

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT SATIRE

written by Guest Contributor May 16, 2016



There's a story my friends and I like to tell over and over. It's not our story. It's Tina Fey's, and we read it in *BossyPants*. Actually, I never read it; I listened to the audiobook driving cross country, and it may be because I first heard the story in Tina Fey's voice—somewhere in the 300th hour of Texas—that occasionally I hear her telling it again like she's speaking directly to me. First, she “went black in the eyes.” Then she said, “I don't fucking care if you like it.”

It's a story about working at *SNL*. The ‘she’ is Amy Poehler, who is goofing around on set, performing in an ‘unladylike’ manner when Jimmy Fallon (the ‘you’ in the story) says faux-squeamishly, “Stop that! It's not cute! I don't like it.” And then comes the line my friends and I repeat over and over like a mantra: I don't fucking care if you like it.

Last winter, the writer Ben Schwartz wrote a pretty great article for *The Baffler* called [“Satirized for Your Consumption.”](#) The article—which I enjoyed very much and recommend—argues that we live in a time of “satirical excess” and that, in 2014, we saw clear signs that comedy had been co-opted, becoming “the new language of power, policy, and politics.” As examples, Schwartz turns to the CIA's Twitter account, Obama's appearance on *Between Two Ferns*, and Hilary Clinton's conversation about her 2016 presidential run with Jon Stewart. Throughout the article, when discussing political satire, Schwartz refers to Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, Jon Oliver, and Dave Chappelle, among others. Like Jimmy Fallon, who he identifies as one of the six “nattily-clad, life-of-the-party, white-guy topical jokers” adding to the satire glut.

It is, of course, notable that Schwartz does not mention Amy Poehler. Or Tina Fey. Or, actually, any contemporary female comedian except Alison Agosti (he does mention Maureen Down and Elaine May in passing). There's a fairly obvious reason for this: when Ben Schwartz was writing his article, 'fake news' was almost entirely the purview of men. Outside *SNL*, no female comedian had ever sat behind the desk at a fake news program or hosted a late night talk show. The editors of *The Onion* and its satirical clickbait site, *Clickhole*, were (and still are) both men. To my knowledge, no head of state has ever sat down with a female comedian between two ferns.

Then, about two months ago, Samantha Bee entered the fray and became the first female comedian to host a comedy 'news' show. (Unlike Stewart and Oliver, who sit behind an anchor desk wearing a coat and tie, Bee stands the whole show wearing kicky boots, and sometimes, high-top sneakers.) "Samantha Bee is Crashing Late-Night Comedy's Sausage Fest" proclaimed *Mother Jones* days before the show's premier. One trailer for the show had the comedian declining a plate of sausage offered to her by a passing waiter. In her first half-dozen shows, Bee has produced short Herzog-style documentaries on Jeb Bush and CPAC, visited a Syrian refugee camp, and [critiqued media coverage of Black History Month and Black Lives Matters](#) (writer Ashley Black: "you know what's not cool, using Martin Luther King as a cudgel to beat black people with.") Samantha Bee has also tackled a number of decidedly 'gendered' stories, such as untested rape kits, sexual harassment at the work place and dress codes for women testifying before state committees.

If *Full Frontal* had been on the air at the time of Schwartz's article, I have no doubt Schwartz would have included it—but it wasn't. Of course, there were examples of female comedians doing political satire of this kind before Samantha Bee. Jane Curtin, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler and Cecily Strong had all been behind the anchor desk on Weekend Update. There weren't any ferns, but Vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin appeared on *SNL* to spar with Tina Fey. *The Daily Show* may be all but synonymous with Jon Stewart at this point—even with Trevor Noah at the helm, but it was created by Lizz Winstead and Madeline Smithberg. Two years ago, Alexis Wilkinson, who now writes for the terrific *Veep*, became the [first African American woman to be president of the Harvard Lampoon](#). With her (also female) vice-president, she launched the *Huffington Psst* for the Lampoon's summer parody project; the site received over 200,000 unique views while it was on line. In 2015, Cecily Strong hosted the White House Correspondent's Dinner, making her the fourth woman to do so; she joined Paula Poundstone, Elayne Boosler, and Wanda Sykes.

Of course, these are exceptions. Men dominate this kind of political satire—with out or without, but now thankfully with—Samantha Bee. Schwartz's article merely reflects that dominance. On the other hand, fake news and late-night monologues do not constitute the full range of political satire in the contemporary United States, a fact Schwartz acknowledges through his discussion of *The Chappelle Show*. Schwartz also explicitly notes that "several of the most heated discussions in feminism in recent years have comedy as their starting point." His example: rape jokes. His references: Patton Oswalt, Anthony Jeselnik, and Hannibal Buress. Not for example, Sarah Silverman or Amy Schumer.

So while it is perfectly understandable that Schwartz's article focused almost exclusively on male comedians, it still seems a little strange considering we might be in a golden age of female comedy—or at the very least, the world seems presently more receptive to comedians of the female kind. A great number of these comedians explicitly critique issues of gender and representation. On its face, satire—defined as "the use of humor, irony, exaggeration or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics or topical issues"—should include critiques of this kind. Not that female satire is limited to gender issues, but for the sake of this piece, I want to focus (mostly) on female satire that is—examples

where humor and irony serve as a political protest against the patriarchy and sexist representations of women. Because, I'm wondering why this kind of satire often gets left out of the discussion when we talk about satire.

Where are All the Women?

Like Schwartz, I will not dignify the possibility that women aren't included in discussions of satire because women aren't funny. Except to note that great *30 Rock* episode where Jenna and Liz put on a show to disprove that old but persistent myth. The actual audience of *30 Rock* doesn't get to watch their show; they only see brief clips of Jenna and Liz, of the crowd laughing—all of it drowned out by this song: “Women are funny/ We can all agree/ We don't need to prove it to you.”

