Removing The Mask Of Comedy To Reveal The Person Beneath: A Rhetorical Analysis Of How Three Comedians Engage In, And Go Beyond, The Post-Comedy Turn

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REMOVING THE MASK OF COMEDY TO REVEAL THE PERSON BENEATH: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF HOW THREE COMEDIANS ENGAGE IN, AND GO BEYOND, THE POST-COMEDY TURN

by

STEVE INGHAM

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

2021

MAJOR: COMMUNICATION

Approved By:

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Advisor Date

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DEDICATION

While my name is the only one listed as author, this project, and my academic career, would not be possible without the love and support of my family, friends, colleagues, and mentors. While I cannot list everyone who supported me, I would like to mention a few:

First, to my family, my eternal love and gratitude for your support as your wayward son left Iowa to pursue academic success in Michigan and Ohio. In no specific order, I want to thank my siblings, Jessi Ingham, Jill Patchett, and Tyler Ingham, as well as my brother- and sister-in-law Ryan Patchett and Devin Ingham. Thank you to my parents, Marilyn and Ward Ingham, for never letting me forget my accomplishments and the love I have in them. I would also like to thank my extended family, including my grandma, my shero, Sandra Thompson, aunts and uncles Lynn and David Wilder, Mark and Katie Ingham, Linda and Jim Norem, Rob and April Thompson, and Karen Bassett, as well as all my cousins and cousins-in-law.

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Thank you as well for reading this project. I hope you find something useful in it, especially if you find inspiration to argue with my conclusions. I look forward to vigorous academic debate, and I will buy you the first drink when we share our thoughts together.
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Chapter 1: Why did the Comedian Cross the Road? To Criticize Society on the Other Side

Comedians are more than people who make funny observations; they are orators who interpret our daily lives and advance new perspectives on public issues (Greenbaum, 1999). Furthermore, their commentary represents our cultural consciousness, providing a lens through which we can understand our society (Mintz, 1985). As a result, stand-up comedy allows people of all backgrounds to be humorous cultural mirrors, showing us our individual and collective faults. Like Ancient Greek descriptions of the comedic genre, stand-up comedians highlight our foibles for the purpose of mockery and understanding (Burke, 1959). By engaging in stand-up comedy, comedians serve as rhetors who present arguments about our world in a manner that is entertaining and insightful.

While comedians\(^1\) present different perspectives about our society, they are also entertainers. They must find a balance between commentary about cultural issues and entertainment; they risk losing their effectiveness if focusing too much on one over the other (Greenbaum, 1999; Libera, 2020). Many comedians operate through a superiority theory of humor (Lintott, 2016), whereby they critique society through the lens of preeminence. This perspective allows them to make moral judgments about their comedic subjects, including their audience, cultural norms, morality, politics, and social expectations. The use of moral judgment varies by comedian; some do not engage in harsh critique at all, whereas others focus primarily on social commentary. Regardless of the tone, comedians position themselves as rhetors capable of making these judgments through an authoritative persona (Aristotle, 1992; Greenbaum, 1999).

\(^1\) I’m defining “comedian” here as anyone whose job or purpose is to engage in comedy. Used here, this is an inclusive term for jesters, vaudevillians, stand-up comedians, clowns, etc. I will differentiate the types of comedians below.
There are many ways comedians present their material, including diatribe (e.g., Sam Kinison, Chris Rock), mockery (e.g., “Moms” Mabley, Trevor Noah, Jon Stewart), silliness (e.g., Mike Birbiglia, Jim Gaffigan), joke telling (e.g., Rodney Dangerfield, Steven Wright), storytelling (e.g., Taylor Tomlinson, Flip Wilson), vaudeville (e.g., Lucille Ball, Marie Dressler) and comedic songs (e.g., Bo Burnham, Rodney Carrington). While these comedians typically focus on one style over another, they all engage in various methods of social commentary and comedy, mixing them together to be as effective as possible. However, some recent comedians have engaged in a new form of comedy. This style, called post-comedy by Jesse David Fox (2018), complicates the long-held notion that comedians must always be funny to be successful. Some recent comedians have included purposefully non-comedic material in their specials to present serious arguments (e.g., Neal Brennan, Burnham, Hannah Gadsby, and Marc Maron). By including non-comedic material, specifically on mental health and critiques of the genre of comedy, these performers step outside of the norm; however, as shown throughout this project, they have maintained their popularity with fans and critics alike. This study investigates what makes these comedians successful as they include non-comedic material. By doing so, we can broaden our understanding of the rhetorical nature of comedy as a vehicle through which serious arguments can be presented.

Performers of all types must maintain popularity to be successful. Many performers, like actors, gain an audience by how well they can adopt the persona of another person or character. While aspects of the actor’s own persona seeps into each performance, success is attained by how well the actor can immerse themselves into another character (Cannon & Gardner, 2009). For example, Denzel Washington is considered a good actor because he can adopt the persona of various characters, not because Washington himself is a good character (Ebiri & Fear, 2021). Similarly, comedians develop personae to achieve success; however, unlike actors, a comedian’s
persona is considered successful when they are consistent throughout their career. For example, Ellen DeGeneres is judged to be a good comedian because she has been consistently funny and relevant throughout her career (Aswell, 2018), therefore collapsing the persona she has developed onstage with the person behind it. Actors and comedians are expected to adopt personae, but for different purposes.

Comedians inhabit an ideologically different position than actors within the entertainment industry. While some actors use their fame to make political, social, and moral arguments, comedians use rhetorical arguments to achieve fame. Similarly, comedians occupy a dual role of (1) being someone whose job it is to make their audiences laugh by telling jokes and (2) providing social commentary about the world around them (Greenbaum, 1999; Libera, 2020; Mintz, 1985). This positionality allows comedians to challenge societal norms in their material, critiquing power structures in ways that are unavailable to some other artists (Mintz, 1985). With this freedom, comedians have challenged political authority (e.g., Bill Hicks), gender norms (e.g., DeGeneres, Gadsby), and the very construction of humor (e.g., Daniel Tosh). Regardless of their viewpoint, however, comedians are dependent upon their audience accepting their position, if only momentarily, to advance their rhetorical argument.

While the method, delivery, style, and tone have changed throughout the evolution of comedy, performers have used whatever material available to make their audiences laugh. However, modern comedians\(^2\) have rejected this aim, to make audiences laugh, in favor of presenting serious rhetorical arguments about mental health, physical safety, and their careers.

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\(^2\) I use this term to describe a broad group of comedians and their contemporaries who discuss mental health, depression, and anxiety in their performances in both comedic and non-comedic ways. While there have been comedians in the past who have talked about these issues too, the acceptance of this material by audiences has been more consistent and widespread since 2015. Therefore, for the purpose of this project, I am classifying “modern comedians/comedy” as that which takes place between 2015 and the present (2021).
Performers like Brennan, Hannibal Buress, Burnham, Louie C.K., and Gadsby have engaged in what Jesse David Fox (2018a) terms the “post-comedy” turn, wherein discomfort and awkwardness are used as sites of humor with laughter being a secondary goal. Past comedians have used serious issues as comedic fodder, setting up punchlines that resolve tension. Entertainers engaging in the post-comedy turn (Fox, 2018a) do not resolve the tension, placing the onus of tension resolution on the audience rather than resolve it for them. By engaging in this new form, comedians are stepping outside their traditionally accepted role as entertainers who make people laugh to focus more on their underlying authority as rhetors making ideological arguments.

Like other comedians, post-comedy entertainers use different rhetorical tactics to make their arguments. However, traditional audience expectations for the genre of comedy do not allow for serious issues to be discussed in a serious manner. Instead, jokes stop the story short of its proper resolution, using a punchline to end the tension rather than reaching a potentially unfunny conclusion (Olb & Parry, 2018). In the post-comedy moment3 (Fox, 2018a), comedians seem to want to reimagine resolution, stepping outside their comedic persona to do so. For example, traditional comedians use themselves and the moments in their lives for comedic material, including serious events. However, rather than using serious issues to find a punchline, these comedians use their serious lives to inform their argument that these issues should be treated seriously (Fox, 2018a). Thus, this project examines how comedians use non-comedy to centrally discuss mental health, trauma, and violence in a stand-up comedy routine.

While having careers based on making others laugh, some comedians and entertainers lead tragic lives (Carter, 2016; Christensen, 2018; Neporent, 2014). Over the past 40 years, there have been several comedians and comic actors who have died in tragic fashion or committed suicide,

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3 Moment, turn, era, trend, style, genre, and shift are used interchangeably when referring to post-comedy
including John Belushi, Ray Combs, Chris Farley, Greg Giraldo, Freddy Prinze, Sr., Brody Stevens, and Robin Williams. In retrospect, some of these comedians have been suspected of dealing with depression and other mental health issues (Appelo, 1995; Bernstein, Sun, & Somashekhar, 2014; Fink, Santaella-Tenorio, & Keyes, 2018).

Some of these comedians have used their tragic lives as material in their comedy, like Giraldo and Stevens. These comedians seem to endorse the idea that, given time, tragedy leads to comedy, allowing themselves to be used as a site for humor. However, other comedians are not as open with their tragic lives. For example, Williams did not talk about his suicidal thoughts and severe mental health issues before taking his life in 2014 (Berger, 2019). Similarly, Giraldo did not talk about how much he was dependent upon prescription drugs before his death in 2010 (Serrels, 2015). To date, there is little scholarship on how these people dealt with their depression and mental health in an entertainment venue that is notorious for stigmatizing mental health issues (Bharadwaj, Pai, & Suziedelyte, 2017). This project is a first step to filling that gap in the research.

How contemporary comedians use new forms of comedic performance may expose new and effective means of discussing mental health issues.

Unlike actors who are required to act as a different character, comedians can choose to act as outrageous characters or behave more like their private selves, depending on the situation or comedy routine. Due to the nature of comedy performance, one would expect that there is some blurring of lines between the public persona and private selves when comedians are dealing with mental health issues. Further, because a lot of comedy focuses on self-deprecating humor and social commentary (Greenbaum, 1999), the rhetoric and performance of stand-up comedy might tell us a lot about how mental health and suicide are culturally understood and discussed. To date,
there have only been a few reflexive attempts to identify if and how public personalities have discussed their depression or suicidal tendencies during a performance (Miller, 2018).

In this study, I contend that while other performers, such as actors or television personalities, might shy away from discussing topics such as mental illness or suicide, comedians have the artist freedom and platform to risk exposing what others are unwilling to reveal. The comedians I examine in this study go beyond exposing humorous aspects of society and explore material that others might deem unworthy of comic attention. This new comedy style is called post-comedy and it involves using awkward or uncomfortable situations as a new site of humor (Fox, 2018a). Post-comedy has become more widespread in use since 2015 with several comedians using it successfully in their stand-up material (e.g., Brennan, Burress, and C.K.) as well as television shows, such as Louie and Broad City (Fox, 2018a). Because it uses awkward and uncomfortable content as a site of humor, the post-comedy style may provide new perspectives about the nature of comedy and mental health and removes some of the stigma surrounding discussions of mental health.

Post-comedy can create new perspectives about the purpose of comedy, entertainment, and mental health issues (Fox, 2018a). One way is through ideologically framing audience members’ point of view. For instance, Fox (2018a) argues that post-comedy comedians use this new style as a form of comedic framing. More specifically, comedians, and by extension writers and producers, engage in the post-comedic turn when they use typically comedic means, such as stand-up or cartoon, and contrast something non-comedic with the comic. To illustrate this point, Fox (2018a) uses the example of the adult cartoon comedy, BoJack Horseman: “[It] has episodes that play as laughless dramas, but every once in a while your brain smiles when you remember a [cartoon] horse is talking.” Here Fox identifies how comedy can step outside of comedic material but remain
within the comedic genre because something about the production, in this case the talking cartoon horse, remains a comedic element. This show balances comedic and non-comedic elements, using humor and absurdity to provide sites of laughter while also exploring content that would be otherwise depressing. This contrast is what allows for critical examination of cultural and personal issues.

Other comedians have engaged in some aspects of the post-comedy turn as well (Fox, 2018a). For instance, Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* gained notoriety for being a political satirist, taking to task the hypocrisy of news sources and politicians in a comedic fashion. While his critiques focused on serious things, such as the war in Afghanistan, Stewart usually made jokes in his critique. However, there are examples of Stewart being serious on the show, such as after the shooting in Charleston, South Carolina (Kalan & O’Neil, 2015). While he makes a few jokes in the beginning of the opening monologue, the focus remains on the death, racism, and destruction of this event. Stewart’s satire, particularly in noting the absurdity of media coverage and political decision making, is post-comedic in terms of its content, but comic through its perspective. The primary message of this monologue, which focuses on the hurt and frustration of gun violence, was not supposed to be funny; however, because Stewart is speaking on a comedy show, it remains comic, although not comedic (Burke, 1959).

Some comedians choose to use post-comedy because they have a personal connection with the material. In the above example, Stewart hosted a mock news show that became a source of news for many (White, 2016). He was able to use his stage, literally and metaphorically, to present a serious argument. Similarly, the comedians in this sample have personally experienced poor mental health, depression, and physical/sexual assault. Just like every other form of comedy,
comedians make decisions to explore different forms based on what they perceive to be the most successful, for themselves, their careers, or both.

The post-comedy turn, as it is currently understood, can be utilized within the broader narrative of a program, such as the awkwardness of Louie, or within an isolated episode or performance, such as the example of BoJack Horseman. While comedians have been non-comedic in comedy specials before, it was not part of their broader narrative. Therefore, these comedians did engage in an element of the post-comedy turn, but they did not go beyond. I argue that going beyond post-comedy involves the inclusion of serious material as the central focus of the broader narrative, something that has not been accomplished with much success by comedians in the past. Put differently, while some comedians might include serious bits and emotional revelations in their shows, those moments are a small part of the show rather than the culmination of the entire narrative.

While there has been previous research on comedy, mental health, depression, and suicide separately, no project has engaged in a rhetorical analysis of the content and form of modern comedy to understand how these concepts intersect and are discussed through new and powerful rhetorical forms within comedy. By understanding how comedians are using non-comedy onstage to centrally discuss mental health, as well as entertainment and comedy’s impact on mental health, we can reevaluate our assumptions of comedy and its purpose. Traditionally, comedy has been designed to entertain. While humor is still the primary goal (Greenbaum, 1999; Libera, 2020), comedy in the post-comedy era is moving beyond that, engaging in humor to provide a more forceful and meaningful message about the world around us (Fox, 2018a). Although stand-up comedy shows have frequently included hard social commentary, the entire show was not designed around a broader non-comedic message. However, in post-comedy, comedians are using comedy
as the support for the point that comedians are more than joke tellers: they are people with real issues, dealing with them as best they can. Moreover, they use the comedy genre and their predictable rhetorical forms to critique how comedy and entertainment affect discussions of mental health.

I argue that unlike previous comedians who use some non-comedic material within a larger performance meant to entertain, a new style of post-comedy (Fox, 2018a) is being used by comedians to transform humor into a vehicle to make serious conversations about mental health, violence, or the harmful nature of comedy more palatable to an audience who has been prepared for the post-comedy show. My argument is that the use of non-comedy in post-comedy is not merely a minor performance element but is the aim for every rhetorical choice made in the comedy routine. In other words, the ways in which the audience is addressed, the selection of jokes, the framing of problems, the ascription of blame, and the reframing of issues are all meant to serve a broader non-comedic purpose. This purpose is to offer insight into mental health issues, human vulnerability, and the unhealthy character of comedy performance.

To advance this argument, I conduct a rhetorical analysis of three comedy specials that exemplify this post-comedy trend (Fox, 2018a). To understand how audiences are primed to understand and accept the non-comedic material, I draw from Maurice Charland’s (1987) work on constitutive rhetoric to examine how post-comedy comedians rhetorically position the audience and shape its relationship to the comedian. To explore how the comedy specials shape, foreground, background, and reposition the audience’s understanding of comedy, mental health issues, and violence, I use Robert M. Entman’s (1993) and David Zarefsky’s (2004) understanding of framing and frame shifting, respectively.
I selected three stand-up comedy specials that exemplify the post-comedy style as my sample: Bo Burnham’s *Make Happy*, Neal Brennan’s *3 Mics*, and Hannah Gadsby’s *Nanette*. These three comedians have found critical, popular, and professional acclaim for their comedy specials, indicating that their use of non-comedic material is recognized as worthy. Burnham has achieved the most well-known success as a comedian with three comedy specials and several funny videos on YouTube (boburnham, n.d.). His latest special, *Make Happy*, provides a glimpse into his dissatisfaction with the entertainment industry and its effect on his mental health (Burnham & Storer, 2016). For example, Burnham uses most of his performance to set up an extended non-comedic section in the last fourteen minutes of this special where he talks about his mental health and disenchantment with performance with his audience. This special is the first to be purposefully non-comedic as the central theme of the performance, yet still achieve widespread acclaim. Additionally, this special is one of the first to succeed in engaging in the post-comedy turn and still fit within the comedy genre (Fox, 2018a).

The second comedian I analyze is Neal Brennan in his 2017 special *3 Mics*. Here Brennan uses three microphones for different purposes: the first for “one-liners,” the second for “stand-up,” and the third for “emotional stuff” (Brennan, 2017). This last microphone is where Brennan, in a non-comedic fashion, talks about his struggles with mental health, his issues with romantic relationships, and his tragic relationship with his father. Brennan’s special was also successful and well-received.

The last comedian I analyze in this project is Hannah Gadsby with her comedy special *Nanette* (Olb & Parry, 2018). Gadsby begins her special as many others, with jokes and stories. 

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4 One simple measure of their success is based on online rating systems. For instance, Brennan received an IMDb score of 7.9/10 and a Rotten Tomatoes 91% ranking. Burnham: IMDb 8.4/10, Rotten Tomatoes 88%. And Gadsby: IMDb: 8.2, Rotten Tomatoes: 22% (although many audience critics said it was because this wasn’t comedy).
Yet, about halfway through, she tells the audience that she thinks it is time to quit comedy (Olb & Parry, 2018). Gadsby then spends a significant amount of time talking about how comedy is no longer a useful vehicle for her to share her story, one filled with emotional, physical, and psychological pain. She finishes her special with nine minutes of purposefully non-comedic material, explaining how her story has been silenced through comedy. In explaining this argument about silence, she revisits some of her previous comedic material to demonstrate how it tells an incomplete story of her life. This special was also critically acclaimed, winning a Peabody Award (Peabody Awards, 2018) and an Emmy Award (Emmys.com, 2019). However, reactions from viewers were split on their perceptions on the comedic value of the special. This special also fits well into a project about how comedians talk about mental health and their tragic lives in a post-comedy style (Fox, 2018a).

I examine these comedians because they explicitly discuss their mental health or physical trauma in a non-comedic fashion. In exploring how post-comedy and non-comedic material can successfully operate within the stand-up comedy genre, I am interested in how it can work as a new means for discussing mental health, trauma, and violence. One of the major contributions of this project is to understand how contemporary comedians using new forms of comedic performance may expose new and effective means of discussing mental health issues. Comedy both reflects and shapes culture (Kozinski, 1984; Mintz, 1985); it can push boundaries by saying and doing things that other forms of communication and performance cannot (Lockyer & Pickering, 2009; Mundy & White, 2012). A detailed investigation into the tactics and strategies used by comedians to discuss these issues may reveal undercurrents to our cultural understanding about mental health, trauma, and violence, and how these issues can be framed and reframed to understand topics of stigmatization and treatment of mental health issues.
Additionally, this project will contribute to comedy theory by providing a focused analysis of how comedians engage in the post-comedy turn (Fox, 2018a) to provide a social critique of mental health, power dynamics, and social problems. While Sheila Lintott (2016), Gene L. Roth (2002), and Jeroen Vandaele (2002) have focused on Incongruity Theory, Superiority Theory, and/or Relief Theory, there has been little academic focus on how comedians use non-comedic material while still being accepted within the frame of comedy. Previous shifts in comedic style have been difficult to understand in the moment (e.g., vaudeville to lounge, mainstream comedy to alternative and vice versa, etc.), but the post-comedy shift, with its focus on mental health and serious problems, demonstrates a clear difference in perspective and style within the genre of stand-up comedy.

Lastly, the study contributes to our understanding of how privilege operates to enable certain people to discuss mental health and traumatic issues. In examining these three comedians, I argue that only certain people can engage in this post-comedy turn due to their privilege. Brennan, Burnham, and Gadsby all have positions of privilege, specifically their race, language, and nationality that allows them to explore these issues onstage. However, many other people, including other comedians, have not had the same opportunities to share non-comedic material and have it accepted. Many comedians of color, such as Dave Chappelle, Paul Mooney, Richard Pryor, and Wanda Sykes, have discussed issues of racism and hatred in their stand-up specials. These topics were not new to their minoritized audiences, but to make it palatable for their white\(^5\) audiences, they had to use a comedic tone, undercutting the harshness of their critique. While the content remained serious, particularly with audiences who shared their trauma and pain, the

\(^5\) I am following in the footsteps of Dr. Cheryl E. Matias (2016, p. 233): “In order to recognize racialized language, [I] will strategically capitalize words that reference people of color and recognize them as proper nouns. In an attempt to combat the white supremacy in language, dominant groups will appear in lowercase.”
presentation of the material in a comedic fashion prevented probable backlash by those in power. Furthermore, comedians from non-western countries have traditionally not been given the same access to stand-up comedy platforms, specifically Netflix,⁶ to provide comedic material, let alone non-comedic material. Finally, while the three comedians in this sample are privileged by race, language, and nationality, Gadsby is non-male, non-heterosexual, and not a US citizen. Both she and Brennan presented extensive non-comedic material in their specials, only Gadsby’s special was criticized by amateur critics for not being comedy. Comedians with privilege are allowed to break the norm because of their privilege, leaving those without to struggle to find their place. Before diving into my analysis later in the project, I will first review pertinent literature, outline my research method, and preview the remaining chapters of this project.

**Literature Review**

**Mental Health**

Over the last two decades, there has been increased public attention on mental health issues (Horton, 2019). This awareness, in part, has increased due to the number of suicides committed by celebrities, particularly comedians like Brody Stevens and Robin Williams, whose deaths were linked to mental health issues (Bernstein, Sun, & Somashekhar, 2014; Fink, Santaella-Tenorio, & Keyes, 2018; Genzlinger, 2019). While some stars were explicit in connecting their mental health issues to their suicide (e.g., Stevens), others did not, although many people have made that connection for them (e.g., Williams) (Bernstein, Sun, & Somashekhar, 2014; Fink, Santaella-Tenorio, & Keyes, 2018). Unfortunately, despite years of progress in understanding how widespread mental health issues are in this country, there is still stigma associated with disclosing mental health issues, particularly depression (Griffiths, Christensen, & Jorm, 2008; Schwenk, ⁶ However, access to and diversity of comedy specials has improved on Netflix since 2018
Davis, & Wimsatt, 2010). It is likely that due to this stigma, many celebrities do not express their mental health concerns. This is troubling because when a celebrity commits suicide, there is an uptick in the number of non-celebrity suicides within the next four months (Fink, Santaella-Tenorio, & Keyes, 2018).

As with celebrities, many people choose to never share their mental health issues. Some of the barriers that may prevent people from disclosing their mental health challenges include their age (Gonzalez-Dominguez et al., 2018), privilege, status, identities (sex, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and race) (Livingston & Boyd, 2010), and access to healthcare (Wood, Burwell, & Rawlett, 2018).

Within the last ten years, one globally popular comedian (Williams) and one locally popular comedian (Stevens) have committed suicide. They were the catalyst for a renewed focus on mental health within the genre of comedy. In the aftermath of Williams’s suicide, several comedians have talked explicitly about mental health within their comedy specials, marking a post-comedy shift, which includes material that goes beyond, and outside of, traditional comedy, specifically the aspect of making the audience laugh (Fox, 2018a).

The post-comedy shift differs from previous comedians who have used their platforms to address serious and/or taboo subjects because of its widespread success. There have been several comedians who have presented comedic material on serious issues, particularly dimensions of power like race, sex, gender, sexual orientation, and tragic events, but the intent was to use those serious issues as a setup for a punchline. Other comedians have stepped outside of their comedic role to present a serious argument, but it was not part of the broader narrative of their performance.

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7 However, recent celebrities, including Brad Pitt, Dax Sheppard, and others have expressed their mental health concerns, albeit in response to these deaths
8 Not causational; Williams’s suicide did not cause the shift, but the timeline is important to note
For example, when Jon Stewart talked about gun violence in South Carolina, he is a comedian on a comedy show, but he was not using that material as a site of humor; rather, he was using his platform to speak on an issue, and he just happened to be a comedian on a comedy show. This is similar to a sitcom presenting a serious argument: they are using their platform to present a serious discussion, but it is not part of the broader narrative of the sitcom (see discussions below about *M*A*S*H* on pages 98 and 228). The post-comedy turn focuses on material that is not necessarily funny, but still aims to be humorous in some context as the broader narrative of the program (Fox, 2018a).

Recent scholarship has begun to look deeper into mental health due to its increasing societal impact (Carpentier & Parrott, 2016; Kalaichandran & Lakoff, 2019; Rescorla et al., 2019; Schiavo, 2018; Valenta, 2018). Literature on mental health has progressed beyond a broad categorization of mental diseases or conditions to more nuanced perspectives on mental health and the individuality of each person, as well as the unique factors that influence each person dealing with mental health concerns (Blashfield, 2019; Druss & Goldman, 2018; Epting & Burchett, 2019; Husum, Legernes, & Pedersen, 2019). These scholars have identified various issues in former treatments of mental health problems. However, an underlying charge laid out by these scholars is that mental health treatment has not been refined enough (Blashfield, 2019; Druss & Goldman, 2018; Epting & Burchett, 2019; Husum, Legernes, & Pedersen, 2019).

The social stigma that surrounds discussions of personal mental health issues often prevents people from sharing how they feel and cope with their mental health. The inability to discuss these matters, along with the heightened spotlight on them due to their star status, can cause some celebrities to deal with mental health challenges in destructive ways. In hindsight, we can see similar patterns amongst many celebrities who have died via destructive behavior or
outright suicide; celebrities like Anthony Bourdain, Kate Spade, and Williams all committed suicide after dealing with depression and mental health issues (Carman, 2019; Christiansen, 2020).

For instance, in the wake of Williams’s suicide, there was an almost 10% increase in suicides (Fink, Santaella-Tenorio, & Keyes, 2018). Although Williams kept his mental health issues mostly private, celebrities recently have begun discussing their mental health publicly, which some believe to be a progressive move toward destigmatizing mental health (Adams, 2020; Carpentier & Parrott, 2016, p. 1335). However, celebrities and non-celebrities alike still feel stigmatized about their mental health, preferring to keep it private until it is too late (Carpentier & Parrott, 2016, p. 1335).

Generally, mental health issues are ubiquitous in America (Schiavo, 2018). The sheer number of people estimated to be dealing with mental health problems in America, 43.8 million, and those who are “experience[ing] the kind of illness that substantially interferes with or limit[s] one or more of major life activities,” roughly 9.8 million people, should justify more funding and research to help understand, cure, and prevent mental health crises (NAMI.org, 2019; Schiavo, 2018). Renata Schiavo argues that “[m]ental health is at the core of physical health and social well-being” (2018, p. 4). They argue that mental health goes beyond some negative thoughts; poor mental health impacts the entire human body, which emphasizes the importance of understanding mental health, specifically in helping remove the stigma associated with it.

Comedy is a somewhat surprising venue to study mental health. However, there appears to be a connection between performing and mental illness. As psychology student and comedy performer Doug Segal observes, anxiety, borderline personality disorders, bipolar disorder, and depression are “endemic within performers…. I think they’ve all utilised those as engines to fire themselves” (cited in Barrell, 2016). This perspective, that comedians deal with psychoses, is
supported by mental health experts Victoria Ando, Gordon Claridge, and Ken Clark (2014). Examining the rhetoric of comedians might provide insights into how different frames and perspectives can be used to discuss mental health. Comedy is widely understood to shift perspectives and frames to produce both laughter and new ways to view the world (Mintz, 1985).

Although critics contend that comedy can be problematic because it deploys stereotypes and generates humor at someone else’s expense, which is explored in more detail in chapters 2 and 5, scholars are increasingly examining how comedy could be used to discuss important social issues like transracial adoption and women’s mental health issues (Jeffries, 2014). While these studies focus on the therapeutic use of comedy, we should examine comedy as a form of public address about mental health issues. How contemporary comedians use new forms of comedic performance may expose new and effective means of discussing mental health issues.

**Minoritized Peoples, Communication, and Mental Health**

New modes of comedy performance may be enabled or constrained by the relative privilege of the speaker. This is significant because the most relevant privilege that certain individuals and communities hold is access to and awareness of mental healthcare (Lamb et al., 2014; Ngo et al., 2016). Some communities choose to remain private about mental health issues and outside of public attention while others have been purposefully excluded (Lamb et al., 2014; Ngo et al., 2016). Regardless of the reasons for disengagement, these communities fall outside the margins of traditional mental healthcare, remaining separate from those who have the awareness, knowledge, financial resources, and time to dedicate to mental health care (Lamb et al., 2014). Additionally, certain groups may purposefully avoid participating in mental health research because of the history between dominant, privileged researchers and minoritized groups with regards to medical experimentation (Kurt et al., 2016; Moulton et al., 1997). Minoritized groups,
particularly those who have been directly harmed at the hands of unethical researchers, might choose to avoid clinical trials designed to find solutions for issues groups of all types are facing (Kurt et al., 2016).

For the purpose of this argument, I am following the National Association of School Psychologists’ definition of privileged peoples: those who have “[u]nearned advantages that are highly valued but restricted to certain groups” (NASP, 2017, p. 1). By contrast, minoritized peoples are those who do not have easy or any access to these resources. While mental health disparities are a global problem, in the United States privileged peoples fit within a hegemonic structure (Connell, 1987; Gramsci, 1971). More specifically, privileged Americans are white, middle/upper-class, heterosexual, monogamous, Christian, and male. This group of Americans generally has easy access to resources, travel, economic mobility, education, and employment opportunities (Fenner, 2019). While men may have many advantages, they are less likely to seek medical help, particularly about mental health (American Psychological Association, 2017; NIMH, 2019). As Raymond Hobbs argues, this might be because of the stigma surrounding mental health: “A lot of guys don’t want to admit they have this problem. They still see depression as a sign of weakness” (as cited in Campbell, 2019). However, despite this broad categorization, obviously there are variances of privilege within this identified category. Anyone who has only some of these characteristics/aspects about themselves are able to attain some of the privileges available.

Minoritized peoples are still trying to find their place at the table. While some policies and programs provide avenues for minoritized peoples to have a voice, the implementation and response to these policies have not always been successful (Hastie & Rimmington, 2014). Minoritized peoples must fight harder than privileged peoples to even have access to the same resources and opportunities, let alone be able to take advantage of those opportunities (NASP,
In comparison, privileged peoples take these opportunities for granted, further reinforcing their privilege (McIntosh, 1988). Similarly, people tend to avoid recognizing their privilege, preferring to highlight how they are not privileged instead (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Hastie & Rimmington, 2014). This refusal to recognize privilege, as well as the consistent attempt to claim a lack of privilege, further constrains the ability of minoritized peoples to be taken seriously in their arguments for equality.

Some minoritized peoples have found alternative methods of communication, primarily within their communities, that fall outside the awareness of contemporary privileged groups (Barker, 2015; Edet, 1976; Masta, 2018; Spates et al., 2019). Additionally, mental health stigma affects marginalized and minoritized groups more than people who are privileged (Wong et al., 2017). For instance, historically, slaves in the US South used music to subvert white hegemony (Barker, 2015; Edet, 1976). In contemporary times, some Black women cope with “gendered racism” by “[r]edefining Black womanhood, [e]mploying overt and covert forms of resistance, [r]elying on faith, prayer, and the pursuit of balance, and [e]xpressing thoughts and feelings in safe spaces” (Spates et al., 2019, p. 6). Additionally, some Native American students engage in accommodation (i.e., altering themselves to fit a broader societal structure) to both avoid confrontation and resist forms of oppression in mainstream schools (Masta, 2018). Unfortunately, there are few studies on how minoritized groups communicate issues about mental health.

Just like any group of people, comedians make up a diverse population. Stand-up comedy is a unique career because of its blend of amateurism and professionalism. Many beginning comedians do stand-up part-time while working another job, while others leave their ‘day’ jobs for a full-time job as a comedian. However, comedians are contract/gig employees, so they rarely qualify for unemployment. Similarly, employers typically do not solicit stand-up performers like
other jobs, relying on networks and word-of-mouth for recruitment. While international demographic data is, at best, unreliable, there is a broad consensus that there are more male comedians, white comedians, and heterosexual comedians than other categories (Benedictus, 2012; Bennett, 2012; Fox, 2012; Levitt, 2018) particularly in the United States, although more recent data is seemingly unavailable. Recent scholarship on comedy has focused on how comedians tackle modern problems (Jeffries, 2014). Specifically, research has focused on how minoritized peoples, especially people of color and women, have challenged dominant structures (Colpean & Tully, 2019; Gilbert, 2013; Gregori-Signes, 2016; Krefting, 2019; Rovin, 1983; Watkins, 1994). For some, comedy has become a therapeutic option (Jeffries, 2014). At times, comedians put on a “mask of depression” to hide their ‘real’ selves (Serani, as quoted in Neporent, 2014). However, the post-comedy turn seems to provide comedians an opportunity to remove those masks, providing a sense of therapy onstage (Fox, 2018a).

Yet, it seems like only certain comedians can engage in post-comedy while onstage and be successful. While comedians I examine in this study have found success with audiences across the United States, they still embody many forms of privilege (e.g., white, mostly heterosexual, mostly cisgender, mostly male, middle/upper-class at the time of recording, and having access to health care, specifically mental health). While I do not believe they do so purposefully, these comedians take advantage of their privileged statuses without acknowledging those with less privilege. Similarly, minoritized peoples who have talked about serious issues comedically (e.g., Hannibal Burress, “Moms” Mabley, and Pryor) have struggled to find an audience with non-comedic material.

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9 I place the word real in apostrophes to recognize that, because of the nature of comedic style and material, we cannot truly know if this information is real or not.
There are two criteria on which to base success for comedians: commercial and critical. Commercial success involves financial earnings and career opportunities, such as spots on television shows and stand-up specials. Critical success involves earning the respect from fellow comedians and comedy critics alike, as well as earning awards for the quality of one’s work. Many of the comedians I have mentioned in this project have achieved both commercial and critical success, including Dave Chappelle, Ellen DeGeneres, Kevin Hart, Gabriel Iglesias, Richard Pryor, Amy Schumer, and Wanda Sykes. Others have struggled to attain commercial success, even though they are producing high-quality work, such as Mo Amer, Maria Bamford, and Aparna Nancherla. While comedians like Hannibal Buress, Chappelle, Kevin Hart, Nancherla, and Sykes have achieved commercial success, critical success, or both for their stand-up performances, they have not done so in the post-comedy style, at least to the same level as the three comedians in this analysis. For example, Chappelle is one of the most famous and highest-grossing comedians in the United States (Berg, 2017). While he has discussed serious issues, including racism, sexism, and politics (Lathan, 2019), he has always remained comedic; he has not performed a stand-up special with the narrative focusing on the non-comedic issue of mental health. On the other hand, Nancherla’s primary focus for her comedy rests on her mental health, but she has not yet recorded a full hour-long special, even though she has been a comedian since 2006 (Miller et al., 2017). While there are many factors involved in who gets an hour-long stand-up special and who does not, there are very few minoritized comedians who engage in and go beyond the post-comedy turn like Burnham, Brennan, and Gadsby, all who talk about mental health in a non-comedic way in their commercially and critically successful stand-up specials. One factor in that might be the popularity of the post-comedy turn. Another might be that comedians who are minoritized are not given the same opportunities as privileged comedians. Further analysis is needed to parse out
exactly why certain comedians have achieved success, both commercial and critical, and others have not based on privilege and minoritization.

Comedy

While various forms of entertainment have existed before Ancient Greeks dominated the Mediterranean Sea, no formal treatise has been discovered on the subject. Aristotle, among others, philosophized about the distinction between comedy and tragedy, two popular forms of entertainment in Greek society (Aristotle, 1992; Greenbaum, 1999; Lowe, 2007; Mathur, 2007; Rutter, 1997; Smith, 1993). Classical philosophers argue that comedy was an extension of the lower-class clowns and peasants, deserving of derision rather than respect. Plato argued that joking is something that should be avoided at all costs, viewing it as a vice (Rutter, 1997, p. 9). More specifically, Aristotle (1992), echoed by Sir Philip Sidney (Mathur, 2007) emphasized the cultural significance of each form, particularly how tragedy was for the upper echelon of society whereas:

comedy is an imitation of the common errors of life, which he [the author] representeth in the most ridiculous and scornewfull [sic] sort that may be; so as it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such a one. (Sidney, 1999, as cited in Mathur, 2007, p. 35)

This perspective positioned comedy as something only ignorant people would enjoy, allowing them a modicum of superiority over the characters in the comedic performance. Furthermore, this argument reinforced classism, in that comedy allowed peasants the opportunity to feel superior to another, not realizing that upper-class citizens felt that way about the peasants every day.

Classical philosophers focused primarily on the form of comedy, highlighting how characters were laughed at rather than laughed with, emphasizing their inferior class and intelligence (Aristotle, 1992). Aristotle further argued that comedy was at a different maturity level than tragedy, acknowledging that tragedy had reached its peak of newness whereas comedy was
much more malleable in its form and subject matter (Aristotle, 1992). Inherently, this argument also reinforces the notion that tragedy is for the upper classes, wherein comedy has so many more opportunities because stupidity is a basic denominator. This is somewhat mirrored today as comedy uses commonly held perceptions and understandings to find a source of humor. Comedians must find a connection to their audience, and sometimes that means identifying the most common denominator of understanding, which could be stereotypes. For example, non-US comedians performing for US audiences use stereotypes of people from their native countries as a site of humor, knowing that it is unlikely for most US audiences to understand the nuance of Finnish (e.g., Ari Eldjàrn), Malaysian (e.g., Ronny Chieng), and Palestinian e.g., (Mo Amer) cultures, so they mock their own lands/people to find humor, just like many US comedians mock people in the United States to find commonality with their US audiences. Just as Aristotle argues, this opens the door for stupidity to be the basic denominator, something that critics of comedy find less worthwhile than the genre of tragedy (Aristotle, 1992; Sidney, 1999). This perspective would continue into how modern psychiatrists, scientists, and culture critics understand comedy (Dionigi & Canestrari, 2018; MacRury, 2012).

From a psychological perspective, comedy and humor accomplish various mental functions, such as operating as expressions of subconscious desires (Freud, 1905; MacRury, 2012), providing therapeutic release (MacRury, 2012, p. 187), and acting as a means of finding a more positive outlook on a situation (Dionigi & Canestrari, 2018). Moreover, Iain MacRury identifies stand-up comedy as a means to explore unconscious desires, including the “convergence of play and pain, insight and evasion, self- and (iterative) public-symbolisation” (2012, p. 187). MacRury highlights how stand-up comedy provides a vehicle through which comedians and their audiences can share in life experiences, bringing the histories of each to the stage as a means of healing and
exploration. Stand-up comedy is a vehicle through which performers can share their perspectives, often ones based in pain, to find relief in some context (MacRury, 2012, p. 189).

Furthermore, psychologists have viewed comedy, more specifically laughter, as a form of therapeutic release. Because of the communal nature of comedy (Dionigi & Canestrari, 2018; Freud, 1905; MacRury, 2012, p. 187; Yalom, 2011, p. 4), patients engaging in laughter during cognitive therapy treatment might alter their perspective to one that is more positive (Beck, 2005). Underlying this argument is the idea that laughter, and by extension comedy, can provide therapeutic relief for the tension patients might be feeling. By altering the frame from one of tragedy to one of comedy, patients can view their struggles as ones that can be overcome rather than ones that will negatively affect their lives (Beck, 2005; Dionigi & Canestrari, 2018).

Whereas the psychological perspective focuses primarily on the utilization of laughter and comedic framing to provide therapeutic relief in some capacity, other scientific paradigms have investigated laughter and humor in various contexts. In anatomy, laughter, when used positively, can provide a sense of physiological bonding (Lackner et al., 2018; Lackner et al., 2019); however, if used negatively, laughter can freeze the functions of the heart, connecting social/cognitive perceptions of threat with a physiological reaction (Lackner et al., 2018). In biology, researchers have identified how infants empathize with peers’ emotions, including laughter and crying (Crespo-Llado et al., 2018). Finally, in oncology, Hilde M. Buiting et al. identifies how patients, health workers, and social support networks use laughter to reinforce the humanity of the patient (2020). Various academic fields have demonstrated the positive effects laughter, humor, and comedy have on comedians, cancer patients, cognitive therapy patients, and audiences. As scholars continue to explore the importance of laughter on anatomy, biology, oncology, and psychology, humor theorists continue to develop theories on the construction and social impact comedy has.
There have been several theories of humor, such as superiority theory (Lintott, 2016), incongruity theory, and relief theory (Vandaele, 2002). Superiority theory posits that humor is derived from the recipient of the joke feeling superior to the subject of the joke, whether that be another person, a situation, or an object. Incongruity theory posits that we find humor in something that is not immediately logical, such as a pun. Relief theory posits that we release tension through laughter, regardless of the cause. Other theorists have developed additions to these theories, such as Anne Libera bolstering relief theory by adding that we find relief when comedians resolve tension via a punchline (2020). However, no theory on humor encompasses all aspects of comedy because it is so subjective. A comedian might have perfect form, use appropriate grammar, and have the correct content, but an audience might not find them amusing because of their own personal tastes. While there has been no overarching theory of humor, modern theorists view comedy through a collection of lenses based on these theories. Furthermore, modern comedians use aspects from these theories to inform their material.

For example, the definition of comedy from Ancient Greece provides an important starting point for modern interpretations of the genre (Aristotle, 1992; Mathur, 2007). However, the classic perspective positions comedy as an inferior form of entertainment, devaluing its impact on modern culture. Furthermore, scientific analyses have been limited to conclusions that place comedy as a vehicle through which individual healing can occur, such as cognitive behavioral therapy and the exploration of unconscious dreams (Dionigi & Canestrari, 2018; Freud, 1905; MacRury, 2012). While there has been some scholarship on how comedy can be a means of addressing societal problems (e.g., DeCamp 2015; Lockyer, 2016; Milburn, 2019), there has been no significant research on how comedians can use the comedic genre to make serious arguments about mental health.
Comedy is a constantly evolving genre. Traditionally, comedians who moved away from comedic material did so with the understanding that non-comedic material would not be accepted in the same way as their comedic content (e.g., Russell Brand, George Carlin, and Pryor) (Milburn, 2019). However, some modern comedians have challenged the typical form and genre expectations of comedy to allow explicitly non-comedic material to be accepted within the comedy genre, while also sharing more serious messages about mental health, physical abuse, and depression. Additionally, there might be a change in how the audience engages with comedy. Audiences might be more receptive to non-comedic material while still accepting the comedian as such, leading to more openness from the performer. Chapter 2 will explore the development of comedy as a genre in more detail.

To investigate this dynamic, this project is guided by these primary questions: (1) How do these performers engage in the post-comedy turn (Fox, 2018a)? (2) How do comedians situate their audiences to be receptive to non-comedic material? (3) How do these performers use comedic material to incorporate and support serious discussions about mental health while successfully remaining within the comedy genre? and (4) What is the role of privilege in the presentation of non-comedic material in a stand-up comedy special?

The intersection of privilege, mental health, and communication provides key opportunities for some groups while others are ignored. Additionally, comedy provides a vehicle for many, although it remains a site of heteronormativity, further limiting the voices of those who fall outside of the majority (Marx, 2015). To understand how some contemporary comedians confront these issues, specifically the attempt to provide a discussion about mental health in a comedic setting, I conduct a rhetorical analysis about post-comedy rhetorical tactics and strategy.
Research Method

Method of Analysis

For post-comedy (Fox, 2018a) to work, I posit that comedians must rhetorically create an identity for their audience members that strategically situates them to be more receptive to their non-comedic message. To investigate this dynamic, this project covers three broad areas: (1) how rhetors shape their audience to be receptive of their non-comedic material, including the implications on gender, race, and class, (2) how rhetors understand and share their worldview with their audience as it relates to mental health, and (3) how the rhetors’ privileges enables them to present non-comedic material in a comedy special while still being accepted within the genre of comedy. To first understand how rhetors shape their audience, it is important to explore constitutive rhetoric. Maurice Charland’s (1987) notion of constitutive rhetoric is a useful tool to explore how rhetoric constitutes the identity and positionality of an audience. Charland explores how Quebecers construct an identity of the previously nonexistent “Peuple Québécois” to justify a sovereign and independent Quebec (1987). Building on Louis Althusser’s work on interpellation, Charland argues that rhetoric does more than merely persuade through the presentation of logical arguments and proof. Instead, Charland identifies that rhetoric can make ideological support or opposition to a position “inherent to [a] subject position” through “a series of narrative ideological effects” (134). This addition to our understanding of the function of rhetoric gained widespread acceptance in our discipline and the theory has been advanced through various studies, all with the purpose of understanding how rhetoric creates an audience’s identity, specifically an identity onto which an audience can affix themselves (e.g., Taylor, 2016; Thieme, 2010; Zagacki, 2007).

In this study, I use Charland’s basic tenets that rhetoric creates an identity for an audience and that the rhetoric assumes the audience is strategically placed to be more receptive to the
message. Comedians must successfully position their audience to be receptive of their rhetorical argument, that serious issues should be treated seriously. The primary purpose of comedy is to make the audience laugh (Greenbaum, 1999; Libera, 2020). Material that does not generate laughter, outside the setup of a joke, is not comedy. However, the comedians I examine use rhetoric to shape their audience and its expectations in order to present non-comedic material successfully, thereby presenting an ideological argument based on their authority as critics of society and, in this case, the genre of comedy (Greenbaum, 1999; Smith, 1993).

This shaping is different from a comedian feeling comfortable with an audience to share non-funny material. For an example, while on tour for his soon-to-be televised comedy special, comedian Gabriel Iglesias, at the end of his show at the Gallagher-Bluedorn Performing Arts Center in Cedar Falls, Iowa, shared his real issues about marriage. He was not presenting funny material; however, he had just finished his set and, in the moment, felt comfortable sharing this information. Iglesias did not intend to share non-comedic material with the audience, but something about the audience made him feel safe and comfortable enough to do so. In this instance, the audience somewhat affected the rhetoric (G. Iglesias, personal communication, March 09, 2013).

In my study, these comedians purposefully and intentionally share non-comedic material. They do not alter their material based on the audience; they know they would share non-comedic material before the set begins. In order to do this successfully, they have to shape their audience to accept it: in other words, they have to use their rhetoric to constitute their audience for them to accept the comedian’s non-comedic material.

Additionally, comedy is all about perspectives on the world. One way to understand perspective rhetorically is to examine how attitudes and perception frame our understanding of the
world around us. Scholars have examined frames and their rhetorical function. For example, in his study of framing, Robert M. Entman (1993) identifies four functions of framing rhetoric: define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest solutions. This conceptualization of framing positions the rhetor as the one responsible for bringing salience to the issue and providing a perspective from which the audience can engage in these functions (Entman, 1993). Therefore, the rhetor oversees the rhetoric, guiding their audience toward a specific goal, such as understanding policy, news media framing of social movements, and defining actions in and judgements about a war.

Entman describes how framing is based in “selection and salience” (1993, p. 52). He argues that framing does more than just position the audience to view a certain topic from a perspective, but to also draw conclusions, including moral judgments, from that position. Additionally, Entman (1993) argues there are four “locations”: “the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture” (p. 52). These four locations highlight how framing engages more than just the rhetor and the audience: explicitly or not, everyone must understand the cultural perspective of the text in order for the frame to be successful. As Entman (1993) states, “the frame determines whether most people notice and how they understand and remember a problem, as well as how they evaluate and choose to act upon it” (p. 54). Framing is an active process, utilized for the purpose of persuasion.

Additionally, Ervin Goffman (1974) suggests that frames provide background to form an understanding for how to interpret and understand the situation (p. 22). Frames not only situate information, they also provide context. By engaging in framing, rhetors provide necessary context for audiences to make judgments about that information. Rhetors paint the picture using many techniques, such as metaphors, to highlight the important aspects of the frame (Benoit, 2001). For instance, when President Bill Clinton substitutes Senator Bob Dole’s “Bridge to the Past” with his
“Bridge to the Future,” Clinton contextualizes that metaphor so his audience could make judgments about him as a candidate (Benoit, 2001, p. 70).

While many rhetors have used framing to guide their audience toward a specific set of conclusions, I argue that framing can also be used to understand an issue in a different way, allowing the audience to reach their own conclusions, regardless of agreement. While the goal of the rhetor might be for the audience to reach a conclusion, framing in this context allows for audiences to reach their own, thereby utilizing their individual interpretations to come to an understanding with the rhetor.

In addition to establishing a frame for their audience, rhetors also engage in frame shifting to provide opportunities for different interpretations of ideas. Frame shifting occurs when a rhetor “postulat[es] a different frame of reference from the one in which the subject is normally viewed” (Zarefsky, 2004, p. 613). By providing a new context for interpretation, rhetors can influence the audience’s understanding of an idea, particularly in a way the rhetor already perceives that idea. While frame shifting has been used primarily to analyze political rhetoric and news media (e.g., Riker, 1986; Zarefsky, 2004), it has not been used in the realm of comedy to understand how performers can alter audiences’ understanding of contemporary issues. Frame shifting is particularly useful in understanding how these comedians can shift the comedic frame to a non-comedic frame successfully.

