Brown Skin, White Laughs: Navigating the White Humour Regime at the 2024 Edinburgh Festival Fringe as Brown Comedians

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Abstract

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe is one of the most significant events in the global comedy landscape. Despite its official inclusive discourse, the Fringe has been heavily criticised for its lack of diversity in the public domain. This dissertation explores the dissonance between the official discourse and on-ground reality through ethnographic fieldwork among brown comedians at the 2024 Edinburgh Fringe. Using participant observation and intensive interviews, this study explores how brown comedians navigate negotiate, and resist the political, economic, and creative challenges of the Fringe. I build on Foucault's notion of 'regime of truth' to argue that the Fringe operates as a white humour regime that privileges white audiences and aesthetics while disadvantaging others. The heterogeneous identities and life histories of brown comedians become homogenised for their on-stage performances which are shaped by the humour regime to fit racially palatable tropes of 'brownness'. This research highlights how comedians negotiate between identity, industry, and creative expression, positioning themselves across the spectrum of racial performativity and subversion. Through its emphasis on the structural inequalities, the thesis further challenges the meritocratic understanding of the performing arts and the tokenistic diversity, equality, and inclusion initiatives within them. Instead, comedy emerges as a site of contested cultural production embedded in broader socio-political hierarchies.

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1. Introduction

> *Every time a brown comedian comes to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, he does the same show over and over and over again*. We walk on stage and [in a mocking tone] like all the wisdom of our ancestors, Oh my God, my grandparents came to this country with nothing. And whoa, they worked so hard and now we are truly British and this is where I am really from. *Fuck. That. Shit. I'm not even saying those stories aren't true, but they are not the only stories about us that are true. We deserve to be complicated, just like the rest of y'all. But the industry only lets us tell those stories.* A young friend of mine is doing his first Fringe today. He didn't want to talk about being from India, and his agent threatened to drop him. Because it's the only show white people pay to see. Look, I use myself as an example. This show is not about that, and we only sold 2 tickets. *We deserve to be complicated. We deserve to give our everything, but it could be tricky because we also deserve to make a living.*
>
> Sid Singh, 'American Coloniser'

On the first day of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe[1], I found myself in a venue just off the Royal Mile. Much quieter than the bustle outside, there were only a handful of us waiting inside a wine cellar converted into a stand-up venue. Some were walking down the street and were offered free tickets to fill up the room and had no clue what they were about to see. I was one of two people who had paid for a ticket, yet I also had no idea about what I was going to witness. Well-wishers had warned me that to expect the unexpected at the Fringe. Despite this, I was not prepared for the stand-up comic – an Indian American man called Sid Singh– to declare that there were not enough audience members to justify the use of the stage. Instead, I craned my neck at the loud man and watched him punctuate his every word with the creak or clang of metal chairs as he walked across his new makeshift stage – the front row of seats. I was even less prepared for the centrality of this bizarre performance to my later understanding of the brown[2] experience at the Fringe.

[1] Henceforth referred to as 'the Fringe'

[2] I use brown here to refer to South Asian individuals to maintain consistency with emic terminology. I explain this choice further in my methodology.

Figure 1: *Sid Singh performing 'American Coloniser' at the 2024 Edinburgh Fringe*.
Source: Singh, S. [@sidsinghisfunny], Instagram (2024)

Sid's critique of the Fringe did not make much sense to me on the first day of the festival. After all, the Edinburgh Fringe is one of the most significant events in the global comedy landscape. Over 77 years, its spirit of inclusivity has launched the careers of legends like Rowan Atkinson, Graham Norton, Robin Williams, Stephen Fry and Phoebe Waller-Bridge (Hall, 2024) Thousands of artists from across the globe find themselves in the Scottish capital, hoping to be discovered by the producers, agents, scouts, and bookers looking for comedy's next big name. In 2023, two brown comedians won the prestigious Edinburgh Comedy Awards for the first time in the award's history (Lee, 2023). Surely then, the same

festival that has prided itself for “giving anyone a stage and everyone a seat” could not be the one that Sid criticised (The Fringe Society, 2022).

Yet, Sid’s show started making more sense to me as the festival progressed. Navigating the Fringe as a brown woman, I would almost instinctively notice the lack of other people of colour among crowds. Brown comedians I would interact with would further confirm this disparity among the artists present. One even remarked to me, “they should rename it to the Edinburgh *white* festival”. By the time the Fringe ended, the realities experienced by the brown comedians at the Fringe and its contrast with the Fringe’s official discourse was increasingly evident. In recent years, the Edinburgh Fringe has come under harsh public criticism for its failures to correct historical inequalities through tokenistic initiatives (Bhandari, 2019; Logan, 2022; Hutchinson, 2024). Not only does this question the validity of the meritocratic ideals the Fringe represents, but it further highlights the limits of comedy’s counterhegemonic prowess in the UK context. The transgressive potential of the art is entangled in contemporary socio-political structures that it often seeks to overcome. As Sid’s commentary points out, the Fringe, and the industry at large, reinforce exclusionary structures that put comedians of colour at a disadvantage.

Navigating these uneven landscapes of the Edinburgh Fringe, brown comedians negotiate their disadvantaged position within the festival and larger industry through their comedic performances. These performances are thus situated at the intersection of power, cultural production, and identity. In this dissertation, I explore how brown stand-up comedians navigate these intersecting dynamics, resist or reinforce dominant norms, and establish themselves across the spectrum of mainstream comedy by asking, **‘What are the processes and structures of inclusion and exclusion at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe?’** and **‘How do brown stand-up comedians navigate, reflect, and challenge them?’**

Through an ethnographic account of brown comedians at the 2024 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, I argue that the political economy of the Fringe establishes a ‘white humour regime’, a concept I develop across multiple chapters, and subsequently limits the space and scope of comedic expression offered to non-white comedians. An emerging field of literature recognises these structural inequalities (Friedman, 2014; Tomsett 2023; Sedgwick, 2024); however, I push this one step further by focussing on a bottom-up perspective by exploring the impact of the humour regime on a marginalised group – here, the brown comedians - and their varied responses to it. In doing so, I highlight the intersectional diversity and heterogeneity within the group that gets lost in the present humour regime. I develop an analytical framework adapting Foucault and Bourdieu’s respective notions of power to the comedy industry, further nuanced through the dimensions of intersectional identities and racial performativity to embed these dynamics in broader questions of power and representation. This shifts the focus from a romantic understanding of creative performing arts to the percolation of power in industry dynamics – through discourse, through institutions, and embodied identities.

Contextualising the Field

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe was established in 1947 in response to the Edinburgh International Festival’s exclusion of Scottish theatre companies from its program (Pollock, 2022). The latter claimed that Scottish production was not up to the high artistic standards set by the festival. 8 Scottish companies performed during the festival anyway, and this number grew in the years to come. In 1948, journalist Robert Kemp referred to the unofficial festival as “round the fringe of official Festival drama” and the name was coined (Fisher, 2012: 13). A decade later, this unofficial unorganised festival was formalised by the Fringe Society who established a central office and programme of all events taking place in the city (Pollock, 2022). This spirit of inclusion has been the guiding principle for the Edinburgh Fringe, and

what sets it apart from other more curated events. If one has a venue and they register it with the Fringe Society, they are a part of the festival (Fisher, 2012).

However, the Fringe landscape is far more complicated than it was in 1947. The festival has expanded in size, scope and impact. The Fringe now hosts close to 4000 programmes in a 3-week run including theatre, comedy, music, among other performance arts (The Fringe Society, 2024). The presence of industry professionals like producers, agents, reviewers, and talent scouts have made the field more competitive as every artist aspires to be discovered by them (Fisher, 2012). Some venues have gained a reputation for launching careers and now require an application from artists seeking to perform. As such, the Edinburgh Fringe's impact resonates beyond the festival, playing a critical role in shaping the UK comedy industry. Simultaneously, the cost of living and housing crises have made performing at the Fringe an expensive endeavour for artists to partake in (Carrell, 2022; Healy, 2022). Criticisms of the Fringe often point to the festival's failures in addressing issues of equity in its large-scale operations. Volunteers have highlighted labour exploitation (Middlemiss, 2020), women have complained about sexual harassment (Bennett, 2023), and people of colour have objected to racist, and unequal access to the festival (Bhandari, 2019). Racial, gender and class-based hegemonies shape the lived experience of the Edinburgh Fringe for most people.

The problems identified at the Fringe microcosmically represent larger, systemic issues within the comedy industry and across the UK. By bringing all the industry stakeholders in one city for a short but intense run, underlying and often subtle disparities become highly visible. The Fringe's meritocratic principles ignore the impact of contemporary socio-political realities in the creative sphere (Sedgwick, 2024). The disadvantage that brown comedians experience at the Fringe are an extension of the colonial-imperial legacies that shape their everyday lives. The perception of brown as inferior to the

colonial core's white hegemony is part of a legacy that perpetuates racial hierarchies in the UK (Gilroy, 1987/2013). The influx of South Asian immigrants since the region gained independence has been politically contentious and their presence has been marred with systemic racism (Visram, 2021). National identity has been largely defined in terms of whiteness, a vestige of its imperial repertoires of colonialism and slavery (Gilroy, 1987; Sanghera, 2021). Marginalized voices thus have had little agency under this hegemony (ibid).

Stand-up comedy is often seen as a medium to challenge these hierarchies, yet research focussing on marginalised representation lays emphasis on the influence of the hierarchy on comedic discourse. Scholarship produced predominantly in the US contexts focusses on intersections between live comedy and racial and gender hegemonies (see Antoine, 2016). In the UK, these dynamics have been analysed through comedic TV representations of minority groups and found that it upheld the hierarchies overall (Malik, et al. 2018; Kay, 2024). A developing field of literature is taking cognisance of the limited attention live stand-up comedy has received in the UK beyond historical and media analyses (Friedman, 2014; Tomsett 2023; Sedgwick, 2024). Taken together their work highlights the influence of class and gender in shaping the comedy landscape across the country, including the Edinburgh Fringe. It departs from previous scholarship's treatment of comedy as an artform, advocating instead for its recognition as an economic industry. However, the broad focus of their research limits any significant attention to the disproportionate impact of structural inequalities on racial minorities. My ethnography of brown stand-up comedians at the Edinburgh Fringe contributes to the developing scholarship by offering a critical, intersectional perspective from the racialised margins. Such a perspective not only offers an opportunity to investigate and analyse the disproportionate impact of the structural inequalities and ineffective tokenistic efforts of inclusion but further explore how they

interact with the heterogeneous identities of comedians within the racialised, and stereotyped, category of brown.

Methodology

The arguments presented in this research have been developed inductively from anthropological methods of ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation at the 2024 Edinburgh Fringe. The research focus itself developed organically over the course of the festival (Mannik & McGarry, 2017). Initially, my interest at the Fringe was geared toward more classical questions of diasporic belonging among South Asian audiences through brown stand-up comedy. The comedians I was interested in happened to be at the Fringe, so I found myself at the festival, with not much prior knowledge about the festival's significance to the comedians. However, I soon noticed that there were not many South Asian audience members present at the festival. This research 'dilemma' turned my attention to the other brown individuals present – the comedians. Subsequently, they became my primary interlocutors whose experiences, conversations, and performances revealed the complex inequalities they navigated behind the scenes.

Four weeks is a short stint for any in-depth qualitative ethnographic research. However, the Fringe experience felt like a crash-course into the workings of stand-up comedy in the UK. Everyday hundreds of shows would take to the stage, and many would repeat the process every day for the entire month. This heightened intensity is different from the regular rhythms of the gig-based industry. To make the most out of my limited time at the Fringe, I selected one-hour shows by brown comedians listed in the programme. One-hour shows reflected the comedian's experience in the industry and were well detailed in the Fringe programme (Double, 2014). This clarity was amiss from line-up shows with their changing line-ups, shorter sets, and broad themes. Per the Fringe programme, 26 brown stand-up comedians would be performing 28 one hour shows – a record for one of the largest brown

representations in the Fringe history. I observed 21 shows, attending each show at least twice. I was unable to include 5 shows either because the comedian did not consent (1), or their shows were sold out (1), or because their limited run coincided with an unexpected medical emergency on my end (3). Beyond shows, I observed 14 comedians off-stage in informal settings and was able to hold semi-structured interviews with 10 of them for an average of 90 minutes (Skinner, 2012). Additionally, I interviewed 2 producers, 1 programme curator and 2 comedians who I met through my interlocutors but did not have a show at the Fringe that year.

While my ill-health caused some limitations in the amount of data I was able to collect, I have triangulated observations and interviews with publicly available information on the internet to effectively contextualise first-hand experiences, especially where interviews were not possible to ensure a 'thick description' of the Fringe experience (Geertz, 1973). This includes critics reviews, interviews with media outlets, and other social media information. Barring three days where I was advised to be on bed rest by the doctors, I spent every day at the Edinburgh Fringe, attending at least two shows, interviewing comedians, chatting with audience members about their experience, and listening in after the shows as comedians dissected their day.

This 'deep hanging out' led to comedians recognising me as a familiar face, walking up to me after shows to ask what I thought, and feeling less uneasy about talking to me overall (Geertz, 1973). My positionality, as a brown woman with a Mumbai accent with a background in performing arts studying at a reputed university helped immensely. I looked and sounded more like them. More importantly, I was able to instinctively relate to their experiences of being brown in a white context to some degree. As a 'South Asian' myself, I was aware of the differences between regions, religions, languages, and practices enough to not impose broad-sweeping categories and their related presumptions onto them. Yet I was

not completely familiar with their identities as a comedian – I was curious about their life histories, and experiences. This positioned me ideally to investigate the intersections between their identity and the industry they navigate.

The comedians at the core of my research identify with South Asia to varying degrees, however I use the term brown throughout this study. While 'South Asian' functions as a category of analysis (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000), it implies a false homogeneity across a region marked by deep internal diversity (Mohammad-Arif, 2014). Even among the small group of comedians I encountered, differences in geography, history, and lived experience made it difficult to speak of a single identity, especially one that was not an emic term. When I asked interlocutors for South Asian recommendations, they often pointed to East or Southeast Asian acts. This suggested that brown better captured the focus of my research. I retained this terminology in my writing for two reasons. First, I am uneasy using etic labels my interlocutors did not claim, even if they grasped the geographic reference. Second, while my sampling was shaped by an initial focus on South Asian performers and later constrained by the short duration of the Fringe, the insights extend to non-white comedians more broadly, though always mediated by distinct historical and cultural contexts.

In its effort to offer space to the experiences and nuances of navigating the Fringe as a brown comedian, the dissertation tends to generalise 'white' into a homogenous yet dominant category whose privilege structures the inequalities of the festival. I acknowledge that not all white individuals experience the same degree of privilege, and that whiteness is an umbrella term for a heterogenous group. Class, gender, sexuality, ability, and nationality intersect in diverse ways to produce hierarchies of whiteness. These have been the primary focus within scholarship on the comedy industry. However, these distinctions are beyond the scope of the present research whose focus is the perception of whiteness by brown comedians which subsequently influences the way they navigate the industry. These perceptions are based on

larger socio-economic hierarchies that shape their field and as such are not entirely baseless, albeit a little homogenising. Further research could expand on the veracity of these subjective experiences by exploring the audience impressions and differences in more detail.

Research Outline

I explore the uneven terrain of the Fringe and the subjective experiences of brown comedians within it through an intersectional lens. Across six chapters, I progressively demonstrate how brown comedians' positionality in economic, racialised, and gendered hierarchies influence their comedic choices and subsequently their ability to succeed at the Edinburgh Fringe.

Chapter 2 reviews literature analysing questions of humour and comedy across anthropology, sociology, and culture studies. Academic engagement with comedy has been limited yet consistent, with a recent increase in interest. This research contributes to a growing body of work that examines humour's capacity to 'punch-up' to power, while also interrogating its entanglements with the structures it claims to subvert. This field has largely developed in American contexts, with emerging interest within the UK from media and culture studies. The present ethnographic study brings together these works with a critical race perspective. Simultaneously, the research' s focus on South Asian brown comedians enables an exploration of creative expression from the diaspora in a space that historically not associated with them.

Chapter 3 develops an analytical framework to analyse the experiences of brown comedians through a lens of power. I identify power as the mediating force across processes and structures of in-and-exclusion through discourse, institutions, and embodied identities. I draw on Foucault's notion of regime of truth and Bourdieu's concept of *prises de position*s within the field of cultural production and adapt it to the stand-up comedy context. Humour is then politically constructed, and comedians navigate these constructions through negotiations between the humour regime and their habitus. These constructions take on further complexity

through racial performativity, wherein ‘brownness’ evolves from a descriptive marker of positionality to a performed identity. A focus on power further enables a criticism of tokenistic inclusion initiatives under the façade of meritocracy within performing arts.

Chapter 4 begins an ethnographic account of the 2024 Edinburgh Festival Fringe. It sets the scene for the most significant comedy event in the UK, if not the world. I offer a glimpse into the back-stage logistics of producing a show for the Edinburgh Fringe. Through curation, application, performance, marketing, reviews, and award organisations, I demonstrate how comedians navigate a complex system requiring significant financial risk. I balance the comedian perspective with audience demographics and experiences to highlight how socio-economic factors restrict non-white participation and begin unpacking the consequences of these for brown comedians. In doing so, I argue that the Fringe operates a white regime of humour that disadvantages brown comedians at every stage.

Having established the operation of a white humour regime, I explore the impact of this on brown comedians. Chapter 5 highlights the diversity I encountered among my interlocutors whose intersectional identities, life histories, and immigration patterns make it difficult to speak of ‘one experience, one identity’. However, this off-stage diversity is not reflected in their on-stage material. I unravel this apparent contradiction, examining how comedians perceive industry expectations and their response to it through Bourdieu’s concept of position-taking. Adapting Bourdieu to the uneven humour regime challenges the limited and universalising notions of the field of cultural production and highlighting the performativity of habitus in case of racialised comedians. Position-taking then enables a thorough understanding of how brown comedians choose to conform, resist or challenge the white humour regime.

