

# **Coming to the Stage: Identity, Performance, and Persona in Women's Comedy**

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## **Abstract**

What if the real you is just a performance? What if the way you laugh, dance, or even speak is a learned behavior? That is, “what if” is a reality. Gender is performative, but can a gendered performance be layered onto an onstage one? This thesis considers how comediennes of today like Wanda Sykes and Tina Fey navigate gendered performances (and well as other social constructions like race, and class) while creating an onstage persona.

## Introduction

Gentlemen, when you were a kid and expressed sadness be it mourning your loss at a t-ball game or dropping the last piece of cake on the floor, were your tears met with an adult telling you to “man up” or “act like a man”? Ladies, have you ever sprawled out on a couch or floor only to have your comfort disturbed by someone telling you to “sit like a lady”? Essentially, what these experiences highlight is that, while sex (as defined by genitalia) is relatively fixed, gender is performed. The examples above show how society socializes girls and boys to perform gendered roles in a way that is deemed acceptable.

If gender is performative, how do professional performers--dancers, for example--combine their performance of gender with the performance of movement? What about comedy? Have you ever wondered how comediennes combine performance of gender and race with performance onstage? How do these performances change the comedic genre? Can they make comedy a feminist act of resistance?

Maybe you have never considered these questions when you think of women in comedy because you have seen many a *Vanity Fair*<sup>1</sup> article or Jerry Seinfeld<sup>2</sup> interview in which the merits of women in comedy are hotly debated. . All of this excitement keeps us stuck on the banal question, “Are women funny?” This question draws our attention to capability alone, not the ways that women navigate comedy. By making “Are women funny?” the commonplace question, society has conditioned us to see comedy as a male

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<sup>1</sup> Alessandra Stanley, “Who Says Women Aren’t Funny?,” *Vanity Fair*, April, 2008, accessed May 3, 2015, <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2008/04/funnygirls200804>.

<sup>2</sup> LZ Granderson, “What Jerry Seinfeld Doesn't Get About Diversity,” February 7, 2014, accessed May 3, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/02/07/opinion/granderson-seinfeld-diversity/>.

space and comediennes as novel and foreign. This precludes a wider conversation about gender and comedy.

So, are women funny? Can women take a joke? Well, the average man is proof that women can take a joke. This old adage is a great introduction to the well-documented and contested discourse on women and comedy as it explores how “women’s comedy” tends to be harsher than men’s and more political in tone as well as more critical of the opposite sex. As with all things, scholars have attempted to classify the differences between “men’s humor” and “women’s humor.” It seems that “men’s humor” rests on physical tropes as a source of laughter while “women’s humor” is more complex and political. As Gina Barreca explains in her flagship book *They Used to Call Me Snow White But I Drifted* (1991),<sup>3</sup> the complexity of “women’s comedy” makes it smarter in that it avoids the “easy” joke of humiliating the already weak and chooses the more difficult battle of dismantling the powerful.<sup>4</sup> For example, men’s comedy would make fun of the village idiot while women’s comedy would make fun of the village. In this, women’s comedy is inherently political; its distinguishing feature is its ability to upset a

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<sup>3</sup> Originally published in 1991, *They Used to Call Me Snow White But I Drifted* is often considered a classic in the canon of women’s studies. Barreca’s academic background as a humorist gives her unique insight into how humor is perceived and well as how it is performed across the genders. Her book also discusses the comedic style of several comediennes, such as Phyllis Diller, Roseanne Barr, Mae West, and Whoopi Goldberg. See Gina Barreca, *They Used to Call Me Snow White... But I Drifted: Women’s Strategic Use of Humor* (Lebanon, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Shows that embody “men’s humor” like *The Three Stooges* often employ slapstick comedy elements like physical pain, while “women’s humor” like *30 Rock* makes men of power (Tracy Jordan or Jack Donaghy) the butt of the joke, possibly because many women understand or have experienced structural oppression, so while the joke may not be aimed at them, they feel the brunt of it. See *The Three Stooges*, directed by Edward Bernds (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 1960), DVD 2012) and *30 Rock*, directed by Don Scardino, Beth McCarthy-Miller, and John Riggi (Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2006).

hegemonic patriarchal society. Consider the possibility that the “women-aren’t-funny” stereotype was employed as a way to dissuade women from disabling the male-dominated pecking order, that it responds to women’s power with the assertion that “women just aren’t funny,” which turns the conversation away from *power* and makes it a conversation about *ability*. Barreca highlights the Victorian literary cannon and how the heroines are always coping with the burden of their own intelligence, as if it were a source of shame to themselves or potential partners.<sup>5</sup> The heroine’s self-doubt could be considered a part of her coming-of-age narrative but instead it functions as a way to oppress feminine readers as well as provide a feminine norm for society to rest on. For some, Barreca’s observation may evoke more of a “duh” than an “aha,” but what she writes has strong implications for this thesis. It is the shamefulness attached to the heroine’s own intelligence and humor that prevents her from becoming a medium of agency and power.

Barreca argues that it is the ability of “women’s comedy” to demolish and laugh at the very institutions that we are taught to revere that makes it particularly dangerous. Society teaches us that hegemonic and patriarchal structures are to be respected and taken seriously. Making light of these structures undoes their seriousness and opens them up to critique and possible destruction at the hands of the very people they oppress. Women’s finding humor in “serious” male spaces not only allows for a critique of these systems but also presents the problems to a larger audience that can then validate and act on these

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<sup>5</sup> Barreca uses Jane Eyre, Catherine in Wuthering Heights, Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*, and Dorothea in *Middlemarch* as examples of this characteristic in literary women. Barreca, *They Used to Call Me Snow White* (2013), 10-14.

critiques. Fear of this possibility is embedded in every literary canon we study and possibly explains why we still encounter the antiquated notion that women aren't funny.

The scholarship on women's capacity to take a joke or tell one often discusses how gendered humor relies on the lexicon of gendered language as well as how the stigma of a funny woman aligns with the patriarchal need to stifle women and assert male dominance. Linguist Robin Lakoff's popular *Language and Woman's Place* (1975)<sup>6</sup> linguistically grounds gender studies. It argues that how we use certain language behaviors acts as a societal assessment of roles and expectations.<sup>7</sup> Lakoff argues that society raises girls to speak femininely and their adherence to, or rejection of, this socialization directly correlates with how well girls are accepted into society. She explains that gendered language is a no-win game, because if a girl rejects these rules, "she is ridiculed and subjected to criticism as unfeminine"<sup>8</sup> but if she adheres she does not have the tools to participate fully in "serious discussion" as her language restricts her. In short, from the minute they learn to talk, women are set up to fail. The language that is forced on women and the desire to be accepted by society limits women. Women simply cannot effectively express themselves using the constraints of the language they are given, especially since men do not have the same linguistic limitations. Since women are

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<sup>6</sup> Robin Tolmach Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place: Text and Commentaries*, rev. ed., ed. Mary Bucholtz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 47-49.

<sup>7</sup> Lakoff discusses how women use tag questions instead of declarative statements. Lakoff explains that tag questions provide an "out" for the speaker so that she can avoid committing herself to one political stance or statement and in doing so appears as though the speaker is unintelligent or unreliable. Lakoff wonders how much of this has been forced on women in their early years. See Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place* (2004), 53-57.

<sup>8</sup> Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place* (2004), 48.

given such limited tools, they are unable to communicate effectively. The consequence of this communication gap between the sexes is that women find it hard to achieve professional (and thusly economic) equality with men.<sup>9</sup> The glass ceiling is fortified with the reasoning that women are unable (or not smart enough) to communicate when actually they are speaking a female dialect. So it seems that men and women do not speak the same language or, rather, that they use different versions of the same language.

