

# **ALTERNATIVE COMEDY: WOMEN IN STAND-UP**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis focuses on the stand-up performances of female comedians. I begin with addressing the long-held bias against funny women and how this construction affects female comedians today. Further, I will explore the consequences of the female comic's violation of gender roles and, through the analysis of their work, examine how power relations functions between the comic and the audience. Specifically, I will evaluate the work of two white American comedians, Sarah Silverman and Maria Bamford. Both comics' work exists primarily in a dominant white-male oriented sphere of stand-up comedy that has been dubbed "alternative comedy." The alternative comedy scene exists on several planes, in comedy clubs, on the internet and on late-night cable channels with a large audiences. By analyzing segments from their routines, I explore their choices and material to interrogate how the traditionally male stand-up sphere can be used for feminist purposes.

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## **PRE(r)AMBLE**

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the people who have made this project possible. Thanks to Eszter Timar, who supervised this thesis and provided me with scholarly encourage and overall excitement about its possibilities. I am eternally grateful to my parents, my mom, who left Gloria Steinem books with cartoons in them around the house when I was little, and my dad, who watched *Blazing Saddles* with me when I was too young to get half the jokes. Additionally, I want to thank Zoli Pallai, F. Schulze, Jack, and all the rest of my wonderful family.

Feminists don't have a sense of humor  
Feminists just want to be alone  
Feminists spread vicious lies and rumor  
They have a tumor on their funny bone

They say, child molestation isn't funny  
Rape and degradation's just a crime  
Rampant prostitution, sex for money  
Can't these chicks do anything but whine

They say, cheap objectification isn't witty, "It's hot!"  
Equal work and wages worth the fight  
On demand abortion, every city  
Won't these women ever get a life

Feminists don't have a sense of humor  
Feminists and vegetarians  
Feminists spread vicious lies and rumor  
They're far too sensitive to ever be a ham  
That's why these feminists just need to find a man

- Nellie McKay<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nellie McKay, "Mother of Pearl," *Obligatory Villagers*, (Vanguard Records: 2007)

## I. Introduction

I don't like any female comedians... A woman doing comedy doesn't offend me but sets me back a bit. I, as a viewer, have trouble with it. I think of her as a producing machine that brings babies in the world. -Jerry Lewis, 2000.<sup>2</sup>

In the January 2007 issue of *Vanity Fair* magazine, sandwiched between pieces about George W. Bush's war in Iraq and features about burgeoning young starlets, an op-ed article by Christopher Hitchens entitled "Why Women Aren't Funny" reignited a passionate argument about the relationship between women and humor. Printing such an article and putting its title on the magazine's cover had its desired effect, selling magazines and drumming up both controversy and publicity for the star-polemic. It is hardly a groundbreaking statement; the belief that 'women aren't funny' has persisted in Western culture for centuries. From Kate Sanborn's 1885 book *The Wit of Women*, to the scholarly works of Regina Barreca and Nancy Walker, women have fought against this stereotype not just by producing comedy but by creating theories as to why women's humor is not recognized.<sup>3</sup> Humor is subjective: not all women are funny and not all men are funny. Different people find different things funny. But to *still* say that "women" aren't funny, as if they were a homogenous group, must be a joke.

In April 2008, *Vanity Fair* printed a pseudo-response to Hitchens' article entitled "Who Says Women Aren't Funny?" The article featured several prominent female comics and television stars and emphasized the fact that funny women are considerably more visible on television than ever before.<sup>4</sup> More women succeeding on television is progress, but they

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<sup>2</sup> Kristina Day, "Female Comedy Celebrated at the Hepburn Center," *The Day*, May 20, 2010, Stage Section, Online edition, <http://www.theday.com/article/20100520/ENT12/305209483/-1/ENT>

<sup>3</sup> Regina Barreca, "Introduction," *Women's Studies* Vol. 15, Issue 1-3, p. 3-22 (1988), <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=fmh&AN=5811430&site=ehost-live>  
Nancy Walker, *A very serious thing: Women's humor and American culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988)

<sup>4</sup> Alessandra Stanely, "Who Says Women Aren't Funny," *Vanity Fair*, April, 2008. <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2008/04/funnygirls200804>

would not be succeeding without viewers. Why then, at a time when there are more funny women succeeding in entertainment, does this stereotype prevail?

Hitchens' article, as offensive and obnoxious as it is, provides a contemporary argument for an age-old stereotype. Because his argument is symptomatic of both current biases and older arguments against women and humor, I want to explore this argumentation further. The general argument of Hitchens' essay is this: "For women, reproduction is, if not the only thing, certainly the main thing...for women the question of funniness is essentially a secondary one. They are innately aware of a higher calling that is no laughing matter."<sup>5</sup> Hitchens' claim, blind to its own heteronormative and biological essentialism, positions women as primarily reproducers to whom any other pursuit is frivolous. Humor, in his mind, is a tool for men to use, as "the chief task in life that a man has to perform is that of impressing the opposite sex."<sup>6</sup>

However, Hitchens is not the first to make a biologically essentialized argument for the supposed humorlessness of females. Regina Barreca and Frances Gray both cite Reginald Blyth's 1959 work, *Humor in English Literature*, who also asserts the claim:

The truth is...that women have not only no humor in themselves but are the cause of the extinction of it in others. This is almost too cruel to be true, but in every way women correspond to and are representative of nature. Is there any humor in nature? A glance at the zoo will answer this question... [w]omen are the undifferentiated mass of nature from which the contradictions of real and ideal arose and they are the unlaughing at which men laugh.<sup>7</sup>

The nature argument is flawed from the start. Beyond essentializing men and women, Hitchens and Blyth are essentializing humor in total, without regard for its powerful social and political potentials.

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<sup>5</sup> Christopher Hitchens. "Why Women Aren't Funny," *Vanity Fair*, January 2007.  
<http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2007/01/hitchens200701>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Reginald Blyth, *Humor in English Literature: A Chronological Anthology* (Folcroft: 1959), 14-15, quoted in Frances Gray, *Women and Laughter* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 7.

Anthropologist Peter Farb theorized humor as having different social functions within groups. He outlines six specifically: “relief of tension, reinforcement of the picture a society holds of itself, dissipation of aggression, promotion of solidarity within the group that laughs together, lessening of the group’s anxieties, and facilitation of communication.”<sup>8</sup> Humor produces cohesion between people, it reduces stress and helps people talk to and relate to one another. Farb emphasizes the powerful role that humor plays in both social and group interactions. Theories on humor between groups cannot ignore power relations and, most importantly, who makes who laugh and at whom.

Hitchens, on the other hand, limits the uses of humor into two categories, both still firmly rooted in his biological argumentation: the kind of humor between men and women, in which men use humor to impress (and subsequently impregnate) women, and humor between men.<sup>9</sup>

Men are overawed, not to say terrified, by the ability of women to produce babies. It gives women an unchallengeable authority... So you could argue that when men get together to be funny...they are really playing truant and implicitly conceding who is really the boss... A whole tranche of subversive male humor likewise depends on the notion that women are *not* really the boss, but are mere objects and victims.<sup>10</sup>

Blythe is not far off from this assertion when he positions women as the serious natural sex that men can laugh at.<sup>11</sup> Both authors offer a model of humor that positions women as the butt of jokes and naturally incapable of being in the position of power as the teller of a joke.

As these are male perspectives, however, we must assume that much if not all of the empirical evidence for these arguments was drawn from mixed-gender situations. That is not to say that humor has not thrived between women. Nancy Walker’s book *A Very Serious*

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Farb, “Speaking Seriously about Humor,” *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 22, No 4 (Winter, 1981) p. 768, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25089220>.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Hitchens. “Why Women Aren’t Funny,” *Vanity Fair*, January 2007. <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2007/01/hitchens200701>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Reginald Blyth, *Humor in English Literature: A Chronological Anthology* (Folcroft: 1959), 14-15, quoted in Frances Gray, *Women and Laughter* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 7.



*Thing* recognizes several nineteenth-century female humorists, like Marietta Holley and Sarah Willis Parton (published under the pseudonym Fanny Fern), whose humor focused on the domestic experiences of women often overlooked by men.<sup>12</sup> Robin Lakoff's *Language and Women's Place*, published in 1975, suggests that women are less likely to use humor in mixed-company because of its effects on social cohesion as well as perceptions that it is impolite.<sup>13</sup> Funny women, whether culturally discouraged and ignored, limited to in-group interactions, or just plainly misunderstood, have existed as long as women have, with or without the (laughing) approval or recognition of the opposite sex.

Despite the title of his piece, Hitchens has to make some nominal allowance to funny women. And there is the rub.

My argument doesn't say there are no decent women comedians...there are some impressive ladies out there. Most of them, though, when you come to review the situation, are hefty or dykey or Jewish, or some combo of the three. When Roseanne stands up and tells biker jokes and invites people who don't dig her shtick to suck her dick—know what I am saying? And the Sapphic faction may have its own reasons for wanting what I want—the sweet surrender of female laughter. While Jewish humor, boiling as it is with angst and self-deprecation, is almost masculine by definition.<sup>14</sup>

After allowing for female comedians in his argumentation, Hitchens moves to delegitimize their femininity. Sure, women *can* be funny, but what does that say about their womanliness? When (sometimes) hefty Roseanne Barr is aggressive and subversive on-stage, Hitchens presents her as - “know what I am saying”<sup>15</sup> - a failure of feminine gender roles. Hitchens, it would seem, does not equate aggression with “lady-like” behavior. Lesbian comedians are depicted as imitators of the heterosexual power relations. Where straight men are seen as using humor (appropriately) to bed straight women, lesbian comedians are using heterosexual

<sup>12</sup> Karen Lindsey, “Funny Girls,” review of *A very serious thing: Women's humor and American culture*, by Nancy Walker, *The Women's Review of Books*, Vol. 6, No. 5, February 1989, 10-11.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4020434>

<sup>13</sup> Robin Lakoff, *Language and woman's place* (New York: Harper, 1975)

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Hitchens. “Why Women Aren't Funny,” *Vanity Fair*, January 2007.  
<http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2007/01/hitchens200701>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

male humor to similar ends. Then he moves on to Jewish women, beginning with an inaccurate assumption that all Jewish female comedians employ styles of so-called Jewish humor in their acts. The long-standing anti-semitic stereotypes of the desexualized and defeminized Jewish woman are not directly addressed, but ignored in his statement as he instead characterizes the self-deprecating aspects of Jewish humor as unfeminine and straight masculine. Perhaps this article could have more effectively been titled “How Traditional Gender Roles Deny Women Access to Humor.”

As irritating as Hitchens is, he is on to something. Hitchens is illuminating the social constructs that create the stereotype. Funny women cannot *be* women. How can a woman maintain her femininity while being aggressive, expressing angst, speaking publicly and making people laugh? That’s what men do, in order to seduce women, according to Hitchens! In that sense, women using humor can be seen as deviating from assigned gender roles and hence a threat to the masculine/feminine order. That may be saying too much. Just because a woman cracks a joke does not mean she is destabilizing the gender binary. Not all humor is aggressive, subversive, or even public.