Chapter 6 moves to brown comedians found along the margins of the humour regime, whose careers in the UK are not seen as successful in the mainstream sense. I examine the

cases of Indian, female, and queer brown comedians respectively to eschew generalisation of 'brown' experience of the humour regime. By locating these cases at the margins of the Fringe, I further highlight the humour regime's tendency to reject heterogeneity from racialised minorities while simultaneously laying emphasis on the need to centre diverse lived experiences beyond nominal representation.

Across 6 chapters I demonstrate and argue that the processes and structures of inclusion and exclusion at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe can be understood through the concept of white humour regime. The meritocratic structure and tokenistic Equality Diversity and Inclusion initiatives fail to generate any meaningful diversity in voices represented at the Fringe. These failures, at a high-stake event, reinforces existing inequalities reflects larger socio-political and racial entanglements in contemporary Britain. Brown comedians, aware of their position in these hierarchies, navigate from a disadvantaged position in the regime that limits their creative expression, locating their performances on a spectrum of conformity.

2. State of Play: Humour and Stand-Up Comedy

I'm just explaining because sometimes white people don't study and come. You have to do a minimum of 2 days of studying if you're watching somebody's show whose culture you're not familiar with. [audience laughs]

- Urooj Ashfaq

I was sitting in a half-full theatre watching Urooj perform her show, 'Oh No!' when she paused halfway through a Hindu-Muslim joke and realised that the joke was not working as well as the others. She scanned the room and realised that the white audience members looked confused. Distilling decades of communal tensions into one explanatory sentence for the sake of her joke, she made the above remark to recover from the tangent and go back to her set. This brief passing comment highlights the cultural negotiations that colour the experiences of brown stand-up comedians performing at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

Taking her advice perhaps a little more seriously than she meant it, in this chapter I contextualise the present research in the historical albeit limited academic discourse on humour and stand-up comedy across multiple contexts. Drawing primarily on anthropology, sociology, and culture studies, where comedy is predominantly understood as a counterhegemonic medium, I highlight its entanglements with the socio-political hierarchies it purportedly challenges. Exploring these limitations to stand-up comedy's prowess through accounts of racial and gender minorities primarily developed in the US context, I then turn my attention to developments in the UK where an emerging field of research explores the industry-wide inequalities in stand-up comedy. The present research contributes to these varied strands of literature primarily through its focus on brown comedians at the Edinburgh Fringe which offers a critical racial and intersectional perspective that is often amiss from large scale-studies. In doing so, I further contribute to the emerging literature on the limits of counter-hegemony and meritocracy in the comedy industry.

The Politics of Humour and Stand-Up Comedy

The anthropological enquiry into humour dates back to some of the earliest works in the discipline. Malinowski (1937/2015) famously declared anthropology as the science of the sense of humour. For an anthropologist, grasping the cultural form of humour is linked to understanding the subtleties and intricacies of the field. Radcliffe-Brown (1940) utilised the concept of 'joking relationships' to understand kinship structures. Others have focussed more on humour as a revealing social structure itself. Notably, Mary Douglas (1968) conceptualised jokes as an 'anti-rite' that, much like rituals, serve a purpose of social cohesion but does by denigrating dominant values instead of upholding them. Understanding the joke as a 'total social situation' beyond the mere content of its words, locates humour and comedy as embedded in larger socio-political contexts (Douglas, 1968: 363). As such, the individual doing the joking is often equated to being the 'spokesperson, as a mediator, an "articulator" of our culture' (Mintz, 1985:75). Douglas understands the joker to hold a privileged position in society whereby they are immune from real harm to their status as a consequence of their critique (Douglas, 1968: 372-374). This privilege enables the joker to "simultaneously perform self and culture, offering an often-acerbic social critique sanctioned as entertainment because it is articulated in a comedic context" (Gilbert, 1997:317).

In recent years, this performance of sanctioned critique of popular culture has received much academic attention. A significant number of these studies examine how diverse forms of comedy, such as parody, online memes, satire, and stand-up comedy, criticise dominant political regimes. Bernal (2013) explores how Eritrean parodies of conditions under President Afawerki offer a new lens to understand the 'tragicomedy' of the country's instability. Goldstein (2013) understands humour or 'laughter out of place' as a creative emotional aesthetic among women in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro amid everyday violence, fear, and frustrations. Khachab (2016) analyses online meme culture as visual

techniques employed to criticise the Egyptian government's poor electricity management. Göpfert (2024) examines works of cartoonists to highlight dissonances within the Iranian political regime. Through diverse conceptualisations, formats, and locations of enquiry, these works reaffirm humour's ability to punch-up against hierarchies and foster new subjectivities and social cohesion.

The academic emphasis on humour's abilities to act as a counter-discursive mechanism in unequal power dynamics, although important, offers a somewhat uni-dimensional view of its prowess as a 'weapon of the weak' (Scott, 1985; see also Bhargava & Chilana, 2022). In doing so, it neglects to account for the medium's entanglements with contemporary socio-political structures that it often seeks to overcome. Dağtaş (2016) explores this duality of humour – as a means of resistance entangled in a politics of its own – through the humour culture at the 2011 Gezi Park protests in Türkiye. The utilisation of sexist or homophobic language in conversational jokes, graffiti art, parodies, and costumes protestors developed a unique Gezi humour that offered them a voice to resist the dominant political regime while reaffirming social hierarchies.

The dialectical dynamics of humour whereby it simultaneously challenges and conforms to power hierarchies are especially visible in stand-up comedy performances. While there is no strict definition for what constitutes a stand-up comedy act, it usually refers to a comedic performance by a single individual in front of an audience narrating fictional or semi-autobiographical stories, without many props, or theatrical elements, with the intention of making the audience laugh (Mintz, 1985; Aidi, 2012). As a more intimate form of humour, where the joker and audience are in the same space at the same time, it allows for a closer scrutiny of the politics of humour. The stand-up comedian, in this setting, creates a stage persona based on their subjective identity and experiences, and shares it with the audience with the intention to make them laugh (Double, 2014; Keisalo, 2018). The success of a

comedian's set depends on connection with the audience, understood here in terms of shared laughter. As such, both the audience's and the comedian's subjectivities, shaped by their social positions, influence the success of a stand-up comedy performance.

One approach to the study of off-stage social positions' influence has been a detailed analysis of on-stage narrative choices by stand-up comedians. Scarpetta and Spagnolli (2009), approaching the success of stand-up comedy in talking about taboo topics from a psychology perspective, demonstrate how the informal interactional relationship between the audience and the comic facilitates these conversations. However, this informality is constructed by the comedian based on the audience and reflects patterns of racial hierarchies. Black comedians in LA resorted to different techniques to create the relationship with white and black audiences respectively. The comedians started with a self-referred joke with white audiences, while with black audiences they started their interactions with an audience-referred joke to reach the same effect. Beyond shaping the comedian's ability to broach taboo topics, stereotypes around the visible social markers of the comedian also impact how audiences react to the performance (DeCamp, 2016). Comedians either reverse or reproduce these discourses based on their performance of these stereotypes (Weaver, 2010). Taken together, the discourse analyses on-stage dynamics between racialised comedians and their audience suggest that off-stage racial hierarchies are reinforced by marginalised stand-up comedians more than they are challenged.

More ethnographic studies contribute a nuanced reflection on why race and gender relations are reinforced through stand-up comedy outcomes, especially when performed by marginalised comedians. Keisalo (2018) autoethnographically reviews her experiences as a female comedian in Finland through the historically developed notion of women as 'unfunny'. While this has generally led scholars to question why there are few female comics (Gilbert, 1997; Krefting, 2014), Keisalo instead understands the issue in terms of gendered

power relations in society. She argues that the core understanding of ‘funniness’ is seen as contradictory to female public selves. In doing so, she highlights the assumed normative authority of white male comics in the industry, who tend to dominate the Finnish scene despite the presence of many female and non-binary comedians. Furthermore, Keisalo states that the present-day hierarchy that shapes the field is not necessarily negative. Instead, she argues that “a comedian with a ‘marked’ identity may have the advantage of having the interest of the audience, even if she/he may need to work harder to establish authority, including the right to public speaking and self-definition” (Keisalo, 2018:558). The ‘marked’ identity enables a comedian to transgress or even reverse the expectations of the audience albeit with some challenges.

While Keisalo’s work offers deep insight into the role played by gender norms in navigating the interactional context of comedy, its understanding of marked identities as an advantage seems limited if not self-contradictory. Keisalo herself points to the difficulties in establishing authority and its influence on making women feel like they do not belong to the space (ibid). These dynamics are particularly visible when multiple ‘marked’ identities intersect. Antoine (2016) analyses the ‘Slave Draft Pick’ routine by African American female comedian Leslie Jones and the backlash she received for the televised performance of slavery as an anti-racist critique. Antoine combines Butler’s notion of gender performativity (1999) with Carbado and Gulati’s notion of ‘working identity’ in corporate America (2013) to analyse how stand-up comedy performances can push the edges of race and gender hegemonies. Working identity refers to the ways in which Black Americans navigate white institutions, like corporate offices, by appearing racially palatable to the white majority and being distinct – or racially salient enough to count towards the institution’s ‘diversity’ (ibid:2-3). Antoine analyses Leslie Jones’ set as a counter-discourse that challenges gender and race hegemonies like those of corporate America by not catering to them (Antoine, 2016). The

backlash to the routine, from white and black audiences alike, demonstrates the pervasiveness of the hegemonies in policing racialised and gendered persons' portrayal of their own history and self. The intersection of race and gender further aggravated the harshness of criticism against Jones who rightly pointed out similar counter-discourses by black males like Dave Chappelle or Kanye as being celebrated (ibid:46).

Both Keisalo and Antoine's respective work highlight the industry's entanglements with contemporary power hierarchies (ibid; Keisalo, 2018). This is most obvious in the ways they demonstrate the white, male comedian to be the dominant norm in the Euro-American industries. Anyone who does not fit this norm experiences greater difficulty in being seen as funny, transgressive or counter-discursive – as these are policed in line with the larger hegemonies. As such, the presence of a non-white, non-male comedian automatically takes on dimensions of racial and gender performativity because their mere presence on-stage becomes a radical challenge to the norm. However, Jones' irreverence for these norms, boundaries, and hegemonies highlights the agency of the comedian in these power structures. This strategy aligns with Krefting's conceptualisation of 'charged humour' where comedians challenge the unequal structures to make a political point, often forgoing some amount of laughter for the cause (Krefting, 2014: 2).

The existing literature on humour and stand-up comedy reveals a fragmented and largely uncritical understanding of comedy's political potential. Such interpretations risk obscuring the more ambivalent, and at times complicit, roles comedy plays in reproducing hierarchies of race, gender, and class. While a growing body of work has interrogated the socio-political structures that shape comedic production, this scholarship has focussed on content analyses in the Euro-American contexts. The work of scholars such as Dağtaş, Keisalo, and Antoine challenge these trends, revealing how marked identities are not only sites of transgression but also of intensified scrutiny, gatekeeping, and disciplinary power.

British Stand-up Comedy Scene

Having established the complex conditions under which stand-up comedy performances are undertaken by marginalised comedians, I zoom into the emerging academic scholarship concerning the UK comedy scene, highlighting the need for more intersectional explorations. Unlike its US and European counterparts, majority of the scholarship concerning racial and gendered hierarchies have emerged from television and new media discourse studies (see Lockyer, 2010; Malik et. al, 2018). Their findings indicate that humour has largely reified contemporary political ideologies around immigration, rather than offering a counter-hegemonic narrative (Kay, 2024). However, the relationship between these dynamics and live stand-up comedy have been somewhat neglected until recently. In this section I briefly introduce historical works concerning stand-up comedy before turning towards emerging scholarship concerning industry inequalities.

Stand-up comedy, despite being a multi-billion-pound industry, has not received much academic attention beyond the historical development of the field, mainly by historians or performance studies scholars (Sedgwick, 2024). These works have focussed on tracing the origins of the field from music halls and theatres in the 1840s to its present-day form that began in working-class clubs in the 1960s (Huxley and James, 2012; Double, 2017; Beale; 2020). This association with performing arts has limited the scope of potential research into its entanglements with power by drawing attention to its creative aesthetic. This is visible in the attention given to the impact of the Alternative Comedy Movement in the 1980s in diversifying the field to include more high-art ideals (Wilmut 1989; Stott 2005; Medhurst 2007). While these studies have been important in establishing comedy as a serious art form, it has neglected the socio-political dynamics that shape comedic performances.

A developing field of literature is challenging this norm by focussing on the industry dynamics of stand-up comedy in the UK. These works deemphasize the understanding of stand-up comedy by highlighting the socio-political contexts in which it operates instead.

Sam Friedman (2014), in his seminal book *Comedy and Distinction,* explores the role played by industry members like talent scouts, reviewers, and producers in influencing audience consumption and upholding institutionalised practices. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, Friedman critically analyses the 2012 Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Using ethnographic observation, surveys, and interviews, Friedman demonstrates how industry gatekeepers from privileged social classes, mediate between audience and artists. Their decisions around which artists to support are based on imagined ideas of audiences, not actual interactions or data. Reproducing a 'homogenous class habitus' (Friedman, 2014: 160), these most likely white scouts (see Tomsett, 2023: 51-53), dictated who of the thousands of artists with diverse backgrounds would break-through to mass audiences. As such, their mediating role reinforces dominant tastes and intensifies the myth of scarcity of spots available in the industry.

Friedman's work offers crucial insight into the inner workings of the comedy industry in mediating humour tastes. Building on his work, Tomsett (2023) and Sedgwick (2024) explore the mechanisms of inequality within the industry through different lenses. In her book, *Inequality in Contemporary Stand-up Comedy in the UK*, Claire Sedgwick (2024) argues that stand-up comedy must be treated as an industry to make the structural inequalities visible. Drawing on works surrounding the film and music industry, she pushes Friedman's findings further and argues that the historical ambiguity surrounding comedy – whether it was an art or a commerce – have led to inequity in the field in the name of meritocracy. These structured inequalities have further reinforced the hegemonic idea of the comedian as a white, straight, man by enabling a homogenous class habitus (Friedman, 2014: 160). Using the East Midlands, a historically underrepresented region in the UK comedy industry, as a case study, Sedgwick analyses how class and gender mediate success in the industry and how the increased precarity around the Covid-19 pandemic made the inequalities more visible.

Tomsett's research analyses live stand-up comedy for over a decade and specifically explores the positioning of women as simultaneously integrated and marginalised in the industry, from an intersectional feminist lens. Like Keisalo (2018), Antoine (2016), and Krefting's (2014) works in the Finnish and US contexts respectively, Tomsett demonstrates how British comedy is entangled in contemporary gender hierarchies that still understand women as not funny. Her research offers more social, historical, and political context to the recent investigation by Chortle magazine which found that comedy clubs across the UK are six times more likely to book a man than woman (Bennett, 2024).

Friedman, Tomsett and Sedgewick are part of a growing reckoning within academia of comedy as a creative industry (see also, Butler and Stoyanova Russell, 2018). Crucially for this project, all three recognise and engage with the importance of the Fringe within the industry. Their works, albeit to different degrees, describe how the Fringe is a microcosm for the larger industry by distilling thousands of artists' years' worth of work into an intensive 4-week run. As such it often replicates practices and inequalities present in the industry. This is a stark contrast to the majority of scholarly literature available on the Fringe, which is usually concerned with history of the festival (Bartie, 2013; Pollock, 2022), the 'festivalisation' of urban cityscapes (Thomasson, 2022), and the spatial tactics deployed by street artists (Munro and Jordan, 2013). Parallel to this academic discourse, public discourse has grown increasingly critical of the Fringe on account of its lack of diversity (Ryan, 2022), sexual harassment (Bennett, 2023), racial discrimination (Bhandari, 2019), and labour exploitation (Middlemiss, 2020) that have led to calls of 'Boycott the Fringe'. Works like Friedman (2014), Tomsett (2023) and Sedgewick's (2024) respectively help in reducing the dissonant gap between academia and the public domain by situating the latter in larger socio-political frameworks.

While these works advocate for better conditions within the comedy industry through their research, the sheer breadth of their work limits detailed attention to the experiences of racially marginalised and intersectional identities. The small percentage of the group in the larger industry precludes sustained and generalisable criticism. Since their research is concerned with broader inequalities, an in-depth inquiry of the disproportionate impacts of these inequalities of racial and gendered minorities is beyond the scope of their research. Nonetheless, the study of such disproportionate impacts is necessary to better understand the complex intersections between power, identity, and comedy (Crenshaw, 1991). Despite the relevance of intersectional identities, most works concerning stand-up comedy focus on the influence of one aspect of identity alone (see Lockyer & Weaver, 2024). The current research project fills this academic gap by examining how the structural inequalities are experienced by brown comedians at the 2024 Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Through a singular focus on the brown comedian experience, a more nuanced understanding of structural inequalities on intra-group heterogeneities can be developed.

The lack of such critical racial perspective further neglects the historically unequal power structures in which South Asian comedy occurs in places like the United Kingdom. The perception of South Asian as inferior to the colonial core's white hegemony is part of a legacy that perpetuates racial hierarchies in the UK (Gilroy, 1987). The influx of South Asian immigrants since the region gained independence has been politically contentious and their presence has been marred with systemic racism (Visram, 2021). Britishness has been largely defined in terms of whiteness, a vestige of its imperial repertoires of colonialism and slavery (Gilroy, 1987). Marginalized voices thus have little agency under this hegemony (ibid). In his essay reflecting on the impact of George Floyd's death and the Black Lives Matter movement in the UK, comedian Lenny Henry details the experiences of black British comedians and why their lives matter too (Henry, 2021). He argues that the simple presence

of black comedians on stage is a political statement, yet systemic racism in British radio, television, and comedy industries has led to most budding Black talents to move to the US (ibid: 302). Similar analysis has been made for South Asian media representation as well. For instance, Kay (2024) analyses historical South Asian representation across various media formats parallel to political developments in the UK. She demonstrates a positive correlation between the two and argues that the dominant representation of 'brown Britain' has been stereotypical, one-dimensional, and as the object of laughter. The dominant discourse surrounding South Asians has presented a reified version of their culture that treats the group as static and homogenous (Baumann, 1996).

