Derecho a Comunicar
Revista Científica de la Asociación Mexicana de Derecho a la Información

Número 4 | Enero – Abril 2012

DISARTICULATED LAUGHERS: BACKLASH IN BROADCASTED COMEDY IN FRANCE

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RECIBIDO: 15 de noviembre de 2011

ACEPTADO: 30 de marzo de 2012

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PALABRAS CLAVE | género, mujer, medios de comunicación, representación, comedia francesa, política, identidad y visibilidad

KEYWORDS | gender, women, media, representation, French comedy, politics, identity and visibility

Resumen

A partir del año 2000 la diversidad ha caracterizado a la televisión francesa: las mujeres y las minorías étnicas han hecho una aparición notable en programas de entretenimiento durante diez años, especialmente en los *talk shows* y series de televisión. Lo anterior es el resultado de un largo proceso de visibilización de los grupos subalternos en los medios de comunicación, así como de una política de "promoción de la diversidad" iniciada por el Consejo Nacional del Audiovisual después de los disturbios en Banlieue en 2006. Sin embargo, este movimiento es hegemónico y coincide con la campaña presidencial de 2007 que condujo a la elección de Nicolás Sarcozy. En este artículo se argumenta que en la comedia, la caricatura y la satira en los medios se reactiva una concepción tradicional de la política que excluye la identidad y visibilidad subalternas.

Abstract

Since 2000, diversity has characterized French TV: women and ethnic minorities have made a notable appearance in entertainment programs for ten years, especially in talk shows and television series. This is the result of a long process of visibility of subaltern groups in the media and a policy of "promoting diversity" initiated by the National Audiovisual Council after Banlieue riots in 2006. However, this movement is dominant and coincides with the presidential campaign of 2007 that led to the election of Nicolas Sarkozy. This article argues that in comedy, wave caricature and satire in the media wakes a traditional conception of politics which excludes subaltern identity and visibility.

In the 2000s', an impression of diversity characterizes French television: women and ethnic minorities have made a remarkable appearance in mainstream entertainment programs for ten years, especially in talk shows and TV serials. This impression is the result of a long process of visibilisation of subaltern groups in media as well as of a policy of "promotion of diversity" initiated by the Conseil National de l'Audiovisuel (the National Advisory Board for Broadcasting) after the *Banlieue* riots in 2006 (Macé, 2007; Cervulle, 2011). In previous works, I have focused on comedy, especially short comedy spots broadcasted in television talk shows between 1991 and 2009, as a privileged site for the development of politics of representation and politics of identity by two specific groups of comedians, women and ethnic minorities (Quemener, 2010a, 2010b, 2011). I've shown that the advent of closeted issues such as structural discriminations and counter-hegemonic identities was made possible by the renewal of comedy. In France, comedy had inherited from a buffoonery, best characterized by political eloquence, and *café-théâtre* fueled with fiction characters and situation comedy. Female comedians resorted to body devices as central tools to create parodic and perfectly incarnated characters, while ethnic minorities developed "authentic" storytelling and situated standpoint. Both groups used these technics as ways to express new subjectivities and disturb the white and masculine hegemonic figure in French comedy. Relatively speaking, this renewal of comedy genre has contributed to a "domestication" of race and gender issues (Gitlin, 1978: 162) in French public sphere and opened a pathway to marginalized comedians and topics.

Yet, since 2006, the political reading of comedy started to drown in the proliferation of spots and humoristic chronicles that invaded TV entertainment and radio programs. This movement of growth can be identified as insidiously hegemonic and coincides with the 2007 presidential campaign that led to the election of French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Characterized by a hypervisibility of political satire and caricature in broadcasted media and news program, it rehabilitates a traditional conception of comedy and the comedian. Contrary to the 2000s' wave, its primary representatives are white heterosexual male comedians and its comic devices rely on speech acts requiring the mastering of language and the erasure of the subjected body. In this paper, I want to argue that in broadcasted comedies, the revival of caricatures and satire reactivates a traditional conception of politics that limits its framework to "politician politics" (the domain of politics itself) and excludes issues of identity and subaltern visibility. In fact, satire and news comments employ an ironic, sometimes cynical, tone toward power that may pass for critical. But instead of promoting an active citizenry, this cathartic expenditure to social distress and discontents lower the level of political possibilities to complaints and a passive expression of disillusions.