In his 2007 book, *The Literature of Satire*, Charles Knight claims that because of the “virtual absence of women as satirists before the twentieth century (and hence their absence from much of the study as well)... [satire is] more-or-less a masculine genre.” While Edith Wharton and Dorothy Parker are generally recognized as satirists by those specifically seeking to amplify female voices in the genre, these authors are often left out of ‘gender-neutral’ discussions. May Isabel Fisk was a well-known comedian and monologist in the early twentieth century. At one point, she was considered the “funniest monologist in America” by *The New York Times*. Four of her five books went into numerous reprints, and she performed both in America and England, where her shows were reviewed by major news outlets. According to Julia Boissoneau Hans, Fisk's monologues “vilify patriarchal marriage, make fun of monogamy, laugh at prurient husbands, and break down class barriers.” Being monologues, they also “deny the male voice a single utterance.” Noticeable in Fisk's comedy is the absence of racial and ethnic invective, “a radical break” from humor at that time. [Today Fisk doesn't even have a Wikipedia page](#). She is virtually absent from the academy. (If you subscribe to Harper's though, you can read a good number of her pieces in their archive).

All Satire Attacks Something

As the most ‘aggressive’ form of humor, perhaps our dearth of female satirists is not surprising. Satire as a weapon. Satire as assaultive, as vituperative, as destructive—these are all adjectives we have not traditionally used to modify or define “woman.” At least not in any positive sense. Indeed, women who are perceived to be too aggressive have historically been punished.

There's that old joke about a Soviet-era judge:

The judge is laughing, and a friend asks him what's so funny.

“I just heard a hilarious joke,” the judge says.

“Well, tell it to me,” says his friend.

“I can't,” the judge responds, “I just sentenced the guy who told it to ten years.”

That's good satire—what does it have to do with a country like the United States, in a time like now, where satirists are not overtly threatened by state violence? It's been awhile even since a real Smothers' Brother-style battle with a censor—the *South Park* episodes featuring depictions of Muhammad may come the closest. Between free speech, a more relaxed moral landscape, and the Internet, comedians are fairly free to say what they want. Still, there is an argument that women who satirize gender norms are punished more severely than

their male counterparts, and this punishment is specifically gendered, manifesting as attacks on the female body and female sexuality. Like that chapter in *BossyPants* where Tina Fey finally gets around to answering her ‘correspondence’: “When is Tina going to do something about that hideous scar across her cheek?” and “Tina Fey is an ugly, pear-shaped, overrated troll.” Or that Amy Schumer sketch where the all-male focus group is asked about her comedy routines, but they only comment on her body and face and whether they would bang her. The fact is: female comedians are viciously judged on their looks in ways that male comedians rarely are. I thought about doing more research to support this claim, but, frankly, I didn’t have the strength to go on the Internet and find all those trolling, objectifying comments about women I admire. Also, I think we all know it’s true.

Primarily, these kinds of comments are meant to silence women, to put them in their place, to erase accomplishments of any kind, to remind us that—in the end—the sole value of a woman is her body. Some of these comments, of course, are written by other women, but it doesn’t matter who wrote them. All together, they represent an anonymous collective, seeking to enforce a certain kind of femininity by disciplining those who go outside of it. All together, they function not unlike a censor.

Miramax and the Real Girl

There’s another de facto censor in the United States that silences female voices and allows only narrow representations of women to exist. That censor is the market, because the market is what in large part determines the kind of stories we have access to. And we spend a lot of time in this country engaging with stories. Though this election cycle has attracted new voters to the polls, voter turn-out in the 2014 mid-term elections fell to a seventy-two year low. Contrast that with American’s investment with media; by some estimates, the average American spends up to four hours a day watching television and eleven hours a day interacting with digital media. ‘Hollywood’ has become an increasingly powerful institution, which not only reflects social norms but also shapes the way people experience their lives. They are also institutions overwhelmingly controlled by men; in fact, in 2015, the ACLU asked state and federal agencies to investigate the hiring practices of major Hollywood studios. The underrepresentation of women in Hollywood was also noted (satirically) in The Make it Fair Project PSA. A few statistics: 80% of popular films are written by men, 70% of speaking roles in movies are given to men, and, in 2014, 88% of box office hits featured a man in the leading role. The video is funny (“we won’t relent till it’s 100 percent” sung “We Are The World” style by women of various shapes, ages and colors), but the numbers border on horrifying. It means the great majority of women we see on screen, we experience primarily as bodies, and the majority of women we see on screen who actually speak are acting out roles written for them by men.

Probably white men—a fact brought to the forefront, again, by the 2015 Oscars. Much of the discussion surrounding the Oscar’s focused on actors of colors not getting recognized for the work they were doing—but it also drew attention to the general whitewashing of the movie industry. (Speaking of satire, John Oliver did a nice segment on the Oscars; I also like Dylan Marrow’s Tumblr, *Every Single Word*, where he edits popular movies down to the words spoken by people of color. A few examples: *Moonrise Kingdom* is eleven seconds long; *Frances Ha*, thirty –one seconds; *Noah*, eleven seconds.) But Hollywood is white in more insidious, less visible ways as well—like writer’s rooms. Despite the popularity of more diverse TV shows, such as *Empire*, *black-ish*, *Fresh Off the Boat*, and *Jane the Virgin*, diversity in writers rooms actually decreased between the 2011-12 season and the 2013-14 season. And despite majority non-white writing rooms like *Empire* and the increasing visibility of women like Shonda Rhimes, people of color occupied just 5.5% of Executive Producer/ Showrunner roles in the 2013-14 season. And all of this should be compared to the early early 90’s when shows like *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *A Different World*, *In Living Color*, and *Living Single* aired on network TV.

In the literary world, things are not much different. The 2014 Women in the Literary Arts (VIDA) numbers showed progress overall in the number of women writers reviewed and published in major publications and literary journals. But they also revealed the continuing lack of representation of women writers of color. Revealed might be the wrong word as that underrepresentation was already apparent to many.

