After *Nanette*:
Hannah Gadsby's Comedic Accountability

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ABSTRACT

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Ethics in comedy is a topic that is particularly fraught with tension in contemporary discourse, which often revolves around questions of what is "off-limits" or whether a joke "punches up" or "punches down." Hannah Gadsby's comedy specials, *Nanette* and *Douglas* deal directly with this tension and, rather than offering neat resolution, Gadsby suspends this tension and, I argue, transforms it into a productive form of uncertainty. While several authors in feminist humour studies have already explored Gadsby's contributions to feminist comedy, my contribution to this body of work pays particular attention to the formal qualities of her stand-up through examining her metanarrative technique. By introducing a metanarrative, self-critiquing element to her stand-up specials, Gadsby's work points toward an ethic of storytelling which pushes up against the limits of representation and embraces the ambiguous territory of misunderstanding and misrepresentation. My analysis borrows critical frameworks from Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Ahmed's work on the circulation of affect and the feminist killjoy, and Halberstam's work on failure and refusal, among other sources, to put Gadsby in conversation with a canon of contemporary feminist philosophy and ultimately elevate humour as a mode of storytelling that can allow for the ambiguities and anxieties that are inherent to a relational mode of ethics.

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1. Introduction

In her 2020 Netflix stand-up performance, *Douglas*, Hannah Gadby includes an art history lecture as part of her set, which, she explains, is "exactly what [her] haters accuse [her] of doing." The surprise twist she offers is that "it's fucking funny" (00:08:22). Indeed, despite the playfulness of the form, Gadsby's style of humour is didactic. The metacomedic critique delivered through *Nanette*, her earlier comedy special, links cruel laughter to the misogynistic, homophobic violence that she has encountered throughout her life, thereby problematizing the form and questioning the usefulness of the genre as a vehicle for marginalized voices. To read Gadsby's critique as a simple dismissal of comedy, however, is to overlook the philosophical complexity of her work. This paper will examine Gadsby alongside a number of contemporary queer and feminist theorists to examine the subtle yet subversive ways that Gadsby recuperates the genre of stand-up comedy as a mode of narrative that welcomes self-reflection and ambivalence and moves towards and emergent model of accountability as narrative, or a literal "account" for multiple perspectives, as developed in *Douglas*.

Nanette has received a great deal of scholarly attention, and it is no wonder why, given how Gadsby's style of critique is very attuned to the zeitgeist of feminist humour studies. In 2017, Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai write:

> Comedy's pleasure comes in part from its ability to dispel anxiety, as so many of its theoreticians have noted, but it doesn't simply do that. As both an aesthetic mode and a form of life, its action just as likely produces anxiety: risking transgression, flirting with displeasure, or just confusing things in a way that both intensifies and impedes the pleasure. Comedy has issues. (234)

This concern is mirrored in the critique that Gadsby poses in *Nanette*, which has been a fruitful site of analysis for feminist humour theorists, particularly Gadsby's cathartic outpouring of emotion which is shocking not only in content, but in form, due to its deviation from generic conventions. *Douglas*, released on the same platform two years after *Nanette*, has received significantly less critical attention. While Gadsby rejects comedy on ethical grounds in *Nanette* for the dearth of accountability in the genre, she makes a return to the comedic form in *Douglas*. My research intends to trace how *Nanette*'s project of undoing comedy foregrounds its rebuilding in *Douglas* through metanarrative technique, which, according to my reading, offers an intervention to *Nanette*'s ethical concerns with the genre of comedy. From the marginal position of her queer identity, Gadsby centers the importance of accountability in comic performance and the limits of the joke's formal qualities to serve this purpose. However, I will argue that, due to the formal representational limitations of both the joke *and* the story, individualistic models of personal accountability fall flat, and risk reproducing the single-perspective nature of hegemony. *Douglas* carries forward the project of accountability started in *Nanette* not by offering resolution by way of a quick fix of the comedic form, but rather by using metanarrative tactics to make visible the ineffable gaps between representation and reality, and transforming these gaps into ambivalently productive sites that negate any static notion of selfhood. By laying bare the constructed nature of subjecthood, Gadsby also gestures towards all that is unknown and unfamiliar to the subject, and suggests that accountability must account for what is not accountable. In other words, Gadsby's narrative form favours a position of willingness to learn.

The argument of this paper is made in three parts. First, I put forth my own analysis of *Nanette* and the issues it raises with comedy. Given Gadsby's focus on tension, I turn to relief

theory, a classic camp within humour studies. However, by putting relief theory in conversation with affect theory, I, along with Gadsby, scrutinize the desirability of group "relief" and the relational nature of tension. Throughout this section, I rely heavily on Sarah Ahmed's work, as her figure of the feminist killjoy is central to my argument about refusal as a social (and antisocial) responsibility for Gadsby, even as she refuses responsibility for the tension that she is expected to relieve. Gadsby's rhetorical moves in *Douglas* necessarily entangle comedy with the difficult notion of accountability.

Next, I extend Gadsby's critique of comedy to the narrative form itself. While Gadsby's telling of her story is necessary for her sense of self, it is also necessarily incomplete, and thus limited in its relational capabilities. Following Judith Butler's lead in focusing on the double and intrinsically linked meanings of "account" – referring both to responsibility and self-narrativization – I highlight the contradictions that arise between identity and representation. While authenticity is often celebrated in comedy, I argue that the illusion of immediacy in the trope of authenticity erases the ideological underpinnings that inform how narrative is constructed.

My final section, after outlining the ways that relationality complicate the possibility of a full, authentic account of the self, finally recuperates the force of this relationality in a multi-perspective model of community accountability by analyzing how Gadsby engages with her audience. While I have thus far deconstructed and problematized the idea of individual accountability, the act of mutual witnessing between Gadsby and her audience is what produces the impact of her metanarrative style. The very gaze for which she performs her identity also generatively unravels it as her account of herself bumps up against the limits of representation. Building on Butler's ethics of accountability in conversation with Jack Halberstam's writing on

queer failure, I argue that to be *accountable enough* within comedy is to account for what cannot be perfectly, accurately, or sufficiently accounted for.

