

ARE YOU AMERICA? PRETTY BIAS, TOTALLY INFAMOUS

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTERS OF ARTS

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE

TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, SPEECH, AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

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DENTON, TEXAS

AUGUST 2020

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not exist without the unwavering support of my thesis advisors, Dr. Bender and Dr. Busl. I'm eternally grateful to them for making me a better writer and a better human. I also owe credit to my partner, Daniel, for always reminding that real love also includes comedy. My parents supported me every single day of my graduate school journey, and I couldn't have finished without them. I have to say a very special thank you to all of the many friend groups that constantly encouraged me. You all made this possible for me. Thank you for joining me on this fantastic ride.

## ABSTRACT

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This web based projected seeks to explore the way Sacha Baron Cohen's Show "Who is America?" disrupts our traditional understanding of performative and rhetorical practices. Through his encounters with his guests, Baron Cohen often creates anecdotal revelations that the audience can interrogate by considering why a guest reacted the way they did. This project ultimately seeks to explore how Sacha Baron Cohen's work disrupts our traditional notions of rhetoric in relationship to anecdotes. By exploring some of the setups with his guests, putting them in anecdotal contexts, and acknowledging how Baron Cohen disrupts our traditional understanding of particular performative terms, we may discover new possibilities for exploring the roles our character and identity play in our rhetorical practices. In addition, I suggest we will find that there are many anecdotes within pop culture that we have trivialized and coded as "low-brow," including the show, "Who is America?," that actually have a significant impact on how we share our own stories.

# The Devil's Water



“HE DOESN’T LOOK A THING LIKE JESUS / BUT HE TALKS LIKE A GENTLEMEN / LIKE YOU  
IMAGINED WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG”

— THE KILLERS, *WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG* (2006)

In 2003, Sacha Baron Cohen’s “Da Ali G Show” debuted in the UK. Baron Cohen became infamous for subduing the notable guest stars who appeared on his show by confronting them as outrageous caricatures. Fifteen years later, Baron Cohen’s disguises evolved and became politicized in strategic ways with his new show “Who is America?,” indicating Western society’s transformation of media expectations. Baron Cohen’s evolution of manipulation demonstrates his understanding of his audience’s expectations. Baron Cohen’s strategic rhetorical comedy allows him to maintain his ultimate goal of eliciting shock and skewing perspective. While Baron Cohen is in control of the outlandish situations that stir the comedic elements, his (usually) oblivious guests control the action and create the punchlines. When Baron Cohen fools his guests, he often leads them to revealing pieces of their hidden identities. These rhetorical derivatives of the show rely on Baron Cohen’s assumptions of his guests’ motivations. This unpredictability leads us, as an audience, and Baron Cohen—as the agent of the performances—wondering what move he will need to make to create the necessary action for his victims to fall into his traps.

“Who is America?” premiered on the television network Showtime in 2018 during a time of peak political turmoil. This turmoil continues to seep through social media outlets, where many people are quickly soaking in news through snippets, videos, and images. The show’s opening credits emphasize this “meme” culture that has pervaded essentially all forms of

social media. The sun rises over amber waves of grain, while in the background, we hear John F. Kennedy proclaim, “Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.” Other timeless quotes from past United States presidents quickly contrast with Donald Trump infamously mocking a reporter with a disability. A montage of all things “American” then shows us Pamela Anderson, Hillary Clinton, the Women’s March, and people buying guns in grocery stores. The sequence is a mockery of the disillusionment within American nationalism and the performances that feed into its continued propaganda.

This idea of disillusionment drives Baron Cohen’s show, and he even embraces it through his performances and character disguises. His emphasis on disguise is the backbone for how his guests take to him. In a recent interview, he **remarked**: “There’s a huge amount of research and study and prep that goes into all the characters because they have to be real..With each of these characters, I create a very, very detailed backstory, because I need to be prepared to answer any question they ask.” Baron Cohen created several new characters for the show including Dr. Nira Cain-N’Degeocello, a liberal extremist who in one episode **presents** why a small town in rural Arizona needs an elaborate mosque; Billy Wayne Ruddick, a far right activist who **interrogates** Bernie Sanders about his opinion on President Obama’s healthcare plan; and Italian billionaire, Gio Monaldo, who **attempts** to get O. J. Simpson to confess to the murder of Nicole Brown. The meticulous detail Baron Cohen puts into his characters suggests a particular attention to the emotional component of rhetorical success.

The rhetorical success of the show also relies on its audience(s)’s interpretations of the consequential anecdotes that derive from the inner workings of the show. Through his encounters with his guests, Baron Cohen often creates anecdotal revelations that the audience can interrogate by considering why a guest reacted the way they did. This project ultimately seeks to explore how Baron Cohen’s work disrupts our traditional notions of rhetoric in relationship to anecdotes. By exploring some of the setups with his guests, putting them in anecdotal contexts, and acknowledging how Baron Cohen disrupts our traditional understanding of particular performative terms, we may discover new possibilities for exploring the roles our character and identity play in our rhetorical practices. In addition, I suggest we will find that there are many anecdotes within pop culture that we have trivialized and coded as “low-brow,” including the show “Who is America?,” that actually have a significant impact on how we share our own stories.

# “The Anecdote”

“THAT’S HOT.” — PARIS HILTON

I laugh about how my priority during the middle of a pandemic is trying to finish my thesis on time. I’ve never felt more insensitive in my life, but coping through comedy is therapeutic for me. I’m living in a time where “economic relief” is the hot topic, but I’m safely behind my computer asking, what about comedic relief? I think this incredulity is why anecdotes, but more so, “comedic” anecdotes are important to our understanding the nature of the world around us. Luckily for this writer, my game plan from the beginning was to write about Sacha Baron Cohen’s comedic, satirical television show "Who is America?". Actually, literally just now as I write this, I decided I should throw on an episode for motivation, and I completely forgot that a clip of Paris Hilton appears in the opening credits. Most people think my absolute guilty pleasure is anything Taylor Swift, but REALLY I LOVE Paris Hilton, and I’m super embarrassed by that.

Let’s think about the question “Who is America?” We could answer it with either “Paris Hilton” or “Donald Trump.” Look, to the average progressive millennial they may appear one in the same, but I follow Hilton on Instagram, and I think her generosity for others and love for chihuahuas sets her apart from Trump. While Baron Cohen may not have created these credits, it is clear that the credits are meant to stand for a “typical” answer to the question: Who is America? Yes, Hilton is the epitome of American Capitalism, but I watched “The Simple Life” (2003-2007), and I think it’s really funny that she is included in the opening of “Who is America?.” The obtrusive comparison between Hilton and Trump is inevitable because of their consistent elitist performances; however, Hilton should really stand for the metaphor of what happens when we try to bridge divides without first researching what we’re getting into. During the duration of “The Simple Life,” Hilton at least made attempts to identify and find common ground with people from different social worlds—something I’ve never witnessed Trump attempt.

Anecdotes allow us to humanize situations, which we may witness through both “The Simple Life” and “Who is America?.” These shows offer examples of comedic anecdotes that reveal depths we may not have known existed within other people. For example, “The Simple Life” created anecdotes that allowed us to identify with Paris Hilton, someone who might seem ethereal because of her life-style. On the show, Hilton is **seen** enjoying herself hanging out at a small town’s local gas station, milking a cow, and making a pie for a county fair—activities I experienced myself growing up. Usually, when we find ourselves relating to the anecdotes of others, we have made a connection from their story to a story of our own.

Anecdotes are complex in definition because of the infinite possibilities in experiencing and sharing them. Anecdotes may be best understood when placed in conjunction with theorist Kenneth Burke’s definition of rhetoric. Throughout his many works, Burke implies that rhetoric is the ability of symbol systems to move bodies to action. Therefore, I see anecdotes as a conveyor for symbol systems that then subsequently move bodies to action in some way. For example, I recently published a piece about what it was like growing up with two moms. One of my friends then reached out to me because she felt that as a Muslim in America she faced an incredible amount of persecution, but she had never thought about how this experience may be identifiable with what it is like being lesbian in America. I told an anecdote, and my friend reacted. These reactions do not have to be epiphanic, a multitude of reactions may consequently result from a rhetorical anecdote. As all anecdotes create some reaction, I will continue to refer to them as simply “anecdotes” as opposed to “rhetorical anecdotes.”

Anecdotes operate in a number of ways. As we identify the unique properties behind individual anecdotes, we may see how these qualities determine an anecdote’s rhetorical outcomes. In his work, “Anecdote and History,” Lionel Gossman remarks on some of these properties. He **states**: “The word ‘anecdote’ itself was and is used to describe a wide range of narratives, the defining feature of which appears to be less their brevity (though most are quite short) than their lack of complexity.” Gossman points to a universal understanding in sharing anecdotes. People share moments of their lives with us almost everyday, whether it’s at work, on the internet, or on television. I can’t think of a day where I haven’t experienced an anecdote. I don’t tell my partner, “Hey, just read this great anecdote today,” but there’s an innate understanding that packages of other people’s information are often delivered through anecdotes. Gossman goes on to **refer** to the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of anecdote, and how it may minimize the term:

As the OED puts it, an anecdote is the “narrative of a detached incident, or of a single event, told as being in itself interesting and striking.” That general dictionary definition, which obviously aims to distinguish the anecdote from more complex narrative forms like history and the novel, still accommodates a wide variety of verbal practices, both oral and written, both popular and cultivated: the joke or the tall story; the jewel-like short narrative, with its witty



punch line, that was developed in the salons of the elite in the eighteenth century; the short tale, usually containing a moral lesson...Moreover, the anecdote may be fairly detached and free-standing, as in anecdote books or collections. Or it may be integrally connected with and embedded in a larger argument or narrative, as in sermons and most historical writings.

Gossman's assessment informs my understanding of anecdotes because he emphasizes that anecdotes are multifaceted pieces that drive our understanding of larger narrative frameworks. The Oxford English Dictionary definition Gossman points to appears to divide anecdotes from these structures, but these literary forms usually still rely on anecdotes to prove their purpose. For example, news segments are often more compelling when told in conjunction with an interview of someone's personal experience.

While differentiated from larger narrative structures, anecdotes maintain properties that we may observe and analyze in order to understand the larger consequences of who performs them—similar to the broader frameworks they are often tied into. Gossman **states**: "As to its form, what most people would consider the classic anecdote is a highly concentrated miniature narrative with a strikingly dramatic three-act structure consisting of situation or exposition, encounter or crisis, and resolution." From Gossman's formula, we may notice the diverse potential anecdotes allow for performers because anecdotes are not limited to one specific genre, which allows them to fluidly appear in an infinite number of circumstances. This broad potential is indicative of how we categorize and understand anecdotes as well as how we understand the people who convey them—perform them.

An anecdote's tonal properties will inevitably affect its perception. Technology allows for anecdotes to be conveyed quickly and accessibly. Television provides a space for anecdotes to be portrayed clearly and concisely. (We might debate that television also adds dramatic complexity to anecdotes due to their productive nature, but for my purposes television allows for anecdotes to be portrayed within a specific time frame that allows them to be neatly wrapped and described.) While I originally watched "Who is America?" as it premiered on Showtime, in creating this project, I found it more feasible to rewatch clips on YouTube, another media for accessing anecdotes. I suggest exploring the scenes through YouTube clips, focused on one scene at a time, still aligns with Gossman's three-act anecdotal formula.

The properties of an anecdote are also often analyzed by the agents involved. Baron Cohen's utilization of different characters throughout "Who is America?" points to how innately ingrained in us this idea already is. We can readily deduce that one of his guests may have acted differently if confronted by a different character. For example, Dick Cheney, **as a guest**, would likely not have been as friendly with liberal extremist **Dr. Nira Cain-N'Degeocello** because of their polarized perceptions. To approach his guests' different identities, Baron Cohen utilizes unique strategies such as disguising himself as a billionaire when interacting with his wealthy guests as well as characters whose ideologies exist in an politically extreme opposition when meeting with certain politicians. Along with planning his disguises, Baron Cohen's attention to dialogue plays a significant role in how the traps on his show consequently create humor. He has to be rhetorically aware and prepared for the unique ideologies his guests are going to bring to a



scene. Each guest offers a unique perspective on politics and pop culture, and Baron Cohen parses his guests' notoriety by placing them in precarious situations. These situations culminated into impressionable moments that allowed "Who is America?" to make its own mark on American pop culture.

If we consider anecdotes a part of a larger narrative structure, then we need to pinpoint what we mean when we use the term "anecdote." Along with Gossman's assessment that describes anecdotes as a three act structure with a beginning (situation), middle (encounter), and end (resolution), I suggest we apply a socio-connotation to the term. Anecdotes serve as reflections of moments—happenings—that allow room for individual interpretations. Often, our interpretations can be easily summarized. We may observe how these interpretive summaries encourage us to recall the anecdote to memory. These recollections are reflective of the broader social implications of anecdotes because they keep moments of pop culture from slipping away—disappearing (as much as Kanye West may want them to vanish). Anecdotal summaries are usually how we point to influential moments in pop culture. Every anecdotal setup within "Who is America?" can be infamously summarized: "Sacha Baron Cohen convinces Dick Cheney to sign a waterboard," "Sacha Baron Cohen reveals Jason Spencer's xenophobia," "Sacha Baron Cohen tries to convince a small town in Arizona they need the largest mosque." Anecdotes have a notable peak in drama that allows them to cultivate American pop culture: "Joan Crawford accepts the Oscar to Bette Davis' dismay," "The glove didn't fit O.J. Simpson," "Kanye West interrupted Taylor Swift to let us know Beyonce should have won." We live our daily lives around these notable moments, and we rarely consider their impact on our own anecdotes, our own biases. We put so much stock into anecdotes, audiences literally demand them from celebrities on Late Night television. We turn to Jimmy Fallon, Conan O'Brien, and Jimmy Kimmel to pull anecdotes from celebrities, so that we can be reminded that they are as human as we are, so that we might identify with them. "Who is America?" seeks to uncover the anecdotes famous people may not be as willing to share on talk-shows.

