

A Queer Immigrant's Form of Tactical Frivolity: Stand-Up Comedy

BA Acting Honors
ADPA6000/C Independent Project
Lecturer: Jonathan Pugh
Word Count: 6066

Immigrant
Immigration
I.C.E. - Immigration and Customs Enforcement

Drag
 Queer
 People of Color
 Political
 Desensitization
 Dominant Narrative

Abstract

This dissertation examines the role of comedy as a form of affective intervention within a contemporary media landscape defined by saturation, affective fatigue, and political polarization.

In an environment continuously saturated by repeated exposure to mediated violence, audiences are not uninformed but increasingly detached, producing what is conceptualized as an “affective collapse.” Drawing on theories of media desensitization, political satire, representation queer performativity, hyperreality, and critical pedagogy, this study positions comedy—particularly when combined with drag performance—as a mode of intervention. One that operates as a practice of resentization, reintroducing emotional friction into conditions of passive spectatorship.

Focusing immigration discourse and transnational identity across the United States and the United Kingdom, the dissertation explores how dominant narratives of illegality and belonging are constructed and contested through humor. Comedy is approached not as a vehicle for information, but as a performative medium that reorganizes how political realities are felt, often through discomfort, incongruity, and embodied critique.

Methodologically, the project employs autoethnography, using the author’s own practice in drag stand-up as a site of research. An account of performance as a Mexican-American comedian in the United Kingdom, this dissertation demonstrates that humor is not ancillary to political discourse but constitutive of it. By integrating drag aesthetics into stand-up, the performer destabilizes normative frameworks of identity while simultaneously amplifying critique. This dual strategy enables comedy to function not merely as representation but as disruption—challenging dominant narratives, unsettling audience assumptions, and generating spaces of critical discomfort.

All audience responses—including laughter, silence, tension, and obvious discomfort—are analyzed as indicators of affective and pedagogical engagement.

Ultimately, this dissertation positions that hybrid drag-comedy performance as a form of critical pedagogy, one that disrupts desensitization and fosters reflective engagement. In doing so, it reframes humor not as escapism, but as a politically significant mode of resistance and meaning-making.

1. Introduction

The contemporary subject is not uninformed but overwhelmed. Digital media has produced an environment in which exposure to violence is constant, immediate, and largely unavoidable. Images of war, deportation, and systemic injustice circulate at unprecedented speeds, yet this escalation has not translated into sustained political engagement. Instead, it has contributed to what can be understood as *affective collapse*: a diminished capacity to respond emotionally to suffering.

This condition is not incidental but structural. As Susan Sontag (2003) suggests, repeated exposure to images of pain risks transforming moral response into aesthetic consumption. Similarly, Katerina A. Fanti et al. (2009) empirically demonstrate that prolonged engagement with violent media reduces emotional sensitivity and increases tolerance toward aggression. In the context of algorithm-driven platforms—where repetition is incentivized and attention is fragmented—desensitization becomes not only likely but inevitable.

This shift in engagement is compounded by declining trust in traditional journalism. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2023) documents a significant erosion of confidence in legacy media, particularly among younger audiences who increasingly turn to alternative sources for political information. As Geoffrey Baum (2005) argues, satirical news formats such as *That Daily Show* do not simply parody journalism but actively participate in political discourse, blurring the boundaries between information and entertainment. In this context, comedians emerge not as peripheral entertainers but as influential mediators of public understanding.

Figures such as Hannah Gadsby exemplify this shift, demonstrating that comedy can function simultaneously as narrative, critique, and testimony. Her work destabilizes the expectation that comedy must resolve tension through laughter, instead using discomfort as a tool for critical engagement. This challenges conventional assumptions about humor as escapist, repositioning it as a medium capable of confronting trauma and injustice directly.

This dissertation begins from the premise that comedy's political significance lies not in its ability to simplify information, but in its capacity to reorganize affect. It asks not simply what comedy communicates, but how it structures the audiences to feel—and how those feelings might interrupt desensitization. The central argument advanced here is that comedy, especially when combined with drag performance, operates as a form of *re-sensitization*: a practice that reintroduces emotional friction into an otherwise numbed media landscape. In doing so, it transforms passive spectatorship into a more active, if uneasy, form of engagement.

2. Desensitization as a Cultural Condition

Desensitization is often framed as an individual psychological response, yet such a framing obscures its broader cultural production. Within contemporary media systems, desensitization emerges from structural conditions: repetition, abstraction, and detachment. These conditions are not accidental but embedded within the logics of digital capitalism, where attention is commodified and emotional intensity is continuously circulated.

