

"THAT'S WHAT SHE SAID": POLITICS, TRANSGRESSION, AND WOMEN'S HUMOR
IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN TELEVISION

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ABSTRACT

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Since the early 2000s, women affiliated with comedy television have been widely discussed as exceptions within a masculine industrial context, celebrated as brave counterexamples to ideas women lack comedic voices, or derided for not being good enough as comics or feminists. Television has been included in this discussion as a space where women's representation, in comparison to film, provided more dynamic options for actress. Comedy has been used in these conversations as journalists and bloggers increasingly focus on women's lack of representation within comedy formats in addition to already lack of diversity on and offscreen. The goal of this research is to analyze women's comedic work for television.

The following is an examination of women's authorship in comedy television. There have been a handful of women who have acted as headwriters/ showrunners/ producers/ stars in comedy texts within the past ten years. Through analyses of four women in particular: Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Diablo Cody, and Lena Dunham, this research highlights the ways in which women's perspectives are incorporated within their texts. Through comedy they provide characters and points of identification that go beyond stereotyping and shed light on the nuanced nature of women's lived experiences. These texts both resist and conform to societal expectations of women.

Television Studies exists within a state of fluctuation as industrial shifts uproot the ways in which television operates and even how we as an audience watch or experience programs. Expansion of channels, changes in ownership, challenges over content have affected the ways in which audiences view television as an object. This dissertation is an exploration of those cracks, which were made by female comedy writers to provide insight into women's daily lives and experiences within American contexts. While by no means all-inclusive, women working in contemporary television continue to try and negotiate wider openings for women's content on the screen and battle against the saturation of male-centric narratives.

To all the laughing Medusas

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LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: AN INTRODUCTION

In a 2012 interview with the New York Times, Eddie Brill, at the time the talent coordinator for *The Late Show with David Letterman* (1993 -) stated “There are a lot less female comics who are authentic [...] I see a lot of female comics who to please an audience will act like men” (Zinoman, par. 13). In April similar comments were spoken by Lee Aronhson, co-creator of *Two and a Half Men* (2003 -) and writer for *The Big Bang Theory* (2007 -), two popular contemporary sitcoms. He contended while there were a select few funny women on television, that “we’re approaching peak vagina on television, the point of labia saturation,” (Vlessing, par. 11) and further admitted one of the major currents of *Two and a Half Men* was the premise women damaged men (par. 13). Despite women participating in comedy production on stage, in film, and television, their abilities as comedians and writers continue to be questioned.

Women are used frequently as the subject of jokes. Patricia Mellencamp argues “...comedy works to contain women...” (335). Most accessible comedians, meaning ones seen on television (standup specials, sitcoms, and variety shows) or films, are men. Comedy regarding women focuses on gender differences and usually women’s irrationality and lack of emotional and bodily control. Women’s bodies, hysteria, sexual appetite, and irrationality are common threads tying many male comedians’ routines or works. The jokes themselves are not the same, but the same sentiments continue to circulate. The repetition of such jokes by various comedians seems to suggest there is truth in stereotypes. Women *are* crazy, because there are a variety of jokes centered on this idea. In these instances, jokes are used to reinforce stereotypes. Comedy, however, has the capability of dispelling cultural myths and challenging norms.

Within Aronsohn and Brill's statements lies a fear in their work spaces overflowing with women. Humor is a means to construct identity, meaning many women who do use their comedic voice work to detangle themselves from the subjection of joking. In doing so they take on and challenge many stereotypes and contradictions about women like the fact they lack humor (or try too hard), they all want marriage and children (or hate men), they degrade men (or choose to be mistreated), or lack complexity (or are too complex). Concern over women overstepping their boundaries and overpowering male narratives pervade industry and culture, even if statistics show women remain marginalized from creative production (Lauzen 1). What those few women are saying and doing within their comedic works is the focus of this dissertation. This research does not posit all comedy originating from women is feminist in nature (ideological strands lie below the surface of many texts); however, analysis is included concerning female authors' methods and tactics in comedically complicating and contradicting postfeminist and feminist expectations.

The following is an examination of women's authorship in comedy television. There have been a handful of women who have acted as headwriters/ showrunners/ producers/ stars in comedy texts within the past ten years. Through analyses of four women in particular: Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Diablo Cody, and Lena Dunham, this research highlights the ways in which women's perspectives are incorporated within their texts. Through comedy they provide characters and points of identification that go beyond stereotyping and shed light on the nuanced nature of women's lived experiences. These texts both resist and conform to societal expectations of women.

Looking at those women who succeed in television requires understanding the ways in which the industry works, the cultural context that helps dictate what is made and received by audiences, and how texts work within cultural and industrial frameworks. Those working within culture industries are negotiating their work within shifting industry expectations, but this dissertation argues that in many cases those marginalized are working even harder to have their work included within programming schedules. This research works primarily within the scholarly frameworks of television, gender, and humor studies. Each field contributes greatly to our understanding of media's relationship with ideology and hegemony through their examinations of form, representation, and context.

Television as More than Appliance

Whereas in 1961, FCC Chairman Newton Minow labeled American television as a “wasteland,” early British cultural studies scholars found meaning in how television was structured and provided structure for people's everyday lives. Stuart Hall's “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse” provided a method of approaching television as a negotiation of meaning between producer and viewer. Despite the intended meanings of programs, Hall argued that viewers had agency to accept or challenge dominant discourse. Raymond Williams contemplated television's form and flow in *Television Technology and Cultural Form*. In his discussion of programming types, Williams mentions the unique form of the “solo turn and the variety sketch into ‘situation comedy’ (59), which he clarifies needs to be considered outside of drama and variety. However, he goes no further than identifying British situation comedies that he thinks

evolve the form rather than simply adapting sketches into longer comedies. Here is one of the first attempts to define the situation comedy as something other than drama or variety.

In his 1978 critique of the lack of scholarly work on the sitcom, “Television Situation Comedy” published in *Screen*, Mick Eaton situates the sitcom in terms of generic form and its place within industrial setting. The two components he identifies are the narrative component of the situation and the inclusive nature of those within the narrative: the family and the workplace (62). The formal elements that construct the sitcom, or what differentiates it from other genres on television, have continued to be analyzed in current scholarship. Despite the assurance from scholars like Jason Mittell that the sitcom is one of the most “recognizable, prolific, and well known of the television genres,” (248, *Television and American Culture*), there remain some questions concerning aesthetics.

The ability to recognize and categorize genres has been a predominant focus in both film and television scholarship. In film analysis, genres have been discussed in terms of aesthetics. In his 1970 essay “The Idea of Genre,” Edward Buscombe writes of the importance of looking at the visual similarities between films. He uses the western as an example, discussing similarities of setting, costuming, and other visual indicators such as horses, guns, and trains. Genre, for Buscombe, is about visual familiarity as opposed to similarities in thematic or cultural reflection. The use of formal elements as a means of taxonomy is borrowed from literary analysis, in which Rick Altman has defined as the semantic approach (31). In his 1984 essay “A Semantic/Synactic” approach Altman further expands how genres can be analyzed. He notes the two primary approaches to genre analysis: semantic and syntactic, the former which privileges aesthetic analysis,

and the latter which looks at texts within their industrial contexts and definitions (31).

Altman suggests that both can be used simultaneously in order to analyze films and their genres. While aesthetics can be used to help link films together, to foster familiarity, it also is necessary to place those films within a larger historical and cultural framework to understand how they make meaning and how audiences interpret those messages.

Television shares with film the fact that both are visual mediums. Each also provide narratives and are products of cultural industries, which is why in early television scholarship film theories were often used as a model from which television scholars could build. Many of the earlier television programs were also made in the image of film. Westerns, cop dramas, and comedies (all popular film genres in the late 1940s and early 1950s when television broadcasting began in the U.S.) made up the majority early television programming schedules. The situation comedy was a new addition, more in the vein of radio serial narrative than film. The combination of radio's familiarity in weekly closed narratives and the visual practices associated with film, helped develop early sitcoms like *Meet the Goldbergs*, *Beulah* (1950-3), and *Burns and Allen* (1950-58).

Attempts to further define the sitcom genre have continued as aesthetics and viewing practices changed. Jane Feuer discusses the difficulties in applying genre analysis to television due to the medium's swift response to industrial and cultural shifts (155). Feuer tracks the sitcom's cultural turn in the 1970s from self-contained family or work dramas to programs like *Mary Tyler Moore* (1970-77) and *All in the Family* (1971-77), which incorporated continuing narratives and took on political and societal issues within their narrative arcs (155). The immediacy in which television can respond to cultural and political shifts leads to different types of sitcoms, representations, and

political focal points. Feuer enhances the genre's significance; instead of treating the sitcom as a means to solely entertain audiences, the sitcom becomes a flexible and political entity.

In his breakdown of the sitcom genre, Jason Mittell includes the dramedy within his analysis, which may counter some of our familiarity with sitcoms (252). Dramedies usually are longer than thirty minutes, frequently do not include laughter to punctuate jokes, and are shot more cinematically using single-camera format. Hence, there continues to be discussion over the sitcom's formalist elements. Mittell highlights the flexibility of the sitcom as a format.

Despite those who continue to identify *what* the sitcom is, Brett Mills continue to expand the definition by claiming the only quality shared universally by the situation comedy is the fact the it is a "form of programming which foregrounds its comic intent" (49) and that the "comic impetus of the sitcom is therefore its most obvious and significant genre characteristic" (49). In categorizing the sitcom by its comedic intent, the ways in which we can explore connections between programs (their intertextuality) becomes easier. It does not, however, provide free reign for scholars to ignore the aesthetics, narratives, themes, cultural contexts, and place within the television industry. Jason Mittell in, "A Cultural Approach to Television Genre" encourages scholars to look beyond similarities in narrative structures or tropes, and "locate genres within the complex interrelations among texts, industries, audiences, and historical contexts" (7). The focus, Mittell clarifies, is to not explore the text itself, but examining how genres are "culturally defined, interpreted, and evaluated" (9). At the end of the essay, Mittell provides a five point outline for how to evaluate genres: 1) consideration of programs

within the medium of television, 2) maintaining a balance between broad and narrow descriptions, 3) acknowledging generic genealogies, 4) understanding television series as cultural products, and finally 5) as part of a larger system of cultural hierarchies and meaning (16-19). As opposed to considering only the aesthetic component, tying genres together, or only considering programs individually, analysis must try to maintain a balance between understanding the text and its context.

Whereas the familiarity of the sitcom as a thirty-minute, self-contained narrative with either studio audience laughter or an added laugh soundtrack was the norm for network television, the innovations in cable and satellite have diversified the ways in which comedy can be made and broadcast. Likewise, what can be considered television has changed as technology such as digital recording devices, the Internet, and streaming services like Hulu and Netflix create and air their own content. Exploring these relationships helps form a clearer picture of how texts are created, for and by whom, and their cultural significance. Developing these relationships allows for discussion of ideology, which is not typically a central focus.

Feminist Media Scholarship

Feminist media scholars have examined the implication of television programs as a site of identity negotiations. Their approaches can be divided into two major threads: exploring relationships women have with television through studying audience reception and issues of representation. The former began with the understanding of television as an object, one situated in the home. Ien Ang's *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and Melodramatic Meaning* is a notable example, wherein Ang interviewed viewers of the popular soap opera and made connections between the melodrama as a genre, the

audience's interpretation of visual and narrative elements, and its cultural relevance. In *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, Ang unpacks the ways the television industry constructs and markets to its audience. In attempting to find the audience outside of institutional definitions and conceptions, Ang forms an understanding of the audience as multidimensional with various interests and varying degrees of investment to the form. She also helped to establish the significance of television's relationship to the audience, as opposed to the audience's relationship with television.

Lynn Spigel, who has written extensively about television's introduction to the home and its effect on the families, spaces, and culture, would further explore television as a cultural object. In *Make Room for TV* (1992), she analyzes newspapers, magazine articles, and promotional materials to assert television as family medium, one that "promised to reassemble the splintered lives of families who had been separated during the [second world] war. It was also meant to reinforce the new suburban family unit, which had left most of its extended family and friends in the city" (39). Women as domestic caregivers were paired with television as it operated within their domain of the home and also acted as a symbolic window. Spigel explores these relationships further in *Welcome to the Dreamhouse* (2001), wherein television's role in forming and defining the burgeoning suburbs is addressed. She contends, "Television allowed people to enter into an imaginary social life, one that was shared not in the neighborhood networks of bridge clubs and mahjong gatherings but on the national networks of CBS, NBC, and ABC" (45). Relationships and character identifications are relative to the viewer. This relationship is best observed in domestic comedies, where the popularity of these shows has expanded as viewers can form a sense of community and self-identification with

certain on screen characters. The sense of community, however, is limited as entertainment is now available in the home, increasing women's seclusion to the home (48).

Women's relationship to television becomes significant, as television becomes a means to culturally include and exclude them from the public sphere. This strand of feminist scholarship assumes television not only acts as an appliance with which women interact, but also provides models and meaning to those who watch. If, for example, television does, as Spigel notes, offer viewers an opportunity to engage in an imaginary social life, what does that life look like? What are the expectations? What are the promises? What is the pleasure? What are the ramifications of these imagined communities?

Second and Third-Wave feminists had long been engaged with battling and questioning media representation and much of their writing and activism influenced sitcom writers like Susan Harris, Treva Silverman, and Diane English. The National Organization of Women even took on television in the 1970s for its lack of portrayal of women as well as individual programs' affirmation of traditional, subservient female gender roles. In 1972, the organization sued to prevent the station WABC in New York from renewing their broadcasting license on the basis of sex discrimination and the lack of women both off and on screen. WABC still kept their license, but NOW and feminist activism interested in media portrayals influenced much of the media scholarship that followed (Perlman, 416-418).

Studies about representation provide insight into issues relating to gender, race, sexuality, class, weight, and disability. Studies emerge from both the social sciences and

humanities, with the former coding tropes or viewer responses, while the latter use and apply textual analysis and theoretical frameworks. Patricia Mellencamp uses psychoanalysis in *High Anxiety: Catastrophe, Scandal, Age, Comedy* (1992) to elaborate on the function humor plays within domestic sitcoms like *Burn and Allen* (1950-58) *I Love Lucy* (1951-57), *Roseanne* (1988-97), *Who's The Boss* (1984-92), and *Murphy Brown* (1988-98). Mellencamp argues that humor within sitcoms acts as a container for anxiety and feelings of containment (337). Mellencamp clarifies "In contrast to the supposedly 'liberating' function of jokes, humorous pleasure 'saves' feeling because the reality is too painful" (337). Humor contains feelings of displacement or restraint, but the pleasure in recognition, identification, and laughter also provides a sense of pleasure.

Mellencamp's analysis on sitcoms plays a small part in her overall text, but one that is significant for those studying television comedy as it is one of the few works on television that considers the implications of humor within television texts. Regina Barreca and Katherine Rowe add to Mellencamp's attempt to dissect women's humor. Barreca is more concerned with the ways in which women are dissuaded from performing comedy and are frequently referred to as not being comedically inclined. Similar to Mellencamp's analysis of comedy as containment, Barreca argues

Comedy is confrontational and boundary breaking, since you walk away feeling angry even as you laugh. This sort of comedy does not do away with women's feelings of powerlessness--instead it underscores the political nature of a woman's role. It should make us even more determined to change those aspects of our situation that confines us. It is comedy that inspires as well as entertains. (14-5)

The issues of containment and liberation through humor remain, but Barreca adds the sense of power inherent in making jokes and making others laugh. Though she does not speak to how this is affected by television, she does note the significance of comedians like Roseanne, who interrupt gendered discourses about domesticity with discontent, self-deprecation, and snark (24).

Rowe also discusses gender and comedy in relation to boundaries, containment, and transgression. Using frameworks from French feminists, Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous alongside Bakhtin's theories of the carnivalesque, she documents how comedic women are considered "out of control" or unruly. Rowe notes television's relative freedom to challenge conventions, particularly in relation to film (81). The flexibility of television's flow, according to Rowe

releases women from the confines of the Oedipal plot and her positioning within a heterosexual couple into the more loosely constructed image of the sitcom family. This image while appearing to uphold the authority of patriarchy, might in fact be seen as masking the crumbling of its power. (80)

The use of parody and play in television help deconstruct traditional conventions of Hollywood, which further allows comedians like Roseanne to toy with representations and challenge norms (81). The domestic sitcom in particular allows for a certain amount of unruliness for women. Though Lucy Ricardo never truly breaks free from the domestic sphere and becomes the great actress/singer/dancer she desires to be, her ambition and desire to do more than stay at home are those textual spaces that deserve analysis. The fact that she is rarely content, and Ricky continually attempts to keep her contained,

provide options for audiences to consider the cultural significance of their domestic conflicts.

The majority of studies regarding women's representation do not take into consideration the sitcom's form or structure, as much as they evaluate it as part of a larger history of domestic or workplace sitcoms. Industrial analysis is considered to a point, in as much as writers note programs' channels, relevant network disputes, or audience demographic. One of the primary goals of this type of research is determining which series are feminist and postfeminist or "positive" or "negative" representations of women.

Those articles that discuss the ways in which identities are represented are only one thread of representation analysis. Issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, fatness are analyzed within case studies, but do not expand those analyses to how those issues circulate in other series or discuss how comedy specifically frames political commentary . These studies use television programs as sites for cultural discourses to play out for audiences. Jennifer Fuller argues in "The 'Black Sex Goddess' in the Living Room: Making Interracial Sex 'Laughable' in *Gimme a Break*" the jokes directed toward Nell Carter's fat and racialized body worked to contain her safely for the sitcom audience (265). In "Fat Monica, Fat Suits, and *Friends*: Exploring Narratives of Fatness," Amy Gullage discusses the role weight played in constructing the character of Monica and in reasserting gender norms regarding bodily comportment (6). Using Fiske and Hartley as a framework, Jessica Birthisel and Jason A. Martin suggest *The Office* as a model for those negotiating gender within the workplace. Their article "'That's What She Said': Gender, Satire, and the American Workplace on the Sitcom *The Office*," concludes that

despite the “transgressive potential” of the mockumentary and hyperbole used within the show, the program fails to challenge patriarchal authority (76). These analyses share similarities in that they all are case studies of popular television sitcoms, which look specifically at the various way people are represented, offer focused and thorough textual analyses of selected episodes, and evaluate programs based on whether they assert or challenge norms.

Another and similar thread is looking at how specific programs can be identified as either feminist or postfeminist. The representative analyses above evaluate whether or not programs are progressive, but most assert humor is used as a means to restrict women within patriarchal cultural frameworks. Since the 2000s there has been an interest in discussing the infiltration of postfeminism into media representations. Many of these analyses centered on *Sex and The City* (1998 - 2004), which offered itself as a source of empowerment for its female viewers, but which many feminist media scholars thought did more harm in its representations of consumerism and focus on personal success (Arthurs; Gerhard; McRobbie). Recently postfeminism has been discussed in relation to the *30 Rock* and representations of Tina Fey’s character Liz Lemon going back and forth between feminist icon and postfeminist attachments to stuff (Mizejewski, 2012; Patterson, 2012). Rather than thinking of how texts express ideas, these articles analyze how ideas filter into programming. In Lauren J. DeCarvalho’s “Hannah and Her Entitled Sisters: Postfeminism, (Post)Recession, and *Girls*,” she describes main character Hannah’s efforts to survive in New York without working “indicative of postfeminist entitlement in how it works under the assumption that second-wave feminists worked hard to afford women a space in the workplace, so now future generations need not do

the same” (368). As opposed to the above accounts of sitcoms actively representing people based on stereotypes, the notion of “indicative” designates a sort of passivity, of cultural ideas seeping into the text rather than ideas being constructed by or through the text.

Gaps and Interventions

One of the issues when dealing with the situation comedy is, as Mittell has stated, its familiarity. As one of the most popular genres, it is difficult to discuss without assuming everybody has an understanding of the narratives, tropes, and jokes. Television studies often privileges the program form in ways that frequently place the meaning of texts in the background. Feminist readings of television, in contrast, tend to privilege meanings in ways that can ignore industrial contexts that affect content. This dissertation bridges the gaps between these strands of scholarship. Through looking at female authorship, it is possible to discuss the ways in which women who work in creative roles in television comedies write about gendered experiences and negotiate their identities as creators and meaning makers.

The “writing room” has held a problematic place for those interested in television studies. Unlike film scholarship, which has over time developed a means of discussing authorship and intent through auteur studies and theories, authorship for television has been more difficult to dissect. Collaborations between multiple writers who more often than not circulate between shows or write maybe one or two episodes per season or even per show make it difficult to define authorship. Newman and Levine in *Legitimizing Television* define auteur as “an artist of unique vision whose experiences and personality are expressed through storytelling craft, and whose presence in cultural discourses

functions to produce authority for the forms with which he is identified” (38). The authors further link current television with film’s history of legitimacy in the 1960s, when critics began to look at directors as cinematic authors moving film away from a purely commercial medium (39).

Dan Harmon, for example, created and produced the popular series *Community* for the first three seasons prior to exiting the show after disagreements between himself, members of the cast, and network NBC. Viewers and critics expressed concern over the “voice” and “tone” of the show once he stepped down. Though the series is understood as the product of multiple voices (19), Harmon’s leadership as creator and head writer made him stand out as a singular author with intent. Programs are still used to sell products, but there are creators who aim for more complicated content and have reoriented television more toward the artistic antecedent of film. Showrunners are likened to directors in terms of serving an authorial role. Showrunners like David Simon (*The Wire*), J.J. Abrams (*Lost*), Joss Whedon (*Buffy The Vampire Slayer*), Vince Gilligan (*Breaking Bad*), and Matthew Weiner (*Mad Men*) have been noted for their expansion of television’s boundaries and ushering in an era of authorship in television. According to Jason Mittell, these figures represent an “authorship through management,” approach as they are the ones noted for sustaining narratives and tones despite several writers entering and exiting over the course of (hopefully) several seasons (Mittell, “Authorship” par. 7). In this regard, the author is somebody not necessarily in charge of the text, as a literary author is, or necessarily all aesthetic choices, like a film director; however, showrunners are credited with overseeing and maintaining tonal and narrative continuity.

Women's power over texts and gender representation has taken form in a variety of ways that do not conform to the models of authorship identified by Mittell. Lucille Ball was not technically an author or a showrunner for *I Love Lucy*, however, she was identified by Madelyn Pugh Davis as fulfilling a similar managerial role through her positions as star and producer. Even Roseanne, who formed the narrative basis of *Roseanne* through her standup comedy persona, was not the showrunner. Matt Williams acted as head writer and showrunner, which frequently lead to battles with Roseanne. The infamous on-set battles led to Roseanne's characterization as difficult and out of control, as opposed to somebody trying to maintain control over her work. Amy Poehler is not the creator or showrunner for *Parks and Recreation* (2009 -), but the program attaches itself to her star power and aligns tightly with her outwardly expressed feminism.

While the rise of authorship helps legitimize television as a medium beyond commercialism and more into categories of narrative art, the lines drawn for what is considered authorship remain questionable. Women's authorship in particular requires further reflection as female creatives deal with double standards, exceptionalism, and challenges not posed to their male counterparts. These challenges require negotiations from female authors, usually in presentation of their material or public personas. In an article for *The New Yorker*, entitled "Confessions of a Juggler," Fey comments on questions posed to her about having more children and her ability to "juggle it all." She notes the invasive nature of this first question, which requires consideration of her body's reproductive system. The latter question, Fey notes, is one said with some accusation as it assumes all obligations are being performed poorly. She wraps both within a larger industrial context where women are posed these questions whereas men are not. Working

mothers, like Fey, are positioned as abandoning their children for the sake of their careers, as opposed to fathers who are expected to work and not act as domestic caregivers.

Fey's solution to ending the questions, pressures, and anxieties for women within the entertainment industry is

[...] for women to become producers and hire diverse women of various ages. That is why I feel obligated to stay in the business and try hard to get to a place where I can create opportunities for others, and that's why I can't possibly take time off for a second baby, unless I do, in which case that is nobody's business and I'll never regret it for a moment unless it ruins my life. (64)

Within the article, which also serves as a portion of her book *Bossy Pants*, Fey strategically moves from a personal reflective mode to discussing larger industrial and cultural issues. The problem is not with her, nor women, but the ideologies currently circulating that continue to contain women both socially and within the TV industry.

Due to the difficulty in establishing an auteur approach to television, in this study authorship is evaluated through three lenses, which at times overlap. First, is the consideration of the roles of creators, showrunners, and head writers directly tied to the creation of narratives and character development. As head writer of *30 Rock*, Tina Fey remarked at one point that her character Liz Lemon was being written as "too dumb" and her boss and foil Jack "too fatherly", which were criticisms launched by feminist critics in online forums. Fey took more time to actively reconstruct the direction (Baldwin, par. 13). Her ability to choose and redirect characters' narratives provided her a level of

control within the production of the text. Power over representation as a writer is highly significant considering it is this quality of programming that most audiences are interpreting and academics are critiquing.

Fey's responsiveness above demonstrates her role as a manager or overseer as opposed to an "author" in the strictest sense. Her answer denoted a lack of control to the point it had to be regained, her team harnessed. It was not a case of being compelled by her own senses; rather, the idea of her group of writers expanding outside of the framework she established years prior. There is a sense of flexibility in play with character and narrative arcs, but also a sense of maintaining expectations, particularly concerning the identifiable nature of Liz Lemon.

Second, are considering those performers who due to their star power have a certain level of creative control. Nearly all forms of entertainment have eventually depended on star power to promote their products. Radio listeners formed around their favorite personalities. Since the early teens, film studios began luring audiences with particular stars. Television, almost since its inception, has depended heavily on celebrity power to draw audiences. Doing so was a way to promote the medium itself and pillage radio of its talent, as well as convince lesser Hollywood stars to jump on board. Considering the seriality of television sitcoms and the importance of familiarity and audience attachment, this aspect of control becomes incredibly important within the medium of television. Stars also have the ability to resist or push changes made by writers or directors. Television lore is filled with stories of stars throwing tantrums because of changes to their characters or because their ideas for narratives were not

appreciated. Stars commonly negotiate or use their star power in ways that allow them further control.

Third, are those with producer credits, who invest financially in the program and have some say or influence, but do not write actual content. There are varying levels of producers, but each with their own stake in the program: financial, name/brand, their position within the industry. Like many performers, producers often do not have direct control over scriptwriting, unless they hold dual roles. However, Producers have some level of control and are known to make suggestions or demands based on the needs of the network because they answer to the network and sponsors, as well as maintain financial control over their series. Norman Lear, Marcy Carsey and Tom Werner, and Dick Wolf are examples of producers who have created name brands and franchises, providing them experience and credibility. Carsey and Werner produced *The Cosby Show* (1984-92), *Roseanne* (1988-97), *That 70s Show* (1998-2006), all lasting more than half a decade on air, giving them a fair edge in determining what makes a series successful. Their name and input can make its way down the line to those in the writing room. Additionally, producers' negotiations with stars, showrunners, directors, and writers also influence the show. Hiring, firing, and financial cuts all impact television content.

Television production consists of varying levels of negotiations and battles over content. Throughout television's history women have played part in power struggles, many of them overlapping with general battles between creative personnel and executives, but with the addition of institutionalized sexism. Current discourse surrounding the "emergence" of women within the arena of television comedy asserts women's relative absence from industry histories, despite playing active roles in the

construction and development of television from its inception. Since television's commercial beginnings, women actively have constructed texts and played parts within the production process. In particular, Comedy was viewed as a nice fit for women in the early days of TV broadcasting, as the genre was viewed as "light" and inconsequential in comparison to dramas. Television as an experiment was an outlet for women's creativity. With television emerging during World War II content was developed by women.. Its establishment as a commercial force, however, left women continuing to battle misogyny and stereotypes behind the scenes and onscreen. The brief history provided in chapter two will mark those very moments, bringing women back into television history and demonstrating ways in which women have interjected their voices within creative processes, taken initiative to represent women's lives, and struggled for representation. Women did not just emerge recently into television production. There is a long history of women working in television who have acted as role models and boundary breakers for contemporary women.

This is an examination of threads. Television texts are used as examples of comedy produced by women. Episodes are treated as products produced within an industry informed by cultural attitudes and ideas concerning what television, comedy, and gender politics are and what they mean. Analyzed as well are articles, blogs, and books by the writers discussed, articles from industry and popular publications about their work, and public appearances on television or online series. All are used as means to provide a more complete understanding of how their texts are situated in the industry and in culture, as well as how they present themselves, address questions concerning their gender, and discuss women's roles in media production.

Four Authors

There are several women currently working within the commercial, network television industry who fit the models of authorship in sitcoms that I have outlined above. Mindy Kaling writes, performs, and produces *The Mindy Kaling Project* (2012 -). Zooey Deschanel acts as producer and star of *The New Girl* (2012 -). Whitney Cummings has authored two programs, *Two Broke Girls* (2011 -) and *Whitney* (2011 - 13) . Each provide interesting case studies, however, this study focuses on the work of Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Diablo Cody, and Lena Dunham because they best represent those models of authorship proposed above, as well as hold opposite sides of a representative and industrial spectrum.

Tina Fey and Amy Poehler are popular within the industry and among audiences. As Golden Globes hosts they were able to push boundaries by poking fun at singer Taylor Swift's love life, equating marriage to director James Cameron with torture, and former host, Ricky Gervais's past performance upsetting the Hollywood community (70th *Golden Globes*). Recently it was announced both were recruited to host the event for the next two years, confirming their status as edgy but popular performers. Both women hold an interesting space within comedy television as they are well respected within their industry of comedy television, experience mainstream success, but also have publicly noted their feminist allegiances and intent in their work.

Tina Fey is one of the most popular and recognizable showrunners and female comedians in contemporary television. Since her emergence as a performer on Saturday Night Live, she has been treated as a phenomenon and icon. Her sitcom *30 Rock* (2005 -

2012) never garnered high ratings, but maintained a place as a favorite amongst critics. The show also was noteworthy for its criticisms of media conglomerates with its frequent parodying of NBC's parent company General Electric, its regular representation concerning racism and misogyny in media, and the struggles of being a feminist in a postfeminist context. The program and Fey have been lauded for their portrayal of feminist politics and highlighting difficulties women face within the workplace, as well as derided for not doing enough for women.

Amy Poehler also has been praised for her role as Leslie Knope on *Parks and Recreation* (2007 -), but the character faced criticisms early on for Knope's silly and at times irrational behavior. However, Knope's personality is framed as necessary as her male colleagues frequently are belittling her, departments refer to her gender as a negative, and Pawnee's populace revert to antiquated stereotypes. The program, which like *30 Rock*, a workplace sitcom centers around a female character and features the struggle of a woman to negotiate her identity at work. Unlike Liz Lemon on *30 Rock*, however, Knope also actively seeks change in her community.

Both programs are network television series and are part of a larger history of network programming, with a commercial broadcast network striving to attract the most viewers. The politics of mass viewership and maintaining sponsor interest for these types of programs usually characterize them as overly formulaic, traditional, and without political substance. *30 Rock* and *Parks and Recreation* challenge this perspective. They borrow from successful formulas of the past with *30 Rock* a descendent of the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Parks and Recreation* from the creators of the American adaptation of *The Office* (2005- 13). Jokes, however, play an important part in informing the politics of

both programs, particularly the inclusion of jokes related to issues of gender. Several episodes, which are discussed in more detail later, focus on issues of women's labor, issues of female empowerment, complicated relationships with feminism as a theory and a lifestyle, and battling public conceptions of what it means to be empowered women.

While network programming attempts for mass appeal to attract corporate sponsorship, subscription cable depends on the viewers who specifically pay for their content. Within this agreement is tacit approval for more complicated and edgier content, meaning profanity, sex, and graphic violence. The agreement between consumer, network, and cable provider are also enhanced by the lack of FCC regulation in comparison to network television, which due to the accessibility of content is more tightly controlled. The format also has allowed for more extreme deconstructions of television genres. Whereas networks have shows that poke and prod the corporate structure and play with genre formulas, there still is hesitancy in airing series that completely challenge the expectations of network executives and advertising sponsors alike.

Diablo Cody and Lena Dunham come from the world of film, but as is evidenced in the cultural references within their programs, the creators of *United States of Tara* and *Girls* are fans of television. Both take familiar narrative television genres and pervert them to create different, complicated forms. Cody's *United States of Tara* takes the family sitcom and removes the stable backbone of mothers and fathers. In doing so, Cody highlights the importance of each person within the family contributing to the family's wellbeing and having their own ethic of care. Using the familiarity of the domestic

sitcom, Cody deconstructs the American family, particularly the role of mothers, and represents more complicated and emotionally fragile family ties.

Dunham borrows from another strand of domestic comedies, which situate friends as a surrogate family. Borrowing heavily from *Sex and the City*, *Girls* removes all sense of sentimentality from narratives of friendship and romantic relationships to confront audiences with the harsh realities faced by those who grew up under the influence of popular culture. As the narrative focus of the series, Dunham also is questioned frequently and critiqued for her repeated nudity and recurring representations of sex. Within these encounters, however, lay critiques of gender and sexuality, which are rarely available within network or even most cable television.

The four series examined in this study vary slightly in form. *Parks and Recreation* is a mockumentary, which allows for some intimacy between characters and audience. *30 Rock* frequently incorporates cuts from the main narrative to external moments that underscore jokes made. *United States of Tara* relies on moments of awkwardness in long takes and actress Toni Collette's dynamic performances to accentuate comedic moments. Dunham's narratives are cut in between four separate narratives and walk a tighter line between tragedy and comedy, as well as being visually darker than the others. They all, however, follow Mills's theory of comedic impetus. They also are similar in their general time frame of thirty minutes, single-camera shooting style, and self-reflexivity.

Chapter Breakdowns

The first chapter provides context for the relationship between gender and comedy. Humor has been analyzed and framed by multiple disciplines. However, to date Only a few texts seek to explain gendered uses of humor in social situations and within

the comedy profession. Thinking of women's use of humor, in terms of taking on the role of subject/teller as opposed to object/listener, as a transgressive act helps bridge those gaps in scholarship. Through establishing why and how women use comedy, this study aims to demonstrate the ways in which we can better understand the significance of their work on television, which reaches a large segment of the national population. Thus, chapter one also explores how the political potential of women's use of comedy also establishes frames for why the works of Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Diablo Cody, and Lena Dunham are significant.

