



# YES, AND LAUGHTER LAB

**UPLIFTING DIVERSE COMEDY FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

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CO-FOUNDERS, *YES, AND...LAUGHTER LAB*

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*Caty Borum Chattoo and Mik Moore, co-founders of the Yes, And Laughter Lab introduce the inaugural convening in 2019*

## COMEDY CAN CHANGE THE WORLD: INTRODUCING THE **YES, AND...LAUGHTER LAB**

**Comedy points out the absurdity of bigotry. Comedy makes hard truths easier to hear. Comedy exposes hypocrisy. Comedy challenges the status quo when protocol protects the powerful. Comedy stigmatizes bad behavior. Comedy opens our eyes to perspectives and experiences that may not be our own. Comedy even invites us to learn about complex topics and seek more information about them. Comedy serves as a form of catharsis and social critique, and it opens the door to talking about taboo ideas; it normalizes groups and individuals too often portrayed as “the other.”**

Today, diverse comedy writers and performers want to create hilarious comedy that reveals their lived realities, addresses injustice, and brings people together to connect about urgent topics like racial justice, gender equity, climate change, Islamophobia, drug addiction, gun violence, and so much more. They want their comedy to make it out in the world, sometimes collaborating with philanthropists, movements, and social justice organizations to expand their audiences and social impact. We aim to support them.

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Launched in 2019, the ***Yes And...Laughter Lab*** is a competitive incubation lab and pitch program that lifts up diverse comedy writers and performers creating new comedy about topics that matter. The Laughter Lab is designed to introduce diverse comedians to the entertainment industry, social justice organizations, philanthropists and activists who can help bring their work into the entertainment marketplace – and into movements for social change.

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The *Yes, And...Laughter Lab* is an essential part of the comedy landscape – designed to be one of the most important places for networks, platforms, and distributors to find exciting new comedy content and creators, while connecting an expanding pool of non-profit and advocacy organizations with potent creative partners. Over time, the Laughter Lab will curate a dynamic community of diverse comedy writers and performers who are using their hilarious voices to entertain us and say the hard – and funny – things about the world we inhabit.

**The *Yes, And...Laughter Lab* was jointly created in 2018 and launched in 2019 by the Center for Media & Social Impact and Moore + Associates. The Laughter Lab's funders include:**



[WWW.YESANDLAUGHTERLAB.COM](http://WWW.YESANDLAUGHTERLAB.COM)





*The team behind the Inaugural Laughter Lab: (L to R), Mik Moore, Caty Borum Chattoo, Erika Soto Lamb, Bethany Hall, Varsha Ramani and Sarah Vitti*

### **About the Center for Media & Social Impact**

The Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI), housed at American University's School of Communication in Washington, D.C., is an innovation lab and research center that creates, studies, and showcases media for equity and social justice. Focusing on independent, documentary, entertainment, and public media, the Center bridges boundaries between scholars, media producers, social justice organizations, and communication practitioners. In 2017, CMSI launched *The Laughter Effect*, an ongoing research and creative initiative to study and produce convenings and creative efforts that address social justice issues through diverse, hilarious comedy. [cmsimpact.org](https://cmsimpact.org)

### **About Moore + Associates**

Moore + Associates is a boutique creative agency in New York City. It believes that cultural change is critical to political change and that humor is an effective way to shift culture. Neither an advertising agency nor PR firm, its work exists in the growing space in between, providing clients and artists with new ways to succeed at the intersection of public policy, pop culture and new media. Humor has been key to its success at breaking down walls and catalyzing conversation. Moore + Associates works with actors, comedians, and other pop culture artists to use their talents to conceptualize and perform in its campaigns, and partners with writers, producers and managers in the creative process. For foundations and nonprofits seeking to understand and shift popular narratives, Moore + Associates develops cultural and narrative strategy plans that analyze the landscape and recommend ways to effectively intervene. [mooreandassociates.co](https://mooreandassociates.co)



Talking about the #LaughterLab and Define American Writers' Room which gave the audience a sense of the narrative magic that can be created when comedy and social justice come together. L to R- Elizabeth Voorhees, Bethany Hall, Jordan Carlos, Jose Antonio Vargas, Rev. Ryan Eller

## ABOUT THE REPORT

**The Yes, And...Laughter Lab: Uplifting Diverse Comedy for Social Change explains why a team of cultural strategists, engaged scholars, and comedians created the Yes, And...Laughter Lab, how it works, and why it matters.** By sharing the inner workings of the Laughter Lab model and comedians' perspectives about it, the report invites disparate professional sectors – comedians, entertainment industry partners and collaborators, and social justice and philanthropy leaders – to learn more about the Laughter Lab and consider the value it adds to their work.

