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THE FAT FEMALE BODIES OF *SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE*:
UNCOVERING THE NORMATIVE CULTURAL POWER OF A COUNTERCULTURAL
COMEDY INSTITUTION

by

KATHARINE CACACE

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Katharine Cacace

This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in Liberal
Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of
Arts.

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ABSTRACT

The Fat Female Bodies of *Saturday Night Live*: Uncovering the Normative Cultural Power of a
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Despite its reputation as one of the most countercultural and anti-establishment voices in mainstream television comedy, *Saturday Night Live* helps produce and reproduces cultural norms. Using weight and gender as a lens, this paper investigates *Saturday Night Live*'s methods of creating, imitating, and evoking the fat female body in order to limit female agency and police unruly female power. It contends that even the inclusion of nonnormative female bodies—fat bodies, queer bodies, and bodies of color—is merely a reiteration of the techniques of neoliberal multiculturalism for the television audience.

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Introduction

On November 22, 2016, President Barack Obama awarded one of his final Presidential Medals of Freedom to Lorne Michaels, the creator and executive producer of *Saturday Night Live*. He was honored alongside artist Maya Lin, philanthropists Bill and Melinda Gates, blue-collar troubadour Bruce Springsteen, and pioneering computer programmer Grace Hopper, among others. In his remarks, President Obama insisted that, “after four decades, even in this fractured media culture that we’ve got, *SNL* remains appointment viewing—a mainline into not just our counterculture but our culture, still a challenge to the powerful, especially folks like me.”¹

To say that *Saturday Night Live* is a comedy institution might understate its centrality to American popular culture for the past forty-one years. For example, Doug Hill and Jeff Weingrad’s book *Saturday Night* positions the show in nearly biblical terms, the awaited comedy messiah of 1975:

The mood of the country was changing. Gerald Ford had pardoned Richard Nixon and declared the long national nightmare of Watergate over. Saigon finally fell in April of that year; urban guerrilla Patty Hearst was captured and repented; Nelson Rockefeller was Vice-President. It was a cynical time, a time ripe for satire. And with rock stars fading into post-sixties dissolution, a time ripe for comedians. All they needed was for someone to provide a forum.²

The program’s audience is no less immune to this mythology. Tell people that you’re writing about *Saturday Night Live* and they eagerly share fond memories of staying up late to watch it in high school. They will quote you their favorite lines with gusto. And while it is certainly tempting to focus on what is or is not exceptional about *Saturday Night Live*—and the entertainment media often does, both the exceptionally good and exceptionally bad—I am most

¹ “President Obama Awards the Presidential Medal of Freedom,” YouTube video, 1:00:13, posted by “The White House,” November 22, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-txpiizCgc>.

² Doug Hill and Jeff Weingrad, *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live* (New York: Beach Tree Books, 1986), 29

interested in the ways *Saturday Night Live* has, since its inception, conformed with expectations about what television should look like, and the reasons why it coasts on norms of beauty.

It comes as no surprise that bodies are a source of humor. They are universal. They erupt inconveniently, secrete relentlessly, respond sexually, and age unavoidably; they sag, jiggle, snore, blush, sneeze, stink, grow hair and lose it, consume and expel. Yet some bodies are considered funnier than others, unequally deployed as joke tellers or joke bearers in television comedy. Both fat male bodies and fat female bodies have limits of what they may represent, messages that are more easily communicated to an audience from the flesh of one than from the other.³ If the history of the fat female body on *Saturday Night Live* can be easily encapsulated, it is simplest to say that she is most often embodied only when her embodiment is the joke. The fat male body, however, has a wider range of expression. What cultural mechanisms allow a fat man to slip into an ensemble, playing with equal possibility a football player, a father, the captain of a spaceship, a president, a woman, a straight man, a samurai, a clown, and a blues musician? For nearly four decades of broadcast history, what prevented a fat woman from doing the same? And, when a fat female body appears, what does it signify?

I began this project from the perspective of representation, hoping to trace a gradual transition from a time when television routinely put thin women in fat suits to a more inclusive present. As a viewer, I sensed a shift in 2012 when *Saturday Night Live* hired Aidy Bryant, its first fat female cast member, and I hoped this was the herald of a new era of body diversity. Despite claims that the show is now irredeemably commercial, I aimed to prove that its

³ A note about my use of the word “fat.” When I speak about fat bodies throughout this paper, I draw not on my own judgement of fatness and thinness, but rather on a cultural dialogue about specific bodies. Those I discuss as fat are identified as such either by *Saturday Night Live* itself or by popular media. Moreover, I wish to avoid associating fat bodies with any kind of morality, aesthetic value, cause, or effect. Fat is merely a feature of human embodiment. To quote Marilyn Wann in her foreword to *The Fat Studies Reader*: “There is nothing negative or rude in the word *fat* unless someone makes the effort to put it there; using the word *fat* as a descriptor (not a discriminator) can help dispel prejudice.”

subversive potential now sits with fat women, queer women, and women of color, just like early seasons of the show used the good looks of its young cast to get countercultural material past the censors to air. What I found instead was that a network television comedy institution indeed behaves institutionally. It disciplines. It produces and reproduces norms, some grievously unjust. Sometimes, it punishes. Moreover, in the case of *Saturday Night Live*, its gestures toward diversity in ways that are deeply neoliberal, aligned in its methods and goals with the political establishment it so publicly eschews.

In order to discern the particular uses of the fat female body on *Saturday Night Live*, I will first consider the cultural history of both funny fat men and funny fat women. Then, I will explore the evolution of the show itself with an eye to gender, particularly with regard to how misogyny bred in the backstage workplace during the first five seasons created a lingering environment that makes it harder for female performers of all proportions to thrive, but particularly disadvantages those that do not conform to a thin, young, white beauty standard. Given this history as background, I will then examine individual sketches and discuss several of *Saturday Night Live*'s techniques to create a fat female body, nearly all of which mine humor from its form and reproduce its marginalization. Prosthetic fat, fat drag, phantom fat, and, in some light, even turning the spotlight on anatomically fat female performers: each is a means for television comedy to suppress what it does not want its audience to see.

The Funny Fat Man: A Brief History

If we take as our end point *Saturday Night Live* performer John Belushi, we can trace the particular trajectory of the fat male body in comedy across hundreds, if not thousands of years. In his literary history of comedy as a genre, Andrew Stott supplies our starting point in ancient

Greece. A combination of words meaning “from outside the village” and “song,” and associated almost from its inception with the wine-swilling party god Dionysus, comedy has always been connected to “the principles of festivity, inversion, relative sexual freedom, and travesty,” as well as “the removal from the city [Dionysus] encourages, placing him at the fringes of the civic environment and drawing his followers away from urban jurisdiction and inducing them to conduct that would be unacceptable in the city.”⁴ Stott connects this most obviously to some of Shakespeare’s pastoral comedies, such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, but this Dionysian association also opens a different route to understanding the uses of the fat male body in American popular comedy.

Dionysian influences, those of overindulgence, sensuality, and raucous celebration, eventually became associated with the Roman god Bacchus, from whom we still borrow the adjective “bacchanalian” to describe celebrations marked by abandon. Notably, the visual history from Dionysus to Bacchus in the Renaissance marks a shift from a trim, almost androgynous figure to a rotund man. Painters Cornelis de Vos, Niccolo Frangipane, and perhaps most notably Peter Paul Rubens (see Figure 1) provide examples of this new visual representation of Bacchus. Given this blueprint, it is far easier to understand the embodied genealogy of comedy from Dionysus to Bacchus and eventually to characters like Falstaff, Fatty Arbuckle, and John Belushi—each outsized, indulgent, and absurd.

⁴ Andrew Stott, *Comedy* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 4-5.



Figure 1. *Bacchus*, Peter Paul Rubens. (Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Sander Gilman lights this path in *Fat Boys*, one of the few treatments of the fat male body in literary and visual western culture, by providing further steps in fat male iconography: Sancho Panza of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, for example, as well as the jolly Americanized representation of Santa Claus. Though he travels this road not to understand why some fat bodies are funnier than others and instead to explore the medicalization of fat, Gilman helpfully reminds us, referencing fat studies scholar Hillel Schwartz, that “in terms of the widest range of historical

and cultural interest, it was the fat boy who claimed center stage in the obsession about fat bodies for most of Western history.”⁵

For Gilman, Shakespeare’s Falstaff is patient zero, the primary fat character in literature whose body is used to express his character. He traces Falstaff’s history through the archetypically masculine roles of “a soldier, a knight, a courier, and a lover,” all of which are fundamentally compromised by his rotund stature, which comes to represent an excess of “masculine sexuality.” But for our purposes, to look more broadly at Falstaff, we must consider that his fat body contains within it the stories of the soldier, the knight, the lover. He is not evoked as a foil to those concepts, but as a vehicle to explore them. In that way, fat male characters beginning with Falstaff have a wider range of meanings to draw upon. There is also the fact that a fat male Shakespearean character exists; so too Sancho Panza, and any number of literary and theatrical roles that would permit physically fat male actors to give nuanced, interesting performances. These characters may be the butt of a joke, but they are also handled by careful writers and often given the sort of texture that permits a fat male comedy actor to draw on more than just his physical body.

Since Gilman is medically focused, he traces a shift in scientific literature to identifying fat as a female problem beginning in the late nineteenth century. By the mid-twentieth century, it is an accepted truth that women fight fat and fat attacks women. To illustrate this shift, Gilman uses Foucault’s concept of social control and its forever inaccessible norms. This asymptotic distance “is the permanent gap that society imagines between healthy plumpness and morbid obesity,” he notes. “The gap, however, is what is real. These two categories are constantly shifting in relationship to one another.”⁶ This is a helpful construction to apply to the gendering

⁵ Sander Gilman, *Fat Boys: A Slim Book* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 4.

⁶ Gilman, 11.

of fat, as well. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the gap between acceptably plump and morbidly obese is simply larger for men than it is for women, and both points are higher on the scale.

Though fat is a female problem, men certainly struggle with others. Feminist scholar Susan Bordo recognizes that wrestling with bodily dissatisfaction is by no means exclusive to women, but fat is not one of the key bodily aspects where she locates male anxiety. Instead, she highlights baldness, softness (lack of muscularity, distinct from fat but not unfeminized) and penis size. “The pressure is enormous on both sexes,” she emphasizes. “But just as women try to become like the skinny models but don’t really feel very happy about starving themselves, most men are not fully ‘one’ with the cultural messages that tell them their power resides in their pants.”⁷

In a later discussion of what Bordo identifies as beauty’s “(re)discovery of the male body” in the 1990s, she identifies two different routes to widespread cultural visibility for images of male and female flesh. “The naked and near-naked female body became an object of mainstream consumption first in *Playboy*...and then in movies, and only then in fashion photographs.”⁸ The nude male body came to modern film and television by way of fashion, through what she sees as pioneering photographs in Calvin Klein ads of the 1990s that showed a new heterosexual male body: lithe, pliant, leaning, and consumable. Though this new bodily ideal for men created a sense of dissatisfaction—she cites a study from the late 1990s that claims nearly 90% of male undergraduates felt they were not muscular enough—the particular standards of male beauty are less important than the trajectory she identifies. Male and female bodies travel

⁷ Susan Bordo, *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1999), 43.

⁸ Bordo, 168.

distinct paths through the American visual culture of the twentieth century, accreting different meanings.

Following behind Bordo, Gilman and Stott from ancient Greece to NBC's studio 8H at Rockefeller Center, we arrive at *Saturday Night Live* with a rubric into which John Belushi's body may be inserted, but Aidy Bryant's may not. It is on this considerable history that Belushi and Chris Farley built careers praised for their edge (and even sometimes for their athleticism) and gave comic performances lauded for their humanity.