My focus in this thesis narrows in on this humor, the aggressive public humor employed by female stand-up comics. I will examine how female comics use different types of humor and question how their routines draw attention to and comment on feminist issues. Further, I will explore the consequences of the female comic’s violation of gender roles and, through the analysis of their work, examine how power relations function between the comic and the audience. Specifically, I will evaluate the work of two white American comedians, Sarah Silverman and Maria Bamford. Both comics’ work exists primarily in a white-male sphere of stand-up comedy that has been dubbed “alternative comedy.” Stand-up has several genres with funny and groundbreaking female performers (Latina comedy and Black stand-up both have significant followings in the U.S.).

The alternative comedy scene exists on several planes: in comedy clubs, on the internet and on late-night cable channels with large audiences. Despite being called “alternative,” this genre of comedy has considerable mainstream representation, more so than other forms. Several comedians from the alternative comedy genre have moved on to network sketch shows like “Saturday Night Live” and starred in big-budget comedy films. In the next chapter, I will examine the field of stand-up and the various venues where it is performed. Additionally, I will define and what is meant by “alternative” comedy and introduce its major players. The third chapter will provide in depth analysis of Bamford and Silverman’s material using an analytical framework adapted from Joanne Gilbert and Elizabeth Grosz.<sup>16</sup> I will analyze how the comedian’s style, sex, and audience create meaning and effect the messages contained in the comic material.

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<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, “Sexual Signatures: Feminism after the Death of the Author,” In *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, (New York: Routledge, 1995)  
Joanne Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004)

## II. Background

Originating from vaudeville, stand-up began to constitute a genre of its own in the late 1930s.<sup>17</sup> Traditionally, stand-up comics and their audience have been overwhelmingly male. In many ways, as Philip Auslander points out, “stand-up comedy is an intrinsically male-centered form.”<sup>18</sup> The general setting of the comedy club is relatively unchanged since venues specifically designated for stand-up began to crop up in the early 1960s.<sup>19</sup> Stand-up performances of different kinds existed prior to the emergence of devoted venues, often they were part of larger variety shows, however clubs dedicated to stand-up helped to solidify it as a recognized form of performance. In its purest form, “stand-up” is a set of relations that are created between a comic and an audience. These relations exist in certain spaces, traditionally, the comedy club. As a space, the typical comedy club consists of a small stage and a seated audience, usually at small tables within feet of the stage space.<sup>20</sup> Because of the small stage space and close proximity of the audience, the comic is able to gauge reactions and adapt the comic material to suit.

The single fixture on the comedy club stage is the microphone on a stand.<sup>21</sup> When occupying the stage, the comic begins in a position of power. When successful, the comic performs his or her routine of jokes and the audience laughs, determining the success of the performance. Laughter functions in several ways. First, it signifies that the audience understands that material presented and can identify with the material. Second, when the

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<sup>17</sup> Joanne Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 46.

<sup>18</sup> Phillip Auslander, ““Brought to You by Fem-Rage”: Stand-up Comedy and the Politics of Gender,” in *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, ed. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 318.

<sup>19</sup> Joanne Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 52.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>21</sup> Some comedians use additional props on stage. Zach Galifianakis uses a piano in his performances, as did several stand-ups before him. Steve Martin was famous for both his banjo performances and physical gags, like the arrow-through-the-head-piece. In the alternative comedy scene, the use of props and music is becoming more prevalent, like Dmitri Martin’s use of PowerPoint presentations and large graphs as well as comical songs.

audience laughs they are conceding power to the comic. In this sense, laughter functions as a kind of approval, justifying the joke and the presence of the comic on stage. Lastly, laughter is a weapon. When Farb says that one of the functions of humor is the “promotion of solidarity within the group that laughs together,” that laughter is a tool that divides those who are laughing with who or what is being laughed at.<sup>22</sup> If women’s use of humor already violates gender roles and threatens the normative order, a woman on-stage making the traditionally male audience laugh would be dangerous to the masculine structure of stand-up. Indeed, as Phillip Auslander put it: “A performance genre that apparently depends on the domination of the audience by the performer through phallic assertion does not seem a promising candidate as a medium for women’s expression.”<sup>23</sup>

## ROUTINE

The expression that occurs on the stage is known as a routine. Though the routine is usually made up jokes and bit written beforehand, the comic must be prepared to adapt when necessary, either by falling back on their own catalog of material or improvising. Comedy clubs and also televised appearances by comedians strictly adhere to time limitations. Typically referred to in increments of minutes, ranging from 8 to 20 minutes, the comic’s routine must stick to the time requirements or risk upsetting the management.<sup>24</sup>

In a given evening, a comedy club will advertise several comedians to perform in one night. The list of comedians set to perform is called the bill. Similar to films and television, billing and promotion can determine the success of an act, the size and excitement of the audience and the coherence of a program. This is one area where women are often at a disadvantage. Though more women have entered the traditionally male field, women are still

<sup>22</sup> Peter Farb, “Speaking Seriously about Humor,” *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 22, No 4 (Winter, 1981) p. 768, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25089220>.

<sup>23</sup> Phillip Auslander, ““Brought to You by Fem-Rage”: Stand-up Comedy and the Politics of Gender,” in *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, ed. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 318.

<sup>24</sup> Joanne Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 56.

outnumbered and a female comic “will most likely be surrounded by four male comedians on a bill.”<sup>25</sup> Further, most comedy clubs are hosted or emceed by either one of the billed comics or a representative of the club, who warms up the crowd with jokes and introduces the comics to the stage. Several female comics have reported introductions that reinforce their marginality in the genre and season their performance before they even begin their routines; introductions like: “female comic,” “a lovely lady with big tits,” or “a woman who fucked her way to the top.”<sup>26</sup>

## AUDIENCE

Though stand-up is traditionally a solo venture, where a comic performs their routine on stage alone, the role of the audience cannot be ignored. The comic adapts the content of the performance to the audience; if the comic judges that the audience before them is mostly middle-aged businesspeople they may swap out a joke about the newest young Disney starlet for something that is more likely to resonate with the age group or style of the audience. Traditionally, a comic’s success in the comedy club is highly dependent on an ability to read an audience and spontaneously construct a routine that will make them laugh. John Limon composed a set of theorems to define the genre of stand-up: “If you think something is funny, then it is. A joke is funny if and only if you laugh at it. And the only end of stand-up is to make people laugh. What those theorems make clear is that an audience has a definitive role in regard to a stand-up act that no other audience at an art performance has.”<sup>27</sup> This relationship between the audience and the comic is most aggressive in the comedy club, where the disappointment of the audience can make the performance of stand-up fail. If the

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<sup>25</sup> Alison M. Kibler, “Gender Conflict and Coercion on A & E’s *An Evening at the Improv*,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 32 (1999), 45-57, quoted in Danielle Russell, “Self-deprecatory Humor and the Female Comic: Self-destruction or Comedic Construction?,” *thirdspace*, 2/1 (November 2002), 5.

<sup>26</sup> Joanne Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 34

<sup>27</sup> John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 11-13.

comic does not make the audience laugh then the relations that create a successful stand-up act are not formed.

The comic assumes the position of power on stage. But that does not leave the audience powerless. Heckling is common in stand-up and can ruin a comic's performance. More often than not, hecklers are male. By disrupting the routine and drawing attention to themselves, hecklers can turn an audience and take the power position from the comic. The comic can often manage heckling and keep control. Zach Galifianakis brings his hecklers on stage and interviews them, making them the punch line and taking back control.<sup>28</sup> In other cases, a heckler can break the relations between the audience and the comic, and the stand-up, will tank.<sup>29</sup> Whether heckling is due to poor reception of comic material or simply the constitution of the heckler, one major contributor to heckling that is also a major part of the comedy club is the bar.

As a space, comedy clubs have few amenities and the profits for the club (and performers) typically come from a cover charge for admission and bar revenue, which is often built-in with admission as several clubs have a two-drink minimum.<sup>30</sup> Due to the consumption of alcohol, required by the club or otherwise, the audience members will occasionally become inebriated, increasing the likelihood of aggressive hecklers.

Stand-up comedy is a business, and comedy clubs are the primary site of that business. Comics try their best to make a living wage with their work, which can often mean making the jokes that the audience wants to hear as opposed to those that fulfill their own artistic vision. As Joanne Gilbert puts it, The "master's tools" may never dismantle the "master's house," but the master's cover charge and two drink minimum might help to build

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<sup>28</sup> Zach Galifianakis, quoted in Patton Oswald, Episode 2: New York City [Television series episode], In *Comedians of Comedy*. (New York: Comedy Central, 2005)

<sup>29</sup> Joanne Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 56

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 54

another very nice house... A female comic who has temporary control of the hegemonic wallet may, indeed, be performing a political act.<sup>31</sup>

## MARGINAL HUMOR

When Joanne Gilbert discusses female comics, she uses the term “marginal humor.”<sup>32</sup> Gilbert defines marginal humor as humor that “includes the use of self-deprecation and blatant rhetorical subversion.”<sup>33</sup> These two features are commonly seen in the material of female comics, though not exclusively. Stand-up’s long history of male comedians have employed these characteristics in their acts, however female comedians are additionally “marked” by their marginality as female bodies in traditionally male space. Though marginal humor is not strictly a female model, Gilbert says, “marginalized individuals are afforded a freedom unique to their insider/outside position...Women who perform their marginality may offer a potentially subversive critique of the hegemonic culture while simultaneously eliciting laughter and earning a living.”<sup>34</sup>

In the next section, I will look at two pioneers of marginal humor who have set the stage for the marginal humor of Bamford and Silverman: Lenny Bruce and Phyllis Diller. Bruce began his career in the early 1950s and quickly became one of, if not the most, controversial performers of his time. Despite his everyman appearance, Bruce’s routines were littered with foul language and dealt with race, sex and cultural taboos. Bruce was arrested multiple times on both drug and obscenity charges. On several occasions his performances were attended by plain-clothes officers who later arrested him for the use of words like “cocksucker” and phrasing like “go come in a chicken.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Joanne Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 165.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>35</sup> Doug Linder. 2003. The Trial of Lenny Bruce. UMKC School of Law: 2003  
<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/bruce/bruceaccount.html>.



Already a figure in the counter-culture and author of a 1963 autobiography *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, the press covered Bruce's obscenity trial and several prominent intellectuals and performers signed a petition protesting his arrest, including Susan Sontag, Gore Vidal, Bob Dylan, Paul Newman, and Elizabeth Taylor.<sup>36</sup> Much of the evidence used against Bruce was constructed from crude notes taken by a New York City inspector during one of his performances and were read deadpan from the witness stand.<sup>37</sup> Bruce expressed frustration at how his performance was recounted during the trial, saying "I'm going to be judged by *his* bad timing, *his* ego, *his* garbled language."<sup>38</sup> Bruce was found guilty of the obscenity charges and was sentenced to "four months in the workhouse" though he begged that court "just hear my act once."<sup>39</sup> His sentence was appealed but Bruce died of a morphine overdose before his case reached appellate court.<sup>40</sup> Bruce's innovative comedy and fight against censorship secured his place as a legend in stand-up, and his trial reinforces the importance of viewing stand-up as a set of relations. Stand-up functions between an audience and a comic and removing it from this relational setting can easily alter how it is perceived.