Using these rhetorical theories, I analyze how comedians constitute their audience, shaping them to be receptive of their non-comedic message and frame their rhetoric to allow the audience to use different means to reach the same conclusion as the comedian based on their own perceptions of culture, content, and reality. Additionally, I analyze comedians’ use of frame shifting to understand how they alter audience’s normal interpretations of an idea to be more
acceptable to a new interpretation; specifically, how they alter audiences’ perceived understanding of a stand-up comedy special to be more accepting of non-comedic material. Finally, I explore how certain privileged comedians are able to talk about mental health onstage whereas other, minoritized comedians may not while engaging in the post-comedy turn (Fox, 2018a).

While rhetoric provides opportunities to explore how comedians present their message, both comedic and otherwise, it is inherently limited. Because rhetorical methodology does not engage with the rhetor or the audience directly, such as having the scholar interview the speaker, the findings in this project are necessarily qualified. However, I argue that rhetoric provides the best means through which we can understand how these rhetors shape their audience, share their worldview, and shift frames to present a serious argument about mental health within the genre of comedy.

For the sake of clarity, whenever I refer to something being “comedic,” I am referring to the intent of the material or the rhetor of being funny. Additionally, I also use the metaphor of a comedian’s mask slipping away or being pulled off. This metaphor is developed from two existing metaphors: the comedy/tragedy masks of theater and the “mask of depression” that Deborah Serani identified when comedians hide their depression behind a funny face (Serani, as quoted in Neporent, 2014). I use this metaphor to help describe how comedians step outside of the characters they have developed onstage to show what seems to be the ‘real’ person beneath. While this person beneath could absolutely be another character used for the purpose of entertainment, I argue that what lies beneath the mask is the real person coming through, and each comedian who reveals themselves does so with the intent of being non-comedic in their presentation of real issues. Comedians have developed stage characters to maintain success throughout their careers, and these comedians are no different. Burnham is a meta-critic (Burnham & Storer, 2016), Brennan is critical
of race (Brennan, 2017), and Gadsby’s soft-spoken style leads to her to use primarily self-deprecating humor (Orb & Parry, 2018). However, these comedians drop their characters in these specials to emphasize the negative, and sometimes, violent situations they find themselves in, without making it funny. While many comedians have used personal experience for comedic material, these comedians are purposefully not funny when talking about mental and physical health.

Texts

This analysis focuses on three texts: the one-hour comedy specials of Bo Burnham (Make Happy), Neal Brennan (3 Mics), and Hannah Gadsby (Nanette). Bo Burnham became an internet sensation as he recorded comedic songs in his bedroom and published them on the now-popular video sharing platform YouTube. When he turned 18, he performed his first stand-up special for Comedy Central (Burnham & Miller, 2009). Burnham mixes traditional stand-up comedy with comedic songs, mostly based in satire and wordplay. He has maintained his success by performing three other comedy specials: Words, Words, Words; and Make Happy, the latter is used for this analysis. While he has consistently used mental health as comedic material, his final stand-up special was more explicit about mental health, particularly his depression and frustration with the pressure put upon him, both by himself and by society (Burnham & Storer, 2016). In the final fourteen minutes of his special, Burnham explicitly talks about his declining mental health in a (mostly) non-comedic manner, which is atypical for a comedy special (Burnham & Storer, 2016; Valenta, 2018). While this time is spent being not funny, Make Happy is widely accepted by the comedy community and by audiences nationwide. This special is one of the first critically acclaimed stand-up specials with a significant portion dedicated to non-comedic material. More
recent comedians, and comedy specials, have achieved parallel success utilizing similar techniques.

The second text in this project is Neal Brennan’s comedy special *3 Mics*. Brennan sets the stage, both figuratively and literally, by placing three microphones at strategic places on the stage. The microphone on stage right is used for “one-liners,” the microphone on stage left is used for “stand-up,” and the microphone at center stage is for “emotional stuff” (Brennan, 2017). This utilization of a purposefully placed center microphone to discuss such a stigmatized and emotional issue makes this special unique. Brennan does not try to make fun of his mental health, although a couple of lines get laughs. Similarly, he does not use his mental health as comedic material while using the other two microphones; the special is set up to almost be three distinct performances in one. Of the three post-comedy (Fox, 2018a) comedians I will be analyzing, Brennan spends the most time explicitly talking about his issues in a non-comedic manner. However, like Burnham, Brennan achieves widespread acclaim for this special, further cementing the possibility for comedians to discuss their problems in a non-comedic way without losing their status and success as a comedian.

The final comedian I analyze in this project is Hannah Gadsby in her special *Nanette* (2018). Gadsby states early in her special that she is dissatisfied with comedy, and she proceeds to explicate why she feels that way throughout the special. However, her style is different from someone like Carlin or Bill Hicks, who presented their material as a diatribe against society and individuals. Instead, Gadsby presents material comedically with an undercurrent of anger. Like Burnham, Gadsby carves out roughly ten minutes of her comedy special to be serious. She told her audience that she was done being funny, because it was not working; not for her or for anyone else like her (Olb & Parry, 2018). Gadsby discusses the physical abuse she received as a lesbian
woman in Tasmania, including reversing a joke told earlier, where she was able to avoid assault by joking with a jealous boyfriend (Olb & Parry, 2018). Instead, as revealed in the final part of her special, the jealous boyfriend did beat her for flirting with his girlfriend, something that was not abnormal in a socially conservative community such as Tasmania in the 1990s (Olb & Parry, 2018).

It is important to note that gender plays a significant role in this project. For example, Burnham’s masculine male identity allows him to explore comedic opportunities within his special that is not available to other, non-male identifying comedians. Because of the inherent masculine nature of the genre of comedy, specifically that men are accepted as being funny whereas women must fight against the stereotype that they are not (Berretta, 2014; Hitchens, 2007; Walker, 1988), Burnham has a distinct advantage over others, including Gadsby. When one is allowed access to all forms of entertainment, exploring those forms, including ones that do not fall into traditionally masculine tropes like sexual appetite and physical aggression (Doyle, 1995), does not typically lead to public backlash. Similarly, the genre of entertainment allows comedians and actors to explore techniques, characters, styles, and choices that fall outside of the traditional gender paradigm as well. In other words, because Burnham is a white, heterosexual, heteronormative, cisgender, able-bodied, middle-class male from the United States, he is given more informal license to explore non-masculine ideas on stage, such as discussing his feelings and mental health openly.

Certain other comedians are given that license as well, including Neal Brennan. While he does not utilize as many performative techniques as Burnham, Brennan dedicates the majority of his special to exploring his mental health and his feelings, something that falls outside the traditional masculine expectation of keeping one’s feelings locked inside (Hobbs, as cited in
Campbell, 2019). However, his comedy special has not been criticized for being feminine; instead, it has been acclaimed because of its exploration of mental health (Czajkowski, 2016; Gross, 2017; University Wire, 2017). Just like Burnham, Brennan is able to explore his feelings because of the combination of his privilege and the genre of entertainment.

While Hannah Gadsby’s performance was also critically acclaimed for her exploration of mental health (Berman, 2018; Wired Staff, 2018), the informal criticism on Nanette remained focused on how it did not fit within the genre of comedy, even though it was more comedic than either Burnham’s or Brennan’s specials. The comment in the footnote is masked in open social critique, but it really lays bare the gendered stereotypes and expectations Gadsby faces within the realm of comedy. Other commenters responded to this post with more positive perspectives, but the sentiment in the referenced comment encapsulates the critique against Nanette and its message.

The inherent masculinity of stand-up comedy, as well as the privileged position masculinity plays in Australia, where Gadsby is from, and the United States, where Burnham and Brennan are from, impact how these specials are interpreted. Burnham and Brennan are seemingly free to explore mental health in whatever way they want, including dedicating large portions of their

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10 One example of an internet comment summing up their position on Nanette includes:

Unpopular opinion, but Hannah Gadsby’s ‘stand-up’ routine called “Nanette”, if you can call it ‘stand-up’ is propaganda promoting her own agenda to make a quick buck. I understand homophobia is rampant and we should really do something about it, but censoring ourselves is really just masking the problem. As a collective human race we need to stand together unified. Not labeling ourselves and then getting mad when those labels bring assumptions. If you told me you were a girl, I would assume you need tampons. Turns out you’re transgender and get offended because I didn’t know. So what am I supposed to do? Ask everyone what their acceptable vocabulary is? No I hardly think so. Does this mean we need to punish speaking your mind when someone takes offense? Certainly not. What we need to do is spend more time helping our children be the people we couldn’t, and less time worrying what others think about you. You can’t be popular with everyone. I also very much do not appreciate the veil it’s being marketed as “A Netflix comedy special” Sure she is standing up on stage, sure she says some jokes. However the main portion of the routine was talking about how hard it is to live with mental illness and gender-queerness. It is a look at the current environment of our society, but it’s under the wrong image, and sending the wrong message. All this made me do is come out wondering how much damage she could be pushing forward.

specials to their emotions, something that falls outside the traditional masculine realm. However, Gadsby is criticized much more severely, including by Sarah Balkin for not properly being a feminist killjoy because her message does not lead to sustained action (2020). Similarly, Burnham and Brennan, outside of a couple jokes that do not investigate gender in depth, do not discuss their gendered positions, most likely because masculinity is the norm and everything else is the aberration (Connell, 1987).

Furthermore, Gadsby provides a unique dimension of privilege amongst the three comedians identified for this analysis. All are white, but Gadsby is the only non-male, non-heterosexual comedian among these three who has achieved widespread success in her special despite including non-comedic content. Her positionality in the world, and within this sample, provides the impetus for a primary argument in my project, which is that only certain people are allowed to engage in the post-comedy turn (Fox, 2018a) and talk about explicitly difficult and painful things in a comedy special while also achieving widespread acclaim and success based on that special.

These comedians are not the only ones who have talked about mental health on stage. Daniel Fernandes, Maron, and Aparna Nancherla also discuss struggles with anxiety and depression as well, although in a broadly comedic fashion. They balance between joking about their mental health to providing a window into their perspectives without a punchline, allowing their audiences to hopefully understand the tension they feel as people who deal with mental health issues. In his special Shadows, Fernandes explores how it feels to talk about mental health in India:

Now clap your hands if you’ve ever had to deal with a mental illness, anxiety or depression [some members of the audience clap]. Good, good. You know the Indian comedy scene
has evolved when we move [on] from stuff like, “Clap your hands if you’re Gujarati [peoples living in the western-most state of India who speak an Indo-Aryan language].” Here Fernandes highlights how mental illness has become more acceptable to talk about, rather than just joking about differences amongst peoples from various states in India. Furthermore, Fernandes understands how important it is to remove stigma around mental health, something that still affects many today.

Marc Maron, a white man from New Jersey, has provided an opportunity for a broader discussion about comedians and mental health, particularly in his stand-up material and successful podcast titled *WTF with Marc Maron*. In both, Maron highlights how comedians are more than just people who tell jokes; they have complicated lives just like everyone else, but that gets overshadowed because of the perception that comedians are supposed to be funny all the time. More specifically, in a podcast with fellow comedian Paul Gilmartin, Maron discusses the struggles he has faced with his mental processes and the understanding that he is not like everyone else, but he is also not alone (Gilmartin, 2011). The tension between being funny and being real is a constant struggle for Maron, as well as other comedians, as they deal with their lives both within and outside of comedy.

While mental health has been a talking point for these comedians, it has primarily been used as a setup for a punchline. Comedians have been able to explore their personal struggles, which is a positive, but they have been limited by the comedy genre in the past. However, as I show in this project, some modern comedians have been able to alter that paradigm to present non-comedic material on mental health in a serious fashion while and still be accepted within the realm of comedy.
The comedy specials were accessed using the popular streaming site Netflix. Each special was selected because it has received critical acclaim, based on popularity ratings on two internet rating systems based on fans’ perspectives of the program: IMDb.com (Internet Movie Database) and rottentomatoes.com. Netflix has become the de facto home of stand-up comedy specials (Schwerdtfeger, 2017), with many comedians seeing opportunities to share their material with a broader audience than traditional cable television. Additionally, Netflix continues to produce and publish original comedy specials, allowing for comedians to gain a larger audience earlier in their career than in the past (Keegan, 2019).

These three performances were the first major, successful comedy specials that employed a form of the post-comedy turn (Fox, 2018a). While they were successful, they were also limited in their diversity, particularly racial and classist diversity. All three comedians identify as white (two from the United States, one from Australia). Similarly, all share a middle/upper-class background, albeit they have each earned fame in their own ways. Each represents various forms of privilege, which potentially allowed them the opportunity to present non-comedic material successfully in the first place, something people without privilege may not have had. I explore this dynamic in further detail below.

**Chapter Previews**

These comedy specials do not exist in a vacuum; societal, cultural, and historical forces impact what comedians discuss in their performances. Similarly, comedy has developed to reflect and critique dimensions of the situations they are in. In Chapter 2, I provide an overview of the history of comedy, specifically in the United States. While comedy has existed outside the United States, necessarily so because of the jesters who performed for royalty and the multitude of non-
US comedians performing today, this dissertation is focused primarily on the United States and its dimensions of privilege, power, and perspectives on comedy.

In this discussion, I describe the development of comedy as one that is not only a response to and influencer of culture, but also as a genre that informs itself. As comedians have continued to critique power, they have found new ways to do so. Radio provided audiences a means of connecting with comedians and characters, such as those in *Amos ‘n’ Andy*. Television provided comedians, such as Johnny Carson and James Corden, an opportunity to critique politics and celebrities. Furthermore, Netflix has provided a vehicle for comedians across the world to gain international audiences.

Comedians, as performers, are citational, in that previous comedians, shows, and performances inform their own material (Warren, 2009). Moreover, sites of humor have traditionally focused on three areas in relation to the comedian: the self, the audience, and the other. More specifically, comedians have used themselves as places of humor, particularly how they do not fit societal expectations, such as weight, height, gender, or physical appearance. Based on these sites of humor, it is a rational progression that comedians would also focus on their mental health or thought processes. Just like some comedians critique power in a serious manner, it seems a logical step that other topics would earn the same treatment. Therefore, as I argue in Chapter 2, the move toward post-comedy (Fox, 2018a), specifically in its treatment of mental health, is a rational one.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 focus on individual comedians in the post-comedy era in chronological order. Chapter 3 examines Bo Burnham, a young comedian who became famous through his

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11 As you will notice in these chapters, some quotes are analyzed multiple times. As I explain below, because of the nature of comedy specials and the rhetorical skill of these performers, they are utilizing multiple techniques simultaneously to make their non-comedic arguments palatable to their audiences.
YouTube channel, specifically his musical comedy. Burnham’s fourth special, *Make Happy*, includes many of the same meta-critical material that Burnham is known for, but the content deals with more serious issues, such as body image, suicide, and mental health. This special is unique in that the last portion of the show involves Burnham singing directly to his audience in what he terms a Kanye West-style rant, followed by a bow and the statement “Thank you. I hope you’re happy” (Burnham & Storer, 2016). The camera follows Burnham off stage wherein the audience’s thunderous applause is abruptly shut off as he sits at a piano. Burnham then talks and sings directly to the audience watching the recording, singing a deeply personal and exploratory song about what it means to be happy. While some of the material is humorous, the purpose is to be non-comedic in these final bits.

Burnham frames his content to explore real issues in a manner that is acceptable to his audience. While the live audience is broadly young and white, Burnham wants to demonstrate that there are real issues facing people in America, himself included. Burnham frames his material to be acceptable and therefore as something which his audience can engage using Entman’s four functions (1993). Similarly, Burnham constitutes his audience as those who have the most power to do something about it. By calling them out on their whiteness and privilege, Burnham shapes them to be actors of change rather than resigned receivers of action. Additionally, Burnham explicitly removes his character’s mask to reveal pain, even though it takes some interpretation to understand what he might be talking about. However, the revelation of Burnham’s ‘real’ self is not obvious; instead, the audience must actively understand the culture and context in which Burnham has situated himself and his viewers to get the full picture. Finally, Burnham represents many forms of privilege, something he identifies in this special but does not explore further. Burnham is a white, heteronormative, able-bodied, English speaking male from near Boston, Massachusetts.
However, except for minor jokes, he does not explore his privileges as someone who has the social freedom to explore his mental health on stage.

Chapter 4 focuses on Neal Brennan’s comedy special 3 Mics. This special has the most explicit presentation of non-comedic material of any in my sample because Brennan uses different microphones in different areas of the stage for different material. The microphone on stage right is used for one-liners. The microphone on stage left is used for storytelling jokes. And the microphone in the middle, upstage of the other two, is used to discuss Brennan’s mental health in an explicitly non-comedic fashion. Brennan has long been a social critic, writing for the popular television show Chappelle’s Show (Armour, Brennan, & Chappelle, 2003-2006), which openly mocked societal norms. However, this was Brennan’s first full-length comedy special on Netflix, and it was widely accepted despite its radical format.

In this special, Brennan constitutes his audience as those who are willing to listen to him be purposefully non-comedic. Instead of breaking the expectations of the audience for the sake of art, he shaped his audience to be receptive of his non-comedic material, leading them to be sympathetic of his plight while still accepting his performance as comedy. Brennan reveals his ‘real’ self in this special as he is the most explicit in doing so. Furthermore, Brennan frames his content to be accepted. He begins the show with comedy before moving to non-comedy, allowing his audience to get comfortable with the stand-up style rather than diving into an exploration of mental health issues. Similarly, he frames his content as being his fault (to an extent), relieving the audience of the burden of blame. Finally, he can use his privilege, albeit non-purposefully, to find success with this post-comedy style (Fox, 2018a). However, just like Burnham, Brennan does not interrogate why he, a white, middle-class, successful, heterosexual male with access to a national audience and healthcare, is treated differently than those who are minoritized.
Chapter 5 focuses on Hannah Gadsby, a comedian from Tasmania, Australia, who found worldwide success with her comedy special Nanette. Even though Gadsby is from Australia, her special gained notoriety as she toured around the world, including New York City. Additionally, the issues of power, privilege, and patriarchy are present in the United States, and the impact of her material has affected critics and fans in the United States as well as Australia. While Gadsby has been performing comedy for over a decade, she mentions in the first half of this special that she is done doing comedy. This explicit statement marks a shift from the other specials in my sample in that she does not define what it is she is doing. Even though she makes her audience laugh throughout the performance, she allows them to categorize it. Similarly, in her newest special Douglas, she discusses the backlash from her special, specifically as those with privilege perceive it (Parry, 2020). Nanette is a slight outlier in my sample for a few reasons: Gadsby is the only non-male, non-heterosexual person in my sample; Nanette was not as popular on rottentomatoes.com as the others, mostly due to people arguing that it is not comedy (although this informs the argument on privilege as well); and Gadsby is the only non-American comedian, although this special was released in America. This special is the most direct in its discussion about minoritized peoples as it details struggles with mental health, non-heterosexuality, and male hegemony. However, Gadsby, just like the other comedians in my sample, does not deconstruct her own privileged status, although she has less privilege than Burnham and Brennan.

While there are some differences between this special and the others, it is part of this project because of its inclusion of non-comedic material while still being accepted by audiences and critics around the world, even winning a Peabody Award (Peabody Awards, 2018) and an Emmy Award (Emmys.com, 2019). Her material fits the style of the post-comedy turn (Fox, 2018a), making it ideal for analysis. In addition to the lack of interrogation of her privilege, Gadsby constitutes her
audience as those who are willing to fight for change, not just wait for change to happen. She is more direct in her condemnation of her audience for their passivity but does not blame them for the ills of the world. By doing this, Gadsby shapes her audience to be one of action rather than reaction. Additionally, she frames her material in a way that makes her audience aware of inequalities in comedy, history, and western society. Finally, Gadsby purposefully reveals her ‘real’ self in this special, identifying experiences of violence in a non-comedic fashion. While Gadsby experiences fewer privileges than Burnham or Brennan, she does not explore the privileges she does have, such as being white, able-bodied, and English speaking. Despite these three comedians not investigating their own privileges, they do provide a first step toward successfully exploring dimensions of mental and physical health on stage within the genre of comedy.

Chapter 6 discusses the results of this project. It explores and compares themes and rhetorical tactics found across all three specials. It explains how these observations add to our current scholarship on comedy, communication, mental health, and privilege. It concludes by proving directions for future research. By conducting a rhetorical analysis of these three comedians, we can further our understanding of how comedy has changed, including how comedians are constituting their audience, framing content, revealing their ‘real’ selves, and taking advantage of their privilege while discussing mental and physical health, depression, and societal ills.
Chapter 2: From Jesters to Post-Comedy: An Exploration of the Progression of Comedy

By providing an avenue for critique, comedy has become one of the most popular forms of social commentary and entertainment around the world. One of the most significant homes for modern comedy is the United States, where freedom of speech, democratic governance, and entertainment for profit have provided comedians a place to perform without much restriction or threat (Achter, 2008; Higgie, 2017; Ravits, 2000; Webber, 2013). While these freedoms have allowed modern comedians to speak on myriad topics, both benign and taboo, largely unhindered, it has not always been the case. For example, in the 1960s, Lenny Bruce was arrested multiple times on obscenity charges, with investigators claiming that his material was presented in a way that undermined the positive moral values of his artform (People v. Bruce, 1964; People v. Bruce, 1966). Although Bruce was convicted of obscenity in Illinois, the decision was reversed upon appeal (Collins & Skover, 2002). Similarly, Bruce was convicted and imprisoned in New York (Collins & Skover, 2002), dying two years after his arrest in 1964. However, he received a posthumous pardon by the State of New York, wherein they finally acknowledged the conviction was politically motivated. Bruce’s legacy in pushing the boundaries of acceptable comic performance continues to influence modern comedians as they challenge social, political, and moral norms in US culture (Britt, 2016; Mintz, 1985; Popović, 2018). Furthermore, the freedom to present material on any topic, which was central in the legal controversy about Bruce and its aftermath, provided the opportunity for modern comedians to speak about their mental health, as well as criticize what they perceive to be underlying causes, without fear of legal persecution.

While challenges to freedom of speech have allowed comedians to feel safe from arrest, modern technology has provided more opportunities for comedians to find their audience. Social media platforms, in particular Twitter, provide comedians a means to post short-form jokes and
connect with their audiences more regularly, furthering their ability to establishing relationships with their audiences to maintain popularity. YouTube has also been massively influential, allowing comedians and other entertainers to post their own material without worrying about going through production companies and possible censorship from corporations, who are more focused on the financial aspect of entertainment. Finally, streaming services, such as Netflix, have been important for comedians. Netflix has moved from being a place to rent movies to becoming its own production company, allowing more opportunities for movies and shows to be developed specifically for the streaming service, skipping the hassle of major movie production companies. More specifically, Netflix, like Comedy Central in the 1990s and early 2000s, has become the go-to site for stand-up comedy specials. Comedians of all backgrounds have had the opportunity to write, produce, and perform stand-up specials just for Netflix. Between 2017 and 2019 alone, Netflix published 158 stand-up comedy specials, with many of them featuring comedians recording their very first special.

Of the three comedians I analyze in this project, each have taken advantage of the freedom to explore any topic onstage and modern technologies to present non-comedic material within the comedy genre. While comedians from around the world have benefited from this increased exposure, the confluence of various factors, particularly freedom of speech and the location of modern technologies’ headquarters, as well as being a primarily English-speaking country, maintains America’s predominant role in comedy. While the United States is the premier site for modern comedy, the comedy genre evolved from a broad range of global influences. In the next section, I will describe the historical development of comedy as social critique, including the focus on, and exclusion of, people who are minoritized. Then I discuss the elements of jokes, including
the comic persona and targets of jokes. Finally, I explore how the post-comedy turn (Fox, 2018a) was a rational progression of comedy.

**History of Comedy as Social Critique**

Comedy can be categorized broadly as either observational or critical (Berlant & Ngai, 2017). The former provides humor in the benign and mundane. Some comedians, such as Jim Gaffigan, Jerry Seinfeld, and Steven Wright have built their careers on silly observations. While remaining uncritical, observational humor can provide a vehicle through which comedians can point out absurdities in life. The latter type of comedy provides a critique of the world, potentially undermining the authority of those who hold power. One of the earliest known forms of comedy that incorporates both was the court jester: someone whose role was to entertain royalty (March, 2018). They used observational comedy to point out absurdities in actions or personalities, hoping to elicit laughter from their audience. Jesters had limited license to be critics within the royal court as they were one of the few who could mock those in power. However, jesters were constantly on edge because there was a fine line between what those in power allowed to be mocked and what was deserving of removal, either by means of imprisonment or through death. Eliciting laughter reduced the potential impact of the critique, thereby allowing many jesters to mock royal persons without losing their lives. Jesters were allowed limited license to engage in political and social commentary, which are consistent and still relevant through-lines of comedy routines (March, 2018).

Although little is known about the comedic history between medieval jesters and touring groups of the 1800s, comedy historian Mel Watkins (1994) provides a thorough analysis of how humor, specifically African American humor, allowed comedians to maintain their roles as political and social commentators. In the United States, white comedians were afforded
opportunities to freely travel and use any style of performance to provide humor and satire to hundreds of fans. However, African American comedians had very little freedom and were relegated to stereotypes, minstrelsy, and farces as they negotiated the bitter and violent suppression of African American humor. Performers were expected to caricaturize African American stereotypes, such as Sambo (simple-minded), Jezebelle (sexually driven female), or Aunt Jemimah (female life revolved around domestic work) (Green, n.d.; Watkins, 1994). While some African American comedians (e.g., Stepin Fetchit) found success while occupying these stereotypical roles, many were not allowed to eat or lodge with the white performers (Watkins, 1994). Some performers were even banned from staying overnight in towns, causing many popular African American performers to sleep in fields and ditches when not performing (Watkins, 1994).

At the turn of the 20th century, comedians of all races and genders were given a broader platform to perform. With the advent of movies, vaudeville (1880s-1920s) became the popular style of comedy (Watkins, 1994; White, 2016). Through vaudeville, comedians were provided an opportunity to engage in physical humor like slapstick, while providing political and social commentary (White, 2016). Several types of performers starred in vaudeville, such as actors, contortionists, musicians, plate-spinners, tumblers, and comedians (Garner, 1997). However, the focus was on the latter, specifically their social and political commentary in a family-friendly performance. Some of the freedom and success of vaudeville comedians occurred because they were able to provide biting criticisms of the world around them while not having to carry the entire show. Many comedy stars either began or were directly influenced by vaudeville, such as Abbott and Costello, Steve Allen, Lucille Ball, and the Marx Brothers (Garner, 1997).

Vaudeville expanded the range of topics that comedians could discuss. In this format, comedians not only engaged in physical humor to make their audiences laugh, they also engaged
in social discourse by challenging sex and gender norms and racial ideology through different forms of dress and mockery of stereotypical patterns of behavior (Wagner, 2011, p. 35; Watkins, 1994; White, 1994, p. 299). As comedy became more popular in mainstream society, comedians of all types were able to consistently challenge common beliefs and perceptions, moving from stereotypes that maintain racist and sexist expectations to an overt criticism of societal structure (Limon, 2000; Rovin, 1983; Tafoya, 2011; Watkins, 1994).

Additionally, vaudeville allowed comedians of all backgrounds to interact with comedy in new ways. Before vaudeville, most traditional comedians did not interact directly with their audience; instead, they interacted with others onstage or performed a routine or scene that was humorous (Watkins, 1994). In comparison, vaudeville helped some comedians engage with their audiences as they interacted with and played off their audiences to comedic effect.

As new film technologies developed, motion pictures provided comedians with the opportunity to record and share their comedic material with audiences around the United States. However, these opportunities were limited to those who had privilege, specifically white men. For example, African American comedians struggled to get acting roles, and typically those parts required racist and stereotypical performances. Moreover, the roles did not provide many comedians the opportunity to provide social critique of these stereotypes (Watkins, 1994).

Before the commercialization of radio, comedians were dependent on traveling across the country to perform in front of live audiences. Comedians were able to tailor their content to their specific audiences, and censorship was up to the owner of the establishment. With the commercialization of radio, comedians were asked to perform without a present audience, something many comedians initially refused to do. However, with the promise of a steady
paycheck and a wider audience, comedians began using radio as a medium to reach audiences around the country and around the world (Watkins, 1994).

While comedians were able to reach a broader audience, the family-oriented medium raised the problem of censorship. Comedians had to have material screened beforehand to make sure it was palatable to wider audiences and meet obscenity standards. Furthermore, comedians were required to avoid the more risqué elements of their act, such as using vulgar language or overtly sexual material. Even when comedians could present adult material, audience reaction was often negative (Watkins, 1994).

However, after seeing the early commercial success of comedy on radio, reluctant comedians saw the value of this new medium. With the increase of comedians using radio, the style of comedy had to change. Comedians had to rely on voice acting and characters to be successful, primarily through scenes and situations rather than physical comedy. Similarly, serials and variety shows became popular because of the nature of radio; a comedian could not perform the same material over and over again because the audience had heard it before. Instead, comedians and other performers had to make each show unique (Watkins, 1994).

Eventually, radio provided comedians opportunities to explore different forms of comedy and variety shows, such as the *Jack Benny Show*, and serial shows, such as *Amos ‘n’ Andy*; both shows excelled in this new medium. Comedians were becoming more popular because they could quickly reach a larger audience. For instance, comedians no longer had to rely on word-of-mouth advertising and promoting or slow cross-country travel. Instead, they could be exposed to and establish a rapport with a regional or national audience through the radio (Mundy & White, 2012, p. 81).
More importantly, comedians and audiences connected on a personal level like never before. Comedians and actors established personae that resonated with audiences and had a lasting effect on them. For instance, during the original airing of *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, audiences reacted strongly when a gunshot was heard during Andy’s wedding (Watkins, 1994, p. 277). Audiences were invested in the lives of these comedians and the characters they portrayed, creating a new dynamic between comedian and audience. This connection marks the beginning of a continued relationship between audience and comedian, wherein the audience becomes invested in the comedian themselves rather than just the funny material they are presenting. This relationship would continue for many comedians as they became famous in other venues like television.

The advent of television provided performers the balance between oral and visual comedy that early motion pictures and radio could not provide. Specifically, comedians were able to perform brief routines on late night television shows, such as the *Late Show with Johnny Carson* (Watkins, 1994). Late night television talk and comedy shows initially struggled to find success with a wide audience. As a result, these shows sought out musical and comedy performers who might draw new viewers. These shows provided comedians of all levels of fame a spotlight through which they could reach a wider audience. In comedy, minutes are counted as currency (Johnston, 2018). As a result, comedians thought primarily in terms of minutes, wherein a 15-minute set was worth more than a 5-minute set. Television opened new opportunities for comedians to have longer sets and more exposure. These new opportunities led many performers (e.g., Rodney Dangerfield, Richard Pryor, and Robin Williams,) to reach superstardom (Rovin, 1983; Watkins, 1994). Television also shifted the style of comedy from primarily skits to direct engagement with the audience via monologue (Fox, 2015; Swain, 2020; Watkins, 1994). These long strings of jokes, stories, or comedic observations allowed performers to explore social and observational
commentary, providing a more direct critique of the world around them while continuing to establish a rapport with the live audience (Fox, 2015). Additionally, performances on television were broadcast to viewers across the country, widening the awareness of these comedians to millions of people (Fox, 2015).

As the United States moved through different eras, such as the conservative, traditional, and family-oriented 1950s to the bawdy, raunchy, and rebellious attitude of the 1960s and 1970s, television followed suit (Zoglin, 2008). Television programs began to focus on more intimate topics, such as race, sex, drugs, and poverty, topics that were rarely discussed in shows like Leave it to Beaver or The Andy Griffith Show.

The changing times and increase in television networks and viewing options led to the creation of edgy comedy shows like Saturday Night Live, Second City TV, and In Living Color, which elevated several comedians and the entire comedy genre. Due to the increased exposure through late-night comedy, comedians moved to acting in shows and films, broadening their range and commercial appeal. Audiences would learn about these comedians, become invested in their success, and then follow them to other mediums.

Just like radio, television, in its infancy, was strict with censorship. Television producers saw the widespread appeal of the medium and wanted to maintain a wide audience, so risqué material, particularly sexually explicit content and profanity, was disallowed. Comedians, to find success on television, censored their material. While many comedians accepted these restrictions as a tradeoff for mainstream success, some comedians still pushed back against the standards to maintain artistic freedom (Rovin, 1983). This fight over censorship would continue until other media became available, such as recorded comedy specials.
Given the rising profile of many star comedians, record companies saw the potential for profit in recording comedians’ material. However, unlike television and radio, comedians were able to talk about whatever they wanted if the record company was willing to produce it (Genzlinger, 2017; Rovin, 1983). Because record consumers were not a captive audience, comedians could engage in adult themes and use profanity without fear of reprisal. Given the success of these recordings, television and movie studios saw an opportunity to capitalize with stand-up comedy specials.

The stand-up special revolutionized the way comedians could share their material with audiences. Comedians could present the best of their material and become household names without spending years developing their reputation via word-of-mouth advertising. Further, comedians felt most successful when they could engage with their audiences directly (Limon, 2000, p. 12). Thus, comedians who had put in the work already could present a stand-up special showcasing their best material and be seen by millions of people.

Stand-up specials became the new standard and mark of true success (Keegan, 2019). However, not everyone could have a stand-up special, especially a recorded one. Comedians had to have a reputation as someone who could make money before they were recorded. While there were certainly some misses for stand-up specials, many comedians were able to establish successful careers via stand-up specials, such as George Carlin, Steve Martin, Eddie Murphy, and Williams. More recently, comedians such as Dave Chappelle, Jeff Foxworthy, Jim Gaffigan, and Amy Schumer have had successful careers that began with stand-up specials. These comedians were able to parlay their stand-up careers into television and movie careers with varying levels of success (e.g., Chappelle’s Show, Half Baked, Inside Amy Schumer, Mork & Mindy, Trainwreck).
The visual presentation of comedy specials has changed drastically over the last 40 years. Originally, stand-up specials were considered similar to movies, so they were presented in theaters and on Home Box Office (HBO) between the 1970s and 1990s. As more stand-up specials were produced, they eventually became their own genre. With the creation of the television channel Comedy Central in the late 1990s, stand-up specials made up the bulk of the channel’s content, edited only for time constraints and broadcast standards. The hour-long special now became 42-44 minutes to allow time for commercials. Comedy Central also started featuring up-and-coming comedians during half-hour stand-up specials (e.g., *Comedy Central Presents*) and television shows geared specifically toward the presentation of comedians on television (e.g., *Premium Blend*).

When Netflix became an online streaming service in 2007 and began creating their own material in 2013, stand-up specials became more popular (Fox, 2017; Schwerdtfeger, 2017). While comedy heavyweights such as Chappelle, Gaffigan, and Schumer have multiple specials on Netflix, lesser-known comedians, such as Nate Bargatzi, Brennan, Gadsby, Felipè Neto, and Taylor Tomlinson, achieved widespread success because of exposure through the subscription service. Netflix allowed comedians to have their one-hour comedy specials more readily accessible and available to consumers around the world. This change in availability moved a stand-up special from “the pinnacle of a performer’s career” to a “rung on a rising comedian’s ladder” (Keegan, 2019). Comedians like Brennan, whose *3 Mics* comedy special truly stretches the definition of comedy, would probably not have been as successful if he toured with this material around the country without recording it for national consumption (Brennan, 2017). While many people seek funny material in a comedy special, Brennan specifically and purposefully uses non-comedic content for a significant portion of his special. Given the cost of touring and the potential risk of
not being commercially successful because of the content, a national or limited tour might not be successful. However, given the low production costs of producing a comedy special in comparison to other original content, Netflix can make considerable profit off of comedy specials, which is why they have invested so heavily in this area of entertainment (Schwerdtfeger, 2017). This makes Netflix an ideal platform for comedy that seeks to take risks.

The diversification and fragmentation of media has provided an opportunity for comedians to engage in and go beyond post-comedy (Fox, 2018a). Without YouTube, Netflix, and other digital technologies, these comedians would have been reliant upon large television and radio networks to present their arguments. While possible, it is unlikely that these networks, who are dependent upon widespread commercial appeal, would feature these comedians because they so dramatically altered the comedy genre. Furthermore, these comedians would have likely not been invited to perform on these networks or they would have been required to revise their material to be more mainstream to the point that their serious arguments might have been missing.

With Netflix, Twitter, YouTube, and other digital platforms, comedy has become more personal, allowing comedians of all types to explore different forms of stand-up comedy. Additionally, the diffusion of power from large production companies and networks has allowed lesser known comedians to self-publish, allowing a closer connection with audiences with less concern about the limitations of contracts, potential censorship, and concerns about commercial success. More specifically, comedians who fall outside traditionally privileged communities can avoid the potential institutional bias of production companies, finding their audiences more easily than ever before.

These changes in media and comedy style have opened the genre in ways to challenge the dominate white, masculine, and heteronormative bias in comedy. While commercial exposure has
increased for many underrepresented comedians, African American, Latinx, and women comedians have had a long history of involvement in comedy. However, as I explore in the next section, privileged voices are still the dominate perspective in mainstream American entertainment.

**Minoritized Groups of Comedians**

Comedy, and entertainment as an industry, has long been a white, heteronormative, male institution (Marx, 2015). Whether based in the racist policies of not allowing African Americans on television in a major role or sexist ideas that women were not funny, people who are minoritized have been marginalized in comedy. Many minoritized groups have been able to perform in the entertainment industry, but typically as minor roles, particularly if they reinforce stereotypes of race and/or gender (e.g., Stepin Fetchit). As comedy, and discrimination policies, progressed, people who are minoritized have found their own places in comedy. However, while there are more opportunities than ever before for comedians of all backgrounds, race and sex still play a role in how comedy is perceived. Below I will detail two groups with a long, yet minoritized, history in comedy and entertainment: African Americans and women.

**African American Comedy**

While there have been several comedians of color over the past 100 years in the United States, they often have been used and viewed by white audiences as a side attraction, something of a novelty of which audiences feel comfortable mocking rather than a legitimate entertainer (Watkins, 1994). African American comedians, comedic actors, and vaudevillians would draw on the stereotypes of their audiences to elicit laughter, both providing for opportunities for comedians to perform as well as re-inscribing long-held notions of blackness (Watkins, 1994). Furthermore, “blackface,” using makeup to put on the face of a caricature of a person of African descent, was
used by both white and Black performers, although for entirely different reasons, during vaudeville (Watkins, 1994).

Opportunities for comedians of color were extremely limited in the United States. While vaudeville, traveling performances, and the “Chitlin’ Circuit” (Watkins, 1994) allowed all types of people to act, sing, dance, and entertain, performers of color were not given equal treatment by their audiences. Despite being celebrated onstage, some performers were not allowed to sleep in the same hotels, eat in the same restaurants, or be outside after dark because of their skin color (Watkins, 1994). Additionally, they were rarely allowed to perform on their own merit; instead, they were required to darken their skin tone with blackface and use racial stereotypical roles, such as a Jezebelle, Mammy, Trickster/Coon, or Uncle Tom (Green, n.d.; Pilgrim, 2012; Watkins, 1994). This situation was a double-edged sword for performers: there were opportunities to perform but to be accepted, they had to adopt stereotypical personas that reinforced negative perceptions of non-white performers.

As comedy moved from vaudeville to lounge performances, which were similar to today’s stand-up comedian routines, comedians of color, while given some opportunities, remained limited in what they could do onstage, particularly in front of white audiences. One comedian that broke through these barriers was Jackie “Moms” Mabley, an African American woman who, at one point, was the highest paid comedian in the United States (NWPAPride.org, 2020). Mabley used stereotypes of African Americans in the United States to provide satirical commentary on those expectations. She was best known later in her life where she would costume herself in a big dress, floppy shoes, and a knit hat and talk about having sex with younger men. Mabley played on racist stereotypes of people of color being hypersexual with men, despite being “openly known to be a
lesbian” (NMAAHC.si.edu, n.d.). By playing on the audience’s stereotypes of who she was supposed to be, Mabley found a place in comedy that allowed her some success.

The comedy boom of the 1970s and 1980s provided comedians of all types to perform around the world. Many comedians took advantage of new media to find success, such as audio and video recordings. Furthermore, some comedians achieved national superstardom just by being a comedian, including Steve Harvey, Steve Martin, Murphy, and Pryor. Many of these comedians were able to turn their success as comedians into television or movie careers. Previously, comedians had to do the opposite: they must have been able to act or develop comedy programs on the radio or television to find success, such as Johnny Carson, Bob Hope, and Dick Van Dyke.

While opportunities developed for all comedians, there was still a schism between the white and male mainstream comedy and underrepresented/minoritized communities, particularly for African American comedians (Braxton, 1994). Even some nationally popular comedians, such as Murphy and Pryor, highlighted racial tensions between Black and white populations in their comedy performances. In some ways mirroring civil rights era tensions, comedy explored American race relations, with many African American comedians developing material and programs geared more toward a socially conscious audience. Yet, other African American comedians found success by focusing on a largely Black audience.

More specifically, for many African American comedians, comedy provided a vehicle through which they could share their collective trauma and experiences with racism and discrimination with sympathetic audiences (John, 2012; Weaver, 2010). Furthermore, many African American comedians, particularly in the vaudeville era, were able to critique white power structures without overt fear of retribution because they did so while engaging in stereotypical
comedic behaviors that white audiences expected, such as the Sambo or the Jezebelle (John, 2012; Weaver, 2010).

As civil rights activist Walter Fauntroy states, “Black comedy is what I call tools of the spirit, by which we cut a path through the wilderness of our despair” (Fauntroy, 2009, as cited in John, 2012, p. 344). Like the blues tradition in music, comedy served as an emotional and traumatic repository for Black comedians, allowing those who share experiences of trauma to express their pain. Furthermore, African American comedians can use comedy as a vehicle to share those experiences in a humorous manner, although the content manner is serious. In the 1970s and 1980s, Richard Pryor became a popular comedian because he was able to connect to a variety of audiences, sharing his pain as someone who grew up with a prostitute for a mother, as well as the persistent and ubiquitous racism he and many others faced daily (Rovin, 1983). Other comedians, such as Bill Belamy, Dave Chappelle, Mo’Nique, and Paul Mooney, also share their painful experiences with racism and discrimination. As I demonstrate below, African American comedians from various generations use comedy to share trauma with a variety of audiences, but the trauma remains impactful.

For example, Def Comedy Jam, which ran from 1992 to 1997, allowed many African American comedians a venue to perform, something that was limited in mainstream venues based primarily on perceptions of African American comedy being too vulgar and raunchy (Braxton, 1994). Def Comedy Jam provided opportunities for many young Black comedians to get their start. Some of the most famous comedians and actors to come out of Def Comedy Jam include: Bruce Bruce, Cedric the Entertainer, Dave Chappelle, Deon Cole, Lavell Crawford, DeRay Davis, Mike Epps, Jamie Foxx, Vanessa Fraction, Eddie Griffin, Tiffany Haddish, Kevin Hart, Steve Harvey, DL Hughley, Arnez J., Queen Latifah, Martin Lawrence, Bernie Mac, Tracy Morgan, Patrice
O’Neal, Chris Rock, J.B. Smoove, Aries Spears, Chris Tucker, Damon Wayans, Jr., Katt Williams, and Sheryl Underwood (Center Stage Comedy, 2018). Due to the exclusionary nature of mainstream white comedy, *Def Comedy Jam* provided comedians a venue to get their start.

With the rise of continued racial problems in America, racial tensions continue to be a site of comedy, underscoring the ubiquity of racism in the United States. Many modern African American comedians continue to highlight aspects of race, racism, and differences in expectations for Black and white people in the United States. More specifically, modern African American comedians build off the work of their predecessors, including Mo’Nique, Pryor, and many others, as they engage two different audiences simultaneously: minoritized peoples, who understand first-hand the trauma associated with racism and discrimination, and peoples in power (re: white) who can laugh at the jokes of the comedians without necessarily understanding the serious and painful subject matter. For instance, DeRay Davis (2017), who got his start on *Def Comedy Jam*, demonstrates this distinction through a joke in his 2017 comedy special *How to Act Black*:

> We played guns. Before we had guns, we played imaginary guns. “Pop-pop, nigga.”
> Whenever you played “Cops and Robbers,” nobody ever wanted to be the police. “You’re all the police.” “Fuck that! You’re all the police!” Fuck it, then. We’re playing “Robbers and Robbers.”

Here Davis identifies a key aspect of the relationship between people in the African American community and the police, that there is an inherent mistrust, based on centuries of discrimination and subjugation, of the police. This mistrust is not just felt by adults dealing with police, but also impacts seemingly innocent children’s games of cops and robbers, wherein Davis and his friends

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12 To maintain the essence and flow of the bit, I primarily use long block quotes to demonstrate how comedians use comedy to discuss various topics. While some jokes/stories allow for me to break them up and analyze separate sections, many rely on the development of the story over several sentences to set up the punchline. I do my best to maintain the integrity of the joke while also analyzing it effectively.
viewed being a robber as more positive than being the police. He continues below when talking about other traumas in the African American community:

When you play imaginary guns in the hood, nobody ever wants to get shot. You be right up on a nigga. “Bah!” “You missed.” “Nigga! I just blew your brains out! Didn’t I blow his brains out? There’s always a kid, “He did blow your brains out, dawg.” Kids make up bullshit. “Okay, you blew my brains out. I went to the hospital and got my brains fixed. I’m back.” “You can’t get your brains fixed! I hate killing you!” Everybody’s playing imaginary guns. Pop, pop, pop…¹³ pop. My boy walks up with an imaginary shotgun. Ch-ch, boom! Nigga’s like, “Oh Shit! Where you get that?” [audience laughs] He was like, “My daddy got it for me.” We was like, “Damn! We’re really imagining. He got a daddy now, y’all!” [audience roars] Then everyone starts saying, “I want a daddy, too!” “I got a strong daddy!” “No no, I got a tall daddy!” One of my boys says, “My daddy got a job!” I was like, “Nigga… You’re fucking the game up. Next, you’re gonna say he’s coming to pick you up.” (Raboy, 2017)

While the topics are tragic, Davis can connect with his audience about shared dimensions of gun violence and absent fathers, things many people of color face in the United States.

In this quotation, Davis discusses three stereotypes of Black men in the United States: connections to gun violence, negative perceptions of the police, and absentee fathers. These jokes provided humor for both insiders and outsiders, something Catherine A. John (2012) highlighted as important when understanding African American humor. Davis provided insider humor when discussing issues people of African descent face in the United States, such as absentee fathers and

¹³ When used in a quotation by a scholar or outside source, the ellipses represents some text that has been cut from the quote. When used in a quote from a comedian, the ellipses functions as a representation of a pause or delay in speaking.
a lack of trust of police. He also provided an outsider perspective by satisfying the potential stereotypes of a white audience, particularly the ubiquitous violence of people who are Black, including young boys. Davis, like so many other comedians of minoritized populations, understood that they would probably not be as successful or as popular if they simply railed against racism and discrimination. Rather, by using humor to make the content palatable to those in power, Davis has achieved success and a larger audience to share his message.

Along with joking about racial stereotypes and tensions faced by people who are minoritized, other successful comedians, such as Wanda Sykes, present material on the paranoia African Americans face in the United States. In her 2009 special I'ma be Me, Sykes explains how, after Barack Obama was elected president in 2008, she could finally be herself by dancing in public and buying whole watermelons. She prevented herself from doing this before because of the racist stereotypes placed on African Americans, particularly by white people. More specifically, Sykes explains why this tension exists:

I’m so happy ’cause now I can relax a little bit [now that Barack Obama is president]. You know, I can loosen up. Don’t have to be so black all the time. Don’t have to be so dignified.

You know, ’cause we did it. Black folks, we always got to be dignified. Yeah, ’cause we know if we fuck up, we just set everybody else back a couple of years, right?” (McCarthy-Miller, 2009).

The continual paranoia, frustration, and self-censorship prevents people who are minoritized from being their full person, reinforcing racism and discrimination in the United States. Other comedians face this tension as well, sometimes without empathy from their white counterparts. During an episode of Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee, host Jerry Seinfeld was driving guest Chris Rock in a 1969 Lamborghini down the highway while speeding. A New Jersey police officer
pulled him over. As they were waiting for the police officer to arrive at the car, Rock says, “It’d be such a better episode if he pulled me to the side and beats the shit out of me, don’t you think?” He and Seinfeld laugh as he continues: “Now here’s the crazy thing: if you [Seinfeld] weren’t here, I’d be scared. Yeah I’m famous, still black.” Seinfeld lightly taps him on the arm and says “Stop it. That’s terrible.” Even though both are laughing, Rock is clearly uncomfortable being pulled over by the police, even though he was not driving. Rock has experienced this fear before as he was pulled over three times in seven weeks in 2015 (Sieczkowski, 2015), furthering the fear felt by many African Americans in the United States. Even though Rock is famous, he still fears the violence he could receive because of his skin color, something he has included in his comedy performances as well (The Molyneux Post, 2020).

Another comedian that emphasizes racial differences is Dave Chappelle. Much like Davis and many others, Chappelle got his start on Def Comedy Jam. Chappelle, after some success on television, recorded his first stand-up special Killing them Softly, which Rolling Stone listed as the sixth best stand-up comedy special of all time (Ciabattoni et al., 2015). As Chappelle gained more national acclaim, he and the co-writer of Half Baked, Neal Brennan, created the hit sketch comedy program Chappelle’s Show, which purposefully highlighted dimensions of racial relations. While there are many memorable and meaningful bits and characters from the show, three stand out as important critiques of race: Chappelle putting on “whiteface” as a news reporter; the leader of the Ku Klux Klan as a blind Black man; and Wayne Brady being a pimp.

