INTRODUCTION

# *Pretty/Funny Women and Comedy's Body Politics*

## FUNNINESS, PRETTINESS, AND FEMINISM

In 2007, eminent journalist Christopher Hitchens published a widely circulated *Vanity Fair* essay called "Why Women Aren't Funny," making the provocative argument that humor is more natural, pervasive, and highly developed in men than in women. Women don't need to be funny, he claimed. It's not a trait men find attractive in women, while funniness is a trait women value in men. Funniness for Hitchens is like height or good teeth—advantages for natural selection. There are very funny women comedians, he conceded, but they tend to be "hefty or dykey or Jewish, or some combo of the three." He explained this remark by claiming that lesbian and Jewish humor, as well as the humor of large-bodied comics like Roseanne Barr, is "masculine" and thus does not actually fall into the category of women's comedy. But given his theory of attractiveness and natural selection, it is clear that he is drawing on the stereotypes of large/Jewish/lesbian women as unappealing to men.

The essay provoked the feminist outrage Hitchens no doubt intended, but the gist of his argument—that women are rewarded for what they look like and not for what they say—is one of feminism's most basic cultural critiques. Because of this bias, "pretty" versus "funny" is a rough but fairly accurate way to sum up the history of women in comedy. Attractive actors with good comic timing, from Claudette Colbert and Lucille Ball to Meg Ryan and Debra Messing, have had plum roles as the heroines of romantic comedies and sitcoms. These women weren't known for their own wit but for their performances of witty comic scripts. Most of all, they had to be pretty. In contrast, women who write and perform their own comedy have been far fewer as mainstream figures in modern popular culture, and most often they've gotten far because they were willing to be funny-looking: Fanny Brice, Phyllis Diller, Carol Burnett, Lily Tomlin. Or, like

Mae West, they were willing to camp up or otherwise make fun of traditional femininity. Stand-up comedy, meanwhile, which developed into the premier venue for comedians, was where the bad boys played—Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, Richard Pryor—and they didn't have to be pretty. As late as 2005, a *New Yorker* essay opined that "comedy is probably the last remaining branch of the arts whose suitability for women is still openly discussed" (Goodyear).

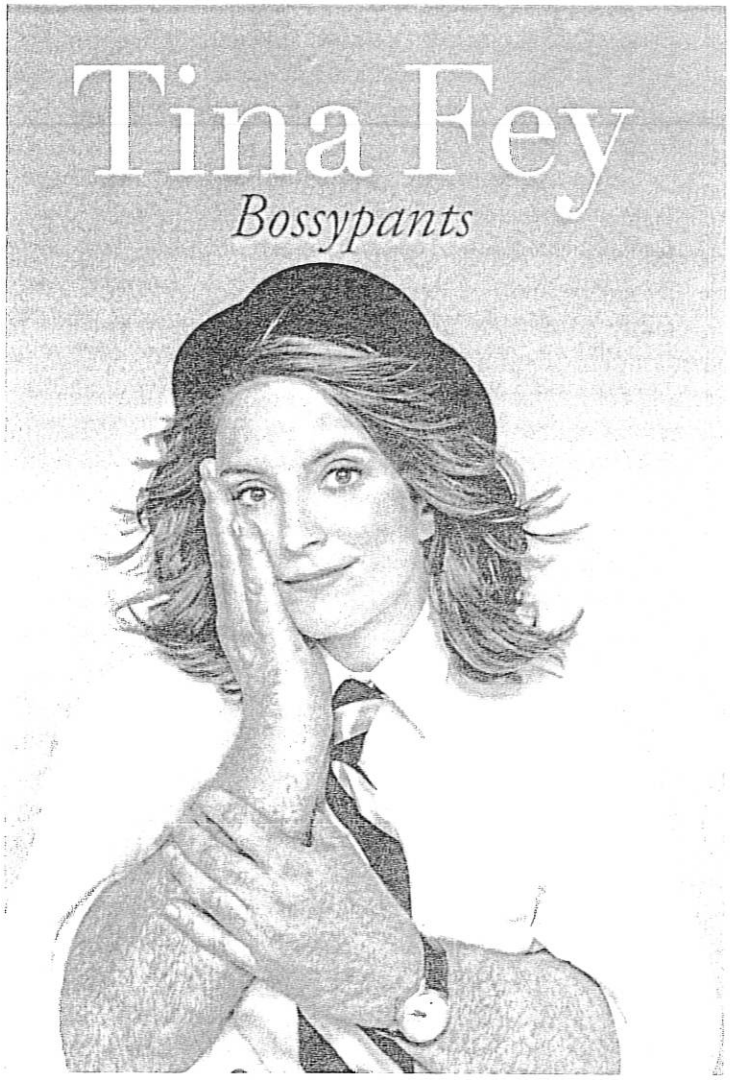
However, by 2005 comedy's "suitability for women" was a pertinent question because women were increasingly visible in the comedy scene—in clubs and comedy troupes like Second City but also on network and cable television. Women stand-up comics like Sarah Silverman, the topic of the *New Yorker* profile, were taking on the foul language, political incorrectness, and gross-out humor that had once been a boys-only zone—hence the issue of suitability. These women were expanding into other terrains as well. In 1999 Tina Fey became the first woman head writer on *Saturday Night Live* (1975–), which soon featured a number of talented women whose careers took off over the next decade—Amy Poehler, Maya Rudolph, Molly Shannon, Rachel Dratch. A 2003 *New York Times* article about this promising group was titled "It's the Revenge of the Ignorant Sluts," referring to an *SNL* skit from the 1970s, an era described by female cast members as singularly unfriendly to women comics and writers. The show may have been groundbreaking, but they complained it was also "a stinky boy's club" (Nussbaum).

In fact, a number of women comics who became mainstream stars between 2000 and 2010 were gritty survivors of similar "stinky" television experiences in the 1990s. Margaret Cho and Ellen DeGeneres made dramatic comebacks after failed network sitcoms in the previous decade. Kathy Griffin, declining the fate of the eternal sitcom sidekick, turned the tables by transforming the sidekick into the cranky D-list would-be star. Fey, meanwhile, skirted the dreaded sitcom wife/girlfriend roles by creating *30 Rock* (2006–2013), a metacomedy about mainstream television; and Silverman, her comedy famously unfit for network TV, was able to launch her own R-rated sitcom on cable, *The Sarah Silverman Program* (2007–2010). By the time Hitchens published his essay in 2007, Emmy awards had been picked up by *30 Rock*, *Kathy Griffin: My Life on the D List* (2005–2010), and the daytime talk show *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* (2003–); the roster of popular women comics included, in addition to the ones mentioned above, Wanda Sykes, Amy Sedaris, Mo'Nique (Imes), Kristen Wiig, Janeane Garofalo, Susie Essman, Lisa Lampanelli, Chelsea Handler, Sheryl Underwood, Joy Behar, Rita Rudner, and Cheryl Hines.

Citing this extensive history, *Vanity Fair* published a response to Hitchens the following year with a lushly illustrated cover story by Alessandra Stanley: "Who Says Women Aren't Funny? For the Defense: Sarah Silverman, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, and Nine Other Queens of Comedy." Countering Hitchens's assertion that funny women aren't attractive, campy Annie Leibovitz photos pictured Fey, Poehler, Silverman, and the others as tarted-up vamps lounging in limousines, plunging necklines, and dimly lit hotel rooms. Stanley's essay refuted Hitchens's argument, but it also developed a feminist argument that for women comics, the issue of looks has always been crucial. Recently, as more women comics have entered a previously "masculine" field, she points out, a sexist dynamic has kicked in: because U.S. culture remains obsessed with image and looks, the better-looking comics have an advantage. "It used to be that women were not funny," she writes. "Then they couldn't be funny if they were pretty. Now a female comedian has to be pretty—even sexy—to get a laugh" (185). The latter part of this quotation refers to the booming careers of Chelsea Handler, Olivia Munn, and Whitney Cummings, for example, gorgeous women whose sex appeal is intrinsic to their commercial appeal as comics.