Phyllis Diller began her long stand-up career in the late 1950s at the age of 40, already a mother of five children.<sup>41</sup> Known for her exaggerated appearance on stage, her costumes included enormous wigs and heavy, bright make-up. She "earned the nickname "Killer Diller" because of her rapid-fire delivery—twelve punchlines a minute."<sup>42</sup> Decked out in grotesque hyperbolic femininity, Diller brought self-deprecating humor to a new level.

<sup>36</sup> Petition Protesting the Arrest of Lenny Bruce, UMKC School of Law: 1964.  
[www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/bruce/brucepetition.html](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/bruce/brucepetition.html)

<sup>37</sup> Doug Linder. 2003. The Trial of Lenny Bruce. UMKC School of Law: 2003  
<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/bruce/bruceaccount.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Linda Konner, Untitled. Review of *Like a Lampshade in a Whorehouse*, by Phyllis Diller with Richard Buskin, *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 252 Issue 6, July 7 2005, 57.

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=15951869&site=ehost-live>

<sup>42</sup> L. Martin and K. Segrave, *Women in Comedy* (Secaucus, New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1986), quoted in Joanne Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), xiv

Along with sharp witticisms about Fang, her fictionalized husband, she joked about failing as a housewife and about her appearance. Stand-up has historically been a very difficult boys-club for female comedians to crack and Diller was arguably the first to do so.

Diller used marginal humor as part of her stage act, though it was not always recognized as subversive. As Gilbert concludes, several critics read Diller's stand-up as performances of her own self-loathing, but that is only a surface reading.

Although initially her self-deprecating material may appear demeaning (toward herself and/or women in general), a closer scrutiny reveals that Diller's jokes accomplish what all marginal humor accomplished—it calls cultural values into question by lampooning them. Diller uses herself as the butt [of the joke] to make fun of culture at large. Through self-deprecating material, a comic ridicules the society that creates ideals for appearance and behavior as well as individuals who subscribe to those standards.<sup>43</sup>

Diller's use of self-deprecating humor uses the control position of the stand-up comic to make the audience members laugh not just at her but also at themselves. When she is critical of her exaggerated appearance, the audience is also laughing with her at the standards that make such an exaggeration appear like an attempt at prescribed femininity.

Diller's stand-up stood out at the time, not only because of its subversive style, but because she was one of very few women performing traditional solo stand-up acts. She stayed in step with her male contemporaries despite the fact that women were viewed as a "novelty" act at the time.<sup>44</sup> As late as 1983 Diller had to dress in full male drag to attend the Friars Club Roast of her colleague Sid Caesar. The Friars Club did not allow women to be present at Roasts officially until 1988, because "the language gets kind of graphic."<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Joanne Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 131

<sup>44</sup> Linda Konner, Untitled. Review of *Like a Lampshade in a Whorehouse*, by Phyllis Diller with Richard Buskin, *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 252 Issue 6, July 7 2005, 57.

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=15951869&site=ehost-live>

<sup>45</sup> *Ocala Star-Banner*, "Dressed in Drag, Diller Attends Friars Club Roast," October 28, 1983.

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1356&dat=19831028&id=jwdFAAAAIBAJ&sjid=cQYEAAAIAAJ&pg=3187,6899280>

## ALTERNATIVE COMEDY

With their acts, both Bruce and Diller rewrote the rules of stand-up and opened the field for more subversive material from male or female comedians. Stand-up comedy has not remained static since their contributions, Richard Pryor, George Carlin, Lily Tomlin, Gilda Radner and countless other have pushed the boundaries of the stand-up form. In the 1990s, a sub-genre of “alternative” comedy began to form in the U.S. that defined itself by breaking the rules of traditional stand-up.<sup>46</sup> Little has been written about the alternative comedy movement in the U.S. other than what the participants themselves have written and reviews of their work.

Alternative comedy in the U.S. grew out of two separate scenes, one in Los Angeles and the other in New York. In Los Angeles, alternative comedy has become synonymous with a venue called Un-Cabaret. Beginning operation in 1991, founder Beth Lapidés and Greg Miller “applied artistic criteria to stand up and created an 'alternative comedy' revolution, valuing story over jokes, meaning over form, urgency over polish, and intimacy over schtick,” expanding stand-up and challenging the normative structures of the field.<sup>47</sup> Through workshops, Un-Cabaret worked with several comedians that have become the foundation of the west-coast alternative comedy scene, including Margaret Cho, Bob Odenkirk, David Cross, Janeane Garofalo and Judd Apatow.<sup>48</sup>

In New York, the alternative comedy scene grew out of the improv scene. New York’s Upright Citizens Brigade Theater became the cornerstone of alternative comedy, inspiring other to create mixed-form comedy shows in various venues including stand-up

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<sup>46</sup> Alternative comedy is also a genre that emerged earlier in 1980s in the U.K. with stand-up comic performances and programs like *The Young Ones* and *Absolutely Fabulous*. Several authors have written about British alternative comedy, including Linda Gray in her book, *Women and Laughter*. In this paper, alternative comedy refers to the American brand of the term, which though influenced by British alternative comedy, came about under different circumstances.

<sup>47</sup> "About Un-Cabaret UN-CABARET FREE-RANGE COMEDY." UN-CABARET FREE-RANGE COMEDY "Taking Comedy Seriously Since 1991". <http://uncabaret.com/node/1>

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

but also integrating innovative improvisational acts.<sup>49</sup> The New York scene has also produced many comics that broke through to the mainstream, like Demetri Martin, Eugene Mirman, and, Upright Citizens Brigade founding member and Saturday Night Live alum, Amy Poehler.<sup>50</sup> Even though alternative comedy as a movement has only been recently labeled; several comics claim that it is not a new development, but more of an ethos. Andrea Rosen who ran the “Pie Hole Comedy Show” in New York claims “Mel Brooks was an alternative comic. So is Steve Martin.”<sup>51</sup> When Lapidès created Un-Cabaret she worked to redefine the field in content and practice, “in contrast to divisive lowbrow stand-up, it set out to be un-homophobic, un-xenophobic, and un-misogynistic.”<sup>52</sup> Alternative comedy recognizes feminism as a discourse, but by doing so, it does not put it above critical commentary.

At the 2009 AltCom convention, New York alternative comedian Eugene Mirman provided an outline of alternative comedy:

I have decided to write down the definitive tenants and principles of alternative comedy. The first rule: passion and art before commerce. Two: smash old ideas and make new ones out of the bones of the status quo, pubic hair and glue. And then smash them again. Go to dive bars and hook up with twenty-somethings who like “Aqua-Teen Hunger Force.”...As an alternative comedy comedian it is your duty to live life like a train without any tracks--totally free, but also stuck. Every time you perform you must get Janeane Garofalo to run on stage and shoot you with a Spiderman thing and then yell, "THE PATRIARCHY IS HERSTORY!" ...Also before each show, jerk off a dog in a Burger King restroom, to show your disdain for boundaries. And lastly, your comedy lives on the edge of a sword that shreds all through the complacency of the world. So, in the right context you are allowed to use racial slurs, like: Jew-face, Mr. Light-Brown, Hombo--that's a homosexual hobo, and Niiiiiiiiiiiiiii.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Lisa Selin Davis, "Serious Fun," *The Brooklyn Paper* (New York), November 10, 2003, Online edition, sec. Go Brooklyn. [http://www.brooklynpaper.com/stories/26/45/26\\_45piehole.html](http://www.brooklynpaper.com/stories/26/45/26_45piehole.html)

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> "About Un-Cabaret UN-CABARET FREE-RANGE COMEDY." UN-CABARET FREE-RANGE COMEDY "Taking Comedy Seriously Since 1991". <http://uncabaret.com/node/1>

<sup>53</sup> Eugene Mirman, "Eugene Mirman Defines Alternative Comedy at AltCom 2009," Online video clip, YouTube: 2009. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57cFX5hebTY>

To compare their texts, one might initially see Mirman's definition as contradictory to the values of Lapides' west-coast model of alternative comedy. The material produced by Un-Cabaret's participants is no less edgy than what Mirman proposes, though they word their mission statements differently. The major characteristic of alternative comedy, definitions aside, is the reflexivity that alternative comics rely upon when crafting cultural critiques—a characteristic not limited to comic scene or generation. As a buzzword, alternative comedy is erroneously used to describe several comedians working in the field, but the significance of the term is to denote comedians that challenge the boundaries of the field through innovation, pastiche and reflexive provocation.

Both Bamford and Silverman perform traditional stand-up, but they have also both explored alternative forms of stand-up, which are included in this analysis. Silverman wrote and starred in the 2008 film, *Jesus is Magic*. The film combines narrative, songs, and clips from a live stand-up performance. The film begins with Silverman's friend discussing their recent achievements and successes, Silverman feels left out and claims that she has written a one-woman show that will be performed that night and the film documents her "last-minute" production.

In 2007, Bamford wrote and starred in *The Maria Bamford Show*, a 20 episode web-based series. The short webisodes, less than four minutes apiece, star Bamford as herself/comic persona after a mental breakdown returning to her parents' home in Minnesota to recuperate and get her life in order. Bamford plays all of the character in the show, differentiated through voices and costume.<sup>54</sup> Bamford also performed the comic material from *The Maria Bamford Show* in a live one-woman show called *Plan B. The Maria Bamford Show* appeared on-line hosted by Super Deluxe. This website, now defunct, was an on-line comedy platform owned by Turner Broadcasting that showcased both live and cartoon

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<sup>54</sup> Because Bamford plays several characters in her performances, extracted quotes from her work will identify the changes in her characters.

webisodes.<sup>55</sup> Super Deluxe also hosted crossover web-content for Adult Swim, a block of late-night programming aired on the Cartoon Network, a basic cable channel devoted to cartoons for children by day, and cartoons for older viewers at night. Adult Swim has become a breakthrough venue for alternative comics, airing innovative programming like the alternative comedy post-modern series *Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!* Super Deluxe closed in 2008 and much of its web content, excluding *The Maria Bamford Show*, was transferred to the Adult Swim website.<sup>56</sup>

Though both comedians perform stand-up in comedy clubs, they have created stand-up texts outside of the traditional stand-up environment. Alternative comedy, as previously mentioned, thrives on innovation. As alternative comics, but also as female comedians, Bamford and Silverman have adapted their comic routines into mediums where they as performers have more control. Though Silverman's stand-up bits from *Jesus is Magic*, were performed before an audience, the camera focuses on her and the attention cannot be hijacked by hecklers. Likewise, Bamford removes the audience completely for *The Maria Bamford Show* and puts her material into the new form of webisodes, expanding her virtual audience.

