

# LOUIE, LOUIS: THE FICTIONAL, STAGE, AND AUTEUR PERSONAS OF LOUIS C.K. IN *LOUIE*

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper examines stand-up comedy in light of the persona studies idea of the proliferation of the public self to consider the ways comedians are represented and self-presented. Stand-up comedy as a performance mode deploys a literal version of Goffman's front-stage and back-stage personas, raising questions about who comedians "really" are. Where the simultaneous observation of the on- and off-stage personas of comedy performers was previously only afforded in representational fiction, the diversification of what constitutes on-stage space for comedians has provided opportunities for comedians to perform versions of their back-stage selves in a broader variety of public, front-stage spaces. In the case of American comedian Louis C.K., his television series, *Louie*, has proven to be a liminal entity that operates in the spirit of presentational media, while produced, constructed, and distributed as representational media. This paper uses *Louie* to examine the front-stage and back-stage personas of personal, confessional comedians like C.K. who present aspects of their private lives in their public work. In addition, I look at how C.K. asserts his public persona as a self-presentational meta-presence within the representational depiction of his fictionalised self on television. The result is a step toward understanding the nature of self-performance in the front- and back-stage personas of stand-up comedians and how representational media with a distinct authorial voice can act in the spirit of presentational media.*

## KEY WORDS

persona; stand-up comedy; self-performance; Louis C.K.; *Louie*

## INTRODUCTION

Presenting yourself authentically will only grant you successful navigation of the world if you choose the right stage and frame for the performance. That is often the overarching idea about persona that comedian Louis C.K. offers in playing a fictionalised version of himself in the critically acclaimed series *Louie* (FX 2010 – ). Renowned for C.K.'s almost singular authorship of the series as writer, director, star, executive producer, and, oftentimes, editor, *Louie* "makes stand-up comedy cinematic" (Zoller Seitz, "Why"). The series' stand-up aesthetic is a direct translation of the singularly authored, personal point of view expressed in C.K.'s stage work to a

visual, narrative form. The program's character Louie, like Louis C.K., is a divorced father in his forties living in New York City and working as a stand-up comedian with an everyman stage persona that situates social commentary within the often crudely honest details of his personal experience. *Louie* has proven to be a breakthrough for C.K.'s career and has brought increasing critical and popular attention to his work on stage and television. This has, in turn, drawn further attention to the similarities between C.K.'s life and its fictionalised representation.

As stand-up comedians, C.K. and his character Louie can be thought of as structuring their professional and personal lives in terms of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor of self-presentation. Front-stage is the stand-up performance persona, shared by C.K. outside the series and his character within it, operating in a comedic frame that permits him to say the unsayable and to make confessions about his private self that would not otherwise be appropriate to air in public. Back-stage is the social life of the Louie character, C.K.'s semi-autobiographical stand-in and we, as an audience, are granted far more access to this world than the off-stage persona of Louis C.K. himself. Nevertheless, Louie is a persona that viewers are encouraged to accept as authentic, as a self-presentational version of C.K. that operates in a narrative world not so far removed from our own. It is a world where Louie is a little less famous, a little less wealthy, than his real-world creator, but a world that is permeated with the same kinds of absurdities that C.K. critiques in his stand-up comedy. In Louie's back-stage life, however, the frame is wrong, and he is unable to fight against the world's absurdities as he would on stage.

This paper, following P. David Marshall's proposal that persona studies can "look at how the constitution of our fictional narratives is shifting in an era of presentational media and persona" ("Persona Studies", 15), considers how contemporary representational narratives about comedy performers are shaped by notions of self-presentation. Like fiction films about stand up comedians, such as *Punchline* (Seltzer 1988) and *Funny People* (Apatow 2008), *Louie* represents the front- and back-stage life of the stand-up within the same textual frame. In the televisual tradition of sitcoms based on stand-up comedians' material, like *Roseanne* (ABC 1988-1997), and *Seinfeld* (NBC 1989-1998), there is an element of self-presentation in the narrativisation of a stand-up's act. In *Louie*, there is a clearly defined presentational framework around the representational form that situates the series in the contemporary climate of stand-up comedians performing their back-stage selves in diversified front-stage contexts. However, by looking at Louis C.K. and *Louie* as personas through Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor, we can investigate how the front- and back-stage personas of stand-up comedians are understood as cultural objects and how comedians with a personal, confessional style, like C.K., make the argument for their front-stage persona as being their authentic selves. By reading *Louie* through persona studies, this essay argues that the "proliferation of the public self" (Marshall, "Persona Studies") can imbue traditionally representational media with the spirit of presentational media, illustrated by C.K.'s attempts to assert his extra-textual public persona as the auteur of *Louie*.

