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Drink Coke. Don't Steal Movies: A Queer in Pursuit of Laughter and Empathy

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Drink Coke. Don't Steal Movies: A Queer in Pursuit of Laughter and Empathy

Senior Project Submitted to

The Division of the Arts

of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Acknowledgments: Thank you, Jack Ferver, for all your guidance throughout this process. Thank you, Mom and Dad, for supporting me and my endeavors in theatre throughout the years. Thank you, Victoria Haschke, for helping me run sound during my performance when my event host did not show up on the day my senior project board came to see my show. Thank you, Nilaja Sun, for teaching me the importance of performing generously. Thank you, God, for creating the Heavens and the Earth and all the humans in it, including yours truly. Also, thank you, Jesus Christ, for dying for my sins. I never really understood why it was necessary for You to be brutally crucified for God to forgive the human race for original sin. I mean, She's God! If She wanted to pardon us, why couldn't She just forgive us and skip the whole "sacrificing Her Son to save the world" routine? But in any case, by all accounts, it seems like the whole crucifixion experience was a really unpleasant ordeal, and so if You did that for me and all the people I love and care for in my life, then You certainly deserve some respect. So thank You.

Please Note: Like my stand-up comedy set, the content of this paper is not entirely factually. I have changed some names (anytime the name CHAD appears, it is filler for another name), and I have also told blatant lies because I felt like it.

DRINK BEER. DON'T TRUST SPARC.

7:30 P.M. Monday, February 13, 2017: I'm pacing back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth in the Root Cellar. Sound crew still hadn't shown up. They had shown up two hours before the performance yesterday, despite there being a snow storm. I had brought a back-up speaker just in case the day before, but I assumed if sound crew

showed up during a snow storm, surely they'd be there for my second performance, the performance which my SENIOR PROJECT BOARD AND SENIOR PROJECT ADVISOR WOULD BE ATTENDING!!!!

Pacing, pacing, pacing. Muttering curses to myself. Not only was sound crew not there, but my co-host of the event and person running sound for the show hadn't shown up either and wasn't answering my calls. "Hello?" I heard her voice say. "CHAD! Sound crew still isn't here! What are we gonna-" "Sorry. I tricked you. I can't get to the phone right now. Please leave a message!" If you're ever thinking of making your voicemail message one of those cheeky "hahaha, tricked you! This is a recording!" kind of memes, please don't. There is a special ring of hell for such tricksters.

My heart trembled, palpating violently. I kept forgetting to breath, then choking on air when I remembered. Those caffeine pills I took to make sure I was bursting with energy for my performance weren't helping me calm down. I called sound crew. No answer.

7:45 P.M. "Hey, Ariel!" My parents have walked into the Root Cellar. "Ready for your performance?"

"Um, uh, hi! Uh, no. Not really. I'm kind of fucking freaking out right now. Sorry. I'm just- The fucking sound crew was supposed to be here, like, two fucking hours ago. And, like... I don't know if they're just...really fucking late, or if they just totally forgot, and I'm just... Sorry."

"No, no! I mean... That's horrible," says my mom. "Is there... Is there anything we can do to help?"

My parents drive me back to my dorm. 7:55 P.M. My phone starts buzzing. "Hello?"

"Hi, this is-"

“You’re the sound crew guy, right?”

“Uh, yeah, what-”

“Hi. Great. Um... Yeah. Sorry, I, just, uh... So I have a show tonight. And I was supposed to get sound equipment, but the sound crew didn’t show up. So, um, yeah. I kind of...don’t know what the fuck is going on right now.”

“Oh! Okay, okay. So...what’s your event?”

“It’s called ‘Drink Coke. Don’t Steal Movies.’ It’s a...fucking stand-up comedy show. I was supposed to get a mic and some speakers.”

“Okay... I see your show for Sunday... But I don’t see anything for Monday.”

“Well, I mean... Well, I definitely registered the event for both days! And, I mean...if I needed the equipment one day, I mean...why the fuck would I not need it the other day? I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I know I’m... I know it’s not your fault, SPARC probably fucked up, or...fucking someone, I don’t know, I’m sorry, I’m just... just sort of freaking out right now, I mean, this is my fucking senior project, and my fucking senior project board is coming tonight, so...”

“No worries. Look, I can’t get you any crew for tonight, but you’re free to use whatever equipment you need.”

