

# Introduction

In January 2017, a protester from the activist group Code Pink, Desiree Fairouz, was arrested for laughing during the confirmation hearing for Senator Jeff Sessions to become the next attorney general of the United States. While introducing Sessions, the other senator from Alabama, Richard Shelby, stated that his colleague had a “clear and well-documented” record of “treating all Americans equally under the law.” Fairouz found that claim laughable—so she laughed. A rookie Capitol Hill police officer, who before the incident had never made an arrest nor guarded a congressional hearing, decided to take Fairouz into custody for disorderly conduct.

In May, Fairouz was convicted, but Judge Robert E. Morin tossed out the guilty verdict in July because the government had improperly argued that her laughter alone was enough to convict. In September, numerous news organizations reported that Fairouz would be retried when she refused a plea bargain, but shortly before the new trial date, the Department of Justice announced it was dropping the charge.<sup>1</sup>

If there was any doubt that laughter could be construed as comic political speech, the actions of the government in this incident prove otherwise. In effect, Fairouz’s laughter registered as an unruly gesture within the staged civil disobedience of Code Pink and as another sign of its dissent, one understood as disruptive of official proceedings and therefore subject to the criminal code.

The fear implied in the government’s actions, especially in its decision to retry Ms. Fairouz, suggests that some force still remains in the claim that “Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand,” famously expressed in an unfinished story by Mark Twain.<sup>2</sup> Although the implication of radical

change in that assertion surely counts as a rhetorical overreach, comic laughter obviously worried the Department of Justice. The assault of laughter may not blow “a colossal humbug . . . to rags and atoms at a blast,” as the passage from the story claims, but it obviously can disturb in significant ways. Otherwise why respond with criminal charges? This incident dramatizes the role of comic laughter as a fundamental social gesture signifying how comic political speech might operate in the twenty-first-century public sphere. Moreover, the incident underscores how forcefully satire might function as the comic form of what the ancient Greeks called *parrhēsia*, speaking truth no matter the consequence—but via laughter-provoking mockery and ridicule. No wonder that Donald Trump attacked *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) and Alec Baldwin for his impersonation of the president; the parody rattled the White House. Mr. Trump claimed SNL has terrible ratings when the facts demonstrate exactly the opposite: the skits featuring Baldwin as Trump practically revived the show, a meta-joke engendered by the impersonation. The repeated sketches on SNL featuring Baldwin as Trump so enraged the president that he wondered in a tweet, “how do the Networks get away with these total Republican hit jobs without retribution?”<sup>3</sup> Trump’s demand for retribution against a television show airing satirical sketches reiterates the Desiree Fairooz debacle that attempted to repress the laughter of citizens as a danger to the state. Whether in print, broadcast, streamed, or staged in public places with guerrilla tactics, satire and its comic laughter can be logged as assaults on the follies and vices of civic society, what Jürgen Habermas famously called the public sphere.<sup>4</sup>

*Satire as the Comic Public Sphere: Postmodern “Truthiness” and Civic Engagement* examines the relationship between satire and the public sphere, a relationship that creates the comic public sphere, a parodic counterpart to Habermas’s classic articulation of a particular kind of discourse and set of social practices first associated with Enlightenment values and technologies. The core thesis of the investigation can be simply stated: satire functions as comic political speech and signifies the presence of the comic public sphere. Even in its postmodern forms down to the present day, satire bears the legacy of the Enlightenment’s values of reasoned debate, facts and evidence, accountability, and transparency that characterize Habermas’s concept of the public sphere. Satire signifies the comic public sphere because it implicitly advocates for those values, no matter how aggressive its laughter-provoking presentation.

