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"The Personal is Political Comedy: Queering Stand-up in Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* and Jerrod Carmichael's *Rothaniel***"**

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Introduction

In June 2018, the international streaming service Netflix released a title that would go on to dominate conversations about comedy for the foreseeable future, by audiences and critics alike. Billed and advertised within the site as an hour of stand-up comedy, Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette,* which directly contests and questions foundations of comedy, was hailed by some as a "game changer" for the stand-up format, while others questioned whether it could (or should) be called "stand-up comedy"[1]. In *Nanette*, alongside explicitly humorous moments, Gadsby delves deep into stories of personal trauma, at times refusing to defuse the tensions that arise in discussions of thorny, painful subjects. Speaking to *The Guardian* in 2018, Gadsby says of *Nanette* that they[2] "broke the contract and that's what made this work. […] I betrayed people's trust, and I did that really seriously, not just for effect" (qtd. in Valentish). What, exactly, is the contract to which they refer? What does an audience expect from a stand-up comedian?

Answers to those questions are not as clear-cut as they may appear. An initial, surface answer—and the one to which Gadsby appears to refer—would be that audiences expect a stand-up comedian to make them laugh. This is to some degree supported by previous stand-up scholarship—as Ian Brodie claims, "[t]he audience expects to laugh, and the comedian has a professional obligation to effect that laughter" (*Vulgar* 217). Indeed, the most basic definitions of the format (ones that also claim their own limitations), explain stand-up comedy as "a single performer standing in front of an audience, talking to them with the specific intention of making them laugh" (Double, qtd. in Double, *Joke* 19). However, stand-up as an art form occupies a unique place in Anglophone public imagination, holding expectations beyond laughter. Many scholars link stand-up to an ancient tradition of a wise fool criticizing dominant hierarchies (J. Gilbert, *Standing Up* 65; Yaross Lee xvi). For some critics, it is by nature a form of social criticism (Meier and Schmitt xxv; Quirk, *Manipulate* 5; Yaross Lee xvii). Its format of oral performance by a single speaker directly to an audience resembles and borrows from more blatantly rhetorical forms of performance, such as lectures or political speeches (Meier and

[1] The former view can be found, for instance, in Jenna Scherer's "'Nanette': Hannah Gadsby on Her Gamechanging Stand-Up Special"; the latter can be found in Matthew Monagle's "Netflix's 'Nanette' and the Importance of Uncomfortable Conversations," for example.

[2] In the time since *Nanette*'s release, Gadsby has come out as nonbinary and expressed a preference for they/them pronouns, which I will use within this thesis.

Schmitt xxv); stand-up comedy is considered by some scholars a highly effective rhetoric for social change (Greenbaum 33; Schmitt and Meier xxv; Reed 765; Willet and Willet 135; Quirk, *Manipulate* 171). Early, influential comedy scholarship considers the stand-up comedian in relation to other fields; as "anthropologist," (Koziski), as "cultural articulator" (Mintz 75) and "public intellectual" (Champion and Kunze). Beyond entertainment, audiences and scholars of comedy seem to expect stand-up comedians to articulate and make sense of the surrounding world; the "contract" appears to include making audiences think as well as laugh.

But tensions and gaps arise in these contradictory expectations. The social criticism of stand-up is often affected from the "margins" rather than the mainstream, emphasizing a stand-up's position as an "other," removed from the culture upon which they comment (Brodie *Vulgar*, 66). Though stand-up's classic role is understood as a "naked self" (Yaross Lee xvi), the comedian's "performed autobiography" (Brodie, *Intimacy* 174) does not always lie comfortably alongside, or necessarily engage with, the topical and observational elements. As far as jokes hold the potential for challenging norms and assumptions (Zijderveld 299), they also mark a subject as able to not be taken seriously, or engaged with emotionally; as Henri Bergsen writes, humor demands a "momentary anaesthesia of the heart" (11). Though stand-up's encouragement towards laughter can sometimes reinforce and extend elements of social criticism, it can simultaneously negate the criticism's potency. These contradictory understandings of stand-up appear, to an extent, incompatible.

Gadsby, too, directly questions the validity of conventional stand-up comedy as a method of communicating their story. In *Nanette*, they do not always set out to make their audience laugh. At times they make their audience sit and linger in spaces of tension, which they refuse to defuse. At times they make their audience think, questioning things the audience might take for granted. Similarly, Jerrod Carmichael, in his 2022 stand-up performance *Rothaniel*, moves between registers of laughter, tension, and contemplation. Perhaps, rather than breaking the contract, Gadsby and Carmichael renegotiate it, expanding it to respond to stand-up's wider potential. In doing so, they situate *Nanette* and *Rothaniel* in a current moment of comedians probing at the limits of stand-up comedy. The last five years in particular have seen a wave of stand-up performances that disrupt the field of stand-up comedy, destabilizing formal norms and exploding possibilities within the format. These performances take the form of stand-up "specials"—long-form recordings of live performances that are directed and edited for broadcast or digital release (Boardman, "What Is" 55-56)—and are marked by a few key, shared characteristics. They often wrestle with the place of humor within stand-up, playing around with the deployment and withholding of humor-resolution, at times lingering in

moments of tension and tragedy. Characterized by reviewers as "confessional," "intimate," and "vulnerable,"[3] these specials bluntly delve into taboo topics—among them mental health and non-dominant sexualities—and frame these topics through the comedians' purported own life experiences; queer comedians at the forefront of this trend often center their identities within their performances. Logistically, these specials have an unprecedently wide reach—often released by international streaming platforms, they are disseminated to large-scale global audiences. Frequently formally innovative, the specials in this trend are also often actively meta, deconstructing the comedians' own methods and the inner-workings of comedy as a whole. Speaking with *The New York Times*, Gadsby calls for a "revolution in form to accommodate different voices" (qtd. In Sebag-Montefiore); *Nanette*, *Rothaniel*, and other destabilizing and boundary-blurring comedy specials of the moment seem to embody this revolution. In their deconstructions of stand-up norms and negotiations of humor and tension within comedy, these specials reject binary understandings of stand-up.

I argue that these specials can be read as 'queering' the format of stand-up comedy. I use "queering" in this way along the lines of Michael DeAngelis's conception of queerness as a "structural narrative strategy" (579), in which queering of genre is "not only a deconstructive operation, but also a model for restructuring of meaning, even when the […] narrative neither includes gay characterizations nor represents homosexual subject matter" (579). At the same time, I am also interested in the use of queering to "to disrupt or deconstruct binary categories of sex, gender, and/or sexuality" (Lanser 923-924). This thesis analyzes this trend as a queering of stand-up comedy, driven by the research questions: What underlying tensions and limitations within stand-up do these specials challenge? How do they queer the stand-up format, both with regard to disrupting conventions and embodying new possibilities? How does this queering illuminate their critiques of gender norms, negotiating the personal and the political?

Looking in particular at the specials' utilizations and deconstructions of comedic persona, humor, and narrative, I argue that in queering the format of stand-up, specials in this trend—which, moving forward, I will refer to as "queered stand-up"[4]—negotiate underlying tensions and contradictions surrounding the place of humor and emotion within stand-up traditions, offering new possibilities for stand-up as social criticism that also protects the needs

[3] For examples of reviews using these descriptors see Schaefer and Jalees "Sara Schaefer and Sabrina Jalees on How *Nanette* Will Change Stand-up"; Washington "'Rothaniel' Reviewed: Jerrod Carmichael's Vital Coming Out"; Li "When a Comic's Silence Says Everything"; Chen "The Rise of the Non-Traditional Stand-up Special"; and Zinoman "What Happened After the Joke: A Stand-Up's Harrowing Tale."

[4] "Queered stand-up," in my conception, refers to its binary-disrupting negotiations of stand-up traditions alongside considerations of gender norms, in contrast to (or perhaps building upon) "queer comedy," which often focuses primarily on gender analysis.

of the comedian. To do so, I focalize my analysis through a close-reading of two specials at different points along queered stand-up's continuum—*Nanette*, which served as a key catalyst, and Jerrod Carmichael's recent *Rothaniel* (2022), which, in its meta-revisioning of its narratives and "vulnerable" examination of heteronormativity, can be seen as perhaps the most direct taking-up of *Nanette*'s thrown gauntlet. My theoretical framework draws from interdisciplinary elements of previous comedy and humor scholarship, alongside queer theory, to analyze the ways in which *Nanette*'s and *Rothaniel*'s content and form work together to deconstruct norms both within stand-up and in cultural expectations surrounding gender and sexuality. This thesis thus has a doubled aim—that in-depth analysis of *Nanette* and *Rothaniel* will shed light on both the texts themselves and the wider trend of which they are part.

I use "trend" to refer to a wider conception of these specials not to define and delineate (and thus border) this wave. Rather, I hope that "trend" conveys a wider expanse of patterns that reappear, as some specials draw more from some recurring aspects than others. I am interested in the way that there seems to be a wider cultural reckoning of comedy and stand-up's place in a cultural landscape, as well as in the ways many queered stand-up specials seem to be in conversation with one another, responding to these reckonings in similar, even cooperative, ways. Though *Nanette* on its own has received a certain degree of scholarly attention, and critics and reviewers writing for magazines and newspapers have made note of the trend I discuss (citing patterns and connecting related specials), there has been little academic analysis of queered stand-up on a wider scale.[5] I find queered stand-up, in its negotiation of one of the most prominent art forms of the present moment, to be influential and relevant; keeping within the scope of an MA thesis, I aim for this project to serve as both a tentative beginning of an academic investigation into queered stand-up and a call for further scholarship.

The first chapter of this thesis works to contextualize queered stand-up—both historically and with regard to previous stand-up scholarship—and to provide a more in-depth look at its makeup. The first chapter also begins developing a theoretical framework for analyzing queered stand-up. The analyses that follow perform a case study of the ways in which *Nanette* and *Rothaniel* in particular queer three distinct elements of stand-up tradition: persona, humor, and structure. The second chapter explores the way these specials construct a queered,

[5] Additionally comedy studies, as a relatively new field, maintains a lot of gaps in scholarship. One key text this thesis draws from, *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand-up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social* Change, "urges future rhetorical studies of stand-up to extend the conversation by looking more closely at those comics speaking from more marginalized social positions" (Yaross Lee xxxi).

meta persona, one that is self-reflexively framed as "confessional" and "authentic." The third chapter investigates the way these specials queer expectations of humor within stand-up comedy, finding room for more serious moments, and offering a humor of connection. The fourth chapter considers the ways this inclusion of serious moments affects the special's narratives, and the self-reflexive ways in which the specials disrupt narrative structures to illuminate both the comedians' personae and the specials' social commentary. The conclusion summarizes my main findings and considers the possibilities *Nanette* and *Rothaniel* illuminate for queered stand-up as a wider whole.

1. Contextualizing Queered Stand-up Within Contemporary Comedy

1.1. Towards a Definition of Stand-up Comedy

For a form with such frequently contested borders, stand-up comedy seems rather difficult to neatly define. Many scholars avoid an explicit definition in their analyses, relying instead on an "I know it when I see it" attitude; as Oliver Double writes, "[i]t's an instantly recognisable form of entertainment, but putting a finger on what makes it so easy to recognise is not so simple" (*Joke* 19). Indeed Double's somewhat reductive definition of stand-up cited in this introduction ("a single performer standing in front of an audience, talking to them with the specific intention of making them laugh" Double, qtd. in Double, *Joke* 19), stems from his first book about stand-up comedy, 1997's *Stand Up! On Being a Comedian*. By the time of writing *Getting the Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-up Comedy* in 2014, he revisits his original definition and notes its limitations, expressing the difficulty of defining the form outright. To this earlier definition, he adds, among other elements, "personality," saying that stand-up "puts a person on display in front of an audience, whether that person is an exaggerated comic character or a version of the performer's own self" (*Joke* 19) as well as "present tense," explaining that "[stand-up] happens in the present tense, in the here and now. It acknowledges the performance situation" (19-20). Double's revision of his own definition both provides a useful way of framing key characteristics of stand-up, and an acknowledgment of nuances that are lost in strict definitions of the form.

Other scholars also point to the reductiveness inherent in a basic definition. Lawrence Mintz says that a "strict" definition would "describe an encounter between a single standing performer behaving comically and/or saying funny things directly to an audience, unsupported by very much in the way of costume, props, setting, or dramatic vehicle" (71). However, Mintz

calls that conception "limiting" and suggests that a definition should be broadened in order to be workable (71-72). Rather than strictly define stand-up, Ian Brodie speaks of "a set of interrelated themes" (*Vulgar* 13). He describes these themes in writing,

> [t]he contemporary stand- up comedian does something more than tell jokes, […]. The something they do is observational, by the comedian grounding it in an experiential, proto-ethnographic act; reflective, by endeavoring to interpret that experience; perspectival, by taking a particular position for interpretation; critical, by privileging that position; and, above all, vernacular, by locating it in the local rather than the universal. This locality is both figurative, the assumed or anticipated shared experience of the audience and performer, and, as the performance progresses, literal: informed by the audience's reactions, the experienced comedian customizes the performance. (*Vulgar* 13)

Brodie moves beyond conceptions of stand-up as purely one-sided—a speaker speaking to an audience—to note its interactional nature, that it is inherently a dialogic form, "performed not *to* but *with* an audience" (*Vulgar* 5, emphasis in original), eliciting reactions from the audience, not only of laughter but also potentially applause, "whoops," or booing (22-23). Brodie also describes the narrative format of a stand-up routine, which "interweave[s] material into a routine, which may run from five minutes to over two hours" (*Intimacy* 163), rather than solely "tell[ing] jokes in the sense of a series [sic] discrete units, with an explicit set-up which culminates in a punch line" (163). In stand-up, "[e]ach unit, or 'bit,' is inexorably linked with the others in the routine, the performance venue, composition of the audience, the perceived relationship between the teller and the audience, the technological medium (beyond amplification) in which it is being transmitted, and the personality of the comedian herself" (163). Brodie also notes that "[t]he stand-up comedian may switch between narration and didactic commentary throughout a given performance text" (*Vulgar* 26). My own understanding of stand-up in this thesis is founded on Brodie's and Double's conceptions of the genre as a broadly-defined form that nevertheless rests on certain key characteristics, including (but not limited to) a dialogic nature based in interaction between a comedian speaking on stage and engaging with audience reactions (which include but are not limited to laughter); a subjective perspective communicated through a stage persona, which is created by a collusion of many different elements of the performance; and a format based around "bits" that can contain both stories and jokes, ranging in topic from personal narratives to observational points. This conception, however, in its emphasis on breadth and porous borders, acknowledges the possibility of exceptions for any given point, accepting examples that challenge elements of these "definitions."

For the purposes of this thesis, I would like to intertwine Brodie's and Double's definitions with those that more directly focus on stand-up's potential as social criticism. For

this I find the book *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand-up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change,* a collection of essays that examines stand-up comedy's possibilities as a vehicle for social change, particularly useful. In the introduction, Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt take a holistic view of stand-up comedy, stepping back from the term to include the idea of "standing up" as being active rather than passive and marking an engagement with the wider world, as well as including the term's "metaphorical or implicit meaning in English of confronting or challenging authority and/or oppression" (Meier and Schmitt xxv). They explain that the chapters in their book consider stand-up comedy from these layered perspectives, as "a complex rhetorical act that is both grounded in traditional, monologic, speaker-to-audience oratory and potentially disruptive, resistive, and conducive to social change" (xxv). Its speaker-on-stage-format, calling to mind other more overtly rhetorical communication traditions (such as speeches and lectures), make it somewhat familiar in appearance as rhetoric of social criticism, helping it be accepted as a vehicle for social change. This thesis engages with stand-up as a medium that can but does not need to include these more activist levels of communication.

1.1.1 Broadening Definitions: Stand-up and Social Change

Other scholars point to stand-up's use of humor as central to its potential for social change. Lacy Lowery and Valerie R. Renegar build on Meier and Schmitt's multiple layers in the term "stand-up comedy" in their chapter on Margaret Cho to describe the way stand-up's liminality allows for social criticism, writing, "[t]his public forum grants people the ability to widely disperse opinions regarding social issues in an entertaining and enjoyable manner […]. Through the veil of humor, stand-up comedians can offer social criticism that might otherwise be deemed inappropriate or met with aggressive resistance" (15). They point to humor's ability to make risky criticism more palatable. Other scholars, such as Sophie Quirk, examine the ways jokes[6] can work directly to challenge norms. Quirk studies the way that jokes can help present

[6] Rather than explicitly define "jokes" or "joking," Quirk refers to different humor theories to explore different ways jokes can engage with social criticism. Humor theories will be explored further in Chapter 3, but for the purposes of this section, I would define jokes as Ian Brodie broadly describes them as "instances of humor" (*Vulgar* 25). Hannah Gadsby, in *Nanette*, themself defines jokes as containing a setup and punchline, a creation of tension and then a resolution of tension. Brodie perhaps provides an academic expansion of this definition, further explaining that jokes "may be identifiable as having a beginning, middle, and end and thus can be extracted or redacted from a longer flow of talk. But their recognition as "joke" is ultimately dependent not on form or even content but on reception" (*Vulgar* 25-26). He places the resolution of the joke with the audience, explaining, "[l]ike legend, jokes do not provide their own resolution. The listener restores equilibrium by 'getting it' […] Getting it differs from finding it funny" (*Vulgar* 25-26). Though they vary in form, they are generally marked by containing a punchline: "the specifically placed endpoint that invites the audience's specific interpretation" (*Vulgar* 26).

alternative points of view by pointing out the existence of, and then challenging assumptions around, social "norms" (*Manipulate* 33), thereby allowing audiences to see concepts as part of a wider whole (33). Borrowing from the work of Anton Zijderveld, Quirk writes that, "joking is about deviating from the 'norm' in order to expose the perceived notion of normality and allow us to question why it should be so" (Quirk, *Manipulate* 117). Joanne Gilbert builds on her previous research on marginality in stand-up (which will be explored more in depth later in this chapter) to state, "[i]n the hands of skilled comics – especially those whose identities relegate them to society's margins – humor is an epistemological lens, one that affords a critical perspective otherwise unavailable to mainstream audiences" (*Standing Up* 57). These scholars demonstrate the possibilities in stand-up's use of humor to further social criticism.

However, as referenced in the introduction, there are contradictions in the potential of humor—and thus stand-up comedy—as a vehicle for social change. These contradictions may be best exhibited in the idea of stand-up comedy as operating within a "play" frame. Quirk combines Johan Huizinga's conception of "playgrounds" as spaces removed from daily life and daily methods of communication that operate under individual rules and etiquette (Quirk, *Manipulate* 74) with theories of joking as "something which transports joker and audience to a theoretical safe-space" (74). She claims, then, that "the comedy venue itself is a material playground; a physical safe-space which operates in accordance with the marginal rules of comic licence" (74). A clear genre designation (and perhaps, explicit borders) of a performance genre positions audiences from the beginning as to how to interpret and experience a performance: the designation of a "play" frame in stand-up comedy—communicated either in a comedy club setting or a label of "stand-up comedy" on a streaming website—encourages audiences to view the material through a comedic lens. This can, as demonstrated, work to make risky ideas and challenges more palatable to an audience. But putting an idea in a joking play frame can also trivialize it, which can keep the utterance from being taken seriously (Brodie, *Vulgar* 33). Quirk discusses the ways in which joking can also suspend moral and emotional engagement, explaining that, when laughing, emotions of pity and sympathy are often put aside. This affects relationships between audience and performer and audience and the wider world, as, "[i]n joking, we permit the participants license to subvert the important ethical edict that human beings should show sympathy to one another" (*Manipulate* 46). John Morreall writes, "[t]o laugh about something is not to take it seriously, and for you to not take seriously what I take seriously is for you to not take *me* seriously" (*Politics* 70, emphasis in original). For all its possibilities for social change, stand-up comedy 'as it stands' fails to reconcile its impulses towards social criticism with the weight of taking serious ideas and experiences seriously.

While Quirk, Brodie, and others highlight these tensions, they tend to frame them as more inevitable contradictions and uncomfortable tensions within the format—they explore the possibilities inherent in stand-up traditions as they have heretofore existed, but still operate within the frames of established traditions. Indeed most scholarship explores stand-up according to established conventions, rather than with an eye to possibilities of revisionism (Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett's *Uproarious: How Feminists and Other Subversive Comics Speak Truth* marks a notable exception, and will be explored further in the third chapter). This thesis argues that queered stand-up both recognizes the places in which stand-up traditionally falls short as a vehicle for social change, and explores and embodies possibilities in the format, finding new ways to respond to and negotiate these tensions.

1.2 Historicizing Queered Stand-up

Following a working definition of stand-up comedy both as a format and as a vehicle for social change, this section will examine stand-up comedy more explicitly in space and time. As I find the trend of queered stand-up to arise particularly in the present moment, I would like to situate it within a historical continuum. To do so I will sketch a brief history of stand-up comedy. As this is a wide and shifting tradition, I will highlight elements that I find relevant for this thesis, focusing in particular on elements that these queered specials perpetuate, react to, contest, or negotiate.

First, however, I would like to spatially locate this thesis' analysis. In the introduction, I refer to an Anglophone cultural imagination—this thesis examines in particular English-language stand-up specials from multiple countries of origin. In this way, I do not mean to claim that this trend is purely an English-language phenomenon; as comedians like Enissa Amani, who performs in German and who has faced controversial criticism contesting her work's status as stand-up comedy[7] demonstrate, comedians internationally and across languages are engaged in a similar project of negotiating stand-up's borders. Nor do I mean to suggest as well that US American, British, and Australian national cultural contexts are easily or cleanly conflatable. Rather, I am interested in these specials that, to some degree, supersede geographic borders. This happens on multiple levels. Predominantly released on streaming platforms, these specials face unprecedented ease of global access, and English is used as a sort of lingua franca for international cultural consumption (Seidlhofer 59); additionally, many renowned comedians, including Gadsby and Carmichael, physically perform and tour

[7.] See Rützel "Und wie lit ist dein Avocadotoast" for an example of this criticism.

internationally, rendering their sphere of influence international. So too, do these specials often operate as Christopher Gilbert describes Eddie Izzard's comedy,[8] as "broach[ing] topics that transcend geographic boundaries and touch on more widespread problematics of human sufferance" (C. Gilbert 22). While some scholars of comedy dive into specific national contexts,[9] others take a wider view, situating stand-up in a generalized Anglophone context[10], and drawing from comedians from various cultural backgrounds for their analyses. For the scope of this paper, I will focus on wider social contexts, rather than particular national contexts. I use "Anglophone" specifically to mark the specials as English-language (possibly more globally accessible), and also to mark them as stemming from a somewhat shared tradition.