More nuanced understandings of the South Asian diaspora in the UK have been developed in anthropology yet they have ignored study of live comedy by South Asians, as these spaces are not traditionally associated with the diaspora. Majority of the scholarship produced on the UK South Asian diaspora is oriented towards understanding how the heterogenous group maintains a homeland orientation while attempting to integrate into diasporic destinations. This is perhaps guided by the focus of diaspora's differences to native populations or the definitional scope of the academic terminology. Rogers Brubaker (2005) in his seminal work on diasporas identifies three key elements in academic attempts to define the term– 1. Dispersion through space 2. Homeland orientation and 3. Boundary Maintenance. While definitions have evolved to include more dynamic and processual nature of these three elements and the political nature of their mobilisation (Mavroudi, 2007; Alexander, 2017), the emphasis on difference, homeland, and boundary maintenance seem to have limited studies exploring diasporic engagement. Exceptions to this include research on second generation youth cultures (Alexander and Kim, 2013), media studies analysis of TV representation (Malik et al. 2018; Kay, 2024), and experiences of British Asian sportsmen in national institutions (Fletcher, 2011).

The existing scholarship on humour and stand-up comedy in the UK reveals an uneven and underdeveloped engagement with the socio-political structures that shape the industry, particularly in relation to race, gender, and class. While much attention has been paid to the content of comedy and its aesthetic evolution, new research has begun to critically examine the structural inequalities embedded in the industry. However, these studies largely remain limited in their exploration of how racialised communities, like the South Asian brown comedians, experience and navigate these dynamics. This represents a critical gap in both comedy studies and diaspora studies, where South Asian identity has predominantly been explored through lenses of migration, cultural difference, or media representation, often excluding live performance spaces like stand-up comedy. By focusing on South Asian comedians at the 2024 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, this research aims to bridge that gap and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how socio-political hierarchies operate in comedy contexts. It asserts that stand-up comedy must not only be analysed as performance or content but also as a site of lived inequality, shaped by the same power structures that define access, visibility, and legitimacy across the broader cultural landscape.

Conclusion

Academic scholarship on humour and stand-up comedy has largely explored its counter-discursive potential and ability to challenge societal norms. Conversely, little attention has been paid to the limits of transgression and comedy's entanglements with the socio-cultural landscape in which it is produced. Explorations of these entanglements in the US and Finnish contexts reveal the influence of off-stage racialized hierarchies in on-stage comedic discourses of marginalised comedians (Antoine, 2016; Keisalo, 2018). Such perspectives are still missing from more recent scholarship in the British context (Friedman, 2014; Tomsett; 2023; Sedgwick, 2024). Pivotal steps have been made in establishing comedy

as an industry with inequalities, especially at the Fringe, but less attention has been paid to race and intersectional identities (ibid).

The present research aims to contribute to these emerging fields of literature by examining the processes and structures of inclusion and exclusion at the Fringe through the critical and racialised perspective of brown stand-up comedians. It takes insights from the US and Finnish contexts on embodied identities and expands them to the British context. This perspective advances more nuanced understandings of the anthropology of humour and power dynamics of intersectional identities. In the next chapter, I develop an analytical framework that connects three levels at which power operates to capture the dynamics between hegemonic discourse, institutional forces, and marginalized individuals.

3. Analytical Framework

Stand-up comedy performances by brown comedians in the UK are situated at the intersection of power, cultural production, and identity. The Fringe, as the biggest comedy event in the country, embodies these tensions – offering opportunities for visibility while simultaneously reinforcing existing structures of power and exclusion. As a meritocratic field, attempts to correct historical imbalances have often led to tokenistic representation, leaving structural inequalities intact. To unpack these complex experiences, I develop a multi-level analytical framework to analyse how power operates through discourse, through institutions, and through embodied acts of performance.

The framework integrates Foucault's notion of regime of truth (1980) with Bourdieu's field theory of cultural production (1983), nuancing these further through a focus on racial dynamics and performativity. I build on Kuipers' adaptation of truth regime as humour regime, exploring the implications of the latter for marginalised comedians (2011). This forms the basis of my argument for the Fringe as a white humour regime over the course of the following chapters. I deploy Bourdieu's concept of *prises de position* or position taking (1983) to highlight how comedians navigate the regime through their individual habitus, which I argue become actively performed aspects of their positon through the notion of racial and gender performativity (Butler, 1999). A focus on power while studying subjective experiences of brown comedians makes the structural inequalities facing them visible and locates it within larger socio-cultural racial hierarchies. Further, it shifts focus from understand comedy as an artistic pursuit to an industry with severe inequality issues. This is particularly visible in the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion discourse at the Fringe and the further marginalisation of counter-discursive expressions of agency.

A Regime of Humour

Michel Foucault's conceptualisation of truth as operating within a "regime" links a seemingly 'objective' reality, based in 'objectively' gained knowledge, to an explicitly political and social construct of power:

> The important point here, I believe, is that truth isn't outside power, or deprived 'of power […] Truth is of the world: it is produced by virtue of multiple constraints. And it induces the regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse it harbours and causes to function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements, the way in which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures which are valorised for obtaining truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, 1980:131)

A regime of truth challenges notions of objectivity of knowledge and reality, instead exposing their historically constructed nature. This subjectivity is continually reinforced by different apparatus and institutions as the dominant and 'objective' reality. Processual constructions of reality to reify existing hierarchies shift truth from an ideology, belief or a superstructure to one that is embedded in the socio-economic base that constitutes the everyday (ibid:133). As such, it influences the norms, practices, and exercise of agency by actors as normal or abnormal. The construction, practice, and maintenance of truth is thus understood as a regime (ibid).

Giselinde Kuipers (2011) applies this concept of regime of truth to humour. "Humour regimes" (Kuipers, 2011:69) enable an understanding of what is deemed 'funny' as discursively shaped by the dominant norms of the context in which it occurs. Analysing the Danish 'cartoon scandal', she argues that:

> […] humour regimes are clearly bounded: they declare certain topics off limits and endow some with more rights to speak in jest than others. They silence people, too, by dictating that one 'should be able to take a joke'. Such regimes, like all regimes drawing social boundaries, are infused with power. Some taboos and some sensibilities are more valid than others. (ibid)

Comedy is therefore not a neutral space of creative expression. It is formed in the context of larger discourses and norms in society. What kinds of comedic narratives are accepted or rewarded (or not), who is allowed to joke (or not), what is funny (or not) in what circumstances are all key factors in the comedy discourse which constitute and operate as a humour regime. Institutional apparatuses like comedy festivals, awards, venue, reviewers, producers, and talent scouts legitimise (or limit) comedic expressions uphold the regime further, without any overt effort to coordinate their efforts.

Developing these ideas further from the perspective of marginalised comedians, humour regime's ability to control their creative expressions becomes visible. Not only does the regime mark their presence within the humour regime as distinct, if not abnormal, but further exercises control over their comedic narratives' critical and popular reception among normative audiences. Left unchecked, it solidifies existing stereotypes and prejudices while limiting the ability of counter discursive narratives from reaching the audience. Such conditional inclusion enables the regime to resist appearing like a humour regime while delimiting the scope for any meaningful diversity in voices or stories to occur. In doing so, it becomes a self-fulfilling mechanism that reaffirms the existing power hierarchies. The possibility for comedic counter-discourses to pose an impactful challenge to the humour regime is further limited by the humour's framing as a popular performing art (Sedgwick, 2024). As an aesthetic creative medium, the role played by socio-economic and political factors that shape the industry behind the art form is often neglected. Adapting Foucault's concept of regime to humour enables a closer analysis of the role of power structures in shaping humour in stand-up comedy in the UK.

Over the course of my ethnographic explorations, I will argue that the specific discursive forces shaping brown comedians' experience of the Edinburgh Fringe constitute a white humour regime. In order to highlight the specific mechanisms through which brown

comedians navigate the white humour regime in a creative industry, Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production offers a more precise analytical tool. Bourdieu's framework allows for a nuanced exploration of how marginalised comedians position themselves within the Fringe, negotiating between their identity and the field to accumulate capital. Taken together, their works offer more nuanced analysis of the discourses and structures that shape the Fringe experience.

The Field of Cultural Production

Bourdieu characterises the field of cultural production through the relationship between the agents within a cultural field and the socio-historical context of larger society in which they exist (Bourdieu, 1983). He places art within the realm of power and understands its workings as characterised by the agent's habitus, structures of the field, and available capital. Crucially, Bourdieu understands the working of the cultural field as distinct from a reversal of the economic world. This is elucidated by the heteronomous and autonomous principles of hierarchization (ibid: 319). The heteronomous principle defines success in terms of the socio-economic field – ticket sales, awards, reviews - while the autonomous principle values the internal recognition of artistic parameters. He explains that:

> The more autonomous the field becomes, the more favourable the symbolic power balance is to the most autonomous producers and the more clearcut is the division between the field of restricted production, in which the producers produce for other producers, and the field of "mass-audience" production (la grande production), which is symbolically excluded and discredited (Bourdieu, 1983:320)

Bourdieu posits that unlike the economic world, the cultural world values symbolic capital in more than socio-economic capital.

However, there have been several criticisms of Bourdieu's dyadic conceptualisation of cultural field – particularly emerging from non-European contexts (see Olszewska, 2015). For one, despite broad acknowledgement of the field of cultural production occurring within the realm of power, the principles do not take power structures into account. Winegar (2006:

4) in her ethnography of Egyptian modern artists criticises this self-contradiction and argues autonomous artistic positionings and evaluations are not free from the universalisation of Euro-American aesthetics as superior:

> Yet the claim of objectivity, which is akin to the illusion of disinterest that Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and Terry Eagleton (1990) identify as central to ideologies of so-called natural taste and the aesthetic, takes place on an unequal playing field. Those doing the judging have significantly more power than those being judged. The "objective" appeal to universal, "natural" standards enabled by the idea of art's autonomy masks all kinds of actual "interests" in non-Western art and artists. These interests include making money off the work, advancing careers by representing and writing about it, and claiming that other people's intellectual prowess and critical artistic capabilities are less sophisticated than one's own.

Winegar's criticism of the unequal playing field of cultural production, made in a non-European context, is also applicable to the experiences of marginalised artists within a European context – such as the Fringe.

Winegar's critique of universalising tendencies and their entanglements with socio-economic benefits are particularly evident in comedy and the humour regime. Mass appeal and symbolic capital often reflect one another in a field where laughter is the final goal. Both socio-economic and symbolic capital are harder to access for marginalised comedians in a field discursively shaped by dominant aesthetic values and judgements. It is more productive to acknowledge how both of Bourdieu's key principles are entangled in larger socio-political regimes (Olszewska, 2015: 148). This enables a focus on how marginalised comedians navigate the unequal field of cultural production through the concept of *prises de position* or 'position-takings' (Bourdieu, 1983). This concept refers to how individuals, guided by their own dispositions strive for capital – symbolic or otherwise – available in the field. Some acquiesce to the demands of the industry; others challenge these norms and most try negotiating between the two (ibid). All of these have consequences in terms of the success, both artistic and commercial, that comedians can access.

Bourdieu's conceptualisation of the field, when adapted to the study of marginalised performances of comedy, grounds the notion of humour regime into negotiations between identity and socio-economic capital. It complements the Foucauldian emphasis on discursive power through its emphasis on the mechanisms of the field. This provides a lens into the principles and choices that comedians must navigate to acquire capital within the humour regime. However, to discuss how the humour regime affects racially marginalised comedians, Bourdieu and Foucault's conceptualisations must be further studied through the lens of racial dynamics. In the next section, I nuance the concepts of humour regime and position-taking further by exploring the relationship between power, performance, and embodied identities.

Between Performance and Performativity: Embodied Identities in Comedy

Stand-up comedy performances, beyond being informed by an individual's intersectional identities, become representative of them. Identity is central to stand-up comedy performances as individuals primarily draw on their experiences and observations to create comedic narratives. In their seminal essay entitled, "Beyond Identity", Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 4) differentiate between identity as "categories of practice" and as "categories of analysis". Categories of practice broadly constitutes the invocation of identity in everyday contexts which is an important part of social subjectivities that researchers study. Moreover, identity operates at multiple levels. On an individual level, multiple identities often determine an individual's position in the larger hierarchical society and shape their subjectivities in differing manners (Anthias, 2006). However, on a collective level of analysis such nuances are often lost to produce a homogeneous representation of a particular identity (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Anthias, 2006). Hall (1996) argues that such unity is not a natural feature of identities, rather they are processually constructed and performed within dynamics of power (Hall, 1996).

Individuals navigate their multiple intersecting identities through shifting contexts and consciously, or otherwise, choose which identity to perform or invoke in the given setting. The individual and collective identities are related insofar as the multi-identity individual operating within the larger societal structures performs collective identities differently in a diverse range of contexts. Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956) takes a dramaturgical approach to social life as a performance. Goffman understands the individual's presentation of self as a curated version of themselves that offers cues to observers or audiences about their 'self'. For a stand-up comedian, these performances of 'self' are heightened by their literal on-stage positioning (Double, 2014). Crucially, within his schema, Goffman recognises the role of stereotypes or collective representation as an institutionalised/established fact for the observers:

> When an actor takes on an established social role, usually he finds that a particular front has already been established for it. Whether his acquisition of the role was primarily motivated by a desire to perform the given task or by a desire to maintain the corresponding front, the actor will find that he must do both. (Goffman, 1956: 17)

When applied to the on-stage persona of a comedian, Goffman's work highlights how their mere presence on stage elicits audiences to presume information about them, particularly when their race or gender identities mark them as distinct from the audience. However, Goffman's understands embodied categories to be static albeit intimately linked to the actor's personal front. Judith Butler's theorisation of performativity pushes against this, instead arguing for a historically and culturally contextualised understanding of facets of identity[3] (Butler, 1999). Performativity thus enables an understanding of how comedians are not only performing their comedic material but also their embodied identities.

In a setting where whiteness is the default norm, upheld as such by the broader regime and structures within it, comedians of colour undertake these racialised and gendered

[3] While Butler makes these arguments in the case of gender, they have been further applied to understanding racial identities (see Clammer, 2015).

performances in addition to their routine. Comedians are keenly aware of the stage persona that they present to audiences and the ways in which they perform (or not) their different traits/facets of identity (Double, 2014). American sociologist and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois (1903: 4) speaks of the double consciousness experienced by subordinated groups in an oppressive society and the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" within them. This racial consciousness percolates into performance of identities whereby individuals choose to highlight or downplay racial or gendered qualities to maintain a degree of palatability towards the dominant group (Carbado & Gulati, 2013). Comedians whose intersectional identities position them at a disadvantage across several parameters find that they must navigate the stereotypes attached to all their multiple identities and work harder to establish authority on-stage (Crenshaw, 1990; Lockyer & Weaver, 2024). Stand-up comedy performances by marginalised comedians within a white humour regime are therefore, a site for lived, performative negotiations of larger cultural and societal discourse.

Locating Agency within Structures of Power

The picture that emerges from discussions of power's influence on marginalised comedic narratives and experiences offers limited agency to the individual comedians. A stand-up comedy routine is highly curated by the comedian who is aware of the larger dynamics and its influence on the reception of their show. Comedians are keenly aware of the stage persona that they present to audiences and of the ways in which they perform (or not) their different traits/facets of identity (Double, 2014). Such awareness opens the possibility to challenge and resist the dominant humour regime. By failing to repeat the expected racialised and gendered performance, the comedians create a 'discursive gap' that holds the potential to transform (Butler, 1999: 178-179). This discursive gap is visible in a plurality of formats. Some comedians engage in 'charged humour' (Krefting, 2014) by directly offering social commentary on the hegemonic power structures, and some comedians finding alternative

goals for their comedy such as finding empowerment of self or other marginalised peoples through creative expression.

This exercise of comedic agency does exist, even within the Edinburgh Fringe. However, it receives no promotion or incentive from the institutions and exists at the margins of the festival. The public criticism of the Fringe's meritocracy has led to the development of some Equality Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives (The Fringe Society, 2025). On paper these initiatives have led to a numerical increase in diversity of comics – in terms of nationalities, race, gender, etc (ibid). Yet, as I will demonstrate, this numerical increase has not corresponded with a diversity of opinions, perspectives, and voices. Despite an overt commitment to 'giving anyone a stage and everyone a seat', acts of diversity in the fringe setting – as in the comedy industry at large – remain what Sara Ahmed (2012: 117) calls 'non-performative'. Drawing on Butler's idea of performativity, Ahmed describes non-performative as:

> the failure of the speech act to do what it says is not a failure of intent or even circumstance, but is actually what the speech act is doing. Such speech acts are taken up as if they are performatives as if they have brought about the effects they name, such that the names come to stand in for the effects.

Ahmed's ethnography on diversity work within universities in the UK demonstrates how the language of diversity is co-opted into a public relations stunt against criticism of racism (ibid: 143). In doing so, universities shield themselves from immediate criticism, while also not addressing the embeddedness of racist practices. Furthermore, it complicates complaints of racism that highlight the discrepancy between promised speech and lack of action as the problem, making access to solutions even more difficult. Institutions can claim they are committed to EDI, and when someone raises a complaint that challenges this, their immediate response is to restate the non-performative speech without addressing the systemic issue (ibid). Any meaningful change is no longer necessary, and marginalised individuals are

forced to conform to the nominal space offered to them. Ahmed's critique of EDI in universities is reflected in the comedy industry. The latter, given the blurry line between arts and industry poses additional hurdles in claims challenging issues of EDI which are not seen as a required element of artistic festivals and organisations. Understanding comedy through a lens of power, enables these criticisms of the comedy industry. (Sedgwick, 2024).

Conclusion

Brown comedians at the Fringe navigate a contested cultural site where structures of power, identity, and cultural production are negotiated. Through its focus on power across multiple levels, the framework understands stand-up comedy as occurring within a humour regime embedded in larger socio-political hierarchies. It integrates Foucault and Bourdieu's notions of power, adapted to the comedy context, and adds the dimension of race and gender dynamics that influence brown stand-up comedians' experiences. Adopting this multi-level outlook balances structural critique with possibilities of individual agency to conform to, resist, or challenge the humour regime. Moreover, it demonstrates the weakness of institutional claims to diversity by drawing on Ahmed's critique of non-performativity of EDI initiatives and adapting it to the comedy industry.