Numbers like these represent a systematic exclusion of women, particularly women of color, from texts. What these numbers fail to show is that—within this already small space—the permitted representations of women are severely circumscribed, constrained by a patriarchy that seeks to control female bodies even in the hypothetical space of film and book. I don't wish to suggest I can't tell the difference between state-sponsored censorship and the kind of silencing that results from 'free' speech and the 'free' market, but I do want to suggest that the result is the same: only certain stories about women get through and into the public for mass consumption.

And also this: to make it to market, we might expect to find certain kinds of subversiveness—of hiding—in comedy that criticizes patriarchy.

What does Female Resistance Look Like

We are told that we live in an age of detachment and irony, but, in satire, irony is frequently a form of protection, a way to critique existing power structures while allowing deniability and distance from that critique (like animals in allegory or aliens in science fiction). In fact, satire accommodates contradiction: it is aggressive and non-confrontational at the same time. To lean into one of those negative stereotypes, what could be more female than that?

If female satire appears more coded than male satire, this would also conform to accepted understandings of how power struggles work. Anthropologists and sociologists have long recognized that resistance for marginalized groups may appear less than revolutionary. Examples of covert resistance are numerous in the economic sphere: absenteeism, work slow-downs, even using gendered or culture-specific tactics like crying or spirit possession (as shown in Aihwa Ong's study of Malaysian factories) to resist specific kinds of labor discipline. David Graeber has noted specifically the way feminism is often conceptualized as something other than revolutionary—even while it continues to revolutionize the lives of women. Tina Fey once said that men were in comedy to break rules while “[c]onversely, the women I know in comedy are all good daughters, good citizens, mild-mannered college graduates. Maybe we women gravitate towards comedy because it's a socially acceptable way to break rules.”

Taking this kind of resistance into account, it's worth investigating whether female satire that makes it to market is more coded, more obscured under layers of irony, more hidden.

A Conventional Form

Female satire often comes embedded in traditional forms like the sitcom or the rom-com. Unlike *The Daily Show*, where the contradiction between form and content immediately alerts the audience to the presence of satire, the critical element in female-driven forms may appear more muted or even not like satire at all.

My favorite scene in *Bridesmaids* is [the café scene](#) with Kristen Wigg and Maya Rudolph. There, Kristen Wigg's character explains to Maya Rudolph's character how she didn't really want to give a blow job, but the

guy (Jon Hamm) kept “putting it near her mouth.” With her abnormally funny hands, Wigg presses her knuckles to her face over and over in order to represent his dick’s searching journey. When my friends and I discuss this scene, we note how it almost feels like it shouldn’t be there; it feels adlibbed in a movie of typical rom-com scenes and gags. It’s just two great comedians riffing, a slipped-in moment, which is also a critique of a certain kind of sexual aggression that women confront in their lives. It’s not rape. It’s not assault. It’s just a moment in a sexual encounter where a man is not listening to what a woman wants, either because he is not attuned to her or because he hopes his persistence will be rewarded—that to avoid awkwardness the woman will simply give in. As that old saying goes, the scene’s funny because it’s true.

My friend Maddie and I love this scene, and we have taken to mimicking the way Wigg presses her knuckles to her face. We do this—not only to refer to moments where men have seemed too sexually aggressive—but also to refer to those ‘men explain things to me’ or ‘men talk over me’ moments. When I told a male friend about this once, he said we were mean. But for us, it captures something; it offers a quick, humorous shorthand to express more serious frustrations.

It reminds me of Issa Rae’s, webseries, [*The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*](#), which is one of the few examples of a female-driven black nerd comedy. Last year, E. Alex Jung wrote an article in *Vulture* about this form of comedy, citing Hannibal Burrell, the Lucas Brothers, Keegan-Michael Key, Jordan Peele, Eric Andre and Wyatt Cenac, among others. The article does include quotes from (female)comedian Phoebe Robinson, but article is focused on men. In fact, Issa Rae, writer and actor of *Awkward Black Girl*, has said she started the webseries after reading an article about how there were few women working in this space.

The plot of the series is familiar: the first season places J, the eponymous protagonist, in a fairly typical love triangle. Except she’s surrounded by characters whose experience of her is mediated through cultural definitions of and assumptions about blackness. She encounters it at work all the time—with her white, female boss (“Girlfriend,” she says, “how are we going to go get cornrows now?”) and her co-worker Amir (“the walking rainbow of racism”). But she also comes up against it with her close friends, people who get her, people who see her—except for the times they don’t. Such as her close friend CeCe, who is Indian-American (“Black guys love it when I talk like that,” she tells J as she alters her speech patterns to flirt with a black man at a party) and her would-be boyfriend, White Jay (who takes her to a spoken word performance on their first date). These moments are funny, woven into the narrative of a rom-com/sitcom, but in their specificity and in their repetition, the critique is there—against what Claudia Rankine might describe as a “[w]hat did you say?” moment, an example of the “quotidian struggles against dehumanization that every brown or black person lives because of skin color.”

It’s hard to imagine the penis-shove moment in a rom-com written by a man, or the repeated microaggressions J faces in a text by a white writer. Maybe it’s because male writers don’t see the penis-shove the way a female writer might. And because white writers don’t see the ubiquity of these small, racist acts. I’d like to state clearly here that I’m not saying it’s impossible to write across gender or race (or class or sexuality). I am saying it’s harder. There’s a danger of flattening. Watching popular media, it can feel as if these moments have been erased when—maybe—these moments are absent simply because the writers didn’t know to notice them.

Or maybe it is a more systematic erasure related to a specific narrative we tell about sexism and racism right now. They exist, sure, but mostly in the past. And while there may be some lingering systematic inequalities—like who gets paid more and who goes to prison more and who dies more—most people, nowadays, are not overtly racist or sexist and, therefore, most people wouldn’t encounter direct, personal forms of racism or sexism in their daily lives—not from actual people. Instances of racism and sexism are, of course, appropriate

for movies and television shows that are ‘about’ these topics, but they simply don’t belong in stories about ‘regular’ twenty-somethings and thirty-somethings trying to find love and careers. As if—depending on who you are as a twenty-something or thirty-something—you wouldn’t experience exactly the kind of moments captured in *Bridesmaids* or *Awkward Black Girl*. As if, regular twenty-somethings and thirty-somethings weren’t constantly coming up against a system of patriarchy and white supremacy that manifests itself in people and lived-in moments. As if finding ways to negotiate them, to laugh about them, to protest them in some way wasn’t just the facts of life.