As Oliver Double explains, stand-up comedy underwent a sort of "parallel evolution" (*Joke* 46) in the US and the UK, with similar traditions evolving in Australia as well (46). In his deep dive into the history of stand-up as a form, he focuses on connections between the evolving movements and the ways in which British and American comedy scenes influenced one another, rather than pinpointing exactly where the form began (like the difficulties in defining the format, stand-up's exact origin is to some degree scholastically contested, with claims made for both the US and the UK). Though many scholars link stand-up comedians to ancient traditions of wise fools contesting authority (Mintz 71-73, J. Gilbert, *Standing Up* 57, Yaross Lee xv), stand-up in the form it is recognized today has its more modern roots in comedic forms from the late 19th century, vaudeville in the US and music hall traditions in the UK (Double, *Joke* 23, 37). As those particular cultural frameworks and styles died out, the patter-based comedy of their monologists and MC's grew to flourish in new locations (26-27). In the US, these were often ethnically segregated: in resorts catering to Jewish communities in what was known as the "Borscht Belt" in the Catskill Mountains and in theaters in Black communities in major metropolitan cities such as Detroit, Chicago, and (perhaps most famously and lastingly) in Harlem's Apollo Theater, collectively known as the "Chitlin Circuit" (26-27). In the UK, this style of comedy shifted to performances in working men's clubs (43). While these acts "encouraged key elements of stand-up like an intensely direct relationship with the audience, improvisation and a firm emphasis on the here and now" (26), acts of this time differed from later stand-up as they "consisted mainly of performers reciting relatively short

8. Which C. Gilbert analyzes specifically in regard to US social politics, though Izzard is British.
9. See Krefting *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* and Quirk *The Politics of British Stand-up Comedy: The New Alternative* for example.
10. See for instance Brodie *A Vulgar Art*.

jokes, typically written by someone else, which may or may not have had anything to do with the performers' own thoughts and opinions" (Rappaport and Quilty-Dunne 478). This proto-stand-up is characterized by comedian Todd Glass as "lacking honesty" (qtd. In Rappaport and Quilty-Dunne 478); comedians of this period "usually told generic, impersonal jokes that could be told pretty much anywhere, by anyone, at any time" (Lintott, "Today" 397). Somewhat divorced from both the performing comedian and the surrounding world, though it contained many familiar elements (a monologic/dialogic format and routine of spoken comedy), this embryonic form was not yet quite the modern stand-up as "defined" by Brodie.

Stand-up comedy in the form recognized today is largely accepted to have emerged with the counterculture comedians of the 1960s (Grobe 8, Double, *Joke* 27, Rappaport and Quilty-Dunne 478). Richard Zoglin calls this transition "a long march from joke-telling to truth-telling" (63). This comedy grew out of spaces that also hosted beatnik poets and folk singers, and these comedians were referred to as "sick comics" or "sicknicks" alongside the new label of "stand-ups" (Brodie, *Vulgar* 12, Double, *Joke* 27-28). This "sickness" came from their uses of dark humor and willingness to excavate the vulgarities of their own psyches (Double 27-28); Christopher Grobe links them to the confessional poets of the period (8-9). The enduring image of a stand-up comedian as a male performer, dressed casually and standing at a microphone in front of a brick backdrop, stems from this time, and from one figure in particular: Mort Sahl as he performed at San Francisco's burgeoning underground comedy club, the hungry i (Double, *Joke* 27). Sahl, along with Lenny Bruce, Mike Nichols, Phylis Diller, and others, gave stand-up "a different character—performers generally adopted a more conversational tone, began to explore issues of personal and social significance in a more serious way, and moved away, to a degree, from the highly formulaic joke structures of their vaudeville predecessors" (Rappaport and Quilty-Dunne 478). Rather than the emotional distance that characterized earlier comics, "[t]hese comedians made stand-up personal, even confessional, more vulgar, and explicitly responsive to matters of the day. [...] Stand-up grew increasingly intimate and intimately involved with current social, political, and personal events and attitudes. This is the sort of stand-up comedy we know today" (Linott, "Today" 397). Stand-up at this time became both political and personal, becoming a form from which audiences could expect social commentary and social criticism as well as confessional personae.

Though stand-up began as a widely countercultural phenomenon, as it grew, it began to both enter and develop a mainstream. Comedy clubs appeared in the US in the 1960s, exploding in popularity in the 1980s (Double, *Joke* 31). These dedicated spaces for stand-up helped both to foster new talent and begin to develop norms and expectations within the format (31).

Though the UK's first dedicated comedy club did not open until 1979, folk music clubs fostered a similar growth in conversational comedy that resembled more modern stand-up forms (43-44). Comedians began to reach new heights in popularity—during the 70s, popular comedians like Steve Martin and Richard Pryor in the US and Victoria Wood in the UK sold out arenas for their performances, moving stand-up beyond and outside comedy clubs (32, 44). Mainstream audiences also gained increased exposure to stand-up comedy and comedians through television, particularly through late-night comedy shows (Brodie, *Vulgar* 172-174). This exposure happened on a dual level. On the one hand, comedians were invited to perform short stand-up sets on these shows, exposing their act to wider audiences. On the other, if hosts such as Johnny Carson enjoyed their performance, they would be invited to the "couch," to be interviewed by the hosts in segments that had different levels of mediated spontaneity (Double, *Joke* 316), but in which comedians could more clearly articulate and perform their stage persona, or even draw distinctions between what appeared to be their "stage" persona and "offstage" persona (Brodie, *Vulgar* 174). Audiences were hungry for this sort of illusive access; as Joan Rivers observed in 1971, "[a]udiences nowadays want to know their comedians" (qtd. in Grobe 10). Soon recorded (and thus mediated) performances of stand-up became more widespread. 1975 marked "the first HBO comedy special, a format that would become the dominant medium and revolutionize stand-up comedy" (Brodie, *Vulgar* 174). Viewers "saw comics do their acts as God intended—not as five-minute excerpts but as the full-length unexpurgated performance that previously only cabaret or concert-hall audiences glimpsed" (Berger qtd. in Brodie, *Vulgar* 174-175). These recorded specials came with their own directorial and editorial choices. "[A] cutaway to the audience—and to specific members of the audience—could be employed by the producers to frame and encourage a reaction for the home viewer" (Brodie, *Vulgar* 176). Stand-up comedy, from this point, was as much a mediated form as a live one, with multiple methods of consumption and engagement.[11]

Comedy at this time also negotiated mainstreams in terms of gatekeeping, access, and popularity. Though there have always been female comedians, as Joanne Gilbert notes, "public comic performance has historically been dominated by males" (J. Gilbert, *Marginality* xiv). She references a "common assumption that stand-up comedy is inherently a 'male' genre" (xiv). Judith Yaross Lee maintains that "the historic dominance and special privilege of straight white

[11] Philip Auslander makes note of the "symbiotic" (1) relationship between liveness and mediatized forms, pushing back against a sense of live events as more "real" and mediatized events as "secondary and somewhat artificial reproductions of the real" (3). I consider the relationship between recorded and live incarnations of stand-up performances to be in line with this symbiosis.

male comedians is also a major (if not the major) component of many comics' successes" (xxxi). Whatever (still largely white, straight, and male) countercultural credit stand-up began with, its mainstream in the 1970s and 1980s largely reflected dominant social hierarchies. Additionally, alongside these mainstream comedians and considerations, stand-up served at times to enforce, rather than subvert, the status quo (Quirk, *Manipulate* 71, 54). This reinforcement of hierarchies is particularly visible in traditional negotiations of queerness in comedy. Olu Jenzen explains that, "queerness has always been an essential part of mainstream comedy, but mainly as 'the target of the joke, or more commonly through a performance of rampant innuendo'" (35). Jokes about queerness, told by straight comedians, served to reinforce conceptions of queerness as "other" and "wrong." Indeed, though some queer comedians (like Lily Tomlin and Jane Wagner, and slightly later Wanda Sykes and Ellen DeGeneres) performing at this time were quite popular, they did not speak of their queer experiences in their routines or explicitly claim a queer identity (Reed 762). As journalist E. Alex Jung writes, "[i]f we're to think of comedy as a culture, then traditional club comedy required gay people to assimilate to a heterosexist sensibility in order to succeed" (Jung). Stand-up traditions at this time worked to maintain queerness as a marginal experience, and to enforce cultural expectations of heterosexuality.

Once a mainstream comedy tradition began to take root, however, an alternative branch grew out from underneath it. Though this wave developed alongside the expansion of comedy clubs in the 1970s (Double, *Joke* 45), it crystallized into a larger movement in the 1990s, labeled as alternately "DIY comedy" or "alternative comedy" transatlantically and "altcom" primarily in the US (57). Though this style is also "hard to define and frequently in flux" (58), it "tends to be loose, quirky, folksy, homemade, autobiographical, politically liberal and full of geeky pop culture references" (58). Queer comedians who negotiated their identities within their stand-up began to come to the forefront. Eddie Izzard, for example, destabilized gender norms with his gender presentation (C. Gilbert 21-22). Margaret Cho also attacked racial and sexuality norms, but with humor that often rested on self-deprecation and "ironic essentializing" (Lowery and Renegar 10), which worked to at times reinforce the power of the dominating cultures. Though both Cho and Izzard grew fairly popular, they were still framed as outside the margins, outliers and exceptions that proved the rule. But these alternative comedians paved the way for the queered stand-up of the contemporary moment. Jung describes a "second comedy boom" that, after beginning with these alternative comedians in the mid-90s, intensified in 2009, and "allowed for more flexibility in tone, content, and style. This created an opening for the rise of gay and lesbian comedians and performers like [Guy] Branum, Tig Notaro, Billy Eichner,

Cameron Esposito, and Rhea Butcher to fill lineups, but also expand what was possible" (Jung). It is into this landscape of slowly emerging queer visibility in comedy that the trend of queered stand-up has emerged.

The contemporary comedy landscape is a result of the interaction of many of the addressed forces. Queered stand-up of the current moment emerged from a tradition that increasingly valued positionality and a "confessional" element within stand-up, as well as an expectation of social criticism. Perhaps parallel to the developments within stand-up tradition, elements and forces in the wider world can also be seen as contributing to queered stand-up's rise. Key among these is the rise of new media technologies. Streaming services have dramatically increased stand-up's reach. YouTube has made recordings of stand-up far more accessible (Double, *Joke* 49). Streaming giants like Netflix and Hulu, in commissioning a vast swath of stand-up specials[12] have turned a mediated engagement with recorded material, rather than live performance, into a dominating method of consumption for stand-up; the format of "specials" themselves—directed for virtual consumption and which make use of cinematography and editing—have become increasingly prominent in public conceptions of stand-up (Boardman, "Evaluating" 58).[13] Though licensing deals can to some degree limit releases internationally, by and large these specials are available across the globe, widening their potential audiences dramatically, and have helped stand-up comedians achieve "the highest levels of celebrity status" (Lintott, "Today" 397). Consumers can now easily play stand-up specials on demand, and the wide array also lends space for more niche productions. Social media sites like Twitter and TikTok allow comedians to test out possible jokes and share their work directly (Lintott, "Today" 399-400; Double, *Joke* 50; Brodie *Vulgar* 209). They also allow and encourage unprecedented access to comedians directly, and audiences often use social media to explore the lines between a performer and their performed self, and examine their "authenticity." As Mary Luckhurst explains, "In stand-up comedy it is now the fashion and audience expectation for the gap between the performer's branded public self and their stage persona to be as narrow as possible and for offstage and onstage selves to be intricately blurred into one" (55). Technology, then, has expanded both comedians' reach to audiences, and audiences' reach back to the comedians. These expectations of access and different methods of mediated consumption have only increased with the COVID-19 pandemic, as comedians have

[12] Netflix alone commissioned and released 59 in 2022, as of December 2022.

[13] Boardman notes that few academic investigations into a "special" as a particular format of stand-up comedy currently exist, and calls for the development of a particular methodology for analyzing the format (see "Evaluating Stand-up Specials" and "What is a Stand-up Special").

increasingly taken to the internet as a means of sharing their work, while also providing somewhat "behind the scenes" glances at their homes (Lintott, "Today" 399-400). This pandemic access has only fed audience desire for access to performers (Bond 250-251), comedians included.

Comedians have also reached new heights of influence and prominence. Beyond celebrity status, comedians have become the public figures perhaps most visibly aligned with fighting oppression through their art.[14] Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett note that comedy has taken the "political spotlight" from music (139). They explain that "[s]ince 9/11, these impulses and symbols of longing for change have found their way through comic truth tellers as real talk elsewhere has become hard to find" (147). Beyond earlier conceptions of stand-up comedians as cultural "truth-tellers," they claim that we are living in "the age of the comedian" (140), which they encapsulate in musician Bono's extolling the US senate to send comedians like Amy Schumer and Chris Rock to counteract extremist violence (140). Julie Webber explains that "[i]n the past two decades' fraught political climate, audiences have increasingly turned to political comedy as a mechanism for making sense of the surrounding world" (4). Comedians of the current era follow traditional expectations of stand-up comedians as "cultural articulators," and public trust in the conclusions they reach has only increased in the last decades; this extended platform brings an extended power and responsibility. Comedians queering stand-up are aware of this climate of expectations and influence. They negotiate new ways of engaging with stand-up's influence and the comedian's role as modern "truth-tellers," probing at what audiences might expect from such a figure.

The trend of queered stand-up has also come up alongside a rise in queer comedy in a wider sense. Not only is queer comedy receiving increased scholastic attention (Jenzen 35), but it is expanding, both creating its own spaces to thrive and making inroads into the mainstream. In 2018, E. Alex Jung published an article highlighting "the rise of queer comedy" (Jung), in which he writes of a "larger seismic shift that has occurred in the past few years: Instead of gay people trying to fit into traditionally heterosexual and male comedy spaces, they're creating a gay paradigm" (Jung). He claims that this comedy has moved beyond early concerns focused predominantly on representation, of seeing queer comics and queer bodies on a stage (goals

[14] Sandra Mayer makes the case for celebrity authors filling this role; she points to the similar ways in which nonfictional life-writing produces a "truth capital" (40) in perhaps a similar vein to that of stand-up comedy. She writes, "[a]s genres of self-exploration and self-justification, lecture and memoir both capture, and serve as vehicles for, the fluent cross-field migrations between the spheres of literature and politics" (39-40), explaining the way speaking from an outsider (marginal) position holds relevance in current political landscapes (39).

perhaps reflected in the "alternative comedy" careers of comics like Margaret Cho and Eddie Izzard), to enact a "queer sensibility" (Jung). Though Jung identifies the epicenter as New York City, he notes a sister scene in Los Angeles, and this rise of queer comedy is visible on an international scale as well. As of 2023 Vienna, as an example, plays host to at least two regularly occurring queer comedy clubs.[15] In June 2022, Netflix released *Stand Out: An LGBTQ+ Celebration*, a recording of a queer comedy festival held earlier in the year that featured acts from headliners like Margaret Cho, Eddie Izzard, and Wanda Sykes shepherding in acts from new, young queer talent. Queer comedy has spread and thrived through the internet as well, and is receiving mainstream recognition with special orders by Netflix, Hulu, and other streaming groups. Queered stand-up, in my conception, builds upon this rise—both queered and queer.

As Gadsby themself says in *Nanette*, "[a]rtists don't invent zeitgeists—they respond to them" (Gadsby, *Nanette*). *Nanette*, *Rothaniel*, and other queered comedy specials respond to a zeitgeist of increased queer visibility in comedy, increased access between performer and audience, internationally available and proliferated streaming, and vast social currency for comedians. These forces combine to position audiences to have very particular expectations for their comedians—of access to both the comedian's conceptions of the surrounding world, and to the comedians themselves. Exploring the current comedy landscape, Mary Luckhurst writes, "Current trends in stand-up comedy both interrogate and problematize the relationship between self and persona in relation to the market demand for the confessional, the desire for authenticity, self-expression, and real-life" (Luckhurst 56).[16] I find queered stand-up specials to be concerned with negotiating these contradictory contemporary expectations.

1.3 Anatomy of a Trend

This section will explore queered stand-up in more depth, to further illuminate the trend. To begin, I would like to note that *Nanette*, *Rothaniel*, and other queered stand-up specials respond to a zeitgeist that had already begun probing at the boundaries and expectations of stand-up comedy. The few years before *Nanette*'s release saw the release of multiple stand-up specials that asked similar questions and experimented with what stand-up comedy could be. Tig Notaro

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15. See "Gays and Theys," a monthly English-language queer comedy showcase organized and hosted by Aislinn Kane, Linda Stonem and Emily Thornhill in various locations around Vienna, and PCCC*, (Politically Correct Comedy Club), a multilingual queer comedy club hosted by Denise Bourbon, frequently facilitated through Vienna's WUK (Werkstätten und Kulturhaus).

16 This article ("Hannah Gadsby: Celebrity Stand Up, Trauma, and the Meta Theatrics of Persona Construction") and in particular this quote, is among the closest academic references to what I analyze as queered stand-up. Luckhurst does not quite specify a particular wave, but in her descriptions of broader trends and expectations within stand-up, she identifies many of the same elements.

served as perhaps one of the earliest adopters. She gained whirlwind notoriety in 2012 for a live set that began with the words, "[h]ello, good evening, hello, I have cancer, how are you?" (Notaro, *Live*). In the set, later released as an album, Notaro shares her extraordinary run of bad fortune—hospitalizations, the death of her mother, a painful breakup, and a breast cancer diagnosis—while still in the midst of processing these events herself, without the emotional distance she would normally use for her comedy; remaining, in her words, in the tragedy space of the equation of comedy = tragedy + time (Notaro, *Live*). Hasan Minhaj drew acclaim for his 2017 special *Homecoming King,* in which he mines stories of his relationship to his immigrant parents "for pathos as well as humor" (St. Félix), and "elicits not just laughter but tears" (St. Félix), while projecting images on a screen behind him to illuminate his stories. In Neal Brennan's *3 Mics* (2017), the comedian alternates between three different microphones, each dedicated to either "one-liners," "emotional stuff," or "stand-up" (Brennan, *3 Mics*). In Maria Bamford's *The Special Special Special* (2012), she performs for an audience of only her parents in her living room. *Vulture*'s Jesse David Fox selected Jerrod Carmichael's *8* as his top stand-up special of 2017, but the set's subdued, narrative-based format led the critic to first question "how funny should stand-up be?" (Fox "2017"). Answering himself, he continues, "I know many people — and probably many comics — would quickly respond, 'Very! It's in the name: stand-up comedy. Comedy means funny.' *8* made me not only rethink that assumption, but even start to believe that it's a fallacy" (Fox 2017). Pre-*Nanette* (and *Rothaniel*), these specials utilized formal innovations and deconstructions to deal with taboo, uncomfortable topics and allow space for emotions outside of laughter.

Nanette's release brought this kind of comedy to the forefront. It crystallized an impression that had been bubbling for a while, that comedies had stopped being necessarily "funny." Or, more, that comedies had stopped considering "funniness" as the primary end-goal of a performance. In 2018, *Vulture,* the culture-focused blog outlet of *New York Magazine*, ran articles under the umbrella of "post-comedy week," with the subheading, "[a]ll week long, Vulture is exploring the many ways modern comedy has tapped into its serious side" (*Vulture*). "Post comedy" is the label Fox gave to a zeitgeist in which "[c]omedians and comedy writers are increasingly pushing the bounds of what it means for something to be a comedy in the most basic sense, rewiring the relationship between comedies and jokes. So what is comedy without jokes?" (Fox "Funny"). Fox furthered his question about *8* in an article titled, "How Funny Does Comedy Need to Be?" in which he explores the way comedians renegotiate the relationship between comedic art forms and jokes, redefining stand-up and pushing at the boundaries of the fields. His conceptions of "post comedy" share many characteristics of what

I identify as "queered stand-up": "post-comedy uses the elements of comedy (be it stand-up, sitcom, or film) but without the goal of creating the traditional comedic result—laughter—instead focusing on tone, emotional impact, storytelling, and formal experimentation" (Fox "Funny"). Other publications and articles wrestle with similar questions. Jason Zinoman's *New York Times* list of "Comedy Highlights of 2017" claims that "[t]he most memorable moments of the year in comedy were not funny" ("Highlights"), and Romesh Ranganathan asks in a 2018 *Guardian* article, "[a]udiences love serious comedy—so should I stop trying to make people laugh?" (Ranganathan). In reviewing *Nanette*, Rachel Withers writes that "[t]here has been a wave of female comedians of late turning around to say, 'Actually, that's not funny' of their own jokes" (Withers). In her *Atlantic* review of *Nanette*, Sophie Gilbert writes, "[i]t feels not coincidental that some of the most beautiful, innovative works of art of late have similarly balanced light and dark" (S. Gilbert). Newspaper and magazine reviewers have spent the last years questioning humor's role in stand-up comedy, laying the groundwork for examinations of queered stand-up.