“Great! Great. Thank you. Um, it’s not... Is there anything I, like...need to know about using the equipment or anything?”

“It should be pretty self-explanatory.”

“Okay, uh, great. Thanks. Sorry I was... Sorry I’ve been really fucking rude, I... Thank you. Thanks. Goodbye.”

8:15 P.M. My show was supposed to start fifteen minutes ago, and I'm only just arriving back at the Root Cellar. "Hey, everyone! Hi! I'm here. Hey." Trying to carry speakers through my audience without decapitating anyone. "Uh, yeah. Sorry I'm late." I frantically begin trying to unpack the equipment. "Sound crew... Something got...fucking mixed up with SPARC or something. Um..." I look out into the audience. Pretty full crowd! "Uh, so, are all the members of my SPROJ board here?" I see Jack, Miriam, and Jorge in the back-left corner of the room. They give a little wave. "Great! What about CHAD? Is CHAD here?" Murmurs in the audience. "Great! She was supposed to be the event host, but whatever! That's fine." Some uncomfortable chuckles in the audience. My parents enter with the rest of the sound equipment. "Oh, great! The rest of the sound equipment. Thanks, Mom. Thanks, Dad. Yeah, those are really my parents." Some people in the audience applaud as my parents walk through the audience with the rest of the equipment. "Okay, now, let's see." I begin to examine the equipment to figure out if I have any clue of how to set it up. I quickly realize that my technical abilities are hopeless. "Uh, hey, so does anyone in the audience have any tech experience? I...am hopelessly incompetent." A moment of no response. Eventually, my friend Victoria comes forward.

We both try to figure out the speakers, but we don't seem to be making much progress. "Eh, whatever." I shrug, not wanting to waste much more of the audience's time. "I don't need a microphone to project!" I proclaim in a diva voice. "THIS IS THEATRE!" Victoria goes to sit back down. "Oh! But I actually do still need someone to run sound." Victoria stands back up. "Thanks, Victoria. Sorry about this!" "No, it's fine!" "Okay, so here's what I need you to do..." I turn on my iPad. 8:22. The show should be almost over at this point! I show Victoria what sound cues I need her to play and give her an annotated script. I test the small speakers I brought as a back-up. I play the song "Mouth Pressure" (a mash-up of the instrumentals of Queen's

“Under Pressure” and the vocals of Smash Mouth’s “All Star”). “SOMEBODY-” “Great!” I quickly shut off the song as Steve Harwell’s vocals come in. The audience chuckles at the absurd remix. I walk to the center of the set. “Ready?” I ask Victoria. She nods and begins playing the first sound cue.

“YOU WOULDN’T STEAL...A CAR???”

The evening before my senior project proposal was due, I was drunk on a train back to Bard. I had a few beers and a shot of Jack Daniels on the Amtrak to Penn Station. Then after walking from Penn Station to Grand Central Station, I made a discovery: They sell food *and* beer in Grand Central Station! I indulged as I waited for my train back to Bard.

On the Metro-North: I realized that not only had I failed horribly at getting any work done on my senior project proposal over spring break, but I had failed to have done any work on it in the six hours I had been traveling so far. Fuck, I thought. I got out my notebook and the sheet with all the questions I needed to address in my proposal. Hmmm. I was pretty sure I wanted to do a solo performance of some kind; Nilaja Sun’s solo performance class I was in had already inspired me greatly at this point. But what kind of solo performance should I do? At the moment, I had just begun working on a piece for Nilaja about the transphobic “bathroom bill” that had just been passed in North Carolina at that time. But I wasn’t sure if I wanted to do a piece like that for my senior project. Not that it wasn’t a worthy subject, or that similar subjects wouldn’t have been worthy subjects. I was just getting tired of constantly playing the trans performer complaining about how hard it was being trans. I was beginning to feel like a nagging broken record, whining on and on about the same thing to people who (I hope for the most part)

weren't the people who really needed to hear the message. But if I didn't do a piece about that, what could I do for my senior project?

Aha! What if I did a solo performance that played with the format of stand-up comedy? I think I'm pretty funny, I thought to myself, as many, many other people, funny and not funny alike, had thought about themselves before. I could do that!