However, the dynamic of pretty versus funny, the default description of how women are usually perceived in the history of comedy, is richer and more nuanced than the Stanley summary suggests. In fact, notions of "pretty" are often what women's comedy exploits as funny. Mae West made an entire career of camping up all notions of femininity. The pseudo-fabulous Leibovitz photos in *Vanity Fair* exemplify the same point, parodying edgy clichés of femininity from the femme fatale to the scandalous female celebrity à la Paris Hilton. A similar comic strategy is evident in the cover photograph of Tina Fey's best-selling book *Bossypants* (2011), a collection of personal essays about show business and motherhood. The book's title as well as the photo refer to Fey's well-known position as "boss," first as *SNL*'s head writer and later as the creator, writer, producer, and star of *30 Rock*.

The medium-close-up photo spoofs the traditional author glamour shot. Fey poses serenely, wearing tasteful makeup and lipstick, her hair arranged in loose waves down to her shoulders, but her head sits on a male torso wearing a white dress shirt and a tie. More than that, the sleeves are rolled up to reveal huge, hairy, male forearms and hands—an unnerving way to picture the woman who "wears the pants" as secretly, monstrously male. More subtly, given Fey's reputation as a feminist, the photo alludes to and satirizes the popular T-shirt claiming "THIS IS WHAT A FEMINIST LOOKS LIKE." The photo is also a parody of Fey's magazine cover-girl images that have relentlessly emphasized her attractiveness, an ironic twist on her celebrity, given that she became famous for what she says rather than




*Given Tina Fey's reputation as a feminist, the cover photo of her 2011 book,* Bossypants, *is a comic take on the T-shirt slogan "This is what a feminist looks like."*

what she looks like. For both the Fey photo and the Leibovitz shoot, the joke turns on the high stakes of what these women look like—and that's a joke specific to the genre of women comics because funny-looking male comedians have never been an issue or problem. The pretty versus funny cliché about women comedians is so commonplace that Steve Martin used it in a joke introducing Fey as the winner of the 2010 Mark Twain Prize for American Humor. Spoofing her cover-girl status, he said, "Isn't it refreshing to find a female comic who's both really good and funny-looking? Excuse me—that should have read, 'Really funny and good-looking.'"

The major premise of *Pretty/Funny* is that in the historic binary of "pretty" versus "funny," women comics, no matter what they look like, have been located in opposition to "pretty," enabling them to engage in a transgressive comedy grounded in the female body—its looks, its race and sexuality, and its relationships to ideal versions of femininity. In this strand of comedy, "pretty" is the topic and target, the ideal that is exposed as funny. And although the pretty/funny tension is a way to characterize the comedy of a number of women past and present, I am particularly interested in a group of high-profile comics who emerged into mainstream stardom or made dramatic comebacks between 2000 and 2010, the decade when liberal political comedy also came into the foreground of a bitterly divided American politics. My topics in this book are Kathy Griffin, Tina Fey, Sarah Silverman, Margaret Cho, Wanda Sykes, and Ellen DeGeneres, comics who draw on the pretty/funny binary by targeting glamour, post-feminist girliness, the Hollywood A list, feminine whiteness, and romanticized motherhood as fodder for wit and biting satire. Except for Fey, who was trained in improvisation and usually performs as a fictional character, these women are stand-up comics who have also starred or co-starred in television sitcoms and occasionally in films, though my emphasis in the following chapters is on the work they wrote themselves in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

These women are successful performers, but they are most of all writers of their own material. They are comic auteurs whose work cuts across multiple media—television, film, theater, and books, including witty autobiographies by Griffin, Silverman, and Cho and collections of anecdotes and jokes by Sykes and DeGeneres. So while most of their writing is performed as scripts, some of it is also widely available as texts that can be read and reread; Fey's *Bossypants* was at the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list for five weeks when it was released and sold a million copies within six months. Following the cinematic meanings of auteurism as vision, we can see the style or signature of Fey's and Silverman's comedy even in the episodes of *30 Rock* and *The Sarah Silverman Program*, respectively, that

they did not write. Likewise, *Kathy Griffin: My Life on the D List*, Griffin's reality television series about her scramble for stardom, bears her authorship through its choice of topics, its tone, and the editing of scenes, shots, and transitions. These comedians are stars and celebrities because, beyond having the acting chops and good comic timing of a Carole Lombard or Lucille Ball, they are exceptional writers of comedy.

My subsidiary claim in this book is that women's comedy has become a primary site in mainstream pop culture where feminism speaks, talks back, and is contested. I am not claiming that all the writer-performers covered in this book identify as feminists or should be seen as feminist spokespersons. Far from being politically correct, they often take political correctness as their target. And their articulations of gender politics cover a wide spectrum, from Cho, who openly embraces feminism as her politics, to Griffin, who is the most removed from feminist rhetoric even though she has openly campaigned for political causes—gay marriage and the end of the military's policy on homosexuality—that are aligned with contemporary strands of feminism. Overall, the political impetus of their work reflects the strategies, trends, and contradictions of the women's movement since the 1970s.

That is, their work reflects feminism as a diverse set of discourses that range from "women's lib" to the queer-friendly politics that veer away from acknowledging "women" as a category at all. We can hear the latter when Kathy Griffin jokes about identifying as a gay man or when Margaret Cho embraces the identity of a fag hag.[1] The comedians covered in this book were born between 1958 (DeGeneres) and 1970 (Fey and Silverman), the era when Second Wave feminism emerged primarily as a fight for legal equality. The division of feminism into three "waves" is a blunt and problematic way to historicize women's activism over the past five decades, so the following summary is offered not as a history but as a general guide to the ways feminism has been thought about and talked about as a context of these women's comedy. The Second Wave, named to acknowledge its follow-up to the first large-scale American feminist movement early in the twentieth century, was popularly associated with Betty Friedan's trapped housewife, Gloria Steinem's liberated career woman, and later, more radical figures like Shulamith Firestone and Robin Morgan who demanded full-scale institutional changes to marriage and the family. These "women's libbers" of the 1960s and 1970s campaigned not only for shifts in traditional gender roles such as child care provider but for equality in the workplace and for reproductive rights; they also targeted pornography as part of their larger attack on objectified images of women in culture. So the generation of women who came of age in the 1970s reaped many legal and social



benefits of Second Wave activism, including antidiscrimination laws (Title VII), the *Roe v. Wade* decision that legalized abortion, the wider availability of birth control, and a guarantee of equal athletic facilities for women and men in schools (Title IX).

This is the equality feminism often spoofed on *30 Rock*, with its flashbacks of a teenage Liz Lemon, who sued her school district to let girls play football. The episode "Luda Christmas" reveals that she played on the team for just one day. "But I did change everything forever," she rhapsodizes in happy self-delusion. As this suggests, one of the ongoing subtexts of *30 Rock* is that 1970s equal-rights feminism has remained uneven in its effects and benefits; Liz Lemon is able to rise into a powerful position as a network executive, but the networks persist in hopelessly sexist content, featuring series like *MILF Island* (Mothers I'd Like to Fuck Island). The popular status of feminism entails both its successes and the ongoing resistances to those successes. On the one hand, feminist-influenced legislation and institutional changes beginning in the 1970s made such an impact that feminism understood as gender equality became "Gramscian common sense," Angela McRobbie notes, even though feminism remained in some spheres of public life "fiercely repudiated, indeed almost hated" (28). The widespread circulation of Rush Limbaugh's term "feminazi" well into the second decade of the twenty-first century testifies to feminism's continued ability to trouble the status quo through its baseline resistance to traditional gender roles.

Even though women of color were active during this time in other liberation movements, Second Wave feminism was tethered to its popular image of liberating suburban housewives and was perceived as a white, middle-class phenomenon. This is the liberal, do-good feminism satirized by Wanda Sykes in a skit about performing for a feminist benefit event. In the version captured in an episode of her sitcom *Wanda at Large* (2003) titled "Clowns to the Left of Me," one of the WASPy feminist organizers gushes, "You're an African American woman, I'm a liberal. We're practically twins." Revolt against this myopic whiteness was a major dynamic in the formation in the 1990s of Third Wave feminism, which protested the racism and heterosexism of the earlier movement. Third Wave feminists like Rebecca Walker, Naomi R. Wolfe, and Donna Haraway advocated a more inclusive social critique—global, multicultural, media-savvy, and attuned to the needs of women of color and all varieties of sexual orientations.[2] Criticizing the Second Wave as "victim feminism," Third Wave feminism was aligned, although not entirely synonymous, with the girl power movement of the 1990s that found compelling role models of female clout in television series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) and *Xena:*

*Warrior Princess* (1995–2001). Third Wave feminism similarly drew on this model of female strength as opposed to male oppression as its axiom, but while girl power tended to reproduce middle-class whiteness as an ideal, Third Wave feminism prioritized difference and diversity—sexual, racial, class, ethnic, physical. The pro-sex stance of the Third Wave, including its embrace of popular culture and pornography, is evident in the gay male audience cultivated by Kathy Griffin, the gay visibility of Ellen DeGeneres and Wanda Sykes, the exuberant LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) rhetoric of Margaret Cho, and the bawdy irreverence of Sarah Silverman. And as I discuss in Chapter Two, feminists who identify along these lines attacked Tina Fey in 2011 for representing, on *30 Rock*, a feminism that was disengaged from queers, disability issues, and racial politics and that was conservatively aligned with the cisgender or "cis" (gender-normative) body that is unquestioned in 1960s-style equal-rights feminism.

