

“I have to quit comedy”: the Female Trickster’s humour in trauma renegotiation

Cássia Frankenthal Quinlan

Coletivo Apotecárias, Brazil
cassiafq@gmail.com

Abstract

This article weaves a possible way of trauma renegotiation through humour. Using Hannah Gadsby’s account on her process of writing and performing her comedy act Nanette, Peter Levine’s work with trauma and the Female Trickster’s humour, it is possible to observe how humour can be used in trauma renegotiation. Although humour had been used as a distancing tool from the emotional experience of trauma, in analysing Gadsby’s approach to her own traumas using humour from a feminist and postcolonial perspective, it is possible to see that humour can be used in trauma renegotiation as a bridging tool to lessen the pain of trauma.

Keywords: humour, trauma, Female Trickster, Hannah Gadsby, Nanette.

Humor is your own unconscious therapy
(Langston Hughes, cited by Dance, 1998, p. 97)

(Faith Ringgold says) the only way of surviving the colonial and patriarchal enemy is laughing at him. She is not playing around; on the contrary, she yells at him, interrupts him when he speaks, does not pay him any attention. Laughter is a way of resistance, of survival, a way to gain strength. ... When one belongs to an oppressed group it is imperative to learn how to laugh at the face of the enemy, says Ringgold. The problem is that things are not as clear as they once were, it is not possible to know who is the oppressor and who is the oppressed. Or better yet, it is hard recognizing oneself as oppressor and oppressed; I suppose that, in this case, what is required is laughing at oneself.
(Paul B. Preciado, 2018, p. 147)

1. Introduction

In June 2018, Hannah Gadsby’s comedy act *Nanette* (2018) premiered worldwide through its recording by streaming service Netflix. While that could have been yet another “man filming a comedy special like a man” (Gadsby, 2022, p. 362), it caused a commotion by doing the exact

opposite: she blurted out a lot of her personal trauma, making that the reason for her choosing a career in comedy in the first place and then stating that she would have to quit it. In identifying as an “autistic Australian genderqueer vagina-wielding situation” (Gadsby, 2022, p. 16) she relates to the Female Trickster (Tannen, 2007) and is able to transform much of her trauma into a stand up comedy set that explores personal and collective traumatogenic issues related to Euro-American colonial and patriarchal society and culture, such as body image, homophobia, mental health, sexual and gender violence.

Luckhurst (2008) points to an aetiology of trauma from a physical injury to a psychological/psychiatric one. Through a timeline from accidents during and after the industrial revolution in 1870’s England that resulted in injuries that were not seen in the body to the effects of war and socially degrading experiences, he points to medical and legal debates and psychological perspectives about trauma that culminated in the inclusion of a new mental disorder - posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) - in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 as a means to define and treat trauma. Luckhurst (2008) posits that, as a consequence of this new diagnosis, from the 1980’s and especially 1990’s on, a new form of literature based on traumatic autobiography hit the mainstream pop culture, including the comedic area, making this event important in a psychological analysis given that artistic expressions are a means to access socio-psychological structures and contents (Tancetti & Gimezes, 2024). So while Hannah Gadsby is not the first comic to mix humour and pathos (Seizer, 2011), she seems to have an atypical autobiographical act (McNeil & Zuern, 2022) in which she does not seek laughs by telling her own traumas, as in many examples brought by Double (2017), including his own act *Break a Leg*.

In classical terms, comedy is a type of narrative “in which things go entertainingly awry and are then patched up” (Eagleton, 2019, p. 56). Eagleton (2019) and Double (2017) assert that comedy is tragedy plus time in a similar manner, understanding “time” as a way of distancing oneself from the traumatic experience, which is different from trauma renegotiation. This is made more explicit in Double’s (2017) affirmation on the necessity of creating distance from a serious and non-comic subject in order to make it funny. Gadsby (2022, pp. 225-226) also expresses this idea: “They say that comedy is trauma plus time. But I have never needed time. I have always written my stories for laughs at the same time as the humiliation is tearing my self-esteem to shreds” and that she has “a gift for turning humiliation into comedy without needing any of the time normal people need.”

Regarding stand-up comedy, McNeil and Zuern (2022, p. 230) point out an increase in the number of sets that relate autobiography and socio-political issues by “Pranking an audience expecting comedy (but) instead delivering scathing social indictments and auto/biographical testimony,” which relates to Gadsby’s (2022, p. 233) notion of stand-up comedy as “an act of self-portraiture.” This “new wave” of socio-political comedy seems to relate to humour’s ambiguity, of both “bond and weapon” (Eagleton, 2019, p. 139). Eagleton (2019, p. 41) cites Bergson’s understanding of laughter as a way to ridicule “people and things that become mindlessly automated, obsessive, stuck in a groove, unable to adapt themselves to their circumstances.” Thus, humour would serve as a means to “whip these aberrations back into line by the power of ridicule,” using laughter “as a social corrective ... thus producing the psychological plasticity that modern societies demand.” Eagleton (2019, p. 41) also points out that humour’s “most traditional function has been social reform,” adding also that it “can be a question of defence or affirmation, subversion or celebration, solidarity or critique.”

The ways in which humour has been used in a negative way, as with recreational racism, have been studied by authors such as Moreira (2020) and Bueno (2022). As for studies on stand-up comedy and trauma, Double (2017) and Dore (2023) both explore humour’s use in traumatic events and socio-political awareness, but neither focus specifically on trauma: while Double

(2017) mainly explains how he turned his experience into a comedy set, he does not talk about the experiences he went through from a trauma perspective, and Dore (2023) analyses how the comic she studies dealt with her experience with a disease and turned her set into an awareness piece, not referencing her object's relation to trauma itself.

Although initially related to North American Indigenous tales (Radin, 1956), the trickster has also been found in other cultures, such as Hermes in Greek mythology, Loki in Norse mythology, Ananse and Eshu in African mythologies (Hynes and Doty, 1993), Boto (Magalhães, 2024), Curupira and Saci-Pererê (Wahba, 2024) in Brazilian mythologies. Many authors have studied the trickster and have different perspectives on it, but one common characteristic of the trickster is its hard definition, given its aversion to logocentrism: “the trickster is ever so much more than we can find and understand” (Hynes, 1993, p. 216) and is an oxymoron of its own (Bassil-Morozow, 2014). Also common descriptors of the trickster are “contradictoriness, complexity, deceptiveness, trickery” (Doueïhi, 1993, p. 200). According to Hynes and Doty (1993), trickster stories provide critical thinking as well as the possibility of reflection upon the culture they appear and appeal to, which relates to Makarius (1993, p. 86) understanding of the trickster: “The ambivalence and contradictions that impregnate the accounts of the trickster (derive) from a situation generative of ambivalence and contradictions that has shaped itself in the society, and of which the myth of the trickster is the expression.” Due to this intimate relation to social aspects and its disobedience to the established order (Baptista, 2024), the trickster also has social relevance for its ability to open our minds and transform reality (Doueïhi, 1993).

