



Laughing in the Face of Danger: Performativity and Resistance in Zimbabwean Stand-up Comedy

DOI:

[10.1080/13600826.2020.1828295](https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2020.1828295)

Document Version

Accepted author manuscript

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Källstig, A. (2020). Laughing in the Face of Danger: Performativity and Resistance in Zimbabwean Stand-up Comedy. *Global Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2020.1828295>

Published in:

Global Society

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on Manchester Research Explorer is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Proof version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Explorer are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Takedown policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please refer to the University of Manchester's Takedown Procedures [<http://man.ac.uk/04Y6Bo>] or contact uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk providing relevant details, so we can investigate your claim.



Laughing in the Face of Danger:

Performativity and Resistance in Zimbabwean stand-up comedy

Amanda Källstig

Abstract

This article explores how stand-up comedy acts as a form of resistance in repressive societies, combining discussions of Judith Butler's concepts of performativity and subversion with empirical material from Zimbabwe, particularly as it pertains to patriotism and gender. It builds on extensive fieldwork material from Zimbabwe in 2018 and 2019, to argue that stand-up comedy provides a rare opportunity, despite severe restrictions to freedom of expression, where comedians articulate their opinion in front of a crowd. Notwithstanding harassment, arrests and abductions, comedians in Zimbabwe feel emboldened to speak-out about anything from politics, to relationships, power-cuts, fuel-queueing, weed-smoking and car troubles. Performing themselves onstage these comedians reinforce and resist norms; patriotism is situated within, but displaced from, a binary view of Zimbabwean party-politics; and patriarchal gender norms are contravened by empowered female comedians who perform both the 'rebellious' artists and caring mother. Interrogating these performances of the self enables us to see limits and possibilities of comedic resistance, and demonstrates how people continue to express themselves in political environments that attempt to silence.

Introduction

Contrary to expectations, Zimbabwean stand-up comedy has not only survived a repressive regime, but flourished in it. Comedians suffer harassment and intimidation from state agents and party supporters, from both the government and opposition, if their comedy is perceived as critical of the 'wrong' political leader, party or decision. As recently as August 2019 popular comedian Samantha Kureya was abducted from her home, beaten, stripped naked and forced to drink sewage (Burke, 2019a). According to an interview I conducted with a person close to her, the abductors presented themselves in a way that suggested they were police or military personnel, and warned her against continuing to perform political comedy. This article shows that, despite this repressive environment, stand-up comedy has continued to grow in Zimbabwe. It has developed into a genre defined by its autobiographical and self-expressive nature, making stand-up one of a few places where people openly present their views in front of a crowd. Applying Butler's concepts of performativity and subversion to the

global south, this article contributes theoretically and empirically to our understanding of how comedic resistance operates in repressive environments.

With the removal of President Robert Mugabe in November 2017, people hoped that they would enjoy their constitutional right to freedom of expression. However, intimidations continued, and legislation used to regulate peoples' freedom of expression still remains in place. A key example is the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act (2002) which makes it illegal to undermine and/or insult the president. This law was contested in 2013 in the Zimbabwean Supreme Court where it was deemed to undermine freedom of expression (BBC, 2013). However, the current president, then Justice Minister, Emmerson Mnangagwa appealed the decision and at the time of writing the matter has not yet been resolved (Marima, 2018). In the meantime, whilst unclear why, the act remains operational. According to a Zimbabwean independent online newshub, Open Parly (2018), in November 2018 people were still being detained under it. In spite of this repressive environment, stand-up comedy has continued to grow and become a space where comedians express their opinions – in comedic form – in front of an audience.

This article will explore how comedy has grown in Zimbabwe despite economic hardship and a repressive regime. It particularly looks at how stand-up comedy provides comedians with a platform to express their opinions by performing their experiences. Why does stand-up comedy continue to grow in Zimbabwe given the risk associated with the genre, and how do these autobiographical performances resist power-relations within the nation? Drawing on Judith Butler's discussion of performativity and subversion I argue that Zimbabwean stand-up comedians both disrupt and reinforce societal power-relations from within when they perform themselves onstage.

This article is based on two periods of fieldwork in Zimbabwe (four months in total). The first period was conducted two months after Mnangagwa was elected president in 2018,

and the second one was held a year later. I conducted 28 semi-structured interviews inquiring into peoples' experiences of being a comedian on and off-stage; in Harare I spoke to 15 stand-up comedians and 5 other artists; in Bulawayo I interviewed 4 stand-up comedians and their manager. An additional 3 interviews were held with comedians via WhatsApp call. I originally identified interviewees online, through personal contacts and by approaching comedians after shows. In this article, I focus on live stand-up comedy performances, although some of the people interviewed also engage in online skits. Interviewing comedians and artists allows me to speak to the experience of *being* a comedian in a repressive environment. I also engaged in participant observation; attending stand-up shows, spending time with comedians at their office, and attempting to talk to audience members. The latter proved difficult as venues, mostly theatre spaces, did not allow people to linger after shows. I anonymised some of the material gathered based on how particular statements or opinions might affect the person who expressed it. Discussions about anonymity are complex and nuanced given the repressive political context in which comedians feel themselves constantly in some degree of danger, and the simultaneous desire of performers to have publicity and have their voices heard.

The next section situates this article within literature on comedy and resistance in the African context. This is followed by an examination of Butlerian performativity and subversion, which frames the discussion of stand-up comedy's resistive properties- particularly in relation to the production of patriotism and gender. I will highlight how, despite the risks associated with expressing your opinion, Zimbabwean stand-up comedians feel emboldened to perform themselves and their experiences on stage. This article is a contribution to our understanding of how comedic resistance operates in repressive environments. It contributes theoretically by applying Butler's concepts of performativity and resistance to comedy in the global south, empirically by showing how power-relations are

reinforced and resisted through stand-up, and methodologically by engaging with a group of stand-up comics that continue to perform their experiences despite the risks to their lives.