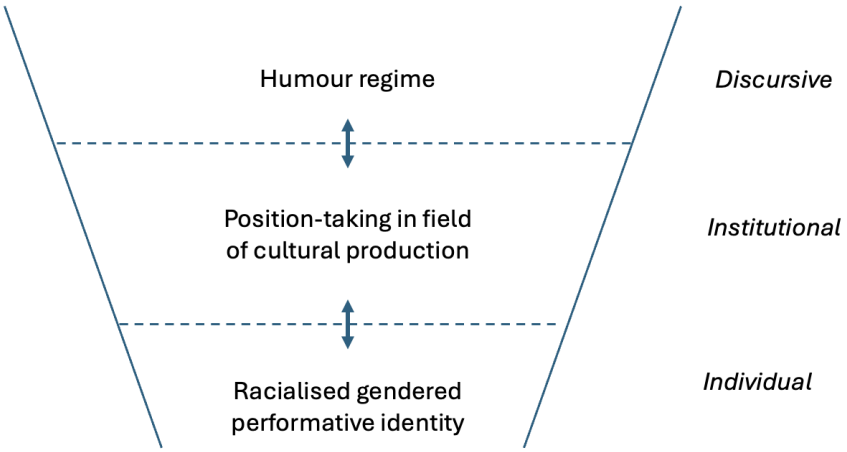

Figure 2: *Analytical Framework Diagram*.

Rarely, if ever, is it possible to fit a range of subjective experiences into a neat conceptual framework. The multi-level analytical framework I have elaborated in this chapter, will gain depth and nuance as ethnographic data is presented in the next three chapters. The first of these three will apply this lens to the Fringe itself, mapping the political economy underlying the spirit of inclusivity, and reveal how structural inequalities configure the field which brown comedians navigate.

4. The Political Economy of the Festival City

Conceptualising the Edinburgh Fringe as a White Humour Regime

> *I was on the bus recently, right and it was in London. So, it might have been my fault, I do know that. I was the only Indian person on the bus. And before you ask, yes, we do check every time. [makes eye contact with me, I laugh] Exactly. [looks at the other audience members] I'm looking at the other Indian person in this room.*
>
> \- Runi Talwar

The above excerpt is from the time I attended 'Indo-Aussie-Kiwi' comedian Runi Talwar's show at the 2024 Edinburgh Fringe. In an audience of 24 people, I was the only brown person, a fact I had noted across multiple shows at the Fringe. This fact was not incidental. Rather it reflected a broader pattern of exclusion embedded in the festival's structure. Despite its vision to 'give anyone a stage and everyone a seat', the festival has recently come under harsh criticism for its lack of representation (Bhandari, 2019; Logan, 2022; Ryan, 2022). The present chapter reveals the dissonance between the official discourse and subjective realities surrounding the Fringe. I argue that the Fringe operates within a humour regime that privileges white comedians and audiences. Various institutions that constitute the Fringe, such as program curation, award juries, reviewers, and audiences, reproduce socio-economic and cultural barriers that hinder the inclusion of non-white[4] comedians and audiences.

My analysis of the Fringe as a white humour regime builds on Foucault's concept of regime of truth adapted to humour (Kuipers, 2011). In this chapter I argue that the Fringe's humour regime centres whiteness as the normative identity for comedians and audiences, ultimately shaping what is considered funny, acceptable, or deserving of recognition. The chapter first sets the scene of research in the city of Edinburgh and its relationship with the Fringe. Charting the growth of the festival since its post-war beginnings, I focus on how the festival has changed with increasing significance. From here, I turn my attention to the impact of these high stakes on the participating comedians through a focus on the political

[4] In this chapter, I use both terms - brown and non-white in a bid to establish the 'whiteness' of the Fringe that hinders everyone else's participation. Some reports and quotes cited in the chapter use the terms BAME and global majority to the same effect.

economy of the Fringe. I argue that this political economy alters the demographics of the festival by limiting the presence of brown comedians and audiences and subsequently creating a white humour regime that is reinforced by the venues, reviewers, talent scouts and award juries.

The Festival City

August in Edinburgh is a time unlike any other. I last visited the city in December 2023, when it was freezing cold, rainy, and dark with scarcely anyone visible outside. The soot-covered buildings, a vestige of the Industrial Revolution, were surrounded by hills clad in a misty fog that lent itself well to this image of the city. In contrast, Edinburgh felt like a city bursting with energy in August. In the span of one month, the Scottish city hosts seven major and several minor festivals (Bartie, 2014; Pollock, 2022). Thousands of artists and audiences descend upon the city, in an experience simultaneously likened to the Haj and the Olympics. Even as residents flee the chaos, the city's population doubles to over a million people (Carmichael, 2024). The seven festivals range from military performances, film, books, paintings, and performance arts. Of these, the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, is the biggest and most popular (Fisher, 2012).

The Fringe takes over the city. The scale of the event is experientially overwhelming. Restaurants, theatres, pubs, clubs, offices, university buildings, churches, parks, streets – all spaces are turned into make-shift venues. You hear stories of legendary people performing in the tiny broom closets before they were 'discovered' at the Fringe all the time. The Fringe changes how one experiences Edinburgh. New landmarks and ways to navigate emerge as popular tourist attractions like the Edinburgh Castle or Scott Monument fade to the background. This is particularly visible in the nexus of the Edinburgh Fringe activities – where most of my fieldwork took place. A regular day of fieldwork involved walking 25 minutes from my residence to the closest of the four Big Venues – Assembly @ George

Square. From here, the other big venues were a 2–10-minute walk away. Walk straight for two minutes and you are at Pleasance Dome, another two and you'd be at Underbelly @ Bristo Square. If you go right instead and walk for 3 minutes, you will find yourself at the Pear Tree. Cross the traffic lights and walk ten minutes down the road for Just the Tonic, which is two minutes uphill from the Pleasance Courtyard. If you walk from the Pleasance Courtyard towards the Royal Mile, you'd encounter Gilded Balloon Patter House and Just the Tonic @ Cabaret Voltaire on your way. Between all these spaces, you are overwhelmed with flyers, posters, volunteers, more venues and street artists all seeking your attention.

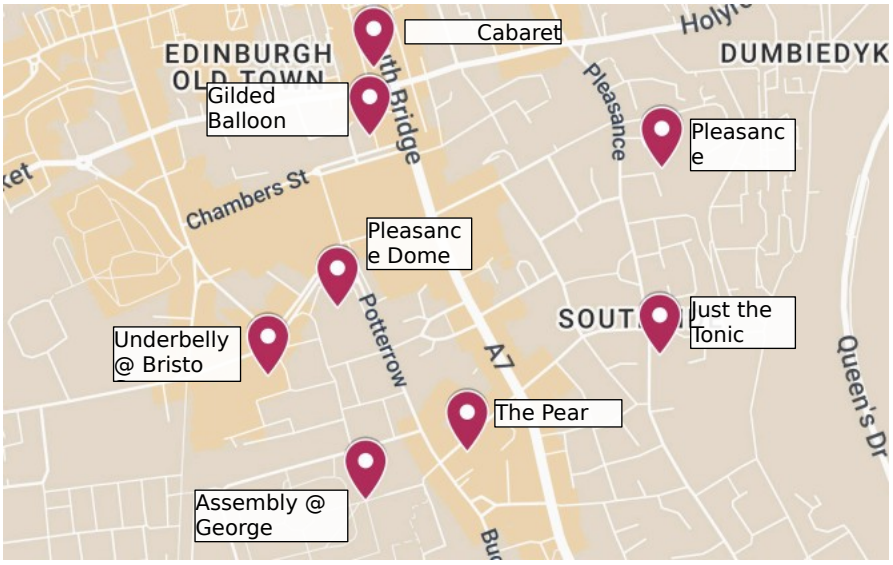

Figure 3: *Map of Edinburgh highlighting key fieldwork sites*.

Even time moves differently at the Edinburgh Fringe. The city follows the regular rhythm where people go to work in the mornings, and most public spaces would shut by 6pm. Restaurants in the city stay open for longer but they too shut by 11pm at the latest. In contrast Fringe spaces would be at their liveliest after 8pm. Mornings were reserved to overcome the hangover from last night. Afternoons had some shows, and the density of events would pick up 4pm onwards. The festival had its own food trucks and bars to accommodate these differences.

Sometimes I would exit a bustling Fringe bar around midnight, only to be met with complete quiet as soon as I was out the door.

The city and Fringe seemed like parallel worlds, yet both were integral aspects of each other's identity (Thomasson, 2022). The Fringe's vision to "give anyone a stage and everyone a seat" can be traced back to its very beginnings in 1947. Rudolph Bing, an Austrian Jew who had arrived in Britain to flee Nazi persecution, along with the Scottish representative of the British Council, Henry Wood, and the Lord Provost of Edinburgh, John Falconer established the first Edinburgh International Festival (of Music and Drama) (Pollock, 2022). The festival hoped to bring a 'a sense of peace and inspiration with which to refresh their souls and reaffirm their belief in things other than material' after the devastation of the Second World War (Fisher, 2012: 11). In order to do this, it invited high art from across Europe including Glyndebourne Opera, Sadler's Well Ballet, Vienna Philharmonic, and the Colonne Orchestra from Paris (Pollock, 2022). Even before the festival began on the 24th of August 1947, many Scottish people questioned the lack of Scottish presence in the festival programme. The argument offered by Bing and other festival organisers was that Scottish theatre was not up to the standards of those invited. Undeterred by this gesture of unwelcome, eight companies decided to perform in Edinburgh during the Festival anyway (ibid).

The number of companies coming to perform in Edinburgh unofficially during the Edinburgh International Festival grew steadily from then on. In 1959 the Fringe society was established to formalise the fringe activities, opening a central office, and a programme detailing all the performances (Pollock, 2022). From 8 Scottish companies in the first year, the number of companies and shows at the Fringe has grown rapidly with 3,746 registered performances from over 60 countries being held in the 2024 edition (The Fringe Society, 2024). Since the 1980s, the number of comedy acts has been on the rise (Pollock, 2022). In

2024, majority of the shows listed in the fringe programme were comedy (39%) (The Fringe Society, 2024). Through this massive growth the Fringe has maintained its vision of providing anyone with a venue a platform to showcase their talent. This commitment to inclusivity has led to many influential artists finding their big break through the festival and in turn, attracted more artists to the festival every year. However, the increasing size and prominence of the festival have had monetary and creative repercussions for the comedians that disproportionately impact brown comedians.

The Political Economy of Fringe Productions

With close to 4000 shows being performed in the span of 3-4 weeks, comedians leave no stone unturned to get audiences, reviewers and juries to their shows. Walls, lampposts, shop windows or virtually any space on which one could potentially tape or glue things onto become advertising space. This intensity of advertising is driven by the increased significance of the festival as a place where new talent is discovered. The Fringe has become a high-stakes event for comedians beyond a mere outlet for creative expression. Books have been written by Fringe veterans on guiding performers to make the most of their Fringe (see Fisher, 2012). Selling tickets or getting reviews or nominations or even being booked by a talent agency – Fringe artists come with a clear strategy of what they want to make of their significant monetary investment. As such, the festival acts like a platform to make connections and advance careers.

The potential to launch careers is further heightened by the hefty costs involved in producing a show for the Fringe. Comedians strongly consider every strategic decision that will help capture the attention of the few industry professionals. This is most evident in venue considerations. Despite hundreds of venues, a handful have gained a reputation for launching legendary careers. These venues are more likely to be frequented by industry professionals. The Big 4 venue organisations are Assembly, Underbelly, Pleasance, and Gilded Balloon

(Fisher, 2012). However, they receive more interest than there is capacity, so they curate their Fringe programmes by seeking applications from prospective comedians. The venue curators will offer a deal to successful applicants that would seek 40% of ticket sales with a minimum amount promised to the venue based on box office predictions (Pleasance Theatre Trust, 2025). Beyond the venue, comedians pay the Fringe Society upwards of £90 as a registration fee, 4% of their ticket sales for bookings made through the Fringe website, a per ticket Facility fee, charges for copyrighted music, insurance, and any costs for hired technicians and equipment (ibid). Comedians incur further costs on publishing and distributing show flyers and posters beyond the venue site. Many comedians have deals with their production houses or talent agency, who claim further commission for helping with the application and production process. Beyond the costs of producing their show, comedians must also budget upwards of £4,000 for the inflated costs of living, housing, and travel during the festival (Healy, 2022). One could forgo some of these costs and perform at the Free Fringe – where audiences pay what they can to the artist at the end. However, the Free Fringe is less likely to be visited by reviewers, award juries, and agents – unless there is great word of mouth around the show.

Overall, comedians are expected to lose £10,000 at the Edinburgh Fringe every year (House of Commons, 2024b). This is over a third of the average annual income for comedians in the UK which is currently calculated at around £26,000 (House of Commons, 2024a). Comedians must weigh their options prior to the Edinburgh Fringe and decide the level of financial risk they are willing to undertake based on their socio-economic position. These decisions highlight that the Fringe is not an equal experience for all artists. One informant in a report by Rachel Healy on the increasingly profit motivated Fringe model, Rose Johnson expressed her frustration as follows, “Someone is making loads of money off the fringe, but it’s not the performers.” (Healy, 2022). A report by Runnymede Trust on race

and class intersections in post-Brexit UK demonstrated that BME populations disproportionately exist in lower socio-economic classes. As such, it is even less likely for most non-white comedians to afford a Fringe run (Khan & Shaheen, 2017; Bhandari, 2019). Established artists have an easier time at the Fringe because they have recognition value on which they can draw in audiences and industry members alike. Newer artists hoping to develop recognition and connections through the Fringe are bound to struggle more with these barriers. Comedians often work a day job along with performing at the Fringe because comedy alone cannot sustain the costs of the Fringe. This limits their ability to market their shows. While the Fringe does give everyone a stage, the statement obscures the underlying condition of affordability of the stage.

While the barrier to entry is high for UK based comedians because of the sheer costs involved, its higher still for international participants. Not only does one need the financial resources to be able to come to the Edinburgh Fringe, with extra travel costs, but there is socio-cultural capital required to navigate the festival successfully. Knowing which venues to book, how to market their shows in a new context, bringing in reviewers, agents, producers, award juries are skills specific to the regional market. Venues offer help with certain aspects of performance, but these have additional costs attached (Pleasance Theatre Trust, 2025). One of the producers handling Indian comedians at the Fringe explained that all comedians coming from India are through their production house because they have a foothold in both countries. This enables them to select Indian talent most likely to do well in the Fringe and guide them through the Fringe logistics. Navigating the event would be much tougher without such help. On the other hand, this means Indian comedians must pass an extra round of curation before they even apply for the big venues.

The political economy of the Edinburgh Fringe, when understood in the context of socio-economic realities shaping the UK, explain the predominance of white comedians at

the Edinburgh Fringe. In the sea of posters covering every nook and cranny of the city centre, only a handful of non-white performers could be seen. Walking through the different streets, I would try and keep count of how many posters I came across that featured at least one non-white person. Restaurants and shops owned by immigrants would display posters of people hailing from their background. Their presence was limited in the larger landscape. These observed realities were reflected in the statistics published by the Fringe every year. Of the 3746 shows, around 1,400 shows were comedy (The Fringe Society, 2024). 105 of these (7.5%) were shows put up by majority POC individuals (Fringe of Colour, 2024). Further only 26 (approx 1%) of these were solo shows put up by brown stand-up comedians. A handful of others also performed in line-ups and showcases. This small percentage still marks one of the biggest representations of brown comedy at the Fringe.

Fig 4: Rows of Fringe posters across Edinburgh

The high costs borne by comedians producing a show for the Fringe, trickle down to the price of tickets which are priced between £12-20 for new and upcoming comedians. Concessions are available for students, but they do not reduce the cost beyond £1in most cases. These, along with increased costs of travelling to Edinburgh in August, deter non-white

audience members from participating at the Fringe. Subsequently, white, middle class, heterosexual audiences are the majority norm for most Fringe shows (Tomsett, 2023).

This audience demographic has a direct impact on the kinds of comedic narratives comedians engage in. As an audience-oriented craft, comedy is geared towards eliciting an audible and immediate reaction from the audience – laughter. Engaging with the audience is a key aspect of the art form. Given the centrality of the audience in the success (or failure) of a comedian's career, comedians will tweak, edit, or fully change jokes and punchlines based on who the majority audience is. For non-white audiences, the white demographics this can create a sense of exclusion from the Fringe. Anya Ryan, a brown critic, writes about the discomfort of being the only person of colour in several rooms:

> The venues are small enough to glance around and confirm, once again, that you're the only Black or Brown person present. […] You become aware of it in the silences that follow outdated terminology, or reportedly racist gags […] At the fringe, theatre and comedy do not feel made for people like me to enjoy. (Ryan, 2022)

As Ryan's words point out, not seeing other people of colour in the largest fringe festival has a certain exclusionary feeling attached to it. My experiences as a brown woman at the Fringe further corroborate these experiences. As a researcher, I would take note of the audience in the room. Often, I would be one of a few or the only person of colour in the audience – no matter if the venue could host 300 or 20 people. The jokes and narratives no longer cater to non-white individuals who are a minority in most rooms, instead they seek to make the majority white audiences laugh.

As the Edinburgh Fringe has grown and its impact on the comedy landscape has increased, so has the complexity, scale, and level of competition. The daunting costs attached to producing a show for the festival, amid a cost-of-living crisis, reinforce socio-economic barriers to entry for non-white comedians. Those who still make it to the Fringe have a secure financial position – through day jobs or other means – to bear the cost. This limits inclusion

of diverse voices at the Fringe. Simultaneously the ticket costs and lack of on-stage representation, create an alienating atmosphere for diverse audiences. This self-reinforcing cycle has consequences for the kind of humour that is produced, accepted, and even rewarded at the Fringe. If the dominant audience is white, then comedians will cater their jokes to white groups to maximise laughter. This fact is at the crux of the humour regime at the Edinburgh Fringe qualifying it as 'white' . Awards, reviews, talent scouts, and curation further exacerbate the impact of this dynamic through its judgements on who gets to be funny and rewarded for it, and under what circumstances.

