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Laughing at Ourselves: Music and Identity in Comedic Performance

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Peter Trigg entitled "Laughing at Ourselves: Music and Identity in Comedic Performance." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Music, with a major in Music.

Rachel Golden, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Leslie Gay, Jacqueline Avila

Accepted for the Council:

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Laughing at Ourselves:
Music and Identity in Comedic Performance

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Music
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Peter Trigg
May 2017

Dedication

This thesis dedicated to my family
for their unending support
during my growth as a
researcher, musician, and person.

Also dedicated to comedy,
without which,
life would be quite dull, indeed.

Dedicated to the game.

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Abstract

Standup comedy actively performs and engages with constructions of self and social identity, especially in terms of ethnic difference and the negotiation of American race relations. Musical comedy, wherein standup comedians perform song onstage, represents one facet of this expression that configures musical texts and expectations in the service of cultural observation and critique. Bo Burnham and Reggie Watts characterize two disparate approaches to the practice based on their aesthetic tastes, existential anxieties, and racial experiences. The two present their respective identities onstage in relation to a changing American political landscape of the early 21st century that has seen widespread social anxiety about gender and race, particularly. I argue that by presenting musically diverse and absurd representations of self, Burnham and Watts act out different types of hybridity, wherein they must confront their internal contradictions and respond either by reconciling them into a cohesive identity, or breaking down under the weight of the inconsistencies.

I first investigate Bo Burnham and his position as a white male within an entertainment industry that he despises because of its consumerist manipulations. I apply the work of Timothy Taylor on the connection between music and capitalism to explicate how the two interact in Burnham's act, as well as that of Simon Frith and Paul Willis for how his popular performance serves to construct and signify identity. He performs genre parody that exposes the inauthenticity of mass-mediated cultural identities, as well as musical skits where he performs his own divergent identity and struggles for consistency. Secondly, I consider Reggie Watts as he mediates a hybridized racial identity through pastiche and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s concept of 'Signifyin'' on previous black musical texts. Based on Paul Gilroy's notions of the Black Atlantic, double consciousness, and hybridity, I show that Watts constructs a unified identity that embraces the absurdity of his self-performance, and racial categorization in particular. Overall, my examination of these two performers argues for more study of musical comedy as a mediator of identity and hybridity.

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Chapter One

Opening Act: Introduction

Although comedy has a long history of social commentary, my interests lie in humor's functions in popular culture and identity creation through performance. As a musicologist with a concentration in popular forms and language, I have been particularly interested in comedians that make use of music to deliver their performances. The practice of musical comedy has existed for centuries in the form of parody, but it still remains an underrepresented convention in the contemporary comedy scene, excepting a small group of performers who have had great success in the genre. New Zealand duo Flight of the Conchords, Australian pianist Tim Minchin, and American parodist "Weird Al" Yankovic represent some of the most visible musical comedians worldwide, although not necessarily the most unique. My investigation focuses on two American performers—Bo Burnham and Reggie Watts—who I have chosen based on their divergent approaches to music, humor, and identity in modern America.

Burnham's satirical self-reflexive narcissism reveals more about the American and capitalist experience than meets the eye, as does Watts's deliberately confusing and fragmented musical narrative of race. The two represent very different racial experiences through musical presentation and humor as they both attempt to articulate their perceptions of self in today's era of increasing economic and cultural globalization. Bo Burnham's meticulously planned shows directly

challenge the capitalist economic systems that allow him to perform and become successful through a dishonest stage persona. He confronts his own complicity as a white man in the structures of capitalism, and consequently struggles to reconcile the contradictions inherent in his position as both entertainer and activist.

Conversely, Reggie Watts approaches his performance as an improviser, and his monologues and songs obliquely challenge racial inequities. Instead, he mediates his identity as a hybridized member of the African diaspora by combining black musical forms through his unique blend of vocals with technologically mediated accompaniment. His hodge-podge of sound appears absurd to the audience as he rarely says anything of evident consequence, preferring instead to foreground his musical antics and his ridiculous, often meaningless lyrics. In contrast with Burnham, Watts embraces the ludicrousness of his profession; where Burnham sees his contradictory position of an entertainer, Watts accepts that position as another extension of his already complex racial identity, wherein he must reconcile his diverse background daily.

These comedians' combined output from 2010-2016, a time when both have enjoyed successful careers, expresses these anxieties of identity at an important cultural moment for changing ideas of race and gender in the United States. This time period, marked by the presidency of Barack Obama, saw myriad changes in American social life, including the legalization of same-sex marriage and increased publicity of police violence against young black men. Additionally, the growth of social media influence during this time period has garnered significant attention as an influential tool for information dissemination and identity creation. Importantly,

these new social realities exist as constructs within an American system that remains dominated by white male heterosexuality. In my discussions below, I investigate how economic and social arrangements like the entertainment industry encourage particular readings of race and gender to consumer audiences. Seen through the historical lens of slavery, Jim Crow, and blackface minstrelsy, popular media has traditionally denigrated blackness as dangerous, natural, primitive, and animalistic.¹ Those stereotypes obviously make wild assumptions based on skin color and additionally, they oversimplify the human condition as a set of cohesive characteristics. Similarly, gender remains an essentialized trait that Judith Butler investigates in *Gender Trouble* as a primarily performed aspect of identity.² These frameworks situate identity as a product of environment, then, where politics, media, history, and privilege all work together to fashion complex and inconsistent individuals. I begin with a study of Bo Burnham, an early internet sensation, who specifically challenges the capitalist media structures of the 21st century that also made him famous.

Bo Burnham, born in 1990 and trained primarily in theater, began his comedy career on YouTube as a teenager. He credits the rise of YouTube with his own success, as a large like-minded audience found him without much promotion on his end.³ After a short stint in college, Burnham decided to pursue professional work as a comedian built around his pop-influenced piano tunes and irreverent lyrics. After a series of relatively successful album releases, he taped *what.*, his first

¹ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working*

² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

³ Pete Holmes, "Bo Burnham," podcast audio, You Made It Weird, May 16, 2012, <http://nerdist.com/podcasts/you-made-it-weird-channel/>.

live comedy special in 2012, followed by *Make Happy* in 2016. In contrast to most contemporary standups, who draw heavily on improvisation and reactions from the audience, he plans his acts down to each word and gesture, drawing from his experience as a thespian.⁴ Because of his admitted obsession with the mechanisms of performance, Burnham provides a valuable case for analysis within theories of performance art and presentation of self.⁵

As an entertainer, Burnham relies on his audience to support him, but he simultaneously resents that dependency.⁶ Much like the situation that Judith Butler laments in *Gender Trouble*, Burnham sees celebrity as an inescapable cultural force that recapitulates itself through media and language.⁷ Acting through a character, who I call Bo in my second chapter, he works to subvert the capitalist cultural construct of celebrity through his own satirical performance as a public figure. By repeated and absurd representations of that character, he aims to restructure language and, consequently, thinking, about the place of celebrity and performance in everyday life. By presenting this repetitious and subversive performance style, he works within the model of gender defiance that Butler posits, wherein cultural changes must come from repeated challenges to the norm until those things also become integrated into culture.⁸ Although Burnham does challenge gender norms through his performances, his subversion has many different foci, including class, race, mental health, and identity struggles that go along with his involvement in the

⁴ Holmes, "Bo Burnham," 2012.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Holmes, "Bo Burnham," 2012.; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 195.

entertainment industry. Through defiance of cultural expectations in these areas, he carries out Butler's model of subversion in multiple political arenas.

In similar fashion to performance art of the 1960s, Burnham becomes the subject of his own pieces while still performing (through his character) as object. As Burnham performs with a specific intent for his audience, they become involved in performance themselves as interpreters. Following the lead of Simon Frith, I consider Burnham's writing and text differently from the act of performance before reflecting on them in combination.⁹ That is to say, Frith posits that popular song must be theorized in context of both text and performance. As subject, Burnham writes his act to confront the problems that he faces in modern America, while as object, he creates an onstage presence that acts as a caricature of himself: arrogant, self-obsessed, and unapologetic. Burnham comprises both the source of material and the site of narration, but in two different incarnations. This conflict allows him to speak freely and subversively within the comedy tradition without censorship because the audience has no way of knowing which bits are to be taken seriously and which are not. His intentional subject/object status places most of the interpretive responsibility on the audience as cultural decoders.¹⁰

Burnham's relationship to his audience involves both seduction and alienation of the listener. Also building on the work of Frith, I interpret Burnham's use of music and lyrics as a skillful manipulation of the audience in order to deliver

⁹ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 158.

¹⁰ Frazer Ward, *No Innocent Bystanders* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2012).

his satirical and subversive message.¹¹ When playing music, Burnham's character is at his most likable, and thus has the most freedom to communicate his ideas. During his traditional standup monologues, he scorns the audience by mocking their intelligence or naivety, and those sentiments draw laughs from the crowd when put into popular song forms. For example, when he begins a song with a simple rhythmic piano part and four-chord structure, he capitalizes on the entrenched expectations of pop given to cultural participants by mass media. The "bubble-gum" nature of his pop-styled lyrics, with a focus on love, and their appeal to young consumers do not surprise his audience, and the familiarity of these structures allows him to draw his audience into complacency before shocking them with his unexpected lyrical content.

I argue that Burnham ironically performs a specific, white, youth-oriented, and political identity through his musical comedy that challenges consumerist ideals and constructions of identity. His early development as a YouTube phenomenon, subsequent engagement with social media, and youth place him squarely within the millennial generation both in terms of timing and anxieties. His worries revolve around the capitalist structures that have created him and forced him to sell a fabricated version of himself to an audience. As a white and successful comedian, Burnham holds a privileged position both economically and racially, wherein he has had the privilege of a quick rise to fame that many could not. He uses his privileged situation as an opportunity to bring the machinations of consumer culture to light. Using sources that discuss the usual invisibility of whiteness, as well as the capitalist

¹¹ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 205.

systems at work in the music and entertainment industry, I demonstrate how Burnham's performance challenges entrenched cultural structures.¹²

Where Burnham bases his act on a theatrical model, African American comedian Reggie Watts draws from extensive experience as a performing and improvising musician. Originally born in Germany in 1972 before moving to Montana, Watts grew to love performing music in high school.¹³ After a short time studying jazz in Seattle, he began performing with bands of various genres, including soul, hip-hop, and funk. His initial interest in improvisation began here, but developed into a comedic act in 2004 when he moved to New York City. Soon, Watts had his own unique style of performance that combined technology, music, and comedic monologue into a seamless improvised piece. In 2010, he released his first taped special, *Why Shit So Crazy?*, followed by *A Live in Central Park* two years later. Since then, he has continued to successfully contribute to the television programs *Comedy Bang! Bang!* and *The Late Late Show with James Corden*.¹⁴

I again use the theories of Simon Frith to investigate Watts's particular brand of performance and its differences from Burnham's.¹⁵ While Burnham uses popular music as a seductive aspect of his subversive textual material, offering the audience a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down, Watts's music shores up fragments of sound to create meaning in an otherwise syntactically nonsensical

¹² Lawrence Grossberg, "Identity and Cultural Studies: Is That All There Is?," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage Publications, 1996); Timothy D. Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.)

¹³ Pete Holmes, "Reggie Watts," podcast audio, You Made It Weird, September 28, 2016, <http://nerdist.com/podcasts/you-made-it-weird-channel/>.

¹⁴ For more on Watts, see <http://reggiewatts.com/>

¹⁵ Frith, *Performing Rites*.

performance. Using Frith's investigation of popular music voice, I approach Watts's vocalizations as various characters, as well as disembodied sounds, which combine to create a unified whole. Watts approaches his comedic performances from an absurdist's perspective, asking his audience to consider the chaotic soundscape that he builds for them and find meaning in the madness. As a self-avowed "disinformationalist,"¹⁶ Watts uses his body, voice, and language to undermine traditional comedic and musical tropes. Instead of informing his audience, he "disinforms" them of their expectations, primarily by his use of non-semantic and poetic language. Switching deftly from nonsensical British accented monologues to beatboxed tunes, Watts shapes his audience's experience by these peculiar employments of sound. The complex interplay between music and text results in an existential humor that Watts performs through various characters.

With both Watts and Burnham, the separation between performer and character identities comes into question. As a black man and a trained jazz musician, Watts occupies a much different position from Burnham, a white young man from middle-class Massachusetts with experience in pop, piano, and theater. Building on the work of Guy Ramsey and Paul Gilroy, I argue that Watts continues the long tradition of the African American "Blues Muse" in an intersectional manner that places him as a player in the Black Atlantic framework, performing his transnational racial identity through music while also representing his gender, class, and politics using absurd linguistic forms. Ramsey's work lays the foundation for "exploring [musical performances'] potential *within* a specific social history at the nexus of

¹⁶ Danny Halek, "Reggie Watts, Man of Many Voices, Improvised His Way to Success," *All Things Considered*, last modified April 1, 2015.

musical pleasure, religious zeal, sensual stimulation, and counter-hegemonic resistance.”¹⁷ These various intersectional markers feature prominently in Watts’s stage work as he engages with fragmented material and shapes it into something intelligible, a testament to his and other black Americans’ experience of double-consciousness. Henry Louis Gates’s theory of “Signifyin’” lends substantial viability to Ramsey’s argument and also clarifies Watts’s performed representations as multifaceted symbols and metaphors.¹⁸

Through these two distinct perspectives, I show how music contributes to the cultural dialogues within contemporary comedic performance. While comedy and music have long been utilized as political tools, their combination represents a unique mediation of identity and ideals in relation to race and consumerism. Reggie Watts and Bo Burnham provide unique examples of such mediation through their differing approaches to stage performance, music, and comedy itself.

Method and Scope

This study analyzes the convergence of music and comedy in the context of critical theories in performance art, identity, and contemporary American society. Language, sound, and physical enactment coordinate in musical performance to represent identity in ways that traditional comedic performance does not, drawing on musical conventions to extend its scope of commentary. I show that musical

¹⁷ Guy Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 41.

¹⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

stand up comedy performances, specifically those of Bo Burnham and Reggie Watts, offer a substantial artistic contribution to American culture and identity by confronting the very anxieties that their mostly millennial viewers currently face. This commentary addresses generational anxieties especially poignantly in the realms of social justice and performance of identity in a modern transnational America.

In many disciplines, theories about the connections between performance and identity, identity and culture, or culture and performance abound, but the involvement of comedy in these aspects culture remains underexamined. Musical comedy in my usage is characterized by the performance of song in context of a staged stand-up comedy routine. These songs, as discussed below, may comprise genre parodies, cultural observations, or even simply ridiculous lyrics that aim to make the audience laugh. This style of comedy performance has social meaning based on its use of common musical forms that carry previous cultural associations, and thus performers can actively decide to draw from an inculcated cultural imagination for their own observations.

Anxieties of performance bear peculiar weight in the comedic profession, where many performers feel that they tend the dying embers of free speech in America.¹⁹ To investigate this, I explore work on performance and cultural critique, although little of it emphasizes the implications that comedic performance brings to its subjects. Particularly important to these types of performance theories are the boundary between performer and audience, as investigated in the work of Frazer

¹⁹ Pete Holmes, "Bo Burnham #3," podcast audio, *You Made It Weird*, September 14, 2016. <http://nerdist.com/podcasts/you-made-it-weird-channel/>.

Ward.²⁰ As Ward shows, performance artists of the 1960s often blurred the line between performer and audience by forcing spectators to take action through situational constructions. American cultural theorist David Rushkoff also scrutinizes the way that technology and capitalist commodification have created a nation in which many citizens constantly perform themselves to an online audience.²¹ If comedians are to be commercially viable, how might they also “speak truth to power” without alienating their audience or betraying their own artistic values?²² How does the use of music in comedy affect those relationships? The answers to these questions straddle the line between sincerity and caricature, sometimes liberating the performer and sometimes further entrenching them in established cultural codes.

In musical and comedic performance models, enacted markers of gender generate desired (and sometimes undesired) reactions in the audience, playing off the notions of feminine and masculine that dominate our heteronormative society. A musician or comedian of color like Reggie Watts racially marks himself by overt and covert musical sounds and linguistic methods of mimicry. Considerations like race, class, and gender have extensive applications to both comedic and musical performance, but their junction represents a singular opportunity for unique presentation of identity. Judith Butler’s notion of continuous and culturally embedded gender performance lays the basis for much of my thinking about

²⁰ Frazer Ward, *No Innocent Bystanders*.

²¹ David Rushkoff, *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now* (New York: Penguin Group Inc., 2013), 67.

²² Holmes, “Bo Burnham #3.”

performance in all aspects of identity.²³ Similarly, Reggie Watt's enacts a continuous display of racial identity that challenges essentialized notions of blackness in America. His involvement with the musical traditions of black America as well as those of experimental composers allows him to mediate his racial identity through both common and novel sounds. Following the work of W.E.B. DuBois, the notion of double consciousness appears in this racially marked work, paralleling black American attempts to make meaning for themselves through music in an otherwise marginalizing society.²⁴ Simultaneously, Bo Burnham satirically represents the cult of the "straight white man" through his narcissistic on-stage character while still considering some of the class problems that plague his own millennial generation: student debt, job availability, and political disenfranchisement.