## FORMING A PERSONA STUDIES APPROACH TO *LOUIE*

Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor of self-presentation can be readily applied to stand-up comedy. With the clear demarcation of literal front- and back-stage spaces in stand-up comedy performance, the stage personas of comedians will be, according to Goffman's theories, in some way different from the person they are in their off-stage "real life." While this degree of difference in persona is expected, the stage performance of a comedian like Louis C.K. who claims to perform as himself, who claims his material originates from lived experience, and who serves his personal life up to his audience for the purposes of humour, problematises these

different personas in ways that stage and screen performances based on a clearly demarcated on-stage character do not. The curtain between the front- and back-stage space of the comedy club becomes a porous boundary and the continuity of self-presentation creates a persona that is often still “on,” even in what are ostensibly back-stage spaces. Confessional comedians of C.K.’s ilk exist in a perpetual state of what could be authentic self-performance or a performance of the authentic.

Comedians can remove themselves from the frame usually occupied by their persona – the stand-up comedy performance – and continue to present the comedic persona, which is purported to be an authentic representation of self. The result is comedians who seem to be performing as themselves, exposing details of their personal life in the on-stage comedic frame, but, despite their claims to authenticity, are presumed to have an off-stage persona that is kept largely hidden. The performance of self in comedy is, as Brett Mills argues, a constant state of “acting” as and “being” the self, both in and out of fictional realms, which can work to obscure any sense of who the comedian “really” is (200). Hence, it is not surprising that modern stand-up comedians, whose back-stage selves are presented in an increasing variety of public, front-stage venues (on- and off-screen, on- and off-line) and are moving between states of acting and being as themselves without clear boundaries, emerge in this climate of proliferating public selves (Marshall, “Persona Studies”).

How comedians obscure their “real” selves through constant states of self-performance is a type of narrative trope found in what Marshall calls “representational” media forms such as stage and screen fiction. These representational fictions have set the tone for cultural narratives about the on- and off-stage selves of comedians, despite the trend toward autobiographical comedy developed in the “alternative” comedy movement of the 1970s and 1980s (Moon 202). In terms of screen fiction, Tony Moon cites *Mr. Saturday Night* (Crystal 1992) and *The King of Comedy* (Scorsese 1982) as examples of works that “have alighted upon the complexities and dichotomies of the comedy performer, seeing it as ripe territory for original drama” (202). Fictional representations of comedians allow audiences to witness comedy performers in both “performative and social context[s], where their offstage lives inform their onstage personas and vice versa” (Moon 202). With fictional stories about comedy performers offering this unique view of both the front- and back-stage personas, Moon argues that particular cultural narratives and questions about the authenticity of comedian emerge from these representations.

To the stage and screen works that are the basis of Moon’s case study, I would add that authentic self-representation in comedian stage persona has been addressed in other works of film fiction, such as *Punchline*, *Funny People*, *Sleepwalk with Me* (Birbiglia 2012), and *Top Five* (Rock 2014). Further to film fiction, I suggest that what constitutes on-stage space for a comedy performer has diversified beyond the comedy club or theatre stage; there are now a variety of publicly visible, on-stage venues where comedians are able to perform versions of their on- and off-stage personas, in fictional and non-fictional, representational and presentational forms. These diversified front-stage venues permit comedy performers to represent themselves as individuals, showcasing back-stage personas in looser front-stage contexts. Documentaries and tour films such as *Comedian* (Charles 2002), *The Comedians of Comedy* (Blieden 2005), and *The Greatest Movie Ever Rolled* (Polito 2012) present the performative and social personas of comedy performers side by side in a manner that purports to be non-fictive. Comedian podcasts such as *WTF with Marc Maron*, *You Made it Weird*, and *Walking the Room* provide a venue for comedians, as hosts and/or interview subjects, to perform their off-stage selves and engage in “back region” talk about their private lives as people and as comedians in what will eventually become a front stage venue before an audience once the podcast is released online. Social media

platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and blogs constitute the online performance of the on- and off-stage selves, as well as presenting the persona of the comedian as, simultaneously, promoter and product.

Television opportunities for comedians have also diversified beyond hosting or stand-up spots on late night variety shows (such as the various incarnations of *The Tonight Show* or *Late Night* franchises) or sitcoms that create a fictional world based on stage material and persona, such as *Roseanne*, *Seinfeld*, or *Home Improvement* (ABC 1991-1999). Television series like *Louie*, *Maron* (IFC 2013 - ), and *Legit* (FX 2013-2014) are built around comedians playing fictionalised versions of themselves that depict both the front- and back-stage personas of actual comedians. Unlike the sitcoms prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s based on the material and persona of a comedian prevalent, these more recent series feature comedians playing fictionalised versions of themselves as comedians, rather than fictional characters drawn from their stage material. While past comedian-driven sitcoms tended to adhere to the standards of traditional sitcom style, with multiple cameras, proscenium staging, and recording with a live audience, the contemporary comedian series utilises the single camera comedy style which lends a sense of televisual realism to the depiction of the comedian's life. For example, although both *Seinfeld* and *Louie* depict comedians playing versions of themselves as working comedians, the singular focus on Louie as the series protagonist, single camera shooting style, naturalistic performances, absence of laugh track, and the more personal nature of C.K.'s comedy in the latter work to give the impression of C.K. playing a fictionalised version of himself, in contrast to the sense that *Seinfeld* is playing a fictional character who also happens to be a stand-up comedian named Jerry Seinfeld.

Like the fiction films Moon discusses, the contemporary comedian series explores the figure of the comedian by showing them in front- and back-stage contexts, but, because the comedians at the centre of these series are playing themselves, it allows comedians to speak for themselves through the prism of fiction. Unlike Moon's strictly fictional case studies, though, the comedian self-performance television series carries with it the comedian's extratextual public persona. This public persona, composed of various iterations of the comedian's performance of self on- and off-stage, in fiction and non-fiction, is a meta-presence that operates in ways akin to presentational media. The presentational public persona feeds into the representational text, with the two conflated in ways that make the contemporary comedian television series a kind of self-(re)presentational media. Although these series are mediated, fictionalised forms distributed on the traditional media platform of basic cable television networks, there is an authorial presence of self-performance that is in the spirit of presentational media "performed, produced and exhibited by the individual" (Marshall, "Persona Studies" 8).

## **REPRESENTING LOUIE AND PRESENTING C.K.**

Through the development of his 2007 HBO special *Shameless*, C.K.'s stand-up comedy underwent a stylistic shift from absurdist non-sequiturs to an inwardly-focused examination of his life. His observational humour became grounded in the reality of his everyday experiences and personal point of view. This change in material began a career transition that brought C.K. wider success and more recognition as a stand-up comedian. The thematic switch in C.K.'s stage work that turned his comedic focus inward was concurrently replicated in screen fiction on the HBO sitcom *Lucky Louie* (2006). Although filmed in traditional sitcom style with multi-camera, proscenium staging, and a live audience, the tone of the series aimed for a kind of realism not usually found in the traditional family sitcom. In the series, C.K. does not play himself-as-comedian as he does in *Louie*, but, like other comedian sitcoms that build fictional worlds from stand-up acts, *Lucky Louie* remains a direct translation of the blunt, honest, and somewhat bleak

sensibility of his stage persona. C.K.'s comedic persona is now described as "a unique mixture of abject self-loathing, crushing pessimism, wide-eyed curiosity and, here and there, glimmers of hard-won sweetness" (Weiner), qualities that are seen in both the on-stage and off-stage personas of Louie.

