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**Author**

Feldmar, Shawna

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**Opting-Out of the Have-It-All Discourse:  
Sarah Silverman's Alternative to Contemporary Feminism**

For the last two years, *Vanity Fair* has been waging a heated argument with itself on the topic of “the humor gap”. It began in 2007 when polemicist Christopher Hitchens explained, in an article entitled “Why Women Aren’t Funny,” that they simply don’t have to be, because 1) their primary calling in life—motherhood—extinguishes their humor and 2) their need to appear less intelligent to men eliminates motivation to improve it<sup>1</sup>. Critic Alessandra Stanley later responded boldly that it only “*used to be* that women were not funny.” Now some actually are—but, they have to be attractive to get anyone to notice<sup>2</sup>. The latest installment in this debate was penned by sometimes feminist New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd, who follows Tina Fey’s rise to success and gives special attention to the full-scale makeover the star underwent before Lorne Michaels let her on screen as *SNL* Weekend Update anchor. It also highlights Fey’s “teutonic will”—the impressive discipline and determination she has exercised in every aspect of life in order to get where she has. For Dowd then, women can be funny, even powerful, but, unlike their male counterparts, they must give up an awful lot for the opportunity<sup>3</sup>.

I find this debate troubling. And yet, it doesn’t seem out of place in the current cultural climate. It’s perfectly consistent with a contemporary third-wave/postfeminist discourse in which the successes of feminism are liberally invoked as a response to any lingering backlash rhetoric, only to be immediately repudiated—now that women have the freedom to choose whichever lifestyle fancies them—as no longer necessary. Simultaneously, there seems to be a continual state of anxiety and sorrow over personal circumstances that limit the *individual* woman’s options and restrict her potential<sup>4</sup>. Should she pursue a family? Or a career? Should she indulge herself? Or practice extreme self-discipline? Today, I want to think about a way out of this postfeminist dilemma, which perpetually replicates itself without producing any positive

changes in the lived lives of women. I want to explore the possibility of a discourse—in this case, via media representation—that is not stuck questioning whether women’s lib succeeded, that does not insist on the power of personal choice, and that does not lament the pitfalls of contemporary femininity.

And any argument that aims to prove that women, as an essentialized category, are now suddenly funny, despite the concessions they must make in order to be such, tends to just reinscribe postfeminism—not move past it. Unfortunately, despite her brilliance, the star of this discussion Tina Fey has much the same effect. Her comedy and the literature that analyzes it rely on a postfeminist discourse that operates as style, backdrop and object of critique. This approach ultimately reifies the dilemma via a kind of media visibility that reinforces postfeminism’s prevalence and power. And then there’s Sarah Silverman, who said this about the *Vanity Fair* debate: “it’s absolutely true...None of it made me mad, but none of that stuff ever does. It just doesn’t affect me”<sup>5</sup>. But I’ll return to her in a few minutes.

First, I’d like to take a closer look at Tina Fey and consider the limitations of her brand of feminist comedy. Relying primarily on traditional television formats, Fey has taken a well-worn path to stardom, from improv-sketch comedy, to writing for SNL, to headlining her own network sitcom, *30 Rock*. Her role is much like those played by Lucy, Mary Tyler Moore and Roseanne, a strong-willed woman who dominates in terms of performance yet struggles to succeed in a man’s world. Like these earlier, sometimes unruly women, Fey uses her off-screen persona, quite similar to that of her character Liz Lemon’s, to negotiate some of the ideological gaps opened by the program’s narrative<sup>6</sup>. Specifically, while the audience delights in the ups and downs of the fictional Liz’s TV career and wonders to what extent her feminism can succeed in

the workplace, they find comfort in knowing that the real Fey's career is faring well, uninhibited by her purported rich family life, love of food and unwillingness to play like the boys do<sup>7</sup>.

The question then becomes: if Fey is replicating the work of women fifty years her senior, can she be a mark of progress? An excellent article from Flow recently suggested a mixed outlook<sup>8</sup>. It references several episodes, one in which Liz encounters a personal hero Rosemary Howard, a radical feminist TV writer in the 1960s. Inspired by this icon of women's lib, Liz quits her job to pursue a project with Rosemary, only to come begging her patriarchal capitalist boss Jack for it back; she discovered that she no longer wants to emulate this woman, who had become an unmarried, childless, broke, alcoholic. The episode exemplifies what Charlotte Brundson has called the "disidentity at the heart of feminism", or the way in which feminist subjects continually find themselves asserting: "we're not like that" to their mothers and grandmothers, or in this case, their second wave feminist heroes. Brundson suggests that this disidentity of "not being like those other women...is constitutive of feminism...in all its generations", or in short, a hard pattern for new iterations of feminism to break<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, according to Brundson, a certain feminist media criticism that has recently proliferated—those essays which determine whether a text advances feminist ideals and then categorizes it according to ideology (postfeminist, liberal, etc)—is engaged in this same practice of disidentification.

