

FUNNY BUSINESS: WOMEN COMEDIANS AND THE POLITICAL  
ECONOMY OF HOLLYWOOD SEXISM

by

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: *Funny Business: Women Comedians and the Political Economy of Hollywood Sexism*

In the last five years there has been great public interest in Hollywood's "gender problem," namely its unequal representation of women in key creative roles such as director, producer, and studio head. Yet, in the long history of women in film and television, comedians have had the greatest success and degree of agency over their work. From silent film comediennes like Mabel Normand to Lucille Ball, Carol Burnett, and more recently Tina Fey and Amy Schumer, women comedians have resoundingly had success behind-the-screen as well as in front of it. In order to comprehend the disjuncture between the data and the women comedians' success, we must account for the women at the center of contemporary popular culture who seem to have successfully navigated highly gendered structures of media.

This dissertation offers an extension of the existing scholarship on the industrial practices of women mediamakers and a historical production study of gender. This dissertation opens up ways of exploring the range and complexity of gendered practices in Hollywood. It shows

how these actions operate within discursive frames and institutional frameworks that generally serve to perpetuate the exclusion of women. I suggest that cultural industries like film and television, when examined simultaneously as creative spaces and business enterprises using a political economy approach blended with cultural studies, offer revelatory sites for the study of gendered labor practices in Hollywood.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

In April 2015 a Tumblr site called “Shit People Say to Women Directors & Other Women in Film” began collecting anonymous anecdotes illustrating rampant sexism in Hollywood. One submission read:

I was at one of my first networking lunches, with lots of important filmmakers in attendance. During a break I happened to strike up a conversation with the first woman who was able to join the cinematographer’s guild. She said that she’d had all the qualifications for years, and had applied long before she got in, but that the man in charge of membership refused to let her join, telling her, ‘Over my dead body!’ ‘Oh my god,’ I asked her, ‘how did you ever get in?’ [She replied,] ‘He died.’

This darkly comedic story provides hope that women eventually will have more access to influential segments of the Hollywood industry. However, the story also suggests it could take (literally) lifetimes for that to happen. This account is one of many that illustrates the gender-exclusivity existing at several levels of the Hollywood industry, in both below-the-line and above-the-line work. The predominance of male gatekeepers in Hollywood has become a widely known barrier for women’s success in mainstream film and television. In the last decade, popular press prominently featured female writers and directors of film and major cable and network television shows. Headlines like “TV’s New

Girls' Club," (Loofbourow) and "Female Film Directors Gain Ground, Slowly" (Rickey) suggest women-made media is enjoying widespread popularity. Yet, the surge in visibility of women writer-directors in popular culture obscures a dismal reality. A study by *Women and Hollywood*, a leading website advocating for gender parity in the entertainment industry, shows that 22 of the directors of the top 250 films in 2016 were women (Silverstein). The drop is even sharper in the writing department. The annual "Celluloid Ceiling" report that measures gender parity onscreen and behind the scenes found that: "In 2015-16, women comprised 26% of creators, directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and directors of photography working on broadcast network, cable, and streaming programs. This represents an increase of 1 percentage point from 25% in 2014-15, and no change from 26% in 2012-13" (Lauzen "Celluloid Ceiling" 3).

The historical exclusion of women from the Hollywood industry is nothing new, and these reports corroborate the work by influential feminist media scholars about structural sexism in the industry. However, the numbers contradict the overrepresentation of women mediamakers in popular culture discourse. In order to comprehend the disjuncture between the data and the media's overrepresentation, we must account for the women at the center of contemporary popular culture who seem to have successfully navigated highly gendered structures of media.

This dissertation offers an extension of the existing scholarship on the industrial practices of women mediamakers. This chapter focuses on the connections “between the micro contexts and the macro forces” (Mayer 15) and offers a historical production study of gender. This dissertation opens up ways of exploring the range and complexity of gendered practices in Hollywood. It shows how these actions operate within discursive frames and institutional frameworks that generally serve to perpetuate the exclusion of women.

I frame this dissertation in the context of the rise of the creative and cultural industries. In a brief article for *Open Democracy*, Angela McRobbie notes, “One of the central features of the modern urban economy is the explosive growth in the numbers of people making a living through culture and the arts.” Essentially, as her article’s title suggests, “everyone is creative.” In recent years, Hollywood (as a metonym for both filmmaking and television production) has had to adapt to an onslaught of new competing technologies and business models that only highlight its tenuous position as king of media. In order to adapt, Hollywood has only tightened its models of production, distribution, and marketing, leaving very little room for entry from those not already within the Hollywood inner circle. Like Silicon Valley, academia, or a number of other creative cultural industries, Hollywood’s structures, processes, and rituals are only accessible to a few of many willing to play by its rules. Although “everyone is creative,” few can actually sustain a career and

effectively monetize their creativity. Women are most often left out of positions of power in this move toward an open and flexible economy.