The *Yes, And...Laughter Lab* endeavors to spotlight diverse comedy talent and to inspire social justice organizations and philanthropists to integrate comedy and popular culture into their work. Ultimately, the Laughter Lab aims to help build a pluralistic landscape for comedy in the entertainment marketplace and movements for social change. This report was co-authored by Caty Borum Chattoo and Mik Moore, co-founders of the *Yes, And...Laughter Lab*, and it was also shaped by the Laughter Lab's core executive operations team: Bethany Hall, Varsha Ramani, Sabrina Bleich, and formerly Sarah Vitti.





## WANTED: A DIVERSE COMEDY LANDSCAPE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE (AND LAUGHS)

**The *Yes, And...Laughter Lab* was inspired by our assessment of two realities. First, the contemporary entertainment industry is beginning to embrace more diverse comedy talent, and yet, many stories remain untold, and many voices remain unheard. And second, comedy is a powerful mechanism to provide widely accessible social critique – and a sense of play and optimism – into efforts for social justice and equity.**

In the first instance, the entertainment stories and comedy we see on screen, and the writers and creative minds behind them, still do not reflect the wide diversity of the American experience. Although the cultural landscape of American entertainment is more diverse than it has been in decades past, despite these exciting outliers, making a career in entertainment and comedy remains more difficult for women, people of color, ethnic and religious minorities, disabled creators, LGBTQ+ and similarly marginalized communities.<sup>1</sup> In film and TV, the underrepresentation of racial and ethnic minority creators and on-screen performers is well documented, and gender imbalance in creative decision-making roles persists.<sup>2</sup> This matters a great deal. When we fail to reflect culturally who we are as a full people, we miss crucial opportunities to understand our own communities – to see people who are not like us, but also to see ourselves and our communities represented accurately and positively on screen.<sup>3</sup>

And yet, there's reason for optimism. More platforms in the streaming entertainment age means new homes for diverse comedy. Across the industry, many of the hottest



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**Comedy is a genre and artistic mechanism for expression that aligns deeply with social justice.**

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TV showrunners and creators are talking overtly about social justice topics and equity – weaving these topics through their stories and finding deeply committed audiences – like Jill Soloway (*Transparent*), Gloria Calderon Kellett (*One Day at a Time*), Kenya Barris (*Black-ish*), Hasan Minhaj (*Patriot Act*), Issa Rae (*Insecure*), and others.

Within the vast scope of entertainment and popular culture, comedy deserves unique care and attention, particularly when we consider its power for representation and equity. Comedy is a genre and artistic mechanism for expression that aligns deeply with social justice. By expressing social critique and creatively engaging in tough social issues – in ways that can either skewer the status quo or infuse motivating hope and optimism into dismal problems – comedy can attract attention and engage audiences in ways that are memorable and effective. Research across disciplines shows that comedy is uniquely persuasive, memorable, enlightening, and attention-getting when it comes to serious issues – and it works in tandem with serious forms of messaging and journalism to engage publics around social challenges.<sup>4</sup>

The contemporary moment for social justice is powerful – and urgent. Contemporary activism in the networked media era has changed public engagement dramatically; social justice and civil society groups are newly empowered as content producers taking control of telling their own stories. They are also influencing entertainment industry marketplace trends. The result? Today's media environment means that social justice groups can, and must, engage the public through creative, entertaining ways – not through one-dimensional strategies of information and journalistic framing alone – if they want to be effective. Comedy in the entertainment marketplace can help advance social justice issues, and so can customized comedy shaped together by non-profit advocacy organizations and comedy talent.

Against this backdrop, how can a model for content development and networking help propel forward the comedic voices we want to see in the world, and why does it matter for social justice? The Yes, And...Laughter Lab seeks to create change on both levels: to lift up and support the commercial aspirations of diverse comedians who make us laugh while they help us understand important issues, and to help facilitate fruitful collaboration between the social justice organizations and comedians. Diverse comedians sharing underrepresented perspectives make the world a funnier place for all of us, and they provide a mechanism to invite needed play, hope, and social critique as we work together to create a just, equitable world.