The Funny Fat Woman: An Alternate History

Even when Susan Bordo writes about the male body, she finds it important to mention that women are engaged in an endless struggle with fat. "It's a depressingly well documented fact that when girls and women are asked to draw their bodies...[they] tend to see themselves as too fat no matter how thin they are," she says in *The Male Body*, describing dissatisfaction with fat as a "norm of female perception."⁹ Because female comedians are subject to this near universal conditioning, fat is always nearby. It is an evergreen subject in women's jokes, regardless of an individual comic's size or shape. As such, histories of women in American comedy tend to point to a thread of potent self-deprecating material that runs through burlesque theater, Vaudeville, and so-called Borscht Belt humor. It is a common mode that connects even the most current comedy to early female stand-up stars like Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers. Lisa Merrill suggests that these women would not have been able to succeed without telling jokes at the expense of themselves and other women, because it lent them a certain level of legibility to audiences.¹⁰ They performed comedy in the same register as men of their era.

⁹ Bordo, 69.

¹⁰ Lisa Merrill, "Feminist humor: rebellious and self-affirming," *Women's Studies* 15 (1988): 271-280.

Alternatively, Nancy Walker argues that women’s humor across American history has always only appeared to “turn on and perpetuate traditional stereotypes of women,” citing tropes like the “nagging wife” or the “inept housekeeper.”¹¹ It would not be a stretch to include the homely frump, the failed dieter, and the fashion victim as additional image-based examples. Walker’s distinction, though, is that a female comedian or humorist uses these images in a way that “makes clear that a group other than [women] has made the rules by which they must live.”¹² Lawrence J. Epstein goes further to suggest that even female comedy which appears to target and denigrate other women can sometimes function as an act of subtle subversion. He uses as his example Joan Rivers and her unending abuse of actress Elizabeth Taylor. Rivers began her career in an era when male Jewish comedians often evoked the figure of the henpecking Jewish wife as their primary comedic foil. Female Jewish comedians—triple-shackled by their femaleness, their ethnicity, and their indecipherability to the industry itself—had very few targets on whom they could unleash their wit. Rivers, like Totie Fields or Phyllis Diller, used herself as her own punching bag. However, inspired by the direct, personal comedy of Lenny Bruce, Rivers took on celebrity foibles and failures as her other primary target. To Epstein, this technique was less about lampooning specific women and more about “clearing a path” in comedy, “mocking the male images of beauty,” and “finding a way for ordinary women to fight back.”¹³

This more generalized trend of female comics of all sizes telling self-denigrating jokes should not eclipse the small but distinct presence of the funny fat female performer in show business history. Performers like Trixie Friganza (Vaudeville’s self-proclaimed “perfect forty-

¹¹ Nancy Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women’s Humor and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988): 10.

¹² Walker, 13.

¹³ Lawrence J. Epstein, *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001): 259.

six”), Sophie Tucker, and Totie Fields used their looks as comedy fodder just like thinner women, but their jokes almost entirely revolved around their weight.¹⁴ Their material was often sexual, particularly for Friganza and Tucker who both performed parodic stripteases on stage. They mined humor from the perceived incongruity between their sexual appetite and their heft, their desire and their undesirability. Thus, it is not to say that fat women did not have a role in comedy in the twentieth century. It is true, however, that these roles were a short-lived phenomenon which ultimately did little to create space in the industry for more fat bodies. Epstein notes that even successful personas like “the Red Hot Mama embodied by Sophie Tucker were isolated to show business and didn’t outlast the particular personalities who projected them.”¹⁵

These personalities were not only contained by particular bodies. They were contained within a particular era, and all elements redolent of this era were purposefully excluded from *Saturday Night Live*. Creator and executive producer Lorne Michaels specifically rejected the dated brand of Borscht Belt comedy that bred Tucker, Fields, and Rivers when he assembled his cast of “Not Quite Ready for Prime Time Players.” Instead, he favored a variety show format plucked from classic television, but chose to upend it with counterculturally-inflected material. Michaels was particularly inspired by Sid Caesar’s classic 1950s variety program *Your Show of Shows*—which, coincidentally, was filmed in the same studio assigned to *Saturday Night Live* in NBC’s headquarters in Rockefeller Center—in order to speak about the establishment through its own medium to the youth generation.

¹⁴ *The Oxford Companion to American Theater, 3rd Edition*, s.v. “Friganza, Trixie [nee Delia O’Callahan],” accessed November 4, 2016, <http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195169867.001.0001/acref-9780195169867-e-1117>

¹⁵ Epstein, 254.

Gender and *Saturday Night Live*

Doug Hill and Jeff Weingrad's seminal *Saturday Night* is the first sizeable volume in the always expanding library of popular writing about the show. Its dishy backstage scoops are often unattributed, and therefore unverifiable, but its unrefuted influence has helped to establish the image of the show's initial run from 1975 to 1980 as a drug-fueled all-nighter crowded with comedy geniuses. *Live from New York*, an oral history collected by James Andrew Miller and Tom Shales, builds on Hill and Weingrad's work to document the show's history up through its fortieth season in 2015. Both books present the founding female writers, performers, and producers of *Saturday Night Live* as integral to the program. However, in popular memory, these women are generally recalled as lesser deities in the titanic mythology around John Belushi, Chevy Chase, Dan Aykroyd, Bill Murray, writer Michael O'Donoghue, and other hard-living men associated with the show. And while *Saturday Night Live*'s reputation as a workplace often hostile to women has been contested, *Saturday Night* and *Live from New York* are rife with evidence that show was not for cast members Gilda Radner, Jane Curtin, and Laraine Newman what it was for Chase or Belushi. Neither was Garrett Morris, the lone black performer in the original cast, enjoying the star treatment afforded to the cast's more popular white male members

Before considering the kinds of bodies the show chooses to represent, it's critical to understand the climate that produced those representations. Hill and Weingrad helpfully trace the genealogy of the show's character:

Saturday Night was the first program of its kind to commit itself consciously to the subconscious, to emulate as much as it could the spirit of artistic abandon embodied and endorsed by the gods of twentieth-century hip. Baudelaire, William Blake, D.H. Lawrence, William Burroughs, Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac, Lenny Bruce, Ken Kesey, the Beatles, and Hunter S. Thompson were as much the fathers of *Saturday Night* as Kovacs, Carson, Benny and Berle.¹⁶

¹⁶ Hill and Weingrad, 119.

One might note that this list of influences does not contain any women, and in fact embodies a particular sort of artistic masculinity that early *Saturday Night Live* writer Rosie Shuster called “the New Macho.”¹⁷ In fact, just two women are cited as influential on the early direction of the show.¹⁸ There was Carol Burnett, whose brand of goofy, accessible theatricality was positioned as antithetical to the goals of the show, and there was Lily Tomlin, the hip feminist comedy superstar of the 1970s who gave executive producer Lorne Michaels his start working on her television specials.¹⁹ Yet even Tomlin couldn’t escape the show’s withering misogyny. “She’s not funny,” John Belushi proclaimed backstage during an episode in the second season which Tomlin was guest hosting: “She’s the ugliest fucking cunt...she’s terrible.”²⁰

Sexism, overt like Belushi’s as well as the subtler systemic variety, was pervasive during the first five seasons and firmly established a boys’ club mentality still detected and described by women affiliated with the show’s more recent seasons. Frequent guest host Buck Henry thought it was terribly kind of Lorne Michaels to allow “all his secretaries” to attend pitch meetings, assuming the female writers were administrative assistants.²¹ John Belushi routinely urged Michaels to “fire all the women writers” because he believed women were constitutionally incapable of being funny.²² Chevy Chase agreed.²³ Chauvinism in the writers’ room made it nearly impossible for female writers to get their sketches to air, which left female cast members with little more than mom, wife, and secretary roles to play.²⁴ One of Bill Murray’s favorite gags

¹⁷ Hill and Weingrad, 232.

¹⁸ Hill and Weingrad, 60.

¹⁹ Miller and Shales’s *Live from New York* provides the interesting fact that one of these Michaels-produced Tomlin specials included a segment titled “Arresting Fat People in Beverly Hills.”

²⁰ Hill and Weingrad, 239.

²¹ Hill and Weingrad, 149.

²² Hill and Weingrad, 233.

²³ James Andrew Miller and Tom Shales, *Live from New York: The Completely Uncensored History of Saturday Night Live as Told by Its Stars, Writers and Guests, 40th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2015), 148.

²⁴ Hill and Weingrad, 245.

was to “pick up a passing woman and bite her on her rear end.”²⁵ The female writers were paid less.²⁶ Women of color were not hired at all. The male cast members pumped wardrobe personnel for descriptions of female guest host’s bodies and pitched only breast jokes to voluptuous actress Raquel Welch.²⁷ Aykroyd and Belushi, avidly embracing Hunter S. Thompson’s gonzo ethos, punched holes in walls, decorated their office with women’s used undergarments, and palled around backstage with a swastika-tattooed Hell’s Angel named Big Vinnie who was “charged with throwing a woman to her death off the roof of the Angel’s headquarters.”²⁸

The atmosphere created by the men of the initial cast enabled the considerable sexism of future casts. Chris Farley, a particularly troubling example, was hired despite being kicked out of high school for exposing himself to a female student and having lost a job as a bouncer for grabbing a female patron’s behind. His further harassment of women—tossing a waitress over his shoulder and carrying her out of her restaurant and into a cab, repeatedly “poking and hugging” unwilling extras until one threatened legal action—is uniformly dismissed by male show staff as “all harmless.”²⁹ Yet, despite seemingly egregious examples across decades of show history, Caryn Murphy notes the continual denial of institutionalized sexism in her analysis of *Saturday Night Live* as a gendered workplace.³⁰ Former head writer Fred Wolf, for example, vehemently rejects accusations that the show has historically been a friendlier environment for men in Miller and Shales’ *Live from New York*. “It just so happens that men are wildly more

²⁵ Hill and Weingrad, 250.

²⁶ Miller and Shales, 36.

²⁷ Hill and Weingrad, 150.

²⁸ Hill and Weingrad, 232.

²⁹ Tom Farley, Jr. and Tanner Colby, *The Chris Farley Show: A Biography in Three Acts* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 200-202.

³⁰ Caryn Murphy, “‘Is This the Era of the Woman?’: *SNL*’s Gender Politics in the New Millenium,” in *Saturday Night Live and American TV*, eds. Nick Marx, Matt Sienkiewicz, and Ron Becker (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013), 175-176.

successful than women at *Saturday Night Live*, but not by design. It's just genetic makeup, in my opinion," he explains, unintentionally illustrating the bias he claims does not exist.³¹

Unsurprisingly, the show's initial trio of female performers, Jane Curtin, Gilda Radner, and Laraine Newman, were cast in accordance with a much narrower aesthetic range of possibility than the show's men, whose physicality displayed more variety. This is not to denigrate the comedic talents of these women because, in fact, their ability to be funny in an environment that demanded loveliness first and foremost speaks to their considerable chops. The women of *Saturday Night Live's* first cast were beautiful enough to exist on television, but not so distracting that they might dim the film stars recruited to host the show. This precarious position rendered them nearly invisible.³² Hill and Weingrad reference an early *Photoplay* cover story about Chevy Chase, the show's first breakout star, which only mentioned the three women of the cast in a single sentence. They were not even referred to by name, instead identified as "Chevy's girls," and "these beauties."³³ Belushi, described in an early *New York Times* review as a "burly young actor from Chicago with a face like an angry pudding," possessed a perhaps un-beautiful but prized physicality that signified the countercultural—the New Macho identified by Rosie Shuster.³⁴ According to Chevy Chase, it was in fact Belushi's bulky, haphazard presentation that finally convinced Michaels to cast him, reportedly saying "we could use somebody who looks like him."³⁵

Performers Chase and Curtin both embodied a white, young physical ideal. Their good looks are often referenced throughout the *Saturday Night Live* literature, but they were cast and

³¹ Miller and Shales, 387.

³² Hill and Weingrad note Candice Bergen's appearance as a guest host during the show's first season as the moment when the show's format gelled. They attribute this in no small part to "her looks," and describe the female cast members and writers "bemusement as Lorne, Chevy, John and Danny ran around 'like puppy dogs' all week, vying for her attention."