Collected together, multiple stand-up specials seem to reappear in these lists and discussions of stand-up specials renegotiating the format; reviewers connect between different queered stand-up specials. *Nanette* and *Rothaniel* are among the most mentioned, as well as Cameron Esposito's *Rape Jokes* (2018), which negotiates the phenomenon of jokes about rape through her own experiences of sexual assault; Drew Michael's *Drew Michael* (2018), filmed without an audience; Ali Wong's *Hard Knock Wife* (2018), which digs into visceral experiences of motherhood and is filmed while Wong is visibly pregnant; Chris Rock's *Tambourine* (2018), his first recorded special in ten years and one that joins him with the trend, departing from previous patterns in combining his social commentary with deep introspection; Bo Burnham's *Inside* (2021),[17] filmed entirely in the comedian's home during the first lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic; Gary Gulman's *The Great Depresh* (2019), which charts his experience with depression, mixing in as well documentary footage from the comedian's life; and Joel Kim Booster's *Psychosexual* (2022), which sees the comedian periodically checking the degree of "relatability" his stand-up has for a straight white male audience member. *Nanette*, as previously mentioned, consists of an interrogation of comedy's uses as communication, and *Rothaniel* sees Carmichael fashion an intimate, conversational relationship with his audience

[17] While Burnham's *Inside* is admittedly more musical comedy special than stand-up comedy, its formal innovation and illusory access to Burnham's private self and spaces marks it as distinctly related to queered stand-up. Additionally, Burnham may be seen as an influential figure of queered stand-up behind-the-scenes; he has directed multiple specials referenced in this thesis including *Rothaniel*, *8*, and *Tambourine.* Other figures reoccur behind-the-scenes as well—Jerrod Carmichael directed *Drew Michael.*

as he comes out publicly as gay for the first time. These specials provide a small sampling of other specials on a wider scale that wrestle with the same topics. Reviews linking multiple specials together note that these specials "upend audiences' expectations with raw or confessional material" (Washington) and "[get] autobiographical while digging into topics considered taboo" (Chaney). According to Fox, "it's become increasingly clear that they are comedies in practice, formally redefining what comedy is itself" ("Funny"), and Nick Chen examines recurring elements of formal innovation in his article "How the Nontraditional Stand-up Special Took Over Comedy" (Chen). Some descriptors reappear, among them "confessional," "intimate," "empathetic," and "authentic"—terms that will be explored in more depth in the next section. As demonstrated here, the trend of queered stand-up moves beyond *Nanette* and *Rothaniel* to encompass a multitude of specials, whose similarities have been highlighted by journalists and cultural critics.

Drawing from the ways in which these specials have been discussed in magazine and newspaper reviews, I identify queered stand-up as specials that queer the format of stand-up comedy by renegotiating expectations of the format. Following Brodie's way of defining stand-up across interrelated themes, I do not propose a strict definition but rather outline recurring patterns across queered stand-up. These specials take a self-reflexive stance towards comedy and stand-up, often explaining and deconstructing their own methods. They renegotiate the existence of a play-frame in stand-up, leaving space for serious, non-humorous moments. They often consider the mental health of the comedian—both by exploring mental health in the content of the special as well as by considering the effects of the performance on the comedian (and audience), at times framing the experience as "therapeutic." Rather than being structured around jokes and punchlines, their structures are based predominantly in narrative. Those narratives, often including taboo, weighty, or traumatic elements, are presented *as if* drawn directly, "authentically" from the comedian's life. The specials engage in social criticism through these confessional personas, filtering political comedy through a subjectivity, a claimed "personal" lens. In a 2019 TED Talk, Gadsby says that, with *Nanette*, they aimed to "break comedy so that [they] could rebuild it and reshape it, reform it into something that could better hold everything [they] needed to share" (Gadsby, "Three Ideas"). I find queered stand-up to be a way of rebuilding comedy to suit those needs.

My analysis focuses in particular on specials that can be seen as queer in both content and form, that are both queer and queered. Many of the comedians at the forefront of this trend (notably Hannah Gadsby, Jerrod Carmichael, Carmen Esposito, Tig Notaro, and Joel Kim Booster) discuss their queer identities and experiences within their specials. These stories cover

a range of queer experiences: some delve into the experience of "coming out" to friends and family, seeking acceptance that is at times withheld, while others speak of the shame, internal and external, with which they grew up, and of experiences of homophobia, gender-based violence, and culturally-enforced gender roles. Some speak to lighter elements of queer experiences, referencing the joy and connection in accepting their orientation and identity, and finding others like themselves. In these specials, queer comedians speak of their experiences existing on the margins of society, but in telling their stories, they claim space for themselves. Carrie Sandahl links queer monologues in this format with a tradition of "witnessing," which she describes as "a project of revising history, educating others about one's personal experience, and mobilizing them to political or social action. Such a project is vital to those whose stories have been left out of mainstream accounts of history" (29). She describes bearing witness as a "responsibility" (49), one that "pairs grief and rage with remembrance" (49). These comedians utilize "confessional" elements of their specials as an act of witnessing. In doing so, their social criticism is informed and embodied by their personal narratives. I focus on *Nanette* and *Rothaniel* in particular as the two combine many aspects of the trend of queered stand-up, while focalizing their stories through a distinctly queer lens.

1.4 Queer as in Funny: Theorizing Queered Stand-up

Following the preceding investigation into the makeup of queered stand-up and where it fits into a historical continuum of stand-up, this section will suggest an interdisciplinary methodology for analyzing this trend for the purposes of this thesis. In section 1.3 above, I introduced examples of non-academic reviews in newspapers, magazines, and blogs to demonstrate wider public awareness of this trend. The reoccurrence of certain descriptions was a catalyst for my recognition of queered stand-up as a trend. While they are often used somewhat interchangeably within the reviews (seeming to attempt to articulate a particular connection between the specials etc), these descriptions have a long history within academia, at times specifically within stand-up comedy studies, and at times with histories in other interdisciplinary fields. The academic considerations of these terms often contain nuances that I find useful for understanding queered stand-up in relation to previous stand-up traditions. To begin a theoretical investigation into queered stand-up, I will integrate a further examination of these previously-cited terms with elements of comedy and queer theory.

Many reviews describe queered stand-up specials as "authentic," a somewhat nebulous term. Authenticity related to "truth" is near impossible to claim or prove within a stand-up

special, and is largely beside the point. Authenticity in comedy, and in these reviews, might be understood as *presenting* the line between a comedian's onstage and offstage persona as particularly thin. Oliver Double explains that

> [t]ruth is a vital concept in most modern stand-up comedy because of the idea that it is 'authentic'. The boundary between offstage and onstage is blurred and, in many cases, the audience believe that the person they see onstage is more or less the same as the person they might meet offstage. This inevitably means that there is an assumption that what the person onstage says about his or her life is more or less true. (*Joke* 97-98)

Here Double acknowledges that an objective "truth" is beyond analysis—rather, "authenticity" refers to an audience's *impression* that they are witnessing truth. Daniel Abrahams explores the double-bind in which this leaves a comedian, writing, "[t]he comedian must be seen as authentic, but that is not the same as being authentic. This can leave the comedian in a precarious position: either their authentic self just so happens to line up with what the audience expects, or she is caught having to fabricate an inauthentic stage persona just to be accepted as authentic" (499). When using the term "authenticity," I refer particularly to a claim, or invocation, of truthfulness, and not any objective truthfulness that can be verified. I understand "authenticity" in stand-up comedy within this idea of a fabricated persona—that any stand-up comedy characterized by reviewers as "authentic" convincingly presents the boundary between their onstage and offstage personae as negligible, and frames their performance as granting access to that offstage persona.

"Authentic" comedy is often linked with "personal" comedy, though there are key differences. Double uses "personal" to describe comedy that relates directly back to the performer, writing, "[t]he new school of comedy is personal comedy. Your act is about you: your gut issues, your body, your marriage, your divorce, your drug habit ... the idea that the comedian's act should reflect his or her real personality is commonplace" (*Joke* 115). Personal comedy, for Double, is filtered through the comedian's own experience; as Brodie says, it is "perspectival" (*Vulgar* 13). Though audiences may expect "authenticity" from "personal" comedy, the use of a stage persona is key in communicating these stories; the personal is persona-driven. As Brodie explains, "[t]he audience brings foreknowledge not only of what a stand-up comedian is, but of who this stand-up comedian is. The comic persona is the stand-up comedian's projection of a character who is, simultaneously, meant to be identical to his or her 'real' self" (*Vulgar* 102). Theories of persona will be explored in more depth in the next chapter, but particularly with regard to "personal": I want to emphasize that my understanding and use of the term is mediated and disrupted by "persona"—any reference to the "personal" refers not directly to the comedian themself but to their constructed stage persona.

The sharing of "personal" stories is often lauded as "vulnerable," particularly with regard to stories of trauma, or about serious or taboo experiences. Within stand-up, Matt Hargrave discusses vulnerability as "putting oneself out there," writing, "[t]he craft of stand-up involves a dual decision: not only the choice to put your 'self' out there but also which 'self' to send as representative" (69). Hargrave zeroes in on the way personae mediate vulnerabilities. He analyzes vulnerability in stand-up distinctly in relation to mental health, which both appears as a topic in the content of these specials and affects wider questions about the mental and emotional effects of stand-up comedy for performer and audience. Hargrave explores this duality, centering it in experiences and performances of selfhood, explaining "'[m]ental health,' in so far as it means anything, is the capacity to develop—and cope with having—a self. 'Mental health' is embedded in the craft of stand-up since the form places high demands on the individual practitioner's ability to negotiate this self aesthetically and publicly" (69). Hargrave borrows from Erinn Gilson's conceptions of vulnerability from her book *Ethics of Vulnerability* (2014) to contest equations of vulnerability with weakness and to characterize it less as a "state of perpetual risk" (Hargrave 69) and more as "an ambiguous, multifaceted, and productive experience, full of human potential" (69). Fury, however, focuses on this "risk" in vulnerability. Reviewing *Nanette,* they quote Daniel Mallory Ortberg's framing of the experience of coming out to someone as trans: "I just feel like I've handed you a weapon. And even though you say 'I love you, I promise I will never use this bow and arrow which has been specifically fashioned to find your heart,' you're still holding it" (qtd. in Fury 47). This dual nature of vulnerability will be explored more in depth in Chapters Two and Three, but this thesis considers vulnerability a negotiation of exposure, mediated by stage persona.

"Vulnerability" is relational, as is "intimacy," another descriptor that reappears in reviews of queered stand-up. "Intimacy" has a longer history in scholastic analyses of stand-up comedy. Ian Brodie has made it a cornerstone of his analysis of stand-up, describing the form as a "Genre of Intimacy" in his 2008 article. For Brodie, this intimacy is an element that allows a comedian and their audience to surpass the distance of a stage (or, perhaps, a recording)—based as much in form as in content. This intimacy is predicated on a conversational style made possible by the invention of the microphone—comedians can project their voice across great distances, without needing to shout, and maintain the tone and dynamics of one-on-one conversation (*Vulgar* 53). This microphone-driven conversational intimacy primarily occurs on an auditory level; Brodie identifies the way television furthers this created intimacy through the addition of visual close-ups (167). Andrea Greenbaum also frames the conversational style of stand-up as a way of closing distance between audience and comedian and connects it directly

to the comedian's rhetorical power, writing, "the stand-up's rhetorical style is dialogical, designed to bridge the gap, the distance between orator and audience" (Greenbaum 34). Brodie, too, moves conceptions of intimacy beyond technical, physical levels of surpassing the distance of a stage to include surpassing cultural differences (*Vulgar* 64), and frames intimacy as a relationship that requires trust between comedian and audience ("Intimacy" 173). However, Brodie notes the artificial nature of this intimacy, borrowing from Peter Narváez to describe it as an "illusion" (*Vulgar* 156). This thesis speaks of "intimacy" in these dual contexts, referring to distances bridged and connections made on both a technical and emotional level, but always as a performed intimacy that is ultimately an illusion.

Finally, perhaps the most commonly used descriptor for queered stand-up specials is the term "confessional." Though comedy that purportedly draws from the performer's own life is often labelled as "confessional," there are few academic interrogations of "confessional comedy." Christopher Grobe, in his book *The Art of Confession*, argues for an understanding of confessional art forms as a wider genre, linking the "confessional comedy" of the 1960s directly to the contemporaneous "confessional poetry,"[18] and linking both to later forms such as reality television's "confession booths" and social media's revealing access (vii). For Grobe, "[w]hat unites them, in spite of their difference, is a shared belief: that private selves can be captured through public performance—and that capturing them this way matters" (vii). For Grobe, confessional art is art that explicitly claims a connection to the performer's self. Other scholars of confessional art study the way artists use confessional styles to frame not only their own lives, but also to comment on the wider world. Referring directly to the "confessional poets" of the 1960s (as linked to contemporary stand-ups by Grobe), Tyne Daile Sumner describes a "confessional" style as one that "fused personal revelation with incisive public commentary" (*Spiders* 167). Grobe furthers this in linking confessional art to more overtly activist spheres, referencing the "coming out" of LGBT political activism in the 1960s, and "consciousness-raising" of second-wave feminism in the 1970s (11-12). Though Grobe notes the potential usefulness of confessional art for social activism, he references the contradictions within the idea of confessional art, the uneasy tension between any possible "truthful" revelations and the construction inherent in presenting these for the consumption of an audience. He signals audience acknowledgment of the construction behind any purported "confession": "[w]e demand not authenticity, but the spectacle of crumbling artifice; not direct

18. "In September 1959, M. L. Rosenthal declared, 'The use of poetry for the most naked kind of confession grows apace in our day.' By the 1960s, you could say the same of standup comedy" (Grobe vii).

access to the personal, but a sidelong view of the persona falling away; not straight-ahead fact and sincerity, but the roundabout truths of an ironic approach. We want the truth, of course, but we want it hard—because the strain authenticates" (vii). Within this thesis, I use "confessional" particularly within this vein, to describe comedy that claims an "authenticity," that presents its stories as stemming from a comedian's personal life, but with the acknowledgment that that presentation is a construction. I find that the comedians in the trend invoke a confessional style but also acknowledge its artifice.

As these terms are now loosely defined in a theoretical context for the purposes of this paper, I will utilize them throughout my analysis, both to link to the reviews that also characterize and identify the trend, and to clarify the specific ways in which I characterize these specials. As a further theoretical lens, this thesis will also draw from elements of two key subjects within comedy-studies scholarship: on stand-up's rhetoric and marginality.

As previously discussed in the introduction, stand-up is widely studied as a rhetorical format. Meier and Schmitt note, "[a] decidedly oratorical spectacle, the stand-up comedy performance remains one of the last remnants of the rhetorical tradition in contemporary culture" (xxiii). Much of this understanding of stand-up as a rhetorical form stems from Andrea Greenbaum's 1999 ethnographic study, "Stand-up Comedy as Rhetorical Argument: An Investigation of Comic Culture." Greenbaum explains that "stand-up comedy is an inherently rhetorical discourse; it strives not only to entertain, but to persuade, and stand-up comics can only be successful in their craft when they can convince an audience to look at the world through their comic vision" (33). This persuasive element is key to stand-up's efficacy as social criticism. Greenbaum notes different rhetorical strategies comedians employ to persuade their audiences. In adapting their performances to different locations, venues, and moments in time—as well as to direct audience interaction—stand-up comedians utilize an "understanding of *kairos*, or situatedness" (33) for maximum efficacy. Key to their persuasiveness is an establishment of an Aristolean *ethos.* Greenbaum explains that "[w]hile Aristotle's view of ethos relates to moral character, I think it is fair to extend the definition to include character which establishes a speaker's authority" (35). She links that character to a comedian's stage persona, which then works to establish a performer's "comic authority" (35). This thesis will utilize Greenbaum's conception of a stand-up comedian's building of *ethos* and comic authority through persona, analyzing the comic authority that stems from a subjectively constructed persona, as well as its rhetorical effectiveness.

Later scholars build upon Greenbaum's work by identifying other rhetorical strategies particular to one comedian's body of work. For example, C. Gilbert analyzes Eddie Izzard's

use of a rhetorical *metalepsis* to create changes in perspective (23, 32). In a similar vein, this thesis will work with the rhetorical concept of "pathos" in queered stand-up. As noted above, Greenbaum finds that stand-up's dialogic, conversational style bridges gaps and creates intimacy (in Brodie's sense) between comedian and audience, and claims that this intimacy enables stand-up comedians "to connect emotionally and intellectually with their audience" (33). However, previously explored notions of the suspension of emotion through humor may problematize this understanding of intimacy within stand-up traditions. Following Quirk, Morreal, and Bergsen's notions of the tensions between emotion and humor, this thesis will explore "pathos" in queered stand-up as an "appeal to emotion," (Brinton 207) one that allows space for emotions such as anger, fear, pity, and sympathy. I will use these rhetorical elements to examine directly queered stand-up's potential as social criticism and as "rhetoric of social change" (Yaross Lee xiv), as these feelings "influence judgment or decision making and […] are accompanied by pleasure or pain" (Brinton 208).

One scholar who perhaps builds most directly and influentially on Greenbaum's work is J. Gilbert, with her conceptions of a rhetorical marginality. Marginality has been a central conceit of stand-up scholarship for as long as stand-up scholarship has existed. Mintz identifies a comedian's establishment of a marginal status as a way of encouraging the audience to exempt them from normal moral standards of behavior, allowing them to risk criticism (74). Brodie describes the way stand-up comedians speak from the outside-looking-in, by "cultivating a hermeneutic of marginality, of pointing to the center from its periphery" (*Vulgar* 158). He notes that traditionally, a comedian's marginality is not related to their status as potentially othered from a dominant group. Rather, he conceives of marginalization as "a subjective framework created by the performer in collusion with the audience. This is the technique by which comedians representative of groups so clearly not forced into the margins—the proverbial middle-class white male—are able to maintain an outsider stance" (*Vulgar* 104). J. Gilbert, by contrast, examines the dual marginality of comedians who actually exist on society's margins. She describes her work as "focus[ing] on the way female comics rhetorically construct and perform their marginality onstage, educating audiences with their distinctive brand of cultural critique" (*Standing* 57). She speaks to the way "comics wield rhetorical power in situations in which the marginal are not only accepted but valorized" (*Marginality* xii). She explores the subversive potential in rhetorical marginality (5), particularly in the way female comics "perform their own marginality" (xvii). I analyze the way comedians of queered stand-up perform their own marginality, linking it to their establishment of comic authority and claiming space for their stories.

Before moving to my analysis, I would like to clarify my use of "queer" in describing this trend. Within this thesis, I use "queer" in multiple ways. Here I borrow from Sara Ahmed's "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology," in which she uses queer "in at least two senses," sometimes " slid[ing] from one sense to the other" (565). For Ahmed, queer describes both "what is oblique or off-line or just plain wonky" (565) and "nonstraight sexual practices—in particular lesbianism—as a form of social and sexual contact" (565). Ahmed finds value in incorporating both meanings of "queer," noting their historical interconnectedness (565). More specifically, in this thesis I draw from Judith Keegan Gardiner's articulations of "queer" as both "an umbrella term for the non-heteronormative, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and transgender people and behaviors" (189) and "also in the more specific late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century sense of cultural approaches characterized by critiques of gender binaries and heteronormativity and often by metadiscursive practices, epistemological uncertainty, and skepticism about universal categories and essentialisms" (189). I acknowledge the amorphous quality of the term, not only in its pluralized meanings but in the way its very nature expands an open space; as Jennifer Reed explains, "[i]t is a purposely imprecise word, as its primary aim is to challenge strict demarcations of sexual and gendered identities. It can be applied to any 'binary outlaw'" (765). Judith Butler discusses the ever-expanding uses of "queer" in *Bodies That Matter,* writing, "[i]f the term 'queer' is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes" (228). As an adjective, I use "queer" as an umbrella term to hold destabilizing, disruptive elements both with regard to non-straight sexualities and wider contexts.

My use of "queering" as a verb draws from these liminal elements as well. Scholars like Sandahl point to the elements of "queering" that question norms of sexuality; she describes "queering" as "practices of putting a spin on mainstream representations to reveal latent queer subtexts; of appropriating a representation for one's own purposes, forcing it to signify differently; or of deconstructing a representation's heterosexism" (37). While my use of queering contains that element in analysis of queered stand-up's content, I also broaden the term to speak to the specials' negotiation of the form of stand-up comedy. For this, I find Michael DeAngelis' conception of a "queering of genre" useful. He describes "queering of genre" as a "narrative strategy that […] operates against the grain, using the conventions of genre both to integrate and familiarize, and to de-contextualize and render strange" (578). I find *Nanette*,

Rothaniel, and other specials in the trend on which my thesis centers to queer the format of stand-up comedy in this way. As quoted in the introduction, DeAngelis finds queering to be not only a "deconstructive operation" (579) but also "a model for restructuring of meaning" (579). This element is crucial to my understanding of queered stand-up as not only a destabilization or deconstruction of existing conventions, but of an opening of new possibilities within the format. I relate this to Gadsby's stated efforts of not destroying comedy but "rebuilding" it (Gadsby, "Three Ideas").

Though these recent specials work in specific ways to queer the format of stand-up, comedy has long held an innate potential for queerness, as studied by an increasing number of scholars. Judith Yaross Lee borrows Emily Dickinson's idea of "truth told slant" to describe stand-up's liminality, in the way it both claims authenticity and winks at its own artifice (xv-xviii). This slanted truth calls to mind the same "wonky," "contra-straight" conceptions of queerness as discussed above; as Alexander Doty writes, "[l]et's face it, as a genre comedy is fundamentally queer since it encourages rule-breaking, risk-taking, inversions and perversions in the face of straight patriarchal norms" (*Flaming* 81). Reed considers humor as inherently queer, as "[q]ueerness and humor both work through a willingness to delve into an indeterminate space between formal structures or categories that define normative human life" (766), viewing queerness as "the slippage from straight" (766). Reed also explores the possibilities within this connection: "[q]ueer comics use humor to encourage identification with, not a particular subject position, but an un-fixed, even contradictory composite of subjectivity. In fact, both humor and queerness rest on a conscious recognition of the multiple and contradictory nature of subjectivity" (765). She provides a model for the possibilities in queered stand-up, explaining that this queered and opened understanding of subjectivity "provides an opening for spectators to identify not so much along linear points of sameness, but across commonalities of feeling that make it possible to imagine connection across differences, and a more spacious and flexible circumstance in which to relate to others" (765). These possibilities within queer comedy with regard to humor will be discussed more in depth in Chapter Three.