The way we react to certain anecdotes reveals elements of our personality because through our reactions we simultaneously reveal our perceptions. These perceptions are framed around what Kenneth Burke calls "terministic screens." Each individual has unique terministic screens because we all experience the world in our own ways. Terministic screens comprise the elements of our lives that have influenced how we see our worlds and our current perceptions. When we seek to share our perceptions with others, we often use anecdotes. The reason I raise the notion of terministic screens is to demonstrate their influence on anecdotal interpretations. The anecdotes of a rhetorician who uses words like "terministic screens" are likely going to be quite different than the anecdotes of a small child. However, just because we have different terministic screens doesn't mean I can't identify with my 8-year-old neighbor's anecdotes about his cat. While our individual terministic screens differentiate us as people, anecdotes unite us through relatable moments. Our interpretations of an anecdote within "Who is America?" are derived from the terministic screens through which a guest approaches their scenario with Baron Cohen. Baron Cohen's guests presidential candidate Bernie Sanders and reality star Corinne Olympios are going to see the world through distinctly different terministic screens because of a number of factors such as gender, age, and their places within society. The audience who witnesses their setups will also have separate influences leading to their individual interpretation of a setup. No one person shares

the exact same terministic screens as another due to the variables that impact our reflections and deflections of reality. However, acknowledging the existence of varied terministic screens may allow us an angle for approaching how an guest's agency is impacted when thrown into a particular setup.

I would suggest that as we find ourselves identifying with the unabridged anecdotes Baron Cohen creates with his setups, we are working through the process Kenneth Burke refers to as "identification." In his work, "A Rhetoric of Motives" (1969), Burke **defines** identification as: "A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so." We may persuade someone to believe our interests are joined by using anecdotes. In a recent article, Débora Antunes elaborates on Burke's concept of "identification" that allows us to clearly picture how anecdotes fit into the identification process. She **says** that identification "is not about similarity, but joint interests." Antunes' clarification is important because it informs how we approach someone with our anecdotes. For instance, my 8-year-old neighbor and I have few similarities, but we are both interested in cats. If he tells me he lost his cat when it ran up a tree, I'm compelled to help him find his cat not because both own cats, but because we are both interested in the cat's safety. This is a trivial example, but we can think about this idea in more critical ways.

We may find ourselves identifying with Baron Cohen on "Who is America?" because we are also interested in the depths involved to reveal someone's vulnerabilities—parts of their subconscious they never thought could be cracked. An elected official may not want to become more like their constituents, but they may be interested in their votes so they share relatable anecdotes to make it appear as if similarities exist. Antunes also remarks on an important element of the identification process, she **states**:

...the identity of A or B is not excluded when they come together because of shared interests, being them at the same time consubstantial and independent individuals. Gary Woodward summarises the concept by saying that identification "creates spikes of decisive recognition that can bind us to specific sources, while affirming the boundaries of our own recognised world."

As we attempt to share our interests through anecdotes, Antunes remarks that we have to be conscientious of the impenetrable nature of individuality. Antunes' supports Burke's concept with Woodward's summary, but I would argue that we should consider that these "spikes" and affirmations of "boundaries" are also almost always conveyed to us through anecdotes. We may notice these instances when we identify with someone else's story, but we still distinctly distinguish it from our own.

We may find ourselves lacking connections to particular anecdotes. For example, I can't imagine myself being convinced to happily sign someone's waterboard like Cheney was persuaded to. Antunes **elaborates** on the issues of divisiveness within the identification process:

Burke also explains that as the natural division of human beings is the origin of the necessity of identification, both division and identification are constantly subordinate to each other. It is interesting to notice that even the associations formed through identification imply division since people organise themselves in groups that are usually distinguished from other groups, creating an antagonism between “them” and “us”.

We may think about these divisions when we think about how American political representatives often represent people who are radically different. We often create groups when we find similarities in others, but we still only identify with them insofar as our interests are shared. Antunes continues by suggesting that identification creates divisions while inevitably perpetuating them, she **says**: “In other words, identification results simultaneously in sociality and rivalry, since people tend to tie themselves to the perspective created by a group, at the same time that they ignore or reject other angles.” Anecdotes impose on these natural divisions Antunes and Burke point to because anecdotes offer endless perspectives of the individual worlds occurring around us. We have to decide if we share in these perspectives or if we reject them.

When we find that we share a sense of our own substance with another we often find a connection of closeness—a connection of humanity. As long as we are willing to accept anecdotes from others, then we are allowing ourselves to be privy to unique perspectives. We may not always agree with these perspectives, but when we are aware of them we are able to point to them when we see people make choices we may not have made. For example, I write about “The Bachelor” contestant Olympios in **“Performing Reality.”** We are around the same age, and when I saw her on “The Bachelor” I identified with her desire to enjoy herself on the show. However, within her segment on “Who is America?,” I initially had trouble understanding why she went along with the ploy. Now that I have read her analytical anecdote of what happened, I find myself with a greater sense of understanding. Through finding understanding in her anecdotes, I take part in what Burke refers to as “consubstantiation,” which is a derivative of the identification process. In “A Rhetoric of Motives” (1969), Burke **explains** consubstantiation as: “In being identified with B, A is ‘substantially one’ with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another.” As humans, we often have a natural sense of yearning to identify with others while maintaining our sense of individuality. Burke **suggests**, “In acting together, men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes, that make them consubstantial.” “Who is America?” interrogates these commonalities by showing how people in positions of power and celebrity actually feel about identifying with others by exposing the guests’ ignorance.

Insofar as “Who is America?” asks its namesake question, “Who is America?,” people in the United States are always already consubstantial with Baron Cohen because we know the question and watch the anecdotes to seek the answers. I would argue that the trick is finding consubstantiation with the show’s guests. We may never understand why a guest on the show acts in a certain way, but as we react to their actions, consubstantiation inevitably occurs because we are experiencing their anecdote with them. So while the identification process

can be divisive, anecdotes allow for us to at least find a sense of congruency even with the show's most grotesque guests.

Anecdotes are the package through which Baron Cohen's humor is delivered, which allows us to digest the repulsive qualities of some of Baron Cohen's caricatures as well as some of his guests. Each piece of the setup allows us to scrutinize and manage the show's consequences because we observe the scene, characters, and resolution through an anecdotal formula. Baron Cohen sets the stage for his audience to be in on the joke, so that we can find humor in a guest's pitfall.

Understanding and acknowledging the purpose of anecdotes allows us to more narrowly discuss the dynamics of the situational humor. Each guest offers us an interpretation of who they are as a person, then it is the audience(s)'s job to determine where the guest fits under the umbrella question "Who is America?." Having an idea of the terministic screens through which an agent may approach a situation sometimes allows us to accommodate ourselves to that person in order to meet them where they're at, to pinpoint the sense of congruence with another individual even if we find their experience unrelatable. Baron Cohen is notoriously manipulative towards his guests when he effectively uses his characterized rhetoric to identify with his guest (often choosing characters that will relate to particular guests), and we as an audience have to decide if the vulnerabilities his guests reveal are worth the cringe. Even if they are worth the sometimes horrifying outcomes, then we have to decide how far we would be willing to go or to see someone else go to uncover the truth. Sometimes, we may also find that our identification with the guest is what motivates the humor, such as when Sanders **refuses** to be on the same page as conservative Billy Wayne Ruddick.

Insofar as we find an anecdote comedic, we identify with it. In "Attitudes Towards History" (1959), Burke **says**: "Comedy deals with man [sic] in society...Comedy is essentially humane." The setups Baron Cohen creates through disguise often provide comedic relief because the audience can find laughs in the outlandish scenarios. In a recent article, Brett Biebel discusses the forgiving nature of comedy, he **says**: "[Comedy] asks its audience to remember that its characters are not inherently evil, and it encourages identification with fools." Baron Cohen's successfully executed satire elicits honesty, the comedic consequences elicit an unbearable truth because we often see a deceitful side of his guests. The comedic elements encourage audiences to keep watching—to keep seeking truth from the guests. I'm not going to pretend that I've done Plato's work and uncovered what TRUTH means. Truth isn't a definition pertinent to me generally. We all have truths that usually were revealed to us through anecdotes we experienced, and sometimes these truths are relevant, and other times the truth is that I'm never going to enjoy eating a Cheeto chip, and that's okay in spite of how many people seem to like them. However, I think that it is essential to recognize that comedy allows its users to unveil truths within individuals. As these truths are revealed, we may find ourselves unexpectedly identifying with someone. (For example, I can appreciate when people refer to Donald Trump as a Cheeto.)

The goal of "Who is America?" involves ultimately revealing the guests' motivations and hidden identities. When we experience the reveal, we may or may not find ourselves appreciating a guest's response to Baron Cohen's trap. Baron Cohen's comedic

consequences may make us feel significantly dissociated from others when we consider their uninhibited responses to the disguises he utilizes within his show. In the section **"Drama in Disguise,"** I go into depth about former representative Jason Spencer's **appearance** on "Who is America?." I find the scene hilarious because of how Baron Cohen orchestrates the setup, but I find Spencer reprehensible for how he responds. This dissociative response can occur through any sort of comedic channel, not just Baron Cohen's show.

"Who is America?" utilizes anecdotes in intentionally comedic ways. Comedy is complex in definition, which makes it difficult to precisely pinpoint. For this reason, we may acknowledge that we need a working definition of comedy that pertains specifically to "Who is America?." The Oxford English Dictionary Online **defines** comedy as: "A drama written in a light, amusing, or satirical style and having a happy or conciliatory ending. More generally: any literary composition or entertainment which portrays amusing characters or incidents and is intended to elicit laughter." While this definition offers us an initial playing field for understanding comedy, we may recognize that Baron Cohen's guests may not be amusing and they may not "elicit laughter." Therefore, when we think about the show we have to consider comedy in juxtaposition with the guests. The comedy is intended for the audience, and it is delivered at the expense of the guest.

Burke views comedy as humanizing, which we see as guests expose vulnerable parts of their identities. Biebel **notes**, "Burke had high praise for comedy thanks to its ability to deal in human rather than absolute terms. In a world of pluralism, skepticism, and debate, comedy can provide a coherent articulation of difficult-to-reconcile tensions." "Who is America?" specifically interrogates these tensions and often exposes them through comedic turmoil as Baron Cohen continues a setup from start to finish. Baron Cohen's show picks apart the ideas of pluralism, skepticism, and debate by targeting specific guests. For example, a good deal of skepticism surrounds O. J. Simpson, and Baron Cohen creates comedic turmoil by attempting to identify with Simpson as a wealthy businessman. Simpson's reaction further perpetuates skepticism through his hesitancy creating comedy out of the uncomfortable. Baron Cohen's history for fooling guests also reinforces comedic elements. He takes outrageous measures through his disguises to attempt to expose what he believes to be true.

Another feature of "Who is America?"'s comedy that we have to consider is the role Baron Cohen has in choreographing it. In her work, **"When Comedy Goes to Extremes: The Influence of Ideology and Social Identity on Source Liking, Credibility, and Counterarguing,"** Amy Becker considers the definition of comedy specifically in conjunction with "Who is America?." Becker labels Baron Cohen's choreography as "extreme comedy." Extreme comedy, she **says**, is: "material that goes too far in its criticism, working at the margins to shock us with its attempts to satirize and parody our current state of political affairs and our hyperbolic media environment." Becker's assessment suggests that extreme comedy may elicit shock which interferes with the Oxford English Dictionary Online definition by disrupting the traditional "happy" comedic ending. However, while this may be true, I argue that by disrupting our traditional expectations, the show creates a comedic social commentary. This commentary would lack meaning if every guest was left unscathed. Baron Cohen's guests often represent a reflection of American imperfection, and if their flaws lack emphasis there is little for the audience to take away. Becker criticizes "Who is America?" for subverting political agency rather than just undermining it. She **says**, "Extreme comedy is therefore a



form of destabilizing humor that attacks the highest political targets for their clear wrongdoings, rather than for their minor gaffes or personal foibles.” The idea of extreme comedy appears to frustrate Becker, and I’m sure much of the show’s audience, because as she **says**: “extreme comedy is satire that spends more time dividing rather than uniting us in the effort to be a more engaged and active, yet critical citizenry.” Instead of seeing the show as subversive, I would argue with Becker and say it is necessary revisionism. Baron Cohen’s extreme comedy provides us with new information about political representatives and celebrities that we may have never been privy to if the show didn’t push comedic boundaries.