Some may read Lakoff's work as a way to substantiate the claim that "women aren't funny"; if men and women speak different dialects, comediennes could have a hard time making men laugh. Performance studies scholar Philip Auslander believes, however, that the disconnect between male audiences and female comedians has to do with exclusivity, not a communication gap. In "'Brought to You by Fem-Rage': Stand-up Comedy and the Politics of Gender"<sup>10</sup> Auslander contends that female-based cultural vocabularies are inaccessible to male audiences and that women's comedy is thus a "feminist tool" that can unseat patriarchy in public space. It is unique among types of performance, he argues, in that the fem-specific voice eliminates the fetishistic male gaze and power lies not with the viewer but with the performer. This insight changes the question from "are women funny?" to "what identities are women creating in comedy?"

The latter question requires additional understanding of the "double act" of gender and onstage performance. This double act is largely ignored in academic discourse, probably because our understanding of gender and gendered politics follows

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<sup>9</sup> Lakoff phrases this as "...systematically denied access to power." Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place* (2004), 48.

<sup>10</sup> Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan, eds., "'Brought to You by Fem-Rage': Stand-up Comedy and the Politics of Gender," in *Acting Out: Feminist Performances* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 315-34.

the ebb and flow of works produced by women's studies scholars. When Lakoff wrote about gendered language in 1975, feminist scholar Judith Butler's flagship works on gender as performance were probably not even in their infancy. Lakoff instead was in conversation with several psychologists who suggested that it is the role of men to create humor and that women can only enjoy humor.<sup>11</sup> The "science" behind these works is arguably reflective of the time in which they were produced and deflects from the more relevant conversation about what performance means across the genders. It was not until the appearance of Butler's groundbreaking book *Gender Trouble* (1990)<sup>12</sup> that academia could put a name to gender's performativity. Essentially, Butler argues that gender is not innate but rather a norm; it is "real" only as long as it is performed. With respect to women's humor, this insight raises the question, how do women, who already participate in the performance of femaleness, negotiate humor as an extra layer of performance?

An understanding of this intersection of gender performance and onstage performance provides us an analytic wheelhouse for exploring comedienne's work today, arguably a golden age for women's comedy in the United States. The work of Wanda Sykes, Tina Fey and the comedienne's that have come after them offers the paradigms this thesis dissects. Wanda Sykes's seventy-minute set *Wanda Sykes: Sick and Tired*, Tina Fey's work on the first three seasons of *30 Rock*, and Chelsea Peretti's *One of the Greats*

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<sup>11</sup> Joanne Cantor discusses the findings from a study conducted in 1976 by Dolf Zillman wherein nearly 70 college students rate jokes that depict men and women of equal social status in uncomfortable or hostile environments. Zillman found that in all situations, both men and women ranked male-centric jokes funnier than female-centric humor. For more information on gender and humor, see Joanne Cantor, "What's Funny to Whom? The Role of Gender," *Journal of Communication* 26, no. 3 (September 1976): 164-72.

<sup>12</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), passim.

and<sup>13</sup> beautifully exemplify how performance, gender, sexuality, race, and class play together in front of a live audience. Do audiences understand these identities as performative? If so, do these identities operate as costumes for the show? Or does the audience see them as “real” and ever-present, and does this matter in terms of how this comedy is consumed?

Each of these comediennes—Sykes, Fey, and Peretti—embodies several labels (Black, white, woman, feminine, rich, working class, smart, ditz, masculine, straight, gay) but can they perform them at the same time? How do different identities negotiate with one another? Must they ignore one identity to play up another? How do other women in comedy make these negotiations?

#### **MORE POWER TO WHOM? WANDA SYKES AND POWER POLITICS**

I was on a plane and a flight attendant walked up to me and goes “Wanda, this is Bobby. Bobby’s flying by himself today... and we gon’ sit him next to you.” Why? Obviously, Bobby’s parents don’t give a fuck about him, so what do you expect from me? Do I look like the air nanny? I don’t want to be bothered; I want to sit here and read my book. You know? But Bobby wanted to talk. The whole fucking flight.... I put my iPod on; I figured Bobby’d get the hint. Bobby kept talking. Kept talking! Tapped me on my shoulder. I was like, “See, this is why you’re flying by yourself. Maybe if you shut the fuck every now and then someone would accompany your little ass. Ain’t nobody waiting for you on the other end....” And I start thinking because my favorite show is *Lost* and I was like, “What if this plane goes down... and it’s just me and Bobby?” I’m a eat him. I am.<sup>14</sup>

This joke opens Wanda Sykes’s first comedy special, *Wanda Sykes: Sick and Tired*, and acts not only as a way to ground the audience in the Wanda Sykes style but also as a way for Wanda Sykes to introduce herself to the audience. Presumably, any

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<sup>13</sup> *Wanda Sykes: Sick and Tired*, directed by Michael Drumm (Image Entertainment, 2006), DVD 2006). Chelsea Peretti, “Chelsea Peretti: One of the Greats” (video), 2014, accessed April 26, 2015, <http://www.netflix.com/WiMovie/80004534>.

<sup>14</sup> *Wanda Sykes: Sick and Tired*.

opening joke relies on the tenets of advertising; first you *establish* your brand and then you *build* your brand. A performer operates like a brand, and the viewers' (consumers') first interaction with the brand should establish who a performer is, what the performer stands for, and what differentiates this performer from others. Then the performer builds on this interaction to grow with the viewer-consumer.

Before we dissect Sykes's content, it is important to address her physical-stylistic aesthetic, which viewers take in before she even opens her mouth. *Wanda Sykes: Sick and Tired* was a HBO special that premiered on October, 14, 2006, nearly a decade after her successful stints as a writer-actor on *The Chris Rock Show*<sup>15</sup>, and a writer on *The Keenen Ivory Wayans Show*. Other notable credits Sykes had accumulated before she was offered an HBO special include work on *The Drew Carey Show*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Wanda at Large*, *Down to Earth*, *The New Adventures of Old Christine*, and *Pootie Tang*.<sup>16</sup> Through her two decades of fame, Sykes has donned several different onstage get-ups, some glamorous with floral tops and feathered tresses to match,<sup>17</sup> and others a bit more relaxed complete with pastel blouses and her brown relaxed hair curled femininely.<sup>18</sup> However Sykes' signature cinnamon-blond cropped natural hair, jeans, and a dressy top seems to be the style that has stuck around the longest.

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<sup>15</sup> In 1999, Sykes won a Primetime Emmy for "Outstanding Writing for a Variety, Music, or Comedy Program" for her writing efforts on her work on *The Chris Rock Show*. "Wanda Sykes: Awards," IMBd, accessed March 28, 2015, [http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0843100/awards?ref=nm\\_awd](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0843100/awards?ref=nm_awd).

<sup>16</sup> "Wanda Sykes," IMDb, accessed January 15, 2015, [http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0843100/?ref=tt\\_ov\\_st..](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0843100/?ref=tt_ov_st..)

<sup>17</sup> "Wanda Sykes: Funny Ladies Collection," YouTube, September 1, 2012, accessed March 28, 2015, [http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0843100/?ref=tt\\_ov\\_st](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0843100/?ref=tt_ov_st).

<sup>18</sup> "Wanda Sykes On Comedy Showcase," YouTube, June 20, 2013, accessed March 28, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gnQFY0LIPc>.

### PRESENTING THE POLITICAL

In *Wanda Sykes: Sick and Tired*, Sykes sports a do that is very different from the chemically-straightened, jet black bob she wore during her time on *Wanda at Large*.<sup>19</sup> For Black women, hairstyle is not just a matter of fun or ease but often a symbolic political declaration or statement of identity.<sup>20</sup> Historian of beauty culture Cheryl Thompson writes about the pressure on Black women to adhere to a white standard of beauty; about the Black hair industry, which heavily relies on dangerous chemical relaxers<sup>21</sup> and hair extensions; and about how these pressures or the reluctance to adhere to them shape and inform political identities.<sup>22</sup> Sykes's lesbian sexuality further complicates these issues. Although she did not come out publically as a lesbian until

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<sup>19</sup> Billy Procida, "Louis C.K., Wanda Sykes, Jerry Seinfeld, and More! 11 Comedians as Comedians On Television," *LaughSpin*, accessed March 28, 2015, <http://www.laughspin.com/2014/05/19/louis-c-k-wanda-sykes-jerry-seinfeld-and-more-11-comedians-as-comedians-on-television/>.