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<sup>55</sup> Rafat Ali, "Turner To Launch Super Deluxe Multiplatform Edgy Youth Brand | paidContent," The Economics of Content | paidContent, Guardian Media. <http://paidcontent.org/article/turner-to-launch-super-deluxe-multiplatform-edgy-youth-brand/>

<sup>56</sup> Staci D. Kramer, "Another One Bites The Dust: Turner Folds Comedy Site SuperDeluxe Into AdultSwim.com," The Economics of Content | paidContent, Guardian Media. <http://paidcontent.org/article/419-another-one-bites-the-dust-turner-folds-comedy-site-superdeluxe-into-ad/>

### III. Case Study and Analysis

For the analysis of the comic texts, I am turning to framework developed by Elizabeth Grosz in the essay “Sexual Signatures: Feminism After the Death of the Author” from her book *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*. Stand-up is notoriously difficult to situate within feminist disciplines. However, Grosz draws from literary, cultural studies and philosophy to pose a set of questions that interrogate and problematize both how a text (literary, performative, or otherwise) is assessed and how a text can be labeled feminist or patriarchal.<sup>57</sup> I use Grosz’s model here as a starting point and a structure through which to analysis these texts for several reasons: First, Grosz admits in her essay that no text is ever always feminist or always patriarchal, but that these labels are not fixed and “depend on its context, its place within that context, how it is used, by whom and to what effect.”<sup>58</sup> In terms of stand-up, which itself only exists within relations between the audience and the comic, a model of analysis that emphasizes the contextuality of a text.

Secondly, Grosz makes a differentiation between texts she calls “women’s” or “feminine texts” and “feminist texts.”<sup>59</sup> This separation is important when discussing women in stand-up or simply women and humor. When the field, humor or stand-up, constructs itself as inaccessible or inappropriate for women in the first place, one must avoid labeling women active within that field as de facto feminists. Outlining the differences between texts that are authored by women or specifically for a feminine audiences and a feminist text “which self-consciously challenge the methods, objects, goals, or principles of mainstream patriarchal canons” is important to the analysis of the routines themselves.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, “Sexual Signatures: Feminism after the Death of the Author,” In *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 10-11

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 23

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 11

<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, “Sexual Signatures: Feminism after the Death of the Author,” In *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 11

Drawing from feminist literary theory, Grosz proposes four questions which I will use as starting points to analyze and interrogate the comic texts of Maria Bamford and Sarah Silverman: “1) the sex of the author; 2) the content of the text; 3) the sex of the reader; and 4) the style of the text.”<sup>61</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, I will rearrange the order of this criteria.

## STYLE OF THE TEXT

The comedian’s stage persona is a stylistic trait that differs from comedian to comedian. The persona that a comic speaks through on stage is frequently the source of much misinterpretation of a comic’s material, as the persona is often seen as a reflection of the comic as opposed to a constructed image. As previously discussed, Diller’s performances were characterized by her outlandish costumed stage character, while Bruce, on the other hand, performed in his normal dress with his normal voice. Gilbert explains, “audiences perceived Bruce to be the same person onstage and off. Indeed, it was this congruence that made Bruce a comic catalyst.”<sup>62</sup> The stage persona is an important tool for the comic, though the comic and the persona may not differ greatly. Following Bruce’s contribution to the field of stand-up, most comedic personas are based in some way upon the comic. As Gilbert says,

In the genre of stand-up comedy, performers present a pastiche of observations and characters both real and imagined. At the bottom, however, is the autobiographical self—a multifaceted protean entity that encompasses both the onstage and offstage personae.<sup>63</sup>

Silverman’s stage persona combines autobiographical factors with an exaggerated arrogant ignorance that is heavily gendered, mentioning that since she is a “totally cute white

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 11

<sup>62</sup> Joanne Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 51

<sup>63</sup> Joanne Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 51



girl” she should be able to “say “chink” on network television”<sup>64</sup>. Within her stage persona, she juggles stereotypes with hapless attempts at political correctness,

I don't do that [anal sex]... My friend Mike was. you know, he was like, um, last night --Ah, you know, it's not disgusting, it's natural... Um, first of all doodie comes out of there... I'm like going off and remember as I am talking that, you know, Mike is gay and I now have to back-peddle and say like-- No, you're asshole is like your vagina, that's totally cool.<sup>65</sup>

Speaking to the New York Times about her stage performances, she said, “I like being aggressively stupid. I either say what I think, or the opposite of what I think. And hopefully the absolute power of both transcends.”<sup>66</sup> This blending of self and persona had earned her many detractors who fail to see the humor in a joke regarding race or rape. Additionally, Silverman often uses “blue” humor, which tends to denote bawdy or dirty jokes and foul language, as did Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor before her and beyond a few notable contemporary exceptions, like Margaret Cho and Wanda Sykes, “blue” humor is more often seen in the performances of male comedians.

When Hitchens faults Rosanne Barr’s comedy for being tough, rough and telling the audience to “suck her dick,” it is not only her weight that is unfeminine, but her “blue” humor.<sup>67</sup> Occasionally, “working blue” neither Barr nor Silverman exemplify the feminine wit Hitchens finds suitable for women. According to Hitchens, Silverman’s comedy is further delegitimized because she is Jewish, though contrary to Hitchens, Silverman’s comedic persona exudes arrogance and she uses little self-deprecating humor in her acts.

<sup>64</sup> *Sarah Silverman - Jesus is Magic*, Film, Directed by Liam Lynch, (Santa Monica: Interscope Records, 2005), 49:28.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.31

<sup>66</sup> David Itzkoff, "Sarah Silverman's Message to Your Grandma: Vote Obama," *The New York Times*, October 6, 2008, Online edition, sec. Arts, Television.  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/07/arts/television/07sara.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/07/arts/television/07sara.html?_r=1)

<sup>67</sup> Christopher Hitchens. “Why Women Aren’t Funny,” *Vanity Fair*, January 2007.  
<http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2007/01/hitchens200701>

Bamford, on the other hand, has an anxious, almost nervous, stage persona. Fellow alternative comic Patton Oswald characterized her persona, “like a Martian doing racist jokes about Earthlings, she is so in her own sphere.”<sup>68</sup> Though she may not be a Martian, Bamford’s persona and routine are marked by alienation. She often uses dark and self-deprecating humor to address issues of mental health and her personal struggles. Bamford portrays a number of characters through distinctive voices and physical impressions throughout her routines and her interactions with them tend leave Bamford an outsider. Reoccurring characters in her act include her mother, a faithful Christian Diet Coke addict, Amy Sleeveerson, a ditsy but disturbed friend, and her sister, a hyperactive decoupage enthusiast and mother.

In her article *Feminist humor: rebellious and self-affirming*, Lisa Merrill praises the use of multiple characters in stand-up over traditional stand-up.<sup>69</sup> Citing the work of Lily Tomlin, Merrill views this approach as more conducive to feminist concerns, “This posture allows the character to appear to initiate a dialogue with the assumed spectator thereby introducing the spectator to the lifestyle and value system the character embodies, without the performer exercising an obvious editorial statement.”<sup>70</sup> Though not exclusively, Maria frequently adopts this multicharacter approach in her stand-up.

Though the comic persona provides a way for comedians to distance themselves from the audience, both Bamford and Silverman “break the 4<sup>th</sup> wall” and address the audience as themselves at the ends of *Jesus is Magic* and *The Maria Bamford Show*. In the final scene of *Jesus is Magic*, Silverman seduces herself in a mirror, making-out with her own image in the mirror. But at the very end of sequence, the persona falls away and she breaks character

<sup>68</sup> Patton Oswald, Episode 1: From Los Angeles to Baltimore [Television series episode], In *Comedians of Comedy*. (New York: Comedy Central, 2005), 2:29

<sup>69</sup> Philip Auslander, ““Brought to You by Fem-Rage”: Stand-up Comedy and the Politics of Gender,” in *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, ed. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 318

<sup>70</sup> Lisa Merrill, “Feminist Humor: rebellious and self-affirming,” *Women's Studies* 15, no. 1-3 (1988), 277. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=fmh&AN=5811679&site=ehost-live>

laughing at the camera.<sup>71</sup> Further, as the credits run, an outtake reel rolls to side, showing Silverman nervously goofing off during filming.<sup>72</sup>

During the last episode of *The Maria Bamford Show*, Bamford explains that she, herself, has not had a mental breakdown and that the “documentary” she has produced is fictional. She explains that the characters and story line she has created are actually her “worst fears.”<sup>73</sup> Both comedians move to justify their personas and differentiate themselves from the images they construct of themselves.

## SEX OF THE AUTHOR

In any stand-up performance, the sex of the author cannot be divorced from the performance. The physical presence of a sexed body on stage signifies the beginning of the comic’s stand-up performance. In a space typically dominated by men, the presence of the female body would appear to alter the audience’s initial perceptions of the performance. The comic’s physical body, male or female, is an integral part of how the text will be read by the audience. Gestures, faces, postures and impressions help to make up the visual performance that is an integral part of the comic’s performance. How a comedian chooses to use, display, and acknowledge their body on stage differs significantly between comedians. Though the issue of a sex has been dealt with at great length in previous sections, I want to examine how the Bamford and Silverman deal with their sex in routines.

Both Bamford and Silverman, through their alteration of the stand-up form, diffuse the aggressive environment characterized by the male-dominated comedy club environment. In doing so, they are not only creating outlets for more innovative comedic expression but also creating a place from which they can comment on the situation of women comedians on stage. Whether on stage or filmed, as women, both are dealing with issues of male gaze.

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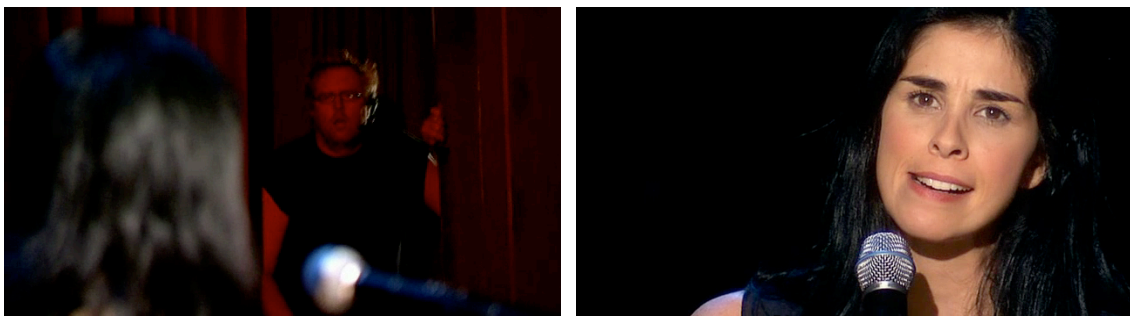
<sup>71</sup> *Sarah Silverman - Jesus is Magic*, Film, Directed by Liam Lynch, (Santa Monica: Interscope Records, 2005).