By placing the traditional expectation of comedy in line with Becker’s conception of extreme comedy, we may conclude that the humor of “Who is America?” can be defined as: amusing satirical entertainment that seeks to revise how we understand American political and popular culture. By invoking this type of comedy on the show, Baron Cohen remarks on larger social issues such as racism, sexism, and xenophobia. Baron Cohen’s guests may leave a scene without recognizing the commentary he is making about them, but the show’s audience can find resolution in the reveal of what a guest’s reaction says about them. For example, in the season finale of “Who is America?,” Baron Cohen **attempts** to fool O. J. Simpson with the intention of trying to trap Simpson into admitting he killed Nicole Brown. Baron Cohen disguises himself as playboy millionaire Gio Minaldo in a clear attempt to identify with Simpson’s current lifestyle. Despite Baron Cohen’s efforts, Simpson never admits to murdering Brown. (Yes, both Baron Cohen and myself will have to live with wondering if he had just chosen one of his other disguises if he could have gotten to the truth.) However, Simpson’s avoidance suggests that he consistently performs in his every day life as though he did not murder Brown, and he refuses to relent that performance for anyone. In this case, extreme comedy allows us to find as much humor in Simpson’s foolishness as we do with Baron Cohen’s performance.

Baron Cohen employed extreme comedy long before “Who is America?” with “Da Ali G Show” and movies such as “Borat.” The fact that Baron Cohen has previously employed extreme comedy gives him a particular credibility over the revisionism the show cultivates. His previous comedic practices provided him with the edge he needed to successfully execute *Who is America?*. To go one step further, I would offer that his particular credibility is, in fact, what continues to shock his audiences. Baron Cohen’s process rarely fails because audiences are still shocked to learn that Baron Cohen fooled them with disguises (it’s like when the Scooby Doo crew uncovers the monster). When Baron Cohen fails in his specific endeavors there is still something to gain—an anecdote. Baron Cohen’s comedic rhetoric provides audiences a memorable experience, an anecdote that they might share with someone else; as long as his comedy is memorable, Baron Cohen’s comedic craft is preserved.

While I previously mentioned that truth’s definitional sense is not as relevant to me in creating this project, I find it pertinent to acknowledge that truthful anecdotes are not only more appealing, they are also more rhetorically successful. Honest and authentic anecdotes are almost always the most persuasive in moving bodies towards meaningful reactions. This “truth factor” is why Baron Cohen commits to his characters: if they ever became unbelievable he would immediately fail. Much as Baron Cohen commits to his comedy,

one of the directors and writers of “Who is America?,” Nathan Fielder, is equally known for his commitment to comedy on his show *Nathan for You* (2013-2017). As a *Nathan for You* fan, I was not surprised to learn about Fielder’s involvement in *Who is America?*. Fielder’s comedy aligns with Baron Cohen’s by utilizing anecdotal moments with real people, except that Fielder orchestrates events as himself without a disguise. I bring up Fielder because an episode of his show *Nathan for You* is literally called “The Anecdote,” and only serves to reinforce how much we depend on honest anecdotes to identify with others. In “The Anecdote” episode, Fielder explains that he has been invited to appear on Jimmy Kimmel’s late night show. Having failed at delivering laughable anecdotes on previous talk shows, Fielder plans out a hilarious tale in advance. The only issue is that none of his story has actually happened, so he sets out to make it happen. Fielder’s appearance on Kimmel is easily accessible on YouTube. Perhaps most hilariously, Kimmel clearly has no idea the efforts Fielder made into creating this anecdote, and Fielder’s appearance on Kimmel is the punchline for the *Nathan for You* episode.

Usually, relatable comedy is co-extensive of real-life experience. Fielder’s antics are relatable because every single one of us has embellished a story to make it more funny or compelling. Baron Cohen’s orchestrated anecdotes put his guests in outrageous situations making their experiences wildly unrelatable, but the guests’ reactions are comedic based on how compelling audiences find them to be. Many of us have a tendency to lean into the comfort of accepting a television personality point blank, but Baron Cohen’s art picks people apart to reveal pieces we might never have expected from them. Sure, there is a whole other portion to this art wherein we miss the depth to Baron Cohen in all of his own agency because we are focused on him as a character in disguise. We cannot become, as Burke might suggest, consubstantial with him through his artistic encounters. However, we may ultimately find consubstantiation with Baron Cohen by joining him in asking “Who is America?”.



# Performing Reality

**“FOR HOW MANY GENERATIONS NOW HAD HIS PEOPLE BEEN TURNING THEIR BACKS ON THINGS? HOW LONG HAD THEY SAT IN THEIR LIVING ROOMS AND WATCHED OTHER PEOPLE DIE?”**

**— CLARE B. DUNKLE, *THE SKY INSIDE***

Throughout graduate school, I made it clear that I was interested in the rhetoric of reality television. I spend way too much time thinking about the show “Survivor” because I essentially live in “Survivor” fandom. My support system is probably shocked that I didn’t just write my thesis about “Survivor.” Anyways, I was watching the latest episode of “Survivor” when I started thinking about how wonderful the host, Jeff Probst, is at assessing the dynamics of the show through his narration of events. I realized Probst isn’t really a “narrator” though, he is a host living the anecdote of the show along with the contestants. The notion of “hosting” made me think about Sacha Baron Cohen’s dynamic “host-like” element throughout the orchestration of “Who is America?.” Baron Cohen pushes past the traditional concept of “host” by taking the term to another level, which is to say he instigates. Hosts observe, while Baron Cohen interferes. His instigations leave viewers fumbling with the ethical components behind his manipulative humor. I would suggest this humor is easier to take in when it is nefarious politicians’ reputations on the line, but the comedy can be more difficult to level with when it involves other guests, such as reality stars.

Many of Baron Cohen’s sketches do involve political representatives, such as Bernie Sanders and Jason Spencer, but a few particular guests seemed to allude to a commentary on pop cultural issues. For example, “Who is America?” includes scenes featuring reality star Corinne Olympios. Olympios gained recognition for her appearance on ABC’s “The Bachelor” as well as “Bachelor in Paradise.” She gained notoriety by establishing herself as her season’s villain, the woman all of the other women despise. In her article, “The Troubling Truth Behind ‘Who is America?’s Corinne Olympios Prank,” Sonia Saraiya **elaborates** on Olympios’ character development throughout “The Bachelor”: “Olympios seemed to thrive on the controversy she created—a necessary character trait in the vicious world of reality television, albeit one that tends to incense viewers.” Saraiya’s commentary suggests that Olympios followed a self-fulfilling prophecy of becoming “The Bachelor” villain. Throughout her season on “The Bachelor,” judgement of Olympios appeared to derive from her wealthy background and childlike mindset. She would often comment on how she missed her “nanny” making her cheese pasta and how she helped her father run a multimillion dollar company. Olympios shifted audiences’ perceptions of the entire “The Bachelor” franchise after briefly appearing on “Bachelor in Paradise.” Olympios publicly came forward with her experience of



being sexually assaulted by another contestant. The incident went viral and drew criticism of the show's production. Public discourse was so rampant, that Olympios herself decided to speak up in an attempt to address the misconceptions of the assault. She **said**,

My intent over the past few weeks has been to learn and understand what happened on June 4 [2017]. While I never filed complaints or accusations against anyone associated with "Bachelor in Paradise," my team and I felt it was very important to be thorough in getting to the bottom of what had occurred. I felt victimized by the fact that others were judging me through conflicting and unsubstantiated reports, while I myself had no recollection of the events that transpired. My team's investigation into this matter has now been completed to my satisfaction. I am also happy about the changes that have been made to the production of "Bachelor in Paradise." While I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to have been a participant on "The Bachelor" and while I was invited to return to "Bachelor in Paradise" when production resumed, I respectfully made the decision not to return. I understand the media's interest in this story, and I greatly appreciate my fans' concerns for my well-being, but I think it is best if I keep any further thoughts private for now.

Even though audiences had come to expect a villainous side from Olympios, her commentary on the situation remained mature and impartial to audience criticism. I find it critical to provide this information about Olympios because these qualities compose the perceptions her audiences have of her. When I originally planned to write about her appearance on Baron Cohen's "Who is America?" I thought I might be more inquisitive of her actions. However, as I looked into reviews of her appearance, I found a great deal of defense towards her. I will suggest that by considering these defenses, we may compose an initial framework for some of the influences that steer the direction of Olympios' segment. Additionally, I think considering Olympios as an individual separates her identity as a whole from Baron Cohen's inclusion of her on the show. As we explore Olympios' experiences both on "The Bachelor" as well as on "Who is America?" we may find that Baron Cohen's inclusion of her on his show is more of a commentary on "The Bachelor" franchise and its fans generally, not just Olympios.

As someone who watches "The Bachelor," I wanted to include Olympios' side of the story, here, because the details surrounding the event were well known to fans of "The Bachelor." I want to suggest that it would have been unlikely that Baron Cohen was unaware of what happened to Olympios because the situation became a part of her notoriety. Olympios was the only guest to appear on "Who is America?" to have recently experienced sexual assault. While I would never suggest that this single experience defines Olympios as a whole, the experience sets her apart from any of the other guests on the show along with being the only guest to have appeared on "The Bachelor." These experiences influence what theorist Kenneth Burke would identify as her "terministic screens." In his work "Language as Symbolic Action" (1966), Burke **says** a terministic screen is: "a screen composed of terms through which humans perceive the world, and that direct attention away from some interpretations and toward others." Olympios' many unique experiences such as being on "The Bachelor," growing up with a lavish life-style, and even having a nanny as an adult all contribute to the unique terministic screens through which she sees the world. The assault she experienced

significantly impacts these terministic screens by marking them with trauma.

In a recent article, Jim Kuypers and Caitlin McDaniels expand on Burke's concept of terministic screens to further inform our understanding of Olympios' experience. They **say**, "How we use our language, the choices we make concerning specific words and phrases, shed light on the underlying assumptions that inform our understanding of the world." Terministic screens impact our perceptions of the world, but trauma has a way of disrupting those perceptions because it twists how we may have originally understood the way our worlds operate. Kuypers and McDaniels also remark on why critical audiences should consider the terministic screens of performers. They **say**, "When critics examine the choices made by communicators, they can see how key terms coalesce, interact, to form terministic screens." This idea is critical to analyzing all of the setups on "Who is America?"; otherwise, as critics of the guests, we are simply judging their experiences based on our own accord. Without considering the terministic screens that comprise the guests we miss crucial driving facets of what motivates them to make particular choices. We may think that it is wrong for Olympios to blindly agree to participate in Baron Cohen's setup, but if we consider her previous experiences as an individual, we may be more understanding of her perspective.

We may note that terministic screens differentiate themselves from the notion of perspective in that they are specific to one individual. For example, two individuals may have the same perspective and both may have enjoyed watching Corinne Olympios on "The Bachelor." However, the terministic screens that comprise these individuals may suggest that they enjoyed Olympios for different reasons. One individual may enjoy drama for various reasons, so they may have appreciated the chaos Olympios brought to the show. Another individual may be from a wealthy background and find identification with Olympios leading to their appreciation of her on "The Bachelor." So while their perspectives are the same in their appreciation for Olympios, the terministic screens that brought them to that point are going to be unique to each separate individual. In a recent work featured in "Political Campaign Communication: Theory, Method, and Practice" (2017), Kuypers **says**,

[Terministic screens] are indicative of the internal thinking of the communicator [for the nature] of our terms affects the nature of our observations, in the sense that the terms direct the attention to one field rather than to another. Also, many of the 'observations' are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made.

Kuypers' explanation of how "terministic screens" originate allows us to consider their impact within Olympios' anecdote. When we think about how performers use terms, we may consider how terms uniquely operate in individual scenarios. This idea clearly presents itself when we consider the different terministic screens through which a contestant may approach "The Bachelor" as opposed to the terministic screens through which a guest approaches "Who is America?." Olympios' understanding of the world is going to influence the unique ways in which she approaches each scenario.

In the case that follows, I want to point out that "The Bachelor" plays on network television while "Who is America?" occurred on Showtime requiring a paid subscription to watch either through an already owned streaming channel or as an added purchase through owning cable.

Network television is usually more readily accessible without fees, and networks shows also often appear the next day on low cost streaming websites. While clips from “Who is America?” can be found on YouTube, the show’s initial viewers likely drew a very different crowd than “The Bachelor” audience. The likelihood that viewers knew who Olympios was beyond a reality star is slight.



Olympios appears in the second episode of “Who is America?,” where she is fooled by Baron Cohen disguised as an Italian billionaire known as Gio Monaldo (yes, the same disguise as with O. J. Simpson, indicating Baron Cohen recognized that performing as wealthy would solicit certain reactions from other wealthy people). In the scene, Gio Monaldo convinces Olympios to pose in a hazmat suit with a bikini underneath for a

photoshoot and provide an interview under the guise that she is supporting victims of Ebola in Africa. Then, Gio Monaldo convinces Olympios to create a public service announcement imploring viewers to sponsor a child soldier. I mentioned that I identified with Olympios’ desire to enjoy herself while being on “The Bachelor,” I thought that even though she could act immature and be over-the-top, she still seemed smart and intuitive throughout the show. When I saw her willingly participate in Baron Cohen’s setup, it was astonishing to think that she wasn’t as intuitive as I thought. I wanted her to notice the incredulity and overall ridiculousness of the situation, but she never seemed to get there. At one point she even questions Monaldo asking, “Won’t people know I haven’t been in Africa?” Monaldo simply placates her by reminding her the photoshoot is for charity. I found myself wondering how Olympios negotiated that idea with herself.

