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21 April 2022

RHETOR 123

“Lower Classy” fantasies in Cristela Alonzo special

Hi, I want to talk to you about stand-up comedian Cristela Alonzo and her 2017 Netflix special “Lower Classy.” The title, “Lower Classy,” is thematically a play-on-words: She grew up poor, raised with three siblings by a single mother in a border town in the south of Texas. She also was the first Latina woman to create, write, and star in her own U.S. primetime comedy. In many ways Alonzo still identifies with her “lower class” upbringing, but in other ways she has broken into “upper class” mainstream culture, so she’s Lower Class-y. As you enjoy the special, you can watch how this “borderline” position between upper and lower class plays out in her everyday life. Here’s a small example before I get to my thesis:

Setup:

Towards the beginning of her special she tells us a story about how when she was a kid, she was a really big fan of New Kids on the Block. She said that when she was a kid, she had a fantasy. Her fantasy was to be the maid on their tour bus, and be so good that the members of New Kids on the Block would fall in love with her.

Punchline:

“Why the fuck was I a maid in my own fantasy? Like, even in my fantasy I can’t give Latinos better jobs? And then I started thinking about it. It’s because a lot of the women that I knew, that’s what they did for a living.” (12:04).

I really like this clip because it highlights something really important about Cristela Alonzo and just identities in general: your reality is created by what is around you, and you don’t even realize that the reality that has been built up around you is marginal, ie. a consequence of a dominant culture pushing others to the edge of the cultural spotlight.

a) This brings me to the thesis of my presentation: In “Lower Classy,” Cristela Alonzo rhetorically constructs her borderline marginality with an observational style of humor that illuminates the marginal world; the fantasy to dream of a world unrestrained by the artificial norms created by dominant white upper-class culture.

As a woman I want to break that glass ceiling, but as a Mexican I want to clean that shit”

b) This joke playfully positions her as a woman who wants to break through the glass ceiling, and become rich and live a comfortable life, and on the other hand she says she “wants to clean it” giving the faintest callback to an earlier question she asked, “Why the fuck was I a maid in my own fantasy?” We understand as the audience that the Mexican side of her identity doesn’t actually fantasize about cleaning, but acts as a placeholder idea for imaging new norms for

Mexican-American cultural life—one that is free of the limitations of class. (ref: [dominant/marginal cultural sites](#).)

Cristela Alonzo grew up in Texas, and she's performing this special in San Antonio because the state of Texas, with its massive-scale suburban sprawl, represents a part of American culture that is often neglected by dominant urban cities like LA or SF—Texas is truly the American marginal. Single family households, car-based economy, car-based culture, this landscape is the antithesis to modern walkable communities with mixed zoning like a “true city.”

(Texas sprawl pic)



(NYC urban pic)



Despite how strong the forces of the world can be to push people aside into marginal sites, Alonzo tells a long joke starting at around 47:24 pushes the boundaries of this fundamental distinction:

b_ii) Problematic

[This will be animated to show the trajectory through this scene with colors and stuff]

Shopping at Bloomingdale's

clearance

vs.

regular price section

Standing at handbag

Employees walk past (no help) vs. employees proactively coming to help

Getting an employee's attention

Attention seeking vs. attention attracting

Buying an \$800 bag

Not taken seriously vs. trivial (this is normal)

Deciding how to react

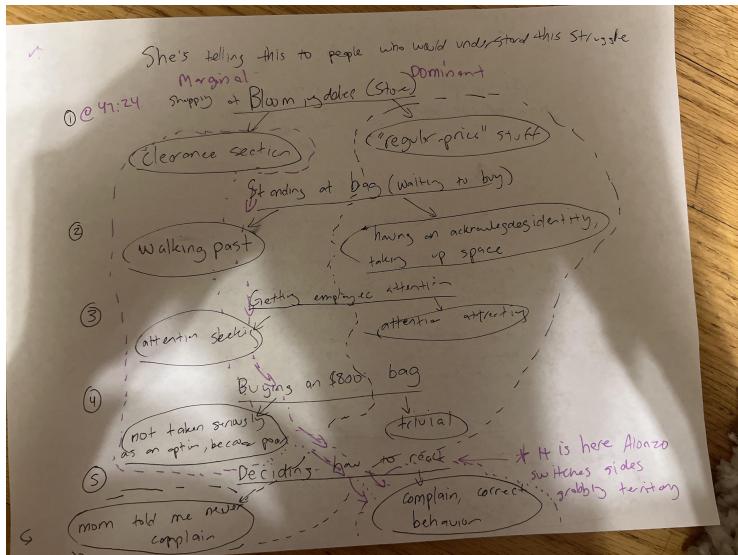
"Mom told me never to complain" vs. complain, correct "disrespectful" behavior

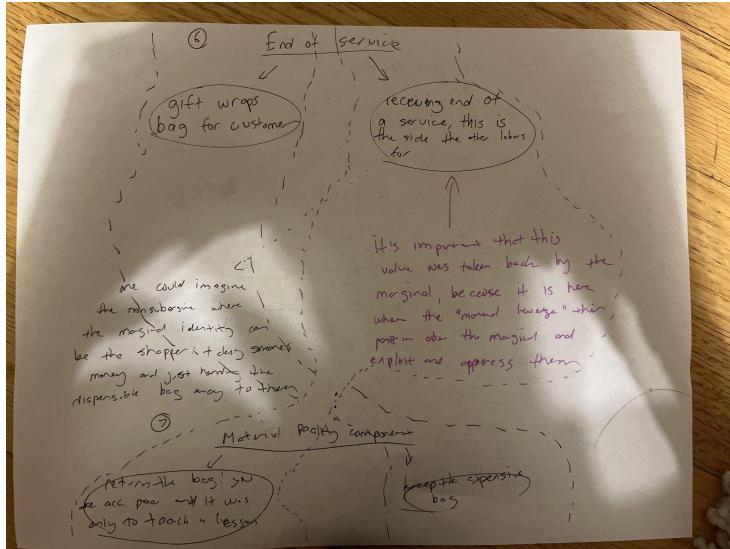
End of Service

Gift wraps bag for customer vs. receiving end of service

Material Reality

Return the expensive bag vs. keep the expensive bag





It might be standard to treat this story in spatially linear terms. That is, Cristela Alonzo and the rude store worker do not stay on their respective sides of the border between “marginal” and “dominant.” Using Colleary’s idea of a [Comic heterotopia](#), Alonzo makes it possible to have a playful movement of norms between herself and the employee, and by the end of the story she actually holds the power of dominant norms—until the “true ending” occurs and she has to return the handbag. Nevertheless, this is still a playful movement between borders, and in turn invites the audience into a world where it is possible to have the world work for *them*.

(WIP, will further and further and further refine)