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A Wee Bit Further over There: An Exploration into Offensive Comedy

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A Wee Bit Further Over There: An Exploration into Offensive Comedy

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2022

Dedication

To my family: Joe, Susan, and Margaret Reisert.

To my swim coach: John Weitz.

And to my friends: Adan Lawlor, Kristof Szabo, and all the friends I've spent this final year at Bard with. You know who you are.

I'd also like to dedicate this to the three comedians I wrote about. This will be online, and they're still alive, so there's a non-zero chance they'll read this which, if they do (and I hope they don't), I want them to know it's been a blast writing about their work.

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Introduction

One should never write about comedy. Now, you may be thinking something along the lines of; oh, that's just a joke, this is a senior project about comedy, wouldn't it be clever to start a project about comedy with a joke? Well, maybe, and I'm glad you think I'm so clever, but the sentiment is meant honestly: don't write about comedy. If you put academics who write about comedy and real comedians in a room together (which has happened), the academics will get lost in everything that revolves around jokes; why something's funny, or how something is funny, or what is the joke doing didactically? Meanwhile, the comedian will simply shrug and say, "It's just a joke, don't worry about it." But, regardless of which of these two groups you would rather pay attention to, comedy really only has one tenet; was the joke funny? Did someone laugh? If the answer is yes, then it counts. The joke is comedy and that's it. That is all that matters about a joke, everything on top of that is icing; it's fluff, it doesn't matter because that joke got a laugh.

Unfortunately there is a problem with that question about whether the joke is funny. What if the answer is no? That's when we ask; "was it meant to be funny?" This second question is somewhat tricky. Various literature nerds love to argue that "the artist is dead" which essentially means that to analyze a piece of art one only needs to worry about the effect that the art has on its audience and that audience is then allowed to ascribe to that piece of art whatever meaning it so chooses regardless the artist's intent. Comedy cannot be looked at in this way. Comedy needs to be interpreted for both its intent and effect. The subject of intent and jokes will be covered more later in this paper, but at the very least, this question allows us to define who is and isn't a comedian. Was the intent of the comedian to be didactic? Or to merely entertain? Jokes can do

both those things; it just depends on the joke. Comedians can do both, making both political jokes and poop jokes, and there are certainly stand-up specials filled with both types. But, if the point is only to be didactic, while thinking about the humor second, then that is the job of a politician, not a comedian. This is important if you're thinking about YouTube political commentators who refer to themselves as 'comedians.' Just because you identify as a comedian doesn't make you one. To be considered a comedian, you have to put the laughter of the audience above everything. Even political comedians, at least ones of whom I will talk about in this paper, put the humor first. The attempt at being funny is just as important as actually getting the laugh, even if the attempt doesn't make a single person laugh. But, for the purposes of this paper, I will only be talking about comedians who have published, featured stand-up specials. The benefit of limiting this paper to only stand-up comedians is that we can hear when the audience laughs. Stand-ups always record their specials in front of audiences, as opposed to just in a sound studio like an audiobook, so that those listening at home can hear the laughter and see the audience. Watching the special, one can see who's in the audience, hear which jokes get the laugh, and hear how much the audience laughs.

Hearing how much the audience laughs is important because not everyone will laugh at every joke. Just because you didn't laugh at something doesn't mean that it wasn't funny. This aspect of humor is the difficult, interesting, and confusing part of comedy that gets people like me so invested in writing about the art form. The only requirement of the art, laughter, is completely subjective. What makes someone laugh depends on what they know. Laughter is the receipt of understanding. It's the proof of purchase that indicates the audience member bought into whatever it was the comedian was joking about. If someone were to read Jane Austen and

not have the sense and sensibility of her time, then the humor in her work will go over that reader's head. Or, for another example, if you didn't laugh at that last sentence then you don't know that Jane Austen has a book named *Sense and Sensibility* making that last sentence, a really bad pun for which I am sorry. But, also, just because someone didn't laugh doesn't mean they didn't see the humor.

What I mean by "see the humor" is that one can hear a joke, be able to understand how it's a joke based on how it functions, while also not laughing. What the audience laughs at, aside from what they know, also depends on their taste and sensibilities. Not only does taste depend on the individual but so does sensibility, and sensibility also depends on the time. To be totally blunt, this is just a nice way of saying "offended." If an audience member hears a joke, doesn't laugh, but gets it, that probably means that person was offended by that joke (or maybe the joke just wasn't funny enough which is also possible). And what someone is offended by is also completely subjective. One of the comedians I'll talk about in this project once said in a special, "I'm offended by banality." His point was that boring and uninteresting art, or banal art, is useless which is why it bothers him, therefore he finds it offensive for wasting his time, but that opinion of taste is solely up to him. Everyone does this, deciding what they are or aren't bothered by, whether consciously (as he does) or subconsciously. Another comedian, Patrice O'Neal, once said rather off-handedly in a talk show, "a good joke should have half the audience laughing and the other half horrified." The point of humor isn't to horrify people, but the point is that it does happen and some comedians, including Patrice, feel as though offending people is inescapable.

There is a certain level of a universal taste which changes over time. What may not offend one generation of people, may greatly offend the next. This idea is sometimes reduced to

a common expression; comedy doesn't age well. I could pick any number of examples, but the one that I think works best is the movie *Blazing Saddles* by Mel Brooks. Out of everything that could and has been said about that movie, it really was the first movie to depict a fart. Farting was (seemingly) considered indecent (or maybe no one thought to put one on screen) to the point that it took the movie industry until 1974 to make the audiences hear one. It was not, however, the first movie to depict the N-word, but that's not why I'm bringing this movie up. I'm bringing it up because of a story that I've only been able to corroborate on a few "did you know" type websites, so believe it with a grain of salt. In the years after it was first shown in theaters, *Blazing Saddles* made its way onto TV screens. But, several networks found the farting to be indecent so tried cutting the scene. The scene proved too important, so the stations settled on censoring the farts all together by cutting the sound during it. If you watched that scene from your couch at home in the 1970s, you would've seen a bunch of cowboys, eating beans, standing up for a second, straining their faces, before sitting back down again, in complete silence. Yet, the N-word was never censored because those same stations were fine with it. To the networks, the N-words were fine; the farting was not. This wasn't even fifty years ago, and today's audience's would find that completely backward. No network or streaming service would ever dream of censoring a fart. They wouldn't censor the N-word either, but that would come with a viewer advisory warning. This fact is at first staggering, yet probably isn't too surprising when you think about it.

The idea that comedians have only been offending people for around fifty years is preposterous; it's been around for as long as comedy's been around. If the only thing jokes are trying to do is be funny, the unintended consequence that has plagued that goal forever is that

those same words which get laughs, also upset some people. There's an interesting phenomenon today that people think that "canceling" comedians is new. Calling it "canceling" is new, but humanity has always put jokes under the microscope of decency. Aristophanes was an ancient Greek playwright who lived between 446BC and 386BC. In several of his early plays, Aristophanes talks about a character named Kleonymos, a fat, lying, politician who gets mocked for throwing his shield away in battle. The act of throwing one's shield away shows extreme cowardice which is a really big deal, and a very offensive claim, in ancient Greek society. At the time in Athens, there was a very real military general named Kleonymos, who was in the middle of fighting in the Peloponnesian War. Kleonymos was definitely upset about this, and there is even evidence to support that Kleonymos publicly persecuted Aristophanes himself, although there's not enough evidence to support that Aristophanes was prosecuted. I wouldn't describe today's comedians as persecuted in that way, but I would say that they face a similar level of artistic criticism. When Chappelle released *The Closer* (2021), you could find articles by journalists rhetorically asking questions like; what subjects are ok to joke about, what is the responsibility of comedy, what is the point of writing these jokes right now? The ancient Athenians asked themselves those same questions back in their own time partially because of Aristophanes.

After more than 2000 years, we still find ourselves squeamish about a particular way we use words, asking ourselves the same broad questions about comedy. This means that I will definitely be able to answer all of those questions in the next sixty pages. I did mean that last sentence as a joke. If there's any takeaway from this introduction it is that this paper is about questions that can't be answered on a subject so tricky to write about that it appears that nobody

should. And what's worse, is that I'm writing this right before the end of the world. Whether it's nuclear war with Russia, or environmental meltdown from global warming, or a group of scientists who get a bit depressed one day and decide to use the Large Hadron Collider to form a black hole in Geneva, these realities make writing about comedy feel a bit useless. Still, here we are, 2000 years later, and we're no closer to answering such questions anyway; So, in the spirit of the expression "analyzing comedy is like dissecting a frog," let's go kill some frogs.

Chapter 1; Sincerely Funny

I'm not sure how or why or when this expression entered the public vocabulary, but, at least for my generation, we would describe the relationship I am about to write about as "beef." "Beef" can be defined as slang for a rivalry; it's the meaty animosity between two prominent figures (who, you could say are outstanding in their field) for one reason or another. A whole series of YouTube videos documents the various rivalries between famous athletes called "Beef History." But this paper isn't about athletes; it's about comedians. Hannah Gadsby and Dave Chappelle do not like each other. From the outside, they can look rather similar. Both are world-famous comedians, Both have deals with, and have released stand-up specials through, Netflix, and have made, along with their jokes, their own theories on comedy within their comedy. This means we have to ask the age old question; Where's the beef?

It's impossible to know just when their dislike for each other started. They're both world famous comedians so it's likely they've at least known about each other for a while, but, as far as I can tell, they've never met and hadn't spoken about each other until this year. Publicly, their beef began sometime in October, shortly after the release of Chappelle's 2021 special, *The Closer*. Many people, including Gadsby, slammed the special for being anti-trans. Gadsby, like most other critics of the special, took to social media. Gadsby went in on Netflix's CEO Ted Sarandos on Instagram writing "Fuck you and your amoral algorithmic cult" on October 15th, just ten days after the release of *The Closer*, due to being provoked by Chappelle's fans. Gadsby also commented, "yes I watched the whole thing. leave me alone." Ted responded on Twitter by, essentially, just asking Gadsby to not drag his name into someone else's work. Then, less than a

month after the special, Chappelle released a video on his Instagram addressing the controversy. Chappelle, during his explanation of his side of the controversy, went out of his way to ask his fans to “never call Hannah Gadsby funny,” which is really insulting for one comedian to say about another. But, Chappelle may have privately disliked her earlier because in his 2017 special *Equanimity*, He seems to reference her work. In her special she says, in a serious way, that she needs to quit comedy. In his special, he also says that he needs to quit comedy but because he’s “too goddamn funny.” This explosion of hatred from these two people seemed to most as coming only from the fact that Gadsby is a proud member of the LGBTQ+ community, identifying as non-binary they/them, and that Chappelle had just made jokes about this particular group. But for the keen nose, the stench of this aging beef had been wafting up from a deep basement meat locker for some time just waiting for someone to open the door. What I am referring to are their own particular, contradicting theories on comedy itself.

Going back to Gadsby’s statements on Instagram, they ended their statement with “I do shits with more backbone than you. That’s just a joke! I definitely didn’t cross a line because you just told the world there isn’t one.” Despite the fact that “I do shits with more backbone than you” is, indeed, an excellent joke, it’s meant with an unusual amount of irony and sarcasm. They’re upset that Netflix's CEO would allow for jokes like Chappelle’s to be shown on his platform. This take on Chappelle’s work is not at all surprising from Gadsby. In their own Netflix specials, essentially in their 2016 special *Nanette*, they outline their theory on comedy and the morality of telling certain types of jokes in front of such a sizable audience.