The concept of hyperreality, developed by Jean Baudrillard (1994), is particularly useful here. In a hyperreal environment, representations no longer refer to reality but circulate independently, producing a simulation of experience. Violence, in this context, becomes detached from its material consequences and reconstituted as an image to be consumed. The endless scroll of digital platforms collapses distinctions between events, rendering crises interchangeable and ultimately disposable.

This detachment is further shaped by what Pierre Bourdieu (1991) conceptualizes as symbolic power—the capacity of dominant institutions to structure not only what is visible but how it is interpreted. Media does not merely present reality; it organizes how it is understood. Representation, as Stuart Hall (1996) argues, is constitutive rather than reflective: it produces meaning rather than simply transmitting it. In this sense, the repeated framing of violence as spectacle contributes directly to its normalization.

This process is intensified by platform logic. Social media environments privilege speed, brevity, and emotional impact over contextual depth. Complex geopolitical crises are reduced to fragments—images, headlines, short clips—stripped of historical and structural context. This produces what scholars describe as *context collapse*, in which meaning becomes unstable and interpretation increasingly individualized.

As a result in this environment, audiences encounter suffering without context, producing what Lilie Chouliaraki (2013) terms “ironic spectatorship”—a mode of engagement characterized by awareness without commitment. In increasingly “super-diverse” societies (Simon Vertovec, 2007), this fragmentation of meaning is intensified, as multiple cultural frameworks intersect without necessarily producing shared understanding.

The political consequences of this condition are profound. If desensitization reduces the capacity for empathy, it also undermines the possibility of collective action. Without effective investment, information alone is insufficient to motivate an audience’s response. The problem, therefore, is not ignorance but emotional detachment.

Comedy intervenes precisely at this level. Unlike traditional journalism, which often reinforces distance through claims to objectivity, comedy reintroduces proximity. It does so by reframing issues through narrative, embodiment, and effect. Rather than presenting suffering as distant and abstract, comedy situates it within lived experience, making it emotionally legible. In this way, humor disrupts the passive consumption and invites a more active mode of engagement.

3. Comedy as Affective Intervention

To conceptualize comedy as activism requires a shift away from analyzing what comedy says towards examining what comedy does. Comedy is not merely representational; it is performative. It reorganizes how audiences experience political realities by structuring affect in specific ways.

Theories of humor emphasize incongruity as a central mechanism. As John C. Meyer (2000) argues, humor functions through the juxtaposition of incompatible frames of reference, producing both

recognition and disruption. This dual function allows humor to simultaneously reinforce and challenge social norms. It creates moments of identification while also exposing contradiction.

This duality is particularly significant in political events. Official discourse often relies on coherence, authority, and repetition. Comedy disrupts this by introducing inconsistency and exaggeration, revealing the instability of dominant narratives. At the same time, research by Judy B. Funk *et al.* (2004) suggests that affective emotional disengagement from violence can be disrupted when content reintroduces personal or affective stakes. By juxtaposing incompatible frames of reference, humor exposes contradictions within dominant narratives. This is particularly effective in political contexts, where official discourse often relies on coherence and authority.

However, the political force of comedy cannot be reduced to incongruity alone. Its effectiveness lies in its ability to produce *productive discomfort*. Laughter, in this sense, is not purely pleasurable but ambivalent. It involves a simultaneous release of tension and a recognition of contradiction. This ambivalence is what allows comedy to function as a site of critical reflection.

This dynamic is evident in the work of Dave Chappelle, whose performances frequently oscillate between humor and confrontation, deliberately unsettling audience expectations. While such performances are frequently controversial, they illustrate how comedy can provoke reflection rather than passive enjoyment. The discomfort is produced, not incidental but central to the political function of humor.

The concept of “tactical frivolity,” developed by Robert Hariman (2008), further illuminates this process. By adopting a playful or non-threatening tone, comedians can introduce critiques that might otherwise be rejected. Humor lowers defenses, allowing audiences to engage with challenging material without immediate resistance. This indirection is not a limitation, but a strategic advantage.

Crucially, this does not make comedy apolitical or superficial. On the contrary, its effectiveness lies in its indirectness. Comedy operates not by persuading audiences through argument, but by transforming how the issues are felt. By refusing the conventions of formal argumentation, comedy reaches audiences at the level of feeling rather than persuasion. It intervenes the level of affect, and creates the possibility for re-sensitisation within a desensitized media environment by doing so.

4. Immigration, Narrative, and the Production of Illegality

Immigration discourse provides a particularly revealing site for examining the political function of comedy. In the United States, narratives surrounding government-affiliated agencies such as ICE—Immigration and Customs Enforcement—are shaped less by empirical evidence than by ideological framing. Institutions such as the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents operate not only through policy, but through representation, producing categories of belonging and exclusion.

As Nicholas De Genova (2013) argues that “illegality” is not an inherent condition but a socially constructed category produced through legal and discursive actions. This construction is deeply racialized, positioning Latine bodies and reinforcing associations between migration and criminality.

