STANDING UP COMEDY: ANALYZING RHETORICAL APPROACHES TO IDENTITY IN STAND-UP COMEDY

by

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ABSTRACT

My thesis addresses contemporary conversations about stand-up comedy and the art-form's capacity for facilitating complex rhetorical decision-making. I examine how stand-up comedians have positioned themselves on-stage through choices pertaining revealing personal behaviors, personas, and beliefs in public settings. Ultimately, I argue that the art of stand-up does not require truth-telling on-stage, and that there exists an implicit contract between performers and audiences which details comedians' license to share falsehoods, exaggerations, and embellishments on-stage without the repercussions that accompany these actions in other discourse settings. Finally, I evaluate how comics have handled this rhetorical "license," with some performers delivering easily identifiable falsehoods on-stage through characters and caricatures, and others choosing to deliver autobiographical material in spite of the license. My research offers a framework through which audiences may digest the speech utterances in stand-up comedy performances as the product of purely rhetorical, calculated choices. I will propose that audiences treat each stand-up performance, no matter how seemingly intimate or personal, as artifice. I then offer case studies of three comedians who approach the notion of crafting an on-stage persona in different fashions and evaluate how each of these comedians utilize the implicit license of stand-up comedy. My research contributes to conversations in rhetoric and composition related to the performance of public and private "selves."

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Two Scenes from Contemporary Stand-up Comedy

April 28, 2018: Stand-up comedian Michelle Wolf hosts the White House Correspondents' Dinner. Adorned in a black blazer, she stands before a crowd of political donors and media representatives to carry on a nearly 40-year-old tradition. In her stand-up monologue, she makes jokes about members of the media and criticizes members of President Trump's cabinet, staff, and Trump himself, who had refused to attend the event. Many of Wolf's jokes follow a similar formula of presenting real-life setups followed by exaggerated punchlines: "There's a ton of news right now, a lot is going on, and we have all these 24-hour news networks, and we could be covering everything," she says. "Instead, we're covering three topics. Every hour is Trump, Russia, Hillary, and a panel of four people who remind you why you don't go home for Thanksgiving" (Wolf). She concludes her set with, "Flint still doesn't have clean water," a setup that hangs in the air with no punchline.

After the event, Wolf faces backlash for insulting members of government and national media. The *New York Times* describes the audience of journalists as "seeth[ing] over what they deemed Ms. Wolf's over-the-line jokes" in an article titled "Did Michelle Wolf Kill the White House Correspondents' Dinner?" (Grynbaum). In subsequent interviews, Wolf defends her performance as consistent with the expectations of the White House Correspondents' Dinner and the craft of comedy.

January 4, 2018: Netflix releases stand-up comedian Tom Segura's special "Disgraceful." In his show, Segura discusses endangered species, jokes about his Peruvian heritage, and tells stories related to his family relationships. In the special, one of his jokes regards the people of Lafayette and the Cajun accent, and Segura proclaims that he is in favor of building a wall if it's

around the state of Louisiana. Upon the show's release, political commentators and radio show hosts in Lafayette detest Segura's claims and share outrage at his performance.

On January 27th, Segura addresses the controversy on his podcast "Your Mom's House," which he hosts with his wife and fellow comedian Christina Pazsitzky. In response to the backlash, he claims that he was joking, and that audiences should not interpret his on-stage sentiments as reflective of his off-stage beliefs. "There's so many people out there… holding people to what they're saying on stage, as equal to what you would say offstage," he says. "You know that's not the same thing, right?" Pazsitzky adds, "There's a thing called context… if you're going to a comedy show and you're all agreeing in this social contract... it's not meant to be taken literally or seriously" (YourMomsHouse). Segura concludes the segment by announcing he's booked the first available show in New Orleans, and advertises his website's "Build the Wall" T-shirts, which depict a fence around the state of Louisiana.

These two scenes highlight the range of perception of what the expectations and duties of a contemporary stand-up comedian are. As in Michelle Wolf's case, should comics face ridicule and backlash for setups and jokes that poke fun at people, especially if those people are publicly recognizable and wield power? Or, as in Segura's case, should audiences interpret performers words as a reflection of their off-stage attitudes and beliefs? Audiences vary in their response to the material of stand-up performances. And of course, performers of this art-form sometimes intend to stoke audiences by asking difficult questions, offering fantastical scenarios, and submitting challenging political stances. With this project, I hope to offer a framework for interpreting the sentiments shared in a stand-up routine as rhetorical actions responding to a unique set of speaking situations and audience expectations.

Exigence and Goals

As an undergraduate student in the fall of 2015, I wrote an article-length piece wherein I evaluated stand-up comedy through the framework of rhetorical definitions of "literature." As I engaged with secondary research and perused existing conversations in the realm of "rhetoric in stand-up comedy," my research repeatedly took me to studies of "identity" in stand-up comedy. Many scholars, detailed below, have explored the notion of comics' "on-stage" identities and have considered how they are reflective of, or contrary to, their off-stage lives. Some of the texts I found defining "literature" offered similar criteria, claiming that an audience was in the presence of the literary when the actions and words of a speaker do not match with the intent that we would ordinarily attribute to them. I titled my 2015 piece "Stand-up Comedy as Literature," and within it, I made the argument that scholars should regard stand-up comedy as literature on the basis that comedians play characters on-stage, and performers do not intend to represent their beliefs accurately on-stage.

I kept this idea in the back of my head over the next three years as I began my Master's work and pursued rhetoric and composition as my field of inquiry. Through graduate-level courses and conference presentations, I remained transfixed on elements of rhetorical theory revealing themselves in stand-up performances. As I turned my focus to the thesis requirement for my Master's studies, I reminded myself of "Stand-up Comedy as Literature." In revisiting that 2015 piece, I noticed that I had unknowingly begun laying the foundation for an argument about how audiences ought to rhetorically perceive and digest a comedian's on-stage performance.

Some authors studying stand-up comedy define the craft as an "escape" for performers, and regard "on-stage" as a place where comedians can finally "be themselves." Often, authors

allude to comedians who are hampered by trauma or social quirks off-stage, and see the stage as a venue for a release of those hamperings. In a similar vein, some authors have conceptualized the stand-up stage as an extension of the performers' private, off-stage lives. These theorists cite autobiographical moments in stand-up shows where performers seem to allude to real-life events, and use the stage to deliberate real, offstage emotions.

While I agree that, for some comedians, the stage is a place to comprehend and reflect on the happenings in their personal lives, I intend to refute the conceptions of stand-up which paint the art-form as purely autobiographical. Through my research, I've noted that comics approach rhetorical decision-making in a variety of ways—some adopting a character who embodies and reports their off-stage beliefs and attitudes, and others carefully crafting a rhetorical character who exists in opposition to their off-stage persona. In either case, performers carefully craft their routines, and vet them through cycles of open-mic events and low-stakes venues before performing for larger crowds and recording shows. I plan to show that even the most autobiographical stand-up bits require crafting a persona through which to deliver the material. Ultimately, I will propose that audiences treat each stand-up performance, no matter how seemingly intimate or personal, as artifice, and offer a rhetorical model for understanding the speech acts contained within stand-up comedy performances.

Chapter Breakdown

With this thesis, I aim to investigate how audiences have received stand-up, and work to offer a framework for understanding any and all comedy performances as a type of calculated, inauthentic speech. The remainder of this first chapter contains a review of existing literature wherein I summarize the conversations in rhetoric related to the notions of performing a persona

through speech acts in stand-up comedy. This chapter concludes with a quasi-history of stand-up comedy, documenting the rise of the art-form in the United States, birthed from early 1900's traditions of minstrels and clowns, through its first boom in the 1960's, the evolution of the craft in the late 70's and early 80's, to its present-day conceptions and impacts on popular culture.

In Chapter 2, I delve into theory about the role of a stand-up comedian and the expectations of the genre of stand-up. Using a foundation of linguistic theory, I will examine the "contract" that exists between performer and audience during a stand-up show and consider its rhetorical implications on how audiences receive the performance. I will posit my argument that audiences and critics ought to regard each stand-up performance as an artificial speech act wherein the comedian has neither the obligation, nor the ability, to craft a routine which is completely reflective of an existing person's experiences. At the conclusion of chapter two, I offer a framework by which we may understand how each comedian handles the social contract. Throughout the subsequent chapters, I will make adjustments and refinements to this framework in order to better approximate the exchange of language that takes place in comedy performances. By this point in the paper, I will have argued that all stand-up performances should be regarded as artifice. In the first iteration of the framework, I suggest a spectrum-continuum on which each comedian's approach to comedy may be mapped. The "range" of the first literary framework, which I explore in Case Study 1, will span from "Comedians Whose Stand-up Character Who Most Accurately Resembles Their Offstage Persona" to "The Completely Contrived Stand-up Character."

In my final three sections, I conduct case studies on three different comedians who vary in their approach to developing an on-stage persona. Each case study will give us insight about the functionality of the framework and guide us in making adjustments to it to better represent

the craft of stand-up and the rhetorical decision-making that it prompts. In Case Study 1, I investigate the "Completely Contrived Character" end of the framework by conducting a case study of Jerry Seinfeld. Seinfeld is famous for his metered delivery and attention to linguistic detail in his performances. On many occasions, he's discussed how his act is not meant to reflect his personal life and that he often says things that he does not believe or endorse because they are funny. On HBO's *Talking Funny* and his own Netflix show *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*, Seinfeld has explored ideas related to crafting an artificial persona on-stage. I use this case study to exhibit the maximum level of artifice comedians may achieve in crafting their on-stage persona.

Case Study 2 contains a case study of Hannah Gadsby, whose approach to stand-up persona contrasts Seinfeld's and sits on the "Character Resembling Offstage Persona" end of the spectrum. In Gadsby's Netflix special "Nanette," she details her childhood as an LGBT youth growing up in Tasmania during a time wherein practicing homosexuality was outlawed. Gadsby's material is incredibly personal and exists to deliver a political message. If there was ever a comedian whose on-stage persona was indistinguishable from her off-stage persona, it's Gadsby in *Nanette*. I highlight conversations between comedians and theorists shortly after the release of the special, which prompted disagreements about the tenets of comedy and the divide between stand-up and a "one man" or "one-woman" show. The case study concludes with a discussion of the implications of Gadsby's performance on the rhetorical framework I've proposed, and an adjustment of the criteria of the framework to evaluate individual shows, as opposed to comedians themselves. My case study will show that, even with this performance, Gadsby's performance abides by my conception of an artificial speech act.

In Case Study 3, I will investigate "The Middle Ground." After establishing the two "extremes" on either side of the framework, I will explore those comedians whose personas incorporate elements of "crafting" and elements of authenticity. I conduct a case study on Dave Chappelle, exploring how his persona on stage is a paradoxical mix between autobiography and complete fabrication. With this final case study, I will adjust my framework further by proposing that we evaluate each utterance a comedian offers on an individual basis. I argue that depending on the circumstances of his performance, Chappelle's comedy has existed everywhere in between the two previously explored extremes, and has served as an example of the complex rhetorical decision making that comedians contemplate with respect to their on-stage personas.

Literature Review: Performing Persona in Stand-up

Stand-up in American Culture

Scholars have studied stand-up comedy in the United States as a cultural institution, with performers embodying and responding to elements of American society (Mintz 1985; Friedman 2014; Gillota 2015; Jesus 2017). Mintz served as one of the first academic voices proclaiming comedy's cultural relevance in 1985, publishing "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation," wherein he claimed "the student of a culture and society cannot find a more revealing index to its values, attitudes, dispositions, and concerns" than the genre of stand-up comedy (Mintz 1985). Three years later, he published *Humor in America: A Research Guide to Genres and Topics*. Within, he states that "there is reason to argue that [stand-up] should be at the very center of the study of human belief and behavior whatever its particular perspective" (Mintz 1988). As a cultural barometer, stand-up and other similar branches of comedy have become an industrial fixture in the United States (Friedman 2014). With the fluctuation of

conversations in politics and social movements comes a response from the realm of stand-up comedy: “Most critics who do explore the form see the stand-up comedian as a cultural critic and/or outsider” (Gillota). Comedians draw from current events and social issues to develop material, and many stand-up comics adopt a persona that assumes a political position and uses stage time to address cultural issues. In “All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents,” Jesus and Mahrouse outline how some comedians use “charged humor” to “[tackle] the fraught terrain of racism, sexism, ableism, and heterosexism” (Jesus 2017). As many comedians use their routines to make claims in political conversations, scholars have investigated how comedians position themselves as performers and as cultural mediators.

Marginalized Voices in Stand-up

Scholars have particularly looked into performers of comedy from marginalized groups. In “Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique,” Gilbert’s 2004 exploration of marginalized voices in stand-up, she claimed, “drawing on their shared history of oppression, marginal comics serve as licensed social critics, using rhetorical strategies such as self-deprecation to critique and sometimes subvert the status quo” (Gilbert). Olson also explores the idea of comedians bringing personal sentiments to the stage in Mintz’s *Humor in America*, saying, “Some theorists explain the humor response of standup comedians as a kind of self-therapy used to overcome their insecurities, channel their anger at society’s injustices, and win acceptance from their audiences” (Olson 126). Other scholars have documented the journey to success for the “female comic” throughout history (History 2017; Perez 2017). CNN’s *History of Comedy* series documents big names in the past hundred years of comedy. In Episode Two of the series, “The Funnier Sex,” the documentary features the noteworthy female comedians who

innovated the stand-up comedy scene, not just for “females,” but for the industry as a whole (History of Comedy 2017). The episode highlights comics such as Joan Rivers, Roseanne Barr, and Sarah Silverman, who found success in the comedy world despite its undertones and overtones and sexism. Perez (2017) continued the study of equality in stand-up in “Race, gender, and comedy awards: from civil rights to color-blindness,” which documents the Grammy winners and nominees of “Best Comedy Album.” In the study, Perez reveals that males were nominated more than females for the award by a ratio of almost nine-to-one (Perez 2017). Though many scholars have focused on women’s oppression in stand-up comedy throughout history, women today still face prejudices in the comedy world which prevent them from succeeding at a rate similar to male performers.

