SAIF Final Report for David Gillota (2012-2013)
Topic: Stand-Up America: Humor and Identity in the 21st Century

Abstract
I applied for and received funding in order to complete the research and writing of my book project entitled *Stand-Up America: Humor and Identity in the 21st Century*. This book will explore the ways in which prominent American stand-up comedians use their humor to explore larger ideas about American identity, especially as they relate to issues of race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientations, political affiliation, and class.

The Introduction will provide a survey of relevant humor theory and will also contextualize my study in relation to American identity politics. The Introduction will also articulate my own theory of stand-up comedy in which comedians perform their identity primarily in relation to their real or imagined audiences. Comedians, I argue, either use their humor to identify with their audiences, to challenge their audiences, or, through self-deprecation, to place themselves on a lower level than their audiences. I call these three modes identification, opposition, and abjection. While most humorists tend to work primarily within one of these modes, nearly all humorists also vacillate between them, changing modes depending on the political or social ramifications of a particular comic routine. In this way, the comic performances of comedians emerges as a constant negotiation between individual expression and group interest.

The first chapter will focus on the recent trend of group-based comedy films, in which four or more comedians perform a show together. These shows (such as the African American based *Original Kings of Comedy* or working-class based *Blue Collar Comedy Tour*) create a comedy brand and are designed to appeal to a particular demographic. I will analyze not only the humor in these shows but also the ways in which the filmed performances are framed. Very often, the group identity in a comedy film is reinforced with footage of the performers backstage or with brief interviews with audience members. In subsequent chapters, I will look very closely at the stand-up careers of five prominent stand-up comics: Ellen DeGeneres, Margaret Cho, Chris Rock, Russell Peters, and Louis C.K. All five of these comedians have created recognizable comic personas and are associated with a particular brand of humor. More importantly, each comedian, with the exception of Louis C.K., is often seen as a spokesperson for a particular group. For example, Ellen DeGeneres and Margaret Cho have emerged as prominent voices for the gay and lesbian community, and Chris Rock is widely recognized as an African American community leader, and Russell Peters speaks not only for Asian Americans but on behalf of “brown people” everywhere. As a white male, Louis C.K. does not represent a particular group interest; rather through the modes of opposition and abjection, he uses his humor to unseat white masculinity from its position of unmarked power. In these chapters, I analyze each comedian in the context of his/her wider career, for all of them have achieved fame beyond the stand-up stage.

Budget:
I requested and received $4000 for salary. This allowed me to work on my project full-time over the summer.
Results:
The results of my SAIF Grant were successful. I managed to do research for the entire book and write drafts of the introduction and first chapter. I also got a related article, entitled “Black Nerds: New Directions in African American Humor,” accepted for publication in the peer-reviewed journal *Studies in American Humor*. Furthermore, in April 2014, I am presenting a paper related to this project at the national conference for the Popular Culture Association.

Benefits to the University
This book will give national attention to the University and serve as an outward symbol of the University’s commitment to diversity. Furthermore, this research informs my classroom practices, as I discuss the importance of ethnic and gender representation in all of my courses. In particular, I feel that discussions of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation often emphasize racism and persecution. Stand-up comedy, while by no means ignoring these issues, is often a site of positive resistance and community building and can therefore provide a useful counterpoint to trauma and oppression. Ethnic humor therefore provides students with a richer understanding of American culture.