Something to Declare: First-Generation Immigrants' Stand-Up Comedy in the UK

Daphna Baram

Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts
Lancaster University

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Supervised by Dr Cami Rowe and Professor Andrew Quick

Lancaster University

Abstract

Something to Declare: Immigrants' Stand-Up Comedy in the UK by Daphna Baram.
This thesis examines how first-generation immigrant stand-up comedians negotiate and communicate their identities and messages to predominantly British audiences while performing in the UK. Since the 2010s, immigrant comedians have become increasingly visible on the British comedy circuit. This research, using an ethnographic approach, explores how socio-political events—such as the 2007 financial crisis, the lead-up to Brexit, and its aftermath—have shaped the strategies these comedians use to engage with their audiences. It shows that immigrant-comedians devise unique negotiation strategies with their British audiences. The study draws on post-colonial theory, Emmanuel Levinas' concept of the Other's "face" in identity formation, and Pierre Bourdieu's ideas of cultural capital and habitus, particularly in relation to nationality and class. Through this lens, the thesis reveals how immigrant comedians navigate a deeply rooted British comedic tradition, using humour as a tool to carve out a sense of belonging, one joke at a time.

Declaration

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is my original work and has not been submitted, in whole or in part, to any other university for the award of any other degree. The word-count of this thesis is 79,723 words.

Daphna Baram, 20 March 2025

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Contents

1. Introduction: Humour, Comedy, Stand-up Comedy and Immigrant Comedians

On 1st June 2017, one year after the Brexit vote, I stepped, sweating, onto a stage at the Eton and Windsor Brewery. I was about to tell the audience in front of me, who were middle class and exclusively white couples from the area: "Hi, I'm Daphna, an immigrant". I did, and the room went silent. Almost in unison, the men folded their arms. "I've taken a break from packing to say goodbye." A tense titter. I went for the women with a few menopause jokes, but my eyes were on the most hostile-looking man in the room. His girlfriend was laughing, and he eyed her angrily, so I told the joke that had forced me to escape Potters Bar a week earlier: "When immigrants try to find out if the queen is single, they get told she is married to a racist drunk, so we all think Jeremy Clarkson is the King". The bloke stopped elbowing his missus. His beer came out of his nose, despite himself. The room roared. I won, but times were hard. Some furious heckling had already forced me to cut my set short at the Royal Legion Club in Kent, and on the train back home I read Facebook posts from colleagues about challenging performances that night. But I lived to fight another gig and wondered: Is there a formula? Have I devised a strategy here, or will I die next time on stage?

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This thesis aims to examine the strategies used by first-generation immigrant stand-up comedians (FGICs, for the sake of convenience) when negotiating their comedy and identity to audiences in the United Kingdom. I contend that FGICs in the UK use particular strategies, techniques, and adaptations for that purpose, which involve the adaptation of language and accents, the structuring of comedy around heritage and immigration, topic selection, selection of what to critique (the UK, "the British", or their own homelands), and comedically using or debunking stereotypes.

Naturally, comedians interact with their audiences, their social contexts, and global issues. All stand-ups often utilize the general strategies discussed above, irrespective of their perceived "Otherness". In their performance spaces, stand-up comedians face marginalization and must cultivate trust and connection with audiences, highlighting their unique perspectives while fostering a sense of shared experience. Yet there is room to investigate what FGICs do, as they face unique challenges when communicating with diverse audiences, forcing them to develop specific strategies to overcome obstacles through a process of trial, error, and learning. However, focusing solely on the challenges faced by first-generation comedians is insufficient. Unlike their peers, first-generation comedians incorporate themes and narratives from their homelands. This process is not, as we shall

see, a mere act of transplantation. The comedian's work is a carefully constructed historical piece that tackles various issues, aiming for relevance and humour among British audiences. Thus, it is not only questions of politics, culture, race, class, ethnicity, and gender that are involved in this process of generating first-generation immigrant humour; histories and experiences from elsewhere also come into the mix.

1.1.1 Research Questions

This ethnographic thesis is based on my experiences as a participant observer, having moved to the UK in 2002 and pursuing a 15-year career in stand-up comedy from 2010. My research focuses on these key questions:

> Which performance methods do first-generation UK comedians find most effective? Do these strategies succeed?
>
> Do the challenges they engage and turn into their routine materials highlight their differences or commonalities?
>
> Stance and approach: Is their approach unifying or conflicting? What makes certain comedians choose their specific strategies?

I break those questions down into these sub-questions:

> What communication barriers do immigrant stand-up comedians face with British audiences, and how do they overcome them?
>
> To what extent do language, class, race, national stereotypes, colonial history, gender, and intersectionality influence FGICs' construction of identity and comedic strategies when performing for British audiences?
>
> Above all, I ask: What inspired these first-generation immigrants to take on the role of stand-up comedians?

My use of the term "British audience" refers to any audience met by UK-based comedians during live performances. Of course, any stand-up audience will include some non-British people, such as tourists, immigrants, students, or temporary residents. Some regions in the UK are perceived as more multicultural and diverse than others by interviewees, who have pointed out variations between large cities and smaller towns and villages, and some have embraced these differences as positive experiences and others have avoided certain locations. Finally, we must also consider another key factor—the audience the comedians imagine when they set out to design and write their routines.

1.1.2 Gaps in Knowledge

FGICs were largely absent from culture comedy studies and sociological research until recently. In a chapter dedicated to reviewing the relevant literature, I discuss studies of ethnic minorities and second-generation comedians within stand-up comedy. Research on immigrant stand-up comedy is still in its early stages, primarily because stand-up itself is a relatively recent phenomenon, originating in the US in the early 1960s and in the UK a decade later. First-generation immigrants were therefore naturally "late arrivals" on the British comedy scene. I discuss the various reasons for that in subsequent chapters. For a basic overview, the ease of international travel in the 21st century and the UK's EU membership (1993-2020) with its freedom of movement are key. With the global rise of stand-up comedy, the UK, as an early adopter of the genre, has transformed into a central destination, drawing aspiring comedians from around the world.

A few important articles about immigrants in stand-up comedy were published recently (as of 2002). Some have specifically examined first-generation comedians while others contain a mixed discussion of first- and second-generation comedians. Some are a part of a wider discussion of otherness in comedy, intersectionality, and other relevant theoretical notions. I am delighted to add my voice to the emerging body of research, with this broader ethnography comprising multidisciplinary approaches.

1.1.3 Humour and Comedy

Laughing is a uniquely human trait. Very early on, Aristotle noted that "man is… the only animal that laughs." (Critchley, 2002, p. 1). Simon Critchley explains how humour "produces a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented." (Critchley, 2002, p. 1). Arguably, humour is a tool - possibly even a weapon - for the creation of critical discourse. As he puts it: "humour might be said to be one of the conditions for taking up a critical position with respect to what passes for everyday life." (Critchley, 2002, p. 41).

Laughter features in the Old Testament, though unfortunately not quite as often as rage and doom. In the book of Genesis, Sarah laughs at the angels who arrive to tell her she will give birth to a son. "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?" she asks (KJV, Genesis 18:12), in what was possibly one of the earliest examples of incongruity humour, as conceptualised by Kant, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard (Critchley, 2002, pp. 2-3). Michal, Saul's daughter, laughed at her husband, King David, "leaping and dancing before the Lord, and she despised him in her heart" (KJV, Samuel 6:16) - a fine example of humour of superiority, which Critchley attributes to Plato, Aristotle and Hobbs (Critchley, 2002, p. 3).

Comedy as performance art and as a tool of social criticism also dates back in history, from the Greek comedies of Aristophanes (c. 448 B.C. – c. 388 BC) to the Commedia dell'arte of

the 16th century, or Shakespeare's comedies at the Globe and Stratford Upon Avon, or Molière in the 17th century.

The potential of comedians - or rather fools and court jesters, as they were known - to influence, expose hidden truths and speak them to power, was addressed by Erasmus as early as 1509. "'And let me tell you, fools have another gift which is not to be despised. They're the only ones who speak frankly and tell the truth, and what is more praiseworthy than truth?'" (Erasmus, 1993, p. 56). To reinforce the idea, Erasmus quoted what he claimed to be a Greek proverb, "a fool oft speaks a seasonable truth." Indeed, it is often through scenes of comedic nature that painful public truths are exposed. As Ralph Rosen noted, "Aristophanes' rambunctious, often obscene attacks, on prominent politicians, for example, would somehow both make an audience laugh and leave them with a lesson of sorts from the poet-as-pedagogue." (Rosen, 2012, pp. 3-4). In Shakespeare's tragedy *Julius Caesar*, the poet Cinna gets killed by an angry mob because they mistake him for one of the conspirators who assassinated Caesar (Act 3, Scene 3). The scene is gruelling yet horrifyingly comedic, and serves as blunt criticism on mob mentality.

From Greek satire to contemporary stand-up, comedy always had the ambition or pretence to speak truth to power - even if under the guise of personal perspective or harmless-sounding jokes.

1.2. Stand Up Comedy – Overview

Stand-up comedy, which is at the heart of this thesis, is a relatively new phenomenon. Comedy scholar Oliver Double testifies to being shocked at finding out that the term "stand-up comic" was first used in 1966 (Double, 2005, p. 17). After struggling at some length to define stand-up comedy, he manages to narrow it down to three main characteristics:

> "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's own self;
>
> Direct communication – It involves direct communication between performer and audience…It's like a conversation made up of jokes, laughter, and sometimes less pleasant responses.
>
> Present tense – It happens…in the here and now. It acknowledges the performance situation. The stand-up comedian is bound to incorporate events in the venue into the act." (Double, 2005, pp. 19-21).

Stand-up comedians may also use musical instruments and perform musical comedy, and they entertain different types of jokes and modes of delivery, from one-liners, stories, physical humour and fetes, and may adopt different characters or stage personas.

Ian Brodie defines stand-up as "a form of talk. It implies a context that allows for reaction, participation and engagement on the part of those to whom the stand-up comedian is speaking… However heavily one-sided, it is nevertheless a dialog form, performed not to, but with, the audience" (Brodie, 2014, p. 5). Stephanie Koziski defined a stand-up comedian as "a cultural anthropologist" (Koziski, 1984, p. 57). Lawrence Mintz, while acknowledging that "a strict, limiting definition of stand-up comedy would describe an encounter between a single, standing performer behaving comically and/or saying funny things directly to an audience, unsupported by very much in the way of costume, prop, setting, or dramatic vehicle," (Mintz, 1985 p.71), concluded that stand-up comedy is a form of social and cultural mediation, and that it "confronts just about all of the profoundly important aspects of our culture and our society, and it seems to have an important role allowing for expression of shared beliefs and behaviour, changing social roles and expectations." (Mintz, 1985, p.80).

1.3. Definitions

1.3.1.   Comedians as Defined for this Thesis

For this ethnographic study, I sought a more inclusive, inter-professional definition to guide my selection of interlocutors. Some comedians have short-lived careers on the comedy circuit, and for years, social media has seen debates about who qualifies as a stand-up. A hardliner's view was that only those who make a full-time living out of comedy should qualify; others countered that one must be "established", or known within the open-mic community.

As a thesis requires boundaries, I needed to make sure my interviewees had considerable experience to allow me to detect a trajectory of negotiation strategies vis-à-vis an audience, and to enable these interlocutors to reflect on the evolution of their experiences over time. Therefore, I excluded comedians with less than three years of stand-up experience. This rule had some exceptions, such as comedians from unusual and interesting backgrounds.

1.3.2 First-generation Immigrants as Defined for this Thesis

Also crucial is the definition of a first-generation immigrant. I started out intending to interview comedians who immigrated to the UK as adults and stayed here, but the reality of 21st-century immigration is more complex. A handful of comedians were born in the UK, left during childhood, grew up elsewhere, and then immigrated back. Many, including but not limited to immigrants from Ireland and Europe, often return to their home countries for parts of the year. Some left because of the Covid-19 pandemic, but most came back, and a few left because of Brexit. In light of all this, the criterion was laboriously defined as comedians (see above) who were either born or grew up abroad, who have, or had at the time of being interviewed, an intention of remaining indefinitely in the United Kingdom, and

who view themselves as immigrants, or who have naturalised in the UK. Putting those problems to one side, my primary focus was participants who relate to "elsewhere" in their routines. This content better defines them as first-generation immigrant stand-up comedians than any technicality, because it shows how *they* define their routines.

1.4 Stand-up Comedy, a Brief History: The US and the UK

The rise of stand-up comedy in the United States is usually placed in the mid-to-late 1960s, with Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor among those who transformed the American comedy club scene, frequently facing conflict with both club owners and the law due to their use of what was deemed obscene at the time. Comedians like Alexei Sayle, Malcolm Hardy, Rik Mayall, Dawn French, and Jennifer Saunders are considered by the UK to be the pioneers of alternative comedy in the late 1970s. As Sophie Quirk noted, "a comedian from the Alternative pool could expect to be censured for telling a packaged, racist joke" (Quirk, 2015, p. 7). However, Quirk comments that much of the comic culture that was considered alternative at the time of its emergence has increasingly turned into the mainstream (Quirk, 2015, p. 7).

Stand-up comedy in the US evolved from vaudeville theatre, hailing significantly from Yiddish culture and Borscht-belt comedy clubs, which were immigrant-rich environments. It is therefore unsurprising that second-generation immigrants like the Jewish Lenny Bruce and the African-American Dick Gregory and Richard Pryor became successful and rose to fame. The British comedy scene has its roots in music halls and variety shows (Double, 2014, pp. 35-41), but closer to its birth it evolved out of very different sources both as their extension and as a rebellion against them: the working men's clubs in northern England and the dramatic clubs at Oxford and Cambridge. Both origins represent different ends of the British class spectrum, but neither tended to involve representation or involvement of immigrants or any other kind of ethnic minorities[1].

Stand-up comedians in the UK created television shows such as *The Comedians* (1971-1974) and *The Young Ones* (1982-1984) which turned Rick Mayall, Alexei Sayle, Adrian Edmondson, and others into household names. As Double notes, by the end of the 20th century, stand-up comedy was a profitable business. (Double 2014, p. 45). Alongside the more established comedy clubs, open-mic clubs mushroomed in the basements and attics of pubs. Many comedy clubs are based in London and in big cities, but weekend comedy clubs are also popular in smaller towns and villages, providing entertainment that is easily accessible for those preferring to get it at the local pub. Such clubs are often populated by audiences in their 30s or older, which tend to be more homogenous than city audiences. A

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[1] Until the mid-1970s, many of the working men's' clubs had a white-only policy, and banned immigrants. See: Schofield, 2023, p.549.

comedy circuit has been created, providing work for comedians who commute to cities, towns and villages to make a living on the weekend, while most often performing at smaller clubs near home during the week, trying new material. Newer stand-up comedians also cut their teeth at those smaller clubs, performing shorter spots. The Edinburgh Fringe Festival has been taken over by stand-up comedy, which is by far the biggest section of its brochure, from free shows by relatively new comedians to professionals playing the large halls.

1.5 The Nuts and Bolts of the Comedy Circuit: How it Works

1.5.1 The Open-Mic Circuit

Most of the fieldwork in this research involved interviewing comedians who are active on the stand-up comedy circuit. Hundreds of comedians join the circuit every year. Some are churned out of comedy courses or workshops, and some just sign up for an open-mic gig and start performing - or, in the comedy jargon, "gigging". New comedians on the open-mic circuit get to perform unpaid 5-minute sets. Most if not all gigs are now based on pre-applications, which are normally done on Facebook. Gigs are usually organized by promoters - frequently performers themselves - who choose around 10-15 acts to participate. Everyone performs for their allotted time. Exceeding your time slot is a serious infraction that could result in being banned from future bookings. The Master of Ceremonies (MC) is responsible for managing the show, engaging with the audience at the start, introducing the performers and handling disruptions. Entry is usually free or inexpensive, and although a collection might be taken, the performers rarely receive any of the money. Venues may pay show promoters through direct compensation or a "tap"—an allowance for drinks. A veteran comedian will usually close the show with a 10-20-minute set to test new jokes and routines. Comedians making it through the open-mic circuit apprenticeship can move forward. This type of progress often manifests in longer appearances, typically lasting 10, 15, or 20 minutes, and fees.

1.5.2 The Professional Circuit

Although comedians always go back to open-mic gigs to test material, remaining exclusively on this circuit for too long is viewed as a failure, and "an open micer" (pronounced "open micker") is a pejorative. The next step is securing professional circuit gigs, which happen all over the country, from small village pubs to large city comedy clubs. Professional comedy gigs are usually organized by non-comedian community members. The usual structure of a professional gig includes an MC and two paid 20-minute acts ("opener" and "closer"), with two or three shorter "middle spots" between. "Open spots" are unpaid, "middle spots" offer modest pay, and aspiring comedians take them on in hope of impressing the promoter and getting promoted to better-paying, longer slots. The show has an intermission or two,

where members of the audience are encouraged to buy drinks. In these gigs, the audience pay to enter the show.

1.5.3 Edinburgh Fringe and Other Comedy Festivals

Every August, the Edinburgh Fringe Festival marks the peak of most comedians' year, running for three and a half weeks. Although it's the world's largest art festival, stand-up comedy has steadily grown to be its most prominent feature. To get a one-hour spot, comedians apply to "Free Fringe" or "Free Festival", which operate free venues. Afterwards, they share an hourly slot with 2-3 other performers, or, in due course, showcase their solo act at the Fringe festival.

The Edinburgh Fringe was once renowned for launching comedians' careers, propelling them into tours, television, and other hallmarks of success through exposure to reviewers, agents, and bookers. However, the vast, commercialized nature of the fringe means that only those with pre-existing connections, such as PR or agents, achieve recognition. The Edinburgh Fringe presents significant financial hurdles for comedians, particularly newcomers, due to steep accommodation costs in August, flyer printing and distribution expenses, and potential venue fees; profitability is improbable for many. So before even looking at Pierre Bourdieu-inspired questions of how working-class comedians might gain and feed into the cultural capital necessary to be successful at the king-making Fringe, they are blocked by financial considerations before they have a chance to write one joke.

1.5.4 Blending In: Second and First-Generation Immigrant-Comedians

Historically, the first immigrant stand-ups arriving on the British scene were from the Irish Republic (see Ch. 5). The first Black comedian to achieve mainstream success was Yorkshire-born Charlie Williams, followed by Lenny Henry, who became successful in the late 70s and early 80s. In the 1990s, Asian comedians, namely second-generation Iranians, Indians and Pakistanis, became prominent on the circuit, with Omid Djalili and Shappi Khorsandi rising to fame. The first all-Black television sit-com, *The Fosters*, aired in 1976 on London Weekend Television, to be followed almost two decades later by *Desmond's* on Channel 4. The late 1990s and early 2000s saw the emergence of "Asian" television sitcoms like *The Kumars at No 42* on BBC2 and *Goodness Gracious Me* – which evolved from a radio sketch show on BBC4 to a televised BBC2 sitcom following its success.

On the comedy circuit, first-generation immigrants only became visible in the middle of the first decade of the 21st century. The lack of "official" history and documentation made it difficult to note the first emergence of immigrant stand-up comedians on the British stand-up scene. However, a discussion in Facebook's stand up group The Comedy Collective, conversations with circuit veterans like Ivor Dembina and Ray Campbell and surveying publications covering the circuit, indicate that the first immigrant-comedians to become

notably successful were German Henning Wehn and African-American Reginald D. Hunter. Nowadays, two decades later, a noticeable number of first-generation immigrants are performing comedy at all levels. A few have achieved actual fame – Katherine Ryan (Canada), Sindhu Vee (India), Sofie Hagen (Denmark), and Desiree Burch (US). Many others are making their way up while others from all continents await their turn.

This historical overview invites us to focus on another dimension of FGICs: they need to find their way in a well-established and diverse scene. It is no wonder that first-generation immigrants were latecomers to stand-up comedy, nor is it surprising that they need to devise particular strategies to negotiate their comedy to their British audiences. Stand-up requires language skills and knowledge of cultural subtleties and references. Its conversational nature requires some intimacy - true or contrived – with one's audience or, as Ian Brodie described it, "breaking through cultural distance." (Brodie, 2014, p. 64). Many FGICs do not speak English as a first language but need to communicate their comedy in a highly nuanced language like British English. They are required to deal with stereotypes about their countries, explain their policies, and share what is viewed as their national traits. Criticism of the UK on their part is often unwelcomed - unless they find a clever and enticing way to get the audience's implicit permission.

FGICs and British stand-ups share similar obstacles, needs, and skills. All comedians have to use language in order to communicate with their audiences. They are all judged by their audiences, they are all expected to address things that are noticeable about them – physicality, accent, class – but they have the advantage of being able to read their audience the way their audience reads them. Their audience can decode them within seconds: Northerner / Londoner/ Scottish / public-school/grammar school / council estate / "toff" / "chav". The difficulty for first- generation immigrants is that sometimes those stereotyping cues about them are not there to be played with, or are too elusive, or way too blunt. This makes being from Malta, for example, as a place about which hardly anyone has any strong prejudices – as tricky as it is to be from Nigeria or Romania – places about which everyone seems to know a thing or two, or even have an opinion. Some places are in-between: coming from Israel, I sometimes face audiences who are familiar with the finer details of the regional conflict and want to congratulate or condemn me, while others stare at me bluntly – though the latter are becoming rarer, as the news from Gaza grows grimmer.

Another issue is the immigrant's ability to "read the room" – in gigs around the UK, namely, to know who is in front of them and to avoid inadvertent slips of the tongue. For example, one interviewee related an incident in which he declared his Catholicism in a room full of Rangers football fans in Glasgow, without realizing it might invoke hostility. Considering that comedy often involves treading the fine line between appeasing and provoking the audience, this kind of local knowledge can prove invaluable.

The arrival of first-generation comedians on the comedy scene around 2005 almost coincided with the financial crisis of 2008 and the run-up towards the founding of the UKIP and towards the referendum on Britain's breakaway from the European Union. While the financial crisis had a less direct impact on the comedians and is less relevant to this thesis, it arguably led to the run up towards Brexit. The resentment around lost jobs growing unemployment and the rising cost of living were directed, as is often the case, towards the newcomers and foreigners. This development affected immigrating immigrants, especially Europeans, significantly. For many immigrants, this seemed to create a shift from an egalitarian Britain that was proud of its multiculturalism to a less friendly living and working environment. The new immigrant comedians – whether they had recently arrived in the UK or had been living there for a while - had to hit the ground running in terms of their comedy negotiating strategies. The rift over immigration did not exclude the comedy circuit, and included a few public debates and exchanges, such as comedian Andrew Lawrence's anti-immigration (a category he bundled together with ethnic minorities) and anti-women outburst on public media in 2014, which led to a public debate encompassing a few FGICs that will be discussed in later chapters. I will argue that this hostility - whether genuine or perceived - reinforced the need for FGICs to devise further communication strategies with their audiences, involving self-deprecation, criticism of their own countries, demonstration of British knowledge and savviness, combined with daring or implicit criticism of the United Kingdom, served very carefully.

1.6 Methodology

The approach used in this thesis is explained in depth in the following chapter on methodology and theory. Briefly, this participant-observer qualitative ethnographic research, written by an immigrant stand-up comedian, draws on semi-structured interviews with UK immigrant stand-up comedians from August 2020 to August 2024. Moreover, the case studies analyse specific jokes or comedic sets from the participants. The methodology serves the research questions in allowing the comedians to unfold and explore their comedic trajectory and pick up on their strategies, some of which they were not necessarily aware of crafting, and how they helped (or hindered) their negotiation with their audiences. The use of joke text-analysis helped demonstrate how the strategies the comedians reported devising and employing were, in fact, employed on stage. The data collected supports my argument that first-generation immigrants need to craft specific tools in order to negotiate their identities to their audiences.

1.6.1 Structure

Following the introduction, the literature review synthesises and contextualises existing research relevant to this study. Earlier, I noted the scarcity of writing on this specific subject, with only slightly more on stand-up comedy as a whole. My approach was to situate my

research within the broader context of critical theory, post-colonial and post-racial analyses, immigration studies, theatre and performance, and the growing body of work on stand-up comedy, to provide a means to begin developing and contextualising my argument. The theoretical part of the theory and methodology section of this introduction deals with the actual theory that instructed me in analysing my field work and its conclusions.

The chapter break was influenced by a combination of considerations. Each chapter expands on previous chapters, using case studies to show new negotiation tactics and considerations, culminating in an assessment of how FGICs' communication strategies impact their audiences.

To begin, I chose the case with which I am most familiar - my autoethnography. It illustrates a stand-up comedian's journey, exploring their immigrant experience and complex homeland relationship, using theory and shared experiences. It also shows the journey of trial and error in the negotiation process, which will keep coming up in various forms in all the case studies.

Three crucial timelines frame this chapter, detailing the development of my negotiation strategy with my UK audience: my life in the UK leading to citizenship, my development as a stand-up comedian, and the changes in UK and global politics in the 21st century. The chapter also served as a guideline for my exploration and interviews with fellow immigrant comedians, which are the backbone of the fieldwork for this thesis.

Each chapter was meant to be thematically structured, yet FGICs from particular areas tended to share a focus on certain issues. The overarching themes in most chapters are highlighted by comedians from a particular area. However, each of those chapters include references to the themes made by comedians from other parts of the world, too. Therefore, each of the chapters 5-7 looks into comedians from a certain area, but also investigates main themes that characterise their comedy. 'Chapter 8 examines themes that both extend the individual (joint performances of comedians from one area) and divide the self (intersectional comedy). I chose this chapter division because it made intuitive sense, but while writing discovered that it also allowed each chapter to draw on the previous one and built further from it, thematically.

After the autoethnography, I opted to start with African comedians (Ch.5), Because they have in common a post-colonial legacy, and often address Britain's colonial legacy, post-colonial dynamics, identity, and diaspora issues. At the same time, as all the interviewees for this chapter were black, they also invariably address race as a central theme. The theory connected to those concerned remains relevant throughout the case studies in the thesis, with additional ones gradually added, which is why I chose it to come next. The chapter "Out of Africa: Black Post-Colonial Comedy" considers the negotiation strategies of comedians immigrating to the UK from African countries, some of which were formerly

under Britain's colonial rule (Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa) and some who weren't (Ivory Coast), and the influence of their post-colonial experiences on the discourse they develop with their audiences, which ranges from defiance against the colonial past, a representation of a well-adjusted yet generic pan-Africanism, and an outsider's view. The analysis draws on Emmanuel Levinas' *Face of the Other* and Judith Butler's investigation of it (2004) as a tool for showing the Other's humanity and invoking it in viewers. Post-colonial theory from Edward Said and critical theories of race by Nirmal Puwar helped frame the exchange between comedians and their audience in the context of the demand to represent their countries, or even the whole of Africa, but never universal mankind. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and habitus (1984) and Le Hir (2014) writing on national habitus were instructive in portraying the walls African comedians felt they needed to penetrate in order to be heard and accepted by their audiences. Simon Critchley's introductory book to the fundamentals of humour (Critchley, 2002) shows how the various theories of humour are applied by the comedians and used as keys into the British national habitus. The chapter shows the relevance of colonial trajectory and racism to the ways African comedians approach their audiences, even if their tactics and stance diversify. Whether appeasing, playful or accusatory – the past is always present.

The next chapter addresses Indian comedians. They, too, deal with colonial past, but they tend to also consider class distinctions in relation to themselves and their audience while discussing problems similar to those faced by African comedians. Positioning their chapter next allows for the analysis of their concerns and strategies in light of and juxtaposed with the "African", thereby leading to further development of the thesis. The chapter "Indian Comedians, Cosmopolitanism and Perceptions of Class" relates to the way they negotiate their comedy with British audiences through the prism of class and class perceptions. I argue that class - and certain similarities between the Indian and British class systems - is one of the devices used by comedians to broker their comedy to their British audiences. In this analysis I was helped by Sharon Lockyer's (2010) writing on comedy and class in the UK, as well as Casting (2018) and Sutton (2020) on the centrality of class to British comedy and culture. I used Madhavi Shivaprasad's writing on comedy and caste in India (Shivaprasad, 2020) to demonstrate how and why class became such a strong tool for negotiation between the two cultures. In this chapter, particularly for the analysis of how Sindhu Vee utilises her parenthood as a common 'language' with her audience, I engaged with theories on immigration and parenthood, like Durrant *et al*. (2003), Bornstein *et al*. (2006), and Akifeva *et al*. (2023). For questions of identity and racism raised by the comedians and the ways they dealt with them on stage, I drew on Chatterjee's analysis of power relations and imperialism (Chatterjee, 2012).

The next chapter (Ch. 7) breaks away from the post-colonial context, and looks into immigrants from countries closer geographically, but often further removed culturally. European comedians come from the nearest countries, but have no trajectory of colonial subjection by Britain. Most of them are white but not all of them are treated as such, and

especially immigrants from Eastern Europe may suffer from certain degrees of racism for which, again, the theoretical outline created in the previous chapters is relevant. In addition, European immigrants often grapple with language and accents, and touch on "passing" and whiteness. I opened this next chapter with Irish comedians, who are the only immigrants with the experience of British rule, and extended to towards East and Western European comedians and their communication strategies. Chapter 8 - "European Alien Neighbours: European Comedians, Language, Identity, Whiteness and Passing", examines the identity negotiation of comedians who migrated from European countries, particularly in the context of the looming break from the European continent and its aftermath. I found Nirmal Puwar's (2004) discussion of the permission to represent the universal person specifically relevant here, in the context of comedians attempting to "jump the hurdle" of introducing their otherness in order to have their more broadly themed humour accepted. Theories about whiteness and racism, particularly in the Irish and continental contexts, by Hickman and Walter (1995), Walter (2011, 2016), and McCall and Wilson (2010), were instructive in understanding how comedians - whether intentionally or not - may utilise their whiteness in communicating with audiences. Palmieri's research project on "oral translation" of stand-up comedy on stage (Palmieri, 2017), was instructive in understanding language-related considerations influencing comedians' communication choices.

The last thematic chapter explores two devices: grouping together on a national or ethnic basic to perform on the comedy circuit, and utilising intersectionality in service of comedy. Entitled "Stronger Together", this final chapter looks into two phenomena that represent polarised negotiation tools: FGICs who empower themselves by grouping together on the basis of identity to perform comedy, and intersectional comedians, who utilise their various identity facets and juggle between them in order to convey their messages or mould their identities in their exchanges with British audiences. In this chapter I draw on Weaver and Lockyer (2024) on intersectionality in stand-up comedy, Winichakul and Zhang (2024) on immigration and the arts in the US, Araeen (2000) on 'benevolent racism' and De Souza *et al.* (2015) on 'accent biases', to make sense of comedians' decisions to unite together in order to negotiate their identities more easily or to push forward a specific facet of identity for certain audiences or at different times.

The conclusion reintroduces the plethora of strategies, tactics and considerations serving first-generation immigrants when devising their lines of communication with British audiences. It will reflect on the relevance of these strategies for comedians with different types of Otherness, and will outline some suggestions for further research.

2. Methodology and Theory

In a very recent "manifesto" on "how to do stand-up research", Izuu Nwankwọ defines stand-up as "a site of a multi-layered, polyvalent interface of artistic skills and bodies, where whorls of meanings exist, not just in spoken words but also in the (in)actions of performers and audiences." (Nwankwọ, 2024). In a similar manner, Elliott Oring speaks of the limitations of theory with regard to the study of humour:

> "Humour researchers need to confront the range of phenomena they are called to analyse and explain. They must determine whether they truly understand what others are laughing at. They must make explicit the knowledge needed to comprehend the humour – the domestic as well as the exotic. Theories must account for an extraordinary variety of data spread across a great range of peoples and historical periods. Theories will not stand that do not address the array of humorous expression – whether from Kiriwina or the island of Manhattan." (Oring, 2008, p.204)·.

Nwankwọ's definition - with the necessary modifications - and Oring's warning inspire the multifaceted and polyvalent theoretical segment of the present study. The initial section of this chapter introduces the methodological framework, paradigm, epistemological positions, and the justification for employing an ethnographic research method. It also addresses positionality, ethical considerations, and limitations. The following section provides an overview of the theoretical perspectives informing my research. Finally, I will elucidate the interrelationships and synergies that exist between these sources.

I have opted to include the methodology and the theory I used in this thesis in one chapter, although divided into two sections, because I believe the two are inseparable in this kind of research. The choice of an ethnographic methodology in the case of stand-up comedy by immigrants is bound to look into the way those comedians tell their stories, whether in the comedic-storytelling form to their audiences or as interviewees-interlocuters to me. This form of data collection is, to me, directly connected to their identities, to their Otherness, to the narrative of their efforts to break into and take space in the British national habitus, to the ways they present and represent themselves, and to the difficulties they face in their efforts of communicating with their audiences. The way I conducted the research, namely the methodology, led me directly to the theoretical framework I used to analyse the data collected, as will be explained in the subchapter regarding theory.

2.1   Methodology

The key method I employ in my research is qualitative, as opposed to quantitative, data collection and observation, in short - ethnography. I first identified the categories and sub-categories of comedians I wanted to study and the theoretical frameworks I could apply to

each group. I performed a basic prosopography study on the entire group to identify commonalities, similarities, and differences in their biographies, helped by some guiding literature (particularly Hayll, 2007). I then built my data through interviews with first-generation immigrants practising stand-up comedy in the United Kingdom. I conducted the interviews in London and Edinburgh, spanning from August 2020 to August 2024. The interviews in Edinburgh were particularly prominent during the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, an annual event held in August, in which comedians from the United Kingdom and other countries take part. Some of the interviews have taken place at comedy venues or cafes, others in the comedians' homes (whether their temporary residences in Edinburgh or their regular UK homes).

The interviews were loosely structured. In the first stage, the interviewees were asked to respond to a questionnaire containing an identical set of questions to which all interlocutors were asked to reply. Although the questionnaire was emailed to the interviewees before I met them, we normally filled it out as a part of the interview. Later, we moved on to a looser and more open-ended conversation, directed by a prepared list of guideline questions. In several cases, I asked questions for clarification in subsequent weeks. My choice for semi-structured interviews was instructed by Galletta and Cross' notion that this form "responds to an imperative for fine-grained qualitative analyses in order to open up new possibilities in understanding complicated phenomena often accepted as unproblematic. The semi-structured interview is particularly instrumental in achieving this type of texturing. It creates openings for a narrative to unfold, while also including questions informed by theory. It also leaves a space through which you might explore with participants the contextual influences evident in the narratives but not always narrated as such". (Galletta & Cross, 2013, p. 2). In other words, I did not want to miss interpretive angles that the interviewees might display, points of experience, or of sociological and political context they might attribute to their trajectory.

Both the questionnaire and the questions for the semi-structured interviews were submitted for ethical review and were approved by the ethical review committee at Lancaster University in January 2021. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the Otter transcription and recording tool, and I then tried to group the interviews by themes arising from them. Many comedians incorporated intersectional characteristics in their testimonies on immigration and life in the UK. Overall, the discussion focused on the comedians' intentions when approaching British audiences, their strategies when communicating their own foreignness, and the success or failure of the approaches they took in negotiating their materials. The comedians' assessment of why they devised those strategies and how they worked has proven to be the most informative part of my fieldwork.

After some deliberation, I made a considered choice to not engage in audience response evaluation. The main reason for this choice is my interest in intent: I wanted to find out

what the comedians intended to achieve when devising their communication strategies, and how they judge the success or failure of their efforts. Another reason was the fact that while the comedian is a constant in their own professional journey, whereas their audiences constantly change. For the purpose of deciphering patterns in negotiation strategies, which is at the core of this thesis, it is therefore more beneficial to study the former than the latter. The performers are the ones who devise the strategy, apply it and change it according to the results they perceive and observe, whereas the audience normally only experience the comedian's mode of negotiation once. The focus on the performers also levelled some of the intervening parameters that may influence audiences' response, such as the level of fame attached to a certain performer, the way the performance is set up, other performers on the same bill, the competency of the MC and the promoter in setting the gig up.

2.1.1 Analysis of Evidence

My analysis - in this context also conversation analysis - of the interviews was both thematic and linguistic. I analysed the interviews to identify common themes and keywords among the comedians' experiences after completing the fieldwork. That mode of analysis gave the thesis its shape. Some chapters revolve around the experience of specific comedians, describing and analysing it at length, while other comedians' statements feature more briefly in chapters according to relevance. While it was not necessarily my initial intent to group comedians from one country or region, in more than one case such groupings were deemed coherent and made thematic sense and helped me construct my argumentation and respond to my research question. In other cases, for example in chapters that deal with intersectionality, the featured interlocuters tend to be more diverse.

2.1.2 Textual Analysis

In his "manifesto" on how to research stand-up comedy in the context of theatre studies, Izuu Nwankwo dwells on the tension in stand-up between performing and storytelling. As he reminds us, stand-up "is designed for live performance rather than for reading." (Nwankwo, 2024, p. 32). The performance itself, in the moment in which it is performed, is the main essence of the art and the impact of stand-up comedy.

Therefore, textual analysis of the interviewees' stand-up comedy sets, namely, what they actually say on stage, is not the primary element in my methodological approach. The comedians' jokes or sets are used to consider and demonstrate how they fulfil their intentions when addressing their audience. The material is not the only way to judge how a comedian executes their strategic plan towards the audience, but it is a significant part thereof. Other variables are their "banter" or "audience participation", namely their spontaneous chatter with the audience, how they respond to heckling or other audience interventions, and their general stage persona attitude (high status, low status or mid-status).

I used examples of text analysis of the comedians' sets to give me a better understanding of how their intended strategy manifests on stage. When possible, I watched full fringe shows, consisting of 50–60-minute sets. In other cases, I watched the comedian perform their 10-20-minute sets in compilation gigs. I aspired to watch all the comedians in live performances, out of which I recorded relevant parts. In some cases, I watched additional sets online, on YouTube and TikTok or on the comedians' websites. I sometimes refer to comedians' public posts on social media, primarily Facebook, as indicative of their state of mind, especially after incidents occurring between them and audience members during performances.

While seeking to find some common denominators in the FGICs' approach, strategies and experiences, I was acutely aware that they are all different individuals, and that their experiences were shaped not only by being first-generation immigrants but also by their own unique personalities, their countries of origin, their class and financial situation. In many cases, they also bear intersectional identities: some are people of colour, others are female, gay, disabled, or are "Othered" in different ways. They also each have their political views, social attitudes and religious inclinations. Their views of their experiences are often determined by those factors to a greater extent - or at least no less - than their immigrant identities. Those differences made me aim to tell their stories and draw conclusions while looking at each as an individual rather than as a "phenomenon", and only then to examine the characteristics and experiences that bring them together as a group.

2.1.3 Positionality

Questions concerning the place or the position of the ethnographic observer vis-à-vis his object of study are a much-debated topic in such studies. After Clifford Geertz, one could say they are almost a cliché (Inglis, 2012). Yet it is critical to briefly engage the question here, given the uncharted territory this study presents, and just as importantly, my own biography in relation to the topic. My experience as an immigrant in the UK since 2002 and as a stand-up comedian since 2010 is discussed at length in the auto-ethnographic chapter of this thesis. During the research period for this thesis, I made sure to distance myself from the social life at the comedy circuit. Though I did partake in some performances, these were rare. I did not run any gigs and ensured that none of the interlocutors depended on me for any favours, whether placements on performance line-ups or any other benefits or services that could potentially influence their willingness to participate in the research. Having clarified the above, I strongly believe, from a feminist perspective, that a researcher's life experience, privileges or lack thereof, and other factors influence her positioning. My position as a participant-observer is crucial to the way I devised my thesis. Adopting sociologist W.L. Neuman's view that encourages "incorporation of the researcher's personal feelings and experiences into the research process" (Neuman, 2011, p. 114), I decided to include an autoethnographic chapter in this thesis presenting my own journey as a first-generation immigrant stand-up comedian. I believe this serves not only to position myself

and my possible biases and prejudices vis-à-vis my research but also helps introduce what drove me to conduct the study. The questions I referred to myself, so to speak, and addressed in the autoethnographic chapter, informed those that I later presented to my interviewees.

I presented all interviewees with identical questions but my conversations with them took the form of loosely structured interviews to ensure vibrant conversation. The combination of the prepared questions and the free discussion served to establish whether there are themes that feature in all the participants' experiences as practitioners working in the comedy industry, while simultaneously exploring the unique path taken by each.

2.1.4 Autoethnographic Approach

As I mentioned above, I am intimately connected to the subject of my study. Thus, the methodology applied in this research is informed by an autoethnographic element as well as the interviews with other practitioners of stand-up comedy in the UK who are also first-generation Immigrants. Including an autoethnographic chapter in my thesis was one of my earliest decisions regarding my research project. It was my own experience as an immigrant, as a comedian and as an immigrant-comedian that piqued my curiosity and interest in other FGICs' professional and personal journeys in the United Kingdom, therefore I felt compelled to "interview" myself first. To a great extent, writing my own autoethnography and revising my trajectory in the world of stand-up created the blueprint for the interviews with fellow comedians, invoking the questions which genuinely interested me.

Autoethnography is "an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyses or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues" (Adams *et al.*, 2009, p. 2). When taking this approach, I drew on Paulus' (2021) description of the process leading to its acceptance as a legitimate tool of research: "Driving the emergence of new forms of subjective (confessional, impressionist) autoethnographic writing, then, is the insight that the richness of cultural lives and life practices of others cannot be fully captured or evoked in purely objective or descriptive language. The researcher is both observer and participant in the scene. So, as ethnography continued to evolve, autoethnography—which dealt with the problem of researcher presence by inserting the researcher as the primary character and author of a story— emerged out of a need (driven by researchers' intuition of something missing) to capture deeper, richer, fuller evocations of cultural scenes." (Poulos, 2012, p. 9).

2.1.5 Positionality: The Inter-Circuit Dimension

There are, admittedly, possible pitfalls on the path of the participant-observer, both as an ethnographer and an auto-ethnographer. As a participant-observer, one "enters into a culture and withdraws from it at the same time." (Evans-Pritchard, 1973, p. 3). Positioning myself outside of the comedy circuit and its cohort of immigrant-comedians as a researcher was simultaneously a privilege and a hindrance. Many of my interviewees were people I had met before at gigs, many of whom I viewed as friends. There were no more than a handful whom I had never met before. Our interview meetings were in most cases familiar and friendly, with an assumption of a common language and frames of reference, and shared experiences. Phrases such as: "You know what it's like", "Have you ever done that gig in Somerset?" or "You know that racist promoter" kept coming up in conversation.

And though I usually knew (or thought I knew) exactly what they meant, my strategy as a researcher was to ask them to explain what they were trying to say, in their own words and from their own experiences. This was even more important in cases in which I identified with their experience, because I wanted to avoid projecting my own memories and feelings, scars and victories, on theirs. On some occasions, comedians quoted back parts of my own sets, particularly those relating to my immigration experience or to stories from my homeland as I had told them on stage.

In other cases - which were very few but stung nevertheless - I encountered a certain reticence, especially at the initial stage when I asked for personal (yet rather technical, such as name, home address, immigration date, etc.) details out of a prepared questionnaire. I was initially taken aback and felt as if those incidents were going to colour the whole interview. I couldn't understand why those interviewees, whom I considered personal friends, had suddenly become so cagey - especially considering that once the interviews began in their semi-structured form, those interlocutors changed. They were open, honest and generous while sharing their experiences and their interpretations of them. Reading Evans-Prichard gave me insight into this experience.

In contrast to when we sat together in a greenroom and gossiped while awaiting our turn on stage, now, I had turned up in a café with my notebook and audio recorder. Doing so, I had, at least partially, plucked myself out of the "culture" of the stand-up comedic practice, placing myself instead as an observer, a researcher, a potential scrutiniser. The subsequent change in attitude took place when the interviews became less formal and technical, turning into what felt like a chat between colleagues.

Another issue that could not be completely absent from my fieldwork was the fact that the comedy circuit has its own inner politics, a fact which is relevant to my relationship with my interlocutors. Some of them were more commercially successful than others, myself included. Some were so successful that they did not feel obliged to respond to a humble

researcher who is most generously described as a midrange circuit comedian. Others, despite their fame and success, kindly made time for me. Some had to be approached with all airs and graces, others remembered me as a promoter who granted them some stage-time when they were just starting out. Some had not met me previously but were fans of my infamously spiky commentary on the comedians' Facebook group, "The Comedy Collective". I believe that the precautions that I have taken in distancing myself from the circuit during my research, assured that none of those relationships could have inflicted any damage on the vigour of my research and analysis. The measures included making sure there are no favours owed between me and the interlocutors, avoiding running any gigs that could benefit them or applying to perform at gigs they were running. Still, I was constantly aware of my position as a participant-observer, and believe that readers of my thesis need also to bear it in mind.

2.1.6 A Glossary of Professional Terms and Phrases

In light of the fact that comedy research is relatively new to the academic work, I have included, after the table of contents, a glossary of terms and phrases used on the comedy circuit by stand-up practitioners.

2.1.7 Participants

To look at the experience and applied strategies of FGICs, this thesis needs to adhere to two main definitions: that of a first-generation immigrant, and that of a comedian. I tried to focus my research on stand-up comedians who arrived in the United Kingdom as adults, but a few of the participants arrived as adolescents. My fieldwork has led me to realise that the definition of immigrant can get elusive in the 21st century, in which travel is fast and mobility is feasible for many.

It is common among comedians, especially professionals or semi-professionals, to spend the better part of the Northern Hemisphere's winter in Australia and New Zealand for the comedy festivals, and then move to the United Kingdom for the Brighton Fringe in May and the Edinburgh Fringe in August. Immigration is not always a permanent condition: some people divide their lives between countries or continents; others have careers that are rooted in more than one place. The point of moving to the United Kingdom may also be seen as a point of contention and required me, at times, to flex my criteria.

Benjamin Bello (President Obonjo), for example, was in fact born in Liverpool, but was taken back to Nigeria as a baby and returned to England at the age of sixteen. Steve Hili spent significant periods of his childhood and youth in London, but was mostly educated in Malta, started his stand-up career there, and still performs there often. Evelyn Mok moves between Sweden and the United Kingdom and views both as "home". Trev Tokabi was born in London and moved to Ivory Coast at the age of 9, but views himself as an "Ivorian", with

French as his native language. I decided that their stories and experiences were significant and telling enough to be included, especially as all three had intersectional aspects to their identities, being people of colour and, in some cases, second-time immigrants. Because the research focuses on intentions, strategies and perceptions, for me one of the most important criteria was self-determination. If an interviewee met most of the criteria and felt like an immigrant in the United Kingdom, in most cases I viewed this as a decisive characteristic. I found cases of first-generation immigrants who reported being sometimes mistaken for second-generation British, like Bello and Hili, particularly noteworthy.

Another important definition is that of a stand-up comedian. The stand-up comedy circuit is divided on the question of who is entitled to refer to themselves as stand-up comedians. Some place the bar at making one's full living out of stand-up performances (Spector, n.d.), however, it could take years for a stand-up comedian to start making a full living as a practitioner; some never make it to that status but still perform regularly, several times a week. In stand-up circles there is frequent use of the term "an established stand-up". New comics are told that when they become "established" they will be granted longer performing spots at comedy clubs, will start getting paid for their services, will be able to stage a full hour's solo show at fringe festivals, and so on. The definition of this "established comedian" status is not entirely clear.

There are many courses for stand-up comedians across the country, with various workshops and tutorials offered, but these do not offer their graduates any diploma or licence-to-practice. It is accepted that stand-up is learned on the stage, indeed, for some it is a point of pride to have never taken a course and to have acquired all their experience through various open-mic gigs. Becoming established means that people on the circuit know your name, that you "gig" (perform) regularly several times a week, and that you have no difficulty in getting an open-mic spot, and possibly the odd paying spot. Comedians define themselves as either open-mic (never paid), semi-professionals (paid on occasion) or professionals (always paid, though it should be noted that all stand-up comedians do open-mic spots on occasion in order to try new material and hone their craft).

First-generation immigrant stand-up comedians come from various places. It is possible to cluster them roughly into groups: comedians from former British colonies in Africa and the Indian subcontinent; comedians from different countries in Europe (most of them members of the EU, who until the United Kingdom's break from the EU in 2019 had special right to live and work in the UK, some making use of their rights to remain in the UK after the implementation of Brexit); comedians from English-speaking countries – Australians, Americans and Canadians (it should be noted that English-speaking countries such as India or Nigeria are within a different category, mainly due to the comedians' perception of the treatment they received on the comedy circuit and the UK in general, and their expressed sentiments regarding their homelands); and a loose fourth category of "everyone else". Within and across these groups, some immigrants embody additional categories of

Otherness along with their status of immigrants: persons of colour, LGBTQ, or disabled. Some of these characteristics are addressed in specific chapters, and others will be touched on across chapters.