However, contemporary feminism is far more complicated than this Second versus Third Wave schematic would suggest. In a 2009 retrospective, gender-studies scholar Carisa Showden summed up the current feminist mash-up as "postfeminism, power feminism, third-wave feminism, dome feminism, libertarian feminism, babe feminism, I'm not a feminist, but . . . 'feminism'" (166). To that list we can add what J. Jack Halberstam describes as "Gaga feminism," named after but not limited to the Lady Gaga persona, which disposes of stable gender identities, looks to "new forms of politics, social structures, and personhood," and is not about sisterhood but rather about "shifting, changing, morphing, extemporizing political positions quickly and effectively" (27–29). Analysis of this complicated picture is beyond the scope of this introduction.[3] Instead, I hope to map out in the next few paragraphs the various feminist issues in which the women comics in this book engage. The contradictions of their politics are the contradictions of contemporary feminism; when Wanda Sykes makes fun of feminism as white and bourgeois, she is taking a position popularized by the Third Wave, but when she incorporates abortion-rights advocacy into her stand-up acts, she draws on a legal-rights rhetoric associated with white, bourgeois, 1960s feminists.

The most salient feminist issue in *Pretty/Funny* is postfeminism, popular versions of which are widely derided in these comedians' satires of "pretty" femininity. McRobbie argues that postfeminism both appropriates and disregards feminism's successes; just as feminism became "common sense" or "taken into account" as an achievement, it became disposable as a past event. The empowerment rhetoric of feminism, originally directed toward social change, was instead easily funneled into an empowerment of the individual through sexuality, femininity, money, and cultural capital. In



this line of thinking, sexualized images of women that the Second Wave had decried as degrading them can be recycled as proof of triumphant personal power; the woman in a sexist ad can be read as an assertion that feminism is no longer necessary, in that she "seems to be doing it out of choice and for her own enjoyment" (McRobbie, 33). In this logic, sexual attractiveness is an enabling choice despite cultural and consumerist pressure to purchase the clothes, cosmetics, and accessories necessary to produce it. The personal makeover—postfeminism's ubiquitous pièce de résistance—is extensively spoofed by the comics discussed in this book, from Ellen DeGeneres's queer renditions of being made over by her audience to Margaret Cho's funny but chilling account of how her sitcom-TV makeover nearly killed her.

Nevertheless, consumerist versions of postfeminism—the pressures to buy into the ideals and purchases of chic, forever-young femininity—to some extent overlap with strands of Third Wave feminism and certainly with Gaga feminism. Halberstam acknowledges this in the latter movement when she includes "a celebration of the joining of femininity to artifice" as one of its facets (xiii). A telling blind spot of Second Wave feminism, by some accounts, was its indifference to pleasure, not only the wide varieties of sexual pleasure but the pleasures of femininity, including fashion. In its condemnations of sexual objectification, Second Wave feminists often lost or overlooked the playfulness of dress-up and artifice, a dynamic joyfully enacted as high drag for Lady Gaga and seen in the elaborate self-Orientalization of Margaret Cho in some of her post-2000 performances. Rejecting the moralistic and often judgmental Second Wave rhetoric about attractiveness, feminism since the 1990s has been more likely to see women as co-creators rather than victims of fashion and consumerism. The result is feminists "giving workshops in high heels," as one young feminist describes it (Boris, 102).

The problem is that chic Third Wave or Gaga feminism may very well look exactly like the fluffy femininity or sleazy suggestiveness heralded by popular postfeminism as a return to traditional gender values—a luxury young women can well afford, advertisers imply, because the need for feminist activism is long gone. Or as Showden summarizes it, the typical postfeminist assumption is that "women today are confident in their bodies and with their sexuality and do not need a political movement to tell them what is demeaning and what is liberating" (171). When Liz Lemon protests this concept on the *30 Rock* episode "TGS Hates Women," frantically pointing out the sexism of the "baby hooker" look of a young woman comic, Liz comes across as the frumpy Second Wave feminist who doesn't get it and who proves the old adage that feminists have no sense of humor. Overall,

30 *Rock* mines fizzy versions of postfeminism for comedy: in "Mazel Tov, Dummies!" Liz interprets the gushy every-bride-is-a-princess sentiment by getting married in her *Star Wars* Princess Leia costume, usually pulled out of her closet only to disqualify herself from jury duty. 30 *Rock* is a particularly rich example of women's comedy taking on the contradictions of the multiple feminisms registered in popular culture, and in Chapter Two I go into more detail on popular postfeminism as a dismissal of political feminism.

Given this complex field of gender politics, the comedians in this book nevertheless enact feminist assumptions in their challenges to cherished ideals about the appropriate behavior, race, and sexuality of the pretty—that is, appropriately feminine—female body. Prettiness is a tempting target for feminist comedy because it is a diminutive term associated with girlishness rather than womanly attractiveness. The title of the Roy Orbison song and the 1990 film starring Julia Roberts switch out the more colloquial phrase "pretty girl" for "pretty woman" exactly because of that connotation: the woman who is pretty is young and accessible. In the Orbison song she's approachable, and in the Roberts film she's available at an hourly rate. While the words "beautiful" and "glamourous" suggest power, "prettiness" implies delicacy and daintiness, the very qualities lampooned by Fey's boss photo and the comics-as-sluts photographed by Leibovitz. In mainstream culture, the pretty woman is not only slim and young but also and perhaps imperatively white or at least light-skinned—a fact brutally satirized by Margaret Cho and Wanda Sykes. It's not surprising, then, that feminist scholars have long found subversive pleasures in the power of female wit and waggery over feminine norms, from Fanny Brice's parodies of Ziegfeld Girls to Roseanne Barr's sardonic domestic goddess, and have traced the history of women in comedy as a feminist history.[4] When Lily Tomlin played Tina Fey's radical-feminist mother in the 2013 comedy *Admission*, many reviewers noted that the casting itself was a nod to the genealogy of women's comedy.

The women comics included in *Pretty/Funny* are the beneficiaries of this rich history, attaining a high-profile presence in mainstream culture despite—or because of—their association with queer and feminist politics and, in some cases, their legibility as queer, black, and ethnic bodies. Ellen DeGeneres's gay wedding, for example, was a large-scale media event that made the cover of *People* magazine. Wanda Sykes was the first lesbian comic to be invited to the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner. Griffin, who loudly proclaims her primary audience as her gays, is regularly asked to co-host CNN's New Year's Eve special, with the expectation that she can draw substantial ratings for her outrageous antics



and language. Griffin and Cho base their comedy on an aggressive critique of Hollywood culture, Griffin with her D-list persona and Cho with her fierce outings of Hollywood racism. Both also take queer positions outside of a prevalent family-values politics. Sarah Silverman, meanwhile, mobilizes her Jewishness in a stunning and high-risk satire of bigotry and white privilege. And for highly visible political comedy, Tina Fey's 2008 impersonations of GOP vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin were singular in their impact. Never before has a comedian of either sex made such an imprint on national politics. An example of Fey's continuing clout, as well as her association with feminist public discourse, was her inclusion in a 2012 front-page *New York Times* article on a renewed debate about working mothers (Kantor, "Elite Women"). Fey was cited as an example of women "at the top of their fields" who have weighed in on the complications of motherhood and career, referencing a highly circulated chapter ("Confessions") from *Bossypants* on this topic. The inclusion of a comedy writer-performer as part of what the *New York Times* article calls a national "feminist conversation" sums up what's new about Fey's stardom: she is a comic who is being taken seriously. And what's very new is that she is a comic whose name often comes up in discussions of feminism.