³³ Hill and Weingrad, 217.

³⁴ Peter Andrews, "'Saturday Night' Never Plays It Safe," *New York Times*, Feb. 29, 1976.

³⁵ Miller and Shales, 35.

deployed for different reasons. Chase’s “prep school” appearance and “innocent delivery” were quickly recognized for their subversive possibility. His boy next door appeal permitted more potentially offensive material to make it past the censor to air, like a repeated gag wherein Chase talks dirty to a sexual partner on the phone at the beginning of “Weekend Update,” a satirical news sketch.³⁶ Jane Curtin, on the other hand, was cast over another actress specifically because her “‘white bread’ looks balanced better with the darker, flakier styles of Gilda and Laraine, who had already been hired.”³⁷ Predestined to exist as the program’s visual anchor in normative white female beauty, Curtin “felt stifled and underused, stuck in housewife or talk-show hostess roles, often the straight woman rather than the lead.”³⁸

Though beauty is not synonymous with thinness, the former has nearly always been considered a requirement for the latter on American television. *Saturday Night Live* is no exception. Female performers throughout the show’s history have described pressure to remain or become thin, a pressure that sometimes found a release valve in a sketch. For example, in an early season writer Marilyn Suzanne Miller created a musical sketch for the female cast members in which they sang a love song to saccharine, a recently banned zero calorie sweetener. Hill and Weingrad describe Miller as “eternally on a diet,” a characteristic she shared with “most of the women on *Saturday Night*.”³⁹ When Lorne Michaels left the show in 1980, Jean Doumanian took over as executive producer and ordered diets for her new female performers so that her cast, already facing comparisons to the now-beloved *Not Ready for Primetime Players*, would measure up as “sexier and prettier.”⁴⁰ In more recent seasons, Tina Fey famously lost thirty

³⁶ Hill and Weingrad, 160.

³⁷ Hill and Weingrad, 73.

³⁸ Hill and Weingrad, 248.

³⁹ Hill and Weingrad, 262.

⁴⁰ Hill and Weingrad, 391.

pounds to transition from writer to Weekend Update anchor.⁴¹ “I never would have been where I was without *SNL*...nobody would have let me be on camera,” she later reflected.⁴² Current cast member Cecily Strong recalls arriving to her first cast photo session to find the wardrobe department did not have a dress in her size and having to squeeze into a smaller one instead.⁴³ In her second season, she was harassed online for appearing to have gained weight and was chastised by Lorne Michaels for responding to the “bully dickheads” on Twitter.⁴⁴

And, while I hesitate to draw a line of causation from *Saturday Night Live*’s aesthetics to individual mental illnesses and addictions, there was an undeniable presence of eating disorders among the first cast. Gilda Radner’s bulimia is widely discussed in both *Saturday Night* and *Live from New York*, but was addressed most unflinchingly by her widower Gene Wilder in his memoir:

It always happened after dinner, never after lunch or breakfast. She ate so sparingly and sensibly at those times. But after dinner, when she had indulged her cravings for food, she had to get rid of it quickly so that she wouldn’t get fat. If I were reading in the living room, I could hear her vomiting in the bathroom, but I knew I had to keep my mouth shut and pretend that I didn’t hear or smell anything, as much as it went against my natural instinct to try to help.⁴⁵

In *Live from New York*, Marilyn Suzanne Miller is careful to recall Radner’s bulimia as part of a larger pattern of disordered eating. “We were aware of Gilda’s eating problems, but we didn’t know it was called bulimia. We thought it was this incredibly brilliant idea that Gilda thought up,” she explains.⁴⁶ Similarly, Hill and Weingrad assert a widespread belief among early cast and crew that Laraine Newman suffered from anorexia, noting “her weight at times dropped to eighty

⁴¹ Maureen Dowd, “What Tina Fey Wants,” *Vanity Fair* (New York, NY), January 2009.

⁴² Miller and Shales, 565.

⁴³ Miller and Shales, 663.

⁴⁴ Miller and Shales, 663.

⁴⁵ Gene Wilder, *Kiss Me Like A Stranger: My Search for Love and Art* (New York: St. Martins, 2009), 195-196.

⁴⁶ Miller and Shales, 152.

pounds.”⁴⁷ Newman herself attributes her physical deterioration during seasons four and five of *Saturday Night Live* at least in part to her heroin addiction, describing “party[ing] to the point you’re emaciated” to later cast member Cheri Oteri.⁴⁸ Susan Bordo’s argument that eating disorders are in fact a crystallization of patriarchal rule is instructive here, as are the counterexamples of John Belushi and Chris Farley.⁴⁹ For funny men, show business is more permissive about the body. Addictive consumption can extend to food with fewer professional consequences.

To pull together these many strands of history and thought, of literature and popular culture, of personas behind and before the camera, I reach back to Laura Mulvey. In “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema,” Mulvey famously identified the male gaze of film. Women on screen are displayed for a spectator presumed to be male, possessing a quality she calls *to-be-looked-at-ness*.⁵⁰ Women in comedy, the cast of *Saturday Night Live* included, have an additional quality I would call *to-be-laughed-at-ness*. Feminist scholars Lisa Merrill and M. Alison Kibler’s work on comedy harmonizes with Mulvey’s; they find that within mainstream comedy, women have historically been vehicles for jokes directed to a male listener.⁵¹ In fact, some men of *Saturday Night Live* proudly identify the presumed gender of their audience. Former cast member Norm MacDonald has asserted that he performed Weekend Update only to amuse himself and writer Jim Downey. Chevy Chase agrees, explaining “that as long as six guys

⁴⁷ Hill and Weingrad, 353.

⁴⁸ Miller and Shales, 469.

⁴⁹ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body, 10th Anniversary Edition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), xxi.

⁵⁰ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works*, eds. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Malden: Blackwell, 2001), 397.

⁵¹ Merrill points out that this is not the case with feminist comedy (that which presumes the audience is comprised of or includes women). Writing in 1988, she cites Lily Tomlin, brief *Saturday Night Live* cast member Danitra Vance, Whoopi Goldberg, and Elayne Boosler as examples. This argument strikes another resonant chord with scholarship surrounding Mulvey’s essay; responses from feminist film scholars pushed back against Mulvey’s lack of attention to female producers and spectators.

on a couch behind that camera I was looking into laughed, and I knew those guys, then I was there.”⁵² Chris Rock, an underutilized cast member for two seasons in the 1990s, clarifies that this audience wasn’t just male, it was white: “[There were] No black writers and no one really got into that side of the culture.”⁵³

Given the history of fat men in comedy and as the doubly-tight strictures of *to-be-looked-at-ness* and *to-be-laughed-at-ness* for female performers, the different physicality of the male and female cast members seems inevitable. However, the existence of fat women in American culture, from which *Saturday Night Live* draws its material, is even more unavoidable. To joke about fat with a cast of almost exclusively thin female actors, a fat woman must be fabricated through prosthetics or drag, channeled like a ghost, or specially invited to appear as herself. These methods have different goals, reveal different truths about female fat in American culture, and expose the normative power of even the most countercultural television comedy.

Fritzie Kringle and Television’s Fabricated Fat Woman

The first fat female body to appear in a sketch on *Saturday Night Live* is that of European cooking show host Fritzie Kringle.⁵⁴ As the announcer introduces her segment, *The Fritzie Kringle Show*, we see that she is enthusiastically stirring the contents of a big bowl in a cutesy kitchen decorated with cat tchotchkes and loud blue and yellow wallpaper. Kringle wears a dowdy floral shirtdress and a patterned apron that emphasizes her large bosom and expansive bottom half. Her hair is twisted into big buns pinned to the sides of her head. When she speaks, she has an indistinct European accent that sounds perhaps Scandinavian.

⁵² Miller and Shales, 431.

⁵³ Miller and Shales, 383.

⁵⁴ *Saturday Night Live*. Season 1, episode 8. Directed by Dave Wilson. Written by Anne Beatts, Chevy Chase, Al Franken et al. National Broadcasting Corporation, December 20, 1975.

Kringle cheerfully explains that she will be teaching viewers to make Christmas cookies. She holds up a cookie sheet that holds several dollops of her “yoomy” dough, the deliciousness of which she demonstrates by repeatedly swiping her finger through a gooey glob and licking it off with relish. She instructs the viewer to decorate the cookies with raisins, pecans, miniature marshmallows, and chocolate chips, but she shovels most of the ingredients into her mouth before they make it to the cookie sheet. At times, Kringle’s mouth is so full of food she can hardly deliver her lines. Finished with her preparation, she displays to the camera a cookie sheet with a few tiny smudges of dough on it, all that remains after she’s eaten her way through the ingredients. To illustrate the finished product, she removes from the oven a pan that holds just two miniscule cookies, burned around the edges. The finished cookies, she proclaims, are a delicious compliment to a Christmas goose. She pulls a second pan out of the oven with a flourish. It holds just carcass, picked clean of meat. She signs off still chewing.

As Angela Stukator explains in her discussion of fat female bodies in film, “the fat woman is made into a spectacle for our amusement. While the laughter she evokes may or may not be bound to her wit, a narrative gag, or prank, it invariably pertains to her physical body.”⁵⁵ In this way, Fritzie Kringle is a televisual fat joke distilled to its most fundamental elements: a fat body that consumes compulsively, reifying its idiotic lack of control as we watch. The Fritzie Kringle bit only lasts for about ninety seconds, but the audience giggles from the moment the sketch begins because Kringle is in fact played by the petite Laraine Newman wearing pendulous prosthetic breasts and absurdly wide hip pads. The joke—inasmuch as there is a joke—is almost entirely visual, relying on the dissonance between Newman’s true physiology and her appearance in the prosthetics to support the one-note overeating gag. The sketch provides only

⁵⁵ Angela Stukator, “‘It’s not over until the fat lady sings’: Comedy, the Carnavalesque, and Body Politics,” in *Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 200.

her body and its processes to amuse the audience. However, unlike a fat joke borne by a woman who is herself physiologically fat, Newman's prosthetic fat creates a narrative distance between the performer and the fatness that permits a viewer to laugh guiltlessly. In other words, prosthetic fat absorbs the audience's disgust, preventing it from settling uncomfortably in the viewer's psyche or on the performer's real body.

Amy Gullage explores and the uses and potential of prosthetic fat in her discussion of the television situation comedy *Friends* and its character "Fat Monica," who is played by actress Courteney Cox in a full-body fat suit that includes facial prosthetics. "The comic functions of Fat Monica serve to underscore the marginality of her body, with the majority of the humor relating to her failure to achieve a desirable and disciplined body represented through slenderness," Gullage states.⁵⁶ She uses David T. Mitchell's disability model of narrative prosthesis to demonstrate how *Friends* uses prosthetic fat as a device to reproduce hegemonic stories about women. Fat Monica, for example, is unable to find a romantic partner; the program permits her to date only after she has lost weight, linking the fat female form with lovelessness and suggesting weight loss as a remedy.

While Gullage ultimately argues for the radical potential of the fat suit, which enables a single actor to embody multiple forms and therefore the chance comment upon those forms, prosthetic fat is rarely, if ever, employed in this capacity in television comedy. *Saturday Night Live* is no exception. However, when considering the fat female bodies in the *Saturday Night Live* archive, those fabricated via prosthetic fat are relatively rare and clustered within the earlier seasons of the show. These performances conform with Gullage's observations about *Friends* and reproduce hegemonic bodily norms in two ways: by lampooning a fictional fat everywoman

⁵⁶ Gullage, Amy. "Fat Monica, Fat Suits and Friends: Exploring narratives of fatness." *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 2 (2014): 178-189.

or a particular fat celebrity for lacking self-control around food, or by linking fat together with advanced age and nonwhite ethnicity to make clear the overall sexual undesirability of a character played by a normatively beautiful cast member.

