



# EXPRESSION OF GENDER AND IDENTITY IN STAND UP COMEDY: A CASE STUDY ON JERROD CARMICHAEL'S ROTHANIEL

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**Abstract:** Jerrod Carmichael is an American stand-up comedian, actor, and filmmaker. He is most well known for co-creating and starring in the semi autobiographical NBC sitcom *The Carmichael Show* (2015-17) and for the three stand-up specials he has created for HBO – *Love at the Store* (2014), *8* (2017), and *Rothaniel* (2022). The Primetime Emmy Award winning *Rothaniel* serves as another entry into an era of stand-up comedy that acts as a vulnerable and brutally honest look into the comedian's psyche – with Bo Burnham's *Inside* (2021) and Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* (2018) being other notable works of the said era. *Rothaniel* sees Carmichael drenched in the lights of an intimate setting in the legendary Blue Note Jazz Club in New York City, as he lets the audience indulge in the many secrets of his being – including a revelation about his own sexuality. This paper attempts to analyse the employment of the medium of stand-up comedy in the vulnerable expression of one's own identity and gender, examining Carmichael's anecdotes as a black homosexual man in America with reference to other works from contemporary cinema, music and comedy that discusses a similar zeitgeist.

**Index Terms** - Stand-up comedy, Jerrod Carmichael, Sexuality, Gender, Identity, Self, Culture, Expression, Rothaniel

## I. INTRODUCTION

Rothaniel is a 2022 American Stand-up comedy special written and performed by Jerrod Carmichael, with acclaimed comedian Bo Burnham serving as the Director of the said special. As author Bryan Washington mentions in his review for the special in *The New Yorker*, Rothaniel's over-arching motif is one that analyses secrets and the toll they take on humans and their relationships with each other. Sticking to that motif, the comedian reveals to the intimate audience placed in the Blue Note Jazz Club, two of the greatest secrets he had harboured over the years – one being his sexuality and the other being his actual first name – Rothaniel. As the special progresses, the comedian elaborates upon the stark change in the perception of him in the eyes of his family, friends, and society, coming from a conservative African-American family native to North Carolina. Regarding the topics of Gender and Identity, Judith Butler, a prominent American philosopher, has expressed the viewpoint that gender is not linked to the body but is solely a product of social construction. In her book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Butler examines the commonly held cultural assumption that gender is socially constructed, which contradicts the prevailing belief that it is inherent. Butler argues that conventional gender and sexuality concepts are used to justify male domination over women and the oppression of transgender and homosexual individuals (x-xv). With stand-up comedy growing further in its role as a post-modernist expression of one's self through the works of Bo Burnham, Hannah Gadsby, Daniel Sloss and more, Rothaniel provides insight into how culture and society imposes certain masculine traits upon an African-American man and the reaction they provide when the said man doesn't conform to whatever they perceive to be acceptable traits of an African-American man.

## II. OBJECTIVE OF STUDY

This paper examines the effects that the conventional patriarchal stereotype of masculinity has on Jerrod Carmichael, as he attempts to express his own self and identity through his medium of stand-up comedy. In "Rothaniel" as Carmichael reveals his sexuality to the audience present, and his greater audience at large, he also discusses how his immediate community reacted to it. This includes his parents, his brother, and his friends. Their reactions encapsulate a shared cultural sensibility towards homosexuality. This can arise from religion and their adherence to whatever is "socially acceptable". This acceptance of societal norms was called upon to

be disrupted by American philosopher Judith Butler, through their 1990 book “Gender Trouble”. This disruption of the prevalent notion of a gender binary was termed “gender trouble”. Butler argued that gender is not an essential quality stemming from biological sex, or an inherent identity, but is simply an act which is grown out of, and is reinforced by, societal norms and creates the illusion of binary sex (xxviii-xxx). This adoption of the gender binary notion of thinking by the majority is exemplified by the backlash Carmichael received for his initial coming out to his immediate community. This backlash is represented by Carmichael through the art of humour in his stand-up special, like Carmichael recalling how his best friend felt like he was “tricked” into having a gay best friend. But as the stand-up performance dives further into its form as an expression of the artist’s self, Carmichael goes into brutal detail on how his sexuality has strained his relationship with his mother, who is a devout Christian.

“Again and again a man would tell me about early childhood feelings of emotional exuberance, of unrepressed joy, and then a rupture happened – somehow the test of manhood, men told me, was the willingness to accept this loss” (Hooks 15).