Whatever critiques have been leveled against Habermas’s concept, the public sphere and its digital format today remain a fundamentally discursive

realm. Satire understood as the public sphere's comic supplement, when viewed from the long historical perspective since the Enlightenment, underscores the crucial civic quality of accurate information and the narrative form generally called *news*. The role of news narratives anchors the eighteenth-century version of the public sphere first identified by Habermas; moreover, that crucial role has continued into the twenty-first century's version. However, under the pressure of digital technologies, the word *news* today does not necessarily signify a factual basis for reasoned debate but rather indicates a contested site in which counternarratives circulate and political spin doctors offer "alternative facts," as a White House aide, Kellyanne Conway, famously did to describe the initial press briefing of Sean Spicer, the first White House press secretary for the Trump administration.

Political discourse in the US—adversarial and dominated by television performances—often shows the same desire to push counternarratives to support alternative facts. For example, in April 2018, a handful of House Republicans wrote a letter to the Department of Justice demanding the prosecutions of Hillary Clinton and other Democrats to match the Russia investigation by special counsel Robert Mueller and the FBI. As Matthew Yglesias put it, "The point here is almost certainly not to generate any actual prosecutions so much as it is to try to muddy the waters in the media."<sup>5</sup> Websites such as the Drudge Report, Breitbart, and Infowars routinely construct narratives about current events to counter traditional news outlets, which have been tagged scornfully as the "lamestream media." *News* as a reference to reporting events now signifies not just a range of newspapers and broadcasts on TV and radio, as well as cablecasts or online dissemination, but a discursive space in which alternate realities compete.

There could hardly be a better example of consequences implied in Jean-François Lyotard's famous dictum about the delegitimizing of meta-narratives that characterizes the postmodern condition. In his analysis, the question now asked about knowledge by "the State, or institutions of higher education is no longer 'Is it true?' but 'What use is it?'"<sup>6</sup> This shift in attitude about knowledge presents the fundamental problem for news reporting and thus the public sphere, for "use" can be turned any number of ways by the doctrine of alternative facts dispensed by spin doctors and public relations experts. Arguably, the most famous and far-reaching example of alternative facts to create a false narrative that circulates in the public sphere denies climate change, but Trump's demonstrably false assertion about *SNL*'s terrible ratings suggests the ubiquitous use of alternative facts to support even the most trivial claims. Supposedly, "May you live in interesting times,"

voices an old Chinese curse, with “interesting” apparently standing in for “tumultuous” and “disruptive.” There can be little doubt that we do indeed live in interesting times. We have a president who rattles off falsehood so routinely that a major newspaper has published as a book a series of editorial opinions titled *Our Dishonest President*.<sup>7</sup>

The doctrine of alternative facts mounts a potentially deadly challenge to the idea of consensus built into Habermas’s public sphere, for it attacks the Enlightenment’s basic narrative of progress both scientific and social. The danger arises by exchanging the meaning of *consensus*—an agreement reached through dialogue and among free agents with reasoning intellects—for a consensus extracted from a media ecosystem, one that can be harnessed to political and economic apparatuses only interested in maintaining and improving their performances—that is, one in service to power. If enough people circulate those alternative facts and the conspiracies they foster, what Jean Baudrillard would call a simulacra of public sphere consensus appears, wherein appearance devolves into simulation.<sup>8</sup>

This threat has helped propel satire as a comic form of pushback in a bid to adapt the public sphere to the more recent phases of the postmodern environment. As though proving the second law of thermodynamics in social and political terms, the more that public sphere debate and discussion based on accurate news reporting have been attacked, the more satire has been employed as an equal and opposite reaction. The recent production of satire in the United States has thrived under these conditions. Rachel Caufield and Rob King each argue that American culture currently features a golden age of satire, an assertion that strikes a clear note, given the unrivaled ascendancy of Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, Bill Maher, Samantha Bee, and John Oliver as pop culture satirists.<sup>9</sup> The popularity of comic work by Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, and Amy Schumer, for example, like the 2016 addition of Samantha Bee’s *Full Frontal* (TBS) to the weekly line-up of cablecast shows, indicates the strength of gender-inflected satire. Larry Wilmore’s *The Nightly Show* (Comedy Central, 2015–16) briefly brought an African American sensibility to the cultural scene memorably expressed earlier by *Chappelle’s Show* (Comedy Central, 2003–6) and more recently by *Key & Peele* (Comedy Central, 2012–15). Trevor Noah’s current version of *The Daily Show* (Comedy Central, 2015–present) features an international as well as person of color’s satiric point of view, enabled by Noah’s South African background. The addition in 2017 of Jordan Klepper’s short-lived *The Opposition* to this formidable line-up indicated Comedy Central’s basic belief that satire continues to sell.<sup>10</sup>