<sup>20</sup> In the Black community, women with "good hair" (naturally wavy, straight or curly but not kinky hair) are praised for their beauty and often given preferential treatment from those both inside and outside the Black community. Women who do not naturally possess such locks turn to tools like flat irons and blow-dryers that straighten hair with high heat or, for a quicker and more common "fix," use chemical straighteners to create a more European look. For more information on the politics of Black hair, see Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 125.

<sup>21</sup> Studies have shown that there is a correlation between long-term use of hair relaxers and health issues such as fibroids, early puberty, and breast cancer. For more of the study's findings, see Lauren Wise, "Hair Relaxer Use and Risk of Uterine Leiomyomata in African-American Women," *American Journal of Epidemiology* 175, no. 5 (March 1, 2012): 432-40.

<sup>22</sup> Cheryl Thompson, "Black Women and Identity: What's Hair Got to Do with It?," *Politics and Performativity* 22, no. 1 (Fall 2008-2009): 83.

2008<sup>23</sup>, two years after *Wanda Sykes: Sick and Tired* premiered, her natural hairstyle in the show connotes a liberated sexual identity. Wanda Sykes herself discussed the relationship her hair has to her political and sexual identity in a 2010 interview with *Curly Nikki*.<sup>24</sup>

It definitely is an extension--the visual of who I am. I'm an individual. I don't want to be like other people. I guess it is a statement of how comfortable I am with myself. Oh, totally. I really think embracing my curly hair was therapeutic, and maybe subconsciously it was my way of going through the whole coming-out process, being open and outward. My hair was saying (in a sarcastic tone), "Oh hey, look at me, I'm gay! This is my gay hair! Anybody notice my short hair cut? Wanna ask me anything, people? Look who's not getting perms. What about that?! What does that say? Ooh, I'm not looking for a man am I? With this hair?!" So I think that was my way of going through the whole thing with my sexual identity. It speaks to who I am.

Sykes sees her hair as an integral part of her identity: a way to break away from the heteronormativity associated with longer flowing hair and embrace her sexuality as well as a signifier of her acceptance in her own definition of beauty. Her decision to wear her hair natural marks her as unusual in the entertainment industry in which Black actresses often relax or straighten their hair for roles.

Sykes's rejection of certain norms is not in her appearance alone; her comedy's content does the rest of the heavy lifting, creating an identity that appearance alone cannot produce. Black women have to work against several stereotypes that are

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<sup>23</sup> Sarah Warn, "Wanda Sykes Comes Out as Gay and Married," *After Ellen*, November 15, 2008, accessed March 28, 2015, <http://www.afterellen.com/people/40401-wanda-sykes-comes-out-as-gay-and-married>.

<sup>24</sup> Nikki Walton, "Wanda Sykes and Her Gay Hair," *Curly Nikki*, October 29, 2010, accessed February 10, 2014, <http://www.curlynikki.com/2010/10/wanda-sykes-on-her-gay-hair.html>.

popularized in mass media, such as Mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel<sup>25</sup>, and the welfare queen.<sup>26</sup> The mammy stereotype is a remnant of slavery. Enslaved Black women were characterized as too strong to be members of the “weaker sex” as they worked the fields like men, in a self-reliant, and self-sufficient, and defeminized manner.<sup>27</sup>

This defeminization remains in the mammy character. The mammy is usually presented as inherently feminine with large breasts and a motherly demeanor, yet she is often unfeminine and desexualized. As psychologist Carolyn M. West notes, the mammy character is one of most popular stereotypes of Black women<sup>28</sup>; thus it makes sense for Sykes to feel the need to dispel this perception. West describes the mammy as “highly maternal, family oriented, and self-sacrificing” so in an attempt to distance herself from any assumptions that she is a mammy, Sykes actively negates the maternal and any of mammy-like qualities viewers may assume that she possesses. The opening joke in *Sick and Tired* obliterates the mammy stereotype, and situates Sykes in a position of agency and self-identification in which she can then build on to create a sense of comfort with, not racialized difference from, her audience. With the Bobby joke, Sykes establishes

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<sup>25</sup> Carolyn West, “Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel: Historical Images of Black Women and Their Implications for Psychotherapy,” *Psychotherapy* 32, no. 3 (September 1995): 458-66.

<sup>26</sup> This section largely discusses the descriptions provided by West, but for more information regarding the media representations/falsehoods of the “welfare queen” see Richard M. Coughlin, ed., “Welfare Myths and Stereotypes,” in *Reforming Welfare: Lessons, Limits, and Choices* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1989), 79-106.

<sup>27</sup> For more information on characterizations of female slave women in the American South, see: Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 119-123.

<sup>28</sup> Popular and still relevant examples of mammys include: Aunt Jemima, and any of the Black characters in *The Help. The Help*, directed by Tate Taylor (Walt Disney Studios, 2011; DVD 2011).

what she is and what she is not. While she does not wish to be read nor understood as a mammy, she still desires to highlight her Blackness as a part of her identity and the repercussions come with adopting this identity.

### **RACE IS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT, AND YOU FELL FOR IT**

I respect animals too. When I was in Hawaii, they wanted me to go swimming with the dolphins.... So I did it, I went swimming with the dolphins and it's exactly what I expected. You get out there and they put you in little small groups, I was with 3 other girls and you get to play with them, they do tricks and stuff... and then there's a photo op and they take your picture and they taught the dolphin different poses. They'll hug you, or kiss you or the dolphin'll let you kiss them but I had a racist dolphin. I did. I had a racist-ass dolphin, I was in the group with three other white girls and you should see their pictures they were cute! You should see my fucked-up picture dolphin hugging me like this [makes a stinky face while leaning her body away].

Sykes's Bobby joke does the work of getting the audience out of its own way. It

addresses preconceived stereotypes of Black women and distances her from them. The dolphin joke, however, works to steer the conversation away from racial stereotypes and to the complexities of race and identities. While the mammy joke allows Sykes to assert her agency and desire to reclaim her identity, the dolphin joke emphasizes the fact that a positive self-identity does not eliminate the societal race caste projected by others.

Instead of the dolphins' treating Sykes like her white peers, they adhere to racist behaviors (despite race being a social construct). The ludicrousness that the dolphin has an innate sensibility that race is not a social construct but "real," understood and enforced in the animal kingdom, highlights the enforced racial inequality that is projected unto her. With the dolphin as the perpetrator, the joke provides a way to remove the white guilt from racism.. This makes it easier for white people in her audience to understand racism as a reality in Sykes's world without guiltily rejecting the message. The joke is not that she is constructing a world in which everyone participates in racism; we already live in

that world. Instead, by her adding the element of fantasy wherein even a dolphin has no respect for Black women, the audience can recognize and laugh at the racist structures to which we adhere.

Essentially, the mammy joke and the dolphin joke show complexities in racialized identities, performed or otherwise. Wanda Sykes is asking the audience to step outside of its comfort zone not only to laugh but also to understand. This delicate work teeters between the provocative and the comfortable. She is provocative in that, without screaming, “I am not a mammy!” she pulls the audience in and confronts us with unsettling racialized images in American media. Sykes is aware that this puts her at risk of alienating her audience, and after she establishes her brand, she uses the dolphin joke to create a sense of ease and commonality between herself and the audience.