The second chapter provides a historical overview of women's authorship in comedy television beginning with Gertrude Berg in the early days of television broadcasting and ending with the rise of postfeminist texts in the 1990s. As this chapter demonstrates, Entertainment industries help shape cultural values and attitudes, even as television programming is likewise shaped by them. A month after the Stock Market crashed in 1929, Gertrude Berg's *Meet the Goldbergs* premiered on the radio and provided a national maternal figure who offered advice to survive the Great Depression. World War II presented a plethora of opportunities for women, who were accepted into positions once reserved for men prior to joining the military. While working class women and women of color had been working consistently before the War, the move of white, middle class women to the workforce provided a reminder of women's abilities outside of the domestic sphere. Programs of the early years of television, most of which originated in radio, implicitly harkened to women's search for opportunities outside of the home or disrupted the image of women as simply wives and mothers. Continuing the thread of dissatisfaction came images of women with magical abilities, literally. The

1970s brought forth a stark array of new programming and representative tropes. The surge of protests challenging white, middle class, patriarchal authority in the forms of Women's Liberation, Civil Rights, and Gay/Liberation informed the production of sitcoms, most notably those created by Norman Lear. Shifts in practices of representation and the ability of the sitcom to incorporate explicit references to political ideology changed the space of television. When in the 1980s, feminist oriented programs like *The Golden Girls* (1985-92), *Roseanne*, and *Murphy Brown* (1988-98) aired and became popular, television once again became injected with politics, particularly in the conservative climate brought by Reaganites and the growing strength of the religious right.. Shows created by women were rare, though there were programs featuring female characters as independent, workingwomen, who desperately wanted to settle down and have a family.

This brief outline of cultural and televisual eras hopefully highlights the complicated nature of television's relationship to culture and women's positions in both. There are overlaps and disconnects. There are complications and contradictions. There is resistance and conformity. Yet, the fact remains that women's relationship to cultural formation through their production of comedic texts is important in understanding the contemporary comedic climate.

If comedy comes from experience, cultural contexts help establish the type of work and issues coming from and being explored by women within culture industries. Providing an historical overview helps situate contemporary television through the developments made in women's representation pre-, during, and post-second wave feminism. Leaving that history unacknowledged ignores the changes that have indeed

taken course over the years and have allowed for a more open industry. Though still relatively masculine in makeup, the television industry has undergone several shifts and overhauls throughout the years that have provided opportunities for women in addition to those breaks women have made for themselves that have helped others.

Chapter three examines women on network television. Network television is the most accessible of programming, with channels like NBC, CBS, ABC are aimed toward the largest and broadest audience demographic. The American sitcom also was developed on these channels, developing its own aesthetics as a serialized comedy format with its own conventions and audience expectations. *30 Rock* and *Parks and Recreation* have been successful for NBC, which in the 1980s and 1990s branded itself as a comedy network with its “Must See Television” block of sitcoms. Fey and Poehler have become widely regarded for their comedic abilities and their place as accessible feminist icons through their work on television. Through their programs’ narrative arcs, characters, and public image Fey and Poehler have opened up discussions about women’s roles and expectations when dealing with working and personal relationships.

Unlike network, cable, especially subscription cable has leeway when it comes to representation. Sex and violence are especially represented. Networks like HBO, Showtime, and Starz operate based on a fee-based system, programming does not have to conform to the same standards as a commercialized service. The opening of content has allowed for more nuanced narratives with comparisons to film. Subscription networks used the cinematic value to underscore their difference from network television, promising shows that challenge audience’s expectations. Diablo Cody and Lena Dunham have used the format of subscription cable to their advantage, which is the subject of the

fourth chapter. Coming from the worlds of film, both created programs, *United States of Tara* (2009 – 11) and *Girls* (2012 -) respectively, which not only have provided challenging views of family and womanhood, but have used the sitcom model to launch their critique.

Finally, the conclusion reviews some of the issues explored within this study and additionally expands on some of what is largely not discussed by those television critics and scholars interested in “women and comedy.” Women of color and women of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities are virtually ignored within the umbrella topic of “women and comedy.” Usually the critics expound upon the lives and works of straight, white, middle class women. The lack of women within media coverage points to larger cultural issues, such as the assumption of whiteness and heteronormativity as norms that dictate the type of content making its way onto television. Additionally of note, is the lack of women of color in the industry. There are a few notable showrunners like Shonda Rhimes who created and wrote *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005 -), and *Scandal* (2012 -). Issa Rae also has been tapped to bring her popular web series *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* to network television. Women of color more often than not are included within the racial umbrella of television representation more so than that of gender and sexuality, pointing towards television’s continued reliance on types and simplistic understanding intersectionality.

Television studies exists within a state of fluctuation as industrial shifts uproot the ways in which television operates and even how we as an audience watch or experience programs. Despite its relative youth as a medium, television has undergone overhauls. Expansion of channels, changes in ownership, challenges over content have affected the

ways in which audiences view television as an object. Some changes are due in part to the desire for more and better representation. This dissertation is an exploration of those cracks, which were made by female comedy writers to provide insight into women's daily lives and experiences within American contexts. While by no means all-inclusive, women working in contemporary television continue to try and negotiate wider openings for women's content on the screen and battle against the saturation of male-centric narratives.

CHAPTER 1: WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH WOMEN AND COMEDY?

In U.S. culture, there is a general perception that women are not funny. Various types of comedians, from stand-ups to actresses have been posed questions concerning the stereotype. In 2007, Christopher Hitchens wrote his infamous “Why Women Aren’t Funny” article for *Vanity Fair*, in which he patiently detailed the reasons why women’s humor had not achieved the same level of men’s; it was not as biologically necessary. Women were to choose mates, not flounce their feathers (4). In response, *Vanity Fair* published an issue the next year entitled “Who Says Women Aren’t Funny?” The cover featured Amy Poehler, Tina Fey, and Sarah Silverman draped in white gossamer, olive branches in their hair, like contemporary muses. The cover article, a direct address written by Alessandra Stanley in return to Hitchens’s piece, highlighted the work of many female comedians and their take on the criticism they faced as funny women. According to Stanley, there are not incentives for women to be comical and at times women are socially punished for their humor (par. 8). Germaine Greer made similar comments in 2009 later for *The Guardian* regarding men’s superiority in the field of comedy. Her rationale did not involve biological imperatives; instead, Greer credited the lack of opportunities for women to develop their sense of humor as they are more often encouraged to be passive and demure. Neither personality lends well to comedy. Greer points out

Comedy is learned; you get better as you go along. Men who emerge as professional comedians grow up within a dense masculine culture of joke-making and have been honing their skills ever since they started school.

Girls have nothing similar of their own and are not invited to horn in on the guys' act. (par. 6).

Despite the number of women available to act as counterpoints, perceptions linger about women's lack of comedic prowess in comparison to their male counterparts. In spite of misogyny and masculine context, women continue to push past and through gendered comedic lines. In doing so, they engage in transgressive actions through parody and satire of patriarchal ideals and reworkings of masculine gazes and narratives.

All three writers mentioned above note the low number of women performing comedy, either as part of a natural order or as a ramification of patriarchal cultural norms. Women who cross those lines of propriety, who go against norms dictating comedy is "not for women," are then regarded as exemptions to the cultural assumption that women lack humor. Women taking on the roles of comedians can be considered a form of transgression. Defined by Chris Jenks, transgression is going

[...] beyond the bounds or limits set by a commandment or law or convention, it is to violate or infringe. But to transgress is also more than this, it is to announce and even laudate the commandment, the law or the convention. (2)

There can be no transgression without declaring boundaries. Pushing the accepted lines of what is appropriate and expected of women can even include the act of writing, performing, and critiquing. In the documentary *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*, Joan Rivers describes consequences for her early offenses as a comedian. She accounts

The last line of my original act was: 'This business is all about casting couches. I just want you to know my name is Joan Rivers and I put out'.

And you would hear the audience...such a sweet, silly line from a girl twenty-eight years old, you know, dressed up to look nice...the audience...half of them laughed. Jack Lemmon saw me and walked out.

Said 'that's disgusting.' So for my time I was very shocking. (Stern, 2010)

Openly discussing women's sexuality in the mid-1960s would no doubt be shocking, but also implicit within the joke is the victimization of women who are often subjected to harassment and sexual coercion to get ahead in the workplace. The audience understands the power structure described. The half who laugh approve of Rivers's glibness and sexual ownership, whereas the others recognize and disapprove with 'disgust' at Rivers's openness. Another memory from Rivers consists of her being told by her manager that a joke concerning abortion was entering murky cultural territory and that women should not discuss such topics. Even in a contemporary interview, Rivers appears frustrated at the idea exclaiming, "That's exactly what we should be talking about!"

Rivers's anecdote suggests comedy as a type of exposure. Through comedy, Rivers can bring to light topics otherwise improper and contained. Both jokes remind audiences that in spite of these topics' containment, sexual harassment and abortions are a reality. Moreover, through jokes, Rivers subverts expectations, at least for the period and perhaps even today. Brash announcements are aggressive in nature because they force audiences to reflect and examine their ethics and perception of how culture operates. In the case of Rivers, audience members were forced to confront the fact that women face sexual discrimination and often face sexually compromising situations. In this way, women's humor is a dare directed at audiences to take on women's perceptions, and consider gender differences as it relates to lived experiences.

This does not necessarily mean all comedic women are intentionally and politically transgressive, attempting to dismantle patriarchal authority. Their presence, in general, is a means of pushing the boundaries dictating whether women can be funny. Despite an increasing amount of work on women and the media, a text that focuses on women and comedy is lacking, particularly one that emphasizes women's use of comedy as a tool and their agency in making jokes.

Finding Humor

The nature of humor is complicated. It is easy to declare something as humorous, but when attempting to understand why it is such, the ability to create definitions and explanations can become thorny. Harry Levin discusses the history of comedy in *Playboys and Killjoys: An Essay on the Theory and Practice*. Levin breaks down the history of humor theory. Utilizing literary analysis to elucidate on the historical perceptions of comedy and its usage within literary texts, he attempts to define comedy and its transitions throughout the years. One of the most useful aspects of his work is the relationship between tragedy and comedy. The line between both is thin, with those like Charlie Chaplin defining comedy as "life viewed from a distance; tragedy, life in a close-up" (9). With only difference being proximity to life, the fact that both tragedy and comedy are working with similar issues pinpoints the cultural influences at play. Both drama and comedy writing and performance are working with the same issues of identity within culture, just utilizing a different style of delivery. Historicizing comedy allows to legitimizing the genre as a useful form that just does as much as tragedy can to illustrate and comment on cultural issues and problems. This legitimation is important as it demonstrates the significance of a de-prioritized body of work; however, Levin's

selections are the more popular works, hence male figures who have ‘made’ comedy. This can be considered a reflection of the prioritization of men’s work over women’s over the course of literary history.

It is not necessary to deconstruct a joke, analyze its various parts and attempt to derive an explanation. This makes the process all the less fun. The importance of the joke lies in what exactly the joke is working with and the purpose on behalf of the teller or performer(s) of it being told. In terms of understanding the function of a joke, it is necessary to return to why humor is relative, relevant, and how it works within national contexts. Sigmund Freud’s *The Joke and Their Relation to the Unconscious* is a good starting point to understanding how humor works.

Freud’s work with jokes illustrates the importance of the joke within culture. The joke is never superfluous, always meaningful in that it unearths or walks the line between acceptable and unacceptable topics of conversation. Freud demonstrates the significance of jokes, emphasizing their value as a form of release or escape from the power structures dictating behavior. Besides the importance and usefulness of Freud in academic scholarship, the significance of this particular text is that it firstly, explores the nature of everyday interactions through something as basic as the joke. Secondly, Freud not only discusses the structure of the joke, but also does so in order to explain reasons why people find humor in certain wordplays, jokes, or situations. This emphasis on the why question situates comedy as a subjective experience, one defined by other considerations. Not surprisingly, women play little role in this work, unless as the subject or object of a joke.

In the introduction of *On Humour*, Simon Critchley does not describe the links between comedy and tragedy, but the abyss in between. He contends

We might say that humour is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke, between expectation and actuality. Humour defeats our expectations by producing a novel actuality, by changing the situation in which we find ourselves. (1)

Comedy, then, is about subverting expectations. It is about knowingly leading the listener one way and redirecting their attention. Critchley continues saying “The comic world is not simply ‘die verkehrte Welt,’ the inverted or upside-down world of philosophy, but rather the world with its causal chains broken, its social practices turned inside out, and common sense rationality left in tatters” (1). Jokes momentarily upset social orders through making explicit accepted cultural boundaries. It is this break that causes Regina Barreca to claim women with a sense of humor are dangerous, because they expose the power dynamics maintaining patriarchal authority. She posits “So when women look at those in power, or at least those institutions we were taught to revere, and laugh. In this way women’s comedy is more “dangerous” than men’s, because it challenges authority by refusing to take it seriously” (2). Women’s jokes have the capability of baring lines as well as challenging the rationale for maintaining gendered boundaries.

The way jokes works, however, is dependent on context and as Levin and Freud demonstrate, that context is often masculine. The teller and receiver of the joke must be on the same page in terms of understanding what the joke is and why it is funny. The ability to make a joke, however, requires more knowledge and wit to make the construction work, whereas the receiver simply needs the knowledge to “get it”. This

dynamic between teller and receiver is explored by Freud, but the importance or function of the humor lies in Andy Medhurst's *A National Joke*.

Medhurst connects the joke to cultural identity, with the understanding that humor is both inclusive and exclusive. While humor can be used to unite individuals, this connection is dependent on the mutual understanding of the joke's context. *A National Joke* illustrates the ways in which humor is based in parts, within a national context. He contends comedy is a "brief embrace in a threatening world, a moment of unity in a lifetime of fissures a haven against insecurity, a refuge from dissolution, a point of wholeness in a maelstrom of fragmentation, a chance to affirm that you exist and that you matter" (19). Humor is a way to bring together audiences under an umbrella of laughter. A variety of identities may exist within a movie theatre or comedy club, but the plurality in laughter helps create moments of solidarity. This embrace can also turn less welcoming if those in the audience find themselves excluded from such moments; for example, finding themselves as the "butts" of jokes or simply not understanding the joke. As much as comedy can bridge gaps, it can also be used as a means to reaffirm social orders.

Medhurst does not deconstruct power relationships specifically, but does account for certain situations where discomfort comes from jokes that reflect a particular power dynamic. In his account of a joke told to him in a barroom setting, he reveals the power of jokes told from the unconscious. In casual conversation, a simple joke was told indicting interracial relationships, misogyny, and homophobia. Medhurst discusses what Stuart Hall considered, "the invitation to belong" and the teller's assumption Medhurst would find humor in the joke. Medhurst discusses his own feelings of exclusion as an

“anxious-white-liberal and a gay man with a long-term stake in issues of sexual politics” (23). Jokes containing racist, homophobic, and misogynistic undertones highlight both ideology and the politics of who can and cannot tell jokes, who can and cannot enjoy those jokes, and the ideologies and politics that inherently lie in those jokes.

Distinguishing who can tell these jokes and who are usually the “butt” of such jokes demonstrates just how the simple act of telling a joke can illustrate the power relationships that exist within culture. The pleasure in comedy is central to the idea of how jokes fit in to a particular context, especially if the joke is dependent on the relationships of the individuals to the overall cultural context, both being aware of why the joke is going against the conventions set forth by Freud. Comedy is able to reflect back the real world as opposed to the idealized version, remind us of our debasement, and find pleasure in the abject. The ability of women to take hold of such a powerful device upsets power relationships. Women are not supposed to play in filth and debasement. Thwarting expectations by talking about sexual encounters, indulging in toilet humor, and waxing on about periods, takes women down from objectified pedestals. Women taking on the position of tellers throw the standards and expectations back onto patriarchy, reversing and criticizing societal roles and expectations.

Women and Humor

Neither Freud nor Andy Medhurst discusses, specifically, the role of women and comedy. Medhurst considers representations of sexuality with a minor focus on women, but women continue to be on the sidelines even within his fairly inclusive text. The issue of women and humor has been handled from a variety of academic angles. The *Journal of Pragmatics*, for example, published a special edition focused directly on gender and

comedy. It is acknowledged, through the publishing of such an issue, and the introduction that “there has been a striking marginalization of women in all fields of humor, from restricting female humorous practices to devaluing and ignoring them, to reproducing the stereotype that women ‘do not get the joke’” (1). The articles included follow suit, discussing the roles women play within interpersonal communications, both amongst women and men.

In “Gender and Humor: The State of Art,” Helga Kotthoff admits to the alterations in the amount of humorous activity amongst women, as well as the changes in academic pursuits to further explore the differing relationships men and women have with humor (6). In this admittance are the contentions that women are marginalized and their humor controlled. Kotthoff discusses humor in four ways: status, aggressivity, social alignment, and body politics. This model for understanding the functions of comedy within groups, better explains the power dynamics inherent in comedy and opens up possibilities for studying the functions of women’s comedy at a professional level. Kotthoff’s findings support Martin D. Lampert’s and Susan Ervin-Tripp’s study concerning differences in jokes made between men and women, both within same and opposite sex groups. “Risky Laughter: Teasing and Self-Directed Joking Among Male and Female Friends,” provides actual conversations demonstrating differences in joke telling, what types of joking are utilized by men and women, and how interactions shift when placed in different gendered contexts. They found, for example, women did less teasing in all female groupings and teased more in mixed groups, focusing remarks on men within the group. The opposite was true for men, who teased more in all male groups and used self-deprecation when women joked about them (62). Lampert and Ervin-Tripp

reason changes in behavior are indicative of the power relationship existing between men and women. The authors also deduce that the styles of humor are similar to social conventions dictated at an early age of young boys and girls teasing each other. Girls, however, continue to be discouraged against aggression while boys, in comparison, are conditioned to be aggressive but to be gentler on girls (62).

If the gendered power dynamic works within social conversations, it can be assumed similar issues arise within the entertainment industrial setting. The focus on women within these pieces emphasizes their marginalization. The authors' close analyses and reliance on social scientific methods aid to firstly acknowledge the fact that women use humor and secondly reveals how they use it. They discuss aspects of women negotiating their humor within groups and doing so in order to fit into certain expectations. The ways in which men and women employ humor at a basic level connects cultural context with the power of comedy. Men and women's negotiations with when, where, and how they perform within these social situations also links to power. Women changing their style of comedy when amongst men betrays their upbringing within a culture to align themselves with patriarchal standards. Men's belief they should take it easy on women, because women are not able to keep up or are too sensitive to handle the same teasing done amongst men, reveals the power at hand when comedy is involved.

Becoming a professional comedian as a woman, then, transgresses these boundaries between gender expectations. Trespassing expectations and refusing to play to type simply by investing themselves in comedy, women performing comedy professionally goes beyond women in everyday settings enacting an aggressive type of humor in discussions, as professionals make themselves a public face or a focal point.

Turning to a more philosophical approach, John Limon has described the inward reflection of comedians as abjection. Particularly for those along the margins, self-deprecation becomes a form of abjection, so that in Limon's conception comedy is the attempt to rid the undesirable, in this case marginalized identities (4). He continues "To 'stand up' abjection is simultaneously to erect it and miss one's date with it: comedy is a way of avowing and disavowing abjection" (4). Gaps and dissolution, much like Critchley's position, in jokes assert that which is abject (gender, sexuality, race, for example), force the audience to acknowledge the comedian's abject position and challenge listeners by ridiculing themselves and in doing so the ideologies attached to abject identities. Joking is aggressive, but the act of self-deprecation helps minimize the challenging nature of the joke. Limon also discusses the way women in particular present themselves in ways to appear less hostile. Using Ellen Degeneres and Paula Poundstone as examples, he discusses how they enact masculinity through costume (dressing in suits) while at the same time enacting girlishness to diminish the power of their speech. Limon states "...the apparently unwitting revelation of female blather is clothing for the concealed weapon, the masculine punch" (110).

The concept of masked challenger is further asserted in Allison Oddey's *Performing Women*. Oddey interviews a series of women who work with comedy and drama in theatrical and media forms. Rather than shying away from comedy to allow men have all the fun, they take the stage and comment in many ways on their marginality, which inherently takes on patriarchal power structures. In the handful of interviews with women who do comedy like Jo Brand, Meera Syal, Jane Horrocks, and Dawn French, all discussed the relationship between performance and gender. Brand, whose standup

directly tackles her identity as an overweight, British woman, noted the alarming lack of women in comedy and how they negotiated their presence within the masculine world (115-116). Likewise, Dawn French explicated on the word “strumpet” as it is linked to women and especially comedy performers. All of their interviews highlighted the importance of comedy in making meaning and asserting a type of identity that does not fit within the ideals set forth by hegemonic codes of conduct.

Work interested in comedy’s public performance is continued in Joanne R. Gilbert’s *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*. She contends, “because public comic performance historically has been dominated by males, female comics are often perceived as threatening by audiences, club owners, and even their male comic colleagues” (xiv). Gilbert considers the relationship between humor and gender in terms that better identify ways in which humor is important to and for marginalized groups, specifically women.

Much like the way Kotthoff categorizes the types of comedy utilized in casual conversations, Gilbert categorizes professional performances in terms of types, labeling them the kid, bawd, bitch, whiner, and reporter (96). Each persona demonstrates a particular identity, a means of both commenting and performing the identities of women. The sexualized “kid” offers the feminine perspective in a nonthreatening way, desexualized with a playful curiosity, whereas the “bawd” brashly flaunts her sexuality, openly discussing sex in a manner that most would find unbecoming. Unlike friendly teasing discussed by Lampert and Ervin-Tripp, the “bitch” is far more aggressive in discussing men while the “whiner” utilizes a self-deprecating humor approach for such hot button topics. Talking about the positions of female comedians in this way

illustrates positions taken in order to discuss the marginal roles of women onstage. Gilbert further discusses the political implications of these aspects of performance, of performing marginality, in ways that gives voice to the women performing and the audience listening. Both Oddey's and Gilbert's text exemplify the threatening position women have when they take on comedy at a professional level. Men are provided certain flexibility in maintaining the power associated with joke telling. Women, on the other hand, face far more scrutiny if unable to perform.

Women having to take on certain performative roles to help characterize the comedian in order for them to speak more freely, marks another act of negotiating. Aware of their position, identities are forged in order to better relay their message to the viewer. Male comedians often adopt a persona, as well, but they are also able to choose those more in line with their actual identity. Women's overall message may not be overtly political, as Gilbert contends, but the fact that these women are bringing up issues like body image, sex, interpersonal relationships and the difficulties women face within society, make their comedy inherently political. The very nature of women writing, as Helene Cixous writes in "The Laugh of the Medusa," can be considered an act of women regaining power by taking the phallic pen away from their male counterparts. Considering the rules directed toward women and the types of comedy employed as compared to men, in the act of actually performing comedy, the nature of transgression is made even more apparent. Taking the phallic pen back is also a theme that appears in Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which is Not One*, where she asks "Isn't laughter the first form of liberation from a secular oppression? Isn't the phallic tantamount to the seriousness of meaning? Perhaps woman, and the sexual relation, transcend it "first" in laughter?"

(163). These are fairly simple tasks, the act of writing, the act of laughing, or finding humor. Yet, within patriarchal contexts even these simple acts can constitute actions that go against those within power, can be perceived as threatening to the status quo, and put women who take on these positions subject to criticism.

The linking of comedy to freedom seeking is the main subject of Kathleen Rowe's incredibly engaging discussion of gender and comedy in *The Unruly Woman*, which ties social humor found with those who take on the comedic profession. Heavily dependent on the work of Irigaray, as well as philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, Rowe discusses women's political use of humor. Her focus is specifically on unruliness, which emphasizes the nature of a transgressive role taken on by women. The nature of the carnivalesque as a means of revelling in performances that challenge hierarchies, Rowe demonstrates, is rich with possibilities in discussing female comedians. Rowe's introduction accounts for the rules set forth for girls and women, how the unruly woman is used as a benchmark for regulating bad behavior, and how women comedians being unruly through comedy provides examples of new roles being formed (4-5). Rowe's text also bridges the gap between social and professional humor, as discussed before, and brings these political implications of humor to both film and television.

Funny Women Boxed In

The inclusion of media within this discourse of female representation, the political implications, and performances has been an ongoing pursuit for feminist scholars. Several of those on the forefront of television studies have focused on the relationships women have with television programming, with an interest primarily in melodramas or soap operas. Ian Ang's work with those watching *Dallas* and Charlotte Brunsdon's work

on representation in *Eastenders* are hallmarks within television studies. Yet, in comparison to the work scholars have done on television, the aspect of representation of women in comedy is still fairly thin, though admittedly growing. Most works focus on the aspect of representation and workings of identity as they play out on the screen.

The nature of identity and television has played a major part of the academic discourse centered on the medium. Raymond Williams's *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* is an essential text in understanding the importance of representation as seen on television. Fascinated with the medium, Williams discusses the placement of television within the culture, discussing it not simply as a piece of furniture, but as tool. The importance of Williams's scholarship lies in where he places television. He situates television as a tool, a reflection, and as a technological outcome of various social and political needs. Television is, therefore, inextricably linked to its cultural context and remains flexible as an apparatus.

In looking more in depth at representation, it is necessary to understand the cultural context, but also to understand the interaction between what is happening outside of the box and within the box, how they are communicating and informing each other. John Hartley's and John Fiske's *Reading Television*, helps usher television studies into academic discourse as they credit the television with being a newfound bard. The purpose of television, as seen by Hartley and Fiske, is to function as a storyteller, one that helps tell the stories bringing audiences together under one cultural umbrella. This conception of television as bard also opens up questions of what is then significant within a culture, of which stories are more privileged, and which themes are repeated.

In detangling meanings exchanged between producers and consumers, Stuart Hall in “Encoding/Decoding,” explains the negotiation that takes place between producers of television programs and consumers. While producers structure programs around certain agendas, commercial or government, the viewer’s readings of the messages communicated may differ (1). While Hall contends consumers often receive and accept the producer’s intended message, there is still flexibility in terms of interpretation and acceptance. Viewers experiences/beliefs may conflict with those of the producers and lead to readings that go against the grain. Though women watch television shows that represent women as sexual objects or nagging housewives, there are different ways in which they can interpret or accept these messages. While some may consider these representations models, others may decide these depictions of women based on class, race/ethnicity, education, sexuality, are not representative of their lived experiences. When most of these programs are either structured by or around men and masculine ideals, women working *within* the industry mark an opportunity to make shows more representative.

Representation is the point where feminist television criticism has taken hold. *Channels of Discourse* provides models for how television can be discussed in theoretical terms. E. Ann Kaplan’s chapter accounts some of the major influences for feminist criticism and television. Her essay offers avenues of scholarship that are quite useful for this study, like the nature of power, and comedy being a form of empowerment. Kaplan’s examples from popular culture of the 1980s might be dated, but there is still value in her work, especially as it relates to representation and the ways in which representation has and can be explored. Soap operas and music videos utilize different structures and means

of representation that only somewhat overlap with comedy. In fact, it is not rare for women to be in soap operas, as melodramas have been associated with women since their popularity in film during the studio era; in addition, women in music, while having their own gendered difficulties, are not a rarity.

There are those who look toward history to find examples of women using comedy or the political implications of comedy within a past where women were far more restricted. Patricia Mellencamp's work with early 1950s sitcoms utilizes psychoanalysis in order to understand how women, despite their marginalized positions, can still evoke the anxiety entailed in being woman, despite the limitations of time and cultural restrictions. She asserts comedy functions as a type of release of anxiety felt by those highly controlled by cultural expectations and who search for the release that domestic comedy can provide. Utilizing the work of Deleuze and Guattari, Mellencamp compares jokes to secrets. Reiterating Medhurst, Mellencamp notes the ability of the joke to speak to that which cannot be openly said. The mutual appreciation of that secret provides the sense of exaltation between teller and listener.

If television is at once a reflection of culture, as well as a maker of meaning, then the roles of women are defined and reinforced through viewership. Comedy, being a form that seeks to destabilize meanings and say what is unexpected, reworks these expectations. The uncertainty ushered in by comedic performances expresses the aspect of identity construction, as emphasized by many feminists under the wing of Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble* is an exploration of how those meanings and definitions are formed, what they mean, and how gender is construction, maintained through patriarchal power structures. In taking on personas of different types of women as professional

comedians or understanding expectations of women to the point where communication is restricted emphasizes the importance of breaking away from fixed identities. The two types of performances, however, cannot be conflated. Whereas the comedian creates a persona, Butler taking a similar position as elucidated in Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Every Day Life*, asserts that there are certain rules that are followed by those who understand the implications and consequences of not adhering to cultural expectations.

This description of everyday performances reflects on the positions of women within certain cultural contexts and the negotiations that take place to belong. The transgression of these boundaries, between inclusion and exclusion, are understood though not necessarily written. Foucault's work with power, authority, and transgression helps to explain how the simple act of women participating within the masculine field of comedy can be considered a type of transgression. He defines transgression as that which

incessantly crosses and recrosses a line that closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable. But this play is considerably more complex: these elements are situated in an uncertain context, in certainties that are immediately upset so that thought is ineffectual as soon as it attempts to seize them. (445)

In returning to the joke made by Joan Rivers concerning casting couches, the joke was a flash of deeper meaning that lasted for a second, but had lasting impression. The joke was one line, but was able to cause the audience to feel uncomfortable, some even to the point of leaving the room. It was clear that Rivers crossed a line and this is something all

comedians do through humor. This need to constantly work and rework stereotypes and keep pushing boundaries helps relay the importance of women's continual efforts to work within the field. To be labeled as a transgressor does not imply a violent act nor a necessarily purposeful act in the sense of actively thinking of each routine as an activist motion.

If, as Cixous, argued, writing itself is a transgressive act, then performing would be pushing that boundary even further. The significance of voice and body expressing political ideas in front of an audience is a powerful image. Television, itself, can be considered an apparatus, both as a tool on behalf of a certain organization, be it corporate or government, as well as a political tool to enact changes within larger systems. This tension over power and transgressions enacted to cross these unspoken, undefined lines and legitimize those border crossings, exemplifies Foucaultian tension and power struggle.

One of the difficulties, however, in discussing comedy, transgression, and power is the nature of the medium in which sitcoms exist. The carnival and carnivalesque, according to Chris Jenks, takes place along the periphery. The reason the world can be represented as topsy-turvy is its disconnection from and parody of the established order (162-3). Television hardly exists along the margins, as 114.7 million households in the United States contain television sets (Fox, par. 2). Secondly, television is an industry. Programs on networks only draw audiences in order to further their commercial purpose. The fact that comedy programs exist within a commercialized space, financially supported by advertising and approved by network executives, allows for easy dismissal of sitcoms offering a carnivalesque moment for audiences.

There are few venues for humor, however, which do not operate within an industrial context. Stand-up allows for more individual freedom, but there remain gatekeepers determining others' success. Likewise, club promoters choose comedians who will help sell tickets, drinks, and build the club's reputation. That frame should not delegitimize the experience comedians have in deconstructing/reconstructing jokes, assembling the flow of their set list, and developing their performance. The desire to make jokes and push boundaries does not stop once comedians begin writing for television. Instead, writers must work within stricter boundaries. Not only are comedians pushing cultural norms, but also what is representable on television. Writers are not restricted necessarily in cultural critique, but in the actual content depending on the network (the difference, for example, between programming on NBC and HBO).

Regina Barreca's *They Used to Call Me Snow White...but I Drifted* provides a less academic, but useful understanding of women's relationship to humor. It is her assertion women use humor to dissipate pain associated with their everyday lives (22). It is for this reason she says the self-deprecatory joke is most often the type of joke women make, a point reaffirmed by the social experiments described above. The insular nature of the self-deprecation results in women's humor more often than not acting as a form of self-aggression. Rather than directing humor toward the entities that promote and maintain standards of beauty, for example, women direct snarky comments at themselves. Rather than use humor offensively, women use it more defensively.

Using humor more aggressively denotes power. Doing so can redirect a conversation, call into question certain ideas or perceived truths, or be used to verbally deconstruct threads of power. Bakhtin, once again, comes into play, as the nature of the

carnavalesque as a political force allows for further understanding of the fear of women gaining equal footing in the sphere of comedy television. As evidenced by the comments made by Aronsohn quoted in the introduction (vaginal saturation) women's bodies and speech remain contained on television, at least in how they are referred to and or discussed. Aronsohn's *Two and a Half Men* does not shy away from making jokes about vaginas. In "For the Sake of the Child," for example, Alan (Jon Cryer) and Charlie (Charlie Sheen) call each other vaginas as derogatory insults. *The Big Bang Theory* (also co-created by Aronsohn) utilizes jokes about women to dismiss them. There are several episodes involving jokes about Penny's (Kaley Cuoco) period, which provides rationale for why she is behaving irrationally according to main character, Sheldon (Jim Parsons). Though arguably the show frames Sheldon as an out of touch scientist, the jokes remain centered on women's uncontrollable bodies and unruly vaginas.

Shows with women actually referring to their bodies provide a different lens. Rather than referring to their vaginas as a part, with the implication they are disgusting, there are slightly more complicated discourses circulating in comedy shows where women are the joke tellers rather than merely the objects of the joke. In *30 Rock*'s "Up All Night," Jenna Maroney (Jane Krakowski) mentions her participation in "Vagina Day," a charity event involving women who have never been asked to perform in the Vagina Monologues. She repeats part of her monologue: "My vagina is a convenience store. Clean and reliable. And closed on Christmas." Despite a reference to cleanliness, the joke is not as simple as making a joke about the vagina itself (though that is certainly there). The joke instead is about the ways vaginas are discussed, even in celebratory terms. The use of the Vagina Monologues, a play by Eve Ensler which is heavily

performed across the United States, adds another layer to the joke. While “Vagina Day” seems like a ludicrous side project, it also points to the fact there are few places wherein women’s bodies can be openly discussed. Eve Ensler’s is the elite, because it is one of the few popular projects that does open up honest conversations about women’s bodies, sexuality, and pleasure. The *30 Rock* joke is therefore not about women, but rather about the ways women’s bodies are framed in popular media and discourse. The dig is not at Maroney (except her narcissism), but at the sources of vaginal discourse.

You Don’t Have to Laugh

Upon receiving an award from *Glamour’s Women of the Year* in 2009, Amy Poehler gave the advice “girls, if boys say something not funny, you don’t have to laugh” (*Glamour Magazine*). Poehler’s suggestion received laughter and applause from the audience, in a mutual form of understanding that expectations dictate women laugh at men’s jokes regardless of whether those jokes are actually funny. This is part of the power struggle discussed above – where women are encouraged to have a sense of humor, but not be funny. Comedians in the program *Girls Who Do Comedy*, a special hosted by comedian Dawn French featuring both British and American comedians, reiterate this sentiment. All discuss how their humor was cultivated, their experiences as performers, and the negotiations made as funny women. French makes a point to ask each about the relationship between attraction and humor, with most respondents claiming that while they gained attention were not thought of as attractive.