2. *Nanette*, Tension, and Comic Relief

One of the most salient themes in *Nanette* is a critique of the comedic genre which, through Gadsby's emphasis on tension, tacitly invokes a form of relief theory that ultimately, due to her precarious social identity, is enmeshed with a classical superiority theory, where her inferior social status is reinforced (Willet & Willet 5). Relief theory emerged in the eighteenth century and underwent various revisions throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries according to advancements in the fields of biology and psychology, but at the center of the theory remains the idea that laughter's physiological function is to provide some sort of release of tension or nervous energy (Morreall). Gadsby alludes to the purported benefits of laughter, claiming that:

> 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. It's even better to laugh with other people. When you laugh, in a room full of people, when you share a laugh, you will release more tension because laughter is infectious. You stand to release more tension when you laugh with other people than you would if you laugh alone. Mainly because when you laugh alone, that's mental illness and that's a different kind of tension. Laughter doesn't help. Trust me. Tension isolates us. And laughter connects us. Good result. Good on me. What a guy. What a guy. I'm basically Mother Teresa. But just like Mother Teresa… my methods are not exactly charitable. (*Nanette* 00:29:00)

Despite the charitable analysis of laughter that Gadsby initially offers, she goes on to explain why that method does not hold in the context of her comedy, which, according to her, follows the cycle of an abusive relationship: the tension that her comedy dispels is "artificially inseminated," and so the relief that the audience experiences at the joke's punchline is, in this analogy, akin to an abuser's gesture of reconciliation after a violent outburst. In the context of the performance, which deals with Gadsby's real, lived experiences of sexist, homophobic violence, this analogy carries particular weight, especially as she follows up by declaring, for the second time during the act, that she must quit comedy. Gadsby here builds a sense of accountability into her performance, where she claims responsibility for manipulating the emotions of her audience, before asking the same of the men ("especially the straight white men") in the audience and take responsibility for the tension created by their own misogyny, and to learn how to "deal with [their] own tension without violence" (01:01:44). Gadsby's metacomedic style in instructive, as she performs on stage a metacritique of her own comedy which models the type of reflection that she demands of those in power – as Gadsby puts it herself as the show nears its close, "[she] takes [her] freedom of speech as a responsibility" (01:06:50).

Even as Gadsby takes this accountability, however, her account of this tension is complicated – the source of tension she is grappling with is politicized along axes of power and normativity. While Gadsby takes responsibility for the tension that she causes through her comedy, she in fact righteously refuses to take individual responsibility for the tension caused by her difference. In *Nanette's* climax, she recounts multiple, formative instances of sexual and physical assault from her childhood and young adulthood to illustrate the tendency for society to punish difference through violence, which has filled her whole life with tension displaced from the relational, affective atmosphere to the constructed, individual site of difference. "And this

tension," Gadsby tells her viewers, "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 the time, because it is dangerous to be different" (01:00:16). In an interview, Gadsby attributes her comedic talent to her difference, not just in her sexuality and gender presentation, but also in her neurodivergence. Gadsby states:

> I *am* the tension. My actual presence has always caused tension. I've never done things right […] and when you don't do things right, you cause tension, so I learned how to diffuse that diffuse that tension that I myself created […] so, that natural ability that I had as soon as I walked on stage was really grafted through a life of being a presence that was really off-putting to people. (Illing 01:4:42-01:5:31)

Despite Gadsby's claim that she is the creator of the tension that she brings to her social environment and constantly diffuses, her language of her ability to control the tension being "grafted" onto her by circumstance suggests a more complex story of the interplay between Gadsby herself and her environment. Ahmed writes that when we describe an atmosphere as tense, we need also to explain the cause of the tension – often produced by difference. Upon identifying someone or something that sufficiently embodies otherness, tension can be ascribed to that body (and others like it) so that "shared feelings are directed toward that cause" (*Cultural Politics* 227). Within the narrative produced by these shared feelings, Gadsby's subjecthood is authored by others as the source of tension.

Affects, such as tension and anxiety, according to Ahmed, do not come from the "inside" of a subject, making their way outward to others. Rather, subjects and the surfaces/boundaries that separate them are shaped through our emotional responses (10). Ahmed's account of tension suggests that Gadsby has been interpellated as the source of tension, constructed as an "affect

alien," standing in the way of other's happiness, and bearing the burden of responsibility for negative affects felt by those who are accustomed to certain norms. While Gadsby does provide her viewers with plenty of laugh-worthy jokes throughout much of her performance in *Nanette*, the show has nonetheless been labelled by many as "anti-comedy" and "post-comedy" (Guiffre 29). Gadsby not only breaks away from comedy conventions, but also breaks away from gendered and ableist conventions in her refusal to balance and dissipate the tension in the room. While comedy is not traditionally considered part of women's work, Berlant and Ngai note that it is a form of affective labour, much like caregiving, in that "the demand for play and fun as good and necessary for social membership is everywhere inflecting what was once called alienation" (237). As a lesbian, Gadsby neglects her role as a woman to provide affective and reproductive labour in the nuclear family – as Halberstam states, "[*l*]*esbian* is irrevocably tied to failure in all kinds of ways" and function as "the bearers of the failure of all desire" in her inability to "embody the connections between production and reproduction" (94-95). By degrading herself through the use of lesbian jokes, comedy could function as a means to simultaneously appeal to an imagined homophobic audience and reinforce her position as a social failure by disguising the inherent violence of misogyny and homophobia, all in an effort to make as this potential audience comfortable and to relieve them from the emotional work of tolerating difference. Gadsby's anticomedic refusal to cushion her rage with punchlines that diminish the traumatic nature of her story of assault, despite her initial claims to cause tension, doubles down on her status as a failure, juxtaposing her failure as a woman with her failure as a comic.