To analyze the revival of political satire and its implications in terms of public issues and debate, I will draw upon the notion of backlash as defined by McRobbie in the

Aftermath of feminism (McRobbie, 2009). In fact, this revival presents the characteristics of a conservative movement that disarms subaltern identities and politics by bringing a restricted notion of politics in the front line. Yet the purpose of this paper is to reveal the complexity of backlash by exploring some of its problematic territories. First, backlash is neither confined to gender issues like Faludi's original definition (1991) nor to a counter-attack against feminist victories. Several scholars have already complexified the phenomena by introducing the notion of intersectionality in the analysis of either backlash (McRobbie, 2009: 41-43) or the sexualization of culture seen as one of its active dimensions (Attwood, 2006; Gill, 2009). My point is here to highlight that backlash operates inside a process of gendering, racialization and classing and to show that backlash surprisingly corresponds to a meeting point of racial and gender issues, that also leads to their confliction. Second, backlash is considered neither as a permanent state of affairs nor as a conservative outbreak arising from nowhere. It qualifies a cultural movement that encompasses most of the social progresses and aesthetic innovations of the previous period. One of its grounding mechanisms is to appear as the "natural" outcome of successful politics of representation. In comedy, I will show that the come back of traditional forms of comedy disregards ethnic issues and reactivates gender stereotypes but that the identification of this process is made difficult as it causes in its nets comedians of subaltern groups. Backlash does not equal a disappearance of subaltern representatives, but the "depolitization" and "de-subjectivation" of their discourse. Third, backlash translates into the disarticulation and resignification of subaltern identities and politics. Comedy by subaltern groups in fact moves toward a fragmentation of identifications and the promotion of a privatized form of agency. Yet, despite this loss of collective imaginations, backlash also comes with a reconfiguration of margins through the assertion of the multiple territories of identity.[1]

For the purpose of this paper, I focus on a transmediatic corpus that gives a primary place to TV and radio spots, but takes also into account galas and collective shows broadcasted on television, one-wo/man-shows seen in *café-théâtre* between 2006-2010. The reason of this heterogeneity is to be found in the configuration of comedy itself. While during ten years, television has been the privileged field for comedy, it starts from 2006 to loose its primacy to the benefit of new spots in morning programs of radio channels. This displacement engenders a change in aesthetics. Television comedy was the place of visually colorful and bodily engaging sketches that nourished proximity with carnival. Instead, radio programs favor caricaturists and commentators of news and headlines. At the same time, the decreasing interest of TV shows in comedy leads to a revival of *café-théâtre* that takes advantages of its confidential audience to develop hybrid genres of comedy[2] and regain a place of promotional leadership. I will pay much attention to two levels of analysis, and to their potential contradictions: that of discourses and comic devices and that of the career of the comedian and the show he/she plays in.

[1] The expression is taken from Bell Hooks dealing with "postmodern blackness" (Hooks, 1990: 31).

[2] The multiplicity of *café-théâtres* in Paris leaves room for several genres of comedies, some like L'empiafée, developing bridges with musicals, others like Gaspar Proust, asserting the stillness and verbal comic devices.

THE ANDROCENTRIC WHITE GAZE OF POLITICAL SATIRE

BEFORE BACKLASH (1996-2006)

Until the 1980s', the key figure of comedian in French comedy could be qualified as a white heterosexual male. Despite its apparent hegemonic position, he asserts the point of view of an outsider, mostly on the basis of class. His humor identifies with buffoonery: it targets and criticizes bourgeois and governing elites, by reversing hierarchies and degrading symbols of "noble" and "high" culture (Bakhtine, 1970: 27-29). Coluche for instance, one of the most famous comedians in the 1970-1980s', rooted its satire of Frenchness on his urban working class, performed by his clothes, his belly and his Parisian popular accent. Through out the years, his working class standpoint imposed itself as the mouthpiece for the discontents of various social groups, such as Arabs, homosexuals, workers, hence transcending class identifications. Comedy relied on a "consciousness" performed by the daring speech of the comedian and on the confrontation with a concentrated and vertical power.

The deaths of Coluche and another well known comedian, the imitator Thierry Le Luron, in 1986 opened up comedy to new waves made of young comedians who invested *café-théâtre* with multiple one-wo/man-shows. It came with a diversification of topics, through situation and fiction comedy, and a move away from buffoonery. The first female humorists and minority representatives appeared then, benefiting from the first TV shows such as *Le Théâtre de Bouvard* (Antenne 2, 1981-1986) and *La classe* (France 3, 1986-1994) and from the first videotape recordings. Staging characters and short stories, comedies of the 1980-1990s' might be considered as a transitory step to the turning point of the mid-1990s'. On television, talk shows started to hire comedians in short spots as a way to attract and secure audiences. The leading channel was the paying and young Canal+, which asserted its inspiration in the free and sarcastic HBO (Bueaud & Mérigeaud, 2001).

Ethnic minorities found their leading figure in Jamel Debbouze who made a short sitcom called "Le cinéma de Jamel" between 1997 and 1999 in the talk show *Nulle Part Ailleurs* on Canal+. As a young Arabic boy, coming from the *banlieues* (suburban areas often associated in social imaginations with poverty, delinquency and immigration), Debbouze and its close partners (Omar et Fred, Gad Elmaleh) introduced storytelling by using a personal "I" and playing with stereotypes. Their sketches settled a sense of "truthfulness" or authenticity that took their most accomplished form ten years later with the advent of stand-up initiated by Jamel Debbouze himself and a sitcom writer Kader Aoun. The two partners launched and produced in 2006 the first stand-up comedy show, *Le Jamel Comedy Club* on Canal+. Starring a company of unknown comedians, the TV show found in the Anglo-Saxon style of comedy an open pathway to deal explicitly with ethnic, religious, and gender identities.