If, in media, women are the objects of the masculine gaze, funny women have little place within mainstream venues. Because the media industries have provided few narratives which counteract objectified women, audiences do not have access to various

representations of women's lives or abilities. Rather, women remain for the most part, either the butts of jokes or the moral arbiter who counters funny men's bad behavior. Actress Anna Faris recently lamented to *The New Yorker* the industry's skepticism of funny women. She stated studios insist comedic women be beautiful, likeable, and only mildly comical (52-55). The pressure on women to fit societal standards of beauty are more important than their ability to be comical, which keeps many from obtaining positions within television. Tina Fey notes in an interview with Maureen Dowd for *Vanity Fair* that she was not considered to be on the air on *Saturday Night Live* until after a dramatic weight loss (Dowd, 3). Rachel Dratch discusses in her memoir the character types often sent to her, all of which are older, witch-like characters, or as she classifies "the unfuckables" (5). The message put forth by industry practices is that women's comedy must be restricted and be dependent on women's appearances and objectification.

As evidenced through the works cited above, humor is flexible both in delivery and interpretation. It is about translating sharable experiences and small traumas. Embarrassment, awkwardness, isolation, rejection are just a few of the staples of comedic jokes. They are also feelings without gender bias. Their roots and constructs may differ along gendered lines, but for the most part, they are experiences and feelings that have the potential to transcend identity categories.

Women's marginalization from sharing these experiences within the field of comedy points to larger issues in American culture concerning women's absence from modes of media production, the lack of women's narratives in media, and the hesitancy of executives (and perhaps audiences) to take on women's perspectives. Considering the

target demographic for most popular media are adolescent men, who are confronted with images of women as either as sexual objects or nurturing maternal figures, the insertion of varying viewpoints altering from the predominant gaze and meaning, struggle to attract audiences.

Transgressions, in form and content, range within the sitcom format. Women have played significant roles in pushing the boundaries of a format often thought traditional and at times stale. However, women helped establish the successful framework, then transcended the form from wasteland fodder to quality television in the 1970s, and then again in the new millennium. In terms of what can be discussed and how – women and women's narratives have transgressed discursive boundaries surrounding bodies, sex, abortion, labor, and gender roles. Only a handful of women like Roseanne have unabashedly challenged executives and audiences, others have more covertly negotiated these gendered spaces. The female authors discussed in the following pages have incorporated feminist challenges within their work, reworked representational strategies for female characters, and have provided means for female audience members to feel empowered and represented.

CHAPTER 2: BREAKING INTO THE BOYS' CLUB

Television came to age in post-World War II America, where the state of gender norms were in flux. During the War, women were told in order to support American troops they had to enter the workforce, with many taking on positions in factories, offices, and even entertainment. Scholars have also referred to this period as post-feminist, when in-between the suffragette and women's liberations movements, political activism moved slowly and rhetoric regarding women as wives and mothers predominated (Genz and Brabon, 10). With women gaining status and liberation through financial independence, the idea of returning home took convincing. Television helped establish gender norms positioning men as breadwinners and women as domestic caregivers. Spigel writes in *Welcome to the Dreamhouse* of television's role in sculpting "Suburban America"(31-2). On one hand, television was able to bridge gaps between the suburbs and cities from which many families moved. On the other, it transmitted more hegemonic ideologies as universal – representations of the family were rather singular as a majority focused on white, middle class, nuclear families.

Television upon its release was also gendered. Placed with the feminized domestic sphere, it quickly became synonymous with women; however, it was noted as bridging the gap between the masculinized public spheres and feminized private spaces. In some ways it allowed women into the public through representation. It also acted as a convenient reason to keep women within the home, as it acted as enough access to the public without needing to be physically present within them (48). The role of television in constructing and encouraging women to adopt the model of wife and mother was instrumental in developing the iconic mothers-in-pearls image that would become

synonymous with the sitcom. Comedies especially, which at the time were mostly domestic sitcoms featuring married couples and nuclear families, helped cement stereotypes commonly referred to in contemporary popular culture. Ironically, those who helped form those images were women who created or contributed to media empires.

Women played wives and mothers in other forms of entertainment like film and radio. Gertrude Berg, who developed and wrote her own material, established one of the more iconic maternal roles. Molly Goldberg as a character became an institution within radio and Berg a national sensation. Berg created one of the first sitcoms, *The Goldbergs* for radio in 1929, one month after the Stock Market Crash. The Goldbergs were a Jewish immigrant family living in New York's Bronx borough. Narratives followed the family's daily life, especially focused on Molly, the matriarch of the family, whose "old world" values were frequently challenged by American culture. The show grew quickly in popularity, with Goldberg becoming a mother to the nation (Smith Jr. 35). It is this image that also led to a media empire of products like cookbooks and various household items produced or sanctioned by "Molly" herself. Berg became the second richest woman in the United States behind First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt (*Yoo-Hoo*).

Despite the success of Berg's career, she also made sure to maintain a rhetorical balancing act of representation. On one hand, she was financially successful and in control over her product. Berg was not a woman who easily bowed under institutional pressures. When it came to entering television, she faced a fight to adapt her program. None of the executives would meet with the star who had already proved her marketability with audiences. Berg's annoyance at being refused led her to contact president of CBS, William Paley, directly. While her own account of the events does not

initially sound strictly confrontational, her refusal to be cast aside by executives and her ability to contact network president William S. Paley indicates her power position within the industry, as does the willingness of Paley to acquiesce her demands for an audition. With only the assurance that the program's transition into television "might be a flop on TV - or might be great," (Berg, 235) the not so subtle reminder Berg had been making money for CBS for fourteen years further cemented the star's importance to the network.

On the other hand, Berg's public representation of herself was as devoted wife and mother, much like her Goldberg character. Unlike Goldberg, Berg was a workingwoman, a fact which would become an ironic thread throughout the age as women like Berg and Lucille Ball would assert themselves as domestic women and reinforce how much they enjoyed their families. The truth, however, is Berg spent much of her time writing for the Goldberg family and performing. According to her biographer and family, she was a workaholic who could barely cook and hence the irony of her releasing a cookbook at all (*Yoo-Hoo*). Berg may have helped construct what would become June Cleaver, but she herself was not that woman.

Berg acted as creator, producer, writer, and lead performer on the show, which afforded her a majority of control over the series. In her autobiography, *Molly and Me*, Berg reinforces the importance of her position as an artist and establishes the often-complicated relationship she had with executives. She states

From the point of view of the people on the show the actors, the writers, the producers, Mr. Sponsor is an evil man just waiting to tear the microphone from our hands. What he's got against us artists no one has yet discovered. The fight between the men with the money and the

“creative” minds has gone on since the first artist was hired to paint on the walls of some Neanderthal spear-makers cave. (198)

Berg’s statement regarding the tempestuous relationship between artists and executives includes Berg herself in the “us” who are artists. She establishes the significance of her position in a field of entertainment not readily associated with art. Her clarification of those who disregard “Mr. Sponsor” are also positions she held on the program both in radio and television. Though a generalized statement concerning the state of the industry in which she worked, Berg creates a specific binary between her position as an auteur and the men (her emphasis) she had to impress in order to gain sponsorship and hence entry into the industry. The tone of that passage, and the rest of the book for that matter, also reveals Berg’s personality as a no nonsense woman with aspirations that went beyond “domestic goddess.” Whereas Molly Goldberg generally accepted her plight and advocated the idea of “making the best of what you have,” Berg provided multiple confrontations with men in power.

Considering her relationship with sponsors and executives was marked by difference and conflict throughout her career, Berg’s dismissal of those who impede on artistry points toward two developments. First, is her consideration of popular media formats, specifically radio in the example above, and television. For Berg, radio and television were a different way to tell stories. She could reach millions rather than a limited few. Berg notes several times in her autobiography how important it was for her to build relationships with her audience. She embraced the connections they had with her characters and she takes a certain amount of pride in the letters she received from listeners and viewers, as an artist, as well as being somebody with some amount of

influence. Berg, for example, includes a letter written by mother who asks “Mrs. Goldberg” (not Berg) if she could talk about pool halls, so her husband would be less harsh toward their son (247). The letter confirms the importance of artistry, as it reinforces Berg’s cultivated persona, Molly Goldberg, as well as demonstrates the significance audiences placed on television programs as models for behavior.

Berg’s example also reveals the hierarchical structures already in place in the experimental stages of television, which have continued into the twenty-first century. For Berg, the demarcation rests between production and corporate entities. Everybody works together in order to create a program, but each with their own interests. Berg jokes that she often thought of dramatizing thoughts of performers, writers, and sponsors during the making of an episode (245). The actor would be depicted as egotistical, with the production revolving around him (her emphasis). From the sponsor’s point of view, everything would be silent and blank, as he waited for the advertisement. It would be during the commercial when colors and sound would appear and afterwards the scene would return to the sponsor impatiently waiting in black and white. The writer, of course, has the most poetic of Berg’s scenarios. There, the “scene would have no actors, only beautiful colors on the screen and the lines would be read by Sir Laurence Olivier and Dame Judith Anderson” (246). Once again, Berg establishes the significance of her position as a writer and an artist, as well as reconnects art (theater in this case) with mass culture (television) by including references to those already established art forms. She also determines the roles and expectations those in production have and their struggles over control.

The need for programming enabled Berg to sell her series as a television serial, though she did struggle to convince executives that what she did was marketable for the burgeoning medium. Berg also saw more potential in television than those around her. Before television even began she referred to herself as an artist and placed value on entertainment. Many episodes of *The Goldbergs*, both in radio and television, demonstrate entertainment can serve an ideological tool. Episodes often operate like morality plays, where characters confront a conflict and learn a valuable lesson based on their choices. More often than not, Molly acts as the social conscious, but at times is also the subject. In one episode, for example, Molly meets a man on a train entering the city. They form a fast friendship that quickly leads to flirtation. Her new friend offers to take her out for a date and she agrees, skirting dangerously toward having an affair. Confused and frustrated she breaks off this friendship and confronts her husband over their own relationship and her perception of his lack of affection. He recites a poem by Shelley, one of her favorite poets, which serves to prove he really does love Molly (“Brief Encounter”). The affair itself is mild, but the idea of Molly being dissatisfied, having emotional needs, and indulging in an affair (especially as a middle-aged mother with adult children) poses an alternate view of women, and one quite challenging for audiences, especially in what is often considered an emotionally lighter genre. Goldberg, in the late 1940s/early 1950s already references what Freidan would call the “Problem that has No Name,” or a sense of dissatisfaction of what life without options looks like for women.

It was rare for anybody to have that much control over a program at this point in television history, and even more so for women. Berg helped usher in the potential for

women to write, but perhaps more importantly, the establishment of the domestic sitcom surrounding women's daily experience is one of the more significant contributions of *The Goldbergs*. Berg interweaves subjects important to women, even caring to insert suggestions into narratives for possible learning experiences. Her perspective and point of view are personal reflections on larger cultural issues, which is something not often attributed to 1950s television. Berg was writing a type of sitcom that would become popular in the 1970s and maybe it is not surprising that Norman Lear credits Berg as a major influence on his career (*Yoo-Hoo*). Though Berg remains relatively obscure within entertainment history, her impact as a creator and writer helped set the standard for the sitcom. She helped develop the type of narratives that could be told, the ways in which they were told visually, and the authorship only recently discussed in relation to television.

Berg was one of the few women able to write and perform her own show in the early days of television. There were other sitcoms featuring women, like *Mary Kay and Johnny* (1947-1950), *Mama* (1949-1957), and *Beulah* (1950-2) debuting and airing around the same time, but Berg was innovative in the fact that she was a woman with creative control over television narrative and representation. For the most part, women were not granted many opportunities behind the scenes of television during this period. In an interview with Mollie Gregory, longtime CBS executive Ann Nelson remarked

The girls are never going to get in the boy's club. I don't care what you say. And you know what? I'm not sure we want to be in it. Because who needs that? We can do it without them. (99-100)

Nelson began working for CBS television in the mid-1950s and faced hurdles moving up the ranks and negotiating her position as a female executive. Based on Nelson's and others' accounts from Gregory's interviews, there is a sense of resignation to male dominated industries and women's exclusion during this era and even today. "That is just the way it is," is acknowledged, but with the acceptance of being able to still work along the margins. Yet, this recognition of unequal power structures is not one of defeat. Nelson's tone also relays the sense of labor necessary to remain working and supersede male counterparts. In essence, to defy their expectations of what women could accomplish. In reference to the early days of television, Nelson added

Television was new territory. Nobody knew what they were doing, so how could they tell me I wasn't doing it right? It all worked out okay. Sure, I was passed over as vice president of business affairs in 1950. They just told me they couldn't let a woman handle the department. In 1952, when the division split, guess what? The boys got the television division and I got the radio division. But I don't feel left out. I thought, 'Oh, well, what else is new?' I was used to that. (100)

Writer Madelyn Pugh Davis also suggests as much in her autobiography, *Laughing with Lucy*. Davis was a writer for Lucille Ball's *My Favorite Husband*, a popular radio program. Eventually, Davis and her writing partner, Bob Carroll, Jr. moved to write what would eventually become *I Love Lucy*. She struggled to be accepted by her male counterparts based on her feminine traits. As a comedy writer, she was particularly isolated, as men dominated the field and considered comedy too daring and risqué for women. Unlike Berg, who wrote and produced all of her scripts, Davis found herself

auditioning for writing positions. It was not until her partnership with Bob Carroll Jr., that she became moderately accepted. At this time having a male partner gained her access into spaces previously denied to her based on gendered assumptions. She was better able to negotiate male spaces even if it meant those men underestimated her. Most considered her only a typist, one who took notes for her partner, and not a joke writer who took an active role in creating comedic scenarios. Davis acknowledges the difficulties in working within such an environment, but utilizes a similar approach to Nelson in accepting the limitations within the context of 1950s gender politics (14).

Davis also acknowledges the lack of women in the industry during the early days of television and even at times throughout her narrative remarks on the strides women have made since, as well as notes continued sexism. Davis, as do most of the women from the period, distances herself as a pioneer and feminist throughout her book, never mentioning feminism and continually contending that she was just a writer doing her job. The subtext, however, of some of her experiences denotes the continued dismissal of women in creative roles. She describes:

Before I started writing with Bob, there was one infamous moment when I was struggling to get on a network radio show. I applied to a young male comedy team who were planning a pilot. They were very polite but explained that they weren't going to hire me because "you wouldn't fit in, you're a girl." I proved that I was just as good as the next guy by going to the ladies' room and bursting into tears. (105)

The example provided demonstrates the amount of fight required for women to push their way into writing. Davis mentions several of these experiences throughout the narrative,

treating them as just parts of the business and does not explicitly reference chauvinism. Yet, including incidents such as the one above also paints a less than rosy portrait of entertainment's inclusion. The above anecdote, however, implicitly exhibits what women writers went through, particularly in the field of comedy. Though many writers can account for struggle, the episode described here implies gender provided another obstacle. The criticism was not based on her credentials, but only in the fact she was a "girl." She confirms most programs were written by groups of men, leading to her designation as a "girl-writer" (14). The label denotes her singularity and marginalized status in a field of mostly men when her gender is used as a means of marking her. The infantilization of "girl" further isolates her, marking her as less than her male counterparts. Pugh, however, often couches the negativity of her experience as a point of pride.

Though she refuses the title of "pioneer," she does not shy away from mentioning how she and other women writers weeded their way into writing rooms and of the progress made since. Within the first chapter she mentions a luncheon celebrating TV comedy writers and producers in the Beverly Hills Hotel. She adds "I was thrilled to see such a large crowd because when I was starting out in television in 1951, you could have held that meeting in a booth at McDonald's" (13). Even the limited amount of women writing for television was a point of contention for male writers. In one of his 1953 editorials for the *Saturday Review*, writer and comedian Goodman Ace, wrote about the "surge" of women entering into comedy writing rooms. He cites four women writers who have "furtively but surely slunk into [male writers'] racket" and because of their entry into the field "the gentlemen who have been writing gags for the stars of television,

particularly, have lately begun taking uneasy inventory of their jingoistic security” (30). Despite the language, Ace’s article is mostly concerned with praising a colleague in the writing room, Selma Diamond, who surprised him with her sharp and bawdy jokes and represents three of those he cites slinking their way. Davis is another one, and the only who wrote for a sitcom, as well as Lucille Kallen who wrote for Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca’s variety program. He is also sure to mention that what is most frightening about these women challenging “chauvinistic security” was they were writing for top rated programs. Not only were they slinking their way into writing rooms, but in the process they were also helping to define TV comedy.

Davis also lists the handful of women she knew to even be working as writers. She is able to name them individually and provide their personal narratives. Through both her and Ace’s abilities to list writers by name, they validate the lack of women actually working within the industry, regardless of Ace’s threats that women were taking over. Male writers and creators still dominated, men were still considered more funny, and women were still thought to not fit into writers’ lifestyles. Davis’s trajectory and points regarding the lack of female comedy writers during this particular era of television are echoed by Irma Kalish, who in an interview with Amy Poehler for her web series *Smart Girls*, details a similar career.

Kalish, who wrote with her husband Rocky, reiterates the experiences Davis mentioned – of being underestimated and marginalized. Comedy for both women was not necessarily a position strived for as much as what happened. Kalish notes women worked on television, however, not many worked on comedies. According to those in the industry “women can’t make you laugh. They can make you cry, but they can’t make you laugh”

(*Amy Poehler's Smart Girls*). Being underestimated, however, would allow for those in writing rooms to be continually surprised by her efforts, which for better or worse, would help her negotiate her way through the industry, writing memorable episodes for some of America's hallmark programming in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s.

Berg credited the Goldberg's success with identifying with audiences and representing common experiences realistically with a bit of tongue in cheek humor. Lucille Ball credited the success of her narratives to them being identifiable exaggerations. As soon as CBS dropped *The Goldbergs*, the network began airing *I Love Lucy*, which would soon take the reigns as television's premiere situation comedy. Lucille Ball would supersede Berg's stardom and though she may not have written the program, as Berg did, being the lead performer and Vice President of the Desilu Production Company would afford her creative control over what many have deemed the most successful American sitcom. Regarding the transition from radio to television, it was Ball who held the power over whether there would be an adaptation. She agreed to only be in the series as long as her off-screen husband, Desi Arnaz, played her onscreen husband. Her condition is one frequently referenced in interviews and biographies. When CBS executives doubted audiences would believe an American woman would be married to a Cuban man, the couple invested their own money into a traveling vaudeville routine, which was a success. In response, CBS offered them the show and Arnaz and Ball began their own studio, Desilu, which would produce and distribute their program (Davis, 50). As president, Arnaz made the majority of executive decisions, a fact regularly reinforced by Ball in interviews. Ball acted as vice-president of the studio, mostly contributing her name and persona, but also made creative decisions and demands for programs in which

she was featured. She also became president in 1960 after her divorce from Desi Arnaz and became both executive and creative force for Desilu Studios.

Lucille Ball is credited as a great comedic actress, but she and her writers are rarely referenced for her creative vision for *I Love Lucy*. While Ball did not write the Ricardos' narrative, Madelyn Pugh Davis (with Bob Carroll Jr.) did, under producer Jess Oppenheimer. Davis helped create the character "Lucy" that television audiences became familiar with, and who would draw audiences to Ball's other shows. It is unclear how much Davis actually contributed in her working relationship with Carroll Jr., though her autobiography, *Laughing with Lucy*, and interviews suggest work was split evenly. Davis helped provide the "woman's point of view," sometimes using herself as a jumping off point to building a plot and trying out gags to test their comedic value and to prove the stunts were possible.

As Patricia Mellencamp notes in *High Anxiety* "Lucy endured marriage and housewifery by transforming them into vaudeville: costumed performances and rehearsals which made staying at home (a lack of choice and economic power) frustrating, yet tolerable" (323). One of the pleasures Ball herself attributed to the show was the lampooning of domesticity. In an interview with *The Saturday Evening Post*, Ball characterized the show as "exaggerated satire... We start with the normal premise; then take our characters beyond that, but not beyond the point where the viewing public likes to have them taken" (Martin, 93). Though scenarios were satirical, Ball pinpoints the combination of believability and physicality as the major draws of the program. Davis often acting as the starting point helps bridge gaps between satire, tragedy, and empathy. Davis wrote how she and Carroll designed scripts specifically around their familiarity

with Lucille Ball's skill at physical comedy. Scripts included assembly lines, cigarettes, and alcohol, but they did not specify how to frantically grasp for chocolates, react to setting a wax nose on fire, or intoxication. Those scenes often cited by fans and critics are due in part to the ways Ball performed "Lucy" in addition to the narratives constructed by writers (Davis, 64).

A woman who off-screen not only worked outside of the home, but also had some control over the production of the text, performed the representation of Lucy Ricardo as a housewife. Despite being labeled as a traditional sitcom, the program itself is complicated. A majority of focus has been placed on the representation of Lucy's life within the realm of the domestic, her attempts to escape, and her eventual return. Within episodes, however, the power struggles that exist between the men (Ricky and Fred) and women (Lucy and Ethel) are more intricate than most readings of the show. This is due in part to those examining the texts solely based on narratives without nuances added by performances. The way in which jokes are performed: the gestures and motions, the timing, and rhythm are vital to experiencing the comedic pleasure. Jokes and gags, especially slapstick, can be simply spectacle, but at the same time, as Mellencamp suggests, contain anxieties and fears audiences may feel or experience. For Mellencamp, Lucy represents feelings of containment brought with domesticity (323). Considering a majority of the series as a whole is about Lucy trying to "break-in" to the business and "break-out" of being nothing but a housewife, feelings of containment are well realized, represented, and released through the narrative and performances.

In the first aired episode, "The Girls Want to Go to a Nightclub," (October 15, 1951), the Mertzes celebrate their eighteenth wedding anniversary. Whereas Ethel wants

to go to a nightclub, her husband Fred wants to attend a boxing match. As is the formula, Ricky supports Fred, and Lucy sides with Ethel. The women plan to manipulate both men by appealing to their sweet natures, a plan the men also attempt. Tactics being unsuccessful, Lucy decides she and Ethel will go with dates to the nightclub, while their husbands go to the fight. After pondering the possible repercussions of his wife going out with another man, who he assumes will be able to sweep her off her feet, Ricky decides he and Fred will also find dates and follow their wives to the nightclub. Of course, neither Lucy's or Ricky's plans work and both couples end up together, though to the women's chagrin, at the prize fight in their finest clothes. On the surface, this episode appears to put women back in their place, with men making the majority of the decisions.

However, representational strategies, as well as small narrative points create more diverse readings. Firstly, the opening of the episode displays both women in the Ricardo's kitchen cleaning dishes. They appear tired and are dressed in house clothes. In discussing their marriages, with Ethel's anniversary at the forefront, both women seem resigned to marriage. At one point, Lucy states "Ever since we said I do, there are so many things we don't." The line itself sparks a reaction from the audience, one of understanding and agreement. Though just a simple sentence, the line betrays notes of dissatisfaction, of the fact that marriage itself was not necessarily a gift to women. The joke is also ambiguous, leaving room to interpret what it is the Ricardos do not do. This thread of discontent is what ties episodes of *I Love Lucy* together. Lucy's dissatisfaction with not having options for financial freedom are viewed as r frivolous in comparison to men's problems, as opposed to evidence of institutionalized sexism.

Lynn Spangler has suggested one of the major pleasures in watching *I Love Lucy* is Lucy and Ethel's friendship (36). Lucy cannot commit her antics in the vein of individualism that runs rampant in American media. Lucy needs Ethel and more is accomplished with them together than separately. Despite the anxieties associated with Lucy's antics, Ethel's inclusion eases our fears. There is a sense of safety in their friendship. Though the series took place before second-wave feminism, Lucy and Ethel represented the solidarity many feminists advocated. Together they battled their husbands and social propriety. The significance of their relationship on *I Love Lucy* is supported through their continued partnership in *The Lucy-Desi Comedy Hour (1957-60)* and *The Lucy Show (1962-68)*.

The Goldbergs and *I Love Lucy* stress women's knowledge, ingenuity, and care. Molly Goldberg is not an intelligent woman, by the standards of formal schooling, but her intuition and experience are privileged. Lucy's ability to subvert her husband and devise ingenious ways to break into the industry are part of the pleasure in watching *I Love Lucy*, regardless of her failures. Both shows used women's lack of social and economic opportunities post-World War II as a means to spurn comedic moments. Women returning to the kitchens and being refused various opportunities to work or experiencing discrimination within the workplace became part of the tragedy reworked into cathartic comedic energy. Neither program relies solely on self-deprecation to make these points. Molly is portrayed as "out of touch" with contemporary American values, but only as a means to demonstrate the significance of community, family, and holding onto one's values. Berg herself did not identify as a feminist, but her work from radio to

television privileged women's lives and perspectives and forced audiences to identify with a working class, immigrant mother in the city and suburbs.

I Love Lucy worked with women's subjectivities more so than moralizing. Lucille Ball also encouraged writers to move toward extremes. The core of each episode was Lucy's attempt to escape the home and usurp Desi's control, but each ended in her comedic failure. Through Ball's performance the anxieties inherent in the character's dissatisfaction with marriage and domestic living are ameliorated. Viewers are encouraged to laugh at and with her. Additionally, audiences are lead to empathize with Lucy more often than not. Her attempts to get into show business, her desire to be a perfect partner, friend, and parent are identities many are encouraged to reach, but like Lucy fail to meet.

The women behind these programs share the irony of reinforcing domestic roles for women, while they themselves were working. Berg and Ball created empires from their images but maintained their domesticity and "every-woman" status in magazine and newspaper articles. Berg stressed the importance of family while a wife and mother, but also took time for herself to write scripts. In an article for *Woman's Home Companion*, entitled "My Imp and I," Berg writes of her "imp" drive, that which drove her to write (11). She notes her wealth throughout the piece, but quickly returns to Molly-isms to demonstrate her groundedness, like "Better a crust of bread you can enjoy than cake that gives you indigestion" and "My happiness is beyond my vocabulary" (11-12). When interviewed, her children stated they would often not see her for days as she worked in libraries or cafes (*Yoo-Hoo*). Likewise, Lucille Ball performed her way into the homes and hearts of American audiences. Though Desi Arnaz was the businessman who made

creative decisions that would influence how sitcoms would be filmed and distributed, Ball was the driving force behind the series. Narratives of Ball readily remark on her work ethic and her inability to leisure. When asked by *People* magazine in 1980 if she was “sympathetic with the women’s movement,” Ball replied “They can use my name for equal rights, but I don’t go out there and raise hell because I’ve been so liberated I have nothing to squawk about” (“Ask her Anything,” 93-4). Throughout her career, however, she maintained her secondary position to Desi and placed more emphasis on her personal life than her professional. Even when she took over the reigns of Desilu, interviews focused on her personal life: life as a mother, rebuilding after divorce, and her place in television history. There were mentions of her status as president of the studio of the company, but they were only presented as minor reference points.

The two programs are themselves not completely representative of the 1950s. In fact, the sitcom selections in the 1950s were fairly paltry in comparison to the popularity of variety, western, or action programs. *I Love Lucy* consistently dominated the ratings throughout its run. Its lowest appearance in the Nielsen ratings (by year) was third, second to that was in its second to last season, placing second in 1955 to *\$64,000 Question* (“Nielsen Ratings/Historic/Network Television by Season/1950s”). Throughout the 1950s, however, only eight sitcoms were represented in the top twenty. The sitcom was still gaining ground within television. What we can learn from the narratives of Berg, Ball, and Davis are the ways in which their programs demonstrated the ways women’s positions were constructed both on and off screens. Berg actively fought television executives and sponsors for control over the show and her representations of American

life. Ball and Davis demonstrate types more subtle strategies, such as using celebrity power or avoidance to resist patriarchal power and control over the text.

These early examples of television by no means represent the whole, but as two of the more popular programs aired in the early days of television, they reveal how women introduced themselves to television production and the ways in which womanhood was represented. Women writers, particularly for comedy, were few, as Davis suggests. The boys' club atmosphere of radio comedy had filtered into television production, but women did and continued to push their way into and onto television. Television as a new form of representation also provided complicated representations. Though couched in comedy, there are glimmers of gender politics advocating for women. Options were included within narratives and though characters often returned to secondary positions, the potential for something more remained. Options for women outside of the home were also represented in the narratives of those women behind the characterizations and narratives. As workingwomen, they often negotiated between what would appeal to sponsors and male executives in charge and what would satisfy them as creative agents. The Berg, Ball, and Davis's influence as writers, performers, and creators helped set the mold for television comedy.

1960s Suburban Mom Realness

When *The Goldbergs* hit the airwaves in 1949, there were four sitcoms on television. Two years later, there were eight and by 1956 there were eighteen across the three major networks. Approximately nine and half hours of comedy were made available during prime-time (Brooks and Marsh, 1566-73). The number steadily increased throughout the 1960s with the sitcom presenting itself an admirable adversary to westerns

and action/adventure series proliferating television schedules. Despite increases in programming and need for writers, women remained fairly marginalized from creative production during this period. Those who began television in the 1950s continued to work for various sitcoms throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and even 1980s. Opportunities for women writers, however, were few and the lack of women's perspectives in comedy lead to a shift from women making observations about domesticity to observing women within domestic spaces.

Sixties television reflected cultural rupture with emerging feminism, but in increments. Much of television continued to represent women within the domestic sphere, but rather than privileging women's experiences or representing the home as escapable, television sitcoms limited women's roles outside of the home. *Leave it to Beaver's* (1957-63) June, *Bewitched's* (1964-72) Samantha, and *I Dream of Jeannie's* (1965-70) Jeannie are rarely shown outside of the home and much of the narrative consists of keeping them from entering the public sphere. As the 1950s is characterized as a period of convincing women to return to the domestic space, the 1960s demonstrates the era's overstatement of American culture's desire for women to be at home raising children.

There was also a shift in the sixties in the popularity of the sitcom. As opposed to eight sitcoms ranking in Nielsen's Top Twenty in the 1950s, twenty sitcoms were represented in the Nielsen ratings in the 1960s ("Nielsen Ratings/Historic/Network Television by Season/1960s"). The popularity of *I Love Lucy* demonstrated audiences were interested in exaggerated scenarios, relationship snark, physical comedy, and domestic situations. The formula continues sixty years later. Audiences in the 1960s also

saw a rise in visibility of female standup comics like Phyllis Diller, Joan Rivers, and Totie Fields on television. All became known for playing with gender expectations and tongue-in-cheek comedy as they deconstructed women's bodies, the institution of marriage, and politics.

As television became more established as a medium, programming expanded, as did the need for writers to fill increased airtime. Gertrude Berg wrote her show by hand while her husband transcribed them (*Yoo-Hoo*). In its six year run, *I Love Lucy* had a total of five writers. During *Bewitched*'s eight year run, the show accumulated forty-one, seven of whom were women. Out of the 254 episodes aired, 35 were credited to women ("Bewitched"). Five episodes in *I Dream of Jeannie*'s 139 episodes had five episodes credited to women ("I Dream of Jeannie"). Many of those women working on these episodes were part of husband and wife teams or in Davis's case another male writer. It was still necessary for women to have, in a way, a sponsor while writing. The importance of perspective described by Davis was further stifled, as instead of working alongside one to two writers, women were positioned against eight to ten male writers.

In contrast to sitcoms like *Bewitched* was the *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961-66). The program ran for five years, had twenty-six writers, none of whom were women. *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, however, stands out, as it is one of a few shows to represent a female comedy writer as a character, Sally Rogers (Rose Marie). The program oscillated between main character, Rob Petrie's (Dick van Dyke) home and work life. His coworkers, Buddy Sorrell (Maury Amsterdam) and Sally Rogers represented an alternative family, competitive siblings, which would be a representational practice employed more often in sitcoms in later years. The character of Sally Rogers highlighted

women's contradictory lives in the 1960s. As a single, working woman, she was aggressive enough to obtain her position as a writer and also maintain her place as "one of the boys." Her quick wit made her a dynamic, but also made her a relatively lonely character.

Despite her personality and success as a writer, Sally was often framed as desperate for a man and in most episodes commented on her single status. The first season's "Sally is a Girl" delves into the idea of the writing room "boy's club," and the problematic nature of Sally treated as "one of the boys." Sally becomes a contested subject between Rob and his wife Laura (Mary Tyler Moore) during a dinner party hosted by the couple. While Rob and Buddy praise her ability to tell a joke like a man, Laura brings up the softness and femininity of Sally's hair. During the party, Sally tells a dirty joke, wildly waving her hands and contorting her face and body to portray grotesque characters. While Rob and Buddy appreciate the performance, her date does not. As Laura explains to Rob afterward, Sally has forgotten she is a girl because at work she is considered "one of the boys." By the end of the episode, Sally learns in order to attract a man she must perform femininity. Sally feigns inexperience and lack of knowledge concerning automobiles and storytelling. The final joke is on her date, who genuinely believes Sally while the audience knows better. Her willingness to concede her personality for the sake of a date provides a lesson in gender performance.

In an interview with the Archive of American Television, Rose Marie asserted "I was not a secretary...I was a writer. In fact, I was the first ever women's lib part that was ever on television. I made the same amount of money as the boys did, we were all equal, and I was a writer not a secretary" ("Rose Marie"). The fact Rogers is accepted not only

by her peers, but the audience, who assumedly does not question her presence, demonstrates a change in the cultural mindset. Also, the importance actress Rose Marie places on not being a secretary is reminiscent of Davis's description of women's attempts to avoid being designated as nonprofessionals.

Sally's portrayal within the scope of "Sally is a Girl" and *The Dick Van Dyke Show* once again demonstrates contradiction and confusion. On the one hand, she is incorporated into the boys' club of comedy writing, is successful, and independent, but Rogers's status as a single woman is unfulfilled. Her desperation to be married was the butt of jokes and became a standard trope for the series. According to Rose Marie, in respect to Rogers's love life, the character was modeled after comedy writers Lucille Kallen and Selma Diamond ("Rose Marie"). Modeling the desperation of one of the few comedy writers in the business on a show with no female writers adds to the contradiction of television programs. Being a small community, some of the writers had relationships with Kallen and Diamond, working with them in writing rooms for variety shows ("Rose Marie"). In a way, modeling Rogers after Diamond is a wink and a nod, a form of playful ribbing among comedians. Another interpretation is to make light of women who were funny, but perceived as gender failures. No matter what successes Sally obtained as a writer, she was never treated as complete until she married. Sally's self-deprecation in this case, is not her own, but the veiled criticism of her writers. Diamond and Kallen may have been to some extent considered one of the boys within the community, but were differentiated by their gender and caricatured.

