fat. The body image issues that I discuss in that scene were not placed upon me by my stepmother, they were placed by impossible patriarchal beauty standards and my stepmother was merely the messenger. Through the autoethnographic writing process which will be discussed shortly, I have been able to focus the conflict of *We're Like Sisters* unto the system that strained our relationships. By linking the conflicts I've had with my sisters to the wider sociocultural framework that shaped our growing up I have created a feminist performance that foregrounds the patriarchy as the villain of the show rather than one of my family members. Additionally, this show should be considered feminist performance as 'the very act of standing on a stage and expressing your opinions as a woman could be considered a feminist act' (Tomsett, 2023:1).

In my first round of brainstorming, my frustration over how my family had acted during the early stages of the pandemic, their hosting spreader events, and seeing 'both sides' of the January 6th insurrection came to the surface. I was particularly frustrated with my sisters and with how differently I was treated by the rest of the family compared to the treatment the family had for them. I knew I wanted to make an autoethnographic piece examining how my sisters and I ended up being so different despite growing up in the same house. In looking at our family structure and the various life stages my sisters and I were in at the time, I was drawn to the female archetypes of The Mother, The Maiden, and The Crone, a 'triad first popularised by Robert Graves in *The White Goddess* (1948)' (McColman et al., 2020: 32). Each of my sisters fit into one of these female stereotypes while I existed outside of them and while these archetypes did not make it into the final show, they did provide inform the overall structure of the show. As I began exploring these archetypes, their relationship to my sisters, and started writing, I found the creation process draining rather than invigorating. At the height of lockdown when I was already feeling isolated, trying to write a serious autoethnographic piece began to exacerbate my depression. To combat my creative and mental health rut, I signed up to Bryony

Kimblings' online *Deluxe Devising Day* workshop and then to *Angel Comedy's Beginner's Stand-up Comedy Course*.

2.5.1 Autoethnographic Writing

During the early stages of writing and development, *We're Like Sisters* was meant to be a purely autoethnographic performance, rather than a comedy infused autoethnographic performance, therefore I was using autobiographical and autoethnographic writing approaches and techniques to develop a performance text. Autoethnographic writing provided me with a strong foundation of material to play with and develop into a Fumerist Autoethnography performance as these techniques captured the raw memories and emotions as they relate to my experiences with my sisters. In the following sections, I detail the autoethnographic writing prompts and techniques that were most influential in the creation of *We're Like Sisters*.

2.5.2 I Remember

When starting a new autoethnographic piece I often turn to an exercise I first experienced in a ZU-UK workshop entitled 'I Remember'; which is exercise based on Joe Brainard's memoir *I Remember* (1975), to surface possible memories and themes to explore through performance. In the memoir, Brainard begins each sentence with the phrase 'I Remember' (1975) and this journaling exercise operates in the same way. For this stream of consciousness exercise, I set a timer for 10-30 minutes and write down anything that is prompted by the phrase 'I Remember'. I find this exercise beneficial at the start of the autoethnographic writing process as it's an effective way to get a lot of potential material down on the page without being self-critical and editing the writing process before it has begun. In my practice I often use 'I Remember' to find new ideas to explore. It's a useful exercise that lays out one's past experiences, making it an ideal beginning exercise for creating autoethnographic performance. For the development of *We're Like Sisters* I altered my approach to this exercise slightly; instead of writing down any memory that was prompted by 'I Remember' I focused on memories that involve my sisters and our relationships between one another. By focusing the 'I Remember' exercise on my experiences with my sisters I was able to generate text that, after workshopping and testing with an audience, was incorporated into the final script and became the opening segment of *We're Like Sisters*. Overleaf is an excerpt of the writing that 'I Remember' produced which can then be seen in the script in signpost of figure (Full 'I Remember' responses in Appendix C.3.1).

I Remember 16th Feb 2021

I Remember each time I was told I was getting a sister.

|

I Remember dancing at April's wedding reception.
 I Remember a cool teenage girl dancing near me.
 I Remember my cousins acting like I should know this girl.
 I Remember this teenager and I dancing together.
 I Remember what she told me as the songs changed over.
 I Remember her leaning down to me, saying "I'm Megan, I'm your sister."
 I Remember laughing at her, thinking it was a joke
 I Remember thinking why would this cool older girl tell me she's my sister when I'm an only child.
 I Remember her insistence that she was my sister.
 I Remember Shannon and Joanna confirming what this stranger was telling me.
 I Remember telling my mom about this bombshell when I returned home.
 I Remember her not being surprised; she already knew.
 I Remember feeling hopeful as I finally had a sibling that I had craved for so long.
 I Remember feeling lied to; why now? Why had I gone 7 years without knowing my sister?
 I Remember how my family spoke of her once it was out that she was my sister.
 I Remember her being a topic of gossip. I Remember not liking it.
 I Remember what it felt like when I became the family gossip topic, when I became the dirty secret.

Figure 8 Text first generated during 'I Remember' writing exercise, first introduced to me through ZU-UK workshop (2017). Exercise is based on Joe Brainard's memoir *I Remember* (1975).

I Remember each time I was told I was getting a sister.

When I was 7, I was dancing at my cousin April's wedding reception. There was this really cool looking teenager girl dancing with my cousins and I. While we were rocking out to whatever early 00s jam was blasting through the community hall, my cousins acting like I should know this girl. I remember this cool girl and I breaking away from the group of cousins to dance out on our own. As the songs changed over, she leaned down and said "I'm Megan, I'm your sister."

I Remember laughing at her, thinking it was a joke. why would this cool older girl tell me she's my sister when I'm an only child? But she insisted that she was my sister and my cousins, who I knew I was related to for sure, confirmed Megan's story. I Remember telling my mom about this bombshell when I returned home from the time spent at my dad's house. She wasn't surprised; she already knew.

I Remember feeling hopeful as I finally had a sibling that I had craved for so long. But I also felt lied to; why now? Why had I gone 7 years without knowing my sister?

I Remember how my family spoke of her once it was out that she was my sister, her being a topic of gossip. I Remember not liking it. I Remember what it felt like when I became the family gossip topic, when I became the dirty secret.

Figure 9 *We're Like Sisters* Script where I adapted the above text from 'I Remember' into a section of the final show.

2.5.3 Spry Warm-Up Prompts

With the memories surfaced during ‘I Remember’, I drove into the next stage of generating material that could be refined into an autoethnographic text. To do this, I turned to Spry’s *Body, Paper, Stage* (2011) which outlines several autoethnographic writing warm-up prompts that can be used to ‘assist in beginning and continuing the writing process’ (2011:153). It was through using these warm-up prompts that I was able to surface experiences and memories related to my sisters. Spry challenges the reader to write a paragraph for each prompt, ‘even if you don’t think it applies to your experience’ (2011:153) which allows the autoethnographer to examine one experience through many lenses, resulting in a well-rounded text. Spry provides potential writers with eight warmup writing prompts, each one aimed at addressing a different element of performative autoethnography composition. The compositional element that I responded to the most during this first pass was the *Self-Other Interaction* prompts which are as follows:

Brainstorm a list of people related to your experience in anyway, past or present, living or not.

- a) If there is an interaction with the other:
 - i. write a paragraph describing the interaction, or write out the dialogue as you remember it.
 - ii. Then write a paragraph describing what you were thinking at the time during the interaction.
 - iii. Write a paragraph describing what you think of the interaction now. How does this differ from (ii)?
 - iv. Write a paragraph describing how you wish or thought the interaction was going to occur.
- b) Write a paragraph concerning what you think the other may have been thinking. (Spry, 2011: 154)

My responses to these prompts focus on an interaction that I had with my stepmom when I was 9; this was the first time I was body shamed.

**iii. Write a paragraph describing what you think of the interaction now.
How does this differ from ii?**

Now this memory stirs up so much within me. First of all, these body issues that were born this day are ones I still carry with me. It's a cut that runs fucking deep. How dare she comment on my development. This one interaction has fucked with my self image more than any one isolated incident ever has. The follow up of "I just want to make sure you are happy being you", the way she said it, implies that because I am bigger I shouldn't be happy. Because I'm me, happiness might always lay just out of reach. I'm sure in the fatphobic society that we live in I would've been body shamed somewhere else. But for the first time to be made by not even a family member, by someone who had just joined my life, to comment so deeply on something so trivial yet deep at the same time is completely fucked up.

iv. Write a paragraph describing how you wish or thought the interaction was going to occur.

