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TAKE BACK THE MIC: THE RISE OF FEMINIST STAND-UP COMEDY IN AMERICAN CULTURE

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For Mom and Dad,

and funny women everywhere

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Abstract

"Take Back the Mic" examines the first cohorts of feminist stand-up comics in the United States, from the years immediately preceding the emergence of the women's liberation movement through the end of the twentieth century. Through an analysis of comic performances, media coverage, audience reception, and interviews, this account reveals how comics introduced a variety of female perspectives and pro-woman sentiments into American stand-up comedy. It argues that feminist comics used their acts to demand public recognition of their whole personhood and their right to participate fully in cultural life. The entrance of women into stand-up was not merely about the right to perform the same old jokes along with the guys. Rather, feminist comics wielded humor as a tool in order to make their voices heard by audiences unaccustomed to considering women's perspectives, and advocated for the cultural authority to engage in freer self-expression. In so doing, they reshaped the comedy stage as a site for feminist engagement.

In telling the story of the origins and growth of feminist stand-up comedy, "Take Back the Mic," brings together issues of feminism, politics, and public performance in the later decades of the twentieth century. The comics included here – from Sophie Tucker, Belle Barth, and Jackie "Moms" Mabley to Joan Rivers and Lily Tomlin to Roseanne Barr and Ellen DeGeneres – both reflected and shaped the culture that surrounded them. The rise of feminist comedy was a gradual process, helped along by reciprocal dynamics between the underground and mainstream in which new styles developed on the fringes of mass culture (such as women's movement venues), and then infiltrated the center (such as comedy clubs and network television). The trajectory of the genre, over many years and across a variety of venues, reveals a range of feminist energy and discourse in periods and arenas previously thought fallow. Comedy

constitutes an overlooked area of public life in which feminist actors fought for not just access and equity, but also authority and self-expression. While feminist activists and politicians worked to remove the legal and economic boundaries that circumscribed women's lives, feminist comics used their platforms to critique the cultural prescriptions that inhibited them, and to offer their own ideas for a better, more truthful, and funnier future.

Introduction

At the 1979 Michigan Women's Music Festival, comic Robin Tyler served as the master of ceremonies. She told the audience about the first drag ball she ever attended, where she was arrested for the crime of, remarkably, female impersonation. It was New York City in 1960, and 500 men, fully clad in women's clothing (down to the crinolines), were dancing when the police stormed in. Tyler approached one of the police officers to ask why they were arresting the men at the ball:

> He said, 'You don't fool me, you're one of them!' So he threw me into handcuffs – which is how I got into bondage – throws me into the paddy wagon and takes me to jail for female impersonation. They allowed me one phone call. Did I call my mother? Are you kidding? Did I call my lawyer? No. I called the *New York Post*! And the next day the headline read 'Forty-four men and one woman arrested for female impersonation.'[1]

Standing in front of a welcoming audience at a women's festival that explicitly barred men from attending, Tyler mocked the absurdity of prescribed gender norms as she recounted the extraordinary story of a police officer arresting a woman for the crime of female impersonation.

In pointing out the futility of enforcing gender norms, Tyler revealed them to be socially constructed, rather than somehow natural or essential. The target of the printed headline was ambiguous (the police? Or Tyler, a failed woman?) but on stage, in front of a crowd of allies, Tyler was able to transform unquestionably into the creator of the joke, rather than the target. In 1960, Tyler was dismissed by an authority figure; by 1979, at the Michigan Women's Music Festival, she had become an authority figure – the master of ceremonies.

Tyler was one of the most prominent members of an early generation of female comics who made feminism a central component of their performances. This cohort included comics

[1] Val Edwards, "Robin Tyler/Comic in Contradiction," *BODY POLITIC*, no. 56 (September 1979): 21.

such as Lily Tomlin, Elayne Boosler, Kate Clinton, Ivy Bottini, and others. Tyler spoke for many of them when she called humor "a powerful political tool," and succinctly described how, though it might seem surprising, humor was an apt choice of medium for those looking to advance the rights of women: "We have to take the weapons they traditionally used against us, turn them around and aim back."[2] Feminist humor certainly thrived before the 1960s – see, for example, the satirical suffrage verse of Alice Duer Miller, the Harlem Renaissance fiction of Jessie Redmon Fauset, or the saucy films of Mae West – but the burgeoning of women's liberation proved a more fertile time for feminist comedy than any prior era in American culture.[3]

Until then, female comics adhered to a more vaudevillian style popularized by male comics. Standard-bearers such as Bob Hope, Jack Benny, Milton Berle, and Henny Youngman (the latter best known for his classic one-liner, "Take my wife…please.") emphasized impersonal, interchangeable jokes over their unique voices. [4] Phyllis Diller, the first woman to achieve mainstream success as a stand-up in the late 1950s and early 1960s, emulated Hope's fast-paced delivery and bombarded audiences with rapid-fire jokes.[5] But her status as a female comic set her apart and put audiences ill at ease. She responded with costumery and self-deprecation: she dressed outlandishly in a fright wig and garish housecoats in order to hide her attractive figure on stage and made herself the butt of most of her jokes. Still, her act contained nuance – as she listed the ways in which she failed as a woman, housewife, and mother, she

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[2] Edwards, "Robin Tyler/Comic in Contradiction," 22.
[3] Krefting, *All Joking Aside,* 38-65. See also Epstein, *The Haunted Smile*; Stephen E. Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) and Stone, *Laughing in the Dark*.
[4] Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 6-7.
[5] Yael Kohen, *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy*, (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2014), 7-11.

simultaneously offered the public a smirking response to the impossible expectations women faced. Joan Rivers soon rose to national prominence as well. Like Diller, self-deprecation was her comic lingua franca, but Rivers's material was laced with a frenetic, aggressive energy that reflected her frustration with the challenges of femininity as well as a palpable yearning to connect with the female members of her audience of who could relate to her plight (characterized succinctly by her early catchphrase, "Can we talk?").[6]

Earlier female comics, who got their start in Vaudeville and the burgeoning nightclub circuit that followed it, achieved success and notoriety through their use of bawdy or "blue" humor. The racy jokes of Black comedian Jackie "Moms" Mabley were popular in the early to mid-twentieth century, but for much of her career she remained isolated on the Chitlin Circuit (the primary venues available to African-American performers at the time). Jewish comedians like Belle Barth, Totie Fields, and Rusty Warren released popular party records of adult comedy in the 1960s, but as was the case with Mabley, it was the understanding that they stood outside the bounds of traditional femininity (whether because of race, weight, attractiveness, or sexual availability) that gave them license to stand up in public and use vulgarity to mock the world around them.[7] Still, the initial rumblings of a feminist comic tradition are discernible in their defiant and self-assured attitudes, their clever retorts to the indignities they experienced as women, and their delight in seeking their own pleasure.

It was the advent of women's liberation that facilitated the transition to a cohort of female comics who rejected self-denigrating material and vulgar shock-comedy in favor of a politically motivated feminist perspective. What had been feminist subtext in earlier female comics' acts

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[6] Shawn Levy, *In On the Joke: The Original Queens of Standup Comedy*, (United States: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2022), 301.
[7] Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny*, 18-19.

became text in the performances of this next generation. As feminism became a more significant part of American culture than ever before, postwar shifts in popular comedy from vaudevillian slapstick to biting social satire and autobiographical storytelling created openings in the entertainment world for feminist social critique. This dovetailing of cultural trends enabled comics like Tyler (and her then-partner, Patty Harrison), Tomlin, and Bottini to bring their feminist-oriented comedic stylings to audiences in a variety of forums, from NOW meetings and college shows, to major theaters and network television appearances. Feminist comics went on to establish a vibrant comedy scene at the primarily-female music festivals, bookstores, and coffeehouses that made up the women's culture community. Whereas previous female comics elicited laughs from sheer surprise of their lewdness or the ways in which they failed to exemplify feminine ideals, feminist comics made it clear that society deserved the mockery, not themselves. When they brought up taboo topics, they did it to share more of themselves on stage and to connect with their audiences, not merely to shock them.

The rise of cable television, which brought stand-up comedy into an unprecedented number of American households, along with the flourishing comedy club scene, pushed stand-up to its highest level of cultural prominence during the "boom years" of the 1980s and early 1990s. The rapidly expanding world of stand-up provided new opportunities for women entering the industry, yet they still faced a male-dominated field that was often hostile to female comics. As a result, many female comics in mainstream venues incorporated feminist outlooks into their material, but stopped short of making it the dominant element of their acts so as not to alienate audiences and industry powerbrokers. Growing numbers of female comics rose to prominence in the boom years, including figures such as Roseanne Barr, Brett Butler, Margaret Cho, and Ellen DeGeneres. In general, though, female stand-ups failed to achieve parity with male comics; they

likely never accounted for more than one-quarter of the comic population through the end of the twentieth century.[8] But they nevertheless made significant inroads in mainstream comedy and played a leading role in the creation of alternative comedy as a popular and influential style.

Challenges for women in comedy remain significant at present. Female comics are still well outnumbered by male comics – recent estimates put women stand-ups at no more than one-third of the field.[9] While comics Chelsea Handler, Samantha Bee, Lilly Singh, and Amber Ruffin have all helmed their own late-night shows in the last decade, no woman has yet hosted one on network television. It was not until 2017 that even one female stand-up cracked the *Forbes* list of the ten highest-paid comics.[10] As of 2023, only four female comics have won the Grammy award for Best Comedy Album in the category's 65-year history. The question of whether women are as funny as men has continued to persist (most famously in Christopher Hitchens's 2007 *Vanity Fair* article, "Why Women Aren't Funny,") and female comics still report frequently fielding questions about the novelty of being "a woman in comedy."[11]

Despite the impediments that women continue to face in the field, the cultural legacy of twentieth-century feminist stand-up comics reverberates into the present day. Two decades into the new century, on the other side of the internet revolution, the comedy landscape has been further democratized. Today, there are a plethora of female comics at the upper echelons of the

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[8] Nolan Feeney, "Why Aren't There More Women On The Top-Earning Comedians List?," *Forbes*, July 11, 2013. https://www.forbes.com/sites/nolanfeeney/2013/07/11/why-arent-there-more-women-on-the-top-earning-comedians-list/.
[9] Rebecca Krefting, *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 120-121.
[10] "5. Amy Schumer ($37,500,000)," Forbes, July 18, 2017. https://www.forbes.com/pictures/596e3dc44bbe6f2e2a0965e6/5-amy-schumer-37500000/.
[11] Condé Nast, "Why Women Aren't Funny," Vanity Fair, January 1, 2007, https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2007/01/hitchens200701. Jesse David Fox Van and Kathryn Arendonk, "Do We Really Need Documentaries About 'Women in Comedy'?," Vulture, April 1, 2021, https://www.vulture.com/article/good-one-podcast-women-in-comedy.html.

industry as well as female-led comedy specials, sitcoms, sketch shows, and films that give voice to a feminist perspective. *Bridesmaids*, the first female-centric major comedy film, smashed records when it grossed over $284 million at the box office in 2011. The sketch program *Inside Amy Schumer* (2013-2022) won a Peabody Award as well as three Emmys. Hannah Gadsby's special *Nanette* (2018), which dealt with her experience in comedy as a woman and a lesbian, became the must-see comedy special of that year and still looms large over intellectual debates about comedy as an artistic form. At the same time, comedy has become a fertile realm for cultural criticism and a primary site for feminist engagement in popular culture.[12] As stand-up comics have come to constitute some of the most publicly visible proponents of feminism in American culture, it is necessary to look to their predecessors to understand how this transformation took place.

"Take Back the Mic" examines the rise of the first cohorts of feminist comics, from the years immediately preceding the emergence of the women's liberation movement in the 1960s until the end of the twentieth century. Through an analysis of comic performances, media coverage, audience reception, and interviews, this account reveals how comics introduced a variety of female perspectives and pro-woman sentiments into American stand-up comedy. It argues that feminist comics used the stand-up stage to demand public recognition of their whole

[12] Linda Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 6. Megan Garber, "How Amy Schumer and John Oliver Became the New Public Intellectuals," *The Atlantic*, May 28, 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/05/how-comedians-became-public-intellectuals/394277/. Jared N. Champion and Peter C. Kunze, eds., *Taking a Stand: Contemporary US Stand-up Comedians as Public Intellectuals* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021). "Comedians Are Leading the Feminist Movement — And Here's What That Says About Us," *Mic*, accessed October 17, 2022, https://www.mic.com/articles/113262/comedians-are-leading-the-feminist-movement-and-here-s-what-that-says-about-us.

personhood, the promise of their right to participate fully in cultural life. The entrance of women into stand-up wasn't merely about the right to perform the same old jokes along with the guys. Rather, feminist comics wielded humor as a tool in order to make their voices heard by audiences unaccustomed to considering women's perspectives. By unshackling themselves from the burdens of patriarchal and heteronormative gender constraints, which barred them from publicly disclosing the realities of their lived experience, feminist comics helped women achieve greater access to an important platform for cultural discourse. In so doing, they reshaped the norms of that cultural discourse in order to forge connections with their audiences and to convey their humanity more fully. In short, they transformed the comedy stage into a site for feminist engagement.

The transition was a gradual one, helped along by reciprocal dynamics between the underground and mainstream in which new styles develop on the fringes of mass culture (such as women's movement venues), and then infiltrate the center (such as comedy clubs and network television). However, the overarching trend toward greater freedom of expression for women is nonetheless apparent. The trajectory of feminist comedy, over these decades and across these disparate arenas, reveals a range of feminist energy and discourse in periods and arenas previously thought fallow. Comedy constitutes an overlooked area of public life in which feminist actors fought for not just access and equity, but also authority and self-expression. While feminist activists and politicians worked to remove the legal and economic boundaries that circumscribed women's lives, feminist comics used their platforms to critique the cultural prescriptions that inhibited them, and to offer their own ideas for a better, more truthful, and funnier future.

This dissertation employs a novel approach – a historical analysis of comic performance. While historians have examined the cultural politics of women performing in public, particularly with regard to the moral controversy that resulted from their appearance on the theatrical stage in the nineteenth century, this dissertation is the first historical study of female stand-up comics.[13] In telling the story of the origins and growth of feminist stand-up comedy, "Take Back the Mic," brings together issues of feminism, politics, and public performance in the later decades of the twentieth century.

Humor warrants study from a historical perspective in this instance for two reasons: first, opponents of feminism have painted humor as intrinsically opposed to feminism, even more so than other expressive forms like literature and music. Such critics have long assumed that women in general lack an authentic sense of humor, but they paint feminists as distinctly humorless.[14] Media studies scholar Susan Douglas writes of the prevailing characterization of feminists: "We all know what feminists are. They are shrill, overly aggressive, man-hating, ball-

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[13] Robert Clyde Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Pamela Cobrin, *From Winning the Vote to Directing on Broadway: The Emergence of Women on the New York Stage, 1880-1927* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009); Faye E. Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses and Audiences, 1790-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000); Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Sara E. Lampert, *Starring Women: Celebrity, Patriarchy, and American Theater, 1790-1850*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020). For work on female comic performance in early film history, see Maggie Hennefeld, *Specters of Slapstick & Silent Film Comediennes*, (Columbia University Press, 2018), and Kristen Anderson Wagner, *Comic Venus: Women and Comedy in American Silent Film*, (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2018).
[14] Nancy A. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 140-142.

busting, selfish, hairy, extremist, deliberately unattractive women with absolutely no sense of humor who see sexism at every turn."[15]

The stereotype of the feminist who "can't take a joke" persists to this day, yet feminism and humor complement each other in key ways. As cultural scholar studies scholar Maggie Hennefeld argues, the "sweet spot of humor…provides an ideal coconspirator for feminist activists, artists, and authors to represent a social structure that seems untenable (if not unimaginable) within the patriarchal power politics of any present at hand."[16] More broadly, the works of prominent humor theorists have offered insight to the connection between humor and challenges to orthodoxy. Sigmund Freud wrote of the "liberating element" and rebelliousness of humor, as well as its ability to turn the "wounds dealt by the outside world" into a source of pleasure.[17] Mikhail Bakhtin expounded on the comic as a subversive social force in his work on the carnivalesque.[18] Henri Bergson described laughter as "above all, a corrective," viewing it as a method by which a group could recognize and critique that which is wrong or out of place.[19] These rhetorical aspects of humor demonstrate the organic ways in which it lends itself as a medium for subaltern – including feminist – critiques of society. Indeed, humor allows its authors to venture beyond critique, to posit new possibilities regardless of how unlikely or ridiculous they may seem.

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[15] Douglas, *Where the Girls Are,* 7.
[16] Maggie Hennefeld, "Editor's Introduction: Toward a Feminist Politics of Comedy and History," *Feminist Media Histories* 3, no. 2 (April 1, 2017): 3.
[17] Sigmund Freud, "Humor," *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 9, (January 1928): 2-3.
[18] M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 1st Midland book ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).
[19] Henri Bergson, Cloudesley Brereton, and Fred Rothwell, *An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, (London: Macmillan and Co, 1911), 197.

Second, humor provides a frank and unvarnished vantage point from which to study history. Historian Joseph Boskin writes, "As a cultural index, a reflector of social change and conflict, humor provides an unusual historical ray into the complex connection between society's concerns and issues."[20] As humor critic Laurie Stone put it: "What we laugh at during any period is a soulprint of the age."[21] The comics included here both reflected and shaped the culture that surrounded them. By examining this culture through the lens of humor – whether through Robin Tyler's stand-up routines about life as an openly lesbian radical feminist in the 1970s or Roseanne Barr's sitcom about the everyday struggles of working motherhood in the 1990s – we gain insight into new dimensions of the struggle for women's liberation and the discourse that surrounded them.

In analyzing the feminist nature of female comic performance, this project looks at a wide range of comic voices in the latter half of the twentieth century. Given the prominent role of ethnic comedy in the postwar United States, namely in Jewish and African-American comedy, the intersections between minority comedic stylings and the burgeoning feminist comic tradition provide a rich alternative perspective from which to study subaltern humor. In a 1979 interview about her own feminist humor, Tyler explained the link:

> Comedy reflects the political state of the times. In the 1940s the focus was on anti-Semitism and a lot of Jewish comics came up. In the 1960s we had the third world problems, and we began to get other minority comics like Richard Pryor and Freddy Prinz [sic]…The greatest humour has sometimes come out of oppression. The most oppressed groups have had to use humour as a pressure valve. Laughter illuminates the trouble.[22]

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[20] Joseph Boskin, *Rebellious Laughter: People's Humor in American Culture*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 17.
[21] Laurie Stone, *Laughing in the Dark: A Decade of Subversive Comedy*, 1st ed. (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1997) xvii.
[22] Edwards, "Robin Tyler/Comic in Contradiction," 22.

While early female comics were most often white—the African-American Mabley being the most prominent exception—racial diversity grew among female comics over these years, particularly during the 1980s comedy boom (see, for example, Marsha Warfield, Margaret Cho, Adele Givens, and Thea Vidale). Examining the feminist humor produced by comics of different racial and ethnic backgrounds not only allows for an intersectional analysis of late-twentieth century American comedy, but also helps illuminate the similarities and differences among comic traditions that share a common goal of righting social wrongs.

Furthermore, the work of lesbian comics also constitutes a significant component of feminist comedy in the second half of the twentieth century. Comics such as Lea DeLaria, Clinton, Suzanne Westenhoefer, Karen Ripley, and Tyler, who in 1979 became the first comic to perform openly homosexual material on national television and to release an openly gay or lesbian comedy album, reveal the lesbian comic tradition that began decades before Ellen DeGeneres achieved stardom, and continues to this day.[23] The lesbian community created an (albeit small) alternative comedy scene beginning in the mid-1970s in coffeehouses, bookstores, and music festivals associated with the feminist movement. Performers such as Kate Clinton, who refused to hide their sexuality while performing, flourished in front of these welcoming audiences. This "lescom" circuit, as some have called it, served as a precursor to the better-known alternative comedy scene of the 1990s, where later comics turned to nontraditional venues populated by friendly audiences in order to enjoy greater creative freedom.

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[23] Jan Breslauer, "COMEDY: Heard the One About Lesbian Comics?: Kate Clinton and Lea DeLaria Have Fought the Homophobia of the Comedy World and Broken into the Stand-up Mainstream," *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 1993. Krefting, *All Joking Aside*, 141-145.

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"Take Back the Mic" draws on the scholarship concerning women acting on the theatrical stage and the moral controversy this illicit conduct evoked. It continues the work of Sara E. Lampert and Susan A. Glenn to elucidate how the performances and celebrity of nineteenth-century actresses both shaped and reflected prevailing cultural representations of virtuous womanhood. By examining stand-up comics rather than actresses, this study affords greater access to the performers' authorial voices, access that invites us to glimpse their perspectives on the tension between public performance and feminine propriety.

Beyond the focus on comedy, "Take Back the Mic" differs from such scholarship by its temporal setting, as it seeks to further probe the problem of women's public performance by moving the examination forward in time. It begins with the women's liberation movement, proceeds through the growing conservatism of the Reagan and Bush administrations, and concludes in the mid-1990s, in the aftermath of the stand-up boom and amid intense cultural deliberation concerning the direction of the next generation of feminism. This chronology also enables the study to contribute to the scholarship that aims to blur the boundaries between the so-called "waves" of feminism in order to better capture the breadth of the movement.[24] The dissertation sheds light on feminist discourse in the years between waves, as well as in arenas not generally considered sites of political engagement, such as nightclubs, late-night television shows, and music festivals.

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[24] Stephanie Gilmore, *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Nancy A. Hewitt, *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2010); Kathleen A. Laughlin and Jacqueline L. Castledine, *Breaking the Wave: Women, Their Organizations, and Feminism, 1945-1985*, (New York: Routledge, 2011); Nancy Whittier, *Feminist Generations: The Persistence of the Radical Women's Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

This account also departs from existing historical studies of feminism and popular culture in the mid-twentieth century. Its focus on female-authored media directed at both mass and niche audiences distinguishes it from the prevailing scholarship, such as that of Susan Douglas and Wini Breines, which has interrogated the development of feminist consciousness amid a postwar mass culture largely under the creative control of men.[25] Where female-authored cultural productions in general, and feminist comedy in particular, has merited scholarly analysis is in fields like American studies, women's and gender studies, performance studies, and media and communication studies. Rebecca Krefting's theory of "charged humor," Joanne Gilbert's conceptualization of "marginalized humor," Linda Mizejewski's breakdown of the body politics of female stand-ups, and Suzanne Lavin's analysis of the performances of Diller, Tomlin, and Barr all inform this study.[26] However, "Take Back the Mic" gives priority to the broader historical context and significance rather than the isolated textual analysis of the works in these fields.

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[25] Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing up Female in the Fifties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media*, 1st ed. (New York: Times Books, 1994). See also: Katherine J. Lehman, *Those Girls: Single Women in Sixties and Seventies Popular Culture*, Culture America (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2011); Patricia Bradley, *Mass Media and the Shaping of American Feminism, 1963-1975* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003); Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment, eds., *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture* (London: Women's Press, 1988).

[26] Regina Barreca, *New Perspectives on Women and Comedy* (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992); Joanne R. Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004); Krefting, *All Joking Aside*; Suzanne Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance: Phyllis Diller, Lily Tomlin, and Roseanne*, Studies in American Popular History and Culture (New York: Routledge, 2004); L. Mizejewski, V. Sturtevant, and K. R. Karlyn, *Hysterical!: Women in American Comedy* (University of Texas Press, 2017); Linda Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014); Nancy A. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); Katelyn Hale Wood, *Cracking up: Black Feminist Comedy in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century United States*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2021).

Feminist music and art have been analyzed to elucidate the experiences of women in American society, but humor – a vibrant and popular expressive form – has not yet garnered scholarly attention from historians of feminism.[27] By exploring the unstudied realm of comedy, this dissertation reveals a new dimension to the feminist struggle to dismantle cultural limitations on women's public self-expression. In so doing, it offers a needed contribution to the study of women's roles in the public sphere in the twentieth century.[28]

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[27] For scholarship on feminist art and music, see: Norma Broude, Mary D. Garrard, and Judith K. Brodsky, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1994); Linda M. Grasso, *Equal under the Sky: Georgia O'Keeffe and Twentieth-Century Feminism* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017); Eileen M. Hayes, *Songs in Black and Lavender: Race, Sexual Politics, and Women's Music*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Jo Anna Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*, (London: Routledge, 1996); Bonnie J. Morris, *The Disappearing L: Erasure of Lesbian Spaces and Culture*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016); Bonnie J. Morris, *Eden Built by Eves: The Culture of Women's Music Festivals*, 1st ed (Los Angeles, Calif: Alyson Books, 1999); Sarah M. Ross, *A Season of Singing: Creating Feminist Jewish Music in the United States*, (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2016); Ann M. Savage, *They're Playing Our Songs: Women Talk About Feminist Rock Music*, (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003); Jayne Wark, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America*, (Montreal; Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006).

[28] For more on separate spheres ideology and its implications, see: Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870-1940*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000);
Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, (New York: Norton, 1986); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-earning Women in the United States*, (Romania: OUP USA, 2003); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, (New York: Basic Books, 1988), Emily Remus, *A Shoppers' Paradise: How the Ladies of Chicago Claimed Power and Pleasure in the New Downtown*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2019); Kathy Lee Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-century New York*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), and Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*, (Illini Books ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

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Humor itself is notoriously difficult to define. This study maintains a broad understanding of humor as that which seeks to evoke laughter, with closer attention to the comedic forms that stand-ups utilize. Drawing on the work of literary theorists, I understand comedy as the theatrical performance of humor.[29] The dissertation focuses principally on stand-up comedy, though television shows (namely, comic-helmed situation comedies) are also included. My primary concern is analyzing the unique voice of each comic, which stand-up preserves more clearly than film or television shows with directors and large writing staffs that often mediate and obscure the individual's voice.

The definition of stand-up comedy that guides this project comes from noted American studies and humor scholar Lawrence Mintz, who articulates a capacious understanding of the genre that extends beyond the single unadorned performer behaving comically. He includes comedy teams, skits, improvisation, and film and television performances so long as these productions stress artist/audience communication and favor comic behavior over plot development.[30] In this vein, I include comics like Tomlin who created comic characters rather than personal monologues for her solo performances; Tyler and Harrison who toured as a dual act; and members of the 1990s alternative comedy scene, who often improvised material onstage and stretched the boundaries of the genre with their avant-garde stylings.

Numerous forms of humor exist – such as satire, shock, insult, and wordplay – but this project is concerned with humor that can be broadly characterized as feminist. While a women's humor tradition exists, particularly literary humor, the distinction between women's humor and

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[29] Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, xii.
[30] Lawrence E. Mintz, "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation," *American Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (1985): 71-72.

feminist humor must be clear in order to draw out the common agenda that unites the comics studied here, connecting them across their different ages, races, sexual orientations, and artistic styles. English and women's studies scholar Gloria Kaufman, in her pioneering compilation *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor and Satire* (1980), distinguishes between the two traditions. Feminist humor, she argues, is defined by an attitude of "social revolution," the idea that the existing social order can and must be altered, while female humor defers to the status quo. Kaufman elaborates: "*Female* humor may ridicule a person or a system from an accepting point of view ('that's life'), while the *nonacceptance* of oppression characterizes feminist humor and satire."[31] Similar to studies of African American humor, Kaufman positions resistance to the status quo as the key to feminist humor, taking Freud's notion of rebelliousness and pushing it further, imbuing it with political significance.[32] Indeed, power lay at the heart of comedy – as literature scholar Frances Gray claims, "to define a joke, to be the class that decides *what is funny*, is to make a massive assumption of power."[33] Or as journalist Ellen Hopkins wrote of women comics taking to the stage during the stand-up boom: "Power doesn't just reside in *not* being the target of a comic's jokes. Real power is being the one who's telling them."[34]

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[31] Gloria Kaufman and Mary Kay Blakely, eds. *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor and Satire*, (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1994), 13.
[32] See Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, 30th anniversary ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy*, 2nd edition (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1999).
[33] Frances (Frances B.) Gray, *Women and Laughter*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 8, emphasis in original.
[34] Ellen Hopkins, "Who's Laughing Now? Women.: Today's Young Comediennes Prove That Real Power Lies Not in Being the Target of Jokes, but in Telling Them. Women on the Verge of a Comedic Breakthrough," *New York Times*, September 16, 1990, sec. Arts & Leisure.

American studies and literature scholar Nancy A. Walker expands this definition of feminist humor, claiming that it "laughs at the very idea of gender inequality in an attempt to render such inequality absurd and powerless."[35] In order to achieve this laughter (and gain the power that results from it) feminist comics offered new perspectives on the status quo they sought to overturn. As theater scholar Suzanne Lavin writes, "A defining characteristic of feminist solo comedy is its positing of women's truth and experience to replace the myths of the patriarchy."[36] The prominence of women's own experiences in feminist comedy echoes the feminist tenet "the personal is political," which historian Sara Evans places at the heart of the "brilliant creativity and longevity of feminism in the late twentieth century."[37]

This understanding of feminist humor has guided my selection of the comics included in "Take Back the Mic." Like other recent scholarship that looks beyond feminist-identified organizations and advocates, this dissertation considers activity that took place both within and outside the recognized feminist movement.[38] Given the many differences among the comics in question – in terms of race, sexual orientation, class, religion, age, and location – there was no universal approach to feminist humor, nor consensus regarding the specific feminist messages each comic put forth. Some of the performers highlighted here openly and loudly declared their feminism, while others avoided the question, eschewed the label, or emphasized other aspects of their identities (such as lesbian or African-American). Their acts, however, all contained elements associated with feminist humor: female perspectives that counter or critique patriarchal

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[35] Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 145.
[36] Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance*, 90.
[37] Sara M. Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (New York: The Free Press, 2003), 4.
[38] See: Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

myths; a sense of rebelliousness against societal gender norms; a mocking stance toward gender inequality; the impetus to change the status quo; and the desire to foster community among women. To be clear, this project studies female comics not on the basis of their sex alone but on the subversive feminist content of their acts. Accordingly, the final chapter also includes male stand-ups from the alternative comedy scene who engaged with the tenets of feminist humor. The differences among the comics enrich this study, as they reflect the diversity of those who engaged with the feminism spawned by women's liberation. They constitute fruitful sources from which to interrogate the conflicts, fissures, and points of connection among those who took up the feminist charge within one of the most traditionally male-dominated industries in American culture.[39]

This dissertation assesses the ways comedy and feminism have come together in modern American mass culture, therefore its scope is nationwide. While mainstream comedy emerged primarily from the television and film production hubs of New York City and Los Angeles, the comics surveyed here played comedy clubs in mid-size cities all across the country, such as in Baltimore, St. Louis, Denver, and Palm Beach. The comics who frequented nontraditional comedic venues, such as women's music festivals and feminist bookstores, found themselves performing in small cities, college towns, and even rural areas. Indeed, the title of this dissertation derives from a 1980 women's comedy show that Roseanne Barr organized in conjunction with the University of Colorado at Boulder's "Take Back the Night" anti-rape march after she claimed a local club banned her following a feminist routine.[40] Further, the different venues included in this study attracted audiences of varying sizes: comedy shows might have

[39] For an example of a historical analysis that similarly employs a broad understanding of feminist performance, see Glenn, *Female Spectacle*.
[40] Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance*, 54.

garnered an audience of a few dozen in a feminist bookstore, a few hundred in a nightclub, a few thousand at a women's music festival, and several million for a network sitcom.

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"Take Back the Mic" opens by charting the emergence of feminist comics in American stand-up comedy. The genre evolved from Vaudevillian roots – there, performers would often entertain audiences with a mix of singing and comic repartee. Thus, Chapter 1, "From Blue Bawds to Wonder Women," begins with figures like Sophie Tucker, Belle Barth, and Pearl Williams, whose comic stylings largely came in the form of humorous songs, laced with double entendres and outright bawdy declarations. These women found success from the 1940s-1960s on the nightclub circuit and with sales of their routines on underground "party albums." Their material was not feminist on its face, but the assertive and unapologetic act of commanding audiences with tales of decidedly unvirtuous female behavior marks them as foremothers of the burgeoning feminist comic tradition. It then interrogates the work of the two earliest female icons of stand-up comedy, Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers. Often dismissed as flatly self-deprecating (and thus, anti-feminist), closer examination reveals that their approaches reflected not just the comic trends of their time and the demands of the male-dominated industry, but also a critique of the gender dictates that they consistently failed to uphold and even delighted in flouting. Having assessed the early inroads that women made in stand-up comedy, the chapter then uncovers how the advent of the women's liberation movement inspired the first generation of explicitly feminist comics. In tracing this trajectory, we see a microcosm of the larger dissertation: the way in which comics employed a feminist approach to their acts and in so doing, transformed the comedy stage into a site for greater public self-expression for women.

Chapter 2, “A Stage of Their Own,” examines the stand-up comedy circuit of the women’s culture community (the female-centered arts and culture scene fostered by radical, lesbian, and cultural feminists) from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s. At women’s music festivals, feminist bookstores, and coffeehouses, feminist comics performed for feminist audiences. The community was almost entirely female and majority lesbian-identified. In these sequestered spaces, feminist comics were freed from the constraints of mainstream comedy clubs and theaters. Here, their gender did not differentiate them, but rather provided a point of relatability with their female audiences. In these performances, comics opposed the critics of feminism who sought to curtail their rights, gave voice to their personal experiences and perspectives on the world around them, and taught their fellow women to marshal comedy as a tool of expression and healing. This overlooked aspect of movement history provides a window into the agendas of a diverse array of members and how the community reckoned with those differences through laughter and joy, as well as conflict and anger.

In juxtaposition with Chapter 2, Chapter 3, “Women of the Night,” turns from niche feminist audiences to the cultural center in its analysis of feminist humor in comedy clubs and on cable television during the 1980s “stand-up boom.” Stand-up comedy grew massively in popularity in the late-1970s and into the following decade. The rise of cable television ushered in an unprecedented demand for stand-up performances (as they constituted cheap programming for the many hours cable had to fill) and comedy clubs proliferated around the country. The popularity and expanded opportunities of stand-up, combined with the increased female participation in economic and cultural life that resulted from the women’s movement, meant that more women entered comedy than ever before. Still, the mainstream comedy stage remained an arena where it was assumed that the default comic was male. Women who pursued stand-up

faced hostility from audiences as well as producers and talent bookers. In addition, the stand-up boom coincided with the years generally thought to represent a cultural "backlash" against the women's movement, characterized by the marked decline in feminist identification and activism that occurred between the so-called second and third waves of feminism. It is precisely this concurrence of trends that makes the stand-up comedy performed by women in mainstream comedy clubs a valuable source for interrogation. Chapter 3's analysis of the ways in which feminist comics navigated the antagonistic world of mainstream stand-up reveals their mediated discourse, one that offered feminist interpretations of the world around them but couched them with more palatable material so as not to threaten the status quo by calling for revolutionary change.

The dissertation concludes in the aftermath of the stand-up boom, the 1990s, with Chapter 4, "Private Topics, Public Laughs." Like Chapter 1, it looks at both the mainstream and niche fringes of the comedy world. It argues that within the two most notable developments in the industry at that time – network sitcoms helmed by stand-up comics and alternative comedy – feminist stand-ups brought matters of feminine private life into the male-dominated public sphere of comedy. Confessional, autobiographical comedy that aired private concerns in public had increasingly been gaining prominence in American comedy since the early 1970s. But it was not until the 1990s that feminist comics brought the harshest truths of their experiences to audiences outside the women's movement. Comic-helmed network sitcoms, such as *Grace Under Fire* and *Ellen*, featured storylines about unemployment, domestic violence, homophobia, substance abuse, and single motherhood. The avant-garde comics in alternative venues revealed their struggles with cancer, strained family relationships, crash dieting, and lighter yet-still-personal topics like online dating. By insisting that these unsavory and revealing topics were

both meaningful and appropriate for the public stage, they furthered the work of earlier feminist comics in demanding the right to greater self-expression and recognition of their full personhood. In an era of renewed cultural prominence for feminism, comedy proved a site of innovative storytelling and honest reckoning.

In the early twenty-first century, as a new generation of feminist comics emerged, their careers bolstered by the internet and social media, their work came to coincide with a resurgence of feminist organizing amid the #MeToo movement, the ongoing battle over reproductive rights, and the defeat of Hillary Clinton by Donald Trump for the presidency in 2016. The question of their predecessors arose frequently and while many of them duly credited the more well-known of the comic pioneers who predated them, the fuller story of how feminist comics transformed the stage into a site for freer self-expression, greater cultural authority, and unabashed joy has gone unexamined for too long. This is that story…plus quite a few jokes.

Chapter I: From Blue Bawds to Wonder Women: The Origins of Feminist Comedy

On her 1960 party album, "If I Embarrass You, Tell Your Friends," Belle Barth, a Jewish female comic and singer of the mid-twentieth century, summed up her career in one sentence: "I know clean stories," she said, "I don't make money with them, but I know them."[1] Barth, along with other bawdy female comics of the early and mid-twentieth century, was a fixture on the nightclub circuit, peddling one-liners and comic songs. Lenny Bruce, one of the most famous and acclaimed stand-up comics in American culture, opened for Barth early in his career. He is known for his frequent battles with the authorities over the edgy and "obscene" nature of his stand-up, but he is said to have complained that "while everyone was talking about how dirty and sick he was, it was *really* Barth who was the sickest of them all."[2]

Barth faced many of the same obstacles that Bruce is famous for, such as arrests and fines for lewdness charges as well as bans from television and radio.[3] Yet she and her fellow blue (i.e.

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[1] Belle Barth, *If I Embarrass You, Tell Your Friends*, After Hour Records LAH 69, 1960.
[2] Josh Kun, "'If I Embarrass You, Tell Your Friends': The Musical Comedy of Belle Barth and Pearl Williams," in Bruce Zuckerman, Josh Kun, and Lisa Ansell, *The Song Is Not the Same: Jews and American Popular Music*, vol. v. 8, The Jewish Role in American Life: An Annual Review, (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press for the USC Casden Institute for the Study of the Jewish Role in American Life, 2011), 92. Bruce was not the only one to compare himself to Barth. In 1962, a *Los Angeles Times* journalist referred to Bruce as, "the only comic in the free world who can make Belle Barth blush." See Paul Coates, "This Is Politics---the Fine Art of Getting Everyone to Love You," *Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 1962.
[3] Kun, "If I Embarrass You, Tell Your Friends," 92. Giovanna P. Del Negro, "From the Nightclub to the Living Room: Gender, Ethnicity, and Upward Mobility in the 1950s Party Records of Three Jewish Women," in Simon J. Bronner, *Jews at Home: The Domestication of Identity*, vol. v. 2, Jewish Cultural Studies; (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010), no page number provided. For accounts of Barth's run-ins with law enforcement, see also: "Charges Against Singer Dismissed," *Los Angeles Times*, February 18, 1961. Herb Lyon, "Tower Ticker," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 14, 1958, sec. Part 3. Herb Lyon, "Tower Ticker," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 9, 1962, sec. SECTION ONE.

vulgar and dirty) female comics, like Sophie Tucker, Pearl Williams, and Jackie "Moms" Mabley, are not often remembered for their boundary-pushing routines. Still, they were the women who achieved the greatest success in solo comedy performance before the mid-1960s. Their routines, filled with clever entendre and outright vulgarity, shocked and delighted audiences. They got their starts throughout the early twentieth century in vaudeville theaters, and, in the cases of Jewish and African-American comics, respectively, the Borscht Belt and the Chitlin' Circuit (the names given to the spaces where each group performed before they gained access to mainstream venues). Their successful nightclub acts and party albums (the term for records that featured explicit material) brought them financial gain as well as cult notoriety, even as they were excluded from the popular media due to their lewd routines. Such material also provided an outlet for these performers to challenge the era's prevailing gender norms that dictated female submissiveness and virtue. In the nascent days of stand-up comedy – and before the emergence of women's liberation – it was blue material that provided an entrée for female performers in the industry.

The next generation of female stand-ups, most notably Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers, appeared on the scene in the fifties and sixties. They were among the first to move beyond raunch as the basis for their material. These comics did not offer an explicitly or consistently feminist perspective in their routines. Indeed, self-deprecation and mockery constituted a substantial proportion of each comic's repertoire. However, their takes on daily life gave voice to a negotiation of the norms that governed womanhood during these years (particularly white, middle-class, heterosexual womanhood). Their bodies of work during these decades reveal the cultural standards to which they, as women, felt beholden, including those they failed to meet and those that they delighted in flouting. The contradictory messages they offered about their

duty to live up to these standards of propriety, appearance, and self-sacrifice reflect the tensions that permeated popular culture at the time regarding proper roles for American women.