Humour as resistance in Africa

Humour is an important way in which people express themselves. As Ebenezer Obadare (2016, 63) points out: “[h]umor allows the put-upon postcolonial subject to imagine a place and reality that is radically different from the current one of widespread abjection, constant humiliation and desperation.” This article contributes to a widening of perspectives within research on comedy in Politics and International Relations to look beyond the ‘West’. Obadare (2009, 244) reminds us that humour in Africa “remains relatively under-investigated and is still far from seriously regarded, even though it appears to be one of the most important means by which the majority define, ‘get even with’, and ‘resist’ the power elite and the dominant power-relations.” This section surveys the relationship between comedy and resistance in Africa.

The relative rarity of literature on comedy and resistance in Africa is especially evident when it comes to stand-up. Those examining stand-up often focus on the linguistic, communicative and performative tools used by the comedian onstage (Adetunji, 2013, Filani, 2018, Ogoanah and Ojo, 2018). A sub-set of these examinations focus more closely on the relationship between stand-up and the environment in which it is performed (Githatu and Chai, 2015, Donkor, 2013). Julia Seirlis (2011) and Grace Musila (2014) stand out in this literature, engaging with stand-up comedy in relation to power and resistance in post-Apartheid South Africa. Seirlis (2011, 518) highlights how, paraphrasing journalist Bafana Khumalo, “young men [...] who were throwing rocks at the police are now throwing wit from a stage.” Whilst the resistive properties of stand-up comedy, as demonstrated by Musila (2014), are more nuanced, this captures how the genre has transformed into a tool of resistance in the region.

Another approach to comedy in Africa investigates how comedic imagery is used to challenge the state. It posits that satirical cartoons are a “key [indicator] of the health of a democracy” (Hammett, 2014, 204). Key here is a debate about the ability of comedic imagery to resist state power within the Postcolony. The state’s sensitivity to laughter is well demonstrated by Zanu-PF’s reaction to images of Mugabe falling when exiting an airplane in 2015 (Siziba and Ncube, 2015). As soon as he fell, attempts were made to stop images from spreading, and when people started to create funny memes, a press conference was held (*Ibid.* 524). Jonathan Moyo, the then Minister of Information, summarised the state’s anxieties regarding the matter, telling journalists that: “we should have [a] reasonable and mature discussion and not start laughing at each other” (Bulawayo24, News, 2015). Given this, Gugulethu Siziba and Gibson Ncube (2015, 522) argue that “satirical memes are a form of invisible power which plays a vital role in questioning dominant discourses.” Wendy Willems (2008, 4) concurs, explaining that “[t]he indirect, ambiguous and polysemic character of comic strips and cartoons make them less explicit in their meaning and therefore particularly suitable as forms of political critique.” She posits that this allows the artist to evade potential legal repercussions in a repressive political environment. This literature also highlights the complexity of humour’s resistive abilities – raising the question of whether comedic imagery and satirical cartoons resist or reify power (Mbembe, 2001, Hammett, 2010, Dodds, 2010). To address this, Daniel Hammett (2010, 5) suggests engaging with cartoons “as a dynamic, continual and shifting negotiation of ideas of power, resistance and dissent.”

Achille Mbembe’s (2001) examination of resistance in the Postcolony is incredibly influential in this debate. He argues that whilst laughter can disrupt power it also, to an extent, repeats and reproduces it, as “[f]or the most part, those who laugh are only reading the signs left, like rubbish, in the wake of the *commandement* [authority/power]” (2001, 107-

108). This captures the complicated nature of comedic resistance; demonstrating that to make fun of a particular subject, people generally have to engage with the language produced to address it. This iteration of the language of power complicates the way in which comedy is, and can be, subversive. This article departs and draws inspiration from this literature which highlights the complex dynamic between power, resistance and comedy in Africa.

Concurring with James Brassett's (2016, 180) important intervention into research on comedy, it seeks to look at resistance as it operates "(with)in not against" power and subjectivities. The next section begins to unpack how autobiographical stand-up comedians can challenge power from within by looking at Judith Butler's concepts of performativity and subversion.

Butler, performativity and resistance

Butler is a particularly useful theorist for understanding how Zimbabwean stand-up comedy has flourished, and resisted power within a repressive regime. She provides a way to reconcile and explain how stand-up comedy resists and reinforces power. According to Butler, the subject does not exist prior to discourse. Instead it is through the iteration of societal norms, practices and conventions that the subject is constituted in what is not a "singular 'act' or event, but a ritualised production" (Butler, 1993, 60). This process does not rule out what has been referred to as 'agency' or even resistance; the subject is not "*determined* by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely" (Butler, 1990, 198, original emphasis). Butler (*ibid*) then locates agency, and subsequent subversion, in the "possibility of variation on that repetition." The constitution of the subject through discourse is then key to understanding the process of subversion.

Butler (2017) explains the continuous production of the subject by referencing John Austin's theory of performative speech acts. According to Butler (2017, 172-174), Austin locates the efficacy of the speech act in its historicity – arguing that it draws its power from the way in which it calls upon social conventions and norms. The speech act is thus not a single event but part of “a citational form, a repetition of what has come before” (Butler, 2017, 175). The consequence of this is that when the stand-up comedian performs their experiences onstage they also bring with them, iterate, and display the societal norms through which their identity is continuously being (re)constituted. Butler (1993) refers to this iterated production of identity as performativity.

Zimbabwean stand-up comedy operates in the intersection between Butlerian performativity and theatrical performance. The comedian cannot choose their identity, nor can they strip themselves of that identity when they leave stage, however as expressed by Joanne R. Gilbert (1997, 317) when discussing her own stand-up comedy, the comedian can emphasise certain aspects of their identity - “[l]ike any comic, I was performing a version of myself that suited the audience and the occasion [...] select[ing] bits and pieces of [myself] to share” (1997, 317). Through the choices that stand-up comedians make about which stories to tell, and aspects to share, they draw attention to specific discourses, power-relations and hierarchies. Whilst Zimbabwean stand-up comedians do not pick their identity, they are making choices about what aspects of it they emphasise onstage.