#### **LAUGHING IN THE FACE OF HETERONORMATIVITY**

While Sykes now publicly identifies as a lesbian, she is not known as a huge gay icon like Perez Hilton or RuPaul (both with largely gay audiences). While Sykes’s comedy tends to be political in content, her jokes largely play to the domestic space.<sup>29</sup> It makes sense, then, that she would align herself with her female audience members by poking fun at men:

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<sup>29</sup> There is quite a bit of notable scholarship about lesbian comedy, and the domestic space. These works often use Ellen DeGeneres, her mainstream appeal, and her “humor without an agenda” as a paradigm. For more information, see Jamie Skerski, “From Prime-Time to Daytime: The Domestication of Ellen DeGeneres,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 4, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 363-81.

I love dogs and I hate when women compare men to dogs. We gotta stop doing that, ladies. You know saying “men are dogs, men are dogs.” Uh uh... dogs are loyal. You know, you... I mean, come on guys, I’ve never found any strange panties in my dog’s house. Dogs are great. ; They never leave you, they’re there for you, and they can lick their own balls.

Now that Sykes’s Bobby joke has established what she is not, and her dolphin joke has established what she is (and how that is viewed by others), she works to build an alliance with the heterosexual women in the audience. Here, Sykes jokes about the oft-made comparison of men to dogs, and at first it seems she would take this opportunity to build up the egos of men by shaming women with “We gotta stop doing that, ladies.” It seems that she will take the position that it is offensive to men to compare them to dogs, but instead she takes the stance that the comparison it is unfair to dogs as it ignores their loyalty. Here Sykes plays to the societal acceptance of heteronormativity as she stresses women’s disappointment in the opposite sex. For Sykes, women are not just the fairer sex; they are the sex that gets to laugh.

Within the first ten minutes of her set, Sykes aligns herself with the female audience. It might be argued that in this moment she aligns herself only with the heterosexual female audience members, but since heteronormativity is an integral part of patriarchy, all women can understand the demands of male sexuality. When she performed *Sick and Tired*, Sykes had been divorced from her ex-husband for about seven years and had met or was about to meet her current partner, Alex. Although she had not yet announced it in front of the press, she identified as a lesbian.<sup>30</sup> The men-are-dogs joke

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<sup>30</sup> At the time of production for *Sick and Tired*, Wanda had not publicly “come out” as lesbian. See Sarah Warn, “Wanda Sykes Comes Out as Gay and Married,” *After Ellen*, November 15, 2008, accessed March 28, 2015, <http://www.afterellen.com/people/40401-wanda-sykes-comes-out-as-gay-and-married>.

points to how certain identities—in this case her sexuality and gender—are performed. Her delivery of the joke gives women in the audience a unified “we” voice.<sup>31</sup>

This “we” continues as she talks about a woman’s right to abortion, about gay marriage, and about keeping government out of women’s bodies. Sykes weaves short political jokes throughout her more benign content and in doing so she often leans to the left. In *Sick and Tired*, she voices support for gay marriage as well as for average Americans’ wielding more control of their country’s politics and their own financial futures. More important, she voices support for women’s complete autonomy, not because it is common sense for women to rule their own bodies but because men just do not know what to do with a woman’s body.

In the middle of her set, Sykes imagines a world in which the sexes get along better because every woman is equipped with a “detachable pussy.” She happily muses that jokes that, by detaching their vaginas, women would be able to dedicate their spare time to fun and personal development instead of sexually servicing men. Her reverie is halted, however, by the idea that men would be irresponsible with such a valuable asset as a woman’s vagina. Here, Sykes implies that women must control their own bodies because men simply cannot be trusted to take care of them. Sykes’s detachable-pussy joke slyly voices a pro-choice stance that is palatable to all kinds of audiences no matter their political affiliations.

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<sup>31</sup> It would be interesting to know the demographic for her audiences in general. For this particular show, it seems there are no public Nielsen records for the ratings or demographic breakdown for *Wanda Sykes: Sick and Tired*

### SYKES DOES CAPITOL HILL

Over the course of the show, Sykes creates several political identities and eventually gets her audience to share them by rooting politics not in the liberal or the conservative but in the shared experience of most Americans. An example of her everyman politics is her critique of the Bush administration:

This is the most arrogant administration I've ever seen.... You watch the news and you see someone from the administration, like Cheney or whatever, they go over to Iraq and say we gonna do a surprise visit to Iraq to boost the morale. How arrogant is that? When is the last time a surprise visit from your boss made your day?!

This joke is very different from the identity jokes about Bobby, the dolphin, and men's inferiority to dogs. She completely switches gears less than a half-an hour into the show and she unites the entire audience by going completely political. Now, many American comedians use national politics as an "in" to create camaraderie between themselves and the audience. By using politics as a common ground, Sykes adheres to one of the major tenets of political humor and allows the audience to be the comedian as they are in on the joke, instead of being the butt of it. Still, Sykes's way of discussing politics avoids harsh stances and instead appeals to the everyman. Her opening observation that the Bush administration "is the most arrogant administration I've ever seen..." could be a set-up for a rant on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan conducted under the Bush administration. Instead, she immediately disarms the audience by invoking the shared experience of the working class. Avoiding references to parties or platforms, she invites people across the political spectrum to laugh, which in turn aligns her with the whole audience. Throughout

*Sick and Tired*, Sykes makes clear that she is very liberal politically,<sup>32</sup> but in making politics consumable by the everyman, she performs a political persona that may be different from her offstage self. Both her comedy and the radical political views it conveys become palatable to all audiences as they are dipped in respect and the shared experience of the “us” or everyman.

In the beginning of her set Wanda Sykes addresses race and identity with an united “us” voice as she gently shakes her audience awake to the fact that she bears no resemblance to the mammy and to the disappointing yet humorous idea that dolphins outrank Black women in the sociopolitical hierarchy. This “us” voice is also characterizes the joke about the Bush administration. However, the following joke, though it contains similar racial and political content, takes a completely different tone:

I think white people commit more crimes than Black people. I know you're thinking, “But Wanda, the news and stuff says...” Yeah, I know, you see a lot of Black people getting arrested. But people behind bars, that does not represent who commits crimes; people behind bars represents that got caught. We always get caught... cause they just waiting for us to fuck up.... Racial profiling, I'm trying to stop it so I'm treating everybody the same. Just treat everybody like criminals.... That's what you gotta start doing. It's my favorite thing. Like when I'm at a red light, I wait for a nice car to pull up beside me with a well-dressed white guy behind the wheel and I just stare at him. And as soon as he looks at me... I lock my door. Man, how you like it? Huh?

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<sup>32</sup> Sykes has had several political spots where she provided an insight to her personal beliefs, including the White House Correspondents' dinner. For more information see, Jeremy Kinser, “Wanda Sykes Explains Why the GOP Hates Her,” *Advocate*, September 9, 2012, accessed October 24, 2014, <http://www.advocate.com/politics/2012/09/09/watch-wanda-sykes-explains-why-gop-hates-her>. or Mike Lupica, “David Feherty Shouldn't Get Pass for Tasteless Joke - but Neither Should Wanda Sykes,” *NY Daily News*, May 11, 2009, accessed March 30, 2015, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/david-feherty-shouldn-pass-tasteless-joke-wanda-sykes-article-1.411114>.

The joke here is the unusual adoption of equal opportunity hate instead of the often-spouted equal opportunity love content that comedienne Ellen DeGeneres<sup>33</sup> would advocate. Sykes's tone now switches from an "us" versus "them" feel to an "us" versus "y'all." Operating differently than the others do, this joke does not establish her identity; since that framework has already been set, she can deviate from and play within it. Her race and gender are not permanent states but rather costumes that she put on and remove depending on the part of the audience she is playing to.