First-generation stand-up comedians are relatively scarce and constitute a phenomenon that is fairly new (the first immigrants appeared on the circuit in the early to mid-2000s)[2]. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, I decided to focus on comedians who are at least in the "established" category, and who have been performing comedy for at least three years. This was to guarantee that they have a certain amount of regularity on the circuit, with sufficient experience under their belt to produce some meaningful observations. I was willing to make some exceptions in the case of comedians hailing from unique places or who have other exceptional characteristics that may contribute to the scope of the thesis, but in the vast majority of cases I managed to hold to this criterion.

2.1.8 Epistemology

The question of insider vs. outsider account is intimately relevant to the material presented and discussed here. Indeed, cultural anthropologists and ethnographers grappled with distinction between "etic" (objective or "outsider" accounts) and "emic" (subjective or "insider" descriptions), ever since linguist Kenneth Pike made this famous distinction in his study on language and behaviour (Pike, 2015, see also Harris, 1976, and Dundes, 1962). My research is led by the Interpretivist Paradigm, an approach focused on the meaning of social phenomena rather than their origin or function, informed by Max Weber's observation of humans as meaning-makers. Hence, the understanding of social action requires us to figure out the meaning of the actions in question for the subjects.

This choice of paradigm informed my methodological decision to engage in ethnographic research. My position, therefore, is constructivist, and my positioning is rooted in subjectivism. The foundations of the interpretive approach date back to Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, in which he argued that humans interpret their sensations; they do not directly experience the "out there" world as it is (Willis, 2007).

This, however, does not mean that it is impossible to draw conclusions from the accumulative evidence collected from a group of interlocutors, each describing their different path in a similar field. To make sure the evidence is not merely anecdotal, I ensured that my group of interviewees was relatively large. I interviewed thirty first-generation immigrant stand-up comedians. The number of first-generation stand-up

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[2] There is very little literature on first-generation immigrant stand-ups. A post aimed at stand-up circuit veterans I posted on the Comedy Collective post on Facebook on 21 October 2020 generated many responses, the gist of which was that except for very few from the US, New Zealand or South Africa, at the fringes of the comedy scene, first-generation immigrant stand-ups were not active on the stand-up circuit in the 1970s, 80s or 90s. See https://www.facebook.com/groups/TheComedyCollective/posts/3405658632837338/

comedians in the UK is estimated by members of the comedy industry at sixty to eighty at the time of writing this thesis (2024)[3]. Therefore, this research encompassed between one half and one third of them. According to various data saturation studies, 20-40 interviews suffice for data, meaning and theoretical saturation (DiStefano & Yang, 2009 p.146).

My interest focuses primarily on intentions: what are the FGICs' goals when addressing British audiences; how they go about achieving these goals; which ideas they intend to communicate; what results they plan to accomplish, what outcomes they hope to avoid; and which responses they mean to deflect. To find the answers to these questions there is, to my mind, no better way than asking them, and supplementing their answers by watching their performances and reading their materials.

The situation of performance, and the demand of a performer to assess the reception of their set or show, are naturally not an exact science. This makes it very hard to evaluate the accuracy of the comedians' perceptions of their communication methods with audiences and the results they yield. But I do not argue that there is no way to rate the success or failure of a comedian's efforts. There are some important signifiers that indicate whether a stand-up performance was successful: did the audience laugh? How frequently? How loudly? Was the performer interrupted or heckled? Were they booed? Did audience members walk out during the performance? Did they fold their arms and stare in silence?

In the longer run, there are more far-reaching indications: would the comedian be invited to perform in more shows, perform longer spots during the week, or get invited for paid weekend spots? The highest goal for most comedians is to be able to make a living solely out of their comedic pursuits, playing bigger and bigger rooms, to be invited to television shows, and to have their "comedy special" – a one-hour show, normally a tightened version of their Edinburgh fringe show – filmed and produced by one of the larger streaming services such as Netflix or HBO (for more on the comedy trajectory of stand-ups, see Brodie, 2014, pp. 64-66).

However, the evaluation of success according to those criteria is not the purpose of this thesis. I draw on Norman K. Denzin's observation that the ethnographer does not merely view performance on its technical artistry but also on its liminality and construction, as a struggle, an act of intervention, and as a socio-political act: "Viewed as struggles and interventions, performances and performance events become transgressive achievements, political accomplishments that break through sedimented meanings and normative traditions." (Denzin, 2023, p. 3). It attempts to decipher the communication and negotiation strategies of the stand-up comedians interviewed, and therefore their description of their efforts and self-assessment of success are invariably the most reliable sources of information. As in any ethnographic research, the danger of bias is ever-present. Comedians

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[3] Based on conversations with comedy promoters Ivor Dembina (Hampstead Comedy Club) and Radu Isac (Immigrants Comedy Club) and lists I created in the course of completing this thesis.

tend to either overestimate or underestimate their achievements. However, their sense of success or failure is a significant part of evaluating their negotiation process and their strategy, as it instructs them in making decisions about modifying their sets, fine-tuning their approach to the audience, and making this approach more sophisticated.

2.2 Ethical Considerations

As required by the Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts at Lancaster University, I submitted my research plan for ethical review and passed it on my first year, before I started my fieldwork. I created a participant information form explaining the goals of the research to potential interviewees, and they all signed consent forms specifying that they could retract their consent within four weeks of the interview or decide to be interviewed anonymously. I also specified the data protection procedures and the university's regulations on preserving research materials. No interlocutors opted to be interviewed anonymously, and only two asked to see their quotations I intended to use - requests to which I agreed. They did not request any changes or omissions.

From my perspective, the most important ethical consideration, beyond technicalities, was the absence of any hierarchical relationship between me and the interviewees. I have not employed or been employed by any of them, and it has been over ten years since I last ran a comedy gig. The gigs I ran between 2012 and 2014 in London were unpaid open-mic gigs. A few of the performers I interviewed performed in my gigs on occasion. Although stage time in a comedian's early career can be seen as a benefit, however small, in such gigs the benefits go two ways and were not relevant at the time of the interviews. It should also be noted that while a few of the interviewees are successful comedians, none of them are in any position to influence my own comedy career.

2.2 Theoretical Considerations

Within this subchapter, I will expound upon the evolution of my theoretical mindset as I worked on this thesis. As I shall outline in my literature review, stand-up comedy is a recently emerged artistic expression and remains a nascent area of scholarly investigation. Over the past few years, a significant amount of research has been conducted on the topic, particularly by scholars such as Oliver Double and Sophie Quirk at Kent University, Sharon Lockyer at Brunel, and a few others. Nonetheless, stand-up comedy research is unquestionably in its early stages within the realm of academic cultural studies.

Even more notably, while some work has been done regarding second-generation immigrants and ethnic minorities in stand-up comedy, nothing has yet been written specifically about first-generation immigrants who are stand-up comedians. This meant that I had to turn to theory from different fields, such as post-colonial theory, race studies,

sociology, philosophy, theatre, critical theory, and migration studies. There is a wealth of writing that looked as if it could be relevant, but its significance was revealed gradually, alongside the fieldwork.

2.2.1 Comedy as the Site of Negotiation and Manipulation

"As to jests. These are supposed to be of some service in controversy," declared Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* (Aristotle, 1941 pp. 1449– 1450). Comedians, it seems, always have to negotiate their place in society. In her seminal article on stand-up in the USA, "The Stand-up Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Culture Critic," Stephanie Koziski characterizes the critical roles comedian assumes vis-à-vis society. As she explains, comedians "may associate a particular regionalism with a type of cultural inferiority or superiority, prescribe for the ideal community of men or offer explanations of change as innovative, destructive, cathartic, threatening or inevitable." (Koziski, 1984, p. 57). She likens the comedian to a "licensed spokesperson [who] can grasp and articulate contradictions in the culture of which other Americans may be unaware or reluctant to openly acknowledge." (Koziski, 1984, p.65). The final words in these passages should resonate even more strongly with regard to stand-up comedians who are immigrants. Comedians offer criticism of the societies within which they live, which may sometimes be understood as "destructive" or "threatening." That understanding of the comedian as a critic of culture invites - or even demands - thinking about FGICs and how their "otherness" impacts their work. It is easy to see why the particular role of the culture critic would be far more problematic with regard to FGICs. After all, they might be documented immigrants, but it is safe to assume that not everyone in their adopted societies would accept them as "licensed spokespersons" making jokes about the ills of British society.

I address this problem in several ways. First of all, I would like to address my basic assumption that immigrant stand-up comedians indeed negotiate their otherness, as well as their material, to their native British audiences. Some onlookers, and even quite a few of the practitioners I interviewed, insist that comedians "just tell jokes", or are "just being funny". I find it essential to stress that stand-up comedy as a practice is deeply rooted in a process of negotiation with the audience, and, moreover, with manipulation of the audience.

In this, I am inspired by the work of one of the few leading researchers in the field of stand-up comedy: Sophie Quirk. In her ground-breaking book *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*, Quirk analyses the ways in which comedy practitioners sway and misdirect audiences. She argues there are three main aspects to the manipulation employed by comedians: manipulations aiming to get the audience to laugh, through "management of expectation, atmosphere and perception that form the backbone of successful stand-up performances" (Quirk, 2015, p.35); Another, is a manipulation causing the audience to allow into the room ideas that are considered taboo, or that would generally be considered uncomfortable – namely, ideas that would not be acceptable to

discuss under normal circumstances (ibid). The third is a manipulation Quirk defines as "dangerous and exciting" in its possibility of having a lasting influence on audience members, individually or collectively "and even take part in a wider social negotiation, having an impact that endures." (ibid).

Another important point made by Quirk is the idea that the comedian needs the audience's unspoken consent in order to address certain issues comedically. She quotes anthropologist Mary Douglas, who stated that "the element of challenge is a vital ingredient of every joke; yet, at the same time, a joke can only work if it is 'permitted' by its audience." (Douglas, 1999, p.155).

Immigrant stand-up comedians are, therefore, acting within the remit of their wider trade when negotiating with or even manipulating their audience. As I shall demonstrate, their first 'step' - managing expectations - has almost always to do with how they introduce themselves as Others; the second - challenging their audience's sensibilities - is also, almost in all cases, related to their immigrant identity. As for the third, having a wider impact – that would naturally depend on the comedian's popularity and influence, but again, many FGICs expressed their intention and hope to have such an impact.

Regarding the point of obtaining "permission" to make their jokes, here, we also see that this process of negotiating permission is not exclusive to FGICs, but they seem particularly acutely aware of the proceedings of getting the desired go-ahead. All interviewees were convinced that the path to securing the audience's consent is what they described as "getting it out of the way", namely introducing their "foreign" identity, explaining it and joking about it, at least for the first five or ten minutes of their set, and in many cases, throughout their set.

A question that came up as crucial in the process of my fieldwork was: what is the immigrant stand-up's key for successful negotiation? In Ian Brodie's writing about stand-up as folklore, he equates the stand-up comedian to the local storyteller, as a person who is integral to the audience to whom they speak (Brodie, 2014, pp.16). However, Brodie himself recognises that the comedian may be "other" to their audience: "The comedian and audience are part of a group by virtue of, if nothing else, their interaction in a face-to-face relationship." As a result, Brodie views the comedians' task, particularly when facing audience who are not in the same social category as their own, "to deconstruct (in all senses of the word) the differences in self-identity, often by virtue of contrast with a non-present 'Other'". (Brodie, 2014, pp.16-18). By way of extension, the immigrant comedian is very much a 'present Other' or, if you will, a "present absentee".

This could imply that in order to successfully negotiate their messages to their local audiences, FGICs must first and foremost demonstrate in-depth knowledge of British culture, particularly local: slang, cultural references to film and TV, infamous criminals, class

signifiers and royal history, but also literature, politics and other cultural references. This assumption also corresponded to my own experience, namely my feeling that my audiences showed appreciation for my efforts to demonstrate such local knowledge.

2.2.2 Otherness and Familiarity

Immigrants are, naturally, not the only 'Others' in stand-up comedy. Otherness can manifest in race, disability, body shape, gender, sexuality, class, and other characteristics. A comedian can also "other" themselves to their audience through the content of their comedy. In this respect Oliver Double mentions the example of Phil Jupitus, a white English comedian, who created a show called 'Jedi, Steady, Go!" in the late 1990s, attracting fans of the Star Wars film franchise. However, the audience was surprised to find out that the comedian dedicated the show to ridiculing their obsession with minor Star Wars trivia (Double, 2014, p.243-244).

Double also notes Bob Monkhouse's assertion that an audience is "not a community" and that even if their presence in a room brands them as one, this community ceases to exist once they leave the performance. Double himself, however, leans towards Brodie's side of the argument, saying they "may be already be bound together by some sense of community, even if by only a shared love for Star Wars" (Double, 2014, p.244).

However, a comedian who is local or indigenous to his audience, can set himself apart from his community. Bill Hicks, for example, was at odds with his native domain in the South of the United States, not only due to the liberal content of his comedy, but also, as Double notes, due to his stage persona. Hicks "exuded high status, took his time over his delivery, he stroked back his longish hair…. He would sometimes approach an audience with an attitude bordering on contempt..." (Double, 2014, p.245-246).

But the situation of a comedian who feels strong or established enough in their environment to challenge their audience in such ways, is far more privileged than that of performers who have no choice but to "own up" to their discernible 'otherness'. A choice on whether to show your true colours is a specific kind of cultural currency that most FGICs do not enjoy paying. They cannot decide what kind of otherness to display, it has been bestowed upon them. In her book *Space Invaders,* Nirmal Puwar presents the notion of the 'straitjacket' of representation forced on women and non-whites in the public eye. "Not only are black MPs singled out as being marked by their racial particularity in terms of who they can represent, but also in terms of what they can represent. It is assumed that race is their main interest." (Puwar, 2004, p.65).

This observation, as I will show, is equally valid for stand-up comedians, in the pressure from the expectation to represent, and the assumption that any woman or non-white person

represents all their "ilk". "The fascination with whoever becomes defined as the archetypical figure of alterity is found in forums across different sectors." (Puwar, 2004, p.71).

In the context of a comedian being a part of, or "othered" from their audience communities, I also draw on - but sometimes find myself at odds with - Walter Benjamin's ideas of the storyteller, which in my understanding are very much identifiable with the current stand-up comedian. Benjamin depicts the storyteller as an envoy of our communities, a "merchant or sea man", whom "we" send to faraway countries, to come back and regale us with stories of the world away from our reach. "People imagine the storyteller as someone who has come from afar. But they enjoy no less listening to the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions. If one wants to picture these two groups through their archaic representatives, one is embodied in the resident tiller of the soil, and the other in the trading seaman" (Benjamin, 2016, p.2). In either case, whether telling the tales of home, land, or country, Benjamin's archetypical performer comes from within the ranks of their listeners. They know the lay of the lands on which they stand, and this is what gives them the crowd's permission to speak, to engage and to deliver their perspective of the near and the far, the familiar and the unknown. Where does that leave our immigrant stand-up comedians? How do they gain their audience's trust?

2.2.3 Insider-Outsiders

An interesting hint of an answer is provided by Edward Said's interpretation of Sigmund Freud's reading of the character of the biblical leader Moses. Somewhat like Benjamin's storyteller, Moses too was an insider-outsider. Born to an Israelite family, rescued and subsequently raised by the Egyptian daughter of Pharaoh among Egyptians, he returned as an adult to become the leader of his own people. Despite his difficulty in communication (his stammer), he managed to lead them out of slavery in Egypt and to the brink of the Promised Land.

"Moses was Egyptian," Said tells us, "and therefore always outside the identity inside which so many have stood, and suffered – and later, perhaps, even triumphed. The strength of this thought is, I believe, that it can be articulated in and speak to other besieged identities as well – not through dispensing palliatives such as tolerance and compassion but, rather, by attending to it as a troubling, disabling, destabilizing secular wound – the essence of the cosmopolitan, from which there can be no recovery, no state of resolved or Stoic calm, and no utopian reconciliation even within itself." (Said, 2014, p.28)

This troubling and destabilising wound of which Said speaks corresponds theoretically and thematically with the pain, suffering and death of Emmanuel Levinas' "Other" or "the face as the extreme precariousness of the other" (Butler, 2004, p.135). The face, according to Butler and Levinas, bears for the audience the gifts of self-awareness and defined identity; it "calls me out of narcissism towards something finally more important" (Butler, 2004, p.138). This

more important thing is, to Levinas' mind, "to be unable to kill". It is also, Levinas adds, "a situation of discourse" (Butler, 2004, p.138). Butler explains: "Why would it be that inability to kill is a situation of discourse?... The situation is one in which we are addressed, in which the other directs language towards us. That language communicates the precariousness of life that establishes the ongoing tension of non-violent ethics" (Butler, 2004, p.139).

The Levinasian "Face" and the way its discourse with others ameliorates the potential violence of the encounter is at the back of my argument that the stand-up comedy club situation provides the perfect storm for this discourse between the "Other" (in this case, the immigrant-comedian) and the community around them, namely the absorbing community of British audiences. The comedian in the performance situation enjoys the defence of the stage and the microphone, the physical distance from the audience, and the situational permission to poke fun at them. Simultaneously, the audience members are galvanised by the power of their fellow men and women in the room, and the vulnerability of the performer who is alone on the stage. This, in turn, enables the performer to show their "Face", to make a moral demand on the audience while entertaining them, allowing them to be exposed to their pain and humanity through laughter.

Comparing this to the status of current-day stand-up comedians is not so far-fetched as it might seem, when we consider the fact that they are often seen as modern-day prophets. Italian right-wing political Beppe Grillo and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenski were both stand-up comedians prior to becoming politicians. Political statements by leading performers tend to steer intense debates in the United Kingdom: when Andrew Lawrence attacked female and FGICs, the media debated it for days (see, among others, Alexander, 2014; Lee, 2014). When comedian Russell Brand called on young people to avoid voting in the general elections in protest, and then changed his mind - it became a subject of extensive discussion in both social and traditional media (see, among others, Selby, 2015; Hanson, 2015). Stand-up comedians such as Leo Kearse, Simon Evans and others lead talk shows on GB News, and even the respectable magazine *Foreign Policy* saw fit to devote a long article to how "Comedians Will Soon Rule the World" (Parikh, 2016). Moses, albeit a somewhat humourless character, is deemed an appropriate role model. According to Said, Moses (as well as Hannibal) was a hero for Freud due to his "audacity, persistence and courage", qualities often attributed to stand-ups, particularly the first.

2.2.4 The Habitus as a Gatekeeper

This combined well for me with Pierre Bourdieu's ideas of the Habitus as the gatekeeper of the ruling classes, who use education and "good taste" to block the way of the working classes into the privileged habitus. As Tony Bennett explains in his introduction to the English edition of Bourdieu's *Distinction*, Bourdieu contends that "people who belong to the same social group and who thus occupy the same position in social space tend to have the same taste across all forms of symbolic practice... those who have similar kinds of taste for

art will have a similar kind of taste not just for food but for all kinds of cultural or symbolic goods and practices" (Bennett, 2010, p. xix).

However, those shared goods, often marked as good taste, are, according to Bourdieu, privileges secured for the upper and upper-middle classes. "Tastes (i.e., manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes. In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation, and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance ("sick making") of the taste of others." (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 49).

The invisible walls of the Habitus are, in turn, used to exclude the working classes by defining their preferred cultural products as "vulgar", "common" or simply "in bad taste". This exclusion, according to Bourdieu, is always done from the more fortunate side of the class barrier. "It goes without saying that the social classes are not equally inclined and prepared to enter this game of refusal and counter-refusal and that the strategies aimed at transforming the basic dispositions of a lifestyle into a system of aesthetic principles, objective differences into elective distinctions, passive opinions…into conscious elective choices are in fact reserved for members of the dominant class." (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 50).

2.2.5 The National Habitus

The kind of habitus whose well-secured gates FGICs attempt to enter when performing in the United Kingdom are not necessarily the cultural class habitus of which Bourdieu speaks, but they are not dissimilar. Bourdieu's theory about taste and class has been stretched by his followers, such as such as Marie-Pierre Le Hir (2014), to encompass the "National Habitus": a set of values, tastes and cultural references which define the boundaries of a nation's cultural territory. The term "national habitus" was first coined by Norbert Elias (Le Hir, 2014, p. 3) who, like Bourdieu, worked in the 20th century, even though the notion of the habitus became most identified with the latter.

It was Elias, however, who emphasized the national aspects of the habitus and the hardship in penetrating its boundaries. However, it is important to note that Elias did not explain the difficulty in an immigrant's transformation solely by the nation they were attempting to penetrate, but also by the baggage they carried with them: "at least for adults, a change of national identity is hardly easier than a change of personality, and the chance of success is hardly any greater. More than just a change of passports is involved. A disturbance of national identity and of the national image embedded in the self-images of people, whether caused by a transformation in the life of a single individual or that of a whole nation, always leads to a reorientation of behaviour and feelings. It requires a reassessment of a person's values and beliefs and a reorganization of their perception of self and others. However much the ability to make such an adjustment may vary from individual to individual, with

adults it has definite limits as a rule. An adult Frenchman or German does not easily lose his basic character as such or forget his earlier identity if he becomes an American citizen." (Elias, 1996, p. 7).

Thus, according to Elias, the concept of the national habitus describes not only the space of the absorbing nature into which the immigrants attempt to step, but also their own baggage of values, languages, habits, customs, religious and spiritual affiliations, manners, family relationships, sense of humour, and so on. All of those can make it as hard for FGICs to connect to their audiences, as do those audiences' national habitus-related boundaries.

But despite the difficulties described by Elias, later immigration scholars emphasised the ability of immigrants to adapt to the system and negotiate with it. Paul Michael Garett noted that the habitus is not an impenetrable wall: "we are not automatons or mindless vehicles of our governing habitus. Rather, habitus acts as a very loose set of guidelines permitting us to strategize, adapt, improvise... to situations as they arise." (Garrett, 2018, p. 128).

It is exactly this point - and the processes leading to it - that this research aims to identify in the practice of first-generation immigrant stand-up comedians. The very decision to get on a stage for the first time may be seen as a sign of adjustment to life in the United Kingdom and a willingness to be in dialogue with British audiences, but as many of the interviewees pointed out, their starting point was far from indicating any "readiness", and their motivations were more gullible than informed. Strategizing, adaptation and improvisation are exercised within the ongoing negotiation process with the audience, from one gig in London to the next in the Home Counties. This initiation journey not only teaches the audiences about the reality of immigration but also, to an extent, turns the immigrant-comedians into Brits.

Sam Friedman, another devotee of Bourdieu's, wrote specifically about the Edinburgh Festival and generally about the place of taste and money in a comedian's prospect of success (Friedman, 2012). The sense of National Habitus is the door the comedians must open to get permission and be welcomed - or at least allowed - to have their say.

While Bourdieu described in distinction how the higher classes use their cultural privileges mainly by transforming them into tastes for the high arts, Friedman argues that in this current age of the "cultural omnivore", the distinction is not between the art form and art products consumed, but in the discourse, language and terminology used by different consumers to analyse them. The fact that comedy is now a "legitimate" pursuit for all classes, "opens up the possibility that popular culture like comedy may be used in the pursuit of distinction." (Friedman, 2011, p. 351). But, as Friedman demonstrates, the distinction is not only created by opting for comedians who are known as "highbrow" or sophisticated, but in the terms in which they are discussed. For example, he demonstrates

how both interviewees that he described as HCC (High Cultural Capital) and LCC (Low Cultural Capital) enjoyed watching comedienne Eddie Izzard, but their reasoning for this enjoyment varied. While LCC respondents noted the comedienne's 'energy' or 'silliness', HCC ones related to the 'surreal', 'whimsical' or 'challenging' aspects of her comedy (Friedman, 2011, p. 351).

All of this reinforced my conviction that being "one of us" – namely being able to demonstrate a sense of belonging or at least understanding the national habitus – is the immigrant-comedians' key to audience acceptance. This direction was supported in my fieldwork by some comedians' reports on their efforts to incorporate local slang, British cultural references and class traits into their comedy, in order to prove their cultural savviness to their British audiences.

2.2.6 The Face of the Other

At the same time, there was some evidence pulling in a different direction. One phrase kept coming up in every single conversation with interlocutors: "getting it out of the way" in the context of referencing their foreign origin and immigration status in their sets. Indeed, addressing everything that is noticeable about one's appearance, such as voice, accent etc., is considered a "truism" of stand-up comedy. When interviewing comedy teachers and directors, they have made that point emphatically. "You absolutely have to mention anything that the audience may notice about you early in your set," said stand-up comedy director Amanda Baker, who directs Edinburgh Fringe shows for comedians of all levels, from beginners to those who are household names in the UK (Baker, 2022). " If you are short, tall, fat, come from north England, black, disabled – all those things need to get out early in your set", said comedian and comedy tutor at the London Comedy School, Mr Cee (Stylee, 2023). In her *Comedy Bible,* Judy Carter advises: "be sure you know what's obvious about you" (Carter, 2001, p. 140). For first-generation immigrants, more often than not, the answer is obvious. Interviewees often addressed the assumption that failing to mention their country of origin might "distract" the audience from listening to what they had to say, as they would be preoccupied with attempts to figure out where they were from.

However, in the case of first-generation immigrants, another important caveat kept coming up: the idea that the more hostile the audience seemed to be to the performer as an immigrant, the more time the comedians felt they had to devote to talking about their foreignness in order to "appease" the room. "The more 'Brexity' they are, the more time I feel I need to dedicate to being Italian," said comedian Alex Martini, the term 'Brexity' describing an antagonistic white English audience that tended to support the United Kingdom's decision to break out of the European Union (Martini, 2021). "In places out in the countryside where the audience is more likely to be a bit antagonistic, I feel I need to talk more about being Romanian," explained Romanian comedian Radu Isac (Isac, 2021).

The cumulative appearance of this argument made me realise that it is a balance of demonstrating "local savvy" and "owning up" to who you are, that genuinely opens the doors of the national habitus. As an immigrant stand-up facing British audiences, you must demonstrate not only that you know where you are, are aware of the ground rules and the values accepted by the people in the room, but you also have to show that you have a sense of your own identity and willingness to stand by it, explain it and share it. This, again, strongly echoed Levinas' notion of the "face" of the "other" and its importance in changing individuals and society.

Levinas, writes Judith Butler, tells us that "the structure of an address is important for understanding how moral authority is introduced and sustained if we accept not just that we address others when we speak, but that in some ways we come to exist, as it were, in the moment of being addressed" Butler's description of the ways in which we are addressed, which, for her, "binds us morally" seems very relevant to the stand-up performance form of address, namely being addressed by others "in ways that we cannot avert or avoid; this impingement by the others' address constitutes us first and foremost against our will or, perhaps more appropriately, prior to the formation of our will." (Butler, 2004, p. 130).

The form that this address takes in a stand-up comedy performance is constructed upon a different, yet very subtle, balance of power between the Other, the performer, and the room facing them. This is not the one-on-one encounter that Levinas and Butler may have had in mind. The participants in this encounter have their strengths and vulnerabilities: the act seeks the love and acceptance of the room, and at the same time, a recognition of their pain and suffering. The room has the advantage of numbers, they can gang up on the performer, make them feel unwelcome in the room, and escalate their objection from arm-folded silence to heckling, and in rare cases, even to object-throwing and actual violence. The comedian is lonely on the stage, but they are on it – in a heightened position, with the advantage of the microphone and their own wit and charisma. They can use those means and skills to isolate pockets of objection in the room and turn the rest of the audience against them while appealing to their sense of humour, justice, or to the very fact that they have come to watch the stand-up comedian and not a random heckler. In some cases, the whole comedic set can be seen as a process of invoking the Levinasian moment: getting the audience to empathise with the performer's pain, feel their own pain, and achieve the relief of laughter.

Examining this rather sombre text by Butler, which deals with notions of pain, grieving and death, might at first glance be deemed inappropriate for a discussion of humour and comedic performance. But both Butler and Levinas address an issue that worries both FGICs and their audiences. Audiences tend to be wary of the immigrating "Other" - particularly if they hail from previously colonized or otherwise deprived countries and might criticize or accuse the audience of their plight. The comedians, in turn, are often concerned about

antagonizing their audiences by sounding ungrateful or accusatory. Comedians report reluctance of audience members which they perceive as a fear of being accused of something. Some comedians indeed do accuse, air grievances, or take the audience to task; others do not, but suspicion and suspense hang between them and the crowd.

Kenyan stand-up Njambi McGrath feels this is her obligation: "Comedy gives me an opportunity that comes with an obligation. I have a platform; my mother and grandmother did. The women who were forced to spend all their days breaking rocks, whose babies died of starvation on their backs, because they couldn't have a break to breastfeed - those women did not have a voice." (McGrath, 2022).

Vlad Ilich from North Macedonia has less anger directed towards the British, yet he too feels that he must bring the realities of war and suffering home to his audiences: "I learned how to value life because of the war. And so, for me, it is still the almost universal value of the meaning of human life. I don't think people have experienced starvation; they haven't experienced war for a long time. And they don't know what the essence of human life is. My task here is to transcend them; to be able to communicate that to an audience." (Ilich, 2022).

McGrath's criticism, or even Ilich's gentler attempt to introduce pain, could turn conflictual in the context of stand-up. The sense of primordial threat for the audience caused by the "Other" comedian's outpouring originates in the Levinasian notion that "to expose myself to the vulnerability of the face is to put my ontological right to existence into question." (Levinas & Kearny, 1986, pp. 23-24). However, Levinas and Butler view this clash as a potential healing process: "it might prompt us effectively to reinvigorate the intellectual projects of critique, of questioning, of coming to understand the difficulties and demands of cultural translation and dissent, and to create a sense of the public in which oppositional voices are not feared, degraded or dismissed, but valued for the insolation to a sensate democracy they occasionally perform." (Butler, 2004, p. 151). I maintain that at its best, or at least when successful, the comedy of others in general, and particularly immigrants, can make this calling of "the face" meet open ears and hearts. This, in turn, can make their owners understood or at least, as so many of them express a desire for, seen.

2.2.7 Post-Colonial Theory

I found another interpretative tool, both in general but particularly for comedians immigrating from Britain's former colonies, in the writings of post-colonial theorists, especially Edward Said, Stewart Hall, Kehinde Andrews, and Nirmal Puwar. The centrality of identity in the social construction of immigrants' culture in post-colonial thinking illuminates the baggage - and the gift - that FGICs bring into the UK comedy scene. Representation is another central term for post-colonial thinking. Its importance for a more egalitarian society but also the expectations it creates towards immigrant-comedians – both to their benefit

and their hindrance – are essential for understanding the works of the comedy scene for immigrant-participants. Nirmal Puwar's discussion of the way space is taken by Others, mainly women and non-whites, based on post-colonial theorists as well as on feminist theory and Bourdieu's construction of Habitus, had a significant impact on my analysis.

Identity and Identification - Hall's depiction of identity and its nature corresponds well with the process of the immigrants' way of inhabiting a new national habitus, as is described by Elias and Garett, in the understanding of mobility and variety in its construction. Hall beautifully presents his concept of identity as non-essentialistic but rather strategic and positional. Rather' it is opposite to what seems settled in its semantic. It is not rigidly attached to a "stable core of the self…identical to itself across time…Nor is it that 'collective or true self hiding inside the many other… which a people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common." (Hall, 1996, pp 3). Hall's concept of identity is flexible, in that "It accepts that identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but ultimately constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions." (Hall, 1996, p 4).

The relevance of Hall's construction of identities is in how the presence of immigrants and their identities in society in general, and more so their presence as comedians on the comedy circuit, by nature of their constant interaction and negotiation with other communities, is ever-changing. It is not fixed. It derives its strength and character from their "history and ancestry", but also from the fact that their identities, just like those of the audiences they face, are ever "fragmented and fractured", and to the extent that comedy is a wound with pain is at its core, as demonstrated by so many of the interviews I conducted, it derives from this fracture. Examples of this "fracture" can be seen in Njambi McGrath's broken image of British colonialism which inspires her comedy (McGrath, 2022), or in Benjamin Bello's surprise at discovering that he is not really "some kind of English" or that there is "another kind of Nigerians", whom he encountered only when arriving in south London (Bello, 2022).

Hall's indication of the construction of identity as central to enabling agency is another key theoretical notion in addressing the nature of FGICs' stand-up comedy trajectory in the UK. "In relation to what kind of problems does the irreducibility of the concept, identity, emerge?" asks Hall, and replies: "I think the answer here lies in its centrality to the question of agency and politics." (Hall, 1996, p. 1). Hall explains that he means politics in a wider context than its formal structures. "I agree with Foucault that what we require here is 'not a theory of the knowing subject, but rather a theory of discursive practice'", (Hall, 1996, p. 1). I argue that stand-up comedy is indeed such a "discursive practice", and that a strong sense of identity enables FGICs, and comedians in general, to harness the agency required for addressing audiences of majority group citizens of their adopted country.

Representation - In *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place*, Nirmal Puwar addresses the subject of representation of Black bodies. "Black bodies in professions that pertain to the universal, the general and the truth are, unlike white bodies, perceived to be representative of their race. This is a phenomenon that can be observed across different fields." (Puwar, 2004, p. 65). Puwar expands her thoughts on representation to the role of MPs, but stand-up comedy is certainly one of the "different fields" that "pertain to the universal and the truth". She draws on Richard Dyer's famous saying that unlike racialised people, who are limited to speaking for their race, unracialized people claim to speak for the whole of humanity (Dyer, 1997, p.2).

Comedians are in the public eye, they entertain but also speak out of position, and according to the evidence of all the FGICs I interviewed – notably those who are Black or people of colour - their audience expects them, to some degree, to represent the places from which they have come. In some cases, they feel an obligation to do so regardless of the audience's assumed expectations (See Martini, 2021, McGrath, 2022, Moseley, 2023 and Ilich, 2022). Some interviewees noted their strong desire to be unchained from the shackles of representation, and to be able just to make general observations about topics such as dating, shopping, pop culture and so on, but almost invariably feel that they first must pay their dues to represent - or at the very least address - their countries of origin (see: Isac, 2022, Martini, 2022, Szèles, 2023).

In the following chapters I will present a variety of cases based on my fieldwork, all demonstrating the practical reflections of those theoretical notions: the encounter between the non-other audience and the "Other" FGICs, the negotiation of permission of entry into the Habitus, and the identity of the comedian as simultaneously "one of us" and an "Other".

2.2.8 Brexit and British Attitudes Towards Immigration

Both my experience on the British comedy circuit and the years in which this research was conducted overlapped (which was hardly a coincidence) with the years in which the debate over Brexit, the vote over Brexit, and the first years of the United Kingdom's break from the European Union took place. This necessitated some understanding of the political atmosphere towards immigration in general in that period and towards European immigrants in particular. Evidence that anti-immigration attitudes in general galvanised support for Brexit in the UK (Clarke *et al*., 2016), was presented by Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley in their 2017 analysis of the 2016 referendum result. Their findings indicated that anti-immigration attitudes were a major predictor of voting to leave the EU, and that worries about immigration (especially its cultural and economic effects) were a significant driving force for the "Leave" campaign. Their research demonstrated how the campaign for leaving the EU relied successfully on public fears regarding immigration (Clarke *et al*., 2016).

Further research by Rooij, Van der Linden, and Goodwin also indicated that the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated prejudice against immigration and the sense of threat and fear of foreigners even after Brexit was implemented (Rooij *et al.*, 2021).

At the same time, other research by Schwartz, Hudson and van-Heerde-Hudson insists that anti-immigrant attitudes were in fact softened after the Brexit referendum, among Leave and Remain supporters alike, and these effects persisted for several months. The authors attempted to understand what they referred to as this 'populist paradox'. Indeed, "among Leavers, a greater sense of control over immigration channelled the effects of the Brexit outcome onto anti-immigrant attitudes", however, individuals' efforts to distance themselves from accusations of xenophobia and racism explains the softening of attitudes towards immigration observed among both Leavers and Remainers (Schwartz *et al.*, 2021).

This mixed evidence may account for the fact that the testimonies of immigrant stand-up comedians about the amount of hostility they felt while performing around the United Kingdom in the run-up for Brexit and its aftermath are so varied. Some reported a hostile work environment in the run-up towards Brexit; others said it was more apparent after the actual vote on the referendum; yet others claimed they felt no hostility at all. It is important to note that those differences may have to do with other variables: some comedians avoid performing outside of London or at other places where they feel unsafe. Other differences could be related to the public perception of the comedian's countries of origin. Eastern European comedians reported more explicit hostility towards them than comedians who immigrated from Western Europe. Alex Martini, an immigrant from Italy, said "I am not their problem; Brexit was not aimed against me, Italians are 'cute immigrants'. They wanted to get rid of the Romanians." (Martini, 2021). Indeed, Romanian comedians tended to report more racist incidents in their shows around that time (Isac, 2022, Szèles, 2023). An article by Radziwinowiczówna and Galasińska (2021) in the *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* demonstrates that the public atmosphere and media publications around the Brexit period were more hostile to Eastern Europeans than towards other immigrants.

3. Literature Review

This thesis analyses the ways in which FGICs negotiate their material to British audiences, a subject that is new to academic research, hence the hope for innovation and contribution to knowledge. When I embarked on this research project, I could hardly find specific references to it at all, but a few articles touching upon it have emerged recently. This literature review, more than it aims to find the gap in knowledge on this specific subject, strives to situate it among the relevant existing knowledge on comedy, immigration and performance. It will also help define the appropriate interdisciplinary zone between comedy, theatre, philosophy, sociology and politics. Various relevant perspectives on stand-up comedy and immigration are presented here through the prism of relevant literature.

3.1 Stand-up Comedy and Immigration

As noted, academic writing relating specifically to FGICs was quite scarce when I started researching for this thesis. A few studies have since emerged, particularly since 2022; some bundled first and second-generation immigrants together, while others included ethnic minorities in the same bale of otherness. The collection *Punching Up in Stand-Up Comedy: Speaking Truth to Power* (Bhargava & Richa, 2023) was a helpful recent addition to the academic bookshelf, illuminating the experience of Others, including immigrants, in stand-up comedy in various countries worldwide.

Mihaela Constantinescu (2024) illuminates the identity construction of immigrant stand-ups in general, and the Eastern European comedians I interviewed in particular. Constantinescu's conclusion that the way comedians stage stereotypes "depend on the comedian's identity investment in the persona he creates during the humorous performance, as well as on the degree of marginality he assumes for that persona" (Constantinescu 2024, p. 69), was helpful in defining the interplay between displaying stereotypes and allowing the comedian's own personality to come through.

Giacinto Palmieri's (2017) PhD thesis sheds light on how comedians whose first language is not English translate jokes, notions and expressions "on their feet" (literally), negotiating their own language directly to audiences. Palmieri's insights contributed to my understanding of the communication strategies of non-English-speaking FGIC, and the dynamics of the Italian comedy group (see Ch. 8).

Jen Harvie (2005) Nadine Holdsworth and Nicholas Hytner (2010) and Holdsworth (2024), all make fascinating observations on Theatre and its relation to nationality and nationalism, with Harvie particularly focusing on the UK. While aware of their contribution, I believe that stand-up comedy differs significantly from theatre. The differences are reflected both in its

modes of production, namely its individual nature and frugal (in most cases) funding, and in the relationship between content and performance, where the author, the performer and the director are in most cases one and the same. This implies a different way of relating to the nationalities of both performers and audiences, no need to create some kind of unity within a team of performers, and often a positionality which stages the one performer in front of – sometimes even against – an audience. In this context, I found writing on otherness in stand-up comedy to be more relevant to my research and analysis.

3.2 Post-Colonial Immigration, North Americans, Antipodeans and Europeans

The presence of FGICs in the UK is a recent phenomenon, while second-generation immigrants left their mark on the comedy circuit as early as the 1980s and 1990s. The growth of the comedy scene in the UK in the 21st century made it attractive to foreign stand-up comedians who wanted to try and thrive in it, and the relative ease in pursuing a career in stand-up, compared to other performing arts, made it attractive to immigrants who were already present in the UK.

Andrews (2021) provides a useful short contemporary history of how the UK - and particularly its conservative governments – has framed its attitude towards immigration. The distinction he makes between the country's approach towards Black and Brown immigrants from Britain's colonies and the relative newcomers from EU countries is useful for the differences I intend to explore in the comedic approaches of comedians from those groups. However, Andrews' strong focus on race might somewhat blind him to the fact that the deep familiarity of those coming from previously colonized countries with British culture provides them with a few advantages over their European counterparts who, despite the geographic proximity of their homelands, are sometimes less "at home" within British language and culture. It also might have driven him to make light of racism directed at Eastern European immigrants.

Andrews notes Margaret Thatcher's argument that "people are afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture…" as a pretext for future hostility towards such newcomers. This, he concludes, was an attack on social democracy itself, which "only works if society feels that everyone should have a stake in sharing the wealth… White workers are supposedly being short changed by multiculturalism, which is privileging the darkies who are swamping the country and demanding special protection under anti-racist legislation. Britain's embrace of individualism was in large part driven by its rejection of diversity." He adds that "we saw the same use of racist logic in the campaign for Brexit […] with fears of uncontrolled immigration being its major talking point." (Andrews 2021, pp. 196-197).

This raises poignant points for FGICs not only in communicating with their British audiences, but also with fellow British comedians, particularly white ones, often such who define themselves, accurately or less so, as working-class. One of the notable points of outrage in the UK's comedy community in the last decade was the storm over Andrew Lawrence's Facebook post (Facebook, 2014), saying, among other things, that:

> "I can't help but notice increasingly a lot of 'political' comedians cracking cheap and easy gags about UKIP… Particularly too much moronic, liberal back-slapping on panel shows like Mock the Week where aging, balding, fat men, ethnic comedians and women-posing-as-comedians, sit congratulating themselves on how enlightened they are about the fact that UKIP are ridiculous and pathetic." (Middleton, 2017).

Lawrence, until then known as an up-and-coming white working-class comedian, faced a backlash from comedians like Frankie Boyle and Dara O'Briain, who referred to him as "bitter and "self-delusional" (O'Briain, 2014). The incident has set the stage for repeating spats, especially between white comedians identifying as working class and Liberal, white, ethnic minorities and female comedians.

While immigrants did not overtly take part in that scandal, Lawrence claimed "concerns" about free movement and the "open borders" of the UK to justify his outburst, thus making things increasingly uncomfortable for FGICs in the run-up to Brexit. It should be noted that while second-generation comedians, who are represented in the higher echelons of British comedy, had an opportunity to speak for themselves and gained defence from famous left-leaning comics – first generation immigrant comics were not heard on it, not even the more successful among them, like Henning Wehn (Germany) or Reginald D Hunter (US).

O'Briain himself is an Irish immigrant in the UK, who makes "outsider's" observations (see O'Briain, 2009), but who had by then gained the status of a household presenter and national treasure. This in itself gives some validation to Andrews's assertion that white immigrants from the EU have vast advantages compared to their non-white counterparts: "White migrants are still white and their children melt into the population in a way that we never can. In many ways, freedom of movement from Europe was just a continuation of the long-held immigration policy to encourage white migration whilst discouraging those who are Black and Brown". (Andrews, 2021, p. 197).

EU migrants, particularly those from eastern Europe, certainly felt the heat in the run-up to Brexit, but Andrews qualifies that "it is not incredibly surprising that the xenophobic backlash against EU migrants coincided with the financial crash and Austerity." (Andrews, 2021, p. 197). Interestingly, the 2009 crash had hit just as first-generation immigrant comics became more visible in the UK, and they were forced to deal with said xenophobic backlash.

Andrews notes that immigrants from the colonies have a specific claim in the UK, deriving from the country's colonial past. "Immigration, in and of itself, is the chickens of Imperialism coming home to roost… Our blood, sweat and tears lay at the foundation of British progress." (Andrews, 2021, p. 199).

3.3 Otherness

Questions of otherness and the ways in which it is negotiated are central to the experience of FGICs. In order to discuss otherness in comedy and the way Others present themselves, a discussion of the relations between a "stand-up", "jester", or "story teller" and "the room", namely their audiences, is necessary.

In his essay 'The Storyteller' (2016), Walter Benjamin notes that: "people imagine the storyteller as someone who has come from afar. But they enjoy no less listening to the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions. If one wants to picture these two groups through their archaic representatives, one is embodied in the resident tiller of the soil, and the other in the trading seaman." (Benjamin, 2016, p. 2). Namely, even when the storyteller has "come from afar", they are still one of us who was sent to faraway countries to collect impressions and tell them back to us in our cultural language. The immigrant storyteller only possesses one of those traits – they come from afar. In order to bridge that gap and "qualify" by Benjamin's description, the immigrant needs to add to their tales of 'afar', the familiarity of the local. In the global world, this task is easier than it used to be – Local cultures travel around aided by social media, films, television and other cultural products, and the immigrant has the tools to internalize local culture, to some extent, prior to arrival. Yet the immigrant still needs to deal with that gap, and with certain suspicion towards the foreigner who purports to become a 'storyteller'. "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale." (Benjamin, 2016, p. 3), but this unity requires a leap over cultural boundaries.

"The listener's naive relationship to the storyteller is controlled by his interest in retaining what he is told", and, "memory creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation," Benjamin argues. But immigrant stand-ups and their audiences do not share a collective memory, nor historiography, which Benjamin suggests "constitute the common ground of all forms of the epic" (Benjamin, 2016, p. 7). This, again, requires a preliminary creation of common ground, from which native storytellers and comedians are exempt.

"What the storyteller knows from hearsay is added to his own experience. His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to tell his entire life. The storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story… The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself

(Benjamin, 2016, p. 14). This is a mammoth task for anyone – and its hardship is doubled when the common experience shared by the performer and his audience is minimal.

Similarly, Ian Brodie (2014) introduces a perception of stand-up as a type of folklore, requiring a rapport and an assumption of common grounds and shared values between performer and audience. "Contemporary folklore is rooted in the concept of the group, and the contact between its communicator and receivers" (Brodie, 2014, p.16).

"The comedian and audience are part of a group by virtue of, if nothing else, their interaction in a face-to-face relationship […] When I meet someone for the first time, certain cues give me an initial orienting of them within my worldview, allowing for the projection of sets of both common and opposed factors. This initial orientation is based on culturally and experientially grounded expectations for the worldview of the other associated in particular, culturally significant keywords. Such projections are prejudicial and, as such, quickly contestable. They are, however, prejudicial in both communality and difference. They have both esoteric and exoteric expectations associated with them." (Brodie, 2014, p. 17). How, then, can FGICs become a part of that group? Brodie makes an important contribution here. In those first few seconds of encounter, the audience judges the comic, based on the cues exposing their world view. This judgement, I argue, is based not only on the extent to which the comic, the communicator, is "one of us", but also on the extent to which they can communicate their otherness, own up to it, acknowledge it, and convince the audience that it merits their attention.

According to Brodie, the viewers ask themselves: "is this position on a topic, this articulated experience, is it something consistent with my understanding of the universe, something identifiably inconsistent, or something apart from but not wholly other, something new but not threatening?" The positioning of the stand-up – particularly outsiders to "the group"- is crucial to the success of their negotiation with their audience. Whether they aim to criticize the British society or to be integrated into it – they must tread those lines carefully. I do not argue that they may only be unthreatening, but rather that the threat they bear should be measured, mitigatable, or, as Quirk defines the stand up's ultimate tool for altering consciousness, manipulative (Quirk, 2015, p. 1).

Brodie recognises that stand-up comedy is a useful setting for containing this tension between world views:

> "Whereas exclusivity and dissent would be destructive in certain forms of discourse, stand-up comedy, which is play and not polemic, thrives in the milieu of difference. The sociocultural distance of performer and audience that often occurs is reconciled not through its negation but through both its recognition and the recognition of other sets of commonalities." (Brodie, 2014, p. 17).

The stand-up comedian, therefore, has the power to control the tension, even that which is raised by their very identity – as long as they deftly manage their presentation of dissent or conformity, challenges and integrated understandings – by controlling their vocabulary and, I'd add, their tone.