Olympios recently explained the encounter from her own perspective in an interview with Julie Miller for “Vanity Fair.” Olympios **explains**:





“This giant, tall, blond guy was screaming, ‘Don’t do this. Don’t do that.’ Screaming. . . I introduced myself. He said, ‘Hello, hello. Welcome, welcome,’ with this thick Italian accent,” she said. “I’m thinking, ‘This is such an overdone accent. I don’t know if he’s trying to be like that guy on Cupcake Wars, with the overdone French accent. I don’t know what he’s doing.’ He’s also obnoxiously dressed.”

Olympios’ commentary of events provides an anecdotal sense of her thought process. Baron Cohen’s caricature struck her vulnerabilities by overwhelming her with his outrageous persona. When we consider the events through her terms, we might observe the obvious discomfort she experienced. Alternatively, as a woman around the same age as Olympios, I find myself questioning her willingness to continue. She claims a clear doubt that people will believe she was in Africa, but Baron Cohen (in disguise) persuades her to continue by reinforcing the idea that the whole ordeal is for charity. The outrageousness of it all baffles me, but her intentions appear pure as she strives to navigate the extreme anecdote.

A clear consequence from Olympios’ experience on “Who is America?” was her compelled need to justify to her audience why the events happened—why she fell for it. I find this notion relatable because we often try to explain our choices and when we come up short we struggle with figuring out why. Following her appearance on “Who is America?,” Olympios gave several interviews where she provided more details as to why she fell for the shtick. Unlike many of Baron Cohen’s other guests, Olympios’ audience actively communicates with her through social media. Her need to address what happened points to an odd double standard for reality stars as opposed to the politicians on the show. Our current political administration has made it clear that politicians have little need to justify corrupt actions as long as they make it an underdog story. Joe Biden introduces efforts to end violence against women and suddenly the violence that he committed against Anita Hill is forgotten. On the other hand, reality stars can’t just introduce new policies to allow their fans to forget their foibles. In this sense, reality stars have to take ownership and responsibility of their wrongdoings in order for their fans to forgive and forget.

Personally, I think that being a reality star provides Olympios to be honest in ways that salvage her reputation in ways that politicians lack. Olympios has the power to redeem herself by reclaiming her actions. If we consider Olympios’ perspective of the aftermath, we may begin to understand why she would be so easily persuaded by Baron Cohen. He caught her off-guard during a vulnerable time in her life. In her article, Saraiya **reveals** some of Olympios’ after thoughts: “At one point, she said, she thought to herself, while panicked and hyperventilating, ‘Oh my God, am I going to die? Is this O.K.? Am I O.K.?’ When she left, she said, she cried for hours. Discovering she had merely been subjected to a prank from Cohen was a relief, she said, because ‘imagine if that was real.’” Olympios prior trauma already punctured her understanding of the way her world works, and the confrontation with Baron Cohen severed this understanding even further. In line with Saraiya, Miller alludes to Olympios’ feelings of isolation. Olympios **told** Miller,

“I leave, only to find that they had sent my manager home hours ago—and they had my phone the whole time. I called my manager like, ‘How dare you leave

me. That was fucking insane. I thought I was going to die. It was the weirdest shit ever. I hate you. I feel like America's going to hate me.' I was hysterically crying for like three hours."

Saraiya and Miller both observe Olympios' post-anecdote feelings. While wildly different situations, Olympios' response to her experience on "Who is America?" is as raw and emotional as her response to her experience on "Bachelor in Paradise." Her reflections on these anecdotes may allow us a greater sense of empathy towards her. Her world was already destroyed in a way many of us may never understand, and she now has to incorporate grappling with how she handled Baron Cohen's setup.

I would suggest when we find difficulty empathizing with someone, this may indicate that we lack in our ability to identify with them. We might overcome this inability by willingly learning why someone would make certain choices. In Olympios' case, we might consider how she was already coping with trauma that removes a sense of presence. Baron Cohen's setup pushed her past the point of assessment, she could only react. Saraiya **explains** Baron Bohen's contempt for those who seek validation through "media exposure" emphasizing Olympios' compatibility for the setup. Saraiya criticizes the setup by establishing the issue of directional power Baron Cohen has over Olympios. Saraiya **states**: "It's beyond reason why Cohen and "Who is America?" would choose to target a figure at the center of such a sordid story. The show is calling her integrity into question in the same way that it is calling the integrity of conservative politicians into question, as if that is an apples-to-apples comparison." Olympios's trauma and her assessment of the trauma indicates that she was already struggling with understanding her own perception of integrity. After more thoroughly considering Olympios' perspective, I find myself with similar conclusions as Saraiya. While Olympios has fans, she isn't representing them on a political level where her decisions may impact their futures. Role models can be dropped, but politicians have to be actively voted out.

I do think it is fair that Baron Cohen wants to explore the limits of a social media influencer. Olympios' over 700,000 Instagram followers are indicative of her social media presence—which we might also identify as her social media performances. Before "Who is America?," it had been almost a year since Olympios was in any sort of spotlight. Still, her notoriety and influence made her as much of a prime target as Sanders. For these reasons, we may recognize why Baron Cohen would choose her for his show. Saraiya continues by **suggesting** Olympios was essentially incompatible for Baron Cohen's ploys, criticizing the troubling power dynamics of the situation: "This is all to say that the dynamic between a young female reality star at the beginning of her career and an older male photographer, as Cohen pretended to be, is inherently fraught." She goes on to interrogate the particularly problematic power dynamics in this setup that are less critical in other setups such as with politicians and journalists. While I mostly agree with Saraiya's **assessment**, particularly her note on the power dynamics issue, there is still something about "a reality star beginning her career," that does not sit well with me. Throughout the whole ordeal, the idea that reality television is not a career path is something that Baron Cohen is heavily critiquing. The whole scene suggests Olympios has few limits when it boils down to maintaining relevance and at what cost? If she walks away, in the moment, then this photoshoot loses purpose and no one sees her support a fake charity. Ultimately, the decision

to continue kept her in the limelight even if it did not pan out the way she had imagined. Maintaining the limelight means Olympios maintains her social media presence—she preserves her relevance to her audience.

I refer to what happened in Olympios' scene as "an extreme anecdote." Olympios was placed into a position no one has ever been in before, and there's not a map of directions like she would have had in preparing for "The Bachelor." As we find ourselves involved in culminating anecdotes, we may find that these anecdotes also serve to preserve our relevance, our legacies. The anecdotes we share with others, whether they leave us looking notorious or nefarious, suggest how we want others to see us when we have control over them. When an extreme anecdote is presented without our consent, such as in Olympios' case, how we handle the consequences is our opportunity to preserve our reputations. Miller explores more of the consequential elements of Olympios' experience and relates these to her time on "The Bachelor." Miller **states**:

When Cohen dupes veteran politicians and journalists with decades of media experience and savvy gatekeepers, the resulting comedy is somewhat earned, if uncomfortable. But there's something that feels a bit strange about entrapping a twentysomething reality star in a room under false pretenses—especially when that reality star has proven herself comfortable with being a comedy punch line and unflappable by unflattering edits. As a person close to Olympios told us, "Most people couldn't do what she did on The Bachelor—and be given 'the villain edit'—and not die [out of embarrassment]. She can endure that stuff. She has a different gene than the rest of us. So it's become funny to her."

Miller points to the qualities that garnered her notoriety, but Miller misses that these parts of Olympios' identity are what Baron Cohen wants to experiment with. If someone is unfazed by being typed as the villain, then we want to know what it takes to make them react. Miller reveals that Olympios was indeed unfazed by Baron Cohen's trap: she has, Miller says, "come to terms with her 'Who is America?' Guest star turn" and now just sees the episode as "a funny thing."

Baron Cohen's work, in this case, reveals the issues of desperation for self-promotion. Olympios' reflection focuses on the exposure she foresees. The experience may have revealed parts of herself that she wants to conceal, but she fails to take any opportunity to address the issues of her participation. Olympios grasps for fame, and Baron Cohen shows his audience how this motive dominates her. Miller **concludes** her article by suggesting the benefits of the trap Olympios fell into: "...maybe any press is good press, especially for a millennial attempting to build her own empire. She has a slew of projects in motion—a clothing line, a podcast, a digital series, a roman à clef, and a mysterious project she will be rolling out soon—and a television platform is a television platform." Baron Cohen antagonizes this type of conclusion because it perpetuates a culture driven by vanity. Olympios may have had good intentions when she participated in the photoshoot, her own words suggest that as long as she is still seen then she has been successful.



Viewers may recognize that it was controversial of Baron Cohen to choose a contestant who was sexually assaulted to be a guest on “Who is America?”; however, Baron Cohen seems to purposefully choose his guests in ways that lead to controversy not just for the show, but also for his viewers to consider long after watching an episode. Olympios, like many other women who have experienced sexual assault, will always be associated with this incident. Since this was the first time that a sexual assault was reported publicly from “The Bachelor” franchise, many people outside of the show’s viewers became aware of the situation. Therefore, an argument could be made that Baron Cohen selected Olympios because he knew she was famous even outside of the franchise because she openly commented about the assault she experienced on “Bachelor in Paradise.”

Burke’s theory of dramatism can help us understand exactly why Baron Cohen would select Olympios for his show, which I find necessary to consider in order to emphasize Baron Cohen’s credibility as a rhetorical artist. The idea that Baron Cohen deliberately chose a victim of sexual assault would discredit him among many audiences. In a recent article, Robert Wess **refers** to Burke’s explanation of dramatism within “A Grammar of Motives”: “Dramatism suggests a procedure to be followed in the development of a given calculus, or terminology. It involves the search for a ‘representative anecdote,’ to be used as a form in conformity with which the vocabulary is constructed.” In other words, to have a fully represented anecdote, we also have to consider Baron Cohen’s motivations. With Wess’s assessment in mind, we may understand why it is useful to have some background on both agents involved in the scene in order to determine their ultimate motivations. Olympios went through a traumatic experience, but Baron Cohen does not allude to this during his anecdote with her. Instead, Baron Cohen exploits the irony that Olympios, a wealthy heiress, took to “The Bachelor” franchise to find love—a franchise driven by consumers who continue to watch the show.

At the time “Who is America?” was originally filmed, Olympios was undeniably one of the most infamous contestants not just because she experienced assault, but also because she often expressed her multifaceted experiences publicly on social media. In their article, “Toward A Dramatistic Ethics” (2015), Kevin McClure and Julie Skwar **refer** to Burke’s “Language as Symbolic Action,” “A Grammar of Motives,” as well as “Permanence and Change” to build a framework for Burke’s dramatistic theory, which focuses on the choices that agents may make in a given situation. They **say**, “Burke’s Dramatistic view of language centers on action, and ‘action implies the ethical, the human personality.’ Language affords subjects (or, Burke’s word, agents) with the ability to act, and ‘[t]o say that action is motivated is to say that one is not (entirely) a victim of circumstances, but that one must make a choice.’” This idea allows us to further interrogate why Olympios made an ideal candidate for Baron Cohen’s extreme anecdote. Her agency centers around maintaining her fanbase and perpetuating her relevance as a social media influencer. Baron Cohen might have guessed that Olympios would go along with his ploy because her influence relies less on her reputation and more on the actions she takes to be seen.

Based on Burke’s theory of Dramatism, we may acknowledge that ethical agents are going to vary among individuals, as we all individually approach situations with our unique perspectives—our unique vulnerabilities. Within Olympios’ scene on “Who is America?,” Baron Cohen is able to reveal her vulnerabilities; he persuades her to continue the

photoshoot and the interview by appealing to her desire to support charity. He humanizes her in such a way that is rarely achieved with pop culture icons because we, as viewers, witness her using her own volition to determine how to navigate her encounter with Baron Cohen's disguise. She lacks social media followers or her manager directing her—she is extra vulnerable within an extreme anecdote. On one hand, Baron Cohen relentlessly shows us how far Olympios is willing to go no matter how ridiculous the whole scheme seems because he is ultimately commenting on a broader dynamic of pop culture's influence on reality stars. On the other hand, Olympios becomes more relatable by explaining why she fell for the setup. The fact that openly explained how overwhelmed she felt, humanizes her in a way most of us can identify with.

Burke's terminology may push us to reconsider (or, alternatively, further validate) our initial judgements of Olympios by incorporating her post-reflection and prior conflicts into our assessments of her anecdote. Again, we have to consider the influences of individual's terministic screens otherwise we make useless generalizations that fail to allow us to empathize and identify with others. Burke explains that terministic screens can be compared to the development of a photograph. Kuypers and McDaniels expand on Burke's comparison by asking us to consider the unique individualism each agent brings to the photograph—to the anecdote. They say,

Kenneth Burke emphasized that our grammatical choices can reveal the meaning behind rhetorical artifacts, and that terministic screens can be used to understand how “what we say we know is filtered through our terms.” It is the “capacity of language (terminology) to encourage us to understand the world in some ways, while filtering (screening) other interpretations out.” The idea behind a terministic screen can be used with the analogy of a photograph, just as the lens of a camera is responsible for creating new perspectives with the same object, a terministic screen filters a view based on the specific terms used. Since terministic screens have that filtering affect, “our attempts to describe or interpret reality are limited initially by the terms available to us, and then further, by which ones we choose.”

Much as a Polaroid picture may develop as time passes, so may our reflections of an anecdotal experience. Blatantly, as with many guests on the show, Olympios perspective significantly shifted once recognizing that she was fooled by Baron Cohen in disguise. As Kuypers and McDaniels note, we can only assess with the terms available to us. The terms of understanding during Olympios' anecdote were confined to the situation until she learned that she had been set up. Based on this assessment of terministic screens, we may acknowledge that, as an audience, we may all witness the same anecdote but, due to our individual terministic screens, we all experienced the scene differently.