These examples suggest an unprecedented diversity to accompany satire's unprecedented visibility. A survey of satire in a stand-up format would easily elaborate this televisual hint of its ubiquity and of its reach in popular culture. Moreover, satire's visibility is truly international.<sup>11</sup> The literary scene in the United States over the past decade or so offers a long list of writers, some more well known than others, working in comic modes—Paul Beatty, Alison Bechdel, Robert Coover, Lydia Davis, Amy Hempel, Chuck Palahniuk, Guy Portman, Thomas Pynchon, Phoebe Robinson, George Saunders, David Sedaris, David Foster Wallace, Alexander Weinstein, Colson Whitehead, Gerald Vizenor—to round out this picture of satire's robust presence in contemporary American culture.

This ubiquity has occurred, in part, via the newest mass medium, the internet, with its progeny YouTube, a video world unto itself. Podcasts and streaming take their place as new formats in older media, existing alongside social media platforms that have a potential for comic presentation. These communication platforms blur genres in unforeseen ways through what Geoffrey Baym calls “discursive integration,” which can be read, along with Baudrillard's regime of simulacra and its doctrine of alternative facts, as symptomatic of a postmodern condition, or, at the least, of the regular collision of modernism and postmodernism, or as an interweaving of the “political normative” and the “aesthetic-expressive.” For Baym and other scholars, discursive integration has become a key factor in analyses of twenty-first-century satire because the “fundamental blurring of conceptual categories and media discourses . . . has created both the conditions *and the need* for the emergence of comedy [i.e., satire] as a site of political conversation.”<sup>12</sup>

Satire in the United States of the twenty-first century, then, bears the marks of a postmodern aesthetic even as it continues to display Enlightenment intellectual roots not just in its efforts to inform in order possibly to reform but in its efforts to educate American citizenry. Being made aware of and educated about civic issues stands out as a theme as well as a goal of much contemporary satire. That goal implies a philosophical underpinning for satire today that contradicts or at least revises the deep irony of early postmodernism, an irony that questions foundational assumptions about knowledge and spurns metanarratives in which consensus values might be anchored. That early version of a postmodern condition would seem to preclude any satire at all, for how can the reformist impulse of satire as a comic mode operate in an aesthetic and cultural environment in which all ethical and moral values are said to be contingent? Nevertheless, the death

of satire in the twenty-first century has clearly been exaggerated, for satire is not just surviving but thriving in a new cultural and aesthetic moment, as the list rehearsed above indicates.

The rise of fake news outlets such as the Drudge Report, Breitbart, and Infowars has been paralleled by satire in mock news formats.<sup>13</sup> The agonistic dynamic of news and mock news and fake news that permeates public discourse demonstrates the complicated discursive integration already in place even as it suggests a satiric battle already in progress. The assault on the Enlightenment's values of facts, evidence, and reasoned debate underpinned by good information in newspapers and other periodicals has propelled the mock news format to prominence, particularly since the advent of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (1999–2015).<sup>14</sup> However, the defining moment for the satiric mocking of fake news and its correlative habits of pushing alternative facts and denying scientific research came with *The Colbert Report* (2005–14), a spin-off from *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, hosted by Stephen Colbert, when Colbert coined the term “truthiness” to describe the turn against facts and evidence.<sup>15</sup>