The other group to engage in talk shows is composed of female comedians who had few representatives until 2000s'. One of its leading figures is Florence Foresti: she became famous with a series of characters in the talk show *On a tout essayé* on France 2 between 2004 and 2006. With a few other comedians (Axelle Laffont, Julie Ferrier, Armelle), she introduced body language as an active part of the comic device and built

her comedy shows on an openly blurred frontier between the comedian and the character. Foresti initiated a humour based on dissonant gender significations. Some of her female characters became famous for their "gender troubles" (Butler, 1990), performed as a contradiction between the masculine connotation of body language and a verbal identification to female category (Butler, 1997). Such discrepancies between body and speech acts play as a revelator of the process of categorizations, so did the contradiction between personal storytelling and race/ ethnic stereotypes. Despite their location in a mainstream cultural field, such performances renewed the map of political and social imaginations by introducing the possibility of hybrid cultural and gender blurred identities.

POLITICAL SATIRE RELOADED

When it reemerges as a central genre in comedy in 2006, political satire, also called *humour chansonnier*,[3] seems to have opened the commentary frame to new ideals and struggles. Fed with a "peoplisation" of politics in media (Dakhlia, 2008), it targets personalities of different public domains (sport, art, culture, music, politics, etcetera) and networks rather than focusing only on politicians and traditional elites. This creates an image of a dispersed, rather than centralized, power. By dealing with several topics, whether they are politically significant –such as debates on immigration policy or economical crisis– or entertaining ones –sport headlines– using the same tone and devices, the satirists assert their legitimacy to produce an overview of the world's issues. But instead of stressing a personal opinion or experience, this overview urges a detachment and a distance to the world they comment and an outsider knows position.

Some comedians seize this confrontation with an overwhelming and circulating power to build a "virilized" image. Among them, Christophe Alévêque and Stéphane Guillon stand for the typical males, dealing with politics and power relationships in their regular spots in talk shows (*On n'est pas couché* on France 2 for Alévêque in 2007 and *Salut Les Terriens* on Canal+ for Guillon since 2006), on radio (Guillon had a spot on France Inter news program in 2008-2010) and on the internet (Alévêque made a series of videos in which he expresses his outrage at French politics in 2009). In their middle age, they often wear black or grey colors, reflecting their dark hair and short bears. Their voice is low, but fills in the space with "coup de gueule" –this title given to Alévêque's sketches in *On n'est pas couché* means that the comedian shouts at one's head– and anger at the slightest sign of manipulation of public opinion. On stage, in their one-man-shows, their bodies raise impression of heaviness and amplitude. Through these performances, Alévêque and Guillon assert a distant and "under control" point of view, disconnected from the world they comment and from the masses of ignorant people they want to "save". They identify with either the buffoon or the superhero,[4] whose role is to make people see what they don't see. Their sketches activate imaginations of control, hardness, power and courage and enhance a virile masculinity (Bordo, 2000: 57).

[3] The word *chansonnier* refers to *chanson*, meaning songs in English. It recalls that comedy shows before the popularisation of sketches with one-man-show in the 1970s', were performed through songs.
[4] Christophe Alévêque calls his 2008 one-man-show *Super Rebelle*, referring in a parodic way to Superman.

Yet, a second displacement contradicts this re-valorization of masculine virility in comedy. In fact, in 2006, political satire shows signs of "feminization". One of its most famous male representatives, the imitator Nicolas Canteloup, who has a spot in the family talk shows, *Vivement Dimanche* on France 2, differs from its colleagues by presenting an androgynous look, a beardless and soft face, and wearing light colors. His androgyny is exposed when he imitates both female personalities with few accessories. His body shows ability to perform indistinctly codes of both masculinity and femininity, and to reveal their masquerade (Butler, 1990). Yet the performance of Canteloup needs to be replaced in a more general analysis of transvestism in comedy. By referring to well-known and existing people, the comedian also disengages from the gender troubles his imitations create. The viewer might pay much more attention to the "reality" of the character and its caricature than to the gender masquerade. Eventually such a performance leaves the comedian's identity unchallenged and even consolidates his masculine gender identity by encouraging laugh at codes of femininity and weak masculinities.

