

## A Queer Tension: The difficult comedy of Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette Live*

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### Introduction

This article concerns itself with feminist comedy that is deemed angry and difficult, yet has had critical and commercial success. Hannah Gadsby's stand-up show *Nanette Live*<sup>1</sup> can be described as difficult because it is politically challenging, emotionally demanding and disrupts the established format of stand-up comedy. *Nanette* challenges the underpinning assumption of postfeminism: that feminism is no longer needed.<sup>2</sup> It is feminist and angry. Which, arguably, does not have an obvious place in today's popular culture where comedians are expected to be postfeminist. An example of cultural expectations in the postfeminist era is the figure of the female comedian as an 'empowered' individual who is seen as a product of feminism, because she can take centre stage and speak out, whilst dismissing the need for feminism in her comedy. Another example would be the reframing and revalidation of sexist jokes – what Susan Douglas calls 'enlightened sexism', whereby the assumption that full gender equality has been achieved, makes it 'okay, even amusing, to resurrect sexist stereotypes of girls and women'.<sup>3</sup> To explore the phenomenon of angry feminist comedy in the postfeminist era further, the article considers the comedy of Gadsby through the prism of the figure of the feminist killjoy<sup>4</sup>, asking what place the feminist killjoy has in comedy? It also draws a different take on the figure of the feminist killjoy as outlined by Jack Halberstam in *Queer Art of Failure*.<sup>5</sup> Halberstam uses the term 'shadow feminisms', which are 'angry' feminisms, orientated towards negative affect, that also resonate with the antisocial turn in queer theory, and that have 'long haunted the more acceptable forms of feminism that are oriented to positivity, reform, and accommodation rather than negativity, rejection, and transformation'.<sup>6</sup> In my reading of *Nanette Live*, I seek to reflect on how both the killjoy and the queer art of failing offer forms of political 'sabotage', that 'take the form not of becoming, being, and doing but [...] undoing, unbecoming, and violating'.<sup>7</sup> comedy as masculinist popular culture. Further, drawing on queer theoretical work by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick<sup>8</sup>, Sally R Munt<sup>9</sup>, Katherine Johnson<sup>10</sup> and others who have conceptualised shame as performative, the article considers tension and anger as forms of queer aesthetics that have the potential to communicate experiences of shame, social injustice and trauma affectively. I begin by briefly locating *Nanette* in relation to genre expectations and in relation to feminist comedy studies. I then present the empirical multimodal analysis of the broadcast media text *Nanette Live*.

### *Nanette* as feminist comedy - transforming form

Stand-up comedy has diversified and expanded its audiences since the Alternative Comedy scene emerged as a politically charged form of comedy in Britain during the Margaret Thatcher era in the 1980s, establishing itself as mainstream via television shows like *Live at the Apollo*<sup>11</sup> and later, via Comedy Central, Netflix and HBO comedy specials.<sup>12</sup> However, queer and feminist stand-up comedy has continuously mainly addressed minority audiences, thriving in marginal comedy spaces and in queer clubs, and has more recently increasingly found its audiences online via platforms such as YouTube. The phenomenal success of the Netflix special *Nanette* has however put feminist stand-up squarely into a mainstream entertainment landscape and 'challenges stand-up comedy as a masculinist cultural form'<sup>13</sup> at a moment in time when there is an apparent connection to be drawn between speaking

out about gendered violence, as Gadsby does in *Nanette*, and the impetus of the #MeToo movement to break the silence around sexual violence.

Gadsby toured Australia, UK and USA with *Nanette* before it was produced as a Netflix special in 2018. The show was filmed at the Sydney Opera House, a culturally prominent venue, significantly larger than the majority of the venues on her tour. She has received multiple prestigious awards for the show, including Best Show at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and the Melbourne International Comedy Festival, and most recently an award at the Emmys. In this respect Gadsby's work could be considered highbrow, or for a rarefied comedic and political taste, which arguably complicates its status as mainstream popular entertainment. But *Nanette Live's* commercial success also suggests that to understand its audiences, we need to depart from such established models of understanding comedy audience segments.<sup>14</sup> Her stand-up style 'alternates between cheeky and rageful'<sup>15</sup>, moving between jokes about the LGBTQ (Lesbian Gay Bi Trans and Queer) community's persistent clichés, 'the pressure on my people to express our identity and pride through the metaphor of party is very intense', and the absurd nature of masculine privilege. She alternates between performing an odd ball character – emphasised physically by opening up her eyes in an extreme wide-eyed expression reminiscent of early Expressionist film – essentially an outsider position that invites the audience to laugh at her, and adopting a persona who is astute and trustworthy, as in her art history connoisseurship or meta-commentary on comedy itself. Sometimes she switches to a much more intimate voice, for example when sharing experiences of body-shaming, homophobia and gendered violence. As an out lesbian and gender non-conforming person, she has an outsider relationship to political power and dominant culture, moving between varying, yet intersecting, vantage points from which she addresses the centre from the margin. This relates to what Joanne Gilbert, drawing on bell hooks, identifies as the 'distinction between sociological and rhetorical marginality', which she sees as 'key to understanding the potentially subversive nature of female comedic performance'<sup>16</sup>, and helps us recognise the potential power of marginality as a chosen perspective, not unrelated to, but separate from, imposed oppressive structures. Gadsby's perspective is 'queer' or sideways in more ways than just speaking from a marginalised sexual identity position. For example, in her comedic exploitation of hetero ideals, whilst focusing on exposing and ridiculing sexism and homophobia, she also draws on experiencing the world differently from a neurodiverse perspective, which puts the notion of 'normal' into question, simultaneously from multiple positions. The nature of intersectionality is also unpicked in the jokes about how she temporarily 'enjoys' male privilege when she as a butch lesbian is mistaken for a man (receiving really good customer service), but also how sexuality and gender transgression creates a complex convergence of oppression in the 'lady faggot' joke the article will return to later.