The Unlikable Female Character

Another level of irony found in female-driven satire is the unlikeable female character. *30 Rock* is a good example (which, note, presents as a sitcom about variety shows, not a satire of variety shows). However, it is a sitcom about a variety show, which satirizes media portrayals of women. To accomplish this critique, *30 Rock* employs a second layer of irony and a fairly traditional satirical convention: the caricature. Jenna Maroney is not a character, she is a caricature. A narcissist terrified of growing old, she is jealous and vain, a bad friend, and a bad colleague. She is given few ‘likable’ traits, few moments of redemption. It would be easy to read Jenna Maroney as critique of women, but the unlikable female character is a fairly common rhetorical device in female-driven satire (see [Dorothy Parker](#) and Edith Wharton). As Julia Boissoneau Hans notes, we are supposed to read Gulliver’s folly as ‘universal,’ so why is it that when vice is embodied in a female form, we read these as vices unique to women?

For what it’s worth, I read Jenna two ways; first, as a critique on the society and industry that produce her intense obsession with how she looks; and second—in her narcissism and self-absorption—as a critique on traits that are American, not necessarily female. There are too many Jenna-afraid-of-not-being-the-prettiest-girl-in-the-room-because-she’s old-now plot lines to go over here. Instead, I’ll move outward: the Morning Randolph character on *Episodes*, Valerie Cherish in *The Comeback*, and the [“Julia Louis-Dreyfus’s Last Fuckable Day” sketch](#), which appeared last season on *Inside Amy Schumer*.

In *30 Rock*, *Episodes* and *The Comeback*, the satirical element comes to us embodied in one of the female characters. In *Amy Schumer*, that layer of irony is absent as Amy, Tina, Patricia and Julia all ‘play themselves.’ It’s notable, I think, that the Amy Schumer sketch is the most recent of the bunch. In its third season, one is tempted to say Amy Schumer raised the stakes a little; the sketches got a little darker; they became increasingly directed at misogyny. But it’s important to put these most recent sketches in context. Schumer’s earlier shows and her stand-up include a lot of material critical of women; while this material obliquely implicates the patriarchal nature of our society, by focusing on how women act within in (“I’m cool with it”), it can sometimes feel that the viewer is laughing at women, not with them in the same way it feels like we are laughing at Jenna Maroney. For a show on that boys’ club Comedy Central, this set up may have allowed room for sketches that more directly go after patriarchy—specifically how men participate in it.

Nevertheless, in all four shows, we see hyperbole and defamiliarization extending a familiar misogynistic premise all the way to its logical conclusion: a woman who refuses to age (Jenna Maroney); a woman who never ages (Morning Randolph); a woman who, when she finally does age, is put off to sea, “Sally Fields wuz here” scrawled desperately into the wooden seat on which she sits.

But, as she rows her boat towards home, Julia Louis-Dreyfus takes a moment to comment on Bruce Willis’ relationship with a woman twenty years younger than him. “Good for them,” she says, cigar clamped in her mouth, but the “good for them” sounds very much like “bless his heart.”

I love that moment. Along with the knuckles-against-face gesture, Maddie and I have added it to our lexicon of ways to call out sexism without having to inhabit the anger of it. Good for them, we say, because sometimes all the ways the rules are different for men feels soul-crushing. Of course, we've also heard the story about how—in real life—Rachel Dratch was cast to play Jenna Maroney but was replaced after the pilot. Rachel Dratch has said, “I am offered solely the parts I like to think of as The Unfuckables.” All of that makes the character Jenna Maroney's persistent fears that she will lose her job if she is not perceived to be young or pretty enough hard to laugh at sometimes.

Female Satire as a Protest Against Traditional Representation

30 Rock and *The Comeback* bring up another important element of female satire: it often aims its critiques directly at media and Hollywood representations of women, not at Politics or the State. It is worth asking why *The Daily Show* (and its imitators/ innovators), which critique the news media for how it represents the world, is considered political satire, while *The Comeback*, for example, which critiques how the entertainment media represents women, is not. I'm sure Schwartz, and most people, would consider *The Comeback* satire, but I wonder if they would consider it a political protest—even though it uses humor and irony as a way to critique systematic misogyny. It could be that, for some, sexism isn't real. It could be that, for some, gender is not considered political. The obvious answer is probably that *The Comeback* doesn't critique the real. It makes fun of the Hollywood kind of media, and Hollywood media is only made-up stories. To critique those stories is not satire but metafiction. It's insiders looking in, while *The Daily Show* looks outwards into the real world, or at least at how the news media covers the real world.

That's not an unimportant distinction, but it's also a little too easy. As Northrop Frye points out, satire is often concerned with—even defined by—self-parody. It is a form that is intensely concerned with form, because satire often presents as an ironic perversion of the Romantic, that other genre, which is concerned with the idealized, the conventional. The second phase of satire, Frye asserts, shows “literature assuming a special function of analysis, of breaking up the lumber of stereotypes, fossilized beliefs, superstitious terrors, crank theories, pedantic dogmatisms, oppressive fashions, and all other things that impede the free movement (not necessarily, of course, progress) of society.” It also frequently includes metafictional elements, “which prevent even the process of writing from becoming an oversimplified convention or ideal.”

When we transfer these ideas to television, isn't *The Comeback* a protest, concerned as it is with analyzing how we consume media—the oppressive fashions of reality television in its first season? And, in its (comeback) season, the pedantic dogmatisms of the auteur-driven, cable programs—isn't the white male anti-hero, our modern day Heathcliff? What about *The Hotwives of Orlando*? What about UnREAL—and the way the women are 'produced' to perform a certain kind of racialized, femininity?