It shouldn't have happened with Amy at all. It should have been my actual mom checking in on me. If she felt I needed to learn the harsh realities for the sizeism in society, she would have. Amy had no right to comment. If I had come home from school upset for someone calling me fat, fine. But to out of the blue confront be about my body (which was changing because of puberty) in a public changing room...i don't think I have ever fully shaken the same that she created within me in that target that day.

b. Write a paragraph concerning what you think the other may have been thinking.

Everything Bailey is trying on fits perfectly but we keep having to go up a size for Holly. I've noticed she's been getting bigger lately. Kids can be cruel so I'm going to pull her aside and make sure she's okay.

Yes! Love this exercise! It sets out characters and now I have a full scene written just from this one prompt. I think this will fit in workshop 3 or 4.

Figure 10 My first response to Spry's Self-Other Interaction Prompts.

The writing that came out of the Self-Other Interaction prompts became the basis of the scene about my relationship with my stepsister, Bailey. Growing up I was always compared to my stepsister and that comparison, spearheaded by the adults around us, drove a wedge between us. She is classically beautiful according to American beauty standards in that she is thin, blonde, blue eyes, and she has followed the traditional life stages of university, marriage, having babies while I, on the other hand, am fat, single, child-free, and do not plan on changing any of those things. This scene in *We're Like Sisters* is intentionally less comedic than the rest of the show to break away from the funny fat woman stereotype that is often used in theatre. 'According to Jester, when fat women are allowed a place in the theatre at all, they have typically been relegated to the roles of the old, the ugly, or the comical' (Rugseth & Engelsrud, 2017:289), and while I am a fat and funny woman, when discussing my body image issues I felt it was important to break out the comedic conventions of *We're Like Sisters* to stage my fatness in a way that did not demean myself or my fat body by making it the butt of the joke. Instead, through this scene I focused on the way others have commented on my body and in doing so I created 'a situation in which [I was] free to speak and act out and become visible to the world' (Rugseth & Engelsrud, 2017: 238).

HOLLY: This was the first time anyone had commented on my body, the first time I felt ashamed of it. And it was the last time I was carefree going into a changing room. These words have stuck with me, even though they were said out of kindness...I guess. I'm sure in her mind she was thinking: everything Bailey is trying on fits perfectly but we keep having to go up a size for Holly. I've noticed she's been getting bigger lately. Kids can be cruel so I'm going to pull her aside and make sure she's okay. But all that I heard were these ugly words and how I should be like my sister. My sister was right and because I was these things, I was wrong. I didn't want to be wrong. I wanted to be right; I wanted to be like my sister for a long time....

Great intensions. Horrible, ass sucking delivery.

The body issues that were born in the Target dressing room that day are ones I still carry with me. It's a cut that runs fucking deep. This one interaction has fucked with my self-image more than any one isolated incident ever has. I'm sure in the fatphobic society that we live in I would've been body shamed somewhere else. But for the first time to be by a family member and to do it by comparing me to my stepsister...it's an interaction that not only effected my self-image but my relationship to the person I was being compared to. And how I compare myself to other people. All of this (points to mirror) gets carried with me into every relationship, every interaction I have.

Figure 11 We're Like Sisters Script where I adapted the above text from Spry's Self-Other Interaction Prompts to develop the body-shaming scene.

2.5.4 Comedy Writing

With Kimmings performance briefs and the question of 'what do I want the audience to feel?' running around in my head I found myself integrating stand-up comedy elements into the developing autoethnographic show. My autoethnographic writing had laid a foundation for the show but by integrating stand-up comedy, I was able to create an engaging, audience centred performance that was no longer draining to work on and perform. It is important to note the distinction between integrating comedy into autoethnography versus integrating stand-up comedy into autoethnography. While current autoethnographic performance can be and is funny, like the work of Bryony Kimmings, the key difference is the role of the audience. In stand-up the audience acts as a scene partner to the stand-up comedian as they are in constant dialogue with one another, this is vital to the form, and it is that performer-audience relationship that I am applying to my autoethnographic practice.

The process of comedy writing for *We're Like Sisters* primarily took place during the gigs I performed in the run up to the show, which will be discussed in the Development section. Before I performed at these gigs, however, I needed to brainstorm new ideas to write about that could then be integrated into the show. Having previously developed my stand-up comedy persona, I now had a clear comedy point of view through which I was able to write which focused my brainstorming process. The comedy writing exercise I found most beneficial for brainstorming new material for *We're Like Sisters* was the Heading exercise. Stand-up comedian Mike Gunn in his *Comedian's Comedian Podcast* (Goldsmith, 2012) interview describes the Headings writing exercise from his comedy practice that originally came from comedy writer Gene Perret. For this exercise you pick a topic, Gunn used the example of photocopy repair as his topic while my topic was siblings and my relationships with my sisters, and you create a table with the following headings: *people, places, things, words, and phrases*. Then you write down as many words associated with your topic under the corresponding heading. Once the headings are filled in, Gunn goes back and writes down the opposites to as many words as possible. I replicated this process to come up with material for *We're Like Sisters* and these different headings allowed me to see the relationships between topics which made it easier to, for lack of a better term, find the funny. Through this exercise I came up with the title of the show, *We're Like Sisters*, and one of the opening jokes; 'Isn't it fucked that 9 times out of 10 we use the phrase "we're like sisters" to justify fighting with or talking shit about another woman?'

Siblings - Headings Exercise

| People | Places | Events | Words | Phrases | Opposites |
|----------------|---------------------|--------------|------------|-----------------------|------------|
| Sister | Childhood home | Birthdays | we're like | Sister | Only child |
| Brother | Nebraska | Christmas | | head trauma | |
| Step sister | Grandmother's house | Graduation | Child - | Step child | |
| Step brother | School | Weddings | Red head | Favourite | |
| Mom | | Births | The | Child Syndrome | |
| Dad | | Easter | Only | Success of the family | |
| Step mom | | Thanksgiving | black | | |
| Step dad | | | | | |
| Friends | | | | | |
| Friend pc | | | | | |
| Cousins | | | | | |
| Aunt | | | | | |
| Uncles | | | | | |
| Family friends | | | | | |
| Brady Bunch | | | | | |
| Family | | | | | |

Figure 12 Comedy writing headings exercise for the topic 'Siblings', table contains the headings 'people', 'places', 'events', 'words & phrases', and opposites'.

2.6 Fumerist Autoethnography: The Development Process

Once *We're Like Sisters* had an autoethnographic backbone that was developed through various writing exercises, and I had a few joke ideas formulated, I moved on to developing and refining material with an audience by performing a series of open mic gigs and work in process shows. In this section I highlight a few of my gigs to show how material was developed and then incorporated into the final show, which illustrates the positive impact that developing a performing *with* an audience can have on the autoethnographic process.

2.6.1 Gigs

After developing the basics of my stand-up comedy practice, I began writing and testing material that could be incorporated into the final show following the Action Research cycle discussed above. For 2 months, I gigged several times a week in the run up to the final performances of *We're Like Sisters* (Appendix A.1). I used these gigs to test and workshop jokes that, if they were successful, meaning a joke made audiences laugh at multiple gigs, then they were added into the show. By testing and experimenting with

material over several gigs I was able to quickly refine material into jokes that worked with several audience and discovered which bit of material audiences did not find funny. In this section I will discuss the development of two jokes, the PhD joke and the Blue Sister joke, the former is an example of a joke that was developed and added into *We're Like Sisters* while the latter is an example of a joke that did not work therefore was only performed at one gig. To workshop material through gigging I first wrote a skeleton set where my opening and closing joke would be the same, acting as a foundation for the set, but the material in the middle could be shifted around and swapped out for different material depending on the gig. This set, entitled the 'Family Disappointment' set, opened with 'Hi, I'm Holly and I am the disappointment of my family' which immediately told the audience what to expect from my set and it provided me with a writing prompt as I began to plan and write jokes for *We're Like Sisters*.