Rob's wife Laura Petrie was often used to balance Rogers's lack of femininity. Whereas Rogers has to be more self aware of her speech and movement, Laura is shown

as “naturally” feminine in comparison. Laura often acts as Sally’s counterpoint or an example of the ideal life Sally is chasing and cannot achieve. Laura, however, is not a docile and submissive housewife. Narratives often assert Laura and Rob as partners and equals. Laura also ushered in a more modern representation of women. Mary Tyler Moore shared the importance of her character often shown wearing pants, as opposed to most television mothers who wore long skirts. In her autobiography, *After All*, she wrote

It may not seem like much of a contribution to the evolution of women on television, but it became a cause of celebre. The sponsors objected to what could be considered a brazen look to all those circumspect buyers of the sponsor’s -- Procter and Gamble -- products. It was resolved that I would wear these objects of sexual controversy in one scene only per episode.

But I began to sneak them in here and there with Carl’s blessing, after he promised the sponsors that my trousers wouldn’t “cup under.” (86)

Presented once again is the intervention of sponsors dictating content. Moore as an actress pulls her weight in negotiations along with her boss producer and writer Carl Reiner to represent women “more realistically” rather than idealistically. Despite an approximate twenty-year gap between Berg’s and Moore’s accounts, their struggles with sponsors are similar. Berg talks vaguely about her struggles as an artist, Moore is specific in her battle to represent young wives realistically, which meant wearing pants.

There was continued interest in how to represent women’s lives realistically. Ball and Davis asserted they aimed to create exaggerations but maintained a foot on the ground. Though similarly struck, according to Moore there is a hint of conspiracy in her actions, enlisting the help of Carl Reiner. Her experience is not marked with heavy

fighting or pushing within the production itself, but with executives. By her example, the men writing for television were more receptive to ideas concerning representation. At the time of her suggestion, Moore's part as Laura was still secondary to that of Rose Marie's Sally, and with little comedic experience, she had little power to assert ideas above Reiner's (86). In this example, however, is some type of move toward more liberal ideas concerning representation of women, at least within the confines the sponsor established.

At least in terms of writers for *The Dick van Dyke Show*, attitudes seemed to be shifting concerning women, albeit not completely. While featuring Moore as a woman in pants and as fairly equal to her husband in terms of their relationship, Moore also provided an account where the boy's club attitude remained. Moore writes of an incident involving Reiner's son, Rob, who would later grow up to become an actor on *All in the Family* and director, "reached out and swatted [her] behind, saying, 'Hiya'" (Moore, 114). Rather than enact punishment, the elder Reiner handed down a meek warning with a smile. Reiner advocated for Mary Tyler Moore, but the attitude "boys will be boys" prevailed.

Berg and Ball were hardly representative of the creative control obtainable by women in 1950s Hollywood and television. They were rare examples of women's success. They approached television as a type of experiment and developed the narrative formulas and aesthetics that continue into contemporary television. Studios used those formulas to develop programming from the 1960s. The focus on domestic spaces and the idealization of the suburbs was used as a means to visually contain women. In the same respect, there was a hint of a change in the thinking of those in writing rooms, turning a bit more progressive. Based on themes and representations of most women on television,

however, stereotypes remained. The medium of television had proven itself as more than a fad and an excellent means to advertise to consumers. The sitcom, while still made to appeal to women and families, was no longer written or dominated by what was considered “a woman’s point of view.” Narratives, then, reflected women’s lives and points of view from the vantage point of men. Audiences then geared to laugh at their antics, rather than alongside their antics.

Saucy Singles Ready to Mingle

The turbulence of 1960s counterculture and liberation movements inspired change in the 1970s television. In 1965, Bill Cosby became the first Black actor to appear as a lead on a dramatic program, *I-Spy* (1965-68). In the late 1960s, sketch series like *Smothers Brothers* (1967-70), *Rowan & Martin’s Laugh-In* (1967-73), and *The Flip Wilson Show* (1970-74), premiered, carrying through into the 1970s a sense of madcap, antiauthoritarianism, and comedic anarchy. The sense of youth-in-revolt would be continued with *Saturday Night Live* (1975-), which offered a diverse cast of young comedians and the added sense danger in live-ness not seen in television since the medium’s beginning. Women like Lily Tomlin, Gilda Radner, and Carol Burnett became household names and comedic institutions. Women, who gained entry into the world of comedy, developed and wrote their own characters and materials and were gaining behind the scenes and onscreen. Television went from reinforcing the status quo to a format more than willing to pose politically charged challenges against racism, sexism, and classism. Sitcoms turned from representing content white middle class families to discontent and ethnically diverse working class families. Those entering into television were in tune with youth culture and many were themselves politically active within social

movements. Title VII's passing, which made provisions against discrimination based on race, color, sex, and nationality provided women legal status and protection, but did not necessarily open the floodgates of inclusion; however, they did provide women with the recourse to defend their rights. Title VII at least encouraged male executives to reconsider their positions on hiring women.

Despite increased levels of awareness and activism, women remained underrepresented within various industries, including television. The severity of activism that plowed its way through the east coast barely hit Hollywood and instead came with an exodus of writers and producers from New York. Diana Gould, who formed the Women's Committee within the Writer's Guild in 1971, had been such an activist. She was involved in the *Ladies Home Journal* sit-in, which urged editors to alter their representations of women within the pages or include inserts featuring feminist writers. She described her move to Hollywood and starting the Women's Committee the following way "I found nothing like the awareness of women's issues that I'd known in New York. That's why I started the Women's Committee at the Writers Guild. We needed it" (Gregory, 114). Up until the seventies, women knew of each other, but were not in positions to collaborate. During the decade women found each other and began working to change perceptions and structures within the industry and on television.

Female comedy writers also experienced the same hesitant and dismissive attitudes women in the 1950s faced. Treva Silverman, who wrote comedies throughout the 70s and 80s, remarked on several of the points made by executives about her as a writer. Male executives inferred she only originated storylines but not comedic content while writing with male partners, that because she was a woman her comedy would be

too domestic and unsophisticated, and that women were just, point blank, not funny (Gregory, 38). Executives even categorized women's writing as "itsy-poo," and as something they were not interested in putting on television (38).

As an executive for *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, her philosophy was often challenged with the assumption that as a woman she would hire women, but she was faced with the fact that many women at the time were not ready to write for national television (38-9). Lack of opportunities for women at the behest of executives uncomfortable with funny women helped keep female writers marginalized in the fields of content production.

One of the major goals for the Women's Committee was to research gender disparity within the industry and to provide numbers for the inequalities they saw in representation behind the scenes. Members of the committee committed their efforts to researching the number of women included as writers by going through scripts, noting the gender of those working within writing rooms, and calculating the numbers of women in comparison to men. Providing statistics meant proving their claims of being disenfranchised were not unfounded. Noreen Stone, who wrote television movies, described the reaction of the executives when confronted with the numbers:

We told them that women were underemployed. They said, 'Nonsense.'

We read them the statistics, they looked at the report, and they gasped.

See, the biggest hurdle in the 1970s for our committee was to be taken seriously. The gents figured we were just a bunch of complaining women - until we brought in the statistics. (Gregory, 9)

When the numbers were released to Susan Cameron at the *Hollywood Reporter* and became public, studios and networks realized their position (115).

Feminism was highly visible in popular culture with protests, popular books, speeches, public figures such as Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan emerging as spokespeople, and organizations created to further promote and advocate for women. The revelation women were not represented within the creative community was not news to the female writers who were told explicitly their talents were not desired. It was mostly news to those who had never thought about discrepancies. The statistics made public did help bring the industry around to understanding the need for more women, even if it was solely to maintain appearance for the public and appease special interest groups. Those underrepresented behind the scenes and those women who were working finally had leverage to make changes. Two production companies, Norman Lear's Tandem Productions and Mary Tyler Moore's MTM are credited with being bright spots for women writers and narratives. Tandem and MTM ushered in an era of programming that challenged viewers' ideologies, provided a number of opportunities both on and off screen for women, and expanded the boundaries of sitcom.

Most notable in changing the sitcom format was Norman Lear, who as a producer created *All in the Family* (1968-1979), *Sanford and Son* (1972-77), and *Maude* (1972-77). Lear is significant in opening up the space for the sitcom to explore the lived experience of those marginalized. His shows focused predominantly on low-income, working class people, and often people of color and women. Lear's sitcoms provided avenues for revealing the inconsistencies of the American dream and the overall messiness of culture that had been glossed over in the sitcoms of the 1950s and 60s. Portraying culture in such a way allowed for the significance of standpoint, to better represent the ideas and lives of those who did not fit within the overarching narrative of

white middle class families commonly portrayed and accepted as the norm. Most notably, Lear's sitcoms used the traditional genre format pioneered by *I Love Lucy* in order to satirize the ideal families represented in the past. Lear himself is also a type of contradiction, as somebody who recruited women writers for his programs, but also played into the boy's club system holding women back. Legally positions within industries were opening, however, equality in practice was not realized. Likewise, though Lear altered the state of television, became one of the more ardent advocates of women writers, and created programs that featured strong and independent women, he has also been criticized for remaining in a patriarchal state of mind.

Maude has been both heralded as a feminist text, and criticized for presenting a watered down feminism. *Maude* featured Maude Findlay (Bea Arthur), a middle class woman in New York, who had married and divorced three times, had one child, and was politically active through local organizations. A spin-off from *All in the Family*, which presented a conservative viewpoint, *Maude* was its liberal foil. Episodes featured topics like racial tension, class warfare in a failing economy, and women's issues. The latter is most often accounted for by critics in the two part episode, entitled "Maude's Dilemma," which aired prior to *Roe v. Wade*. Kalish co-wrote the infamous abortion episode and when interviewed declared the show progressive for the way it dared to handle controversial subjects, especially in an industry dependent on commercial success and viewership. She also argues that what they were able to accomplish in the 1970s would not work later, arguing: "If we took one of the *Friends* characters and wrote an episode about her having an abortion, the hue and cry would be outlandish. Yet, today we're

supposedly more liberal and liberated” (Gregory, 27). Kalish’s statement reiterates the significance television has in addressing contemporary cultural issues.

While most discussions of 1970s television are dominated by Norman Lear’s influence on the sitcom, Mary Tyler Moore also helped construct the landscape through her co-ownership of MTM Enterprises. Moore already cemented herself as a television star for her role as Laura Petrie on *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. Two years after the show ended, Mary Tyler Moore and husband Grant Tinker formed MTM in 1969. MTM developed highly popular shows in the 1970s for CBS, such as *The Bob Newhart Show* (1972-8), *Rhoda* (1974-8), *WKRP in Cincinnati* (1978-82), and most notably *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-77). Along with *Maude*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* helped usher in a new type of woman, one explicitly influenced by the feminist movement and the drive for economic independence suggested by those like Friedan. The thread tying MTM’s productions according to Ethel Winant was the focus paid to developing more three dimensional characters. Moving away from cartoonish characterizations brought forth through slapstick, the humor was derived from character relationships and verbal repartee.

According to Winant,

The MTM shows were about human beings being funny with specific attention to the reality of women’s lives. *Mary* did something in comedy that was really different: it showed women as distinct individuals who didn’t defer to Daddy or hubby. (qtd. in Gregory, 36)

The program also altered the representation of the domestic space, by featuring surrogate families. Her neighbors, co-workers, and friends act as her support network and the

“family” she creates as a single woman as framed through the narrative is beneficial and healthy.

Though Maude is aggressively political, Mary Richards has difficulty asserting her self when challenged. Part of the pleasure in watching Mary is her evolution from naïve, single girl to empowered, single woman. Mary is young and more interestingly a woman who had formerly ascribed to traditional values. Prior to becoming an independent, workingwoman she was engaged to a medical student who upon becoming a doctor left Mary. A large portion of the show is then dedicated to Mary’s self-discovery, as somebody who can work, provide for herself, and struggle. As opposed to Maude, who was established as a middle aged and classed woman, Mary found herself confronting challenges of finding and maintaining a job, a situation many identified with at the time.

Mary Richards was unmarried and thrust into her position as a producer for WJM-TV station in Minneapolis. Initially interviewing for a secretarial job, Richards is offered a position as an associate producer for the station, and much of the series revolves around her finding her place and her unpreparedness to assert herself in the workplace or in her personal life. Mary Richards is vulnerable, more so than Maude or women who came before her because her purpose was unclear, her life did not fit within the ideological package for women, but she managed to end each episode with a laugh. Upon its end, writer and director Nora Ephron reminisced “all I want to say, and without being too mushy about it, is that it meant a lot to me the second time I was single and home alone on a Saturday night to discover that Mary Tyler Moore was at home too” (Ephron, 74). Critic Karl E. Meyer also expressed admiration, claiming “Both lowbrows and highbrows

have continued to be captivated by a program that verges on the adult, shows sparks of genuine wit, and contains - for all its production slickness - a gallery of certifiably human faces” (Meyer, 49). Seen in both statements are the connections made between characters and audiences, akin to the sense of closeness Berg strived for, a connection and understanding between those onscreen and the viewers. However, within Meyer’s statement is the notation between high and lowbrow audiences. The show was privileged for its use of verbal wit over physical antics. The shift is not solely important in terms of aesthetics only, but in the delivery of ideas and experiences.

Mary Tyler Moore Show writer, Silverman in particular noted the era of television as one where male writers and producers were open, but still dealing with their own oversight and inability to see beyond their own privilege (“Treva Silverman”). Unlike those working in the 1950s and even in the 1960s, men working on programs were at least, as Silverman calls them, “responsive” to her ideas (“Treva Silverman”). She is careful to differentiate between sexism and unthinking, due to their willingness to see things from her perspective. When posed with the situation, for example, that the choice between family and career is only asked of women, Silverman notes her male colleagues agreed with her and continued to think along those lines (“Treva Silverman”). Male writers were allies, but without confronting misogyny themselves, were unable to fully think through some of the problems they were trying to write through. Women like Silverman helped provide context and case studies for women’s issues in the writing room. She actively encouraged writers to include moments where other characters denounced sexist ideas or actions. This was done in order to ensure sexism was denounced, rather than left ambiguous and open for interpretation.

Though writing for Tandem and eventually her own company Witt/Thomas/Harris, Susan Harris remarked in an interview for her Induction into the Emmy Hall of Fame in 2011 that “comedy was a less threatening way to deliver messages,” which is why she chose comedy over drama (“Hall of Fame 2011: Inductee Susan Harris”). Harris, working for *Maude*, could write episodes touching on hot issues at the time, as could Treva Silverman for *Mary Tyler Moore*, and through veiled comedic language could appeal to audiences. In this statement quality programming is differentiated with the recognition of television’s potential ideological reach and a tool for instituting change. Whereas those like *The Goldbergs* and *I Love Lucy* sought to appeal to audiences directly, to remind audiences of their own personal experiences, programs of the 1970s sought to appeal to their cultural awareness and thought.

The Legacy of Feminist Backlash

Susan Harris, Treva Silverman, and Irma Kalish continued to write into the 1980s. Their careers as successful writers provided more opportunities for creating and writing for programs. Harris would go from *Maude* to creating shows *Silver Spoons* (1982 – 1987), *Golden Girls* (1985-1992), and *Empty Nest* (1988-1995). Each program reexamined “families,” and posed various models as replacements for the nuclear family while also playing with standard gender roles – fathers as nurturers, single mothers, and older women. Kalish would continue to write and produce for *Good Times* (1974-79), *The Facts of Life* (1979-88), and *227* (1985-90). Women within the industry increased, as did the programs featuring women in strong roles in sitcoms. Progressing in the 1980s, Jane Feuer has argued that unlike cinema of the period, television was “more feminized and ideologically complex” (2).

The framework of television was fracturing, as videocassette recorders (VCRs) enabled viewers to record their own programs as well as consume films within the home. Remote controls allowed viewers to more easily shift back and forth between channels and avoid commercials. Cable television also wiggled its way into viewers' homes. By the end of the 1980s, 60% of homes had VCRs, one-fifth of households had access to Pay Per View, and 57.1% had cable (Feuer, 3). Network television in the forms of NBC, ABC, and CBS had previously dominated the televisual landscape as the only options, with the opening of new avenues for home entertainment; their status became unstable. As new technologies emerged and challenged the ways in which television could be used and viewed, the political climate also shifted. The election of Ronald Reagan to U.S. presidency in 1980 brought forth an eight-year conservative shift. The television industry was not immune to Reagan's deregulation policies.

Both technological and political changes lead to what Amanda Lotz has identified as the multichannel era. No longer were the three major networks, which had been in some form of operation since the radio era, commanding the majority of viewership. According to Lotz, during the eighties, networks lost 26% of their viewers (13). Television had emerged from the 1970s no longer an experiment, nor a wasteland. Programs stemming from companies like MTM and Tandem demonstrated television could appeal to both high and low brow tastes and provide thinking points for audiences to consider.

Shows like *Who's the Boss* (1984-92), *Mr. Belvedere* (1985-1990), and *Charles in Charge* (1984-90), all demonstrated the complicated nature of shifting gender roles. Men featured on these particular programs were caregivers, employed by families with

working parents or a working single mother. Much of the comedy derived from the difficulty of men to fulfill the maternal role often affiliated with women's nurturing. There remained, however, a strong presence of women in shows like *227* and *Golden Girls*. Both continued the trend of incorporating politics into programming, with sharp wit in the form of sarcasm. Both were created by writers who began under Norman Lear, Michael G. Moye, who started as a writer on *Diff'rent Strokes* (1978-86) and *Good Times*, and the above-mentioned Susan Harris. Both featured women regularly marginalized from representation, older women and women of color. Additionally, shows like *The Cosby Show* became majorly popular in the 1980s. Programs reaffirmed the significance of family, albeit not necessarily the nuclear. They did, however, move more toward representing the middle class after the devotion in the 1970s to the working class.

The entertainment industry reflected what was happening nationwide. With many women returning to the workforce, after being discouraged to do so since the 1950s, men's and women's roles were questioned and in flux. The idea of women as maternal nurturers did not mix well with the boardroom, nor did the image of women having any semblance of corporate power over men. Feminism provided the mental and emotional tools to return to work after long absences, and assert their identities as women, and think of the opportunities out in the workforce rather than accept their gendered fate as wives and mothers. That is legally.

Laws were introduced and structured to legally provide opportunities for women, but socially, concerns over women's abilities continued to circulate. The argument was not about whether or not women could balance work and family, but whether they should do either. As much as feminism opened up spaces for women, as Faludi and others have

pointed out, women were also the brunt of feminist backlash. Male anxieties and fears patriarchal authority waned drew many to characterize the “new women” of the 80s as nothing more than angry, sex deprived, women. The same arguments the Women’s Committee of the WGA met with in 1971, were the very same in the 1980s, if not with a bit more bark and bite to those afraid of the feminist aftermath in an already competitive industry.

When Roseanne was honored by Comedy Central in a roast, Katey Sagal, who played Peggy Bundy on *Married with Children*, congratulated Roseanne Barr for playing a housewife who didn’t like to cook or clean, and did not fulfill the standard roles set up for her by mainstream society and all one year after she (Sagal) had played Peggy Bundy for a year (“Comedy Central Roasts: Roseanne”). Though this caused a lot of laughter, particularly from Roseanne herself, what went unacknowledged was the fact that Roseanne Barr had created and honed the bad housewife character for years prior to either shows’ premiere.

Like *The Goldbergs*, *I Love Lucy*, and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Roseanne* (1988-1997) transformed the televisual landscape. Though *Roseanne* had just as many women writers as *Married with Children*, who account for less episodes than *Married*, the presence of Roseanne as a head writer alters the comparison. While *Married with Children* was about Al Bundy’s family not conforming to traditional models for the family, the major focus of *Roseanne* was Roseanne. Matt Williams developed the sitcom and would become, at least for a short period of time, the showrunner. The series was based on Roseanne’s stand-up comedy with the comedian acting as headwriter and

producer. Roseanne also plays, to some extent, herself within the series, even using her own name to further cement her connection with the character.

One of the ways *Roseanne* differs from *Married with Children*, however, is the fact that Roseanne did not have a choice in whether or not she worked. The show positioned her income as a necessity for the family. Roseanne was aware of her position as a comedian and as a celebrity figure. Her standup comedy deconstructed her life as a wife and mother. The television show that followed continued to represent women's lives in more biting and explicit ways than what had been represented in years past. Previously aired sitcoms like *I Love Lucy*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* highlighted the possibility of escape in economic independence. *Roseanne* debunked the potential through representing women's labor outside of the home. The character Roseanne did not feel empowered through work; in fact, the show demonstrated the hardships associated with women's labor in low paying positions, and even portrayed the ways women continued to be discriminated against in the workplace.

The fact Roseanne was and continues to be unapologetic caused consternation within production and the public. Both as character and persona, Roseanne represented what Kathleen Rowe has called "the unruly woman." Some of the struggles Roseanne faced within production and the industry over creative control are reminiscent of Gertrude Berg's attempts to maintain her creative and artistic vision in spite of the "man with the money". Likewise, frustrations over educating others on the women's experiences or marginalized spaces have been discussed rather gingerly by many women interviewed - either with the resignation of "that was the way it was" or with, as those like Harris and Silverman, a sense of progression. Roseanne, however, has not been that

politic and has instead continually criticized those in power and the systems of production for inhibiting her as a creator.

She begins her second autobiography *My Lives* with anecdotes from her offscreen feud with writer/creator Matt Williams. She accounts for what she considers his abuse of power, his attempts to humiliate her, and take control of her show. Roseanne claims the major source of disagreement was her character's function within the narrative. She writes

He could not get into his head that a woman was the main character and that she was *not passive*. He couldn't understand that the female character could *drive* scenes, that the family functioned *because* of her, not in spite of her. I gave him books on feminist theory, talked into tape recorders for hours, lectured him on motherhood and matriarchy for hours and hours, but he just never caught on. (5)

The differences between both Roseanne and Matt Williams lead to discord on the set and contributed to Roseanne's framing as difficult, out of control, and a "bitch". As Rowe suggests, much of the controversies surrounding Roseanne are because she is a woman who refuses to be contained in any sense and offsets patriarchal demands and expectations of ideal American womanhood. The fact there was little difference between the Roseanne depicted weekly and the person on the weekly covers of *National Enquirer* also highlighted the battle over diminishing Roseanne's power as a woman within the industry (Rowe, 60). The contradictions between women's power within the industry and onscreen were demarcated, Roseanne converged those two identities.

Both *Married with Children* and *Roseanne* are similar in terms of their aesthetics. The programs envelope their criticisms in satire and use self-deprecation to discuss larger issues. The Bundys and Connors are representatives of white, working class, and families with multiple children. The types of comedy they use, however, differ. *Married with Children* combines verbal with physical gags. The program utilizes the social commentary Norman Lear's productions brought to the sitcom, as well as the pantomime found in *I Love Lucy* and *The Three Stooges*. *Roseanne*, however, was more often based in Lear's satire and wit than in physical humor. Instead of having criticism internalized and embodied by a single character, such as *All in the Family*'s Archie Bunker, the social commentary is outwardly directed towards those in power. *Roseanne* actually challenges those in positions of power and actively seeks to make changes.

Another aspect to the sitcom, at least until this point, was the separation of domestic from workplace. The domestic sitcom is one about the situations families face, with work implied or shown sparingly, but the series itself focuses on those issues that most effect the home. The workplace sitcom is not entirely different, except the setting and characters are connected by labor with family life alluded to but rarely shown. *Roseanne* intertwines work with the domestic, illustrating the complex spaces women inhabit and the types of labor expected. Even a program like *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, which portrayed Rob as both a writer and a husband, still managed to separate his work life from home. His position as a successful head writer allowed him economic advantages to do so, as well as the fact he was not needed to take care of their son or help with the house. It was a bonus, but unnecessary. *Roseanne*, through its representation of a working class family, with a mother who works to further support her family, shows that

work and family cannot be completely separate for women. The program represents situations through a variety of intertextual allusions. The show is itself a mixture of melodrama and comedy, but has also used the musical and horror (Rowe, 71-2).

In the first season Roseanne works on the line at a plastics factory. In the episode entitled “Workin’ Overtime,” Roseanne and the other women working at the factory are forced by their supervisor, Booker to work weeks worth of overtime. The audience watches as Roseanne is forced to negotiate between two positions. As a laborer, she has little freedom. When trying to call home, she has to convince her supervisor, Booker (George Clooney), to call home and let her family know of her hours and what tasks need to be done around the house. Other scenes include women complaining that despite the extra money from working overtime, they are actually losing money with the costs of childcare.

There is no resolution at the end of the episode. When Roseanne escapes to a coffee shop, she shares her experience with the server, who considers Roseanne’s job at the factory a luxury job. The women’s commiseration further expands the representation of class within the program, expanding outward to other women’s experiences. The moment also shows the significance of women talking to and with each other, building relationships through communication and mutual understanding. The nature of women’s collaboration goes back to the significance of Lucy and Ethel’s friendship and antics of the 1950s. Roseanne’s conversation with, at the time a stranger, holds significance in its representation of mutual feelings and echoes feminist consciousness raising. While Roseanne’s experience represents a particular standpoint, the show attempts in this episode and others, to include more experiences common to women.

Despite the fears of gender inversion in the early 1980s and the backlash toward feminism that followed, *Roseanne* offered a complicated view of working class women's lives, which were often not acknowledged by either conservatives pushing for tradition nor middle class feminists were pushing for equal opportunity. *Roseanne* challenges both sides of the argument and American culture at the time, depicting the lives of working class families as not easily fitting into either agenda. As the program progressed into the nineties, the Connor family continued to represent those struggling to not simply achieve the American dream, but to stay afloat. Roseanne is shown attempting a variety of jobs, none of which seem to provide the satisfaction or the stability women were looking for at the time.

Roseanne marks a shift in programming, marked by the emerging emphasis on diversity and options deregulation set out to produce. Both depended on savvy audiences to understand the humor and to share the same thoughts or experiences to find the shows funny. They also demonstrate women taking creative control, owning their work, and incorporating women's viewpoints and critiques within network programming. The programs also note a transition into more complex portrayals of families, particularly working class. The inclusion of brief monologues on the negotiations between husbands and wives, as well as explicit criticism directed toward people and power structures reveal a step forward in building a savvy audience. The struggles over what both these programs meant and represented to the American public continue the discussions over what the industry's responsibilities are and what the public wants. Women played a large role in creating or writing the programs that appeared in the late eighties and which

caused confusion and at times debate. For this brief period, several programs created by and featuring women characters, narratives, and viewpoints were at the forefront.

At the same time *Roseanne* challenged cultural myths surrounding working class families, *Murphy Brown* took a cue from *Mary Tyler Moore Show* and represented the struggles of strong-willed anchorwoman Murphy Brown (Candace Bergen). Diane English in an interview with *Makers*, discussed the serendipity involved in the program's beginning. Though CBS was quick to jump to purchase the show, they also wanted to avoid discussing Murphy Brown's alcoholism (her return from rehab starts the program) and change her age from 40 to 30. With the 1988 Writer's Strike, English made no changes, leaving CBS little option but to shoot as it was written ("Diane English"). The changes CBS wanted to make are telling of the continued problems women faced with executives. Similar suggestions regarding youth were suggested for Susan Harris for *Golden Girls*, which caused her to cast as she did and rarely mention exact ages (Harris). Like *Roseanne*, English noted her feminist stance, saying "All of us who try to take down the barriers to human achievement are feminists" ("Diane English").

Murphy Brown was framed through the lenses of a woman who had grown up during the throws of the second wave movement, had paved a way for herself in the world of television, and reflected the continued frustrations women felt in the workplace to audiences. If *Roseanne* was calling attention to disparities working class women faced, *Murphy Brown* showed despite economic flexibility misogyny still proliferated. *Murphy Brown* also provided controversy through her actions. In 1992, *Murphy Brown* made the choice to be a single mother. The decision famously lead to Dan Quayle eviscerating

Brown in a speech, condemning the lifestyle choice as irresponsible, offensive, and insulting to the shared understanding two married parents are better than one (Quayle).

Roseanne and *Murphy Brown* represented explicit challenges to the status quo. Both provided strong female characters that negotiated and strategized in order to be taken seriously, prove their value, and question gender roles. The writers and producers played with the traditional sitcom format – the dependence on Roseanne’s domestic goddess mystique and Murphy Brown’s personal choices all furthered the sitcom’s range and political potential. The seventies had opened the door to more politically engaging comedy at the height of socially liberal politically moments. Post-backlash, women continued to challenge audiences to continue thinking of women’s places within American culture. Television shows introduced in the mid-90s, however, did not follow as closely to the political outline provided by those in the past. Aesthetics were similar, as were themes of surrogate families and friendship, and additionally frustrations with daily life. However, programs like *Frasier* (1993-2004), *Friends* (1994-2004), and *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005) were incredibly popular, but rarely political in the same ways as those discussed above.

Since the emergence of Tina Fey as *Saturday Night Live*’s headwriter women’s humor and authorship have gained media attention. From network to cable bloggers and popular journalists increasingly focus upon female comedians. Tina Fey, Lena Dunham, Amy Poehler, Chelsea Handler, and Whitney Cummings are paraded and critiqued as representatives of not only themselves as authors, but an entire gender continually framed as unfunny or lesser than male counterparts. Success maybe difficult to categorize, as what may be considered economically successful may be insufferable to critics (*Two and*

a Half Men, for example). Similarly what is highly valued as “quality television” may not gain a substantial audience (*30 Rock*). There remain differences, however, in how female authors are treated which are dependent on the sitcom’s aesthetics (and by proxy the network on which it appears) and thereby quality, their personal background (and relatability), and how they negotiate themselves personally and politically. When television first arrived, women involved in sitcom production attempted to distance themselves from empowerment and feminism. From the late 1960s to 1980s, women were more open about their politics. They demanded their place as creators, producers, and writers. They were interested in tackling and exposing issues for the general public. Contemporary television women do more negotiating in a postfeminist culture. Depending on network, audience expectations, and social location women utilize several strategies to incorporate women’s issues and political challenges within their texts.

CHAPTER 3: *ROCK, PARKS, AND NETWORK TELEVISION*

Network television, comprising NBC, ABC, CBS, and FOX, remains the standard on which television hierarchies are based. Considerations like “edgy,” “different,” and “cinematic” are used as a means to differentiate from the familiarity of network television, its traditions, and its history of establishing the symbols and systems associated with television. Networks are affiliated with the 30-minute format (20-23 with commercials), audience laughter punctuating punch lines, theatrical sets and performances, and twenty episodes per season. Some qualifications have shifted through the years. *Bewitched*, for example, and several 1960s comedies used canned audience laughter as opposed to a live studio audience. This allowed for better control over reactions and time spent in production, but did not allow for the performer to play to the audience. In the 1980s and 1990s, shows like *Roseanne* and *Seinfeld* reincorporated the audience into production but would also at times include on location footage with canned reactions.

NBC’s “Must See TV” block gained popularity in the 1980s by combining programs like *The Cosby Show*, *Family Ties* (1982-89), *Cheers* (1982-93), and *Night Court* (1984-92), creating a two-hour block of comedic flow. In the 90s, NBC continued to produce successful sitcoms like *Mad About You* (1992-99), *Wings* (1990-97), *Seinfeld* (1989-98), *Frasier* (1993-2004), *Friends* (1994-2004), and *Will & Grace* (1998-2006) which provided the network with nearly twenty years of quality sitcom programming. Many of these sitcoms were oriented around an ensemble, though many used male protagonists as anchors. Women, in this case, were placed as objects of the gaze more so than for their comedic abilities. Few had comedic training or backgrounds as standup or

improv performers. As long as they were funny “enough” and there was a solid supporting cast, shows could work. Critic Zack Stentz bemoaned networks’ attempts to put attractive women in situation comedies, over comedians. Citing Brooke Shields’s appearance on *Friends* as a starting point, he noted that because she did not completely fail as a caricature of a stalker girlfriend, critics quickly acclaimed the performance, prompting networks to cull through talent and find traditionally attractive women to place in situation comedies (par. 3). NBC was particularly guilty of pursuing this type of programming. Post-*Friends* and *Seinfeld*, NBC struggled to find footholds and began releasing odd mixtures of scripted and reality programs that could be cross-promoted between other networks (Sandler, 294). In striving to maintain their status as the place for comedy, NBC ran through several series and pilots attempting to recreate the formulas of *Friends* and *Seinfeld*, that is, shows about twenty or thirty-somethings who are single, dating, and struggling financially (though still able to afford a middle class lifestyle), with the focus more on surrogate families than genetic ties.

Despite slight alterations to the sitcom formula, comedy programs remained easily distinguishable as sitcoms. Audiences knew them when they saw them. There was comedic impetus, audience laughter, and familial relationships. The plot structures were similar even if the style of jokes differed. Antics ensued but at various levels. The differences between *Seinfeld*’s and *Friends*’s brands of comedy, for example, illustrate these points. Both programs were incredibly popular sitcoms, but each differed from the other in type of humor and characterization. The former was cerebral, the comedy deriving from awkwardness, discomfort, and an anxiety rooted firmly in reality. Characters could be eccentric, like Kramer, but the show itself did not rely as heavily on

joke set-ups as much as it did on situational humor. *Friends*, on the other hand, was much sillier. While the characters were realistic, the plots and actions were more exaggerated. Jokes were explicit and much more reminiscent of the types of setups found in traditional sitcoms.

With the advent of cable, however, networks were pushed to expand their content and stretch the bounds of generic formulas. The rise of cable within American homes converged with major shakeups in network television. *Wings* ended in 1997, *Seinfeld* in 1998, *Mad About You* in 1999, *Friends* and *Frasier* in 2004, and *Will And Grace* in 2006. NBC's schedule went from a standard and solid block of programming to an unstable revolving door of sitcoms attempting to replace fan favorites. A major dent was left in NBC's schedule as well as on hallmark comedies on network television.