The Fringe's Field of Comedic Production

While the Edinburgh Fringe gives a platform to artists, a complex system of networks enable a successful Fringe for the artists. A comedian relies on other individuals and organisations like the venue, technicians, and producers to bring the show to life and further on the critical reception of the show to position it in the larger field (see Becker, 1982 on 'art worlds'). These relationships do not occur in neutral territory. Bourdieu's conceptualisation of the field of cultural production, which he understands as the economic world reversed, offers a better understanding of the relationship between power and art (Bourdieu, 1983). Having demonstrated the prevalence of white audiences and comedians, I now turn my attention to how this socio-economic reality is reinforced by the various Fringe institutions. In doing so, I further challenge Bourdieu's simplistic and universalising tendencies and incorporate criticisms emerging from non-European contexts to analyse the unequal Fringe landscape.

The official Festival Fringe is a three-week event. However, the process of getting to the Fringe often starts almost a year in advance when comedians start developing ideas for their next show and applying to the prominent venues. In 2018, comedian Jenan Younis conducted an experiment, applying for comedy spots at the Fringe with 2 names – his real name and an anglicised version of his name. 81% of comedy promoters booked him under the

anglicised name, as opposed to the 12% who did with his real name for the same show (Bhandari, 2019). Younis' experiment highlights the impact of the unconscious bias promoters and venues have. However, when venues are questioned, these criticisms are often dismissed as economic concerns. In response to an email enquiry about their Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) and curation practices, one of the big venues' curator Bob[5] responded as follows:

> In terms of the diversity of the programming team, we are diverse in terms of career progression/socio-economic background and have a good balance of gender and sexuality, however in other areas we are less diverse which is something we are aware of and working to improve.
>
> The work itself is our key consideration, the quality of it, what it has to say, formally how it is explored and then if this particularly would speak to our Fringe audience […] We look at their ability to sell in the competitive Fringe market place […] the commercial viability of a show is a big consideration, where there are a lot of seats to sell.

Bob's response highlights the tensions between EDI and commercial viability when curating a programme for the Fringe. The key audiences and ticket purchasers are middle-class, white individuals. Naturally, if commercial viability is a parameter for decision-making, then shows that cater to non-white audiences are less likely to be selected. The lack of racial minorities represented in the curatorial board increase the likelihood of this phenomenon. Crucially, the curators do receive EDI training, but with over a thousand applications and the priority of white audiences, these take a backseat. There are additional funding resources available for minorities, but since the key priority remains unchanged, this only increases numerical strength rather than a diversity in narratives. Ticket costs further limit the accessibility of non-white audiences and further reinforce existing inequalities.

The curatorial process limits the number of non-white comedians at the Edinburgh Fringe. Those who do make it into the programme still face additional challenges with the critical reception of their show. Critic reviews in a large-scale festival hold the power of

[5] Pseudonym

guiding audiences to and away from certain shows. At the Edinburgh Fringe, all major reviewers – barring one, are white male individuals. Unlike curators, reviewers do not receive any EDI training. Their positionality impacts their perception of the show, as illustrated by one case I observed. Rahul Subramanian, an Indian male comic, in his show 'Who are you?', talked about how he messes with his bank's wealth manager by telling him that he does not want his wealth and assets to go to his wife in the event of his death. The point of the joke was to make fun of the assumptions the wealth manager made about his client, a practical stranger, in a bid to hit his sales target. A South Asian woman reviewing for a smaller publication, the Wee Review, wrote, "Rahul's way with hyperbole – lifting everyday occurrences into the absurd – leaves his audience gasping for air." (Misra, 2024). In contrast, a white reviewer for Chortle, a leading comedy magazine in the UK, writes about the "performative misogyny" of the joke and calls the entire routine "truly regressive" while also admitting to not knowing the cultural references that left the brown audiences roaring in laughter (Richardson, 2024). The readership for Chortle far exceeds that of the Wee Review, and by labelling the show misogynistic, people unfamiliar with the comedian are less likely to go. The same show, by the same comedian, at the same venue is understood completely differently based on the reviewer's positionality. The consequence of this misunderstanding has a major impact on the comedian's success and reputation at the Fringe.

Friedman (2014), in his ethnography on industrial gatekeepers at the 2012 Edinburgh Fringe demonstrates the role of cultural capital in determining who 'breaks through' at the Fringe. Focussing on the talent scouts at the festival, he finds that all his informants came from similar and privileged backgrounds. They lived in London, held a related higher education qualification, and most likely had at least one parent in a managerial position (ibid). Others have deduced that these were also most likely white individuals (Tomsett, 2023). A significant finding of Friedman's work is that most talent scouts sign talent based on

imagined audiences, often relying on their own cultural capital or existing formulaic categories, to make these decisions. Crucially, the mediating role played by the scouts between artists and audiences reinforces the existing status quo at the Fringe. Imagined audiences are further utilised by curators to justify the imbalance in their programs and by reviewers who dismiss the success of the show among brown audiences while writing for the white readership. Where Friedman analyses this as the impact of their cultural capital, I posit that white aesthetic value judgements are universalised often conflating this symbolic capital with imagined economic capital. The field not only defies Bourdieu's conceptualisation of cultural production as the 'economic world reversed' but further highlights the inherent inequalities of the field.

These inequalities are rendered visible in the Edinburgh Comedy Awards (ECA). Winning or being nominated for an ECA is often likened to winning an Oscar. Award winners not only receive a cash prize that supports their work but are often picked up for streaming platform specials. I was told by my interlocutors that the ECA, in theory, attempts to have each show reviewed by white and BME panellists before entering them for their longlist. However, in 2024, a non-white comedian whose show was being considered for one of the awards was told that there were not enough BME panellists to ensure this practice. All shortlisted comedians in 2024 were white. British Black comedian Kate Cheka, whom I met through my interlocutors, wrote about this experience[6]:

> I do wonder if the seven white comedians this year nominated for Best Show don't feel a bit awkward? Surely getting nominated for an award feels less meaningful knowing you are at an advantage? The value of something socially constructed like an award lessens over time as it becomes clear that only certain people are really eligible. And I just don't believe that there was not a single global majority person in this huge arts festival of almost four thousand shows that was not worthy of the best show nomination, especially when neither shortlists were in fact full.

[6] Kate initially hoped to get her article published but it was not picked up by newspapers. I was present when she first presented her ideas to my interlocutors and later acquired a copy.

Kate's comments highlight the sense of frustration and anger that many non-white comedians feel at the Edinburgh Fringe, especially in a year where many performed despite the late July 2024 race riots in the UK targeting their communities (BBC, 2024).

In face of mounting criticism after 2018, ECA founder Nica Burns made the following statement at the opening ceremony:

> It's a month. It's a festival, a celebration. It's insane and marvellous. Then we all go back to the real world, to study, to work, less hours, better pay, better conditions, but not half as much fun. Where else in the UK can you just get up and do it? So yes to entrepreneurship. Yes to people's choice. Yes to open access. Let the performers and workers decide whether to come or not. Hands off our fringe! (British Comedy Guide, 2019)

Burns simultaneously acknowledges the systemic issues with the Edinburgh Fringe and reinforces them by arguing that equitable practices would be against the spirit of the festival (Sedgwick, 2024). She posits better practices as against entrepreneurship, highlighting the profit-driven mindset behind the façade of meritocracy, that does not care about the performers and workers it exploits.

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe's collective network of curators, reviewers, and award juries seem to work in a pattern that tends to actively disadvantage brown comedians at every step. In this chapter I have argued that the socio-economic realities of the Fringe are lifted from a coincidence to an actively reinforced white humour regime through institutionalised practices. Despite differing degrees of acknowledgement of the lack of diversity at the Fringe, institutions choose to either shift blame to audiences and commercial viability or argue its anti-Fringe and a universalised aesthetic judgement. Both Becker's notion of art worlds and Bourdieu's field of cultural production fall short to capture the complexity of the Edinburgh Fringe. Power mediates the art world's critical reception of brown comedians from curation to award nominations through its emphasis on white socio-cultural capital. The aesthetic judgements occur within an unequal field that disproportionately affect brown comedians,

often justifying their lack of symbolic capital through economic limitations. These ‘move towards innocence’ (Tuck & Yang, 2012) act as non-performative speech acts, where verbal acknowledgement does not translate to positive action (Ahmed, 2012:117). Through these various structures and processes and a refusal to change the system, the Fringe operates like a white humour regime.

Conclusion

The Fringe, despite its inclusionary foundation and vision, has become a space marred with processual and structural inequalities that affect non-white - including brown - comedians disproportionately. The rapid growth in scale and significance has intensified competition without ensuring equitable opportunities to participate. This is evident in the prohibitive costs that exclude lower socio-economic class participation across the festival. Intersecting racial and socio-economic demographics of the UK inordinately impact the brown presence at the festival, skewing it towards those from similarly privileged backgrounds as the majority white presence. This socio-economic reality is continually reinforced by the institutions that constitute the Fringe’s field of cultural production. While these institutions do not coordinate their actions, their limited interventions to improve representation at the Fringe nevertheless reinforce and uphold the white humour regime. Who is seen as (un)funny, which narratives will (not) be rewarded and who has the power to make these decisions are in turn structured by this regime.

Understanding the Fringe as a white humour regime not only enables a closer inspection of the larger socio-political hierarchies that structure the embodied experiences of brown comedians but also challenges Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of the field of cultural production as a reversal of economic world. It highlights instead how economic considerations shape the field, aesthetic judgements, and access to symbolic capital. Despite the inequality of the terrain, Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of position-taking (1983) is still

valuable in understanding how individuals navigate the Fringe. In the next chapter, I move to the experiences of brown comedians present at the 2024 Fringe and the varied ways in which they negotiate the white humour regime.

5. Being Brown in a White Fringe

How Brown Comedians experience and navigate the white humour regime

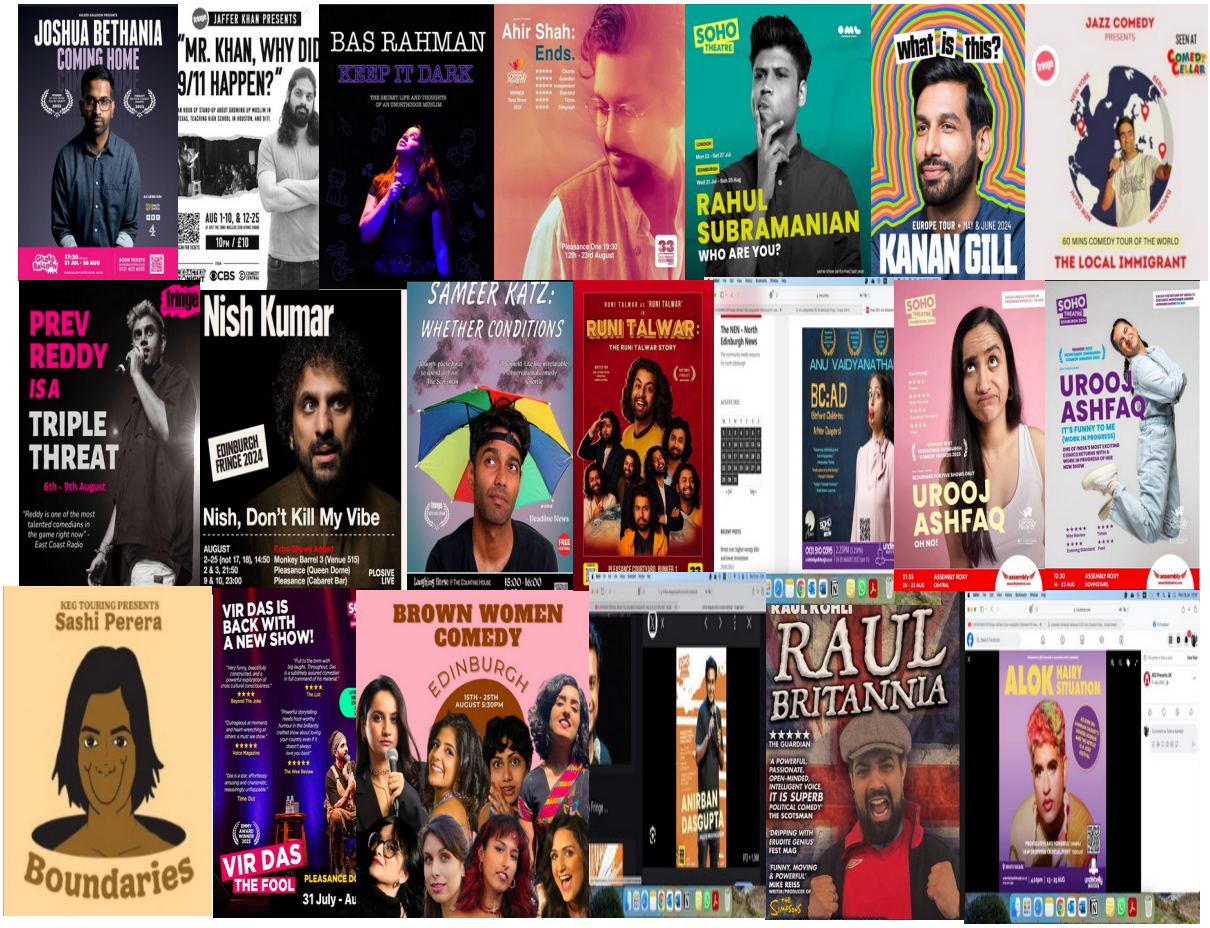

Figure 5: *Collage of brown comedian posters at the 2024 Edinburgh Fringe.* Source: The Fringe Society, 2024

As a researcher interested in brown stand-up comedians, I spent the 2024 Edinburgh Fringe, observing their interactions, hopping from one venue to another to see the performances, and 'hanging out' with them. Off-stage, in interviews and informal conversations, I learnt more about the person behind the performer. Their life trajectories and interest in comedy had developed in unique circumstances. Despite this diversity, I found that much of their comedic narratives overlapped on-stage. I found myself being able to predict the jokes and punchlines

comedians were after before they even got there. How was it that their unique personalities and experiences translated into the same few topics? Having established the larger uneven terrains of the Edinburgh Fringe, I now turn my attention to the impact of the white humour regime on brown comedians and their creative expressions. By consistently promoting a limited idea of 'brownness', any meaningful diversity is lost in a bid to cater to the white humour regime. In doing so, I demonstrate how privileging white audiences and artists through institutionalised means actively disciplines brown comedy into racially palatable norms, beyond making the field an unequal field of cultural production. I deploy Bourdieu's notion of *prises de position* (1983) or position takings to examine how brown comedians navigate the humour regime, nuancing it further through the lens of racial performativity.

The chapter first highlights the diversity within the umbrella term 'brown' or 'South Asian' present at the 2024 Edinburgh Fringe. It pushes against the homogenising effects of these terminologies, highlighting the difficulties in speaking of one identity (Hall, 1996). From here, I move to a sense-making endeavour of the dissonance between the on-stage predictabilities and the off-stage heterogeneity among my interlocutors to establish the homogenising effect of the Fringe humour regime on marginalised comedians. Brown comedians position themselves on a spectrum of conformity within this regime based on their dispositions and find varied levels of success (or lack thereof). I explore these position takings through the case of two comedians who find themselves on the opposing ends of the spectrum of conformity.

Collective Identity and Coincidental Camaraderie

Despite the relatively small presence of brown comedians at the Fringe (>1%), the term 'South Asian' fails to capture the sheer heterogeneity I encountered within the group. My interlocutors represented diverse locations, varied migration histories, and intersectional identities, that make it difficult to speak of one geographic or ethnic identity that captures

their complexities. Academic discourse on identity reflects these tensions between the individual and the collective terminologies (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). In order to mitigate this dilemma, I chose to adopt the emic self-referential term ‘brown’ when speaking about my interlocutors. The ambiguity of the term sidesteps pre-conceived ideas about ‘South Asian’ while enabling fluidity between the specific and the broad experiences. Before diving deeper into how brown comedians navigate the Edinburgh Fringe, I first discuss in more detail the specific life histories of the group at the centre of this research.

The comedians this research focusses on understood different South Asian countries to be their homeland to different degrees of proximity. Some, like Prev Reddy, were descendants of indentured labourers brought to South Africa by the British colonial project. Others were first, second, or even third generation members of the diaspora. Ahir Shah’s grandfather moved to the UK in early 1960s to as a guest-worker and his family moved shortly after. Many like Jaffer Khan, Bas Rahman, Daizy Maan, Raul Kohli, Sashi Perera, and Sid Singh are children of immigrant parents who moved to destinations like the UK, US and Australia. A few like Joshua Bethania and Shalaka Kurup moved to the UK for work or education in the past decade. Some, like Prateek Jajoo and Runi Talwar, have migrated multiple times in their lifetimes. Runi describes himself as an ‘Indo-Kiwi-Aussie’ moving from India to New Zealand and then to Australia and finally, the UK. A group of five comedians had come from India - Anirban Dasgupta, Kanan Gill, Rahul Subramanian, Sumukhi Suresh, Urooj Ashfaq and Vir Das – and represented diverse regions within the country.

The brown comedians converging at the Fringe had realised their passion for stand-up comedy in different ways. Ahir started performing as a teenager. Daizy Maan started as a co-founder of an organisation to empower women that held comedy nights, eventually finding her way to the stage. Many hold steady day jobs and hope to switch to stand-up comedy full-

time eventually. Joshua decided to try stand-up to help with his public speaking skills at work, only to realise his passion for the field. Sashi Perera, from Australia, made the switch from a human rights lawyer to stand-up comedy after going viral on TikTok and taking a sabbatical to pursue it. These differences in career trajectories meant that everyone arrived at the 2024 Fringe with distinct goals. More veteran comedians already had established audience bases and were looking for opportunities to expand their careers through a streaming platform deal or international tour. Newer comedians were still looking to add to their audience base, and finding connections like agents, producers, and scouts who could help their comedy reach more people. Often, these comedians had a day job to ensure a steady income while they sought to convert comedy into their full-time profession.