Mainstream political rhetoric reinforces this framing by associating immigration with criminality, economic burden, and cultural threat. Yet empirical research from the National Academies of Science (2017) consistently demonstrates that immigration contributes positively to economic growth, directly contradicting the dominant narratives of burden. The persistence of such narratives, therefore, cannot be explained by ignorance alone; it reflects the power of discourse in shaping perception. Similarly, Ricardo Ramirez (2013) highlights the increasing political agency of Latine communities, challenging their portrayal as passive or marginal. In fact their electoral votes are how many people and acts tend to be voted into the US government.

The persistence of negative narratives, therefore, cannot be explained by a lack of information. Instead it reflects on the power of discourse in shaping perception. Repetition, media framing, and political rhetoric work together to produce a coherent, but purposely misleading narrative.

Comedy intervenes in this process by exposing the absurdity of these narratives. Through exaggeration and satire, comedians reveal the inconsistencies and contradictions embedded within dominant representations. For example, jokes that literalize political rhetoric—treating metaphors as reality—can highlight their internal inconsistencies. In doing so, comedy disrupts the take-for-granted assumptions that underpin public discourse.

For a Mexican-American performer, this intervention is both political and personal. Comedy becomes a means of reclaiming narrative authority, allowing the performer to challenge not only public discourse but also internalized assumptions about identity and belonging. By transforming lived experience into performance, the comedian repositions themselves from object of discourse to subject of narration.

5. Transnational Identity and the UK Context

Relocating to the United Kingdom complicates the dynamic of identity, belonging, and representation in significant ways. The immigrant subject is no longer positioned within a singular national narrative but must navigate multiple, overlapping frameworks of identity. For a Mexican-American performer, this involves negotiating not only U.S. racial and political discourses, but also British constructions of migration, nationality, and difference.

The UK's post-Brexit context is particularly important in shaping this environment. Public discourse surrounding Brexit was heavily structured around themes of sovereignty, border control, and national identity. Immigration became a central symbolic issue, often framed not in terms of economic or humanitarian realities but as a threat to cultural cohesion and public resources. This mirrors, in important ways, U.S. political rhetoric surrounding immigration, where border security and illegality dominate the public narratives.

However there are also key differences between the United Kingdom and the United States contexts. In the United States, immigration discourse is deeply radicalized through a long history of Latine marginalization, with proximity to the U.S.-Mexican border playing a central role in placing public perception. In contrast, U.K. immigration debates have historically focused on postcolonial migration

and, more recently, Eastern Europe mobility within the European Union. As a result, the Mexican-American subject occupies a somewhat ambiguous position within British racial hierarchies—simultaneously hypervisible as “foreign” yet not always legible with dominant categories of difference.

The ambiguity provides a unique form of cultural dislocation. As Stuart Hall (1996) argues identity should not be understood as a fixed essence but as an ongoing process of becoming, continuously shaped through representation, negotiation, and performance. For Mexican-American individuals in the UK, this process involves navigating American stereotypes, British cultural norms, and Mexican heritage simultaneously.

Media narratives play a crucial role in this construction. In both the U.S. and the U.K., immigration is frequently framed through crisis-oriented language, emphasizing legality, strain, and threat. Yet the specific imagery and references differ. U.S. media often invokes the border as a site of invasion or control, while the U.K. media discourse frequently centers on the ideas of “flooding” or “waves” of migrants—metaphors that similarly dehumanize but operate through different historical immigrants.

Comedy provides a space in which these tensions can be both exposed and negotiated. By drawing attention to the inconsistencies between the U.S. and U.K. narratives, the performer can highlight the constructed nature of both. For example, a joke that contrasts the American fear of border-crossings with British anxieties about European migration can reveal the arbitrariness of these distinctions, undermining their perceived naturalness.

At the same time, comedy allows for the articulation of lived contradictions. The Mexican-American performer in the U.K. occupies a position that is neither fully inside or outside the dominant narratives. This in-betweenness becomes a resource for critique. By foregrounding their own positionality, the comedian can expose the instability of national identity itself, challenging the assumption that belonging is fixed or self-evident.

In this sense, traditional comedy does more than represent identity—it actively produces new ways of understanding it. It resists the demand of coherence that often underpins nationalist discourse and instead embraces contradiction, ambiguity, and fluidity. Through humor, the performer is able to navigate and reframe the complexities of living between cultures, transforming dislocation into a site of critical insight.

6. Drag as Performative Critique

If stand-up comedy disrupts narrative, drag performance disrupts embodiment. Together they form a powerful critique that operates simultaneously at the level of language, identity, and visual representation. To fully understand this dynamic, it is necessary to engage more deeply with the theories of performativity and their implications for both race and gender.