## HOW THE LAUGHTER LAB MODEL WORKS

By the time audiences watch comedy – in live shows or on screen in programming like sit-coms, stand-up specials, sketch shows, satirical news, films, and more – the creators of that work have been honing their craft for years. They have been dreaming the big ideas, writing spec scripts, workshopping their funny bits in comedy clubs, creating web videos to showcase their talent, and more. While it's true that the participatory media age – in the era of YouTube and social media networks – has opened the playing field a bit wider for diverse voices, comedy writers and performers still need to interact with entertainment industry gatekeepers and decision-makers to build their careers and reach new audiences. How can we facilitate this process? We know for these creators, access to the entertainment industry is meaningful, building supportive professional networks is important, and providing ways to interact with powerful new collaborators and allies from social justice and philanthropy can expand their reach and deepen their impact. **Helping comedians develop, shape and pitch their best socially conscious comedy is the heart of the Laughter Lab.**



## ***HERE'S HOW IT WORKS:***

Following a competitive process with a professional comedy and social justice selection committee, the *Yes, And...Laughter Lab* invites applicants (or teams of applicants) from across the country to pitch their comedy projects, five in New York and five Los Angeles, to a room of hand-picked television and streaming network development executives, comedy producers and directors, cultural strategists, non-profit leaders, and foundation representatives. The goal is to build support around each comedy project to accelerate its impact and influence. Participating comedians overwhelmingly come from diverse communities often overlooked or typecast in Hollywood, including immigrants and refugees, women, queer and trans, BIPOC, and religious minorities.

The *Yes, And...Laughter* model includes four main components: **competitive application and selection process, training program, pitch and performance events, and entertainment industry and social justice partners.** Facilitated by the **leadership committee** (entertainment industry and social justice organization leaders) and the **core executive team** (leaders and staff from the two co-directing organizations, CMSI and M+A) the full *Laughter Lab* cycle takes place over about six months in a calendar year, although the comedy participants and partners remain an ongoing part of the *Laughter Lab* community.

The *Laughter Lab* leadership committee includes the executive team (CMSI and Moore + Associates teams) and representatives from *Laughter Lab* official partners and allies. The leadership committee advises on the operations of the lab, providing crucial counsel for major decisions including reviewing all applications to select the top 40 semifinalists before passing those on to the selection committee. The leadership committee then recommends the winners from among the finalists.



## 2020 LEADERSHIP COMMITTEE



**Sabrina Bleich**  
Producer



**Caty Borum Chattoo**  
Co-founder/co-director  
of the Laughter Lab and  
executive director, CMSI



**Jennie Church Cooper**  
Talent Manager, Haven



**Negin Farsad**  
Comedian and Storyteller



**Bethany Hall**  
Creative Director of  
Comedy Initiatives, CMSI



**Erika Soto Lamb**  
Vice President of Social  
Impact Strategy, Comedy  
Central



**Kristen Marston**  
Culture and Entertainment  
Advocacy Director, Color of  
Change



**Arij Mikati**  
Managing Director of  
Leadership and Culture,  
Pillars Fund



**Mik Moore**  
Co-founder/co-director  
of the Laughter Lab and  
president, M+A



**Sue Obeidi**  
Director of the Hollywood  
Bureau, Muslim Public  
Affairs Council



**Varsha Ramani**  
Program and  
Communications Manager,  
CMSI



**Betsy Richards**  
Director of Cultural  
Strategies, The Opportunity  
Agenda



**Ishita Srivastava**  
Director of Culture Change,  
Caring Across Generations



**Sarah Vitti**  
Producer, Moore +  
Associates



**Elizabeth Grizzle Voorhees**  
Managing Director of  
Creative Initiatives, Define  
American



## THE LAUGHTER LAB MODEL AT WORK:



### Competitive Application and Selection Process

To begin the process, the *Yes, And Laughter Lab* team puts out a public call for comedy writers and performers to submit an application through [www.yesandlaughterlab.com](http://www.yesandlaughterlab.com). Each submitted comedy project, which can be at any stage of development, must relate to one or more social justice issue or topic. The Laughter Lab comedy selection committee, which changes from year to year, juries the top projects.