Prosthetic Fat and Self-Control

The fabricated fat everywoman is most frequently used in sketches that “invariably pertain to” the “physical body,” to paraphrase Stukator, but which do not address the specifically gendered meanings of the fat woman. The recurring Widette family sketch during season four is a clear example. Dan Aykroyd and Jane Curtin wear enormous prosthetic posteriors and padding around their thighs to portray Mr. and Mrs. Widette. Gilda Radner and John Belushi in similar prosthetics play their children, and guest stars padded to the same proportions play their friends and relatives. In three appearances across the fourth season, the Widette family physicality supports a series of visual and physical gags: the family can’t all fit on the couch at the same time;⁵⁷ Curtin produces an enormous rectal thermometer to take Radner’s temperature;⁵⁸ the family tries to project a film on the gargantuan behind of guest host Milton Berle, who is clad in white pants.⁵⁹ The sketches likewise allude to notorious fat bodies in American culture, as when the family mentions Orson Welles or Beverly Sills, celebrities ridiculed for their weight gain. Most typically, the family overeats: macaroni and cheese and home fries for dinner, extra potato salad on the side, bread pudding and cheesecake for dessert, leftover spaghetti and tater tots in case they run out of everything else. Ideologically, this deployment of prosthetic fat is

⁵⁷ *Saturday Night Live*. Season 4, episode 9. Directed by Dave Wilson. Written by Dan Aykroyd, Anne Beatts, James Downey, et al. National Broadcasting Corporation, December 16, 1978.

⁵⁸ *Saturday Night Live*. Season 4, episode 11. Directed by Dave Wilson. Written by Dan Aykroyd, Anne Beatts, James Downey, et al. National Broadcasting Corporation, February 10, 1979.

⁵⁹ *Saturday Night Live*. Season 4, episode 17. Directed by Dave Wilson. Written by Dan Aykroyd, Anne Beatts, James Downey, et al. National Broadcasting Corporation, April 14, 1979.

straightforward. The Widettes have fat bodies. These bodies are brought into being by a visible lack of self-control around food. As Stukator explains, “within a network of interrelating and dependent hierarchies, unruliness gains its meaning from that which it is not: ordered, rule-bound, and restrained, attributes associated with normative masculinity and femininity.”⁶⁰ The Widettes consume as obliviously as they swing their huge rear ends, a loop of unruly behaviors and resultant unruly male and female forms so ridiculous in their magnitude that the audience’s laughter is uncomplicated by pity or revulsion. Even so, the sketch reinforces a line of causality that links cluelessness, consumption, fatness, and ridicule.

In her seminal media studies work *Where the Girls Are*, Susan Douglas accuses omnipresent advertising images of toned thighs and “buns of steel” of “making [her] and all the other women I knew really hostile and defensive. Their sleek, seemingly healthy surfaces really demanded that we all be pathological: compulsive, filled with self-hate, and schizophrenic.”⁶¹ The demands of these images are easy to apprehend. Here is perfection, they cry, and your job is to attain it. Though it seems counterintuitive, a thin female *Saturday Night Live* cast member or guest host will occasionally wear prosthetic fat in order to portray a specific famous woman in a sketch that serves the same ideological purposes, just refracted.⁶² For example, comedian Joan Rivers donned prosthetic fat during her hosting stint in season eight in order to portray actress Elizabeth Taylor (a perennial target of her stand-up) in a commercial parody for Calvin Klein jeans, “now in industrial strength.”⁶³ Rivers-as-Taylor lounges on a couch next to a table laden

⁶⁰ Stukator, 199.

⁶¹ Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1994), 263.

⁶² It is not to say that fat male celebrities fly under the radar. In an early season, John Belushi plays the overeating Marlon Brando, for example, sitting on a bed surrounded by food. The difference is that both Brando and Belushi represent a wider view of what fat men can do in entertainment, neither held back from success by their physical form. Both play roles that do not invariably pertain to their physical body, to paraphrase Stukator.

⁶³ *Saturday Night Live*. Season 8, episode 17. Directed by Dave Wilson. Written by Paul Barrosse, Barry W. Blaustein, Robin Duke, et al. National Broadcasting Corporation, April 9, 1983.

with milkshakes, spaghetti, and a truly absurd arrangement of eclairs on skewers. Picking her teeth with a toothpick, Rivers implies that Taylor ate the horse from *National Velvet* and winkingly proclaims it was her ambition to “become the *biggest* star in the world.” Similar portrayals include petite cast members Robin Duke as aging actress Shelley Winters and Victoria Jackson as comedian and television star Roseanne Barr. Both portrayals are notably coarse, loud and grating, depicting women who are as powerless to control their unappealing presentation as they are their unacceptable bodies. Like Douglas’s crazy-making advertisements that hold up the standard of bodily perfection, these fabricated fat celebrity impersonations demonstrate the punishment. Both representations police.

Prosthetic Fat, Age, Class, and Ethnic Difference

In his appearance as guest host during season five, comedian Bob Newhart plays a contestant on a game show called *The Dating Zone* who must choose between three unseen female contestants to take out on a date.⁶⁴ Newhart, who is married, is accidentally chosen to participate in the game show as its central bachelor and finds himself railroaded by the host to play along, regardless. While a funny premise, the real joke of the sketch is that he must choose between three unacceptable bachelorettes. Laraine Newman plays a dominatrix with pointy black fingernails and a cat o’ nine tails. Gilda Radner is a vaguely mentally disabled woman, designated by a blank stare and a series of jerky mannerisms Radner regularly recycles throughout the first five seasons to signify impairment. Finally, Jane Curtin plays an older woman whose accent marks either an indeterminate ethnic identity or a working-class New Yorker—its delivery is unclear. She is later described in the sketch as a “sagging, burned-out

⁶⁴ *Saturday Night Live*. Season 5, episode 18. Directed by Dave Wilson. Written by Peter Aykroyd, Anne Beatts, James Downey et al. National Broadcasting Corporation, May 10, 1980.

boozehound,” but her appearance is generally grandmotherly. She wears close-cropped gray wig to designate her age and a loud floral shirt and vest over padding that emphasizes her weight. The game show host explains that Curtin’s character “hails from the Bronx, she collects swizzle sticks and cocktail napkins, a former go-go dancer—she hopes one day to be a go-go dancer again—meet Iris DeFlaminio.”

This type of prosthetic fat pops up quickly, in passing. Other examples include Robin Duke as an abrasive old Italian grandmother, Victoria Jackson as a Mexican housewife, and Heather Locklear as an older Jewish woman during Mike Meyers’ popular “Coffee Talk” sketch from the 1990s. Here, fat is bundled with other physical traits maligned by racism, classism, and ageism to underscore a character’s total sexual undesirability. The ethnicity, age, class, and size of Iris DeFlaminio together create a screen to obscure the white, thin, young normative beauty of Curtin herself.

Saturday Night Live has a troubling track record with regard to hiring cast and crew of color, as well as producing content for and about people who are not white. In her analysis of Eddie Murphy’s performances on the show, Raquel Gates notes that “in spite of SNL’s well-deserved reputation as a force of social critique, the show has been erratic at best in its treatment of African American issues and cast members.”⁶⁵ This criticism resounds when considering all kinds of non-white ethnicity. There have been no visibly Asian cast members, few out queer cast members, just two Latin American cast members, and one cast member of Middle-Eastern descent, yet white, straight actors routinely play roles mimicking those identities. Optimistically, Gates identifies a few moments when African-American *Saturday Night Live* cast members have been able to work in two modes, appealing to the assumed white audience of the show while

⁶⁵ Raquel Gates, “‘Bringing the Black: Eddie Murphy and African American Humor on *Saturday Night Live*,” in *Saturday Night Live and American TV*, ed. Nick Marx, Matt Sienkiewicz, and Ron Becker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 151.

simultaneously communicating a different, more subversive message to audience members of color. And though famous Eddie Murphy sketches like his short film “White Like Me” might have entertained white audiences while challenging the racism of the show itself and of Reagan-era American neoliberalism writ large, it is hard to find any such redemptive revolutionary subtext in dressing up a thin white actress to play a bit part as a frumpy Mexican housewife. I believe these moments that group fabricated fat with age and ethnicity are aimed squarely at white viewers, and use a racist shorthand to deemphasize the normatively attractive attributes of white, thin cast members. This type of fabricated fat woman could not function without drawing meaning from a hierarchy of difference that equates whiteness with desirability, thereby enforcing hegemonic norms of beauty as well as racialized bias.

For as damaging as they might be, these kinds of representations of fat women by thin women wearing prosthetics are few and far between in the *Saturday Night Live* archive and, thankfully, the method appears to have passed out of favor entirely later years. Physiologically fat female performers are similarly rare across until Aidy Bryant joined the cast in 2012. Who, then, brings the majority of *Saturday Night Live*’s fat female bodies to the viewing audience? Overwhelmingly, the answer is fat men.

From Prosthetic Fat to Fat Drag

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler uses drag—the practice of a performer temporarily inhabiting another gender for the purposes of entertainment—to illustrate the contingent nature of “anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance,” distinct “dimensions” that are often, but not necessarily, organized into particular arrangements in accordance with compulsory

heterosexuality.⁶⁶ Drag uncouples these dimensions from each other and exposes the tension between them, a jumbling-up that has the potential to “compel a radical rethinking of the psychological presuppositions of gender identity and sexuality.”⁶⁷ However, Butler also cautions that “parody by itself is not subversive.” Drag performances that simply reenact the performative tropes of gender “become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony.”⁶⁸

Men appear in drag on *Saturday Night Live* far more often than women do, and fat men appear in drag particularly frequently. As with prosthetic fat, these performances represent the fat everywoman as well as particular fat female celebrities or notorious cultural figures. As women in prosthetic fat fell out of favor in the 1990s, fat drag performances proliferated and took up many of the same goals, revealing the ways women can fail at performing femininity and reinforcing a social hierarchy of beauty wherein women who are older, nonwhite, and fat are less desirable than the thin, young, white *Saturday Night Live* performers.

There is no shortage of examples of fat male cast members playing women—fat women, by anatomical necessity—whose characterization follows the general rules of fat women fabricated through prosthetics. They are portrayed as physically unbecoming to the point of ridicule: John Lovitz chose to play Sarah Ferguson, the Duchess of York, as a slob; Chris Farley played Carnie Wilson, a member of pop trio Wilson Phillips, next to particularly statuesque extras hired to play the other members of the group in order to highlight how supposedly unappealing Wilson is; Horatio Sanz, a short skirt riding up over his fishnets, dove headfirst into a limousine and lolled across Tim Meadows’ lap to play a drunk prostitute. They consume compulsively: John Belushi played an overeating Elizabeth Taylor; Jim Belushi played a ravenous Rosemary Clooney; Horatio Sanz played actress Camryn Manheim wearing a dress

⁶⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2006), 187.

⁶⁷ Butler, 189.

⁶⁸ Butler, 189.

covered in chocolate stains to a red carpet awards show; Chris Farley played a ditzy retail employee who inhales French fries and slips into a deep baritone when her friends question her eating habits; and Brendan Fraser and Darrell Hammond portray the culinary stars of the Food Network's *Two Fat Ladies* who deep fry salad and glug melted butter directly from a measuring cup. And finally, like the Widettes, they are oblivious to their shortcomings: Tracy Morgan played *The View's* Star Jones as a self-centered imbecile who repeats her own legal credentials; and Chris Farley played an older woman who endlessly reads suggestions from the Zagat food guide while her husband chides her to shut up and begs to die. These performances follow the general guidelines of prosthetic fat, but use drag to amplify the joke, capitalizing on what Butler calls an essential "giddiness" that comes along with new arrangements of sex, gender, and performativity. And if prosthetic fat allows for a distance between the performer and their appearance that permits the audience to laugh from a position of superiority, drag further wrenches open that gap. A thin, white actress in a fat suit offers some insulation from feeling cruel, but a man in drag adds the secondary buffer of gender. The fat woman with the unacceptable body is entirely theoretical.