There is a congruity between Louie and C.K., and the on- and off-stage versions of each, that strongly suggests Louie is an authentic self-performance of C.K.. The authenticity of C.K.'s performance of various personas is often emphasised when critics and commentators attempt to examine the cultural significance of his comedy and its current value in American popular culture. A 2014 *GQ* cover profile describes the ways that C.K. attempts to defy the boundaries between the front- and back-stage spaces of performance and artifice, citing the direct-to-audience distribution of his comedy specials for five dollar downloads on his website, the fact that many of the actors on *Louie* (including C.K.) wear their own clothes on screen or perform without makeup, and his entrance to the stage in his *Live at the Beacon Theatre* special: "no musical or lighting cues, just Louis C.K. walking onstage, grabbing the mike, saying, 'Go ahead, sit down, we're just starting,' catching the audience before they were 'set', [erasing] any distinction between performance and reality, him and us" (Corsello 2). The fictionalised Louie displays a similar defiance of front- and back-region boundaries, keeping his appearance the same on- and off-stage, largely attempting to live his off-stage life by the sensibility he advocates in his comedy, and using the topics of his off-stage life as depicted in narrative segments of the series as the fodder for his stage material. Topics from his private life, such as his children, his self-image, and his sex life are given equal and congruent attention in the depiction of both Louie's on- and off-stage personas.

The continuity of authenticity in C.K.'s self-performance exists despite narrative discontinuity in the series. The first three seasons of *Louie* establish a narratively elastic style that has been described as a televisual adaptation of a stand-up aesthetic (Zoller Seitz). The stand-up aesthetic of the series presents C.K.'s fictionalised self in both front- and back-stage contexts through stand-up segments and narrative vignettes that show snapshots of Louie's life. Vignettes within the same episode, or from episode to episode, generally do not depict a continuous narrative, and often the continuity of character details about Louie are broken to serve the story. For example, his siblings have changed over the course of the series. Throughout the first season, Louie's brother Robbie is a recurring character, with the suggestion that the two brothers are the only children in the family. In later seasons, three different women are introduced as being Louie's sister, with contradictory references made to the circumstances of Louie's childhood: his father absent in some, present in others, his relationship with his mother good in some, terrible in others. As in stand-up comedy, the finer details of a story may be embellished or fabricated in order to serve the particular joke or point of each chunk of narrative material in the series.

Like C.K.'s stage material based on the examination of his own life, the series is largely grounded in a proposed reality, achieved through the visual style of the single hand-held camera, practical locations, and naturalistic performance style. However, the series also deviates into moments of absurdity or surrealism, such as when a woman escapes from a bad date with Louie by jumping into a waiting helicopter or when we see inside Louie's dreams or drug hallucinations. By witnessing the off-stage life of Louie, the audience sees where and how the stage material originates, and the way C.K. televisually represents his fictional self's perspective of his world. The stand-up aesthetic of the series comes from these disconnected ideas, the front- and back-stage, the realistic and surrealistic, presented together in a continuous flow that is united by the presence of C.K. as the person communicating the ideas, whether through his on-stage persona, the persona of his fictionalised self, or as the auteur responsible

for creating his material and its televisual representation. While there is not a strict degree of narrative seriality in *Louie*, there is the seriality of persona that evolves through repetition and consistency of the persona's performance (Marshall, "Seriality").

## LOUIE FRONT- AND BACK-STAGE

While on stage, the stand-up comedian persuades you they are performing themselves. Their jokes and anecdotes are delivered in first person and they try to make you believe that what they are telling you stems from personal experiences or observations and is funny because of their own unique take on the world. They are looking to entertain and to get laughs. When they are on stage, they are "on," and when comedians present their stage personas as versions of themselves it can create certain expectations about who they are off-stage as well. Judy Carter writes that a common misconception about comedians is that they may be "funny, happy, outgoing, laugh-getting clowns" off-stage, when the reality is their off-stage selves may be over-analytical, depressive, or more interested in discussing creative ways to commit suicide than getting laughs (35). Narrativising this misconception forms the basis of the fictional trope of the comedy performer as sad clown that Moon observes in creative works about comedians.