Judith Butler’s (1990) concept of performativity challenges the assumption that gender is an innate or stable identity. Instead, Butler argues that gender is constituted through repeated acts—gestures, behaviors,

and performances that create the illusion of a coherent state. Drag exposes this process by exaggerating and recontextualizing these acts, revealing gender not as natural but as constructed.

However, Butler's framework also opens up broader questions about embodiment beyond gender alone. If identity is produced through performance, then the body itself becomes a site of political negotiation. Drag does not simply imitate gender; it reworks the body as a medium of critique, using exaggeration, stylization, and theatricality to disrupt normative expectations.

This disruption becomes even more significant when considered in relation to race. While early discussions of drag often centered on gender transgression, more recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of radicalized embodiment within performance. Works such as *Facing Drag: Gender Bending and Radicalized Masking in Performing Arts and Popular Culture* (2025) highlight how drag has historically intersected with practices of masking, mimicry, and racial representation. These intersections complicate the notion of drag as purely liberatory, instead situating it within histories of power and performance.

At the same time, scholars such as José Esteban Muñoz (1999) offer a framework for understanding how marginalized performers navigate these complexities. His concept of *disidentification* describes a strategy through which individuals engage with dominant culture forms without fully assimilating to them. Drag, in this sense, becomes a way of working both within and against normative structures—simultaneously inhabiting and transforming them.

Recent work by Micheal Y. Brumberg-Kraus (2023) further expands this perspective by conceptualizing queer performance as a form of mythopoetic resistance. From this viewpoint, drag is not only a critique of existing identities but also a creative practice that generates new possibilities for being. It allows performers to reimagine themselves outside the constraints of dominant narratives, constructing alternative modes of visibility and belonging.

For queer performers of color, drag operates as both expression and freedom. It allows for the amplification of identity while simultaneously providing a layer of protection. The body becomes a site where multiple forms of marginalized intersect, including race, gender, sexuality, and nationality. Drag provides a means of navigating these intersections by transforming the body into a performative surface—one that can be manipulated, exaggerated, and refined.

Importantly, this transformation is not purely symbolic. The visual and embodied nature of drag intensifies the affective impact of performance. Costume, makeup, and body language work together as an immediate sensory experience, one that operates alongside and sometimes beyond the dialogue. When combined with comedy, this creates a layered form of communication in which humor and embodiment reinforce one another.

For example, the unexpected juxtaposition of a highly stylized drag persona with politically charged humor disrupts audience expectations at multiple levels. The visual spectacle draws attention, while the comedic content challenges interpretation. This combination provides a heightened form of engagement, in which audiences are simultaneously entertained and unsettled.

In this sense, drag is not simply an addition to stand-up comedy but a transformation of its conditions. It alters how the performer is perceived, how the material is received, and how meaning is produced. By destabilising normative assumptions about both identity and performance, drag expands the political possibilities of comedy, enabling it to function as a more embodied and affectively resonate form of critique.

7. Hybrid Performance: Drag Stand-Up as Resistance

The fusion of drag and stand-up produces a hybrid form that exceeds the capacities of either mode alone. This combination allows for a multi-layered critique that operates simultaneously at the level of narrative, embodiment, and affect.

In this form, the comedian does not simply tell jokes but constructs a performative argument. Humor, costume, and persona work together to destabilize audience expectations and reframe familiar narratives.

As explored in *A Blues Singer and a Drag Queen Walk into a Bar: A History of Stand-Up Comedy* (Silver, 2025), stand-up has historically functioned as a space for marginalized voices to contest dominant narratives through humor. From a practical perspective, John Wright (2017) emphasizes the embodied and physical dimensions of comedic performance, reinforcing the importance of presence and delivery in shaping audience response.

Similarly, Jerry Corley (2025) argues that effective jokes rely on core storytelling components—character, setting, conflict, and a shift in perspective that produces surprise. In hybrid drag stand-up, these elements are externalized and amplified before a single word is ever spoken. The drag persona itself pre-loads the “setup”: costume, makeup, and exaggerated embodiment establish a character and implicit narrative frame that guides audience expectations. When the verbal joke arrives, it operates as the punchline not only to the spoken setup, but to the *visual premise* already in place.

This hybridity is particularly effective for addressing sensitive issues such as immigration and race. The theatricality of drag creates distance, allowing audiences to engage with difficult material without immediate defensiveness. At the same time, the intimacy of stand-up maintains a sense of authenticity and connection. “At least now when someone tells me to ‘go back to my country,’ it’s actually true for once” (Infierno, 2026) was stated in our Mexican-American’s performance as a bite towards the xenophobic and racist comments hurtled and heckled their way.