These myriad differences among brown comedians did not take away from their shared camaraderie at the festival. As many as 15 of the 23 comedians found common references, languages, and insights to form a community at the Fringe. I often found myself interviewing one comic at a venue, only for other brown comics to join us if they were at the same place. They would party together after their shows, offer each other feedback, eat dinner together or simply hang out. Anirban Dasgupta, an Indian comedian, spoke of the importance of the group to him as one of his favourite things about the Fringe in an interview:

> [I]t'll be tough to do this without them. I remember I performed at comedy festival in Montreal, like 2 years back. And at that festival, I was the only brown person there. And I really felt lost there. I had a good time in my shows and all but I really didn't know anyone outside it. […] Doing this festival with all my Indian comedian friends that that was a big part of how I feel about the festival because maybe without them it would have been lonely. We would come back, discuss each other shows. We realize that everybody is kind of going through the same experience.

The Edinburgh Fringe albeit a fixed space for a fixed time, becomes a point of convergence for a transnational group of people formally designated under one category. Brown comedians found comedy through different mediums and at different junctures in their life, yet they found their way to the 2024 Edinburgh Fringe, albeit with different intentions for its

run. The field of cultural production of the Edinburgh Fringe is thus not only limited to the national context but further includes transnational flows of people, ideas, media, and finance (Appadurai, 1996). Moreover, this transnationality and its varied histories challenge the homogenising effect of collective identities. South Asia consists of 5 to 7 countries, thousands of spoken languages, and a long history of migration with the largest diaspora in the world (Chatterji & Washbrook, 2012). Even in a small subset of 26 brown comedians, this difference is evident. While these differences resist homogenising collective labels, brown comedians can fluidly move between their differences and commonalities – be it to foster a sense of community or to cater effectively to the Fringe audiences.

What Are They Laughing At?

Despite their own sense of camaraderie and intra-group heterogeneity, the on-stage persona for most brown comedians reflected a homogenous and often stereotypical notion of 'brownness'. As the Fringe progressed and I learnt more about my interlocutors' varied histories and personalities, I was confused at the lack of these textures in their comedic performances. The contradiction between their off-stage personalities and on-stage performances led me to the entanglements between comedy's audience-oriented nature and disciplinary expectations in a white humour regime.

These entanglements were especially visible in the case of newer comedians who tended to talk about the same set of themes such as their strict family's expectations of marriage and normative careers, their race, and their stance on immigration politics. In practice, it would mean that their jokes involved these topics, but they added their own style to the punchline. Here is one example of 'arranged marriage' as a topic that was raised by multiple comedians from different backgrounds:

> **Comedian 1:** I went to a wedding recently and I had to get a wedding card. And I went to the shop and I was looking for the cards. They're all very nice. They're always

like ‘seeing the love between you is how I know true love exists for I hope one day I can have the love you have’ – that sort of thing literally doesn’t apply though, because I was going to an arranged marriage. [audience laughs] So I was looking for a card that just said I hope you like each other someday [audience laughs again].

Comedian 2: my parents were very conservative as well, you know, arranged marriage is a big thing in our culture. Everybody knows arranged marriages and how that works. All white people have seen the documentary on Netflix.

Comedian 3: How do you all feel about arranged marriage? Respond by either cheering or bullying my culture.

Comedian 4: all they [grandparents] had was a photograph and a few biographical details and within a matter of days, they were in bed together [Audience laughs] Sorry, just because you [audience] have all chosen to go via the algorithm, and not old woman in your family does not make it less arranged. All you've done, in my opinion, is outsource responsibility to the one thing, somehow less accountable.

The four examples come from live stand-up shows by brown comedians that I viewed at the Fringe over the 4 weeks I was there. ‘Comedian 1’ is based in the US and comes to the UK frequently, ‘Comedian 2’ is currently in Germany, ‘Comedian 3’ is a US comic, and ‘Comedian 4’ is a renowned UK comedian. They vary in ages, career stages, location, religious beliefs, and homeland orientations. The one commonality through all their shows is that the audience was majority white. The four examples signal a larger pattern among comedic narratives of brown comedians performing to a white audience The repeated invocation of arranged marriage not only make self-referential jokes in the presence of a dominant racial group (Scarpetta & Spagnolli, 2009) but further attempt to make the brown comedians racially legible through a stereotype.

In a conversation with Joshua, whose Fringe show revolved around some of these topics, he explained the deliberate reasoning for his choice, “I tend to pick on like very low hanging fruit topics because I'm still quite new and I'm not being too ambitious in terms of the topics, but the style itself.” New comedians are often advised to stick to established topics that are known to generate laughter from the audience (Krefting, 2014:198-202). Not having to worry about the content, they can focus on developing their comedic style and getting comfortable with performance aspects of the craft (ibid). Established ‘funny’ topics also

remove concerns about whether the audience is familiar with the joke's background. In the UK context, knowledge about South Asians in the public domain comes largely from news and TV representations (Malik, 2002). Media analysis of these representations demonstrates how they are often one-dimensional stereotypes which present South Asians as the object of laughter (Kay, 2024). Comedy takes place within a shared realm of knowledge between the comedian and the audience. If the audience has no idea what the comedian is talking about, then the comedian either risks explaining the context of the joke to the point that it is not funny anymore or they stick to established themes. As such, the prevalence of jokes around strict parents, marriage, immigration and colonialism stem from the shared repertoire between the Fringe's white audience and the brown comedian, established mostly through media representations.

Adapting to audiences is an important skill in stand-up comedy (Double, 2014). Audiences change from one show to the next and a good comedian will make most audiences laugh. In order to do so, comedians must negotiate with the audiences. If the joke does not work in one format, comedians adapt their set to maximise laughter. In his debut show at the Fringe, Runi Talwar talks about how an astrologer's claim of his bad luck became a self-fulfilling prophecy that guided his life. Here, explaining the context of Indian astrology and remedies to lessen planetary effects is a worthwhile effort because it ties the whole show together but other things, like the importance of the 2004 Cricket World Cup are risk worthy. In our interviews, he explained the importance of audience in shaping his creative process as follows:

> The cricket story was actually much longer, much more involved and much more detailed. At the time, I was like, 'this is great. I'm painting the picture of the world I want to talk about'. But then I realized, quite simply, most people don't really like cricket. These are the kind of considerations you have […] You have to give the audience what they want. So, the conclusion that I ended up coming to after February -March is that whatever the cricket story is, I have to figure out a way to distil that into what I want to get out of it. So, at the very least, I don't lose an audience with it

In Runi's case, cricket became the background to the more important aspect – his 'unluck'. These creative decisions stem from the audience's positionality. Had Runi's audience been more familiar with the sport, chances are the cricket story could have been longer. This was not the case with the Fringe audience, so he cut the story.

Negotiating with a predominantly white audience, brown comedians are often advised to include their ethnicity in their routines. This further establishes whiteness as the default norm for audiences and comedians and racializes the brown comedians as salient. The sense of advantage from being different is replaced by the need to be racially palatable to the white humour regime. This set of circumstances culminates in a setting where brown comedians feel the pressure to perform their collective identity. Monica Chatterjee, a brown comedian who was at the Fringe but not performing a full hour noted this fact in her interview:

> I want to talk about different things, normal things that people go through. For some reason I do see a certain set of people in the industry who are like, 'yeah, I mean, that's cool. But I want to know more about your South Asian upbringing' […] why do I have to talk about my South Asian culture in every form and manner?!

Similarly, early in his career, Joshua would start his set with the line, "You might recognise my voice from your bank's customer support" (Joshua Bethania Comedy, 2023). Eventually he stopped doing that joke when he realised it was "pretty hacky" and he spoke about it in his interview:

> It used to always get like a massive laugh and like I had the crowd listening to me non-stop from there […] As recent as like let's say like a month ago, some TV show person called and said, 'I really loved your joke where you say your accent is like your bank customer support'. I haven't done that in like 2.5 years. Then I realized they [white people] love to hear those things. They're like, you know, keep these things rather than the other things which can fit in anyone else's [read: white] voice as well. There's definitely that expectation.

The expectation to perform jokes related to his ethnicity made Joshua question, "Are they laughing at the joke or are they laughing at me? Am I just giving them permission to laugh at a stereotype that they already were thinking in their head?". Joshua's consideration of the

joke's impact demonstrates how whiteness becomes an epistemic boundary that limits his range of narrative choices. Self-referential jokes that do not challenge the status quo become incentivised and make it harder for brown comedians to resist the regime.

The white humour regime perpetuated by the Edinburgh Fringe sets whiteness as the normative identity for both comedians and audiences. Navigating this regime places brown comedians at a disadvantage, as their heterogeneous multi-faceted identities are often funnelled into racially salient, stereotypical repertoires that are palatable to this dominant framework. The unequal power dynamic between comedian and audience is further intensified by the racial dynamics at play. Scarpetta and Spagnolli (2009) found that African American comedians were more likely to make self-referential jokes when performing for white audiences. Similarly, Weaver (2010) and De Camp (2016) observed that minority comedians often risk reinforcing negative stereotypes through their performances. The experiences of brown comedians at the Edinburgh Fringe push existing research further by questioning why comedians feel the need to perform self-referential or negative stereotypes in the presence of white audiences. Performing for a predominantly white audience not only influences the content of jokes brown comedians tell but also foregrounds their racial identity as distinct from the audience. This distinction turns the comedian's embodied identity into an active component of the performance. Jokes about arranged marriage, strict parents, and normative expectations—already circulating in mainstream discourse—position brown comedians as racially legible and non-threatening to the socio-cultural inequalities that shape the Fringe.

Position-Takings among Brown Comedians

Brown comedians not only recognise their disadvantageous position within the white humour regime at the Fringe, but also consciously position their comedic narratives in response to it. Bourdieu conceptualises the notion of artistic position-taking as the encounter between

individual habitus and capital to be gained from the field (Bourdieu 1980: 311). Positions are taken by artistic agents through their works and their political strategies within the field. Both strategies are geared towards agents' aim to defend or improve their capital relative to their position in the power dynamics (ibid: 311-313). Given the marginal position of brown comedians in the power dynamics, challenging the regime came at several risks to their comedy careers. In contrast, acquiescing to the narrow scope offered by the regime offers security and better chances of success. Brown comedians negotiate between their individual inclinations and expectations of collective identities, taking diverse positions on the degree of conformity and racial palatability to the humour regime. Given the small number of brown comedians, their individual positionings directly influence other brown comedian's ability to conform or resist.

Utilising data from interviews, observations of live performances, and recordings available online, I analyse the spectrum of position-taking among brown comedians at the Fringe through the case of two shows – Ahir Shah's hit-show 'Ends'[7] and Sid Singh's 'American Coloniser'. Both Ahir and Sid are Edinburgh Fringe veterans. In 2024, Ahir did a short run of 'Ends' at the Fringe leading up to its Netflix premier, enabled due to its 2023 'Best Show' award (Parent, 2024). Meanwhile, Sid's show takes a stand against conformist shows like 'Ends', understanding them as reinforcing the white humour regime. Compared parallelly, the shows unravel the impact of the white humour regime on the brown comedians.

One of the biggest stars in the brown comedy circle at the 2024 Fringe was Ahir Shah. He returned to the Fringe for a sold-out 5-day re-run at a 300-capacity venue after winning the Best Comedy Show award for 'Ends' in 2023. As the first British Asian person to win the prestigious award, Shah's victory seems to represent the meritocratic ideals of the Fringe's official discourse. 'Ends' is a performance that offers hope for a more optimistic future to a

[7] I did not have permission to directly quote Ahir's show 'Ends'. I offer a description of the relevant points instead. My analysis here is based on observations from watching it live and then online.

country facing a series of crises. Through an emotionally charged retelling of his grandfather's life as an immigrant in the 1960s' xenophobic Britain, Ahir emphasises that things have gotten better and argues that British multiculturalism is an exemplary force to the rest of the world. He uses the case of Rishi Sunak's Prime Ministership to make this point, despite not necessarily agreeing with his politics. He captures this sentiment through the joke, "politically I was enraged, but racially, I was thrilled!" (Parent, 2024). He traces Sunak's success story across multiple generations of struggle, from the violence of British colonialism in present-day Pakistan, to his becoming the first British Asian Prime Minister on Diwali. He intertwines this with his own family's initial struggles and later success as immigrants in a foreign land.

Ahir's show holds a lot of personal value to him. In our interview he detailed the search of life histories and experiences of his maternal grandfather, who passed away when Ahir was young. Herein lies the power of the show for Ahir:

> [Imagines telling his grandfather] Years from now, this story is going to be told and people are gonna be on your side and they're gonna acknowledge that this isn't right and it's gonna be different. And it's gonna be your grandson who's telling as well because it is different for them.

Ends becomes a means to give his maternal grandfather's struggles as an immigrant a platform that it did not have for decades. There is an authenticity to his storytelling, and audiences respond to this. When I watched the show, people around me were emotionally affected and sobbing at the end. Curiously, I noted that in a venue of 299 seats, less than ten were people of colour and none of us was as deeply moved by the show as the majority white audiences.

As I walked out of the venue, I bumped into my interlocutors and realised that they held strong negative opinions about the show. In later interviews, people would bring it up un-prompted as examples of shows they disagreed with. As one comedian put it, "all you're

doing is taking an experience and telling a story that is meaningful, but it loses all meaning when the meaning that you've derived from it is that we should be happy and shut our mouths about what is happening in the UK politically because he [Rishi Sunak] is brown.". Others simply described it as 'racist', or 'disingenuous' or 'catering to white people'. At the Edinburgh Fringe, brown comedians chose to repeatedly distance themselves from Sunak's prime ministership in their routines, not wanting to be associated with him through shared racial identity. Ahir did the opposite; he seemed to argue that even the wrong kind of representation matters. While Ahir's political opinions do not necessarily align with Sunak's, his use of stand-up comedy to make this argument was heavily rewarded by the white humour regime. The strong response of other comedians is not about his personal belief, but the trend it set for the 2024 Fringe among brown comedians. Of the 25[8] listed one-hour shows by brown comedians in 2024, eight mentioned the immigrant experience – be it living between two cultures, or family histories – and four of these refer to the UK context specifically (Fringe Society, 2024b). While Ahir did not start the trend, nor was this his first show on the topic, his success reinforced the humour regime's expectation that brown comedians should talk about their immigration experiences, but in ways that do not challenge the status quo.

Sid Singh, an Indian-American comic based in the UK, decided to address these trends and the white humour regime through his show at the Edinburgh Fringe. In an interview we did after the Fringe ended, he explained the source of inspiration of his show, 'American Coloniser' as the lack of humane complexity offered to people of colour and immigrants in white contexts and understand the experiences of brown comedians through that framework.

> Everyone expects the right wingers to demonize us. Everyone expects left wingers to think of us [brown people/immigrants] in these glowing terms, but I was like let's

[8] Two comedians did 2 shows each for the Fringe, instead of one.

> actually question what these glowing terms are and what is the price we pay for those glowing terms. Often what you see is, the left is very quick to put us in a box. That to me, is what is holding us back from being human in their eyes. […] well, of course the right side is also going to demonize you. And if the left is doing that, who is actually looking out for the concept of us being human?

Sid implicates the Fringe as well as the larger industry and socio-political context in which it operates in narrowing the scope of any meaningful diversity to predetermined acceptable topics. He makes this point in his show by giving an alleged history of his own ancestors who were terrible people and always on the wrong side of history. He calls out shows like Ahir's that seem to support Rishi Sunak as a win for multiculturalism by emphasising that Sunak "would have deported your grandfather". He mocks the trend further by promising to donate 50 percent of his earnings from the show to help him fly to his grandmother's ancestral yoga factory and plant a chicken tikka tree.

Behind the mockery, there is anger at his colleagues and friends for pandering to white liberal audiences by putting "all the words white people know about India into one sentence". Sid's criticism of brown comedians rightly points out that the shows were pandering, but there were buyers for it too:

> I know some [white] people like, hey, that's not fair. […] We are more than people who came before us. We are more than the murderers and liars and thieves and hypocrites and colonizers. We are complicated human beings. And that is a fair argument. But what bothers me is white people love making that argument for themselves. But they ain't never give that shit to us. Every time a brown [comedian] comes to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, he does the same fucking show over and over and over again. We walk on stage and [in a mocking tone] like all the wisdom of our ancestors, Oh my God, my grandparents came to this country with nothing. And whoa, they worked so hard and now we are truly British and this is where I am really from. Fuck that shit. I'm not even saying those stories aren't true, but they are not the only stories about us that are true. We deserve to be complicated, just like the rest of y'all. But the industry only lets us tell those stories. […] Look, I use myself as an example. This show is not about that and we only sold 2 tickets. We deserve to be complicated. We deserve to give our everything, but it could be tricky because we also deserve to make a living.

I used this quote from Sid's show to begin this dissertation and now I return to it having contextualised it in a larger humour regime because it highlights three significant points. For

one, it clearly demonstrates the differential expectations from the white norm and the racialisation of brown comedians in the humour regime. He directly challenges the status quo, forgoing laughter to challenge the regime (Krefting, 2014). Second, his comparison between the success of his show that resists conformity to those that do reinforce the humour regime highlights how the choices of one brown comedian impact the others given the limited number of brown comedians in the circuit. This further explains why brown comedians are likely to take a conformist approach to the white humour regime or hold strong opinions when they disagree with the position-takings of others. Third, Sid does not devalue the stories that are currently seen as racially salient yet palatable. These stories hold legitimate value as powerful mediums of creative agency and expression. Rather, it is the limitation of not being able to speak beyond established themes that are rewarded with awards, rave reviews, and Netflix deals, that affects Sid and many others like him.