It seems clear that fat drag can make the same meaning as prosthetic fat, but fat drag has additional possibilities. In fact, there is a particular use case for fat drag that wields its echoes masculinity as a punishment. It is reserved for women with a measure of power and influence who have committed some kind of transgression.

Linda Tripp, Fat Drag, and the Punishment of Power

Cast member Will Ferrell began to play former Attorney General Janet Reno with the mien of a professional wrestler in 1996, shortly after her bungled raid on the Branch Davidian

complex in Waco, Texas that resulted in a shootout, a standoff, and a fire that killed dozens. Cast member Tim Meadows—himself thin, but on *Saturday Night Live* race often serves as a more significant marker than gender—began to play Oprah as an overeating narcissist at the very height of her media influence in the late 1990s, shortly after she tangled with the beef industry and began the book club that held an iron grip on America’s book publishers. Cast member Darrell Hammond appeared once in 1996 as Marge Schott, abrasive owner of the Cincinnati Reds baseball team, after accusations surfaced about her egregious racism and antisemitism. But no case is as illustrative of the punitive potential of impersonation as John Goodman’s repeated guest appearances as former Pentagon employee Linda Tripp, notorious player in the Clinton impeachment scandal. What makes this case unique is that there is a record of her reaction to the portrayal, which includes cosmetic changes to her appearance, and a sketch *Saturday Night Live* aired in response to her criticism.

The Clinton/Lewinsky affair and the ensuing impeachment dominated American news media and entertainment alike throughout 1998 and 1999. Tripp’s role in the scandal was widely viewed as catalytic. On the advice of a literary agent, Tripp illegally recorded telephone calls with her friend Monica Lewinsky once she became aware of Lewinsky’s sexual relationship with President Clinton. These calls ran counter to his disavowal of any such sexual contact in depositions for another legal matter and, and in exchange for immunity from prosecution for wiretapping, Tripp provided the tapes to independent counsel Kenneth Starr.

It should be noted that Tripp was not the only woman vilified by the press. Lewinsky was humiliated—she gave a TED talk in 2015 called “The Price of Shame” in which she called herself “patient zero of losing a personal reputation on a global scale almost instantaneously”

⁶⁹—but it is fascinating to note that, despite copious ridicule about her weight, she was always played by a thin, unpadding Molly Shannon on *Saturday Night Live*. And despite years of joking about the castrating rigidity of Hillary Clinton, *Saturday Night Live* never used a male actor to play her either, instead relying on different interpretations by cast members Jan Hooks, Ana Gasteyer, Amy Poehler, and most recently Kate McKinnon. Feminist pop culture writer Sady Doyle looked at the media images of Hillary Clinton and Monica Lewinsky during the impeachment and found that they were “mirror images of each other,” the “Betty and Veronica of sexism: the icy blonde and the overheated brunette, the prude and the slut, the shrewish wife and the trashy mistress, the sexless middle-aged woman and the trampy young one, the frigid, man-hating intellectual and the needy, man-hungry ditz.”⁷⁰ Tripp was neither thin nor young, doubly transgressive physically, but crucially she was also a scheming solo operator with enough power to nearly topple a presidency, a role for which there is no easy feminine archetype—a successfully unsexed Lady Macbeth, perhaps. Her naked ambition to use the impeachment for gain was punished on *Saturday Night Live* with an incredibly unflattering impression played by John Goodman.

Goodman played Linda Tripp five times during the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth seasons of *Saturday Night Live*, during the height of the Lewinsky/Clinton scandal. It is important to note that Goodman was not a cast member and was invited to guest star as Tripp for each appearance, signifying that this portrayal was specifically cast and not a matter of choosing who among the regular performers might fit the role. Goodman first appeared as Tripp in a cold

⁶⁹ Monica Lewinsky, “The Price of Shame.” Filmed March 2015. TED Talk video, 22:26. https://www.ted.com/talks/monica_lewinsky_the_price_of_shame/transcript?language=en#t-233487

⁷⁰ Sady Doyle, *Trainwreck: The Women We Love to Hate, Mock, and Fear...and Why* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2016), 202.

open⁷¹ in February of 1998.⁷² Cast member Molly Shannon, playing Monica Lewinsky, meets Goodman/Tripp at a restaurant. When the two characters hug, screeching feedback as though a microphone has been held too close to a speaker rings out, and Goodman/Tripp flinches. The audience is meant to understand that, like their infamous phone calls, Goodman/Tripp is recording the meeting. Goodman/Tripp speaks into an enormous flower pinned to the lapel of her dress throughout their conversation, meant to indicate that it is a microphone. The few Lewinsky jokes in the sketch revolve around oral sex—Shannon/Lewinsky orders a Bartels and Jaymes wine cooler in order to deliver the line “I love BJs”—and instead the scene centers on Shannon/Lewinsky accidentally revealing embarrassing details about Goodman/Tripp’s life into the microphone she does not know is recording. Shannon/Lewinsky thoughtlessly asks whether Goodman/Tripp will be “getting liposuction on her jowls” and reminds her of a sexual liaison with a “Promise Keeper in the bathroom of the Smithsonian.” Goodman/Tripp eventually grabs Shannon/Lewinsky by the back of her neck and smashes her face into the flower, her voice dipping into its lower register as she demands her friend confess her “dirty, dirty secrets.” Lewinsky is certainly characterized as horny and brainless, but the sketch goes out of its way to portray her as the wronged party for trusting the duplicitous, masculine Tripp.

In ensuing appearances in 1998 and 1999, Goodman appears as Tripp in a flash-forward segment that imagines an *Oprah* episode in the year 2002 reuniting “the cast” of the Clinton scandal.⁷³ Oprah identifies Tripp as “the woman without whom none of these people would be here,” echoing popular opinion that she is truly to blame for the entire scandal. The next appearance “recreates” the taped conversations between Monica Lewinsky and Linda Tripp

⁷¹ This term “cold open” refers to the initial sketch which runs prior to the opening credits and theme music.

⁷² *Saturday Night Live*. Season 23, episode 12. Directed by Beth McCarthy. Written by Ross Abrash, Cindy Caponera, Robert Carlock, et al. National Broadcasting Corporation, February 7, 1998.

⁷³ *Saturday Night Live*. Season 24, episode 1. Directed by Beth McCarthy. Written by Robert Carlock, Jerry Collins, Steven Cragg et al. National Broadcasting Corporation, September 26, 1998.

based on the sounds picked up in the background, which are interpreted as the two women eating.⁷⁴ Though the scene includes both Shannon/Lewinsky and Goodman/Tripp bingeing unhealthy food and lying to each other about what they're eating (Lewinsky claiming that she is eating "some grapes" and Tripp that she is eating "rice cakes and Tab"), only Goodman/Tripp eats like an animal. While Shannon/Lewinsky drinks beer and snacks on junk, she eats it normally—one tortilla chip at a time, and a few small bites of cake. She mostly slurps from a very large 7-11 Double Gulp soda, the size of which is the joke, not how she consumes its contents. Goodman/Tripp, on the other hand, frantically pours cheeseballs from a can into his mouth, then onto a pizza. He picks up the mess with his hands and shoves fistfuls into his face. He belches audibly into the phone. He conducts part of the phone call in the bathroom, on the toilet—even Shannon/Lewinsky appears disgusted by the noises she can hear. Goodman ends the scene spraying whipped cream into his mouth, visibly winded from the eating.

Goodman's fourth appearance comes shortly after the President's acquittal in February of 1999.⁷⁵ "So, through this whole impeachment scandal, the one thing and the American people have agreed on is that Linda Tripp is a rat fink," says cast member Chris Parnell as Tom Brokaw, introducing a parody of the interview the real Linda Tripp gave NBC in an effort to salvage her reputation. In that interview, Tripp famously claimed that her actions were those of a patriot—a statement the show twists when Goodman/Tripp clarifies that she was invited to play football as the new linebacker for the New England Patriots. The interviewer, played by Ana Gasteyer, serves as a chorus for the American public, excoriating Tripp for betraying her friend and causing an investigation that cost "the American taxpayer tens of millions of dollars," all in

⁷⁴ *Saturday Night Live*. Season 24, episode 7. Directed by Beth McCarthy. Written by Robert Carlock, Jerry Collins, Steven Cragg et al. National Broadcasting Corporation, November 21, 1998.

⁷⁵ *Saturday Night Live*. Season 24, episode 13. Directed by Beth McCarthy. Written by Robert Carlock, Jerry Collins, Steven Cragg et al. National Broadcasting Corporation, February 1999.

pursuit of a book deal. She stresses that Linda Tripp has a “3% approval rating” when “Saddam Hussein has an 8 [percent approval rating].” Goodman/Tripp responds that it “feels like high school.”

Then, in a metatextual move, Gasteyer asks how Goodman/Tripp feels about Goodman’s impression, and Goodman speaks through the Tripp impersonation to laud his own acting ability and defend *King Ralph*, a Goodman film that was a critical and commercial failure. Thus, at the very moment Tripp was trying to appeal to the American public for empathy, *Saturday Night Live* again created enough room between parody and the parodied to absolve the audience of potential cruelty. By exposing himself to slight ribbing about his flop of a film, Goodman created a moment of personal humility that, though radically out of scale with the abuse poured on Tripp, allowed the impression to continue.⁷⁶

“There is a self-fulfilling prophecy at work in the denigration of fat people,” states Kathleen LeBesco in *Revolting Bodies*. “Because the social environment fails to support the idea of fat as personally and sexually appealing, the continuous insults to which they are subject may do psychic damage to fat people.”⁷⁷ While I do not intend to debate or defend the merits of Linda Tripp’s actions with regard to Monica Lewinsky, the presidency, or the country, I do believe interviews with Tripp herself surface the very real damage done by this performance. In an interview with Larry King in February of 1999, she directly addresses the fourth Goodman appearance, saying that while first few made her “laugh hysterically,” the show had crossed a line into bullying. “But this last one, it hurt my feelings... That hurt my—I saw that today on one

⁷⁶ Reaching back to Monica Lewinsky’s TED talk, it is important to note the timing of the Clinton impeachment. Twenty-four-hour cable news and the Internet were just reaching widespread penetration in American homes, enabling a proliferation of coverage comparable to today’s news and entertainment media, but within a culture that had not yet sped up to move subjects quickly into and out of the news cycle. Lewinsky and Tripp remained in the news for two years. It is interesting to compare this with the much shorter lifespan of a story like Donald Trump’s *Access Hollywood* tapes, which only made news for about a month.