Identity in Comedy

As comedy is undeniably linked to issues of identity, scholars have studied how comedians play with the notions of identity, carefully crafting and revealing versions of “themselves” (Daube, 2010; Gillota 2015; Chirico 2016). Gillato’s “Stand-Up Nation: Humor and American Identity” states that theorists “see the stand-up comic chiefly working as a cultural critic, using his or her humor to defamiliarize accepted cultural norms” (Gillota). In “Performed Authenticity,” Chirico (2016) investigates the dual nature of each comedian’s identity, noting the autobiographical, self-deprecating nature of stand-up performances, and studies the navigation between comedians’ “authentic and public” selves (Chirico 2016). Of course, comedy sparks a convergence between the performer’s persona and the audience’s expectations and social outlooks. “The selves that stand-ups construct onstage are neither stable nor complete, and in a single performance, a comedian may align himself or herself both with and against multiple

group affiliations" (Gillota). In 2010, Matthew Daube published "Laughter in Revolt: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in the Construction of Stand-Up Comedy," in which he states that "stand-up's style and subject matter are inextricably linked to issues of race, ethnicity, and the production of identity" (Daube 2010). Stand-up comedians must be vigilant in analyzing their audience and how one's identity connects with it. Brodie's "Stand-Up Comedy as a Genre of Intimacy" states that, "By maintaining control of this conversation, [comedians] are able paradoxically to give control away, wrestling it back when required, thus creating the illusion of intimacy, exchange, and reciprocity between themselves and the audience" (Brodie 153). Identity in stand-up comedy reveals itself differently with each performance, and comedians offer different avenues for revealing "themselves" through performance. "Stand-up is therefore an essentially fluid art-form that will not adhere to any single or totalizing definition" (Gillota).

All of this existing research in stand-up comedy gives us a solid impression of the role that comedy plays in contemporary American society and the expectations that audiences may have when attending shows. And yet, as exemplified by the backlash Michelle Wolf and Tom Segura experienced, we still seem to be having misfires in our conversations about what the role of a stand-up comedian is, or, what audiences are seeing on stage when watching a stand-up comedy performance. With the notion of "persona" in stand-up, some scholars seem to view stand-up as an art-form wherein the performer reveals their "true" or "private" self. Other scholars see the stage as a place for comedians to play with rhetorical devices and experiment with the versions of "themselves" to act out. In my project, I hope to address this split and submit a framework for digesting stand-up comedy performances and offer a solution.

Having established some of the ongoing conversations in the academic rhetorical study of stand-up comedy, I'd like to offer special attention to John Limon's *Stand-Up Comedy in*

Theory, or Abjection in America. I value the work the Limon has published and acknowledge that the ideas that he's brought to this rhetorical conversation have certainly moved it forward, but his 2000 work serves as sort of an antithesis for the argument I intend to make, or at least, a starting point for one of the common conception of stand-up performance.

In his 2000 work, Limon posits that the central theme of all stand-up comedy is "abjection." He claims that the characters that comedians portray are in response to the real-world alienation and degradation that their off-stage selves feel. Limon first defines "abjection" by its conventional understanding: "abasement, groveling prostration." Then he attaches another, more precise definition of the notion of "abjection" he uses, as "a physic worrying of those aspects of oneself that one cannot be rid of, that seem, but are not quite alienable" (Limon 4). The craft of stand-up comedy, according to Limon, is a therapeutic exercise for the tortured soul of the comic. He poses pivotal questions in his exploration of stand-up identity: "comedians are not allowed to be either natural or artificial. (Are they themselves or acting? Are they in costume?)" (Limon 6). His work explores different comedians and their approach to their on-stage personas, but offers some seemingly broad generalizations in defining how performers craft a persona in response to the rhetorical situation of stand-up: "the deepest desire of stand-ups is to be, with respect to their lives, unencumbered. Limon offers an interesting academic framework for analyzing on-stage versus off-stage persona, but I plan to refute these broad claims and convenient, generic conceptions of a stand-up's (off-stage) life. In another chapter, Limon claims that "all stand-ups are abject insofar as they give themselves over to the stand-up condition, which is a noncondition between nature and artifice. (They are neither acting nor conversing, neither in nor out of costume.)" (Limon 105). The argument that I make will push against the notions of stand-up performance which paint it as an extension of a comedian's life. I

plan on adopting Limon's notion of the "noncondition between nature and artifice" to evaluate how comedians conceive and perform their identities. However, I plan to argue that stand-ups are acting, and they are in costume, even in moments when it appears the opposite. I will show that they merely create characters, some which may closely resemble their off-stage selves, but are characters nonetheless and should be regarded as characters while on-stage.

History of Stand-up

In order to fully grapple with the conversations surrounding stand-up comedy and its audiences' perceptions of the performances, I will summarize the history of stand-up comedy in the United States and its evolution as a medium. Mintz claimed in 1985 that the "role of the comedian as social commentator is surely not a new one," and even cited Shakespeare as a pioneer in the art-form of comedy monologues (Mintz 1985). While the recognizable medium of stand-up doesn't appear in the United States until around the 1950's, its inception was another step in artistic performances "in the tradition of fools, jesters, clowns, and comics, which can be traced back at least as far as the Middle Ages" (Mintz, 1985). Olson acknowledges the birth of stand-up as another medium in a long line of American traditions, going from "the clown, or formal servant attire of minstrelsy," to vaudeville shows and "the exaggerated face makeup, wigs and flashy costumes worn by America's talking clowns" (Olson). As its own tradition, stand-up comedy takes a turn moving into the 1960s. Comics like Lenny Bruce, Joan Rivers, and Woody Allen performed shows wherein they address "neuroses and foibles" and their routines "[become] more personal" (History of Comedy). Early sixties' comedians were distinguished by "the counterculture uniform of longer hair, jeans, t-shirts and beads," and the late 60's by "designer suits, dark ties, and dress shirts" (Olson).

In the 1970's, comedy experienced a "new wave" (which would be the first of many waves). The humor of the 70's hinged on a "more relaxed delivery" (Olson). Comedians forewent the rigid structure of the 60's for a more colloquial tone. In an April 1978 edition of *Newsweek*, Tony Schwartz penned "The Good Humor Men," wherein he said "If 1960s comedians were didactic and politically serious, many 1970s comedians adopted a light-hearted irreverence, "if not an arrogance on-stage" (Schwartz). If the 50's and 60's established the expectations of the genre, the 70's flipped those expectations upside down. According to Robert Weide, "by the time we get to the 70's, comedy starts to get away from punchlines" (History of Comedy). He cites Steve Martin as the most successful act of the era, who was "poking fun at the whole nature of comedy... Taking the standard conventions and turning them on its ear" (History of Comedy).

This trend of subverting genre expectations in comedy continued through the early 80's. In a 1981 edition of *Time*, Richard Corliss wrote that the day's new comics "have jettisoned the topical satire of the '60s for a less political, more radical examination of the comic's relation to the society he entertains," and deemed the era the "Post-Funny School of Comedy" (Corliss). By the time of Andy Kaufman in the 1980's, audiences and critics began having trouble discerning where the comedian's character ended and where their actual selves began. Corliss wrote that Kaufman "[complicated] matters by insisting that certain of his routines are dead serious" (Corliss).

Some scholars and critics mark the mid-80's as another "wave" in stand-up, defined by further attention to social commentary and cultural critique. In 1985, Mintz differentiated between "traditional stand-up comedy characterized by an irrelevant quest for laughs," and the wave of "comedy which is more socially and politically satiric or insightful" (Mintz 1985, 77).

This "wave" carries through to the present day as comedy booms with performances on both ends of this spectrum—those that evoke nothing but laughs and those that call for social contemplation.

Today, stand-up thrives on a variety of platforms and with a multitude of audiences. Gillota notes that "stand-up comedy today also reflects the contours of contemporary identity politics. Regardless of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, or political affiliation, consumers can find stand-up geared toward them" (Gillota). Consumers may access stand-up performances through traditional television outlets like Comedy Central and HBO, or streaming services like Netflix and Hulu. In the past year, Netflix has released over a hundred stand-up titles ranging from 30 minute sets to hour-plus specials, including "Comedians of the World," a stand-up collection consisting of 47 half-hour sets from comics from 13 different geographical regions. For performers and consumers alike, stand-up comedy exists as a cultural institution signaling it will maintain and bolster its relevance in American culture.

CHAPTER 2: EXISTING THEORIES IN STAND-UP CRITICISM

The Role of a Comedian

Comedians come from all sects of life and approach the craft in different ways, but each seems to be driven to convey some message to an audience. Today's comedians have etched out a role as commentators on culture, as they're positioned to observe the world in which they live and report back to audiences. Mintz offers that the primary function of stand-up comedy is "social and cultural analysis," claiming that comedians "make us understand ourselves and society more thoroughly, more deeply, more meaningfully (Mintz 1985; Mintz 1988). The goal comedians have in making these cultural observations is not merely to observe, but to question. They note the natural order of things, the status quo, and then question its existence. The craft of stand-up comedy does not tell us how the world works, so much as it pokes holes in the design. Gillota offers that the ultimate end of stand-up comedy is "challenging social norms and refusing to succumb to the sanitizing effects of civilization" (Gillota).

In terms of intimacy, stand-up comedy serves as one of the most personal and singular forms of artistic performances. Consider comedians' tendencies to analyze the world and reveal those observations from their own point of view—a perspective rarely, if ever, diluted by hierarchical concerns or corporate intervention. As an art-form, stand-up is so intimate that the exigence of this thesis comes from some audiences' perceptions that stand-up is entirely truth—and these audiences are not wildly out of line in believing so. Let us for a moment juxtapose stand-up performance with another art-form with a reputation for the intimate, like music. Depending on the dynamics of the particular genre, performing music live requires hours of setup, tuning instruments, and conducting sound checks. Producing a music album usually means recording in a studio and mixing, a team of sound engineers, withdrawn from a live audience.

Stand-up comedy performances, on the other hand, simply require a venue, a microphone, and someone to listen. Nearly every stand-up comedy album in existence has been recorded live with an accompanying audience. And it's not just the circumstances of the art-form that separate stand-up as especially intimate—it's also the material.

Comedians conduct their craft naked in their presentation, equipped with only their personal observations, opinions, and the expectation that they be funny and connect with the audience. In essence, they have little to rely on aside from their own experiences and perspectives. A comic must deliver each piece of material, no matter how outlandish or reflective of a third-person perspective, through his or her own body and voice.

Innately, comedians reveal themselves, or a version of themselves, while performing. Chirico calls the "autobiographical aura of standup" a "hallmark of the genre" (Chirico). She notes that on stage is a "real person... sharing confidences through a microphone" (Chirico). Throughout history, many comics have succeeded in the business by amplifying the personal nature of stand-up. Their persona on stage, and their material, seems to match with the person who exists off stage. The stage becomes, in a sense, a place to report on the happenings in their off-stage lives. Humor theorists attributed the pursuit of an approving audience to "comedians' early life events" (Olson). Others have noted the autobiographical approach to comedy "as a kind of self-therapy used to overcome their insecurities" and "channel their anger at society's injustices" (Olson). The comedic stylings of the late Richard Pryor seemed to exemplify these theoretical stances. In the "Spark of Insanity" episode of CNN's *History of Comedy*, longtime friend of Pryor Dr. Todd Boyd says, "Richard's comedy was funny, but it was also therapeutic. It was almost like this guy was using the stage the way a therapist would use their couch" (History of Comedy). In Pryor's 1982 album and film *Live on the Sunset Strip*, he explicitly jokes about

his psychotic meltdowns, drug-fueled escapades, domestic disputes, and his very real attempt at suicide by setting himself on fire, which had been a public topic of conversation in the years preceding the performance. Pryor uses the stage as a confessional, in part to take control of the narrative and in part, perhaps, to demonstrate newfound sensibility by poking fun at his offstage, slightly younger self.

Pryor may be one of the most noteworthy examples of utilizing stand-up performance as a therapy session, but he's hardly the only comedian who has implemented the tactic. Later in "Spark of Insanity," comedian Rachel Bloom says, "If you're a comedian, there's a part of you that is unhinged and more importantly, unhappy." Bobcat Goldthwait notes that "[comedians] are susceptible a little bit to madness," while Craig Ferguson uses similar language in defining his approach to stand-up as "harvested madness" (History of Comedy). These depictions of the craft of stand-up align with Limon's sentiment that "what is stood up in stand-up comedy is abjection" (Limon). These comedians take the discomforts and shortcomings they face in real life and use the stand-up stage as a place to unpack it all through creativity and critical evaluation.

The comics and theorists outlined above seem to agree with Limon's stance on the nature of stand-up comedy—that what the craft is, at its core, is a release, and an honest reflection of oneself. But stand-up encompasses thousands of performers, each with a unique approach to the craft, and we'd surely struggle to interpret all stand-up performances as a reflection of one's innermost thoughts and demons. As a "fluid art form that will not adhere to any single or totalizing definition," we should note that not all comics and theorists' perceptions of stand-up coincide with Limon's (Gillota). In studying other approaches, we need not revamp our conception of stand-up, or claim that comics whose acts are less personal are doing something adjacent to comedy. The rules remain the same, no matter the approach: A microphone, an

audience, and oneself. Some performers take the autobiographical expectations of the genre and play with them. For these comics, Chirico posits that stand-up performance involves the *illusion* of autobiography and intimacy (emphasis mine). "This dynamic of self-revelation within the context of a public performance creates a sense of authenticity; the comedian garners laughter not solely from the jokes he or she tells, but from the sense of speaking autobiographically" (Chirico). With a similar sentiment, Brodie claims that these comedians depend on "creating the illusion of intimacy, exchange, and reciprocity between themselves and the audience" (Brodie).

Some theorists and practicing stand-up comedians have understandings of the art-form as more performative and manipulative than autobiographical and self-revealing. These comedians don't seem to wrestle with an obligation to reflect their true selves in their acts. On stage and in their writing, they exercise calculated decision-making and rhetorical forethought intended to have a particular impact on an audience. We may recall Tom Segura's response to the backlash about his Cajun joke, expressing that audiences shouldn't expect to hear his real, personal, level-headed opinions during his act. Comedian Patton Oswalt offered further clarity in a letter to himself published on his blog in 2013, where he offered his stance on the time-honored and comedian-despised tradition of heckling during stand-up routines. He defined heckling as a disruption of his scripted speech act: "Hecklers don't make a show memorable. They prevent a show from being a fucking show. Comedians do not love hecklers. They love doing the original material they wrote and connecting with an entire audience" (Oswalt). In an interview cited in "Spark of Insanity," Robin Williams described his approach to stand-up as "a total different perspective… a combination of writing and acting at the same time" (History of Comedy).

So if they aren't themselves, what characters do they depict? For some comedians, stand-up means embodying someone else, or something else, on-stage. While Pryor speaks from his

own perspective about the happenings in his own life, comics like Oswalt and Segura often position themselves as third-person speakers—characters through whom they deliver their jokes. Olson says these comedians "display human foibles," and that they "act out chaotic behavior that contrasts with behavior supportive of social cohesiveness" (Olson). They engage in activities and share opinions that differ from society's acceptable standards—and the joke is that the performers and the audiences know something is amiss. Mintz says that comedians embrace the role of the "negative exemplar," which may come in many forms: "the grotesque, the buffoon, the fool, the simpleton, the scoundrel, the drunkard, the liar, the coward, the effete, the tightwad, the boor, the egoist, the cuckold, the shrew, the weakling, the neurotic" (Mintz 1985). These characters depend on the audience's understanding that what they're witnessing is in jest, and the "socially unacceptable traits are enacted by the comedian to be ridiculed, laughed at, repudiated, and, finally, symbolically 'punished'" (Mintz 1985).