Both Louis C.K. and his fictionalised self, Louie, share the same stage persona, which exists within the text of the series, and extra-textually in C.K.'s stage work and recorded specials. The comedic stage persona is a critical element of what defines stand-up comedy. Oliver Double defines stand-up as a performance that puts a personality on display before an audience, either as a purposefully constructed comedic character or a version of the stand-up's own self (19). The personality of the stand-up is the defining element of their individual act as it "provides context for the material, it gives the audience something to identify with, and [it is] what distinguishes one comic from the next" (Double 59). Louie/C.K.'s on-stage persona constructs him as an everyman who is critically and honestly observant about himself and his perspective of the world. The confessional and self-deprecating nature of much of his material, such as using his middle-aged body as a target of humour and talking about his masturbation habits, sex life, and self-loathing, works as a rhetorical device that debases his stage persona and does not elevate him above his audience as non-comedic public figures might seek to do.

To break down the Louie/C.K. stage persona in Goffman's terms, the performance of the front-stage comedic persona is set as "an effort to give the appearance that his activity in the region maintains and embodies certain standards" (110). The standards of activity in the region of on-stage stand-up comedy performance are those set by what constitutes a performance of stand-up comedy: the intention of humour, the focus on personality, and the first-person, live communication from performer to audience (Double 19). On-stage, comedians are expected to be charismatic in order to persuade the audience that what they have to say is worth listening to and that they are delivering comedic premises built on an authentic foundation of self-performance. In grounding their comedy in their own persona, often in ways that can make their persona and what it represents the butt of the joke (as when Louis C.K. targets himself, or targets his privileged social standing as a wealthy white American heterosexual male), comedians can endear themselves to the audience. The self-reflexive observation in this kind of humour also lends authority to the jokes that make targets of others: the ability to be accurately self-critical reinforces the ability to be accurately critical of the culture they represent more generally.

The juxtaposition of what is appropriate speech or action for the stage and what is not appropriate for the back-stage space generates much of the comedy in the series. C.K.'s stage persona is an embodiment of the transgressive, saying the unsayable function of comedy

(Purdie 3); that is, the states he performs on stage, such as irrational anger and self-revelation, are socially inappropriate outside of the frame of the comedy stage. If C.K. were not engaged in a one-way performative conversation with the audience on stage, but rather in an everyday social dialogue with his audience, his topics of conversation, his delivery, and his emotion would be out of place. In the frame of stand-up comedy performance, taboos are free to be broken, and C.K. can say terrible things that audiences accept, such as when he expresses moments of hatred toward his own children.

The Louie we see on stage is blunt, honest, and seeks to dismantle the inherent absurdity of everyday American culture, while back-stage, Louie is often framed as being the only sane man in the asylum, a straight man foil for the world at large. In Louie's world, he is more often than not the only person who sees these absurdities, yet faces resistance (resulting in varying degrees of humiliation) when he attempts to call out any injustice or bad behaviour off-stage in the same manner as he would on-stage. Back-stage, Louie generally attempts to live by the same ethical code and sensibility that his on-stage persona advocates. The resistance he faces off-stage when highlighting the farces of everyday life that others take for granted positions the stage as the space where he can exist most successfully as the best, most true, version of his authentic self. On-stage, there is no resistance as the audience laughs and applauds. Off-stage, the same point of view gets Louie into trouble.