In this first example, Chappelle played a recurring character that mocked the racial dimension of being a news reporter; specifically, that whiteness was a prerequisite for success in this career. Chappelle, a Black comedian, would get into “whiteface” by using white makeup, a clear critique of “blackface” that white comedians and actors would wear when mocking African
Americans. He would also talk with a “white” voice, using a stifled laugh while avoiding Ebonics. Chappelle used this character’s affect, as well as the content of the skits, to criticize whiteness and the power differentials inherent in race in the US. This critique of whiteness, and the racial dimensions of success, emphasized the perceptions of both blackness and whiteness in the media.

The second example, a blind Black man being a Grand Dragon of the KKK, is more comedic. The sketch begins as a mock documentary, with the Grand Dragon, wearing the traditional KKK garb, being interviewed. As the sketch progressed and the character spewed typically racist ideas, crowds of southern US white people gathered to hear the Grand Dragon speak. To emphasize a big point, the Grand Dragon takes off his hood, unknowingly revealing that he is a blind Black man. Because he is blind, the character does not know he is Black and that all the racist things they have been saying applies to him. Initially the white crowd is upset, but the character negotiates his identity, even going so far as to divorce his wife because she married a Black man. This sketch is a critique of both the KKK and the aspect that no one can be colorblind when it comes to race; it is an ever-present and embedded aspect of our society, going beyond skin color.

The final sketch focused on stereotypes of people of color, specifically the thug and the Uncle Tom (a Black man who shows happiness at being a slave) (Pilgrim, 2012). In this example, Chappelle, as himself, goes out with Wayne Brady, someone whom Chappelle had just critiqued as being an Uncle Tom in the weeks prior to this recording (Brennan & Chappelle, 2004). The sketch begins with Brady acting in the same way he has acted throughout his career, which is a nice and well-behaved man. However, as the sketch progresses, Brady starts doing things that surprises and scares Chappelle. For example, after Brady picks up Chappelle in his SUV, he drives up to an alley where a group of people are standing. He says quietly, “There he is,” pulls out an
automatic weapon and kills a man, yelling “Riverside motherfucker!” Chappelle is noticeably panicked because Brady just murdered a man, which makes Brady nervous. Brady becomes aggressive with Chappelle, asking him if “he’s going to snitch.” Chappelle assures him he will not, and the evening progresses on. When Chappelle and Brady realize that they need money to go out, Brady says that he will take care of it. Chappelle thinks that Brady will go to an ATM to draw money from the bank; instead, Brady pulls up to the curb beside a group of prostitutes, who call Brady “daddy.” As the women hand Brady several $100 bills, Chappelle looks on in shock. When one woman apologizes because she only has $100, Brady gets mad, stating his oft-quoted sentence: “Am I gonna have to choke a bitch?!?” This entire sketch plays on perceptions of Black men, specifically the stereotypes of a thug and an Uncle Tom as well as the notion that Black men must stick together, regardless of differences in perspectives or outlooks on life. This critique of racial dynamics is a constant through-line of this show. Furthermore, dimensions of race are a frequent topic for many African American comedians, exposing and critiquing dynamics of power and racism in the United States.

Furthermore, other minoritized comedians have explored dimensions of power, paranoia, and self-censorship in their material. In his 2018 special The Vagabond, Mo Amer highlights the continual struggle he faces as an immigrant in the United States, particularly as someone who travels internationally for a living. He recounts difficulties he faces when traveling to and from other countries, such as Germany, Iraq, and the United States, particularly the paranoia he feels about Immigration officials “random[ly]” searching his bags (Lathan, 2018). More specifically, Amer jokes about the continual tension he faces as someone who looks different (re: not white) in the United States, dealing with both explicit and implicit biases against him as someone from the Middle East with the name Mohammed. He focuses much of his material on this dynamic,
performing a rhetorical function of assuaging his audience’s potential discomfort of Amer’s minoritized position.\textsuperscript{14}

Another comedian who struggles with the dynamic of racial/national identity in the United States is Hasan Minhaj. While he has achieved success as a correspondent on \textit{The Daily Show with Trevor Noah}, hosting his own show \textit{Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj}, and performing a stand-up special \textit{Homecoming King}, Minhaj dealt with discrimination as a teenager. As he explains in his comedy special, Minhaj fell in love with a classmate who was white, and she acted like she loved him too. However, when picking her up to go to the prom together, her father informed him that they did not believe it would be best to have their daughter be involved with a boy from India (Storer, 2017). Minhaj used this story as the focal point for his special, emphasizing that the tension he feels as the child of immigrants from India still affects him as an adult. This tension is not felt by most other, white comedians from the United States.

While racism in the United States has been consistent, particularly affecting non-white peoples, other forms of discrimination exist. Women have faced centuries of paternalistic subjugation, disallowing them the full advantages and opportunities given to men, especially white men. This dynamic is prevalent in comedy as well, as women have attempted to undercut this discrimination in various ways. In the following section, I explore how women have faced and dealt with minoritization in comedy.

\textsuperscript{14} This tension is somewhat supported by the description of his special on the transcription website “Scraps from the Loft”: “Arab-American comedian Mo Amer recounts his life as a refugee comic, from traveling with the name Mohammed to his long path to citizenship.” Other comedians, such as Maria Bamford, Jim Gaffigan, Richard Pryor, Jerry Seinfeld, and Wanda Sykes were not marked by their race/nationality/ethnicity in their descriptions. While this website did not always label their comedians by race/nationality/ethnicity, it is interesting to note here.
Women in Comedy

Much like African American comedians, women long have been excluded based on the assumption that they were not funny (Berretta, 2014; Hitchens, 2007; Walker, 1988). Besides being raced, comedy is often understood and perceived to be a masculine field (Walker, 1988), and women are assumed to either not understand or engage in the humor because of their femininity (Weingartner, 2016; White, 2016). While these assumptions often limited early female participation in comedy, there were early exceptions, such as women who dressed up as men to mock masculinity (Rodger, 2002) and women touring on the “Chitlin’ Circuit” or performing in vaudeville (Watkins, 1994).

For two centuries, women were marginalized in comedy because they were often trapped in gender expectations of femininity. Women in vaudeville who engaged in physical comedy (e.g., Marie Dressler and Eva Tanguay) were viewed as unfeminine and therefore socially punished for it (Wagner, 2011). Similarly, contemporary female comedians are judged for being too vulgar (e.g., Natasha Leggero, Tomlinson, Michelle Wolf, and Ali Wong), although men are often celebrated for their crassness. These women are violating feminine gender norms to break into the masculine realm of comedy (Colpean & Tully, 2019).

Expectations of women in comedy have changed drastically over the last century. While some female comedians were given opportunities in the days of vaudeville, they had to either fit gender expectations of being unintelligent, or they had to be so different that they were a novelty to experience, such as “Moms” Mabley. In the 1950s, Lucille Ball used her vaudeville experience to become popular through her show *I Love Lucy*; however, she still straddled the line between supposedly dutiful housewife and someone who failed so miserably as a housewife that she became a novelty. Eventually, some female comedians gained enough success that they began
having successful stand-up comedy careers (Colpean & Tully, 2019; Gilbert, 2013; Weingartner, 2016) and starring in their own television shows and movies (White, 2016). Through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, women comedians got more opportunities, for example, such as Carol Burnett in *The Carol Burnett Show*, Roseanne Barr in *Roseanne*, Ellen DeGeneres in *Ellen*, Llana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson in *Broad City*, Amy Schumer in *Inside Amy Schumer*, and Iliza Shlesinger in *The Iliza Shlesinger Sketch Show*. Other women comedians have had major roles in movies as well, such as Maya Rudolph and Kristin Wiig in *Bridesmaids*, Leslie Jones, Melissa McCarthy, Kate McKinnon, and Kristin Wiig in *Ghostbusters* and Rudolph again in *Grown Ups*.

While women have found many venues for their artistic talent, including acting, producing, writing, and directing, they are still policed and marginalized by patriarchal gender norms in comedy. Often, women are limited to roles that are regulated by their age and physical attractiveness. Additionally, rarely are women given the headlining role at all, seemingly pushed to be the supporting character to men (e.g., Nancy Travis in *Last Man Standing* [Tim Allen], Jenna Fischer in *The Office* [Steve Carell, John Krasinski, and Rainn Wilson], and Allyson Hannigan and Cobie Smulders in *How I Met Your Mother* [Neil Patrick Harris, Josh Radnor, and Jason Segel]). Even though all these women receive similar airtime as their male counterparts, they are not billed as the top performers. Thus, women in comedy continue to fight against the cultural assumption that they are less humorous than men.

Women have often had to move outside of or violate feminine norms to engage in comedy, and some women have been accepted for it by their audiences (e.g., Ball, Tina Fey, Mabley, and Schumer). Because of this development, scholars have defined women’s humor as “feminine comedy” (Dickinson et al., 2013), which describes how women comedians use humor to be subversive and critical of patriarchal norms in society and comedy (Barreca, 2013; Dickinson et
al., 2013; Walker, 1988). By doing so, women engaging in “feminine comedy” reject traditional expectations of femininity, both in content and in physical presence (Dickinson et al., 2013). Just like African American comedians, most women comedians would like to have broader audiences, but racist and sexist norms of comedy have prevented many entertainers from underrepresented communities to find widespread appeal (Balkin, 2020; Wagner, 2011; Watkins, 1994; White, 2016).

For instance, an example of how feminine comedy criticizes hypocritical and sexist norms can be found in Amy Schumer’s 2019 special titled Growing. At one point in the show, she talked about how women are made to feel shame about menstruation:

It’s exciting being pregnant. It’s not all bad. The best part about it is not getting your period. Yeah. That’s the silver uterine lining, if you want to look for one. That’s nice because, you know, what I realized, right before I got pregnant, I noticed… how ashamed… we’ve all been made to feel about getting our period… our whole lives. Like we choose it, you know? Like, “Can’t kick my bleeding habit, you know? I just want it. I want to do it.” It’s supposed to be, you know, a secret. The second you get it, your mom goes, “You’re a woman now. And that’s disgusting. Never let anyone know of your filthy secret.” And you’re like, “Okay. I’m 12. I’m ready to handle this.” This is my Rainbow Brite lunch box. ♫ Rainbow Brite Stars are shining bright ♫ And it is. That’s the most embarrassing thing that could possibly happen to you as a kid, that someone knows you have your period, or they see you have your period. At that age, for men, the most embarrassing thing is unwanted erections, right? But then they grow up and show them to everyone. Maybe that’s what we should do. I don’t know. Call a coworker into your office. “Carl…” Psst.
Come in here. Close the door.” “Carl, you’re getting very sleepy.” All this talk about dick pics, how about a tamp pic? You up? (Schumer, 2019)

In this example, Schumer emphasizes the absurdity of feeling ashamed about having a period, but men sending unsolicited pictures of their genitalia to women is perfectly acceptable. Making women feel ashamed about their bodies is a hallmark of patriarchal gender norms (Parrish, 2017), something that is a theme of Schumer’s material throughout her career. By joking about it, Schumer is able to present a serious argument about negative gender expectations and make it palatable, a key technique in gaining acceptance. Even though she is making a feminist argument, Schumer is largely able to avoid the feminist killjoy stereotype (Ahmed, 2010; Balkin, 2020) by using humor, potentially leading to a negative response to her material.

This joke sets up an important argument for Schumer: that boys and girls are taught differently about how to understand their bodies. More specifically, not only are they taught differently, but that difference in perception is harmful to women. By identifying this difference, Schumer was able to discuss serious issues in a humorous fashion, allowing her to present an argument while limiting the potential negative backlash from her feminist perspective. In a related vein to African American comedians\textsuperscript{15}, women comedians use humor to talk about serious issues with audiences who understand their trauma, laugh at the punchlines, or both. In this story, audiences who understand the hypocrisy of perceptions of the human body share in the frustration, whereas those who might not agree with that argument can still agree that sharing unsolicited pictures of male genitalia is unacceptable as well.

“Feminine comedy” (Dickinson et al., 2013) has been a site of a particular female perspective, but it is not always seen favorably. For example, in her critique of perceptions of

\textsuperscript{15} For further explanation, see John (2012).
female humor, Hannah Gadsby (2018) discusses how lesbian baiting, labeling women who do not accept societal norms or behavior as lesbians regardless of their sexual orientation, is used to attack feminine comedy and protect male comedy:

What sort of comedian can’t even make the lesbians laugh? Every comedian ever. That’s a good joke, isn’t it? Classic. It’s bulletproof, too. Very clever because it’s funny… because it’s true. The only people who don’t think it’s funny… are us lezzers… But we’ve got to laugh… because if we don’t… proves the point. Checkmate. Very clever joke. I didn’t write that. That is not my joke. It’s an old… An oldie. Oldie but a goldie. A classic. It was written, you know, well before even women were funny. And back then, in the good old days, lesbian meant something different than it does now. Back then, lesbian wasn’t about sexuality, a lesbian was just any woman not laughing at a man. “Why aren’t you laughing? What are you? Some kind of lesbian?” Classic. (Olb & Parry, 2018)

Here Gadsby points to sexist notions that (1) women were not funny and (2) lesbians do not have a sense of humor, particularly if they do not laugh at a man’s joke. While women have carved out a place in the realm of comedy, the very notion that they had to find their own place illustrates the patriarchal nature of comedy.

Similarly, Gadsby identifies the silencing of lesbian women within comedy based on perceptions of women, particularly non-heterosexual women, as being inherently not funny (Berretta, 2014; Hitchens, 2007; Walker, 1988). Gadsby recognizes the duality of the definition of lesbianism, particularly how, in either case, lesbians fail in being acceptable women because they are not subservient to men. In the chronologically first definition Gadsby states, that lesbians were just women who did not find men funny, the assumption is that women who are successful as women must inherently find men funny. If a woman did not find a man funny, then they fail as a
woman, making them a lesbian. The second definition operates similarly: lesbians fail as women because they do not want to have sex with men, which is the ultimate failure of womanhood and femininity.

Gadsby goes further than defining this duality by implicitly discussing strategies women use to protect themselves. Regardless of their femininity or attachment to men, women would laugh at men’s jokes to protect against being labeled as a lesbian, which was taboo in several societies, including Gadsby’s native Tasmania. Similarly, feminist lesbians in the United States have an unearned reputation of being man-hating, hate-filled radicals (Anderson, 2010, p. 161), so feminists and lesbians (not exclusive identities) have to protect themselves against violence. Therefore, using a strategy of laughing at jokes at their expense, regardless of the humor or intent, might be a way to protect themselves in places where they do not have as much freedom as heterosexual/normative peoples do.

Because of the gender and racial norms and barriers that police participation in comedy, American humor has become rather specialized. Instead of trying to reach a broad audience, many modern comedians find their niche and succeed in that genre or with a specific audience. This focus alters the popular paradigm of comedy that assumes that comedians must reach as broad an audience as possible (Tucker, 2012). Of course, comedians want to find a large audience to be successful, but even the most successful comedians are not able to please everyone (e.g., Ball, Chappelle, Foxworthy, Pryor, and Williams). While this could be limiting, contemporary comedians seem to be able to find more niche audiences because of the wide variety of methods of delivering that content, specifically through specialized media.

Yet, despite the many gender and racial barriers to access, there have been increased opportunities for people of all backgrounds. For example, in 2017 alone, what Nesteroff (2017)
terms the development of a “comedy bubble,” Netflix released 56 new comedy specials. That trend continued in 2018 (58 specials) and 2019 (44 specials). Of the 158 comedy specials Netflix published between 2017 and 2019, 111 were published in English, 27 in Spanish, six in Portuguese, five in French, four in Italian, three in Korean, and one in each Arabic and German. Additionally, of the 147 comedians not featured in a compilation in this sample, 75 were of Caucasian descent (Canada, England, Australia, United States), 34 were of Latinx descent (Argentina, Brazil, Columbia, Mexico), 20 were of African descent (African American, Black, South African), seven were of Southern Asian descent (India, Malaysia), six were of Eastern Asian descent (China, Korea, Philippines, Singapore), and five were of Arabic descent (Iran, Lebanon). Furthermore, Netflix released 38 specials in 2020 despite COVID-19 production problems.

The minoritization of people of underrepresented communities has led to comedians using their platforms to speak out against racist and sexist structures. While some white comedians, such as Neal Brennan (2017) and Jim Norton (2017) discuss race in their specials, it is not the primary focus. However, some comedians of color, such as Mo Amer (2018) and Hasan Minhaj (2017) seemingly cannot avoid talking about race, crafting their shows around racist depictions and expectations of a Muslim and an Indian, respectively. Additionally, many women comedians talk about issues that only women face, such as menstruation and pregnancy. Yet, gender and racially privileged comedians are seemingly free from having to focus on gender- or race-specific content.

I am not bringing up this point to say that comedians of color or women comedians only talk about their race and gender, or that they cannot be funny unless they talk about their race or gender; rather, I am highlighting that people of underrepresented communities seemingly have to acknowledge their non-whiteness and -maleness as a means to apologize or account for their physical presence of being non-white or -male. For instance, as noted by Dr. Ronald Jackson, II,
of the University of Cincinnati, white males rarely talk about their whiteness and maleness, reinforcing the notion of racial privilege (personal communication, 2015). Comedians of color, as well as women comedians, have to seemingly assuage the audience by apologizing for their presence, or they have to overtly address their non-whiteness and/or non-maleness while onstage, something white men do not have to do.

Building on the idea of racial and gendered othering, Hannah Gadsby highlights the othering of people who are not heterosexual: “I cook dinner way more than I lesbian. But nobody ever introduces me as ‘that chef comedian,’ do they?” (Orb & Parry, 2018). Similarly, comedians who are alternatively abled seemingly must address it onstage as well. For instance, Josh Blue jokes about his cerebral palsy in his aptly titled special *Being Disabled has its Perks* (Dry Bar Comedy, 2020). Similarly, comedian Maysoon Zayid jokes about her cerebral palsy to “get the CP out of the way” (Bingham & Green, 2015, p. 279), recognizing the otherness of her disability. There is an underlying assumption in comedy, that the genre is for white, heteronormative, able bodied men, so they do not need to address it, whereas anyone who does not fit that identity must acknowledge it in some capacity. This assumption limits peoples’ ability to break the form as they seemingly must dedicate time in their special addressing other things first, like their race, gender, or sexual orientation, before having the opportunity to critique the genre.

While the traditional goal of comedy has been to make the audience laugh, some modern comedians have either partially or completely rejected this aim. Some comedians are using different sites of humor to entertain their audience, including non-comedic experiences. More specifically, comedians engaging in post-comedy (Fox, 2018a) have built upon the foundation of sites of humor, particularly the comedian themselves. To do so successfully, comedians must rely on the intimate, interpersonal relationship between audience and performer, establishing a shared
perspective from which to find humor. Comedians have used tragic experiences as comedic fodder, so, as I argue below, talking about non-comedic material in a non-comedic fashion is a rational step in the progression of comedy rather than an aberration.

**Elements of Comedy**

Comedy is dependent upon the interaction between the performer and the audience. Comedians aim to make their audience see the world from their perspective, even if just for a second, to elicit a response. The basis of comedy is to make the audience laugh. Comedians attempt to do that in various ways, primarily through commentary on their lives and the world around them. Some comedians limit their scope to avoid social or physical consequences, such as jesters and comedians in minoritized positions, while others are more critical of societal and cultural norms (Collins & Skover, 2002; Rovin, 1983; Watkins, 1994).

**Target of Jokes**

Traditionally, comedic material focused on three ‘butts’ of the joke: the self, the audience, and/or the other. One of the easiest targets of humor for comedians is the self (Weingartner, 2016). No one knows the foibles and faults of the comedian better than the comedian themselves. While others may see their flaws and mock them, an effective comedian knows how to present themselves as worthy of comedic material. Comedians use themselves as a basis for humor primarily by showing how they do not live up to societal ideals, such as not being as smart, attractive, culturally aware, or savvy as they might want to be (Tafoya, 2011; Watkins, 1994; Weingartner, 2016). This self-deprecating style of humor allows comedians to explore their own faults without causing offense because the comedian is only making fun of themselves. However, they must present this

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16 When I place a word or phrase in apostrophes, I am indicating that the word is used in popular conceptions of the term, but I am not directly quoting someone. For the example here, the ‘butt’ of a joke is a common phrase, but I am not citing a source.
in a way where the audience can understand the material and see themselves in similar situations. While there is some humor in mocking the self to prevent others from doing the same, comedians must be able to allow the audience to see themselves in their material, providing the comic mirror (Keisalo, 2018; Limon, 2000). Members of the audience might not have the same foibles as the comedian, but the comedian is responsible for showing that certain flaws, such as vanity, stupidity, and a lack of awareness are human flaws and should be seen as funny rather than fatal.

Another focus of comedic material is the audience. Here the comedian purposefully points out generalized faults of the audience to elicit laughter. Importantly, they are usually not calling out individuals from the audience and making fun of them specifically; rather, they are using the audience as representative of a broader societal or cultural ill, similar to a jeremiad (Gunn, 2021; Tafoya, 2011), although some comedians use specific audience members as comedic foils with the understanding from the audience that this was going to happen (e.g., Robert Kelly & Don Rickles). Comedians who engage in the jeremiad style of comedy, such as Lenny Bruce and Chris Rock, do so with more bite and acid than those who make fun of themselves. However, other comedians use the audience as a jumping off point for their material, such as clowns or court jesters (March, 2018).

The third ‘butt’ of humor is that of the other, wherein the comedian places the joke outside of themselves and the audience (Weingartner, 2016). This has traditionally been accomplished by mocking those either in power (e.g., politicians) or those who are minoritized or underrepresented due to power differentials. By placing the comedic focus outside of the audience and themselves, the comedian attempts to identify with the audience in a shared perspective of the other. By making fun of the other, comedians can avoid antagonizing the audience directly or using themselves as comedic material.
As comedy has grown, comedians typically move between these three targets in their material. For example, in short comedy format, like ‘Chitlin’ Circuit,’ comedians might spend their five-minute sets on themselves (Watkins, 1994). However, comedians in an hour-long stand-up special struggle to keep one ‘butt’ as the focus for the duration. Thus, they change the target of the joke throughout the performance. Changing the object of a joke or the political and social content of the performance requires considerable craft. Additionally, comedians must find a way to remain within the accepted boundaries of comedy, even when challenging those same boundaries. If they fail, they could face economic or social consequences.

If a comedian steps too far outside the genre of comedy, they could fail as comedians by being unfunny. Audiences of comedy expect the performer to make them laugh, so if the entertainer is unsuccessful, then audiences are less likely to want to watch them perform again. Comedians in all venues face economic consequences. Comedy clubs depend on successful performances to attract customers, selling more food and drinks while the comedian performs. Similarly, production companies depend upon comedians to be funny to sell more copies of the recording, thereby making them money. If a comedian fails to remain within the boundaries of comedy, they could impact the success of the companies around them.

While this is important, comedians are more likely to be worried about their own economic success. If they fail to stay within the comedy genre, they are less likely to be welcome to perform at other venues. While all comedians perform poorly at various times in their careers, they are most likely trying to be funny and just failing, for a variety of potential reasons. However, if a comedian purposefully steps outside the genre of comedy, they are taking a more active step in their potential failure. Similarly, venues and production companies are less likely to feature a comedian who is purposefully not funny. That would be like a music company hiring a pianist to
play a concert, only to have them recite Shakespeare instead. Regardless of their skill with Shakespeare, they were supposed to perform another form of art. This failure to meet the expectations of the genre would likely lead to that performer being hired less by other companies, thereby reducing the potential income of the pianist or, in this case, the comedian.

Comedians also face potential social consequence for their performances as well. If a comedian does not uphold the expectations of the genre, they could be socially censored. An example of this is comedian Lenny Bruce. While he was also legally censored, Bruce was forced to leave England after a performance in London was deemed obscene (Marshall, n.d.). While he did not commit any crimes, the pressure from political and social leaders influenced the decision to force Bruce to leave the country. Other comedians have faced social sanction for their material as well, including many of the performers of *Def Comedy Jam* (Braxton, 1994). Greg Braxton highlights how this show created a “double-edged sword” wherein Black comedians are expected to be vulgar while also appealing to a broader audience (Braxton, 1994). Regardless of their style, comedians who perform on *Def Comedy Jam* might be beholden to an expectation of vulgarity that makes them uncomfortable thereby reducing their potential appeal to a wider audience.

To reduce these economic and social consequences, comedians try to use material that will be accepted by their audience. One easy target of comedy is to use the self. As discussed above, comedians use their own bodies, thought processes, and experiences as comedic fodder. However, as I describe below, personal tragedy can also be a site of humor. Regardless of the site of comedy, comedians establish a comic stage persona that reflects a humorous character or characteristic, allowing them to explore topics they might not have otherwise. I discuss those personae below.
Comedy Stage Persona

Communication research on comedy has focused on the style of comedians (e.g., Keisalo, 2018), effects of comedy on populist politics (e.g., Milburn, 2019), dynamics of race (e.g., Park, Gabbadon, & Chernin, 2006), and the history of comedy (e.g., Lowe, 2007; Krefting, 2019; Rodger, 2002; White, 2016). As Christopher A. Medjesky (2016) highlights, comedians develop a persona that “builds to become the overarching vision of how the comic desires to be viewed, and, thus, how the comic views her or his audience” (cited in Balkin, 2020, pp. 82-83). However, recent scholarship has not focused on comedy personae and how that allows comedians to discuss different content in different styles. This project will provide a new perspective on the comedic persona, specifically how comedians reveal their ‘real’ selves.

With the modernization of comedy, specifically with the popularity of comedy tours in the 1800s and beyond, comedians developed stage personas. Comedians recognized that the average human was rarely funny enough to please a variety of audiences, so comedians developed exaggerated characters or personas to present a consistent style onstage (Keisalo, 2018; Tafoya, 2011; Watkins, 1994). These personas could either be an exaggeration of themselves or a caricature for comedic effect.

As comedy evolved, stage personas remained relevant and important for comedians to maintain as they presented a consistent perspective. Some comedians are active in their creation of a stage persona, such as Larry the Cable Guy, Stepin Fetchit, Haruna Kondo, and “Moms” Mabley (Tafoya, 2011; Watkins, 1994; Weingartner, 2016). Other comedians allow their stage persona to develop as they continue in their career, such as Tina Fey, Dick Gregory, Paula Poundstone, and Amy Schumer. As comedians continue to explore different ideas and topics, their stage personas solidify or change to be more successful.
Personas help comedians maintain consistency in their performances while also allowing them to step outside of themselves to explore comedic opportunities. For example, the character “Moms” Mabley was a sex-crazed elderly woman, dressed in a floppy hat, oversized muumuu, and slippers, who focused on material that demonstrates her love for younger men. However, the performer, Jackie, was a lesbian woman who dressed modestly (NMAAHC.si.edu, n.d.; NWPAPride.org, 2020). By creating this stage persona, Jackie Mabley was able to use comedic material that was ill-suited for her, but perfectly suited for the “Moms” character. Furthermore, Jackie Mabley might not have been able to perform as a lesbian woman of color because of societal bias, but a caricaturized version of a sex-crazed Black woman fit the accepted Jezebelle stereotype (Green, n.d.; Pilgrim, 2012), thereby allowing her to have a successful career (NMAAHC.si.edu, n.d.; NWPAPride.org, 2020; Watkins, 1994).

Similarly, comedians use personas to highlight funny aspects of themselves. Just like everyone else, comedians are not funny all the time. However, audiences expect the performers to be funny, so these personas emphasize, and perhaps caricaturize, the comedic aspect of the performer, allowing them to succeed onstage as a comedian. As discussed above, comedians must fit within the comedy genre to remain successful. Failing to maintain the persona, including purposefully removing the persona onstage, can be detrimental to the performer’s success. Moreover, the comedians in this project have established personae of their own: Burnham as a somewhat silly meta-critic, Brennan as a producer/writer, and Gadsby as a comedian who uses self-deprecation as a primary focus. In this sample, each step outside of their personae to present a serious argument about mental health, risking economic and personal failure in the process.
Using Personal Issues as Comedic Material

Many comedians have embraced the popular notion that comedy is found in areas of personal pain (Rivera, 2019). As the person presenting the content, there is no easier source of information than themselves, focusing on the first ‘butt’ of comedic material. Over the last 40 years, comedians have used their bodies as sites of humor. Whether they are overweight, oddly proportioned, or seemingly not conforming to societal expectations of the human body, comedians use those expectations to find a place of commonality and kinship with their audience.

For instance, Louie Anderson is a comedian that has been performing for over 35 years. He is best known as a stand-up comedian and television star, specifically his cartoon *Life with Louie*, being the host of *Family Feud*, and winning an Emmy Award as Christine Baskets on the hit comedy *Baskets*. Anderson got his national start on the *Late Show with Johnny Carson* in 1984 and, in his first joke, immediately used his personal life as a source of comedy, turning something that had been a target for bullies into a place of humor:

I can’t stay long. I’m in between meals, so bear with me. I was just at McDonald’s and all those statistics just changed. I went shopping today. What’s with all this ‘one size fits all’ stuff? Being in California, being fat, trying to get into the California life. Went to the beach the other day, every time I’d lay down, people would push me back into the water. (Barrie et al., 1984)

In the same set, Anderson described why he used his weight as a source of humor: “People say ‘Louie, why do you do those fat jokes?’ ‘Cause if I didn’t you guys would sit out there and go, ‘Do you think he knows he’s that big?’” (Barrie et al., 1984). Anderson has always struggled with his weight, but he preferred to use it as a site of comedy rather than tragedy. By framing a personal
issue as funny, Anderson continues the theme in comedy that personal pain can be a source of humor.

Another comedian who uses his weight as a site of humor is Gabriel Iglesias. Iglesias gained national fame on the NBC show Last Comic Standing. While he was kicked off the show for using his cell phone, which was against the rules to prevent outside help to write jokes, Iglesias performed his first stand-up comedy special in 2007 called Hot and Fluffy. Since then, Iglesias, nicknamed “Fluffy,” has gained national fame, selling out shows all around the world and starring in a Netflix comedy show Mr. Iglesias. As his nickname suggests, Fluffy is overweight, something he talks about constantly in his specials. One of his most famous jokes, told in his first special and requested by fans in other shows, is a joke about being pulled over by the cops:

And speaking of that, I get pulled over by a cop one night, two minutes after coming out of a Krispy Kreme drive-thru. Alright? Don’t get ahead of me, watch, I made a left turn instead of making a right but I wasn’t paying attention ’cause I had a box, I was, like, [gasp] “Oh, you’re gonna get it when you get home! Oh, you’ve been so bad. So–[female screech] you’re gonna get it.” I’m not paying attention, I go the wrong way, right? [rrr] Sure enough– [siren] [shout] “Ohhh!” I pull over. [rrr and screech] “Mm. Later.” [ba-ba-ba] I’m sitting there patiently waiting and the cop is taking forever. I said, “The hell with this, he’s taking too long.” I grab my box, I put it on my lap, I flipped it open, right? And–[mmmm] [lascivious chuckle] [mmm] [high-pitched screeches] Oh, I was gonna get nasty. And just as I was about to tear it up, the cop gets to the window and says the same thing that they all say, right? [deep male voice] “You know why I stopped you?” It was too easy. I looked at him and I said, “‘Cause you can smell it.” Oh, he was dying, [deep male] “Son of a
bitch!” Whatever, he let me go, man. So you just gotta be careful. If you can make a cop laugh, you got a chance. (Rodriguez, 2007)

In this joke, Iglesias marries his self-deprecating humor with his use of sound effects, using his weight and appetite for doughnuts as a site of comedy. Iglesias has used his weight as a site of humor in every performance since then, allowing his audience to laugh at what many people perceive to be an issue: being overweight. While Iglesias recognizes in other bits that his weight might be a problem, it provides a consistent site of comedy for him throughout his career. Just like Anderson before, Iglesias finds humor in a personal issue, allowing him and his audience to laugh together rather than mock his weight.

While not overweight, Hannibal Buress also uses his body as a source of comedy. Buress has been performing stand-up comedy since 2002, with his most famous bit coming in 2014 while talking about the rape allegations about Bill Cosby, which many credit as being the catalyst for Cosby’s imprisonment (Dalton, 2018; Graves, 2018; Izadi, 2018). However, while receiving acclaim for bringing attention to Cosby’s illegal actions, the credit given to Buress silences the survivors of Cosby’s rape, reifying male privilege. As Emily Crockett argues, women, who have long been viewed as property of men, have to prove their chastity “and that they put up extreme resistance in order to have any hope of winning a court case” (2016). While this argument supports men who are accused of rape, it also supports men who accuse others of rape. Whereas women are perceived to be unreliable as victims and potentially as guilty as their rapist (the “she must have wanted it because of the way she was dressed” argument is a clear example; additionally, historical codes of law, such as the Code of Hammurabi and the Torah both execute men and women in cases of intersexual rape [Crockett, 2016]), Buress was believed more readily than Cosby’s 60+ victims because of his gender. He was able to use one joke to spark more interest in Cosby’s actions,
whereas women, such as Andrea Constand, had accused him of rape in 2004 with no results. While Buress was able to use his status to help send Cosby to jail, the survivor’s of Cosby’s assaults still face stigma and disbelief because of theirs.

In his first major stand-up special, Comedy Comisado, Buress mocked his physical appearance when talking about wearing glasses:

I gotta tell y’all something. There’s something I have to tell you guys. These are fake glasses. I don’t wear… I got… These are fake glasses. I just wear these glasses to make you comfortable, ’cause that’s how I am on television. With glasses on. But I don’t wear glasses anymore. I got LASIK. Look, these are fake. Watch this. It’s fake glasses. I’ll do this, too. I don’t need this. I got LASIK eyeball surgery. LASIK surgery, perfect vision. Perfect goddamn… Hey, don’t cheer for me like I won a raffle or some shit. I paid for it, full price. These ain’t no Kickstarter eyes right here. One swipe, the transaction was done. No downside to LASIK. Except for the fact that without my glasses, I sort of look like how Milhouse from The Simpsons looked like without his glasses. I have very beady, shady little eyes. (Bangs, 2016)

By talking about his body, Buress accomplished two potential objectives: (1) finding a source of humor that is shared by many in the audience and (2) making fun of himself before someone else can. Similarly, he somewhat addressed a stereotype of Black men, that they are criminals with “beady, shady little eyes.” To prevent this stereotype or perception, Buress wore glasses, even though they are not required for his vision. Furthermore, Buress used himself as a punchline to make his audience comfortable, allowing him to talk about more serious topics later in the show, such as romantic relationships and potentially racist taxi drivers (Bangs, 2016). Even though Buress was not engaging in the post-comedy turn (Fox, 2018a), he was still constituting his
audience to be receptive of his more serious critiques. Like Davis, Pryor, and many others, he understood that his positionality as a Black man meant he had to toe the line between shared experiences of racism and being an acceptable Black man to his white audience (John, 2012), using humor as a means to avoid backlash.

As these examples illustrate, perceptions of the human body and self provide an easy bridge between performer and audience. Making fun of one’s body is safe in comedy; however, challenging more complicated issues, like racism, drug abuse, and love, are more difficult for a comedian. Within the established genre of comedy, wherein the purpose is to make the audience laugh (Greenbaum, 1999; Libera, 2020), providing a biting critique of complex issues is much more difficult. However, some comedians, such as Pryor, Williams, and Tomlinson use their voice to highlight hypocrisies in society and the struggles they have faced with those issues.

Because of the history of racism in the United States, particularly between people of African descent and people of European descent, there have been significant differences in how peoples interact with humor. Due to the desire to maintain racial superiority, white men feared educated and empowered African Americans. Therefore, they did everything possible to prevent it from happening, including criminalizing the education of African American peoples, preventing them from voting, and creating discriminatory legislation, such as the Jim Crow laws. While there were many African American people who outwardly protested and fought against this discrimination, they were typically not accepted and were further repressed by those in power. Some comedians, however, were able to find a way to subvert that power without backlash from those in power because they understood how to use comedy as a way to seemingly support racist stereotypes as with minstrelsy in particular (Weaver, 2010) while also mocking those in power. As Karen Sotiropolous explains:
...white critics were particularly attentive to moments when black audiences in the balcony laughed but whites remained silent. These moments made all too clear that black performers had told jokes that went literally and figuratively over the heads of their white audiences. (2006, p. 6)

Just like slaves who used music while working to protest and mock the plantation owners, African American performers were able to both uphold and subvert racial hierarchy through the lens of comedy. If they were unable to perform the caricatures and stereotypes expected of them, then white audiences would likely have not accepted them, leading to both financial and potentially physical safety. However, because they satisfied the racist expectations of their white audience, they had the opportunity to mock them as well, sometimes without their knowledge. The ability to walk this line mirrors court jesters in the past, where they had some artistic license but very little true power if their content was not accepted. Similarly, racism is a continual problem in the United States, and many modern comedians walk this line as well, although in different ways. One of the most famous comedians to do so was Richard Pryor.

Richard Pryor was an influential comedian in the 1970s and 1980s, starring in several movies as well as recording many comedy albums. Pryor was best known for his critique of racism. He was also unafraid to tackle other controversial topics like sex and violence. One of Pryor’s most famous comedic tools was to personify non-human things to provide a different perspective. In one bit, Pryor uses personification to talk about racism from an animal’s perspective:

See, I love pets. I do, I got like a miniature horse, you ever seen them, a miniature horse about this big. Full grown, that’s as big as they’re ever gonna get. Yes, ma’am, I’m not lying, named Ginger. A friend of mine, Burt Sugarman, gave me this horse. He helped me produce my TV shows. He gave me this horse instead of money. And the horse is nice but
it don’t do nothing. Horses don’t do nothing when they’re that little but eat and shit… And the first time that my dogs saw the horse, they thought it was another dog, right, ‘cause animals don’t have no racism, they thought it was another dog. They said, “Look, there’s another dog with a long tail, let’s go say hello.” And my cousin Denise, she had a great Dane staying with us, they said, “Yeah, come on, let’s go over, yeah,” and they ran over. Then that horse smell hit their ass, right. They said, “Hey, this ain’t no goddamn dog.” And the great Dane said, “I don’t know what it is, but I’m gonna fuck it.” (Pryor, 1979)

As he established throughout his career, Pryor uses personification to discuss racism, albeit in a dramatic and vulgar manner. By putting racism in the perspective of an animal, Pryor was able to make a difficult topic humorous while still critiquing it. As he identifies, animals do not make negative judgments based on differences in something as significant as species, let alone skin color. The dog is more worried about having sex with the horse than the differences between them. Inherent in this joke is the notion that dogs (especially Denise’s Great Dane) are not overly intelligent as they do not care whether the horse is a dog or not. However, as Pryor implicitly argues, if dumb animals can look past those differences, then why are humans unable to do the same?

Pryor, like many other Black comedians, used humor to make material about racism palatable to his white audience. He was able to joke about the shared trauma of racism that many in the African American community experience in the United States (John, 2010), and he was able to make the white audience laugh because he was using humor to undercut the seriousness of the content, even though the serious argument was still present. By doing so, Pryor was able to critique racism in an acceptable manner, at least to many white audiences who might not have listened to a Black man, particularly one who had achieved commercial success, complain about racism.
Pryor was very effective at finding the balance between entertaining an audience of people who are minoritized while also entertaining a white audience (John, 2012; Weaver, 2010). Additionally, Pryor set a precedent for future comedians of minoritized communities to use humor as a means to present an argument while lessening the odds of having that argument be rejected because it goes against the hegemonic structure of that particular society.

Another comedian who used difficult experiences as a site of humor was Robin Williams. Williams performed his first major comedy special in San Francisco in 1983. This performance came after his success as a television star on the hit sitcom *Mork & Mindy*. After this show and a successful beginning to his stand-up comedy career, Williams would go on to become one of the most famous actors and comedians in the world, starring in comedic roles, such as the Genie in *Aladdin* and Mrs. Doubtfire in the movie of the same name. He would also demonstrate his ability to act in dramatic roles as the therapist in *Good Will Hunting* and a frustrated author in *World’s Greatest Dad*.

In his first special, Williams presented material in a style that was energetic, quick-witted, and engaging. He improvised much of his special, interacting with his audience. In his prepared material, however, he used his personal struggles as a source of comedy. One of his longest bits was on how drugs affect the ability of someone to function. Inherent in this bit is the notion that Williams has used these drugs in his life, particularly cocaine and alcohol. “You know cocaine is God’s way of saying ‘you’re making too damn much money.’ …also, the wonderful side effects of cocaine. Oh, the paranoia and the severe impotence. Oh yay!” Another example focuses on alcohol abuse:

We’re talking about Jack Daniels and how it might affect you. The worst thing is you’ve been drinking Jack Daniels all night, in the morning you must pay the price…. And then
you make the mistake of going to work. Hahahahaha What a fool because you can hear
snails crawl! (Mischer, 1983)

In these quotations, Williams is using his personal experience with drug abuse to find a comedic
perspective. Without these personal experiences, Williams would not have been able to provide so
much detail on how each drug affects a person’s ability to cope.

A final example of the use of personal issues as a source of comedy is from Taylor
Tomlinson, a new comedian who has only gained national notoriety in the last five years. Like
Iglesias before her, she was on Last Comic Standing, being a top-ten finalist. Additionally,
Tomlinson has recorded a Netflix special titled Quarter-Life Crisis wherein she discusses the
struggles of being a woman in her mid-20s who is single:

I am not a casual dater. Here's how not casual I am. I actually got engaged this year. Uh,
nope. Didn't work out. Context clues [points to left ring finger]. I would have expected
better from you, front row. It's okay. It's all for the best. Uh, didn't work out. Just wasn't
the right fit. But man, I learned a lot about myself in the process of getting engaged. First
off, I didn't know what a basic bitch I was, who was gonna love being engaged that much,
but something happened when that ring went on my finger. Something in my stupid lady
lizard brain went..."bloop!" "Level completed." I just kind of floated through Target,
like..."Oh, am I better than everybody? What's that? No, I don't need help. Someone loves
me. I'll find the towels, right after I cancel therapy. I'm all fixed." (Raboy, 2020)

In this example, Tomlinson turns personal hurt, such as a failed engagement, into a major site of
comedy. Additionally, Tomlinson, like Pryor and Williams before, discusses societal ills in a
comedic frame, walking the wire between critique with no punchline and comedy with no
substance.
Tomlinson identifies the assumed and implicit understanding that women are supposed to get married as a marker of success in life. Furthermore, by joking that she is “all fixed” because she is about to get married, Tomlinson mocks the conception that marriage is the answer for a single woman’s problems. Joking allows Tomlinson to regain some power over the narrative of her failed engagement. Rather than viewing it as a failure, she alters the frame to one of positivity, that she learned a lot about herself. Tomlinson uses her personal experiences as a site of humor, allowing audience members to laugh with her rather than view her with pity.

The intersection of age, race, and gender play a role in how Tomlinson addresses here experience with a failed engagement. The expectations of women to get married to find happiness and completeness inform her perceptions of being a “basic bitch.” Similarly, when using language like “bloop! Level completed” to highlight the entrenched and engrained expectation of women to get married, Tomlinson identifies how this perception is harmful.

Because comedians provide a lens through which we can understand our society (Mintz, 1985), they occupy a unique position: one that presents arguments about serious issues in our world while making us laugh at it. On the one hand, the presentation of serious issues makes us aware of things that are wrong with our society. On the other hand, laughing about these issues potentially undercuts the seriousness of those problems, leaving audiences thinking that these problems are not as serious as originally thought because we can laugh at them. Comedy is a vehicle through which serious arguments and humor come together, but it rarely provides a solution to those issues, something Hannah Gadsby critiques in her special Nanette (Orb & Parry, 2018). In the previous two examples, Pryor and Tomlinson, two people who seemingly have nothing in common other than their chosen careers, share in how they explore societal issues that they face every day. For Pryor, racism was (and is) so engrained in our society that it becomes harmful, even when no one
is using the ‘n’ word. For Tomlinson, sexist expectations for women are harmful, but yet still upheld by women, reinforcing the hegemonic masculinity structure inherent in society in the United States (Connell, 1987). Both comedians have personal experience with these problems and have found a way to make them palatable to those in power: for Pryor, white people; for Tomlinson, men. Neither Pryor nor Tomlinson were the first to present these arguments or highlight these issues, but they were some of the first to do so in a humorous manner, leading to broader acceptance of their message, even if not broader agreement. By talking about these serious issues, comedians can bridge that gap between issues faced by minoritized communities and those in power who can affect change more directly. Pryor, Williams, and Tomlinson all use personal tragedy and societal problems as sources of humor, but the problems are not funny. While this is a limitation of the genre, comedy is unique in that it provides this opportunity in the first place.

As we have seen thus far, comedians engage with their material in different ways. While comedy has long been a place to provide a critique of social norms, political inconsistencies, and assumptions of humanity, comedians have typically done so in a consistently comedic manner. While there are certainly notable exceptions to the joke-first paradigm (e.g., George Carlin and Bill Hicks), the genre of comedy has progressed to allow serious topics to be sites of humor.

While personal style always plays a role, comedy has evolved to include serious discussions about serious topics as well. The balance for a comedian is to find a way for them to make something serious palatable in the form of a joke. When Tomlinson talked about the expectations on women to be engaged, she was able to mock those conventions through first-person experience. In other performances, however, comedians present blocks of serious material, allowing for different emotions to be drawn from themselves and their audiences. While this is a branch of comedy that many comedians utilize, it is important to highlight that these comedians
use serious issues to set up a punchline, albeit in longer form. Some comedians discuss heavier material in their performances, but typically pay it off with a joke. Several comedians have successfully used discussions of very serious personal issues while remaining within the comic frame.

For instance, Adam Ferrara is a comedian and television personality, best known for his work on Top Gear (2010-2016). He has recorded a one hour-long comedy special titled Funny as Hell (2009). In this performance, Ferrara discusses his family, relationships, and interactions with other people. Near the end of his show, Ferrara tells a sad story about his father getting cancer:

Came time for the chemo and I sat my pop down. Pulled in every favor I had. I got my hands on some money. I greased who I had to grease. And we’re in the garage, and I tell him I said, “Pop look. It’s all taken care of. I got you into the best hospital in the city, all right? Don’t ask me how, don’t ask me why, but your name is at the top of that list. And all I need you to do is walk through that door and I want you to beat this thing down, you hear me?” “Yeah, kid, thanks. You stepped up; don’t think I don’t notice that, eh? Good man. But we go for this chemo thing, ya know, we’re gonna go over here by the house.” I said, “Pop, look at me. I got you the best shot we got at beatin’ this.” “Yeah, I know son. And, uh, I looked at that city hospital, I really did but, it’s gonna be a two-three-month deal and where you gotta go it’s got all those stairs and your mother don’t climb the stairs no good no more, so. That can’t work for us.” He’s looking right down the barrel at it, and his priority is my mother, can’t climb those stairs no more. [long pause] That’s the same man made me shovel the driveway with a broken arm. (Lage, 2009)
The entire set up was heartfelt and sad, depicting a tragic moment in his and his father’s lives. However, he was able to use that tragedy as a setup for a punchline. While this problem was real, Ferrara used it as a site of comedy in a special rather than let it remain tragic.

As identified above, non-comedians also use humor to provide a more beneficial perspective on tragic events (Buiting et al., 2020). Oncologists, cancer patients, and supports of patients use humor to not only avoid focusing on the tragedy of cancer, but also to humanize the patient as someone more than a cancer patient, but as a person still capable of functioning in the world (Buiting et al., 2020). Similarly, humor is used to avoid dwelling on tragedy in other situations as well, including eulogies (Ingham, 2021, lecture on special occasion speeches). One of the functions of eulogies is to “reorient the [audience] to the deceased” (Foss, 1983, p. 187), and sometimes it is best to remember the funny things that happened. Therefore, it is not a surprise that comedians, whose job is to find bring humor to their audience, use tragic events as a place of comedy. Ferrara was able to take the seriousness of his father potentially dying and remembering a seeming hypocrisy in his behavior: thinking about the welfare of his wife over his own life yet forcing his child (Adam) to perform rigorous physical work with a broken arm. This joke allowed both Ferrara and his audience to find a somewhat happy ending to the story, even though the story was necessarily incomplete.

Another comedian who uses serious content is Kevin Hart. Hart is one of the most popular comedians of the last ten years, performing sold-out comedy shows and starring in major films such as Get Hard, Ride Along, and the remake of Jumanji. Hart has a widespread appeal, reaching to audiences of all backgrounds. He can use his life, particularly the troubles he deals with, as a source of humor, such as his drug-addicted father:
See, here's the thing. I'm so happy that I was young when my dad was on drugs. The reason why I say that is because when you're young, you're naive. I didn't want to believe it. Everybody else knew my dad was on drugs, except me. I didn't never want to fucking believe it. People would tease me, I would just get emotional. I would get mad fast. The person who teased me the most was my own brother. He would always talk shit. "Kev, Dad ain't never coming home because Dad is on that shit, man." "You better shut up. You don't know what you're talking about. Dad went back to college. You don't even know. You don't even know where he is. He's in college." My message to y'all is don't ignore the signs, okay? If you think somebody in your family is on drugs, do not ignore the signs. Don't make the same mistake I did. I'll never forget this shit. It was my birthday. My grandma gave me a birthday card, I opened it up, $20 fell out. When the $20 fell out, my dad stepped on it. I'm waiting for the joke to be over. This nigga's trying to slide out. "All right, all right--" "Hey, give me the goddamn $20, Dad. I saw you step on the shit." That's my dad though. (Small, 2011)

As an adult comedian, Hart was able to look back on a tragic aspect of his childhood and find humor in it, connecting with his audience as well.