At its core, this project is concerned with the distribution of power in Hollywood and Hollywood's power relations as they are inflected by and through gender. To that end, this dissertation combines a cultural studies approach with a political economy approach to study "the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources" (Mosco qtd. in Johnson 10). Some media scholars, such as Thomas Schatz are rightly wary of this combination of approaches. Schatz notes that media industry studies has taken a "decided slant toward a political economy approach," meaning, "analyses that focus on ownership and control, on technology and policy, on marketing and consumption, with only incidental concern for the creative and cultural dynamics involved" (40). In response to criticisms that "political economy is simplistic and inadequate" (152) Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan argue that political economists are necessarily aware of "the people whose collective labor creates media artifacts, the artifacts themselves, and the people who engage with or are exposed to those artifacts" (153). This dissertation, like Wasko and Meehan, is interested in both "the means and modes of production as well as the products themselves" (Schatz 40). According to film scholar Derek Johnson, this approach "consider[s] the organization of the social relations of the media business and the unequal exchange of creative resources within it, asking who

has the power to produce culture in what ways” (9-10). Power, in this study, as in cultural studies as a field, is considered in terms of meaning, identity and representation as well as in terms of financial power, decision-making power, and creative control.

I agree with Havens, Lotz and Tunic that it is important to pay attention to the “micropolitics of everyday meaning making” (238) as well as the larger economic factors that are usually studied within the umbrella of political economy and critical media industry studies. I take a similar approach to the one they outline as the basis for their work in that “rather than centering those micropolitics within acts such as the resistive readings of individual audiences members [...] critical media industry studies examines the micropolitics of institutional operation and production practices” (ibid.)

Though there have been many academic studies and mainstream news pieces about gender inequality in Hollywood, few of them contextualize the gender disparity within the context of a larger culture industry. Furthermore, studies of creative and culture industries rarely look at Hollywood exclusively, favoring instead new media forms such as YouTube vlogging, bloggers, or the tech industry. As Bridget Conner, Rosalind Gil, and Stephanie Taylor argue, “Inequalities in creative work have been relatively underexplored until recently” (1), and it is important to also have studies that specialize in breaking down inequalities within specific sectors. This being said, ultimately, this dissertation suggests that cultural industries like film and television, when examined

simultaneously as creative spaces and business enterprises, offer revelatory sites for the study of gendered labor practices in creative industries, of which Hollywood is only one (albeit, an important and illuminating) example. To justify this conclusion, the dissertation takes many turns throughout its chapters. However, it must begin by outlining what necessarily is a “creative industry,” and how movie and television production fits into the schema of these industries.

There is a mystification of what the cultural and creative industries *are* and what, in fact, workers employed by them *do*. Though this is much more the case in places with a high degree of job specialization like Silicon Valley and even academia, the elusive nature of a coherent job description in Hollywood, especially for above-the-line workers (for example, the second chapter of this dissertation takes up the question “what is a showrunner?”) makes many researchers studying media or other creative industries focus solely on their nebulous defining qualities. By extension, there is even a debate about what exactly to call these industries. While some, for example, Jason Potts, John Hartley, Paul Ormerod, and Stuart Cunningham define them by the relational qualities and dub them “reputation economies” or “network[ing] economies,” based on the required high degree of sociality for these jobs, others like David Hesmondhalgh would prefer to define “creative labor” as “work which is geared to the production of original or distinctive commodities that are primarily

aesthetic and/or symbolic-expressive, rather than utilitarian and functional” (Conor et. al 416).

This dissertation attempts to look at both the social makeup and creative end-product produced by Hollywood. The focus of this dissertation is not to generate a broad definition that encompasses as many of these fields as possible, but is instead to see how the dynamic and varied workings of Hollywood necessarily involve multiple kinds of approaches that all fall under the category of “political economy” and “cultural studies.”

The project begins with a discussion of agents and networks and they ways in which those relationships contributed to the gender disparity within Hollywood. However, as I will soon discuss, it is important not to forget the final product that is produced by the creative industry in question. Though much of this dissertation is invested in the processes of production and distribution, Hollywood ultimately manufactures creative products – movies and television shows. It is debatable as to what proportion of studios’ times are taken up by actual mediamaking versus promotion and ancillary marketing, but the cinematic or televisual product is, even if a façade, primary. Raul Rodrigues-Ferrandiz laments how scholars have forgotten the creative product at the end of the line: “We have passed from the anguish and disappointment Adorno felt on seeing the creative act of the artist swallowed up by the logic of industry, to qualifying the entire industry as ‘creative’ to place creativity itself at the very heart of this industry” (qtd. in Schatz 41). This dissertation is

invested in the ways Hollywood and its stars are selling both product and person as exemplars of creativity.

The focus on high-profile individuals within the industry in this dissertation is not to perpetuate a “great women of history” approach to media studies. Instead, these individuals are used as examples of what a successful business model looks like within an industry that often prohibits women from having a high degree of success. The comedians I discuss in this dissertation are seldom starring in the tentpole action films of Hollywood’s summer season, and that is precisely why their influential places within film and television are worth investigating.