With the success of the Netflix special, it is unquestionable that Gadsby, and her show *Nanette*, has a place in mainstream popular culture. This raises questions about the appeal and relatability of an unapologetic queer feminist comedy act. Liam Evans in *The Independent* claims that *Nanette* proves that 'woke comedy is commercially viable'<sup>17</sup>. Unpicking this, the article argues that more precisely Gadsby constructs a classed 'liberally minded' spectator position in the vein mainstream television has done since the 1990s<sup>18</sup> through which accessibility of her material to wider audiences is made possible.

What makes *Nanette* stand out in the current landscape of stand-up comedy is how the show offers a shift in perspective, from conventional female comedy centring on self-deprecating humour<sup>19</sup>, to explicitly making straight white cisgender men the butt of the joke. The persistence with which she pursues this perspective is unusual among mainstream comedians. Nevertheless, as Hilton Als contends in his review of Gadsby's subsequent show *Douglas* (2019); speaking back to patriarchy still concedes this as the main framework of reference.<sup>20</sup> Jack Halberstam, writing about *Nanette*, also picks up on what he sees as a narrow focus on 'the harm done by men to women and a tendency not to place that harm in larger context involving race and class'.<sup>21</sup> Whilst agreeing with this observation, I argue, there are additional dimensions to how Gadsby is handling the dynamics of reversed comedy. It is not simply a turning of the tables on at whose expense the joke is. Rather it also involves engendering the formula of the misogynist non-serious rhetoric of 'lad' humour, for feminist purposes, directing it towards men: 'this is theatre fellas', Gadsby says in an encouraging voice, '... loosen the f\*\*\* up and learn how to take a joke'. The burden of that expectation falls on the shoulders of a part of the audience who do not expect it. This expectation creates a particular tension as it inverts the stereotype of the humourless women, which I will come back to later in the article.

### **Reading *Nanette Live***

This article draws mainly on a close reading of the Netflix special *Nanette Live* using multimodal discourse analysis to also consider aspects beyond the content of the performed script. Noting Tomsett's concerns that by solely relying on content analysis of a stand-up performance, the researcher risks extracting jokes from their context and putting disproportionate emphasis on particular words used by the comedian in a 'live' moment<sup>22</sup>, the analysis here equally considers the structural composition of the show as well as the register, style and dramaturgy of the delivery, alongside aesthetic and performative aspects such as dress, voice and body language. This is important in order to capture the technical crafting of the piece and allows for an understanding of how it communicates affect. Equally it is important to consider *Nanette Live* as a mediated text. For the purpose of this article, it is the primary object of study in its own right, not a proxy to studying the show live, in situ. Thus the analysis also considers the mediation techniques of the filmed version, such as how it is shot and edited. The visual aesthetics of *Nanette* to an extent draws on camera work typical for the genre of stand-up for television, moving between various forms of close-up of the performer, mid-shots establishing the stage space around her, and wide shots that show the audience. But it also breaks with genre expectations in that it refrains from using cutaway shots featuring members of the audience, laughing. More importantly perhaps is how the dynamics of the editing works to emphasise the story Gadsby tells in particular ways, utilising the advantage of lingering close-ups of her face to accentuate emotion, and mid-shot to direct attention to the narration. The recorded version of the show retains some of its liveliness, yet it is a distinct, produced, televised experience, different from consuming a stand-up show in a club or theatre, surrounded by other audience members. *Nanette Live* includes for example some prefacing and closing footage from Gadsby's home, authenticating and familiarising the stand-up persona.

Filmed stand-up has a more controlled temporality than a live show and the moving between different types of camera shots imposes a particular temporal dimension,

shaping the viewer's experience. Certain elements become of increased importance in the broadcast version – such as how the comedian signposts when it is appropriate to laugh for example. In a live setting this may occur in subtle ways, which the audience will be tuned into, but has to be more explicit for the purpose of television audiences. For example, in the case of *Nanette Live* Gadsby often initiates a giggle or a smile or mimics a stunned face to cue these points, inviting you to laugh.

My close reading of the performance produced for television is further contextualised in relation to journalistic commentary such as critics' reviews and other journalistic texts discussing Gadsby's work and its reception by audiences, in order to capture the debates pertaining to the show, how it subverts comedy conventions and reactions to that. This is potentially particularly fruitful in terms of considering what critics and wider audiences make of the 'difficulty' of the stand-up show; its feminist critique of male privilege, its transgression of the comedy form and its demanding emotive delivery.

### **Feminist and Queer Comedy Studies**

Progressively more attention is given to women in stand-up comedy and the role of feminism in mainstream entertainment. Linda Mizejewski suggests, 'women's comedy has become a space where feminist topics emerge'.<sup>23</sup> Some comedians self-identify as feminist performers, or their comedy is described as 'feminist', which mainly seems to stem from a practice of pointing out the hypocrisy, casual misogyny and absurdity of gender politics in contemporary society (cf. Jo Brand, Margaret Cho, Bridget Christie, Suzi Ruffell, Michelle Wolf and Gina Yashere). In their categorisation of types of feminist humour, Limor Shifman and Dafna Lemish, foreground the 'oppositional' relation of feminist humour to current gender norms and inequalities, and include 'humour that mocks men and hegemonic masculinity'.<sup>24</sup> The female body (and associated taboo subjects) and body politics are topics that occupy a central place in feminist comedy and Mizejewski's work focusing on the trope of the excessive female body and comedy's potential to challenge gender conventions, is representative of contemporary feminist comedy studies. Women comics, she argues, 'engage in transgressive comedy grounded in the female body – its looks, its race and sexuality, and its relationships to ideal versions of femininity'<sup>25</sup>, making normative ideals the target. Laughing about these ideals is seen as liberating.