My materials for analysis consist of disparate sources and source types, depending on the nature of the subject being discussed. My theoretical frameworks originate primarily in scholarly work on humor, race, and feminist theory as these apply to performance and identity. I employ these frameworks as applicable to recorded media of comedy performance, including standup video, albums, television appearances, and interviews. Through each of these mediums, I investigate personal reactions to the absurdity of race, gender, and the social construction of those characteristics by mass culture. An important source of comedic insight also comes from comedian-moderated podcasts, one of the most popular new avenues for comedians to perform to a loyal audience. Thus, interviews referenced are not my own, but are taken from podcast conversations between comedians as indicated.

²³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 195.

²⁴ Ramsey, *Race Music*, 40.

Additional interviews from magazines and televised media also provide supplementary information in my arguments.

The various video segments I use as examples contain a mix of traditional comedic monologue, nontraditional improvised monologue, theatrical skits, character acting, and musical performance. I investigate the lyrical content, sound content, and performance practices of each of these examples in light of racial, social, and gender-specific frameworks in order to elucidate the performance of identity through comedy, music, and their combination. Additionally, I utilize the insights provided in interviews with these performers to make conclusions about the nature of their comedic methods and goals as they relate to the capitalist entertainment industry. My combination of those personalized accounts, theoretical scaffolding, and recorded performances provides a strong basis for analysis of the cultural forces at work in these examples of musical comedy.

Specifically, I am focusing exclusively on content created between 2010 and 2016. For Burnham, that time period includes three full comedy specials: *Words Words Words* (2010), *what.* (2013), and *Make Happy* (2016). The most recent of these specials provides the majority of the material for my inquiry, as it demonstrates the culmination of Burnham's artistic progression and attempts to construct identity. Watts has released three full-length specials in the same time frame: *Why Shit So Crazy?* (2010-11), *A Live in Central Park* (2012), and *Spatial* (2016), as well as many more less formal performances on YouTube. These examples share many of the same performance characteristics for which Watts has become known, including his trademark improvised musical creations. Additionally,

I include some shorter performances on programs like PopTech and TED, as well as referencing his involvement with *The Late Late Show with James Corden*, where he has recently become the bandleader. Using the works of both comedians in this time frame, I elucidate how each of them performs unique versions of identity through humor and musical sound.

Review of Literature

In terms of scholarly study, comedy and musical comedy remain underrepresented areas of scholarly investigation. While this fact in some ways restricts my available avenues for inquiry, it also widens my search for prospective research material. I have constructed my own working system of analysis drawing from previous models used in pop culture, music lyrics, and performance art, including but not limited to performance of gender, racial hybridity, and construction of self through sound. Additionally, these models work in context of a particular cultural moment wherein issues of social justice have dominated American politics and popular media in an age of social media between 2010 and 2016. Together with primary sources that include extensive interviews with the comedians, I form a cohesive picture of how various combinations of musical comedy can represent a multifaceted and contradictory individual.

The podcast *You Made It Weird with Pete Holmes* has proved an invaluable resource for content relating to both Bo Burnham and Reggie Watts, as well as numerous other comedians and performers including Ben Folds, Weird Al Yankovic,

and Tim Minchin, all of whom have influenced my thinking on musical comedy.²⁵ Holmes structures these podcasts as closely to a natural conversation as he can, often interjecting his own experiences into the stories of his guests, but usually with the purpose of deeper understanding. Most often, these interviews begin with the topic of comedy, its practice both philosophically and practically, and the performers' experiences in the comedy world. In many cases, these candid conversations about comedy lead to exchanges about the values that lead performers to create their content, and how they intend their audience to receive their work.

In the case of Burnham, three such interviews have occurred over the course of four years, and the inconsistencies among these interviews help to reveal Burnham's performances as a coded, commodified, and complicated part of American mass culture. In his earliest interview, conducted just after the release of *Words Words Words*, the pair mostly talk about their own notions and tastes in comedy. As the interviews and specials continue to come out, it becomes obvious that Burnham has very specific worries about American consumerism and the effect it has on the identity of the nation's youth. These talks accurately reveal which topics Burnham found most important for each of his specials and aid my analysis of his work. The candor with which the interviews are undertaken also allows for Holmes and Burnham to nurture a rich environment for conversation that invites informative revelations from each performer. At times, the content of these interviews shows Burnham's commitment to a project or idea and then is quickly

²⁵ Pete Holmes, podcast audio, *You Made It Weird*.

contradicted a moment later. When told that he was an inspiring comedian, Burnham answered, “You get me back in a year and I’ll say things the opposite of what I’m saying now, and I embrace that about myself. It’s probably my age. I don’t ever want to apologize for passion, even if it’s misdirected or I recant on it in 4 years or whatever.”²⁶

In his most recent interview, Burnham speaks pointedly about a perceived breakdown in cultural capital brought about by media elites and “celebrity.”²⁷ In a model posited by Bourdieu, mass production of goods serves to lower the cultural capital that they hold.²⁸ That is, only the rare and unique works of art have real meaning and value, while popular forms simply feed the market’s need for material. This framework accurately describes Burnham’s internal struggle; he wants to create art with intrinsic value, but he must use consumerist models of entertainment to do so. Burnham also attempts to tackle the tension between generations as a possible cause for social unrest, cultural stagnation, and personal mental instability. These ideas play out in *Make Happy*’s stark takedowns of musical commodification and examinations of identity politics and social anxiety.

I argue that much of Burnham’s anxiety arises from a neoliberal capitalist culture, as explained by Timothy Taylor and his involvement in the systems that bolster it.²⁹ Music, comedy, and capitalism remain inextricably linked in modern America, where the commodification of performance has led to a popular culture

²⁶ Holmes, “Bo Burnham #3.”

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital” (1985), *Handbook of Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 56.

²⁹ Timothy D. Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present*, 45.

that many, including Burnham, feel is inadequate and dishonest, and thus essentially worthless.³⁰ Additionally, he performs a particular “whiteness” that often remains under wraps, bringing racial difference to light instead of normalizing the white identity. Through genre parody, he consistently shows how popular artists take advantage of their fans by providing them with insincere and unoriginal content, including his racially pertinent takes on the absurd presentations of rap and country identity. His own anxiety originates in the irrational paradox of his position as an entertainer and privileged white male; he attempts to create a truthful performance of self while simultaneously feeling pressured to perform a constructed character for amusement of his fans. That friction between the real and fabricated identity leads him to more personal and introspective performances. I show that through his development as a comedian, he has continually become more and more disenchanted with his celebrity status, culminating in his most recent special, *Make Happy*.

A gap always exists between what is meant and what is said in performance art, causing an existential anxiety within and without the performer; a similar issue marks both Burnham’s and Watts’s performances. Frith considers the role of popular performance both in the traditional sense of musical performance, and also in the sense of listening as performance.³¹ He first constructs a working understanding of performance in which he combines the ideas of objectifying fine art and “subjectifying” performance art, challenging a long assumed subject/object

³⁰ Holmes, “Bo Burnham #3.”

³¹ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 203.

binary.³² He recognizes the importance of audience to performance art, saying it “depends on the audience’s ability to understand it both as an object...and as a subject, that is, as a willed or shaped object, an object with meaning.”³³ In response to the anxiety of his reception, Burnham presents his character cynically, as a jester who doubts the ability of his audience to understand the deeper ramifications of his performance. Watts, in contrast, embraces the anxiety by pushing his language to point of unintelligibility, as in this excerpt, where he begins in a Scottish accent, and slowly transitions into a sing-song rhythm of strong beats that I emphasize with italics:

*“Knocking things over, yes.
It’s a *thing* you can do
When you’re *moving* through a *crowd*
And you *can’t* see the *blue*.
Well, the *darkness* and the *darkness*
As the *millipedes* do *crawl* upon your *feet*.”³⁴*

From this position, the distance between artist and audience collapses, as neither group can accurately explain the meaning of the performance. Watts’s silly verses are literally meaningless, so both he and his audience understand them equally—that is, not at all.

In addition to his subject-object discussion, Frith considers three parts integral to the act of popular song: text, voice, and performance. In his examination

³² Ibid., 205.

³³ Ibid., 205.

³⁴ Reggie Watts, “A Live at Central Park,” Amazon Prime Streaming Video, 43:00, posted by Amazon.com, accessed November 12, 2016, https://www.amazon.com/Live-At-Central-Park-Explicit/dp/B007ZD420A/ref=tmm_msc_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=

of song lyrics as texts, he identifies two further categories: “Words, which appear to give songs an independent source of semantic meaning,” and “rhetoric, [or] words being used in a special, musical way, a way which draws attention to features and problems of speech.”³⁵ He posits these distinctions in order to make the point that “the issue in lyrical analysis is not words, but words in performance...Lyrics, that is, are a form of rhetoric or oratory; we have to treat them in terms of the persuasive relationship set up between singer and listener.”³⁶ He then investigates the popular idiom of the love song as either a reflection of social practice, or conversely, as a contrast between the real and the fictive. Additionally, Frith goes on to discuss the relationship between spoken and sung language as it relates to verbal skill in writing, singing, and emoting.

Analysis of the popular music voice can have multiple layers of meaning, working in unison or against each other. Watts and Burnham each use their voices as tools to a specific end, both in terms of sound expectation and identity. In his discussion of voice, Frith raises questions of whose voice one hears speaking when listening to a pop song. He argues that the obvious answer, the singer, cannot fully satisfy analysis of popular music where voice may encompass a writer, performer, character, or caricature at all once. Additionally, he identifies a connection between the voice and the body as it applies to gender, sexuality, and commodification. The way that an audience hears a voice has profound implications on the reception of that music, and gender often acts as the first marker of voice differentiation. Frith’s most poignant point covers his question, “what is the relationship of someone’s

³⁵ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites*, 159.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

vocal sound and their being?”³⁷ The voice may in some cases allow for speaker recognition, but it can also deceive. The audience’s perception of sincerity often relies on voice conventions that performers may fake for effect.

These complicated relationships between speaker, performer, and audience make pop irony and realism “all but impossible to disentangle,” a fact which I argue Burnham and Watts both use to their advantage.³⁸ Watts makes extensive use of electronic voice modifiers and often changes language or accent in the middle of speaking, while Burnham consistently parodies popular genres by co-opting their sounds. As performers in the comedic genre, traditionally used to “speak truth to power,” both comedians become unreliable narrators marked by the constantly shifting nature of their voices.³⁹

Most important to my study is the notion of construction, as both comedians I investigate perform constructed characters onstage that represent their real identities through action. Judith Butler’s model of performed identity parallels both Bo Burnham and Reggie Watts as staged entertainers who perform particular character identities that do not necessarily match their everyday identities, but do often overlap. Her work provides the basis for much of my thinking on identity performance. Most notably in *Gender Trouble*, she challenges the persistent gender binary that represses various other forms of gender identity expression. She argues that subjects construct gender through socially normalized actions in contrast to the long-held belief that social norms resulted from naturalized gender disparities. Her

³⁷ Ibid., 197.

³⁸ Ibid., 199.

³⁹ Holmes, “Bo Burnham #3.”

argument “is that there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed’ but that the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed.”⁴⁰ According to Butler’s definition, all identity-marking actions function as performance of identity rather than precise reflection of some prefigured true identity. Indeed, many other variable identity metrics also enter the fray, as both Burnham and Watts construct character identities around race, class, gender, and politics. I especially apply Butler’s theory of identity to Burnham, who remains entrenched in the white heteronormative capitalist patriarchy, but attempts to challenge it from within. Butler recognizes the difficulty of subverting gender norms from within the current system, but Burnham repeatedly offers a challenge to societal norms of gender, race, and class as theorized in *Gender Trouble*, wherein the only way to change the inculcated norms of gender is to consistently and repetitively challenge them by insisting on changes in language and action until they become the norm.⁴¹

In keeping with Butler, Burnham and Watts defy the gender binary through their use of poetic language, a distinctly gendered medium of performance in her assessment. The repetitive use of gender defiant language, though often fraught with imperfections and contradictions, has resulted in real changes in language and ideas based on repetition of artistic material. Burnham and Watts’s recurring poetic performances place them outside the heteronormative standards of American culture, where they then maintain the freedom to signify in unexpected ways. The subversion of expectation also works to their advantage comedically, where the breaking of expectations often provides the reason for laughter.

⁴⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 195.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 157

I position both Burnham and Watts as models of hybridity in very different ways due to their racial contexts and experiences. I situate Watts's identity along frameworks of hybridity, wherein a performer may inhabit the space between minority and majority groups, representing a separate incarnation of ethnic/gender/political identity. Defined by Lawrence Grossberg, hybridity is a state of existence wherein "subaltern identities exist between two competing identities."⁴² In the studies below, hybridity figures differently for each comedian; Bo Burnham presents a character that embraces a dominant racial narrative while also ironically resisting it and struggling to reconcile his own hybridity, while Reggie Watts represents the liminal space and necessary combination of his black American and French backgrounds. Watts exemplifies another point of Grossberg's: "Neither colonizer nor precolonial subject, the post-colonial subject exists as a unique hybrid which may, by definition, constitute the other two as well."⁴³ As I argue, Watts inhabits different characters that demonstrate his multifarious identity in discreet, fragmented parts. Grossberg also inspects the role of fragmentation in formation of identity, drawing on the work of David Bailey and Stuart Hall to characterize the "decentered" identity, wherein each aspect of race/gender/politics must be explored separately.⁴⁴ These ideas apply throughout my investigations as a basic framework for understanding the construction and performance of identity.

⁴² Lawrence Grossberg, "Identity and Cultural Studies: Is That All There Is?," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 91.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

The enactment of character influences the performances of both Watts and Burnham in contrasting ways that I investigate through the lens of performance, especially those by Lily Tomlin and Lenelle Moïse. As Jennifer Reed explains in her discussion of Tomlin, character performance acts to “subjectivize” each incarnation—that is, each character becomes a subject in themselves, with intact particulars of identity that Tomlin performs through word and action. From the perspective of feminist theory, “each character has her own movements, facial expressions, and intonation...All of these moves transgress the rules for feminine deportment, and thus transgress ‘woman.’”⁴⁵ Burnham prominently features similar transgressions in his own performances by enacting impropriety through his narcissistic stage persona. Watts also transgresses “rules of deportment,” through physical and aural depictions of multiple characters. These quick code switches initially seem to suggest total identity fragmentation, but the fluidity with which Watts navigates characters implies a unified identity formed through bricolage.

Afro-Caribbean specialist Jerry Philogene’s investigation of the Haitian-American poet Lenelle Moïse provides a valuable example for integration of diverse aspects of identity into a single individual, especially in context of Gilroy’s Black Atlantic. Her identity performance raises questions about intrapersonal contradiction: both high and low brow, colonized and colonizer represent her. Watts’s own multicultural status situates him in the same discourse, where “Moïse’s work occupies this transitory zone of *endezo*, where multiple cultural forces cross

⁴⁵ Reed, “Lily Tomlin’s *Appearing Nitely*,” 440.

and co-exist within the axis of memories and languages.”⁴⁶ Unlike Tomlin, Watts does not perform outside his own identity, instead choosing to perform separate parts within his kaleidoscopic identity in succession.

I extensively employ Gilroy’s framework of the Black Atlantic in order to situate Reggie Watts as a transnational performer who embodies a diverse and multifaceted black American identity. This seminal work on African diasporic identity draws extensively from the concept of “double consciousness” as posited by DuBois, wherein black Americans had to negotiate themselves as both American citizens, and cultural outsiders to the white elite.⁴⁷ Watts furthers this theory by his hybridity as French and African American citizen, born outside the U.S. and raised in Montana. Using the method of “Signifyin’” as posited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Watts suggests and implies various meanings and identities by performing ambiguous texts based on traditional black cultural forms.⁴⁸ Some exploration of those forms is taken from Tricia Rose’s work in hip-hop, in addition to Ramsey’s investigations mentioned above.⁴⁹

The concept of the absurd proves important to my argument in that Watts and Burnham perform their own unique internal conflicts based on their personal reactions to the illogicality of identity. I take from Simon Critchley’s work for my concept of the absurd, which includes more than meets the eye. While meaningless

⁴⁶ Jerry Philogene, “Lenelle Moïse: Postscript Swimming in the Waters of Endezo,” *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 19.3 (2015): 342.

⁴⁷ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 30.

⁴⁸ Gates, *Race Music*, 196.

⁴⁹ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

lyrics or silly antics play into his definition of absurdity, Critchley uses various works of humor scholarship to investigate the reasons that we laugh and point out how all human experience can ultimately seem irrational.⁵⁰ Here he builds on and synthesizes that scholarship to assert that what makes us laugh is “a person acting like a person.”⁵¹ Both of the comedians I investigate below perform their identities in such a way that this view of absurdity rings true; they each attempt to present themselves as whole persons, but they find that whatever they do, it just seems ridiculous. Consequently, they diverge in their responses to ridiculousness, either by embracing it as a characteristic human trait or by eschewing it and becoming depressed at the supposed meaningless of an absurd life.