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> *The Maria Bamford Show*, Web Series, Directed by Damon Jones, Los Angeles: Fat Head Films & Super Deluxe, 2007. Episode 20: Exit, 2:23.

Laura Mulvey, in her discussion on the topic, contends that the cinematic gaze is male and argues that the female “body is held up as a passive erotic object for the gaze of male spectators, so they can project their fantasies on her.”<sup>74</sup>

Silverman, in *Jesus is Magic*, confronts the male gaze very briefly, but almost literally. At the end of a joke, Silverman wipes an animated tear from her eye and flicks it away toward the wing of the stage. A stagehand in the wings out of the audience’s sight line is dressed in black with a headset and glasses. He catches her single tear and proceeds to reach down his pants and begin to masturbate while watching Silverman on stage.<sup>75</sup> Silverman sees this happening, looks at the stagehand with a mixture of surprise and shock, and turns back to the stage. She feigns an awkward smile at the crowd that falls into a perplexed crinkling of her brow. Within a split second, she regains her footing instantly and begins her next joke seamlessly. Through this exchange, Silverman addresses the male gaze inherent in both stand-up and film in a short exaggerated acknowledgement. Her response shows both her confusion and something like disgust, but does not let the incident move her from purpose in the least. She returns to her material and her job as a stand-up without wavering.



Steve Agee and Sarah Silverman<sup>76</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Shohini Chaundhuri, *Feminist Film Theorists* (London: Routledge, 2006), 35.

<sup>75</sup> *Sarah Silverman - Jesus is Magic*, Film, Directed by Liam Lynch, (Santa Monica: Interscope Records, 2005), 28.54.

<sup>76</sup> *Sarah Silverman - Jesus is Magic*, Film, Directed by Liam Lynch, (Santa Monica: Interscope Records, 2005), 29.06

Silverman illustrates male gaze in its most radical definition, but her response to it is to shrug it off. She denies the figurative or literal man masturbating at her any power over her or her performance and does not even allow the exchange much time or attention, other than the recognition of such a condition. As for the man in the wings, he not penalized for his lewd act or even seen again in the film. He is a specter, unseen by the audience (who in this case, serve mostly the purpose of symbolizing the stand-up audience and creating the illusion of pure stand-up for the film viewer), he manifests to the performer who is aware of his presence. Sandwiched in between a joke about benevolent white women sending sweaters in “fun colors” to starving Africans and a joke about Martin Luther King, Jr. torturing his children by farting in a hot car and rolling up the windows, Silverman does not shy away from commenting on her own experience as a female stand-up performer.<sup>77</sup>

Bamford tends to focus on how women are expected to perform in the stand-up environment. In *The Maria Bamford Show*, Bamford receives a call from her agent letting her know she has been booked to open for the 1970s power ballad band, Bread. All of her family and friends are in attendance and she begins to get nervous on stage. Instead of performing her act she performs to the audience’s expectations of what a female comic’s routine should be. Bamford uses this bit in several performances outside of *The Maria Bamford Show* and for the purposes of analysis I will look to the version performed for her Christmas stand-up special. As she performs this piece, her normally high voice is lowered and posture changes so she appears more forward and confident.

Hey guys, ladies, guys, ladies! When we are dating, ladies, we have system don't we—we do, we have a system, WE DO, we do! Here's my system: first date, kiss on the cheek (points to cheek). Second date, we can make out. Third date, if he buys me shoes and chocolate (gasp laugh) he can get keys to my apartment and he can go through the back door! (pokes her bottom) Brrr-brr! (through laughter) I'm empty inside, I'm a husk! I can't feel my hands! (laughing smiling, lightly slaps herself on the face) I'm writing a book, it's

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<sup>77</sup> Sarah Silverman - *Jesus is Magic*, Film, Directed by Liam Lynch, (Santa Monica: Interscope Records, 2005), 28.19.

called "Men Are From Mars And Women Want Your Penis," am I right?  
 (under her breath) I don't feel good. I don't feel well. (trails off) I don't feel  
 well. This is the greatest job in the world, in the greatest country in the world!  
 (sings) Oh say does that star-spangled banner yet wave.. (speaks) I'll be selling  
 my t-shirts after the show, they say "Skinny Bitch!" cause that's what I am!  
 (sings) O'ver the land of the free... (speaks) i'm trapped!... (sings) and the  
 home of the brave. (speaks) And if you really want to get to know me, I'll be  
 back at the Comfort Inn and Suites at the intersection of the 2 the 210 and the  
 1-10-2 (she points in several directions) making crosshatch patterns into my  
 arm with a curling iron. Long sleeves, am I right? LONG SLEEVES, ladies!  
 (gasps, smiles, screeches. faces falls back to a tight grimace.)<sup>78</sup>

The transformation that occurs between Bamford and her female comic impersonation  
 is drastic. Her voice and posture change, but there is also a looming sense of instability.  
 Through this performance, Bamford is not only making clear how difficult it is for a comic to  
 break past the expectations that an audience has for a performer based upon their sex, but also  
 how sad and disturbing the expected performance can be. In her performance of the same bit  
 on *The Maria Bamford Show*, she adds this:

Bamford: (In fake comedian voice) And that's the funny part, is that we do  
 things in a similar way and then have the same exact reaction to them.  
 WHAT?!

Sara Bamford: That is true.

Amy Sleeveerson: I love how we are all the same!

Random Man: That is so part of the paradigm that I understand! God damn it!

Bamford: (In fake comedian voice) Don't get up in my grill, am I right?

Amy Sleeveerson: Oh my god, she's talking like a black person on television.  
 (Bamford makes a loud FART NOISE and laughs. The audience erupts with  
 laughter, cheering. Maria look disappointed and turns back into her normal  
 voice.)

Bamford: You guys, don't you guys get it, that that wasn't me! You only like  
 me when I am not being myself!<sup>79</sup>

<sup>78</sup> *Maria Bamford Presents: Maria Bamford's One-Hour Homemade Christmas Stand-up Special*, Film,  
 Directed by Neil Mahoney, Los Angeles: TVACOM and Showfriendz, Inc., 2009. 49:15.

<sup>79</sup> *The Maria Bamford Show*, Web Series, Directed by Damon Jones, Los Angeles: Fat Head Films & Super  
 Deluxe, 2007. Episode 9: Bread, 2:03.



Bamford as a “Female Comic”<sup>80</sup>

Bamford reinforces the difficulties is going outside of the normal expectations for a female comic or for any comedian. Though Bamford uses the stereotypical female comedian as the basis for her impression and critique, these issues are important for any comedian who seeks to do something innovative and beyond the scope of what an average comedy club audience expects for entertainment. But nonetheless, Bamford makes this impersonation decidedly female, with references to the “Skinny Bitch” t-shirts, which are reminiscent of the more aggressive style female comedians.

## CONTENT OF THE TEXT

To analyze the content of the stand-up texts of Bamford and Silverman, I will break down their material by topic. Joanne Gilbert breaks down the routines of female stand-up comics into eleven categories: “sex, relationships, weight/body image, fashion, religion/ethnicity/region, family, gynecology, domestic activities, politics, popular culture phenomena, and random observations.”<sup>81</sup> This topical breakdown is helpful in deconstructing the routines and their meanings. That said, it is necessary to problematize Gilbert’s assertion that these topics are specific to women’s stand-up. For the most part, these headings could be applied to the stand-up routine of any comedian of any gender, especially if the topic of gynecology were expanded to include scatology and proctology.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 2:33

<sup>81</sup> Joanne Gilbert, *Perfoming Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 73

## Sex

When it comes to talking sex, Bamford is generally quiet on the subject. However, sex, rape, and sexuality regularly appear in Silverman's performances. Early on in her performance during *Jesus is Magic*, she offers this bit: "I, uh, I was raped by a doctor. Which is um, you know so bittersweet for a Jewish girl. (laughter and scattered applause from the audience) Well, thank you. I knew something good would come out of that, out of rape."<sup>82</sup> As a feminist, I never thought I would be in a position to defend a joke about rape, but Silverman's quip is not an empty crack at rape or its victims. She characterizes the rape as "bittersweet," because the perpetrator was a doctor. This not only nods to the perceived cultural pressures for Jewish women in the U.S. to marry esteemed professionals, but also to the cultural climates that view rape as less of an offense when perpetrated by individuals of higher social stature, as seen in the dominant press coverage of the Roman Polanski scandal.

Further, Silverman's next line draws directly, nearly quoting, Catholic pro-life rhetoric that condemns abortion even in extreme cases of rape or incest. The U.S. pro-life movement's campaign cites research claiming that women who became pregnant from rape and chose to take their pregnancy to term and keep the child "felt they had turned something awful into something good."<sup>83</sup> Pro-life campaigns frequently justify their stance to outlaw abortion by using this rhetoric. Silverman, though, sees laughter as the "good thing" to come out of a rape joke.

Rape jokes may not be an initial audience-winner, in most cases, and Silverman certainly angered many people with her jokes.<sup>84</sup> In response to much of the bad press

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<sup>82</sup> *Sarah Silverman - Jesus is Magic*, Film, Directed by Liam Lynch, (Santa Monica: Interscope Records, 2005), 8:00.

<sup>83</sup> Mahkom and Dolan, "Sexual Assault and Pregnancy," *New Perspectives on Human Abortion*, 182-199, University Publisher of America: 1981, quoted in Olivia Gans and Mary Spaulding Balch, J.D., "Rape, Incest, Fetal Abnormality" (NRL News: Catholic News Agency, July 8, 1998) <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/resource.php?n=888>

<sup>84</sup> "Sarah Silverman is a menace to ALL women, inciting sedition against women," Femisex.com: Notes on Culture. [www.femisex.com/content/sarah-silverman-a-menace-all-women-inciting-sedition-against-women](http://www.femisex.com/content/sarah-silverman-a-menace-all-women-inciting-sedition-against-women)



Silverman received for making a joke about how society deals with rape, feminist writer

Megan Carpentier defended Silverman, stating:

By putting sexual assault on a kind of untouchable comedy pedestal, I think we're getting further away from allowing victims to be able to make it a normative, discuss-able and, yes, mock-able experience, and that the more different we make it and ourselves from victims of other situations, the more difficult it is to get actual equity in the way the rest of society treats it.<sup>85</sup>

Whether Silverman's jokes achieve this or not, her joke is not a crack at the victims, but how society characterizes them.

### Relationships

Silverman will occasionally set up a joke by bringing her romantic relationships into the storyline, but Bamford tends to break down relationships and her romantic entanglements in greater depth in her routines. She rarely goes into specifics about relationships, but focuses on finding new love and break-ups. Here she talks about the difficulty in telling female friends about a break-up:

I have been in relationships, I was in one that broke up about a year ago and it just didn't work out, a super-nice guy. I hate when people try to make it like it's somebody's fault you know like,

Friend: (louder female voice) WHAT HAPPENED.