Moving beyond a focus on the body as the primary site of female comedy and in an attempt to address the question of how feminist comedy can be defined beyond this rather narrow scope, Tomsett introduces the concept of fumerist (fun feminist) comedians.<sup>26</sup> The term was originally coined by the American comedian Kate Clinton and is of course a wordplay implicating the state of being very angry, to be 'fuming'. This suggests that to both scholars and comedians, anger is part of feminist comedy.

Despite increased interest in feminist comedy, not least from an academic perspective, since the 2000s, most commentators still draw attention to the difficulty of women carving a space in a male-dominated industry and the perils of being seen to do comedy with 'a feminist agenda'.<sup>27</sup> Relatedly, women in comedy have for decades worked to challenge the stereotype that women aren't funny.<sup>28</sup> Comedians and feminist comedy scholars have commented on the double bind caused by this expectation, which makes it very difficult to reject being funny without being seen to simply confirm that presumption.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, the figure of the humourless

woman produces the expectation that women comedians on stage will make an effort to prove themselves or appear comical through means such self-deprecation or spectacle. Gadsby spends some time picking this apart on stage. Self-deprecation in women's stand-up acts, Tomsett concludes, is often deemed a negative from a feminist point of view because it replicates and thus upholds patriarchal tenets, and basically serves as an extension of a long history of comedy where women are laughed at.<sup>30</sup> However, not exclusively so, as it may also be understood as an empowering expression of a female-centred critical distance, its point of reference not necessarily male-centred at all. This ambivalence will prevail because responses to comedy vary, but Gadsby is critical of how she has used self-deprecation to make herself understandable to mainstream audiences in the past, and in dissecting the formula she demonstrates its limitations for telling an authentic story.

So when Gadsby both delivers 'funny' and then retracts it, she not only exposes the 'limitations of stand-up'<sup>31</sup>, she overtly refuses the formula. In *Women and Laughter*, Frances Gray gives a historical overview and critique of why women are perceived as having no sense of humour.<sup>32</sup> Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant find that the practices for regulating women's place in comedy that Gray outlines are very much still in place, noting that one way of curtailing women's comedy is the notion that it is angry and therefore inferior – too serious, too affective, too insisting.<sup>33</sup> In this article I make the argument that such 'failure' can more productively be understood as a deliberate queer aesthetics and politics.

Queer comedy studies is an emerging field, that has hitherto mainly dedicated itself to critiques of a longstanding tradition of using queer characters for comedic ridicule. In other words, queerness has always been an essential part of mainstream comedy, but mainly as 'the target of the joke, or more commonly through a performance of rampant innuendo'.<sup>34</sup> Such comedic ridicule is doing the work that Michael Billig argues 'lies at the core of social life, for the possibility of ridicule ensures that members of society routinely comply with the customs and habits of their social milieu'<sup>35</sup>, such as sustaining heteronormative values. However, we have also seen the commercialisation of much queer culture in the USA and Britain, exemplified by television shows such as *Will and Grace* (1998- ) and *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009- ). In this broader televisual context, queer comedy like Gadsby's stands out because it is clearly commercial yet remains angry and political. Relatedly, Jennifer Reed argues that 'transformative popular culture, especially seen in the form of good humour, creates a potentially queer space'<sup>36</sup>, by exposing the absurdities of the dominant world order and its notions of common sense that we are expected to share whilst also showing us other possibilities. In queer comedy, the 'regime of normal'<sup>37</sup> is challenged and non-heteronormative perspectives validated. For Reed, the way both queerness and humour exist in relation to liminality in its mode of expression, constitutes a productive space.<sup>38</sup> Further she sees the potential for connectivity in queer comedy, not as residing in shared cultural identity, but in more flexible, and I would add affective, commonalities:

...both humor and queerness rest on a conscious recognition of the multiple and contradictory nature of subjectivity. This provides an opening for spectators to identify not so much along linear points of sameness, but across commonalities of feeling that make it possible to imagine connection across

differences, and a more spacious and flexible circumstance in which to relate to others.<sup>39</sup>

This is something that resonates with Gadsby's success with *Nanette*, and how she through inhabiting multiple subjectivities, disrupts our understanding of identity categories by calling herself 'a little bit lesbian' and 'gender-not-normal' and joking about how little time she spends 'lesbianing' in comparison to how much she cooks, yet is never referred to as the chef comedian. And when she says 'I identify as...tired', she offers a subject position disconnected from identity in the usual sense, yet politically charged (as in I'm tired of sexism and homophobia) and open to anyone to share.

Jennifer Krefting approaches feminist and queer comedy through the concept of 'charged humour', by which she means outspoken and oppositional comedy often politically critical or speaking from the margins, or humour that does not riff on the enjoyment of partaking in shared dominant values that characterises mainstream comedy.<sup>40</sup> This includes feminist and queer comedy. Charged humour is not necessarily the same as political humour, nor is it about being challenging simply by being offensive. The economics of the industry, Krefting argues, work to keep this type of comedy niche. She explains that because this form of humour is always at risk to sabotage the funny, or challenge norms to the extent it alienates the audience, it typically remains fringe rather than occupying the comedy mainstream. However, 'the right cocktail of charger comedy and shock humour or charger comedy and modern-day minstrelsy can buoy a charged comic seeking mainstream audiences'.<sup>41</sup> Taking a different view from Reed, Krefting suggests that charged humour brings its audiences together 'around some focal point be that cultural, corporeal, or racial/ ethnic similarities'.<sup>42</sup> But how is this identification created in a mainstream entertainment context, with demographically more diverse audiences, or indeed audiences dominated by the traditional demographics of the stand-up genre? The question is not intended to imply this is not possible. Reed's work for instance, documents how the work of queer feminist writers and comic performers Lily Tomlin and Jane Wagner successfully occupied this space.<sup>43</sup>

