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ColdTowne Theater: Exploring Disaster Humor

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ColdTowne Theater: Exploring Disaster Humor

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Thesis

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Dedication

“It does not matter how slowly you go, so long as you do not stop.” –Confucius

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Abstract

ColdTowne Theater: Exploring Disaster Humor

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Disaster humor is a category of humor research that has not been much explored in terms of live audience reactions, something this study undertakes at a small improvisational theater in Austin, Texas. In generating the typology of jokes at this particular theater, instances of disaster humor in live performance were collected, coded and compared in terms of categorization and audience reaction. Ultimately this small study produced a promising look at the relationship between joke acceptance and what it meant for intergroup identity as a community, which should be further explored in future research; recommendations for this are made at the close of this work.

Keywords: humor, disaster humor, improv

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Rationale and Literature Review

Introduction: Why ColdTowne?

Fine and De Soucey (2005) discuss the following:

> To be sure, numerous studies address joking *in* [original emphasis] groups. However, most of these studies treat their examples as discrete instances, rather than as events that are meaningful in light of both past and future interaction. The joking history of groups has been downplayed. The examples are not seen as being linked together and linked to the group from which they emanate. (p.2)

With this in mind, I undertook the study of joking interactions as they occurred over time in a well-established group of performers; I looked at a particular type of humor that I will soon further define: disaster humor[1], because it was prominent in this theater. I wanted to record the instances of this type of humor as they occurred in live performance and audience reaction to them (as Mintz [2008] mentions in his chapter of *The Primer of Humor Research*, there is "very little study of audience reception"), which led to findings about humor and the performer-audience relationship that will be further discussed in the appropriate section.

I chose ColdTowne Theater because I had performed there myself two years prior to the time the fieldwork for this study was conducted—2007 and 2009, respectively. I knew the background of the theater and that its establishment stemmed from the founders fleeing New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina (*About*, n.d.). I knew they put on a show

[1] See Glossary, on page 92, for this and other terms

called “Hurricanes are Funny” shortly after arriving and establishing themselves in Austin. With a preexisting line of contact at the theater from my time as a performer and with the knowledge of this particular background, I thought it was the perfect place to study. The community is tightly knit, but accepting of new members; all six schools named by the Austin Improv Collective (*Classes - Austin*, n.d.) train students and let them know of performance opportunities at the other schools. ColdTowne is one of them and indeed the founders had performed at another- The Hideout- before undertaking the establishment of ColdTowne in 2006 (*About ColdTowne*, n.d.).

ColdTowne Theater and the Austin Comedy Scene: The way it is structured, presented, kept- and in some cases appears to look purposely unkempt- by its members and performers, ColdTowne Theater looks like most of the other Austin comedy venues. I spent two weeks guest performing at ColdTowne in 2007 and visited other theaters- The Hideout and The New Movement- periodically from 2007 up to the beginning of my fieldwork in 2009 to watch friends perform in shows. The only place that appeared very different from these others was the Capital City Comedy Club: a larger venue that attracts talent from a greater pool than those who perform at The Hideout, The New Movement and ColdTowne. Student-performers and graduates-cum-performers mostly populate these latter three venues, and not performers of the same nationally recognized caliber that perform at Capital City. Capital City also does not offer classes the way the other theaters do and has a greater focus on stand-up work than any other comedic form; whereas the smaller venues seem to concentrate mostly on improvisational shows, with less sketch comedy and stand-up.

When I walked into the three smaller venues, I felt a sense of small-scale community, characterized by the friendliness and ease between the performers and audience. When I walked into Capital City for a show, I felt like I was walking into a place of business. The sense of belonging and welcome was absent there. It is perhaps not a coincidence that The Hideout, The New Movement and ColdTowne are all a part of the Austin Improv Collective (*Classes - Austin*, n.d.)- while Capital City is not.

Because ColdTowne is similar to the rest of Austin's smaller comedy theaters, in size, appearance, atmosphere, participants and comedy style, and because I had contacts there, I chose it for my concentrated fieldwork in joking in a comedy group. There is a very home-like atmosphere present in the theater itself: the mismatched type of furniture that you have when you first move out on your own, whatever Mom and Dad give you and that you can afford to buy off Craigslist (a popular website that serves as a modern "want advertisement" section of sorts). This, combined with the small size of the theater- 900 square feet (Jastroch, 2010)- gives a very intimate feeling to the audience, similar to spending time at a friend's apartment—if they were eccentric enough to have a black box-style theater in their apartment, that is. Further adding to this casual atmosphere was the Bring Your Own Beer (BYOB) policy ColdTowne had during the summer of 2009 while they were waiting for their liquor license. Future plans for relocation, or expansion of the theater, are unknown at the time of this writing; ColdTowne is, however, currently undergoing revisions on the property from fundraising done in 2010 (Jastroch, 2012) via Kickstarter—a website exclusively made for fundraising various projects via crowdsourcing.

The comfort level of the audience members at ColdTowne shows in the way they arrive early and settle in: some literally put up their feet, have a book to read before a show starts—or in the case of one girl I saw on my very first night of fieldwork, even take out a hairbrush and groom herself. Another young man had an entire case of beer he had brought with him and was drinking from, quite comfortably. None of these- the last two in particular- are examples of behavior expected from people who are not completely comfortable in their environment. Although the argument for lack of general social knowledge could also be made here, it is not supported by the reactions of others. The people sitting around them would have shown signs of discomfort; there was none apparent. As far as I could see, everyone around them accepted this behavior without remark.

People typically dress casually and comfortably at ColdTowne, in a fashion that can often readily be described as "hipster"—that definition will be expanded shortly. Few dress formally, unless for a specific performance, as observed on several occasions. The most interesting fashion observation occurred when I brought a friend with me one night during my fieldwork. My friend proceeded to break down the cost of one performer's wardrobe and how she appeared, in my friend's opinion, to have tried to make herself fit into the style and lower socio-economic status reflected in most of the other performers and patrons' mode of dress, despite indications of belonging to a higher status herself. Rubenstein noted the use of clothing as an object to indicate identification with a group (as cited in Cerulo, 1997, p. 396) and Mintz (2008) mentions clothes as an aspect of popular culture (p. 281) which social groups share similar taste in. The bigger

implications of this will be further discussed in my findings, but it is worth noting early on this indication of ColdTowne as a distinct group.

Interestingly, nods to performers diminishing their own socioeconomic status can be recognized even by well-known professional comedians such as Daniel Tosh, playing to the wealthy stereotype of a crowd in Orange County, California, or even Conan O'Brien's running joke about his 1992 Ford Taurus that he refuses to upgrade to anything fancier (Tosh, 2007; "Tonight Show with," 2009).

Tosh hosts a show called *Tosh.0* on Comedy Central, which provides sarcastic commentary on pop culture events across various forms of media, including viral internet videos ("Home page," n.d.). Conan O'Brien was a brief host of *The Late Show with Conan O'Brien* before losing this position to another late-night comedian and creating his own new show on a cable network. Both comedians have been performing since shortly after they graduated from college- O'Brien in the late 80s and Tosh in the late 90s- and have performed significantly well enough to write for and host their own successful shows. Thus they are clearly well to do, but in order to relate to audiences and comedy culture that does not emphasize wealth, they perpetuate these jokes that support a lower socioeconomic status, even though their audiences know they are well outside of it. It is notable that this is accepted and perpetuated on both ends and by all levels of performers; both sides are working equally to maintain the illusion.

This would be an interesting facet of the comedy culture to further explore in-depth in future research—the role of the socioeconomic appearance of performers in live comedy and how it interacts with the culture of their audience. This has more specific

implications when the performer is playing to a regular audience such as at ColdTowne; the majority of ColdTowne performers are locally based and do not travel around the country to give shows as many professional comedians do (such as the aforementioned Daniel Tosh). ColdTowne serves as a young, mostly post-college hangout.

While some members of ColdTowne do travel for comedy festivals- indeed I noted during my fieldwork that regular performers were sometimes absent from recurring shows for this reason- and the theater does host and/or collaborate with some local festivals, most of the ColdTowne students remain in Austin. Many of the regular ColdTowne performers are current or past students. No local festival occurred within the timeframe of my research.

I knew from my brief performance time at ColdTowne that they would be exactly the place to find the kind of group I wanted to study: specifically, a theater-related community of performers and their regular audience. Mintz (2008, p. 285) highlights the dearth of live audience reaction studies, to live humor performance, using ethnographic methods:

> . . .there is very little study of audience reception. Communications studies and sociology do some survey work, and some raw data exists that helps us form a sketchy picture of who is laughing at what. Looking at the text by itself does not tell us if the audience is male or female, young or old, rich or poor, black or white, rural or urban, educated or not, and so forth. Moreover we have no idea how something is received much less why it is received as it is. There are almost no accounts, even for live

> performance, that explore how audiences related to a text, what they laugh at, of what they approve or disapprove, and what it means to them, ultimately. Ethnographic research promises to address this need, but there is precious little to show for it thus far, applied to humor in popular culture, even as a model for new research.

This study strives to fill in some of that gap. The ethnographic aspect will be expanded shortly; we will tackle the term "popular culture" (or pop culture) briefly now. Pop culture comes with its own difficulties; within this project it will encompass the broadest definition possible since just about anything in day-to-day life is liable to come up as viable material in improv. Popular culture as used in this study draws on Mintz (2008) and includes nearly "all aspects of everyday experience, including commonplace material culture such as food-ways, vernacular architecture, industrial design of familiar products, clothing styles, toys and games, personal grooming, and just about anything else that people use as they go about their lives (p. 281)". Entertainment is a major element of such popular culture as television, literature, the Internet and live performances.

Review of Literature

Due to the nature of this study focusing on disaster humor, the literature review will touch on studies that emphasize the current competing theories for why such jokes are made, the different names ascribed to darker humor ("disaster humor" included as a fairly recent term and phenomenon) and those studies that have looked specifically at disaster humor and established it as a recent term and phenomenon.

Why do we use humor? Freud emphasized the intersection between unconscious drive and conscious thoughts. Humor was the emergence of thoughts usually suppressed and therefore an outlet for troubled emotions (Matte, 2001). According to Smyth (1986), "one of the ways in which the psyche wards off threats to [our] sense of immortality is through humor. Cancer, mass murder, poisonings, etc., are taboo subject matter of highly charged emotional significance." We as human beings are afraid of our own mortality, particularly when it is presented to us in the form of a large-scale disaster or high-profile loss. Then it becomes especially difficult, if not impossible, to ignore. Violence of any kind serves to remind us of our fragility and we try to diffuse our uncomfortable feelings about this situation however we can—particularly through the use of humor, though it may be thought of as inappropriate at such a time. Humor is a hallmark of humanity extending back through recorded time (Howe, 2002, p. 252).

The type of humor often considered to be a collective means of coping- and which is the focus of this work- comes in the form of "disaster jokes" (Davies, 1998; Dundes, 1987; Ellis, 2001; Morrow, 1987; Oring, 1987; Kuipers, 2002). In this writing, disaster

jokes will be the term used when discussing a particular joke while the term "disaster humor" will be used when a larger sense of scale needs to be conveyed.

As the scope of this work shall define it, disaster humor includes any joke about a serious or violent- and either recently occurring, or extremely well known, historical event- that most often involves the loss of human life. Examples of such events range from a single man in a wheelchair being shot and pushed overboard on a cruise ship (Smyth, 1986, p. 249) as in the case of Leon Klinghoffer in the 1980s, to the Challenger shuttle disaster or the bombing of the twin towers on September 11, 2001. Disaster humor also includes jokes centered on natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina's 2005 deadly arrival on the US Gulf Coast, the 2010 earthquake in Haiti or the earthquake and subsequent tsunami in Japan in the spring of 2011.

Disaster jokes have been referred to in previous studies as sick jokes, gallows or dark humor and a number of other similar terms aiming to highlight the emotional response to such humor—bitter, salty, etc (Ruch, 2008, p. 21). Kuipers (2002) also notes that these types of jokes are deliberately amoral in nature (p. 454). I feel the term disaster lends fuller meaning and explanation to what is being studied; it is more than just a joke told for shock value because its content is generally thought to be taboo. That is certainly one part of it—but only a small part. Calling it disaster humor widens the scale to things on a more universal, shared, *human* plane. We fear on a primal level experiencing a natural disaster we have no control over and even limited planning ability to deal with in advance; such violent events remind us of our mortality, remind us how helpless we can be. The use of the term disaster humor encompasses this wider impression of what is

being joked about: the person joking about something so out of their realm of control, that they fear it innately (whether or not they are thinking about it explicitly at the time the joke is made). In making this type of joke, the joke maker is simultaneously aiming to restore some of their agency (Ellis, 2001), relieve the pain in their psyche through the regular grief process (Dundes, 1987; Ellis, 2001; Morrow, 1987) and further to rebel against the typical- often media-enforced- reaction to disaster, through use of humor (Kuipers, 2002; Oring, 1987; Smyth, 1986). Perhaps making such a joke is at once a cry for unity and of independent self-expression, of needing to be heard as a distinct voice from the rest of the quietly sad, or resolutely stoic and moralizing, population.

The type of jokes outlined in the beginning of the previous paragraph were the kind of examples I expected before embarking on my fieldwork, because they were the most obvious kinds of examples I had heard or seen, and they were the first that sprang to mind when I thought of "disaster humor". Through the course of my research, however, my definition expanded to include instances of violent attacks that can be universally applied across humanity (taboo joking subjects: rape, assault or abuse against children or women) as well as high-profile loss, often in the form of celebrity death. I will more fully discuss my reasons for expanding the definition to include these instances- beyond natural disasters or violent, high profile attacks- in my results section.

Implicit in this work is the difficulty of defining humor, as it is a broad, abstract subject, a "slippery subject. . .elemental, universal, and yet extraordinarily difficult to analyze" (Reaves, 2001, p. 2). Humor is linked inextricably to our own culture (Kuipers, 2002; Kuipers, 2006), with time period and language relevant to both; with some of these

elements missing the joke becomes lost on the audience—which in the course of my research, amounted to an actual theater audience rather than individual joke recipients in a controlled study or one-on-one setting. This differentiates my work from many of the humor research studies that have come before it, with the intention of bringing a new perspective to the body of existing work through the natural reactions of an audience to offensive comedy, no matter how small that audience may be.