But I knew if I just wrote "i want 2 make ppl laff" for my senior project proposal, my project would likely have the same fate as Bard theatre majors CHAD BLUE and CHAD GOODMAN's ill-fated ANCHORMAN musical. I would have to disguise my intention to perform stand-up comedy for my senior project with a little more pretention. "I plan on writing and performing a solo performance piece exploring the relationship between humor and groups of people typically underrepresented in comedy, particularly transgender people," I wrote. "In the piece I hope to explore how humor might be used to promote empathy and awareness or whether humor really is a very effective way to encourage empathy and awareness for all groups of people; I also will attempt to portray the struggles of being a comedian who is a member of a group of people who are often marginalized and being put in a position where you feel like to succeed, you either need to demean yourself in your performances in some way (often inadvertently demeaning the group you are a part of in some way in the process) or where you feel like you need to demean other people in other groups."

In my drunkenness, I was both glad that I had managed to come up with a senior project idea with plenty of hours to spare and totally convinced that I could write stand-up comedy. I turned on mobile data and lazily scrolled through all the bullshit on my Facebook feed, when I received an email from Jen Lown. "Reminder that we're having student showings this Wednesday evening! There are still some spots available." With drunken valor, I replied,

“Heyyyyyyy are there still any spots left to perform at Zocalo?? Cuz if there are then I WANT TO PERFORM!!!!” Now I had an opportunity to test my ability to generate stand-up material. In less than three days. Fuck.

By Wednesday evening, I had a script ready to perform in front of my theatre-making peers. I had finished making a few last-minute tweaks to the script about a half-hour before the showings began. Not quite enough time to really read through the script and decide whether or not the script I wrote was really something I wanted to perform in front of an audience, but I supposed that sometimes it was better that way.

At the time, I was interested in playing failure in stand-up comedy. I took inspiration from the way Andy Kaufman would often blur the lines between reality and performance and play with audience expectations, particularly the expected relationship between audience and performer, and I was particularly interested in the idea of queer failure in performance, with influence from the work of queer artists like Dynasty Handbag. So I decided to try writing comedy bits that were explicitly about transgender issues: bits that I knew the audience might not fully understand or feel comfortable laughing at. Such bits included a bit about transphobic cisgender men on OkCupid and a bit about “trans-face” (in other words, when cisgender actors play transgender characters, particularly when cisgender male actors play trans women). I also decided to experiment with the idea of using comedy to address serious topics like self-harm and suicide.

I decided that during my performance I would drink beers between my bits. My delivery was uncomfortable and awkward, partially because I was reading my bits off a script and partially because I was playing somewhat of an “awkward amateur stand-up comedian” persona, somewhat similar to that of Kyle Mooney’s Bruce Chandling. I was interested in exploring what

kind of audience-performer relationship would result by establishing my stage persona as pitiful, yet also a performer who wants the audience to laugh; I would thus produce a situation where the audience may or may not feel tempted to laugh, yet may not feel comfortable laughing, and yet feels an expectation that they should laugh because the performer attempts to make them to laugh. As a result, there were some moments that the audience felt comfortable laughing, but most of the laughter was nervous laughter. Additionally, there were moments where the audience's discomfort was immensely evident.

I discovered a vulnerability in the performance. It felt vulnerable to perform a comedy routine that at points was deliberately unfunny, and it also felt vulnerable to reveal personal information about self-harm and other self-destructive tendencies, particularly in a performance that I introduced as one that was supposed to be comedic. But as I performed and as I heard feedback after the performance, I discovered this was a selfish vulnerability. I didn't feel a strong sense of success with the performance because I didn't perform for my audience; I performed for myself in front of an audience.

However, there were two responses to this performance that stuck with me: When I asked what points of my performance made people uncomfortable, one student said, "Whenever you made generalizations about cisgender men;" another person observed that part of the reason why it's difficult to make jokes about transgender issues now is that as a culture we're at a transitional point in terms of people's perceptions of transgender people. These responses presented two challenges to me going forward: The former challenged me to find ways to expose cissexism and transphobia through humor without completely alienating or demonizing cisgender men; the latter challenged me to find comedic premises that acknowledge and address my transness while still remaining accessible to people still ignorant about transgender issues or still struggling to

accept the idea of transgender identities. In this early performance, I discovered I wasn't interested in *playing* failure; if my senior project performance had failure in it, it would be genuine failure, derived from an authentic attempt to make audiences laugh while empowering myself as a transgender performer.