One joke that I developed through the 'Family Disappointment' set was the PhD joke (watch [here](#)). I open the PhD joke with my family's frustration in me becoming 'woke' while I attended university and end the joke by making fun of the fact that I have multiple degrees in Theatre and Drama, which economically speaking is not the most intelligent investment. The first time I performed this joke, I had not anticipated the audience to react to my mention of currently working on a PhD but during that first gig I got a few cheers and claps of congratulations for reaching this milestone. When I reflected after the gig, I found the audience's reaction to my PhD to be a possible opportunity to 'incorporate the here and now into the material of the show' (Double, 2014: 325). The next time I performed the joke I was prepared to react to the audience's reaction at the mention of the PhD. For *We're Like Sisters*, I was able to take the refined version of the joke and place it into the show in my discussion of my relationship with my youngest sister, comparing our family's reactions to each of our degrees. In the development of the PhD joke I followed the Action Research cycle as I planned the first version of the joke, then I observed the audience's response to my act of delivering the joke, and finally I was able to reflect on how to integrate their action into the set which set off a new plan for the next time I performed this material.

While the PhD joke was a success, not all my joke ideas held up under the judgement of the audience. An example of a bit I tried that did not work is a joke I refer to as the 'Blue Sister' joke. This joke was based on an American phenomenon called 'Pink vs Purple Sister' (Simon, 2023) which looks at connection between the colours of two sisters' wardrobes, room décor, gifts that parents gave them, etc., and their personality

traits. The Pink vs Purple Sister phenomenon also describes how each sister fits into the overall family unit as ‘it’s become an unspoken rule that being the “pink sister” is considered superior, while the “purple sister” often feels like they’re settling for second place,’ (Simon, 2023). While this is a phenomenon that I experienced growing up, because I am one of four, I was neither the Pink nor the Purple Sister I was the Blue Sister, a term which I invented for this joke. I had a blue Christmas stocking, got the blue version of whatever pink/purple gift my young sisters got, and I was othered more than the Purple sister, often feeling like third or fourth place in the sibling pecking order. I attempted to turn this very American based phenomenon into a joke to illustrate how I was the black sheep in my family. At a gig at Rising Star Comedy (Appendix A.1), I tested my ‘Blue Sister’ material and got blank stares from the audience during that bit of my set; because ‘all that matters is that the audience share the comedian 's understanding of the reference’ (Double, 2014: 235) I had to cut the joke entirely because the audience did not share my understanding of the Pink vs Purple Sister reference. Interestingly when I noted the audience was not responding to this joke and that I would be cutting it from the cut, I got a few laughs. By listening to and engaging the audience in the writing process of *We’re Like Sisters* I have been able to develop stronger material. The stand-up comedy process of getting feedback on material in real time is incredibly valuable and should be used to develop autoethnographic performance.

2.6.2 Scrap Scripting

In addition to my autoethnographic writing and stand-up gigs, I utilised the concept of Scrap Scripting outlined in *Creating Solo Performance* by Bruno and Dixon (2015) to further develop the script of *We’re Like Sisters*. Scrap Scripting is the concept that throughout the creative process you begin ‘collecting lots of ideas’ (Bruno and Dixon, 2015: 36) by writing down any ideas that inspire you be it text, images, movements, songs, and sounds that could be integrated into future performances. For *We’re Like Sisters*, I used scrap scripting by looking through all my previous sets for jokes and bits that might fit into the various beats/scenes of the show. To do this, I collected all my successful jokes, bits, and sets from the last three years and wrote each individual gag down on an index card. This material had already been developed with audiences through previous gigs so I already knew that they ‘worked’ even though they had not been written with this particular show in mind. After writing out all of my index cards, I then took a piece of A4 for each scene of *We’re Like Sisters* and began experimenting with integrating previous stand-up material into the show (See Figure 10 below).

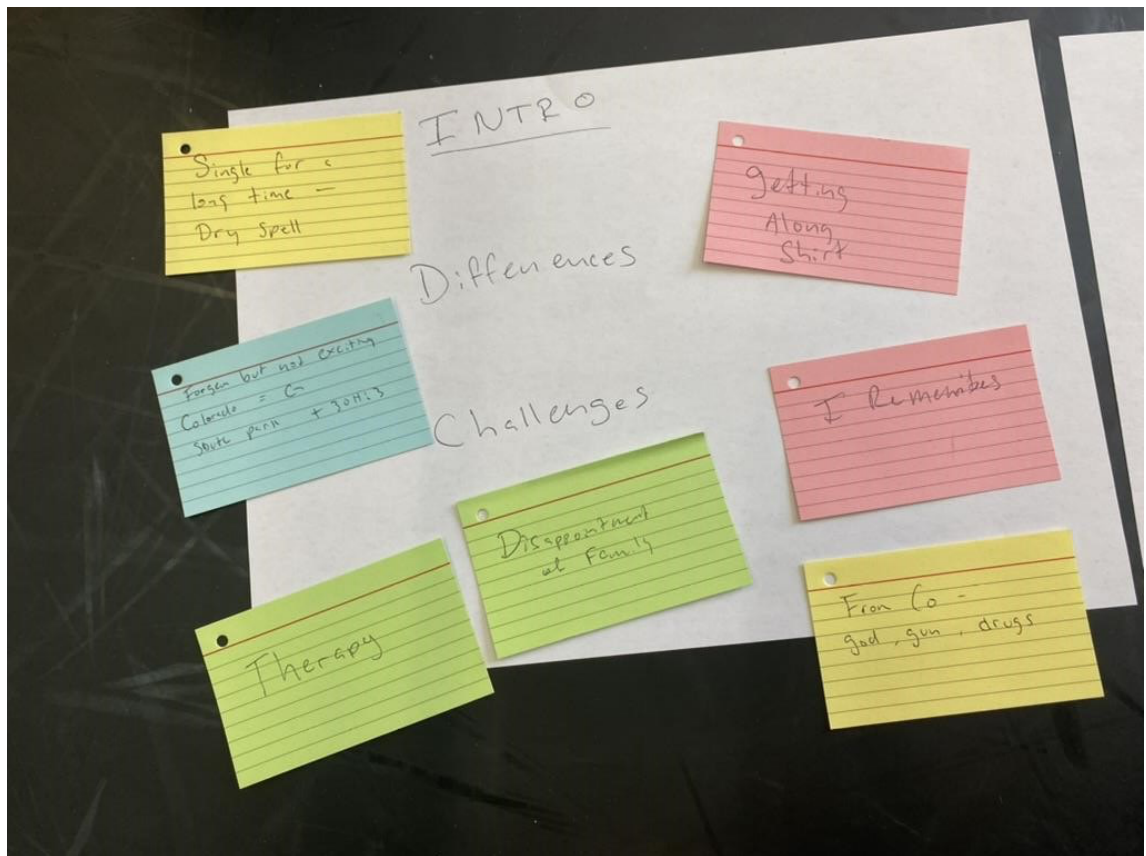


Figure 13 Scrap scripting during final rehearsals for *We're Like Sisters* where I wrote out each of my jokes/bits on separate notecards so I would experiment with placing them at different points throughout the show.

2.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the procedural knowledge within Fumerist Autoethnography Praxis which includes my autoethnographic practice and my fumerist stand-up comedy practice. The knowledge of both of these artistic practices have informed the writing and development of *We're Like Sister*, a Fumerist Autoethnography stand-up comedy show examining the strained relationships between me and my sisters.

At the opening of this chapter, I outline the field of performance autoethnography and examine how the various ethnographic models for performance could be integrated into stand-up comedy practice. I then discuss the value of autoethnography as research method; as a heuristic research method autoethnography values process over the results of the research and recognizes that in any sort of artistic research practice there will be a process of trial and error which in turn leads to a research process that leads to new knowledge even if the results of the research are unsuccessful. I then discuss the

limitations of autoethnographic research, citing that some critics do not consider that the personal and subjective nature of autoethnographic writing counts as research. I argue that despite this limitation, the empowering and transformative power that autoethnographic research offers outweighs the limitations of the form. To conclude my survey of the autoethnographic field, I discuss the ethical conundrum that autoethnography create in that how do we ethically portray others within out autoethnographic writings. To address this ethical conundrum, Dwight Conquergood (1985) identified four ethical pitfalls that ethnographers might fall into in their work and where ‘each of Dwight 's ethical dilemmas pits the researcher as an outsider often a stranger against the other’ (Denzin, 2018: 256). These ethical pitfalls address how ethnographers and autoethnographer write and perform others who are impacted as part of the ethnographic narrative. In addition to these previously identified ethical pitfalls, I argued that there is a section of widespread ethical discussion missing from the autoethnography discourse and that is the ethical obligation we have to our readers and audiences. There is a lack of widespread writing and research into the ethics around an autoethnographic audience and Fumerist Autoethnography seeks to address this gap in the field. I argued that there needs to be a more far-reaching ethical discussion around autoethnography’s audience as autoethnographic writers and makers need to clarify what the role of the audience is within their work.