This layering allows for what Corley (2025) might describe as *compound incongruity*—multiple expectation reversals happening at once. For example, the audience expects flamboyance, camp, or glamour from the drag figure; instead they are confronted with a politically charged outburst like “The immigrants are coming! The immigrants are coming!” (Infierno, 2026). The humor emerges from the collision between the expected narrative (playful or sassy performance) and the delivered content (xenophobic and racist panic), exposing the absurdity of the latter.

The result is a form of performance that is both accessible and disruptive—capable of engaging audiences while simultaneously challenging them. The hybrid form intensifies the fundamental mechanics of joke writing—setup, misdirection, and punchline—by disrupting them across narrative, body, and spectacle. This produces shows that are not only cognitively surprising but also affectively and politically resonant, allowing humor to function as both entertainment and critique.

8. Methodology: Autoethnography as Critical Practice

This dissertation employs autoethnography not as supplementary reflection but as a central methodological framework. Following Carolyn Ellis (2004), personal experience is treated as a site of knowledge production, particularly in relation to identity and performance. This approach resonates with narrative based methodologies such as *New Kids in Town: Oral Histories of Immigrant Teens* (Bode, 1989), which foreground lived experience as a critical lens through which broader social dynamics can be understood. Rather than seeking objectivity through distance, autoethnography embraces subjectivity as a source of insight.

The development of the stand-up set involved an iterative process through experimentation, collaboration, and audience engagement. Each performance functioned as both artistic expression and research encounter, generating data through audience response. This included not only verbal feedback, but also embodied live reactions such as laughter, silence, and visible discomfort.

Working alongside Joseph Gillan further emphasized the collaborative nature of comedy. Performance is not produced in isolation but emerges through interaction. “ ‘...be open to collaboration. Other people’s ideas are often better than your own. Find a group of people who challenge and inspire you... and it will change your life.’ — Amy Poehler” (Carter, 2020). Timing, tone, and delivery are continuously adjusted in response to audience dynamics, highlighting the relational nature of meaning-making.

Audience feedback, though most left incomplete, revealed the significant variability of reception. Responses ranged from strong appreciation to moments of discomfort or hesitation. Rather than viewing this variability as a limitation, it is understood here as evidence of impact. Comedy’s effectiveness lies not in producing consensus but in its capacity to provoke reflection of the public’s normal way of thinking. Making society question what they were led to believe is right, wrong, and somewhere in-between.

9. Audience Feedback Responses

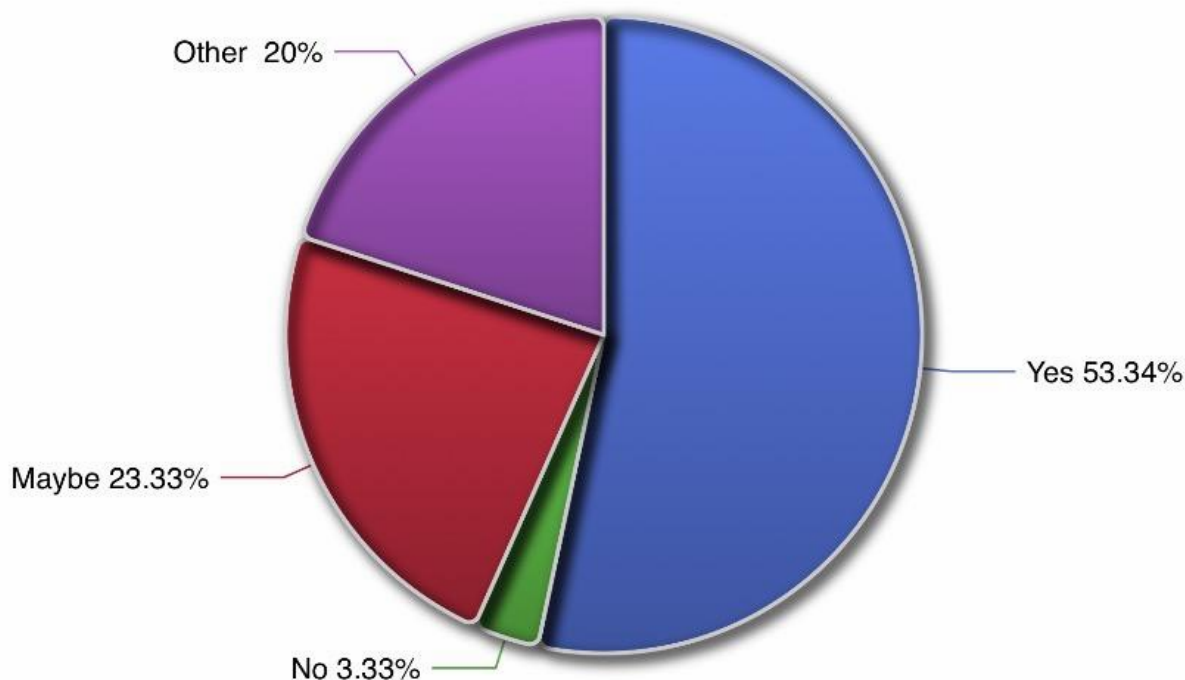
Many audience members had chosen to keep themselves anonymous while filling out this form. Other audience members were mildly drunk, so their statements were reworded to try and see what they meant to say. Anything that was illegible is unfortunately not included. No question was required in the survey, so several others had chosen to ignore any written questions.