Maria: (mumbly lower voice) It just didn't work out, super-nice guy, didn't work out.

Friend: COME ON, WHAT DID HE DO?

Maria: Nothing, he's super-nice guy, didn't work broke up.

Friend: COME ON.

Maria: (sigh) Well, he started hitting me. Yeah, With really soft stuff, like cosmetic wedges and cotton balls, from the back-- and I'm like, I feel that. And then, he started cheating, especially at magnetic travel Scrabble, "Kickin' it" is not a word. Then he's all like-- Oh, why don't you go suck it, and I'm like-- why don't you go suck it and he's like -I'm not the one that can't fly! Which is ridiculous, because I told him from the beginning I was flightless. These are clearly prehensile! Mama can't get any air!

Friend: GIRL, THAT IS SO LIKE MEN.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Carpentier, Megan. "Is a Rape Joke Ever Funny?" Jezebel. November 30. <http://jezebel.com/5094798/is-a-rape-joke-ever-funny>

<sup>86</sup> Maria Bamford, "Love Songs." *Unwanted Thoughts Syndrome*, Comedy Central Records: 2009.

Bamford, who frequently problematizes her relationships with female friends, expresses a feeling that she needs to demonize her ex-boyfriend to justify her break-up. Though she is satisfied that the relationship ended because it “didn’t work out,” she feels pressured to characterize her ex as an abusive cheater who expects Maria to be able to fly, which her friend seems to find not only acceptable, but normal for men. Despite the conversation being with her friend, Bamford’s shows her discomfort and anxiety in her ability to respond appropriately.

Not all of the break-ups that Bamford discusses in her act require such embellishment. In *The Maria Bamford Show*, she reenacts a discussion with her niece where she has to explain a recent break-up.

My last break-up was really painful, especially when I had to tell me nieces.

(CUT TO: Maria acting out her discussion with her nieces while holding a ceramic angel playing her niece and a stuffed lion, representing herself)

Niece: Tee-tee, Tee-tee, where you're boyfriend, Frank?

Maria: Frank isn't here. We broke up.

Niece: Why?

Maria: Frank had these urges and he didn't know whether he could control them, or understand them. And not that I am against bisexuality, but it made me feel unsafe.

Niece: Why?

Maria: I don't know why.

Niece: Why?

Maria: (sigh) I don't know. (Pause, breaks into wild sobbing)

Niece: Oh, Tee-tee (Maria then smiles and bows with both the angel and lion)<sup>87</sup>



Maria Bamford<sup>88</sup>

<sup>87</sup> *The Maria Bamford Show*, Web Series, Directed by Damon Jones, Los Angeles: Fat Head Films & Super Deluxe, 2007. Episode 5: Ready for Love, 0:20.

<sup>88</sup> *The Maria Bamford Show*, Screenshot, Directed by Damon Jones, Los Angeles: Fat Head Films & Super Deluxe, 2007. Episode 5: Ready for Love, 1:10.

Bamford jokes at her own inability to feel secure with her bisexual partner and unlike the way she characterizes her other break-ups, as mutual and friendly, she is distraught about it. Her assertion that her partner's bisexuality made her "feel unsafe," whether unsafe in terms of her physical health or the security of the relationship, the remark sounds biphobic. As does her previous statement, oriented toward the negative, that she is 'not against bisexuality,' as though sexual orientations have pro-con positions. What might render this bit redeemable is the confusion and sadness Bamford expresses at not knowing why she is unable to understand her own fear.

In the first break-up passage, Bamford feels the need to invent drama to satisfy her friends and in the second, she expresses a sense of loss at the expense of her own confusion, but there is one relationship that Bamford characterizes as negative.

You don't want to get in a bad relationship, though. Watch out for that, right? I realized I was in a very volatile relationship. With myself. Yeah, I know I seem charming, but I am always yelling at myself when I am by myself--Why don't you go to gym and have a baby!<sup>89</sup>

Out of all of the relationships she recounts, the worst one is with herself. Though she may appear together, charming even, she jokes at the negative feedback loop that makes her feel inadequate. Bamford looks at the cultural expectations of womanhood, being fit and procreating, as pressures that she has internalized, disrupting how she feels about herself. Though the bit plays on a level of personal instability, it also comments on the broader situation of women who struggle to accept themselves in light of the cultural expectations put on them by society.

### Weight/Body Image

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<sup>89</sup> *Maria Bamford Presents: Maria Bamford's One-Hour Homemade Christmas Stand-up Special*, Film, Directed by Neil Mahoney, Los Angeles: TVACOM and Showfriendz, Inc., 2009, 17:21.

This topic tends to appear frequently in routines by female comedians and both Bamford and Silverman comment on their own bodies and social attitudes toward weight, appearance, and beauty standards. Silverman, in the following bit, couches her joke in a discussion of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Obviously, I am not trying to belittle the events of September 11th. They were devastating. They were beyond devastating. You know, and I don't want to say especially for these people, or especially for these people, you know, but especially for me. Um, because it was-- it happened to be the same exact day that I found out, um, that the Soy Chai Latte was like, 900 calories. I had been drinking them everyday. You know, cause you hear soy, you know, you think healthy. And it's a lie. But it was also the day we were attacked, and... devastating.<sup>90</sup>

In her selfish and ignorant persona, Silverman turns even 9/11 into a segue back to herself only to bemoan her caloric intake, as if to equate the emotional impact of a terrorist attack to the discovery of her potentially fattening beverage choices. Though her persona is not an 'everywoman' kind of commentary, this joke certainly comments on the sort of inflated emotions that people attach to food and dieting. Further into her set, almost as an aside she says, "I don't care if you think I'm racist, I just want to think I'm thin."<sup>91</sup> These comments are part of larger criticism of a society in which it is socially acceptable for people express more concern about their own physique than larger social issues, like race.

Bamford confronts her body image issues more specifically than Silverman. In many of her acts, as well as in *The Maria Bamford Show*, she mentions (or in the case of the series, her mother mentions) her small breasts,

How I can possibly maintain my perfect 32AA? Can I get a witness from any of my girlfriends from Japan? 32AA. They're precious rare miniatures. I was thinking about getting breast implants, because I am a radical militant feminist. And a hypocrite as it turns out.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>90</sup> *Sarah Silverman - Jesus is Magic*, Film, Directed by Liam Lynch, (Santa Monica: Interscope Records, 2005), 18:07.

<sup>91</sup> *Sarah Silverman - Jesus is Magic*, Film, Directed by Liam Lynch, (Santa Monica: Interscope Records, 2005), 57:44.

<sup>92</sup> Maria Bamford, "32AA," *The Burning Bridges Tour*, Stand-up Records: 2003.

In her routines, on a few occasions, Bamford calls herself a radical militant feminist, but she also acknowledges the effect of the beauty culture on her perceptions of herself. Additionally, she views breast implants as opposed to her feminist beliefs. While feminists, both academic and otherwise, struggled with the issues surrounding cosmetic surgery at length, Kathryn Pauly Morgan reduces the debate to a matter of liberation or colonization.<sup>93</sup> Cosmetic surgery can be viewed as a liberating choice available to women to change their bodies according to their own wishes or a way in which women surgically alter themselves to reflect the culturally dominant notions of femininity. Bamford aligns herself with the belief that cosmetic surgery generally falls under the lines of colonization; initially characterizing her breasts as “precious miniatures,” but conscious enough of social pressures for bodily perfection that she felt compelled to consider implants. Bamford’s comments in the previous passage are further explored here:

I am thinking about what I would get done on a makeover show if I could get anything done... And uh, check this out, I don't know if you can see it-- but I think I would get the part of my, uh, it's back here, the part of brain removed that cares about what other people think...<sup>94</sup>

In this passage, Bamford contextualizes her thoughts on cosmetic surgery within the current glut of “extreme” makeover shows that provide men and women with extensive surgery to improve their lives. But in this instance, as opposed to wishing for a larger chest, she would opt for the surgical removal of, what could be interpreted as, her own culturally informed notions of femininity. Instead of wanting to perfect her body to social beauty standards, she would rather remove the pressures to conform to them.

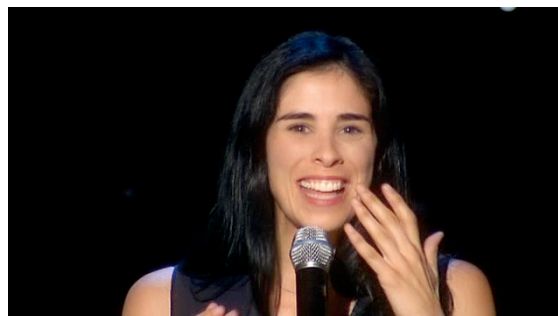
## Fashion

<sup>93</sup> Kathryn Pauly Morgan, “Women and the Knife: Cosmetic Surgery and the Colonization of Women’s Bodies,” *Hypatia*, Vol. 6, No. 3: Feminism and the Body (Autumn: 1991) p. 35-38  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3809838>

<sup>94</sup> Patton Oswald, Episode 3: New York to Philly to Atlantic City [Television series episode], In *Comedians of Comedy*. (New York: Comedy Central, 2005)

In terms of fashion, neither comedian tends to devote much or any of their work to current fashion trends like clothes, or shoes. But they do create critical commentary on consumerism and the pressures of a fashion culture. Silverman confronts a myriad of these issues in the following piece:

I'm not a, I'm not, ah, like a haughty-touty kind of girl. Uh, like I don't wear any jewelry. I'm not, like, um, I don't really--like I'm not into jewelry or anything. I'm such a hypocrite. There is a jewel that I think is, ugh, I am gonna sound like such a JAP. There is one jewel that I think is stunning, that I-- it's just like a classic and it's just-- and by JAP, I mean Japanese. But, it's um, it's just gorgeous, you know. It's really, um, it's rare. You know it's only found like on the tip of the tailbone of Ethiopian babies. They, they de-bone the babies. I know that sounds so bad when you say it out loud! But, no, if you saw it-- so worth it, SO worth it. You know, it's like, how do I even describe it? Like uh, like if a, um, like if a diamond had that newborn baby smell. I WANT IT! But, I, uh, have a moral issue with it obviously, cause they are treating the unions, um, that de-bone the babies really bad...Pick your battles, I guess... It's soo cute.<sup>95</sup>



Sarah Silverman<sup>96</sup>

Always the provocateur, Silverman begins with her a playful exchange of racial epithets, from the JAP, denoting the Jewish American Princess stereotype, to a racial slur against the Japanese. Then she embarks on a creative re-thinking of the blood diamond controversy, where precious stones are extracted from infants. Silverman makes this fictional jewel out to be the prize of the female consumer, as it fulfils not only her want for a beautiful stone but that it has that “newborn baby smell.” Her concern in acquiring one is not for the “de-boned

<sup>95</sup> *Sarah Silverman - Jesus is Magic*, Film, Directed by Liam Lynch, (Santa Monica: Interscope Records, 2005), 13:10.