A strict reverence for the gender binary and the cultural stereotyping that African-American men face can be seen through the Academy Award winning film *Moonlight* (2016), directed by Barry Jenkins. In the film, Chiron – the protagonist, is forced to stick to hyper-masculine characteristics stereotypically attributed to African-American men. Once again Butler’s statements on Gender Performativity gains prominence as Chiron is expected to behave in accordance to the gender role he is thrust upon, and when he deviates from it he is reprimanded – like how his mother calls him homophobic slurs. Chiron is not allowed a lucid expression of himself that a child is allowed, an expression which American feminist author Bell Hooks refers to in the aforementioned quote. This forces Chiron to be more aggressive and perform masculine gender traits, while in truth to himself he identifies himself as a different individual. Although not to the drastic degree of Chiron, Carmichael goes through his own struggles with sexuality and identity. The comedian speaks of how he himself couldn’t come to terms with his own sexuality as he comes from the “hood”. Carmichael prior to coming out had lent his voice in the form of vocal snippets and skits in the 2019 Neo-Soul/Pop album “Igor” by Tyler, The Creator. The album told the narrative of a homosexual relationship between Tyler and a man who refuses to

truly accept his sexuality and chooses to be with a woman instead. The album and its themes also proved to be instrumental in the discussion of gender and identity in the African-American community owing to the cultural background of the artists involved. The reasons as to why Tyler and his mysterious lover's relationship dies can be associated with the lover's conflict with the idea of the gender binary and his own gender identity, while Tyler accepts his own identity. Through Rothaniel, Carmichael elucidates upon his inner conflict as he is stuck between the expectations of the gender binary and his own gender identity – effectively employing the medium stand-up comedy to express it fluently to a larger audience. Carmichael breaks down the etiquettes of comedy to liberate himself and the form as a whole to his own sense of being. The special sees the audience interact with the comedian asking him questions and comforting him. While the fourth wall tends to be a bit blurred at times with stand-up comedy, Carmichael destroys the fourth wall in this special as he allows not only the audience to be changed by his words, but allows the audience to affect him. Rothaniel, while existing as a singular aesthetic piece of art, grows and evolves within its own existence.

### **III. HYPOTHESIS**

This paper addresses stand-up comedy's evolution into its modern form as an extension of an artist's inner workings by examining the artist's expression of gender and identity, as we study Jerrod Carmichael's stand-up special "Rothaniel".

Stand-up comedy is a form of comedic performance where a performer addresses a live audience directly from the stage. The medium itself has a rather racist origin that has its roots in the stump speech of American minstrel shows, which had performers in blackface mocking African-Americans. As the years went on African-American comedians like Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, and Dave Chappelle made their indelible marks on the medium's history. The medium itself saw evolution from a simplistic monologue form to a raw expression of one's self – exemplified by the postmodern era of the artform. Comedians like Bo Burnham, Hannah Gadsby, and Daniel Sloss are examples of such vulnerable artists in the medium, with Jerrod Carmichael joining the ranks with his landmark comedy special "Rothaniel". The cultural significance of an African-American comedian coming out as a homosexual man through his own stand-up comedy special is therefore massive. This

has allowed for a discussion of stand-up comedy as an expression of one's gender and identity. Like Hannah Gadsby taking an anti-comedy stance while discussing their own struggles with gender and identity through "Nanette" and Bo Burnham's existentialist musings on "Inside", Jerrod Carmichael also finds himself breaking the form of traditional joke-spewing monologues in service of self-expression. This evolution of the medium has allowed for an almost stream of consciousness lucidity to the relationship between the audience and the comedian to a point where they are a part of the performance as well.

Perceiving through the lens of Judith Butler's Gender Performativity Theory is of great importance while analysing Rothaniel sees Jerrod Carmichael expresses his struggles with adhering to the conventional norms of masculinity attributed to an African-American and living in a society where the majority accepts the gender binary as the acceptable norm. The gender performativity theory questions how particular gendered behaviour can be considered natural, and believes that notions of masculinity, especially in the case we are analysing, are imposed upon as roles by the notions set by heteronormativity.

As gender is stated to be simply a role placed upon individuals to play on the world's stage, Jerrod Carmichael gets on stage and seeks to communicate the strife the conformist norms bring about to him through his artform.

#### **I V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative analysis of Jerrod Carmichael's 2022 stand-up comedy special "Rothaniel" was conducted, as it was studied through the scope provided by Judith Butler's Theory of Gender Performativity.