Gadsby believes in the omnipresent “line,” the envisioned boundary between what is or is not acceptable to say on stage. This idea comes from the belief that art has influence over an

audience. Those who see the art, hear these jokes, will come away with different points of view on that subject, or maybe, as some claim, go so far as to cause violence either toward others or themselves. The idea that “language is violence” is the primary concern of those who worry about crossing that line. Gadsby, in their aforementioned Instagram post about Chappelle’s special, expressed how Chappelle’s fans had been harassing them. Gadsby wrote, “Now I have to deal with more of the hate and anger that Dave Chappelle’s fans like to unleash on me.” Gadsby is facing the “hate and anger” of these fans because Dave crossed the line. On the other side of this idea of “the line”, are those people who don’t think the line exists at all. If one thinks that the line doesn’t exist, then they believe that comedy has no real influence over its viewers. I’ll talk more about this idea later. What someone who doesn’t believe in the line might say to Gadsby’s situation is probably that Dave’s fans were only talking about Gadsby at all because they are the most outspoken LGBTQ+ comedian there is. In articles after Gadsby’s Instagram post, journalists commented on how they, in particular, were singled out. Someone who doesn’t believe in the line would probably argue that Gadsby only got what they got from fans because of how outspoken they are on this specific issue. Regardless, Gadsby, as they have expressed in their work, does believe in the line of acceptability, and they joke accordingly.

Now, before I continue, there’s something that needs to be addressed. As of writing this paper, Dr. Hannah Gadsby identifies as non-binary, and, up until this point I have been referring to them as such. But, at the time of recording *Nanette*, Gadsby identified as a cis-gendered lesbian. This is important because, in this special, Gadsby tells stories referring to themselves as such. For the sake of clarity, I will be referring to Gadsby as she identified at the time of

recording the piece I will be writing about. It'll be easier, and more clear, to refer to them as "she" and their audience as "they" instead of using the same pronoun to describe both.

In her special *Nanette*, Gadsby talks at length on the art of comedy itself. As a person who's been performing comedy for so long, they've come to their own conclusions on the effect their words and art have had, not just on their audiences, but on themselves as well. They start by saying that they think they should quit comedy. First, they say "when I started doing the comedy, over a decade ago, my favorite comedian was Bill Cosby." This joke gets a laugh, because the audience knows that, in the past decade, the truth about what Bill Cosby has done to women has come to light. The point here is that Gadsby is telling the audience that the comedians of the past have failed her. That the people she used to respect are no longer deserving of that old respect. but, Gadsby brings up Cosby as the counterpoint to how she sees comedy today. Shortly after mentioning Cosby, she says "I built a career out of self-deprecating humor... And, I don't want to do that anymore. (Then they ask,) Do you know what self-deprecation means when it comes from somebody who already exists in the margins? It's not humility; it's humiliation." To Hannah, comedy is harmful and humiliating. Gadsby is directly comparing comedy itself to Cosby. Bill Cosby, a once beloved family, friendly man now understood to be incredibly evil and destructive and who needs to be forgotten. Comedy, she's arguing, is the same, once understood to be friendly, only to be realized now to be the destructive creature it is. What's interesting about this particular bit¹ is that while saying all these quotes, their audience isn't laughing, they're all applauding.

¹ When I use the word "bit" it describes a comedian's collection of jokes on a particular topic. If their work were written down, it would probably look like a paragraph, or maybe a short chapter. But, because this medium is the spoken word, we use the word bit.

In older specials, this would never seem to happen. People would either laugh at the comic's joke, or laugh while applauding if the joke was particularly funny and clever, but it was far less common to just applaud without laughing at all at a comic's not-funny, yet truthful statement. This is part of a really interesting trend in comedy now that I've noticed as a long-time fan. The comedian will say something that isn't funny but is just impossible to disagree with, just like Gadsby's not wanting to be humiliated anymore, and get a wild applause. I'm not sure why this is, but I personally don't like it because it makes the special seem more like a political rally than a comedy special. But in Gadsby's case, she isn't trying to be funny in that moment to begin with. Her intent is to use this special to make broader points about comedy that may not be heard any other way. What she's saying is worth saying, but it's the audience's reaction to it that's strange. Comics themselves have noticed this trend. During a recent panel about comedy², the comedians in it joked about the difference between the audience's laughter and applause. They never go into what the difference is (it's simple enough) but they continually make jokes at each other's expense when one of them gets an applause and not a laugh. At this panel, they committed to getting the laugh so much that getting applause was mockable. Maybe, Gadsby's audience wants her not to feel those negative emotions brought on by her own work, to empower her to speak her truth. Like most audiences, they want the comedian they're seeing to speak the truth, so they expect Gadsby to do the same.

One thing that Gadsby doesn't say, but does do, is use this humor's nature of humiliation, to get back at those who have humiliated them. It's like verbal retribution, Gadsby isn't going out in the world and beating up the person who beat them up in the same way; they're getting on

² An episode of the Glenn Loury Podcast, taped at NYC's Comedy Cellar on March 23rd, 2022.

stage and telling thousands of people in the theater (and hundreds of thousands more online) that the person who assaulted them is an asshole. For example, early in the special, after cracking one joke, Gadsby says “[a joke] was written, you know, well before even *women* were funny.”

Gadsby emphasizes the word “women” in order to get the laugh. Gadsby understands that most people know the common stereotype held by most male comedians is that women aren’t funny. Gadsby repeats this lie, adds their own emphases to the phrase, and this gets a laugh because, to point out the obvious, she is a woman. It’s her use of emphasis on the word “women” that makes this a joke. What’s important here is that this is an example of her using humor to fight back at male comedians of the past. She has her audience laughing at a stereotype that many male comedians believe. This joke is just one example of how aggressive Gadsby’s comedy is toward those male comedians she doesn’t like. She goes on after that joke by doing a fake impersonation of a generic male comedian. The bit is about how comedians have not understood why lesbians don’t laugh at their jokes. They say, as the male comedian, “what you need is a good dicking!... Drink some jizz!” Gadsby is, more or less, saying that male comedians have responded in this way when women don’t laugh at their jokes. At about minute seventeen, when Gadsby makes this comment, she gets the audience’s laughs because it’s over the top, it’s sarcastic. The audience understands that this sarcasm is coming from a degree of truth, but the presentation and phrasing are hyperbolic and, therefore, gets the laugh. Much later in the special, Gadsby starts talking about why men don’t like her comedy. She jokes about men often and Gadsby explains that she feels as though the men aren’t laughing at their bits. She can probably see this too, standing on stage looking out over her audience. So their advice to men is, “what you need is a good dicking!... Drink some jizz!” It’s a powerful reversal of this already wild statement. By

taking this inappropriate remark and using it back on those who bullied them to begin with, Gadsby creates a biting satire. Gadsby's using this inappropriate remark to get back at those who bullied her and humiliate them in a way that she probably sees as righteous, as if she's getting her justice. This joke gets a wild applause, a much larger one than the first time they use that punchline. The audience laughing at all this, and at every joke mentioned so far, is, as it seems, as diverse as one could hope an audience to be; because they're mostly white women.

This bit about the laughter of men shows Gadsby's acute understanding of comedy because of how she uses repetition. Gadsby repeats the same punchline, but, when it's said a second time, it's even funnier. This is classic comedic form. Philosophers have written about comedy since Plato but, often, comedy was never the primary idea that they wrote about. What's credited as being the oldest book that is entirely about comedic form is Henri Bergson's *Laughter* (1900). In it, he writes abouts comedic repetition. Even he describes repetition as "classic comedy" more than a hundred years ago! The second way this bit show's Gadsby's knowledge of comedy is her understanding of comedy's power.

One of the oldest ideas of comedy is that when people laugh, they laugh "at" something or someone. In *Philebus*, Plato writes a dialogue between Socrates and Protarchus. During the conversation, Socrates argues that in comedy there is a blending of pleasure and pain in comedy. Socrates says, "and pleasure in the misfortunes of a friend is an effect of malice.... thus the conclusion is that when we smile at a friend's absurdities, once more we are blending pleasure with malice, or in other words, with pain." They're arguing that laughter comes from a place of scorn. Plato doesn't call this idea the "superiority theory," but it's one way we talk about 'laughter as scorn' today. I couldn't find in my research where this expression comes from

specifically, but all evidence supports that it came about sometime during the last century. One of Superiority Theory's most modern proponents is Roger Scruton. Scruton described laughter as "attentive demolition" and wrote, "If people dislike being laughed at, it is surely because laughter devalues its object in the subject's eyes." The theory is that laughter comes at the expense of someone or something else. Gadsby is shedding light on that when comedians use humor, they're aware of bringing that pain to whatever they're making fun of.

Gadsby explained earlier in her special about how she doesn't want to use humor's ability to humiliate people, like herself, who've already been humiliated by comics. Yet, she seems more than willing to unleash that power on those who, in the past, have been the bullies to people like her. Immediately after the bit about men not laughing, she begins to talk about laughter itself. The bit begins with the joke, "People say laughter is the best medicine. I reckon Penicillin might give it a nudge." This gets a noticeable laugh from the audience, while also setting the tone for her thoughts on comedy because this joke is about the misconception that people have about comedy. After that joke, she began talking about her theory on the joke itself. Gadsby explains, "When you strip it back to its bare essentials... a joke is simply two things... a set-up and a punch line... a question with a surprise answer." Gadsby goes on to explain further that the set-up creates tension, while the punchline releases that tension through laughter. For Gadsby, all that the comedian is doing is creating and releasing tension. But to her, this creation of tension, this forcing of an idea on an audience, is abusive. She says, explicitly, while pointing simultaneously at themselves and the audience, "This is an abusive relationship." Gadsby explains that this abuse is two-fold. First, as explained, it's abusive toward the audience. What if the audience didn't come to the show to be made uncomfortable? Yet, the comic forces them to

be anyway? Gadsby has mentioned many times by this point in *Nanette* that she feels that she's been made fun of in the past by comedians, and this idea she's bringing up, is that she doesn't want to continue doing that. She doesn't want to cause the pain she's felt. Secondly, there is the hatred of the release.

To Gadsby, the release of laughter is the failure to recognize the truth of the moment. What's meant by this, is that Gadsby is concerned that the audience will laugh at something without understanding the real emotional impact of the moment. Gadsby wants the audience to feel an emotional impact, not simply laugh at the story. There's two examples of this. The first, from around minute thirty-nine, occurs when she's talking about the moment her mother apologized to them. Gadsby and her mother had a rocky relationship, one that Gadsby talks about during the show. But to her, the most important moment in their relationship was when her mother evolved and apologized for trying to raise her as if she was straight. Her complaint about comedy is that this moment of sincerity between a mother and her daughter can never be funny. Now, Mother/daughter relationships (or more broadly, parent/child relationships) can be funny, for example the movie *Lady Bird* (2017) which explores this particular type of relationships in a hilarious way, but Gadsby's point is on the level of the sincere. The truth of her story is that she and her mother shared a sincere moment, and, in comedy, according to Gadsby, one cannot be both sincere and funny. Therefore Gadsby is intentionally not going for a laugh instead, going for the truth. It's moving, and during the show when she's telling this story, the audience is perfectly silent. This moment isn't funny, nor should it be, according to Gadsby, nor is Gadsby trying to be. That's the point, and the audience is proving it. They break it down, almost mathematically, by saying, "A story needs three parts: A beginning, a middle, and an end. A joke only needs two

parts: a beginning and a middle.” Those two parts do not leave room enough for the storyteller to be completely sincere. Jokes are incomplete stories, and she’s trying to tell honest stories.