Hynes and Doty (1993) point to an increase of studies on the trickster's image, including perspectives that go against a generalising view of it. Given the trickster's sexual ambiguity and openness to femininity (Wahba, 2024), its relation to counterculture and transgression (Baptista, 2024) and social changes related to feminist movements (Tancetti & Gimenez, 2024), it seems natural - as much as needed - that feminist perspectives of the trickster also appear in our culture, such as Tannen's (2007), which relates the Female Trickster's humour to the trauma of marginalisation and stigmatisation of women's experiences in what she presents as a postmodern and feminist perspective of the trickster.

Postmodernity, in one crude sentence, implies the questioning of univocal and supposedly universal truths about “humans” and opens up room for more plural and diverse understandings of the world through the inclusion of different perspectives, voices and world views other than that of a traditional and canonical one. Of the many postmodern studies, here I will rely especially on Postcolonial and Feminist perspectives.

Postcolonial studies refer to critical theories in academic areas that study and analyse the impact of colonialism and imperialism and their exploitation, especially on colonised territories and bodies. In confronting the notion of identity as based on the white-European/North American-male, the identity of “Other” is raised and debated on works such as those of Frantz Fanon ([1952] 2008; [1961] 2022) regarding psychiatric health and racism, and Spivak's ([1985] 2010) notion of the feminine subaltern in Indian culture under British rule. In a “decolonial spin” (Aguiar, 2016, p. 274), it can be understood as an epistemological perspective derived from subaltern speeches and colonial differences as a contribution to academic development.

Feminist perspectives originated from feminist movements from 1920's on and have plural understandings and postulates, most of which originate from a critical analysis of the essentialist comprehension of the world in terms of sex and gender, pointing to the oppression of women by men. Feminist Studies, one of its branches, focus *on* women and is made *by* women. They are based on critical epistemologies that focus on plural perspectives and are guided by subjective perspectives of feminine experiences, bringing forth gendered understandings in different areas of knowledge. Their methodologies are based on empowerment by rescuing

women's voices, bodies, agency, autonomy and authority in questioning norms dictated by those in charge, usually the "white-Euro-American-men" (Narvaz & Koller, 2006; Tannen, 2007).

Both postcolonialism and feminists perspectives are here understood to be in line with Doty and Hynes' (1993, p. 28) notion that "trickster figures ... go against the Western grain" and to Doueïhi's (1993, p. 196) criticism to the many approaches from a domination perspective of the trickster: "the trickster is bounced back and forth, stretched and twisted, so as to fit within the framework staked out by the discourse of domination by means of which the Western world, scholars included, distorts and suppresses its Other."

There are many studies relating humour and socio-psychological-political issues, or, as Dore (2023, p. 214) puts it, "political comedy." Although Gadsby's *Nanette* brings forth many of these issues, here it is not my intent to debate this topic, but rather to propose a case study on Gadsby's (2022) description of her process of writing and performing *Nanette* as she describes it in her autobiography *Ten Steps to Nanette* (2022, p. 6), where she tells two stories: "one is about my rather odd start to life, and the other is about my rather odd decision to end my life in comedy," and relating it to trauma theory as presented by Levine (1999; 2010) and humour as embodied by the Female Trickster from a feminist and postcolonial perspective.

Gadsby (2022, p. 219) is herself very assertive in her idea that "it's only appropriate to distort the ideas of the men who distorted the ideas of other men who distorted the perception of half the human race to the point of erasure" in what she calls an "uncooked dick-drip marinating in bias blindness" in much of science's use of a "dick-swinging and pseudo-scientific justification of misogyny and racism." She also points out that "Western culture is built around the fucked-up and demonstrably false premise that 'white men' are the natural peak of the human pyramid. By that measure, history becomes nothing more than a glorified mood diary for white men." As a consequence, the history of all those non-white-men is not only rewritten, but mostly silenced and erased, which makes her question: "... isn't it possible that hidden amongst all the things that history has forgotten is what holds the key to what we are missing now?."

The following section will not follow the traditional format of an academic article in separating literature review, object, and analysis; they will all be presented together. This choice is based on Baptista's (2024) understanding of the Female Trickster as inspired by the Greek goddess Metis and her indication of trickster not only as a noun, but also as a verb and adverb. This choice also considers the epistemologies briefly described earlier in respect to diversities that both break canonical patterns of thinking and structuring knowledge and as a means to give voice and value to plurality in terms of knowledge production and expression in a trickster-like intended way. Hence, I will weave¹ Gadsby's (2022) own description of her process of writing and performing *Nanette*, trauma theory and trauma renegotiation as described by Levine (1999; 2010), and mainly Tannen's (2007) approach to humour through the Female Trickster, from postcolonial and feminist perspectives, in order to explore one way in which humour can be used to renegotiate trauma. This stems from Cixous's (2022) calling to women writing and from Gadsby's (2022, p. 338) own words that she is "no expert, but I do reckon an expert should really study this" when describing her experiences of releasing stress by performing *Nanette* and using some of the resources she developed in the process of writing and performing it. Since the object here is her own narrative, it is through it and by echoing it (Berry, 2006; Quinlan,

¹ Higgins (2022, p. 30) uses the art and image of weaving, a typical and almost exclusive activity of women, as a way to retell Greek myths narrating them without women's voice, once it is closer to how women could express themselves in Ancient Greek society, but also "inspired by the moments in classical literature when female characters take control of the story. On a number of striking occasions, this happens through the art of weaving." Gadsby (2022, p. 331) also uses the term weaving to describe her process of writing *Nanette* and as homage to women in her life who "helped hold me together."

2021), that theory will be introduced and used to accompany her account, explain trauma and present a possible use of humour as a resource in the process of renegotiating it.

2. Gadsby, *Nanette*, humour and trauma

Gadsby (2022, p. 198, added emphasis) made her debut in comedy when she was 27 years old, participating in a comedy competition. She narrates her reaction to the audience's laughter at her being startled once on stage as "precisely the sound I needed to hear so I could *return to my body and find my voice*." After performing, she could feel for the first time that she might have stumbled upon something she was good at: "I didn't drink (the laughter) up as some kind of *validation or approval*. It was more about how it made me feel in my own skin. Never in my whole life had I ever felt such a deep and crystal-clear focus in the presence of others" (Gadsby, 2022, p. 196, emphasis added). She also states that, while profoundly satisfied with her performance, she later understood how depressed, isolated and vulnerable she was feeling at the time.

Tannen (2007, p. 151) asserts that humour is a "developmental adaptation which requires the mind and body to hold itself between the tension of the opposites in constant movement between the poles of reality and the imaginary as it makes sense of the nonsense and absurdity of life." This notion of development is similar to Levine's (1999) image of life as a stream that runs in currents of experiences with altering cycles of disturbance, tranquillity and integration; he understands our bodies as the banks of such stream, functioning as a barrier that safely guards the experience of inner change and movement. In this sense, individual trauma shock is an external force that ruptures the bank of human experience, creating a trauma vortex that rushes life-energy away; this trauma vortex can either get individuals stuck in it or make them completely avoid the breach where the trauma occurred. At the same time, a counter vortex is formed from within the stream as a balancing force that rotates in the opposite direction of the trauma vortex, creating what Levine (1999) calls counter vortex. In order to heal trauma, one has to learn how to navigate through these stream vortexes.