To conclude my discussion on autoethnography, I examine my autoethnographic practice. My autoethnography is informed by interpretive autoethnography which ‘begins with those moments that define a crisis, a turning point in the person’s life’ (Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis, 2013: 128), and mystory autoethnography which ‘begins with those moments that define a crisis, a turning point in the person’s life’ (Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis, 2013: 128). In discussing my autoethnographic practice I note that the lack of clarity within my relationship to an audience in autoethnographic performance makes it difficult for me to convey the complexities of my family dynamics and to give myself space to directly discuss my mental health within autoethnographic performance without trauma dumping. To clarify my relationship with an audience, the audience’s role within my performance, and to lessen the risk of trauma dumping, I have turned towards fumerist stand-up comedy.

To open my discussion on fumerist stand-up comedy I analyse the stand-up shows of Hannah Gadsby and Sofie Hagen as case studies for the effectiveness of fumerism as

a stand-up comedy approach. I argued that both Gadsby and Hagen use fumerism, humour theories, and comedy persona to connect with audiences and offer social critique on the macro- and micro practices of life. After discussing the fumerist practice of these professional stand-up comedians, I move on to discussing my fumerist stand-up comedy practice. Unlike my autoethnographic practice, my stand-up comedy practice was discovered through the course of this practice-based research investigation. To get the most out of the merging artistic practice, I adapted an Action Research model to further develop my stand-up comedy practice. Through the Action Research cycle of pattern of plan, implement (or act), observe, and reflect I was able to develop jokes and stand-up comedy sets, refine my comedic persona, and develop material for *We're Like Sisters*. Although my fumerist stand-up comedy practice is still evolving I have developed a stand-up comedy mantra (Target, 2021) which outlines the main tenants that I want my comedy to adhere to. I then established my comedy persona which is informed by two comic performance postures outlined by Gilbert in *Performing Marginality: Humour, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (2004). The first performance posture is The Kid, a posture that 'playful and observant offering honest assessment of people in situations' (Gilbert, 2004: 97) and fits my self-deprecating performance style. In addition to The Kid I utilise The Bitch performance posture which 'is the angriest female comic persona [...]this posture uses "put down" humour as a form of social critique lampooning and lambasting individuals and groups' (Gilbert, 2004: 108). I use The Bitch to offer my harsher feminist critiques of patriarchal values and by combining The Bitch with The Kid, I have developed a comedy persona that is equal parts playful and angry. Finally, in my discussion of my comedy practice I build on the theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapter One by demonstrating my use of the three main humour theories.

My autoethnographic and fumerist stand-up comedy practice have each informed the writing process of *We're Like Sisters*. I began the writing process for this show by using autoethnographic writing exercises first. Through exercises like 'I Remember' and Spry's autoethnographic writing warm-up prompts that can be used to 'assist in beginning and continuing the writing process' (Spry, 2011:153), I was able to develop an autoethnographic text which served as the backbone for my comedy to sit. After I had the structure of the show laid out through my autoethnographic writing, I began brainstorming jokes and material to 'punch up' my autoethnographic text. This material was then tested and developed through gigging before being incorporated into the final show. This brings

me to the development process of *We're Like Sisters*. Through gigging I was able to workshop material with audiences, using their immediate feedback to refine or cut jokes from the script. By listening to and engaging the audience in the writing process of *We're Like Sisters* I was able to develop stronger performance material. In addition to gigging with new material, by using the concept of Scrap Scripting I was able to integrate previous jokes and stand-up sets into *We're Like Sisters*.

In the next chapter I will critically reflect on how the theoretical knowledge outlined in Chapter One and the practice-based knowledge discussed in this chapter have influence the final performances of *We're Like Sisters*. In addition to reflection on the final performance, I will evaluate Fumerist Autoethnography as an approach to autoethnographic performance making and will examine the relationship between a fumerist autoethnographer and their audience.

3. Chapter Three: Know-What; A Critical Reflection and Evaluation of the Fumerist Autoethnographic Process

In this chapter I evaluate the Fumerist Autoethnography process by proposing a set of evaluation criteria based on Denzin's (2014) criteria for evaluating performance ethnographies and Fox's (2017) criteria for stand-up autoethnographies. I will then use the proposed criteria for evaluating Fumerist Autoethnography to reflect on and evaluate the performances of *We're Like Sisters*. I will first reflect on the Work in Progress (WIP) performance that took place during Project on a Bus's new works festival, then I will reflect and apply the criteria proposed earlier in this chapter to the final performances of *We're Like Sisters* at Bread & Roses Theatre. After evaluating the performances, I will return to the performer-audience relationship which has underpinned this entire project, and I will argue that the performer-audience relationship that results from using Fumerist Autoethnography as a performance making approach is one that is mindful and trusting which allows for the exploration of taboo and traumatic subjects without trauma dumping on the audience.

3.1 Criteria for Fumerist Autoethnography

Through this Practice as Research investigation, I have set out to develop a new approach for making autoethnographic performance that centres the performer-audience relationship in autoethnography. The final aspect of developing this new approach lies in proposing a set of criteria for future Fumerist Autoethnography performances for myself and other potential autoethnographers to follow. To develop these criteria, I am building from the theoretical knowledge around fumerism and stand-up comedy, the procedural knowledge that's been gained through performing at stand-up comedy gigs and performances of *We're Like Sisters*, as well as Denzin's (2014) criteria for evaluating performance ethnographies and Fox's (2017) criteria specific to stand-up autoethnographies. In autoethnographic research 'all inquiry reflects the standpoint of the inquirer' (Denzin, 2014: 70) therefore traditional methods of evaluating the quality of autoethnographic writing need to be adjusted, 'the criteria for evaluating research are now relative' (Denzin, 2014: 71) especially when evaluating a subjective form such as autoethnography. For evaluating performance autoethnography Denzin proposes the following set of criteria in *Interpretive Autoethnography* (2014):

I value those autoethnographic performance texts that do the following:

1. Unsettle, criticise, and challenge taken -for-granted, repressed meanings
2. Invite moral and ethical dialogue raw reflexively clarifying their own moral position
3. Engender resistance and offer utopian thoughts about how things can be made different
4. Demonstrate that they care, that they are kind
5. Show, instead of tell, while using the rule that less is more
6. Exhibit interpretive sufficiency, representational adequacy, and authentic adequacy
7. Are political, functional, collective, and committed (Denzin 2014: 77).

These criteria then informed Fox's development of criteria for stand-up autoethnographies as Fox '[translated Denzin's] language into a stand-up performer's context' (Fox, 2017: 47). Fox's criteria, from her thesis 'Stand Up and Be (En)Counterred' (2017) are as follows:

Criteria Specific To Stand-Up Autoethnographies:

1. The stand-up ethnographer should establish a "joking relationship" with an audience (an audience laughs/is amused sometimes)
2. Give the audience the sense that change could occur outside the "magic circle" of comedy and carry over into the "real world".
3. Use resistant/marginal methods of humour which challenge hegemonies (e.g. parody, reverse discourse, mimicry and masquerade).
4. Make an audience feel able to undertake dialogue in an atmosphere in which spontaneity and immediacy are valued.
5. "Punch up" at targets rather than "punching down" (that is, target the powerful and oppressors with humour, not the powerless and oppressed).
6. Use comedy to reveal the ideologies the performer lives and struggles with. (Fox, 2017: 47)

I considered both of the criteria sets laid out by Denzin and Fox when developing my own criteria for Fumerist Autoethnography. As my autoethnographic practices is partly informed by the interpretive autoethnography methodology proposed by Denzin, it was a natural progression to return to interpretive autoethnography as the foundation for my criteria. Fox and her development of stand-up autoethnography was the next logical progression for developing the criteria for Fumerist Autoethnography. Fox's thesis proved how effective stand-up comedy and autoethnography are in a blended approach to developing performance and research. Fox and I each offer different approaches for how other practitioners might merge autoethnography and stand-up comedy practices, proving that there is value in combining these two seemingly dissimilar forms. Therefore, the criteria for Fumerist Autoethnography approach are as follows:

1. Use various methods of humour to challenge, unsettle, and criticise patriarchal ideologies the performer lives and struggles with.
2. Fumerist Autoethnographer should establish a 'joking relationship' with an audience and create an atmosphere in which spontaneity and immediacy are valued which will make audiences feel able to undertake moral and ethical dialogue with the performer.
3. Explore the interplay feminist rage and feminist humour in a way that is playful, engaging, and accessible for both audience and performer.
4. Use feminist humour methods as a communication tool to offer utopian thoughts about how things can be made different, i.e. social dreaming, to give the audience the sense that change could occur outside the 'magic circle' of comedy and carry over into the 'real world'. In other words, move the audience to laughter and mockery of the patriarchy.
5. Demonstrate that they care and that they are kind through use of comedic persona and 'Punching up' at targets rather than 'punching down'.