The second example is definitely similar, it’s about the failure of comedy to reach a certain depth of emotion but, instead of sincerity between mother and child, it’s about the loneliness felt after suffering. Toward the end of the special, at about an hour in, she goes back to a story from the middle about a man she argued with about Vincent Van Gogh. At this point, they reveal the end of the story which is: the man assaulted her. When she’s done telling the story, and explaining that she was beat-up solely because of her gender, Gadsby says “And this tension, it’s yours. I am not helping you anymore. You need to learn what this feels like because this... this tension is what not-normals carry inside of them all of the time.” Gadsby wants the audience to hear their story, to feel their story as they have lived it. And it wasn’t at all funny to her, and by joking about it, the audience would not be able to feel the story as Gadsby wants them to. At the very end of the special, they restate this point, they say, “I must quit comedy. Because the only way I can tell my truth and put tension in the room is with anger... but what I don’t have the right to do is spread anger... because anger, much like laughter, is infectious.” She never specifically mentions “angry comics” but it seems that this point is an explanation as to why Gadsby sees them as problematic. Gadsby wants the audience to feel her story, make them understand, while not forcing them to feel her anger as well.

The last point that she makes, or at least the last one I’ll discuss now, is that comedy is “low-brow.” Gadsby juxtaposes comedy with art history, the degree she received after finishing college. The difference according to her is “High art, that’s what elevates and civilizes people... Comedy? Lowbrow. I’m sorry to inform you, but nobody here is leaving this room a better

person. We're just rolling around in our own shit here, people." It makes sense that this would be Gadsby's opinion. To go back to the power of humiliation in comedy, that is what she sees comedy is doing. It brought her down as a lesbian, and now she's using it to bring down the people that made her life worse. It's that notion of using words to degrade people that makes this art low-brow. There are classical examples of this theory as well. Going back to aristotelian times, Aristotle wrote, "Comedy is, as we have said, an imitation of characters of a lower type—not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly." He isn't exactly saying, "rolling around in our shit," but he is referring to comedy as ugly and an imitation of the "low." To Aristotle, Stories, tragedies and comedies are merely imitations of the real world. He writes, "The same distinction marks off Tragedy from Comedy; for Comedy aims at representing men as worse, Tragedy as better than in actual life." Gadsby, maybe at one point, tried to use comedy to represent people as better but is arguing in this stand-up special that she has given up. She can escape this theory of comedy.

It would be easy to write so much more about the points Gadsby makes in this special, but it's about so much more beyond comedy. It's about the arrogance of men, the patriarchy, the power of storytelling, and too much more to mention here. Outside of the bits about her mother, and even the one about Van Gogh, the stories told in this special about men; either men who've physically abused or male figures in history that are known to have abused women but seemingly get a pass (i.e. Picasso). The last ten minutes of this special aren't funny, they come across as a very moving piece of prose. Gadsby begins the special by saying that she doesn't want to do comedy, and by the end of it she isn't really. She's doing spoken word performance art with a couple of laughs thrown in. Gadsby uses a lot of inflection, raising her voice in both volume and

pitch toward the middle of the sentence before lowering both while making the intense point. Gadsby also will hold for a dramatic pause before getting to the next word, which forces the audience into a contemplative silence. I can't put my finger on any more than these examples, but I've been to church a lot in my life and those ten minutes sound like a really well written sermon.

I think it's intentional that they never explicitly separate the difference between the power of comedy and the power of men, but there is a difference. Comedy only reaches so far. Most of the men they talk at length about aren't comedians. She does mention Cosby, but she explicitly mentions the various men who abused them, and Picasso, and Van Gogh (although Van Gogh is praised, unlike the others mentioned). But to look at all the thoughts as comedy, they still work. If one were able to count laughter, this special certainly would have a smaller laugh count than most, but Gadsby still has their audience laughing throughout the special. Toward the end, in the last few minutes, when Gadsby is really in the meat of her conclusion, she says, "Laughter is not our medicine. Stories hold our cure. Laughter is just the honey that sweetens the bitter medicine." This line, this thesis of comedy, she concludes on, is an incredibly succinct formulation of all her points. Throughout the special, when she's done telling some dark story or saying some uncomfortable truth, they still get to a joke. She still makes the audience laugh. For example, toward the end, after a long moment of rallying the audience to applaud their strength as a re-built woman, Gadsby says, "to the men in the room, who feel I may have been persecuting you this evening... well spotted." It's a condescending little joke, but it's still a joke. The joke defuses the tension in the crowd so that Gadsby can continue and make whatever point she was trying to make with the joke.

As mentioned before, Gadsby makes the point of what distinguishes jokes from stories. To her, the more important are stories because stories allow for a far more honest expression of emotion. But, ironically, in this special, Gadsby will still tell jokes during her stories. By the end of the story, they won't joke any more, but they'll joke in the beginning and middle of it. For example, in the middle of the special, they joke about how a male audience member confronted them after a show with some very big misunderstandings of Van Gogh. It comes across as light and funny. They make this man look silly with how little he really understands about the painter. Much later in the special, Gadsby revisits this story. They explain how that story really ends with that man assaulting them. It's the dark truth, to the funny set-up. It's the humor of the beginning that gets the audience wrapped into the story, so that when they reveal the dark end, the audience can't help but listen. This style of storytelling, and this use of humor, is used by the novelist Chuck Palahniuk. Palahniuk explained in a recent podcast how he uses humor in a similar way. He said, "You're creating tension and you're resolving it very quickly and you're allowing people to sort-of build a greater and greater tension because they're trusting you more and you're getting in under their radar because you're gradually assuring them that you're never going to take them too far and then once they're completely on board then you take them too far. And you completely break their hearts when they're deepest in the story." This is what Gadsby is doing with their use of humor in storytelling. The purpose is so that the audience will listen long enough to get to the dark part of the story, and the purpose of the dark part of the story is to give the audience something to relate to. The feelings of shame and powerlessness are hard to talk about and reconcile, but it's made easier when someone else tells their story of experiencing those emotions too. Gadsby says toward the end of the special, "What I would have done to have

heard a story like mine... not for money, or power, but to feel less alone.” Gadsby wants to give the audience the stories she wanted to hear, hoping that they recognize and connect to the story. Palahniuk echos this point in the podcast, he says, “I enjoy [these stories] because they prove I’m not the only one. I’m not the only one that’s had these moments of complete humiliation or complete powerlessness.” This feeling of connection to the story that Palaniuk and Gadsby strive for is as old as comedy. In Aristotle’s poetics, it reads “Besides which, the most powerful elements of emotional interest in Tragedy- Peripeteia or Reversal of the Situation, and Recognition scenes-” This quote does refer to tragedy and not comedy, but it still fits, because Palaniuk and Gadsby are, more or less, using comedy as tool to get the audience to the tragic point in their stories.

In 1945, George Orwell wrote an essay, *Funny, but not Vulgar*, where he wrote about comedy and how it succeeds. He writes, “A thing is funny when — in some way that is not actually offensive or frightening — it upsets the established order. Every joke is a tiny revolution.” This comment means two things. First, we can ask every joke, “what is this revolting against?” And, second, we can ask, “what happens after the revolution?” By this logic, then, the very existence of this special is undercut by irony. As much as Gadsby says that she wants to quit comedy, for the many reasons mentioned, she also uses comedy in all the ways that Orwell thinks one should. If a ‘standard’ piece of successful comedy is one that’s boundary pushing and transgressive then this special is a successful piece of standard comedy. Gadsby both gets laughs and is also very clearly pushing against the patriarchy, the men who have abused Gadsby herself, and against comedy. Now, let’s use one of Gadsby’s jokes to answer those questions as an example. Going back to Gadsby’s joke, “to the men in the room, who feel I

may have been persecuting you this evening... well spotted.” To answer the first question, what is being revolted against here is two-fold; one, the tension in the room, and, second, the assumed arrogance of the men in the room. To ask the second question, What happens after the revolution? The audience now is ready to hear whatever, probably uncomfortable, thing that Gadsby has to say. Like the metaphor of laughter being the honey to the story's medicine, that's what the joke is doing, it's making the audience ready and comfortable to hear the things they are (usually) not ready for and are uncomfortable with. If comedy can be used to humiliate people (as I've already written about), it can be used to humiliate the dark ideas and aspects of life. Comedy is what makes the darkness in life palatable, and that's where this special shines. Gadsby is asking us to look at things we don't want to look at, but gives us just enough humor to find it palatable to the audience.

What I've done over these paragraphs is put Gadsby's ideas about comedy into the context of the history of literary writing on comedy. Stand-up is a relatively new form of comedy, Aristotle and Plato were writing about comedic plays filled with actors and dancers, not one person simply standing alone with a microphone in front of a crowd. Sure, its roots can be traced farther back, but stand-up as modern audiences know it really came into being in the middle of the last century with comics like Lenny Bruce. Because of this form, audience's directly contribute to the art itself. Not only is the difference between laughter and applause important to the comedian, but the fact that they (the comedian) are the only mediator between the audience and their ideas: They are alone in the face of the court of public opinion. This means that whatever the didactic reason for the joke is, whatever the unintended consequences may be, all of the onus is on that comedian alone. Gadsby takes this responsibility very seriously

and shapes their³ role as a comedian within that context. Gadsby has defined their role as a stand-up as one that speaks truth to the power of the patriarchy and to provide the stories of their life to the audience so that they may recognize their own stories within Gadsby's. Gadsby is painfully aware of how the audience is impacted by the jokes, and jokes accordingly.

³ In reference to Gadsby, going back to their preferred, correct pronouns.

Chapter 2; Fighting like a Lion to be a Lamb

I advertised at the beginning of the last chapter that this paper would be about beef, and it still very much is. That chapter was about Gadsby's side and now for the opposite side: Dave Chappelle. Right now, Dave is very much "the guy" in stand-up comedy. One could write a paper longer than this one about who the greatest comedian of all time is and, I'm not trying to get into that debate, but Dave certainly is a contender of that title, like it or not. When this beef with Gadsby began, most headlines about it were asking who Gadsby was at all, while assuming their readers had heard of Dave. But, going back to the beef, Dave is certainly the one who cast the first stone. In early October 2021, Chappelle released a special called *The Closer*. This special came, not only at the end of his contract with Netflix⁴, but at the end (or the end for now, anyway) of his artistic evolution, Whereas Gadsby's *Nanette* was only the first of two Netflix specials.

An anecdote of this evolution can be seen in the titles of his specials. His second special, released in 2004, is titled *For What It's Worth*. It's a good title, for what it's worth, because it captured his general attitude of 'these are my thoughts on what's going on right now, but I'm a comedian so take that as you will.' It means that he has something to say but he's not sure if he cares if you don't listen. One of his newer specials, released in 2017, is called *The Bird Revelation*. This title accomplishes so much more than the 2004 special because it has a double meaning. Its first meaning is that it's a reference to the special's epigraph "I came alive. I could fly" which is attributed to Charlie "Bird" Parker. This means that the revelation is, literally,

⁴ After *Chappelle Show* (2003-2006), Dave took an over decade-long hiatus from comedy, not publishing any work until his first two Netflix specials were published in 2017. This creates two distinct areas in his career and, when I refer to a special being "newer," that simply means it's newer than 2017.

“Bird’s” revelation because it was the revelation of a man called Bird. The second meaning comes from a bit Chapelle does within the special. In the bit, he talks at length about a book called *Pimp: Story of my Life* (1967). This book is the autobiography of a man called Iceberg Slim who was a pimp in the 1930s-50s. Chapelle uses stories from the book to describe how our capitalist society ‘pimps’ workers, while relating it to his own struggle, how he felt ‘pimped’ by and in show business. In the book, the characters who Chapelle is relating to are mostly women who are the victims of the pimp. The pimps would refer to women as “birds.” Chapelle is directly comparing his own revelation to leave show business (which he did in dramatic fashion back in 2005) to the same revelation of the women, or “birds,” who get out of being pimped as described in the book through the title of the special itself.