Thus, humour and trauma can be linked by the incongruous aspect they share. As Eagleton (2019, p. 67) puts it, "humour springs from a clash of incongruous aspects ... it involves the disruption of orderly thought process or the violation of laws or conventions ... a breach in the usual order of events." Furthermore, the trickster can be related to trauma by the "being trapped" motif (Bassil-Morozow, 2014), its ability to collect fragments of experiences and ordering them into wholeness, as pointed out by Pelton (cited by Bassil-Morozow, 2014), and "as psychic adventurer (that) continues to go where others wish to venture yet fear to tread" (Hynes, 1993, p. 211). From a feminist perspective, the Female Trickster can also be related to the development of an identity that does not serve predefined gender roles or a feminine *persona*, playing with and changing social contours and structures (Tancetti & Gimenez, 2024), as can be seen in *Nanette* when Gadsby (2018) talks about being mistaken by a man and how she understands and deals with this.

Gadsby (2022) tells parts of her life story and a number of traumas she suffered, including episodes of molestation in her childhood and adolescence, rape, body shaming, homophobia, physical violence, having her home invaded, and gynaecological violence, all of which have contributed to her episodes of anxiety and depression.

Levine (2010, p. 48) explains individual trauma as a profound experience of fright in any situation that renders an individual unable to respond to a perceived threat: "Trauma occurs when we are intensely frightened and are either physically restrained or perceive that we are trapped. We freeze in paralysis and/or collapse in overwhelming helplessness." This freezing, which is linked to fear paralysis and tonic immobility - such as when animals "act" like they are

dead - has little to do with choice. Although Gadsby (2022, p. 61) playfully describes this paralysis and immobility as her survival strategy in face of danger when, instead of the two most common responses to danger, fight or flight, she either “sit(s) very still and just ha(s) a bit of a think about things” or “narcolepsy” (Gadsby, 2022, p. 229), it is important to stress that this is a natural response to intense bodily energy generated in order to respond to a threat that ends up having no way of resolving itself; it is as if, in a car, one would press the gas and the brake pedals at the same time. In order to resolve trauma, it is necessary to uncouple and separate feelings of fear from feelings of immobility, consciously exploring the many sensations, emotions, images, and thoughts associated with a traumatic episode.

Levine (2010) focuses on physical situations, but it is possible to relate this experience of freezing or collapsing to social situations in which one finds oneself helpless and unable to fend for oneself, such as abusive relationships with family members, partners or bosses, angry parents, catcalling, racist, sexist, xenophobic, and homophobic comments and jokes.

Tannen (2007, p. 3) presents the Female Trickster as a manifestation of the “capacity to transform both an individual life and the collective consciousness of the culture she becomes visible to. She appears at the crossroads in a culture’s psychic development, always cloaked in the appropriate drag.” She also adds that “unlike previous Tricksters she is embodied as a female who refuses to be a victim of a collective consciousness which restricts female psychological authority, bodily autonomy and physical agency.”² The Female Trickster uses humour as a strategic and subversive device towards individual and social transformation and revolution through social work.

Tannen (2007, p. 152) posits that humour can help us “face the horrors of human life without turning to stone,” which seems to be a reference to Medusa, a Greek myth also used by Levine (2010, p. 37) to explain trauma. In one version of the myth, after killing Medusa, the gorgon that turned people into stone when looked upon, Perseus collected two vials of her blood: in one vial was the power to kill and in the other one was the power to restore life and raise the dead. He uses this image to explain the dual nature of trauma: “The paradox of trauma is that it has both the power to destroy and the power to transform and resurrect. Whether trauma will be ... cruel and punishing ... or a vehicle for soaring into the heights of transformation and mastery, depends upon how we approach it.”

Humour can bring forth complicated issues and also create a bridge between apparently contradictory elements (Tancetti & Gimenez, 2024; Fillus, 2024; Wahba, 2024), which could also explain humour’s dual capacity of hurting or healing: “It is in this sense, of humor’s ability to explicate a contradictory tone, to wrestle and harvest paradox, that humor can be used either to take control, to maintain power, or to overthrow authority,” which is related to its characteristic re-evaluation of social structures, hierarchies and values (Tannen, 2007, p. 152). This is especially connected to stigmatised and marginalised individuals who embody the trickster and use its humour “to test the margins of safety and to let off psychic steam. All margins, like borderlands, are dangerous to a symbolic order based upon logos certainty,” especially when attacking hypocrisy (Tannen, 2007, p. 151). An example of this is seen in *Nanette*, when Gadsby (2018) talks about how women not laughing at men’s jokes is explained by lack of sexual intercourse, but then using this same idea when men do not laugh at jokes

² Tannen (2007, p. 240) explains that she uses the female image but not that of women to emphasise the difference with the most common Trickster image which is typically represented by the white cis male body. She sustains that the “postmodern Female Trickster” is “a new variant of Feminine energy manifesting through humor which can be embodied in many forms: a heterosexual woman or man, a cross-dresser, a transvestite, a homosexual and other gender forms. This Feminine sense of humor I am describing requires a psychological orientation of maturity, one that can appreciate and understand difference and diversity.”

made about them. Trickster energy is playful and can trigger transformation through humour: “humor initiate(s) a problem-solving process of making sense out of nonsense by encouraging humans to test their limits in developing survival-psychological and bodily-strategies” (Tannen, 2007, p 139), reinforcing Hynes and Doty’s (1993) disagreement with the idea that comical material does not have social significance and relevance.

Tannen (2007) asserts that, as the psychological development unfolds, so does the humour, and jokes can start being used strategically to distract from feelings and experiences that are usually not well accepted socially, such as aggression and sexuality. As Tancetti and Gimenez (2024) stress, an important aspect of the Female Trickster is her agency in choosing her object of laughter, orienting her humour not at laughing at the other or maintaining a hierarchical social structure but as an invitation to laugh at the symbolic and social patriarchal and colonial order. In *Nanette*, this is made clear in many moments when Gadsby (2018) makes fun and calls attention to social aspects of many life experiences she has had that accrued from power/hierarchical dynamics based on gendered understandings of the world, such as when she states that “the thing is I don’t assume bald babies are boys. I assume they’re angry feminists, and I treat them with respect!” and that men and women “are from very different planets: men are from Mars and women are for his penis.” Close to the end of the show, she also says that “I want my story heard. Because, ironically, I believe Picasso was right; I believe we could paint a better world if we learned how to see it from all perspectives, as many perspectives as we possibly could. Because diversity is strength.”

When discussing the differences between white cis male and the Female Trickster humour, Tannen (2007, p. 157) asserts that, while the former is the implied norm of Euro-American culture, other groups of comedians’ humour, such as women, LGBTQIA+, Black, Asian and Indigenous, tend to “question the normative structure itself,” especially if humour is used to confront the many objectified places these groups are put in, which tends to be understood as problematic by the symbolic and social order imposed by a patriarchal and colonial society. She goes on stating that the Female Trickster embraces a kind of humour that subverts “the deliberate choices of the powerful; their hypocrisies, affectations and the mindless following of the acquisitive and consumption oriented social *status quo*,” also challenging authority by refusing to take it seriously, in a stance many times infused with anger, truth and revolt, specially by questioning traditional cultural values and norms, most often with unexpected endings, inverting the symbolic and social patriarchal and colonial order (Tannen, 2007, p. 159). This is exactly what Gadsby (2022, p. 21) does when she states that her intention with *Nanette* was “to destroy the myth of the ‘genius’ and draw attention to the long history of abuses of power that dominate the story of Western art.” This is made explicit in *Nanette* when she asserts that “Picasso suffered the mental illness of misogyny” and how the depiction of women through art makes them inferior to men and limited in terms of presenting themselves as either virgins or whores.