Both Ahir and Sid exemplify the different ways in which brown comedians negotiate their comedic narratives with white humour regime. The audience-oriented skill of comedy is elevated by the white humour regime to a white normative comedy, that doesn't challenge the existing socio-cultural hierarchies, instead reaffirming their beliefs. Both Ahir and Sid exercise agency in how they choose to respond to the humour regime. Ahir, whose main audience base is the UK, exemplifies a more conformist position and Sid, whose audience is Euro-American is at more liberty to challenge the status quo. Their personalities, habitus, and comedic narratives intersect to inform their conscious choices. Moreover, these choices lead to different outcomes – 'Ends' was premiered on Netflix and toured internationally. Sid decided to use his funds from comedy to support a legal charity organisation in the United States when mainstream success seemed elusive. However, both cases highlight the negotiations, position-takings, and consequences of performing in an inherently unequal system.

Conclusion

Examining the dissonance between on-stage homogeneity and off-stage diversity among brown comedians reveals a tense negotiation between their individual, collective, and creative identities, and the white humour regime. Despite their varied life histories, immigration patterns, and career trajectories, brown comedians reproduced similar on-stage narratives that marked them as racially salient yet palatable to the white audiences and aesthetic sense. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of position-taking (1983), I analysed how brown comedians actively choose their comedic strategies in response to both the affordances and constraints of the field. I extended this framework further through the lens of racial performativity, highlighting how race becomes a consciously enacted and commodified aspect of performance — not just lived but performed to secure recognition, relatability, and career sustainability. Brown comedians position themselves across the spectrum of conformity and resistance, negotiating between the humour regime, their personal inclinations, as well as others' position-takings. What is ultimately at stake is not simply the inclusion of brown comedians in elite cultural spaces like the Edinburgh Fringe, but the terms under which that inclusion is permitted. When brown comedians are only valued for reproducing familiar stereotypes then the space for narrative complexity, contradiction, and ambiguity is foreclosed. These constraints reflect a broader paradox in the politics of representation: while diversity is increasingly celebrated in principle, it remains policed in practice.

Having examined how brown comedians navigate the racialised expectations of the Edinburgh Fringe, the next chapter turns toward brown comedians on the margins of the humour regime at the fringe. The margins of the Fringe constitute a space where the humour regime's effects are limited, either through additional barriers to success or a position of privilege. Exploring the unique positioning of female, queer, and Indian brown comedians in

the margins respectively, I highlight the plurality of voices present among brown comedians at the Fringe which the white humour regime chooses to overlook

6. Mapping the Margins of the Fringe:

Exploring intersectional identities and counter-discursive narratives

Comedy in and of itself. It's quite a small table. There are only so many seats. On that table, there are only so many seats for a female comedian. On that same table, there are only so many seats for a female comedian of colour. Nothing wrong with the person at the table, my ire is at the game

Bas Rahman

The above excerpt is from an interview with comedian Bas Rahman, a British Pakistani comic who was at the Fringe for one week. I asked her, why were there so few brown women at the Fringe and her response laid emphasis towards the structural inequalities of the Fringe's humour regime. Bas further highlights how intersectional identities, here being a female person of colour, bring additional dimensions to the effects of power that warrant further distinctions when speaking of brown comedians (see Crenshaw, 1991). Brown female comedians, for instance, are located at a disadvantage not merely because of their race but also because of their gender identity and these worsen the effect of each other. The present chapter explores how intersectional identities position brown comedians at the margins of the white humour regime at the Fringe. Having established the effects of the white humour regime on their racialised identities, I now consider how factors such as gender, sexuality, and geography further position minorities within the marginalised group at the fringes of the regime. While these positions make mainstream success harder to achieve, they also find themselves uniquely unrestrained from the humour regime. As such, margins become the space for counter-discursive narratives that highlight the heterogeneity among brown comedians both off-stage and on-stage.

I base my analysis through the categories of female, queer, and brown comedians from India respectively. While the three categories of brown comedians are not equally excluded from the humour regime, they find themselves at the margins of it nonetheless. Female and queer brown comedians operate within the white humour regime and face

additional barriers to mainstream inclusion. In contrast, Indian comedians at the Edinburgh Fringe had established audiences in their homeland and were not concerned with the humour regime at play. Despite their different attitudes, success within the white humour regime was limited for all of them. Together, they highlight plurality of voices that are currently reduced to the nominal space given to “brown” comedians.

Where’s all your (brown) women?

In September 2024, female comedian Lucy Beaumont called out several comedy clubs in the UK for having all-male line-ups and asked, “Where’s all your women?” (Bennett, 2024). Following Beaumont’s allegations, leading comedy magazine, Chortle UK, conducted a survey of 168 line-ups at 12 major comedy club in the country from September 2024 to November 2024. It found that prestigious comedy clubs book six times more men than women (ibid). In response to these allegations, one of the surveyed venues responded that they cannot include more women, “without compromising the overall quality of the show” (ibid). While important, Chortle’s survey and the entire controversy around it neglected the disproportionate impact of these practices on further intersectional identities. Similarly, studies in the Euro-American contexts have explored the relationship between female public identities and its interactions with stereotypes in live comedy to understand why women are seen as ‘not as funny as men’ (Tomsett, 2023; Keisalo 2018). However, there is relatively little scholarship on how this is further influenced by other intersecting identities (Lockyer & Weaver, 2024). Given that most of these studies focus on the entirety of the comedy landscape, they inadvertently replicate the marginalised position offered to minority comedians. Exploring the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality lays emphasis on the specific structural mechanisms that limit diverse participation beyond reductive binaries of male and female.

Locating the female and queer comedians at the margins of the Fringe is a reference to their geographical positioning, fewer numbers, shorter stints, and less demonstrable success. Of the 21 brown comedians I observed at the Fringe who had a one-hour show, 5 were women and 2 were openly queer. Their venues took me to new neighbourhoods in the city where the Fringe was not as prominent as the centre. The rooms they performed in were consistently smaller and even the audience was sparse. Their shows were often slotted before prime hours, often in the afternoon or early evening. None of them stayed for longer than a week at the Fringe, with some only performing for three days. Reviewers were also more likely to miss these shows given the logistical hurdles.

This was in contrast to brown, cis-male performers I interacted with. While they also struggled, especially in contrast to white counterparts, their experience was qualitatively better than female and queer comedians. As a female comedian, Shalaka, explained to me in an interview:

> Male comedians get booked more than female comedians, no matter what they say. Especially on the brown circuit. […] And because 'Brown' is such a big term, it doesn't matter what kind of brown you are, which is good in my opinion. But because there's so many more brown men. It's already seen as like a big thing when they are booked that there's no further consideration for the fact that they have the same lived experience.

Bookers and agents are very likely to not look for intersectional diversity and merely check a box that fills the diversity quota. Sam Friedman, who worked as a publisher for Fest magazine before turning the Fringe into his doctoral research, highlights this through conversations he has with talent scouts (Friedman, 2014). He details how one of his interlocutors chose to recruit an African-Caribbean man for a TV show, despite his relatively poor performance that day, due to a 'huge gap in the market' for the specific aesthetic (ibid:33). Friedman's analysis demonstrates how questions of inclusion end up revolving around imagined market demand and aesthetics rather than a diversity in voices and lived

experiences. This analysis can also be applied to understand the limited representation of brown female comedians in comparison to brown male comedians.

The difference in lived experience for brown female and queer comedians is not only limited to the logistical aspects of their shows but also to their overall experience of the festival. The possibility of serious harm altered the way my female interlocutors navigated the Fringe space. Prime slots for comedy start 8pm onwards and women feel less safe as the clock ticks on, especially as audiences get more inebriated. The Fringe festival too, would get livelier as the night went on. As more comedians would finish their shows for the day, they would gather at venues and clubs to meet each other. Female comedians would start to leave these gatherings around 1 or 2 am. Often, they would book a cab and travel together or share their live locations until they made it home. This concern for safety extended to me – they would ask if they could drop me home or if I could text then when I reach home. The fear was not new to me. As a brown woman who has grown up in urban Indian contexts, this was known learned behaviour (see Phadke et. al, 2011). After a certain point, the public space feels unsafe and women retreat.

> Late night comedy kicks off at 9 pm. So, the comedian's life is like from 9 pm to midnight you know. That is when you are out. That's not a great time for women, just from a safety perspective. Forget about family's requirements and everything else. From a safety perspective, hanging around the streets at 11pm, you are probably upping your chances to be harassed.

This learned behaviour articulated by Daizy Maan during an interview, often enforced by strict rules from the family, changes how one perceives a space and the world around them.[9] While studies surrounding female presence in the comedy industry often question their limited presence, less attention is paid to how the infrastructure of comedy act as a barrier to their full participation in the field. These learned behaviours are often part of the female

[9] These fears are not unfounded. The Fringe has been repeatedly criticised for not ensuring safe spaces for women, with many complaints of sexual harassment (Chortle, 2023).

experience of oppressive patriarchal systems. Yet comedy also offers a medium to challenge the system and seek a voice for themselves.

A popular proverb among comedy circles is ‘pain + time = comedy’ (Double, 2017). Humour is often, although not necessarily, derived from embarrassing or traumatic events in comedians’ lives. Women and queer individuals I spoke to were more likely to make explicit connections between their comedy and personal journeys with shame and trauma in patriarchal and heteronormative environments. Daizy Maan, the producer for the ‘Brown Women Comedy’ show, articulates this in her interview as a motivating factor for creating space for brown women in comedy:

> [O]ne of the things I feel like in our culture is that's used to control women is shame. We learn the words “shame, shame!” so young. The first thing we learn right. “Shame shame puppy shame” It's all funny, but it's [teaching] shame! And words like *besharam* [shameless – a common insult]. ‘You talk too loud’, ‘you laugh too loud’, ‘you ask questions’. And I think there's something in using comedy, or the arts in general, that disarms people and helps them feel less shame by making light of it

Indeed, comedy offers female comedians a way to process and challenge the entrenched notion of shame, often used to control female bodies. This was especially evident in the case of Bas Rahman. Bas grew up in London in a conservative Muslim family as the first and only sibling that was allowed to move out of home for university and not have the obligation to visit every weekend. Bas connects the impact of this event to her finding comedy as a coping mechanism:

> I decided I was going to do comedy when I was slut-shamed by my own brother in my first year of university going to my second year of university. It was such a shameful dark period of my life […] But I remember at some point in my second year of university going ‘think I want to try that [comedy]’. I think had my life gone peachy, had that not happened. Had I continued to be a sort of happy and kind of carefree individual, I don't know that I would have landed here.

Humour and stand-up comedy become Bas’ way of coping and processing the shame that her family made her feel. Her comedic style, to date, pushes against the stereotypical image of a

British Muslim by starting her set with jokes her curiosity about male genitalia or her secret white boyfriend she cannot tell her mum about.

Alok Vaid-Menon, the only South Asian trans[10] comic present at the Fringe, refers to comedy's potential to humanise as emotional alchemy (Bennett-Goleman, 2003). They explain their show in an interview with Playbill magazine as follows:

> It's a show about being trans during these anti-trans times and using comedy as a way of saying that even though things are really hard, we can do something different with funny than we can with sad. A lot of my work is inspired by this idea of emotional alchemy or like taking negativity and transforming it into positivity or beauty. That's what I try to show in the show – here are all these horrible things happening around me and here is how I maintain my joy despite it. (Playbill, 2024)

Emotional alchemy builds on the metaphor of how alchemists attempted to turn lead into gold and applies it to human emotions. Alok's show, 'Hairy Situation', attempts do the same with their experience as a transperson. Their material ranges from the hate they receive, to not fitting the South Asian typecast in Hollywood, to being a hairy brown person and their experiences with a male urinal. Through the medium of comedy, Alok highlights the humanity of being queer that is otherwise presented only in negative mainstream news contexts.

> I think for a long time the only representation I had seen of trans people in comedy was as the butt of the joke and people making fun of us. So it didn't feel like an environment that was warm or conducive to me […] once I began to learn from them [other queer and trans comic] that I can occupy this space, it was so powerful because comedy has always been how I have survived and now I get to be honest in my art. These things do not just come from a place of wanting to be funny, it;s like wanting to be able to go on with my life. (Playbill, 2024)

Rather than romanticising the role of the comedian as a social critic, Alok acknowledges the inherently exclusionary nature of the field and chooses to occupy a space within it regardless.

The experiences of female and queer brown comedians at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe highlight how structural inequalities are not only visible through institutional means

[10] I use trans as an umbrella term for gender-nonconforming terminology. Elsewhere, Alok has identified themselves using other terms but to avoid confusion, I use the one they have used in the quotations here.

but felt through spatial, temporal and embodied means. Marginalisation then, is not simply a matter of numerical strength but the conditions under which representation is allowed. Limited runs, less financial success, further locations, and safety concerns actively hinder full participation of diverse voices in the present humour regime. Simultaneously, comedy offers a medium through which broader experiences of marginalisation can be voiced. Comedy offers a space to process the pain and trauma and find shared humanity through laughter. In doing so, the narratives that female and queer brown comedians create act counter-discursively. By not catering to the humour regime, and seeking a space of agency and empowerment, they enable a plurality of voices that the mainstream lacks. In the next section, I turn my attention to the six Indian comedians whose performance at the Fringe, while located more centrally than the female and queer brown comedians, is understood to be part of the margins through their irreverence towards the humour regime. Their positionality, as already-successful performers with large followings and established careers, offered a rare comparative lens to those located within the humour regime.

Indian Comedians at the Fringe

The Indian comedians present at the Edinburgh Fringe faced a unique circumstance where they were located at the centre of the festival, yet their goals and ambitions differed from other comedians whose careers were primarily based in the UK and the broader Euro-American contexts. All six of them have been performing in India for nearly a decade, if not longer. Many helped establish the nascent Indian stand-up comedy industry. Their established careers include international awards and nominations, Netflix or Amazon specials, global tours, and sold-out theatres and arenas. Their presence at the Edinburgh Fringe was arranged by a prominent London-based production house who arranged their shows at prominent venues in the Fringe centre. Moreover, their participation in the festival was driven by the significance of the event in the comedy landscape, rather than hoping to advance their career.

In an interview with Anirban Dasgupta, he dismissed my questions about the Fringe politics as follows:

> I'm just coming from outside doing one month here, and then going back to my world … It's like all the problems of that country [UK] or like the bias or opinion or whatever is their problem. It's not my problem

The Fringe, for Anirban, was a bucket list moment where he could perform at the same venue as comedy legends and see icons perform at their shows. While he and other Indian comedians found a supportive community with other brown comedians, their expectations and experiences from the festival were very different. This was known to the other brown comedians as well, as Sid Singh explained:

> [Indian comedians] do not exist within the UK industry. They do not exist within the white comedy space. They are going to have success no matter what. People have to come to them to make money, not vice versa. I was talking to [a producer] about this. I think a lot of them are actively coming to the Fringe to perform to white people to see how their jokes fit into non-Indian spaces. Because they have the luxury of that kind of experimentation, they're going to have a career when they go back to India regardless

An important aspect of this experimentation was that the comedy routines performed by Indian comedians were largely developed in front of a brown audience. The humour regime that operates in India is different from the one seen in the UK and other predominantly white contexts. Stand-up comedy in India has been a highly contentious and controversial art form, with comedians often being sued for hurting religious sentiments or embroiled in cases of defamation. This circumstance highlights the inherently political nature of comedy and the institutional opposition to it. Scholars have thus focussed on the entanglements of stand-up comedy with the political landscape in the country (Bhargava & Chilana, 2024), and its complicit nature in upholding gendered and caste-based hierarchies (ibid).

Performing to a white audience takes away many of these limitations and instead offers an opportunity to explore previously off-limit topics. As Anirban explained:

> It's so beautiful, like I have no idea who the audience is and the audience has no idea who I am. It's complete blank slate. They probably like don't even know how to spell my name. And in those shows, I have always thought that I am the only non-white person in the line-up and. I think there is something exciting about it. That [feeling] can only help. I invite that feeling. Like I'm already different even before I have said anything. There's a novelty to what you're going to say automatically because you're different from most people there. I feel like that's an advantage.

Anirban's experience of novelty in performing to white audiences echoes Keisalo's understanding of marked identity as an advantage for stand-up comedians (2018: 558). While, so far, brown comedians' experiences push against this simplistic notion, Anirban's experience offers an exception that proves the norm. As a brown comedian whose regular audience is non-white and familiar with his work, and whose career does not hang in the balance with white audience expectations, racial saliency becomes an advantage.

I had the opportunity to speak to the producer for Anirban and other Indian comedians' shows[11] and he was more articulate about the racial dynamics, given that his job involved booking the venue, getting reviewers, and ensuring ticket sales. He believed that Indian comedians were not used to thinking of racial dynamics in a room because their general audience was also Indian but "for them [white audiences] I think that the first thing they think is 'does he know what he looks like'?" However, since these things were his domain, he was aware of the effect of the humour regime. It was tougher to get reviewers to watch Indian comedians' shows, and those who did missed cultural references and published poorer reviews. However, their struggles with the industry did not alter their experience of the festival. Free from the structures and biases of their homeland and those that other brown comedians had to deal with on a more regular basis, their material went beyond the narrow

[11] Who wished to remain anonymous

scope offered by the white humour regime and provided a glimpse into everything a brown comedian could talk about, beyond their race, if given the chance.

Kanan Gill's show, 'What Is This?', centres the existential crisis of being in your thirties and the pressures to 'settle down'. He talks about never-ending bureaucracy, dating profiles, his dilemma with getting cats, and managing to sign up for the World Tiramisu Championship. Through it all, he brings in questions of identity and contentment with who we are and the ideal future self we pursue. Sumukhi Suresh's limited run of 'Hoemonal' touches on ideas of femininity and how female friends, gynaecologists, mothers, and dating terrible men after thirty influence questions of womanhood. Anirban Dasgupta's 'Polite Provocation' offers an hour of political comedy that questions the standard of 'Truth' Indian comedians are held to in the country, filled with jokes he will "only do for the next 25 days". Urooj Ashfaq's work-in-progress responds to criticism of her not being a "dark enough" comedian through stories of her being stalked, her parents' divorce, astrology, and her teenage obsession with the erstwhile English boyband One Direction.