Finally, it was the performers who emerged yet later, amid the growing impact of women's liberation, who pushed this comic discourse even further. Beginning in the early 1970s, comics like Lily Tomlin, Pat Harrison, Robin Tyler, and Ivy Bottini put forth a more holistic take on female experience, and boldly contested the injustice and unreasonable expectations that they faced as women. These comics included blue material in their performances, but they did so in order to put forth an authentic female perspective that did not shy away from truths simply because they were unsavory or improper. Raunch was no longer the primary terrain on which female comics could make an impact in the genre. They also avoided the self-deprecating material that Diller and Rivers so often mined. Influenced and empowered by the discourse of women's liberation, they instead made it clear to audiences that they found fault with patriarchal society and its dictates, not with their own inability to meet those dictates. It is within this progression from one-dimensional shock humor to a deeper, more varied, and more candid articulation of comics' experiences as women that we can locate the emergence of feminist stand-up comedy as an expressive form.[4]

The legacy of the "blue bawds" of American comedy is important on its own terms, but it takes on greater significance when we understand the trajectory from the comic singers of the "Dreck Circuit" to the pioneering comediennes of mainstream entertainment to the innovators of

[4] It is useful here to note that the division of these performers into three generations or cohorts is somewhat artificial and imprecise. Any chronological analysis of the decades-long careers of performers who entered the field at different stages of life will run into challenges, but the comics in each of these three groups (the bawds, the mainstream pioneers, and the early feminist comics, respectively) all generally made their names around the same time and all shared a similar stylistic foundation, despite some overlaps in age and career trajectories.

feminist stand-up comedy.[5] In the mid-twentieth century, female stand-ups began to make the comedy stage a new space in which women made claims for the public recognition of their personhood and greater freedom of expression. The transformation of the possibilities of the comedy stage to serve as an arena for women comics to publicly express their full selves did not occur overnight. But by the early 1970s, the growing cultural impact of women's liberation and new styles of personal and incisive stand-up dovetailed, opening the door for a feminist approach to stand-up comedy to emerge. This environment allowed female comics to use the form to convey a fuller and more honest depiction of their lives than the comics who came before them. Soon, whether in a night club or on a college stage, a female comic could command an audience's attention as she told of her heartfelt appreciation for her vibrator, her experiences of discrimination while job-hunting, or simply her frustrations with the phone company.

Feminist comics' calls for public recognition of their full personhood acted on multiple levels: they represented a bid for greater power by virtue of the performers' positions of authority as the sole comic onstage, while they also functioned as a move to overturn cultural norms of female propriety and deference. These claims not only encompassed other calls to end sex discrimination, like those for the rights of citizenship, labor equality, and bodily autonomy (all of which appeared in early feminist comics' repertoires), but they functioned as demands for respect the comics deserved. Such claims inherently reached to the heart of the struggle for social and political equality for women. By performing material that moved past raunch into areas that were sincere, quotidian, political, and absurd, feminist comics refused to adhere to constraints on

[5] Kun, "If I Embarrass You, Tell Your Friends," 92. "Dreck" is Yiddish for trash or something worthless. Given the lewd nature of her act, Barth referred to herself as a "self-awarded MD: maven on dreck." Kun used the term "Dreck Circuit" to refer to the nightclubs where Barth and the other bawds performed across the country.

their creativity that circumscribed the work of their predecessors. Their more diverse and free-wheeling styles made their own case for the easing of restrictions on female behavior and expression in public, as well as for the acknowledgement of their humanity, in all its many forms.

The most prominent comics of this moment were mainly white and heterosexual. By no means, however, did this cohort lack diversity. Many were Jewish, Mabley was African American, and Harrison, Tyler, and Bottini identified openly as homosexual during this period (after declining to address her sexuality for decades, Tomlin later came out and eventually married her longtime writing partner Jane Wagner in 2013). Most were from middle-class backgrounds, though some of the early comics came from immigrant families that struggled financially when they were children. These backgrounds informed their stage material, both in the ways the comics felt subject to the ideals of American womanhood at the time, and the ways in which they fell outside those norms – unsurprisingly, like male comics, female comics made use of their particular social positions to comment on society as a whole. However, many identities are left out of this discussion of the origins of feminist comedy due to the relative lack of diversity among early prominent female comics.

"Nothing, honey, is more expressive than the way I say 'hell or damn.'"

Sophie Tucker started performing in Vaudeville acts in 1906 where she performed "coon melodies" in blackface because producers thought her too overweight and unattractive to sing as a white woman. She despised the form, though she won success in blackface, and sought to vary her act – soon she found that audiences enjoyed both the Yiddishisms she added and the off-color content of her racier songs. Her songwriter, Fred Fisher, persuaded her that if she sang about sex she would not offend or scandalize audiences because her large physical size would

render the songs humorous, and their first-person perspective would make the audience laugh at her distress.[6] Beginning around 1916, Tucker found audiences especially receptive to her performances in the newly-emerging nightclub and cabaret venues.[7] Tucker's songs were unapologetically sexual and upfront about the realities of male/female relationships. Titles like "Make Him Say Please," "No One Man is Ever Going to Worry Me," and "You've Got to Make it Legal, Mr. Siegel," demonstrate Tucker's frank perspective on female sexuality.[8]

Part of the innovative appeal of Tucker's songs came from their blended roots. She drew on both traditional Jewish music as well as African-American blues and bawdy songs. Tucker frequented African-American clubs in New York and Chicago, and historian June Sochen writes, "She followed the lead of Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey and sang lyrics with double entendres and sometimes only single entendres."[9] While her songs would pale in comparison with those of Barth or Williams, from the 1910s through the 1940s Tucker won over audiences with an act that portrayed women as enthusiastic and knowledgeable sexual partners who were open about their desires.[10] Though no longer at the height of her fame, she continued performing until her death in 1966.

Tucker's gender, size, religion, and eventually age, all contributed to the subversive nature of her performances. As a larger woman who continued working well past middle age,

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[6] Sarah Blacher Cohen, "The Unkosher Comediennes: From Sophie Tucker to Joan Rivers," in Cohen, *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 110.
[7] June Sochen, "Fanny Brice and Sophie Tucker: Blending the Particular with the Universal," in Sarah Blacher Cohen, *From Hester Street to Hollywood: The Jewish-American Stage and Screen*, 1st Midland book ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 47-48.
[8] Cohen, "The Unkosher Comediennes," 108-109.
[9] Sochen, "From Sophie Tucker to Barbra Streisand: Jewish Women Entertainers as Reformers," in Joyce Antler, et al. *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture*, (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England [for] Brandeis University Press, 1998), 72, 74.
[10] Sochen, "Fanny Brice and Sophie Tucker," 53.

and who made her Jewish heritage a central feature of her act, she turned the stereotypical image of the frigid Jewish mother on its head.[11] While the sight of a heavy woman singing carnal songs added to their comical effect, she proudly defended her figure and her right to a sexual appetite at any age. In her routine "I Don't Want to Get Thin," she conversed with the pianist on stage:

> Sophie: I'm fat, and I know it, and I intend to stay 'fat.'
> Pianist: But Miss Tucker, you shouldn't say 'fat.' In the best places, they say 'stout.'
> Sophie: Well, in the best places, I'm fat. I'll tell you something girls, keep it in your dome. All the married men who run after me have skinny wives at home.[12]

The self-assured manner in which Tucker professed her desirability and enthusiastic engagement in sexual activity illustrates the beginnings of a comic discourse that took joy in resisting society's prevailing gender norms. The bawds that followed her shared this sense of rebellion, but it was not until the emergence of women's liberation that comics made feminism an integral part of their acts in order to openly contest restrictive gender norms and call out their socially constructed nature.

Tucker's direct approach to female sexuality and her performance style precluded her from many media outlets. She told one interviewer of her distaste for the radio: "You can't do this, you can't do that. I couldn't even say 'hell' or 'damn,' and nothing, honey, is more expressive than the way I say 'hell or damn.'"[13] Eddie Cantor once said of Tucker, "She has no inhibitions…She sings the words we used to write on the sidewalks of New York."[14] Still, while the later comics of her ilk traded in more vulgar material for its own sake, Tucker made it clear

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[11] Sochen, "Fanny Brice and Sophie Tucker," 48.
[12] Grace Overbeke, "Subversively Sexy: The Jewish 'Red Hot Mamas' Sophie Tucker, Belle Barth and Pearl Williams," *Studies in American Humor*, no. 25 (2012): 40.
[13] Sochen, "Fanny Brice and Sophie Tucker," 54.
[14] Cohen, "The Unkosher Comediennes," 107.

that she felt her songs were "all moral. They have to do with sex, but not with vice."[15] Tucker's efforts to expand what the public deemed "moral" to include healthy and pleasurable female sexual activity reveals an incipient feminist approach to comic performance. While her immediate successors did not take up this cause, the feminist comics that came onto the scene in the wake of both women's liberation and the sexual revolution made it a central component of their routines and ventured even further to argue for the morality of lesbian sexuality.

The bawds who followed Tucker's lead, such as Belle Barth, Pearl Williams, and Totie Fields, similarly played up their girth, their sexual drives, and their unflinching approach to topics that were off-limits to well-behaved women. They began their careers in the forties and fifties, mainly in Borscht Belt venues – Fields actually began her career as a tummler in Boston strip clubs.[16] They incorporated more traditional joke-telling in their repertoires, but comic songs remained a staple of their performances. Williams was famous for her definition jokes: "Definition of indecent? If it's long enough, hard enough, and in far enough, then it's indecent."[17] "Definition of a happy Roman? Glad-he-ate-her."[18] Totie Fields quipped "Happiness is finding a library book that's overdue and finding out that you're not."[19] On albums with titles like *I Don't Mean to Be Vulgar, But It's Profitable* and *My Next Story is a Little Risqué*, Barth

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[15] Sophie Tucker, *Some of These Days: The Autobiography of Sophie Tucker.*, 1st ed. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1945), 96.
[16] Cohen, "The Unkosher Comediennes," 113. Tummler is a Yiddish term that refers to a comic who served as a sort of master of ceremonies at Borscht Belt resorts in the Catskills, charged with entertaining the resort's guests.
[17] Del Negro, "The Bad Girls of Jewish Comedy: Gender, Class, Assimilation, and Whiteness in Postwar America," in Leonard J. Greenspoon, ed. *Jews and Humor*, (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2011), 142. Cohen, "The Unkosher Comediennes," 113. Tummler refers to a host or master of ceremonies, usually a male comic. The term was most commonly used at Borscht Belt venues.
[18] Pearl Williams, *A Trip Around the World Is Not a Cruise*, After Hours Records LAH-70, 1962.
[19] Totie Fields, *Totie Fields Live*, Mainstream Records S/6123, 1969.

sang about remedies for pubic lice and winning a bet by "banging" 100 men in a row. When she was interrupted by hecklers, Barth would deliver her trademark retort: "Shut your hole honey, mine's making money."[20]

These comics became synonymous with lewd and boundary-pushing material and run-ins with the law. Newspaper ads for Barth's shows ran with descriptions like "Miss Controversy," and the qualifier "Adult Adults Only."[21] Pearl Williams's ads, which likened her act to Barth's, similarly read: "For Adults Only – Uncensored."[22] In 1962, Ameen David, owner of the Washington D.C nightclub The Champagne Room, placed an ad in the *Washington Post* decrying the vulgar acts found in modern nightclubs and boasting of his establishment's family-friendly entertainment. It began: "In the wake of Belly-dancers, Belle Barth and B Girl publicity, one wonders how far the Night Club industry has strayed from good, clean, enjoyable entertainment." He chose to cite Barth partly because her name fit his alliterative claim ("We at the Champagne Room beseech the Bs Begone"), but it is notable that she was the only individual David cited in his list intended to call to mind purveyors of vice.[23]

In a 1958 "Tower Ticker," (a *Chicago Tribune* entertainment column) Herb Lyon noted both Barth's financial success and legal challenges: "Singin', Swingin' Belle Barth…[will] winter it at the Mist here for a grand a week. Belle's brittle, off-color songs n' stinging lines have

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[20] Kun, "If I Embarrass You, Tell Your Friends," 92. Overbeke, "Subversively Sexy," 48-49, Del Negro, "From the Nightclub to the Living Room," no page number provided.
[21] "Display Ad 8 -- No Title," *Los Angeles Times*, December 23, 1960. "Display Ad 319 -- No Title," *Los Angeles Times*, April 21, 1963, sec. Calendar.
[22] "Display Ad 128 -- No Title," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, October 31, 1962, sec. City Life.
[23] "Display Ad 126 -- No Title," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, June 27, 1962, sec. Sports. "B girls" was a term that referred to women who would converse with bar patrons and encourage them to buy drinks.

been banned near north by Police Capt. Tom Harrison."[24] Four years later, a similar occurrence: "Latest vulgar performer to be pinched by the cops is dittyist Belle Barth in a Buffalo bistro. A Miami Beach fixture for years, Belle recently was barred from appearing on Rush street."[25] The bawds took note of how legal troubles often led to higher public profiles and used the run-ins to their advantage. After an arrest, Tucker remarked that she "was left sitting on top of the world, with pages and pages of publicity and a line at the box office three blocks long." Comic Rusty Warren (who learned the tricks of the business from Tucker) titled one of her party albums *Banned in Boston*. In reality, however, she was never banned in the city.[26]

The bawds, though not played on the radio or featured on television, still achieved commercial success. Party albums grew from steady sellers to blockbusters by the early 1960s, despite their reliance on only word-of-mouth and in-person shows for publicity.[27] Notably, Stanley Borden, the producer behind top party album labels After Hours and Surprise, told *Billboard* in 1961 that records of women telling suggestive stories outsold similar records by male comics.[28] Commenting in 1962 on Hattie Noel's latest popular party album for Dooto Records, a leading label for African-American artists, company president Dootsie Williams similarly noted that record-buyers seemed to prefer listening to women talk about sex, rather than hearing men talk about it.[29] These claims have not been verified, but the popularity of

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[24] Herb Lyon, "Tower Ticker," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 14, 1958, sec. Part 3.
[25] Herb Lyon, "Tower Ticker," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 9, 1962, sec. SECTION ONE.
[26] Shawn Levy, *In On the Joke: The Original Queens of Standup Comedy*, (United States: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2022), 130, 157.
[27] Party albums became popular in the mid-1950s when production costs went down significantly for 33 rpm LPs, making distribution less expensive for the small labels willing to risk legal trouble on racy material. Levy, *In On the Joke*, 45-46.
[28] Bob Rolontz, "After Hours, Surprise Lend Spice, Sales to Nation's Record Markets," *Billboard Music Week*, October 23, 1961.
[29] "Hattie Noel Disc Rated Best Seller," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 1, 1962. African-American singer and actress Hattie Noel was a veteran of the Chitlin' Circuit, Broadway,

female comics' party albums is nonetheless evident. Barth eventually released 11 albums and reportedly sold two million records. Williams released seven albums and likely sold over one million copies. Given the lack of female voices in mainstream comedy, and the prevailing gender norms of innocence and propriety for women of the era, the dissonance of the bawds' risqué material likely fostered more extreme reactions from listeners than comparable performances by male comics. While both male and female comics experienced trouble with law enforcement during their live sets, it stands to reason that listeners' shock in response to female performers delighting in lasciviousness contributed to the healthy sales of their albums.

In addition to their party albums, the bawds performed in front of sold-out crowds and commanded high salaries.[30] Due to the blue nature of their acts, they often performed late in the evening (or early in the morning) at clubs on the fringes of big cities or resort towns, but their popularity also earned them bookings in more well-known clubs.[31] In fact, by 1961, Barth drew as much as $3,500 per week as she played top rooms across the country, headlining venues like Carnegie Hall and Caesars Palace (though at the former Barth censored her act significantly).[32] Williams took home as much as $7,500 per week and performed at upscale hotels and nightclubs

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Hollywood, and USO tours, but never rose to fame despite her steady work. In her late-sixties, after her acting days were over, she ventured into comedy, recording a handful of successful party albums between 1961 and 1964 on producer Dootsie Williams's label, Dooto Records. Though she was a talented comic actress, Dooto writers penned the jokes for her act. Noel did not tour to promote the albums (not wanting to go on the road given her age) and stopped performing altogether in 1964. She passed away in 1969. For more on Noel, see Levy, *In On the Joke*, 58-61.

[30] Del Negro, "From the Nightclub to the Living Room," no page number provided.

[31] Levy, *In On the Joke*, 128, 134.

[32] Bob Rolontz, "After Hours, Surprise Lend Spice, Sales to Nation's Record Markets," *Billboard Music Week*, October 23, 1961. Del Negro, "From the Nightclub to the Living Room," no page number provided.

such as the Fontainebleau, Maxine's, The Hotel Windsor, and Chez Paris. Barth and fellow bawd Patsy Abbott even came to own their own nightclubs in Miami in the 1950s and 1960s.[33]

Jackie "Moms" Mabley, the most prominent African-American female comic of the era, had a successful comedy act in front of all-Black audiences on the Chitlin' Circuit (the segregated theater circuit to which African-American performers were relegated before they gained access to mainstream venues) from the 1930s through the 1950s. During this time Mabley played the Apollo stage more than any other performer (though when she debuted there in 1940 she was the first female comic the Apollo ever hosted) and garnered up to $10,000 per week for her bookings.[34] By the early 1960s, party albums helped her popularity cross over to white audiences and her first national television appearances in 1967 expanded her fame even further. Mabley passed away in 1975, but the last fifteen years of her career were marked by best-selling comedy albums; prominent television appearances on shows such as *The Merv Griffin Show*, *The Smothers Brothers,* as well as Harry Belafonte's 1967 special *A Time for Laughter*; performances at venues like The Kennedy Center, The Playboy Club, and both black and white college campuses; and invitations to visit the White House under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson.[35] The wide range of venues that hosted her in these years speaks to the near universal acclaim she

[33] Del Negro, "From the Nightclub to the Living Room," no page number provided. Kun, "If I Embarrass You, Tell Your Friends," 93.
[34] Darryl Littleton, *Black Comedians on Black Comedy: How African-Americans Taught Us to Laugh*. (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2006), 79. "Mabley, Moms (19 March 1894?–23 May 1975), Comedienne," American National Biography, https://www.anb.org/display/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-1800763.
[35] Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock*. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 514. Elsie A. Williams, *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley: An African American Comedic Tradition*. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995), 50. Levy, *In On the Joke*, 50-51.

achieved with her folksy yet incisive humor, once she was no longer excluded because of her race.

Like the Jewish bawds, she played up her sexual appetite onstage as she aimed to shock audiences with her risqué material. In fact, in 1939 Mabley was banned from a Baltimore nightclub due to her lewd jokes, only to be asked to return shortly thereafter, presumably due to her popularity.[36] Mabley couched her performance in the costume of an old woman in light of the vicious stereotype of the sexually-promiscuous Black woman. The costume became slightly less of a put-on as she actually aged into the role, but it still varied sharply from her demeanor off-stage. In private, she was known to wear well-tailored men's suits, slick her hair back in a masculine fashion, and surround herself with young, beautiful female companions. Onstage, though, Mabley lusted after young men, praising their virility, while mocking the uselessness of old men.[37] In one of her most famous lines she quipped, "Old man can't do nothin' for me but bring me a message a young one!" Another common refrain was "A woman's a woman until the day she dies, but a man's only a man as long as he can."[38] Like Barth, Fields, and Williams, Mabley reversed the traditional joke by turning men into sex objects and seeking to belittle and humiliate them.[39]

Mabley's act resembled those of the Jewish bawds in that her cultural background significantly informed the content and structure of her jokes. Where the others drew on

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[36] Louis Lautier, "Capital Spotlight." *Afro-American (1893-1988)*. Baltimore, Md., United States, March 4, 1939.
[37] Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 392. Williams, *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley*, 48. Levy, *In On the Joke*, 29-30.
[38] Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 365. Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 392.
[39] Overbeke, "Subversively Sexy," 48-49. Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 392.

traditional Jewish music and tropes regarding Jewish wives and mothers, Mabley incorporated African-American folk humor in her work. Her gossipy, conversational tone and exaggerated colloquial dialect helped endear her to audiences. She would often begin performances by greeting her "darlin' children," "home folks," or "kin folks," and announcing, "I got somethin' to tell you!" She purposefully mispronounced words (e.g. "set up" instead of "upset") and included elaborate descriptions of soul food that evoked a shared heritage with her audiences.[40]

However, Mabley's act differed from the bawds' in her expressly political content. While plenty of her gibes centered on her predilection for younger men, Mabley also commented on world events and political issues in her act. For example, in *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club* (1961), Mabley told of not traveling to Alabama even though she owned property there: "I'm not goin' to let the Greyhound take me down there and the bloodhounds run me back."[41] In *Moms Mabley at the UN* (1961), Mabley described a dream in which she finally made it to the front of a voting line in Georgia, only to discover she had in fact lined up to be hanged. This latter album, as the title implies, featured her take on international issues (mostly mocking foreign leaders, sometimes in off-color ways). In one bit, she described the racial discrimination a UN delegate from the Congo encountered at a hotel in Arkansas, thus demonstrating how global issues connected back to her experience as an African American in the United States.[42] As a Black woman who, for most of her career, performed for Black audiences, her racial identity made it harder for Mabley to separate quips about everyday life from the political reality of Jim Crow

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[40] Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the UN*, Chess LP-1452, 1961. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 362.
[41] Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club*, Chess LP-1460, 1961.
[42] Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the UN*.

America. Where the Jewish bawds could take jabs at the social prejudice Jews faced in the U.S. at mid-century without evoking politics outright, the same was not true for Mabley.

In sum, this early generation of comics was able to take a defiant stance for women by daring to speak in public about lewd topics like pregnancy, adultery, and STDs. In doing so, they were also able, at times, to make their pro-woman sentiments known. Tucker, for example, encouraged women to prioritize themselves over unfaithful men with her song, "Never Let the Same Dog Bite You Twice." Other numbers, like "I'm Living Alone and I Like It," and "I Ain't Takin' Orders from No One" showed that women could lead autonomous lives and find satisfaction at the same time.[43] Even Fields, who usually focused on self-deprecating humor regarding her short and stout figure, contested norms of female domesticity and subservience with a classic bit about her wedding day:

> The day I got married I told my Artie, pick which room you want me to be great in. I can't excel in every room of the house, I'm sorry. Thank God he goes out to eat. Hey, you show me a girl who's busy in the kitchen all day, I'll show you a man fooling around with one who isn't. Right, girls?[44]

Here, Fields offered a frank view of marital priorities, with domestic duties ranking behind sexual satisfaction.

Despite these pro-woman perspectives, it would be an overstatement to characterize their routines as predominately feminist. Primary tenets of feminist humor include centering women's truths and experiences and calls for reform in order to improve conditions for women in general. The one-liners and impersonal anecdotes that peppered the bawds' acts obscured their own investment in upending the social order. The routines offered clever mockery of gender inequality, but lacked a sense of urgency to remedy that inequality. For example, in the above

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[43] Overbeke, "Subversively Sexy," 41.
[44] Fields, *Totie Fields Live*.

joke, Fields ultimately placed the onus on wives to keep their husbands from straying sexually. Without the feeling that revolutionary change was possible or even necessary, their material aligned more closely with "female humor," that mocks the status quo, but nonetheless accepts it.[45] In this vein, Fields spoke of her jealousy of movie star Arlene Dahl's beauty: "I'm so sick of being everybody's buddy. Just once, to pick up a paper and read, Totie Fields raped in an alley. I put on new underwear every night just to get ready." She continued on to compare her 19-year marriage favorably with Dahl's multiple divorces, but by playing sexual assault for a laugh line about her unattractive appearance, Fields undercut the feminist implications of her set.[46]

While calls for women's independence and self-respect permeated the bawds' routines, mixed messages like the ones above were still common – not surprising given the cultural ubiquity of female subordination at the time. Theater studies scholar Grace Overbeke's analysis of Tucker's work can be applied to these figures (though less so to Mabley): "although [they] discussed women's issues from a different and undoubtedly subversive perspective, they were still issues of the bedroom and kitchen, not of the globe."[47] Here, Overbeke overlooks the political significance embedded in "issues of the bedroom and kitchen." Indeed, the recognition that "the personal is political" constitutes one of the bedrocks of feminist ideology.[48] But the distinction she draws between personal and global issues in the repertoires of these comics is still useful. The bawdy comics of the early to mid-twentieth century did largely restrict their material to matters of sexuality, romantic relationships, and domestic obligations – in other words, to the

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[45] Gloria Kaufman and Mary Kay Blakely, eds. *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor and Satire*, (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1994), 13.
[46] Fields, *Totie Fields Live*.
[47] Overbeke, "Subversively Sexy," 45.
[48] Sara M. Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (New York: The Free Press, 2003), 4.

feminine private sphere. It was not until later generations that female comics brought a broader and more complete consideration of women's lives and the worlds they inhabited to the comedy stage.

You first have to say, 'Here I am.'"

Legendary comic Phyllis Diller made her premiere in San Francisco in 1955 and soon found success by ridiculing herself and her shortcomings as a housewife – she mocked her messy home, her poor cooking, and her unappealing figure.[49] In reality, she began working as a copywriter after her husband lost his job and they and their five children faced bankruptcy and foreclosure, eventually heeding her husband's and friends' pleas for her to try comedy.[50] Theater critic Gerald Nachman writes that she, "wasn't the first woman stand-up comedian, but she was the first to make it respectable, to go toe-to-toe with her male counterparts in prime clubs."[51] By 1961, she appeared on *The Jack Paar Show* (on which she eventually performed over 30 times) as well as other leading comedy and variety shows such as those hosted by Ed Sullivan, Red Skelton, Dean Martin, and Jack Benny. Before long, she was making up to a million dollars a year between touring gigs, albums, acting credits, and books.[52] She emulated the rapid-fire and pithy style of her hero, Bob Hope, whom she eventually toured with overseas. Classic Diller barbs include: "I'm in the fourteenth year of a ten-day beauty plan," and "I finally found out how my neighbor gets her laundry so much whiter-looking than mine. She washes it."[53]

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[49] Kathryn Kein, "Domestic Failure, Comic Pleasure: Phyllis Diller and the Feminist Potential of Failure, 1955–1969," *Studies in American Humor*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2018): 75-76.
[50] Suzanne Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance: Phyllis Diller, Lily Tomlin, and Roseanne*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 18. Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 220.
[51] Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 212.
[52] Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance*, 18.
[53] Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 228.

Diller is most remembered for her self-deprecating demeanor, with costumes that included a fright wig, boa, and garish, boxy dresses meant to divert attention from her body (which was, in reality, traditionally attractive).[54] She typified her negative approach to her self-image in her oft-used line, "Something awful happened last night. A peeping tom called me on the phone, hysterically begging me to draw my shades. He said he was eating." In a 1966 set on *The Milton Berle Show*, she played up the gaudiness of her appearance even further: four well-built, shirtless men carried her on stage atop a four-poster divan while she clumsily vamped for the audience and mimed shock at the men's attractiveness. She opened her routine by noting the stark contrast of their appearance with her own: "Oh boy, are they beautiful? I don't look too good, I drove through a car wash with the windows open," followed by an eye roll and a shake of her head. Much of the rest of the set featured Diller's description of her terrible driving skills ("Where in the world would I get a license? ...I got two tickets on my written test!") as well as those of the one driver foolish enough to follow her – another woman, of course. Despite the "woe-is-me" nature of her material, Diller's smile is irrepressible throughout her act, particularly when she pauses while the audience cracks up.[55]

Diller stated that she made her living by self-denigration, so that she could then go on to denigrate others – primarily her husband character, "Fang," who served as the butt of many of her jokes.[56] She told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1977: "First you do it to yourself and you have license to do it to others, your mother-in-law, the neighbors, your kids, your uncle, his brother.

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[54] In fact, Diller posed nude for *Playboy* in 1966 at Hugh Hefner's request (for an intended gag piece) but her photos never made it to print because the editors found the slender-yet-full-chested Diller too attractive. See Levy, *In On the Joke*, 199.
[55] *The Milton Berle Show*, Sept. 19, 1966. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7TotBipTRA
[56] Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 227-228.

You first have to say, 'Here I am.'"[57] Diller's mask of a costume and self-deprecating style were thus part of a strategy to make herself heard in an environment unaccustomed to female voices. She described the situation she faced on stage: "Being a woman, right away you walk out to almost total rejection. Almost nobody wants you to be a female comic and they give you a lot of static just because of your sex."[58] Here we begin to see the complexities of her act: she looked the part of a clown, and mocked herself for it, but in doing so she was able to win control of the audience and set the tone for the show. The great lengths to which she resorted to get through to her audiences were directly tied to the obstacles she faced as a female comic.

Diller's position as a transitional figure in the evolution of feminist comedy is evident in her on-stage approach to "Fang," the character based on her husband, Sherwood Diller. Fang began as an improvisation early in her career and grew into a "beloved character," according to Diller. In deriding Fang, Diller mocked his physique, his intelligence, his work ethic, and his drinking.[59] For instance, "I've been asked to say a couple of words about my husband, Fang. How about short and cheap?" and "[Fang] hates work. One day he called in dead."[60] On one hand, this vein of jokes was a natural outgrowth for Diller, a devotee of stand-up icons like Henny Youngman who regularly made their wives the target of their barbs. Further, by mocking

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[57] Betty Liddick, "Women in Comedy: No Laughing Matter: 'Performers Defeminize Themselves to Be Funny,'" *Los Angeles Times*, August 7, 1977, sec. PART V.

[58] Larry Wilde, *The Great Comedians Talk about Comedy*, first edition (New York: Citadel Press, 1968), 213.

[59] Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 228. Phyllis Diller divorced Sherwood Diller in 1965 after 26 years of marriage. The derision she directed toward Fang onstage likely had some basis in truth; Sherwood was allegedly a domineering, manipulative, and unhelpful partner, and the marriage was an unhappy one. She soon remarried, but continued to use the Fang character throughout her career.

[60] Alexandra Petri, "Ten Classic Phyllis Diller One-Liners," *The Washington Post* (blog), August 20, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/compost/post/ten-classic-phyllis-diller-one-liners/2012/08/20/0876f86c-eb0c-11e1-a80b-9f898562d010_blog.html.

Fang specifically, Diller avoided the implication that she was debasing *all* men. On the other hand, the novelty of Diller as the first prominent female stand-up meant that her husband put-downs were a new addition to the comedy scene. In a culture that venerated men as the default heads of households, the dismissive regard she conveyed for him provided a rebuke to the "Take my wife – please," sentiment (Youngman's most famous line) that otherwise held sway in comedy.

Joan Rivers, the next woman to make it big in stand-up, started trying her hand at comedy in the late fifties while attempting to make it as an actress in New York. Unlike Diller, Rivers didn't try to downplay her appearance, instead opting for elegant hairdos and stylish dresses while on stage. She caught her break in 1965 with a successful appearance on the Johnny Carson show.[61] Nachman describes Rivers as "the well-groomed comic granddaughter of Yiddishe mamas like Belle Barth and Pearl Williams." But where they made jokes at the expense of men as well as themselves, Rivers reveled in self-ridicule.[62] Her routines played up her struggle to attract a husband ("I went out with anything," she said of being 27 and single, "If he could walk and talk and find the doorbell, that was it,")[63] and, after she married, the ways in which she fell short as a desirable wife ("I have no sex appeal. If my husband didn't toss and turn in his sleep, we never would have had the kid.")[64] Yet they also offered entertaining retorts that subverted the demands of femininity and frank perspectives on what really mattered in life. Alluding to her poor skills in the kitchen, she told audiences, "If God wanted me to cook, he

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[61] Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 597, 612.
[62] Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 592.
[63] Joan Rivers, *The Next to Last Joan Rivers Album*, Buddah Records BDS 5048, 1969.
[64] Lawrence J. Epstein, *The Haunted Smile: The Story Of Jewish Comedians In America*, (United States: PublicAffairs, 2008), 257.

should have given me aluminum hands."[65] Here, Rivers drew on the Jewish American Princess stereotype – the privileged Jewish woman unwilling to engage in housework – but imbued it with a feminist edge in her observation that severed the seemingly-natural connection between domestic labor and the female body.

These representative lines reveal the multiple layers of Rivers' take on gender norms – Rivers put herself down, claiming she was unattractive and incompetent at housework, but she still got in jabs at the unrealistic and unfair expectations she faced as a result of her gender. Her routines were largely circumscribed by the boundaries that marked "female concerns," but they nonetheless featured gestures of resistance within that discourse. In a 1967 set on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, Rivers lamented how difficult dating is for women compared to men. She told the audience, "I feel sorry for any single girl today…the whole society is not for single girls, you know that." But single men? "All he has to be is clean and able to pick up the check, he's a winner." She continued, citing the powerlessness girls and women experience: "A man can call up anyone in the whole world…a girl can't call. A girl, you have to wait for the phone to ring, right?" Rivers reminded the crowd that though she was now married, she had experienced many years failing to achieve the main goal of womanhood, finding a husband: "I know what I'm talking about because my mother had two of us at home that weren't, as the expression goes, moving." She returned to self-denigration both to personalize her point and to use absurdity to demonstrate the intense social pressure to marry: "Anybody that came to my house was it. [In the voice of her mother] 'Oh, Joan, there's the most attractive young man down here with a mask and a gun.'" Unlike the bawds before her, Rivers mined the challenges of her own life story for material and made her anger at the limited social position of women apparent. Her self-

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[65] Rivers, *The Next to Last Joan Rivers Album*.

deprecation was at times one-dimensional in order to achieve quick laughs, but she also used the technique to relate to her audiences and to call out injustice that affected women more broadly.

The self-denigrating material that made Diller and Rivers famous has led to great debate about the feminist nature of their stand-up. During the era of women's liberation, many feminists denounced the belittling nature of Diller and Rivers's jokes, while others noted the complexity of their routines. For example, theater critic Sandra Archer acknowledged the complexities of Rivers's act in a *San Francisco Chronicle* column titled, "She Dresses Like a Lady and Tells Men's Jokes." Archer noted that Rivers "tells nightclub jokes about the troubles of being a woman, housewife and mother in 1972 America, all the while mocking the fashion and rule that woman must remain beautiful and graceful."[66] By examining their work in the context of a burgeoning feminist comic discourse, we can situate each of them as a transitional figure. Each relied on self-deprecation for a number of reasons: to break through audiences' hostility to their sex, to emulate popular joke styles of the day, and to establish their license to mock others. And, to different degrees, each comic ventured beyond self-deprecation in their critiques of the world around them. They made stylistic choices that helped them become the first female comics to succeed at the highest levels of stand-up, but both still worked within the existing norms of mainstream, male-dominated comedy.

Diller and Rivers's bodies of work have proved rich sources of analysis for scholars of American humor. Theater scholar Suzanne Lavin, for example, argues for "the importance of Phyllis Diller's comedy as a force in challenging the idealization of women as objects of beauty,

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[66] Sandra Archer, "She Dresses Like a Lady and Tells Men's Jokes," *Marin Women's News Letter*, No. 5, September 1972. (The article is reprinted from the *San Francisco Chronicle*.) See also Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 614.

happy homemakers, and unquestioning supporters of their husbands."[67] Humor scholar Joanne Gilbert calls for recognition of the complexity of self-deprecating comedy. She claims, "Diller uses herself as the butt to make fun of culture at large. Through self-deprecatory material, a comic ridicules the society that creates ideals for appearance and behavior, as well as individuals who subscribe to those standards." She contends this style of humor can function as a mechanism for women to resist these norms and expectations.[68] American studies scholar Kathryn Kein takes this analysis further in her reassessment of Diller's work, arguing that beyond mere self-deprecation, Diller's enactment of domestic failure highlighted the pleasure inherent in defying traditional gender norms.[69]

These readings of Diller's work, which I argue are applicable to Rivers as well, attest to the comics' nuanced responses to the challenges of womanhood in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Like the bawds before them, they generally confined their material to the domestic sphere, but through their exaggerated domestic failures they drew attention to the mounting challenges that accompanied modern womanhood. Postwar American culture, while remembered for its patriarchal strictures that glorified domesticity as the only path for women (at least, white, middle-class women), in actuality presented a more complex aspirational image for American womanhood. Historian Joanne Meyerowitz's study of the era's popular magazines reveals a discourse that offered explicit praise for women's individual accomplishments and public service alongside messages emphasizing wifely and motherly duties. Magazine profiles aimed at a broad, middle-class readership tended to highlight high-achieving women, while also

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[67] Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance*, 20.
[68] Joanne R. Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 141.
[69] Kein, "Domestic Failure, Comic Pleasure," 76-78.

praising their delicate, feminine natures: for example, Dorothy McCullough Lee, the "pale housewife" (and attorney) who took on Portland, Oregon's organized crime during her 1949-1953 term as mayor. As Meyerowitz puts it, these different images of womanhood "coexisted in ongoing tension" with each other and proffered an early version of the "'superwoman,'…who successfully combines motherhood and career."[70]

This cultural context of elusive and contradictory standards for the successful embodiment of femininity must be kept in mind when analyzing the performances of Diller and Rivers. Diller and Rivers highlighted their own failures above all else, but to read their material as only self-recrimination *or* critiques of social norms is to flatten the work they did, both to call out unrealistic and unfair standards as well as to simply make a buck by letting others laugh at their own shortcomings. Rivers closed her performance on *The Next to Last Joan Rivers Album* (1969) by declaring that if she knows she can make even one person happier with her God-given gift for humor and if "…I can pick up seven grand for doing it, I'll be there!"[71]

The next generation of female comics were the ones to directly confront the injustices they felt as women. They used the techniques of their predecessors – vulgarity, self-deprecation – but they also broadened their subject material, introduced new performance styles, and made their demands for recognition more explicit than any that came before them on the comedy stage.

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[70] Joanne J. Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958," in Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 231-233. See the full article for her discussion of contradictory gender prescriptions in popular women's magazines leading up to the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).
[71] Rivers, *The Next to Last Joan Rivers Album*.

"At first we weren't funny. Then all of a sudden feminism came along."

Alongside the emergence of women's liberation, stand-up comedy in the United States – as performed by both men and women – changed profoundly. Nachman succinctly describes the earlier style of stand-up, writing: "Comedians, clad like band leaders…announced themselves by their brash, anything-for-a-laugh, charred-earth policy and by-the-jokebook gags." Comic Mort Sahl pioneered the shift, "simply by the unheard-of comic device of being himself and speaking his mind onstage." Joan Rivers described the transition, stating, "Audiences nowadays want to *know* their comedian. Can you please tell me one thing about Bob Hope? If you only listened to his material, would you *know* the man? His comedy is another America, an America that is not coming back."[72] The stand-up legends who soon followed, such as Lenny Bruce, Dick Gregory, and George Carlin, favored narrative over one-liners and offered cutting social and political satire. Most importantly, they brought a brutal honesty to the stage that let audiences get to know them on a much more personal level than earlier comics. This new style of comedy that emphasized autobiography is now most often associated with Richard Pryor, who found great success in the 1970s with tales of growing up in a brothel in Peoria, Illinois, and dealing with addiction, violence, and mental illness, all while offering trenchant commentary on race relations.