Gadsby's strategy involves a flattering appeal to our higher natures as well as setting up a contrast between an agreed on 'Other' and a consensus based 'We'. Somewhat paradoxical, as noted before, Gadsby's comedy diverts from most mainstream comedy in that it parodies straight cisgender men, yet it still relies on caricaturising an 'Other'. Similar to a lot of popular culture that features entertaining or likable queer characters, Gadsby plays on offering to the audience the identification with the group 'we are the liberally minded people who don't have a problem with the gays'. For example at the beginning of the show she makes a set of comedic points about originating from 'backwaters' Tasmania, described as anachronistic, inbred, homophobic and essentially 'other' to the audience. Essentially, this strategy involves flattening any complexity of what originating from Tasmania means, for the sake of producing a collective 'We' in the room. She further strengthens the audience's sense of a 'We' by making us feel good and clever, as when she tells a joke about a young guy who thinks she is coming on to his girlfriend outside a nightclub and retorts by calling her a 'f\*\*\*ing faggot', in the manner a straight man would to insult another straight man. He is being intentionally homophobic, but unable to read her gender, he doesn't get the gendered aspect of 'faggot' quite right, and so in the anecdote, he

looks foolish. Having laughed at this joke, the audience shares not only the enjoyment of being credited for not being homophobic, but may also credit themselves for being on the ‘inside’ of getting Gadsby’s gender right. So in this way Gadsby rallies the audience around a shared (or aspirational) ‘cosmopolitan’, current, and urbane like-mindedness. In other words, the audience does not necessarily identify with Gadsby’s experience as a neurodiverse, ‘gender-not-normal’ lesbian - or her feminism - but they can identify with the ‘tolerant’ point of view that is linked to having high cultural capital.<sup>44</sup> Thus at first glance it may appear that Gadsby dives straight into telling hard truths to an audience who were not expecting it, but as demonstrated here she carefully creates a spectator position from which audience members feel comfortable to engage with marginal perspectives.

### **‘I am going to have to quit comedy’ - A feminist killjoy on the comedy stage**

Jilly Boyce Kay and Sarah Banet-Weiser state in a *Feminist Media Studies* special issue on anger, media, and feminism that ‘we are witnessing an extraordinary new visibility of women’s anger – we might even say feminist anger – in public discourse and popular culture’, which they position in contrast to popular feminism’s repudiation of anger as a productive affect.<sup>45</sup> Whether rage can be a productive affect, is a question at the heart of *Nanette* and the answer is not uncomplicated; in the show Gadsby both makes a case for the need to communicate and show consideration for anger *and* questions its value for social change.<sup>46</sup> In my analysis I focus on anger as a potential critical resource, but also on how Gadsby’s shifting between funny and angry upsets comedy conventions. Following this, I argue that *Nanette* breaks new ground by making space for the feminist killjoy in comedy.

Gadsby is not the first angry feminist comedian on stage. Bridget Christie’s *A Bic for Her* (2013) is for example a show that has been noted for its angry expression, and it is a show that Gadsby cites as a forerunner to *Nanette*.<sup>47</sup> Mark Monahan reviewing Christie’s show in the *Telegraph* says that a show about feminism ‘might well set “earnest” alarm bells ringing’, and follows up by expressing that ‘while it’s understandable that she should have opted for such a fulminatory tone, it’s a pity, too. This is in many ways a craftsmanlike hour of comedy, as full of imaginative jokes as it is of righteous anger, yet you may emerge from it feeling lectured and hectored’.<sup>48</sup> Brian Logan in his review of *A Bic for Her* picks up on how ‘angry’ feminist comedy in this vein is a tightrope act, threatening to fall apart (as comedy) because of the awkwardness of the anger. He says: ‘Christie is still discovering how best to combine comedy and ideological conviction. Her instinct is to clown around and self-deprecate, which is consistently funny, but too often makes her fury the butt of the joke, rather than the sexism that provokes it’.<sup>49</sup> When Gadsby presents the audience with stark illustrations of heterosexism as deeply and structurally imbedded in society – riffing for example on our unwavering respect for the misogynist and abusive Cubist painter Picasso because of his genius, she does so within the framework of comic performance, moving back and forth between different tonal registers and modes, between satirical jokes and serious urgency. Yet so many comments from reviewers and audiences state it is no longer comedy, it is a lecture. An illustrative example would be the journalist Josh Glancy, who in *Sunday Times* calls Gadsby ‘relentlessly glum’, and finds the show overly didactic: ‘Nanette would make an excellent SOAS [The School of Oriental & African Studies, London] lecture’. He goes on to describe the effects it had on him, stating: ‘it left me craving a large scotch and a hit of Valium’.<sup>50</sup> This requires some unpacking. From the way the term

is used here we can discern two implied meanings; firstly ‘lecture’ is used to denote a talk on a serious matter with the intent to educate, and secondly a talking-to, or a reprimand. The second meaning is somewhat couched inside the first in these comments. To label the show a lecture is also a diversion away from its affect. It is a selective reading (as are all readings of course) that chooses to emphasise on the factual and impassive – a way of filtering out the emotions of anger and shame, because otherwise its impact is too overwhelming, requiring Valium to manage.