## 2020 SELECTION COMMITTEE



**Abbi Jacobsen**

actress and writer

*Broad City, The Lego  
Ninjago Movie*



**Aparna Nancherla**

actress and writer

*A Simple Favor, Mythic  
Quest: Raven's Banquet,  
The Characters*



**Baron Vaughn**

actor

*Grace and Frankie, Mystery  
Science Theater 3000: The  
Return, The New Negroes*



**Bassem Youssef**

comedian, producer,  
television host

*El-Bernameg, The B+ Show*



**Franchesca Ramsey**

actress, writer, comedian

*MTV, MSNBC*



**Jeffrey P. Jones**

director

*Peabody Media Center*



**Jenny Yang**

comic and writer

*Angry Asian America*



**Roy Wood Jr.**

actor, writer, producer

*The Daily Show, Space  
Force, Better Call Saul*



**Ryan Cunningham**

producer, editorial  
department, production  
manager

*Search Party, The Shivering  
Truth, The Last O.G.*



**Wyatt Cenac**

writer, actor, producer

*Wyatt Cenac's Problem  
Areas, The Daily Show,  
People of Earth*



### Training Program

After the selection process, we invite a group of 20 finalists to participate in a two-day training program, where they strengthen their projects and learn how best to pitch them to both the entertainment industry and non-traditional collaborators and partners in philanthropy and social justice. The training program invites participating comedians to hear from and talk to comedy professionals and luminaries. The goal is to inspire Laughter Lab comedians to continue developing their own work – and also to create a community of comedy people who invested in social change.



### Performance and Pitch Events In Los Angeles and New York

We invite ten Laughter Lab project winners or teams to perform and deliver a fully polished (and hilarious) pitch of their project to an exclusive group of entertainment industry leaders and decision-makers (networks, managers, agents), along with social justice organizations and leaders who work on the topics included in their comedy. We curate a customized “pitch table” for each comedy project. The Laughter Lab hosts these invite-only pitch events in New York and Los Angeles (five winners per city).



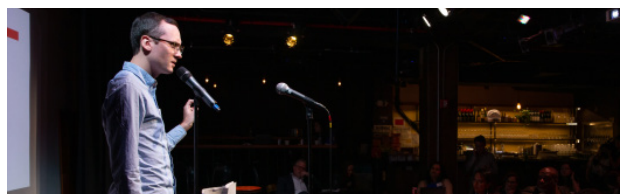


### Entertainment Industry and Social Justice Partners

Partners from the entertainment industry, philanthropy and social justice non-profits advise on the Laughter Lab and participate in the pitch events, which are underwritten by our sponsors. **Partners are eligible to join the YALL leadership team, evaluate applicants, and have a guaranteed spot at pitch tables, along with an opportunity for first-look meetings with pitch winners.** By becoming a partner of the Laughter Lab, these organizations are positioned to develop long-term relationships across the divide separating industry from NGOs.







## PILOT LAUGHTER LAB PITCH PROJECT & PARTICIPANTS (2019)

In the 2019 pilot year, out of nearly 500 applicants, the Laughter Lab selection committee chose 34 finalists and six final pitch winners.

### FINALISTS

- Niles Abston – *Planet Blak*
- Erick Acuna – *Acuna Acuna: A Latinx Journey in the US*
- Jeff Ayars – *Gold Boy*
- Madalyn Baldanzi – *Diversified*
- Jessica Brunetto – *Sisters*
- Ernie Bustamante – *The Latino Vote*
- Nick Chambers – *Grown*
- Ethan David – *The Relief Effort*
- Ayanna Dookie – *Who Does the Baby's Hair?*
- Timothy Dunn – *Queerball*
- Bradley Einstein – *Treehuggers*
- Molly Gaebe – *Darling*
- Jenny Gorelick – *Her-ricane: All Women+Stand Up Comedy for Disaster Relief*
- Josh Healey – *The North Pole: Loyal to the Soil*
- Tarik Jackson – *Bushbaby*
- Mohamed Kheir – *Mohamed's Green Card Special*
- Mark Lichtenstein – *So Much Winning*
- Rachel Mac – *It's Getting Hot In Here*
- Fawzia Mirza – *Mexistani*
- Drew Morgan – *Held in Contempt*
- Eddie Mujica – *Cuban Pete*
- Noa Osheroff – *Speak American*
- Nikki Palumbo – *Mad Gen*
- Lindsey Hope Pearlman – *Winning the Future*
- Matt Porter – *Pod Shaped Hole*
- Lauren Rantala – *Witch Hunt*
- Dallas Rico – *Marred*
- Zoe Samuel – *Displaced*
- Karen Sepulveda – *Bodegaverse*
- Nathaniel Kweku – *Growing up Immigrant*
- Milly Tamarez – *Flexx*
- Gregory Tindale – *White Privilege Black Power*
- Shanrah Wakefield – *Hot Hot Diplomacy*
- Kristina Wong – *Kristina Wong for Public Office*