### TINA TIME

Tina Fey's brainchild *30 Rock*, which ran on NBC from October 2006 through January 2013, catapulted her to comedy royalty and she continues her comedic legacy as the go-to host for several elite award shows, but she does not have the stand-up history that Sykes does. Fey's work must therefore be read slightly differently, but her work as a comedy writer (more specifically a showrunner<sup>34</sup>) and actress nonetheless reveals a great deal about the onstage performance of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

Like Wanda Sykes, Tina Fey's work as the showrunner for *30 Rock* relies heavily on playing with identity. Unlike a stand-up show in which the performer has just about an

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<sup>33</sup> Skerski, "From Prime-Time to Daytime," 365.

<sup>34</sup> A showrunner combines the roles of an executive producer, head writer, and script editor. In sitcoms like *30 Rock*, showrunners often rank higher than directors (this is unusual, in film directors have the final say). The showrunner has the unique opportunity to put forth one's unique voice because they have greater creative control than any other role. Whereas other collaborative efforts such as improv have no single voice because the writers and actors share the weight of the creative process. On *30 Rock*, Tina Fey shared this role with Robert Carlock of SNL. Kera Bolonik, "The Showrunner Transcript: 30 Rock's Robert Carlock on Working on Joey and His Dedication to Joke Density," *Vulture*, May 16, 2011, accessed May 3, 2015, [http://www.vulture.com/2011/05/robert\\_carlock\\_showrunner\\_tran.html](http://www.vulture.com/2011/05/robert_carlock_showrunner_tran.html).

hour to establish, build upon, and play within a self-created identity, a successful television series offers years of character development, identity play, and exploration. In this context, Fey's performance of whiteness is especially telling in that she rejects the master narrative of "whiteness" and womanhood that sitcoms typically put forth. Liz Lemon, the character she plays on *30 Rock*, exemplifies the instability and artificiality of identities generally understood as fixed and innate. Below I examine three consecutive episodes of the show that exemplify the complexity of her gendered and racialized performance.

**NOT THAT KIND OF WHITE:  
TINA FEY, WHITENESS AND CONSTRUCTING THE WHITE OTHER**

Tina Fey's trademark "geek chic" look as Liz Lemon differs from the "girl next door" look of female sitcom stars on *Friends*<sup>35</sup>, a series popular throughout the 1990s. These differences in style are accompanied by other differences. On *Friends*, Jennifer Aniston's character Rachel is a beautiful, kind, but not-too-smart girl who is trying to make it in the fashion world without having any connections to begin with. Over the course of the series, the audience learns that Rachel was a popular cheerleader who often cut class to hang out with attractive football players. As an adult, Rachel struggles as a waitress for a long period of time while her peers thrive in their fields. Eventually, Rachel finds her footing in fashion, but the bulk of her storyline is based on her on-again off-again love affair with Ross Geller. Liz Lemon on *30 Rock* is refreshingly different from Rachel. While Rachel's storyline centers mostly on her love and home life, the entire arc of Liz's story is about her work life and her desire to create feminist humor. If we melded

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<sup>35</sup> *Friends*, directed by Gary Halvorson, Kevin Bright, and Michael Lembeck (Warner Home Video, 1994), DVD 2006).

the two worlds, Liz would be the nerd that Rachel teased in high school, and Liz would feel sorry for Rachel for peaking in her teens. Now that Liz is the head writer of a popular show on network television, she is winning the game of life.

But that does not make her life easy. Liz is portrayed as the one normal person in show business; idiots, divas, and the rich and vain surround her. While Liz works with people who are less than ideal, she puts her all into the production of the show, often putting its welfare ahead of personal goals. Fascinatingly, the show does not focus on the zany antics of the stars of her show but on Liz Lemon's daily struggle to "have it all". Despite Liz's desire to be a people-pleaser, she does not pander to her corporate bosses when they tease her about her appearance. In fact, despite the teasing, she usually wears loose jeans, unflattering shoes, and a branded hoodie to work. Liz prides herself on virtues like kindness and intelligence, not beauty.<sup>36</sup>

Sitcom writers must constantly recode and display a character's traits because the viewers may change from week to week. A sitcom--unlike stand up, which thrives on an establish-build-play model--invites viewers to identify themselves in the performers. What viewers find in Liz Lemon is a child of second- and third-wave feminism; she prides herself on equalitarian politics inside and outside of the office. Jack Donaghy, her boss and ideological foil (played by Alec Baldwin) is a suit, a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps kind of guy who has clearly benefited from white privilege.

A great deal of the humor of *30 Rock* derives from the stark differences between Liz and Jack. Liz Lemon thrives in the grey area: she is neither masculine nor feminine;

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<sup>36</sup> I remember the watershed moment of "smart as sexy" in the new millennium when Pink critiqued Lindsay Lohan, Paris Hilton, and pop culture at large in a music video. "P!nk - Stupid Girls," *YouTube*, October 24, 2009, accessed March 28, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BR4yQFZK9YM>.

she has the money of the rich, but the ethics of the poor; and she is straight, but her shoes are bi-curious.<sup>37</sup> Jack, on the other hand, relies on rigid, black-and-white categories to enforce his manhood. Jack regularly exhibits a bit of heterosexuality, homophobia, and competition; he personifies hegemonic masculinity.<sup>38</sup> Jack's homophobia is interesting in that it does not seem to come from a place of hatred; instead it comes from the desire to win. While Jack does not have to compete with gay men for romantic partners, he does have to compete with them in business. Jack's nemesis Devon Banks is an openly gay businessman who will do anything to replace Don Geiss (Jack's mentor) as the CEO of General Electric, including sleeping his way to the top.<sup>39</sup> Devon gets under Jack's skin so much because, for Jack, the ultimate marker of his manhood is not his ability to bed women but his ability to gain the upper hand in business.

#### **POWER GRAB BAG: JACK VERSUS LIZ**

During the episode "Hardball" (Season 1, Episode 15.), Liz discovers that some of her show's cast members will have their contracts renegotiated. She tries to rally them and to explain their value to Jack.

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<sup>37</sup> In "Blind Date" (season 1, episode 3), Jack sets Liz up with a female friend of his because he assumes Liz is a lesbian due to her style of dress.

<sup>38</sup> Mike Donaldson, "What Is Hegemonic Masculinity," *Theory and Society* 22, no. 5 (October 1993): 643-57.

<sup>39</sup> Despite being openly gay, Devon Banks marries Don Geiss's weird cat lady of a daughter in order to slip in to family and then in to power.

**Jack**

But whatever Josh gives us, he's still replaceable.

**Liz**

He's not replaceable as my friend.

**Jack**

He's not your friend now, he's your opponent. He's going to try to grab all the marbles. And it's our job to hide the marbles.

**Liz**

That's not how you play marbles, Jack.

**Jack**

No, but that's how you keep them. When I was a kid, I had like forty purple ones.

This small interaction between Jack and Liz is not the crux of the story, but it epitomizes their opposing worldviews. This scene exemplifies how Tina Fey views white privilege and how her egalitarian-feminism prompts her to try to correct the white privilege that she no doubt benefits from. While Jack embraces the benefits of American masculinity and its privileges, Liz is wary of them.. Sociologist Michael Kimmel quotes a bumper sticker that offers a snapshot of American masculinity: "He who has the most toys when he dies, wins." Kimmel asserts that white American masculinity is measured by wealth, power, and status,<sup>40</sup> and Jack seems to agree. In fact, it seems against the fiber of his being to share his imaginary marbles whereas Liz represents the egalitarian (and in her case feminist) ideal of redistributing wealth so that everyone gets a piece of the proverbial pie.

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<sup>40</sup> For more information on American masculinities, white privilege, and the limitations of both see, Michael Kimmel, "Why Men Should Support Gender Equality," *Women's Studies Review* (October 2005): 102-14.