Expectations for the sitcom were also changing, as Britain's *The Office* (2001-03) repopularized single camera filming techniques and the mockumentary. *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) had become a major program for HBO and comedies on Showtime soon followed, but much of the priority was on quality drama. Shows like *The Sopranos* upped the ante for networks which had focused their efforts on the cheap productions of reality television. For the first half of the 2000s, the situation comedy was no longer the standby genre. Many even lamented that the sitcom was dying. Mills has discussed this period as one of critical panic and musings regarding the comedy's apparent demise. Mill's, however, notes that similar concerns arose in the past, regards these panicked moments as part of the genre cycle, and points out that if comedy's apparent demise is worthy of panic, then surely that only points to the continuing demand for comedy (125-6).

In 2005, *30 Rock* premiered on NBC. The show's main character, Liz Lemon (Tina Fey), is head writer for a sketch comedy show called *TGS with Tracy Jordan* on NBC. She acts as the go-between for all those on the show—writers and performers, corporate and cast, the Teamsters—who physically build *TGS*. The show was incredibly meta in the fact that it was about television, but even more so in that its main character was played by Tina Fey, the show's creator and showrunner, who had previously worked as head writer for *Saturday Night Live*. *30 Rock* never became a success for NBC in terms of audience but was a hit with critics who praised the show's satirical take on television as art and business. It noted NBC's willingness to opt for critical success rather than popularity as they continually renewed the series despite its low numbers (Eum, par. 2). Tina Fey developed into one of the most successful and well-known television writers in history. Tina Fey also became, for better or worse, the representative of the status of women in comedy.

Tina Fey's move from ensemble player to television show creator, writer, showrunner, and star provided a new frame of authorship for women in television, at least since Roseanne in the 1980s and 90s. One fundamental difference between Roseanne and Fey is public image. Roseanne was frequently framed as an out of control megalomaniac; on the other hand, Fey is regarded as an accessible, serious, and hard-working woman. The acclaim, public interest, and credit given to Fey arguably opened up doors for other women who would emerge onto television screens, like Amy Poehler (*Parks and Rec*), Whitney Cummings (*Two Broke Girls* and *Whitney*), Zooey Deschanel and Elizabeth Meriwether (*New Girl*), and Mindy Kaling (*The Mindy Kaling Project*). Though they continue to hold a variety of positions within their respective projects, they all share the

fact that they have substantial control over the comedies they produce as writers and/or producers and/or performers, in addition to the fact that they are the center of their networks' marketing strategy.

Despite the fact that women have been involved in television from its inception and even helped mold genres, including that of comedy, the fanfare surrounding Fey, in particular, is especially important to examine. For more than a decade she has been acknowledged and tokenized. She has been outspoken regarding certain women's issues but also negotiated space to allow for relatability with a Middle American audience. Fey also is viewed ambiguously by feminists who praise her as an icon for representing women and discussing issues relating to women but at the same time criticize her for lack of inclusion, not being sex positive, and her character Liz Lemon's sporadic hysteria.

Fey frequently relies on what Nancy Walker describes as "double text" in her humor, a self-deprecatory process wherein women joke about themselves while at the same time commenting on their cultural status (qtd in Lauzen, 4). Jokes made about women are left to audience interpretation, allowing for enough ambiguity for mass appeal but also providing political commentary. As opposed to the examples from subscription cable—that will be discussed in the next chapter—which are often more explicit in their feminist stances, "double texting" is better suited for working on commercial network television. The ambiguity does make it difficult at times to decipher political meanings, which can be frustrating for feminists who want to see more actively feminist role models and activism on television; however, ambiguity does also leave wiggle room for feminism to be mentioned and discussed. Fey's "double texting" has opened up spaces for women's programs to play between postfeminist and feminist sensibilities. Her turn to

iconic success also encouraged networks to recruit more women to create, produce, write, and star in comedies. Despite such encouragement and attention paid to women and comedy, however, the actual instances of inclusion remain stagnantly low. The following will discuss Tina Fey's influence on the television industry and the perceived move toward female characters, women's narratives, and subtle (and not so subtle) acts of feminism.

Under the Tin-Fluence

In every manifestation of the "women are/aren't funny" debate, Tina Fey is brought in as an example and/or for her professional opinion, though she has publically discussed the futility of arguing with those who argue women are not funny (Fey, 144). When accepting the Mark Twain Award for Humor, she mentioned looking forward to the day when women were no longer quantifiable within creative industries, comedy in particular ("The Kennedy Center Mark Twain Prize for Humor"). Each success and failure is seemingly documented. Reports from organizations such as The Geena Davis Institute, Women's Media Center, and even popular online publications like *Splitsider* and *Vulture* have invested money, time, and effort in quantifying women's roles and positions within the industry in order to prove that disparities continue to exist. In her oral history of women and comedy, *They Killed*, journalist Yael Kohen commented:

Women have always been funny. It's just that every success is called an exception and every failure an example of the rule. And as each generation develops its own style of comedy, the coups of the previous era are washed away under the set of new challenges a younger group of women inevitably face. And yet, despite all the hecklers, boys' clubs, and old-

school notions about women in comedy, the result is always the same:

They kill (5).

Stigmas surrounding funny women remain. This is particularly important when considering the steps necessary for comedians to “break through” and make a living from comedy or even become mainstream comics.

Tina Fey’s origin story commonly begins with her involvement in Chicago’s Second City improv collective. One of the fundamental features of improvisation is the goal of creating a narrative through collaboration rather than focusing on individual performance. The purpose is not to outshine others but to build something collectively. Tina Fey, again, is not the first woman to train at Second City and transition into television. Second City has been one of the primary sites for *Saturday Night Live*’s recruitment and has spawned stars like Gilda Radner, Catherine O’Hara, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, and Amy Poehler.

Tina Fey gained notoriety as the first female head writer of *Saturday Night Live* in 1999 after twenty-four years of male writers. *Saturday Night Live* has been well known for its issues with women, namely John Belushi demanding all women writers be fired (Kohen, 103), female based sketches being dismissed by male writers, or even the lack of ideas on how to write for women. The constant thread in addressing these issues is to be rather politic, with few admitting straight up sexism (barring the John Belushi incidents, though even those are dismissed as examples of Belushi’s eccentricity). Claims are directed more toward institutionalized misogyny and the fact that comedy writers pull from their own everyday experiences, and in an environment staffed with a majority of male writers, women’s perspectives are often drowned or misunderstood.

Former *SNL* writer Ann Beatts explains, “I think there are things women know about that men don’t, because women are immersed in male culture but men aren’t immersed in female culture” (102). Sitcom writer Janis Hirsch has labeled the phenomenon “nice guy misogyny,” wherein liberal and receptive male writers still feel the anxieties around women’s narratives. As an example, Hirsch mentions the differences between men and women talking about breakups. For the former there is laughter and empathy, for the latter it becomes defensive and dismissive (Harris, par. 9-10). Writers from the past ten to fifteen years frame the division less in terms of gender but more so in terms of writers who focus on “character” and those who focus on “plot/jokes.” Character based comedy is less about direction and more about examining people’s peccadillos and embracing their nuances. Hard joke comedy is not necessarily about plots, but about making clearly defined jokes.

It is important to mention that Tina Fey was neither the first, nor the only writer of the show who shifted comedy toward women. Paula Pell, a writer for the show since 1995, argues that a shift toward women becoming more popular on the show was apparent from the mid-90s with the emergence of comedians like Molly Shannon, Cheri Oteri, and Ana Gasteyer (243). The writers on *Saturday Night Live* also linked Fey’s success as a writer within the notoriously masculine *Saturday Night Live* writers’ room to her friendship with head writer Adam McKay. Cindy Carponera offers:

The boys wanted Adam’s approval because they loved him so much and he was so talented, and they were going to give it to her. So she wound up having a different relationship right away with the boys. I’m not knocking

her talent. She's very talented, very funny. But she had permission in a different way to create more freely (qtd in Kohen, 254).

Much like Davis's and Kalish's relationships with their writing partners, similar patterns continue nearly forty years later after the work of various social movements. Fey, however, was also able to set herself apart. Second City executive Kelly Leonard contends:

[Fey] had such insights into the female psyche that, I know from many women that I'm friends with, make them uncomfortable. Because it's so true, it's painful and truly unique to this time, to her voice to getting this stuff out (qtd in Kohen, 255).

Whereas other female writers had difficulty pitching their views within male-centric writers' meetings and table reads, the freedom granted to Fey allowed for more freedom and acceptance for other women writers. Others note her fearlessness and conviction in pitching material, particularly in crossing the lines of what could and should be said (255). Fellow writer Lori Nasso writes, "[...] she wasn't afraid to say what she wanted to say. She could let it rip in a sketch. She always had a point of view [...] she just knew what she wanted and she was great" (qtd in Kohen, 255).

Fey used *Saturday Night Live* as a source for content in *30 Rock*, a sitcom about a sketch-comedy program influenced by the main character's improvised beginnings. The premise of *30 Rock* revolves around the tension between the art of comedy and the corporatization of art and entertainment. Liz Lemon and Jenna Maroney (Jane Krakowski) found success on the stage and were given a television sketch comedy show called *The Girly Show* where Lemon acts as head writer and Maroney the star. The first

episode involves a corporate shakeup of NBC brought forth by the new boss, Jack Donaghy, who now runs the microwave and NBC divisions for General Electric. The upheaval includes a complete redesign of *The Girly Show* for the financial betterment of the corporation. Rather than retaining Jenna as the lead performer, Donaghy reaches out for the talents of controversial comedian Tracy Jordan and makes him the star of the show now called *TGS with Tracy Jordan*.

This first episode consists of the tension between Lemon and Donaghy, as the former tries to cling to her creative control. Part of the conflict, however, at least implicitly, is the change in the show's gender dynamics. The show goes from being a celebratory comedy show centered on women's comedy performance to placing women in more marginalized positions. The removal of any designations regarding women or girls and the adoption of a male comedian also implicitly denotes the fact that women are not marketable as comedians. The fact that Tracy Jordan is a black comedian also allows for the show to bring up cultural issues regarding conflicts involving gender and race.

In "Believe in the Stars," Jenna and Tracy get into an argument over who is treated worse in the United States, women or African Americans. In order to prove themselves right they arrive in blackface and drag (respectively) to experience each other's lives. The argument is framed as superficial in the sense that it stems from a relatively minor argument over their star status rather than from an example of actual oppression. Their approach to the argument is also overly simplistic, as it ignores the complexities of intersecting identities effecting cultural negotiations. Their battle over who is more oppressed is also framed as a futile argument in and of itself. By the end of the episode they are encouraged by a teenager to find each other's similarities rather than

their differences, and they move forth from that episode and that series more as allies than nemeses.

The amount of absurdity involved in their fight and the extreme lengths they go through to be right, which inherently means crossing “normal” boundaries into the transgressive, becomes a politically charged form of play. Jokes at the expense of commercialization, conglomeration, and marginalization are scattered throughout the series; however, they are also somewhat negated through the context of the program, the speaker, and the extremity of critical expression. The mixture of condemnation with negation is what often causes frustration among feminist critics who see Tina Fey as not “feminist enough” despite the power she has gained within the industry, her progressive politics, and feminist admission.

Part of the difficulty in deciphering the politics of *30 Rock* stems from the program’s self-reflexivity. The show’s postmodern sensibility is what helps differentiate it from the standard sitcom. It was live-action but followed a similar framework as animated shows like *The Simpsons* or *Family Guy* (1999 -) which frequently cut between the main narrative and tangentially related inserts. In the episode “MILF Island,” a Page Six article prints a quote from an anonymous source from the *TGS* staff about Jack’s intelligence. A full-scale search for the culprit is called despite the fact that early on in the episode it is revealed to be Liz in a frustrated moment in the elevator. During a conversation between Liz and Jack, Tracy walks in condemning Liz for what she said about Jack, handing her the paper, and saying he heard her say similar things the previous week. The camera then cuts to an image of a *Cathy* comic strip which follows the struggles of Cathy’s less than stellar romantic life and love affair with chocolate. When

Liz points that out, Tracy affirms his statement and the camera then cuts to Liz in a position identical to that of Cathy in the strip. Lemon, dressed in loose fitted clothing, with big frazzled hair, yells, “Chocolate! Chocolate! Chocolate! ACK!” much like Cathy. In this example, the show breaks away from the narrative flow in order to make the visual gag. The show goes out of its way to make the joke.

The dominant narrative is interrupted for four seconds in order to make a joke concerning men’s frame of reference for women. Constant interruptions such as this continually remind the audience they are watching television. There is no attempt to invite the audience into realistic narratives as with sitcoms in the past. The cut to Liz as Cathy also makes light of the stereotype of the lonely woman that both the cartoon *Cathy* and *30 Rock* represent. Cathy cartoons are synonymous with lonely women who frantically search for husbands, eat through their feelings, and feel desperation to get married and start a family. The comic strip has been parodied and used to describe women’s fears of being single. Liz is not wholly different, at least in the eyes of Tracy who is the one describing this memory. His conflation of Liz and Cathy underscore the ways women are lumped together into the “desperate” category.

30 Rock is also reflexive in the way it harkens to television’s past. *30 Rock* is influenced by *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in how the writers incorporate single women’s anxieties within workplace struggles. The first scene of the series acknowledges precursors like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *That Girl* (1966 - 71), as a musical interlude follows a buoyant Liz Lemon through the streets of New York, an empowered, professional woman. Non-diegetic music plays as Liz hands out hot dogs on her way to work, after she purchases all of them for the sake of justice when another customer cuts

in line and forms a new line. We watch her interact with people who are thankful for her as the song continues:

“Who’s that? Kicking it down the street? Causing a stir? Who’s that? I know that you’re wondering that. That’s her. That’s her. That’s her. That’s her. Who’s got the kind of charisma that the boys prefer? Who’s hot and you know that she knows it? That’s her. She’s like a summer’s sky, a slice of cherry pie, a nervous butterfly. Me oh my. Who flaunts her feminine magic side? That’s her!” (“Pilot”).

By the end of the song she is at work and the camera moves from her to the stage where a sketch is being rehearsed and the *30 Rock* audience begins to understand that the song is no longer a non-diegetic melody constructed for Lemon but for the subject of a sketch being rehearsed, who turns out to be the TGS character, Pam: The Overly-Confident Morbidly Obese Woman. The pairing of Liz and Pam is funny, as it sets up *30 Rock*’s future juxtapositions with Liz as a possible feminist icon with the bad comedy show and questionable representational practices of women on the show she is supposed to control.

The program does frequently return to questions and issues of identity politics and aligns itself to liberal viewpoints, but is also preoccupied with making jokes and often relies on stereotypes. *30 Rock* is much more explicitly concerned with jokes than character development. The point, for Fey, is to make jokes. For the sake of creating comedy, Fey often backs over potentially charged issues. This has caused many feminists online to criticize the show’s enactment of what blogger Sady Doyle calls “Liz Lemonism,” which is limited in its scope and activism (qtd in Mizejewski, 9). According to critics, though Liz Lemon openly expresses herself as a feminist, she also represents,

problematically for some, the limitations of liberal feminism. Linda Mizejewski notes the complicated feminism depicted in the series. In “Feminism, Postfeminism, Liz Lemonism: Comedy Politics on *30 Rock*,” Mizejewski notes much of the plays with representations of feminism, namely, Fey’s lampooning of mainstream feminism as white and middle class, poking fun of postfeminism by emphasizing the selfishness of female characters who focus solely on personal empowerment, and deconstructing of patriarchy through the reworking of boss Jack Donaghy’s relationship with Liz Lemon and capitalism. However, Mizejewski’s analysis ends with the claim that despite such plays with gender politics, the show continually reinforces the limits of liberal feminism (13).

Mizejewski cites the episode “Brooklyn Without Limits,” the seventh episode of the fifth season, as one emblematic of the problematic nature of the show’s depiction of feminism. In the episode, Liz Lemon shops at what she assumes is a localized and independent shop in Brooklyn. There she finds a pair of jeans she credits as best fitting and most flattering for her body. After depicting her purchasing several pairs, the remainder of the episode features characters admiring her new look and body shape. When she discovers the store is not local and in fact owned by Halliburton and the jeans made in sweatshops, she struggles with whether she should continue wearing the jeans. The episode ends with her political conscience taking over and her switching out of the jeans and into ill-fitting overalls. Mizejewski uses this example to show the lack of options for activism within the show. She argues that Lemon’s refusal to wear the jeans, while positive, does not go far enough and indulges in a more postfeminist attitude toward political engagement through the reinforcement of personal life choices over activism (12). She argues that if the show was more feminist oriented, Lemon would have

protested Halliburton and started a campaign against the company through letters or social media (13). While Mizejewski may consider this more “activist oriented,” the problem with such criticism is that it ignores the fundamental point of sitcoms: the comedic impetus.

Though it may be more insightful as a feminist to include more activist oriented material to support feminist claims and provide examples of enacting agency, in order for the show to remain marketable on a network channel which privileges appeals to the majority, it must also retain its status as a comedy. With feminism remaining a hotly contested word and concept, mainstream advocacy is more difficult. For the most part, feminist critics forget *30 Rock*’s instability. Though a critical and award winning success, the program always had difficulty gaining a large audience and was frequently threatened with cancellation prior to its eventual demise in its final season of thirteen episodes (Eum, par. 2). Upon its final episode, Tina Fey suggested that the show should have been only twelve episodes long so audiences could bemoan the network for cancelling prematurely (Harp). The series did have a strong but small fan base. Even if Fey and her writers did want to provide hard-hitting criticisms, they did not have the capital to do so. Instead, the show negotiated within the boundaries of the sitcom and the network. Writers provided jokes that advance arguably leftist, progressive ideas, while at the same time acknowledging some of the faulty thinking or assumptions made by leftist progressive thinkers.

Feminist arguments against Lemon’s feminism and *30 Rock*’s vacillating nature when it comes to representation are useful. However, one can also read feminist representations on *30 Rock* as complicating the nature of a monolithic and perfected

feminism. Liz Lemon struggles with the politics of identity. On the one hand she is a fervent feminist who demands equality within the workplace and seeks to advance women's positions within society. On the other, are the ever-tempting offerings of capitalism and consumption; in other words, the overwhelming nature of postfeminist sensibility circulating in American culture through media. Fey's work serves to reinforce the temptations and difficulties in striving for an ideal feminism especially when feminism itself consists of a complicated knot of meanings. Lemon's feminism is always a struggle. If anything, Lemonism is about the complicated nature of being a feminist within a context that does not appreciate the political philosophies eschewed by feminism.

The tension is best expressed in the season five episode "TGS Hates Women" which famously lampoons popular feminist site Jezebel.com as well as popular media's representation of female comedians. One of the first jokes of the episode lampoons the purpose of popular blogs advocating feminism. When asked about the site JoanofSnark.com, Lemon replies "it's a really cool feminist website where women talk about how far we've come and which celebrities have the worst bikini bodies. Ruth Bader Ginsburg." Within a minute, popular feminism is criticized for its contradictory positioning which claims to empower women yet tears them down using methods similar to those used by the popular media it critiques. The following joke is directed inward when Lemon reads the site's article, "Why Does *TGS* Hate Women." Out of anger she retorts that the last episode aired featured only sketches about women. The scene flashbacks to sketches from that episode with Jenna playing Amelia Earhart, who crashes her plane because of her period, and Hillary Clinton, who, at a press conference,

demands that the United States nukes England after getting her period. Lemon tries to claim those jokes, clearly based in misogynist thinking, as ironic appropriations, but the attempt to argue drops off as she admits she doesn't know what irony means anymore. The true irony is the fact that the flashbacks *are* ironic as they point out Lemon's (and Fey's) own hypocrisy.

In response to JoanofSnark's criticisms, Lemon hires a young writer named Abby (Cristin Milioti) who has gained notoriety for her online video posts. Abby, however, turns out to be an infantilized woman who sucks her thumb, talks in a baby voice, and shamelessly flirts with her male colleagues. In an attempt to enlighten Abby, Lemon takes her to visit Eleanor Roosevelt's monument in Riverside Park. Lemon encourages Abby to drop the "sexy baby" act to which Abby contends it is not an act and criticizes Lemon for judging her based on her gender performativity. By the end of the episode, Lemon finds out that Abby *is* putting on a performance and reveals a video of her performing standup, which she also posts to JoanofSnark. Abby then admits it was a performance but one executed so she could hide from her ex-husband who has been stalking her. Upon leaving the writer's room, Abby yells, "You must really hate women, Liz. Liz Lemon is a Judas to ALL WOMANKIND." Liz awkwardly attempts to continue the writer's meeting, where the sketch they are discussing involves Wonder Woman getting her period.

The episode points to the varying nature of feminisms, comedians, and performances. JoanofSnark and Lemon are pointed out as hypocrites, despite their good intentions. Feminism in this way becomes multidimensional. Lemon learns that her perspective is not always right and mainstream feminism as advocated by JoanofSnark is

challenged and complicated. Lemon's belief that Abby was putting on an act in order to conform to societal expectations was wrong and rather than approach Abby on her level, she begins educating her with the assumption that she is not capable of forging her own identity. The episode does quite a bit in addressing the criticisms Fey has faced herself for hiring more male than female writers, frequently chastising over sexualized women, and backing off from hard-hitting feminist critique. At the same time, Fey also questions whether or not indulging or redirecting her efforts would mean progress for women. Fey challenges audience members to think of their position as it relates to women. Lemon makes a solid case for why women are important and female empowerment necessary but also asks feminists to consider their own positioning in the twenty-first century.

Poehler-izing Postfeminism and Feminism on *Parks and Recreation*

Though not a first, Tina Fey did reopen spaces for women on television. The attention paid to her abilities as a writer and performer coupled with the critical success of the program could have no doubt helped female writers, performers, and showrunners looking to break into television. *Chelsea Lately* (2007 -), *Parks and Recreation* (2009 -), *Two Broke Girls* (2011 -), *The New Girl* (2011 -), *The Mindy Kaling Project* (2012 -), *Don't Trust the B---- in Apartment 23* (2012), and *Whitney* (2011-13) in addition to those on cable, like *Sarah Silverman Program* (2007-10), were all developed after *30 Rock*. The popularity or critical success of these shows helped usher in others, creating building blocks from which women could pluralize representations of women on network television.

One of the major benefactors of *30 Rock* was its sister program, *Parks and Recreation*, and its star, Amy Poehler. She is neither the show's creator nor the head

writer; however, she is the central figure and a producer of the series. Additionally, Poehler has been cited amongst many as a no-holds barred personality, one who does not bend easily to expectations. Two comedians in particular have provided examples of Poehler's challenges to norms. First, Tina Fey writes in her book, *Bossy Pants*, of a moment of play between Poehler and Jimmy Fallon during a table read at *Saturday Night Live*. The anecdote is as follows:

Amy was in the middle of some nonsense with Seth Meyers at the table, and she did something vulgar as a joke. I can't remember what it was exactly, except it was dirty and loud and 'unladylike.' Jimmy Fallon, who was arguably the star of the show at the time, turned to her and in a faux-squeamish voice said, "Stop that! It's not cute! I don't like it." Amy dropped what she was doing, went black in the eyes for a second and wheeled around him. "I don't f**king care if you like it." Jimmy was visibly startled. Amy went right back to enjoying her ridiculous bit (142).

The incident acknowledges the rumors of *Saturday Night Live*'s identity as a boys' club, emphasizing Jimmy Fallon's stardom and the idea that there were jokes considered "unladylike." Poehler's instant reaction and admonishment of Fallon's nice guy misogyny underscores her refusal to play along with his joke. She does not empathetically laugh nor put up the pretense of pleasure in his joke. Poehler instead acknowledges Fallon's gender bias and challenges it aggressively, uncompromisingly. Fey continues to write:

With that exchange, a cosmic shift took place. Amy made it clear that she wasn't there to be cute. She wasn't there to play wives and girlfriends in

the boys' scenes. She was there to do what she wanted to do and she did not fucking care if you like it..." (143).

Fey, however, does not discuss this incident as an isolated event in *Saturday Night Live's* history. Instead, she uses Amy Poehler as an exemplar for feminism and encourages her readers to do what they do regardless of whether people like it (144-5). Fey specifically identifies this moment as a point of reflection within gendered comedy debates. She states:

I think of this whenever someone says to me, 'Jerry Lewis says women aren't funny,' or 'Christopher Hitchens says women aren't funny,' or 'Rick Fenderman says women aren't funny....Do you have anything to say to that? Yes. We don't fucking care if you like it (144).

Fey quickly clarifies that this statement is internal only, citing Jerry Lewis's charity work, Hitchens's illness, and Fenderman's nonexistence (144). The statement recognizes the debates around women's abilities as well as media outlets' attempts to use her as a go-to respondent on all topics relating to women and comedy, and as an exception. Finally, the statement also underscores Fey's political conviction and sense of collectivity as part of a community of women in comedy all working to defy stereotypes through their presence and work.

The celebratory nature of challenging a colleague could be read as purely a personal victory and one that aligns more with postfeminism. It is an individual victory as opposed to one that opens doors or breaks walls. I argue, however, that Fey's call to arms and its applicability to other industries and scenarios act more akin to a model of action in its refusal to conform to rules. Her change in personal pronouns from "I" to "We" alters

the statement in such a way as to encourage readers, who she assumes in the introduction are girls and women, to confront misogyny. Fey generalizes further by outlining for women ways in which they can negotiate those spaces by finding allies and proving oneself with their quality of work (145).

Another anecdote comes from *Saturday Night Live* alum Rachel Dratch's memoir, *Girl Walks into a Bar...: Comedy Calamities, Dating Disasters, and a Midlife Miracle*.

Dratch tells a story about being in a bar with Poehler, both pregnant:

One night, we went to a restaurant. She was more visibly pregnant than I, and the waiter asked if I would like a drink and then turned to Amy and said, "And *you* can't *have* a drink!" To which Amy shot dagger eyes and said pointedly, "Yes, I can! Don't stand between a pregnant lady and her wine" (201).

It is not simply about the personal politics within this decision to drink; t Poehler in this moment challenges assumptions toward women's bodies, pregnancy, and motherhood. Poehler's reaction not only startles the waiter but Dratch as well who does not perceive the waiter's question as anything insidious. Poehler's retort leads to a questioning of assumptions and a challenging of bodily comportment.

These two examples indicate Poehler's refusal to conform to expectations within personal interactions. The examples come from friends and peers, but Poehler comes up often as an influence for younger comedians like Audrey Plaza, Lena Dunham, and Mindy Kaling. Kaling even devotes a section of her book to her moment of admiration of Poehler and describes tracking her career from her brief appearances on *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* playing Andy Richter's little sister (131). The anecdotes also give

credence to Poehler's feminist persona off-screen as well as to the onscreen persona of Leslie Knope on *Parks and Recreation*. Many, like Mizejewski, contend that Knope is more of a feminist than Liz Lemon (10). As opposed to Lemon, Knope does not compromise her political beliefs. It is her unbending will that often becomes the butt of the joke but at the same time forms a character audiences empathize with and want to succeed.

Knope is the director of Parks and Recreation in the small town of Pawnee, Indiana. Even as a child, Knope idealized government service, considered it her civil service, and as a woman, her feminist obligation. Nobody else within her department has the same dedication and political fervor as Knope, but her earnestness often drives them out of complacency and to her rescue when incidents occur. Her unyielding nature, while commonly remarked as annoying to other characters, is also the trait they cite as most respectable or admirable. Knope is also quite adamant about asserting herself as a woman and is often confronted with issues of gender equality, and episodes quite frequently present gender issues to viewers.

Parks and Recreation's premiere in 2009 is significant in that it follows a watershed election in 2008. It was the first election where a woman, Senator Hillary Clinton, was a viable nominee for President. Vice president nominee and Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin rallied herds of conservative American women to help break the gendered glass ceiling of American politics. 2008 also marked the year the president elect was a person of color, Senator Barack Obama. The campaigns also breathed new life into late-night comedy, particularly when it came to Sarah Palin's personal life, mannerisms, and intelligence. One of the most cited sketches, and in fact political caricatures, was on

Saturday Night Live and featured both Tina Fey and Amy Poehler playing Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton respectively. Fey returned specifically to play the Governor due to their incredible likeness and Poehler, who though neither an impressionist nor bears likeness to the Senator, was thought best to represent a firmly established candidate. The premise of the sketch was that both women were coming together to address the misogyny that had surrounded them in this election. By this time, Clinton was no longer in the race but within the sketch appeared to “cross the aisle” and address the media’s sexism.

Poehler was still a cast member on *Saturday Night Live* while performing as Clinton and during that time had also been co-host of the program’s “Weekend Update” segment. Those familiar with *Saturday Night Live* or interested in the election were then confronted by Amy Poehler’s likeness quite frequently, either physically embodying discourse in taking on a character or deconstructing political rhetoric as a “news persona.” It is natural, then, for Poehler’s first sitcom to focus on politics and touch upon current events.

Knope has pictures of Janet Reno, Madeline Albright, and Hillary Clinton scattered throughout her office in addition to the political biographies she has lined up behind her desk. Leslie Knope is constructed as an ideal politician working and negotiating with corrupt institutional structures. Knope also strives to support women and women’s issues and combats misogyny in her daily interactions with colleagues. In the introductory season, Knope continually references the significance of her position as a woman in politics and her refusal to allow gender stereotypes and bias to keep her from her job. The episode “Boys’ Club” takes this head on as she “breaks into the boys’ club”

of Pawnee's city managers drinking in the government courtyard after work. After the party runs out of liquor, she takes bottles of wine from a gift basket donated to the department and one she had refused to let others take due to possible ethics violations. Realizing her hypocrisy the day after, she makes a tearful apology into the camera:

[A]fter taking the wine from the basket – I let down every female in public office – I would like to take time to apologize to each and every one of them in alphabetical order [puts down the pictures in her office]:

Michelle Bachman. Republican. Minnesota. I'm sorry. Tammy Baldwin. Democrat. Wisconsin. I'm so sorry, Tammy. Melissa Beane... ("Boys' Club").

Knopes's desire to break the glass ceiling in the case of breaking into a social boys' club falters and in doing so we see her own acknowledgement of wrong-doing in addition to the sense of responsibility she holds as a woman in public office.

The humor is most often derived from Knope's idealism amidst the cynicism both diegetically and non-diegetically communicated. The program is filmed as a mockumentary, which allows for many pregnant pauses, "stolen" footage, and characters' awareness of being filmed. These techniques stress points in which characters' realities do not mesh with their constructed identities or performances. In "Canvassing," the audience meets Knope's mother, Marlene Griggs-Knope, who is also a city official in Pawnee. In a brief interview with the documentary crew, she stares into the camera and says, "I want my daughter to be successful, which is why I am always telling her it's ok to be a wife and mother" ("Canvassing"). The camera lingers for a second before cutting to Leslie in a different scene. This interaction establishes a handful of implicit meanings

audiences members can interpret. First, is the relationship between mother and daughter. Leslie goes into her mother's office to seek advice about a public forum for a park she wants to build, trusting her mother as a powerful, meaningful personal and political figure. Marlene's statement suggests those feelings are not mutual, in the sense that she does not believe in her daughter's political game.

Second, is the patronizing nature of the comment itself and the denigrating way in which it is posed to the crew. Marlene also positions the disconnection between domesticity and politics insinuating that the two are mutually exclusive and that the former is of less value. Leslie might as well be a wife and mother, because she is not a good politician. The irony is that Marlene herself is able to do both. The line itself is humorous, but there is an additional sense of pleasure in the brazen confession. Marlene is sure to distinguish her motherly love for Leslie, but this is a mother much more cutting and biting.

The cynicism toward politics and institutions is revealed in moments where Leslie's own idealism falters. In "Woman of the Year," the Pawnee chapter of the Indiana Organization of Woman (IOW) awards her boss Ron (Nick Offerman) with the Woman of the Year award. Leslie has coveted the distinction since she was a young girl and was convinced she would be awarded for creating "Camp Athena," a camp for at-risk teen girls. The episode is filled with false misogyny as Ron teases her about winning the award. He questions whether a cooking pot would be a better prop than an Executive Director Barbie fashioned after Knope for the IOW's publicity. He eventually calls a meeting between himself, Knope, and the IOW to refuse the award and nominate Knope

in his stead. The representative finally reveals why a man won the award in the first place:

Well, uh, every year we give it to a woman and frankly nobody cares. The media has all but written us off as a niche interest group. But if you give a woman's award to some mustachioed masculine man such as yourself, well then eventually people take notice. ("Woman of the Year")

The footage cuts to Knope in her office yelling into the camera "The IOW is a bunch of sexist jerks who need to get back to the kitchen where they belong and let the real feminist work be done by the real feminists like Ron Swanson. Oh my God what is happening?" Despite the rapidity in which the conversation occurs, the political meanings and implications are firmly entrenched. In order for women's organizations to be recognized they must honor men or acknowledge masculinity. Implicitly communicated as well is the nature of negotiation of feminism within postfeminism. The perceived need for the organization to move away from celebrating women with a feminist award acknowledges the lack of interest or need for feminism, indifference toward issues of equality, and a lack of acknowledgement of women's labor and political participation.

The guise of a documentary also enables the crew to "steal" scenes that spawn embarrassing or simply secret moments characters try to hide from the camera. Their awareness also filters into the act of performing for the camera to some extent—their decisions concerning what they should disclose versus what is private and the tension between what the documentary should be about (presumably politics in a small town) and the interesting side dramas that occur around the plot. The sense of spontaneity is also enhanced by a fair amount of improvisation featured on the show. On *Inside the Actor's*

Studio, Poehler mentioned the flexibility of the creators and other performers when it came to adlibbing despite, she adds, already written and great scripts (“Amy Poehler”). The sense of liveness allowed in this dynamic creates more possibilities for those performing the lines, particularly Poehler, who like Fey, started by doing Improv in Chicago and started her own theater in New York with the group Upright Citizens Brigade.

Poehler herself is an actor and producer of the show and has written three episodes. She is not the head writer as Fey is on *30 Rock*, but like Lucille Ball in the 1950s, is treated by cast and crew as a central figure in determining the direction of the program. One example comes from co-creator Michael Schur who credits Poehler with casting comedian Louis C.K. as a love interest. During a Paley Fest talkback session, Schur claimed that the part was originally written as a young, handsome, hard-bodied police officer. When consulting Poehler regarding the part, she suggested Louis C.K. Schur points out the stark difference between the character as written down and the actor, who is older than Poehler, balding, and not fitting of the type of masculinity called for in the script. Poehler, however, pointed to CK’s ability as a comedian and that at the end of the day, the program should focus more on the comedy (*Paley Center for Media*). It is also significant that Poehler chose to cast somebody more equal than what the script originally called for and though it is unclear if script changes had to be made in order to compensate for the changes in the character, the nature of the relationship and the power dynamics within that romance would most likely have been altered, if not interpreted differently by the audience, had Knope been paired with a younger, physically fit police officer. It can also be assumed that Poehler’s “I don’t care if you like it” attitude

remains, and as a producer and performer she retains agency over her character and some of the narratives (though it is unclear whether or not negotiations or arguments have occurred).