The unique perspectives of the setup also applies to Baron Cohen and Olympios. From the beginning, the anecdote is exploited because Baron Cohen is in on the scheme, but Olympios sees the setup as real. Baron Cohen not only carries the power of deception over her, but he also has the ability to transform out of his disguise and remove himself from the audience's

**judgement. These dynamics supplement the issues Saraiya and Miller address in regards to the power Baron Cohen has over Olympios as a woman in an impressionable situation.**

**Baron Cohen's disguise disrupts our understanding of the agents' perspectives. Baron Cohen's audience(s) know he is in disguise, but the fact that his guests lack this piece of information ultimately makes the anecdotes Baron Cohen creates extreme. McClure and Skwar interweave Burke's dramatistic pentad (act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose) with his conception of terministic screens, and I find their summation interrogates the core issue of how skewed perspectives affect the interpretation of an anecdote. McClure and Skwar state:**

While expressions of motives through "terministic screens" are unavoidable, Burke maintains that there are some uses of terminologies that are more representative of reality than others. Terminologies that feature one term or ratio as the "perspective of perspectives" and that suppress other terms or ratios in the pentad are less representative of reality, since any "rounded" or full statement features all five terms.

**McClure and Skwar's observation emphasizes the need to consider every aspect of Burke's pentad before drawing any final conclusions. However, the issue with using the pentad to assess an anecdote on the show is that the act, agent, agency, and purpose vary depending on what role we subscribe to. We may only be able to fully commit to being the audience, but we can seek understanding motivations through the terministic screens an agent brings to an anecdote.**

**While this issue of understanding motivations is blatantly demonstrated throughout anecdotes on "Who is America?," rhetorically, this idea applies to our interpretation of any anecdote; we can never fully commit to understanding anyone's terministic screens except our own. This inability of humans to read other people's minds alludes to the difficulty in assessing the different perspectives within Olympios' anecdote. As an audience, we may attune ourselves to the truth we are privy to and recognize Baron Cohen's goal of revealing a hidden dimension of Olympios' identity—the lengths she will go to acquire fame, and the lengths her social media followers are willing to let her go. Alternatively, we may recognize the conflicts Olympios endured and show appreciation for her willingness to publicly display vulnerability by becoming one of her social media followers.**

**Regardless of where we land on identifying with Olympios, we may agree that the spread of fame through viral videos benefits her by maintaining her pop cultural notoriety. Once a video goes viral, it can't be retracted, suggesting a loss of control over the situation. On the other hand, however, this viral circulation actually provides an opportunity for Olympios to regain control over how the anecdote is perceived by her audience. Her "Who is America?" anecdote will exist in perpetuity, but she can shift her audience's perception of her by posting new anecdotes through photos on her Instagram page.**

Technology interferes with our understanding of the pentad by disrupting its traditional operations. Agency, agents, scenes, acts, and purposes are distorted technology controls their perceptions. In his work “The Philosophy of Chrysippus” (1970), Josiah Gould **says**:

Our spontaneous identification with the powers of technology can lead to quite a range of bluntness. . . . Almost without thinking, we incline to be like the fellow who had delusions of grandeur because, each time he approached the door of a supermarket, it of itself opened to let him pass.

After considering this passage, I would ask my readers to replace the idea of a revolving supermarket door with the idea of a constantly recording camera. By employing Gould’s metaphor, I suggest that even the camera in Olympios’ anecdote has more power over the situation than she. If reality is based on the symbols we believe in and those beliefs comprise our terministic screens, then the camera not just of the photoshoot but “Who is America?”’s production determines Olympios’ fate just as much as she does if not more so. The technology can be cut and edited, but Olympios’ identity, based off of her interpretation of events, stays static. While Olympios lacked control as the anecdote occurred, she can continue the recording by taking to social media to explain her choices, just as she did with her experience on “Bachelor in Paradise.”

Perhaps, though, Olympios’ lack of social media response to her experience on “Who is America?” allows her to conceal how she actually feels about the events she has experienced. This response serves as a reminder that a reaction to an anecdote can simply be indifference. Terministic screens may serve as motivators towards indifference, as Kuypers and McDaniels **note**:

For Burke, there are “terms that put things together, and terms that take things apart.” In other words, terministic screens can also act toward composition and division, since all “terminologies must implicitly or explicitly embody choices between the principle of continuity and the principle of discontinuity.”

If Olympios has an image she wants to maintain, then her reactions to events have to align with that image. If the issue of her image is the case, then we may as well see Olympios as wearing a costume just as Baron Cohen wears one. Just because someone may express indifference does not mean that this indifference is without performative properties. Olympios’ costumes radiate throughout her Instagram account reinforcing why Baron Cohen’s broader goal was not to necessarily stir Olympios into some epiphany of self-reflection, but to point to the ideologies within pop culture are polarized by shows such as “The Bachelor” that suggest true love and capitalism are what tying the knot is all about.

As much I think I understand Sacha Baron Cohen’s intentions within this particular anecdote, the dilemma I have when considering the scene derives from Baron Cohen’s refusal to draw conclusions for his viewers. Baron Cohen’s previous work presents clear social commentaries, such as the revelations of prominent racism that emerge in “Borat.” Within “Who is America?,” he usually victimizes political representatives—people chosen **for**

positions of power. However, something about choosing a reality star stands out. Let us consider IndieWire writer Ryan Lattanzio's **description** of "Who is America?":

His 2018 Showtime series "Who Is America?" tackles humankind's dark side head-on by bait-and-switching real-life figures to catch them in their blind spots. In the show, he got Dick Cheney to sign a waterboarding kit, former chief justice Roy Moore to take a pedophile lie-detector test, and "The Bachelor" star Corinne Olympios to endorse the training of child soldiers on camera.

Immediately, we may recognize that the victimization of Dick Cheney and Roy Moore are going to strike humor for particular audiences. The addition of Olympios must have ulterior motives. In a write up for The New Yorker, Emily Nussbaum **stated** the following about her initial screening of the show:

Before screening Sacha Baron Cohen's "Who Is America?," Showtime flacks handed me a nondisclosure agreement. They locked up my phone. Guards roamed the aisles with night-vision goggles. The implication was clear: this show, heralded by panicky press releases from politicians, was incendiary stuff. Then, three days later, the network tiptoed backward like Trump after Helsinki. "At its core [Who is America?] is a comedy show," a pre-airing e-mail insisted. "This is not a statement on the state of the country, but Baron Cohen experimenting in the playground of 2018 America."

Even though Nussbaum does not refer to Olympios, her analysis of Baron Cohen "experimenting in the playground," may allow us to further consider why he would include Olympios in an episode. Reality shows are the ultimate scapegoat of television, but "The Bachelor" still has millions of viewers flocking to the show for a taste of drama they usually lack in their own lives. I'll be the first one to admit I'm guilty as charged. I watch the show because I find the hyper-drama captivating; I'm not invested in anyone finding their one true love. "The Bachelor" has not convinced me that finding love is its ultimate purpose anyways. Like most television shows it clearly seeks to rake in viewers regardless of the stakes involved for the contestants.

While we are considering the viewership of "The Bachelor," I also want to note that many of the women who appear as contestants go on to earn money promoting products on their social media account. This occurrence is known in the reality television world as "shilling." (At least through my experience browsing "The Bachelor" **subreddit**.) A gaudy impression surrounds shilling, and the Oxford English Dictionary Online supports this assessment, defining "shill" as, "a decoy or accomplice, esp. one posing as an enthusiastic or successful customer to encourage other buyers, gamblers, etc." This whole concept of contestants taking advantage of sponsorship by shilling to their Instagram followers supports Baron Cohen's assessments of social media as often being vain self-promotion, but also product promotion for monetary compensation. Even if Olympios gained nothing but embarrassment from her encounter with Baron Cohen, as an audience, we might see how some social media



**influencers seem lavish and grandeur, but their morals are easily punctured if it means making money.**

**When we identify “The Bachelor” as an extension of pop culture, there are clear issues with the anecdotes that lie within this franchise. The main issue being that “The Bachelor” is supposed to be a show about finding love but exists at the behest of consumerism. It is not exactly controversial of me to suggest the clear opposition between love and capitalism. The notions of capitalism significantly disrupt the “reality” aspect of a reality show about finding love. The relationship between capitalism, social media, and “The Bachelor” signify a commentary on the absolute lack of love involved in this triangle derived from a show advertised as being about finding love. Whether this is Baron Cohen’s larger point or not, the show asks “Who is America?,” and contestants who go on “The Bachelor” knowing that they will have a career shilling once their time on the show ends is an answer. How we, as an audience, feel about this particular answer is a reflection of the terministic screens that lead us to our own conclusions. If one of my readers is particularly passionate, I would suspect that they have already taken to social media to express their grievances with reality shows.**

**Baron Cohen was recently awarded the Anti-Defamation League’s Leadership Award for his commitment to exposing prejudice. In an article for Haaretz, Josefin Dolsten **quoted** a portion of Baron Cohen’s acceptance speech:**

**“Facebook, YouTube and Google, Twitter and others — they reach billions of people. The algorithms these platforms depend on deliberately amplify the type of content that keeps users engaged — stories that appeal to our baser instincts and that trigger outrage and fear,” Cohen said. “It’s why YouTube recommended videos by the conspiracist Alex Jones billions of times. It’s why fake news outperforms real news, because studies show that lies spread faster than truth.”**

**When we consider Baron Cohen’s statement in conjunction with Burke’s philosophy about terministic screens, I would suggest that we may notice that social media outlets act as veils to terministic screens. Influencers, such as Olympios and other Bachelor contestants, use social media to present what they want their fans to know about them. In this way, social media detracts from our understanding about the realities of what influences a reality star’s terministic screens. Social media outlets masquerade as truth and reality. Baron Cohen continued his speech to **say**,**

**“...if we prioritize truth over lies, tolerance over prejudice, empathy over indifference and experts over ignoramuses — then maybe, just maybe, we can stop the greatest propaganda machine in history, we can save democracy, we can still have a place for free speech and free expression, and, most importantly, my jokes will still work.”**

**We can address the irony in Baron Cohen’s critique of social media, his modus operandi center around fooling his guests, just as we use social media into fooling others into believing**

**what we want them to think our lives are like. However, we might distinguish between Baron Cohen's motivations towards seeking truth through hijinks from the blatant control over content social media outlets, well, shill. His critiques, in the case of Olympios, also matter because Olympios' relevancy is perpetuated by social media through her followers. The vanity creates an obliviousness to the underlying issues Baron Cohen calls our attention to. The main way I see to address Baron Cohen's critics is to, at least occasionally, demonstrate aspects of our authentic selves on social media. The calls for change Baron Cohen asks of us may not be televised, but we may authentically tweet them.**



# Drama in Disguise

“I GOT NEWS FOR YOU, UNCLE SAM / I GOT NO USE FOR YOU / YOU'RE JUST ANOTHER  
MADE UP MAN / IN A STUPID COSTUME / HERE COMES A MAGICIAN AND HE'S GOT NO  
TRICKS / WANTS TO CUT THE LADIES IN HALF / HE AIN'T SEEN THE FUTURE LIKE WE ALL  
DID / 'CAUSE HE'S LIVIN' IN THE DARK AGES”

— GROUPLOVE, *PROMISES* (2020)

While many theorists have investigated narrative and performance theories in relation to Sacha Baron Cohen's rhetorical devices. Theorist Judith Butler also offers ways of approaching Baron Cohen's work by considering the politics that performative bodies often fabricate. Butler's elaboration on the concepts performance and performativity, particularly put into political spheres, allows us to further consider and apply the dynamics of Baron Cohen's multifaceted comedy to our broader sense of reality. What I mean, here, is that while rhetorically we may inherently label something like “comedy” as political in its own right, the work Baron Cohen produces in “Who is America?” has broader implications than just the rhetorical dimensions surrounding the comedy itself. There are not only aftermath effects from the show, but as anecdotes occur on the show, it immediately brings light to issues surrounding performative values within the United States. The concepts of performance and performativity provide a framework for understanding these broader implications. When we place Butler's definitions in conjunction with Kenneth Burke's, we may analyze how unexpected performativity disrupts Burke's concept of the rhetorical **pentad**, which includes: agents, acts, scenes, purposes, and agency.

When I think about the distinction between performativity and performance, I consider the difference between a rehearsed reaction (performance) and our natural inclinations based on societal expectations (performativity). Therefore, I view the reactions of Baron Cohen's guests as being indicative of social performativity. As I argue that Baron Cohen is the originator of his comedic style, I understand that an argument could be made that many improvisational comedy shows are conceptually the same. However, while improv relies on performativity's intimate relationship to performance, Baron Cohen's comedy relies solely on his guests' expectations of anecdotal performativity. The element of the unexpected arises because, unlike improvisation, Baron Cohen's guests are not aware of the scheme: they almost never initially see through his disguises. However, social performative expectations and even anecdotal evidence from his more infamous guests allude to the rhetorical decisions Baron Cohen may have to make in order for a scene to work. In her opening examination of “linguistic injury” in “Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative” (1997), Butler suggests that reactions to language create a perpetual loop of negotiating how we are supposed to perform in response to reactions that we may not even agree with. She **says**,

When we claim to have been injured by language, what kind of claim do we make? We ascribe an agency to language, a power to injure, and position ourselves as the objects of its injurious trajectory. We claim that language acts

and acts against us, and the claim we make is a further instance of language, one which seeks to arrest the force of the prior instance. Thus, we exercise the force of language even as we seek to counter its force, caught up in a bind that no act of censorship can undo.