Liz's desire to support her subordinates shows her desire to *correct* the privileges that she receives as a white person. Arguably the only differences between Liz and Jack is their sex, so it can be perceived that Fey is attempting to highlight that Liz Lemon's sex and corresponding realities (gender biases, sexism) allow Liz to understand oppression, which in turn solidifies her resolve not to impart it to others.

Later in "Hardball," Jack excitedly tries to teach Liz the art of negotiation, advising her to avoid talking to Josh before the first meeting about his contract. When Liz's Josh expresses concern about the upcoming negotiation, Liz decides to ignore Jack's advice and comforts Josh. She tells him that his job is secure because, according to market research, he is well received by certain demographic groups, and that as long the two of them together, they can compromise and negotiate a contract beneficial to both. When the negotiations get underway, however, Josh turns on her.

**Liz**

Is this new furniture?

**Jack**

It's my negotiation set.  
(Liz looks confused. Josh and Alan enter.)

**Jack**

Gentlemen!  
(Josh and Alan, his agent, sit in tiny chairs. Liz and Jack are in higher, plush chairs and they look down at Josh and Alan. )

**Jack** (to Liz)

Little chairs make little men.

**Alan**

OK. Let's skip the foreplay and get to the penetraish. Josh is looking for a fifteen percent raise, a two-pic guarantee with Universal, and time off for every Jewish holiday, no matter how ridiculous.

**Josh**

I mean, Yaznach is coming up.

**Liz**

Well, that seems pretty reasonable; right, Jack?

**Jack**

Here's my counteroffer. One dollar.

**Alan** (rattled)

What?

**Liz**

Oh, boy.

**Jack**

Now we're negotiating.

**Alan**

But that's absurd.

(Jack produces a folder and starts laying out black-and-white surveillance photos.)

**Jack**

You know what's absurd? These photos of Josh roughhousing with Lance Bass at Sea World.

**Josh**

What? We were just being silly!

**Jack**

My offer is now seventy-five cents.

**Josh** (leaning in and nervously whispering to Alan)

It keeps getting lower. I think we should take it.

**Alan**

Look, Jack, we know about the testing. Women from twelve to twenty-four love my guy.

**Jack**

Who told you that?

(Liz signals to Josh not to say anything.)

**Josh**

Liz did.

**Liz** (fierce whisper)

Shut up.

**Josh**

What?

**Jack**

That's privileged information.

**Alan**

That's what I thought! We're back in the game.  
(Alan and Josh high five.)

**Jack** (glaring at Liz)

I knew you weren't ready for a big chair.

Here, Liz's rejection of masculine values—her desire to share the proverbial toys with others—undoes her. Josh betrays Liz despite her efforts to protect him from Jack's cutthroat tactics. Liz is not ready for a "big chair" because she is too busy trying to play fair; sadly, she works in a male world that thrives on rule-breaking, greed, and building up masculinity. While Liz's whiteness gives her entry into this world, her femininity keeps her from full participation.

After the first contract negotiation meeting, Josh takes a sick day and Liz sympathetically goes to a café to buy him some soup. She is surprised to run into Josh at the café, where he is taking a business meeting with the producer of a competing show. Liz angrily confronts Josh. She is hurt that he would stab her in the back after she got him his job, and she vows to get revenge. As payback for Josh's betrayal, Liz decides use the second round of contract negotiations as an opportunity to participate fully in Jack's harsh business practices.

**Jack**

Gentlemen. Make yourselves comfortable.

(Jack and Liz sit. There are no other chairs in the room. Josh and Alan awkwardly stand across the coffee table from them. Liz stares daggers at Josh.)

**Alan**

Uh...

(Josh notices a pile of headshots on the table. They are all photos of young, white men. He seems concerned.)

**Josh**

What are all these headshots for?

**Jack**

Nothing. Just some meetings we're taking.

**Liz**

Yeah. Meetings. Blammo.

(Jack puts a hand on Liz's arm. Alan seems rattled but powers through. )

**Alan**

Look, Jack, Josh has an offer from a competing show.

**Jack**

Yes, Liz mentioned that to me. I don't think that's going to pan out.

**Josh**

What? Are you kidding?

**Liz** (to Josh)

You look like what would happen if a bird impregnated an oil slick.

**Jack** (to Liz)

Okay, take it easy.

**Alan**

What happened? What did you do to our offer?

**Jack**

Let's just say I called my friend Saul Sheinhardt at our parent company Sheinhardt Wigs. And he called his nephew Morty Sheinhardt, who called his son, Jon Stewart.

(Jack sits back satisfied. )

**Liz**

Ya burnt!

**Jack**

Your move, Alan. .... All right, let's get down to brass tacks. Josh can stay.

**Josh**

Oh, thank God.

**Jack**

But no raise, no movies, Jewish holidays of my choosing, and Tracy gets to use Josh's bathroom at his discretion.

**Alan**

Thank you! Thank you! I need this money, I have a really bad sex addiction!  
(Jack looks over at Liz, satisfied. Liz seems confused.)

**Liz**

That's it? I thought you said we could crush him.

**Jack**

I did. I took away everything. That was a crushing.

**Liz**

No! Do more stuff.  
(to Josh) You made me look like an idiot, you have to pay.

**Jack**

Lemon, he's not getting a raise.

**Liz** (to Josh)

Do the worm.  
(Josh throws himself on the floor and starts doing the worm. Liz stands over him.  
Jack looks on, pleased. )

**Jack**

Good lord. The worm. It's so degrading. Are its origins German?

**Liz**

Now tell me five reasons I'm better than you.

**Josh**

You're smarter than me. You can beat me in arm wrestling. You can eat more than me. You read the paper.

**Alan**

Do you want me to do anything?

**Liz**

Be a crab. Fight the worm.  
(Alan starts crab walking and bumping into Josh. Jack puts an arm around Liz.)

### **Jack**

Wow Lemon, you really took to this like a natural. More than I ever.... All right, the crab's getting aroused. Shut it down.

In the first half of “Hardball” the audience gleans that the reason Liz fails at the Jack’s version of leadership in that she is simply too nice. Later in the series, the audience will learn that Liz’s kindness comes from years of her honing her capacity for empathy (with the help of women’s studies courses). Having unlearned primal behaviors that Jack consciously embraces, instead of becoming hyper-masculine to survive in Jack’s world, she becomes the adversary of the corporate greed that his masculinity represents. In this episode, she tries momentarily to change her identity and become more like Jack, but masculinity does not look good on her. As Fey illustrates in Liz’s flip to the dark side, gender identity is performative, not hard-wired. This means that Liz’s egalitarian feminism and Jack’s greedy masculinity are conscious decisions made daily and with every action.

### **SHE WORKS HARD FOR THE MONEY**

As we see in *Wanda Sykes: Sick and Tired*, a performer may need to refute perceptions of an identity that she embodies. For Tina Fey’s Liz Lemon, this means rejecting the benefits of white privilege; Liz constantly asserts that she worked hard to reach her position and did not receive any help along the way. In fact in “Jackie Jormp-Jomp” (Season 3, Episode 18), Liz must take some time off after she goes on a date with a budget consultant to persuade him not to cut funds from her show. Her efforts at sexual bartering do not work; they only land her in trouble. She is suspended from work for sexual harassment and forced to attend sensitivity training. Instead of using this

“vacation” as a way to recharge, she constantly worries about the goings on of the office and even sneaks back into work and begs the powers that be to let her stay.

**Jack**

Lemon, you know you're supposed to go home after your pervert seminars.

**Liz**

I'm going. I just hate not being here.

**Jack**

You sure you miss this?

**Liz**

Yes. As crazy and stressful as this place is, not being here is worse.

**Jack**

I feel for you. Remember that time I came back from the World Economic Forum with mono and missed a week of work and I wanted to pull my hair out but I couldn't because it's too thick? People like us, we need the stress.<sup>41</sup> We're only happy when we're overcoming obstacles. You take that away, we start bouncing off the walls, spend our days jabbering at doormen.