Hart understands that drug addiction, including the stereotype of Black fathers being absentee because of drug addiction, is a serious issue. However, he was able to use humor to diffuse the seriousness of his father’s absenteeism and drug addiction. Instead of focusing on the tragedy of the event, including dwelling on it as an adult, Hart was able to find a silver lining, leading him to feel better. Because there is a societal stereotype in the United States of Black men being drug addicts and bad fathers, white audiences can accept the truthiness of the stereotype, even if it is not true. Additionally, people who are African American understand the power of the stereotype,
potentially laughing at the stereotype while also empathizing with Hart’s childhood traumas (John, 2012; Weaver, 2010).

Lastly, Maria Bamford, a comedian who has been performing since 1998, uses a comedy style that is erratic, using a variety of voices and perspectives to highlight interactions between people. Additionally, Bamford has talked about her mental health, including her diagnoses of having Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and Bipolar II. In one of her bits she talks about the stress of trying to find love while also having mental health problems:

I’m 46 years old. Of course I’ve fallen in love many times before. It was always over 100% my fault, uh, that it didn’t work out, ’cause you know how it is. You fall in love with someone. You tell them, uh, that you love them, and then you share with them what you think is the single most horrifying fact about yourself. They’re gonna think it’s something else. But… For example, I would tell you, “I love you so much. Heads up: mental illness runs in my family. If ever I start talking too fast about wanting to get in touch with the pope or some other ethical authority, you’re gonna wanna put me in a purple van, drive me to doggy day care ’cause I need to be boarded for the weekend.” Some guys said, “Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Fair enough. And some guys were like, “Oh, okay.” And I rejected them. (Yu, 2017)

Here Bamford highlights not only the incredible pressure of falling in love, but also dealing with mental illness. Additionally, she shares the tremendous hypocrisy she has embodied when someone else shared their history. While this is seemingly unfunny in text, Bamford’s use of different voices and inflections clearly intimates that this is designed to be funny. Because of her awareness of her own hypocrisy, Bamford used personal issues as a site of humor because she understood that many in her audience were also hypocrites, exploring the shared experience.
These examples demonstrate that a comedian’s life, particularly when things are not going perfectly, have been sites of comedic inspiration. While there are strands of comedy that are used more often, such as getting old, having kids, and being overweight, there are others as well. More specifically, Pryor gives voice to his body having a heart attack, Williams highlights his struggles with alcohol and drug abuse, and Bamford highlights how frustrating it is to find love. Each comedian brings their own flavor to their performance, allowing for a different perspective on real issues. However, while the focus is on tragic or serious events, the comedians turn it into a site of comedy, allowing their audience to laugh at the problems in their lives.

In addition to these examples, there are thousands of comedians performing all around the world today, particularly with the explosion in popularity and availability of Netflix specials for new comedians. It is important to emphasize how ubiquitous using personal problems as a source of comedy has been over the last 40+ years. Comedians, and by extension audiences, understand the importance of finding laughter, even if it is mocking one’s own life. While stand-up comedians have changed in their style and presentation, the use of personal issues and/or tragedies remains a constant source of comedic material. These comedians maintain the primary aim of traditional comedy, which is to make their audience laugh (Greenbaum, 1999; Libera, 2020); they are simply using personal problems as a setup for a funny punchline. Because comedians have already used their tragedies in this way, it is not a radical change for modern comedians utilizing the post-comedy style to talk about personal issues and/or tragedies in a comedy special (Fox, 2018a). The marked difference, however, is that they are not using that material for comedy; instead, they are talking about these issues in a non-comedic manner. More specifically, comedians use personal material to entertain their audience, amusing their audience with jokes and stories that highlight foibles and pitfalls of themselves. On the other hand, comedians engage in and go beyond the post-
comedy turn to highlight serious issues; they use jokes to set up their serious arguments rather than using them to undercut a serious critique. Comedians going beyond the post-comedy turn are focused more on the serious message they are presenting rather than eliciting laughter from their audience, which is different from the traditional aim of comedy. The comedians in this sample go beyond saying something serious in a comedy special; they use the entirety of the special, including the comedic content, to set up their serious argument about mental health.

Furthermore, some comedians discuss serious matters without being funny. However, the material is an addendum to their special rather than part of the narrative arc, meaning it fits within the style of the post-comedy genre, but does not go beyond, like the specials examined in this study. While not that common, certain comedians, such as Patton Oswalt, have talked about serious topics onstage in a non-comedic manner. And, while there are some small jokes included in this section, the focus is to be non-comedic. About halfway through his 2017 comedy special titled *Annihilation*, Oswalt brings up a tragic event that recently happened in his life:

This next section is very hard for me to get into. But it was really nice… That was a fascinating front row. Wow. Thank you, guys. Thank you so much. That was… So… The, uh… Just over a year ago, um, I became a widower. And, uh, I have… I’m moving along as best I can. It is, you know… I can get up and I can do my job. I can be a dad. But, uh, it’s not, you know… it’s still… The wound is there. It is healing. It’s not shut yet. And, uh… Ooh, by the way, if one more person wishes me strength on my healing journey, I’m gonna throw a balloon full of piss into every candle store on the planet, because… it’s… It is not a healing journey. Uh, and calling it a healing journey makes it harder, by the way. When I’m… When it’s 4:00 a.m. and I’m in the backyard crying, and looking at the sky in my underwear, uh, you know, it doesn’t feel… I’m like, “I think I’m fucking up my healing
journey right now.” If they would call it a “numb slog,” then I could at least go, “I’m nailing it. All right. I’m… right where I need to be on my “numb slog.” And also, it… There’s no sense to it. It doesn’t have… And that was my, you know… my… My wife was a true-crime writer and researcher, and the phrase she hated the most was, “You know, everything happens for a reason.” She’s like, “No, it fuckin’ doesn’t. It’s chaos. It’s all random. And it’s horrifying. And if you want to try to reduce the horror and reduce the chaos, be kind, that’s all you can do. It’s chaos. Be kind.” She would just say that all the… “It’s chaos. Be kind.” Now… I would always… We’d have these huge philosophical arguments where I was like, “I don’t believe in an intelligent creator, per se. I think that there might be a lattice work of logic and meaning to the universe that maybe we’re too small to see.” And she was like, “Sweetie, it’s all random. It’s all chaos. It’s chaos. Be kind. It’s chaos. Be kind.” And we would go back and forth. And then she won the argument in the shittiest way possible! And if there is some intelligence up there with a plan, then his or her or its plan sucks. If part of the plan was looking at me and Michelle as a couple, and go, “Well, I gotta take one of them. Now, let me see. She investigates cold cases and tries to bring a sense of relief and sense to bereaved families. And, uh, he talks about his dick in front of drunks. Now, who… should I take off the planet right now?” That’s like looking down and seeing, like, Louis Pasteur and the guy who fluffs the donkey at the Tijuana fuck show. And you’re like, “Well… those donkey dicks aren’t gonna get hard on their own. I gotta… Someone’s gonna invent pasteurization eventually.” (Goldthwait, 2017)

Oswalt, almost as if he is compelled to talk about it, discusses how he is dealing with his wife’s accidental overdose of sleeping medication. At this point, Oswalt is clearly trying to not cry, something he is only somewhat successful at doing. While this is a deviation from the norm of
comedy, in that all material is designed to be funny, Oswalt does not engage in the post-comedy turn (Fox, 2018a) in the same way the comedians I examine do. Even though he includes non-comedic material to disclose his tragedy, it is not part of the broader narrative of the show, which focuses on the breakdown of US society.

Oswalt identifies a tragic event in his life and discusses it in a public forum, potentially providing therapeutic relief for himself. Because the relationship between comedian and audience has become more personal with comedy specials and social media, Oswalt, like many other comedians, feel more comfortable sharing personal hurt onstage. Furthermore, he knows his audience was sympathetic toward him and would accept him stepping outside the comedic form during his special. Other performers are not provided the same consideration (e.g., LeBron James “shut up and dribble”), but because of the personal connection between performer and audience in comedy, Oswalt felt comfortable sharing his tragedy in a non-comedic fashion, and his audience felt comfortable allowing him to do so without rejecting him as a comedian.

However, even though Oswalt explored non-comedic material in this special, he did not engage in the post-comedy turn because he did not use discomfort or awkwardness as a site of humor. Instead, Oswalt continued to present jokes in his previously established style, including rants, puns, stories, and traditional jokes, all of which were designed to elicit laughter. Similarly, Oswalt did not go beyond the post-comedy turn because he was not presenting a non-comedic argument as the focus of the narrative of his special. While he included some serious arguments (e.g., “it’s chaos, be kind”), it was not the central narrative of his show. Oswalt’s inclusion of non-comedic material, while part of the development of the comedic genre, does not engage in the post-comedy turn nor go beyond it. However, as I explore below, post-comedy is not an aberration from
the comedic genre, nor is it an illogical move in the evolution of comedy. Rather, there are several factors which makes post-comedy a logical, albeit not pre-determined, style of comedy.

It is important to highlight how minoritized comedians have dealt with mental health, trauma, racism, sexism, and paranoia in their comedy performances. Comedians who are minoritized must navigate overlapping dimensions of subjugation and, while comedy provides a vehicle through which these tensions can be explored, they are still limited by these dimensions. Comedians of color have often discussed trauma in their material, and it partially informs how other comedians, including those who are not minoritized, frame their content. While I am not exploring dimensions of race as a primary focus in this project, it is a vital perspective to understand as it relates to the privilege the comedians in my sample embody, as well as the privileges they do not.

**Moving to Post-Comedy**

While there have been thematic changes in comedy over the past two centuries, the primary function was to make the audience laugh (Greenbaum, 1999; Libera, 2020). Comedians might also present a diatribe against social/political ills, present a jeremiad against the audience, and/or make the audience think more critically about the world around them, but they did so with the purpose of making audience laugh. However, over the last decade, some comedians have moved away from this style of comedy, while also maintaining their place in the comedic form.

Past comedians, such as Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, and Dick Gregory used an angrier tone as they grew as comedians, but some of their material happened to be funny rather than was meant to be funny. If the audience did not laugh, their material would not be considered comedy, but it would still be successful because of its message. However, with recent comedians such as Brennan, Burnham, and Gadsby being purposefully not funny, they are still part of the comedy
genre. This phenomenon is part of this investigation: how are these comedians able to keep their specials within the comedy genre despite being purposefully non-comedic with some of their material?

Comedians in the post-comedy era (Fox, 2018a) have begun to present material that goes beyond, and outside of, traditional comedy, specifically the aspect of making the audience laugh. Louis C. K., among others, began doing this when they presented awkward discomfort as a form of comedy, which is different from using awkwardness, like Lucille Ball, as a form of comedy. The three comedians I analyze purposefully go outside of this traditional comedic perspective, wherein they present intentionally unfunny material in their comedy special that is part of their broader narrative. Other comedians have discussed non-funny material before, but not with the same acceptance and popularity as these modern comedians. These comedians have found widespread success with this post-comedy turn (Bennett, 2016; Berman, 2018; Collins, n.d.; Donegan, 2018; Fox, 2018a; Wired Staff, 2018). Brennan, Burnham, and Gadsby have stepped outside of their established comedic personae to express their ‘real’ selves, temporarily removing their character’s mask. Burnham spends the last fourteen minutes of his comedy special singing about his concerns about performance; Brennan spends a third of special talking explicitly about his mental health in a non-comedic manner; Gadsby expresses her frustration and anger with the genre of comedy in the last ten minutes of her comedy special. These comedians are still funny in their material, but the intent is not to be funny: the intent is to express the ‘real’ self to their audience in a manner rarely done before. Despite this turn, these comedians have found success, something that could be a confluence of various factors, such as race, gender, and intelligence. How are they able to remain within the realm of comedy if their intent changes? This dynamic is something that is also investigated in this project.
I argue that the inclusion of non-comedic material in the post-comedy turn (Fox, 2018a) is not a radical shift in comedy; instead, it is an extension of the development of comedy as a site of critique of serious issues, a recognition of the humanity of the performer, and the increased attention paid to mental health issues. The comedians in this project incorporate elements found throughout the history of comedy, including using themselves as places of humor, critiquing social structures, and finding humor in the assumptions audiences make about performance, comedy, and society. However, as I show in the next three chapters, each add to the post-comedy turn by discussing mental health in a non-comedic way as part of their special’s narrative by using and altering the conventions and format of comedy to make a serious overall point. Before doing so, I first discuss important aspects of mental health scholarship that help bridge the gap between comedy and mental health as a serious topic.

**The Seriousness of Mental Health**

Comedians provide a different perspective on serious issues (Neporent, 2014). While some comedians have forwarded the notion that their material is under attack (Lisi, 2015), comedians are still protected from prosecution by the US government. However, comedians have faced the challenge of critiquing power structures in the United States. One of those structures that has been focused on recently is mental health (Assari, 2019; Henderson & Gronholm, 2018). Some modern comedians, such as the ones analyzed in this project, have brought new attention to this issue, providing a unique analysis of the power dynamics surrounding mental health and comedy.

As discussed in Chapter 1, mental health has long been recognized as a serious issue (Bhavsar, Bhugra, & Persaud, 2020; Husby et al., 2020; Schwenk, Davis, & Wimsatt, 2010; Smith-Frigerio, 2020; Wood, Burwell, & Rawlett, 2018). As medical awareness has increased, so has public awareness, specifically overcoming the stigma of disclosing mental health issues.
(Bharadwaj, Pai, & Suziedelyte, 2017; Griffiths, Christensen, & Jorm, 2008; Schwenk, Davis, & Wimsatt, 2010). This increase in public attention has led to more sympathy for people suffering with mental health issues, including celebrities and comedians (Adams, 2020; Carpentier & Parrott, 2016, p. 1335).

Comedians are not immune from mental health issues; rather, they are more likely to experience psychotic symptoms (Ando, Claridge, & Clark, 2014). Comedians can provide audiences a bridge between the seriousness of mental health and a humorous perspective on it. This perspective allows some comedians, such as Maria Bamford and Aparna Nancherla, to mock themselves and aspects of mental health that makes them seemingly abnormal, something they have done with other aspects of themselves, such as physical appearance, health, and events in their lives. Additionally, comedians can alter the frame from one of tragedy, in that mental health is a flaw in our lives that will lead to our demise with no hope of dealing with it, to one of comedy, wherein we accept our mental health issues and try to do the best we can.

While comedians can provide a humorous reading of mental health, they can also do more through the post-comedy turn (Fox, 2018a). As Jesse David Fox identifies, comedians have long been taking serious issues and talking about them humorously. Additionally, comedians have also taken serious material and presented it in a serious manner while remaining, broadly, within the framework of comedy. For example, Fox highlights how past comedies have broken comedic norms to present a serious episode (2018a), such as the *M*A*S*H* episode “The Tooth Shall Set You Free,” which deals with a racist major trying to get rid of his African American soldiers. This episode was presented in a serious manner, falling outside the expected norms for a sitcom (although *M*A*S*H* had frequently presented serious material). This show can provide a non-comedic story while also remaining within the genre of comedy, even though the overarching goal
is not to make the audience laugh. As Fox describes, episodes such as this “used to be noteworthy, remembered as special, rule-breaking episodes for decades after; now, there are whole comedic series that live in those spaces” (2018a). Some modern comedians, such as Stephen Colbert, Marc Maron, and Jon Stewart, have done this as well, providing a serious interpretation of events around them while remaining within the comedic framework.

This post-comedy turn (Fox, 2018a) provides a starting place for comedians, but I argue that some modern comedians go further by talking about serious issues seriously within a comedy show. Fox describes the post-comedy turn as being a manner of comedians staying within the framework of comedy while talking about serious issues (2018a), but these issues tend to remain outside of the comedian, such as climate change, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and political crises. However, the comedian has typically not engaged in self-exploration while remaining within the comedy genre. I argue that some modern comedians not only recognize the seriousness of mental health, but also want their audiences to recognize it too. In the following chapters, I analyze how Bo Burnham, Neal Brennan, and Hannah Gadsby engage in, and go beyond, the post-comedy turn to include serious discussions about mental health while remaining within the comedy genre.
Chapter 3: Bo Burnham Blends Performance, Audience, Entertainment, Entertainer, Privilege, and Mental Health into a Complicated Recipe for Happiness

“[Helen Keller] doesn’t mind the zits on my ass: gives her more to read” (“The Perfect Woman,” Woldt, 2009), “All you goddamn dirty Catholics can Cath-o-lick my balls” (“Cookout,” boburnham, 2007b), and “Now my glory days are gone. I was John Elway now I’m Elton John” (My Whole Family Thinks I’m Gay,” boburnham, 2006). These were some of the first lyrics then 16-year-old Bo Burnham sang as one of the initial YouTube stars in the mid-2000s. As a tall, lanky, satirical musician, Burnham gained fame quickly as someone who was willing to provide a meta-critical perspective on musical form and the expectations of content.

Bo Burnham was born in 1991 and grew up in a suburb of Boston, Massachusetts (boburnham, 2007a). He is a white, heterosexual male and moved to Los Angeles, California, to be closer to the entertainment industry as he continued to find success as a comedian (Burnham & Storer, 2013). Burnham displayed tremendous musical talent, playing both piano and guitar, but also a penchant for comedy well beyond his years. Over the next eleven years, Burnham would develop into a superstar, performing in sold out stadiums across the world. Since his rise in fame in 2006, Burnham has released more YouTube videos, CDs, poetry books, and comedy specials (Ezell, 2014; Fishwick, 2018). He gained a following as a teenager and made his national stand-up debut in a Comedy Central special titled: Comedy Central Presents: Bo Burnham. Burnham continued his comedic career through the performance of three more comedy specials: Words, Words, Words; what.; and Make Happy. The latter is what I will be focusing on in this chapter.

Like previous comedians, Burnham uses primarily observational humor to build out his material. He has written content focusing on hypocrisies and ironies he notices in his daily life, such as the arrogance of religion, the misleading musical industry, and the faulty notion that
performers are exactly the same offstage as they are onstage. Burnham incorporates elements found in other comedians’ work, such as using comedic songs (e.g., Rodney Carrington, Stephen Lynch, and Dmitri Martin), irony (e.g., Jim Gaffigan and Robin Williams), and satire (e.g., Hannibal Burress, Michael Che, and Seth Meyers). However, Burnham’s combination of music, irony, and satire make him a unique comedic performer who provides a meta-critique of entertainment and performance.

As he attained national fame, Burnham seemingly became a voice of his Millennial generation, which the Pew Research Center defines as those born between 1981 and 1997 in the United States (2015) (Toscano, 2016). He was one of the first people to turn YouTube into a platform to share his content, attaining widespread recognition and fame. Burnham’s original content, while seemingly silly on its face, had more depth upon closer inspection. For example, his song “Cookout,” which focuses on a hypothetical summer bash held by the Ku Klux Klan, highlighted the stupidity of widespread hatred in the name of Christianity. Another song, “3.14 Apple Pi,” highlighted the racial dynamics of white people co-opting hip hop, given his positionality as a Boston suburbanite. Additionally, his first song to reach major popularity, “My Whole Family Thinks I’m Gay,” provided a critique of the perceived connection between behavior, such as how someone walks, to presumed sexual orientation. All these songs were published while Burnham was 16 and 17 years old.

Every generation faces crises and struggles. The Baby Boomers dealt with the Cold War and the threat of nuclear annihilation. Generation X experienced the AIDS and crack cocaine crises and the aftermath of the Vietnam and Gulf wars. Generation Y struggled with the introduction of the Information Age and the increasing interconnectedness of global problems. Additionally, every generation has had entertainers who have provided a rallying persona for them. The Millennial
generation is often criticized in comedy (Brennan, 2017; Zabielski, 2018), on social media (Weekman, 2020), and in the workforce (Monster Staff, 2020) for being angry, humorless, lazy, and ungrateful. However, this generation has faced incredible challenges, such as the slowest economic growth over the last 100 years, school shootings, and terrorist attacks in the United States. (Weekman, 2020). While no generalization is ever accurate for every member of a generation, Millennials are often attributed as being critical and distrustful of society (Pew Research Center, 2015; Weekman, 2020). Burnham, through his hypercritical and meta-narrative analysis of the pressures placed on Millennials, quickly became a voice of that generation (Toscano, 2016; Zielonka, 2016). Burnham was able to use entertainment to critique elements of society, such as diversity, religion, racism, sexism, and social media. By critiquing the everyday structures of society, Burnham was able to gain popularity as someone who understood the issues the average Millennial was facing, something that had been missing.

In his YouTube performances, Burnham sang about a variety of topics, such as Helen Keller, the KKK, sexual orientation, and fictional characters in a rehabilitation center. As he matured, he performed material with a harsher critique, such as an ironic song on irony, the lies of the music industry, and advertising (Burnham & Storer, 2013). This development, from someone singing about myriad, unrelated topics, to someone establishing a theme of meta-critique throughout a comedy special, helped Burnham maintain an audience of people who saw him as a performer who understood the real issues, not an entertainer who would pretend as if everything was perfect. By establishing this persona, as someone who could identify and critique the taken-for-granted structures and pressures of society, Burnham was able to use his voice not only to talk from the perspective of a Millennial critiquing society, but also as someone who was able to
critique the hegemonic buy-in of Millennials of these structures, particularly entertainment and social media (Burnham & Storer, 2013; Burnham & Storer, 2016; Toscano, 2016; Zielonka, 2016).

The culmination of this development was demonstrated in Burnham’s fourth stand-up comedy special: *Make Happy*. This special was different from any previous comedy special because it brought the elements of Burnham’s unique persona, meta-critique of both society and how people buy into it, and an exploration of his own struggles with mental health as he also struggles with the pressures placed on him.

In this chapter, I argue that Burnham’s serious discussion of mental health is non-comedic and it is the central message of this one-hour comedy special. The jokes, special effects, songs, and other performance elements all build up to a final message about the corrosive nature of comedy and performance, which have negatively affected his mental health. While serious discussions about real issues have been part of comedic performances before, they have not been incorporated into the comedic narrative as a whole. Instead, they have been used as either a setup for a punchline or they were seemingly a separate part of the show; one the performer was comfortable sharing but was not part of the fabric of the show.

As Jesse David Fox (2018a) maintains, the post-comedy turn is a new form of humor wherein the site of humor is moved from a place of building to laughter to a place of awkwardness; instead of trying to elicit laughter, humor is found in a sense of discomfort with a closer conception of classical or dramatic understanding of “comedy,” wherein the main characters are flawed, yet determined to succeed (Burke, 1959; 1969). As I explore in this chapter, a major portion of *Make Happy* is purposefully not comedic; instead, it focuses on the discomfort of someone exploring their mental health and the psychological costs of entertainment. Throughout this special, Burnham uses his persona, developed over ten years, to provide a critique of both the entertainment industry
and how he, and other Millennials, are supposed to deal with it. This chapter will highlight examples from Burnham’s *Make Happy* comedy special that demonstrate how he frames his material, shapes his audience via constitutive rhetoric, and shifts those frames to make his non-comedic material more palatable to his audience.

**Performing the Deconstruction**

*Make Happy* begins with Burnham waking up in his hotel and follows him as he walks through parks and city streets, presumably toward the theater where he is performing. Throughout this opening Burnham is wearing clown makeup on his face, potentially representing his thought that he is just a clown for our amusement (Husband, 2016). There is a female voiceover talking directly to the audience, both at home and in the theater, setting the stage for the performance. The voiceover highlights how “the world is not funny” because of various reasons, such as millions of people not having access to clean water and that Guy Fieri has two functioning restaurants. Before the audience at home enters the theater with Burnham, the voiceover finishes with “now that we know the context, let’s do this.” By using this voiceover, Burnham begins to situate his audience to be ready for a show that is not just laugh after laugh but might have some more depth.

In fact, as my analysis will demonstrate, this show is an hour-long deconstruction of performance. Burnham critiques performance while performing, providing a meta-commentary on performance while he brings his audience along as if they are also critiquing performance with him. This deconstruction allows Burnham to identify ways in which the entertainment industry, and other factors, have led to his declining mental health, which is a main theme of the show.

Throughout Burnham’s career, he has had struggles with performance. More specifically, Burnham has suffered from panic attacks while onstage (Monks, 2019), noting that the idea of
performance terrifies him (Fox, 2018b). In an interview with Jesse David Fox (2018b), Burnham identifies how his feelings toward stand-up have evolved throughout his career:

I was doing stand-up for a while and liked it. I had always been a nervous person and I had the first panic attack of my life doing my last show onstage in front of 800 people in Edinburgh. You know, just tunnel vision. I didn’t know what was happening. That just started to happen incrementally and I felt like I couldn’t do stand-up anymore. The finale to my last show, what, was like [the last song in Make Happy] but I was pretending that the problem I had was other people’s perception of me, when the problem really was more personal than that. This felt like a way of saying the one thing I wasn’t being honest about onstage was that I was absolutely terrified of it.

He specifically identifies his final song as a means of presenting the ‘real’ Burnham to the world, one that cannot deal with performance any longer. I argue that this is one of the first instances of Burnham breaking away from his comedic persona, allowing the audiences to see the ‘real’ Burnham behind the persona. While I recognize that the ‘real’ Burnham may just be another persona, based on his interviews and previous statements demonstrates that this is likely. Furthermore, Burnham highlights how his stage persona, one that he has critiqued in all his stand-up specials, was “not who I am AT ALL” (Schwartz, 2016, emphasis in original). By performing this special, Burnham was able to bridge the gap between his stage persona and his ‘real’ self.

Unlike many other comedians, Burnham is challenging the legitimacy of the division between performer and audience to establish a sense of equity between himself and his audience. He does this to emphasize the issues with that dynamic, both from the audience’s perspective and his own. By bringing his audience into the fold, Burnham can both continue his meta-critique of the entertainment industry as a sarcastic Millennial while also providing a larger critique of the
social and societal pressures on younger people to constantly perform. He seeks to find a common
ground between himself and his audience, allowing him the opportunity to share with them his
feelings of frustration, disappointment, and poor mental health about the entertainment industry.

**Framing**

Throughout his career as a performer, Bo Burnham has established himself as someone
willing to push the boundaries in pursuit of a joke. In the beginning, he became famous through
parody songs, such as songs about Helen Keller (Woldt, 2009) and how his entire family thinks he
is gay (boburnham, 2006). However, as he moved toward being a professional stand-up comedian
after he turned 18, Burnham became more of a critic of the structures around him, providing
introspective and meta-narrative critiques of society. In his fourth stand-up special, *Make Happy*,
Burnham focuses primarily on being a critic, using comedy to highlight issues in music,
entertainment, and the relationship between the audience and the performer.

In this section, I will identify how Burnham frames himself and his material. As Robert M.
Entman identifies, there are four primary functions to framing rhetoric: define problems, diagnose
causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies (1993, p. 52). I argue that Burnham used the
first three of these functions to situate his performance to provide a critique of social structures in
American society.

Throughout much of his performance, Burnham positions himself as both an insider and
an outsider of performance: he is an insider because his entire comedic career has focused on his
knowledge and understanding of performance, particularly his presentation of this dynamic in
previous works (*Words, Words, Words; what.*); he is an outsider because he is critical of the
pressures placed on performers, specifically those who are seemingly forced to perform for no
reason (Schwartz, 2016). Burnham emphasizes this dynamic when responding to people who call him a hypocrite:

I think I wear my hypocrisy on my sleeve. I would never say I’m not a complete hypocrite. The show is meant to be manic and strange, and it’s doubling back on itself because it is so hypocritical. I think the problem is that oftentimes, the only people that are qualified to talk about something are people that, were they to talk about it, they’d be hypocrites. I don’t think I would know certain things if I hadn’t benefited from it. So I feel like it’s sort of my job to just pull the rug out from under something. I just wanted to do a show with bells and whistles about bells and whistles, to make a spectacle about what a spectacle is. (Schwartz, 2016, emphasis in original)

These two perspectives help situate Burnham’s rhetoric throughout this stand-up special. By explicitly identifying certain experiences as justification to talk about those experiences, Burnham understands the inherent hypocrisy in complaining about the very thing that he has benefited from. Similarly, he understood the potential backlash he could have received from his audience because of this hypocrisy. However, by establishing himself as a meta-critical performer and walking his audience through the critique in Make Happy, Burnham was able to preempt this reaction and successfully present a serious argument about entertainment to a group of people who are probably not officially connected to the entertainment industry.

As discussed above, Burnham begins his special by contextualizing the performance, saying that the world is not funny and that we cannot use laughter to fix our problems. However, this seeming contradiction frames his entire performance as one that will critique the dynamics of performance and comedy. In his introductory song, Burnham asks the audience to participate, such during a song, he asks “All the ladies in the house let me hear you say, ‘hell yeah!’” After asking
the men and then virgins to respond, Burnham asks “If you can divide by zero let me hear you say, ‘hell yeah!’” When the audience cheers, he stops singing to say “No you can’t. Don’t be Pavlovian. I’m looking for real answers here.” By breaking the mold of the traditional call-and-response style to ask this question, Burnham is framing his performance as more than just a joke followed by laughter; he wants his audience to pay attention to the material, searching for meaning within the text.

As Burnham progresses through his special, he continues to reinforce the notion that this performance, while following some similar styles as his previous stand-up specials, is different; it has a deeper point. After this call-and-response segment of his introductory song, he breaks down into an introspective verse, discussing how his biggest problem is the audience and the relationship between the audience, performance, and trying to find happiness. At this point, roughly five minutes into the special, Burnham has already defined the problems: Burnham has real issues with his mental health and laughter is not the cure for them. This dynamic between laughter and problems is key to how the audience reacts, but it is also important to the tension Burnham is feeling as a comedian. He is arguing here that laughter, the basis of his career, is not enough to overcome his unhappiness. While he understands that the audience expects to laugh, he cannot accept that laughter will solve anything, especially his own problems. Already Burnham is framing this entire performance as one that will go beyond a typical comedy special, where the comedian tells jokes, the audience laughs, and everyone goes back to their lives. Instead, Burnham is framing this performance as one with more depth, both for the audience and for himself.

Now that Burnham has defined what he sees to be the underlying problems, he continues to identify other problems he sees with entertainment/performance. Burnham is primarily a singing comedian, using songs as vehicles of humor and critique. While he does perform some traditional
joke-telling comedy, the bulk of his performance comes from original songs that emphasize issues with certain elements of entertainment. One of those critiques is how performers engage with different musical genres; the first being hip-hop, which Burnham argues has become “beat fetishism.” Burnham has explored this genre of music in previous performances, including “3.14 Apple Pi,” a song published on YouTube in 2007 (boburnham, 2007a), wherein he makes fun of himself, a white Bostonian man, performing rap: “I’m from beautiful Massachusetts, and I know what you’re thinking, you’re thinking you’re thinking ‘Massachusetts: gangster rap!’ So, I’m gonna try that right now.” Here he recognizes the racial dimensions of a stereotypically white place like Massachusetts and the historical creation of rap. Similarly, before beginning his critique, Burnham again jokes about his whiteness: “Most hip-hop artists, for me, and it is for me, hip-hop, has traded in words and poetry for beat fetishism” (Burnham & Storer, 2016, emphasis added). Burnham recognizes that hip-hop is not designed for someone like him, a white Boston suburbanite comedian, but he establishes his credibility through his expertise as a performer. To critique the genre, he has a heavy beat playing behind him while he raps the nursery rhymes “I’m a Little Teapot” and “Baa Baa Black Sheep.” Burnham argues that music should be self-expression, and this brand of hip-hop does not embody what music is supposed to be about. Through this song Burnham is diagnosing a cause (a lack of sincerity in hip-hop) of the problem (beat fetishism), using his position as an entertainer to provide a knowledgeable critique of the genre. By identifying the problem-cause relationship in performance/entertainment, Burnham highlights a potential cause for his unhappiness: the inherent hypocrisy of the industry, leading to frustration, disappointment, and depression when dealing with his own relationship with the audience. While he does not argue that the entertainment industry causes his unhappiness, he does make a
connection between the expectations of entertainment on himself, his audience, and society and unhappiness, both for himself and for his audience. The second musical genre that Burnham criticizes is country music. Just like hip-hop, Burnham is not critiquing the genre as a whole, but is instead highlighting how certain styles of country music, what he terms “stadium country,” are disingenuous. He begins a country music song by singing in a “mad lib” style, using bland words to pander to his audience. Once again, through this critique, Burnham is identifying the cause of these problems, the seeming dishonesty from performers, as a reason to critique performance. Moreover, he is identifying how hypocrisy and lies within the entertainment industry, specifically disingenuity, can be a reason for unhappiness. These examples help us understand the position Burnham is taking as he moves toward framing his problems to and with his audience. By critiquing the dishonesty of performance, Burnham is questioning the legitimacy of the performer/audience relationship. This framing allows Burnham to justify his material on his lack of happiness as a performer. Without identifying the dishonesty with performance, Burnham would have had less success providing non-comedic material later in the show. Throughout these critiques Burnham is making moral judgments of performers, audiences, and performance in general. By doing so, he is attempting to align his audience’s perspective with his as he moves toward a more personal perspective on performance. As Burnham progresses through his comedy special, he continues to highlight hypocrisies between performers and their audiences. For example, he sings about trying to find meaning in Katy Perry lyrics. In this song he jokes about suicide as an alternative to finding meaning in the entertainment industry: “So if you’re depressed then you need to book a therapy session, talk about your depression, and let a professional hear it. But if you search for moral wisdom in Katy Perry’s lyrics,
then kill yourself.” While his audience knows that he is being satirical, his overall message is twofold: (1) audiences have become dependent upon entertainers to solve their personal problems and (2) entertainers have taken it upon themselves to provide answers to their audience’s problems. This dynamic, according to Burnham, is highly problematic because of the complex nature of depression, suicide, and self-esteem.

Burnham is not alone in identifying the potentially problematic dependence upon external factors to find happiness. As John Bowlby argues in various works, humans establish attachments to others, deriving emotional satisfaction from those relationships (Bowlby 1951; 1973; 1984). By extension, fans establish attachments to celebrities and performers, potentially deriving happiness from the ways in which entertainers act in the world. The relationship between happiness and outside factors is more complicated than finding a song to feel better.

In a similar vein, fans of entertainers might develop parasocial or imagined relationships with celebrities (Horton & Wohl, 1956), leading to a feeling of friendship between the celebrity and themselves (Gregg, 2018; Kim & Song, 2016). As noted by Karl Roberts (2007), for some people, these attachments “may become highly significant and even come to dominate their lives” (p. 56). Celebrity conduct, Roberts (2007) also reports, can “provoke feelings and emotions akin to those experienced in real-life relationships” (p. 56). Some fans even developing problematic relationships with celebrities, such as when fan Yolanda Saldivar killed her musical idol, Selena. Fortunately, most fans are not as obsessed. However, with the rise of social media and the ability to connect more easily with celebrities than before, fans might feel like they are part of celebrities’ lives, particularly when sharing emotional content (Kim & Song, 2016). This emotionality provides a sense of closeness that is present in many friendships, although it cannot be reciprocated
in a parasocial relationship because it is a one-sided relationship, with all of the emotional investment done by the fan.

Although the celebrity cannot participate in a parasocial relationship, if the celebrity loses all their fans then they can no longer continue their success in the same way. A celebrity is dependent upon their fans and some level of parasocial relationship for their careers, money, success, and, for some, a sense of self-worth. Without positive reinforcement in the form of fans, celebrities might lose their happiness.

This is what Burnham is critiquing in his framing of the entertainment industry. First, he is critiquing celebrities’ dependence upon fans for their happiness. Second, he is critiquing fans’ dependence upon celebrities to make them happy. Both stem from an element of attachment theory, which states that humans become dependent upon close physical, emotional, and psychological relationships with others to maintain security, safety, and happiness (Bowlby, 1951; 1984; Schuengel et al., 2013). Burnham is hypercritical of this interdependent relationship that falls outside the aim of entertaining. His argument suggests that comedy and entertainment is meant to amuse an audience, not attempt to solve life or mental health problems. Moreover, he argues that this interdependence has potentially led to his unhappiness in a destructive, cyclical pattern; he cannot find happiness because he cannot make his audience happy, and he cannot make his audience happy because he cannot find happiness.

In Chapters 4 and 5, we will see a similar pattern in how Neal Brennan and Hannah Gadsby critique their relationships to celebrity and entertainment. Brennan identifies how he engaged in “star-fucking,” an attempt to use relationships with other celebrities for protection and happiness (Brennan, 2017). Gadsby argues that her career formed a sort of negative relationship between herself and comedy, wherein she tried to find a medium to tell her story through comedy because
that was the only place she could tell a story, even if it was incomplete (Olb & Parry, 2018). However, she realized that this relationship could not provide her happiness because of the incomplete nature of comedy to tell true stories. This theme, that the dynamic between performer, audience, and performance is unsatisfactory, is a major site of analysis for these comedians, as Burnham further demonstrates.

Burnham continues by singing another song about our unrealistic expectations about love. In this song Burnham highlights the hypocrisy of the ‘perfect’ person. His first verse discusses the unrealistic ideal of women in their pursuit of Prince Charming. His second verse discusses the unrealistic expectation of a physically attractive yet humble and selfless woman. Once again, Burnham uses his songs to provide a meta-critique of society and its demands on humans to act in certain ways to achieve happiness. More specifically, Burnham is critiquing the expectation that finding the perfect romantic partner is the only avenue for joy in a romantic relationship, once again reinforcing the notion that happiness, while sometimes dependent upon external factors, is more complicated than finding one element or person (Bowlby, 1951; 1984; Kavetsos, Dimitriadou, & Dolan, 2014; Schuengel et al., 2013). He further explores this dynamic in the close of his show.

Burnham sings two concluding songs: one to his live audience and another to his asynchronous audience. Both offer insights into the ‘real’ Burnham and the struggles he faces as he continues his career as a performer. To properly understand these songs, it is important to understand how Burnham frames the material within the songs.

Before either song begins, Burnham provides a lot of context for what his special is about. He speaks about the issues of the Millennial generation, such as being forced to perform for no reason all the time. He talks about how he has been performing his entire life and that he felt
disingenuous talking about anything but performing. As previously noted, being disingenuous is a major concern for Burnham, which he identified in his critique of hip-hop and country music. Burnham continues by highlighting how the goal of his generation, especially those in the audience (who at this time are visible because the house lights are up) is to end the day watching their lives on their phones. After talking about these issues, Burnham asks the audience if he can speak about his issues. While this is a key moment, it is also important to remember the privileges, some of which Burnham recognizes, of his position: “I’m supposed to get up here and say, ‘follow your dreams,’ as if this is a meritocracy? It is not, okay? I had a privileged life and I got lucky and I’m unhappy.”

To begin the first song, Burnham identifies how he is going to follow the style of Kanye West during the Yeezus Tour\(^\text{17}\), providing a rap/rant about the issues he is facing. By providing this introduction, the audience is primed by the framing to know what will following: like in many of West’s concerts, Burnham will use the song as a vehicle to expose his problems. The song has two parts: the first focuses on seemingly insignificant issues, such as a Pringles can being too small to allow his hand to fit properly and the letdown of a burrito expert at Chipotlè not warning him about the ingredients in his burrito. By comedically framing the first half of this song, Burnham is able to allow his audience to feel comfortable in the song, knowing that it fits the established style.

\(^\text{17}\) To justify this, Burnham prefaces this rant by referencing West’s Yeezus tour, wherein West ranted about societal and personal problems onstage to his audience in a semi-rap, semi-spoken word format. While Burnham mimicking West here can be viewed as co-opting a Black performer’s discussion about serious issues without understanding the racial and mental health factors West experiences, Burnham states: “I thought maybe I could do this. I’ll be honest, my problems are not as high stakes as Kanye’s, but I have problems.” Burnham accomplishes two things here: he recognizes that his whiteness and privilege potentially undercut the seriousness of West’s issues, but Burnham also recognizes that this rant might be an effective forum to explore his own mental health issues. I argue here that Burnham successfully adopts West’s performative choice without neglecting the privileged and minoritized positions of both performers, respectively. However, Burnham could have been more explicit and inclusive of West’s struggles with mental health as well, particularly bipolar disorder (CBS News, 2019).
of Burnham’s performance: sometimes talking about seemingly insignificant things as a source of humor with an underlying, albeit not always obvious, critique.

However, the second part of the song is where the ‘real’ side of Burnham is exposed. The transition between these two parts is where the comedic tone for the remainder of the show ends. Here is where Burnham identifies his biggest problem (in a singing/spoken word style):

I can sit here and pretend like my biggest problems are Pringles cans and burritos. The truth is my biggest problem is you [the audience]. I wanna please you, but I wanna stay true to myself. I wanna give you the night out that you deserve, but I wanna sing what I think, and not care what you think about it. A part of me loves you, a part of me hates you. A part of me needs you, a part of me fears you. And I don’t think that I can handle this right now [repeats the last line as he changes emphasis]. (Burnham & Storer, 2016)

Clearly Burnham is not making a joke in this last segment, and no laughter is heard from the audience throughout the remainder of this song. This segment demonstrates how important it was for Burnham to frame the rest of his special as a site of critique, defining the problems and identifying the causes of his issues with performance. The audience is positioned to be receptive to this expression of self-doubt and unhappiness, and Burnham continues to reinforce his argument by repeating the phrase “I don’t think that I can handle this right now.” He even imbues more meaning in his words, singing “you can tell them anything if you just make it funny, make it rhyme. And if they still don’t understand you then you’ll run it one more time.” This repetition reinforces his message of disenchantment with performance and his feeling of being let down by those who knew better, leading to his unhappiness. Without framing his special in terms of exploring issues of performance, establishing early on that he is unhappy, and reinforcing his message through
critical songs, the central argument that he has real issues that cannot be solved through performance would have been much less successful with the audience.

The immediate standing ovation when the song ends suggests that Burnham was effective. At the end of the round of applause, Burnham walks off the stage into a separate, smaller room. As he sits down to the lonely piano, the cheering and applauding from the audience sharply cuts off, leaving just the at-home audience and Burnham alone in an extremely intimate setting. Before playing the piano, Burnham states “oh good, it’s just us.” While the previous song completed the performance for the live audience, there is a little more in store for the audience at home. Burnham begins playing, and it is a little unclear what the message might be as he starts talking about potential responses to his show. However, Burnham, just like he did at the beginning of his show, is seemingly seeking information from the audience, even though he cannot see this audience. He asks, “on a scale from one to zero, are you happy?” This seems like an odd question to start a new song, but it fits within the frame Burnham has established throughout his special: he is unhappy with performance and he wants to connect with the audience on that point.

As Burnham continues the song, he reinforces the idea that happiness is potentially unattainable for him and for his audience. After asking the question, he goes into a quick section on how he perceives happiness:

I really wanna try to get happy and I think that I could get it if I didn’t always panic every time I’m unhappy in life. I’m owed some life where I’m always, like, happy. Which is stupid ‘cause I wouldn’t even want it if I got. Wait, oh God, my dad was right. (Burnham & Storer, 2016)

It is unclear at this point whether Burnham is singing to the audience or singing to himself. If he is singing to himself, asking if he is happy, he knows he is not. However, the audience members
can also play along with this song, answering questions regarding their own happiness. The intimacy of this setting, the small space and the close-up on Burnham playing on the piano, leads to a voyeuristic interpretation, where we are looking at someone trying to deal with their own unhappiness. Burnham continues the song: “So if you know or ever knew how to be happy. On a scale from one to two now, are you happy? You’re everything you hated. Are you happy? Hey, look Ma, I made it. Are you happy?” After completing a short piano outro, a door to the left opens to a bright day with a white house in the background. An unknown woman holding a dog walks onto the porch. Burnham steps outside and, to the beat of the instrumental music, almost in a cartoonish, hoppy, Steamboat Willie-esque style, walks toward the dog and woman, who then walk inside together, thus ending the program.

This final scene reinforces the framing theme of being both an insider and an outsider. Burnham concludes his performance with an intimate song about happiness and the lack thereof, but he walks into a scene of the American ideal: a house with a front yard and a heterosexual significant other. There is this dichotomy of holding up the ideal life and simultaneously critiquing it.

Burnham left the live audience as they stood in a standing ovation, despite his last song being raw and revealing. It was clear what the audience was supposed to do as Burnham was finishing. However, it is unclear how the at-home audience is supposed to feel after listening to this last song. I argue that this feeling of discomfort is intentional because of how Burnham framed the entire special; it also fits within the post-comedy style of discomfort being a source of humor, even if the audience is unsure what to do with it (Fox, 2018a). In this moment we see an exemplar for Burnham’s argument: that performance does not lead to happiness, even though an element or smokescreen of happiness might be achieved after the performance. By framing his special as a
representation of the critique of performance with the underlying theme of unhappiness, Burnham effectively presents an argument that happiness is not easily attained because of shallow accomplishments, such as listening to a song or even watching a stand-up comedy special.

Burnham successfully frames his material to be both a presentation and critique of performance. He uses his position as an insider to demonstrate the issues faced by both entertainers and consumers in the realm of performance. However, strategic framing is not enough to be successful with the audience; Burnham must use other rhetorical tactics to shape his audience to be receptive to his non-comedic message. One way in which rhetors can situate their audience is through constitutive rhetoric. In the following section, I explore how Burnham uses constitutive rhetoric to shape his audience to be receptive of his non-comedic material about mental health.

**Constitutive Rhetoric**

Constitutive rhetoric shapes peoples’ identities in ways that preconfigure them to hold a particular perspective or viewpoint (Charland, 1987). In this comedy special, Burnham uses a mix of meta-critique, satire, and music to shape his audience to be receptive of his non-comedic material, particularly his personal feelings about the hypocritical and flawed expectations of performance. Additionally, Burnham position his audience to see things from his perspective, demonstrating that there really is no difference between performer and audience.

While there has been little work on constitutive rhetoric and an individual performance, such as a comedy show, I contend that comedians and other performers interpellate their audience during their performances. However, the primary difference in my use of constitutive theory is that I am not interested in how the rhetoric shapes the collective identity of a group in order to motivate them to act, such as in the case of the Quebec sovereign independence, which Charland investigated. Rather, in comedy performance, the performers are not necessarily trying to get their
audiences to act cohesively; rather, they are trying to situate their audience to be accepting of their material, which means that the rhetor must position the audience in a way in which they identify through a shared perspective and understanding.

One of the things that makes Burnham’s, Brennan’s, and Gadsby’s comedy specials unique is that they explicitly present the central issue in their performances as non-comedy. While many comedians have a serious material embedded within their performances (e.g., Greg Giraldo’s issues of fame; Ron White and the death penalty; Robin Williams’s connections with his father), Burnham clearly states at the beginning of his special the underlying problem he is facing: his struggle to find happiness as impacted by the relationship between him and his audience.

Much of Burnham’s material is meta-critical, including commentary on the connections between behavior and sexual orientation (boburnham, 2006), the arrogance of monotheistic religions (Burnham & Storer, 2013), and issues with perception of celebrities (Burnham & Storer, 2016). In Make Happy, Burnham takes it a step further by critiquing his own career as someone who has found success as a performer while understanding that many of his generation are expected to perform constantly. He further explores this dynamic in an interview with Dana Schwartz (2016): I think a lot of people have a feeling that they’re being watched and they need to perform their lives for people and I think it’s just sort of gross and sort of the death of everything.” Burnham can use his position as a performer to identify with and provide a voice for those who feel like they must constantly perform.

In his introductory song, Burnham takes a break from the singing and joking to talk directly to the audience. He sets it up by singing, “You want me to get introspective? I’ll get introspective.” He then changes style completely, from a fun and upbeat introductory song to a mellow and intimate song identifying his problem: the audience. Burnham sings “I don’t know why I’m here.
I know you paid money, I should be funny. Other than that, I don’t know why I’m here.” While this builds on his comedic style of being introspective and providing a meta-commentary on comedy, music, and the world, he is most explicit here in identifying his concerns.

As Burnham continues throughout this special, he uses constitutive rhetoric in various ways to prepare and situate his audience for his finale. Sometimes he is explicit in shaping how the audience should be reacting, such as arguing that the audience should not use laughter to avoid real problems. He also argues, while setting up a comedic song about suicide, that the audience should not rely on entertainers to make them feel better about themselves; instead, they should consult professionals, like therapists, to help deal with issues of depression and anxiety, supporting the perspective that therapy is the best remedy for mental health issues (Halder & Mahato, 2019; Sale et al., 2016). By discussing how audiences should react and engage with entertainers situates them to understand the role between the two, specifically how audience members should view themselves as having more agency in their lives when dealing with serious mental health issues (Coote & MacLeod, 2012). Here Burnham is providing a perspective that his audience should take charge of their lives rather than depend on entertainers or anyone else to provide the solutions for them.

Constituting his audience in this way allows Burnham to blur the lines between the audience and the performer, a theme he will return to in his concluding song. By breaking down these barriers, Burnham is identifying with his audience to see him as one of them, not as an ideal or a distant entertainer who is living a perfect life. Rather, Burnham is dealing with serious issues just like his audience, and, as Burnham implicitly argues, it is important to understand that everybody is facing real issues that should be dealt with responsibly and professionally.
Burnham is fairly explicit in how he constitutes the audience: have agency over your own mental health, do not depend upon an entertainer to provide happiness, and accept that all people, including entertainers, have real problems. While positive, this argument is problematic because of its neoliberal and privileged assumption that everyone has the resources and opportunities to ignore systemic issues and focus on themselves to find happiness. I explore this dynamic in more detail below. To continue this theme, Burnham paradoxically casts himself as both an exemplar of the problems he is identifying as well as a possible exception. He positions himself as someone who is similar to his audience, dealing with legitimate mental health issues that have been unresolved through constant performance. Similarly, he positions himself as being an outsider, someone who understands that his sole job description as a comedian is to make the audience laugh, thereby using his position to establish his credibility while also critiquing the societal dimensions that have led to the complicated relationship between performer and audience. By doing so, he is able to move between the roles to find humor, but also to state his message without alienating his audience.