Butler's words show us that language potentially creates a perpetual loop with its potential to injure and a desire to respond to the injury with language. Our performativity signifies how we have been conditioned to react to language.

"Who is America?" further complicates Butler's language loop because Sacha Baron Cohen is in disguise, which disrupts his guests' understanding of the situation or what Burke may refer to as the scene. According to Burke, the scene encompasses the background and setting of the drama, or in our case, the anecdotes we observe throughout "Who is America?." Understanding Burke's concept of scene allows us to readily point to particular anecdotes within "Who is America?" within their specific contexts. The context of the scene impacts Baron Cohen's disguises by providing the foundation for how they create satire. For example, it is the satirical elements of the scene that make it humorous for Baron Cohen to disguise himself as the progressive liberal Dr. Nira Cain-N'Degeocello and attempt to convince a conservative small town in Arizona that they need the world's largest mosque. In a recent article, Michael Rangoonwala elaborates on Burke's concept of scene in a way that examines the broader cultural influences indicative of a . Rangoonwala **says**,

In addition to physical environments, scene can represent ideas such as cultural movements or communism. The scope of the context assigned to the scene, such as the difference between a city and a continent, is termed the circumference of the analysis. Lastly, scene has the philosophic terminology of materialism. Materialism as a system "regards all facts and reality as explainable in terms of matter and motion or physical laws." Fay and Kuypers describe it another way as determinism.

Based on Rangoonwala's assessment of a scene's potential to reflect "cultural movements," we may conclude that the scene determines the zeitgeist of a consequential anecdote. For example, "Who is America?"'s scene is an extension of not just 2018, the year it was released, but the scene is also indicative of the political atmosphere driven into chaos by Donald Trump's presidency, which began two years prior. The motivations of individual scenes within "Who is America?" are dictated by Baron Cohen's astute observations of different facets regarding American culture. Alternatively, the motivations of the show's guests are dictated by the scenes they individually occur within. The different disguises Baron Cohen uses with individual guests naturally elicit different reactions.

The success behind a scene, especially a scene bound for virality, is the reveal of an often suppressed truth on the part of a guest. Baron Cohen's disguises imply a particular tone, a particular identity, and a particular association to observers. Through his disguises, Baron Cohen embraces the opportunity to meet his guests with unconditional terms...at least for himself. Since he can remove his disguise, he can remove responsibility for a guests'

grotesque reactions. Butler remarks on the ability of speech to break from its context. She says,

Understanding performativity as a renewable action without clear origin or end suggests that speech is finally constrained neither by its specific speaker nor its originating context. Not only defined by social context, such speech is also marked by its capacity to break with context. Thus, performativity has its own social temporality in which it remains enabled precisely by the contexts from which it breaks.

Butler's assessment of performativity allows us to draw the connections between Baron Cohen's disguises and the undeniable political consequences they cultivate. Performativity's ability to break context creates consequence by disrupting social expectations. Perhaps obviously, this idea becomes clear once the guests on Baron Cohen's show realize they were set up only after the show airs. Once they experience the reveal of the setup, their reflections and how they react are subsequent ramifications of the show. These ramifications are entangled within the loop of how we determine our response to a language—to a performance. Understanding and finding comedy within Baron Cohen's work means recognizing his guests may be pushed into boundless obscenity, and we have to navigate our reactions to the obscene, which is a performative response we may or may not be able to consciously control. The turmoil that occurs within ourselves serves to demonstrate how different styles of comedy usually only work with particular audiences.

The combination of Baron Cohen's chosen disguise and the context of a scene steer the direction, which often leads to obscenity especially with his political guests. The most brazen example of political obscenity on "Who is America?" undeniably occurs when Sacha Baron Cohen is disguised as his character Erran Morad. Hareetz writer, Adrian Hennigan, best details the disguise of Erran Morad:

First, there's that look. Everything about him screams macho Israeli military type: the swaggering gait straight from an IDF propaganda video; the ramrod-straight back; the outfits – the black sweatshirt with ATS "Anti Terror School" logo whose accompanying Hebrew translation is printed the wrong way around i.e., the text goes from left to right, mocking the interviewees' superficial awareness of Israel. Heck, even his hair is jet-black.



Erran Morad persuades and identifies with his audience by embracing toxic masculinity and preaching Islamophobia. The audience has to understand Baron Cohen's intentional utilization of the character against the particular guest in order to understand how the rhetorical outcomes operate comedically. This intrinsic understanding may be why *Esquire* deems Erran Morad as Baron Cohen's best character: "This character has

effectively gotten high-profile Republicans to reveal they want to arm kids and ruined the career of Georgia lawmaker Jason Spencer. Colonel Morad isn't here to play, and he's getting those he encounters to show their true colors, whether it looks good for America or not." As an audience, we may recognize that this specific character Baron Cohen created has the potential to reveal truths from his guests that other characters cannot. This idea is gross because it means toxicity has to meet toxicity in order to be exposed, but when we acknowledge the grossness we may see the value of revealing a politician's true intentions. (I also can't help but wonder if the toxic masculinity that radiates from Erran Morad would have identified more with O. J. Simpson.)

Baron Cohen plays on our societal fetishization of identities while simultaneously feeding into them to serve what much of his audience already knows to be true—politicians are deceptive. Erran Morad's encounter with former Georgia State Representative, Jason Spencer, quickly became the most circulated clip from "Who is America?." The clip has over 10 million views on YouTube, and a top comment from YouTuber Jeboteknik says, "This is like a 'South Park' Episode but with real people." The most infamous moment from the clip begins when Erran Morad intends to teach Spencer how to avoid being kidnapped by Islamic terrorists. "Because of who you are, you could be the victim of kidnapping by ISIS," Morad confidently tells Spencer, who enthusiastically nods in agreement (I would suggest to my readers that if you find it funny that Spencer is afraid of being kidnapped by ISIS, then you are a target audience for this scene). In just a matter of seconds, it is clear Morad gains his trust by conceding to Spencer's naively innate understanding of his self-importance. The scene continues with Morad asking Spencer how he would get attention when confronted by kidnappers, and Spencer explains that he would start screaming and take clothes off. Morad informs Spencer, "In America, there is one forbidden word, it is the n-word..." allusively suggesting that this word would protect Spencer from being kidnapped. Morad goes on to impersonate a terrorist kidnapping Spencer, while Spencer shamelessly screams the derogatory term to practice drawing attention for when he is inevitably kidnapped by ISIS terrorists. Morad then confronts Spencer, "Are you crazy? The 'n-word' is noonie. Not this word. This word is disgusting." The fallout of the clip garnered Spencer's resignation. While Baron Cohen revealed an abominable truth to Spencer's identity, Spencer continues to deny responsibility. In a tweet following the incident, Spencer said, "I deeply regret the language I used at (Cohen's) request as well as my participation in the 'class' in general. If I had not been so distracted by my fears, I never would have agreed to participate in the first place. Spencer's perpetual denial of agency signifies a long standing denial of his identity that only serves to reinforce systemic racism. Much of the show's audience has to reconcile with the fact that there is something comedic behind the reveal of Spencer's prejudice. Butler offers insight into how Spencer's performativity allows him to still be blind to his faults:

Language is thought of "mostly as agency—an act with consequences;" an extended doing, a performance with effects. This is something short of a definition. Language is, after all, "thought of," that is, posited or constituted as "agency." Yet it is as agency that it is thought; a figural substitution makes the thinking of the agency of language possible. Because this very formulation is offered in language, the "agency" of language is not only the theme of the formulation, but its very action. This positing as well as this figuring appear to exemplify the agency at issue.

We do things with language, produce effects with language, and we do things to language, but language is also the thing that we do. Language is a name for our doing: both "what" we do (the name for the action that we characteristically perform) and that which we effect, the act and its consequences.

While Butler examines language's own agency, the points she makes allude to the broader social issue of Spencer choosing to use derogatory language. By Butler's points, Spencer cannot erase his performance as it will exist in perpetuity because of the agency within the language he chose to use—not just because of the internet. The language's agency serves as a reminder for Spencer's actions, but simultaneously keeps Spencer from understanding the implications of the fallout because he is blinded by his own political discourse. Perhaps, Spencer "actually" regrets actions, but more likely he regrets being exposed. While Sacha Baron Cohen instigated Spencer's exposure, his performativity ultimately led to his demise. When the language we choose fails to meet the expectation of societal performativity, the rhetorical consequences can often be irreversible, which we witnessed as Spencer lost his entire political career to this one anecdotal moment.

The term agency best explores how "Who is America?"'s guests react to the exploitation of their Idealism through their performative inclinations. Butler intimately connects the idea of agency to language demonstrating languages' potential ownership of the context. Burke provides us with the rhetorical framework for acknowledging how language possesses agency. Burke explains that agency is the "how" of the drama—the means of an anecdote. The means of an anecdote depends on the contextual language to motivate its outcome. Ragoonwala expands on Burke's definition of agency by pairing the term with the concept of pragmatism, which provides a framework for us to understand how agency motivates individual Idealism. Ragoonwala **says**,

The term agency refers to how an act occurs, and its matching philosophic terminology is pragmatism. In pragmatism, "the meaning of a proposition or course of action lies in its observable consequences, and the sum of these consequences constitutes its meaning." In other words, the means to an end is featured and goodness or truth is indicated by the outcomes. Burke describes the school of pragmatism in an example with science: "Once Agency has been brought to the fore, the other terms readily accommodate themselves to its rule. Scenic materials become means which the organism employs in the process of growth and adaptation." This example illustrates how a focus on agency causes a focus on processes.

Our individual understandings of "goodness" and "truth" dictate how we see agency operate. Language gains agency when employed for rhetorical motivations which are intimately tied to performative motivations. "Who is America?" suggests agency can be interpreted in numerous ways, including Baron Cohen's, the guests', and the audiences' different perspectives. These different perspectives rely on each agent's interpretation of a scene's consequences.



While we may consider the implications of agency for other politicians Baron Cohen imposes on such as Roy Moore and Dick Cheney, we can also think about the connotations of agency in a broader applicable context. Like many of us, I have kept up with the democratic presidential debates for the 2020 democratic nomination, and I would suggest there exists an even deeper connection to the debates and Baron Cohen's show than political themes. In a recent debate, I watched Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and Pete Buttigieg (among the others) battle over who has the best plan for American Hhealthcare. Regardless of who we may or may not agree with, I suggest we might all agree that they are battling over human issues. These issues are driven by the acts and scenes that permeate through American society. Unlike the presidential nominees, Baron Cohen interrogates issues beyond what it means to exist as human. He pushes towards what it means to act human—to perform humanity.

In fact, the act of Burke's pentad is the term we witness as disrupted the most by "Who is America?." Acts are the motions of reality that promote universal understanding of particular value systems. For example, we may generally agree that murder is inherently wrong, but we may understand an act of murder in self-defense. Rangoonwala uses Burke to extend on this idea that acts influence our understanding of the motions that drive an anecdote. Rangoonwala **says**,

Burke claims that act is the central, beginning term that develops the pentad since it creates a situation to examine in the first place. Its corresponding philosophic terminology is realism. Realism, in contrast to nominalism, can be defined as "the doctrine that universal principles are more real than objects as they are physically sensed." With realism then, language is utilized to understand objective reality and universal truths. However, while Burke identifies realism as the philosophical school for act, he further describes action in ways [connoting] freedom, choice, and essence. For instance, he states the "act itself alters the conditions of action," implying an existentialist philosophy in which actions form essence.

Baron Cohen exploits realism by creating a false sense of reality through cunning disguises. However, his facade is necessary in order to reinforce not only the purpose of his comedy but also to continue to expose the charades of his guests. While Baron Cohen's guests possess freedom, choice, and essence, they are responding to a simulacrum designed to reveal their individual, vulnerable identities. This concept sounds sneaky and corrupt at the onset, and honestly it probably would not jive with the Institutional Review Board, but when we specifically consider the politicians Baron Cohen exposes, I think it is difficult not to see how this potentially benefits the greater good. The more we know about those who are in positions of power supposedly striving for the betterment of their constituents, the better we may be able to assess their capabilities. By way of an, act Baron Cohen sets the motions in place for the anecdotes he creates to have potential comedic outcomes while simultaneously exposing a guest's shortcomings.

Baron Cohen's satirical intentions become critical to not holding him accountable for imposing on the lives of his guests. In order to do this, however, audiences must understand

that satire is taking place within the show's setups. The comedic elements of Baron Cohen's satire leave audiences negotiating the benefits to certain truths. It is difficult not to want to laugh at Spencer's shortcomings, but knowing he was in a position of leadership makes laughter difficult to swallow. In a recent article dissecting the relationship between satire and comedy, Beth Bonstetter informs this idea. She **says**,

Audiences need to understand not only that something is acting satirically but also how it is operating, if they are to understand the satiric message and how the satirist is wielding his or her power. In other words, audiences need to do more than laugh at the outrageous antics of Sacha Baron Cohen in *Borat*; they also need to understand how he is presenting his subjects of criticism and whether his presentation simply invites ridicule or calls for rehabilitation of these subjects. Failing to understand this and instead reducing such actions to merely "entertainment" can at best result in nonaction, a reinforcement of the social problems as individual faults rather than systemic ones, or, at worst, a reifying of racist, sexist, classist, heterosexist, or otherwise hegemonic ideas.