The sea-change in mainstream stand-up comedy contributed greatly to the work of the feminist comics who emerged in this era. As women's liberation gained force, it led to a confluence of rhetorical styles between stand-up and feminism. The work of Lily Tomlin, Robin Tyler, and Ivy Bottini demonstrates how feminist comics presented their full selves on stage in order to engender audiences' empathy and to challenge their preconceptions about women, as

[72] Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 7, 22.

well as to entertain. As historian Sara Evans has described the women's movement, its growth "depended less on specific ideas than on the ability of women to tell each other their own stories, to claim them as the basis of political action."[73] The same principle holds true for feminist comedy, as one of its defining characteristics is "its positing of women's truth and experience to replace the myths of the patriarchy."[74]

Lily Tomlin began performing in New York in the mid-1960s, developing comic characters rather than a classic stand-up routine in the hopes of creating work for herself and shielding her material from theft. In 1969, at the height of its popularity, she joined the cast of the sketch comedy show *Rowan & Martin's Laugh In* (1967-1973) and quickly became a national figure.[75] From there she released her first comedy album, *This Is A Recording*, in 1971 – it went gold and won that year's Grammy Award for Best Comedy Album.[76] Soon, she began working with her longtime writing partner (and later wife) Jane Wagner. In collaboration with Wagner, Tomlin released another successful album, *And That's the Truth*, in 1972, followed by four primetime comedy specials from 1973 to 1975, two of which won Emmy Awards for comedy. She went on to receive an Oscar nomination for her role in the film *Nashville* (1975), to host *Saturday Night Live* twice in its premiere season (1975-1976), to find success with one-woman shows on Broadway, and, in April 1977, she was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine with the moniker "New Queen of Comedy."[77]

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[73] Sara M. Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (New York: The Free Press, 2003), 29, 41.
[74] Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance*, 90.
[75] Jeff Sorensen, *Lily Tomlin: Woman of a Thousand Faces* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989), 30-33, 45-51.
[76] Sorensen, *Lily Tomlin*, 57.
[77] Sorensen, *Lily Tomlin*, 64-93. Lily Tomlin, ONE Subject File Collection, Coll2012-001, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California

Tomlin created an array of beloved characters in these years; most notable were Ernestine (the oddly aggressive telephone operator) and Edith Ann (a precocious five-year-old). Others included the "perfect" housewife Mrs. Judith Beasley; Glenna, a child of the sixties; Suzie Sorority of the Silent Majority; Lupe, the world's oldest beauty expert; and Trudy, a "certifiably" crazy bag lady who amidst her ramblings was known to spout profound truths. Tomlin described the joy she derived from her characters: "The person I love most of all is somebody who conventionally looks out of place, and who thinks she's wonderful."[78] She contrasted her affinity for character comedy with more conventional stand-up methods: "The comic who stands up there and tells mother-in-law jokes is being himself telling jokes. I'd rather be the mother-in-law."[79] Jeff Sorenson, Tomlin's biographer, elaborated, claiming, "The essential Lily Tomlin character, then, is a woman who recognizes no authority outside of herself, who fearlessly and unrepentantly does whatever she feels like doing."[80]

In her 1973 CBS special, *The Lily Tomlin Show*, Tomlin's housewife character, Judith Beasley, presented a commercial for GRR laundry detergent. Based in Calumet City, Illinois, Mrs. Beasley addresses the audience directly and initially draws laugh from her monotone delivery. After describing the detergent's new additive "carnivore," which "seeks out and gobbles up stains like a thousand tiny little piranha fish," she displays the stains on her family's laundry in order to demonstrate GRR's cleaning power. A baby's soiled cloth diaper and her son Billy's grass-stained chinos are shown, but then she holds up her husband's shirt: "And here, these lipstick stains on my husband's collar." Mrs. Beasley does a subtle double-take and then

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[78] Sorensen, *Lily Tomlin*, 3-66, 54.
[79] Don Shirley, "Lily Tomlin: She's Totally in Character, Clearly in Command: Totally in Character," *The Washington Post (1974-)*, March 23, 1975, sec. STYLE Entertainment/The Arts SHOW.
[80] Sorensen, *Lily Tomlin*, 54.

immediately gets quiet, as the realization that her husband is having an affair dawns on her. She puts the shirt in the washing machine, takes a deep breath, and then returns to the business at hand, peddling the detergent. She boasts of its concentrated efficiency, but veers off-track, describing how her husband has been distant for weeks and indifferent "no matter how hard I try to please him." The pattern continues, but Mrs. Beasley's anger grows more and more prominent. "The hell with you," she says of her husband and rips up the negligee he gave her as an anniversary present. She violently stuffs it into the washing machine and shouts, "Well, you want to know something? Billy isn't yours!"[81] The sketch draws humor from the unexpected darkness of adultery revelations in a detergent commercial, but the cheated-on Mrs. Beasley is not the butt of the joke. Tomlin presents Mrs. Beasley's anger as valid and, importantly, gives her the last word with her announcement that she has, in fact, cuckolded her husband.

In her character work, like the previous sketch, we can see how Tomlin both innovated a new comic style based in empathy and drew on techniques favored by her predecessors, Diller and Rivers. For example, Lorne Michaels, the longtime showrunner behind *Saturday Night Live*, worked with Tomlin on three of her television specials. He contrasted her comic methods with the broad and aggressive style of most men in comedy: "Lily, by refusing to be hostile, by making herself vulnerable, is breaking the mold."[82] An article naming Tomlin a *Los Angeles Times*'s 1976 "Woman of the Year," stated:

> When she speaks in the flat monotone of average housewife Judith Beasley or when she dispenses contorted beauty hints on behalf of Madame Lupe, the world's oldest beauty expert, Lily Tomlin insists she is not ridiculing the individual type but criticizing the pressures—to consume, to be attractive—that exert their distorting influences on all of us.[83]

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[81] *The Lily Tomlin Show*, CBS, March 16, 1973.
[82] Ellen Cohn, "Lily Tomlin," *New York Times*, June 6, 1976.
[83] Gregg Kilday, "1976 TIMES WOMAN OF THE YEAR: Lily: Laughing on the Outside," *Los Angeles Times*, April 9, 1976, sec. PART IV.

As Tomlin arranged it, Mrs. Beasley was not the target of the commercial parody because she failed to guarantee her husband's fidelity. Instead, she was the agent of the joke, frustrated at both her husband's disrespect and the social reality that has left her with the task of laundering the evidence of his betrayal.

Tomlin, who was known for her political activism in the 1970s – she publicly supported individuals and causes like Bella Abzug, Joan Little, and Women Against Violence Against Women – made her political convictions manifest in her art.[84] In a 1973 *New York Times* interview (subtitled "Lily Tomlin: No Skits that Demean Women"), Tomlin made the connection explicit, stating "I feel I'm being politically active when I perform."[85] In a 1977 *Washington Post* interview, she elaborated on her reputation as a feminist:

> People saw a feminist consciousness in my early work only because I respected myself and I respected the people I did. That's really the basis of feminism to me, the very best part of what there is about feminism. I'm not afraid to be identified as a feminist—I mean it's limiting as an artist to be 'identified,' period—but I do believe in the humanism of feminism.[86]

According to Ellen Cohn, writing for the *New York Times* in 1976, Tomlin also shied away from labels like "comic," or "actor," preferring, simply, "Lily Tomlin." Cohn explained that Tomlin's inclination was not rooted in pretension, but rather "visceral distrust of anything or anybody that might limit her individual voice."[87]

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[84] Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance*, 38. Lynn Van Matre, "People: For Tomlin, Being Funny Isn't That Important," *Chicago Tribune*, October 31, 1975, sec. 3.
[85] Leticia Kent, "They'll Leave You Laughing-and Thinking: Lily Tomlin: No Skits That Demean Women Of Lily Tomlin," *New York Times*, March 11, 1973, sec. AL.
[86] Tom Shales, "LILY: Funny, Mischievous and Vulnerable--But She's Nobody's Kook Lily Tomlin: Nobody's Kook," *The Washington Post*, June 13, 1977, sec. STYLE People/Entertainment/Comics.
[87] Ellen Cohn, "Lily Tomlin," *New York Times*, June 6, 1976.

Influenced by the energy of the feminist movement, Tomlin's character comedy reflected a fuller depiction of womanhood on stage than ever before, one that deviated from prescribed gender norms in ways that were not merely mischievous and defiant, but satirical and childish, angry and absurd.[88] Additionally, in a departure from her predecessors (aside from Mabley's political material), Tomlin's subject matter was not limited to matters of sexuality or domesticity. In the same 1973 CBS special as the Judith Beasley sketch, Tomlin's telephone operator character, Ernestine, called the president of General Motors (GM). The three-minute conversation mixed silly jokes, like Ernestine assuming she was speaking to the "General" of General Motors, with sophisticated satire about auto industry pollution and President Nixon's political maneuverings. (Ernestine remarks, "Milhous already knows more about shifting gears than anybody in the country.")[89] Viewers were able to laugh at both Ernestine's snorting ignorance and her astute social commentary.

Tomlin portrayed a wide range of female characters, all of whom were unapologetically themselves. She spoke of her affection for her offbeat characters in her biography: "I don't necessarily admire them, but I do them all with love. After all, in private we're all misfits."[90] Through their varying ages, occupations, political orientations, and backgrounds, Tomlin was able to provide a multidimensional view of American womanhood – one based on her conception of private, personal experience – and offer it for public consumption. In so doing, she used her

[88] Lavin makes a similar claim about the effect of the women's movement on Tomlin's comedy: "Tomlin and Wagner led a current in women's comedy performance that took its force from the heady days of the women's movement. Stressing feminist views by rejecting the status quo for women and suggesting change, their characters urge a reassessment of conventional roles for women." Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance*, 38.
[89] *The Lily Tomlin Show*, CBS, March 16, 1973.
[90] Jeff Sorensen, *Lily Tomlin: Woman of a Thousand Faces*, (United States: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 5.

comic performance to make a claim for women's freer self-expression and greater cultural authority.

Robin Tyler and Pat Harrison were a comedic duo initially billed as sisters (though in fact they were lovers). They started their comedy career in the late sixties performing slapstick as well as the self-deprecating humor typical of women comics of the era. Soon, however, they acknowledged their homosexuality and made feminism a central component of their repertoire, a move Tyler credits for their success: "At first we weren't funny. Then all of a sudden feminism came along." Feminist humor, Tyler claimed, gave women the opportunity to make the society oppressing them the target of their jokes, rather than themselves.[91] As she would explain to the *Los Angeles Times* in 1977: "We're not trying to change all women. We're trying to change the world for all women."[92]

Tyler and Harrison released the first explicitly feminist comedy album in 1972, *Try It—You'll Like It*, which they followed in 1973 with *Wonder Women*.[93] The opening to *Try It—You'll Like It* highlights the distinctions between their comedy and that of earlier stand-ups. After declaring themselves to be "staunch, firm supporters of women's liberation" Harrison jokes that to help support the movement she bought a women's liberation wristwatch: "You know how it works? You wind it up, it doesn't work in the kitchen!" Tyler approvingly responds, "Right on!" One could imagine an anti-feminist comic making this same joke, but Tyler's prompt affirmation, combined with Harrison's cheerful tone, makes it clear that this outcome is a positive one in their eyes. Harrison soon follows it with Joan Rivers's line, "If God had wanted

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[91] Krefting, *All Joking Aside,* 141-144. Edwards, "Robin Tyler/Comic in Contradiction," 21.
[92] Liddick, "Women in Comedy: No Laughing Matter" *Los Angeles Times*, August 7, 1977.
[93] Rebecca Krefting, *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 141-145. Val Edwards, "Robin Tyler/Comic in Contradiction," *BODY POLITIC*, no. 56 (September 1979), 21.

women to be in the kitchen, he would have given them aluminum hands." Harrison immediately jumps in correcting her (and thus modifying the joke), "*She* would have given her aluminum hands."[94] In short work, the duo avowed their feminist outlook, showed that where one might see an insult against feminism, they see an asset, and expanded upon an existing joke by switching what audiences assume would be the unchangeable part of the premise, the gendered language for God.

Their albums included more overtly political material, as well as jokes intended to titillate. In one bit, they pretended a woman was asking her boss why she's paid less than her male coworker: "Because you can't stand up to pee, Mary. That's worth at least 40%."[95] Here, they lay bare their view of the gender wage gap – immaterial physical differences that, absurdly, led to significant challenges for women – and invited the audience join them in laughing at it. One of their more salacious lines included, "I don't want to say I got attached to my vibrator, but last Valentine's Day I sent it two dozen roses."[96] Unlike their bawdy predecessors, however, Tyler and Harrison did not flout norms of propriety simply to surprise audiences into laughter. Gone was Barth and Fields's winking at the naughty nature of their statements. Instead, Tyler and Harrison sought to normalize the notion that women both experience sexual urges and indulge in self-pleasure. In this case, the element of surprise lay in sending flowers to an inanimate object, not their mere mention of taboo topic.

Tyler began performing on her own in the mid-1970s, and in 1979 released the album *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom,* the first openly gay or lesbian comedy album. That same year, Tyler became the first comic to perform openly gay or lesbian material on national

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[94] Robin Tyler & Pat Harrison, *Try It – You'll Like It*, Dore Records LP 327, 1972.
[95] Tyler & Harrison, *Wonder Women*, 20th Century Records T-413, 1973.
[96] Tyler & Harrison, *Try It – You'll Like It*.

television, on Showtime's *1st Annual Funny Women's Show* hosted by Phyllis Diller. During that appearance, she recounted a time when a male audience member heckled her, yelling, "Hey, are you a lesbian?" She elicited laughter, cheers, and applause from the crowd with her retort: "Hey, are you the alternative?"[97] On *Always a Bridesmaid*, Tyler shared her understanding of the accusation with the audience, offering a positive interpretation: "Every time a woman is self-confident, impressive, they call her a dyke, so I think it's a compliment, don't you?" She then took on electoral politics directly, with two tracks titled "Dear Ms. Bryant" and "Dear Ms. Schlafly." In each, she countered their anti-homosexual and anti-ERA activism with a mix of playfulness and pathos. She also updated some of her older material, once again telling how she sent her vibrator two dozen roses for Valentine's Day, but this time around, she noted, "The energy crisis almost killed me. I gave up my blender, I gave up my toaster…" Her closing words to the audience summarized her comic philosophy: "From the bottom of my heart, if I offended anyone at all...you needed it."[98]

Critics as well as audience members relayed their positive reactions the new style of comedy that Tyler championed in venues that ranged from gay rights fundraisers to student centers on conservative college campuses. According to one reviewer of a show in Minnesota, Tyler's routine consisted of a commentary on her life, the gay and lesbian communities, and a "fantastic pot pourri [sic] of Jewish humor, drag show slapstick and the new feminist humor she defines as jokes where 'women are the subject, not the object of the joke.'"[99] After seeing

[97] Krefting, *All Joking Aside*, 141.
[98] Robin Tyler, *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom*, Olivia Records RT-3, 1979.
[99] Tim Campbell, "Arts & Entertainment," *The GLC Voice*, November 1976, Robin Tyler, ONE Subject File Collection, Coll2012-001, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California.

Tyler's show at a nightclub for a "No on 6" benefit in 1978,[100] reviewer Karen Devan of the *Santa Barbara News-Press*, praised her performance, writing, "I sat back and listened to Ms. Tyler talk about social issues of the day. Like most satirical comics, she has that knack of hitting you with a shocker, making you laugh, and then leaving something to chew on when you walk out the door."

A staffer from the Swarthmore College Women's Center wrote to Tyler after her 1979 performance on campus: "We won't easily forget your brilliant blend of serious analysis and hilarious wit…Judging from the many conversations I've overheard since then in the snack bar, dorms and library, you really challenged many people to re-think major issues in feminism and current events." Two organizers for Women's Week 1979 at California State University, Los Angeles described to Tyler the "overwhelmingly positive impact" that audience evaluations attributed to her show. They lauded her ability to use humor to broach controversial political issues and to "enable the audience to sympathetically grasp new concepts." They continued, "The warmth and personableness of your routine quickly drew the audience close and held their attention to the very end."[101] Following another performance that year, the campus center director at Trinity College wrote:

> Your performance before a near-full house, something unfortunately unheard of on this campus, was timely thoughtful and very, very funny. You made us laugh at ourselves and we didn't realize that until after the show. This was for many of the people that I spoke with after the show the best part. Your views on women, men and social perceptions were food for thought and many of us who saw you are still chewing and digesting.[102]

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[100] "No on 6" refers to the Briggs Initiative, officially California Proposition 6, a ballot initiative sponsored by state legislator John Briggs, which sought to ban gay and lesbian individuals from working in California's public schools. The initiative was defeated on November 7, 1978.
[101] Robin Tyler, ONE Subject File Collection, Coll2012-001, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California.
[102] Robin Tyler, ONE Subject File Collection, Coll2012-001, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California.

The entertainment and education programmer from the University of Waterloo, Denise Donlon, wrote that the college's conservative atmosphere was in need of a spotlight on the issues that Tyler addressed: "Your powerful delivery exploded in laughter those questions on life, morality and human rights that we are often too inhibited to tackle." She continued, "It was truly exhilerating [sic] to feel the emotion and exuberance you rang [sic] from the audience. I only wish there was a tape recorder in the hall to capture the enthusiasm during intermission." The excitement continued well after the show. Donlon wrote, "The letters and calls that came into the office following your performance really made the job of programming thrilling. (Especially gratifying was the announcement of a women's group that formed from women who attended!)"[103]

The reception of Tyler's comedy highlighted its focus on primarily feminist political and social issues. She dealt with sexist television commercials, feminism and gay rights issues, and sexual double standards for men and women. But the reception also mentions other elements of her act (warmth, wit, empathy) that facilitated the communication of her agenda. Tyler blended wit, silliness, and political zeal when on stage. She enjoyed shocking audiences, whether by speaking frankly about growing up as a lesbian or by mocking the sexual shortcomings of men, but like the rest of her comic repertoire, she used blue material in service of raising awareness about the challenges women faced at the time, especially lesbian women. By taking to the stage to voice her opinion, Tyler demanded public recognition for her life experience, one that fell outside the bounds of heterosexual female propriety.

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[103] Robin Tyler, ONE Subject File Collection, Coll2012-001, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California.

In 1966, Ivy Bottini was a 40-year-old, married mother of two living in Levittown, New York and working in the art department at *Newsday*. She was a key member of NOW in its early years, co-founding the New York state chapter and introducing consciousness-raising to the organization. She went on to serve as that chapter's third president from 1968-1970 and as a National Board member for two years. However, she was one of many activists forced out of NOW in 1970 after she came out as a lesbian and left her husband for a woman.[104]

Bottini then moved to Los Angeles where she continued to facilitate consciousness-raising among women's groups, and eventually decided to attempt her long-held dream of performing stand-up comedy. She began in 1974, marketing herself as a "feminist comedienne." She played at feminist conventions, NOW meetings, and college campuses across the country.[105] Her routines dealt with the everyday realities of being female, from playing baseball with the boys as a child to avoiding unwanted sexual advances after puberty. Rather than address these topics for shock value, she mixed comedy and pathos as she interrogated the complex feelings these issues provoked. While joking about how as a child she understood the word menstruation as "men's treasure" she also called out the shame and secrecy with which young girls were taught to treat their periods, especially by their own mothers. At many shows she performed what she titled "the feminist strip," where she would remove all her clothing except for a tight black leotard to protest the unrealistic expectations placed on women's bodies and to stand in solidarity with her fellow women whose bodies weren't "perfect."[106] And when she did aim to

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[104] Ivy Bottini papers, Coll2009-005, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California. Vicki Lynn Eaklor, *Queer America: A GLBT History of the 20th Century*, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2008), 145.
[105] "Those Funny Lesbians: A Tribute to Lesbian Comedy," *Queer Music Heritage*. Nov. 2009. http://queermusicheritage.com/nov2009.html
[106] Ivy Bottini papers, Coll2009-005, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California.

surprise audiences with the brazen implications of her material, it was still in service of her pro-women agenda: "I use all the four-letter words that human beings have in their vocabularies," she joked. "The world always expects women to do it but never to say it."[107]

Notably, Bottini often paired her comic performances with seminars on consciousness-raising. She would run the consciousness-raising workshop for women only, and then perform her one-woman show, the "Many Faces of Woman," for mixed audiences. This combination of the most iconic activity of the women's movement – consciousness-raising – with perhaps its least iconic activity – comedy – shows that the two concepts are more interrelated than they seem at first glance. Bottini used both methods to spread awareness about gender discrimination: consciousness-raising to access individual experiences as women, and comedy to make those experiences public and to demand that they be acknowledged by audiences of both sexes. Her sessions presaged the classes and seminars on humor as a tool for expression and healing that comics offered at the many women's music festivals that grew out of the more radical end of the women's liberation movement.[108]

The politics of Bottini's comedy drew the attention of the mainstream women's movement. In March 1976, Elizabeth Sewell, a member of the National Organization for Women from Sonora, California, wrote to Bottini to praise her performance at Merced College. Sewell invited Bottini to bring her act to the local NOW chapter. She closed her letter, writing: "I would personally like to thank you again for your performance. It touched me in ways that no amount of [consciousness-raising] could do. You were strong, vulnerable, funny, sad, heartbreakingly

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[107] Kay Longcope, "Ivy Bottini Blazes Trail with Feminist Comedy," *Boston Globe*, n.d., Ivy Bottini papers, Box 6, Folder 18, Coll2009-005, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California.

[108] See chapter two for more on the feminist comedy at women's music festivals in this period.

real; never have I experienced such honesty and openness from a stage. Thank you."[109] This testimony reveals both the complexity of Bottini's work and the power she tapped into by using comedy to forge a connection that more conventional movement tactics could not achieve.

Bottini's performance, which often ended with a mimed and improvisational enactment of an anonymous woman's entire life cycle, drew on a wider range of emotions and experiences than the work of her predecessors, all in order to evoke audiences' empathy, laughter, and respect for the lives of women. Her grounding in feminist consciousness-raising influenced her performance style, one that similarly emphasized sharing the full range of a woman's emotions and desires. Here we see the ideas and tactics of the women's liberation movement manifest in a new cultural arena, the comedy stage.[110]

Conclusion

The trajectory from the bawds of the nightclub circuit, who used raunch to flout gender dictates, to the feminist comics, who were empowered by the women's movement, was marked by conspicuous shifts in styles and substance. Where Tucker and Barth scandalized audiences with sexually-explicit songs, Diller and Rivers mocked unrealistic standards for women and their own inability to meet them. As the cultural influence of the women's movement grew and popular comedy trends evolved, a new generation of comics emerged that sought to put the female experience, with fewer constraints, at the center of their work. As comics, these women

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[109] Elizabeth Sewell to Ivy Bottini, March 16, 1976, Ivy Bottini papers, Coll2009-005, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California.

[110] The evidence in Bottini's comedy of her immersion in the feminist movement parallels the shifts in Richard Pryor's comedy following the time he spent in Berkeley in the early 1970s with Black writers and intellectuals who emphasized Black ethnic pride. For more on how they inspired him to move away from the "colorless" material assumed to be palatable to mainstream audiences and to incorporate Black vernacular and street life into his act, see Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 539-540.

came to stand as authority figures before audiences, ones who refused to remain within the predetermined boundaries expected of their sex. In the process, they made the comedy stage a space where they could advocate for respect and recognition as women. Writer and activist Gloria Steinem once said of the relationship between feminism and comedy: "The power to make people laugh is a really big power. [And] when you can make people laugh not out of hostility but out of revelation, because you make people recognize something, [it] is great."[111] By expanding their repertoires and imbuing them with a feminist outlook, Tomlin, Tyler, and Bottini tapped into this power and in so doing, added a new tool to feminism's arsenal.

Significant challenges remain for women in the comedy industry to this day, such as antagonistic audiences, discrimination in bookings, and sexual harassment by male comics, not to mention additional obstacles that comics of color, lesbian comics, or trans comics encounter. However, the turn to explicitly feminist material that is discernible by the early 1970s opened new avenues and provided a new language for women to express themselves. Comics who engaged with feminism generally took one of two routes in the next two decades: performing within the explicitly feminist women's culture community (chapter two) or the male-dominated mainstream comedy clubs (chapter three). Though they used different methods, the stand-ups in each realm continued the feminist comic tradition these earliest performers had pioneered. Now, whether it involved dirty jokes, heartfelt sentiments, political agendas, or broad physical comedy, feminist comics used the stage to not only titillate and amuse audiences, but also to put forth a fuller, more complex depiction of womanhood than audiences had ever previously been offered.

[111] "Amy Poehler's the Latest Female Comedian to Stop Making Fun of Herself and Start Asserting Herself," *New Republic*, October 29, 2014, https://newrepublic.com/article/120039/amy-poehler-yes-please-history-women-comedy.

Chapter II: A Stage of Their Own: The Feminist Comedy Circuit, 1974-1994

At the 1982 New England Women's Musical Retreat (NEWMR), emcee and comic Kate Clinton began a short set by telling the audience about her experience getting her first period and the awkward fumbling that ensued as she struggled with, "those mattress pads and those sanitary napkin belts with little pieces of shrapnel in the front and back." She vented her frustration further, saying, "Boys always tell these really embarrassing puberty stories about how they had to go to the druggist and buy condoms and it was so embarrassing…my heart bleeds for them. You try to conceal a 2x2x4 foot box of Modess!" From this punchline, she turned the conversation toward her audience, calling for them to share their first tampon insertion stories, and then initiating an audience poll: how many are wearing a light days feminine deodorant pad right now? How many are wearing the heavy days? The mini pad? The maxi pad? Eventually she devolved into gibberish examples. Her menstrual-themed material continued, covering the pitfalls of tampons, pads, and sponges before attacking the artificial and sanitized advertising of these products. She concluded her time on stage by telling the story of the first time she inserted a tampon, complete with pantomime. The audience responded to this routine with murmurs of affirmation, shouted responses to Clinton's queries, and raucous laughter. Clinton's mention of the common "foot up on the edge of the bath tub" position elicited particularly boisterous laughs of recognition. [1]

[1] NEWMR '82 #8 (Teddy Holte & Leaf Miller cont., Hillary Kay & Hana Lanin) and NEWMR '82 #9 (The Jane Doe Band, Open Mic: Susan Graetz, Sheryl Williams). Box 72a, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

Then, it was time to get back to the musical portion of the show – Clinton introduced musicians Hillary Kay and Hana Lanin and turned the stage over to them.[2] As emcee for this final day of the festival, Clinton was on stage frequently, tasked with keeping the audience engaged and at a high energy level, but a primary component of her job was highlighting the musical performances that often garnered more notoriety than the comics who performed alongside them. Musical acts may feature more prominently in the cultural legacy of the feminist movement, but the prevalence and popularity of stand-up comedy in feminist gathering spaces from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s shows that these acts were an integral part of the women's culture community in this era.

Clinton's unabashed use of intimate menstruation-related humor, and the warm reception it received from the crowd, demonstrates how she, like her fellow comics on the circuit, was able to break taboos female comics faced, and perform material she felt was honest, authentic, and, of course, funny. This boldly female-centric comedy was made possible by the nature of the spaces in which it was performed. The women's culture scene comprised music festivals, coffeehouses, women's centers, and feminist bookstores where the entertainers were all female, the audiences were almost entirely female, and the overriding sentiment was the celebration of women's empowerment and community. The majority of performances in these spaces were musical, but audiences could also take in all sorts of programming, such as poetry, plays and skits, dance performances, lectures, readings, and, of course, comedy.

[2] NEWMR '82 #8 (Teddy Holte & Leaf Miller cont., Hillary Kay & Hana Lanin) and NEWMR '82 #9 (The Jane Doe Band, Open Mic: Susan Graetz, Sheryl Williams). Box 72a, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

For comics, this environment meant an escape from the male gaze, which was often a major obstacle to their performances.[3] In mainstream comedy clubs or theaters, female comics were often derided by male comics, bookers, and audience members who claimed they had nothing to offer beyond period jokes and complaints about their dating lives. Female comics lamented the uphill struggle they faced to win over audiences that were hostile toward them simply because of their sex. Comic Marga Gomez described her experiences with non-feminist audiences for the crowd at NEWMR '91, explicitly calling out the difficulty male audience members had looking beyond her identity as a woman: "women enjoy me and men are threatened in these audiences…the men always say, 'well, just don't forget that you're a woman!' How does that happen? People start laughing and I forget who I am?"[4]

Conversely, in feminist venues, female comics found themselves being taken seriously by audiences who appreciated hearing a comic's perspective to which they could personally relate, often for the first time in their lives. That sense of connection made it possible, in turn, for feminist audiences and critics to enjoy stand-up comedy in a way they had not found possible previously. As a reviewer in the feminist newspaper, *New Women Times*, wrote of comic Robin Tyler after a 1980 festival: "She is able to show the humor in the simplest activities of our daily lives and…enables the audience to respond to their own changes and struggles."[5]

The performances, as well as the workshops and classes, that constituted the feminist comedy circuit from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s consisted of political, rhetorical, and

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[3] Suzanne Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance: Phyllis Diller, Lily Tomlin, and Roseanne*, Studies in American Popular History and Culture (New York: Routledge, 2004), 92.
[4] NEWMR '91 #6 (Sue Fink cont., Marga Gomez, Marla BB, and Alizon Lissance). Box 72m, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.
[5] Leah Warnick, "Evening Event: 1980 Womansong and Celebration," *New Women Times*, 6, no. 20 (Dec. 1980), 1.

didactic elements through which comics battled opponents who critiqued the advancement of women's rights; gave voice to their personal experiences and their perspectives on the world around them; and taught their fellow women to marshal comedy as a tool of expression and healing. All of these elements enabled feminist comics to connect with their audiences in a way not possible in traditional comedy clubs or theaters. It was the explicitly pro-woman environments of the alternative venues that the women's culture community created that facilitated this deep level of connection between feminist comics and the audience members who sought out these niche spaces. Those gathering in these spaces still faced divisions – most performers and audience members identified as lesbians, and though predominately populated by white, able-bodied, middle-class women, differences of race, religion, class, and ability were never far from the surface. However, the refuge these environments offered from a patriarchal culture allowed members to at least try to reckon with such divisions.

By the mid-1990s, a variety of factors, including an adverse political climate, shifting feminist priorities, and economic pressure, would lead to the decline of the music festivals, coffeehouses, and women's bookstores that made up the bulk of the feminist comedy circuit. The importance of this comedy scene – popular at the time among the overlapping constituencies of radical feminists, cultural feminists, and lesbian feminists, but now little remembered – extends beyond the brick-and-mortar institutions that housed it. The ways in which these artists poked fun at themselves and their fellow feminists, as well as the joy they were able to evoke through their musings and reflections, reveal new depths to the work members of the women's culture community undertook in their effort to dismantle patriarchal structures and assemble a new worldview that centered women, while still acknowledging their many differences. Here

feminists could stand up to their opponents with a jubilant sense of defiance, rather than one characterized solely by anger.

Further, the feminist comedy circuit influenced mainstream American comedy in ways that have not been fully recognized, as they have for similar niche comedy circuits like the Borscht Belt and the Chitlin' Circuit, wherein Jewish and African-American comics, respectively, developed their distinctive comedic styles.[6] The comic tradition that feminist stand-ups created on this circuit illustrates not only new dimensions of the women's movement, but also the origins of prominent trends in mainstream American comedy in the ensuing decades.

Made by Women, for Women

By the early 1970s, the broad umbrella of women's liberation included multiple offshoots, each with a different approach to improving society for the benefit of women. The two most prominent wings were the liberal and radical feminists. Liberal feminists sought political and economic equality for women within existing social structures, whereas radical feminists argued for the fundamental transformation of social institutions in order to upend the patriarchal organization of society. Beyond this divide, many feminists of color emphasized the interconnected nature of sexism and racism, as well as imperialism in the global context. Cultural feminists, closely aligned with radical feminists, celebrated the female "essence," which included supposedly inherently feminine qualities like caretaking and emotional connection that they

[6] See, for example, Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Jeremy Dauber, *Jewish Comedy: A Serious History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017); Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *Shadow and Act*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1972); Lawrence J. Epstein, *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America*, (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001); Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); and Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

viewed as superior to assumed masculine qualities, such as competition and violence. Lesbian feminists battled homophobia and heteronormativity, which they saw as outgrowths of patriarchy, with some lesbian separatists in favor of distancing themselves from heterosocial society.[7]

The individuals who constituted the women's culture community largely came from the radical end of the movement, including cultural and lesbian feminists, but often did not describe themselves as anything other than simply "feminist." Indeed, many subscribed to tenets of more than one of these philosophies, so one cannot draw neat lines between the constituencies. What mattered most in the context of the music festivals, bookstores, and coffeehouses of the feminist comedy circuit was not any label, but rather participants' opposition to the subjugation of women and their desire to come together in community with women.

To that end, feminists recognized the need for physical spaces in which women could gather to share their problems and mobilize politically, similar to the role of churches for the Civil Rights Movement, factories for the labor movement, and college campuses for the student movement. In cities across the country, they created women's centers as well as institutions that offered women practical resources such as contraceptive access, shelter from abusive partners, and job training. The popularity of these resources led to the establishment of separate health clinics, domestic violence shelters, and feminist-oriented bookstores and coffeehouses. Lesbian-identified women, in particular, played a profound role in the creation of such spaces. They

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[7] Hannah Dudley-Shotwell, *Revolutionizing Women's Healthcare: The Feminist Self-Help Movement in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 2-3. Eileen M. Hayes, *Songs in Black and Lavender: Race, Sexual Politics, and Women's Music* (African American Music in Global Perspective. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 1.

helped found a successful underground lesbian press, women's-only communes, rape crisis centers, softball leagues, and numerous other similar organizations.[8]

Together, these feminist movement spaces engendered feelings of solidarity and empowerment among community members.[9] They provided environments in which women could seek refuge from the physical and psychological stresses exerted by a patriarchal society. By excluding men, in large part, they allowed the women who visited them to develop their own sense of identity, both individually and as a collective.[10] In this way, such spaces functioned in a manner similar to the homosocial domestic spheres that early- and mid-nineteenth century middle-class and elite white women inhabited. Here, women could connect with each other on the basis of their shared experiences and form bonds that could help them navigate the obstacles they faced in the heterosocial world.[11]

The rise of the women's culture community from the feminist movement included the birth of the women's music industry, which, in turn, facilitated the growth of the feminist comedy circuit. Feminist rock groups such as the Chicago Women's Liberation Rock Band and lesbian singer-songwriters like Alix Dobkin released albums in the early 1970s. Singer and peace activist Holly Near founded Redwood Records in 1972, while self-identified radical lesbian feminists Meg Christian, Judy Glugacz, Helaine Harris, Cyndi Gair, and Ginny Berson founded

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[8] Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 226.
[9] Daphne Spain, *Constructive Feminism: Women's Spaces and Women's Rights in the American City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 12-13. See also Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 48-63, 161-162.
[10] Spain, *Constructive Feminism*, 13.
[11] See Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

Oliva Records in 1973.[12] The two companies became the most influential recording labels in women's music and released comedy albums as well. 1974 and 1975 saw the creation of three more important institutions in women's music: women-only sound companies; women-only distribution companies; and, most relevant to this study, the women's music festivals where feminist comics found their largest audiences.[13]

Feminist Kristin Lems produced the first major women's music festival, staged at the University of Illinois campus in 1974. She was motivated to organize it after attending a folk music festival that featured no female artists.[14] The first annual National Women's Music Festival (NWMF) took place from May 28 to June 2 of that year. The program bore the tagline, "give music back to its muses."[15] Like the many women's music festivals that would follow it, the NWMF offered a series of workshops and open mics in addition to musical performances. Thus, attendees at the first NWMF could listen to sets by musicians Holly Near and Meg Christian, watch their fellow concert-goers perform at women's-only jam session and open mics,

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[12] Eileen M. Hayes, *Songs in Black and Lavender: Race, Sexual Politics, and Women's Music*, African American Music in Global Perspective (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 46. Ginny Berson et al., "The Muses of Olivia: Our Own Economy, Our Own Song," *Off Our Backs* 4, no. 9 (1974): 2–3. Andrew Male, "'Our Sound Engineer Got a Death Threat': How Lesbian Label Olivia Shook up Music," *The Guardian*, July 19, 2020, sec. Music, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/jul/19/lesbian-record-label-olivia-linda-tillery-californian-feminists-death-threat-music.

[13] Bonnie J. Morris, *The Disappearing L: Erasure of Lesbian Spaces and Culture*, SUNY Series in Queer Politics and Cultures (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016). 26-27.

[14] Morris, *The Disappearing L*, 27. For other examples of the sexism in 1970s folk music that inspired the creation of the women's music industry, see Jerome Rodnitzky, *Feminist Phoenix: The Rise and Fall Of A Feminist Counterculture*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group,1999), 61-62.

[15] "1st – 4th NWMF, 1974-1977," Box 10, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

and participate in workshops like the one Judy Sarver hosted on the third morning of the festival: "Demonstration and Workshop – Women and Humor."[16]

While the NWMF took place on college campuses each year in the Midwest, most other festivals sought the discretion and autonomy that rural facilities could offer. There festival organizers could assure greater privacy for their attendees, many of whom took the opportunity of the same-sex atmosphere to go topless, and many of whom were lesbians not otherwise open about their sexual orientation. By 1976, the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival became the largest festival on the circuit, even purchasing its own tract of land in 1982, but other festivals cropped up nationwide: the New England Women's Musical Retreat; the Southern Women's Music Festival and Rhythmfest, both in Georgia; and the West Coast Women's Music and Cultural Festival in California were among the most prominent. Smaller festivals also took place in Arizona, Nevada, Texas, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Iowa, and even Alaska. The festivals were accessible to women of limited means, as they generally offered a sliding scale admission price and the possibility of work exchange. At their peak in the 1980s and early 1990s, festivals could draw crowds as large as six to eight thousand and last as long as seven days.[17]

Together, music festivals and movement spaces like feminist bookstores, coffeehouses, and college women's centers comprised the main venues for the feminist comedy circuit. Feminist bookstores functioned as key cultural gathering sites for authors, performers, movement organizers, and patrons. They fostered dialogue, facilitated political action, and enabled financial self-sufficiency among community members.[18] Less material exists documenting the history of

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[16] "1st – 4th NWMF, 1974-1977," Box 10, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. Morris, *The Disappearing L*, 71.
[17] Morris, *The Disappearing L*, 35, 71-76.
[18] The importance of feminist bookstores as cultural spaces cannot be overlooked: "Unlike general bookstores, women's bookstores emerged as crucial conduits of feminist writings, music

feminist-oriented coffeehouses and similar gathering spaces, but often they were associated with a bookstore or women's center, such as Charis Circle and Charis Books, in Atlanta. The former organization grew out of the popularity of the events the bookstore hosted, and for decades has helped subsidize the cost of the bookstore with revenue from cultural programming.[19]

These women-focused institutions were no doubt an outgrowth of the separatist impulses among certain radical and lesbian feminists, but the sites where feminist comics performed – music festivals, bookstores, coffeehouses – served more as temporary sanctuaries from the hostile and oppressive forces of mainstream society. In the face of growing economic pressures and declining interest on the part of younger generations, both women's music festivals and feminist institutions such as bookstores would face a sharp downturn by the mid-1990s, but while they were thriving, they provided a friendly and welcoming alternative to mainstream comedy clubs and theaters for a growing number of feminist comics eager to share their takes on the movement and society at large. These spaces, as historian Robert O. Self argues, "depended on a horizontal, rather than vertical, notion of knowledge and culture: women talking to women."[20] Or as comic Marga Gomez put it when she walked on stage at NEWMR in 1991 to begin her set: "My name is Marga Gomez and I'm a woman in comedy, and there's nothing better for a woman in comedy than an audience of women."[21]

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and arts that were ignored by mainstream companies." Junko R. Onosaka, *Feminist Revolution in Literacy: Women's Bookstores in the United States*, Studies in American Popular History and Culture (New York: Routledge, 2006), 118.

[19] Linda Bryant, "A Personal History of Charis by Linda Bryant," http://www.charisbooksandmore.com/personal-history-charis-linda-bryant

[20] Self, *All in the Family*, 181-182, 227-228.

[21] NEWMR '91 #6 (Sue Fink cont., Marga Gomez, Marla BB, and Alizon Lissance). Box 72m, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

She Who Laughs, Lasts

The subjects that comics like Kate Clinton, Robin Tyler, Karen Williams, and Marga Gomez covered in their routines included everyday issues like the discomfort of visiting the gynecologist or the disappointments of growing old; topical concerns like presidential politics; and the challenges of living as lesbians in a culture staunchly opposed to their lifestyle. In a society that was still coming to grips with women wielding authority in previously male-dominated professions, assuming the powerful role of stand-up comic and unapologetically giving voice to their perspectives was a defiant, rebellious act.[22] Where the bawds that predated them offered shock humor, insults targeting other women as well as themselves, and subtle critiques of the expectations of womanhood, these comics flouted those expectations, found pride in themselves and took joy in their connections with other women, and joked about taboo topics in order to destigmatize them, not simply to appear edgy.