In her performance, Gadsby does not use the term feminist killjoy per se, but definitely approximates it in her phrase ‘a lesbian used to be any woman not laughing at a man’. The female troublemaker, Ahmed writes, is ‘trouble because she gets in the way of the happiness of others’.<sup>51</sup> In *Nanette* an analogy of this ‘act’ is played out on stage. The promise of laughter is there (you are watching a comedy special) only to be performatively withheld. The laughter that gets stuck in our throat and the denied release of tension are clearly ‘getting in the way’ of the audience enjoying the show in any conventional way. It is unfunny in a troublesome way. Exactly how irksome this getting in the way of the laughter has been to some audiences can be gleaned from commentary on the *Nannette* show on Twitter. Whilst positive and appreciative posts about the show outnumber the negative ones, it is still interesting to note the language used in the posts that express disapproval: ‘annoying’, ‘awful’, ‘disappointing’, ‘depressing’, ‘unfunny’, ‘comedy cancelled’, are terms indicating the frustration felt, linked to this moment.<sup>52</sup> As Ahmed notes, ‘the feminist killjoy “spoils” the happiness of others’ by being the ‘origin of bad feeling’ and ruining the shared (presumed good) atmosphere.<sup>53</sup> The severity of this offense is played out in a shtick that goes:

Why don’t you laugh? What are you, some kind of lesbian? [in faux manly voice]  
 Classic! [in own voice]  
 Go on you gotta laugh! Lighten up! Stop taking everything so seriously.  
 F\*\*\*ing learn to take a joke. You need to lighten up! [in faux manly voice]  
 Tell you what you need – you need to lighten up! You need a good dicking!  
 You know? Get some cock up ya’. Drink some jizz! [in faux manly voice, increasingly insisting and hyped]

Here the tone starts jestingly but rapidly descends into something more aggressive and disturbing. Using body language, Gadsby performs the increasing frenzy the ‘character’ gets caught up in, which retains the comedic element whilst at the same time illustrating the proximity between the provocation of the feminist killjoy and corrective sexual violence.

Being difficult on the comedy stage, undoing comedy by not giving audiences the comedy they came for, violating the joking relationship, rejecting the expectation of building and releasing tension, and performing her trauma insistently, revisiting her assault twice in *Nanette*, instrumentalises the political negativity Halberstam evokes in *Queer Art of Failure*. Two questions that Ahmed asks demonstrate how directly relevant the figure of the feminist killjoy is to the project of *Nanette*; firstly, ‘does the feminist kill other people’s joy by pointing out moments of sexism?’ and secondly, ‘does she expose the bad feeling that get hidden, displaced, or negated under public signs of joy?’<sup>54</sup> Both, I would argue, in the case of *Nanette* as a feminist killjoy project. But then, I don’t think the act of doing so is the whole point of the



show. Rather its effect stems from the exposing of the *mechanisms* of hiding the bad feeling and the *injury* caused by the sexism and homophobia, which a later section will explore further.

The perceived impossibility of *Nanette* as comedy, I suggest, is a form of queer failure. Halberstam makes the argument that failing may be a queer strategy - theorised not only in relation to normative imperatives of gender and sexuality but in the face of neoliberal capitalist values of 'success'.<sup>55</sup> Extrapolating Halberstam's thought, I suggest that the 'failing' comedy of Gadsby, is a queer strategy, or a queering of comedy, at the level of its aesthetic form. Gadsby approaches the topic in her (actual) TED talk and her take is that: 'I did not fail to do comedy. [...] I broke comedy... to rebuild it, reshape it. That is what I meant when I said I quit comedy'.<sup>56</sup> Krefting approaches the way *Nanette* breaks with the comedy from the perspective of disrupting the format of satire, or testing its limits: 'The irony is that Gadsby's refusal to fulfil satire's contract by incorporating laughter and play means that the viewing public does not question the validity of her critiques as much as they question the legitimacy of *Nanette* as comedic performance'.<sup>57</sup> More precisely perhaps, Gadsby does not refuse satire's expectations alone, but quite markedly suspends the comedic form mid performance. She pauses the routine of delivering jokes to explore hidden layers of the life stories and anecdotes underpinning the comedy, in a different, more serious register. The strategy thus not only involves 'kill[ing] other people's joy by pointing out moments of sexism'<sup>58</sup> but to do so at a moment of heightened comedic expectations.

There is more to the strategy of the feminist killjoy than sabotaging the funny. It also lays bare the rhetorical bind used against those who are not prepared to go along with sexist jokes or homophobic banter. Gadsby makes the mechanisms of enforcing a consensus visible by turning the tables. She recommends straight men who may feel threatened by her show to take the advice (typically offered to women) to not be so sensitive, to get over themselves: 'it's only theatre fellas... Just jokes. *Clearly* just jokes.... Just jokes fellas, calm down', she says in a composed, commanding voice, and addressing the issue of 'a crisis in masculinity and male entitlement' in these changing times, she gives the advice to: 'try to develop a sense humour about it', followed by a repeat of the earlier 'you need to lighten up' shtick, but this time addressing the 'fellas'. This is where it becomes clear how important it is that the show is framed as stand-up comedy rather than theatre or performance. The 'just jokes' expression is an established idiom in stand-up comedy, and the genre's entrenched parlance is here explicitly being subverted in tandem with a patriarchal view on humour.