These criteria will be used later in this chapter to critically reflect upon and analyse the final showings of *We're Like Sisters*. This set of criteria emerged through the writing, development, and performances of *We're Like Sisters*.

3.2 Performance Reflections

After the process of testing and refining material through stand-up comedy gigs, it was time to perform the *We're Like Sisters*. In the following section I will discuss my Work in Progress (WIP) show that took place as part of Project on a Bus's *We're Not Quite There Yet* new work festival (2022) which informed the final stage of development of the production of *We're Like Sisters* at Bread & Roses Theatre (2023) in Clapham, London.

3.2.1 Project on a Bus Work in Progress show

For my work in process show as part of Project on a Bus's *We're Not Quite There Yet* new work festival, which you can watch [here](#), I aimed to test how an autoethnographic text would play in a stand-up comedy space and how performing autoethnography as my stand-up persona effected my connection to an audience. My main goal for this performance was to look at the interplay between the autoethnographic driven sections of the show and the more traditionally stand-up comedy driven sections. To explore this interplay, I chose to perform the stand-up driven opening scene and the autoethnographic scene about my relationship with my stepsister and my first experience being body shamed to see what type of performance merged when stand-up comedy and autoethnographic performance practices are merged.

One of the most successful discoveries that came from this work in process show was the role that persona plays in this merged performance practice. For most of *We're Like Sisters* I speak through a handheld microphone which reinforces the stand-up comedy influence for the audience and while using the mic I am in my Bitchy Kid comedy persona. However, there is one moment of the show where, to highlight my vulnerability, I put down the mic and address the audience without my persona. By breaking out of my comedy persona for this moment, I 'turned the laugh tap off myself, it was a decision' (Douglas, 2021), I invite the audience into my inner world. Without the mask of a comedy persona, I am able to share one of my deepest emotional wounds with an audience but then I quickly redon my comedic mask and attempt to break the emotional tension I've built in the room by delivering a string of rapid-fire cliché jokes. The use of comedy persona and the mic signals to myself and the audience that we are in 'comedy mode' which means when I break out of that mode for one pivotal moment of the show, that moment holds weight for me as a performer and for my audience. Due to the success of this aspect of the work in progress performance I integrated the same convention into the final show.

Another discovery that was made through this preview had to do with the audience's hesitation to laugh. This performance was the final showing in a day long new works festival and while the festival showcased a variety of performances my performance was the only comedic one of the day, therefore the audience was not as inclined to laugh out loud as a traditional stand-up comedy audience would. While the audience did laugh at a few points during the performance it seemed to me that they were reluctant to do so. To address this reluctance for the final showings of *We're Like Sisters* I knew I needed to set the show up as a stand-up comedy show rather than a theatre show. To get the audience

warmed up and open to laughing out loud I decided to invite some of my favourite comedians from the London comedy circuit to open the show for me, which I will discuss more in the following section.

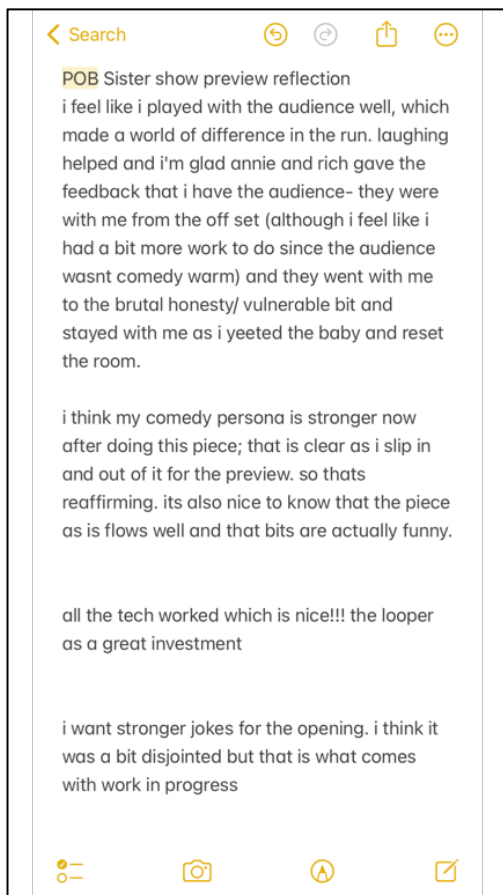


Figure 14 Project on a Bus Work in Progress performance reflection, written immediately following my performance on my phone's notes app.

3.2.2 We're Like Sisters at Bread & Roses Theatre

We're Like Sisters at Bread & Roses Theatre in Clapham, London was the culmination of my stand-up gigs, autoethnographic writing, and Project on a Bus's Work in Progress (WIP) performance. The show ran from the 4th of April to the 8th of April 2023 and each night was supported by emerging and established comedians from the London stand-up comedy circuit. These acts opened the show by performing material about their families and they set the tone of the performance. In this section I will reflect upon the nature of the audience's laughter during the performances and will use the criteria I proposed above to reflect upon and evaluate the final performances of *We're Like Sisters*.



Figure 15 Performance photo of *We're Like Sisters* from Lizzie Simpson's Instagram story (2023).

During my WIP show at Project on a Bus, I felt that the audience was hesitant to laugh out loud so for the final run of performances I wanted to ensure that the space was playful and less formal to encourage audible laughter from the audience. The audience's hesitance to laugh out loud for both the Project on a Bus preview and the final performances can be attributed to two main factors: audience size and the performance space. Throughout the run of We're Like Sisters the audience size ranged from 3-20 people, so it was a very small and intimate crowd, but they were seated across 50 seats leaving lots of space between the various parties who were in attendance. This made creating momentum with the energy in the space that would lead to regular bursts of laughter difficult at times. Additionally, the audience seemed to be allergic to the front row; on each night of the show, I would ask audience members to move to seats closer to the stage and every night without fail they would move to the second row rather than the first. While the wide space, small audience numbers, and the number of empty seats effected the space which in turn effected how the energy of the room flowed to create audible burst of laughter, that does not mean the audience did not find the show funny. On stage I was able to see audience members smile as I delivered a punchline and shoulders moving up and down in quiet chuckles. These audience reactions were difficult to capture in the documentation of the performances and the work in progress gigs as 'recording a form of live entertainment [such as stand-up] which relies on happening in the here and now changes its nature' (Double, 2014: 314). In evaluating a Fumerist Autoethnography performance, audiences audible and regular outbursts of laughter are not the only metric of success in the autoethnographer-audience relationship, which leads me back to the proposed evaluation criteria.

Criteria 1: Use various methods of humour to challenge, unsettle, and criticise patriarchal ideologies the performer lives and struggles with. While there are many examples of humour to criticise patriarchal ideologies, I will focus on the ideology that I currently struggle with the most; the fatphobia that exists within patriarchal beauty and body standards. Earlier in thesis I discussed how the body shaming scene that directly addresses this patriarchal ideology was intentionally the least humorous scene so that I could confront the funny fat woman stereotype while still creating a stand-up comedy performance and to offer my strongest social critique of the show. While much of that scene was not particularly funny I, in the words of Hannah Gadsby, 'turned the laugh tap off myself' (Gadsby, 2021) to build tension in the room and utilise the release/relief humour theory. Through my use of a looper pedal which played the words of the 'instant character' (Double, 2014: 393) of my stepmom I was able to abandon the microphone signalling to the audience that I have also temporarily abandoned my comedy persona.