This is not to say that all contemporary women comics or even most women comics participate in this kind of feminist conversation or edgy politics. Precisely because it is now a thriving field, women's comedy features brilliant stars such as Handler and Cummings whose work is less political. And the glamourous women comics are likely to be the moneymakers. Late-night host Handler was the only woman included in the top-ten lists of highest-grossing comedians in 2010 and 2011, and Cummings was television's cause célèbre in autumn 2011 when she created two network series and starred in one of them (2 *Broke Girls* and *Whitney*). Yet it's also the case that contemporary women's comedy includes far more feminists and feminist themes than discussed in the following chapters. In a May 2012 article in the *Washington Post*, Rebecca Traister cites Amy Poehler, Kristen Wiig, Samantha Bee, and Kristen Schaal along with Fey as evidence, the headline suggests, of "The End of the Hairy, Joyless Feminist." Her theme is that all these women comics challenge the concept of "what a feminist looks like."

In the bigger picture, women's comedy has become a space where feminist topics emerge not only in the stand-up comedy of performers such as Janeane Garofalo and Rachel Dratch but in films such as Mo'Nique's *Phat Girlz*, in Poehler's sitcom *Parks and Recreation* (2009–) and Mindy Kaling's sitcom *The Mindy Project* (2012–), in Lena Dunham's HBO dramedy *Girls* (2012–), and in debates around films such as *Bridesmaids* (2011) and *Juno*

(2007), both written by women and embroiled in controversies about representation. *Juno* was criticized for its take on teenage pregnancy and its snide portrayal of an abortion clinic, depictions defended by writer Diablo Cody, who claimed that her "feminist hat" is "permanently welded" to her head (in Wakeman). *Bridesmaids*, widely welcomed as a feminist perspective on wedding culture and class difference, nevertheless lit up blogs and websites with debates about its gross-out comedy scene and the jokes around Melissa McCarthy's large size: Could a feminist movie accommodate these elements? (Wallace). The arguments themselves are less important than the surprise that the dreaded "F" word—feminism—was being casually invoked as a pop-culture issue and, in the case of writers like Cody, an identification. Along the same lines, when the hit television series *New Girl* (2011–) was criticized in 2012 by comic Julie Klausner as "antifeminist," the show's creator, Liz Meriwether, responded by giving *Entertainment Weekly* an interview in which she explained herself as "a feminist who's actively trying to create interesting roles for women" (in Maerz). My point is that questions and debates about feminism and comedy are not limited to feminist blogs but show up in mainstream journalism and have become part of the public sphere.

## BODY POLITICS

My argument so far has centered on women's comedy as a vehicle for feminism and as a site where the pretty/funny binary plays out in two ways: as the traditional organization of women's bodies in comedy and as a strategy women comics have used to resist and lampoon that dynamic. My more specific argument focuses on the latter—the strand of female comedy grounded in the body and its politics. The politics—that is, the power dynamics—is actually cited in Hitchens's notorious essay when he quotes author and wit Fran Lebowitz in support of his argument: "The cultural values are male," she says; "for a woman to say a man is funny is the equivalent of a man saying that a woman is pretty" (n.p.). Lebowitz reroutes Hitchens's argument from biology to culture to explain why a woman's looks get prioritized over what she says. A striking example is the unwanted media attention directed to Hillary Clinton's physical appearance during her run for the presidency in 2008. Commentary on her policy statements was often upstaged by remarks about her hair, clothing choices, and legs. Rush Limbaugh famously asked if, should she be elected, Americans will "want to watch a woman get older before their eyes on a daily basis" (in Nason). Significantly, one of the most scathing and high-profile



feminist criticisms of this trend was an acclaimed *Saturday Night Live* skit by Amy Poehler and Tina Fey, who impersonated Clinton and Sarah Palin, respectively, being treated by the media in very different ways because of their looks. As this suggests, Hitchens's observation rearticulates "the male gaze," a theory that remains sadly relevant, especially in determining, for instance, which female bodies can become stars and what roles they can take.[5] Tom Hanks may get ever goofier-looking in middle age, but as of this date, he can still play any role in Hollywood, from dashing action hero hunting down the Da Vinci Code to romantic lead for Julia Roberts. A female star aging like Hanks would have no such range.

But she could have a shot at being funny. Joan Rivers, who has always identified as a feminist, made this point in her famous 1974 quip about the importance of looks in the making of a woman comedian: "There is not one female comic who was beautiful as a little girl" (in Shapiro, 638). The quip intimates a great deal about how a young girl might compensate for her failure to be what culture most desires in a girl, and many of the comics discussed in the book talk about their girlhoods in similar terms. In show business, the failure to be beautiful was, in the past, likewise compensated by comedy. Fanny Brice, Lily Tomlin, and Carol Burnett traded on their unglamourous looks to embody cartoonish characters, while women like Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers herself felt obliged to make themselves funny-looking or to position themselves as grotesques. In the Stanley article in *Vanity Fair*, Amy Poehler remarks that while she and her comic cohort are considered good-looking, they are not the beautiful female bodies that dominate film and television. "For funny ladies, we're attractive. But when you open us up to real, professional attractive people—I do not want to run with those horses" (190). However, professional attractive people—stars, celebrities, models—continually proffer to female consumer-spectators endless images of impossibly perfect glamour and flawless femininity. As of 2010, a middle-aged Sarah Jessica Parker was still posing in frothy high school prom dresses to advertise perfume.

This is not to say that conventionally attractive women don't do transgressive comedy about gender but rather that the pretty versus funny dynamic is a rich source of humor for women because it is part of the larger social structure of how women are seen and judged. Consider the case of Jean Carroll (1911–2010), a lovely woman who shocked nightclub audiences in the 1950s by doing comic monologues "in a shimmering evening dress, dripping diamonds and mink. That in itself was subversive," her *New York Times* obituary notes, as were her jokes about "being driven crazy by spouse and children, a time-honored staple of male comics" (Fox). Carroll's shock tactic relied on the belief that a glamourous woman was sup-

posed to show up in a nightclub as a showgirl or singer, not a joker. As this implies, the dynamic of stand-up performances by women often entails the male gaze even if the point is its subversion or elision. Nor does the gaze need to be literally male. John Berger's classic formulation about social power and women's internalization of male surveillance is especially relevant to the woman who, in stand-up comedy, literally stands up to be surveyed by the audience.[6]

Women comics are judged for their looks before they have a chance to speak, critic Danielle Russell asserts. She quotes comedian Abby Stein, who spoke of the anxiety about the audience "looking at your body instead of listening" to the jokes. Along the same lines, comedian Jenny Jones "estimated that she lost the first minute of her routine while people decided if a buxom blonde had anything to say" (n.p.). Male comedians are not subject to this judgmental gaze because, to use Berger's framework, their looks are not necessarily their source of power. Jim Carrey may look like a conventionally dashing leading man, but his power is his ability to contort his good looks into zany, absurd, or wacky faces. Conversely, the male comic who is not particularly attractive simply has another advantage; Louis C. K. can use his portliness and grubby looks as part of his bumbling schlep persona. Both cases prove the argument made by Laraine Porter that male comics don't need to deal with their status as visual objects to make themselves heard: "The male stand-up is much less likely to have his object/subject status determined by what he looks like" (80). Little wonder, then, that for many women comedy writers the cultural expectations about femininity and the female body have provided rich material for humor.

The body politics of this comedy resonates with ideological implications. Hitchens's argument hints at this larger picture: "Because humor is a sign of intelligence (and many women believe . . . they become threatening to men if they appear too bright), it could be that in some way men do not want women to be funny" (n.p.). Indeed, the pretty versus funny binary adheres to the traditional Western binary of body versus mind as well as the traditional gender alignment of that split, with women positioned as body, man as mind or intellect. When Hitchens gives credit to Jewish women comics as truly funny because of their "masculine" humor, he may be drawing on the stereotype of Jewish intellectualism that in the Western schema masculinizes a woman. The Judeo-Christian tradition strongly endorses the identification of women with their bodies rather than their minds: Adam was the rational one, but Eve seduced him into making a very bad decision—a theme Christian theologians elaborated with teachings that women are innately crasser and more tethered to their bodies than men. Women are "the devil's gateway," wrote the early Christian author Tertullian, and Saint Augustine famously preached that a man is the image of God, but a woman can become part of this image only as a man's partner.