First Stand-up Drag Comedy show was performed on February 21st during the monthly open mic night at CWRW (King Street) in Carmarthenshire, Wales.

Second Stand-up Drag Comedy Attempt was performed a week later on February 28th for another monthly open mic hosted by the Criwdem Celf! This was also located in Carmarthenshire, Wales (King Street).

Hades Laughter

Did my set make you laugh despite the topics brought up?



Did you learn anything new today? If yes, what?

February 21st - CWRW

- “Mexicans are THE BOMB!”
- “That taco bell doesn’t count as Mexican food???”
- “Taco Bell isn’t normal Mexican Food, what’s better than that?”
- “Didn’t know there was a show about an American coaching a football team in Britain”
- “ICE IS IN LONDON?!? AND ITALY?!?”

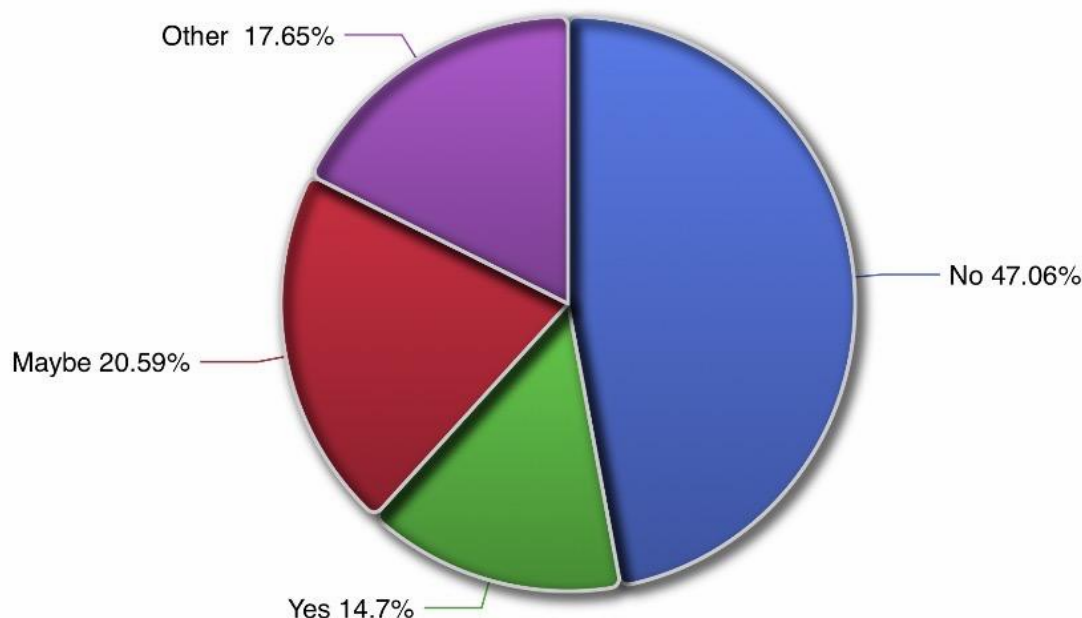
February 28th - Criwdem Celf

- “Just never thought Mexicans would want to ever live here”

- “I did not know that people learned english as survival tactic.”
- “I always thought Mexicans had more Spanish sounding names like Hosay or Alejandro. It’s very cool to learn that I share a name with you.”
- “I didn’t know what ICE was, I don’t follow American politics. I wish you gave more information about them.”

Hades Laughter

Did your views on immigrants and people of color change during this set?



Were you offended anyway? Why?