The similarities between the fictionalised back-stage Louie and the front-stage performance persona of Louie/C.K. suggests that the stage persona is an authentic representation of self. The stage persona is heightened due to its performative context and the lines and beats of Louie's/C.K.'s stage material are memorized, having been performed numerous times before, but the sentiment appears to come from the authentic sensibility of the off-stage self and is given the illusion of in-the-moment thought by the casual delivery of confessional material. As Richard Dyer reminds us, our cultural assumptions situate the locus of the "authentic" and "true [self]" in the realm of the private and intimate, appearing "when people 'let themselves go,' pour forth their thoughts and feelings in an untrammelled flow" (122). While the comedy stage is not physically in the realm of the private and intimate, much of what is considered the locus of the private self is nevertheless on stage, contained within Louie/C.K.'s stage persona. The topics C.K. broaches in his material and the way he performs it give the impression of C.K. "letting himself go" in the public safe space of the frame of comedy. The stage persona, built on a public performance of private, seemingly spontaneous, emotions, is therefore coded as the authentic self, but performed in a way that Louie/C.K. has the most control over the perception of this persona.

The front-stage space of stand-up performance is intended to be a controlled one-way communication where the performer speaks and the audience listens and responds with laughter and applause. When the fictionalised Louie is depicted on screen as losing control of his stage persona, the back-stage persona appears as an indication of the negation of his status: it is shown to be a weakness, and the status shift of the broken performative context is played for comedy. In the season four episode, "Pamela Part 1," the proposed authenticity of the stage persona's rhetoric is undermined by the actions of the back-stage self in ways that provoked a controversial reception. The schism between the front- and back-stage selves of the character in this moment creates a space for C.K. to assert his extra-textual persona of the auteur at the expense of the Louie character.

## C.K.'S AUTEUR PERSONA: LOUIE'S CRITICAL GOD

C.K.'s status as the author of *Louie* is clearly apparent both in the text of the series itself, and in para-texts of publicity and the textual body of C.K.'s celebrity persona. The opening credits announce C.K.'s multiple roles in the production of each episode, indicating the series' almost singular authorship. Most episodes include segments of C.K.'s stand-up in the same form as it exists in the world outside of the series, and a link is drawn between C.K.'s work on stage and in the production of the series: Louis C.K. is the sole creative voice producing the material. Critical reception and reviews of the series write about C.K. in the role of the author of the text, and interviews with C.K. about the series focus on his role as author. For example, Andrew Corsello describes C.K. on the set as seeking specific, predetermined line readings from his actors—he “composes his dialogue as much as he writes it,” and does not want his actors to improvise (2)—creating an image of C.K. as having a specific artistic vision for his series and as not particularly open to collaborative input that could change the intention of his work.

In much of the reception of the fourth season, C.K.'s role as auteur was foregrounded by critics attempting to interpret the intent behind some of the season's more difficult and controversial elements. This departs from the established narrative style and structure of the past three seasons and is largely comprised of multi-part episodes that continue a single narrative, which is referenced in later episodes outside of the multipart arc. Rather than lacking in strict continuity, almost the entire season takes place in a clear timeline within the same narrative world. The result is a more cohesive sense of the Louie character living a continuous life, with actions generally having consequences throughout the narrative.

The role of C.K. as auteur is made particularly apparent both in the text and in para-texts of reception in the tenth episode of this season, “Pamela Part 1,” where a segment of Louie's stand-up ridiculing cultural apathy towards violence against women is juxtaposed with a scene of Louie attempting to overpower his friend Pamela when she rejects a romantic advance. A significant amount of this episode is devoted to a segment of stand-up comedy where Louie's on-stage persona—the socially conscious, self-examining, self-deprecating, vulgar, and brutally honest cultural commentator—talks about the inequality of women in American culture. On stage, Louie expresses indignant bewilderment at the fact that women were unable to vote in the United States until 1920. He talks about the absurdity of the way women were traditionally referred to by their husband's name, making their identity based around being the property of a man. He breaks down the cultural apathy towards violence against women, describing how it was once the norm but is only now merely “frowned upon,” and cites the example of the casual use of the term “wife-beater” as an affectionate name for a type of shirt.

The following scene shows Louie on the subway. In the crowded car, he sits across from a man talking to a woman who, while expressionless and not engaging the man in conversation, appears to be with him by the familiar way the man addresses her. As the train stops, the woman abruptly stands and exits, her actions so sudden that it appears to communicate that this is not her stop; she simply wants to get away from the man invading her space and forcing his voice upon her, and is willing to wait for the next train in order to do it. The man continues to talk to the empty seat for a few moments without acknowledging that the woman has left or breaking his flow of talking to the unresponsive, nonspecific audience of the train. Louie eventually gets up and fills the vacant seat next to the man, who continues without acknowledging Louie. Louie makes eye contact with the man and nods along, pretending to be interested.