Decisions are made to reinforce Knope's position as a woman within government, where episodes continually emphasize the lack of women represented, the explicit and institutional sexism that exists within the town of Pawnee, and the ways in which narratives and dialogues are applicable to other industries. In the episode "Women in Garbage" Knope and the other women come together to celebrate the work of Paula Hork, the first woman to serve on city council. Written by Norm Hiscock, the episode follows Knope's attempts to right the wrongs of misogyny in government. Hork recounts "the old days" where male councilmen "smoked cigars, snapped [her] bra, [and] wore mirrors on their shoes to look up [her] skirt" ("Women in Garbage"). In attempting to explain how much things have changed since Hork's time, Knope realizes that despite the thirty-year gap not much within Pawnee has changed. The men on the council, for example, do keep track of her menstrual cycle to counter decisions she makes as an official. When she calls for a meeting between departments to brainstorm solutions for how they can recruit more women in local government only men are sent to the meeting. Knope is only acknowledged for her ability to cater and is patronizingly dismissed from the meeting she called.

The remainder of the episode concentrates on Knope's attempt to convince the men in the government of women's ability to perform equal to (though Knope strives for better than) men. She and employee April (Aubrey Plaza) decide that in order to prove women's capabilities they will take on the least equitable department: sanitation. For the

day, they resolve to work the route as garbage “men.” They even start outperforming the men on the usual route, moving more quickly. Upon their gloating, the usual workers take them on a detour to move a refrigeration unit from a restaurant’s parking lot. The two women attempt to move it between the both of them but fail. At first, this could be perceived as the show’s means to discredit women as physically weak or even a patronizing attempt to indicate that while women are strong and determined, their bodies prevent them from fully realizing their goals. It appears as a slight indulgence in essentialism. However, it is revealed that the unit has been a problem for the men as well who are also unable to move the refrigerator. Knope is told by the owner that the unit actually works. Knope takes the opportunity to call three women from the local soup kitchen who not only move the refrigerator but agree to return it to their kitchen and put it to use. When the men return and observes that the women figured out a way to not only move the obstacle but also to not waste the opportunity, they finally give in and the narrative cuts to the women from the soup kitchen dressed in sanitation uniforms, the implication being that they have recently been hired to work for the sanitation department.

This metanarrative strengthens the fact that women are more than capable of participating in government at multiple levels. It reexamines common arguments launched against women and feminists that contend that women are unable to bear the challenges associated with “hard labor.” The episode, along with the arc of the series in general, reinforces the benefit of collectivity and cooperation. April’s willingness to help Leslie goes against April’s overall disinterest in most things. Women come together to solve the problem and in doing so find ways to help others, which represent, if not

feminist thinking, alliances with the feminist movements' ideologies. Rather than what is arguably the wishy-washiness or murky feminism represented in *30 Rock*, *Parks and Recreation* is able to maintain the balance between ideology and comedy.

“Women in Garbage” symbolically offers itself as a guide to the continued debates regarding women comedy writers. The narratives of the past provided by Hork are similar to those women who started out as writers, like Kalish and Davis in the early days of television. The various exclusions and instances of discrimination—patronization, fraternity, and harassment—are threads that bind media and politics. Though both industries have expanded, with more attempts at inclusion, institutionalized sexism remains. Writers for comedy, despite popular media's recent penchant for celebrating women comedians, remain rare. A mere 28% of the people working behind the 2011-12 situation comedies were women (Lauzen). That percentage includes directors, cinematographers, writers, and producers which means those individual numbers are significantly less. However, as noted by the study, these numbers have increased from the previous season, marking signs of improvement but still highlighting the limitations for institutions affected by institutional misogyny. Poehler's frequent recruitment by popular magazines, newspapers, and blogs to answer the question “are women funny?” no doubt have an effect on an episode challenging gender stereotypes.

What is perhaps even more remarkable than Poehler's star power and acceptance by critics and audiences for her work on *Parks and Recreation* is the work she is producing and distributing through other networks and online for young girls. *Smart Girls at the Party* is a web series distributed free through Poehler's YouTube channel called *Smart Girls*. In each episode, Poehler takes the time to acknowledge young

women's successes as athletes, academics, activists and/or discuss their life goals, pursuits, and hobbies. The objective is to focus on girls who are actively engaged in their surroundings, who strive for achieving something outside of personal relationships or socially set beauty standards. Each webisode aims to educate the audience and encourage viewers to pursue challenging activities or to participate in their communities.

At the beginning of each program, Poehler provides the show's introduction: "Welcome to *Smart Girls at the Party*. The show that celebrates individuals who are changing the world by simply being themselves." The statement itself is gender neutral, avoiding exceptionalism. Those interviewed on the show are not only being interviewed because they are girls who do non-girly things like drag racing or boxing, but because they are part of communities not typically thought of as "girl friendly." The show even cuts to the interviewees participating in their craft or activity, demonstrating what it is they do. The visual cue helps show the practicality, the reality of the situation, essentially, that what these girls do is not impossible. The series emphasizes emotional strength, intelligence, and activity. More importantly, the show reinforces Poehler's sense of "not giving a fuck if you like it," through privileging those who are being themselves and in doing so are changing the world.

Poehler also produces and stars in the animated program *The Mighty B!* which follows the exploits of a Honeybee Scout (akin to Girl Scouts), an incredibly driven and precocious girl named Bessie. Living in San Francisco with her single-mother and brother, Bee spends each episode trying to accumulate badges. While at times her energy is represented as overwhelming, overall the program privileges her intelligence, determination, and self-reliance. Her character is frequently pitted against another group

of girls in her troop lead by the popular Portia who represents a more traditional model of girlhood. Portia concerns herself with maintaining her status as a popular girl who dotes on her looks. Portia is not stupid; rather, she is quite intelligent as she manipulates situations to compete with Bee. Whereas Portia is concerned with her social standing, Bee remains focused on completing and surpassing goals. She is able to build a robot with artificial intelligence to compete in a science fair, learns how to play drums in order to be in a band, and overcomes her fear of the woods through rationalizing her fears. The program presents a model of girlhood rarely seen in children's programming. She is not a superhero, though she imagines herself to be, nor does she idealize traditional modes of femininity.

Poehler is involved in creating programming for girls, adolescents, and adults. Each of them contributes in some way in spreading positive messages about girls and women while also attempting to court a mass audience. Both are rare in television programming. Poehler's success and star power allow her to pursue these as options. Though arguably anybody could produce a *Smart Girls* which is a simple, bare-bones, interview web-series, Poehler is the major draw. Likewise, Poehler as a crossover into children's programming also brings in adult fans in addition to those with children who recognize the possibility of the multigenerational appeal of the program.

The fact that Poehler is using her power within the industry to produce positive programming for women of all ages with various access points demonstrates one way in which women continue to negotiate their politics in television. Fey and Poehler act as models for how feminism can be incorporated into network television which often serves mainstream, middlebrow tastes. What is possible on subscription, which often pushes

ideological buttons and boundaries, is not as possible on network. Fey's mixture of the absurd with lighthearted prodding of contemporary feminism is one way to slowly incorporate more empowering but complicated female icons. Poehler's continual affirmation of women's abilities within *Parks and Recreation* continues the thread, though the focus on a female figure in politics offers more ways to explicitly discuss/lampoon political ideologies. Her work in other areas, like *Smart Girls* and *The Mighty B!* also validate the importance Poehler places on building support networks for girls and offering alternative models of girlhood to traditional representations of "girl power."

Negotiating Molds

Fey and Poehler stand out as contemporary beacons because not only are they strong female voices in a field continually referred to as a boys' club by popular presses, but because they have also been able to negotiate within the gendered lines of television comedy to gain mainstream popularity rather than niche status. Mainstream status implies that they are popular with young, white, male viewers, that is, comedy tastemakers. Though others have broken through to network television, their status as niche remains. Fey and Poehler are the prototypes for the female oriented programming that followed. Though, again, not necessarily the most financially successful programs, *30 Rock* and *Parks and Recreation* are regarded as "quality" programming.

Without either women or programs it is hard to determine whether or not others like *The Mindy Kaling Project*, *The New Girl*, *Two Broke Girls*, *The B---- in Apartment 23*—all of which emerged relatively soon after *30 Rock* and *Parks and Recreation* began—would have been pursued by executives. Unlike Fey and Poehler's programs, the

others have been dismissed as women's programs. Becoming "niched" texts, these programs no longer follow the path established by Fey and Poehler. It is not that these shows do not strive to promote women's issues, but they more often than not indulge in promoting postfeminism. There are examples of empowerment or conversations between women about women that open up spaces of dialogue. For example Mindy Kaling's character in *The Mindy Kaling Project*, Mindy Lahiri, is a gynecologist and every so often the show refers to women's bodies and health. *The New Girl*, created by showrunner and fempire member Elizabeth Meriwether, has featured conversations about women's pleasure and frequently deconstructs masculinity. While these programs feature women in major roles and provide insights into women's lives, the comedy rarely packs the same punch as either *30 Rock* or *Parks and Recreation*.

In a piece for *Vulture* entitled "Can Whitney Cummings Get Respect?" author Vanessa Grigoriadis painstakingly gives reasons why Cummings should be given more credit for having two sitcoms on network television and simultaneously working on a late-night talk show. Grigoriadis compares Cummings to Louis C.K., whose show *Louie* (2010 -) has become a critical success: "Unlike Saint Louis C.K. who can do no wrong, Cummings, panned by critics and bloggers, has a hard time proving she can do anything right," (par. 2) and unlike the other women currently producing comedies for television she's the damaged woman, the one who covers up her scars by being too loud and too hard, and overcompensates for being emotionally unavailable by wearing her sexuality on her sleeve instead of hiding it behind baby fat or "adorkable-ness" (par. 2).

The latter points made are slight digs at Lena Dunham, Mindy Kaling, and Zooey Deschanel whose shows are either popular with critics, audiences, or both. This foray into

criticism by Grigoriadis, though well intentioned as supportive of Cummings, also shows the ideological issues at play in critiques of women's comedies. Rather than acknowledging the amount of criticism directed toward Cummings's way as based within a larger gender issue in the media, Grigoriadis unfairly pits Cummings against other women comedians. There is no mention of the fact that the sitcoms of those above writers are different types of sitcoms, all of which differ from the traditional sitcom format Cummings has chosen. Nor does Grigoriadis mention the difference in networks, with Cummings firmly entrenched in network television with *Two Broke Girls* on CBS and *Whitney* on NBC, as opposed to HBO and Fox. There is no need to pit the women against each other and it is hard to imagine male comedians being pitted against each other in the same way.

The example above accentuates the ways in which comedy programs featuring and about women are thought to purely appeal to niche markets as opposed to the mainstream, referred to as lesser in comparison to male texts, and are lumped together in one group based on the gender of the main characters and writers. *30 Rock* and *Parks and Recreation* differ slightly in the fact that while both are noted for the female comedians on the show, are about women who hold positions of authority and power, feature feminist rhetoric, and deconstruct patriarchal attitudes they are nevertheless not treated like token or niche programming. Tina Fey and Amy Poehler have been marked as iconic female comedians, but in a sense they have been able to negotiate the masculine worlds associated with comedy.

In *We Killed!* women who worked with and for Tina Fey discuss the difference between her comedy and that of other women writers. According to the comedians, Tina

Fey's humor fits more with joke telling than character building, the former characterized as more masculine (248-9). Ana Gasteyer, *Saturday Night Live* cast member from 1996-2002, states, "This is a generalization, but I think Tina was almost more of a guy in her approach to comedy and Will Ferrell was more of a girl" (253). The difference, given by the comedians, is the gender assignment of comedy: men tell jokes, women perform characters. Elaborating on the difference further is Emily Spivey, a former writer for the sketch show:

If there was a way that character pieces weren't perceived as feminine and concept pieces weren't perceived as more masculine, but that's just the way it is. Perhaps I'm speaking out of turn, but I feel like a lot of the character stuff is generated by women ... Maybe that's because women are just more emotional and they're gonna notice the softer, more emotional side of things, and that's really what a good character is (249).

Paula Pell, another writer for *Saturday Night Live*, explains it by breaking it down further to funny situations vs. funny people (248), the former masculine and the latter feminine. Pell characterizes funny situations as a brand of comedy that aims to make fun of people by watching them fail. The comedic pleasure in characters is watching and identifying with their quirks and peccadilloes. It could perhaps be the difference between laughing AT people and laughing WITH people.

Tina Fey's ability to adopt or adapt situational humor is what isolates her as the favorite and championed female comedian. *30 Rock* can be sympathetic, but more often than not encourages the audience to laugh at characters through verbal wit and physical gags. Relationships are built and there are sentimental moments that remind the audience

of the surrogate family structure that helps mark the genre, but the show is more based in concepts than characters. Amy Poehler is no doubt respected by her peers as a comedian in her own right, has been nominated numerous times for her performances on *Parks and Recreation*, is a late-night talk show favorite and has, along with Fey, hosted *The Golden Globes* in 2013. Poehler does not have the authorial control that Fey enjoys (though even Fey has admitted to losing track of the writing), but her role as producer and star has been lauded as something that shaped the show.

In relating the pleasure of working on the show to an audience at Paley Media Fest in 2011, Poehler stated that the majority of talented people were nice and pleasant to work with and that the cast, being made up of talented people, provided a solid work environment. Actor Chris Pratt interjected, claiming that not all talented people, particularly those on the top of the call sheet, were pleasant and the fact that Poehler was not only nice but supportive of others' work was rare and what helped make the show stronger (*Paley Center for Media*). Comedian Retta had similar comments at the Paley Fest discussion, claiming that her role as a background performer was expanded upon based on Poehler's recognition of Retta's comedic timing during rehearsals. Likewise, Poehler's interest in building women's confidence and strength in their identity runs throughout the program as narratives continually reinforce feminist politics. Be it acknowledging the lack of women in politics, referencing contemporary feminists like Naomi Wolf, or its emphasis on the benefits of collaboration and teambuilding *Parks and Recreation* incorporates palatable feminism for mainstream audiences.

The significance of women's presence on network television needs to be emphasized. While many would criticize television programs as not being political

enough, they ignore the importance of exposure when it comes to marketing in creative industries. The success of these shows become critical because there is so much invested in them as representatives of a demographic often marginalized. The fact that each is doing comedy, controlling their own representation, and privilege different forms of performance and aesthetics is important. They demonstrate that not all women are the same, share the same sense of humor, or have similar understandings of how the world works. More work is required to improve diversity on television especially for women of color, but within a capitalist conglomeration such as media, women's recent interventions provide another step toward equality, complexity, and plurality. Granted, these are arguments that have been made at least since the 1970s and I am hesitant to claim this contemporary moment as revolutionary, as it would echo the same contentions made for *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* or *Roseanne*. These programs were and are influential, but they have not revolutionized television programming or their industrial context to the point of bringing about an era of equality among sexes.

CHAPTER 4: ROLE PLAY, PRIVILEGE, AND QUALITY CABLE

In an interview with the Paley Center, Jenji Kohan, creator and writer of Showtime's *Weeds*, joked that after becoming frustrated with network television she "traded money for freedom" when signing with the subscription network ("Weeds – How the Show Got Started"). This is a theme that runs through the narratives of many creatives who choose to work on paid cable services as opposed to network television. Nora Ephron commented for *Vanity Fair* that there appeared to be more women comedians because men alone could not fill the many hours that cable television offered to audiences (Stanley, par. 6). Ephron's comments denote the relevance of television's expansion into niche marketing, which Lotz defined in *Redesigning Women* as the industry's acceptance of the female demographic as significant (7). However, Lotz also relates the rise of complex female characters to cable dramas rather than to comedies.

In her acceptance speech for "Best Actress in a Television Series – Drama," in 2013, Claire Danes thanked her fellow nominees for having "on their own contributed to making television this wonderfully rich place for really dynamic, complex, bold female characters." She went on to say, "I'm very proud to be working in this medium, at this moment, in this company" (70th *Annual Golden Globes*). This was the same year in which *Homeland* (2011 -) won Best Drama for the second year in a row and HBO's *Girls* won Best Comedy after its first season of only ten 30-minute episodes, or approximately five hours of television. The two final awards of the night were given to shows about women, one of which was a comedy authored by a woman.

In her speech, Danes credited Showtime, known popularly, along with HBO, for being part of the effort to revamp the way television looks by moving more toward a cinematic aesthetic. Avenues for serialized entertainment now exist on television and online and are fast approaching what Lotz has called the post-network era. Viewers have more access points for seeking their programs. With increased spaces, women's representations have increased, been more multi-dimensional and controversial.

Due to the differing restrictions for cable and network television, the former is able to pursue more contentious storylines and portray nudity, sex, drugs, and violence more graphically. Networks such as HBO, Showtime, and Starz have also opened up opportunities for portrayals of women, with some of their more successful programs, drama and comedy, having female protagonists. Series like *Homeland*, *Nurse Jackie* (2009 -), *Weeds*, *The Big C* (2010 -) have provided alternatives to the stock mothers and wives stereotypes with their complicated representations of women. While portrayals of wives and mothers persist, they do not conform easily to set stereotypes. Programming on these networks highlight dissatisfactions with the "types" provided for women and particularly complicates how these roles have been portrayed within postfeminist texts.

Using Diablo Cody's *The United States of Tara* and Lena Dunham's *Girls* as primary examples, the following will discuss the ways in which authorship, audience, and industry converge in ways that help dissect postfeminist texts within a postfeminist culture. Both Cody and Dunham utilize ideas associated with postfeminism, like girl culture, independence through consumption, and the perception that feminist causes are no longer relevant to comment on and critique culture. They do so, however, not to

reinscribe a postfeminist sensibility, but to counteract the idea of postfeminism with examples of continuing gendered inequalities.

Post- and Third-Wave Sensibilities

Rosalind Gill contends that postfeminism is often discussed in three different ways: as an epistemological break, a historical shift, and as part of a feminist backlash (*Gender and Media*, 250-253). For Gill, however, postfeminist media should be discussed as a sensibility rather than an object, as a circulation of convergent ideas and identities rather than a static and easily identifiable thing (254). Postfeminism is a construction of multiple discourses, influenced by a feminist backlash—accounted for by those like Susan Faludi—and the rise of postmodernism and self-reflexivity in media. In Dow’s *Prime-Time Feminism* she begins discussing postfeminism in relation to the feminist backlash that emerged in the 1980s. Many moved away from activism believing it to focus more on empty complaints than on enacting change (89). Women gained footholds within the television industry, but rather than continue their joint pursuits to further open up spaces, disseminate power further, and advocate for further equality, had to prove themselves at individual levels.

Angela McRobbie’s work has been instrumental in defining postfeminism, particularly in comparison to Third Wave feminism. In “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” McRobbie notes popular culture’s use of feminist discourse as a lifestyle choice as opposed to a political necessity. She writes:

[P]ost-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to

install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasize that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force (256).

In this construction, feminism is assumed to have accomplished its goals as women are represented holding occupations associated with men, such as lawyers, doctors, and/or law enforcement; such programs also do little to acknowledge continued sexism within those occupations and additionally represent women as unfulfilled within these positions (257). In achieving economic success, women in film and television are often framed as discontented until they have found a person to marry and with whom they can have children. Women are then still defined by domesticity. They are represented as having choices, but their need to have children is what ultimately returns them to their traditional roles of wives and mothers (260). Despite the fact that feminism opened up many choices for women, the continual representation of women as dissatisfied only with their personal lives and not with issues relating to wage gaps, sexual harassment, or glass ceilings makes feminism seem like something that is creating more anxiety than changing misogynist thinking. Beliefs in achievement circulate within the culture, entering into public consciousness through television, film, popular literature, and magazines. As Gill accentuates throughout *Gender and Media*, the continued reassurance of success and emphasis on individual accomplishment builds and reinforces a sensibility that women's roles have changed, their choices are theirs, and not part of larger and more complex cultural and/or ideological processes.

Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra in their introduction to *Interrogating Postfeminism* further construct postfeminism as a commodity more so than practice. For these authors, postfeminism works to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as

empowered consumer. Thus, postfeminist culture emphasizes educational and professional opportunities for women and girls; freedom of choice with respect to work, domesticity, and parenting; and physical and particularly sexual empowerment (2). The successful woman becomes a commercial type, ready to sell products and a lifestyle for film and television. Because trope has become a recognizable character, it underscores the taken-for-grantedness of feminism (5). As opposed to the struggles seen in television in the 1970s and 1980s, the 90s and 00s have shown women as somewhat equal to men and in some cases have worked towards “bettering” them through sarcasm or irony.

The major assumption that “feminism is over” ignores, however, the continuance of feminist activism through third-wave feminism. Second-wavers speak as if feminism ended with them, a generational construction which, as Hogeland argues in “Against Generational Thinking, or, Some things that ‘Third Wave’ Feminism Isn’t,” further divides activists, based along age lines. Third-wave feminism encompasses concerns for issues relating to sex, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. The major thread is the opening up of feminism to include multiple meanings of femininity, various sexual identities, and issues such as race and class that help construct various subject positions. Shugart contends that third-wave feminists define themselves as everything second-wave was not and characterizes those affiliated with this wave as rebellious teenagers, treating them not as a continuation but as a shift in a new direction (195). Her treatment of what she refers to as a “so-called” movement also highlights the confusing nature of third-wave feminism (194).

Hogeland outlines arguments made against third-wave feminism based on generational thinking, where older feminists assume that the new generation of young

women are taking advantage of the changes due to feminism but not carrying on the activism necessary to maintain or make further progress toward equality (107-8). She points out that the changes in attitudes are not due to a lack of concern or care but because of the flexibility of contemporary feminism and the ways in which advocating feminism has changed (110). She argues that perceptions of difference between generations of feminists is detrimental, as it pits waves of women against each other rather than open up spaces for dialogue and collaboration (118).

Hogeland advocates for non-generational feminist approaches, but does acknowledge differences between contemporary and older feminism based on cultural shifts and technological developments. The generational differences experienced by the contemporary feminists—the ability to see what has happened before, the attempt to surpass it, and being sold conflicting images of femininity—are often what cause the most anxiety. Disagreements over what constitutes “womanhood,” what feminism is and isn’t, and who or what is a good representation become contentious and confusing when examining popular culture.

Cable Television for the Ladies

The history of subscription cable runs parallel to and intersects with network cable’s development. Emerging in the 1970s, cable and satellite feeds were experimented with and offered as an alternative, though, as fledgling stations, they had little to offer. Networks like Home Box Office (HBO) and Showtime, which began in 1972 and 1976 respectively, had beginnings similar to those of the networks in the 1950s. They offered several hours of programming a day, which most often meant films, to a limited audience. Because these channels worked outside of the network system, they had freer

reigns with representation. The lack of commercial incentive to keep the content mild to ensure the widest audience available enabled subscription cable channels more flexibility with language, nudity, and thematic content. For more than twenty years, HBO and Showtime lay under the surface and throughout the 90s ushered in cult comedies.

HBO garnered a reputation for being a space for the comedian, hosting stand-up specials and showcases in addition to providing development deals for stand-ups to move to television. *Mr. Show with Bob and David* (1995-98), *Tracey Takes On...* (1996-99), *The Chris Rock Show* (1997-2000), and *Tenacious D* (1997-2000) all aired on HBO during the 1990s and offered comedians a space to try out more challenging comedic material in comparison to what they could do on network television. HBO kept a balance between absurdist sketch television and understated comedies (more frequently referred to as dramedies) like *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992-1998) and *Arli\$\$* (1996 – 2002).

Similarly, *Showtime* experimented with original programming, producing in the 1980s cult science fiction programs like *The Outer Limits* (1995-2002) and *Stargate SG-1* (1997-2007). Like HBO, Showtime provided standup comedians showcases with programs such as *Super Dave* (1987-91); however, Showtime did not have HBO's comedic range. *Showtime* did, however, air a sitcom in 1998 entitled *Rude Awakening*, featuring cult star Sherilyn Fenn (from *Twin Peaks*), Lynn Redgrave, and Rain Pryor. The narrative involved a former child star Billie Frank's (Fenn) struggle with alcoholism. The show echoed a past history of television, rather than the cinematic aesthetic affiliated later with subscription cable. All action took place on sets, rather than on-location, the acting was exaggerated for comedic effect, and one-liners and sexual innuendos were used heavily throughout the series. Jokes regarding Billie's promiscuity, her sister-in-

law's Christianity, and Frank's mother's disregard (Redgrave performing as Joanna Lumley's *Absolutely Fabulous* character, Patsy) were sprinkled throughout, often without context. The series aired for three seasons, but there is little evidence it existed in the first place, as no DVDs have been released, no videos posted on YouTube, and few torrents are available.

Rude Awakening may have had more impact if it had not been for *Sex and the City*'s debut a couple of months prior to its own. HBO garnered widespread critical acclaim with *Sex and the City*, a comedy about Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) and her three best friends' exploits and dramas in New York City. The program became the first subscription cable television show to win an Emmy and garnered a tremendous following. It was the network's first foray into original programming, but its wide appeal ushered in HBO's status as "must-see tv." The program ushered in new aesthetic practices for the sitcom and for representations of women. *Sex and the City* became a critical and audience darling, dominating television award shows, and was noted for changing the landscape of television. *Sex and the City* challenged and demonstrated the flexibility of the sitcom genre.

Intimacy and sex had already entered into mainstream television, but had never quite been the major focus of any program. Since the 1960s, single women became a new demographic and hence emerged from the margins into television and film (Lehman, 3). The links between *Sex and the City* and Helen Gurley Brown's groundbreaking 1963 book, *Sex and the Single Girl*, are evident as both highlight the pleasures of being single, economically independent, and sexually satisfied. The major difference, however, are the times in which they take place, with Brown's text slipping through during the emergence

of second wave feminist thought and activism, whereas *Sex and the City* operates within a moment where feminist issues are assumed to no longer be relevant. Despite operating within a postfeminist cultural sensibility, feminists have argued that the program continued to direct challenges toward patriarchy. Jane Gerhard, in “*Sex and the City*: Carrie Bradshaw’s Queer Postfeminism,” argued that the show, unlike *Sex and the Single Girl* and even the articles *Sex and the City* was based upon, focuses on the significance of Bradshaw’s friendships. According to Gerhard, the show’s creator, Darren Starr, “put Carrie in a web of committed relationships with other (straight) women. For this Carrie, sisterhood is indeed powerful if not political (39).

The significance of friendships within the series is further reiterated in Jane Arthurs’s insightful article, “Sex and the City and Consumer Culture: Remediating Postfeminist Drama.” Arthurs expands on outside representation to discuss the ways in which *Sex and the City* operates as a show within the multichannel system that mirrors the niche market model the magazine industry has been operating under for decades (84). The expansion of channels has allowed for more gendered programming, abandoning the “hybridisation of masculine and feminine genres that has characterized prime-time drama on network television” (84). The benefit of this system is that programs can be made that better address women’s issues because there are channels that either cater to women as a demographic or want to attract that demographic. HBO has not developed a reputation as a women’s network and has not really offered many programs directed toward women (though shows like *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* (2002-08) attract audiences across demographics); however, *Sex and the City* did speak to a demographic lacking on HBO as well as to those Arthurs refers to as middle-class bohemian (91). The ultimate

contradiction, however, is that while the program advocates feminist ideas like gender equality, the independence of the main characters comes through consumerism (95).

Whether the program maintains a balance relies on the viewer.

Sex and the City's popularity, however, was undeniable. *Sex and the City's* tone differed from most programs seen on network television. Like most subscription programs, the series was filmed more like a movie than a television show. The premise of the program was that each episode relayed scenarios from Carrie Bradshaw's sex column which featured relationships, awkward scenarios, and issues relating to single women in metropolitans. The majority of episodes began and ended with Bradshaw's inner monologue, a fairly uncommon thread in sitcom programming, where pithy dialogue allowed for conflict and comedic timing. Questions or issues posed by Carrie concerning relationships and sex also allowed for discontinuity within the narrative, with frequent cuts to "regular" New Yorkers responding to questions about favorite sexual positions or dirty secrets. These cuts, away from the main characters to those on the streets, assert both Carrie's significance as a journalist whose work responds to those on the streets, as well as the nature of the show, "revealing" what "real" people were thinking with regards to sex.

Though HBO and Showtime both allow lines to be crossed, viewers also began to expect cinematic quality. The aesthetic differences between *Sex and the City* and *Rude Awakening* were stark. Edgier content is not sufficient enough to move away from network television; rather, audiences were looking for television that surpassed the use of clear sets, three-camera set-ups, and joke writing. One way to help cultivate that subscription brand was to begin bringing those associated with the film industry to the

networks.

Diablo Cody and Lena Dunham: Third Wavers, Filmmakers, and Post-Fem Commentators

Diablo Cody and Lena Dunham's programs on the paid subscription networks Showtime and HBO represent complicated constructions of women's lives. Both authors are highly referential and belong to generations who have grown up surrounded by popular culture. Cody's *United States of Tara* and Dunham's *Girls* emphasize problems of postfeminist culture as well as difficulties in defining contemporary feminism. The former program, a deconstruction of the family sitcom, detangles narratives of motherhood through its representation of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). As opposed to the traditional family sitcom, which often reinforces motherhood, *Tara* continually questions the utility of the traditional family and ideal motherhood. Likewise, *Girls* demonstrates the ways in which contemporary femininity has been shaped by television. Continually compared to *Sex and the City* by critics, which is also acknowledged by writer Dunham as an influence, *Girls* represents post-*Sex and the City* femininity by featuring characters who went through adolescence with Carrie Bradshaw as a model of an urban, fashionable, single woman.

Though *Sex and the City* has been academically criticized for its representations of consumerism and privileged cast of female characters, the show has been popularly claimed as a hallmark for women on television, both critically recognized and popular with audiences. Rather than celebrating life as a single woman in New York City, Dunham's *Girls* unveils the anxieties and fears associated with postfeminist media representations. Both programs are comedically dark and provide complicated narratives,

fitting into the aesthetic and “quality” expectations of subscription cable channels like HBO and Showtime. As channels marketed to more “savvy” viewers, each author’s play with narrative conventions and more complicated characters would appear to fit into each channels niche; however, both programs have faced issues. *United States of Tara* was abruptly cancelled, unable to finish its narrative arc. *Girls* was quickly renewed for its second season, but Dunham and the show continue to be heavily criticized for lacking diversity, endorsing nepotism, and containing a lax narrative structure.

Cody and Dunham are also outspoken feminists and have been vocal about their position as women within film and television and their immersion in popular culture. For these reasons they are both admired and derided. As female authors, they are often ostracized or consulted only for their opinions on issues relating to gender and media. Such gendered separation not only acknowledges the disparities that exist along gendered lines, but essentialism can also lead to tokenism.

Diablo Cody: Deconstructing New Momism

Diablo Cody gained notoriety as a blogger turned author. Her blog, *The Pussy Ranch*, detailed her experience as an exotic dancer in Minneapolis and served as the basis for her book, *Candy Girl: A Year in the Life of an Unlikely Stripper*. The book is filled with insider details regarding the exploitative treatment of sex industry workers and demystifies the glamor often attached to stripper culture and the allure she has for the job as a sex-positive feminist. Cody acknowledges her position as a college educated, third-wave feminist who chooses her role within the industry as opposed to being economically forced into the job. Generationally, Diablo Cody straddles the line between a Generation

X-er and a Millennial. This places her as both a representative of the self-referential and slacker connotations given to the former and as a Godmother to millennial culture.

Cody's stratification is important as it is related to the ideological shifts from second to third wave feminism and postfeminism. In "Isn't it Ironic? The Intersection of Third-Wave Feminism and Generation X," Helene Shugart argues that third wave feminism is indicative of larger cultural shifts that formed Generation X. Shugart claims of Generation X, "few of their experiences and defining moments truly have been their own; rather, for the most part, they've seen it onscreen, and this explains their fascination with cultural icons and images" (134). Those approaching adolescence and twenties in the 90s were not only surrounded by popular culture, with access to television, film, music, but were also beneficiaries of television's cable expansion and home video entertainment (134).

Television's expansion provided airspace that needed to be filled—with reruns of television programs and airings of old films. Home video entertainment also enabled viewers to purchase and in turn own their favorite films, watch them repeatedly and in their own time. Likewise, home video also opened up the market, allowing studios to rerelease material in addition to smaller, lesser-known films, and thereby increasing their circulation. The growth of entertainment and Shugart's characterization of a population saturated with popular culture is evident in Diablo Cody's writings, and in fact, her reflexivity has become one of the hallmarks of her work.

The film *Juno* (Reitman, 2007), for example, relies on popular culture references to mark the main character as "cool" and indulges in discussions of music or culture rather than move along the plot. Cody's dialogue has become synonymous with cultural

play and consists of techno-slang, relying on the power of youth culture's penchant for "text speak." The script is littered with phrases like "Honest to Blog," "That ain't no Etch-A-Sketch. This is one doodle that can't be un-did, Homeskillet," and a slew of snark. The "fun" aspect of Cody's dialogue also helps offset the dramatic action of the film and the major questions of teen pregnancy, adoption, infertility, and marital failure. The film's tonal balance was widely discussed and resulted in Cody's Academy Award nomination and win. Cody's supreme adoration of popular culture has followed *Juno* in her next film, *Jennifer's Body* (Kusama, 2009), an homage to horror with a satirical bend. In *Young Adult* (Reitman, 2011), the main character is a ghostwriter of young adult novels with covers that resemble the *Sweet Valley Twin* series, an allusion to an adaptation project on which she has been working. Cody has built her reputation as somebody who not only consumes popular culture but also recirculates artifacts.