Using this grounding in humor theory as a stepping off point, I make a connection between American televised political satire and the political satire of standup comedy. Sophia McClennen’s work especially elucidates the convergence of humor and media and its subsequent effects on political climate in modern American society.⁵² In order to gain a more complete understanding of humor theory and its interaction with politics and gender, I surveyed a number of works covering the definitions, uses, and effects of different aspects of humor, including laughter, parody, satire, and mockery, all of which might connect to my overall idea of absurdity in diverse ways. In general, work in humor theory remains indebted to psychoanalytical theory posited by researchers like Freud, but more recent scholarship suggests a number of varied perspectives. Among these, Linda Hutcheon

⁵⁰ Critchley, *On Humour*, 59.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵² Maisel and McClennen, *Is Satire Saving Our Nation?*, 7-9.

provides ample background from which to discuss parody of musicians and styles as performed by Burnham and Watts. Additionally, she explicates the term of parody while still allowing for interpretive space on the part of the audience.⁵³

Thesis Outline

In Chapter 2, I scrutinize the comedy specials of Bo Burnham and their engagement with various aspects of performativity through popular song. Investigating his problems of performance, I argue that his presentation of popular forms speaks to generational anxieties for millennials who are involved in a time of political and change that impacts their perceptions of politics, gender, race, and economics. Bo Burnham constructs an identity that challenges social hierarchies from within while still battling existential anxieties. My investigation reveals how Burnham fluidly builds and breaks relationships with his fans through verbal attacks and musical misdirection, setting him as an unreliable narrator to his own performance. His two filmed acts, *what.* and *Make Happy*, closely examine the role of performance in everyday life through a distinctive combination of poetic language and popular music styles. Burnham presents himself to the audience as a simultaneous insider and outsider, flipping between love and disdain from line to line of his pop piano tunes. Set against this noncommittal presentation of self, he concurrently aims to communicate with the audience about important social and political problems that revolve around the consumer culture without alienating

⁵³ Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, 44.

them from his message. As mentioned above, his anxiety of self plays an important role in these performances; he regularly uses his platform to criticize the dishonesty of popular performers like Katy Perry, but simultaneously takes part in the same performative deceptions as a part of his livelihood. Interestingly, he even addresses this dichotomy himself on stage, saying “I want to please you, but I also want to say what I think and not care what you think about it.”⁵⁴ This paradox also exists in his racial presentation as an actor within the white majority that consistently challenges white normalization.

Chapter 3 turns to the work of my second central comedian, Reggie Watts. Building on works by Rose, Gilroy, Ramsey, and Grossberg, I examine Watts’s practices of sound construction in the larger framework of absurdist humor, postmodern thought, and hybrid racial identity. Using both humor theory based on parody and the absurd in literary and musical traditions, I show that Watts adheres to the philosophies of both comedy and music in terms of confrontation and representation. Through his peculiar use of voice modulation and improvised song, he subverts musical expectations and replaces old forms with a representational pastiche of sound that corresponds to his own hybridity. As a multiracial, post-colonial individual, Watts performs traditionally black American music using a disorienting rhetorical style that privileges semantics over syntax, interpretation over objective truth. He constructs meaning from disparate sources, paralleling his racial experience in America, but does so in a rhetorically ambiguous manner that

⁵⁴ Bo Burnham, “Make Happy,” Netflix Streaming Video, 59:50, posted by Netflix.com, Accessed June 6, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80106124?trackId=14170286&tctx=1%2C2%2C48844d3e-a9f0-4d04-b787-82b42564dd7e-9868891>

welcomes varied readings, “Signifyin” on his marked racial experience. These racial aspects allow for my inclusion of traditional black musical forms, wherein Watts continues a collective artistic movement on the part of African Americans in the solidarity of struggle for multifaceted America identity.

As chapters 2 and 3 investigate the two as separate comedic acts, chapter 4 synthesizes and discusses the effectiveness of their different strategies as ways of presenting the self, specifically in their respective responses to absurdity. I argue that Bo Burnham’s style of popular subversion foregrounds semantics over musical sound, wherein the musical medium of popular forms acts foremost as a means of “seduction” that mirrors and satirizes consumer culture. Burnham intends for an audience steeped in American cultural products to associate his musical styles with their popular equivalents, subsequently delivering an ironic and politically active text that would be unacceptable without familiar music to soften the blow. Subsequently, that performance reveals systematic deceptions of audiences by entertainers, including Burnham himself. This crisis of identity makes him question his part in the social hierarchy, ending with his inability to reconcile absurdities and contradictions within himself. Conversely, Watts performs in such a way that musical sound eclipses semantic meaning. By foregrounding absurd language, he refuses to provide his audience with a steady narrative for interpretation. Instead, language devolves into electronically mediated sound that I argue represents Watts’s construction of identity as a fragmented and chaotic, but nevertheless, unified individual. He embraces the absurdity of identity as a hallmark of the hybrid individual in contrast to Burnham’s more cynical representation of self and

whiteness in general. These two separate incarnations of performance exemplify the convergence of music and comedy in order to mediate identity politics.

Chapter Two

Can't Handle This: Bo Burnham

As Judith Butler posits in *Gender Trouble*, all life is performance. No individual exists separate from their actions; instead, we continually construct our identities by performing actions based on social and cultural contexts.⁵⁵ Bo Burnham has taken this perspective on life and identity to heart in his comedy performances, where he invariably pushes his audience to consider the constructed nature of contemporary life in reference to consumer culture. To do this, he splits himself into two parts—writer and performer—that reveal his philosophies on construction and authenticity through absurdity and parody. As a parody artist, his methods closely resemble those of the celebrities that he lampoons, but with the explicit goal of disrupting the norm of a capitalist consumerist pop-driven society.

Burnham challenges racial constructions of normalized whiteness by drawing attention to his own racial position of privilege and complicity in the commodification of culture. In this method, Burnham's absurdity delivers a more "true" message than the artists he parodies because it reveals the artificiality of performance. His performances aim to show that neoliberal structure of pop-driven consumerism manipulates people into receiving inauthentic and meaningless products of culture. As a member of such a society who has succeeded within the capitalist system, he must continually draw attention to the insincerity of his own

⁵⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 195.

stage performance in order to reveal the machinations of performing in a consumer culture. Through genre parody and character presentation, Burnham grapples with his contradictory positions as a privileged actor in capitalism's web of cultural deception and his simultaneous need to perform genuine and meaningful work, leading to a staged mental breakdown that represents his inability to reconcile the incongruities of his identity.

Genre and sound play a particularly important role in Burnham's musical critiques of capitalism, as he performs different styles and aural markers that represent distinct communities and the culturally constructed identities, therein. Songs, in the words of musicologist Richard Middleton, "seem to point towards particular historical moments, knots of collective experience, cultural traditions, and so forth."⁵⁶ As cultural products then, musical sound can signify particularities from race and gender constructions to notions of love, sadness, or joy by commenting on previous texts. Additionally, he notes that song experiences are collective; they characterize groups of people that Dick Hebdige called subcultures, which share a communal identity based on historical, economic, and racial background and subsequently perform that identity through specific stylistic choices like music and dress.⁵⁷ Sound represents one form of identity performance then, separating groups from each other based on collective musical values.

Burnham takes advantage of various genre expectations by presenting songs that adhere to musical norms using familiar instruments, rhythms, and melodies. At

⁵⁶ Richard Middleton, "Modes of Representation," in *Reading Pop: Approaches to Textual Analysis in Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 231.

⁵⁷ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979).

the same time, he reveals the absurdities within particular communal identities that those genres construct. Among others, studies by Tricia Rose, Aaron Fox, and Robert Walser explicate how genre divisions create different particularities of identity performance in varied communities. Each genre has a predetermined form and sound based on common practice in popular culture, and Burnham's audience is surely familiar with such expectations. Rose shows how hip-hop's sound characterizes black experience in the late 1980s as "aural manifestations of philosophical approaches to social environment," where specific communities construct their music based on identity and vice versa.⁵⁸ Burnham subsequently parodies those constructions in light of a consumer culture that he feels taints art, as examined below. Similarly, Fox investigates the language surrounding working-class country musicians in Lockhart, Texas, especially in how it constructs masculinity and what he calls "real country" aesthetics.⁵⁹ In the same way, Burnham performs an absurd version of that masculinity and his own conception of country in order to show the inauthenticity of the identity mediated by the mass-marketed genre. He parodies a number of genres in the same way, switching voices and physical presence deftly from pop ballad to hip-hop to country and back. By playing on expectations for each of these culturally entrenched musical forms, he communicates his take on mass-mediated identity.

As a system, capitalism not only acts as a framework for economic practices, but also as an essential feature of individual and collective identity. This follows

⁵⁸ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 67.

⁵⁹ Aaron Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 22.

closely with ideas of both Paul Willis and Aaron Fox, who argue in separate studies that small communities graft themselves to particular genres and styles as markers of distinction.⁶⁰ In Willis's study on British motorbike subculture of the 1970s, he shows that the group has a collective "style of identity" and masculinity that they perform variously, including through their choices in music.⁶¹ By eschewing new music of the '70s for '50s rock artists, the motorbike boys set themselves apart from hippie culture through capitalist buying habits.⁶² Timothy Taylor further remarks on the intertwining of music and capitalism, a structural feature in American culture that forms communal identities based on their collective tastes and habits of consumption. Taylor characterizes neoliberal capitalism as an ideology that "profoundly shapes the culture in which it finds itself,"⁶³ and argues that the "freedom" of the United States' capitalist culture allows consumer to construct their identities based on their products of consumption.⁶⁴

For Burnham, the rub comes from the capitalist market's intentional manipulation of its consumers for monetary purposes that lead to unhealthy performances of identity. Interestingly, in 1990 Willis singled out the machinations of record companies that market oldies for a generation that had never heard them before, paralleling his earlier studies on the motorbike boys and their infatuation

⁶⁰ Paul Willis, *Profane Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 36.; Aaron Fox, *Real Country*, 22.

⁶¹ Willis, *Profane Culture*, 18.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶³ Timothy Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 45.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

with early rock and roll.⁶⁵ As I show below, Burnham vehemently distrusts the authority of the market on artistic production and consumption, especially as marketed to youth. Taylor explicates the phenomenon of youth marketing and advertising as an economic solution to the need for more consumers during the 1950s, when baby boomers began to acquire spending money.⁶⁶ In light of Pierre Bourdieu's discussion of cultural capital, advertising represents a danger because of its power to force "norms and constraints linked to the requirements of the market," not to the requirements of the society.⁶⁷ Below, I investigate how Burnham explicitly performs the absurd norms of popular genres by revealing the insincerity of their producers.

Burnham performs American whiteness in a particularly significant way compared to many fellow white comedians, who never clearly consider their own racial privilege. In a tradition dominated by white males, even the few white performers that make mention of race are necessarily making a political statement on visibility and agency. As Richard Dyer notes, when whiteness goes unspoken, race becomes the domain only of those who are not white. He considers a perceived separation of humanity into two categories—one racially marked, and the other "just human."⁶⁸ In his words, "as long as white people are not racially seen and

⁶⁵ Willis, *Profane Culture*, 35.; Paul Willis, *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young* (Milton Keynes; Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1990), 61.

⁶⁶ Taylor, *Music and Capitalism*, 40.

⁶⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. by Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 345-346.

⁶⁸ Richard Dyer, "The Matter of Whiteness," in *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, ed. Paula Rothenberg (New York: Worth Publishers, 2008), 10.

named, they/we function as a human norm.”⁶⁹ In naming whiteness as a racial reality, one removes it from the pedestal of “just human;” instead, the biases and conventions of whiteness become particularized and thus, representative of only a portion of humanity.

Burnham’s presentation of whiteness challenges the assumption of “just human” by foregrounding his own prejudices and privilege as a white male performer in a capitalist system that values his voice above others. Through my investigation of Reggie Watts below, for example, I speak often about his performance of hybridity and American black music. Burnham also performs a version of hybrid identity by both recognizing his privileged position and challenging it through musical investigations of the cultural products that construct race on a day-to-day basis. He despises the American consumerist system in which he has succeeded, and thus seems to lack roots in ethnicity that might otherwise situate him as an “American” with a cohesive racial identity. Instead, he persistently questions his role as a white performer, showing that the average white American comprises a combination of cultural biases and consumer products that sell a racially ideal picture of society—one that doesn’t exist for minorities.

Burnham’s Performance Style and Subjects

Throughout his career, Burnham’s works have focused on performance itself, wherein he musically lampoons the act of performance and the societal structures

⁶⁹ Dyer, “Matter of Whiteness,” 10.

that encourage celebrity and consumerism. When performing these musical selections, he generally uses only a piano and his voice, although he sometimes performs the pieces theatrically, acting along to a pre-recorded musical track. He presents himself onstage with a mix of confidence and self-deprecation that immediately results in comedic situations. He performs in varied genres as explained above, always speaking as a caricature of the identity that the genre ostensibly mediates. His onstage persona in the three hour-long specials that I investigate changes constantly,

As a tall and gangly twenty-five year old, Burnham's relative youth and awkward figure allow him to fully embrace two sides of himself. He plays the part of the narcissistic and liberal millennial well, consistently sneering at his audience as sheep in service to the capitalist system, while he is the only one who really understands. In addition though, he performs an undeniable lack of self-confidence that comes through in his ironic turns of phrase and obvious grabs for attention. His sneers often end in a joke at his own expense, leaving the audience wondering whether he really means the things he's saying or not. Watching a Bo Burnham show is like being showered with backhanded compliments by a friend of a friend. You never quite know if he's being serious or not. Burnham's lovability comes from that tension; if he means what he says, it's pretty rude, but if he doesn't, it's just funny.

I focus entirely on the three comedy specials *Words Words Words, what.*, and *Make Happy*, performed in 2010, 2013, and 2016, respectively. *Words Words Words* represents Burnham's first foray into the live comedy special, where he presents his

narcissistic character clearly and with little introspection. His work in *what* continues the self-confident presentation with the addition of theatrical performances that bring his identity into question as discussed below in the songs “Right Brain, Left Brain” and “We Think We Know You.” His most recent special, *Make Happy*, most explicitly handles his anxieties of performance and disdain for consumerist capitalism through excoriating critiques of mass mediated genres like hip-hop and country, as well as moving and emotional representations of Burnham that reveal his discomfort with his conflicting values as a performer. The three specials show a progression in his career that moved toward more politically active statements on the effect of consumer culture on identity and his own complicity in that system.

Many of his songs act as testimonials against mass culture, especially as his style and writing matured. When performing genre parodies, he critiques the music industry for what he sees as a lack of creativity that does not serve the public.⁷⁰ These sentiments fuel many of his caricatures, as he ridicules everything from hip-hop “beat fetishism” to bubblegum pop stars.⁷¹ In a 2016 interview, he laments that celebrity and comedy have become so intertwined that late night hosts like Stephen Colbert and Jimmy Fallon have lost their edge. They opt to feature celebrities for “these bullshit little skits they do...where basically almost always the entire reason the thing works is because ‘God is doing something human.’ Like this beautiful

⁷⁰ Pete Holmes, “Bo Burnham #3,” podcast audio, *You Made It Weird*, September 14, 2016. <http://nerdist.com/podcasts/you-made-it-weird-channel/>.

⁷¹ Bo Burnham, “Make Happy,” Netflix Streaming Video, 59:50, posted by Netflix.com, accessed June 6, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80106124?trackId=14170286&tctx=1%2C2%2C48844d3e-a9f0-4d04-b787-82b42564dd7e-9868891>.

gorgeous celebrity (that really isn't that), is getting up and farting the pledge of allegiance with their armpit."⁷² As the conversation continues, he tones back his charged rhetoric, saying "I'm just like 'stuff should be better,' that's all. Stuff should be a little bit better."⁷³ These concerns highlight his anxiety over the mixing of commercial and artistic interests in media where the almighty dollar reigns supreme. Burnham then, shares Bourdieu's worries about the destruction of "the most precious cultural gains of humanity" by their link to capitalist markets.⁷⁴

Much of Burnham's music revolves around presentation as an activist, wherein he has the opportunity to insert politically charged rhetoric into his show through ironic performativity. As a political tool, satire and irony have proved useful in left-leaning television media, and Burnham uses his songs to push similar agendas.⁷⁵ His performance of pop, hip-hop, and country genres act as a medium for him to speak about how politics and consumer culture are intricately linked, which Burnham artfully satirizes with lyrics that reveal political realities in relation to genre identifications and style, as cited in Willis above.⁷⁶ Through his genre parodies and more explicitly political tunes, Burnham considers the meaninglessness of gender categories, the phenomenon of "men's rights" activism, and the use of music as a way to solidify identifications in gender and race.

⁷² Holmes, "Bo Burnham #3."

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market*, trans. by Richard Nice (New York: Free Press, 1998), 37.

⁷⁵ Sophia A. McClennen and Remy M. Maisel, *Is Satire Saving Our Nation?: Mockery and American Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁷⁶ Willis, *Profane Culture*, 35.

As a comedian, Burnham's ability to insert that rhetoric into his performance is paramount; otherwise he represents just another product of consumer culture that inculcates the values of a society with which he disagrees. Throughout his performances though, he loses sight of whether or not he can ethically continue to perform when he so knowingly manipulates his audience. His performances turn inward toward personal identity and the contradictions therein, where antipathy exists between his onstage persona and his real-life resentment toward the industry in which he takes part. Although he certainly pushes a political agenda through much of his music, this aspect of identity performance takes center stage in his most effective and complex songs. This category shows his struggles to combine truth and construction in a way that he believes serves his audience.

Bo parodies his own position as a privileged liberal man by mimicking millennial stereotypes of self-obsession and "whininess," all to the goal of encouraging thoughtful consideration of the absurdity. When presenting songs that act chiefly as political comments, Bo shows the absurdity in cultural norms of gender and race by magnifying their contradictions. Keeping in mind the schema posited by Auslander that separates singer from persona and character, each of his songs contains layered meaning based on cultural and musical convention.⁷⁷ As a theatrical performer, Bo acts in contrast to faux-conservative pundit Stephen Colbert, who lampooned conservative talking points by carrying them to their

⁷⁷ Philip Auslander, "Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto," *Contemporary Theater Review* 14.1 (2004): 6.

furthest extent.⁷⁸ Instead, he performs his own political position, not an adopted one, as ridiculous in order to question its validity.