Burnham’s rhetoric is deploying a perspective about mental health treatment: personal empowerment leads to improvement in people with depression (Coote & MacLeod, 2012; Ross et al., 2008) and more severe mental illness (Linhorst et al., 2002). More specifically, when people were given the opportunity to talk about external factors of depression, such as stigmatization and oppression based on sexual orientation, people felt an increase in self-esteem (Ross et al., 2008). Furthermore, when people with depression were given agency, they reported higher life satisfaction (Coote & MacLeod, 2012). Even though Burnham is not establishing a mental health program for his audience, his argument urging his audience to take control of their lives rather than
being dependent upon celebrities does seek acceptance of a mental health personal empowerment intervention philosophy.

Successful comedians must take aspects of the world and make them funny, and that involves occasionally massaging the truth to find a suitable punchline. However, Burnham, throughout his career, has taken this a step further. As he grew to fame in his YouTube videos and his first three specials, Burnham established a comedic persona of being satirical and metaphysical; he does not make jokes about seemingly trivial things without a meta-critique to support it. For example, Burnham transitions away from one bit in this special that becomes too meta into another that really is not a joke:

[in a stereotypical female’s voice] Okay, you know what? This bit is getting a little weird and meta. Okay, we’re done with it. [back to his normal voice] I agree. Where’s that going? Sometimes you don’t write an end to a bit so you skip it. Before you know it, you’re on to the next thing. Guys, I was at the store recently and, uh, [audience claps] no, I will save you time. I bought something. (Burnham & Storer, 2016)

This joke moves from being too metaphysical to pay off to a joke about the triviality of the grocery store, thus establishing Burnham’s persona of meta-critique and satire.

Additionally, by including a non-humorous joke (the punchline was that he bought something), Burnham once again performs a meta-critique of the expectations of humor, particularly that anti-humor, or the act of purposefully stating a non-funny punchline as the punchline, can be humorous to those who are in on the joke, so to speak. Furthermore, Burnham is once again telling his audience to pay attention to the details of his show, constituting his audience and foreshadowing his argument later in the special.
Because he has established this persona, Burnham is able to discuss the narrative of his meta-critique about deconstructing barriers between the performative and ‘real’ self. For example, about halfway through his special, Burnham talks about honesty and how he is “not honest for a second up here!” By stating this, Burnham continues his comedic style of being pre-planned and performative (Husband, 2016); his audience knows that he does not joke about his personal life or make simple observational jokes very often. However, Burnham continues in his special to emphasize that he has legitimate problems. While seemingly contradictory, I argue that this helps constitute his audience to be accepting of his material. If he were to state that he was being honest all the time, then his persona would lose much of the force it had obtained throughout his career, especially when he sings about controversial topics, such as fictional creatures with drug problems and a Ku Klux Klan cookout. If he were being honest and serious all the time, then he might lose the ability to be satirical and present a meta-commentary on the world around him. However, while he states that he is not being honest, he still found success in bringing up ‘real’ issues, such as his concerns about finding happiness for himself and for his audience.

To further blur the lines between audience and performer, Burnham asks for the house lights to be raised several times throughout the performance, changing the traditional optics of the performer being under a spotlight onstage while the audience sits in darkness. Both in the introductory and concluding song, Burnham talks directly to the audience in a more serious tone, establishing the idea that this is a conversation between people with real issues rather than a performer and audience being in the same room. This change in the relationship helps set up the non-comedic material Burnham is presenting. Before he begins his discussion about issues with performing, Burnham explicitly dissects the supposed barrier between performer and audience:
But I worried that making a show about performing would be too meta. It wouldn’t be relatable to people that aren’t performers. But what I found is that I don’t think anyone isn’t. Could we get the house lights up for a second? And could you, let the lights onstage, let the artifice fade away. Now we’re all the same. (Burnham & Storer, 2016)

By breaking down the artifice between performer and audience Burnham identifies with the audience by placing everyone on the same level; there is equality here, and audiences should not elevate entertainers, nor should entertainers look down at the audience. By deconstructing the relationship between audience and performer, Burnham positions his audience to be receptive to his exploration of himself as a flawed and troubled person, much like many in the audience. This reinforces Burnham’s perspective about his mental health: the unequal relationship between performer and audience, wherein the audience places the performer on a pedestal, has led him to be unhappy because he cannot live up to the expectations of his audience. Similarly, as he argues throughout this special, entertainers like himself should not be expected to solve their audience’s problems. Instead, individuals should take charge of their own happiness, although this is problematic because of his embodied privilege.

**Burnham’s Closing Song**

We can see the result of Burnham’s use of constitutive rhetoric in his concluding song and how much time he dedicates to it. Time is important to comedians. When a special is only an hour and ten minutes long, typically most of the time should be spent on humorous material. However, Burnham begins his concluding song, including the setup, with over fourteen minutes remaining in the special, a significant amount of time for any performer.

Burnham begins this bit by asking, “What is this really about?” This question gets to the heart of his issues with performance. While he makes a couple of jokes in setting up this bit, the
tone has clearly changed from a comedic performance to something more serious with some comedy interspersed. Burnham once again talks directly with the audience about his issues, such as the dynamics between audience and performer. He argues that his generation, which includes many of the people in the audience, are forced to believe the notion that they should be performing all the time for no reason, especially through social media and YouTube, creating a prison of performance that is nearly impossible to escape from.

As he sets up his final song, Burnham references how Kanye West sang a song and ranted at the end of his performance, signally that he too would discuss issues like West did. While Burnham states that his problems are not as deep as West’s, he asks the audience to allow him to share anyway. The audience cheers, giving him permission (although it would have been unlikely, based on his pre-planned style, for Burnham to not share if the crowd did not cheer) (Husband, 2016). This song is the ultimate result of the post-comedy performance (Fox, 2018a), where his constituted audience can accept his material. If the audience had not been effectively constituted by the time of this introspective song, then they could have easily been turned off or rejected the material. Instead, as the camera shots of the audience demonstrates, the audience appears to be accepting of the material, listening to his song, and laughing when appropriate.

Before analyzing the content of the final song and how constitutive rhetoric succeeds in setting up Burnham’s non-comedic content, I should contextualize how this song is the end result of the performance. Within the song, Burnham employs some of the tactics that traditional rhetors use when presenting arguments: he establishes a thesis early in the performance, he seems to understand and engage the disposition of his audience, and he finishes his performance by reinforcing his message. Furthermore, Burnham is engaging directly with his audience, responding to the laughter and applause he receives from them. While this follows the typical form of live
comedy, in that comedians and audiences consistently interact, Burnham’s pre-planned style complicates the seemingly impromptu request from Burnham as he asks his audience to allow him to “say [his] shit.” Burnham’s performances have typically been planned to the most minute detail, as he explains in an interview:

I can’t really do the thing that other comedians do, like casually bringing up a bit. I went and made a three-minute track, certain it would work, and when I tried it out I knew in the first five seconds I thought, “Oh fuck this isn’t going to work at all!” But I have two minutes and 55 seconds left of the thing. (Husband, 2016)

Given how much he rehearses and plans his performances, it could be possible that Burnham coaches or instructs his audience to react in certain ways. Some comedians use stage instructions with technology like applause or silence signs. This could be the case when Burnham instructs the audience to behave in certain ways and they comply. For example, he tells the audience, if they are enjoying the show, “make some silence” and they remain quiet. While he could have instructed them before hand to do this, it seems unlikely. Rather, the audience accepts being constituted by Burnham as he progresses throughout his performance.

One way this is demonstrated is through the ways in which Burnham interacts with the audience in three instances. First is about halfway through the special. After Burnham makes a joke about the audience with the house lights up, the audience laughs. However, Burnham immediately tells them to stop and sit in silence, which the audience does. The camera is behind Burnham facing the audience, so, while it is unclear due to audio editing if the entire crowd was silent, it is obvious that the audience was mostly still. By doing what Burnham asked immediately, especially in such a genre-altering request (to not laugh at a joke), the audience was willing to go with Burnham. The second example is at the beginning of Burnham’s closing song, when he asks
the audience if he can “say my shit.” The audience immediately responds by clapping and cheering, knowing that he was going to begin what he describes as a Kanye West-like rant about real issues. The final example is at the end of the live performance, where the audience, without hesitation, stands up for a resounding ovation of his performance. These three indicators of the audience listening to Burnham and responding to his message help demonstrate the effectiveness of the constitution of the audience.

To return to the content of the concluding song, it embodies the main argument that Burnham is trying to make: that he is unhappy with the relationship between audience and performer and is therefore unhappy in life. While I have discussed this song to some extent in the previous section, it is important to highlight that, while the first half of the song is comedic, the second half is explicitly non-comedic. However, Burnham uses repetition to identify that his problems lie within himself as he deals with the relationship between the audience and performer and his lack of happiness. This song is mostly non-comedic, but his audience accepts it because they have been constituted to do so. The entire performance, I argue, has set up this song, especially when the song concludes and Burnham finishes his performance, and possibly his stand-up career, by saying, “Thank you. I hope you’re happy.” In his final song, he explores the complicated relationship between performer, the entertainment industry, and audience. He discusses his perception in an interview with Andrew Husband (2016):

It does what I’ve been trying to do as clearly as I’ve tried. I think what I try to do is undercut, make fun of and expose everything that entertainment tries to do — while also pulling it off. Basically saying, “This is all fake and I’m lying to you and none of this is real and I’m trying to manipulate you.” Then after telling you, still manipulating you while hopefully making you feel something.
By deconstructing the dynamic between performer, performance, audience, and entertainment, Burnham provides a perspective that is rarely seen: someone who is an insider of the entertainment industry with power, status, and success while also being aware of the hypocritical and unrealistic expectations of the industry, audience, and performance in general. This dimension fuels Burnham’s comedic performances: he presents a meta-critical perspective on entertainment, tells his audience that is critical of the function of entertainment, then uses those same functions to entertain his audience.

As I have argued, Burnham effectively positioned his live audience to accept this message through the finale. However, we must remember that there is a second audience involved in this performance: the audience watching the recording. While I discussed this final song in the context of framing, it is important to look at it through the lens of constitutive rhetoric as well. As the audience cheers in an immediate standing ovation, Burnham walks off the stage into a smaller room with just a piano. As he sits down at the piano, the cheering from the audience is sharply cut off, leaving only the sound of Burnham to be heard. Burnham starts this segment with “oh good. It’s just us.” Clearly this bit is geared toward just the audience at home, something that Robin Williams did in his first comedy special as well (Mischer, 1983).

Burnham begins to play a slow and melancholy song. His first lyrics talk about the potential reactions from the audience at home, such as watching in a group or watching alone. He states that “if you hated it that’s fair. But either way, do you have time for a parting questionnaire?” He goes beyond framing the content to be accepted; he also is constituting his home audience to share his viewpoint. This song has only one joke in the beginning, but the rest, including what happens after the song, is clearly not designed to be funny. This conclusion to his current stand-up career is
designed to situate the audience to accept Burnham’s struggles with mental health, self-esteem, and happiness.

His work after this special reinforces his central argument that he is disenchanted with performance and can no longer do it while also protecting his mental health. Since this special was released, he has not engaged in a major stand-up performance, although he recently posted on social media that he would be releasing a new self-produced comedy special without an audience (Bosselman, 2021). Since releasing *Make Happy*, Burnham has developed other artistic projects, such as directing his movie *Eighth Grade*, which focuses on issues faced by an eighth-grade girl as she moves from middle to high school (Burnham, 2018). Burnham’s work seems to reflect the argument that he was revealing something real about himself rather than just providing another facet of his stage persona (Fox, 2018b; Husband, 2016). As he reflects on his comedy career, Burnham explains his perspective on comedy:

> I’ve always just been very confused about how comedy is supposed to be about honesty, how everyone would always say to me, “You got to be more honest up there,” but honestly what I’m feeling is: this is strange. That’s the first thing I’m thinking. That me standing up here is super weird. This is all very weird and us pretending this isn’t weird, pretending like I’m your best friend, just a cool guy at a party getting up making jokes, is really strange. (Schwartz, 2016)

As he suggests, by deconstructing the insincere dynamic that exists between audience and performer, Burnham finally can be honest with his audience, and has found some semblance of happiness because he can be honest. He presented this position to his audience as well, particularly in his final song in his third stand-up special *what*. (Burnham & Storer, 2013). This final song was a meta-critique of the expectation of a performer, such as Burnham, being the same offstage as he
was onstage. More specifically, audience members and former acquaintances expected him to be outgoing, funny, witty, and entertaining, even though Burnham self-identifies as introverted and shy (Burnham & Storer, 2013). By explicitly deconstructing the expectations of performance, Burnham is able to constitute his audience to be receptive of his critique.

In conclusion, throughout this special Burnham successfully constitutes his audience to be receptive of his non-comedic material. He used signposts throughout the special to help his audience along, specifically emphasizing his ‘real’ problems in the introductory and concluding songs. Furthermore, Burnham’s persona as a meta-critical voice of the Millennial generation (Toscano, 2016) allowed him the opportunity to connect and identify with the audience, something that is important for rhetors to succeed in getting an audience to adopt a new perspective and make change (Burke, 1959). While Burnham has established frames for his material and constituted his audience, he must also shift current framing about himself, the audience, and our understanding of mental health to attain success within the post-comedy style (Fox, 2018a).

**Frame Shifting**

According to David Zarefsky, rhetors engage in frame shifting to provide opportunities for different interpretations of ideas. Frame shifting occurs when a rhetor “postulat[es] a different frame of reference from the one in which the subject is normally viewed” (Zarefsky, 2004, p. 613). By providing a new context for interpretation, rhetors can influence the audience’s understanding of an idea, particularly in a way the rhetor already perceives that idea.

Many comedians engage in frame shifting to provide a comedic perspective on serious material, such as mocking politicians, social structures, and dynamics of society. While Burnham does this as well, especially as he articulates his critiques of music and performance, I argue that he shifts frames within his own frames, allowing for different interpretations of his own arguments.
During the performance, there are three significant frame shifts: (1) from just another entertainer to a critic of entertainers/performance, (2) from a distinction between performer and audience to blurring the lines between the two, and (3) from the performer being a finished product to an incomplete performer.

**From Just Another Entertainer to a Critic of Entertainers/Performance**

Throughout *Make Happy*, Burnham establishes himself as an entertainer. For example, he refers to previous comedy performances, such as the time he had a random person sitting on a stool in red pants in the middle of the stage when he first appeared in his second comedy special *what*. Additionally, Burnham performs songs, which has been his signature throughout his comedy career. Throughout the special, he also refers to several well-known entertainers, such as Kendrick Lamar, Willie Nelson, Dolly Parton, Bruce Springsteen, and Kanye West. Burnham even reinforces this notion when making a joke about celebrities lip-syncing on the *Late Show with Jimmy Fallon*:

> Entertainers, they are lying and they are manipulating you. And it’s not in a good way. It’s like advertising. You deserve better. I’m not saying I’m it, but I’m the guy that says you deserve better. You go get better. You say, “thank you weird man. Bye!” (Burnham & Storer, 2016)

While the words say he is different from these other entertainers, the language he uses about not being better supports the argument that he is an entertainer. He is also using his platform as an entertainer to present this argument, further reinforcing that contradiction.

Burnham also uses his insider knowledge as an entertainer to provide a stronger critique of entertainment. He can critique the form of song genres with the knowledge of how they work, such as “beat fetishism” in hip-hop and pandering in country music. Another example is when he sets
up his song critiquing Katy Perry lyrics, saying that fans should not stick by him: “If I stop entertaining you, throw me to the curb. You wouldn’t stick with your mechanic if he stopped fixing your car. I’m in a service industry, I’m just overpaid.” With this line, Burnham is making the claim that he is just one of many performers, and it is the responsibility of the audience to make decisions about their own lives, not sticking with an entertainer who is unsuccessful.

While Burnham establishes early on that he is just another performer, he subtly shifts the frame to highlight how he is different; one that can accurately critique entertainment with the audience’s best interests in mind. By providing a critique of entertainment and performance in general, Burnham moves closer to the audience, providing an avenue through which audiences can identify issues with performance with an expert’s perspective. Burnham does this through his songs, but he also shifts the frame when talking about his personal issues with performance, especially how he feels trapped in the prison of performance. This shift allows for a genuine appraisal of performance; not just an entertainer using this critique for the purpose of entertainment, but for someone who is using entertainment to provide commentary. By shifting frames, Burnham is placing himself closer to the audience’s perspective, where entertainment is being critiqued from an outsider’s viewpoint. Burnham does an effective job shifting frames from being just another entertainer, trying to make money by getting audiences to laugh, to viewing Burnham as a critic of performance, seeing things from a different perspective, allowing for the possibility of a closer connection between Burnham and his audience and a new perspective on entertainment.

**From a Distinction between Performer and Audience to Blurring the Lines between the Two**

While Burnham alters perspectives between entertainer and outsider, he also shifts frames to allow for a blurring of lines between the performer and their audience. This shift is a little more
subtle than the previous one. To begin a comedy performance, typically there is a clear distinction and distance created between the audience and the performer. There are some markers, such as the audience all facing toward the performer, the audience sitting in the dark while the performer stands in the spotlight, the performer holding a microphone, the performer mostly controls the flow of communication, and the performer being paid by the audience to entertain. While many comedians engage with their audience, especially in smaller venues, rarely is the line between performer and audience deconstructed.

Burnham uses his own style to contradict the audiences’ expectations. He knows that his audience is aware of how his performance is extensively planned out; he talked about it in his previous comedy special. As he moves onstage, especially in the beginning, he berates the audience. When the audience applauds when he sits at the piano for the first time, he insults them: “Did you not think I was gonna use it, idiots? It’s not a prop.” When he moves to the piano again later in the special, he walks slowly around the piano, the flips them off with both hands, saying into the microphone, “You don’t know where I’m going. Don’t act like it. You are not ahead of me. I will retain the element of surprise!” While out of context these statements seem mean, he is playing on the established persona of his material being planned out. His audience laughs each time, playing along with the joke. These bits reinforce the difference between the performer and the audience.

Burnham begins his comedy special with clearly demarcated lines: he is the one onstage and his audience is sitting in the dark facing him. However, throughout his show, Burnham begins to play with that line, blurring the distinction between the performer and audience. At various points in the show, Burnham asks for the house lights to come up, showing the audiences’ faces. While the audience does not have the opportunity to speak, by showing the entire audience in clear
light to the camera, Burnham begins to break down the barriers and distance between audience and performer.

Burnham further deconstructs the divide between audience and performer when discussing the problems he is facing as a performer and as a person. Burnham positions himself as the performer when telling jokes and singing songs. However, at both the beginning and ending of the special, he introduces the notion that he and his audience are trapped in dilemma posed by the audience/performer binary; the line between who is a performer and who is the audience is not clear because society has forced him and his generation to constantly perform in all aspects of their lives, regardless of the meaning of the content. Because Burnham sees himself as both a performer and an audience member, he rhetorically situates the audience in the same position by including them in his discussion about the expectations placed on their generation. By blurring this line, Burnham analyzes the traditional delineations between audience and performer and allows his audience to view him as another person caught in the fissures of the performer/audience binary, further reinforcing Burnham’s complaint of being lost and unhappy.

By shifting the frame from the clear distinction between audience and performer to blurring the lines between the two, Burnham can connect better with his audience, placing everyone on the same plane. He explicitly makes this claim in his special. Although it eventually sets up a joke, the purpose of this bit is to highlight how the performer and audience are on a similar level:

As a comedian, what you’re supposed to do, you’re supposed to talk about what you know. So to talk about traffic or laundry felt incredibly disingenuous. But I worried that making a show about performing would be too meta. It wouldn’t be relatable to people that aren’t performers. But what I found is that I don’t think anyone isn’t. Could we get the house
lights up for a second? …Let the artifice fade away. Now we’re all the same. (Burnham & Storer, 2016)

Burnham continues to divulge his feelings of listlessness and unhappiness about the expectations placed upon him. Removing the barriers between audience and performer allows for increased empathy; no longer is Burnham on stage and the audience off stage. Instead, everyone is on stage at the same time, trapped in the constant stress and pressure of being a performer. By challenging the lines between performer and audience, Burnham is able to make his position relatable to his audience as he searches for empathy.

From the Performer being a Finished Product to an Incomplete Performer

To date, all of Burnham’s specials have been pre-planned projects; ones with no opportunities or desire for improvisation (Burnham & Storer, 2013; Burnham & Storer, 2016; Hartman, 2010). There seems to be very little that has been left to chance or whimsy; instead, each joke, motion, cue, and sound is pre-planned with the purpose of finding the right timing and emphasis. In his second special, Words, Words, Words (Hartman, 2010), the background behind Burnham has words written in cursive. Upon closer inspection, those words are the exact words Burnham uses in that special in the same order he uses them. He also points out, in his third special what. (Burnham & Storer, 2013), that he plans things down the gesture. Furthermore, in his fourth special, Make Happy, Burnham reinforces his preplanned style when “improvising” a song, which just means that there is a prerecorded track with an open spot to fill in the person’s name of whom he is speaking: “[Italicized is prerecorded] Bo had sex with “Rob’s” mom…”. To plan to the finest detail gives the impression that Burnham has thought of everything and, in his performances at least, he has a completed product for the consumption of the audience.
Burnham also implicitly makes the argument that other performers are incomplete performers as well when he talks about other artists like Kendrick Lamar, Dolly Parton, and Katy Perry. He focuses specifically on the latter, albeit in a critical manner, when he sings a song that challenges the motivational power of Katy Perry’s song “Roar.” While Burnham sets the stage for the acceptance of the argument that performers are incomplete, he begins to shift that frame as he talks about his personal issues.

To allow his audience to accept the idea that he is struggling with self-esteem and mental health issues, Burnham must first tear down the notion that he, as a performer, is a complete product. Instead, Burnham uses his songs, especially the two concluding songs, to highlight how incomplete he feels: his act is just a performance and not a true representation of himself. If his show were more authentic, he would be onstage talking about his complicated relationship with the audience and performance in a non-comedic way (Fox, 2018b; Husband, 2016; Schwartz, 2016). Ironically, that is essentially what he is doing throughout this special. Burnham can shift the perspective of a complete performer to a new frame that views the performer as person trying their best, but also dealing with personal issues off stage. This shift in frames further allows Burnham to identify with his audience as he attempts to reveal his ‘real’ self.

**Conclusion**

Throughout his comedy special, Bo Burnham provides a critique of performance. He establishes early in his special that laughter cannot solve the world’s problems, and that performers, especially those who do not imbue meaning in their work, are being disingenuous toward their audience. Additionally, Burnham encourages his audience to not accept pandering, bland, unhelpful content from dishonest performers but should instead take charge of their lives and their problems to be productive and happy.
Burnham clearly frames his content by engaging in three of the four functions of framing: define problems, diagnose causes, and make moral judgments (Entman, 1993). While Burnham does provide potential solutions (e.g., setting an appointment with a therapist to talk about depression), his primary utilization of framing focuses on critiquing the dishonesty and disingenuousness of performance. Furthermore, by framing himself as both an insider and an outsider of entertainment, Burnham is able to provide a critique of the harmful dynamics between audience, performer, performance, and entertainment.

Burnham successfully constitutes his audience to be accepting of his non-comedic content, especially the material presented at the end of his performance. He sets the stage early in the special by identifying his concerns with the audience, particularly how he feels about the dynamics of the audience/performer relationship. Furthermore, by identifying his problems early, he allows the audience to prepare for that material. While he still needs to work to entertain the audience, they know, both through past performances and the heads-up given by Burnham, that this show will include more than just silly jokes and glitter. By using constitutive rhetoric, Burnham is able to situate his audience to accept his non-comedic material, something that is difficult to do well in a stand-up comedy special.

Finally, Burnham successfully shifts three frames to provide a means to present his arguments about performance. He shifts frames from (1) just another entertainer to a critic of entertainers/performance, (2) a distinction between performer and audience to blurring the lines between the two, and (3) the performer being a finished product to an incomplete performer. By shifting these frames, Burnham is able to present non-comedic material in a palatable format and have it be accepted by his audience.
Unlike many of the comedians in chapter 2, Burnham is more explicit in shaping his audience to be receptive of his non-comedic material. He purposefully positions his audience to reject taken-for-granted notions of performance, entertainment, and comedy to share in his worldview: that performer and audience are intertwined and inseparable, and that has caused tension and unhappiness in his life as well as many others.

While Burnham is artistic in his presentation of this material, he also comes from a privileged position, which he partially recognizes. Burnham is a white, heteronormative, able-bodied, English-speaking, educated, middle/upper-class male born near Boston, Massachusetts. He was able to take advantage of a fairly new medium, YouTube, at an early age. Burnham was able to access a guitar, piano, and recording equipment to put his songs online, as well as a room in which to record these songs without outside noise or distraction. Burnham’s privileged position allowed him opportunities not available to many others.

Burnham was able to utilize his success to transition into a formal comedy performance for Comedy Central called *Comedy Central Presents: Bo Burnham*, recorded shortly after his 18th birthday (Burnham & Miller, 2009). While Burnham had been performing as a professional for a while, he was able to immediately turn his YouTube success into a successful career after becoming of legal age to do so.

Burnham’s privilege allows him to reach various audiences, and his movement from YouTube star to conflicted performer represents his disenchantment with the entertainment industry. Furthermore, his youth allows him to connect with young people as well, diving into issues they might be feeling about their lives. While these connections allow for deeper meaning, Burnham’s privilege limits his ability to connect with certain peoples who are minoritized. While he mocks racism, Burnham does not spend much time delving into other complex factors of poor
mental health, such as poverty, bullying, and sexism. While any person is inherently limited by their own experiences and knowledge, Burnham is unable to discuss anything other than his privileged position and its connection to poor mental health, which is something that Hannah Gadsby has more success with, which I will discuss in Chapter 5.

Additionally, Burnham is able to use his privilege as a white male to talk about mental health in a public setting without fear of public backlash. While he has discussed his seeming lack of masculinity in other performances, including *what.* (Burnham & Storer, 2013), he does not investigate here how his masculinity, particularly how it embodies (literally and figuratively) the privileged position within the genre of comedy, allows him to engage in discussions of mental health and social critique that might not be available to people who are minoritized. While he is dealing with significant mental health concerns, Burnham’s privileges, both in his embodied positionality and his ability to stop performing stand-up comedy, allows him opportunities not available to others.

*Make Happy* is a clear example of how a modern comedian has effectively utilized elements of the post-comedy turn (Fox, 2018a) and used rhetorical arguments to find acceptable ways to present non-comedic material and have it be accepted by their audience. Burnham successfully presents non-comedic material to his audience, as represented by the immediate standing ovation of the crowd and the positive reviews from various entertainment critics (Bennett, 2016; Collins, n.d.). In this special, Burnham engages in an aspect of the post-comedy turn, wherein he presents non-comedic material within a comedic setting. While much of the post-comedy turn focuses on using discomfort for an alternative site of comedy, Burnham uses it to present non-comedic material about mental health and happiness to his audience. He injects a few jokes in his non-comedic material, but the majority of it remains focused on serious issues, such
as depression. By engaging in and going beyond the post-comedy turn, Burnham is able to present his ‘real’ self without being rejected by his audience, even though it is not always funny.

Even though he claimed that Make Happy was going to be his last stand-up special, Burnham released a new special titled Inside (Bosselman, 2021) in 2021, a project that shows him record, edit, and perform stand-up while locked in quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic. He has also performed small sets in comedy clubs in Los Angeles (Fox, 2018b). However, Burnham has not stopped working in the entertainment industry. He has made guest appearances in Rory Scovel’s stand-up comedy special Rory Scovel Tries Stand-Up for the First Time (Moran, 2017), as well as directing Chris Rock’s comedy special Tamborine (Burnham, 2018). He has also directed the movie Eighth Grade (2018) which mirrors a lot of what Burnham has dealt with in his life: anxiety, depression, and self-consciousness about performance on the internet. While he has stepped away from stand-up comedy, Burnham continues to explore his relationship with the entertainment industry.

In this performance, Burnham was able to successfully incorporate his central message surrounding mental health into the show by breaking down barriers between performer and audience, identifying issues of the Millennial generation and how they affect mental health, and situating his audience to be receptive of his non-comedic material. However, his message, that individuals should take control of their own happiness, is limited because of its neoliberal perspective of a white man telling others what they can do as if they have the same resources and opportunities he does. This undercuts his argument, although he does not address it in his special, reinforcing his privileged position of either being unaware of the compounding issues others face, such as racism, sexism, and classism, or he does not care about those problems to talk about them.
Despite this, he was able to remain within the comedy genre because of his blend of traditional, setup-punchline humor and a use of the post-comedy style (Fox, 2018a). In the next chapter, I will discuss how another modern comedian, Neal Brennan, used different methods to accomplish similar goals of incorporating elements of the post-comedy style to have his audience accept non-comedic material, yet remain within the comedy genre.
Chapter 4: Removing the Vest: Neal Brennan Searches for Relief from Depression

In what he describes as a step in his backward career, Neal Brennan discusses race, sex, and depression in his genre-breaking stand-up comedy special 3 Mics (Brennan, 2017). In this special, Brennan uses three separate microphones to present different types of material: the microphone on stage right is used for “one-liners,” the microphone on stage-left is traditional “stand-up material,” and the microphone at center stage is used to present “emotional stuff.” These microphones were labeled in the recording for his audience at home, but the live audience was left to figure it out on their own, something friend and collaborator Dave Chappelle encouraged him to do (Czajkowski, 2016). In addition to providing opportunities for different content, these microphones represent the stages of Brennan’s career.

Brennan began his comedy career working the door of a local comedy club (Gross, 2017). He would write jokes, but he did not want to perform them onstage, so he advised other comedians to use that material, finding that the audience laughed at his jokes. After meeting Chappelle at this comedy club, Brennan was able to co-write a movie with Chappelle called Half Baked. While the movie did not find widespread acclaim, it has remained popular to a wide audience (IMDb.com, n.d.[a]; metacritic.com, n.d.). Despite the critical failure, Brennan was able to use his writing talent to co-create and co-write the highly successful sketch comedy program Chappelle’s Show. At the stage-right microphone, the one-liners represent Brennan’s career origins as someone writing material for someone else to use.

The second microphone, stand-up material, represents how Brennan’s career has developed since Chappelle’s Show came to an end in 2006 when Chappelle moved to South Africa after feeling frustrated that the show’s message was being lost (Gross, 2017). Brennan has found some
success as a stand-up comedian, recording a special through Comedy Central titled *Neal Brennan: Women and Black Dudes* (Brennan, 2014).

The final microphone, emotional stuff, is where Brennan sees himself now. While the topics discussed at this microphone span Brennan’s entire life, the culmination of feelings, and the opportunity to present them, is where Brennan finds himself at this point in his career. Like many other comedians, Brennan embodies the idea that comedians use humor to overcome their pain (Genzlinger, 2017; Rivera, 2019). Brennan felt comfortable presenting this material because of the positive support from fans (Czajkowski, 2016), as well as seeing examples in other comedians’ work (Chesler, 2017) such as Mike Birbiglia in his special *My Girlfriend’s Boyfriend*. Brennan sensed an impetus and encouragement to share this material onstage, despite it not fulfilling the traditional aspects of stand-up comedy (Czajkowski, 2016).

This chapter examines how Brennan uses the emotional stuff microphone for what I argue to be a site of therapeutic relief. He uses the other two microphones, one-liners and stand-up on stage right and left respectively, to bracket his central content, allowing him to build a narrative that mirrors his career. Similarly, the content at the stage left and right microphones help Brennan situate his audience to be receptive of his non-comedic material. Moreover, the use of this purposefully centered microphone allows Brennan to partially engage in the post-comedy turn (Fox, 2018a), allowing him the opportunity to share his ‘real’ struggles with a sympathetic audience. Unlike Bo Burnham, I argue that Brennan is more explicit in revealing his ‘real’ self, using the emotional stuff segments as an opportunity for his audience to get to know his pains and struggles with depression.

Brennan has struggled to find relief from his depression, which he likens to a “weighted vest.” He goes on to describe how it has affected his life: “I always felt like I was at a disadvantage
mood- or energy-wise to my peers. It was never life-threatening; it was just life-dampening.” He has turned to both therapeutic and medical interventions to overcome his mental health issues, but neither have been successful. He states that “medication could take weights out of the vest,” but it did not remove the vest altogether. Additionally, while he did not specifically talk about his therapy sessions, he does make a joke about knowing the difference in approaches: “If you don’t know the difference [between psychologist and psychiatrist], congrats for having a great life.”

Many people like Brennan seek to find solutions to their mental health problems (Whitbourne, 2015). A common approach is to turn to medication as quicker fix; however, this requires better self-discipline to use effectively (Olfson & Marcus, 2009; Mann et al., 2019; Posternak et al., 2011). Additionally, medicine is easier than engaging in long-term therapy (Gavin, 2019; Whitbourne, 2015). However, in the long-term, medication and therapy each have advantages that influence which course of treatment someone may take, such as cost-effectiveness and time dedicated to the program (APA.org, 2020; Morrison & Stomski, 2018; Whitbourne, 2015). Furthermore, mental health treatment is highly personal, making it frustrating for people to find the best option, whether medical, therapeutic, or a combination of the two (American Psychological Association, 2017; DeRubeis, Siegle, & Hollon, 2008; Gavin, 2019; Whitbourne, 2015).

Much like Burnham, Brennan is tired of not being able to solve his problems with mental health. Both performers use their access to an audience to share those difficulties, providing a form of therapy for them both. Borrowing the premise of an Ellen DeGeneres joke (Gallen, 2003), I suggest that both Burnham and Brennan forego paying for therapy to have people pay them to talk about their problems onstage. This represents a major site of privilege: both have plenty of money to pursue therapeutic treatment with a professional, but instead they chose to perform a testimonial
of their own struggles with mental health to a paying audience. More specifically, Burnham used self-reflexive and -exploratory song lyrics to investigate how he understands happiness, depression, performance, and the relationship between himself and his audience. Brennan is much more explicit in how he uses stand-up as therapy, using the center microphone for a majority of his stand-up special to talk about “emotional stuff.” Implicitly both recognize the value of therapy with a professional (i.e., Brennan has sought therapeutic treatment and Burnham states that people should seek professional advice for real problems), but their ability to get paid while engaging in self-exploration is something most people do not have.

Both have talked about these specials being therapeutic for them and their audiences, both implicitly and explicitly. Burnham is more subtle in his approach as he identifies the success Kanye West seemingly had when sharing his rant at the end of his Yeezus tour (Burnham & Storer, 2016). Similarly, Burnham talks about the ability to talk about how being honest is important to him: “I’ve always just been very confused about how comedy is supposed to be about honesty, how everyone would always say to me, ‘You got to be more honest up there,’ but honestly what I’m feeling is: this is strange” (Husband, 2016). By being honest about his conflicting perspectives on comedy, Burnham found a sense of therapeutic relief in his special. Additionally, by quitting comedy (although his newest release contradicts this [Bosselman, 2021]) Burnham has found a new avenue for happiness now that he was able to release his tension through a form of therapy.

Brennan is more explicit in framing his special as a form of therapy. In an interview with Talib Kweli, Brennan explains the catharsis he felt after the special was recorded:

It sounds trite but, that was more valuable… I think about it so little now, and I used to be really consumed with anger toward it… maybe I exorcised it so to speak…. In that regard, it was very helpful in that I don’t think about it. (Rivera, 2019)
This release from constant anger, stress, and frustration is a key marker of long-term therapy: the ability to work through issues rather than medicate the feelings (Halder & Mahato, 2019; Sale et al., 2016).

In addition to their positive perceptions of therapy and the use of their comedy special as a form of therapy, another similarity between Burnham and Brennan is their use of humor to situate their audience to be receptive of their non-comedic material. Burnham played off his persona to balance between silly jokes to more biting critiques of performance and its effects on his mental health. Similarly, Brennan brackets his emotional stuff with humor, relieving the tension that jokes invite, something Hannah Gadsby also does in her special.

While there are some similarities between Brennan and Burnham, one major difference is how they go about balancing humor and ‘real’ issues. Burnham incorporated his problems into the narrative arc of his show. He explicitly stated his problems in his introductory song, returning to that theme both humorously and not for the remainder of his special. On the other hand, Brennan’s three segments are discrete; there is no overlap in content, tone, theme, or topic between the three. Additionally, when moving from one microphone to the next, the stage goes black and the audience cannot see Brennan move. While his live audience may not be aware of the organization of the show, this separation provides a clear indicator of how Brennan views the importance of each segment: all part of a broader narrative, but distinct aspects of his life.

This chapter explores how Brennan uses the one-liners and stand-up microphones to situation his audience to be receptive of his emotional stuff segments, which focus on the problems he is dealing in his ‘real’ life. This chapter also analyzes how Brennan frames depression as something that should be confronted rather than attempted to be fixed through medical intervention. Finally, this chapter examines how Brennan shifted key frames, such as moving from
a pessimistic to a more optimistic perspective and that depression is something to live with rather than something that can be fixed; an outlook that allows him to find some peace in his life.

Brennan’s performance adds depth to the post-comedic perspective in that he is most explicit in his discussion of mental health. Unlike Burnham, who uses metaphors and musical artistry to incorporate his struggles into performance, Brennan stands in front of his audience with no production elements blocking the content. Additionally, Brennan does not try to entertain his audience with jokes or music when discussing mental health; instead, he lays bare his problems with nothing to hide behind. Brennan alternates between personas, specifically the “Neal” who is a comedian and the real “Neal” who is dealing with severe mental trauma and depression. In the sections below, I will explore how Brennan used constitutive rhetoric, framing, and frame shifting to successfully alternate between these personas.

Constitutive Rhetoric

Of the comedians examined in this study, Brennan is the most explicit in using constitutive rhetoric, although he spends much less time in his performance situating his audience to be accepting of non-comedic material. Instead, the bulk of the work Brennan does is in the beginning, where he organizes the segments at each microphone to be presented in vastly different styles. By explicitly labeling for the audience watching the recording at the start of the special that one microphone, located center stage, will be dedicated to emotional stuff, his audience is prepared to listen to it if they continue watching. Additionally, by creating discrete segments in his show, both his live and watching-from-home audience are situated for the different material. However, differentiating the microphones is not enough to make the audience accepting of the non-comedic material. He uses humor at the other microphones before diving into his emotional material, fulfilling in the basic aim of a comedy special: make his audience laugh. As each of his jokes
receives laughter, he is able to situate his audience effectively to be receptive to his non-comic material.

Brennan separates each segment of his special by moving between the microphones. However, we never see Brennan move from one microphone to the next except right before the final joke. After each segment, the stage darkens, signaling the end of that segment. The lights always go down on the last word of the segment, making it clear that this was planned beforehand to clearly delineate between segments of the special. By breaking up the segments in this way, Brennan allows himself and his audience a chance to reset (Czajkowski, 2016).

Each segment has its own flavor of humor, but all three have humor within. Just as a song needs structure to be intelligible, so does a comedy special. Brennan uses the stage left and stage right microphones to establish a successful structure, allowing for non-comedic material to be intelligible within this framework. He uses these microphones, and the content at those microphones, to help his audience accept his material at center stage. Additionally, Brennan is visually flanking the emotional stuff segments with the placement of the microphones, as well as contextually flanking the material by his use of each microphone in a consistent manner. Brennan includes a couple of jokes in his emotional stuff segments to maintain the structure established early on, but the tenor of these segments remains non-comedic.

The order of segments he uses for this special appears to be purposeful to maintain intelligibility: one-liners, stand-up, emotional stuff, one-liners, stand-up, emotional stuff, one-liners, stand-up, emotional stuff, emotional stuff, one-liners. By establishing the structure of the special, Brennan can express himself without losing his audience and their expectations. The structure appears to successfully prepare the audience, as evidenced by the fact that he receives loud applause after his third emotional stuff segment despite the lack of consistent humor.
While the one-liners and stand-up segments harkened back to Brennan’s career progress, neither were a site of critical analysis by comedy critics (Czajkowski, 2016; Gross, 2017; University Wire, 2017). Instead, the primary focus of critics was the emotional stuff segments, something that comedians had not done before. To delve further into how Brennan situates his audience, I provide an overview of the style and content of each of his segments.

**One-Liners**

Brennan begins his special standing at the microphone on stage right which he labels as one-liners, foregoing the traditional introduction for a comedian. As the lights come up, Brennan is holding notecards and begins telling simple setup-punchline jokes. While these jokes are labeled one-liners, that is a bit of a misnomer. Jokes fitting within this subgenre are organized to have a quick setup and a quick punchline, but the setup can be two or three sentences rather than one complete sentence. This segment features Brennan telling simple jokes to get the humor going early in his special. This microphone reminds the audience of Brennan’s comedic style on Twitter (Chesler, 2017). Similarly, this segment allows Brennan to temporally, as well as thematically, reenact the progression of his career, starting with writing one-liner jokes for other comedians while working at a comedy club (Gross, 2017). The jokes do not have a consistent topic, but they do lead to easy laughter from his audience. In the first segment, Brennan tells three jokes. He then returns to this microphone after an emotional stuff segment, telling four jokes, four jokes, and one joke, respectively. By using one-liner jokes, Brennan can get his audience to laugh quickly, reinforcing the structure of the special. Similarly, by reenacting the development of his career, Brennan is bringing his audience along with him as he builds up to the problems he has discovered in the progression of his career and life.
Stand-Up

When the stage lights come up after the first one-liner segment, Brennan is standing behind the microphone on stage left, which has been labeled stand-up. These segments feature Brennan presenting material in a more standard style of comedy, using a mixture of jokes and stories to lead to laughter from his audience. This segment is also unique for this show because Brennan takes the microphone off the stand and moves around onstage a bit, although he always stays on stage left. The content for this segment is more organized, although still broad. Here he focuses on critiques of society, particularly elements of generational and racial differences in the United States. Brennan implicitly uses his whiteness to explore these dimensions, being able to negotiate different forms of race, class, and gender to explore and critique generationalism and social constructs of perspectives on race.

Brennan uses this segment to provide the most coherent formulation of humor throughout his performance. He follows the stand-up style that he has established throughout his career (Brennan, 2014). Additionally, this style is more consistent with other comedians’ stand-up styles, where they mix jokes and stories to reach punchlines. While every comedian is different in how they organize and deliver their material, the stand-up style remains the standard among comedians (Olb & Parry, 2018). By using this style, Brennan is helping his audience remain comfortable with his stand-up special, allowing them opportunities to not feel disoriented when he goes to the center microphone to talk about emotional stuff.

The utilization of the first two microphones is important. Brennan uses them to actualize the expectations of the comedic form, allowing his audience to find comfort in laughing at a stand-up comedy special. Additionally, while the content is clearly matched to Brennan’s style, the styles are fairly rudimentary. Many stand-up comedians tell one-liner jokes and stories, and rarely focus
on just one over the other. Notable exceptions are Steven Wright’s one-liners and Tom Segura’s stories. The jokes at the first two microphones are not revolutionary in content, such as lambasting social issues or providing avenues of critique of the audience. However, they do provide a scaffold for the rest of Brennan’s special.

Brennan uses these two segments to establish the structure of the special, much like a song. The one-liners are almost like the hook, such as opening chords or a solo. The stand-up establishes the chorus, where the form is similar each time, even though the words are clearly not. The emotional stuff segments are like the verses, each providing subtext, detail, and the message of the special. Brennan goes back and forth between these microphones in a similar way as a song, moving from the instrumental part to chorus to verse. This constant cycle establishes consistency, even though the special itself breaks from the broadly accepted form of a comedy special, wherein jokes are told consistently for the purpose of making the audience laugh.

**Emotional Stuff**

The majority of 3 Mics focuses on Brennan’s exploration and explanation about the emotional and psychological issues he has faced throughout his life. In the first emotional stuff segment, Brennan talks about his mental health, starting with the stark sentence: “So I’m depressed.” This statement, said in a much more somber manner than anything before in this special, sets the tone for the rest of the segment. Brennan helps his audience watching the recording know what is to come by labeling this segment emotional stuff, but the live audience was not given that information. The statement “So I’m depressed” breaks many of the tropes of stand-up comedy as he does not follow this setup with a punchline.

Brennan continues to talk about the things he has done to try and work through his depression, such as therapy sessions, transcranial magnetic stimulation, and being part of the Big
Brothers Big Sisters of America organization: “I’m in the Big Brothers program, because I’m an angel that fell to earth. No, I actually joined because I heard volunteering releases endorphins, which I gotta say…eh.” While there are a few jokes interspersed in this segment, such as “if you don’t know the difference [between a psychologist and a psychiatrist], congrats you’re having a great life,” the majority of this segment remains somber in tone. Brennan talks about the side effects of the drugs he has taken (e.g., “…weight gain, weight loss, nausea, gogginess, memory loss, which for my job is not good”), the lack of awareness of mental health in the United States (e.g., “It’s really aggravating when you have a mood thing. You can feel people’s suspicion. Imagine if you had a cold, and people were like, ‘He doesn’t really have a cold. That stuffiness is a choice.’ It’s really frustrating”) and his childhood relationship with his father, (e.g., “a violent alcoholic. He didn’t hit me that much, but he used to terrorize my brothers.”).

As Brennan finishes up this segment, he reveals more about a discussion he had with his ‘little brother’ from the Big Brothers Big Sisters organization:

So, one day, nine-year-old kid, we’re hanging out. He sees me take an antidepressant, put it in my mouth. He’s, like, “What’s that?” I was, like, “An antidepressant. I do it to make myself feel better…” and I’ve also shot ketamine into my veins.” You know when you forget to lie? You’re, like, “Oh, here’s everything.” “And I’ve shot magnetic pulses into my head, but only, like, 45 times for half an hour.” And he’s looking at me, and I can see his wheels are spinning. When a nine-year-old is ready to say something, you’re, like, “I have no idea which way this is going. I don’t know if this is gonna be great or crazy.” But he goes, “You do all that stuff to try to feel better?” I go, “Yeah.” And he goes, “So you’re like a cucumber…but you’re trying to turn yourself into a pickle.” I was like, “Yeah.” [stage lights blacken] (Brennan, 2017)
This open conversation with his ‘little brother’ brings to the fore a couple of elements that will remain consistent during the segments on emotional stuff: Brennan uses small jokes to maintain the structure he has established; he emphasizes how open he has been about his mental health; he explains the enormous effort he has put into addressing his mental health; and he ends each segment with a sense of optimism. By doing these four things, Brennan situates his audience to be ready for future conversations about these issues. It is no accident that the remainder of his emotional stuff segments follow a similar pattern of talking about serious issues with small jokes interspersed, ending on a positive note. However, the content of the remaining segments differs in their intensity.

After a second segment of one-liners and a segment of stand-up, Brennan returns to center stage for another segment on emotional stuff. Now that he has presented the verse of his special through his first emotional stuff segment, Brennan can dive deeper into himself and his emotional issues, especially as he has already established his depression and attempts to get better.

The next segment features discussion of how Brennan’s career was defined by hiding behind the talent of other celebrities, especially Chappelle, or what Brennan calls “star fuck[ing].” Brennan identifies how he believes he is not talented enough to stand on his own, even though he was nominated for an Emmy for directing *Chappelle’s Show* (Armour, Brennan, & Chappelle, 2006). Additionally, he argues that he engages in “star-fuck[ing]” in relationships of all kinds, worrying about whether a celebrity friend likes him or not. Brennan also explains why he is doing stand-up, which is to stop hiding:

I love to find someone to hide behind, but this is the right thing to do. Me doing stand-up by myself is the right thing to do. It’s just more honest, you know? I could find somebody
to hide behind, but that would just be... fear and habit. So, yeah, like, I can’t hide. Like, I want to hide. I’m dying to hide. But, win or lose, I can’t. (Brennan, 2017)

This exploration of why he has acted this way in the past demonstrates one of Brennan’s key dilemmas as a performer and someone with mental health issues: he is afraid of putting himself in the spotlight because he is afraid of being disliked. While this is not an issue that is limited to people with mental illness (e.g., public speaking being one of many peoples’ biggest fears), Brennan has identified that his fear has negatively affected his ability to be his own person. By talking about these fears, he breaks down some of the barriers between himself and his audience members as he moves toward positioning his worldview as like theirs. For example, he explains how he has entered certain relationships, both romantic and professional, in the hopes of receiving a boost in ego and self-esteem, realizing that he has no self-esteem. Here he recognizes that he is not the only person to do this. Instead, Brennan is demonstrating that he and his audience members are on the same level as they search for meaning and support in their lives.

The third, and heaviest, segment on emotional stuff follows a brief segment of one-liners and stand-up comedy, just like the other segments. However, this segment consolidates the other segments by talking about Brennan’s relationship with his father. While he begins with a joke, “So, back to my dad. I almost couldn’t get a one-man show license, unless I did a full monologue about my dad,” this segment focuses on Brennan’s attempt to establish a relationship with his father before his father’s death. This part of the show is the climax of all of Brennan’s efforts to constitutively position his audience throughout the special. He has situated his audience to be prepared for purposefully non-comedic content by establishing the structure of his special and providing background information on his mental health, such as his attempts to tackle his depression and his “star-fuck[ing].”
This third segment is the longest of any segment so far, and it remains somber throughout, although there are a couple of jokes, such as the one identified above and one about a previous conversation with his father about money. The rest of the segment features the dynamics of the relationship between Brennan and his father, including Brennan telling his father about how he felt growing up as the tenth child to a violent alcoholic father and how he felt that his father did not love his kids.