Queerness and stand-up share a project of questioning and destabilizing norms; this thesis will examine ways in which the trend of queered stand-up brings such projects together, engaging with them in new forms. It will focus on questions of norm-contesting that loom large within queer theory, particularly with regard to heteronormativity. Samuel Chambers defines "heteronormativity" as the acknowledgment that "heterosexuality is the norm, in culture, in society, in politics. […] Heteronormativity emphasizes the extent to which everyone, straight

or queer, will be judged, measured, probed and evaluated from the perspective of the heterosexual norm. It means that everyone and everything is judged from the perspective of straight" (178). When comedians of queered stand-up tell stories centering on experiences of non-straight sexual orientations and practices, they present an alternative to expectations of heterosexuality. The performance of their marginality destabilizes cultural norms in a method beyond traditional incarnations of stand-up comedy. This thesis uses "queering" as a lens to view the project, enacted by *Nanette*, *Rothaniel*, and other specials in this wider trend, to destabilize norms within stand-up comedy, and within wider cultural contexts.

1.5 Introducing and Contextualizing *Nanette* and *Rothaniel*

Before directly analyzing *Nanette* and *Rothaniel*, this section will consider the specific contexts of the two specials. *Nanette* was written in a moment in which Gadsby felt the world was becoming more "unsafe" for them (qtd. in McHenry), due in large part to the rise of Donald Trump and the toxic debate about gay marriage in their native Australia (Gadsby reveals in *Nanette* that homosexuality was illegal until 1997 in Tasmania, where they were raised). Prior to *Nanette*, Gadsby was fairly well known in Australia, stemming in large part from the popularity of their previous stand-up, which was characterized by a "cheerful, feel-good, and kooky" persona (Luckhurst 58), and "personal tales […] about [their] sense of alienation, shame, [their] learned homophobia, and self-disgust at [their] lesbianism" (58). They also gained fame from their appearances on the chat show *Adam Hills Tonight,* which they co-created and in which they co-starred from 2011 to 2013, and in Josh Thomas' lauded sitcom *Please Like Me* from 2013 to 2016, a show which provided notable visibility of gay characters in Australia (57), and in which they played a character also named Hannah, elements of whose biography and characteristics resemble Gadsby's own. They first performed *Nanette* at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival in 2017, where the performance won "Best Comedy;" it racked up similar awards at other festivals such as the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2018 and the Montreal Comedy Festival in 2018, and gained great critical acclaim when performed off-Broadway and toured in the US and UK. The Netflix version, filmed in the Sydney Opera House in 2018, was released into a climate undergoing a reckoning with similar themes Gadsby discussed (Harvey Weinstein and the #MeToo movement), and won Gadsby both a Peabody Award and an Emmy Award for writing in 2019. Many reviews have cited

Nanette as changing the field of comedy.[19] Rachel Syme describes the response to *Nanette*: "[i]t is rare to see a work of art met with a rapturous reception. Sure, there are always fans, but I'm talking about fanatics. I'm talking about work that makes instant evangelists of those who behold it, that has people rushing to their social channels to urge strangers to watch this now, it changed my life and it will change yours too" (Syme). The extent of influence of *Nanette* perhaps encourages a reading of the special as kickstarting the trend; while earlier incarnations such as *Live!* And *Homecoming King* may contest conceptions of *Nanette* as its originator, *Nanette* can be seen as a key catalyst for the development and reach of queered stand-up.

Nanette begins as a straightforward, if skilled, example of stand-up comedy. Gadsby utilizes their affable persona to tell self-deprecating jokes about their lesbian identity and struggles fitting in in the world. However, midway through, *Nanette* shifts in tone, as Gadsby declares their intention to quit comedy. They question its potential as a medium for them to communicate their story. They provide a meta explanation of joke structures, describing jokes as moments of tension which are then alleviated. This resolution of tension is problematic for Gadsby on multiple levels: it both forces Gadsby to sit with the tension on their own, and forces them to truncate their story to fit within this two-part structure. Gadsby spends the rest of *Nanette* revisiting previously told jokes and stories, expanding them to allow space for more nuance, and including accounts of traumatic moments they had previously excised from their performances. Throughout *Nanette,* Gadsby both provides and withholds resolution of tension, while renegotiating their methods of storytelling.

If *Nanette* can be viewed as one of the original sparks of queered stand-up, *Rothaniel* can be seen as a recent example of a special taking up *Nanette*'s mantle. Upon release on HBO in April 2022, *Rothaniel* granted Jerrod Carmichael similar levels of acclaim and influence; appearing as number one on multiple critics's lists of the best comedy specials of 2022[20] and winning the same Emmy Award as *Nanette*—"Outstanding Writing For A Variety Special." Carmichael had previously gained recognition for *The Carmichael Show,* the sitcom he created and in which he starred. *The Carmichael Show* mixed traditional multi-camera elements with thorny political comedy to negotiate differing expectations placed on Black families (both on television and beyond). Carmichael was also renowned for his previous stand-up efforts, which

[19] See Scherer "'Nanette': Hannah Gadsby on Her Gamechanging Stand-Up Special"; Valentish "'I Broke the Contract': How Hannah Gadsby's Trauma Transformed Comedy"; and Lintott "Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette*: Connection Through Comedy."
[20] See Zinoman "The Best Comedy of 2022"; Martin "The 20 Best Comedy Specials of 2022"; Jackson and Seabaugh "Best Comedy Specials of 2022"; and VanArendonk "The Best Stand-up Specials of 2022."

often wrestled with many of queered stand-up's concerns—most notably his 2017 special *8,* which holds a similar punchline-eschewing, conversational style to *Rothaniel* and delves into similar territory of family trauma. The difference between the two specials, or perhaps the place in which *Rothaniel* furthers Carmichael's earlier efforts, is in its seemingly more intense personal revelations—specifically in Carmichael's mid-*Rothaniel* revelation that, despite previous material about girlfriends and heterosexuality, he identifies as gay.

This revelation, perhaps comparable to Gadsby's mid-show declaration of their intent to quit comedy, characterizes and shifts perception of both that which comes before it and that which comes after it. The special as a whole is deeply concerned with secrets, as Carmichael tells stories about the weight secrets have had within his own family dynamics, and then experiments with similar elements of secret keeping and revelation with the audience. He seemingly withholds and then carefully grants access to sensitive information about his own life—as perhaps best demonstrated in the show's title, which works as both a punchline and seemingly vulnerable admission. Throughout the special, Carmichael refuses to share his birth first name, a combination of the names of his two grandfathers; the show ends with the simultaneous punchline and revelation that that combined name is in fact *Rothaniel*. The impression created in the special is of a comedian processing his life in real time—Shirley Li in the *Atlantic* describes it as "a portrait of a comic navigating a personal moment publicly" (Li). This is emphasized in the special's explicitly interactional nature—not only does Carmichael elicit laughter and applause, but also directly asks the audience questions, to which he responds. He dismantles his previous persona and constructs a new one in front of the audience, making visible that process of construction. *Rothaniel* was released into a climate of post-Trump presidency, mid-pandemic, and post-#MeToo; in other words, in the midst of a cultural reckoning of the weight of secrets.

Despite differences in surrounding climate and specific content, both *Nanette* and *Rothaniel* subvert audience expectations—both in what is expected of a stand-up performance and of their own comedic personae in particular, offering new information that re-characterizes their personae. Both specials enact structural innovations about midway through that change their course, as they revisit stories and jokes the comedians had previously told and present them in a new light, with additional information. They wrestle with expectations—both on an individual scale, within families and social conceptions of gender roles, and on the wider scale of a stand-up performance. I analyze both *Nanette* and *Rothaniel* to explore the ways in which they work to queer stand-up, and the possibilities they demonstrate for the form.

2. “No More Secrets”: Queer, Confessional Meta-Personae

2.1 “Playing Oneself”: Theorizing Persona for Queered Stand-up

For all the difficulties in defining stand-up as a genre, most scholars agree that one of its key characteristics is a format of a single performer speaking onstage (Double, *Joke* 19). The content of stand-up comedy is produced by the stand-up’s body—text of the performance is spoken in their voice and modulated and supported by their facial expressions, gestures, and movements. As Mary Luckhurst and Sandra Mayer explain, this is a hallmark of performance arts, in which the performer’s body makes up “the material of artistic form and expression” (1). The performer’s body produces the material, and the content of a stand-up special is filtered through the performer figure; as Double phrases it, stand-up “puts a person on display in front of an audience” (*Joke* 19). Crucially, however, the “person” on display is a mediated, constructed version of the comedian—this thesis rests upon an understanding that any figure an audience sees onstage during a stand-up comedy performance is a reflection of a stand-up comedian’s stage persona, separate from any identifiable “self” of the comedian. Though the previous chapter utilized conceptions of stage persona to characterize methods within queered stand-up, I will begin my analysis by clarifying my understanding of “persona” within the context of stand-up comedy.

On a broad scale, scholars from multiple different disciplines have explored conceptions of persona as a constructed, public self separated from a private self; comedy scholars have increasingly utilized these early, more wide-ranging considerations to probe at the unique ways stand-up, as a particularly liminal genre, probes at these boundaries. Melanie Piper borrows from dramaturgical sociologist Erving Goffman to delineate between a comedian’s “front-stage” and “back-stage” personae (14). The demarcations between these are traditionally made literal by the separation between performance spaces and non-performance spaces, but stand-up’s first-person format, as well as the idea that it is “intended to be regarded as true” (Brodie, *Intimacy* 175) means that these separations are frequently blurred, with stand-up comedians’ “front-stage” personae increasingly expected to hew closely to their “back-stage” personae (Piper 14-16). Luckhurst considers the different ways in which these “front-stage” personae can be fashioned by borrowing Michael Redgrave’s terminology of “mask” and “face” (55). “Mask” personae appear more as a tool for self-concealment, and “face” appear closer to self-revelation; both play with the way these personae *appear* to audiences, and an *appearance* of “face” is crucial for stand-up.

At its core, a stand-up comedian's "front-stage" persona is "a distilled, or exaggerated, essence of themselves, embodied on stage, which becomes the vehicle for their comedy" (Hargrave 67). It is a defining component of a comedian's act, one that "provides context for the material, […] gives the audience something to identify with, and [is] what distinguishes one comic from the next" (Double, *Joke* 59). While some "character comedians" work to establish a larger-than-life persona (Quirk, *Manipulate* 132), "[a] stand-up comedian is generally taken to be performing as herself" (Rappaport and Quilty-Dunne 482). Rappaport and Quilty-Dunne suggest that this suspension of disbelief and conflation of person and persona is a key component of a stand-up performance: "[a]lthough most people recognize that the personality and viewpoint portrayed in the performance is not necessarily that of the performer herself, it is part of the pretence that the 'character' that the audience is viewing is the real performer" (482). This persona takes time to work toward and develop; an industry superstition suggests that "it takes seven years for a comedian to learn how individual beliefs and values can be configured into an effective stage persona, seven years to forge a compelling political identity, and seven years to 'find a voice' that is the mark of a unique and successful persona" (Luckhurst 56). Comedic stage persona is, conventionally, both cumulative and singular—added to and honed over time and over a range of performances.

However, the spaces in which comedians can articulate, and are expected to perform, their stage personae have "proliferated,"[21] and this has changed expectations toward their personae. Piper suggests that lines between performance spaces and non-performance spaces have themselves blurred, and "what constitutes on-stage space for a comedy performer has diversified beyond the comedy club or theatre stage; there are now a variety of publicly visible, on-stage venues where comedians are able to perform versions of their on- and off-stage personas" (15). Beyond late-night television interviews, comedians' appearances on podcasts, social media, and semi-autobiographical auteur television shows provide new venues—both under the comedians' control and outside it—for comedians to perform their stage personae, creating "increasingly porous boundaries of front- and back-stage spaces" (23). Piper describes new "front-stage" personae as including an "extratextual public persona […] composed of various iterations of the comedian's performance of self on- and off-stage, in fiction and non-fiction" (16). As the lines between "front-stage" and "back-stage" are increasingly blurred, I will use "stage persona" to refer to personae performed for audience consumption, within a broad conception of what might be considered "stage."

[21] To borrow persona-studies scholar P. David Marshall's terminology; Marshall describes a contemporary "proliferation of public selves" ("Persona Studies: Mapping the Proliferation of the Public Self").

As an element honed over time, "the" stage persona is conventionally singular, and considered directly linked to the comedian. "Finding your voice is understood to be the same thing as finessing a persona that is intimately aligned with a comic's offstage personality and sense of self" (Luckhurst 56). The stage persona is, increasingly, personal; as quoted of Double in the introduction, "the idea that the comedian's act should reflect his or her real personality is commonplace" (Double, *Joke* 6). Piper and Luckhurst both discuss the ways in which contemporary stand-up comedians are expected to, in essence, play themselves (Luckhurst 54, Piper 18). As Luckhurst describes it, "[i]n stand-up comedy it is now the fashion and audience expectation for the gap between the performer's branded public self and their stage persona to be as narrow as possible and for offstage and onstage selves to be intricately blurred into one" (54). Piper links this directly to the first-person narration of a stand-up performance, as "they try to make you believe that what they are telling you stems from personal experiences or observations and is funny because of their own unique take on the world" (18). The "personas of stand-up comedians are understood as cultural objects" (14), and "comedians with a personal, confessional style […] make the argument for their front-stage persona as being their authentic selves" (14). A comedian may frame their stage persona as a direct reflection of their self-identity, but this narrative is itself a part of the performance, by nature a construction.

Gadsby and Carmichael, in *Nanette* and *Rothaniel*, make this construction visible. They enter into their respective specials with personae built and honed over time, through previous stand-up performances as well as extra-textually, and answer demands for confessional, authentic access by dismantling and contesting the usefulness of their previous personae. They enact new meta personae that blur boundaries between "face" and "mask," between "front-stage" and "back-stage." In short, they queer expectations of stage persona. Their meta, real-time manipulation of their own stage personae both reveal the construction inherent in stage personae while also allowing them to become malleable and movable, deployed to suit alternate needs. For Gadsby and Carmichael, a stage persona becomes no longer a singular entity, tied inextricably to the comedian, and instead becomes a possible plurality, malleable and changeable, to be wielded differently in different contexts to support their various needs. This chapter will examine the ways in which *Nanette* and *Rothaniel* queer understandings of stage-persona within stand-up to enact meta-confessional personae—deconstructing their own "confessional" methods. These queered personae use the appearance of "confession" to establish a rhetorical comic authority, questioning gender norms in particular based in invocation of personal experience.

2.2 "I am in My Prime": Hannah Gadsby's Interrupted, Fumerist Persona

Gadsby's queering of persona in *Nanette* rests on them previously having a cohesive, established stage-persona. Gadsby's cumulative stage persona had previously been built up from appearances in multiple different "front-stage" contexts. As discussed in the introduction, Gadsby has long been a fixture on the Australian and international Anglophone stand-up scene, in which they developed a persona that was affable, if neurotic; mocking, but gentle, apt to criticize but not particularly incendiary (Luckhurst 58). After a rocky period following coming out as a lesbian, their sexual orientation became a key part of the persona, but framed in a gentle, self-effacing way (56). Luckhurst describes the way in which Gadsby's initial persona falls in line with J. Gilbert's conception of a "reporter" persona: Gadsby frames themself as a non-threatening lesbian, one who will critique and mock societal ills but somehow also shrug off their weight, with a conflict-averse demeanor, politicized only "gently," and appearing overall comforting (58-59). This stage persona is also solidified by Gadsby's "extratextual" appearances as a character also named Hannah in the fictional television show *Please Like Me*. Elements of Gadsby's background—at times tragic and upsetting events played for laughs—appear as part of fictional Hannah's background; interviewers conflate and probe at the connections.[22] Hannah the character is subdued and reflective, in line with Gadsby's conflict-averse persona, though her morose demeanor perhaps adds shades of depth to Gadsby's affability. Gadsby furthers this persona in other interviews, described by reviewers as thoughtful, considerate, and humble (Sebag-Montefiore). Pre-*Nanette*, Gadsby thus formed a distinct, if subdued, comedic persona.

However, audiences entering into *Nanette*—particularly the filmed version of *Nanette* streamed on Netflix and considered in this thesis—may be unfamiliar with Gadsby's accumulated persona. *Nanette*'s first incarnation as a stage show was initially performed in Gadsby's local contexts, for audiences largely familiar with, and actively seeking out Gadsby (Luckhurst 57). As *Nanette* grew into an international phenomenon, racking up awards and attention, it also gained new audiences. Though widely acclaimed by the time of its Netflix debut, the recorded version needed to consider how to introduce Gadsby to a global audience—one that, rather than purchasing a ticket and traveling to see an in-person show, might casually stumble upon the recording when browsing Netflix's site. For *Nanette*'s examination and deconstruction of persona to succeed, the special must work to communicate Gadsby's

[22] For instance see Hill "Hannah Gadsby Talks Art, Please Like Me and the 'Not-Fun'" and Burford "A Guide to Hannah Gadsby's Pre-Nanette Work."

accumulated persona to audiences whose first exposure to Gadsby might be *Nanette*'s recorded incarnation. To do so, the special leans into both its format as a filmed and recorded object and its dual levels of audience consumption.

Nanette's filmed techniques and editing work to reconcile the in-person and virtual audiences. The special begins with a pre-recorded film sequence of Gadsby in a private sphere. They open the door with keys and are greeted enthusiastically by dogs; the impression conveyed is that this is Gadsby's own home. They put away their keys and sunglasses, making a cup of tea before curling up on their couch with their dogs—shifting into a cozy, domestic environment. However, this footage is intercut with footage of Gadsby's entrance into the expansive, packed-to-the-rafters Sydney Opera House to thunderous applause. A figure performing on a grand stage, and drawing such passionate crowds, seems to be a far cry from the self-effacing stage persona Gadsby had previously employed, and these two spheres at first appear largely separate—the subdued sounds of Gadsby's teacup clinking into its saucer and the whining of their dogs against the raging applause. However, as the folksy, acoustic "Bobby Reid" plays over both sequences and the cuts between the spaces become more frequent, the effect, rather than contrasting between two disparate elements of Gadsby's stage persona, helps to connect between them. Gadsby is the performer entering onstage, distinguished enough to draw crowds and applause, but they are also the quiet, cozy homebody. Efficiently, Gadsby's more subdued persona is communicated to the digital audience, who can now see the homebody version of Gadsby when looking at the Gadsby on stage.

Initially, Gadsby works to reinforce this persona onstage as well. Their demeanor, speaking in *Nanette*'s early sections, is subdued—posture somewhat hunched, their voice clear but modulated calmly. Using descriptive language and "I" statements, they directly narrate their identity to the audience. Acknowledging their androgynous appearance, they define themselves, somewhat mockingly, as a "gender non-normal"[23] lesbian (Gadsby, *Nanette*). Building upon this conception, they compare themself to the more "loud and proud" gays at Pride events, asking, "where do the quiet gays go?" (Gadsby, *Nanette*). In contrast to people who celebrate their orientation and gender identity, Gadsby frames themself as emotionally reserved, an introvert more pleased with "the sound a teacup makes when it perfectly aligns with a saucer" (Gadsby, *Nanette*) than with loudly expressing their emotions. Synthesizing their way of framing their queerness and their reserved personality, they declare that, above all, they "identify as tired" (Gadsby, *Nanette*). This works to gently mock contemporary conventions

[23] All transcripts quoted in this thesis have been taken during my viewings of *Nanette* on Netflix and *Rothaniel* on HBO. I have used exclamation points to denote raised tone of voice, and ellipses to denote pauses.

surrounding identity politics, but through a self-denigrating lens. Their initial persona on-stage is positioned in line with the "reporter" persona, mocking contemporary demands for identity labels (as well as their own quiet nature), but in a passively complacent way—criticizing from the outside.

This inoffensive, resigned persona has its uses and benefits. Non-normative identities and sexual orientations are, as Gadsby expresses, often viewed as dangerous. Framing themself as affable and non-threatening in a world and climate that views parts of their identity with suspicion has in some ways allowed Gadsby a voice in mainstream society. Sanding down any edges, creating a persona that defused rather than incited tension kept Gadsby safe; as they themself declare, "it was a survival tactic" (Gadsby, *Nanette*). By framing their social criticism through a gentle, "reporter" persona, Gadsby performs the delicate balance of offering criticism while still being found palatable; performing this balance allows their voice to be heard. The persona and voice that Gadsby developed over time allowed them to move through "gender normal" spaces, to survive in homophobic climates and present their status-quo-defying identity in a way that was acceptable to mainstream audiences.