The Indian comedians present at the Edinburgh Fringe offer a unique example of being physically located at the centre of the humour regime yet being privileged enough for the consequences to not impact their careers. While they are not marginalised in the same ways as female or queer brown comedians operating within the humour regime, both groups centre their multiple identities beyond the prescriptive norm offered by the humour regime. Indian comedians can resist easy categorisation within the UK's white humour regime and offer some answers to the possibilities of performing brown identity without the burden of collective representation. These dynamics come into sharper focus in the spaces that intentionally centre brownness in audiences and artists while operating within the white humour regime, such as brown-specific comedy shows.

Brown Women Comedy

Some comedians and producers within the community recognise the white dominance in the humour regime and intentionally create spaces for comedians from marginalised ethnic backgrounds. These initiatives, although somewhat controversial (see Tomsett, 2023), are a relatively new development. In the South Asian context, Brown Women Comedy (BWC) was the only brown line-up show at the Fringe. BWC is an initiative under the Australian South Asian Centre co-founded by Daizy Maan. It boasts of being the first and largest comedy show in Australia featuring South Asian women. In addition to comedy shows, they also conduct workshops to have more female brown voices on the circuit. A late entrant to the festival, they were not part of the Fringe Programme that was published in April. I found them by accident while browsing Instagram. This is perhaps why they were located on the outskirts of the Fringe and only had a five-day run. Despite these circumstances, the show did surprisingly well for its first run outside of Australia. As one reviewer put it, “This show is much better than its venue might suggest” (Teakle, 2024)

> For me, the brown women comedy is not just about comedy. It's about making taboo topics less shameful. […] we had someone talking about how her dad came here as a refugee in a truck full of potatoes […] We had a comedian last year talk openly about her bipolar diagnosis. We had a comedian get up there and talk about like a leaked sex tape. We had all sorts of really open, vulnerable, but also hilarious, some of them very dark. We've had comedians like talk about them being bisexual or coming out. These are all things that we do not even talk about at home. (Daizy Maan)

In many ways, BWC offers women a space to process, challenge, and control the narrative of their lives beyond the shame and trauma of living within patriarchal systems. As an audience member, BWC offered a safe space to laugh and destigmatise topics otherwise seen as too taboo for public spaces. Testimonies by female brown audience members, a critical part of their marketing strategy, often emphasise the feeling of belonging, or laughing along the kind of humour they grew up with in their household, and a sense of community in an otherwise white context (Brown Woman Comedy, 2024).

However, BWC seems to be somewhat unique in their ability to create a safe space. Brown comedians I spoke to, like Shalaka, seemed to be on the fence about brown-specific shows:

> Maybe I'm ashamed to say this. I haven't decided what my position on this [brown specific shows] yet. Because I've never done well in shows with brown people because of the demographics […] The expectation is you will joke about things like arranged marriage or how school is tougher. It's like watching Brown British comedians from like 10 years ago. I hate using the word lowbrow, but the punch lines are more obvious. There's more stuff about 'My wife is like this', 'My husband is like this', 'I'm hairy, so I have to wax all the time because I'm a brown woman.' 'My mother yelled at me for this. My mother yelled at me for that.'

Much like Indian comedians at the Edinburgh Fringe, brown female and queer comedians express discomfort in the brown humour regime as well. BWC is somewhat unique in the crowd it attracts relative to other 'brown comedy' shows by being queer-affirmative and a safe space for women. However, in other brown spaces, the marginalised position of female and queer identities is constrained by stereotypes held by the brown humour regime. Their discomfort illustrates how humour regimes everywhere have their own hierarchies and the little affirmative action projects situated in white contexts can do to alleviate counter-hegemonic voices from the margins.

Ellie Tomsett's research on the female comedians in the UK reaffirms previous findings that female-only comedy spaces are viewed as a positive experience (Tomsett, 2023). Her mixed-method analysis crucially did not find many people of colour respondents – both among audiences and performers. By approaching the female-only space from a racialised angle, I find many similarities between our works, and also some key differences. Brown Women Comedy was overall a positive experience that was lacking from the larger Fringe experience. However, when brown female comedians were asked about their opinions, especially those whose comedy style is not inherently 'South Asian', they felt more uneasy about the conventional South Asian humour which had its own humour regime that brown

audiences expect in these settings. In the next section, I examine these dynamics further through the case study of Prev Reddy, whose success in the brown humour regime dissipated quickly after he came out as queer, and the freedom he experiences in the margins of the white humour regime.

Prev Reddy is a Triple Threat

Understanding the complexity of being a marginalised comedian within a minority group at the Fringe, but also in any cis-heteronormative white context was perhaps most striking to me in the case of Prev Reddy. Preven 'Prev' Reddy is a South African Indian comedian who made his debut at the Fringe this year with his show 'Prev Reddy is a Triple Threat'. Prev was born and raised in the predominantly Indian township of Durban, South Africa before moving to Johannesburg for his acting career. Prev calls this show his "coming out" show, following his decision to retire a popular internet character, Shamilla Aunty. The latter, an example of contemporary 'brown-voice' (Kay, 2024: 58) was a beloved stereotypical character of many South African Indians and helped catapult Prev's career to success. He told me:

> We played massive venues in Durban [as Shamilla Aunty]. I played the Durban ICC, which is our International Convention Centre. The only two comedians who performed that year was myself and Trevor Noah at that venue. And I had sold out 3000 seats.

Shamilla Aunty resonated with the Indian South African audience for her exaggerated judgemental portrayal of the nosy Indian neighbourhood aunties. This is something many comedians in different diasporic and homeland contexts have gained recognition with, most famously Punjabi-Canadian Lily Singh with over 14 million YouTube subscribers (Kay, 2024; Singh, 2025). Prev too, toured with the character, became a social media influencer, landed a Netflix series, and is a public personality in South Africa. Despite this success, Prev decided to retire the character in early 2024. The reason for the switch was simple, he wanted

people to get to know him – beyond the character. His debut show at the Fringe chronicles his life story as a queer Indian South African “one trauma at a time”.

Prev’s decision to publicly come out as gay had a significant impact on his career. He lost marketing deals and a significant chunk of his audience. This was not entirely unexpected. Growing up in the conservative environment and judgemental environment of Durban, Prev was aware of the shame attached to his sexual identity. Humour became his way of coping with this:

> It's your typical cliche mentality that being gay is wrong. […] You either have the people who are overtly to your face, ‘you disgrace me’, ‘you disgust me because you are so and so’. Then you have the ones who will talk to you but behind your back they will gossip, ‘everyone must know how Prev has brought shame to this family’.
>
> So when it finally came time to people realizing [I might be queer] my default would be to make a joke or to just, I don't know, I've always had the gift of the gab, you know? So if they would try and ask me about sexuality, I'd make a joke.

The taboo around queer sexual identities was carried forth in the comedy scene, that largely catered to the Indian demographic:

> I knew that wasn't the type of comic I was. Number one, I was 20 years old, so entirely different generation. And then there was the whole queer aspect of it. And going on the stage to talk about your life as an Indian comic in the South Asian scene, that what doesn't seem like a there's real safe space to go up and start making [queer jokes]. The only time they accept queer jokes is if someone is making a possible homophobic joke.

Having found success as Shamilla aunty, who spoke to the Indian niche audience, was not worth the masking of his queer identity. Prev’s debut at the Fringe, after retiring the character, seeks to correct this dual life. It chronicles growing up as a flamboyant child in the ‘born free’ generation, and his journey navigating secret boyfriends, queer friendships, the impact of coming out and his career in entertainment as someone who decidedly did not fit the stereotypical mould in a conservative society:

> I really hope you leave here thinking the story is about a boy with big dreams, passion and a deep understanding of who he is. You know, I spend so much time running away from who I am and what I wanted to be, only giving people a version of myself that they love, that they accepted and that they want to see. But like I said, I hate running. So, my name is Prev. I'm queer, I'm Indian, and I'm outspoken. I am a triple threat. [end of show]

Prev Reddy's story encapsulates the paradox of comedy as both a refuge and a reckoning. Despite finding normative success, he ultimately lets go of it to find agency within his multi-faceted identity. Like the other brown comedians located at the margin, Prev's work challenges the boundaries of both brown and queer identities, refusing containment within any one category.

Conclusion

The margins of the humour regime—though shaped by exclusion—are also sites of rich creative and political potential. These margins are not uniform, nor are they equally navigable.

Yet, in their differences, they reveal a plurality of voices that resist being collapsed into simplistic representations of "brownness." Be it Alok's emotional alchemy, or Daizy Maan's community building, or Bas Rahman's journey from shame to comedic power, brown comedians on the margin subvert the humour regime's norms. The Fringe's margins present a 'discursive gap' (Butler, 1999) where brown comedy is complex, embodied, and deeply political. Through this plurality, brown comedians not only critique the humour regime but begin to imagine what comedy could look like outside it. This is especially apparent through the case of the Indian comedians at the Fringe, whose position at the margin is a result of their detachment rather than structural inequalities. Their performances illustrate what becomes possible when brown identity is not overshadowed with racial performativity. Their privilege within a minority positionality provides a glimpse into a future where brown

comedians might perform without having to translate themselves for dominant cultural norms.

Taken together, the brown comedians located at the margins challenge the Fringe's humour regime in three significant ways. First, their diverse comedic narratives prove that mainstream brown comedy is structured in response to the white humour regime. Second, their motivations to pursue comedy, despite the additional barriers to entry, emphasise the importance of comedy as a medium of agency and empowerment for the marginalised identities. Third, their existence at the margins despite their diverse backgrounds highlight the inefficacy of the EDI initiatives in centring meaningful diversity.

7. Conclusion

The experience of the Edinburgh Fringe as a white humour regime, perpetuated by institutional and socio-economic conditions, and navigated as such by brown comedians at the Fringe was part of multiple conversations during the festival but always as a means to voice other immediate frustrations like bad reviews and poor ticket sales. Towards the end of the Fringe, as award nominations were announced and most people of colour were left off the shortlist despite the list not being full, these conversations came to the forefront. A month of intense performances every day had gone unrecognised, and frustrations were visible. At a table next to a big venue, I sat with a group of brown comedians who rotated in and out between their own shows and other commitments, yet the most salient topic of conversation remained the Fringe's racial bias. Kate Cheka, a comedian of colour present at the table, had just written a sharp critical article that she hoped would be published in the newspapers. In it, she expresses disappointment at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe for failing the non-white artists in a year where many of their communities were targeted in race riots right before the Fringe started. Sid Singh remarked that the Edinburgh Fringe has proven time and again that it will not give people of colour the recognition that Kate's article asked for. In his view, it would be better to find a different goal than the one the Fringe promises but fails to deliver. Many interlocutors would bring up the heated discussion that followed in their interviews later. Crucially, none of them disputed the premise that the Edinburgh Fringe had failed them, though they disagreed on their response to its failure, and almost all chose to return the next year.

The paradoxical behaviour of brown comedians where they were acutely aware of the humour regime that does not favour them and choose to return to the festival anyway lays emphasis on the centrality of the Edinburgh Fringe in their careers. The scale of the festival,

combined with its impact on the comedy scene in the UK and abroad, have made it an essential and often mandatory part of a comedian's career. For one month, the top producers, agents, and scouts are actively searching for new talent in Edinburgh. It offers a seemingly high probability for advancing in the comedy industry and comedians invest a significant sum for it. The inclusive model of the Fringe and the various institutions that seek to recognise and champion new talent sell a meritocratic ideal for a creative artist. However, as this research has demonstrated, marginalised comedians experience this field through a sense of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011).

Brown stand-up comedians at the Edinburgh Fringe navigate racialised structures of in- and exclusion by balancing creative expression with strategic compliance, reflecting critically on the limitations of the field while carving out marginal spaces where alternative modes of performance and recognition can emerge. The subjective experience of the 23 brown comedians navigating the 2024 Edinburgh Fringe demonstrates how socio-economic barriers and their subsequent cultural impact orient the field towards against them and toward a white humour regime. The political economy of the Edinburgh Fringe reveals how the high costs of participation act as structural barriers, disproportionately affecting comedians from marginalised backgrounds. These costs further influence ticket prices, limiting diversity among audiences and subsequently among reviewers, juries, curators, and scouts. This ultimately results in a self-reinforcing system where social, economic, and institutional capital are concentrated in the hands of the already privileged, white, middle-class, cis-heterosexual individuals. I choose to describe this inequality in terms of a white humour regime, drawing on Kuipers' adaptation of the Foucauldian term (2011). This enables an emphasis on the power dynamic that unravels the façade of meritocracy at the Edinburgh Fringe. No longer merely about the creative pursuit of artistic ambitions, performing stand-up

comedy as a brown comedian becomes an active negotiation with the dominant group's control over the former's legitimacy, visibility, and opportunity.

Performances by brown comedians therefore navigate the limitations of the humour regime, comedy's audience-oriented nature, and their own positionality. The positions brown comedians take in this humour regime occur in an unequal, and racialised field of cultural production where symbolic and economic capital are often intertwined. Position-taking on racial performativity among brown comedians varies according to career stage and personal ideology. However, the limited number of brown comedians within the scene means that the choices made by one often constrain the representational possibilities available to others. Understanding these position-takings in the larger context of the white humour regime enables us to see how these choices are not borne out of free-will, rather they represent the suppression of individual heterogeneity to dominant expectations of collective identities. This mechanism/phenomenon becomes especially clear when looking at the margins of the Edinburgh Fringe. The margins, albeit not seen as successful within the humour regime, highlight the possibility of meaningful diversity that empowers creative agency. Free from the pressures to conform, brown comedians exercise a freedom of creative expression that does not depend on the humour regime's approval. Not only does their presence at the margins become the exception that proves the norm, but they offer a glimpse into future possibilities of diversity, equity and inclusion at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

Exploring the subjective experiences of brown comedians through a conceptual focus on the relationship between power, identity, and cultural production enables a nuanced understanding of comedy as an industry rather than a mere creative pursuit. This shift is necessary to highlight the structural inequalities that shape the experiences of brown comedians are part of larger socio-political hierarchies, and advocate for better Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion policies within spaces like the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. To better

understand how power shapes the experiences of brown comedians at discursive, institutional, and performance levels I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualisation of position-taking in addition to the Foucauldian notion of humour regime. Position-taking emphasises the relationship between individual habitus and the larger field of cultural production, explaining how comedians choose to conform, resist, or even challenge the humour regime. However, I further complicate Bourdieu's relatively simple structure of the field of cultural production by emphasising the dimension of racial performativity. Habitus no longer simply informs position-taking, it becomes an actively performed signal of the position itself in an unequal field where symbolic and economic capital are often intertwined. Despite the stronghold of the humour regime within the Fringe, brown comedians operating along the margins forgo symbolic and economic capital and mark the presence of alternative, counter-discursive possibilities.

The research presented in this dissertation contributes towards a burgeoning scholarship that recognises the structural inequalities present in the UK comedy industry, including the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Works by Friedman (2014), Tomsett (2023), and Sedgewick (2023) critically examine these inequalities through the perspective of class, gender, and regional disparities that reinforce the socio-economic hierarchies of contemporary times. In aligning with these works, I further push against popular anthropological understandings of humour as a counter-hegemonic force, highlighting the differential limits of the medium through its entanglements with structural inequalities. Simultaneously, the research's focus on the experiences of these inequalities from a marginalised intersectional perspective contribute towards the otherwise cursory mentions the groups receive in industry-wide studies, particularly in British/European contexts. Exploring the disproportionate impact of these studies through brown comedians further contributes to an exploration of brown 'South Asian' identities in predominantly white spaces. This departs

from the definitional emphasis on traditional spaces and links to homeland seen in studies of South Asian diaspora within anthropology.

Despite the present research's focus on brown comedians, the Edinburgh Fringe humour regime affects most comedians from disadvantaged backgrounds. In a House of Commons committee hearing on the 'State of Play: Live Comedy', comedian Matt Forde stated that the Fringe model was unsustainable for comedians from working class backgrounds (House of Commons, 2025). This sentiment was echoed by grassroots comedy organisations, associations, researchers, and BAME comedians present at the hearing, notably without any prompt directly asking about the Edinburgh Fringe. The research presented here only begins to unravel the unsustainability of the model from the perspective of brown comedians. When I started my fieldwork, I had little idea that the dissertation would focus on my interlocutor's voiced frustrations with the 'white' festival and my reflexive observations as one of the few brown women in any venue. Future research could explore these structural inequalities from a myriad of intersectional perspectives. One way to expand the work of this dissertation could be to follow the process of developing a comedy show from ideation to work-in-progress to a one-hour comedy show presented at the Edinburgh Fringe. Other projects could complicate the binary between 'white' and 'people of colour' elaborating on which was beyond the scope of this dissertation. Others still, could move beyond the Fringe completely, and observe alternative agency offered to stand-up comedians by social media platforms and new media productions to cultivate audiences for live shows elsewhere. Given the increasing scrutiny of performance arts sectors across the globe for their complicity in upholding racial and gender hierarchies (see Hasselriis, 2016; Long, 2023), there are many opportunities for deep ethnographic work in multiple contexts.

Despite anthropology's historically limited interested in questions around humour, the significant growth of the field, the present research, and future scope present a promising

possibility. While laughter and jokes may seem trivial on the surface, they are laden with deep political significance. Questions of who is permitted to laugh, who holds the authority to make jokes, and the contexts in which humour is sanctioned offer insight into the broader socio-political dynamics. These issues are particularly salient in the experiences of brown comedians performing at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, whose presence offers a microcosmic lens through which to examine persistent inequalities in representation and cultural legitimacy. However, the insights gleaned from the Fringe are not confined to this space alone; they reflect wider structural hierarchies and exclusions. Despite these challenges, brown comedians continue to participate in the festival annually. While this persistence might be interpreted through the lens of Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" (2011), it may also be understood, following Lenny Henry, as a radical act of cultural assertion (2021). This is especially evident within alternative and marginal performance cultures, where diverse voices are already active and vibrant. What is needed is not simply an increase in the visibility or number of minoritized performers, but the development of a more just and inclusive representational infrastructure that actively values, centres, and sustains the complexities of cultural difference.

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