⁷⁷ Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 88.

of the cable news shows, and that one hurt my feelings. To me, that was—that was not funny anymore to me.”⁷⁸ Soon after, Tripp dyed her hair dark brown and underwent a “facelift, liposuction, and a chin implant” thanks to “an anonymous benefactor.” *People* magazine connected this physical transformation with the Goodman impression in an interview published in 2003:

Being called a snitch hurt, says Tripp, 54, but John Goodman’s impersonating her on *Saturday Night Live*...ouch! “One picture truly is worth a million words,” she says, “and in my case they had a lot to work with.”⁷⁹

Saturday Night Live responded directly to Tripp’s criticism, though in doing so it broke its longstanding format for such an intervention. Celebrity personalities often appear briefly on the show to pretend to confront the cast members who impersonate them. Robert DeNiro has interrupted both Alec Baldwin and Jimmy Fallon’s impressions of him, for example. Jennifer Aniston stopped by as recently as the December 3, 2016 episode to interrupt cast member Vanessa Bayer’s impression of her *Friends* character Rachel Green. Sarah Palin and former Attorney General Janet Reno have both appeared on the show and played along with particularly harsh impersonations by Tina Fey and Will Ferrell. Even Monica Lewinsky popped up and doled out jokey sex advice in a sketch with Tim Meadows’ lothario character the Ladies’ Man. Linda Tripp, however, did not appear as herself to confront John Goodman’s impersonation. Instead, in January 2000, several months after she complained about how hurt she was and began to undergo plastic surgery, Goodman once more dressed as Linda Tripp and delivered the following “special message:”

As you might know, these last two years I have hung out here whenever they needed me to be Linda Tripp in a sketch. It was revealed this week that Miss Tripp has undergone some *extensive* plastic surgery. She’s also dyed her hair, had

⁷⁸ CNN.com, “Transcript: Linda Tripp on Larry King Live,” <http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/stories/1999/02/16/tripp.transcript/>

⁷⁹ J.D. Heyman, “A New Tripp,” *People*, December 22, 2003.

liposuction, and lost over forty pounds. Now, many people feel she was driven to cosmetic surgery because she was relentlessly mocked by some late night comedy shows. I've always considered my impression more of an homage, but maybe she took it the wrong way. After seeing the photos, I got a call from Lorne Michaels saying that if I still wanted to play Linda Tripp, all I would have to do is lose some weight, and he would pay for the plastic surgery. Now, I love comedy. But there's certain things that I won't do for a laugh, and losing forty pounds is one of them. So tonight [removes glasses and wig] I retire the wig. I will no longer be playing Linda Tripp. But, I am proud to introduce *Saturday Night Live's* new Linda Tripp...Miss Julia Roberts. [Gestures to the side of the stage, waits as audience claps, then laughs maniacally.] Who are we kidding!? Old Linda's had some work done, but there's no way somebody as hot as *Julia* would play Linda Tripp! I'm still playing her. So, when Linda goes to jail in Maryland, look for me. In fact, I might even slap on another twenty! See ya!⁸⁰

Goodman laughs gleefully and waves at the camera (see Figure 2). As it pans away and the show moves to commercial break, he turns around and wiggles his backside at the camera, seemingly to Tripp herself. Without the wig, there is in fact no element left significantly constitutive of an impression. Goodman talks as himself, and looks almost entirely like himself aside from a slightly feminized wardrobe, a few pieces of jewelry, and a dusting of cosmetics.

This is an unprecedented move by *Saturday Night Live*. It explicitly designates a thin drag impression, one nearly bursting with masculinity, as a punishment for the actions of the individual woman it portrays. Unlike Tina Fey's unflattering but physically uncanny impression of Sarah Palin, for example, the threat of Goodman's continued performance is in opposition to Tripp's current appearance. No matter how much weight Tripp loses, Goodman proclaims, the show will always memorialize her as a fat man. It will disqualify her from womanhood in the popular memory for the sins Ana Gasteyer ticked off in the interview parody: betraying a friend and dragging the country through a costly and embarrassing impeachment trial in the name of audacious self-promotion, a particularly egregious sin for a woman popularly portrayed as large,

⁸⁰ *Saturday Night Live*. Season 25, episode 9. Directed by Beth McCarthy Miller. Written by Kevin Brennan, Robert Carlock, Steven Cragg et al. National Broadcasting Corporation, January 8, 2000.

old, and frumpy. As Tripp herself described it in *People*: “If I had looked perky, sweet and cute, I wouldn’t have been defined the way I was by the press.”⁸¹

Saturday Night Live is a mainstream comedy institution with a particular set of tools for responding to and reproducing American popular culture. If prosthetic fat is one of its effectively entertaining means of policing consumption and emphasizing laterally unattractive qualities like age and ethnicity, fat drag is a measure stronger in all dimensions. It is funnier, more absurd, and potentially more threatening. In the case of Linda Tripp, the impersonation was explicitly punitive of her powerfully unruly actions and appearance, and it literally remade her body in a smaller, more acceptable form. Regardless of this new body, Goodman’s threat that he will always be able to portray Tripp is credible not just because the show wants to be cruel. It hints at the unique temporality of fat for American women.



Figure 2. John Goodman’s minimal costuming in his final appearance as Linda Tripp, January 2000.

⁸¹ Heyman, “A New Tripp.”

Phantom Fat

In a scene from season five of *Saturday Night Live*, Bob Newhart and Jane Curtin sit at a table in an upscale restaurant. A violin player roams the scene in a tuxedo.⁸² Newhart clasps Curtin's hands and says lovingly that he feels like they've known each other far longer than the ten days they've been dating. Newhart proposes, but before Curtin can fully respond a waiter delivers a big tray of food. We find out Curtin has ordered only a salad. Newhart has ordered lamb chops, an enormous baked potato and a side dish of vegetables, so much food that the waiter must move plates around to fit it in front of him. Newhart asks whether Curtin might not want to order something else, but she insists that "with the dressing, that makes it very filling."

Newhart presses on with his proposal but Curtin reveals that she's been keeping a secret she's afraid might ruin their relationship. The couple goes back and forth, Curtin insisting that she "used to be different," and Newhart assuring her that he's "been around a little himself," assuming her secret is a sexually liberated past. Eventually, Curtin blurts out that she "used to weigh 260 pounds." She produces a photo from her wallet, unseen by the audience, and passes it to Newhart. His face falls. The audience starts to chuckle. Newhart struggles to find something nice to say, resonant with his gentle Midwestern comedic persona, stressing that the photograph "looks like it was taken on a nice day." Curtin is ashamed, but Newhart reassures her that knowing about her fat past will not stop him from loving her. "Even my mother is a little fat," he explains, though he immediately flicks the picture and qualifies, "Nothing like *this*...but a little!"

Curtin smiles, visibly relieved. She grabs a roll from the basket of bread on the table and zealously butters it. Newhart asks how many years ago the picture was taken and, speaking around a thick mouthful of bread, Curtin clarifies that it was taken only four months earlier,

⁸² *Saturday Night Live*. Season 5, episode 18. Directed by Dave Wilson. Written by Peter Aykroyd, Anne Beatts, James Downey et al. National Broadcasting Corporation, May 1980.

before she “had her jaw wired shut.” In almost the same breath she asks for a “teeny” piece of Newhart’s lamb chop and, before he can cut off a bite, she grabs it with her hands, tears a hunk of meat from the bone and begins gnawing at it. Here, Curtin breaks briefly out of character, laughing at the amount of food she has in her mouth. Then, back in character, she clarifies that she didn’t eat any solid food for three months when her jaw was wired, which worked “a lot better than when [she] had her intestines tied off. That was okay, but as soon as I got untied, I gained the weight right back!” The audience laughs, and she rips off another huge bite of meat.

The waiter returns. Newhart intends to shoo him away, but Curtin asks for a dessert menu, gesticulating with hands that are greasy with meat. Newhart rubs his forehead, embarrassed. Curtin reaches across the table to dip what remains of the lamb chop in some sauce on Newhart’s plate. “Maybe you’re right about giving ourselves a little more time,” Newhart chuckles nervously. “We’ve got the rest of our lives.” Curtin again reaches across the table and grabs a big spear of asparagus off of one of his dishes and consumes it in nearly a single bite. The violinist swoops back into the scene but, as Curtin is chewing, Newhart frantically waves him away.

I would like to hold this sketch in mind for a moment and visit another which aired ten seasons later in 1989. Cast member Jan Hooks and guest host Robert Wagner sit in another fancy restaurant, on a romantic date.⁸³ Gentle piano music tinkles in the background. A waiter brings a basket of bread and Wagner orders an expensive bottle of wine. They banter flirtatiously until Wagner unexpectedly grabs a roll from the basket and eats it with his hands, huge chunks of half-chewed bread falling out of his mouth and onto his lap. As the date unfolds to Hooks’ horror, Wagner gulps wine so voraciously it spills down his front, glugs minestrone from the rim

⁸³ *Saturday Night Live*. Season 15, episode 8. Directed by Dave Wilson. Written by A. Whitney Brown, Gregory Daniels, Tom Davis et al. National Broadcasting Corporation, December 1989.

of a soup bowl, wipes mashed potatoes all over his face, and, exactly like Jane Curtin, picks up a steak with his hands and tears off huge chunks with his teeth. When he realizes his date's discomfort, Wagner explains that he's spent years learning to act like a perfect gentleman but could not master table manners. "I suppose this means you'll be leaving me now," he assumes, but Hooks, sympathetic, insists she will stay with him. Wagner asks her to dance and, as the scene ends, he is revealed to be a terrible dancer as well.

These sketches have nearly identical premises and advance with the same comedic beats but, with the genders reversed and the unhinged eating displaced from Curtin's female body onto Wagner's male one, they end on very different notes. While Wagner remains sympathetic to Hooks, Curtin—played by a woman who meets every normative standard of television beauty—is no longer attractive to Newhart. And while Wagner's eating is attributed to an individual foible, however unlikely, Curtin's is explained by the suggestion of a fat past and the accompanying threat of a fat future.

Like women in fat suits or fat men in drag, thin woman channeling temporally dislocated fat are present throughout the *Saturday Night Live* archive. I will refer to this technique for portraying the fat female body as "phantom fat." Some particularly resonant examples of phantom fat include an early series of sketches where the very thin Gilda Radner recites the many foods she has overeaten that day, or a sketch wherein the similarly svelte Jane Curtin and Laraine Newman seek weight loss help from an extreme diet program set in a remote arctic igloo where they must fight over food. A later sketch from the 1987-1988 season premiere relies on an audio gag where an unseen slide whistle is played up the scale to indicate turn-ons and down the scale to indicate turn-offs. Petite cast member Victoria Jackson and Steve Martin play a couple on a first date, and her admission that she used to be fat is greeted with an emphatic "turn-off"

whistle. And while there is no shortage of these kinds of examples on *Saturday Night Live*, it is interesting to note that phantom fat is not restricted to this one particular television program. Main character Liz Lemon of NBC sit-com *30 Rock* (2006-2013) was a chronic overeater, but was played by thin *Saturday Night Live* alumna Tina Fey. NBC's *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015) was set in the fictional town of Pawnee, Indiana, whose residents are characterized as chronically overweight. The town is ranked as the “#4 Most Obese City” on a still extant Pawnee city website set up as a promotional gag by NBC.⁸⁴ Despite constant binging on stacks of waffles covered with whipped cream, main character Leslie Knope is played by slim Amy Poehler (another former *Saturday Night Live* cast member). Current FXX comedy *You're the Worst* has a buxom but normatively-sized character routinely called “Fat Lindsey” in its early episodes.⁸⁵

I contend that the ability of *Saturday Night Live* and other television programs to create humor about weight with performers who appear normatively thin reveals the spectral nature of female fat in contemporary American culture. I chose the term “phantom fat” to describe these jokes in order to connect it to a rich body of modern scholarship on ghosts, specters, and haunting. Some of this work draws on psychoanalysis, demonstrating that ghosts might represent cultural trauma of the past alive in the present; Avery Gordon's sociological case for the study of ghosts to manifest racial trauma, Grace Cho's work on the Korean diaspora, and Anastasia Ulanowicz's exploration of the Holocaust and September 11th in children's literature are excellent examples. It is true that the impossible physical demands of cultural beauty standards on women could certainly be described in terms of trauma. However, I believe phantom fat is more clearly tied to another school of thought, the “hauntology” of Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*

⁸⁴ <http://www.pawneeindiana.com/about/history.shtml>

⁸⁵ In the course of my research, I found that *Jezebel* writer Sadie Stein recognized the pattern of thin television actresses playing compulsive overeaters back in 2009, though she called this kind of character a “skinny glutton” and used its prevalence to raise questions about emotional health and debasement. I draw on some of these same examples—particularly Liz Lemon—but am interested instead in the spectral temporality of fat.

and the British cultural scholarship that follows in its wake. Derrida uses spectrality to describe Marxism after the fall of Communism across Eastern Europe and, while I'm not concerned here with the geopolitical nature of his argument, he brings into question aspects of time in a helpful way:

If there is something like spectrality, then there are reasons to doubt this reassuring order of presents, and, especially, the border between the present, the actual or present reality of the present, and everything that can be opposed to it: absence, non-presence, non-effectivity, inactuality, virtuality, or even the simulacrum in general, and so forth.⁸⁶

British aural and visual culture scholar Mark Fisher picks up this thread in his book *Ghosts of My Life* in order to apply it to popular music. He defines the late twentieth and early twenty-first century as a time with “no present to grasp and articulate anymore,” having left behind an older paradigm of the linear unfolding of culture through time in favor of a “strange simultaneity,” a culture that has “folded back on itself.”⁸⁷ In fact, Fisher uses a uniquely feminist strategy to demonstrate this unusual arrangement of time: he cites “the personal is political,” a phrase associated with second-wave feminism, as justification to use his experience of clinical depression as a metaphor for the haunted cultural present.⁸⁸

There is an undeniable connection through the body of pasts and futures, possible and lost, and this is the mechanism of phantom fat on television. These jokes capitalize on the ability for fat to throw time out of joint. When aimed at an audience presumed to be male, the result is a particular kind of one-dimensional phantom fat joke which permits a thin female body to represent past or future fatness. The Bob Newhart/Jane Curtin sketch arguably speaks to men, expecting the audience to understand the disgust he feels when he finds out that Curtin used to be

⁸⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 48.