For comedians who embrace this approach, feigning the stance of personal confession that stand-up prescribes creates comedic effect. Talented stand-ups may have their audiences momentarily believe that what they're witnessing is an honest reflection of the comic's self. Often, set ups will seem like autobiographical reflections, only for the punchline to dissolve the illusion and reveal the farce. An example would be the meter that Rodney Dangerfield relied on throughout his comedy career, which sounded like: "The other night, I was in a place, I felt like having a few drinks, I went over to the bartender and said 'surprise me,' he showed me a naked picture of my wife." For other comedians, the joke is playing an easily identifiable character who clearly isn't meant to resemble the truth or fool the audience. Chirico offers the example of the "fictive persona" of Larry the Cable Guy, "who never worked for a cable company but relies upon this fictive self for his comedy" (Chirico). The autobiographical nature of stand-up is

unavoidable, yet performers find ways to have fun with that expectation, describing imagined situations and creating non-real characters.

Comic License

With our understanding of the choice comedians have in accurately or inaccurately depicting "themselves" on-stage, we may revisit the notion that performers of stand-up comedy evoke a special "license." In the introduction, I cited Christina Pazsitzky, who, in response to the backlash Tom Segura faced about his Cajun joke, said of audience members, "you're going to a comedy show and you're all agreeing in this social contract... it's not meant to be taken literally or seriously" (YourMomsHouse). In the section above, I highlighted both comedians who used the stage as an environment for truth, and comedians who saw the stage as a place to play with the audience's perception of their character. So what is it about stand-up comedy that gives comedians a choice to make with regard to their authenticity? Mintz claims that, as a "licensed spokesman," comics are "permitted to say things about society that we want and need to have uttered publicly, but would be too dangerous and too volatile if done without the mediation of humor" (Olson). In this instance, Mintz refers to the license comics have been granted to speak unpleasant or uncomfortable sentiments which they themselves actually sympathize with. This license comes with a responsibility, or a performer's obligation to make it clear to the audience in which fashion they're exercising the comedic license. Chirico highlights the paradox that "performers convey authenticity even while staging a performance… juggling multiple selves during the act" (Chirico). Because the rhetorical situation of stand-up inherently involves the expectation for a performer to "reveal" oneself, the choices that comedians make with regard to

the contract still reflect the autobiographical nature of the art-form. Thus, Chirico highlights the "implication that a truer self will emerge from behind the public façade" (Chirico).

An important perk of this license seems to be that comedians are under no obligation to believe what they're purporting on-stage. They may craft a "a comic character" to "represent, through caricature, those negative traits which we wish to hold up to ridicule, to feel superior to, and to renounce through laughter" (Mintz 1977). Thus, the joke in this case is that the comedian assumes a position that the audience knows is undeserving of sympathy or agreement. For example, here's George Carlin in his 1999 HBO special *You are All Diseased* on children in the United States: "Something else I'm getting tired of… there's all this stupid bullshit that we have to listen to all the time about children.. 'Help the children!' 'What about the children?' 'Save the children!' You know what I say? Fuck the children! Fuck 'em! They're getting entirely too much attention" (Carlin). The comedian is "defective in some way," and enjoys an "exemption from the expectation of normal behavior" (Mintz 1985). "He represents conduct to be ridiculed and rejected, and our laughter reflects our superiority, our relief that his weaknesses are greater than our own" (Mintz 1985).

It's with these conceptions of stand-up in mind that I challenge Limon's stance that "the deepest desire of stand-ups is to be, with respect to their lives, unencumbered. All a stand-up's life feels abject to him or her, and stand-ups try to escape it by living it as an act" (Limon). The notion that comics live their lives as an act may ring true to a degree for some comics, like the Richard Pryors, whose private lives turn into public performance. But even in Pryor's case, his material is the result of hours of writing process, teasing out concepts, and perfecting his timing through practice with low stakes shows and smaller, forgiving audiences. Even the most autobiographical stand-up set requires attention to detail, rhetorical prowess, and an

acknowledgment of the “role” their perspective inhabits. And plenty of comics approach rhetorical decision-making differently than the Pryors of the comedy world. While some adopt a character who embodies and reports their offstage beliefs and attitudes, others carefully craft a rhetorical character who exists in opposition to the off-stage person. In this section, I noted the “license” that comedians have to perform through a persona on-stage which does not accurately reflect their off-stage selves. In the following section, I will analyze the verbal positioning that signals and enables this license to support my proposition that we treat each stand-up performance, no matter how seemingly intimate or personal, as artifice.

Defining Comedy with Definitions of Literature

If we acknowledge the license comedians have to present a less-than-true version of themselves on stage, we must determine how that rhetorically impacts the speech act of their performance. From the perspective of the comedian, that means considering how they represent their persona on stage through language. For audiences, the license means that we ought to come to an understanding about what we’re hearing when we watch a comedian perform. What effect does this license have on the speech act, and how should it impact how we digest a comedian’s on-stage words? In 1971, Richard Ohmann published “Speech Acts and the Definition of Literature.” Within this piece, he set out to discover parameters which “[permit] us to distinguish a literary work from a nonliterary discourse” (Ohmann). In his pursuit to differentiate literary speech from nonliterary, he frequently cited J.L. Austin’s “How to do Things with Words,” a series of lectures given in 1955 and published in 1962. Both of these pieces serve as crucial texts for discerning the intent behind acts of speech, and as such, lend some groundwork for defining the speech performed during stand-up comedy acts.

Ohmann's and Austin's works hinge on the concept of breaking down speech acts according to the speaker's intentions. In nonliterary settings, a speaker prescribes their words to be interpreted at face value, upholding the accompanying sentiments normally attached to those words. In literary settings, the speaker intends for the audience to differentiate between the words spoken and the actual sentiments behind them. To illustrate the intent of speech acts, Ohmann uses Austin's breakdown of a single speech act into three observable categories: locutionary acts, illocutionary acts, and perlocutionary acts.

When a speaker utters a phrase, the locutionary act simply refers to the utterance of words. Ohmann says, "a speaker produces sounds (a writer sets down graphic symbols) which are well ordered with respect to the phonological system and grammar of a particular language" (Ohmann). Illocutionary acts define the intent behind the speech act, as governed by the speaking situation and the relationship between the speaker and audience. Austin posits the term "illocutionary forces," to refer to the intentions behind a speech act, and offers "asking or answering a question, giving some information or an assurance or a warning, announcing a verdict or an intention" as examples of illocutionary acts (Austin). The third category, perlocutionary acts, refers to the effects of the speech. Ohmann says speech "may intimidate you, inform you, puzzle you, sadden you, and so on" (Ohmann). For perlocutionary acts, the speaker only has "limited control." They depend on the audience's interpretation and are subject to potential misfires in understanding. So, in any given speech act, each of these categories are at play. Ohmann offers the following example:

"Locutionary act: Saying 'Stop, or I'll shoot.'

Illocutionary acts: Ordering, threatening

Perlocutionary acts: … Frightening, enraging…" (Ohmann 10).

Perlocutionary acts play a role in Austin and Ohmann's works, and will play a role in later chapters of this project. But for now, we'll focus just on the relationship between locutionary and illocutionary acts. In both How to Do Things with Words and "Speech Acts and the Definition of Literature," Austin and Ohmann consider what happens during speech acts when there's an incongruence between the locutionary act and its illocutionary force. Austin offers rules that dictate proper exchanges of discourse wherein the locutionary and illocutionary acts align. When a speaker's utterance breaks one of these rules, Austin deems that utterance unhappy: "if we sin against any one (or more) of these six rules, our performative utterance will be (in one way or another) unhappy." (Austin). The rules most pertinent to a conversation about comedian's license are the last two he lists, which state:

> "(C. 1) Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves, and further
>
> (C. 2) must actually so conduct themselves subsequently" (Austin).

So, in an instance wherein a speaker shares thoughts or feelings that they themselves do not believe in, or if the speaker does not convince the audience that the speaker believes the sentiments he or she is sharing, this qualifies the speech act as unhappy. "I cannot be said to have warned an audience unless it hears what I say and takes what I say in a certain sense. An effect must be achieved on the audience if the illocutionary act is to be carried out" (Austin). So, unhappiness occurs when a speaker's words lead to misaligned locutionary and illocutionary acts.

Austin expounds on the concept of context, the "occasion of an utterance," within a speech act and considers how the speaking situation affects the "happiness" of the act (Austin). By taking context into consideration, audiences may glean information about the intent behind the speech, or the illocutionary force: "It makes a great difference whether we were advising, or merely suggesting, or actually ordering, whether we were strictly promising or only announcing a vague intention" (Austin). Austin mentions one potential contextual explanation for a speech act in his first lecture, which would signal misalignment or unhappiness between the locutionary and illocutionary acts: "Surely the words must be spoken 'seriously' and so as to be taken 'seriously'... I must not be joking, for example, nor writing a poem" (Austin). This gets us to the sphere in which comedy exists. The environment of stand-up comedy is such that the speaker utters statements detached from the context of a normal exchange of discourse. "Unhappy" utterances are common and expected in stand-up comedy situations (consider George Carlin saying "Fuck the children" in a context other than a comedy show). Austin addresses "insincere" speech acts, wherein a speaker may offer a locutionary statement without believing in the illocutionary force attached to it. The act is "unhappy" for illocutionary purposes, according to Austin, as he likens it to making a promise one does not intend to keep (Austin).

Austin, in contemplating what makes a speech scenario unhappy, says: "The normal conditions of reference may be suspended" (Austin). Ohmann's quest to define the line between literary and nonliterary leads him to this same place, with speech acts containing misaligned locutionary and illocutionary acts. He notes that literature requires the "suspension of normal illocutionary forces" (Ohmann). "Did Shelley actually meet a traveler from an antique land?" Ohmann asks, "That question is irrelevant to "Ozymandius'" (Ohmann). Similarly, Austin notes, "Walt Whitman does not seriously incite the eagle of liberty to soar" (Austin). The authors are

simply responding to a speaking situation, a literary one, in which they have been afforded flexibility with their language choices and the sentiments behind them.

The differentiation between literature and discourse, or unhappy speech acts and happy ones, is the basis of Ohmann's definition of literature. Ohmann first defines literature as "discourse abstracted, or detached, from the circumstances and conditions which make illocutionary acts possible; hence it is a discourse without illocutionary force" (Ohmann). Through further contemplation, he qualifies his definition, noting that literature may still contain utterances with illocutionary force—but that those forces do not work in the same fashion as they do in nonliterary discourse: "A literary work is a discourse whose sentences lack the illocutionary forces that would normally attach to them. Its illocutionary force is mimetic" (Ohmann). With this stipulation, Ohmann asserts that a work of literature may produce illocutionary acts, but the acts do not genuinely come from the speaker or writer. To Ohmann, literature is play: "a series of acts without consequences, and a release from the tension that normally attends speech acts." In literature, the speakers "do not directly implicate the reader in a sequence of requests, assertions, questions, and so on, as does a nonliterary discourse" (Ohmann). Literature has the structure of ordinary speech acts, utilizing the same set of referents but without exercising the force that audiences would normally attribute to them. Ohmann leaves room for truth in these unhappy, literary acts, but the speaker is under no obligation to be truthful throughout the entire act: "This is not to say that works of literature in no way imply the truth of certain propositions… it does not carry that content as an argument does, sentence by sentence" (Ohmann). After he's set down his definition of literature, Ohmann addresses some of the types of speech acts that satisfy his requirements, and considers if he should further amend his definition to make it more exclusive. He notes that he has "let the concept of literature subsume

jokes, ironic remarks, and the rest," but defends this decision and his definition, saying, "jokes, etc. actually are very close to being literature (consider the ways one responds to, and judges, a joke)" (Ohmann). With only a slight refusal to use absolute language, Ohmann seems to support the original assertion that stand-up comedy may be considered literature.

The Listener's Role

As consumers of stand-up comedy, audiences benefit from understanding the complexity of the speech acts. Austin's categories of speech acts tell us that the receiver's interpretation of the utterances play a role in the act. The perlocutionary act depends on audience members properly understanding the non-serious nature of the speech. In instances wherein the speaker, in this case the stand-up comedian, is deliberately telling nontruths, the speech act relies on the audience's diagnosis of falsehood. Ohmann says a speech act's falsehood is "one tip-off to the fact that the imaginary narrator of the story is being ironic, and the reader must know that in order to construe rightly the speech-act in question and all subsequent ones" (Ohmann). The audience plays a pivotal part in the exchange of speech, requiring "competence as decipherer of speech-acts" (Ohmann). This notion that the words the audience hears during a comedy show do not reflect the actual thoughts of the performer on-stage qualifies the entire speech act as mimesis—an act of speech pretending to be honest discourse. But it's intentionally deceptive. It "imitates (or reports) a series of speech acts, which in fact have no other existence" (Ohmann).

So if the "speech" which comedians deliver take place in a sort of non-existent realm of reality, the audience must attach conditions of the speech themselves. "It leads the reader to imagine a speaker, a situation, a set of ancillary events, and so on" (Ohmann). In a sense, the "whole poem," or in this case, performance, "is encased in invisible quotation marks" (Ohmann).

This notion brings us back to the contemporary conceptions of stand-up comedy that we've addressed. Mintz outlined a comedian's duty to represent "negative traits" present in society through "caricature" (Mintz 1977). This conception of stand-up comedians as cultural reporters and actors echo the audience's need for "recognition of the comedian's traditional license for deviate behavior and expression" (Mintz 1985).

The Literary Line

While all stand-up comedians are equipped with the comedic license to tell falsehoods and misrepresent themselves on stage, they exercise that freedom to varying degrees. We've begun hinting at a sort of spectrum that exists which we may use to track how a given stand-up approaches the license. On one side lies Richard Pryor, who muses on the nature of his existence using the true events from his real life as on-stage material. On the other side lies the Larry the Cable Guy and the earlier cited Rodney Dangerfield, whose acts contain easily-diagnosable falsehoods. I argue that the comic license, though exercised differently, is in play for both ends of this spectrum. Whether he utilizes the license to its maximum or not, Pryor has the freedom to lie about his past on stage and not be held to the standards of falsehood that audiences would attribute to him in another setting, like in a deposition or speaking under oath in a courtroom. To explore this idea, Ohmann cites Wayne Booth's The Rhetoric of Fiction, and lifts the idea that "the speaker of a poem is always a persona, however much he may resemble the actual poet" (Ohmann). As stand-up comedy is a cousin of poetry through its misaligned illocutionary forces, I submit we apply this conception to the art of stand-up comedy. Something special happens with regard to their speech when a comedian takes the stage: No matter how closely the person on-

stage resembles his or her off-stage self, they are different. The speaker, and the material that they share, in a linguistic sense, exist solely for the purpose of entertaining the audience.