The way these choices can subvert power-relations can helpfully be understood through Butler's examination of drag. According to Butler (1990, 187), drag presents three “contingent dimensions of corporeality” [...] anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance.” Assuming that all three dimensions are distinct from one another, drag illustrates the discord of gender and sex; unsettling its claim to originality by providing a parody of “the very notion of an original” (1990, 187-188). The play upon gender in drag

reveals the self-constituting basis of gender as a phenomenon; where gender is self-grounding. Drag does not operate outside of a discursively produced world, instead it disrupts gender through a “parodic recontextualization”; it re-enacts the norm, displacing its meaning (188). This can also be seen in stand-up comedy – where comedians can humorously recontextualise different facets of their identity to show its constructed nature.

Fantasy and imagination play a significant role in this “parodic recontextualization”, giving the comedian room to manoeuvre within discourse. To Butler (2004, 29), fantasy is what ‘reality forecloses’- it operates within the limits of what is ‘real’ while imagining another version of reality that ‘challenges’ current norms. Butler (*ibid.*) argues that the embodiment of fantasy, seen in drag, butch, femme and/or transgender people, “brings elsewhere home”; locating ‘elsewhere’ within the repetition of that which to us seems real (*Ibid.*). The body is here understood as “a mode of becoming that in becoming otherwise [...] reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone” (Butler, 2004: p.29). This makes us question “what is real, and what must be” (2004: p.29). This is possible because societal norms derive power, not from an outside authority, but from their own repetition.

This account of performativity is useful to understanding how Zimbabwean stand-up comedians are able to resist a repressive regime by performing themselves. Alan Sinfield expresses this process of subversion eloquently explaining that it “plays back the dominant manner in a way that discloses the precariousness of its authority” (Sinfield, 2000: p.105). It is not that stand-up comedians escape the ‘system of meaning’ that exists within society, rather, they can play with it, through their comedy, in a way that questions common stereotypes and/or conceptions. This means that much can be gained in our understanding of comedic resistance by theorising it as occurring from within society, in the iteration of its norms, rather than looking for it to happen apart from, or against it. This helps us make sense

of how in articulating their experiences onstage Zimbabwean stand-up comedians enact the society that they are in whilst simultaneously unsettling it.

Repression, self-expression and risk

Zimbabwean stand-up comedy has grown rapidly in recent years, with self-proclaimed stand-up comedy pioneer, Edgar Langeveldt, beginning to perform in the late 1990s (Langeveldt, 2000). Since then the nation has gone from having one stand-up comedian to over twenty. This has all happened within a repressive political climate and in an un-stable economic situation making comedy, according to Zimbabwean artist Sam Monro, “quite unique even [...] in the arts industry in Zimbabwe, in terms of managing to speak truth to power [in] a very tight controlled political context and also managing to still thrive in a completely dis-functioning economy” (interview with author, 19/10-2018). Not only is stand-up comedy thriving but comedians feel empowered onstage. Here I will focus on how it is, given the risks, that Zimbabwean stand-up comedians feel emboldened to perform themselves onstage.

It is dangerous to be a stand-up comedian in Zimbabwe; especially one that performs political comedy. There are repercussions to being perceived as supportive or critical of the ‘wrong’ political party or person. In the first nine months of Mnangagwa’s presidency, at least four comedians were arrested (Moyo, 2019). In February 2019, Samantha Kureya and her co-star Sharon Chideu were both called to Harare Central Police station and eventually fined for wearing costumes that resembled a military uniform in a comedic skit from 2016 (Sharon Chideu, stand-up comedian, interviewed by author, 28/10/2019). In August 2019, another incident occurred when Kureya was abducted at gun point. These types of incidents are not new to Zimbabwe: comedians have told me that during the Mugabe-era they were regularly arrested, harassed and intimidated by both the government and opposition supporters (c.f. Monro, 2015). A stand-up comedian told me in an interview that they used to

be arrested every time they stepped off stage. Despite these risks, comedians like Kureya and Chideu continue to perform comedy in Zimbabwe.

Prior to the February 2019 charges, Chideu described the sensation of stepping onto stage in an interview with me, like “wearing a superman costume and the only thing that can get you is kryptonite, and by now you are like, ah, there is no kryptonite here.” Her tone has changed slightly since then, now she talks about the importance of not “letting them win”, and how comedy is her job and source of income, but the sentiment remains the same (interviewed by author, 28/10/2019). Instead of letting her fear and paranoia limit her, Chideu sees the recent traumatic events as a source of material that she can use onstage. She was already joking about her own reaction to Kureya’s abduction, and the prospect that the perpetrators might be on their way to her house, in October 2019 at Reps Theatre in Harare. Whilst scared, Chideu still feels emboldened to tell her stories onstage.

It is not just comedians and artists that have to watch what they say, but the general public is also under constant surveillance. The Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO), a branch of the government said to be responsible for many abductions and disappearances, employs a large number of confidential informants, creating an uncertain environment where someone might always be listening (McGregor, 2013, 786). Back in 2004 there was a surge of people getting charged due to statements they made on their morning commutes: one person was taken into custody after having been overheard telling his brother “not to be ‘thick-headed like Mugabe’” (Willems, 2010, 5). This highlights the environment within which comedy is occurring, and just how unusual it is for Zimbabweans to feel emboldened to speak out. Chideu emphasises this in an interview with me back in October 2018:

“You can talk about your sex-life onstage, like straight-up, your mum could be sitting in the audience but you’re like I’m onstage, I’m working, that’s that [laughs]. And also I’m like- you don’t really know if I’m telling the truth or if I’m lying. You’d be like: ‘ah its

stand-up comedy.’ But yeah, there is an element of truth in there. Politics as well, you, you can joke about politics. [W]hen you’re not on stage you [...] start talking in hushed tones, [...] you’re worried about who’s listening. But onstage you’re shouting it out [...] so yeah that’s what happens. It’s different, stage and offstage. You get this bravado from nowhere, once you’re off its gone.”