The headliners addressed their unique roles as feminist comics head-on in their routines. The performers who comprised the feminist comedy circuit trafficked in what American Studies scholar Rebecca Krefting terms, "charged humor," characterized by its imperative to incite social change, foster community, and fight for civil rights and social visibility.[23] Kate Clinton made the purpose of her comedy explicit in her sets at NEWMR '82. Returning to the stage after a musical act concluded, Clinton reintroduced herself, stating one of her common refrains: "I am a stand-up comedian…yes, I stand up because one never knows from where one sits, where one stands." She continued, addressing the uneasy relationship some movement members had with comedy:

> I am reclaiming our women's humor with your help. We know whose butts have been the butts of the jokes for too long and therefore we don't trust humor. So, I'm trying to

[22] Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance*, 6-8.
[23] Rebecca Krefting, *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 25.

> reclaim the notion of humor and one of the things I'm trying to reclaim is the notion of the practical joke. I want to make the practical joke very practical for us.[24]

Clinton's recognition that her humor was tied directly to her political stances demonstrates that for her, these performances were inherently related to feminist political mobilization. Indeed, she reconceptualized the term "practical joke" as something that is practical, in the hands of feminists, because it can change the world.[25] Rather than overlook the derisive ways in which mainstream comedy treated women, Clinton acknowledged them to justify the societal reforms feminists called for and to advocate for transforming the comedy genre itself.

Karen Williams, another prominent comic on the circuit, spoke at the same festival of the sacrifices and struggles of her chosen line of work: "When I was figuring out my life I decided I wanted to do something that would be financially rewarding and would give me lots of fame and fortune and not too many challenges…so I chose Black lesbian mom comic." She went on, calling for compensation for the difficulties she faced: "If I'm going to be all that, I want some rewards. Like, I want discounts on my groceries." When she made a move to leave the stage and the audience called out for more of her material, she replied: "You don't understand, it's not the more I want, it's cash. I don't feel any paper bills or coins pelting me up here. I could give a shit less about your admiration. Thanks, but cash will do."[26] Williams's direct acknowledgement of the ways in which her race, sexuality, and gender negatively affected her career and family show

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[24] NEWMR '82 #4 (Mary Rhines cont., Open Mic: Punk Mary, Genny Holland, Nancy Tucker). Box 72a, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.
[25] "Clinton, Kate," Box 2, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.
[26] NEWMR '91 #4 (Karen Williams cont., Jean and June Millington), Box 72m, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

that her political concerns were omnipresent, even when an admiring audience was calling for an encore.

While the feminist circuit's performers and audience members were largely white, organizers constructed these spaces with inclusivity in mind. The rhetoric organizers and performers used in these shows, and the activities planned alongside them, demonstrate how these activists attempted to reckon with the divisions that had hindered the women's movement in the years leading up to the rise of the women's culture industry. Historian Wini Breines's assessment of the tentative reunion of Black and white feminists beginning in the late 1970s aptly describes such efforts: "They came together not in simple sisterhood but in interactions that acknowledged their differences…feminists confronted social institutions and one another, across race, often with hope and frequently in pain and frustration…in a self-conscious effort to construct an antiracist feminist movement together."[27] As a result, particularly as the circuit grew in popularity, festivals and community spaces featured performers from numerous racial and ethnic backgrounds; workshops on anti-racism and intersectional social issues; chemical and substance-free areas for those in recovery from addiction; vegetarian meals options; childcare services; and they were among some of the most physically-accessible venues in the nation before the implementation of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.[28]

Still, comics of color, most often Williams and Gomez but also performers such as Danitra Vance and Monica Palacios, drew attention to the particular struggles they faced, both within the women's culture community and in society more broadly. For example, at another

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[27] Wini Breines, *The Trouble between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 17-18.
[28] Morris, *The Disappearing L*, 73. Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-century America*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 222.

point in the same performance Williams complained of the spartan conditions at the rural festivals: “By the end of this festival route, trust me, I have camped my ass off and I’m not enjoying it…camping – ‘it’s the lesbian national sport.’ [African Americans] don’t call camping sport, we call it homeless.” Similarly, after telling a joke about why, as a Black woman, she was uncomfortable with the idea of a sadomasochism conference (presumably because the dominant/submissive dynamic evoked elements of the master/slave relationship) she told the audience, “For those who don’t get it, find a Black woman and ask her. But don’t ask her stupid shit.”[29] Here Williams gestured toward the educational atmosphere of the festivals with regard to issues like race, and the emotional labor of explanation that often fell to women of color in these situations. This racial reality becomes even clearer when observing that Williams was introduced to the stage with the pronouncement that she was “never afraid to confront us or educate us…”[30]

The significant efforts made by event organizers to accommodate different groups nonetheless provided endless fodder for the comics poking fun at their surroundings. For example, Karen Williams, when beginning to recite what she labeled her “pussy poem,” happily noted how the butch sign language interpreter didn’t miss a beat when interpreting the word pussy.[31] Comic Lynn Lavner spoke on her 1992 album *Butch Fatale* about her experience working the women’s festival circuit as an outsider who came up in the clubs and piano bars of

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[29] NEWMR ’91 #4 (Karen Williams cont., Jean and June Millington), Box 72m, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.
[30] NEWMR ’91 #3 (Saturday Night), Box 72m, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.
[31] NEWMR ’91 #3 (Saturday Night), Box 72m, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

New York City: "I was told that the festivals are chem-free, drug-free, smoke-free, etc. And I thought, 'that's terrific, you usually have to pay for that stuff!"[32]

Despite these initiatives toward diversity and inclusion (and perhaps because of them), community members frequently complained when festivals failed to live up to these standards. Indeed, battles over political correctness became a bane in the community, taking up significant amounts of organizers' and attendees' time as discussions and disagreements were addressed.[33] In response, comics sometimes offered sharp takes on what they saw as hypocritical and stifling elements of the women's culture community. Tyler, for example, used her act to criticize the pressures she encountered at festivals to shave her head or refrain from eating meat. "When I knew it was just bullshit, I had to talk about it on stage," she told *Hot Wire,* the feminist journal devoted to women's music and culture, in 1987. "It's easy to call the bullshit around Ronald Reagan, or the Pope," but she also felt the need to call out "the ludicrousness of our own sorority-like ways."[34]

More often, comics used their positions as feminist allies to gently take aim at what they saw as mockable characteristics of the women's culture community. While serving as emcee at NEWMR '91, Marga Gomez rattled off a list of parody announcements, including a notice for a comedy benefit the entertainers were planning, as well as the boycott of the benefit, which the same individuals were organizing alongside it.[35] Kate Clinton began her set at NWMF '83

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[32] Lynn Lavner, *Butch Fatale*, 1992, Bent B 32499, Warren Debenham Comedy Sound Recordings Collection, American Comedy Collections, Emerson College, Boston, MA.
[33] Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 235-236.
[34] Toni L. Armstrong, "'I Love Women Who Laugh': Comedy in Women's Music & Culture," *Hot Wire* 3, no. 3 (July 1987): 34.
[35] NEWMR '91 #6 (Sue Fink cont., Marga Gomez, Marla BB, and Alizon Lissance). Box 72m, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

saying, “Before I facilitate tonight’s humor experience…”[36] Comic Lea DeLaria referred to her girlfriend Kelly as her lover onstage, but then corrected herself for overstepping her “feminist boundaries” with such possessive language, instead opting for: “Kelly, the woman with whom I bump pussy.”[37] DeLaria, Clinton, and Gomez were able to mock the festival culture without losing their audiences (their sets were successful) because they were part of the community. Rather than making the women in attendance the butt of the joke, as they were so used to being in more traditional comedy venues, these comics helped the audiences release some of the tension that resulted from their fervent efforts toward political correctness without denigrating the sentiment that undergirded those efforts.

Fighting Back with a Smile

Comics on the feminist circuit offered plenty of material that looked beyond their own roles as entertainers and the foibles of the women’s movement. They dealt with the significant obstacles that women faced in their everyday lives, from sexism at work to the challenges of single motherhood. Many also included material on the joys and difficulties of their lives as lesbians. But they didn’t stop at their own individual concerns. Clinton and Lea DeLaria, Vickie Shaw and Judy Sloan also took on the Reagan and Bush administrations, Anita Bryant, the Catholic Church, and Operation Desert Storm. Like the feminist comics of chapter one, Lily Tomlin, Ivy Bottini, and Robin Tyler, these comics both politicized their personal struggles and made clear their personal offense at the political realities they faced. Thus, comedy offered

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[36] Kate Clinton, *Making Waves!*, 1984, Whyscrack WHY102, Warren Debenham Comedy Sound Recordings Collection, American Comedy Collections, Emerson College, Boston, MA.
[37] NEWMR ’88 #3 (Anna Crusis Choir cont., Heather Bishop, Children’s Concert), Box 72l, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

feminists a way to express their political outrage where anger could go hand-in-hand with laughter.

Clinton spoke to this duality when she told *Hot Wire* (in its very first issue, November 1984), "Feminist humor holds out the possibility of change, movement. There is a spiraling helix of hope that is in the work of feminist humor that I find totally absent from men's and mainstream women's humor."[38] The press materials for Clinton's *Making Light* (1982) album also elaborated on the intent of feminist comedy to bring women together and to offer hopeful alternatives in the face of dispiriting circumstances:

> Kate calls herself a fumerist. Wherever she performs, she fumes, makes light and exposes our oppression…Kate believes that through our humor we are all equal to the task of making light – light enough to see where are going in these dark times, light enough to make women visible to each other and light enough to be able to move through heavy issues.[39]

Clinton leaned heavily on the moniker "fumerist" (also a portmanteau of feminist humorist) and this statement demonstrates her commitment to feminist humor. Its defining characteristic, according to feminist scholars Gloria Kaufman and Mary Kay Blakely, is an attitude of social revolution, the ridiculing of a social system that must be altered.[40] On the feminist circuit, Clinton and her fellow performers found audiences who shared their zeal for jokes that targeted the oppressive forces they battled every day.

Those forces only grew in strength as the feminist comedy circuit became more established. While the early 1970s saw victories for the women's movement including congressional passage of the Comprehensive Child Development Act (CCDA – a bill that

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[38] Yvonne Zipter, "Making Conversation with Kate Clinton," *Hot Wire* 1, no. 1 (November 1984): 11.
[39] "Clinton, Kate," Box 2, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.
[40] Gloria J. Kaufman and Mary Kay Blakely, *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor & Satire* (Indiana University Press, 1980), 13.

provided for state-subsidized childcare), Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments Act, and the Equal Rights Amendment (along with the ERA's quick ratification by 30 states), along with the Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* (1973) that legalized abortion nationwide, many of these victories ultimately came up short. The CCDA died after President Nixon vetoed it, Title IX struggled for years with lax enforcement, and due to the success of Phyllis Schlafly's STOP ERA campaign, the ERA failed to win ratification in the required 38 states, even after Congress extended the ratification period.[41] The *Roe v. Wade* decision faced decades of fierce opposition from conservatives intent on restricting abortion rights before it was eventually overturned by *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health* (2022).

The late 1970s saw the consolidation of right-wing constituencies, including evangelical Protestants, conservative Catholics, John Birch Society activists, and other moral traditionalists, who joined together to fervently oppose the feminist movement. These forces grew in strength during the Reagan and Bush administrations, as socially conservative constituencies aligned with anti-government, free market conservatives. While the Right's social agenda did not succeed on all fronts during these years (for example, liberals in Congress protected Title X funding for sex education and family planning) they did largely succeed in setting the terms of the national political debate, pivoting from the Left's framework of full and equal citizenship to one premised on a critique of government dependency and a conservative view of traditional family values.[42] It was in this often demoralizing political environment that feminist comics used their platform to call out the hypocrisy and absurdity of their opponents, and to provide their audiences with the opportunity to find amusement in the face of political struggle.

[41] Self, *All in the Family*, 128, 291, 304.
[42] Self, *All in the Family*, 310-311, 338, 368-369.

Comics varied in the feminist slants they applied to their topical material. Judy Sloan called out what she saw as the macho posturing of the George H.W. Bush administration when she criticized "Operation Desert Schlong." She attempted to lay bare Bush's true political priorities in a State of the Union address by juxtaposing his professed support for average Americans against his apparent sexual arousal at the notion of cutting the capital gains tax (a proposition on which, he told Congress, he "wouldn't take no for an answer").[43] Clinton took a dryer, less salacious approach, evidenced by her list of parody laws that she imagined the Reagan administration would implement – fetal search and seizure, virginity as a high school graduation requirement – and leading the 1985 NEWMR audience in a primal scream after discussing Reagan's reelection.[44] Comic Vickie Shaw targeted the women who had made it to political office in Washington, D.C. for selling out their fellow women. "The women in Washington aren't real women," she claimed, "they're men with cramps."[45] Their overtly political material still frequently had universal appeal, however. Judy Sloan got one of her biggest laughs when she admired Bush for quoting John F. Kennedy in that State of the Union address: "That took a lot of gall, 'let me quote the person I maybe helped to kill.'"[46]

The comics' more personal material, unsurprisingly, offered greater specificity and detail as they attacked the sexism and homophobia they so often faced. Sloan suggested a novel approach to sexism in the workplace at NEWMR '87. She complained she was not earning as

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[43] Judith Sloan recording, undated, Ladyslipper Music Inc. Records, 1965-2011 and undated, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.
[44] NEWMR '82 #14 (Linda Powell and Julie cont., Ginny Bales – Blazing Saxes) and NEWMR '85 #10, (Sun. Nite cont., Washington Sisters, Kate Clinton) Boxes 72a and 72d, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.
[45] WMA NEWMR '97 #3 (Destiny cont., Vickie Shaw), Box 72m, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.
[46] Judith Sloan recording, undated, Ladyslipper Music Inc. Records, 1965-2011 and undated, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

much as her male co-workers simply because she did not have a penis, and then told of her strategy a recent job interview. Sloan felt that the male interviewer was not paying adequate attention to her, "so I took a penis out of my pocket and slammed it on the desk during an interview (you think I don't have a penis, but I do). I got his attention – it worked better than a resume."[47] Sloan's absurd take on how to get equal attention in the workplace elicited raucous laughs while calling out the illogical basis for her discriminatory treatment.

Lea DeLaria, a butch lesbian comic (later known for her role on the Netflix series *Orange is the New Black* [2013-2019]), told of being confronted on the street in Provincetown, Massachusetts – known for generally being gay-friendly – by a teenage boy: "He got right in my face and said, 'you fucking bull dyke,' and I thought, 'ooh, what a smart man. I bet he took one look at my face and knew I was white too.'" DeLaria swore back at him and then a nearby police officer intervened. When DeLaria said that the teen called her a bull dyke, the police officer asked her if she did anything to provocate the remark. She recounted to the audience:

> Provocate? What is that? That was oppression. If I was a straight person and that drunk teenage boy got in my face the cop would have locked him up and thrown him in jail. But nooooo, I'm a lesbian, an open lesbian, with differently-abled hair, walking down the street. That is oppression and I know oppression because I grew up in the Midwest.[48]

DeLaria's account offers an angry, yet affirming tale of a woman standing up for herself against verbal harassment and police discrimination due to her sexual orientation. She modeled for audiences one possible way to respond to such attacks, and whether anyone chose to follow her

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[47] NEWMR '87 #4 (Catherine D'Amato cont., Open Mic), Box 72l, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

[48] NEWMR '88 #3 (Anna Crusis Choir cont., Heather Bishop, Children's Concert), Box 72l, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

example, the story itself could serve as a release for the tension brought on by these interactions.[49]

Karen Williams similarly spoke to the challenges of masculine-appearing women. A self-described femme, Williams defended her use of comedic material centering on butch/femme relationship dynamics that mirrored stereotypes about heterosexual relationships. "I tell you why I do butch/femme," she said, "Stonewall wasn't about the femmes, persecution of lesbians was about the butches, the women who couldn't hide that they were lesbians."[50] While specifically addressing the greater challenges butch women faced in the wider world, Williams alluded to the pressure many women, lesbian and straight, felt to adhere to cultural norms of femininity when in mainstream social spaces. This material offered a personal connection for those who identified as butch or femme, but it also spoke to more widespread struggles of feminist womanhood in the decades following the rise of the women's liberation.

Vickie Shaw found delight in subverting the language used against her as an out lesbian woman. She addressed the straight women in the audience at NEWMR '97, telling them: "Don't be ashamed of your sexuality, you can't help it, you were born that way and we don't have anything against you. Don't want you teaching our kids, but other than that…" She then turned to her fellow lesbians in the crowd: "When you all joined [the lesbian community], did you get an agenda? Because I didn't get one and I'm pissed off. My family has a copy of this agenda and

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[49] For more on the liberating element of humor, see Sigmund Freud, "Humor," *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 9, (January 1928): 2-3. For more on the ways in which feminist humor can release harnessed energies, see Regina Barreca, *New Perspectives on Women and Comedy* (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992), 6.
[50] NEWMR '93 #4 (Karen Williams cont., Heather Bishop) Box 72m, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

they throw it in my face a lot."[51] Shaw turned the prejudice she faced as a lesbian on its head, redirecting it toward heterosexual women, and undermined the homophobic argument of an insidious gay agenda through willful ignorance. The feminist comedy circuit had begun shrinking significantly by the time Shaw performed this material in 1997, but the feminist tradition of making light of heavy issues in order to effect change had not diminished.

The Unvarnished Truth

In 1974, four Boston feminists came together to establish a women's bookstore in the city, one they named "New Words." They met through radical theologian Mary Daly (when instead of giving her sermon at Harvard's Memorial Church – the first there by a woman – she led a walkout in protest of its patriarchal ideology) and they drew inspiration for the bookstore from her 1973 book, *Beyond God the Father*. Daly wrote, "Women are hearing each other and ourselves for the first time and out of this supportive hearing will emerge new words." This statement, which echoed the same emphasis on women's expression that underlay feminist comedy, was featured on the store's first flyer.[52] The importance Daly and the store's owners, and indeed, the broader women's movement, placed on the expression of women's voices and experiences was reflected in the comedy that grew out of spaces like New Words.

Feminist comics performing at women's bookstores, coffeehouses, and music festivals, brought to light aspects of their lives as women – as Black women and Jewish women, as young women and old women, as butch women and femme women – and in doing so, argued for the importance of these themes. Like many comics, they spoke of topics taboo in other settings, but

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[51] WMA NEWMR '97 #3 (Destiny cont., Vickie Shaw), Box 72m, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.
[52] Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985), 8, as quoted in Spain, *Constructive Feminism*, 86.

in their cases, these subjects were frowned upon even on mainstream comedy stages. Menstruation, lesbian sexual attraction, sex toys, the frustrations of motherhood – these topics provided fodder for feminist comics as they situated themselves as the subject of their own narratives, rather than an object under the scrutiny of the male gaze, an historic advance for women in public performance.[53] Here, women set the agenda for discussion, and the cultural norms that usually discouraged them from speaking openly about the unladylike aspects of their lives became playthings in the hands of skilled comics.

Raunchy and explicit material was the most salient way feminist comics could flout restrictive gender norms and win not just laughs, but hoots and hollers of recognition and excitement from their audiences. Whereas the bawds before them used raunch in order to elicit laughter at their shocking and mischievous conduct, comics on the feminist circuit deployed blue material so as to build bonds based on common experiences and to claim ownership over subjects that society had deemed off-limits to proper women. The opening vignette of this chapter represents just one part of Kate Clinton's extensive menstruation-themed repertoire, which she crafted in order to highlight the most unseemly aspects of the experience. She told of growing up with three brothers, that her biggest problem during puberty was disposing of used sanitary pads without the men in her house ever seeing them. She and her mother would fold and wrap them, until they had the "large menstrual mummy" and then would implement football-like strategy to get them out of the house unseen. "I'm not sure what would have happened to them had they seen a used sanitary napkin," she said, "perhaps they would clot up and blow away…" While she criticized the pressure women felt to hide all evidence of their periods from the men around them, she also asserted that the details of menstruation could only be truly understood by

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[53] Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance*, 92.

those who experienced it. She continued her set, asking, “Can you ever imagine explaining to a guy what it’s like to sneeze and blow your tampon out a quarter of an inch? There’s no way.”[54] In another routine, she asked the audience, “How many of you have ever lost the string to an already inserted tampon?” After garnering affirmative responses from the crowd, she replied, “Easy! We’ve got friends to help us find them. Isn’t that lovely?”[55]

Clinton used this boundary-pushing material to emphasize the positive connections women could form in places like women’s music festivals where they all (or nearly all) shared the embodied experiences of female life. As she told the feminist journal *Sojourner*, “I think some of the truest moments, when women really laugh together, are when I talk about bodies, things we all have. It’s a good place to start a routine, with everybody seeing that we’re all alike.”[56] Clinton’s emphasis on physical commonalities reflects the predominant ethos in women’s culture spaces that while participants may have had many differences (such as age, race, religion, ability, or class), they could relate to each other through the shared embodiment of womanhood. Movement organizers cited this shared embodiment as the basis for policies that excluded transgender women and male children or companions from some festivals and events. However, by the mid-1990s, the growing prominence of transgender women and a declining preference for separatism on the part of attendees facilitated a shift to an ethos that emphasized

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[54] NEWMR ’82 #14 (Linda Powell and Julie cont., Ginny Bales – Blazing Saxes), Box 72a, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.
[55] NEWMR ’82 #8 (Teddy Holte & Leaf Miller cont., Hillary Kay & Hana Lanin), Box 72a, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.
[56] Shane Snowden, “Feminist Kate Clinton’s Chewy Humor,” *Sojourner* 10, no. 2 (October 1984), 23.

the multiplicity of intersectional identities among women, rather than focus on a shared bodily experience.[57]

Robin Tyler, the first feminist comic to release an album with her then-partner Patty Harrison in 1972 (*Try It – You'll Like It*, referring to women's liberation), also performed on the circuit, eventually producing several festivals, including the West Coast Women's Music and Comedy Festival, the only one to explicitly mention comedy in its name.[58] Tyler recorded her 1985 album *Just Kidding* while performing at the Southern Women's Music Festival that summer. In it, she detailed the frustrations of visiting a male gynecologist. The thin paper gown that barely covered her body, the long wait in an empty examining room, and, worst of all, the freezing cold speculum straight out of the refrigerator.[59] Festival audiences responded enthusiastically to material that covered the experiences common to women's health issues – subjects they would be hard pressed to hear about in any other performance venue – and the more personal and detailed the description, the more they loved it. This sort of material did more than entertain: Clinton, for example, poked fun at her awkward experience having a mammogram on her 1984 album, *Making Light*. She included the scene in order to demystify the exam, in hopes of lessening the high number of cancer-related deaths among women in the community, and reported that "about a hundred" women thanked her for speaking openly about the experience.[60]

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[57] Morris, *The Disappearing L*, 43.
[58] Alix Dobkin Papers, 1973-2004; Letter from Robin Tyler to performers at West Coast Women's Music and Comedy Festival, July 24, 1985. MC 598, box 3, folder 7. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.
[59] Robin Tyler, *Just Kidding*, 1985, H & T Productions RT2, Warren Debenham Comedy Sound Recordings Collection, American Comedy Collections, Emerson College, Boston, MA.
[60] Shane Snowden, "Feminist Kate Clinton's Chewy Humor," *Sojourner* 10, no. 2 (October 1984), 23.

Feminist comics broached taboos not just of female health, but also pleasure. Tyler, for instance, spoke on stage of her affinity for sex toys, joking on both of her first two albums that she sent her vibrator two dozen roses on Valentine's Day.[61] That Tyler kept using this particular joke over a period of at least seven years (she released her first album in 1972 and her second in 1979) demonstrates the success it must have had as a laugh line with feminist audiences. Karen Williams enjoyed teasing the New England audiences at NEWMR for being more prudish than the audiences at her west coast shows. She asked if the crowd-members even knew what certain sex toys were used for, and whether they were aware of female ejaculation. "Do they have that here? East of the Rockies?" she inquired.[62]

Beyond the straightforward connections that bodily-themed humor could foster among the audience members at these shows, comics performing this material took the most reviled and repressed parts of womanhood – menstrual blood, masturbation, vaginal fluids – and flouted not only their ownership of these issues but their delight in making them public as objects of shared mockery. Whereas the women attending these performances were likely used to male comics' derision and objectification of their bodies, or bawdy female comics who broached these topics largely for shock value, here feminist comics made women's bodies the subject of their jokes, rather than the target. Instead, they placed their aim squarely on the social norms that demanded female chastity, cleanliness, and silence.

In addition to bodily humor, lesbian comics also reveled in using lewd humor to describe their attraction to other women while in the safe confines of feminist venues. Clinton, describing

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[61] Harrison and Tyler, *Try It – You'll Like It!* Dore Records 327, and Robin Tyler, *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom*, Olivia RT-3, Warren Debenham Comedy Sound Recordings Collection, American Comedy Collections, Emerson College, Boston, MA.
[62] NEWMR '93 #4 (Karen Williams cont., Heather Bishop) Box 72m, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

her Catholic upbringing and the guilt and shame it instilled in her, told one audience: "I was the kind of woman who would not say lesbian if her mouth was full of one!"[63] Vickie Shaw recounted her father's objections after she came out. He said, "homosexuality, that's a cult. They'll suck you in!" "Well, yeah! That's why I joined!" she replied.[64] Innuendoes such as these allowed lesbian feminist comics to openly share the erotic lives that they so often had to hide or downplay in the wider world, as well as to subvert gender norms that dictated innocent and virtuous behavior for women in the public sphere.

The few comics who were also mothers mined their experiences raising children for performance material as well. Vickie Shaw bragged of the strength she felt as a mother: "I don't have delusions of power," she said, "I'm a mom. I AM power."[65] Karen Williams, like popular comics Bill Cosby before her and Louis C.K. and Ali Wong after her, spoke frankly of the frustrations of parenthood. She explained to the NEWMR '91 audience that her son told her he knew she did the best job raising him that she could with limited skills and resources. She complained to the crowd: "Boy, doesn't he know that anywhere along the line he could have been crib death? Six years old, slip in the tub? Crib death. Instead I let him live…so that he could assess the kind of job I've been doing."[66] The casual way in which Williams joked about letting her son die would have been shocking coming from a male comic, so it was unprecedented for a female comic to promote a view so antithetical to the notion of the loving, all-sacrificing mother.

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[63] NEWMR '82 #9 (The Jane Doe Band, Open Mic: Susan Graetz; Sheryl Williams), Box 72a, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.
[64] WMA NEWMR '97 #3 (Destiny cont., Vickie Shaw), Box 72m, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.
[65] WMA NEWMR '97 #3 (Destiny cont., Vickie Shaw), Box 72m, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.
[66] NEWMR '91 #4 (Karen Williams cont., Jean and June Millington), Box 72m, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

But given the laughs this material elicited, women in the audience shared her frustrations and vicariously enjoyed her rebellion against the strictures of motherhood.

The feminist comedy circuit provided spaces wherein women could earn a living and a following by standing on stage and telling the stories of their lives. All comic performance requires modulating material to fit the desires of the audience, but at festival grounds and coffeehouses, feminist comics did not need to censor themselves to please male-dominated crowds. The anecdotes they told were not deemed too niche or unrelatable by male club bookers. And importantly, given that the bias persists to this day, the presence of multiple female comics on the same lineup was not a problem, but, in fact, an asset. The array of feminist comic voices offered audiences even more opportunities to hear stories of women's experiences that resonated with their own.

Do-It-Yourself Comedy

Professional comics were not the only people in the women's culture community to use humor to give voice to their personal experiences as women. Nearly every festival offered open mic sessions, where musicians, storytellers, poets, and individuals looking to try their hand at comedy could get on stage and speak their truth. As one would expect, most open mic performers were musicians, but the programs for these festivals frequently called out for performers of all kinds, specifically including aspiring comedians. The program for the 1985 NWMF advertised a first-come, first-serve open mic session, stating, "For those daring musicians, poets, comedians, etc. be sure to bring your instruments/materials. Let others see talent on the rise!"[67] Open mic nights were popular outside the festival circuit as well. Charis

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[67] "11th NWMF, 1985," Box 10, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

Circle in Atlanta circulated a flier for their women-only open mic night, which featured images of both a female rocker and a woman speaking at a microphone. It read, "Are you a woman who writes stories, poems or songs? Do you sing, play an instrument, dance, tell jokes? Come share your art with other women!"[68]

In addition to open mics, many festivals offered workshops geared toward helping women learn to comical and theatrical techniques to express themselves. Some of these workshops took the form of an open mic session that offered critiques from professional comics, such as Lea DeLaria's "Open Mic Comedy Workshop" at the 1985 West Coast Women's Music and Comedy Festival. The program described it as a session geared "for those women who would like to try stand-up comedy but don't have the ground floor places to begin…Each performer will be given 5 minutes, then critiqued in a supportive atmosphere."[69] The direct acknowledgement of these workshops as friendly, positive environments was especially significant, as so few of the participants had any experience with stand-up.

Workshops also focused on other dimensions of feminist comedy, including its history, its writing, and its power to change minds. At the 1982 NWMF Robin Tyler led a workshop called, "History of Comedy as a Tool of Resistance," with the tagline: "A serious/hilarious look at the history of comedy."[70] The previous year at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival Tyler offered, "History of Comedy Past, Present & Future; and the coming Video Boom & What this

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[68] Charis Circle flier, Box 24, Folder "Events, 1991-1999," Charis Books, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.
[69] "West Coast Women's Music and Cultural Festival, 1981-1993," Box 12, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.
[70] "8th – 9th NWMF, 1982-1983," Box 10, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

Technology Will Mean to Womyn."[71] The 1984 NWMF, as part of its stated goal to include "all aspects of women's art and culture," featured a women's writers conference. There, Jorjet Harper, a Chicago-based comic performer and writer, offered lessons on how to analyze comedic devices and styles, and how to shape the power of humor for its intellectual and emotional impact in her workshop, "Writing Humor."[72] Kate Clinton's "Women and Humor" at NEWMR '83 claimed that participants would examine the "power of feminist humor as a commitment to joy in our lives and as an underrated weapon in the war against oppression."[73]

One of the most important aspects of humor in the workshops and classes of the feminist comedy circuit was its capacity for healing. Karen Williams in particular focused nearly all of her workshops (which she offered at a majority of the festivals where she performed) on the therapeutic power of laughter. She led one of her typical "Humor and Healing" sessions at the Michigan festival in 1990: "Through guided meditations and exercises, affirmations, sharing of personal experiences and hearty laughter, we will experience a transformation of the soul and healing of the heart."[74] Some workshops targeted specific ailments women experienced which could benefit from the restorative power of comedy. At the 1983 NWMF, Maxine Feldman facilitated a session for women maintaining their sobriety: "Women's Comedy/Women's

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[71] "6th Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, 1981," Box 12, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.
[72] "8th – 9th NWMF, 1982-1983," Box 10, Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.
[73] "NEWMR Programs and Brochures, 1981-87," Women's Music Archives Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.
[74] Alix Dobkin Papers, 1973-2004; 15th Michigan Womyn's Music Festival program, 1990. MC 598, box 16, folder 2. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. Karen Williams went on to found the Humor and Healing Arts Institute, through which she offers workshops and lectures to "encourage the fullest and highest activation of human potential for compassion, wisdom, and life force through the daily use of humor and healing arts." http://www.hahainstitute.com/haha-institute

Sobriety: Humor as a healing art. So what's so funny about survival? Everything! We'll share stories."[75] The prevalence of these sessions on the festival circuit reveal how affirming workshop leaders and participants must have found it to share their personal stories in a way that emphasized their comical elements. Humor scholars have often noted the capacity for humor to serve as a release valve for stress, particularly stress felt by marginalized populations. The rich African-American and Jewish comic traditions are attributed in part to this phenomenon, but even more than those communities, it was the feminist comedy circuit of the late-twentieth century that made this connection an explicit and purposeful part of its repertoire.

Festivals, coffeehouses, and other feminist cultural spaces offered several other forms of comedic education during this period. Classes on improvisation and sketch comedy, as well as clowning and mime, were popular throughout the country. The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, the most popular on the circuit, hosted a wide range of these offerings over the years. For example, Jacquelyn G. Miller taught a class there on clowning, mime, and juggling in 1984.[76] In 1989, comics Karen Ripley and Teresa Chandler (known for their improvisation group "Over Our Heads,") led a session called "The Magic of Improvisation," where they taught the basics of the craft as well as a variety of theater techniques and games.[77] In 1990, Judy Sloan offered, "Comedy/Looking for Laughter: Using Humor & Improvisation to Speak the Truth."

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[75] Alix Dobkin Papers, 1973-2004; 9th National Women's Music Festival program, 1983. MC 598, box 2, folder 5. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

[76] Susan B. Echo Papers, ca.1870-2010; Michigan Womyn's Music Festival workshop schedule, 1984. MC 806, box 27, folder 8. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

[77] Alix Dobkin Papers, 1973-2004; 14th Michigan Womyn's Music Festival program, 1989. MC 598, box 16, folder 1. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

She drew on both group and individual techniques for voice and movement so that participants could "explore making the truth of our lives funny."[78]

Feminist cultural spaces of this period are often remembered – when remembered at all – for their folk music, poetry readings, and consciousness-raising sessions, but the workshops and classes of the feminist comedy circuit expose the appetite community members possessed for comic performance. Whether the participants in these meetings shared funny stories from festivals past, learned how write a set or improvise a scene with fellow performers, or explored how comic narratives could help relieve their emotional burdens, they all sought out the chance to express themselves through humor in spaces that would facilitate, not hinder, the voices of women.

The Tradition Lives On

Several institutions from the feminist comedy circuit of the 1970s – 1990s are still active today, such as the National Women's Music Festival and Atlanta's Charis Books. But many were forced to cease operations in the 1990s. The Woman's Building in Los Angeles, an influential cultural hub devoted to women's art since 1973 (which often hosted comedy performances and classes) closed in 1991.[79] After growing rapidly between 1985-1994, the number of feminist bookstores in the country began to fall precipitously. The growing conservative climate and increasingly divisive social issues heading into the 1990s (characterized by reactions to the HIV/AIDS crisis, legal battles over abortion and gay rights, and debates concerning the

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[78] Alix Dobkin Papers, 1973-2004; 15th Michigan Womyn's Music Festival program, 1990. MC 598, box 16, folder 2. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

[79] Jori Finkel, "Remembering the Landmark Woman's Building," *Los Angeles Times*, January 15, 2012, http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jan/15/entertainment/la-ca-pst-womans-building-20120115.

seriousness of sexual harassment); a diminished desire among young feminists for women's-only spaces; and the rise of chain bookstores like Borders and Barnes & Noble all contributed to the decline of these important cultural resources.[80] The larger women's music festivals survived the 1990s, but many of the smaller ones fell away during these years. Those that remained, most notably the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, faced growing criticism about their exclusion of transgender women. This controversy eventually forced the Michigan festival to close in 2013 and tarnished its legacy in the eyes of many in the feminist and LGBTQ communities.[81] Lastly, growing mainstream success for feminist musicians and comics in the 1990s lessened the need for separate feminist cultural spaces. As a result of all these factors, the feminist comedy circuit shrunk considerably by the end of the decade.

Despite the decline of overtly feminist cultural spaces, the feminist comic tradition lived on in other ways. The overwhelming popularity of mainstream stand-up comedy in the 1980s, and the proliferation of comedy clubs that resulted from this trend, dropped off sharply in the early 1990s. Therefore, young comics broadened their search for venues in which to perform in the early and mid-1990s, leading to the rise of what came to be known as "alternative comedy." Like the feminist comedy circuit, the alternative comedy scene was characterized by performances in bookstores, coffeehouses, and other venues besides comedy clubs. In 1994, Beth Lapides premiered *UnCabaret*, the first established (and eventual flagship) alternative comedy performance space in Los Angeles, but her show of the same name actually began in 1991, at a performance space in the Woman's Building. When workshopping her one-woman show *Globe-O-Mania* at the Woman's Building, the women there explained to Lapides how excluded they

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[80] Onosaka, *Feminist Revolution in Literacy*, 1, 6, 137.
[81] Morris, *The Disappearing L*, 67, 79.

felt from the mainstream comedy world as women, lesbians, and artists. Upset at having just seen misogynistic comic Andrew Dice Clay perform at the Comedy Store to great applause, Lapides understood their perspective. She told them, "I'm gonna make a show especially for you. It's gonna be unhomophobic, unmisogynist, unxenophobic. I'll call it the Un-Cabaret." The show debuted on March 8th, in honor of International Women's Day.[82]

UnCabaret was not a female-only show, but Lapides's rules that comics deliver the personal, conversational performances that came to characterize alternative comedy helped ensure the room remained a female-friendly space. The rooms were small and intimate, with audiences seated on couches. Repetition and characters were not allowed on stage. Lapides explains: "What it meant was: don't do your act. This was a place of discovery. This was a place of being able to experiment…It was really just about you. And the audience came along for the ride." Performers and audiences alike fostered the safe and experimental tone of alternative comedy spaces. Looking back, Lapides says, "In all the years of *UnCabaret*, I can literally remember only two instances of heckling."[83]

Major female comics such as Janeane Garofalo and Kathy Griffin, as well as male comics like Patton Oswalt, David Cross, and Bob Odenkirk, emerged from the alternative comedy scene and brought feminist-influenced styles with them as they attained mainstream success.[84] Alternative comedy thus marks the first significant comedic movement that feminist comics originated, and developed in partnership with male comics. Without the honest, bold, and

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[82] Yael Kohen, *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy*, (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2014), 227-229. "Kathleen Clark - Artistic Director – Miscellaneous," 1990-1991. The Woman's Building Collection, box 2, folder 3, UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.
[83] Kohen, *We Killed*, 229.
[84] Kohen, *We Killed*, 209-232.

nontraditional comic styles that performers honed on the feminist comedy circuit, popular comedy in the United States would not boast the growing array of voices, themes, and formats that we have access to today.

Chapter III: Women of the Night: Female Comics in the Comedy Clubs and Cable Television, 1978-1992

In her 1987 Showtime comedy special *Broadway Baby*, comic Elayne Boosler declares to the audience, "women get hungry at night." When her boyfriend wakes up in the morning confused that their food is gone, she blames it on burglars: "whoa, what else did they get?" In this bit, Boosler claims that women will leave a nice, warm bed to go to 7-11 at four o'clock in the morning for snacks. From there, she moves on to mocking the suggested serving sizes on various food items. "You ever read the side of a pint of Hagen-Dazs? You know what it says? Serves four!" The audience laughs heartily, voicing their agreement with her incredulity at the willpower such restraint would require. Then she returns to the idea of a middle-of-the-night trip to 7-11: "We put on a pair of underwear, a pair of shoes, a nice long coat, get in the car…everyone there is dressed the same way. It's women and killers, it's four o'clock in the morning." She continues: "I always pray, don't let me get it in a parking lot dressed like this, they'll say I was asking for it." This line gets a solid laugh and Boosler continues describing the indignities of a late-night snack run and her compulsion to snack as soon as possible after leaving the store.[1]

Boosler's material here – on its face concerned with a seemingly-relatable challenge she and her fellow women face, but packing an incisive jab at misogynistic social mores – exemplifies the comedy performed by women comics in the bustling 1980s club scene. Boosler offers her audience accessible observational humor about everyday life, often mining gender stereotypes for jokes that serve to reinforce said stereotypes, but her act is nonetheless rife with protestations against the unrealistic standards and chronic injustice she saw women face all

[1] *Elayne Boosler: Broadway Baby*, directed by Steve Gerbson, Showtime, 1987.

around her. The audience appreciated her quips about gorging on M&Ms and enjoyed her impression of the mice that undoubtedly created the miniscule recommended serving sizes for Reese's peanut butter cups, but Boosler's act contains greater nuance. In telling this story, she doesn't ignore the dangers that a woman could very well face then, as she could today, when making that late-night snack run: a violent man looking to harm her and the hypocritical society that would deny her justice if she failed to perform femininity correctly. That she slipped this condemnation in the middle of an otherwise-commonplace bit illustrates both her comic philosophy as it relates to her gender ("I'm a human being trapped in a woman's body," she famously maintained[2]) and how many female club comics approached gender equality while on the stage – in indirect yet unmistakable ways.