Burnham and Bo: Who Is Who?

In order to more easily differentiate between the entertainer and his character, I have chosen to write about them using the names Burnham and Bo, respectively. Burnham's acts of performance require his own critical distance, enabling the audience to see both the intention behind his decisions as well as the rationale behind Bo's character. As Linda Hutcheon explains, irony and parody exist together as the superimposition of two contrasting texts.⁷⁹ As a writer, Burnham creates distinct texts that state explicit points of view, but the character Bo's musical performances act as a secondary text that contrasts in meaning. In combination with his political activism and resentment of capitalist structures, these tools of parody and irony work to challenge preconceived notions of culture by setting contrasting texts against each other to be compared.

As an amateur actor through his childhood, Burnham embraces the onstage character performance of Bo. He builds his act on this strategy as opposed to the current trend in standup comedy toward speaking about real life, in the vein of Louis CK or Bill Burr. In interviews with Pete Holmes, Burnham consistently

⁷⁸ Maisel and McClennen, *Is Satire Saving Our Nation?*, 112.

⁷⁹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 34.

distances himself from his character through invocation of his theater background, saying that he feels uncomfortable when people expect him to be funny in real life, because “I haven’t worked on that on stage. Like my onstage thing, I feel like I might as well be doing a play or something. Just reading lines, being a character.”⁸⁰ Holmes attempts to compliment Burnham, saying that his performances feel sincere and “you always make me feel like a fraud.” Burnham responds by focusing on his own construction: “Oh, that’s not true. My show is a complete fraud.”⁸¹

While many comedians and performers work to manipulate their audiences for the desired effect, Burnham makes sure to inform his audience each time they have been manipulated, foregrounding his betrayal as a part of capitalist consumer culture. Burnham emphasizes his prescribed artificiality during the hour-long special *Make Happy*, his most recent and most introspective work. Performed in a large theater in New York with prominent focus on lighting and effects like smoke machines, disorienting camera angles, and pre-planned theatrical scenarios, this special represents Bo at his most anxious.⁸² He parodies several different genres, explicitly names his white privilege, and finishes the show with a musically mediated mental breakdown that results in a final question to his audience: “Are you happy?” The planned artifice of his show bothers him, but he also needs it in order to be effective. At the 18:30 mark in *Make Happy*, he asks an audience member for his name as a starting point for an improvised song.⁸³ After choosing a man in

⁸⁰ Pete Holmes, “Bo Burnham,” podcast audio, You Made It Weird, May 16, 2012, <http://nerdist.com/podcasts/you-made-it-weird-channel/>.

⁸¹ Holmes, “Bo Burnham #3.”

⁸² Burnham, “Make Happy.”

⁸³ Ibid.

the front row named Rob as his target, a prerecorded track plays with small gaps where Bo inserts the name “Rob”—obviously this is not as improvised as he said it would be. Burnham’s construction brings attention to the betrayal of our expectations, asking the audience, “How does he do it? How does he pretend to do it? How does he remain contrived? I’m not honest for a second up here! Honesty is for the birds, baby. You want an honest comedian? Go see the rest of them.”⁸⁴

Burnham meticulously plans his shows then, carrying out every aspect with the goal of comedic manipulation, wherein he may outright lie in the pursuit of theatrical effect.

Make Happy revolves around the interplay of performance with truth and manipulation, and the character of Bo serves to make that connection more palpable. At the 00:20 mark, the special opens on Bo waking up in a hotel room in clown make up, underscoring his position as nothing more than a pawn in the grand scheme of the performance.⁸⁵ As a character, Bo represents a convergence of absurdity, self-loathing, and depression that finds expression through witty wordplay and reinterpretation of popular song forms. Bo’s self-loathing springs from the falsehood of his performance and the manipulation of his audience. Ironically, he feels that he cannot stop performing this constructed identity because the audience, as part of consumer culture, demands that he entertain them. Because of that friction between performed identity and personal identity, public and private, he feels compelled toward duplicity. He constantly reveals his own deceptions as a counter to this compulsion, skillfully demanding attention with his sure-footed

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

performance style while simultaneously contradicting that assuredness with his words.

Even in his earliest special, words played an important part in Bo's self-portrayal through the songs on *Words Words Words* (2010), where title track of the album culminates in the repeated refrain, "I hate catchy choruses and I'm a hypocrite."⁸⁶ This album represents the beginning of his career as a cultural commentator, and he would later continue the satirization of repetitive popular music in his second hour-long special, *what.* (2013), performed in a 700 seat auditorium in San Francisco.⁸⁷ He takes the quick wordplay of his early work into more introspective waters with *what.*'s piano ballads like "#deep" and "From God's Perspective," where he croons self-importantly about his own deepness and the foolishness of religious belief from behind a grand piano. The staged performance "We Think We Know You" at the end of *what.* features Burnham standing alone in the middle of the stage in a spotlight, where he confronts the feelings of fraudulence that pervade society from social media to Bo's own clown-like antics.⁸⁸ As a performer who began his career online and engages with social media variously, "#deep" also makes explicit reference to Internet culture and the way it encourages his contempt for others and himself because of its supposed inauthenticity. *Make Happy* later follows this line of thinking, allowing Bo to open up even further from

⁸⁶ Bo Burnham, *Words Words Words*.

⁸⁷ Bo Burnham, *what.*, Netflix Streaming Video, 59:54, posted by Netflix.com, accessed June 20, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/70295560?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C1%2Cd7e7ded7adb35fc724a229b87a566d2e0af75fbb%3A9992c3e70bffcc7347194dd570f94d6a52aeb35>

⁸⁸ Burnham, "what."

his shell of self-loathing in the final songs “Can’t Handle This,” explained below, and “Are You Happy?” The questions remain though: how much Burnham exists in Bo and vice versa?

“From God’s Perspective,” a song through which Bo performs his narcissistic version of God’s thoughts, begins with a contradiction: “I don’t want you leaving my show thinking that I think I know better than people, or that I think I’m better than people in general...Ok...this is a song from the perspective of God.”⁸⁹ Once again, he uses absurdity to create friction between the familiar and the unfamiliar, setting real religious beliefs against ridiculous statements. His strikingly expressive piano ballad uses his whole vocal and dynamic range, as well as a speaking voice that he uses in asides:

You shouldn’t abstain from rape just ‘cause you think I want you to.
You shouldn’t rape because rape is a fucked up thing to do.
[Aside:] (Pretty obvious, just don’t fucking rape people.)⁹⁰

Using the tools of a popular performer, Bo once again comes across as a sincere and almost conversational speaker while still executing his musical goals using changes in register, dynamics, and timing to draw attention to different sections of the tune. He often pauses between lines, forcing the audience to consider his first line without context. “You shouldn’t abstain from rape just ‘cause you think I want you to” is a remarkably jarring line by itself, and Bo lets those feelings sink in before he goes on to release the tension. Bo/God excoriates his audience repeatedly, saying:

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

You're not going to heaven.
 Eat a thousand crackers, sing a million hymns.
 None of you are going to heaven.
 You're not my children, you're a bad game of Sims.⁹¹

Burnham sees much of religion in the same light as neoliberalism—as a mass-marketed and hierarchical product that misleads its consumers.

Through the double lens of irony, one sees that Bo/God and Burnham have something in common: Just as God has constructed his game of Sims, Burnham has constructed Bo for the audience's benefit. This song gives the audience one of the first glimpses of Bo and Burnham's real convergence. In stark contrast to his usual clownish persona, Bo shows a rare moment of sober consideration instead of ironic mockery when earnestly declaiming in a markedly higher register:

My love's the type of thing that
 you have to earn and when you earn it,
 you won't need it.
 I'm not gonna give you love just 'cause
 I know that you want me to.
 If you want love, then
 the love has gotta come from you.⁹²

Following Burnham's special as an act of performance art, one sees that Burnham as subject has begun to infiltrate Bo as object. These lines match closely with something stated by Burnham in an interview nearly three years later, wherein he gave his perspective on a piece by David Foster Wallace: "That was his mission statement. To say...`Irony is not enough. Acidic tearing down of shit is not enough. I'm not here to tell you that I see through all this bullshit and aren't you cynical like

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Burnham, "what."

me? I'm here to say I love you."⁹³ Burnham's thoughts here, normally in opposition to Bo's toolbox of irony and ridicule, seep through to the audience using music and comedy as a readily consumed medium.

The separation between Bo and Burnham, though real, becomes less and less sustainable as Bo's narcissistic appearance begins to falter, but once again, we must question the validity of that performance in itself, knowing that "honesty is for the birds, baby."⁹⁴ His performances set truth and fabrication against each other in order to bring attention to their interchangeability. The complicated relationship between his two halves serves to further Burnham's thematic goals, wherein he questions the nature of truth by presenting himself both as object and subject of performance in the same manner as a performance artist. Describing this interplay, Frith says, "work and artist [are]...the same thing, and the space of art [is] redefined as a moment or period or *event*."⁹⁵ These events often bring binary oppositions to light: mind/body, inside/outside, subject/object.⁹⁶ Despite his confident presentation, the audience must hold these two perspectives equally in order to gain the full ironic effect of Bo's performance and Burnham's writing as they lambast his consumerist position.

⁹³ Holmes, "Bo Burnham #3."

⁹⁴ Burnham, "Make Happy."

⁹⁵ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 204.

⁹⁶ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 205.

Burnham's Use of Music

Frith asserts that meaning in music comes from a social process and “scheme of interpretation” that allows for the reading of cultural forms by the consumer— a scheme that Burnham here utilizes in order to enhance tension and emotion in the viewer.⁹⁷ Burnham even recognizes that his musical ability plays handily into his stagecraft, saying that he knows it’s “further away from the purest form of standup comedy, but it’s a different way of story telling...It can be used to cut corners but it can be used to like also enhance the emotion of something, or enhance the tension of something.”⁹⁸ This self-aware perspective on musical comedy accepts that many comedians actually see the use of music as a cop-out,⁹⁹ but Burnham goes further by filling his songs with confrontational rhetoric that is only rendered digestible by its musical packaging. As a performer, Burnham knows that he manipulates his audience, and music provides him with an expedient avenue for quick changes in emotion and expectation.

Burnham’s utilitarian musical model aims to deliver a message not just to entertain. It places the burden of meaning on lyrics and interpretation instead of musical statement.¹⁰⁰ Often speaking without ambiguity, Bo declaims a line so shocking that it cannot be overlooked: “Just don’t fucking rape people.”¹⁰¹ But in keeping with his double-speaking character, lyrical meaning sometimes remains ambiguous. Historian Peter Bailey argues that performers like comedians have the

⁹⁷ Ibid., 249.

⁹⁸ Holmes, “Bo Burnham.”

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 164.

¹⁰¹ Burnham, “what.”

freedom to use unspecific language because they “[construct] their own audiences, their own colluders, by using a mode of address which both [flatters] the audience’s social competence and [acknowledges] its social wariness, its feeling that it might *get things wrong*.”¹⁰² Thus, the audience remains unsure of implication, generating numerous possible meanings before even beginning to consider whether the speaker during any given song represents Bo’s or Burnham’s perspective. Comedy gives Burnham the perfect stage on which to enact such a show rife with political rhetoric and personal inconsistency because, as a comedian, entertainment remains his principal responsibility. Yet, from his early albums through *Make Happy*, the audience sees that Bo does not feel fulfilled by simply entertaining anymore.

The junction of theatrical and musical performance provides an exceptional space from which to comment on identity because of the sheer intricacy of interplays between body and music. By way of example, opera fluidly combines these two separate practices into one artistic performance; as explained by performance theorist Patrice Pavis, “under the influence of musical and gestural rhythm, these elements have fused, mixing and melding together what seem to be opposing elements: speech and music, time and space, the voice and the body, movement and stasis.”¹⁰³ Fellow performance theorist Philip Auslander sees merit in the analysis of the music and performance together. Using a framework of Frith’s, he theorizes the different classes of “characterization” that song performers may

¹⁰² Frith, *Performing Rites*, 209.

¹⁰³ Patrice Pavis, *Analyzing Performance*, trans. by David Williams (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 121.

embody: the real person, the performance persona, and the character.¹⁰⁴ Auslander also recognizes the important contribution of cultural processes, including the music industry, on creation of both persona and product. His final schema for the analysis of popular music places the three “characterizations” in succession, leading to a musical output that is received by an audience—all of this contained within conventions of performance, genre, and culture.¹⁰⁵ Burnham exemplifies this intermingling of musical and cultural forces through his parody songs.

Burnham’s Politically-Tinged Parodies

One of Burnham’s most popular styles of performance revolves around song parody, where he mimics the performance of different genre styles for the purpose of revealing the manipulations therein. As a part of the capitalist system of culture, popular song genres provide him an opportunity to reveal various deceptions that consumers undergo daily. His word-heavy writing proves remarkably flexible for use in any genre, including hip-hop, country, pop, and electronica, and the Bo persona readily appropriates each of these identities without accurately embodying any of them. Bo attempts to take on these pop identities as Taylor argues the consumer does, but of course, he cannot be a blank slate.¹⁰⁶ His presentation as a young white man automatically creates certain expectations, which he then uses to mock musical misrepresentations.

¹⁰⁴ Auslander, “Performance Analysis,” 6.

¹⁰⁵ Auslander, “Performance Analysis,” 11.

¹⁰⁶ Taylor, *Music and Capitalism*, 55.

In two of the examples below, Bo parodies rap and country identities, each of which holds a very specific model of masculinity for him to criticize, following his politically active rhetoric and disdain for mass culture as a marker of identity. Both Tricia Rose and Aaron Fox devote chapters of their work to the sexual politics of these two respective communities, wherein male perspectives dominate, albeit in different ways.¹⁰⁷ Hip-hop masculinity tends toward emphasis on violence and independence from the law, while country masculinity equates manliness with hard work, rural locales, and Christian values that often situate women as the “other.” Aside from his witty wordplay and gender subversions, the joke in these examples revolves around his undeniable misfit status—his rap is performed by a skinny white boy, his country sung in his Massachusetts interpretation of a southern accent. Given the observations of Dyer on whiteness, these performances give special import to Burnham’s identity in hip-hop and his relationship to Southern whiteness. Rapping as a young white man, Burnham draws attention to his often overlooked race. Singing country as a successful Massachusetts comedian, he challenges the class and gender stereotypes that characterize the genre. Given the expectations of each genre, Bo’s performance subverts norms visually and lyrically.

In *Make Happy*, Bo parodies rap, mocking a perceived lack of creativity in lyrics due to consumer culture. As Rose points out, hip-hop has played a significant role in the continuation of “the long history of black cultural subversion and social critique in music and performance,” but Burnham’s sees mass-marketed rap as a lower form of the art. His performance describes contemporary rap as “beat

¹⁰⁷ Rose, *Black Noise*, 146-182; Aaron Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 249-271.

fetishism” wherein the lyrics hold no value compared to “a sick beat,” that only acts as a manipulation of listeners to dance instead of meaningful rhetoric.¹⁰⁸ Using a smoke machine, low lighting, and a hunched rapper stance, Bo then raps “I’m A Little Teapot” (See figure 2.1) and “Baa Baa Black Sheep” over a stereotypical hip-hop dance beat, juxtaposing the children’s song with hip-hop in order to show his perception of how dance track rap lyrics lack the substance to affect societal change. This performance involves the exposure of whiteness as a specific racial marker that usually goes unnoticed. As stated above, Dyer posits that such challenges to racial norms disturb a hierarchy that situates whites as “just people” and others as “something else.”¹⁰⁹ Thus, Burnham’s simple attempt to bring attention to racial realities acts subversively to his own position on the dominant and privileged side of the societal racial disparity.

In the San Francisco performance of *what.*, Burnham turns his attention to the influence of the recording industry on popular music, specifically in how it packages and markets bubblegum pop songs. Willis gives a similar assessment of the connection between identity creation and record marketing in reference to “oldies,” as mentioned above.¹¹⁰ Burnham builds on upon this principle by applying it in a contemporary pop context that considers how youth marketing sells love to teens through music. Simon Frith pointedly analyzes the pop love song as a formulaic construct that puts forward a specific romantic ideology.¹¹¹ He contends that this ideology may act variously within the populace; either it reflects real values

¹⁰⁸ Burnham. “Make Happy.”

¹⁰⁹ Dyer, “The Matter of Whiteness,” 10.

¹¹⁰ Willis, *Common Culture*, 61.

¹¹¹ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 161.

of love in that culture, or it gives an unrealistic account of love that the culture embraces due to marketing. Repetition, as Robert Fink argues, plays an important role in the advertisement of such songs, which use redundancy to manufacture desire in consumers.¹¹² Love songs traditionally repeat a romanticized perspective of relationships that focuses on sentimentality, constructing relatively one-dimensional experiences for the listener using common forms and sounds.

Bo caricatures both the sentimentality and unoriginality of such forms in his pop songs while also showing confidence in the existence of a more authentic version of love outside the accepted construct. The question of “real” and “unreal” lyrics creates substantial confusion, both in describing the motives of Burnham and in examining lyrical effects on an audience. Frith goes on to say that the distinction between the two is mostly arbitrary: “And even in life...one is more likely to say ‘I love you more than there are stars in the sky’ than ‘there are ambiguities in the way I feel about you.’”¹¹³ Thus, Bo’s performances contain that double-speak of irony—he speaks unambiguously, but doesn’t mean what he says; he tells the truth, but through a model constructed by capitalist market structures.