Even secular philosophies have positioned mind above body and relegated women to the lower term, along with darker-skinned races also considered socially and intellectually inferior. Elizabeth Grosz claims that, given this debasing identification of women with their bodies, early feminists sometimes aimed at "transcending" the body, with the unhappy result of reinforcing the body/mind dualism. Grosz points to more recent feminist thinking that embraces the body as "the political, social, and cultural object par excellence," irreducible to either biology or culture (18), and it is within this framework that I describe a female comedy grounded in the cultural body. The politics of this comedy centers on questions of race, sexuality, and power. What female bodies are valued? What bodies count as feminine? As sexy? As visible and legible? Feminist questions of long standing, they are now, for many women comics, the subtext and setups for punch lines.

## THE POLITICS OF STAND-UP

Although the body politics of comedy can be traced back to this broad ideological heritage, a more specific and physical example is the practice of the stand-up monologue, which began in nineteenth-century vaudeville and music halls with humorists such as Mark Twain. It developed in the form we know it today mainly through post–World War II nightclub culture. Performing stand-up comedy, like piloting a plane or being a detective, was long considered an implicitly male undertaking. Lily Tomlin, commenting on this predominantly male history in the 2009 PBS documentary *Make 'em Laugh: The Funny Business of America*, explains the cultural logic: "A woman couldn't stand up and tell jokes because it was too powerful. To make an audience laugh meant you had control of them in some way." Joan Rivers has said, in the same vein, "Comedy is masculine. To stand up and take control of an audience verbally is very difficult" (in Horowitz, 107). Both comedians emphasize the authority of the physical positioning. The posture of standing up assumes status and power as well as qualities of aggression and authority, also considered innately masculine. As John Limon puts it in his eloquent theorization of the genre's posture, "What is stood up in stand-up comedy is abjection" (4). Limon focuses on subjectivity instead of masculinity in the power dynamic of this posturing, but his overview on stand-up as well as his cultural history of its masculinities generally supports the pretty versus funny paradigm I lay out

here. Limon writes, for instance, that in the first decades of stand-up comedy a woman comic who added "sexual allure to her wit" would have been threatening instead of entertaining (55) and that a woman comic who was "not grotesque" would trigger a "vacillation . . . between pleasure and displeasure" (57).[7]

Given the anarchic thrust of comedy and the transgressive effect of the woman standing up to be heard rather than looked at, comedy is a rich site for queer performance. The entire rhetoric of female stand-up comedy, the confidence and antagonism of the woman comic "making" an audience laugh, is an undoing of gender, says Russell: "In 'doing' comedian the woman ceases to 'do' female; that is, the linguistic behavior of one contradicts the expected speech patterns of the other" (n.p.). The undoing of gender has profoundly disruptive results, as Judith Butler and queer theory have persuasively demonstrated. Certainly when female comics hijack male space and the authority to be funny, they are also hijacking the cultural organization of heterosexuality itself, the social order described by Berger in which female value resides in being pretty. The disruptive effect is reflected in the *New Yorker* comment about comedy's suitability for women and in Hitchens's remark that good women comics are masculine by virtue of their size, lesbianism, or Jewishness.

This suspicion about women comics as gender outlaws is summed up by cultural critic Rosie White in her remarks on the Stanley essay in *Vanity Fair*. She calls attention to a comment that Tina Fey and her cohort "don't look like comedians." Even if these comics "are said to be funny and sexy," White remarks, "they are still perceived as odd and unusual—as funny peculiar" (356). The expectation, she says, is that female comedians are butch lesbian, grotesque, ugly, or simply male—which is the expectation of Hitchens, too. Her conclusion about this is succinct: what's at stake is the issue of "appropriate femininity," a quality culturally opposed to "being intelligent, sharp-witted" (ibid.). But once appropriate femininity becomes the site of satire or outrageous flippancy, the most basic assumptions about sex and gender are hilariously imperiled, no matter how attractive or femme the performer. Marusya Bociurkiw makes this point when she links the physical slapstick of Lucille Ball and Ellen DeGeneres, both of whom have acted out a "silent rage" against feminine norms in their sitcoms, she claims. Because "the comic's body is structured as the site of dis-ordering and re-ordering of the symbolic order," their slapstick antics resulted in a "productive disequilibrium," undermining appropriate femininity (177). For DeGeneres, the disequilibrium is her queerness, but by linking her antics to those of Lucille Ball, Bociurkiw points to the queerness implicit in a comedy based on rage against gender norms. Of the



women covered in this book, three identify as gay or queer—Cho, Sykes, and DeGeneres—but queer disequilibrium is also evident in Kathy Griffin's D-list persona, which eschews slapstick but embraces the abjection of failed glamour, flipping it into comedy.[8]

The gendered power dynamic of stand-up comedy—its presumed masculinity—is often associated with the raunchiness exemplified by high-profile comics Lenny Bruce (1925–1966), George Carlin (1937–2008), and Richard Pryor (1940–2005). For most of the twentieth century, suggestive jokes and off-color language were, for middle-class audiences, a male privilege. Freud's theorization of "smutty" humor, dated though some of its aspects may be, is spot-on about the aggressiveness and seductive intent of this humor, as seen in the comedy of bawds from Mae West to Lisa Lampanelli. Freud famously assumes that women can be only the targets (the pretty body), not the (funny) speakers, of dirty jokes. His argument is that "smut is directed to a particular person" for the purpose of sexually exciting that person. Freud can picture this scenario only in a Victorian gender arrangement: "Smut is thus originally directed towards women," he says, even if women's presence, "owing to social inhibitions cannot be realized, [but] is at the same time imagined" (*Jokes*, 97). In short, sexual jokes broadcast the desires of the male speaker, and the desired woman need not be actually present for the joke to be funny among men; in fact, owing to social inhibitions, the woman is likely not there at all. So, Freud's theory of sexual comedy imagines women only through their absence. Lucy Fischer, noting that the woman "is eventually eliminated from the scene entirely and replaced by the male auditor" in Freud's formulation, connects this "circumvention" to other notable absences of women in the history of comedy, such as the favoring of male cross-dressing as a comic staple (62).[9]

But Freud perceptively identified the roots of smut in sexual aggression and desire, and he was right about the social taboo of women publicly and assertively speaking about their own desires. In mainstream culture, this taboo remained in place until the sexual revolution of the 1960s, and we can see its tenacity in the shocked reactions Sarah Silverman garnered in 2005 for language that Lenny Bruce and other male comics had brought to mainstream attention four decades earlier.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF GENDER AND AMERICAN COMEDY

The pervasiveness of the pretty versus funny binary in comedy is evident in a toss-away remark by *New York Times* writer A. O. Scott ("The Lady or the Teddy"). Mocking the clichéd structure of a film he was review-

ing, he says archly, "Mila Kunis is also in the movie, but she can't be funny because she's a girl, and her job is to be amused, tolerant and pretty." Pretty versus funny can easily describe the gendered history of American popular entertainment in the twentieth century, beginning with the theatrical revues that juxtaposed leggy showgirls with male comedians. The grand Broadway spectacles of Ziegfeld, the Shuberts, and others glorified the bodies of white women who were considered suitable for show, as I have demonstrated in my previous work (*Ziegfeld Girl*), and the silent choreographies of these bodies contrasted with the wit of the male comedians. The latter included African American comic Bert Williams (1874–1922) and a host of Jewish and ethnic comics, beginning the trend of Jewish and then black comics that would influence American comedy for the entire century and exploit comedy's richness as a site of minority unruliness and defiance. The few comic women in these early revue shows are striking for their transgressions of traditional femininity, as seen in the brash bawdiness of Sophie Tucker (1886–1966) and the insubordinate clowning of Fanny Brice (1891–1951)—both of them set up as the outrageous (and Jewish) contrast to the chorus girl. We can appreciate in Tucker's lewdness, her persona as the Red Hot Mama, how comedy provides a venue for lusty female sexuality even though it was positioned, for Tucker, as distinct from the pretty and more conventional appeal of the showgirl. Robert Allen points out about Tucker and other sexually assertive singers of this era, especially African American performers like Bessie Smith (1894–1937) and Ethel Waters (1896–1977), that their sexuality was linked to qualities considered inappropriate for bourgeois audiences—their age, excess, and nonwhiteness (272–273).