One way of looking at the group, says Brodie, "is as an association of people with shared expectations or norms: I expect members of this group - mine, yours, ours – to know this history, to share these values, to behave in these manners, to hold these attitudes, to draw meanings from these experiences. I am assured when expectations are met… I am challenged when expectations are not met, when something other happens, and I must reflect on what caused me to have those expectations in the first place".

Managing those expectations is challenging for all comedians, but for FGICs it verges on the impossible. It requires a deep, intimate acquaintance with the local social and political culture, and an understanding of its nuances, while holding on to one's own identity and argument. How do immigrant comics walk that line and frame their negotiation mode? That is the question at the heart of this thesis.

3.4 Presence as a Form of Political Action

According to Diana Taylor (2020), "presence" is an ongoing commitment to combat injustice and colonially conditioned knowledge production by walking and talking with Others. Bringing physical presence and words to the public sphere is a political deed, it changes reality. It gives presence to a group of people or to ideas that were until then marginalized, colonized, or silenced.

Most immigrant stand ups do not purport to represent a nation or a political idea. Most talk about their desire to be accepted for who they are individually, to be seen. However, just like women, LGBT people and ethnic minorities, they change the stand-up comedy scene by merit of their very presence in it. They demand space and recognition in the public sphere by being a part of it.

What the comedians say has meaning, but being on stage already makes them possess their small part of the public sphere. This is true of all arts, but in stand-up comedy, a field that was for many years occupied almost exclusively by white men, – the effect of the "invasion" of minorities - and immigrants among them - arguably redefined the scene. It has transformed criticism of the comedic premise from a matter between audiences and comedians to an internal debate.

One of the difficulties in identifying the *modus operandi* of FGICs in conveying their messages is that many of them deny having one. Yet all of them want to be heard, accepted, and 'let in' by their audiences. But even those who do not wish to raise any grievances still have to go through the anthropological ceremony they invariably define as 'getting it out of

the way' - 'it' being their accent, colour, name, ethnicity, or anything that exposes them to their audience as 'foreign'. This procedure, whether conducted reluctantly or purposefully, creates new rules of engagement in the space in which the performance takes place. Dwight Conquergood argues that "proximity, not objectivity, becomes an epistemological point of departure and return." (Conquergood, 2013, p. 13)

What we know, in part, expands Diana Taylor, "depends on our being there, interacting with others, unsettles from our assumption and certainties, forging at times the conditions for mutual recognition, trust and solidarity. It's impossible to pretend to be objective or disembodied. The performance itself, as a framework and as a doing, contributes to the meaning." (Taylor, 2020, p. 9). Taylor notes that "we do not just recognise and acknowledge each other in a neutral 'space of appearance'. The encounter between the individual 'I' and the collective 'we'…"entails complex rituals and politics of recognition." Who gets to speak and reveal their 'unique personal identities'? Who gets to speak for whom? Do I even recognise you as human? As a part of my 'we'?" (Taylor, 2020, p. 10). A performance space, - and I will argue, specifically a stand-up comedy performance space – in which the comedian possesses the microphone, the height of the stage, is a unique space where the immigrant performer gets to do just that. And even if not making far-reaching political statements, even when insisting on talking about the personal and the mundane, FGICs make a difference by their very presence in the room, and by addressing their audience. Because, as Taylor puts it, "The 'I' that initiated the conversation is not the 'I' that emerges"; the encounter changes all that take part in it. If the anticolonial practice, in Taylor's words, "means going to meet people in their own spaces, on their own terms, not to study or observe them but to listen and learn from their actions, words and epistemic systems" – the practice of immigrant stands-up combines those ideas. FGICs go to meet their audiences in their territories and on their terms, and they do observe them, and share their observations with them, enabling them to learn their own "actions, words and epistemic systems". This double-edged gaze enables dialogue and recognition.

3.5 Otherness, Social-Cultural Capital and the Comedy Habitus

George Mead (1934) noted that "identities are produced through agreement, disagreement, and negotiation with other people". Zevallos (2011) adds that ideas of similarity and difference are central to the way in which we achieve a sense of identity and social belonging. Identities have some element of exclusivity. Social membership depends upon fulfilling a set of criteria. Stand-up is a unique space for carrying out this negotiation, which produces identity, not just to be held by its owner, but to be perceived by their environment. The status of the stand-up comedian – on stage, holding a microphone and controlling the room, may undo, temporarily, any gaps between them and their audience in terms of Bourdieu's notion of capital (Bourdieu 1986) – a gap that is social and cultural, even when it is not economical.

Pierre Bourdieu coined the term 'habitus' to explain individuals' dispositions to action in relation to the field, namely, the social context in which capitals derive their value (Bourdieu, 1986 and 1990). The 'habitus' created by the stand-up situation puts the comedian in a dual status: seemingly, they stand to be judged by an audience, and live or die on stage through its laughter and approval; however, they are simultaneously the holders of the symbolic capital of the microphone, namely, they control, for a limited amount of time, not only the speech, but the discourse and the rules on engagement. How they use this to determine the habitus in the field would greatly depend on their professional ability and experience as stand-ups, namely, their ability to manipulate in order to establish their identity on stage and negotiate their messages and their otherness.

Bourdieu views artistic 'taste' as a construct of class, upbringing and education. (Bourdieu, 1984 p. xxiv) This notion puts FGICs in a complex position. The art form that they have chosen is not 'noble' enough to define its followers as the holders of refined tastes. However, Sam Friedman (2011, p. 347), applying Bourdieu's ideas of taste as cultural currency for comedy and particularly for the British stand-up comedy scene, makes a strong case for comedy, including stand-up comedy, having its own class markers.

Friedman draws on the work of Peterson and Kern (1996) and their influential notion of the 'cultural omnivore' which was recently corroborated in the UK context by Bennett *et al.* (2009). Bennett *et al.* diagnosed that contemporary 'elites' no longer consume only what he referred to as 'legitimate culture', but are better characterized as open minded 'omnivores', happy to incorporate both high and low cultural forms into their consumption repertoires. "If 'high' cultural objects have lost their signifying power, it would follow that it is now increasingly difficult for the culturally privileged to 'cash in' their cultural capital resources." (Friedman, 2011, pp. 349-350).

Friedman identifies "highbrow" comedy artists and products as ones that were subjected to the attention, interest and praise of critics, as well as to some academic engagement and analysis, for example, stand-up comedian Stewart Lee, and the television series *Brass Eye* by comedy writer Chris Morris.

Friedman argues that nowadays "British comedy is, to some extent, now being mobilized by the culturally privileged as an instrument of distinction." However, he finds that "'comic cultural capital' is mobilized less through taste for certain legitimate 'objects' and more through the expression of rarefied but diffuse styles of comic appreciation. In short, it is embodied rather than objectified forms of cultural capital that largely distinguishes the privileged in the field of comedy." (Friedman, 2011, p. 209).

Interestingly, the consumption and embracing of 'foreign' art is often used as a middle-class trope in the UK. Immigrants are viewed as existing outside of the class system in the UK, which is a falsehood: immigrants use class in their negotiation with audiences, though the

choices they make while branding themselves may also become a hindrance. For example, Reginald D. Hunter said: "Black people don't come to see my show because they do not connect to the middle-class television shows that my white audience sees me on" (Hunter, 2022). Alex Martini, who comes from a rural Italian background, testified that he "connects well to working-class British audiences," but also hopes to demonstrates to middle-class audiences that "in Italy being working class does not mean being uneducated." (Martini, 2021).

This class/race awareness enables FGICs to recognise the issues in negotiating their comedy. Their ability to recognise and tackle those issues can become a significant part of their own cultural capital (see the next section) and help them bridge gaps of knowledge and social/cultural familiarity with the country that absorbed them.

3.6 Cultural Distinction, Embodied vs. Objectified Cultural Capital

Seeking to find expressions of cultural privilege in the world of stand-up comedy, Friedman (2011) distinguishes between objectified cultural capital - namely, knowing how to pick the supposedly 'right' cultural objects to appreciate - and 'embodied' cultural capital – how those cultural products are consumed and appreciated. While "for the culturally privileged, then, liking and disliking the 'right' comedy does appear to act as a status marker," people of high and low cultural capital might still appreciate the same comedians, even though their reasoning for it may differ. For example, Freedman presents a survey showing that there were no big gaps in the appreciation for comedians Eddie Izzard, Russell Brand and the Monty Python troupe, among holders of high, low, and medium cultural capital (interestingly, huge gaps were present in the appreciation for generic symbolisers of class such as Stewart Lee and Bernard Manning). However, the ways in which such appreciation was explained was what embodied the cultural capital. Freedman quotes spectators' views about comedian Eddie (currently known as Suzy) Izzard. A lower cultural capital fan (Fraser, a tree surgeon) emphasised the "silliness" of the act, saying "Absolutely mental! It's not all about real life. It's more silliness." (Friedman, 2011, p. 357). At the same time, Tom, a high cultural capital TV writer, used rather different terminology: "He's something pretty much unique in comedy. I mean he does a lot of cuddlier stuff, but it's still clever. When you talk about cats and dogs, it's a bit of hackneyed comedy thing, but he talks about a cat drilling for food behind the couch, that's brilliant, it's a beautiful flight of fancy." (Friedman, 2011, p. 357). Freedman argues that the ability to frame one's appreciation in the right terms positions them at a higher footing, more than does the mere choice of cultural items to consume, especially in the current cultural arena of "cultural omnivores" or "enlightened eclecticism" (Friedman, 2011, p. 353). If everyone is allowed to enjoy football, action films, and Michael McIntyre (another comedian who used to be scorned by self-appointed cultural connoisseurs, but according to Freedman's 2009 survey is liked similarly by holders of lower and higher cultural capital), the distinction is only in how those two groups explain those preferences. "Above all," notes Freedman, "HCC respondents characterized the comedy

they liked in terms of sophistication. Favourite comedians were 'intelligent', 'complex', 'intellectual' and most of all 'clever'" (Friedman, 2011, p. 358). It is therefore not enough that the comedy is just "funny". I'd add "ironic" to the most common terms used to justify intellectual respect to what might seem, through different lenses, to be vulgar or simplistic. From the perceived "lower" end of the cultural capital spectrum, the demand is often heard that comedy should be "just funny". In contrast, one of Freedman's HCC interviewees, Steve, a graduate student, said: "I don't think laughter is integral. It's really irrelevant for me personally. I suppose you're taking in the artistic value rather than just purely making you laugh." (Friedman, 2011, p. 360).

From this perspective, immigrant stand-up comedians need to find their way through both doors, being considered worthy as "objectified" cultural capital, and as "embodied" cultural capital. This would require penetrating both the national habitus - which to an extent enables most British people to develop a consensus about certain comedians - and the class-based habitus, that enables their comedy offerings to be discussed in cultural-capital-appropriate terms. Immigrating with the cultural capital that could ease this type of integration could highly influence their ability to negotiate their comedy to UK audiences: class awareness, acquaintance with British culture and comedy savviness could all be parts of an immigrant comic's cultural currency.

3.7. Comedy and the Recognition of Others

Daniel Smith (2021) suggests that comedy appeals to contemporary people because it provides an apt social-aesthetic form through which to face up to living with others at a time when it is hard to bear others or otherness. Smith deconstructs, helped by Simmel and Freud's tools, the process of the recognition of others. "My representations of you fail to capture the independence of you from my representation of you. The same goes for any representation I proffer of myself; I only ever share part and partial versions of my entire individuality. Capturing the feeling of being a person cannot be gained through any adequate representation. Yet as we must forge representations of one another to relate to one another." (Smith, 2021, p. 58).

Stand-up comedy enables the performer to portray an image of their own "otherness" and at the same time of their own "similarity" and plant it in their audiences' minds. They also reflect the representations they have, in their own minds, of their audience. Comedy, argues Smith, "is one solution to resolving our mutual unlikeness by way of forging knotted paths toward recognising how we could be alike." (Smith, 2021, p. 53). The immigrant stand-up, arguably, has multi-faceted knotted paths to forge, negotiating their linguistic, ethnic, cultural and religious otherness, which is sometimes intertwined with other types of Otherness: sexual, gendered, physical and so on. The audience would normally have a common experience of growing up in the UK, with all the cultural references, social codes and collective memories entailed. The FGICs' tool for paving the path – the joke – should

carve its way through this common experience – the Bourdieu-esque "habitus". The shared intimacy of the joke or, in Smith's words, "the secret", produces "a space in which the realisation of individuality occurs through the mutual togetherness without either first or third giving up on their mutual difference and autonomy."

Smith notes, however, that the way to create a common space is not just by the Others convincing their audience that they are similar to them. The individuality of the Other must be given space to make itself known, not just for the Other's sake, but for everybody present:

> "Herein lies a cosmopolitan ethics for a divided present. Kristeva (1991), Said (2003) and Rumble (2011) discern a politics of cosmopolitanism in psychoanalytic accounts of where the boundaries between self and Other become indiscernible: the uncanny double, like Simmel's stranger, breaks down the boundaries between myself and others. Such accounts suggest for Said (2003, p. 54) that 'Identity cannot be thought or worked through itself alone; it cannot constitute or even imagine itself without that radical original break or flaw which will not be repressed…' In this radical, original break which continues to haunt us, Kristeva (1991, p. 192) sees the 'discovery' of psychoanalysis as offering a politics of cosmopolitanism: our solidarity is to be founded upon "the consciousness of our unconscious.' In this Kristeva (1991, p. 192) places us 'far removed from a call to brotherhood", and for Said (2003, p. 54) a far cry from an uncritical multiculturalism of 'tolerance and compassion'" (Smith, 2011, p.25).

In what FGICs almost unanimously describe as "getting it out of the way," namely, acknowledging their own difference to the audience before moving on to more general topics - which they unanimously recognised as an expectation of their audiences – they have instinctively recognised just that. They are requested to define the boundaries between them and the Others, so that their identities would not morph.

3.8 Stand-up comedy studies

In the field of comedy studies, A few contributions to stand-up comedy academic research were particularly instructive in this research. Oliver Double's *Getting the Joke* (2014) provided an important insight into the history of stand-up comedy, its mechanisms, and an analysis of joke construction that was enlightening in understanding how FGICs negotiate their messages through the way their jokes are put together.
Sophie Quirk's *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence* (2015) was an illuminating outline of the creative way in which comedians convey and communicate subtle messages. It helped me put tricks of the trade employed by FGICs in the context of stand-up comedy practices in general. Those "manipulations" illuminate the interlocutors' descriptions of the strategies they devised to communicate with audiences.

Ian Brodie's *A Vulgar Art* (2014) is an exploration of the connection between stand-up comedy and folklore. Initially, I was suspicious of the idea that comedy requires the kind of intimacy with the audience that Brodie deems as a condition, in the context of immigrants' ability to achieve it. However, I found that it provides an excellent description of what I came to see as "the habitus walls" which stand-up immigrants need to penetrate. It also offers acute observations regarding social identities and the ways stand-ups perform "the self", which helped me further decipher the interviewees' negotiation tactics.

3.9 Permission and "Licence"

The issue of familiarity and otherness as pre-conditions to gaining an audience's "permission" to perform applies to all stand-ups. The audience's acquaintance with them, or at least an ability to recognize some attributes about them that would brand them as *bona fide* entertainers, are necessary in order to open that door. Sophie Quirk uses comedian Jack Dee's controversial joke about violence against children and paedophilia as an example. In 1992, following accusations of violence against families in the Orkneys, Dee said in a London show: "How are you gonna get people in this country to stop smacking their children? It would be nice to stop fucking them first of all, wouldn't it?" (Quirk, 2015, p. 51). Quirk notes that Dee got away with the joke, despite mixed responses. "Clearly, though, neither Dee nor his audience really share these assumptions or attitudes", and it is this clarity that allows the laughter to come out first, followed by some tame grunts of disapproval.

Quirk looks into the concepts of "harm" and "risk" in comedy. Arguing with Ronald de Sousa, who claimed that audiences' attitudes could not be temporarily suspended in order to enjoy a joke, even if their belief in the situation described might be thus suspended. She argues that if De Sousa is right, the audience would only have laughed if they believed "that it was acceptable to treat children…this way." As this is clearly not the case, argues Quirk, their immediate response is not disapproval, but laughter. What would happen, however, if the relationship framed by the word "clearly" did not exist between the comedian and their audience – meaning, the audience does not trust the comic to be "one of us" and share their values and beliefs? Some immigrant comics of African or Muslim origin play on the tension created by that suspicion, referring to "my fourth wife" (Bello, 2022), or to looking like a "terrorist". This comedic device derives its potency exactly from the absence of that *bona fide* premise that Dee has with his audience. Similarly, Romanian comedian Radu Isac senses that British audiences suspect East European comedians of misogyny, which means he can't just "tell a girlfriend joke." (Isac, 2021). As an immigrant, Dee's *bona fide* assumption and permission do not extend to him.

Stand-up comedians gain their "licence" to speak to an audience and push its boundaries in various ways, many of which relate to that sense of familiarity embodied in this one word – "clearly". Incongruity can only exist when the base-line is recognised, explicitly or intuitively. British audiences recognise their comedians' branding, be it your pub landlord (Al Murray), a middle-aged northern woman (Sarah Millican), a cockney 'Geezer' (Jeff Innocent), or a 'posh toff' (Miles Jupp). Foreigners and immigrants are devoid of such shortcuts, therefore, as will be shown later, they are compelled to address their origin at relative length, to get the above mentioned "permission" to address other subjects (Isac, 2022, Martini, 2021, Garofalo, 2022). Immigrants, to changing degrees, cannot necessarily be "presumed innocent" regarding certain topics, depending on prevailing stereotypes regarding their countries of origin. For example, comedian Alex Martini used to, especially in his first years in comedy, devote much of his set to playing the stereotype of a very culinarily fussy Italian who resents the British "barbaric" attitude to food, because he believed this attitude was expected of him (Martini, 2021), and hence he created a "stereotype shortcut" into his comedy.

3.10 Cosmopolitanism, Transnationalism, and Class

Some FGICs frame the way they display themselves in binary 'here versus there' terms. The transnational discourse informs their acts and they are keen to share their experience in discovering a new set of rules of engagement, cultural references, weather and political atmosphere, whether their take on the UK is complimentary or critical in comparison to their homeland. Other immigrant-comedians' experiences and self-definition are more cosmopolitan. They regard themselves as 'citizens of the world', they use the pronoun 'we' when they talk about society, and feel they are a part of the world class that sets the rules. Their sense of being and cultural references are globalised. Where they perform does not matter as such, as their audience seems to be familiar to them in more international terms. They would often relate to themselves as people who "relocated" rather than as immigrants. "Cosmopolitans" tend to be upper or middle class.

The cosmopolitan approach is alluring for some comedians because it spares them having to explain their foreignness, and allows them to delve into subjects that interest them without having first to "get it out of the way". As Moosavi noted, the capacity to speak in these terms is rarely attributed to immigrants who come from less privileged parts of the world: "It is frequently argued in public discourse that rather than having cosmopolitan outlooks that would enable them to fully integrate into pluralistic societies and support the universalistic principles that are presumed to underlie liberal democratic institutions, they are embedded in particularistic values and beliefs" (Moosavi, 2015). At the same time, it means, to an extent, ignoring a significant part of their own identity and experience. However, Horst and Olsen argue that "cosmopolitanism can develop from the migration process itself and the subsequent connection to a diversity of places." (Horst & Olsen, 2021). Cosmopolitanism may be derived not just from the place of one's country of origin among

the nations, but from the class and wealth of the individual, as Sindhu Vee (India), one of the major champions of cosmopolitanism amongst interlocutors, demonstrates. (Vee, 2021).

Walker and Serrano (2006) view cosmopolitanism as a preferred way forward. "We suggest cosmopolitanism, the practice of valuing all cultures equally, as a plausible alternative to the historical assimilationist/nativist practices." Their study of the Otavalo indigenous in Ecuador, who are both indigenous and immigrant, presents it as "an example of a group coping with and taking advantage of globalization to strengthen their community both at formulating a cosmopolitan approach to immigration and social policy." (Walker and Serrano, 2006, p. 1).

Brett and Moran (2011) argue that the juxtaposition between cosmopolitanism and nationalism is void. "As Calhoun (2007) has recently argued, nations matter; to oppose cosmopolitanism and nationalism too sharply is misleading. Nationalism is also a project about binding different ethnic, regional and religious groupings together into larger political communities, and civic nationalism employs arguments that draw on the same universalist values and arguments as cosmopolitanism. Among other things, such arguments underpinned the development of democratic institutions and made possible the redistributive policies of welfare states (Brett and Moran, 2011, p. 189). This, I find, is a compelling argument which corresponds well not only with cosmopolitan comedians who believe the world is one and with "transnational" immigrants who argue "I'm different but I'm just like you", but also with those who insist on their difference - be it cultural, political, or religious. Because the potential of blending all those differences into a coherent society is not only ever-present – it is also best promoted by making those differences clearer, and using them in order to interact and negotiate.

3.11 Diaspora

First generation immigrants' relationships with their diaspora-communities can be as complex as their relationship with the "indigenous". The issues start from defining said community (I, for example, do not feel that the British Jewish community is my "diaspora", and have a sensitive relationship with Israelis in the UK around political questions). A few comedians said that they feel "expectations" from Muslim or Black audience members even if they do not come from the same countries of origin, or that they were mistaken for second-generation comedians and judged by criteria that seemed irrelevant to them.[4]

J. Michael (2013) made a few observations about Muslim comedians in the US, their relationship with their diaspora communities and their attempts to educate others about themselves. Most of his references are to second-generation immigrants in the US, but many of them apply to first-generation ones in the UK. "Muslim-American comedy,

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[4] See Vee (2021): "I am not the daughter of a news agent from Bromley who has 'done well for herself'".

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performed by Muslims taking humorous advantage of a new and negative relevance, has an obvious audience comprised of non-Muslim outsiders. Muslim stand-up performance is an opportunity for important social exchange; Muslim comics are eager to explain and educate about Muslim America, and many Americans are intrigued by the idea of 'funny Muslims' and want to learn more about this community. Jokes that are told from the perspective of a Muslim insider to a non-Muslim outsider are a staple of the stand-up routines of many socially critical Muslim comics. These jokes rely on the humour of incongruity, superiority, and social relief to send important social messages to both Muslims and non-Muslims about how American Muslims relate to post-9/11 discourses that define them negatively in American social life." (Michael, 2013, p. 139). However, the primary position of ethnic humour in America is that of insider-outsiders, second generation immigrants fighting for their place in the American ethos. The message "I'm just like you" is easier to convey when you went to an American high school and played baseball, than when you are fresh off the plane.

A classic "I'm like you" is manifested in this routine by Comedian Maysoon Zayid: "a parody of going to the airport draws on her personal situation of multiple marginalities as an 'Arab' looking woman with a disability who is a suspected terrorist. Her airport jokes begin with a scene at home in New Jersey, where her girlfriends ask if she is afraid to travel to Palestine. Zayid (2009) shares with the audience what really frightens her:

"I am not afraid to go to Palestine! I am afraid to go to Newark Airport! Security sees an Arab trying to board a plane, and we don't have a good record." The joke continues to describe how her disability deepens the suspicion: "They see an Arab trying to board a plane. But … I have Cerebral Palsy, which means I shake all the time. So, they don't see just an Arab, they see a shaky Arab, and they're like, that bitch is nervous!" (Michael, 2013, p. 141).

Interestingly, what undoes the Otherness are disadvantages unrelated to being Muslim: fear of flight, Cerebral Palsy. There is something disarming about the foreigner coping with issues that are familiar, even if they constitute different types of Otherness; it brings their content more to the realms of cosmopolitanism.

There is a similarity between ethnic minorities and immigrants in the attempt to dispel suspicions relating to religion, and this is particularly common nowadays in Muslim comedy. "Tissa Hami (Baker, 2008) suggests that the Muslim woman's position in the mosque is not a subordinate one but rather a place from which they can indulge in voyeurism: 'In a mosque, the men pray in the front and the women pray in the back, right? Americans look at that and they think: those women are so oppressed. We're not in the back because we're oppressed. We just like the view! We're praying for a piece of that.'" (Michael, 2013, pp. 142-143).

Michael discusses the ways in which Muslim-American comics address their own communities, and their critique of them:

> "Several Muslim male comedians' jokes about Muslim women suggest that their critical humour may not be as incisive when it comes to gender roles and Muslim women's lives. One such joke begins as Moss (Kalin, 2008) explains his friends' observations upon hearing that he 'is Muslim now': [as his friend] "But son—don't play. You're a Muslim, you know what that means." [as himself] I said, "What?" [as his friend] He said, "That means you can have four wives!" [to the audience] People! You get married, you get one wife. With four personalities." (Michael, 2013, p. 147).

Again, there is a difference between FGICs and native-born second-generation comedians. The former are not necessarily ingrained and embedded in diaspora communities; their families are often "back home", which makes them potentially freer and less supervised, hence possibly more inclined to be critical of their religions, cultures, and homelands. At the same time, their precarious status as newcomers can make them more dependent on community-based agencies, official or otherwise.

Ridiculing one's own community and its first-generation immigrants can be used as a tool by second-generation comics to distinguish themselves. 'I'm not like those people'… 'I'm not that kind of Muslim/Jew/Black person' – first-generation immigrants need to position themselves in relation to this phenomenon, too. Michael analyses a joke by a Muslim comedian making fun of an old uncle and concludes it has: "an important social message for the Muslims in his audience… The insinuation is that community spokespeople should be able to speak and translate in ways that will promote, not complicate, how Muslims are treated in the mainstream media." (Michael, 2013, p.150).

Discussing the culture of migration, Homi Bhabha (1996, p. 53) quotes T.S. Eliot: "The culture that develops on the new soil must therefore be bafflingly alike and different from the parent culture: it will be complicated sometimes by whatever relations are established with some native race and further by immigration from other than the original source. In this way, peculiar types of culture sympathy and culture clash appear." (Eliot, 1949, p. 62). This, notes Bhabha, is "the partial culture, the contaminated yet connective tissue between cultures – at once the impossibility of culture's containedness and the boundary between. It is indeed the culture in-between, bafflingly both alike and different." (Bhabha, 1996, p. 54).

Immigrant stand-ups occupy this space perfectly. They must pick the traits not only of local culture, but also of the specific boundaries of an art form in which the UK is viewed as one of the leading forces. With the exception of Canada and the United States, most immigrants come to the UK from places where stand-up as an art and entertainment form is less developed. However, a culture of humour exists everywhere, and comics bring their comedic traditions with them in some way or another. For most, the intimate and personal

nature of stand-up would not enable them to 'pass' as 'locals. One of the first rules of stand-up comedy is that you must address on stage everything that stands out about you. A foreign look or accent cannot be overlooked or pass without comment.

3.12 Negotiation via Manipulation

Sophie Quirk (2015) views manipulation as the comedian's main tool of creating influential comedy that can change people's views (Quirk, 2015, p. 1). A lot of this manipulation is based on Freud's notion of humour:

> "In Freud's theory, the most satisfying jokes are those that save us the effort of policing our thoughts, which we do by blocking uncivilized ideas… it implies that we take an unconscious pleasure in ideas that are hostile, bigoted or otherwise uncivilized. Immigrant comedians (and to a lesser extent ethnic minority comics), often use the mirroring of such ideas back to the audience, as means to achieve a laughter of relief, and at the same time to acknowledge bigotry aimed at them. Generic jokes of the "I know I look like a terrorist" ilk, or "I am not all that foreign – my cousin stole your car" – plays on this kind of manipulation." (Quirk 2015, p.22)

Quirk notes that "the audience puts itself into the comedian's hands with a willingness to be 'tricked' in exchange for the reward of laughter." (Ibid) Arguably, this is a very tentative deal, dependent on the laughter provided, and the audience's willingness to 'deposit' themselves might depend on how much they recognize the comic as 'one of us' - another potential hurdle for FGICs.

Quirk quotes Simon Critchley's idea: 'Most humour, in particularly comedy of recognition… simply seeks to reinforce consensus and in no way seeks to criticise the established order' (Critchley, 2002, p. 1). This might make all truly critical comedy an impossibility. One of the interlocutors, Italian comedian Giada Garofalo, was particularly adamant that "comedy is not an agent of change, but a regulator." (Garofalo, 2022). However, it could be argued that the very nature of the comedic manipulation is in distilling this sense of warm consensus and 'recognition' in an audience, only to sneak up on it with a blunt criticism – using their laughter to disarm them.

Quirk poses an interesting challenge to my initial thinking – namely that the immigrant comedian, or any comedian, need to choose between being socially critical or 'just funny', and that some sacrifice the former to indulge in the latter. "The imperative to be funny cannot be divorced from the imperative to deliver social commentary; the two things go hand in hand. Thus, all stand up sets offer challenge and comment, whether or not the authors themselves intend or recognise it." (Quirk, 2014, p. 30).

Do FGICs deliver sometimes inadvertent or unintentional political comedy through the mere fact of their identity? The presence of first-generation stand-ups in the UK became apparent

towards the end of the first decade of the 21st century and in its second decade – in the run up to and the wake of the Brexit era. There were times during this era in which, in certain areas in the UK, having a foreign accent was viewed as a challenge. Therefore, this is an intriguing question to explore.

Using "inappropriate" language is a hurdle for FGICs whose native language is not English. Quirk (2015) analyses Mark Thomas' story about feeling "out of his depth" while delivering a speech for the *New Statesman*. In Thomas's testimony, "It didn't go well… fourteen 'fucks', three 'wanks' and a 'cunt', in five minutes." Quirk explains that to 'get' the joke it is necessary to understand that "Thomas's regular performance style involves a relatively liberal use of expletives", therefore they will not be seen as particularly "naughty" in the context of his performance. The audience, however, knows that at the dinner to which he's referring, they would be deemed inappropriate (Quirk, 2015, p. 50-51).

3.13 Identity

Stuart Hall (1996, p. 1) significantly pins the irreducibility of the concept of identity "in its centrality to the question of agency and politics. By politics I mean both the significance of modern forms of political movement of the signifier 'Identity', its pivotal relationship to a politics of location…" (Hall, 1996, p.1). He mentions his agreement with Foucault that what is required in its analysis is "not a theory of the knowing subject but rather a theory of discursive practice." (Hall, 1996 p. 2; Foucault, 1970). All those facets of identity, the centrality of location and discursive practice to it, and the element of agency, are highly relevant to the activity of FGICs. I argue, again in agreement with Quirk, that the very decision taken by a new arrival to the country to get on a stage and speak to the local population is a highly political act - whether conscious or not.

Hall views the concept of identity he deploys as "not an essentialist, but a strategic and positional one." (Hall, 1996, p. 1). It is not innate to its carrier, but is a tool, a point from which a statement is made:

> "Identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation." (Hall, 1996, p. 4).

This is an exciting definition of how immigrants - and outsiders in general - negotiate their identity vis-à-vis an audience. FGICs are in a transitional journey of identity-forming. While communicating it to others, they also change and merge. They do not let go of their past and homeland, but they are moving towards a future in a new country while speaking to their new compatriots.

Bauman (1996) makes a few observations on identity, which are relevant to the interactive nature of stand-up comedy – constantly broadcasting while being judged:

> "One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure where one belongs; that is, one is not sure how to place oneself among the evident variety of behavioural styles and patterns, and how to make sure that people around would accept this placement as right and proper, so that both sides would know how to go on in each other's presence. 'Identity' is a name given to the escape sought from this uncertainty. Hence 'identity', though ostensibly a noun, behaves like a verb… (Bauman, 1996, p. 18)

To Bauman, construction of identity is a form of presentation, but also of compensation: "Identity is a critical projection of what is demanded and/or sought upon what is - or more exactly still, an oblique assertion of the inadequacy or incompleteness of the latter." Indeed, as I will show: the comedic negotiation is a constant explanation of inadequacies and idiosyncrasies, connected to and explained by identity. (Bauman, 1996, p. 19).

3.14 Stereotypes

FGICs often rely on stereotypes about their countries or regions of origin. Others need to introduce the stereotypes in order to create a premise for their jokes. In this context, the warning by Howitt and Owusu-Bempah (2005, p. 48) may be relevant not only in cases of racist humour aimed at immigrants, but also for immigrants who utilise stereotypes to get audiences to laugh. They note that "jokes, in general, do not begin and end with individuals; they are transmitted socially, changed and embellished… Jokes are communicative acts which play a significant role in social exchanges – a medium through which society disseminates and generationally transmits its dominant attitudes towards outgroups. Racist jokes, therefore, act as propaganda in support of a racist ideology." Michael Phillips notes that a joke will be incomprehensible to a person who does not have a pre-existing knowledge of the stereotype upon which it plays (Phillips, 1984, p. 92). According to Quirk, (2015, p. 59), Owusu-Bempah demonstrates the opposite, namely, that members of an audience can spot an exchange as a joke and discern that the reference point needed to interpret it is a stereotype. They then calculate what the stereotype is and recognise that they were expected to have a pre-existing knowledge of it. If surrounded by a laughing audience the hearer figures out that the stereotype is acknowledged by their peers. According to Owusu-Bempah, this is how jokes keep stereotypes alive - by teaching them to the uninitiated and to a new generation.

This is a compelling argument. However, if the teller of the joke is of the ethnicity or nationality that said stereotype is attached to, then arguably they are, as the trope goes, "allowed to say that". That alleged permission derives from the idea that by their very presence in the room, they are dispelling the stereotype, or using it ironically. The audience,

it is assumed, does not expect them to go "against their own". That said, the fact that the audience likes the comedian and enjoys the joke does not imply that they do not internalise the stereotype that has now been reinforced – having come from the horse's mouth.

To what extent do FGICs feel that they have an obligation to protect their expat communities, ethnic groups or homelands in suppressing the use of certain stereotypes? Do they feel they need to be responsible when "borrowing" stereotypes that do not necessarily "belong" to them, as in the case of Asian non-Muslims, who use "I know I look like a terrorist" tropes. I, for instance, use a closing joke of which I'm fond, based on the stereotype of Jews being "tight": "I promised to keep my set short and tight and I am a woman of my word: I'm a Jewish woman, I've never given birth; it doesn't get any tighter than that." I refuse to let go of this joke even though one (non-Jewish) comedian friend said it sounds "a bit anti-Semitic". It is a successful joke, it gets big laughs, but deep in my heart I deliberate whether this is indeed "my" stereotype to use, considering I was not even aware of it before I came to the UK. Israeli Jews feel an affinity to Middle Eastern and Eastern-European traditions that pride themselves on largesse and generosity. At the same time, my audience more often than not views me as "Jewish".

3.15 Critical Performance and Autoethnography

I found Norman K. Denzin's writing, both in his monogram Performance Ethnography (2003) and his later book, *Performance Autoethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* (2018) to be particularly relevant to both the ethnographic methodology of this thesis, but also to the ethnographic nature to many of the interlocutors' performance work. It was instructive in understanding the ways in which life stories and personal histories can be used to create performances which aspire towards political change.

In the following chapter, I will look further into my own dilemmas on my journey of negotiation communication with my British audiences, followed by chapters developing my conclusions from my ethnographic field work with other immigrant-comedians.

4. A Middle Eastern Mary Poppins: Autoethnography

Having presented the theoretical, methodological ground for this thesis, the core definitions used and the relevant literature, I turn to the ethnographic part of this study, which constitutes the bulk of it. Considering, as I noted in the introduction, that my main incentive for conducting it was inspired by my own experience, I shall start by having a thorough look at it, and present my own autoethnography. This chapter is a case study of my own journey as an immigrant stand-up comedian devising strategies of negotiation for my UK audiences, which served as a blueprint in my interviews with my interlocutors. It is illuminated by theoretical content by Nirmal Puwar, Emmanuel Levinas and Pierre Bourdieu, whose notions are central to the analysis of data collected for this thesis. The chapter will demonstrate how my immigrant Otherness pushes me towards creating a tactical, targeted and ever-evolving discourse and content negotiating my identity to my audiences in the UK. These strategies are not created in one day, but were developed throughout my comedy career, immigration trajectory, political developments in the UK, and my improving comedy skills.

4.1 Self-Presentation

When I started performing stand-up in 2014, I knew I had to address my foreignness as the first thing I did on stage. Worried about harsh responses to my Israeli-ness, I wanted to qualify "what kind of Israeli" I was: namely anti-Zionist, a 'lefty', a dissident. My accent was not very identifiable, and to my surprise most people did not know much about Israel. I had to first spoon-feed them the stereotypes, and then set myself apart from them.

This was my first joke about Israel, set on those specifications:

> *I'm from Israel.*
> *The one from the news:*
> *Jews, Arabs, Boom!*
> *But it is very complicated,*
> *Not that complicated:*
> *We took another people's country and we don't know why they don't like it.*

Because we love it.

It was not enough. I felt I had to "justify" my comedy pursuit in the UK by doing some "work for the cause" back home. But I didn't know how to talk about Israel without sounding lecturing or flippant. It was precious to me, therefore beyond my funniness' reach. They audience was often unsure if it was ok to laugh. What side of the divide was I? Jewish? Palestinian? A Jew supporting the Palestinians? Was it 'anti-Semitic' to laugh? The jokes I've written were not strong enough to be both succinct and informative. I didn't know which gaps had to be filled. I lacked the skills to vent political rage without being obscure or crass. As I will argue throughout this thesis, devising identity negotiation strategies requires skill, which evolves over time.

4.2 Edinburgh Collaborations

In 2012, I performed in two Edinburgh Fringe shows with fellow immigrants, Moroccan Mina Znaidi (Baram & Znaidi, 2012) and Iranian Peyvand Khorsandi (Baram & Khorsandi, 2012), who immigrated from Iran as a child. It was on this show that I had my first encounter with an anti-Semitic heckler, a drunk man from the Czech Republic who realised I was Jewish, pointed at me and shouted "You! You killed Jesus". Drunken hecklers are a nuisance, but they are not all that hard to shut down. I said "We didn't kill him, we did not even sell him. What Jew sells a hippy for 30 shekels, that's 5 quid. We are business people!"[5] He stumbled out.

I left the 2012 Fringe with two realisations: First, that the dichotomy between my attempts at political comedy and my sex-related material did not gel well with my audience. At that point, I still attributed my failures in negotiation to my notion that the more political audiences were "too self-righteous" for the sex material, and the random EdFringe audiences were "too ignorant" for the Israel material. In retrospect, I now think that the political Israel-related material suffered from my shortage of joke-writing skills, and the sex-related stuff suffered from lack of originality. The other thing I realized was that talking about my foreignness in earnest was a good direction, and that I should aim to collaborate with other "foreign" comedians.

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[5] A performance on 8th August 2012.

In-between Fringes, I began to identify audiences that were more welcoming to me, a strategy that other interviewees noted they used as well. For me, large components of ethnic minorities were always a good sign. I went down well in Asian gigs and Black gigs, gigs in which foreign students came to watch comedy to improve their English, and the Italian gig Il Puma Londinese (see chapter 8). The Italian audience was welcoming because of the common foreignness, the Mediterranean common ground – and the common "foe" in the background – the "British", whom we now got to host instead of being hosted by.

4.3. Stereotypes as Tools and as a Hindrance

I also found that stereotypes relating to certain ethnic minorities can be both useful and hindering. Some audiences, and some comedians, insisted on relating to me as a "Jewish comedian", which was awkward. I was never a part of the Jewish Community in the UK, and am averse to the political line of its mainstream in Israel. I'm an atheist, and my humour did not seem to me to be "Jewish". "Pretending" to be Jewish deemed presumptuous and inappropriate, but most promoters found it quite hard to understand. A fellow comedian, a Catholic Cockney, once suggested to help me write "jokes about being Jewish". Audience members would pull out old Jewish jokes for me to tell "next time". And everybody asked if I knew Jackie Mason.

Owens and Lynch (2012, p. 303) argue that first-generation immigrants demonstrate higher resilience against negative stereotypes compared to later generations. I suspect that at least some of this resilience is rooted in plain ignorance. I did not know what British Jews "were like" - genuinely or stereotypically - so I could not utilise those stereotypes to help me communicate with audiences through common tropes. Even when I did learn them, I did not feel those stereotypes were mine to joke about. Benjamin Bello described a similar predicament when arriving in the UK as an adult and being unfamiliar with the ways, traits and characteristics of second-generation Nigerian immigrants (Bello, 2022).
Years ago, I was asked whether a cartoon of the newly elected Jewish Tory leader Michael Howard was antisemitic, because of the circles around his eyes. I did not recognise the stereotype, but became wary of being expected to represent "Jews". A year later, when my book came out, reviewer Brian Cheyette argued that I have "something of a tin ear when it comes to the experiences of Jews as a minority in the diaspora" (Cheyette, 2004). In 2018, I

left a Jewish Comedians WhatsApp group on political grounds, but I was told I did not belong there because I do not know what it is like to be a British Jew. I had to surrender. I am technically both British and Jewish, but I was no British Jew.

Notwithstanding, I was asked a few times to perform in a Jewish daily show ("Jew-O-Rama") that ran in the Edinburgh Fringe, and was well received. I also couldn't resist playing on at least one "learned" Jewish stereotype when I held on to my "tight" joke (see p. 64).

I started noticing cohorts in the comedy circuit, especially among new comedians: Black, Muslim, white working-class, white middle class, Irish, and a group gradually but swiftly rising in prominence - female comics. Immigrants were too few and scattered to form a group, though this, as I will show, has changed (see Ch. 8). It was also hard to find my comedic place as an immigrant. I saw quite a few comedians who played the "I have a cute accent and I am clueless" trope, and begrudged it. As time went by, more and more immigrants entered the circuit and became a visible presence, with more sophisticated outlooks.

4.4 From a National Identity to Immigrant Identity

My first solo Edinburgh show in 2013 was about having a dual personality – the wild Miss D and the conscientious Daphna – which held very few references to Israel. In an early bit, Miss D, the evil entity, described how the devil suggested she take over the body of Daphna, the conscientious journalist. "'But somebody already lives in it,' says Miss D. 'Didn't you say you are from Israel? This has never been a problem for you people,' the devil retorts." (Baram, 2013).

I argue that there is a gradual shift between speaking about oneself primarily as a national of a country of origin, to assuming an immigrant's identity. The main reason for it may be prosaic – you sometimes do not know whether your presence in the target country is temporary or immigratory. However, Schildkart (2003, pp. 40-41) argues that immigrants develop an "immigrants' identity" that becomes more central to pre-settled immigrants in the US than their ethnic or original national identity, despite their strong ties to their countries of origin. My main initial concern was not to speak of myself as an immigrant, but

as an Israeli. It was a challenging effort – displaying both my Israeliness and my criticism of it – to an audience who cared little about either.

I realized I have an accent, albeit a mild one, and used it as a negotiation tool. It helped me express the idea that Israelis are bolshie, aggressive, and sexually aggressive*:*

> "I have not apologised for the accent yet. I'm sorry. (pause). For EVERYTHING. (looking worried) Anybody lost an erection since I started talking? Sorry. Though, there's always some perv at the back of the room who pops one up. If it is you, handsome, come talk to me later." (Baram, 2013).

As I will show, a hypersexualised attitude is sometimes used by comedians, especially newer or older female comedians, but not specifically by immigrants. It can be a device for negotiating different types of Otherness, like aging, or being a female comedian in a still largely male circuit. El-Shokrofy, E.M. and Ahmed (2022) argue that Black female comedians utilise sexuality to "fulfil the image of the powerful strong black woman and comment freely on the social, religious, and political concerns." Roberta Mock notes that white female middle aged comedians (e.g. Rosanne Barr, Lucille Ball, Joan Rivers and others following in their footsteps) talk about sex to a specific effect: "In their redeployment of taboos which mark the female body as grotesque and unruly, these women expose the scopic regimes that limit how post-menopausal women are read, and thereby erased, in the public realm." (Mock, 2012, p. 9). My own experience as a practitioner and observer of comedy - and that of a few of my interlocutors - demonstrates this tendency (see Garofalo, 2022, Mock, 2022, and Souma in Ch. 7).

By 2018, I was capable of conveying the same message in a softer, yet more effectively funny way, through my now warmer and more "grown up" persona, and by linking myself to a celebrity the audience already knew and liked:

> *You can't laugh at my accent. That's Wonder-Woman's accent.*
>
> *Gal Gadot plays Wonder-Woman and she's Israeli too.*
>
> *We have a lot in common, Gal and I.*
>
> *Don't look at the waist-line, that's not it.*
>
> *We share this accent and were trained to kill by the same organization,*
>
> *Only she went on and made a fancy international career out of it.*
>
> *For me – it's just a hobby* (Baram, 2018).

AKA Miss D, my second solo show at Fringe 2014, was more biographical, and my persona was getting slightly closer to my own "self". By then, I felt I needed to explain to my audience that Israelis are not identical to the British Jews they know:

> *We are supposed to be the improved Jews. The Jews 2.0. We are the phallic symbol of the Jewish people. How do you reform a group of people who for generations were leading intellectuals and merchants? You kick them into the desert and turn them into Arnold Schwarzenegger.* (Baram, 2013)

> But also, that I was a misfit –

> *After the first shootout they took my gun away. For my own protection. And everyone else's.* (Baram, 2013).

Another joke that was rather successful described my despair with the sexual habits of British men, who make you put clothes on rather than take them off:

> *I have a fireman's uniform.*

> *A French maid's outfit*

> *5 corsets*

> *A whip*

> *And a body bag.*

> *The body bag is not for me.*

> *It's for the next Englishman who tries to spank me!* (Baram, 2013)

Looking back on it, the joke leaves a lot to be desired, but it worked with my persona at the time and went down well in the small room- above a pub with open-mic gigs. It did, however, get me in some trouble at the Comedy Café in London after a middle-class and conservative sounding lady rose up to say "we actually like English men very much, thank you!" The light noting the end of my 5 minutes was flashed in my face after 4, and I was blacklisted from the Café for two years.

My argument here is not that the Comedy Café had an anti-immigration policy, but that improving your comedy skills makes it easier to convey challenging ideas to audiences. I was back at the Café twice, in 2015 and 2017, with immigration-related material, but my tone was more confident and less defiant, which got the audience on board. My stage persona evolved from "aggressive and scary" to "warm and clever", when I understood there was

more than one way to signpost the fact that I was from the Middle East. The audiences rewarded the warmth more than the bolshie-ness.

As other interviewees noted[6], improving language skills is a communication strategy, even when there is nothing wrong with one's English. I practiced tongue twisters to improve my diction, and learned to end every sentence I wrote with a hard consonant to make my accent clearer. The effort aimed to dispel the audience's worry that even if they understood me now - they might not in the next moment.

4.5 Becoming British

By 2015, I was on the verge of Britishness - studying for the "Life in the UK" test in order to obtain an Indefinite Leave to Remain. The rising prevalence of an anti-immigration narrative, alongside my personal feeling of being more stable and integrated in the UK, pushed my stage persona from mainly "Israeli" to primarily "an immigrant". My show for EdFringe 2015, *Something to Declare*, portrayed the test as a treat from the government to immigrants - "to make sure we can survive. In a pub quiz." I, the generous immigrant, shared it with the British, who are deprived of it, "which is unfair because y'all love a pub quiz." (Baram, 2015).

The show was formed as a pub quiz. I asked the audience questions from the test, they shouted their answers, followed by a joke about the questions from my perspective. The question sequences were divided by three stories. The first, *Invitation*, was a tale of how I misunderstood an invitation for Christmas dinner from an Oxford professor because it was so muffled, timid and apologetic, compared to the typical Israeli invitation, which is "often confused with kidnapping" (Baram, 2015). The second, *Marriage of Inconvenience,* was about how an upper-class Englishman proposed to marry me in order to get me a visa to stay in the UK, and backed off on the pretext that he intended to run for politics. I was bemused by the fact that one of the reviewers described the potential husband in the story as "a feckless, floppy-haired member of the English upper class" (Nemec, 2015), whereas I had avoided any physical description of the man who was, in fact, inspired by a true exchange between myself and a curly-haired British friend of Indian origin.

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[6] See mainly chapters 6 and 7, which focus on European comedians.

The third story, *The Hapless Terrorist*, was one from my pre-immigration days. It was funny and interesting, and depicted a side of me from before I became "immigration-obsessed", back in my homeland, in a certain position of power. It was a story of a man I once represented, who tried, and failed, to explode eight bus stops, until his last failed attempt made him lose the tip of his finger, and got him caught. The story concludes with a bit of a rant in praise of uselessness with a bit of a dig at the then Labour Party leader, Ed Miliband.