⁸⁷ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), 9.

⁸⁸ Fisher, 28.

fat and could be again. Fisher describes the cultural present as a time of “failed mourning...refusing to give up the ghost or – and this can sometimes amount to the same thing – the refusal of the ghost to give up on us.”⁸⁹ This same relationship exists between Curtin’s current thinness and her past/future fat. She can never truly experience the loss of her weight.

In contrast, phantom fat jokes written by women and produced for an audience presumed to contain women allow an overeating thin female body to *also* represent an infinitely thin present—a temporal possibility I have yet to see acknowledged, perhaps because it is so gendered. In Fisher’s discussion of trip-hop musician Tricky, for example, he notes that the artist frequently writes in the voice of a woman, insinuated to be the “ghost” of his mother’s unrecognized ambition to be a poet. “Gender doesn’t dissolve here in to some bland unisex mush,” Fisher explains. “It’s an art of splitting which is also an art of doubling. Through the women who sing for/as him, Tricky becomes less than one, a split subject that can never be restored to wholeness.” What Fisher misses is that this doubling and splitting is an essentially female mode of performance. In her paper on Tina Fey’s comedic persona, Martha Lauzen uses Nancy Walker’s work on gendered humor to point out that female comedians have historically written jokes that function in two modes: on a masculine level, echoing stereotypes, and a feminine level, identifying those stereotypes as such.⁹⁰ With this history in mind, it is worthwhile to reconsider the phantom fat on female-helmed television shows like *30 Rock*. Liz Lemon is never referred to as a person who used to be fat. While Lemon inhaling a hoagie might denote the threat of past or future fat to male audience members, she may simultaneously represent to women a fantasy of infinite thinness, where eating has no repercussions. No matter how much she consumes, Liz will appear in the next episode as thin as ever. It is important to recognize

⁸⁹ Fisher, 22.

⁹⁰ Lauzen, Martha. “The Funny Business of Being Tina Fey: Constructing a (feminist) comedy icon.” *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 1 (2014): 106-117.

that, most fundamentally, phantom fat is a tool for television to joke about weight without ever displaying a displeasing female body. Even so, phantom fat jokes of this sort may also provide a sort of fantasy reprieve for female viewers who live under the threat of past and future fat.

Even in comedy, phantoms do not appear simply to say hello. Like popular ghost stories about unfinished business, the more metaphorical scholarship on cultural ghosts is chiefly interested in how the present can be manipulated by something lost that has not ceased to be. Phantom fat on *Saturday Night Live* and elsewhere on television comedy is foremost a joke, and often tossed-off, but its construction hews so closely to Derrida and Fisher's description of spectrality that it stands as evidence about female fat in American culture. Even the most stereotypically trim figure can be made to represent fatness with the mere suggestion of a weight once lost that may return. However, certain phantom fat jokes written by women also hint at a different way of experiencing cultural time, rejecting both the past and the future, and instead reveling in an endless present where consumption means nothing.

Phantom fat of either sort, fat drag, and prosthetic fat all serve as a way to evoke fat without featuring a physiologically fat woman, and without implicating an audience in laughing at her. But what, if anything, changes when a fat woman appears as herself?

Representation as Fat Activism

Across the more than eight hundred episodes of *Saturday Night Live* that have aired since 1975, fat women have hosted just twelve. Oprah Winfrey was the first in 1986, and while her very first joke revolved around refusing to play notably large football player Refrigerator Perry, her single episode expanded the range of roles for authentically fat female bodies more than the previous eleven seasons combined. Aside from playing herself, a successful fat woman, she

portrays an undercover cop, a scientist, and the owner of a lunch counter in an odd sketch meant to be sort of a Cinderella story. Her appearance was followed by Delta Burke and Roseanne Barr in 1991, two additional appearances by Roseanne in 1992 and 1994, Rosie O'Donnell in 1993 and 1996, Gabourey Sidibe in 2010, and Melissa McCarthy in 2011, 2013, 2014, and 2016. To put those appearances in perspective, that is the same number of episodes that John Goodman alone has hosted as of December 2016.

Aidy Bryant joined *Saturday Night Live* as a featured player in the 2012 season, but was promoted to full cast member in 2013. Since then, she has consistently played varied, interesting roles that rarely rely on, and even more rarely deny, her size. Like John Belushi or Chris Farley before her, she is flexible enough to play many types of role but works best in a few modes. She excels when sketches call for horny forthrightness or blustering narcissism, but she is perhaps at her best playing wide-eyed naiveté, which has supported a wealth of child and teenage characters over the years. Additionally, her physicality allows the show to expand its repertoire of celebrity impressions to include political anchor Candy Crowley, anti-gay rights crusader Kim Davis, actress Rebel Wilson, and singers Adele, Winona Judd, and Megan Trainor, all women the show might otherwise ignore if they didn't warrant the drag treatment explored earlier.

Rather than try to encapsulate five years of Aidy Bryant's performances, I wish to take a close look at one remarkable sketch from Bryant's third season on the show. It opens with a quick teaser for shows on the fictional channel "Detective TV" like "Good Cop, Jive Cop"—effectively situating the sketch in the world of 1970s television—and then begins to roll the opening credits for a retro buddy cop show starring Kate McKinnon and Aidy Bryant.⁹¹ As they run and punch and pull their guns in elaborately feathered wigs, an announcer calls them "tough

⁹¹ *Saturday Night Live*. Season 39, episode 16. Directed by Don Roy King. Written by Colin Jost, Rob Klein, Brian Tucker, et al. National Broadcasting Corporation, March 2014.

as nails,” and “the best cops in Chicago.” Eventually, the name of the show is revealed to be “Dyke & Fats.” Kate McKinnon, herself a queer woman, is playing “Dutch Plains as Les Dykawitz.” Bryant plays “Velvy O’Malley as Chubbina Fatzarelli.” After a series of visual gags about queerness (McKinnon reveals that her wallet contains only pictures of her dogs) and fatness (Bryant reveals that her wallet contains only links of sausage), the duo enters a station house and approaches guest star Louis C.K., who is playing their commanding officer. Intending to congratulate them, he says “Yeah, good going, Dyke and Fats!” The women explode, pointing their fingers in his face and yelling “You don’t get to call us that!” and “Those are *our* words!” The sketch ends, after a beat of brief, awkward silence, with Bryant screaming one more defiant “No!”

In “Dyke & Fats,” *Saturday Night Live* allows its cast members to fully inhabit identities pushed off screen for nearly forty years. Moreover, it lets them literally police the words used to refer to those identities. In a way, it also reinvents a well-known sketch from the show’s first season, wherein guest host Richard Pryor and Chevy Chase trade racialized insults at a job interview until Chase tosses out the n-word. Pryor infamously returns with “dead cracker,” an obvious threat.⁹² Chase immediately folds and gives Pryor the job, but his insults still hang in limbo at the end of the sketch. They were uttered and punished, but never quite taken off the table. “Dyke and Fats” abandons this oppositional structure. The women delight in their identities and relish their words and, without the one-upmanship of Chase and Pryor’s repartee, they simply refuse to let Louis C.K use their chosen terms. The sketch feels like an organic product of these two particular female perspectives, and their glee in performing it is palpable.

⁹² *Saturday Night Live*, Season 1, episode 7. Directed by Dave Wilson. Written by Anne Beatts, Chevy Chase, Al Franken et al. National Broadcasting Corporation, December 13, 1975.

Bryant barely holds in a smile as she and McKinnon march victoriously from a crime scene, her finger pointed to the sky.

Feminists have long advanced representation as proof of women's oppression, particularly with regard to unattainable standards of beauty. Wendy Chapkis's feminist classic *Beauty Secrets* is full of interviews with women who identify images present in popular media and entertainment as the source of their anxiety about their appearance. Kathay, who identifies herself as someone who has gained and lost weight several times throughout her life, laments that "the images held up to us—especially the erotic images—are of such a physical elite. They have been plastered in front of our face forever telling us what a sexual female looks like."⁹³ Chapkis herself cites a 1984 survey about body image in her introductory chapter, attributing its finding that an overwhelming three-quarters of women polled feel "too fat" to "comparisons each woman makes between her body and the currently fashionable underweight media model."⁹⁴ Tracing this same relationship between the idealized figures of American visual media and individual, imperfect bodies animates every chapter of Susan Douglas's *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* and Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*.

In response, fat activists have historically pointed to new, better, and more varied representation as a solution to the problem feminists raised. *The Fat Studies Reader*, an introductory text to the field, includes several pieces that champion fat representation. Stefanie Snider introduces her essay about fat queer zines published in the San Francisco Bay Area by calling them "activist objects" created by a movement in order to "find and infiltrate spaces

⁹³ Wendy Chapkis, *Beauty Secrets: Women and the Politics of Appearance* (Boston: South End Press, 1986): 158.

⁹⁴ Chapkis, 13

within American culture to form self-representative and self-loving communities.”⁹⁵ Likewise, Lara Frater makes the case that “Chick-Lit” romance novels are one of the few places “where a fat woman gets a chance to star.”⁹⁶ She argues that the sub-genre of fat girl Chick-Lit is ultimately “a gateway to fat acceptance in mainstream media.”⁹⁷ Coming at the same point from a different and somewhat vituperative angle, Beth Bernstein and Matilda St. John excoriate fat celebrities who lose weight in the public eye—so-called “Roseanne Benedict Arnolds.”⁹⁸ Though they question how much women should “need Kathy Bates or Mo’Nique or Queen Latifah to stay thick and stay cool,” they argue that an image of an unapologetically fat female celebrity is important because it “models in public the wherewithal that’s difficult [for an average woman] to marshal in such a hostile environment.”⁹⁹

Social science supports the existence of general cultural hostility towards fat, and has likewise all but proven that there is a connection between the way television comedies represent women’s bodies and real life outcomes for women.¹⁰⁰ Viewed in this context, “Dyke & Fats” feels revolutionary. Likewise, Melissa McCarthy’s brilliantly physical opening monologue from 2013, which focuses on a pair of perilously high platform pumps she has chosen to wear but

⁹⁵ Stefanie Snider, “Fat Girls and Size Queens: Alternative Publications and the Visualizing of Fat and Queer Erotopolitics in Contemporary American Culture,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Ester Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009): 235.

⁹⁶ Lara Frater, “Fat Heroines in Chick-Lit: Gateway to Acceptance in the Mainstream?” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Ester Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009): 223.

⁹⁷ Frater, 240.

⁹⁸ Beth Bernstein and Matilda St. John, “The Roseanne Benedict Arnolds: How Fat Women are Betrayed by Their Celebrity Icons,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Ester Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009): 263.

⁹⁹ Bernstein and St. John, 268.