These parodic shows as well as other satiric endeavors have been fruitfully examined from a media studies perspective concerned with refuting the argument that mock news shows and their ironic satire encourage disengagement from and even cynicism about politics. Several studies argue that the entertainment television of the mock news shows represents instead innovative political engagement, countering apathy or cynicism by encouraging a participatory culture for their audiences, in effect, a new public sphere, or deploying the “ironic authenticity” of a postmodern satire to create counterpublics.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, this positive argument has been vigorously reinforced by an assertion that contemporary satire might constitute a kind of political action called “satiractivism,” a level of citizenship performance beyond any discursive and affective engagement one might usually claim for satiric texts. This multipronged counterargument includes dissecting the studies upon which others have made the disengagement/cynicism argument, while offering empirical evidence refuting earlier empirical evidence.<sup>17</sup> Within this media studies framework, the satire in formats that play with the news—Stephen Colbert's or Jimmy Kimmel's late-night monologues or Samantha Bee's *Full Frontal* segments—is conceptualized as political communication.

I want to both extend this line of argument and turn it from media studies about political communication to what is conventionally called *humor studies*<sup>18</sup> by investigating how a certain kind of satiric text operates

via a comic aesthetic within postmodern culture, and thus demonstrating how a parodic relationship to Habermas's idea of the public sphere enables comic political speech. This angle emphasizes poetics over politics, aesthetic expression over political communication. The alternative view that satire functions as political communication can be discerned, for example, in the statement that "two sharp-witted comedians—Bill Maher and Dennis Miller—[were] granted . . . the license to bend the inherited rules of entertainment talk and craft a new model by melding politics with humor."<sup>19</sup> This analysis works within a history of television from the disciplinary viewpoint of media studies, but humor studies would say that satire always melded politics with comic techniques, including humor, so "new model" makes little sense. What happened from the humor studies point of view was that postmodern aesthetics and the post-network environment provided an enormous cultural opening for satirists to do what they always did, critique social and political habits, albeit in new media formats. Similarly, arguing that mock news shows starring Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert function as "the vanguard of a new kind of public affairs media [or] political journalism" and in doing so create "various political narratives" implies that satire is political speech.<sup>20</sup> Within humor studies' framework of investigating cultural comic artifacts, this line of thinking misreads the satire being deployed because it misapprehends the nature of satire as *comic discourse*; moreover, it provides an opening for the all-too-common argument that satire fails completely to be effective as a change agent.

I argue for conceptualizing satire as a form of aesthetic communication *supplementing* political discourse with its mode of comic discourse. It must be admitted, however, that understanding satire's function in the public sphere is not clear-cut. Though Amber Day calls her satiric examples "instances of political discourse," her project employs multiple theoretical angles—performance studies, communication studies, and literary studies as well as media studies—and so she stands closer to humor studies privileging aesthetics rather than politics. Day underscores the hybrid nature of the comic cultural artifacts being discussed so that a "clear separation between safely detached satire and real political life is often not . . . neatly identifiable [while] there is plenty of discursive exchange that takes place in the form of the seemingly 'irrational'—in the registers of parody, satire, fiction, and nonsense."<sup>21</sup> My concept of the *comic public sphere* encompasses these claims by theorizing its parodic relationship to the public sphere. I am not claiming that media studies analyses are without their virtues. In fact, I would agree that what counts as political engagement has been profoundly

altered by a variety of new cultural artifacts rated as laughter provoking. Rather, I am asking what might be learned about such cultural artifacts, many accessed primarily on television, when examined from another theoretical angle.

The prominence of the news format for satiric purposes has been maintained and enhanced by an alumnus of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, John Oliver, and his mock news magazine show *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* (2014–present). Oliver uses most of his weekly half hour to dive deep into a single civic or social issue in a fashion that apparently often fits easily into the concept of satiractivism. As I argue, specific episodes of *Last Week Tonight* mark an explicit turn toward satiractivism, a turn that can also readily be seen in another relatively new and popular satiric show, *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* (2016–present).<sup>22</sup> Both shows exhibit a distinct penchant for directly encouraging citizens to act in the public sphere. Thus, not only does satire project a thriving aesthetic as well as power a commercial enterprise, not only has it of late asserted itself as a notable force within the public sphere, but some satiric efforts have ratcheted up public sphere involvement with a turn toward an overt activism, a turn that threatens to blur my claim of a basic distinction from satire's function as comic political speech, as supplement to serious political speech.