For Ahmed, the feminist killjoy emerges in juxtaposition to the "happy housewife," whose happiness is contingent on being good at being a housewife and cultivating her husband's happiness (paradoxically at the expense of her own) (*Promise of Happiness* 52-53). Hennefeld

aptly identifies Gadsby as a killjoy and borrows Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism," a term she applies to "one's investment in an outcome that forbodes increasingly diminishing returns" ("Affect Theory in the Throat of Laughter" 134). Despite a lifetime of attempting to ease tension, Gadsby's alienation persisted, for even her very *existence* as a lesbian, especially a butch one who is perceived as "incorrectly female" marks her as a killjoy in advance of any efforts she may make to bridge the gap of difference by laughing along with lesbian jokes (*Nanette* 01:00:12). Billig questions contemporary "common sense" beliefs about the goodness of "good" humour, pointing towards a degree of self-deception that straightforward beliefs about laughter as good facilitate when we hide a "shameful, darker side" to the laughter that one might share with others because of this belief in a collective good (11). Billig's *Laughter and Ridicule* examines the social function of laughter as a disciplinary tool that governs social life. Gadsby echoes this theory in her exploration of self-deprecatory humour, stating that "it's not humility, it's humiliation. I put myself down in order to seek permission to speak. And I simply will not do that anymore – not to myself or anybody who identifies with me" (*Nanette* 00:18:00). By "seeking permission to speak" through self-deprecation, the jokes that Gadsby refers to reinforce social hierarchies that continually refuse marginalized voices that very permission, ironically seeking acceptance into a dominant group by reaffirming their dominance and her subjugation, demonstrating a form of false consciousness behind one training themselves to "take a joke" for the sake of sociality and the ostensible greater good of shared laughter. The style of self-deprecating humour that Gadsby critiques attempts to bridge the gap of difference between "normal" and "not-normal" by aiding in the construction of difference and ensuring that those deemed normal suffer no discomfort due to their own casual bigotry. By killing joy/laughter,

Gadsby rejects the need to "seek permission" or gain approval, even if that means failing in her role to be funny and joyful.

> Gadsby points out the catch-22 of trying to position oneself as a good-humoured lesbian:
>
> 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. (00:15:10)

Ahmed similarly describes this type of coerced laughter and the feeling of alienation that comes from refusing to laugh at a joke that one finds offensive – to lose one's "good cheer" in such a situation is to become "affectively 'out of tune' with others" and to "withdraw from a bodily intimacy" (*Cultural Politics* 223). Gadsby's divestment from the cruel optimism of comedy and positivist outlooks on laughter is a refusal to redirect the discomfort of this loss of attunement towards herself in the form of shame, and rather allows the discomfort/tension to circulate freely. Gadsby undermines assumptions that laughter and humour are innately good and productive for sociality by rejecting the false promise that she could find her own happiness through ridiculing herself in an effort to produce joy for others. Rather than taking responsibility for the comfort and happiness of those who wish to take joy in her degradation, Gadsby instead proposes that her social responsibility is to *kill* that joy.

Billig offers an account of "unlaughter" as the rhetorical opposite of "laughter" in the context of imposing social discipline – more than simply describing any time when one is not laughing, unlaughter is a "display of not laughing when laughter might otherwise be expected, hoped for or demanded," in order to express disagreement of disapproval towards the comic

(192). Unlaughter complements Ahmed's figure of the feminist killjoy insofar as the killjoy refuses to find joy or laughter in jokes intended to harm – even when this disciplinary laughter is often claimed to be "teasing" and "goodhearted" (197). However, in the context of the feminist killjoy, I would argue that the disciplinary power of unlaughter is limited by the underlying structures of social power due to the consequence of alienation that results from the breaking of intimacy when the feminist killjoy as the only one to express dissent in a group of laughing subjects. The power of the laughing crowd is further complicated, as Ahmed points out, by misguided assumptions that one can know what another is feeling:

> How many times have I sunk desperately into my chair when that laughter has been expressed at points I find far from amusing! We do not always notice when others sink. One can feel unjustly interpellated in such occasions: the gestures of discomfort and alienation do not register; they do not affect the collective impression made by the laughter. […] Alien bodies who do share the affective direction simply disappear from such a viewing point. We cannot even assume that those who appear directed 'in the right way' feel the same way about the direction they are facing. (*Promise of Happiness* 42-43)

As the comic, Gadsby's critique of offensive, homophobic jokes embedded into her act, even as she sprinkles it with these jokes in various forms, instructs the audience *not* to find them funny, defying the expectation that the comic has of the audience. When references to covert violence change to an overt account of physical violence, Gadsby retracts the offer of a punchline that a comedy show promises, and harnesses a more collective form of unlaughter that subverts assumptions of that laughter is a sign of approval or agreement while unlaughter is a tool to shame or discipline the comic. While one does tend to expect laughter at a comedy show, this mode of unlaughter is not intended to discipline the comic, but rather it is a solidaric silence.

Gadsby does not perform as good-humoured in order to disprove the myth of lesbian humourlessness but rather deconstructs a positivist ethical framework for humour that prioritizes laughter at all costs.

Having spent much of her life on the margins of society, subjected repeatedly to violence, Gadsby proclaims, "[i]t would have been more humane to just take me out to the back paddock and put a bullet in my head if it is that much of a crime to be different!" (*Nanette* 01:02:33). By invoking death and comparatively rendering her own experience a sort of social death, Gadsby exercises a form of antisocial "radical passivity" that signals "the refusal to quite simply be," in the style of the silent and silenced subaltern, resisting an illusory model of self-authorship where the only viable choices presented are to "become a woman" (read: cisgender, heterosexual, and complicit in patriarchy) or relegated to abjection (Halberstam 140). Of course, to describe Gadsby's performance in *Nanette* as passive would be a grave mischaracterization of a passionate and energetic work – it is clear that Gadsby's suggestion that death would be preferable to violence is here referring to the perspective of her younger self. The Gadsby on stage, referring to Picasso's statement that if you can "destroy the woman, you destroy the past she represents," appeals to connection through storytelling, rather than jokes and laughter, as the alternative to being "destroyed" (*Nanette* 01:03:20). While socially acceptable womanhood (or comedian-hood) are not viable ontological modes for Gadsby, she positions her unlikely survival as a counter-narrative to the one which offers such limited options for how to be in the world.