It was a challenging "bit". It was completely true, and to me, it was hilarious, but my audiences, while mesmerised, simply refused to laugh. It was too loaded; it was about death, it wasn't clear whose side I was on – was it ok to laugh? It worked better in storytelling shows like Sajeela Kershi's *The Immigrant Diary*. I was not sure whether it was because the audience consisted of many immigrants who lived in warzones themselves and could therefore appreciate its dark humour and complex politics, or maybe because unlike in stand-up, in storytelling the humour is incidental to the tale. But as a part of my show, it always struggled*. (Baram, 2015).

The show was clearly "cheeky" in that it had me, the immigrant, criticizing not only the government's test, but some of the values it represents, while having constant digs at much of what the British People hold dear.

But my tone was now friendly, with plenty of "this is why I love you guys..." even when it meant "here is what I find excruciating". I was no longer scary, but warm, clever, with something to pontificate on; or, as I introduced myself to my audiences, "a Middle Eastern Mary Poppins".

As the following joke and its consequences demonstrate, one consideration when negotiating a British audience is the extent to which an immigrant comedian is allowed to poke fun at what they hold dear:

> *Question no 2: The Queen is married to Prince Philip, true or False?*
> *Audience: True!*
> *Well done. You must think this is easy, but most immigrants come to this country oblivious to the Duke.*
> *His reputation doesn't travel very well for some reason…*

Anyway, we ask our British friends – what's the deal with your queen, is she married? Single? Gay? Straight? Is she on Tinder?

(laugh)

And the English laugh just like you did, and they say "oh forget about Liz, she's been married for years and years to an old racist drunk."

And this is why every single immigrant in this country thinks Jeremy Clarkson… is the King! (Baram, 2015).

The joke was popular in London gigs, but at a gig in Brookman Park, it forced me to literally escape through a back door at the end of my set. The conservative audience left no room for doubt about their royal allegiances.

4.6 Reading the Room

Reading the room is a major directive in comedy, but sometimes reading *about* the room prior to performing in it is useful for devising a strategy. Immigrants and UK comedians alike say they tend to research venues before performing in them (The Comedy Collective, 2025). The qualities for which FGICs search can be unique. Following my royal debacle at Brookman Park, I started Googling Brexit and election voting patterns in British towns and villages to be better prepared for adversity. American comedian Erin Crouch, who immigrated to Germany and tours around Europe and the UK, says she always researches performance venues, but finds she needs to be particularly specific in the UK: "British audiences love cultural references, but you can't fake it. In the UK I always walk the line between being the clueless American who finds everything weird, to mentioning stuff I did notice while walking around on the day." (Crouch, 2025).

Being able to demonstrate familiarity and savviness about the United Kingdom was always a strong point for me but I had to acquire specific knowledge. Using the right turn of phrase helps, and knowing the difference between Mackems and Geordies is crucial. The ability to use cultural references helps create an intimacy with the audience that, as Brodie notes, "allows performers to bridge cultural and spatial distances, creating a collaborative experience with the audience." (Brodie, 2009, p. 140).

Something to Declare was a success. I was also lucky that the Paddington film, which centred on the good-natured bear as an immigrant, came out that year. The show's poster featured me dressed up as Paddington. The write-up*: "An immigrant on a mission to pass the Englishness Test, build a New Jerusalem, and become Nigel Farage's greatest nightmare"* (EdFringe programme, 2015, p. 81). attracted just the right type of audience – but some of the "wrong types" too.

Dubbing the test "the Englishness" test was a cunning way to bring the Scottish audience in Edinburgh on one side, but there was also a genuine argument often heard about the test – that it does not reflect the values of other parts of the UK. The walk-on-stage song I chose was William Blake's *Jerusalem* – the most English of hymns, but also my hometown, with the underlying idea that the true Jerusalem will be built in England. I chose the Emerson, Lake, and Palmer version (1973), which was more "hard rock" than pious, to inject a hint of irony into that idea. Displaying savviness regarding British nuance is another negotiating tool.

The good reception told me I was making progress, but the show also made me some enemies. In an uncomfortable moment of the Fringe run, two head-shaven men with "Britain First" tattoos came in and sat with their arms folded, staring at me sternly in a way that seemed menacing. The room was full and they sat at the back, but I only had eyes for that pair. I had a small victory when one of them chuckled at one joke. On their way out, they granted me a frosty nod. They didn't put money in my bucket. I decided we had reached a draw.

4.7 Facing Resentment

One of the reviewers was a bit sour about the very premise of the show:

> *Daphna Baram plays the outsider in England, reflecting on what makes people British from her own standpoint as an Israeli woman. The problem here is that we've been told what we're like so many times before and unfortunately Baram has little new to add. Most of 'Something to Declare' skits on the cultural differences between British and Israeli people, running through all the usual stereotypes- British pub culture, the British social reserve (as opposed to Baram's imposing aunts), and eating turkey at*

Christmas. Baram's more unique material shines when discussing life on the other side of the cultural divide. She proves to be a natural storyteller and brings a warm intelligence to her more extraordinary experiences as a human rights lawyer in Israel." (Wilkinson, 2015).

I resented the review at the time. Nobody likes criticism, least of all stand-up comedians - a painfully ego-driven bunch. But I felt a sting when I deciphered what I was told as: "don't slag us off, we like self-deprecating only when we deprecate ourselves". From my current perspective it seems less unfair and embittered, and more loyal to what the reviewer actually felt.

The List publication was more impressed by my observations:

> "Cross-cultural similarities and differences are a mainstay of comedy. This year, a lot of comedians will be tackling the controversial subject of immigration. Those aspiring to be more daring will be trying to find punchlines in terrorism. Daphna Baram – Israeli, Jewish, a former human rights lawyer and also former journalist now living in London – is uniquely placed to discuss all three with an underpinning of authenticity." (The List, 2015).

When I toured the show in and out of London – a new map of the UK started to emerge in my head. Shows and gigs based on the show's material in London, Leicester, Brighton and Glasgow did well. I felt I was able to communicate at least some of my immigrant's angst to my hosting nation.

But not all places were similarly welcoming. I was invited by a well-meaning promoter friend to perform the whole show at the Royal Legion Club in Broadstairs, Kent. By that time, I already used to refer to Kent as "Mordor", but I did not want to disappoint Mel, who promised it was going to be "civilized". It wasn't. After 15 minutes of stony silence, the booing and heckles begun. A few people stormed out. I cut my losses and ended the show after 25 minutes out of the 50 that were the length of the show.

4.8 Growing Political

Throughout 2016 and 2017 I laboured at setting myself up as a political comedian with topical jokes. It was the right time for it, the vote for Brexit took place, Trump was elected, Jeremy Corbin became the Labour candidate. I toured my new show in smaller festivals and around the UK. Trump, Brexit and current affairs populated my show *Begging to Differ* (Baram, 2016). My persona got closer and closer to who I was: educated, middle class, foreign but Britain-savvy, well meaning, slightly angry but openly worried of what is to come. By the very end of 2016, I received my British citizenship. I was still very much an immigrant, but my royal "we" and "us" started working triple shifts: we Israelis, we immigrants, we Brits.

> *Did you know that recently London was booted out of a list of best cities to live in Europe and was replaced by … Birmingham!*
>
> *Well done Birmingham, the Europeans love you, and you voted FOR Brexit!*
>
> *Treat them mean, keep them keen…*
>
> *So yes, I'm from Israel that's the accent.*
> *I try to tell people that it's an East London accent but they don't buy it.*
>
> *I'm sorry.*
>
> *Not just about the accent, about everything.*
>
> *That's Jewish guilt.*
>
> *Now, between Christmas and Easter, it's at its strongest.* (Baram, 2017).

But my main dread, as well as most of my audience's, was of course Brexit:

> *I woke up on the fateful morning to a text from a friend reading, "I'm so sorry, I'm ashamed to be British today".*
>
> *But then the next 5 texts were from British friends asking to marry me for my Israeli passport.*
>
> *Now who's desperate!?*
>
> *I've been living here 15 years looking for a husband,*
>
> *Now I can go for the highest bidder.*

Chicken Soup Crusader, my 2017 Fringe show, was again a show that depicted me both as a political commentator but also combined my critique of Israel, and my experience as an

immigrant, against the backdrop of Brexit's dawn and the general elections which the conservatives won.

My Basic Brexit set had a few "bits" added, bridging my "new Jerusalem" back to the real one, this time, with a more bitter than sweet flavour to it:

> *So many people say they don't feel at home any more. British people and foreign people go "oh I don't feel at home anymore". I don't get it:*
>
> *Racism in the streets, Violence in the air*
>
> *I know that smell of xenophobia in the morning*
>
> *Politicians taking no responsibility.*
>
> *Just let some sunshine in and it's Jerusalem all over again.*
>
> *I'm home!* (2017).

Combining observations about your homeland and about Britain is another tool to mitigate the offensive effect of your criticism on one hand, and making it more effective on the other. As Italian comedian Luca Cupani (2022) points out, owning up to the trajectory of both fascism and "uselessness" in his country made his British audiences more responsive to his criticism of their own government. Watching Theresa May trying to bring Brexit on inspired a few jokes, which repeated an ongoing theme in the show: the ironic idea that my Israeli experience might come in handy for my struggling new country. I advised the Prime Minister to build a few settlements in Gibraltar, if she wanted to keep it. But I also attempted to explain Israel from a British perspective:

> *It's like "EastEnders":*
> *You can go to space for 20 years and still count on two things: Israel is still kicking off and Phil Mitchell is upset.*
>
> *When I first watched EastEnders I thought, wow, this is home: people march into their neighbours' houses, open the fridge, make comments on their choices, tell them to get a divorce, or an abortion, visit their brother in prison. That's like being in a wedding in Tel Aviv.* (Baram, 2017).

The show ended with two "immigration stories", one about how I was miffed to discover that a professor of Middle East history in Oxford didn't know that it sometimes snows in Jerusalem, hence I deflected him using the most British trick in the book: white lies designed to conceal social awkwardness.

> *I said I was waiting for a friend, because it felt awkward and also, I didn't want to be seen with a person who doesn't know it snows in Jerusalem. So, I stayed out and froze for another 15 minutes. My journey to Britishness had begun… (Baram, 2017).*

And another, about how I snuck into Ireland without my passport, using a new trick I'd picked up: not speaking.

> *When your face is white but your accent is just bizarre your best strategy is to keep quiet… Back in London, I wrote to the Israeli IDF Chief of Staff, suggesting it as an invasion tactic. He replied: 'We have an army full of Jews. It won't work.' (Baram, 2017).*

Looking back on it, *Chicken Soup Crusader* broadcasts a sense of the earth moving under one's feet in the most uncertain way – America is a mess, the UK, where I finally found a home, is virtually cutting itself away from Europe. My light "Mary Poppins-y" tone and my fuzzy warmth could not conceal the shivers down my spine as I was writing and delivering: I made the leap to Britishness, but Britishness itself was no longer a known - or safe - entity.

But for a while, the Brexit upheaval felt as if it was being postponed. I worked for a British sister-organisation of the Israeli Committee against House Demolitions (ICAHD UK). The role enabled me to combine my political passion for Palestine with my comedy pursuits by running a line of comedy fundraisers under the *Laughing for Palestine* moniker. The fundraisers, alongside public advocacy for ICAHD UK, consolidated my persona and my confidence. Writing political comedy about Israel was still hard, but performing comedy in service of a cause in which I had resonance was liberating.

4.9 Land and Mother: The Political Goes Personal

Sugarcoating, my next show, reconciled me with my body and with my mother, and allowed me again to "speak as a universal person", as Puwar (2004) defines it. But this discussion of body image, motherhood, daughterhood, and health was inseparably intertwined with marks of my homeland. At its heart was the story of my mother, "the most beautiful woman in town", who was also an unsung hero, having lost her arm at the 1967 Six Day War, and her fat daughter, trapped in a tortured relationship with her.

> *The doctor said: the arm must go, she'll die.*
>
> *And the nurses said no! Look, she is so young, only 24, and pretty, too.*
>
> *When I was a child, I didn't think what I think now, which is - why do beautiful people need their arms more than ugly people?*
>
> *If you are pretty, people give you a hand! (Baram, 2018)*

Sugarcoating shifted between current London, where my body comes back to haunt me through a succession of health-related mishaps – and Israel, where my relationship with my body and with my mother consequently started to patch up. It signposted a leap in my

ability to tie the personal and confessional into the advocatory and political, which in turn made me feel I was coming full cycle - as an immigrant and as a performer.

> *Israel – You are going to love it.*
>
> *Or hate it.*
>
> *No, not like marmite*
>
> *More like BDSM.*
>
> *without the safe words.* (Baram, 2018)

But also, I had to remind myself and my audience, that here is where I am now:

> *I'll tell you what I got for Christmas, I got British.*
>
> *I'm delighted!*
>
> *There are downsides of course:*
>
> *No more sober sex*
>
> *No more speaking my mind.*
>
> *I spend Saturday nights in a ditch with my knickers round my neck*
>
> *Being passive aggressive.* (Baram, 2019).

A need for political expression can be a strong motivator for devising negotiating strategies through comedy. After 22 years in the UK and 15 years in stand-up, I still feel committed to speak about my country. I have let go of what interviewee Radu Isac (2022) referred to as "comedy rules", or what every interlocutor for this thesis viewed as an obligation to "get it (your identity) out of the way". I do not need to "explain my accent," a necessity many interviewees related to, or my complexion. My accent is now mild enough for people to not immediately notice it, I am a white woman – I can get away with speaking as a "universal person". And yet, I always feel obliged to speak about it.

It is not an easy undertaking. The October 7th massacre (2023) in Southern Israel and the genocide Israel launched on Gaza in retaliation made me realise that "speaking as a universal human" can no longer mean telling jokes about menopause. It necessitates speaking for humanity, raising a voice against what the Israeli government does in my name, yet voicing the mourning, grief and humanity of my community and family in Jerusalem, for friends who were held hostage in Gaza. I returned from Israel to London on 7th October, and had to perform at a conference at Brunel University the following day. I told the story of what happened to me on that Saturday morning, my niece dragging me out of bed to safety, my mother insisting on hanging the washing on the roof while rockets might still be falling, my brother making his children play violent computer games to stop them from watching

the more violent news, and EasyJet being the only airline not cancelling their flights out of Israel that night, "because they'd rather be shot down than give a refund" (Baram, 2023).

The political obligation is, nonetheless, deeply personal. I Identify with the perspectives of three of my interviewees, Sameena Zehra's (2022) sense of obligation to use her privileges to speak out, politically, for what is right; Njambi McGrath's (2022) anti-colonial rage (in her case, against the oppression of her people and her family, in mine, against the wrongs my homeland unleashes on Palestinians and the suffering that, in turn, befalls on Israelis, too); and Vlad Ilich's (2023) yearning to let people in Britain "know what it is like to live in the shadow of war". My experience and their thoughts boded with the theory. Our desire to penetrate the British national habitus and acquire the required cultural capital, echo Bourdieu's definitions of them. Added to it is our will to show our face - of our Otherness - and have it recognised. In Levinas' and Butler's terms we want to raise the ethical demand - hazarding the fearful moment of invoking in our audience the "temptation to kill" - in hope of getting there with the punchline that is "a call for peace" (Butler, 2024, p. 134). And finally, we constantly aim for the desired permission described by Puwar (2004), to speak as a universal person, even if all it means is being allowed to tell a rather silly joke about dating.

5. Out of Africa: Black Post-Colonial Comedy

"I had one of those cold calls, and the guy on the phone said to me, have you had an accident that wasn't your fault? I said: yes, mate; Colonialism." (Njambi McGrath, 2022).

"I promise not to talk about being black. Enough, I've been black for 51 years. I am 56 now" (Benjamin Bello, 2023).

"I was 'randomly searched; at Waitrose; again, so I demanded to speak to the manager. Because sometimes life kicks you in the arse so hard, you must turn into a Karen'" (Trev Tokabi, 2024)

"You say you discovered Africa, a whole continent with millions of people living there for thousands of years. So how come when my brother comes into your house and discovers a television, you put him in jail?" (Thenjiwe Moseley,2023)

After presenting my own experience, this chapter discusses the experience of Black African stand-up comedians in the UK, and their strategic negotiation tactics with their audiences. Methodologically, it is based on interviews with four comedians – two men and two women - who came to the United Kingdom from Africa, and addresses their ways of negotiating their comedy with British audiences through their immigration experience, the relation in their comedic identity between being Black and being immigrants, their perceived experience of racism and discrimination, and changes in the content of their comedy throughout their experiences.

5.1 Balancing a Dual Otherness

I shall argue that Black African comedians strive to find a balancing point when strategizing how to communicate their dual Otherness to their audiences. They have different opinions on what to emphasise: being Black, or being from another country. Their decision on which facet of their identity to underline has to do with their personal trajectory in relation to colonialism and oppression, their political outlook. They realise that the ways in which they

occupy space in the performance room is a statement of presence, and that it features as their most immediate port of negotiation – all else derives from it.

Black comedians from Africa embody at least two types of 'Otherness' through which they perform. They are both Black and 'foreign'. Most of them hail from countries colonised by the British Empire in the past, although interlocutor Trevor Tokabi is from the previous French colony Côte D'Ivoire (Ivory Coast). I looked at the interviews and comedic material of those comedians mainly through the perspective of post-colonial theory. I found Nirmal Puwar's theoretical analysis, drawing on feminist thinker Luce Irigaray, Pierre Bourdieu's exploration of the Habitus from a class-related and national viewpoint, Edward Said's Orientalism and Homi Bhabha's comments on in-between culture, to be particularly instructive when attempting to break down those comedians and their negotiating process with British audiences.

Drawing on Said and Bourdieu, Puwar asks who is the 'universal' person, the type of human the majority of society imagines when an unidentified person is mentioned, and who are the people who have to fight their way into the habitus. "While all can, in theory, enter, it is certain types of body that are tacitly designated as being the 'natural' occupants of specific positions. Some bodies are deemed as having the right to belong, while others are marked out as trespassers… Not being the somatic norm, they are space invaders." (Puwar, 2004, p. 8). Puwar describes those invaders as women and non-white people. (Puwar, 2004, p. 145). The analysis refers mainly to "Black bodies", even though Puwar usefully explains that when referring to 'Whiteness' and 'Blackness'. "This is by no means a sociobiological argument that assumes a determinate relationship between skin colour and behaviour. This perspective does, however, attach importance to the signifying consequences of phenotypical features, such as skin colour." (Puwar, 2004, p. 150). This distinction will be particularly important when discussing immigrants who are visibly white but are othered by both nationality and race. One of the characteristics of women and non-white people is their visibility. As marked bodies, contends Puwar, they undergo double exposure (2004).

5.2 The Despot and the Clerk: Benjamin Belo

Stand-up comedian Benjamin Bankole Bello is visible in all those ways. Born in Liverpool and taken back to Nigeria as a toddler, he was educated in a "British-style" military school and returned to the UK at the age of eighteen (Bello, 2022). Adding to his visibility, he appears on stage as a character - President Obonjo, a fierce, angry generic African dictator, clad in British military uniform. Obonjo is a sophisticated creation: although he initially strikes the critical viewer as a caricature – a violent, loud, polygamist womaniser with a taste for executing his political rivals - he transpires to express nuanced and poignant critique of British culture, politics and politicians.

"Others" in spaces that have traditionally been dominated by the white male norm, explains Puwar, are perceived not only as being out-of-place, but also as a threat. Puwar mentions the comment attributed to Winston Churchill upon the arrival of the first female MP, Lady Nancy Astor, in the House of Commons in 1919: "I find a woman's intrusion into the House of Commons as embarrassing as if she burst into my bathroom when I had nothing with which to defend myself, not even a sponge." (Vallance, 1979, p. 13). Black people invoke fear of having the space overtaken by them, writes Puwar: "Like immigration, there is a great emphasis on numbers, alongside a moral panic of lowering standards and being 'swamped' by alien others… The fear of losing the unnamed normativity of whiteness and masculinity in organisations is projected on these other bodies as an 'organisational terror'. (Puwar, 2004, p. 145) This sense of threat and tension was particularly rife in the period around the Brexit referendum, as noted by Clarke *et al*. (2017), and as a result of the subsequent Covid-19 pandemic, as indicated by Rooij *et al*. (2021).

In comedy, those sentiments were given voice by relatively minor incidents which nonetheless echoed far and wide. One of the loudest of those was comedian Andrew Lawrence's outburst, complaining in a Facebook post on 25th October 2014 about the BBC's 'surreal diversity targets' and for programmes such as *Mock the Week* packing its panels with "Aging, balding, fat men, ethnic comedians and women-posing-as-comedians" (Donaldson, 2022). The angry response (see: Alexander, 2014, Lee, 2014), came not only from women, ethnic minority people and balding fat men. Many comedians felt that

Lawrence had crossed a line. There was a lingering feeling that a new front had been opened.

Bello applies a few negotiating tools through comedic devices to mitigate the sense of threat caused by his presence. The first is the counter-intuitive device of exaggeration. President Obonjo's character is far more intimidating than Bello himself could ever be, but audiences are taken by his bigger-than-life caricature. Exaggeration is an old comedic device, going back to the days of Aristophanes, invoking a sense of incongruity and absurdity (Roeckelein, 2022, p. 55).

At a certain point in the character's life on stage, Bello opted for another comedic device. He started alternating on stage as himself – or rather an even further lower-status version of himself: Benjamin Bello, the soft-spoken middle-aged man of suburban St. Albans, with his humble suit and upper-middle-class English accent, in a strong contradiction to President Obonjo's heavy Nigerian twang.

'Benjamin', the tired suburban clerk whose life was taken over by Obonjo the despot, who now "sleeps with my wife", shared a stage with the President in Bello's Edinburgh Fringe shows of 2017. Over time, Obonjo has become a circuit headliner, while Benjamin is still labouring to establish himself. The power struggle between the "monster" and his creator, the foreigner and the British, the outsider and the insider, continues both on and off the stage. The gap between the two creates what Immanuel Kant described as laughter that "arises from the sudden transformation of a heightened expectation into nothing." (Critchley, 2002, p. 9). Exaggeration in self-deprecating humour, expands Critchley, "sets up an expectation of an extreme flaw or misfortune, which is then deflated by the comedian's acknowledgement of the exaggeration, leading to humour." (Critchley, 2022, p. 6).

Along with alleviating the exaggeration in the president's character, 'Benjamin' - unlike the President - abided by one of the demands that Puwar notes is directed at Black bodies: "They are expected to take on the ways and means (social codes) of upper/middle-class whiteness. Adherence to the norms and values of the hegemonic culture is almost a condition of entry." (Puwar, 2004, p. 151). Benjamin's accent and language provide him with a source of that 'social capital' which Bourdieu viewed as a way of buying entry into the

habitus. (Bourdieu, 1990). Thus, concludes Puwar, 'honorary citizenship' can be granted to those who exhibit signs of so-called civilisation and cultural refinement." (Puwar, 2004, p. 151).

According to Bello, Obonjo was inspired by US President Barak Obama in conjuncture with African dictators: "At the time I started performing, around 2010, Obama was frustrated by difficulties getting his new policies through with the Republicans in Congress. I started imagining how he would deal with them if he was an African dictator. I felt my subconscious mind telling me what I had forgotten about the reason I left Nigeria, about growing up in a military dictatorship. Comedy enabled both of us to be on stage: the nice timid Englishman, and the aggressive dictator. It makes it easier for people to identify with Obonjo and like him." (Bello, 2022).

However, even the crude-seeming President manages to demonstrate a large extent of political savviness when it comes to the United Kingdom. "You see what is really interesting," he boomed after Prime Minister Liz Truss fired Kwasi Kwarteng from the Treasury, "One day you are Chancellor of the Exchequer, the next minute you are dressing up in uniform" (Bello, 2022). This off-the-cuff short topical joke has a multiple impact: demonstrating the President's UK political savviness, taking a swing at Kwarteng, and implying that he fled the country to become a dictator in Africa. While self-deprecating, it also implies that the audience cannot tell one Black man from another.

Bello himself abandoned his first name, Bankole, when he returned to England, for his second name, Benjamin, as a forename, because he did not want people to mispronounce it. Later, he re-added his first name as a middle name "because it sounded posh, like Jacob Rees-Mogg." (Bello, 2022). Bello says Obonjo takes no notice of such considerations: "When people said, 'How do you pronounce it?' he said, "How dare you! If you can pronounce Obama, you can pronounce Obonjo!" (Bello, 2022). Unlike 'Benjamin', Obonjo is aggressive and unapologetic. He enables the meek immigrant to transform and take control. At the same time, the exaggerated and somewhat silly larger-than-life character is never genuinely intimidating.

This ambivalence - the tension between wanting to express an authentic identity and aspiring to seem "posh" - keeps coming up in Bello's narrative. Despite the character's popularity, Bello encountered a few disturbing racist attacks as a comedian, and most of them happened when he was dressed in President Obonjo's uniform. This may raise the question of whether a hostile response was provoked by seeming to invade a space in which he does not belong, in line with Puwar's conceptualisation of the arrival of a Black body onto a scene that he does not have the social permission to occupy. His choice of attire may seem specifically poignant considering that the military uniform worn by Obonjo is a standard British uniform, decorated with various medals and military insignia from memorabilia shops.

In one case that I witnessed personally, a man in the Edinburgh Fringe of 2022 approached Bello at a café near his venue. "He said if I didn't like the country, I should go back to Africa… he was shouting, saying repeatedly that he wanted to attack me," (Dalgetti, 2023), Bello told a local newspaper. The incident ended when the police were called (by me), after the man threatened to take Bello outside and hit him. In another incident at the same Fringe, a woman had repeatedly told Bello at a pub "I couldn't see you there" (Dalgetti, 2023), which he understood to implicate that being Black, he was invisible in the dimly lit space (Bello, 2022). A few days later, he told EdinburghLive, a man on the street shouted: "Go back to your country, if you were in Africa right now, you'd be starving." (Dalgetti, 2023). The incidents attracted some coverage (Chortle, 2023).

On 1st April, 2024 in London, during a performance as President Obonjo in Covent Garden in London, a group of audience members heckled him, calling him, among other slurs, "Monkey". (Bello, 2024a). Bello kept performing as President Obonjo without breaking character, but the consistent heckling forced him to stop his performance after 12 minutes. The police were called and one of the hecklers was arrested for racial abuse. Bello reported supportive responses from other audience members and fellow comedians (Bello, 2024b). The venue promptly invited him to perform his full Fringe show at the club (Bello, 2024c). Startled, Bello posted that he avoided performing for a few days but described his two gigs that followed as "redemption gigs". Many comedy colleagues posted supportive messages, expressing outrage about the incident. However, one person identifying as a "Scottish

comedian" on X (previously known as Twitter), among a wealth of racist texts on his wall, accused Bello of resorting to claims of racism just because he "can't deal with hecklers". (@DawnOfTheDeadMK7, 2024). It is not clear whether the user @DonOfTheDeadMk7 is a genuine comedian, but the claim is a rather typical one on the circuit when an act is accused of covering for a professional failure by complaining about racism, sexism or homophobia.

"It could have happened to another Black act," said Bello, "and I think this group would have attacked me if I had performed as Benjamin, too. But in Obonjo's case I feel that the uniform prompts it: A Black man with an African accent wearing a British uniform – it makes him look more like an outsider, and there is a perception that it is an audacity on his part to be wearing them. The first set of uniforms I had was more old-fashioned, and ever since I started wearing a more modern set of British Army uniforms, I get more hostile responses." (Bello, 2024). An angry follower on TikTok posted on Bello's profile: "Don't ignore me, you use British kit. if you continue to use it, I will report you to the police." (Bello, 2024c).

The space invasion in the case of the 'modern uniform' is dual. Whereas the old-styled uniform could be seen as a mockery of a somewhat realistic African leader, the modern ones might get too close to mockery of the national symbols of the Habitus by an "outsider" and therefore, for some, cannot be allowed.

In the summer of 2023, complaints of perceived racist abuse during the Edinburgh Fringe were heard from other black immigrating comedians. Thenjiwe Moseley, a female immigrant from South Africa, now based in Surrey, reported feeling that she encountered racism on a few occasions: "When I am flyering for my show (Moseley, 2023a), some people are just scared to see me approach, and put their phones and wallets away. I feel sorry for the black men, who are obviously deemed as more intimidating. Some of them have stopped flyering and just hired white flyerers." (Moseley, 2023). This is quite a revealing testimony from Moseley, an elegantly dressed, well-spoken woman in her 40s. She also complained to Just the Tonic, the company running her venue, about staff behaviour towards her audience, which she viewed as racially motivated. "I was having staff members come in just before the show, asking the audience if they were sure they came to see The Mandela Effect, and not another comic. They couldn't believe that I'm attracting a white audience." (Moseley, 2023). Unlike most newer comedians, who perform at free-access

venues, Moseley opted to perform at Just the Tonic, a paid venue. Moseley might have "invaded" the space of the respected venue, but she claims that the sense of being out of space was now directed at her white audience, lest they stumble accidentally into the "wrong" space she has now occupied.

Obonjo's authoritarianism enabled Bello to process personal pain and express more subtle political ideas. "I did not want to speak about my mother suffering from domestic violence, and my parents divorcing, but those are things that left their mark on me. I was sent to a military boarding school in Nigeria when I was 15, very English colonial and upper class, for five years of loneliness, discipline and pain. President's aggression helped me deal with that, with his alter-ego, Benjamin, finally expressing the pain of being ran over by this dictator" (Bello, 2022).

The implicit demand to "represent" is constantly at the background of every 'other' comedian. " Symbolic relationships between race, gender and positions of authority cannot be overestimated. The gendered and racial symbolism of these positions must be underscored in order to fully appreciate the dynamics involved in the presence of 'newcomers' to particular professions," writes Puwar. The 'marked bodies' are pushed into the 'straitjacket' of representation (Puwar, 2024, p.66).

Obonjo's character enables Bello to lift that burden to an extent, and remind the British audience of the historical background of military dictatorships in Africa. At a certain point, the stereotypical despot started realizing his own duties of representation. "A lot of these dictators started as freedom fighters. As soon as they fell out with the West, they became dictators. Something triggered them: Mugabe, Gaddafi. People need to understand that there's a history there. When I started performing comedy, I didn't realise this responsibility for the impact of what you say on stage. I developed the character to be playful, joyful. But over the last three years I became political, and that it when it became really funny, and people could understand. There is a process: you become political, and your character evolves in the same direction." (Bello, 2022).

Bello's strategy to scrutinize the UK is to let President Obonjo use his dictator's position to poke fun at British politics and politicians. "People saw Obonjo on posters before

encountering the act on stage, so they expected an evil, brutal dictator. They thought they could predict what he was going to say. But the man hidden inside the uniform was still me, the laid-back, soft-spoken, English Labour supporter, even if that 'English' side of me didn't come out when I was in character. An audience member said: 'I didn't know I was gonna love a dictator, but I love you.'" (Bello, 2022).

Obonjo, in character, and from his endearing sometimes child-like wild perspective, can smuggle in some home truth. His character is in line with that of a court jester, as defined by Barbara Otto "A jester could use humour to mock and advise a king without causing offense because of his identity as a harmless simpleton" (Otto, 2021, p.33). And it is he, not the Anglified in his own description Bello, who "can expose some of the hypocrisy in our so-called democracy. He can speak about the Qatari money that is invested in the UK, and the British interests in Iran. He can offer to bring African supervisors to monitor the UK elections and improve the outcome. He is a president exiling in the UK and he is obviously interested in politics but is baffled by the characters he comes across. This is not what he thought our democracy would look like." (Bello, 2022). Bello says it had taken him time to realise this about his own creation, but the result was that the President started talking more and more about UK politics.

Those changes had to do not only with the shifts in Bello's understanding of Obonjo's character but to his exploration of his own identities. "I don't feel as Nigerian as I used to. I would say I'm an international person. I haven't forgotten my roots. To an extent I was becoming too westernized. Obonjo was my way of reminding myself of who I really was. I used to sound a certain way and all of a sudden, I started sounding so English. When I arrived in the UK, nobody could understand me." The change in his accent, as Puwar notes, is another negotiating tool and key for acceptance: "Non-whites who can perform perfect English, for instance, Salman Rushdie, are more likely to be accepted and respected by the British Elite." (Puwar, 2024, p.178. note 5). It also enabled Bello to break from what is known as the "Urban Circuit" – a ring of comedy gigs performed and watched almost exclusively by Black people - to the "general", namely mostly white, circuit. "I made a concerted effort. I thought it was great to be within the Nigerian community but I really

needed to understand British comedy, so I moved into the mainstream circuit." (Bello, 2022).

Bello's journey, then, was double. His character was not just a device to negotiate with his audience, black or white, but to define his own identity and deal with his experience of immigration, displacement and absorption. The split is evident in Bello's two different stage personas, Benjamin and President Obonjo. Benjamin is English, and Obonjo is generically African, but Bello can see many Nigerian traits in him: "He is larger than life, expensive and pragmatic, those are typical Nigerian qualities".

When performing as Benjamin, Bello says to his audience that he "bought this accent at Waitrose, and I don't know how long it is going to last. It might get expired soon" (Bello, 2022). In the texts he puts in Obonjo's mouth, however, he doesn't stress the Nigerian aspect of his immigrant identity, because he felt there were many Nigerian stand-ups on the circuit when he started performing. His USP - Unique Selling Point – was in being generically, and in many ways stereotypically, African.

This constant shift between identities: the Nigerian, the all-African and the British was recognised and noticed by post-colonial thinkers not as a weakness or a mere necessity due to circumstances, but as a power in its own right. Stuart Hall wrote: "Not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference." (Hall, 1990, p.235). This regional affiliation, Bello notes, is not a uniquely African immigrant trait. He mentions, as an example, Kuan-wen Huang[7], a Taiwanese comedian who immigrated to the UK, and runs a southeast Asian gig. Another stand-up comedian who expressed a strong reginal-ethnic Southeast Asian identity was Rick Kieswetter. The activities of both comedians are discussed in chapter 8.

And despite all those intertwined identities – sometimes the room is hostile to both Bello and his President. His hybridity and his comedic devices that help him negotiate.   Like some other non-white, immigrants or just liberal comedians, there are signs he attributes to a

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[7] For more on Huang see chapter 8.

hostile environment: "I once walked into a room, out of London, and I could smell it. It's white. And you see the way they look at you, and the England flags, older people - you get that they are Brexiteers. And how I dealt with it is why I sometimes feel comedy is spiritual. We all get told of the importance of reading the room, but sometimes you just know what to do from your comedy. It is also a psychological process that evolves along the way. And there's no escape, I am already there, so I it as an opportunity to educate them. I acknowledge the elephant in the room. I tell them straight away that they might not find me funny because I am an immigrant who is going to tell them what's wrong with this country. And I do it in character, as Obonjo, aggressively."

When asked about the audience's response to it, Bello said: "Some of were shocked, some of them applauded because they just couldn't believe it. I just tell them straight away, 'I've done my research. And I know that this is going to be a tough gig because I shouldn't really be here. After all, I am an immigrant in army uniform, and I have never served'. You have to acknowledge the room." In this sense, for Bello, the idea of "getting it out of the way" - which for many FGICs means acknowledging their own otherness - translates also into acknowledging the audience's prejudices.

I have witnessed a similar experience when I was asked, in 2011, to organise in Ashford, Kent, in my early years in comedy. It was a post-dinner performance in a bingo club, populated by the club members - all white and in their late middle age. Dane Baptiste, a British black comedian from South London, got on stage to hostile and tense silence. "So," he said, "you didn't see me coming, did you"? (Freshly, 2011). The room boomed with laughter. Even though the audience was just told, however elegantly, that the performer recognised them as racist, they have taken it as a badge of honour; a relief of tension, which is one of the constituting elements of humour. (See Critchley, 2002, p.2-3).

When I mention the anecdote to Bello, he immediately identifies with the dynamics described. "That's just it. I actually tell them they are racist, and then you just go to saying, I'm an exotic dictator. And I just do stuff, and then they laugh, and if they don't laugh, I accuse them of being racist. They get the joke and the acknowledgement. Comedy is psychological; you need to get into the heads of the people. So, for example, when I went to Bracknell, a posh area in Berkshire, and a retired military man who used to work for Prince

Charles came over and said, 'You are really funny but I kept wanting to walk over and straighten up your uniform, you are wearing your cap all wrong'. I explained that I went to military school, but that I chose to wear them a bit wrongly as this is funnier." (Bello, 2022).

But beyond what turned into a conversation between two army chums, those very 'White' areas of England get to Bello: "I used to, especially in the beginning, feel very lonely there, I suddenly thought 'Jeez, I am really black'. I am truly not from around here, not from England, I'm reminded that I am an immigrant. Not that I'm making a concerted effort not to be an immigrant. But when I go to those places, it genuinely dawns on me." (Bello, 2022). Unlike Bello, the playful, confident and irreverent President Obonjo can say whatever he wants. At a liberal-Democrat conference he promised MPs to deport Nigel Farage to Africa. He told a hairdresser in the audience that a man of his suits and stature had not come to the UK to steal her job; he would much rather move into no. 10 Downing Street. He warned his audiences that "their racism will fuck up your economy" (Bello, 2022).

Brexit was a watershed, and Bello, too, felt the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment in the UK (Clarke et al, 2017). "I talked about Brexit a lot until it was actually voted upon. At that point I felt that's it was done. Promoters also started asking me to speak about it less, the audiences were tired of it." (Bello, 2022). The run-up to the vote, however, was tense: "There were places where I felt the mixture of social deprivation and anger directed towards immigrants, and it was hard. But it is vital for me – and it is easy to cross that line – to not turn your comedy set into a lecture, don't tell them off. Make it funny even when it is hard. They are entitled to vote for whatever they see fit, this is the beauty of democracy and I believe in it." (Bello, 2022).

Obonjo's beliefs, however, veer away from those of his creator. Alongside advocating polygamy and executions of rouge politicians, he often mockingly attacks democracy as a cause of chaos and corruption and makes outrageous suggestions for "reforms". Bello says that the character gets the audience's legitimacy to say those things, which in turn pushes them to defend their democracy. (Bello, 2022). The comedic devices of superiority, exaggeration and incongruity and tongue-in-cheek provocation serve the President well. As noted by Critchley, on incongruity: "Humour is produced by the distinction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke, between expectations and

actuality" (Critchley, 2002, p.1). Obonjo might look like a superior despot who craves to expand dictatorship into the United Kingdom, but the audience is still well aware that the person standing in front of them is an immigrant of an ethnic minority, who has a vested interest in democracy. In this space exactly, Bello exercises what Sophie Quirk defines as influential manipulation. (Quirk, 2015, p.25).

The difference around Brexit, believes Bello, was not so much vis-à-vis the audience, but in relation to the promoters, the bookers: "Comedians knew at the time that bookers who had strong views for Brexit might not book you because how you express yourself on stage or on social media. One booker who told me openly that he wouldn't have me at his club because I said anti-Brexit stuff on Facebook. He was the only one who said it openly, but I know there were others." (Bello, 2022).

Bello never performed in Nigeria, but was influenced by some comedy he watched there. " The comedy I grew up watching in Nigeria was character-based sketch-comedy. The local comedians were versions of Benny Hill, Mr. Bean, and Tommy Cooper – with character, slapstick, and a lot of silliness; all this exists in Obonjo. I only started watching stand-up comedians as such, mainly Richard Prior, when I came to the UK."

He informs Liverpool audiences that he was born there, but does it in Obonjo's accent and character. "They are pleasantly surprised. I wouldn't dream of trying to pull on a 'scouse' accent. I can't really claim Liverpool-ness; my only memory of it is from an old photograph I have of me with my family, on a ship, getting ready to go back to Nigeria. I had a Beatles t-shirt on, though. I was a little fan" (Bello, 2022). Here, again, the hybridity and ability to travel between spaces noted by Hall (Hall, 1990, p.235), or what was identified by Dick Pels as a "long-standing connection between estrangement or distinction from local cultures and beliefs, and claims about 'better vision', a deeper reflexivity, increased objectivity, cognitive innovation, access to larger truths." (Pels, 1999, p.63).

5.2 Calling the Audience to Task: Njambi McGrath's Angry Comedy

Much of the post-colonial theory mentioned above could be applied to Kenya-born comedian Njambi McGrath. However, she performs within a spirit and intention relating also to a somewhat different school of thought, that of Emmanuel Levinas's notion of the

'face' of the other, and Judith Butler's reading of it. At the heart of Levinas' notion of the face of the Other is the initial rage and desire to kill, invoked by the exposure to the Other's suffering and pain. This is followed by the transformative impact of the encounter with that 'face' on members of the majority or power yielding group members: "The face as the extreme precariousness of the other. Peace as awakeness to the precariousness of the other" (Levinas, 1985, p.78). McGrath had also come to England as a young adult with an idea of Britain in her mind, which radically changed after living in the country for a few years. The change was a result of a thorough reading and investigation of the history of British rule in Kenya and of her family's history.

McGrath moved to the UK in 2010, from New York where she lived for a few years after leaving her homeland (Mark, 2013). She started performing comedy shortly after she arrived in the country with her husband and two daughters. Her comedy stance after performing comedy regularly for three years. Her father's death prompted her to explore her family's history, and her discoveries shook her deeply (McGrath, 2022). Her comedy ever since has been embedded in pain and trauma. It is reproachful and potentially uncomfortable for her often white British audiences. It seems to reflect to the letter Butler's portrayal of the demand addressed at "us" by the Face of the Other: "That situation is one in which we are addressed, in which the Other directs language at us. That language communicates the precariousness of life that establishes the ongoing tension of non-violent ethics." (Butler, 2004, p.139).

The situation of stand-up comedy enables the Other on stage to address the room with a reversing of power. The audience, purely by numbers, represents the majority, the norm, but the Other is on a stage, normally a heightened one, holding the microphone. The comedian can approach a member of the audience, ask questions, or direct a joke at them. This creates tension, or, as Butler puts it "There is a certain violence already in being addressed." Especially as "the other has made a demand upon me, accused me of a failing, or asked me to assume responsibility" (Butler, 2004, p.139).

All of McGrath's comedy relate directly to her Kenyan trajectory, to her family's experience in the British concentration camps, to British colonialism and its treatment of Kenyan people. Based on personal, historical and family history research, much of her content is

angry and often challenging for her British audiences. When she presented her first Edinburgh show, 'BonjouLicious', at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2014, under the comedy category, the comedy reviewers in Edinburgh were baffled. "Njambi McGrath's BonjouLicious is possibly the most horrific comedy show ever. And I don't mean that euphemistically. This is a deeply upsetting story of the gruesome tortures, rapes and murders committed in Kenya in one of the most shameful episodes of British history…This savage history lesson is so far from being a comedy show, we won't even attempt to rate it as such." (Bennett, 2014). The Scotsman reviewer Kate Copstick observed that the show was placed in the wrong section of the Fringe's brochure: "It was a brilliant show but it was not a comedy show" (Fleming, 2015).

McGrath acknowledges that maybe the show was not necessarily branded the right way (McGrath, 2022). She was also relatively new to comedy at the time, and evolving skills are crucial, especially when it comes to processing hard life experiences and political content into the form of comedy. But McGrath stuck with her path of insisting on both strands of her performance career: keeping to comedy form and making her shows more and more joke-rich, as well as taking to British to task with the wrongs their Empire caused in Africa. Her later shows, despite varying appreciation, and no matter how painful the subjects she touched on, were never denied the status of legitimate comedy again.

McGrath's reproaching comedy may upset some audience members, but the relentless outcry she displays, the urgency she feels in the need of the British to understand how they wronged her, her family and her people, may have in it the seeds of a dialogue, of a connection. As Levinas writes "the face of the other in its precariousness and defencelessness, is for me at once the temptation to kill and the call to peace, the 'You shall not kill'" (Levinas, 1985, p.167). Namely, the anger can transform into a bond.

Not all audiences are happy to be called up on British history: "Some people are in denial some people are shocked in reaction to what they hear. Some people are apologetic, embarrassed or ashamed. When I was talking about my book (McGrath, 2020), somebody asked whether I made all those things up. In Edinburgh, at the end of a show, a white man who lived in Kenya said I lied about British history. To make a point he dropped a penny in my collection bucket. He was very angry." (McGrath, 2022).

But McGrath is a woman on a mission. "I cannot talk about myself and my family without talking about British history. My mother had spent eight years in a concentration camp. We are talking about British history because we are bound by it. That's what shaped who I am. I wish I could just spend all my time talking about something else. There are much easier things to talk about than concentration camps." (McGrath, 2022).

McGrath does not criticize Kenya in her show. "Kenya and Africa are portrayed in the West in a very racist manner. The history of Europeans in Africa was brutal: they stole Africans and sold them as slaves, forced them to work and beat them and tortured them and castrated them and raped them and did all those things. Now, they are pretending to be saviours of Africa. If I criticised Kenya, people might feel it is a justification of the things they do to my people." (McGrath, 2022).

McGrath was raised in Kenya to admire the Empire: "The British conquerors told us how amazing Britain was, so you wanted to go to Britain, it was like Mecca for you. British people forced us into Western education and have taken away our identity." (McGrath, 2022).

McGrath picked comedy as the vehicle for her messages because she wanted to get the ear of British people: "You cannot get a productive result if you just lecture, because then you might create animosity. The audience comes to laugh, so I make jokes, people are laughing; but they are taking note. When you engage people, they are more likely to remember what you told them. I'm a comedian, this is my job. The purpose is to get the message through, and to craft it in a funny form." (McGrath, 2022).

McGrath is married to an English man, lives in England and raises her children in the UK, but her sense of Intimate knowledge of the British, for her, derives from learning about the evils of the colonial past. "I know about the British from their victims: from the way they created the tools to castrate men, from when they cut women's nipples off, raped women with sticks and put chillies in their vaginas. Because of what they have done to us. Other nations have a very sort of rosy view of the British because they think they're all like … Downton Abbey and whatever. But to Kenyans, British people caused absolute abject terror. They unleashed hideous suffering on my people." (McGrath, 2022).

"When I was a child, we were brainwashed, told that white people are the purveyors of justice. After my father died. I was already married to my lovely husband, and we had children. I began my research my family history and speak to my relatives. I felt depressed and betrayed. I have always believed that the British stood for good, that they were on the right side of History; only to find out what they did to my grandmother; how they used to shoot breastfeeding mothers and bury their babies alive for a game. I was traumatized. I still find it very difficult to talk about this. My mother and other relatives died without having told their stories. They suffered so much. It still causes me great sadness."

Not all of McGrath's material is bleak or accusatory, some of it is light-hearted and turns reality on its head. In a routine that opens with a white English mother at Waitrose asking her daughter what she'd like for supper, McGrath reflects jokingly "My mother never asked me what I wanted to eat. She would say 'Don't eat it all, think about all the poor obese children in Africa!'" (McGrath, 2017).

McGrath speaks with great vehemence. At times, even with hatred, or bitter rage. Why, of all ways of communication, does she choose to entertain the offspring of her family's tormentors? "I feel that comedy chose me. I started comedy in 2011 and my father only died in 2014, which led me to this exploration of the past and new awareness. It changed my mind frame and my shows, and by that time I had comedy as a tool, a means of expression to bring out my messages" (McGrath, 2022).

McGrath recognises the therapeutic power of comedy for herself, alongside its influence on others. The processing of trauma through stand-up is considered common among comedians: Hanna Gadsby's successful show "Nanette" discussed her experience of abuse for being a lesbian in rural Australia (Gadsby, 2017), Richard Gadd's hit show Baby Reindeer told the story of how he was raped by a comedy writer and stalked by an abusive woman (Gadd, 2019, 2024). Both shows turned into successful Netflix shows, but other, smaller shows dealt with painful subjects too – Chris Dangerfield exposed being sexually abused as a child (Dangerfield, 2014), and Adrienne Truscott spoke about having been raped in her show against rape jokes. (Truscott, 2015). National trauma and pain of displacement, war and death may also find their relief and release through humour. The Jewish post-holocaust humour is believed by scholars to have helped "process the recent trauma of war"

(Lederhendler et al, 2016, p.124). McGrath's showing the 'face' of Kenyan suffering under the British Empire is a part of a long trajectory of healing oneself and one's audience through laughter.