In past seasons of *Louie*, given the disconnected and discontinuous narrative structure of the series, a scene like this might be taken as a brief interstitial between segments without greater consequence to the narrative. From the pattern of continuity that C.K. as author establishes throughout season four, however, this scene becomes a bridge between the thematic disparity of Louie's words on-stage and actions off-stage. In light of Louie's failures with women throughout the season (including the extended serial narrative of "Elevator" parts 1-6, where Louie falls in love with his Hungarian neighbour who eventually leaves him to return home) and yet another rejection from his friend, Pamela, at the beginning of the episode, Louie's actions on the train could be read as Louie empathising with the man for being ignored by the woman who exited the train to get away from him. By empathising with the man and pretending to pay attention to him where the woman wouldn't, Louie is aligned with the man in a way that suggests both of them speak empty words to nonspecific audiences with varying degrees of response. Like the man on the train, the stand-up segment we've just seen features Louie talking *at* a collective audience, rather than engaging *with* specific individuals. It is the role that Louie's stage persona is built for: the words he speaks at people from the stage are invested with a degree of importance regardless of the audience's response to them or regardless of the lack of meaning they might have for either Louie as the speaker, or the faceless collective of his nonspecific audience.

In the next scene, Louie arrives home, where Pamela has fallen asleep on the couch after watching his daughters. When Pamela gets up to leave, the physical differences between the large, imposing C.K. and the petite actress, Pamela Adlon, are emphasized through their blocking on the set, with C.K. pulling himself up to his full height and leaning forward over Adlon as she ducks and cowers away. Louie invades Pamela's personal space and eventually grabs her arm while she tries to duck away as he attempts once again to bring up the subject of a relationship with him. In direct contradiction to the sentiments of the previous stand-up segment regarding the absurdity of the inequality of women and the lackadaisical cultural attitude of violence against women, Louie pursues Pamela around his apartment, using his substantially larger physical presence to dominate her. Pamela attempts to escape, repeatedly telling him that, no, she does not want this. Finally backed into a corner, both literally and figuratively, Pamela concedes to allowing Louie to kiss her. Much like the woman on the train who ignores and tolerates the man beside her talking at her, Pamela makes this reluctant concession in order not to escalate the situation: her lips remained pursed, mouth closed, face in a grimace, and she ducks further back into the corner turning her face away from Louie's. Making the concession permits her to leave, while Louie, oblivious to the hypocritical violence of his actions, leans back against the door and fist pumps a whispered "Yes!" of victory.

As the author of the work, C.K.-as-auteur is present in the episode by deliberately depicting Louie's total lack of self-awareness in the disparity between his words on stage and his actions off stage. C.K. undermines the established parallels between his public persona and the off-stage persona of his fictionalised self, deliberately illustrating his *own* self-awareness as an auteur by criticising the actions of his self-proxy character. While Louie's off-stage actions are criticised by the observations of his on-stage self (the same stage persona that exists outside of the text as C.K.'s stage persona), Pamela also criticises the violent and ineffective nature of Louie's actions with the comment, "This would be rape if you weren't so stupid." In his role as auteur, C.K. has written the scene, including Pamela's dialogue and has directed the performance of the scene to deliberately emphasise his character's physical dominance over Pamela. It is C.K.-the-auteur who has arranged this sequence of scenes: the stand-up segment, the bridging scene on the subway, and the undermining off-stage scene in the apartment. The construction of the episode makes a deliberate point about the empty politics of Louie's stand-

up and his apparent blind spot when it comes to the rigorous self-examination that usually characterises his on- and off-stage personas.