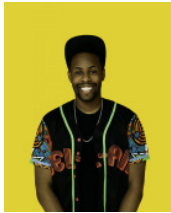
## PITCH WINNERS (2019)



### ***Average Women with Average Rage***

Negin Farsad, Ophira Eisenberg, Leah Bonnemera

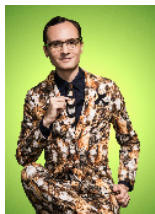
Three of New York City's best comics (their therapists told them to say that) blend personal stories with political commentary as they attempt to dismantle the patriarchy in one 90-minute show. Negin Farsad, Leah Bonnemera and Ophira Eisenberg combine forces to bring you a spirited, frank, and funny standup show, infused with a comfortable amount of rage.



### ***Franklin***

Mamoudou N'Diaye

For years, we were enamored with the *Peanuts* gang; Charlie Brown, Snoopy, Linus, Lucy, Sally, Pigpen, Schroeder, and Peppermint Patty. Now, after years away from the rest of the gang, Franklin, the only Black kid in town, returns home with axes to grind and hatchets to bury.



### ***Going Native***

Joey Clift

*Going Native* is a series of comedic, animated PSAs, that shine a satirical light on some of the weird microaggressions people make toward Native Americans. Think of it as a non-musical *Schoolhouse Rock!* meets *Key and Peele*, with a Native twist.



### ***Los Blancos***

Gabe González, Marcos González

*Los Blancos* is a half-hour narrative comedy series that follows the Blancos, one of the richest and whitest Latino families in Miami. Scared they'll lose their social standing after the family business begins to falter, the family turns to the one thing that will save them: Politics.



### ***Murf Meyer is Self-Medicating***

Murf Meyer

Murf is a former heroin addict and current alcoholic with twenty-five years of experience (ab)using substances. Please join this folksy degenerate for an evening of thematic storytelling where he'll share some of his most amusing, drug-fueled lowlights with you.



### ***Nice Tan***

Carla Lee

*Nice Tan* is a WOC/QPOC-led sketch comedy project about life and identity in a world that's not as "woke" as it thinks it is. Our mission is to feature underrepresented perspectives in sketch comedy and skewer the various identities we inhabit in a pointed, irreverent, and hilarious way.





The winning pitch comedians for the inaugural Laughter Lab

## WHY THE LAUGHTER LAB IS VALUABLE FOR COMEDIANS

How is the *Yes, And...Laughter Lab* valuable for comedians who participate in the program? Through in-depth interviews with the inaugural pitch winners,<sup>5</sup> we reveal why the Laughter Lab matters to comedians who are making hilarious art for entertainment and social justice.





## CENTERING AUTHENTIC REPRESENTATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE



**Mamoudou  
N'Diaye**

This experience let me just expand kind of my circle of other people doing this sort of work because prior to 2016, I feel like not a lot of comics were talking about politics and stuff like that. When we did, it was in a less onstage manner. [The Laughter Lab] gave me a little bit more confidence. And then to meet all those other comics who have been feeling like they're trying to be representative of not only our marginalized identities but also representative of our POV in a comedic and fun way, and being very meticulous and very smart with the way they went about doing it was super impactful. And **now I'm sitting at this very nice intersection that I've always wanted to be at with social justice in one hand and comedy in the other. I think the lab was instrumental in opening up that door.** Like my foot was in the door but it wasn't quite open for me.



**Murf  
Meyer**

Having the social justice side of this is important – because **in addition to entertaining an audience, most comedians, or artists in general, are really trying to say something with their work.** It doesn't always have to be something deeply personal about themselves; they may be speaking to more universal themes. But for me at least, having that bigger truth in mind really helps me focus and tighten up the material I'm working on.



