

Working to laugh: assembling difference in American stand-up comedy venues, by James M. Thomas, Lanham, Boulder, New York and London, Lexington Books, 2015, viii+173pp., £52.95(hardback), ISBN 978-0739189559

This book is framed as a contribution to Urban Nightlife Studies. It employs the method of ethnography to examine, over an 18-month period, the organization and performance of stand-up comedy and cabaret at three urban nightlife venues in one town in the USA. The theoretical perspective is informed by post-structuralism, particularly Deleuze and Guattari and Hardt and Negri, and outlines 'affective economies' and 'affective labour' in this context. This theoretical bent is adopted in an attempt to explain the urban nightlife scene as 'a diverse encounter between heterogeneous logics and practices, and expressions' (5). The study is explicit in advocating the political nature of comedy in the USA. For Thomas, comedy plays 'a very important role in the development of American contentious politics' (5).

The strength of *Working to Laugh* is its ethnographic detail. Thomas, like all good ethnographers, is able to transport the reader into the field, into the venues that the stand-up comedians and audiences inhabit. Although I did not always agree with the joke analysis presented, Thomas describes the manner of performance and audience response in vivid detail, and thus the study uncovers significant data.

Of the three venues, *The Comedy Kitchen* is the most mainstream, and a mass of active discrimination is documented at this venue. In relation to heteronormativity, the venue values the hiring of conventionally attractive female staff members for front of house roles, and does little to discourage heteronormative and sexist discursive practice from male staff members and customers. Body types are further discriminated against – audience seating is planned so that conventionally attractive individuals and groups are placed nearer to the stage and thus in more favourable seating. Obesity stigma is present here because the obese are sat to the margins of the venue and ridiculed by staff when out of earshot. With regard to class and race, the customer dress code at the venue is designed to exclude poor whites and African-Americans. Comedians are booked who reproduce hegemonic and mainstream values, and African-American or minority comedians are seen to present particular 'problems' because of the audiences they draw. Finally, free ticket promotions are posted to customers only after race and class profiling of collected customer information.

Helter Skelter represents a sub-cultural or alternative venue that does not reproduce *The Comedy Kitchen's* obvious appeal to the mainstream but is still a site where hegemonic discursive practice on race, gender and heteronormativity is reproduced. *Helter Skelter* makes an active appeal to 'disorder'. The science fiction and horror inspired venue embraces the ethos of the outsider in an attempt to offer something distinctive in the town. The venue lacks the scripted, 'customer service speak' of the US mainstream, and the utterances of staff, customers and comedians are often politically incorrect. This is most obvious in the openly sexist and misogynistic language used by male regulars and staff members. Indeed, the owner takes an active role in such discursive expression. The lack of restraint placed on comedians at the venue sometimes produces progressive political comedy but also leads to the expression of racism and sexism (71). Thomas discovers that an alternative identity is no simple recipe for counter-hegemonic comedy.

The third venue, *Soleil*, is perhaps the most interesting. This is a bar that caters to the LGBT community. In a variety of cabaret acts, heteronormativity is consistently reversed, although the venue also presents acts that fail in their attempts to do this. The text does not examine *Soleil* in as much detail, which is a disappointment.

For the most part, the book is a fascinating ethnography. That said, the adopted post-structuralist theory of 'affect' explains very little and the selection of theory seems arbitrary or incomplete. The clear examples of interconnected discrimination wedded to mainstream or sub-cultural enjoyment are well presented but when further elaborated through the terminology of 'desire', 'assemblage' and 'affective economy', the explanation becomes tautological. There is also a problem with the discourse of 'positivity' in this theoretical approach, which gives an 'account of desire as an active, positive force' (25). Although a 'positive', active description of nightlife discrimination is a useful addition, this is incomplete without a theorization of the negative, exclusionary and suppressive impacts on bodies and desires. Thomas explains such exclusions exceptionally well in his ethnography but they remain under theorized. The material could also have been explained more simply and accurately through Bourdieusian concepts of capital. For example, when Antoine, the owner and manager of *The Comedy Kitchen*, expressively excludes racial minorities and poor whites from his venue, it is primarily because of their perceived lack of economic and cultural capital. They simply are unable to make the 'correct' exchanges in the comedy and nightlife venue. The fact that they are not able to actively contribute to the mainstream definition of 'good times', and thus the affective economy, is the effect rather than the cause of this discrimination.

Finally, it would have been interesting for the author to have included some discussion of reflexivity and the role of the (male) researcher. Thomas accesses nightlife venues, often on his own, and records racism, classism, sexism and heteronormativity in comedy and in the discursive practices of employees and customers at the venues. It may have been the case that the author's class, race, gender and sexuality affected assess at various points in the research. It would have been interesting to see some discussion of this.

Overall, this book is a detailed discussion that adds to a growing field that critiques various forms of comedy as more than 'just a joke'.

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