Bassil-Morozow (2014) presents a social aspect of the Female Trickster in her ability to bring light to subjects that are usually hidden for their unpleasant, shaming and/or embarrassing components, unmasking them while challenging social structures gone stale and that keep taboos hidden. This is why Tannen (2007, p. 158) asserts that women’s humour can bring “out into open terrain that which is not supposed to be noticed, and if noticed, not said and in doing so humorously shape-shifts (aggressive) energy,” as does Cixous (2022) in her approach to Medusa’s laugh and female humour as a strike to men’s supposed superiority. This can also be related to the Female Trickster’s relation to virgin goddesses (Tannen, 2007; Tancetti and Gimenez, 2024) and her refusal to be a victim of a social structure that defines what she can or should be/do. This is made explicit when Gadsby (2018) plays with the depiction of women in the context of art history and states that “No wonder we can’t reverse park, ladies! Dumb history women couldn’t even reverse park their arses onto a chair!”

While the Female Trickster humour can be funny, it calls attention to gender issues in a social context that sometimes are not funny. This type of humour correlates closely to Gadsby's (2022, p. 15, emphasis added) notion of *Nanette* as "arguably the most *deliberately* miserable, unfunny hour of comedy ever made," given that she aims to denounce the privilege of white cis men in Western culture and comedians "who have no problem *defending bigotry in the name of laughter*" in what she understands as a malicious use of humour and laughter intended to maintain a power hierarchy, in this case, between men and women. She also describes *Nanette* as "not a comedy show in the same way that Frankenstein's monster is not a human ... I took everything I knew about comedy, then I pulled it all apart and built a monster out of its corpse" (Gadsby, 2022, p. 21), intending to create a cathartic experiment in order to transmute trauma in telling some of her personal experience with traumatic events but not leaving out the violence she suffered, as she had done in previous comedy sets. And, as both Makarius (1993) and Tannen (2007, p. 133), question: "What trick could be more cunning than a trick which breaks a societal taboo(?.)"

As such, the Female Trickster's humour can open the possibility to explore tough topics by sharing experiences due to its characteristic creativity of challenging a system gone stale (Bassil-Morozow, 2014): "As dialogic, humor gives a plasticity to the psyche which can hold the center between the paradoxical energies of strength and vulnerability" (Tannen, 2007, p. 163), which is at the core of Levine's (1999) strategy in dealing with trauma and cruising through the trauma vortex and the counter vortex. This can be seen in *Nanette* when Gadsby (2018) at first tells part of the story when she was mistaken for a gay guy who supposedly was making a pass at another man's girlfriend, later telling the full story when the man returns and physically assaults her for being a lesbian, and also when she talks about being molested as a child and sexually abused in her early adult life.

Amongst the many experiences Gadsby (2022) narrates, she emphasises a conversation she had with her mother as the fuel to write *Nanette*. She manages to tell her mother's reaction to her coming out as a lesbian as a joke in many of her sets, since what she heard as a response was her mother asking her how she would react if her mother told her she was a murderer, which was, in reality, quite traumatic for her. Many years later, they were driving together when her mother reveals a deep regret trying to raise her as if she were heterosexual and the hard time she had dealing with the subject. At the same time this conversation happened, Gadsby (2022) was in deep suffering due to the political debate on marriage equality in Australia, which she relates to her suffering with the debate on legalising homosexuality in 1990's Tasmania, during her adolescence. Facing both the pain and trauma she understood she and her family suffered due to the prejudice towards homosexuality and the love shared within her family, she feels an "unrelenting urge to update the way I told my story" and decides "it was time that I took the pin that I had kept sticking into my own story" (Gadsby, 2022, pp. 316-317).

The feeling of safety Gadsby (2022) felt in this conversation with her mother relates to the first of nine building blocks that Levine (2010, p. 75) describes as part of the tool he developed for renegotiating trauma, which is establishing "an atmosphere that conveys refuge, hope and possibility." Levine (2010, p. 74) posits that this sense of safety is necessary for the second and third building blocks, which are: a) the support for exploring and accepting positive and negative sensations regarding a trauma, which Gadsby (2022) started doing while revisiting ideas and themes she had for *Nanette*, and b) what he calls "pendulation and containment," as one goes from the trauma vortex to the counter vortex, learning to contain their own sensations and emotions. These first three building blocks are what Levine (2010) understands as the firm ground necessary for the psychobiological process of trauma renegotiation. Gadsby (2022, p. 193) asserts that "there is no such thing as a straight line through trauma" which is conforming with Levine's (2010, p. 74) other six building blocks, which are not "linear, rigid or

unidirectional” but “intertwined and dependent upon one another and may be accessed repeatedly and in any order.”

Gadsby (2022, p. 324) describes her overwhelming sense of paralysis when facing her decision to write *Nanette*: “The biggest issue for me is that the process (of writing) was traumatic, because I was not chipping away at a mere tangle of competing ideas, I was digging into a hotbed of my own trauma,” describing the hard time she had trying to approach the many experiences, sensations and ideas she had for *Nanette* but being unable to deal with them: “*Nanette* had been all I could think about for months. It was just that whenever I came close to making a start, the tangle in my head would expand and totally overwhelm me like a backseat airbag. Even if I only gave it a sideways glance, I could become distressed”; or, at times, “if I ignored that red flag and tried to push beyond it, it wouldn’t take long before I’d begin to feel physical pain” (Gadsby, 2022, p. 322), which are both common reactions to the trauma vortex. She understood that she was deeply traumatised but also that she had a very valuable story about healing to be shared, but the anger she felt was hard to deal with.

This anger relates both to the discourse of the Female Trickster (Tannen, 2007) and to a consequence of the movement back to life that Levine (2010, p. 65) describes happening as “people resist, move through and then move out of immobility.” He explains that trauma renegotiation happens by uncoupling fear from immobility, breaking the feedback between them while the “person safely learn(s) to ‘contain’ powerful sensations, emotions and impulses without becoming overwhelmed” (Levine, 2010, p. 68). By uncoupling fear and paralysis, both can be felt and experienced in a “self-paced termination,” dissolving trauma, as well as other feelings and sensations associated with the traumatic event (Levine, 2010, p. 68). After one angry outburst in *Nanette*, Gadsby (2018) states that “It’s not my place to be angry on stage. I’m supposed to be doing self-deprecating humour. People feel safer when men do the angry comedy” and the decision she made of not identifying as a victim anymore when she affirms that “I am in my prime! Would you test your strength out on me? There is no way anyone would dare test their strength out on me! Because you all know there is nothing more powerful than a broken woman who has rebuilt herself.”