**Leah  
Bonnema**

It was great for us to **share in an experience where people validate and support what we do: combining what's important to us politically and socially with our comedy.** It was wonderful to feel like a part of something and to be appreciated for that.



**Gabe  
González**

Before the Lab I had sort of been working in two worlds. I worked in the world of journalism, covering politics, issues pertaining to the Latinx community, as well as the queer community, and that existed very separately from my comedy. So, I would work on researching and finishing these scripts that were maybe a little funny, but they were focused on reporting, right, for my news job. And then on the side, I would sort of do stand up and pitch these digital shorts. And whenever I went to a digital platform or a TV platform with the digital presence and pitch things that pertain to the topics I was working on in journalism, I'd get the response that it was maybe a little too political or a little too niche. I think before the Lab, the idea of covering news topics or relevant topics in an opinionated way was kind of siloed from my comedy, right? **I think the Lab was exciting in that it encouraged participants and people submitting projects to marry those things in an intentional and explicit way, rather than trying to sneak it in.** It was very open about that.



**Carla  
Lee**

It was really exciting to feel really seen and understood, and to share *Nice Tan's* mission at an event creating positive dialogues around comedy and social justice. **I wish there were more events like this! It was so special and unique.**



## CREATING A SUPPORTIVE ARTISTIC NETWORK



**Murf  
Meyer**

It's one thing to go into a comedy club and kill and do a dynamite set – it feels great. But **the Laughter Lab had that extra layer of community engagement, with a universal energy behind it.** It's like this is shit we all care about, shit people can relate to on one level or another. So that really drove me coming out of the Laughter Lab, not just like, "Oh, I got some jokes in here that I could use moving forward." This was more of a driven purpose that seemed to land with a lot of folks that were in the room. Occasionally after a show, I'll have someone come up to me and say, "Hey, I relate to that bit you did because I went through the same kind of thing." And the overall camaraderie at the Laughter Lab really felt like that, like we were all banded together.



**Carla  
Lee**

**We all learned so much from watching each of the pitches, especially from watching others pitch projects that were nothing like ours.** Everyone was just so damn good, and our team kept saying to each other how much we want to see all of these projects out there in the world thriving. We loved learning from our colleagues and we're so glad to be connected with everybody we met at the Yes, And...Laughter Lab. We're rooting for each and every project we saw!



**Leah  
Bonnema**

I feel like I made good friends with the other people who were pitching, other comics who are invested in something – to use a phrase, "the greater good" seems wrong – but you know what I mean. **It's always valuable to know other people who are deciding to do similar things.**



**Joey  
Clift**

The Laughter Lab introduced me to a room full of really funny comedians. We're also in the social justice space so this acts as a good kind of support system now. And then also, **just being there and seeing all the performances personally introduced me to a lot of really funny comedians and also just their struggles and the things that are passionate about, which expanded my worldview a lot.** It really helps amplify my voice and a lot of things that I'm passionate about.



**Gabe  
González**

This reminded me almost of being part of an improv group or being in a conservatory, where we have these periodic check-in and there's structure and there's feedback. **And I think that critical feedback from the many voices that we have supporting us throughout and that really hands-on approach was very helpful and so encouraging in terms of structure and deadlines and giving a forward momentum to the entire process.**



## BRINGING THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE TOGETHER



**Negin  
Farsad**

It was really valuable to us to think strategically about where our project could go. And then since we've had a lot of conversations about the exact target, what is the market need and where can we fit in with market demand? Just stuff like that where you're not necessarily thinking strategically unless you have to. And **this taught us to think strategically and I think that was really valuable.** Knowing that we have what worked and what didn't work is really helpful. And just getting the feedback from the people in the room of like, "This really spoke to me." That helps us amp up those things, so that we can go to those miserable board rooms and do what we have to do and ultimately selling the project.



**Joey Clift**

**A really big benefit of the lab for me is that it just got me in front of a room of a hundred people, really cool execs and funders, nonprofits, and now I'm on their radar and they're also, by seeing my pitch, just more aware of Native American issues.** If my manager emailed out to set up a pitch for something and the person that she's emailing hasn't heard of me, then they're probably not even going to read the email. Whereas this really boosted up my project, and also just my story and the things I'm passionate about in such a way that when my manager sends that email, people are like, Oh Joey Clift, he did the Yes, And... *Laughter Lab!*



**Gabe  
González**

**I had never been to an event that was really just full of people interested in merging comedy and kind of advocacy or social justice. That was just such a unique experience from me.** If I'm networking, it's at a standup show and it's over drinks afterward, and we're just talking shop. Right? This is so unique and I think I learned a lot about how to talk to people about myself and my passions afterward in a way that I was used to doing.