5.3 Not my Colonialism: Trevor Tokabi

When Trevor (Trev) Tokabi opens his comedy set in the UK, he first explains his French African accent. "I'm from Cote D'Ivoire, Ivory Coast, the name was changed - by the colonisers. You see, it is all about the colonialism" (Tokabi, 2024). Tokabi was born in London and his mother moved back with him to Ivory Coast when he was nine years old after his parents had parted ways. "I was told I was going on a school trip," (Tokabi, 2024a), he quips in his set.

In many ways, Tokabi is a mirror image of McGrath. He feels that he has no 'beef' with his British audience, hailing from a country previously colonised by France.

In Ivory Coast he had to learn French, and feels equally "foreign" in both languages. "When in Ivory Coast I feel as if my first language is English; when I am in the UK I feel as if it is French". His accent also positions him as a foreigner in both places: "In the UK I clearly have a French African accent, but in Ivory Coast, I don't sound quite local, either; people often ask me where I am from" (Tokabi, 2024). Tokabi finds it hard to define the centrality of his immigrant identity to his comedy. "It is not the focal point, but it is always somehow there. A lot of it has to do with identity from my perspective, so I tell stories from my own point of view, but at the same time most of them could happen to anybody, they have a universal side." (Tokabi, 2024).

Tokabi, like most stand-ups, feels that he has to address his accent, colour and origin, but he is defiant about the necessity of doing it as early in the set. "It is what they teach in comedy courses, but I don't think it is necessary to do it from the get-go. You don't have to do it until you are comfortable on stage. When I am in the audience watching somebody telling jokes, I'm not thinking, 'Oh, this is funny, but I wonder where he's from?' I don't think people are not getting the jokes because they're stuck on that thought. So sometimes I don't refer to it at all" (Tokabi, 2024).

This may have to do with increasing experience and a sense of familiarity with an audience. Nationally acclaimed FGICs like Reginald D. Hunter (US), Henning Wehn (Germany) and Sindhu Vee (India) all address their origins at some point in their shows but feel no obligation to open their sets with it. Tokabi believes you do not have to be a household name to allow yourself some liberties with the order of things: "If you feel you have a rapport with the audience you can introduce your background in the middle of your set, or even before you leave" (Tokabi, 2024).

In a performance at Up the Creek comedy club, Tokabi opened with a joke which assumed his foreignness was obvious, and that took a quick dig at the British: "My lifestyle is heavily influenced by British culture; I mean: I have a drinking problem" (Tokabi, 2016). The joke earned him a big laugh from the audience and freed him to move on to discuss sexuality and sex patterns, without mentioning his country of origin until the end of his set. The recording of the show demonstrates he was doing well: the audience kept laughing and he seemed at ease on stage, so he did not deem it necessary. There was no need for him to knock on the doors of the habitus by making his "Immigrant's bid"; they were wide open for him. That said, even in this specific performance, he implied in his first joke, subtly and with a very light touch, that he is, indeed, not "British". His accent has done the rest of the work for him.

Tokabi's material is not be very political. His observations often touch on work, technology, aging and sexuality. Even though, as he admits, in tense times any comparison between "back home" and the UK may seem contentious. He feels that his lack of post-colonial zeal may have to do with the fact that Britain is not the colonizer of his perceived homeland, but France. "Maybe if I was living in France, I would have felt a stronger urge to deal with the colonial past in depth." He says, "But I do not have this kind of anger with the U.K." (Tokabi, 2024). His political post-colonial issues are with France: "They are still taxing our governments. They still have the embassies, a military presence, and a big say in the political climate. If a president they disapprove of gets elected, they bring instability, a bit like the Americans in South America, they can 'fix' things. So, you feel that it is more likely that if I have emigrated to France, I would have become one of those critical minority comedians there" (Tokabi, 2024).

Being in the UK, he does not feel that urge. "I've never seen my comedy as political, for example, like that of Njambi (McGrath) or Athena[8]. In my opinion, they are doing a good thing, but I cannot write that stuff for the life of me. I've tried to write topical stuff, but it just doesn't fly. I can make a comment about current affairs as a passing quip, But I can't hold it for longer. My brain cannot hack it. I can 'clock' that what the Prime Minister just said on television was silly; but I do not know how to formulate it to communicate that to an audience." (Tokabi, 2024).

The need to push back against expectations is not uncommon among stand-up comedians who are immigrants or a different type of "others". Those expectations can come from the audience in a specific room, the family or social environment of the comedian, or the comedian's own worldview and self-image. The ability to comply with such expectations depend on the comedian's desire to do so, their level of experience and talent, and their other fields of interest. Many want to defy the expectations prompted by their looks, origins or race, and many insist to be seen as "just myself" rather than a part of a collective. But even when the will exists, writing political material is not easy. I always sought ways to speak critically about Israel, but often found such jokes hard to craft due to my reverence towards this dear-to-my-heart subject, or my lack of experience at joke writing. In my first years, I just let it go and spoke about topics that felt easier to discuss. It has taken me 14 years in stand-up to express myself politically with some skill.

Sarah Ahmad describes such expectations as a "numbers game" (Ahmed, 2009, p.49), where the very presence of representatives of the 'other' signifies a change, a challenge to 'whiteness'. "What does it mean to embody diversity? … The turn to diversity is often predicated on the numbers game, on getting more of us, more people of colour, to add colour to the white faces of organisations. So, if we are the colour, then we are what gets added on… Our arrival is read as evidence of commitment, of change, of progress. Our arrival is noticeable." (Ahmed, 2009, p.41).

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[8] Athena Kugblenu, a Black UK born circuit comedian, known for her social and political commentary.

Despite claiming to be "non-political", Tokabi embodies Ahmed's argument in one of his sets. While stating that being from the Ivory Coast is more central to his identity than being a black man (Tokabi, 2024), he often touches on race in his comedy. "Very-very diverse crowd", he pokes fun at a room highly populated by white people at a London gig (Tokabi, 2019). Pointing at the one black audience member, he says: "One guy in the front row. Is that the one per cent guy in the office? … You must be in the brochure….'We are a very diverse office we have people from all over the world...'"(Tokabi, 2019).

The expectation from Others to represent their ethnic, religious or national group is not always comfortable to performers, or other 'Others' in the public eye, as noted by Puwar. (Puwar, 2004, p.66). While enabling a reliance on stereotypes makes producing label-based jokes easier, it can also harbour a tangible tension. Audience members often fear that the comedian on stage, especially if non-white and hailing from "the colonies", might be carrying a grudge which is about to be thrown in their face. It is the same "demand" that Butler notes in her reading of Levinas, the feeling that one is "being addressed" or held to task. (Butler, 2004, p.129).

Another example of comedians of colour being reluctant to comply with stereotypes comes up in an interview with black comedian Ray Campbell, in Oliver Double and Sophie Quirk's podcast Stand Up Diversity. Campbell, who immigrated to the UK in the 1980s from the US and performed comedy ever since; says he did "not perform black; I made a conscious decision not to fulfil the majority-white audience expectations of black comedians" (Double & Campbell, 2023). Those expectations, in his view, were to speak of "Black things", as most of the very few black immigrants to the UK in previous years did (Double & Campbell, 2023). Campbell also resented the fact that he was expected to represent British Black culture that was not his own (Ibid). His comedic and political dilemma echoes that of Members of Parliament Puwar interviewed, who faced an expectation to restrict themselves to dealing with "Black issues" (Puwar, 2024, p. 65). Campbell made a point to not stick with Black politics in his left-leaning political comments. He preferred to speak against the regime of Augusto Pinochet in Chile, consumerism and related subjects. The impersonations he made were of white politicians like John Major, Neal Kinnock and Roy Hattersley. Arguably, the

decision of Tokabi and others to defy expectations by speaking very scarcely about politics can be seen as deriving from a similar reluctance to abide by expectations.

Tokabi feels that being foreign may be an advantage when trying to get booked by comedy promoters. Echoing Hall's points about the potency of the hybrid outlook (Hall, 1990, p.2), he observes: "British audiences like seeing British comedians they can identify with, but watching a foreigner is exciting in other ways. They think, 'let's find out something new'. They may have never heard of the place you are from. We bring outsiders' perspective; audiences embrace it." (Tokabi, 2024).

He does not feel he encountered racism while performing comedy in the UK, then, immediately, mentions a few incidents that he attributes to "ignorance":

> I don't think that's necessarily racism. At a break in a gig in Eltham, a lady kept telling me a story about how black women didn't like her because she had mixed-race children and claimed that black women 'looked at her weird' in a supermarket. I just didn't understand why she shared that with me. Nina Benjamin (a black British comedian) came over to say hello to me, then heard her and moved away as if saying 'I'm not even engaging with this'. But I was taken by surprise; I did not know what to do, so I just listened. (Tokabi, 2024).

Tokabi experienced the period around the vote on Brexit as challenging. "When I performed outside of the urban cosmopolitan hub of the big cities, the atmosphere could get toxic. If you told a joke about Brexit it had to be good, but even then, they either loved it or remained silent. The message from some communities was: 'Don't talk politics; you are a comedian, just tell us jokes'. But I tell jokes about social issues, my background, everything. So, if I have a joke about Brexit, surely, I can tell it; If it's funny, people will laugh." (Tokabi, 2024).

Tokabi says he did not have many Brexit jokes in his set "But I riffed about it. It became easier after the vote because it became clearer that it was not such a great idea. I had a show in which an audience asked about the voting process for a quiz we had, and I said that it is very important to explain what the voting is about, or you end out with Brexit. This did get a laugh." (Tokabi, 2024).

His ability to deal with various audiences grew with experience. "At first, I was more intimidated performing outside of London, because I was often the one minority ethnic on the bill, and you feel the tension on stage. Over time, you get more confident; you just have to go out there and do your best." (Tokabi, 2024).

Tokabi is aware of the impact of the Black body, particularly male, being perceived as a threat, as noted by Puwar (2004). He does not experience this only as a hindrance. Being "a big black guy" gives him a sense of security in rowdier gigs. "Those guys who heckle, they tend to size up their prey. I think if I was a little black woman they'd be a lot more aggressive" (Tokabi, 2024). Tokabi is aware of his friendly presence which does not seem threatening, "But they can tell. I'm not a violent guy but I've been in a few scrapes..." (Tokabi, 2024).

Tokabi feels he is "a bit like a tourism agent" when it comes to talking about the Ivory Coast on stage. "I talk about how beautiful it is, but recently just started to make those comparisons in terms of how Cote d'Ivoire and England are similar: the schools are collapsing, the health facilities are sinking, and everybody is talking about corruption. In Africa we have a nutrition problem; here we have an obesity problem. We are not all that different. The UK is a first world country that is not all that far from a third world one." (Tokabi, 2024)

This strategy - of coming from a seemingly low-status position and making comparisons between Africa with the UK in a seemingly flattering tone - works well with Tokabi's unassuming stage persona. But does his audience agree?

> There is a generational difference. Gen Z audiences lap it up. It is their reality: they can't get a GP appointment, they are angry at the political situation, unhappy with the policies around food, so they identify with the criticism. The older generation doesn't. Their sentiment is 'This is my UK; don't you dare criticize it'. (Tokabi, 2024).

Tokabi's observation here is compatible with a briefing of an Oxford University research group about the UK public's attitude towards immigration, concluding that "Younger people and people with university degrees tend to express more positive attitudes towards immigration than older people and people with lower levels of education." (Fernández-

Reino & Blinder, 2023, p.11). It also echoes a popular notion amongst comedians assuming that the young tend to be more "woke", while older people are often conservative, Brexit supporting and, bluntly "racist".

Tokabi feels no need to criticise his homeland:

> If somebody is making fun of a country, I want it to be done in a light-hearted, positive way, rather than like, 'my country's crap'. I feel that you are a representative of your country, and should not slag it off in a foreign country. There are hardly any other Ivorian comedians in this country. In France, we're known for good music, good food, talented footballers - but comedians – there are not many; it makes you feel you need to stand for your country. (Tokabi, 2024).

1.4 Representing More than Yourself: Thenjiwe Moseley

Thenjiwe Moseley, too, feels that African comedians should be "careful" in what they say about their native countries, "Because you always represent more than yourself" (Moseley, 2023b). Like McGrath, she feels that comedy has given her a tool of expression: "The place immigration takes in my comedy set has probably grown over time. Comedy has given me a voice to talk about my identity, who I am and who we are as a people. Comedy is one of the very few careers where you can do that." (Moseley, 2023b). Talking about her identity as a black South African woman was not, she believes, a matter of choice for her: "I come from a history of segregation, where you are always reminded that you are black. That has always been my identity. Wherever I am, it will come up. That's how I've been identified all my life. It is in our subconscious mind." (Moseley, 2023b).

Moseley feels that not only must she address her identity on stage:

> Sometimes I also have to defend it and the reasons that we behave in a certain way. There are still a lot of stereotypes, so I feel like it's my duty, as I have the opportunity to talk to people and address those issues. Obviously, I do it in a funny way, in a polite manner, so we can get to understand each other. I want people to understand

us, there are almost no books about the black people of South Africa. There is no way else they can get information about us. (Moseley, 2023b).

Living in one of the "whitest" areas of Surry, she says she feels accepted in her community, which does not mean she does not sometimes upset her audience, or the reviewers: Sometimes people take it personally as if I was talking to them directly, or take it like an attack. I do not care if they get home and remember to get upset, as long as they laugh while they are in the room, because us, comedians, want – the response there and then. The reviewers have time to go home and get upset after they've left… (Moseley, 2023b).

Like many 'Other' comedians, she feels most comfortable performing in London, not just because the audience is more liberal, but also because she feels its comedy savviness makes their approach more welcoming. "I feel London is more diverse, and people are less uptight. In London clubs you get regular comedy-goers who understand comedy more than elsewhere." (Moseley, 2023b).

Moseley adds a layer of complication to her experience as a foreign comedian, when she says that sometimes audiences in black communities, in what is known as "Urban gigs", find it harder to digest her comedy. "It is ok as long as I tell jokes about my mum, put on her accent and so on. But when I go with intellectual eye-opening jokes, they get scared. They feel like they're going to be deported with you. As if what I say is too radical. I also feel that whereas in the white circuit, nobody questions your accent - probably because they cannot tell one 'Black' accent from another - in the Black circuit people who were born in the UK sometimes feel superior to people who immigrated here." (Moseley, 2023b).

 All the interlocutors in this chapter shoulder, each in their own way and style, the expectation to represent their countries. As Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, drawing on Said, notes: "When you first leave Uganda for Europe you think, 'At last I'm free to do what I want.' But when you arrive there, you become an African for the first time, in a sense. Because you are responsible for Somalia!" (Tiyambe Zeleza, 2005, p.1). In this sense, Bello takes on representing 'all' of Africa, in assuming the role of a pan-African dictator of an imaginary country. McGrath and Moseley are both committed to voice the plight of their specific

homelands, from the perspective they developed in the UK for all its complexities: McGrath with angry demand for the colonisers to assume historical responsibility, Moseley with a desire to introduce her homeland's story of liberation. Interestingly, and despite being technically born in London, Tokabi seems to consider himself as a post-colonial outsider, whose main interest is to speak for the universal once he paid the "tax" of speaking about his country. As Homi Bhabha put it "The culture which develops on the new soil must therefore be bafflingly like and different from the parent culture: it will be complicated sometimes by whatever relations are established with some native race and further by immigration from other than the original source. In this way, particular types of culture sympathies and culture-clash appear." (Bhabha, 1996, p.53). Those historical reconstructive narratives have their unique importance, urges Bhabha, "in the ability to re-inscribe the past, reactivate it, relocate it, re-signify it. More significant…it allows us to work through the present." (Bhabha, 1996, p.53).

6. Indian Comedians, Cosmopolitanism and Perceptions of Class

Children are rude, they missed behave, and here you are told that as a parent you need to be in honest dialogue with them. I didn't grow up in dialogue. I grew up in monologue. My mother told us shit and we went and did it! (Sindhu Vee, 2023)

The Indian government had to pick one out of the 23 languages spoken - Gujarati, Marathi, Konkani, Kannada, Tamil, Telegu, Malayalam, Bengali, Assamese, Oriya, Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, Kashmiri- so they considered it carefully and chose … English. (Sameena Zehra, 2012)

Women used to go crazy over my Irish accent, and whip cream all over me and it was disruptive because I couldn't use the photocopying machine. So I learnt Indian accent for 22 years. Now, when women talk to me I know exactly what they want; they want me to fix their laptop. (Mark Silcox, 2023)

Following the discussion of African comedians, this chapter examines the communication strategies of another brand of post-colonial comedians, those who immigrated from the Indian subcontinent. Their post-colonial context is ever-present, class is weaved either into their content, their means of communication with their audiences or their comedy styles. The chapter will discuss how class affects stand-ups' negotiations with their audiences and its role in cosmopolitan and transnational self-identifications. I will argue that the way they view and introduce themselves as insiders, outsiders or insider-outsiders relates strongly to their background, class and context of immigration, as well as with their ideological or political perceptions. The ongoing connection and relationship between Britain and its "Raj" is evident in all of their narratives in changing degrees.

Class, broadly defined, is not an unknown feature in the history British comedy and humour. Sharon Lockyer states that ridiculing "the dynamics and intricacies of the British class system has been a central ingredient of British television comedy since the 1950s." Indeed, "class struggles, differences, and tensions have been a source of comedy on the small screen." (Lockyer, 2010, p.121). However, she contends, unlike categories such as gender, race, and ethnicity, the category of class is rather neglected in scholarly discussion of British humour. Providing a quick survey of the question of class in British TV comedy, Lockyer argues that class in British comedy has been reduced to a "set of pathological consumption practices which serve to personalise class identities and class inequalities." As a result, she contends, the "importance of economic capital has been replaced, or at least supplemented, by cultural capital." (Lockyer, 2010, p.124). The latter point is critical for the present study and particularly this chapter since it points to the possibility of the interchangeability between

class as a form of economic capital and class and an expression of cultural capital a la Bourdieu. I shall return to the this point shortly.

In "Comedy and the Representation of the British Working Class from On the Buses to This Is England '90," Tracy Casling reminds that mocking and even demonizing the British working class is a common feature of British humour since the introduction of television in the 1950s. Such reactionary mockery intensified after the rise of Thatcherism (Casling, 2018). Casling argues that the TV show *This is England '90* was a response to the "pervasive and reactionary use of comedy by talking back to the Thatcherite period and mocking individualistic middle-class values" (Casling, 2018, p.202). In this regard, we can see a specific strand of British humour not only as class-based response to anti-social policies, but also as a weapon. As we shall see, some of the immigrant stand-up comedians discussed in this chapter are themselves members of the Middle Class. That complicates the question— of hoe immigrants relate to class.

In a similar vein, Alex Sutton has recently discussed a major turning point in 1980s humour in response to Thatcherism and the rise of Neo-liberal economy. As he argues, the emergence of alternative comedy during that period should be understood and discussed along the lines of the Marxist class theories. Sutton draws on Frankfurt School (Adorno) Marxist approach to culture and "culture industry" to identify rising strands in British stand-up comedy since the 1980s along the lines of class analysis (Sutton, 2020). Sutton accentuates the relevance of class for understanding comedy by placing alternative comedy within the variegated world of what Randall and Rogers have termed "vernacular theory." (Randall, 2011; Rogers, 2020). Thus, building on the flexibility and sophistication of Cultural Marxism, Sutton demonstrates the relevance of Marxist theories of class for the understanding of British stand-up. He suggests that this class-cantered stand-up is not mere "resistance," but, in effect, a "form of class struggle" (Sutton, 2020, p.129). As he sums up, "Changes to the content and production of British stand-up comedy during the 1970s and 1980s were a consequence of changes implemented by the state, itself a manifestation of ever-shifting class struggle in a global society." (Sutton, 2020, p.129)

One must consider, however, that the changes and shifts that Sutton discusses apply almost exclusively to the white working class in Britain at the time. Is this approach useful for discussing stand-up done by migrants in the first decades of the 21st century? One must admit that even the most sophisticated and advanced Cultural Marxist theories, will not help us. Not to dismiss class analysis altogether, it does mean that one needs to think of class in the context of present study in terms that do not exclude the main features that have been discussed earlier such as ethnicity, religion, race and gender. More importantly, one must escape the rigid Marxist approach to class analysis by considering, like Casling, questions of representation and highlighting, like Lockyer, the interchangeable relationship between economic capital, and cultural capital. Therefore, perhaps no better to start our discussion here about class and stand-up comedy with a banker.

6.1 Parenthood as a Turning Point: Sindhu Vee

Sindhu Vee is an investment banker from Delhi who shifted her career into comedy in her forties in 2012, and became a household name success in the UK. She does not consider herself an immigrant to Britain, despite living in the UK for 25 years, having UK born "English children" and being married to a Danish national. She carries a British passport but says it is "for convenience, it made travelling with the kids easier." She views herself as an "Indian ex-pat who happens to live in the UK now" (Vee, 2022). A joke from her 2021 Fringe shoe *Sandhog* encapsulates her position nicely: "When I came to this country many years ago, I very quickly applied for and got a UK passport. Because I was like 'man, I'm never going to be like these people', no offence, 'but I should at least have the same paperwork'; it seemed polite" (Vee, 2021a). The end of the joke demonstrates her sense of being at home everywhere. When her Danish un-naturalised husband says he doesn't understand why she does not bin her chewing gum, she retorts "I do not understand why don't you fuck off back where you came from" (Vee, 2021s). The joke is a typical turn on the theme of "Others" who, upon undergoing a change, look down on their fellowman/women who have not. It brings to mind an old Jewish joke about a Jewish man who walks into a church under the promise to be paid £50 upon converting to Christianity. When he comes out of the church a (Jewish) friend asks him "Well, did they pay?", he replies "You Jews, you only ever think about money". However, Vee's joke has a double turn which is based on the clandestine assumption in the audience's mind that the Danish passport in superior to the Indian one, and possibly to the British one, too.

Vee's comedy evolves around and centres on her family life and her children bringing together question family gender roles as well as race. Her show includes many anecdotes and stories about her extended Indian and Danish families. She says that "Having children is what made me Indian again", namely her identity as an "internationalist" who studied in Oxford and worked in New York and London shifted her back towards her origins and values once she became a mother.

> When I was single and did not have children, I did not function in this world like I was Indian. I may have worn some Indian clothes like slippers, my features are Indian, and I had my nose pierced, but it was never consciously part of my identity at all. However, as soon as I had children, I started seeing the world around them telling them to behave in ways that I've found wrong, and that's when my life became 'Indian'. And suddenly, that's when all my Indianness came out. Because you can't let your kids grow up like that. There are so many things that British kids do that I find wrong. For instance, when my kids would say, 'Please, mommy', I'd be like, Oh, my God, this is so

English. Because in India we didn't say please to our mothers. It's would
deem crazy (Vee, 2022).

In one of her jokes about her 'English children', Vee quotes her son commenting on her being invited to perform at the prestigious television show Live at the Apollo by saying "Thug life chose you, bruh". When she reminds him that she was his mother he texts "I know, gigging like a boss" (Vee 2021a). Parenthood is not just what connects her to her Indian origins, it is also what connects her to her British audiences, who are by and large, middle-class parents. And who doesn't have a pre-teen who tries to sound like a mobster? The fact that Vee's children are 'English' while they made her more Indian may well be an accurate description, but it is also a communication device between her and her audience. As Durrant et al noted, the context of parenting takes place in a cultural context which effects attitudes towards parenting practices" (Durrant et al, 2003, p.585).

In their introduction to Acculturation and Parent-Child Relationships: Measurement and Development, Marc Bornstein and Linda Cote describe how the process of becoming parents leads first generation immigrants to balance the influence of the absorbing culture into which their children are born, with the values and culture of their own homelands, which strengthens their own identification with their native culture (Bornstein and Cote, 2006, p. 4-5). Akifeva et Al concluded that "In order to resolve cultural continuity dilemmas, migrants choose between different cultural standards. They often do this on the basis of a trichotomy of cultural difference, with the culture of origin seen as either proper, or as backward (discussed shortly), or as something to be merged with the Western approach (Akifeva et al, 2023, p.13).

Vee utilised those dilemmas in her comedy, and uses them as a connection strategy with her audience. In another joke, she compares disciplinary steps taken by British parents, like the star system for good behaviour: "You get a star for only kicking your mother in the face seven times today" (Vee, 2021b) or the naughty step "You've been terribly behaved, kindly go and relax on the staircase" (Vee, 2021b) Vee then conflates this to the Indian parenting style she experiences: "I thought 'what did our parents do to discipline us, and remembered, of course, they implicated us, from a very young age, in their own death. And then use it as a way to guide our behaviour" (Vee, 2021b) She goes on to an impersonation of an Indian mother scolding her child for putting two lumps of chocolate in her milk. "Are you trying to kill me?" (Vee, 2021b). Vee cunningly asks one of her English audience members if she can use her name in the joke, and when she gets permission, she addresses the imaginary child as Nichola, making the whole exchange both more personal and more absurd. The audience knows that no child called Nichola gets addressed in those terms, which enhances the absurdity of the situation. At the same time, they can conflate the described situation with their own parenting style, or the one they have been subjected to as children. Vee's

familiarity with both cultures builds a direct bridge between her and her audience; despite the foreignness of the dynamics she describes. At the same time, it invokes familiarity with almost anybody who was raised in a non-protestant culture, in societies where emotional extortion is a trademark mothering style.

A similar vehicle for demonstrating the ease with which she hops between her English middle-class awareness and her Indian upbringing smartly leads her set "too long" in which she describes how English influences on her behaviour become apparent when she goes to buy balloons for her sister's birthday party, in Delhi. The 'English' in her is horrified by the idea that the shopkeeper intends to task a ten-year-old child with blowing up forty-two balloons. That same 'English woman' also mitigates her reservation by reminding herself that she should not intervene with the local culture by protesting against child labour. The debates end with the "inner Indian woman" taking over, and asking the shopkeeper "Are you sure this child can blow all the balloons up in time for the party?"

The exploited ten-year-old Indian child and Vee's brilliant play between being "English" and "Indian" brings India, real India, into her show. The scene should remind us that India itself has its own millennia long romance with class and cast, that the current neo-liberal reality only made worse. The scope of this chapter is too limited to enter in the world of Indian stand-up comedy, but Vee brings to mind an interesting parallel that Madhavi Shivaprasad has recently presented in a study dedicated to stand-up comedy and caste in India. In her article, Shivaprasad presents the very recent emergence of a new form of stand-up in India, that is engaging, among other things, the touchy issue of class and caste in Indian society (Shivaprasad, 2020). Within this context, she states, "Casteist humour, however, is rampant and allowed to proliferate unchallenged." (Shivaprasad, 2020, p.26). Curiously, many of the examples she discusses have to do with the domestic arena, which Vee discusses often in her comedy and a one that relates, in the British context to class. Producing an interesting parallel to Vee, Shivaprasad focusses in her study on upper caste Indian comedians. She explains that this is because of the "the relative dearth of comedians from marginalised castes performing on stage." She mentions one such marginalized comedian, Deepika Mhatre, a popular comedian whose routine pokes fun of the "'madams'" in whose homes she works as a domestic help." Mhatre does not touch the question of caste in her routine. She dresses her jokes in terms of class (Shivaprasad, 2020, p.29) In this regard, it is interesting to think of Vee's invoking of her inner "English lady" being horrified because a ten-year-old Delhi child is brutally exploited as form of criticism of class/realities in India that have become the subject of recent humour in India. But we must note that it is the same inner "English lady" that debates with the inner "Indian lady" about possibility of chastising the shopkeeper. In the end it is the outraged Indian lady that chastises the shopkeeper. The horrified English lady remains silent. Why? To my mind, in this scene we can see a distant echo of the colonial legacy India. Partha Chatterjee in his *The Black Hole of Empire*, has shown how, from early on, British outrage at "brutal" Indian practices had laid the ideological grounds for the "civilizing" mission of colonial rule in India (Chatterjee,

2012). By this logic, in the postcolonial period, expressing "English" outrage in Delhi because a ten-years-old boy is not allowed. This is why "English Vee" tries "not to interfere" with an Indian reality and eventually gives way to "Indian Vee" so she can put the shopkeeper in his place.

Which brings to the question of race. Vee says she only once experienced racism in the United Kingdom, when she was walking back to a train station from a gig on the outskirts of London. "I walked past and a man who was previously at the gig made some comments about how disgusting he found my comedy, because 'I know Indians, with your servants and your caste system'. And I was like, 'Whoa'. I don't even talk about servants or the caste system. I just walked away." (Vee, 2022). Vee says she feels that UK born comedians of Indian descent have more experience of racism and are more alert to it. "I have an intellectual understanding of what they've experienced in terms of racism, but I did not experience it. I grew up but in India. No one was racist to me there." (Vee, 2022) Vee is not the only interviewee who felt this way. Benjamin Bello from Nigeria also said he discovered racism in the UK, as "I obviously did not experience it in Nigeria" (Bello, 2022). Those notions are reflected in recent research. A recent survey by the Oxford University Migration Observatory found that "People born in the UK to migrant parents were much more likely to see themselves as belonging to a discriminated group than the foreign-born," and that "Adult children of migrants consistently report higher levels of discrimination in surveys than the foreign-born." (Fernández-Reino & Cuibus, 2024). The authors explain the differences in higher expectations of equal treatment by UK born citizens, who also suffered more discrimination, they are more aware of ethnic inequalities and more likely to attribute it to discrimination (Fernández-Reino & Cuibus, 2024).

At the same time, Vee feels that UK born Indians tend to be more segregated and worried about race: "There are many women who are born here, Indian, who if they date someone white, their parents will kill themselves. My parents were like, okay, as long as he's not homeless, Fine." (Vee, 2022)

Vee believes that the world of investment banking she came from into comedy, is devoid of racism, based on meritocracy and is not preoccupied with questions of class.

I never experienced racism in banking, ever. When I was junior on the trading floor in New York they had an elegant way of sort of making me know my place. They might say 'Hey bird from Delhi, get lunch ok?'. But there was never any threat of anything uncomfortable; there was no power dynamic to race. The other thing is that I've been married to a European, so a lot of my experiences were diluted in that sense. (Vee, 2022)

Vee is upset by assumptions about her class, which she views as deriving from assumptions related to her race, and views it as a particular trait of the political culture in the UK in general, and the world of UK comedy in particular.

People in comedy are obsessed with class, they keep trying to label me: you went to Oxford, label! Your children are in private school, label! I came here on a scholarship. All your prime ministers did that. I was a bursary girl. I didn't have money for an airline ticket, but I used my brains to get it. I'm so tired of comedians, making assumptions about my class background, because they are applying the symbols they have in their culture to me. I find that it's only in comedy. No one in banking does this. The more lefty you are in comedy, the more obsessed you are with class. And I'm like, 'No, you take that to one of the other white friends; get away from me'. It's a terrible way to live, you don't give people a chance. I feel this because I am from the outside, if I was raised in this country, I wouldn't have felt like this. Many of my friends who were born here, into this, were victims of it (Vee, 2022).

Vee feels that the assumptions about her are not just the fantasy about a Maharajah's daughter who went to Oxford using his money, they can be played the other way, too, and based an image of her on the Cinderella success stories such as those of politician Rishi Sunak or Priti Patel- born to lower-middle-class families:

They think I am the newsagent's daughter, because of my race. I did not grow up in the corner shop and I was not called the 'P word' all day. And I'm one of the highest tax rate payers in this country. I am not here for your benefits I came here to give you jobs! People assume things about brown people. Comments I get from people in the industry make me think that if I'll get on stage and say 'oh I'm brown, everybody is so mean to me' they'll say 'oh, now we get you', because I'd be just telling them what they want to hear. And then people ask: 'Why do brown people only talk about race?' It is because that's all you are allowing us to be! (Vee, 2022).

Here, again, the questions of representation arise. The demand to "represent", which allows for only certain tropes to be present. In my earlier days in stand-up comedy, a British comedian from London, who was struggling to grapple with my Israeli identity, offered to write for me "some jokes about being Jewish", because he felt this would represent an identity that both him and my audience would understand. The fact that it had nothing to do with who I was seemed irrelevant. The acceptance of the Other into the comedic fold, seems to be dependent, among other things, on an adherence to certain stereotypes and tropes. "We are witnessing an unflagging multicultural hunger within the drive for diversity in institutions. Alongside this shift. Long-standing traditions seem to be alive and well, as the spiritual, authentic, exotic, religious, ceremonial, innocent and barbaric continue to be the dominant ways in which diverse bodies are received," Wrote Puwar, interpreting Edward Said (Puwar, 2024, p. 69). The new orientalism experienced by Vee and others goes beyond the realm to traditional stereotypes and encompasses newly created ones. Or, in Puwar's words: "Differences continue to be celebrated but trapped in managerial and reified understandings of multiculturalism. In more bohemian and avant-garde circles, the fascination has moved from essential notions of tradition and culture to the newness of hybrid cosmopolitan bodies. The effect of both of them is similar – objectification and

fetishism. Easily available tropes such as Bollywood and 'Black cool' are preferred over open-ended conversations." (Puwar, 2024, p.69).

The notion that being Brown can brand you and stereotype you, can be played in different ways. As Driscoll noted in his book about British authors in class, Zadie Smith and the institutions marketing her, used her race to imply she grew up in a working-class family, whereas the facts were far from it:

Whenever Smith is presented to us by the media, the information we are usually given is that she is of mixed race, with a Caucasian father and a Jamaican mother: the implication being that this racial information is enough to inform us of everything essential. But such an introduction is rather slippery as it fails to inform us of her class. Similarly, book jackets laconically tell us that she was simply "born in northwest London" and "still lives in the area" implying that she has somehow remained true to her "roots." If, on the other hand, we were told that her father was a photographer and her mother a psychologist and that Smith did a degree in literature at Cambridge and is now currently Fellow in Residence of Creative Writing at Harvard, her class profile looks somewhat different. (Driscoll, 2009, p.63)

While Smith, at least according to Driscoll, attempts to create a smoke screen regarding her class, based on race-related assumptions, Vee mainly demands to be seen as what she is: a cosmopolitan well-to-do Indian mother, whose family is at the centre of her being.

One of the difficulties in trying to make an audience see you for what you 'truly' are beyond tropes, is that comedy in general and Stand-up comedy in particular are so often based in stereotypes, as Matthias Pauwels noted, using stereotypes in stand-up can work to strengthen prejudices or dispel them (Pauwels, 2021, p.86). The expectation to "get it out of the way" and "come clean" about your background early in your set, and to do all this humorously, also makes references to popular stereotypes almost mandatory, even if they are used only to turn them on their head– a desirable goal to aim for not just for educating the audience, but also in terms of comedic form and technique. As Sophie Quirk noted, manipulation can be used in order to influence. While the manipulation has a brief in-the-moment effect, an influence that has "an effect upon the real, internal attitudes and beliefs of the individual" (Quirk, 2015, p.2), can be long-lasting.

For Vee "It would be strange not to" refer to where she comes from in her set. "How can you be from somewhere else and not talk at all about it? That means you're working really hard not to talk about yourself. As a comic, you talk about what's happening in your life. I guess immigrants who do not go home often do not have much to say about it, maybe if I did not have any Indianness in my life, which I have a lot of, I wouldn't talk about it either." (Vee, 2021).

This may be a partial explanation; however, my research indicates clearly that country of origin is a cultural currency like any other, and comedians who immigrate from the United

States or the more affluent European countries, feel less obliged or inclined to speak about their counties of origin, and feel free to delve into "general subjects". As Puwar noted "Who can represent universally is defined in the shadow of the nation and modernity as it has come to be dominantly defined… black bodies are perceived to be over dominated by race in terms of what and who they can represent," (Puwar, 2004, p.64). in other words, she stresses, the universal human is still white. And still, class acts as a "mitigating circumstance". This could be is the class of one's countries of origin in the hierarchy of countries, or one's individual class, as in Vee's case. Her reasoning for speaking about it is tied to her desire to express her own individuality, not to appease her audience or "represent" other Indian people. Also, despite making references to her homeland, she does not feel obliged to have it as a major theme. "I actually do not speak much about India in my recent shows," she says (Vee, 2022).

6.2 Defying Racism by Using Class: Sameena Zehra

Sameena Zehra, too, gets angered by the question, directed at her by promoters asking whether her set or show includes 'Indian material': "What do they expect me to do, break into some Bollywood wedding dance?" she wonders. Her outrage reminded me of promoters or comedians greeting me at venues with "Hava Nagila", or Yiddish phrases they picked up somewhere, which I did not even recognise. I do not speak Yiddish.

Zehra was born in Srinagar, Kashmir, to a Muslim liberal family. When she was a year old her Parents moved to the United Kingdom, but when she was nine they divorced, and she returned to India with her mother. She is an atheist, and in her first show *Tea with Terrorists* she describes the dialogue that followed her 'coming out' as a non-believer to her family: "I grew up in a very devout religious Muslim household. At the age of nine I stopped believing in God. For such religious people, my family was fucking lax about it. They were like 'Ooh, you don't believe in God, well, he exists, and one day you'll be sorry. But if you don't want to believe, that's ok, good luck.' It was a very weird mix of Liberalism and threat." (Zehra, 2012).

Like Sindhu Vee, Zehra's background, too, is upper middle class, but she does not come from the business world. Unlike Vee, she views her class background as central to how she deals with her British audiences, and with her Otherness. This is directly related to her left-wing world views. She currently lives in New Zealand, where she experiences a "second immigration". She is aware that while being Brown and Muslim make her a part of an "unwanted entity" both in the UK and in India, being middle class bestows a privilege upon her:

It's a constant calibration of working out where do I sit in the space. Having the privileges of Middle Class, I can pass through both India and the UK without much of a problem. The privilege of this education unknowingly gave me an attitude that makes people think, 'oh,

maybe I do have to listen to her'. A confidence that means I am allowed to walk in this space. And when you realise you have that it makes you think even more that you need to understand who does the space really belong to? How can I put whatever privilege I have for good use and be aware of it? (Zehra, 2023).

Zehra's stand-up comedy often touches directly on Political issues from a very British left-wing perspective, but her great strength for which she received critical acclaim is her storytelling, that often touches on her life story and her extensive travel. For her, there is no distinction between the overtly political and the seemingly non-political: it is all political.

> All the things that I talk about are to do with how we express ourselves as human beings and why we make choices, and how we end up where we are. So much of that is to do with identity, for example: why am I an acceptable immigrant? Why am I not threatening? Why somebody else is? It is all within those stories, some of what I'm exploring is familiar connections, how culturally we are different, yet the same, how we choose to exist in particular ways that benefit us or be deliberately obstructive, for whatever purpose. Other people might come to my shows and say 'you told me a funny story about Your grandmother. But for me, all my shows are deeply political, not always intentionally so, but because my life is political, like everybody's life is whether they recognise it or not. (Zehra, 2012)

The idea that the higher one's class the more invisible is one's race or colour echoes in research, too. In her research of class and racial inequality in the United States, Kathleen Odell Korgen argues that "It is important to acknowledge that the pretence of colour-blindness tends to drop in tandem with the social class of the persons being viewed." (Korgen, 2010) In other words, class makes others blinder to your colour. Lucinda Platt also noted that the "race penalty" – a decrease in the prospects on non-white applicants in the work market due to their racial origin – is reduced in correlation with the rise in their socio-economic class (Platt, 2017, p.12).

In Zehra's show *Arse Biscuit* she examined her own prejudices and biases as a 'woke' middle class person in the United Kingdom. She describes encounters with people who she assumed were racist or otherwise bigoted because of their appearances or their newspaper of choice, and as the anecdotes turn, the joke is often on her. The show was inspired by her memories of her beloved friend Midgey, whom she was critical of because she used to tell racist jokes about Sikh people, which offended Zahra's sensibilities. Midgey was also deeply religious and "quite right wing (Zehra, 2023). In the show Zehra recounts encounters which made her confront her own biases. The first, with a shaved head tattoos-covered cab driver ("I made some choices I regret"), who told her about the discrimination his best friend, a black man, suffered at work; another, an older woman who reads the daily mail on the train,

("the crosswords is great"), and ended up expressing progressive views. Those encounters make her own up to her own biases. "It is related to immigration, even if not directly. It has to do with how we construct our identities against who we perceive as antagonists and how we stereotype each other, and it also has to do with my own stubbornness; those moments in my life made me think twice" (Zehra, 2023).

Like Vee, Zehra also says she did not experience racism in India, but there, she experienced otherness, having arrived back not speaking any of the local languages, and with an English spoken with a south London twang. "I was a foreign brown child again, this time in a brown country", this time, in a catholic school in India, ran by Irish nuns, and later in a The Lawrence School Centre that was set up by the British for the children of Army officers. "They allowed the children of the Indian upper classes in; they had a lot in common and saw them as allies. They shared power in some ways, but never the real power." (Zehra, 2023). Back in England in her late teens, she was confused when someone called her a "Paki" as a pejorative. "In Kashmir we called people from Pakistan Pakis is a benign way, as a matter of fact, so I just felt I needed to correct him," she said in one of her performances, "Twenty minutes later I realised "Oh! You did a racism!" (Zehra, 2023).

In another show, at the Leicester Square Theatre, she tells, an audience member came to tell her he enjoyed her show even though she was "Not British". Zehra retorted "Think of my like tea; Not ethnically British, but one of the best parts of your culture. Now fuck off!" (Zehra, 2023).

Another member of the audience praised her for her quick off the cuff response, but Zehra believes that "Any marginalised person will tell you, if you are at the receiving end of these things, you've thought about what you're going to say. And then the opportunity one day presents itself, and you just had the right retort." She feels that her duty to respond to racism comes with her privileges: "There's not a lot of racism aimed at me, but it's there. And when I hear it, I want to laugh it off, but I feel I have a responsibly to all brown people, including those who are more vulnerable" (Zehra, 2023). This is an interesting example of how a person of colour, and an immigrant, in other words an Other, takes upon themselves to represent both the universal, an anti-racist stance deriving from an anti-racist world view, and their own "minority group". Zehra believes, it follows, that the ability to exceed what Puwar describes as the demand from people of colour to represent "their race" (Puwar, 2004, p.66), derives from being "middle class enough" (Zehra, 2023).

The long colonial heritage, her own personal trajectory of moving in between India and England and the similarities of the class systems, made is easier for her: "I have negotiated the upper classes in India like the upper classes in the UK. You learn how to negotiate that conversation where you just drop the right kind of reference lightly, and they will know what they need to know. Like 'Oh I did that play with Rushdy or yeah when my grandfather was in Cambridge, and you get their respect." And while she feels she no longer needs to

plant those hints of equality or superiority in a deliberate and explicit way, she knows that middle class liberal British people recognise her as "one of their own" (Zehra, 2023).

One thing that Vee and Zehra have in common, is that from a rather early stage in their career they did not have to do many circuit gigs. Due to being able to afford to invest in their career and thanks to careful planning, as well as exceptional talent – they both ended up performing mainly full 60-minute-long solo show. Zehra's background in theatre contributed to her knowledge of the industry, and helped her produce her own shows without an agent. Vee, once deciding she wanted to have a go at becoming a professional comedian, had put much hard work and a significant amount of money into realising her new dream.

This exemption from facing the circuit has its significance. When audiences come to an open mic gig or a circuit show, they rarely know who is going to be on the line up. Even if they have seen a poster with the acts' names, or even faces, on it, they are unlikely to pay much attention to them, except for the headliner who in some cases may be a household name 'off the telly'. The audience knows that even if they are not impressed by a certain comedian, another one will take their place in ten minutes. One of the implications of this reality is that the audience may be taken by surprise when an act who is any kind of Other - a woman, a person of colour, an immigrant, or a non-binary or gay act. And if they are hostile to that specific type of otherness, there is always a danger that the comedian will have to face their hostility (Sansome, 2022).

However, when Audiences buy tickets to see an hour's show by a specific comedian, they tend to take more interest in who exactly they are. If an audience comes to see an immigrant comedian who is Black, Brown, Jewish or Muslim, they will have read at least a brief blurb describing the gist of the act and would have seen the comedian's photos (Sansome, 2022). As a result, if someone dislikes Brown comedians, they would be highly unlikely to go and see Vee nor Zehra. Both noted that this might be one of the reasons that their comedy experience has very rarely been confrontational on the background of their immigrational or racial identities (Zehra, 2023; Vee, 2021).

Both Vee and Zehra view themselves as cosmopolitans. Vee attributes it to her banking background and her education; Zehra to her middle-class background and her familiarity with British culture, including that of the upper classes. This notion corresponds well with David Harvey's proclamation in 2000 – "Cosmopolitanism is back" (Harvey, 2000, p.529). Cosmopolitanism, wrote Harvey, "has now re-emerged from the shadows and shaken off many of its negative connotations… and to the coherence of the idea of the nation and the state (through massive cross-border capital Bows, migratory movements, and cultural exchanges) have opened a space for an active revival of cosmopolitanism as a way of approaching global political economic, cultural, environmental, and legal questions." Harvey later recognized that cosmopolitanism is not necessarily a currency available to everybody

and is promoted by the classes who can benefit from its advantages. He quoted comparative and historical sociologist Craig Calhoun's observation that after the cold-war cosmopolitanism became "a project of empires, of long-distance trade, and of cities," it also shaped up as an elite project reflecting "the class consciousness of frequent travellers" (Calhoun, 2009, p.79). However, Werbner (1999) identified characteristics of "working class cosmopolitanism" among migrant labourers from Pakistan who she researched in the United Kingdom, or, as Homi Bhabha defined it, vernacular cosmopolitanism. Werbner questions Marxist scholars' assumption that cosmopolitanism is the exclusive domain of the upper classes: "Sometimes it is factory workers rather than wealthy merchants who display more openness to their non-diasporic compatriots. Diasporic intellectuals may be alienated from their working-class compatriots despite their celebration of cultural hybridity." (Werbner, 2006, p.498).

The distinction between a cosmopolitan and immigrants who view their immigration in a more binary, transnational way may not necessarily be as clear cut, in light of Werbner's conclusions, and considering the fact that other comedians who were interviewed for this research, from less privileged backgrounds, who demonstrated cosmopolitan or vernacular cosmopolitan worldview elements, for example Alex Martini, Romina Puma and Sylas Szabolcs, Vlad Ilich. It should also be noted that the cosmopolitan awareness did not exempt any of those comedians, including Vee and Zehra, from having to pay their dues to "getting it out of the way" and introducing their country of origin in their set. It might have to do with the fact that all the above-mentioned stand-ups are non-white or have very clear and strong foreign accents. At the same time middle class white comedians from North America or Scandinavia, like David Mills (US), Sophie Hagen (Sweden), John Hastings and Katherine Ryan (Canada) can perform a whole she without mentioning their country of origin. Zehra and Vee may have many privileges as performers, but there are exceptions. As Nirmal Puwar noted poignantly, representing the universal is still only for "unmarked bodies" (2004, p.64).

6.3 British Comedy Style as the Habitus' Key: Mark Silcox

Nobody on the comedy circuit knows Indian comedian Mark Simcox's' real name, which is Arun Arora. Not because he makes any particular effort to hide it, but because nobody ever wondered how come the quiet man with the surreal routine and heavy Indian accent came to have such a quintessentially English name. The name may be one of the reasons that many comedians on the circuit, as I found out when I was trying to find out whether he was an immigrant in the preliminary part of my research, were convinced that he was born in the UK. Quite a few acts argued with convictions that his heavy Indian accent is not real, and that he adopted it to match his character; this is not true, the comedian's accent is as genuine as his stage persona. "Even before I started comedy, I never tried to change my accent to sound more like an English person, or to dress differently. Silcox is normally dressed like an "old school" middle aged Indian man, but not in traditional clothes, he tends

to perform in wool jackets or a shiny sequin jacket, buttoned up shirts and ties. He has a moustache and wears spectacles.

His appearance bodes well with his persona, bordering on character comedy, of a somewhat off hinged scientists who "likes to explain things" (Silcox, 2024). As one reviewer described it: " his persona *isn't* a persona: it's just him and it's irresistible! His delivery is painfully/brilliantly slow, in a strong, characterful Indian accent, and proves teachers can be very funny indeed." (Dannreuther, 2023). He explains, with great conviction and deliberation but in a low, dead-pun voice, anything from complicated chemical processes to social relationships, in a mixture of fact based and preposterously made-up ideas.