In her history of the liminal spaces of vaudeville and burlesque, M. Alison Kibler documents how bawdy women comics and singers of the early twentieth century operated under the radar of bourgeois culture. These women could be raunchy-funny, Kibler tells us, because they "were often outside of the ideals of feminine beauty—they were fat, dark-skinned, or 'too mannish,'" and their comedy often consisted of parodies or "battles" with middlebrow feminine icons such as ballerinas (14). Predictably, this counterhistory of bawdy female comedy is also predominantly Jewish and African American, composed of women whose color, ethnicity, or immigrant status marked them as not feminine, giving them license to participate in the male world of smut. Late in their careers, black comics Jackie "Moms" Mabley (1894–1975) and Pearl Bailey (1918–1990) went mainstream with cleaned-up versions of their personas for the stage and screen, but their work in clubs and on the Chitlin Circuit—the entertainment venues for black performers up until the 1960s—was renowned for its raciness (Haggins, 147–150, 157–160). And, Kibler recounts, white women who performed in blackface in vaudeville could appropriate this "low" cultural standing, giving them "space for rebellious and sexually aggressive performances" that were comic but also provocative (130).



For much of the twentieth century the raunchy comedy of many of these women, including Jean Carroll, was circulated in under-the-counter "party records," 78 rpm recordings of adult comedy that flourished from the 1930s through the 1970s, featuring risqué songs and monologues by comics such as Rusty Warren and Bea Bea Benson. One of the best known of these, Jewish bawd Belle Barth, recorded albums with titles like *My Next Story Is a Little Risque* (1961), *I Don't Mean to Be Vulgar, but It's Profitable* (1961), and *If I Embarrass You, Tell Your Friends* (1960) and ditties about female sexual prowess: "I'm gonna line a hundred men up against the wall. / I bet a hundred bucks I can bang them all." Given the ways female sexuality was silenced, euphemized, or neglected in mainstream pop culture in the early 1960s—the era of Doris Day virginity and twin beds for Mr. and Mrs. Cleaver—the work of Barth and others in party albums and clubs suggests the value of comedy as a venue for female sexual expression and insolence. However, Joanne Gilbert claims, in this tradition of the raunchy female (heterosexual) comic, no matter how threatening her sexual power might be, she can be "palliative" in her suggestion that she is sexually available so that her overall effect may be "What you see is what you get—are you sure you can handle it?" (108). Again, the status of the female body itself—its visibility, availability, and presumed heterosexuality—is intrinsic to women's comedy even at its most transgressive.

Certainly the most high-profile comic bawd of the twentieth century was Mae West, who by 1932 was "the most famous woman in America," according to biographer Marybeth Hamilton, "her persona a hot topic of controversy, her name a byword for sex" (193). West's comedy was grounded in her curvaceous body, its lush size implicit to its appeal and threat; in *I'm No Angel* (1933) she eyes her slim, young co-star Cary Grant as she would an hors d'oeuvre. Her scholars have shown that West's hourglass plumpness was a throwback to the burlesque heyday of the 1890s; its sheer excessiveness in the 1920s and later was part of its meaning as insatiable and lewd. Its excesses were also part of West's affront to traditional meanings of gender. Her over-the-top, camped-up performances of feminine wiles, combined with her husky, masculine mannerisms and walk, suggested that femininity is a performance that can be pulled off by men or women alike, as she had learned in the gay subculture of New York City's theater world. Her subversive sexiness also had distinct racial implications, as Pamela Robertson Wojcik has demonstrated. On the one hand, West positioned her "glowing

whiteness" as part of her sexual value, carefully surrounding herself with darker women; on the other hand, her film roles and songs affiliated her with black working-class and black lesbian cultures—that is, with abject sexualities certainly not considered pretty (290–292).

West's career in Hollywood peaked in the early 1930s before a new kind of comedy appeared that quickly surpassed in popularity West's gold-digger narratives. Romantic comedy featured far less edgy women wholly distanced from West's campiness and grotesquery. For the rest of the century the idea of women and comedy was tethered to this type of film and to beautiful white stars such as Katharine Hepburn, Carole Lombard, Doris Day, Meg Ryan, and Drew Barrymore—that is, to women acting in comedies rather than to women comics. Kathleen Rowe has eloquently argued that romantic comedy is the film narrative where the comic, unruly woman has historically done best, her feistiness and insubordination given free rein but in the end safely contained through coupling or marriage (95–106). But throughout the twentieth century, Hollywood also popularized what Steve Seidman has dubbed "comedian comedy," the type of film that centers on the antics and persona of the comic star—as Mae West's films had done. This type of film became a vehicle for comic teams such as Laurel and Hardy and solo stars from Jerry Lewis to Adam Sandler. Rowe sums it up succinctly as "male-centered comedy" (104).

While cinema favored pretty women who were good with comic scripts, funny women who wrote their own material were scarce until the late 1950s and early 1960s, when Elaine May, Phyllis Diller, and Lily Tomlin emerged as the first mainstream postwar female comedians.[10] All three began with work onstage and became household names through their appearances on television. Generally, women comics have fared better in television than in cinema because glamourizing close-ups are fewer on the small screen and niche marketing can target female audiences. Writer-performers like Carol Burnett, Roseanne Barr, Brett Butler, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, and Mindy Kaling have had their own sitcoms, and Joan Rivers became the first woman to host a late-night talk show. But despite the importance of television as a venue for women comedians, women seen in television comedy are still mainly attractive actors in the vein of Lucille Ball, Mary Tyler Moore, and Debra Messing rather than comedy writers. The standard casting for most sitcoms, from *The Honeymooners* (1951–1955) to *Modern Family* (2009–), continues to be the funny-looking husband and his requisitely lovely wife. In films the same dynamic allows comical bodies Seth Rogen and Jack Black to be coupled with the likes of Katherine Heigl (*Knocked Up*, 2007) and Kate Winslet (*The Holiday*, 2006), respectively.





This minihistory gets to the pivot of the pretty versus funny binary: because their looks are less important, men have been more likely to take on the physical grotesqueries of comedy, where the funny-looking body and face are assets, which is rarely the case for women in popular entertainment and more generally in culture. From Harold Lloyd and the Marx Brothers to Bob Hope, Seth Rogen, and Zach Galifianakis, men with far-from-handsome bodies and faces have been prime for stardom as performers in stand-up, television, and film comedy, as less-than-pretty women have not. Two traditions of comedy, both of them charged with gendered implications, account for this discrepancy.

First is the convention of the uncomely comic or clown who is the sympathetic outsider. Frank Krutnik describes how this "outsider or misfit . . . presents a spectacle of otherness by serving as a conduit for energies that are marginal, non-normative or antisocial" (3). The liminality of this figure has traditionally given the fool, court jester, or sidekick character the power to buck authority and cause chaos because he has nothing to lose. However, my stress here is on the physical appearance of this character as a spectacle of otherness—Buster Keaton's sad sack, Steve Carell's hapless loser, Jack Black's slob. This comic misfit can be a sympathetic character who assumes comedy's most common narrative—and certainly a cultural favorite—the romance. Keaton's homely clown, Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp, and Billy Crystal's nerd can pursue and get the girl at the end, as can the characters played by Carell and Black. Woody Allen as the skinny, bespectacled nebbish can woo lovely Diane Keaton not only with the power of his wit but with the cultural cachet of the underdog and the loner. But there is no female equivalent of Allen's nebbish—a lovable, funny-looking female outsider who can also carry a romantic storyline. The female outsider is a trickier position to negotiate; in cultural iconography, the "lone woman" connotes the witch, spinster, or hag.

My point here is not simply that funny-looking male comics can get romantic roles, though that's a huge advantage given that most film comedies include romance and films can launch a comedian to mainstream stardom. My emphasis is rather about the cultural roles one might imagine for a funny-looking man as opposed to a funny-looking woman. Those cultural roles and bodies animate popular fictions and narratives. The male comic whose odd-looking appearance signals the misfit and outsider has traditionally had more—and more sympathetic—narrative options. But this tradition is neither inevitable nor fixed, as demonstrated by the popularity of Melissa McCarthy's sitcom *Mike and Molly* (2010–) and McCarthy's

award-winning role in *Bridesmaids*. Victoria Sturtevant makes a similar point in her study of Marie Dressler (1868–1934), who was MGM's most profitable star in the early 1930s. Because of her looks and size (five feet seven, two hundred pounds), Dressler was limited to roles as dowagers, matrons, ugly ducklings, and rowdy drunks, although that didn't prevent her from "hijacking the camera's gaze from her costars" and achieving widespread popularity during the Depression (2–3). But Dressler is the exception. Film comedy includes no long, ongoing line of Marie Dressler types, as opposed to the long line of Buster Keaton types extending to Steve Carell and Jonah Hill. Instead, a large-bodied woman like McCarthy or Rebel Wilson occasionally does well against the odds. Sturtevant notes that the uncomely or excessive woman comic can be appealing to female spectators "as a model of feminine energy and transgression" but is profoundly at odds with the way women need to look and act in patriarchal culture, where they "rely on men for economic and familial security" (34). The crux of female value in that system is femininity—being pretty.