### **A queer tension in the room – rejecting catharsis**

Shame and anger are the driving affect in *Nanette*. Gadsby explores the lasting impact shame has had on her, growing up as a queer child in a profoundly homophobic surrounding, exploring how queer identity is rooted in shame. Queer shame as previously mentioned has been theorised as affect that is performative, but also as a creative and political negativity. Sedgwick pointed to the political power in shame, arguing that queer activism and resistance are engendered by experiences of shame.<sup>59</sup> Heather Love urges us to see not only the spectre of shame that is ever present also in today's 'successful' queer identities, presented to us in a lot of contemporary 'post gay' popular culture for example, but to note how entering that mainstream sphere is

conditional. What she means by that is that it requires one to rid oneself from the shameful, to ‘...break[s] ties with all those who cannot make it –the nonwhite and the nonmongamous, the poor and the genderdeviant, the fat, the disabled, the unemployed, the infected’.<sup>60</sup> In *Nanette*, Gadsby, not only acknowledges how queer shame has shaped her life and her identity, she also interrogates shame as an underlying aspect of her practice as a comedian, reflecting on her former routines built mainly on self-deprecating jokes, as something that not only mask her trauma and shame but that cause further harm; ‘Do you understand what self-deprecation means when it comes from someone who already exists in the margins?’ she asks, ‘It’s not humility, it’s humiliation’. So is her declaration that she is ‘quitting comedy’ a rejection of this practice? The expectation would be, as pointed out earlier, to do the opposite, to distance oneself from the shame. As Love puts it, ‘insofar that identity is produced out of shame and stigma, it might seem like a good idea to leave it behind. *It may in fact seem shaming to hold onto an identity that cannot be uncoupled from violence, suffering and loss*’.<sup>61</sup> Gadsby holds on to the identities she is better off distancing herself from and returns to ‘histories of injury’, including her own. She talks about how her self-hatred is ‘as natural as gravity’ and similarly how shame takes on a material quality, ‘I sat soaking in shame in the closet for ten years’, she states, illustrating how shame is performative, how it produces the self.

Honing in more specifically on the relation between shame, trauma and stand-up, Gadsby narrates how she has sealed off trauma as jokes. This has made partial snippets of her experience palatable to comedy audiences, as well as provided her with a method for distancing herself from shame. But not in a completely failsafe way, Lydia Buckingham points out in her suggestion that also in the case of the jokes, the trauma is present in the vocal delivery, with a tension in the larynx, which audibly demonstrates the imbedded psychological distress. This, she proposes, contributes to an uncomfortable feeling felt by the audience, despite delivering the content in the comic register. Extending her argument, Buckingham suggests that trauma is communicated through the vocal register, not only in *Nanette*, but paradoxically also in Gadsby’s earlier acts, dominated by self-deprecating humour.<sup>62</sup>

Commenting on building tension in the room, Gadsby notes in an interview how it involves risk – risk of disappointment or losing the audience – but also emotional risk:

I was breaking the contract. [...] They [the audience] were there for comedy and then I didn’t give it to them. That tension in the room, there’s no guarantee that I can hold it.<sup>63</sup>

The strategy revolves around sabotaging the ‘promise’ of comedy, the formal structure of building suspense or anticipation in a joke and then withholding the punch line or the ‘release’. Daringly, Gadsby says that her aim is to ‘share the literal, visceral pain of my trauma’, and for the audience members to hold the pain. Strategically, however, she has already anticipated what the reaction might be, in an earlier joke about her mother’s response to her coming out as a lesbian. Her mother lamenting ‘Oh Hannah! Why did you tell me that? How would *you* feel if I said I was a murderer?’ The joke here revolves around the absurdity of equalling being queer with something as repulsive as being a murderer, but a further layer to the exchange is how it demonstrates the outrageousness of Gadsby to put the burden of this knowledge on someone else. Her mother in this scene is trying to fight off being made

to hold any of the pain, similarly to how the audience is anticipated to react when requested to share the traumatic impact of homophobic oppression. The ridiculousness of her mother has however compromised that option.

Drilling down to further detail, Gadsby lays bare the genre conventions: ‘I make you all feel tense and then I make you laugh and you’re like “thanks for that”’, only to then deliberately *not* release the tension through a punch line. So what does it mean to withhold the punch line release? Gadsby’s intention is clear: ‘I wrote a comedy show that did not respect the punch line. That line where comedians are expected and trusted to pull their punches and turn them into tickles. I did not stop. I punched through that line into the metaphorical gut of my audience’.<sup>64</sup> When she withholds the release she enters into perilous territory – typically stand-up comedians cannot afford to leave their audience feeling as if they have missed the punch line; you would risk losing the audience. But addressing the audience, she insists: ‘this tension is yours. I’m not helping you anymore’. Here Gadsby deploys difficulty and refusal as queer feminist action, and I suggest, creates a queer space of negative affect as a political strategy.

Many commentators have called attention to the place of anger in *Nanette*. In popular culture narratives more broadly, women expressing anger get punished. They may be liberating loud, disobedient, *difficult* but always pay a high price. Writing about the ‘cultural turn towards listening to women’s anger’ signified by the #MeToo movement, Emilie Pine questions the emotional labour women undertake to ‘display our pain for a public gaze that is often unsympathetic’.<sup>65</sup> Holding on to your anger means that you run the risk of being dismissed as a ‘trauma queen’<sup>66</sup> or engaging in ‘puritan-minded radicalism’<sup>67</sup> and reproached for delivering a rant rather than a comedy act<sup>68</sup>, or as Krefting notes about Gadsby: ‘the apex of her anger disallows laughter’.<sup>69</sup> There is a notion that remaining angry disconnects, which links to the ‘antisocial turn’ of queer theory and politics – one that resists the notion that only in reconciling or overcoming the anger can there be a ‘win’. *Nanette* is ambivalent in this respect. On the one hand it takes an ‘antisocial turn’ mid-way through the show, when the anger replaces the jokes. But at the end of the Netflix special<sup>70</sup>, the release is offered in a rather grandiose delivery. Gadsby states,

I am angry and I believe I have every right to be angry, but what I don’t have every right to do is to spread anger. [...] *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 seriously, and just because I can position myself as a victim *does not make my anger constructive*. (emphasis added)