Several of the comedians that I interviewed emphasised this difference, stating that they felt able to talk about things onstage that they would not talk about normally. For example, one comedian told me that after a show that they still, at least half an hour after the show, felt the adrenaline rushing through their veins; a feeling of being invincible and powerful, and all they wanted to do was get back onstage.

This feeling of empowerment has important consequences for stand-up comedy as a genre in Zimbabwe. It has allowed stand-up to develop into an autobiographical performance where it is almost expected that you speak about yourself. Several of the comedians that I interviewed stated that stand-up was best performed when the comedian based their jokes on their own experiences, and at the Simuka Comedy Academy (a free Friday school where youths are taught stand-up comedy) it is stressed that stand-up is best performed as an autobiographical art form. The emphasis put on the autobiographical nature of stand-up is illustrated by Ian Phiri when he describes how more experienced comedians mentored him after one of his early sets in Chisipite, a suburb to Harare:

“[They told me:] ‘okay what you are doing is nice, you are creative, and you are a bit intellectual, but what we want you to do is stop being American, be Ian Phiri.’ That’s when [I] started having a different perception towards stand-up comedy[,] I started being analytical about what they were saying, [and] I learnt stand-up comedy is self-expression[;] everything else has been done except your life. And then I started, eh,

bringing my [...] own life experiences into my stand-up comedy and, uhm, my own observations like my political view, everything like, I was, I didn't have any fear" (interview by author, 20/10-2018).

In the Zimbabwean comedy community, basing stand-up on the comedian's life experiences is seen as a way to ensure that the material is original, relevant and funny. Chideu demonstrates this by referencing the 2018 cholera outbreak in Harare. She explains that a lot of comedians were making generic jokes like - "have you heard about the recent cholera outbreak, it's a shitty situation." Chideu argues that these types of jokes are boring to audiences that have heard them repeatedly. However, stand-up based on the comedian's life will always be unique and thus new and interesting to the audience.

Similar sentiments were expressed by several other comedians. For example, Sikhanyiso Mlambo (interviewed by author, 17/10-2018), known as Cknyaniso Dat Guy, a stand-up comedian and teacher at the Simuka Comedy Academy, stated that as local audiences compare comedians to each other basing your comedy on your own experiences sets comedians apart from domestic and international acts. Whilst it is good to learn from more experienced comedians ultimately developing your own style based on your life will lead to better and more original comedy. To Victor Mpfu, known as Doc Vikela, one of the more experienced comedians in Zimbabwe, basing your comedy on your own life is a question of professionalism (interviewed by author, 12/10-2018). Mpfu said that drawing material from your own truth helps you avoid stealing other people's jokes; something that was described as an awful offence. The next section explores these comedic performances of the self, particularly looking at norms in relation to patriotism and gender. Drawing on Butler to frame the discussion I tease-out how Zimbabwean comedians, through their autobiographical performances, iterate and unsettle power within the nation.

Gender and patriotism in Zimbabwean stand-up comedy

Comedy's ability to "speak truth to power" in Zimbabwe is sometimes blatantly evident, as when organisations like Magamba Network purposefully use satire and comedy as a tool for their activism, and sometimes more subtle ("Who we are", 2019). This might look like stand-up comedians using indirection to make fun of political leaders; referring to them as older relatives and imitating voices, using body language or common phrases as a way to convey to their audience who they are talking about, or it can look like comedians displaying stereotypes, norms and narratives in imaginative ways that resembles Butler's 'parodic recontextualization.' It is in these latter instances that it becomes clear how comedy can both subvert and reinforce power-relations. Here, I look at patriotism and gender to begin to explain how Zimbabwean stand-up comedians perform themselves, and in doing so society, in a way that disrupts power. I start with patriotism, illustrating how stand-up comedy allows a space for expression within a nation where freedom of expression is heavily regulated. I then examine gender to show how stand-up comedy can resist and reify power simultaneously.

Patriotism

In an interview with me from 2018, a Zimbabwean stand-up comedian stated that their comedy aimed to deal with the "monumental task that is being a Zimbabwean and loving your country." This captures the difficulties experienced in the nation and reflects upon the complex brand of patriotism produced by the Zimbabwean state. A relatively young nation, Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980, and has almost exclusively been ruled by the Zimbabwean African National Union – Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF) (Bratton, 2016, 1-2). Holding on to the legitimacy gained as a result of the liberation struggle, Zanu-PF has used several means, such as national holidays, music and speeches, to create a country where

being loyal to the nation means being loyal to the party and vice versa (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems, 2009, 964). This conflation of party and nation creates a complex and confusing brand of patriotism for those that do not agree with everything that the state does whilst still feeling strong loyalty to their nation. Here, I examine how Zimbabwean stand-up comedy opens a space to explore what it means to be a citizen of the nation, despite limited freedom of expression.

In attempting to create a party-nation, Zanu-PF has adopted and adapted patriotism as a way to legitimise its regime. This has involved applying a binary rhetoric; creating an either/or society. In this society supporters of Zanu-PF are true patriots, whilst those who are not are assumed to be opposition supporters, and portrayed as “traitors, puppets, sell-outs [and/or], enemies of the nation” (Willems, 2013, 25). Any issues faced by the Zanu-PF government are blamed on “hidden forces”, such as ‘Western’ countries and their supposed conspirators within the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) (Siziba and Ncube, 2015, 524). There are multiple layers to this definition of patriotism, which becomes increasingly narrow as further restrictions are added pending perceived threats to the party. When the MDC was gaining supporters in urban areas, the government often spoke of true Zimbabweans as those with access to a rural home, and during the so-called land-reform, all white people, regardless of their place of birth were referred to as Boers (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2009, 1151-1152; Willems, 2013).