The second convention of comedy that treats funny-looking male and female bodies differently is the tradition of the grotesque carnivalesque. Theories of the carnivalesque are about the ways bodies are mapped in culture rather than the ways they are imagined in stories, though there are obvious connections. Mikhail Bakhtin was the first to point out that instead of the "classic," well-proportioned body idealized in Western culture, the grotesque body—disproportionate, ludicrous, misshapen—is the one celebrated in comedy. Bakhtin's topic is the Medieval carnival, the festival where order and hierarchy could be turned inside out and upside down, with the pauper crowned as king and the "lower body"—guts, sex organs, buttocks—idealized instead of the head and heart. As opposed to the self-contained classic body, the grotesque body is open and leaky, so that "the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities . . . the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose" (26). This is the voracious, out-of-bounds comic body of Falstaff and John Belushi, Chris Farley and Cedric the Entertainer. Sturtevant claims it is the excessive body of Marie Dressler as well, who often performs as "the unruly woman," breaking physical and social boundaries of femininity with her size, behavior, and appropriations of male prerogatives such as being drunk. But Sturtevant warns about the considerable penalties for women who embody carnivalesque grotesquery in that women's bodies are always already under suspicion as contemptible; most likely this body is "mocked because it does not comply with cultural codes of female beauty," even if women audience members admire its indiscretions (33–34).

In characterizing Dressler as an "unruly woman," Sturtevant uses



Kathleen Rowe's influential moniker and model of the insubordinate woman in comedy, which in turn draws on Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque. Rowe traces the unruly woman as a comic character dating at least from Medieval mystery plays. This figure is characterized by her excessive body, speech, and laughter and her associations with dirt, disorder, looseness, and liminality; she "may be androgynous or hermaphroditic," the crone or the hag, and "excessive or fat, suggesting her unwillingness or inability to control her physical appetites." Because the unruly woman is impervious to patriarchal claims on her, she is ultimately the "prototype of woman as subject—above all when she lays claims to her own desire" (31). Rowe finds this robust persona in the character of Miss Piggy, whose ferocious appetites match her aggressiveness, a combination Rowe also finds in Mae West and Roseanne Barr. But Rowe, along with other feminist scholars who have drawn on Bakhtin, foregrounds the cultural uneasiness about the female grotesque in Western culture. The unruly woman is an ambivalent rather than wholly positive figure because of misogynist suspicion and contempt for the female body's leakiness and openness, a body that "through menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, participates uniquely in the carnivalesque drama of 'becoming'" (33). This is the female grotesquery Sarah Silverman uses as the basis for much of her comedy, as described in Chapter Three. Generally, however, because of the cultural mistrust and even abhorrence of the female grotesquery incarnated by the likes of Miss Piggy, Rowe finds that the more socially acceptable version of comic female unruliness is romantic comedy, as mentioned above, where funny women are pretty, heterosexual, and eventually positioned in stable, conventional relationships if not marriage.

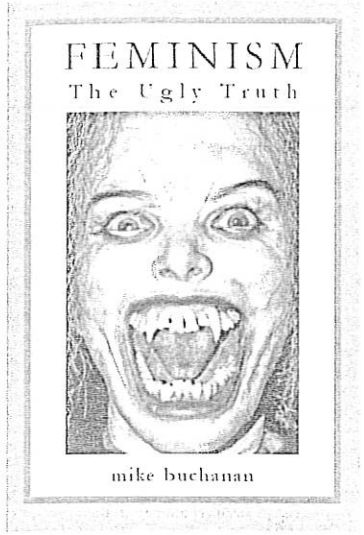
They are also mostly white. "Pretty," after all, is a loaded term signifying whiteness as well as heterosexuality. If the leading ladies of romantic comedy are not white, they are slender women of color with Caucasian features and light skin—Jennifer Lopez, Paula Patton, Robin Givens, Halle Berry, Sanaa Lathan, Gabrielle Union, Nia Long, Vivica A. Fox—and, except for Lopez, in films targeted at African American audiences. In my previous work on this issue ("Queen Latifah"), my argument is that the ideal bodies of romantic comedy are white because the ideals, tropes, and images of heterosexual romance are white. I note that femininity itself is racialized, and its idealized versions are white, a crucial element in the pretty/funny dynamic of women's comedy. In his book-length study of whiteness in visual culture, Richard Dyer documents the cultural associations of whiteness with the ideal woman ("the fair sex") as well as the standard cinematic lighting techniques that privilege whiteness and produce, for white women, beauty that literally "glows" (*White*, 122–142).

Assumptions about femininity are not only racial but race-specific; Margaret Cho satirizes the clichés of the fetishized China doll and geisha girl, while Wanda Sykes works against the stereotypes of the Jezebel and the Sapphire, dangerous and undesirable versions of black womanhood. As Sykes's work suggests, prettiness is an especially prickly issue for African American women, whose femininity has been consistently denied and erased in the historical trajectory impelled by slavery. The disavowal of attractive black womanhood was a disavowal of the white rape of slave women; in this logic, interracial sex could be blamed on the primitive Jezebel who was the seductress. Scholars have amply demonstrated how black women have been portrayed "as the antithesis of the American conception of beauty, femininity and womanhood" (Jewell, 36), often masculinized through attributes of aggression, size, and independence (42). At the same time, Patricia Hill Collins asserts, femininity was consistently associated with "milky White skin, long blond hair, and slim figures," standards by which black women were deemed "less beautiful, and at worst, ugly" (*Black Sexual Politics*, 194). The upshot of this, she argues, is that disparaging images of black femininity are necessary to uphold the white ideal (199). This troubled cultural history gives a decidedly political spin to the comedy of Mo'Nique, for example, who defiantly celebrates the large-bodied black woman as desirable in her 2006 film *Phat Girlz*, her miniseries *Fat Chance* (2005–2007), and her exuberant self-promotions as a bona fide sex symbol. As scholars have noted, comedy's anti-authoritarianism and outlaw stance have long provided a site of defiance and identification for minorities. The liminality of comedy itself—its "safety" as a form of speech that doesn't have to be taken seriously—has allowed comic venues to air and popularize debates about sensitive topics, as seen in pop-culture phenomena such as *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) and *Glee* (2009–).

## WHY NOW?

Even given this longer history of women comics, the more prominent place of women's politicized comedy after 2000 begs the question "Why now?" Why would an admittedly polarizing comedy of gender and race emerge in mainstream entertainment in the era of the tea party, Fox News, and *Sex in the City*–style postfeminism? The popularity of this progressive women's comedy occurs at a particularly conservative moment in American culture, when traditional notions of appropriate femininity are being lionized. In 2011–2012, one of the top two contenders for the GOP presidential nomination was Rick Santorum, who espoused a position that






*The rise of politically oriented women comedians comes at a time when feminism is more visible but also more visibly reviled. The cover of this 2012 book suggests that feminists are neither pretty nor funny.*

a woman's place is in the home, a clue that in a contentious U.S. political scene the comedy of these women is outright offensive to some segments of the American public. While motherhood is being romanticized and even fetishized in pop culture and politics, with reality shows hovering over teenage moms and with state legislators at war on reproductive rights, Kathy Griffin on her 2012 stand-up tour told audiences about her contempt for fertility: "If I have one egg left, I'll fry it tonight."

And precisely because feminism has regained visibility, it has also gained renewed loathing as a source of social and economic problems. Tina Fey's clever takes on what a feminist looks like are contemporaneous with books such as Mike Buchanan's *Feminism: The Ugly Truth* (2012), featuring a cover photo of a repulsive female zombie, her mouth red with blood and jagged with fangs. So the politicized women's comedy discussed in *Pretty/Funny* emerged not from a growing liberal consensus but as resistance to the rising power of American conservatism and mounting anxieties about race and difference.