This turn has altered what might be expected from contemporary satire, not only transforming at least sections of it to a laudatory effort to engage citizens in the ongoing conversation that constitutes a living democratic society, but also demanding participation in civic affairs to alter public policy on specific issues—insisting, in effect, that citizens exercise their most basic rights of free speech and access to the ballot box. Thus satire as comic political speech now apparently metamorphoses into political speech routinely in its satiractivist strain. More precisely, satire as a kind of comic activism presents itself as a rhetorical monster, part public sphere essay and part comic public sphere jokes and insults. Television shows like *Last Week Tonight* and *Full Frontal* illustrate the particular focus this study takes, zeroing in on satire that plays with news as media format and narrative form. This satiric playfulness upholds via comic means the ideal of communicative rationality the public sphere represents and so explicitly counters what might be called *the anti-public sphere* represented by fake news outlets like the Drudge Report, Breitbart, and Infowars. This study has as one of its goals the investigation of satiractivism's place in the contemporary moment of proliferating satire in order to understand how it helps to fuel the discursive dynamic in the digital age between the



comic public sphere and the public sphere that intends to counter the anti-public sphere.

Satire has the baseline status of a particular comic mode functioning as comic political speech—that is, as a particular kind of speech act that supplements the public sphere with the possibility of effecting *metanoia*, a change of mind in its audience. Satire operates as a comic public sphere because any specific instance of satire has an embedded intent to promote discussion and debate and thus encourage the possibility of civic reform.<sup>23</sup> While that definition could be tabulated as transcendental, two historical overviews of satire indicate a crucial pivot that stresses the private and conservative side of satire that appears in Western classical and medieval and neoclassical satire, before the Enlightenment. However, overlapping the conservatism of neoclassical satire in the eighteenth century is the beginning of the public sphere idea of inquiry into public affairs that can include all citizens.<sup>24</sup> Thus satire as the sign of the comic public sphere appears as more modern and postmodern than otherwise. My broad formulation, then, should be revised: satire since the Enlightenment, as part of the project of modernity, functions most clearly as the sign of the comic public sphere, even in postmodern forms.

Specific topics important to any investigation of satire are explored in particular. One has been suggested already: the efficacy of satire. A bastion of mockery, satire has been mocked for having no discernible effect within the body politic or social. A second issue links author intention and the audience for satire. It would seem that, for satire, authorial intention often must give way to audience interpretation: a reader could say that a text might have been intended as a satire, or simply can be read as such regardless of any intention by the author.

The context of the Trump administration, some might say, calls for harsh forms of satire: the body politic under Trump's leadership has become so morally corrupt that blistering satire often feels required. When Juvenal about 110 CE wrote that "it is difficult not to write satire," he apparently felt that living in a social environment of mendacity and vulgarity, who could resist exposing its folly in the most obvious genre available, satire? Nearly twenty centuries later, the United States finds itself in conditions similar to Rome, replete with mendacity and vulgarity and satire. A third theme asks, therefore, when is satire so caustic that it should be classified as screed or rant powered by the low invective David Denby calls *snark*—that is, when does the ridicule and comic insults endemic to the comic public sphere devolve into the mere snarkiness of the anti-public sphere?<sup>25</sup>

Denby's analysis produces doubts about Juvenal as a satirist; the Roman writer's poems were largely motivated by revenge against individual butts: lampoons, not satires. Denby thus invokes Samuel Johnson's definitions of satire and lampoon in his *Dictionary*. Satire is a "poem in which wickedness or folly is censured," and "proper satire" should be distinguished from a lampoon, "which is aimed at a particular person." Moreover, a lampoon is a "personal satire; abuse; censure written not to reform but to vex."<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Swift put it this way: "There are two ends that men propose in writing satire, one of them less noble than the other, as regarding nothing further than personal satisfaction, and the pleasure of the writer; but without any view toward personal malice [i.e., lampoon]; the other [satire proper] is a public spirit, prompting men of genius and virtue to mend the world as far as they are able. And as both these ends are innocent, so the latter is highly commendable."<sup>27</sup> *Snark* is slang for the low invective that powers mere lampoons. In the analysis I develop, *snark* understood as the degenerate invective of mere lampoon signals the presence of the anti-public sphere, while proper satire in service to civic virtue indicates the comic public sphere. One of the goals of *Satire as the Comic Public Sphere* is an exploration of how to distinguish the ridicule that animates both discursive spheres and so distinguish satire from screeds and rants.