I will be using the term "culture" throughout this work in reference to the Austin comedy culture as it specifically exists in ColdTowne, its performers and audience. As Agar (2006) reminds us, "culture is one of the most widely (mis)used and contentious concepts in the contemporary vocabulary" and spans a messy history of study. It is important to note, however, the interplay of humor and group culture. Keith Basso, in studying the humor of the Western Apache in *Portraits of "the Whiteman"* (1979) noted, "Western Apache jokers are properly regarded as more than mere purveyors of preexisting cultural forms. They are creators of culture as well, and serve in this capacity as active agents of cultural change" (p. 82). The joke makers of ColdTowne, then, are poised to impact the culture of the group as a whole.

Using these guidelines for the scope of the project, we will define the culture of ColdTowne (consisting of its performers and audience) to include the basic style and mode of dress, way of speaking, choice of drinking, general manner- and ultimately, the sense of humor- of this group-within-a-group. I use it as an example of the culture of Austin comedy as a whole at this moment in time for the reasons explained in the introduction.

The study of humor is complicated by the “uncomfortable problem that when this ‘feel-good’ emotion is taken seriously, the ‘fun’ can quickly evaporate” (Reaves, 2001, p. 5). Many comedians and humor writers denounce the dissection or breaking down of jokes or humor because the “magic” of it is lost; their goals, however, obviously differ from those of scholars. Anthropologists have conducted most humor studies in an effort to understand the elusive part of culture that humor plays, with the focus mainly on the big picture of culture; psychologists as well have focused on a bigger picture of humor motivations. Again, humor is often seen as a method of coping with the harsh reality of unpleasant aspects of life- pain, death, loss and the violent carrying out of any of these three things; this is, after all, an explanation heavy in common sense (Kuipers, 2002). While this coping mechanism remains part of my hypothesis in the reasoning behind the making of disaster jokes, it is not the entirety of it.

This power of humor to diffuse difficult emotions in the psyche, is enormous, as discussed by Smyth (1986, p. 255):

> The diffusion of anxiety . . . thus works on two levels. On one hand the abstract concept of death is presented in such a manner that it can be laughed at; and, on the other hand, the specific graphic depiction of the details of death is robbed of its anxiety-provoking power through embedding the most graphic images of death and dismemberment within a humorous structure. By dealing with the grotesque and morbidity in a joking manner, the graphic reality of tragedies can be reduced to the realm of the unreal, through a shift of communicative "keys" or "frames" from the deadly serious to the comically grotesque.

Few dispute the role of humor in helping to mediate difficult emotions after a traumatic event; instead it should be asked: is this the *only* reason someone might make a disaster joke? After all, with something like the Challenger explosion being classified as a disaster event, how does that affect the average person? Disaster jokes are made and "disaster jokes are appreciated by many people who in no way can be said to suffer personally from the disaster" (Kuipers, 2002, p. 452).

Kuipers is ignoring, in this case, the fact that the joke teller may relate in some non-obvious way to the person being joked about—in terms of the Challenger explosion, the majority of the jokes seemed to be about the teacher on board the shuttle, Christa McAuliffe, as the joke teller could relate to her in terms of "a domestic person. . .a sort of Everyperson" (Morrow, 1987, p. 180). McAuliffe, though trained for the mission, was the only one on board who was not a professional astronaut and thus served as a more relatable foil to joke tellers.

Kuipers (2002) goes on to argue that the openly hostile nature of many disaster jokes could not possibly render them an effective balm for a traumatized psyche; she dismisses that explanation for their use outright. Using Oring's (1987) study of Challenger joke cycles as a starting point, Kuipers pulls disaster joking into the light of mass media exposure—or over-exposure, as it may be. Especially with the growth of mass media and the ever-expanding, always-available nature of news on the Internet (now stretching to include social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook) since Oring's work in 1987, it is hardly a revelation to anyone that the media shows the same traumatic footage of disaster events on a loop, presenting us with material that is meant to evoke

specific emotional reactions. The problem with this is the constant presence of it, which makes the general public feel as if they are present as witnesses and participants (Smyth, 1986) combined with the fact that most of us are physically removed from any great disaster that is occurring; there is only a certain amount of empathy and emotional outpouring the average human is capable of in a disaster event before they will turn to other methods of coping, such as humor (Dundes, 1987, p. 73; Morrow, 1987, p. 182; Smyth, 1986, p. 253; Oring, 2008, p. 195). It can be argued, then, that disaster jokes are not just an attack on the subject of the joke, but on whatever mechanism or system is perceived to have ultimately caused the tragedy in question (Morrow, 1987).

September 11th, for example, seemed permanently stuck on our television screens not only the day the event took place, but through the weeks and even months that followed. On the tenth anniversary in September of 2011 it seemed that not a single media outlet had neglected to plan some form of anniversary tribute programming featuring the same tragic footage that played on repeat the day of the events: the planes hitting the towers, the towers falling down, the chaos in New York as dazed citizens hurried down the streets, paper and ash falling like snow. These images would be followed by those of grief-stricken family members and citizens at memorials and the iconic walls of homemade or hastily printed flyers with pictures of the missing and the dead: all played on loop, over and over, so it only takes a moment to recall it. These sequences of images have become metonymies for the whole event, saturating any mention of it; with them, television programmers are attempting to tell people how to feel (Oring, 2008, as discussed momentarily) and some will inevitably rebel against being

stimulated with these images that move them to act, yet have no solid action to take (Ellis, 2001)—and some will act out in a more obvious and public way than others, possibly by joking. Oring (2008) discussed this same sequence of events with the Challenger disaster, when "the media attempted to define for the public the meaning of the event and how it should respond to it. Some anchormen on network news programs, for example, actually recited poetry (p. 195)." The news presentation of 9/11 followed this same pattern, if even more dramatically.

In 2006, magicians and comedians Penn and Teller recorded an episode of their television show *Bullshit* about the World Trade Center attack of September 11, 2001. They opened with this (transcript my own):

> On September 25th, 2001, fourteen days after the horrors of 9-11, Gilbert Gottfried told this joke at the Friar's Club Roast: "I have to leave early tonight, I have to catch a plane to LA. I couldn't get a direct flight- they have to make a stop at the Empire State Building." Some people were disgusted. But what else could Gilbert do? He was a comic before 9-11 and he was a comic after. After a disaster people keep doing what they've always done, sometimes just more so. The military got more military, the peacenicks got more peacenick, the FBI got nosier and Gilbert got more- well, to us- funnier.

This joke was particularly shocking in light of the fact that many wondered if "a moratorium on joking. . .[had] been declared" since no jokes about the incident had been made- at least publicly in the United States- in the hours and days following the event (Lewis, 2006, p. 176). Lewis (2006) expands on the moratorium on joking: comedy

clubs were closed, Jay Leno and David Letterman off the air, *The New Yorker* ran without its infamous political cartoons, the satirical newspaper *The Onion* had suspended publication—and "in a culture defined by its transgressive audacity particularly in the area of violence-based humor, this restraint in itself was unusual enough to suggest questions" (p. 175). No one was sure how long to wait before making a 9/11 joke, and many did not feel ready, as their jokes about subjects such as dating seemed trivial in comparison to recent events (*Comedy since 9/11:*, 2011). Mintz (2008) also comments on this, saying late night talk show hosts were "watched closely to see when and if it was safe to laugh again" (p. 296). From the examples listed above and by those disaster jokes cited by Kuipers (2002) after 9/11, it becomes apparent that this moratorium was mostly on professional comedians. However, Gottfried is not known for his sensitivity or subtlety, and *is* known for crossing lines—it is somewhat amazing that he was able to follow a disaster joke about 9/11 with a more outrageous joke- The Aristocrats- that includes bestiality and incest. When The Friar's Club Roast aired on Comedy Central in 2001, it was edited for obscenities by an auditory censoring of curse words (*Comedy Central presents:*, 2001) and according to Jim Holt of New York Magazine, someone in the audience shouted "Too Soon!". Gottfried, according to Holt (2011), shocked the audience by ad-libbing the infamous Aristocrats joke and saved his performance.

In 2011, on the tenth anniversary of the September 11th attacks, he appeared on WNYC radio and recounted the experience from his point of view (transcript is my own):

> So I, I went up there- I wanted to be the first one to do, like, the bad taste joke about September 11th. I guess part of me was, uh, wanted to, like, maybe shock

> people out of their stupor. . .the audience started, like, there was a loud gasp. There was mumbling back and forth and you could hear the chairs move. And, and then I went into telling The Aristocrats joke—and that, somehow, turned it all around. You know, like, the Aristocrats joke- for the few who don't know it- is about incest and bestiality. So the audience, basically, is sitting there laughing hysterically . . . tragedy and comedy are just—they're not as opposite or separate as you'd think; it's like, I always thought: comedy and tragedy are roommates. So wherever tragedy is, comedy is staring over its shoulder, sticking its tongue out.

Gottfried may carry the credit for making the first public, "bad taste" (his term) disaster joke after 9/11, but he certainly was not the only one making topical 9/11 jokes- jokes circulated on the Internet, for example, in the days following the attacks (Kuipers, 2002)- and Gottfried was certainly lucky that his joke did not backfire against him—in this instance.

In terms of crossing lines, joking can be compared to the concept of "Garfinkeling": one way to prove that a social rule exists, is to break it and observe the consequence of peoples' subsequent behavior; Garfinkel developed this method for research on unrecognized social rules (Garfinkel, 1967). Lockyer and Pickering portray joking in this way, as a "negotiation" process about the line between funny and offensive (as cited in Kuipers, 2008, p. 384). Often with disaster humor it takes crossing that line with one or multiple audiences to determine where the performer will range in their jokes. For some, it is a reason to repeatedly stray across that line despite the consequences. Gottfried remains an excellent example of repeatedly crossing lines in

joking, as he lost his job as the voice of Aflac's "spokesduck" after he made jokes via Twitter in March of 2011 surrounding the earthquake and tsunami in Japan—immensely devastating events (Gobry, 2011). He apologized publicly and deleted the offensive tweets, but Aflac still released him as their spokesperson; in addition to the large public backlash against his jokes, it is speculated they released him because Aflac conducts 75% of their business in Japan (Gobry, 2011).

Gottfried's 9/11 joke resulted in no backlash from Aflac, though he had been voicing their duck since it first began appearing in commercials the year before (*History of Aflac*, n.d.). Perhaps the tolerance from Aflac in that case stemmed from the fact that Gottfried is "now given credit for being the first comedian after 9/11 to deliver a hugely cathartic laugh" (*Comedy since 9/11:*, 2011) that America 'needed'. Gottfried's actions and the consequences of them in both of these situations, illustrate exceptionally well the concept of disaster jokes as a form of high-stakes negotiation with an ever-changing audience.

WNYC's Jim O'Grady explained via radio broadcast that while humor lagged for a short while in the wake of the September 11th attacks and "some [presumably news] commenters" speculated that comedy would never be the same again- that America was sober now- people rather quickly realized that comedy still worked the same (*Comedy since 9/11:*, 2011). This is supported by Ellis's (2001) finding that joke cycles- patterns of joke making- around disaster events have a period of latency before the jokes emerge in waves—something that seems to hold true for verbal jokes (digital venues may prove to be a different story; more research is needed here). As Kupiers notes in her 2002 study,

however, the first jokes about September 11th reached her two days later on the Internet (p. 451); this is considerably sooner than Ellis's (2001) prediction of 17-22 days. I posit two reasons for this: first, Kuipers is based in Europe, at the University of Amsterdam, and the Internet is a worldwide forum; it is reasonable to assume that as non-American entities they would be further removed from the impact of the event and more likely to joke about it sooner. These are the people that, as Kuipers said, could in no way be affected by the disaster—unless of course they had family or friends in the area. Ellis supports the appearance of disaster jokes in other parts of the world in noting that a lack of direct actions to take after an event leads to those watching it from afar looking for symbolic acts to undertake in support of it (2001, p. 1). Second, the rules seem to be different for Internet-based jokes born from mass media culture (Kupiers, 2002) and verbal, performance jokes that still have to answer to a live audience (Ellis, 2001). Internet-based jokes are more visual in nature and lack the same structure as the verbal jokes (Kuipers, 2002), which typically took on Q & A patterns and referenced popular media, such as well-known advertising campaigns (Dundes, 1987; Oring, 1987; Smyth, 1986). The visual images in Internet-based jokes do also reference popular media; Kuipers (2002) notes the "boundaries between news, popular culture and fiction become blurred and this creates ambivalence" (p. 468).

While Kuipers (2002) firmly dismisses disaster humor as a tool for catharsis and coping, the several comedians on the WNYC program concluded by insisting that comedy held both catharsis and defiance, and gave people just a little bit of power over a situation that left everyone- particularly New Yorkers- feeling helpless and powerless.

Perhaps these things are not, as some of the previously mentioned research suggests, mutually exclusive; perhaps coping and defiance are in play when such jokes are made and a further reason also exists, which was touched on briefly in the WYNC broadcast: that of agency of the joker, which transfers in some way to the audience. A person cannot fight a natural disaster or the inevitability of death, but they can take back some agency against these things and remake themselves from a victim using the performance inherit in joking (Kapchan, 1995)—perhaps particularly if such a joke is performed in the midst of an improvisational comedy show. Oring (2008) hints at this need for a sense of control in an uncontrollable disaster situation, when the media is trying to tell everyone what to feel (p. 195), and Morrow (1987) echoes it in his study of Challenger jokes (p. 182).

The question then is would this sense of agency through joking, in turn, strengthen the bond between performer and audience member and help to cement the acceptance of these kinds of jokes, in addition to providing both a sense of coping and defiance in doing so? It was with these questions that I approached my fieldwork.

It occurred to me that the powerfully shifting emotions and ideas that arise in an audience's mind when disaster footage is aired on repeat (Kuipers, 2002) might not be so different from those that arise when taboo subjects come up in performance: the audience in either case is purposefully being stimulated to elicit a reaction. This elicitation illuminates the artist's ability to shape the way these events (their agency), when mentioned, are looked upon and reacted to on a base level, by the audience (Kapchan, 1995, p. 479).