However, Gadsby demonstrates within *Nanette* that this sanded-down persona comes with costs. As *Nanette* moves forward, cracks in Gadsby's reserved persona begin to show; a live-wire tension comes in the air as Gadsby becomes more biting, seemingly feinting towards an attack before resolving it with statements of "only joking" (Gadsby, *Nanette*). This comes to a head when Gadsby asks, "[d]o you know why I'm such a funny fucker?" (Gadsby, *Nanette*). Not quite self-deprecating, their tone here is tight and strained; the profanity expressed in this way is jarring, and puts the audience on edge, away from the gentler comforting of *Nanette*'s first half. They continue, "[d]o you? It's because, you know, I've been learning the art of tension defusion since I was a child. Back then it wasn't a job, wasn't even a hobby, it was a survival tactic. I didn't have to invent the tension. I was the tension" (Gadsby, *Nanette*). Gadsby points to the harm and desperation in this "survival tactic" of tension defusion, and directly links it to their experience growing up as a queer person, taught to internalize homophobia and self-hatred. They say, growing up, "I sat soaking in shame… in the closet, for ten years. […] When you soak a child in shame, they cannot develop the neurological pathways that carry thought… you know, carry thoughts of self-worth. […] When I came out of the closet […] [t]he only thing I knew how to do was to be invisible and hate myself" (Gadsby, *Nanette*). The affable stage persona that shaped Gadsby into a palatable figure for a homophobic world resolved discomfort for the audience but left the tension and the shame for Gadsby themself. Developing themself into a palatable stage persona and sanding down their edges were acts of violence against

Gadsby themself; as Luckhurst writes, this more palatable persona served as a Redgravian "mask" but was a "corrosive agent" (60). The putting themself down and making themself small may have given them "permission to speak" (Gadsby, *Nanette*), but it also took away their power, putting them in a position in which the audience's needs of comfort and conflict-resolution were addressed to the detriment of their own needs.

In these moments of leaning into tension, Gadsby destroys their old persona, offering a new one in its place. Gone is the prim and proper subservience and emotional reserve; in its place is a stage persona that embraces both previously pushed-down emotions of anger and fury, as well as the power and the sense of self-worth Gadsby previously felt denied. Gadsby compares their passionate, riled up persona to the "angry" comedy conventionally performed by male comedians. Calling these men (for whom George Carlin and Louis C.K. might provide examples) "kings of the genre" (Gadsby, *Nanette*), Gadsby declares that audiences often do not accept angry personae from non-men (Gadsby, *Nanette*). But Gadsby pokes fun at this, questioning what these straight white men have to be angry about (Gadsby, *Nanette*), and framing these angry male comedians as somehow weaker, upset over the little things, with angry comedy driven from a sense more of indignation than any real violation (perhaps in line with Brodie's sense of constructed marginalization). Gadsby adopts their own new angry, righteous stage persona to convey their fury and pain as a reaction to very real, very destructive social marginalization. Willett and Willett borrow comedian Kate Clinton's conception of "fumerist" humor to describe angry comedy with a distinctly feminist bent, that challenges a patriarchal status quo (27). "Fumerist" might be understood as a feminist answer to "angry man" comedy, in which the anger is righteously defensive—not representing the inherent threat embodied by an angry man, but instead constituting a reclamation of previously-denied power. Hargrave describes an "interruptive" stage persona as one that "splits and refocuses an established persona in order to voice another more layered truth" (71); Gadsby's new "fumerist" persona allows them to voice the angry, negative feelings they had previously internalized. Rather than reducing them to fit mainstream social expectations, this stage persona gives them a position of power, and allows them to express a fuller breadth of their emotions. In destroying their old persona and offering a new one in its place, Gadsby utilizes persona as a tool for protecting their own mental health.

This new, "fumerist" persona is also useful for Gadsby in fulfilling their needs with regard to social criticism. The previous "reporter" persona couched its criticism in a gentle and comforting dynamic, resolving and making light of social issues Gadsby found painful and contentious. The self-marginalization Gadsby previously exercised not only caused harm to

Gadsby themself, but mitigated the issues of which they spoke, softening Gadsby' points, with Gadsby themself, or others in low-status positions, serving as the targets. As Gadsby declares,

> [c]omedy is more used to throwaway jokes about priests being pedophiles and Trump grabbing the pussy. I don't have time for that shit. I don't. Do you know who used to be an easy punchline? Monica Lewinsky. Maybe, if comedians had done their job properly, and made fun of the man who abused his power, then perhaps we might have had a middle-aged woman with an appropriate amount of experience in the White House, instead of, as we do, a man who openly admitted to sexually assaulting vulnerable young women because he could. (Gadsby, *Nanette*)

Their previous method of comedic social criticism is untenable, and *Nanette*'s political and social commentary is no longer gentle or comfortable; it is personal, raw, painful, and un-look-away-able. The "fumerist" persona grants Gadsby the power to directly challenge the figures and social norms that enrage them. Gadsby's shifted persona both protects their needs with regard to mental health, allowing for a more well-rounded sense of their personality, and inverts power dynamics of marginalization within stand-up.

This addition of space for more "layered truths" and deeply held emotional convictions and opinions may be seen as Gadsby's persona more directly aligning with their "back-stage" self. Indeed, many critics and reviewers praise the "authenticity" of Gadsby's performance; their throwing off the old persona is framed as "soul-baring" (Ellen). By including a wider range of their emotions and experiences, Gadsby's new persona can be read as answering demands for the confessional and revelational. But Gadsby's manipulation of their own persona within the context of the show demonstrates the constructed nature of persona. The new persona that emerges is just that—a new stage persona, not necessarily a face behind a mask. Luckhurst coins the term "meta-persona" to discuss Gadsby's real-time reworking of their persona (Luckhurst 61)—by visibly changing their persona onstage, Gadsby demonstrates persona as a malleable entity, potentially unmoored from the comedian themself. Gadsby in *Nanette* challenges conceptions of persona as a singular voice developed and honed over time; instead, it is a plurality of tools, able to be deployed and wielded differently at different times. An enactment of meta-persona argues for personae that can shift to suit a comedian's multiple needs, and are not necessarily read as access to a comedian's "back-stage" self.

2.3 "We at a Gay Show, Bro?": Jerrod Carmichael's Coming Out and Negotiations of Authenticity

Like Gadsby, Carmichael spent years honing a distinct stage persona, which he then interrogates and dismantles within *Rothaniel*. However, unlike Gadsby, his newly emergent stage persona is less of a drastically different entity, and more of a reconfiguration of elements

of his previous stage persona. His initial stage-persona communicated certain elements of personality: he appeared casual and impish, often playing devil's advocate. He discussed controversial issues, often presenting multiple perspectives. Most notably, pre-*Rothaniel*, Carmichael was a comedian who could have comfortably been described as confessional. Conforming to contemporary expectations of "personal" stand-up, he explicitly mined his own life for his comedy. His stand-up (most notably *8*) delved into his psyche, into his thoughts, fears, and preoccupations. This came through strongly within his political material—material that did not appear perhaps overtly political because it was so deeply grounded in Carmichael's own experiences. He embraced his perspective as a Black man in the United States, utilizing an examination of racial social marginalization to poke holes in societal prejudices, and to provide social commentary through the sharing of his own experiences of discrimination and fear. Alongside his controversial considerations, he told stories about his family, friends, and relationships, delving into taboo, "personal" topics. Above all, Carmichael's previous stand-up worked to fashion a stage persona that appeared to be authentically aligned with his "back-stage" persona, utilizing an impression of "face."

Carmichael's extratextual persona, too, was steeped in confessional and personal elements. This is strongly embodied in the work for which he was previously most widely known, the semi-autobiographical sitcom *The Carmichael Show.* Carmichael created and starred in the sitcom, which follows the fictional Carmichael family's experiences as a Black family in the United States. The characters have a particularly liminal quality as fictional characters—not only does Carmichael play a character also named Jerrod Carmichael, but the fictional members of the Carmichael family are named for Carmichael's own family members, including his father, Joe, and mother, Cynthia. As Carmichael reveals in interviews, and as is listed in NBC's official description of the show, the fictional characters are based on their real-life correspondents (Carmichael "Uncomfortable"; NBC). This marks *The Carmichael Show* as an outlier among eponymous comedian sitcoms, in which the protagonist often keeps the lead's name, but supporting characters are made to appear more explicitly fictional. In personality, *The Carmichael Show*'s Jerrod Carmichael is a somewhat immature, conflict-averse younger son who uses humor to deflect from his family's debates. He also has a serious girlfriend (later, wife) named Maxine, a figure created for the show and who does not draw inspiration from a real-life counterpart, and one of the show's core focuses is the way in which Jerrod and Maxine navigate the ups and downs of a long-term relationship. Fictionalized representations of comedians in eponymous television shows can act as a liminal space for the comedian, feeding and negotiating elements of their stage-persona (Piper 15-16). Carmichael's fictional portrayal

helps to construct his extratextual persona as both confessionally "authentic" and explicitly heterosexual.

Rothaniel's filmed introduction, like *Nanette*'s, works to communicate elements of Carmichael's previous persona to new audiences, invoking elements of a "back-stage" persona in the "front-stage" context of the special's performance. The sequence begins on a wide shot of a snowy evening on a city street; a small, distant figure walks into frame. The camera tracks the figure, bundled up as they cross city streets; it is only in an eventual close-up that the figure is revealed to be Carmichael. The camera then follows Carmichael as he traverses city blocks until he enters the performance venue—a small jazz club—scored by a melancholic jazz song in the background. Viewing Carmichael from behind, the (virtual) audience is taken with him on his journey into *Rothaniel*'s performance: the effect is of seeing Carmichael in "private" before the "front-stage" performance. Tracked in an unbroken shot, Carmichael enters the venue, familiarly greeting a man at the door and handing his coat to the coat-check, and then vaults onstage; the pre-performance, "back-stage" Carmichael is visually connected to his "front-stage" self. The introduction works to frame *Rothaniel*'s Carmichael as particularly unvarnished, positioning the audience to expect authenticity and access to a "back-stage" Carmichael; the filmed introduction helps characterize Carmichael's stage persona as "face."

Rothaniel's consideration of authenticity, of "face" and "mask," however, are not only negotiated in form; rather, considerations of these topics explicitly constitute much of the special's content. Carmichael quickly reveals a preoccupation with authenticity and truth, largely through an exploration of secrets. That exploration has a dual level—Carmichael both reveals, in a confessional style, previously hidden secrets within his own family, and considers the ambivalences inherent in secret-keeping. Early in *Rothaniel*, Carmichael says, "I wanna talk about secrets! Secrets! I should whisper it, right? I carried a lot of secrets my whole life. I feel like I was birthed into them" (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*). He goes on to speak of the varying different levels of infidelity in his family background, as his grandmother had an affair with a married man and both of his grandfathers as well as his father fathered children outside of their marriages. He describes the way in which the family members carried these secrets, describing secrets as "[t]hings that exist, but don't exist. It's things that are right there, hiding in plain sight" (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*). For Carmichael, secrets deny truth but must, by nature, go unacknowledged. This creates a certain cognitive dissonance that resembles the "practical and cognitive disengagement" (Quirk, *Manipulate* 38) inherent in stand-up, in which an audience must suspend elements of disbelief to accept the things a comedian says as truth (38-39). Through Carmichael's dual-levelled exploration of secrets, he both pushes back against this

suspension of disbelief in his confessional stage-persona, and probes at it as a concern within relationships.

Carmichael notes the distress and difficulties in this dissonance—he frames keeping secrets as something harmful and negative. For Carmichael, keeping secrets is akin to "lying," and antithetical to truth and authenticity. Therein lies the cognitive dissonance in Carmichael's persona performance; his "authenticity" rests on an acceptance and assumption that his previous performances have not only appeared revelatory and confessional, but are also distinctly truthful. However, *Rothaniel* demonstrates that this was not necessarily the case. Midway through the special, Carmichael admits that he felt "like a liar" (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*) after pushing his father to be honest with his mother about his infidelity (and break the stasis of his family's conspiratorial shared ignorance) when he himself had a secret, one he "kept from my mother, and my father, and my family, my friends, and you, all of you, professionally, personally" (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*). In a weighty moment perhaps akin to Gadsby's declaration they need to quit comedy, Carmichael reveals, "the secret is that I'm gay" (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*). This revelation is presented as a soul-baring sharing, an exercise in revealing a long-hidden truth. Divulging this information, one that contests previous public understandings about him, he reveals the extent of the illusion of his previously fashioned authenticity. However, by coming out, he becomes no longer a "liar" like his father. This revelation can be seen as taking off a "mask" to reveal a "face;" indeed, multiple reviews of *Rothaniel* use this language to describe this moment[24]. In turning from a "liar" to a "truth-teller," his stage-persona appears all the more authentic.

His initial stage persona did not merely appear authentic in a general sense; as explored earlier in this subchapter, it denoted a particular personality. Carmichael constructed a public self in the way and format in which he wanted to be understood. In *Rothaniel*, Carmichael demonstrates an explicit concern about the way he is viewed by others, highlighted in his feelings about his first name. He says, early in *Rothaniel*, "[o]ne of my biggest, one of my last held secrets is my name. My name is not Jerrod. Welcome to the show, everybody. I thought we were being honest tonight" (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*). He explains that Jerrod, the name he uses personally and professionally, is his middle name. He hates his birth first name and has gone to extreme lengths to hide it, including bribing staff on his high school yearbook (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*). In his preoccupation with the way others frame him, down to his own

[24] See Zinoman "Jerrod Carmichael Comes Out in a Riveting Special That's About So Much More" for example.

name—and in his admission of attempts to modify that—he draws attention to the labors in constructing a self for public consumption and legibility. Like hiding information and secret-keeping, he construes this process as lying, saying, "[y]ou know, lies. How you lie to people? I'm afraid of not… Man, just like my mom, is that performance of like who you're supposed to be. Like I'm afraid of not smiling. I smile a lot. I feel like if I don't smile, I look like the n*s that shot Malcom X. I know" (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*). In this he directly admits that he constructs his self-presentation to conform to social expectations—down to the level of facial expressions—performing his personality in order to be read a certain way by others. This particular consideration hinges on a degree of racial specificity, hinting at the expectation he faces, as a Black man, to appear friendly to not appear intense or threatening. In this he demonstrates the multitude of reasons why he must be very aware of the way he moves through the world, and this commentary is an acknowledgement of the real ramifications of viewing people in particular ways, particularly people of marginalized backgrounds. Carmichael emphasizes the weight in persona construction, both within performance contexts and beyond.

This concern with how he presents himself to the world, Carmichael reveals, is, to a certain degree, warranted. Just as positioning himself to be seen as friendly works to comply with social expectations for him as a man of color, so too does the remaining in the closet, and presenting himself as a heterosexual man, help to keep him safe in a homophobic society. Remaining in the closet works to construct a heterosexual public persona; in a sense, being "in the closet" can be viewed as one of the most prominent ways of understanding social persona construction, so accepted that the process has its own name. As Carmichael reveals, his heterosexual, closeted persona also allows him to maintain a very particular way of being seen by his family and friends. He explains his reluctance to come out publicly by saying, "I didn't actually say it to people, because I know it changes people's, some people, it changes their perception of me. I can't control that" (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*). Here social persona construction—remaining in the closet—is framed as a way of controlling how others see him; that control is vital, as the possibility of being viewed differently poses a danger of changing his relationships. However, the hiding itself is also positioned as a negative, as a hurtful lying. He describes the way his best friend felt "tricked" when he came out. "That's the thing, I came out too late, a little too late. […] All my friends felt like I was just duplicitous, like I was just lying to them. They didn't know who I was. They all reacted like Sally Field in Mrs. Doubtfire. They were like, 'The whole time?' They were very mad about that shit" (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*). Secret-keeping, the construction of a particular public persona, is compared to lying, and is positioned as manipulative. But the revelation of his sexuality, in a homophobic

climate, can be a negative thing for his social sphere. Carmichael says, "[m]y homeboy, Jamar, said… This is one of my best friends. I let him sleep on my couch when he needed it. I was always there for him. He told me he felt like he was tricked into having a gay best friend. He said, 'I would've never signed up for this'" (Carmichael *Rothaniel*). This is a painful rejection for Carmichael. He demonstrates the way that revelation of truths can be "soul-baring," but that this vulnerability can lead to "risk" in both public and private contexts. Carmichael's more "authentic" persona is thus ambivalent.

But the (appearance of) authenticity of this persona is itself ambivalent, and liminal. As discussed earlier in this subchapter, the contract of stand-up requires a certain suspension of disbelief, in which the audience must not only view the performance as consisting of truth but must also ignore this process. The audience must not look too closely at the possible truths or un-truths within the performance—rather, they are encouraged to accept the statements and stories as they stand. Carmichael, however, works to make the audience explicitly conscious of the possibilities of both truths and untruths. In his examination of lies and secrets, he forces an awareness of those things conventionally ignored. In this way, he interrupts that suspension of disbelief. This is furthered in his modifications of his initial stage persona through his revelations. Elements of his life, from his sexual orientation to his name, were expected to be "regarded as true," both within the performance space, and, by framing himself as confessional, within outside expectations of authenticity. But through the course of *Rothaniel*, he explicitly frames those as "lies." By framing his previous persona as a "lie," and by revealing the elements it previously hid, he exposes persona as a construction. *Rothaniel* here becomes a direct interrogation of persona. In this way, though Carmichael previously appeared authentic and confessional, offering access to a "back-stage" self, that access and particular authenticity is revealed to be itself a construction, a "mask" persona that appeared to be "face." The newly revealed "face" persona becomes ambivalently authentic; "confessional" and yet not.

In interrupting that suspension of disbelief, Carmichael, too, enacts a "meta-persona," one whose seams and inherent construction is visible. In a way, this meta persona appears as an even more authentic persona, through its acknowledgment of its own artifice. But in another way, it acknowledges the construction inherent in any persona—including not only his previous stage persona but also the new, "soul-baring" stage persona. This interrogation of persona is queered, blurring boundaries of confession and withholding, structuring ambivalences around authenticities. If Carmichael's previous persona was framed as "confessional," his emergent *Rothaniel* persona can then be read as "meta-confessional." This persona is confessional in the sense as outlined by Grobe, explicitly containing an understanding of its performative nature,

its way of fashioning itself for public consumption (vii). It borrows the trappings and aesthetics of a confessional persona, but, in the exaggerated claiming of its own truthfulness alongside an awareness of the constructed nature of persona in general, it draws attention to persona's status as a construction. It contains both elements; it is queer. This meta-confessional persona offers multiple uses. The confessionality claims a certain degree of revealed access to the performer and closeness to a "backstage" persona, allowing them to appear to comply with contemporary demands for authenticity and access. At the same time, a meta persona that is visibly constructed, however close to a "backstage" persona it purports to be, becomes umoored from the comedian; it creates a distancing. Hargrave discusses a type of stage persona that works as a "shield," operating as "a mode of address which allows the comic to choose those parts of him- or herself that they will allow public scrutiny" (69), permitting "the voicing of vulnerabilities that would otherwise be too painful to share" (69). In his discussion of his family's and friends' alternately disappointed and unresolved reactions to his coming out, Carmichael reveals the pain that can come from being vulnerable. The ambivalent authenticity of Carmichael's meta-confessional persona allows him to share vulnerabilities while remaining, to a degree, protected.

2.4 Confessional Meta-Personae and Beyond

When Gadsby kills off their previous persona and reveals a righteously angry one in its place, the effect is of a removal of a mask of politeness and agreeability to reveal the roiling emotions that were kept hidden underneath. This new stage-persona is positioned as "soul-baring" in contrast to the previous persona, but the very process of dismantling and enacting different personae onstage calls attention to that process. Carmichael pulls off a similar trick in *Rothaniel*. Adding new information fundamentally changes public perception of him, and the stage persona previously articulated to be authentic and confessional is seen to have been itself a mask; the newly revealed Carmichael stage-persona both leans into appearances of authenticity while acknowledging its own artifice. Both disrupt the conventional tether linking comedians directly to their stage persona, long seen as a direct line, a voice developed in the singular. The creation of new stage personae deployed alongside previous personae demonstrate a possible plurality of personae, built and utilized to suit certain needs; as those needs change, personae can be discarded for ones that better suit other needs. Gadsby and Carmichael demonstrate the possibilities for queered stand-up in negotiating conventional utilizations of stage persona.

The particular refashioned personae Gadsby and Carmichael construct in their respective specials have a direct use for their multiple needs. In positioning their previous personae as "mask" and their new personae as a contrasting "face," they invoke a sense of the confessional, appearing to fulfil contemporary demands for authenticity and linkage between "back-stage" and "front-stage" personae. Simultaneously, however, the visible process of destruction and change and demonstration of plural personae reveal the constructed nature of both these particular stage personae, and personae as a whole. In a sense, their emergent personae can be seen as "meta-confessional personae," responding and fulfilling expectations of close access while winkingly acknowledging their own active construction for public consumption. These meta-confessional personae queer conventions of stand-up comedy personae in their embracing of ambivalences in the possibilities of stage-personae. There is a certain cognitive dissonance in conventional stand-up, as it requires a suspension of disbelief, a refusal to look at things head-on, in order to accept things regarded as true. Gadsby's and Carmichael's meta-analyses of their own methods force awareness of those elements traditionally ignored. They both encourage the *appearance* of truth within their performances while also outright acknowledging the illusion. In their enacting of meta-confessional personae and embracing these ambivalences, rather than positioning them as contrast, Gadsby and Carmichael queer stand-up conventions of personae.

The specifics of Gadsby's and Carmichael's "confessions" do not happen in a vacuum. The revelations they share directly reflect vulnerabilities of queer, non-straight people in a heterosexual, homophobic world. There is a power in framing their experiences as the ways in which they personally have experienced societal, politicized trauma. As Hargrave positions vulnerability as "an ethical resource that helps manifest virtues of empathy and compassion" (69), Carmichael and Gadsby's confessional elements work to put a "face" to these wider social concerns. Their vulnerable personae work to personalize political issues, positioning their authority as stemming from personal experience. They offer a rhetoric of social change for stand-up based in connection and empathy. However, the meta elements of their personae mitigate the "risk" (Hargrave 69) inherent in this kind of vulnerability. As Gadsby and Carmichael demonstrate, meta-confessional personae allow queered stand-up to reflect needs of both the individual comedian and a societal whole; working toward social change with regard to social acceptance of non-normative sexualities in invoking empathy through the sharing of vulnerabilities while still protected by the queer, winking ambivalence of authenticity.