Ohmann offers a sort of evaluative test in "Speech Acts and the Definition of Literature" to gauges the "literary" nature of a given work. He creates a "line" which separates the seemingly truthful works from those immediately diagnosable as literary. His justification of the line and where certain works may fall looks like this: "*In Cold Blood* is entirely on one side of the line; an Agatha Christie novel is entirely on the other side. The definition would not cause one to say that the Christie novel is more literary, or has more of the characteristics of literature, than In Cold Blood. The two discourses are conclusively different in their attendant conventions" (Ohman).

Throughout the following chapters, I will adopt and adapt Ohmann's evaluative literary "line" for speech acts in the realm of stand-up comedy. The notion of plotting comedians' approach to comedy in a line-based framework has been explored elsewhere. In *Vulture*, Matt Zoller Seitz wrote "Bill Maher is Stand-up Comedy's Past. Hannah Gadsby Represents Its Future." Within, he frames some comedians' stylings as oppositional to each other. "The gap between Gadsby's vision and execution and Maher's is vast. Imagine George Carlin's career-redefining and still scathing *What Am I Doing in New Jersey?* on one side of a canyon, and on the other, a man in a suit yelling into his iPhone about political correctness while waiting on line at Whole Foods" (Seitz). Seitz's comparison deals more with the comedians' subject matter and originality, which isn't the intention of this project, but the notion of plotting extreme examples of comedy characteristics on a continuum and envisioning a "gap" in between them (the middle of which where, presumably, other comedians' stylings fall) serves us well for this project. The first iteration of my proposed framework, which I explore in the next chapter, is bookended with

the "Completely Contrived Character" on one end and the "Stand-up Character Most Accurately Resembling Offstage Persona" on the other. On one side lies the Larry the Cable Guys—the comedians whose approach to comedy involves explicitly acting out generic behaviors and offering nothing to reveal any truths about the comedian's real life. On the other end, the Richard Pryors, and the comedians whose personal lives serve as fodder for their material but are nonetheless playing a part. In the subsequent chapters, I will examine both sides of this framework by examining a representative comedian and applying the tenets of literary speech acts to their work.

CASE STUDY 1: JERRY SEINFELD

In this chapter, I outline one side of the comedic framework, analyzing those comedians who use the stage as an opportunity to craft a character entirely unrelated to their offstage self. We've already mentioned one of the inhabitants of this end of the spectrum in earlier chapters: Larry the Cable Guy. Larry the Cable Guy is played by Dan Whitney, who experienced massive success in the early and mid-2000's portraying the character on stage. "Larry the Cable Guy" exudes a southern lifestyle, complete with a southern accent, and makes jokes tailored for Middle America and self-described "redneck" audiences. In an offstage interview, Whitney describes himself as a "linguistic chameleon" and notes that when he drops the southern accent, it often surprises onlookers who hadn't yet separated "Larry" from Dan (Bensinger). Whitney's crafting of a character is an egregious example of presenting oneself as a character on stage—everything, from his personality to his clothing to his name, changes once he's onstage. Other comedians who inhabit this end of the spectrum and play a character make it less obvious.

One of these comedians is Kristen Schaal, whose early stand-up work depicts a timid and nervy open-mic act on stage. In one of her first television specials, "Kristen Schaal Live at the Fillmore," she spends half of the hour set delivering jokes through her persona that land with the audience and receive laughs. Halfway through the performance, Schaal begins stumbling over words and walking off-stage to collect herself, feigning a "bombing" performance. Her "meltdown" was scripted, a part of her unconventional act, but not everyone was in on the joke. Schaal played her character so convincingly that she fooled at least one media outlet, the *Hollywood Reporter*, who described her special as a "horror of secondhand embarrassment, usually felt far more keenly at an amateur stand-up performance than a sleek one-hour

production on a comedy network" (Keene). The author then questioned, "Or was it all a surrealist experiment to judge our reactions? In that case, I confess: I was duped" (Keene). In discussing the special and its reception, Schaal addressed her approach to stand-up and how she conceived of an entirely different person for her stage presence. "I was always a character. And when I would write the bits, it would always be in third person of what "The Girl" was doing... It was so helpful because it was very freeing. Because it wasn't about me, it was about this character, which was me, but not me" (Fox).

While many comedians inhabit this end of the framework, few have seasoned history and respect within the comedy community to rival Jerry Seinfeld. Since he began performing stand-up in the 1970's, Seinfeld has maintained an almost caricature-like embodiment of a stand-up comedian on-stage, with a tightly scripted and rehearsed act featuring minute linguistic choices and attention to detail. In this section, I will delve into Jerry Seinfeld's approach to stand-up comedy and consider how he represents the "Completely Contrived Comedy Character" end of the spectrum, citing both his on-stage performances and off-stage comments. I plan to analyze some of Seinfeld's jokes and examine how they exemplify "unhappy" speech acts according to the theories set forth by Ohmann and Austin. Thus, I will argue that Seinfeld's performances may be categorized as "literature" in a rhetorical sense. I will also explore comments that Seinfeld has publicly made about the nature of stand-up and the affordances that it offers its performers. Ultimately, this chapter will demonstrate why audiences ought to perceive the speech within stand-up comedy performances as artifice.

In this chapter, I attempt to pinpoint Seinfeld's genuine thoughts on comedy and note moments where he seems to reveal his actual self from behind his public-facing facade. As I conduct this analysis of a person through their public appearances, I anticipate receiving

questions about its legitimacy. How can we know when “Jerry Seinfeld” is speaking, and when it’s really him, especially when I’m arguing that we only ever see him playing a character on-stage? My response is this: Through my research, combing through Seinfeld’s appearances, I’ve found consistency in the stances Seinfeld takes with regard to comedy. Interestingly, Seinfeld seems the most genuine and honest when he publicly talks about the dynamics of funny. As a heralded stand-up icon, Seinfeld has published a wide variety of sentiments over a long period of time, but within the past decade, Seinfeld seems to have made it a mission to have his thoughts on comedy theory documented accurately. He has made his philosophy of stand-up clear through interviews, published discussions with his peers like HBO’s “Talking Funny,” and his show Netflix, *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*. I’ve found what I believe to be common threads that Seinfeld has woven through these productions which accurately illustrate his feelings on the subject, and I maintain that the following sentiments I’ve highlighted here are consistent with his stand-up comedy ideology.

Seinfeld’s Philosophy: “Funny” is Greater than “Truth”

The concept of Seinfeld’s Netflix series, *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee,* is simple. The unscripted show follows Jerry Seinfeld as he picks up one of his comedy contemporaries from their homes in a stylish car. The pair admire the car together, then get in the car, and go have a conversation over coffee. Topics of conversations vary from guest to guest, and never seem to follow a formula or format. But, as the guests on the show are comedians, the topic of comedy arises to some degree in each episode. In a few episodes, Seinfeld directly addresses some of the issues I’ve wrestled with throughout this project related to truth-telling in comedy, and the license stand-up comedians have to stretch the truth, or disregard it entirely.

In episode 4 of season 5, Seinfeld meets up with comedy legend Tracy Morgan. Through the twists and turns in their conversation, Morgan glances against a common stand-up sentiment. "You wanna know why people laugh at that?" he asks after cracking a joke, "Because it's the truth." Seinfeld jumps at the opportunity to offer his own stance in response, momentarily sacrificing the sense of camaraderie and stirring some discomfort between he and his guest: "No, it's not. Funny is funny. Funny has a certain life to it, a certain magic to it. If you only needed truth, people would read the paper and howl." Seinfeld continues as Morgan warms to his stance: "Funny has nothing to do with being true, and honest" (CCGC). As Seinfeld conducts this spirited debate, it's clear that it's not the first time he's contemplated and voiced this position—and it wouldn't be the last.

Seinfeld echoed his stance over the summer of 2018 with an interview with The *New York Times Magazine*'s Dan Amira. He said, "Jokes are not real. People assume that when you say something that you believe it. It's purely comedic invention." He then offers a simple example of comedic invention from his own act: "I do this whole bit about Pop-Tarts and how much I love them. I don't love Pop-Tarts. It's just funny. It's funny to say it, so I say it" (Amira). With this, Seinfeld hints at a few of the rhetorical issues relevant to this thesis. The idea that "jokes are not real" aligns with Ohmann's stance that jokes function like literature because of their speaker's intentions. Further, Seinfeld addresses the notion that "comedic invention" exists because of the license comedians have to speak nontruths for the purposes of comedy.

In a later episode of *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*, Seinfeld discusses the dishonest nature of comedy with stand-up comic and Chappelle's Show co-creator Neal Brennan. Speaking to his level of truth telling on-stage, Seinfeld says, "It doesn't matter what I say. It's word art… "don't tell us 'this is not genuine,' we know it isn't. We know nobody talks in a series of jokes"

(CCGC). He then offers another example of a comedian utilizing the license: “My favorite thing was when Rodney [Dangerfield]’s wife died, she stayed alive in the act” (CCGC).

Seinfeld’s Illocutionary Force

In the section above, we see how Seinfeld articulates his approach to stand-up comedy while he’s off-stage. Now, we may consider how he brings these conceptions of comedy to life in his on-stage performances. Seinfeld is known for creating material from the mundane. His sitcom, loosely based on his stand-up persona, “Seinfeld,” was heralded as “a show about nothing.” As we examine Seinfeld’ stand-up, we find a whole lot of “nothing” in his performances as well. His 1998 HBO special “I’m Telling You for the Last Time” features material about cab drivers, airport security, grocery stores, old people driving, Halloween, and supermarkets. We get very little about Seinfeld’s personal experiences, or social opinions intended to change his audience’s outlook. His character on-stage exists to entertain, and his speech acts are merely a vehicle for his audience’s laughter.

Recall Ohmann’s evaluative parameters for speech acts: when the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts all align, the speech is “happy,” and ought to be interpreted as discourse. Ohmann tells us that, when we follow this formula, the illocutionary forces of literary speech acts do not carry out the intention that the locutionary act prescribes. The speaker performs a locutionary act, but attaches a different illocutionary force. Let’s consider this segment of Seinfeld’s special:

> “Why is McDonald’s still counting? This is really insecure isn’t it? 40 zillion – 80 million-billion killion tillion. What is this? Does it mean anything to anyone, 89 billion sold. Okay! I’ll have one! I would love to meet the Chairman of the Board at McDonald’s

and just say to him, 'look we all get it. You've sold a lot of hamburgers, whatever the hell the number is!'" (Seinfeld 1998).

In this segment, Seinfeld playfully performs multiple locutionary acts. Take the phrase: "I would love to meet the Chairman of the Board at McDonald's." In a nonliterary situation wherein the audience is interpreting Seinfeld's words verbatim, this phrase could serve as a locutionary action with specific illocutionary force. If we wanted to make this speech act "happy" according to Ohmann's standards, it would look like this:

Locutionary act: Saying, "I would love to met the Chairman of the Board at McDonald's."

Illocutionary act: Requesting a business meeting.

Of course, nobody watching Seinfeld's routine actually believed he was honestly requesting a meeting with the chairman of the fast food chain, because of the context in which Seinfeld is speaking. Let's consider the desired perlocutionary acts that Seinfeld is striving for in this speech act. As a comedian, Seinfeld is putting words and phrases together for the sole purpose of evoking laughter and amusement. In describing what goals a stand-up should set, Seinfeld says, "what you're trying to do is make us laugh" (CCGC). So, we may argue that no matter what locutionary act Seinfeld performs on-stage, we know that the desired perlocutionary effect is making the audience laugh, and helping the audience recognize the joke. In acknowledging Seinfeld's joke as an unhappy speech act, Ohmann's evaluative breakdown looks like this:

Locutionary: Saying "I would love to met the Chairman of the Board at McDonald's."

Illocutionary: Mocking McDonald's marketing choices.

Perlocutionary: Making the audience laugh, diagnose joke.

In this case, we see that the audience has a responsibility to recognize the context in which Seinfeld is speaking, read his tone, and interpret his statements as disingenuous.

Let's see how Ohmann's criteria function with another segment of Seinfeld's routine: "I think, if I was an Olympic athlete, I would rather come in last than win the silver. If you think about it… if you win the gold, you feel good. If you win in the bronze, you think: "Well, at least I got something." But if you win that silver, it's like: "Congratulations! You… almost won." (Seinfeld 1998). For this example, focus on the claim, "I would rather come in last than win the silver." In a normal discourse situation, Seinfeld would utter this statement to articulate his feelings on his preferred placement at the Olympics. If we interpret this utterance and its associated illocutionary force to make it a "happy" speech act, it would look like this:

Locutionary: "I would rather come in last than win the silver."

Illocutionary: Stating a preference.

Upon hearing "I would rather come in last than win the silver," audience members must decide if Seinfeld is expressing a genuine stance, or if he intends for his words to not be taken seriously. No listener aware of the context of this utterance would hold the offstage Seinfeld to this claim. In the (extremely unlikely) scenario that Jerry Seinfeld competed in the Olympics and earned a silver medal, we wouldn't say that Seinfeld has already offered his stance on finishing second through this quote. This utterance was merely a gateway to evoking laughter for his audience.

What makes Seinfeld a perfect exemplar of the Completely Contrived Comedy Character is that he hardly ever performs "happy" utterances while on-stage. Almost all of his speech acts are performed in jest, through the guise of his on-stage character. However, there are moments in Seinfeld's stand-up wherein he—at least momentarily—sprinkles some truth into his act and performs seemingly "happy" locutionary utterances. In the following section, I cite some

examples wherein Seinfeld's jokes seem to take place in reality. I consider how he acknowledges his off-stage self through his stage persona and how, in these "honest" moments, Seinfeld establishes the truth to twist it in his own dishonest way in subsequent speech acts.