“Repeat Stuff” exemplifies how Burnham inserts these thoughts on capitalist music marketing through the conceit of Bo’s over-the-top performance. As with many of his songs, Bo begins with a short monologue that sets up his perspective for the upcoming lyrical ironies. Saying that the love song remains a vibrant and interesting genre, he informs the audience that his next tune tries to capture how

¹¹² Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 121.

¹¹³ Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 163.

new artists like Justin Bieber have changed the format of the love song for a new generation. The first two verses, sung from the perspective of a male pop star, mock the generalities that love songs utilize to appeal to a broad audience:

I love your hands 'cause your fingerprints are like no other.
 I love your eyes and their blueish brownish greenish color.
 I love it when you smile, that you smile wide.
 And I love how your torso has an arm on either side.¹¹⁴

Bo acts the part to perfection, pinching his voice to sound younger and making consistent eye contact with the audience to “convince” them of his sincerity.

The second half of each verse contains a surprising turn wherein the truth of his construction comes out. First,

I love the fact that you are dumb enough to not realize
 Everything I've said has been said before
 In a thousand ways, in a thousand songs
 Sung with the same four chords.”¹¹⁵

And before the chorus,

“I hope you don't see through this clever ruse,
 Designed by a marketing team
 Cashing in on puberty
 And low self-esteem.”¹¹⁶

These two themes—the stupidity of consumers and their subsequent manipulation by the music industry—lay the basis for a refrain that features the words “repeat stuff,” sung ad nauseam. Just as Fink says in reference to advertising agencies, repetition of an ad helps the consumer to remember the product, but some took the

¹¹⁴ Burnham, “what.”

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

idea further and began to use repetition within the ad itself.¹¹⁷ Bo demonstrates this flamboyantly, bouncing and smiling as he sings “repeat stuff” over and over again to his amused audience. He encourages the crowd to sing the “repeat stuff” chorus as if they were participating during a real concert, then stands and salutes as if it were part of a Nazi march (See figure 2.2), recalling Adorno’s fear that mass-marketed “commodity listening” leads to the loss of individuality and (possibly) freedom.¹¹⁸ Though employed as a heavy-handed criticism of popular music that disregards the diversity of popular genres, Burnham’s lyrical twists and Bo’s absurd antics keep the laughs coming without offending the audience even as he calls them cogs in the wheel of capitalism. Much like his criticism of hip-hop, this song also calls for increased originality, arguing that greed has led to this repetitive slump:

“We know it’s not right.
We know it’s not funny.
But we’ll stop beating this dead horse
When it stops spitting out money.”¹¹⁹

(Full song charted in Table 2.1)

Burnham’s most recent and poignant special, *Make Happy*, includes two poignant parodies, both of which build on the themes of audience manipulation and unoriginality by exposing the way that celebrity singers beguile their audience members. The first of these is his “Country Song,” through which he argues that country singers today pander to their audiences by using specific words and phrases that evoke rural life, even if the singers themselves live upper-class lives in the city.

¹¹⁷ Fink, *Repeating Ourselves*, 124.

¹¹⁸ As discussed in Taylor, *Music and Capitalism*, 23.

¹¹⁹ Burnham, “what.”

Aaron Fox's work provides a well-rounded discussion of the notion of "real country" according to the working-class of Lockhart, Texas. He shows how the members of that community connect their own authenticity to their working-class status, and how their musical tastes reflect the same values.¹²⁰

Burnham effectively argues that current country does a disservice to that notion. Instead of valuing honesty, hard work, and the simple life, today's artists simply take advantage of the market demand. The song makes extensive use of "stadium country" conventions like violin, mandolin, and a key change as well as the supposedly "simple life" phrases "dirt road, cold beer, blue jeans, red pickup." Additionally, Bo also shows that the singer doesn't care about the actual subject matter in short asides that mock the audience for listening to him lie.¹²¹ The second verse draws attention to the sexual undertones in many of these country songs, which Fox also reveals as a culturally entrenched idea in Lockhart.¹²² Specifically, Bo hopes that his "Southern charm offsets any rapey vibes [he's] giving."¹²³ Bo's embodiment of the Southern aesthetic makes no attempt at complete accuracy. As a Northeasterner, his unrealistic construction aims to reveal the distance between country stars and real working class people—the more obvious Bo's fraudulence, the more effective his criticism.

¹²⁰ Fox, *Real Country*.

¹²¹ Burnham, "Make Happy."

¹²² Fox, *Real Country*, 250.

¹²³ Burnham, "Make Happy."

Burnham's Self-Construction and Anxiety

Make Happy initially shows Bo in his most comfortable position as a self-obsessed liberal in "Straight White Man." Dripping with sarcasm, Bo laments the roughest aspects of being a straight white man:

I state my problems,
Other people roll their eyes.
Three trips to the mall
Zero khakis in my size.¹²⁴

He uses a wide range of vocal timbres to express his dismay in this ballad. He also frequently delays lines for comedic effect, and his piano playing takes center stage as he plays moving chromatic octaves reminiscent of *The Phantom of the Opera* main theme. His dramatic piano playing and affective facial expressions play to Bo's well-documented narcissism as he sets his own insignificant hardships against those of less privileged groups:

The women want rights.
The gays want [groan] kids?
Can't you just leave us alone?
And also, no to the things you asked for.¹²⁵

Of course, the musical packaging is only a tool for Burnham to insert his subversive lyrics, but "Straight White Man" does seem heavy handed on first impression, unlike the double-speak that Bo usually employs. Critchley's theory of comedic friction explains these comparisons between the privileged and unprivileged, but Burnham unpacks more of his own sentiments in a later interview,

¹²⁴ Burnham, "Make Happy."

¹²⁵ Ibid.

saying that straight white men have become a scapegoat for generational inequities that saddled many millennials with exorbitant student debt and little possibility for advancement.¹²⁶

The irony in “Straight White Man,” then, revolves around the fact of its own ridiculousness. In his view, the straight white man is not the enemy of progressiveness, but simply another person wrapped up in their own inconsequential problems. Burnham doesn’t exclude himself from this group, but instead embraces the humor in the absurdity of his situation. As Critchley says, “humour consists in laughing at oneself, in finding oneself ridiculous, and such humour is not depressing, but on the contrary gives us a sense of emancipation, consolation, and childlike elevation.”¹²⁷ That tendency in humor, based on Freudian psychology, also goes toward the separation of the ego into a subject (super-ego or conscience) and an “abject object” of disdain.¹²⁸ This model fits Bo’s self-flagellation as a straight white man and complicity in the structures that tend to favor that combination of characteristics. He recognizes that discrimination and racial inequality exist by following the song with a short monologue that exposes a disparity in racial history and education. “White guys invented everything but peanut butter, I believe. That’s what I was taught in school...Doesn’t sound right, but the American educational system having a racial bias? No way, Joseph.”¹²⁹

Burnham deepens his self-presentations through increasingly integrating theatrical performance with musical performance, allowing him to perform more

¹²⁶ Holmes, “Bo Burnham #3.”

¹²⁷ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), 95.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹²⁹ Burnham, “Make Happy.”

physically demanding skits. In these meticulously staged pieces, he recognizes that he lives with varied and contradictory parts of a whole that he must reorganize in order to form an intelligible identity. Recalling Frith's classes of characterization in song performance, Burnham's staged constructions of self illustrate the presentation of all three classes—the real self, the stage persona, and the song character.¹³⁰ These categories prove imperative to analysis of Bo Burnham's work, as seen in the unrelenting conceits that serve to both situate his characters, and also to blur the lines between them.

By examining his own characteristics, Burnham confronts the inevitable truth that he does not exist simply as a man, comedian, or writer. Instead, both he and his Bo persona are created, in Butler's words, "in and through the deed" of performance.¹³¹ Additionally, that identity is mediated through consumption of cultural products in Taylor's view of neoliberal capitalism, which Bo acts out through his musical constructions of self that show him to be an absurd individual, created of conflicting parts. The two biggest productions in this show, "Right Brain, Left Brain" and "We Think We Know You," make extensive use of recorded sound with which Bo "interacts" in a feat that required meticulous practice in timing. Both of these pieces play out as short theatrical productions, but neither would elicit the intended response without their musical content. Additionally, the use of technology and a backing track place Bo explicitly in an object position where his body acts as Frith's "site of narrative" upon which actions of the prerecorded track are

¹³⁰ Auslander, "Performance Analysis and Popular Music," 6.

¹³¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 195.

wrought.¹³² In my first example, this remains true throughout; the second example sees Bo reclaim his own subjectivity through literal restructuring of the aural narrative. Frith also stresses that because Western performance only makes sense in terms of culturally shared practices that include both individuals and community, art necessarily sets public and private against each other.¹³³ Bo performs this tension by allowing his audience into a personal experience of his identity formation through self-presentation while still uncertain about their outside perceptions. Per Frith, “this gap is a continual source of anxiety, an anxiety not so much that the body itself but its meaning is out of our control.”¹³⁴ Embracing that anxiety, Burnham’s identity studies reveal his constant self-construction and ask the audience to accept that invention as truth.

“Right Brain, Left Brain” exemplifies Burnham’s use of musical contrast to invoke specific emotional states by building on pop expectations while also presenting conflicting perceptions of self. The song uses unambiguous lyrical content and musical contrast to construct separate emotional and rational personas, which could be considered exaggerations of Bo and Burnham, respectively. The left brain character (rationality), bathed in a cold blue light, sings measured lines along to an obviously computer-generated beat (See figure 2.3A). The even and mechanical musical landscape lends itself to presentation of a similarly even-tempered and rational character. The music and lighting change abruptly when switching to the right brain (emotionality), adding a bright red glow and a pop/rock

¹³² Frith, *Performing Rites*, 205.

¹³³ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 206

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 206.

piano, drumset, and string section that urges Bo's more emotional crooning (See figure 2.3B).

In a study on identity performance in karaoke, Kevin Brown expounds on how musical expectations can serve to bolster essentializing notions of gender.¹³⁵ In parallel with tendencies to equate blue and pink with different genders, Burnham uses color to comment on the supposed femininity of emotion and masculinity of reason. Brown's assertion that "the use of color as a code for gender has become inscribed into our consciousness" proves correct in Bo's exaggerated physical and vocal performances of gender difference between left and right brain.¹³⁶

This strategy of contrast effectively illustrates how Bo utilizes sound to affect expectations and to enhance emotion, as stated above. The two sides wage war musically, but also in a dramatic dialogue wherein the two sides excoriate one another for failing to fix Bo's problems with their respective approaches of emotion and reason. Once right brain begins to cry, left brain shows empathy and tries to suggest a way for them to work together through comedy. The track marks this coming together with a new musical texture that combines electronic beat, piano, and strings. Investigating this combination through Butler's framework of identity performance, one sees that Burnham literally acts out his conflicting personal traits by separating them into different characters and allowing them to communicate. In the end, his actions show that he must accept both sides of his personality to function healthily, and the song thus puts forward a comprehensive version of

¹³⁵ Kevin Brown, *Karaoke Idols: Popular Music and the Performance of Identity* (Bristol: Intellect Ltd., 2015), 54.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

identity that embraces emotionality and reason as important characteristics that work together toward the creation of art and identity.

With “We Think We Know You,” Burnham challenges outside perceptions of Bo’s identity by sampling different voices and rearranging their words into new forms while remaining silent, robbing himself of a voice or agency in opinions of him. Three consecutive monologues open the piece, from a female former classmate, a marketing agent, and a male friend of a friend, respectively. The first tries to invite Bo to a party, but does a poor job of feigning friendship in order to get him to play for her friends. The agent begins his monologue by complimenting his talent, but goes on to criticize his introspective streak, citing studies that young people want “jokes about Twitter, or sugary cereals.”¹³⁷ The last approaches Bo to tell him that he acts like an “asshole” since he became a comedian. Reflecting Burnham’s real feelings, the speaker mentions that he may just be acting for the stage, but quickly decides “that makes no sense.”¹³⁸ Each speaker represents a differing perception of Bo, all of which he has challenged previously—his distaste for pretense, capitalism, and his own part in the deceit.

Beginning to take on a more subjective position, Bo begins to mix the first lines of each monologue into a song by pointing in three different directions in rhythm, one for each speaker, as if cueing their lines individually as an orchestrator or conductor. Performance art often values subjectivity as a claim to autonomy and

¹³⁷ Burnham, “what.”

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

individuality, especially in feminist performance.¹³⁹ Bo takes the subject position here by controlling when each line takes place through physical action, effectively claiming what little autonomy he can while still remaining silent by prompting the speakers when he chooses. Each line denotes a different outside view of his identity: “Bo! Oh my God!,” “Mr. Burnham,” and “Fag.” They soon change for each character: “We think you’ve changed,” “We know best,” and “You suck.” With these new words, Burnham points in time to mix the sentences and create the final line, “We think we know you.”¹⁴⁰ This pastiche of sounds once again situates him as an absurd character, as he presents us with an identity that has been created from the outside in, from society to person—a system that he criticizes.

Where the song started with Bo as object, voiceless and acted on by three other entities, it ends with his reclamation of subjectivity. Looking beaten after the final “we think we know you,” he accepts his fate and begins to mime piano playing along with the track, layering a piano riff, synth pad sounds, and a bass drum. The continued repetition of the previous three monikers begins to strip the words of their meaning, as they become sounds that he can manipulate for the song. Now physically active and involved with the music, Bo has regained autonomy and become the orchestrator of the sounds instead of the listener, though he still deals with the problem of cultural products that construct him. Even in silence, Burnham makes his statement known by disintegrating the words of those who described him and recombining them musically into a more fitting representation that allows him

¹³⁹ Jayne Wark, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 35.

¹⁴⁰ Burnham, “what.”

to use his musical talent as an expression of self. Because he cannot escape outside constructs like capitalist structures, he chooses to continue creating music as a manifestation of identity.

Throughout *Make Happy*, Burnham and Bo seem to become more and more inseparable, culminating in a monologue on performance of self and a subsequent musical homage to Kanye West. In the monologue, Burnham shines through his stage persona by coming to the front of the stage for a more personal presentation, giving his audience some background of his performance life and how it has led to self-reflexive anxiety over his identity (See Figure 2.4). This moment represents a crisis for Burnham, as he has broken the rule of character presentation that typifies his live performances. By intentionally speaking to his audience from the position of Burnham, not of Bo, he attempts to work through his anxiety of performance by letting his fans see more of the “real person” behind the mask. He says he initially worried about writing a show about performance because it wouldn’t be relatable but realized that everyone constantly performs identity, matching Butler’s conclusions.¹⁴¹ Burnham states that he and other young people have been told to express themselves, but they soon find that no one cares what they think, flocking instead to the few people who have found an audience through social media and other capitalist constructs. He realizes his own part in this system and its artifice: “I’m supposed to get up here and say follow your dreams as if this is some sort of meritocracy? It is not. I had a privileged life *and* I got lucky *and* I’m unhappy... I know very little about anything, but what I do know is that if you can live your life

¹⁴¹ Burnham, “Make Happy.”

without an audience, you should do it.”¹⁴² Bo’s clown-like veneer and ironic distance has fallen by the wayside as Burnham’s discontent with celebrity and its inherent deception takes center stage. Simply by performing this monologue, he draws attention unambiguously to the artificiality of his performance in order to parody celebrity and the popular notion that success leads to happiness. Instead, the following song represents his attempt not to make himself happy, but to satisfy the audience who pays him to continue living under those false pretenses.

Burnham begins his Kanye tribute, “Can’t Handle This,” in the same fashion that Kanye rants at his live shows, with auto-tuned vocals over an organ accompaniment that eventually grows to include percussion and piano. Keeping in mind Burnham’s whiteness, this performance becomes yet another attempt to subvert his own position of racial privilege. His first line, “Can I say my shit?,” asks the audience for permission to speak as Burnham instead of as Bo, underscoring Frith’s idea of the anxiety of presentation, which he just revealed to the audience in monologue. As he will say during a short spoken period in the middle of this song,

The truth is, my biggest problem’s you.
I want to please you,
But I want to stay true to myself.
I want to give you the night out that you deserve,
But I want to say what I think
And not care what you think about it.¹⁴³

These sincere lines follow his auto-tuned ruminations on the diameter of Pringles cans and the duties of a burrito maker, starkly contrasting his role as entertainer with his personal wish for true expression. By simply putting these inane worries in

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Burnham, “Make Happy.”

such a dramatic musical form, Burnham elevates their importance, but he shows us with his spoken lines that the constructed hilarity only exists for the audience and is nearly too much for him to bear, repeating “I don’t think that I can handle this right now.”¹⁴⁴

Many factors combine in this performance to create an intense experience, including lighting, movement, and voice effects that utilize a range of sounds that Bo could never make without technological intervention (See figures 2.5A and 2.5B). Kneeling at the front of the stage, he modulates his voice as he sings, spanning multiple octaves well beyond his natural range, both high and low. Burnham purposefully stages this performance with passion, much like “Right Brain, Left Brain,” because he is again at war—this time with his audience and his own mind:

Look at them!
They’re just staring at me like
‘Come and watch the skinny kid
With the steadily declining mental health
And laugh as he attempts to give us
What he cannot give himself.’¹⁴⁵

As Critchley notes, finding oneself ridiculous can often lead to the use of “humour as anti-depressant.”¹⁴⁶ While Burnham does find himself ridiculous and uses comedy as a balm for that discomfort, he still struggles to reconcile his identity. Touching on this problem of mental health, he allows the public (audience) into his private life, involving them in his creation of art and subsequently, of this complex and hybrid

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Burnham, “Make Happy.”