Gadsby's body is not only made to bear the punishment of her queerness, her sex, and her neurodivergence, but it has been used as a backdrop for the violent men in her life to assert their own superiority. By drawing a connection throughout her performance between her self-deprecating jokes, her social conditioning to diffuse the tension blamed on her, and the way

various instances of physical violence have marked her body as subordinate, Gadsby suggests that comedy has material consequences that must be considered in every instance of bigoted humour. Early in the set, Gadsby plays on the trope of the unlaughing lesbian, performing a caricature of a man stating "I'll tell you what you need to lighten up. You need a good dicking. Get a cock up you! Drink some jizz!" (00:16:45). Gadsby's unlaughing account of assault that comes later in the show retroactively casts a very dark shadow on this joke as she recounts it being played out in real life. The laughter elicited from the joke form of the narrative is rendered problematic when the real life violence reflected by the trope comes to light.

3. Storytelling, Representation, and the Relational Self

Despite Gadsby's argument against self-deprecation in *Nanette*, the show is still peppered with the very type of joke that she denounces – the final punchline she offers, even after telling her story of violent assault, is after asking men to pull their socks up: "How humiliating! Fashion advice from a lesbian. That is your last joke" (*Nanette* 01:00:45). Sheila Lintott argues that Gadsby's use of self-deprecation is in fact necessary for the success of her show, despite Gadsby's own thesis on its potential to cause harm, because of the form's ability to "lighten the load on the audience" and reduce the likelihood of defensiveness – lending authority to her story without further alienating herself (618-619). While this reading may be somewhat true to the form's functionality, it seems to ignore Gadsby's own account of the shame and alienation she feels *regardless* of how good-humoured she is. As Rebecca Krefting points out, Gadsby's ambivalence towards the political power of jokes is based on her commitment to accountability:

> Satire intends to elicit laughter. This imperative function to undermine the seriousness of issues of inequality and undermine the legitimacy of the satirical critique. Even as scholars have suggested that satire counts as meaningful humorous discourse, they also

> have exhibited caution in waxing triumphant about satire's capabilities, understanding that there are ways that satire, because it bends to the humorous, mitigates personal responsibility. […] the pleasure of satire is partly from the knowledge that you won't be held accountable to changing your behaviour. (98)

Gadsby doubles down on the politically impotent nature of "lowbrow" comedy, warning her audience that "nobody here is leaving this room a better person. We're just rolling around in our own shit here, people" (*Nanette* 00:32:24). While this is a pessimistic view of comedy, and my own argument indeed points to the philosophical significance and indeed the generative potential of Gadsby's comedy, I do believe that it is important to first take Gadsby's stated intention in good faith: not to "unite [the audience] with laughter or anger" but to have "[her] story heard, [her] story felt and understood by individuals with minds of their own" (01:07:08). I do not wish to depoliticize this act, but rather touch upon the limitations of storytelling. In *Nanette*, Gadsby appears to privilege storytelling over comedy in the hopes that it can foster connection across difference, but just as her story in *Nanette* does not offer a resolution that appeals to any account of easy, natural, linear social progress, Gadsby cannot promise what affects will take shape as her story touches upon the porous boundaries of others.

One may reasonably hope and expect, of course, that *Nanette* might offer a sense of solidarity for others who might identify with Gadsby's story and, perhaps, even increased understanding amongst the larger population for those marginalized people – such is the importance, for so many, of diverse representation. Citing Audre Lorde's "The Uses of Anger" and applying it to contemporary affect theory, Hennefeld writes on the transformative properties of negative affect, claiming that it is "only dangerous when pathologized as such, […] and only punitive when isolated to the individual or in-group rather than shared across heterogenous social

bodies" ("Affect Theory in the Throat of Laughter" 133). Certainly, *Nanette* received a great deal of acclaim and seems to have resonated with many in such a way that might activate these very transformative properties. However, while clearly invested in the politics of identity and representation - as made evident by her describing her rejection of self-deprecation as a refusal to diminish herself "or anybody who identifies with [her]"- Gadsby also expresses exhaustion with identity politics (*Nanette* 00:18:20). She describes feeling somewhat alienated by mainstream queer representation while simultaneously receiving negative feedback on her lack of "lesbian content" (00:09:10). After recounting an instance of being told by a fan that she is obliged to come out as transgender for the sake of the transgender community, Gadsby declares:

> All jokes aside, I really do want to do my best by my community. I really do. But that was new information to me. I'm not… I don't identify as transgender. I don't. I mean, I'm clearly "gender not normal," but… I don't think even lesbian is the right identity fit for me, I really don't. I may as well come out now. I identify… as tired. I'm just tired. (00:18:56)

Gadsby is here touching on the impossible paradox that comes along with representation – her story, on the one hand, *is* undeniably enmeshed with the social context of her life, and the collective need for queer and other marginalized identities to be recognized in their humanity. Without grafting her story onto a sociopolitical narrative, she risks internalizing the failures of society as personal shame. Identity politics are intrinsic to the affective truth value of her story. On the other hand, however, the need to represent anybody other than herself threatens to override the individual complexities of her identity.