When performers engage in disaster humor and ask their audience to shift frames along with them (should the audience be accepting of their jokes), they are taking control of a larger situation in the only way they can in that moment. This can change how they act in their role as a victim and has the potential to carry over to the audience as well. They are no longer passive, as is the immediate presumption when mentioning the role of "victim". Most often everyone present- both performer and audience members- were not physically present for the high-profile disaster being joked about. Their role of victim is symbolic and stems only from a shared fear of such events. (I listened during my fieldwork for any performer or audience member's mention of being present during an event that was joked about; this will be discussed in the conclusion.) However, the unique situation of the founding of ColdTowne- born in the wake of Hurricane Katrina- must be noted here. Even if "Hurricanes are Funny" was not performed during the course of my fieldwork (and those founding members do not perform as often as they did in the past, now traveling and teaching more), it is important to note this tradition of agency in performance as part of the history of the theater. It is, in fact, the reason for its very existence in Austin.

Reaves (2001) argues that in these instances when performers choose to engage in disaster humor, "power. . .reverts to the artist, who has established his ultimate control of the entire conception" (p. 4). Reaves was writing about artists of the pen and political cartoon, but I argue the same concept holds true for those satirizing in a live performance, rather than on paper.

Live performance speaks directly of agency and "the notion of agency is implicit in performance" (Kapchan, 1995, p. 479) by virtue of the fact that in performing a piece, you are taking action and expressing your own previously formed thoughts and opinions, while possibly influencing those of the audience around you. This influence is more likely in an audience with close ties to the performer (Fine & De Soucey, 2005). Agency is a very powerful device; as it is implicit in general performance as discussed by Kapchan (1995, p. 479), it must be so also in humor performance. The performer is making the choice to take action, invoking agency through joking, and they are inviting the audience to join them.

One need look little further than the struggle to "better understand how humor works as a mode of expression, a cultural product, and a serious topic for discussion, despite its levity" (Reaves, 2001, p. 2) to understand the need to explore humor's ability to shape the minds of both performers and audiences, especially when it comes to powerful emotions surrounding disaster events. Humor is, after all, highly personal; something uproariously funny to one person might meet with disgust and revulsion from another (Lewis, 2006). In-groups such as the ones at ColdTowne, however, share a sense of humor as a means of cementing their social identity and establishing themselves as separate from other, out-groups (Abrams & Bippus, 2011; Ferguson & Ford, 2008).

The general working parameters for disaster humor have already been set forth, including the fact that my expectations for the definition were expanded once I began collecting data during my fieldwork, the procedure for which will be outlined after briefly examining other humor theories of note related to disaster humor.

Additional Humor Theories of Note

Disaster humor, as a concept relatively recently distinguished from other types of dark humor as established previously in this work, will obviously be closely related to other humor theories that have influenced its development and can serve as explanations to the motivation disaster joke makers have in making these kinds of jokes.

Freud and repression. According to Freud (1905), "repressed impulses find relief in disguised form in jokes as well as in dreams" (as cited in Ruch, 2008, p. 29). Freud's theory would go a long way toward explaining aggressive tendencies in jokes and the prevalence of racist jokes in contemporary society: these latent feelings are being expressed in the only somewhat socially acceptable manner. The telling of these jokes would also serve as a sort of catharsis, as discussed by Ferguson and Ford (2008, p. 285). I will discuss the implications of this theory and joking instances at ColdTowne subsequently.

Disparagement/Superiority theory and SIT. Disparagement/Superiority theory is another means of accounting for aggressive content in jokes—Ruch (2008) explains "according to the theory, funniness of a joke depends on the identification of the recipient with the person (or group) that is being disparaging and with the victim of the disparagement" (p. 29). The use of disparaging humor as often been attributed to Superiority theory (Feinberg, 1978; Gruner 1997, 1998 as cited in Abrams & Bippus, 2011) which expects that those making disparaging jokes do so to affirm their feelings of supremacy from the subject or group being joked about. This tradition in humor "dates back to the writings of classical Greek philosophers" (Carrell, 2008; Ferguson & Ford,

2008) and can have to do with self-esteem and confirming in-group status (Ferguson & Ford, 2008).

Abrams and Bippus (2011) supplement Superiority with Social Identity Theory or SIT, which "would predict that as long as individuals are grouped together based on some shared identity, they will denigrate out-groups to enhance their social identity" (p. 194). While discussion of culture and the specific group culture of ColdTowne will be discussed within this work, the wealth of identity scholarship sits outside of its realm. Therefore SIT is acknowledged, but the implications for it will not be applied to ColdTowne joking instances, as Disparagement/Superiority theory will be.

Joke Cycles

Disaster jokes typically take on a pattern after a disaster event: Smyth (1986) and Morrow (1987) discuss the particular form and cycle that jokes exhibited after the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger in 1986; most jokes took on a question-and-answer (Q and A) format and many were directed at the teacher who had been on board the shuttle, Christa McAuliffe. Morrow (1987) states that while initially this can be interpreted as the public expressing negative feelings toward McAuliffe, these jokes prove upon further examination to be a lashing out against the institution that caused her death. Ellis (2001) discusses the jokes that occurred after the events of September 11th, 2001, including the near-blackout on public humor that was only broken by Gottfried, as illustrated earlier. This work will examine whether or not disaster jokes made at ColdTowne follow the established cycles fully or partially, establish their own, or can be said to create a starting point for new joke cycle study in the future.

Expanded Description of Fieldwork and ColdTowne

Participants. The participants in the study consisted of whichever patrons were present in the theater at the same time I was, in addition to a rotating cast of performers comprising a number of different established performance groups and current students testing their skills. The majority of performers are current or former students, but guest performers and headliners do come in and perform. Interestingly, all sets (which, again, some performers overlapped membership in) of people fell into the same general categories of age, style of dress and apparent economic status: most were young (typically anywhere from 21-35 years of age), Caucasian and male. Most subjects were dressed in a casual, contemporary manner, often falling into the aforementioned hipster description—a style, which while appearing to eschew wealth, can actually cost quite a bit of money to maintain; it purposefully makes it difficult to tell if the person who has adopted it has money or not. This coincides with the references to appearance of socioeconomic status made previously. The general aesthetic involves a mixture of trendy pieces- as of my fieldwork in 2009, this included but was not limited to "skinny" cut jeans, plaid shirts, knit caps and oversized vintage glasses frames made of plastic, to name a few notable recurring items- with things found in thrift stores, inherited from family members or purchased from certain retail establishments favored by the hipster culture, such as American Apparel (Greif, 2010). This aesthetic of dress is typically paired with an affinity for riding bicycles (and certain kinds, such as a fixed-gear), drinking certain inexpensive brands of beer (such as Pabst Blue Ribbon) and smoking certain kinds of cigarettes (like American Spirits). This expanded definition of

preferences is based on my own observations as a member of the same general age group in Austin coupled with the 2010 essay in the New York Times Sunday Book Review section on the "Sociology of the Hipster" by Mark Greif.

There were occasionally a few theater patrons or performers noticeably above the usual age group or of a different racial background or socio-economic status, deduced using visual cues such as mode of dress and accessories such as expensive cell phones, bags, etc.

The predominance of youth among performers and audience members could be attributed to the presence of the University of Texas in Austin, the training-ground nature of the theater, or the simple fact that performing and taking classes requires a time devotion that those with families and/or demanding jobs simply cannot undertake. Most likely it is a combination of these things: students naturally have more free time they can devote to taking improv classes and the majority do not juggle demanding jobs and/or families while in pursuit of their education. This is true particularly if they fit in the aforementioned demographic of the theater's performers, which most undergraduate college students do; a look at the Admissions Research Student Profile Enrolled Freshman Class of 2009 total percentages for automatic admits and other enrolled in the UT freshman class of 2009 shows: 51% were white, 47% were male and 56% self-reported their parents' income as over $80,000 a year. The report for 2008 shows similar numbers, which are also reflected in the latest US Census Bureau information: about 68% of the City of Austin's population is white, about 70% are between the ages of 18 and 65 and the male-to-female ratio is still half-and-half (*Austin (city) QuickFacts*, 2010); the

demographics at ColdTowne reflected these reports, with exception only to fewer females. Confirming this parallel would be a task for future research, of course; I put it here as a possible explanation for the demographics of ColdTowne during the time of my fieldwork.

Fieldwork. Fieldwork for this study was conducted several nights a week from July-September 2009 at ColdTowne Theater in Austin, Texas. Shows attended varied in nature from completely improvisational shows to semi-improvisational sketch shows, stand up and even a gong-based, open-format variety show. ColdTowne shares a building with another local Austin business, I Luv Video, a movie rental store. Patrons of I Luv Video can often be heard through the ceiling of ColdTowne's theater, which sometimes influences performances. The building, at the time of research and the time of this writing, is on Airport Boulevard and 48th street.

All fieldwork was conducted as a participant-observer. A mixture of public performances and closed-to-the-public classes were attended; all classes were training students in improvisational methods. Class observation was restricted to that of more advanced levels in order to maintain the comfort of new performers in the introductory classes, as requested by the theater. After attending and observing only two classes, this was dropped in favor of solely attending live performances due to continual difficulty in scheduling: classes were often cancelled or rescheduled at the last minute with me unable to reach anyone on the phone about it. When I was able to reach my contact at the theater- one of the founding members- he explained this was often typical of classes, which are scheduled to meet once a week for two hours. After spending an hour locked

outside of the theater, in the parking lot, more than once, I decided to switch focus to the richer data available from audience reactions and interplay between performers and audience.

I observed 22 shows during the course of my fieldwork; in some instances, I saw the same one-man show or sketch show twice, but as live performance varies and the audience was different each time, I counted each show separately. For all shows and classes I took note of identifying characteristics of performers, but did not record any names or plan to identify anyone specifically in my work. This was part of my research proposal; I felt that preserving the anonymity of the performers and even audience members would be crucial to presenting the interactions and instances of potentially offensive disaster humor without preconceived notions based on "who said what". I was more concerned with the group than with individuals.

Improvisational shows- or "improv" for short- are comprised of a basic pool of performers who are combined and recombined into different performance groups that go on stage for one scene at a time, until their total performance time slot has come to an end. For example, a group called Magical Cat could be scheduled to perform from 8pm until 8:30pm. Depending on which style of improv they used, different combinations of group members (rarely the entire group at once, except during introductions) would take the stage for one scene at a time until it was 8:30, whether they had tied their storyline up by then or not. Performers were often signaled to leave the stage by use of a repeated dimming of the lights. Occasionally music was used in increasing volume to signal the end of a performance and usher performers off the stage.

Improv contrasts with sketch and other types of shows; while the majority of the shows I observed at ColdTowne were improvisational, some were sketch shows and stand-up and will be noted accordingly. Sketch shows are written and rehearsed beforehand, but performers may improvise small moments within a scene if something that seems to work better within its parameters occurs to them during performance; this definition is partially gleaned from my own performance in sketch shows in the past (which, again, were my initial introduction to ColdTowne). Stand-up is similar in nature to sketch, in that jokes are typically written and rehearsed prior to taking the stage, but some jokes may be improvised on the spot or altered by the performer, often based on current events and/or the energy of the audience.

The gong-based, open-format variety show only happened once during the course of my fieldwork and was held late at night; basically any performer who had stuck around from the previous shows was allowed to take the stage and perform in whatever capacity they wanted- sing, perform stand-up or a monologue, etc- until they were no longer entertaining to the audience and were "gonged" off the stage (these were terms used by that evening's host). The longest-lasting performer then "won" the evening. All of these definitions are derived from my own observations of performances and how performers described their activities during the course of my fieldwork, and these terms will be used in the context of these exact observations, some of which will be further explored in the results section.

Data Collection. Research was conducted using participant-observation. I was previously acquainted with some of the performers at ColdTowne, as I had performed at

the theater myself two years previously in a guest capacity, with an established group (The P! Company) that still continues to perform. I did not consider this a conflict of interest as two years had passed between the times of my guest performances before I began conducting fieldwork for this study. Rather, I considered this small past tie to the theater as a starting point for introduction into this community and a familiarity with the format of the theater and culture of the group that would more likely lead to acceptance of me as a non-threatening presence—and subsequently, the collection of richer data. This proved to be correct, as I was accepted into the group not long after I began conducting fieldwork and even began to be invited to social events outside of the theater, attended by the overlapping groups of performers and students (who, again, were both also often audience members). This caused me to cut the duration of my fieldwork off sooner than I had initially planned to, as I did not want to compromise the nature of my data and find myself questioning the inclusion of something I had overheard at a social event that might have been said in expectation of privacy. Over the course of my research I began to feel accepted as more of a friend and peripheral part of the group (an "eventual student" as performers and current students kept asking me when I was going to start taking classes) rather than just an outsider, a researcher. This happened in spite of the fact that certain performers had nicknames for me that they would use in a playful manner and tone of voice; one in particular would refer to me as "the narc" and would announce my near-nightly presence at the theater in expressions such as "the narc is here!"

The most notable event to foster the feeling that I was growing too close to my subjects and they too comfortable with me, was when I was invited to a performer's

birthday party and included in the champagne toast held for her in the parking lot (which was often used as a gathering place before and after shows and classes, due to the extremely small size of the theater). Only members of the group were present; no "outside" friends arrived during the course of the party or took part in the champagne toast. It was during the course of this social event that I decided I was going to have to end my fieldwork soon, rather than face the complications of trying to carry on a growing social relationship with the performers and students that could have compromised my research. I feel strongly this would have happened, had I continued on in the same manner.

The question of discontinuing the social aspects of my interaction in favor of pursuing solely research is important: first, and most importantly, I felt that I had arrived at a point that I had collected enough data to discontinue fieldwork comfortably. Secondly, I frankly do not feel it would have been possible to separate myself in such a manner and still retain access to the type of rich data I wanted in a theater that small. I would have had to literally ignore and refuse to speak to anyone between shows or before and after them, which simply was not practical in a theater that holds less than fifty people at any given time- including performers and technical support- when at capacity. Interaction would have therefore still been frequent, even if I refused all outside social interactions—which often took place in the parking lot or front lounge area of the theater. There is also the issue of the interactive nature of improv, which would have further complicated any attempts to distance myself.

Indeed the “participant” aspect of my study was chosen due to the interactive nature of many of the theater’s performances—audience members are routinely incorporated into stand-up and used as a source of ideas for improv scenes; both of which I experienced in the course of my fieldwork, due to my constant presence in the audience and the small nature of the theater. Audiences were never very large- sometimes consisting of less than ten people and never more than thirty- and while I tried to keep my participation to a minimum in order to observe the interactions of other patrons with the performers, I would respond to questions directed at the audience if no one else was responding. This was done for the sake of show pacing (if the audience fails to offer any suggestions after a few seconds- an eternity in performance- and audience and performers are both staring at one another, not much interaction is going to happen and no jokes are going to be generated), but more importantly, this action made me a more normal audience participant. It would have been strange for me to attend that many shows and never once have ventured to participate in producing an idea with the rest of the audience; the aim was to participate as a more or less typical audience member.