By dropping out of my persona I was able to reveal the harsh truth of my body image issues and critique the impossible patriarchal beauty and body standards which prompted my stepmom to pull me aside to speak to me about my size. At this point in the show, I had created a thick tension in the room that needed to be released. Quite abruptly I call out that I have veered too far away from comedy, toss a baby doll overhead, and pick the microphone back up and in doing so I put my comedy persona back on. Using the release/relief theory, I then launch into a string of rapid-fire stand-up cliché jokes to resolve the tension this scene created.

Criteria 2: Fumerist Autoethnographer should establish a 'joking relationship' with an audience and create an atmosphere in which spontaneity and immediacy are valued which will make audiences feel able to undertake moral and ethical dialogue with the performer. To establish a joking relationship with my audiences and create spontaneity in the space early on in *We're Like Sisters* I invite the audience to directly respond to me through the use of a poll. Polling the audience is a technique that I have used in my 5-minute stand-up sets and is a technique I aim to incorporate to each of my stand-up comedy sets (see My Stand-up Comedy Mantra from Chapter Two). While I am not yet comfortable with doing crowd work in my stand-up comedy polling the audience is an effective work around. As 'the comedian is under an obligation to respond' (Double, 2014: 340) to whatever happens in the performance space and polls invite the audience to offer something for the comedian to respond to in a controlled but still meaningful way. I find polls to be a structured way to invite spontaneity and immediacy into an established set. I brought this technique into *We're Like Sisters* to create a space where audiences felt they could freely comment and respond to what I was doing onstage which in turn created opportunities for me to improvise and comment on the 'here and now' (Double, 2014:19), making each performance unique and tailored for that specific audience. To establish a joking relationship with the audience early in the show I open by asking audience where they fall in birth order in their family: are they an only child? The eldest? The middle or somewhere else in the middle? The youngest? Nearly every performance the 'babies of the family' where the most enthusiastic about where they fall in the family order (whether that's because they were the last group asked or if there is some psychological reason babies of the family are happier than the rest of us, who knows?). After this poll I did a few self-deprecating jokes to tell the audience that it's okay to laugh at me, which further established our joking relationship.

Criteria 3: Explore the interplay feminist rage and feminist humour in a way that is playful, engaging, and accessible for both audience and performer. While the interplay between feminist rage and humour was explored throughout the show, in this section I will focus my discussion on my use of a plastic baby doll. This baby had several uses throughout the show as it represented my relationship with my youngest sister, my inner child, and my rejection of traditional gender role. In performances I used this doll as lightning rod for all my anger and frustration as I bashed its head into the microphone stand repeatedly. I tossed the baby up in the air just to let it crash to the floor several times throughout the show. When selecting props for the show I specifically chose a baby doll as it symbolises patriarchal gender role; one of the first toys I got as a little girl was a baby doll as I was expected to roleplay motherhood while the boys around me got to play with dinosaurs and trucks and tanks. For *We're Like Sisters* I wanted to take this symbol of gender roles and the expectations of motherhood that have been placed on me by my conservative family and patriarchal society and, for lack of a better phrase, beat the shit out of it. By repeatedly dropping and bashing the baby doll into things, performatively I was able to reject my assumed materiality as well as release some of my pent-up anger and frustrations over the patriarchal expectation that I have children.

Criteria 4: Use feminist humour methods as a communication tool to offer utopian thoughts about how things can be made different, i.e. social dreaming, to give the audience the sense that change could occur outside the 'magic circle' of comedy and carry over into the 'real world'. In other words, move the audience to laughter and mockery of the patriarchy. At the end of the show, I offer up my utopian thoughts for my siblings and me. I hope that through my period of being no contact with that part of my family, I would have healed enough to forge new relationships with my sisters. These relationships will ideally be free from the rigid expectations the patriarchal family unit has placed on each of us, and instead will be founded on mutual respect despite our differences (or, more accurately, my differences from the rest of them). To end the show, I claim that my sisters and I 'aren't like sisters, we are sisters'. With this final line of the show, I offer my social dreaming to the audience both regarding my family and how family units function overall. While I do not believe one owes people anything just because they are related, I hope that families will reject the patriarchal family unit and replace it with a more accepting, patience, loving, and diverse familial structure.

Criteria 5: Demonstrate that they care and that they are kind through use of comedic persona and 'Punching up' at targets rather than 'punching down'.

Throughout *We're Like Sisters* I punch up to my main target, the patriarchy. While I mock and criticise the patriarchy and patriarchal values using my Kid and Bitch persona throughout the show, I want to highlight the body shaming scene one more time. By developing this scene using Spry's autoethnographic writing prompts, I was able to quickly identify the societal norms and expectations which shaped that back-to-school shopping experience in Target, giving me a clear target for my jokes. This also helped me realise that the strain between my stepsister and I was not placed there by either one of us, rather it was the adults around us. Had I not come to that realisation this scene could've easily turned into a stepsister bashing segment where I would be punching down by making her the target of my jokes. Through autoethnography and placing this experience in a wider socio-cultural context, I was able to shift the target of my criticism to the norms that prompted the adults around me to encourage me to be more like my stepsister.

3.3 Fumerist Autoethnographer-Audience Relationship

One of the main research aims of this investigation was to discover an approach to autoethnographic performance making that would create a new and mindful relationship between the autoethnographic performer and their audience. By utilising Kimmings' performance briefs, particularly the 'what do I want the audience to feel' prompt, I reflected on my relationship to audiences in my previous autoethnographic work and I felt there was a lack of clarity in that relationship and in what the audience's role was in my performances. When I sat down to write my next autoethnographic performance I felt that left unresolved this lack of clarity in my relationship to the audience and in the audiences' role within my performance would cause me to trauma dump on audiences. Through critical reflection on my relationship with an audience during the performances of *Found Family* (2018), the Project on a Bus WIP show (2022), and the final performances of *We're Like Sisters* (2023) I have been able to gradually 'identify what is distinctive about a given practice and the substantial new insights it yields' (Nelson, 2013: 44). In the context of this research investigation each of the above performances have gradually led me to new insights into the autoethnographer-audience relationship as I deepen my know-what knowledge of 'what works' (Nelson, 2013: 44). With each performance I felt my relationship with the audience improve as the more I integrated stand-up comedy into my autoethnography the more I was able to get 'the audience to trust and accept' (Abrahams, 2020: 492) me and my performance.

During the Project on a Bus WIP performance, I used a fumerist stand-up approach to performing that I had not used in my prior autoethnographic performances. By using this approach, I felt connected to the audience in a similar way to when I performed at the Angel Comedy showcase and subsequent stand-up gigs, but I felt the audience was hesitant to laugh. Although I had ‘won’ the audience over, the audience’s role within the performance was still unclear. To remedy this for the next performances, *We’re Like Sisters* at Bread & Roses, I decided to maintain my fumerist stand-up approach to performing but chose to frame the performance as a stand-up comedy event rather than a theatrical event. By framing *We’re Like Sisters* as a stand-up comedy show through marketing and showcasing other comedians, I aimed to further clarify the audience’s role in the performance, transforming them from passive spectators to active participants as the co-authors of what counts as humour. By framing *We’re Like Sisters* as a stand-up comedy event *and* using fumerist stand-up approach to performing I discovered ‘what works’ in the autoethnographer-audience relationship is to emulate the stand-up comedian-audience relationship in order to create trust between audience and performer as well as to clarify what the audience’s role is in autoethnographic performance.



Figure 16 Stand-up performance at Angel Comedy RAW (2023) where I am inviting audience to weigh in on my dating life.

From my perspective using Fumerist Autoethnography develops a mindful performer-audience relationship as audiences play a more active role in the performance event. By inviting audiences to influence and shape the performance through their participation (laughter, groans, applause, heckles) I am giving my audiences agency and licence to reject what I am doing onstage. This leads to a deeper level of performer-audience trust as we are closer to collaborators in the performance than in traditional theatre performer-audience dynamic. By integrating stand-up comedy into my autoethnographic practice, I have cast my audience in a more active and influential role, one that is dependent on trust in order to make the humour of the performance function, which leads to a more mindful consideration of the audience and their connection to the performer.