This restricted view of patriotism is challenged through Zimbabwean stand-up comedy. Performing their identities and experiences onstage, stand-up comedians are able to provide alternative ideas about what it means to be a citizen. A joke by Wencilacy Katuka, known as Kadem the Comic, demonstrates how the state’s Manichean construction of society is unsettled onstage:

“So you know what, I did a joke on Morgan Tsvangirai [former leader of MDC], and then he passed on the same day. It was scary.

I did a joke on Winnie Mandela, she passed on two days later [pause] I’m telling the truth!

So tonight, I just want to do some Emmerson Mnangagwa [current president] jokes, just to see what will happen to him [anticipated laughter].

Ey, ey, ey, I just did that joke to expose the MDC! So the CIOs [Central Intelligence Officers], everyone who laughed, that’s MDC for you” (private communication with author, 02/12-2019).

This joke demonstrates how Butlerian performativity can operate subversively. Throughout this joke Katuka’s identity is iterated in an ambivalent manner; he seems to belong to both parties and neither at once. Playing with several narratives at the same time, Katuka demonstrates their arbitrary nature, and in Sinfield’s (2000: p.105) words “plays back the dominant manner in a way that discloses the precariousness of its authority.”

Jokes do not need to be this explicitly party political to challenge the state’s construction of ‘Zimbabwean-ness’ and trigger new ideas about patriotism. Munyaradzi Guramatunhu, better known as Munya, provides a telling example in her 2019 set. She talks about how she went to Europe and realised how weird the current situation in Zimbabwe is. Guramatunhu uses several examples to explain, including how in Zimbabwe, if you are having problems with electronic transfers at the store you might ask someone in the queue if they have cash and make a ‘deal’ with them. If you do this in Europe, Guramatunhu realised, the person would just give you a weird look, like “*I don’t speak poor.*” This joke is not outrageous; it doesn’t tell the audience something outside the realm of reality. It operates within the limits of the society it is in, whilst highlighting the bizarre in the normal. Allowing the audience, to question “what is real, and what must be” (2004: p.29). In Guramatunhu’s

jokes, being Zimbabwean is not about voting for Zanu-PF or MDC, it instead is about, to utilise her own term, '*speaking poor*.' Defining Zimbabwean identity in this way, Guramatunhu subtly unsettles the link between patriotism and party politics. She displays a version of Zimbabwean identity that is not aligned with domestic politics, instead it is related to having a set of experiences that people foreign to the country might not.

Whether deliberate or not, Zimbabwean stand-up comedians can oppose the official narrative through iterations of identities and experiences that unsettle – and have people question – the official line. Not all the comedians I interviewed saw themselves as activists or resisting, but several of them underscored stand-up's ability to help people see society in new ways. Chideu, who in her 2018 set speaks a lot about her sex life, argues that her comedy gives Zimbabweans another way of discussing sensitive issues in the household. Instead of having to reveal their own stories they can talk to each other by referencing her jokes. Another comedian, Brian Mafuso, argues that stand-up “doesn't have that mega-impact that oh my God this person is actually doing this because of stand-up, but I think it manages to get people to start talking about things that they never really thought about talking about” (interview with author, 13/10-18). A couple of audience members that I talked to made similar remarks, stating that people are more open to new ideas when they are attending stand-up. Elise Decamp (2017) similarly observed that stand-up comedy clubs in the Midwestern United States created an atmosphere that allowed for resistance to stereotypes, pending how audiences and comedians relate to each other, and the topic discussed.

Providing alternate and relatable stories of Zimbabwean life, stand-up comedians can spark conversations about what it means to be patriotic – and to what degree personal experiences fit within the official portrayal of the nation. Moulding stand-up into a genre that encourages self-expression; Zimbabwean comedians find themselves inclined to tell the audience about *their* experiences – in such a way that even if slightly embellished, or altered

they are faced by a reality through which to question and compare the official depiction of the “authentic Zimbabwean.” Next, I look at the role of gender in stand-up to unpack how comedy sometimes reifies and resists societal norms.

Gender

In Zimbabwean, women are often treated and seen as subservient to men. Chipso Hungwe (2006) investigates conceptions of gender and femininity in Zimbabwe, outlining the continued importance of binary distinctions made between what is seen as ‘respectable’ and ‘unrespectable’ behaviour. According to Hungwe (2006, 42) the “ideal Zimbabwean (Shona or Ndebele) woman [...] is self-effacing, restrained in her public behaviour, family-oriented and caring towards her male partner and relatives.” This resonates with the experiences of several of the female comedians that I interviewed who emphasised that whilst attitudes are beginning to change within the nation, issues of equality and consent remain a problem. A female comedian describes how Zimbabwean men’s understanding of consent often is selective:

“[they] pretend like they don’t understand consent and then once you introduce a homosexual man into it they are like ‘oh, no, no, no’, suddenly it is important that I never led you on, suddenly they understand the fact that it is not about what you are wearing, suddenly they understand the fact that you need to ask for consent. But once it is us, it’s like ‘oh no you know these things are just natural’”.

This demonstrates how in many ways Zimbabwe remains a patriarchal society where women are seen as subservient and matters of sex, consent and nudity (or lack thereof) are gendered. This section uses gender to unpack how stand-up comedy can both disrupt and reinforce power.