Political satire also counts for the first time a female comedian Anne Roumanoff. Coming from fiction comedy, she benefited of a certain success in the 1990s', by staging ordinary women from the middle class. In 2007, she obtains a spot during in the family talk show *Vivement Dimanche*, animated by the aging anchorman, Michel Drucker. Her character in the spot, called "Madame Bistrot", contradicts two strong assumptions on women, that they aren't able to be funny (Rowe, 1991) and that they aren't able to deal with politics (Bonnafou, 2003/4: 121). Yet, despite the feminine appearance of the enunciator "Madame Bistrot" (Roumanoff wears red tops, long hair, light make up) that cannot mistake her with a man, her sketches introduce gender ambiguity. In fact, "Madame Bistrot" stands for the typical alcoholic person in a *bistrot* (French word meaning bar, brasserie), which refers, in social imaginations, to a masculine universe. Moreover, her stiff body and the use of sexual allusions not only relate to a stereotypical masculinity (Yaguello, 1978) but also echo a familiar, openly misogynistic, *humour chansonnier*.[5] As a consequence, the text and the body stillness of Madame Bistrot appear disconnected from the subjectivity and the body language of the comedian Anne Roumanoff. For Roumanoff's case, femininity nevertheless serves as a tool to federate audiences around a low, accessible position. Contrary to her male partners, Roumanoff, as Madame Bistrot, does not assert a position of authority, rather a bottom position that gives a populist feel to her spot. The text of the sketch resorts to "good words" and "common sense" and aims at reflecting the opinion of ordinary people at large. Madame Bistrot thus complains about strikes, prize growth, political discontents, and comments the privacy of political leaders, promoting a plaintive and voyeuristic spectatorship.

This populist tone also includes a second group of comedians to be incorporated in *humour chansonnier*. In fact, political satire diversifies by nourishing proximity with stand-up comedy. The first stand-up comedy show in France, *Le Jamel Comedy Club*, helped young, mostly non-white, unknown comedians to get recognition and opened an arena for comic devices based on race, gender, religious, sexual identity. Three of the comedians in the show got a spot in mainstream TV shows, Thomas N'Gijol, Fabrice Eboué and Mustpaha Al Atrassi between 2006 and 2008. In front of political guests and

[5] The *humour chansonnier* became popular through the TV and radio shows *Les Grosses têtes* and *Le théâtre des deux ânes*. One of the satirists of the shows, Bernard Mabille, is the cowriter of the sketches of Roumanoff.

candidates at the presidential election, their stand-up reached an interesting contesting balance, combining the targeted satirical comments and the expression of a subaltern experience and point of view. But black and Arabic comedians have been hired in radio or TV shows not only on the basis of their subaltern position, but also on the basis of their daring speech and actions that allow for easy entertainment. Quickly after their integration in mainstream TV shows, *vannes* –targeted comments– and provocative speech take over the expression of a subaltern point of view. Their multiplication weakens the evocation of race and ethnic issues by engulfing them in several other topics and individualized comments. This process results in a fragmentation of the comic discourse and renders difficult to locate the comedian's position. Everything happens as if the incorporation of stand-up in mainstream comedy is suspended to its "neutralization" and the guarantee of its "universal" claims, in clear its "unmarking" and its correspondence to hegemonic forms of comedy (Brekhus, 2001; Dyer, 1997).

SEXUALIZED FEMININITY AND VIRILIZING MASCULINITY

Far from being neutral, an analysis of the texts of political satire reveals a conservative view on politics and public debates. Political satire regains an unprecedented popularity by taking advantage of the rich political news. Its revival coincides with the campaign for the presidential election held in 2007 that opposed two primary candidates, Nicolas Sarkozy for the party of the Right wing, Union pour la Mouvement Populaire (UMP), and Ségolène Royal for the party of the Left wing, the Parti Socialiste (PS). Comedy finds in the Royal/Sarkozy confrontation a great source of entertainment and invests it not only by exaggerating gendered behaviors but also by creating contradictions between their gender performances and their aspiration to high responsibility. On the one hand, the candidature of Ségolène Royal activates sexist comments and an ambivalent image of womanhood. Often associated with typical feminine traits such as emotion, seduction and understanding (Coulomb-Gully, 2009; Juillard, 2011), the image of Ségolène Royal in comedy is subjected to discredit and accusations for incompetence. It becomes the archetype of the beautiful and seductive candidate. Anne Roumanoff in a 2007 sketch calls her the "Barbie doll" compared to Martine Aubry, the "annoying" and "ugly" female figure of the Socialist Party. Reduced to appearance, Royal's feminine "qualities" often turn into hysteria and uncontrolled behaviors. In Nicolas Canteloup's imitations, her perseverance and ambition are discredited as they become obsessions. Canteloup as Royal enters the TV set by checking hands and waving incessantly at the audience, yet not listening to the anchorman's questions. After her defeat at the election, Royal is pictured as being in denial. She continues the campaign and often mistakes her defeat for a victory. This uncontrollable behavior comes with a castrating attitude and threatening jealousy toward her husband François Hollande.