While organising ideas and themes, Gadsby (2022, p. 326) understood that trying to tackle *Nanette* in one movement would be too much and that she needed to find a new process to organise herself, and so “The first thing I did was rid myself of the self-imposed pressure to do it all at once and decided to take baby steps,” which relates to another one of the nine building blocks in Levine’s (2010) renegotiation of trauma: titration, that is, gradually accessing traumatic memories so there is room for safe discharge of hyperarousal states, yet another building block in trauma renegotiation. With this approach, she could feel bits of internal pressure beginning to ease off, which represents movements of pendulation and containment of her traumatic experiences, as well as positive feelings once she started to elaborate parts of her traumas: “As each idea was loosened and freed from my head cocoon, the pressure inside me would begin to ease off... Every time I felt myself panicking about the impossibility of making all the pieces fit, I reminded myself: *one idea at a time*.” This cycle was repeated as many times as she needed. She mentions the helpful insight she had of inserting stimming cues to her text, which was a great resource of hers, once stimming, a self-soothing behaviour common in people with autistic spectrum syndrome (ASD), helps them calm down. One of her stimming cues was the sound of a “teacup hitting its saucer. The sound does not simply *feel beautiful*, but it *comes attached with memories of being loved and feeling safe*” (Gadsby, 2022, p. 337, emphasis added). This not only helped her move through the writing process but was also a very tricksterly move, once stimming is commonly misunderstood and frowned upon by neurotypical people and thus denied for neuroatypical people in social situations.

Thus, she was beginning to understand her need for self-regulation, another building block to renegotiate trauma (Levine, 2010), and started using titration, pendulation and containment

with resources she began to discover in her own story, such as her family relationships, other social relationships that were positive for her, sounds and colours that would help her couple positive feelings and sensations while uncoupling feelings of rage, anger, fear and immobility in order to write *Nanette*: “I have learnt how to advocate for my own experiences instead of being ashamed of my pain and confusion. I stopped worrying about what I was expected to do, and worked on building an understanding of what I could do to make myself feel safe and calm” (Gadsby, 2022, p. 273), thus dealing with issues such as her body image and her gender queerness by making fun of the nonsense of social expectations that were imposed on her. At the end of this long process she realised that “it shouldn’t be a surprise that I was able to take sixty minutes of abject misery and turn it into a very compelling and hugely successful piece of work. I have skills, people, I know what I am doing, even if you don’t like it” (Gadsby, 2022, p. 19). This can also be related to Bassil-Morozow’s (2014) notion that the internal trickster refuses to be ashamed by the system and reinforces the impulses of deviating from norms that imprison which, once again, can be related to the Female Trickster virginal aspect, in the sense described by Tannen (2007) as her unwillingness to be dominated by patriarchal impositions. In the show, Gadsby (2018) embodies this idea while talking about the depiction of women in art history, stating that “I understand the world I live in and my place in it. And I don’t have one. And do you know how much time that saved me? I’m quite old, but look at the skin! That’s ‘cause I haven’t wasted time looking for how I fit in. I don’t! A lot of naps...”

Shame is another aspect of trauma that Gadsby (2022) and Levine (2010) mention and that Bassil-Morozow (2014) relates to the Female Trickster. Levine (2010, p. 60) posits that given the psychophysiological response patterns to trauma and shame they “form a particularly virulent and interlocked combination.” Gadsby (2022, p. 95) states that “when you are forced to keep a trauma secret in order to survive, you need to actively avoid incorporating the traumatic event into your official version of self,” which takes away the feeling of safety and reinforces feelings of shame and of responsibility for the event that occurred, reinforcing the victim status. Regarding some of her life experiences, she also adds that “I was under the distinct impression that it was entirely my own fault. That’s how shame works” (Gadsby, 2022, p. 96) and that “I was so well trapped that I believed my pain was a natural law, like gravity” (Gadsby, 2022, p. 122).

While still trying to come to terms and adapting to this new diagnosis, Gadsby (2022, p. 95, emphasis added) decides not to include her ASD in *Nanette* but understands that “everything I said could only ever find meaning in the minds of others once it had been *filtered through the lens of my body and all the distortions it seems to engender*,” but as a Female Trickster she refuses to take responsibility for how patriarchal society determined her body and sexuality should be, stating that she made the “decision *not to diminish my ambiguity by explaining it*; people would just have to sort me out on their own. *It was, after all, their problem.*” This statement relates to another building block in Levine’s (2010) renegotiation of trauma, which is a corrective experience of trauma and an active empowered defensive response to a perceived threat. In being an “Other” to Euro-American culture - woman and lesbian, Gadsby (2022) relates to a linguistic aspect of the trickster that Doueïhi (1993, p. 197) presents: “This is a form of domination and repression of which any discourse about any ‘Other’ must be guilty unless that discourse is self-questioning, that is, unless it involves a questioning of the very language it itself uses and a questioning of the discourse of which that language is a part,” reinforcing Baptista’s (2024) point that language creates reality. In *Nanette*, Gadsby (2018) brings forth this idea during her speech on female depiction in art history and the many non-identifications she has with what is portrayed of women by men, which can be summarized as “flesh vases for (men’s) dick flowers.”

Gadsby (2022, p. 330) was able to understand how to structure her set in terms of delivery, building it up as a three-layer set. In the first layer, she would occupy herself with the material

itself and her attitude while performing. As she had been mistaken for a man a number of times, she used this in her favour, dressing and behaving in a masculine way, as to appear more acceptable, acting in a very Female Trickster-like manner, as she knew that the masculine visual reference might give her, at least at a first glance, more credibility. Moreover, blue is one of the colours that calms her, which is why she wore blue clothes and had a blue scenery in *Nanette*. The second layer she instilled in her act was the function of it, that is, the content she conveyed in her set, regarding trauma and social aspects of her experience, another Female Trickster trait, which is transformation through social work (Tannen, 2007). The third layer was her ability to sustain her own presence on stage, living “in the space that would necessarily open up between these two opposing ideas.”

Once this structure was settled, Gadsby (2022, p. 331, emphasis added) realised that the comedy form she knew would not cope with the material and intention she had: “If I wanted to tell the truth, and create a cohesive narrative for myself . . . , if I wanted to share the *literal visceral pain of my trauma, I knew I had to invent something new*’ and so the answer she came to was writing a comedy act that was not funny, one in which she ‘*refused to seek the laugh.*”

This new way of making comedy relates to an aspect of the Female Trickster that Tannen (2007, p. 180) describes as non-funny, embedded with the ability to “be present, in a bodily sense, in order for one’s voice, whether shouted or symbolic, to be heard,” which relates to the Female Trickster’s social worker aspect that can be understood as “energy which gets other energies moving into a dynamic state of transformation,” asking questions that break and reinscribe former taboos (Tannen, 2007, p. 236). Hynes (1993, p. 206-207) correlates the trickster’s humour to insight and enlightenment, asserting that “Separating the entertaining humor from any inherent link with enlightenment results in mere diversions that distract people from deeper social complaints, awareness, or action,” adding also that “Without this deeper element (these humorous) spectacles simply divert people from the more serious matters in need of attention and reformation.” Regarding theatre that is humorous but not funny, Eagleton (2019, p.64) cites Brechtian drama and a certain economy of energy that happens when the audience is not invested in the effort of make believe, by which “we direct what (energy) we save not into laughter but into a process of critical reflection on the action the play presents,” which correlates to Gadsby’s (2022, p. 336) use of humour that does not seek laughter when talking about her traumas and making social denouncements in the context of stand-up comedy. This aspect can be noticed in her assertiveness in knowing that *Nanette* “had to serve a purpose above and beyond my own story.” Thus, *Nanette* could help its audience’s imaginal realm comprehend that taboos can be broken without society falling apart.