¹⁰⁰ To cite just a few: Kristen Harrison, “Television Viewers’ Ideal Body Proportions: The Case of the Curvaceously Thin Woman,” *Sex Roles* 48, nos. 5/6 (2003): 255-264; Gregory Fouts and Kimberley Burggraf, “Television Situation Comedies: Female Body Images and Verbal Reinforcements,” *Sex Roles* 40, nos. 5/6 (1999): 473-481; and Gregory Fouts and Kimberley Burggraf, “Television Situation Comedies: Female Weight, Male Negative Comments, and Audience Reactions,” *Sex Roles* 42, nos. 9/10 (2000): 925-932.

cannot walk in, is an athletic strike against fat oppression.¹⁰¹ Aidy Bryant's performances over five seasons in varied roles which do not police or punish her body in accordance with beauty norms is a coup, and she models fat positivity for fat girls and women in the viewing audience.

The presence of unruly female bodies in sketches like "Dyke and Fats" on a show that began its run more than four decades ago with a female cast seen only as "Chevy's girls" seems like progress. If a subversive spirit remains alive and well anywhere on the show, it is in sketches like these. Cast in another light, however, the inclusion of more diverse bodies on *Saturday Night Live* serves a different purpose: to deploy difference in service of political power.

Fat Inclusion and Neoliberal Multiculturalism

Saturday Night Live has always aligned itself with the counterculture and audiences have generally accepted its conviction that it is, or at least began as, a proudly anti-establishment program. In an interview with *Rolling Stone* for a short book they put out in 1979, Lorne Michaels describes his vision for the program as "a comedy-variety show in which the writing would bend to neither a star's shtick nor any preconceived format, a free-for-all in which various writers would always express *themselves*."¹⁰² *Rolling Stone* writer Timothy White lauds the show's "cutting edge of truth," calling its humor "daring and incisive" and crediting the writers and performers with a sensibility that "doesn't cheat the accuracy of its language," or "shrink from touchy, tough, or sophisticated topics."¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ *Saturday Night Live*, Season 38, episode 17. Directed by Don Roy King. Written by Seth Meyers, Colin Jost, James Anderson et al. National Broadcasting Corporation, April 6, 2013.

¹⁰² Tom Burke, "The First Season," in *Rolling Stone Visits Saturday Night Live*, ed. Marianne Partridge (Garden City: Dolphin Books, 1979): 29.

¹⁰³ Timothy White, "Some Background," in *Rolling Stone Visits Saturday Night Live*, ed. Marianne Partridge (Garden City: Dolphin Books, 1979): 11.

Despite this edgy reputation, *Saturday Night Live* has always been cozy with politicians, and with the government itself. Chevy Chase's bumbling impression of President Gerald Ford was one of the first truly famous bits that emerged during the show's first season. Unflattering as the impersonation may have been, the Ford administration eagerly cooperated with the show almost immediately. Ford's press secretary Ron Nessen hosted an episode towards the end of that same supposedly subversive first season, an episode that featured President Ford himself in a recorded video at the opening. Similarly, there is no shortage of political figures who have appeared on the show: Georgia state senator Julian Bond and presidential candidate Ralph Nader both hosted in 1977, New York mayor Ed Koch hosted in 1983, Democratic presidential candidates George McGovern and Rev. Jesse Jackson both hosted in 1984; presidential candidate Steve Forbes, New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani, and Senator John McCain hosted throughout the 1990s, and former Vice President Al Gore and the Rev. Al Sharpton hosted in the early 2000s. Donald Trump hosted a much-criticized episode during his presidential campaign in 2015, and, like several other political figures out on the stump, former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton dropped by that same year to make a cameo appearance as a bartender opposite cast member Kate McKinnon's Hillary Clinton impression.

Guest appearances aside, there is hardly a better way to illustrate the ties between the political establishment and *Saturday Night Live* than to point to the career trajectory of Al Franken. He rose from *Saturday Night Live* writer to *Saturday Night Live* performer to political humor author and radio DJ to sitting two-term United States senator representing the state of Minnesota. But one need not know that a sketch writer became a politician to sense the latent neoliberalism of the show. It runs on the recognizable mechanisms of "neoliberal multiculturalism," what Jodi Melamed defined as a system that exploits difference to obfuscate

the actions of a “world historic organization of economy, governance, and biological and social life” which “demand[s] that nation-states act in the first place as subsidiary managers of the global economy.”¹⁰⁴ In the discussion that follows, I will lean heavily on her explication of the neoliberal multicultural apparatus.

Let us return for a moment to the Ron Nessen episode in the first season. *Rolling Stone* writer Tom Burke happened to sit in with the cast and crew the week that very episode was in production and interviewed Lorne Michaels about his career in comedy between calls with Nessen about scheduling. When Burke asks about Michaels’s short tenure as a writer on the variety show *Laugh-In*, Michaels “asserts venomously” that the straw that broke his back was Richard Nixon’s cameo appearance. On *Laugh-In*, Nixon uttered their catchphrase “Sock it to me?” During the show Michaels executive produced just three days later, President Gerald Ford would utter the catchphrase, “Live from New York, it’s *Saturday Night!*” Burke catches the irony later in his interview, noting that the “Nessen week, though funny enough, appears to be either *SN*’s blatant Washington ass-kiss, reciprocation for everyone being asked there for dinner the week before, or a thorough duping by the White House of *SN*, which produces on Saturday a long slow-motion replay of Nixon’s Sock-It-to-Me.”¹⁰⁵ The implication is that *Saturday Night Live*, for all of its countercultural texture, is thoroughly enmeshed in the eddy of capital and government by the end of its first season on air. It follows then that, despite hundreds of political sketches, so many politicians would see *Saturday Night Live* as a friendly arena to raise one’s public profile.

Jodi Melamed follows the manufacture of racial difference through American history and uncovers techniques particular to liberal and neoliberal governments; she finds that misdirection

¹⁰⁴ Jodi Melamed, “The Spirit of Neoliberalism: From Racial Liberalism to Neoliberal Multiculturalism,” *Social Text* 89, vol. 24 (2006): 15.

¹⁰⁵ Burke, 36.

is the primary strategy of neoliberal multiculturalism. By way of example, she notes that the Bush administration hands out Korans to unfairly detained prisoners of war at Guantanamo Bay to indicate an official respect for Muslim beliefs. This superficial embrace of difference both obscures unjust acts of war against Muslim populations abroad and designates the United States as infallibly inclusive. Once caught in the act, one perceives this sleight of hand everywhere. Television is by no means exempt, and one could argue that it in fact serves as a crucial testing ground to familiarize American audiences with the methods of neoliberal rule.

Let us then reconsider Aidy Bryant's tenure on *Saturday Night Live* from this new angle. If indeed her hire could be considered a microscopic act of neoliberal multiculturalism, her inclusion would obscure the maintenance and reproduction of other, graver injustices. This bears out. Bryant began just a season before cast member Leslie Jones was hired, and their stars rose at roughly the same time. By her own admission, Bryant feels like she was "magically able to circumnavigate" much of the bias fat performers usually receive in Hollywood, from producers and audiences alike.¹⁰⁶ Jones, on the other hand, is a large black woman and the oldest cast member ever hired, and has received racist, sexist, appearance-based abuse from the internet so egregious it received news coverage.¹⁰⁷ Her website was hacked and the culprits leaked her private nude photographs to the public. Even her otherwise nuanced *New Yorker* profile quite rudely describes her as having "a round, rubbery face" and chooses the section of her stand-up to quote wherein she describes herself as "a big bitch" with "big-ass feet."¹⁰⁸ In contrast to Bryant's varied roles, Jones most often performs self-deprecating stand-up in her own voice during the Weekend Update segment or plays a fictionalized version of herself as romantically entangled

¹⁰⁶ Sarah Benincasa, "SNL's Aidy Bryant Talks Boyfriends, Best Friends and Being Prom Queen: BUST Interview," *BUST*, November 2015.

¹⁰⁷ Anna Silman, "A Timeline of Leslie Jones's Horrific Online Abuse," *The Cut* (blog), August 14, 2016, <http://nymag.com/thecut/2016/08/a-timeline-of-leslie-joness-horrific-online-abuse.html>

¹⁰⁸ Andrew Marantz, "Ready for Prime Time," *The New Yorker*, January 4, 2016.

with one of the cast's punier young white men—the joke being the sheer impossibility of the couple, but hinging on the unacceptability of Jones, not the man. Therefore, while Bryant is deployed as a symbol of body diversity, she obscures the show's use of Jones in stereotypically racialized and gendered roles.¹⁰⁹ Zooming out, the inclusion of both Bryant and Jones can be seen as part of a larger implementation of the same pattern. By giving the show a gloss of diversity, they permit its ever-deeper investment in advancing the neoliberal political agenda, accomplished by both abstaining from effectively subversive humor and colluding with specific politicians to rehabilitate their damaged brands.

Conclusion

I find myself writing about *Saturday Night Live* in the wake of the 2016 presidential election. Half the country enters the next four years like a fire inspector into a house recently burned down, poking through the ashes to find the faulty wire that lit the whole thing ablaze. The program has received criticism in the popular press for helping to normalize Donald Trump's racism, sexism, and xenophobia by inviting him to host an episode in late 2015.¹¹⁰ A toothless interview on *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* (also produced by Lorne Michaels) faced similar backlash.¹¹¹ And even as *Saturday Night Live* struggles against perpetual criticism that it is no longer relevant or full of “danger,” that the question is even being posed about what blame

¹⁰⁹ I don't wish to pass judgement on the actual content of Leslie Jones's stand-up, which I believe might have a very different effect when she performs it in a comedy club instead of on the air. The frame of *Saturday Night Live* casts a specific pall on her work, given its historic mistreatment of cast members of color, its sketches that still often assume a white viewer, and the many gendered transgressions I listed in the section “Gender and *Saturday Night Live*.”

¹¹⁰ Daniel D'Addario, “SNL Needs an Actual Point of View,” *Time*, November 13, 2016, <http://time.com/4569026/saturday-night-live-snl-donald-trump-review/>

¹¹¹ Brittany King, “Jimmy Fallon Under Fire for Lighthearted Interview with Donald Trump,” *People*, September 16, 2016, <http://people.com/tv/jimmy-fallon-receives-backlash-after-donald-trump-interview/>

for Trump's rise falls at Michaels' feet points to the program's lingering cultural significance, and more broadly, to the power of television comedy as a medium.¹¹²

Chasing the fat female body through the *Saturday Night Live* archive has at times felt like a misdirection of energy amidst this narrative, but I believe my excavation has uncovered some facts applicable beyond these specific bodies. Television comedy has ways of vanishing what it does not want to see, a toolkit to dismantle what it considers ugly. I contend that these tools are effective on both physical and ideological ugliness. Just as thin women in temporary prosthetics portrayed fat women as foolishly indulgent and nothing more, impersonations of Donald Trump by Phil Hartman, Darrell Hammond, Taran Killam, and Alec Baldwin parodied his boneheaded narcissism and little else. This is reductive puppetry in either scenario, the momentary manipulation of an unsavory body to narrow its meaning and undermine its power.

Though my heart jumped when I was able to connect these small and transient moments of television comedy to bigger currents in cultural studies or American neoliberalism, I was left somewhat disheartened not to be able to tell a story about the work of female comedians I admire along a more revolutionary arc. I have come to understand, however, that life in America is, maybe out of pragmatism, organized around identity. Perhaps we cannot deny the insidious entanglement of neoliberalism and the manufacture of those identities, but neither can we deny the twinge of recognition one feels when we are reflected back to ourselves. Representation may be an insufficient mechanism to dismantle institutional injustice, but it is a salve to the individual pain of erasure and marginalization. The fat women of *Saturday Night Live* invite us to laugh

¹¹² A famous bit of *Saturday Night Live* lore specifically revolves around the accusation that the show had lost the element of "danger." Original writer/performer Michael O'Donague left the after the second season, but returned in the fifth—widely expected to be the show's last season—to "burn the place down." During a rant in the writer's room that the show was no longer edgy, he spray-painted the word "danger" on the wall in a dramatic display of comedy machismo. Fellow writer Marilyn Suzanne Miller rolled her eyes at the display, claiming in *Live from New York* that "it took him forever to spray paint it. I thought the can was going to run out."

heartily, to enjoy those moments that buoy our sense of self. Most importantly, they implore us to watch critically.

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