This is a direct dismissal of anger as a constructive power for social change. It is described as something not just unconstructive, but directly dangerous. So at this point the audience might feel conscious of injustices, complicit even, perhaps, but it is unclear what the ‘positive’ way forward might be. Is Gadsby’s opting for this ending telling of the limitations of mainstream entertainment? Perhaps. Whilst the unhappy queer is a cliché littered all over popular culture, and the stereotype of the angry feminist a comedy staple, the prospect for more than a momentary ‘owning’ of the anger isn’t conceivable. At a time when violent speech has gone mainstream (the show includes a joke about ‘angry white man comedy’) it is perhaps wise to reflect on the effects of anger resonating from the stage. Krefting argues that Gadsby’s

‘harnessing’ of the anger results in ‘catharsis and growth’.<sup>71</sup> I disagree as I find it problematic to cast the diffusion of anger as emotional growth. Rather I would suggest, that anger does not always completely alienate. It is through showing her vulnerability that Gadsby can retain the relationship with the audience; walking a tightrope between coming across as too angry or too radical in her politics and finding a connection with the audience.

### **Concluding remarks**

This article has concerned itself with how Gadsby’s comedy deploys difficulty and refusal as queer feminist action in an era of postfeminist popular culture dominance. It has explored this through two prominent mechanisms; the killjoy and the refusal of the release of tension. In her work Ahmed discusses the figure of the feminist killjoy with reference to literary examples and everyday life, but a feminist killjoy on the comedy stage, I have suggested here, is quite a different and radical move. By reexamining her former standard routines, Gadsby deliberately makes the funny unfunny, redressing how she as a comedian has ‘been trimming away the darkness, cutting away the pain and holding on to my trauma for the comfort of [the] audience’.<sup>72</sup> Female angry comedy is however not without risks, and these are also discussed in the article.

The article has also demonstrated how the structure of *Nanette Live* formally supports Gadsby’s strategy to perform a critical dismantling of comedy, whilst it is simultaneously performed. *Nanette* centrally deals with queer shame, but not in way that reproduces queerness as shameful. Rather it explores in the comedic register the hegemonic structures that sustain it. Her move to create space, within the set, for experiences beyond the jokes has caused genre trouble, as evidenced in press and audience commentary. Whilst causing genre trouble may have been deliberate, the article concludes that the comedian has to deploy a number of rhetorical techniques to continue to engage the audience when the show breaks with genre expectations.

Lastly, this article has also explored humour revolving around the increasingly ambivalent status of the cisgender straight man in the era of #MeToo and demonstrated how Gadsby skilfully plays with naturalised and ubiquitous assumptions about the gendered nature of humourlessness by turning them on their heads. Thus, the female / lesbian failure is enacted, queerly, onto the humourless ‘fellas’ in the audience.

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- <sup>1</sup> Directed by Madeleine Parry and Jon Olb, Netflix, 2018.
- <sup>2</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, London: Sage, 2009.
- <sup>3</sup> Susan J. Douglas, *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism: How Pop Culture Took Us From Girl Power to Girls Gone Wild*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010, p. 9.
- <sup>4</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2010.
- <sup>5</sup> J Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2011.
- <sup>6</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 4
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, London: Duke University Press, 2003.
- <sup>9</sup> Sally R. Munt, *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.
- <sup>10</sup> Katherine Johnson, "'How Very Dare You!' Shame, Insult and Contemporary Representations of Queer Subjectivities', *Subjectivity* 5:4 (2012), 416 – 37.
- <sup>11</sup> Sam Freidman, *Comedy and Distinction: The Cultural Currency of a 'Good' Sense of Humour*, London: Routledge, 2014.
- <sup>12</sup> For more details on the repackaging and assimilation of alternative comedy into mainstream television see Lloyd Peters. 'The Roots of Alternative Comedy? — The Alternative Story of 20th Century Coyote and Eighties Comedy', *Comedy Studies* 4: 1 (2013), 5 – 21.
- <sup>13</sup> Rebecca Krefting, 'Hannah Gadsby: On the Limits of Satire', *Studies in American Humor* 5:1 (2019), 93.
- <sup>14</sup> The Netflix streaming platform frame makes it appealing to a particular television audience, for example. But on the other hand, it should be noted that access to streaming television is not ubiquitous. It is determined by factors creating what is known as the 'digital divide', including age, class and access to broadband.
- <sup>15</sup> Jack Halberstam, 'Just Joking: Notes on the Comedy of Hannah Gadsby', *Bully Bloggers*. 9 August 2019: <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/>
- <sup>16</sup> Joanne R. Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004, p. 5.
- <sup>17</sup> Liam Evans, 'Satire Should Expose Power, Not Malign the Marginalised', *Independent (Daily Edition)*, 27 February 2019.
- <sup>18</sup> Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*, London: Rutgers University Press, 2006.
- <sup>19</sup> See Ellie Tomsett, 'Positives and Negatives: Reclaiming the Female Body and Self-Deprecation in Stand-up Comedy', *Comedy Studies* 9:1 (2018), 6 – 18.
- <sup>20</sup> Hilton Als, 'Hannah Gadsby's Song of the Self', *New Yorker*, 22 October 2019.
- <sup>21</sup> Halberstam, 'Just Joking'.
- <sup>22</sup> Tomsett, 'Positives and Negatives'
- <sup>23</sup> Linda Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014.
- <sup>24</sup> Limor Shifman and Dafna Lemish, "'Mars and Venus" in Virtual Space: Post-Feminist Humor and the Internet', *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28:3 (2011), 255.
- <sup>25</sup> Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny*, p. 5.
- <sup>26</sup> Ellie Tomsett, 'Twenty-First Century Fumerist: Bridget Christie and the Backlash against Feminist Comedy', *Comedy Studies* 8:1 (2017), 57 – 67.
- <sup>27</sup> Robyn Stacia Swink, 'Lemony Liz and Likable Leslie: Audience Understandings of Feminism, Comedy, and Gender in Women-Led Television Comedies', *Feminist Media Studies* 17:1 (2017), 14 – 28.
- <sup>28</sup> Frances Gray, *Women and Laughter*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994. Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant (Eds.), *Hysterical! Women in American Comedy*, Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 2017.