DRINK BLEACH. DON'T PERFORM SELFISHLY.

"Take care of your audience," Nilaja Sun would remind us in her solo performance class. "Respect your audience. And honor your audience's time!"

Nilaja Sun emphasized the importance of true generosity in performance. One of my first performances in Nilaja's class was a piece about a time in middle school when I confronted two other middle schoolers who were mocking a girl and calling her "gay." Predictably, when I tried to defend her against this homophobic abuse, they began directing their insults towards me. But as I described this incident in front of the class, I told it with a sense of humorous detachment, rushing through the monologue and laughing off the ignorance of my middle school bullies and the impact the experience had on me at the time.

"Now this is important," Nilaja said. "Because in America, gay people are told that they don't belong. That they're not deserving of love. And so, they learn to build barriers between themselves and the world." Nilaja gazed into my eyes intently. I found it difficult to hold eye contact with her. "Ariel, you don't have to apologize for your story. Your story is important. People need to hear your story."

"I want you to go again. Just the part leading up to the point where your bullies call you gay. And I want you to take your time with it. Really embody him when he calls you gay, and

then become yourself, in that moment. Remember how it felt. Allow yourself to show the audience the vulnerability seventh-grade-you felt in that moment. Oh! And also: Look at your audience. Really look at them. Make eye contact. Don't shut anyone out."

I inhaled, took an actor's moment, and began: "'Well, so what if she was gay?' I said. 'What's wrong with being gay?'"

I took a moment to shift into the physicality of my middle school bully. "'You're gay!'" I stared out at my classmates, remembering what it was like to have to constantly pretend I wasn't queer, to fear the shame of being exposed as a pervert. "I was petrified in that moment. I had only just begun to discover my sexuality in seventh grade. I didn't feel comfortable outright denying or confirming it.

"'You're gay!'"

From the experience of telling that story in class, I learned the importance of generous vulnerability. It was important for me to be honest about the emotional impact homophobic abuse of my childhood had on me because it is important for people to empathize with people like me. I couldn't force my audience to empathize with me, but it was better to fail by trying to evoke empathy than to fail by shutting my audience out, to fail by letting my insecurity drive me to tell the audience that I didn't expect empathy because I knew I wasn't worthy of empathy.

My final performance in Nilaja Sun's class was about the infamous transphobic "bathroom bill" that had been passed recently in North Carolina. In the piece, as well as performing text based on interviews I found of people from North Carolina, I also talked about my own experiences being transgender, particularly my experiences in high school. I described being in a state of what I called "trans-limbo," in other words, feeling trapped between knowing that I was transgender, but not being in a setting where I felt comfortable being entirely open

about it. In an earlier draft of the piece, I mentioned that before I felt like I could be open about being trans, I preferred when people thought I was gay (even though I'm actually not exclusively attracted to men, I'm pansexual) because "people often tend to think of gay men as less than men, and even though it was fucked up, it felt better to not really be seen as a straight man." After performing this earlier draft of the piece, Nilaja warned me to be careful of what kind of "us and them" implications I was projecting onto my audience; it was wrong to make the assumption that most people (including people in my audience) hold this kind of heterosexist view. This was another kind of generosity as a performer: to be generous in the assumptions I make about my audience, and not to project prejudices onto them.

Nilaja also encouraged me to transform the ending, in which I related the struggles of many transgender people in North Carolina facing the reality of the "bathroom bill" to my own struggles growing up trans and living as a trans person now, into a "teachable moment." Give the audience an opportunity to learn how to respect my gender identity, how to help people like me feel safe and accepted. I should make the generous assumption that even if some of my audience still struggled to embrace the idea of transgender identities, that they might appreciate an opportunity to try to learn how to be respectful of their transgender peers.

I produced my moderation piece titled, "Fix Society. Please," in response to the highly-publicized suicide and online suicide note of Leelah Alcorn in 2014. The title came from her suicide note, in a section which read, "My death needs to mean something. My death needs to be counted in the number of transgender people who commit suicide this year...Fix society. Please." I felt compelled to make the piece not only in response to her suicide note, which was regularly circulating my social media feeds throughout the winter and spring of 2015, but also

several posts on social media by transgender friends (particularly trans women) revealing their own struggles with suicidal urges.