Her films are also self-aware as gendered narratives. All of her films to this point feature female protagonists in compromising positions where their intentions can be ambiguous and even unlikeable. *Jennifer's Body* parodies teen girl culture, especially the roles defined for them in popular culture which demarcates "good girls" from "sluts." Main character Jennifer (Megan Fox) becomes possessed within the narrative and begins to crave the flesh of male teenagers. The film parodies the idea of cannibalistic female sexuality and in doing so, also parodies the fear surrounding women's sexuality and pleasure. It is not so much fear of passive sexuality, or simply engaging in sexual activity but of a woman being a sexual aggressor. In *Young Adult*, main character Mavis returns home to try and reignite a romance with her old high school boyfriend. Mavis is fairly unsympathetic as a character and full of flaws as her depressive nature leads her further

into unlikeable territory. When asked about Cody's choice of characterization in the film she noted:

The conventional knowledge in Hollywood is that an unsympathetic female character can tank a movie. I'm hoping that's not true. I'm knocking on wood really emphatically right now but honestly I have a lot of theories. Sometimes I wonder if it comes down to mommy issues. The idea of a cold, unlikeable woman or a woman who is not in control of herself is genuinely frightening to people because it threatens civilization itself or threatens the American family (Silverstein, par. 3).

Cody goes on to note the ability of audiences to accept flawed male characters. The dearth of women playing unlikeable characters was something she wanted to change or at least play with in her films. When asked if she thought there were consequences to women speaking out for women's rights or advocating feminism in the industry, Cody responds:

I don't think the consequences are as obvious anymore, which is actually why they are more insidious. I know other women in the industry who have tried to insist to me that sexism does not exist, or that they themselves have not experienced it, or that I need to be quiet about feminism because we are all obviously making such great strides and I'm going to set us back by being the stereotypical shrill annoying feminist. And that just chafes my hide because no progress would ever be made in any area of discrimination if people were just quiet (par. 18).

Hollywood is indicted for its lack of support of women and female narratives and the fear associated with the “f-word,” as are postfeminist attitudes. Cody’s desire to reevaluate women’s representation by rewriting character scripts and challenging audiences marks her work.

Cody has even become a text herself. After the release and success of *Juno*, actress Ellen Page hosted *Saturday Night Live*. In Page’s opening monologue, comedian Andy Samberg parodied Cody. Interrupting Page dressed in a copy of Cody’s leopard print Oscar gown and pinup girl tattoo, “Cody” complains that Page is not delivering the monologue the way “she” wrote it and reminds Page of her Academy Award, after which, Page resumes reading the monologue, hesitantly. Page eventually complains and Cody exits, but not before making it known, in possibly an improvised joke, that “I [Cody] was a stripper” (“Ellen Page/Wilco,” 1 March 2008). Despite Ellen Page as host, the monologue is obsessed with Diablo Cody. Words like “monoblog” and “Snoop Bloggy Blog” are used at a rapid pace in order to highlight Cody’s appropriation of popular culture and the saturation of Cody’s texts with Cody Speak. Despite the spontaneity of Samberg’s “stripper” quote, it speaks to the larger cultural discourse centered around Cody and the media’s preoccupation with her past as a stripper and her ownership of a job commonly denigrated. On top of the playful parody of language, the monologue denotes the uncomfortable relationship between women who gain power and status within film and television industries.

Almost as soon as the film *Juno* became popular, Cody became instantly controversial. On the one hand, she was celebrated (almost condescendingly so) for her cleverness and balance between self-referential comedy and drama. On the other,

however, she was dismissed by critics for her outspokenness, sense of entitlement, and lack of industry decorum. Simply, Cody's behavior strays from that of conventional Hollywood women. Though not confrontational, Cody does not deny feminism as an influence on her work, nor distance herself from the "F" word. Diablo Cody, instead, has established herself, or rather, the industry has established her, as a resident Hollywood feminist. Whereas postfeminist culture has discouraged women from identifying or "coming out" as feminists, Cody has continually asserted her feminism. When promoting the film *Jennifer's Body*, Cody frequently referenced the film's feminist coding. During an interview with Jessica Wakeman from *The Frisky*, Cody was asked whether as a writer she felt an obligation to include feminist messages in her texts. Cody responded:

My feminist hat is permanently welded to my head – I definitely can't take it off! It's so important for me to write things from the female perspective and in service of women and in the roles for women. That's usually what I'm thinking going into it. Obviously, the story goes first. But then my next priority is how I am going to sneak my subversive feminist message into this (1).

Several points stand out about this interview and the question in particular. The focus placed on gender and the responsibility is placed on Cody (which she acknowledges in the interview) to represent women at all, in addition to the complexities associated with identity. The significance, at least for Wakeman and Cody, is having some type of representation of women in film. To date, Cody has written women-centric narratives; however, these narratives are also centered primarily on middle class, heterosexual, white women with little or no representation of women of color or various socioeconomic

positions. Her narratives are often of those with privilege. Yet the lack of distinction between intersecting oppression and identities indicates popular media's discomfort with issues of race, class, and sexuality. Representation of women at all is treated as a major accomplishment.

Cody Flipping the Familial Script

Cody's familiarity with generic play and homage, coupled with her focus on women, makes *United States of Tara* an especially compelling case study. Cody's authorship tests the bounds of what is possible to represent within the sitcom. Tara Greigson (Toni Collette) is the narrative focus. A woman diagnosed with Dissociative Identity Disorder in her late teens/early twenties, she has spent the past eighteen years attempting to control her disorder, while raising two children in the suburbs of Kansas City, Kansas. Tara works as an artist; she declares, "...I create opulent environments for women with too much money and I'm good at it" ("Pilot"). Working on commissioned projects allows her flexibility, as she constantly fears transitioning into her alters. Her husband, Max (John Corbett), is a landscaper and it is indicated several times throughout the seasons that they married soon after Tara became pregnant, at nineteen. Their reasons for staying together, however, shift throughout seasons, as their relationship is challenged by Tara's transitioning and search for the reason(s) behind her DID, in an attempt to understand the trauma that birthed the alters. Her daughter, Kate (Brie Larson), is a rebellious teenager but is represented not simply as a brat, but as a woman attempting to carve a space for herself as an individual amidst a family where the focus is always on her mother. A similar relationship is posed between Tara and her sister Charmaine (Rosemarie DeWitt) whose insecurity leads her into making rushed and questionable

choices regarding relationships. Despite at times appearing selfish and self-serving, she is one of Tara's greatest champions and support and as more is learned about Tara's abuse, the more their relationship is recognized as one of mutual protection. Finally, Marshall (Keir Gilchrist), Tara's son, is a highly sophisticated teenager who listens to Miles Davis and acts more as a caregiver to his mother and sister. His position changes, however, as he grows more and more into an adult and as his mother's alters become more challenging. T (an alter), for example, makes out with his first crush, which is quite a blow to Marshall as a young man pursuing his first relationship as a gay man. One of the major threads running through each relationship is the inability or refusal to differentiate between Tara's and her alters' actions.

When directly affected by her alters' behaviors and the conflicts they create, the characters are quick to blame Tara as mother, wife, and/or sister; however, when only a witness, each is quick to isolate the DID and remind others that it is not Tara. Embodied within these conversations and interactions are the identities associated with women as caretakers and Tara's inability to fully adhere to those positions. Within the text, it is difficult for her to act as a "normal" mother, wife, or sister while embodied by another person and thereby constantly losing time.

At first, the program appears to be a standard sitcom. The father and mother, two kids (one boy, one girl), and the suburbs compose the stereotypical sitcom family. The inclusion, however, of the mother's Dissociative Identity Disorder, the son's homosexuality, and the daughter's experiences with sexual assault and abuse pervert standard sitcom tropes. In an interview with the online publication *Vulture*, Cody discussed the difficulty in making a show such as *United States of Tara*:

I have to tell you, this show is a challenge, in terms of tone, and it's a struggle to write a half-hour comedy about mental illness. You look at that category in terms of Emmys or the Globes, and its stuff like *Two and a Half Men* and *Glee*. We couldn't be more different. Nobody gets molested on *Glee* and nobody turns feral and pisses on her son's bed, and that's something we did in our fifth episode. We have to be consistently funny but also, because we're about mental illness, have gravity (1).

Cody herself separates her program from traditional network sitcoms. CBS's *Two and a Half Men* has been treated as the final bastion of the traditional, three-camera sitcom, and Fox's *Glee* (2009 -), is an hour-long comedy that also mirrors the traditional after school special (though, arguably, is not a sitcom). As a sitcom, *Two and a Half Men* offers easily resolved narratives and setup-punch line joke structures that audiences have been overly familiar with. One of the fundamental differences between a show like *Two and a Half Men* and *United States of Tara* is that the latter is more challenging ideologically, aesthetically, and narratively.

Running for three seasons, it played with the conventions of melodrama and comedy, self-aware of the "afterschool special" quality of the disorder narrative that had been represented before, in addition to the complications in representing DID within a comedy. Both genres involve spectacle—the melodrama with overwhelming emotions, and comedy with laughter. The writers and performers subdue such expectations by focusing less on Tara's relationship with herself and more on the culture surrounding her that establishes certain "norms." The nature of "normal" is exposed and dissected throughout the series as each character's performance of these norms is challenged from

within the narrative. Max buckles under pressure to be the ideal husband and father, Kate comes to terms with the futility of her rebellion, and Marshall learns how to “perform” his homosexual identity.

The family sitcom is perhaps the most familiar comedic television template. Programs like *Leave it to Beaver*, *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960-68), *The Cosby Show*, and *Home Improvement* (1991-9) have developed the format with narratives focused on mischiefs within the family that cause brief moments of strife that are resolved (most often by parents) by the end of the credits. Though a majority of episodes contain rather relatively minor discords, there were also “very special” episodes that dealt with more serious topics, particularly tied to recent discourse. Teen pregnancy in *The Cosby Show*, gun violence in *Family Matters* (1989-98), for example, served to provide a public service to audiences and demonstrate the ability of television to go beyond entertaining audiences and into education. The family sitcom has helped establish familial norms through representation. The white suburban family with a mother, father, two children, and a pet pervades the family sitcom. There are sometimes some variations regarding race and class, but for the most part the majority of the sitcoms remain white, middle class, and heteronormative. While not as heavily referential as Cody’s other work, *United States of Tara* utilizes familiar tropes of the family sitcom to turn formulas on their head and disrupt expectations.

Tara “turns” when unable to directly confront an issue, particularly one that touches on the origin of her DID. Her alters are compelling characters, not only for the performances of each put in by Toni Collette, but for their place as Tara’s protectors and the reasons for their presence. Tara’s transitions occur because she is unable to confront

situations involving her family, like her daughter's rebellion, her son's distancing himself from his mother, and her husband's attempts to fix her. Many of the confrontations she faces from her family are due to the constructions of normality, which DID does not allow for in the traditional sense. Each character, however, comes to terms with the fact that for the family, this is their normal. For audiences, however, the show offers different challenges, particularly concerning definitions of motherhood, family, sanity, and normal.

United States of Tara counters criticisms of privileging individual experiences by emphasizing each character's own interactions with patriarchy, gender norms, and expectations. Despite Kate's easily recognizable confrontation with sexual harassment at her job as a server in a family restaurant, the majority of the series focuses on Tara attempting to figure out the trauma. She initially thought she was raped at boarding school, but it is discovered that she was actually abused much earlier as a child by her older half brother, which not only brings in discourses regarding child abuse and pedophilia, but also alludes to the multiple sexual attacks on Tara. Marshall is also derided for his refusal to conform to a hegemonic masculinity and choosing instead to bake, listen to jazz, and indulge in Louise Brooks' filmography. He often gets into bickering matches with Tara's male alter, Buck, a truck driver who bases much of his masculinity on his ability to consume various drugs and sex.

Gendered familial roles are heavily challenged within the series. Tara continually asserts her feelings of love and devotion for her children, which is expected of mothers. In a review of the first season, *Entertainment Weekly's* Ken Tucker claimed that his "pleasure was complicated by the idea that Tara-the-show is transfixing, but Tara-the-mom really ought to go back on her mood-steadying meds" (84). In a later essay in the

same publication, Mark Harris wrote of television's great "bad" mommies in Showtime's lineup. Writing of Tara, he suggests that she is ambivalent toward the way she treats her children, saying, "Her attitude is take-me-or-leave-me; the havoc that her personalities wreak is so irreparable that she hardly bothers to apologize" ("TV's Great Bad Mommies"). Harris does concede that Tara's position as mother opens up a space to discuss the ways in which parenting is regularly critiqued and reflects a culture in which parents are made to feel guilty. The way in which Tucker measures motherhood contradicts Collette's view in which she clarifies that Tara is "a flawed human being, but she tries her darnedest and loves her kids more than anything..." ("United States of Tara"). Noted by all three reviews is the break from traditional representation of sitcom mothers who are able to balance domestic responsibilities and work obligations.

While there may be a mishap or two for sitcom mothers, they are usually the voices of reason, supreme nurturers, and the steady backbone to the family unit. The husband and children within the family most often perpetrate the comedy with mother coming in to save the day and/or provide the social lesson to be learned by infractions. The fundamental difference between the traditional family sitcom and *Tara* is the fact that Tara is rarely in shape to play the part; instead, she is more often than not the person being taken care of than providing care. Tara's inability to fulfill the roles ascribed by popular culture causes frustration and conflict within the family.

This critical mode of representing motherhood has become a figurehead in subscription cable, as thus far a majority of Showtime's comedies have featured untraditional or questionable mothers. At the end of her book *Motherhood and Representation*, E. Ann Kaplan discusses the apparent shift of representations in

motherhood at the beginning of the 1980s, signifying the impact of technology and social movements on American culture. The inclusion of television, in particular, helped circulate cultural ideas at an even more rapid rate, providing audiences with more representations, though not necessarily a wider range (180). Kaplan notes a move in the 1980s toward representing mothers as uninvolved and bringing in fathers as nurturers (184). Films like *Kramer vs. Kramer* (Benton, 1979), *Mr. Mom* (Dragoti, 1983), and *Three Men and a Baby* (Nimoy, 1987) focused on representing the concerns of men who had to deal with the ramifications of women returning to work. Similarly, Kaplan shows how similar discourses come through in *Full House* (1987-95) and *My Two Dads* (1987-90), where groups of men are made responsible for child rearing, though with dead mothers rather than working ones.

Much could be traced back as a type of cultural challenge to the women's movements of the 1960s/70s and the surge of white middle-class women returning to work, as women of color and lower class women were rarely portrayed in these texts. Working mothers in the late 1980s and early 90s had somewhat more sympathetic representations than their earlier counterparts with *Murphy Brown*, *Roseanne*, and *Grace Under Fire* (1993-98) emerging as those attempting to balance the responsibilities of home and work. By the 2000s, however, women working became a norm. Single women and mothers were expected to provide voices of reason within the (surrogate) family and balance their work lives. While positively positioning women working as a part of everyday life, as opposed to the anxieties depicted in previous decades, new images were circulated concerning women's abilities to "have it all." Whereas the working mothers of

the late 80s struggled to make ends meet, those in the 00s were mostly just frustrated over their children not picking up their socks.

Authors Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels explore the role of media in constructing images in their popular book, *The Mommy Myth*. Postfeminism, they contend, has only opened up contradictory views of motherhood and wars over definitions. Popular culture insists women organize their children's lives, provide them with activities and attention to enable them to become better human beings, while at the same time fulfilling their "feminist" duty of working full time. Douglas and Michaels point to the impossible standards women are expected to achieve as mothers and the pressure on single women to join the motherhood club. They label the move toward motherhood "new momism," wherein motherhood is advocated as something that fulfills women, that must consume women physically and emotionally, and which assumes that women are more naturally inclined than men towards raising children (4). Plenty of parental manuals and books about various mothers' experiences have surfaced which discuss the pleasures and difficulties of parenting, some aiming to challenge the discourse around mothers.

The subject of motherhood also became a major focus on subscription cable's programming, particularly Showtime which developed *United States of Tara*, *Nurse Jackie*, *Weeds*, and *The Big C*, all of which were advertised as shows with untypical suburban moms, and all of which, through their modes of representation, pose the question of what constitutes a good mother, and provide characters whose identity as mother only plays a part in their construction of selves. Jackie is identified by her profession as a nurse with her family in the narrative background. Both her occupation

and social status make her foray into drug culture contradictory. In *Weeds*, Nancy Botwin is a widow who becomes a marijuana dealer in order to support her two sons.

Motherhood is only significant in the sense that it positions morality and criminality as exclusive discourses that require more unpacking. Botwin, as an anti-hero, also challenges the perceptions of suburban motherhood as all knowing, insightful, and perfect. Finally, *The Big C* positions a narrative where a woman abandons “mother” as her primary designation and pursues her own interest. Being diagnosed with cancer provides an enlightening experience and recognition that abandoning the self in order to achieve maternal ideals stunts personal development. Motherhood, for these networks, is flexible and a discursive construction rather than a static identity.

New momism is implicitly and directly challenged within *United States of Tara* in the way it features how difficult parenting can be when dealing with children, particularly teenagers, and even more so when challenged with mental disability. Important, as well, is the nature of representing caregiving. The alters that take over Tara’s body are doing so as Tara’s own caregiver. It is continually emphasized that their purpose is to stand in for Tara, to protect her. Tara’s frustrations over her inability to gain control over her mind and body are coupled with her perceived inability to be a caregiver to her family. But this representation also establishes the significance of each person within the familial unit as caregivers. Max cares for Tara and the children, and the children take care of each other as well as their mother and father. Tara’s little sister Charmaine cares for the entire family and often puts her own personal life on hold in order to do so. The hierarchies as represented in most domestic sitcoms are pointed out as failures because the family dynamic cannot exist as a 1:1 ratio; rather, the family unit is more dynamic in its power

structures. Third, are the multiple definitions of motherhood that transpire throughout the series which focus on the relationships between mothers and their children. By the end of the series, all the women become mothers. Kate becomes a stepmother to her boyfriend's child once they start discussing living together. Charmaine gives birth to a baby fathered by a man not her fiancé. All of these women are aware of the standards set before them of what "good" mothers should be, as reinforced by literature, film, and television. Their inability, however, to meet and achieve these goals create stress and anxiety.

United States of Tara and Showtime's mothers comment on and criticize traditional representations of the sitcom family. Due to the program's cancellation, there is no sense of conclusion. The program instead ends on a cliffhanger with Tara deciding, after a particularly violent episode, to check herself into a mental health facility for the safety of herself and her family. Each character has their own trajectory, but the lack of conclusion also means a lack of relief, which for a show that continually built dramatic tension, did not sit well with many viewers.

As a writer, Cody has played with the nature of adulthood with narratives of teenage pregnancy, teenage girls as monsters, and adults who refuse to leave their adolescence. One of the more compelling points about *United States of Tara* are the battles between ego and id that take place *within* Tara's own body, the difference between adulthood, children, and the thin connections that link both. The program's humor derives from the displeasure of Tara's negotiations. Though watching her go in and out of her identities presents complications in her life, especially as the audience learns more about her, the pleasure also lies in the freedom of her alters. The act of possession and pleasure runs through the entire series, but even as we find pleasure in the

perversion of characters like Teeny and Buck, the tragedy of Tara unable to control her body maintains a balance so as not to let the show become a parody of Dissociative Identity Disorder. Rather, Tara's character exemplifies not only issues of control, normativity, and how societal norms do not account for those with disabilities, but also just how difficult it is to perform normality within reality. It is either through the identification with characters or the relief in the audience's distance from the problems wherein humor lives.

The program operates within the heavily charged space of domesticity and motherhood, and is all the more heightened with the addition of DID, which is commonly misunderstood. The creators and writers take great care in negotiating this territory. In one story arch, Tara begins to work for and befriend Tiffany St. James (Jessica St. James), who is aware of Tara's narrative through Charmaine. In attempting to bond with Tara, Tiffany's attempts to bridge their experiences as women, saying:

The funny thing is that I kind of feel like everyone has it. Little bit. Like over the course of the day, how many different women do we have to be? Like work Tiffany, sexy Tiffany, or dog owner Tiffany. You know, it's hard, right? ("Work")

The conversation is uncomfortable as the audience watches Tara's body curl as she listens to Tiffany's well-meaning, but ill-informed analysis of their commonalities as women. This monologue, though brief, underpins the point that Tara's experiences are her own and nobody else's and helps in maintaining a distance between the audience and Tara. Tiffany represents frustrations at the difficulty of maintaining different subject positions and the struggles in "balancing it all," a promise which mainstream media

assigns to feminism. However, as much as one may be able to sympathize with Tiffany's argument, the writers also try to distinguish between cultural pressures and Tara's trauma. While the majority of the audience aligns with Tiffany, who does not share Tara's experience, they are at the same time also shown Tara's discomfort with the suggestion of similarity, which translates the familiar subjective experience of identification that Hollywood film and network sitcoms often strive to achieve.

Turning the audience away from identifying with the main character accomplishes two things. First, it maintains the distance necessary for audiences to understand the significance of Dissociative Identity Disorder. The relationship between the main characters and the audience is more ambiguous, allowing for the complexities of Tara's trauma to be explored, for the narrative to retain humor, and for there to be play within the conventions of the family sitcom. The second, is that such a distance not only lets the audience continue to identify with the family structure and Tara's place within that structure (in addition to the other characters' relationships within and outside the family, like Marshall's exploration of his sexuality, Kate trying to escape domesticity, and Max's attempts to "fix" Tara) but also allows them to reflect on the differences that may isolate themselves from Tara. This open space leaves room for dialogues to occur, particularly concerning trauma, disability, and domesticity.

Lena Dunham: Generational Voices, Bodies, and Self-Disclosure

Common to Diablo Cody and Lena Dunham is their flexibility in representing girls and women, while at the same time providing feminist critiques of stereotypes and traditional models for women's lives. In his notes for the Criterion Collection edition of Lena

Dunham's debut film, *Tiny Furniture*, author Phillip Lopate begins his introduction to the film by talking about generic shifts. He starts:

Comedy evolves. We long ago bid adieu to the physical acrobatics of Buster Keaton, the wisecracks of Bob Hope, the witty repartee of Cary Grant and Irene Dunne. The now-reigning comedy of embarrassment, seen in the films of Judd Apatow and the Farrelly Brothers and all the loss-of-virginity farces ... Lena Dunham's work is related to this mainstream comedy of embarrassment, but she takes it one bold step further, producing a much more subtle and sophisticated comedy of chagrin. And in Dunham's world, there is no happy ending, only an enlightened realism (par. 1).

The world according to Dunham in *Tiny Furniture* carries through into her work on HBO's *Girls*, produced by the embarrassment king himself, Judd Apatow. After much build up by critics, the program premiered on April 15, 2012, to both great acclaim and criticism.

Like Cody, Dunham has a history within film, having written and directed shorts and her critically successful independent feature, *Tiny Furniture* (2010), which came to the attention of comedy producer/director Judd Apatow. All, including *Girls*, involve poking fun at gendered subjectivities, women's negation of men's patriarchal privilege, and deconstructing issues relating to class and access. Her student films, *Pressure* (2006) and *Creative Nonfiction* (2009), have countered male narratives of romantic relationships through their use of a female protagonist and female perspective. In the former, three college-aged girls sit in the middle of a library stack talking about sex. Their candidness

resembles similar scenes representing male discussions concerning dating and sex. Their conversation turns to orgasms with Dunham asking the others “what it feels like,” but the best way they can answer her is through using sneezing as a metaphor. Dunham then goes into detail about how she would pick her nose in such a way that would make her sneeze, because she enjoyed the sensation. After talking more about orgasms, both friends leave Dunham who proceeds to physically make herself sneeze. The relationship made between cumming and sneezing within the scene and the final reference to masturbation provides the audience a means to consider the mythic female orgasm, female masturbation as taboo, and women’s pleasure.

These topics are often not considered on mainstream film, let alone on television. *Creative Nonfiction* provides more focus on women’s points of view in a narrative about a burgeoning romance. In between the main character Ella’s (Dunham) own feature film and scenes from her actual life, she provides a narration of a fictional short story she is writing for class. The story features a young woman kidnapped and enslaved by an obsessive high school teacher. She escapes, but is forever on the run from him. Upon finally being captured by him in the middle of nowhere, she shoots him and it is that physical violence which brings an end to her travels and the fear she attaches to this relationship. This fictional motif that continues throughout the film serves as a background to the real emotions and anxieties Ella feels in dealing with a man she wants to sleep with and the anxieties centered around her virginity.

The significance of these films is the way in which each constructs Dunham as an auteur. The films focus on interpersonal relationships, feelings of displacement and anxiety, and difficulties in communicating, especially with emotional honesty. All of

these themes are explored in the darkest of comedic terms and are steeped in irony.

Dunham's characters are often privileged and entitled. This is a trait carried through in her films and web series. In *Tiny Furniture*, for example, the main character, Aura (Lena Dunham), attempts to figure out how to negotiate life after college, which is more difficult in the midst of her mother's and sister's success. The links between the women in this film, particularly the one Aura forges between herself and her mother through reading the latter's early diaries, does more to elucidate upon the similarities and differences between generations. The connections are the anxieties that permeate for all twenty-somethings who are unsure of what their futures hold and for all young women who struggle with their self-esteem.

Disparities exist within the pursuit of goals and their differing expectations. After Aura shares her mother's food and wine with her friends, her mother complains that Aura is living in her house, eating her food, and that the space Aura assumes is hers is only temporarily so. The final scene of the film bridges the gap between mother and daughter as they bond over their shared experiences as well as the difference between Aura's assumption of her mother's history and the actuality. Fundamentally, the point is that her mother has moved on from the anxious twenties that now drive her daughter. The examination of privilege, self-worth, and entitlement is comedic, though not done through various one-liners or physical comedy, but rather through the emptiness in space that begets awkwardness, pregnant pauses in conversations, and contradictions in people's speeches and actions.

In Dunham's web series, *Delusional Downtown Divas*, the characters do more to maintain a steady cash flow from their parents than actually pursue work, even their art.

One of the running gags is that when asked what she does, the character AgNess can only reply that she is a businesswoman, who does business (“AgNess Loves Noodles”). It is made clear through exaggeration and through caricature that these characters are to be further analyzed, questioned, and challenged rather than taken at face value. Finally, there is the nature of Dunham’s semi-autobiographical approach to storytelling and filmmaking. Dunham has admitted that most characters and narratives are constructed around herself and her friends, many of whom make appearances in her projects (*Fresh Air*). Narrative strands are drawn from real life conundrums. It is because of her success at film festivals like SXSW where *Creative Nonfiction* was screened and *Tiny Furniture* that she garnered the attention of Apatow, who suggested bringing Dunham to HBO.

Girls, like *United States of Tara*, unties television tropes, challenges conventions of representations, and questions generational and cultural attitudes. The show, along with Dunham herself, has been heavily criticized by those reading the series as a celebration of privileged white women in New York City. It is difficult, however, to watch the program and call it a celebration, as the show differs from programs like *Sex and the City*. New York Times columnist Frank Bruni classifies *Girls* as a

recession-era adjustment. The gloss of Manhattan is traded for the mild grit of Brooklyn’s more affordable neighborhoods. The anxieties are as much economic as erotic. The colors are duller, the mood is dourer and the clothes aren’t much. It’s “Sex and the City” in a charcoal gray Salvation Army overcoat (par. 8).

If we rely on description alone, it is difficult to ascertain how anything so seemingly drab could be comedic. In fact, at times the show is bleak and often episodes end

unsatisfactorily or without any sense of narrative resolve. Dunham does not so much represent awkward as subject her characters to live in it.

The overall premise is that Hannah (Lena Dunham) has just graduated from college and lives with her best friend, Marnie (Alison Williams) in New York City. She is an only child supported by her parents, who are college professors in another state. Her friend Jessa (Jemima Kirke) appears to be a free spirited woman who is sexually promiscuous and verbally brash; whereas her other friend, Jessa's cousin Shoshannah (Zosia Mamet), is a high-strung virgin. The character types mirror those within *Sex and the City* as does the show's focus on sexual relationships. Overall, *Girls* presents itself as the aftershock of *Sex and the City*. When asked by Bruni why sex was such a focus of the series, Dunham replied that it was due to the "lack of honesty" she saw in television representations as she "felt like [she] was cruelly duped by much of the television [she] saw," including *Sex and the City*, which created aspirations rather than focus on the reality of living in New York City. *Girls* redirects representation of female sexuality from binaries of pleasure/non-pleasure to reveling in the separation of mind and body during sex. Whereas *Sex and The City* differentiated between good and bad sex, *Girls* poses scenarios in which physical pleasure differs from emotional satisfaction. Characters are "sexually free," but also dissatisfied by the lack of emotional connection between themselves and their partners.

The first episode includes references to *Sex and the City*, with the character Shoshanna attempting to fit her cousin Jessa into a mold of one of the characters. Later in the episode, Hannah's pseudo-boyfriend, Adam, asks Hannah about her tattoos. She replies that she was overweight in high school and decided she would, in the spirit of Riot

Grrrl culture, take back her body. These references signify a level of understanding by Dunham and the producers, of the contradicting models of femininity that were available for a demographic of women who grew up from girlhood to motherhood with popular culture's representations. Dunham, however, has pointed out that the demographic she covers, of women in their early twenties, is one rarely seen on television (Danes, par. 9). While they might be shown on the covers of magazines or in advertisements, much of what has opened up for women in television are dramas or comedies featuring those considered older, usually in more dramatic roles.

Three-dimensional parts for women, that is, parts that require anything more from the actor besides acting as a sexual object or as a stock girlfriend/friend, remain rare. Framing the characters within New York, which is symbolically used within Hollywood films as a playground for the fashionable and intellectual elite, allows for the representation of the push and pull between expectation and reality. The show has suffered some criticism from those who dislike the messiness this allows for in characterization, especially as the central figure, Hannah, straddles between sympathetic generational icon and loathsome privileged brat. Dunham, however, has offered that this confusion is part of a larger purpose she has for this show, as one that highlights the complicated positions women have in a postfeminist culture, one heavily informed by porn culture, economic collapse, technology, and popular culture.

Unlike many shows featuring young twenty-somethings in metropolitan areas, *Girls* unpacks many of those tropes associated with youth, freedom, relationships (both sexual and platonic), and labor. Much of the series mirrors familiar romantic comedy narratives, particularly those associated with indie comedies like *Garden State* (Braff,

2004) and *500 Days of Summer* (Webb, 2009) where the insecure yet fashionable, intelligent woman is provided girlish characteristics in order to be the safe, attractive, romantic heroine for the failed masculinity of the male lead. The show's frequent comparisons to *Sex and the City* also highlights Dunham's deconstruction of the myths associated with the white, upper class lifestyle represented and promoted on the program which influenced many adolescent and adult women to strive for nearly unachievable expectations.

One of the reasons Dunham's text appears darker is because it lacks solidarity between women. There is no ritual, as there is in *Sex and the City*, which binds the women together. In the series, they have a standing date, usually over food, in which they discuss their lives over the past week. The return to these moments and weekly bonding between the women and even the audience breeds a sense of solidarity and stability within these friendships. These women are invested in each other's lives. The women of *Girls* have little connection in comparison. By the end of the first season, characters are in the midst of major transitions and are mostly isolated from each other. Jessa marries, in a surprise wedding, a questionable stranger she met with Marnie. She is shown leaving with her new husband, off to parts unknown. Shoshanna is revealed in bed with an older male character, Ray, anxious about transitioning from a virgin to a non-virgin. Marnie remains at the party, drunk and lonely, making out with a stranger. Finally, is Hannah's end. After a major fight with her boyfriend Adam, which ends with him being hit by a van, she finds herself completely alone. Her dream of having a relationship with Adam is over and her group of friends, often considered the go-to support network are nowhere to be found and she reluctantly finds herself spending all night on a train, alone, lost on

Coney Island, and eating a piece of wedding cake on the beach as dawn passes into morning. We watch as Hannah furiously eats the wedding cake and all the symbolism attached to it—the spontaneous wedding it inspired, the emotional explosion that wedding caused between characters, including pushing Hannah and Adam into a confrontation over their relationship, and leaving her for the first time alone without a support network.

The second season is even more disconnected as there is little interaction between the friends. Jessa's spontaneous marriage ends and after a brief moment with Hannah, she disappears. Hannah and Marnie put a hold on their friendship after a drunken mistake between Marnie and Hannah's gay ex-boyfriend. Shoshanna devotes her time and energy to Ray, whose cynicism and lack of ambition drive them apart. The loose threads tying characters together are completely unwound. Hannah spends a majority of the series going deeper and deeper into depression. The stress and anxiety she experiences while trying to finish a project in addition to her feelings of loneliness cause obsessive compulsive tendencies to reemerge from adolescence. Her independence from Adam, who had always been ambivalent as a boyfriend, seems at first a positive turn toward self-discovery. Their eventual reunion at the end is written like a fairy tale. A damsel in distress being saved by her prince, except there is no sense of relief at this reunion. Though in a standard romantic comedy the dramatic act would be brimming with passion and romance, the scene begets nothing but foreboding.

The “the friendship as family” emphasis seen in programs like *Friends* and *Sex and the City* is deconstructed in these moments, as *Girls* reveals these representations of friendship to be more aspirational and idealistic than realistic. Dunham, in her

commentary, notes that the real romance of the series rests between Hannah and Marnie. There is intimacy between the two characters, but by the end of the ninth episode, Marnie and Hannah emotionally divorce after a large argument. There remains intimacy and the desire to be friends, but the writers also take care to show that such relationships can be complicated and messy, and that sometimes it may be difficult to understand the friendships held between people. Not every day can end with a resolution. Hannah, Marnie, Jessa, and Shoshanna are rarely all in the same room together and when they are it is usually at a large event where they are separated. Rarely do the characters actually share anything with each other; rather, they experience the world differently and share with their friends only snippets, leaving out details in order to shape the story as they want rather than allowing for the vulnerability involved in having intimate discussions, as those that occurred within *Sex and the City*.

Whereas previous generations like Baby Boomers and Generation X privilege collectivity in some fashion, like cliques and surrogate families, Generation Y and Millennials privilege the individual. *Girls* dwells on each character's own estimation of their narcissism and over-estimated self-worth as twenty-somethings. The great contradiction, however, is that despite the need for individuality, there is an incredible draw to transparency when it comes to privacy. Despite the overall focus being on the individual, there remains a desire to be connected, to be part of something, to and obtain meaningful relationships. Social networking has ushered in a confessional culture, where people feel free to tell all their "friends" and "followers" their thoughts and activities from the mundane to the intimate.

Dunham is also highly vocal about her politics, which often includes frank discussions about feminism. In a conversation with Claire Danes for *Interview* magazine, they discuss contemporary postfeminist culture without declaring it postfeminist. Danes praises the program for its ability to capture women's experiences without being aspirational. She continues to say:

Girls is kind of a pejorative word now, and I think even with the fact that it's called *Girls* and the title is in all caps and gobbles up the entire screen, you kind of reclaim it. I feel like the topic of feminism has gone out of vogue because there's this idea that any inequality that has ever existed is now finally resolved and we should all just be cool. But it's so important that we become engaged in that conversation again (par. 8).