Silcox /Arora was born in Bhopal, the capital city of the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, a place known mainly for the worst industrial disaster in history, when a Union Carbide pesticide manufacturing plant leaked a mixture of deadly gases composed mainly of methyl isocyanate, leading to the death of at least four thousand people. He immigrated to the United Kingdom in 1990, completed his PhD in chemistry in Imperial College, London, and worked for chemical industries. He nowadays works as a chemistry teacher in a high school, and as a stand-up comedian, a career he embarked on in 2008. He is a popular stand up on the British comedy circuit and has also developed a parallel career as an actor in minor roles in film and television. Like Vee, he was in no rush to apply for British citizenship because India did not allow dual citizenship, and he had to go there often on business. He changed his mind in 2018 and became a British citizen, once he no longer had business to tend to in India, and, he admits, possibly due to the uncertainty that came with Brexit (Silcox, 2024).

Silcox believes that the main reason for his success in communicating with British audiences is the fact that his sense of humour and his comedy material are "British", particularly his surreal material, low key persona, dead-pan delivery and harmless yet poignant sarcasm. British humourist Paul Jennings defined British humour as "subtle, airy, real but elusive, accepted as a national trait but apparently quite unexportable" (Jennings, 1970). Angela Kiss related to its elusive, light tough characteristics "It has a certain degree of unfathomability: there are no neon lights indicating that they are actually joking" (Kiss, 2017). Kiss also highlights the importance of dead-pan delivery in the British humour culture. Other features of British humour discussed in academic literature are a sense of Irony, use of sarcasm, and a certain flavour of cruelty (Chen and Dewaele, 2021, p.150).

All of the characteristics mentioned are prominent in Silcox's comedy: the sheepish low-key persona that speaks with great confidence, a certain hint of fantasies of grandeur, the constant deadpan delivery, the surrealism of his "teachings" and very subtle sarcasm. Yet all this "Britishness" is wrapped in a very Indian packaging in terms of Silcox's accent and appearance.

Silcox does not mention his Indian origin in his set. He introduces himself as "Irish", which frames his whole set in incongruity and elicits immediate laughter. "I don't need to say that I'm Indian, they can see it from my accent and appearance. I say I am Irish, and they laugh. people expect you to make joke and I don't make direct joke. I just tell lies; on stage I am a deluded character." (Silcox, 2024). The underdog position "has always been my style. I never had any position of power, I was a teacher here, I was a teacher in India, nobody takes me seriously." (Silcox, 2024). Silcox's self-deprecation in real life seems genuine, but he ignores the facts that he has a PhD from the very respected Imperial College, and that he is held in very hard regard among comedians. But the character he puts on very much complies with his description. His biggest influence on what he is like on stage, seems to be his own life experience and low-key off-stage personality: " I actually always been like this, like, I don't talk much I listen, I try to understand who the other person is, how other people think." (Silcox 2024). Silcox says he realises many comedians mention the places they immigrated from to "frame their identity and build their stage persona" but he never felt a need to do that. His audience knows where he is from immediately, which gives him an opening to speak about facets of his personality that interest him more. "Live a simple life and have fun, that is my message, he claims.

Maintaining stereotypical characteristics from a comedian's homeland is a practice which can be useful at creating "shortcuts" in terms of the verbal information delivered to the British audience by an immigrant comedian. Italian comedian Romina Puma said "I don't really need to go on too much about being Italian – my accent is so strong that I couldn't hide it if I tried" (Puma, 2022). Romanian comedian Sylas Szabolcs who speaks English in a heavy Glaswegian accent, makes sure to dress in a style identified with Romanian immigrants, to highlight his origin (Szèles, 2023). This strategy can be used, as in Silcox' case, to create a gap between what he says ("I'm Irish") and what he looks like, or, as in Szabolcs' case, to reinforce the content of his set, which is mostly about being an immigrant. In Puma's case, she feels that her accent gives her an exemption from dwelling on her origin. The trait of maintaining ethnic or original-nation performativity is not exclusive to performers. As noted by Sociologist Maykel Verkuyten, "Ethnic performance, behaviours through which individuals actively communicate their ethnicity, demonstrates the salience of their ethnicity in their lives". Further, "it is the 'doing' of ethnicity that validates individual identity claims, that consolidates ethnic group identities and that is instrumental in promoting group success." (Verkuyten, 2010, p.26).

Silcox names English stand-up Milton Jones as his favourite comedian and main influence. Jones is a one-liner comedian who specializes in wordplay. Whimsical and wild haired, he always wears his signature colourful Hawaiian styled shirts. The main similarity between him and Silcox may be the air of whimsey. Silcox also mentions comedy shows he watched in India as a possible inspiration they used "a lot of wordplay and strange turns of phrase, but also a lot of slapstick, which I do not do." (Silcox, 2024).

It is interesting to look at Edinburgh Fringe reviews of Silcox's shows, in terms of the comparisons made and adjectives used, because they give a hint as to the depth of "Britishness" of his act, or at least judge it using international comedic terms: "The inexplicable darling of the alternative circuit, making an appearance in every show you love like a moustachioed Kevin Eldon (a very English, white, Kent born comedian who appeared in many television comedy shows since the 1990s)…" (Ingram 2023) "One can't entirely dismiss the possibility that this is a glorious Kaufmanesque long con, a staring contest between the audience and a man with an almost unprecedented commitment to character and conceit. It's fascinating. Silcox is brilliant. Silcox is terrible." (Ingram, 2023). The references and the style of writing and the type of references place Silcox within a long tradition of the well-respected Alternative Comedy school of performance, to which contemporary British stand-up comedy hails from. The reviews, by the way, never mention Silcox's Indian (nor alleged Irish) origin. This strengthens his notion that his British comedy style is his main means of communication with his audience.

Silcox, too, believes that the reason he did not encounter much adversity, racism or antagonism has to do with the fact that he does "not often go out of London" (Silcox, 2024). When he does go, he makes sure to be booked by "good promoters who run well organised gig" (Silcox 2024). Silcox, like a number of other interviewees with extensive UK circuit experience, believes that a decent set up of the room, good MCing and a respectful presentation of the comedians is more crucial to the success of a gig than the identity of the audience attending (Silcox, 2024).

Vee, Zehra and Silcox demonstrate different strategies to negotiate their identities to their audiences in the United Kingdom. Vee attempts to connect to her audiences through her family experience, being a wife and a mother and, indirectly, through being of a similar, or possibly somewhat higher, class. At the same time, she maintains a certain outsider's attitude, nationally, ethnically and religiously. The audience identifies with her similarity to them in her class identity and family experience, and yet is intrigues by her other "side", that scolds them for some of their values and ways of being without any apologies or sheepishness, and they lap it up, thanks to her high-status persona.

Zehra navigates her way to her audience through similarly high stage status. She is more "British" in her self-perception, and invites her audience, in no uncertain terms, to view the world as she does. She is very aware of the privileges of her class, and the confidence and acceptance they grant her. She takes her audience with her on her journeys through her storytelling, but even when she leads them through the Kashmiri mountains, her language remains familiar and inspires safety.

Silcox's communication power lies in the elusiveness of his persona. On stage, as in real life, the audience is not sure whether he is playing a character, just like Tommy Cooper (1921-1984) in his Fez, or Andrew Sachs playing the eccentric Spanish waiter Manuel in the classic

comedy sitcom Faulty Towers. He achieves the illusion by combining a comedy style very familiar to his British audiences, combining surreal, low key, lower status attitudes with grandiose and mad-professor-ish traits.

The trio's success, either in Zehra and Vee's touring full solo shows trajectory, or Silcox's gigging circuit career, demonstrate how versatile and varies the negotiation and communication threads between an immigrant comedian and their audience can be. Those threads weave through class, language, similarity, familiarity and alienation, through a variety of comedic forms and artistic decisions, but they are never accidental.

Class seems to be central to Zehra and Vee's self-perception either by acknowledging its privileges, as Zehra does, or being conflicted in attitude towards it, like Vee. In both cases it makes them confident, mitigates their race factor by making the audience, in line with Korgen's conclusions, "more colour-blind". It also enables them to tour their own shows, build their own audiences and avoid the circuit, which reduces the danger of encounters with unfavourable audience members.

In Silcox' case is more complex. his education and comedic style, which is surreal and influenced by classic British comedians - spark recognition among British middle-class audiences, who tend to favour him. At the same time his Tommy Cooperesque vibe and his television appearances grant him an appeal for a wide range of British audiences.

The next chapter discusses comedians who come from closer afield geographically, but possibly more remotely in terms of their cultural affinity and language familiarity – the Europeans.

7. Alien Neighbours: European Comedians, Language, Identity, Whiteness and Passing

"I am half Ukrainian half Russian; I am my own worst enemy"; Dimitri Bakanov (Ukraine).

I became a British citizen after Brexit; It was like getting an upgrade on your ticket for the Titanic; Luca Cupani (Italy)

"I think of Romania as a second world country: we do not have hunger, nor do we have an obesity problem"; Radu Isac (Romania)

On Friday English people go to lunch, get drunk and go back to work. Irish people would never to that… We never go back to work! Rory O'Hanlon (Ireland)

I change my stage name to Martini when I came to England because it's the only Italian word that can be pronounced by a whole nation of alcoholics; Alex Martini (Italy)

"I moved here two years ago to steal jobs; not from you, from the Romanians"; Vlad Illich (North Macedonia).

This chapter moves us into the relatively recent arrivals into the UK comedy scene: the European comedians. It examines the ways in which comedians who immigrated to the United Kingdom from the Republic of Ireland and the European continent, create strategies for communicating their identities to their audiences. The arrival of most continental comedians on the British comedy scene, (which can be dated to the emergence of German Henning When on the London comedy circuit in 2005 as will be extended upon later in this chapter), almost coincided with the economic crisis of 2007, and the run up to and aftermath of Brexit. In that period, those comedians responded to this reality, while reacting to certain hostility, real or perceived, from some of their audiences. I argue that comedians from the European continent often feel obliged to discuss their identity at more length early in their sets than they would have liked to, as a 'tax' to being permitted to speak as 'universal persons' later in their sets. Some display attributes of 'Britishness' like becoming British citizens, or having "proper" education – an attribute they view as a token of class. Notwithstanding, they also try to display pride in their own identities and share various traits of their homelands – from pain and suffering to cultural achievements or even political and historical shame and regret over their countries' trajectories. I will introduce early arrivals - Irish comedians and their historical contribution, the relevance of whiteness and religious differences, particularly from the perspective of Catholic comedians, language &

cultural navigation of continental comedians, the Impact of Brexit, performance strategies, identity negotiations and Comedy Circuit Dynamics.

The theoretical prisms used in this chapter draw on Pierre Bourdieu's Habitus theory, and Emmanuel Levinas's notion of the encounter with the Other's "Face", as interpreted by Judith Butler. In addition – As almost all Europeans perform in Britain in their second language, English – I found Giacinto Palmieri's (Palmieri 2017) study of how comedians translate their sets on stage from their native language to be particularly helpful. Cultural Identity theory like Elain K. Ginsburg on "Passing" and Michael Billig and Bronwen Walter on whiteness, performance theory and immigration and integration studies, as well as critical race studies scholars like Kehinde Andrews and Nirmal Puwar, particularly on "marked bodies" lack of permission to speak as a universal person - were instructive in terms of the way comedians place and define themselves vis-à-vis their British audiences. Performance theory, specifically from stand-up comedy scholars Sophie Quirk, Ian Brodie and Mary Douglas, as well as Simon Critchley's writing on humour, were instructive in connecting the joke forms chosen by the comedians to their strategies of negotiating their foreignness.

7.1.1   Distant Neighbours: The Irish Comedy Pioneers

Before delving into the specifics of their individual and group experience, it is useful to present some context for the presence and activities of European stand-up comedians in the United Kingdom.

Irish comedians pioneered immigrants' stand-up comedy in the UK. Arguably, the first among them was Terrence Allan (Spike) Milligan, father of the mythical BBC "Goon Show". Milligan was an early stand-up, who arrived in England from India, where he was born, in 1931 (Carpenter, 2004, p.8), and started his comedy career after the Second World War in which he served. "British" enough to refer to himself as a part of the British national "we", yet enough of an outsider compare it critically both to Ireland and to India, he poked fun at the English language and at the British empire (Milligan, n.d.).

Most of the Irish comedians who came to London or northern England since the 1960s came from Northern Ireland, namely, from within the United Kingdom, and are not within the remit of this research. The first Dubliner who came to fame in the UK was Dave Allen, who got his own BBC show only after a successful tour in Australia in 1963 (BBC 2011, Telegraph, 2005). By 1974 Allen was enough of a national treasure in Britain to lead a BBC TV show titled "Dave Allen in Search of the Great English Eccentrics," with a more blended English-Irish pronunciation (Allen, 1974), which diverted considerably from the more pronounced Dublin accent in which he told his jokes (See Allen, n.d.).

In the current generation of Irish stand ups, Dara O'Brian, presenter of BBC popular show Mock the Week (2005-2022) and occasional presenter of the BBC news quiz, *Have I Got*

News for You, knocked on the British Habitus' doors in different English towns, cities and villages in the early 2000s. He concluded: "If there is such a thing as national characteristics, certainly from where I stand, on stage with a microphone in my hand, it's really only a collection of shared cultural reference points." (O'Briain, 2009, p.300). His observations, attempting a reginal "comedy shorthand," (O'Briain, 2009, p.36). are an example for how FGICs work in areas they do not know: "Newcastle: Funny accents, don't wear coats; Liverpool: Funny accents, sentimental… Birmingham: probably Asian, or a lap-dancer" (O'Briain, 2009, p.36). Regional stereotyping helps FGICs create immediate connection with their audience. As Brodie noted: "One of the skills of the comedian is to identify the world view within which he or she is operating, and express this to the audience more or less immediately." They may, and will, challenge it, but they must first "indicate" It (Brodie, 2014, p.18).

In the 21st century Irish Dylan Moran, Graeme Norton, John Moloney, Ed Byrne, Tommy Tiernan who started performing in the UK in the 20th century, are popular household names, alongside younger successful circuit comedians like Aisling Bea and Eleanor Tiernan. Some have parallel careers in the UK and in Ireland and keep travelling back and forth. Moving to the UK, particularly to London, is seen as a professional "must" by younger or newer Irish comedians, who want to use the benefit of the wider comedy circuit, and the relatively recent popularity of Irish humour and accent in the UK (See McGovern, 2002; Negra, 2010).

Despite their common background, Irish FGICs use different "negotiation tools" with their British audience. The ones they pick may depend on the years of their arrival, the political atmosphere at that given time and their own class and background. A comedian with Tommy Tiernan's heavy Donegal accent and working-class background is bound to take a lot more time in his performances in England to get those elements of his persona "out of the way" by introducing and addressing them than Andrew Maxwell, the liberal Dubliner with the middle-class London experience.

The Irish comics enjoy some privileges when working in the UK: their geographic proximity, ease of travel, relative familiarity with British culture forged in the fire of many years of conflict. The Irish suffered discrimination in Britain for generations and were at the butt of countless jokes, depicting them as drunken and stupid (Hewitt & Owusu-Bempah, 2005, p.57). However, the years that have gone by and possibly some sense of reconciliation, made this specific kind of bigotry unpopular and delegitimized, or not viewed as representing genuine hatred.

Last, but not least, most of the comedians coming from Ireland are white, as are most other European immigrants. I argue that this is relevant to their ability to negotiate with British audiences, and mitigates their otherness. However, the question whether white immigrants suffer from "real" racism still stirs controversy. It might be useful to note Michael Billig comment, mentioned by Simon Critchley in a paragraph about ethnic humour: "The British

laugh at the Irish…the Americans laugh at the Poles…" (Critchley, 2002, p.11). Billig takes issue with the fact that Critchley's "does not include whites laughing at Blacks" and concludes that jokes about the Irish are viewed as "true humour" while joking about Black people deems racist, therefore "reprehensibly unfunny" (Billig, 2005 p.28).

Bronwen Walter argues that the Irish only came to be seen as white recently, and that their racialisation transmuted but still "place the 'white' Irish outside the boundaries of the English nation" (Walter, 2011, p.1295) – placing Irish otherness somewhere in between the post-colonial and the racial.

The arrival of non-white immigrants in the post second world war era, served to "whiten" the Irish into the mainstream, or, as Robert Miles noted, "The previously excluded became included in the context of the signification of the 'new' intruder and the continuing cultural variation is overlooked in the course of the reconstruction of the nation as culturally homogenous contra another Other." (Miles, 1993). Jewish immigrants underwent a similar process, according to David J Graham, who argued that the British Jews have become "Ethnically 'invisible' in British identity politics" (Graham & Graham, 2009). Bronwen adds a class dimension to the analysis, saying the Irish in Britain "played an important part in the continued exclusion of the working classes from bourgeois whiteness, through their contribution to the racialised othering of the working classes as a whole." (Walter, 2011, p.1311). Being currently viewed as white help the Irish "speak for the universal human", and position themselves as such.

The Irish experience arguably reflects on the continental and Eastern European immigrating comedians discussed later in this chapter. Maybe it is just a matter of time before they get to be seen as a part of the mainstream. However, the Irish have much in common with the British to start with. The debate about the extent to which Irish immigrants suffer from racial discrimination in Britain is ongoing. Bronwen insists that "The invisibility of Irish-British identities reflects both an assumption by the majority society of 'white' cultural sameness and self-censorship because of ongoing anti-Irish attitudes. A major consequence is the reinforcement of the Black/White 'racial' binary rather than a recognition of longstanding plurality within the 'diaspora space' of Britain" (Walter, 2016, p.18). Hickman and Walter argued that anti-Irish racism exists, and that "Focus on the paradigm of 'colour' has limited the range of racist ideologies examined and led to denial of anti-Irish racism" (Hickman & Walter, 1995, p.6).

There are some indications that Irish comedy is particularly "in vogue" currently. Dixon and Falvey (1999) described the attractiveness of the "gift of the gag". The Irish accent, the candidness and openness in addressing subjects of family, religion and alcohol make the comedians from the Irish Republic come across as charming and "cute", a positioning that can often work to their advantage. However, this image can also be belittling and marginalising. It sometimes seems that it takes a certain amount of acquired "Britishness"

to be taken seriously when discussing political matters, as the case of Andrew Maxwell discussed later in this chapter demonstrates.

Current immigrants from the Irish Republic have another advantage – being a part of the European Union's successful project. The economic and financial rise of the "Celtic Tiger", as Ireland's economy came to be known, and the country's integration into the EU while the UK drifted away from it, gave the Irish a new sense of identity. "Europeanisation has been fundamental to the Irish peace process and the reconfiguration of the partition of Ireland," note McCall and Wilson (2010, p.12). The Irish may be "invisible" in terms of their skin colour, but as De Souza et al noted, accents are a strong 'tell', which "identifies and potentially stigmatizes" (De Souze et al, 2016, p. 609), and most first-generation Irish immigrants have distinct accents.

Tiernan and Ardal O'Hanlon, and many of the younger generation circuit comedians like Rory O'Hanlon, Aisling Bea and Elinor Tiernan who moved from Dublin to London, focus a lot of their comedy on Irish nostalgia and characteristics and Catholicism (Allen, n.d., Tiernan, 2007). The rebellious comments about the religion they were raised in can be seen as irreverent in Ireland, but in protestant and mostly secular UK, they express identity.

Catholicism as a marker of otherness features also in the comedy of Luca Cupani from Italy, a practicing catholic. Unaware of the religious divide, Cupani got into a spot of trouble in a Protestant club full of Glasgow Rangers fans in Glasgow. "I said I was Catholic; I was just trying to tell an anecdote… it did not go down well. Some left the room, there was a bit of booing. Later the promoter said, 'You shouldn't have told them that you were Catholic'. Couldn't he tell me that earlier? Some audience members apologised later; they realised I did not understand the situation. Had I known, I would have, said 'I was kidnapped by a Catholic family, it wasn't my fault'… (Cupani, 2022).

 Andrew Maxwell, who immigrated from Dublin to England in 2004 and currently lives in Kent, adopted a different type of outsider's outlook. He dedicated most of his 2017 Fringe show to his difficulties living as a middle-class liberal in conservative Kent (Maxwell, 2017). His sense of longing was dedicated more to his previous London home than to his native Dublin, and despite repeatedly acknowledging being "an immigrant from the EU", he is refreshingly aware of the privileges of being an educated, urban micro-celebrity. As reviewer Steve Bennett observed "He now lives among the Ukippers whom he's diametrically opposed to, politically, but acknowledges as decent folk. He doesn't ignore the xenophobia driving some of the Leave vote, but it's far from an eviscerating portrayal of them all as knuckle-dragging racists." (Bennett, 2017).

Another show by Maxwell, Hubble Bubble (Maxwell, 2014) was dedicated wholly to his opposition to Scottish independence, a particularly bold move, considering that the show was held in Edinburgh amid the storming debate on the Scottish independence referendum

that was to be held a month later, in September 2014. To grant himself legitimacy and get the audience permission to touch on such a contentious topic, Maxwell leaned hard on both his facets: the "insider" and the outsider. He plaid on being an "Irish lad", a native of a country that broke away from Britain's choking embrace; at the same time, he leaned on his privilege as one of, in Puwar's terminology, an "unmarked body" (Puwar, 2004, p.131)., namely, a white English-speaking man, charming accent notwithstanding – which allows him to speak as the "universal person". Or, as Puwar depicts it "Those who are in whatever regard- race, class, sexuality or gender – fish in water, whose habitus is immediately adjusted to the demands of the field, do not feel the weight of the water, and hence they do not see the tacit normativity of their own specific habitus, which is able to pass as neutral and universal." (Puwar, 2004 p.131).

Kehinde Andrews expanded the claim that white immigrants do not suffer from racism as much as Black ones, or at least that the bigotry against them washes off over time, to cover all white European immigrants. "White migrants are still white and their children melt into the population in a way that we never can. In many ways, freedom of movement from Europe was just a continuation of the long-held immigration policy to encourage white migration whilst discouraging those who were Black and Brown." (Andrews, 2021, p.97), Andrews notes that between 2004 and 2014, the proportion of the UK population from Europe, excluding Ireland, rose from 1.5% to 5%. "It is not incredible surprising that the xenophobic backlash against EU migrants coincided with the financial crash and austerity" (Andrews, 2021, p.97), he states, implying that racial hostility against Black and Brown immigrants exists regardless of economical motivation, whereas sentiments against white immigrants arise specifically at hard times.

7.1.2 Early Continental Funnies: A German Comedy Ambassador

Unlike the Irish, stand-up comedians from the European continent became visible in the first decade of the current millennium, with the arrival of German "comedy ambassador" Henning Wehn, the most prominent among them. Wehn made his first steps on the London circuit in 2002. He relied heavily on stereotypes assumed to be held by the British about the Germans (humourless, punctual, leaning towards fascism) and taking digs at the British sense of superiority above all Europeans. In an article for Time Out in 2008 Wehn summarised his motivation to embark on comedy in a way that demonstrates all of the above traits:

The good weather, the tasty food and the classy women made me stay. In order to blend in with the locals, I decided to get extremely lazy, spend money I don't have and, most importantly, to unjustifiably bang on about my great sense of humour. This is why I decided

1,646 days, nine hours and 42 minutes ago to try my hand at stand-up and become the German Comedy Ambassador. (Wehn, 2008).

This paragraph demonstrates well why When has become Britain's most successful European stand-up comedian. He combines in it many of the stereotypes that Europeans hold about the British, especially after spending some time in the UK, while attaching to himself many of the stereotypes the Brits (and most other Europeans) maintain about the Germans. This, in turn, makes him bulletproof – criticising his homeland in British terms, makes his seem as if he shares the consensus in the room, by which meeting the criteria defined by Brody for "establishing an intimate exchange" with it. Combined with his awkward appearance and heavy accent, he can get away with this combination of self-deprecation and brutal criticism over his hosting country. The habitus' doors opened to him.

When's career took off with television performances and sold out tours. Overtime, his comedy identity shifted. in 2015, in his Live at the Apollo performance, he recognised that in gigs "up north" (When, 2018). he is heckled by audience members to "fuck off back to London". Namely, his whiteness, education and class - as well as immigrating from a rich continental country - brand him as a Londoner. His identification grew "British". In his post-Covid-19 EdFringe show, It'll All Come Out in the Wash (a distinctively English phrase), when he said "we", especially in political contexts, he meant the British. He relates to British politics as a citizen, not as a guest. For example: "Whoever is in government we have to be sceptical because their main goal is to get re-elected. Whatever they do, if it happens to be in the best interest of the country, it is no more than a lucky coincidence" (When, 2022). At the same time, he maintains his German identity and still refers to himself as "Germany's Comedy Ambassador" (Wehn, n.d.). In a speech at the German Parliament, the Bundestag, in March 2023, when describing the exchange of cultural influence, King Charles the 3rd stated: "For the last fifty years, we have laughed together; both at each other, and with each other… In Britain, Germany's Comedy Ambassador, Henning When, has given us an understanding of German quirks, as Monty Python brought our own here" (Sky News, 2023).

Wehn's ability to maintain both his identities, the original German and the acquired British reflects a phenomenon described by Schiller et al as "transmigration" (Schiller et al, 1996, p.48). Trans migrants are "Immigrants whose daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders, and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state." (Schiller et al, 1996, p.48). Schiller et al note that transmigrates are not sojourns, "because they settle and become incorporated in the economy, political institutions, localities and daily lives of the country in which they reside. However, they… maintain connections in the country from which they emigrated." (Schiller et al, 1996, p.48).

In this, Wehn has much in common with the Irish immigrant-comedians, who maintain strong contact with their homeland, and enjoy similar popularity to that which they gained

in the UK. Another FGIC who shares such trans-immigrational traits is Steve Hili from Malta, who gained some popularity as a comedian and radio presenter in Malta, and migrated to the UK to develop his comedy further. Sofie Hagen (Sweden), Daniel Symondson (Norway), Katerina Vrana (Greece) also enjoy popularity and have developed parallel careers in both their homelands and the UK.

7.1.3 Funny Freedom of Movement: The Continental Wave

Following in When's footsteps, European comedians mushroomed on the UK circuit in the 2010s; some blossomed. The most successful among them are Swedish Sofie Hagen, Spanish-Welsh Ignacio Lopez, Norwegian Daniel Simonsen and others. Many others became regulars on the open mic circuit.

Wehn, like Hagen and Symondson, managed to acquire the privilege of opting to speak as a universal person, a privilege, as Puwar suggests, saved for "unmarked" bodies. As I will show, very few Eastern European immigrants feel they have this privilege, whereas quite a few Italian comedians feel they have access to it. I would suggest that whiteness is not the only criteria here. Ford indicates that not all European immigrants are equally welcome in the United Kingdom (Ford, 2011). Being of a certain "class" in terms of one's country of origin may have a lot to do with it. Some countries in Europe rate higher in terms standards of living, levels of education, governance and human rights (Schimmelfennig, 2016, Bericat, 2019). Coming from Germany, Sweden or Italy, at least north Italy, may be a key to such permission. Coming from the Balkans or Eastern Europe may make meeting the criteria for speaking as a universal person harder to qualify for.

In this context, there is no wonder that being able to speak as a universal is viewed by many FGICs as a coveted holy grail. When asked whether there was a message to her comedy, Italian Giada Garofalo said:

> "Comedy is reactionary, not revolutionary, because you need to reduce messages. It is a release or relief. People feel that if they cheered to a political statement, they no longer need to do anything about it. Being funny liberates me. I enjoyed telling the audience about the end of a relationship and suddenly feel that the whole room understood exactly my feeling. This recognition was the closest I was to a feeling that I accomplished some kind of mission." (Garofalo, 2022)

 Freedom of movement in European Union – for as long as the United Kingdom was one of its member states - enabled European citizens to live and work in the UK. A few came after already having some experience of performing in their homelands, like Italian Romina Puma, Romanian Radu Isac and Maltese Steve Hili (puma, 2022, Isac, 2021, Hili, 2022). Others got

into stand-up comedy "accidentally" while already living in the United Kingdom. Some hail from more affluent and "established" West-European Countries, and others from Eastern-European states. Some initially came to work in IT or academic jobs, others in the service industries. Their foreignness in the British context is not just language related. It often seems that the cultural gaps between Britain and its neighbouring European continent are larger than those between the United Kingdom and its faraway former colonies, who have had their fair share of imperial influence.

Another incentive for aspiring European stand-up comedians to come to the United Kingdom was the growing popularity of stand-up comedy in Europe. With the growing international popularity of stand-up and the rise of English as an international language – cohorts of English-speaking and local comedians in the continent started running comedy gigs – most of them in English, where comedians hone their craft in front of a mix of English speaking and European audiences. Comedians from English speaking countries are welcome guests on such gigs. Such scenes exist in Amsterdam, Berlin, Paris, Barcelona, Budapest, Helsinki, Stockholm and other cities. Prague has its own English language comedy Festival. A website founded in 2023 introduces European comedians, gigs, Festivals and competitions, aiming to "connect English-speaking comedians and audiences throughout Europe." (EuropeanComedy.com, 2023).

The founding groups of those clubs are English speakers who are often joined by local comedians or other active stand-ups from different countries. The audience consists of a mixture of tourists, immigrants, Anglo-Saxons abroad or local audiences, seeking entertainment or wishing to exercise their English. Many comedians in those circles aspire to go to the United Kingdom or the United States, which they view as comedy Meccas.

7.1.4   Brexit: A Rising Tension

In the years of their emergence on the circuit, British society went through the Brexit campaign, dating from approximately 2010. Later came the run-up for the referendum on leaving the European Union, in June 2016, and the actual severance of the UK from the EU, on January 31, 2020. Comedians interviewed for this chapter differed in opinions on whether and what extent did the Brexit campaign and aftermath create a hostile working environment for them. Most remembered the weeks just before the vote and immediately after as being notably tense, sometimes even volatile, and mentioned feeling safer in London or in the larger cities such as Manchester and Glasgow, which they perceived and experienced as more diverse and liberal, in that period. All of them expressed their opinions in careful and nuanced terms.

Three main issues emerge from the testimonies of European stand-up comedians in the UK: Their desire to be viewed as legitimate individuals regardless of where they come from, especially in the context of Brexit; the declared wish of a majority of them to not be seen as

"representing" their countries, yet at the same time the pride some take of certain traits of their homelands; Their desire to be allowed to speak about the general and the universal, and noting the fact that this unofficial right, as noted by Nirmal Puwar, is often reserved for the "racially unmarked", namely (albeit not only), white people (Puwar, 2004, p.56). Interestingly, white immigrants are not exempt from the sense of illegitimacy for speaking universally about everyday experience. The requirement to get "permission" for speaking about such things by first showing an awareness of your otherness - is required even of white immigrants too.

Daniel Abrahams writes about the establishment of trust between audience and comedian as a prerequisite condition for the success of their comedy. He suggests that Russel Peters, an Indian comedian who immigrated to Canada, became successful "because he often focuses on his own upbringing as a racialized immigrant and how that sets him apart in Canadian society" (Abrahams, 2020, p.495). Acknowledging one's own otherness, then, is a key to gain the audience's trust. As Abrahams notes, this is a general rule in stand-up comedy. The trust he is referring to is, as he explains, is not absolute, and it can be easily lost. For example, he brings White House advisor Stephen Miller, who is Jewish, but is known for expressing himself in an antisemitic way. "Miller may be Jewish but owing to his role in implementing racist violence backed by an antisemitic logic, I do not trust him to have a nonpejorative conception of Jewishness." (Abrahams,2020, p.498). Abrahams illustrates here an important issue in a comedians' communication strategy with their audiences – the extent to which you can rely on your "technical" identity for permission to criticise it is limited. As I noted earlier, I often feel I cannot allow myself to criticise 'Jews' just because I am technically Jewish. Romanian Radu Isac explained his decision to dedicate his 'Immigrant Comedy' Show in Camden, London to first generation comedians only by expressing reluctance of what he viewed as second generation immigrants' tendency to "slag off their parents' homelands" (Isac, 2021). He views this trait as more legitimate for first generation comedians, despite him being generally averse to in.

7.1.5 The Shadow of the Iron Curtain: Eastern Europeans Comedians Establishing Their Identities

Isac is a successful professional circuit comedian. Isac came to the United Kingdom from Romania in 2015 with some experience at performing stand-up, to promote his comedy career. Despite having name for himself some name in Romania's budding comedy circuit, Isac had to change his approach in the UK, especially in terms of how much of his set is dedicated to his Romanian origin. He nowadays managed to reduce it to "10%-30%" (Isac, 2021) but even this is too much. "I never want to talk about being Romanian. It seemed like a good subject for comedy when I just moved to England but very fast it became 'hack'" (Isac, 2021). mundane, clichéd, and poor-quality job. The term is often used against women - who are accused of "only talking about their periods" (see Hagen, 2014); and minority

groups (who allegedly "always talk about being black"). Over a hundred questions in the popular answer and question website Quora (Quora, n.d.) are dedicated to "Why are black comedians so obsessed with race"). At the same time, comedians are encouraged by reviewers and by comedy tutors to "talk about what you know" and enhance your unique point of view. Both Isac and other comedians, like Vlad Ilich (2022), Alex Martini (2021), mentioned the pressure and sense of obligation to speak about being foreign as a key for the permission to talk about more general subjects. I also had my attempts to discuss anything but my 'Israel experience' dismissed by reviewers.

What Isac and others describe is one of the many paradoxes that immigrants, like many types of "Other" comedians - encounter: the expectation that they reveal and discuss what is unique and personal about them, which seems to clash with the requirement to avoid being "hack". If outsiders, or a "racialised body" as Puwar puts it, cannot be "universal human" or "Representing the universal" (Puwar, 2004, p.64) – what else can they be?

Isac explains both his decision to abide by the perceived requirement to address his country of origin and his reluctance to do so by professional considerations: "I feel obliged to make references to it because of "comedy theory", obliging us to talk about everything that is obvious about you. If I do not mention that I am Romanian, the audience's patience dissipates." (Isac, 2021). That said, Isac explains his reluctance to speak of his homeland in his set, in terms of his ability to use his comedic tools to connect: "If I dwell on being Romanian I do not get to discuss what I have in common with the audience, only what separates me from them, which is not the discourse I want." (Isac, 2021).

The synergy and dichotomy between showing your audience your "Face", in the Levinasian sense of the term, and at the same time trying to establish similarities and common grounds keeps coming up in interviews with interlocutors. The former device aims to mitigate hostility and show goodwill, the latter – to break into their national habitus. Levinas's idea of "Peace as awareness to the precariousness of the other," (Levinas, 1985, p. 167) reflects repeatedly in FGICs' accounts. Isac views rapport creation as walking that thin line: acknowledging your Otherness while emphasising the things you have in common with the audience.

Those ideas correspond well with Brodie's notions of the first encounters between a comedian and an audience-packed room:

> "When I meet someone for the first time, certain cues give me an initial orienting of them within my worldview, allowing for the projection of sets of both common and opposite factors. This initial orientation is based on culturally and experientially grounded expectations of the others, associated with particular, culturally significant keywords. Such projections are prejudicial and, as such, quickly contestable. They

are, however, prejudicial in terms of both commonality and difference: they have both esoteric and exoteric expectations associated with them." (Brodie, 2014, p.17).

This complex balancing act involves talking about one's foreignness and finding common ground with the audience. The purpose of it is to be seen as "peddling a kind of inside humour, which gives an audience the impression that they are the only ones who really understand it," as veteran American stand-up Mike Nicholas described his generation of comedians. (Brodie, 2024, p.12, quoting Time, 1960). It is a hard undertaking for an immigrant, considering the tight-knit nature of many comedy rooms, especially in small towns and villages where the weekly or monthly comedy night takes place at the local pub. As Brodie describes it "It is an association of people with shared expectations and norms: I expect members of this group – mine, yours, ours – to know this history, to share these values... I am reassured when expectations are met." (Brodie, 2014, p.17).

Isac describes speaking on stage about Romania as if it was an initiation ceremony that provides him with the desired key to the National Habitus dominating the performance room - the coveted permission to speak his mind as if he were native. The legitimacy it can afford him is similar to the permission given to Walter Benjamin's storyteller, who "takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale." (Benjamin, 2016, p.3). In Isac's words: "I just open by talking about being Romanian for a minute and then I see if I need another minute or two. Once I've done that sufficiently, depending on the type of audience – they would let me talk about whatever I want" (Isac, 2021).

Isac's has previous experience of otherness. Being originally from the Moldavian north of Romania "I'm used to having a different accent to my audience; I have to explain it in Bucharest, too. I learned how to do comedy as an outsider in the UK from my experience in Romania." (Isac, 2021).

Fellow Romanian national Szabolcs Szèles (Sylas Show), had a similar sense of Otherness in his homeland, being of a Hungarian ethnic minority of Transylvania. But what branded him as Other in Romania, sparks some recognition in British audiences "They get excited about Dracula, that's a good starting point for comedy." (Szèles, 2023).
 Italian Giada Garofalo, too, was already an outsider before coming to the UK: "I was not Italian in Italy; I was Sicilian. I became Italian when I came to London. I don't feel any country is 'mine'." (Garofalo, 2022).

 Isac feels his relatively conservative opinions on some matters reassure some of his British audiences, and form a communication channel. Those who expect immigrants to be particularly liberal, are relieved – or disappointed: "I had one joke about Brexit, taking the piss out of Politically Correct. The liberal London audience, who initially liked the idea of me

being a Romanian, did not like the opinion I expressed. It was not PC enough." (Isac, 2021). In other instances, the effect was opposite. Shortly after his arrival in the UK I saw Isac get in trouble at an open mic gig in which he opened one of his jokes by saying "I don't like Spanish people." The backlash showed Isac that making complicated points on the back of a risqué opening gambit can backfire. "I was trying to make the point that me not liking somebody is automatically transposed to hate. It didn't work" (Isac, 2021).

Isac feels that liberal audiences have their own prejudices about immigrants. "If I make a girlfriend joke a liberal audience might respond badly because they expect misogyny from an Eastern European immigrant, even if the joke is quite benign. People identify my accent as 'Russian', and the Russians are seen as 'bad guys', because of the Cold War memory or Putin's era of oligarchs and human trafficking. It is similar to how Muslims are expected to mention terrorism or deny being terrorists." (Isac, 2021). As Puwar writes in the context of Black men and women, they "are constantly under the spotlight, as they are seen to represent a potential hazard" (Puwar, 2004, p.61).

Isac believes that the Romanian-Russian association may influence his chances of being booked for certain gigs: "They sometimes think somebody from this part of the world might be homophobic… I feel that in the UK my accent is a bad guy's accent. Promoter sometimes acts as gatekeepers by assuming their audience might not like a certain type of comedian. But I keep applying for gigs which rejected me because I feel like I can make any audience laugh, even 'reluctant' audience." (Isac, 2021).

 The process described by Isac and other immigrants is in parts unique to immigrant-comedians, but to an extent is valid for all stand-up comedians. As Mary Douglas wrote in her seminal article "Jokes", "The element of challenge" is essential to all jokes, but the joke can only be effective if it has been "permitted by its audience", (Douglas, 1999, p.152, p.155). Sophie Quirk explains Douglas to mean that "Jokes are rejected when they trespass on values and authorities that are considered sacred" (Quirk, 2015, p.17). It could be argued, that this "permission" is given not just based on what they say, but also on who they are, and whether their identity earns them the "right" to say such things. Establishing one's foreignness or is seen as a way of gaining such permission.

Isac feels that such a plea for permission – achieved by speaking at length about his Romanian homeland - is specifically required in some areas of the UK. "There are places in the UK where I need to dedicate more time to being an immigrant, normally places outside of the big cities. Maybe they are less used to foreigners. I feel I am expected to explain what kind of foreigner I am, what is it like to be from there." (Isac, 2021).

Despite the ever-looming Brexit debate in the early years of his activity in the UK, he "wouldn't necessarily say that how they leaned on Brexit is the criteria, some places are just less used to foreigners." He prescribes the "Romanian bit" with almost clinical precision: "I

just open by talking about being Romanian for a minute and then see if I need another minute or two." (Isac, 2021).

To read the room, he developed "a little trick: if it's if I play a room with a liberal crowd, I ask the promoter not to tell them where I'm from, but if I feel like it might be a 'Brexity' crowd, I ask the MC to tell them. Once the MC has already given them the bad news, I can get on stage and give them the good news –that I am actually funny" (Isac, 2021).

Isac explains this strategy with comedy-related professional considerations, too: "There's an extra beat that I'm gaining there, a beat in which they are not pulling back when I say 'Romanian'. And then I just do the joke about being Romanian, so I just get the laughter without having them pull back." (Isac, 2021). Introductions are important in creating expectations, and instructing the MC on how to introduce you is a part of a comedian's negotiation strategy. I ask MCs to not say I am Israeli, because some of my opening gambit involves getting the audience to notice my accent. As many of the FGICs use their first minutes on stage to address their origin, alerting the audience to their Otherness in advance might spoiled it. It also might increase their Otherness ad single them out on the bill. One of female comedians' biggest peeves used to be MCs telling the audience "and not we have a woman", "female comedian" or "comedienne". It was seen as preparing the audience for the worst, and setting the comedian up for failure, because, as Stephany Brown noted "it is generally difficult for marked and marginalized bodies to be taken seriously or accepted as valid stand-up comics." (Brown, 2020, p.43). Isac's choice, then, is rather daring, but he is a comedian who thrives on certain levels of tension; and putting one's identity's forward in order to subvert misconceptions is as much a negotiation strategy as withholding it.

 Isac is careful when it comes to mapping the UK in terms of places that are less or more welcoming to FGICs. "Everywhere is different; some of the Midlands is posh, some more working class, some towns are ethnically diverse, some villages not at all." (Isac 2021). He avoids researching places where he is about to perform for the first time: "I just go and find it as it is." (Isac, 2021).

Despite his occasional tension with "liberal audiences", Isac still feels at ease at "Angel Comedy or Top Secret (central London clubs). "The harder are Stoke on Trent, deeper Essex, and Kent. I do not necessarily think they have something against Romanians, they just don't want a Romanian dude as their comedian at the end of a day's work. Maybe they worry that it's going to be political, that I'll make fun of the British or accuse them of being racist, so it is some kind of defensiveness." (Isac, 2021). This echoes of Levinas and Butler's notion that the encounter with the Other's "Face", precariousness and pain, is threatening. "For Levinas," Writes Butler, "the situation of discourse consists in the fact that language arrives as an address … by which we are… held hostage. So, there is a violence already in being addressed." (Butler, 2004, p.139).

Interestingly, the term "hostage situation", is often used jokingly by comedians when describing the performance to their audiences. Many encounters with "the face of the other" – like being accosted by a beggar, sitting a talkative stranger on a flight – may involve elements of entrapment, but very few performative situations have more of a threatening potential than a stand-up show: The comedian is on a stage which is normally armed with a microphone; and picking on audience members is largely considered legitimate. The performer is in a minority compared to the audience members, a guest, and in the case of the immigrant stand-ups, an Other – but they are in control of the room. The Levinasian sense of threat is, therefore, rather acute. FGICs may feel that speaking about their foreignness, namely, their disadvantageous situation, might mitigate the threat. However, the mollifying underdog-ness and the potential of turning into an accuser with a demand – are ends of a double-edged sword. On one hand - the desire to share the pain, to humanize yourself by showing your Face; on the other, as Butler writes, "Personification does not always humanize" (Butler, 2004, pp. 140-141).

Isac makes clear that he is "not on a mission to dispel stereotypes." His mission, he insists, is more professional and career-oriented. "It is a commitment to myself: to get myself to as many places as possible and learn about them". (Isac, 2021)

At the same time, he is careful to not spread or reinforce stereotypes, either. "I don't tell jokes about Romania or Romanians in my set. I do them in Romania, but in the UK, I do jokes about the UK. I like making jokes about the people who are in front of me." (Isac, 2021).

Vlad Ilich is from North Macedonia, a country that most of his British audience knows very little about. He started performing stand-up in Malta, where he studied theatre and philosophy. Born in 1993, he "missed" most of the Yugoslav Balkan War, but was raised in its shadow. He remembers his childhood experience of the conflict of February to August 2021 between the government and ethnic Albanian insurgents, and the ongoing ethnic tension in the country between Macedonians and Albanians between 2012 and 2017 (Isac, 2021. See also Tziampiris 2012, 153–171).

Unlike Isac, Ilich has an ambitious sense of mission which is personal but also transnational and even universal.

> My main responsibility is, as a residential artist, or as an artist of Macedonia is to transcend culture to time. Because of the war, I learned the universal value of the meaning of human life. People here have not experienced war or starvation for a long time. My task here is to transcend them; to be able to communicate that to an

audience. Stories are the heart of human experience and the best way for a person to relay a message. I found a few ways to make what happened during the war funny. But the audience, especially the British are very sensitive, so you first have to ease their minds, to tell them it's okay. To say 'It happened to me, and I'm laughing at it, please laugh with me. And that's how we get through the pain. People who have been through pain have a more positive reaction to it being talked about than people who haven't, which is almost counter-intuitive. (Ilich, 2022)

Ilich's 'mission' echoes of Butler and Levinas' ideas of the Face of the Other's role in the encounter with what Puwar depicts as the 'universal' human, namely, 'white' people. However, while Butler and Levinas frame the "Face" as a purveyor of suffering and mourning, Ilich's mission – as is Njambi McGrath's and others -is to frame it in the context of entertainment and laughter in order to communicate. It adds a layer of difficulty to the negotiation process but also an element of seduction: if you go through the pain of the story, joy awaits at the end. Butler describes the redemptive effect of the call: "To respond to the face… means to understand the precariousness of the Other" (Butler, 2004, p.184), or, as Levinas writes: "the face of the Other in its precariousness and defencelessness is for me at once the temptation to kill and the call for peace, the 'you shall not kill'" (Levinas, 1985, p.167). In the world of "others'" comedy this redemptive moment between your 'addressee' being 'tempted to kill you' to them recognising your humanity and their own, goes through the gate of your ability to make them laugh at the pain.

Both Ilich's sense of mission and his difficulties in communicating his messages to his audience, resonated with my experience, as described in the autoethnographic chapter of this thesis. I, too, felt that British audiences find mentions of war, suffering and violence difficult to laugh at, as well as my need to reassure them that it is 'allowed' to laugh at the described pain. Similar themes came up in many of the interviews I conducted. Ilich's tries to mitigate the Levinasian moral demand that comes with being 'addressed' by the Other, and being subjected to their 'face': "I try to keep it light, I cannot just go right in saying, 'The Balkan War is all your fault.' They will not accept this" (Illich, 2022). Italian doctor and comedian Stefania Licari has a similar obligation to speak out, educate and inspire: "Ultimately, art is political… A voice on stage means a privilege, voice id power, the most advanced societies are the societies where art is really developed. Have a voice and use it." (Licari 2023)

Ilich found that comparing his UK experience to his life back home, has a positive effect: "I was surprised how well they engage with stories about a country they have never heard of. It makes me feel like a tourist's brochure, I think it flattered them." (Illich, 2022). Ilich estimates that he dedicates about a third of every set to speaking about North Macedonia.

"You have to get through it; people hear your accent and see you, so you need to explain it." (Illich, 2022).

Ilich, too, believes that the introduction of his foreignness is a rite of passage; an initiation ceremony for what Brodie describes as "establishing an intimate exchange between himself or herself and the audience… creating a group through talk" (Brodie, 2014, p.18). Or, in Bourdieu's terms, being permitted into the National Habitus by introducing one's own National Habitus. Such introduction may serve as the self-confessionalism of the 'legitimated autodidact' (Bourdieu, 1984, p.16-17), an openly stated cultural self-proclamation which may grant its holders some "cultural goodwill" from the owners of cultural currency (Bourdieu, 1984, p.319, 321, 384-385). Namely, the admission of being foreign and introducing one's own cultural Habitus, opens the national Habitus' door for the immigrating comedian, and permits them to speak to the group consisted by the audience.

Time and experience made Ilich more daring with breaking that prevalent rule, and experiment: "I sometimes move this foreign bit to the end. Especially if I have a very strong unrelated joke that I can open with (Ilich, 2022).

The audience's interest is not Illich's only consideration: "When I started in comedy in the UK, I missed home and I needed to talk about it; it made me happy when people listened. Later, it became more about integrating and also to compare the British and Balkan ways of life. People in the Balkans are warm, loud with fewer personal boundaries; You meet someone you like and immediately invite them into your home. Here, in London, you say hello and the next day they build a fence." (Ilich, 2022).