The fate of Ségolène Royal encompasses old conceptions of womanhood in political satire resorting to well-known dichotomies. Women are associated with silliness, incompetence and sexuality, such as this comment of Christophe Alévêque on the new huge house of the American singer Mariah Carey: "It is so big that she cannot find

panties."[6] Such sexualization of the female body is also the foundation for its rejection and abjection. Its counterpart lies in repulsiveness, hardness, rigidity and frigidity that justify an excessive and ironical expression of disgust. Stéphane Guillon for example, in a chronicle given on February 3rd 2007, pictures the candidate of the Green party Dominique Voynet as a woman that "deters to fuck". He asserts a masculine gaze that sexualizes women on the basis of the so-called sexual needs of the male commentator. Such sexualizing process also governs the appreciation of first ladies. Bernadette Chirac, the spouse of President Jacques Chirac, stands for the castrating and irritating woman, compared to Carla Bruni Sarkozy, who stands for the attractive and seductive woman. These representations reduce femininity to an inescapable ambivalence; made of repulsion/attraction, witch/bitch.

On the other hand, the candidature of Nicolas Sarkozy "denaturalizes" the association between virility and political power. The image of the candidate, ex-minister of domestic affairs, is synonymous with nervousness and poor self-control. Depicted as a proud child, his agitated behavior, emphasized in imitations by moving bodies, reveals a feeling of inferiority and a constant need of reassurance about his masculinity and ability to power. His intimate life, especially his relationship with the top model and singer Carla Bruni, is depicted as fulfilling this need for reassurance and as an expenditure for his nervousness –"he need to do 'radada' otherwise he'll blow up", as Roumanoff comments–[7] whereas his authoritative policy in terms of immigration and foreign affairs, expresses his search for his power. By repeating and recontextualizing the nervous image of Sarkozy, political satire emphasizes the strategic nature of Sarkozy's authority and virility (Achin, Dorlin, 2008: 28-29) mobilized to counter-balance not only the "too emotional" reactions of Royal but also the "naturally" poor charisma of the candidate/president. Laughs at such caricatures establish a distance to non charismatic masculinities and qualifies them as unsuitable to the pursuit of power and to governing responsibilities. Like Sakorzy, François Hollande, a member of the Socialist Party and husband of Ségolène Royal, is mocked for not responding to the virile, under control, male figure. Described as a "fraise tagada" (strawberry candy) and is said to have "une tête de cochon" (a pork face), his weakness is also produced as a consequence of the castrating attitude of his wife and leads to his feminization. The recurrent joke made by Roumanoff or Guillon imagines him as "the first lady" in case Royal would win the elections. The association of virility and charisma is here positively connoted and erected as the condition to govern and to secure power against women.

The reactivation of gender stereotypes relates to what McRobbie for her "complexification" of backlash, identifies as "neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life" (McRobbie, 2009: 12). In fact, political satire implicitly promotes a return to a patriarchal conception of politics that rejects women and enhances a "natural" male authority. The message of political satire is even stronger that it gets its truthfulness from the "objective" inquiry of the present political moment. Royal's candidature appears in fact as the late outcome of affirmative action in favor of women representation in

[6] "Pas étonnant qu'elle ne trouve plus sa petite culotte."

[7] "Il a besoin de faire radada sinon il va exploser."

political parties,[8] but becomes the window, if not the alibi, for the denial and the repetition of gender stereotyping. Her candidature activates the fear for female autonomy and combativeness. In comedy, it is represented as a threat for the future of the country and works as a motor to illegitimate feminist struggles. On the other side, comedy mocking Sarkozy's nervous attitude emphasizes the need for charisma. Through the stereotyping of womanhood and the valorization of virility, comedy shows signs of a return of an androcentric vision. This vision finds its best expression in the explicit rejection of feminist struggle for equality. Christophe Alévêque in his one-man-show *Super Rebelle* in 2008 declares that women have "won" the battle for equality and poses as "martyr" of female power. Complaining about their control over daily lives, he calls for a return to sex and pleasure as the only way to solve social and relational problems. In this case, comedy explicitly denies the need for feminist politics under the argument of accomplishment, and at the same time reinstalls a sexualizing male gaze on relational and social issues.

THE DISARTICULATION OF IDENTITY POLITICS

DE-SUBJECTIFYING FEMINISM AND QUEERISM

The androcentric representation of French public debates comes with a second movement that I have qualified as a disarticulation of feminist, sexual and ethnic politics. By disarticulation, I refer to McRobbie's dismantling of feminism and impossibility to think of a basis of "coming together" (McRobbie, 2009: 26). In the case of comedy, it does not only coincide with the "assumption that there is no longer any need for such action" as McRobbie writes (*ibid*). It rather translates into the fragmentation of identity politics in comedy through the multiplication of anecdotes and hyper-individualization of storytelling, the acceleration of punch lines, and the carnivalisation of the body, meaning an excessive use of colors, weird costumes and exaggerated attitudes (Langman, 2008: 666). It leads to what Shane Gunster identifies in the American sitcom *Seinfeld* as a privatization of agency that "sonspors a casual indifference to the differences" and makes difference become "a farce within the spectacle of the everyday life" (Gunster, 2005: 219). In the next part, I will show that even though comedy made by subaltern groups is informed by different forms of identities and experiences of exclusion, it is also one of the primary site for a de-politicization that weakens contestations and alternative solidarities against the hegemonic movement.