The majority of female comics who rose to prominence in comedy clubs and on television during the stand-up boom (from the late 1970s to early 1990s)[3], were white, heterosexual, middle-class women. Comics like Elayne Boosler, Carol Leifer, Diane Nichols, Lotus Weinstock, Cathy Ladman, and Joy Behar. Unlike the performers on the feminist comedy circuit, few club comics identified themselves with the term feminist, but they shared a similarly liberal political orientation (unsurprising given the left-leaning bent of most popular comedy at this time) and revealed their support for gender equality in less overt ways. There were female

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[2] Elayne Boosler, "Elayne Boosler on 'Party of One,'" *Timeless*, DVD. Brooklyn Productions: 2018. See also: Elayne Boosler, Twitter, May 29, 2014. https://twitter.com/ElayneBoosler/status/472084210422128641

[3] Debate continues about when, exactly, the stand-up boom that characterized the 1980s ended, but most accounts note that it was underway by 1992 and complete by 1995. See K. E. N. McAlpine, "Stand-Up Takes a Tumble : The Comedy Club Boom of the '80s Has Gone Bust in the '90s, and Some Blame TV for Offering Top-Quality Humor at Low Cost.," *Los Angeles Times*, May 25, 1995, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-05-25-vl-5693-story.html. Yael Kohen, *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy*, 1st ed. (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2012), 209.

club comics in this period who offered more outright and explicitly feminist material (along with anti-racist and anti-ableist content) in their acts. But they faced other prejudices due to their race, ethnicity, disability, and class that emboldened their desire to call out such discrimination. These comics, such as Marsha Warfield, Ellen Cleghorne, Geri Jewell, and most famously, Roseanne Barr, feature later in the chapter, to demonstrate how they drew on the multiple avenues of marginalization they faced to put forth bolder material that audiences would still find acceptable.

While the perspectives of female club comics varied regarding the challenges confronting women in these years, and thus their acts varied as well, they all sought to work within the confines of the male-dominated mainstream stand-up comedy environment: comedy clubs and network and cable television, largely run by men who saw other men as their target audiences.[4] Further, these female club comics performed during a period of purported "backlash" against the activism of the women's movement, which contributed to the antagonistic stance toward feminism that permeated these venues. The clubs and TV were a far cry from the collegial atmospheres avowedly feminist comics found at women's music festivals and feminist bookstores and coffeehouses.

Under these constraints, female club comics fine-tuned the feminist nature of their material so as to challenge, but not directly flout, the era's prevailing gender norms. For example: they endlessly mocked the advice magazines like *Cosmopolitan* offered women to keep their men satisfied, but they did not fundamentally confront the notion that all women were in search of romantic success with men. They protested the markup and the demeaning advertising

[4] Allison Yarrow, *90s Bitch: Media, Culture, and the Failed Promise of Gender Equality*, First edition. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2018), 2-3.

of commercial products targeted at women, but they didn't advocate for boycotts or critique the capitalist and patriarchal underpinnings of such advertising.

The layered and complex nature of female club comics' acts in these years reflects the competing demands they attempted to juggle in order to succeed in mainstream comedy. Cultural historian Lawrence W. Levine aptly articulated a point that undergirds this analysis when he described popular culture as offering audiences a series of possibilities rather than a single, coherent text: "The Marx Brothers gave their audiences not truths but situations in which they could *perceive* truths about their society and their lives. Audiences retained the possibility of choice."[5] The female comics performing in clubs and on television in this period did the same – the different valences with which they imbued their sets allowed audience members to engage with the elements that resonated with their personal experiences. Whether it was through multilayered jokes or a delicate balance of subversive and conformist content that kept audiences on their side, these comics put forth material that suggested feminist views while at the same time avoiding the negative associations that accompanied explicit feminist identification. The comics who fell outside the norm of straight, white, middle-class women were more upfront with their social commentary, but they also imbued their sets with sufficient nuance so as to suit the era's norms of mainstream comedy that were less-than-friendly to outright declarations of feminism. This multifaceted method of creative expression allowed comics like Boosler to win over the greatest number of audience members without conceding the personal perspective that helped her stand out from the sea of male comics. Boosler may have been a person trapped in a

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[5] Lawrence W. Levine, "The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences," *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 5 (December 1992), 1398.

woman's body, but she consistently called out the realities of living in that body while she cracked wise as a person just trying to entertain her audience.

"It is the rock of the 80s." "It was a war zone."

The performances of women club comics provide a compelling window through which to view popular cultural conversations about the position of women in American society in the decade following the height of the women's liberation movement. There were certainly social spaces like women's music festivals and feminist coffeehouses that spotlighted feminist comedy during these years, as well as other venues that featured more dynamic feminist activism such as grassroots political organizations, women's health clinics, or domestic violence shelters.[6] Nevertheless, the comedy club holds particular value for its unique role in the 1980s zeitgeist. At the end of the 1970s, stand-up comedy began to rise to new heights of popularity in the United States, a trend soon reflected by scores of new comedy clubs. Jon Fox, publisher of the "Just for Laughs" newsletter for club managers, claimed that the number of comedy clubs in the nation grew from approximately 50-75 in 1983 to over 200 in 1986, in addition to about 1000 clubs that featured comedy occasionally.[7] The Comedy U.S.A. Industry Guide put the number of full-time comedy clubs at over 400 by 1992, likely its peak.[8] Spending an evening at a comedy club became a more commonplace leisure activity than at any point in the nation's history. The rise of

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[6] See Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
[7] Thomas Morgan, "Comedy Finds a New Niche in Cable," *The New York Times*, October 13, 1986, sec. Sports Monday. Other estimates put the number of comedy clubs at over 300 at its peak. See Wayne Federman, "Ep. 04: The 1980's Comedy Boom," Oct. 9, 2018, in *The History of Stand-Up*, podcast, MP3 audio, 40:40, https://www.thehistoryofstandup.com/s01/04-the-1980s-comedy-boom.
[8] Stephen Holden, "Audiences Are Laughing, but Performers Find That More Isn't Merrier.: Serious Business of Comedy: Too Much of a Good Thing The Macho Energy of the 80's Has given Way to a Cautious Tone.," *The New York Times*, June 12, 1992, sec. Weekend.

comics like Eddie Murphy, who crossed over from stand-up success to film and television superstardom, led to a rapid increase in the number of people trying to make it comedy. *The New York Times* estimated in 1985 that the ranks of stand-up comics in the city had increased tenfold over the past decade. Caroline Hirsch, the owner of the prominent "Caroline's" comedy club in New York City, summarized the moment in comedy simply: "It is the rock of the 80's."[9]

The birth of cable television in the 1970s, especially premium channels like HBO, Cinemax, and Showtime that sought to fill hours of programming with stand-up, further facilitated comedy's cultural ascendance.[10] In 1980, HBO and Cinemax (under shared ownership) featured seven comedy programs. By 1986, that number had risen to 36. The low production costs of stand-up relative to other original programming like a sitcom or film initially drew the upstart cable networks to the medium. Comics appreciated the additional opportunities for recognition that cable networks provided, as well as the greater freedom they enjoyed on channels that did not prohibit swear words or racy subject matter.[11] The growing popularity of stand-up helped HBO and Showtime establish themselves and, by the end of the 1980s, the networks were in stiff competition to attract the hottest comic talent. In addition to individual specials from those at the top of the field, cable television also offered a variety of shows that highlighted the work of club comics across the country. Such programs included *An Evening at the Improv* (1981-1996), *One Night Stand* (1989-1992), *Improv Tonite* (1988), and *Comedy Club*

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[9] Stephen Holden, "NEW BREED OF STAND- UP COMICS IN THE CLUBS," *The New York Times*, January 31, 1985, sec. Arts, http://www.nytimes.com/1985/01/31/arts/new-breed-of-stand-up-comics-in-the-clubs.html.

[10] Fred Ferretti, "NEW BREED OF STAND-UP COMICS," *The New York Times*, December 5, 1982, sec. Magazine, http://www.nytimes.com/1982/12/05/magazine/new-breed-of-stand-up-comics.html. HBO was founded in 1972 by Time Inc. and Viacom established Showtime in 1976. HBO launched Cinemax as a companion channel in 1980.

[11] Morgan, "Comedy Finds a New Niche in Cable," *The New York Times*, October 13, 1986, sec. Sports Monday.

Network (1987-1994), among others.[12] The sets analyzed in this chapter largely come from these shows, along with individual comics' specials and albums. Such sets usually represented the comic's signature bits and most carefully-honed material.

In the quickly growing comedy scene across the country, more female comics got the opportunity to perform than ever before, though they were still a very small minority in the field. As the ranks of stand-ups swelled, reports estimated that women came to make up approximately 6-10% of the population.[13] The work of earlier feminist comics contributed to the increased confidence of this small-but-rising number of women pursuing stand-up. In 1981, comic Emily Levine told critic Lawrence Christon that Lily Tomlin and the broader feminist movement had given her and her peers "a revised view of comedy as an outlet for their views and experiences." She continued, "now that comedy is becoming a recognizable form in itself, and with the opening of more clubs and the development of cable TV, it's given us an arena where we can be in charge."[14] Still, as club owner Hirsch was quick to point out, significant challenges remained for women in comedy: "although there are an increasing number of women comics, it's still harder for them to make in the field than it is for men."[15] Thus, while female club comics used

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[12] Donna Coe, "A Big Lift for Rising Stars: HBO and SHOWTIME Vie for Talent Exclusives," *Comedy USA*, Spring 1989, 42. John Kiernan Collection of Comedy Materials, Box 2, Folder 3. *T-Mss 1994-020. Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. By 1990 approximately 53 million households subscribed to cable, which accounted for 57% of homes with televisions at the time. Premium channels like HBO and Showtime reached smaller numbers, but they were growing in subscribers during this time. See "Cable's Story," The Internet & Television Association, https://www.ncta.com/cables-story.

[13] Holden, "NEW BREED OF STAND- UP COMICS IN THE CLUBS," *The New York Times*, January 31, 1985.
Betty Liddick, "Women in Comedy: No Laughing Matter: 'Performers Defeminize Themselves to Be Funny,'" *Los Angeles Times*, August 7, 1977, sec. PART V.

[14] Lawrence Christon, "The Comedy Column: A Standout as a Stand-up Feminist," *Los Angeles Times*, March 8, 1981, sec. CALENDAR.

[15] Holden, "NEW BREED OF STAND- UP COMICS IN THE CLUBS," *The New York Times*, January 31, 1985.

their authority onstage to articulate their takes on the world around them, the politicized content of their comedy (whether it be feminist, leftist, populist, etc.) was mediated by a variety of factors. Club comics wanted to earn laughs, ticket sales, and, above all, fame, so it was necessary for them to make strategic choices to achieve those ends. The ways in which they balanced the competing tensions of self-expression and audience and industry appeal shed light on the historical moment in which they created their content: one characterized by a persistent, though indirect, feminist discourse.

The peak years of stand-up's popularity in American culture coincided with the years generally thought to represent the greatest backlash against feminism in the twentieth century, the marked decline in feminist identification and activism that occurred between the so-called second and third waves of feminism. While women's liberation no longer dominated the headlines the way it had in years prior, this period was still characterized by a new terrain of gender relations that resulted from the significant structural changes the movement had wrought. Following the legalization of abortion and loosening of contraption restrictions, the federal prohibition against sex-based employment discrimination, and the spike in divorce rates in the 1970s, these years saw a rapid transformation in social and professional relations between the sexes and the nuclear family structure in which those relations had previously been presumed contained.[16]

It was not merely that comedy was an industry created almost entirely by and for men that made clubs and television an unwelcoming environment for feminist discourse. In the early

[16] Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy since the 1960s*, First edition. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 328-338. See also: Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group), 2008.

1970s, national attitudes shifted from predominately negative to generally favorable for the women's movement, but these numbers declined again in the mid-1980s and further, public opinion grew increasingly antagonistic toward feminists compared with the women's movement as a whole. By 1992, women rated their feelings for feminists on average as ten degrees cooler than their feelings for the movement as a whole on the National Election Studies' "feelings thermometer" poll, while men rated their feelings for feminists as 6-7 degrees cooler than for the movement.[17] So not only were the women comics in 1980s comedy clubs a minority, they were embedded in a culture that was growing less and less receptive to explicit reckonings with the goals of the women's liberation movement, and even more acutely, with the proponents of feminism themselves. Comedy clubs in this period were thus not ideal spaces in which to make "feminist" a central component of one's identity on stage.

In fact, beyond eschewing the feminist label, female club comics were sometimes unwilling to acknowledge their gender at all while offstage. The challenges female comics faced in the industry made some of them reluctant to draw greater attention to their outsider status. Elayne Boosler and Sandra Bernhard, for example, declined to do press that centered on their experiences as female comics. This decision meant missing out on a number of feature articles that highlighted the growing number of female stand-ups.[18] And when impresario Mitzi Shore, owner of the famed Comedy Store in Los Angeles, announced in 1978 that she was opening a

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[17] Leonie Huddy, Francis K. Neely, and Marilyn R. Lafay, "Trends: Support for the Women's Movement," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2000): 311. Historian Robert O. Self similarly summarized the post-1980 period, citing the ascendancy of the New Right and its victory in putting feminists and other liberals on the defensive in the national political discourse. Self, *All in the Family*, 369.
[18] Phil Berger, "THE NEW COMEDIENNES," *The New York Times*, July 29, 1984, sec. Magazine, http://www.nytimes.com/1984/07/29/magazine/the-new-comediennes.html. See also Beth Ann Krier, "The Unfunny Struggle of Some Aspiring Comediennes," *Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 1985, http://articles.latimes.com/1985-03-20/news/vw-22840_1_women-comics.

new room just for female stand-ups (cheekily dubbed "The Belly Room"), Boosler and fellow comic Marsha Warfield immediately balked at the idea of performing in what they saw as a ghettoized space.[19]

There was logic to creating a space like The Belly Room, given the severe constraints imposed on female comics by both comedy producers and consumers. While Shore's Comedy Store functioned as a stepping stone to television success via a set on NBC's *The Tonight Show*, that opportunity was available almost exclusively to male comics, as host Johnny Carson was publicly known to be uncomfortable with female comics and rarely featured them.[20] Female stand-ups also faced fewer booking opportunities at the club level simply because of their sex. Comic Carol Leifer described the refusal of many club owners to put two female comics on stage back-to-back (never a consideration for male comics), "like it's some old vaudeville rule about not having two monkey acts without a magician in between."[21] *Chicago Tribune* entertainment writer Rick Kogan put it another way: "Club owners would start giving away liquor before

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[19] Kohen, *We Killed*, 134-135. The Belly Room had a short life span (it closed in 1979, though it has reopened periodically in the years since) and left a polarized legacy. Some comics were grateful for the space it offered women to work out new material and bend the rules of club comedy. Whoopi Goldberg, for example, enjoyed testing out her hour-plus shows in the Belly Room, an opportunity she would not have had in the club's other rooms. But many women pointed to the disadvantageous set up of the space: audience members in the already-small room were frequently waiting for seats to open up in the main rooms, which meant that Belly Room performers would be interrupted when staff came in to alert guests that space had become available downstairs.

[20] Such opportunities were available to male comics, such as Jay Leno, Garry Shandling, and Freddie Prinze. However, Johnny Carson was notoriously unwelcoming to female comics and rarely booked them. See Berger, "THE NEW COMEDIENNES," *The New York Times*, July 29, 1984; and Kohen, *We Killed*, 142-147. Lawrence Christon, "SHE DOESN'T MAKE IT EASY: Diane Ford's Sly, Earthy Humor Arid Outspoken Style Make the Boys' Club of Stand-up Comedy a Bit Uncomfortable," *Los Angeles Times*, January 27, 1991, sec. Calendar.

[21] Chuck Crisafulli, "Women a Comedy Force? No Joke," *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 1993, sec. Orange County.

they'd put two women on the same bill."[22] Comic Diane Ford recounted her experiences touring the burgeoning club circuit in the late 1970s: "It was horrible. It was a war zone. I was the only one for years who was traveling and the club owners, and other comics were so mean to me. Not all of them, but there were quite a few bad apples in those days. They just didn't like the idea of a woman comedian."[23]

The hostility toward women in mainstream comedy during the boom years was not limited to those who dared step on stage. Several of the most popular comics of the era were known for their overtly sexist material. Comic Eddie Murphy epitomized the heights of success for a stand-up during the boom years: he was a stand-out performer on *Saturday Night Live* from 1980-1984; he starred in several blockbuster films; and he recorded two comedy specials, *Delirious* (1983) and *Raw* (1987), the latter of which he released as a motion picture that became the most financially successful comedy special of all time.[24] Filled with his criticisms of fortune-seeking women, sexually-withholding women, and unattractive women, the *New York Times* called *Raw* a "primer on misogyny." Comic Andrew Dice Clay rose to national fame in 1988 with sets that described graphic and violent sexual encounters with women and routinely referred to women as "pigs," and "chopped meat."[25] At the height of his fame in the early 1990s, Clay sold out stadiums like the Forum in Los Angeles and Madison Square Garden, released top-

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[22] Rick Kogan, "Women Comics Deliver Laughs with Style and Substance," *Chicago Tribune*, July 25, 1988, sec. Section 2.
[23] Dennis McLellan, "SHE IS WOMAN, HEAR THEM ROAR: Diane Ford Was Out There On the Floor When Bawdy Language Was a Man's Domain," *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 1991, sec. Orange County.
[24] Federman, "Ep. 04: The 1980's Comedy Boom," Oct. 9, 2018, in *The History of Stand-Up*, podcast, MP3 audio, 40:40, https://www.thehistoryofstandup.com/s01/04-the-1980s-comedy-boom.
[25] Philip Van Munching, "No Dice for Saturday Night," *The New York Times*, 1990, sec. The Arts.

selling comedy albums, and acted in an array of Hollywood films. In 1990, *Saturday Night Live* cast member Nora Dunn made headlines by walking off the show rather than participate the week he guest-hosted, a boycott soon joined by the episode's musical guest, Sinead O'Connor.[26] Clay and Murphy, along with other top comics like Sam Kinison, garnered accusations of homophobia and xenophobia as well. While controversy followed all of them, their financial success, industry acclaim, and, in the case of Kinison, celebrity-filled memorial after his sudden death in 1992, demonstrate the acceptance and admiration they nonetheless experienced in mainstream comedy in these years.[27]

"We have to write actual jokes!"

Performing at the Improv in Los Angeles in 1990, comic Anita Wise used her gentle, high voice and demure manner to surprise the club's audience with some sharp observations about the different experiences of men and women. She lamented that the burden of birth control fell solely on women and called for men to do their fair share. "They should invent something for you guys. …Nothing complicated, god forbid." After this line got a big laugh she continued, "You know yourselves. Something easy to use. Contraceptive beer. Something we women could be sure you were taking." The notion of contraceptive beer hit hard with the audience, even eliciting applause from Improv owner Budd Friedman. Then she pivoted to her wish that men would take their time when making love, particularly "that time up front." "Really, guys don't

[26] Patrick Goldstein, "Andrew Dice Clay: To Brooklyn in Search of the Real Is This the Only Woman in America in Love with This Man? In Search of the Real Andrew Dice Clav If We Are to Believe Him, the Diceman Is Just a Character, and He Is Really a Sweet, Sensitive Guy from Brooklyn," *Los Angeles Times*, June 3, 1990, sec. Calender.
[27] Rick Vanderknyff, "O.C. COMEDY REVIEW: It's a Far Cry From Sobbing: Tears Aren't on the Lineup at Sam Kinison Tribute Taped in Anaheim, Where Comics Irreverently Honor Their Outrageous Colleague.," *Los Angeles Times*, September 5, 1992, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-09-05-ca-5616-story.html.

realize that women need that time to warm up. I don't know why not, because a guy is the first person to tell you not to gun a cold engine. They want us to go from zero to sixty in 5.5, we're not built like that. We stall."[28]

Here, Wise blended several styles of humor in order to communicate her dissatisfaction with female-specific aspects of her sexual experiences. A soft insult targeted at men; the silliness of the image of beer that prevented pregnancy; the clever comparison between arousal and auto mechanics. She paired these rhetorical choices with the stereotypical image of a man lecturing a woman about car maintenance and with her own unexpectedly bold plea for sexual satisfaction. The intricate makeup of this joke set exemplifies the kind of push and pull that Wise and her peers offered up to audiences at comedy clubs around the country when exploring what might be stand-up's deepest well of material, the differences between men and women.

Other comics were more concise when noting how men and women behave differently. In order to prove her point, comic Monica Piper would choose a man from the audience and speak directly to him: "Men and women are so different…you sir, you choose to grow hair in places that I would spend a thousand bucks to have ripped right off my face!"[29] She mined laughs from the juxtaposition of beauty standards for men and women, while also acknowledging the costly and painful lengths to which many women would go achieve them.

Elayne Boosler spoke of the stark distinctions she noticed between men and women during her televised set on A&E's *An Evening at the Improv*. She did so both with quick jabs ("If women get upset, we eat or go shopping. If men get upset, they attack a country. It's a whole other way of thinking,") as well as carefully-constructed elaborations.[30] In an extended bit in the

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[28] *An Evening at the Improv*, season 5, episode 25, Aired on June 16, 1990.
[29] *An Evening at the Improv*, season 3, episode 14, Aired on August 5, 1988.
[30] *Elayne Boosler: Party of One*, directed by Steve Gerbson, Showtime, 1986.

middle of her 1987 Showtime special, *Broadway Baby*, she contrasted the various "genes" that each sex is lacking (the clothes shopping gene, the jump-up-and-touch-the-awning gene, the buy-stupid-useless-items-at-the-drugstore gene), culminating by praising men for the confidence they have in their appearance. "I think a man looks at his face when he's 13 years old and he says, 'well, this is my face, I'll shave it.' Not women. Women have medicine cabinets of broken dreams." She continued, impersonating women delusional in their beliefs that the next cream they buy will make them taller, or even gentile.[31] Once more, Boosler both luxuriated in gender stereotypes (she claimed, for instance, that shopping traits are so firmly entrenched that when she teases men for saying "But I already have a pair of black pants" that they won't understand the joke and that women will have to explain it during the car ride home) while calling attention to the disparate impact those stereotypes often had on women, both financially and emotionally.

Boosler looked beyond everyday differences between men and women when she focused her sights on her male colleagues in comedy. She opened her 1989 Showtime special with a self-aware scene about her struggle to reach the next level of success in entertainment: the movies. She complains to her producers, director, and manager that only male comics are able to break into the film industry, which gave her the idea to mimic their style of comedy: "I could put the word 'dick' in my act 10,000 times," she tells her team. They react with horror, warning her against the vulgarity, telling her that it is harder for women in comedy. "Yeah, we don't have penises to dwell on," she replies. "We have to write actual jokes!"[32] Here we see some of Boosler's most direct and cutting social commentary. Her frustrations with the industry were

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[31] *Elayne Boosler: Broadway Baby*, directed by Steve Gerbson, Showtime, 1987.
[32] *Elayne Boosler: Top Tomata*, directed by Steve Gerbson, Showtime, 1989.

numerous at this point, even as she was widely considered the preeminent female stand-up of the period.

Boosler's career obstacles were significant, and not unrecognized within the field. A Jewish Brooklynite, she began doing stand-up in the early 1970s after initially working at The Improv as a waitress. She got her start alongside future stars like Andy Kaufman, Richard Lewis, and Richard Belzer.[33] Lewis told *The New York Times* in 1984 about Boosler's accomplishment in breaking into the ranks of male stand-ups: "She was the Jackie Robinson of my generation. She was the strongest female working. She broke the mold for most female comics."[34] Future fellow comic Joanne Astrow echoed this sentiment, noting that in the mid-1970s Boosler was, "the *queen* of New York comedy—first of all because she was the only one."[35] Despite frequently being hailed as the next big success, Boosler could not achieve the same feats as her male peers. She booked her first spot on *The Tonight Show* only when singer/actress Helen Reddy guest-hosted in 1977. Later that year she performed on the show when Johnny Carson was hosting, but the production team assigned her writers that fed her hacky, self-deprecating material she refused to use. Afterward, Carson supposedly told his comedy booker, "I don't ever want to see that waitress on my show again."[36]

Boosler continued to make a living on the road, playing clubs across the country. But after touring for twelve years, she still couldn't get a cable special of her own – neither HBO nor Showtime would hire her. While the men she came up with were on their second specials, no female comic had filmed even one yet. So Boosler decided to produce her own. She self-

[33] Kohen, *We Killed*, 119-122.
[34] Berger, "THE NEW COMEDIENNES," *The New York Times*, July 29, 1984
[35] Kohen, *We Killed*, 120.
[36] Kohen, *We Killed*, 145-147.

financed it with her life's savings, and made deals with crewmembers that they would get paid when she was able to sell the special. In 1985, she filmed *Elayne Boosler: Party of One*, but it sat untouched for over a year. In it, Boosler spoke openly about the premium channels' refusal to offer her a special. She claims executives told her that her material about *Playboy* and the fact that she touches her breast onstage were inappropriate. Her response commented wryly on the unequal bar to which they held her, due to her sex: "I watched Eddie Murphy and Richard Pryor and Robin Williams's cable specials and I realized, no wonder I can't get a special…I'm holding the wrong thing!"[37]

Eventually, new management took over at Showtime and, according to Boosler, the special aired in 1986 only because one executive's wife pressured him to buy it. *Party of One* garnered positive reviews and won immediate acclaim. It speaks to the level of intransigence Boosler faced that despite her track record as a successful touring comic and the quality of the special she produced, she still required the lucky break of a male executive deferring to his wife's opinion in order to reach this standard milestone for a comic at her level. Boosler went on to produce three more specials for Showtime in the next five years (all of which she retained the ownership rights to, unusually enough, because she self-produced the first one). *Party of One*'s success motivated HBO to order a new stand-up show called, "Women of the Night." Still, rather than give each female comic a one-hour special, the show split each episode into 15-minute sets by four different comics.[38]

Key to *Party of One's* success was the nuanced nature of Boosler's approach as a female comic discussing women's issues. John J. O'Connor, the *New York Times* reviewer, wrote, "If

[37] *Elayne Boosler: Party of One*, directed by Steve Gerbson, Showtime, 1986.
[38] *Elayne Boosler: Party of One*, directed by Steve Gerbson, Showtime, 1986.

the Boosler character is sharp, independent and occasionally scathing, she is not abrasive." O'Connor's assurance that Boosler's act is not abrasive evinces the fine line a female club comic had to walk in order to succeed – incisive, but not *too* aggressive. He contrasted her performance with the self-deprecating and exaggeratedly unattractive acts of Phyllis Diller, Joan Rivers, and Totie Fields: "Ms. Boosler, a handsome, confident woman, simply picks up a microphone and tells funny stories. There are no unnecessary frills." Boosler seemingly walked a difficult tightrope. She was neither grotesquely self-demeaning nor threateningly assertive. In this way, she differed from both her predecessors in mainstream comedy venues, and her contemporaries in the niche feminist comedy circuit. O'Connor's review quotes Boosler's contention that she doesn't do a feminist act, that she's a human being trapped in a woman's body.[39] But that quote must be understood in its proper context: the act in question, her first comedy special, only existed because Boosler took the initiative to produce and sell a product that had been rejected by industry standard-bearers solely because of her sex. While feminist advocacy was not the driving force behind her material, producing the special was, nonetheless, a feminist action.

"I want a man in my life, but not in my house."

Many of the female comics on the club circuit during the boom years were single or divorced, biographical details they incorporated into their acts. Boosler named her aforementioned special *Party of One* as a reference to her displeasure at the way restaurants treated customers who dined alone. Lizz Winstead, who would go on to co-create *The Daily Show* on Comedy Central, often opened her sets by noting that she studied philosophy in college. "I think, therefore I'm single," she quipped. She explained that she was happy to be single after

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[39] John J. O'Connor, "2 Comedy Programs, on HBO and Showtime," *The New York Times*, October 7, 1986, sec. Arts, https://www.nytimes.com/1986/10/07/arts/2-comedy-programs-on-hbo-and-showtime.html.

getting out of a three-year relationship: "I'm on the road with this job about six months out of the year and this guy tells me he needs some space. Aw, you need some space sweetheart? Strap yourself to a fuckin' MX missile."[40] These lines warmed the audience to her, demonstrating that she was interested in finding a long-term male partner, but they also offered a sharper edge that made it clear she felt men were failing her, not the other way around.

Several comics described the plight of single women looking for men who wouldn't fear commitment. Cathy Ladman, for instance, joked that all the men she met thought that monogamy was a game by Milton Bradley.[41] But others went further, juxtaposing the struggle to find a committed partner with other challenges unique to single women. Rita Rudner claimed that the best way to ensure a man would never bother her again was to tell him that she loved him, that she wanted to marry him and have his children. "Sometimes they make skid marks."[42] Boosler, in mocking magazines for advising women to hold their keys between their fingers as a security measure when walking to their cars at night, suggested that instead women hold up their keys and yell "commitment!"[43] These jokes relied on the cliché that heterosexual women desire monogamy while heterosexual men attempt to avoid it all costs, but they also gestured toward the real threats that men could pose toward women – unwanted and unceasing attention as well as physical harm. In this way, the jokes functioned on more than one level as commentary on the myriad challenges of modern dating for straight women. The mediated nature of this material comes into stark relief when we compare it with that found on the feminist comedy circuit in the same era. There, lesbian relationships were the norm, and comics needn't fear alienating their

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[40] *On Location: Women of the Night 2*, Directed by Ellen Brown, HBO, May 21, 1988.
[41] *An Evening at the Improv*, season 5, episode 24, Aired on June 9, 1990.
[42] Berger, "THE NEW COMEDIENNES," *The New York Times*, July 29, 1984.
[43] *Elayne Boosler: Broadway Baby*, directed by Steve Gerbson, Showtime, 1987.

audiences when discussing the threats that men, and patriarchal society more broadly, presented for women.

Club comics' frustrations with life as unpartnered women were not limited to grievances about dating. Boosler also dealt with the indignities of singledom for women, particularly as she passed 30 without marrying. In 1986's *Party of One*, (filmed when she was 32) she told the audience, "I've never been married. I only say I've been divorced so people won't think there's something wrong with me." Later, she spoke of the demoralizing experience of preparing Campbell's soup for one. "They tried, but they really rub it in. You pick it up, is says, 'Directions: Heat it up. Don't heat it up. Who gives a shit, you're alone."[44] In her next special, she told of her confusion over her car insurance rates going up. "I've never had a ticket, never had an accident. 34 years old, my insurance goes up…Know why it went up? 'Cause I'm single. 'Cause I'm single. Like I have nothing to live for. There's a cliff, what the hell?"[45] These jokes all evoked ridiculous images in the minds of the audience – divorce as an enviable characteristic, aggressive cooking directions, singledom as tantamount to suicidal ideation – while also articulating a plea for acceptance. Boosler made it clear that she does not see herself as a pitiable creature because she is unmarried, rather it is society that treats her as such. In illustrating that notion through extreme example, she highlighted its absurdity and undercut its validity.

Boosler's fellow women comics also took aim at the standards of femininity in American culture, both implicit and explicit. New York City comic Joy Behar was featured on HBO's *Women of the Night 2* in 1988. There she argued that the best time to be a woman was the seventeenth century, when Peter Paul Reubens was a painter. "In those days two, three-hundred

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[44] *Elayne Boosler: Party of One*, directed by Steve Gerbson, Showtime, 1986.
[45] *Elayne Boosler: Broadway Baby*, directed by Steve Gerbson, Showtime, 1987.

pounds and the men would kill themselves for you. Just think of this, girls. Imagine knowing that eating an entire pizza could actually *enhance* your appearance!" The crowd laughed and cheered at this notion, unsurprisingly. Later in the act she mentioned the oft-cited statistic that a woman her age (over 40) has the same odds of getting married as she does of getting kidnapped by terrorists. "For me, those two things are equal…I want a man in my life, but not in my house…What do I need him there all day long for? I have no time for a man, I'd have to put Nair on my upper lip - I'm a very busy woman…Just come in, attach the VCR, and get out!"[46] This bit evoked a wide smile from Behar; it appeared she was genuinely entertained by the thought. In both instances here, Behar referenced social dictates for proper female behavior – a strictly-regulated diet to maintain one's figure and a desire to attract a man to marry – and reoriented them to suit her own desires.

Yet Behar was careful not to go too far, lest she lose the audience's sympathies. She soon broached the confusion she sensed among men in the wake of the feminist movement. "I'm a feminist," she said, and then clarified: "I'm not a radical feminist. I don't belch in front of men. I'd like to, I really would, but I don't. And I wear a brassiere. Which has nothing to do with politics, it's got more to do with Newton's laws of physics at this point."[47] By trivializing radical feminism in this joke, Behar reassured the audience (both in the theater and watching at home) that while she may critique female beauty standards and feel confident in her independence, she does not align herself with the extreme wings of the feminist movement, those who seemingly want to fundamentally upend relations between the sexes.

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[46] *On Location: Women of the Night 2*, Directed by Ellen Brown, HBO, May 21, 1988.
[47] *On Location: Women of the Night 2*, Directed by Ellen Brown, HBO, May 21, 1988.

Monica Piper took issue with feminine hygiene product advertising in her 1988 set at the Improv in Los Angeles. In describing the rules of the "civilized society" in which we all live, she wryly noted, "This is a society that tells me that pantyliners will give me confidence." She paused for laughs before continuing, "I think they're partly right. I think pantyliners and one hundred grand in an IRA account will *just* about do it."[48] In another set she claimed that men hate how long it takes women to get ready to leave the house. "But there's a good reason for it, and you should learn it now, okay? Natural beauty takes [and here her voice changes from quiet and gentle to loud and gruff] TIME AND MONEY." Men can get ready in five minutes [she compared them to dogs shaking off water as they get out of the shower] but if women are rushed, they'll end up looking ridiculous and unattractive.[49] Piper made sure to acknowledge the financial realities of her experience as a woman (one she assumed female audience members all shared with her) even if, as in the latter instance, she did not ultimately question the burden they imposed.

Diane Ford found reliable laughs in gendered stereotypes about sports and shopping: "Men don't understand how to seduce women. Really all they ever had to do was just walk up behind them and whisper in their ears, '75% off.' We stop like a deer in headlights." But in the midst of this "women love to shop" material she also attacked beauty standards with surprising frankness. "The worst thing to shop for is bathing suits. I hate bathing suits. I don't know why we can't all be shaped like the 18-year-old boys they design 'em for."[50] Her closing joke for a later set honed in on the different messages fed to men and women by popular magazines. Women's magazines, Ford claimed, were preoccupied with men's interest: "If he loses his

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[48] *An Evening at the Improv*, season 3, episode 14, Aired on Aug. 5, 1988.
[49] *Comedy Club Network*, season 10, episode 4, ~1989-1990.
[50] *An Evening at the Improv*, season 4, episode 7, Aired on Feb. 17, 1989.

interest, do this to keep his interest, be this to keep his interest." She then pointed out that men's magazines are never concerned with sparking women's interest. "Men's magazines just have articles like 'Bag 'em, trap 'em or marry 'em. We'll show you where to find the right license.'"[51] Ford contrasted the emotional energy the media instructed women to expend on men with the objectification they could expect to receive in turn, an acknowledgement that functioned as incisive critique of unequal standards.

Lotus Weinstock delved even further into gender prescriptions, basing the majority of her 1991 Improv set off a *National Enquirer* article titled, "How to Use Body Signals a Man Can't Resist." Supposedly authored by three academic experts, it outlined the ten gestures and mannerisms that would communicate a woman's interest in a man and ensure his reciprocal attraction. Weinstock, of course, demonstrated each gesture (keeping an open palm toward him, licking her lips, etc.), exaggerating them wildly and adding each new one atop the previous to the point of absurdity. The crowd loved it.[52] Weinstock particularly relished incorporating the absurd into her act. A decade earlier on the stand-up show *The Comedy Shop*, Weinstock mentioned a report she read that "career women" were susceptible to stress and could develop extra body hair as a result. She brushed off the report as nonsense, while revealing her lower leg to be covered in fur. After getting her laugh she admitted to the crowd that it was fake, but claimed that she lived in a high-crime area of Los Angeles and the leg fur helped deter against rape and other assaults.[53] In each of these examples, the silliness with which Weinstock imbued her commentary made it palatable to audiences who may not have otherwise sympathized with her critique. Underneath

[51] *An Evening at the Improv*, season 7, episode 16, Aired on April 13, 1991.
[52] *An Evening at the Improv*, season 7, episode 13, Aired on March 23, 1991.
[53] *The Comedy Shop*, season 3, episode 7, Aired on Nov. 1, 1980.

the ridiculous gestures and props, Weinstock drew attention to the impossible demands and real dangers she felt women too often encountered.

"Some people say I have a dirty act…Fuck 'em."

Joanne Astrow's 1988 set at the Improv mostly featured jokes about her twenty-year marriage: in LA it's a miracle to be married for that long, in San Francisco it's a felony. But she concluded her set with a question: "Is there any woman in this audience who has found her G-spot? And if so, would she show it to us? Because I don't believe it exists. I think they made it up just to make us crazier. One more thing to feel inadequate about."[54] With this claim, Astrow conveyed that while she supported the idea of women's sexual pleasure, she also understood it as one more aspect of life in which gender norms could serve to burden women.

Astrow's suspicion that the G-spot didn't actually exist is notable for this reason alone, but the openness with which she spoke of female sexuality on the stage points to another way in which female club comics integrated feminist sentiments into their acts: blue material. Like the "blue bawds" before them (Sophie Tucker, Totie Fields, Belle Barth, Moms Mabley), these comics featured crude, sexual, and suggestive material in order to titillate and amuse their audiences. But unlike their predecessors, female club comics did not generally make it the main substance of their act. The sporadic nature of the blue material rendered it even more shocking to audiences when they did wield it. For example, when appearing on *Women of the Night 2* on HBO, Ford primarily devoted her act to jokes about divorce and insipid advertising. But at the end of her time on stage she told of how her new husband complained that her tendency to sit in her underwear, drink beer, and watch football was not ladylike: "I tell him, neither is a blow job

[54] *An Evening at the Improv*, season 3, episode 12, Aired on July 22, 1988.

and you don't complain about that."[55] The audience rewarded this cheek with applause and cheers, in addition to laughs.

Boosler favored more suggestive material, rather than outright vulgarity, in her act. She famously quipped about the sexual double standard: "Men want you to scream, 'You're the best,' while swearing you've never done this with anyone before."[56] But she was not loath to be frank when the premise called for it. In *Party of One* she griped that the movies bored her ("I don't want to see Matt Dillon trying to get laid for the first time *again*,") that sex scenes always had a stark-naked woman and a man in a three-piece suit. "Only time you ever see a penis in the movie is if a pervert sits down next to you."[57]

The female club comic best known for her blue material in these years was Marsha Warfield. One of the few Black women to achieve acclaim as a stand-up in this period, she later became best known for her role as Roz, the bailiff on NBC's hit show *Night Court*, which ran from 1986-1992. A native of the South Side of Chicago, where she got her start in amateur nights, she moved to Los Angeles at the age of 21 in 1975. She was an immediate success at The Comedy Store, her status there secured after Jay Leno and David Letterman praised her act.[58] Warfield seemed to derive great joy from shocking audiences with her bawdiness. She frequently closed her sets with the pithy, "Some people say I have a dirty act…Fuck 'em."[59]

One of her classic bits concerned her affinity for masturbation. "I was excited to learn that women could have orgasms," she claimed. "And I realized that orgasm is right at your

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[55] *On Location: Women of the Night 2*, Directed by Ellen Brown, HBO, May 21, 1988. *Women of the Night 2*, HBO, 1988.
[56] Kohen, *We Killed*, 121.
[57] *Elayne Boosler: Party of One*, directed by Steve Gerbson, Showtime, 1986.
[58] Kohen, *We Killed*, 133.
[59] Marsha Warfield, "Marsha Warfield from Night Court LIVE in San Francisco (1987)," https://www.marshawarfield.com/about.

fingertips." She let the joke sink in and reveled in the growing laughs and whistles from the audience. "Now don't think that I do that a lot. But if I had a baby, it would look just like me."[60] Of course, the social dictates concerning proper female behavior were different for Warfield as a Black woman. Whereas white female comics could simply shock audiences by deviating from their presumed chasteness and virtue, Warfield had to contend with the pervasive "Jezebel" stereotype that deemed Black women overly sexual and promiscuous. But Warfield had a comedic predecessor who carved a path for her with regard to subverting that stereotype.