Processing those social differences is not merely intended to soothe homesickness; it is also a political quest. "It is not a light side. Immigrants are grouped and depersonalised, which makes it easier to label us, but once you humanise them, we become real people, and you think 'No, Romanian Victor is not just here to steal my job, I know him, I had a drink with him'." (Ilich, 2022).

The drink, the telling of the joke, allowing yourself to entertain the British and let them to be entertained by you, sharing your precariousness but also the intimacy that is at the heart of funniness – all fall into the wider category of Levinas' 'face of the other'. The Other whose very presence in on stage is the "disruption of dominant forms of representation" (Butler, 2004, p.43). which is necessary for "something about the precariousness of life to be apprehended" (Butler, 2004, p.43). The vulnerability, that engulfs any comedian taking the stage is, as Butler writes, "a precondition of the human" (Butler, 2004, p.43). The individuation Ilich strives for is not a commodity easily achieved: "Individuation is an accomplishment. Not a presupposition, and certainly no guarantee." (Butler, 2004, p.27).

The representation, therefore, is in the very presence of the Other, in the encounter of what Puwar refers to as "marked identities" (Puwar, 2004, p.70). "unmarked bodies" (Puwar, 2004, p.62). In this sense, the material matters less than the presence of the represented Other. As Douglas noted: "The joke form rarely lies in the utterance alone, but . . . can be identified in the total social situation." (Douglas, 1978, p.93).

For Ilich, the act of individualisation is both personal and political: "This is not just about wanting the British audience not bunch us all into an anonymous 'Eastern European' faceless mass," he explains. "It is about seeing us as individual humans. Liberals saying 'No, they're here to do the jobs that we don't want to do', is problematic too. What we are saying is: 'We have dreams, just like you. We are not just there to work the cogs of the economy in the jobs that you don't want to do. I comedy is how we shed this light." (Ilich, 2022).

The nature of stand-up comedy makes it a useful form for the creation of such individualization, being inseparable from the individual who performs it. As Brodie states: "Stand-up comedians are characters in their own narrative, of their own making. They profess to have had certain experiences and express certain opinions not merely in front of but to an audience." (Brodie, 2008, p.175). This individuality is what makes it a distinct event of "The Face" for its precariousness and intimacy, and a useful vehicle of individualisation.

Another reason for resorting to the specific and individual, and to material about 'back home', is a shortage in cultural references. "There are some nuances in British culture, which I still don't get. I don't have the style, that dryness of British Humour. It's a disadvantage compared to British comedians, who are home, performing in their native language, know the cultural context, wordplay comes easily to them. When audience members respond – I need that extra second to translate it in my head. It makes you feel like a bit of an underdog, and you need to earn the audience's respect." (Ilich, 2022).

Illich traces his comedic experience back to his grandfather, who was "a big prankster, a huge fan of slapstick, we used to watch Charlie Chaplin together a lot". He attributes his familiarity with British humour to the fact that Macedonian television provided British comedy shows such as 'Allo-'Allo and Monty Python films and sketches: "Monty Python are huge in Macedonia even now," (Ilich, 2022).

The first stand-up comedian he ever watched was Eddie Murphy. "I connected to his observations and storytelling, he speaks about his uncles, I found immediate resonance in it, it reminded me of the funny stories from home." (Ilich, 2022).

The attraction to family-based storytelling and observations mixed well for him with what he views as the Balkan sense of humour: "Balkan people are very laissez-faire, there is a lot of ribbing and cynicism, Bosnians are especially great at sarcasm, it is extremely dark. In Macedonia, because it is such a small country, there is a strong need to define ourselves by

talking and joking about other countries. I think my humour is 100% Balkan. Balkan audience get it. With British audiences I feel I can't get too surreal. They need me to stick with some logic, even if the story itself is not at all logical." (Ilich, 2022).

Like Isac, Dimitri Bakanov would not have opted to speak about his Ukrainian-Russian origin, if it was not for comedic considerations. Bakanov, who was born in Kherson in Ukraine to a Ukrainian mother and a Russian father, immigrated with them to London when he was 11 years old. His accent is perfectly English ("school has a way of beating accents out of you"), and only his name and his vaguely "foreign" look give him away. "the vague and inexplicable rules of "the industry" say that you must have a USP (Unique Stand Point), otherwise, you're competing with white males. Using my eastern-European angle, I can tick a different box." (Bakanov, 2022).

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict made his origin specifically "topical" and relevant "It is very cynical. I'd rather not talk about it, I'd rather just do jokes about dating, relationships, religions, just my own observations about life," (Bakanov, 2022). He admits. He used to try to dedicate as little of his set to it as he could, but "At the moment it is relevant, that's why people book me. I do not do comedy in order to educate or to change people's life; I want to tell silly jokes." (Bakanov, 2022). However, the right to tell silly jokes seems to be invariably tied to the right to "represent humanity", a privilege which, as Puwar notes, is not "available to those considered to be of colour" (Puwar, 2004, p.59). Bakanov, like all eastern Europeans interviewed for this research, is indeed white, but as Blachnicka-Ciacek and Budginaite-Mackine noted, eastern Europeans in the UK are branded as "Other Whites" "Which is not quite the same as British Whites" (Blachnicka-Ciacek & Budginaite-Mackine 2022, p.1082). "Whiteness has many 'shades'. These shades are less about colour, but more about one's gendered body, national, cultural and social background, and its relation to other (racialised) bodies." (Blachnicka-Ciacek & Budginaite-Mackine, 2022, p.1082). However, they noted, "cultural capital, such as accent and looks, help some of the interviewees to 'escape' racialisation." (Blachnicka-Ciacek & Budginaite-Mackine, 2022, p.1082). Bakanov's accent does not "expose" him but, as he said, his looks do. And, as in the case of most comedians, so does the content of his comedy.

Bakanov feels that in London audiences view him favourably because he is from Ukraine. "Both English liberal audiences and immigrants from the former Eastern Bloc tend to dislike Russia, and being a Russian speaker makes you popular with Russian-speaking audiences, but being Russian doesn't."

Out of London, he believes, the audience is not as interested in the specifics of the conflict: "If I am out of London, especially in smaller villages where there are not many foreign people, they sometimes get more impatient. As in 'OK, mate, that's all very well, but what about the jokes?' And I feel they suspect I might want to try and educate them, so I just move on to general jokes." (Bakanov, 2022).

Despite his upper-middle-class accent and intonation, Bakanov thinks his foreignness exempts him from class-based tensions with his audience: "Essentially, I don't think you have class as a foreigner, so I don't enter into that class divide. Technically, I'm middle class, but they rarely get it. I used to try and say things like 'the reason I do not have a foreign accent' and then someone would comment that I do sound Eastern European. Then I tried to say, 'you can hear from my accent that I'm Eastern European' and someone responded Nah, you sound posh'. So, I stopped addressing the accent. It just confuses them." (Bakanov, 2022).

Bakanov is careful when talking about Ukraine on stage. "I speak about it, but I do not 'represent' it because I do not want to 'represent' anything except for myself. I do not like teaching people stuff or being moralistic. If they learn something from the story, great, but that's different to peaching. I also do not want to belittle it too much. I see comedians get on stage and go 'This is where I'm from and here are some cheap jokes about it', catering to the most basic stereotypes." (Bakanov, 2022).

The Russia-Ukraine War provided Bakanov with ample professional opportunities: "Around 2015 I was the only comedian from Ukraine on the circuit. I got to do massive charity gigs in theatres with the biggest comedians of the country. I was only asked because I'm from the Ukraine, so I had to do the material about it." (Bakanov, 2022).

Brexit was another testing time for Bakanov's reluctance to 'represent' anything but himself. He felt committed to mention Brexit, but his motives were different to most European comedians'. "I never felt people did not want me there because I am Ukrainian, but I felt I was expected to talk about it even though I did not actually care."

A typical Bakanov joke is "I never had grief from racists; probably because I look like one," demonstrating his awareness to the advantages of being a "white comedian who sounds very English" (Bakanov, 2022). His motive for bringing Brexit up in his comedy was his colleagues' material. "I had to address watching other, normally British, comedians berate audiences and tell them that they are racist because of Brexit. I just had to say, 'guys, you're fine. You're not racist'" (Bakanov, 2022). Bakanov says he "could feel tension in audiences. I felt their message was 'We don't want to be lectured'. Nor do I." (Bakanov, 2022).

7.1.6 What's in a Name: Authenticity and Familiarity

Szabolcs Szèles realised upon arriving in Glasgow in 2013 to train as an actor, that his name was not going to go down easily in the United Kingdom. So, he turned his surname, Szèles, into the first name Sylas. He performed as Sylas Szabolcs for a while, then change his stage name into Sylas Shaw. "I then went back to Sylas Szabolcs to connect to my roots, and then again to Sylas Shaw to get more acting gigs, so now I get fewer offers for Romanian Pimps

roles. Once I can get British roles, I'll go back to Szabolcs. It is who I am, I love my heritage, I do not want to hide it" (Szèles, 2023). The change made less difference in comedy, though comedy MCs were grateful for a name they could pronounce. "I enjoyed watching them pronounce 'Szabolcs': some tried to make it funny, others worry they'd butcher it." (Szèles, 2023).

This tension between the quest for authenticity and the need to seem familiar to the audience is ever existing. Henderson and Gabora's suggestion that audiences tend to equate what they recognise as authenticity with what they appreciate as skill (Henderson & Gabora, 2013), might account for some comedians' efforts to remain authentic despite their desire to integrate.

Italian Alessio Mariottini changed his stage name to Alex Martini. "I wanted my name to be more palatable for the English," he explained. "And there were many jokes, word plays cultural references like Dirty Martini; Shaken not Stirred... an audience member taught me a TV slogan from the 80s 'Anytime, anywhere, any place – Martini' (Martini, 1981)." (Martini, 2021). By using a new surname, Martini invoked old memories from the core of the British national Habitus, and connect it to his own. He awakened in his audience what Bourdieu coined as a "cultural goodwill" (Bourdieu, 1984, p.318).

Martini's countryman, Giacinto (pronounced: Ja-chin-to) Palmieri, tried the opposite strategy. Despite being called Giac (pronounced: Jack) in his social and professional life, he introduced himself into comedy using his full name. I was one of the MCs in the early 2010s who struggled to introduce him on stage, and got it wrong. "It provided me with my first joke," said Palmieri, "Thank you (name of the MC) my name is exactly something like that'". He'd then teach the audience to pronounce his name and add "It sounds quite macho, right? It actually means Hyacinth. Which is why I'd rather be called Giac." (Palmieri, 2025).

Here, again, addressing his name gave Palmieri an opportunity to bond with the audience over the hapless MC's head. They became the ones in the know, learning a complicated foreign name and its meaning. At the same time, he demonstrated knowledge of a "complicated" English word such as Hyacinth, followed by a self-deprecating joke mocking simultaneously the audience's expectation for a 'macho Italian', and Palmieri's - whose persona is a typical 'confused intellectual' - aspiration of being one. Hence, with three sentences, Palmieri got the audience into his national habitus, while being allowed implicitly into theirs.

This bond between the comedian and their audience is based on one of humour's most basic fundaments, as described by Herbert Spencer's relief theory, "where laughter is explained as a release of pent-up nervous energy." (Critchley, 2002, p.3). Anthropologist Kate Fox noted the embarrassment and social anxiety of "the English" about mispronouncing names, particularly foreign ones (Fox, 2004, p. 49-51). Dwelling upon their

names, the comedians draws attention to this tension, and then provides a relief. I have always been surprised by how much calm was brought into the room by my self-introduction "Daphna, that's like Daphne with an A".

Szabolcs was not the first immigrant comedian who regretted changing his name into something for the benefit of British audiences. Shaparak Khorsandi, who became a household name comedian in Britain as "Shappi", changed her first name back to Shaparak. She explained it in an article in 2011: " I relinquished a huge part of my identity because I was made to feel embarrassed by my name and I wanted to fit in." (Khorsandi, 2021). The article attracted a barrage of hostile comments, accusing Khorsandi of being "A part of the woke brigade", and "virtue signalling" – interestingly pejoratives implicitly acknowledging her as British - alongside a few supportive ones (Khorsandi, 2021, in the comment section).

Bursell found that "Individuals in Sweden with foreign-sounding surnames who take on more Swedish-sounding or neutral surnames have a positive earnings progression compared to individuals who keep their foreign-sounding names." (Bursell, 2011, p.471). Relying on de-stigmatisation theory, Bursell argues that the name change detaches the stigmas attached to their holders. There are, however, other considerations that are often more important for immigrants – like taking pride in their identity. Canadian scholar Karen E. Pennesi argues that for immigrants sticking with their original names redistributes the responsibility for the integration between them and their absorbing society. (Pennesi, 2016).

For immigrating stand-up comedians, there are a few interjecting issues regarding deciding on a name change. Being in the public eye, a name change alone cannot hide their otherness from their audiences, who are exposed to their accents and looks. Such a contrast may arise suspicion, and deem unauthentic; audience members can see them as attempting to infiltrate into the national habitus, however both Martini and Szabolcs' experience indicates, however anecdotally, otherwise. The audience embraced their effort to accommodate their names to their current habitus.

The harsh responses to Khorsandi's return to her original name, indicates that the defiance implicated by that measure was seen as unwelcome. It is important to distinguish between Khorsandi's actual audience, who abided by her decision, and random less sympathetic respondents on the Independent's website. Comedians negotiate their messages with their audiences, and while in Szabolcs case "his" audience consists mostly on random strangers, Khorsandi's audience along the 30 years of her career have been, by and large, British liberals. In an interview she said something which may explained why she felt she could trust her audience to follow her: "Don't start out your career imagining you are going to teach them something. Learn to make the audience laugh hard first," (Pape, 2022). implying, she gained their permission to use her name as a payoff for making them laugh first.

The quest for balancing communication and authenticity does not limit itself to names. Luca Cupani says "Promoters said I look too fair skinned to be Italian. An audience member approached me during a break said 'you can drop the accent now'" (Cupani, 2022). Giada Garofalo, too, reported audience members post-show saying "Oh, this is really how you talk?" (Garofalo, 2022). Jestrovic argues that audiences' expectations often push performers towards hyper-authenticity, "the hyper-authentic embodies expectations of the beholder and the tendency of the performing subject to meet those expectations" (Jestrovic, 2008, p.160). When a performer cannot identify with the expectations, they might invoke resistance. As an Israeli, I was angered by audience members asking why do I not "speak more about Jewish stuff". I had no inclination, or sufficient knowledge, to do it.

Martini tried the hyper-authentic route, and dedicated whole sets to Italian food and its superiority over British food. He was getting outraged on stage about "people who put pineapple on pizza", but his heart was not in it. "I felt it was expected of me as an Italian", he explains. The more confident he became as a comedian, he abandoned those hyper-authentic subjects in favour of routines that expressed his personality more accurately.

7.1.7 'Say What!?' Accent, Language and "Passing"

Szèles 's accent sounds almost purely Glaswegian (Szèles, 2023). "With this name (Sylas Shaw) and this accent, promoters do not usually notice I am foreign when booking me, until I get on stage and talk about it." (Szèles, 2023). This strategy is known in critical race theory as "passing"; letting the audience assumptions buy you some time before exposing your origin. As Ginsburg puts it "Passing forces reconsideration of the cultural logic that the physical body is the site of identic intelligibility" (Ginsburg, 1996, p.4).

Ginsburg argues that the objective of passing is not necessarily motivated by "a desire to shed the identity of an oppressed group to gain access to social and economic opportunities; the rational for passing may be more or less complex and ambiguous and motivated by other kinds or perceived rewards." (Ginsburg, 1996, p.3).

Like Szèles, my mild accent and whiteness do not "expose" me instantly as an immigrant. Ginsburg description depicts accurately what those moments of obscurity "buy" for a stand-up comedian "Passing has the potential of creating a space for creative self-determination and agency; the opportunity to construct new identities, to experiment with multiple subject positions, and to cross social and economic boundaries that exclude and oppress." (Ginsburg, 1996, p.3) At the same time, as Szabolcs found, adopting a passing-enabling name creates a conflict of identity. As Amy Robinson noted "The problem of identity… is predicated on the false promise of the visible as an epistemological guarantee" (Robinson, 1994).

Italian Luca Cupani thinks that in a country so full of regional accents, his is not necessarily a hindrance: "A few audience members told me 'when we heard your accent we thought you were shit but then we listened and we liked you' It was a relatively conservative place and the audience comes to hear 'the best of British stand up'. I speak quite clearly, I think an act from Liverpool or Scotland sometimes might find it harder." (Cupani, 2022).

Szèles' first Edinburgh Fringe show, *They Said There Will Be Jobs* (Szèles, 2023), was fully dedicated to his immigration experience, but he hopes "My next show will be about me as a person." (Szèles, 2023); an interesting choice of word, implying that the "person" and the immigrant are not one and the same. This possibly represents how dehumanising the call to "represent" seems to be for many immigrants, as opposed to being allowed to "represent the universal (Puwar, 2002).

"I've been in the UK for ten years so now I need to do my immigration show and then move on from it, " (Szèles, 2023). He explains.

In his shorter club sets Szèles "I address being from Romania, because I do not want the audience to get confused, and then I can branch into dating and other general things" (Szèles, 2023). The universal, then, is subject to the audience's permission. Talking about dating, he explains, is not in the context of him being an immigrant dating British women but more "as a young man dating in the current economy." (Szèles, 2023).

Interestingly Szèles, who only performed in Glasgow, Edinburgh and London and reported to "have had no problems there" as an immigrant, shares the arguably prejudiced opinion that many FGICs hold about "more rural areas" (Szèles, 2023). "In some rural parts of Scotland and England I might have to work harder and pick my topics more carefully. I have a bit where I'm slagging off Nigel Farage - that might not go over well everywhere. But you always need to figure out how much you can tell an audience before they go 'No!" (Szèles, 2023).

Upon further reflection, Szèles was less convinced that the question is really how 'rural' a gig is. "It mainly depends on how people in a certain place feel about immigrants. I have a friend who is Glasgow-born of Chinese heritage who has the thickest Glaswegian accent, and he had trouble when gigging in Glasgow just because he looks different. I sometimes have it easy because at the end of the day – I am a white guy." (Szèles, 2023).

On stage, Szèles speaks about Romania, and particularly about Transylvania, where he comes from, with affection, but he does not feel he is obliged to "represent" it. "I care about where I'm from, but I was never a nationalist, and I am not didactic about it." (Cupani, 2022).

7.1.8 Not all About the Pizza: Italian Comedians, Class, Education, and Language

Luca Cupani's comedy style is often surreal and tends towards stream of consciousness more than towards a classic set-up – punchline structure. He feels that ever since he naturalised as a British citizen, his British audience is happier to take criticism from him. "I had this joke where I said the United Kingdom is as United as the Democratic Republic of North Korea is Democratic. It did not go down well at first but once I said I was British, it became legitimate. Criticising someone's mum is ok if she is your mum too." (Cupani, 2022).

Cupani seems perplexed by British class notions. "Of course, there are rich and poor but we don't have this class loyalty. I hear comedians sometimes speak as if enjoying something nice implies they betray their working-class allegiances. In Italy the idea is more – aspire to do better, your miner father would be proud if you became an engineer. You are not betraying the Queen by eating a croissant, even if it is French. I'm sure she had loads of croissants in her time. The class system, as well as the idea of class loyalty and identity, are intended to keep people down, to get them to vote for Brexit. I don't talk about it on stage yet. I feel that I need to get a better understanding of this caste system" (Cupani, 2022).

Cupani feels that his reluctance to perform to rowdy audiences, which he generally describes as "stag-dos in Essex", may have to do with the nature of his comedy. It is not for everybody, it is a bit subtle, sometimes it requires … I have some logic, I draw some conclusion, you need to follow the reasoning is not just 'you know that last time I got so drunk I shat myself'. I don't have enough drunk material or jokes that slag France off. I like to talk about history, about Italy and its role in the second World War. I talk about Catholicism; I joke about a bit about sex, but in a polite way. I do self-deprecation. I'm not a working man's club type of comedian. But I do not say no to gigs, especially after the pandemic, wherever they pay, I go" (Cupani, 2022). Cupani, a church goer, feels that atheism is over hyped in British comedy: "Atheism in comedy is a bit hack because we're not living in the Inquisition times anymore. It doesn't take this much courage to flaunt it. You're not Galileo, or even Bill Hicks in the deep south of the US." (Cupani, 2022).

Giada Garofalo, too, feels she is better-received in London and other cities than in smaller places, but she does not attribute it to being an immigrant: "I feel it is harder in conservative upper middle-class audiences in very small places, small towns and villages, but I do not think it is because I am Italian, I think it is because I talk a lot about sex and can be quiet direct. But I never felt it was hard for me in London, even when I was performing in a pub full of 'laddy lads', I managed it. Maybe it is because I am unthreatening, I have a mousy voice, so even when I talk about rough stuff, I am perceived as everybody's friend" (Garofalo, 2022).

Garofalo does not feel any of her identities held her back in comedy. However, "Sometimes I was under the impression they did not want to have two foreigners on the same line up of a professional gig. But I also remember this, in the early days, was very much the case with female comedians, when they would say, or we already have too many women." (Garofalo, 2022). As Garofalo notes here, Immigrants, much like women, are "othered". The idea that you cannot have too many of one kind of otherness on a line up is one I came across, too, in my early days in comedy. Cupani felt affronted by the situation. "I was quite new here and I felt the rise of nationalism, the discourse about the world war and the poppy debate were intended to exclude me, and others." (Cupani, 2022)

Even when he came up with his Brexit joke, he did not perform it often:

> I felt the audience was embarrassed or tired. After the vote It was like entering the house where someone hung himself and is still swinging from the ceiling, but he is their grandfather, so you just pretend to have your dinner. I got away with the joke, because it implicated my homeland, too. It was: 'it was so badly done it looks like an Italian Job. (Cupani, 2022)

What Cupani described is the popular and useful device of self-deprecation in the plural form of "national deprecation". If you laugh at your own group first, you may then take a dig at the dominant group. I employed a similar strategy in a joke after Boris Johnson became Prime Minister. "I left Israel because I did not want to live in a country where the Prime Minister is a racist with terrible hair," a clear reference to Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. However, as Yi notes, generalising self-deprecation of this kind "runs the risk of perpetuating the harmful ideas it aims to counteract." (Yi, 2022).

Brexit also motivated Cupani to become a British citizen "because I did not trust the settlement process". The main change he felt on the comedy scene was in the way MCs presented him. "They'd say something like 'Brexit failed, he is still here'. Cupani thinks the fact that he was "not gigging much outside of London" protected him somewhat. "In London there was more demand for immigrants round Brexit time. But I felt that if I go say to Spain and say I'm Italian on stage there is this sense that I am almost family whereas here it was harder." (Cupani, 2022). Giada Garofalo says "When I was flyering in Edinburgh for my 2017 show an English guy who heard I was from Italy said 'No, I don't want it, go home'." (Garofalo, 2022).

Cupani feels he has a responsibility to acknowledge his country's fascist past. The joke was "Fascism was supposed to brew slowly, like Limoncello, like the Spanish who stretched it over 40 years, while the Germans concentrated it into a shot, and ruined it.'" He explains that "I always feel I need to own up to the fact that Italy invented fascism. We came up with it and the Germans took it and made it work." (Cupani, 2022).

Alex Martini, too, feels it is a good strategy to take a dig at Italy early in his set (Martini, 2021). He also believes it allows him some leeway into talking more critically about the UK, even though "they don't like taking it from someone they do not view as a peer." (Martini, 2021). Romina Puma says she suffices with a small opening joke which implies some criticism of the UK "I am an Italian who was born in Germany and lives in the UK, which is why I am efficient, like a German, loud and passionate, like an Italian and I do love to complain like a Brit". Still, she rarely touches on "political" issues." (Puma 2022).

Cupani talks about history also because, "It makes me look educated", which he feels helps his audience place him in the British class system. "Once they can see I'm educated, they figure out vaguely where to place me." (Cupani, 2022). Cupani says love for history is an Italian trait "because it was pretty much downhill from Rome, so I can advise the British to how to deal with historical downfall." (Cupani, 2022).

The disregard for the Italian cultural trajectory was offensive to Giada Garofalo: "People asked 'do you have comedy in Italy' and I thought 'how dare they', because of course we have a very long tradition of it." (Garofalo, 2022). Yet, Garofalo thinks it is crucial to not be prejudiced against the audiences: "We must trust them to react to it spontaneously. They will laugh not from their head, but from their belly. But if you start thinking, 'Oh, they won't like me, because I'm not from here' – that's setting yourself up for failure." (Garofalo, 2022).

 Alex Martini, too, feels that sharing his knowledge, particularly knowledge of British and Italian history, with his audience gains him acceptance. But it also enables his to show a facet of the Italian education system that he believes the British are not aware of: " In Italy you can get great education regardless of your class." (Martini, 2021).

7.1.9.   The C Bomb: The Weight of Words

Many of the Italian interviewees related to language barriers, even though all of them speak near-perfect English. Giacinto Palmieri, who is referred to in this thesis both as a comedian and as an academic source, dedicated his PhD thesis to "oral translation" of comedy, using his fellow Italian comedians in London as a focus group ((Palmieri, 2017). Stand-up comedians, generally, tend to swear on stage, especially, but immigrants generally, and comedians specifically, often do not know which words are legitimate, and which are taboo.

Palmieri argues that "a stand-up comedy performance in the comedian's native language, will probably appear more 'in colour' than one in the second, since this performance will reflect the performer's stronger emotional involvement." (Palmieri, 2017, p.153). The release of such involvement, concludes Palmieri derives from the fact that "the strength of taboo words in the second language is partially lost on the speaker, which might lead to a feeling of greater freedom in using them" (Palmieri, 2017). In the process of negotiation with an English native-speaking audience, this may be a hindrance, as it might 'land' as an offence against the audience's sensibilities or, as Garofalo described it "can be seen as a

'cute' mistake" (Garofalo, 2022). To which the audience may be more forgiving. Garofalo used to tell an anecdote about it:

> 'Cunt' in Italian is 'figa', which is used as a compliment, meaning "a pretty girl", whereas in the UK "the C bomb" is a huge insult. The joke was "I came here for people to finally call me what I always wanted to be called… (Garofalo, 2022).

Giacinto Palmieri analysed on stage common idioms which perplexed him. "I managed to say in a job interview 'I hit the ground running while thinking outside the box. They were so confused that they hired me. This is how we steal your jobs" (Palmieri, 2009).

Deficiencies in cultural references are another difficulty. Cupani "Didn't know who Andy Murray was" (Cupani, 2022). I remember attempting to find out why comedians would use the word "Viennetta" to signify Northern working-class culture and was helped by British comedian who explained to me on Facebook that the creamy dessert was sold cheaply in supermarkets in the 1980s and served as a special treat.

A few European comedians left the UK in the run up for Brexit or in its aftermath. Others are travelling back and forth while still performing, and many naturalized as British citizens. They bring further layers to the British comedy scene, and specific ways of engagement with British audiences. While most of them have to deal with cultural gaps, language deficiencies and the looming shadow of Brexit, they, joyfully or grudgingly, recognize that they need to address and acknowledge their origins.

This chapter presented the complexities involved is devising negotiation strategies for comedians from Europe: Intuitively, and based on their circuit experience, they echo some profound ideas that were discussed in great depth in theory. They recognize the importance of showing their "face of the Other" in order to break potential hostility and invoke identification, as presented by Butler and Levinas. They demonstrate how the aims Levinas described – bringing understanding, bridging over hatred – can be achieved not only by sharing pain, death and mourning, but through light hearted entertainment and laughter.

These comedians use their 'face' to penetrate Bourdieu's Habitus in its national version, and make their own habitus' a part of the British comedic tapestry. They often personalize the tension between what they view as a requirement to explain their background and their desire to express themselves personally and speak for the universal - a holy grail noted by Puwar as non-permitted for "marked bodies" - and bypass the demand to "represent" their countries or ethnicities. At the same time, they realise their authenticity and ability to create intimacy with their audiences, as defined by Brodie, requires them to dedicate time to qualifying their foreignness. Considering that most immigrants from Europe, certainly on

the comedy circuit, are white, most interlocutors acknowledge it as an advantage. Combined with name-changing and accents adjustments some use "passing" strategies in order to get through the doors of comedy club, although none try to pretend to be British.

Their strategies range from changing their names, using "national deprecation" or introducing their countries in flattering lights. Most of them recognize the British interest in class and attempt to find their place in it by demonstrating their knowledge and education.

In the next chapter I will introduce two other strategies employed by immigrants to negotiate their comedy and their identities: grouping together as immigrant-comedians, and for intersectional immigrants - highlighting other facets of their identities.

8. Stronger Together: Comedy Groupings and Intersectional Comedians

The only reason the British have a class system is that they are so crap at racism (Reg. D, Hunter, 2010)

I'm not from here, I'm from America, as you can probably tell by my, erm… hope! (Tim Renkow, 2016)

I don't care that you guys drink a lot…but then you vote. (Ariel Souma 2022)

I keep this comedy thing quiet in my day job; because if they find out I can actually speak English…. (Rick Kieswetter, 2024)

I have a British passport but I am not British; I am an American but I've not been living there for too long, and I ask myself – how did I wake up at 50 and realised I am Canadian?! (Davis Mills, 2021)

Having examined the comedy of comedians from specific geographic areas in chapters 5-7, this chapter deals with phenomena that is relevant to immigrant comedians across the board. The phenomena it describes, I suggest, constitute strategies for communication with British audiences on the part of FGICs. In some ways, the two complement each other. The first is what I shall refer to as comedy groupings, namely comedians from the same country or region joining together for various performance groups. Those groups may be created ad-hoc for a comedy compilation fringe show, or act regularly in operating a regular weekly or monthly gig. Sometimes they constitute of a mixture of first-generation and second-generation immigrants from a specific origin or ethnic group, as in Yellow Comedy, which was created by American-German-Italian-Japanese comedian Rick Kieswetter. Sometimes it is the immigrants who host in their gig local-born comedians or immigrants from other countries, and in some cases, as in Radu Isac's London Immigrants gig and Kuan-Wen Huang's[9] Comedy with an Accent – a gig recreated annually for the Edinburgh Fringe – the gig is open for immigrants from all countries to take part in. I will argue that those groups

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[9] For more on Huang's gig see chapter 8.

empower the comedians participating in them and enable them to express their unique personalities as well as speak more universally.

The second mechanism – intersectionality - is available for FGICs who have two, or more, major facets to their identity, such as being an immigrant and a person of colour, an LGBTQ identity, adhering to a religion or having a particular disability. Female comedians may also fall into this category. The facet of their identity that those comedians opt to emphasize in their comedy may be the one they identify with more, or one that is relevant for a cause they want to promote. But as I will demonstrate, it may also have to do with that facet being, at least in their view, more marketable or more communicable to their audience.

I chose to examine both phenomena within this one chapter because they involve two opposite yet complementary mechanisms. The first: expanding the self and creating wider groups in order to survive and thrive in a competitive environment; and the second: to pick, choose and introduce various facets of identity from within a divided yet whole self.

Theoretically, this chapter draws on scholarship of intersectionality, and empowerment through collaborations on which I found Dameri and Mescoli's (2019) study on multicultural artists collaboration in Belgium – demonstrating how collaborations between migrants in the arts increase agency and enable them increased visibility - particularly helpful. Solidarity and grouping with peers, illuminated by Winichakul and Zhang on Immigrants and the arts in the United States (2024), Escafre-Dublet, A. (2010) on similar collaborations in France; and Puwar (2004) on the thriving of identity through larger representation. All the above illuminate the empowering quality of collaboration between Others, which I will argue is one of the negotiation strategies of Immigrant stand-up comedians. I also drew on new research in the field of otherness, specifically immigration and integration related, and stand-up such as Ten et al (2022) and Tesnohlidkova (2024). As in other chapters, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and habitus, and Levinas' notion of the other's "face" help frame my understanding of the fieldwork.

8.1.1 Ganging Up – Immigrants' Comedy Groupings

Romina Puma embodies both parts of this chapter. She arrived in the United Kingdom in 2010, shortly after she was diagnosed with Muscular Dystrophy, a disease that was to put her in a wheelchair a few years later, and that is currently considered to be without cure. Puma gathered around her a group of Italian comedians, most of them completely new to the field, and created a monthly show called Il Puma Londinese, The London Puma. The gig was unique on the London comedy scene in that most of it was conducted in Italian: Puma was MCing it in Italian and all the Italian acts performed in it in Italian. In every gig there were three or four English speaking comedians - some British and some immigrants from

other countries. Those comedians performed in English, and were placed on the line up interchangeably in between the Italian speaking acts. The audience consisted of members of the Italian community in London, who brought with them English speaking spouses, friends and dates. As a participant-observer, namely as one who served both as an audience member and as one of the English-speaking acts, it was a fascinating experiment that served multiple purposes for the Italian group. First for a group of recently arrived immigrant, it had an element of turning of tables: for once, they were the hosts in a country that hosted them, and they were a majority among the acts on stage, in a reality where most gigs were only happy to host one immigrant at a time. The audience, too, was mainly Italian. It also created a situation in which they were compelled to write comedy in their native language, or translate the English language comedy – which they have written for their "normal" gigs in the UK - into Italian. This is not a regular experience for most UK based immigrant acts. Most of us only have the privilege, or task, of performing in our native language when we go "back home". Comedians like Steve Hili (Malta), Radu Isac (Romania) Henning Wehn and Paco Hubner (Germany), regularly perform in their homelands, in their respective native languages, and in the UK, in English. However, most FGICs only perform in the UK, and in English. In fifteen years of performing stand-up comedy, I only ever performed in Hebrew twice. The exhilaration of the privilege of performing in my native language, alongside the linguistic challenges it posed, surprised me, but also made me understand the wisdom of the "Puma gang"

Puma herself had rather different thoughts in mind when she had set the group up. "I came to London in 2010 thinking I'll learn some English and live in a big city again. I had some experience performing sketch and character comedy in Italy, but I did not even hear about stand-up comedy. I worked as a waitress. My English was so non-existent that I could not even take orders, only serve them. My boss, a Polish immigrant, encouraged me to go on an English course, and just as I started improving, my illness kicked in, and my back hurt so much that I could no longer work. My doctor said I can't work if I wanted to stay alive." (Puma, 2022). One day she found herself accidentally at a comedy show in a basement in Farringdon, watching a line-up of comedians. "They were telling stories and I was surprised. I realised you do not have to be a character, you could just talk about your life." (Puma, 2022). Puma went home and wrote her first comedy set "immediately, just like that." (Puma, 2022). Puma says she stuck to her script religiously, fearing her English would betray her, but she tried her set at Dirty Dicks, a gig near Liverpool Street Station, and "Had a blast. I realised that is what I want to do." (Puma, 2022).

Puma had set up her comedy night together with an Italian acquaintance, Alex Martini, who was not a comedian at the time, though he had some acting experience, and many technical capabilities. A pizzeria owner in Oval offered her his space, and she had written an hour of character comedy in Italian. However, she soon discovered that the Italian speaking audience kept coming back, demanding different material. "How many hours could I write? I needed more comedians." (Puma, 2022).

Puma started recruiting among her Italian acquaintances. She roped in Martini, Giacinto Palmieri. Giada Garofalo and others. "I did not have enough comedians, so I was recruiting. At first, I ran it as a variety night – I had musicians. puppeteers – anybody who could speak the language. Giacinto came to watch the gig, he brought Giada in, and then I found Luca Cupani, and Federica Bonomi and so on. Gradually, we professionalised; I dropped the variety acts, and we turned into a full-on stand-up group." (Puma, 2022).

Not all Italian comedians in London wanted to join. Valerio Miconi, who started performing in London in 2014, was not interested in becoming a part of Puma's group. "I didn't want to be associated with a specific group in general, even less so with one that was based on national origin. I wanted to be a comic on my own terms, and I felt those groups were not providing me with something valuable. Their audiences were usually, if not always, from Italy, and would require me to perform in a different language than English. As I was just starting out at the time, I felt like I didn't want to be shit in two languages" (Miconi, 2025).

Within a few months, however, the group was kicked out of the Italian pizzeria and had to find itself a new home. That's when the idea of having English speaking guests came up. "It came out of desperation really, there was a limited number of Italian acts, and of potential Italian audience members. We had to diversify our line up and increase our audience numbers." (Puma, 2022).

The gig was run as a collective with all the Italian acts developing their English language acts and their presence on the UK circuit. "The challenge of shifting my set from Italian to English and back was hard because Italian is a 'longer' language – there are more words, more syllables, " said Garofalo. "It was Romina's idea to get English-speaking acts to broaden the audience and bridge between English and Italian comedy." (Garofalo, 2022). The nature of the audience, the Italian group discovered, necessitated some diversion from the British open-mic tradition, in which gigs take place at pubs. "It had to be somewhere that serves food because when Italians go out it has to involve eating." (Garofalo, 2022).

The effect of the grouping enables the comedians to develop a sense of belonging empowerment and expression which helped them pave their own individual ways in the general British comedy stand-up scene in the United Kingdom. The benefits of such strategies were acknowledged in similar research of other performance art fields. DiMaggio and Fernandez-Kelly explained that "The arts are one of the most accessible conduits through which migrants may find a sense of community belonging, even when not granted any kind of official acceptance or citizenship. Art can be used to assert dignity and claim national membership" (DiMaggio and Fernández-Kelly, 2015, p. 1236). Dameri and Mescoli (2019, p.49), in their study of artists groups in Belgium, found that "Art offers opportunities for migrants to actively participate in the socio-cultural and political environment in which they reside and to claim various forms of official and unofficial belonging."

The impact of immigrants grouping together in the arts goes beyond their own individual, or even group, empowerment. It influences the society as a whole. Winichakul and Zhang (2024), in their study of Immigration and the creative arts in the US, found far reaching implications to the tendency of Immigrant artists to stick together:

> In the short run, our results suggest that immigration helped produce greater numbers of native artists. Over a century later, counties with greater historical immigration house more arts businesses and non-profit organizations that generate more revenue, employ a larger proportion of the community, and have earned more federal arts grants. When evaluating potential mechanisms, we see that arts development was not solely attributable to immigrant artists or artists from immigrant families. Our analysis instead suggests that broader interactions between the general immigrant population and natives contributed to this growth."(Winichakul and Zhang, 2024, p.329).

It is clearly early to make such far reaching speculations about the comedy scene in the UK, where the presence of immigrants and their tendency to group together are both new, but the example of the US, where Jewish and Irish immigrants moved the comedy industry from its early days (Double, 2014, pp.26-29), is encouraging in this sense.

It would be hard to assess such groupings as bearing political effect on immigrants' rights or aspiring for such influence, considering their limited scope. Angeline Escafre-Dublet, who examined immigrants' art collaborations in France in the 1980s, concluded that "It demonstrates how immigrant artistic production can become a tool to voice immigrant demands and to contribute to connecting a movement. It shows that immigrant arts challenge national lines and help us refine our understanding of national models" (Escafre-Dublet, 2010, p.17). However, it seems that the current stand-up collaborations have different aspirations, focused more of personal expression. As Garofalo argues, "Comedy is not revolutionary, it is mollifying. It makes you feel you have done something for the world's problems by laughing along" (Garofalo, 2022). Stefania Licari, an Italian comedian and medical doctor, who was not in the UK at the time the group was active, disagrees: "Being onstage means your voice is recognised. It's a privilege, but privileges come with duties. I have a voice and things to say, I want to be heard. And for people want to listen. It's my duty to inspire, educate and share my stories, as a woman and as an immigrant." (Licari, 2023)

For the English-speaking guests, blending into the Italian gig required some negotiating strategies of their own. "Some of them were a bit panicked; they were out of their comfort zone, because to connect to the audience they had to make an effort, improvise a bit" (Garofalo, 2022). As a performer who frequented the club, I remember a British comedian staring desperately and angrily at the audience, saying "Do you even understand a word I say?" The audience, understandably, was not keen to help him out. Another started a joke

about then Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown and stopped half-way through, "You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?", he said, frustrated, to the audience (Personal notes). Others had a much better time. "Tim Shishodia, who is a very 'English' comedian, always did well. He never worried that they might not 'get him'; he trusted them to get him, so he never set himself for failure," says Garofalo (Garofalo, 2022).

In his study of Oral translation in comedy, Giacinto Palmieri, a linguist and a member of Il Puma Londinese, analyses Shishodia's contribution:

> Humorous identity deconstruction at the London Puma comedy club can be seen in what happened when English comedian Tim Shishodia was invited to present a night there, against the custom of having an Italian presenter. Having studied Italian at the university level, Shishodia decided to present the night in Italian. Moreover, he pretended to be learning English as a beginner and shared his very modest and tentative efforts in that sense with the audience, who were aware he was English. By doing so, Shishodia parodied what most non-Italian comedians often do with reference to the Italian language when performing at the London Puma. It was, to summarise, a performance of what Sieg (2002) calls ethnic drag (Palmieri, 2017, p.145).

The hosting of British and other English-speaking comedians, derived initially from a necessity but created a dynamic of its own. The mixing of "native" and immigrant artists in a situation where the tables in terms of power structure are turned can yield various outcomes. Ofer Gazit, who studied immigrant and local jazz players who jammed together in a New York club, observed that "Linguistic and ethnic affiliations sometime contribute to a sense of belonging, but they can also create senses of isolation and alienation" (Gazit, 2015, p.45). He concluded that such a setting "privileges competence" (Gazit, 2015, p.45). which is clearly in the interest of the artists involved. Stand-up comedy is a more individual and possibly insular situation than musical jamming, and requires less intimacy between performers, but it includes many similar facets.

 I personally felt that my ability to connect with the audience at Il Puma Londinese had to do with the fact that I was a Mediterranean immigrant myself, and that my comedy at the time was preoccupied with my immigration ordeals, and with complaining about 'The English' and their ways. The audience was nodding with recognition no less than they were laughing.

Il Puma Londinese gig stopped operating in 2016. Puma's disability made it harder for her to operate it and all the Italian comedians involved were getting busier and busier on the English-speaking comedy circuit.

When Rick Kieswetter - Japan-born, US raised by a German father and Italian mother - founded Yellow Comedy, he had in mind making the faces of Southeast Asian comedians visible to British audiences. It started from a drink gathering for Christmas, which "many

South-East Asian comedians, Phil Wang, Nigel Nig, Evelyn Mok and others, attended" (Kieswetter, 2022). It occurred to Kieswetter that "Growing up in the US in the 1970s, I've never seen such a thing – a platform to show that there is more than one way of being Asian" (Kieswetter, 2022).

Kieswetter's idea had to do both with exposing the "Face", the humanity of others in the Levinasian sense, but also enabling each member of the group to be seen as an individual:

> "It's a bit like Monet's haystacks; They look different under different light. When you have eight people of the same race, you're not distracted by it, you can listen to their different insights - In this case it was Ken Chang, a British Born Chinese, Nigel Nig, a Malaysian, Phil Wang - half and half and Evelyn the Swedish-Chinese. After the show people said 'thank you, we have never seen anything like that before'." (Kieswetter, 2022)

Being exempt from the burden of being the one representative of their continent or ethnicity, enabled the comedians to decide what they wanted to "represent", and the format enabled more personalisation and less stereotyping. Relating to black artists, Rasheed Araeen wrote:

> "Whatever they do, they must not escape their ethnic or racial identity. For them, to adopt an autonomous subject position, like their white contemporaries, would deprive them of the link necessary to authenticise their position. This is based on the 19th-century belief… by which 'others' are ontologically linked to their own cultural roots (African or Asian) and they are presumed to be incapable of entering the world of modern ideas without this link" (Araeen, 2000).

Obviously, being a part of an "others" group defines one as an Other, but at the same time, it enables participants to highlight their uniqueness and gives them more freedom. In Araeen's words: "The issue is not whether one relates to one's own culture or not… but whether one has the freedom to define oneself as an individual according to one's own choice and creative imagination." (Araeen, 2000, p.64). Performing on a line-up in which you are not singled out, allows the acts more freedom to be themselves and exercise the right which, according to Puwar, they are so often deprived of – speaking as the universal human.

Not all national or ethnic comedy groups are run collectively. Some are organised as regular gigs, organised by one promoter, according to a specific immigrant-based theme. Such are Radu Isac's Immigrant Comedy, a monthly London gig, and Kuan-wen Huang (Taiwan) *Comedy with an Accent*, which runs during the Edinburgh Fringe.

Like Puma's gig, Isac's, too, was influenced by practicalities: "It was meant to be a gig for Eastern European comedians, but there were not enough of us, so I opened it for all FGICs." However, Radu's main purpose sustained: "I wanted to create a space where immigrants

would come and watch comedy. I think they tend to avoid it because they often do not understand the jokes and do not 'get' the comedian's context. They do not see the things about the comedian that the British audience realises the moment they get on stage. I felt that I do not understand half the stand-up comedy I get to see in the UK, and I watch comedy every night. If I see an act like Jeff Innocent, for example, a cockney middle-aged comedian, I do not get his context just by looking at him, the way British people do, and that's after performing comedy in this country for six years. I might get the actual jokes, but I can't 'place' him in terms of class, geography and so on."

Quite appropriately, Isac picked the Camden Comedy Club in Camden, London for his Immigrant gig, a venue that even when not hosting immigrant-specific gigs enjoys a crowd of many tourists, both British and foreign, but also frequented by Londoners. Unlike gigs that mix first and second-generation immigrants, Isac decided that he wanted to keep the focus on first-generation immigrants:

> "I don't necessarily like comedians making fun of their home country; but if you are a first-generation immigrant, then as far as I am concerned – it is your set and your country; do whatever you want. You decide what's best. But if you are a second-generation comedian, whose only reference in the set is to make fun of their parents' country – I don't want that on my immigrants' show." (Isac, 2021).

Isac's conclusion that first-generation immigrants tend to be more respectful and reverent about their countries of origin is only partly supported by academic research. There is indeed no specific study of comedy in this context, but Delisle argues that Second-generation immigrants may be more nostalgic about their ancestral homelands than first-generation immigrants, due to what she refers to as "genealogical nostalgia" (Delisle, 2012). Wessendorf, points out that many second-generation immigrants develop a sense of longing and belonging to their parents' homelands. (Wessendorf, 2007).

Taiwanese comedian Kuan-wen Huang established *Comedy with an Accent* as a regular show at the Edinburgh Fringe, and he runs a podcast with the same name in which he interviews immigrant stand-ups from all over the world, and "finds out the amusing tales, obstacles and strategies of other non-native speakers who perform English stand-up comedy on the UK circuit. We also peek into the comedians' foreign upbringings and cultures, how they approach the English language, how they switch between languages and any random anecdotes that get caught in the chitchats" (Huang, 2024).

Huang says he had set up the Comedy with an Accent in order to reflect his frustration as an act whose mother tongue is not English:

"The pursuit for diversity in comedy seems restricted to certain criteria: race, gender, sex, and religion but sometimes there is a superficial attitude to box-ticking rather than achieving diversity in substance. A line-up could seem diverse - but you end up with comedians who went to similar schools. The British obsession with accents triggered my interest. The UK has a strong monolingual culture. People speaking another language but performing in English face jibes at their "non-perfect" accents or some superficial compliments for their fluency. The diversity of cultural backgrounds/ways of thinking are not celebrated quite as much. Circuit comedians still do very bad impersonations of certain accents and that is not considered offensive" (Huang, 2025).

Huang's particular interest in accents and the treatment of language in comedy made him include in his podcast and his comedy line-ups of comedians not only immigrants, though they were the majority – but also Welsh, Scottish, northern Irish and north-England comedians. Class, he believes, is a significant element in comedy, too. "I think this is kind of an Oxbridge thing. The footlights have too strong an influence on the UK industry. Almost unhealthy" (Huang, 2025).

The influence of accents in invoking prejudice against immigrants is in dispute between scholars. De Souza et al stress that foreign accents only cause individuals to discriminate if they already hold prejudicial opinions (de Souza et al, 2016, p.609). However, Spence et al found that standard-accented candidates for jobs were considered more hireable and that the bias was stronger for high-communication jobs. The bias, they discovered, was not mitigated by the candidate's eloquence. "the degree of accent bias was associated with perceptions of the candidates' social status, and accent bias was particularly pronounced among female candidates and for candidates who spoke in foreign (as compared with regional) accents." (Spence et al, 2024, p. 371).