Yet another quality of the Female Trickster that Gadsby (2022) presents in the structure of *Nanette* is what Tannen (2007) calls an ethics of care, focusing on a non-violent approach to relationships, keeping them intact, rather than an ethics of justice, based on rules and regulations, typical of Euro-American patriarchal and colonial societies. This appears in her preoccupation with her audience, understanding that while her performance was not safe for her, it would not be safe for her audience: “I knew that the material I was covering in *Nanette* had the potential to be very triggering for many people, and, as I was not giving them fair warning, this felt deeply problematic to me” (Gadsby, 2022, p. 340). So, while she had her stimulating cues on her text, she also “tried to provide as many different safety threads as I could think of for (the audience). And the biggest safety sail of all was making it absolutely clear that *I was not in the business of prioritising the comfort of powerful people*” (Gadsby, 2022, p. 348, emphasis added), also understanding that *Nanette* was meant to be a tool in her renegotiating trauma and sharing that with her audience, and not as a weapon against other people, maintaining a posture that aims at connecting people rather than instilling a hierarchical structure of dominance. And this is because Trickster humour is not about power seeking or any arrogant motives: “the trickster looks to no power outside himself, but sets out to subdue the world by his wits and his wit”

(Ricketts, 1993, p. 87-88), a notion reinforced by Tannen's (2007, p. 176) stress that "Trickster has come to change the configuration through the process of resignification and reinscription of dominant value structures." Gadsby (2022, p. 226) had felt this before in a previous set when she shares some of her adolescent experiences and realises that the audience's laughter "was not cruel but rather born of recognition of adolescent anguish." This seems to have helped her stating, in *Nanette*, that "Power belongs to (straight white men). And if you can't handle criticism, take a joke, or deal with your own tension without violence, you have to wonder if you are up to the task of being in charge," also affirming that "I take my freedom of speech as a responsibility, and just because I can position myself as a victim does not make my anger constructive."

The way Gadsby (2022, p. 347) managed to care for her audience regarding the content of *Nanette* was making the first part of her set more mild and comfortable in terms of jokes, which would also increase the impact of the tougher part of her set: "If I had loaded the front half with 'belly laugh,' then I don't think the 'gut punch' that came after it would have been nearly as impactful." With this she managed to create a false sense of security, which she would later take away, as part of creating an environment close to trauma, and also "creating a buffer for myself, to make sure I could deliver my difficult material responsibly."

Gadsby's (2022, p. 22) process of writing and structuring *Nanette* is infused with Female Trickster qualities and deals directly with trauma in a similar way as proposed by Levine (1999; 2010) and so is her performance of the set. In playing with the idea of having *Nanette* as a trauma healing experience for herself and her audience, the first thing she does is create this false sense of security and assurance, only to "take that safety away and not give it back. Why? Because that is the shape of trauma." But the play on creating safety and taking it away also facilitates the exploration that Levine (2010) proposes once she starts talking about some of her traumas, which she can perceive in her audiences' silences and tension. She designed *Nanette* in a way that was both responsible with herself and with her audience by not attempting to "build myself a life raft to navigate the white waters of my trauma rapids, because I wanted to make sure that *my body* was the most alive and vulnerable in the room," being quite present at the time, in order to experience both the tension and the relief while telling her traumas (Gadsby, 2022, p. 340, added emphasis). And she managed to do that making sure she was attentive to her emotions and sensations, as well as using a grounding³ resource as she physically rooted herself firmly on the stage, mimicking the image of a male comedian that just stands in front of the microphone and speaks his mind.

Another smart trick in *Nanette* was the flexibility that made it possible for Gadsby (2022, pp. 353-354) to adapt her delivery to different audiences but that she discovered also served her self-regulation, given that she was still very sensitive to its content: "Thankfully, the flexibility I designed for my audience also accommodated me and I was able to reconfigure *Nanette* so that she could be whatever I felt she needed to be."

In one of her early performances of *Nanette*, while talking about the abuse inflicted by Pablo Picasso, a male member of the audience questioned her about the importance of the subject and seemed confused as to the whereabouts of her jokes during the set. This promptly caused in her an angry reaction that ended up having two consequences: she was able to actively respond to his provocation and it also made her realise that she needed yet another layer in her performance, specially for those who did not enjoy her set, which she relates to them being triggered and thus not being able to engage with her work "in the way of critical thinking." She "wanted to distract that very large segment of the world which is prone to devolving into *reactive anger when it comes to women speaking unapologetically in public*." So she decided she needed to "make sure

³ Grounding is also a resource used by Levine (1999; 2010) in order to sustain moments of trauma navigation.

that their cognitive skills had been shut down before I allowed myself to be truly vulnerable on stage' and with that she expected to cause 'intensely negative feelings but not allow them any capacity to connect meaningfully with me at my most vulnerable' (Gadsby, 2022, p. 348, emphasis added).

While this is a very cunning move to protect herself from negative backlash, it also relates to what Levine (1999) postulates about "cognitive thinking" when it comes to trauma renegotiation. He explains that our brain can be grossly divided in three parts: the reptilian brain, responsible for our instinctual responses; the mammalian or limbic brain, which relates to our emotions; and the neocortex, the "rational" part of our brain. So, when facing a threatening event the parts of our brain that are faster in terms of response, the reptilian and the limbic, which are slower in terms of evolution and therefore links us to our more instinctual behaviours, such as survival, come into play. But our neocortex interrupts what is an instinctual response, and ponders on what might be the best way to resolve the situation. Thus, it is common for humans to feel overridden with instinctive responses as well as thoughts about a situation, which interrupts instinctual responses, putting us in a dangerous position when it comes to trauma, once we end up being more vulnerable to the threat for not being able to respond to it. Not only that, but our neocortex can also help us rationalise a traumatic situation, distancing ourselves from the emotional and somatic aspects of the experience as a way to protect us from feeling it, which at first can be helpful, but ends up setting the trauma even more firmly in our bodies, since it is not resolved. So when the neocortex takes the reins on dealing with trauma, it can many times be unhelpful in the process, once it does not allow our instinctual responses to happen, interrupting the flow of trauma renegotiation, even if we use humour: "How heavily I had to *edit the reality*, namely the violence, *so I could make it work within a comedy context*" (Gadsby, 2022, p. 325, emphasis added).

So while Levine (1999) works around the neocortex and tries to help the body finish its instinctual responses in order to avoid the formation of a trauma, or to resolve it, Gadsby (2022) uses that in her writing process to renegotiate her traumas, but also as a way to "defend herself" from possible new traumas while performing, depending on the reaction of her audience.

In one of the first big presentations Gadsby (2022, p. 349) made with *Nanette* she felt as if it was a "monster. I think part of it had to do with the fact that I had finally found a true and consistent balance between all the many moving parts of the show" also feeling that she and *Nanette* "were a living, breathing double act, both responding to the ebb and flow that I suppose must come with navigating an immensely high-stress circumstance over a prolonged period of time" (Gadsby, 2022, p. 354).