Gender norms are absorbed into the practicalities of Zimbabwean stand-up comedy. This is captured by Guramatunhu when describing the thought process behind her stage outfits:

“Male stand-up comedians have the: either you are in a suit and pretty well done up, or you are very casual. I have never seen a woman step out to do stand-up comedy in a ball gown [laughs], or office attire [which] would be the equivalent of their suits, because that’s too much: [...] if you’re in heels everybody is judging how you are walking, if you are in heels and a skirt everybody is like: ‘ohh and then we could see up her skirt, and she was dressed so appallingly.’ And then if you are dressed too casually: ‘no wonder she is a stand-up comedian, she doesn’t take herself seriously she probably has all these jokes she makes with her cats, with her six cats or something’. Like it’s *just, a, lot* – because now this is also one of the few times you are onstage as yourself.”

This process of picking a stage-outfit is a clear example of Butlerian performativity where the actions of the comedian, in this case the choice of outfit, iterates societal norms. Through her choice of clothing Guramatunhu, as put by Joanne R. Gilbert (1997, 317), “simultaneously perform[s] self and culture.” Guramatunhu is perfectly capable of choosing what to wear onstage, but it is a decision that has implications and which operates within strict constraints - she does not get to “experience [herself] as a body pure and simple” (Butler, 1986, 39). The effect of societal norms extends beyond the comedian’s choice of clothing, anything from mannerisms, gestures, and the comedic narrative are encapsulated, imbuing the comedian’s actions with meaning. However, this does not preclude them from, to some extent, resisting these perceptions.

Philip Auslander (2005, 317), reminds us that comedy is “inextricably linked to social power and dominance.” This holds true for stand-up, even those that describe the genre as a dialogue with the audience will agree that the comedian has more control of their set than the audience (Quirk, 2010). The comedian picks the topics discussed, decides on the premises and perspectives that will be considered and in other ways ‘manipulate’ the situation, for example, simplifying certain issues (*Ibid.* 120-122). The comedian’s power is further enhanced by the use of a microphone. As Ian Brodie (2016, 54) explains, “[t]he amplified performer’s voice literally overpowers that of any one member of the audience.” As a genre, stand-up comedy thus affords the comedian a certain type of power, even if ever so briefly.

This makes female stand-up comedians somewhat unsettling in Zimbabwean society where women are generally seen as subservient to men. The treatment of female politicians exemplifies this complicated relationship between women and power in Zimbabwe. Tendi Blessing-Miles (2016) has investigated how politician Joice Mujuru’s bid for power was quashed through gendered surveillance practices, where claims were made about possessing surveillance footage of her naked and using witchcraft against Mugabe. Further examples are found in the treatment of the former and current first lady; Grace Mugabe and Auxilla Mnangagwa. Grace Mugabe who had shown political intentions during her husband’s regime, was smeared on TV following Mnangagwa’s election. She was portrayed as the source of Zimbabwe’s problems (Dendere, 2018, 377-378). The current first lady, Auxilla Mnangagwa was also reined in following her husband’s election. It was quickly announced that she would focus on being “the mother of the nation” and renounce her political positions (*ibid.*). This indicates a fear of, and discomfort with, women who are close to, or potentially hold, power.

Female stand-up comedians sit uncomfortably in this society given the power they wield onstage. To reconcile the power they possess onstage, Zimbabwean society has imbued female comedians with male characteristics and (attempted to) remove their agency. Their lifestyle is described as ‘rebellious’ and/or ‘wild’, and they are often assumed to have succumbed to peer-pressure from their male counterparts who are said to engage in, and be the reason that, female artists are involved in, excessive partying, drinking, drugs and promiscuity (Tanya Sena, stand-up comedian, interview with author, 03/09-2019). These actions are contradictory to societal conceptions of what women should be and do. Tanya Sena, known as Tanya Alex, explains how these perceptions affect her:

“people expect women to get married, and settle down, and stop all this business, so I think when they see women doing it, I think they think we are just doing it for fun, or we are rebelling, or living out a dream, and then next year she will be married. [So] they don’t bother investing too much emotion in you, because they are expecting you to go home and raise kids.”

Comedic routines that play out these norms in contravening ways upsets, resists and reinforces them. Sena’s set where she ends up ‘accidentally’ flirting with a cashier both performs the idea of the promiscuous comedian, and the innocent Zimbabwean woman. Re-counting the story, Sena tells us how the cashier asked her if she needed a plastic (a term used to refer to both plastic bags and condoms) for her ‘big package’, and offered to take it to the car. Sena tells us that she thought they were talking about her groceries, until he told her when he finished work and she realised he had been flirting.

Similarly, Chideu’s 2018 set plays with ideas of the ‘rebellious’ and promiscuous artist and the caring mother. In her set, she jokes about the difficulties of being a single

mother whilst wanting to have, and enjoy casual sex. Stating that her child was ugly at birth and comparing it to her mother-in-law (before affirming that the baby is now cute), Chideu plays out motherhood in terms that do not fit with the idea of the caring Zimbabwean woman. Her performance of both motherhood and 'rebellion' whilst in a position of power (possessing agency) highlights the ambivalence of both these norms which contravene each other, denaturalising the idea of the subservient woman by putting on display a woman who is not.

Stand-up comedy also leaves you with a feeling that the powerful woman onstage might walk offstage and continue to intrude on the societal 'system of meaning.' Audiences often assume that who the stand-up comedian is onstage, is who they are offstage, especially with autobiographical, first person, performances. British comedian Jo Brand captures this, explaining in an interview that she has found men to be scared of her offstage because of her strong feminist performances (Double, 2014, 299-300). Oliver Double (2014, 182) demonstrates this distinguishing characteristic of stand-up comedy comparing it to theatre: "[h]owever fine an actor's portrayal of Macbeth may be, we are unlikely to genuinely mistake them for the actual eleventh century Scottish king".