- <sup>29</sup> See for example Sara Schaefer's Twitter thread responding to 'American comedians disgruntled about Hannah Gadsby's special for not having "enough" jokes.' <https://twitter.com/saraschaefer1/status/1014558411688734725>
- <sup>30</sup> Tomsett, 'Positives and Negatives', p. 6.
- <sup>31</sup> Rebecca Krefting, 'Hannah Gadsby Stands Down: Feminist Comedy Studies', *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 58: 3 (2019), 166.
- <sup>32</sup> Gray, *Women and Laughter*.
- <sup>33</sup> Mizejewski and Sturtevant, *Hysterical!*
- <sup>34</sup> Johnson, "'How Very Dare You!'", p. 422.
- <sup>35</sup> Michael Billig, *Laughing and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Laughter*, London: SAGE, 2005.
- <sup>36</sup> Jennifer Reed, *The Queer Cultural Work of Lily Tomlin and Jane Wagner*, 2013, p. 4.
- <sup>37</sup> Michael Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. xxvii.
- <sup>38</sup> Reed, *The Queer Cultural Work*, p. 21.
- <sup>39</sup> Jennifer Reed, 'Sexual Outlaws: Queer in a Funny Way', *Women's Studies* 40:6 (2011), 765.
- <sup>40</sup> Rebecca Krefting, *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.
- <sup>41</sup> Krefting, *All Joking Aside*, p. 3.
- <sup>42</sup> Krefting, *All Joking Aside*, p. 5.
- <sup>43</sup> Reed, *The Queer Cultural Work*.
- <sup>44</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, London: Routledge, 2010 (1984).
- <sup>45</sup> Jilly Boyce Kay and Sarah Banet-Weiser, 'Feminist Anger and Feminist Respair', *Feminist Media Studies* 19:4 (2019), 603.
- <sup>46</sup> It should be noted here that as a white woman, for Gadsby, the option to express anger is available in ways it is not for women of colour. For an important intervention into the racism of the 'angry black woman' stereotype, see Audre Lorde's work, in particular her address 'The Uses of Anger', *CUNY Academic Works*, 1981: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/509>
- <sup>47</sup> Brian Donaldson, 'Hannah Gadsby: "I Hope It Shows People There Is Life after Trauma"', *The List*, 2 September 2019: <https://www.list.co.uk/article/111267-hannah-gadsby-i-hope-it-shows-people-there-is-life-after-trauma/>
- <sup>48</sup> Mark Monahan, 'Bridget Christie: A Bic for Her, The Stand' (review), *Telegraph*, 15 August 2013: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/edinburgh-festival-reviews/10245761/Bridget-Christie-A-Bic-for-Her-The-Stand-review.html>
- <sup>49</sup> Brian Logan, 'Bridget Christie, Edinburgh festival 2013 review', *Guardian*, 6 August 2013.
- <sup>50</sup> Josh Glancy, 'Josh Glancy in America: It may be because our leaders are clowns, but there's one thing that really isn't funny any more comedy', *Sunday Times*, 4 August, 2019, p. 7.
- <sup>51</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 60.
- <sup>52</sup> With the success of *Nanette*, increasingly (mainly) men have publically wanted to dismiss Gadsby's show or tell her that what she is doing is not really comedy, something she addresses in her new show *Douglas* (2019).
- <sup>53</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 65.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid
- <sup>55</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*.
- <sup>56</sup> Gadsby, *Three Ideas*.
- <sup>57</sup> Rebecca Krefting, 'Hannah Gadsby: On the Limits of Satire', *Studies in American Humor* 5:1(2019), 99.
- <sup>58</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 65.
- <sup>59</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*.
- <sup>60</sup> Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, London: Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 10.

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<sup>61</sup> Love, *Feeling Backward*, p. 30. My italics.

<sup>62</sup> Lydia Buckingham, 'The Sound of Tension: the aural aesthetic of oppression in Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette*' [Conference paper], 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Cultural Studies Association: Performance, Politics, and Power, 30 May –1 June 2019, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.

<sup>63</sup> Gadsby in interview with Carina Chokano. Carina Chokano, 'The Weaponized Comedy of Hannah Gadsby', *Rolling Stone*, 28 February, 2019.

<sup>64</sup> Gadsby, *Three Ideas*.

<sup>65</sup> Emilie Pine, 'Finally, angry women are the solution and not a problem but we still have far to go', *Guardian*, 24 September 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Halberstam, 'Just Joking'.

<sup>67</sup> Als, 'Hannah Gadsby's Song of the Self'.

<sup>68</sup> Other commentators have been annoyed by the 'pedagogical impulse' (Halberstam 2019) and expressed it would be better suited as a TED talk than stand-up.

<sup>69</sup> Krefting, 'Hannah Gadsby: On the Limits of Satire', p. 98.

<sup>70</sup> This is an instance where the television special differs from earlier performances of *Nanette*; in earlier versions you don't get this final moderation of anger, instead Gadsby leaves the stage with the tension more prominently hanging in the air (Krefting 2019).

<sup>71</sup> Krefting, 'Hannah Gadsby: On the Limits of Satire', p. 101.

<sup>72</sup> Gadsby, *Three Ideas*.