The shift in title complexity highlights the more formal shift of the complexity in his material. In the early work, like in *For What It's Worth*, he maintains the form of comedy developed (mostly) by Pryor which is to play with overtly binary stereotypes. Jokes where the humor is found by showing the difference between stereotypical white people and stereotypical black people or stereotypical men and stereotypical women. Jokes where the humor lies between the absurd difference between the behaviors of two opposite groups. Even in this special, though, Chapelle goes about exploring this in more compelling ways than compared to his first special. I’ll get to examples of this later, but generally, he develops the style. He goes from saying outright “white people do X, black people do Y ” into something more subtle. There’s one bit in the second special where it appears to be Chapelle merely recounting a story where he was in the car which his white friend was driving. But, he uses the bit to explore how he (the black man,

obviously) reacts differently to this situation than his white friend. The binary stereotypes are still there, only slightly less obvious, being used in the same way as before.

In his later specials, he breaks from this formula, partly because it's more compelling, but also because he can't use it anymore. In the old specials, his jokes relayed on the audience seeing him and thinking of him as the black stereotype. Like, in the bit where he and his friend are pulled over, that only works because he's seen as the stereotype. The problem in the later specials is that audiences just can't see him that way any more because he's too famous. The audience knows who he is and what his story is. The problem of "being too famous" has ruined comedians' careers because when they reach that point they don't know how to develop their act into something fitting their new fame. I know this happened to Eddie Murphy, after his two massive specials he never really did stand-up again, but this is a subject worth diving into more later (although, I will say, this is something Louis C.K. started fighting with before being 'me too-ed.' In his specials he would actively deny his fame and wealth to maintain an "everyman image"). But Chapelle doesn't fall into this at all. He develops his act, and embraces his new identity.

This is why, in his new bits, he can't be the black stereotype anymore. A good example of this is in his special *The Age of Spin*, (the first of the new specials) he does a bit where he's in the passenger seat of a car again that gets pulled over, but this time he and his friend are both black. Chapelle starts by admitting they were both scared. This gets the laugh because he states the recognizable stereotype in a different way. He then, in his next sentence claims "Not my fear. I'm black, but I'm also Dave Chapelle." This works because he manages to both maintain his blackness but also showing his fame. It doesn't come across as arrogance because he doesn't

outright say he's famous, he's recognizing the audience's intelligence by just saying his own name. He knows that we know that he's famous. The humor is no longer in the old, usually binary between races, but in the more subtle binary between a famous black man and a not famous black man. If humor is found in the difference between two things then this bit uses two things that are usually separated. And throughout this bit, once the cops recognize Dave Chapelle, he states, "we gettin' out of this shit" while buttoning up his jacket. It's funny because it's the unexpected response to getting pulled over and questioned by the cops, but also is grounded in reality because it's how Dave Chapelle would be talked to by the cops as a celebrity. The twist comes when his friend is actually arrested by the cops and Chapelle is left in the car, which is when he returns to being an 'everyman.' He says "and I thought what *anyone* would think in that situation. What (comedic pause) is going to happen to me?" This is funny because it's arrogant, but on an everyman's level of arrogance. Anyone would think that, not just a famous celebrity. The bit turns into just his encounter with the cops once he asks the cops if he can drive himself home, despite his driver refusing to take the Breathalyzer. The tension here hinges on the fact both the cop and Dave know his fame in the story, so the cop is unsure what to do, while Dave remains casual. He shows this by referring to the cop in the story as the n-word, which most people wouldn't do. But it's also funny when Dave asks for the keys to the car from the cop, because that's what most people would want to do in that situation, but only the fictionalized version of Chapelle has the confidence to ask. The peak of the tension in the story is when Chapelle decides he would take the breathalyzer just to see if he would pass, and the relieving, final punchline of the bit comes when it turns out the Chapelle was high and that weed doesn't show up on the breathalyzer. (This bit also only really works for audiences that are okay

with weed. Someone who doesn't think that weed is safer than alcohol would not find Dave driving away stoned that funny). You can see that the humor of this comes from unexpected actions and reactions to his fame, which is new for him and is generally unexpected for any comedian to do. Comedians don't want to embrace their fame because it's an unrecognizable situation for the audience, but because Chappelle holds on to his identity as black man, suspicious of cops and the authorities, while adding into it his own flavor, he can do what most comedians can't while still getting the laughs.

This all goes to show where Chappelle was artistically, going into the release of *The Closer*, but it doesn't explain why that last special created so much beef with another comedian. It started beef, because of the trans jokes, and the reception of those jokes. Earlier, at the end of the chapter on Gadsby, I wrote that the only thing about comedy that's changed since the dawn of time was the form of stand-up itself. That's kind-of a lie, it's a half-truth. The other thing that's changed is the internet. Never before has the audience had such a powerful platform to talk back to the comedian's work. Who cares if 95% of the audience laughs? If the person in row 17 seat 10 decides that they didn't like it, that person can go to Twitter and rally people who weren't even at the performance into a wrathful fervor against the comedian. Gadsby is aware of all these realities, and *Nanette* was, in some ways, a product of this. For Chappelle, it meant that his audience could go onto twitter and tweet in the thousands their dislike for the jokes. According to Gadsby, Chappelle's fans went to them online to talk about the jokes, which is why they commented on his special in Instagram in the first place. That's how the beef was started. But this explanation of why the beef was started, doesn't really cover the scope as to why *The Closer* was such a big deal.

It was a big deal because it meant that Chappelle was “canceled.” I put that in quotations because there’s some debate on how true that really is. Before the internet, no comedian had ever been “canceled” as we know it. Comedians were actually persecuted, Think back to the intro chapter about Aristophanes being persecuted by Kleon. To be “canceled,” in the modern definition, I would say, is when a mass of people online influences how/where a comedian does their business and how they make their money. But, being canceled for a joke is pretty rare. Most of the time when people think of canceled comedians they think about Louis C.K. or Bill Cosby. Neither of them were canceled because of a joke, they were canceled because of crimes they committed which were revealed over the internet. You can still call them “canceled,” the internet did influence where they conduct their business, but a lot of that feels justified over what they did and what they were canceled for, which has nothing to do with comedy. Chappelle, however, was only sort-of canceled. The special itself was never taken off Netflix, and Netflix signed Dave to help produce another show *Dave Chappelle’s Home Team* (2022). He was influenced because most streaming services, including Netflix, refused to show the documentary he made during the summer of 2020 about what he did during the pandemic. Yet, he still managed to show the world the movie by touring it around to large arenas. I managed to attend one of these shows back in November and, believe me, it’s possible streaming services didn’t want to show it because it wasn’t all that good anyway. The most interesting part of this showing, though, was when Dave Chappelle himself walked on stage. He walked out and casually said, “Week five of being canceled is going... ok.” It’s fine, to me, for him to think that he was canceled, but it is deeply ironic for him to say that in front of a crowd of thousands of people all cheering wildly for him. But, regardless if you think he was canceled or not or if you were upset with the jokes or not, it

doesn't change the fact that Chappelle made jokes which talked about the subject of sexuality, and gender expression. This paper isn't meant to persuade you to not be offended by the jokes, you're welcome to be as offended as you like. This paper is meant to argue that he was allowed, that he had the right, to make those jokes in the first place.

As for the jokes themselves from *The Closer*, it's impossible to write about them, without talking about where they came from because they didn't come out of nowhere. This may have also influenced the reception of the special; people were anticipating the jokes from the beginning. This even predates Chappelle's beef with Gadsby, which is really the shank cut of beef, to the larger controversy between Chappelle and the whole LGBTQ+ community.

It all begins back with one of the first of the new Netflix specials called *The Age of Spin* (2017). In it, about a third to half way through, Chappelle does his first bit about trans people and the only one in the show. The bit starts with Chappelle talking about Manny Pacquiao who had just made horrible comments about gay people. Chappelle's point is, generally, that he understands why Gay people are mad. He says, "I understand why gay people are mad, and I empathize. You know what? I'm just telling you as a black dude, I support your movement, but if you want some advice from a Negro, pace yourself. These things take awhile. Just because they passed a law doesn't mean they're gonna like it. *Brown vs. Board of Education* was in 1955, somebody called an [expletive] in traffic last Wednesday." If you think about this purely as a joke, it makes a lot of sense within the Incongruity theory. This is the idea that people laugh when two ideas make enough sense that they can see why they are connected but far enough in distance that it doesn't make sense. According to an article on humor, it states that the first philosopher to talk about using the word "incongruity" to describe humor was James Beattie,

who was a contemporary of Kant who's more famous for writing about this subject despite not having used that particular word. In his *Critique of Judgement* (1790) Kant wrote, "Laughter is an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing" (Kant 199). The argument here is that it doesn't matter where the tension is, as long as there's an expectation and a break from expectation. In this joke, the expectation is that Americans can handle equality, like with the court case, but it's undercut by the truth that Americans are still racist. I don't really understand who's being made fun of here, in terms of the Superiority Theory talked about in the last chapter, but we can certainly see humorous tension. The tension is the incongruity, and this joke has that tension. But, to think about the joke, not as a joke, but as a point, it's not insulting. Or, more importantly, it's not meant to be insulting. I'm in no real position to say what is and isn't actually insulting, I'm not a member of either community he's talking about, but I can say, based on his language what he meant, and this wasn't meant to be insulting.

That's how this bit starts, and eventually he brings it around to trans people specifically. He talks about "the letters" and then says, "'T' should stand for: tough road ahead." But this is the part that people were (probably) troubled by. That came later, when Dave started talking about the birth of Caitlyn Jenner. He says "Is this a time in American history when Americans can make a decision for themselves, and even though other Americans don't understand it, they'll support it?... if it is, then good for America (applause). That's Dave Chappelle, the American. Although, Dave Chappelle, The Black American, he was a little jealous? How the fuck are transgendered people beating black people in the discrimination olympics? (laughter)" I have no real proof, but I think this is the part that made people upset, and the few jokes that followed this one. The point that ends up being made is that trans people haven't suffered as

much as the african american community. I don't think Chappelle is trying to use the Superiority theory to make fun of the trans community, I think he's using the incongruity theory to make the audience laugh at the differences between the two. He, in the joke, separates and compares how on one hand he's happy that Caitlyn was embraced, but on the other hand he's showing jealousy. I think this joke falls into a modern logical trap.

This is a more modern trend that I've noticed recently, I don't really have any proof to back it up, but people love to have been the person that has suffered more. Suffering denotes a certain amount of value. Everyone loves to see, and be, the underdog who struggled their way to the top. It's far more noble to have earned something through a trial than to just be given something. I see my peers in school do this, everyone will downplay whatever advantages they were given growing up because no one wants to be the privileged one. The problem with this is that you can't compare suffering. Every athlete I've ever spoken to says that their sport is the hardest because it's the only sport they've ever known. And, what makes it worse, is that when I say that swimming is the hardest sport, someone who's done any other sport will be upset because it lessens their struggle, it lessens their value. So, when Dave Chappelle compares the struggling of Black Americans to the LGBTQ+ Community, it seems as though he's downplaying the struggle gay people have gone through to get to where they are. Fortunately, there isn't a way to tell what Dave's real intent was.

This is one of the unsolvable problems of comedy; intent matters, and there's no way of looking into the comedian's soul to see and understand what they truly meant. The audience is only given the artist's imperfect words. This bit, from *The Age of Spin*, should be under more scrutiny than any other trans jokes that Chappelle has told because they weren't prompted by

anything, he just said them. Every other bit about this subject is in response to the outrage this bit caused. Every other bit about the gay community has, at the very least, the intent of responding to outrage that is, more or less, out of his control. This means that I can't tell you if Dave was trying to make some broad political argument about the gay community or if he was going for a simple, mundane, laugh. But, I'd wager that he would say he was doing the latter.