February 21st - CWRW

- There was something incoherent in Welsh? Unsure if this was meant to be a short rant or if this audience member had misread the question. (Had asked a colleague, Deryn Bach, to translate but to no avail)
- “Why the look? It makes me think of clowns, and I don’t think Mexicans want to be viewed that way.”
- “You make fun of the English, but not the Welsh? There’s some favoritism at play here.”
- “I wanted to perform my own music at the MUSIC open mic, but I ended up listening to this instead.”
- “Taco Bell’s my favorite place to eaaaattttt :(((“

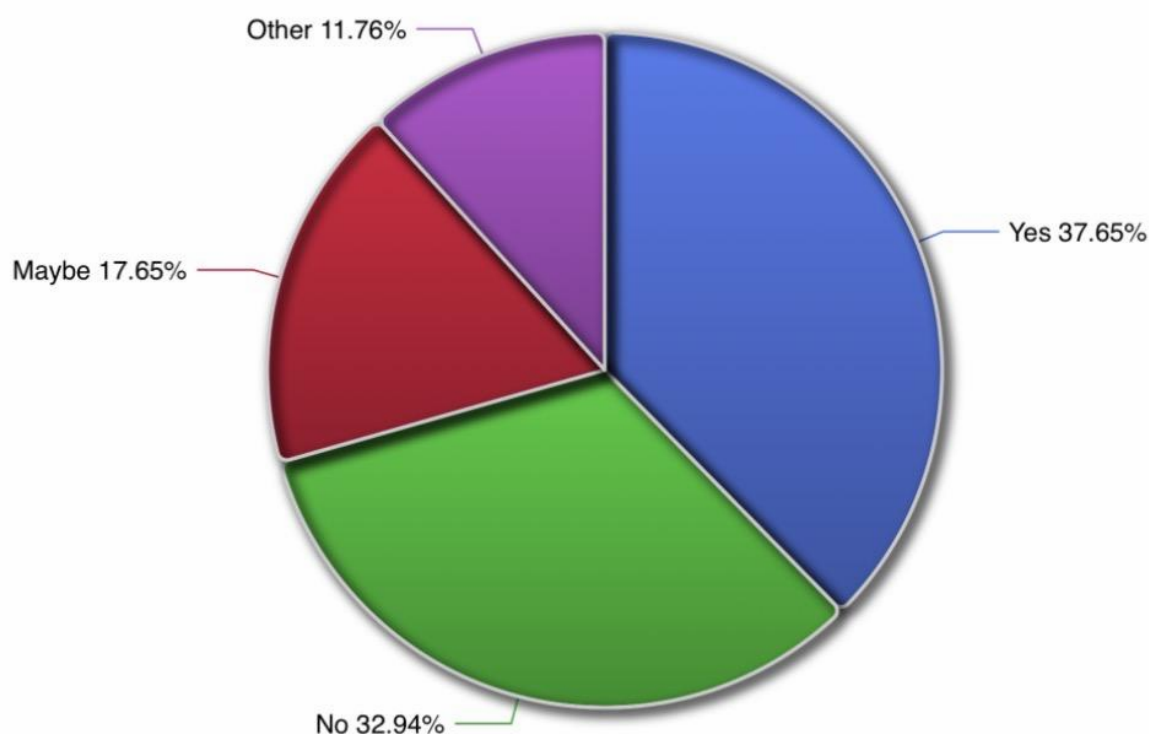
February 28th - Criwdem Celf

- “Isn’t drag supposed to be men playing women or something”

- “As an Englishman, I completely understood why many jokes were being made but did you have to compare our Border Force with those guys back in the states. At least our officers haven’t deported any natives.”
- “You chose to be in Wales because of our history? I’m not offended, I’m mostly curious. Why are you learning about Wales’s history with colonialism?”
- “Nah, that was lush. Some people need to hear it.”

Hades Laughter

Are you now rethinking ways you’ve interacted with other people before?



Any feedback to make my set better?

February 21st - CWRW

- “Make fun of your president.”
- “Memorizing you fell flat a couple times when looking at phone. Get rid of phone and you be good to go. Otherwise, good job.”
- “Sucks that the mic isn’t wireless I’d love if you moved around more.”
- “IT WAS GOOD!!”
- “Maybe add in some lipsync music, since you’re a drag performer.”

February 28th - Criwdem Celf

- “You could’ve elaborated on some jokes more. I feel like we got a little lost.”
- “I personally think you had a great set, but I believe this open mic is meant more for poetry or alternative music. Maybe trying out another venue would make for better reactions”
- “I liked it as a stand alone, but what if you and your friend performed together?”
- “You seem so stiff around the equipment, maybe move around the space.”

As shown above, audiences reacted vastly different from one another to the Mexican-American’s stand-up set. Every person had a different idea of how to make it better or how it had offended them—whether the offense was for other marginalized groups of people or not. Showcasing how even discomfort or curiosity created engagement for the Mexican-American comic to use for the next stand-up event. Based entirely on the graphs, many people had answered “yes” and “maybe” on whether the set made them rethink how they treat or think about other people—proving Michalinos Zembylas’s (2015) theory that discomfort actively creates the space for reflective and critical thinking.