The arc of the argument for *Satire as the Comic Public Sphere* begins with "Defining Satire," which situates satire as one of the oldest aesthetic modes having the potential for provoking laughter. This first chapter offers a definition meant to provide a durable framework for understanding satire at its most basic level and thus to aid scholarly exploration of satire in any cultural environment at any historical moment; it also offers the idea of *The Comic*, the book's most radical theoretical idea: all laughter-provoking cultural artifacts constitute a separate discursive realm. In addition, this chapter advances the theory of *a-musement*, or the satire two-step—that is, satire rhetorically asks its audience to muse on or ponder the topic presented after laughing. Finally, the chapter broaches the problem of ridicule being used for civic reform.

The second chapter, "The Public Sphere," acknowledges the Enlightenment as the major pivot in a historical account of satire. Though "Defining Satire" presents a definition meant to aid in explorations of satire at any historical moment and in all cultures, the rise of the public sphere in specific European countries profoundly alters the role satire might play in the civic life of modern nations. This pivot becomes significantly visible in the assertion—for example, in Samuel Johnson's definition—that satire explicitly

intends reform, whether social or political, an intention mostly confined to private behavior before the ascendancy of Enlightenment ideals. Thus my basic claim that satire signifies the comic public sphere, strictly speaking, emphasizes satire since the Enlightenment.

“The Public Sphere” provides historical context for understanding satire today as comic public sphere within a postmodern aesthetic, with two goals: first, that postmodernity does not erect a barrier to satire today, as some have argued. Embedded in that goal is a second, showing the ground of that claim, namely, that postmodernity constitutes a phase of what Habermas calls “the project of modernity” first expressed by Enlightenment thinkers.<sup>28</sup> Understanding the Enlightenment as the birth of modernity and understanding postmodernity as a later phase shows that, while satire displayed a specific negative quality at the height of early postmodernity, its intent to participate comically in the public sphere was never in doubt. Postmodernity, then, appears not as a rejection of Enlightenment ideals but as a profound modification, a relationship that Richard Bernstein presents with the metaphor *constellation* to capture the paradox of optimism and skepticism in the resulting amalgamation of principles. This chapter presents in brief what I take to be the most important historical and philosophical background for contemporary satire: postmodernity’s relation to the Enlightenment, a relation that, in addition to creating a constellation of values for the contemporary cultural scene, enables the comic public sphere with satire as its sign.<sup>29</sup>

The next chapter, “Truthiness Satire and the Comic Public Sphere” highlights Steven Weisenburger’s idea of generative and degenerative satire while tying it to the claim that within postmodern satire—even in its more caustic examples that threaten to cancel itself—proper satire still survives, pushing back against the argument that postmodernity precludes satire. According to Jonathan Greenberg, the opposite is true: postmodernists revive satire as a dominant literary phenomenon, though the term *black humor* is often used rather than *satire*.<sup>30</sup>

The key to that pushback for an important slice of contemporary satire is Stephen Colbert’s neologism *truthiness*. The public sphere and satire depend upon news narratives and the journalistic imperative to report events as accurately as possible: *public sphere* names a discursive site for the conversation that ideally furthers democracy via rational communication. Postmodernity may have sapped the power of Truth as a transcendental concept, but accuracy in the news still greatly matters for the conversation of the public sphere. Thus, what I call *truthiness satire* does not mock

postmodernity's skepticism toward transcendental truth; instead, truthiness satire mocks those who misapprehend that skepticism for a moral relativism in which anything goes, for an environment in which facts do not matter against the gut feeling of mere opinion.<sup>31</sup> In its reverse discourse form, truthiness satire operates as emblematic comic supplement to the postmodern public sphere; it appears to accept the validity of opinion over fact when its purpose insinuates exactly the opposite: to bolster the pursuit of accuracy in the news and in public sphere discourse. Truthiness satire as a comic maneuver often uncovers the stake in today's public conversation about civic issues: the informed citizen functioning as the lifeblood of a vibrant democracy.