However, my presence did, at one point, directly affect a stand-up performer’s set. The paraphrased excerpt from my field notes follows:

> The final comic of the night takes the stage; he is the Punchline headliner, though I’m not sure how serious of a title this is. The host mentions something about him being voted the “funniest person in Austin” (I vaguely recall a contest about this) but the hosts here have been known to make up credentials for headliners before. The headliner is the first

> performer to take the stage holding an energy-tea-drink rather than a beer or some other kind of alcoholic beverage. He notices me taking notes in the audience and asks if school has already started for the semester—I answer impulsively, nearly groaning out “yes”. He says this sounds bitter and then asks if I am a student, I answer that yes, I am a grad student and he asks if I am doing work right then (which I obviously am) and everyone starts laughing.

That however, was not the end of the interaction. It went deeper when he decided to keep asking me questions about what I was doing and appeared to decide to use this as part of his stand-up; a recurring call-back. The exchange and its implications for me as a researcher from my field notes:

> This is a slightly tricky situation for me, an interesting toeing of the lines of “participant-observation” because he starts asking questions about what sort of work I am doing and when I say I am working on my thesis he responds, “Wait a minute we have to discuss this”. He continues to make comments throughout his set such as “don’t know what that means about my *identity*” that are clearly related to my thesis, since I told him the title and the [proposed] topic. I don’t feel that knowing I was taking notes ultimately affected his performance; as his set went on he seemed to shake off what little shock he had and delved into the rest of his material easily. This might have been different with a less experienced performer.

As is evident from the paraphrasing of my field notes, the very act of taking them became a center of focus in a performer's stand-up set. Fortunately, as the headliner of that night's show he had more experience and was not as likely to be shaken by someone taking notes and making a critical observation of their performance as it happened. As I mention in the notes, it could have distracted a newer performer to the point of interfering negatively with their set, which is of course something researchers strive to avoid, but is always a risk with this sort of presence. This was a risk I was confident in taking, however, due to the nature of the data I wanted to collect.

I chose an ethnographic approach, as Mintz (2008) speaks about the "crucial elements of the story of who is responsible for what themes" (p. 285) that are only available through this method of research, in addition to the call for more study of live audience response in humor research. I thought this would be the best way to capture the richest data of the joke typology of ColdTowne, and the acceptance or rejection of the appearance of disaster jokes by the audience.

The interactive nature of improv led me to choose to approach the study as not only an observer ethnographer, but also a participant. The nature of ethnography itself leads the researcher to be involved in the group to some degree; openly embracing that you will, by your very presence and even with minimal actions, be influencing the events around you is an aspect of research I find it important to embrace, especially in a situation as unique as this one.

The generally homogeneous nature of comedy- predominantly young white males (Hertz, 2010)- is often remarked upon in popular media; the makeup of ColdTowne

performers does not much stray from this demographic, as noted in the Participants section. While still a subject of note (and one I will address further later), the main focus of this study was on the prevalence of disaster humor in the comedy culture of ColdTowne. Indeed I noticed during the course of my fieldwork that few topics seemed to be off limits in terms of material to performers—and the audience was poorly receptive of even fewer topics. This last aspect is what made the observation of the occurrence of disaster humor particularly engaging and challenging—and set me to define what the parameters and definition of disaster humor would be, in terms of this study.

Additionally I began to collect instances of disaster humor as they appeared on Twitter; as this was not originally a planned part of my research, I note mostly how Twitter might be used as a tool for research in the future, in the discussion. There was no conflict of interest in this collection as all jokes collected were, at the time of collection, from public and open accounts.

Data Analysis.

Analysis of Field Notes. Notes were taken in the field by hand in the darkened theater, as previously mentioned. These truncated notes were then typed and expanded further as soon as possible—typically within 72 hours of the initial note-taking to preserve as much accuracy as possible in the recordings. In total, 69 pages of expanded, singled-spaced notes were typed, both to expand on initial observations I had time to write during performances, and as a means of backing up my raw data.

These notes were then hand-coded using a color system to denote 13 separate categories, including:

- Description of the theater
- Description of theater patrons
- Description of performers
- My descriptions (memories and actions etc)
- Show information and advertising
- Feelings and impressions
- Hypothesis and/or conjectures based on data I was gathering
- Description of stage action
- Possible instances of disaster humor
- Interaction between myself and performers
- Mechanics of comedy (observed and recalled from previous performance)
- Cultural rules of ColdTowne
- Stage dialogue

I chose "possible instances of disaster humor" by highlighting all jokes about violence of any nature or any large-scale event, historical or present; I also pulled out instances of what Kuipers (2006) dubbed "transgressive humor"—any jokes that were of a "tasteless ethnic and sexual" nature. I then assessed each individually to determine their fitness as disaster jokes, the notable instances of which will be discussed in detail in my findings. This created the humor typology of the disaster joke at ColdTowne.

Laughter and other measurement tools. Here we must take a moment to discuss the use of laughter as a measurement tool in the course of my research; it was the best I

had available to me in a small, dark theater when I was often also engaged in taking as many notes as I could during performances. The moods of the audience could best be measured in this way, followed by other auditory cues such as groaning or vocal displays of disapproval, though none were very harsh in nature (nobody started any fights or stormed out of the theater, for example).

The mood of the crowd could be felt to change during moments of extreme discomfort: silence took the place of the usual low-hum of the crowd, accompanied by shifting in seats. The looks on faces across the room (as much as light would allow) at times like these ranged from the carefully neutral to the outright disturbed. At some jokes the audience would smile more than laugh; as psychologists Sroufe and Waters (1976) warn, "smiling and laughter are not simply a continuum . . .not all smiles are small laughs" (as cited in Latta, 1998, p. 12). This made the presence of smiles and definite absence of laughter a good indicator that a joke had not gone over as well; indeed it is also possible to spot a smile of discomfort on someone's face, clearly different from one of polite response. All persons who have experienced an uncomfortable social situation know that smiles can be used to attempt to alleviate discomfort or awkwardness in addition to their expected default of expressing happiness or amusement; this is equally true of audience remembers reacting to controversial joking subject matter. Thus paying attention to these cues was useful for me in analyzing the response to a particular joke.

Any other form of measurement- such as a survey or rating on a Likert scale- simply was not feasible for a study meant to capture the sense of community between performers and audience members as it unfolded naturally. Ruch (2008) notes that

“questionnaires of sense of humor are typically blind to the dark side of humor”, as our society still regards humor as a virtue (p. 46)—and dark humor is precisely what I wanted to concentrate on. I could think of no way to implement a scale or questionnaire study without disturbing the audience’s natural reactions to the performances. This is why the participant-observation method of ethnography was selected with laughter and other vocal cues subsequently elected as measurement tools.

With this feel for the research venue, participants involved and methods undertaken in research- as well as those used for analysis- established, let us move forward into the basis for disaster humor that I was operating on in the field.

Findings from the Field: ColdTowne

Every person has an idea of what is funny and of what others will also find funny—which as you find quickly in live humor performances, can be an extremely incorrect assumption. Often in order to find where the line lies as to the inappropriate nature of a joke, the performer has to cross it (as with the example of Gottfried cited earlier), and not always intentionally. Live comedy is challenging and definitely an emotional risk for performers, who might think they have the mood of an audience and then cross over that line to find they did not, or that they have lost it. A comedian has to "know" an audience and the culture of that audience, depending on the performance location—and here it must be asked: should it only be qualified as disaster humor if someone is offended by it, in one way or another? Even if no one in the immediate audience is offended and the joke goes over well (or well enough that the performer is not booed offstage), should it still be qualified as disaster humor if you know that someone *would* most likely be offended by it? I used these questions as a starting point in my effort to explore the typology of jokes within the confines of the Austin comedy community and more specifically as it occurred within ColdTowne Theater, as previous research had not addressed this question of what exactly disaster humor is within a particular culture (Davies, 1998; Kuipers, 2006; Latta, 1998; Raskin, 2008).

We have already established that a joke about a major natural event, such as Hurricane Katrina or the Holocaust qualifies as disaster humor—but what about the personal struggle with disease, disability or the death of a famous performer who many considered a kind of national treasure? Would jokes about Helen Keller or Michael

Jackson then fall under the category of disaster humor? Should we categorize only jokes about Helen as disaster humor, because it is reprehensible to joke about the disabled, but not Michael Jackson, because public sentiment may hold that celebrities are national public property who relinquish their right to be human when they become famous?

James Loewen discusses the nature of schoolchildren's jokes in his 1995 book *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, saying "students poke fun at the goody-goodiest of them all by passing on Helen Keller jokes. In doing so, school children are not poking fun at a disabled person, they are deflating a pretentious symbol that is too good to be real (p. 36)." This is another example of using humor as a means of acting out against expectations for how to receive information and behave as a result; the children are expected to learn about Helen Keller and follow her inspiring example, but instead they mock her because she is presented in a way that makes her too good to be real. The fact remains, however, that they are actively making fun of a disabled person- even if they do not perceive her as a "real" person- and it is only this deeper analysis that takes the focus from that fact.

Oring discusses joke analysis further in the Anthropology and Folklore section of *The Humor Primer* (2008), focusing on Dundes' work with dead-baby jokes, which exist in the realm of sick humor, which overlaps with disaster humor in some areas:

> It was Dundes who insisted that jokes had to be interpreted and not merely recorded. His view of the sick humor of the dead-baby joke cycle (e.g., Q: What is red and sits in the corner? A: A baby chewing on razor blades) was that it expressed hostility and resentment against babies. The recourse to contraception

> and eventually abortion from the 1960s through the 1980s – when the joke cycle ended – made people anxious and guilty about their complicity in preventing or destroying babies. The telling of dead baby jokes which dehumanized babies relieved their tellers and listeners of some of this guilt (Dundes 1987 [1979]: 3–14). Dundes's theory of joking is a cathartic one: through jokes people express repressed sexual or aggressive wishes and relieve themselves of their anxieties. This follows Sigmund Freud's theory that jokes "make possible the expression of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way" (Freud 1960 [1900]: 101).

Dundes's (and many other's) catharsis (Ferguson & Ford, 2008; Freud, 1905 as cited in Ruch, 2008), Kuipers's (2002) argument for media over-exposure leading to emotional rebellion and Kapchan's (1995) notion of agency in performance, all come together as the starting analytical point for instances of disaster humor at ColdTowne.

Disaster Humor at ColdTowne

Instances of Disaster Humor. Fifty-five instances of jokes and running jokes that could potentially be disaster humor were separated out from the main body of the field notes and further coded for content; ultimately ten were determined to be clear instances of disaster jokes. The case for or against classifying other borderline jokes will be made successively. Smaller reoccurring categories of jokes included: loss, racism and religion (blasphemy) with the overwhelming major arc of violence encompassing nearly every example. Violence was thus determined to be a major contributing undertone to all instances of disaster jokes and consequently of disaster humor at ColdTowne. The term disaster encompasses both natural disasters and those that are man-made, such as war. Many jokes that fell under racist labels concerned historical events such as the Vietnam War, or violent racist acts of the past or present (some referenced actual events, others were fictional improvisations); these jokes are made with the understanding that the audience would find the possibility of the performer actually holding these views and articulating them in this manner onstage to be so absurd and impossible that saying it then becomes funny. This coincides with Oring's (2003) observation that it is possible "modern societies are more disposed towards ironic modes of communication" (as cited in Oring, 2008, p. 186) particularly as they relate to humor. In a place less populated by the young, highly educated and liberally minded, such jokes would be seen in a very different light indeed; this concept of irony in humor as a modern mode of communication is also discussed by Lewis (2006) at length in *Cracking Up*.

Racist jokes. Some instances of racist jokes are complete non sequiturs, such as the occasion when one performer ("Devin") yelled out "I hate slaves!" during a scene without any prompting from another performer or from the suggested topic for the scene. In this instance Devin- a large, white male with a beard- garnered enough laughs that he repeated it at several different points, continuing to use it as a non sequitur. No part of the scene was ever built by another performer to make this outburst make any kind of sense in any context of their time on stage. Devin used it again as a final callback at the end of the performance ("I really hate slaves") to great response from the audience. The word choice here is interesting to note; he chose to say- and most likely not consciously because choices are made in a split-second on stage- to yell out "slaves" instead of "slavery". The latter would have been a straightforward way to declare against the institution of slavery, but he instead went for the more overtly offense, and ironic way, to communicate this instead.

That this outrageous and racist joke was accepted by the audience and included in the humor culture of this particular theater is clear, but the bigger question is: does it count as disaster humor? It is not clear-cut and rests on the periphery, under the classification of such humor "flavors" as bitter, salty or dark (Ruch, 2008, p. 21) but not obviously a "disaster" as it is typically defined.

This is difficult in particular because while racism alone does not equate intended violence (it *could* include that, but could also amount to dislike and avoidance), slavery itself does have very negative connotations surrounding all of the violence that was inherent in its practice historically, especially in the United States. Even if he was

ironically condemning the practice, does simply using that word, then, call up an intrinsic level of violence from the past that cannot be ignored? Is it only funny when used by a big, white, bearded guy because in a young liberal town like Austin, it seems impossible for someone to actually hold this viewpoint, express it onstage during improv, and *mean* it? Would he make this same joke in a different town with different demographics?

I believe that it did work here specifically in this town and theater because there is a perceived level of absurdity behind it that makes it okay, even though the audience still knows it is offensive. It could be that the audience was laughing at political correctness, at the absurdity of those viewpoints once being commonly held and/or the knowledge that some people do still hold them—or a mixture of all of those things. They did, however, laugh.