Jackie "Moms" Mabley, one of the most prominent African-American comics of the early and mid-twentieth century and certainly the most successful female African-American comic of that period, similarly sought to shock and amuse audiences with her ribald repertoire. But she cloaked herself in colorful housedresses and hats that made her appear elderly (until she eventually aged into the character) so as to neutralize the potency of her act. The link between the two performers is clearest when looking at how Warfield gave new expression to Mabley's most well-known joke, "Old man can't do nothin' for me but bring me a message a young one!"[61] Warfield took this joke from implicit to explicit when she told audiences, "Some people say old men are better…They have more endurance and can make love for longer. I say let's think about that for a second. Who wants to fuck an old man for a long time?"[62]

Warfield had a cleaner version of her act she brought out for occasions that required it. Between 1978 and 1980 she appeared multiple times on Norm Crosby's nationally syndicated

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[60] Warfield, "Marsha Warfield from Night Court LIVE in San Francisco (1987)," https://www.marshawarfield.com/about.
[61] Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock*. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 392.
[62] Warfield, "Marsha Warfield from Night Court LIVE in San Francisco (1987)," https://www.marshawarfield.com/about.

The Comedy Shop (1978-1983), an early stand-up show that featured several comics per episode along with celebrity guests, but did not allow lewd material or explicit language. There she joked about her childhood experiences in Chicago public schools and the Baptist church, her relationship with her mother, and her preferences in men (a concession to the times, it would appear, as she publicly identified as a lesbian in 2017 after years of it being an open secret among those who knew her).[63] But it was her racier material combined with her self-assured style that truly characterized her stand-up, according to her peers. Fellow comic Roberta Kent said of Warfield's edge, "She had a bite to her, *whoa*, she had a bite to her." Merrill Markoe, another woman comic of the era, said "I wondered how she had the balls to be so aggressive and serene at the same time…she had this very unintimidated timing. She would deliver a punch line, and then just stand silently and *stare* at the audience deadpan. She would *wait* for them to laugh."[64]

Aside from her natural talent and the effort she put into developing her material and sense of timing, shifting trends in popular comedy also enabled Warfield to find success by playing blue. Whereas in past decades stand-up comedy had largely been divided between the racy style of "party albums" and the more family-friendly vaudevillian slapstick, those lines began to blur as comics like Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, and Richard Pryor achieved fame in the 1960s and 1970s. The comedy that then developed during the stand-up boom years did not have to concern itself with propriety as much as in previous eras, as it was mostly confined to adult-only comedy

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[63] *The Comedy Shop*, season 1, episode 4, Aired on Sept. 29, 1978; season 2, episode 14, Dec. 11, 1979; season 3, episode 11, Aired on Nov. 29, 1980. Wells, Veronica, "Comedian Marsha Warfield: My Mom Asked Me To Wait Until She Was Dead To Come Out," *MadameNoire.com*. Dec. 11, 2017. https://madamenoire.com/1008661/comedian-marsha-warfield-my-mother-asked-me-to-wait-until-she-was-dead-to-come-out-says-shes-not-mad-at-patti-labelle-for-outing-luther-vandross/

[64] Kohen, *We Killed*, 133-134.

clubs and premium cable television. But it still required immense courage on the part of Warfield to stand before white and Black audiences and make bold and brash statements like her takedown of "penis envy:" "I never met a woman that was jealous that she didn't have one. You can buy one!"[65]

Warfield's fellow African-American female comics were similarly unabashed in their stances toward social and political issues, particularly related to gender and race. Unlike the white women comics who couched their critiques in more palatable hijinks, Shirley Hemphill and Ellen Cleghorne were frank and forthright. Shirley Hemphill, best known for playing the waitress Shirley on ABC's *What's Happening!!* from 1976 to 1979, made her weight the focal point of her stand-up act, but not in a demeaning way.[66] She described the indignities of a doctor's appointment as a large woman – the gown that didn't fit, the examining table that's too small – but placed the blame on the medical establishment for failing to accommodate her body. Further, she made it known that the reason she was concerned about her physique in the first place was the connection between weight, hypertension, and race, and that after appearing on a hit television show she fully intended to "be alive to count every penny."[67]

Cleghorne, who would later join the cast of *Saturday Night Live* and appear on *Def Comedy Jam*, used her set at the Improv in 1991 to speak out against a sexual assault case in which the defendant was acquitted because the female victim was wearing a miniskirt (and thus "asking for it"). "So, ladies, next time there's a real ugly guy walking down the street – shoot him! He was asking for it! He knew he was ugly when he left the house."[68] Here, Cleghorne goes

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[65] Warfield, "Marsha Warfield from Night Court LIVE in San Francisco (1987)," https://www.marshawarfield.com/about.
[66] "Shirley Hemphill: A Star is Born," *Ebony* Vol. 35, No. 7, (May 1980), 93.
[67] *The Comedy Shop*, season 1, episode 18, Aired on Jan. 5, 1979.
[68] *An Evening at the Improv*, season 7, episode 26, Aired on June 22, 1991.

further than Boosler in the joke that opens this chapter. Rather than merely lament that women are unfairly judged in sexual assault cases, Cleghorne advocates seeking revenge for this injustice.

Cleghorne's act also dealt openly with race: she spoke of flying first-class to tape an episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and imagining that everyone in first class was shocked to see a Black woman there ("she must be going to tape an episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*" she pictured them thinking). She told of her grandmother's ingrained colorism and her disappointment when Cleghorne began dating a man with darker skin than she: "it took a long time to get this color, now you gonna mess it up!" And she called out ways in which society treated Black and white women differently. After citing her college degrees in theater and anthropology she asked the audience: "Now why is that when they show a white woman's breasts on tv that's called pornography and when they show a black woman's breasts that's called anthropology?"[69]

HBO's *Def Comedy Jam* (1992-1997) epitomized Black stand-up comedy in the later part of the boom years. Russell Simmons created the show in an effort to provide a platform for young, Black stand-ups. He suspected that, like with rap music, Black comedy could find an audience among viewers of other races. Simmons was correct, and *Def Jam* set viewership records for HBO and spurred countless similar programs, while bringing dozens of unknown Black comics to television. It launched the careers of stars like Martin Lawrence, Mo'nique, and Bernie Mac. With roots in the African-American comic tradition, like that of the Chitlin' Circuit, comics' routines on *Def Jam* were often more explicit and boisterous than those on other cable shows or in non-Black comedy clubs (critics noted *Def Jam*'s "unabashed rawness and

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[69] *An Evening at the Improv*, season 7, episode 26, Aired on June 22, 1991.

profanity"), and included slang and references unfamiliar to non-Black audiences. They centered concerns of the African-American community, such as police brutality, the AIDS epidemic, and relations between Black men and Black women.[70]

As with all of mainstream comedy at the time, male comics significantly outnumbered female comics on *Def Jam*; the male-dominated nature of the atmosphere was apparent. Yet, the Black female club comics who performed on *Def Jam* were more candid about their independence and demands for respect than their peers in majority-white clubs. In an early *Def Jam* appearance, Laura Hayes told the audience about how her mother would dispatch her and her sisters whenever they caught one of their boyfriends cheating. She described them in joyful terms, presenting a unified front as they drove to confront the unfaithful man. But she brought the house down when she acted out what happened when they arrived at her baby sister's house and found the boyfriend about to take a swing at her. She rips off her wig, yells "Oh no, motherfucker, not today! God damn it! Fuck that!" and struts around the stage grabbing her crotch. The men and women in the audience "give it up" (stand up, cheer, offer high-fives) for Hayes after this move, one that combined the masculine crotch grab with the specifically Black, feminine wig removal, all of which served to illustrate the act of women saving their sister from violence at the hands of her partner. Still, this bit worked on multiple levels that audiences could interpret to their liking. One could understand Hayes's crotch grab alternatively as a move to

[70] Greg Braxton, "LAUGHZ N THE HOOD: Television: A Showcase for Unknown Black Comics, 'Russell Simmons' Def Comedy Jam' Begins Its Second Season Friday on HBO," *Los Angeles Times*, August 6, 1992, sec. San Diego County. Greg Braxton, "Has Black Comedy Been Beaten Blue?: 'Def Comedy Jam' Is a Hit--but with Some African American Comics Turning to Cable Shows That Limit the Raunchiness, Clean and Subtle Could Be the Wave of the Future," *Los Angeles Times*, February 20, 1994, sec. Calendar.

assimilate into the macho ethos of the *Def Jam* stage, a mockery of macho-posturing signals, or commentary on the unacknowledged similarity between masculine and feminine behaviors.[71]

After multiple appearances on *Def Jam*, comic Adele Givens went on to film her own HBO Comedy Half Hour special. In it, she confessed to the crowd: "I will always love you is a lie by a fake bitch. A real woman will tell you, 'I will love you until you fuck up.'" This bold declaration of female independence fit in with the truth-telling that she claimed to do on behalf of African Americans. At one point, Givens tells the white members of her audience that she's going to tell them some of Black people's secrets, though she makes sure to add, "Don't get nervous, Black people, I'm not gonna tell them the important shit." She also argued that white people and Black people need to get know each other, calling out residential white flight in the process: "I move in, you move out, don't do that. Stick around, get to know a bitch, I'm pretty cool!"[72] Givens, Hayes, and other female *Def Jam* comics, like the white female club comics, did not explicitly speak of feminism on stage, nor did they advocate for broad structural change to ease the oppression of women. The world of mainstream comedy, including *Def Jam*-type venues, stood in stark contrast with the performances in the avowedly feminist women's culture community. But these Black club comics did bring political matters like domestic violence and housing segregation to the stage, offering clever and assertive responses that did little to temper their bite. Such routines reflected the intersectional approach to social issues they derived from their identities as Black women.

Outside of *Def Jam*, female club comics from other marginalized backgrounds brought their experiences to bear in their comedy as well. Comic Geri Jewell dealt frankly with her

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[71] "Season 1, Episode 4," *Def Comedy Jam*, HBO, Aired on July 22, 1992.
[72] "S3 E9: HBO Comedy Half-Hour: Adele Givens," HBO, 1996.

experience with disability in her stand-up sets, but she made clear that it was but one facet of her life. Jewell was a young white woman who started performing stand-up in 1978 at The Comedy Store in Los Angeles. She is best remembered for her role as Cousin Geri on NBC's *Facts of Life* from 1980 to 1984, where she was the first person with a disability to have a regular role on a prime-time television series.[73] Born with cerebral palsy, Jewell struggled with slurred speech and involuntary movements while performing. But she dreamed of doing comedy from childhood – she even made a pen pal of her idol, Carol Burnett. Jewell told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1980 that the she placed a high value on using her voice professionally: "A lot of people with CP can't talk. I was very fortunate to be given the ability to speak. It's something I don't take for granted because it's a gift."[74]

Jewell used that voice to demonstrate to audiences the many ways in which she was no different from anyone else, as well as to educate them about the realities of living with cerebral palsy…to a point. At The Improv in 1992, Jewell opened her set by acknowledging her disability ("I move this way naturally, it's nothing you've been drinking,") but then pivoted, "If you don't know what CP is…this isn't a telethon, I'm not going to tell you." She told audiences of the importance of her hair looking just right ("it's the only part of my body I can control") and her romantic relationships ("Engaged means I can look but I can't touch, but that's really hard because this hand moves a lot.") She spoke openly of her sex life, that her fiancé would constantly ask her if she'd had an orgasm because of her movements: "Richard, if I have an orgasm, I'll tell you! And if you're not there, I'll leave you a message!"[75] Beyond mere

[73] Biography, https://gerijewell.com/bio/.
[74] John Boal, "Performing Comedy Is Her Therapy," *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 1980.
[75] *An Evening at the Improv*, season 9, episode 11, Aired on March 7, 1992.

entertainment, Jewell's act served as an assertive call for audiences to recognize the full extent of her life experience, including, but not limited to, her gender, her sexuality, and her disability.

Comic Roseanne Barr now has a long and complex legacy, but in the during the boom years she rose to the top of the comedy world by leveraging her identity as a white, working-class into a brash, original comic persona. While she didn't achieve Eddie Murphy or Steve Martin levels of fame, playing arenas and headlining films, she released her first comedy special in 1987, just a year after Elayne Boosler's *Party of One*, and the following year starred in her own sitcom, *Roseanne* (1988-1997), on ABC. Raised in Salt Lake City, she first started doing comedy in Denver in the early 1980s, after customers in the Bennigan's where she waitressed encouraged her to try stand-up. At the time, she was also active in Denver's feminist circles, volunteering at a women's bookstore and taking part in the Woman's Collective, a feminist political group. At Bennigan's she honed her brash insult humor, but her political activity led her to incorporate a feminist edge to her material. She blended these styles to develop an on-stage persona that "[stood] in defiance of middle class restrictions on women."[76] She proudly reveled in her large body and her working-class background. She turned the figure of the housewife on its head and refashioned her role as that of "domestic goddess." She deserved to be served, rather than serve others. As she said in her 1990 special, *I Enjoy Being a Girl*, "I believe that men are on this earth for one reason and one reason only: to serve me and to bring back food and build a comfortable hive for me and my larvae and to move on when it's time for a younger drone with more stamina."[77]

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[76] Suzanne Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance: Phyllis Diller, Lily Tomlin, and Roseanne*, Studies in American Popular History and Culture (New York: Routledge, 2004), 54-56.
[77] Roseanne Barr, *I Enjoy Being a Girl*, Hollywood Records HR-61000-2, 1990.

Barr did not shy away from the moniker of feminist. As she stated later about her early comedy: "I did feminist comedy. It was a response to all the comedy by guy stand-ups that I'd been seeing since I was a little girl. I definitely had an ideological point of view that I was putting across." Barr's "domestic goddess" persona found success because she juxtaposed relatability (her weight, her frustrations with her husband and children) with aggressive assertions of power that many women likely wished they could articulate. Her frank assessment of the challenges of working-class life gave her greater license for critique than many of her fellow female comics who hailed from middle-class backgrounds. As a result, she was able to articulate a more manifestly feminist message than many of her peers.

But Barr was not immune from the unfriendly environment in the 1980s club scene. She acknowledged how mainstream comedy clubs required that she temper her material. She claimed she was banned from Denver Comedy Works after she mocked the male comics, at which point she worked in niche venues like lesbian coffeehouses and Unitarian churches, until she adjusted her act. "It took me about two years to kind of restructure it so that I was able to work in the regular comedy clubs. I had to make it less political and more mainstream."[78] Barr soon found success with the more mainstream version of her act, but as the following chapter will show, she was later able to integrate her political viewpoints, particularly her feminism and pro-labor sentiments, into her hit network sitcom, *Roseanne*.

Conclusion

Sitcoms overtook the stand-up stage as the primary locus for mainstream comedy as 1990s went on. Comedy trade papers reported that the profitability of comedy clubs started

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[78] Kohen, *We Killed*, 164-165, 192.

declining after 1990.[79] The stand-up boom went bust between 1992 and 1995, as the field became oversaturated with comics of middling talent, expensive outings at the clubs (often a cover charge plus a two-drink minimum) fell out of favor among patrons, and televised comedy faced overexposure from the major networks, premium cable, and even two basic cable channels devoted exclusively to comedy.[80] Following the bust, top comics found success by helming network sitcoms like *Roseanne* and *Ellen* (1994-1998). On the ground level, a new generation of comics turned away from the comedy clubs that remained, instead performing in nontraditional venues and pioneering a new, loosely structured genre called alternative comedy.

The legacy of the boom years looms large over comedy history, but it is one dominated by male comics, whose routines ranged from innocuous observational comedy to material that demeaned and objectified women. Interrogating the work of female club comics during the boom offers a new vantage point on the era. The numerous ways in which they included feminist sentiments in their acts reveal the many constraints under which they operated during the stand-up boom years. While white, straight, middle-class comics weaved tempered feminist critiques into acts that otherwise played by the rules of club comedy, and of the wider culture of the time, the comics who fell outside that norm were not nearly as tacit with their agendas, instead drawing on the challenges they faced as minority women to more openly contest the status quo. By and large, the entertainment industry did not reward women comics with great success (certainly not as great as their male counterparts) but in bringing their feminist perspectives to

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[79] Chuck Crisafulli, "The Last Stand for Stand-Up?" *Los Angeles Times*, January 9, 1994, sec. Calendar.

[80] Federman, "Ep. 04: The 1980's Comedy Boom," Oct. 9, 2018, in *The History of Stand-Up*, podcast, MP3 audio, 40:40, https://www.thehistoryofstandup.com/s01/04-the-1980s-comedy-boom.; McAlpine, "Stand-Up Takes a Tumble" *Los Angeles Times*, May 25, 1995, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-05-25-vl-5693-story.html; Kohen, *We Killed*, 209.

the stage they unsettled the male-dominated comedy scene by demanding public recognition of their lived experiences as women. Though the era in general, and its stand-up comedy in particular, are often remembered for a lack of feminist activity, close examination demonstrates that female comics used the stage as a platform to keep questions of gender and equality both active and engaging within one of the most dynamic areas of the period's cultural zeitgeist.

Chapter IV: Private Topics, Public Laughs: Feminist Comedy After the Stand-Up Boom

In the pilot episode of comic Brett Butler's star-vehicle sitcom *Grace Under Fire* (1993-1998), Butler's character Grace goes on a blind date that her best friend Nadine has orchestrated. Grace, a single mother who recently divorced her abusive, alcoholic husband, gets ready for the date while Nadine keeps her company, bouncing Grace's infant son on her lap. Nadine tells Grace, "You know, I got a feeling that this Russell guy could turn out to be Mr. Right." Grace wryly retorts, "The last guy you said that about I married, and he turned out to be Mr. Right Hook."[1]

This scene offers a glimpse into a quintessentially homosocial environment, a woman's bedroom where she primps for a date with her closest female friend while tending to an infant. Unlike most of its sitcom predecessors, even those led by female protagonists, it provides an unflinching depiction of the conversation between two adult women. The fact that Grace's ex-husband physically abused her is presented as an important element of Grace's situation as a divorced mother of three. Neither the show nor Grace takes the situation lightly, but – this is a sitcom, after all – Grace mines even this traumatic aspect of her reality for laughs.

Major network sitcoms had years earlier begun to reflect fractures of the nuclear family in their premises, particularly as divorce rates spiked in the 1970s and single-parent households became more common and carried less stigma. But those shows, such as *Who's The Boss?* (1984-1992), *Kate and Allie* (1984-1989), and *Full House* (1987-1995), maintained stable and loving home lives for the children that did not include regular exposure to violence or substance abuse. *Grace Under Fire* told its viewers from its first episode that Grace and her children had

[1] *Grace Under Fire*, season 1, episode 1, "Pilot," aired September 29, 1993.

faced those issues, as well as poverty, and that they continued to struggle with the ramifications of all three, even as they found joy and laughter in their calmer present.

Butler was a veteran of the 1980s and early 1990s stand-up comedy boom, one of the lucky ones who landed a starring role in a sitcom before the comedy club industry imploded. The comics (male and female) who failed to reach that level of fame, as well as those who came to the industry after the bubble burst, faced a barren comedy landscape that offered few opportunities for live performance and even fewer opportunities for performers with acts that fell outside the mainstream. While shows like *Grace Under Fire* reached audiences of millions, comics still paying their dues adapted to the dearth of performance opportunities by staging shows in alternative venues like bookstores, coffeehouses, and even laundromats. With alternative venues came a looser and more personal style of comedy.

Butler's show, a primetime network sitcom, represented the center of mainstream commercial comedy in the 1990s. Conversely, comics like Judy Toll, part of a new movement that came to be known as alternative comedy, stood at the fringes of the industry. Toll took advantage of the freewheeling and longform style of alternative comedy to hone her confession-laden act. An early adopter of internet dating websites, she read her correspondence with potential suitors, mocking the arrogant men who pursued her on these sites. The men were the butt of the joke, but the act was a soul-baring one for Toll. She described the contents of her dating profile and shared her replies, cringing painfully and offering context in an effort to lessen her embarrassment. Toll's dating exploits constituted a significant part of her repertoire, but not the entirety of it. She is well known for admitting her involvement with the Church of Scientology and turning the story into material for act. She came to repudiate that involvement and sought to recoup the significant funds she donated to the church. Surprisingly, her efforts

were successful. When she received a reimbursement check for the $37,000 she had given to Scientology, she had it blown up to the size of a novelty check and brought it onstage as a prop for her celebratory retelling of the ordeal.[2]

These seemingly distinct and unrelated examples of 1990s comedy – a scene from a sitcom pilot and some anecdotes from a small stage in Los Angeles – share a common ethos. Both took subjects that society had deemed private – domestic violence, dating rituals, personal finance – and brought them into a public sphere. In the 1960s and 1970s, stand-up trended away from one-liners and impersonal bits that any comics could perform interchangeably toward more intimate and autobiographical comedy, most memorably pioneered by the iconic Richard Pryor. Pryor enraptured audiences with his stories of growing up in a brothel and his experiences with drug abuse and self-harm, and, significantly, found success bringing Black vernacular comedy to white audiences. Many male comics followed in his footsteps, like Eddie Murphy, Chris Rock, and Louis CK,[3] but the path to genuinely autobiographical comedy – that is, authentic material not sanitized for public consumption – was more fraught for female comics.

The historical legacy of separate spheres gender ideology, which coded feminine as domestic and masculine as public, meant that the gulf between private and public was wider for female comics than male comics.[4] Therefore, their efforts to bridge that divide by airing their

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[2]Michael Schneider, "Comic-scribe Toll succumbs at age 44," *Variety*, May 7, 2002, https://variety.com/2002/scene/news/comic-scribe-toll-succumbs-at-age-44-1117866537/. Paul Brownfield, "Judy Toll, 44; L.A. Comedian, Writer," *Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 2002, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2002-may-04-me-toll4-story.html.

[3] Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock*. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 563.

[4] For more on separate spheres ideology and its implications, see: Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870-1940*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000);

personal experiences in public carried implications beyond those of their male peers. Whereas audiences, as well as the broader comedy industry, understood the concerns of male comics to be relatable, they viewed issues associated with female comics as foreign and niche. In other words, matters associated primarily with women, particularly those that were distressing or in any way distasteful, were not considered suitable for public dialogue on the comedy stage. But in each of these forums, network sitcoms and alternative comedy, we see an effort by the comics to tear away at the public/private division, to bring matters of the feminine private sphere to the attention of the male-dominant public sphere. Whether it was one's experience with coming out of the closet or job hunting, battling cancer or shopping for clothes, these performers brought both distinctly feminine concerns and perspectives to a culture industry not used to reckoning with such matters. In so doing, the comics refused to surrender their voices to adhere to the norms of their genres, instead demanding social recognition of their personhood and their lived experience in the very act of making public comedy out of private life.

Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, (New York: Norton, 1986); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-earning Women in the United States*, (Romania: OUP USA, 2003); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, (New York: Basic Books, 1988), Emily Remus, *A Shoppers' Paradise: How the Ladies of Chicago Claimed Power and Pleasure in the New Downtown*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2019); Kathy Lee Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-century New York*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), and Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*, (Illini Books ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

During the 1990s, feminist comics were most prolific in two disparate realms of the comedy industry: network television and the alternative comedy scene. Comics Roseanne Barr, Brett Butler, Ellen DeGeneres, and Margaret Cho all helmed their own sitcoms during this period, and enjoyed greater levels of creative control than the actresses in earlier female-led sitcoms. Comics Janeane Garofalo, Kathy Griffin, and Beth Lapides were founding members of the alternative comedy movement, alongside male comics Bob Odenkirk, David Cross, Andy Dick, and Taylor Negron. Where sitcoms were tightly scripted and rehearsed, alternative comedy shows were unstructured and unpracticed. Television sitcoms were firmly beholden to their traditional structures as well the corporate interests of the networks and advertisers that dictated their boundaries. Alternative comedy shows stressed their distance from mainstream comedy clubs: all material was supposed to be new and free-form; storytelling was emphasized over one-liners; and the relationship between the performer and the crowd was more conversational and collegial than the often hostile one between club comics and the potential hecklers in their audiences.[5]

Despite the stark differences in these expressive forms, the common drive among feminist comics to bring new aspects of women's lives into the spotlight is clearly discernible in both. Unlike the predominately female audiences of the women's movement comedy circuit, both sitcoms and alternative comedy featured mixed-gender audiences. This meant that such performances both sought and earned the attention of male viewers while laying bare elements of female experience previously unshared on the comic stage. The feminist comics working in both these areas of the industry refused to segregate themselves within the women's culture

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[5] Yael Kohen, *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy*, 1st ed. (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2012), 209-210, 227-229.

community or to moderate their feminism to appease comedy club audiences. Thus, while the alternative and sitcom comics had roots in each of the earlier scenes, the work they produced stands apart from the feminist circuit comedy of chapter two and the club comedy of chapter three.

By the 1990s, women in the United States were more active in public life than ever before, but they continued to face barriers that prevented them from achieving parity with men when it came to positions of authority. After the 1992 midterm election (the so-called "Year of the Woman"), the number of women in the U.S. House of Representatives increased from 28 to 47 and sent a record-high six women into the U.S. Senate, but they were still greatly outnumbered by the men in each chamber of Congress.[6] That same year, in the business world, all but one of the chief executive officers of Fortune 500 companies were male, as were 95% of the workers in upper management.[7] The dearth of women at these highest levels of authority in society exacerbated the obstacles they faced in stand-up comedy. After all, the stand-up comic constitutes a cultural authority figure who, when successful, asserts control over an entire audience.

Feminist activists had succeeded in removing numerous legal and economic restrictions since the beginning of women's liberation, such as those governing employment, divorce, and credit, and popular opinions toward issues like premarital sex and cohabitation as well as working mothers had relaxed alongside them. Still, significant cultural restrictions concerning appropriate public conduct for women persisted. These limitations of acceptable female behavior

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[6] Gail Collins, *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present*, 1st ed (New York: Little, Brown and Co, 2009), 343.
[7] Terry Barnes, "Women In Music and Home Entertainment: Despite The Restrictions Of Glass Ceilings And Mommy Tracks, Women Executives Are Making Music Their Business," *Billboard (Archive: 1963-2000)* (New York, United States: P-MRC, April 24, 1993).

made it more difficult for women to succeed in an irreverent and rebellious field like comedy. As a result of these factors, the comedy industry remained a glaring example of gender inequality in the last decade of the twentieth century. The highest estimate of women's share of the stand-up population came from club owner Caroline Hirsch, who put it between 20-25%.[8] On television, women made up only 15% of the creators, 21% of writers, and 24% of executive producers of the top 100 primetime shows.[9] Because of the extreme disparity between male and female voices in the industry, popular comedy retained its discursive bias toward male perspectives.[10] Audiences expected to consume comedy in which the male perspective was the universal standard, as it was almost all they had ever experienced.

The work of these comics to disrupt that expectation is part of the broader trajectory of feminist comedy (and thus, feminism) to make claims for audiences, and society, to recognize a fuller, more complex reality of American womanhood than popular culture had previously allowed for. Having described a comic's goal of audience laughter as "an embodied act of recognition," theater scholar Katelyn Hale Wood succinctly captured a key strategy of feminist comics: "Laughter brings the private, lived experience into the public sphere."[11] Indeed, airing personal matters in public had been a growing trend across the stand-up genre since at least the early 1970s, but the assertion by feminist comics that their concerns were just as valid, relatable,

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[8] Nolan Feeney, "Why Aren't There More Women On The Top-Earning Comedians List?" *Forbes*, July 11, 2013. https://www.forbes.com/sites/nolanfeeney/2013/07/11/why-arent-there-more-women-on-the-top-earning-comedians-list/.

[9] Allison Yarrow, *90s Bitch: Media, Culture, and the Failed Promise of Gender Equality* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2018), 2-3. This data pertains to all primetime shows in the 1998-1999 season, not just comedy programming.

[10] Yarrow, *90s Bitch*, 2-3.

[11] Katelyn Hale Wood. *Cracking Up: Black Feminist Comedy in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century United States*. (United States: University of Iowa Press, 2021), 17.

and amusing as those of male comics marked a significant step toward dismantling the remains of separate spheres ideology that continued to shape popular comedy.

The ways in which feminist comics of the post-boom years negotiated the boundaries of public and private in their performances can be understood in light of the work of critical theorists who have articulated and interrogated the concepts of public and private. Nancy Fraser, elaborating on Jürgen Habermas's theorization of the public sphere, offers frameworks applicable to each of the genres included in this analysis. Essentially, in both genres, feminist comics sought to contest the boundaries that dominant groups erected concerning public and private. Those boundaries, as Fraser notes, were "frequently deployed to delegitimate some interests…and to valorize others."[12] Comics of each genre employed different strategies to advocate for the importance of their interests, but they shared an overarching goal of telling stories they felt were honest and authentic, stories that urged audiences to recognize the humanity of their authors and the complexity of their lived experiences. They refused to silo their sexuality, their financial struggles, or the racism and sexism they encountered in order to approximate the straight, white, male subjectivity that had seemingly defined the role of stand-up comic since its infancy in the 1940s and 1950s. Instead, they incorporated these experiences into the hearts of their acts and unapologetically demanded that audiences confront their realities.

The methods feminist comics used varied, largely based on the medium they employed (network sitcom versus alternative comedy stage). On broadcast television, feminist stand-ups fought for inclusion within the dominant public sphere. They pushed back against the "bracketing" of identity (other than that of monied, straight, white men) that had traditionally

[12] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 73, https://doi.org/10.2307/466240.

been a prerequisite for engagement in the public sphere of American culture, a sentiment that still held sway in an entertainment industry that had begun to incorporate a more diverse array of main characters, most often African-American families, but was not yet accustomed to including authorial voices from marginalized communities.[13] Feminist comics not only brought their lived experiences as women to their work, they made it a central component that undergirded the cores of their shows. In this way, they took an integrationist approach, attempting to expand the limits of mass culture, and comedy more specifically, to include matters that its past participants had generally understood as off-limits in the genre.

In contrast, comics on the alternative scene formed what Fraser termed a "subaltern counterpublic." Alternative comedy spaces functioned as discursive settings that ran parallel to the dominant arenas of the comedy industry. Specifically, alternative comedy venues stood in contrast to mainstream comedy clubs, which alternative comics felt were hostile to their diverse identities and unconventional comedic methods. In response to what they perceived as stifling and reductive creative atmospheres in mainstream clubs, alternative comics originated a new, looser style of comedy that emphasized creativity and innovation. Thus, the subaltern counterpublic of alternative comedy provided feminist comics safe environments in which to create and share counterdiscourses, shape their identities, and develop oppositional stances toward wider publics.[14]

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[13] See, for example, *Sanford and Son (1972-1977)*, *Good Times (1974-1979)*, *The Jeffersons (1975-1985)*, and *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992).

[14] Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 67-68. See also: Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Germany: Polity Press, 2015) and Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002). Kohen, *We Killed*, 209-221.

The alternative comedy scene influenced mainstream comedy in later decades – a result of both shifting cultural tastes and technological innovations like streaming video and social media – but mainstream influence need not be the sole metric by which we measure the impact of 1990s alternative comedy. In the shorter-term, alternative comedy's subaltern counterpublic facilitated community-building, identity affirmation, and affective pleasure among populations otherwise marginalized in a capitalist, heteropatriarchal, and racially stratified society.[15]

Network sitcoms and alternative comedy sat at far ends of the comedic spectrum, but 1990s feminist comics used each of them to find ways to share the intimate truths they refused to conceal any longer. As a result, they offered new discursive and artistic possibilities for both their communities and broader publics. This performative work also sheds light on the feminist movement at the close of the twentieth century. Alternative comedy – a youth-dominated subculture that emphasized intersectionality, diversity of perspectives, and personal experience – emerged in concert with third wave feminism and offers a new site to explore its expression beyond the oft-cited RiotGrrrl and 'zine culture.[16] The network sitcoms make for a more complicated story. Programs such as *Roseanne* and *Grace Under Fire* were explicit in centering

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[15] "About Us," UnCabaret. https://www.uncabaret.com/our-story. "The Alt-Comedy Show That Made Patton Oswalt and Bob Odenkirk (Among Others) Better Men," *MEL Magazine* (blog), November 20, 2018, https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/the-alt-comedy-show-that-made-patton-oswalt-and-bob-odenkirk-among-others-better-men. Chuck Crisafulli, "No Joking. Just a Lot of Laughing: Comedy: Offbeat Stand-up Is Moving from Clubs to Cable. Just Don't Go Looking for a Punch Line.," *Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 1995, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-07-15-ca-24132-story.html.

[16] See Nancy A. Hewitt, *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2010); Laughlin, Kathleen A., Julie Gallagher, Dorothy Sue Cobble, Eileen Boris, Premilla Nadasen, Stephanie Gilmore, and Leandra Zarnow. "Is It Time to Jump Ship? Historians Rethink the Waves Metaphor." *Feminist Formations* 22, no. 1 (2010): 76–135. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40835345; Lisa Levenstein, *They Didn't See Us Coming: The Hidden History of Feminism in the Nineties* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2020); Yarrow, *90s Bitch*.

their working-class perspective and thus evoked the legacy of labor movement feminism. Cho's *All-American Girl* and DeGeneres's *Ellen* made race and sexuality, respectively, key components of their shows, evincing a diverse, intersectional vision of feminism. By examining how feminist comics made use of these divergent forms of comedy and drew on various streams of feminist ideology, we gain a new perspective on the multiplicity of American feminism in this era.

"It's to your advantage to bring in someone who's already discovered how to be memorable."

The tradition of women helming sitcoms long predates the premiere of *Roseanne* in 1988 or *Grace Under Fire* in 1993. In fact, it predates television itself. Gertrude Berg created, wrote, and starred in *The Goldbergs*, a show that began on NBC radio in 1929. It aired on the radio six nights a week until 1946. In 1949, it was reborn on television as one of the first sitcoms, with Berg maintaining creative control and her starring role.[17] The radio and television versions both depicted the home life of the titular family, second-generation Jewish immigrants living in the Bronx. (It is noteworthy that a Jewish family was the basis for a popular radio and television program in these decades, but the program repeatedly emphasized their American identity over their distinctiveness as Jews.)[18]

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[17] Berg had grown up around the entertainment industry: her father ran Fleischmann's, a Catskills resort, where Berg wrote skits to entertain guests. The entertainment circuit of the Catskills resorts in the early to mid-twentieth century was known as the "Borscht Belt," and had a profound influence on American comedy through the many Jewish comics that rose to prominence through its ranks, such as Henny Youngman, Jackie Mason, Mel Brooks, and Sid Caesar. (Female comics, like Belle Barth and Pearl Williams, also performed at Catskills resorts. They were popular acts in the mid-twentieth century, but they did not achieve the same mainstream success or lasting cultural impact as their male counterparts.) For more on the female comics of the Borscht Belt, see chapter one. Additionally, Berg's *The Goldbergs* is unrelated to the recent ABC sitcom *The Goldbergs* (2013-), which was created by Adam F. Goldberg.
[18] Shandler, Jeffrey and Pete Smith. "Gertrude Berg." *Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*. 23 June 2021. Jewish Women's Archive. https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/berg-gertrude

Next was *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957), which Lucille Ball co-produced with her husband, Desi Arnaz. It, too, dealt with a family's home life, but unlike the sitcoms discussed in this chapter, *I Love Lucy* offered a sanitized depiction of domestic life (see, for example, Lucy and Ricky's twin beds). The chaos that erupted in each episode resulted from Lucy and Ethel's hijinks, not the unsavory or fraught realities of day-to-day life. Ball, a veteran film and radio actress by the 1940s, had starred on *My Favorite Husband*, the radio show on which *I Love Lucy* was based. Its success led CBS to ask Ball to adapt it for television. Through some shrewd negotiations, she and Arnaz won concessions from CBS, including production of the show through their company, Desilu.[19]

These early (and in the case of *I Love Lucy*, highly influential) sitcoms were followed by a small number of others with women in positions of creative leadership. Marlo Thomas was an uncredited executive producer on *That Girl* (1966-1971), the first sitcom centered on a young, single woman. Mary Tyler Moore produced the iconic show of second wave feminism, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977), alongside her husband, television executive Gary Tinker. (*Moore* also featured an unprecedented number of women on its writing staff, more than a dozen over its seven-year run.) The following decade, Linda Bloodworth-Thomason created and executive produced the ensemble workplace comedy *Designing Women* (1986-1993).

In the late-1980s and 1990s, a new trend came to dominate the sitcom landscape. Due to the massive rise in popularity of stand-up comedy (comedy clubs proliferated across the country during the 1980s and cable television brought performances into more homes than ever before)[20]

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[19] Darryl J. Littleton and Tuezdae Littleton, *Comediennes: Laugh Be a Lady*. United States: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2012.
[20] See chapter three for a fuller account of stand-up comedy's popularity from the late 1970s through the early 1990s.

and the success of sitcoms like *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), and *Roseanne* (1988-1997) (each of which took its premise from a stand-up comic's act), television executives focused their efforts on finding up-and-coming stand ups to anchor the next hit sitcom. By the 1993-1994 season, five of the six most popular television shows were sitcoms that starred stand-ups (*60 Minutes* being the exception). In the spring of 1994, networks ordered pilots that starred a long list of comics, including Rita Rudner, Howie Mandel, Carlos Mencia, Lewis Black, Steve Harvey, and Margaret Cho. Only the latter two comics' shows received series orders, but the number of pilots demonstrates the degree to which networks were betting on stand-up-helmed sitcoms.[21]

These sitcoms were usually built around the persona and material of the stand-up in question, but they were not solely the creations of the comics. Generally, network executives would become interested in a stand-up who was breaking through – whether through performances on late-night shows or successful touring – and would ask the comics and/or veteran television producers to pitch a show based on the comic's act. Iconic stand-up George Carlin, who starred in *The George Carlin Show* on Fox from 1994 to 1995, acknowledged the shift, noting: "Most of the older sitcoms were based on premise. Now, more and more, you get the person and then develop the premise."[22] In the case of *The George Carlin Show*, the upstart network FOX approached Carlin, seeing him as a fit for the "edgy" feel to which the company aspired. The premise of Carlin as an oddball New York City taxi driver followed from there. In the programs discussed here, producers derived premises that meshed with the comics' personas

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[21] Lawrence Christon, "Why the Stand-Up Routine Works: How Many Network Execs Does It Take to Make a Hit Sitcom? Just the One Lucky Enough to Find the next Seinfeld or Roseanne. Stand-up Comics Are Today's Hitmakers. But How Does That Differ from TV's Past?" *Los Angeles Times*, June 19, 1994, sec. Calendar.
[22] Christon, "Why the Stand-Up Routine Works," *Los Angeles Times*, June 19, 1994.

and reflected the contemporary zeitgeist in some way, all seeking to profit from a connection to a rising or established stand-up. Barr starred as a working-class mother struggling to support her family; Butler played a similar role but as a divorced mother who had overcome alcoholism and domestic violence; DeGeneres portrayed a bookstore manager who primarily hung out with her friends, both at work and at home (a la NBC's mega-hit show *Friends* (1994-2004)); and Cho depicted a Gen-X 90's slacker who worked a menial job with her friends and came into conflict with her traditional Korean-immigrant family.

In addition to glomming on to the rising popularity of stand-up comedy, television executives recognized the distinctive voices that comics brought to the table as a key advantage of partnering with them to develop a show in the early 1990s. Sandy Grushow, president of the Fox Entertainment Group, stated, "What the good [comics] bring is a distinctive point of view, like Martin Lawrence, who had something to say before he ever got to his sitcom."[23] Kim Fleary, vice-president of comedy series development for ABC Entertainment, agreed: "through stand-up, we've been exposed to fresh points of view, both men and women."[24] NBC Entertainment President Warren Littlefield elaborated, claiming that given the large increase in available programming (citing cable television and the anticipated changes the internet would usher in), "it's to your advantage to bring in someone who's already discovered how to be memorable."[25] Further, like most multi-camera sitcoms, the four shows discussed here were filmed in front of

[23] Christon, "Why the Stand-Up Routine Works," *Los Angeles Times*, June 19, 1994.
[24] Nancy Mills, "Standup Warrior: Wise-Cracking Comedian/Actress Vidale Fights for Single Moms, 'Thea' Show," *Chicago Tribune*, April 24, 1994, sec. Womanews.
[25] Christon, "Why the Stand-Up Routine Works," *Los Angeles Times*, June 19, 1994.

studio audiences, so each comic's ability to thrive while performing before live crowds proved an asset.[26]

The comics at the heart of each of these sitcoms did not enjoy full creative control over their show's style and plotlines, but networks' keen desire to launch sitcoms centered around a stand-up's act demonstrate that their voices were still a crucial component of each show's makeup. In this way, these programs differed from earlier and contemporaneous sitcoms that also emphasized female-centric storylines but lacked a comic's authorial voice, such as *Kate and Allie* (1984-1989), *227* (1985-1990), *The Golden Girls* (1985-1992), *Designing Women* (1986-1993), and *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998). Each of the new comic-centered sitcoms drew on key elements of the comic's identity and perspective: *Roseanne* featured the unapologetic frankness of a working-class mother that characterized Barr's stand-up; *Grace Under Fire* offered a wry, clever take on working-class life in the wake of domestic violence and substance abuse, all of which Butler had experienced and incorporated into her act; *Ellen* focused on DeGeneres's characteristic observational humor before pivoting to deal openly with her homosexuality; and *All-American Girl* explored the conflict between Cho's second-generation youth and her Korean-immigrant parents, a conflict that Cho has mined throughout her decades-long career. It is precisely the connection between each comic's stand-up material and their respective sitcom that makes it necessary to interrogate these programs. In these years when the stand-up boom peaked and crested, the network sitcom represented the apex of a comic's career trajectory. Any study of stand-up in this era that overlooked comic-helmed sitcoms would be remiss.