Or what about Phoebe Robinson and Jessica Williams's video, “The Intervention,” which critiqued the 2014 Lifetime reality television series, *Girlfriend Intervention*—a show whose premise was that, each week, one (basic) white woman is made over by four black women “taught to always have it together and tell you how it is.” Interspersing clips from the show and interviews with women on the street, Robinson and Williams analyze the representation of black women on (reality) TV. By cutting together clips from the show with phrases like “a black women would never,” and “every sister knows this,” they expose the way TV representations collapse black women into one monolithic type. It's also a protest against the “fairy black mother,” a conventional representation of the black woman, in which she is defined through her association with a white woman. As Phoebe Robinson puts it: “Just like anyone else, black women are multi-layered,

complex, different and most importantly, they are not relational. They are beings unto themselves and do not merely exist to help white women find themselves, fix their lives, and then disappear.”

It’s not surprising to me that female satire so often protests against media representations of women (and, implicitly, how we as a society consume them). It’s like being on a line where everyone in front of you gets to tell a story about who you are. And it doesn’t have to be true, this story, and the people on the line are primarily strangers. And most of the time, the stories are really about them, and you are just an instrument they use to say whatever it is they want to say about themselves, or to justify some terrible thing they want to do, or some material they want to hold onto. Also, the line is hundreds of years long, and you’re at the end of it. Plus, when you go, there’s a time limit so—while there’s truly a lot you’d like to say—you figure you’d better start by responding to what everyone said about you before you were given the chance to speak for yourself. Because, well, come on. But also because the things they’ve been saying about you mean they’re not going to take you seriously on other subjects anyway. Really, they don’t even believe you when you try to tell them what it feels like to exist as you.

The Comeback and [“The Intervention”](#) are speaking to the stories that came before them (and which continue to be told). They are also more direct than your *Bridesmaids* or your *30 Rock*. Valerie Cherish may be an unlikable woman in a sitcom, but she is character, not a Jenna Maroney. The critiques against sexism in Hollywood are not exactly hidden. “The Intervention” doesn’t hide at all. Of course, *Bridesmaids* was a ridiculously successful movie. *30 Rock*—which was more overtly satirical than *Bridesmaids*—lasted seven seasons, though its ratings were never stellar. *The Comeback* was cancelled after its first season, then brought back nine years later. “The Intervention” is a video posted to the Internet (albeit one with over 100,000 views). The point is: is there a correlation between the aggressiveness of the critique and the willingness of the market to consume it? Maybe it’s just that *The Comeback* is too meta for a general audience, too Hollywood in jokes. Of course, *Entourage* lasted a pretty long time. There was a movie too.

Sometimes, I imagine a show like *The Soup* or *The Daily Show*, but instead of covering reality TV or the news, it covers representations of women in the media. I wonder how many people would watch it.

Changing the Conversation

At the end of his article, Schwartz holds out some hope for satire by recognizing those bright spots of comedy that “alter perception and change the conversation.” Female comedians consistently satirize gender norms and institutionalized patriarchy in ways that constitute such bright spots. I’ve mentioned a few already, but I’ve compiled a few more examples. For me, this section is an incomplete attempt to broaden what we talk about when we talk about satire. It is meant to augment Schwartz’s discussion—not to tear it down—and it includes its own omissions and myopia; most notably that many of the examples come from white, straight women inhabiting/representing a middle class status. Not surprisingly, I am also a white straight woman. In her book *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson rejects the idea that privilege can be copped to—“privilege saturates, privilege structures”—essays no less than life. I’ll return to this point. In the meantime, here are a few examples of satire by women that I would argue change the conversation:

Reproduction

Gillian Robespierre’s *Obvious Child*: a rom-com with an abortion at the center. There’s the boy, two quirky best-friends, a fraught mother-daughter relationship, a pregnancy, and an abortion. At the end of the movie, Jenny Slate’s character—in *mise en abyme* kind of moment—incorporates the abortion into her comedy

routine, the same way the movie incorporates it into the structure of a rom-com. (Notably, there is also the David Cross character—Slate’s scene with him is a critique of a specific kind of nice guy/mentor harassment). *Obvious Child* is sometimes referred to as the answer to *Knocked Up*, which corresponds to Frye’s point about the self-parodying function of satire, and my point about the ways in which female satire injects subversive elements into traditional forms. Here, the subversive element is pretty out there; notably, it is a recent example, and it didn’t do so well in the market. But it got made—and a lot of people talked about it.

The Weekend Update about *New York Magazine*’s Baby Panic cover, in which Sylvia Hewitt warned not to wait too long to have children because fertility dropped sharply after the age of twenty-seven. Tina Fey’s answer: “I definitely should have had a baby when I was 27, living in Chicago over a biker’s bar, pulling down a cool \$12,000 a year.” Amy Poehler, Rachel Dratch and Maya Rudolph also dropped in to make some jokes. A 2013 Atlantic article titled, “How Long Can You Wait to Have a Baby,” spends a couple thousand words talking about science and sociology, before ending with a reference to this skit. The last lines of the article: “Eleven years later, these women have eight children between them, all but one born after they were 35.” As this sketch highlights, abortion is not the only site of struggle over the control of reproduction.

Sexual Violence

Amy Schumer’s sketches, [“Football Town Nights”](#) and [“A Very Realistic Military Game”](#) are both illustrative. “Football Town Nights” parodies *Friday Night Lights* and centers around Coach telling his players that if they want to be on his team, they have to “not rape.” Then, when the team is down at the half, Coach gives a passionate pump-up speech, telling his team that football is about “violently dominating anyone who gets between you and what you want” and “you got to get in the mindset... that you are entitled to this.” In “A Very Realistic Military Game,” Schumer takes the controller from her boyfriend who has been enjoying some light, first-person shooter entertainment (*Call of Duty* or similar). When she picks a female avatar, she is raped by her superior and spends the game filling out paperwork and attending disciplinary hearings. Her rapist is eventually absolved, and she never gets to ‘play’ with the gun. The sketches are societal critiques, but it is worth noting that both sketches come wrapped in popular media.