In this performance, I decided to use performative failure as a means to express the helplessness I felt when faced with the reality of transgender suicide. Before the performance, I passed out printed out transphobic statements (mostly from YouTube comments on vlogs I made about transgender issues), a few statements based on some of the social media posts by transgender friends talking about their own struggles, and a few quotations from Leelah Alcorn's suicide note to members of the audience, and I told them to yell the statements at me as I tried to read a monologue I wrote advocating for transgender acceptance and raising awareness about the disproportionately high suicide rates among transgender people. (Forty percent of respondents of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey had attempted suicide in their lifetime. At the time of my performance in spring of 2015, the rate commonly reported was forty-one percent.)

I was interested in creating a situation where I as the performer worked in opposition with the audience, and I wanted there to be a chance of failure. As the performer, I would try to triumph above the abuse of the audience by effectively conveying my message above the yelling. However, as I performed, I played the persona of a shy, insecure transgender teen (attempting to channel some of who I was in high school, and even wearing a shirt that I wore more frequently in high school); this persona made the challenge more strenuous because the character was the kind of person who was less inclined to confidently raise their voice. I originally planned to pass the statements to every member of the audience (partially because I anticipated some audience members being reluctant to yell the statements I gave them, and partially because I wanted my task as a performer to be as difficult as possible), but Jonathan Rosenberg (my Introduction to Theater Making professor) discouraged me from doing this because he believed it would be too

hard for me to succeed. My instinct was to ignore this advice and to give statements to every member of the audience, but I decided to compromise and give statements to more audience members than Jonathan suggested, but still only about half of the audience. I did try to choose audience members I suspected may be more willing to hurl abuse at me though.

Based on the results of the final performance, I felt that I should have followed my instinct. My task was too easy. The audience members I gave statements to (for the most part) completely stopped yelling at me after I had read only a few sentences of my speech. It was a strange situation indeed: There was a certain degree of failure in how successful I was as a performer!

At the time I was developing my moderation piece, I became fascinated with the work of Andy Kaufman, particularly how he often fostered a subversive, confrontational relationship with audiences. In particular, an appearance he made on *The David Letterman Show* on October 15, 1980 inspired me. In the segment, Andy Kaufman appeared disheveled, claimed his wife took away his children and all his money, and then ended his appearance by begging the audience for money before someone removed him from the set. Throughout the monologue about his supposed troubles, the audience laughed, knowing that Andy was lying, and Andy scolded the audience for laughing at him, claiming he wasn't trying to be funny. Andy Kaufman's deliberately awkward and unprofessional demeanor throughout the segment encouraged me to explore how one could provoke a compelling relationship between audience and performer through a performance that on the surface appears incompetent. I was also intrigued by the idea of establishing an ambiguous relationship between the person I presented myself as in my performance, and the person I was in my everyday life; just as some people who watched Andy Kaufman on *The David Letterman Show* that day may have been uncertain how

much truth about his life he revealed in his monologue, I hoped that some people in the audience may have actually thought that the insecure, shy person I portrayed myself as in “Fix Society. Please,” was actually a true reflection of how I acted in everyday life. (And actually, truth be told, it wasn’t an entirely inauthentic portrayal of myself; I often can be very shy, particularly when interacting with people I do not know very well.)

My impulse to use performative failure in this piece undoubtedly relates to the notion of queer failure: “Within straight time the queer can only fail; thus, an aesthetic of failure can be productively occupied by the queer artist for the purpose of delineating the bias that underlies straight time’s measure. The politics of failure are about doing something else, that is, doing something else in relation to a something that is missing in straight time’s always already flawed temporal mapping practice,” (José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 173-174). In my piece about my feelings of hopelessness when faced with the suffering of my transgender siblings, I felt compelled to embrace the aesthetics of queer failure because my present (the present of “straight time” as José Esteban Muñoz called it—the reality of the queer in the here and now) offered no satisfying solutions to the problem of the transgender despair I knew so many transgender people experienced. The biases of “straight time” asserted that society had no fault in transgender despair and transgender suicide; it was transgender individuals’ own fault for not learning how to be comfortable in their “natural” bodies and their “natural” genders, or even if it wasn’t necessarily the fault of trans individuals, it was just the unfortunate, inevitable reality of the “mental illness” that was the “transgender delusion.” By attempting to portray the queer failure of a transgender teen attempting to combat the prejudices against the validity of transgender identities in straight time, I attempted to evoke a sense of hopelessness that demanded change, asserting a need to escape the prison of straight time!