If nothing else, Dave Chappelle loves to swim in the sea of ambiguity between the coasts of "just joking" and "heavy political arguments." This makes it impossible to tell what he's trying to do within each individual bit but, when talking about comedy generally, he will always say that he's always just joking, and he's not the only comedian to do this. Comedian Andrew Schultz at a recent panel about comedy in today's world and was asked by an audience member, "There seems to be a bit of a contradiction: you want to say that comedy has the power to challenge power, and then you want to say that it's just jokes. Maybe 'contradiction' is too strong but there's a tension there I was hoping you'd address." Schultz responded, "It's just jokes. Stop trying to make it more than that, it's just jokes. Leave it up to intellectuals and journalists to write all these think pieces to make us seem better than that. We're just trying to be funny, and if you're out here trying to be more than just funny... you're probably not that funny." This quote alone may lead you to think that Schultz is always on the coast of "just joking" (to return to my earlier metaphor), but he too makes a cheeky comment later in the same panel about not wanting to reveal too much. I think what he was referring to was his own writing process. That when he, as he thinks other comics do, sits down to write his material, he doesn't think of it as anything more than "just a joke." he doesn't sit down to write some heavy political argument. Yet, it's much too naive to simply believe that when he does find himself writing something political, he

doesn't think about the effect at all. Whatever he may think while writing it, he still needs to get up on a stage, look the crowd in the eye, and tell the joke. But comedians know what they're doing when they choose to say the joke on stage. Before starting his bit about gay people in *Age of Spin*, Chappelle says "here we go, here comes the deep water," before making a face imitating that of a diver.

In Chappelle's next special after *The Age of Spin*, *Equanimity* (2017), he addressed his controversy he said that his intent was that he was "just fuckin' around." Before he even gets to that line, Dave talks about how he doesn't understand why the trans community doesn't like him. Dave says, "It's tough, man, I don't know what to do about it 'cause I like them. Always have, never had a problem with them." What Chappelle does instead is go further into the issue. He digs into why he wants to joke about them at all, he says, "I've never seen a group of people in such a hilarious predicament, and not have a sense of humor about it. It's funny when it's not happening to you." That last line is the crux of the problem for Chappelle. Comedy, and what's funny, often depends on one's perspective. Chappelle doesn't just confront it in *Equanimity*, but it's the idea that he brings his next special, *The Bird Revelation*, with. He says, "Sometimes the funniest thing to say is mean." the audio of him saying that happens over a black screen, before you even see Chappelle himself, almost like it's the epigraph of the stand-up special. The quote continues, "It's a tough position to be in. So I say a lot of mean things, but you gotta remember, I'm not saying them to be mean, I'm saying them to be funny. and everythings funny until it happens to you." This is the inner conflict of Dave Chappelle, and every comedian like him, trying to be funny, trying to bring joy to the audience, while rationalizing the fact that they're also being a little mean.

Chappelle is far from the first person to think about this issue of offending the person the joke was about. Sigmund Freud also thought about this issue in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) In it, he lays out the various persons involved in joke telling and joke hearing. Mostly he talks about the first person, the teller of the joke, and the third person, the hearer of the joke. Freud argues that it's the hearer's mood that determines the amount of enjoyment that the audience will get from the joke. If the audience isn't already in a happy or at least an indifferent mood then there'll be no way for them to laugh anyway. But, Freud acknowledges the problem of joking about a particular group of people in front of them, and that to do so at all is considered, at least, "invective." Freud writes, "The third person cannot be ready to laugh at an excellent obscene joke if the exposure applies to a highly respected relative of his own; before a gathering of priests and ministers no one would venture to produce Heine's comparison of catholic and protestant clerics to retail tradesmen and employees of a wholesale business; and an audience composed of my opponent's devoted friends would receive my most successful pieces of joking invective against him not as jokes but as invective, and would meet them with indignation and not with pleasure" (Freud 105). To put it simply, to joke about a group of people in front of them, never makes them feel too good, regardless of the intent of the joke teller. This is a risk that Chappelle runs into all the time. His stand-up is broadcasted to everyone who subscribed to Netflix (legally or not) and no matter who he chooses to joke about, a member of that group will inevitably hear it. Even if that joke is meant with the best intention, just by virtue of being mentioned, whichever group that may be, will be bothered by the jokes

Chappelle has clearly thought about this issue of bothering those particular groups he mentioned, yet it doesn't ever seem to actually stop him, Whereas it is, more or less, the

foundation for why Gadsby thinks the way they do. As the last chapter talked about, Gadsby refuses to make fun of the groups that they too (and were) a part of. Gadsby knows well what it's like to hear a joke "not with pleasure." But, when this is something that Chappelle will just philosophize about in his work while not changing, Gadsby gets around this issue by only making fun of the groups of people that they feel are worthy of criticism. Gadsby, to a degree, wants to make those groups that have hurt them in the past (I.e. white men) feel that pain and do so by joking about them. They feel validated in their morals, and joke accordingly. Chappelle doesn't seem to have the same retribution towards any group in particular, but understands how his words make various groups feel.

Going back to the growing and continuing controversy through Dave's career at this point, I will, for now, skip over the next one. I've mentioned where *Age of Spin* and *Equanimity* fall within the controversy. I talked a little about *The Bird Revelation* and I'll be skipping (for now, I'll get to it, don't worry) and *Sticks and Stones*. Throughout them all, he talks about comedy and, at various points, the controversy with the trans community. But, he talks about far more than just that, talking about the Me Too movement, Celebrity cancel culture, and pretty much whatever else was controversial at the time. *The Closer* began with Chappelle talking about the Covid pandemic and how it affected him, and how it probably affected the audience more. This is another case of Dave needing to address and confront his fame and wealth. But, once he gets through the first 14 minutes, he then addresses the controversy head on. Chappelle isn't at all subtle, he says, "This is precisely the disparity that I wish to discuss." That disparity is back to what I talked about earlier; Chappelle is comparing the struggles of the gay community in America to the struggles of the african american communtiy in America. He says that he's

jealous of how fast gay people have furthered their movement, compared to his own community. And his theory on why that is, is that it's because they're also white. He then asks bluntly, (after stipulating that this question is not a joke), "is it possible, that a gay person can be racist?" I think the most obvious he gets about the over all point of the special is when he says, "Gay people are minorities, until they need to be white again." Like Gadsby, this statement gets merely applause and no laughter. These particular jokes and statements are new, and that question is new, but mostly, it's the same comparison (and same points) as every other time he's talked about that community. I'm not going to write more about the jokes themselves because they all orbit that center of gravity I've already described. But, what Chappelle does in *The Closer*, more than any other one of the specials, is that he talks about why he does what he does.

What's interesting is that Chappelle does not apologize. Dave never admits that he did anything wrong, not at the start of the controversy after *Age of Spin* and not after *the Closer*. This is probably because he genuinely doesn't think that he did anything worth apologizing for. One of the things he says early in the special is, "I'm being very brutally honest so we can solve this problem." For him, the power of comedy is to break through the subjects that we would be too normally scared to confront for ourselves. It's when we allow ourselves to be scared that, whatever subject it may be, then has power over us. Chappelle wants to break us out of that so we can confront the issues he's raising with humility. On Charlie Rose, Louis CK (I'll get back to him later) said "Saying that something is too terrible to joke about is like saying a disease is too terrible to try to cure. that's what you do with awful things, you joke about them. it's how you get through it." With this, we can see why Chappelle makes those jokes; so that we can cure

those problems he sees. This is why intent is so important, the audience needs to understand that, even though he's upsetting some people, he's doing it for the greater good.

This is why Comedians, like Chappelle, will try to push the boundary of what is acceptable to talk about. George Carlin once said, "I think it's the duty of the comedian to find out where the line is drawn and cross it deliberately." Chappelle is crossing the line so we can find it, but he's also not telling us what to do once we know where the line is. Chappelle is not giving us any easy answers. The reason for this is because morality and ethics are far more gray than anyone would like to admit. People would like the world to be black and white, just look at Cancel Culture. Celebrities are revered, adored, and all the pleasant adjectives that you would like someone to be, but as soon as they do one thing wrong they're done, out of the spotlight, and undeserving of anyone's love or respect. But, no one is so simple. A good example of this is Bill Cosby. I've mentioned him already because Hannah Gadsby joked about him as the pinnacle of toxicity in the patriarchy. Gadsby, like every reasonable, normal person, throws Cosby right under the bus. How could you not? Outside of maybe Harvey Weinstein, he was the most evil man in Hollywood. It would be easy for a comedian like Chappelle to do the same. Similarly, Chappelle ruthlessly mocks Weinstein in *The Bird Revelation*. But he doesn't do that for Cosby. He never mentions Cosby by name in the bit but, in the *Age of Spin*, he tells a joke about a superhero who has to touch a woman's vagina in order to activate their powers. Chappelle states, "that's the dilemma for the audience, because he rapes, but he also saves a lot of lives." This is his own dilemma about Cosby. Chappelle will not and does not forget the horrible crimes the man committed, yet he is also unwilling to forget how important Cosby once was. Cosby broke countless color barriers in Hollywood in the latter half of the twentieth century, and is (probably)

a former hero of Chappelle. There's no clear solution to this and Dave doesn't try to give one, but he makes it so the audience has to think about it. A youtube essayist called Nerdwriter1 (real name Evan Puschak), gave a really good metaphor for why comedians do this. He says, "Great comedians are like detectives. Take a look at Luther or any other detective movie or TV show and it's easy to see that, as a society, we're sympathetic to the idea of letting detectives bend the rules for the greater good." Dave Chappelle is like a detective trying to figure out, not the justice, but the morality of what to do about these large social problems.

And this brings us back to Chappelle's jokes about the trans community. Part of why he's telling those jokes is because he's trying to solve an issue. But that's also not the whole truth, Chappelle has a little bit of an ax to grind, in two ways. First, from the story told in *The Closer*; Chappelle is frustrated with how that community treated his fellow comic Daphne Dorman: a trans comedian who supported Chappelle in the wake of his controversy, who committed suicide due to those comments. Chappelle recognizes that there were most likely several other factors that lead her to take her own life, but he makes it clear that part of the blame for it is on the trans community who greatly harassed her on Twitter for supporting Chappelle's comedy. Second, because the trans community is directly influencing, using twitter, how/where comedians joke. The example Dave uses is how Kevin Hart was fired from hosting the Oscars because of four very old jokes. Dave covers both of these feelings in the last line of the special. He says, "I'm not telling another joke about [the LGBTQ+ community] until we are sure that we are laughing together... All I ask from your community, with all humility, will you please stop punching down on my people." He used the very loaded phrase "punching down." This is the modern, bastardized way of talking about the "superiority theory." It's the idea that jokes are always

“punching” something (As an old expression goes, ‘they call it a ‘punchline’ because it’s suppose to hurt), and that jokes are only morally acceptable if they are punching “up.” This is along the lines of Gadsby’s thinking; Gadsby is only willing to tell jokes about the patriarchy because they deserve to be made fun of. Some groups in society are “down” and some are “up” and the comedians job, according to people who use that phrase, is to only make fun of the groups that are “up.” Chappelle hates this idea of comedy because, like I said, he thinks of the comedy as incongruity, not punching anything. He’s using the phrase in that quote with a lot of irony. He’s trying to show that, as a comedian, he’s only trying to make people laugh while that community is actively trying to hurt his (and Kevin Hart’s) career under the guise of moralism. To quote Freud again, “Joking is the disguised priest who weds every couple. Vischer carries this further: He likes best to wed couples whose union their relatives frown upon.” Chappelle is wedding a couple that many people clearly frown upon.