Carmen Maria Machado’s “Especially Heinous: 272 Views of Law and Order SVU” lists twelve seasons of imagined SVU episodes and investigates the tension between violence against women and the way we consume it as entertainment. “There are so many of them,” Machado’s character Olivia Benson says (a character of a character). And there are so many of them: In her essay, “The Longest War,” Rebecca Solnit draws our attention to this fact: between 9/11 and 2012, 11,766 women in the United States were killed as a result of domestic violence; that’s more than the victims of 9/11 and all American soldiers killed in the ‘war on terror’ combined. (This number, of course, does not include non-Americans killed in the ‘war on terror’). Last year’s Pulitzer-Prize winning investigation, “Till Death Do Us Part” revealed that, in South Carolina, a woman is murdered by an intimate partner every twelve days. And there are so many of them: *The Fall*, *The Killing*, *Game of Thrones*, *True Detective*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Psycho*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Antichrist*, *Suspira*, *Irreversible*, *Seven*, *Hostel*, *The Descent*, *The Martyrs*, not to mention a probably infinite list of B movies. We are a society that likes to watch women die, often brutally, often with a sexual component. It is worth noting that—once again—Machado satirizes the way this violence is portrayed in popular media, not state policies that may or may not sanction this violence. In truth, domestic violence laws are fairly protective of women at this point; TV, not so much.

That Persistent Virgin/ Whore Thing

It's hard to go from sexual violence to talking about women having lots of sex, but if sexual violence is about control, the virgin/whore dichotomy is also about control.

This is an area much covered so I won't belabor long here—maybe just to note the 'pegging' episode in *Broad City*. Abbi is having sex with her neighbor, Jeremy, when she suggests 'switching.' It's clear that Abbi means get on top, but the audience is primed for a misunderstanding in which Jeremy will think she means anal sex. And he does, but the turn on the joke is that he wants Abbi to perform anal sex on him using a strap on. After some initial reluctance (and a phone call to Ilana), Abbi gets into it, and the episode is peppered with shots of Abbi parading around the apartment wearing a dildo. In popular media, anal sex is pretty much erased, or is something men should want (but only as the penetrators and only with women) and that women should constantly be on guard against—unless they're the whore type (clutching your ass being the new clutching your pearls). In this story though, a man wants it from a woman. It's also something married couples do, Ilana tells her parents. At the end of the episode, Ilana's father goes to buy a dildo at the mall (because—what—"only my ass is in play", his wife asks him), and the conversation has changed.

Scatological humor

Broad City, and its cinematic cousin *Bridesmaids*, are also notable for their use of the scatological and the grotesque, typical conventions of satire that are often considered masculine forms of humor but which, here, protest the idealized female body, the body as object. Season Three of *Broad City* has continued to push up against this specific boundary. We went from Ilana and Vanessa William singing "I shit"—a reminder that women also shit, but from behind a closed door and in angelic voices—to a recent cold open of Ilana and Abbi skyping while on the toilet. When I heard that tell-tale plop sound of poop landing in water, it sounded to me a little like a victory yawp. Ilana and Abbi are unruly—not just in their personalities, but in their bodies (unruly women with perfect bodies being a common representation of women in media). As Anne Helen Peterson explains, "being unruly is more than just being funny. Sandra Bullock is funny, but she's not an unruly woman. Unruly women have unruly bodies — they're too big for their clothes, their hair refuses to stay down. They talk too much, laugh too loudly, say things ladies shouldn't. They fart and burp and poop; they make themselves known, refuse taming."

The Female Subject, or Women Can Be Young, Lost and Incompetent Too

Sometimes, *Broad City* (and its imitators/ innovators) are thought of as Judd Apatow for the female set—likable losers if you will. Abbi and Ilana are alternatives to the hypersuccessful-but-unlucky-in-love character who inhabits a lot of rom-com/sitcoms. J, the eponymous character in *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl*, is sometimes described as the black Liz Lemon. Maybe, Abbi and Ilana are only possible because of James Franco and Seth Rogen; and maybe Issa Rae is only possible because of Tina Fey. Still they are both stories with women at the center, which have transcended whatever they were born out of. In the hands of other writers, Abbi, Ilana and J would only be the girlfriend, the enabler, the manic, pixie dream girl, the black friend; here they are complete unto themselves. They are subjects.

It's not all unequivocally good, though

As Rebecca Wanzo and Kyla Wazana Tompkins note, *Broad City's* humor relies heavily on incongruity, or combining the normative and the non-normative. Wanzo and Tompkins are troubled by the fact that the humor

in Abbi and Ilana's activities seems to rely on the assumption that there is something incongruous about middle-class, white women living precariously on the economic edge, scrounging for money, taking jobs they find demeaning. Heather Schwedel of Slate, disagrees; she views *Broad City* as a show that is "stealthily about class." Abbi and Ilana, the characters, are only problematically self-aware of their privilege, but the show itself, Schwedel argues, relies on their "goofy entitlement" to critique class—much in the same way I argued above that Jenna Maroney's character is a critique of sexism. Assuming for a second that *Broad City* is critiquing class—it comes down to whether it's more Edith Wharton or Dorothy Parker. Is satire being used to affirm class privileges, or break them down? Wanzo and Tompkins point about *Broad City* is that someone has to clean the toilets, and the show reaffirms the way certain kinds of labor are devalued, labor that in contemporary N.Y. is more likely to be completed by the working poor, the working class, immigrants and people of color. In its third season, *Broad City* seems to be giving both Schwedel and Wanzo and Tompkins support for their arguments; Ilana's tendency towards appropriation is called out more overtly; we travel to Abbi's lovely and huge suburban home; we see her old dreads. Ilana does finally get fired from her job. We get clear cues from the show that its characters are...problematic, as it were. One might question whether they are being presented as harmlessly problematic, though. Anne Helen Peterson again: "But only a certain swath of people — namely, those who can get away with pissing people off without significant repercussion — have the privilege of being assholes, and that's where the representational logic of *Broad City* gets sticky. Does showing that women can also occupy this space somehow make the archetype less noxious?"