One manifestation of this de-politicization can be found in the mainstreaming of queer politics in comedy (Schehr, 2004). Despite the poor publicity of queer movements in France, what I identified earlier as blurred frontiers between masculinity and femininity may be analyzed as a "queering process" that results in subjectivities that I do not identify with neither one nor the other category (Quemener, 2011). This blurred gender identities come with a liberalized way of looking at sexualities. In *On a tout essayé*, Foresti as Mathilde, a young teenage girl, asserts a flexible, bisexual sexuality, fueled with gender troubles (*ibid*). Parts of her discourse show signs of irony: Foresti speaking through her

[8] The 1995 law for parity obliged political parties to present as many female candidates as male in local elections under the threat of fines.

character also acknowledges the sexual freedom of young generations. In such examples, the political reading of such characters and speeches relies on the possibility of identification to the character, the comedian or the situation. Foresti creates this possibility by mixing fiction and reality and building coherent, slightly caricatural characters. Each character is both a fiction archetype existing on the TV set and a parodic version of Foresti, who reminds the viewer of her presence underneath the character.

The sketches of Jonathan Lambert in the talk show *On n'est pas couché* in 2008 demonstrate a more problematic reading, despite their apparent proximity to Foresti's. Each week, the comedian imagines and interprets a "friend from childhood" of one of the guests in the show. Covered with colorful and bizarre costumes, he addresses the guest as if he was a real person and tells stories about his or her childhood, mixing fiction and real facts. In a 2008 sketch, the comedian plays Daniel/Danièle Brochant, a female transiting to male, who introduces him/herself as a friend of the Brazilian actress Christina Reali. Daniel/Danièle Brochant presents the attributes of two sexes: he/she has boobs, long hair, a high voice, but he/she wears a shirt with a tie and discovers a pair of testiculars transplanted on his/her wrist, as a surgery testing his/her reactions to transplant and preparing his/her phalloplasty. Daniel/Danièle Brochant is put in a real situation, facing the guest and addressing her. He/she is nevertheless known to be a performance on a TV set, which reminds the viewer its fiction. The sketch shows a rupture in the sex-gender causal chain, for both the character whose sex and gender are not identifiable, and the humorist who disappears punctually under the character. But this gender trouble is represented in a fragmented manner. Contrary to most characters in TV shows, those of Lambert appear only once. This absence of repetition prevents from building a consistency and the audience from becoming familiar to it. It also spreads the comic project in various characters and situations. The image of the disguised body on the TV leads to a similar fragmentation: it is composed of several body parts shoot in close-ups that nothing brings together. Such a sketch uses a transgender character as an entertaining, colorful and carnivalized spectacle, but erases subjectivity and, probably, possibilities of identification by the audience. It also builds the character as a stereotypical mirror of the Brazilianity of the actress by activating imaginations of transsexuality and prostitution. The queering process here gives birth to a recall of colonial imageries and a fragmentation that drowns the expression of a (critical) standpoint.

The mainstreaming of queering process in popular culture suffers a heterosexualization of alternative models of femininity. Florence Foresti who introduced in her early sketches characters with "masculine femininities", launches in 2009 her second one-woman-show called *Motherfucker*. While her image as comedian was overwhelmed with gender trouble and rumors of lesbianism, this last show deals with her authentic pregnancy and motherhood. It comes with a (re)assertion and reassurance about her heterosexuality. During its promotion, Foresti declares to have solved her gender trouble ("Now that I am mother, I know I am a woman") and makes quick allusions to the "father". With such words, Foresti reactivates the "natural" link between heterosexuality, femininity and motherhood, all the more strongly that she may have transitorily broken it in her previous performances. She nevertheless revisits the image of motherhood, dealing with the inconveniencies of pregnancy, mocking children's behaviors and refusing to become a devoted mother. The new maturity she claims and

this new discourse on motherhood reframe her alternative model of femininity in heterosexuality and resignify her androgyny as teenage tom boyishness, emptying them from their potential threat (Halberstam, 1997: 28-29). They also coincide with the advent of new female comedians who assert their freedom not to correspond to the norms of a seductive and active womanhood. Louise Bourgoin in the Canal+ TV show *Le Grand Journal* in 2008-2009, a young, good looking and dynamic woman, orchestrates absurd situations and the degradation of her appearance (with bloods covering the face or marks of exhaustion). One of the recurrent characteristics is the emptiness of her sketches, that are based on "nothing" and that often end up with "no transition". Yet, despite her efforts to make herself ugly and "not normal", she never abandons her BCBG image and often flirts with hysteria and silliness. Through these different examples, comedy appears as a site of transgression of gender norms and roles and of assertion of one's own choice in keeping a lifestyle unchanged despite new constraints and social expectations (such as motherhood). But this spectacle of liberalized gender performances most of the time diverts attention from the restoration of a heterosexual framework as well as from its closeness with stereotypical representations of femininity.