What’s interesting is that, this is where, I think, Chappelle and Hannah Gadsby are far more similar with how they use comedy than either of them would care to mention. In that last paragraph, I talked about how Chappelle is talking about how he feels that the trans community has power over him and that’s why he makes fun of them. Gadsby is doing the same thing with men. For what it’s worth, both of these people can agree that making fun of white people is totally fine. But the real point is that both comedians are using their art to exact some revenge against a group that they feel wronged them in some way. Gadsby feels wronged by comedians, Chappelle feels wronged by the trans community, and both of their responses to this are the same; jokes mocking the other. This is why they hate each other, while still managing to be really similar. Another thing they both seem to do is that they divide jokes into two camps; harmless or

offensive. These categories are definitely broad and change depending on which groups the jokes in question are being told to and how publicly they're being told. But, for all intents and purposes, Gadsby and Chappelle are thinking about the jokes that are in specials; the ones seen by at least one member of every group in every country that can access the work. For Gadsby, this form shows itself in two ways. Either Gadsby is making harmless jokes to get to serious, unfunny points or, they're making jokes meant to offend the people of society that they have deemed worthy of ridicule. For Chappelle, it is a little different.

He has bits that are really funny, that do not touch on any serious topics at all. For example, In the one new Netflix special that I haven't mentioned yet, *Deep in the Heart of Texas*, he has a whole bit where the repeated punchline is "pussy juicy." It's an exceedingly goofy bit because those words are Lil Wayne lyrics that he finds stupid and is mocking that rapper for his goofy lyrics (I'll admit that that rapper probably isn't too happy, but whatever). And I think that Chappelle sees jokes like these as useful, but only insofar as to make himself seem likable, before he gets to the more offensive material. For the audience's sake, the jokes are useless. Yes, the bit got a laugh, and there is something noble, maybe honorable, about simply bringing joy to someone, but it also means that there's nothing for the audience to take away from the joke either despite the laughs. Comedians before Chappelle worried that their work, their humor, was useless. In 1954, legendary radio comedian Fred Allen wrote a book about the existential crisis he was facing at the time. His work as a radio comedian was about to be relegated to the past, due to the increasing popularity of TV comedies. The last chapter of the book covered his love for radio, and his own somber anxieties. The last line of the book best expresses this worry. It reads, "All that the comedian has to show for his years of work and aggravation is the echo of

forgotten laughter” (Allen 240). Fred Allen died less than two years after publishing that. Joy is a fleeting feeling, and when comedians are in search of only that, it relegates the joke to that singular moment.

This is why Chappelle, I think, tries to search for the topics that discuss socially relevant and difficult topics. He’s trying to be both funny while engaging with the audience in a sneaky and thoughtful way. I’ve talked about how Chappelle is like a moral detective already, but I haven’t talked about why this upsets people so much. It’s best explained by Freud who wrote, “In the one case the joke is an end in itself and serves no particular aim, in the other case it does serve such an aim - it becomes tendentious. Only jokes that have a purpose run the risk of meeting with people who do not want to listen to them” (Freud 66). This echoes the distinction between harmless and offensive jokes. What that means is that Chappelle has come to the conclusion that offensive jokes are the most useful jokes.

I’ve used the word “controversy” many times throughout this paper, but really, all that means is a conversation. When something, like *The Closer*, comes out we say that a controversy happens. Controversies look like this: Tweets are written, columns, news articles, reviews are published, and people are just generally expressing their feelings. Or, to put it another way, people are engaging with the work. *The Closer* is, like it or not, a work of art. In 2021, I don’t think that there was a more talked about piece of art than *The Closer* (I can’t think of another example, but I’m open to suggestions). I’ve talked about all the ways that Chappelle uses humor; controversy is proof that those conversations that he wants us to have with ourselves are playing out on a national level. We don’t have to agree, but we just need to talk. In *Slate Magazine*’s article shortly after *The Closer*, it reads, “He is clumsily and perhaps unknowingly inviting us to

consider just how much work there is left to do in the pursuit of equality.” I think Chappelle is knowingly inviting us to consider just how much work is left to do, and that we are better for it. Now, detractors of the special, beyond just finding it distasteful, argued (to put it simply) that “language is violence.” I couldn’t find much evidence, though, to support this particular claim. A few weeks after the special, *Psychology Today* wrote an article about this idea. The article reads, “though Chappelle's show may be offensive, there’s little evidence to link it to the potential for increased violence.” Violent behavior comes from a much more complex place, stemming from childhood trauma and mental health, not from people’s media consumption.

In the end, all there really is to say is: Dave Chappelle loves stand-up. It is his art, it is his craft, and there probably isn’t a thing in the world that will stop him from being a life-long practitioner of comedy. And just like Fred Allen, he sees his art under a new existential threat, but his is from Cancel Culture. From his Mark Twain Prize Ceremony, Dave Chappelle said, “There is something so true about this genre, when done correctly, that I will fight anybody that gets in a true practitioner of this art form's way, ‘cause I know you’re wrong. this is the truth and you are obstructing it. I’m not talking about the content. I’m talkin' about the art form.” To Chappelle, the form itself, just one comedian with just one microphone, is as powerful as it is simply entertaining. Chappelle believes the democratization of the form; that it’s so simple and cheap that every idea, every stance, is represented by someone somewhere. Where Gadsby may see some comedians being “problematic,” Chappelle sees a whole sea of comedians all bouncing off each other endlessly. But, despite the differences in their views on the subject of comedy, they use the form itself in practically the same way. Where Gadsby sees their career impacted by men which they use as justification to make fun of them, Chappelle sees his career impacted by

the LGBTQ+ community and uses that as justification to make fun of them. The beef between these two comedians will never be resolved because they're really just two sides of the same patty.

Chapter Three: Banality is Offensive

I described in the last chapter that it's the similarities between Hannah Gadsby and Dave Chappelle that polarize them to the point where they can't see each other's points. This means that we need an outsider's perspective. Frankie Boyle is a Scottish comedian who first rose to prominence in the mid 2000's on the British comedy show *Mock the Week* (2005-2009) and has remained famous with a string of specials (and controversies) released every few years since. His style is often surreal, bleak, and very political. Once, he referred to the history of British Prime Ministers as "a never-ending conga-line of narcissism." He's so far on the left end of the political spectrum that he puts most average, so-called 'activist,' liberal-arts college students to shame, yet his comedic style would make those same students blush. He's not that well known in the United States, both because he often references specifics about British politics that most Americans wouldn't understand, but also because he's terrified of flying and therefore has never stepped foot in the country. But what really makes him different from Chappelle and Gadsby isn't just that he's from another country, but the viewpoint on the world he's been given by that country. Chappelle and Gadsby are playing identity politics, asking who belongs to which gender and/or racial group. But Boyle thinks about the world through class and socioeconomic status. Chappelle talks about this a little when referring to the "poor whites" in contrast to the "rich whites" but, it's the main thing that Boyle talks about. For example, making fun of the Queen in America is nothing anyone would bat an eye at. Boyle, on the show *Mock the Week*, did an impersonation of the Queen where he said, "I am now so old that my pussy is haunted." This led to a Conservative MP calling the comments "disgracefully foul," and then the BBC (the network

the show originally aired on) to do an internal investigation into the comments. But this paper isn't about his takes on the Queen, it's about his takes on Gadsby. In his 2019 special, *Excited for You to See and Hate This*, Boyle has a lengthy bit that is a direct response to Gadsby, mentioning both them and their special directly by name, all after recommending Gadsby's show to his audience.

The title itself, *Excited for You to See and Hate This*, is a response, in a way to Gadsby as well. It's probably referencing the fact that no matter how much "hate" some special has, it doesn't stop the special from existing in the first place. From Boyle's perspective, he's produced plenty of controversial jokes, but none of them have actually halted his career. In fact, you could argue that he's made a career out of controversial jokes. So the title, I think, is his way of addressing this, but also putting a humorous spin on it. Using irony, he's probably not all that excited for anyone to hate his work, he is an entertainer, but it's funny for him to phrase it as if he was actually excited for the hatred.

It's also possible that he's always expecting hatred from the fact that he generally always feels misunderstood. He said once in the introduction to an audiobook about his time working for *The Guardian*, "This job generally involved me explaining to an editor why they shouldn't be offended by something they hadn't understood." This perspective is rather interesting. I've only ever talked about comedians who are essentially unedited, with only a microphone as a buffer between their own thoughts and the audience's ears. But, this brings in the perspective of the editor. Before Boyle could ever publish an article, he would have to go through an editor. This means that, no matter how bothered by the article someone may be, the blame could never be

wholly on his shoulders. He's not the only person who approved of that particular joke going out to a wider audience.

Later, in the same monologue he said, "I suppose you might wonder while you read this, why I express myself in the way I do. I think it's that I see civility as being a little overrated... I think we need to decide, as we enter humanities' dark and final trench, if we want to be able to describe what's coming towards us or have the moral victory of dying with our civility intact." He has certainly shown which side of this he's on. By all accounts, Frankie Boyle, the man, is a wonderful, good guy; while his art is rather bleak and somewhat misanthropic. All that's to be said about this comedian is that, of the three written about here, he is the most aware of his own style. Chappelle and Gadsby are wrapped-up in their own political causes, whereas Boyle really is only ever trying to write a good joke. He wrote about the struggle of his work:

"The plight of the satirist, such as it is, is a compulsion to look at the grimmest, most important thing they can think of, and then for reasons that probably wouldn't survive a really good therapist, try to make it funny. To try to address the iniquities of their society, the satirist must manufacture some hope that what they're doing might make a difference, then type it all up and send it off somewhere before they remember that it never does."

Sometimes, I'm not sure why he keeps writing his jokes. But, whatever the reason, I'm glad that he does, and the world is a better place because of it, despite his own pessimism. I wrote toward the end of the last chapter about that 'hope.' That may be in all the public discourse that comes out of whatever controversy brings some good. Boyle is constantly grappling with the idea that maybe every joke, no matter how pointed or controversial, never really does anything for better or worse. In this quote, he seems to imagine that laughter only makes someone forget

momentarily the bad thing the joke is talking about. Jokes don't heal or destroy, they only make one forget for a second, and that to be truly healthy one should go to a therapist.

What's somewhat strange about that quote is that it contradicts, in a way, that third and last theory of comedy. I've talked about Superiority Theory, Incongruity Theory, and now it's time for the Relief theory. It's the idea that jokes allow us to laugh in the same way a valve on a pipe releases pressure. We have these bottled-up emotions inside of ourselves that are only allowed to come out when we laugh. The most famous writer of this idea is Sigmund Freud. He wasn't the first with this idea, that would be Lord Shaftesbury and his essay "An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humor" (1709), but he wrote about it most and is the one this theory is most attributed to. He wrote:

Thus, as we come to a better understanding of the psychical processes of jokes, the factor of relief takes the place of economy. It is obvious that the former gives a greater feeling of pleasure. The process in the joke's first person produces pleasure by lifting inhibition and diminishing local expenditure; but it seems not to come to rest until, through the intermediary of the interpolated third person, it achieves general relief through discharge. In my interpretation of this, it really only seems to be accurately describing nervous laughter. That there is some situation, or joke that is so dark, that it requires, out of the general confusion and discomfort of the hearer, it needs to be discharged through laughter. But, I think, the idea of "lifting inhibition and diminishing local expenditure" seems to be lost somewhat when it comes to regular, not dark or awkward, jokes. For Boyle, some of his work may fall in the "nervous laughter" category, but I think generally Boyle would disagree that's what his audience is

laughing at in his comedy. I'll explore this further in this chapter, as Boyle himself thinks about his own comedy in his work.