In 2012, the AV Club published an article titled, "Where are all the blue collar sitcoms?" in which Todd VanDerWerf wonders what happened to shows like *Roseanne* or *King of Queens*—or even shows like *Cheers* or *News Radio*, which portrayed middle class people, but included characters who were clearly working class. Van DerWerf argues that this trend has been accompanied by a gradual whitening and youngifying of TV, but the class issue is more insidious because you can look at a TV show and see everyone is white but "realizing how few working class—or for that matter, poor people—are on TV takes time, particularly because the show gives the appearance of being about people with jobs just like those watching them, but don't depict any circumstances of having to live within a set of means." Schwedel notes that in *Broad City*, you often know how much things cost—the aforementioned dildo, for example. It's an important point; when you are living within a set of means, you spend a lot of time knowing how much everything costs. (Note, NBC recently renewed *Superstore*, starring America Ferrera, for a second season—a work place comedy about employees at a big box chain).

The way satire about gender intersects with satire about class (and satire about race, and satire about sexuality) is important, and not without problems. Female characters who go outside the norms of traditional gender roles—Liz Lemon, all the *Sex & The City* women, for example—are sometimes rendered legitimate because of their success in the market place. Abbi and Ilana, Jenny Slate in *Obvious Child*, all the *Girls*—they may not be part of the professional class either because of their age or because they are 'artists'—but they still represent a kind of college-educated, middle-class, white existence. "I definitely should have had a baby when I was... pulling a cool 12,000 a year" seems to connect motherhood to class ascension, as if women who made \$12,000 a year didn't raise babies all the time.

Making women subjects and telling stories that challenge gender norms is important, and some women are white and middle class and straight. But if TV is whitening and youngifying and becoming upwardly mobile, then we run into the situation where—though more women are telling stories—those stories are almost exclusively about the white, the young, the middle class. And we shouldn't be too happy about that as it takes us directly to that familiar, important problem of a feminism that appears to assume the white, middle class woman is the universal female subject.

I started by noting the de facto censorship of the market and the way it allows certain types of stories to be told, the way certain versions of female comedy might slip through, offering new representations, moments of critique and protest. If this is the case, we might not expect anything too subversive, too alternative, too radical; we might even expect subversive elements to be cushioned by the traditional, to encounter representations of women that challenge gender norms at the same time they reify existing notions of race, class and heteronormativity.

When we get to intersectionality, it's worth investigating if we would find protest at one point, coupled with a doubling down of the status quo along others—that racial and ethnic representations are protested, while a certain kind of middle class heteronormativity seems to be endorsed (*black-ish*, *Fresh Off the Boat*). Or that representations of sexuality are challenged while dominant class, race, and gender representations go uncontested (*Modern Family*). It's worth thinking about whether the way some of these shows approach class is the very thing that allows them to slip past a de facto censor in a time when TV portrayal of class seems limited, or whether the protest against a certain representation of race or sexuality as pathological and nonnormative is challenged directly by that appeal to class—we might be black or Latino, or two men or two women, but we want the same thing you do, which is to raise a nuclear family amidst a certain standard of living.

Also, while most of the examples I used in this article are on television or Hollywood movies, the three that aren't are *Awkward Black Girl*, *The Intervention*, and *Especially Heinous*, which are a webseries, a video posted to Robinson's blog, Blaria, and a novella, published in *The American Reader* respectively. They are also the only three texts I mentioned created by women of color. Phoebe Robinson and Jessica Williams are both successful television writers and actors—and of course there's Tracee Ellis Ross, Aubrey Plaza, Rashida Jones, Kalinda Sharma, Sofia Vergara, Shonda Rhimes, Nahnatchka Khan and others. Still, it's a little troubling there aren't more stories like *Awkward Black Girl* or sketches like "The Intervention" on network TV. They're not that radical. They're just by and about black women, and they include critiques of how black women are written and how black women are read. Eddie Huang has been pretty vocal about his problems with *Fresh Off the Boat*, the third prime time television show ever to focus on Asian Americans—and the first to be renewed for a second season. Though he has acknowledged the importance of the show, he tweeted: "I don't think it is helping us to perpetuate an artificial representation of Asian American lives and we should address it." Issa Rae—whose series *Insecure* was greenlit by HBO and whose memoir became a bestseller—has also been forthcoming about the struggles she has faced taking her vision from webseries to TV—from general whitewashing of subject-matter and cast to trying to hire a diverse crew behind the camera. It makes one take a longer look at *Scandal* and *The Mindy Project*—what happened here to put women of color at the center of a show? To tell this story, what other stories are they compelled to tell us?

These questions are largely outside the scope of this piece, which is the kind of structural privilege Nelson writes about—that it is possible for me to think and write about how TV represents women without necessarily having to confront questions of intersectionality. I have also neglected to devote space to the accusations against Amy Schumer, Sarah Silverman, and Tina Fey, who have all been criticized for jokes around race and ethnicity. Additionally, there is the issue of my competence to address questions of intersectionality that don't belong to me. But these are important questions, and they should be taken seriously. To be taken seriously, we should start treating the texts they arrive in seriously—regardless of whether they look exactly like those texts we talk about when we talk about satire. Because then all those questions we ask about *The Daily Show* we can start to ask about comedy that critiques patriarchy. Is it real protest? Or does it allow a pressure release that actually frustrates political action? Is it a form of creative consumption, where quoting *30 Rock* is the same as

wearing Nikes, or trucker hats? Do these taste-based identity markers merely replicate existing power and social relations? Do they reinforce them? Has a real critique against patriarchy been co-opted or sanitized by patriarchal and market forces? Is there too much ‘funny’ to hear the funny that is a critique anymore? In, say, an *Amy Schumer* or the unlikable female caricature, might we encounter the sexist “misapplication of comic material” that Schwartz discusses with respect to *The Chappelle Show*? Do comical critiques against patriarchy actually reinforce the idea that women should not be angry about sexism because so much of that critique is ‘just a joke?’ What is comedy capable of and—tied up as it is in the market—is it doing even that?