**Carla  
Lee**

People have been really excited about the momentum surrounding our project thus far, and I think the Lab was another tipping point where we could continue building off of that excitement and taking more of an independent route to get it off the ground without relying on the typical process and avenues. **We emerged from the Lab with new partners who are really excited to see what we come up with next, and are super supportive of our efforts.** We're speaking with these partners about creating bespoke content for causes that we are really aligned with and really care about. The Laughter Lab really expanded our thinking on how to increase visibility for *Nice Tan* and generate a groundswell of excitement around our vision.



**Ophira  
Eisenberg**

I liked that there was a variety and I heard what stuck out to the people on the entertainment side the most, which was different from what stood out from the philanthropy people and the people that were envisioning this for a nonprofit organization, how they could use it. **I actually found the different perspectives the most interesting aspect of the Lab.**





## OPENING SPACE FOR CREATIVE FREEDOM (HINT: IT MAKES BETTER COMEDY)



**Gabe  
González**

Having to go into a pitch presentation with no preconceived notion about the voice of a particular place or what I think they might want it, I think it encouraged me and Marcos to make sure we really covered all our bases and had a strong voice to the presentation and the project that wasn't necessarily shaped by an expectation of catering to a single person. We just truly had to rely on what we wanted to represent. **Part of what I loved was that the application itself was for any comedy format.** Literally any format, a live show, a standup special, a script, a musical, an abstract puppet. This is not the lab where there is a formula for the right topic. What social justice encompasses and what the needs of marginalized groups encompass is constantly changing, right? It is constantly in flux. But when you're bringing in social justice and politics, and all these elements to it, I think there is a part of it that has to be very now.



**Mamoudou  
N'Diaye**

My project was trying to at least bring a whole universe and a black lens. While Ramy has opened the door to talk about Muslim stories, I think that intersection of race is something that people don't normally think about with things. I don't want to pigeonhole myself. I do want to write truly stupid, dumb, aimless comedy just in my life. **But I think that there is an opportunity to, whether it be with Ramy, or my own work, to examine being Muslim from an American Muslim perspective.**



**Joey Clift**

I would say that for me, the *Yes, And...Laughter Lab* had immense value to my work. On a micro level, it allowed me to pitch my project in front of a lot of really great nonprofits, funders, and people at networks. Through the lab backing, I got a ton of meetings in a ton of different places that really wanted to help out. That's just like a one to one, with the backing of the lab, **it really elevated the project into something that people really wanted to hear about and were really interested in.**



**Murf Meyer**

What really matters to you, what's fun for you, and what's important to you? And that stage of this is where you really get to see people spread their wings creatively, rather than have this sort of mandate that your comedy has to fit into. **There was no constraint here. I think the freedom of that really gets people truly passionate about the ideas they're bringing to the table.**



## THE FUTURE: CREATING A STRONG PIPELINE FOR COMEDY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Creating a consistent pipeline for diverse, socially conscious comedy writers and performers to succeed in the entertainment marketplace is a complex task. Programs like the *Yes, And...Laughter Lab* contribute by lifting up talented comedians, creating a network of support around them, providing access to diverse entertainment and comedy professionals who can provide tips and feedback to pitches and ideas, and fostering new relationships that can be useful immediately and in the future.

And yet, the Laughter Lab is only one small piece of a broader collective effort – by many in entertainment and in philanthropy – to create a popular culture landscape that is as diverse as the world in which we live. Comedy matters precisely because the funniest material can unexpectedly confront us with hard truths or introduce us to characters who are authentic and hilarious about their lived realities, or stories that provide a new way of seeing. Comedy also has the ability to reach across ideological divides and create common ground. We believe these truths matter when it comes to shaping a future that honors equity, fairness, and a strong sense of belonging for all.

As the Laughter Lab continues to develop a vast network of comedians whose work interrogates and advances equity and justice, we highlight particular imperatives: entertainment industry decision-makers wield a great deal of power, and must be explicit about their desire to recognize, mentor, and welcome hilarious comedians as showrunners, writers, creators, and performers in order to help fulfill the potential for programs like the Laughter Lab. We welcome the opportunity to continue to develop structured ways for entertainment industry leaders and organizations to interact with talented Laughter Lab comedians and provide them with meaningful opportunities to develop their inspiring work.