This brings me back to the Flow article, which opens with another episode of *30 Rock*. Put in a bizarre scenario that forces her to choose between a sandwich and a man, Liz refuses to compromise, and yells with a sense of empowerment "I can have it all!" before devouring her meal and only then, pursuing her departing love interest. The authors find feminist pleasure in this unwillingness "to trade in self-gratification for heterosexual romance," and identify with the tensions between feminist politics, personal desire and realities of contemporary femininity that

emerge. But acknowledging the hurdles Fey must overcome in order to produce this comedy, and lamenting her recent sexualization by the popular press, they end on a dejected note, wondering what price women must pay for becoming more visible in comedy<sup>10</sup>.

And again, the discourse seems to be back where it started—are women funny? What must they sacrifice in order to be funny? Have feminists made any progress? It seems that as long as these questions keep arising in a postfeminist context, little has changed. And I find that ultimately, I am less invested in whether or not Tina Fey is postfeminist, third wave or liberal, whether Liz Lemon eats the sandwich or chases after the guy, than I am in the fact that she is stuck having to make that choice in the first place (and forced to celebrate it no less). Her predicament, while it offers points of identification, serves primarily to reinforce the ideological status quo in which feminism has granted women the choice to have it all but done little to create the kind of structural change that makes those choices viable (especially when one considers the many women, in the US and abroad, for whom such choices—between career and family, self-indulgence or romance—remain unattainable luxuries)

So I turn to Sarah Silverman, who was referenced in the *Vanity Fair* debate, even appearing on one cover, but then rather conspicuously passed over. In fact, it seems the popular press hasn't known quite how to position this rising star or her success. Some journalists simply quote her at length, attempting to distinguish the truth from the character posturing<sup>11</sup>. More frequently though, the press just simplifies her humor as essentially masculine: a potty-mouthed boy disguised in a hot body. And yet, her most frequently quoted one-liners are utterly reliant on her identity as a woman: "I was raped by a doctor, which, for a Jewish girl, is so bittersweet" and "Last night I was licking jelly off my boyfriend's penis. And I thought, oh my god, I'm turning into my mother"<sup>12</sup>. The press' inability to describe her suggests that unlike Fey, Silverman may

not fit as neatly into the classic postfeminist narrative. A heavy pot-smoker with no ambitions to marriage or motherhood and no transformative makeover, Silverman has not overcome hurdles or sacrificed in order to achieve success. And with a routine that draws on female identity, yet refuses to explore the humor inherent in contemporary womanhood, she cannot stand as any kind of postfeminist icon. Stymied by this paradox, the aforementioned Alessandra Stanley, sums her up this way: “childish, narcissistic and manipulative...Sarah is even more insensitive and self-absorbed than Elaine was on *Seinfeld*”<sup>13</sup>.

Silverman’s career does not make traditional categorizations any easier. Meandering through the stand-up circuit, theatrically releasing an indie produced musical, headlining a late-night cable series and making her biggest splashes online virally, she has carved herself a niche, becoming one of the country’s most successful working comedians. And yet, she remains invisible to many Americans. Even the format of her series *The Sarah Silverman Program* seems to defy traditional logic. The spontaneous musical numbers and fantasy sequences aside, the narrative focuses on a decontextualized Sarah, who has no girlfriends, no job, no responsibilities, and no love life—save a bizarre relationship with her dog (with whom she shares a nightly heart to heart in bed) and a brief affair with God, who happens to be black and rather needy.

In a recent episode, Sarah discovers she is nine-months pregnant—she had been under the assumption, despite her bowling-ball-size belly, that her missed periods were due to her being “ballerina thin”. The possibility that she’s baring the messiah (God is the only man who has lately “done her from the front”) is a minor detail, as is the birth: the baby turns out to be an animated dragon. And unlike the recent adoption episode of *30 Rock*, which focuses on the barriers single working women face on the path to motherhood and Liz’s continued conviction that “we really can have it all,” Silverman’s show not only ignores, but actively bypasses such

postfeminist anxieties. Finding a mate, getting pregnant, negotiating work and family life, maintaining physical appearance through pregnancy—these concerns have no place on the *Sarah Silverman Program* and the illogical narrative works actively to eliminate them. Their absence instead becomes a source of humor and a kind of absurdist jumping-off point for other bits.