This is clearly already happening—so much has been written about *Broad City* and *Girls*, even the little I have said here seems redundant. (Just last week, Emily Nussbaum won the Pulitzer and wrote a long piece on *black-ish* and its creator, Kenya Barris in the *New Yorker*. Two things stood out: 1) the discussion of whether a nanny character would make the Johnson’s unrelatable (where both parents work and would have five kids)—and the way that decision implicates the intersectionality of class, race and gender on the show; 2) how discussions of making the characters real butts up against a burden to make the characters inspirational—and how that tension is served up in a self-parodying *Cosby* Show moment, revealing again Frye’s second phase of satire: breaking up the lumber of stereotypes, the fossilized beliefs, the oppressive fashions what it means to be black on TV. Another thing that happened last week: *Lemonade*. Which inspired countless articles and a countable number of really excellent and thoughtful articles, prompting author Roxanne Gay to term the time we are now living in AL-After *Lemonade*.) Maybe wanting to call comedy that critiques misogyny or racism—and the way this is represented and consumed—a kind of political satire on par with ‘fake news’ is unnecessarily semantic. But I guess I don’t think so. It just seems to me that when you call one thing satire and one a sitcom, you are implicitly saying that one is more important, that one is doing more work.

Changing the Conversation, Changing the Story

For me, all stories by and about women are a form of political protest, because they exist to confront a system of silencing, a system where certain people are written as subjects and others are not. Granted, the silencing I am talking about occurs primarily in a fictional space. It can feel, even to me, that counting TV shows and movies and books confuses symbolic violence and actual violence, the imagination and the real. But, the real is refracted through our imagination, and our experience of our bodies is mediated by the stories we tell about them. Political stories. “Before we all learned the stories of great men as truth,” Gargi Bhattacharyya writes. “This was the way the world was, and we were just born into the wrong bodies at the wrong time.” Her 1998 book, *Tales of Dark Skinned Women: Race, Gender and Global Culture* contains a simple, almost naïve belief: that she can write herself into the world as subject. Even into this real world, which has continually denied her subjectivity. The stories Bhattacharyya writes about justified colonialism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and slavery; I’m writing about novels and TV shows. They are not the same thing (though they have often been used in service of each other). Having more female-centered TV shows is not going to change the material conditions in which most of world lives, or even how most women live. It would be easy to romanticize narrative, to believe that increasing the number of female-centered novels will have a trickle down effect that is somehow different than increasing the number of female CEOs. It’s so easy that I often do it, engage in some legitimate and some illegitimate mental maneuvering that allows me to see being concerned with female representation in stories as something other than a material concern of a professional woman—in the profession I happen to be in. It’s hard to know what’s a rationalization and what’s not sometimes. Plus, I’m getting too old to believe that there is one thing—whether it be a candidate, school reform, the expansion of civil rights, UBI and debt forgiveness, or changing the narrative—that will, on its own, usher in a revolution while allowing me to live as I have always had the privilege of living, valuing what I have always valued.

Still, I can't help it. I believe in the power of stories, precisely because I have seen what the stories we tell about certain bodies can do. These stories have hurt people I care about. The news media tells terrible stories, our history books tell simple, whitewashed stories. Politicians tell stories that demonize, that dehumanize, that erase and justify violence. But lately, I have been thinking more about these other kind of stories—these silly comedic stories that are a kind of language between me and my friends. They don't feel like a panacea, but they feel like a splint at least.

Of course, in the end, I am taking Schwartz at his word when he claims that true satire changes the conversation. Do the examples I have cited change the conversation? Well, for me, literally; lines from movies and television shows and books have entered my lexicon as a way to talk about sexism and misogyny with my friends. Some of this new vocabulary is referential—we use it to point at something we encounter. Some of it is reinforcing, ballast in a world where so many people want to tell you you don't see what you see. Then, there are parts of this new language that are aspirational. Like when we say, “I don't fucking care if you like it.” We say it, we don't mean it yet. As writers, we want men to like it still; we worry that if they don't, we will be shunted off into that hyphenated place where a hyphen means you take away the first word from the second, like some kind of malfunctioning subtraction sign. It feels to me that we repeat the “I don't fucking care if you like it” story, because we are trying to believe the principle it expounds, which is a different principle than the one we have grown up with—that one says there is something less legitimate about a female subject. Sometimes I feel like I'm a parasite on Amy Poehler. I'd say I'm mostly a benign parasite since I don't even know her, but she feels it, I know she does. Because we always ask so much from the ones that get through. Look at how many questions I ask of these stories and what they represent, as if they stood for all women, as if they ever claimed to, as if they wanted anything except the chance to speak for themselves, to tell a story that reflects back to them what they see.

I think of Maggie Nelson here. She says, we are talking about something that is more than one, more than two, but less than infinity. In other words, we are looking for a method of storytelling that allows for more than just two subjects, the male one and the female one, the black one and the white one, the good one and the bad one. If we can work our way towards this kind of storytelling, narratives won't have to represent so much; they can simply render experience. And we don't need to get bogged down thinking that if we open up the categories of who can be subject or what aspects of a person need to be recognized we will be drowned by the water from the floodgates, because we are talking about something that is less than infinity. The finitude is important for Nelson, because it affords the opportunity to pluralize and specify. “This is an activity that demands an attentiveness,” she says, “a relentlessness even—whose very rigor tips into ardor.”

I love this quote. It made it into my new vocabulary, and it came into Nelson's vocabulary via Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Roland Barthes. In my lexicon, to pluralize means more stories by and about women, stories that render the experience of moving through the world in a body that is both real and symbolic, personal and political. To specify means these will be the kinds of stories that afford women the opportunity to designate what facets of identity feel the most salient to them, to articulate how various parts of themselves and society intersect. The relentlessness means I am always aware of my place in these silencing forces and that I work against them as a reader, a writer and a citizen. And the rigor tipping into ardor? Well, that makes wanting this and acting towards this kind of a love story. And women like love stories—right?

<https://entropymag.org/what-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-satire/>