#### **V. THEORY OF GENDER PERFORMATIVITY**

In 1990, feminist philosopher Judith Butler introduced the concept of gender performativity in their book Gender Trouble. According to their theory, gender is not a fixed aspect of one's identity but is instead a result of the actions and outward signs displayed by an individual. Butler's perspective is that gender is not an inherent trait, but rather a result of actions performed. These actions do not merely express an individual's natural gender, but rather construct and establish it. Hence, gender identity is created through its performance. Gender is not performed in a single instance but is instead repeated in a ritualistic manner over a period of time. This repetition

reinforces the appearance of stability in gender, with the regular performance of gender in compliance with social norms serving to perpetuate and reinforce those norms, legitimizing them. Social structures incentivize individuals to repeat gender performances in particular ways, rewarding conformity to a rigid gender binary and punishing non-conformity. A system of gender binary is inherently exclusionary as it disregards every other gender identity and sexuality that isn't male or female. When we conform to societal expectations of gender, we are granted a defined place in the world and are seen as genuine individuals. Because we are constantly aware of these expectations, both consciously and unconsciously, we are always putting on a gender performance, whether it's for an actual audience or just in our own minds. Therefore gender's performativity produces gender while concealing its own inception. Theory of Gender Performativity rejects essentialisms and stable identities and meanings, while also eschewing notions of authenticity, authority, universality and objectivity. Butler aimed to challenge the assumptions of normative heterosexuality, which enforces strict rules of conformity to traditional gender roles (9-21).

Butler's Theory of Gender Performativity can be connected to the plight Carmichael expresses through Rothaniel in regards to his gender identity and self as he struggles to love his truth in a society that has accepted the conformist gender binary notion. The community that surrounds the African-American comedian expects him to perform his gender role as a "man", but upon realising his homosexuality has trouble comprehending that notion. Multiple screenings of the special were conducted in order to be fully familiarised with the material and the subtext it discusses. Extended viewings of contemporary stand-up specials from Carmichael's peers were also conducted in order to understand the medium's evolution in the current zeitgeist as an expression of one's own self and identity. These contemporary works include aforementioned specials such as Hannah Gadsby's "Nanette", Daniel Sloss' "Live Shows", and Bo Burnham's "Inside". It is interesting to note once again that Bo Burnham served as the director for Rothaniel as well. Books such as Judith Butler's "Gender Trouble" and Bell Hooks' "The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love" aided in the study to examine gender roles and comprehend notions of masculinity, with the prior acting as the fundamental theoretical bedrock for the whole study.



This specific case was chosen to study as it is intriguing to me to see how the art of stand-up comedy has evolved over the years to become what it is today. The medium has been often criticised by the uninformed as being a rather one-dimensional marathon of quips. Pieces like Rothaniel legitimises stand-up comedy 's agency as an art form where an artist can present a raw and vulnerable expression of self without any perceived limitations. Another personal point of interest was seeing the perspective of an African-American comedian belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, while the most eminent African-American comedian of this era, Dave Chappelle, continually makes ignorant statements about the community. The contrast I found also surprisingly held onto a sense of empathy, which was refreshing.

The limitations of this research arises from the fact that the analysis presented is predominantly my personal interpretation of the work, the artist's expression, and the medium. The opinions presented are extremely subjective and could be carrying personal biases or idiosyncrasies.

## **V I. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Judith Pamela Butler, an American scholar born on February 24, 1956, in Cleveland, Ohio, had a significant impact on Francocentric philosophy, cultural theory, queer theory, and some philosophical feminist schools during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their ideas about the performative aspect of gender and sexuality were highly influential. Butler gained widespread recognition for their publications *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993), in which they question established ideas about gender and develop their concept of gender performativity. This idea has significantly impacted feminist and queer studies. Butler's work is frequently examined and discussed in film studies classes that focus on gender studies and the performance of language.

"Rothaniel" is a 2022 American stand-up comedy special written and performed by Jerrod Carmichael. Directed by acclaimed comedian and filmmaker Bo Burnham, the special takes place under the blue lights of the legendary Blue Note Jazz Club in New York City. The intimate setting formed by the crowd and the comedian allow for an almost therapeutic catharsis for the performer as Carmichael reveals many previously hidden facts

about himself – from his real first name to his sexuality. A vulnerable revelation, the special serves as a raw representation of the comedian’s deepest recesses. The special was nominated for three Primetime Emmys, with Carmichael winning one for Outstanding Writing for a Variety Special.

## V I I. ANALYSIS AND MAJOR FINDINGS

This paper aspires to provide readers with a newfound appreciation for the art of stand-up comedy, while it functions as a beating heart spewing raw vulnerabilities onto the audience. The bravery exhibited by Carmichael, which he probably will not be taking any credit for, is commendable – reiterating the fact that he came out as a homosexual to the world at large through this stand-up special. The study of this special has also illustrated that while massive strides have taken place in this day and age for the representation and inclusivity of the LGBTQ+ community, the notions of a gender binary still prevail to marginalise these communities.

## V I I I. CONCLUSION

As the popular adage goes, stand-up comedy isn’t a guy saying funny things but a funny guy saying things. Jerrod Carmichael exemplifies this thought through “Rothaniel” as he goes into details about his life that range from hilarious to bittersweet to heart wrenching. Carmichael painting a picture of his experiences as a homosexual African-American man inadvertently puts a mirror in front of the so-called majority to assess their own priorities and how they interact with marginalised communities.

After all, art is meant to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable.



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