That stake is precisely why in this study I have limited the examples examined to comic artifacts that play with the news. The informed citizen depends upon accurate news narratives to understand civic issues of the moment and the various points of view that debate on them necessarily generates. Truthiness, the degraded and cynical form of a postmodern skepticism about the validity of metanarratives, targets journalistic accuracy as irrelevant and threatens the very existence of the informed citizen.

The role of satire in the contest of truth claims and facts (public sphere) versus truthiness (anti-public sphere) defines the core object of my analysis. That clash invokes the Enlightenment's ideals of rationality and puts the spotlight on news narratives as the (post)modern and mass means of making truth claims in the service of the public sphere. Linking truthiness to the anti-public sphere perhaps registers as obvious enough. Understanding that truthiness satire in a reverse discourse dynamic has become a tactic of some postmodern satire perhaps sounds not so obvious. Within that dynamic, the through-the-looking-glass effect of truthiness becomes a clear satiric target.

My bricoleur use of Jean Baudrillard's regime of simulacra, Geoffrey Baym's discursive integration, and Steven Weisenburger's degenerative satire, along with Alan Kirby's notion of digimodernism, provides context for how truthiness satire demonstrates the embeddedness of the comic public sphere within the public sphere during the current cultural moment of Donald Trump's presidency, while also making visible its discursive antagonist, the anti-public sphere. The theoretical context does not describe all satiric efforts in that cultural moment, only those that have as their basic mode of operation a playfulness with news narratives and news formats.

Having emphasized theoretical and historical background in Part One, *Satire as the Comic Public Sphere* in Part Two examines in more detail

specific examples of contemporary satire. “Satire and Speech Act Theory” begins the second half of the book by suggesting how satire fits into J. L. Austin’s theory about speech acts before moving on to satiric artifacts playing with the news to highlight instances of what I take to be the most consequential satire of the day in the next two chapters, “Satire as Speech Act, Part One” and “Satire as Speech Act, Part Two.”<sup>32</sup> Austin’s concepts of *locutionary*, *illocutionary*, and *perlocutionary* speech acts sort contemporary examples of satire in a postmodern condition, with its potential for a truthiness mash-up of news reporting, into three categories that range across a spectrum—from news reporting resembling satire (locutionary) to satire resembling political speech (illocutionary) and even to satire resembling political action—that is, satiractivism (quasi-perlocutionary).<sup>33</sup>

In the next chapter, “The Limits of Satiric Ridicule,” I am explicitly concerned with the aesthetics of the comic critique embedded in satire. Thus the question of satire being too caustic arises. When does satire, as its playfulness diminishes and its aggressiveness accumulates, cross a stylistic border and morph into mere rants or screeds, the low lampooning invective of snark? This chapter acknowledges that satire’s playful insults have a perennial penchant to become the insults of mere snark. Thus the ethical dilemma for satire: Does its brand of critique, its form of speech replete with mockery and ridicule, interfere with the everyday mutual understanding necessary in the public sphere? The next chapter, “Satiric Intent and Audience Uptake,” explores the issue of audience and intention by examining how speech acts by President Trump have been interpreted in the public sphere. Finally, “Find the Punchline” offers conclusions.

*Satire as the Comic Public Sphere* traces frontiers—not only between comic public sphere and public sphere, between satires and screeds (the limits of comic license), between satire and satiractivism, but also among different kinds of laughter and different phases of postmodernity—in order to acknowledge nuance in its attempts at granular analysis of specific examples. In probing the limits of concepts and ideas, this study demonstrates its own debt to Lyotard’s description of postmodern knowledge making.