The way in which these female comedians disrupt gender narratives is not by stepping outside of the pre-existing 'system of meaning.' Instead, very similarly to how Butler describes drag engaging in a 'parodic recontextualisation', female stand-up comedians play out conceptions from within Zimbabwean society in unexpected ways. In Chideu's performance we see an unlikely pairing of narratives about motherhood and female artists that have us question the legitimacy, origin and truth behind both stereotypes. Playing out these norms, Zimbabwean stand-up comedians find themselves resisting and reinforcing them, giving them authority through their repetition.

Conclusion

The election of Emmerson Mnangagwa in 2018 offered some hope of new beginnings in Zimbabwe, but so far they have not been fulfilled. Despite the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Information stating that the government “supports freedom of expression as enshrined in our constitution; [where] artistic expression, satire or even dark comedy, is part of that freedom” (Moyo, 2019), comedians continue to get arrested and abducted because of their comedy. Regulations limiting peoples’ constitutional right to freedom of expression remain in place, and in January 2019 the government ordered an internet shut down as a way to quash a nation-wide strike action (Burke, 2019b). Within this repressive environment Zimbabwean stand-up comedy continues to grow, with the art-form offering an unlikely escape where audiences get to laugh at their situation, and comedians get to speak out and explore their opinions.

Although there are clear examples, such as Magamba Network, where comedy is used purposefully to resist the Zimbabwean state, I argue that by looking at the more subtle, and potentially undeliberate, ways in which comedians subvert we learn something about how stand-up comedy both disturbs and reinforces power. I concur with James Brassett’s (2016, 175) assessment that “[r]esistance is [...] a performative practice; as central to the making of power as it is to their re-imagination over time.” By examining how Zimbabwean stand-up comedians perform their day-to-day lives we can gain insight into practices of expression in repressive regimes. Hence, this article contributes to our understanding of comedic resistance in these environments, theoretically by applying a Butlerian conception of performativity and subversion to the global south, empirically by illustrating how stand-up comedy resists and reifies, and methodologically by interviewing and speaking to Zimbabwean stand-up comedians and artists.

This article has argued that by applying Judith Butler’s conceptions of performativity and subversion, we can begin to understand how it is that stand-up reifies and disrupts power.

Butler's approach helps us unpack how Zimbabwean stand-up challenges societal norms about, for example, gender and patriotism, in a manner that sometimes is direct and other times more subtle. I argue – based on fieldwork experiences and interviews from Zimbabwe – that by turning towards an autobiographical performance form, stand-up has become a space in an oppressive environment for people to express their opinions, challenge power and question the normalcy of a situation that is anything but. Examining Zimbabwean stand-up comedy enables us to see how people continue to express themselves in political environments that attempt to silence dissent.

Bibliographical statement: Amanda Källstig is a PhD candidate in Politics at the University of Manchester. Her previous publication, together with Dr Carl Death, “Laughter, resistances and ambivalence in Trevor Noah’s stand-up comedy: returning mimicry as mockery” is available in *Critical African Studies*.

Acknowledgment: I am grateful to Dr. Carl Death, and Dr. Aoileann ní Mhurchú for their help and support throughout this process. I would also like to thank the special issue editors, and anonymous reviewers for their suggestions and feedback.

Bibliography

Adetunji, Akin. 2013. "The interactional context of humor in Nigerian stand-up comedy", *Pragmatics* 23(1): 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1075/prag.23.1.01ade>.

Auslander, Philip. 1993. "'Brought to You by Fem-Rage': Stand-up Comedy and the Politics of Gender", in *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, in Hart Lynda and Peggy Phelan, 315-336. The University of Michigan Press: USA.

BBC. 2013. "Zimbabwe court says Robert Mugabe 'insult law' invalid", *BBC News Africa*. Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-24757351> (accessed: 06/01/2019).

Blessing-Miles, Tendi. 2016. "State intelligence and the politics of Zimbabwe's presidential succession", *African Affairs* 15(459): 203-224. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adv074>.

Brassett, James. 2016. "British comedy, global resistance: Russell Brand, Charlie Brooker and Stewart Lee", *European Journal of International Relations* 22(1): 168-191. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066115586816>

Bratton, Michael. 2016. *Power Politics in Zimbabwe*. Lynne Rienner Publishers: London.

Brodie, Ian. 2016. *A vulgar art: a new approach to stand-up comedy*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Bulawayo24News .2015. "Jonathan Moyo defends Mugabe photograph deletion", *Bulawayo24News*. Available at: <https://bulawayo24.com/index-id-news-sc-national-byo-62874-article-jonathan+moyo+defends+mugabe+photograph+deletion.html> (accessed 04/02/2019).

Burke, Jason. 2019a. "Zimbabwean comedian goes into hiding after abduction and beating", *The Guardian*. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/23/zimbabwean-comedian-samantha-kureya-goes-into-hiding-after-abduction-and-beating> (accessed 20/10/2019).

Burke, Jason. 2019b. "Civilians beaten and abducted in major Zimbabwe crackdown", *The Guardian*. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/16/authorities-launch-major-crackdown-amid-protests-zimbabwe> (accessed 02/12/2019).

Butler, Judith. 1986. "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*", *Yale French Studies*, 72: 35-49. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930225>.

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Reprint 1999. Routledge: UK.

Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies that Matter On the discursive limits of "sex"*. USA: Routledge.

Butler, Judith. 2004. *Undoing Gender*. Routledge: London.

Butler, Judith. 2017. "When Gesture Becomes Event", *Inter Views in Performance Philosophy*. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-95192-5_15.

DeCamp, Elise. 2017. "Negotiating race in stand-up comedy: interpretations of 'single story' narratives", *Social Identities*, 23(3): 326-342.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2016.1235968>.

Dendere, Chipu. 2018. "Finding Women in the Zimbabwean Transition", *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism*, 17(2): 376-381. <https://doi.org/10.1215/15366936-7176505>.

Dodds, Klaus. 2010. "Popular Geopolitics and Cartoons: Representing Power Relations, repetition and Resistance", *Critical African Studies* 1(4): 113-131.