3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have evaluated the Fumerist Autoethnography process used to develop *We're Like Sisters*. I proposed a set of criteria to evaluate fumerist autoethnographic performance. This a set of evaluation criteria has been informed by Denzin's (2014) criteria for evaluating performance ethnographies and Fox's (2017) criteria for stand-up autoethnographies. I then used this set of criteria to reflect upon the performances of *We're Like Sisters*. The first performance was a Work in Progress (WIP) performance that took place during Project on a Bus's *We're Not Quite There Yet* new works festival. During this WIP showing I tested how autoethnographic text would perform in a standup comedy space. Through this performance I discovered the performative power of breaking out of my comedy persona to share my vulnerability with an audience. I also discovered that when framed as a theatrical event, audiences were less inclined to laugh out loud during my performance. This was an important discovery has it showed the audience still lacked clarity on what their role was for this fumerist autoethnography performance. To further clarify the audience's role, I framed the next run of *We're Like Sisters* at Bread & Roses Theatre as a stand-up comedy event and in doing so audiences felt free to laugh. To critically reflect on this final run of *We're Like Sisters* performances, I applied the criteria proposed earlier in this chapter as a metric to evaluate the performances. I reflected on moments of the show which I feel embodied each of the criteria for evaluating Fumerist Autoethnography performances.

I close this chapter with a return to the performer-audience relationship that has underpinned this entire research investigation, this time examining the fumerist autoethnographer-audience relationship. I argued that the performer-audience relationship that has emerged through this Fumerist Autoethnography process is a one that is dialogical and trusting which allows for the exploration of taboo and traumatic subjects without trauma dumping on the audience. In Fumerist Autoethnography audiences play active roles, co-authoring humour with the autoethnographic performer. By inviting audiences to influence and shape the performance through their participation (laughter, groans, applause, heckles), Fumerist Autoethnography gives audiences agency and licence to reject or endorse what the autoethnographic performer is doing onstage. This leads to a deeper level of performer-audience trust as we are closer to collaborators in the performance than in traditional theatre performer-audience dynamic. By

integrating autoethnographic and fumerist stand-up comedy practices, Fumerist Autoethnography invites its audiences to sit in a more active and influential role, a role that is built on mutual trust and that is vital to make the humour of the piece function, which creates to a new performer-audience dynamic within performance autoethnography.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Chapter Summaries

In the Introduction Chapter I outlined the lack of clarity in the autoethnographer-audience relationship. Through critical reflection on my previous autoethnographic performance *Found Family* (2018) and by participating in Bryony Kimmings' *Deluxe Devising Day* (2021) online workshop I discovered the gap in autoethnographic performance studies in relation to audiences and the autoethnographer-audience relationship. I resolved this within my own practice. I integrated fumerist stand-up comedy into my autoethnographic performance practice to create new artistic praxis, Fumerist Autoethnography Praxis. Informed by Robert Nelson's Modes of Knowing Praxis Models (2013: 37), I developed a new approach to autoethnographic performance making and have shown how various types of knowledge (know-how, know-what, and know-that) informed my artistic research. Fumerism 'captures the idea of being funny and wanting to burn the house down all at the same time' (Willett & Willett, 2020:26) and by titling this new praxis Fumerist Autoethnography I aimed to 'foreground a feminism that does not brood over victimhood or in-advertently perpetuate images of female suffering and sacrifice' (Willett & Willett, 2020: 27) within my autoethnographic practice as to not trauma dump unto my audience.

In Chapter One: Know- That; Fumerism and Compositional Elements of Modern Stand-up Comedy I examined theoretical and conceptual frameworks shaped this academic and artistic inquiry; fumerism and the compositional elements of stand-up comedy. I argued the value of fumerism as a comedy approach as 'deals with both feminist politics (on a macro- and micro- scale) and also clearly displays her anger at the injustices an inequality is experienced by women' (Tomsett, 2023: 157). I illustrated how feminists can use humour and comedy to humanise themselves and the feminist

movement. Misogynists have attempted to dehumanise feminists by trying to erase feminist humour through the perpetuation of the myth that feminists do not have a sense of humour. I argue that there is danger to a funny feminist as ‘feminists can use transgressive laughter to shatter categories and concepts that have been used for oppression’ (Douglas, 2015: 152). I also examined the compositional elements of modern stand-up comedy. I identified the three key humour theories, incongruity, relief/release, and superiority, and described how each theory functions. I then discussed the shift to persona-based stand-up comedy. Despite the shift to more personality driven stand-up, jokes are still a vital element of modern stand-up comedy and I have identified the various types of jokes and analysed how they function to elicit laughter. Finally, I examine the stand-up comedy audience and how the stand-up comedy audience differs from the theatre audience. I argue that the active role audience members play in the stand-up comedy event should be replicated in autoethnographic performance.

In Chapter Two: Know-How; Developing Autoethnographic, Fumerist, and Stand-up Comedy Practice, I examine my autoethnographic and emerging fumerist stand-up comedy practices and define my procedural knowledge for both practices. This knowledge has been ‘gained incrementally’ (Nelson, 2013: 41) through various gigs, scratch performances, and workshops. In examining my autoethnographic practice, I argue that there is a need for autoethnographers to be mindful of our audiences as we have the same level of ethical obligation to the audience as we do to those whom we portray in our autoethnographic writing. After evaluating my autoethnographic practice, I analysed the fumerist work of Hannah Gadsby and Sofie Hagen using their stand-up comedy shows as case studies to illustrate the effectiveness of fumerism as a stand-up comedy approach. Inspired by Gadsby and Hagan, I then begin to solidify my own fumerist stand-up comedy practice. In stand-up comedy ‘there are certain technical skills which need to be acquired through experience’ (Double, 2014: 2) therefore I began gigging on the London comedy circuit. Through the process of gigging, I developed my stand-up comedy mantra, created various stand-up comedy sets, and discovered my stand-up comedy persona. My experience on the London comedy circuit as well as my autoethnographic practice informed the development of *We’re Like Sisters*. Through autoethnographic and comedy writing techniques and the testing and refining of material with an audience at stand-up comedy gigs I developed a full length Fumerist Autoethnography show, *We’re Like Sisters*.

In Chapter Three: Know-What; A Critical Reflection and Evaluation of the Fumerist Autoethnographic Process, I critically reflected on the performances and process of creating *We're Like Sisters* as I examined 'what works' (Nelson, 2013: 44) in terms of using Fumerist Autoethnography as a performance making approach. To best evaluate *We're Like Sisters* I proposed a set of criteria for evaluating Fumerist Autoethnographic stand-up. This set of criteria was informed by Denzin (2014) and Fox (2017). My autoethnographic practice is partly informed by the interpretive autoethnography methodology proposed by Denzin therefore I used Denzin's criteria as the foundation for my own criteria. Fox, on the other hand, has examined the interplay between stand-up comedy and autoethnography with the development of her own blended approach to developing stand-up comedy autoethnography performances and research. In evaluating my various performances, *Found Family*, Project on a Bus Work in Progress show, and *We're Like Sisters*, I was able to track the differences in my relationship with the audience and discovered that when audiences are given agency and licence to reject what is happening am doing onstage a deeper level of performer-audience trust is developed. By integrating stand-up comedy into my autoethnographic practice, I have been able to develop a more mindful relationship with my audience. When the audience sits in a more active and influential role in the performance event both performer and audience become aware of their connection to one another which in turn can lead to trust and the exploration of taboo and/or traumatic experiences without re/traumatizing the audience or the performer.

4.2 Fumerist Autoethnography Praxis as Approach to Performance Making

In examining the challenges with current challenges with autoethnographic practice I have developed a new artistic praxis to create a more mindful relationship between myself and my autoethnographic audience. Through the develop of Fumerist Autoethnography Praxis I aimed to resolve trauma dumping within autoethnographic performance, to create feminist performances that 'shake up oppressive norms with a good and gutsy belly laugh,' (Willett & Willett, 2020: 27) and that foster a mindful connection between performer and audience. When autoethnography, fumerism, and stand-up comedy are combined into one performance making practice, performers are

able to generate performance material based on their past experiences and use their performance to offer commentary on social, cultural, and political factors that shaped those experiences. By integrating the dialogical relationship between stand-up comedian and audience into autoethnographic performance, Fumerist Autoethnography creates performances in which audiences are active collaborators in their performance event as they are the ones who judge whether the humour of the piece works or falls flat.