In their collection of poetic essays on Blackness and fugitivity, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten make an important point about the demand for representation, stating that "[w]hen

representation becomes the obligation of all, when politics becomes the work of all, democracy is labored. No longer can democracy promise the return of something lost in the workplace, but rather itself becomes an extension of the workplace" (56). While the subject here is Blackness, governance, and democracy, rather than queerness, comedy, and storytelling, Harney and Moten make an important point about the paradoxical politics of representation and the motives that can be found on the underbelly of so-called authenticity, as one person can never represent many people. Harney and Moten also remind us that the denial of difference or complexity in a community based solely on impossible standards of the representation of all forms of diversity is always already an argument in bad faith and such assertions "have never been serious enough to refute" (48). Such a lack of imagination resulting in the denial of another's complex subjectivity is perhaps a greater problem than one of representation, but the tensions exposed between authenticity and performance still pose as a significant philosophical hurdle for the professional performer's responsibility to present a representational narrative. Butler asserts that:

> The structure of address is not a feature of narrative, one of its many variable attributes, but an interruption of narrative. The moment a story is addressed to someone, it assumes a rhetorical dimension that is not reducible to a narrative function. It presumes that someone, and it seeks to recruit and act upon that someone. Something is being done with language when the account that I give begins; it is invariably interlocutory, ghosted, laden, persuasive, and tactical. It may well seek to communicate a truth, but it can do this, if it can, only by exercising a relational dimension of language. (63)

Like Harney and Moten, Butler expresses suspicion towards any seemingly coherent story, but especially one crafted in response to a demand. According to Butler, giving an account of one's's life that satisfies the ethical demands of the asker in fact requires a certain degree of falsification

(63). Ironically, Butler's critique of the personal account reveals a problem with storytelling that is much like Gadsby's critique of comedy. While the formal techniques of comedy often satisfy a crowd's demand for relief in the form of laughter, the personal account must (maybe impossibly) try to satisfy the crowd's ethical demands. The narrative power of *Nanette* comes from Gadsby's break with the persona that she had constructed throughout her career up until that point. This persona is political, but not threateningly so, and always self-deprecating enough to remind her audience of her marginal social position. Using actor Michael Redgrave's concepts of "face" (the actor's authentic or essential emotional self that shines through and produces the unique qualities of an individual's performance persona) and "mask" ("voice, appearance, technique, and mannerism") as two often inseparable parts of the actor's persona, Luckhurst refers to *Nanette* as Gadsby's "assassination" or "spectacular live execution" of her previous comic persona, a killing that simultaneously births a new face intent on unravelling the comic persona as a cohesive subject and exposing its inauthenticity (56-7, 53-54).

Therefore, while *Nanette*'s success with audiences justifies Gadsby's explicit unwillingness keep making jokes at her own expense, it also poses a complex set of problems for her continuing performances. If the "new face" that takes the place of her old persona coheres into a consistent, static performance of self, won't it become embroiled in the same issue of authenticity and representation? In an analysis of Ellen Degeneres's perceived "realness," Weber and Leimbach notes that the (now highly scrutinized) comic television host distinguishes herself from Oprah. Whereas, Oprah is "a highly mediated product dependent upon achieving maximum exposure and financial success," Ellen distances herself from the demands of celebrity and capitalism, and ironically builds her commercial success off this distinction (307). While it may be easy to argue that Gadsby's subversive, trauma-driven comedy is far more radical in form

than Ellen's prankster antics and nonthreatening silliness, given the commercial success of her self-annihilating storytelling tactics in *Nanette*, Gadsby risks turning her trauma into a sensationalized spectacle, performed like a party trick for audience consumption. Butler argues that sociality is a site of both origin and possible annihilation of the self (62). Performativity, after all, generates norms through repetition (*Cultural Politics* 92), and it is the oppressive force of such norms, from gender and sexuality to generic conventions, that threaten authenticity. This is not to say that all norms are necessarily *bad* – many women appreciate how feminist comics have helped to normalize conversation about traditionally taboo topics (sexuality, abortion, etc.) (Cooper 99). However, Gadsby's approach to comedy is as philosophical as it is political - as she says herself, "theories are sexy" - and her politics of identity are not simply rights-based but also ontological (*Douglas* 00:14:25). Current trends in stand-up comedy are dictated largely by market demand for the "confessional" style (Luckhurst 56). Just as Hennefeld and Sammond argue that under the current political climate's demand for "permanent carnival," subversive discourse must go beyond "debates about whether grotesque bodily display is liberating or shaming" (10), I argue that any measure of authenticity is combatted by sociality itself, which both motivates the story's construction and informs its reception and analysis.

In *Douglas,* rather than following through on her retirement plans and divesting from comedy or storytelling, Gadsby adheres to a story-based comedic style while also dealing with the philosophical problem of trauma and authenticity as spectacle head-on, doubling down and refreshing her meta-comedic style, asking the audience:

> if you're here because of *Nanette*… why? Like, don't get me wrong, it was a good show. Solid bit of work, I'm quite fond. But it was a particular show of a very particular flavour. And if that is what has brought you… What the fuck are you expecting out of

> this show? Because I'm sorry, if it's more trauma, I am fresh out. Had I known just how wildly popular trauma was going to be in the context of comedy, I might have budgeted my shit a bit better. Honestly, I could have built quite the career out of it. At least a trilogy. But I went and put all my trauma eggs into one basket like a fucking idiot, and now here we are. You want more? (00:01:29)

Redgrave's analogy of the mask and the face as the two composing parts of the performance of a persona here is exploded, not simply because Gadsby has already abandoned the original comic persona in *Nanette*, but also because she point's to the audience's role in interpellating that persona given their expectations of Gadsby as a performer serving their particular market niche. Letting go of the pressure for absolute authenticity or the illusion of an unmediated outpouring of one's own subjectivity, Gadsby denaturalizes the personal story. While *Nanette* was a representation of her subjective truth, it was also a collection of truths crafted into a story for consumption. The constructed nature of so-called authentic representation is not circumvente. After all, as Butler explains, to tell a story one must

> first be inaugurated into language by being called upon, offered some stories, brought into the discursive world of the story. Only later can one find one's way in language, only after it has been imposed, only after it has produced a web of relationality in which affectivity achieves articulation in some form. (62-63)

Gadsby's metacommentary in *Douglas* reveals *Nanette* to be a constructed object to which she and the diverse people who viewed it may attach different affects. Gadsby herself criticizes the genre of performing marginality by satirizing self-authorship and interrogating the processes by

which abjection (read in comedy as authentic) can be transformed into social and economic currency (Hennefeld and Sammonds 2).