Gadsby (2022, pp. 17) refers to George Carlin when he said that "the job of a comedian is to find the line and then cross it" and she understands that she actually did that with *Nanette*: "I began to write a show that would drive my punches deeper into the metaphorical guts of my audience. *I was going to repurpose comedy into something that could allow me to express the heat of my anger and the pain of my trauma, but without transferring it*" (Gadsby, 2022, p. 331, emphasis added). She sees *Nanette* as a huge success not because it made her famous, but because she understands it as a "somewhat safer space for *trauma-ridden audience-members, who are all too often disregarded in the context of comedy*" (Gadsby, 2022, p. 340, emphasis added), while also elaborating much of her own trauma in repeatedly performing the show, reaffirming herself as a personification of the Female Trickster in causing revolution and transformation, both in individual lives and in the collective environment, through her social work as a comedian. And in this process she also managed to not only renegotiate her own traumas to some extent, but also to develop her psychological authority, bodily autonomy and physical agency while refusing to "fit anyone's perception of who she should be" and no longer perceiving herself as a victim of both the situations she experienced and the society she lives in (Tannen, 2007, p. 156).

Tannen (2007, p. 179) asserts that via a playful attitude the psychological movement from identification as a victim to identification with one's self as an authority is possible, especially if deploying "a comic sensibility; it is a refocusing from trauma towards doing or saying something witty about the incongruous absurdity of life which produces the trauma." And this is possible because "Trickster humor - as moisture - is the fluid which greases the psyche" (Tannen, 2007, p. 140), leading to the idea that, once comfortable enough to make jokes about oneself - jokes that are not self-deprecating - is a way of taking control of one's own life and away from symbolic and social order imposed by a colonial and patriarchal society, thus refusing to introject the victim-responsible-for-their-own-trauma projections. Gadsby (2018) asserts this in *Nanette* by saying that "I am not a victim ... I will not allow my story to be destroyed" and also when she states that "this tension, it's yours. I'm not helping you anymore."

Gadsby's (2022) ending to *Nanette* is not as one would expect in terms of comedy, which is coherent with the Female Trickster's way of not "seeking resolution through some type of happy ending" (Tannen, 2007, p. 166; Tancetti & Gimenez, 2024). By renegotiating her traumas and thus refusing to be a victim any longer, Gadsby (2022) can change the questions that are asked in both her internal and external worlds and is able to maintain her own identity on and off stage using humour as an *adaptation* to her *pathos*, her suffering, and not a means to deny it, as she had done before in carving "my own on-stage persona around the fact that I was depressed" (Gadsby, 2022, p. 247) or even on her only way of knowing "how to take my mental health seriously was to make a joke out of it" (Gadsby, 2022, p. 248).

In dis-identifying as a victim she is able to no longer look for conforming herself with certain social expectations of her, such as her body and sexuality, which is why the last of Levine's (2010) building block could not be connected to her process. This is because this last building block relates to social engagement, something that happens in an atypical way for people in the autistic spectrum: for Gadsby (2022) it was solitude after performing, so she could reorient herself in her own way and time, before interacting again with other people. By making jokes about how she reacts when being interacted with after her shows, Gadsby (2018) stresses the importance of speaking out for herself through comedy, using humour to soften the connection she establishes to her own trauma, especially when talking about psycho-social experiences. In doing so, humour can offer room that "affords testimony and resistance ... (and) a significant opportunity ... to be heard in spaces and from subject positions (that) may not otherwise be afforded" (McNeil and Zuern, 2022, p. 231). This is in line with Tannen's (2007, p. 181) assertion that it is important that "marginalised 'others' ... have their imaginal capacity and ability to communicate their desires if they are to refuse victim status because if one cannot portray or communicate who one truly is, then it makes even the desire not to be a victim too dangerous to be spoken about in public and too dangerous to even imagine."

3. Discussion

Gadsby (2022) was passing by a small city once and stopped at a café to get some coffee for the road ahead. Being raised in a small town she had an ambivalent relationship with them for, on one hand, she used to feel comfortable and safe, due to the lack of excessive stimuli and changes, but on the other, she had always stood out from the crowd and been frowned upon for being different. But at this café she felt safe, because she could recognize that whoever ran the place had to be an old lady, for she knew the kind of decoration this demographic used. That place, which was empty, had made her relax a little bit since she could connect with past experiences with her own grandmother and an elderly couple with whom she was friends growing up, so she took her time waiting to be attended to. While waiting she read a sign that said "Your barista for the day is Nanette" which increased her expectations of a lovable greeting.

But that is not what happened. Once Nanette appeared, Gadsby (2022, pp. 310-311, emphasis added) saw herself facing a completely different person from what she had expected: “Nanette fixed me with a radioactive scowl I was familiar with. She was looking at me as if I represented everything that was wrong with the world: a left-wing, bleeding-heart, arty-farty, fancy gay.” She felt flooded with past experiences of not being welcomed, panicked, apologised and ran off back to her car with no coffee as if she were running for her life. She claims to feel bad for this and imagines that, given time and a good conversation, she and Nanette could have had a good time together and “clear(ed) the slate of our starting assumptions.”

Nanette was Gadsby’s (2022) Medusa: she felt at once the safety of past relationships that was taken away from her by Nanette’s gaze; she panicked in reading the situation as a potentially new episode for being traumatised, though later she saw a possibility to work through their mutual prejudices; she saw in Nanette her past traumas, pains and sense of exclusion. But unlike at the café, when facing so much of her pain and suffering that made her flee, and with the new safe place she found in that conversation with her mother, she could now face the “darker” side of Nanette; she went back, she stayed and managed to elaborate her traumas with the help of her sense of humour, her autism, her body and her voice in writing and performing *Nanette*.

Gadsby (2022, p. 315) did quit comedy, but not as a whole; she quit the type of comedy that kept her stuck in her traumas and fed them as she put herself down in order to make other people laugh, akin to the idea of “comedy is tragedy plus time” as a way to distance herself from her emotions and sensations regarding her traumas: “They say that time heals all wounds... (but) time alone is not enough. Effort is required.” In the show, she says that:

I built a career out of self-deprecating humour. That’s what I’ve built my career on and I don’t want to do that anymore. Do you understand what self-deprecating humour means when it comes from somebody who already exists in the margins? It’s not humility, it’s humiliation. I put myself down in order to speak, in order to seek permission to speak. And I simply will not do that anymore.

Parry & Olb (2018)

That is because she found, through a new way of making comedy, the possibility of facing her traumas instead of denying them or making fun of them and keeping herself in an paralysed position, thus freeing herself from at least a considerable amount of the pain she had carried with her for so long. In doing so, she also managed to keep herself on the tracks of making revolutionary comedy (Douglas, 2022; *Something Special*, 2023) because she no longer distanced herself from her traumatic experiences when writing and performing stand-up comedy acts.

With her new way of making comedy, Gadsby (2022) is able to go beyond simply crossing boundaries and lines in a world of dichotomies of either/or; she starts building bridges “between previously uncrossable boundaries and borders” in a “re/storation work” typical of the Female Trickster: “Building bridges across dichotomies, between boundaries with an awareness of one’s self-interest and the interest of the collective” (Tannen, 2007, p. 204). Gadsby (2018; 2022) is *tricksterly* (Baptista, 2024) empowered by the marginal and liminal space she is allowed to occupy as an autistic lesbian and that makes it possible for her to see how the world was built for women from a woman’s perspective through her art history studies, her own career as a comedian and in her life. As a Female Trickster, she speaks from a socially dislocated/discentered perspective which causes awkwardness in her different perspective of comedy (Tancetti & Gimenez, 2024).