Seinfeld Bordering on Truth

Netflix released Seinfeld's latest stand-up special in 2017. "Jerry Before Seinfeld" is part documentary, part traditional stand-up special wherein Seinfeld performs a set at his first regular comedy venue in New York City. Interwoven with the stand-up performance are interviews and behind-the-scenes footage from Seinfeld's childhood and adolescence. The special tracks Seinfeld's success and recounts his journey into stand-up comedy, as he discusses his old material, writing techniques, and career chronology. But in both in the stand-up set and behind the scenes interviews, Seinfeld sidesteps opportunities to go behind the curtain and reveal his genuine feelings, thoughts, and experiences. In *Vulture*, Matt Zoller Seitz wrote "Jerry Before Seinfeld Is a Carefully Curated Origin Story." In the article, Seitz says, "Those hoping for a thorough and surprising documentary about Seinfeld, or even a concert with a heavily confessional bent, will be disappointed" (Seitz). At the time when Seinfeld appears to be revealing the most intimate version of himself, audiences still find that "there always seems to be an invisible shield up around him... Jerry Before Seinfeld doesn't feel much different than any other Seinfeld concert or talk-show appearance"(Seitz).

Now, we do get more "truth" in "Jerry Before Seinfeld" than we normally do in a Seinfeld set, but it's not truth for truth's sake. Seinfeld has no intentions to disclose anything if not for the sake of it being funny. The truths that he shares in the stand-up performance are setups to jokes, cloaked as confessions, leading to disingenuous, literary, "unhappy," punchlines.

Consider this segment: “I'm born in Brooklyn. That's my home borough. And then my parents moved out to Massapequa, which is an Indian name. It means ‘by the mall’” (Seinfeld 2017). In the setup to this joke, we seem to learn something about Jerry Seinfeld’s life. But by the end of the joke, we see that the truthful confession—where he grew up—was just a linguistic vehicle to get to the punchline. Massapequa doesn’t really mean “by the mall,” and in this joke, it doesn’t matter if Seinfeld is telling the truth about where he grew up.

Another relevant moment in “Jerry Before Seinfeld” comes when Seinfeld makes jokes about Disneyland. He says, “My parents were not taking me thousands of miles to another state so I could sit in a teacup. Both of my parents were orphans, so the fact that I had a room with a bed, they were like, ‘That's your ride. You can go on that’” (Seinfeld 2017). He glosses over a seemingly important kernel of truth—both of his parents we orphans—for the sake of arriving at the punchline: your bed is the ride. Seinfeld minimizes the confession and doesn’t provide any more detail. It’s a “throwaway phrase inserted into the middle of a story that really didn’t require it” (Seitz). Another outlet asks, “Why, after more than 40 years of doing comedy had he only now brought this up?” (Chnda). Cowan notes that, throughout his career, Seinfeld “has been relatively reserved about discussing his roots,” and this moment seems to be the pinnacle (Cowan). A stand-up/documentary special meant to pull the curtain back and reveal the real Jerry Seinfeld to the world, and this window into his childhood is “just a parenthetical that’s skipped over, like a speed bump in a road” (Seitz). To Seinfeld’s on-stage character, an utterance is only as valuable as it is funny. “Jerry Before Seinfeld” has the posture of a “behind the curtain” look at a generational performer. But audiences find, just as they have in Seinfeld’s previous stand-up performances, his on-stage persona prevents his private self from making an appearance on stage.

Conclusion

In this project, I explore the license comedians have to not speak the truth on stage. This chapter has just demonstrated how one comedian approaches and exercises that license. We saw how evaluating the locutionary and illocutionary acts a comedian performs helps us understand speech acts. With our understanding of Seinfeld's approach, I will illustrate my first iteration of the stand-up comedy framework. Ohmann's framework created a "line" which separated the seemingly truthful works from those immediately diagnosable as literary. In the figure below, I've adopted Ohmann's idea of contrasting oppositional characteristics and Seitz idea of a "gap" between differing comedy approaches:

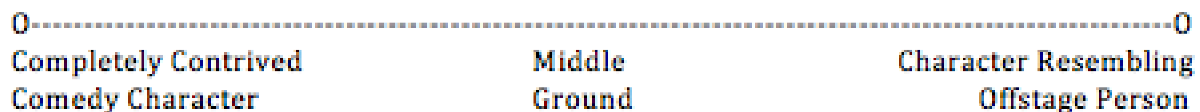

Figure 1: Rhetorical Comedy Framework 1

This framework, intended to evaluate a stand-up comedian's persona, places "Completely Contrived Comedy Character" on one end, and "Character Resembling Offstage Person" on the other end. Of course, a comedian's performance may fall anywhere in the range between these two extreme points. Seinfeld inhabits and exemplifies the "contrived character" end of the spectrum.

At the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned some other comedians, Kristen Schaal and Larry the Cable Guy, who inhabit this end of the spectrum. We may also consider comedians whose identities reside near the extreme end, but do not entirely embody it. In Daniel Tosh's *People Pleaser*, (2016) he gives a cue to his audience that he's shifting from one end of the spectrum to the other. He takes a break from his usually offensive material delivered through an agitated character, saying, "If I can take a quick moment to be sincere, and then I'll go back to

being an asshole, know that I appreciate this" (Tosh). With this verbal signal, Tosh prompts a shift in tone and acknowledges that he's ordinarily not "himself" on stage. After a few minutes of material during which he honestly reflects on his career and achievements, he dissolves back into his character and continues the show.

Anthony Jeselnik performs a similar move in his Netflix special "Thoughts and Prayers." Jeselnik ordinarily delivers his jokes through a deadpan character. Forty minutes into his performance, he alerts his audience of a shift in his material. "All the jokes I write, they're all made up. They're all fake... But everything I'm about to tell you from here until the end of the show, that's all true. I don't tell dark jokes because I'm a comedian; I'm a comedian because I tell dark jokes" (Jeselnik). He then goes on to tell a story about speaking at grandmother's funeral. This moment in the show also signals a change in the meter of his delivery. His material before this moment solely consists of setups and punchlines. With the signal of this shift, Jeselnik tells a longer form story with jokes woven throughout.

Throughout his career, Seinfeld has performed and conversed with other comedy contemporaries who take a more autobiographical approach to stand-up. Publicly, he's appeared intrigued, from a distance, by the wave of comedians who've gravitated toward self-confession on stage. Fox describes Seinfeld as "seemingly asking every guest on Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee who is younger than he is why a comedian should aspire to be truthful over being funny" (Fox). While Seinfeld himself subscribes to the Completely Contrived Comedy Character approach to stand-up performance, he acknowledges that the other side of the spectrum exists as a model for stand-up. "Part of entertainment, sometimes, is the life of the person... We like your show, and then we like your messed-up life," Seinfeld said in an interview with *The New York Times*. "When you saw Richard Pryor, it was more than just the act. You're in the room with this

guy who lived this crazy life" (Itzkoff). In the next chapter, I examine the other side of the spectrum, and delve into those comedians who draw only a thin line between who they are on-stage and off. Seinfeld has endured a legendary career offering his contributions to the craft of stand-up, but there's plenty of room for alternate approaches. "The laws of comedy," he says, "we kind of make them up as we go" (Itzkoff).

CASE STUDY 2: HANNAH GADSBY

As we've laid out in previous chapters, the craft of stand-up comedy equips its performers with a license to produce a certain kind of speech act—one in which the speaker utters phrases not reflective of reality or truth. But the degree to which comedians evoke and utilize this license varies from comic to comic, and performance to performance. In Case Study 1, we explored those comedians who evoke the license heavily. Jerry Seinfeld and comedians with similar styles tell jokes that they don't intend for their audiences to interpret as truth. In this case study, I outline the opposite end of the comedic framework, analyzing those comedians whose onstage character very closely resembles their "true" selves. We've discussed one of the prominent inhabitants of this edge of the spectrum already: Richard Pryor. In the latter part of his comedy career, Pryor addressed real events from his life that had been publicized. He saw stand-up comedy as "therapeutic," and used stage to make confessions about offstage drug use and behavior.

Another comic who has followed a similar path is Patton Oswalt. In "The History of Comedy," Oswalt notes that a lot of comedians are "very sensitive to humiliation, a little narcissistic, a little damaged," and says that "the only way to combat it is to go to the one place where you are stripped bare" (History of Comedy). In his 2017 Netflix special "Annihilation," Oswalt uses the stage to discuss very serious personal matters about his life, "[devoting] about 40 percent of his latest stand-up special to stark material about his wife's Michelle McNamara's death" (Seitz). Oswalt remarks on the struggles of being thrust into single-parenthood, helping his daughter deal with the trauma of losing her mother, and reflecting on the life McNamara had

lived. Similar to Richard Pryor, Oswalt had been a popular celebrity, so the news of his personal life had spread to audience members even before he'd taken the stage and released the special.

Another instance of a comedian embracing this end of the framework came from Tig Notaro. Before 2012, Notaro's comedy would be classified on the "comic character" side of the spectrum—absurdist material, "deadpan one-liners," not much of personal substance, delivered through a caricature (Marantz). That changed when Notaro received a cancer diagnosis in October of 2012, and took to the stage in the following days. "Good evening. Hello," she began her set, "I have cancer." She filled the 30 minute set by ruminating on her personal woes—some laughs, but mostly reflection. The set "was closer to a diary entry—more erratic, but also more intimate," and a far cry from the comedic tone she normally brought to the stage (Marantz). "Of course, comedy should be funny," she said of her performance in an interview, "But if what I am doing right now is not even recognized as comedy, that's O.K. with me too" (Marantz).

I will conduct a case study of Hannah Gadsby, who I place far on the "Character Resembling Offstage Persona" end of the framework. In Gadsby's 2018 Netflix special "Nannette," she details her childhood as an LGBT youth growing up in Tasmania during a time wherein practicing homosexuality was outlawed. Gadsby's material is incredibly personal and exists to deliver a political message. For this project, Gadsby's performance is a perfect exemplar of the "Character Resembling Person" who exists in opposition of Seinfeld's style of comedy. In fact, some critics have already positioned the two as stand-up opposites. Shortly after the release of Gadsby's special, Brian Lowry wrote "Hannah Gadsby and Jerry Seinfeld bring Very Different Comedy Philosophies to Netflix," wherein he posits that "one would be hard-pressed to find a more striking philosophical split than Jerry Seinfeld" and Gadsby (Lowry). Further, he states that comparing the two's approaches to comedy can "provide windows into a conversation

about what comedy is, and a debate about what it should be" (Lowry). Both Gadsby and Seinfeld partake in the same craft of stand-up: both have the license to present themselves in disingenuous ways on stage, and the freedom to represent their lives as accurately or inaccurately as possible during performance. But the moves they make as on-stage characters and the intent behind their speech acts reveal a stark contrast in their comedic rhetoric.

As discussed in Case Study 1, the ultimate intention in each of Jerry Seinfeld's on-stage speech acts is evoking laughter. His tightly tuned sets contain nothing but setups and punchlines; there is no need for truth, or honest reflection, unless it exists to facilitate a joke. As a result, just about every single utterance that Seinfeld performs contains mismatched locutionary and illocutionary forces, and are thus "unhappy" according to Austin and Ohmann's criteria. With Gadsby's humor, we see different intentions behind her speech acts. Whereas Seinfeld and other comedians on his side of the spectrum solely intend for their speech acts to evoke laughter, Gadsby aims to deliver something else through her speech acts. Her performance contains jokes that "tend to treat humor not just as an end in itself, but as a vehicle for making a point" (Garber). This makes Gadsby worthy of study—she acknowledges the license that comedians have to be disingenuous, but in "Nannette," she rarely exercises it, and at times, critiques it.

If there was ever a comedian whose on-stage persona was indistinguishable from her off-stage identity, it's Gadsby's persona in "Nanette." In the show, Gadsby occasionally wields the power of the license, speaking nontruths for the sake of making her audience laugh—but these moments are brief and fleeting. For most of the performance, she speaks from an autobiographical perspective and intends for her messages and the intent behind her messages to be interpreted literally. She delivers political rhetoric that she sincerely wants the audience to contemplate. In this case study, I highlight moments in this performance during which Gadsby

abides by Ohmann's conception of artificial speech acts. Then, I will consider how Gadsby breaks from the tradition of stand-up by critiquing the art form and its inability to facilitate genuine speech. I will present conversations between theorists which aim to satisfy the question: Is "Nanette" a stand-up comedy show, or something else? Ultimately, I will argue that this question arises because of the illocutionary forces that Gadsby attaches to her words. I am not so interested in positing and defending my own answer to the question of whether Gadsby's performance is stand-up, though I believe it is. Instead, my argument relates to the linguistic mechanisms through which comedy functions and is defined. Gadsby's "Nanette," and the cultural conversations in response to it, demonstrate that evaluating the symmetry, or lack thereof, between locutionary and illocutionary forces is a valid barometer for judging speech acts.

Gadsby's Instances of Mismatched Locutionary/Illocutionary Acts

Though Gadsby exists on the far end of the spectrum, she still capitalizes on the opportunity comedians have to tell nontruths. "Nanette" has some moments which echo the techniques used by comedians, exercising the comedic license and performing speech acts with mismatched locutionary and illocutionary aims. These moments are silly, and don't contribute much to the overall message that Gadsby intends to deliver; they mostly serve to break the tension in a dense and political comedy show. Consider this joke, about twenty minutes into the performance:

"I do not remember being called "sir" if someone calls me "madam" immediately after. Because "madam" is a very triggering word for me. It is. It's what my mom used to call me when I was in a lot of trouble for opening a brothel" (Gadsby).

The audience can immediately diagnose the tone and intention behind Gadsby's utterance about her opening a brothel as a child, and recognize that she does not mean it to be interpreted literally. If we were to interpret this utterance literally and evaluate it through Ohmann's method to make a "happy" speech act, it would look like this:

Happy:

Locutionary act: Saying "["Madam" is] what my mom used to call me when I was in a lot of trouble for opening a brothel"

Illocutionary act: Recalling a childhood memory

Perlouctionary act: Audience learns about Gadsby's life

However, audience members know to recognize this speech act as nontruth, and understand it as an unhappy utterance:

Unhappy:

Locutionary act: Saying "["Madam" is] what my mom used to call me when I was in a lot of trouble for opening a brothel"

Illocutionary act: Asserting "madam" is an outdated term

Perlocutionary act: Audience recognizes a joke, laughs

We see from this example that Gadsby acknowledges the license comedians have to attach different illouctionary forces to their utterances. But in "Nanette," Gadsby rarely utilizes the comedian's license to tell nontruths like these. Most of the show contains speech utterances which have perfectly aligned locutionary and illocutionary acts. Consider this moment about 15 minutes into the performance:

> "And I built a career out of self-deprecating humor. That's what I've built my career on. And… I don't want to do that anymore. Because, do you understand… do you understand

what self-deprecation means when it comes from somebody who already exists in the margins? It's not humility. It's humiliation. I put myself down in order to speak, in order to seek permission… to speak. And I simply will not do that anymore. Not to myself or anybody who identifies with me" (Gadsby).