In the account of contemporary satire offered here, *truthiness* signifies the effects of discursive integration and a regime of simulacra that contribute to the postmodern aesthetic within which many contemporary satirists operate. Satire today has many specific targets, but its most significant comic butt must be the potential for a truthiness effect arising from misunderstanding the postmodern condition. *Truthiness satire*, then, ridicules even as it employs some effects of postmodernity, its discursive

integration and regime of simulacra, to fashion a comic *parrhēsia* meant to supplement the debate and discussion of the public sphere.

A word about what this study is not: it does not move outside the realm of American culture in its specific examples, though I intend the definition of satire offered in the first chapter to be theoretically useful elsewhere and in other historical moments. Nor does *Satire as the Comic Public Sphere* pretend to be describing the totality of what constitutes the public sphere in the United States or all the satire that might belong in the comic public sphere. Rather, the primary goal centers on demonstrating how the post-modern aesthetic of truthiness satire operates within the dynamic between the two discursive spheres. The significance of truthiness satire resides not in its being the predominant kind of satire in the current cultural moment inflected by President Trump's administration, but in the way its postmodern aesthetic of playing with the news enables a comic critique of truthiness in that cultural moment. That critique makes truthiness satire the most ambitious and potentially consequential kind of satire today.

Finally, some words about words: *laughable* and *a-musement*. The peculiar orthography of *a-musement* is my way to defamiliarize the usual meaning of *amusement* as simply signifying pleasure: muse on the implicit thought after laughing at the comic presentation. *Laughable*, like *funny*, has two connotations, with one taking precedence in most usages. *Laughable* most often is taken to indicate not just something risible, worthy of laughter, but merely ridiculous, as though that is the only kind of laughter possible, but what of an amiable laughter signaling camaraderie? Are not cultural artifacts built to induce laughter *laughable* in nuanced ways? Similarly, *funny* most often is taken to indicate something risible but with the idea of pleasure, of fun, uppermost. However, *funny* also indicates something peculiar, as in *what's that funny smell?* The point here is that *The Comic*, signifying a discernible discursive realm, encompasses all these connotations. The Domain of the Laughable or the Domain of the Risible names The Comic. *Laughable* means ridiculous, but also laughter provoking or laughter inducing. As Stephen Halliwell demonstrates, even the Greeks had lots of discussion about other types of *geloion*, the laughable, with adjectives added: e.g., mild, cheerful, good-natured, self-deprecating.<sup>34</sup>

One more point on this topic: Johnny Carson once said, "I just don't feel Johnny Carson should become a social commentator. . . . If you're a comedian, your job is to make people laugh. You cannot be both serious and funny."<sup>35</sup> Colbert and Stewart and Bee and Oliver are routinely called *comedians* or *late-night comedians*, not *satirists*. Carson was right in that

not all comedians are satirists, though I venture to say that most satirists think of themselves as comedians too, in the sense that they have entertainment as one of their goals. However, he is wrong about being both serious and funny, which might be the bumper-sticker definition of a satirist. Curiously, commentators often seem to go out of their way to not use *satire* or *satirists*. Thus “political humorists” often serves as a tag for *satirists*, while phrasing like “opinionated comedy” or “a form of serious comedy” denotes *satire*. Often, Carson’s term subsumes both: “Maher, of course, realizes that his *role as a comedian* on an uncensored public stage gives him special license and privilege to ridicule and satirize the powerful.”<sup>36</sup> Jon Stewart at the “Rally to Restore Sanity” or Stephen Colbert in character testifying at a congressional hearing—these public performances are executed, we are told, by “comedic actors,” not satiric actors.<sup>37</sup> Although these examples suggest that *satire* and *satirist* apparently are the Rodney Dangerfield of basic terms to describe certain comic artifacts—*they can’t get no respect*—I use them as the predominant labels in what follows.