Similarly, the philanthropy and social justice sectors must take comedy seriously as an art form with a proven track record shaping and shifting public opinion around issues of equity and justice. This means taking a chance on collaborating with comedians for social change efforts, funding their work as art, and supporting their development as creative artists.

**Shaping a just future requires us to see not only what's wrong, but what is possible. Comedy, often by providing light, hope, play, and optimism, already plays this role, particularly in the hands of a fully pluralistic group of artists who represent all walks of life. Let's support it to do what it does best.**

**comedycentral** @ComedyCentral

Check out [#LaughterLab](#) for your chance to make a difference while making comedy:  
[yesandlaughterlab.com](http://yesandlaughterlab.com)

**YES, AND LAUGHTER LAB**

**OPEN CALL FOR COMEDY SUBMISSIONS!**

Your comedy can change the world.

Learn more and apply at [www.yesandlaughterlab.com](http://www.yesandlaughterlab.com).

**CMSi Moore + Associates**

1:59 PM · Feb 12, 2020 · Sprinklr

**Noam Shuster-Eliassi**

2d · 🌐

Congrats to my ass 🇺🇸 Finally good news so excited to be one of the winners and continue developing my project as part of the laughter lab. Thank you @cmsimpact and so many other partners for your support  
 @comedycentral @sivanbattat @noaoshier @sayobae @sarahveet @rabbisabbi @mikrmoore @harvarddivinity

**YES, AND LAUGHTER LAB 2020 LAUGHTER LAB WINNER**

**Coexistence My Ass**

**NOAM SHUSTER ELIASSI**

[www.yesandlaughterlab.com](http://www.yesandlaughterlab.com)

**YES, AND LAUGHTER LAB**

**Announcing the 2020 Laughter Lab Winners!**

**Muslim Girls Get Physical**  
 Shamsa Tahir Family  
 Aashli Fatima & Ahsan Yousof

**Let's Get Physical**  
 Nadeem Zaidi & Sadeem Shereen

**Everybody Screams At Me**  
 Haniyeh Cheng

**HANDY**  
 Emma Rocco

**REXISTANS**  
 Farwa Mehmood

**The Designing Women**  
 Manjiv Mehta

**Apartment of Solitude**  
 Hina Akhtar & Chae Carter

**Coexistence My Ass**  
 Noam Shuster Eliassi

**Hilo**  
 Lorena Ricci

**LA Lounge**  
 Stephanie McCann

[www.yesandlaughterlab.com](http://www.yesandlaughterlab.com)

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## FOOTNOTES

- 1 See, for example: Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, and Katherine Pieper, *Inclusion or Invisibility? Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment*, University of Southern California Annenberg, February 2017, [https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/2017/04/07/MDSCI\\_CARD\\_Report\\_FINAL\\_Exec\\_Summary.pdf](https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/2017/04/07/MDSCI_CARD_Report_FINAL_Exec_Summary.pdf); and Maureen Ryan, "Showrunners for New TV Season Remain Mostly White and Mostly Male," *Variety*, June 8, 2016, <http://variety.com/2016/tv/features/diversity-television-white-male-showrunners-stats-fox-nbc-abc-cbs-cw-study-1201789639/>.
- 2 Smith, S. L., Choueiti, M., Pieper, K., Case, A., & Marsden, J. (2016, September). Inequality in 800 popular films: Examining portrayals of gender, race/ethnicity, LGBT & disability from 2007 to 2015 (Rep.). Retrieved from <http://annenberg.usc.edu/pages/-/media/MDSCI/Dr%20Stacy%20L%20Smith%20Inequality%20in%20800%20Films%20FINAL.ashx>  
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- 3 For insights about why diverse media representation matters, see:  
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Morgan M., Shanahan J., & Signorielli N. (2009). Growing up with television: Cultivation processes. In J. Bryant and M. B. Oliver (eds), *Media Effects: Advances in theory and research*, 3rd Ed. (34-49). New York: Routledge.
- 4 Caty Borum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman, *A Comedian and An Activist Walk Into a Bar: The Serious Role of Comedy in Social Justice* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020).
- 5 Note that quotes have been edited minimally for readability.



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