About a year after I performed my moderation piece, I attempted stand-up comedy in the Zocalo student showings for the first time. Because I found success with queer failure in my moderation piece, I originally tried to create a stand-up persona that embodied queer failure aesthetics, taking inspiration from the queer failure of Jibz Cameron's character Dynasty Handbag (particularly in the short film "The Quiet Storm") and some aspects of the stand-up persona of Kyle Mooney's character Bruce Chandling. In Jibz Cameron's "The Quiet Storm," Dynasty Handbag fails to act "normally" in her environments, but at the same time, while part of what inhibits her are the self-critical voices in her head, because the environments she interacts with are conveyed through a deliberately amateurish chroma key effects, the video implies her surroundings and the characters she interacts with (and perhaps the society she lives in as a whole) share some of the blame for the inadequacy she feels. In Kyle Mooney's video "christmas special," when he performs stand-up comedy as his character Bruce Chandling, the failure not only comes from the cliché, unimpressive nature of his jokes, but also from moments where sadness overwhelms him, and he cannot maintain his cheerful stand-up persona. I was interested in exploring the discomfort of a comedian failing to channel their sadness into stand-up.

Ultimately, I believe that this first experience attempting stand-up in the student showings was not successful in a way I wanted it to be because the sense of hopelessness and pain I expressed in my stand-up persona lacked intention. The queer failure of my persona in "Fix Society. Please," reflected what José Muñoz referred to as a "hopeless hopefulness." He proclaims that the act of Dynasty Handbag flourishes "at this particular historical moment of hopelessness, letting us imagine...an escape from this world that is an insistence on another time and place that is simultaneously not yet here but able to be glimpsed in our horizon," (Muñoz, 183). In "Fix Society. Please," I had a clear objective of encouraging the audience to consider

how society might be changed to better accept and care for transgender people. But in that first showing of stand-up, I performed with an attitude that offered no hope of society improving its treatment of transgender people.

For my second time showing stand-up at the Zocalo student showings, I decided to simply focus on making my audience laugh. I began with a longwinded joke I knew most people in my audience would connect with about the “Guidelines for making safe and sustainable performances” the theatre department had recently announced. The premise of the bit consisted of me claiming that I had to completely change my idea for senior project because my original idea broke every guideline. I then proceeded to describe an absurd performance piece that, indeed, would have violated every single one of the guidelines, to the point of murdering animals onstage and burning down the Luma Theater. The piece seemed to evoke genuine laughter, which felt more satisfying than the discomfort I produced with my previous stand-up. I decided that even if I wanted to explore queer failure in stand-up comedy, it was important to still actually try to make the audience laugh with every joke I told.

DRINK THE BLOOD OF CHRIST. DON'T KILL TRANNIES!

When I start writing, I almost always find it helpful to start with some sort of structure. I had already started writing isolated comedy bits, but when I started piecing together a complete draft, I wanted to have an idea of what kind of arc I wanted the show to have. I found a preliminary structure when I decided I wanted to begin the show by parodying the anti-piracy PSAs I remembered seeing before movies I would watch as a kid. I was amused by the idea of downloading a file, something so easily duplicated and shared, being equated to theft. This

provoked me to think about theft as a broader concept. It felt like in many ways, capitalism seemed to frame issues of morality in terms of property and theft. I thought about different kinds of theft, and brainstormed six different types of theft that would act as the original six sections of my piece: 1) “You wouldn’t steal...a car?” 2) “You wouldn’t rob...a bank?” 3) “You wouldn’t steal...an identity?” 4) “You wouldn’t steal...a kiss?” 5) “You wouldn’t steal...an idea?” 6) “You wouldn’t steal...a movie?” For the first section, I tried to include bits that vaguely reflected the idea of “physical theft.” For the second through fourth sections, I tried to write bits that reflected the idea of “social theft.” For the fifth section, I wrote bits reflecting the idea of “intellectual theft.” And for the sixth section, I wrote bits with the idea of “spiritual theft.” This created a structure that started with bits that were generally more universal, then transitioned into bits that were more intellectual, and finally concluded with bits that reflected my personal fears.