3. Modifying the Play-frame: A Queered Humor of Empathy

For all the acclaim and accolades *Nanette* and *Rothaniel* (and other queered stand-up specials) receive, they still seem to be dogged by a question of whether or not they can be considered examples of stand-up comedy. The introduction to this thesis explored the way in which the genre lines and definitions are contested, with arguments to be made that *Nanette* and *Rothaniel* absolutely fit the criteria, as amorphous as they can be. The area in which *Nanette* and *Rothaniel* perhaps most directly challenge norms within stand-up is in their negotiations of humor's place within the format, negotiations that have led critics to question "[h]ow funny does comedy need to be?" (Fox "Funny"). In many ways, that question opens a minefield, as humor is acknowledged to be widely subjective: different people find different things funny. However, the question may refer more to the general consensus that, whatever other expectations they may adhere to (as discussed in the introduction), "the primary aim of any stand-up performance is to make the audience laugh" (Quirk, *Manipulate* 14).

I find that *Nanette*, *Rothaniel*, and other queered stand-ups push back against that consensus, troubling the notion of audience laughter as the primary goal of a stand-up performance. Their aims, perhaps, are more multifaceted and ambiguous, more in line with understandings of stand-up comedians that conceive of them as predominantly cultural commentators and artists. At times, humor proves a useful tool for their aims, and they wield it expertly. At other times, they find places in which comedy falls short, failing to suit their needs—not unlike their experiences with their early limiting and singular personae. In these spaces, Gadsby and Carmichael withhold joking resolution, lingering in emotions often excised from humorous spaces. *Nanette* and *Rothaniel* have a slippery, queer relationship to humor, questioning what might be understood as a special's "primary aim," and negotiating humor's place both as a performance goal in and of itself, and as a tool to be used to suit their other aims.

This intangibility is not new for humor—a slippery concept itself that has enticed and eluded scholars from multidisciplinary backgrounds for centuries. Scholars of such wide-ranging fields as sociology, psychology, and anthropology study the ways in which humor affects our ways of thinking and our formations of groups and relationships (See, for instance, Willett and Willett 135; Quirk, *Manipulate* 15-17; Critchley 5-6). The inherent subjectivity of humor, as well as its combination of physical sensation and mental processes, lead to it being discussed as ineffable, somehow magical—as seen in Elwyn B. White's oft-cited maxim, "[e]xplaining a joke is like dissecting a frog. You understand it better, but it dies in the process" (xvii); as Simon Critchley writes, "[a] joke explained is a joke misunderstood" (1-2).

The rise in comedy scholarship has led to a rise in studying humor for humor's sake—not only to examine its relationship to other disciplines, but to attempt to discover and explain how and why people find things funny. Before analyzing the ways in which *Nanette* and *Rothaniel* negotiate humor, I would like to give a brief overview of the basics of humor theory, to explore the ways in which queered stand-up, in its meta-examinations, responds to contemporary understandings of humor.

3.1 "How Funny Does Comedy Need to Be?": Theorizing Humor

As such a contested, or ineffable, concept, many theorists seem to avoid an outright definition of humor. For the purposes of this thesis, and at the risk of sounding reductive, I will borrow John Morreall's explanation of humor as "funniness" (*Relief* 28). Humor theorists work to explain the processes—internal and mental as well as physical—that lead to laughter, to finding something funny. General consensus among humor scholars is that there are three main branches of humor theory (Critchley 2-3; Morreall, *Relief* 4-23; Quirk, *Manipulate* 20-22). Though these are often discussed as separate schools of thought, Quirk suggests thinking of them as alternate models for looking at humor, as no one model can comfortably encapsulate all instances of humor (*Manipulate* 20).

Perhaps the oldest (or most traditional) form of conceptualizing humor stems from the "superiority theory." Reaching as far back as Plato, Aristotle, and Thomas Hobbes, this theory conceives of humor as a pleasure drawn from feelings of superiority over another (Willett and Willett 7); as the basis of humor of mocking others, amusement comes when one is the "agent rather than the target of laughter" (Willett and Willett 7). This theory dominated Enlightenment schools of thought in the eighteenth century, and is perhaps why humor was viewed for long with such suspicion; many early theorists could not conceive of a humor that did not involve putting others down, and this very much reinforces hierarchies and binaries (Critchley 2-3). It has largely fallen out of favor in modern theoretical considerations of humor, but it is often referenced with regard to discriminatory jokes (as in racist, sexist, and homophobic jokes).

While "superiority theory" focuses on psychological and social dynamics, the "relief theory" of humor takes a more physiological approach. Proposed by Lord Shaftsbury in the 1900s and built upon by, among others, Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud in the next centuries, "relief theory" considers laughter as a physical process to release tension; humor and pleasure come from this release, typically seen as short-lasting and superficial (Willett and Willett 12). Here, "[t]he energy that is relieved and discharged in laughter provides pleasure

because it allegedly economizes upon energy that would ordinarily be used to contain or repress psychic activity" (Critchley 3). This theory is the most compatible with later theories of humor, and some frame release as a secondary characteristic of humor, akin to a physical symptom of more psychological processes of humor (Willett and Willet 5). It is largely this way of conceptualizing humor that Gadsby references directly in *Nanette*; their deconstruction of the combative relationship of joking pokes at the imbalances in relief theory's pattern of tension and release. While most earlier examinations of relief theory treat it as largely superficial (a short-term physical reaction with few lasting effects), revisionist scholars Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett point to the ways in which relief theory can also allow humor to be viewed as a healing catharsis (12).

"Incongruity theory," however, has solidified as the most widely accepted contemporary understanding of humor processes (Quirk, *Manipulate* 20). "This theory locates humor not primarily in bodily and emotional relief but rather in the pleasant surprise that occurs through the violation of normal mental patterns and expectations" (Willett and Willett 13). In "incongruity theory," humor comes from the pleasure of surprise, of the unexpected; joking incongruity stems from a subversion of expectations. However, this subversion rests on a certain degree of shared expectations and shared worldviews (Critchley 4).

These three theories work to explain the ways in which humor works on people, the ways in which people find things funny. Jokes, then, may be considered a key method through which humor is communicated and incited. Gadsby gives their own definition of a joke, which will be examined later in this chapter; scholastically, there are widely varied ways of defining a joke, often resting on the different humor theories. Sociolinguist Jennifer Coates explains that "telling a joke is a very specific speech act, that is, a short formulaic utterance, ending with a punch line, which produces (or is meant to produce) laughter" (30). Jokes are generally accepted to have a set-up—an element that sets the status quo, or poses a question, and a punchline, an element that answers the question, or violates it. As Critchley explains, "[w]hen the punch-line kicks in, and the little bubble of tension pops, I experience an affect that can be described as pleasure, and I laugh or just smile" (5). "In hearing the punch-line, the tension disappears and we experience comic relief" (5-6). Instances of humor are not limited to linguistic elements, however. Humor can be encouraged by and depend heavily on timing, gestures, and other contexts: "[a]s any comedian will readily admit, timing is everything, and a mastery of comic forms involves a careful control of pauses, hesitations and silences, of knowing exactly when to detonate the little dynamite of the joke" (6). It is important to note, additionally, that joking is by nature a social interaction, requiring both speaker and audience,

and is often considered dialogical, with the audience reaction (be it laughter, silence, or applause) integral to the "success" of a joke (Quirk, *Manipulate* 89).

Joking can be considered a linguistic feature which signals that something is intended to be found funny. However, jokes often speak toward controversial subjects, both when reinforcing existing hierarchies and contesting social norms. As discussed in the introduction, Quirk suggests that a stand-up comedy performance can be viewed as operating within a play-frame, one that works as a "'safe space' in which jokers can operate outside of the restrictions which govern most regular interaction" (36). This "reinforces the authority of comic licence, telling the audience that it is acceptable to interpret the stories as jokes and to laugh at them. This is crucial because the subject matter is, if viewed sympathetically, sad and disturbing" (48). However, Quirk notes that this play-frame encourages serious things to be taken un-seriously, deemed as acceptable to be laughed at. Serious topics, and the pain of others, are encouraged to be viewed with laughter in a play-frame. In these spaces, emotions, sympathy, and empathy are considered to be suspended, as "sympathy is deemed to be incompatible with laughter" (166). Most stand-up scholarship appears to invoke a binary between humor and amusement and emotion and empathy.

While this examination of a "play-frame" within stand-up comedy is relatively recent, the core three theories of humor have faced few updates; scholars interested in expanding considerations of humor largely utilize these theories to explore the potential for social change within humor, without questioning the foundations of how humor is understood or enacted. Most examinations of the possibilities of social challenge within humor analyze the ways in which different styles of joke can affect social change. The classic idea of jokes "punching up" or "punching down" rests on a potential inversion of "superiority theory;" jokes based around "incongruity" can challenge common perceptions, destabilizing norms in a carnivalesque sense. The relief after tension can explain the joy and pleasure taken in from a joke and codify the positive feelings of experiencing laughter. These classic theories of humor seem to rest strongly on binaries, between superior and inferior, expected and incongruous, tension and release, funny and not-funny, even between humor and sympathy. These methods of analyzing humor have been codified to a certain extent, as socially progressive considerations of humor largely build upon this existing scholarship[25] (perhaps echoing the way in which stand-up conventions

[25] For example see Quirk, whose *Why Stand-up Matters* traces comedian influence and manipulation with regard to political comedy, but rests on traditional humor theories, as well as J. Gilbert, whose *Performing Marginality* considered the way feminist humor can incorporate traditional humor theories. See also the contributors to *Standing Up, Speaking Out* such as C. Gilbert, Lowery and Renegar, and Meier and Schmitt.

have built around many of the same binaries and requirements, without a fundamental challenge or restructuring). Few scholars seem to look backwards to destabilize the ways in which we think about humor; however, Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett do just that. In their book *Uproarious: How Feminists and Other Subversive Comics Speak Truth,* Willett and Willett perform a feminist revision of existing humor theories, carving out a space for a humor, and a consideration of humor, based on connection and empathy, a humor "that connects body and soul, and that connects us with each other" (2). They find space for sympathy and other emotions within and alongside humor, writing that "[h]umor, broadly understood, is a nuanced play of exclusion and inclusion, a dialectic of hostility (laughing at) and joyful solidarity (laughing with), riding an emotional roller coaster of shame and pride" (17). Willett and Willett question the binaries long accepted within humor studies.

Queered stand-up seems to resonate with Willett and Willett's considerations. Not only do *Nanette* and *Rothaniel* question the foundations of traditional theories of humor, but they offer an embodiment of Willett and Willett's humor of empathy. They consider humorous resolution a tool to be alternately deployed and withheld, alongside more serious moments; they contest humor's conventional binaries. At times they suspend stand-up's conventional play-frame, instead creating a space in which humor and emotion can be reconciled, to co-exist and work in tandem. This chapter will analyze ways in which *Nanette* and *Rothaniel* negotiate humor—both its place within the form of stand-up as well as its very foundations.

3.2 "Laughter Is Not Our Medicine": Moving Beyond Humor in *Nanette*

By all appearances, Gadsby begins *Nanette* by following conventional expectations for a stand-up comedy set—with an apparent aim of eliciting laughter. As discussed in the previous chapter, they begin *Nanette* by performing the stage persona they had developed in the past, and part of the reinforcement of that persona stems from their incorporating the type of humor borne out of that "reporter" aspect. This humor is critical of wider social norms, but contests them in an inoffensive, non-threatening way. Gadsby jokes in this way early in *Nanette*. Critiquing homophobic assumptions that label men wearing dresses as "weird," Gadsby states that it is the "gender-normals"—the people who uphold the status quo—who are weird, telling them to calm down. Gadsby says that men wearing dresses are not "weird," rather, "[y]ou know what's weird? Pink headbands on bald babies! That's weird. I mean seriously, would you put a bangle on a potato? No, that's organic. I paid a lot for that potato" (Gadsby *Nanette*). Gadsby here uses a textbook example of incongruous humor in pairing the image of a bald baby girl

with the image of a potato with a headband—a precious, beloved baby compared to a dressed-up vegetable. This works to "make the familiar strange" (Yaross Lee xxvii), revealing the absurdity in such deeply-ingrained gender roles that they require markers of gender to such a ridiculous extent. The joke receives a loud laugh from the audience; it positions gender norms as something laughable. Gadsby's successes here are twofold: in receiving a reaction of laughter, they demonstrate their skill at conventional humor, and they also demonstrate the inherent ridiculousness of heteronormative social rituals. This demonstration of humorous skill perhaps reinforces expectations for a stand-up performance from a "reporter" persona, as social criticism that will be, first and foremost, funny.

Gadsby's critical humor is not only turned outward, however; it turns inward as well. They do not only "report" on the status quo as seen in the wild, as a removed observer, but also speak about the ways in which social expectations of heteronormativity have affected them themself. They speak in detail about their experiences growing up in Tasmania—a region in which a majority of people consider homosexuality a sin and a crime (Gadsby *Nanette*). Gadsby says that they enjoyed growing up there, but they "had to leave as soon as I found out I was a little bit lesbian. And you do find out, don't you? Yeah. I got a letter. 'Dear Sir/Madam'" (Gadsby *Nanette*). Here the individual and emotional experience of discovering their sexuality is framed as an impersonal bureaucratic process—one over which they have no control, as is common in experiences of bureaucracy. This subtly references long-running, homophobic debates about whether sexual orientations are a choice or inevitability. In this exaggerated, incongruous example, orientations are assigned in the manner one might be informed of a fine. The perhaps universal experience of an unfeeling, all-powerful bureaucracy is used to frame a marginal experience of sexuality, positioning gender orientation as something that is notified rather than chosen and cannot be contested. Straight and queer audiences alike are invited to laugh at the absurdity of the ways in which self-discovery of sexual orientation is discussed. Here Gadsby uses a set-up and punchline to elicit laughter, demonstrating their skill at joking, and targets both social norms and the personal experiences of those expectations that have caused genuine difficulty and distress for them. Here, initially, a stand-up play-frame is engaged, as audiences are encouraged to laugh at Gadsby's emotional experiences.

Gadsby's personal experiences, as shown here, become fodder for their jokes; elements of their life are mocked. This fits within a larger pattern of self-deprecation utilized by Gadsby. Self-deprecation was a hallmark of their early style, enacted and reinforced by their self-denigrated persona. They themself provide a target to many of their early jokes, as they mock themself and put themself down. Gadsby employs this style of humor in the beginning of

Nanette. Reinforcing their shy and understated persona, when they enter to thunderous applause, they immediately say, "[t]hank you very much. Thank you. Might've peaked a bit early, but…" (Gadsby *Nanette*). They initially suggest that they, and their performance, will not live up to the height of the applause. This sort of comedy immediately puts the audience at ease, allowing them to feel slightly superior to Gadsby. As J. Gilbert explains, self-deprecating humor is integral to the classic "reporter" feminist persona, who must make herself smaller in order for her voice to be heard, and whose non-threatening nature rests on both an understanding and acknowledgment of her low place in the social hierarchy (*Marginality* 124). In this way, Gadsby's self-deprecating humor can be framed as feminist, as it allows their points to be heard without being outright rejected. Crucially, however, this method serves to reinforce the hierarchies that mark Gadsby as "lower." Their voice may be heard, but at a cost to their own power. Gadsby highlights this contradiction as their self-deprecation moves beyond themself to include and encompass the marginalized groups to which they are a part. They directly mock lesbians—an identity they themself claim, saying, "I'm a disgrace. What sort of comedian can't make the lesbians laugh? Every comedian ever" (Gadsby *Nanette*). Here Gadsby references long-running stereotypes of lesbians as humorless, for what might be called a "cheap" laugh, relying on stale and dated humor, and not requiring originality on Gadsby's part. It appears, initially, that Gadsby has no qualms about throwing their lesbian compatriots under the bus, alongside themself, for the sake of humor, and will continue denigrating themself and groups to which they belong in service of receiving laughter.

However, Gadsby quickly reveals the problems and cruelties inherent in this self-deprecation, the way this type of classic and conventional humor does harm to both Gadsby themself and the art they hope to make. This putting themself down in order to speak is a short-term solution to a deeply-rooted problem, a facade that hides other concerns. Though self-deprecation may allow them to convey their socially critical messages nonthreateningly, it puts them in a hierarchical structure, one which reinforces their marginalization. Gadsby demonstrates this in their continuation of their joke about lesbians and their senses of humor (or stereotypical lack thereof). Initially they claim the joke is "bulletproof," funny because it is true. However, Gadsby then presents the double-bind present for lesbians who hear the joke (and those, like Gadsby themself, who reproduce it). Gadsby says, "[t]he only people who don't think it's funny… are us lezzers. But we've got to laugh… because if we don't… proves the point. Checkmate. Very clever joke" (Gadsby *Nanette*). To uphold social expectations valuing a self-deprecating sense of humor, lesbians are forced to react positively, to laugh, and therefore to become complicit in their own denigration.

As Gadsby demonstrates, this is not radical for people already condemned by society. Self-deprecation may work well for figures who retain a certain degree of social power. It may be a prime method for a wealthy, straight white man at the top of the social food chain to create the sense of marginalization Brodie suggests is necessary for stand-up comedy (*Vulgar* 104), to appear relatable. However, as Gadsby shows, this is a dangerous thing to do to someone who already has a low sense of self-worth, who was as a child taught to hate themself—as Gadsby was, and as queer youth who internalize homophobia often are (Gadsby *Nanette*). Gadsby asks, "[d]o you understand what self-deprecation means when it comes from somebody who already exists on the margins? It's not humility. It's humiliation" (Gadsby *Nanette*). To people from marginalized groups, self-deprecation reinforces negative societal messages and stereotypes on both an individual level and on a wider scale. Gadsby says they "will simply not do that anymore. Not to myself or anybody who identifies with me" (Gadsby *Nanette*). Gadsby initially opts for the elements of self-deprecation they have utilized (and upheld) throughout their career, but quickly attacks this methodology, showing the ways in which this kind of humor, rather than challenging the status quo, reinforces it, doing harm both to Gadsby themself and to others in their community. Gadsby demonstrates the way in which humor of self-deprecation can work to obfuscate intended social challenges.

This critique of self-deprecation leads to the element of *Nanette* that, outside of Gadsby's persona assassination, has perhaps garnered the most attention—Gadsby's efforts to "break comedy" (Gadsby, "Three Ideas"). Gadsby says, in the middle of what is ostensibly a comedy show, "I need to quit comedy" (Gadsby, *Nanette*). At first, audience members react as if this is another joke, and greet the statement with laughter. Gadsby in a sense encourages this; after this first assertion, they segue into another joking, light-hearted story. But, repeating this assertion after their deconstruction of self-deprecating humor, the seriousness of the statement is revealed. In order to explain that decision, and to demonstrate the ways in which comedy falls short as a method for communicating their needs, Gadsby performs a meta-analysis of joke structures. They say,

> a joke is simply two things, it needs two things to work. A setup and a punchline. And it is essentially a question with a surprise answer. Right? But in this context, what a joke is is a question that I have artificially inseminated. Tension. I do that. I make you all feel tense, and then I make you laugh, and you're like, 'Thanks for that. I was feeling a bit tense.' I made you tense. This is an abusive relationship. (Gadsby *Nanette*)

It becomes clear that Gadsby's frustrations with comedy are not merely a "bit," but that Gadsby finds fundamental problems with the format. Gadsby here explains the way that jokes work in line with incongruity theory and relief theory, while highlighting the manipulative elements of

these types of humor. For Gadsby, here, conventional comedy is a manipulative method of communication.

This meta exploration of joke structure has multiple effects. It might be understood as "breaking the contract" with audiences, as quoted in the introduction. Like a magician revealing their secrets, Gadsby dissects the "frog" of the joke, dispelling the "magic" and letting the joke die. This forces the audience to consider and analyze a dynamic often taken for granted. Criticism and didacticism take precedence over humor. This meta exploration also reveals the insidious, painful parts of humor. Though humor is most predominantly linked to amusement, that is only part—or the end—of the equation; an abusive tension, one that is actively placed there by the comedian, must first ensue. Gadsby explains that this tension defusion, something they have made into a career as a comedian, is something they learned as a child, in order to defuse the tension their non-normativity created in their surroundings. They say, "[b]ack then it wasn't a joke, wasn't even a hobby, it was a survival tactic. I didn't have to invent the tension. I *was* the tension. And… I'm tired of tension. Tension is making me sick" (Gadsby *Nanette*). Gadsby demonstrates the way the tension inherent in comedy can eat at both the audience and the performer. But whereas conventionally it must be resolved for the audience, it is not necessarily resolved for the performer; Gadsby themself ends up carrying that tension. In explaining the structure of the jokes, they no longer keep the tension entirely to themself; they make the tension into a shared burden with the audience, working towards creating an empathetic connection.

Gadsby does not only challenge comedy as a performance method. They take it a step further, shaping *Nanette* into a performance that in a way puts a contestation of humor-as-primary-aim into practice. As comedians such as Tig Notaro demonstrate, trauma can be incorporated in stand-up comedy along more conventional standards, and stand-up comedians often delve into tragedy. However, what is considered a hallmark of the art is the resolution into humor; the resolving of the trauma into a joke. In these instances, stand-up's play-frame is engaged. That intact play-frame absolves audiences for laughing about tragic things. Gadsby, however, does not necessarily encourage an assumed resolution, or guarantee audience absolution for laughing at serious things. Alongside moments of lightness and deconstructive arguments, Gadsby includes moments in which they speak about traumatic, painful experiences in their own life. Near the end of *Nanette*, Gadsby speaks about their fear of men, saying,

> it was a man who sexually abused me when I was a child. It was a man who beat the shit out of me when I was 17, my prime. It was two men who raped me when I was barely in my twenties. Tell me why is that okay. Why was it okay to pick me off the pack like that and do that to me? It would have been more humane to just take me out

> to the back paddock and put a bullet in my head if it is that much of a crime to be different! (Gadsby, *Nanette*).