Previous researchers have looked at clear-cut major disaster events such as the Challenger explosion and the events of September 11, 2001 at the World Trade Center; events that are put down as violent disasters in our history that completely captured the attention of the public and the media to the point that people remember where they were when they heard the news about each event happening. As disaster humor is thought to be a recent development in humor (Kuipers, 2002), few researchers have looked beyond these more contemporary events to instances of historical disaster. We know the abuse and atrocities that occurred when slavery was practiced were violent in nature; the practice was abuse on the basest level. The audience accepted jokes about this from the young, white male performers of ColdTowne because of the absurdist quality, because it seems, at present time, completely absurd that anyone could have condoned, let alone

participated in, a practice that subverted basic human rights so extensively and horribly. But why did the performers *make* these jokes? In this case, the use of joking about matters that happened long before these performers were even born might serve as a way to process the past actions of our forefathers and our own generation's rejection of them now—not just for the performers, but perhaps for the audience too. The absurdity is still at play here. We cannot believe that humans used to treat other humans in such a way because of physical differences. We hold a fear that had we been born in that time, in that society, we too might have deemed such treatment and behavior toward fellow human beings as acceptable. The argument can be made that these are not conscious motives; in a Freudian approach it is cognitive dissonance dealt with subconsciously via joking. But while all of this may be true and humor has been proven as a tool for dealing with psychological trauma (Ruch, 2008), that does not make this joke or most similar jokes disaster humor. They remain in the periphery under the labels of dark, sick and politically incorrect—but not disaster. They are still a basis from which to understand this type of humor, however. They are still outrageous.

Historical jokes. In the case of a Vietnam War joke (the performer identified himself as a Vietnam veteran at the beginning of the scene) that became reoccurring during a performance, I again did not ultimately code it as disaster humor. The reoccurring joke was that the performer- in this case, again, a young (obviously far too young to have actually been in the war, which was part of the joke) white male- had learned only one phrase of mock-Vietnamese during the time he served in the war: "Me hung so straight". This took the joke from being topically about what was clearly a major

historical disaster to a racist language joke, or mock language joke (see, for example, Mie Hiramoto's 2011 work "Is Dat Dog You're Eating?") more appropriately classified as politically incorrect humor than disaster humor. The audience reception of this joke was favorable (no outright boos or silence in response to it) but not as enthusiastic as their response to some of the other jokes he told. This could be attributed to the content or it could be because they just did not find this particularly funny. Unfortunately there was no way to tell for certain without asking them, so we will approach a much more clear-cut example.

The clearest example of an overwhelming, non-negotiable disaster of the kind mentioned previously, that occurred during the window of my research, was the performance of a sketch show written around the events in *The Diary of Anne Frank*, reimaged with Anne in the voice and guise of a "Valley Girl" and Peter as a stereotypical teenage "bad boy" in a leather jacket. Both roles were clearly meant to play off of their ages and how they might have been if born in another time or place. An excerpt from my field notes sets the scene and illustrates how this particularly touchy subject was approached by the- again, all white, young and male (except for the white actress playing Anne)- comedy troupe:

> The show has been advertised as Anne Frank; it's set to music from the early 90's, a song that was the theme song for *Dawson's Creek* and is meant to emphasized teenage angst using Anne as its vehicle [mirroring the angst *Dawson's Creek* was known for]. The voiceovers were done with a German accent, but the actress playing Anne in the sketch didn't

use one. She was dressed in something period passable; the boy playing Peter was dressed like an angry youth rocker who didn't care for authority or anything to "tie him down". He put on a leather jacket for their "prom" and asked Anne but ended up taking her sister Margot who was played by a boy in a dress and a wig, which [the actor playing Margot] spent most of the time combing when he wasn't waggling his fingers at Peter or painting his toenails. Prom had toilet paper streamers and was held in the Kitchen/Living room/Dining room areas.

Notable lines from the characters included the following:

Peter: "We're the only other crazy kids in this attic under the age of 35."
Repeated Line: "It's still whispering time."
Anne: "I will always remember Peter even if I never see another boy again in my whole life."

That last line of Anne's is especially horrible in light of the fact that the audience knows the only boys she ever saw after being taken to Auschwitz were likely the concentration camp guards.

Lines like this and their implications were starkly contrasted with the romance and teen angst angles played upon in this reimagining of Anne Frank. In the course of the show they have Peter write a rock song ("the guitar parts must be imagined for obvious

volume reasons”) that he plays for Anne, which she obviously desperately wants to be about her, but that that ends up being about his cat, Buttercup. The jokes work because they are about rather innocuous parts of the situation these families are in—that first crush when you are a teenager, juxtaposed with the bad boy rocker stereotype popular in literature and movies, and the imagined annoyance (and actual terror) of having to be absolutely quiet all hours of the day. Even if the reason is not innocuous- your life depends on your near-silence- the audience imagines if they were in this situation, they could conceivably make those sorts of jokes about it, to get through it. The fact that the audience and writers hold the knowledge of Anne’s final fate as part of the Holocaust is what makes it disaster humor.

The iconic, often-imagined aspect of Anne writing in her diary is made ridiculous in this sketch by the actress choosing a wild, scribbling style of pantomime to emphasize her anger at various events rather than attempting to convey a more realistic writing pantomime; it serves to emphasize the ridiculousness of the angst we all harbor during our youth that the sketch writers were trying to play up with choice of song etc. It is a commentary on current teenage pop culture contrasted with the harsh reality of this particular girl from the past. We honor her for her gravity because she never really got the chance to be silly. This performance, in making her ridiculous, strives to let her be average (at least in a modern sense) just for a little while. The audience laughs at the intended points when the performers pause for laughs; no one acts offended by the subject matter.

In the course of my research in the field, I found that disaster jokes made about particularly touchy subjects like the Holocaust were successful if they played up these kinds of smaller, human or more absurd parts of what happened rather than the disaster itself. We can laugh at typical teenage behavior more easily than Gilbert Gottfried cavalierly recalling a plane crashing into a building so soon after it has actually happened. We remain touchy about certain events even now, a decade or decades after their passing. A study on Auschwitz jokes, for example, makes only one reference to a joke about Anne Frank and even though it is anti-Semitic in nature (as it discusses turning her and other Holocaust victims into soap), the overwhelming message of it is to leave Anne alone, to let her rest in peace (Dundes & Hauschild, 1983, p. 253).

Only one joke was made in reference to the events of 9/11 during the course of my fieldwork in 2009 and occurred as a casual reference within an improv scene where a character (again played by a young, white male performer) relates that while mowing his lawn, he runs over a newspaper and delivers the line “it was like Ground Zero!” The audience did not react to it at all, positively or negatively; perhaps they froze. This might be evidence for media desensitization surrounding a disaster event, but with only one instance occurring in the course of my research I do not have enough to substantiate or disprove previous claims about the affect of media overexposure and subsequent desensitization as it pertains to humor (Kupiers, 2002; Oring 1987) specifically at ColdTowne. Was the audience still sensitive to 9/11? Were they just sick of hearing about it in any form, even years later? Was the image of the flying paper too close to the

events of what really happened- all the papers from the fallen towers swirling around New York- for it to be funny?

Comedian David Cross made a 9/11 joke that was well received by its audience, as he related on the WNYC radio show referenced previously: “So I was, um, I was in New York for September 11th—or as I like to refer to it, the week football stopped.” (*Comedy since 9/11:*, 2011). This joke centers on the frustration with being pushed out of normal life and longing for things to return to normal (as well as touching on the shallow things we find important in normal times) when a disaster like this happens—possibly why it went over well with its audience, when the lawnmower joke met silence and Gottfried’s joke disapproval; timing and venue do not seem to matter as much as the nature of the joke when it comes to highly sensitive events such as 9/11 or the Holocaust.

It is of note that none of these jokes were about the race or religion of the 9/11 attackers, which would be expected if these types of jokes were made solely with the aim to “other” the butt of them as a means of catharsis and elevating the joke maker, as in some interpretations of disparagement humor (Ferguson & Ford, 2008). The “othering” and out-group/in-group confirmations of disparagement humor do not have to be racist in nature. It is also possible the catharsis is meant to relieve the tension of wanting to return to normal life, and/or shaking off the horror that has been experienced.

Violence. I found violence expressed specifically in several categories I identified during coding: death (such as murder, suicide, or the result of a natural or man-made disaster) and abuse (towards women, partners of either gender, children or animals) in addition to the previously discussed “natural violence” inherent in natural disasters. An

outlying category of periods of human suffering was identified that overlapped in some ways—wars intrinsically involve violence but an era such as the Great Depression, for instance, was not generally violent unless citing a specific instance of riot or suicide.

Every joke that involved violent content did not get coded as disaster humor, but was used as a starting point for classification. Events that truly seem to fit without being questioned- the Challenger explosion, the events of 9/11, something like the Hindenburg or sinking of the Titanic- are major occurrences that capture the attention of the global news media and the public; these are the “classic” topics for disaster humor. Things like abusive behavior toward partners and children, murder and suicide are all things that underlie our society but that get treated as separate events, each one highlighted or ignored by the media and the public in turn. What connects us in times of great disaster is our humanity, and the fact that those events remind us on a basic level of what we fear: our own end and the destruction of what we value. In this way, themes of violence that include abuse and death can easily be extended to every one of us. We all unite in the suffering of others when it is brought to our attention, unless we are a psychopath.

It was with this universal link in mind that I examined each joking instance pulled from my field notes and made the determination of whether or not it qualified as disaster humor and ultimately establish a spectrum of acceptable humor and a typology of jokes at ColdTowne. Unfortunately, violent events that have become common mentions on evening news broadcasts- murders, rapes, assault, animal cruelty and theft- were often used as throwaway lines in scenes that did not have enough depth and/or impact to be coded as disaster humor.

Lines and scenes such as (all pulled from transcribed Field Notes):

- "Little boys are full of hope when they go to church—hope that they won't be raped by the priests again."
- One quick scene revolves around abortion and "getting the next one free" if his girlfriend aborts the baby she has; the performer then makes it a point to say this is "part of the joke" as he is actually single
- Knock-knock abortion joke: "Knock knock!" "Who's there?" "You'll never know."
- In one scene, doctors take flaming tequila shots in a burn ward
- Another scene in a vignette-type show features a husband and wife team who make snuff films with unsuspecting victims; in this case, the scene never really resolves itself into a working plotline

These were not ultimately coded because they were not fully developed ideas to analyze or the subject matter- such as religion- came with its own history of humor study outside of disaster humor. In any case, the fact that these were mostly throwaway lines or abandoned plots is disquieting in that it indicates that humans require higher amplification of violence to notice and care, and perhaps serves as another point toward media oversaturation of these kinds of events.

Child Abuse and Molestation. The most poignant scene that involved child abuse or implied molestation took place during a class I was observing where the instructor told the student performers to focus on enriching character relationships and exploring how

initial set-up of characters could make a scene more powerful. The two male performers (from this point, unless specified, the reader may assume that any male performer is both white and relatively young) partnered for this scene were acting out the parts of a Boy Scout and his troupe leader; the leader was trying to warn the child about how dangerous he was in terms of potential molestation with the "child" missing all of the insinuations the audience (me) could not help but pick up on. Part of this stemmed from the fact that the child was engaged in the act of arc-welding a scaled-down guillotine to behead his younger brother with. The child then talked about putting a sticky note on his younger brother's face saying "I'm here!" in thought-bubble form as an answer to when his mom came home and asked "Where's Zachary?"—an incredibly morbid mental picture for an audience, which all the fellow student-performers watching readily accepted with laughter.

The most disturbing moment in the scene (and the funniest as far as the student-performers were concerned, when the instructor asked them at the close of the scene) occurred when the performer acting as the scout master placed his hand on the child's leg while the child was working on the guillotine—and let the touch linger for longer than any casual, appropriate touch might happen. This lent an air of painful realism to the moment and the feeling of discomfort was palpable throughout the room (you could see people leaning away from this action)—but the laughter was also very strong.

However, as poignant and stark as that moment in the scene was, the scene as a whole was ultimately not coded as disaster humor. Building on Kuipers's (2002) basic expectations for disaster humor (which were in turn built on Oring's 1987 work), this

joke was about an anonymous child, not a major news event with a particular victim to focus on. More importantly, this joke was not notably amoral—a parameter set by Kuipers (2002) for disaster humor and mentioned in the opening of this work: the man intending to commit the molestation knew it was wrong and was attempting to warn the child. Much like the racist jokes cited earlier, jokes about child molestation exist certainly on the continuum of sick humor, of dark humor, but do not extend to disaster humor *unless* they are centered on a specific, high profile event.

Violence Against Women. Scenes involving references to violence against women occurred throughout the course of my fieldwork but no direct violence ever occurred—such as one performer slapping another during a scene, for example. (There was the notable instance of a male performer actually feeling up a female performer on stage during the course of a show; she did not openly object, but the audience could perceive her discomfort through her body language and responded by laughing nervously. This served to reinforce the male dominance of the comedy community: no matter how close or what sort of relationship those two performers shared off the stage, it was embarrassing for the female performer to be fondled in front of an audience, no matter how small. The discomfort of both performer and audience was palpable; she moved stiffly, the audience tittered instead of outright laughing and there were even a few squirms and gasps.) I have pulled the most notable examples from my field notes of violence against women to be further analyzed here.

A one-man show called *Dear Frailty* was put on by one of the senior-most performers at ColdTowne (who also serves as an instructor of their classes) during the

duration of my fieldwork. He is slightly older than the average ColdTowne performer and dark-haired; we will call him Drake. One of the scenes of his show involved acting out the filming of an online dating video of an older man who had a hook for a hand. During the scene, Drake insinuated that he was abusive toward his previous wife, with the hook, and that general abusive behavior would be probable within any dating relationship he had subsequently. I saw *Dear Frailty* twice, and each time Drake's scene as the man-with-a-hook-for-a-hand talking about his abusive antics was well received from the audience, possibly because the insinuation was that anyone who responded to this type of video would know what they were getting into. This does bring up an uncomfortable feeling of victim blaming, which might be accidental or could have been meant as underlying social commentary in the show.

A second notable scene on violence against women happened at the end of an improv show and was performed by that night's headlining group and their featured female guest performer (they were otherwise all-male), who was present from out of town. This scene revolved around women not being able to avoid rape in Alaska if they did not have a man to protect them; the female guest-performer acted as a hysterical young woman trying to pick up a man in the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to pretend to be her husband because otherwise "the band of rapists waiting in the parking lot will certainly get me". This scene was mildly well received by the audience as measured by the intensity and frequency of laughter, but reception increased once they left the DMV and rapists behind for jokes about hunting moose in a warehouse.

Neither of these two scenes I have mentioned were particularly long or involved, which in a way serves as social commentary on a problem that is both rampant and widely ignored in day-to-day life in our society. This is especially interesting in light of the male demographics overwhelmingly present in comedy and consistent at ColdTowne; I was not looking for this gender gap and its implications, but it keeps popping up again and again on its own and most certainly deserves further exploration.