As it turns out, contemporary women comics with progressive politics have benefited from a convergence of historical and political developments. As taboos about women using risqué language relaxed in the 1970s and 1980s, women comics began to infiltrate the bad-boy space of stand-up comedy. By the end of the 1980s, videos and cable television enabled more stand-up performers previously limited to club audiences to become more accessible. Because of technology it was no longer the case that comedi-

ans had to rely on a spot on late-night television or *Saturday Night Live* to make a breakthrough. In the 1990s, women who wrote and performed their own comedy began to appear as stars of their own sitcoms (Roseanne Barr, Ellen DeGeneres, Margaret Cho, Brett Butler), and women comedy writers became a more common presence in both film and television. In the following decade, just as women comics became more established and visible, bitter ideological divides in the United States pushed political satire into the national spotlight, with Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert becoming household names for comedy that targeted the country's growing nationalism and anxieties about race and immigration following the events of 9/11. The merger of comedy and liberal politics was perhaps most visible during the 2008 presidential campaign with Fey's impersonations of Sarah Palin. But this is part of the larger dynamics of comedy, which are inclined toward disruption and subordination. As a result, right-wing politics has no equivalent of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (1999–) or *The Colbert Report* (2005–). Comedians rarely show up in support of rallies for stronger immigration laws, shutdowns of abortion clinics, or oil drilling in national parks. But Kathy Griffin and Wanda Sykes have campaigned for gay marriage; Sarah Silverman launched a get-out-the-Jewish-grandparents-vote movement for Obama in 2008; and Margaret Cho has made fierce critiques of Republican policies a regular part of her routines.

*Pretty/Funny* begins with a chapter on Kathy Griffin because her gimmick of the "D list" is central to the pretty/funny binary and its defiance by women comics. For Griffin, the D List is the fate of the abjected female body, the star who fails at glamour and femininity. Describing herself and her stardom as "the anti–Julia Roberts," "the anti–Nicole Kidman," Griffin appropriates her D-list liminality as a space of play and subversion. This chapter focuses on the camp and queer foundations of Griffin's comedy, particularly her assumption of the queer sidekick role, the pal of the pretty star, a position that undermines the status quo by calling attention to a body and narrative—the narrative outside of romance—that is compelling and powerful. It explores the political impact and potential of liminality, the position of the insider/outsider, as a comic strategy with potential for social change.

Chapter Two, on Tina Fey, focuses on Fey's award-winning sitcom *30 Rock*, which similarly uses failed femininity as a touchstone of her character Liz Lemon, who, as the idealistic feminist comedy writer in a male milieu, is Fey's alter ego. This chapter investigates questions of feminism and postfeminism, given Fey's associations with both monikers and *30 Rock*'s inclination to centralize topics such as the nature and limits of feminist comedy. My claim is that *30 Rock* is not a feminist text but rather one that explores the unruly ways feminist ideals actually play out in institutions and in popular culture. Ironically, one example of how the new pretty and funny dynamic works is the backstory of the show's casting; Fey had wanted Rachel Dratch as her co-star, but the network insisted on the more conventionally attractive Jane Krakowski as Jenna Maroney. As it turns out, Krakowski enables *30 Rock* to skewer the "pretty" ideals of certain popular postfeminist trends that glorify the girly, white, heterosexual woman as proof that feminism is no longer needed. This chapter emphasizes Fey's stardom as well, including her work on *Saturday Night Live*, her embroilment in feminist controversy over her Liz Lemon character, and her celebrity image, all of which revolve around the question of What a Feminist Looks Like.

Chapter Three covers Sarah Silverman, whose engagement with the abjected body is far edgier than Griffin's D list or Liz Lemon's well-meaning social clumsiness. Silverman exploits the pretty/funny dynamic by playing her feminine, Jewish-princess persona against her gross-out comedy and the comedy of political incorrectness, both of which have been traditionally male territory. Silverman herself links these domains of body and ethnicity through her frequent self-identifications as "dirty Jew," or "hairy Jew," or, as she sings in one of her sitcom episodes, "half monkey, half Jew." This chapter explores the connections in these topics—the abjected female body and the abjections involved in racial/ethnic identities and hierarchies—through Bakhtin's theories of the carnivalesque, the feminist critique and expansion of that theory, and Mary Douglas's work on pollution and dirt.

Margaret Cho's comedy, the topic of Chapter Four, centers on the politicized celebration of the queer Asian body. Brazenly self-identified as feminist and queer, Cho is similar to Silverman in her embrace of taboo topics about sex and the body, but her comedy springs from a far more emotional engagement with the pretty/funny paradigm because of her disastrous experience with her 1994–1995 ABC sitcom *All-American Girl*. Network and media criticism of her face and body, combined with the eventual failure of the sitcom, nearly destroyed her health, sanity, and career. Cho's 1999–2000 comeback tour, DVD, and memoir, all titled *I'm the One That I Want*, interpret her story of the failed sitcom in the context of American racism and the tyranny of unrealistic body ideals for women. While much stand-up comedy is autobiographical, my argument is that Cho's comedy is unique in its two passionate forms of autobiography, both of them rhetorically charged with life-or-death urgency and both focused on the body: the addicted body in recovery and the queer body positioned as the basis of a feminist, queer, Asian American manifesto about body politics.

For Chapter 5, on Wanda Sykes, I am indebted to bell hooks's writings on "black looks," which develop the raced implications of the male gaze and more generally the way black female bodies are seen in American culture. Sykes is one of the contemporary black women comics who target white assumptions about what kinds of female bodies are considered sexy or pretty, and like Cho, she performs devastating impersonations of how the raced body looks to that audience. Sykes has been praised as the "diva in training," the promising heir-apparent to crossover diva Whoopi Goldberg, and Sykes made history as the first mainstream black woman comic to come out as a lesbian. My interest here is how Sykes's comedy successfully manages two aspects of black womanhood that have taken on troubling "looks," or more precisely, that look threatening to white culture: the "angry black woman" and the sexualized black female body. This chapter focuses on how Sykes resists the restraints and stereotypes of the white gaze and successfully expresses both anger and sexuality—her own pleasure and later, her lesbian identity—under the scrutiny of a spectatorship keyed to specific expectations and preconceptions about African American women.

*Pretty/Funny* concludes with a chapter on Ellen DeGeneres, whose comedy is profoundly grounded in the body—the legibility of the lesbian body, its mobility through multiple contexts, its resistance to social and sexual categories, and its blond whiteness that enables this versatility. The structure of this chapter is different from that of the other chapters because it serves as a coda on affect, comedy, and "the way bodies speak to us," to use Susan Bordo's term. The other chapters analyze the women comics' performances, routines, and television shows as texts that illustrate the pretty/funny dynamic and tension. But my argument about DeGeneres is that even though her sitcom outing in the 1990s made television and popculture history, she has had a far greater impact as a daytime talk-show host, moving away from narrative entirely. The transgression and power of her comedy is less in what she says than in the body she so comfortably inhabits—in the process, remarkably, making mainstream audiences comfortable with it, too. DeGeneres, after all, has taken the public image of pretty to a startling place as a model and spokesperson for CoverGirl makeup. Her CoverGirl status is an ongoing joke on her show, but the joke is exuberantly joyful: the all-American girl next door is a soft butch dyke—pretty, funny, and queer. The chapter concludes with a preliminary exploration of Deleuzian thought as a way to consider the importance of comedy and the social impact of the comedian's body and presence, as seen in DeGeneres's popularity.

Because this introduction begins with Christopher Hitchens's contention that women aren't funny, let me end with Tina Fey's comment on this idea in her book *Bossypants*. She tells the story of what happened when Amy Poehler started work at *Saturday Night Live* and at a writing session made a joke that one of the male stars didn't like because it wasn't "cute." Poehler said, "'I don't fucking care if you like it,'" and Fey describes this as a "cosmic shift" in atmosphere. "Amy made it clear," she writes, "that she wasn't there to be cute. She wasn't there to play wives and girlfriends in the boys' scenes" (144). Fey then connects this to the women and comedy question. "I think of this whenever someone says to me, 'Jerry Lewis says women aren't funny' or 'Christopher Hitchens says women aren't funny. . . . Do you have anything to say to that?' Yes," says Fey. "We don't fucking care if you like it. . . . I don't like Chinese food, but I don't write articles trying to prove it doesn't exist."