In describing harrowing events from their life, Gadsby lets their pain, their fear, and their anger show through. They take a long pause after the distinctly emotional declaration, encouraging the audience to sit with the discomfort, the tension and the trauma in Gadsby's statements. Gadsby here does not resolve their trauma into amusement—daring the audience to laugh, they encourage instead emotions of fury and sadness. Sharing their trauma encourages an empathetic connection with the audience. In serious moments like this, in Gadsby's refusal to resolve tension or discomfort, they suspend stand-up's play frame, encouraging the audience to take serious things seriously. Here there is no "anaesthesia of the heart" (Bergsen 11); the heart is fully engaged, and the audience is challenged rather than absolved.

The heart is engaged alongside the laughing gut; crucially, Gadsby does not stop humor entirely. Contrary to what some reviewers say (see Monagle), *Nanette* does not become suddenly un-funny, with all joking paused; the second half of *Nanette* is filled with jokes, as in the moment Gadsby says "[p]ull your fucking socks up! How humiliating! Fashion advice from a lesbian" (Gadsby, *Nanette).* By these ending jokes, a balance has somewhat shifted. What previously may have read as self-deprecation or self-effacement (mocking the fashion of lesbians) becomes an exercise in power, utilizing elements of their previous self-deprecation to instead mock straight men. This joke is framed in a classic setup-punchline structure. However, it is preceded and followed by serious topics. Gadsby suspends stand-up's play frame, but this works to make it so that commentary is not automatically assumed to be taken light-heartedly. Rather, specifics are important and context is important; an engaged audience must listen closely. Gadsby does not implicitly absolve their audience of responsibility for their own reactions by creating a space in which humor is expected above all; rather, they respect the ability of the audience to figure out the appropriate reaction to a story or statement—be that laughter, silence, or other forms of engagement—themselves. Humor itself is not suspended—the automatic absolution of a humorous resolution is. Gadsby breaks comedy apart to build something new, a frame in which emotion is reconciled alongside laughter. They reset the balance between prioritization of humor and emotion; in its fluid movement between different emotional registers, *Nanette* more fully embodies the wide, diverse, and pluralized range of human emotions. They do not pause humor but integrate it into a space that allows for a range of emotions, from cathartic release to discomfort and empathy, leaving open the possibility for elements to be reacted to with laughter or with seriousness. As Gadsby directly states, the joke about lesbian fashion sense marks the last joke of *Nanette*. The last five minutes consist of a

plea for taking things seriously, as Gadsby ends *Nanette* in saying "that… is the focus of the story we need. Connection" (Gadsby *Nanette*). Gadsby here explicitly calls for empathy and connection to their audience. Further, by not ending on a joke, and ending instead on a serious note, Gadsby challenges the necessity of humor as resolution, or ending force, within comedy. Instead, they make *Nanette* into a comedy that can hold humor alongside seriousness and move between emphases. *Nanette* queers stand-up's play-frame, breaking binaries that long have persisted within stand-up, allowing elements to be taken seriously, light-heartedly, or something in-between. Rather than the onus remaining on the comedian to encourage a particular reaction, this queered play-frame encourages a collaboration between performer and audience to discover how to treat topics. It encourages empathy and connection.

3.3 "This Only Works if You Feel Like Family": Conversational Play-Frame in *Rothaniel*

Though Carmichael, like Gadsby, makes a startling revelation midway through *Rothaniel*, his revelation does not change the mood that has already been set. Rather, *Rothaniel* primes the audience for a non-traditional mood from the beginning of the special. The filmed introduction to *Rothaniel* opens on a snowy cityscape, with Carmichael hunched against the cold, wind howling over the sounds of a wistful jazz melody. The wide-angle lens helps to conjure a more cinematic atmosphere, one driven by a sense of interiority. This continues as the shot moves to the venue—the camera enters before Carmichael, remaining trained on the door until Carmichael enters, with low lighting, a baseball cap, and his ducked head all working to obscure his face, encouraging a sense of anonymity. An unbroken shot tracks him from the audience onto the stage, where a folding metal chair waits for him. Within the space of roughly one minute, multiple signifiers of stand-up conventions are upended. The jazz music and cinematic references conjure a less outright humorous, and more potentially serious and contemplative, mood, borrowing the aesthetics of a "drama" more than a comedy. The visual, filmed connection between performer and audiences makes the traditional boundaries of "onstage" and "offstage" seem negligible. Perhaps most significantly, Carmichael's use of a chair signifies a departure from traditions of stand-up, a form named for the manner in which it is most often performed. In this way the signifiers classically associated with stand-up and comedy, that suggest the audience can expect humor from a performance, are paused. If, as Quirk explains, stand-up conventions establish that the mood of comic license is operative and a play-frame is engaged (*Manipulate* 48, 75), then *Rothaniel*'s introduction troubles this assumption within the

performance. It's worth highlighting that *Rothaniel* was released into a post-*Nanette* world, a world in which a genre-probing stand-up special had already galvanized the comedy community, drawing attention for its questioning of humor's place within stand-up. Perhaps it is then less jarring that *Rothaniel*'s filmed introduction works to set a distinctly non-comedic mood. If Gadsby "broke" comedy, Carmichael is able to play around with pieces that already bear signs of fracture. The mood of comic license is not a given for a stand-up performance, and signs that traditionally signify a comedic mood is active—a light-hearted air, a standing comedian looking out at a separated audience—are missing. Carmichael, then, begins *Rothaniel* without necessarily enacting a play-frame; a sense of "seriousness" and emotions besides amusement, such as a contemplative melancholy, are encouraged from the beginning.

This is not to say that *Rothaniel* is not funny. On the contrary, Carmichael employs humor quite quickly. Like Gadsby, Carmichael demonstrates his proficiency and skill with humor early on. When speaking about his hated first name, he says, "[m]y dad named me… He combined his dad's first name and my mom's dad's first name and mushed them together. Not to make something elegant, like William Edward or something like that. It's more like Toyotathon" (Carmichael *Rothaniel*). The comparison of his name to "Toyotathon," the conjoined word that represents the "marathon" sales of the Toyota car company, makes the name appear ridiculous, and the incongruity of this comparison provides a surprising jolt. This statement is humorous, but less according to the "formulaic utterance" as outlined in the beginning of this subchapter. Humorous statements and comparisons such as these demonstrate that, though a sense of seriousness may be encouraged and the mood of comic license no longer established in the conventional sense, this is still a comedic performance, and some things are encouraged to be found funny.

The majority of humor in *Rothaniel,* however, does not stem from explicit punchlines and formulaic jokes. Rather, *Rothaniel*'s humor might be understood as conversational. "Conversational" is often used as a descriptor for a particular stand-up performance style (see Brodie, *Vulgar* 53 and Rappaport and Quilty-Dunne 478), often denoting a casual, relaxed performance that encourages a feeling of intimacy with the audience. However, Jennifer Coates writes that there have been few examinations of humor in conversation; she analyzes "conversational humor" as its own particular type of comedy, separating it from the exercise of "jokes" and describing it more akin to "humorous talk" (29). Rather than driven by formulaic joke structures, which "do not emerge spontaneously in conversation but stand apart from the flow of talk and interrupt its progress" (31), this conversational humor is a "playful talk" (46) that "emerges as the result of humorous stories, or of bantering or teasing among participants,

or when speakers pick up a point and play with it creatively" (31) and "can be regarded as 'a special kind of figurative language'" (Gibbs, qtd. in Coates 46). Carmichael's style much more closely resembles "playful talk" than conventional joke structure. His vocal inflections, gestures, and own laughter often encourage his statements to be found funny. His tone is often coyly mocking, working to exaggerate and make light of someone else's behavior, as in when he says to his judgmental uncle, "N*, your name June Bug" (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*) and shakes his head in disbelief. He frequently starts and stops sentences, pausing in the middle of a thought and then backtracking, following the thought down a different direction, as when he describes his mother by saying, "I mean she's a nice lady, but like, there's a part of her that's really… She can shut people out" (Carmichael *Rothaniel*). His "umms" and pauses make the material seem fresh, as if it is being conjured and put into this order right there and then—his delivery gives the impression that he is thinking through his performance in real time. The amusement in his humorous talk stems not from the impression of a noticeably well-planned use of language, but more resembles the pleasure of speaking with a funny friend, with amusement stemming from their quick wit.

This is not the typical audience-performer contract expected within stand-up; Carmichael's conversational dynamic is put further into practice in the ways in which he attempts to negotiate his relationship with the audience. Carmichael works to create a sense of camaraderie with his audience. This too is supported by *Rothaniel*'s filmed introduction, in Carmichael's greeting a man at the door as a peer, hugging him and taking a moment to chat, as well as in his shortly following quick, visibly unbroken movement between the off-stage audience space and on-stage. Most notably, however, Carmichael enacts a conversationality beyond his style of delivery: he turns *Rothaniel* into an explicit conversation. As Brodie says, stand-up is by nature dialogical, needing both performer and audience reaction (*Vulgar* 5). Conventionally, this audience reaction—the audience participation in the "dialogue"—is limited to laughter and applause, at times with the largely unwelcome intrusion of heckling or booing (115). However, Carmichael extends the dialogical reactions within his performance to a request for actual spoken contributions from the audience. Early in *Rothaniel*, he speaks directly to his in-person audience, saying, "I'm happy you're here. I'm happy all of you are here. I have so much to tell you. You're comfortable? You can talk back to me. I want you guys to feel that" (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*). He directly encourages the audience to speak back to him, altering the traditional performance-audience relationship, placing the audience on a level with himself. Not just first-person-confessional, *Rothaniel* is actively second-person in its directives toward the audience. In fact, conversational humor in the way Coates describes is not merely

enacted in delivery and framing; it particularly depends on being part of a dialogue (32). However interactional and dialogic conventional stand-up may be, conventionally, stand-up's performer-audience relationship is largely one-sided. Carmichael, however, breaks open this convention, turning the performance more directly conversational.

It becomes a conversation not merely in Carmichael's request for audience participation, but in the audience's complying with his invitation to speak back. Coates explains that a collaborative and interactional dynamic is essential to the establishment of conversational humor (32), and an interactional dynamic becomes central to *Rothaniel* as it progresses. There are audience interjections throughout the show. After Carmichael states for the first time that he is gay, the statement is first met with silence. After an initial moment of perhaps shocked discomfort, the audience starts to clap—slowly and sparsely, before building. A woman shouts, "[w]e love you!" (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*) and Carmichael responds to her, and to the audience members applauding, directly, saying, "[t]hat's very sweet. I appreciate that. It means a lot. And I'm accepting the love, I really appreciate the love" (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*). By responding directly to audience members, Carmichael directly engages them in a conversational dialogue, breaking down boundaries between performer and audience, turning his conversational style into an actual conversation. He further incorporates the audience's responses into the performance, as when he speaks about his female friends being more disappointed in his dating a white man than his dating men in general, and an audience member says "[w]ow," (Carmichael *Rothaniel*) in a drawn-out way, and Carmichael says "[y]ou heard her say 'wow'? That's the sound of a Black woman that feels doubly betrayed" (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*). Carmichael invites the audience to engage with him. The audience in *Rothaniel* reacts not only with laughter, silence, or applause, but in directly speaking to Carmichael; the performance becomes an explicit dialogue.

Coates specifically speaks about "humor involving conversation among friends in informal settings" (30), and *Rothaniel*, as a performance, occurs between groups of strangers. However, *Rothaniel*'s exercising and encouragement of a dialogue between Carmichael and his audience—their collaboration within the performance—makes *Rothaniel* into a way of bringing conversational humor to a performance context. Coates explains that "[w]here conversational co-participants collaborate in humorous talk, they can be seen as playing together. Their shared laughter arises from this play and is a manifestation of intimacy" (31). For Coates, it is collaboration that enacts a conversational play-frame. Coates explains that "[c]ollaboration is an essential part of playful talk, since conversational participants have to recognise that a play frame has been invoked and then have to choose to maintain it. Because conversational humour

is a joint activity, involving all participants at talk, many commentators see its chief function as being the creation and maintenance of solidarity" (32). This conversational play-frame is different from a conventional stand-up play frame. Rather than providing a context in which humorous resolution is expected, encouraging serious topics to be viewed with laughter, this play-frame encourages humorous talk, signified by laughter and overlapping speech, to be viewed as comedic (44). At the same time, "talk may switch repeatedly between serious and non-serious frames, and conversational participants will collaborate with each other to bring about the switches. The unpredictability of this kind of talk is part of what makes it fun for participants" (33). This conversational play-frame offers a new method for allowing space for both the serious and the light-hearted within stand-up.

Rothaniel puts this into practice as a performance. Carmichael's conversational style, or enactment of a conversational play-frame, shapes the way in which he engages with non-humorous moments and serious topics. Though Carmichael discusses serious, taboo topics—most notably history of infidelity in his family—from the onset of *Rothaniel,* the second half of the show, beginning with his coming out, moves to be more and more serious as time passes. Carmichael's delivery, while remaining conversational, becomes less and less light-hearted. The same gestures that previously assisted with the delivery of jokes become more weighted; he shakes his head, covers his eyes, and leans forward in his chair, but his tone of voice becomes more emotional, more tense. His statements stop and start much more, he trails off in his thoughts. His specifically claims this improvisational context, saying, "I'm sorry. A lot of it is not really… It's kinda happening in real time, so it's not totally worked out. Forgive me" (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*). He directly claims the way in which his material is still being worked out, positioning the performance as a moment of reflection and processing; however, his dialogic format brings the audience into his processing. From here, boundaries between performer and audience are broken down further: not only do audience members answer Carmichael's questions, but they also begin to ask him questions themselves, and he responds directly. After Carmichael speaks of the way his mother has not fully accepted his homosexuality, an audience member shouts, "[b]ut you gave yourself so many years. Why don't you give her that time?" (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*), to which Carmichael responds, "I'd love to give her all the time in the world, you know? I don't know how much time it would take. I don't know how much time we have left. Just in general, one of my biggest fears is my parents' funeral, just the thought of one of them dying without saying everything, without contending, without expressing it all" (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*). Carmichael answers the audience member's question with an intimate revelation of his fears. Here there are no jokes, no stories or bits; the

conversation and dialogue appear therapeutic. The atmosphere is no longer that of a friend telling a funny story, but of a friend talking about serious subjects and asking for support. The audience become surrogates of support for Carmichael—the dialogic element turns Carmichael's painful feelings into a shared burden with the audience. Coates explains that this play-frame of conversational humor manifests particularly in informal conversation between intimates, between people who "know each other well" (33). Carmichael works to fashion the audience into intimates, saying directly at the beginning of *Rothaniel,* "[t]his only works if you feel like family" (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*). Not only does this help enact a conversational play-frame within *Rothaniel*, but this dynamic helps to turn the audience into confidants who help him process his emotions through dialogue. Carmichael encourages a sense of vulnerability and intimacy.

Rothaniel becomes a space in which laughter is perhaps not the primary aim, but emotional processing is, and audience members must choose how to react to it. The dialogue of support and family intimacy encourage the sympathy that is often rejected by a play-frame or mood of comic license. Just as intimate conversations can span a trajectory of serious emotion and laughing amusement, *Rothaniel*'s intimate dialogue becomes a space that allows for sympathy and empathy to be encouraged alongside humor. Carmichael's focus on his family history in his content mirrors the family relationship he constructs with the audience—perhaps what "only works if the audience feels like family" is *Rothaniel*'s modified play frame. That familial play frame requires intimacy and a dialogic format to create a space for serious emotions alongside amusement.

However, this acknowledgement and embrace of a wide spectrum of emotional registers does not only come into play with more positive elements of sympathy and support. *Rothaniel* also allows a space for discomfort and unresolved tension. For example, Carmichael's initial coming out to the audience is met with a noticeable silence before applause, and he acknowledges the ambivalence of the response. He says,

> [b]ecause I can feel it, bro. I can feel it. There's a lot that happens coming out. I'm telling you guys and I see the Yankee fitteds. Some of y'all are just, like, 'Shit, we at a gay show, bro?' This is for HBO. You know how many n* just turned the TV off saying to their girl right now, 'We gotta watch something else'? Like, y'all clapped. A lot of you clapped and you felt it. Some of you didn't really wanna clap. You were just like, 'We gotta do that shit. We're in New York and there's cameras' (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*).

He does not absolve the audience for this reaction by joking about it. Rather, his making light of the situation allows space for their discomfort, as well as highlighting the differing expectations between in-person and digital audience levels. He then specifically links this

audience reaction to his own family members' difficulties and discomfort with his coming out, and the ways in which they haven't fully accepted it (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*). By framing audience discomfort like the intimate, familial discomfort in his life, he shares that discomfort, encouraging an empathetic connection. The audience's reactions are allowed to be like those of a family, with silence as well as applause and laughter. The reactions are allowed to be ambivalent.

However, just as Carmichael's consideration of secrets and lies draws attention to the construction of his persona, his meta commentary of his own methods in *Rothaniel* makes visible the layers of construction in this intimate audience relationship. Though he tells the audience initially that he wants them to feel like family, after an audience member interjects in a way that apparently makes him uncomfortable, reminding him that he has not yet revealed his first name, he says "[n]ow you guys are too much like my family. Let's go back to the audience-performer relationship we had before" (Carmichael *Rothaniel*). He acknowledges the artifice of the intimacy he has constructed, but he continues to utilize the conversational play-frame. The conversational play-frame, in its embracing of different registers and ambivalent emotions, becomes a queered incarnation of a stand-up play-frame.

3.4 "I Should Probably Think of a Joke Now": Queered Humor and Connection

While both Gadsby and Carmichael do work to solicit and encourage laughter from their audience, that, and an overall experience of amusement and entertainment, does not seem to be *Nanette*'s and *Rothaniel*'s primary aim. Rather, audience laughter, in these specials, is both an aim in and of itself and a tool in the fulfilment of other aims—the "honey that sweetens the bitter medicine" (Gadsby, *Nanette*). As Gadsby and Carmichael demonstrate, laughter can be a tool for questioning norms. Laughter can provide a catharsis, a connective moment of release. Laughter can be used, in a sense, against the audience, encouraging them to question their own reactions. *Nanette* and *Rothaniel* appear to be incarnations of a therapeutic process in which the comics share things they have kept to themselves for a long time, as explored in the previous chapter. However, they also work to rhetorically present a case for the humanity of queer experiences. In these ways, Gadsby's and Carmichael's aims seem both personal and political, and in both of these spheres, laughter at times falls short as a tool.

Laughter, Gadsby and Carmichael demonstrate, can provide an artificial resolution for tense moments. The conventional play-frame of stand-up, which institutes a mood of comic license that absolves the audience for laughing at serious subjects, can be inhospitable to

emotions outside of amusement. This stands in the way of their more didactic and therapeutic aims, which require the exercise of more serious emotions, both a lingering in painful moments and an encouragement of empathy. Laughter, by contrast, provides release and relief of elements that should not be relieved or mitigated; an expectation of light-heartedness and resolution keeps serious things from being taken seriously.

Facing these concerns, as I have demonstrated, both comedians move away from this conventional play-frame, as well as conventional incarnations of humor. While Gadsby initially appears to enact the classic play-frame, midway through *Nanette*, they attack its "magical" suspension of disbelief. In their moments of meta-analysis and of righteous, visible criticism, they visibly suspend that play-frame (perhaps destroying it within the performance akin to the manner in which they destroy their initial persona). What is left is a frame that allows for multiple emotions, positive and negative, alongside amusement, and does not automatically resolve tension and discomfort. Rather, it allows Gadsby and the audience to share the burden of Gadsby's trauma.

Carmichael, on the other hand, enacts a modified play-frame from the onset of *Rothaniel*. He fashions his performance into a conversation between intimates, enacting a conversational play-frame that allows him to comfortably shift between playful talk and more serious, emotional elements. His modified play-frame is grounded in connection and empathy, embraced alongside, but not subsumed by, humor.

Willett and Willett, in their revision of humor theories, offer an understanding of an "empathetic humor" (2) that "connects body and soul, and that connects us with each other" (Willett and Willett 2). They write that

> [h]umor enhances empathy's transformational capacity to "feel ya," including those whom we might otherwise easily dismiss, as it tampers with the status quo. Rather than transcending an underbelly of affects, empathy combined with humor renders us more porous and relational. Through empathetic humor, bodily openness to affects and emotions streaming from others enhances the fluidity of identity, shifting lived social positions along with the cultural landscape. (136)

Nanette and *Rothaniel* can be seen as embodying this type of empathetic humor, positioning their emotional vulnerability as a connection to the audience. This works to protect their own needs: no longer do they need to laugh off their pain, or fit their pain into the demands of joke structures. Instead, they can linger in their pain in a therapeutic way and incorporate it alongside amusement, creating an intimate relationship with their audiences. Additionally, as Willett and Willett explain, "[b]ecause empathetic humor's connection with others is felt, not just seen or heard, it carries the spark of a socially and politically transformative eros" (136). Gadsby's and Carmichael's incorporation of other emotions outside amusement brings a rhetorical pathos to

stand-up. Queered stand-up thus becomes a way of putting Willett and Willett's empathetic humor into practice, creating bonds that work to support both personal therapeutic needs and efforts towards social change.

4. "I Need to Tell My Story Properly": Queering Stand-up Structure

So far, this thesis has examined both the personified lens through which stand-up is performed (persona), and an element of its content that it is often defined by (humor), as well as the ways in which *Nanette* and *Rothaniel* negotiate these expectations. For the final chapter, I will consider stand-up structure and content as a wider whole, and the ways in which *Nanette* and *Rothaniel* play with and queer conventions within this area.