It is to be noted that only one instance of a woman abusing a man in a relationship occurred in the course of my research, during a sketch show put on by the founding members of the P! Company (the very ones I used to guest-perform with) and others. During the show, it was insinuated that one of the characters was being abused by his girlfriend and his male friends attempt to stage an intervention for him. The show was performed more than once and I saw two of these performances—interestingly enough, one featured an ending where the character was indeed being abused by his girlfriend, who killed off his friends one by one during the show. The alternate ending, performed the second time I saw it, involved an elaborate set of homemade traps set out by the main character, resulting in mishaps that killed off his friends and found his girlfriend innocent of any wrongdoing. The second ending received a better response from the audience; it seems that at ColdTowne at least, gender role-reversal in terms of abuse (as it pertains to the number of abuse jokes made during performances) is not as funny as "traditional" jokes of abuse toward women.

While these were certainly notable expressions of the problem of violence against women, this was again the case of a social problem that ultimately is not a disaster in the

sense it has thus far been defined. The argument for a collective gathering around a social problem is not really possible in the way that it is following a major natural disaster or collective mourning experience. Rallying people seems to require the over-exposure in the media mentioned by Kuipers (2002) and the shock of a high-profile case with a victim to relate to—and a system to rebel against, when it tells the audience how to feel for the victim, over and over. In a horrifying way, unless it was a specific, real-life crime that ended in death and was alluded to during the course of one of these scenes, the attention and outcry surrounding either kind of abusive event illustrated would not happen in a way that would qualify it as a disaster.

Suicide. A similar widespread social problem not often spoken of is suicide. During a show one night, a female performer (young, white and dark-haired) made a series of jokes acting out the role of a "suicide coach" teaching her client (a male performer) how best to carry out the act of ending his life. It was not based on any real life person's suicide or murder-suicide.

This group's performance style was a vignette, weaving many different scenes together, and the suicide coach was one they kept returning to. It was obviously meant to be a play on a "life coach" and so got a good reaction from the audience; life coaches are often regarded as something you have in your life if you have too much money and too little internal guidance (Pawlowski, 2007).

Another scene from *Dear Frailty* had Drake impersonating an old woman from the Depression Era, making jokes about her first husband "Phineas Window, inventor of the window" who eventually jumped out of his own creation—and into a group of

schoolchildren. This got a fantastic laugh during both performances of the show that I saw.

In this case, the first joke was not coded as disaster humor while the second was. The first dealt with suicide as dark humor, involving one individual, anonymous person. Aside from the argument of universal death connecting everyone, there is not a strong enough tie to make this disaster humor. In the case of the second joke, however, it references what was a reoccurring event during the depression—that of people who had once been wealthy (as a great inventor might) taking their own lives because they had lost everything they had. Although there are actually only two documented cases of someone jumping out of a window on Wall Street during the stock market crash that preceded the Great Depression (Lowenthal, 1987), it is such a pervasive myth that it has the same heightened sense of overexposure found in news coverage—and it is particularly salient now that America is experiencing another economic downturn. Although the rest of the circumstances surrounding this were obviously ridiculous and false, in this instance the lack of a particular victim to relate to works in the joke's favor by replacing that role with the fictitious Mr. Window invented by Drake. The historical viability of the event remained strong enough to code the joke as disaster humor, no matter that it is actually overblown.

Thus we seem to be arriving at certain qualifications to code a joke as disaster humor at ColdTowne: a collective sense of emotion around an event amplified by its comprehensive nature—and often by the media. A single assault or death of a loved one would therefore not be coded as disaster humor, while a highly publicized assault or

death of a celebrity (possibly even a victim who becomes a sort of celebrity over coverage of the crime committed) would be coded as disaster humor.

Celebrity death as disaster humor. The death of pop music icon Michael Jackson during my fieldwork allowed me a unique opportunity to explore the possibility of celebrity death as disaster humor. If we operate within the framework of death as a universally feared human experience we all aim to dissolve our fear of as best we can, death of a beloved famous personality can be accepted as a disaster. There is a sense of community felt in their passing by all of their admirers and fans. When Princess Diana died "people mourned the loss of an international celebrity like they mourned the loss of a family member or friend" (Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea, 2003, p. 588). The psychological motivation for this stems from what is known as a *parasocial relationship* as defined by Horton & Wohl in 1956: a sense of intimacy developed by part of a television audience through repeated exposure to television personalities on various programs (as cited in Brown et al., 2003). Brown et al. (2003) extended the concept of parasocial interaction to cover forms of media that have emerged since the term was coined and acknowledged the power they can have in influencing the audience- to champion a celebrity's charities and causes, to resent the intrusion of the media (paradoxically, it would seem as this is how they have come to "know" them)- the natural conclusion of which, it would seem, is to mourn them as they would a friend.

For the general public who may not consider themselves fans, the death of a celebrity personality is jarring in that it serves as a reminder that everyone is subject to mortality, even the wealthy and revered. Those especially affected (in a parasocial

relationship with a particular celebrity) might regard someone like Michael Jackson as not just a pioneer in the music industry, but also as a national treasure because of his work and/or his melodrama. The fact that he died before reaching old age brings together those likeminded in feelings of strong emotional loss; he died before his true worth as a performer and contributor to art could be realized.

I argue therefore, that jokes made following the death of Jackson do count as disaster humor and were subsequently coded as such. The disaster humor label can therefore be extended to other joking instances surrounding prominent cases of celebrity death, such as the aforementioned Princess Diana.

Specific jokes made by a female performer further illustrate this point: during one scene she responded to a joke about the death of Jackson ("the only good thing is that MTV played music videos again for a few days") from a fellow performer with the fact that she "wasn't over the deaths of [Princess] Diana or Liberace either" trailed by a remark later in the performance that she was "on a bad date the night of Diana's death and happy to have an excuse to be upset and go home early".

This concept was fully accepted by the audience, as measured by their laughter as each of these jokes was made. The work of Brown et al. (2003) confirms the idea that someone could be affected enough by the death of someone they have never met to need to take time to mourn- collectively or not- because they held such a prominent place in the collective psyche, via media exposure. The audience clearly could relate, or at least accept, this idea, as they responded positively to the female performer's jokes.

There was a gender caveat I noticed in this exchange however; it was a male performer who made the joke about MTV during his stand-up set and it was a female performer (the headliner of this particular night's stand-up, in fact) who made the joke about not being over any of these celebrities' deaths. Bocarnea, Quicke & Quicke (1998) and Singhal & Rogers (1999) have supported the "influence of gender on affective involvement with celebrities" (as cited in Brown et al., 2003, p. 592) and Brown et al. (2003) further support this, noting gender as a major variable associated with people's celebrity involvement, as "women the same age as Princess Diana generally had a stronger attachment to her than others" (p. 600).

This does, however, coincide with the current societal gender stereotype of women being "more emotional" and this particular female performer seems to emulate this and further stereotypes. She made several cat lady jokes during her set, centering on dying alone with cats. She was dressed in oddly patterned, ill-fitting clothes and was wearing blue eye shadow that went out of style decades before. As this was the only time I saw her perform (but not the only time I saw her at the theater; she seemed casually dressed in the usual style of theater patrons on those occasions) I was unsure if this was a look she typically cultivated as a performer or had selected it that night to go along with her specific set as the stereotype of the kind of woman who would die alone with cats and could not get over the death of celebrities she had never personally known.

This sort of approach might seem to undermine my argument that celebrity death is, in fact, a collaboratively and sincerely mourned event in modern culture, but I think it actually serves to strengthen it; what else do we do when things are true and sit

uncomfortably and unacknowledged in the back of our minds than find a way to express it in humor? ColdTowne performers certainly had an excellent way of bringing these latent, uncomfortable issues to the forefront of the audiences'- and this researcher's- mind.

The Too Soon Rule. In the realm of the offensive joke- as Kuipers (2002) reminds us, disaster humor is always deliberately offensive- there exists the unwritten statute of limitation on making jokes about serious events. You will often hear someone crack a joke about a recent disaster followed by the joke-teller asking "too soon"? This is a means of acknowledging the sensitive nature of the event, at least in terms of timing, while obviously still going ahead with the joke. This I have dubbed the "Too Soon Rule". It is an idea widespread on the Internet and in popular media. One example includes the panel held in Pittsburg on September 9, 2011 entitled "Too Soon?: Humor, Art & Media in a Post-9/11 World" ("Too soon?: Humor,," 2011), an event that was most likely slightly more refined than Gilbert Gottfried's "Too Soon" video filmed for the humor web site Funny or Die. The video features Gottfried in costume making jokes after major historical disasters throughout time- The Hindenburg, JFK's assassination, Lincoln's assassination and more- each followed by voices responding "Too Soon!" (Gottfried, Carter, Ingram, Corirossi, & Perez, n.d.). I also found common use of "Too Soon" in the Twitter samples I collected for reference. Further data collection in other comedy communities would be necessary to determine this, along with Internet collection and date references, all of which were beyond the scope of this work, but will be touched upon as recommendations for future work.

The Too Soon Rule in itself does not tell you enough about whether or not the joke a person made will go over well or be considered too offensive (it would well have been appropriate for Gottfried's 9/11 joke, but Gottfried is unapologetic in his attempts to overthrow the unspoken lines in comedy); the Holocaust occurred more than sixty years ago but making fun of Anne Frank still does not sit well with many modern audiences. Even if they laugh, you can still feel an undercurrent of discomfort in the room.

As for the Too Soon Rule in action during my research, the first example occurred one night during a show when someone started calling out the death of Michael Jackson as a suggested topic for a scene, followed by several voices responding loudly with "TOO SOON!" The Too Soon Rule applies to audience interactions with one another in addition to their interactions with performers onstage.

The best example of a performer's use of the Too Soon Rule during the course of my research was an outburst during a scene, this instance also involving the death of Michael Jackson: "Look at me! I'm MJ- except I'm alive! Too soon? Too soon?!" He cut off the audience's chance to react by engaging the rule himself, letting everyone know that while he was aware of the volatile nature of the joke he was making, he was going to do it anyway—and this was the only variety of "apology" he was willing to make: an admission of it. This certainly lends support to the idea of using jokes for defiance, but also maintaining social order within the theater, as suggested by Fine and De Soucey (2005), by making an admission that the subject matter is known to be inappropriate.

Of note is the fact that during the progression of my fieldwork, I noticed that, at least in improv shows, recent disasters were not delved into with the same depth and

extensive social commentary as were horrific events of the past; stand-up and sketch shows are, as noted earlier, pre-written to a certain extent, so the material is carefully controlled ahead of time, while improv is completely spontaneous. This indicates that performers are willing to tackle difficult historical subject matter with forethought and perhaps are not solely pursing shock value in their spontaneous jokes. The Holocaust was particularly featured as humorous material in one of the pre-written sketch shows I saw, as previously dissected, while the more recent disaster events were touched on more frequently during Friday night stand-up routines. Here there may prove more room for research into the fine differences between topics used or avoided in various forms of live comedy- sketch shows or improv vs. stand-up- but that was not the focus of this particular study.

Rejection of offensive jokes. The one glaring exception to offensive jokes being well received by ColdTowne audiences was a fat joke directed toward women and possibly toward a particular woman in the audience. Every other joke topic- ranging from various forms of violence to child molestation, racism, and blasphemy- met with acceptance (in varying degrees as measured by laughter) by the audience. The exception occurred during the course of one stand-up routine when a young man tried to make a joke calling a young woman in the audience a "fat girl" and saying that subsequently her "opinion didn't matter". His attempts to backpedal out of the joke failed and he dug himself further into the hole he had created. It was not apparent if he was actually directing this insult to any one woman in particular or to a phantom audience member, but every real woman in the audience looked completely affronted while the male

audience members remained carefully neutral. No one laughed; a few audience members groaned or made other disapproving sounds, short of outright booing. The stony silence from most was an obvious message of dislike and disapproval. This was not coded as disaster humor- it was an isolated instance of a seemingly personal attack- but remains of note as the one instance of offensive humor that was clearly not accepted by an entire audience at ColdTowne in the course of my research.

Interestingly, this performer was not a ColdTowne regular that I had seen in classes or performing improv; he was there for the Friday night Punchline stand-up show, which was the show type that attracted the most “outsiders” to the stage to practice their stand-up sets. It is possible that he was a regular Punchline performer, but I did not see him again during the remainder of my time at ColdTowne. This outsider status could be the reason he attempted such a joke—and it failed so horribly. He proved himself ignorant of the humor normally accepted at ColdTowne.

Joke Cycles at ColdTowne

While the only immediate event available for study during the course of my fieldwork was the death of Michael Jackson, the types of disaster jokes made are still comparable to the types of joke cycles- a topic I touched on briefly in the opening chapter- that have been studied in disaster humor before. What about the joke cycles were the same or different, and what implication does that have for ColdTowne?

The death of Jackson seemed only to elicit jokes that fell under the Too Soon Rule in the course of my study; there were not enough jokes made in the time of my fieldwork to establish a specific joke cycle for the Austin comedy community or ColdTowne, or confirm use of the ones that have already been established: the emergence of jokes in several waves after a period of latency, as described by Ellis (2001) in his model of 9/11 joke cycles and supported by previous research such as Barrick's (1980) work on Helen Keller joke cycles, the joke cycles produced after the explosion of the Challenger (Morrow, 1987; Simons, 1986; Symth, 1986) and Dundes's description of AIDS (1987) and Holocaust joke cycles (with Hauschild, 1983). Davies (2008) echoes this standard description in his chapter of *The Primer of Humor Research*. Most of the disaster jokes at ColdTowne, however, were not topical—there were jokes about the death of Princess Diana and Liberace; about Anne Frank and the Holocaust; and about September 11th. Ellis (2001) posits that the 9/11 jokes took time because the nation had to mourn before they could begin to heal through humor—this was simply something too big and too close to home to allow for joking right away, unless, as demonstrated by Kuipers (2002) you were removed from the event by physical distance, as illustrated in

the immediate occurrence of jokes in Europe (p. 451). While in the US, even weeks after the event Gottfried's joke at the roast did not go over well; he had to win the crowd back using a joke that, while outrageous, was decidedly not about 9/11.