The discussion of reclamation and progressive feminist politics is remarkable considering Danes's statements regarding the dismissiveness directed toward feminism and feminists. Her sentiment also evokes the same spirit third-wave feminists had when reclaiming derogatory terms used against women like "girl," "slut," and "bitch."

In more recent articles concerning those in their early twenties, singers Katy Perry and Taylor Swift, when confronted with questions regarding their positions as women in the media or gender equality, have been careful to squirm their way out of declaring themselves feminists. Despite celebrations of "girliness" epitomized by their public personas and songs, they distance themselves from feminist designations. The liberal blogosphere exploded, for example, when upon accepting her Billboard award for "Woman of the Year," Katy Perry announced, "I'm not a feminist, but I do believe in the power of women" (Berlatsky, par.1). Perry's comments represent a continuance of

dissociation with feminism in contemporary American culture, one which continues the strain between popular culture and feminism. Critic Noah Berlatsky points out, however, that the popular aversion to feminism demonstrates the movement's continued relevance and radicalism (par. 2). Not mentioned, but no doubt important, is that public statements such as Perry's open up dialogue regarding the need for feminism or even just women's roles in public spheres. Dunham, for example, has stated that her goal with *Girls*, if anything, is to open up strands of feminist dialogue (qtd in Johnson, par. 12).

The same concerns of programs like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* are continued today with a show like *Girls*. Generationally, they differ as the lead character of the former is at the foreground of experimenting with equality. *Girls*, however, explores what happens when feminism has been commodified and gender equality sold. It becomes no longer about exploring feminist thinking for the first time, but about exploring the contradictions of the packaging and living up to cultural expectations.

Subscribing to Politics

Both *United States of Tara* and *Girls* differ in content in that they represent women at different stages in their lives; however, they are similar in their cultural critique. As mothers become more of a market, pressures regarding what constitute a "good" and "bad" mother are constructed in ways that establish expectations that can only be fulfilled through purchasing products. Likewise, adolescents are sold what turns out to be pipe dreams couched as "girl power" and empowerment through marketable images of young, independent women, which leave most twenty-somethings in constant states of anxiety.

Generationally, both writers come of age during hazy periods of American feminist discourse. Cody, in *Candy Girl*, cites the influence of Grrrrrl Culture on her work, as well as of bands like Bikini Kill and L7 who formed to combat misogyny and were part of a burgeoning feminist movement which picked apart popular culture representations. Dunham also acknowledges the influence of third wavers on her positioning of characters' narratives, but makes clear how deeply impacted she was by the popularity of girl culture and girl power. NPR host Terry Gross pushes Dunham to further clarify her identification as a "girl" as opposed to woman, a term Gross points out was contested by feminists in the 1970s for implicitly linking women to children. Dunham explains that the move toward young women preferring "girl" is predominantly generational and continues to link the designation with Gen Y's and Millennials' discomfort with sincerity and earnestness (*On the Air*). Discomfort with "woman" could also be linked to the early 90s privileging of "girlhood" emphasized through popular literature, film, and music. As Sibielski contends:

[...] while the phrase "girl power" has become ubiquitous within the popular vernacular in recent years, and calls for the empowerment of young women have resonated at a number of sites within U.S. society, the precise definition of girl power remains decidedly unclear. Its varied (and often contradictory) manifestations within those cultural artifacts identified as expression of the girl power ethos make it difficult to determine exactly what girl power is, either as a philosophy or as a set of cultural or political practices (3).

“Girl” became an empowering word and figure for those growing up in the 1990s, watching Hole’s Courtney Love in baby doll dresses, the Spice Girls emphasize on empowerment through friendship, and identifying with the teenagers in *Mean Girls*. The haziness of its definition, as Sibielski points out, is highlighted throughout Hannah’s attempts to be an “empowered” voice of her generation and frequent falls into the pitfalls of postfeminist promises. Despite knowing that she should be an empowered woman of the 21st century, she, like most girls, was only provided the discourse and not the access to equality, neither economically, nor culturally (Sibielski 10). *Girls* reflects the falsities associated with postfeminist culture as women are not economically empowered, are unaware of their rights, and remain in secondary positions to men. Dunham touches upon the continued need for feminism. When Danes notes the fact that feminism has “gone out of vogue” and thinks it important to keep being engaged with women’s issues, Dunham asserts:

I feel exactly like that—where people are kind of like, “Our moms handled this, and we really have nothing to complain about anymore.” It’s amazing how not true that is, and yet I feel like every time I make a claim of misogyny, I always sort of apologize for it first, which is itself not very feminist. I’m always like, “I’m sorry to be the girl who wants to talk about feminism, but that person is sexist.” So the idea that the feminism conversation could be cool again and not just feel like some granola BS is so exciting to me. It is really funny how even cool chicks are sort of like, “Our moms covered the feminism thing and now we’re living in a post-*that* world,” when that just isn’t true (par. 31).

Her discontent is similar to Cody's dissatisfaction with a culture conditioning women to be silent about inequalities, and Dunham ably captures the alienation of contemporary young women from feminism.

The speed with which both writers have gained momentum and recognition is perhaps part of the reason behind the criticism both face, in addition to their rather brazen attitudes toward diluting their politics in order to convert more audience members. Dunham and Cody are two who cannot be contained according to industrial standards for women, which makes them both exciting (and marketable) as well as ripe for criticism. Their flagrant politics also make them easier targets as they speak candidly regarding their personal lives and political thoughts in ways media trained professionals try to avoid. Similar criticisms have been directed toward women featured on non-subscription networks. Sarah Silverman, Chelsea Handler, and Kathy Griffin have all been heavily ridiculed for their personal lives and politics. All have embraced such controversies which has both further polarized them, with their critics labeling them as unruly or "trashy," and simultaneously popularized them, with their fans embracing their transgressive behavior. Silverman, who readily makes jokes about abortion and racism, Handler, who openly discussing her sexual conquests, and Griffin, who vehemently advocates for LGBTQ issues, all have personas that can only translate to cable or short interviews on late night talk shows.

At the end of 2012, it was announced that ABC had picked up a Cody comedy pilot about a Generation X and Y romance. Being a family network, it is difficult to imagine what such a show would look like, especially after a complex venture like *Tara* and Cody's own admission that if she were to do television again she would avoid a

writing room scenario (Greco, par.8-9). The significance of Cody's name in authoring the program, even if it is in name only, does demonstrate the significance of a Cody branding device. It was also revealed, the same year, that Dunham had signed a 3.7 million-dollar book contract with Random House, a staggering amount for a young first time author (Lewis, par. 1). Dunham, however, had proven through *Girls* and public appearances her marketability; even if it was as somebody people wanted to criticize.

Another possible reason for the backlash against the two women is the relative ambiguity of their texts. It is difficult to pick apart an overarching feminist arc within their narratives. They are steeped within the contradictions embraced by third wave feminists, which make them targets for both feminists and anti-feminists. The former group asserts neither are doing enough to advance feminism, that both, for example, continue to privilege white, heterosexual, middle-class women's narratives. Dunham has addressed such critiques with earnestness, admitting oversight, but also noting the difficulties in writing experiences to which she has no access point. To Gross, she admits:

This is a hard issue to speak to because all I want to do is sound sensitive and not say anything that will horrify anyone or make them feel more isolated, but I did write something that was more specific to my experience and I always want to avoid rendering an experience I can't speak to accurately and I want to avoid, you know, kind of class network tokenism in casting because I think people of color are severely underrepresented on TV, but I'm not sure it's always the solution (*Fresh Air with Terry Gross*).

Evidenced here is Dunham's acknowledgement of the significance of intersectionality and the fact that she as a woman is unable to speak entirely for all women and that issues relating to race and class require other voices. Also included is an indictment against the television industry. Her use of tokenism indicates networks' use of diversity as a hollow gesture, rather than one aimed toward including three-dimensional and complicated characters.

Linda Martin Alcoff, for *The Feminist Wire*, also highlights the fact that *Girls*, despite its issues with racial representation, reveals in this lack the continued disparities that exist but are regularly ignored by most media outlets (par. 4). Alcoff writes of the nuances pertaining to sexual relationships, the infantilization of an entire generation regardless of gender, and the importance of self-exploration and examination in *Girls*. She summarizes that "there are seeds of freedom here trying to break free. Part of this will require, without a doubt, a more developed self-consciousness about their race and class particularities" (par. 11).

For anti-feminists, the outspoken nature of these women is too much. Cody's past in the sex industry is commonly used, as in cases like Samberg's impression accounted above, to deride her credibility. Likewise, Dunham's political outspokenness has caused many conservative pundits to label her as hedonistic. In a now infamous viral Barack Obama campaign video, Dunham emphasizes the importance of voting and equates the significance of that first time to losing one's virginity. Upon its release, republicans went on the offensive. Kelly Fenton, deputy chair of Minnesota's Republican party, via Twitter, aligned the video with Satan (O'Neal). The AV Club also reported that Monica Crowley, Erick Erickson, and Rush Limbaugh had also labeled the video vile, hedonistic,

and sexually demeaning to women (O'Neal). The flaunting of sexuality, in addition to their frankness concerning issues related to sex, gender, and sexuality does conflict greatly with the emergence of a post-9/11 evangelical and conservative Republican party.

An inability to fit in also leaves them with little room to establish a middle ground. As they upset both sides of the political divide, it becomes difficult to see/hear anything but criticism directed toward either woman. Rather than the industry being critiqued for its lack of diversity, both off and onscreen, the auteurs and the shows have been lambasted instead. As stated above, *Girls* has been heavily critiqued for failing to depict diversity in spite of being set in New York. According to the Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film, women remain underrepresented in creative positions in television at 26% (Lauzen, 1) and those numbers lower drastically when regarding women of color within the industry. The criticisms directed toward *Girls* are not unsound, but do disregard larger issues relating to disparity within television.

In many ways the main thrust in the negative discourse surrounding Cody, Dunham, and cable subscription is the idea that they should know better. Cable television, as a source of entertainment for those who have access and privilege, has a certain amount of cultural capital, and the audience can expect some semblance of self-awareness from it. It is interesting to note, though, that similar complaints have not been lauded against shows like *The Newsroom* (2012 -), *Veep* (2012 -), *Enlightened* (2011 -), *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000 -), *Californication* (2000 -), *Shameless* (2011 -), *The Big C*, and *Nurse Jackie* which are all currently in production. They are void of representation but privilege whiteness and have at times questionable representations of people of color. There is something to be said for the ways in which both authors, Cody and Dunham,

have made themselves into public figures by being highly accessible via social networking sites like Twitter, magazine interviews, and YouTube. They became highly public rather quickly and seemingly out of the ether, which does not fit nicely into the struggling Hollywood narratives that reinforce the American Dream.

In discussing *Tiny Furniture* and Lena Dunham, Hollywood screenwriter Paul Schrader suggested that the criticism against her was little more than industry jealousy, that it was easier to ask “Why them? Why not me?” when looking at examples of young, successful filmmakers, and arguably young, successful, female auteurs (“Paul Schrader on Dunham”). Both Cody and Dunham, however, represent a new way of approaching media and working within the industry— using blogs to land book deals and web series to make films. Taking advantage of such a system has left them perhaps more exposed to the anonymity of online public opinion, but they continue to be aware of their position and serve back gendered and postfeminist contradictions through their work.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

There are several benefits with women like Fey, Poehler, Cody, and Dunham working on television. Their shows not only help expand the representations of women on television, but provide more opportunities for those attempting to work in the industry. The success and/or publicity surrounding series help reinforce for executives that such narratives are marketable, watchable, and important. Despite the history of shows about women by women have proven successful in the past, the need for continued reinforcement in the midst of male narratives remains necessary. They also provide different types of comedy, which make it more difficult to pigeonhole women's humor. Finally, there is also the nature of feminist discourse surrounding these writers and their programs. At various levels audiences have identified with these women. Tina Fey and Amy Poehler maybe more relatable and empowering for some female audience members than those turned off by the explicit natures of Cody and Dunham; however, women at least have examples of women performing *their* jokes. There are more models of women "doing" comedy in ways that hopefully encourage women to do the same in their everyday lives.

These shows have opened up conversations regarding representation. Women identify with Liz Lemon because she loves sandwiches and struggles to be taken seriously. Leslie Knope has a firm definition of her morals, but does not let it stand in the way of her personal relationships. Tina Fey and Amy Poehler have become synonymous with these characters, as their characters' quirks stream into their public personas. Diablo Cody and Lena Dunham have more confused relationships with audiences, who seem to not know whether to admire or abhor them and their work. Their characters do not invite audiences

to identify, but it is difficult to not identify with their insecurities and emotional connections. Audiences may not want to identify, but situations and feelings may feel familiar. These women have been open to sharing their experiences working in television, help create more spaces for women on television, and their desire to see women become more equal in society.

Since women like Berg and Davis began writing comedies for radio and television, women have continued to expand their space within writing rooms and as creators of their own programs. Arguably more focus has been paid as of late to those like Fey and Dunham as authors, isolating them from their historical context and making them exceptions to the rules. They are reminders women are rarely producers of comedic texts and/or overall demonstrative of the fact women are funny (with the assumption as a gender, women lack humor). Exceptionalism ignores a larger history of women's work in television and the ways in which they have helped television's form and content. Women helped shape what the sitcom was and have expanded its possibilities as a form. They have never been completely absent from the industry, though there has always been struggle for recognition. Questions over women's texts (specifically *as* women's texts) and authorship continue to isolate and marginalize women from a mainstream audience, even if their programs are successful with audiences. They are not treated as generally successful, but successful for women.

One-third of the Fall 2013 network schedule are new programs (Hibberd). Out of the twelve new comedies premiering across CBS, ABC, FOX, and NBC, four are about women. *Mom*, *Trophy Wife*, *Back in the Game*, *Super Fun Night* all feature women as lead characters in various states of upheaval. The former three are about women

regaining their footholds after major life changes (births, marriages, and divorces), whereas the latter is a program about women who celebrate every Friday together. Barring the *Super Fun Night* all new programs focus on women defined by their social positions as mothers and wives. While other programs like *Dads*, *Sean Saves the World*, and *Welcome to the Family* feature expanding definition of fathers, there are also options like *We are Men* and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* which feature men outside of familial networks and experiences. While being predominantly male oriented, the new lineup lacks diversity with little representation for people of color or sexual identities.

The programs discussed in this dissertation are those that have in some way affected the televisual landscape when it has come to representing women, but even more so in how comedy can be used to expose stereotypes and misogyny, as well as challenge assumptions about women and comedy. The fact, however, is women remain quantified entities, as Tina Fey lamented, and women's texts continue to be limited and in frequent comparison to the familiarity of male projects. Double standards continue to exist as women speak to the differences between audience's approaches to female and male characters and negotiating that cultural terrain becomes a source of frustration for media makers. In an interview with June Thomas for *Slate*, Mindy Kaling mentioned continued double standards. She notes male characters are allowed to be selfish and cites examples like Larry David for acting as a conduit through which audience members can live out social outsider fantasies. Kaling claims

So many of the female characters that I see on TV, they're just kind of put-upon and boring. They're so worried about viewers not being able to handle them being nuanced or occasionally selfish. But every woman I

know is occasionally selfish—and also can be heroic and funny. I just try to make her interesting and nuanced, and if some people think she’s obnoxious sometimes, well, people are sometimes obnoxious, and they can still be heroes.” (par. 4).

While profiling *The Mindy Kaling Project* and its writer/star Mindy Kaling, journalist Jada Yuan points to the fact that not since 2003’s *Wanda at Large* had a woman of color written and starred in her own comedy (par. 9).

Despite comments like those of Nora Ephron’s who have claimed television as a safe haven for women’s narratives. It is true in more recent years that television has been more receptive to representing the complexities of women’s lives, but these developments have mostly taken hold in American dramatic television. The idea also ignores continued disparities when it comes to women of color and members of the GLBTQI communities. When the topic of women and comedy is discussed, people are predominantly discussing white women’s roles in comedy.

Issa Rae is an example of new media’s power and influence on television content. Her show *Awkward Black Girl* became a YouTube success and has lead Rae to develop programs for cable networks. The series is composed of eight to fifteen minute episodes that explore anxieties associated with social interactions through the viewpoint of J, who provides snark and questions through voice-over narration. In the beginning of the series, J self identifies as an awkward, black girl. Unique to the program is the continual reinforcement of the importance of intersectionality and subject position. Gender and race exaggerate tension. Situations are not awkward because of her gender, nor her race but those identifiers do influence her and our perception of events/cannot be ignored as

factors. The show represents cultural complications rarely referenced on mainstream television like

- Having a boss who tries to be a friend rather than a boss is not necessarily racial or gendered. *The Office* has provided a model for that character type; however, situations are read differently when the boss is viewed from the perspective of a Black woman. Interpreting questions about hair or being called girlfriend take on different import than when the audience is only a casual observer.
- Being at a party with acquaintances or strangers is an identifiable experience regardless of identity qualifiers, but the experience is more specific when dealing with stereotypes regarding expectations based on stereotypes when it comes to dressing and dancing.
- Flirting and dating have been mainstays of awkward in television and film – but when a black woman dates a white man there are issues surrounding that coupling, particularly when viewing through the subject position of a black woman who meets with glares and criticism, which are points rarely touched upon by mainstream media.

Rae's success demonstrated there was an audience for her authorship. In an interview with Amanda De Cadenet, she described why after the first season she did not take the series to television. She met with a network executive who identified the show as one about a "black woman and her black woman" problems and that in order to attract a black audience, the network would need to recast with celebrities, because "black people recognize faces" ("Issa Rae"). The anecdote serves as a reminder for why television is not yet the Holy Grail for women's representation.

In the interview, Rae cites the network meeting as an example for why there remains so few people of color on and behind television. Executives continue to believe white males represent the neutral experience and all “Others” are not identifiable enough for audiences. She says “I don’t think the executives right now, the ones who are in charge, think people of color, and black people especially, are relatable. They’re not mainstream enough. They’re not...I think that ad dollars are really important and I think that people are scared in a way...” (“Issa Rae”). She also notes a period in the 1990s where it seemed as if narratives featuring people of color were becoming mainstream, citing *The Parkers* (1999 - 2004) and *Moesha* (1996-2001) of examples of shows that were made for mass audiences. She further indicts the rise of cable and niche programming with the decrease in those programs. Now it is possible to demarcate programs based on race and place them on channels marked for a racialized audience, the sense of those narratives being identifiable across racial lines no longer exist. *Good Times* (1974-9), for example, was on during an era in which there was very little competition, channel wise. Audiences, regardless of race were encouraged to identify with the circumstances the Evans family faced as a working class family.

Though *Awkward Black Girl* may not have made it to television, Rae has been recruited to write for television, working with Shonda Rhimes on a possible comedy called *I Hate LA Dudes* and in August 2013 was reportedly working on a sitcom for HBO (“Shonda Rhimes, Issa Rae Join Forces for New ABC Comedy Series) (Andreeva, par.1). Though a way for networks to diversify their programming, Rae is but one woman of color. Her meeting with executives thus far has shown there should remain some apprehension prior to celebration. Her grassroots success, however, does place her in a

position to maintain control over her work as an artist and the product she sells to networks. Rae has also reached out to other creators. On August 17, 2013, Rae hosted a workshop for content creators entitled “New Media: The Next Generation,” which helped answer questions for fledgling writers and filmmakers who were interested in creating content for digital spaces. The workshop also hosted opportunities for registrants to show their work for representatives from “What the Funny?”, a burgeoning urban comedy site from comedian Marlon Wayans.

Rae is not the first to use the internet as springboard for television access, but has definitely become a model for those seeking to gain notice from executives through new media and social networking. In 2013, writer Lena Waithe started circulating a pilot presentation for a show she created and wrote called *Twenties*, about three young Black women trying to sort through their lives, or as she affectionately (and humorously) refers to it “the black version of *Girls*” (“2013 Writers Access Project”). Along with the package, is the encouragement to viewers to pass it along to friends. In an interview with Indiewire she urges “All we want you to do is commit to sharing TWENTIES with twenty of your friends. The more you spread the word the better chance we have of getting it on TV. We’ll keep pitching. You keep sharing. Let’s do this!” (Dowell, par. 9). Invoked in Waithe’s plea is the nature of crowdsourcing, which has become increasingly popular as a means of funding and marketing projects. Waithe states earlier she is not asking for money, only support. The use of “We, You, and Let’s” denote a sense of solidarity of likemindedness and political change in numbers. There is also the power of sharing and social networking in promoting content. Also implicit is the relationship of the author to the audience. The author, in this case Waithe, is no longer anonymous.

Instead, the author is rather exposed in attempts to gather an audience, in hopes the labor put into content was not in vein, and that executives take notice.

New media has opened up avenues for instant streaming content through sites such as Hulu and Netflix, which offer programming from television broadcasts and have recently begun to launch their own original content. Netflix especially has hit the ground running in this regard, approaching filmmakers and Hollywood stars their own content, which they offer to audiences all at once for binge viewing. For the most part content has been more dramatic with *Hemlock Grove*, *House of Cards*, and *Lilyhammer*. Since early 2013, however, Netflix has expanded into comedic territory with its launch of ensemble comedy, *Bad Samaritans*, but also its more notable relaunch of the cult television classic, *Arrested Development*.

In July 2013, Netflix released Jenji Kohan's most recent project, an hour-long dark comedy *Orange is the New Black*, based on the memoir of the same title. The narrative is loosely about Piper Kerman's brief incarceration at a women's prison in upstate New York and her interactions with other inmates. The program involves brief examinations of intersectionality as women's gender, sexual, and racial identities are explored through their interactions with each other and members of staff (who hold various levels of power). The program also includes more risqué content like graphic sex scenes (mostly between women), course language, drug use, and violence. Yet, the writers devote a lot of time to establishing characters and storylines in such ways as provide brief questions and challenges to systems of power and gender norms not expressed in many programs on television.

- Discussions of sexuality being more fluid than gay and straight. Several characters identify as straight, but have romantic and sexual relationships with other inmates.
- The use of sex as a type of currency between inmates and corrections officers. One officer exchanges drugs for oral copulation and further abuses power by beginning a sexual relationship with an inmate.
- Racial and classist divides are explored each episode as groups form around identifying lines. Latina inmates dismiss one Latina character because she does not speak Spanish. A division of women belonging to Evangelical Christian faiths are challenged by others for their racism.
- The inclusion of a M-F transgendered inmate played by transgendered actress Laverne Cox. Transgendered narratives are rare on television, particularly those that delve into personal relationships, decisions to transition, and needs of those transitioning like hormones.

Orange is the New Black is also one of the few shows currently available which have a predominantly female cast. Male characters operate along the margins as plot devices or familiar characters, as opposed to the other way around. Piper's fiancé's only function, for example, is to act as a base from which to compare the outside world to life inside the prison in addition to his supportive partner role. Similar types are created for the guards who are more often than not protagonists, but afforded only minor insights into their backgrounds or lives outside of their relationships with the inmates. It is a stark difference from a majority of television, which operate on familiarity of tropes and characterizations.

The type of content would not work on network, but on subscription cable would be permissible. Content in this case meaning sex and language. One of the marketable aspects of cable and subscription cable are the loosened restrictions, as audiences pay for more adult content. Kohan's joke regarding her trade of money for freedom is indicative of the importance she places on creative freedom. When asked during a roundtable discussion why Kohan moved from Showtime to Netflix, she claimed it was not so much an issue with networks, but experimenting with what was available in what Amanda Lotz has labeled the post-television era. Netflix's dip into content makes internet distribution a "new frontier" for authors to experiment, much like television was in its infancy. Kohan remarks her reasons for writing for Netflix was not issues working within Showtime, but her desire to work into a new frontier of television.

I remember one of my writers on *Weeds* got a new apartment and didn't get cable or a dish. He just hooked his computer up to the TV. I was like, "This is it. This is how it's happening." To be able to be there first, I love the pioneer thing. It's exciting to me. And they pay full rate, they're really nice, they support the work, and they said yes. What could be bad? It's the Wild West. You can do what you want. On the other hand, we worked a year on this and some people are going to watch it in a night and go, "We want more!" And there is something I miss about the longing and the anticipation for the next episode. But, how many times can you get exactly what you want, when you want it? Not very often. So, why not have it with entertainment? (qtd. in Radish, par. 4)

Her notation of the changing face of television and even the sense of television as a tool and object shifting are important to emphasize as a new frontier also means freedom to experiment.

Netflix being more willing to take chances even opposed to HBO and Showtime can provide an outlet for authors looking to play and expand. Andy Greenwald has heralded Netflix as being the new standard for authored programming. Despite disliking their model of uploading all of the content at once for viewers to watch all at once, he does look toward Netflix as an avenue for authors to take risks (par. 9). One of these risks is the inclusion of a diverse cast of women. Kohan states in multiple interviews the difficulty in developing and selling programs about black and Latina characters. For Indiewire, she lists her main character, a white middle-class woman as a gateway drug” continuing to say

I don't think I could have sold a show about black and Latina and old women in prison, you know? But if I had the girl next door coming in as my fish out of water, I can draw a certain audience in through her that can identify with her, and then I can tell all of these stories once she's in, once we've signed onto this journey. She's just a great entry point for a lot of people. (par. 7)

Similar rhetoric to Issa Rae's lament regarding the lack of people of color is included within this statement. Implicit is the negotiation that takes place to sell a program to a network or distributing agent. In order to tell multiple types of stories, executives need a gateway, in this case, a middle aged white woman. As the season unfolds, Piper slowly but surely becomes only a bookmark for the narrative as the audience meanders

through others' background narratives and personal dramas. However, the assumption of Piper as a white woman as being the neutral figure for which audience members are to identify continues the problematic racialization of television. Additionally, Kohan points out the issue of age. According to Dunham who suggests women in their early twenties and Kohan's that middle aged women are underrepresented suggest a majority of characters are between thirty and fifty years of age. Flooding the market with images of women, usually mothers and/or wives, suggests those character types are norms. The lack of range for women on television continues to be short side of television.

The praises of Netflix's capabilities mirror similar arguments made during the rise of network television, basic cable, subscription cable, and satellite. Television as a new frontier, according to Davis, opened up spaces for women to work in entertainment as men continued to write for what was already stable and certain. Programs like *Married with Children* on Fox opened up possibilities to challenge discourse around family and gender roles. Women's networks allowed for niche programming that acknowledged women as an audience, the need for women's programming, and abilities of women to write for that audience. *Sex and the City* is credited as a program that allowed for frank discussions and graphic representations of sex and more importantly of women's sexual pleasure. Though not without its racial and classist issues, remains a stepping-stone for women's representations. Doors supposedly keep opening wider and wider for women; however, the numbers of women working as writers and creators remain low.

Netflix's brand as an independent source of content is still growing. The benefits of it not aligning directly to television's format are the open nature of the brand. Netflix contains niche programming, but as a brand is known more so for the way content is

accessed as opposed to the content itself. Audience members, in theory, maybe more willing to approach programming about women based on brief synopses, rather than depending on a channel brand to encourage or discourage their viewer. Lifetime, for example, is known as a “woman’s channel” specializing in content about complicated and often abusive relationships. Knowing this as the channel’s niche, may dissuade viewership. However, the same content in theory could be more appealing without a niche framing device. The negative aspect of Netflix is the aspect of “options.” Netflix’s options are expansive. They do quite a bit to promote their own programs, like include them as options of “What is New” and within a list of content Netflix’s algorithm thinks the user might enjoy. The overwhelming nature of options available within Netflix’s database does mean it becomes more difficult for those interested to stumble into women’s comedic content due to Netflix’s algorithms.

Early in 2013 the WGA- West released their “TV Staffing Brief,” which analyzed patterns of 1222 writers in 190 broadcast and cable programs in the 2011-2012 season (1). Specifically the report targeted the standings of women, minorities and older writers. According to the report women’s representation raised five percentage point to approximately thirty percent (2), whereas minorities increased seven and half percent to approximately fifteen percent (2). That is for television in its entirety – between drama, reality, and comedy. There is also no mention of intersection of identities; for example, how many older, Latina women are working on television. These numbers are echoed by Martha Lauzen’s research at the Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film. In her study of network television’s 2011-12 Prime Time Season, she notes the numbers were at twenty six percent across the board for above the line representation. Twenty-

eight percent women were shared amongst drama and comedy programs (as opposed to a flat twenty-one percent for reality) (1). Despite public discourse centered around famous women like Tina Fey and highly successful franchises like *Sex and the City*, and frequent notes about television's expansive opportunities for women in comparison to film, the numbers remain fairly low, at least under fifty percent. Granted, these numbers are steady and high in comparison to women and the community of male writers, at least according to accounts have grown more receptive to women's narratives and experiences.

Contradictions abound between the representation and reality. On one hand the celebration of women indicates a positive move toward acknowledging disparities, defending women's humor, and opening up discourses beyond the industry – into popular publications, for example, and discussing women's cultural roles and positions. Women, however, remain underrepresented on television not because they lack skills, but their experiences are considered to still have only niche value. Women's experiences are not as identifiable and based on statements by Kaling and Rae, are discouraged to stray far from traditional representations, which includes further othering through race, sexuality, and emotional complexity. Niche marketing both helps and hinders women in the field by providing more spaces for women to work, but also positioning them as only accessible to a particular audience. As different channels and sources for distribution emerge so dilutes opportunities for women's work to be recognized nationally.

In the interview de Cadenet, Rae briefly mentions the ways in which niche marketing limits access to women's work, citing the lack of centralization ("Issa Rae"). With hundreds of channels of television with their own weekly programming, the number of options on television alone is overwhelming. It is easy for those within the thirty

percent to be missed. Online spaces can become an even deeper hole. With billions of users generating their own content daily, being noticed is a rarity. The reason those like Issa Rae become icons over night is their ability (and luck) to emerge from the wealth of options users have when sifting through online content. Having the opportunity to generate and upload content on the author's terms is no doubt an exciting development in media, especially for young creators. The drawbacks of free labor and content in the off chance of gaining an audience big enough to warrant notice raises more questions about authorship within the digital enclosure.

Despite the contradictions and overwhelming nature of entertainment media, there are positive developments within television. Firstly, is the movement women have made within the industry. Numbers continue to be low, but the experiences of those women differ than their predecessors. Davis recounts her path to the *I Love Lucy* was contingent on misfortune and luck. She became a comedy writer because she was discouraged from pursuing serious journalism. Visibility of comedians like Lucille Ball, Joan Rivers, and Gilda Radner helped influence Tina Fey and Amy Poehler who continue to encourage young girls and women to consider performing comedy. The recent trend of female comedians releasing personal memoirs, provide more avenues for identification and modeling. Sarah Silverman, Rachel Dratch, Jane Lynch, Mindy Kaling, Tina Fey, Jen Kirkman, and Chelsea Handler have been successful in that regard, which creates more opportunities for others.

Second, are the types of comedy produced by women. I have provided a few examples from comedies derived from the traditional sitcom. Women continue to help expand the dynamics of comedy television. Sarah Silverman's Comedy Central serial *The*

Sarah Silverman Program provided absurdist and politically charged comedy that straddled the line between sitcom and sketch. *Inside Amy Schumer* (2013 -) is similar as it moves back and forth between Schumer's stand-up and sketch comedy. MTV's *Girl Code* (2013 -) features female comedians talking about issues specifically related to girls and women, like sex, self-image, and empowerment. Then there remain standbys like *Saturday Night Live* which continue to employ female comedians from a variety of comedic backgrounds. These examples have been fairly popular and well discussed. The range of humor available to draw influence from is wider than in previous years. It is clearer to see not all female comedians are created equal comedically.

Finally, the focus on women and comedy provide a platform for women to discuss restricting ideologies, even through their dismissal of good natured questions by journalists. Tina Fey has referred to the "what do you think of women and comedy?" questions as boring and refuses to participate. Others like Kristin Wiig have been confused over the necessity of the "are women funny?" question and some like Jen Kirkman express contempt. The question being asked is problematic as it is based on the assumption women are not funny and the women asked are exceptions to the rule. Yet, whether it is their refusal to acknowledge the question or challenge it head on, they continually put forth a strong message for readers.

Numbers are low when it comes to women making waves in television. They are working within a context formed around male audience and expectations. As a major source for American comedy, Comedy Central is geared toward an audience estimated at 65% male and its target demographic being 18-34 men (Carter, 1). In a *New York Times* piece entitled "In the Tastes of Young Men, Humor is Most Prized, a Survey Finds," Bill

Carter wrote of the strategies Comedy Central executives were taking to compete with alternative sources of comedy, be them on competing networks or online sources.

Executives conducted online surveys and in-person buddy focus group. Focus groups consisted only of men who noted a penchant for toilet humor, absurdity, and cynicism when it comes to issues of race and class (1). Little is said of gender and sexuality.

Considering male humor, as defined by comedians themselves, is more joke oriented over character it is not surprising the channel becomes male-centric in its humor and joke telling. Being a major source of comedy, the channel establishes the norm for comedy. At times this norm is challenged. *Inside Amy Schumer* has been a success for the network and has struck a rare balance between feminist oriented issues and comedy. In the midst of a post-feminist moment, a male-centric entertainment and comedy context, and with otherwise niche appeal, female success remains a rarity.

Women have no doubt come a long way since the days of *Lucy*, but struggles for acceptance within the entertainment industrial complex continue. Women do not deny being a woman in comedy can be difficult, but many note it is not usually their comedian colleagues as much as it is the gatekeepers – comedy club owners and executives who feel as if the comedy does not translate. Working under these circumstances means undergoing a series of concessions. Each of the series discussed above and their female authors have chosen ways to fit themselves within the standards and expectations of target demographics while steadily expanding representations, discourse, and opportunities for women.

Tina Fey and Amy Poehler gently pushed lines of network television. Fey's work in particular wrapped feminist jokes in layers of meaning, making it difficult to decipher

whether the joke condoned or condemned feminism. Poehler's active feminist presence has brought forth extra care in representing a woman in power on network television. Lena Dunham and Diablo Cody have directly challenged traditional forms of representation through their play with gender roles and character types. The format of subscription cable allows them that opportunity, but the public interest in their lives, careers, and texts opens up discourse about their roles as authors and feminists. Despite the somewhat closed nature of entertainment and the fact seemingly little has changed, the chain of influence continues and more models for feminine and feminist humor emerge.

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