On the surface, stand-up is an odd, somewhat amorphous genre. It does not necessarily follow a set and particular structure; as Brodie says, stand-up generally consists of a mix between jokes, "bits" (shorter stories), and narratives (longer-running stories) (*Intimacy* 163). Comedians move between these elements, often creating a sense of coherence by calling back to previous moments. Stand-up often contains stories, but does not tend to, as a whole, follow one linear, narrative progression in the way a novel or a film might. However, alongside a rise in expectations of authenticity, over time, stand-up norms have become more story-driven, with long-form narrative providing a bulk of content (Rappaport and Quilty-Dunne 478). This expectation for long-form narratives has intertwined with the expectation of more personal comedy; part of the ways that "personal" element is conveyed is through stories of experiences purportedly drawn from the comedian's life (Double, *Joke* 115). However, a consensus that finds humor to be the "primary aim" of stand-up (Quirk, *Manipulate* 14) means that these stories often prioritize humor, leading to a punchline: the narrative build-up perhaps serves as an extended setup. Narrative in stand-up has conventionally consisted of a series of causally-presented events, structured to lead to the fulfilment of a joke.

As explored in the previous chapter, Gadsby and Carmichael do not necessarily prioritize humor in *Rothaniel* and *Nanette*. The respective specials do contain jokes and "bits" interwoven with larger narratives, but these narratives do not necessarily work in service of a joke. Rather, for Gadsby and Carmichael, storytelling is a goal in and of itself. Gadsby and Carmichael tell stories of their own experiences, intertwined with ruminations, arguments and opinions. Their structure is driven as much by narrative and argument as by humor, which

allows space for elements often excised by jokes. Narrative becomes a format well suited to exploring and communicating more serious emotions and to rhetorically encouraging empathy. If a traditional joke format aims to elicit laughter, a broadened narrative structure works to embrace connection.

However, Gadsby and Carmichael play not only with audience's expectations of humor, but also with narrative conventions. They do not only utilize narrative structures, but also break them apart, interrupting chronology and going back and changing things they have previously said. Rather than a conventional "call-back" that creates connection between elements of a stand-up special, they revisit earlier stories to add information that changes understandings of the story; as Gadsby says, "[y]ou learn from the part of the story you focus on" (Gadsby, *Nanette*). In *Nanette* and *Rothaniel*, narrative becomes not only linear, but instead circular, constantly revisiting and refashioning and questioning itself. Gadsby and Carmichael also question and probe at narrative—both as a whole, and their own particular narratives—on a meta level. The combination of their negotiations of narrative, both in the way they exercise it and the way they analyze it, becomes a queering of narrative in stand-up, encompassing both deconstruction and a new path forward.

4.1 "Your Story Is My Story": Empathetic Meta-Narrative in *Nanette*

Gadsby's self-reflexive examination of joke structure does not only center around tension and release. They also deconstruct jokes as a format for communicating elements of their life; as Gadsby says, "[j]okes… only need two parts. A beginning and a middle" (Gadsby, *Nanette*). Frequently in the past, Gadsby "froze an incredibly formative experience at its trauma point and […] sealed it off into jokes" (Gadsby *Nanette*). For Gadsby, communicating experiences through the format of a joke forces not only particular emotions but also parts of the experience to be excised to fit the reductive structure. Gadsby frames this as creating a stasis that keeps them from growing and evolving, as they are unable to reach a full resolution, as "that joke version was not nearly sophisticated enough to help me undo the damage done to me in reality" (Gadsby, *Nanette*). For Gadsby, jokes not only create a structure that forbids emotions other than tension resolved into amusement but also interrupt processes of healing. Gadsby expresses a need for a different format to communicate their experiences.

Gadsby then examines the structure of narrative in contrast to that of jokes. They explain that "stories… unlike jokes, need three parts. A beginning, a middle, and an end" (Gadsby, *Nanette*). While jokes reduce experiences to two suspended parts, stories may present a fuller

picture. Gadsby presents three-part narrative as a way of telling their story properly, and they "need to tell [their] story properly because you learn from the part of the story… you focus on" (Gadsby, *Nanette*). They position storytelling as an alternative format to joke-telling, one that allows space for the emotions, events, and healing incompatible with joking. Here a sense of resolution comes not from amusement and laughter as tension relief, but from narrative closure. According to Gadsby, "[s]tories hold our cure" (Gadsby *Nanette*), as they promote connection.

Gadsby does not only speak about these elements on a meta level; they also put these ideas into practice within *Nanette*. In the beginning of *Nanette*, they tell a story they had previously told in their earlier stand-up specials. In this story, a young man almost beats up Gadsby when he (correctly) intuits that Gadsby is flirting with his girlfriend, assuming Gadsby is a man, and curses at them. When he realizes Gadsby is not a man, he apologizes, saying that he does not hit women. Gadsby finishes the story by saying, "[n]ow I understand I have a responsibility to help lead people out of ignorance at every opportunity I can, but I left him there, people. Safety first" (Gadsby *Nanette*). When first telling this story, Gadsby ends with a punchline, receiving laughter and providing a resolution to the tension—the focus is on the misunderstanding, and the perceived silliness of the man, reducing the threat he poses. However, Gadsby later reveals that this way of telling the story worked to hide important elements. They say, later in *Nanette*,

> [d]o you remember that story about that young man who almost beat me up? It was a very funny story. […] I actually am pretty good at controlling the tension. And I know how to balance that to get the laugh at the right place. But in order to balance the tension in the room with that story, I couldn't tell that story as it actually happened. Because I couldn't tell the part of the story where that man realized his mistake. And he came back. And he said, 'Oh, no, I get it. You're a lady faggot. I'm allowed to beat the shit out of you,' and he did! He beat the shit out of me and nobody stopped him. (Gadsby *Nanette*)

Gadsby tells the story in two different ways: one which focuses on a punchline as a tying of a bow on a humorous anecdote, and one which includes a third part that was previously excised and hidden, including discussion of a painful trauma. Gadsby here demonstrates the reductivity of joke structure by explicitly revealing what was previously hidden. In doing so, they move beyond jokes as the foundational structure for stand-up comedy; including and highlighting the "third part," they open up the format. They can "focus on" the part of the story that is not humorous, but that is painful.

This opening up allows Gadsby to personalize their story, to shape it based on their own needs. A suspended play frame allows Gadsby to consider these elements seriously, and by bringing their trauma in the open, Gadsby can begin the evolution and catharsis previously

denied by reductive joke structures. By revealing that third part of the narrative, that trauma, Gadsby also shares it with the audience, rather than keeping it to themself. Gadsby says, "I just needed my story heard, my story felt and understood by individuals with minds of their own. Because, like it or not, your story… is my story. And my story… is your story. I just don't have the strength to take care of my story anymore. […] All I can ask is just please help me take care of my story" (Gadsby, *Nanette*). Just as a prioritization of humor kept the tension for Gadsby, making them sick, a keeping the trauma to themself kept them from being able to heal. By sharing the story of their trauma, Gadsby also shares the burden. By sharing the burden, Gadsby creates connection. They say, "I will not allow my story… to be destroyed. What I would have done to have heard a story like mine. […] But to feel less alone. To feel connected. I want my story… heard" (Gadsby, *Nanette*). The connection through the sharing of personal stories alongside jokes comes to further embody Willett and Willett's conception of "humor of empathy."

Three-part narrative may have more space than two-part jokes, but it is still to a certain degree linear and causal, with elements put in particular order to lead to a conclusion. This may rub against the fuller, less clean-cut, elements of an actual life. In cutting the story apart and putting it together in alternate ways, refashioning and modifying it, Gadsby not only allows space for the elements that were once excised, but also works to interrupt the linearity of the story. The narrative becomes more circular, unmoored from linear requirements. DeAngelis speaks of a queering as a way of disrupting heteronormative linearity (580, 584), and this circular refashioning of story structure performs a similarly queer disruption of linearity. Gadsby's revisiting and modifications and changing of narrative creates a circular meta-narrative that queers narrative linearity. That circularity holds even more space for excised-things than three part, linear narrative. In this Gadsby combines Willett and Willett's "humor of empathy" with a queer, self-reflexive element.

4.2 "It's Not Totally Worked Out, Forgive Me": Real-Time Processing in *Rothaniel*

Like Gadsby, Carmichael often utilizes a long-form narrative structure, and this becomes a hallmark of his conversational style. At times, as explored in the previous chapter, his narratives incorporate humorous lines, as in the example of his "Toyotathon" comparison. However, this is rarely structured as formula-driven jokes, as jokes artificially interrupt the flow of conversation (See Coates 31); rather than building towards humor as an end-goal, Carmichael's

humorous talk serves as a digression on the way to more serious considerations. This is highlighted by the moments in which he appears to initially frame something as a joke, only to immediately contest and revise this. For example, when talking about his fears of disappointing his mother, he says,

> I think without my mom's approval… I'd like to believe I will be okay. I think I've spent a lot of time trying to supplement that love and I'm very thankful because I have some very, very good friends. Really, really good people who are there… I think it's something that I kind of search for. When there's distance between me and my mom, it's the times I feel the most like an orphan. (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*)

He laughs at the last line, framing it as a punchline; as Coates explains, in conversational humor, laughter signals moments of play rather than seriousness, and invites participants to view the statement light-heartedly (44). However, Carmichael immediately revokes this impression, saying, "I'm sorry, that laugh was fake" (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*) and "I feel abandoned" (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*). Here, what appears to be a joking resolution is revised to embrace a moment of emotional revelation. Carmichael does not end in the "two-part" structure of a joke; he largely embraces a "three-part" narrative structure. In *Rothaniel*, this third part ends, rather than in humor, in contemplation and pathos.

Carmichael, too, disrupts narrative structures within *Rothaniel,* though in a different way to Gadsby. Rather than focusing on the end part of a story, and revisiting that which was once concealed, Carmichael often lingers in the "middle" bit. The stories he tells do not have easy resolutions in linear narrative structure. His parents, brother, and friends still have trouble coming to terms with his sexual orientation. Telling the story of coming out to his mom, he says, "the last time I talked about being gay with my mom, she said, 'I can't go against Jesus.' And it just bothers me. I get it, cause she's… She's doing the best she can. I think" (Carmichael *Rothaniel*). He pauses the story for a digression in which he ruminates about his mother's personality and follows that chain of thoughts without circling back to a resolution to the narrative. When talking about his loved ones' reactions, he says, "I'm sorry. A lot of it is not really… It's kinda happening in real time, so it's not totally worked out. Forgive me" (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*). Here Carmichael suggests that he not only lingers in the middle of stories to pursue other thoughts, but in fact, the stories themselves are still in progress. They are not finished because life is not finished. Carmichael must then find a way to communicate these stories while retaining their in-progress-status. To do this, he frames his performance itself as happening in "real-time," echoing the stories' own present-ness. His conversational style works to create this impression: he appears to be articulating his thoughts in the moment throughout *Rothaniel*, starting, backtracking, and trailing off mid-sentence. This is also

supported by his interactions with the audience; their questions and responses appear to set Carmichael off on particular paths, making the performance appear all the more off-the-cuff and spontaneous. This reinforces an impression of a performance that has not been pre-written or pre-fully thought out, but is to some degree improvisational, continually reworked. In this way *Rothaniel* invokes "processing" on two levels: an exercise in processing emotions, and an in-the-moment circularity of ideas "still processing."

However, just as his meta-confessional persona draws attention to its own construction, Carmichael's repeated explicit invocation of real-time processing calls attention to its possible artifice. Though Carmichael frames the performance as spontaneous, particularly within the audience dialogue, "the impression of spontaneous conversation given by comedians who perform in a more conversational register is almost always a construct," as Quirk (*Manipulate* 83) points out. Indeed, Carmichael's final lines reveals just how fully planned and tightly constructed the special is. After revealing early on that "Jerrod" is actually his middle name, Carmichael dodges revelations of his first name until the end of the performance. After a digression of dialogue in which he considers what he has set out to accomplish in his performance, Carmichael ends by saying, "I've been trying to be very honest because my whole life was shrouded in secrets. And I figured the only route I haven't tried was the truth, so I'm saying everything. Here's everything. I feel okay. I'm very thankful for tonight. Rothaniel. My name's Rothaniel" (Carmichael, *Rothaniel*). On the one hand, this statement is a revelation of something that he had previously kept hidden for a long time. However, this foundational secret is also the name of the show. Retrospectively, it can be seen that Carmichael hints at this in his initial description of his name as a combination of his two grandfather's names, but the connection is not obvious until it is made obvious—a jolting incongruity and surprise at the end of the performance. By calling back to an unresolved question from the beginning of the show, the statement makes *Rothaniel*'s structure circular. This circularity, however, reveals the degree of pre-planning in the performance, the construction in its circularity. Once again, however, Carmichael works with ambivalences, embracing a queered blurring of boundaries rather than positioning spontaneity and pre-planning as opposing forces. He leans into an *appearance* of in-the-moment processing, but leaves open a question of the performance's construction, allowing him to deploy stories and revelations as he sees fit.

4.3 [Queered] Stories Hold Our Cure

As Chapter Three examined, Gadsby and Carmichael explore the places in which humor falls short for communicating their stand-up. Though they do incorporate and utilize humor, it does not constitute their primary aim or method; their performances incorporate declarative statements, arguments, and narrative. In *Nanette* and *Rothaniel*, Gadsby and Carmichael demonstrate the ways in which deconstructed, de-linear—queered—narrative structures can allow space for not only the emotions excised by jokes and humor, but also serious personal experiences, and serious contemplations and ruminations. They offer queered stand-up as a way of disrupting narrative linearity to create a constantly-reworked pathway, with their specials embodying a rejection of resolution in their very structures.

5. Conclusion: Breaking Comedy to Rebuild It

Stand-up, as an art form, is at a breaking point. For as much influence as it has in the cultural imagination, the field had long remained stagnant—with biting, intelligent performances but little by way of innovation. The majority of contemporary stand-up has rested on particular, binary-filled traditions. However much it exercises rhetorical power to effect social change, its onus to provide and encourage laughter seems to take precedence. In its solicitation of laughter, it in a way privileges the needs of the audience over those of the comedian and the groups they represent.

That has, in recent years, begun to shift. A wave of contemporary alternative comedians have identified the rigorous boundaries in conventional stand-up, and worked to push against them. This thesis has argued for the identification of a trend of "queered stand-up," which probes at and dismantles elements of conventional stand-up that have in the past prevented it from reaching its full rhetorical potential. Queered stand-up, too, recognizes the ways in which these boundaries have at times caused direct harm to comedians on an individual level. In queering stand-up conventions, queered stand-up offers ways of extending its rhetorical power with regard to social change, while also considering and protecting the needs of the performing comedian. Comedians like Hannah Gadsby, Jerrod Carmichael, and others within the trend of queered stand-up challenge these conventions, and challenge their audiences.

This thesis has explored the way Gadsby and Carmichael, in *Nanette* and *Rothaniel*, contest key conventions within the format of stand-up comedy. They probe at traditions surrounding stage persona, the lens through which comedians have long framed

themselves within stand-up. While conventions of the genre position persona as both singular and distinctly linked to the comedian, they also demand comedians of marginalized backgrounds and non-normative identities to fashion stage-personae that make them agreeable to a wider, mainstream audience, at times forcing them to hide "unpalatable" elements. In *Nanette* and *Rothaniel,* Gadsby and Carmichael dismantle their previously "palatable" stage personae, creating new personae that allow space for elements—be those righteous fury or discussion of their non-normative sexual orientations—that were previously subsumed, appearing ostensibly "authentic." In this dismantling, they make visible the construction inherent in persona, enacting queer meta-personae that contain ambivalences, allowing space for both the appearance of a revelatory "confession" and a winking acknowledgement of their own artifice. These meta-confessional personae allow Gadsby and Carmichael to personalize their political arguments while also maintaining a protective distance.

Gadsby and Carmichael also challenge the place of a "play-frame" within stand-up, questioning whether a privileging of humorous resolution above all else is necessary for stand-up comedy. Conventional stand-up enacts a play-frame that encourages all topics, however tragic or traumatic, to be viewed light-heartedly and un-seriously, absolving the audience for reacting with laughter to tragedy and trauma. This classic humor fits uncomfortably alongside emotions of tension and sympathy and can present an issue both when working toward social change, with serious topics framed as unserious, and when discussing personal, painful issues, as the comedian reconciles tension for the audience by keeping it within themself. Gadsby and Carmichael respond to these concerns by enacting alternate frames within their performances that allow space for other emotions alongside amusement and promote and encourage empathy and connection. This invocation of pathos can provide both a rhetorical power and a therapeutic catharsis.

Gadsby and Carmichael also challenge a humorous resolution with regard to stand-up structure. In *Nanette* and *Rothaniel,* a self-reflexive structure allows the comedians to revisit previously told jokes and narratives, disrupting traditional, linear narrative. Their queering of narrative structure allows them to embrace ambivalences, creating performances that are continually revising and processing themselves.

As demonstrated by *Nanette* and *Rothaniel*, queered-stand-up brings efforts of social criticism to the forefront, particularly those that critique gender norms and climates that deny the humanity of queer individuals, utilizing their own painful stories. They offer a stand-up that embraces ambivalences, incorporating humor alongside "serious" emotion. They enact a personalization of political marginalization that works to create empathy while protecting

the performer, offering a shared catharsis. Queered stand-up, in this way, offers multiple new possibilities: as form of social criticism embodied through personal experience, and as an art form for processing said experiences, while protecting the comedians through a self-reflexive distance.

As these specials challenge accepted conventions and boundaries of the genre, reviewers at times question whether or not *Nanette*, *Rothaniel*, and other examples of queered stand-up can in fact be labelled as stand-up comedy. I find this question beside the point. However they are labelled, however they are boundaried, queered stand-up specials offer intriguing possibilities as an art form, both in efforts to effect social change, and in examining the role art can fill for the artist. It is my hope, following this thesis, that queered stand-up is further explored, by both academic analysis and future incarnations.

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7. Abstract/ Zusammenfassung

EN:

Stand-up comedy as an art form is ever-growing in influence; as Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett write, “we are living in the age of the comedian” (140). But some comedians have found limitations within the format as it stands. Though it often enacts social criticism and is increasingly considered a highly influential vehicle for social change, conventional stand-up’s primary aim is generally accepted to be to make the audience laugh. Some comedians question this foundation, bringing their social criticism to the forefront. Rather than turning outward, however, a recent wave of comedians have turned more inward, illuminating their political arguments with narratives of personal experiences. In doing so, they delve into taboo topics and embrace moments of “seriousness,” even trauma, at times refusing to resolve tension into humor. In their taking of serious things seriously, some critics challenge their status as stand-up comedy; I argue that these specials can be understood as constituting a new trend within stand-up comedy, which I identify as “queered stand-up.”

This thesis examines the way these “queered stand-up” specials queer the format of stand-up comedy, both in disrupting conventions within the genre and embodying new possibilities. To this end, I focalize my analysis on two specials within the continuum of queered stand-up—Hannah Gadsby’s 2018 *Nanette*, which served as a catalyst for the wave, and Jerrod Carmichael’s 2022 *Rothaniel*, which recently took up queered stand-up’s mantle. This thesis explores the way *Nanette* and *Rothaniel* queer aspects of stand-up persona, humor, and structure to critique gender norms, as well as the ways they consider the comedians’ own needs within the performances. I propose that queered stand-up offers new potential for reconciling current limitations in stand-up, offering a social criticism embodied in comedians’ experiences of marginality, but with self-reflexive elements that protect their mental health.

DE:

Stand-up als Kunstform gewinnt zunehmend an Bedeutung; wie Cynthia Willett und Julie Willett schreiben, "we are living in the age of the comedian" (140). Gleichzeitig kamen einige Comedians zu dem Schluss, dass das Format in seiner jetzigen Form an seine Grenzen stößt. Obwohl Stand-up häufig Sozialkritik übt und zunehmend als einflussreiches Instrument für den sozialen Wandel angesehen wird, besteht herkömmlichen Ansätzen zufolge das Hauptziel des Stand-up nach wie vor darin, das Publikum zum Lachen zu bringen. Einige Comedians stellen diese Grundannahme in Frage und rücken stattdessen ihre Sozialkritik in den Vordergrund. Anstatt sich nach außen zu wenden, hat sich eine neue Welle von Comedians gebildet, die sich dabei eher nach innen richten und ihre politischen Argumente mit Erzählungen persönlicher Erfahrungen beleuchten. Dabei setzen sie sich mit Tabuthemen auseinander und lassen sich auf Momente des "Ernstes", ja sogar des Traumas ein, wobei sie sich bisweilen weigern, die Spannung in Humor aufzulösen. Aufgrund dieser Praxis, ernste Dinge ernst zu nehmen, stellen einige Kritiker*innen ihren Status als Stand-up in Frage; in dieser Arbeit argumentiere ich für die These, dass diese „Specials“ als ein neuer Trend innerhalb der Stand-up verstanden werden können, den ich als "queered Stand-up" bezeichne.

In dieser Arbeit wird untersucht, wie diese „queered Stand-up-Specials“ das Format der Stand-up verändern, indem sie sowohl die Konventionen des Genres durchbrechen als auch neue Möglichkeiten verkörpern. Zu diesem Zweck konzentriere ich mich in meiner Analyse auf zwei Specials innerhalb des Kontinuums von „queered Stand-up“ – Hannah Gadsbys *Nanette* (2018), das als Katalysator für die Welle betrachtet werden kann, und Jerrod Carmichaels *Rothaniel* (2022), "ein Beispiel für "queered Stand-up" aus jüngster Zeit." Diese Arbeit untersucht die Art und Weise, wie *Nanette* und *Rothaniel* Aspekte der Stand-up-Persönlichkeit, des Humors sowie der Struktur „queeren“, um Geschlechternormen zu kritisieren. Außerdem wird die Art und Weise untersucht, wie die Bedürfnisse der Comedians selbst innerhalb der Aufführungen berücksichtigt werden. Ich schlage vor, dass „queered Stand-up“ ein neues Potenzial bietet, um die gegenwärtigen Grenzen des Stand-up zu überwinden, indem es eine Sozialkritik bietet, die in den Marginalitätserfahrungen der Comedians verankert ist, dabei aber zugleich selbstreflexive Elemente enthält, welche die emotionale Verletzlichkeit der Comedians schützen.