Community at ColdTowne

I learned through my interaction with the performers that the longer they stayed in classes and continued to perform at ColdTowne, the more they would naturally branch out to do shows at other theaters and eventually festivals around the country—but, very importantly, that as a performer you never forget where you started. This argues for the importance of this type of study beyond Mintz's (2008) call for further ethnographic studies of live audiences: if a comedian's training ground stays with them so strongly and continues to influence their style and performances throughout their career, the community (and subsequent brand of humor tied with it) they establish at the outset will always influence them as they progress professionally and interact with others. As the Austin comedy community grows in reach and further establishes itself, there will be additional calls for knowledge of the base humor culture that exists here and sends performers out into the world around it.

ColdTowne is a major player in Austin comedy, particularly in their role as a training ground for aspiring comedians; they are one of six schools in Austin that provide improv class training, according to the Austin Improv Collective (*Classes - Austin*, n.d.). This collective is unique in that it promotes Austin improv on a troupe-basis, rather than a school-basis. While each school is obviously competitive in acquiring students, each also tends to specialize in a different form of training. Students choose based on this and they have performance opportunities open to them at the other theaters, should they wish to expand their stage time outside of classes. The Hideout Theater, for example, hosts a lottery which performers can put their names in for and schedules slots for troupes to

perform in regardless of their place of origin (*Classes FAQ*, n.d.). ColdTowne is therefore one facet of this improv collective and offers a rich, realistic representation of Austin's improv training grounds and performances.

From what I observed in the community of ColdTowne, I did not find that the making of disaster jokes and general use of disaster humor stemmed exclusively from a need to cope with intrinsic human fear when faced with violent, large or small-scale disasters any more than I found such jokes to simply be a reaction to media oversaturation. Rather, collective behavior- the community shared between performers and audience- used the agency implicit in these jokes to not only give themselves a small sense of control and rebel against the system, but also to strengthen their sense of community, in addition to coping psychologically with disaster and media dominance. The reaction of the audiences and the choices of the performers attest to a strong community and community sensibility at ColdTowne: the audience received each joke with near-total acceptance or rejection. Again the small scale of this study cannot be said to produce definitive results about more than ColdTowne circa 2009, but it is worth relating the group sensibility about these jokes to other aspects of ColdTowne and how it all contributes to creating a sense of community.

Each instance pulled and examined in the previous section illuminated the shared sense of humor found at ColdTowne among its performers and audience members, while the overlapping nature of these two groups lends more weight to the establishment of a community in the first place. Whether or not the performers identify heavily as comedians and improvisers in their lives outside of ColdTowne is of less consequence

than the fact that it is all they are inside of ColdTowne—it is a place of complete immersion that I even found myself being pulled into, as evidenced by my rapid acceptance into the group. The sheer number of hours spent attending classes and performing in shows- I saw the same people there day after day, there as often or more often than I was, standing in the parking lot long after I had left- exposes the dedicated performers and students of comedy to this social group that begins to become a community for them. They hang out in the lobby and/or the parking lot before shows and after shows, they go to the gas station in groups to buy beers between performances, they ask anyone they have seen in the audience more than a few times if they are thinking about taking classes. These are the actions of a strongly bonded group.

A strongly shared sense of humor both exemplifies this and strengthens it in a recursive cycle; humor is one indicator of who is part of a group and who is not, as evidenced by Fine and De Soucey's (2005) work, and illustrated more explicitly in Basso's (1979) Portraits of "the Whiteman" discussing the cultural rules for humor among the Western Apache. While the Western Apache do not seem to have much in common with a small comedy theater in Austin, the point is that they are both small, developed communities with a distinct and shared sense of humor. Basso (1979) relates, "in all Indian cultures the Whiteman serves as a conspicuous vehicle for conceptions that define and characterize what the Indian is not" (p. 5) which clearly speaks to using humor as a means of defining in-group and out-group members, as both the Western Apache and ColdTowne do. ColdTowne does not make newcomers feel unwelcome, but you have to

spend enough time in the community, including proving a shared sense of humor, to really feel that you belong—per my personal experience in my fieldwork.

That only one joke- which was ultimately not even coded as disaster humor- received a blanket negative reception from an audience while the rest were generally accepted (or basically ignored, as in the case with the 9/11 lawn mower joke), further evidences the shared sense of humor between performers and audience members. This, when combined with the observable similar demographics and mode of dress, argues strongly for a shared sense of community among those who frequent the ColdTowne stage, comfortable couches, recycled theater seats and parking lot. The expectation is set for the kinds of jokes that will be shared not only on the stage, but also from the audience in their solicited suggestions for scene topics, during the interactions that happen in the parking lot, and when jokes are pitched while writing sketch shows. These are clearly "events that are meaningful in light of both past and future interaction" as discussed by Fine and De Soucey (2005, p. 2) and help to build a social framework with which group members can operate from (p. 16). Members of ColdTowne use their humor- accepted disaster jokes functioning as one part of that- to build a frame for social interactions between them across the board: it is how they communicate with each other between shows, in the parking lot and when they are delegating jobs from staffing the front to running the booth. Humor is the currency with which all social transactions are made in this place.

Even with this sense of community established, the question remains of why these jokes are occurring at this theater and among this group of people at all. The history of

Hurricane Katrina (*About ColdTowne*, n.d.) with the founders certainly gives a strong motivation to the original members to use their talent in comedy as a means to come to terms with the violence and loss surrounding that storm. Indeed in my initial experience at ColdTowne as a performer, I noticed a poster advertising for a show they did during the time they had just moved here, just the founders, after the storm; it was entitled “Hurricanes are Funny”. If only it had fallen within the span of this work, I am sure it would have had much to offer on the topic. As of the close of my fieldwork in 2009, it remained a dusty poster in the ColdTowne hallway.

The disaster background is firmly established for ColdTowne’s founding members (who teach now more than they perform themselves, at least during my observations), but we must account for current student and performer use of disaster humor. How did disaster jokes become and remain a part of this group’s shared sense of humor? Here, again, I have no definite answers but instead propose theories. Obviously if the founders are the ones who are teaching classes and presumably training those who will teach beside them as they grow, their sense of humor will have a disproportionate impact on the students they teach and train. The comedy world has a strong emphasis on training ground roots as discussed earlier; this early exposure to disaster humor will certainly stay with these fledgling performers as they grow and expand their performance territory. Base identity has an importance in humor that has not yet been sufficiently explored; this is but one possible jumping off point for it.

I argue that agency is a major, but not exclusive, contributing factor in the popularity of disaster humor among performers and patrons of ColdTowne. They are

giving themselves a sense of control in making these kinds of jokes against forces or systems that they are otherwise powerless to face. This is particularly salient with the age group prominent at ColdTowne: the young, who are still working to establish adult identities and careers.

Thirdly, there is the interesting intersection of the cultural stereotype of the hipster (who can often be found at ColdTowne) as someone who tends to judge those around him or her in a critical capacity- and think better of themselves over others due to superior taste and habits- coupled with the Disparagement/Superiority theory of joking. This would go a long way toward explaining the aggressive undertones in some of the jokes made during the performances I witnessed, whether or not they were eventually coded as disaster humor. Violence was a major theme throughout jokes recorded in my field notes and many at the very least held hostile attitudes in them—toward women, toward minorities, toward children, religion and more.

Often these were clearly hyperbolic statements used to make a social point against what they were literally saying- "I HATE SLAVES!" speaking against mindless racism, for example, using an ironic mode of communication- but then why would a mind create a subversive joke around subject matter if they did not perhaps have something latent to work around? Certainly that approach is Freudian in nature (and speaks more to a repression theory than disparaging), but humor allows for a safe way to explore and release aggressive attitudes and anger without actually engaging in "hurting" someone; again with a shared identity in place, it is less likely that anyone in the audience will even come away offended. Lewis discusses this in *Cracking Up (2006)*, citing research by

Thomas E. Ford that seems to confirm that disparaging humor does nothing to indoctrinate those hearing it against the group being joked about, but that it will “relax inhibitions against disproving acts direct against members of the disparaged group in listeners who already feel antagonism toward the group” (pp. 122-123). In other words, if you are already prejudiced against a group, hearing disparaging jokes about them will lead you to relax your restraint around holding back any negative feelings (or possibly actions) toward that group. If you do not already have negative feelings for the group being disparagingly joked about, the jokes are not going to change your mind. As iconic late night talk show host Jay Leno said, “you don’t change anybody’s mind with comedy. You just reinforce what they already believe” (Lewis, 2006, p. 155).

I believe these kinds of jokes were made in an absurdist manner to work through these issues in a socially acceptable manner—by joking. Regular performers will know they share a sense of humor with the audience and can “get away with more” in jokes than in normal social interaction. They are not in danger of strengthening any audience member’s prejudices if they do not already exist. The aggressive undertone in these jokes- the prevalence of violence hardly precludes it- however, needs to be addressed.

Aggressive tones in joking do not necessarily lend themselves to violence; the aggression can be directed at something such as stupidity. Oring (2008, p. 194) reminds us that assumptions about the aggressiveness of ethnic jokes have been challenged:

> In a broad comparative study of those ethnic jokes that ascribed stupidity to one or another ethnic group, Christie Davies (1990) showed that such jokes were not told about groups that were adversaries but about groups that were

peripheral to the mainstream: geographically peripheral provincials, culturally peripheral ethnics, or economically peripheral proletarians.

While you could certainly call slave-owners and slaves adversaries in the past- and that is certainly historically drawn down black-and-white racial lines- that is not the case any longer. The performer making the "I HATE SLAVES!" joke was therefore, in a way, possibly releasing aggression he felt toward a peripheral group of white ancestors who tolerated such inhumane treatment of fellow humans as the norm. Jokes about slaves in the past were meant to reaffirm the teller's feelings of superiority and to further disparage those they were telling the joke about (examples in Barrick, 1980, p. 443-444). This contemporary retelling takes the power away from that and redirects it toward those who were once making the jokes. It is a new and different kind of joking cycle from the one discussed in the Challenger papers (which we will return to in a moment).

Related to disparaging humor and superiority humor is the idea of ridiculing one's own past mistakes or blunders in judgment (Ruch, 2008, p. 30); past demons can be exorcised in a way that is "safe" for the performer. If the audience laughs with you, it can be assumed that at least the majority of them share this view or did at one time and welcome the chance to laugh at their past mistakes as well.

Of course the counter-argument to be made against this easily shared community culture of ColdTowne, is that those coming to the theater who are not performers- such as friends and family who, however, can be expected to share a certain amount of similarity as part of a shared social group and support their friends and relatives- are coming with

the expectation to relax, have a good time and laugh. Those who are performers, but serving as temporary audience members, are there to support their fellow classmates and build their classmates' confidence in performance as well as to relax in their own time offstage and out of class. After all, they are there presumably because humor is something they enjoy enough to pursue in some form, that many hours a day. This is not enough to keep people coming back to the theater on more than one occasion, however; if they were not enjoying the shows and the type of humor found in them, they would not return to the theater with their gas station beers on separate occasions. They enjoy the humor and it becomes a piece of them: they are someone who goes to ColdTowne Theater and who likes, or at least accepts, disaster jokes. They are part of the community.

Discussion

I have argued, in the opening, that ColdTowne would provide a good setting in which to study group humor and interplay with the audience. Through doing so, I established a second argument that catharsis or sharing repressed feelings were only parts of the equation in the use of humor around disastrous events. Jokes are part of how we negotiate social relationships and maintain emotional health (Ruch, 2008, p. 19)—and what are social relationships but the groups of people we surround ourselves with, which grow into places like ColdTowne and breed new members of a burgeoning community culture? Especially when humor is the aim of a place, like an improv theater, the type of jokes told there must be near-universally accepted by performers and patrons alike or the social system- and success of the theater- will falter. The ever-expanding role of media in our lives certainly has a strong effect on our culture as a whole, and on the types of jokes made at a small improv theater in Austin, Texas.

Media saturation goes far to explain the popularity of disaster humor. This form of humor is perhaps not as subversive as many would assume, particularly in the recent wake of social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook providing constant pop culture bombardment for its users.

The findings from this short-term ethnographic study have interesting implications for humor research as a whole, and especially for disaster humor and small venues. Several suggestions have been made throughout this work as to future possible research directions, based on various moments of interest as they unfolded during my fieldwork. This section will focus on the strengths and limitations of the study, expand

upon the aforementioned suggestions for future research and look at the results of the previous findings in a more in-depth manner in order to expand their meaning—both for humor research as a whole and more specifically for disaster humor in a small venue.

Strengths and Limitations

The relatively short length of this study was an unfortunate circumstance that resulted both from the parameters set forth in the study proposal and, ultimately, the increasing level of friendship between myself as the researcher and the performers (who were also frequently audience members) that could have led to a compromise in the quality of data collected. I chose to cut the duration of my fieldwork shorter than I would have liked rather than risk having to navigate the boundaries between what was told in confidence as a social acquaintance and what was fair game for recording in terms of ethical research. As a relatively inexperienced researcher, I had difficulty juggling multiple identities and obligations and judged it better for the research to play it safe.

The shorter length of this study meant many of findings should be marked as points of interest to be further expanded upon in future research, as they do not carry enough weight to be named as normative truths of the field. This is not meant to diminish the reach of this study, but rather to place its scope within the wider field around it and the potential for growth from this particular exploration of the topic.

Despite these shortcomings, the method chosen for research did enable a deeper, richer look at the humor culture within a small venue than if I had chosen another method, such as handing out humor surveys to groups on campus; analyzing live jokes revealed a sort of closed-circuit, continual exchange where this theater drew its community both from the people who made it up and from the larger comedy community established in Austin.

Discussion of Disaster Humor at ColdTowne

In analyzing each specific potential instance of disaster humor in the previous section, the intent was to take a detailed examination of the type of joke and its reception, not only as an illustration of the particular culture of the Austin comedy community, but also of this one theater itself: ColdTowne. Each example pulled for discussion became a tool to provide the desired richer look into the specific workings of this particular group, and wound up expressing what their sense of humor meant for them onstage and off. We saw disaster jokes accepted about Anne Frank during a sketch show, and audiences reject a personal attack made on a particular woman in the audience. The impact of Michael Jackson's death was shown to be something that affected audiences as strongly as some large-scale disasters. A joke about September 11th met silence, either stunned or indifferent. These reactions coupled with the fact that only one joke was met with icy, silent hostility serves to cement a shared sense of humor between the people who sit in the audience at ColdTowne and those who walk the stage and contribute to the tight sense of community they share. This undoubtedly stems from the time spent both onstage and off, as well as the friends and family with pre-existing relationships they bring in. A shared sense of humor strengthens this bond, cements community identity and constantly reaffirms itself as each joke performance is accepted or rejected, disaster jokes included.