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[26] David Wharton, "COVER STORY : SHOW TIME : At Television Studios in the Valley, Audiences Get a behind-the-Scenes Glimpse at How Shows and Their Actors Get the Job Done--Gaffes, Guffaws and All.," *Los Angeles Times,* October 14, 1994, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1994-10-14-va-50148-story.html.

Though the networks were eager to find comics with distinct voices in hopes of profiting from a successful show, the relationships between the comics and the network were all marked by conflict. Barr and Butler were deemed "divas" by the press for their high-profile disagreements with producers and writers. *Ellen* was canceled by ABC after the network felt that its storylines had become too centered on Ellen's homosexuality. Network executives watered down Cho's brash and lewd act and pressured her so insistently to lose weight that she experienced kidney failure as a result of crash dieting. Per their accounts, the pressures female comics faced were more intense than those their male peers encountered,[27] but the networks' urges to temper and moderate the unique voices, the very voices they had sought out, applied to male comics as well. Comic Garry Shandling, who found television success creating and starring in *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992-1998) on HBO (a premium cable channel that allowed for more risqué and innovative content), spoke of the challenges he faced in a prior development deal with NBC: "The pressures to fit into a mold were enormous. That's why I think shows like 'Seinfeld' and 'Roseanne' deserve enormous credit for holding on to their point of view."[28]

Mirroring the broader demographics of the entertainment industry at the time, sitcoms based around male comics well outnumbered those starring female comics, though some racial and ethnic diversity was present among their casts. The 1990s featured many popular Black sitcoms, but only two male comics, Martin Lawrence and Steve Harvey, achieved notable success with their shows, *Martin* (1992-1997) and *The Steve Harvey Show* (1996-2002).

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[27] For more detail, see: Hilary de Vries, "True Tales of TV Trauma: 3 Comics Chase Roseanne-Dom: How Has Butler Hit the Big Time in Suck a Short Time? By Using the Very Same Demons She Beat in Real Life to Touch Audiences with Her Hit 'Grace Under Fire.' But What about the New Demon: Stardom?" *Los Angeles Times*, September 4, 1994, sec. Calendar. Kohen, *We Killed*, 198. A.J. Jacobs, "Will the real Ellen please stand up?" *Entertainment Weekly*, March 24, 1995. Margaret Cho, *I'm the One That I Want*, Cho Taussig Productions, 2001.
[28] Christon, "Why the Stand-Up Routine Works," *Los Angeles Times*, June 19, 1994.

Networks were reluctant to develop a show solely around a female comic of color. Only two such shows made it past the pilot stage – Korean-American comic Margaret Cho's *All-American Girl* (1994-1995) and African-American comic Thea Vidale's *Thea* (1993-1994) – but neither lasted past their first season. *All-American Girl* warrants further analysis (like *Roseanne*, *Grace Under Fire*, and *Ellen* it found its basis in the comic's act), but *Thea* did not center its premise in any meaningful way on Vidale's comedy. The ABC sitcom featured Vidale as a widowed mother of four children who worked in a grocery store and ran a beauty salon on her porch at night. Vidale's act was known for its brash style and blue content, neither of which made it to *Thea*. Even in press coverage, ABC executives noted that though *Thea* bore her name, it was not based on her life. Vidale herself said of the show: "audiences are seeing the Donna Reed version of 'Thea.'" She lamented the sanitized nature of the show, stating: "We need better stories, stories that are more real, more honest, more me."[29]

"We needed to make people laugh, but the struggle to survive, and to break taboos, was equally important"

The sitcoms of Barr, Butler, DeGeneres, and Cho demonstrate the ways in which they attempted to reveal their truths to national audiences by offering alternatives to traditional sitcom structures and premises that were based in their lived experiences. Their understandings of and relationships to feminism varied, so they employed different strategies and aspired to different goals. But they shared a common drive to bring personal matters to public attention in ways that felt authentic to them. This urge reflects the feminist nature of their comedy: they each sought to emphasize their personal perspectives to counter the prevailing cultural narratives from which their voices had been previously omitted. The topics they chose to highlight – class, motherhood,

[29] Mills, "Standup Warrior," *Chicago Tribune*, April 24, 1994.

sexual orientation, race and immigration – were all deeply informed by their gendered experiences as women and thus stood in contrast with the work of contemporaneous male comics. Bill Cosby's *The Cosby Show* and Tim Allen's *Home Improvement* (1991-1999), for example, dealt with life as husbands and fathers, while Jerry Seinfeld's *Seinfeld* drew on his observational humor about daily minutiae and social niceties.

Programs like these four were not groundbreaking merely for including subjects like employment precarity, sexual harassment, addiction, domestic violence, and homosexuality. Sitcoms had begun to broach these topics decades earlier, but they largely confined these storylines to what became known as "very special episodes." Very special episodes regarding drug use were especially common during the 1980s, an outgrowth of the Reagan administration's War on Drugs. Further, CBS's hit show *All in the Family* (1971-1979) had "transformed the sitcom genre" by airing conflicts over race, sex, and class among the Bunker family following the cultural and political upheaval of 1960s.[30] But *All in the Family*'s conflicts were grounded in the experience of its protagonist, Archie Bunker, a straight, white, working-class man. It was not until shows like *Roseanne* and *Grace Under Fire* that popular sitcoms weaved these sorts of systemic social issues into the fabric of their premise from the perspective of a female protagonist. Through their sitcoms, these comics integrated key elements of their social identities into the public sphere of network television. Such elements – their gender, class, sexuality, and race – would have otherwise been excluded, at least substantively, from their productions. By refusing to downplay these parts of their identities, Barr, Butler, DeGeneres, and Cho produced innovative television that brought new stories to mass audiences. Stories that featured women

[30] Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*, (New York: New Press, 2010), 192, 9.

reckoning with the challenges of contemporary society, challenges they had each experienced personally.

Roseanne followed the white, working-class Connor family in the fictional city of Lanford, Illinois. Together, they weathered the challenges of raising children and making ends meet in a deindustrializing economy where solid union jobs were no longer plentiful. *Roseanne* was groundbreaking in its realistic portrayal of working-class family life and the stresses that accompanied their financial precarity. Barr made it clear that she sought depict not just family life, but an unpolished yet mirthful take on contemporary womanhood. She would not gloss over the challenges that she knew working families were facing, but she would not be defeated by them. Roseanne dealt with rambunctious children, mounting bills, never-ending domestic labor, and excess body weight, but as one media commentator wrote, "unlike her predecessors, these problems weren't her fault; they were just her reality."[31]

The first season of *Roseanne* culminated with a storyline in which Roseanne reaches a breaking point with the difficult working conditions of her assembly line job at the plastics factory. The foreman raises the quotas they have to meet each shift and implements mandatory overtime. Roseanne's husband, Dan, works construction and finds himself in a busy period as well, but feels he can't turn down any work because the family needs the income. While Roseanne can take some solace in the extra income the overtime offers, a coworker who is a single mother points out that the extra childcare her young son requires means that the overtime shifts are actually costing her money. The realities of the grind – long hours for too little pay – are brought to life for the viewing audience.

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[31] Kohen, *We Killed*, 191.

Episode 19, "Workin' Overtime," depicts the exhaustion both Roseanne and Dan experience, working extra-long days while trying to take care of the kids and their home. Notably, Roseanne and Dan split the domestic labor between them, and Dan receives minimal praise for his efforts. When Roseanne criticizes Dan for not cleaning the kitchen counter under the toaster, he replies, "Hey, I do my part around here. That's more than most guys would do. I do the cooking, the cleaning, the laundry, I also do my job, do I get a word of thanks? No." Roseanne retorts simply, "Well, join the club." She moves on, explaining the particular stresses of her difficult day and telling Dan, "I'm going to go lock myself in the bathroom, take a hot bath, and slit my wrists." He cheerfully replies, "I'll get you some clean towels." One might expect the challenges to end here, but Roseanne walks into the bathroom to find that her youngest son, DJ, has made a mess with his paints in the bathroom and returns to the living room only to find DJ and his sister, Darlene, loudly tormenting each other. Roseanne clutches her head in frustration and declares she has to get out of the house for a little while. Dan ushers her out, telling her he'll clean everything up. Roseanne thanks him and says that she owes him one. Dan closes the front door behind her and over the sound of the boisterous children says to himself, "I know."

The next scene depicts Roseanne getting a cup of coffee at a diner right as the waitress is closing the restaurant for the evening. Roseanne and the waitress commiserate over their unsatisfactory jobs (Roseanne: "I gotta check in the hospital just to get a vacation." Waitress: "As long as it isn't the maternity ward." Roseanne: "Well, that's the truth.") The scene ends with the waitress describing the loneliness of her empty house since her husband passed away. Roseanne returns home, noticeably calmer. She suggests that she and Dan "go unmake" their bed, an idea he supports, but they are both too exhausted to do anything but fall asleep together

on the couch. The episode's final scene shows them in bed, Dan claiming that he refuses to set the alarm and intends to skip work the next day. They share a fantasy about a restful, relaxing day, but the episode concludes with Dan admitting that he did indeed set the alarm – they'll do it all again tomorrow.[32]

In offering this frank and unapologetic take on life as a working-class mother, Barr drew on her own life experience. Other typical storylines on *Roseanne* dealt with issues like Roseanne's younger daughter, Darlene, having conflicted feelings about getting her first menstrual period; Roseanne's sister Jackie's physical abuse by a romantic partner; Roseanne's elder daughter, Becky, seeking access to contraception; and Roseanne, Jackie, and Dan, cycling through an array of jobs characterized by low-wages and/or difficult working conditions (telemarketer, waitress, truck driver, etc.). These storylines, ones that take seriously the concerns of working-class women and girls, reflected Barr's self-professed approach to feminism as a class issue. In her first autobiography, Barr wrote that she came to consider academic feminism "dead" and rejected its middle-class orientation, instead opting to speak as a "working-class woman who is a mother."[33]

Barr had risen to the top of the stand-up field in the late 1980s. While she did not achieve the same level of fame as comics like Eddie Murphy or Steve Martin, playing arenas and headlining films, her frequent sets on *The Tonight Show* demonstrated her place among the comic elite.[34] Barr released her first cable special in 1987; it won ACE Awards (cable's Emmy) for Best Female Comedy and for Best HBO Special. Raised in Salt Lake City, she first started

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[32] *Roseanne*, season 1, episode 19, "Workin' Overtime," aired on March 14, 1989.
[33] Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 67.
[34] Kohen, *We Killed,* 194.

doing comedy in Denver in the early 1980s, after customers in the Bennigan's where she waitressed encouraged her to try stand-up. At the time, she was also active in Denver's feminist circles, volunteering at a women's bookstore and taking part in the Woman's Collective, a feminist political group. At Bennigan's she honed her brash insult humor, but her political activity and her lived experiences (she was married with three kids and working low-wage jobs while living in a mobile home) initially led her to incorporate a feminist edge to her material, though, as discussed in the third chapter, she dialed down the feminist nature of her act while she sought to rise through the ranks of mainstream comedy clubs. She eventually developed an on-stage persona that "[stood] in defiance of middle class restrictions on women" and helped her breakthrough as a new comic star.[35] She proudly reveled in her large body and her working-class background. She turned the figure of the housewife on its head and refashioned her role as that of a "domestic goddess." She deserved to be served, rather than serve others.

In the mid-1980s, Marcy Carsey, of Carsey-Werner Productions, wanted to develop a sitcom that centered around a strong working mother. After seeing Barr perform on *The Tonight Show* in 1985, Carsey asked her to sign on as the lead. Barr was fielding offers for many projects at the time, but she was impressed that the team behind *The Cosby Show* had approached her. Production on the first season of *Roseanne* (1988-1989) was riddled with conflict, however, as Barr reportedly assumed she would be given a co-creator credit alongside Matt Williams (one of the Carsey-Werner producers who had also worked on *The Cosby Show*) only to find after the pilot was screened that Williams received sole creator credit. Tension on the set escalated and Williams eventually left the show midway through the first season. Barr continued to butt heads

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[35] Suzanne Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance: Phyllis Diller, Lily Tomlin, and Roseanne*, Studies in American Popular History and Culture (New York: Routledge, 2004), 54-56.

with production staff and ABC executives, but conditions calmed significantly after Williams's departure. Barr grew more satisfied after she was able to exert greater influence over the writing staff and steer the creative direction of the show in line with her comedic style. Barr later wrote: "I and the mostly great writers in charge of crafting the show every week never forgot that we needed to make people laugh, but the struggle to survive, and to break taboos, was equally important. And that was my goal from the beginning."[36]

Barr's approach to comedy was popular, in part because she reflected a prevailing public sentiment of the era in which she was working. The blows to the middle- and working-classes in the 1980s that resulted from President Reagan's fiscal policies and a deindustrializing economy primed audiences to relate to the less-than-rosy picture of working and family life that Barr offered. Like other new shows of the era premised around working-class families, namely, *Married…with Children* (1987-1997) and *The Simpsons* (1989-), *Roseanne* struck a chord with audiences and became a hit, reaching number one in the rankings by December 1988. Viewers appreciated the contrast these shows offered to sitcoms like *The Cosby Show*, in which the parents had prestigious, high-earning careers yet never seemed to spend time actually working.[37] Brandon Stoddard, the president of ABC Entertainment when *Roseanne* debuted, told of the visceral response he observed among women viewing the pilot episode at an early screening for affiliates. "I remember when Roseanne did the speech about her frustration with 'They want me to do this, they want me to do that, I can't be a mom, I have to go to work,' there was an

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[36] Roseanne Barr, "From the Archives: Roseanne on Her Life in Television," *Vulture*, March 27, 2018. https://www.vulture.com/2018/03/from-the-archives-roseanne-on-her-life-in-television.html

[37] Alessandra Senzani, "Class and Gender as a Laughing Matter? The Case of Roseanne," *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 23, no. 2 (2010): 233, https://doi.org/10.1515/HUMR.2010.011. Yarrow, *90s Bitch*, 202.

extraordinarily audible reaction by the women in the room. They totally connected to it."[38] Barr's juxtaposition of realistic challenges and frustrations with her trademark boldly aggressive and witty assertions of power resonated with the American public. *Roseanne*'s original run lasted for nine seasons, from 1988 to 1997, and led to a revival and spin-off in 2018.

Despite its overall ratings success, *Roseanne* received sharp rebuke from many critics and some viewers. They found the character of Roseanne aggressive and shrill, deeming the show vulgar for its gritty depiction of the Connors' everyday reality and man-hating due to Roseanne's unabashed confidence. Barr understood these critiques to be rooted in class and gender bias. Addressing her critics in an interview with Jay Leno on *The Tonight Show* in 1994, Barr argued, "I think what they're really mad about is that I'm a woman calling the shots; and that I'm a waitress; and that I was a maid; and I never went past ninth grade; and I still do a better job than any of them."[39] Here, Barr acknowledged that her path in the entertainment industry could be less conflict-ridden if she refrained from emphasizing her identity as a woman with a working-class background (at least, in ways that struck critics as strident or distasteful). However, not only did she refuse to downplay (that is, bracket) what she considered fundamental aspects of her identity, she insisted in taking pride in them.

The first time Brett Butler heard Barr do a stand-up set on television, she told her husband, "she just kicked the door open for me."[40] Another tough, assertive female comic who offered an unflinching take on working-class life, she knew that Barr's success would make industry insiders more willing to take a chance on her. That hunch proved true when Butler was

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[38] Kohen, *We Killed*, 198.
[39] Senzani, "Class and Gender as a Laughing Matter?" 245, 237.
[40] Mark Malkoff, "Brett Butler," October 13, 2016, in *The Carson Podcast*, podcast, MP3 audio, 51:00, https://carsonpodcast.com/brett-butler/.

offered the chance to cross over from touring clubs to starring in ABC's *Grace Under Fire* in 1993. Like with *Roseanne*, the struggles of living paycheck-to-paycheck constituted an important part of the fabric of Brett Butler's *Grace Under Fire*.

The fifth episode of *Grace Under Fire*'s fourth season featured Grace and her coworkers at the oil refinery being fired, only to immediately be rehired as independent contractors. Their new employment status meant that, despite their union membership, they would lose their medical benefits (as well as free coffee in the break room). Angry at this turn of events, Grace and her coworkers storm the management office at the episode's close, demanding they be reinstated as regular employees with all the associated benefits. In the episode's tag, Grace and the other workers seem satisfied with management's response, contentedly discussing the happy result. Of course, they soon reveal, the refinery's management only conceded on the free coffee in the break room, not the workers' medical benefits.[41] This wry depiction of labor/management conflict offers a markedly cynical view of what workers could expect from their employers in an age of declining union power. The misdirection and reveal that their excitement was about free coffee renders the scene amusing, but the situation's gravity remains, particularly as viewers remember that Grace is the sole means of support for her three children.

"I found that the things I thought was gonna kill me, were funny."

Grace Under Fire tackled tough issues from the very beginning. In the scene from the pilot described in the introduction, Grace asks her friend Nadine if Grace's older son Quentin reminds her of his father, Grace's ex-husband (worrying that "the apple didn't fall far from the tree" after Quentin hit a fellow classmate). "It's not the same thing," Nadine replies, "Quentin is a good apple. The tree drank a lot of Jack Daniels." In fact, the opening of the pilot episode

[41] *Grace Under Fire*, season 4, episode 5, "Dating Buddies," Aired on October 22, 1996.

succinctly articulates the show's thesis. It depicts Grace placing an array of mocking faces (an ape, Adolf Hitler, the devil) over the picture of her ex-husband in their wedding album, while her voiceover explains the circumstances that caused her to leave him. She realized she could either stay married to a "knuckle-draggin', cousin'-lovin', beer-suckin' redneck, or I could work like a dog for lousy money while I raise three kids all by myself. Boy, is it nice to have choices."[42] Though the voiceover was limited to the pilot's initial scene, it sets the tone for the show by giving viewers direct access to Grace's interior perspective on her life and circumstances, making public the sarcastic yet honest contents of her (fictional) private monologue.

Serious subject matter remained a core part of the show's premise as more episodes aired. The eighth episode of the first season ("Grace Under Oath") featured two: the first concerned Grace taking her ex-husband to court to pay the child support he owes and the second depicted Grace befriending a woman, Vicki, at the law clinic who Grace quickly surmises is involved in an abusive relationship due to her bruises. The show derives humor from the inexperienced law student that takes on Grace's case (as she can't afford better legal representation) and the darkly funny barbs that Grace and Vicki trade about the violence they experienced in their marriages. At first, Vicki denies that anything serious occurred, telling Grace that she walked into a door. "Uh-huh. I used to tell people my ex-husband was cleaning his fist and it went off." Vicki struggles to stifle a laugh, but fails. "That's good, I'll try that," she responds. Later, they trade the motivations behind various pieces of jewelry their husbands gifted them while in the apologetic stage of the cycle of abuse. Grace caps off the exchange by showing off her "I'll never drink again, I was aiming for the wall, and boy I'm glad them x-rays came back negative" ring, and once more, Vicki tries and fails to stifle the laugh that clearly causes her pain as a result of her

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[42] *Grace Under Fire*, season 1, episode 1, "Pilot," Aired on September 29, 1993.

injuries. In the episode's next act, the judge awards Grace the child support Jimmy owes her because he sympathizes with her plight as a single mother. But the episode ends on a bittersweet note as Vicki, Grace's new friend, drops off a pie at Thanksgiving dinner but doesn't stay, as she has returned to her abusive husband after trying to leave him.[43]

The penultimate episode of the first season similarly tackles two difficult situations at once. At work, Grace gets promoted to shift supervisor at the refinery, but her new authority upsets her male coworkers who contend she was only promoted because she's a woman. Grace asks her boss if that's the case and he immediately confirms it. Later, her coworkers admit they are mad at the company that promoted her over them, rather than Grace herself (with whom they have a warm rapport), but the episode doesn't resolve the storyline any further. At home, Grace's son, Quentin, wants to accept Jimmy's invitation to spend the summer with him, but Grace forbids it because of Jimmy's alcoholism. She decides to stop hiding the truth from Quentin and gently explains to him about his father's alcoholism and how Jimmy can't take care of Quentin properly, despite how much Jimmy loves him. Grace mocks her ex-husband throughout the episode to the other adults as she usually does – when Nadine comments that he looks taller, Grace replies "Well, that's just cause you're used to seeing him walking on his knuckles – but when her sister dismisses Jimmy's newcomer Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) chip, Grace reminds Faith that she still carries her first AA chip with her and that nine years later it still helps her.[44]

Brett Butler brought firsthand experience to the role of Grace Kelly.[45] Born and raised in the South, like Grace, Butler's difficult childhood included her mother's two divorces, an absent

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[43] *Grace Under Fire*, season 1, episode 8, "Grace Under Oath," Aired on November 23, 1993.
[44] *Grace Under Fire*, season 1, episode 21, "See Quentin Run," Aired on May 17, 1994.
[45] The character's (married) name was a play on the name of the glamorous actress, Grace Kelly, who became the Princess of Monaco when she married Prince Rainier III in 1956. Given the

father, physical abuse, and alcohol-related issues. At the age of 20, Butler married a man who soon began physically abusing her. His abuse persisted, culminating with her husband firing a gun at her. After three years, she left the marriage and the next year started trying her hand at stand-up comedy. Butler was struggling, going from job to job and dealing with substance abuse issues, but understood her sense of humor as an integral part of her personality. She had performed stand-up for the first time as an eight-year-old at a Christmas pageant. Her recitation of George Carlin's "Hippy Dippy Weather Man" bit and anecdotes about her sisters bombed, but heckling her friend's piano-playing scored big laughs. And she later admitted that her strongest motivation for giving up drinking was her fear that if she continued, she wouldn't be funny anymore.[46] As she described it: "I wrestled with a lot of inconsistencies in my life and then I found comedy. You know, the ability to yell out 'Screw you' and be liked at the same time."[47]

Performing at clubs across the Southeast, Butler developed different facets of her comedic repertoire: "the kind of unremarkable, observational comedy that would probably get [her] on TV"; the "times [she] just talked and said true things about what [she] thought about and where [she] came from"; and the dark side, where she "railed and fought hard to be listened to, being profane or abrasive if the occasion called for it."[48] A critic for the *Los Angeles Times* wrote that her performances were "in the Southern narrative vein, rambling personal monologues laced

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sitcom character's decidedly unglamorous lifestyle, she often had a wry retort for people who remarked on the coincidence.

[46] Lavin, "Southern-Style Grit," *Chicago Tribune*, May 22, 1996.

[47] Hilary de Vries, "True Tales of TV Trauma: 3 Comics Chase Roseanne-Dom: How Has Butler Hit the Big Time in Suck a Short Time? By Using the Very Same Demons She Beat in Real Life to Touch Audiences with Her Hit 'Grace Under Fire.' But What about the New Demon: Stardom?" *Los Angeles Times*, September 4, 1994, sec. Calendar. Allan Johnson, "Here's One Butler Who Is Ready for a Comedy Killing," *Chicago Tribune*, September 13, 1991, sec. Friday.

[48] Brett Butler, *Knee Deep in Paradise*, (Australia: Bantam Books, 1997), 230-231.

with quirky observations and references to her own largely dysfunctional life."[49] Jamie Masada, owner of the Laugh Factory, a comedy club in Los Angeles, praised her boldness on stage: "Here was this woman who was so open and honest about any subject, it was really unique."[50] However, this warm reception was a change of pace for Butler, who just a few years earlier went rebuffed by the big comedy clubs, as owners claimed her act was too hostile. But after the success of Barr, and after Butler bleached her brown hair blonde (heeding the advice that it would give her greater license on stage), Butler rose from a road comic getting steady work to one at the top of the club scene in New York and Los Angeles.[51]

Grace Under Fire came about after ABC network executives sought to replicate the success of the hit show *Roseanne* and its "blue-collar realism." The idea was to feature a "comedically heroic woman and the obstacles she faces just getting through the day." ABC executives again tapped the production team of Carsey-Werner, who in turn cast Butler after scouting her stand-up act in New York. Werner cited Butler's "tough, funny, [and] uncompromising" nature as well as her talent with audiences for their decision to cast her as Grace.[52] ABC executives gave *Grace Under Fire* a promising time slot after the hit show *Home Improvement* and it proved popular with audiences. In its first year, it consistently made the top 10 shows each week and ended the season in sixth place. It also won two People's Choice Awards that year, for Favorite New Comedy Series and Favorite Female in a New Series.[53] The

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[49] de Vries, "True Tales of TV Trauma" *Los Angeles Times*, September 4, 1994.
[50] de Vries, "True Tales of TV Trauma" *Los Angeles Times*, September 4, 1994.
[51] de Vries, "Funny Lady, TV Diva: Brett Butler Has Huge Feelings, Even Huger Stories to Tell," *Chicago Tribune*, September 18, 1994, sec. The Arts.
[52] de Vries, "True Tales of TV Trauma" *Los Angeles Times*, September 4, 1994.
[53] Harriet Winslow, "BRETT BUTLER: She's Turned Her Standup into the Amazing 'Grace,'" *The Washington Post*, March 20, 1994.

network, of course, profited from her popularity, raising advertising rates to an average of $200,000 per 30-second commercial.[54]

Butler channeled her capital as the lead of a successful sitcom to push for "bolder, less predictable story lines." Inspired by the risks Barr took on *Roseanne*, Butler urged producers "to make Grace more flawed and the show even more reality-based." Storylines in later seasons continued to deal with challenging emotional issues, such as Grace meeting the son that she had given up for adoption when she became pregnant as a teenager. Butler eschewed explicit feminist labels, stating that the term never occurred to her because she grew up in a women-only home. In press coverage related to *Grace Under Fire*, she identified herself as "post-feminist" as well as "post-post-feminist." She elaborated in one interview: "I think the biggest impact I can have is living my life along lines that push out boundaries for women, and I am frankly in a position to do that now."[55]

In a *Los Angeles Times* interview shortly before the season two premiere in 1994, Butler recalled a comment she made to executive producer Tom Werner that "the neat part of all of this" is "that I'm an interesting complicated woman and people don't hate me yet."[56] Though she sidestepped describing her intent as feminist, Butler sought to foreground Grace's complexity (as an extension of her own) in an artistic medium that she knew did not welcome such a quality in women. In fact, Butler lamented in the press that "no matter how complex a woman may be…her existence within a sitcom 'has to be redeemed by the presence of three fictitious children.'" Having chosen not to have children herself, Butler modeled this aspect of Grace's character on

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[54] de Vries, "True Tales of TV Trauma" *Los Angeles Times*, September 4, 1994.
[55] Winslow, "BRETT BUTLER: She's Turned Her Standup Into the Amazing 'Grace,'" *The Washington Post*, March 20, 1994.
[56] de Vries, "True Tales of TV Trauma" *Los Angeles Times*, September 4, 1994.

her own mother, who raised five daughters largely on her own.[57] Butler also pitched "grittier episodes that address such social issues as sexual harassment and latchkey children" in an attempt bring a true-to-life messiness to the public sphere of the sitcom.[58] Butler encouraged this direction for the show for the same reason that she joked about her abusive ex-husband and her dysfunctional childhood, rather than just the foibles of her friends and family: "I found that the things I thought was gonna kill me, were funny."[59]

Social and political forces outside of television facilitated Barr and Butler's efforts to publicize what had previously been confined to the private sphere, particularly with regard to popular awareness of domestic violence. Cultural recognition of the issue had been growing since the women's movement began campaigning to reform laws and law enforcement procedures in domestic violence cases in the mid-1970s.[60] But it reached new heights of awareness in the mid-1990s, in part due to three key events. In 1993, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, which defined and pledged to eradicate domestic violence. Importantly, the declaration clarified that the abuse of women and girls was not a personal nor family matter, but criminal violence that warranted prosecution. The murder of Nicole Brown Simpson in June of 1994, widely assumed to have been perpetrated by her ex-husband, former NFL superstar O.J. Simpson, and the ensuing trial, brought her years-long experience of spousal abuse to the nation's attention. And in September 1994, President Bill Clinton signed the Violence Against Women Act, which made

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[57] Winslow, "Brett Butler," *The Washington Post*, March 20, 1994.
[58] de Vries, "True Tales of TV Trauma" *Los Angeles Times*, September 4, 1994.
[59] Malkoff, "Brett Butler," October 13, 2016, in *The Carson Podcast*, podcast, MP3 audio, 51:00, https://carsonpodcast.com/brett-butler/.
[60] Elizabeth Hafkin Pleck, *Domestic Tyranny: The Making of Social Policy against Family Violence from Colonial Times to the Present*, (Oxford University Press, 1987), 182-200.

domestic abuse a federal crime and funded services aimed at prevention and victim support.[61] This climate of public acknowledgment of domestic violence as an issue that affected countless women, in the U.S. and around the world, eased the way for *Roseanne* and especially *Grace Under Fire* to deal with violence against women in a sustained, straightforward manner, rather than as material confined to one-off episodes. In turn, the sitcoms' portrayals of domestic violence and its aftermath offered a new vantage point from which the public could approach the issue.

Grace Under Fire made clear to audiences the challenging circumstances Grace faced, but it also showed them the attributes that helped Grace deal with those challenges, particularly, her intelligence. In Butler's stand-up routines, she would upend audience expectations by juxtaposing stories of her upbringing in an uneducated and ignorant community with quick-paced dialogue, filled with literary references and erudite vocabulary, all uttered in her thick Southern drawl. The same held true for Grace's character, albeit to a more moderate degree (the jokes about rednecks became less explicit, while mentions of Shakespeare replaced references to Rabelais). Butler remarked: "I'm always amused by the people who say, 'I just love it that she's so intelligent and working class.' There's a lot of intelligent poor people. It's not always some self-defeating economic mechanism."[62] The show's long-term depiction of an intellectually sophisticated woman battling unyielding economic forces from a disadvantaged social position invited audiences to observe and question the circumstances they were witnessing. It is one more way in which the show contested the norms that governed the public sphere.

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[61] Yarrow, *90s Bitch*, 243-244.
[62] de Vries, "True Tales of TV Trauma" *Los Angeles Times*, September 4, 1994. Brett Butler, *The Child Ain't Right*, Showtime, 1993. *Grace Under Fire*, "Pilot," September 29, 1993.

"I thought it was a great thing for the show, which desperately needed a point of view"

Like DeGeneres's act, *Ellen* did not set out to truth-tell the in the vein of *Roseanne* or *Grace Under Fire*. Ellen's storyline in the pilot, for example, concerns her struggles at the DMV to take an acceptable photograph for her driver's license. But in the fourth season, DeGeneres made the decision to come out as a lesbian both on the show and in real life, making history as the first television star to do so. As the star and the comic voice behind *Ellen*, there was no way to acknowledge her sexual orientation without integrating it into the very fabric of the show. The episode wherein Ellen Morgan admitted to her therapist that she was a lesbian and later accidentally announced her homosexuality into a microphone at a crowded airport gate (there still had to be sitcom hijinks) aired on April 30, 1997. It aired days after *TIME* magazine featured DeGeneres on the cover with the headline "Yep, I'm Gay."[63]

The coming-out episode itself played with private/public tensions: Ellen first comes out in the private space of therapy, then to her close friends, and then inadvertently into a microphone. ABC followed the episode with a special segment dedicated to DeGeneres, in which she and her parents discussed her sexual orientation and their relationship.[64] DeGeneres and her character had different experiences with homosexuality: DeGeneres had been out in her personal life for several years by 1997, whereas Ellen Morgan was only just coming to terms with her self-discovery. But the concurrent timing of the public announcements, combined with

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[63] *TIME*, April 14, 1997.
[64] Susan J. Hubert, "What's Wrong with This Picture? The Politics of Ellen's Coming Out Party," *Journal of Popular Culture* 33, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 33-34. *Ellen*, season 4, episode 22, "The Puppy Episode Part 1," Aired on April 29, 1997. *Ellen*, season 4, episode 23, "The Puppy Episode, Part 2" Aired on April 30, 1997.

the basic facts that the show and the character bore DeGeneres's first name, meant that the storyline indeed blurred the distinction between the two figures.[65]

The remaining two episodes of the fourth season and the entire fifth season primarily dealt with Ellen Morgan's adjustment to openly homosexual life and her efforts to date and sustain a romantic relationship.[66] *Ellen* was canceled by ABC at the end of its fifth season in 1998. Robert A. Iger, president of the network, explained that *Ellen* "became a program about a character who was gay every single week…that was too much for people." Cinema studies scholar Anna McCarthy argues, "Before *Ellen*, queerness was an interruptive, marginal force in the sitcom, its duration limited to one-off figures in 'very special' episodes and supporting characters." She and other critics of the cancellation have alleged that ABC supported *Ellen* when the show made history and pulled in ratings to match, but abandoned it when queerness became a regular, quotidian element of the show.[67]

Like Barr and Butler, Ellen DeGeneres rose to the top of the field during the stand-up boom of the 1980s and early 1990s. She started out as an emcee at a comedy club in her native New Orleans and in 1982 she was named the Funniest Person in America by Showtime. In 1986, she did her first set on *The Tonight Show*. Host Johnny Carson enjoyed her set so much that he invited her to the couch afterward to converse. An invitation to the couch was a major honor for

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[65] Hubert, "What's Wrong with This Picture?" 33-34.
[66] *Ellen*, season 4, episode 24, "Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah," Aired on May 6, 1997. *Ellen*, season 4, episode 25, "Moving On," Aired on May 13, 1997.
[67] Anna McCarthy, "ELLEN Making Queer Television History," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies* 7, no. 4 (October 2001): 597-599.

a *Tonight Show* comic and DeGeneres was the first (and only) female comic that Carson asked over. It launched her career to a new level overnight.[68]

DeGeneres took small parts on various television shows while headlining national comedy tours. After one of those shows was canceled, its creator Neal Marlens took DeGeneres up on her request to develop a show around her. The show, *These Friends of Mine*, premiered on ABC in 1994. It featured DeGeneres in the lead role and was billed as a female version of *Seinfeld* (a moniker that many gave to DeGeneres herself, given her style of clean, observational humor). But DeGeneres clarified that the show was not initially hers the way other comics' shows were: "It was an ensemble show, and then slowly it became my show."[69] During the first season, the original creative team left the show and new producers came in who helped the show finish its first year with top ratings. The new producers crafted the show more around DeGeneres's particular brand of observational humor, even renaming the show *Ellen* before its second season.[70] It followed Ellen Morgan, a Los Angeles bookstore owner, and her friends as they navigated their lives as single, urban thirty-somethings.

DeGeneres told *TIME* about her motivation for coming out: "I didn't do it to make a political statement. I did it selfishly for myself and because I thought it was a great thing for the show, which desperately needed a point of view."[71] In a 2002 interview, she maintained that she had not set out with a political agenda, telling Terry Gross of National Public Radio: "I'm not a

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[68] Delia Lloyd, "Ellen DeGeneres: Funny but so Much More," *The Washington Post* (blog), May 16, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/post/ellen-degeneres-funny-but-so-much-more/2012/05/16/gIQAceHBUU_blog.html. Kohen, *We Killed*, 203-204.
[69] Kohen, *We Killed*, 205.
[70] Sylvia Lawler Call The Morning, "'ELLEN' PRODUCER KNOWS THAT TOP 10 FEELING," mcall.com, accessed October 21, 2021, https://www.mcall.com/news/mc-xpm-1994-11-13-3006140-story.html. Kohen, *We Killed*, 205.
[71] Bruce Handy, "He Called Me Ellen DeGenerate?" *TIME*, April 14, 1997.

political person, I'm not an activist and I kind of got sucked into that role just…by being honest about my sexuality."[72] This attitude reflected an extension of DeGeneres's comedic philosophy. In her view, she did not base her act on specific elements of her identity, such as her sex, class, or sexual orientation, but instead strove for a more universal approach. Describing her material, DeGeneres stated, "I just started writing from the perspective of a human being and it had nothing to do with a female perspective, it was just a human perspective."[73]

In the process of expressing that human perspective, however, she found that she was forced to conceal a significant aspect of herself. Hiding her sexuality took a toll on DeGeneres and eventually her principal goal, she said, was to rid herself of that burden, to live truthfully.[74] Looking back in 2017, DeGeneres described the many warnings she received not to come out (from her publicist, from Disney, etc.) but she countered them, saying "There's nothing better than realizing that everybody knows exactly who I am."[75] While *Ellen* previously had not featured significant autobiographical material, the decision for Ellen to come out made something once traditionally understood as private (a non-hetero sexual orientation) unabashedly public. This effort to push at the boundaries of public sphere access was based in queer sexuality rather than feminist subjectivity, but it nonetheless involved a departure from the socially sanctioned performance of public womanhood.

The move by DeGeneres to include her sexual identity, one that deviated from the accepted norm, in her network television sitcom represented a pioneering effort to contest the

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[72] Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance*, 114.
[73] "The Comedian: Ellen DeGeneres," *TIME*/Firsts: Women Who Are Changing the World.
[74] Eric Marcus, "Ellen DeGeneres," November 2, 2017, in *Making Gay History*, (Interview conducted February 17, 2001), podcast, MP3 audio, 26:28, https://makinggayhistory.com/podcast/ellen-degeneres/
[75] "The Comedian: Ellen DeGeneres," *TIME*/Firsts: Women Who Are Changing the World.

boundaries of the public sphere. As theorists such as Michael Warner have argued, the notion of the closet, despite its private connotations, is very much a public construction.[76] DeGeneres challenged that construction directly by coming out in the most public of ways. Her show was slipping in popularity in the lead-up to her announcement, but she risked far more dire professional consequences by coming out. And those consequences that came to fruition: after the cancellation of *Ellen*, DeGeneres had no income and no offers. It was not until nearly two years later, when she started writing a new stand-up act and taking it on the road, that her career regained any momentum.[77]

From "All-American Girl" to "The One that I Want"

Margaret Cho's "All-American Girl," was the first sitcom in television history to center an Asian-American family. In its broadest terms, the show reflected the voice that Cho had honed on the stand-up stage: that of an American born-and-bred Gen-Xer who loved her traditional Korean family, but struggled to relate to them in many ways. Its storylines depicted Cho's character, Margaret Kim, as a young woman whose concerns ranged from a date for Saturday night to her relationship with her immigrant grandmother to the tension she felt between her American and Korean cultures. Though muddled by the demands of network executives who exerted creative control over much of the show, *All-American Girl* brought new dimensions of American womanhood to the attention of national audiences, particularly in terms of race (pushing beyond television's usual Black/white paradigm) and cultural conflict. Spotlighting a figure like Cho, who had never been allowed to claim such a culturally prominent role, pushed once more against the limits dictating who could assume authority in the public

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[76] Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 52.
[77] Kohen, *We Killed*, 207.

sphere of mass culture, and on what terms. Philip W. Chung, co-founder of *Yolk*, a magazine dedicated to Asian-American popular culture, wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* of the show's landmark status: "The most incredible thing about the series is that it even exists…the fact that a show revolving around an Asian American family is on the air is phenomenal."[78]

The show struggled to find a groove and ABC ultimately canceled the series in March 1995, at the end of its first season. Cho's coarse and irreverent act was a challenge to translate to a family sitcom, particularly one also concerned with racial representation. Critics panned the show for its lazy jokes and flat, stereotypical characters.[79] Reaction among the Asian-American community was mixed, at best, with many criticizing the inaccurate portrayal of Korean culture (for example, Margaret's parents arranged their house according to feng shui, a Chinese tradition) as well as the non-Korean cast, many of whom struggled with the bits of Korean dialogue they were given. They claimed that the network turned the Kims into a generically Asian family in an effort to make them palatable to white television audiences. Others argued that no single show was likely to please a population as large and diverse as the Asian-American community, and that the representation of Asian Americans on television was so important that the community should channel any complaints into constructive feedback while still supporting the program.[80]

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[78] Philip W. Chung, "A Positive Look at the Sitcom," *Los Angeles Times*, December 5, 1994, sec. Orange County.