<sup>96</sup> *Sarah Silverman - Jesus is Magic*, Screenshot, Directed by Liam Lynch, (Santa Monica: Interscope Records, 2005), 13:50.

babies,” but the unions that harvest them comments on the often short-sighted consumer activism that structures the bourgeois shopping culture that she criticizes.

Bamford, much like plastic surgery, approaches fashion in terms of pressure, in this case, familial pressure:

Maria: I gave myself a Party Perm, because today I had two very important appointments.

Mom: Sweetie, would you put on a little make-up? Just a little make-up for your mother?

Maria: Mom, I'm not wearing make-up. I'm not in show business anymore, I don't have to put on the clown mask.

Mom: Honey, when you don't wear make-up-- you look mentally ill.

Maria: Mom! You call yourself a Christ-ian, yet Jeebus Christmas would say I look good.

Mom: Honey, Jesus doesn't know anyone is downtown Duluth...Wha? Oh shit, Maria!

Maria: What, mother? I'm wearing make-up. I'm wearing thick green eyeshadow and a line of lipstick around my lips. Baby look pretty now, Mommy? Baby look pretty now?<sup>97</sup>

Without make-up, Bamford's mother expressed concerned that her friends around town will think Bamford is mentally ill. As though choosing not to wear make-up and violating a gender norm will make her appear crazed or unstable. Yet Bamford response to the pressure involves a feminist tactic of masquerade, using an exaggerated femininity as commentary, much to her mother's disapproval.<sup>98</sup>

### Religion/Ethnicity/Region

Silverman brings religion and race to the forefront of her performances. As a Jewish comedian, she tends to focus more on cultural Jewish-ness than on specific religious beliefs. She does regularly address the Holocaust:

My niece is uh, my lesbian niece, their whole family is very Jew-y and she goes to Hebrew School and LOVES it. And um, she called me up and she's,

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<sup>97</sup> *The Maria Bamford Show*, Web Series, Directed by Damon Jones, Los Angeles: Fat Head Films & Super Deluxe, 2007. Episode 2: Maria Gets a Job, 0:08.

<sup>98</sup> Sue Thornham, "Identity Shopping: Women and Consumer Culture," *Feminist Theory and Cultural Studies*. Arnold: 2000, pg. 152. Reprinted in CEU Feminist Research of Pop Culture and the Media, Fall 2009/2010.

like um, you know, Aunt Sarah, did you know that Hitler killed 60 million Jews? And I corrected her, and I said, you know, I think um, I think he's responsible for-for killing 6 million Jews. And she says, oh yeah, 6 million, I knew that, but seriously, I mean--what's the difference? Uh, the difference is 60 million is unforgivable, young lady.<sup>99</sup>

Stating that the systematic killing of 60 million Jews is “unforgivable,” implies that accepted statistic of 6 million is, in some way, forgivable or has been forgiven. She also bemoans Jewish people that purchase German cars, as most German car companies were part of the Nazi war machine, “they helped, uh you know, facilitate a genocide of a people that would ultimately become their best customers, you know. Any Jew will tell you, it's just bad business.”<sup>100</sup> Silverman plays up Jewish stereotypes often as the punch line to her jokes about race. Recounting a real event, she turns the joke back onto anti-Semitic stereotypes:

I got in trouble for saying the word "Chink" on a talk show, on a network talk show. And it was in the context of a joke, you know, obviously. That would be weird. That would be like a really bad career choice if it wasn't. Um, but nevertheless, the president of an Asian-American watchdog group, out here in Los Angeles, his name is Guy Aoki and he was up-in-arms about it, and he put my name in all the papers calling me a racist and it, hurt, you know. I mean, as, as a Jew, you know, as a member of the Jewish community, you know I was really concerned. You know, that we were losing control of the media.<sup>101</sup>

She jokes that because she is cute and Jews are alleged by anti-Semitic groups to control much of the Western media, that she should be able to make jokes about race (that is not to say racist jokes, but jokes concerning race) on television.

Silverman's references to race are figured into several of her jokes. Though she may begin a joke about family or relationships, the punch line will often turn back to racial prejudices.

I always think, like, I should get on it if I want to have kids, I just... You know once you hit 30, you, you know, you've gotta decide fast. Y'know cause it can be difficult to conceive, it can be dangerous. I mean the best time to have a

<sup>99</sup> *Sarah Silverman - Jesus is Magic*, Film, Directed by Liam Lynch, (Santa Monica: Interscope Records, 2005), 41:50.

<sup>100</sup> *Sarah Silverman - Jesus is Magic*, Film, Directed by Liam Lynch, (Santa Monica: Interscope Records, 2005), 43:55.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 44:40.



baby is when you're a black teenager.<sup>102</sup>

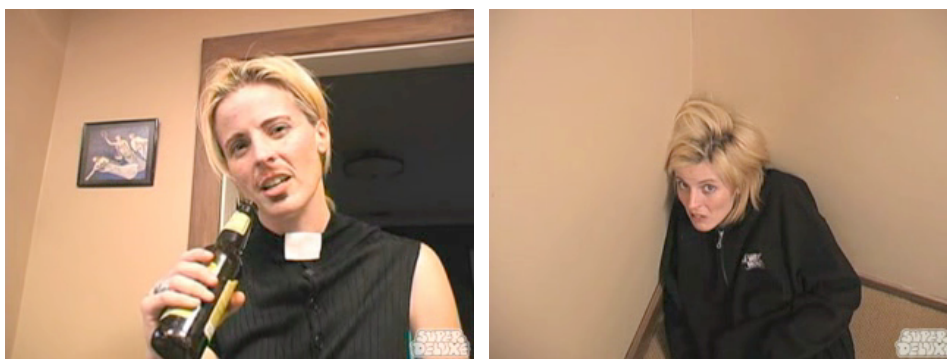
As part of her ignorant persona, she uses these stereotypes as a shocking end to a set-up, making the stereotype the punch line and what the audience is actually laughing at.

Bamford, on the other hand, does not confront race as often as she deal with religion, especially in regard to her mother's Christian faith. She devotes an episode of *The Maria Bamford Show* to the subject, beginning with her leaving fake messages on her mother's answering machine in a high-pitched voice as "Baby Jesus" or sometimes just "BJ."<sup>103</sup> In the same episode, her friend and co-worker, Amy, invites Maria to join her at a new church with free beer and childcare where her husband, the pastor, speaks of salvation and faith:

Maria: Yeah, I believe in the human mind's power to create fantasies that reassure itself in times of trouble.

Pastor Dan: ...Your cold rock hard heart is gonna be cleft in two by the hot Christ blood, the hot pounding Christ blood that comes, and comes, and comes in between the tendrils of your tender, tender heart, making it moist and ready for fertilization and salvation!

Maria: Yeah, I gotta go.<sup>104</sup>



Bamford as Pastor Dan, and herself<sup>105</sup>

The Pastor Dan character, with a priest collar, goatee and beer in hand, describes Christian salvation in strangely sexual terms, while the church itself offers every possible amenity to attract members.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 12:40.

<sup>103</sup> *The Maria Bamford Show*, Web Series, Directed by Damon Jones, Los Angeles: Fat Head Films & Super Deluxe, 2007. Episode 12: Faith, 0:01.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 1:35.

<sup>105</sup> *The Maria Bamford Show*, Screenshot, Directed by Damon Jones, Los Angeles: Fat Head Films & Super Deluxe, 2007. Episode 12: Faith, 1:44, 2:32.

## Family

Bamford's family makes up a large portion of her routines and her interactions with her family are the basis for the *The Maria Bamford Show*. Most often, she depicts encounters with her mother. In one episode, her mother purchases a sun-lamp to help Maria cope with her depression and Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD),

Mom: So, sweetie, what is it you're anxious about?

Maria: Uh.

Mom: Are you worried about the state of the world? And how hundreds and thousands of innocent people die at the hands of their own government and ours?

Maria: No.

Mom: Sweetie, it is that you are worried about your father and I? And us getting older? Cause we are--Falling apart! Ya know, I could go at any second. You know there is a history of stroke in my family, you know- AH! (face seizes) you know, suddenly I can't speak, you know, except out the side of my mouth and then I'm drooling and you know, then I'm missing the part of my brain that exudes kindness and sometimes I'm just yelling stuff at you out of the side of my mouth, like "I hate you, little bitch!"

Maria: No! It isn't about that!

Mom: You know, I think the real reason you are down is because, your 36. Everything you've ever achieved is really in the past now. Probably never really reach those heights again.

Maria: I don't want to talk about it.

Mom: You LOOK 36. And, you know, that's hard. And you're on the scrap heap really.

With the appearance of genuinely trying to alleviate her daughter's distress, Bamford's mother compounds them with the world's problems, the fears associated with caring for aging parents and goes as far as to say that Bamford's career is probably over. Even in her familial relationships, Bamford does not find comfort but only further pressure and anxiety. The same can be said of her relationship with her sister Sara, "My sister has four beautiful children, a delightful husband, um, a very successful side-line decoupage-ing business. Uh, we're not in competition, but somebody is clearly pulling ahead."<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> *Maria Bamford Presents: Maria Bamford's One-Hour Homemade Christmas Stand-up Special*, Film, Directed by Neil Mahoney, Los Angeles: TVACOM and Showfriendz, Inc., 2009, 37:16.

## Politics

Both Bamford and Silverman expose their politics over the course of their routines, but they also dedicate bits to politics specifically. In the case of Bamford, she makes outright feminist claims in this piece in which she imagines herself a make-up spokeswoman:

My old lip color could barely keep up with my busy schedule. In the time it takes to notice the wide discrepancy between my salary and that of my male peers, I'd have to re-apply! In the seconds to count the number of women in high political offices, seated on corporate executive boards, or featured in film and television over the age of forty-- my lip color would be as invisible as this glass ceiling only inches above my head! Loreal, because I'm worth it! And because holding myself to an impossible standard of beauty keeps me from starting a riot.<sup>107</sup>

Silverman made her politics known during the 2008 U.S. Presidential election, when she starred in an expletive-filled online viral video urging Jews to schlep or “get their fat Jewish asses” to Florida to convince their elderly Jewish grandparents to vote for Barack Obama.<sup>108</sup> Florida, a swing-state in the electoral process, determined the 2000 Presidential election in which Al Gore, though securing the popular vote, lost the necessary number of electoral votes that made George Bush president. In the video, Sarah tells young Jews to inform their grandparents about Obama’s Israel-friendly foreign policy and his savory brisket, and if that does not convince them,

Use threats! There is nobody more important or influential over your grandparents than their grandkids, you. If they vote for Barack Obama, they're gonna get another visit this year. If not, let's just hope they stay healthy until next year.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Maria Bamford, TV, *How to Win!* Stand-up Records: 2007.