**Liz**

Hey, I brighten their day.

For Liz, so much of her value and self-respect is tied to her work that, although she reaps the benefits of white privilege, she actively works against the perception that she skates by on her race or gender alone. If any of the other characters on *30 Rock* had to take a few weeks off from work, they would view it as a paid vacation, but Liz sees it as a punishment. She returns home, heads downstairs to chat with her doorman (much to his chagrin), and runs into a beautiful forty-something woman named Emily who is on her way to the building's gym (which Liz had no idea existed). The two become fast friends and Liz is soon introduced to Emily's other friends. They draw Liz into an enticing

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<sup>41</sup> The “us” in Jack’s “people like us” phrasing refers to people who work. While Liz and Jack both work, Jack works for wealth and power whereas Liz works to establish her value as a contributing member of society.

lifestyle of midday cocktails, extravagant shopping, and wealthy older men. At first, she is reluctant to indulge, on account of her worker-bee attitude and disapproval of the rich and idle. Over time, however, Liz begins to feel like one of “them.”

**Emily**

This could be your life too, Liz. Just short the housing market.

**Rich Friend 2**

Or write a cookbook specifically for mixed-race children.

**Rich Friend 3**

Or marry a rich old dude who dies.

**Liz**

Clive, I wanna say?

**Rich Friend 4**

Or have mild lupus and great insurance.

After a little coaxing from her newfound friends, Liz is ready to completely embrace their lifestyle, but her leave from work is nearly over, so she heads to the office and sexually harasses a coworker so she can take another “vacation.” When she returns to her friends, she tells them that she will be theirs for another six weeks. The ladies welcome her and decide to let Liz in on a little secret. It turns out what keeps the ladies feeling alive is not frequent trips to the dermatologist but their membership in a dangerous fight club, and they want Liz to participate. Liz calls them all crazy and attempts to leave, but they say that the only way she can leave is to fight her way out.

As this episode underscores, Liz’s worker-bee attitude is so embedded in her identity that she cannot even get relaxation right. She shares leisure with the wrong friends and misses her comfortable and rewarding identity as a hard worker. In “Hardball” Liz’s identity acts as costume that she can remove at will, but in “Jackie Jormp-Jomp” her inability to take on a new identity is a real obstacle. Perhaps this is

because Liz's worker-bee identity has stronger roots than her longing for retaliation. If Blackness is an integral part of Wanda Sykes's persona, a class identity based on hard work is an immutable aspect of Tina Fey's Liz's Lemon. Her professional persona as a hard worker seems inseparable from her personal life.

### **WHITE OR WRONG?**

Liz seems to openly acknowledge her identity as a white person and addresses it by refusing to be “that kind of white,” as seen in “Hardball.” Overall, she works to be seen as more than a beneficiary of white privilege, but her gendered identity is not truly questioned until Season 3, in the episode titled “The Natural Order.” The episode opens with a vignette that depicts white race prejudice—in particular white people's assumption that Black colleagues will come late to work. When the Black star of Liz's show—the brilliant, erratic, wildly popular Tracy Jordan—is late for rehearsal, she investigates and finds that she and her white co-workers have tried to guarantee that he will show up on schedule by misinforming him as to his call time, by turning his clocks forward, and by call him at eight o'clock in the morning to tell him it's eleven. The upshot is that Tracy has no idea what time it really is. When Tracy learns of their deceptions, he accuses the team of racism<sup>42</sup>, and Liz replies that he taught them how to treat him and that they are only reacting to his behaviors. The next day Tracy not only arrives on time and well prepared but also takes full charge of the rehearsal, which runs like a top. When Liz congratulates him, he gathers the cast and crew, publicly thanks her for showing him “that in today's world everyone should be treated exactly the same,” and then teaches her a lesson about the folly of that assertion.

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<sup>42</sup> There is no subtlety here; he directly confronts their racist attitudes “White oppressors, what time is it really?”

“Parched from being so professional,” Tracy asks Liz for a cup of water; but, as he knows, the water dispenser’s five-gallon jug needs to be replaced. Immediately, she turns to a man to do the job. Tracy insists in the name of equality that she do it herself, and this she does, spilling at least four gallons of water in the process. Liz plays it cool; but, later, when—again, in the name of equality—male co-workers fart in her presence, she has second thoughts and asks Jack to weigh in.

**Liz**

Ohh! Hey, Jack, do you treat me any differently because I'm a woman?

**Jack**

Well, I pay you a little less, yes.

**Liz**

No, I mean day-to-day. Do you coddle me?

**Jack**

In some ways.... With a man, I can be more direct, but with you, uh, I have to have a conversation, talk things through more.

**Liz**

Give me an example.

**Jack**

Well, uh, right now comes to mind.

It seems that in the forty-plus years of Liz’s life, she has never thought of her sex as an advantage. Michael Kimmel writes that the privilege of a privilege is that it is unmarked—that is, regarded as part of the natural order.<sup>43</sup> When her privilege as a woman becomes evident as such because it is suddenly absent, the revelation seems to unseat Liz’s otherwise solid identities. She had accounted for her white privilege but not her gender privilege. Refusing to acknowledge that she is indeed sometimes treated

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Kimmel, “Why Men Should Support Gender Equality,” *Women's Studies Review* (October 2005): 106.

better than male colleagues because she is a woman, Liz continues to try to create a truly egalitarian relationship with them.

**Pete**

All right, Tracy's here. Let's do this bachelor party.

**Tracy**

Yeah! You coming, Liz Lemon? Because a dude boss would be a jerk if he didn't come to Lutz's bachelor party. Also, a dude boss would pay for it.

**Liz**

Yeah, I'm coming. Of course I'm coming. But you're not.

**Tracy**

Twist!

**Liz**

You have to stay here. I haven't gotten your notes on the rewrite, and your input is invaluable to the process since we're all equal now.

(She turns to the rest of her co-workers.) Let's go see some naked daughters and moms!

**Co-Workers**

All right! Woohoo!

Liz is trying to hang out like “one of the boys” even though in this case she really does not enjoy being treated like everybody else. She hates the bachelor party just as much as Tracy hates staying behind to work on the script.

Finally recognizing that she does benefit in many ways from gender privilege, Liz calls a halt to the experiment with absolute equality. She and Tracy agree that, as she puts it, “We need to go back to the way things were, with both of us getting preferential treatment.” After trying on a gender-neutral identity for a few days, prefers her unique version of femininity and returns to it. Centering this storyline on Liz as opposed to one

of the show's younger characters, Fey asserts that identity does not, as the canon suggests, become fixed when an individual comes of age but rather remains pliable.<sup>44</sup>

### THE LEGACY

The skill with which Wanda Sykes and Tina Fey perform identity has laid a strong foundation for up-and-coming comediennees. Just as second-wave feminism built on the first wave's wins and learned from its losses, young women in comedy such as Chelsea Peretti, Abbi Jacobson, and Ilana Glazer have elaborated on the framework established by Sykes and Fey, in some ways replicating their comedy and in other ways deviating from it.

In the Netflix comedy special *One of the Greats* (2014),<sup>45</sup> rookie comedian Chelsea Peretti styles herself the average twenty-something who shops exclusively at a local mall. Unlike Sykes, who experimented with glamorous apparel before settling on her current style, or Fey, who is known for her geek-chic look complete with black-rimmed glasses, Peretti does not seem to have given much thought to her appearance. She steps onto the stage wearing a floral top and dark pants, her hair free-flowing and unstyled. Her look creates the impression that she is just like the young women in her audience, and that is likely a calculated move on her part because her comedy directly addresses gender inequity as they encounter it.

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<sup>44</sup> Barreca, *They Used to Call Me Snow White*, 11.