By bringing to light the ways that contexts *constitute* a story, Gadsby offers up an alternative to authenticity by adding layers of accountability (to remain true to Butler) to the concept of an account of one's self. She does so by recognizing the discrepancy between audience expectation and her own subjectivity and how she plans to represent it in the show and literally adjusting their expectations of them. Built into the structure of *Douglas* is a preamble that offers the audience "a detailed, blow-by-blow description of exactly how the show is going to unfold" (00:03:11). Gadsby makes jokes throughout this long segment about how it is not part of the *actual* show as she offers this summary of form, technique and content, absurdly implying that this summary allows everyone a greater level of objective distance than would be possible in the show itself. She sheds new light on the comedy in *Nanette*, stating that if a joke is perceived as offensive to any audience member, they must "remember the golden rule of comedy, which is, if you're in a minority, you do not matter. You don't. Don't blame me. I didn't write the rules of comedy. Men did. Blame them. I do. It's cathartic" (00:07:45). By sarcastically assuming a position of powerlessness in relationship to the potential offensiveness of her own jokes, Gadsby parodies the so-called logic commonly used by male comedians who refuse to be accountable to their own material, citing an ostensibly neutral, uninvolved standpoint relative to comedy as a form.

In her parodic insistence that because she did not write the rules of comedy, she cannot change them, Gadsby recalls a joke in *Nanette* about how men, amidst the rise of identity politics, are uncomfortable with suddenly becoming "subcategory of human" rather than "human-neutral" as they have historically perceived themselves – "You wrote the rules. Read

them. Just jokes," Gadsby says on the topic of "reverse sexism" (00:26:31). The guise of "human-neutral" allows a similar type of abdictation of responsibility in the ahistoricizing explanation that "that's just the way the world works." Just as Gadsby shifts responsibility for the golden rule of comedy onto the patriarchy, the individual man can differentiate from the metaphysical, human-neutral form of man simply by assuming the ostensibly morally neutral position of "not all men" and thus conveniently opting out of categorical stereotypes.

Beyond the supposed golden rule of comedy, Gadsby makes various jokes throughout *Douglas* about how men have historically had the cultural power of naming and narrating things. *Douglas* functions in part as a metacommentary on storytelling, not just in the form of a comedy set but also in the way history and ideology are constructed in the same way that other stories are. Gadsby points out that the stories that boys are raised on - from "boys will be boys" as an alibi for sexual assault that projects blame onto women, to the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, which inaccurately categorize Donatello as a renaissance artist (allegedly to avoid exposing them to the word "tit" in Titian) - ultimately do not prepare them for the "real world, or history, which they wrote" (00:36:35, 00:41:45). This comment begs the question of what is meant by the "real world" and how one might be prepared for it. If our selves and our environments and the boundaries between each are constituted by our stories, how can we access the truth?

After breaking down comedy (or at least her comic persona as it existed within the industry's current climate) in *Nanette*, Gadsby uses her performance in *Douglas* to recuperate comedy from narratives of authenticity. In particular, she uses her humour to suggest that meaning itself is improvised as she delivers an absurd yet politically poignant comic lecture that re-writes art history. She describes Raphael's *School of Athens* as a painting of "all the men who named all the things," simply but astutely positioning the canonical work as a symbol of the perspectives

historically most valued (00:48:57). Gadsby goes on to invent new narratives to explain the evolution of the Western artistic canon, interspersing critiques of the patriarchy with anecdotes and characters from her own life and imagination – from Dr. Cock Biscotti, a doctor who misdiagnosed Gadsby as "hormonal," to Karen, Gadsby's fictional counterpart to Dr. James Douglas, for whom the female anatomy's rectouterine pouch was originally named. Observing the very limited representation of women within the canon, Gadsby points out that the historical records provided by male painters indicate that "dancing naked in groups of three in the forest is the number one hobby of women of all time" (00:50:45). In denaturalizing the male perspective through this playful voicing of multiple alternative perspectives and interpretations, Gadsby resists a single-perspective version of historical authorship and suggests that history and art, as forms of storytelling, are inevitably shaped and read through broader political and affective orientations attributes value to collaborative, multi-perspective authorship. Hennefeld cites Berlant's assertion that true humourlessness is insistence on one's own perspective as the rule for how to relate to the world. This concept of rigidity as humourlessness draws from Henri Bergon's classic account of "something mechanical encrusted upon the living" as the butt of all jokes ("Affect Theory in the Throat of Laughter" 135). In *Nanette*, Gadsby decries the widespread celebration of Picasso's contributions to art through his development of the style of cubism while erasing his predatory sexual tendencies. She offers, "ironically, I believe Picasso was right. I believe we could paint a better world if we learned how to see it from all perspectives. And our mistake was to invalidate that perspective of a seventeen-year-old girl, because we believed her potential was never going to equal his" (*Nanette* 01:04:22) Gadsby's killjoy polemic targets the humourless and indeed joy-killing mechanisms of hegemony masquerading as natural, common sense, and singularly real.

4. Witnessing and Mutuality: An Emergent Model of Accountability in *Douglas*

At the heart of Gadsby's work is a critique of the fundamental gap between individuality and sociality, and the signifier and the signified. Narrative language proves to be an epistemically flimsy mediator for the affective realities of the marginalized subject. Even in telling her own story in *Nanette*, there is a temporal gap between the narrating self and the narrated self, and so she resists being labelled as a victim. In an interview, reflecting on her experience being beaten and how she neither took herself to the hospital nor reported her attacker to the police Gadsby describes feeling "such sadness for *that* Hannah," who she also describes as monosyllabic, as though she had witnessed this scenario from afar (Illing 47:45). Ahmed expresses suspicion towards the politicization of victimhood as an identity, stating that "the transformation of the wound into an identity cuts the wound off from a history of 'getting hurt' or injured. It turns the wound into something that simply 'is' rather than something that has happened in time and space" (*Cultural Politics* 32). This touches upon the backwards-facing nature of narrative, how opacity of the self poses ethical problems for accountability (Butler 63). The atemporality of a static identity of victimhood carries forward an epistemic and ontological framework which presumes too readily to know one's position outside of ever-changing relational dynamics, and to foreclose the possibility of empowerment. Gadsby notes in her interview with Sean Illing that, as a homeless youth working on a rural farm, she was surrounded by men who posed a threat to her safety, and amongst whom she had no voice. In the present, however, she points out that, having found success and celebrity, she is "not vulnerable like they are now" due to unpredictable shifts in her social positioning (01:16:50).