Personal Reflection. As I have mentioned earlier in this writing, I was a performer at ColdTowne briefly- as a guest with the troupe The P! Company- before the idea for this study came to me. My experience there in a mere two weeks of sketch shows gave me the knowledge of the venue and its patrons/performers as a possible source of

study when the idea did come, suddenly, at an ethnographic panel involving the use of photo elicitation at the National Communication Association (NCA) Conference in the fall of 2008. Like the flashbulbs that took the photos the panel was discussing as a research tool (Mackie, n.d.), the idea of flashbulb moments popped into my head—namely that of disaster days that cause us all to remember where we were and what we were doing when we found out what happened. My mother will still tell the story of how she was playing with her eighteen-month-old baby on the bed when the Challenger exploded on the television screen in front of her. As the baby in question, I certainly do not remember those moments, but I do remember sitting at my computer working one morning in the spring of 2011 and seeing news of the earthquake and subsequent tsunami in Japan fill up my Twitter newsfeed as quickly as the waters flooded villages and swept away lives. Delivery of news in our lives may be changing methods, but the impact it has on us remembering it is not.

I tell this all in first person as open acknowledgement of researcher involvement beyond the usual mention in the methods section; by virtue of my presence I influenced performances and research outcomes. By virtue of my own past performances I was able to put this study together and my idea had a beginning the same as this comedy community's sense of community culture- namely shared humor- did.

Going beyond those flashbulb moments to how we deal with them, however, was the question that really intrigued me. How much had the field of Communication, specifically, looked at humor as a coping mechanism in times of stress? I then extrapolated from my own personal coping mechanism across life situations: jokes to

deal with everything! The perfect place to discover a larger application of this and other theories of humor had to be a small improv theater born of Katrina refuges—and so this was the framework from which I approached ColdTowne and sat in the audience, night after night, scribbling down jokes in the dark and the audience's reaction to them.

Findings expanded. A shared sense of humor (that in this case, that includes disaster humor) between performers and audience members is more than just a relief for performers knowing their jokes have a better chance of success. It helps establish the group culture of the theater—people who get the jokes and appreciate the humor are the in-group and those who do not are not. Disaster humor is a big part of ColdTowne's ethos, and the importance of the training ground in comedy is strengthened by the disaster jokes made by newer, training performers; they have incorporated this founding element into their humor and will take this with them into their comedy career. A shared sense of humor also helps enforce the social strata of the theater: it is mostly men who are making disaster jokes, and they are the dominant force in the theater and in comedy as a whole, not only in Austin, but nationally and professionally as well. The disaster jokes made by female performers were either written by men, as in the case of the Anne Frank sketch (both head writers and founding members of The P! Company are male), or related to the emotional response of the woman in question, as with the Diana and Liberace jokes made by the female stand-up comedian. This has larger implications for the gender dynamics of comedy and for disaster humor as a potential tool for humor typologies beyond how it was used here.

The acceptance of all of these disaster jokes by ColdTowne audiences speaks to the underlying thread of violence in joking (identified as a contributing factor to disaster jokes in my findings). Performers made jokes of a violent nature across the board in every type of performance that I saw, yet we do not live in an overtly violent society, though we are faced with many violent images in media, be they real or fictitious. The prevalence of violent jokes lends further credence to media oversaturation, since violent acts are not a part of daily life in Austin. This is compounded by the 24-hour news cycle available through digital channels. Disaster jokes at ColdTowne are coded as such when they are about specific violent acts on a large scale or that are at least widely known, typically through media exposure. It is possible that this could escalate further in the future, if media saturation continues to desensitize us to violence and we continue to air it out in joking performances: it will take more and more to qualify a joke as disaster humor, rather than a throw-away joke of a violent nature. This small study will serve as a marker on a timeline of violence in joking and disaster humor, should further studies be pursued.

The Too Soon Rule has value as a contemporary cultural marker of apology in social interactions as well as in performances. Using it lets your audience or social interaction partner know that you are aware that the joke you are making is inappropriate in terms of the subject matter and its timing, but that you are going to make it anyway. This allows the joker to get away with subject matter they might not have been able to otherwise. On the other hand, if the Too Soon Rule is invoked by the social interaction partner or the audience, they are using it as a means of shaming the person who made the

joke: it is not okay that you said that, this event just happened and we are not ready. Alternatively, its use can mean that the joke, although accepted, is done so with the knowledge that the appropriate amount of mourning time around an event has not yet taken place. The difference in these two uses of the rule by the audience member or social interaction partner can be found solely in tone and delivery of "Too Soon!": accusatory, or laughingly. This short phrase can go a long way in smoothing humor communications the more it is used and known. As mentioned earlier, it is possible Gilbert Gottfried's 9/11 joke would have been met with less derision- if not still been entirely successful- had he invoked the Too Soon Rule during its performance.

Coding celebrity death as disaster humor serves to confirm research on parasocial relationships: the deep bonds fans can form with celebrities and the devastation they feel in their passing. This understanding can serve comedians in demystifying audience reaction following jokes made about celebrity death or dead celebrities, and subsequently in the subject matter they choose to pursue.

The possibility of using disaster humor as a humor typology tool, as I did in this study, has a lot of potential for further studies in the humor field; such contentious humor gets a very definite reaction and would be a different angle from which to approach the study of humor in other small groups such as ColdTowne—which takes us into our next section.

Direction for Future Research

As mentioned earlier in this study and in many other studies concerning humor (Hertz, 2010), the continual lack of women in key roles throughout the comedy world should be examined more thoroughly in an effort to understand why it continues to be such a male-dominated field, and particularly a white male-dominated field. While this was never meant to be any focus of my study, it was a fact I was unable to ignore when night after night I saw fewer women on the stage than men- and even fewer minority women- especially in a community like Austin that prides itself on diversity and acceptance. This trend continues when pulled to a larger scale—most professional comics and humor writers fall under the same categories of white and male. Celebrated comedy show Saturday Night Live (SNL)- which has been broadcasting since the 1970's (*History*, n.d.)- did not have their first female head writer until Tina Fey took over the role in 1999 (Heffernan, 2003). At the time of Fey holding that position, there were still only three other women on the writing staff, though two did hold high positions (Heffernan, 2003).

The observation of the socioeconomic status that I stumbled upon accidentally during my observations at ColdTowne particularly piqued my interest as a topic that could have rich meaning for the field of comedy with further examination. My off-hand perception that projecting a lower socioeconomic status for acceptance in the comedy world may prove to be untrue outside of the less expensive training grounds such as the ones described in Austin, despite the two anecdotal examples I gave of well known, highly-paid professional comedians. Alternatively if it does prove to be true, it may not

necessarily be about relating to the audience and increasing possible reception of jokes, but more strongly about remaining connected to original comedy roots. Fey has discussed in interviews that bonding in the writer's room at SNL revolves around either where you where trained at the beginning of your comedic education- Second City in Chicago, the Groundlings in Los Angeles- or which clubs you started out performing in with your stand-up routines. Those that come in outside of these worlds have a difficult time adjusting to the culture (Heffernan, 2003). This could hold true across comedy culture as a whole, or only persist in Fey's perception and account of the writer's room at SNL; only further examination of this topic could tell.

The area with the most room for growth is that of media saturation as it pertains to social media; with this new avenue of expressing everything we do in "tweets" of 140 character or less on Twitter and/or sharing photos, videos, links to online news articles and opinions of them all on our Facebook profiles (and whatever other platform that will surely come next), we have new methods of completely inundating ourselves with information about current events, as well as venting our frustration around constant coverage of current events. Taking Twitter alone, I catalogued a number of disaster jokes as they appeared in my feed over the months along with opinions expressed by comedians and writers about the use and examination of comedy. For example:

Disaster Jokes:

- "'Oh, what the fuck is this?!' -the maggots in Michael Jackson's coffin reacting to his fake nose." (Guy Endore-Kaiser, 2011)

- “World War II is one of those rare cases where the sequel's better than the original (bigger villains, stronger ending, more quotes).” (Paul Rust, 2011)
- “Tonight I'm gonna drown my sorrows like they were Japanese villagers.” (Al Coholic, 2011)
- “I'm glad Casanova is dead. Awww, too swoon?” (Alec Sulkin, 2011)

Humor Reflections:

- “Laughter and tears are both responses to frustration and exhaustion. I myself prefer to laugh, there is less cleaning up to do afterward.” (Kurt Vonnegut, 2011)
- “Most times humor is just written to be funny and doesn't need to be deconstructed.” (Wendi Aarons, 2011)
- “When our emotions get overloaded, you see our nervous tics come out. One person's ‘America fuck yeah!’ is another's ‘Osama got an iPhone.’” (Tim Carmody, 2011)

All of those were pulled from my “Favorites” page on my personal Twitter account that I had no intention of using as a research tool at the outset of this study, but came to understand its value as my work progressed. Though it did not fit as a major player within the structure of this particular work, Twitter’s potential as a research tool is enormous and should definitely be explored further in the future. It is a veritable minefield of disaster jokes following any major event that can be classified as such. It is also possible to search the archives by topic to see past instances of disaster jokes.

As an astonishingly high number of people- 500 million- find themselves on Facebook alone (*Statistics*, n.d.), it is nearly impossible to avoid oversaturation from news on current events in your extended online social network, even without a television. As Kuipers (2002) discussed in her piece on disaster humor resulting from a reaction to media oversaturation and a rebellion against how the media is telling us to feel in the wake of disaster, this can only be amplified and extended in the current state of affairs.

In fact this can be illustrated exactly by the words of a Twitter user: “I don't want to be told what to do, how to feel, what to think, or how to react. Not on any day but particularly today. Thanks.” (Wendell, 2011). These words were in reaction to the announcement of the death of Osama bin Laden at the hands of United States Special Forces in May of 2011. People came to Twitter to talk about how the news coverage- on television and on websites and even on Twitter itself- made them feel. Ultimately, not wanting to be told how to feel remains the same no matter how the news is delivered, it would seem.

In terms of joke cycles: the Too Soon Rule as it relates to joke cycles. The argument of appropriate time passing before disaster jokes can be made certainly ties in with what I witnessed at ColdTowne, and even ties in with the statute of limitations I discussed around the Too Soon Rule. Further data would have to be gathered in real time, unfortunately, in order to establish a unique joke cycle around joke types following a disaster as the death of Jackson did not produce enough material to establish such. It can be posited that following an immediate rash of Too Soon jokes, the chosen style would

occur in waves just the others did (Barrick, 1980; Davies, 2008; Dundes, 1987; Dundes & Hauschild 1983; Morrow, 1987; Simons, 1986; Smyth, 1986).

This study has answered Mintz's (2008) call to know what the audience looks like (mostly young, white and male) and how they received jokes- particularly disaster jokes- at ColdTowne theater. In the case of this small venue, the audience and performers found themselves to be enough alike that their shared sense of humor strengthened the bond of their comedy community.

Conclusion

There is a popular notion in every older generation, it seems, that the new generation does not have the same sense of community that they did. There is much agitation today that we, in the US, are loosing our sources of community—Robert Putnam writes about America's changing behavior and increasing disconnection in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), for example. It seems more likely that community does not break down or disappear, but does transform. In an age where it is easier than ever to live far away from family and friends, it is also more common for people to build their own micro-communities, such as ColdTowne. With the amount of time that students and regular performers spend at the theater, it is only natural that they should form strong bonds and a social stratum—and even more natural that it should be bound up in humor, on stage and off.

ColdTowne is a place where people can process difficult topics through humor, whether on spontaneously on stage, drafted beforehand for a sketch or stand-up, or in reacting as part of the audience. This place was created out of the energy of refuges from Hurricane Katrina, who have built a new theater they could call home. ColdTowne is the senior most performers' and founders' livelihood; the base from which they teach classes, offer workshops and branch out into any other available opportunities.

Processing difficult topics together- such as disaster- does not happen for any one reason that humor literature has tried to put forth as the "ultimate" reason. If you mix these theories together- humor as a coping mechanism, as a way to regain agency in rebelling against a given way to react to an event- you have what I saw happening across

the stage and audience at ColdTowne: young people with a strong community who are reacting to disaster in the way best available to them, fighting against the inevitable and accepting it at the same time using humor as their tool. In the field of humor research that spans across disciplines, some much more deeply than others- humor and psychology, humor and linguistics, etc- this is an important implication: we should not focus on humor studies with one lens alone. These different explanations for the use of humor are not mutually exclusive and should not be treated as such; their simultaneous existence should be teased out to find the richer meaning that humor holds in our lives and psyche—and ultimately, how we think of ourselves in this world: our shared community, down to the smallest one we are a part of.

ColdTowne is just a tiny example of that.

Glossary

Austin Improv Collective: A collection of Austin, Texas improvisational venues that work together to promote improv in Central Texas and "develop sustainable performance, practice, management, and teaching skills for Austin's improvisational theatre community" (*About Us*, n.d.).

ColdTowne Theater: A small theater on Airport Boulevard in Austin, Texas that offers shows most nights of the week ranging from improv to sketch and stand-up; they also also offer classes teaching each of these performance types.

Hideout Theater: an Austin, Texas improv venue on Congress Avenue, offering improv and sketch shows in addition to classes training in both disciplines

Hipster: a style of dress that appears to eschew wealth while sometimes requiring the opposite to maintain; the general aesthetic involves a mixture of trendy pieces with things found in thrift stores, inherited from family members or purchased from certain retail establishments favored by the hipster culture, such as American Apparel (Greif, 2010)

I Luv Video: local Austin video rental business; the owner agreed to rent space to the founding members of ColdTowne when they left New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina

Improvisational shows: "improv" for short; these performances are comprised of a basic pool of performers who are combined and recombined into different performance groups that go on stage for one scene at a time, until their total performance time slot has come to an end

The New Movement Theater: an Austin, Texas theater that offers shows most nights of the week, including improv and sketch; they also offer classes training in both disciplines

Sketch Comedy: a form of comedy show with a pre-written script that has been rehearsed prior to performance; actors do often and are even expected to improvise small moments in scenes as it occurs to them

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Vita

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