<sup>45</sup> Chelsea Peretti, "Chelsea Peretti: One of the Greats" (video), 2014, accessed April 26, 2015, <http://www.netflix.com/WiMovie/80004534>.

Much like Sykes and Fey, Peretti exhibits cognizance of her gender identity. Early in her set, she tells the audience:

Oh no, I just wish I was someone else. Honestly, I do all the time. I wish I was a guy. You know what I mean? Like, I just want to feel what it feels like to have male confidence. I mean, just that feeling; it just seems like it must be so amazing. Like, my fantasy of what it is like to be a guy is you just wake up in the morning and your eyes open, and you're like, "I'm awesome. People probably want to hear what I have to say."

Here Peretti, establishes that although she looks like an average mall rat, she will give voice to things that they generally will not—in particular, insight into male privilege and the unearned power and respect that come with it. Peretti asserts her intelligence by pointing out to the audience the kudos men receive for simply opening their eyes. While Fey has to establish, then explain the work of Michael Kimmel in a half-hour episode, Peretti can just flat out say it. Undoubtedly since the principles of male privilege leaped from the inaccessible texts of academia to the masses of television, Peretti could do less work of creating the premise of privilege since it has already been set by Fey. In this way, Peretti builds on Fey's work and simply continues the conversations of *30 Rock* but now she can also go further and change the narrative of the body.

In society (and thusly in comedy), femaleness is used as an insult (as in "you throw like a girl," "don't be a pussy," "you're a douchebag," "or "he's a little bitch") whereas masculinity (being "manly" or "jacked") is considered a positive attribute.

Peretti rethinks this socialization and mocks the male ego by joking about men's bodies in the same way men frequently joke about women's:

Sometimes masculinity is so silly. Just the idea that because you're born a guy you have to be like, "I'm tough!" You know, "I'm tough. I'm putting my foot down. I'm tough." When you guys stomp, do your balls wiggle?.... Takes some of the intimidation out of it.

Peretti wonders aloud if during serious tasks men are aware that their balls are “just dangling—hahaha.” In a world where phalluses allow men to stake a claim in power, it is fascinating to hear that the phallus undoes power. In the world Fey’s created on *30 Rock*, white men are the genderless, raceless, classless norm; but for Peretti, maleness keeps them from being normal.

While her jokes about men’s egos and bodies establish her intelligence, Peretti’s set builds an identity that is primarily apolitical. Whereas Sykes and Fey use comedy to disseminate critiques of racism, sexism and classism, Peretti challenges human society’s entire foundation. For instance, after Peretti mentions her new dog was a rescue, and, when the audience cheers, she quickly adds that she is “not that into the rescuer identity” and that in her opinion, if you boast about having rescued a dog, “you’re kind of taking advantage of the fact that your pet can’t talk.” Here, Peretti asks her audience to think critically about human beings’ savior complex, their ownership of animals and, by extension, their dominion over the planet. While Fey and Sykes address American issues of race, class and gender, Peretti addresses all of humankind. The work that Peretti does here is not greater than the work of Sykes and Fey. Since they have already developed the land, now Peretti can simply play on it.

For Peretti, gendered norms prevent us from being human, she critiques society’s beauty expectations and laughs about women who get Botox in their armpits to stop them from sweating and says “...because why would you? You know as a human.” While Fey and Sykes’s work address being ignored due to race or gender, Peretti does not have these hurdles to jump, since they have already been addressed. Due to the work of Fey and Sykes (and many comediennees before them), Peretti does not have to worry about being

ignored and can try to create something, a sense of unity (and equal ridicule) between the sexes.

Like *30 Rock*, Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson's *Broad City*,<sup>46</sup> which premiered on the Comedy Central network in January 2014, defies many of the conventions of sitcoms. Like Tina Fey, Glazer and Jacobson both write the show and star in it. The characters they play, Ilana Wexler and Abbi Abrams, even share their first names. Also, whereas *30 Rock* leaves behind the girl-next-door character, *Broad City* leaves behind the omnipresence of white male characters like Jack Donaghy. In fact, only one of the show's central characters is a male: Lincoln Rice, a young Black dentist who is Ilana's friend with benefits. (To call him her love interest would overstate her feelings for him.) This romantic pairing is not the crux of the show; the sisterhood between Ilana and Abbi is the only relationship portrayed in every episode. Unlike Liz Lemon, who places herself into all kinds of predicaments by trying to impress men, Ilana and Abbi usually get into trouble by trying to support each other.

In the show's pilot, for example, the two have a bit of an argument about boundaries after Ilana video chats Abbi to invite her to a Lil Wayne concert while having sex with Lincoln.

**Abbi**

All right. Let's just set some ground rules for everyone involved: I don't want to see you have sex. Let's try to avoid that. Um, Lincoln, you seem well,

**Lincoln**

Thank you! I'm on this no bread diet. And it's pretty good, it's been working.

**Abbi**

All right. I'm gonna head out then...

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<sup>46</sup> *Broad City: Season 1*, directed by Lucia Aniello (Comedy Central, 2014), DVD 2014).

**Lincoln**

Peace.  
(He closes Ilana's laptop.)

**Ilana**

That was hot, that was cool. That was like a threesome in a way.

**Lincoln**

Um, Ilana, what are we doing? Are we just having sex? Hooking up? Are we dating? What is this?

**Ilana**

This is purely physical.

**Lincoln**

Why does this always happen to me?

As this scene makes clear, Ilana feels a stronger attachment to her friend Abbi than to her sexual partner Lincoln. Even during sex, Lincoln cannot garner Ilana's full attention. While Abbi was uncomfortable by the unusual video chat, she did not react in an angry or disgusted way nor did she end the friendship, she simply asked for a new boundary to be created and the incident was never addressed again. The relationships in *Broad City* are bigger than the "will they/won't they" romantic arcs of shows like *Friends*.<sup>47</sup> Unarguably, this can be read as queer, poking fun at homoerotic male spaces like football fields or locker rooms. More importantly, Ilana and Abbi's friendship continues the thread spun by other comediennees to create this unique fem-friendly relationship.

Similarly to how *30 Rock* dispels the hackneyed gender norms and romantic crutches of *Friends*, *Broad City* takes the relationships model of Liz Lemon and Jack Donaghy and turns it on its head. Abbi and Alana navigate their friendship in a space that

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<sup>47</sup> It can be said that this very "will they/won't they" arc is felt between Jack and Liz. But their relationship never leans sexual and while it is addressed their friendship always errs on the side of professional, which is admirable for Fey considering that a sexual relationship between Jack and Liz is an easy story arc to fall into.

Fey would be proud of as they encourage and support one another unconditionally. The stereotype of catty women is dissolved and replaced by a bromance typical of shows like *Seinfeld*.<sup>48</sup> For them “having it all” is not balancing a career, children, and a doting husband, “having it all” means having each other. Since the works of Fey and Sykes established, played, and built on politics, race, gender, and class, Abby and Ilana can benefit from it and create new spaces in unmarked territory. During her set, Sykes only mentions her friends in a negligible, tertiary manner (this is not a dig, she had other important work to do in terms of race and gender) and while Liz and Jenna have a solid friendship, the pair are unequally yolked with Liz often feeling unsupported by the vain Jenna. Abby and Ilana’s friendship is the show, it is the reason viewers tune in weekly, but this relationship only lives as the result of the work of the comedienne before them. *Broad City* expands on themes established by *30 Rock*. In like fashion, Chelsea Peretti both builds on and diverges from the identity politics staked out by Wanda Sykes. As shown by Wanda Sykes, Tina Fey, and Chelsea Peretti as gender norms change, so do the ways that comedienne perform gender onstage.

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<sup>48</sup> *Seinfeld*, directed by Andy Ackerman and Tom Cheronos (Sony Pictures Entertainment, 1989), DVD 2013).

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