¹⁴⁶ Critchley, *On Humour*, 101.

self. The music continues to become more active rhythmically as he decides to continue the show nevertheless, saying:

I know I'm not a doctor.
 I'm a pussy.
 I put on a silly show.
 I should probably just shut up
 And do my job,
 So here I go"¹⁴⁷

Following his own advice, he restates the early chorus about burrito ingredients once again. His last unique spoken statement,

You can tell them anything
 If you just make it funny, make it rhyme.
 And if they still don't understand you,
 Then you run it one more time.¹⁴⁸

pulls together the message of the piece: He wants the audience to hear his messages about race, class, economics, gender, and mental health, but he also wants them to make them aware of his manipulations so that they remain critical of the source. He continually constructs his identity through action, but also challenges his own position as a white, privileged entertainer for the benefit of his audience. As a comedian, he can say what he likes as long as it's entertaining, so he uses that opportunity to speak subversively about his part in capitalist machinations and societal hierarchies.

As a celebrity himself, Burnham takes part in the capitalist marketing of a product to its consumers, and as a "straight white man," he may initially seem to reinforce the white heteronormative patriarchal structure of society. However, his

¹⁴⁷ Burnham, "Make Happy."

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

complicity in these systems fills him with anxiety and doubt about his own identity as a performer and person. He splits his personality into what people see onstage, and what they cannot, effectively creating a “real” and “fake” version of himself. He then complicates those versions by attempting to speak his racial and political truths through irony and satire, asking the audience to critically examine through a double-lens what he really *means* when he says or does anything. He privileges lyrics above sound, using popular forms only to draw listeners to his subversive messages. Burnham’s songs take on pop stars, music marketers, race, religion, and gender constructs, but they also poignantly question inside and outside perceptions of identity and self. My next chapter focuses on the presentation of self through the multi-faceted performances of improvisatory comedian and musician Reggie Watts. His work turns inward in a way that contrasts with Burnham’s, concentrating on the varied parts that make up his racial identity in America instead of outside perceptions of whiteness and celebrity status.

Chapter Three

One Body, Many Parts: Reggie Watts

In performance theory, postmodernism emphasizes “double-coding” which often finds expression through irony and dualistic character representation.¹⁴⁹ Comedians employ these strategies well by regularly using irony and deliberate misrepresentation to lampoon and problematize politics, social norms, and identity issues. In the early 21st century, satirists Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart practiced this postmodern double-coding as political pundits on Comedy Central, but even for all their success, many critics still condemn that work for its frequent cynicism.¹⁵⁰ Improvisational musician and comedian Reggie Watts represents a complication of postmodernism’s markedly cynical perspectives by practicing a model of self-construction that uses a totally different set of canonical texts than the elite white majority to mediate his racial hybridity and comedy aesthetics. In the model posited by Grossberg, Watts characterizes the hybridized identity, wherein various fragments of self establish an individual who can constitute each of their kaleidoscopic parts concurrently.¹⁵¹ Using a combination of black musical forms, technology, vocal performance, and comedic irony based in absurdity, Watts creates

¹⁴⁹ Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1996), 131.

¹⁵⁰ Sophia A. McClennen and Remy M. Maisel, *Is Satire Saving Our Nation?: Mockery and American Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 114.

¹⁵¹ Lawrence Grossberg, “Identity and Cultural Studies: Is That All There Is?,” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 91.

a distinctly hybridized identity that signifies his simultaneously contradictory and unified self. I argue that Watts uses musical pastiche to disorient his audience, serving to center his position as a multicultural American by equating the absurdity of life with the absurdity of hybrid identity contradictions.

Watts's biography plays an important role in his identification with multiple cultural forms and practices.¹⁵² Born to a French mother and an African American father in Stuttgart, Germany during his father's tenure in the Air Force, Watts's cultural background differs from many black American youths in the 1980s. At a young age, his family moved to Spain for a short time before a permanent relocation to Great Falls, Montana, where Watts began studying piano at five years old. Following a growing interest in music after high school, he moved to Seattle to study and play jazz, performing with over a dozen bands of varying genres during his schooling. His experience as a jazz/R&B/rock fusion keyboardist in the group Maktub led him to experiment with sampling and looping technology onstage, eventually allowing him to play solo gigs using only his keyboard and a looper. In these venues, he often played chordal patterns into his looper, then improvised his solos over the backtrack. While in Seattle, he also became involved with an improv comedy group, and that latent interest in sketch comedy eventually led him to New York City. Here, he combined his looping musical improvisations with comedic songs and monologues to critical acclaim. His free-flowing comedy shows garnered extensive attention from other comedians and musicians alike, leading him to

¹⁵² Paragraph information taken from Dave Itzkoff, "Always the Quick-Change Artist, From Skits to Songs to Stand-Ups," *New York Times* (New York, NY), May 28, 2010.

friendships with the likes of Conan O'Brien and Brian Eno, who invited him to perform at his daughter's seventeenth birthday party. Since his move to New York City, Watts has worked in varying positions. He regularly performs his trademark standup at gigs and in recorded specials like *Why Shit So Crazy?*, *A Live At Central Park*, and *Spatial*. Additionally, he hosted an IFC show called *Comedy Bang! Bang!* and now leads the house band on *The Late Late Show with James Corden*.

Watts's truly unique performance style elicits a variety of odd responses, and admittedly, my first encounters with Watts ended in confusion; for some time after watching *Why Shit So Crazy?*, I did not know what his real voice sounded like, nor how he really acted. The hour-long special opens in an improvised skit where Watts and fellow comedian Kumail Nanjiani play a farcical *Dungeons and Dragons* game before a disembodied voice calls Watts to perform one last time: "You will do it or you will die."¹⁵³ As strains of Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* filter in, I was immediately struck by how different this opening was compared to the dozens of comedy specials I had seen previously. That whole *Dungeons and Dragons* scene didn't even have any jokes, did it? Why did Watts suddenly have a British accent when the music began? Why did he have so much trouble unbuttoning his top shirt buttons? What am I missing here? These questions remained unanswered as Strauss faded out and Watts began to sing nonsense syllables in a high falsetto. Finishing his song with a well-defined cadence, Watts instantly addresses his audience in a

¹⁵³ Reggie Watts, "Why Shit So Crazy?," Amazon Prime Streaming video, 1:30:00, posted by Amazon.com, accessed January 5, 2016, https://www.amazon.com/Why-S-So-Crazy-Explicit/dp/B003L0J50A/ref=tmm_msc_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=&r=

rumbling bass with the words, “Y’all mothafuckers and shit.”¹⁵⁴ I had now entered the sixth minute of a special that would keep me on my toes for the next fifty, as the talented improviser switched effortlessly among his numerous accents, vocalizations, and body language cues, keeping his audience’s attention by alternating between musical constructions and rambling and absurd monologues.

Watts’s comedic successes rely heavily on concepts of ethnicity and absurdity. Simon Critchley compares the use of ethnic humor with the practice of anthropology, saying that both share the goal of defamiliarization.¹⁵⁵ In his assessment, anthropology aims to investigate those things that humanity takes for granted as essentially human, making them unfamiliar by viewing them as social or cultural phenomena instead of everyday assumptions. As a self-described “disinformationalist,” Watts also aims to defamiliarize his audience with seeming normalities, and that successfully. By disrupting common sense and causing his listeners to question their immediate assumptions, Watts exemplifies a break with reality.¹⁵⁶ That disconnect creates a space for him to signify his own identity in a unique way, combining lexical and musical absurdities into an interconnected and harmonious whole (pun intended). Coming from a multinational family and living outside the U.S. provide Watts with a fresh and knowledgeable perspective from which to tackle issues of race and blackness in America through the framework of hybridity.

¹⁵⁴ Watts, “Why Shit So Crazy?”

¹⁵⁵ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), 65.

¹⁵⁶ Danny Halek, “Reggie Watts, Man of Many Voices, Improvised His Way to Success,” *All Things Considered*, last modified April 1, 2015
<http://www.npr.org/2015/08/01/428415046/reggie-watts-man-of-many-voices-improvised-his-way-to-success>

Here, I connect Watts's performance style with theory on absurdity. Critchley investigates theories of laughter from the early 20th century, specifically Henri Bergson's thesis that what makes us laugh is "a person who gives us the impression of a thing."¹⁵⁷ In this view, the comic character becomes less a person and more an automaton that acts according to a nonsensical rigidity out of habit: Tom and Jerry's endless game of cat and mouse, the Roadrunner's continued escape from the Coyote's traps. Critchley combines this perspective with that of artist Wyndham Lewis, who turns the first thesis around to read that we laugh when "a thing gives us the impression of a person," as in his example of a cabbage reading Flaubert.¹⁵⁸ Furthering this argument, one might see all humans as things—physical bodies that only *behave* as persons. Critchley builds his notion of the absurd on that philosophical decision to divorce soul from body, saying that humor, in fact, often arises from "a person acting like a person."¹⁵⁹ After detaching oneself from real living experience and contemplating that position, the simple and often overlooked fact of human existence becomes a subject about which to laugh.

Watts looks at his existence and that of those around him, and laughs particularly at the absurdity of racial construction. His bizarre vocalizations are meant only to symbolize a continuous process of incorporation, wherein the myriad incongruities of identity can be constructed into a conceivable self through musical texts. In some ways, Watts's choice to use absurdity serves a greater purpose of unifying people, because as Critchley notes, "humour is what returns us to our

¹⁵⁷ Critchley, *On Humour*, 56.

¹⁵⁸ Cited in *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

locale, to a specific *ethos* which is often identified with a particular people possessing a shared set of customs and characteristics.”¹⁶⁰ The shared customs of U.S. cultural humor allow us to look past ethnic differences, but Watts takes his act even further by questioning the true reality of identity in the first place.

In the estimation of Freud, for example, all humor comes from a position of haughtiness, wherein the humorist laughs at the ridiculous nature of their situation. The teller of a joke thus must find the simple fact of existence absurd, but laugh at the inevitable continuation of life.¹⁶¹ Much like Bo Burnham, he consistently plays with the musical/social expectations placed on him by society at large (See Figure 3.1), but from the black American perspective as with my above example from the opening of *Why Shit So Crazy?* In that short five minutes, Watts breaks conventions of black performance by entering the stage to an orchestral tone poem, singing in a decidedly artificial and “feminine” falsetto, and finally giving an ironic nod to social expectations by using the custom of black talking to address the crowd. His visual presentation, characterized by his enormous Afro and a penchant for odd fashion choices like suspenders over a pink shirt featuring a deer, explicitly marks him outside social norms as a wildly identifiable black man and eccentric.

As stated above, Watts has called himself a “disinformationalist” who intends to disorient the audience with his exploitation of expectations and relatively

¹⁶⁰ Critchley, *On Humour*, 73.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

frequent descents into absurdity.¹⁶² With Watts, in contrast to Burnham, absurdity functions not as a form of self-mockery and the “abject object.”¹⁶³ Instead, he accepts absurdity as a reality of life, because as Critchley states, “there is something essentially ridiculous about a human being behaving like a human being.”¹⁶⁴ Linda Hutcheon’s definition of irony proves useful for analysis of the absurd disconnect between Watts’s visual and aural performances, wherein he manipulates audience perceptions of him by switching between characters and expectations through exercise of a variety of accents, musical styles, and vocal registers. The “critical distance” that Hutcheon employs describes the relationship between his concept of self and outside perceptions of him.¹⁶⁵ The superimposition of his performance and the meanings that it implies create a space in which the audience must react and shape their own individual interpretations. He invites his audience to acknowledge the paradoxes of human identity as truth by presenting real-life staged absurdities and accepting them as reasonable. In the end, the joke is that no single answer to the complexities of identity exists. The audience must simply do their best to create meaning, just as Watts does his best to create a self-presentation.

My conflation of performance and identity characteristics comes from the tradition of feminist performance artists and writers, who used specifically biographical material to foreground the experience of women. As Carlson states, “personal and psychological statements were often wedded in early feminist

¹⁶² Halek, “Reggie Watts, Man of Many Voices, Improvised His Way to Success,” 2015.

¹⁶³ Critchley, *On Humour*, 97.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁶⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 18.

performance to specific and repeated physical actions.”¹⁶⁶ As a black man, Watts similarly inhabits a marginalized space and his physical and musical actions also correspond to personal statements on the black experience. Susanne Lavin’s study on Lily Tomlin especially engages with the idea of personal identity mediated through characters. She describes Tomlin as a shaman who takes on multiple personae through total immersion, empowering those characters through convincing performance of humanity.¹⁶⁷ From this perspective, Tomlin is a healer who “exposes vulnerabilities that her audience can relate to, and through laughter, strives toward a ‘cure.’”¹⁶⁸ Because Tomlin is a white woman, she holds a particularly privileged position from which she can attempt her shamanistic appropriation of other identities. In this way, her character studies may be seen as problematic erasures of identity that only recognize the white perspective.

In comparison, Watts holds a somewhat stronger position from which to inhabit other cultural spaces as a black and French citizen of the United States who has lived abroad. His performances of blackness strongly correspond to his musical experience in black cultural forms, but his European characters represent less visible aspects of his complex identity. In his work on poet Lenelle Moïse, Jerry Philogene investigates the writer’s understanding of “belonging, gender identity, and sexuality” through deliberate mixing of English and her native Haitian Kreyól

¹⁶⁶ Carlson, *Performance*, 148.

¹⁶⁷ Lisa Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance: Phyllis Diller, Lily Tomlin, and Roseanne* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 39.

¹⁶⁸ Lavin, *Women and Comedy*, 40.

language.¹⁶⁹ He states, “black diasporic performance has been a site for the imagination of future possibilities, possibilities that challenge historical hegemonies and erasures.”¹⁷⁰ Moïse engages in dialogue between the Haitian and American cultural histories that inform her worldview through her multicultural poetic performances, wherein “they point to Haitianness not simply resulting from a performance of coded repertoires, but from an amalgam of influences and experiences that reflect its positioning at various multi-lingual contact zones and cross-cultural performative spaces.”¹⁷¹ Similarly, Watts engages in dialogue between his black American and Western cultural histories by engaging in a political performance of hybridity. As a visually black man, much of his experience has been defined by assumptions of blackness that do not include his multicultural background. His comedic musical performances, though, provide an opportunity to perform all parts of his identity through an improvised, adaptable, ambiguous, and complicated presentation of his American-ness.

The act of call and response, or antiphony, characterizes what Gilroy sees as an enduring dialogue between current members of the African diaspora and their ancestors, who created the music initially. The multinational characteristics of Watts’s family and upbringing also place him squarely in the middle of the “Black Atlantic” framework.¹⁷² In this seminal work, Gilroy complicates notions of essential national identity through investigation of the African diaspora surrounding the

¹⁶⁹ Jerry Philogene, “Lenelle Moïse: Postscript Swimming in the Waters of Endezo,” *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 19.3 (2015): 336.

¹⁷⁰ Philogene, “Lenelle Moïse,” 337-338.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 338.

¹⁷² Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

Atlantic. In context of Grossberg's definition of hybridity, the Black Atlantic framework exemplifies how culturally varied and geographically separated communities can combine under a single but complex and multilayered diasporic umbrella that shares a history of struggle for place and identity, a view of race that Gilroy calls anti-anti-essentialism. Hybridity and anti-anti-essentialism go hand in hand as both concepts look to accept varied parts into construction of a unified whole. Using the primary metaphor of the ship, Gilroy invokes the history of the Atlantic slave trade as well as the circulation of ideas and people around the same routes that once carried slaves.¹⁷³ These relationships become increasingly obvious upon further examination of the connections that African American slaves kept with their African ancestry, including musical aspects like ring shout and call and response forms, which continue to find use in gospel traditions long after their forced migration.¹⁷⁴

A binary assessment of race and ethnicity runs contrary to Watts's own experience of blackness, and his performances show how double consciousness must expand to include multitudes. Gilroy sees music as a particularly powerful example of "anti-anti-essentialism," which "[breaks] the inertia which arises in the unhappy polar opposition between a squeamish, nationalist essentialism and a skeptical, saturnalian pluralism."¹⁷⁵ To come to this conclusion, he builds on previous work by W.E.B. Du Bois and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. From Du Bois, he takes the concept of "double consciousness," wherein black Americans exist "both inside

¹⁷³ Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 4.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 102.

and outside the West” and must learn to exist with each of these perspectives simultaneously.¹⁷⁶ As a black man in the 21st century, Watts surely enjoys more freedoms and less discrimination than Du Bois, but racial tensions in the U.S. continue to divide communities into a similar inside and outside configuration. His status as a member of a historically disenfranchised minority puts him in the position to comment from each perspective, with consciousness of his blackness and his multicultural heritage, all within the context of an American system that often sees only black and white.