In the special *Excited for You to See and Hate This*, Boyle addresses a few of the issues surrounding comedy that Gadsby talks about, and, for brevity, will simplify their points into just a line or two. But, one of the smaller points he makes is about joke structure. He says, “[Gadsby] says that stand-up comedy works by creating a tension in the audience that’s then punctured by a punchline. I don’t think it works like that, ya know, for me the tension arrives in the punchline. My uncle always said, ‘do what you love and you’ll never work a day in your life.’ He did heroin. (Laughter).” you can tell how this doesn’t fit Gadsby theory. The first sentence creates an expectation of work. The Expression that is used by Boyle comes from people who (I can only imagine) must hate their jobs so much as to warn everyone else about it is cliché, and has been heard by seemingly everyone. But that’s the expectation: mundane work. Then that expectation is broken by the last three words, which are about doing a life-ruining drug. That’s the ‘tension’, the use of heroin, but it’s also what makes this joke funny. I think that this is actually best described by the Incongruity Theory described in the last chapter. To repeat, it's the idea that audience’s laugh at two unlike things that the comedian has put together. That’s what Boyle does with that joke, He’s combining a mundane work expression with hard-core drug use. He goes on to make other examples of jokes during the bit, and one could take most of his jokes and use them as an example of the idea of incongruity. But, Boyle makes the point that laughter can be made in another way besides Gadsby’s way. He’s not trying to undercut Gadsby, he’s just trying to show there’s a lot of ways to make people laugh. Going back to the Bergson essay, he outright lists several of these techniques. In drama, Bergson argues there are three techniques,

“Repetition, inversion, and reciprocal interference of series” (89). I’ve already discussed repetition, but inversion is defined as, essentially, role reversal in a story. But reciprocal interference of series is a bit more complex, it’s defined as, “A situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time” (96)⁵. To simplify, it’s like a situation that can be read as if it were a pun. But, these ideas of drama do (somewhat) translate over into the comedy of writing, or stand-up. Bergson talks about these three in the chapter titled, “The Comic in Words,” where he also talks about exaggeration, irony, and “when an absurd idea is fitted into a well-established verb form” (112)⁶. The last idea essentially means to put a weird idea into a normal sounding sentence.

One form of stand-up, which Bergson doesn’t seem to mention, is what’s known as socratic comedy. I heard this term first in a documentary about Patrice O’Neal called *Killing is Easy* (2020, comedy central). O’Neal was really the king of this style, and a lot of his bits worked this way. What it means, is that the premise of the joke is a question that is explored through more questions and some conclusions. Chappelle really only has one bit like this, and it’s from one of his earlier specials. In *For What It’s Worth*, he asks “How old is fifteen really?” The line itself gets a laugh because it seems like an outlandish question to ponder but Chapelle explores because of the (at the time) recent case of R. Kelly urinating on a 15 year old girl on tape. The humor comes from America’s double standard on when personal responsibility begins. The point Chapelle is making is that 15 year old black kids are tried as adults where white 15

⁵ Also from Henri Bergson’s *Laughter*

⁶Also from Henri Bergson’s *Laughter*

year olds aren't, and he doesn't know why other than racism. So, he's posing the problem as a funny question, even though it's a very serious question.

But, Boyle is far from trying to undercut Gadsby's theories, or even disagreeing with them, because on some of the broader topics, he agrees. For example, Boyle says, "[Gadsby's] main point is that she, as an oppressed person, is letting the audience off too lightly... I think the problem with stand-up is that it simplifies issues. It's hard to get to the truth of something while getting regular laughs." This doesn't ignore the point that Gadsby raised about comedy, which is that comedy can't get to the truth at all, but he does acknowledge the fact that comedy does struggle to get to this idea of "Truth." Each bit of stand-up, especially political stand-up like theirs, has a "truth" under it, some point they're trying to make. For example, Boyle hates the Tory Party, but he would never say that so bluntly, he'd make a joke like, "the Tory Party hates coming second. which is why they only have sex with kids." The truth isn't that they literally do that to children, the truth is that they're evil, or at least, he thinks they work against the way his country should be run. The horror and humor of this particular joke forces the audience to think about the horror and humor of the Tory Party. If Boyle had stated it simply, I hate the Tory Party, no one would have cared. In this particular joke, the "truth" really seems to be how Boyle feels about the Tory Party. Comedian Andrew Shultz, on his podcast *Flagrant 2*, talked about Patrice O'Neal's style of comedy and described it as, "Comedy from feeling. What you feel... doesn't matter if it's right or wrong, it is true." Boyle's joke certainly is not true in what is actually happening in it, but it's his feeling toward the Party that is true. The raw emotion of the joke, behind the surface substance, is the truth of it.

But, I think that the point Boyle is trying to make is about brevity. The “truth” that Gadsby wants, and that Boyle thinks one should strive for, is hard to make with jokes due to the joke’s need to be brief. Freud wrote about this same issue, he wrote:

A joke’s brevity is of a peculiar kind - joking’s brevity. It is true that the original yield of pleasure, produced by playing with words and thoughts, was derived from mere economy in expenditure; but with the development of play into a joke the tendency to economy too must alter its aims, for the amount that would be saved by the use of the same word or the avoidance of a new way of joining ideas together would certainly count for nothing as compared with the immense expenditure on our intellectual activity (Freud 114).

More or less, Their joke’s must be brief, and be economical in their use of language in order to remain focused toward its goal to get the laugh. If only intellectuals had the same standard.

Boyle understands this tension, whereas Gadsby seems to as well, but fights against that nature of comedy. Gadsby seems to be rejecting this idea of “truth of emotion.” Gadsby is writing about how writing jokes where the truth is emotion leads to people being hurt unnecessarily. They seem to be trying to substitute that truth of emotion with political truth. Gadsby does really hate the men who abused them, but seems to be more aiming toward the political truth that the patriarchy holds the most power in the country. Boyle also seems to have a certain respect toward aiming for these political truths within jokes.

He understands the necessity of making these points, like the arguments against the patriarchy that Gadsby is making in *Nanette*, while also recognizing their frustration to make such a complicated point. Boyle seems to be sympathizing with Gadsby on the difficulty of getting to the truth, yet never seems to be going for something so nuanced himself. Gadsby’s

goal seems to be two-fold: first, mock the patriarchy; second, use jokes to lure the audience into an otherwise unpleasant story about being oppressed by the patriarchy before getting to a harsh, unfunny, but very truthful point. Boyle seems to only be writing about the hypocrisy between classes. Later in his bit about Gadsby, Boyle starts talking about a bit he did as a young standup about “Neds,” which is the derogatory term for uneducated and unprivileged Scottish youth. He explains that this was the most popular topic for comics when he was starting out around Glasgow. Everyone was making fun of them for the way they talked, the way they acted, everyone was laughing at “Neds.” Boyle doesn’t outright say that he regrets these jokes, but he does get to the fact that he was wrong for making them. This issue here it seems isn’t just that this bit doesn’t get to the truth about these “Neds,” it is that he ignored the political truth all together. “Neds” are underprivileged and disenfranchised youths, who Boyle thinks shouldn’t have been mocked. Boyle thinks that the people who should be mocked are those people in power who let “Neds” become “Neds.” Much like Gadsby, there is an emotional truth behind the joke, but it’s really aiming toward the political truth. They were disenfranchised by someone, and that someone is worthy of ridicule. This is not to say that comedy needs to be didactic, but the audience should be aware of the difference between when a comedian is joking about the truth of their emotions and the political truth of the world. Comedy has the power to humiliate, and one probably shouldn’t humiliate someone who is already humiliated. This is Gadsby’s idea, they don’t want to continue humiliating themselves when society, they felt, does that to them already, so Boyle’s point is to mock those in power.

This bit, leads Boyle to ask himself this question, “am I really rebelling or am I just conforming?” This is the all-important question of jokes. In an earlier special, the

aforementioned *Hurt like You've Never Been Loved*, Boyle talks about the strength of comedy as getting people outside their normal lines of thinking. He says, "Comedy is just a thing we came up with because most of the time we all think on the same little tram lines, comedy is just a license we gave to some people to go see what's over there, and offensive comedy is just a wee bit further over there. Not to horrify you, but just because we think it might be really funny, maybe interesting, it could be important." Boyle's humor has always been about getting people to think weirdly. He hates conformity, and the best way to break people of that, is to get them to think weirdly. An example of this Boyle uses in *Hurt like You've Never Been Loved* is about how charity can be patronizing. He jokes, "'give a man a fish, and he'll eat for a day. Give him a fishing rod, and he can feed himself. Alternatively, don't poison the fishing waters, abduct his great-grandparents into slavery, then turn-up four hundred years later on your fucking gap year talking a lot of shit about fish.'" You don't have to like this joke, but it makes an important point about how wealthy countries like the UK and US have colonized and enslaved poorer countries in the past, yet do the bare minimum to help them in the present. People get lost in the idea that charity is nothing but good, but this joke is a reminder that too charity can be self-serving and shortsighted. Boyle is far from the first person to make this point; In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by Nietzsche it reads, "But strangers and the poor may pluck for themselves the fruit from my tree: that causes less shame. But beggars should be entirely done away with! Truly, it annoys one to give to them and it annoys one not to give to them." Boyle is making fun of the same conundrum that is outlined here: to give or not to give to beggars. What's interesting is that Nietzsche seems just as excited to be provocative as Boyle is with the part about beggars being done away with.

We've come to this interesting question; how "real" are jokes? For a joke to be worthwhile, there needs to be some point. Not necessarily a didactic, you-must-learn-from-this point, but a recognizable idea one hasn't considered before. What this means is that the literal action of the joke doesn't really matter in its 'real'-ness. If we go back to Boyle's Joke "My uncle always said, "do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life.' He did heroin." Boyle didn't literally have an uncle who did heroin, but the 'real' point has something to do with mocking the cliché nature of the idiom. This goes back to the idea of Comedy getting people to think weirdly. It doesn't matter what that 'weirdly' is, as long as the audience is forced to think.

Last in his response to Gadsby, he takes an example from his past that he regrets. Boyle tells the story of a celebrity event, he was asked to perform in which he had to mock the celebrities there. One of these celebrities was a female boxer that he's been a fan of (in this bit, he never mentions her by name). He wrote the joke, "At the olympics, in the women's boxing, they fought in two minute rounds which was good because if it had been three minutes, I think I would've ejaculated my whole pelvis." Even when Boyle tells this joke, it gets a huge laugh. He explains that, despite how funny it may be, this joke is conforming to an already sexist society. Female boxers put up with objectification and marginalization from fans because they're women all the time, and this joke just adds to that. If the goal of comedy is to be rebellious, this joke fails that goal. Boyle ends the bit by hypothesizing that there's always a different joke to make. That if he's writing a joke that conforms to society's tendencies toward racism or sexism, then there's a "real" joke that he's missing. He makes another joke about hypocrisy, he says "the real joke probably has something to do with the British state having a go at someone for going to war in the middle that has fuck all to do with them. It's like the Pope throwing away his R. Kelly CDs."

That last joke has a lot to do with R. Kelly and the Pope, and if you don't have the right knowledge on those subjects, it probably wasn't that funny.