Ricketts (1993) provides an interesting perspective when comparing the trickster and the shaman images, positing the trickster as anti-shamanic and pointing out the impossibility of escaping the human condition, which includes the impossibility of escaping one’s own pain and suffering. Makarius (1993, p. 198) disagrees with Ricketts (1993) in his understanding of the

trickster as anti-shamanic, for she relates both images to healing: “the trickster’s role is closely linked to, if not identical with, that of the shaman ... They seem to use tricks ... but at the same time they *are* able to heal.” This is further emphasised by Tannen’s (2007, p. 151) understanding of the Female Trickster as an “affirmation of life in the face of pain and suffering” and by Fillus (2024) in his understanding of female tricksters as able to transform what is understood as indecency for women into culture and also that when relevant contemporary issues are constellated through humour they can be understood as protest or denouncement, of discussion and elaboration of bitter and sad realities in a real but also softer way. This is made explicit in Gadsby’s (2022, pp. 24-25) perception that “To be able to wrap your own voice around your own mind, and to be able to craft it into something that has the capacity to make a room full of strangers think and feel differently, even if it’s just for a moment in time, is an incredible and humbling thing.”

This is in line with Eagleton’s (2019, p. 142) positing when he analyses the play *Comedians* that: “remembering tough experiences is not to down the pain, but to allow it to resonate through one’s discourse, dredging the comedy from a depth of affliction or anxiety, rage or humiliation so as to invest it with the authority of that experience.” In doing so, the goal would be “an ugly and fearful truth which has been transmuted into art,” which is similar to what is done in *Nanette* when seen through Levine’s (1999; 2010) understanding of trauma and the Female Trickster’s humour: Gadsby (2022) seems able: 1) to reduce the tension when she faces her traumas without denying them; 2) to act as a breaker of taboos around trauma by facing many of hers and sharing that with her audience without transferring her anger and; 3) to have an empowering experience of herself while integrating traumatic experiences as part of her identity without self-deprecation. This is made explicit throughout *Nanette* when she repeatedly stresses the importance of telling her story properly and fully.

Doueih (1993, p. 200) points out that “the joke is on us if we do not realize that the trickster gives us an insight into the way language is used to construct an ultimately incomplete kind of reality.” This points to a need to reevaluate the notion that “comedy is tragedy plus time” as commonly understood as detachment or humour as a coping mechanism. Time, in this case, should not mean detachment from the experience in question, but an attachment with oneself in the process of elaborating experiences and traumas. For Doueih (1993, p. 201), “It is the power of signification, the possibility to mean, that the trickster celebrates,” which, related to trauma, resonates to the notion of the trickster as a breaker of taboos (Makarius, 1993; Doueih, 1993; Tannen, 2007; Bassil-Morozow, 2014) and especially the taboo of colonial and patriarchal trauma in cases of political autobiographical humour. Bassil-Morozow (2014) points to the Female Trickster as one who uncovers taboo and silenced subjects, bringing them to light so they can be discussed and re-evaluated, reinforcing the Female Trickster as subversive and transgressive, which is a key aspect of trauma renegotiation. In terms of traumatogenic aspects of patriarchal and colonial structures, the Female Trickster is especially important in her ability to walk through and across sarcasm and bitterness while refusing the marginalising and alleged inferiority of women (Wahba, 2024): “I have no doubt that without comedy I would not have had much of a chance in life, let alone been able to develop the kind of confidence and courage I needed to be able to ‘quit’” (Gadsby, 2022, p. 24).

4. Conclusion

From weaving Gadsby’s (2022) description on her writing and performing *Nanette* to trauma and humour studies in a feminist and postcolonial perspective, it is possible to comprehend that humour can help renegotiate trauma. Although humour seems to have been mainly used as an “amused detachment” (Double, 2017, p. 17) in a number of occasions, probably enhancing the

traumatic aspects from the told experiences, when used without this detachment, without the notion of time or emotional distance, it can help individuals not only cope, but renegotiate traumas.

It is important to point out that the trickster is not inherently associated with political and/or social stances per se, however by bringing it to light through a feminist and postcolonial perspective it allows a political view that helps bridging individual and collective issues. In Gadsby's (2022) case, many of her traumas, such as sexual violence and bodyshaming have a social aspect to it, and she realizes how much not inserting the endings of many of the stories she tells about herself removes the violence and trauma of her own perception of herself. This is her main criticism of using humour as a way to deflect traumatic issues in her sets and also in many other comedy sets that relate to traumatic issues, as it happens in recreational racism or sexism. By inventing a new way of making comedy, Gadsby (2018; 2022, p. 15) is able to approach her traumas using humour but not focusing on laughter: when she herself defines *Nanette* as a "deliberately, miserable unfunny" stand-up comedy set, she uses the non-comedic aspect of her traumas to denounce social aspects of her experiences through her work as a comedian. It is because she is able to embrace herself wholly and has integrated her traumas to her own perception of herself that she is able to stress the importance of humour in her life, but using it in a different stance, and she understands the importance of comedians doing their job adequately by embracing a political approach to humour that focuses on powerful people and hierarchical dynamics, instead of focusing on victims of a social structure, reaffirming the Female Trickster characteristic of choosing objects of laughter as a means to question hierarchies, be them in an individual or social realm.

So while it was possible to understand one way in which the Female Trickster and her humour can help renegotiate trauma, it is important to notice that Levine's work is not definite in its understanding of trauma; that the Female Trickster needs further voices to present herself and to present her relation to trauma and other dark aspects of patriarchal and colonial orders. As this essay is not intended to be definitive in the subject, it has all the limitations of works that seek to rupture dominant orders, especially through the choice of honouring the subjective quality in knowledge construction from a feminist and postcolonial perspective (Rowland, 2024; Kilomba, 2021). It is also important to note that, as a case study, this article has its limitations regarding generalising the reflections presented here given the specific representation that was chosen, that is, exclusively that of Hannah Gadsby in her autobiography (2022). Not only that, but having to leave out some other interesting questions such as the interconnection of trauma, shame and the Female Trickster, as well as the Female Trickster's relation to virgin goddesses. Postcolonial and feminist perspectives on humour, on the Trickster and on trauma should also be further investigated for the value they can add, especially regarding how humour has been used to enhance domination, oppression and silencing. Regarding individual and collective bodies traumatised by patriarchal and colonial societies and dynamics, postcolonial and social perspectives on trauma are also relevant (Rothberg, 2008; Craps & Bueles, 2008), as is much needed a review of mythology used to explain trauma and humour. Specifically regarding trauma, using the myth of Medusa to explain it while ignoring *how* she was made a gorgon in the first place - that is, through violence and domination - and, in humour, going beyond hegemonic references that violate, dominate and silence.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my friends on Coletivo Apotecárias for all the shared laughs in many dark times, and also Bárbara Ladeia, Breno Zaccaro, Isadora Frankenthal and Pedro Lamarão for their support.

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