As a black American, Watts’s humorous performances almost necessarily “Signify” on previous texts, speaking both to the absurdity of his antics and to the larger context of his multicultural heritage in the U.S. In order to speak to a broader double consciousness, he performs using a practice that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls “Signifyin’,” which provides “a much needed theoretical framework or, perhaps better, a language to talk about the salient features of black music that distinguish it as a cohesive tradition.”¹⁷⁷ Gates’s work centers on the African figure of the divine trickster, Esu-Elegbara.¹⁷⁸ This trickster spirit acts as the messenger of the gods in religious traditions spanning parts of Africa and the Caribbean, each of which characterizes Esu as an interpreter that often obscures his messages with double meaning. In some Afro-Caribbean communities, Esu and his legacy of indeterminacy

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 30.

¹⁷⁷ Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 21.

¹⁷⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 5.

have merged with a similar character that Gates calls the “Signifying Monkey.”¹⁷⁹ Musicologist Guthrie Ramsey writes that the practice of Signifyin’, taken from Gates’s theory of black literary indeterminacy, leaves oral and musical statements to interpretation and association by use of trickery, wordplay, and double meaning.¹⁸⁰ Using the tropes of black forms, musicians Signify on previous texts, racial histories, and current political situations through linguistic playfulness that contains multiple meanings within the discourse of blackness. The practice of Signifyin’ has a close relationship to Linda Hutcheon’s definition of irony, wherein a particular text actually has a contradictory meaning within the context of its performance.

Watts’s style of performance further demonstrates his involvement with black cultural forms as a means of identity mediation. In most live sets, his stage setup includes two microphones, a reverb pedal, a delay modeler, a multi-track looper, and sometimes an electronic keyboard. In those sets that do include his keyboard, one microphone serves as his vocal microphone, with which he sings his lyrics from the instrument and delivers his spoken monologues. The second mic goes directly through the effects setup, allowing him to loop and modify different sounds through the direct mic while also separately adjusting his vocals. His act may begin in innumerable ways, as each performance is improvised on the spot. As described above, his special *Why Shit So Crazy?* begins with an improvised scene before his stage entrance. As he arrives on stage, a recorded choral ensemble and orchestra plays a rousing version Strauss’s “Also Sprach Zarathustra” while Watts

¹⁷⁹ Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, 11.

¹⁸⁰ Ramsey, *Race Music*, 196.

stands, back to the crowd, arm and microphone raised above his head.¹⁸¹ As he turns, he begins to sing a quiet tune that involves high-pitched squeaks and sound effects, contrasting both the intense musical introduction, and his physical presentation. These unexpected turns characterize his comedic style, where he aims to surprise at every opportunity. These surprises also come in the form of speaking voice and accent. Following the first tune, Watts switches between three accents in quick succession—first a deep voiced version of “talking black,” followed by a British academic, then another “black talking” character in a higher register that leads into his next hip-hop tinged song.

Steeped in American culture, Watts cannot escape the sacralization of Western classical traditions, but he can reveal their absurdity in comedy. The use of “Also Sprach Zarathustra” in *Why Shit So Crazy?* brings up questions of the highbrow/lowbrow musical divide through black Signifyin’ practices. Lawrence Levine investigates the “sacralization” of culture in the U.S. in relation to opera and western art music, saying that the once casual performance of such works became grand spectacle for the consumption of the upper classes through systems of wealthy trustees.¹⁸² Through the turn of the century, Western classical traditions became venerated and esteemed as the highest form of musical expression. The ugly undertones of such esteem included racist denigrations of black American music that continue even in the 21st century. Thus, Watts’s decision to include Strauss in his show stands as an explicitly political action in multiple ways. In one assessment,

¹⁸¹ Reggie Watts, “Why Shit So Crazy?”

¹⁸² Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 132.

his entrance lampoons the apparent veneration that we hold for Western art music traditions. In another, Watts uses the common association of the piece with grandeur to make his own position as a comedian absurd. He knows the associations that most viewers will have with the impressive sound that has been used so often in film, and he shows that he doesn't take himself too seriously by ironically pretending to take himself as seriously as *Also Sprach Zarathustra* sounds.

The song structures themselves usually progress in a set pattern. Watts first assembles a repeating percussion track by vocally beat boxing into the mic connected directly to his effects kit. Then he sings a bass part on top of the existing rhythms using non-linguistic syllables. Some of his songs involve a number of other sounds that he adds "in media res," including new percussive and harmonic elements as he drops and changes the previously recorded tracks using the controls on his pedals and looper. Once the looped back track is in place, Watts begins to vocalize his melodies, sometimes at his keyboard. These may or may not include intelligible words, and when the lyrics are discernible, the meaning usually is not. In these melodic sections, he often covers a wide variety of singing styles and sounds. His extensive range allows myriad inflections, including but not limited to a high pitched rap sound reminiscent of Cypress Hill's B-Real, or R&B and gospel tinged wailing similar to D'Angelo's recent *Black Messiah*. Sometimes these vocals suggest a female speaker through pitch; sometimes they remain ambiguous by use of effects like reverb, pitch changes, and flanging.

Instead of setting his multiplicities against one another, Watts embraces them as parts of a unified self, and mediates that self by indefinite and interpretative

musical representations of an ambiguous and interpretative identity. Most importantly, the improvised vocals evoke certain emotional responses based on sound that doesn't require a semantically explicit meaning. Watts uses his vocal production to Signify on the multiplicity of his own identity. By speaking with ambiguous intent, he forces outside interpretation of his content, which will necessarily end in numerous conclusions. Just like Gates's "Signifying Monkey," Watts plays the trickster—creating situations in which his audience must guess at his purposes through the context of black cultural forms.¹⁸³ By couching his performance in the musical practices of black America, he also situates himself in Gilroy's discourse of diasporic antiphony, and thus in its hybridity, by Signifyin' on historical practices in black music. Watts takes material from his black ancestry, incorporates it into newly improvised combinations, and then presents those creations back in a metaphorical call-and-response with the experience of African communities around the Atlantic. By Signifyin' on his own multicultural background, he combines African oratory practice with lived experience of double consciousness, fashioning a unique understanding of contemporary identity.

For the purposes of postmodern analysis, I place Reggie Watts in the discourse of performance art. Each of his standup sets acts as an individual performance, and much like the work of prominent artists like Chris Burden, Marina Abramovic, or Yoko Ono, the end depends largely on the reaction of the audience. Frazer Ward questions the dynamics of this relationship between performer and

¹⁸³ Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, 11.

audience, concluding that, in art, there are no innocent bystanders.¹⁸⁴ His investigation focuses on how performance artists' works put bystanders in a position of power by forcing them to make decisions based on a constructed situation. For example, Chris Burden's *Shoot*, which made its unaware spectators complicit in the artist's shooting by staging the attack as an artwork.¹⁸⁵ Watts works in a similar fashion, fabricating characters and circumstances for a reaction, but he then dialogues with the audience by improvising responses to them. From the moment he steps on stage, the performance may take whatever shape best serves Watts's comedic intentions.

Comedy itself provides a unique place from which to analyze post-modern performance because of what performance theorist Marvin Carlson calls "double-coding."¹⁸⁶ Much performance art combines traditional images, sounds, and symbols with novel interpretations, constructing a paradox that results in ironic readings. Similarly, comedians like Watts construct paradoxes through character performance that associates seemingly dissimilar persons, sounds, and subjects. The use of irony and dissimilarity arises in literature on postmodern performance, comedy, and Signifyin', placing Watts at the junction of multiple ironic symbolic representations. The character presentations of Reggie Watts initially seem to obscure meaning to the point of questioning reality, but instead of admitting meaninglessness, Watts invites the audience to accept absurdity as meaningful through performance of black cultural forms. In this way, Watts values continuity of experience above more

¹⁸⁴ Frazer Ward, *No Innocent Bystanders: Performance Art and the Audience* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2012).

¹⁸⁵ Ward, *No Innocent Bystanders*, 90.

¹⁸⁶ Carlson, *Performance*, 131.

philosophical attempts to deconstruct reality. His musical style fits this theory well, as his mishmash of noises begins without discernable logic but is then organized into a continuous sound event via technological organization. The supposed chaos of unorganized sounds, signifying various aspects of black identity and truth, becomes an intelligible construction through his artistic intervention.

Watts effectively utilizes every aspect of his voice through his musical performance practices. Simon Frith approaches the voice as a multifaceted mode of expression that can signify in four different spheres—voice as musical instrument, as body, as person, and as character.¹⁸⁷ He focuses on timbre as an indicator of gender, saying that the voice must necessarily reveal gender relations in popular music because “voices can’t be purely sound effects.”¹⁸⁸ While this assessment proves true to some extent in most vocal performance, Watts often uses his voice as sound effect while creating grooves on stage. He strips his voice of gendered identification by imitation of musical instruments, wherein he layers percussive sounds with bass lines and harmonies that then repeat through his machine (See Figure 3.2). Initially, this separation of voice from body may seem to distance Watts from his music, but as he improvises song texts with his repeating beat, both performer and audience are enveloped in vocal sounds. The layering of his voice also parallels Frith’s layered interpretations of meaning that arise from vocal expression. Not only does Watts’s voice exist in the form of musical instrument, but

¹⁸⁷ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 187.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

also as “direct expression of the body.”¹⁸⁹ The physical phenomenon of singing allows vocalists a certain enjoyment “in particular movements of muscles, whether as a sense of oneness between mind and body, will and action...or through the explorations of physical sensations and muscular powers one didn’t know one had.”¹⁹⁰ Through his varied modes of vocal expression, Watts literally expresses the sound of the ecstatic musical body—a kind of “Song of Myself,” if you will. Musical performance in general often involves the expression of what might be considered the performer’s “inner” music, especially in improvised idioms like jazz and blues. Watts follows this tradition of identity performance by vocal expression of his black musical roots and engagement with the body.

The material that he uses for this self-expression, established in black musical traditions, figures importantly into my theorization of his work. His approach to sound and rhythm most closely resembles jazz, funk, and hip-hop practices, and the consistent repetition of his loops also hearkens to rap production techniques. As Tricia Rose says, “rap’s black sonic forces are very much an outgrowth of black cultural traditions, the postindustrial transformation of urban life, and the contemporary technological terrain.”¹⁹¹ She notes that these black cultural traditions value rhythm and repetition in music to a much greater degree than conventional Western musical practices. According to Rose, rap characteristics like percussive vocalizations, bent words, rhythmic complexity, and repetition are

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 192.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 193.

¹⁹¹ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 63.

“aural manifestations of philosophical approaches to social environments.”¹⁹² Black cultures especially emphasize repetition, valuing “circulation and equilibrium” in contrast with Western musical goals of harmonic progression.¹⁹³ Watts’s hypnotic looping exemplifies this black cultural practice, wherein his nonsensical song lyrics underscore the importance of the musical repetition instead of a logical progression of ideas. While the lyrics act primarily as absurd comedic tools, they also mirror the aimlessness of the musical content, and ultimately, the pointlessness of non-inclusive self-categorizations.

The technological aspects of Watts’s act also serve his hybridized construction through musical pastiche. Rose discusses the use of sampling in hip-hop as integral to its sound and construction, as rap producers sought to foreground “the process of repetition and recontextualization” that the practice entails.¹⁹⁴ By taking pieces from previous black musical texts and combining and repeating them in new ways, producers serve not only to signify on their experiences and cultural history, but also to act out the construction of identity through compilation of varied parts. The musical parts might come from any number of songs or genres, but their combination results in a new meaning that we accept as a whole instead of disparate parts. When Watts performs in his trademark looping style, he engages in the same kind of identity construction, feeding parts of himself into a machine and combining them in a way that could not be mediated without technology.

¹⁹² Rose, *Black Noise*, 69.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

In addition to performance of self through song, Watts uses vocal traits to inhabit other personae. He often takes on the accent and mannerisms of various different characters, using sound to explicitly mark the speaker as someone other than simply “Reggie.” One of his most common characters involves the performing convention of “talking black.”¹⁹⁵ As a member of the black community, Watts has a personal connection to this sound, and also to the performative aspects of the culture in which it is used. According to Frith, “talking black” blurs the line between everyday and performative language, wherein “workaday talk and conversation are *constantly* framed as performance.”¹⁹⁶ This is particularly visible in Watts’s performances, wherein he interacts with the audience casually, often inserting the line “you know what I’m sayin’?” as a discursive tool that allows him to speak conversationally while simultaneously constructing a fictive narrative.¹⁹⁷ Additionally, his black talking characters often seem to wax poetic on scientific, philosophical, and political subjects that require an extensive vocabulary that do not initially seem to fit his presentation:

I want to do a song, this uhh...This a song about uh, heritage, and uh, people, and uh...the amalgamation of people’s minds as they come collectively together as a population to affect one another in a way that kind of networks their consciousnesses in a way that can be accessed by those people who view themselves as observers of systems in a hierarchy, which enables them to then thereby surmise certain outcomes that gives information to other people who will classify themselves as observers who then zoom in and zoom

¹⁹⁵ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 209.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁹⁷ Reggie Watts, “Reggie Watts: Humor In Music,” YouTube, 15:37, posted by “PopTech,” June 1, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OORU_Nyr4l4.

out to different levels to kind of analyze and create different situational awarenesses. Um, so...You know? One of those!¹⁹⁸

Watts problematizes racial stereotypes by offering this perspective on black talking, where the speaker's performative and stylized speech marks his mastery of language. Most interestingly, he begins the monologue with a number of hesitant "uhs" that he forgoes during his more involved explanation. They return when he finishes the line, showing how the "uh" sound really exists as part of a performative persona that "talking black" encourages. Following this description, he mixes a short two-measure loop of vocalized percussion with a keyboard riff. These lay the basis for an improvised song that covers none of the subjects that he just named, often relying on nonsensical sounds instead of identifiable words. Obviously, the focus in this performance is not on lyrics, but on musical representations of black identity through traditionally black sounds.

While this performance of black identity certainly goes to a part of Watts, he also presents varied other character aspects through accent that conflict or reinforce perceived notions of blackness (See Figures 3.3A and 3.3B). It is not uncommon for Watts to perform in a British accent, nor in a mix of gibberish and other languages including Spanish, French, and German. As Frith writes, the voice may denote an individual, but it is also "a key to the ways in which we change identities, pretend to be something we're not, deceive people, lie."¹⁹⁹ The sound of a voice signifies so much about identity, including physical characteristics like age and

¹⁹⁸ Watts, "Reggie Watts: Humor In Music," YouTube.

¹⁹⁹ Frith, *Performing Rites*, 197.

gender, but also encompassing ideas like sincerity and excitement. Reggie Watts's use of the voice embraces all of these areas of signification, allowing him to create characters onstage of greatly varying backgrounds, ethnicities, and experiences. Each of these characters represent another part of Watts that remains hidden externally, but which he performs to the audience through sound. Below, I demonstrate in a chart how one such performance takes place, wherein Watts inhabits different characters through sound.

Examining the content of the lyrics above, I argue that Watts places sound above rhetorical importance in his musical constructions. For example, his second song in *Why Shit So Crazy* (charted out in Table 3.1) begins as described with the musical layering before he enters with a series of short scattered syllables. He presents himself as a rapper during this section, but does not fully articulate any of his rhymes. Instead, his performance flows smoothly because each meaningless syllable seems to be a part of the larger unheard line, which he has deconstructed into short bursts of sound and organized according to his rhythmic preference. The first well-defined lines he speaks continue thusly:

What? Yeah, come on!
 Uh! I know what people be thinking
 Because I got this on a stick, yo
 I be checkin' it out
 And in the middle of the night I be doing what it be takin', ooh
 I got some pastries
 Gonna serve 'em and shit to my friends
 I'm gonna cut 'em in half
 Because nobody needs a whole croissant²⁰⁰

²⁰⁰ Watts, "Why Shit So Crazy?"

Watts's nonsensical lyrics play an important role as comedic material, but they do little more than entertain with constant surprises. The musical content of each song holds the most significance because the amalgam of sounds, rhythms, and vocals represents a combination of the facets of black American experience through Watts's eyes.

By combining his experience with jazz and hip-hop, traditional black musical forms, with his vocal talent, technological mastery, and absurdist sense of humor, Reggie Watts represents himself as a markedly complex and hybridized identity. Drawing parts from each aspect of himself, he constructs a unified personality that embraces the contradictions of American blackness with which many have struggled. Through his adherence to typically black forms, Watts Signifies on his racial history, as well as that of the United States, incorporating even the most diverse features of his heritage as parts of his character. By combining this identity performance with comedy, he also presents an optimistic depiction of the challenges that face other Americans. That is, Watts acts as an example of how the most confusing and incongruous parts of life just might be integral to its meaning and enjoyment.

Chapter Four

Closing Act: Conclusion

Throughout these two investigations, I have explored how Bo Burnham and Reggie Watts perform markedly dissimilar identities and perspectives on humor, ostensibly through the same method: musical comedy. When comparing these two bodies of work, the efficacy of comedy in identity construction becomes unquestionable. Indeed, musical comedy provides a nontraditional and nonstandardized medium through which performers can construct nontraditional and nonstandardized identities that conflict with dogmatic perceptions of gender, race, and humanity. Because of their differing perspectives on humor, aesthetics, and absurdity, these two comedians present dissimilar musical constructions of identity that reflect their individuality. I argue here that musical formations can mirror, parallel, and contradict formations of self in such a way that characterizes identity as a complex and subjective process of hybrid construction, or in opposition to larger societal expectations of race, class, and gender. Following from Butler's notion of performed identity and Grossberg's definition of hybridity, I show that Burnham and Watts both craft themselves through differing takes on comedy and absurdity, and ultimately Watts represents a unified hybridized identity while Burnham remains fragmented.