To account for the opacity of witnessing shifts in one's own positionality only in hindsight, Gadsby uses an interesting narrative technique in *Douglas* that highlights the ever-

shifting narrative framework of the self. She compares the retrospective clarity provided by the late diagnosis of her autism to finally having the keys to the city of herself, allowing her to "make sense of so many things that had only ever been confusing" (01:04:50). At this point in the narrative, which follows the chronology of Gadsby's own changing perspective, she has already informed the audience of her diagnosis several times in the preamble – forewarning them that the narrative will "change gears dramatically" when this fact is revealed, and again, telling them "you don't know this yet, but you do: I have autism" (00:12:03). By introducing autism as a crucial perspective that the narrated Hannah does not gain until much later in the story, Gadsby's spoilers make the audience aware not only of Gadsby's autism, but also of the *gap* in the narrated subject's perspective produced by their knowledge of her lack of self knowledge. While her autism diagnosis introduces a welcome new framework for her life, it does not promise social legibility; in fact, it reorients the self away from the project of legibility. Already an affect alien due to her difference, Gadsby is now able to name and reframe that difference. In the comic rendition of dramatic irony provided by Gadsby's introduction to her own show, revealing the unknown does not lead to a tragic flaw. Rather this narrative technique offers glimpses of Kristevan jouissance, or the "kind of painful pleasure shaped by the crisis and dissolution of the subject" from which point "its escalation could go anywhere. But you have to let it go there to find out" (Wanzo 70, "Affect Theory in the Throat of Laughter 127). The epiphany that emerges from the naming of the unknown may shatter the self, but with that undoing comes an emergent, joyful possibility of rebuilding.

Gargi Bhattacharyya suggests that in anti-institutional spaces (specifically, in the context of her paper, in anti-racist online spaces) "choric wordscapes" are produced through the collective repetition of critical ideas as aphorisms (54, 62). This form of thinking together seeks

to improvise a radical poetics of political mantra, wherein repetition "promises a shift in consciousness, a way of using language to unlock another vista but through bypassing signification and returning to language as physicality" (63). Unlike the repetition produced by Butler's performativity, language used in this way is transparently positioned as a politically charged object, in opposition to the abstracted, ostensibly objective epistemologies of the neoliberal institution. Bhattacharyya's choric aphorism is much like Ahmed's concept of stickiness, a term she uses to describe how, through contact with various emotions, objects and signifiers can carry an affective residue or stickiness that mark them as "sites of personal and social tension" (11). While Ahmed's sticky objects tend to carry a threat and an affective element of (often racist or xenophobic) disgust, Bhattacharyya's sticky aphorisms are markers of political affinity gesturing towards a shared critique of power and longing for a better world.

Gadsby's most overt, complex, and fully articulated political commentary throughout both *Nanette* and *Douglas* is directed toward men. Yet, Gadsby knows her audience and knows that they are mostly women, many of whom identify as queer (Luckhurst 55). Gadsby acknowledges her demographic with jokes that are peppered with contemporary leftist aphorisms such as: "[…] I will touch upon, *with consent*, most of the major themes of the show"; "She's probably a T.E.R.F. Punching up"; "In Australia, 'fanny' refers specifically to the lady front bum, to use inclusive language" (00:05:55, 00:19:33, 00:21:00). Rather than serving her narrative or setting up longer jokes, these phrases are strewn through *Douglas* seemingly arbitrarily. Bringing up topics such as sexual consent, transphobia, and inclusive descriptions of genital signal that Gadsby and her audience are tuned into the same cultural zeitgeist. Yet these remarks, in the context of the subject matter, seem surprisingly politically impotent. For instance, when she mentions consent, her facial expression and intentional eye contact with the audience

seem to parody an awareness of the fact that she is being watched, and so that her politically correct language in an inappropriate context reads as an empty gesture, a formulaic response not to an ethical code, but rather to surveillance.

Similarly, Bhattacharyya notes the coopting of the word "intersectionality" as an effortless way to sanitize one's speech of any political incorrectness (64). The poetic function of the phrase, according to Bhattacharyya, is to identify and name a gap in language that makes visible a previously unseen problem (62). Gadsby's deliberately weak example of "inclusive language," referring to the vulva as the "lady front bum" further parodies the paranoid performance of rule-following by actually gendering the anatomy even as the language of inclusivity suggests the opposite. On the one hand, these jokes refer to the rapidly changing linguistic frameworks that shape our politics and call back to Gadsby's frustration expressed in *Nanette* about the pressure she receives as a queer performer to be a representative queer. On the other hand, Gadsby challenges her audience to critically engage with the concept of language and inclusivity, rather than mechanically employing it, as the political impetus of aphoristic language leaks out if it is coopted in place of critique entirely. An act of mutual witnessing is taking place here. Gadsby's parody of politically correct behaviour, apparently to appease her audience, also reverses the gaze and holds the audience to account as the signifier is shifted out of a radical frame. Gadsby is not asking us to do away with inclusive language or parodying it to garner cruel laughter, but rather, these linguistic blunders playfully suggest that one cannot become inclusive simply through following a rigid set of rules for politically correct speech that may keep one out of trouble. Comedy here allows for playful flexibility in meaning that makes way for more relational, improvisational possibilities for accountability.