10. Audience, Discomfort, and Critical Pedagogy

The role of the audience is central to this analysis. Comedy is inherently relational; its meaning emerges through interaction. Laughter, silence, and discomfort all function as forms of engagement, signaling not only reception but also interpretation, resistance, and negotiation of meaning. Rather than passive consumers, audiences become co-producers of the power a comedic moment will have, shaping whether a joke reinforces dominant norms or destabilizes them.

Drawing on Paulo Freire’s (1970) concept of critical pedagogy, discomfort can be understood as a necessary condition for transformative learning. Freire rejects the “banking model” of education—in which knowledge is deposited into passive learners—in favor of a conversational model grounded in problem-posing, reflection, and praxis. Within this framework, moments of tension or unease are not obstacles but openings: they disrupt habitual ways of thinking and create the condition for what Freire calls *conscientização* or critical consciousness. When applied to comedic performance, discomfort becomes a pedagogical trigger that interrupts the audience’s taken-for-granted assumptions and invites deeper interrogation of social realities.

The pedagogy of discomfort, as articulated by Michalinos Zembylas (2015), extends this Freirean insight by foregrounding the emotional dimensions of learning. It posits that feelings such as unease, guilt, or defensiveness are not merely byproducts of challenging content but essential resources for ethical and political transformation. Discomfort reveals the boundaries of one’s “comfort zone”—those normalized beliefs and affective attachments that sustain systems of inequality. In a stand-up context, this might occur when humor exposes implicit biases, privileges, or stereotypes, prompting audiences to confront their complicity in broader structures of power.

Ergo, when audiences are confronted with perspectives that challenge their assumptions, they are compelled to re-evaluate their often unconscious point of view about marginalized groups. This process is neither linear or guaranteed; discomfort can just as easily provoke resistance or withdrawal. However, within a critical pedagogical framework, even resistance is meaningful—it marks the friction where

dominant ideologies are being contested. The key lies in whether this comfort is generative, opening space for reflection, dialogue, and potential change of perspective.

In this context, offense is not simply failure but a site of potential impact. It signals that the performance has disrupted normative frameworks and unsettled the audience's expectations. Rather than measuring comedic success solely through laughter, this perspective reframes silence, tension, hecklers, or even backlash as indicators of critical engagement. Offense, then, becomes pedagogically productive when it encourages audiences to question why they feel unsettled and what underlying assumptions are being challenged.

Comedy, therefore, operates as a pedagogical tool—not by providing answers, but by staging encounters with difference, contradiction, and ambiguity. Through humor's unique capacity to disarm and provoke simultaneously, it creates a space for critical inquiry that can foster social transformation and heightened critical awareness.

11. Conclusion

This dissertation has argued that comedy, particularly when combined with drag performance, functions as a form of re-sensitization in an age of affective saturation. By disrupting passive consumption and reintroducing emotional engagement, it creates modern day conditions for critical awareness and engagement.

Unlike traditional activism, which often relies on direct contact with events and authorities, stand-up comedy operates indirectly. Its power lies in its ability to educate, to unsettle, to provoke, and to linger. Power to be heard by the many rather than the simple few that are already willing to listen.

In line with Paulo Freire (1970), this purposeful discomfort transforms audiences from passive recipients into critical participating thinkers. At the same time, the performative disruptions described by Judith Butler (1990) underscores that identity itself remains an open and contested terrain.

For marginalized performers and actors—queer people, people of color, those that don't know English or the narrative dominant language, and so on—this is not merely artistic expression but political necessity, identity survival, and a start to a sense of belonging again. In a world where dominant narratives erase or distort their experiences, comedy becomes a means of reclaiming their voice and visibility.

Ultimately, laughter is not an escape from injustice but a confrontation with it. It is through this confrontation—uncomfortable, contradictory, and unresolved—that comedy asserts its political force. "Thank you—I've brought my passport, my sense of humor, and zero plans to leave." - Hades Infierno, 2026



Photo taken by Deryn Bach at the second Stand-up Event for Criwdem Celf on the 28th of February, 2026. Outfit had been slightly changed due to "the different vibes" of said location.

All References

A.I. Help:

Prompt: Please tell me how I should structure a dissertation about stand-up comedy, drag, and the politics around immigration in both the United States and the United Kingdom. — this inspired how my format was eventually structured, it went through about 3 different documents of structures before I finally created this final document.

Prompt: Give me advice on how I can make this dissertation meet a word count of at least 6000 words. What needs expanding on? — the advice given inspired me on which works and theories to expand, effectively slicing some of them apart and explaining them more. It made me think of writing my dissertation as if it was a recipe that someone learning to cook for the first time could make. Does that make sense?

Final Prompt: Can you make my transitions among these paragraphs smoother and more coherent with each other? — yeah, this did generate some sentences to help me make my paragraphs easier to follow; however, I read them and did my best to make them academic sounding: Charlie Version!

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