Here, Gadsby utters phrases and attaches illocutionary force to them that would suit an ordinary discourse situation. She doesn't intend for her audience to diagnose a mismatch between her words and her intent—the words accurately convey the intent behind them. She really has felt humiliated, she really did put herself down. She genuinely declares that she will not do that anymore, and she follows through on that promise throughout the rest of the show.

Defining *Nanette* as Stand-up

Shortly after the release of "Nanette," the comedy world buzzed with conversation about its impact. Some heralded Gadsby's work as another evolution in the genre of stand-up comedy. Others were reluctant, or refused to define her performance as stand-up. In "How Funny Does Comedy Need to Be?" Jesse David Fox synthesized the opinions expressed in the comedy world, noting that the conversation about "Nanette" had progressed "to the point where some are questioning if it can even be called 'comedy.' 'Nanette is more a TED Talk than a stand-up special' was a common refrain this summer" (Fox). Comedy performers and critics were somewhat fractured in how they defined the performance, and the debate "compelled comedians to publicly declare their allegiance to it, on Twitter and in interviews, as if it were some post-comedy manifesto" (Fox). In the introduction to this project, I noted some moments in stand-up comedy's history which theorists see as "waves," or trends that stand-up has experienced. Gadsby's special seemed to be signaling and embodying stand-up's most recent wave—one in

which getting laughs is not the sole motivator. In the wake of Gadsby's Netflix release, Olivia Goldhill wrote "'Nanette' and Why a New Wave of Comedians Don't Want to be Funny," wherein she noted that "more and more comedians are losing the jokes part altogether" and "becoming straightforward commentators" (Goldhill). Some suspected that critics' responses to Gadsby's special, specifically the negative responses which refused to categorize the performance as stand-up, were dissuaded by her rhetorical aims and critical stance on the allowances of stand-up. In *The New York Times*, Aparna Nancherla, who has released her own special on Netflix, posited that "Hannah Gadsby's 'Nanette' was criticized by straight male colleagues of mind for 'not being stand-up' because it wasn't all easily digestible setups and punchlines. It was an hour of investigating and questioning what stand-up comedy is and how the power structures underlying it work" (Nancherla). In comparing the seemingly oppositional methods by which Seinfeld and Gadsby approach stand-up, CNN's Brian Lowry summarized how the two reflect on the genre in their respective Netflix releases. "Like Seinfeld, Gadsby talks a good deal about the nature of stand-up comedy. But where he revels in the form, she suggests that she might have to quit comedy altogether, concluding that in a comedy show, 'There's no room for the best part of the story'" (Lowry). No matter from which perspective critics and fellow comics viewed Gadsby's special, it's clear that "Nanette" caused a rupture in the stand-up world which called into question the nature of the craft itself.

As critics digested Gadsby's work and audiences bifurcated on its impact, Gadsby herself weighed in on how her performance ought to be categorized. In an interview with *Vulture*'s Jackson McHenry, she detailed how her special took shape and became a catalyst for such spirited debate. "I was trying to work out ultimately whether some of my stories could be told onstage and made funny. I concluded early in the writing process that they could not be made

funny, if told properly, so I decided to then tell them properly and see what that does to a comedy show. I think we found out: It breaks comedy" (McHenry). On Twitter, Gadsby playfully addressed the debate surrounding her show, writing: "I'LL SETTLE THIS: my show is NOT stand up comedy because i got jack of an art form designed by men for men. Female artists often defy genre" (Gadsby). Later in the interview with McHenry though, she makes the case for her show to be classified as stand-up comedy. Again, with a playful tone, she notes "that condescending thing a lot of female performers get, which is a 'one-woman show'... As soon as a woman breaks genre, it becomes a monologue. I make it about deconstructing comedy and quitting it, so it can't be a monologue. I'm talking about comedy. And I've got a stool with water on it. That's comedy"(McHenry). Here, Gadsby asserts that she utilizes the craft of stand-up comedy to critique the craft of stand-up comedy. Within her show, which she and many other theorists and comics define as stand-up, she addresses the limitations of the genre.

These limitations pertain to the issues I discuss in this project. The expectations of stand-up, the rhetorical situation in which it lives, encourages its performers to speak through characters in disingenuous ways. Stand-up comedy has existed as a craft in which a performer speaks through someone else, no matter how thin the veil is between the performer and the character. The comedic license prescribes for performers to speak in literary terms, and for audiences to digest the utterances as not reflective of reality. "Nanette" subverts, challenges, and refuses to abide by those expectations. Hannah Gadsby performs, seemingly, as Hannah Gadsby. At the beginning of the chapter, I cited an instance wherein Gadsby utilized the license in telling a silly joke about running a brothel. But her utilization of the license throughout "Nanette" is limited is miniscule moments like that—as opposed to shows from comics like Jerry Seinfeld, whose entire show consists of those moments. In Case Study 1, I noted that Seinfeld's comedy

works because the illocutionary force behind all of his speech acts do not match the literal meanings of the words he utters. Seinfeld's perlocutionary aims, for just about all of his utterances, is eliciting laughter from the audience. Gadsby, in subverting the genre of comedy, has different intentions for her speech acts.

Gadsby's Illocutionary Acts: Resembling Herself

In order to conceptualize Gadsby's performance in terms of Austin and Ohmann's criteria for speech acts, we must consider her rhetorical aims and determine the illocutionary force behind the utterances in her show. In Case Study 1, I determined that Seinfeld's ultimate illocutionary intentions in his speech acts were to reveal that a joke had occurred. In Gadsby's *Nanette*, she intends to attach a different, more meaningful message to her words.

Towards the end of the show, she articulates this intention: "Laughter is not our medicine. Stories hold our cure. Laughter is just the honey that sweetens the bitter medicine. I don't want to unite you with laughter or anger. I just needed my story heard, my story felt and understood by individuals with minds of their own" (Gadsby). Here, we see that Gadsby's primary catalyst for her show is telling her story—revealing the true events and experiences she's endured in her life. This is a stark contrast to Seinfeld's motives: inducing laughter and nothing else. In an interview with the *New Yorker Radio Hour*'s Emily Nussbaum, Gadsby's addresses the "harm" in that position, when "the joke is the only reason to speak" (Nussbaum). Gadsby speaks of stand-up comedy's current definition, against which she pushes in *Nanette*: "The point is only to make people laugh, and that troubled me after a while because I've always told stories, and that whole idea that laughter is the best medicine is not something I believe in" (Nussbaum).

Throughout her show, Gadsby ruminates on the nature of stand-up comedy and the artistic limitations it imposes, especially for her style of comedy. She pursues more than just laughs from her audience in this special; she wants to tell the truth, and she wants to deliver a social message. In the middle of her show, she details how the craft of stand-up facilitates, or fails to facilitate, this pursuit. "I feel like, in a comedy show, there's no room for the best part of the story… which is the ending. You know, in order to finish on a laugh, you know, you have to end with punchlines… Stories, unlike jokes, need three parts. A beginning, a middle, and an end. Jokes… only need two parts. A beginning and a middle" (Gadsby).

To resolve this, Gadsby structures her show to reveal the limitations of stand-up comedy using the mechanism of callbacks. The beginning of her show abides by a more traditional meter of stand-up and is loaded with laughs and punchlines—beginnings and middles. Around the 10 minute mark of her performance, Gadsby tells a story of a man who had "almost" beaten her up: "He thought I was cracking on to his girlfriend. Actually, that bit was true, got that right, but…. there was a twist" (Gadsby). She continues that the man backed off after discovering that Gadsby was a female, and draws a laugh from the crowd saying: "Now 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).

The first iteration of this story is funny, and prompts a laugh from the audience. However, we find later in the show that Gadsby has doctored that story in order for it to fit the expectations of a comedy show. She originally delivers it as a setup and punchline, but then she revisits this story fifty minutes later, at the hour mark of her show: "I couldn't tell that story as it actually happened... 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). In her interview with Nussbaum, Gadsby discusses the rhetorical effects of the "callback" that she utilized. "I used a callback to drop them into a future hole and not give them a laugh. So, to go against my instinct was incredibly hard. To not break the tension" (Gadsby). She also notes the "really palpable silences in the show" which go against her instincts as a comic (Nussbaum).

With the two approaches to telling this story, Gadsby exemplifies two opposite methods for delivering speech acts. In the first iteration, Gadsby tells a lie for the sake of landing a joke. "I left him there, people. Safety first." It's not reflective of her true self, and the illocutionary force behind the utterance is evoking laughter from the audience. It's not a move that would exist in ordinary discourse; it's unhappy according to Austin's criteria, and may be deemed as literary according to Ohmann. With this iteration, she follows the formula set forth by the tradition of stand-up comedians before her. Develop a character, tell a lie, sell a punchline, get a laugh. But when she revisits the joke, she doesn't do so as a character. We hear directly from the person onstage, unveiled: "He beat the shit out of me and nobody stopped him." It's reflective of her true self, and the illocutionary force behind the utterance matches with the locutionary act of the original speech. The story doesn't exist to make the audience laugh. She says a man beat the shit out of her, and she means it. Gadsby uses the mechanism of callbacks to have her "stage" persona and her true persona looks eye to eye, and contrast the competing approaches to speech acts. This joke, and the show in its entirety, critiques the artifice that's expected to exist in stand-up comedy. The intent of her message matches with the language she uses. In the most powerful moments of her performance, she refuses to utilize the allowance that the comedic license permits her to use.

Gadsby uses the callback mechanism more than once throughout her show. At the twelve minute mark, she says, “You know, last year, my grandma asked me if I had a boyfriend. And I realized, in that moment, that I’d quite forgotten to come out to Grandma” (Gadsby). If we were to evaluate this speech act as a “happy” utterance wherein her words are intended to be digested as truth, it would look like this:

Locutionary act: Saying “I’d quite forgotten to come out to Grandma.”

Illocutionary act: Sharing a confession.

Perlocutionary act: Audience understands her lack of communication with her grandma.

If we were to evaluate it as “unhappy,” as if Gadsby is delivering the line through some sort of character for an effect other than sharing discoursal information with her audience, it would look like this:

Locutionary act: Saying “I’d quite forgotten to come out to Grandma.”

Illocutionary act: Poking fun at her family’s quirky dynamics

Perlocutionary act: Her audience identifying a joke and laughing.

A half hour later in the show, she revisits this joke, and bluntly offers clarity: “I didn’t come out to my grandma last year because I’m still ashamed of who I am” (Gadsby). With her confession of the truth, she reveals that the earlier iteration of the joke was artifice; it was “unhappy,” existing in the literary according to Ohmann. In doing so, she shows her audience what it looks like for a performer to package a painful reality in an easy-to- digest punchline.

Conclusion

In Case Study 1, I offered the first iteration of a stand-up comedy framework that we may use to evaluate a comic’s approach to stand-up. Throughout this section, we’ve explored Hannah

Gadsby's *Nanette* and considered stand-up performances with perlocutionary aims that extend wider than just eliciting laughter. As such, we should adjust our evaluation of comedians' speech to account for those who have different perlocutionary aims. One change I will make to the evaluative framework is adjusting what we're evaluating. Rather than evaluating the comedians themselves and asserting that a comic embodies one point on the spectrum throughout his or her entire career, we ought to evaluate a particular show or performance on an individual basis. In *Nanette*, Gadsby approaches on-stage persona in a particular way—but she isn't bound by that approach with each performance she ever does. She may choose to develop a new hour of material that utilizes more setups, punchlines, and non-biographical content. In Ohmann's "line," which we're using as a reference, he sets forth his criteria and evaluates based on each individual work. He doesn't say "this author" is more literary; he refers to specific works (Ohman 15). This means adjusting the names of the points at each end of the framework. After making those changes, our updated stand-up framework looks like this:

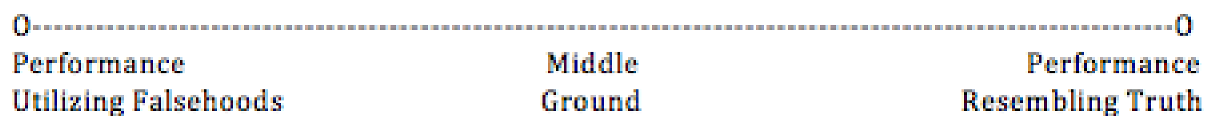

Figure 2: Rhetorical Comedy Framework 2

Aside from adjusting the points on the extreme ends of the framework, our case study of Hannah Gadsby has also shown us the importance of considering a comedian's perlocutionary aims. While stand-up has existed as an art-form to make audiences laugh, some comedians come to the stage with additional intentions. Considering the intentions behind the performance helps us to distinguish the effectiveness.

And of course, Hannah Gadsby is not the only stand-up comedian who approaches the stage with ulterior motives. Other comics have delivered performances which, while funny, offer

some message through genuine autobiographical means. Mike Birbiglia has endured a career in comedy discussing his experiences and happenings in his personal life. In his 2011 stand-up special “Sleepwalk with Me,” Birbiglia addresses his struggles with a sleepwalking disorder that once caused him to fall out of a hotel room window in Walla Walla, Washington. His performance details his affliction and the resulting strain it put on his relationships. There’s humor, like his summary of a dream wherein he competed in the “Dustbuster Olympics,” but ultimately the show exists to says something deeper about persevering through self-discovery and the willingness to address problems.

Conversations over Gadsby’s *Nanette* and its fit in the genre of stand-up comedy continue, and will continue to rage. But no matter the perspective, we must acknowledge that its power comes from the rhetorical situation and expectations of stand-up. Nanette purports to be a comedy show—whether it’s its categorization on Netflix or Gadsby’s usage of a stool with water on it. Gadsby critiques the craft by performing the craft—explores its limitations by exposing them firsthand. *Nanette* represents the “Performance Resembling Offstage Person” end of the spectrum as Gadsby comes the absolute closest to performing as herself on stage. Through *Nanette*, she blurs the lines between performer and self. Sometimes she relies on the quirky speech allowances that the comedy license permits. But each time she does, it’s for the sake of critiquing the expectations of stand-up comedy that she would rely on them.

CASE STUDY 3: DAVE CHAPPELLE

Throughout this project, we've studied the license stand-up comedy allots its performers to produce speech acts which are not reflective of reality or truth. In Case Study 1, we explored Jerry Seinfeld and those comedians who evoke the license heavily in their acts. They deliver jokes through characters on stage and don't intend for their audiences to interpret any of their words as truth. In Case Study 1, we applied the stand-up persona framework, conceptualizing Seinfeld's speech acts and the illocutionary forces behind those acts.