The way C.K.'s auteur persona manifests in the fourth season of *Louie* is a continuation of C.K.'s public persona as "famous for constant self-reflection, self-loathing, and social observation" (Ryan). Para-texts of C.K.'s celebrity outside the series can aid in reading this auteur persona in *Louie* and clarify C.K.'s presentational declaration as a more "highly evolved" version of his fictionalised self. For example, after a 2012 incident in which stand-up comedian and *Tosh.0* host, Daniel Tosh, was criticised for making light of rape in response to a heckler, C.K. voiced his support for Tosh on Twitter. As a result, C.K. was now included in criticisms directed at Tosh. Shortly after the controversy, C.K. appeared on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and explained that he had been on vacation, off the internet, and unaware of the Tosh incident when he posted the tweet. After subsequently becoming involved in the controversy he saw it as a learning experience, and talked about having become aware of the way women's lives are policed by the threat of rape, something that he had never thought about previously ("Louis C.K.").

Whether this performance of C.K.'s auteur persona is actually all that enlightened is ambiguous and up for debate. Much of the immediate reaction to "Pamela Part 1" saw critics disturbed by the scene and confused over C.K.'s intention, but ultimately attempting to withhold fully analysing the scene until the airing of "Pamela Part 2 & 3," scheduled for two weeks later (see, for example, Molloy; Lobenfeld; Robinson; Sepinwall; Zoller Seitz, "Wrestling"). In the concluding parts of the "Pamela" narrative, however, Louie does not face any consequences for his treatment of Pamela and the two end up in a relationship which closes out the season. If this series of events, where Louie's treatment of Pamela offers no obstacle to their relationship, is a blind spot of C.K. the auteur's or part of a broader point about Louie, whose unenlightened everyman character gets away with his ignorance because of white heterosexual male privilege, is difficult to determine given the unfinished and ongoing nature of the continuing television series. Whether the relatively new state of narrative continuity in the fourth season continues through the show's fifth season, and whether Louie and Pamela's relationship carries over to the fifth season, remains to be seen at this time.

The ambiguity and divided reactions to the kissing scene may stem from C.K.'s use of persona in the series. Throughout *Louie*, C.K. has made a consistent argument that his and his character's front-stage persona is an authentic representation of self. The negation of that argument in this episode is jarring, and it can be difficult for audiences to tell which Louie or Louis is in charge here and what point he may be trying to make. However, understanding the various Louie/Louis/C.K. personas at work in the series can offer a clearer reading of how C.K. places his auteur persona within the text. This case study demonstrates that there is an opportunity for comedians whose public personas are tied in with a fictionalised representation of self to step outside the fiction and assert their role as auteur in order to reveal something of their own self-perception and reflexively comment on gaffes they have made in the past.

## CONCLUSION

Representations of stand-up comedians in fiction work through questions about the front- and back-stage selves of comedians, demonstrating how each persona shapes the other and offering ideas about whether we as an audience can know who comedy performers "really" are. In the case of Louis C.K. and his forum for self-presentation through fictionalised self-representation in *Louie*, C.K. has developed an argument for both himself and his fictionalised self as presenting an authentic stage persona. In a departure from this proposition in the fourth

season of his series, C.K. undermines his fictionalised self's authenticity in order to assert his authorial voice in the text of his television series. Examining the multiple versions of C.K. present in *Louie* through the lens of persona studies reveals that the change in the character works to reinforce C.K.'s public persona as the self-examining and self-critical observer. In this example, C.K. sacrifices his fictionalised self's on-stage authenticity and self-awareness in order to demonstrate his own, prioritising the integrity of one persona over another.

By examining *Louie*, we can see how a traditionally representational form of media can potentially act in the spirit of presentational media, supplemented by the meta-text of a celebrity public persona with a distinct author function. The proliferation of public selves shapes the nature of comedians' self-performance and, in the increasingly porous boundaries of front- and back-stage spaces, the study of contemporary comedian persona reveals a shift away from cultural narratives about comedians that have been gleaned from representational works of fiction. As Louis C.K. and Louie C.K. show in this case study, an authentic presentation of self in such a liminal media space can become difficult to interpret when it may not be clear exactly which persona is taking centre stage.

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