The fragmentation of ethnic comedy

So far, I have distinguished between gender and race issues. In fact, they constitute disconnected modes of expression in comedy, when we look at the way comedians represent themselves and build their careers. While female comedians have integrated mainstream culture and comedy, comedians from minority groups have developed a specific position in popular culture by creating their own production house –the one belonging to Jamel Debbouze is Kissman Production– and an "aesthetic from the margins" (Hooks, 1990: 104) with stand-up. In 2006, the stand-up comedy show *Le Jamel Comedy Club* on Canal+ broadcasts the first routines to assert the various dimensions of identity. With comedians from different ethnic groups (Asian, Black, Arabic, mixed race) including women, it performs a multicultural collectivity in which ethnicity and race compose the primary experience of exclusion (Goffman, 1979), but gender, religion, region, sexuality allow for a diversification of storytelling and comic devices. Throughout the three years of existence of the *JCC*, the issue of diversity took over the denunciation of discrimination and favored the multiplication of anecdotes and original selves. In season 2, the presence of Rady is justified by his specific position as an Arabic Muslim guy coming from the North region of France, Nord-Pas-Calais. He cumulates different levels of identifications and possible discriminations (on the basis of race, religion, and regional origin). This is what makes his speech special, but also what tends to de-politicize it. In fact, by evoking his multidimensional identity, his sketch also neutralizes the empowering potential of a single, coherent, stable identity and the denunciation of a one-dimensional oppression. I do not mean to sound reluctant to an unpacking of identity politics in favor of an intersectional approach. But in mainstream comedy, this unpacking process leads to various individual careers, expressions of specific tastes and localized experiences of exclusion, where the most exceptional identities are privileged over the coherence of discourse. Here, the popular representation of diversity echoes political and economical apprehension of it as a creative, innovative, if not entertaining, concept (Doytcheva, 2007).

It certainly serves a complexification of the representation of identity but drowns the collective lines and the imagined communities into a multiplicity of local experiences and selves.

The stress put on personal choices and assertion of identity detached from power structures leads to a localization of identity politics. In these examples, the intersectional conception of identity gets confined at an individual level instead of setting itself up as a political project. This localization and this fragmentation of identity politics in comedy allows for an insidious incorporation of their representatives in mainstream culture. Respectively black and mixed race, Thomas N'Gijol and Fabrice Éboué overcome the disempowering fantasies on black men (e.g. large penis, sexual appetite, potential rappers of white women) by taking upon a strong masculinity (Hall, 1997: 229). With his urban style inspired by soul singers, N'Gijol introduces himself as the typical young guy from the middle class, interested in news, politics and sports. He insists on being a womanizer, taking upon his blackness, attracted to white woman (Jamel Comedy Club, season 2). Even though he does not necessarily disregard women in his discourses, he nevertheless asserts a distinctive, sometimes objectifying, attitude. Éboué is much more ambiguous. Staging a hideous character, he resorts on the TV set of *T'empêches tout le monde de dormer* in 2007 and 2008, to extreme misogyny and racism. He does not hesitate to reduce female guests to dumb women or overemphasize their sexual image. Despite his mixed race and his position of potential victim of discrimination and stereotyping, he demonstrates a violent hate to Chinese people, pictured as an invading population, and resorts to various stereotyping process. Of course, the comic device relies on the theatricality of his racism and his sexism and the revelation of their arbitrariness. But it also builds a "double speak" (Burch, 2000): despite the emphasized vanity, it urges for a cathartic laugh by reproducing a nightmarish image of certain social groups.

The repetitions of hate speech on a TV set mostly occupied by white people interrogate the political purpose of such act. In fact, Fabrice Éboué appears as the best purveyor of conservative views, as his discourse is both *neutralized* by his blackness and his outsider's position, and *condemnable* for being said by a black person and an outsider. The comedian is subjected to a double sentence: he is himself the "other", the only black in the show, and the "other" racist/sexist. Such performances focus the attention on Éboué's provoking act and recreate a consensus in the condemnation through laughs and booing on TV sets of both his racism and sexism. The outcome of this consensus is a transfer of responsibility for discrimination and stereotyping from the collectivity of viewers to the representatives of minority group. Eventually, the mainstreaming of comic denunciation of stereotypes and hyperbolic racialization leaves unquestioned hegemonic whiteness and masculinity.