Throughout this thesis I have proposed Fumerist Autoethnography Praxis as a new approach to developing autoethnographic performance. By adapting Nelson’s Modes of Knowing model for PaR (2013: 38) which demonstrates ‘a multi-mode approach to PaR and evidence produced through different modes of knowledge: “knowhow; know-what and know-that”’ (Nelson, 2013: 38), Fumerist Autoethnography is an artistic practice informed by theory as each mode of knowing informs and is informed by the others.

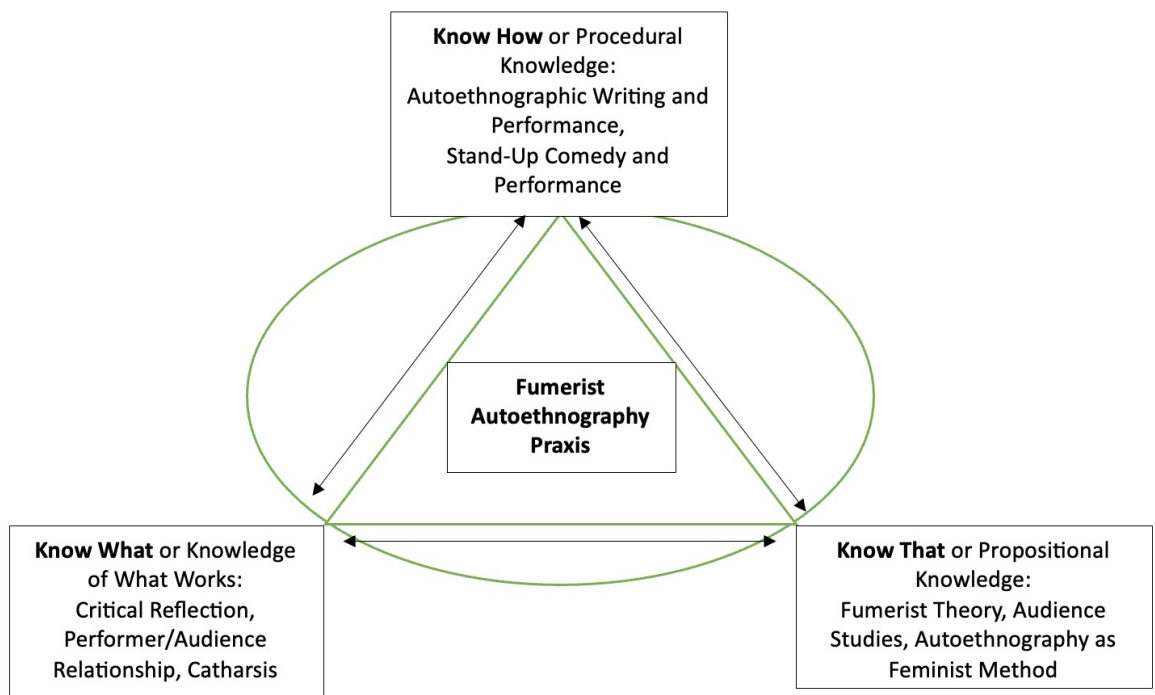


Figure 17 Fumerist Autoethnography Praxis Model Encore, again illustrating the know-that, know-how, and know-what of Fumerist Autoethnography Praxis.

The propositional knowledge of Fumerist Autoethnography, or know-that, offers fumerism and feminist autoethnography as the critical frameworks in which Fumerist Autoethnography is built upon. The procedural knowledge, of know-how, of Fumerist Autoethnography uncovered the process in which fumerist autoethnographic performances are made. To develop *We're Like Sisters* I used autoethnographic exercises develop an initial performance text which served as a 'backbone' for the rest of the performance to be built upon. Then, through a process of gigging and refining material with an audience, I was able to use my stand-up comedy know-how to develop jokes, experiment with my performance persona, and get immediate feedback from audiences. The process of developing and refining material with an audience is central to both stand-up comedy and now to Fumerist Autoethnography. Finally, for the knowwhat, or knowledge of what works, I have proposed as set of criteria to evaluate if a fumerist autoethnographic performance had met the aims outlined above.

4.3 The Future of Fumerist Autoethnography

In the aftermath of a global pandemic, the worrying rise of far-right ideologies, and a resurgence in violent misogyny, now is the time for narratives forms and approaches to research that invite us to laugh and mock the patriarchy. Fumerist Autoethnography as an approach to autoethnographic performance aims to accomplish just that and I plan on using the praxis outlined in this thesis to continue to make my autoethnographic performance work. I invite other researcher, comedians, and autoethnographers to use Fumerist Autoethnography as a means to create performance that offers feminist sociocultural critique on the macro and micro practices of life, performances that are mindful of the performer-audience relationship as we consider the importance of that dynamic, and to create artistic research practices that 'shake up oppressive norms with a good and gutsy belly laugh' (Willett & Willett, 2020: 27).

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Appendix A: Stand-up Comedy Gigs & Workshops

Access Appendix [Here](#)

A.1 Gig Experiments and Reflection Table (access [here](#))

A.2 Stand-up Sets Scripts (assess [here](#))

A.2.1 Aggressively Single Set

A.2.2 Medium Person Set

A.2.3 Flower Set

A.2.4 Family Disappointment Set

A.2.5 Couple's Permit Set

A.2.6 Sober Set

A.3 Stand-up Comedy Writing (assess [here](#))

A.4 Writers Groups and Workshops (assess [here](#))

A.5 File of photos from various stand-up comedy gigs including Funny Women Stage Awards Virtual Heat, Up the Creek Beat the Blackout, and Angel Comedy RAW (access [here](#))

Appendix B: Project on a Bus

Access Appendix [Here](#)

B.1 Project on a Bus We're Like Sisters Work Script

B.2 Project on a Bus We're Like Sisters Work in Progress Reflection

B.3 Project on a Bus We're Like Sisters Work in Progress Performance Video

B.4 Project on a Bus We're Like Sisters Work in Progress Photos

Appendix C: We're Like Sisters

Access Appendix [Here](#)

C.1 We're Like Sisters Script

C.2 We're Like sisters Performance Reflections and Field Notes

C.3 Writing Exercises C.3.1

I Remember

C.3.2 Spry

C.3.3 Headings

C.4 Rehearsal Photos

C.5 Performance Photos

Appendix D: Ethical Approval Letter



University of
East London

Pioneering Futures Since 1898

Dear Holly Jean,

Application ID: ETH2324-0113

Original application ID: ETH2122-0053

Project title: Fumerist Autoethnography: Developing a New Relationship between Performer and Audience

Lead researcher: Miss Holly Jean Kasselder

Your application to Ethics and Integrity Sub-Committee (EISC) was considered on the 18th January 2024.

The decision is: **Approved**

The Committee's response is based on the protocol described in the application form and supporting documentation.

Your project has received ethical approval for 4 years from the approval date.

If you have any questions regarding this application please contact your supervisor or the administrator for the Ethics and Integrity Sub-Committee.

Approval has been given for the submitted application only and the research must be conducted accordingly.

Should you wish to make any changes in connection with this research/consultancy project you must complete 'An application for approval of an amendment to an existing application'.

The approval of the proposed research/consultancy project applies to the following site.

Project site: **Research will take place online via Microsoft Teams as long as social distancing is in place. In person research will be conducted within the UK once it is safe to do so.**

Principal Investigator / Local Collaborator: Miss Holly Jean Kasselder

Approval is given on the understanding that the [UEL Code of Practice for Research](#) and the [Code of Practice for Research Ethics](#) is adhered to.

Any adverse events or reactions that occur in connection with this research/consultancy project should be reported using the University's form for [Reporting an Adverse/Serious Adverse Event/Reaction](#).

The University will periodically audit a random sample of approved applications for ethical approval, to ensure that the projects are conducted in compliance with the consent given by the Ethics and Integrity Sub-Committee and to the highest standards of rigour and integrity.

Please note, it is your responsibility to retain this letter for your records.

With the Committee's best wishes for the success of the project.

Yours sincerely,

Fernanda Da Silva Hendriks

Research Ethics Support Officer

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