When considering Bonstetter's point, satire becomes a clear subtext to Baron Cohen's work. An element of outrageousness stirs us, as viewers, to finding comedy within his guest's gullibility. How could anyone believe that the experience they are having is with someone "real"? From my assessments, his guests' willingness to go along with his antics reflects his credibility as an artist of caricature—a master of disguise. I would argue that no one reads hundreds of pages about Sacha Baron Cohen's creative performances without starting to question whether every television personality is SACHA BARON COHEN...in disguise. Throughout a democratic presidential nominee debate I recently watched, I thought to myself, "Bernie Sanders is looking exceptionally healthy tonight...can I be sure Sacha Baron Cohen isn't filling in for him?" Before readers start to question MY credibility, I want to suggest that it would be more appropriate to question the face value particular performances offer.

Baron Cohen's disguises are blatant to his show's viewers, but we are surrounded by celebrities, politicians, and many other people especially those in leadership positions who put on more concealed disguises everyday. Part of Baron Cohen's commitment to his comedy is the notion that he takes on the ideologies of the character disguises he creates. This point is critical to his work towards revealing the vulnerabilities of others because he uses his false ideologies to identify with his guests. People in positions of power often put on disguises in order to identify with their audiences. For example, Robert "Beto" O'Rourke ran for senator of Texas, and used his nickname as a means to identify with his Latinx constituents. Many political critics took issue with this, but his use of a nickname made him more approachable in many communities. In a recent article, Emma Bloomfield and Gabriela Tscholl **remark** on the necessity of Burke's concept of identification within the political sphere:

Without identification, Burke theorized that persuasion could not occur because there was no point of similarity from where persuasion could originate. He argued, "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by



speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his.” While this statement indicates a sequential relationship between identification and persuasion, Burke also invited the consideration of the two as co-constitutive acts. Burke noted that the process of identification can occur between people “even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so.” Thus, identification and persuasion are not fully sequential or separate acts but are instead components of a dynamic constellation of symbolic interactions that bring people into a state of being “consubstantial.”

Baron Cohen’s disguises disrupt this traditional understanding of identification because Baron Cohen’s willingness to identify with his guests is a part of the disguise, not his real identity. Then again, the show proves that we can fake the identification process to our benefit—a fundamental element to manipulation. In spite of the manipulation, even the fake identification allows his guests to put their guard down; they show him a side they have never shown their constituents or their fans.

While the language of a scene dictates its context, the performer’s disguise dictates the language’s perception. Butler refers to Shoshana Felman in a way that allows us to understand how disguise drives performance in a way that can override performativity. Felman’s words point to how disguises and costumes heavily disrupt spoken language. Butler says,

[Felman] reminds us that the relation between speech and the body is a scandalous one, “a relation consisting at once of incongruity and of inseparability ... the scandal consists in the fact that the act cannot know what it is doing.” Felman thus suggests that the speech act, as the act of a speaking body, is always to some extent unknowing about what it performs, that it always says something that it does not intend, and that it is not the emblem of mastery or control that it sometimes purports to be. She calls attention to the way in which a speaking body signifies in ways that are not reducible to what such a body “says.”

By Felman’s assessment we may see how disguise can be portrayed through the body as well as through speech. In one moment a person may hold one particular view while the next moment they make America great again cap says otherwise. There are all of these rhetorical tools at our disposal that we can use to take advantage of particular situations, what distinguishes us as people is the intention that we have when we use these tools.

The idea of motivation held within Burke’s concept of dramatism is key to understanding how Baron Cohen persuades his guests. Not only does Baron Cohen use disguises to identify with his guests, but his disguises also allow him to relate to their intentions. Earlier, I linked to the YouTube clip of Baron Cohen (disguised as Erran Morad) convincing Dick Cheney to sign his waterboard. Would Cheney sign just anyone’s waterboard? I mean maybe, but the acts between the two appear to lead Cheney to believe that no one, at least within that

moment, would criticize him for supporting a human torture device. This scenario raises questions for how we should understand Cheney and Baron Cohen as agents within the scene. In considering Baron Cohen's scenes with politicians, Burke's concept of agent is nuanced when applied to "Who is America?" Before I expand on this idea, let us look at how Rangoonwala **explains** agent:

Agent, or who is performing the act, has the philosophic terminology of idealism. Idealism is "the system that views the mind or spirit as each person experiences it as fundamentally real, with the universe seen as mind or spirit in its essence." With this philosophy, a human's mental capacities form reality. Fay and Kuypers also associate idealism with self-determination. In idealistic discourse, agents appear rational and empowered, using "an individual's inner resources to overcome adverse circumstances."

While Baron Cohen is certainly an agent within "Who is America?," the show's guests add complexity to the term. Most of Baron Cohen's guests are infamous in some way, which means that they are appearing on a show where an audience is already going to project a particular idea of what kind of agent the guest is. The audience's projection, however (and perhaps obviously), is still separated from the guests' conceptions of how they view themselves. So not only does the audience's preconceived projection effect the guests as agents, but the idea that the show's audiences are aware of the facade, while the guests are not, exploits the Idealism a guest might subscribe to before and after a particular scene.

An analysis of the transcendental nature of an act reveals the complicated dynamics performance has on Burke's pentad as well as on Baron Cohen's guests within a scene. Butler **uses** Felman to show how acts of agents may perpetuate the issue of speech in disguise in opposition to the body in disguise:

Felman writes, "If the problem of the human act consists in the relation between language and the body, it is because the act is conceived-by performative analysis as well as by psychoanalysis —as that which problematizes at one and the same time the separation and opposition between the two. The act, an enigmatic and problematic production of the speaking body, destroys from its inception the metaphysical dichotomy between the domain of the 'mental' and the domain of the 'physical,' breaks down the opposition between body and spirit, between matter and language."

As viewers, we are not privy to the self actualization his guests may or may not have after appearing on his show. Felman may suggest that we should not make absolute judgments of his guests because of this idea, but politicians are supposed to represent the values of the people they serve. While it is rare that any one politician will reflect any one person's entire value system, their thoughts should not be presented in disguise. However, as we are able to distinguish truth from disguises, we may identify the broader purposes of a politician's performative act.

The distinct disguises Baron Cohen utilizes with different guests also parse the purposes of the performances—the motive of an anecdote. Burke explains that the purpose is the motivation behind why an act occurs. Rangoonwala explains purpose as an agent's reasoning. Rangoonwala **says**,

The fifth term, purpose, describes the agent's reason for doing the action. Foss et al. clarify that purpose should not be confused with motive, which is only discovered using all five terms. Purpose has the philosophic terminology of mysticism in which “the element of unity is emphasized to the point that individuality disappears. Identification often becomes so strong that the individual is unified with some cosmic or universal purpose.” The accentuation of purpose emphasizes the ends, rather than the means, as the focus of discourse.

Despite Rangoonwala and Foss's warning, I suggest that “Who is America?” positions purpose and motive as coextensive of each other specifically through Baron Cohen's intentions. A guest's purpose is often going to be justified by the cumulative discourse of how the corrupted scene, act, agent, and agency directed the guest's purpose.

Purpose and motivation unite to demonstrate why a particular action garnered a particular consequence. Ideologies often influence the ways in which we understand our purpose. Bloomfield and Tscholl **elaborate** on how ideologies also impact motivation:

Don Parson proposed that dramatism and argumentation can be productively combined when he summarized Burke's ideas on ideologies: “in choosing a vocabulary of action, humans necessarily select a part of reality and reason from that part.” Our ideologies, and thus the vocabularies we use that reflect those ideologies, provide the foundation for our reasoning processes. Barry Brummett expanded on this point by noting that “ideologies motivate and guide political rhetoric and give it purpose.” How people make sense of situations at least partially explains their “core” ways of thinking and making decisions.

Bloomfield and Tscholl's assessment of ideologies explains why we may more readily identify with someone who shares our ideologies because they already share our understanding of how we contextualize language. How we contextually understand particular scenes influences how we react to them. In our modern political sphere, it is usually activists who point to the purpose for political change and calls to action. The influence between activism and politicians has never been equitable in the United States because politicians' ideologies can be disguised as much as they can be bought. Baron Cohen's show asks us to reconsider our reasoning processes by showing us how these look from another perspective. As much as we may try to separate ourselves from the connotations of politics, “Who is America?” demonstrates that we are not doing enough. We have to interrogate an entire infrastructure that has consistently failed in adequately representing many groups of people. “Who is America?” only just begins to point to the injustice.

While there are many remarkable rhetorical elements that emanate from Baron Cohen's "Who is America?," I strive to emphasize the importance of what disguises within politics reveal to audiences because this continues to be one of the most urgent issues in American society. If we asked the majority of women in the United States, "Who are American politicians?" I think many would answer, "Rapists." As I write this today, my choices for the future president of the United States are both known for their disregard for women. Sure, others will run, but if I vote for them I still lose. Through revealing the disguises of American politicians, Baron Cohen's "Who is America?" encourages us to vote for the fight that we want to go up against, the one we might have a chance to change. The one that will allow us to give a voice to generally marginalized populations. The voices that have been hushed by many of the political guests on "Who is America?." Butler points to the issue of political censorship as she explores its production in terms of power. She **says**,

Censorship is a productive form of power: it is not merely privative, but formative as well. I propose that censorship seeks to produce subjects according to explicit and implicit norms, and that the production of the subject has everything to do with the regulation of speech. The subject's production takes place not only through the regulation of that subject's speech, but through the regulation of the social domain of speakable discourse.

Butler's observation of censorship in accordance with "norms" and "regulation" is indicative of the problems that arise when we speak out about political injustice. We witness this issue at its highest level of intensity when women speak out against men in power who have assaulted them. Examples of this issue include Anita Hill's experience speaking out against Clarence Thomas and Christine Ford speaking out against Brett Kavanaugh. As a country, we can't rely on Baron Cohen to expose the wicked identities of people in power. We have to shift the "social domain of speakable discourse" in a way that exposes their disguises.

Shifting discourse is never an easy task, but we might acknowledge that we have the tools that allow us to move forward. The #MeToo movement laid the groundwork for creating social change for women who have experienced assault. Social media provides platforms for us to speak out against political censorship—political injustice. Butler acknowledges the difficulty in fighting against those in powerful positions. She **says**,

To move outside of the domain of speakability is to risk one's status as a subject. To embody the norms that govern speakability in one's speech is to consummate one's status as a subject of speech. "Impossible speech" would be precisely the ramblings of the asocial, the rantings of the "psychotic" that the rules that govern the domain of speakability produce, and by which they are continually haunted.

Butler's words imply that when we stand against injustice we put ourselves on the line for scrutiny. This is another ramification we witnessed when Hill and Ford came forward. Despite the almost 30 years that came between Hill and Ford's reports, "impossible

**speech” prevailed by allowing Thomas and Kavanaugh to win. We have to learn from Butler as well as Baron Cohen that we cannot be idly complacent. We have to not only interrogate the values set in place by our political representatives, we have to disrupt them until we set a new standard that values women and other historically marginalized groups. This disruption may start by holding political representatives accountable and forcing them to remove their disguises.**



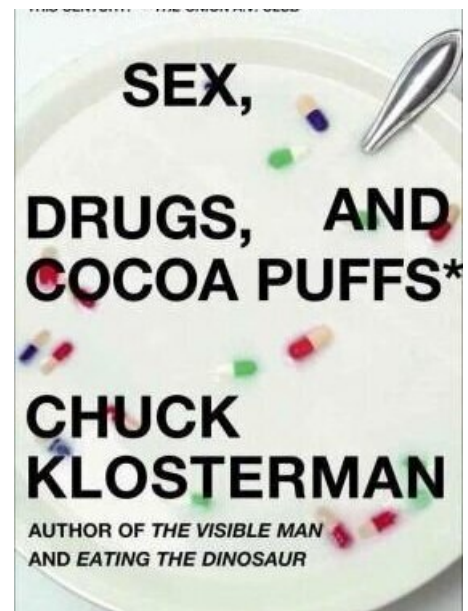
# So You've Been Publicly Humiliated

“IN THE EYE OF A HURRICANE / THERE IS QUIET / FOR JUST A MOMENT / A YELLOW SKY”

— LIN-MANUEL MIRANDA, *HURRICANE (HAMILTON, 2015)*

When I first started this project, I was mostly interested in the rhetorical processes behind how Sacha Baron Cohen was rhetorically fooling people to reveal the depths of their personalities. Through exploring the show, it became apparent to me that the ramifications of revealing who we are to mass audiences are complex in physiological, sociological, and psychological ways. I mean, sure, I'm not out here trying to arm kids with guns, but how am I or any of us supposed to react when we expose vulnerable sides of ourselves and make people cringe?