As I wrote, there were three types of bits I began to feel the most passionate about. There were the bits about my experiences working at a bagel shop on my breaks, bits about my experiences with online dating, and bits about my experiences with Christianity growing up. The former two types of bits were bits that I figured would resonate with my audience (which I anticipated would be predominately Bard students). My favorite punchline came in one of the bits about online dating: “You said you were into humiliation! What’s more humiliating than going through the trouble of driving 200 miles and booking a hotel room only to get stood up by the person you wanted to fuck?” The bits about religion were bits that I felt reflected an important part of my identity as someone who was raised Christian and struggled with my queerness while having parents whose religious beliefs made them hesitant to accept my queerness. Also, I personally find religion to be a rich source of humor.

A few drafts later, I had mostly abandoned the six-part structure I began with, but there was still a similar arc. However, one significant addition was that the piece concluded with a voice-over intervention from God demanding a “sacrifice” to absolve myself of the sin of illegally downloading movies. This sacrifice involved me chugging an entire bottle of Coca-Cola. I performed this draft for my advisor, Jack Ferver.

“In the part where you’re describing the bad hook-ups, it’ll be funnier if you try to be really kind and genuinely curious about the men,” Jack said. “Right now you’re coming off as kind of mean, and that’s too obvious. It’ll be funnier if there’s more juxtaposition. Think Ellen DeGeneres.

“Also, the bit where you’re praying because you really need to take a shit. It’s confusing having it set in more than one place. It’ll be funnier if you’re trying to hold it, you don’t want to have to take a shit in the person-you-just-fucked’s apartment, but you can’t hold it, and you have to use his bathroom, but then...there’s no toilet paper!”

This bit was actually somewhat based on a true experience where I was amused to find myself instinctually inclined to pray as I really needed to take a shit while riding on public transportation. But now I realized the opportunity for more humor out of my humiliation if I kept the scene in the apartment of the person I was hooking up with; the stakes were higher! The audience would find the bit funnier if they empathized with my character in that situation, and they would be more likely to empathize with my character if they felt the fear and humiliation my character felt.

Since Jack recommended Ellen DeGeneres as a possible influence, I watched her stand-up special “One Night Stand.” I observed how she would say lines could have come off as harsh with a different delivery, but because she delivered them with a kind and cheerful demeanor,

there was a juxtaposition that allowed the harshness to come out in a way the audience didn't expect. I discovered that in performing my stand-up, I should embrace the role of the Fool: firstly, by trying to make sure I didn't come off as having any pretention of having any more knowledge than my audience, the audience would feel more comfortable laughing at my jokes because they wouldn't suspect any condescension; secondly, by embracing a certain degree of "innocence" and ignorance in my stand-up persona, I could express more of a sense of discovery, attempting to create the illusion that I was discovering the punchlines with my audience in the moment.

When Jack Ferver gives you feedback on a piece, he will almost always ask you, "What are you saying? And why are you saying it?" What I love about humor is that what you find funny can reveal a lot about you. People often enjoy laughing at things they fear because laughter can relieve that fear. Because many people fear what it means for someone to be transgender, both the fear of what it means to be attracted to someone who is transgender and the fear of what transgender identities mean for gender as a whole (and perhaps even fear of one's own discomfort with their gender), many people enjoy laughing at transphobic jokes. They enjoy laughing at the man who discovers, to his horror, that the woman he fucked is a "tranny." They enjoy laughing when transgender people are portrayed as "freaks" because it allows them to dismiss the legitimate struggles of transgender people and not question their own understanding of gender.

Comedy has the power to reinforce a person's prejudices. But it can also provide an outlet to discover one's own prejudices and can challenge people to question their assumptions about others. What jokes a person can find funny very much depends on what kinds of people they can empathize with. If I tell a story about a cisgender man who freaks out when he

discovers the woman he found attractive is trans, do you empathize with the cisgender man disgusted with the potential implications of this attraction, or do you empathize with the transgender woman who may fear the cisgender man will lash out with violence against her?

With my performance “Drink Coke. Don’t Steal Movies,” I wanted to prove that transgender people can be funny. Because if people feel comfortable laughing with transgender people, laughing out of empathy for transgender people instead of laughing at transgender people as objects, as merely punchlines, it may encourage them to consider perspectives different from their own.

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