Toward the end of this segment, Brennan explains the lasting effects of his attempt to rekindle a relationship between him and his father:

And the next week, I got an e-mail on my phone, and it said, “The will of Daniel J. Brennan.” I was, like, “I guess I’ll open it.” Which, by the way, isn’t in the commercials [for the phone]. It’s not like, “Listen to music. Take selfies. Open wills.” So, I opened it on the street in New York, and I’m scrolling down, and it says, like, “My son Joe gets one-tenth. My daughter Sheila gets one-tenth.” Then it got to me… and it said, “My son Neal gets nothing.” Which still hurts, you know. I know you’re thinking, “Didn’t you just say you got a little bit of gold?” It wasn’t about that. If my dad was giving out blankets, I would have wanted a blanket. Just felt like a little flick to the back of the ear. “This is what your relationship with me was like,” and now it’s over, “and there’s nothing you can do.” There’s a silver lining to it. You’ve got to squint to see it, but I guess I choose to squint. When things had thawed between my father and I… I was talking to him one day and I go, “Dad, I feel like you didn’t love us.” And he’s, like, “Yeah, you’re right, I didn’t.” Which is a horrible thing to hear, but it also felt good. Because my whole life, I felt like I was insane. I’d say to people, “I don’t think my dad loves me.” They’d be, like, “Of course your dad loves you.” I’d be, like, “No, I’m pretty sure my dad doesn’t love me.” So, for him to
just say it, point-blank, “I didn’t love you,” was both excruciating and liberating. Because it meant… I wasn’t crazy. And I tried to tell my brothers and sisters what he said, but a lot of them didn’t believe me, which I get. Who wants to think their dad doesn’t love them? The way I see it now… I feel like they all got money…but I got something I needed. Which was…the truth. (Brennan, 2017)

The realization that he is not crazy is a key moment for Brennan: his feelings, perceptions, and experiences with his father are justified. He no longer has to live in a liminal space of unsurety between knowing that his father does not love him and people telling him that his father does. Furthermore, Brennan was able to maintain his self-respect by not groveling for his inclusion in his father’s will. Additionally, Brennan was able to find a sense of peace, perhaps leading him on a path to resolving some of his underlying issues regarding his mental health. This segment is the climax of the special, tying together the previous “emotional stuff” segments as Brennan struggles to understand why he has struggled with romantic and professional relationships, medical interventions for his depression, and his failed relationship with his father. Moreover, this bit is the key to Brennan’s success in dealing with his mental health issues as he, by nature of sharing them with the audience in this format, recognizes the value in confronting and talking through his issues rather than attempting radical medical treatments.

This section of the third emotional stuff segment provides what Brennan calls a “silver lining” to this special: that even though Brennan is dealing with mental health issues, romantic relationship problems, and a lost chance to have a positive relationship with his father, he has finally learned the truth, which, even if dark, is important. Moreover, Brennan is able to share his experiences with an audience, supporting the argument advanced by mental health professionals
for therapeutic rather than medical interventions for mental health issues (Chatziagorakis, 2020; Whitbourne, 2015).

The emotional stuff segment is by far the biggest alteration to the form of a comedy special. The audience is not laughing or reacting in any way to the non-comedic content, which can be problematic for any comedy performer. Additionally, Brennan is talking about the extremely serious issue of being left out of his father’s will and learning that his father did not love him. Brennan purposefully uses quick repetition of form to effectively constitute the audience. By moving quickly between microphones, he can establish the timbre of the special, helping him frame the expectations and position his audience. Beyond the use of the other microphones, Brennan’s repetition of emotional material also provides the audience with necessary background information about his life to be receptive of the final section about his father. The audience appears to accept his account about his father, as it gives him loud and immediate applause when the lights go dark after Brennan says, “the truth.”

This “emotional stuff” segment, the most intense of the special, represents the culmination of Brennan’s constitutive efforts thus far. He has positioned his audience to be receptive of this material through stage design, interspersing jokes within these non-comedic segments, and developing the narrative arc of his life. As I discuss in more detail below, understanding “the truth” is the pinnacle of hope for Brennan; he has lived his life being held down by what he terms the “weighted vest” of depression, never being able to remove it entirely. However, by learning the truth, he can finally find a way to permanently relieve the pressure he feels under the vest’s weight.

While this is important, it does not make his constitutive rhetoric successful. Brennan has established a rapport with his audience, one that connects on a personal level. By using himself as an exemplar of personal struggle, particularly with mental health, Brennan can connect with his
audience and their struggles as well, removing some of the potential isolation that the stigma surrounding mental health can lead to. In this segment, along with his comedic material, Brennan has successfully constituted his audience to be receptive of his message.

As the lights come back up, Brennan is still standing behind the emotional stuff microphone at center stage. This breaks from the pattern of repetition established before, wherein he would move to tell one-liners after the emotional stuff. This final segment is short and more optimistic than the previous ones. Here he talks about how he has found his air bubble in a world filling with water: jokes. Brennan states that he can “win” when he tells jokes, something he is grateful for. After sharing this optimistic perspective, Brennan finishes his special by stating:

And it’s something I’m so grateful for. Jokes. I got one more. How about I do it and we get out of here? Cool? [cheers and applause while moving to one-liner microphone] I like how on cop cars, “To protect and serve” is in quotes, like they’re being sarcastic. (Brennan, 2017)

The stage goes black, and the audience gives him an immediate standing ovation. This final joke performs two functions: (1) it lets the audience laugh, giving them a conclusion that follows the traditional stand-up special performance, and (2) it reinforces the optimism that Brennan is feeling regarding his mental health by ending on a positive note. Rather than finishing with the “emotional stuff” segment, which was raw and emotional, Brennan completes the narrative arc of his career, from a kid writing jokes at a comedy club to performing on his own to exploring his emotional trauma and concluding with a renewed energy toward stand-up.

Throughout this special, Brennan constitutes his audience to be receptive of his non-comedic material. He began his special by organizing the three microphones into separate styles, focusing on different types of material. This organization, and his engagement with each
microphone, allows his audience to be prepared for each segment, readying them for non-comedic material. After repeating this pattern three times, with each emotional segment becoming heavier than the last, he gets and gives a sense of resolution when he reveals the truth about his father’s lack of love for his children. Ultimately, Brennan sees this as a positive revelation and it helps him move forward in life. His audience has been receptive to this non-comedic material, as they demonstrate by applauding loudly as he finishes. Additionally, critics were positive in their reviews of this special, particularly in its exploration of deeply personal and emotional material in a non-comedic fashion (Eslin, 2017; Genzlinger, 2016; Palmieri, 2017).

While Brennan talks about a wide variety of topics, both serious and comedic in tone, he also comes from a position of whiteness, in that there are issues non-white people face in addition to depression or anxiety. While Brennan does his best to connect with his audience about shared frustration with medical intervention, stigma, and trying to find peace, he does not address the overlapping issues of racism, sexism, and classism that affect people who are not white (Bodnar-Deren et al., 2017; Lipson et al., 2018). Brennan’s position, similar to Burnham above, inherently assumes that everyone has the same opportunities and resources that he does. Even though Brennan is less explicit in persuading his audience to do something about their mental health, his discussion about medical intervention, humor, and talk therapy presents options for his audience to take. However, many in his audience, both live and watching the recording, have compounding factors influencing their ability to even gain access to these resources, let alone use them successfully, such as undergoing transcranial magnetic stimulation for 45 half-hour sessions, which requires a certified psychiatrist to perform and costs roughly $400-500 per session (Porter, 2021). This means that Brennan spent, as a conservative estimate, around $18,000 on these sessions alone, which does not include his other medical interventions. This cost-prohibitive treatment is not available
everywhere, especially in areas where highly trained medical professionals are not as easy to access. Even though the genre of comedy limits these discussions, but including unnamed whiteness, Brennan limits the scope and effectiveness of argument while also excluding peoples who do not share the same privileges, resources, and opportunities that he does.

This comedy special is organized to follow a specific pattern, building toward an emotional payoff. While Brennan uses humor at all three microphones, he makes it apparent that he wants the emotional stuff microphone to be the focus (Czajkowski, 2017; Gross, 2017; Rivera, 2019). He does this by spending the most time at that microphone and placing the emotional stuff segments at center stage. He also discusses his goals within his segments on emotional stuff. However, for this to be acceptable to his audience, he must still position them to be receptive, even within the emotional stuff segments. To do so, Brennan uses humor, even while talking about non-comedic topics.

While Brennan is demonstrating the progress of his career using these microphones, each segment is totally unrelated to the others. Clearly the focus of the special is on the emotional segments, but there are no jokes about his depression, relationship with his father, or search for happiness in either the one-liner or stand-up segments. This separation leads to a rhetorical reading of a difference in personas: the Neal who tells one-liners is young and inexperienced, the Neal who delivers stand-up material is more mature and developed, and the Neal who delves into emotional stuff is the ‘real’ version, one who has used both one-liners and traditional stand-up content to help with his depression. This reading can be reinforced at the end of the special when Brennan, after explaining how important it was for him to learn the truth about his father’s lack of love for his kids, tells the audience he is going to tell one more joke, then be done. Here Brennan completes the circle: he was able to reveal his issues, finding a sense of peace. Now that he has accomplished
that, he has begun to live with some of the weight of depression removed from him. However, it
requires him to almost start over; he can recover from his emotional frustrations to restart his life,
finding a true sense of happiness in stand-up rather than using it as a Band-Aid. Now that he has
finished his therapeutic release of tension, Brennan can get a fresh start on life (Rivera, 2019).

This use of constitutive rhetoric is what likely makes his special so well received by
audience and critics. However, Brennan also engages in framing to help his audience see several
of the issue he discusses from a different perspective. In the next section, I will discuss how
Brennan framed his depression as something that needs to be confronted rather than fixed.

**Framing**

As Brennan demonstrates the arc of his career through the progression of one-liners, stand-
up material, and emotional stuff, he also exhibits his changing perception of how to deal with his
mental health. By finally addressing the underlying problems of his depression, Brennan realizes
that his mental health, specifically depression, is not something that can be solved through medical
treatment; instead, it takes self-reflection to come to grips with his past experiences and the
influence they have on him as an adult. How Brennan frames his discussion of the emotional stuff
segments emphasize the changes in perception Brennan is experiencing regarding his mental
health. While he seeks assent from the audience for his comedy format, he also seems to provide
tacit endorsement of a mental health strategy.

In the first emotional stuff segment, Brennan describes his problems with finding a quick
fix for his depression. He initially began medical treatment at age 24, 18 years before the recording
of this special (Gross, 2017). He continued that medical treatment for 17 years but, after finding
inconsistent success, decided that, in order to try to solve his problems, he had “to try something
else…. [He] need[ed] to throw a Hail Mary.” That Hail Mary, as described in his performance,
consisted of several radical medical treatments, such as ketamine injections and transcranial magnetic stimulation, both providing limited success. Furthermore, Brennan has tried non-medical options, such as meditation, exercise, joining the Big Brothers, Big Sisters program, and the cessation of smoking, but none of them seemed to solve his depression problems. Instead, these options seemed to be a short-term pause, temporarily lifting weights from the vest of depression Brennan referenced earlier in the special.

Brennan’s search for a quick fix for mental health issues mirrors how many people approach medical interventions (Whitbourne, 2015). Taking drugs is easier than attending several lengthy sessions with a therapist. As a result, many people choose medical intervention over therapy. However, as Brennan has revealed thus far, medical intervention is not providing a long-term solution to his problem.

The other three emotional stuff segments show Brennan talking through his problems, engaging in what I argue to be a form of therapy where he is the patient and his audience plays the role of a mental health professional. While these conversations are clearly difficult, Brennan inherently recognizes the value in engaging in therapeutic release rather than trying to find a medical fix for his depression. He continues to highlight what he has revealed about himself, presumably in real therapy sessions. In his second emotional stuff segment, Brennan discusses how he is a “star-fucker,” that hiding behind famous people makes him feel good about himself. Specifically, he describes talks about a relationship with a famous person where he would engage in “star-fuck[ing]”:

She and I started falling in love. And I was, like, “It’s official: I’m a lover.” And then she broke up with me, like that. Yeah. That one destroyed me. I was beside myself blubbing.

She and I were both in a 12-step program. She basically said, “You need to go to more 12-
step meetings and get some more recovery, and maybe we can get back together.” So, I started going, and came to the conclusion, like, I shouldn’t date her. And the reason why is because she’s famous. Like, in the 12-step program, I had to do a lot of unflinching, honest writing about myself, and I came to the conclusion that I’m a star-fucker. (Brennan, 2017)

This experience seems to be a foundational one for Brennan, particularly the reference to the 12-step program. While Brennan does not specify what type of 12-step program they were part of, the “unflinching, honest writing about” himself establishes a clear connection between his struggles to find a solution for his depression and this therapeutic release in a stand-up comedy special. More specifically, Brennan seemed to realize that his lifestyle was not beneficial to his mental health. Not only was he experimenting with medical treatments for his mental health, but he was engaging in harmful relationships as a “star-fucker.” Additionally, as he revealed in the first segment, Brennan had a difficult childhood, particularly a damaging relationship with his father, something that he believes contributed to his poor mental health:

My father was also a narcissist. So, the entire mood of the house was dictated by him, and all the attention went his way. I think me and my brothers and sisters realized early on the best way to deal with him was to minimize our feelings as much as possible so as not to call attention to ourselves. But you do that long enough, and your feelings start to atrophy to the point that you’re incapable of having them. Two things I knew I could feel were ego and adrenaline, so I basically just set out to achieve a bunch of shit to give myself a surge of good feelings. (Brennan, 2017)

This story illuminates an underlying factor in Brennan’s depression, something that was not being addressed when taking shots of ketamine. By engaging in critical reflection as part of the 12-step
program, Brennan seemingly realized that mental health was not something to be fixed; instead, it needed to be confronted, which he does in the last two emotional stuff segments.

At the midway point of the special, Brennan has established a few key points about himself in relation to his depression: he had a difficult childhood where finding boosts to his ego and adrenaline were the only ways to survive; he hides behind famous people to protect himself and find a modicum of happiness; he has experimented with medical treatments for his depression; and critical reflection seemingly changed his perception of mental health from something that required a medical fix to something that should be confronted. The remainder of the emotional stuff segments embody this last aspect, wherein he talks through his problems with his father, seemingly understanding that this discussion is key to dealing with his depression rather than fixing it. The third segment is the emotionally heaviest, focusing on his strained relationship with his father.

The relationship between a parent and child can significantly impact the child’s mental health (Betts, Gullone, & Allen, 2009; Bowlby, 1973; Bozanoglu et al., 2019; Difilippo & Overholser, 2002; Irons et al., 2006). More specifically, parents who exhibit hostility toward their children’s depression symptoms negatively impact their child’s ability to cope (Lewis et al., 2014). As Irons et al. highlight, adults who recall their parents being neglectful or threatening have a harder time “more threat sensitive, more focused on issues of social power and more likely to internalize a critical style” (2006, p. 305). Furthermore, Betts, Gullone, & Allen found that children whose parents were either overprotective or avoidant experienced higher levels of depressive symptomology (2009, p. 481). Additionally, the ways in which parents communicate with their children about past experiences directly influences the child’s abilities to understand those experiences (Bozanoglu et al., 2019; Welch-Ross, 1995). By extension, a lack of dialogue could also contribute to how children interpret their experiences. According to his narrative, Brennan’s
relationship with his father significantly impacted his inability to remove his self-described vest of depression. The search for quick bursts to ego and adrenaline might have influenced Brennan’s search for a medical fix to his depression, in that he sought a medical remedy that would replicate the feelings he got when boosting his ego and adrenaline. What he discovered, however, was that this was not a fix at all: instead, to deal with his depression, he needed to dive deeper to understand the underlying factors of his depression.

As a child, Brennan was seemingly unable to engage in dialogue with his father about many of his experiences; however, while his father was on his deathbed, Brennan was able to find out the truth about his perceptions of his father. Brennan told his audience about a conversation he had with his father about his perception of his father’s affection toward his children: “‘Dad, I feel like you didn’t love us.’ And he’s like, ‘yeah, you’re right, I didn’t.’ Which is a horrible thing to hear….” He goes on to discuss how this perception made him feel in that moment:

…but it also felt good. Because my whole life, I felt like I was insane. I’d say to people, “I don’t think my dad loves me.” They’d be, like, “Of course your dad loves you.” I’d be, like, “No, I’m pretty sure my dad doesn’t love me.” So, for him to just say it, point-blank, “I didn’t love you,” was both excruciating and liberating. Because it meant… I wasn’t crazy. And I tried to tell my brothers and sisters what he said, but a lot of them didn’t believe me, which I get. Who wants to think their dad doesn’t love them? The way I see it now… I feel like they all got money… but I got something I needed. Which was… the truth. (Brennan, 2017)

While Brennan recognizes that it would have been great for his father to love his children, it was still satisfying to confirm the truth, that his father did not love them and that Brennan was not wrong to think so. Furthermore, this confession-style discussion of his relationship with his father
is a hallmark of talk therapy, wherein the patient describes key relationships in their lives, particularly their childhood (Anonymous, 1999; Barth, 2010; Jordan, 2000; Tanaka, 2019), to search for underlying factors in the depression they are feeling as adults, something Burnham advised his audience to do in *Make Happy*.

While Brennan jokes about this concept at the beginning of this third emotional stuff segment, he recognizes the importance of this relationship in his perception of the world. Additionally, outside of one joke, Brennan does not mention his mother as her own person; instead, he collapses his parents together to critique their justification for their parenting style:

My parents were old when I got here. I’m the youngest. So, they were in their forties when I got here. They were born in the 1930s. They were from the “We did the best we could” generation. If you criticized their parenting, they’d go, “We did the best we could.” I always felt, “Really? That was the best?” So, Dad, you’d get drunk, hit your kids, and think, “Now, this is me at my best.” (Brennan, 2017)

Brennan recognizes the importance of understanding his relationship with his father in confronting his depression, ironically reinforcing his father’s narcissism. In these examples, Brennan is confronting his father, something he did not do as a child when seeking ego and adrenaline while avoiding his father’s attention. Here he is once again reinforcing his rhetorical framing that mental health is something to confront through talk therapy rather than attempt to find a fix through medical intervention.

In the final emotional stuff segment, the tone changes significantly. Brennan has brought his audience down into the deep, dark trench of his depression by talking about his failed attempts to fix his problems through medication, his failed romantic relationships, and his harmful relationship with his father. The darkest moment of the special, and something that has been talked
about by commentators and interviewers after the recording was published (Genzlinger, 2016; Gross, 2017; Rivera, 2017), was his discussion of his relationship with his father. More specifically, Brennan reveals his struggles to reconcile with his father as the latter was dying:

Then he started to get sick, and everyone I knew that had had an ill parent was, like, “You gotta make it right with him. If you don’t, you’re gonna regret it.” So, I was like, “Okay.” I took it to heart, and I wrote him a long note, and I expressed all the things I was grateful to him for, and all the things that I was angry at him about, and sent it his way. And didn’t hear back for nine months, and then I got a voice mail where he goes, “Neal, it’s your dad. I never check that e-mail address, and I just checked it, and I gotta say, I read your note. Pretty fair.” I was like, “Okay, cool.” So, he’s gonna take responsibility for his behavior. That’s great. This could really help. So, we started talking. And we actually got along really well. Like, we had rapport. We’d read the same books and felt the same way about things, and I was definitely his son. It was cool. (Brennan, 2017)

This altered relationship was clearly a turning point for Brennan; he was able to find a positive relationship with his father after a childhood of narcissistic neglect. However, the positive relationship was not to last, which I discuss in more detail below.

Next, Brennan described how his father engaged with his children’s success as adults, particularly his as a writer:

Basically, when he came around during Chappelle’s Show, he was always lording money over my brothers and sisters and their kids, and whether he was gonna help them with school or not. He was manipulative about it. I was, like, “I’m not playing your game. Stop with that money talk.” And he took it to heart… and wrote me out of his will. (Brennan, 2017)
Once again, Brennan’s relationship with his father is positioned as having a negative effect on him as an adult. As the relationship between him and his father improved, Brennan recognized that he was still not part of his father’s will; however, he did not want to demean himself to be included in the will:

And we sat in his hospital room in silence. And I could tell he wanted me to grovel for it. I finally said, “Dad, I’d rather you put me in your will than not.” Just… I don’t want to have to beg.” And he fell asleep. He didn’t answer. (Brennan, 2017).

If this story were to have a happy ending, then Brennan’s father would put Brennan in his will because they found a sense of happiness in their relationship at the end. However, that was not the case here:

And the next week, I got an e-mail on my phone, and it said, “The will of Daniel J. Brennan.” I was, like, “I guess I’ll open it.” Which, by the way, isn’t in the commercials [for the phone]. It’s not like, “Listen to music. Take selfies. Open wills.” So, I opened it on the street in New York, and I’m scrolling down, and it says, like, “My son Joe gets one-tenth. My daughter Sheila gets one-tenth.” Then it got to me… and it said, “My son Neal gets nothing.” (Brennan, 2017)

Even though I discussed this same quote above, it is important to understand it fully in terms of framing as well as constitutive rhetoric. The tone of the show is at its lowest point: Brennan uses emotion and the background of his depression to frame his failure in maintaining a positive relationship with his father as the key point of pessimism. To reinforce this, Brennan does not use any form of humor in this segment. Whereas other segments had some jokes interspersed to maintain the structure of the song, there is palpable tension as Brennan says “nothing.” He explains how his relational failure made him feel “Just felt like a little flick to the back of the ear. ‘This is
what your relationship with me was like, and now it’s over, and there’s nothing you can do.’” While the tone of the show is at is darkest, Brennan does not keep the audience there for long; he provides a positive frame for his audience, choosing to see a silver lining: he found out the truth about his father’s lack of love for his children, which reinforced his perceptions of his father.

This entire segment connects most closely to talk therapy, where dealing with hurt and conflict in one’s life can provide opportunities for exploration and resolution (Barth, 2010). While Brennan was unsuccessful in maintaining a healthy relationship with his father, he recognizes that it is not because he has a misguided perception of his father’s affection toward his children. Instead, Brennan, by reflecting on these experiences, recognizes that his father truly did not love them. Learning that truth brought a sense of peace to Brennan, allowing him to move on.

The search for truth is a major factor in Brennan’s change of perception about mental health from something that is fixable through drugs to something that must be confronted through therapy. Brennan takes advantage of his frame to identify how his primary problem, his failure to maintain a positive relationship with his father, provided the opportunity to find solution he needed: addressing the problem directly rather than trying to find a quick fix through medical intervention. This entire special was demonstration of that frame, showing that Brennan has found a new way to understand his depression, allowing him to move forward. He recognizes this change in an interview with Kweli:

It sounds trite but, that was more valuable… I think about it so little now, and I used to be really consumed with anger toward it… maybe I exorcised it so to speak…. In that regard, it was very helpful in that I don’t think about it. (Rivera, 2019)

Instead of finding a medical salve for this anger, Brennan was able to work through this tension by engaging in a form of talk therapy in front of an audience.
While Brennan frames mental health as something to confront, the ability to do so is limited to those who have access, support, physical safety, and money. Additionally, by being a cisgender, heterosexual, white male with power, fame, and status, the neoliberal perspective he takes in essentially saying ‘take advantage of all your resources like I did’ does not account for the real barriers people without privilege face in dealing with mental health concerns. Certain people, specifically in African American (Bodnar-Deren et al., 2017) and Asian American communities (Lipson et al., 2018), have fewer opportunities to engage in therapeutic relief from their mental health problems. For instance, many communities deal with stigma, wherein they are socially pressured to not reveal certain aspects of themselves, including their behavior, for fear of social sanction or physical harm (Bharadwaj, Pai, & Suziedelyte, 2017; Goffman, 1963; Henderson & Gronholm, 2018). While all peoples dealing with mental health face stigma (Bharadwaj, Pai, & Suziedelyte, 2017; Henderson & Gronholm, 2018), Brennan’s privileged status and perspective provide him with more opportunities to explore his mental health without fear of reprisals.

Additionally, Brennan has had the time to dedicate to his mental health. He became successful early in his career, providing financial opportunities to explore different medical treatments for depression. Furthermore, stand-up comedy does not require a significant dedication of time to be onstage; instead, the majority of the time is spent traveling and writing, providing myriad opportunities for Brennan to engage in reflective self-critique that is not available to someone who is working a traditional 40+ hour job, has a family, or does not have access to therapeutic measures, such as the 12-step program or mental health counseling. While it is seemingly a positive perspective to view mental health as something to confront, it may not be feasible for all people.
Brennan’s self-exploration, engaging in a form of talk therapy (Anonymous, 1999; Barth, 2010; Jordan, 2000; Tanaka, 2019), provided him an opportunity to highlight key problems both within himself and without. He identified the frustration he felt when people view mental health as a choice rather than a legitimate problem, reinforcing the stigma of mental health (Griffiths, Christensen, & Jorm, 2008; Schwenk, Davis, & Wimsatt, 2010). Furthermore, Brennan highlights how he did not appropriately address his mental health problems, trying to find a quick fix for the symptoms rather than talking through the underlying issues, such as his relationship with his father. By engaging in a therapeutic form of performance, Brennan was able to bring stigmatized issues to the forefront, refusing to subvert them in the form of a joke. Instead, Brennan, like Gadsby, Patton Oswalt, and Marc Maron, talked through their struggles, finding common ground with his audience. However, just engaging in talk therapy onstage does not make for a successful show or rhetorical argument. To do so, Brennan engaged in frame shifting to provide different perspectives on his problems.

Frame Shifting

According to David Zarefsky, rhetors engage in frame shifting to provide opportunities for different interpretations of ideas. Frame shifting occurs when a rhetor “postulat[es] a different frame of reference from the one in which the subject is normally viewed” (Zarefsky, 2004, p. 613). By providing a new context for interpretation, rhetors can influence the audience’s understanding of an idea, particularly in a way the rhetor already perceives that idea.

The first emotional stuff segment focuses on how Brennan sees himself and his depression. Throughout the remainder of the emotional stuff segments, Brennan uses the backdrop of depression to frame how he understands other aspects of himself, including his desire to hide behind celebrities and his relationship with his father. While these topics are clearly non-comedic,
I argue that Brennan shifts the frames of understanding these issues in two ways: from pessimism to optimism and from the inevitable to the changeable.

**Pessimism Changes to Optimism**

Each emotional stuff segment begins with a note of pessimism and they are not meant to be taken lightly. Here is how each segment begins: first: “So I’m depressed”; Second: “So, up until five years ago, I’d never been in love before”; Third: “So, back to my dad. I almost couldn’t get a one-man show license unless I did a full monologue about my dad. Like I said, violent guy. Abusive. Volcanic temper”; and fourth: “Thank you. Sometimes the world can feel like a room that’s filling up with water.” These first sentences set the tone for the rest of the segment. Each are somber in timbre, establishing a frame of pessimism. And, as each segment development, the pessimism continues. The first segment focuses on the many ways Brennan tries to unsuccessfully address his depression, including therapy, meditation, and medication. Brennan identifies how any time he feels better with one treatment, the side effects were often much worse. For example, when he does ketamine (which he describes as “a horse tranquilizer that’s also a party drug”), he felt great the morning after. However, after five treatments in two weeks, the side effects included nausea, dizziness, and burning eyes for four months. When he takes antidepressants, the side effects include “weight gain, weight loss, nausea, grogginess, memory loss… Which, for my job, is not good… And, worst of all, dick stuff.”

So far, this entire segment has been pessimistic in tone. Brennan cannot find a solution to his problem despite his extensive efforts to do so. He has tried mainstream treatments (e.g., antidepressants and meditation) as well as non-traditional treatments (e.g., ketamine), but none of them have been as successful as he would like. However, the segment ends with a hint of optimism. He finally finds transcranial magnetic stimulation, which seems to be the most beneficial, although
he says that the treatment “feels like kind of a shitty woodpecker.” He also becomes involved in the Big Brothers, Big Sisters organization, which he finds to be unhelpful in releasing endorphins, but has an optimistic conversation with his ‘little brother,’ who says that Brennan “is like a cucumber, but [is] trying to turn [himself] into a pickle.”

Brennan shifts the frame of this segment from being pessimistic about finding a treatment that works to a sense of optimism about addressing his depression. He says that “the depression’s still with me, but not nearly as bad as it was.” The audience is left feeling that Brennan finally has a grasp on his depression, and that things might just turn out okay. By shifting the frame from pessimism to optimism in this segment, Brennan accomplishes two things: he lets his audience know that he is doing better, and he provides a framework for how the remainder of the emotional stuff segments progress.

There is evidence that Brennan’s frame shifting helped his audience. In an interview with Kweli, Brennan explained how his relationship with his dad was not an anomaly: “…the amount of positive – not positive reinforcement I got because of it – but it, it helped a lot of people – like a lot of people related to it…. Every day I get Instagram messages [about people supporting me and talking about their depression]” (Rivera, 2019). Additionally, Brennan highlights how people have appreciated his honest exploration of the lack of love from his father:

And what I’ve found from talking about it in the show is there’s a lot of that going around that – where people don’t feel loved by their parents, and they’re like – it’s not just not feeling it. It’s – you don’t feel it because it’s not there. … And people have been super grateful that I just said it in public because a lot of people feel that way, and no one ever really says it. So yeah, so it was – while it was painful, it was way more illuminating than it was painful. (Rivera, 2019)
By revealing the truth about his father’s lack of love for his kids, Brennan brings to the fore an issue that many people feel but cannot talk about because of the lack of support surrounding it.

Once again, Brennan talks about these options as if everyone had equal access to them. Besides the cost-prohibitive nature of many of these treatments, some need specialized medical professionals, access to the locations at which those medical professionals are located, knowledge of the treatments, and a community that will not stigmatize their pursuit of mental health treatment. This inherent privilege, based primarily on race and class, potentially create a barrier between Brennan’s positive message about mental health care and the ability of some (or most) of his audience from accessing those treatments in the first place. Similarly, a man coming from a racially privileged position (white from Midwest United States) implicitly telling others how to treat themselves reads like a problematic, neoliberal perspective that does not account for a variety of factors that may prevent people from accessing these resources.

The second emotional stuff segment begins with a pessimistic tone as well. Brennan starts talking about a recent romantic relationship, but quickly explains that it did not end well. During that relationship, he also stated that he was in a 12-step program. Furthermore, Brennan identifies why he believes the relationship did not, and could not, work out: he was a “star-fucker.” Brennan uses this term to explain that he prefers to, as he uses a quote from Al Pacino to explain, “warm his hands off [celebrities’] fire.”

So far, this section has been extremely pessimistic. Brennan is struggling to find love, even though he believes the relationships are going well. Additionally, he is struggling to find himself. After his breakups, Brennan identifies that he cannot succeed in a relationship if he cannot find himself, so he attempts to do just that. However, the journey to self-exploration is not one that Brennan finds easy. Once again, the pessimistic tone reemerges.
However, as he progresses through the segment, Brennan shifts the frame to one of optimism. While he is still struggling to find love (although he identifies in the next stand-up segment that he is currently dating someone), he realizes what he needs to do. Just by identifying the issue, Brennan feels more optimistic about solving the issue. To try and overcome the lack of self-esteem and confidence, he tells the audience that he followed his gut by doing stand-up comedy. As proven by this special, Brennan seems to be finding some success in it. While the ending of this segment reads as pessimistic, the tone in which Brennan says it is optimistic:

Me doing stand-up by myself is the right thing to do. It’s just more honest, you know? I could find somebody to hide behind, but that would just be… fear and habit. So, yeah, like, I can’t hide. Like, I want to hide. I’m dying to hide. But, win or lose, I can’t. (Brennan, 2017)

This shift, from pessimism to optimism, once again leaves the opportunity for the audience to be receptive to his non-comedic material as they receive life lessons from Brennan. Even though there is no joke in these final sentences, the audience responds positively through applause, potentially recognizing the optimism Brennan feels.

The third emotional stuff segment follows a similar pattern as the first two, shifting frames from pessimism to optimism. Brennan begins the segment talking about his poor relationship with his father. Throughout the segment, that relationship is the focus, especially how Brennan tries to fix the relationship but cannot do so. While there are small instances of progress, such as Brennan and his father talking together in his father’s hospital room, significant steps are not being made toward a happy resolution. Instead, Brennan learns that, despite everything he has tried to do to fix the relationship, he is still left out of his father’s will in what Brennan describes as “a little flick to
the back of the ear”; a reminder of how the relationship was never fixed and now it is over. While being in the will itself is not important to Brennan, the sentiment of being left out is.

This portion of the special, the revelation that Brennan was left out of the will, is clearly the low point of the show. The audience is quiet, and Brennan stands silent for a moment, letting the emotion sink in. This is vastly different from most comedy specials, where deep, dark, emotional expression, with no intent to pay it off with a joke, is not part of the content at all. However, Brennan immediately shifts the frame from a deep pessimism to a sense of optimism. Instead of dwelling on the end of the relationship, Brennan quickly moves to a memory of a conversation with his father where he reveals that his father did not love his children. Once again, this is not a happy moment, but Brennan pivots quickly into a silver lining: he has learned the truth, which gives him an advantage moving forward. This knowledge confirms how he was feeling throughout his childhood, which gives him an optimistic perspective that maybe his feelings are justified rather than an inappropriate response to his upbringing. This shift, from pessimism to optimism, helps Brennan and his audience find positivity in a place where it was lacking, bringing resolution to this segment and to those in the audience who face similar situations.

The final, and shortest, emotional stuff segment is a microcosm of how Brennan has shifted frames from pessimism to optimism thus far. He begins the segment talking about how he feels his world is filling up with water. He then states that jokes are his way of finding air, allowing him to slow things down for just a moment. He then tells the audience he is going to tell one more joke and “get out of here.” Unlike previous segments, the stage does not go black when he moves from one microphone to another. Instead, we see Brennan walk to the one-liners microphone. He then tells the joke and the stage goes black. The audience then stands in an immediate ovation.
By finishing with this last segment, Brennan can get a bit of oxygen in a world filling up with water. He demonstrates that his jokes are more than just silly things he says; they are a way for him to find a sense of relief: “Like, just for one second, things slow down…and I can win. Like, I can beat life. It’s the best. And it’s so personal.” Brennan can finish his special by momentarily beating life, leaving the audience with a sense of optimism rather than the pessimism that had been present throughout much of the emotional content.

The beginning of this special revealed Brennan’s struggle to find relief from the vest of depression through medical intervention, specifically drugs. However, by switching the frame from one of pessimism about a lack of success to one of optimism toward the future, Brennan reinforces the therapeutic aspect of mental health treatment (Chatziagorakis, 2020; Whitbourne, 2015).

3 Mics is a sort of therapy session, with Brennan revealing the timeline of his career and how he tried to remove his depression through drugs. However, his exploration of emotional stuff in front of a group of empathetic listeners follows the same pattern as a traditional therapy session. Although the audience is not professionally trained to provide options for Brennan, his experience with psychologists and psychiatrists allow him to do most of the work on his own; this show was the culmination of all the efforts he has gone to throughout his adult life, albeit with advantages that many others do not have, such as the time and money to pursue a variety of both mainstream and radical treatments for mental health and depression. Additionally, Brennan’s special helped many others, as noted in an interview with Kweli (Rivera, 2019). Brennan’s perspective, specifically how he shifted frames from pessimism to optimism, proved therapeutic for many people, not just himself.
The Inevitable to the Changeable

Throughout his special, Brennan identifies aspects of his mental health that seem to be the inevitable outcomes of events prior. His first emotional stuff segment focuses on his inability to find successful solutions for his depression through drugs and other forms of therapy. His second segment focuses on his inability to find successful romantic relationships stemming from his lack of self-esteem and confidence. And his third segment focuses on the ways in which his father will not change from a narcissistic, violent alcoholic who has little interest in having positive relationships with his family. However, Brennan shifts these frames in subtle ways as he finds a new interpretation for these issues.

Brennan discusses his depression as something he must deal with consistently in his performance. He describes how “depression feels like you’re wearing a weighted vest. I always felt like I was at a disadvantage mood- or energy-wise to my peers. It was never life-threatening, it was just life-dampening.” This explanation leads to a framing of depression that it is something to confront, not attempt to fix with medication; removing the vest was not possible. In this case, depression seems inevitable, and all Brennan can do is find a way to deal with it. As he explains, Brennan still tries to find ways to lessen the heaviness of the vest through meditation, medication, and different forms of therapy, each with varying levels of success.

While the depression is still present, Brennan subtly identifies a way in which he can remove his feelings of depression: by becoming “a pickle.” While the path to picklehood is unclear, Brennan uses this quote from his ‘little brother’ in the Big Brothers, Big Sisters organization to emphasize that there is an end goal. The idea of finding a way to confront his depression would crop up throughout the other emotional stuff segments as well.
In the second segment, Brennan discusses himself as a “star-fucker.” It is important to highlight that once again, Brennan sees this as an outcome of his lack of self-esteem and confidence, which stems from his childhood with his father. Brennan characterizes this issue as inevitable: he will always be a “star-fucker” because of his detrimental relationship with his father. Unlike the positive tone at the end of the first segment bringing some sort of shift in frames about depression, the end of the second segment does not achieve that shift. However, the third segment does provide a shift in perspective from the inevitable to the changeable when it comes to being a “star-fucker.”

The third segment provides a sense of closure for Brennan. Even though he was unable to fix his relationship with his father, he was able to have conversations with him about his perspective on his childhood. These conversations allowed Brennan to see his father a little bit differently; not more sympathetically, as Brennan still believes his father to be narcissistic and self-centered, but with clarity. As he states at the end of this segment, Brennan has confirmed the truth about his father, particularly how his father did not love his children. By learning this, Brennan can confirm that what he felt, particularly his search for affirmation and achievement, was not an improper response to his upbringing. Brennan recognizes that his was not the healthiest response, but he now knows that he has found some resolution.

At the end of this segment, Brennan seems to feel optimistic again. While he is still struggling with depression, he potentially recognizes that he is on the right path toward viewing depression as something that can be changed rather than it being inevitable. Additionally, by addressing his relationship with his father, Brennan potentially sees a way for him to gain self-esteem and confidence, leading him to change his “star-fucker” relationships and stand on his own. While these claims cannot be definitively supported, I argue that, by shifting frames from things
being inevitable, such as depression and being a “star-fucker,” to one of those things being changeable, Brennan attempts to help himself and his audience understand his ‘real’ self with a different, and more positive, perspective.

While there are many positive aspects to how Brennan frames ways to deal with mental health, there are limitations as well. For instance, Brennan discusses the positive direction of his outlook on life after his father died, he did not recognize the privilege inherent in his ability to do so. Even though Brennan suffered from an abusive father, he was still wildly successful early in life. He became an award-winning writer for *Chappelle’s Show* (Armour, Brennan, & Chappelle, 2006), has positive relationships with famous people in Hollywood, and has the money and time to try many different mental health treatments, including ketamine injections and transcranial magnetic stimulation. While Brennan openly critiques racism and other social issues, he does not discuss how he had access to radical treatments which are unavailable in disadvantaged communities. These experimental procedures, and the access to medical professionals who can administer them, are not widely available, specifically in communities of people who are minoritized where discussions of mental health are still not widely accepted (Bodnar-Deren et al., 2017; Lipson et al., 2018). While there has been wider acceptance of mental health awareness and lower stigma associated with mental health, the privilege of being a rich white man allows Brennan to publicly discuss and explore mental health interventions unavailable to others due to access, cost, and stigma.

While it is helpful for an audience to hear someone explore their mental health and relationship problems in a raw and emotional way, it might lead to an oversimplification of mental health resolution. Brennan has access to a stage, something that many people do not. Similarly, he

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18 This isn’t necessarily a privilege, but it led to other privileges, such as time, money, and access to radical medical intervention.
was able to pay for various types of mental health treatments, ranging from antidepressants and community outreach to experimental drugs. Brennan was able to take all he had learned through two decades of mental health intervention and explore those factors in a stand-up comedy special. Viewers of this content might view the somewhat simple process of talking about their problems as the solution to said problems, without the intervention of mental health professionals to help them understand the underlying factors of these issues. While it is unlikely that a viewer might watch this special and immediately believe their mental health problems are solved in imitation, the frustrating and cost-prohibitive nature of mental health treatment, as well as the ongoing debate between medical and therapeutic intervention, might lead someone who does not have the privileges held by Brennan to engage in the same act, probably leading to less satisfactory results.

**Conclusion**

Neal Brennan’s *3 Mics* stand-up comedy special is broken into three sections: one-liner jokes, stand-up material, and emotional stuff. These three sections allow Brennan to engage in different methods of presenting material to his audience. By organizing each section as he did, Brennan began to constitute his audience to be receptive and accepting of his non-comedic and emotional material. Additionally, Brennan used three of Entman’s (1993, p. 52) four functions of framing to provide a perspective on his material: define problems, diagnose causes, and suggest solutions. Specifically, he framed his depression as something to confront rather than try to fix with radical medical treatments. Finally, Brennan engaged in frame shifting (Zarefsky, 2004) to provide new perspectives from which he and his audience could understand his material: from pessimism to optimism and from the inevitable to the changeable.

Brennan used his three microphones to switch between different personae, including a young Neal writing jokes for others (one-liners), a more mature Neal performing his own material
(stand-up), and the real Neal, one who is facing severe mental health issues (emotional stuff). These personae reflected his development as an entertainer, but they also reflect his development as someone dealing with depression. By shifting frames from pessimism to optimism about his mental health, Brennan was able to find a silver lining in traumatic events. Similarly, by framing his mental health as changeable rather than inevitable, Brennan has more agency in his treatment. These changes in personae and frames helped Brennan as well as his audience with mental health issues (Gross, 2017).

It is important to note here that there has been little critique about Brennan’s stand-up special fitting within the genre of comedy. Rather, the non-comedic material was highly praised (Czajkowski, 2016; Eslin, 2017; Genzlinger, 2016). While a large portion of his special is dedicated to non-comedic material, it has rarely been identified as a glorified TED Talk, motivational speech, or therapy session. In contrast, Hannah Gadsby’s Nanette has been heavily criticized for not being funny throughout the special, despite her performance being more consistently funny, until the last ten minutes, than Brennan’s. As I will discuss in the next two chapters, this difference helps support the argument that there are limitations on who can do what with non-comedic material in a stand-up comedy special and still be accepted as comedy, particularly based on elements of privilege.

Brennan’s comedy special differed greatly from Bo Burnham’s, mostly because of personal style. Burnham was much more theatrical, using music, lights, and pre-recorded bits in his performance. However, Brennan’s use of lights and stage positioning were used rhetorically to help frame and constitute his audience to be ready for, and potentially receptive of, his non-comedic material. While the styles were different, there were two main ways in which Brennan’s
and Burnham’s specials were similar: (1) the presentation of non-comedic material and (2) the positive reception by the audience.

Both Brennan and Burnham were explicit in their presentation of their issues. Burnham used signposts to indicate what his issues were (e.g., “my biggest problem is you”), and Brennan used his center-stage microphone to almost exclusively present non-comedic material. While both comedians broke the form of a traditional stand-up special, they each established a structure for their material. Burnham used music throughout whereas Brennan used the repetition of one-liners and stand-up segments to scaffold his special.

Secondly, both Brennan and Burnham were received well by their live audiences. Both earned laughs from their jokes and got applause throughout the special at key moments. Additionally, both received immediate standing ovations, an unofficial yet strong demonstration of support for a performer. Both performers have been well-received by critics as well, earning praise from professional and amateur critics alike (Czajkowski, 2016; Eslin, 2017; Genzlinger, 2016; IMDb.com, n.d.[b], n.d.[c], rottentomatoes.com, n.d., etc.).

By engaging in and going beyond post-comedy (Fox, 2018a), both performers can help make their non-comedic material palatable to their audiences. Each has a message to share about mental health and how they are dealing with it, and they use constitutive rhetoric, framing, and frame shifting to break down barriers between performer and audience to share those issues with their them while also allowing for a sense of equity between performer and audience. In other words, both Brennan and Burnham position their audiences to see them as just like everyone else: with struggles, concerns, and mental health issues. By doing this, these performers help shape their audience to see these issues through their worldview for the purpose of finding a sense of solidarity together. While Burnham gives his audience some actionable advice, “If you can live your life
without an audience, do it” (Burnham & Storer, 2016), neither comedian expects the audience to go marching in the street against an external threat. Instead, they position their issues as internal and personal, but yet shared by everyone at the same time. These two specials help us understand how comedians are presenting their ‘real’ selves through the post-comedy style (Fox, 2018a) to discuss mental health and depression concerns.

However, the inherent assumption by both Burnham and Brennan, that everyone has the same opportunities they do to either start a behavior (talk therapy) or stop a behavior (living with an audience), does not account for their privileged white perspective. Burnham is able to walk away from his audience because he has already achieved fame and success, providing him with the resources to do so. Additionally, he has the opportunity to continue working in the entertainment industry as a producer and director. So, while he may not be performing in front of a live audience, he is inherently still performing in front of an audience, demonstrating that “liv[ing] without an audience” is not so simple, even for him. On the other hand, Brennan has spent a significant portion of his life trying to fix his mental health problems, presumably spending an incredible amount of money in that pursuit. Because he achieved fame and success early in his career, Brennan had the time and money to do so, something most people dealing with mental health issues do not have. The privileges these comedians have, as well as their successes early in their lives, provides them opportunities to engage in mental health care that is not available to people without those privileges.

While both comedians engaged in discussions of mental health and how they were struggling with it, they did it in vastly different ways. Burnham was more performative in his presentation of ‘real’ struggles, using his established persona of a meta-critic to blend performance and the explanation for why he is not happy. On the other hand, Brennan was about as un-
performative as one can get while onstage, delivering his emotional stuff content with as little pomp as possible. These different styles worked for both, but they had different underlying messages: Burnham’s was that he is struggling with this dynamic and he thinks the audience is too. His argument centered around a struggle that “we” (him and his audience) are dealing with in terms of poor mental health. Brennan’s was that he finally found a sense of peace by using his stage, both figurative and literal, to engage in a therapeutic exploration of his struggles with depression. His argument centered around a struggle that only he was dealing with, although inherently there was a recognition that other people struggle too. These two comedians brought alternative perspectives on mental health, but the core of their performances was similar: struggles with mental health are real and should be dealt with.

However, just like Burnham, Brennan embodies a privileged position because of his identities and his ability to address his issues head-on. Brennan is white, male, cisgender, heterosexual, heteronormative, able-bodied, and from an English-speaking country, all of which allow him opportunities to engage in discussions of mental health that are unavailable to others (Bodnar-Deren et al., 2017, Lipson et al., 2018). Similarly, Brennan’s problems are mostly internal, so he has the option to address them, including through medical intervention and therapy. In theory, he can remove his depression through treatment (although depression does not work like that in praxis). However, this option is not available to Hannah Gadsby because her problems rest in how society is structured. Additionally, people of color, regardless of their commercial or critical success in comedy, will always have to deal with racism in the United States.

Furthermore, just like Burnham, Brennan is able to break out of traditional masculinity within the genre of entertainment because of his privileges, including dedicating the majority of his special to mental health issues and his emotions, both of which fall outside of basic tenets of
masculinity (Connell, 1987; Doyle, 1995). While he breaks those tenets, Brennan’s masculinity affects his performance, in that his gender frames his ability to speak on those issues because of the assumed masculinity of stand-up in general. Additionally, Brennan’s discussions of sex, particularly from a masculine perspective, with his girlfriend in the “stand-up” portions of his special provides a masculine allowance, one he uses to discuss emotional stuff. In other words, because Brennan talked about traditionally masculine things, such as sex with his girlfriend, he was allowed to break traditional masculinity momentarily without being critiqued for being unmasculine. These options are not available to every comedian, including those who are non-heteronormative.

In the next chapter, I will focus on a third comedian, Hannah Gadsby, who explores her struggles with performance as well. While her central message has similarities to Burnham and Brennan, specifically that comedy does not provide a remedy for mental health, her argument focuses on her ability to share her message, which is very much not comedic.
Chapter 5: Quitting to Continue: Hannah Gadsby Quits Comedy to Find Joy

Laughter’s the best medicine, they say. I don’t. I reckon penicillin might give it the nudge. There is truth to it, though. Laughter is very good for the human. It really is. ‘Cause when you laugh, you release tension. And when you hold tension in your human body, it’s not healthy. It’s not healthy psychologically or physically. That’s why it’s good to laugh. (Olb & Parry, 2018)

In this quote from her 2018 stand-up comedy special Nanette, Hannah Gadsby highlights the importance of releasing tension, particularly through laughter, which is a primary topic throughout her show. More specifically, Gadsby emphasizes how important tension is to comedy, in that comedians must build and release tension in their audience to achieve success. Jokes, according to Gadsby, must include this dynamic, otherwise they are unsuccessful. Regardless of the style of joke, whether it be a simple setup-punchline or developed through a story, tension is produced and released.

The problem for Gadsby, according to author Ray Waddle (2018), is that “as a lesbian from a small Australian town, she’s been the tension in the room all her life. And the only way to defuse it was to use self-deprecation: She was the punchline.” As explained in chapter 2, self-deprecating humor is a staple comic material. However, as Gadsby notes in her special, it also requires self-humiliation and self-abuse. And part of that harm comes from not being able to fully tell one’s story by having to stop to release of tension through a punchline. While the audience gets to laugh to release the tension, the comedian is left with the pain and damage, knowing that the rest of the story does not end happily.