Spence et al's conclusions seem to be more in line with Huang's argument, and with the fact that most immigrant stand-up comedians I interviewed felt that they had to account for their accent when addressing the audience because it might distract them. I was advised by my comedy director, Amanda Baker, to work on my elocution in English as she believed that once the audience starts suspecting they might not understand your accent, I should try and defy that expectation.

While all the gigs discussed above are dedicated strictly to first-generation immigrants, others are a mix of first and second-generation; for example, Jew-o-Rama, a Jewish gig at the Edinburgh Fringe, founded by London Jewish comedians Aaron Levene and Philip Simon, which is open for all Jewish comedians including immigrants. Simon says that "In the

Edinburgh Fringe we have access to a vast range of Jews from all parts of the world. There is always one non-Jew 'for balance'. Our audiences have always been predominantly non-Jewish, as again that is who tends to find themselves at the Edinburgh festival" (Simon, 2025).

Weapons of Mass Hilarity is a show founded by second-generation British-Lebanese Assyrian comedian Jenan Younis. It aimed to offer a platform for Middle Eastern comedians, both UK-born and immigrants, and interestingly extends its remit to British Jews too. A line up for example, from 30 September 2021, included Anoushka Rava (Immigrant from France, or Iranian descent), David Lewis (British Jew), Laila Alj (Immigrant from Morocco), Shazia Mirza (Born in Birmingham to Pakistani immigrants).

Weapons of Mass Hilarity has the most openly political agenda of all the projects mentioned in this chapter. It "champions … talent from comedians with Middle Eastern/SWANA heritage as well as fundraising for MAP and Shlama Foundation" (Younis, 2021). It was set up after Younis started feeling "invisible". "The night has evolved and whilst still predominantly SWANA focused, it is now a space where we welcome comedians from all under-represented backgrounds to perform" (Younis, 2021).The difference in the level of social and political demonstrative goals may be explained by the fact that its founder and many of its participants are second-generation comedians, who tend feel more confident in their British identity, and therefore can afford to be more critical, and to have the magnanimity to welcome newcomers

Those collaborations between comedians of similar backgrounds from first, second and even third-generation immigrants reinforce the extent to which an established diaspora can help newcomers integrate into the art. At the same time, quite a few first-generation comedians complained that they find themselves less welcome in "diasporic" comedy shows due to being different or having different political, cultural and artistic sensibilities.

To conclude this section, the grouping of comedians who immigrate from one country, or under the general premise of immigrant gigs, are created for various reasons: dealing with language difficulties, targeting a specific audience or having a "ready-made" audience of a certain nationality, as in the case of Romina Puma; wanting to create a fringe show with a specific unique standpoint, as in Jew-o-Rama and Comedy with an Accent; or aspiring to undermine stereotypes, xenophobia and racism, as was Jenan Younis' intention with Weapons of Mass Hilarity. Evidently, production confinements and constrictions often change the original plans of the organisers; such changes can be the inclusion of local comedians, including first and second-generation comedians or, simply dissolving, as was the case with Il Puma Londinese.

8.1.2 Are you Taller or Greener? Intersectional Immigrant-Comedians

   Many immigrants, including comedians, arrive in the UK with more than one identity: ethnic, racial, gender-related, sexual orientation, a disability and so on. It is sometimes hard to distinguish which personality facet constitutes an "identity", and which is a personality trait or a fact a comedian opts to refer to. I am an Israeli, an immigrant, Jewish, a woman, a socialist. I am going through menopause, and I dedicate some of my set to – but I do not consider it to be a part of my identity. At the same time, I feel that being "fat" is an intrinsic part of my identity even though I am technically no longer overweight. Gilbert (1997) argued that marginalised comedians tend to present their identities as well as their personalities on stage "They perform both self and culture, exemplifying for audiences the inevitable interdependence between personal and social identities." (Gilbert, 1997, p.319). This description may apply to FGICs too, who, much like Gilbert's depiction of female comedians, often present "acts simultaneously oppressive (by using demeaning stereotypes) and transgressive (by interrogating those very stereotypes through humorous discourse)." (Gilbert, 1997, p.320). Weaver and Lockyer (2024) emphasise that "Stand-up comedy specifically contributes to understandings of intersectionality in unique ways due to the importance of self-definition in comic performance." (Weaver and Lockyer, 2024, p.1). Self-definition is indeed crucial for most stand-up comedians, but the constant quest for new material that can, derive authentically from that self-definition, is ever-present, and provides an additional motivation for an intersectional approach.

In her study of FGICs whose identities also intersect a racial identity – Rachel E. Blackburn (2023), examined the work of Black-Persian comedian Tehran Von Ghasri, South-African Black Trevor Noah, British (performing in the US)-Black-female Gina Yashere and Australian (performing in the US)-Brown-Asian-Muslim comedian Aamer Rahman. She concluded that their presence outside their original nation state "further complicates their already othered body" (Blackburn, 2023, p,124).

Many FGICs are intersectional because they have a specific ethnic or racial identity, which makes them Others in their homelands, too. Swedish-born ethnically Chinese comedian Evelyn Mok, who performs both in Sweden and the United Kingdom, puts her Chinese identity at the front of her comedy. In her shows performed in the UK she also often discussed her feminist ideas and identities, and her struggle with body image as a large woman, before or even instead of relating to her immigrant status.

"I was born in Sweden, but for the Swedish, I'm 'Chinese'. In the UK I felt people were almost relieved to discover that I can be related to as 'Swedish'. It made them feel that they were not 'racist'. I certainly talk more about being Chinese. I dedicate the first ten minutes to being Swedish Chinese and then I keep getting back to it throughout my set. Over the years I've been trying to come to terms with my Asian-ness. I do not feel British in the UK,

but I do not feel as foreign as my Asian-ness makes me feel in Sweden. I've been doing comedy festivals quite a lot in Wales and felt quite comfortable there." (Mok, 2022).

Mok says she suspects that dealing a lot with identity, for all its sections, is an easier way of talking to people about what you are instead of why you are. I think over time, the more skilful you become, you need to refer to it less." (Mok, 2022).

Brexit made her feel more "European", as a comedian. "I felt I needed to comment on it, and wanted to 'qualify' it, so I started referring more to my Swedish identity. I have a different perspective, and I felt that I got a different, positive, response from the London audience. I am not sure it would have been the same outside of London, but I hardly ever gigged outside of London. I feel that I avoided going to places where I thought people would have different opinions about Brexit and I would need to challenge them." (Mok, 2022).

Mok feels that being a contrarian is in the essence of stand-up but she does not subscribe to "hardcore stand-up" which means "you can say whatever you want to whatever you want" because "A lot of the people who want to see whatever they want are not willing to deal with the circumstances" (Mok, 2022).

When it came to speaking about Brexit, Mok felt that her Swedish identity was the more comfortable place to do it from. "Swedish people feel that the government is looking out for them, and I did not feel that way in the UK. I feel that the people are pitted against each other, but it is not discussed and then it bursts. I had that joke about Brexit: 'British people are so supressed that they do not even know that they hate everybody around them; and then one morning they wake up and leave the EU" (Mok, 2022).

Mok had a few jokes in which she was mocking Sweden, for balance, but also because it interested and baffled her British audience "I used to say Swedish is so liberal, that I have seen my teacher naked. The British audience found it crazy and funny"(Mok, 2022).

Unlike many other comedians, Mok does think she has a message, which is to "Subvert stereotypes about Asian people." But she feels that this message was more crucial in Sweden than it is in the UK.

> "I feel like in the UK people talk about race differently, in a more honest and progressive way. There's more room for the perspective, for my perspective, whereas, in Sweden, I feel the response is that I'm 'complaining', and that it is not that bad. I feel in the UK I am given a space to talk about my experience." (Mok, 2022).

Her sense of Humour is, in itself, intersectional. She feels influenced by "very dark" Swedish humour, but also by Chinese comedy she watched as a child. "Chinese comedy is very slapstick and loud, silly, very character based. My father and other relatives were very funny

too. I also watch a lot of Korean drama which depicts this kind of humour well. I am trying to write like that." (Mok, 2022).

Mok feels that when she feels an audience rejects her because of her identity or views, she resorts to a larger-than-life and more sexually aggressive version of herself, a weapon that I, too, recognise. There is evidence in research that this kind of response is typical of intersectional comedians. El-Shokrofy and Ahmed (2002) argue that Black female comedians

"Use vulgarity not only for laughter but also as an attempt to release their inner anger and feeling of discomfort in a society recognizing them as different and unequal. Sensual jokes are the comics' only way out for self-assertion, relief, and liberty. By employing these jokes, the comedians could not only relate themselves to their white audience but also control them through laughter after being exiled and ignored for generations. They are now able to fulfil the image of the powerful strong black woman and comment freely on the social, religious, and political concerns." (El-Shokrofy & Ahmed, A.A. 2022, P.53).

Interestingly, then, what intersectional comedians like Mok or I view as a defensive response to adversity, whether to our comedy, our political stance or our very identity, also has a strong element of self-assertion and relief.

Blackburn (2023) observes that intersectional FGICs of race "utilise critical race humour" (Blackburn, 2023, p.125), providing the audience with what Rossing (2014) defines as "the skills and habits of thought necessary to think critically about and transform racial knowledge and reality" (Rossing, 2014, p.30). Blackburn views the process as contributing to the audience's worldview: "Their voices ultimately ask of us to witness them in the fulness of their identities, through our own laughter. Through their work, they expand our world and ways of seeing one another." (Blackburn, 2023, p.125).

Reginald D. Hunter was the first Black American stand-up comedian in the United Kingdom's comedy circuit. He arrived in Birmingham in the late 1990s as an aspiring actor, but the budding and buzzing stand-up scene sucked him in. Hunter stands out for his unique talent as a storyteller, but also for the fact that but from Georgia, in the deep south, a trajectory that influences his accent and his style.

Hunter, who lives in the UK but often goes to perform in the US, says that his intersectionality works differently for him in both countries. "My UK audience is almost exclusively white. They know me from the BBC, from Radio 4, which makes them feel I am one of them. For the black audience that goes to see Chapelle when he comes here – I am too middle class." (Hunter, 2022).

Hunter says he talks about being an immigrant "as a way in" but not so much to introduce who is his, but to respond to what he feels his British audience's need. "I call them artistically narcissistic. They want to hear what you think about them. They still have this colonial idea that they matter, they need to feel important." (Hunter, 2022).

Hunter stirred the occasional scandal in his career. In 2013 a national outrage had risen after he used the pejorative word "nigger" in a performance at The Professional Footballers' Association Awards (PFA) (Riach, 2017). in the UK the word is not used: not ironically, not metaphorically and not even to condemn others who use it for being racist. "The N-word," is the only legitimate way to refer to it. While the word is considered contentious and offensive in the US too, it is still used sometimes within the Black community or by black comedians "In New York every black comedian uses it," says Dana Alexander, a Black Canadian comedian living in the UK. "But I do not use it and I don't approve of others using it." (Alexander, 2025). This issue has been debated extensively in scholarship. Athali and Munandar (2022), for example, argue that the word has undergone a "linguistic reclamation process" which implies that "The derogatory meaning that N-words originally and generally contain may become obsolete under the concept of comedy as a means to discuss heavy and difficult topics" (Athali and Munandar 2022, p.9). Rahman (2012) argues that "The term *nigga* stands as representative of possessing traits associated with an identity that has evolved from participation in the struggle that has produced soul. Because of its continuity in the African American community, *nigga* points to the historic experience of African Americans." (Rahman, 2012, p.136). Perez, however, notes that while scholars view ethnic humour and the reclaiming of slur words by Others as having "liberatory and rebellious potential", White people are feeling "oppressed" by cultural changes forbidding them from using such terms. "It is important, therefore, to pay close attention to the shifting racial discourse is tested and normalised", and that "the rise of racial/racist humour in the colour-blind era suggested a turn from prior decades where others have documented the constraints that limit Whites in particular from engaging in racial humour freely in public" (Perez, 2013, p.498). The main reasoning Black comedians give to stopping using the "N-word" is indeed that it gives implied permission to White comedians to use it. (Alexander, Bello, 2025). Benjamin Bello believes this is what the use of the word by American comedians does: "This is why I do not like listening to Dave Chapelle and Chris Rock," he says (Bello, 2025). In March 2023 White British comedian Alfie Brown apologised publicly for using the word in a routine in 2015 – after London clubs started "de-platforming" him (Davis, 2023).

The Hunter N-Word scandal led to an apology by the Association's chairman, who said it was a "huge mistake" to hire Hunter for the event. Interestingly other PFA respondents touched on intersectionality within the PFA as aggravating circumstances for the way Hunter's gaffe was received. Footballer Kim Little was the first woman to win the award on that occasion and the incident was blamed for taking attention away from her achievement (Davis, 2023). PFA chief executive, Gordon Taylor, while defending the decision to hire Hunter, said the

comedian "was not fully aware of how emotive it (the n-word) has been in football", possibly hinting towards his American origin.

Hunter himself thinks the whole event "was manufactured by the journalist at the time and possibly someone from my own management to make audiences more aware of me, more controversial. I remember that even in my early days in comedy there were people around me pushing me to say contentious things; but just because I am a big black guy, it doesn't mean I'm mad." (Hunter, 2022). Hunter says in his PR photos he is always encouraged to look stern or angry: "The mainstream, embraces what's familiar and for whatever reason, the idea of the angry black man is a stereotype they are most familiar with." (Hunter, 2022). Interestingly, this does not hinder his popularity among what he refers to as "Radio 4 white audiences" (Hunter, 2022):

> "Sometimes I'll meet white people who, whose face will tighten in recognition. And they'll suddenly go, Oh, it's you. It's made certain areas of white society look at me and go, Oh, he's safe. He's alright. He's one of us. He's alright" (Hunter, 2022).

The dilemma of whether to present himself as "cool" or stick with his well-spoken and image followed him throughout his career. "My mother or my sisters, said, you're big and black. People are gonna expect you to be ignorant, loud, and violent, and to steal. We expect to confound those expectations." (Hunter, 2022). This echoes Italian Alex Martini's notion of wanting "them to know I am educated" (Martini, 2021). This kind of aspiration, to be and seem educated and cultured, is familiar among both immigrants and ethnic minorities. As Basit noted, "Social and cultural capital play a significant role in enabling young minority ethnic British citizens to succeed in education and careers and become valuable members of society." (Basit, 2012, p.130). Basit also introduces the notion of "aspirational capital" alongside cultural and educational capitals, "and contends that it is a strong motivating force in improving the life chances of young minority ethnic Britons." (Basit, 2012, p.130). As Hunter (and Martini) demonstrate, those aspirational notions are not exclusive to UK-born second-generation immigrants or ethnic minorities. Archer suggests that middle-class ethnic-minority and first-generation immigrant "parents expressed a desire for personalised education, felt comfortable voicing their opinions and concerns to schools, and were willing to climb the ladder of authority to get their voices heard." (Archer, 2010, p.465). However, she qualifies "'race' plays a significant and complicating role. Indeed, it might be argued that minority ethnic, middle-class children face greater risks than white middle-class children (e.g. in terms of not achieving their 'potential') due to racisms."(Archer, 2010, p.465).

The desire to make "them" view you as educated and respectable which was instilled into Hunter by his family, has been reflected in other Black American comedy. Wanda Sykes, in

her show I'ma Be Me, in which she celebrates the election of the first black President, Barack Obama, repeats the line: "White people are looking at you!". From her own mother admonishing her as a child, to her own mind, when she bans herself from buying a whole watermelon, which she deems as "vulgar" (but promises herself that now, with the new Black president, she'll buy one proudly). In a particularly telling "bit" she imagines a fight scene between Michelle and Barack Obama in which Mrs Obama throws his belongings out of the white house, and her mother keeps saying "Michelle, baby, stop it! White people are looking at you!"(Sykes 2009). Both Hunter and Sykes express the notion that as an Other you are scrutinised, and that your behaviour reflects on others from your community. As Puwar's puts it: "marked Others are subjects who 'can't escape their 'ethnic' identity." (Puwar, 2004, p.69). Therefore, their artworks seem to be "mimetically linked to an ethnic specifity" (Puwar, 2004, p.69).

Hunter shifted over the years from stressing his Black identity to emphasising his American identity, and he felt prompted to do it because of his audience:

"I never felt American before I came to the UK, but the British asked, 'Why is America doing this and that?' and I had to look it up. It was the first time anybody gave me shit for being American, and it made me feel properly American. It's amazing how much you get conditioned to identify with that flag and have that sense of American justice and rightness." (Hunter, 2022).

The rise of awareness against Black people in the US turned Hunter's pendulum Black again: "My blackness felt incidental to my Americanness. But when I started seeing all that footage of policemen shooting black men, all of a sudden, my blackness became more wrapped into that flag." (Hunter, 2022).

Like Mok, then, Hunter's fluctuation between his racial and national identities was influenced by geopolitical events which required him to comment. In Mok's case it was Brexit, in Hunter's – the rise of Donald Trump and the radical right in the US and its global implications. "And now I need to explain Trump to them…" he sighs (Hunter, 2022).

Hunter feels he benefited from cultural differences, too: "At home people thought I was too literate and well spoken, which to a lot of black folks in the US made me egg white. Here my faults became virtues. It made me cool" (Hunter, 2022).

Brandon Palmer was born in the UK but moved to Baltimore, US as a child. He believes the UK is very "race-sensitive", having a social culture of "Sweeping racism under the rug". He "loves being the scary big black guy", but feels that being American, as he defines himself, is more central do his comedy identity:

"In this country, being American is way more important because being black makes me just one of the crowds of Black comedians but there are hardly any comedians who sound like me or have my sensibilities: for example, how I look at opportunities. The first comedy gig I

did here, I was simply not qualified to do, but the American me was like 'Go do that shit!' No risk, no reward!" (Palmer, 2022).

Palmer believes that introducing his relevant identities, namely being Black and American, is necessary despite those facts being evident to his audience from the moment he gets on stage: "It is about getting the right to speak about certain things. I need to establish that I have this right, otherwise they might get apprehensive. This is also why I do not talk about Brexit, I do not think they will be interested in my perspective." (Palmer, 2022).

Rick Kieswetter was born in Japanese in Japan, but adopted by a German father and an Italian mother, both immigrants to the United States, he lived in the US, Germany and the UK. His trajectory is so mixed, that sometimes he plays with the audience assumptions. I have once watched him perform a whole set vaguely pretending to be native American (personal notes). "It is all about the subconscious bias. There was a time when it did not make sense to be both Asian and American, but nowadays the human palate is broader. My experience is that people see race first, and that's how they brand you. But I also feel that as an American, it is hard to adjust to British expectations on stage: we view confrontation differently, class and language differently." (Kieswetter, 2022).

This new palette, he believes, allows and enables a lot of what unites us as humans to be out on stage: "we are products of our upbringing, and our parents and our culture, not just the national culture, but your family culture, and your language, which is all intertwined. We all have some kind of 'food mum', whether she is Italian or Jewish." (Kieswetter, 2022).

Kieswetter's take on intersectionality and cultural variety, alongside his Yellow Comedy, embodies into practice Olivera Tesnohlidkova's observations on stand-up as a migrants' cultural exchange agent: "Stand-up comedy can foster social integration of migrants: community-building and a nurturing a sense of belonging; acquiring cultural competencies of the host culture; and enabling inter-cultural understanding through cultural exchange." (Tesnohlidkova, 2024, p.144).

Arielle Suma is a Black French comedian, whose parents immigrated from Ivory Coast to France when she three years old. She has a heavy French accent and a larger-than-life, sexually aggressive persona. Souma thinks that "Everything that I am is me – French, black, a woman. I do not put myself in a box, but I do need to explain why I have this accent, otherwise they will concentrate on the accent and not on the jokes." (Souma, 2021) All facets of her identity are serve her comedy: "Obviously, I deal with who I am, my views derive from it. Being big makes me more sensitive about some issues, I am black do of course racism is present in my life; I'm French, so clearly I don't eat the crap food in this country, and I am a woman, a scary woman. It is all in my comedy." (Souma, 2021).

Souma feels that her look in combination with her accent made her sound aggressive to "English people. They are so sensitive. I had to tone down to avoid intimidating them. In

France, especially in Paris where I am from, people are not worried about this kind of aggression." (Souma, 2021).

Souma is somewhat cynical about the "market value" of her intersectionality. "I tick many boxes, I am black, I am foreign, I am a woman, and all this in one act on the line up. If you get me, you win! All the rest can be white English boys." (Souma, 2021). Souma does not speak about politics in her comedy, so she avoided Brexit jokes, too. "I do not think the comedy club is the place for this debate. There are comics who do it well, but that's not what people come to watch comedy for." (Souma, 2021).

Souma is infuriated by comedy promoters trying to pigeonhole her into the realm of nationality and racial identity. "One of them said, 'You are good but why are you focused on relationships, why don't you talk about being French and Black?' I am more than a colour and a nationality; I'm a human being!" (Souma, 2021).

Souma represents a more complex version of the desire of Others to be allowed to represent the universal. Her demand is to allow the whole complexity of her identity to be the universal. She does not wat to "get it out of the way" in order to blind the audience to who she is, but for them to acknowledge who she is as the universal. This quest seems both reasonable and bigger-than-life, like Souma herself. Puwar captured the boldness of such an effort: "The ability to pass as the 'universal human' is an incredibly powerful location precisely because positions within the public realms are normed as being universal and disembodied. And yet we know that only certain bodies are assigned as having the capacity to be universal." (Puwar, 2014, 56). Souma, therefore, defies Puwar's observation that as Other – black, French, a woman, a large woman - she cannot speak as a universal person, or at least about universal notions. She demonstrates how comedy can be used as a notion to do just that and in doing so, she is being subversive by the power of her presence on stage and her insistence on talking of her subjects of choice.

Patrick Yousef Monahan, known as Pat Monahan, is an Irish-Iranian comedian who arrived in England from Iran at the age of five. He used his talent for accents and voices to blend in, and adopted what is now his trademark Middlesbrough accent, to escape bullying at school (Monahan 2023), much like Dimitri Bakanov (See Ch. 7). In his comedy his persona has been, for many years, exclusively that of a 'cheeky chappy northern lad', and it had taken him years to start addressing his origin. "At first I didn't think it would interest anybody, and I also couldn't see the funny in it." (Monahan, 2023). His strategy of "passing" worked, until he felt confident enough to bring his trajectory into his comedy in his 2016-2017 EdFringe shows. "I really exaggerated my northern accent because I was thinking, oh yeah, identify with the North. And then, actually, as I got older, I just thought that's stupid. Why do I need to?" Monahan, too, views his ability to address his complex identity as a result of a development in his comedic skills:

I used to think, God, if I tell them about my thing, they'll be like, confused. I couldn't see the funny in it. I thought, no one's interested in that. Our life is quite dull, very working class. And then, as I got better at doing stand-up it got easier, and I thought, okay, I can talk about it a bit. I also used to worry if I say my dad's Irish they'll expect me to be like Dave Allen or somebody (Monahan, 2023).

Dana Alexander feels that being a black Canadian comedian, she can use her ability to speak in various British accents as a way of reassuring her audiences that she has sufficient local credentials: "Because in Britain you can tell where people are from by their accent; you can tell their class. When they hear that you can do those accents really well, it indicates that you've been round." (Alexander, 2022).

Anushka Rava, a French comedian of an Iranian descent, who lived in Paris and the US but settled in London, has never been to Iran. Yet her Iranian identity is more central to her comedy than her French nationality. "I have no choice; because people will always remind me that I don't 'look French' or that my name is not French, and I will have to explain myself. it means my ethnic identity will always be more central to my comedy than my national identity." (Rava, 2022).

It is interesting that of all the subjects that can be discussed in stand-up comedy, relationships are viewed by many FGICs as the utmost representative of the "universal". They believe that British audiences and the gatekeeping promoters view it as being beyond the remits of what they are allowed to speak about, or at least something they have to earn a rite of passage into. That right is gained by "getting it out of the way" and addressing their visible identities first. As Radu Isac puts it "I need to be Romanian for a few minutes and then I am allowed to talk about dating" (Isac, 2021). Race and accents seem to be the main barriers in gaining that right, which is why it seems doubly present in the case of intersectional comedians.

American David Mills and Taiwanese Kuan-wen Huang are both gay stand-up comedians, but Mills, being a White American, finds it easier to assume the position of the "universal human". He rarely mentions being American, and he used to play with his gay identity – sometimes keeping it ambiguous, talking about "the gays" as an outsider, and sometimes mentioning it is passing. "Passing" might be the right term in more than one way. While never pretending to be straight or British, Mills performs a stance known in the comedy industry as "high status". In an article for the British comedy magazine Chortle, comedian Adam Bloom deftly defined high-status comedians as those who "tell you the answers to life" and are "never the victims of their own stories." (Bloom, 2021). Well-spoken, often in a suit and sitting on a stool, he exudes confidence.

"I am clearly not 'from here' and it allows me a liberty that I think Brits don't have. So, it's quite central. I don't write a lot of material about being American, but I'm

clearly not from here. And that is absolutely central to what I'm doing on stage. However, American culture is so ubiquitous, that I don't necessarily have a fresh angle on that. American culture us everywhere, which makes it hard to find a fresh way to talk about it that makes it distinctive and unique." (Mills, 2022).

And despite coming from the world's strongest superpower, and feeling that "I was always made to feel welcome here, he feels there were boundaries he couldn't cross:

"Brexit was one. I did not know much about it, but I had that joke that 'if you send all the immigrants home you might find yourself rolling cheese down a hill'. Many found it hilarious but most British audiences did not take kindly to it. There is a line, and as an outsider you are expected not to cross it, not to get too cheeky." (Mills, 2022).

Mills' attitude towards his gay identity on stage has transformed significantly over time, possibly due to another identity facet that has become more central to him, his age. Having started stand-up comedy in his early 40s, he is now 55.

"Nowadays, I'm really leaning into, after many years of not talking about it. The acting tradition says 'show, don't tell'. But in comedy, we expose, we talk. As I've aged, I've found a lot of power in talking about being a gay man from my generation. Particularly when we perform to younger audiences. So, they see a gay guy from the 90s, and they've never engaged with anyone like me, so I'm trying to own it. And explore what it means to me and what my experiences is and how it how it impacted today." (Mills, 2022)

A typical Mills joke about the generational differences is "When I came out my parents freaked out. Now a 15-year-old comes out, his parents throw him a party and he is captain of the school football team." (Personal notes).

Kuan-wen Huang's intersectionality is much more apparent, being Taiwanese, ethnically Han, a native Taiwanese ethnicity, and quite outwardly gay. He is also very committed to the mission of making the suffering of Taiwan under Chinese rule known to people in the West, and much of his comedy is dedicated to the cause. When praised on the informative value of his debut solo Edinburgh Fringe show Ilha Formosa he says "I smuggled in as much as I could while keeping it funny" (Huang, 2023).

The public ignorance about Taiwan makes it difficult to convey messages in brief. For Huang, using both his identities helped him find a formula which works for him. "It is hard to mock stereotypes that are not really there, so I first say I am an 'immigrant'. I also use my gay perspective a lot, because it helps me play the cheeky one." (Huang, 2023).

Coming from a place that is not well known makes it harder to rely on existing stereotypes. Some audience members, expected me to reflect their stereotypes of a British Jew, hence I had to "remind" them what Israel was while injecting my perspective into it ("It is very complicated. Not that complicated – we've taken another people's country and now we don't get how come they don't like it "). Maltese comedian Steve Hili used shortcut jokes to plant some ideas of Malta in his audience's mind, which set them up for the next jokes: "Malta is a very catholic country where you are allowed to drive while drunk; in short, it is what Scotland wants to be." (Hili, 2022a).

Huang started performing in weekend gigs outside of London because he wanted to "be able to entertain different audiences." He knew that London was a comfort zone to him both as an immigrant and as a gay comedian, "but I did not want to only speak to middle-class people in Islington who want to feel good about themselves." He learned that weekend clubs outside of London or other big cities are harder "because people work hard all week and they come to the club to laugh, not to hear long stories." This led him towards more "gay jokes," which worked well with his "cheeky persona". In that territory, he felt that the presence of female audience members makes him more comfortable. "If there are women in the crowd, I'm typically fine. If there's too much toxic masculinity in the room, It's harder. I have a joke about joining the army, and worrying about my skincare routine. When it's a whole room of men - they think laughing at it 'looks gay' or it really is too far removed from their life experience." (Huang, 2023).

Huang refuses to sell himself short when playing 'rowdy' weekend gigs. "Some comedians speak about 'surviving' an old Jounglers type of gig as a badge of honour. I do not enjoy it. I could adjust, but it does not give me a sense of satisfaction. I don't aspire to be Peter Kay. I adore him, but my comedy heroes are Joan Rivers, Margaret Cho and Trevor Noah; I want to be the international guy" (Huang, 2023).

His way of dealing with such difficult gigs was to turn up his 'gay side': "I'm very aggressively camp when it goes to this type of gigs. I would do the annoying thing of flirting with heterosexual men and then point out their insecurity. But I don't like that trope. Sometimes I just do what is required to survive." (Huang, 2023).

As El-Shokrofy and Ahmed (2022) noted, sexual aggression can be weaponised by marginalised and othered comedians, and while their research focused on Black women, others seem to use it as a strategy. It is particularly common with a few gay comedians like American Scott Capurro and Irish Al Porter.

Contrary to his very political and on-mission attitude in his comedy regarding Taiwan, Huang seems to see his gay material as a part of his 'lighter' identity.

"I don't do a lot of LGBT gigs. When I do, I don't do it like an activist with 'fuck Trump' or 'JK Rowling is a TERF'. I'm a comedian, first." (Huang, 2023).

Romina Puma, an Italian comedian suffering from Muscular Dystrophy found herself speaking more and more about her disability, as her condition was becoming more evident. "When I arrived in the UK in 2012 it was shortly after I was diagnosed, and I could still walk, so it was not a part of my identity," (Puma, 2022), she explains, but when her condition confined her first to crutches and then to a wheelchair, her comedy had to adjust its content. Her show "Not Disabled Enough", which focused on her muscular dystrophy, was successful in the Edinburgh Fringe, and gave her an extent of exposure. She got involved with various charities and performed a few times on morning television shows, but that relative fame was short-lived: "I was the flavour of the day for a moment and then I was dropped," she says. Competition in the disabled comedy field became rife: "There are so many disabled comedians now: Lost Voice Guy, Robert White, Rosie Jones, Aaron Simonds, Tim Renkow, Spring Day. And cerebral palsy became more fashionable than muscular dystrophy," she jokes.

Of that list, Tim Renkow and Spring Day are the only immigrants. They are also a married couple, having met on the UK comedy circuit. They both discuss their disability on stage. (Day, who is not in a wheelchair: "I race him to the toilet every morning, and I win" Renkow: "People talk to me like I'm five. The other day, a guy said, 'You're so inspirational!' and I was like, 'Mate, I'm just shoplifting"). They also share other aspects or their cross-sectional identities. Renkow comments on American culture and politics, Day quips about their "disabled marriage" but her last few shows delved deeply into her childhood in a born-again Christian family that joined an evangelical cult.
 Renkow does not shy away from mixing his immigration experience with his disability in the content of his jokes, which enables him to get away with rather acute political observations. An example from 2016, just after the Brexit vote, while getting himself to barely stand, and shaking with spasms:

> "If I make you uncomfortable, don't think of me as disabled, think of me as a metaphor for Brexit: 'I don't know how he is still standing, but is he going to calm down soon?'" (Renkow, 2016)

Tan et al (2022), in their article analysing comedy of Josh Blue, a comedian with cerebral palsy, concluded that he uses linguistic techniques like irony and self-ridicule to present his disability as a special identity. I would argue that Renkow takes this identity a step further. By writing all his identity, his immigrant outlook, his American homeland and his disability, he manages to speak – just like any universal person, but using his own unique tools – about the universal world.

Many comedians have multiple facets to their identities, but as comedians, we constantly need to choose which of them are useful for us on stage in order to reach out to our audience; which of them give us access to the biggest wealth of material, which are the most evident about us – our race, our accent, a disability, our gender? As we have seen, many FGICs feel that their race or ethnicity are as important, often more important, than their country of origin. However, world events or political circumstances may make a certain identity move up in significance, because of its usefulness for topical jokes. As Others, we are often called to, or feel we are expected to, explain events in our countries of origin, or raise a political flag for our people who struggle back home. All those things end up being reflected on stage. We end up performing, as Gilbert noted both self and culture, and contributing, as Blackburn observed, to our audience's worldview.

Both phenomena discussed in this chapter constitute negotiation strategies. Others who come together are empowered, by permission to be a part of their national and ethnic group, but also, to differentiate themselves. As parts of their identity are covered by others on the bill, they can afford to speak both more personally and more universally, which enriches their performances and gives it nuance. They also get an opportunity, both as a group and as individuals, to introduce to their audience more than one facet of their Others' face.

Intersectionality allows its owners to play with their identities, hence doubling (at least) their negotiation possibilities. At the same time, it can add some complications, as in the case of using specific words in the British cultural-political atmosphere, as demonstrated in Red D, Hunter's case. Or in the case of changes in the fashion of the day, as Romine Puma discovered when her disabled identity had worn out on the previously enthusiastic media. This interchangeability between identities, or the ability to emphasise one over the other or integrate a few facets into one stage persona, is not just a tool for satisfying changing fashions, and not only an arsenal of comedic material, it is also a potential powerful negotiating implement with audiences.

9. Conclusion

It was not a great night, that preview show in Thame, Oxfordshire, in 2016, but it was not a disaster either. The audience did not always want to laugh, yet they did. On occasion, they just stared at me, letting me know I was heading in the wrong direction. I used everything in my arsenal: getting my foreignness out of the way by owning up to it, getting my London-ness out of the way by acknowledging my "double defeat at Brexit," making fun of my "painful" accent, proposing marriage to the most hostile member of the audience in return for my Israeli passport, showing off my knowledge of obscure English slang, and speaking about my military experience. I quoted Paddington Bear, Jeremy Corbyn, and Mary Poppins, explained how my mother lost her arm in a war, and joked about being fat even if I do not look it. I displayed local familiarity, exhibited foreign knowledge, showed my Other's face, and then dared to speak as the universal. When the show ended, an old man made his way from the bar to the back of the room, where I was gathering my belongings and putting my coat on. He handed me a pint of Guinness and said: "Do you know this is the strongest Tory constituency in the country, the heartland of Brexit? Well done for eliciting laughs here." I love Guinness, but this was more than a pint; it was an opening of a door into the British national habitus. Somewhere out there, two Frenchmen, of whom I knew very little at the time, Pierre Bourdieu and Emmanuel Levinas, saluted each other over some proper wine.

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The main objective of this thesis was to decipher the mechanisms by which FGICs negotiated their identities and their messages to their audiences in the UK. It required defining the years of activity of first-generation stand-up comedians in the UK mid first decade of the 2000s onwards, and the main possible difficulties facing immigrants as a group in the UK in that period, which included the 2008 world financial crisis and the United Kingdom referendum over Brexit – the country's departure from its membership in the European Union. Despite those events, which arguably created an uneasy time for immigrants, those were the years in which first generation stand-up comedians' presence was constantly on the rise in Britain.

Three main theoretical tools informed my analysis: Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital and habitus, and parallel ideas of national habitus; Emmanuel Levinas' concept of the "face of the Other" and its humanising effect on non-Others during an honest encounter; and Nirmal Puwar's observation that Others, particularly racially "marked" others and women, are prevented from "speaking as a universal human" and are expected to narrow their observations down to "representing" their own communities. Methodologically the research is ethnographic, and included an autoethnographic chapter which led my process of interviewing interlocutors.

My main conclusion is that immigrant stand-up comedians dedicate much time and attention to devise strategies to penetrate the British habitus walls. Some of their strategies are pre planned but most are picked along the way in response to situations they encounter. Every stand-up comedian is "Other" when facing a room, therefore they all need, as Sophie Quirk (2015) observed, to manipulate in order to get their messages through and even before they do that - to get the audience's permission to address them. As I learned, thanks to my very introspective interlocutors in combination with the above-mentioned theoretical resources, Immigrant stand-ups need to devise an even more complicate balancing act, in order to be allowed to drive forward their comedic content.

Most of the interviewees declared a desire to speak as universal people, which in the world of comedy can mean making observations about dating and shopping, but also pontificating about world politics or the premier football league. A minority wanted to inform and educate their British audiences about their countries, their history, their strife, their oppression or their crimes. However almost all felt that they are expected to - and that the success of their communication with the audience depended on their ability to - "get it out of the way", namely, introduce their Otherness and address their national origins. Many felt that this requirement is necessary due to their accents or physical looks. They were convincing that not addressing their Otherness would "distract" their audience and make them keep wondering where they might be from. This necessary introduction of otherness is considered to be a part of stand-up comedy's accepted wisdom, but for first-generation immigrants it is also a way to reach out to the British audience by a full disclosure which represents required authenticity.

Authenticity, or at least the seemliness of it, is seen as crucial by both comedians and audiences. As Henderson and Gabora (2013) noted, comedy audiences identify authenticity with skill, which drives some FGICs towards hyper-authenticity, or what they expect their audience would recognise as comedic ability. This was demonstrated by Alex Martini's adherence to pretence of being obsessed with food like a "true Italian", or my own choice to adopt a shouty and aggressive persona in my early days as a comedian.

Comedians mentioned their worry that speaking about their identity as immigrants might make their audiences that they intend to "talk politics", especially in the run up and the aftermath of the Brexit vote, or accuse them of being racist for supporting Brexit. They reported attempting to find ways of expressing their feelings and opinions about this political development which affected them no matter where they migrated from, and the audience's reluctance to feel admonished by them.

That fear echoed loudly the fear of the Other described by Butler and Levinas as the wariness of being confronted with the demand which is intrinsic to "being addressed" by the Other. The demand which "makes a moral claim upon us, address moral demands to us" (Butler, 2024, p.134). The FGICs, at the same time, feel that the audience demands they justify their presence without political protestation.

That moment in which the audience realises that an immigrant stands in front of them and the moment in which they laugh is an instance of tension and its release - which embodies the Levinasian stressful space between the "temptation to kill and the call to peace" (Butler, 2024, p.134). Comedians' strategies for managing the tension vary between complete avoidance of contentious subjects or of places where they suspect such tension might occur, self-deprecation ("Brexit was such a bad jokes; it could have been done by Italians;" Luca Cupani), making the comedian-immigrant the bat of the joke ("I'm packing already"; myself and, as I discovered, quite a few other comedians), or – however rarely, come out with that feared accusation ("Yes, I had an accident that was not my fault; colonialism;" Njambi McGrath).

A few interviewees recognised class as a channel of communication, or alternatively as a certain shield that can protect them from racism or xenophobia. A few comedians felt a

need to display their education as a marker of class that would enable their audiences to recognise them as worthy peers. Others viewed acknowledging their own working-class background as something that bonded them with certain audiences.

Intersectionality between their immigratory status and other kinds of Otherness they embody, such as disability, colour/race, gender or sexual orientation added a complication for some comedians, but also an opportunity to choose which facet of their identity they wanted to push forward, and which to keep as a secondary persona or characteristic.

Many interviewees mentioned their tactics of being self-deprecating, or to ridicule their own countries of origin ("national deprecation") prior to criticising or mocking Britain, especially in the context of Brexit.

Almost all interviewees said they felt more at ease performing in bigger cities, where their audiences were likely to be either more multicultural or more liberal. Some avoided performing outside of London or other large cities altogether. Others have taken an opposite approach, and decided to go anywhere where they were booked for a gig, and "take it as they find it". They considered it to be a test for their professional skills as stand-up comedians.

Very few interviewees had a clear sense of mission about their comedy, with regards to their otherness. Njambi McGrath declared a strong need to take the British to task for their colonial exploits in her native Kenya, Sameena Zehra wanted to use her class and education privileges to speak truth to power, Vlad Illich wanted to introduce the British to the pain and suffering of growing up in the aftermath of a regional war, Kuan-Wen Huang wants to inform the world of Taiwan's oppression by China, and I want to speak for Palestine, criticise Israel's policies, but at the same time humanise its people.

However, what I found in the process of research was that even the least "political" stand-up comedians, who declare themselves as "mission-less" or who "just want to be funny" – all embodied a sense of impactful address either in their strategic devising of their negotiation with their audience, or in their very presence on the comedy scene. Romina Puma, while declaring herself to not be a political comedian, created a performing group of Italian stand ups who ran their own gig and hosted English-speaking comedians, which

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turned the tables on the "normal" order on things, and had the "guests" hosting the "natives". It ended up being an empowering experiment which gave presence to immigrants as a rising power in the UK comedy scene. Similar efforts were made by Rick Kieswetter with Yellow Comedy, Kuan-Wen Huang with Comedy with an Accent and Radu Isac with the Immigrant Comedy Show.

The very presence of Others, particularly immigrants in this troubled time, gives a sense of mission to their performances, whatever is its content. They often need to defend their very right to take platform, whether the challenges on this right are subtle or more robust. Sometimes they need to defend it even against adversity from their own peers, as the Andrew Lawrence well-covered public tantrum exemplified. On occasion, as Benjamin Bello and others found, they need to defend it from their audience. Their dual insistence on showing their Levinasian face on one hand and striving to speak for the universal on the other, and despite demands and impositions calling upon them to only represent their "own" group – are apparent in all the strategies they devise.

Regardless of their initial statements about their intentions, it transpired that laughter is not the only objective for Immigrant stand-up comedians in Britain. Humour is their sword, their shield and their outreached hand, in a complex negotiation of their identities, seeking recognition and acceptance both as a group and individuals.

The contribution of this thesis to knowledge can be broken into three main realms. First, it shows that first immigration stand-up comedians develop certain strategies for communicating and negotiating their otherness to local, in this case British, audiences. While not completely different to the strategies generally used by other "Others" in stand-up, those approaches have their own particular characteristics, relating to the particular characteristics of their Otherness, and to the political atmosphere of the period described. Second, it contributes to understanding the negotiation strategies of first-generation immigrants in general, the things that they want to communicate to the general population, their aspirations and messages. Third, but certainly not least, it is, I hope, a welcome addition to the budding and growing research of stand-up comedy as an influential field of the arts and as a part of the general political-cultural debate in the United Kingdom and in

the world, particularly on the point of communication and manipulation between performer and audience.

9.1.1 Further Research

There are two subjects that were left out of the scope of this thesis, and which I believe merit further research. The first is the relationship between first-generation immigrants and their diasporas, both in terms of second and third generation FGICs, and the diasporic audiences. Some comedians commented that they found diasporic gigs harrowing. Others, albeit fewer, found them supportive. The Italian group of comics gathered a supportive diasporic group around it. Radu Isac raised his idea that second-generation comedians tend to mock their parents' countries of origin, and my own experience made me wary of audiences from Israel. The dynamics between immigrant stand up and their diasporas and their diasporas present ample opportunities for further study.

Another comedy environment that raised my interest was that of first-generation immigrants in the European continent. I find it very different to that in the UK, because most of the European gigs take place in capitals, big cities of tourism centres, and the performance language in English. The implication is that both local and immigrating comedians (unless they come from English speaking countries), do not perform in their native language, as are most audience members - which creates a rather different levelling ground and balance of power. The comedy scenes in those cities is normally managed by immigrant from various countries, which adds richness to that tapestry.

To end, I would like to dwell one last time on Levinas' notion of the Other's face. The fieldwork indicates there is more than one face we can communicate through. We wear those changing faces when negotiating our humanity to others and to knock, gently or defiantly, the national habitus' doors. That face comes in various colours, accents, political incentives and personalities. It also is not necessarily the face of our grief or death that reflects our humanity to others and invokes their own. We do not have to necessarily bring pain, and a desire to kill into our encounters with the society that absorbed us, welcomingly or grudgingly. Some of us do it through laughter, one joke at a time.

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Glossary

Act – can be used either as synonymous to "a comedian", or to "a set" - namely a comedian's performance or to the text of such performance.

Bringers – Gigs in which the comedians, normally new ones, are expected to bring one or more audience members to be allowed to perform. Bringers are unpopular among comedians, though not as stigmatised as "Pay to Play". Caveats for the "bringing" duty in some gigs can be "staying" namely, being in the room until the end of the gig. Particularly successful acts may get exempted from "Bringing" due to their higher status and the quality they bring into the gig. Also, promoters of other gigs who are also comedians often get to perform on "Bringer" gigs without bringing any audience, based on the assumption that they will return the favour to the organisers.

Comedian – a performer who performs a comedic act on stage. It is debatable in comedy circles at what point can an open micer call themselves "a comedian"; some say – from the first time they get on stage, though other insist that a few months experience are required.

(To) Die/ (To) Die on one's arse – to fail/ to fail badly at a gig.

Fringe - A comedy festival to which comedians can bring full 50 min to 1 hour shows, or join in with others for a compilation show. Comedians pay to participate in fringe festivals and often lose money in them be it is considered to be a good opportunity to be seen by promoters, reviewers and agents and to perform long shows. The biggest fringe is The Edinburgh Fringe, which is the biggest arts festival in the world; it combines various performance arts but comedy constitutes its biggest preoccupation. In 2024 comedy constituted 40% of the shows on the Edinburgh Fringe programme: 1498 out if 3,746 shows.

Gig / compilation show – a comedy performance that includes a few comedians performing relatively short sets (5-20 minutes).

Hack – generic, common. A pejorative term, used mainly among comedians or in the comedy industry, for predictable, uncreative and common jokes or to comedians who perform them.

Headliner/closer – The last act on a gig, normally performs a longer set (20-30 min) and is the most highly paid act on the line up. Normally a comedian of some fame, albeit relative fame when it comes to open mic gigs.

(To) Kill – To do well at a gig. (synonym: 'to smash it')

Line up – the list of comedians performing on a gig (Synonym: a bill).

MC – Master of Ceremonies, a term used to describe the person who moderates the gig, introduces the acts and chats to the audience. It is the MC's job to "set up" the atmosphere

in the room and make sure the audience stick to the rules (no heckling when the acts are on) and make sure the comedians do not overrun beyond their allocated time.

One liner – A short joke with a quick punchline, often based on puns or wordplay.

Open mic – A performance which take place normally on a weeknight, in which audience members pay very little or nothing, and comedians do not get paid at all. The performance slots are normally short, 5 or 10 minutes, depending on the comedian's experience. The number of acts on an open mic gig is larger than at professional gigs, and could involve 8-15 comedians. Professional comedians attend open mics too, usually as headliners, in order to try new material.

Open mic comedian/ open micer (pronounced: open micker) – a comedian who is relatively new, and who plays mostly or only open-mic gigs. The term is often used pejoratively, especially when referring to a comedian who has been performing for long and is expected to have done better.

Opener – the first act on a gig. In professional gig this is a spot second only to the headliner, and it is paid. On the open mic circuit, it is a baptism by fire for new acts.

Pay to play – Gigs in which the comedians, normally those new to the comedy circuit, have to pay a fee to exercise their right to perform. Such gigs are becoming rarer because comedians view them as the bottom of the comedy barrel and as a humiliation to perform at.

Promoter/Booker – a person who organises and procures comedy gigs. The term can relate to a comedian who organises an open mic gig, or a professional and established producer who runs professional paid shows.

Professional gig – a comedy shows in which all the comedians, or at least the opening act, the closing act and the MC are paid, and the audience pays for tickets. The middle acts, normally two or three of them, are either unpaid "open spots" hoping to progress, or in other cases, they are paid less.

Progression – the process of moving up the comedy ranks, from open mics to professional gigs, and from open spots in professional gigs to the roles of opener, headliner or MC.

Pro – a professional comedian who normally performs comedy as his or her only occupation, and who get paid for all or most of their gigs.

Pun – A short joke based on wordplay.

Room – When referring to "the room" comedians mean in in relation to the ephermal: the audience in a certain room on a certain night.

Running order – the list of comedians performing on a gig by order of appearance.

Semi-Pro – A comedian on a stage of progression from open-mic and professional, who get paid for some of their gigs. Such acts would normally get paid middle spots, or headline smaller gigs.

Show – can refer either to a gig, or to one comedian's solo show.

Story-teller – a comedian whose comedy is based on longer stories dotted with jokes.

Set – a comedian's performed routine which is normally pre-written and includes jokes, stories ad observations.