Instead of finding humor within the boundaries of femininity, Silverman is working outside them entirely; this approach expands her comedy, allowing it to shock when almost nothing else in contemporary culture still can. So why does this matter? Because it opens possibilities—both for comedy *and* for gender. For instance, Silverman is not invested in the kind of disidentification that preoccupies the fictional Liz Lemon, the real Tina Fey and other typical postfeminist subjects. While it is difficult for these others to constitute their identity in any way but the negative—what women they don't resemble—Silverman's existence in a realm of absurdity allows her to define herself positively, if illogically. While this approach to female identity makes it difficult for *me* to describe her without framing her against her converse in Fey, it also makes it impossible for the popular press to position her. So although her fame remains invisible to some, at least she's not becoming easy fodder for the circular and infuriating “women are funny debate” or the subject of yet another postfeminist fairytale narrative.

Moreover, in forging this new identity, which defies categorization, she advances a kind of queer sensibility. I'm referring here not to the gay characters on her series, but to the way in which her comedy relentlessly blurs boundaries around sexuality—by projecting masculine crassness from a female body, using girlish irony that does not fall back on postfeminist disavowals, expressing femininity characterized by neither fragility nor “empowerment”, exploring unconventional sexual behavior without judgment, and embracing a lifestyle that rejects any sense of hetero- or homo-normativity. In fact, Brian and Steve, the program's

“gigantic, orange and gay” characters, are in many ways, positioned within the text as less marginal than Sarah. They’re capable of maintaining emotionally mature relationships and recognizing social cues seemingly beyond her grasp. I do not mean to suggest that Silverman has created a hierarchy of social acceptability in which single women rank lower than gay men, but the exact opposite, that the universe she inhabits lacks any such permanence or structure. As such, I think Silverman and her characters embody a kind of identity instability. Their norm-defying behaviors—whether outright illogical or merely surprising—problematize any attempt at classification and relish in the impossibilities they represent. Taken as a whole then, Silverman’s untraditional approach to comedy does not offer any concrete solution to current gender inequalities. Yet it still points to a viable alternative to traditional sexed power structures, namely, a refusal to comply with the identity categories that reify them<sup>14</sup>.

To be clear, I do not mean to imply that any of this is Silverman’s intention. The comedienne, who maintains that “deconstruction is a comedy killer,” denies any aspect of social commentary in her work<sup>15</sup> and I would like to honor that claim. What I see in her then, is not any ideological paradigm or even a particular critique—be it of feminism, capitalism, or liberalism as a whole—but an overall refusal to engage in any at all. This categorical rejection of category is the lynchpin of her humor, the political power of her apolitical comedy. In our contemporary culture of irony and almost instant cooptation—one in which a biting impersonation of Sarah Palin is immediately recuperated by a campaign that gets in on the joke—this refusal may be the only way not to risk reaffirming the status quo. Accordingly, I hope I have left Silverman somewhat intact today, so that we can continue to take pleasure in the instability of her comedy and find inspiration in the way she bypasses a discourse that continues to trap media producers, critics and scholars alike.



## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Hitchens, Christopher, "Why Women Aren't Funny," *Vanity Fair* Jan. 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley, Alessandra, "Who Says Women Aren't Funny?" Apr. 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Dowd, Maureen, "What Tina Wants," *Vanity Fair* Jan. 2009.

<sup>4</sup> McRobbie, Angela, "Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime," *Interrogating Postfeminism*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Poniewozik, James, "So This Woman Walks Into a Sitcom..." *Time* 5 Feb. 2007: 64+.

<sup>6</sup> For a more in-depth discussion on unruly female comedians, see Rowe, Kathleen, "Roseanne: Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess", *Screen* 31.4 (Winter 1990): 408-419; and Mellencamp, Patricia, "Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy," *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modelski (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> Descriptions of Tina Fey along these lines have recently flooded the mainstream press, the most notable being Dowd's *Vanity Fair* feature.

<sup>8</sup> Vessey, A. and K. Lambert. "'I Can Have It All': Liz Lemon Negotiates Power, One Sandwich at a Time". *Flow TV* 24 Jul. 2008, retrieved 1 Dec 2008 < <http://flowtv.org/?p=1537> >

<sup>9</sup> Brundson, Charlotte, "The Feminist in the Kitchen: Martha, Martha and Nigella," *The Gender and Consumer Culture Reader*, ed. Jennifer Scanlon (New York: New York UP, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Vessey, A. and K. Lambert.

<sup>11</sup> Grigoriadis, Vanessa, "Dirty Rotten Princess," *Rolling Stone* 17 Nov. 2005: 66+.

<sup>12</sup> Brownfield, Paul, "Sugar, Spice, Everything Not So Nice: Sarah Silverman Goes To Bat On the Boys' Turf," *Los Angeles Times* 4 Feb 2007: E1.

<sup>13</sup> Stanley, Alessandra, "Cruel, Clueless, and For a Change, Female," *The New York Times* 1 Feb. 2007: E3.

<sup>14</sup> This notion of queer identity and gender insubordination is best articulated by Judith Butler. See "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," *The Second Wave*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1997): 300-315; and *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Solomon, Deborah, "Funny Girl," *The New York Times* 21 Jan. 2007.