[79] "20 Years Later, Margaret Cho Looks Back on 'All-American Girl,'" *Character Media* (blog), September 15, 2014, https://charactermedia.com/20-years-later-margaret-cho-looks-back-on-all-american-girl/. E. Alex Jung, "All-American Girl at 20: The Evolution of Asian Americans on TV," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, November 9, 2014, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/american-girl-20-evolution-asian-americans-tv/.

[80] Karen Kim, "'Will Margaret Cho's Depictions Reflect on My Own Family?': A Daughter of Immigrants Worries That the Stereotyped Comedy of 'All American Girl' Will Be Seen as Reality," *Los Angeles Times*, October 18, 1994, sec. Washington. Philip W. Chung, "A Positive Look at the Sitcom," *Los Angeles Times*, December 5, 1994, sec. Orange County. "Supporters

Press coverage of "All-American Girl" billed it as the next iteration in the trend of female comic-helmed sitcoms like those of Barr, Butler, and DeGeneres, except this time the comic was a woman of color. Significantly, though, Cho possessed much less creative control over her show than any of the other three comics (despite the "Based on the Stand-Up Comedy of Margaret Cho" credit at the end of episodes).[81] Cho later acknowledged that in her development deal with ABC, the network never offered her a role writing or producing, and that, particularly at the young age of 24, she didn't feel empowered to argue for one. She attributed the show's lack of success with her inability to shape the characters and storylines according to her own perspective: "It wasn't really what I did as a stand-up comedian. They had understood me as a performer wrongly."[82] She felt that if her character had been more "colorful and memorable," qualities that would result from her "unique voice," then the series would have made a stronger impression.[83]

Cho began developing her comic style at a young age. Born in 1968, Cho started performing when she was 16, doing sets at a comedy club located above the San Francisco bookstore that her parents ran. In her early twenties, she moved to Los Angeles and started touring on the college circuit, where she became extremely popular and garnered a nomination

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Call Margaret Cho a Pioneer," *Los Angeles Times*, March 27, 1995, sec. Calendar. Jung, "All-American Girl at 20," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, November 9, 2014, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/american-girl-20-evolution-asian-americans-tv/.

[81] Jung, "All-American Girl at 20," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, November 9, 2014, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/american-girl-20-evolution-asian-americans-tv/.

[82] "20 Years Later, Margaret Cho Looks Back on 'All-American Girl,'" *Character Media* (blog), September 15, 2014, https://charactermedia.com/20-years-later-margaret-cho-looks-back-on-all-american-girl/.

[83] Jon Matsumoto, "She Takes Failure Standing Up: Margaret Cho's Sitcom Bombed, but She Still Feels Superhuman at the Mike," *Los Angeles Times*, October 22, 1996, sec. Orange County.

for Campus Comedian of the Year.[84] At the age of 24, she won the American Comedy Award for Best Female Stand-Up. That same year, she performed at the prominent "Just for Laughs" comedy festival in Montreal; her crowd-pleasing act there led to her development deal with ABC.[85]

Cho's set in Montreal hints at what could have been if *All-American Girl* had amplified Cho's voice, rather than muffled it. She told of being on Star Search International, rather than the real Star Search because she's "so very…international." "They have a real problem with me because I look this way, but I talk this way," (implying that her Asian features and unaccented speaking voice did not correlate). Twice in the set she relates being mistaken for Chinese: once by a racist passerby in Alabama who hurled a racial slur at her, and once by the Star Search producers who asked her to be "more Chinese." Cho impersonates both her mother and grandmother in the appearance, and while those impersonations include their accents, the concerns each woman expresses are fairly universal: that Cho should attend church and that she should be wary of drugs in the entertainment industry. She also spoke of the tribulations of dating, material that had no particular connection to her ethnic heritage. One boyfriend said that if she broke up with him, he would kill himself. "I broke up with him, but he's not dead yet. I kinda want to call him up and go, y'know, what's the deal? I thought we had an agreement."[86] This line elicited laughs from the dark, seemingly callous nature of her response, but it drew attention to the manipulations a woman might encounter from a romantic partner. Cho won over

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[84] "Margaret Cho: Biography," Dead-Frog. https://www.dead-frog.com/comedians/comic/margaret-cho

[85] Jung, "All-American Girl at 20," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, November 9, 2014, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/american-girl-20-evolution-asian-americans-tv/.

[86] Margaret Cho, "Margaret Cho Stand Up – 1993" Just For Laughs, 1993. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34lLm_gFTEY

the audience with this set, amusing them by sharing her perspectives on a range of topics, but never hiding the reality that her perspective was informed by her identity as a Korean-American woman.

Cho had become a success through her stand up in traditional clubs and touring colleges, but she was also part of the alternative movement that her fellow comics in Los Angeles started in the early 1990s. After *All-American Girl* was canceled in 1995, Cho turned to the alt scene to redefine her act with darker and more authentic material. She described the contrast between standard comedy clubs and alternative venues: "what was popular in the late eighties/early nineties was a kind of observational humor where the joke-teller didn't have an identity—anyone could be the joke teller. Alternative comedy was more about the identity of the person telling the joke."[87] Cho knew alternative comedy was conducive space for the highly personal material she was putting together as she worked through the traumatic experience of her sitcom and its cancellation. There she developed what would become her 1999 award-winning off-Broadway show, *I'm the One That I Want*. The story of *All-American Girl* featured heavily in the show. She detailed her addiction to diet pills and resulting kidney failure, the racially insensitive demands of the network, and the pressure she faced from the Korean-American leaders to represent the community in a positive light. Cho's troubles continued past the cancellation of *All-American Girl*. *I'm the One That I Want*'s narrative ended a few years later with an alcoholic Cho resolving not to drink herself to death because of what others think or expect of her, but rather to try to succeed as herself.[88]

[87] Kohen, *We Killed*, 214.
[88] Margaret Cho, *I'm the One That I Want*, Cho Taussig Productions, 2001.

"We care about the whole sexual experience, not just the orgasm."

The story of alternative comedy begins with the birth of its most iconic showcase, the *UnCabaret*. As discussed at the end of chapter two, performance artist and comic Beth Lapides originated "UnCabaret," the show that became the mainstay of the alternative movement, in 1991. After performing one night at the Woman's Building (an experimental space in Los Angeles dedicated to exploring feminism through art), Lapides took note of the palpable joy in the audience's laughter. She asked them when the last time they laughed had been. They told her, "We don't laugh. We're women, we're artists and we're lesbians. At comedy clubs they make fun of us." This comment reverberated with Lapides, who had been growing dissatisfied with stultifying comedy stages and had recently found herself incensed at the misogyny she witnessed in popular comic Andrew Dice Clay's act. Misogyny and homophobia constituted the majority of shock-comic Clay's repertoire, but he was not an exception in the comedy scene at this time. Popular stand-ups Eddie Murphy and Sam Kinison also incorporated macho posturing and explicitly anti-woman material in their acts.[89] Their provocative language elicited a great deal of cultural hand-wringing, which seemingly only furthered their careers. Fuming at both Clay and the audience that laughed at his material, Lapides had already begun searching for, as she put it, "a better way," when she encountered the Woman's Building audience that night.[90]

Lapides set out to make a comedy show where feminists felt welcome, rather than antagonized. She billed the occasion as un-homophobic, un-misogynist, un-xenophobic…the

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[89] David Peisner, "How a Bookstore Became the Unlikely Birthplace of Alt-Comedy," *Vulture*, May 21, 2021, https://www.vulture.com/article/big-and-tall-the-unlikely-bookstore-birthplace-of-alt-comedy.html.

[90] Beth Lapides, "Beth Lapides Reveals How UnCabaret Managed to Reach Its 25th Birthday," *LA Weekly*, October 19, 2018, https://www.laweekly.com/beth-lapides-reveals-how-uncabaret-managed-to-reach-its-25th-birthday/.

UnCabaret.[91] She first hosted the *UnCabaret* at the Woman's Building on International Women's Day. It was successful and Lapides continued to stage the show for years to come, featuring an array of comics and eventually finding a home for it in the basement of Luna Park, a club in West Hollywood.

Two other early shows helped launch alternative comedy, first the Wednesday-night shows in 1991-1992 at indie book store Big & Tall Books and then Janeane Garofalo and Kathy Griffin's *Hot Cup of Talk*. The new genre reinvigorated the comedy field. Though many comics came to the scene because of shrinking opportunities for performing stand-up on mainstream stages with comedy clubs closing across the nation (Garofalo later said, "We were doing it because a lot of us couldn't get stage time. At the time, I thought of it more as a failure of my own. It didn't occur to me… 'Let's start a new movement!'"), their work in alternative comedy led to the creation of a thriving comedy community. By 1994, the *Los Angeles Times* ran an "Alternative Amusement" notice that listed seven weekly alternative comedy shows at various venues across the city.[92] Alt com spread across the country, with shows popping up in cities like San Francisco, Chicago, and New York. The audiences were made up of fellow comics, comedy fans, and rising and established stars in the entertainment industry, such as *The Simpsons*' creator Matt Groening, director Quentin Tarantino, and comic/actor Robin Williams.[93] More than anything else, attendees were people who enjoyed comedy and wanted a change from the same

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[91] The title of the show varies between UnCabaret and Un-Cabaret in different records since its 1991 founding. UnCabaret is used here as it is the current spelling of the title as of 2021.
[92] "Alternative Amusement," *Los Angeles Times*, July 8, 1994, sec. Orange County.
[93] Beth Lapides, "Beth Lapides Reveals How UnCabaret Managed to Reach Its 25th Birthday," *LA Weekly*, October 19, 2018, https://www.laweekly.com/beth-lapides-reveals-how-uncabaret-managed-to-reach-its-25th-birthday/. "UNCABARET 25th Anniversary Show & Celebration," Kickstarter, September 8, 2018. https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/2068740547/uncabaret-25th-anniversary-show-and-celebration

old club routines they felt they had heard a thousand times before. Though, in the case of the shows at unconventional venues, audiences also included the customers who happened to be patronizing the bookstore, coffee shop, or laundromat in question.

Alternative comics built an audience for performances characterized by emotional vulnerability and absurdist metacommentary, both of which had all but disappeared during the club boom of the 1980s. Skits with multiple characters, a capella songs and free verse poetry, and flat-out stunts became commonplace. (Andy Dick giving himself a nosebleed on stage was memorable for many.)[94] But comics' confessional narratives, like Cho's detailing of her experience behind the scenes at *All-American Girl*, remained at the core of the genre. The autobiographical and confessional elements of alternative comedy emerged from the desire of Lapides and other comics to deal openly with the difficult aspects of life, rather than paper over them for a laugh. Lapides explained, "I want it to be comedy that acknowledges the horror of the world that we're living in. It's not escapist, it lightens your load. You feel relieved without feeling like you've escaped."[95] One of the show's mottos read: "Good entertainment for a nasty world."[96] The combination of deeply personal comedy with a determined refusal to ignore harsh truths enabled feminist comics to share unsavory realities and voice their discontent.

The prominent role of women comics in the movement, as performers and show organizers, was conspicuous when compared with the male-dominated club scene and the

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[94] David Peisner, "How a Bookstore Became the Unlikely Birthplace of Alt-Comedy," *Vulture*, May 21, 2021, https://www.vulture.com/article/big-and-tall-the-unlikely-bookstore-birthplace-of-alt-comedy.html.
[95] Ed Karvoski, Jr. "Beth Lapides: The Un and Only Candidate for First Lady," Feb. 9, 1994. Comedians 1900-2012, Lesbian Legacy Collection Subject Files, Coll2009-004, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California.
[96] "Good Entertainment for a Nasty World," Press Release. Comedians 1900-2012, ONE Subject File collection, Coll2012-001, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California. See also "Un-Cabaret" flyer from same collection.

mainstream popularity of shock comics like Clay and Kinison.[97] Cho reflected on the significant role female comics played in creating a friendlier atmosphere at alternative shows: "Comedy in general is such a boys' club. But in alternative comedy you were seeing women so much more; we were creating for women, and so I think it avoided that."[98] It was not that alternative comedy was dominated by women, like the feminist circuit of the women's culture scene, but that women constituted an important part of alt com's community, both as performers originating the new form and audience members who subscribed to its philosophy.

The welcoming atmosphere that characterized *UnCabaret* and other alternative comedy shows functioned as a subaltern counterpublic for performers and audience members who saw their identities neglected or attacked in mainstream comedy venues. Characteristic of a counterpublic, participants created "alternative styles of political behavior and alternatives norms of public speech."[99] In this case, alt com's loose structure constituted an alternative type of public speech, while the genre's emphasis on interrogating challenging topics reflected an alternative style of political behavior that community members developed. These new styles and norms originated largely in response to the restrictions comics encountered in comedy clubs, ones many comics found stifling and reductive.

Unimpressed with and frustrated by the setup-punchline jokes and carefully rehearsed acts of club comedians (alt comics frequently decried the standard club rule of one laugh every seven seconds and often described club comedy as "stale"), *UnCabaret* promotional materials expanded the show's tagline to read "guaranteed un-hack comedy for audiences un-satisfied with

[97] Peisner, "How a Bookstore…" *Vulture*, May 21, 2021.
[98] David Peisner, "How a Bookstore…" *Vulture*, May 21, 2021.
[99] Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 61.

the stand-up available on TV and in mainstream comedy clubs."[100] Lapides, for her part, wanted to recreate the feeling of laughing with her friends on the phone. She encouraged long stories and asked performers questions from her perch in the audience to help shape and clarify the unpracticed bits the comics were sharing onstage. The goal was to find humor, or any other desired reaction, along the way rather than just at the culmination. Or as Lapides phrased it: "We care about the whole sexual experience, not just the orgasm."[101] This pithy description of *UnCabaret*'s ethos, with its evocation of female sexuality and its repudiation of punchline-driven styles in favor of a more holistic approach, speaks to the show's fundamental basis in the tenets of feminist humor.

Alternative comedy provided a space for many performers who felt marginalized by the aggressive and traditionally masculine spaces of comedy club, not just female comics. An *UnCabaret* fundraising pitch, for example, read: "UnCabaret has never been a 'women's show.' Even at the Women's Building. But we have always been feminist."[102] Terry Sweeney, the first openly gay cast member of *Saturday Night Live* (in 1985-1986), felt unwelcome in regular clubs but found *UnCabaret* a cathartic space where he could tell audiences the painful yet amusing story of being forced to repeatedly come out to his boyfriend's mother while caring for her as she

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[100] "Good Entertainment for a Nasty World," Press Release. Comedians 1900-2012, ONE Subject File collection, Coll2012-001, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California. Chuck Crisafulli, "No Joking, Just a Lot of Laughing: Comedy: Offbeat Stand-up Is Moving from Clubs to Cable. Just Don't Go Looking for a Punch Line," *Los Angeles Times,* July 17, 1995, sec. Washington.
[101] Comedians 1900-2012, ONE Subject File collection, Coll2012-001, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California.
[102] "UNCABARET 25th Anniversary Show & Celebration," Kickstarter, September 8, 2018. https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/2068740547/uncabaret-25th-anniversary-show-and-celebration

suffered from Alzheimer's.[103] Alternative comedy situated feminism at its core, but not as its sole defining element. As noted, Lapides included the terms un-homophobic and un-xenophobic alongside un-misogynistic in the initial pitch for *UnCabaret*. This drive to inculcate a diverse, polyvocal community reflects the emphasis on intersectionality and multiple perspectives professed by those identifying as third wave feminists in this period.

Straight, white, cisgender male comics were a part of the scene too. Comics like Patton Oswalt, David Cross, Bob Odenkirk, and Greg Behrendt found value in the mission of alternative comics, as Oswalt put it, "to dig deeper into some of the more emotional, real-life aspects of how you got to that joke." They explored the conflicts in their marriages and traumatic childhood episodes, many concerning their relationships with their fathers. Several of these comics attributed their impetus to interrogate masculinity to their experiences sharing the stage with a sizeable number of female and queer comics. Comic Greg Behrendt, for example, created his show "Mantastic," an exploration of mid-1990s masculinity, at *UnCabaret* after going through a break-up, getting sober, and reflecting more deeply on his own gender identity.[104]

The new genre drew critics, of course, particularly those fond of more traditional comedic styles. One Los Angeles-area critic wrote in *Variety*, "over-cutely touting itself an 'UnCabaret,' [the] show promised an evening of 'un-' comedy for audiences bored by hack stand-ups." He continued, stating, the show "delivered three mediocre yuksters spinning self-indulgent tales of love, life and urban earthquake blight…Some comics might praise this as cutting-edge humor that doesn't operate on plain old joke-telling, but rather riffs along musical

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[103] C. Brian Smith, "The Alt-Comedy Show That Made Patton Oswalt and Bob Odenkirk (Among Others) Better Men," *MEL Magazine* (blog), November 20, 2018, https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/the-alt-comedy-show-that-made-patton-oswalt-and-bob-odenkirk-among-others-better-men.

[104] C. Brian Smith, "The Alt-Comedy Show…" *MEL Magazine* (blog), November 20, 2018.

lines. Others would just call it dull."[105] This sort of denigration, from someone outside the community writing in a mainstream media publication, was common. By virtue of their oppositional stances, counterpublics frequently experience excoriation and exclusion at the hands of those invested in upholding dominant social structures such as, in this case, mainstream comic discourse.[106]

The genre's dual emphasis on soul-baring content and innovative structure fueled the notion that alternative comedy constituted the forefront of comedy in the mid-1990s. A 1994 press release announcing an open-ended run for the *UnCabaret* at Luna Park in Los Angeles (after a recent spate of standing-room-only shows) highlighted the fact that many of the show's top performers had achieved mainstream markers of success – TV appearances, national tours – but boasted that it was only at *UnCabaret* that they could really be truthful and push boundaries:

> The adventurous audiences at the Un-Cabaret demand a real alternative to jokes about 7-11's and blind-dates. And they find it in the Un-Cabaret's cutting-edge comedy about alienation, addiction, the superhighway of information, gay rights, the PC police, violence, drugs, spirituality and other mind-boggling and inescapable aspects of our pre-millenial [sic] society.[107]

Critics noted the emphasis on brutal honesty as well. A review of the show at one of New York's alt com stages, Surf Reality, was mixed but noted: "Painful personal experiences, mixing poignancy and punch lines, animate some of the better material."[108] The reviewer highlighted

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[105] Dan Cox, "The Uncabaret," *Variety* (blog), March 1, 1994, https://variety.com/1994/legit/reviews/the-uncabaret-1200436514/.
[106] Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 61.
[107] "Good Entertainment for a Nasty World," Press Release. Comedians 1900-2012, ONE Subject File collection, Coll2012-001, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles, California.
[108] James S. Hirsch, "Alternative Comedy: Laughs on the Edge," *Wall Street Journal*, July 24, 1996.

comic Sharon Houston to elaborate on this point and explain what differentiated alternative comedy:

> At regular clubs, Ms. Houston describes the true experience of driving off a cliff in Virginia after she fell asleep at the wheel. The riff focuses on her injuries and recuperation. At Surf Reality, she tells the audience how her parents assumed, incorrectly, she had been drunk, and the anger she felt until her parents apologized. 'I'm allowed to be a lot more vulnerable here,' the 26-year-old says.[109]

While many comics appreciated the ability to express vulnerability, avoid hostile heckling, and enjoy audiences that were open to unusual performance styles, others were opposed to what they saw as an environment prone to coddling. Even frequent alt com performers referred to the setting as "womb-like" for its gentleness.[110] Opponents questioned the fundamental premise of a space safe for a comedy show. (Lapides later summed up their reaction thusly: "Oh, people hated [it]. 'Why should it be safe?'")[111] They felt that without the risk of failure onstage, a performer could not tell if their material had merit. Yet others saw both sides: comic Laurie Kilmartin disliked that the audiences felt too hand-picked, too safe, but acknowledged that performers were able to experiment there as a result.[112]

This debate over the optimal sense of safety in the alt com scene reflects a duality inherent to subaltern counterpublics. Fraser writes, "on the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics." The tension is not necessarily an

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[109] Hirsch, "Alternative Comedy: Laughs on the Edge," *Wall Street Journal*, July 24, 1996.
[110] Beth Lapides, "Julia Sweeney" January 27, 2016, in *Life and Beth*, podcast, MP3 audio, 26:02. https://podbay.fm/p/life-and-beth/e/1453882537.
[111] Judy Gold, "262: Beth Lapides (Part II)," July 27, 2020, in *Kill Me Now with Judy Gold,* podcast, MP3 audio, 56:00. https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/262-beth-lapides-part-ii/id992129589?i=1000486340334.
[112] Jackie Kashian and Laurie Kilmartin, "We Don't Want Your Feedback," March 7, 2016, in *The Jackie & Laurie Show*, podcast, MP3 audio, 01:04:00, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-jackie-and-laurie-show/id1071731361.

unproductive one, however. Fraser locates the emancipatory potential of subaltern counterpublics squarely in this dialectic.[113] This dynamic shows itself in the work of performers who developed pieces in the alternative scene and then brought them to mainstream comedy and theater, such as comic Julia Sweeney.

Sweeney began assembling her one-woman show *God Said Ha!* at the *UnCabaret* and *Hot Cup of Talk* in 1995. It detailed her experience with cervical cancer, with which she was diagnosed while caring for her brother who was dying of lymphatic cancer. ("Sympathy cancer," her brother joked.) Sweeney spoke about taboo topics like how cervical cancer affected her sex life and political realities like how her brother's cancer might have been caught earlier if he had had health insurance and could afford medical care. The alt com ethos allowed her to feel safe telling the embarrassing and painful parts of her story – without that sense of security, she claims, she never would have created *God Said Ha!*.[114]

Sweeney, an alum of The Groundlings (a prominent improvisational comedy group in Los Angeles) best known for portraying the androgynous "Pat" on *Saturday Night Live* from 1990-1994, had always performed behind the veneer of characters, but alternative stages inspired her to open up about her day-to-day life. She told *Entertainment Weekly*: "The thing that was so revelatory for me about the Un-Cab was that I could get laughs with things I thought would only be funny to my friend Wendy."[115] As with the opening example of the pre-date scene from *Grace Under Fire*, here we see female comics blurring the line between the heterosocial public

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[113] Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 67-68.
[114] Lapides, "Julia Sweeney" January 27, 2016, in *Life and Beth*, podcast, MP3 audio, 26:02. https://podbay.fm/p/life-and-beth/e/1453882537.
[115] Chris Willman, "Come to 'Un-Cabaret'," *Entertainment Weekly*, August 15, 1997. From Larry Mintz Collection (1954-2005), US MBE ACC-MSS 007, Box 4, Folder 23. American Comedy Archives, Emerson College.

sphere and the homosocial private sphere. In this instance, Sweeney developed the show in "womb-like" alternative comedy venues, but took it to broader audiences, including a Broadway run as well as a film adaptation produced by Tarantino and distributed by Miramax. The play and film both garnered awards and the audio recording earned a Grammy nomination for Best Spoken Comedy Album in 1997. *God Said Ha!* stands as an example of a discursive text that originated in the confines of the alternative comedy counterpublic, then made its way to mainstream media where it brought a new voice to the conversation, one that spoke of painful political realities and intimate female experiences from a personal perspective.

Conclusion

The trend of feminist comics confronting public audiences with topics previously deemed private, one present both at the center of the commercial comedy industry and in the avant-garde movement at its fringes, reveals the ardor with which feminist comics claimed their rights to full participation in public life and cultural production in the 1990s. Unlike their comedy predecessors, they would not settle for the siloed spaces of the women's movement or the partial and contingent inclusion that female club comics experienced. They used their platforms to contest the boundaries of common concern and to argue for the inclusion of those who had been excluded as they had.

The stand-up-helmed sitcom and alternative comedy both faded in cultural prominence as the twentieth century came to a close. Just as comedy clubs across the country had shuttered earlier in the decade, the glut of comic-led sitcoms began to shrink. Where network executives had previously tried to emulate the success of *The Cosby Show* or *Roseanne*, they now sought to produce the next *Friends*. Additionally, the importance of the sitcom itself began to falter as reality programming surged in popularity. Much cheaper to produce, networks devoted resources

to shows like *Survivor* (2000-) and *Big Brother* (2000-), leaving fewer slots for scripted comedy. Where television shows originated by stand-ups did reemerge was on cable and streaming channels in the 2010s, during the next comedy resurgence fueled by the internet and social media. This time around, the comics behind programs like *Louie* (2010-2015), *Inside Amy Schumer* (2013-2022), *Master of None* (2015-2021), *One Mississippi* (2015-2017), and *Insecure* (2016-2021), enjoyed much greater creative autonomy over their shows, which in turn were far less formulaic than twentieth-century network sitcoms.

Alternative comedy shows continued, on and off, in cities large enough to support a thriving comedy scene. In fact, the novelty of alternative comedy wore off largely because its most successful performers crossed over into mainstream film and television. By 2009, journalists were observing how blurred the lines had become between the two arenas that, 15 years earlier, had felt much more distant. Comic Sarah Silverman, who had achieved success in both realms at that point, claimed, "It used to be that alternative comedy was alternative to something. It really isn't anymore." Comics like Silverman, Garofalo, Odenkirk, Cross, and others went on to make a variety of television series, comedy specials, and films that found admiring audiences and influenced future comics.[116]

The comedy landscape changed greatly in the early decades of the twenty-first century: political satire took on new significance amid the War on Terror; social media apps like Twitter and YouTube made content creation easier than ever; and the rise of streaming platforms represented the greatest increase in production opportunities since the advent of cable television. The work that feminist comics began in the 1990s, to bring their full selves into their comedy

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[116] Gina Piccalo, "Alt Comedy is the New Mainstream," *Los Angeles Times*, August 30, 2009. https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-ca-comedy-pipeline30-2009aug30-story.html

and to refuse efforts to curtail their expression, continued to reverberate through these transformations, helped along by later generations of stand-ups who took up the mantle in their stead.

Conclusion

In 2015, comic Tig Notaro filmed her HBO special, *Tig Notaro: Boyish Girl Interrupted*, in Boston. Like Robin Tyler at the 1979 Michigan Women's Music Festival in the introduction, she told of her experience being mistaken for a man by a law enforcement officer. In Notaro's case, she was going through airport security when a male Transportation Security Agency (TSA) officer indicated that she required a pat-down inspection and called for a female TSA officer to undertake it. The female officer began the pat-down but when she felt Notaro's torso and noticed her flat chest and lack of a bra, she walked back to the male officer, presumably thinking that Notaro was in fact a man and that he should do the pat-down instead. The already-androgynous looking Notaro had previously explained to the audience that she was diagnosed with breast cancer three years earlier and had since undergone a double mastectomy, with no reconstructive surgery afterward. Despite the male officer's assurance that Notaro was indeed female, the female officer continued to exhibit doubt. Notaro relayed every step of the interaction with clear delight, eventually admitting to the audience:

> And the thing is, I knew exactly what was happening. And I knew that all I need to do was speak, and then she would know that I was female. But I just did not wanna help her out…at all. I was enjoying the awkwardness so much. I just loved standing there like [mimes shrugging her shoulders, with a "what are you gonna do?" expression] …She finally came back over and said, 'you're good.'

Notaro further reveled in the uncomfortable situation, putting on an artificially deep voice to say thank you as she walked away, just to add to the officer's confusion. After concluding the story, Notaro proceeded to remove her shirt and perform the final twenty minutes of her act topless, with her mastectomy scars on full display. She received raucous cheers from the audience, but

refrained from commenting on her action, instead merely moving on to the well-trod comedy territory of air travel.[1]

Where Tyler, a pioneer in the field of feminist comedy, claimed ownership over the story of the challenge to her womanhood before a sequestered audience of festival-going feminists on a campground in rural Michigan (a sizable portion of whom identified as butch lesbians, like Tyler), Notaro recounted her experience before a mixed-gender crowd at the Wilbur Theatre in the heart of Boston, while filming her special (which she also directed) for a prominent cable channel. In baring her chest, a significant source of the gender confusion she caused, Notaro demonstrated the lack of shame she felt about failing to meet the expectations of womanhood and invited the audience to celebrate it with her. Notaro's bit represented a continuation of Tyler's from 36 years prior, but the stark contrast in the venues, audiences, and distributions of their respective performances illustrates the degree to which feminist comedy infiltrated the mainstream of the industry in the early decades of the twenty-first century.

The growth of feminist comedy, and its biggest stars, has not been without its conflicts and downfalls. As the genre has flourished, it has also fractured and fragmented, due to a variety of factors such as changes to how Americans consume comedy and shifting cultural politics. What had once been a mass audience for network television splintered into a multitude of micro-audiences for cable and streaming channels, often divided along demographic or partisan lines.[2] Contemporary comics engage in fierce debates regarding censorship: is it appropriate for the

[1] Tig Notaro, "Tig Notaro: Boyish Girl Interrupted," *HBO*, 2015.

[2] Rick Porter, "TV Long View: Five Years of Network Ratings Declines in Context," *The Hollywood Reporter* (blog), September 21, 2019, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/five-years-network-ratings-declines-explained-1241524/. Shane Savitsky, "Two Americas, Tuning Each Other out: Political Polarization Extends to Our TV Choices," *Axios*, August 31, 2019, https://www.axios.com/2019/08/31/television-political-polarization-succession-wwe-raw.

comedy stage to function as a safe space or is a stand-up's "freedom to outrage," as veteran feminist comic Judy Gold terms it, sacred?[3] Giants in the field have come crashing down, as twentieth-century icons Ellen DeGeneres and Roseanne Barr both suffered severe public rebuke for misdeeds that left them out of step with the rest of the genre.

Following the 1998 cancellation of her eponymous sitcom, DeGeneres struggled for several years to rebuild her career as an openly lesbian comic. But she brought new life to her career by pivoting into daytime television, launching *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* in 2003. Soon, DeGeneres had become the undisputed queen of daytime, beloved by broad audiences for her sunny disposition, lighthearted wit, and numerous charitable acts. Many in the LGBTQ community took pride in her success and mass appeal, particularly as it coincided with a targeted effort by conservatives to deny the legalization of same-sex marriage rights. However, others came to feel betrayed by DeGeneres, as they feared that she began to value her own financial and professional success over the fight to end discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. In 2019, DeGeneres was seen attending a professional football game in a private box alongside former President George W. Bush, under whose leadership the Republican Party had spearheaded its opposition to same-sex marriage.[4] Then, in 2020, allegations about a toxic work environment on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* surfaced, claiming that the executive producers had for years overseen a culture rife with abuse, bullying, and racism, one for which DeGeneres, as

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[3] Matthew Wexler, "Judy Gold Has Choice Words for Both Sides of the Political Aisle, and Most of Them Are Four Letters," LGBTQ Nation, April 7, 2023, https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2023/04/judy-gold-has-choice-words-for-both-sides-of-the-political-aisle-and-most-of-them-are-four-letters/.
[4] Matt Brennan, "How Ellen Won, and Then Lost, a Generation of Viewers," Los Angeles Times, May 20, 2022, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/tv/story/2022-05-20/ellen-degeneres-show-end-dakota-johnson-kevin-hart-george-w-bush.

the star and host, was ultimately responsible.[5] Despite apologies and vows to do better by both DeGeneres and the production staff, public opinion soured and the show's ratings dipped, leading to its end in 2022 and generally tarnishing DeGeneres's professional reputation.[6]

Roseanne Barr faced a similarly uneven road following the end of *Roseanne* in 1998. Of her various projects after *Roseanne* –a daytime talk show, sitcom pilots, a reality show, even a third-party presidential bid in 2012 – none found their footing. She started drawing attention for a long pattern of baseless and inflammatory Twitter posts, including conspiracy theories as well as racist and homophobic content.[7] In 2016, she publicly supported Donald Trump for President. Her conservative-leaning behavior constituted a marked shift from the decidedly leftist views that had previously influenced her working-class feminist approach to comedy, but her decades of brash and erratic behavior rendered her political transformation unremarkable to many. Nevertheless, public affection for *Roseanne* remained and, amid the era's flood of film and television reboots, ABC ordered a tenth season of the show, which premiered in March 2018 with the highest ratings of any new show in the 2017-2018 season.[8]

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[5] Krystie Lee Yandoli, "Former Employees Say Ellen's 'Be Kind' Talk Show Mantra Masks A Toxic Work Culture," BuzzFeed News, July 17, 2020, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/krystieyandoli/ellen-employees-allege-toxic-workplace-culture.

[6] Andrew Lawrence, "Ellen DeGeneres Walks Away from Her Talkshow Empire and Leaves behind a Mixed Legacy," *The Guardian*, May 27, 2022, sec. Television & radio, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2022/may/27/ellen-degeneres-final-talk-show.

[7] Natalie Finn, "What Happened to Roseanne Barr: When Traumatic Struggles, Heady Success and a History of Saying Anything Met Twitter," E! Online, May 31, 2018, https://www.eonline.com/news/940162/what-happened-to-roseanne-barr-when-traumatic-struggles-heady-success-and-a-history-of-saying-anything-met-twitter. Billy Nilles, "On Roseanne and the Difficulty of Separating the Art From the Artist," E! Online, April 3, 2018, https://www.eonline.com/news/924649/on-roseanne-and-the-difficulty-of-separating-the-art-from-the-artist.

[8] Yohana Desta, "The Roseanne Reboot Completely Smashed Ratings Expectations," *Vanity Fair*, March 28, 2018, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/03/roseanne-reboot-ratings-premiere.

Like Barr, the character of Roseanne proclaimed her political support for Trump. The disagreements that resulted between Roseanne and her still-liberal sister and daughter made up an integral component of the rebooted show, an attempt to reflect the partisan division that characterized the contemporary American electorate. Barr's involvement with the show ended abruptly in 2018, however, following a message she posted to Twitter about Valerie Jarrett, the former advisor to President Barack Obama, that the public widely condemned for its racist connotations. Initially, ABC canceled the show, but a few weeks later the network announced that a new version of the show would return to the air that fall. *The Conners* (2018-) would center on the rest of the Connor family in the wake of Roseanne's death, later depicted as the result of an opioid overdose.[9] Barr tried to alleviate the reputational damage she wrought with the tweet, noting that she was unaware of Jarrett's race and that she posted the message while under the influence of sleep medication, but her efforts met with little success.[10] In 2023, she took to the stand-up stage to share her perspective and air her grievances in a Fox Nation (the streaming service for Fox News) special titled, *Cancel This!* In it, she decried that of all the comics who had been "canceled," such as Louis CK and Dave Chappelle, she experienced the harshest consequences and was the only one fired solely for speech, rather than abusive acts.[11]

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[9] Savannah Walsh, "Roseanne Barr on Being Canceled: 'I'm the Only Person Who's Lost Everything,'" *Vanity Fair*, February 10, 2023, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2023/02/roseanne-barr-on-being-canceled-im-the-only-person-whos-lost-everything.

[10] Bill Chappell, "Roseanne Barr Says Ambien Played Role In Racist Tweet That Spiked Her Show's Reboot," *NPR*, May 30, 2018, sec. The Two-Way, https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/05/30/615421269/roseanne-barr-says-ambien-played-role-in-racist-tweet-that-spiked-her-shows-rebo.

[11] Greg Braxton, "'It Was a Witch-Burning': Roseanne May Forgive Hollywood, but She'll Never Forget," Los Angeles Times, February 9, 2023, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/tv/story/2023-02-09/roseanne-barr-fox-nation-cancel-this. Walsh, "Roseanne Barr on Being Canceled" *Vanity Fair*, February 10, 2023,

DeGeneres and Barr both rose to fame in an entertainment industry that, while centered around a straight, white, male perspective and generally reluctant to include those that fell outside its norm, was still growing more liberal in terms of diversity and inclusion. As chapter four showed, DeGeneres and Barr each played a significant role in that process, fighting to expand the boundaries that determined who could tell their stories on television and what stories they could tell. As a result, they became icons of the feminist and gay rights' movements, respectively, in the final years of the twentieth century. However, those movements grew more emboldened as the twenty-first century went on and neither DeGeneres nor Barr endured as cultural touchstones at the forefront of their battles. Like so many social movement groundbreakers before them, they found themselves surpassed and repudiated by succeeding generations.

The diverse generation of feminist-minded comic stars that emerged in the 2010s, of whom Notaro is one, features comics such as Amy Schumer, Ali Wong, Hannah Gadsby, Michelle Wolf, Issa Rae, Iliza Schlesinger, Patti Harrison, Ilana Glazer, Jen Kirkman, Phoebe Robinson, Aparna Nancherla, River Butcher, Hari Kondabolu, and Cameron Esposito, among many others. This cohort includes comics of color, gay and lesbian comics, trans and nonbinary comics, and immigrant comics, as well as straight male comics. Through specials, sketch shows, sitcoms, scripted films, documentaries, and animation, they produce innovative comedy that reflects their subjective experiences of the world, bringing a plethora of new perspectives to the industry.

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https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2023/02/roseanne-barr-on-being-canceled-im-the-only-person-whos-lost-everything.

Lesbian comic Cameron Esposito released a 2018 special titled *Rape Jokes*. It details her own experience with sexual assault and the culture that surrounds it, and its proceeds went to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network.[12] Indian-American comic Hari Kondabolu's 2014 album, *Waiting for 2042*, centered on his perspective as a racial minority anticipating the projected year when whites will no longer make up the majority of the country's population. It features his "feminist dick joke" that illustrates why, contrary to the stereotype, he feels men are less suited to serve as president of the United States than women (contending that men's sexual urges impede their judgment more frequently than any hormonal fluctuations affect the judgement of women).[13] Ali Wong made history by filming her first special, *Baby Cobra* (2016), while nearly eight months pregnant. In it, she offered a satirical tirade against feminism, arguing that she would rather stay home than work ("I don't want to lean in! I want to LAY DOWN!"); told stories of her then-husband and family that were grounded in their multi-ethnic Asian-American identities; and shared the gritty realities of pregnancy and childbirth, mocking male comics who mine the early stages of fatherhood for material when their wives are the ones engaging in bodily labor.[14] The body-clinging dress she wore on stage, to make her pregnancy abundantly clear to audiences, will soon be on display at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

Today's feminist comics still face many of the same obstacles that their predecessors encountered – fewer booking opportunities, hostile audiences – as well as the more recent threat of internet harassment, but the concept of feminist comedy is no longer a foreign one to most

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[12] Jesse David Fox, "The Comedian Who Is Taking Rape Jokes Back for Survivors," *Vulture*, May 28, 2018, https://www.vulture.com/2018/05/cameron-esposito-rapes-jokes-survivors-sexual-assault.html.
[13] Hari Kondabolu, *Waiting for 2042*, Kill Rock Stars KRS587, 2014.
[14] Ali Wong, "Ali Wong, Baby Cobra," *Netflix*, 2016.

audiences nor one isolated to the fringes of the field. Comics from Sophie Tucker to Elayne Boosler to Tig Notaro helped transform the stand-up stage into a space where women could claim their full rights to cultural expression and authority. Such transformation was evident the day after the United States Supreme Court issued its ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022) that struck down the constitutional right to abortion. That evening, in a parking lot in North Hollywood, a standing-room-only crowd gathered to witness ten comics from the "Pro Roe Tour" grapple with the decision and help the audience use humor to process the historic development. Headliner Iliza Schlesinger described the purpose of the comedy show (in addition to raising funds for Texas' Equal Access Fund): "If there was ever a moment to unleash and be unabashed, it's this one."[15]

The rise of feminist comedy in American culture has not been linear or straightforward, but it nevertheless reveals how, in the years during and after women's liberation, feminist stand-ups contested the cultural prescriptions that inhibited their conduct and expression and claimed the right to participate fully in the cultural life of the nation. In other words, how they stood up in public to unleash their unabashed selves. And how they had a hell of a lot of fun doing it.

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[15] Charisma Madarang, Jake Kroeger, and Ali Lerman, "'I Want to Scream': Stand-up Comics around L.A. Rally Onstage over Roe Decision," Los Angeles Times, June 27, 2022, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2022-06-27/la-comics-rally-over-roe-decision.

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