The renewal of margins

The intersectional dimension of identity does not only lead to a de-politicization of comic discourse. It is also a site where new resistances emerge. Examples of new models of resistance can be found in stand-up, with female comedians staging complex and multilayered routines. Coming from *Le Jamel Comedy Club* Claudia Tagbo, a black

female comedian, combine the personal "I" and storytelling with a body fluidity inspired by female comedians such as Florence Foresti and Julie Ferrier. One of her most famous routines focuses on her attempts to find a boyfriend, using meeting websites and seduction strategies. The different anecdotes give a dark picture of her male partners who appear careless, selfish, skinflint. They come with an interactive performance that challenges the audience. When Claudia arrives on stage, she starts by dancing and exhibiting her shapes on stage, attracting the view on her body. She then watches the room with scrutiny and points one of the boys sitting in the theater, most of the time white, and asks whether he's single. At this point, she makes clear that she'll have the final word: "Not bad but to hairy."[9] Such a line clarifies the general topic of the sketch: Claudia is "craving" for a man and ready to do anything to get one but she gets to choose according to her criteria. The whole sketch is built to assert herself as a subject and not an object of her sexuality and love life. To become a subject, Claudia Tagbo does not resort to traditional codes of seductive femininity. Having short hair, a generous body and demonstrating an energetic and authoritative personality, she stages a non-submissive matriarch. Under her authority, men are disempowered and clearly turn into objects of the female gaze.

This innovating performance echoes counter-models of black femininity. Even though Claudia does not talk explicitly about racial issues in France, she uses her body as a tool to assert authority on stage and to turn the "controlling image' of the exotic black woman into a forceful existence, as did Black women in Blues and writing (Hill Collins, 2000: 117-120). Claudia's authoritative femininity echoes that of another Black female comedian, Shirley Souagnon, who appears in 2010 in *café-théâtre* with a show called *Sketch up* (a mix of stand up and sketches). Souagnon's body is too androgynous to activate the exotic image of the black woman. Instead, Souagnon relates to another "typical" image of black femininity, that of the androgynous, sportive woman. To respond to the common mistakes of people calling her mister, she makes fun of her unnoticeable breasts and of her failure to "prove" she is woman. But like Claudia, this androgyny is presented as a black femininity: it is impossible for a black girl with "cheveux crépus" to have long hair, she says, taking upon a common theme of Black female imagery (Hill Collins, 2000: 97-101). Shirley Souagnon's routine neither fits the image of the exotic black body produced by the white gaze, nor the normative model of seductive and sexually active woman. Instead its strength and creativity lie in an alternative model of femininity that introduces itself as a product of a specific intersectional position and identity.

Conclusion

Despite a few sketches broadcasted on television, the shows by Claudia Tagbo and Shirley Souagnon remain confidential. The fate of female comedians from minority groups also demonstrates a vulnerability to a reassertion of Republican values. At the end of 2010 the show of Nouara Nagouch, an Arabic female comedian, was scheduled in the Parisian theater Le Théâtre du Rond Point. The show was first written to address the community of

[9] "Pas mal mais trop poilu."

people leaving in the suburbs of Colmart, a city of the East France. It gives a broad picture of the way of life in suburban areas and of the cohabitation of Algerians, Senegalese, and Moroccans. It ends with a feminist preach, targeted to one of her main characters, a woman married to a strict religious Muslim man, who forbids her to leave the home. When played at the Rond Point in front of a white, bourgeois and Parisian audience, the final speech takes on a disturbing connotation: by focusing on a Muslim couple, it endorses a simplified conception of Islamic religion and practices, and overethnicized unequal gender relationships (Volpp, 2006). It creates an "other" that comforts the white audience in its "modernity" (Saïd, 1980).

This last example proves the very thin line between the politization of subaltern groups and experience, and their instrumentalization within a hegemonic process. In this paper, I've tried to analyze the backlash movement that happens in comedy since 2006 and to theorize its grounding mechanism. Backlash may be defined here as a double process: the return to stereotypical images of femininity and masculinity and of a white male gaze through political satire; the incorporation of subaltern groups and issues within a mainstream domain, up to the point that their presence and the assertion of particular multidimensional identities become "common sense". But this incorporation also leads to the distortion and disarticulation of the political dimensions of comedy. On the one hand, backlash allows conventional topics such as motherhood to be revisited provided the comic discourse confines itself in a heterosexual frame. On the other hand, it praises multidimensional identities provided the comic performance restricts them to individualized and localized territories.

This backlash in comedy reveals contradictions in the French Republican model. Dealing with gender issues by promoting equal treatments and with ethnic minority through a politics of diversity, the Republican model has never really been able to cop with identity politics, whether it comes from feminists, sexual or ethnic minorities. This favors a conventional packaging of identity politics made to avoid the fear of "particularism" that would contradict ideals of universalism and abstract citizenship. Even though comedy is a privileged site for the revelation of the oppressive dimensions of this model, the revival of a conservative political satire and the dispersion of identity issues interrogate the possibility for a long run counter-movement in France, and of politics of identity that would be able to set themselves up as a political and collective project.

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