By noting how comedy limits people’s ability to present their own narrative, she is highlighting an important aspect of mental health care. When people are unable to tell their stories,
they lack agency. Scholarship (Coote & MacLeod, 2012; Linhorst et al., 2002; Ross et al., 2008) suggests that personal agency is important to overall mental health. For example, Coote and MacLeod (2012) found that when patients are given opportunities to be active agents in their pursuit of treatment, they tend to feel better and have a more positive outlook on their diagnosis. Similarly, Linhorst et al. (2002) identified how, when given the opportunities and resources, clients of mental health care facilities had favorable outcomes when empowered in the decision-making process. This agency is key to getting better, which is something Gadsby refers to several times in her special. Furthermore, by telling her story, Gadsby can engage in a form of talk therapy, something that Neal Brennan found successful in his personal life and stand-up special (Barth, 2010; Brennan, 2017; Gavin, 2019). Gadsby incorporates elements of both agency and talk therapy when discussing serious problems she has faced in her life to expose the problems with the comedy genre and to find some sense of peace by telling her story.

While not an explicit goal of the show, Gadsby is subtly speaking out against mental health stigma, something that many people face (Bharadwaj, Pai, & Suziedelyte, 2017). Gadsby highlights how a comedy show might not be the best place to talk about it, but stigma has prevented public discourse about mental health (Bharadwaj, Pai, & Suziedelyte, 2017; Griffiths, Christensen, & Jorm, 2008; Schwenk, Davis, & Wimsatt, 2010). Also, near the end of the special, Gadsby recognizes that she has taken the opportunity to speak on her mental health, something that many people are unable to do because of factors such as age (Gonzalez-Dominguez et al., 2018), class, ethnicity and race, gender, sexual orientation (Livingston & Boyd, 2010), and access to healthcare (Wood, Burwell, & Rawlett, 2018). There are many layers to Gadsby’s argument, which I will describe below, but an important theme throughout the special is that Gadsby recognizes the importance of mental health, not only for herself but for others like her. By engaging in and going
beyond the post-comedy turn (Fox, 2018a), Gadsby is able to share her story for the first time with a national audience, hoping to find a sense of happiness moving forward. By telling her story to a national audience, Gadsby found some sense of peace, which was unavailable previously within the genre of comedy. Gadsby needed to tell her story to a larger audience, but that is not what everyone needs. However, Gadsby argues that the ability to share one’s story is what is important, and finding the right medium for that is vital to improving one’s mental health.

In many ways, Gadsby’s use of post-comedy is like Burnham and Brennan. For instance, she positions her audience to be receptive to her final, non-comedic message. She provides a clear link between the underlying issues she is facing with her potential solution. And she shifts the entire frame of acceptance in the latter portion of her performance. Further, she reveals the ‘real’ self within the realm of comedy by speaking directly to her audience about the cause and effects of problems in her life. Like Burnham and Brennan, she communicates that comedy is not the solution to these problems.

However, she differs from Burnham and Brennan by directly criticizing the concept of a punchline and comedy. For example, Burnham approached his critique of entertainment through layers of commentary on top of jokes to deconstruct entertainment throughout the performance. Brennan provides hints of a critique of comedy through his progression through each different microphone, but the central message is much more about the progression of his career and the problems he has faced throughout his life. In comparison, Gadsby is direct with her audience, attempting to leave nothing up for interpretation once her performance makes a critical turn roughly halfway through the show.

In this directly critical performance Gadsby embodies many elements of the feminist killjoy (Ahmed, 2010), refusing to allow self-deprecating humor to be humorous. As Sarah Balkin
(2020) notes, the feminist killjoy is a “spoilsport figure whose unhappiness positions her as a source of tension.” More specifically, the role of killjoy can be played by anyone who is perceived to destroy the fun or positive moment in favor of a serious critique, such as a feminist or a person of color amongst people of dominant groups (Ahmed, 2010, p. 582). While the killjoy does not necessarily destroy comedy or jokes, Gadsby’s killjoy perspective fits well because her embodied position, a lesbian woman in a minoritized position in the genre of comedy, kills the joy in a more literal manner because comedy is supposed to lead to joy. I argue that Gadsby purposefully plays the role of the killjoy as she refused to release the tension of her audience, allowing them the opportunity to feel, even for a moment, what she has felt throughout out her life as a minoritized person.

Furthermore, the killjoy inherently embodies a position of minoritization or marginalization, potentially disrupting the joy or happiness of a person or peoples in power. As bell hooks describes in a quote about how a Black feminist may disrupt the celebratory bond of white feminists just by being present:

A group of white feminist activists who do not know one another may be present at a meeting to discuss feminist theory. They may feel bonded on the basis of shared womanhood, but the atmosphere will noticeably change when a woman of color enters the room. The white women will become tense, no longer relaxed, no longer celebratory. (hooks, 2000, p. 56, as cited in Ahmed, 2010, p. 583)

Here hooks identifies how one’s very own presence, regardless of intention, can be a site of disruption to those in power. The Black feminist in this example is the killjoy just by nature of being other, even though she would also identify with feminist womanhood. The white women did not experience this disruption from any other white woman in the group, even though there are
multiple perspectives included from different intersections of identity and experience (Crenshaw, 1989). While Ahmed and hooks both identify aspects of a passive killjoy, in that the Black feminist did nothing other than exist to kill the joy, Gadsby goes further by actively killing the joy of a joyful experience: comedy.

By refusing to allow tension to break, Gadsby is demonstrating how harmful comedy can be, specifically in how it limits certain voices and experiences. Balkin (2020) reads *Nanette* through a feminist killjoy lens, arguing that the show is a humorless comedy that seeks to violate the rules of comedy. However, she maintains that the performance is not as effective as it could be because Gadsby’s rhetoric and performance after the show failed to sustain the feminist killjoy critique. Ultimately, Balkin (2020) questions the effectiveness of Gadsby’s use of humor in the show to maintain the genre expectations of comedy.

Rather than read this balancing between feminist critique of comedy and recognizable comedy, I argue that by setting the foundation for her critique through use of comedy in the first half of her special, Gadsby constitutes her audience to be more receptive of her non-comedy material. She described this phenomenon in an interview with Lydia Polgreen, saying that she included more jokes in her special because it was not connecting with previous audiences. Specifically, she identified that without some of the jokes Gadsby felt too vulnerable and the tension was too high, thus over-antagonizing the audience (BUILD Series, 2018). By including some comedy in the setup for the final segment, Gadsby provides a pressure valve for a small amount of tension to be released, allowing the audience’s tension to not boil over, while maintaining the discomfort of the audience as they learned about Gadsby’s trauma. This differs from Balkin’s reading of *Nanette* by emphasizing the importance of comedy in Gadsby’s critique, allowing her to be a feminist killjoy without alienating her audience.
As mentioned earlier by Balkin, anyone, regardless of gender, sex, race, class, or nationality can be a feminist killjoy in any situation. However, Balkin (2020) critiques Gadsby for failing as a feminist killjoy because she remained comedic. However, as I explore below, Gadsby had to fight against, not only the stereotype of being a killjoy, but also against the stereotype that women are not funny to begin with. If her special would have been nothing more than a pure killjoy critique, then it would have failed within the realm of comedy. However, if it was purely a comedic special, then it would have failed as a feminist critique. Gadsby had to balance between (a) providing a critique without being seen as nothing more than a killjoy and (b) performing the basic functions of a comedy special. Her success in this special helps prove her point, that by breaking gender norms, whether in body or in comedy, she creates tension for others. This tension is exemplified in the critiques she has received, both from scholars (Balkin, 2020) and from fans (Scraps from the Loft, 2018).

By viewing her performance in this way, we can read Gadsby as someone who is successful at building the tension of an audience in hopes of a laugh, only to leave the audience holding onto that tension, a modicum of what Gadsby has experienced through the form of comedy. Furthermore, we can understand the rhetorical power Gadsby has by being a killjoy during a tumultuous period in gender and sexual politics in Australia, England, and United States. While the killjoy has a negative connotation, Gadsby, while embodying this role, found success in maintaining a tight balance between comedy and non-comedy, allowing her message to be more persuasive.

Gadsby’s material was presented through a gendered lens because of its connection to her sexuality, (non)heteronormativity, and survival of sexual harassment and assault. She performed a feminist critique of power, privilege, masculinity, heteronormativity, the construction of gender,
and the limitation of the genre of comedy on those who do not conform to heteronormative expectations. These critiques were informed by her gender, leading her to view her performance through a gendered frame, both by necessity of her being non-heteronormative and her choice to provide a critique of gendered dynamics in Australia and the United States.

In contrast, while also viewed through a gendered lens, Brennan presented a critique of mental health and society as a whole without diving into gendered constructs. Similarly, Burnham performed a critique of comedy as it affects his mental health, also avoiding, except for a couple surface critiques of masculinity, a gendered lens. While he mocked stereotypes, he did not delve into issues surrounding the construction of gender and its effects on others. This further problematizes dynamics of gender as heteronormative white men are the expectation whereas anyone else who deviates is the exception (Connell, 1987; de Beauvoir, 1974). Brennan and Burnham did not have to outwardly address their gender because they have probably not been gendered incorrectly, harassed because of their gender, or faced violence because of their gender. Gadsby’s gender, particularly the struggles she has faced on the confluence of her gender and sexuality, such as her being viewed as a “bloke” from far away, then being viewed as a “trickster woman” for just being herself, has impacted her daily life.

This chapter will examine how Gadsby was able to situate her audience to be accepting of purposefully non-comedic content by describing, defining, and deconstructing the harmful nature of comedy. She was explicit in her argument, doing everything she could to avoid multiple interpretations. By bringing her audience along, Gadsby was able to shape her argument as one that was rational, even though it was controversial. In this chapter, I provide context about the creation, design, and success of Nanette. I then describe how Gadsby constituted her audience to be receptive of non-comedic material by discussing points of tension in her life, specifically her
non-heteronormative identity. Moreover, Gadsby explicitly identifies key areas for her audience, including a breakdown of jokes, callbacks to previous bits, and how past artists destroyed women. In the following section, I describe how Gadsby frames her special to highlight moral fallacies and social inequalities that are harmful to everyone. Finally, I discuss how she shifts frames from using jokes to release tension to telling stories that maintain tension.

**Nanette: Development and Success**

Gadsby developed this special as a response to a homophobic Australian barista named Nanette but found she could not get enough material out of her (Balkin, 2020). She knew this show would be unlike ones she had done previously; this show was to be a more critical response to people denying her humanity, specifically in the context of gendered, sexist, and homophobic violence and subjugation she has been subject to throughout her life. *Nanette*, however, goes further: it explores how Gadsby has been muted, both in her choices and audience expectations to fit within the comedy genre. *Nanette* represents a turning point for Gadsby as she struggles with her comedy career. As she explains in the special, she is unsure about her desire to continue a career in comedy, as she is at odds with the role of comedy and the truth of her life story. Indeed, in a rather surprising move during *Nanette*, Gadsby tells her audience that she was quitting comedy, so it does not really matter if she was unsuccessful. In fact, as she pointed out in an interview with Jimmy Fallon, the show “backfired” because it was so successful (Reed, 2018). Evidence of the special’s success includes it winning a Peabody Award and Comedy Special of the Year (Peabody Awards, 2018), Emmy for Best Writing for a Variety Special (Emmys.com, 2019), the Australian Academy Cinema Television Arts Award for Best Comedy Program (AACTA.org, 2018), and the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation Special Recognition Award (GLAAD.org, 2018). Overall, Gadsby had intended to quit comedy, but her show was so
successful well received that she went on to record a second one-hour comedy special on Netflix titled *Douglas* (2020). By recording a second special, Gadsby seemingly contradicts her decision to quit comedy. I explore this idea in the Framing section of this chapter.

Many reviewers and critics praised *Nanette* (Berman, 2018; Donegan, 2018; Wired Staff, 2018). Like with Brennan’s special *3 Mics*, critics homed in on the non-comedic element, highlighting how it altered the notion of comedy and challenged perceptions of what comedy allows. Judy Berman (2018) highlights how multiple critics and comedians responded to the non-comedic elements. Other critics explore the importance of *Nanette* creating a dialogue, emphasizing how important it is for us to have conversations about the issues raised by Gadsby (Donegan, 2018; Wired Staff, 2018). However, very little attention is being paid to the comedic aspect of Gadsby’s show, something that inadvertently reinforces the argument, which many critics reject, that *Nanette* is not a comedy show (Berman, 2018; Donegan; 2018).

Unlike Brennan, whose comedic material is fairly safe and predictable based on his established persona, Gadsby’s comedic content is more aggressive and confident than what she had been performing throughout her career (Donegan, 2018). Gadsby uses her frustration, trauma, heartache, and disappointment to fuel this special. The first half of the show is comedic, and she fulfills the typical genre requirements of performing a successful stand-up comedy show: she makes her audience laugh. Gadsby uses puns, audience interaction, and playful repetition to release tension, developing a complex narrative that will pay off in the second half of the show. While this comedic performance is technically sound, funny, and provides the foundation for the remainder of the show, it is perhaps because of the second half that the comedy does not get much attention. Just like much of the art Gadsby criticizes, the work that breaks accepted notions of art is what gets talked about the most, and the second half of her show demonstrates that perfectly. In order
to violate those norms successfully, however, Gadsby must situate her audience to be receptive of her non-comedic material. To address this disparity, I analyze how she used the comedic segments effectively to set up her non-comedic material, bringing a different perspective on the relationship between comedy and non-comedy in *Nanette*. Below I discuss how she engaged in constitutive rhetoric to achieve her goal of presenting her argument to a receptive audience.

**Constitutive Rhetoric**

To begin her special, Gadsby tells the story of growing up as a lesbian in a homophobic country, establishing a key theme for the rest of the special. While it is unclear if any of her audience previously knew that she is a lesbian, within the first segment of the show Gadsby explicitly states how she does not fit the heteronormative ideal for Tasmania:

> Now, I feel… I don’t feel comfortable in a small town. I get a bit tense. Mainly because I am this situation. And in a small town, that’s all right from a distance. People are like, “Oh, good bloke!” And then… get a bit closer and it’s like, “Oh no! Trickster woman, what are you doing?” I get a lot of side-eye. So I feel quite tense in a small town. (Orb & Parry, 2018)

By establishing early in the special that being non-heteronormative has been a site of tension, Gadsby keys the audience into an aspect of her identity that will be a consistent reference point throughout the special. Additionally, the tension she has felt, along with the discrimination, subjugation, and silencing she has received has led to her poor mental health. She previously used self-deprecating humor to try and find a way to happiness, but, as she identifies later in this special, that is no longer a viable option.

Gadsby further highlights her lesbianism by joking about her struggle with her sexual identity:
I love Tasmania. I loved growing up there. I felt right at home, I did. But I had to leave as soon as I found out I was a little bit lesbian. And you do find out, don’t you? Yeah. I got a letter. “Dear Sir/Madam.” Wasn’t a great letter to receive in mid-'90s Tasmania. Because the wisdom of the day was if you chose to be gay… I say “wisdom”, even though homosexuality’s clearly not a choice…. But the wisdom of the day was that, if you chose to be gay, then you should just get yourself a one-way ticket to the mainland, and don’t come back. Gays… why don’t you just pack your AIDS up into a suitcase there and fuck off to Mardi Gras? (Orb & Parry, 2018)

While Gadsby is not the first person to use sexual identity as a point of comedy, the constitution of her audience here, the way she lets her audience laugh at her struggles with understanding her sexual orientation/identity, allows her to set up her audience members’ receptiveness to her non-comedy later in the show. Furthermore, by joking about it, Gadsby recognizes the importance of humor in dealing with personal trauma (Buiting et al., 2020). Here she mocks the convention that gay people have AIDS and that being gay is a choice, both of which are untrue.

As Gadsby progresses through her special, she continues to explore other people’s reactions to her sexual orientation. In one story, she explains a frightening situation where she was almost beaten up for flirting with a woman:

I told… a story about the time this young man had almost beaten me up because he thought… I mean, he thought I was cracking on to his girlfriend. Actually, that bit was true, got that right, but…. there was a twist. It happened late at night, it was at the bus stop. The pub had closed, it was the last bus home, and I was waiting at the bus stop. And I was talking to a girl, and… you know, you could say flirting. I don’t know. And… out of nowhere, he just comes up and starts shoving me, going, “Fuck off, you fucking faggot!”
And he goes, “Keep away from my girlfriend, you fucking freak!” And she’s just stepped in, going, “Whoa, stop it! It’s a girl!” And he’s gone, “Oh, sorry.” He said, “Oh, I’m so sorry. I don’t hit women,” he said. What a guy! “I don’t hit women.” How about you don’t hit anyone? Good rule of thumb. And he goes, “Sorry, I got confused. I thought you were a fucking faggot… trying to crack on to my girlfriend.” (Orb & Parry, 2018)

This story ultimately sets up two issues for Gadsby: the first is the ignorant irony of a man thinking that a “faggot” would be hitting on his girlfriend. The second is the instant move toward violence in this situation. Gadsby, as demonstrated later in this special, really struggles to understand why violence is an immediate reaction to a lot of situations, especially sexual or romantic relations. This story will become more important when she refers back to it later in the special.

In another segment, Gadsby explores how both lesbians and non-lesbians react to her being a lesbian comedian. She tells a story about a woman informing her she does not have enough lesbian content in her show; that she is not effectively representing her community onstage. After explaining the complaint, she jokes with the audience, “I’d been onstage the whole time. I didn’t… even straighten up halfway through, you know?” Gadsby explains that she does more cooking than “lesbian-ing,” but that “nobody ever introduces me as ‘that chef comedian,’ do they?” Here is another point of tension for Gadsby, that her sexual identity has become the significant marker of her identity for other people.

At this point in the show, Gadsby follows in the footsteps of many other comedians by using her personal life as a source of comedic material. However, Gadsby follows these genre elements to constitute her audience for her next non-comedic topic, which is that she should quit comedy:
I do think I have to quit comedy though. And seriously. I know it’s probably not the forum… to make such an announcement, is it? In the middle of a comedy show. But I have been questioning… you know, this whole comedy thing. I don’t feel very comfortable in it anymore. You know… over the past year, I’ve been questioning it, and reassessing. And I think it’s healthy for an adult human to take stock, pause and reassess. And when I first started doing the comedy, over a decade ago, my favorite comedian was Bill Cosby. There you go. It’s very healthy to reassess, isn’t it? And I built a career out of self-deprecatimg humor. That’s what I’ve built my career on. And… I don’t want to do that anymore. Because, do you understand…do you understand what self-deprecation means when it comes from somebody who already exists in the margins? It’s not humility. It’s humiliation. I put myself down in order to speak, in order to seek permission… to speak. And I simply will not do that anymore. Not to myself or anybody who identifies with me.

(Orb & Parry, 2018)

This quotation highlights several aspects of Gadsby’s critique of the comedy genre: humor does not allow for non-comedy; it is inherently misogynistic; and it requires self-deprecation or, in Gadsby’s terms, “humiliation” and further marginalization (Orb & Parry, 2018).

These overlapping critiques underscore the argument Gadsby is making, that comedy is not a successful vehicle to find happiness, and therefore she cannot find happiness through comedy. Even though she does not explicitly state this in her special, Gadsby follows a similar pattern as other comedians, wherein she uses past trauma as a site of humor. Furthermore, she implicitly acknowledges the state of her mental health, which has been negatively affected by her inability to share her complete story. Just like Burnham, the dynamics of comedy cannot provide her happiness, so she says that she needs to quit comedy to find a means to happiness. Unlike
Burnham, however, Gadsby criticizes comedy directly, stating that not only is comedy not the best method to share trauma, but it actively reinscribes, reinforces, and contributes to trauma in various ways.

By advancing this argument, Gadsby is momentarily stepping outside of the comedy genre, something Brennan did in his emotional stuff segments as well. However, while Brennan was exploring his own personal problems, Gadsby’s issues are with society and the genre of comedy itself. There are no jokes in this segment; just a presentation of her ‘real’ self, and her concerns about the genre. After using her experiences as a source of comedic content, Gadsby now explains that she no longer feels comfortable with comedy and the tension that it depends upon. By doing this early in the show, Gadsby accomplishes a major element of constituting her audience: she primes the audience for non-comedy so that her break from comedy at the end of the performance does not alienate her audience.

Gadsby establishes that not only is comedy not a source of relief, it is also a site of harm. To her, comedy has become a place to humiliate oneself, preventing her from telling the full story of who she is, and she is no longer content with it. This is where Gadsby best represents the feminist killjoy, adapted to a comedic context, by refusing to let herself be harmed for another’s enjoyment (Ahmed, 2010; Balkin, 2020). In this critique, Gadsby advances the strongest post-comedy argument (Fox, 2018a) we have seen in this study: comedy should be abandoned rather than reformed. In support of this claim, Gadsby maintains that comedy is no longer a successful vehicle for minoritized people because of its incomplete, humiliating, and self-deprecating form. In comparison, Brennan and Burnham stop doing comedy within their shows to present non-comedic material; however, they do not challenge comedy directly (Brennan, 2017; Burnham & Storer, 2016). Gadsby is not just stepping outside of comedy because she sees it as ineffective in
presenting non-comedic material; she is actively resisting comedy because it is a threatening form. In addition to critiquing comedy, Gadsby is indicting the audience for accepting it, another characteristic of a feminist killjoy (Ahmed, 2010; Balkin, 2020). Gadsby does not let the audience sit as passive receivers of comedy; they establish the expectations for the comedy genre: comedians succeed only if their audience accepts the form of comedy and all it represents. By critiquing the audience as well as the genre, Gadsby emphasizes how the solution is not simply her abandonment of comedy; instead, the audience must understand and accept their complicity in comedy.

As Gadsby continues after revealing this criticism, she uses a consistent refrain to lessen the blow of her critiques: “just jokes.” By using this phrase, Gadsby is reminding her audience that, despite her sometimes-serious critiques, she is still a comedian performing stand-up in front of her audience. However, the refrain is seemingly ironic. She uses it to both lessen the impact of a harsh perspective, releasing small amounts of tension to prevent an antagonistic audience, while also criticizing the fragility of straight white men as they deal with challenges to their hegemony around the world. For instance, Gadsby provides a biting critique of heterosexual white men and jokes:

But, no… I don’t think it’s an easy time for you fellas, I do feel for you. Very difficult, very confusing time. Because—And you’re not coping. Because, for the first time ever, you’re suddenly a sub-category of human. Right? “No, we invented the categories. We’re not supposed to play! We’re human-neutral.” Not anymore. I’ve always been judged by what I am. Always been a fat, ugly dyke. I’m dead inside. I can cope. But you fellas… Bit soft in the belly? You hear “straight white man,” you’re like, “No. No, that’s reverse
sexism.” No, it’s not. You wrote the rules. Read them. Just jokes. Banter. Don’t feel intimidated. It’s just locker room talk. (Orb & Parry, 2018)

Gadsby is explicit in who she is critiquing: straight white men. She emphasizes the hypocritical, hegemonic, and patriarchal perspective that straight white men, who claim reverse sexism, are embodying when making that argument. More specifically, Gadsby refuses to let straight white men out of playing by the rules they created, that sub-categories of humans are justified and unworthy of respect and protection. At the end of this bit, Gadsby reinforces her position as a moral authority, which I discuss further below, by using the phrase “locker room talk,” something Donald Trump and others used to justify his remarks in an audio recording with Billy Bush (Nelson, 2017). By explicitly identifying a target audience, Gadsby highlights an area for exploration with regards to her critique later in the special. This bit allows the audience to begin to feel comfortable with her non-comedic message as she jokes about straight white men, making it a reference point for a callback, which is a key technique Gadsby uses in her comedy (Parry, 2020).

Her performance so far has established that her sexual identity and how comedy uses it as a tension for punchlines will be a theme throughout the rest of the show. She has prepared her audience to be receptive of non-comedic material by identifying her discomfort with the genre of comedy. She also has begun her critique of white heteronormative hegemony. As the special progresses, she continues to build on that foundation as she moves into a new subject: art. In this new topic, Gadsby interrogates the argument that suffering is necessary to inspire art, which is a point of contention for Gadsby. She uses her expertise in art history to explore how van Gogh’s mental health was not the reason he succeeded, but rather his relationship with his brother that kept van Gogh connected and inspired. This exploration of art and suffering operates as a rhetorical
frame to understand her broader argument, that the genre of comedy does not allow her to tell her story completely, preventing her from finding resolution and contentment.

**Framing**

In the previous two chapters, I explained how Burnham and Brennan used three of the four functions of framing (Entman, 1993). Gadsby engages in all four rhetorical frame elements. However, she does so for a different reason. While Brennan and Burnham frame their material in certain ways, they do so to conform to the expectations of comedy. Neither critique the genre; they just step outside it for a different purpose. However, Gadsby uses comedy to reject comedy as a genre, which is a radical step to take in the middle of a comedy special. She uses Entman’s four frame elements (1993) to first define both homophobia and her inability to express herself (define the problem); diagnose concerns about reputations and the genre of comedy (identify causes); critique heteronormativity, art history, and comedy (moral judgement); and rethink gender, quitting comedy, and provide a way for her audience to counteract the harms of comedy (offer solutions).

**Defining Problems**

The first function of rhetorical framing is to define the problems with the rhetorical situation (Entman, 1993). Just as Burnham defined problems with performance and Brennan with his self-esteem, Gadsby defines several problems she has encountered in her life: (1) homophobia in her home country; (2) lack of agency; and (3) the genre of comedy as a whole. One of the first problems Gadsby discusses is that of homophobia as the societal norm or default position, especially in her home state of Tasmania, Australia. Gadsby talks about how she was not accepted for being “a little bit lesbian” growing up and the homophobic opinion that being gay was a sinful
choice. She goes on to explain the effect these views had on her as she tried to figure out who she was:

From the years 1989 to 1997, right? This is ten years [sic]. Effectively my adolescence. Tasmania was at the center of a very toxic national debate about homosexuality and whether or not it should be legalized. And I’m from the northwest coast of Tasmania, the Bible Belt. Seventy percent of the people… I lived amongst… believe that homosexuality should be… a criminal act. Seventy percent of the people who raised me, who loved me, who I trusted, believed that homosexuality was a sin, that homosexuals were heinous, sub-human pedophiles. Seventy percent. By the time I identified as being gay, it was too late. I was already homophobic, and you do not get to just flick a switch on that. No, what you do is you internalize that homophobia and you learn to hate yourself. Hate yourself to the core. I sat soaking in shame… in the closet, for ten years. (Orb & Parry, 2018)

While the argument against homophobia is not new, Gadsby takes her audience with her back to Tasmania, where “Seventy percent of the people…believed that homosexuality was a sin.” Homophobia was not limited to isolated instances of name calling; it was the de facto perspective of the citizens of her home state (Orb & Parry, 2018; Winsor, 2016). By sharing this early in her special, Gadsby sets the stage for her audience that this performance is about more than just jokes, it is an explanation and exploration of the causes of her self-censorship. Gadsby had internalized homophobia, believing that people who are non-heterosexual were unworthy of attention, love, and respect. By establishing a potential cause-and-effect relationship near the beginning of the special, Gadsby prepares her audience for a deeper critique of this issue, particularly as she does not joke in this segment, nor does she joke about homophobia throughout her show.
Gadsby argues that this problem led to another problem: her self-hatred. As a through-line for the remainder of the show, Gadsby demonstrates how her self-hatred influenced her perspective on life, such as her refusal to come out to her family, her fear of physical violence, and the internalization of homophobia that still influences her and other people today. These conflating factors led to a deterioration of her mental health, such as her “hat[ing] herself to the core” because she internalized the homophobia of those around her. Societal homophobia was one of the first causes of Gadsby silencing herself and her story, something that would happen again when dealing with other forms of trauma, such as violence against her based on that homophobia. Gadsby’s poor mental health is not new to her, but her reckoning with it is. She found a means through which she could share her story with others who might have similar experiences as she performs a critique of the harmful limitations of comedy.

The second major problem that Gadsby defines is her lack of agency to tell her story. Gadsby recognizes that a story is more powerful than a joke, but a joke is more easily accepted, particularly in the realm of comedy. She sees this problem as having a negative influence on her life as she has been silenced and marginalized by a society who sees her as less than fully human.

Her inability to tell her story led to her feeling silenced, so she turned to jokes to find any voice, no matter how small. Jokes provide Gadsby an opportunity to find an audience, and she has internalized that any audience is better than none, even though her voice is still small and insignificant. As Gadsby points out, albeit humorously,

I understand this world very well. I understand the world I live in… because of art history.

I understand the world I live in and my place in it. And I don’t have one. And do you know how much time that saved me? I’m quite old, but look at the skin! That’s ’cause I haven’t wasted time looking… for how I fit in. I don’t. A lot of naps. (Orb & Parry, 2018)
As she mentions here, Gadsby earned a bachelor’s degree in art history, something she identifies as being pretty useless as a career, but vitally important in her critique of comedy and portrayals of mental illness. For instance, Gadsby tells a story about someone giving her feedback after one of her performances in which she talked about taking antidepressants: “He said, ‘You shouldn’t take medication because you’re an artist. It’s important that you feel.’ He said, ‘If Vincent van Gogh had have taken medication, we wouldn’t have the sunflowers.’” She then critiqued the absurd notion that artists must suffer in the pursuit of their art. As a result, she begins developing a frame through art history for understanding the dynamics of gender, sex, and suffering.

As she continues to rail against this person for his ridiculous advice, he responds by saying “don’t be so sensitive,” which Gadsby does not take lightly. She tells her audience that this piece of advice is the one she receives the most, which contradicts the man’s argument that she should allow herself to feel and suffer for her art. Rather than buy into the man’s perspective that sensitivity is a bad thing, Gadsby frames her sensitivity as her strength, countering the problem she has identified with people giving her unwanted and unhelpful feedback.

Next, Gadsby delves deeper into her argument that artists should suffer for their art. While she touches briefly on interactions between her and men throughout her special, she returns to art history as a framework for her to reach her point later in the show, that women are fully capable human beings and are not the playthings of men. Furthermore, she uses this as a scaffold for her argument at the end of the show that, while homophobia and her non-heteronormative identity are the underlying causes of her pain, comedy is harmful as well. By using this story, Gadsby is defining key problems she has encountered as she tries to find her voice in comedy.

To really drive home her point, Gadsby uses the example of Pablo Picasso. She tells the story of how Picasso “fucked an underage woman” named Marie-Thérèse Walter, who was 17
when Picasso was 42. She then explains how Picasso felt about women: “Each time… I leave a
woman, I should burn her. Destroy the woman, you destroy the past she represents.” She delivers
this line in a tense tone, making sure everyone understands what it means. She uses it to position
her audience as she returns to her earlier story about flirting with a woman at a bus stop:

Do you remember that story about that young man who almost beat me up? It was a very
funny story. It was very funny, I made a lot of people laugh about his ignorance, and the
reason I could do that is because I’m very good at this job. I actually am pretty good at
controlling the tension. And I know how to balance that to get the laugh at the right place.
But in order to balance the tension in the room with that story, I couldn’t tell that story as
it actually happened. Because I couldn’t tell the part of the story where that man realized
his mistake. And he came back. And he said, “Oh, no, I get it. You’re a lady faggot. I’m
allowed to beat the shit out of you,” and he did! He beat the shit out of me and nobody
stopped him. And I didn’t… report that to the police, and I did not take myself to hospital,
and I should have. And you know why I didn’t? It’s because I thought that was all I was
worth. (Orb & Parry, 2018)

By telling the whole story, she first identifies how her silence reinforces Picasso’s statement:
“destroy the woman, you destroy the past she represents.” Gadsby was being destroyed, and so
was her past, and she felt that she deserved it. However, she refuses to be destroyed because she
refuses to be silenced by homophobia and male hegemony. In this story, she provides support for
her thesis: that she should quit comedy.

Gadsby points out that comedy does not allow “for the best part of the story… which is the
ending.” Instead, jokes must cut off the ending because the ending is rarely funny. She goes further
by pointing out that jokes need tension in the form of a setup, and a resolution of that tension is in
the form of a punchline. She argues that this tension is vital. Audiences can laugh because tension is resolved. However, the stories of people’s daily lives and trauma go beyond that moment of resolution. For the remainder of the show, the idea of tension and resolution become central to how she frames her main argument.

As Gadsby explores the history of van Gogh and mental illness, she identifies how art and power have always been intertwined. She states that artists have never been separate from their world, living in a position of misunderstood genius. Instead, she argues that artists have been able to frame our understanding of society. By looking through paintings of women, Gadsby points out “there’s only ever been two options for a little girl to grow up into. Virgin or whore.” Women are typically depicted as naked, fragile creatures:

One of the things I do, I can generate thoughts in my own brain… unprompted. I can do that, all the time! Had another one. They just come all the time, and… Art history taught me, you know, historically, women didn’t have time for the think-thoughts. They were too busy napping, naked, alone, in the forest. (Orb & Parry, 2018)

Here, Gadsby highlights the absurdity of how women have been depicted in art; not as human beings, but as objects of male sexual desire, or what Gadsby terms “vases for their dick flowers.” She then connects this to broader gender power dynamics that shape society’s understanding of women’s place in the world by emphasizing how women are still “vases for [men’s] dick flowers,” although perhaps not as explicitly as the women napping naked in the forest. She reinforces this argument by discussing her trauma, as well as the inherent trauma of patriarchy, homophobia, and comedy that she and others have faced. To break out of this cycle of trauma, at least in a way she can, she rejects comedy as the only option for her. Instead, she rejects comedy as she critiques it, exploring her story in a way that is meaningful and positive to her.
For the remainder of her show, Gadsby explains her story through a feminist killjoy frame. She uses signposts to indicate that she is done with comedy:

To the men… to the men in the room, I speak to you now, particularly the white men, especially the straight white men. Pull your fucking socks up! How humiliating! Fashion advice from a lesbian. That is your last joke. (Orb & Parry, 2018)

By explicitly calling out the white men in her audience, both live and at home, Gadsby makes it very clear that she does not want her critique to remain only within the LGBTQ+ community; instead, she wants to ensure that white men are paying attention to her final message.

The sock joke included here is almost not a joke. While there might be a broad stereotype about the fashion sense of lesbian women, I argue that this joke serves as an indicator that the rest of the special will be purposefully non-comedic. Despite receiving applause there is very little laughter at this joke, and the people who laugh seemingly do so in relief rather than amusement (Orb & Parry, 2018). This joke is the final release valve for the audience’s tension, providing just a little more space for Gadsby to ramp up that tension during her final critique.

The last nine minutes of the special include her explaining, through tears and anger, how she has not been able to tell her story through the lens of comedy. Gadsby uses Picasso’s quote again, but to her benefit this time: “To yield and not break, that is incredible strength. ‘You destroy the woman, you destroy the past she represents.’ I will not allow my story… to be destroyed.”

As Gadsby argues, the ability to tell one’s story is power, and she feels powerless in comedy:

To the men in the room… who feel I may have been persecuting you this evening… well spotted. That’s pretty much what I’ve done there. But this is theater, fellas. I’ve given you an hour, a taste. I have lived a life. The damage done to me is real and debilitating. I will
never flourish. But this is why… I must quit comedy. Because the only way… I can tell my truth and put tension in the room is with anger. And I am angry, and I believe I’ve got every right to be angry! But what I don’t have a right to do is to spread anger. I don’t. Because anger, much like laughter, can connect a room full of strangers like nothing else. But anger, even if it’s connected to laughter, will not… relieve tension. Because anger is a tension. It is a toxic, infectious… tension. And it knows no other purpose than to spread blind hatred, and I want no part of it. Because I take my freedom of speech as a responsibility, and just because I can position myself as a victim, does not make my anger constructive. It never is constructive. Laughter is not our medicine. Stories hold our cure. Laughter is just the honey that sweetens the bitter medicine. I don’t want to unite you with laughter or anger. I just needed my story heard, my story felt and understood by individuals with minds of their own. Because, like it or not, your story… is my story. And my story… is your story. I just don’t have the strength to take care of my story anymore. I don’t want my story defined by anger. All I can ask is just please help me take care of my story. Do you know why we have the sunflowers? It’s not because Vincent van Gogh suffered. It’s because Vincent van Gogh had a brother who loved him. Through all the pain, he had a tether, a connection to the world. And that… is the focus of the story we need. Connection. (Orb & Parry, 2018)

Gadsby is done with comedy because it does not allow her to tell her story. She must find a new avenue and, through this special, has established that she refuses to be rendered voiceless again. Additionally, in this long quote, she connects her experiences with those of others, particularly the inherent trauma faced by women, people who are non-heterosexual, and people who are non-heteronormative by saying “…your story…is my story. And my story…is your story.” Here is an
explicit attempt at making this special about something bigger than Gadsby herself; it is an attempt to connect the audience together in a shared sense of trauma and tragedy, things that can be fixed by connecting with each other rather than ignoring or subjugating someone’s story just because it does not fit the ideal narrative, such as a joke within the realm of comedy.

Somewhat ironically, comedy allowed her new opportunities to share her message as she engaged in, and went beyond, the post-comedy turn (Fox, 2018a) in her first special. Her second special, *Douglas*, builds on *Nanette*, but is more of a traditional stand-up special, although there are elements of post-comedy included as well. Perhaps the understanding of comedy in 2016-2018 (when Gadsby was writing and performing *Nanette*) did not allow Gadsby to share her story successfully, but with the acceptance of the post-comedy turn, comedy may just allow her to now.

In this segment of the show, Gadsby accomplishes several things: she clearly identifies her target audience; she expresses her moral justification for how she feels; she critiques the audience’s acceptance of misogyny and sexism in comedy; she challenges the release of tension through humor and anger; and she finishes her show with a call to action for her audience. Here she finalized her killjoy perspective (Ahmed, 2010; Balkin, 2020), one that refuses to allow humor to dehumanize someone, including herself, a point I return to in the reframing section to follow.

Gadsby recognizes the importance of reaching an audience that goes beyond people like her. As discussed in Chapter 2, throughout the history of African American and women’s comedy, the target audience of the comedy has often been directed at those who have been minoritized (Barreca, 2013; Dickinson et al., 2013; Walker, 1988). More specifically, many African American comedians, as well as comedians of other minoritized positions/identities share in the same traumas and negative experiences as their audience, such as racism, xenophobia, and legal persecution, so they are able to use those traumas to inform their comedy. Additionally, they were
able to mock those in power without them knowing, allowing opportunities to fight against oppression without fear of repercussions. This dynamic allowed comedians of all backgrounds to explore shared trauma in space that allowed them to talk about it, something that was not granted in other venues because of the fears of racists in power (Fauntroy, 2009; John, 2012; Weaver, 2010). The exploration of trauma provides an opportunity for Gadsby as well, although not in the same context as African American trauma.

In this special, Gadsby refuses to let her message be misinterpreted as only being geared toward people like her. Instead, Gadsby specifically names one of her target audiences as the privileged people in western societies: white heteronormative men. Gadsby clearly identifies why she wants this group to feel uneasy tension in this special, to get a taste of what she has experienced her entire life. By doing so, this group will hopefully become sympathetic toward Gadsby’s position, although she recognizes that many times the opposite happens: people get angry and defensive after listening to this material. Rather than let the audience reach their own conclusions as to what they should do with their discomfort, Gadsby provides an opportunity to move forward through connections of love. In other words, rather than letting anger fuel a response, she pleads that we should all love each other. Similarly, rather than release the tension by laughing, thereby glossing over the cause of the tension, she urges the audience to love each other through the tension, providing an alternative technique than the stereotypical feminist killjoy (Ahmed, 2010; Balkin, 2020).

While she does not want her audience to be angry, Gadsby understands that she should be allowed to feel this way. Gadsby recognizes that anger is a justified emotion when thinking about and responding to what she and others like her have gone through. This is a big step for her: previously, as she highlighted earlier in the special, Gadsby would ignore or disallow her anger,
choosing to make it funny instead. More specifically, Gadsby would turn her feelings of anger into a self-deprecatory joke, thereby refusing herself the opportunity to fully respond to the situation in pursuit of making it acceptable for her audience. Gadsby now understands, and is demonstrating, that her anger is not only expected, but it is acceptable, particularly through the feminist killjoy frame.

However, while she now accepts that she can feel angry and this is a justified emotion, she recognizes her rhetorical agency and ethical responsibility with that power. In a move that violates the stereotypical feminist killjoy perspective, Gadsby emphasizes that, just because she feels angry, she does not have the right to spread rage. Like her previous points about turning her experiences into laughter to momentarily connect with the audience, Gadsby recognizes that she could establish a momentary connection with her audience through anger. Once again, while Gadsby understands that she is justified in her rage, she finds it unethical to spread that anger. Instead, she finds a new avenue: connection through love. However, that means she will need to find a new career because, if she cannot present her full story and humanity through laughter or anger, she must find a new way to be herself.

While Gadsby identifies the primary audience for her special, straight white men, she does not let everyone else off the hook. Throughout the second half of the special, reinforced by the final quote from Nanette, Gadsby identifies how popular acceptance results in sustaining misogyny and oppression. Furthermore, she finishes her point on how audiences connect: through laughter and anger. Gadsby recognizes that her audience has been laughing along with her, particularly those who are not straight men. However, she also understands that non-straight men cannot be bystanders when changing the discriminatory and oppressive nature of comedy. On the other hand, Gadsby cautions them against getting angry together; there must be a middle ground. By refusing
to tell the stories of the oppressed, such as herself the survivor of Picasso’s statutory rape Marie-Thérèse Walter, those who do nothing are just as responsible for maintaining patriarchy.

The final thing Gadsby accomplishes in this section of the show is to provide her audience a way to fix those issues. Gadsby calls on her audience to stop being passive spectators of trauma. Instead, the audience should find ways to connect that respect the stories of those who have been minoritized rather the oppressors. She argues that men like Cosby and Picasso should not be remembered because of their art; they should be remembered because of the trauma and violence they caused to their victims.

It is important to note that her audience could have reacted in different ways. They could have laughed to break all of this tension and, as a result, conform to the genre’s expectations for the audience and gloss over the trauma Gadsby has shared. Or, they could have connected through a collective rage that would not lead to a constructive response, according to Gadsby. Or, they could have been silent, refusing to acknowledge Gadsby’s message explicitly and not establishing a connection. All these responses would suggest that Gadsby was unsuccessful in her rhetorical framing. Instead, the audience stood up and cheered, giving Gadsby an immediate and resounding ovation. This response was repeated in venues in Australia and the United States as she finished her tour. Additionally, this reception demonstrated support for her message, and that suggests she may have been successful in framing her arguments in ways that made the audience agree with her critiques of societal structures. Furthermore, her critique opens up more conversations about and for survivors of sexual violence. As Moira Donegan (2018) identifies, Gadsby provides an avenue for survivors of sexual violence to share their stories by telling her story in such a public space. Because of the impact of the #MeToo Movement, particularly as it has allowed survivors of sexual assault, abuse, and harassment to be listened to for the first time, Gadsby’s special has achieved a
level of poignancy and importance previously unavailable (Donegan, 2018). The live audience seemingly recognizes the impact of Gadsby’s message as they listen in “rapt” silence or thunderous applause. While applause does not actually do anything about misogyny and oppression in comedy, the conversations her performance encourages are a positive development (Berman, 2018; Donegan, 2018; Wired Staff, 2018).

**Diagnosing Causes**

Now that we have explored how Gadsby defines the nature and scope of the problems with comedy and society, we turn to her framing of the causes of these issues. Throughout the special, Gadsby argues that our society is too concerned with focusing on the good produced by abusive artists like Cosby and Picasso, rather than denouncing everything about the person. She argues that this desire to focus on the good gets in the way of truly breaking down barriers that threaten and harm survivors of sexual assault and harassment. She uses the frame of art history to explore this issue, citing examples of van Gogh’s mental illness and subsequent medication in addition to Picasso’s rape of a minor named Marie-Thérèse Walter.

She explores this idea by highlighting the absurdity of the notion of “separat[ing] the man from the art.” She emphasizes this argument by using a hypothetical example from art: “How about you take Picasso’s name off his little paintings and see how much his doodles are worth at auction? Fucking nothing! Nobody owns a Circular Lego Nude, they own a Picasso!” One cannot separate the man from the art and, as Gadsby argues, one should not. It is important to recognize the bad with the good when remembering someone. Picasso’s additions to art cannot erase his misogyny, she argues. In other words, Gadsby recognizes that this desire to hold onto someone’s reputation prevents people from seeing the full picture. Additionally, she points to examples like people’s obsession with remembering the good things Woody Allen did for comedy, Cosby did for Black
men, and Picasso did for art that we gloss over their harmful behaviors. Instead, people are being short-changed in their understanding of the artist; their reputation has become more important than the totality of the person.

Gadsby also recognizes another cause to the problems she has identified: the genre of comedy. Much like Burnham’s criticisms of performance, Gadsby explores how comedy is not the proper forum for her voice to be heard. Just by nature of the genre, she is limited in how she can express herself. She cannot tell the endings to her stories because they are not funny, even though the ending is the most important part of the tale. She has not found her voice because she felt pressure to use self-deprecating humor, which she argues is “…not humility. It’s humiliation.” The genre of comedy is ill-suited to what she needs to do: find a voice so she can share her story.

Instead, Gadsby states that she is quitting comedy to find agency to express herself. Like Brennan, Gadsby feels like she needs to start fresh in a new career, one that offers her opportunities to express herself freely and completely. While her freedom of speech was not limited by comedy, she contends that her manner of expression was limited by genre expectations. As she finishes her special, Gadsby explains, “…like it or not, your story is my story. And my story is your story. I just don’t have the strength to take care of my story anymore. I don’t want my story defined by anger.” Gadsby diagnoses the cause of her problem of not having a voice. By quitting comedy, she believes that she can tell her story successfully and completely through a different vehicle.

**Making Moral Judgments**

The third function of framing includes making moral judgments on the situation around the rhetor (Entman, 1993). Gadsby is explicit in her moral judgments, specifically towards homophobia, art history and entertainment more broadly, and the audience’s acceptance of the limiting nature of the comedic genre. She begins her special by talking about how she does not fit
into the heteronormative ideal: from a distance “people are like, ‘Oh, good bloke!’ And then… get a bit closer and it’s like, ‘Oh no! Trickster woman, what are you doing?’” She also identifies how she has received messages from viewers of her shows that she should “come out as transgender,” which is news to Gadsby because she is not transgender. Gadsby emphasizes how she does not fit into the accepted masculine/feminine/transgender categorical system and would rather identify as simply “tired,” exhausted by contemporary understandings of gender. To advance this point, Gadsby proposes an alternative paradigm:

Here’s an idea. I say we get rid of pink and give all the babies blue. I’ve thought about this and it’s not because blue is a masculine color. ‘Cause that… is false. I love that people go, “Blue, yeah, a very masculine color. Very reliable. Very rational color, blue. Yeah, you can trust blue. It’s why we’ve got it on flags. Lot of blue on flags. Navy blue. Everyone trusts a boat.” Blue, if anything, is a feminine color. It really is full of contradictions. You know, blue is a cold color. It’s on the cold end of the spectrum. But the hottest part of the flame? Blue. If you’re feeling blue… you’re sad. But optimism? Blue skies ahead! Make up your mind. A blueprint is a plan, but if something happens not on the plan, where does that come from? Out of the blue! Blue’s a wonderful color to start life with. There’s room for every kind of human in blue. There’s a whole spectrum, ’cause blue doesn’t demand… it doesn’t demand action like all the other colors. Think about this. You’re stuck in traffic… and the lights turn… blue. Less road rage, people. Less road rage. More accidents, ironically enough. (Orb & Parry, 2018)

Put simply, instead of endorsing a pink/blue dichotomy, which reinforces heteronormativity, Gadsby offers blue as an equal opportunity color for all to explore who they really are. She rejects the idea that we need to be separated by gender, especially so young. Similarly, she also rejects
the masculine reading of blue by saying that it “is a feminine color. Full of contradictions.” Here Gadsby identifies how heteronormativity, particularly with a masculine reading, should be rejected entirely to provide alternative perspectives on everything, including something that is ascribed to us at birth.

Secondly, Gadsby uses her experience in art history to critique how women have been represented in art. She argues that, if women are included in art at all, they are portrayed as objects that fall within a binary choice of “virgin or whore.” Depicted in this way, Gadsby contends that women are not understood as intelligent, capable, and diverse people. She explores this criticizing how women in art are often fully or partially disrobed:

Another thing I do that’s not very ladylike is every day I seem to be able to finish the getting of the dressed. Every day! Not a problem. All the buttons, all the way up. I’m quite a vague and forgetful person, but… Seem to do it quite easily. Especially if I’m leaving the house to get my portrait painted. Never once have I thought, “You know what, today, [gestures toward breast] I must just leave a cheeky one out.” High art. I’m going to call it, guys. Bullshit. High art, my arse. (Orb & Parry, 2018)

Gadsby continues her critique of the representation of women as she discusses how women have been erased from art. She describes how Picasso raped a 17-year-old girl when he was 42, but those in the art society decided that was okay because he had much more potential than she ever could. Furthermore, Gadsby highlights how “the history of western art is just the history of men painting women like they’re flesh vases for their dick flowers.” Even when women are included in art they are typically naked or fragile, which erases the potential and totality of women’s humanity. This description of the erasure of the self links Gadsby’s discussion of art to how she
feels about herself, embodied in the quote from Picasso: “destroy the woman, you destroy the past she represents.”

**Suggesting Solutions**

Gadsby recognizes that heteronormativity and misogyny are prevalent in our world. While she would love to remove both, she recognizes that she cannot. However, she does have the power to change how she is able to express herself and share her story. Comedy has been the vehicle through which Gadsby has found her voice so far, albeit in a limited capacity. By nature of the genre, it requires the comedian to find humor instead of telling complete stories, something that Gadsby sees as limiting the meaning of those stories. Instead of trying to change comedy, Gadsby recognizes that it is better to leave comedy altogether.