According to Gadsby, the golden rule of comedy, as previously mentioned, is that minority feelings do not matter. Conversely, Cynthia Willet and Julie Willet propose that there is a different, more principled, but similarly commonly accepted golden rule: "one punches up, not down" (9). While Gadsby does refer to the rule of punching up in *Douglas*, she highlights its limitations in a similar fashion to her parody of injecting everyday language with leftist aphorisms. Gadsby tells her audience that "making fun of Americans is still technically punching up, although that window is closing" (00:04:11). Rather than deconstructing the inner contradictions of America's politics in her usual style however, Gadsby's observational comedy about the United States focuses on rather banal differences in American and Australian English, such as "petrol" versus "gas," "jumper" versus "sweater," and "dickbiscuit" versus "dickcookie." Of course, Gadsby's "good-natured needling of the patriarchy" certainly makes effective use of the punching up principal, uniting an adoring audience against established gendered hierarchies (00:06:00). However, her linguistic hailing of certain issues draws audience members of a particular political leaning together as a community, united against hegemonic powers, only to suggest that not everything can be perfectly mapped onto a static binary framework of dominant and resistant (Willet and Willet 9). Drawing from Antonio Gramsci's critique of "mechanical historical materialism" which over-assumes the direct association between economic structure and political act, Halberstam asserts that "ideology has as much to do with error or failure as with perfect predictability" – in fact, dominant, oppressive norms themselves contain multitudes of contradictions that are swept under the umbrella of "common sense" rather than a transparent belief system that the masses must critically consider and consent to adopt (Halberstam 88-89, 16).

While punching up, as an ethical code, may be useful in inspiring critical engagement with hegemony, it relies heavily on self-authorization of one's own position within a complex, layered, and never fully known web of shifting relations, affinities, and hierarchies. Even within her largely feminist audience, Gadsby points towards complex intersections of politics that do not guarantee the cohesive political unity that might be signaled through the deployment of political language, pointing out the almost guaranteed presence of anti-vaxxers, despite her contempt for them, given that her "core demographic is rich, white, entitled women, and that is a Venn diagram with a lot of crossover" (00:55:17). This points to more than a mere obvious fact of unavoidable difference within any crowd – anti-vaxxers for Gadsby are an example of how closed minds work, as nothing she will say and no new information she can present will change their minds. This form of closedmindedness allows one to form a stable identity around a stubbornly stable belief, embodying the ideological rigidity that Gadsby targets as the object of her jokes. Gadsby's instructions for anti-vaxxers *not* to identify themselves in a literal sense (in this case, by not laughing at the anti-vax jokes to avoid revealing themselves to the audience) also implicitly asks them to remain open to the affects circulating the room even if that compromises their own mode of self-fashioning.

Gadsby, at this point a fellow rich white woman, opens the show by pointing out the instability of her own identity politics: on stage, she has a sculpture of a dog made out of crayons, to which she gestures and says, "I don't need that. I'm part of the problem now. That's my gold toilet. I had no plans to make it in America. This was not my agenda. And then, what happened though, is I wrote a show called *Nanette*, right, that… well then… that's clear, isn't it?" (00:00:45). Given Gadsby's marginalized identity and the content of *Nanette*, this progression is not so clear when read alongside normative narratives of success. Rather than

reading Gadsby's financial success as an unambiguous marker of social progress, I wish to focus on the element of accident in her life. Halberstam asserts:

> What Gramsci terms 'common sense' depends heavily on the production of norms, and so the critique of dominant forms of common sense is also, in some sense, a critique of norms. Heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital acquisition, family, ethical conduct, and hope. Other, subordinate, queer, or counter-hegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive lifestyles, negativity, and critique. (89)

In many ways, *Nanette* is a powerfully anti-social work, both in its critique of social norms, its refusal of the social contract of comedy to produce laughter and ease tension, and in its unravelling of the self by killing her comic persona and sloughing off, through both laughter and its refusal, the various ways through which she has been socially interpellated. Hennefeld notes that "[p]opular discourses of abject feminist laughter increasingly attempt to close the gap between reality and representation," whereas Gadsby dooms such closure and widens the gap ("Abject Feminism" 108). It is through this disruption of the politics of representation that she generates connection through the appeal of what happens *after* disconnection, rejection, negativity, and self-obliteration. Gadsby's account of herself acknowledges the limits of self-knowledge and the unpredictability of social life: the "I" that Gadsby offers in her account is transparent in its opacity, inciting a sense of social responsibility that does not rely on rigid ideological structures but the built in knowledge that these structures will always limit our understanding of that which lies outside of those structures. Gadsby's comedy in *Douglas,* while honouring the importance of storytelling established in *Nanette* orients itself *towards* the

inevitability of misunderstanding, miscommunication, and misrepresentation. In *Nanette*, Gadsby may come close to abandoning the joke as an ethical form, but in *Douglas*, joking provides a necessary element of ambiguity that in fact makes for a more ethically transparent style of storytelling.

5. Conclusion

Throughout *Nanette* and *Douglas*, Gadsby makes, unmakes, and remakes herself multiple times in an impossible exercise of drawing the margin to the center without creating new margins. While the themes of marginalization that recur throughout the content of Gadsby's comedy are undoubtedly urgent in their call for a more accountability-centered society, it is often the form of her delivery that digs deepest into the ethical and ontological complexities of accountability as a practice. Even as language itself is a framework that both limits and enables representation and accountability, Gadsby's innovative use of the narrative form constructs layers of relationality which make visible the affective construction of the self and the other, suggesting that openness to plurality, collaboration, and the occasional undoing of entire worldviews as best practice for comedic accountability.

Douglas and *Nanette* are not standalone works, however. These shows, post-tour, are exclusively available for streaming on Netflix, which indiscriminately profits from Gadsby's accountability-motivated work as well as the work of others who eschew such ethical frameworks – a recent notable example of such being comedian Dave Chapelle's *Closer*, which has come under fire from both the public and Netflix employees for transphobic jokes. The inherent relationality of their form and content implicates their context within a capitalist framework that may permit Gadsby call for radical accountability, having offered her a contract

for a third comedy special even after she publicly decried Netflix CEO Ted Sarandos, while simultaneously allowing the continued circulation of transphobic material (Zilko). Can a practice of undoing the self be extended to an undoing of an industry that is indifferent to difference beyond a profit margin?

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