In Case Study 2, we outlined Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* and the comics on the opposite end of the comedic persona spectrum—those whose onstage persona very closely resembles their private selves. We charted Gadsby on the stand-up persona framework by evaluating the illocutionary force behind her words as we did with Jerry Seinfeld, and introduced another element to the analysis by taking into account a range of desired perlocutionary effects of Gadsby's speech acts.

In case study, I will analyze the "Middle Ground" and explore those comics whose material settles somewhere between the two extreme points on the framework. After giving an overview of the point on the framework, I will focus on the comedy career of Dave Chappelle and add another layer of analysis. In Cast Study 1, we studied Jerry Seinfeld's speech acts and conceptualized his locutionary and illocutionary forces. In Case Study 2, we studied Hannah Gadsby's locutionary and illocutionary forces, incorporated the perlocutionary force behind her utterances, and decided to evaluate individual performances, rather than comedians themselves. In this chapter, I want to continue considering the perlocutionary intentions of stand-up comedians' utterances, and I want to complicate it further by considering how those intentions

may differ throughout the course of one performance. In the example of Dave Chappelle, we'll see that he's existed in the "middle ground" throughout his career, and that his material moves from one side of the spectrum to the other based on the circumstances of his performances.

The "Middle Ground" describes those comedians whose material incorporate some level of honesty and some level of illusion in their acts. Some comedians segment their acts to accommodate both ends of the spectrum in a single performance. We see an interesting way a comedian has delivered material in the "middle ground" in Russell Brand's 2018 Netflix special *Rebirth*. Before the release of this special, Brand had spent some time away from the stand-up comedy stage, and during his hiatus, had made headlines for his actions as a political advocate and critic. Brand saw his stand-up special as an opportunity to address some of the more outlandish television appearances and interviews he'd offered in previous years. During his show, he plays video of his interviews for the crowd and then mocked his behavior and answers, using it as fodder for his stand-up material. With this, Brand revealed a version of his own private persona while existing as a comic character making fun of himself.

I want to study Dave Chappelle and his relationship with the spectrum because while he fluctuates on the scale, he rarely gives the audience an indication that his material is moving from one side to the other. Rather, he weaves his changes throughout his performances, and part of the fun in watching him perform is discerning what's real and what's not. In this case study, I want to explore how Chappelle's position on the stand-up character spectrum has changed throughout his career in response to the circumstances under which he has performed. First, I'll show that Chappelle's comedy philosophy, which he's revealed through various interviews, has incorporated aspects from both ends of the framework. I'll show some examples of his early stand-up, during which Chappelle assumed a sort of character while performing and his speech

acts exercised the comic's license to stretch the truth. Then, I'll consider how Chappelle's position on the spectrum evolved as the effects of events in his career carried over to his on-stage presence. Ultimately, I'll arrive at a conception of Dave Chappelle as a "shapeshifter" on the stand-up persona spectrum, and consider how the decisions he makes onstage today reflect his response to the situation in which he's speaking. I want to further complicate our conception of perlocutionary intentions by using Chappelle to show how his on-stage character changes in response to the time and place in which he's performing. I'll show how Chappelle's career is a collection of points on various places on the spectrum, and that an audience's ability to understand his material depends on diagnosing the desired perlocutionary effects behind his speech.

Chappelle's Comedy Philosophy

In the twenty-plus years of Dave Chappelle's existence as a public figure, he's shared a plethora of insights about his approach to stand-up comedy and the level of honesty he brings to the stage. In *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America*, Bambi Haggins paints Chappelle as a product of the civil rights movement, describing him as "a storyteller, who, with casual and almost lackluster candor, pulls you into his world and his logic" (Haggins). She notes the multifaceted nature of his material and the "dualities in his comic persona" (Haggins). Chappelle's approach to stand-up is hard to pin down, partly because he's been asked to reflect so frequently on the process of his craft and has given a wide range of answers. When Chappelle describes his comedy identity in his own words, we see him play both sides of the fence with regard to the persona spectrum and his approach to crafting his stand-up persona. On one hand, he has regarded the stage as a place for honesty and self revelation. In his episode of Comedians

in Cars Getting Coffee with Jerry Seinfeld, Chappelle says, “Everybody thinks the guy on the stage is the fake, but really it’s the guy offstage that’s fake. The guy on stage, that’s the real guy. The guy off the stage, he’s the one who lies to people, doesn’t say what he thinks, and all this other shit, just so that that guy can exist uninterrupted” (CCGC). These comments would land him on the opposite end of the spectrum as Seinfeld, who sees the stage as a place to lie for the sake of funny. Chappelle shared a similar sentiment in an interview with James Lipton on Inside the Actors’ Studio, saying, “When I'm on stage I get real happy up there. Like maybe that's the only time in my adult life that I feel like myself” (Actors). Based on these quotes, we would be inclined to plot Chappelle’s point on the spectrum near Hannah Gadsby and those comics who use the stage as a confessional for their real lives.

But in the converse, Chappelle has discussed the distance between himself and the on-stage self that he presents. In an episode of *Iconoclasts*, Chappelle sat down with Maya Angelou and the two exchanged notes on their writing processes. Chappelle said, “I was fourteen when I started. So, what are you gonna say about yourself when you’re fourteen? There’s not much to say. Everything is happening outside of yourself” (Iconoclasts). In the Inside the Actors’ Studio interview with James Lipton, Chappelle claimed, “I still don't talk about myself.” When pressed on the autobiographical nature of some of his material, he conceded, “Uh, yes,” but added that it’s “never directly” about himself (Actors). Chappelle has been craftily ambivalent about exactly how much of himself he allows on-stage, but he has spoken about the intentions behind his words, his position as a stand-up in the cultural landscape, and the obligation he feels to play with words and the intent behind them. He opens his 2017 Netflix special “Bird Revelation” saying, “Sometimes, the funniest thing to say is mean... So I say a lot of mean things, but you guys got to remember. I’m not saying it to be mean. I’m saying it because it’s funny” (Chappelle

2017). This statement seems to echo Seinfeld's approach to comedy, treating the craft as an experiment in stitching together the proper linguistic decisions to bring an audience to laughter. He continues this train of thought later in the show, saying, "Everybody gets mad because I say these jokes, but you gotta understand that this is the best time to say them... you have a responsibility to speak recklessly... I didn't come here to be right, I just came here to fuck around" (Chappelle 2017).

Chappelle has also spoken explicitly about the intentions behind his words and how his words' intentions sometimes differ from their ordinary meanings. In his conversation with Maya Angelou, he said, "I think words aren't what hurts people as much as the intentions behind words. So I think that's been one of the reasons I can say some pretty ugly words that would traditionally hurt people, but when they hear it they feel like 'this isn't hurting me' because they can feel the intention behind the word, just in how I'm using it" (Iconoclasts). This rationale harks us back to Ohmann's definition of literature. Ohmann states that audiences are in the presence of literature when a speaker utters phrases (or, performs locutionary acts) and attaches a different illocutionary force to those words than would be attached in an ordinary discourse setting. Chappelle's acknowledges that some things he says on-stage "would traditionally hurt people," but because of his delivery and the "intention behind the word," audiences know to interpret his utterances differently.

Throughout his career, media and linguistic theorists have experienced difficulty in defining Dave Chappelle. Some view his material as progressive and thought-provoking, highlighting issues of race and class in the United States, while others have chastised his use of regressive and offensive language. Chappelle has spent nearly 20 years in the public eye, but has been hesitant to embrace his status as a celebrity. He's commented on some of the most

controversial social topics, but always exuded the belief that his words hold little weight. He sums up his dual-natured performative stance succinctly: “I pride myself on saying real shit that people don't even notice I'm saying, but they feel it… and then sometimes I just tell shit jokes” (Actors).

Chappelle’s Material and His Perlocutionary Aims

Much like his comments, Chappelle’s point on the stand-up persona framework has fluctuated throughout his career. His early comedy involved a lot of storytelling and utilization of the comedic license with exaggeration. In these first two examples, we will see Chappelle performing locutionary acts and attaching mismatched illocutionary forces behind them—specifically in the punchlines of the jokes. I will show that while this material from Chappelle is informed by real world and his actual life experiences, ultimately his language contains nontruths for the sake of creating comedy.

In Chappelle first televised stand-up special, 2000’s *Killin’ Them Softly*, he tells a story about riding in a limousine and unexpectedly being taken to a ghetto neighborhood. At the beginning of the story, we see him paint a picture of the neighborhood that’s informed by truth, but clearly contains some fallacies. As the story goes, Chappelle recognizes his limo ride has gone awry as he starts noticing the neighborhood into which he’s riding: “There was a gun store, gun store, liquor store, gun store… A fucking crackhead ran this way. And then another one jumped out a tree” (Chappelle 2000). The driver exits and Chappelle is left alone in the limo. Then, he notices, “There was a fucking baby standing on a corner. For real. And the baby… the baby didn’t even look scared. It was just standing there” (Chappelle 2000). He yells to the baby:

"'Hey, baby!' Baby, go home, man. It's 3:00 in the morning. What the fuck are you doing up?!" And the baby responds, 'I'm selling weed!" (Chappelle 2000).

From this story, we start to get a sense of what Chappelle means when he says his material is autobiographical but "never directly" (Actors). In his interview with James Lipton, Chappelle described the creative process and intent behind the story:

> "It's based off of true stories. Yes, the joke starts out I'm in a limousine. I knew he was taking me to the ghetto, cause I'm looking out the window. I'm like, "gun store, gun store, liquor store—where the hell you takin' me?" boom… Then we get to the ghetto, and then I do the baby standing on the corner. That was in Washington. I saw some kids running around playing and I was like, 'Who has their kids just running out on the streets like this?' Okay, true story."

Chappelle reveals the elements of the story that are truth, informed by his real life experiences. Then, he peels back the curtain and shows us the nontruths in the story. "Now did the baby talk to me? No! Was he selling weed? No! But I was making a point, you know? I was making a very subtle point, and here I am, a black man in a limousine—now we're getting to the class issues. In the ghetto. So it's truth in jest" (Actors).

Here, we see how material can exist in the middle ground, mixing together elements of truth and nontruth and being revealed through a character who is simultaneously reflecting on his experiences and utilizing the comic's license. More importantly, we see Chappelle's intent behind the story and why it requires him to incorporate both truths and nontruths. Of course, he wants to make the story funny for his audience—but he has bigger perlocutionary goals in what he wants his audience to detect and take away from the story. He tells Lipton he's "making a point" and "getting into class issues." From this, we gather that humor isn't the sole motivator

behind the material, as Chappelle also wants to address very real social issues like class disparity through nontruth and comedy.

Chappelle's History: His Elusive Public Identity

Chappelle's comedic material is informed by his experiences. In order to understand Chappelle and the rhetorical choices he makes onstage, I want to offer a bit of background about his life and career. As a child, Chappelle lived in Silver Spring, Maryland before his family moved to Washington D.C. He attended an arts high school, Duke Ellington School of the Arts, and then moved to Ohio (Actors). According to Chappelle, "the neighborhood was wild… So my mom sent my brother and I to live with my father in Yellow Springs" (Actors). As a teenager, Chappelle tried his hand at stand-up comedy for the first time. "I think I did two and a half minutes, but they were going crazy. I was 14, probably looked like I was 11" (Actors). Over the next dozen years, Chappelle honed his craft and appeared as a guest performer on late night shows. He appeared in roles on a number of sitcoms and filmed several pilot television episodes, none of which led to sustained success. In 2000, he recorded his first full-length stand-up television special for HBO, *Killin' Them Softly*. The special springboarded his career and in 2003, "Chappelle's Show" premiered on Comedy Central. The show consisted of short stand-up monologues and comedy sketches. The first two seasons of the show were wildly successful, with the second season breaking records for "both the first day and seven-day sales records for TV on DVD titles with close to 500,000 units sold" (Comedy Central). Chappelle signed a 50 million dollar contract but infamously backed out of the show in the beginning of filming the third season, withdrawing himself from the American public and seeking solace in South Africa for several months. In his absence, the American media speculated about the reasons for

Chappelle's departure. In the years since, Chappelle has clarified his rationale for leaving, citing disputes between himself and his fellow show writers, disagreements with the network, and "the discomfort he felt with how certain white fans were laughing at his racial material" (Fox 2018).

In the previous section, I noted Chappelle's attention to the intent behind his material, and his tendency to "make a point" through his comedy. In the aftermath of "Chappelle's Show," Chappelle has expanded on the intention behind some of the show's sketches and the signals he's gotten from some audiences who didn't appear to diagnose his intentions correctly. Inadvertently, the show "gave white audiences the cover to laugh at edgy racial material without understanding the history or the pain behind the jokes" (Schilling). Fox acknowledges Chappelle's "concern that people watching (specifically white people) were laughing at the wrong parts of his jokes, obscuring the comedy's intention" (Fox 2018 Funny). In his conversation with Maya Angelou, Chappelle said, "When I left my show, it was because I did this sketch, and I know what I intended, but somebody laughed differently than I intended, and I caught it" (Iconoclasts).

Dave spent many years out of the public eye following his Chappelle's Show breakup, only occasionally popping up for impromptu stand-up sets and never releasing anything for consumption. He resurfaced in 2013, headlining the "Oddball Comedy Tour," and began re-solidifying himself into the fabric of the American stand-up scene, appearing on late night shows and performing at Radio City Music Hall. Today, even with new Netflix specials, Chappelle's reputation is heavily impacted by his Chappelle's Show days and his abrupt exit during his ascent into success. "Dave Chappelle's inexplicable departure from Chappelle's Show — and a hefty $50 million contract with Viacom — hangs over everything he does. Walking away from a massively successful television show, flying to Africa, and disappearing from the entertainment

industry for 12 years is quite a thing to live down...Chappelle carries the brand, but he's maintained the mystery around it" (Schilling). Fox posits that, "while he was beloved for doing comedy, he was revered for stopping" (Fox 2018).

Be it because of the turbulence in his career, the twists and turns in his public perception, or simply the natural maturation of a comedian, Chappelle's onstage material has evolved. Earlier in this chapter, we saw some of Chappelle's early jokes, which were informed by his real life experiences, but still utilized the comedian's license to be untruthful. In the following section, I want to investigate Chappelle's more contemporary performances and evaluate how they land on the comedic spectrum. In *Vulture*, Jesse David Fox asks, "How Seriously Does Dave Chappelle Want to Be Taken?" noting that "his stand-up is now filled with long, laughless monologues that sometimes build up to jokes, but sometimes don't" (Fox 2018). Fox contends that understanding today's Chappelle material involves attention to detail and maybe a bit of guesswork. "Present-day Dave Chappelle wants to be taken seriously, except when he doesn't, and therein lies the issue… Comedians do not have to be right. Though some people might prefer comedians they agree with, being correct is not necessarily part of the job description" (Fox 2018 Seriously). Whereas we could argue that Chappelle's early material almost always involved some element of the "comedian as character" end of the spectrum, his material now involves pulling from the opposite end of the spectrum as well. In the following section, we'll see some examples of Chappelle's contemporary material and consider how he intends for his audience to interpret his words.