The contrasting features in these two performers' styles further my argument toward a complex model of identity formation, wherein the self is

constructed, as Butler would say, “in and through the act” of compilation.²⁰¹ The hybridization of identity necessarily depends on the interplay between two competing cultural forces, wherein the liminal space between them might serve as a third category for self-identification.²⁰² In my estimation, Watts exemplifies racial hybridity through his musical self-presentation, while Burnham typifies white racial anxiety about his own privileged social position and subsequently challenges the normalization of whiteness. Watts acknowledges the inconsistency of his own racial identity as integral to his whole self due to his personal experience as a visually black American, a recognizable subaltern in the United States. Burnham’s life however, has not provided the same experience of hybridity, leading to his split personality and anxiety of performance. Where Burnham sees contradiction, Watts sees coexistence. Where Watts embraces paradox and ambiguity in himself, Burnham attempts to articulate his person more explicitly.

These two models represent essential differences in the identities of their respective performers, and consequently also in the audiences that identify with them. By crafting these musical comedy acts, which I have situated as works of performance art, Burnham and Watts have negotiated, translated, and broadcast their individual identities. They have made their inner selves known to an outside world, bringing the private to the public. Even inhabiting characters, speaking nonsense, and setting ironic text over ironic text, both comedians still undoubtedly communicate their values and anxieties through musical presentations. Irony and

²⁰¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 195.

²⁰² Lawrence Grossberg, “Identity and Cultural Studies: Is That All There Is?,” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 91.

satire feature prominently in televised political discourse, but here they mediate the construction of an ambiguous and contradictory identity through their inevitably layered texts. In irony, these texts are discursive and interpretive, allowing myriad readings by anyone who inspects them. Likewise, aspects of identity are both discursive and interpretive, interacting with each other and representing diverse things to different people.

I argue that Watts and Burnham present different versions of identity in part because of their respective views on absurdity. Burnham's existential crisis leads him to question his own position as a performer, but more broadly, he begins to see that position as disingenuous and consequently performs a mental break in "Can't Handle This." Because he sees the entertainment industry with so much disdain, Burnham can't help but feel the same contempt for himself, and that inability to reconcile his contradictory position causes him great distress. As Burnham views the absurd, he cannot find a way to resolve his paradox, which includes both his profession and his own personal dichotomies. That anxiety culminates in his final song in *Make Happy*, "Can't Handle This," wherein he explicitly states that he can no longer handle the combined pressure of *being* and *performing*. Watts, conversely, accepts the absurdity of his contradictions as one aspect of a complete identity. He retains no anxiety because his racial hybridity and kaleidoscopic musical experience have prepared him to accept those absurdities.

I have situated these case studies pertaining to identity, humor, and popular performance in an attempt to encompass the myriad forces at play in a musical comedy act. Simon Critchley's investigations of the absurd and Linda Hutcheon's

definition of parody position both Burnham and Watts as humor writers who play on the expectations of their audiences by forcing them to confront preconceived notions of music, humor, and self.²⁰³ Using the work of Frith, Auslander, Rose, and Ramsey, I elucidated how current academic scholarship in performance of popular music works to further the main objective of the comedians: laughs.²⁰⁴ Watts and Burnham use tools of music including voice quality, register changes, and timing to create tension and release in their jokes, scaffolding their humor on the socially and culturally predicated norms of genre, like hip-hop, country, and pop. Genre and marketing also play into capitalist theorization of these comedians, both of whom have gained critical acclaim and national recognition. Negotiating those complicated pathways—of comedy, music, character performance, capitalism, and celebrity—results in the formation of distinct identities for each performer, tailored to their experience of each of these aspects.

The differences between these two exhibitions of farce lie in the performers' respective responses to absurdity. Burnham's productions foreground his own hopelessness as a popular performer. He consistently displays anxiety about his social position as an entertainer, quarrelling internally over what aspects he should perform to the audience in songs like "Left Brain, Right Brain."²⁰⁵ Later in his career,

²⁰³ Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002); Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

²⁰⁴ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Philip Auslander, "Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto," *Contemporary Theater Review* 14.1 (2004), 1-13.

²⁰⁵ Bo Burnham, "what,," Netflix Streaming Video, 59:54, posted by Netflix.com, accessed June 20, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/70295560?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C1%2Cd>

that anxiety manifests in a more explicit monologue to his spectators, wherein he states that he feels pressured to be someone other than himself for the enjoyment of the audience. He ends this song by saying repeatedly, “I don’t think that I can handle this right now.”²⁰⁶ Burnham’s use of absurdity in song and character lead him to a kind of mental breakdown, whether real or performed, that provides no resolution to his problems. His comedic take on performance ends cynically, with resignation instead of hope.

Reggie Watts, in contrast, performs an optimistic perception of absurdity and identity. As soon as he takes the stage, Watts radiates confidence in his act. Even while improvising, he controls every change in voice or movement knowingly and intentionally, taking complete charge of his self-presentation. His exhibition of differing characters, back to back and with no forewarning, disorients his audience and brings reality into question. As I mentioned above, his befuddling vocal changes kept me unsure of what the “real” Reggie sounded like for months before I came to any conclusions. Of course, Watts does not have an English accent, nor does he “talk black” in every day situations; those two traits seemingly contradict each other in a single presentation of self, and their comingling characterizes the absurdity of Watts’s performance. He takes his hybrid identity, deconstructs it into many parts that appear irrational when juxtaposed so explicitly, and then recombines those

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²⁰⁶ Bo Burnham, “Make Happy,” Netflix Streaming Video, 59:50, posted by Netflix.com, accessed June 6, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80106124?trackId=14170286&tctx=1%2C2%2C48844d3e-a9f0-4d04-b787-82b42564dd7e-9868891>

incongruities into a cohesive personality through a bricolage of black musical sounds. Where Burnham's anxieties of presentation cause him to withdraw, Watts embraces the necessary contradictions that exist in his identity as a transnational entertainer. Although he may "disinform" or disorient his audience by confusing their notions of individuality, he also informs and orients them toward a new and inclusive version of identity performance.

In terms of humor, Burnham and Watts actually have many more similarities than dissimilarities. As expounded upon above in both chapters two and three, much of the humor in both acts relies on their ability to construct absurdities through their lyrical performances. Burnham's particular brand of farce centers on the satirical juxtaposition of two conflicting texts, wherein he may set two statements against each other equally, shifting the responsibility of interpreting their differences to his audience. My examples in the song "Men and Women" very clearly demonstrate Burnham's penchant for absurd comparisons, as well as speaking to his anxieties about gender norms and essentialism. Here, he exposes inconsistencies in commonly accepted gender stereotypes by likening them to obviously ridiculous statements on women's rights. This formulation of the ludicrous functions as a call to self-examination, just as Reggie Watts achieves the same ends through a different procedure.

Even as he presents disparate fragments of self, Watts de-essentializes his identity for the audience by forcing them to question his reality—can he possibly be all of those things at once? When Watts performs, he situates himself as an absurd character through every improvised action, whether visual, aural, or verbal. In his

2016 special, *Spatial*, he immediately sets expectations for the performance by crawling through his audience toward the stage, all the while repeating, “sorry, sorry, excuse me...”²⁰⁷ As a standup comedian, he expects his audience not to take him too seriously, but he pushes the boundaries of absurdity through his constant and disorienting shifts in character. By performing these consistently ludicrous incarnations, Watts forces his audience to question what the “real” Reggie Watts sounds like. Admittedly, he even tricked me until I found an interview in which he (presumably) uses his everyday speaking voice. The assorted accents and mannerisms serve to destabilize Watts’s identity, and consequently, to destabilize the concept of a cohesive identity itself. His confusing visual presentation combined with his musical bricolage of black forms and technological modulation serve to hybridize his identity, though. Even as he presents disparate fragments of self, Watts de-essentializes his identity for the audience by forcing them to question his reality—can he possibly be all of those things at once? Audience members find that they cannot cling to any one of Watts’s manifestations, and must instead combine them and accept that each one of those pieces makes up a part of the unified performance.

The function of music differs greatly between Watts and Burnham, whose methods cater to their own respective musical strengths and comedic material. Firstly, it is important to note the fastidious preparation of Burnham’s act compared with the improvisational immediacy of Watts’s. Burnham’s method of writing prior

²⁰⁷ Reggie Watts, “Spatial.” Netflix Streaming Video, 1:01:34, posted by Netflix.com, accessed December 6, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80115673?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C0%2C8111e575-a8ec-4312-911e-52a7236d9683-9987867>

to performance, the generally preferred method for some standup comedians, allows him a very wide range of sounds to choose from, spanning instruments, genres, sound effects, and stage props. Any ten minutes of a Bo Burnham show may include both hip-hop and country songs, complete with all the trappings of popular expectations. He readily admits that he plans his shows “down to the gesture,” which plays into the anxiety of performance and self-construction that characterizes his act. Planning thus figures essentially into any theorization of Burnham’s work, as it shapes both the structure and content of his self-presentation.

Conversely, Watts plans sparingly in his performances, some of which are completely improvised from start to finish. In *Spatial*, he structures the show like a live improv show, wherein he performs multiple improvised monologues and songs interspersed with particular set pieces, but his music and lyrics are never pre-written.²⁰⁸ Given his experience with looping technology as a jazz and funk keyboardist, Watts has considerable skill in creating his own accompanying tracks on the spot. Even with the expansive range and numerous sound effects that Watts is capable of producing, his minimal equipment limits sound possibilities to those that he can fabricate with his voice or keyboard. While this prevents him from the same kind of theatrical productions that Burnham puts on, it also allows him exceptional freedom in all aspects of rhythm, harmony, melody, lyrics, and movement. He creates the sounds and decides how to interpret them lyrically and physically with total liberty from expected form. Like Burnham, this method of implementation figures into Watts’s characterization of identity, wherein he

²⁰⁸ Reggie Watts, “Spatial.”

constantly constructs a unified self from seemingly unrelated parts. Planning plays no part in his construction because he must persistently negotiate his position as a transnational entertainer.

Given my two case studies, I contend that musical comedy has much more to offer identity studies than current scholarship seems to suggest. These comedians represent exceptional American manifestations of the genre who perform in distinctive styles that give divergent perspectives on race, politics, and absurdity, but many other avenues remain to be investigated. While writing this thesis, most of my conversations with interested parties have begun with the question, “are you writing about Steve Martin?” I also often heard about Dmitri Martin and “Weird” Al Yankovic, not to mention older acts like the Smothers Brothers and Victor Borge, who undoubtedly influenced the direction of the genre for decades to follow. In addition, women’s comedy particularly remains a poignant and under-explored subject in the field, considering the recent and continuing rise of stars like Iliza Shlesinger, Jessica Williams, and musical duo Garfunkel and Oates, who challenge the idea of any essentialized womanhood in contemporary America. At this particular moment in American history, the foregrounding of women’s concerns and experiences seems itself a counter-cultural act, and these comedians exemplify the subversive use of irony to represent themselves. Lastly, the international comedy scene includes numerous talented musical comedians, each with unique takes on the genre that portray personal and communal identities and values. Tim Minchin, David O’Doherty, Bill Bailey, DeAnne Smith, and Karen Kilgariff represent only a small portion of these international performers in English speaking countries,

covering subjects including Catholic church scandals, emotional isolation, and taking computer games too seriously.

Continued research into the countless representations of identity in musical comedy remains my main goal. Because of its political efficacy, comedy plays an important role in the formation of communities and cultural memory, making it an effective tool in fights for and against social justice. These sorts of investigations intrigue me, because as many know from personal experience, sometimes one must laugh to keep from crying. Laughter functions as medicine to our sickness, as balm to our wounds, as comfort to the hopeless, as company in solitude. Even in the direst of situations, humor can make us lighter and keep us afloat. Perhaps that is why comedy offers such a unique space for the investigation of subjective identity. Humanity has long been involved in a struggle to comprehend what “human” really means, and after thousands of years, it’s difficult not to take a good look at the absurdity of it and have a good laugh at ourselves.

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Appendices

Appendix A - Figures



Figure 2.1: Bo raps “I’m A Little Teapot” in *Make Happy*



Figure 2.2: Bo acts out a Nazi salute as the audience sings “Repeat Stuff” ad nauseam in *what*.



Figures 2.3A and 2.3B: Bo as rational Left Brain (top) and emotional Right Brain (bottom) in *what*.



Figure 2.4: Bo kneels to deliver a personal monologue to the audience in *Make Happy*



Figures 2.5A and 2.5B: Bo Burnham performs “Handle This” to close *Make Happy*



Figure 3.1: Reggie Watts in performance in *A Live at Central Park*



Figure 3.2: Watts modulates his voice while singing at a PopTech performance



Figures 3.3A and 3.3B: Watts in character of a professor (top) and a "Soul Train" inspired television host (bottom) in *Why Shit So Crazy?* and *Spatial*.

Appendix B - Tables

Table 2.1: “Repeat Stuff from Bo Burnham’s *what*.”

Time Stamp	Description
0:13	Begins with piano arpeggios at moderate tempo. Monologue on how love songs have developed new features. “I tried to capture how they’ve changed it, with this love song.”
1:06	Slow piano intro. Lyrics: “Jason Derulo.”
1:21	Immediate tempo change to quick “boom-chuck” style piano accompaniment. Vocal switch to higher range to begin verse 1. “I love your hair, I love your name, I love the way you say it.”
1:29	First lyrical turn: “More than all of that I love the fact that you are dumb enough...”
1:43	Break in character from sweet to violent. “You’ll still love and let me finger you. [Shouting:] FINGER YOU, FINGER YOU!”
1:47	Return to first, high-pitched singing voice. “Oh girl, I hope you don’t think I’m rude when I tell you that I love you...”
1:54	Second lyrical turn: “I also hope you don’t see through this cleverly constructed ruse...”
2:09	Pre-chorus: “America says, ‘We love a chorus, but don’t get complicated and bore us. Though meaning may be missin’, we need to know the words after just one listen.’”
2:21	“Repeat Stuff” repeated.
2:35	Begin verse 2: “I love my baby and you know I couldn’t live without her...”
2:44	Lyrical turn: “Every girl has to think this song’s about her, so I describe my dream girl as really really vague.”
3:10	Breaks character from sweet to violent again in reference to girls who can’t buy his music: [Shouting:] “FUCK THEM WHO NEEDS THEM.”
3:14	Says, “Oh, hello, Satan,” before swallowing the microphone and making guttural noises.

Table 2.1 Continued

Time Stamp	Description
3:22	Removes microphone from mouth: "Satan, you taste so good!" leads into "Repeat stuff."
3:29	Asks the audience to join in the chorus.
3:35	Gets up to do the Nazi salute after saying, "Louder! I can't hear you!"
3:40	Piano slows dramatically.
3:55	Slow verse begins: "I'm in magazines full of model teens, so far above you. So read them and hate yourself, and pay me to tell you I love you."
4:15	Whispers "I love you" into microphone with grating voice.
4:27	Tempo and dynamics both rising as Burnham sings: "How could love be wrong?"
4:39	Final chorus. "Repeat stuff" devolves into another demonic-tinged rant: "I am a vessel, 666, Illuminati, Freemasons..."
4:49	Final lines before short piano outro: "We know it's not right..."

Table 3.1: Unnamed Song from Reggie Watts's *Why Shit So Crazy?*

Time Stamp	Musical Description
6:29	Begins vocalizing percussive two bar phrase in imitation of a drumset. Looped vocals: "You about to, mothafucka"
6:47	Bass line vocalizations on syllable "mum"
6:57	Vocalized shaker sounds
7:09	Switches microphones, takes hunched over "rapper stance," begins to vocalize random syllables as if performing a rap.
7:29	Pauses loop for one second to begin verse: "What? Yeah, come on!"
7:30	Restarts loop and begins at lyrics above: "I know what people be thinkin'." Speaking in laidback rap style.
7:51	Changes registers upward with more forceful vocals, saying: "You think you need a whole croissant? Nobody needs a whole croissant!" Takes on vague Caribbean accent for that line.
8:03	Vocal change to very pinched nasal tone, continuing vague accent to rap: "Chocolate éclairs. Claire's like a chocolate. Chocolate like Claire. My friend Claire, she likes chocolate."
8:13	Tone becomes more natural, as at 7:30, but with continued accent. Plays with word, "google." "We be be googling, googling, googly googly googlygin. Googlygin. Googly like a hooligan."
8:25	Adds reverb at effects table. Register change to falsetto. Long connected line in melody. Stirring motions with one mic, while singing into the other. Stepping and stirring to the beat.
8:57	Adds a "slow down" and tremolo effect to his vocals, falling in pitch briefly before returning to falsetto.
9:05	Begins bobbing up and down as if he were pouting child, saying "I want it so bad, I *unintelligible pouting sounds*..."
9:09	Says "Whoa-Oh," while cutting the back track, letting last "Oh" reverberate artificially to end the song.

Vita

Peter Trigg, a native of Little Rock, Arkansas, graduated from Texas Christian University with a Bachelor's in Music Education after studying saxophone and jazz with Joe Eckert and Joey Carter in 2015. He completed his Masters degree in Musicology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in 2017. His academic interests center on mediation of identity through popular performance, including the mediums of performance art, comedy, and popular music. In addition to this thesis, he has completed work on feminist theory in musical comedy, which he presented at the Society for Ethnomusicology's 2017 conference for its Southeast and Caribbean chapter. Other papers have covered queer sensibilities in the music of Billy Strayhorn and the unequal exchange of ideas between South Africa and the U.S. in Paul Simon's *Graceland*.