Donkor, David A. 2013. "Selling the President: Stand-up Comedy and the Politricks of Indirection in Ghana", *American Society for Theatre Research* 54(2): 255-281.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557413000057>

Double, Oliver. 2014. *Getting the joke: the inner workings of stand-up comedy*. London: Bloomsbury Methuen.

Filani, Ibukunu. 2015. "Discourse types in stand-up comedy performances: an example of Nigerian stand-up comedy", *The European Journal of Humour Research* 3(1): 41-60.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7592/EJHR2015.3.1.filani>.

Gilbert, Joanna R. 1997. "Performing marginality: Comedy, identity, and cultural critique", *Text and Performance Quarterly* 17(4): 317-330.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10462939709366196>.

Githatu M. Mary and Furaha Chai. 2015. "Discursive Structure of Humour in Stand-up Comedy Kenya: Discourse Topics and Stylistic Devices in Churchill's Performances", *International Journal of Language and Linguistic* 3(6): 409-415.
<https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijll.20150306.24>.

Hammett, Daniel. 2010. "Political Cartoons, Post-Colonialism and Critical African Studies", *Critical African Studies* 2(4): 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20407211.2010.10530755>

Hammett, Daniel. 2014. "Narrating the Contested Public Sphere Zapiro, Zuma and Freedom of Expression in South Africa", in *Civic Agency in Africa: Arts of resistance in the 21st century*, edited in Obadare, Ebenezer and Wendy Willems, 204-225. Great Britain: James Currey.

Hungwe, Chipu. 2006. "Putting them in their place: 'respectable' and 'unrespectable' women in Zimbabwean gender struggles", *Feminist Africa 6: Subaltern Sexualities* 6: 33-47.

Langeveldt, Edgar. 2000. "Side road, dark corner", *Index on Censorship* 6: 86-89.

Magamba Network. 2019. "Who We Are". Available at: <http://magambanetwork.com/about/> (accessed: 02/12/2019).

Marima, Tendai. 2018. "After Mugabe, Zimbabwe Still Enforces A Law Against Insulting The President", *NPR*. Available at <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/20/676055453/after->

[mugabe-zimbabwe-still-enforces-a-law-against-insulting-the-president](#) (accessed: 06/10/2019).

Mbembe, Achille. 2001. *On the Postcolony*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

McGregor, JoAnn. 2013. "Surveillance and the City: Patronage, Power-sharing and the Politics of Urban Control in Zimbabwe", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 4(39): 783-805. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2013.858541>.

Monro, Sam Farai. 2015. "Comedy of Terrors", *Index on Censorship* 44(2): 78-82.

Moyo, Jeffrey. 2019. "Politics: no laughing matter in poverty-hit Zimbabwe", *Reuters*. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-zimbabwe-comedy/politics-no-laughing-matter-in-poverty-hit-zimbabwe-idUSKCN1SE1PW> (accessed 01/12/2019).

Mumera, Wisdom. 2018. "Gabbuza's arrest pegs back free speech", *Openparly*. Available at: <https://www.openparly.co.zw/gabbuzas-arrest-pegs-back-free-speech/> (accessed: 06/01/2019)

Musila, Grace. 2014. "Laughing at the Rainbow's Cracks? Blackness, Whiteness and the Ambivalence of South African stand-up comedy", in *Civic Agency in Africa: Arts of resistance in the 21st century*, edited by Obadare, Ebenezer and Wendy Willems, 147-166. Great Britain: James Currey.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo J. 2009. "Making Sense of Mugabeism in Local and Global Politics: 'So Blair, keep your England and let me keep my Zimbabwe'", *Third World Quarterly* 30(6): 1139-1158. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590903037424>.

Obadare, Ebenezer. 2009. "The uses of Ridicule: Humour, 'Infrapolitics' and Civil Society in Nigeria", *African Affairs* 108(431): 241-261. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adn086>.

Obadare, Ebenezer. 2016. *Humour, Silence and Civil Society in Nigeria*. Croydon: University of Rochester Press.

Ogoanah, Felix N. and Fredricj O. Ojo. 2018. "A multimodal generic perspective on Nigerian stand-up comedy", *The European Journal of Humour Research* 6(4): 39-59. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7592/EJHR2018.6.4.ogoanah>.

Quirk, Sophie. 2010. "Who's in charge? Negotiation, manipulation and comic licence in the work of Mark Thomas", *Comedy Studies* 1(1):113-124. <https://doi.org/10.1386/cost.1.1.113/1>.

Seirlis, Julia. 2011. "Laughing all the way to freedom? Contemporary stand-up comedy and democracy in South Africa", *International Journal of Humour Research* 24(4): 513-530. <https://doi.org/10.1515/humr.2011.028>.

Sinfield, Alan. 2000. "Diaspora and hybridity: queer identities and the ethnicity model", in *Diaspora and Visual Culture Representing Africans and Jews*, edited by Nicholas Mirzoeff, 95-114. Routledge: USA.

Siziba, Gugulethu and Gibson Ncube. 2015. "Mugabe's fall from grace: satire and fictional narratives as silent forms of resistance in/on Zimbabwe", *Social Dynamics* 41(23): 516-539. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2015.1106124>.

Willems, Wendy. 2008. "*Mocking the state: comic strips in the Zimbabwean press*". In, *Dilemmas of Development: Conflicts of Interest and Their Resolutions in Modernizing Africa*, edited by Abbink, Jon and André Van Dokkum, 151-163.

Willems, Wendy. 2010. "Beyond dramatic revolutions and grand rebellions: everyday forms of resistance during the 'Zimbabwe crisis'", *Comunicare* 29:1-17.

Willems, Wendy. 2013. "'Zimbabwe will never be a colony again': changing celebratory styles and meanings of independence", *Anthropology Southern Africa* 36:(1-2):.22-33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02580144.2013.10887021>