<sup>108</sup> Sarah Silverman, “Sarah Silverman and the Great Schlep,” Jewish Council for Education and Research: The Great Schlep, Online video clip, YouTube: 2008. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgHHX9R4Qtk>

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.



Silverman in the Great Schlep<sup>110</sup>

She provides a point-by-point comparison between black men and elderly Jews, citing that they both wear tracksuits, love jewelry or bling, drive Cadillacs, and “all their friends are dying.”<sup>111</sup> She stays within her comedic persona throughout the video and does not sacrifice her style of humor, including poking fun at race and cultural stereotypes, for the broader message.

### Songs

Many stand-up comedians have used songs in their acts, but alternative comedy has embraced it. Sarah Silverman often performs her live stand-up with a band called The Silvermen and Maria Bamford produced an entire episode of *The Maria Bamford Show* in song. In Silverman’s *Jesus is Magic*, she performs several musical numbers, one of which is dedicated to female porn stars:

Do you ever take drugs so that you have sex without crying? Yeah, yeah!  
 There's a dream in your head that will never come true.  
 There's a stickiness all over and it didn't come from you.  
 You wish your dad had been there, but more often times he was not.  
 You can't put your arms around a dirty gang-bang cum shot.  
 But that's all you get, that's all you get.  
 Do you ever take drugs so that you have sex without crying? Yeah, yeah!  
 Do you ever take drugs so that you have sex without crying? Yeah, yeah!  
 There's a hole in your heart where the sorrow pours out.  
 There's a hole in your heart where ambivalence sets in.  
 All the penises in the country,

<sup>110</sup> Sarah Silverman, “Sarah Silverman and the Great Schlep,” Jewish Council for Education and Research: The Great Schlep, Screenshot, YouTube: 2008. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgHHX9R4Qtk>

<sup>111</sup> Sarah Silverman, “Sarah Silverman and the Great Schlep,” Jewish Council for Education and Research: The Great Schlep, Online video clip, YouTube: 2008. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgHHX9R4Qtk>

All the penises in the world,  
All the penises in the galaxy,  
Won't fill your heart hole up.<sup>112</sup>



Silverman in song<sup>113</sup>

Silverman, as usual, does not mince words. She echoes commonly held beliefs that sex workers come from situations with little emotional support from parents, or “daddy issues.” Silverman characterized pornography in bleak terms, implying depression and drug abuse. Pornography is a highly divisive issue for feminists. Many feminists stand firmly as anti-pornography, claiming that degrading images of women lead to actual violence and that the female actors themselves are abused, taken advantage of, and coerced into the field.<sup>114</sup> Other feminists, calling themselves “Pro-Sex,” see pornography as an expression of women’s sexuality and an outlet for women to explore their sexuality “safely.”<sup>115</sup> Silverman’s song, which she performs in different costumes including a night-club singer and a preacher, is a harsh criticism in the form of a light pop song that mirrors much of the feminist anti-pornography debate.

Bamford does not use songs as frequently as Silverman. Her song “Don’t Be Afraid of the Dark,” deals with mental health, a subject that much of her material draws from but does not fit in with Gilbert’s set of comedic topics.

Maria: (spoken) If there is one thing I've learned after years of struggling with panic, anxiety and on-going depression, is that there are plenty of us over here--on the side of the street where it's consistently overcast.

<sup>112</sup> Sarah Silverman - *Jesus is Magic*, Film, Directed by Liam Lynch, (Santa Monica: Interscope Records, 2005), 37:23.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 37:23.

<sup>114</sup> Wendy McElroy, “A Feminist Defense of Pornography,” *Free Inquiry*, Vol. 17 No. 4 (Fall 1997) [http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/mcelroy\\_17\\_4.html](http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/mcelroy_17_4.html)

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

(singing)  
 Don't be afraid of the dark,  
 Reach out your hand you'll hit someone like you.  
 Everyone's here in the dark,  
 You might not see me, but I'm out here too!

...  
 Don't be afraid of the dark,  
 Lions and war kill kids in their beds.  
 Global warming and more (Dad: The poor!)  
 Maria: Drink more caffeine and just stay on your meds!

...  
 Pete Patterson: I live in alcoholic blackout because I'm a gay homosexual transgender woman.  
 Maria: You're not going to remember me telling you this, but you're not alone!  
 Don't be afraid of the dark,  
 There's nothing to fear cause we're all terrified.  
 Sink yourself into the dark.  
 Desperation is normal call a hotline, confide.  
 I have Unwanted Thoughts Syndrome,  
 A little known version of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder,  
 That made me avoid all eye contact and especially knife drawers.  
 I been through treatment for depression,  
 I'm 36 and have no kids, (cuddles dog)  
 I've never been married,  
 I have 3 separate addictions, (in a dark room watching television, with a beer and a cigarette)  
 And sometimes I weep uncontrollably for absolutely no reason (sobbing) at all.  
 But I'm staying on meds and drinking plenty of Diet Coke!  
 Kristy Kooms: I'm sorta bulimic.  
 Dad: I'm kind of a grump.  
 Amy Sleeveerson: I'm afraid of my baby.  
 Pete Patterson: I can't take a dump!  
 Mom: I shop to numb feelings.

...  
 All: Don't be afraid of the dark,  
 Just call 911 if you wish you were dead.  
 It's alright in the dark,  
 Let professionals answer the voice in your head!<sup>116</sup>

<sup>116</sup> *The Maria Bamford Show*, Web Series, Directed by Damon Jones, Los Angeles: Fat Head Films & Super Deluxe, 2007. Episode 10: Dark, 2:03.



Bamford as herself, and Amy Poehler<sup>117</sup>

Bamford's mental health issues appear throughout her work, as the premise of her show and as the title of her 2009 comedy album. In her song, she reveals not only the details of her own mental struggles, but those of the characters she plays as well. Maria may not be normal, but neither is anyone else. From addressing issues of denial, shame, anxiety, depression, post-partum depression, and eating disorders, she creates a humorous sketch but still focuses on her message. During the song, she shows a handwritten placard with the telephone number of a suicide hotline. By listing all the factors that make her feel alienated and different, she eases the stigmas associated with them.

## SEX OF THE READER

As previously mentioned, in the comedy club environment, the audience in many ways dictates certain aspects of the comic's performance. By gauging audience response, a comic can determine what sort of material to include and what to skip. Though the comedy club audience In terms of a televised special or webisodes, the waters are less clear. Comedy Central, which airs taped stand-up performances by both Silverman and Bamford through the series *Comedy Central Presents...*, *The Sarah Silverman Program* (on which Bamford guest starred), and occasionally airs *Jesus is Magic* targets the "Male 18-24" demographic.<sup>118</sup>

Likewise, the now-defunct Super Deluxe, the website that hosted *The Maria Bamford Show*,

<sup>117</sup> *The Maria Bamford Show*, Screenshot, Directed by Damon Jones, Los Angeles: Fat Head Films & Super Deluxe, 2007. Episode 10: Dark.

<sup>118</sup> "Time Warner Cable Media Sales: Target Demographics," Time Warner Cable Media Sales - Cable TV Advertising, 2008. <http://www.cablemediasales.com/pages/nets/?cp=nets&sp=demo&demo=M18-24>

also targeted the “Male 18-24” marketing demographic.<sup>119</sup>

This does not mean that young men are the only audience for these programs, but simply that the programmers and advertisers make their programming choices with this demographic in mind. Viewing late-night comedy on these channels, one is likely to see commercials advertising men’s deodorant and internet gaming options, but you won’t find a commercial for tampons or make-up. The presence of Bamford and Silverman’s comedy on these networks and their associated content implies that their work does not disrupt the network’s goal to achieve high ratings in the “Male 18-24” demographic.

Though the comedy club audiences have historically been male, as the genre itself has been, comedy clubs now serve audiences of men and women across multiple demographics.<sup>120</sup> While every comedian has their own target audience to which their material resonates with, some broader than other, Silverman and Bamford’s audiences are not limited to women and are often shown on networks that cater specifically to male viewers. Though specific demographics for their comedy club performances are not available, their popularity on male-skewed networks shows that men, or “Males 18-24” are laughing too. When Bamford jokes about the glass ceiling and oppressive beauty culture or when Silverman mocks racial stereotypes and pornography, male viewers (identifying as feminist or not) understand the material and laugh.

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<sup>119</sup> Staci D. Kramer, "Another One Bites The Dust: Turner Folds Comedy Site SuperDeluxe Into AdultSwim.com," *The Economics of Content* | paidContent, Guardian Media. <http://paidcontent.org/article/419-another-one-bites-the-dust-turner-folds-comedy-site-superdeluxe-into-ad/>

<sup>120</sup> Joanne Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 52



### III. Conclusion

In this thesis, I began by analyzing current and historical conception of women and humor, as cultural biases have prevented women from being taken seriously in the comic world. By determining how this stereotype works through defeminizing and marginalizing female comedians, I have demonstrated how Bamford and Silverman confront these stereotypes in the comic material. Through the analysis of the stand-up field, I have isolated some of the power relations that function between the audience and comic and shown how Bamford and Silverman have reformulated their stand-up routines to avoid the aggressive power relations that function in comedy clubs.

By sketching out a definition of alternative comedy, I hope I have contributed to a greater understanding of the material that alternative comedians create and also drawn attention to the critical potential of the field. Though as Grosz states, “any text can be read from a feminist point of view,” I have shown that the comic material written by Bamford and Silverman addresses feminist concerns.<sup>121</sup> Though they do not always subscribe to the prevailing feminist discourse, the critical thought produced in their routines is valuable. Further, as much of their audience is male, they are not female or feminist comedians that solely “preaching to the choir.”

Relatively little has been written on stand-up comedy in feminist scholarship. Regina Barreca claims that, “feminist criticism has generally avoided the discussion of comedy perhaps in order to be accepted by conservative critics who found feminist theory comic in and of itself.”<sup>122</sup> The stereotype of the unfunny woman is applied even more harshly to feminists. To embrace humor as tool, or even better as a weapon to mock and laugh at the hegemonic structures has infinite potentials.

<sup>121</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, “Sexual Signatures: Feminism after the Death of the Author,” In *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 16.

<sup>122</sup> Regina Barreca, “Introduction,” *Women’s Studies* Vol. 15, Issue 1-3, p. 3-22 (1988), 4.  
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=fmh&AN=5811430&site=ehost-live>

The way Silverman constructs jokes about race in a way that the off-color stereotypes is the punch line, makes the audiences laugh at the inherent absurdity and ignorance that construct the stereotypes to begin with. Bamford's alienation from all of characters she channels resonates with her audiences, not because she delights in her failures, but because she confronts her difficulties conforming to normalcy. They are not the only women doing this, Margaret Cho, Janeane Garofalo, Wanda Sykes, Tig Notaro, are taking the stage to publicly and critically explore these issues. Further research possibilities are limitless, as stand-up lends itself to all levels of theoretical interpretation.

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