Before he gets to his comments about *Nanette*, He gives his own take on the state of comedy. He outlines the two sides of the argument as he sees it, then makes fun of both. His argument against those who are offended by comedy, is that they have their own moral failings they need to reconcile. His point is that no one can take the high road because no one is that perfect. What he says on stage is, "There will always be these people who are offended by comedy, and I used to not mind, until it occurred to me; most people who get offended by jokes also watch porn... there's someone out there right now watching torture porn going, (he then pretends to masturbate on stage) 'I hope no one makes a joke about a swimmer's nose.'" Boyle is using this joke to highlight the hypocrisy of those who share their outrage towards jokes. Yet, the next thing he says after this, is damning of those who take the opposite stance. To him, comedy is more complex than simply freedom of speech. Frankie says, "It's not a free speech issue, it's an artistic license issue." The point he's making here is about what kind of issue comedy falls under. His point is that, as much as comedians have the right to say what they please, they're still held accountable to their audience. The artist isn't removed from the society that they're commenting on and, whatever it is that the comedian wants to joke about, still needs to do right by the audience. For Boyle, to "do right" by his audience means to get them to think weirdly. As already mentioned, he thinks the power of comedy is anti-conformity. So, for him, that is the "artistic license" that comedians have. Chappelle and Gadsby would both answer this differently. Gadsby would say that the comedy is a tool that they use to tell their own traumatic stories for

the audience to relate to, whereas Chappelle has said in interviews that he's trying to "talk recklessly" for reasons mentioned in the last chapter.

Back in October when Chappelle released *The Closer* (2021), it spawned massive outrage to the point where employees of Netflix staged a walkout on October 25th, twenty days after the release of the special. The employees, who were joined by many other activists, argued that Chappelle's jokes were, at the very least, able to be read as transphobic; meanwhile, other activists showed signs saying that Chappelle has freedom of speech, he can say what he wants regardless of its effect on people. Boyle made *Excited for You to See and Hate This* two years before this whole Chappelle scandal, but what he did, years before, in this particular bit, was to point out the real argument: Comedy is beholden only to its own artistic license. Comedy shouldn't be put into either of the categories those activists were arguing over outside the Netflix headquarters, regardless of which side they were on. None of those "activists" made any attempt to argue if Chappelle was in or out of his own artistic license. If you believe that Chappelle was indeed trying to do right, whether by his own definition or by Boyle's definition, by his audience, that the intent was pure, then he had the artistic reason to joke what he joked.

Boyle elaborates later that the jokes aren't real, maybe the point within the joke is, but that's why he's allowed to say them. Frankie even goes out of his way to mock those who mock PC culture. The figure Frankie makes fun of the most is Ricky Gervais. Gervais had made some jokes at the expense of trans-women, in (at the time), his most recent special. Gervais said, "if they can call themselves a woman, I can say that I'm a chimpanzee." Frankie's response was "It wouldn't be that much weirder than Ricky calling himself a stand-up comedian... Just because

Ricky Gervais self identifies as a stand-up comedian, now I'm supposed to call him one! That's political correctness gone mad!"

In Boyle's next bit, he separates the two types of humor that he sees in life; humorous exchanges between people and what he does on stage. The humor between people, to him, is about politeness, it's an ice breaker. If you meet someone for the first time and you get them to laugh, it calms the nerves and adds a sense of connection between strangers. It's like if you're in an office and someone asks, 'working hard or hardly working?' Before walking away laughing at themselves while you roll your eyes. That example is an example of a completely harmless joke; it may be annoying but the intent is only to be polite. But, that's not what he's trying to do on stage. He says about his own humor, "these are sentences with a surprising ending, and it's hard to surprise people politely. 'Excuse me, I'm terribly sorry.... Boo!'" This idea is actually supported by Freud, who wrote, "we are able to understand the peculiar fact about jokes that they only produce their full effect on the hearer if they are new to him, if they come as a surprise to him." (Freud 112). After Boyle's brief moment of describing the types of humor, and about how his humor isn't polite but pointed. In *Hurt Like You've Never Been Loved*, he ruthlessly mocks people who complain about jokes, but he does this for two reasons. First, he said that he didn't "jump out of the bus to tell you them." The point is that the audience has some responsibility when it comes to his jokes because he's only saying those jokes to them in the particular setting they chose to be in. Boyle understands that there's a time and a place for his type of humor, and that the workplace isn't that. Just as one is protected from harassment in the office, because no one goes to work wanting to be harassed, you shouldn't have to hear wild and offensive jokes in your life. What he is arguing, though, is that on a stage in a theater, where all the fans in

attendance bought tickets knowing it was him, he's allowed to say what he wants. On stage is literally the time and place to make those jokes. Boyle isn't the only comedian to make this argument. In his special *Sticks and Stones* (2019), Chappelle says while looking into the camera, "Remember, bitch. You clicked on my face!" What I think this argument ignores is that fans can still be upset by the jokes they see. Just because a member of the audience went to that show, or clicked on the video, does not mean they need to find every joke that's told in it funny; there's no way of knowing ahead of time what the jokes are going to be. Yet, comedy would lose its punch if the audience did know what the jokes were going to be. It's alright to not be okay with the jokes. If humor's strength is that it gets people to think weirdly, then there is nothing more telling that the joke worked, then if the audience got angry (or even laugh). It's the laughter or the rage that shows the audience's engagement with the work, and that's what Boyle wants them to do, just like Dave Chappelle does with his work.

What this means, though, is that the comedian doesn't set out to enrage their audience. Boyle wants people to think about their country, and their country's history, but he doesn't want people to become frustrated or angry or disappointed in him for simply misspeaking or something like that. In *Hurt Like You've Never Been Loved*, he says, "Have some trust, I'm a professional." The word that is not said, yet is implied, is intent. To Boyle, intent matters, when it comes to jokes. He's not just saying them to be mean, he's saying them to make a point. In *Excited for You to See and Hate This*, he has a whole bit where he restates an old joke that made people upset, then goes over why they were upset, and what the point was. Maybe, in 2016, when he made these comments, he believed that intent was all that matters in joke telling. But,

it's clear that by 2019, he's now somewhere in the middle. In the bit about "Neds," and his stuff about Gadsby, Boyle is clearly acknowledging the effect of jokes.

When it comes to acknowledging the effect of jokes, one problem all these comedians have struggled with is that these broad social criticisms come with the risk of painting groups of people as monoliths. I've mentioned several times Gadsby's and Boyle's goal of making some real political point in their jokes, but this problem really applies to Chappelle the most. Don't get me wrong, the problem with the broadness of jokes is that there will always be exceptions to the rule, and so there will always be people in the audience who will feel misrepresented by the humor. But, it's Chappelle who really runs into this problem with his audience. In the *Age of Spin*, in his first bit about the trans community, he comments something along the lines that trans people aren't funny. This of course isn't not completely true, it's too overreaching. What's interesting is that Boyle and Gadsby don't seem to run into this problem. I don't even really have a guess as to the reason..

I've written plenty about intent already in this piece but the reason that it's so important for comedians is that sometimes, the intent is opposite to the effect. Whereas a painter might draw the horrors of war, in an act of protesting a war, the comedian might pretend to endorse those horrors to make a point. Furthermore, they might also say the worst thing they can think of to describe their favorite person. Think about roasts: there's an old tagline, "we only roast the ones we love." Audiences who don't know the intent of the comedian may very well think that, whatever horrifying thing they're joking about, might have a double underlying reason. Is it to entertain, to educate, or to make the point that comedy has its own wondrous ways of facing the world?

Outside of the overt nature of getting laughs, the work done by the comedian is subtle to the point of entertaining a mysterious relationship to the world. Audiences don't sit in the crowd silently nodding their heads saying after each joke, 'well, that was clever.' They just laugh! The real work of the comedian isn't really noticed until the car ride home after the show, when the confused couple who just wanted a nice night out on the town are sitting quietly next to each other awkwardly waiting for the other to ask: 'So... what did you think about those abortion jokes?' For Frankie Boyle, his intent might just be to make us laugh at the darkest things. It is the incongruity between serious ideas and the offhand delivery that affords the subtle balance between horror and relief.

Conclusion; I Find Your Lack of Edge Disturbing

I started this paper by writing that, “one should never write about comedy,” before barreling ahead and writing sixty pages on the subject anyway. And, like all jokes, this one also struggled with the truth. The truth of the matter is that I should never write about comedy. This is because there’s consistently been people who write about comedy and people who actually write jokes and, as shown in this paper, there’s been a grand canyon-size disconnect between the two parties ever since. And I always want to side with the comedian. Even with their most naive attitudes of, “oh, I’m just making jokes.” I’d still rather believe them over the ideas of Freud or Kant or whoever theorized about the nature of comedy. I’m really biased and maybe it’s because I’m jealous of their coyness.

Having written these pages, it’s become clear, at least concerning the three comedians written about here, that they’re pretty much always being either sneakily didactic or outlandishly clever. What I mean by the latter is that even their most outlandish and seemingly direct jokes contain something indirect and complex within them. Whether it’s in the joke’s structure, in how it shapes its plott, or how it pits two seemingly estranged ideas against each other, there is always an unnamed quality in comedy that defies our expectations. No matter what, a well written, laugh grabbing joke, always has to be clever in that expectation-defying way. Perhaps you could call that sneakily didactic, or just the opposite, an outright challenge to any straightforward idea of “truth.”

Whether it’s a political truth or an emotional truth, the jokes these comedians write are always in the pursuit of a version of *their* truth but never quite reaching it. Were they to reach it,

they would kill our laughter. Like all artists, their words and work often feel imperfect, always striving for an unattainable idea. Isn't swimming around in a moral gray area and trying to make sense of the world around them what we all do? And, what makes this all sneaky, anyway, is the fact that they get us to laugh while they do it. No one wants to sit around and think about their own morality (or mortality for that matter) but the comedian forces us to laugh, or not laugh, at the subjects and ideas that we wouldn't choose to think about on our own. Everyone has their own system of morality, things that they are or aren't okay with, and the comedian makes us confront these in as pleasantly disturbing a way as possible. They're never telling us what to think, but they're getting us to think weirdly, ripping us away from our own comfortable truths.

These ways of disturbing our peace and quiet, our stodgy ideas of right and wrong, is something that binds these three comedians together: rebellion. Frankie Boyle calls it "thinking weirdly," Dave Chappelle used the words "talk recklessly," and Hannah Gadsby, perhaps the most subversive of the three, identifies it as the perils of the art of comedy itself. Sometimes people, including myself, talk about comedy's nature of rebellion with the idea of "the line," the boundary between the acceptable and the unacceptable. Comedy is a habitually line-stepping art, perpetually being rebellious in thought. Not to be offensive, not trying to punch-up or down (as people on twitter might call it), but because peering over the line can be dangerously insightful.

I also said in the beginning of this paper that writing about comedy feels a bit useless because of all the terrible things in the world. That, too, was just a funny lie. I really don't think there's a better time to talk about comedy. Jokes can be used to take away the power of something, and that's best when directed at something terrible. My own generation has plenty of terrifying realities to face: climate change, war, student loan debt, and etc. What else are we to do

but joke about it? I really believe it when a comedian says, “Saying that something is too terrible to joke about is like saying a disease is too terrible to try to cure. that’s what you do with awful things, you joke about them. it’s how you get through it.” My generation has a lot to get through, and joking about it is how I think we should get through it.

And even if it’s not for some grand purpose, even if its ambition is not to help us “get through it,” we shouldn’t give up joking about the unsolvable things around us. As much as Boyle writes about how jokes never do anything, he still does it. Despite being let go from the TV show that made him famous, despite the laundry list of scandals surrounding his jokes, and even despite actual, real, lawsuits, Frankie Boyle still writes. I think it’s because he believes in art for art’s sake. You shouldn’t need a reason to keep this brand of art around. That’s what this paper has really been about: an argument in a favor of a specific genre of art. Yet, why does this still feel so controversial to me? I attend, and have written this in, a school full of painters, writers, musicians, and yet, writing about comedy feels scandalous. Are we really so scared of what we might find across the line?

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