Earlier I explained how her non-comedic segments about her struggle to find a voice in comedy has led to an existential crisis: she identifies how comedy has led her to use self-deprecating humor to find a voice, any voice, and that has led her to humiliation rather than humility. Furthermore, she argues that comedy forces her to be incomplete, limiting her material to a tension and resolution format. To find true resolution, to find her voice and herself, Gadsby believes she must quit comedy. The end of this special demonstrates this point: for the final nine minutes, Gadsby tells no jokes. Instead, she rails against how and why she was targeted for violence and frustrated at a world that accepts that violence. She has given up on comedy, but she has not quit on herself. While she does not tell the audience what her new career will be, it seems clear that Gadsby is done with comedy; she has found her solution.

This solution is radically different from Brennan and Burnham, both of whom step outside of comedy to present non-comedic material but do not reject comedy altogether. Gadsby sees no way for her to continue her comedy career and to have her story be told. While neither Brennan
nor Burnham have recorded a comedy special since these examples (although Burnham has recently teased the release of a new comedy special [Bosselman, 2021], Brennan’s reasons are unknown), Gadsby purposefully stops being a comedian. Gadsby does not propose a solution for other people to take up; instead, her solution is only available to her: stop doing comedy.

While Gadsby kills the joy of comedy in this special, she does not actually quit comedy. While it is unclear whether or not she truly intended to quit comedy (Balkin, 2020, p. 81-82; Reed, 2018), Gadsby recorded a second comedy special for Netflix in 2020. However, the concept of “quitting comedy” has a couple meanings that can be used to understand how Gadsby understood her solution in *Nanette*. A common understanding of the term, for example, from the Cambridge Dictionary (2020) defines “quit” as “to stop doing something or leave a job or a place.” When Gadsby says that she has “to quit comedy…” (Orb & Parry, 2018), it is easy to assume she means she is leaving forever. However, quitting does not have to mean that the stoppage is forever. In this special, Gadsby stops being funny while remaining onstage; she defies the genre of comedy while still being labeled a comedian. From this perspective, Gadsby further embodies the killjoy, someone who refuses to allow joy to minimize or refuse humanity (Ahmed, 2010; Balkin, 2020). Unlike the false stereotype of a feminist killjoy, Gadsby can still have fun, but in a more enlightened and uplifting way. This observation is supported by her statements in interviews after *Nanette* was released wherein Gadsby still jokes with interviewers (BUILD Series, 2018; Reed, 2018). Additionally, Gadsby has continued her career as a comedian, finding a method of comedy that allows her to avoid self-humiliation. In her new material, instead of using self-humiliation to punch down at herself or punch down at other minoritized people, Gadsby focuses on punching up at Americans, patriarchy, and men who have committed acts of sexual violence and assault (Parry, 2020). Gadsby was able to quit a common form of comedy by refusing to engage with how it had
been understood; however, she was able to continue her comedy career because of the support of her fans and her success in identifying solutions to the problems of comedy.

**Frame Shifting**

Both Burnham and Brennan shift multiple frames in their specials (Brennan, 2017; Burnham & Storer, 2016). They subtly alter the perspective of understanding throughout the special, using language and stage movement to support those shifts. In comparison, Gadsby only shifts one frame, but it is a meta-frame of her entire discourse: from finding comfort in a joke’s resolution of tension to immersing oneself in the prolonged tension of a shared story.

In previous chapters I argued that Burnham is most explicit in his moral judgments and that Brennan is most explicit in his use of constitutive rhetoric. In comparison, Gadsby is most explicit in shifting frames. Throughout this special, Gadsby helps her audience along by emphasizing punchlines and pointing out hypocrisies. For example, as she explains her lack of knowledge of lesbians as a child in Tasmania, she states that “For a long time, I knew more facts about unicorns than I did about lesbians. Another reason I struggled with– [stops to tell audience] There are no facts about unicorns.” Additionally, she addresses the men in the audience and how they must be feeling: “to the men in the room… who feel I may have been persecuting you this evening… well spotted. That’s pretty much what I’ve done there.” Gadsby helps her audience by being explicit in what she is doing. As a result, she helps her audience follow the through line of the show.

She continues to guide the audience’s attention by providing context to what she is doing onstage:

Let me explain to you what a joke is. And when you strip it back to its bare essential… components, like, its bare minimum, a joke is simply two things, it needs two things to
work. A setup and a punchline. And it is essentially a question with a surprise answer. Right? But in this context, what a joke is, is a question that I have artificially inseminated.

Tension. I do that, that’s my job. I make you all feel tense, and then I make you laugh, and you’re like, “Thanks for that. I was feeling a bit tense.” (Orb & Parry, 2018)

By detailing the relationship between jokes and tension, Gadsby explains the taken-for-granted understanding of comedy: the release of tension. Gadsby continues to explore this relationship by noting how tension can lead to worse outcomes: “punchlines need trauma because punchlines need tension, and tension feeds trauma.” While she leaves this point for a while to talk about other topics, such as art’s depictions of women, she circles back when reaching the climax of the special.

Gadsby explains how her earlier story about the jealous man at the bus stop who “do[esn’t] hit women” was incomplete. She goes on to note that “he beat the shit out of [her] and nobody stopped him,” demonstrating how the joke requires the story to be incompletely told. At this point, Gadsby is angry and frustrated, and those feelings seemingly permeate the theater. The audience is silent as they listen to Gadsby tell the truth: that she was beaten nearly to death because the man said she was “…a lady faggot [and] I’m allowed to beat the shit out of you.”

Gadsby lets this tension remain for a moment. Earlier in the special she would have released this tension with a joke. However, now that the audience is aware of the tension and perhaps desiring that release, Gadsby refuses to give them resolution:

And that was not homophobia, pure and simple, people. That was gendered. If I’d been feminine, that would not have happened. I am incorrectly female. I am incorrect, and that is a punishable offense. 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 because it is dangerous to be different! (Orb & Parry, 2018)
Here Gadsby explicitly informs her audience of her intention to not release this tension. By giving the audience, particularly those who do not have similar experiences of sexism and homophobia, Gadsby provides them a feeling of what life is like for “not-normals.” This forced empathy allows Gadsby to be more successful in shifting her frame.

The remainder of the special uses this tension to focus on her complete story, telling the truth about the violence and hatred she has experienced in her life. By sharing her full story, Gadsby reinforces the shift in frames from using the genre of comedy to release tension to rejecting the genre as a whole in favor of telling the full story. For example, she explains how she was beaten nearly to death, harassed, assaulted, and raped as a young woman. She talks about her feelings of worthlessness wrapped in a world governed by gendered and homophobic norms. In response to those stories, she declares that she refuses to let her story be silenced ever again:

I don’t tell you this… so you think of me as a victim. I am not a victim. I tell you this because my story has value. My story has value. I tell you this ’cause I want you to know, I need you to know, what I know. To be rendered powerless does not destroy your humanity. Your resilience is your humanity. The only people who lose their humanity are those who believe they have the right to render another human being powerless. They are the weak. To yield and not break, that is incredible strength. You destroy the woman, you destroy the past she represents. I will not allow my story… to be destroyed. What I would have done to have heard a story like mine. Not for blame. Not for reputation, not for money, not for power. But to feel less alone. To feel connected. I want my story… heard. (Orb & Parry, 2018)

This is the central point of Gadsby’s argument. Here she fully rejects comedy as a genre because it has silenced her story, shifting the frame from comedy being a place of communal joy to
recognizing the inherent harm the genre can cause when preventing a person from telling the full story. She refuses to let her story be silenced for the sake of a joke, so she kills the joy of jokes themselves. Instead, Gadsby is determined to be heard so that others like her will feel less alone. Gadsby embodies this feminist killjoy perspective when her body, as the performer, is the one that interrupts her audience’s ability move past the tension of a story that does not end with a punchline (Ahmed, 2010; Balkin, 2020). Because she is in control of the narrative of the special, Gadsby prevents her audience from sidestepping or laughing off her killjoy perspective; instead, she forces her audience to confront it, purposefully making them uncomfortable, and challenging them to do something constructive about that discomfort rather than passively accepting the misogyny and sexism that have caused the discomfort in the first place.

Gadsby has shifted frames throughout the special. She began by positioning tension as something to be released through a joke. She has focused her career on that idea. Additionally, she releases tension throughout the show by telling jokes. While the expectation of the audience is that she would engage in comedy, she is explicit that she is shifting the frame of the show. As she reached her conclusion, Gadsby refuses to give her audience the release from the tension they desire. She made them hold onto as much tension as possible without boiling over into anger, providing small instances of release through punchlines and deep breaths to prevent righteous indignation. Gadsby approaches this non-comedic content through love, which falls outside the feminist killjoy stereotype (Balkin, 2020), and she wants her audience to approach it from the same perspective. By not giving them resolution, Gadsby tries to put the audience in her shoes, to know her story, because she lives with that tension all the time. Instead of trying to use comedy to release that tension, Gadsby decided to find a new resolution, one that does not limit her voice, but instead gives it more power.
Conclusion

In this chapter I explored how Hannah Gadsby, in her comedy special *Nanette*, constitutes her audience to be receptive and accepting of her non-comedic material. She uses signposts, guiding her audience, lecturing on art history as a site of critique, and including non-comedic material to position her audience to be accepting of her ultimate point: that she was quitting comedy because her story was not being told properly. Additionally, I argue that Gadsby uses all four functions of rhetorical framing in this special (Entman, 1993) to ensure there are as few misinterpretations as possible.

Through her rhetorical constitution of her audience and her framing and reframing of the function of comedy, Gadsby provides a detailed exploration of the harm causes by self-deprecation and curtailing one’s full story. For Gadsby, her use of this kind of humor has led her to feel unhappy and unfulfilled in her career. As with Gadsby, for many people, research demonstrates that self-deprecation is linked to anxiety and depression (Kopala-Sibley et al., 2017; Luyten et al., 2007; Owens, 1994; Speer, 2019). More specifically, Speer (2019) found that patients of all types, including major depressive disorder, had higher levels of self-criticism than people who were not in psychotherapy. While self-criticism and self-deprecation are not the same thing, self-deprecation is inherently critical of the self, so we can make a connection between self-deprecation being self-criticism with an attempt at being funny.

The central argument of this performance is that Gadsby’s agency, as it relates to telling her life story, is limited by the genre expectations of comedy, leaving her dissatisfied with her career. For many people, feeling as though one has no control of their lives is detrimental to their mental health. As a result, gaining or reclaiming agency is an important aspect of mental health treatment (Coote & MacLeod, 2012; Linhorst et al., 2002; Ross et al., 2008). By taking back her
agency, Gadsby is finding her own way toward improving her mental health and demonstrating to the audience a better way to handle their own mental health. Furthermore, Gadsby explains to her audience that the appropriate response to the anxiety and tension that they feel is not anger, but a shared sense of vulnerability and love.

By viewing solutions to mental health in this way, Gadsby attempts to give agency to her audience, reaffirming the importance of agency for people to solve problems (Coote & MacLeod, 2012; Linhorst et al., 2002; Ross et al., 2008). Furthermore, by using a non-comedic tone, Gadsby reinforces the importance of her message: she is not using her trauma to make her audience laugh, releasing the tension of revealing the tension in the first place; rather, she forces her audience to confront the trauma, feel it, soak in it, be uncomfortable in it, to the point that there are seemingly only two ways to release it: laugh or get angry. Gadsby provides a third option: love. Gadsby inherently argues that love of the fellow human is a choice; not romantic love, but appreciation and respect for another’s humanity. If she would have presented this comedically, the message would have been lost. By being non-comedic, by using discomfort as a site of rhetoric, Gadsby succeeds in engaging in the post-comedy turn (Fox, 2018a) as a starting place. More specifically, Gadsby goes beyond the post-comedy turn to use discomfort not as a site of humor, but as a site of tension that can be resolved in ways other than humor.

She refuses to resolve the tension the audience feels, potentially leaving them unsure about how to resolve it in other ways. Gadsby’s solution allows a way out for her audience. People can understand her frustration, the tension she has felt, while also doing something about it: connecting with others. By providing these solutions, she attempts to leave her audience with the same feeling of tension that she carries with her every day while providing them a way out. This tension is perfectly balanced through Gadsby’s critiques and her ability to release small amounts of tension
throughout her special, preventing communal outrage. Gadsby recognizes her power as a speaker and understands her ethical responsibility to not create an angry audience, even though she feels justified in her anger. By using and releasing tension, Gadsby successfully embodies a more active version of the feminist killjoy perspective (Ahmed, 2010; Balkin, 2020) while also providing her audience with an alternative solution to anger: love.

While Gadsby employs a feminist killjoy perspective (Ahmed, 2010), I differ from Balkin (2020), who argues that Gadsby’s use of the killjoy frame is inconsistent because she continues to embrace comedy. Ironically, this special propelled her career to new heights, including earning several awards (AACTA.org, 2018; Emmys.com, 2019; GLAAD.org, 2018; Peabody Awards, 2018), allowing her to record a second special through Netflix titled Douglas, although her focus remains on comedy because, as Gadsby claims, “What the fuck are you expecting from this show? Because I’m sorry, if it’s more trauma, I… I am fresh out” (Parry, 2020). Even though comedy might not have been the most perfect forum for her story, she seems to have found an audience to tell it to.

This rejection of the typical comedic form is not currently understood to part of the post-comedy turn. Current literature (e.g., Fox, 2018a) on the post-comedy turn describes this form of entertainment as an alternative means of comedy, particularly in discomfort or awkwardness. While Gadsby, much like Burnham and Brennan, uses awkwardness as a means of humor, all three comedians go further by incorporating more serious non-comedic material as the central focus of the specials. Yet, despite the similarity with Burnham and Brennan, Gadsby goes further still to altogether reject the modes of comedy that Burnham and Brennan use.

This suggests that we should expand our understanding of the post-comedy turn. The concept is relatively new and little work has been done to explore the concept outside of Fox’s
(2018a) initial and tentative work. In examining Gadsby’s use of framing, I argue that we should expand the definition of post-comedy to include a literal interpretation of ‘after comedy.’ Gadsby recognizes that comedy, in its current form, is no longer viable for what she wants to accomplish, so she rejects it in the most radical way possible: within a comedy special. This repudiation is similar to the previous comedians in this sample, in that they reject comedy as a genre to present a certain message, but Gadsby rejects the contemporary form of comedy entirely.

As she identifies in her special, Gadsby has been the victim of many violent interactions, such as being raped, beaten nearly to death for flirting with a woman at a bus stop, and being sexually assaulted as a child. These experiences on their own are traumatic, but the added dimension of the internalization of low self-worth compounds Gadsby’s struggles to find herself. She discusses why she did not go to hospital after being beaten:

   And I didn’t… report that to the police, and I did not take myself to hospital, and I should have. And you know why I didn’t? It’s because I thought that was all I was worth. And that is what happens when you soak one child in shame and give permission to another to hate. (Orb & Parry, 2018)

Gadsby highlights how this goes beyond an isolated incidence of violence; this was a result of the trauma she experienced as a lesbian growing up in Tasmania, where homosexuality was considered a choice, sin, and crime (Orb & Parry, 2018; Winsor, 2016). Furthermore, by reducing her life to one not worth living, Gadsby’s fellow Tasmanians instilled in her the sense that she deserved the violence she received. With the power of trauma to affect memories (Meares, 1999), I argue that this trauma-internalization cycle becomes a trauma in itself, leading to the self-disparagement. When encountering situations that remind Gadsby of these traumatic situations, her memory, just like many others, may recall the vivid emotions felt at the time of trauma (Meares, 1999). Like
Brennan, Gadsby seemingly uses her stage to engage in a form of self-therapy, allowing herself to potentially exorcise those negative memories by sharing it with her audience.

While the self-therapy aspect of her special mirrors Brennan, Gadsby views her problems as being primarily external rather than internal. More specifically, she identifies how homophobia, sexism, misogyny, patriarchy, and society’s acceptance of them led to her trauma. Gadsby argues that her being a human did not cause her to be the victim of trauma. Instead, societal dysfunction, not only found in Tasmania but around the world, has led her and many like her to be traumatized. Whereas Brennan saw his mental health issues as mostly internal, something that could not be fixed, Gadsby argues that these problems are fixable, starting with people refusing to be participants in the causes of trauma.

Gadsby’s comedy special shares many similarities with the other modern comedians in this sample. She uses jokes to establish a structure for the show, just like Brennan. She has direct communication with her audience to help them along, just like Burnham. She engages in and goes beyond the post-comedy turn (Fox, 2018a) to use awkwardness as a site of humor, just like both Brennan and Burnham. Additionally, she expresses her ‘real’ self to her audience, breaking down some of the inherent barriers between performer and audience. Finally, Gadsby’s special has been well-received by professional critics (Berman, 2018; Donegan, 2018; Wired Staff, 2018), although amateur critics have argued that it is not a comedy special at all; instead, it is an extended TED Talk or a therapy session and therefore does not fit within the comedy genre. Interestingly, that same critique was not applied to Brennan’s stand-up special, even though Gadsby spent more time telling jokes in her special than Brennan did in his, which I argue is related to Brennan’s privileged status as a white, heteronormative male as opposed to Gadsby’s status as a non-heteronormative female.
While these specials have many things in common, there are a couple major differences: (1) Gadsby’s minoritized status/position and (2) her outright repudiation of the comedy genre. Gadsby is a white, western, middle/upper-class woman who speaks Tasmanian English. Additionally, she has been performing as a comedian for over ten years, finding a voice onstage that many have not found. While she enjoys those privileges, she is also a lesbian (although she would like to be labeled “tired”), non-heteronormative, and female, all statuses that are minoritized, particularly in her native Tasmania where homosexuality was a crime until 1997 (Winsor, 2016). Gadsby has been the victim of physical and sexual assault because of her sexuality and gender identity and continues to fight against masculine heteronormativity in her career and personal life.

While Brennan and Burnham have faced their own troubles, neither have had to deal with physical violence or a rejection of their selfhood because of how they look, act, or engage in romantic relationships. While three comedians is a small sample size, it represents a microcosm of privilege when it comes to having the safety and freedom to speak. Burnham and Brennan were both praised by fans and critics alike for their post-comedy (Fox, 2018a) material whereas Gadsby was rejected as a comedian altogether by some fans (Brennan, 2017; Burnham & Storer, 2016; First We Feast, 2019).

Secondly, Gadsby goes further than Brennan and Burnham in her non-comedic material. She does not simply step outside of comedy to present different material, she rejects comedy as a whole, arguing that it is inherently harmful for people trying to find their voice. This rejection complicates our current understanding of the post-comedy turn, and it is important to continue studying these, and other, comedians to understand how issues surrounding mental health,
depression, suicide, and physical violence are dealt with in what Gadsby argues to be an inherently unfulfilling genre such as comedy.
Chapter 6: Moving Beyond the Post-Comedy Turn

Comedy has evolved considerably since its earliest forms in ancient theaters and royal courts. While the styles, forms, and topics have changed, the primary purpose has remained the same: to make the audience laugh. However, some modern comedians have rejected this goal, favoring a stronger underlying message rather than earning the most laughs, primarily through the lens of post-comedy (Fox, 2018a). While this has been accomplished in comedies before (e.g., the episode “Sometimes you Hear the Bullet” in *M*A*S*H* and “Some of my Best Friends are Rhoda” in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*), the primary aim of these series was to remain comedic. As Jesse David Fox (2018a) highlights, “particularly dramatic episodes of [these shows] used to be noteworthy, remembered as special, rule-breaking episodes for decades after; now, there are whole comedic series that live in [non-comedic] spaces.” Post-comedy is less focused on laughter and more focused on the topic at hand, altering the landscape of the comedy genre.

While still new, the post-comedy turn has provided space for writers, producers, and performers to broaden their scope, challenging previously held notions of what was acceptable within the genre. Recent television shows, such as *Baskets* and *Broad City*, use discomfort and awkwardness as a site of humor. Modern performers, such as Marc Maron and Aparna Nancherla, use mental health as a site of humor, relying on serious issues to inform punchlines. Additionally, comedians such as Ellen DeGeneres, Drew Michael, and Wanda Sykes deconstruct expectations of comedy, including explaining the form, removing the audience, and exploring dimensions of minoritized comedians/peoples in a comedic fashion, respectively. While these methods fit within the scope of post-comedy, they are still somewhat dependent upon humorous situations to accomplish the comedic form. Similarly, post-comedy, as it is currently understood, provides an alternative location of humor, allowing consumers to laugh if they want to, but not relying upon it
to satisfy the genre. Those engaging in post-comedy still uphold the notion that seriousness and comedy can overlap. The comedians in this project, however, advance the form even further, going beyond post-comedy to make a rhetorical argument: that serious issues should be treated seriously within the genre of comedy.

Brennan, Burnham, and Gadsby have advanced the post-comedy form, rejecting the overlap of comedy and seriousness to explicitly separate the two. These comedians use humor to set up their serious argument, but they explicitly present their argument in a serious manner, attempting to limit the interpretation of their argument by their audience. Furthermore, these comedians understand that comedy and seriousness can be simultaneously presented, but they do not want the humor to undercut their argument. Instead, they use jokes to satisfy the comedic form, situating their audience to be receptive of their non-comedic argument, but they stop joking when presenting their serious argument, recognizing that humor can undercut the power of their message.

Comedy has traditionally been a form of entertainment where people, specifically comedians, mock something about themselves, the audience, or an outside factor. While the subject matter from these comedians remained focused on those three sites, they provided a purposefully non-comedic critique of them all. Furthermore, these comedians did not make light of their issues like comedians have in the past; instead, they revealed aspects about themselves in a manner that is uncommon in comedy. Even though these comedians separate comedy (re: humorous) and non-comedy, they blur the lines between the comic and tragic genres. Comedians typically create a stage persona/character which incorporate elements of themselves but add characteristics or dimensions that are not part of their real selves. While comedians differ in how much their characters and themselves overlap, such as “Moms” Mabley being a raunchy sex addict
chasing after younger men whereas the real person, Jackie, was a known lesbian (NMAAHC.si.edu, n.d.), there is typically an attempt to maintain the character onstage while leaving the real person off stage. However, with these post-comedy comedians, there seems to be a dimension of removing the mask of comedy to show their real selves, adding rhetorical support to their argument. By revealing their real selves, these comedians are demonstrating that their material, specifically around mental health, is not being used as a setup for a joke. Rather, they are showing a dimension of their real selves to show that their discussions of mental health are coming from a real place, furthering their chances to have a sympathetic audience.

By obscuring the comic/tragic divide, these comedians do not reject entire genre. The comic and tragic masks, from which I am partially drawing the metaphor of the comedic mask, have typically been shown as distinct forms of entertainment (Aristotle, 1992; Burke, 1959; Sidney, 1999, as cited in Mathur, 2007, p. 35). Plays, movies, shows, and skits have been depicted as either comic or not (inherently tragic in some capacity), and they succeed or fail within that paradigm. While engaging in a comedy special, these comedians are removing their mask entirely. However, they are not trying to change the entire perspective of the special to one of tragedy either. These comedians are arguing that there is a middle ground between comedy and tragedy, including elements of both in a comedy special. More specifically, these comedians are showing that elements of tragedy can be included in the comedic genre, blurring the delineation between the two.

By accomplishing this task, Bo Burnham, Neal Brennan, and Hannah Gadsby advance the post-comedic form. They demonstrated that the genre of comedy does not necessarily prevent opportunities to share real issues at the expense of the comedian. While Gadsby argued that the genre did just that, by presenting a non-comedic argument about the ability to share her story, and
the success of *Nanette* and *Douglas* thereafter, she helped alter the genre as a whole to be more inclusive. Additionally, by discussing personal issues onstage during a stand-up comedy special, these comedians potentially help remove stigma surrounding mental health as they reveal their traumas, depression, and dissatisfaction with aspects of their lives.

**Post-Comedy Turn and Mental Health**

In advancing how post-comedy (Fox, 2018a) operates, each comedian discusses mental health in a different way, providing a personal perspective on the impact of depression, low self-esteem, and dissatisfaction. For example, Burnham establishes early on in his special that he is unhappy, particularly with the relationship between audience and performer. More broadly, Burnham is unhappy with the pressures placed on him and his generation by performance through social media. Brennan pushes the genre further, stepping outside of the comedic genre to critique dimensions of how people understand mental health as something that is not real. Additionally, he emphasizes how his mental health has influenced his career and relationships. Finally, Gadsby explicates her dissatisfaction with the comedy genre as a whole as being unable to provide a vehicle for her to share her story. As a result, she chooses to kill the joy (Balkin, 2020) the audience should feel from the performance. An important distinction between these three comedians is in how they frame their relationship with mental health. In these examples, both Burnham and Gadsby are primarily critiquing external factors that have impacted their happiness while Brennan is exploring personal decisions and internal feelings, although he does identify his relationship with his father as an external factor that negatively influences his life.

These and other comedians provide a vehicle through which people can express concerns about mental health. With the increased focus on mental health in stand-up comedy (e.g., Maria Bamford [2017], Brennan [2017], Burnham [2016], Gadsby [2018], Marc Maron [2020], Aparna
Nancherla [2016], etc.), comedians are recognizing the importance of talking through mental health issues, engaging in a form of therapy for themselves and their audiences (Dionigi & Canestrari, 2018; MacRury, 2012, p. 187). By using comedy, a place to highlight human foibles (Burke, 1959), rhetors are trying to remove stigma surrounding mental health, specifically that it cannot be talked about seriously in a comedy special. While some are still comedic in tone, others, especially the comedians in this project, are declaring that mental health, physical safety, and social inequalities are serious issues and should be treated seriously, particularly in a space (comedy) that has been focused on causing laughter rather than leading to solutions. The post-comedy turn provides a place for rhetors to engage in these discussions in the genre of comedy, potentially removing barriers others face regarding their mental health.

Furthermore, the post-comedy turn provides a starting point for non-comedic rhetors to engage in serious discussions as well. By moving beyond the post-comedy turn comedians are declaring that mental health can be talked about in any forum, including one that has limited serious discussions to maintain its form, as in the case of Hannah Gadsby (Orb & Parry, 2018). Rhetors of all types can position discussions of mental health in a similar manner, arguing that serious issues should be talked about openly, removing the stigma associated with it. Finally, this project highlights that privilege plays a significant role in who gets to talk about mental health seriously in a comedy special. Rhetors, comedians, and rhetorical scholars can recognize this and work toward removing stigma surrounding discussions about mental health, therapy, and treatment.

As my analysis of these three comedy specials demonstrates, mental health discourse in comedy has become more than just a topic deployed for a punchline. These comedians utilize their platform to speak about mental health in a non-comedic fashion, something that had not been done
successfully in comedy before. While some others have talked about serious issues during their performances (e.g., Patton Oswalt, Brody Stevens, Wanda Sykes, Robin Williams, among others), none have focused their special around non-comedic content.

As described in chapter 2, after Oswalt’s wife, Michelle McNamara, died of an accidental overdose of sleeping medication, he presented a short segment in his Annihilation stand-up special focusing on his life as a widower. This discussion, seemingly a form of catharsis for Oswalt, seems more like a necessary talking point because of the recency of the event and his status as a celebrity. However, the rest of the special focuses on other topics, making this segment one bit in a show of many rather than a piece of a narrative that flows with the rest.

On the other hand, the three modern comedians in this analysis use their serious discussions as the central focus of the narrative of their special. For instance, Burnham finishes an evolving critique of performance and self-esteem that begins with the opening of the show and concludes in a final meta-critique of performance and self-esteem, providing an endpoint for his narrative. Additionally, Brennan uses his “emotional stuff” segments to highlight his pursuit of removing the vest of depression. He finishes his show with a long segment about his frustrating relationship with his father, which provides an element of relief, something he had not experienced through medical intervention. Although he leaves the audience with a joke, the final two “emotional stuff” segments bring closure for himself and perhaps his empathetic audience. Lastly, after using traditional forms of comedy to set up her critique, Gadsby leaves the audience with a nearly ten-minute piece about how comedy is an ill-suited genre for telling her story. She does not make a joke throughout those ten minutes, but she provides a purposeful lack of closure, a lack of release of tension, for her audience to hopefully get them to feel how she does every day.
The post-comedy turn is all about altering our currently accepted notions of comedy to include awkwardness and discomfort as a mode of humor (Fox, 2018a). In this project, my analysis supports my argument that these comedians advance the form even further as they develop a narrative within their comedy special to present a serious argument about serious problems, yet still remain within the genre of comedy. While all were praised for including serious material, one received harsh criticism from fans and fellow comedians.

One of the reasons Gadsby received such harsh critique is because the other comedians hold privileged positions and can therefore break comedy genre expectations without fear of rejection (Zinoman, 2011). Gadsby is the only non-male, non-heterosexual, and non-American performer in my sample. Some critics, including fellow comedian Bert Kreischer, argue that Gadsby’s performance was more of a TED Talk because of its focus on non-comedic material, even though the majority of the show followed the traditional format of a comedy special (First We Feast, 2019). Others argue that it was more of a one-woman show than a comedy special, something Gadsby critiques in her most recent stand-up comedy special: *Douglas* (Parry, 2020). Gadsby argues that it was whatever it needed to be; as she explains in *Douglas*, the responses to the special seem disconnected with the purpose of the show:

I got accused of doing all sorts of nefarious things in lieu of comedy. I really did. Like a monologue. What a monster, if true. A glorified TED Talk. Uh-oh. A one-woman show. A lecture. A fucking lecture. Can you believe that one? The cheek of that one. A lecture. *Nanette* was not a fucking lecture. It wasn’t a monologue either. It wasn’t like I was sitting on a stool like a stunned mullet in a spotlight. It wasn’t a fucking monologue. And a glorified TED Talk? Why do they need glorifying? They are fine. And a one-woman show? No shit, Sherlock! And it wasn’t a fucking lecture. You want a lecture? I’ll give you a
fucking lecture. This is a lecture! [Proceeds to lecture about the Renaissance Era] (Parry, 2020)

Here Gadsby highlights how people who critique her show, while legitimate in their right to engage in critique, missed the point. Inherently she is performing a one-woman show by nature of it being one woman performing in a show. Additionally, she points out the ignorance of the critique of it being a monologue, which most comedy specials are anyway. As she suggests, there is an added layer of critique here that she receives that other comedians do not.

Within the context of comedy, Gadsby, while white and from a western country, is minoritized in her gender and sexual orientation. While she does not identify her minoritized status explicitly, the critiques she received, particularly from non-female comedians like Kreischer (First We Feast, 2019), emphasize that she is limited in what she can do onstage whereas her contemporaries, particularly Brennan, did not receive the same response, even though he had much longer segments that were non-comedic in tone. I will discuss privilege in more detail below.

Using the Self for Comedy

Comedians have long used themselves as a site of comedic material, including their bodies (e.g., Louie Anderson, Hannibal Buress, Jim Gaffigan, and Haruna Kondo), things that happen to them (e.g., John Pinette, Amy Schumer, and Taylor Tomlinson), and their childhoods (e.g., Ryan Hamilton and Mo Amer). Additionally, comedians have used tragic or sad aspects of their lives as sites of comedy as well, including failed romantic relationships (e.g., Hasan Minhaj, Chris Rock, and Tomlinson), sibling relationships (e.g., Anderson, Kevin Hart, and Katharine Ryan), and issues related to health (e.g., Adam Ferrara, John Mulaney, and Pinette). Comedy is a vehicle for many to share their stories, providing a sense of catharsis and laughter at aspects of comedians’ lives that might not have been funny in the first place. Or, as DeGeneres essentially puts it, comedy is a
place to get therapeutic treatment but, instead of paying for it, the audience pays you (Gallen, 2003).

Mocking oneself is one of the easiest ways to find humor; very rarely will someone get offended at a joke where the comedian themselves is the site of comedy. By mocking one’s body, comedians can find a sense of connection with their audience because many of them also deal with the expectation of meeting certain societal norms for their bodies, most of which are unrealistic, such as the thin ideal on social media (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2020), expectations of the ideal body for children (Gao et al., 2020), and body dissatisfaction and self-esteem (Taniguchi & Hubbard, 2020). Additionally, many audience members have engaged in romantic relationships that did not end well, so making light of those interactions, like Minhaj did with a friend in high school (Storer, 2017), provides a way for him and his audience to connect on something many share. This shared perspective is helpful when talking about mental health as well because it provides a sense of commonality, further removing stigma surrounding discussions of mental health.

One of the most consistent aspects of mental health treatment is to allow patients to gain a sense of agency, whether that is in their mental health treatment (Coote & MacLeod, 2012; Linhorst et al., 2002) or in talking about their issues overall (Ross et al., 2008). By having a stage, both literally and figuratively, to speak on their issues with mental health, these comedians took advantage of their agency to speak. While their issues with mental health had clearly been developing throughout their lives and/or careers, the topic did not come up much in previous performances in a serious manner.\footnote{Burnham, in what, did have a comedic song/bit about how his left brain and right brain failed to keep him happy through normal means and instead looked toward comedy to find happiness, but the bit remained funny in tone.}
As comedians have continued to use themselves, the audience, and the other as sites of comedy, it is not a radical shift to use tragic events as a site of comedy as well. Comedians such as Amer, DeRay Davis, Hart, Minhaj, Richard Pryor, Rock, and Wanda Sykes have used dimensions of race, particularly racism, as a place of mockery. This strategy provides a sense of connection, as well as a welcoming space, to share traumas and experiences regarding racism and other forms of minoritization. Similarly, DeGeneres, Iliza Schlesinger, Schumer, Tomlinson, and Ali Wong have mocked aspects of gender to highlight sexism and the double bind many women find themselves in. Comedy provides a place for critique that is not available in other places; while the United States is founded on the ideal of free speech, outwardly mocking someone or something else can be viewed as bullying if the subject of the mockery is not aware that it is being used comedically. However, as we have seen with Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart leading the charge on trusting comedians more than journalists (White, 2016), comedians can provide a humorous perspective that is not available to traditional news sources.

Because comedians can provide a twist to the interpretation of events, particularly leaders in politics, celebrities, and popular culture icons, they can do the same for themselves. That is why is it sometimes difficult to figure out if a comedian is telling the truth but joking about it, telling a lie and passing it off as a joke, or some combination of the two. The comedians in this sample are seemingly telling the truth about themselves when presenting non-comedic material. Because the goal of comedy is to make the audience laugh, it seems counterintuitive for Brennan to spend a third of his special being purposefully not funny, Gadsby railing against the genre of comedy with no punchline, or Burnham singing an intimate song about his unhappiness to the audience watching the recording, even within the scope of post-comedy. By understanding these bits as a means of removing the mask of comedy to show the real performer underneath, we can view comedians not
just as people who view the world in a funny way, but as people who are also affected by the negative aspects of our world.

As explained by Kenneth Burke (1959), comedy is a unique vehicle for demonstrating the inherent fallibility of humans. In comparison, tragedy is a genre of entertainment that puts humans, depicted in ways where they are unaware of their tragic flaws, against outside forces, usually resulting in negative results (Burke, 1959). The post-comedy turn (Fox, 2018a) puts these two together; comedians understand their flaws, fulfilling the comedic aspect of a Burkean understanding of drama, but they are fighting a losing battle, one that cannot be overcome without society becoming aware of its tragic faults. These comedians, by treating their mental health as a serious issue, are rhetorically placing their audience in a position to fix these flaws, something that blends the two genres.

By engaging in and going beyond the post-comedy turn, these comedians are able to use the awkwardness and discomfort of talking about mental health, something that is still stigmatized in public discourse (Bharadwaj, Pai, & Suziedelyte, 2017; Griffiths, Christensen, & Jorm, 2008; Schwenk, Davis, & Wimsatt, 2010). Furthermore, these comedians maintain agency over their mental health, something that is important in treatment (Coote & MacLeod, 2012; Linhorst et al., 2002). Additionally, inherent in each of these performers is the recognition of the importance of talking through issues within a talk therapy paradigm (Barth, 2010; Gavin, 2019). This recognition leads to an understanding that these comedians have, most likely, engaged in talk therapy as a form of treatment or have at least researched the effects of talk therapy. Either way, access to knowledge about talk therapy represents a level of privilege.
Privilege in Society leads to Privilege in Comedy

While these comedians are doing something different in their specials by incorporating non-comedic material to reveal their struggles with mental health, they are in privileged positions to do so, having “[u]nearned advantages that are highly valued but restricted to certain groups” (NASP, 2017, p. 1). Other comedians, such as Buress, Chappelle, Sykes, and many others have provided serious critiques of power differentials in society. However, while all of these comedians are able to use their voice onstage, the intersection of dimensions of subjugation, such as race, class, and gender (Crenshaw, 1989) limits their ability speak out against the genre as a whole. Similarly, many people of minoritized positions deal with stigma, wherein they are socially pressured to not reveal certain aspects of themselves, including their behavior, for fear of social sanction or physical harm (Bharadwaj, Pai, & Suziedelyte, 2017; Goffman, 1963; Henderson & Gronholm, 2018). With these overlapping constraints, many people of minoritized statuses are restricted from engaging in post-comedy.

Furthermore, it is important to realize that the people who have critiqued the genre, specifically the writers of these shows, have the opportunity to provide material on these topics because they are in an advantaged position; they have a stage on which to provide a critique. Similarly, the comedians in my sample have many privileges that allow them to speak on these issues, which are not available to many others. These comedians embody many of those privileges, including being white, English-speaking, able-bodied, and middle/upper-class, things many people do not embody in their struggles for equality, equity, and opportunities to describe those struggles. While each comedian has worked hard in their careers for many years, they are still advantaged when given a voice and a platform from which to speak.
Brennan, Burnham, and Gadsby are arguing for action; they are looking for their audience to do something about societal ills, particularly about mental health. Similarly, they are looking for ways to resolve their issues with mental health. Once again, privilege plays a part here. Two of these comedians can personally do something about the causes of their poor mental health. Burnham can stop being a performer, which in turn will solve the cause of his poor mental health, at least according to how he framed it. Brennan can continue to seek treatment, including talk therapy, and continue to confront his mental health problems. It is unlikely that these solutions will remove all mental health problems for these performers, but the issues they identified can be addressed by themselves as individuals. That avenue is not available to Gadsby. She argues that her pain, suffering, and abuse are not things that she can fix or address on her own. Regardless of anything she will do in her life, she will always be a survivor of rape, sexual assault, and gendered violence. While she can also seek mental health treatment, she cannot fix sexism, hatred, or ignorance on her own. Instead, she must depend on others to work with her. This reifies dimensions of privilege as well, deconstructing the notion that everyone has the same opportunities to solve their problems by personal agency, particularly through the “bootstrap” myth (Blacksher & Valles, 2021; Watkins-Hayes, 2009), when those in minoritized positions are prevented from having the resources to do so because of systemic and institutional problems, such as those identified by Gadsby.

Additionally, the stigma of talking about mental health does not affect these comedians as much as it does people who are minoritized (Bodnar-Deren et al., 2017; Lipson et al., 2018). The ability to speak in a venue where the attention is necessarily on you as the rhetor allows these comedians to engage in conversations relating to mental health. While serious arguments about
mental health are new in the comedic genre, the comedians in this sample are able to talk about them because of their privileges.

Comedy has progressed to be more inclusive, but it still limits who is allowed to speak on which topics. For example, when George Carlin critiqued aspects of censorship, he was widely acclaimed for doing so, although censors reacted negatively. However, when Gadsby critiqued comedy, she was criticized by both fellow comedians (e.g., Bert Kreischer [First We Feast, 2019]) and fans, saying her special was more of a motivational speech than a comedy performance. While these differences in reactions are influenced by the culture of the era, they still reflect consistent dimensions of privilege. Carlin was a white heteronormative man critiquing strict social censorship whereas Gadsby is a non-heteronormative woman critiquing society’s acceptance of perpetrators of sexual abuse, particularly those whose reputations and status are ingrained in our history, such as Bill Cosby and Pablo Picasso. Additionally, other comedians, such as Kondo and Schumer, have been pigeon-holed into being female comedians who only focus on female issues, whereas male comedians are not labeled the same way. Similarly, comedians like Buress and Chappelle have been described in terms of being African American comedians focusing on issues of race, whereas white comedians are not labeled as white focusing on white issues. For comedians who are minoritized, finding equal footing to provide a critique of social ills remains a challenge.

Additionally, the genre of comedy still faces issues of sexism, particularly the view that women are not as funny as men (Congreve, 1695; Hitchens, 2007; Walker, 1988). While this stereotype has broadly been rebuked by comedians, there are still more male comedians than females who have achieved widespread success in the last three years. According to Forbes, only one female comedian, Schumer, has cracked the top ten highest paid comedians between 2017 and 2019, reaching number five in 2017 (Berg, 2017) and number seven in 2019 (Shapiro, 2019). She
did not make the list in 2018 (Cuccinello, 2018). While formal barriers to women in comedy in western countries may no longer exist, informal perceptions of women remain.

Struggling against privilege remains an issue when engaging in discussions about mental health. Communities who are minoritized, specifically non-white, non-English-speaking, non-western, non-able-bodied, non-heteronormative non-males, face several factors inhibiting those discussions (Crenshaw, 1989). Communities who are minoritized are not only limited in access to mental health treatment, but they are also more likely to face stigma when just talking about it in their communities (Bodnar-Deren et al., 2017; Lipson et al., 2018). While the comedians in this sample are not overcoming those barriers, they are taking a step toward broader conversations about mental health by treating them seriously in their comedy specials.

**Limitations and Future Research**

This project focused on three comedians, all performing between 2016 and 2018. While they differed in their approach and content, all three were white from English-speaking countries. Additionally, only Gadsby was non-male, non-heteronormative, and non-heterosexual. Future research should include more comedians from different backgrounds, specifically gender and race. By including more comedians, future research can understand how comedians of all backgrounds discuss mental health and other serious issues within the comedy genre, potentially through the post-comedy lens (Fox, 2018a).

Moreover, three examples, while indicating a pattern, do not establish a trend. Jesse David Fox (2018a) identified a shift in the locus of comedy, particularly in a place of awkwardness or discomfort, that has gained popularity in the last ten years. However, it is unclear whether this is truly a shift or a momentary aberration of audience preference. Furthermore, the comedians identified specifically as engaging in the post-comedy turn, Louie C.K., Buress, Burnham, Gadsby,
Drew Michael, and Stewart, do not all have the same post-comedy style. Buress follows many traditional elements of comedy by trying to make people laugh. Likewise, Stewart provides political commentary in a funny way. And perceptions of C.K.’s comedy, while different, have been changed drastically after he engaged in sexual misconduct. These comedians’ material might just represent a momentary shift in preference based on the Millennial generation’s penchant for critique. Future research should further investigate this trend to see if post-comedy represents a long-lasting shift in comedy or if it was a momentary aberration.

A third limitation of this study is its dependence on Netflix. While Netflix has become a site for comedians to find a national audience like never before, it still is a form of media focused on profit. The owners of Netflix are not going to produce, publish, or advertise a special that they do not think will make them money. Similarly, there are thousands of comedians who will never have their material published on Netflix. Being published on Netflix is itself a dimension of privilege. While these comedians have certainly worked hard to achieve enough success to have a special recorded, they were still given opportunities that many others were not. Of the 158 comedy specials Netflix published between 2017 and 2019, 111 were published in English, 27 in Spanish, six in Portuguese, five in French, four in Italian, three in Korean, and one in each Arabic and German. While there is some diversity in the languages being spoken in these specials, they are still predominantly languages spoken in western countries. Although this project analyzed comedy specials that achieved widespread acclaim through Netflix, future research should analyze the work of comedians who have not achieved notoriety in the US, particularly if they are in minoritized communities and presenting non-comedic material.

A final limitation rests on the method itself. Rhetoric provides many opportunities to explore the ways in which rhetors position their language, audience, and message. More
Specifically, the three broad theoretical perspectives employed in this project allow for a lens through which we can understand post-comedy: constitutive rhetoric helps understand how rhetors shape their audience, in this case to be receptive to their non-comedic message; framing helps understand how rhetors understand and share their worldview; and frame shifting helps us understand how rhetors alter their frames, as well as their audience’s, to provide a different perspective on their topic. However, rhetoric is limited in that it does not investigate the motivations, thoughts, or beliefs of the rhetor outside of what they share. While the comedians in this project tell us so much about what they are doing and why, including interviews and research on the comedians themselves outside of their specials, I cannot make a definitive claim about their motivations, true beliefs, or if this non-comedic material represents their ‘real’ selves. While I argue they share their real selves, this claim is necessarily qualified based on the methodology. Future research can supplement my findings by investigating through a social scientific lens, such as interviews about this argument with the comedians themselves.

**Blurring the Lines between Comedy and Non-Comedy**

These comedians are real people, not just characters to laugh at. All recognize that mental health should not be treated lightly. Instead, it needs to be treated seriously, even by professional joke-tellers. They are reinforcing the notion that comedians attempt to get their audience to see from their worldview, if even for a moment. By showing their audience that the topic of mental health should be treated seriously, these comedians are hoping that their mental health is also treated seriously.

Post-comedy (Fox, 2018a), in its current understanding, is a place of humor that differs from what has been humorous in the past. Additionally, it is a place where critique becomes more palatable, and therefore more powerful, because it does not try to pass itself off as being objective
(Fox, 2018). However, it still assumes a comedic perspective, wherein the goal is to be humorous, regardless of if people laugh or not. I argue that the post-comedy turn is a paradigm that provides a starting place for comedians to present non-comedic material, while still fitting within the comedic genre. Furthermore, I argue that an addition to the post-comedy turn will provide a perspective on comedy that allows these serious discussions to take place while still remaining comedic overall.

Bo Burnham, Neal Brennan, and Hannah Gadsby have all engaged in and gone beyond the post-comedy turn because they have refused the traditional expectation of being funny for part of their performance. I argue that they also engage in an added dimension to the post-comedy turn, wherein they use discomfort or awkwardness about talking about serious issues in public while remaining in the comedic genre. By accepting non-comedic material as part of the comedic genre, comedians can improve on the post-comedy genre, presenting important material, positions, and arguments without the expectation of objectivity, while also providing serious readings of situations as well.

Studying post-comedy provides a means through which communication, social work, psychology, psychiatry, and other scholars interpret, evaluate, and apply methods of discussing mental health with their stakeholders. Traditionally comedy has been a place solely focused on making the audience laugh, sometimes at the expense of others (Lintott, 2016). As Gadsby argues, this paradigm is inherently harmful to the comedian, particularly if they are already harmed through minoritization, marginalization, and subjugation (Orb & Parry, 2018). Furthermore, rhetoricians can build on the understanding of the different methods rhetors use to present a message, including being serious within the realm of comedy, which was not an acceptable method
previous to the post-comedy turn. This project is a first step toward filling the current gap in research on post-comedy and mental health.

Indeed, serious discussions about mental health have become more prevalent since Burnham published his special in 2016. Just in the last year, prominent athletes like Naomi Osaka at the French Open for tennis (Osaka, 2021) and Simone Biles in the Tokyo Olympics (Park, 2021) have withdrawn from their respective athletic competitions to focus on their mental health. Some recent television shows have focused primarily on the mental health, including *Ted Lasso* (Hunt et al., 2020-2022) and *Atypical* (Gordon et al., 2017-2021). In addition to other comedians and actors talking about mental health (Bernstein, Sun, & Somashekhar, 2014; Fink, Santaella-Tenorio, & Keyes, 2018; Genzlinger, 2019; Horton, 2019), serious public discourse has become more normalized than ever before, allowing for peoples of all backgrounds to explore their mental health and remove some of the stigma associated with it.

Instead of viewing these non-funny bits as failing within the comedy genre, we can view their merits based on the message rather than on how much we laugh at them. Similarly, by altering the paradigm of the comedic genre, we can be more inclusive of serious critiques of society, particularly racism, xenophobia, sexism, ageism, and other social ills that people in the United States face. By being inclusive of these perspectives, comedy can connect back to the original understanding of the comedic form, that of understanding our faults while still trying to succeed. Instead of seeing these faults as tragic flaws that cannot be changed, viewing them through the comedic, as well as post-comedic, paradigm can help us move forward and fix those faults. By becoming more inclusive of serious comment, we can also be more inclusive of minoritized voices, something that, as Gadsby critiques in her special, is a major fault of the comedic genre. While no paradigm can fix all the world’s problems, perhaps engaging in and going beyond the post-comedy
turn will help us connect traditional forms of comedy with legitimate social critique in a serious manner, helping us to move forward as a society to solve our problems rather than just mock them.
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ABSTRACT

REMOVING THE MASK OF COMEDY TO REVEAL THE PERSON BENEATH: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF HOW THREE COMEDIANS ENGAGE IN, AND GO BEYOND, THE POST-COMEDY TURN

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From court jesters to lounge performers, the ‘Chitlin’ Circuit’ to vaudeville, radio to Netflix, the goal of comedy has been the same: use a comic frame to make the audience laugh. However, some modern comedians have altered that paradigm, including purposefully non-comedic material in their stand-up specials. While other comedians have done this before, they did so as an addendum to the narrative of their special, not as an integral part of that narrative. In this project, I engaged in a rhetorical analysis of three modern comedians, through the lens of humor theory, as they included purposefully non-comedic material, engaging in, and going beyond, the post-comedy turn (Fox, 2018). I found that these comedians were able to find success because of the confluence of many factors, specifically the development of the comedic genre, the acceptance of discussions on mental health, and, most importantly, their privileged statuses.
Steve Ingham began his academic career as a mentee of Professor Brittany Collins at Saginaw Valley State University. After working with fellow students and professors and graduating with a bachelor’s degree from SVSU, Steve earned his master’s degree in communication at the University of Cincinnati, with the support from his committee, including Drs. Nancy Jennings, Melissa Lewis Hobart, and John Lynch. With this dissertation, Steve earned his Ph.D. from Wayne State University with a focus on rhetoric and comedy, with the support from his committee and mentors, including Drs. Kelly Young, Stine Eckert, Anita Mixon, Janine Lanza, Fred Vultee, and Donyale Padgett. Steve continues his research on masculinity, representation, gender ideology, rhetoric, and power.