My parents can tell you that the making of this project was difficult for me because I felt like every time I sat down to work on it I was spending an incredible amount of time feeling that I had to take in everything I was learning all at once. I felt that I needed to live up to false expectations of some fake moral code I created. I thought to myself, “I would never be convinced to dress in a bikini with a hazmat suit to support some fake charity...would I?” I have always been one of those people who overthinks my relationship to pop culture and the systematic influence that it has on some people. For example, when I was a teenager, I read this book by Chuck Klosterman called “Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs” (2003) strictly because Seth Cohen (Adam Brody) on the show “The O. C.” read it. Readers can dissect the psychological issues of that anecdote on their own time, but I bring this book up because Klosterman **writes** a passage that really fits with the turmoil of trying to negotiate our virtues:



Though I obviously have no proof of this, the one aspect of life that seems clear to me is that good people do whatever they believe is the right thing to do. Being virtuous is hard, not easy. The idea of doing good things simply because you're good seems like a zero-sum game; I'm not even sure those actions would still qualify as “good,” since they'd merely be a function of normal behavior. Regardless of what kind of god you believe in —a loving god, a vengeful god, a capricious god, a snooty beret-wearing French god, or whatever —one has to

assume that you can't be penalized for doing the things you believe to be truly righteous and just. Certainly, this creates some pretty glaring problems: Hitler may have thought he was serving God. Stalin may have thought he was serving God (or something vaguely similar). I'm certain Osama bin Laden was positive he was serving God. It's not hard to fathom that all of those maniacs were certain that what they were doing was right. Meanwhile, I constantly do things that I know are wrong; they're not on the same scale as incinerating Jews or blowing up skyscrapers, but my motivations might be worse. I have looked directly into the eyes of a woman I loved and told her lies for no reason, except that those lies would allow me to continue having sex with another woman I cared about less. This act did not kill 20 million Russian peasants, but it might be more “diabolical” in a literal sense. If I died and found out I was going to hell and Stalin was in heaven, I would note the irony, but I couldn't complain. I don't make the fucking rules.

I wanted to include Klosterman's commentary, here, because he is right. None of us make the rules, but we decide how our own rules operate. We may find that our judgments of others are often determined by our impressions of their intention. In other sections, I've discussed how “terministic screens” (the influences in our lives that have determined how we see the world) frame our moral compass. They also frame how we determine morality within others. In the passage, Klosterman points to the intimacy of how shame intertwines with our individual ideas of morality. In his work, “A Grammar of Motives” (1945), Kenneth Burke notes a thought that I suggest we can tie into Klosterman's assessment:

So universally felt is the Grammatical principle behind the defining of essence in terms of death, or tragic end, that in our pseudoscientific days, when the cult of questionnaires has developed its own peculiar function, perhaps one might come closer to an accurate classifying of "personality types" if he worked out a system of "tragic" categories. Surely, for instance, the person who chooses to end his life by violence thereby distinguishes himself from those late Romans who preferred cutting their veins and bleeding to death in a warm bath.

Burke says essentially the same thought as Klosterman (irony of deadly endings included), but adds that our personalities influence how we determine a spectrum of categorical shame. Our personalities are intimately connected with our terministic screens meaning that no one is going to have the same spectrum or even the same categories of shame. In my section of this project called “The Anecdote,” I suggest that comedy, in definition, exists in opposition to tragedy. This opposition is magnetic in structure because, as humans, we cannot negotiate tragedy without comedy and vice versa. This magnetism is indicative of the consubstantiation between tragedy and comedy. I state this confidently because beyond anyone's rhetorical intentions, we cannot know the experience of true comedy or true tragedy without having lived experiences.

Humiliation intimately connects to these experiences when the comedic anecdote fails to reflect how we see ourselves and when the tragic anecdote is a result of our own actions. How we cope with humiliation demonstrates how we understand shame by allowing us to locate

ourselves on our own spectrums of shame and determine what we must do in order to move on.

We might recognize how our individually restricted “shame guides” clearly separates the actions of Corinne Olympios (posing for charity) from the actions of Jason Spencer (screaming derogations). Olympios had pretty solid pragmatic intentions based on the information she had at hand. Yes, there were ulterior motives involved for her. The intent to pose for charity provides an easy way to maintain relevance in Olympios’ world of social media. Still, the idea that other people would be inspired to then also sponsor a charity is rather compelling. Alternatively, Spencer revealed that he is motivated by hatred and xenophobia. Would Olympios have screamed derogatory terms for charity? Who’s to say? Again, none of us make the rules, and readers are welcome to disagree with me.

It seems to me that a lack of questioning motives is where Baron Cohen’s guests are caught being the most exposed. Subsequently, when audiences lack understanding of the guests motives we expose ourselves by the guests we choose to defend and the ones who we appreciated witnessing suffer. These rationalizations may occur solely internalized within ourselves, but they nevertheless occur. When we take the time to reflect on why we rationalize an anecdote in a particular way, we may be better able to address our own vulnerabilities and biases.

Vulnerability drives Baron Cohen’s work because these moments of realness separate his “reality television” from traditional reality television. Instead of the guilty pleasure we may usually lean towards when we watch reality television for the drama, Baron Cohen’s show might make us feel actual guilt—an intense lack of pleasure. I would suggest this guilt is somewhat collective of viewers because we see people who we believe should not be falling for his performances. Baron Cohen’s victims often reveal that they have little to no perception of the hegemonic power structures Beth Bonstetter **names** when she cites the dynamics we need to grasp in order to even find comedy in satire. I dare to say that much of the guilt we might experience when we watch “Who is America?” comes from knowing that many of Baron Cohen’s guests failed at humanity. We might feel like we missed a way to help them not fail. Then again, how do we know anyone is who they say they are unless we witness their moments of vulnerability? In her work, Bonstetter refers to Burke to discuss how the names we ascribe to situations determines the way we frame them, she **states**:

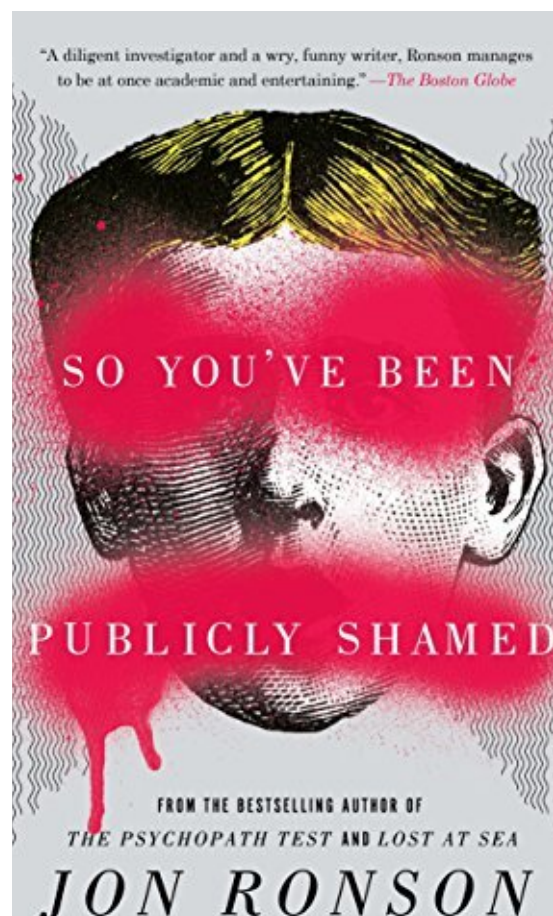
In *Attitudes toward History*, Burke explains that in order to cope with the injustices of life, humans define and name their relationships with “the human situation” as “friendly or unfriendly” and then prepare themselves either “to welcome them” or “to decide how far [they] can effectively go in combating them.” Naming these relationships has consequences, however. Names “suggest how you shall be for or against” certain situations. “Call a man a villain,” says Burke, “and you have the choice of either attacking or cringing. Call him mistaken, and you invite yourself to attempt setting him right.” How people define situations also defines how they react to them. Burke calls this naming “frames of acceptance” and “frames of rejection.”

We have to remember that we are all constantly approaching different scenarios with different terministic screens. While Burke's acknowledgement that we define situations is important to how we interpret the reactions of Baron Cohen's guests, I find a certain injustice within Burke's absolution of villainy. Most of Baron Cohen's victims probably see him as the villain. Likewise, who are we to say that we believe in any of the presidential nominees when all we witness are television personalities. We might read their strategies and observe their resumes, but Baron Cohen blatantly teaches us that appearances are deceiving. For all I know, we may all be the villain in someone else's story. Perhaps here is where we might shift to understanding how we define situations and react to them—restructure Burke's frames that we innately rely on for making deductions of others. For instance, I would make a fabulous villain, I would kill at that role (someone please cast me on "Survivor").

Alternatively, it may not be ideal for particular personalities to justify their roles in certain situations. I think we can/should all agree that there is no justification for a white man in a significant position of power to repeatedly yell the "n-word" as a way of diverting terrorists. I cannot even begin to wrap my head around how Spencer justifies those actions with himself. How do we set him right, Burke? Force him to resign? Sure, but is there any real lesson there? I absolutely think he should not continue to hold a political position, but how do we actually show him what he did was wrong, and how do we convince his supporters who continue to justify his actions. I suppose a start lies in the preservation of "Who is America?"'s medium. Anytime Spencer tries to make a comeback, we will always have the ammunition to take him down because the preservation of his performance is also the preservation of his corruptness. Then again, the only reason this ammunition continues to exist is because Spencer refuses to take responsibility.

While shame has the power to manifest itself within us, I would suggest that ignominy has the power to perpetuate this shame into self destruction. Sometimes, it may be a good idea to reevaluate certain parts of ourselves, but when our shame is exposed, the pressure to publicly compensate can be harrowing. In undertaking this project, I read a book by Jon Ronson called "So You've Been Publicly Shamed" (2015). While Ronson has many thoughtful comments regarding shame throughout the book, he has a particular passage regarding the resurgence of public shaming that alludes to a new wave of call-out culture. Ronson **states**:

We were at the start of a great renaissance of public shaming. After a lull of almost 180 years (public punishments were phased out in 1837 in the United Kingdom and in 1839 in the United States), it was back in a big way. When we deployed shame, we were utilizing an immensely powerful tool. It was





coercive, borderless, and increasing in speed and influence. Hierarchies were being leveled out. The silenced were getting a voice. It was like the democratization of justice.

Historically, limited accessibility meant that societies were restrained in exposing their grievances with others. With social media's domination of western culture, now no one is off-limits. Following the aftermath of his appearance on "Who is America?," Spencer turned to **Twitter** to **respond** to his performance:

I was told I would be filmed as a "demonstration video" to teach others the same skills in Israel. Sacha and his crew further lied to me, stating that I would be able to review and have final approval over any footage used. I deeply regret the language I used at his request as well as my participation in the "class" in general. If I had not been so distracted by my fears, I never would have agreed to participate in the first place. I apologize to my family, friends, and the people of my district for this ridiculously ugly episode.

It seems odd to me that Spencer apologizes to everyone except those he actually offended. When saving face is no longer an option, it seems to me that Spencer had every opportunity to actually offer amends to those his actions offended. The communities he offended deserved better.

"Who is America?" calls for us to question our "shame guides" as we shift them to fit who we want to hold accountable. Whereas Spencer's blatant xenophobia calls for a more intentional apology, but we may consider whether Olympios needs to make amends for falling for a schtick that had her call on people to sponsor child soldiers.. I would suggest that it is fair for us to hold a politician who chooses to represent constituents to a higher degree than a reality star. Maybe some of my readers disagree, but that points to how our different terministic screens led us to these separate conclusions. Ultimately, when we leave the hurt we have caused with our language unacknowledged and unaddressed, we perpetuate ignorance. So while none of us may make the rules, we may agree that as long as the element of accountability exists, we owe it the betterment of ourselves and each other to learn from our humiliation and reflect on what we need to change to avoid perpetuating ignorance.

Spencer's tweet sheds light on the connections between humiliation, shame, and apologies. In his book, Ronson **observes**: "An apology is supposed to be a communion—a coming together. For someone to make an apology, someone has to be listening. They listen and you speak and there's an exchange. That's why we have a thing about accepting apologies." Spencer asked forgiveness from the wrong people. His assessment of his wrong doing is repeatedly blamed on "Who is America?," and he lacks ownership over his shame. I keep using this word "shame" generally with a slight acknowledgement that we all have our own understanding of what shame means. However, I want to point to Ronson's **observations** of shame: "It may be somewhat paradoxical to refer to shame as a 'feeling', for while shame is initially painful, constant shaming leads to a deadening of feeling. Shame, like cold, is, in



essence, the absence of warmth. And when it reaches overwhelming intensity, shame is experienced, like cold, as a feeling of numbness and deadness.” Many of us have felt this experience of shame before, and we identify this reference of shame with our own terministic screening of the feeling. I would suggest that how we determine forgiveness involves knowing that the individual felt shame and is seeking forgiveness for their wrongdoing, not just to release themselves from the physiological and psychological burdens of shame.

I bring these assessments to a close by referring once more to “Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs.” Klosterman **states**: “Life is rarely about what happened; it’s mostly about what we think happened.” When we think that we messed up to the point that we feel shame, we have to acknowledge that feeling not only with ourselves but to those who we want to see us for who we really are. What I mean to say is that we don’t have to make amends with the whole world when we mess up. In fact, a tweet is probably the worst way I can think of apologizing to someone or a group of people. Sometimes, words may not even be what we need in response to our shame. Sometimes, we have to take action.

American politics often stir an inclination towards toxic individualism. This toxicity can be overcome by simply demonstrating a compassion for other people. We have to put the work in whether it is monetary contributions, activism, volunteering, or creating a whole television show exposing the toxicity within others so that they can be aware of their shortcomings. Of course, I’m joking about that last one, but holding people accountable IS the first step towards addressing what we should be ashamed of and acknowledging the personal changes we can make to do better. The perpetuity of Baron Cohen’s “Who is America?” is indicative of Baron Cohen’s thoughtful performances. The show’s existence will continue to hold many of its victims accountable.