Chappelle as a Shapeshifter

Dave Chappelle has endured a long career with many twists and turns. I argue that he has dwelled in the middle ground of the comedy persona spectrum by pulling from both sides of the spectrum at different points in his performances and utilizing all rhetorical tools at his disposal. Dave's most recent stand-up specials highlight his elusiveness, and the inability for audiences to pin down his level of "truth" or how much of himself he's revealing on stage. On January 1st of 2017, Netflix released two Chappelle hour-long specials simultaneously. *Equanimity* is a traditional stand-up show filmed at the Warner Theatre in Washington D.C., accompanied by a full audience, specialized lighting, and polished material. *Bird Revelation*, the second of the dual-release special, was filmed in the "Belly Room" of Los Angeles's Comedy Store, accompanied by a small, intimate audience. Chappelle has some semblance of a plan in "Bird Revelation"—evidenced by the structure of the show and his concluding bit—but much of the material appears more off the cuff and improvisational, matching the comfortable setting. These two shows highlight the range of identities Chappelle may bring to the stand-up stage as he responds to the size of audience, the mood of room, and the expectations of audience.

If we consider the material from early in his career as more often landing on the "character" end of the spectrum, Chappelle's more recent performances include more material that would be categorized on the "true self" end of the spectrum. In *Equanimity* and *The Bird Revelation,* Chappelle brings utters some truth through his comic facade. As Fox says, "You can't retell the story of Emmett Till, as he does in *Equanimity*, or the story of an exploited sex worker, as he does in *The Bird Revelation*, and act like you only came to fuck around" (Fox 2018).

In Chapter 2, we discussed the audience's role in discerning speech acts and the intentions attached to a speaker's utterances. A successful speech act hinges on the audience properly understanding the illocutionary force behind the speech. Chappelle's stand-up material is interesting to study because he's constantly tricking his audience with his intentions and trying to catch them by surprise. This can lead to some misunderstandings and some murkiness about the true intent behind Chappelle's performances. In "How Seriously Does Dave Chappelle Want to Be Taken?" Fox addresses these misunderstandings in digesting Chappelle's acts. "It's not the audiences' 'fault' if people are taking parts of his material seriously that he doesn't want them to — it's a failure of communication; it's a failure of being a person onstage who can encompass both. Chappelle is essentially asking the audience to take him seriously, but not literally… it's not so easy" (Fox 2018). The reason that audiences struggle with identifying Chappelle's intentions is that with each piece of material within a show, Chappelle may have a different perlocutionary effect in mind. In Case Study 1, we studied Jerry Seinfeld as an inhabitant of the "comic character" end of the spectrum. With each speech act that he utters on stage, the desired effect is humor and laughter. In Case Study 2, we analyzed Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* as an exemplar of the "comedian as self" end of the spectrum, as the desired effect in her performance is for her audience to genuinely consider the words she utters. Chappelle's material oscillates between these two desired effects. Sometimes he's telling lies for the sake of comedy; sometimes he's telling the truth for the sake of impacting his audience. Sometimes he uses mismatched illocutionary forces behind his words; sometimes the illocutionary force matches the words he utters. In the following examples, I'll show how Chappelle draws from both sides and plays with the expectations that come with them.

As Fox alluded to in his article, Chappelle spends some time in *Equanimity* telling the harrowing and true story of Emmett Till. As Chappelle speaks about Till's mother, it's clear he's not going for laughs in this portion of the show:

> "'Leave my son's casket open,' she said. 'The world needs to see what they did to my baby.' And every publication here in the United States, from Jet magazine all the way to the New York Times, had this boy's horribly bloated body on its cover... This was a very definitive moment in American history" (Chappelle 2017 *Equanimity*).

As evidenced here, Chappelle's new material may sometimes exist in the realm of Gadsby on the "truthful" side of the spectrum. Chappelle's locutionary act and illocutionary force align here. These words abide by the normal parameters of discourse and as such, would not be deemed as "unhappy" or as "literature" according to Ohmann.

On the contrary, other moments in Chappelle's performances present themselves as honest and truthful moments of self reflection, only for Chappelle to dismantle that illusion with a punchline. The following joke relies on his tendency to deliver real sentiments and have aligned locutionary and illocutionary intent:

> "All jokes aside, Kevin Spacey shouldn't have done that shit to that kid. He was 14-years-old and was forced to carry a grown man's secret. For 30 years. Jesus Christ, he must have been busting at the seams with that one. The saddest part is, if he were able to carry that secret for six more months, I would get to know how House of Cards ends" (Chappelle 2017 *Bird Revelation*).

Chappelle makes a few rhetorical choices to arrive at this punchline. He begins the joke with "all jokes aside," signaling to his audience that they should anticipate a genuine speech act, like his Emmett Till monologue. For the next few sentences, he seriously ruminates on the pain

that this victim of sexual assault must have felt. He then moves on to the punchline, which reveals the illocutionary incongruence of the speech act: The “saddest part” of the situation is that Chappelle himself will miss a television show. The punchline exposes his seemingly genuine heartache as comedic material masquerading as truth.

In November of 2016, Chappelle hosted *Saturday Night Live* and delivered a stand-up monologue to begin the show. His *SNL* monologue a moment of cultural significance for two reasons: It was Dave Chappelle’s first nationally televised stand-up performance in more than ten years since walking away from his 50 million dollar contract in the mid-2000’s. It was also *SNL*’s first show following the election of Donald Trump. So, Chappelle had a lot to address in his monologue, which was full of allusions to his personal life and his perception of American politics. Near the conclusion of his monologue, which until this point had consisted of setups and punchlines, Chappelle gives a signal to his audience that he was about to deliver honest speech: “You know, before I go, I do want to say one thing, and this is not a joke” (Chappelle 2016). As we saw in the earlier example, Chappelle claiming “this is not a joke” is not always a guarantee. But on this occasion, Chappelle’s speech is genuine. He told a story about an experience he’d had at the BET Awards, surrounded by “these people who had been historically disenfranchised.” He ended his set: “It made me feel hopeful and it made me feel proud to be an American and it made me very happy about the prospects of our country. So, in that spirit, I’m wishing Donald Trump luck. And I’m going to give him a chance, and we, the historically disenfranchised, demand that he give us one too. Thank you very much” (Chappelle 2016). Here, we see Chappelle align his locutionary and illocutionary acts. He’s honest when he says “this isn’t a joke,” and shares a sentiment that the audience may interpret as truth at face value.

Conclusion

In this case study, we've considered how a stand-up comedian's performance may oscillate between telling the truth, acting as a caricature, or any midpoint in between. In Case Study 2, we amended the stand-up comedy framework to account for comedians changing their style between performances. We claimed that because Hannah Gadsby had the agency to alter her approach to stand-up persona during her next show, we ought to evaluate each performance individually. Here, we've explored the idea that a comedian may change his approach to identity within the same performance. As such, we should make a final adjustment to the framework to account for the evaluation of individual jokes/utterances. With this, our subject of analysis is more focused and minute than Ohmann's proposed "line," which had us evaluate each work as a whole. I've argued in this chapter that a comedian's evocation of the license varies not just from performance to performance but from each individual joke, or utterance, to the next. With this in mind, the updated stand-up comedy framework looks like this:

O--O

Comedy Utterance Utilizing Falsehoods	Middle Ground	Comedy Utterance Resembling Truth

Figure 3: Final Rhetorical Comedy Framework

The Final Rhetorical Comedy Framework, as it depends on its user's classification of "utterances," welcomes a discussion about the unit of speech that we may qualify as an "utterance." Linguistic and speech theorists have traditionally used "sentences" as the unit by which to measure an "utterance," but others have complicated that criterion. In "Utterances and Acts in the Philosophy of J. L. Austin," Richard T. Garner seeks to discern J.L. Austin's usage of the word. He writes, "Austin uses the word 'utterance' in at least two, and possibly three, distinct ways" (Garner). With this notion, we begin to see how analyzing stand-up comedy as a series of

utterances arranged in perfect sentences may be difficult. This notion is further complicated when we consider that comedians are under no obligation to have their speech acts obey the rules of sentence structure or any other grammatical expectations. In "What is a Speech Act?" John Searle wrestles with Austin's speech act ideology and offers examples of utterances, such as "Hurrah!" and "Ouch!" which would cause us to abandon a conception of speech acts abiding by traditional sentence structure. (Searle). Searle explores the difference between "just uttering sounds or making marks" and "performing a speech act" (Searle). Ultimately, he posits that a speech act, or utterance, occurs when "the sounds or marks one makes in the performance of a speech act are characteristically said to have meaning" and "that one is characteristically said to mean something by those sounds or marks" (Searle). In settling on a baseline definition of utterance for the sake of defining speech acts according to the rhetorical framework I've set forth here, we may employ Searle's simplistic understanding of "utterance: "In speaking a language I attempt to communicate things to my hearer by means of getting him to recognize my intention to communicate just those things" (Searle). Theorists will continue to wrestle with Austin's assertions and develop more complicated and more simplistic definitions for speech acts, and the Final Rhetorical Comedy Framework should facilitate these new conceptions.

Along with Chappelle, other comedians have played both sides of the "literary line" in their acts. Neal Brennan, fellow stand-up comedian and co-creator of Chappelle show, released his Netflix special *Three Mics* in 2017. In his performance, he utilizes three different microphones, differentiated by the material he's delivering. He has a microphones for "Stand-up," another for "one-liners," and the last for "emotional stuff." When he speaks into the "stand-up" microphone, we hear the more traditional set-ups and punchlines of a comedy show. On the "one-liners" mic, Brennan delivers short, refined jokes. On the "emotional stuff" mic, Brennan

shared autobiographical material about his home life, childhood, and his adult experiences with mental health. Throughout the show, he'll occupy one of the microphones for five minutes or so—then the lights fall, and he appears behind a different microphone, signaling a change in subject matter. The experimental format helps Brennan explore the allowances of the craft of stand-up comedy and reveal multiple versions of persona on-stage.

Dave Chappelle's career has been defined by his unpredictability, both off-stage and on. His comedy throughout the years shows us what the "Middle Ground" looks like. He may tell a fictitious story and hide kernels of truth within it. He may offer words posturing as honest, only to reveal their deceit with a punchline. Or, he may really use the stage as a vessel to tell the truth and evoke social change. His unique position as a cultural symbol who once refused money and turned away from fame makes defining his comedy all the more interesting. Audiences "know" Dave Chappelle. When he steps onto a stage, his reputation, and the aura of mystery and wisdom, follows him. But his comedy causes us to question if we really do know him. He uses the stage as a place to paint an honest picture of his life experiences, and yet simultaneously, it's a place where he's free to experiment with language and "fuck around." At once, we're get to know Dave on stage, and question if we ever really could know him.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this project, I set out to address some of the existing conceptions of stand-up comedy as an art-form for performing through a persona. I offered this quote from John Limon to serve as a contrast to my ultimate argument: “stand-ups try to escape [life] by living it as an act” (Limon). In response, I’ve illustrated how some comedians incorporate their “lives” into their performances, while others maintain distance between the two. In part, I wanted to respond to the tendency some audiences have to interpret stand-up comedians’ utterances at face value. I offered the example in the introduction of Tom Segura’s joke advocating for a wall to be built around the state of Louisiana, and the audiences who responded with genuine concern. I hope that my project can serve as an alternative voice in these discussions, prompting audiences to consider the illocutionary and perlocutionary aims that Segura was hoping to satisfy in his performance. Perhaps, with a more literary understanding of the nature of stand-up, we can adopt a conception of stand-up as artificial speech.

In that same sphere, I don’t want the argument that I’ve made here to serve as an excuse for critics to claim that stand-up performances ought to be exempt from political and cultural critique. I have illustrated that a stand-up comedian has an obligation to make his or her perlocutionary intentions clear to the audience, at the risk of delivering misunderstood speech utterances. With this project, I merely propose a level of nuance with which to discuss the intent behind stand-up performance. Studying stand-up comedy and its rhetorical effects means analyzing particular speech acts, under which “the normal conditions of reference may be suspended” (Austin). We should think of stand-up comedy performances as complex exchange of ideas, not unlike a literary work, and consider it as a discourse “whose sentences lack the

illocutionary forces that would normally attach to them" (Ohmann). I don't intend to define stand-up comedy, as I've demonstrated it's an ever-evolving craft. But if we begin to conceive stand-up as an art-form which allows for the presentation of less than accurate versions of "selves" and performed personas, we're better off understanding the rhetorical choices stand-up comedians make.

In the preceding pages, I've explored the idea of evaluating the speech acts stand-up comedians incorporate into their acts and contemplating the level of "truth" they depend on. I settled on the art-form of stand-up comedy as the artifact through which to study this notion because of my personal affinity for the craft. However, the idea of evaluating speech acts and how their users reflect a performative persona is not limited to stand-up comedy. Early in the piece, I considered how musicians utilize a similar license to the one I explored in this project, with the freedom to incorporate both "truth" and "fiction" in their lyrics. I made a note that I considered stand-up comedy to be the most universally misunderstood medium with regards to the speech acts performers utter. Still, the idea of conducting a similar analysis based on the speech acts musicians reveal through the art of songwriting would make for an interesting study for future research. We may consider how our measures for evaluating speech acts change in the rhetorical situation of songwriting, which often involves more reclusively than stand-up and the freedom of revision before publication. Stand-up comedy is a live medium, and the exchange of speech acts from the performer to the hearer is immediate. Conversely, musical songwriting can involve revision and, one could argue, perfection, of the utterances before bringing them to an audience. These slightly different rhetorical circumstances may affect how speech acts function in that particular medium.

The ideas and frameworks set forth in this project may also intersect with other disciplines and areas of study. As this project was born from Ohmann's quest to discern between the literary and nonliterary, I anticipate future scholars may investigate how the idea of rhetoric interesting with speech acts may play a role in literary analysis and fiction analysis. Further, we may lift the notion of evaluating speech acts and the illocutionary forces behind them and apply them to other arenas with complex "speakers." For example, future political science and political rhetorical scholars may consider how politicians represent themselves and their experiences in campaign speeches. I could foresee an understanding of the rhetoric that politicians use as dependent on the misalignment of locutionary and illocutionary forces as similar to those I've investigated in comedians' performances here. Rhetorical scholars and their adjacent equivalents will have no shortage of material to evaluate and analyze, so long as performers and public figures execute complex rhetorical decisions through speech utterances for the sake of affecting an audience.

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