Seldom discussed within studies of the Hollywood industry is work, and the many ways in which that work fuels or is fueled by the machinations of the larger corporate and business structures it serves. Havens et. al argue: “studies of the operation of power within complex media industries provide valuable information about how workers function” (239). Bridget Conor, Rosalind Gill, and Stephanie Taylor rightly point out the consequences of an entire class of workers being described as a “Do What You Love” generation. They write, “It is significant to note the potency and pervasiveness of this personalized figuration of the ‘creative’ and how profoundly it has displaced important questions about working conditions and practices within the CCI, let alone issues of equality, diversity and social justice” (2). Though we cannot dismiss the ways “Do What You Love” is a powerful and mostly accurate portrayal of how creative work is

justified (and sold), pointing out the contradictions in the phrase is a surface critique that does not expose the racialized and gendered ways that ethos is deployed not just by individuals but by the workplaces that promote work insecurity and inequality and reward silence and complicity.

As John T. Caldwell points out in his brief but incisive outline to approaches to media industry studies, “Hollywood [...] reincarnates Bentham’s ‘panopticon’ for the twenty-first century [...]” (“Para-Industry” 161). The industry “disciplines workers through a series of long-sanctioned rituals – giving notes, on-set rewrites, entry level self-sacrificing, worker retreats and so on” (ibid). However, self-surveillance is even more ubiquitous as creative workers are forced to impose on themselves a schedule and tasks, and must outfit themselves with a personal “brand” that functions, in essence, to corporatize the personality, reputation, and social skills of someone looking to enter or maintain their status in Hollywood.

As Conor, Gill, and Taylor make clear in their introduction to *Gender and Creative Labor*, the working patterns and environment of the cultural and creative industries have disproportionately affected women from their prospects at securing an already hard to get job, to maintaining their status at their job, and finally in securing a higher ranked or more secure position. They note, “Creative working, as unbounded immersion and personalized, emotional labour [sic], demands the masculine selfishness of the conventional creative artist and this conflicts with long-established gendered positioning of women as

other-oriented, attending to the needs of others and heeding their preferences” (12).

Hollywood has, since the coming of sound, been slowly evolving toward a more masculinized workplace, with its contemporary emphasis on flexibility and synergy as a new iteration. Karen Ward Mahar makes the argument that although the film industry began within a masculinized context, the year 1916 is the beginning of a phase when “women filmmakers became marginalized when the film industry’s new strategy aimed not at cultural legitimacy but financial legitimacy” (7). According to Mahar, the pressure from Wall Street and other vested interests in Hollywood’s financial viability created an atmosphere unwelcome to women, sacrificing gender parity for economic futurity.

In the last five years there has been greater public interest in Hollywood’s “gender problem,” namely its unequal representation of women in key creative roles such as director, producer, and studio head. But the problem has been a glaring one for much longer, as studies show a period of steady or stagnant growth for women in key creative roles in film and television. This is best described not by blatant discriminatory practices (though those exist as the example at the beginning of this chapter attests) but by changing ideologies tied directly to industry shifts. As Mahar points out, “there was no memo circulated to studio heads asking them to eliminate women filmmakers in the 1920s” (7). There *were*, however, changing ideologies and discourses about sexual difference that influenced business structure and policy. The transition

to sound, as Mahar and dozens of other scholars recount it, was a tumultuous and volatile time for the industry, much like the era of New Hollywood, and the 1990s rise of digital recording and the primacy of streaming services in the mid-2000s.

Following Mahar's logic, it makes sense that women's exclusion from Hollywood is more pronounced than ever, with far less remediation accomplished despite the issue's high-profile. Hollywood has been adapting (some might say badly) to new technologies and new business models that are seen as challenges best taken on by men. This is clearly faulty reasoning, but as Mahar makes clear "industrial growth and change can unexpectedly open as well as close opportunities for women" (8). As Mahar argues in her book, specifically, Hollywood's vertical integration created the backbone for exclusionary business practices disguised as capitalist logic.

If we apply Mahar's framework to the rest of film history, when vertical integration returns in the 1990s, again we see male-centric ideologies take hold not just in mainstream cinema, but also the more "egalitarian" indie cinema, especially as the major Hollywood studios absorb the mini-majors. The male genius "auteur" from the 1960s becomes a core component of Hollywood's business logic. Hollywood produces larger and larger action films to drive dwindling box office returns, and resource scarcity (and the fierce competition it entails) becomes the driving engine of what films get greenlit. In her own study on writer, Miranda J. Banks notes, "What emerges is a realization that

changes in the production, distribution and circulation of screen media content dramatically affect and ultimately redefine the nature of writers' labour [sic]" (545). The same is evident from a study of the women hyphenates that emerge at various times of film and television history.

Mahar's logic also accounts for greater gender parity in other parts of the world that gives them their due for working toward equal pay and employment but does not uphold Sweden or Australia for instance as necessarily "more enlightened" countries. Their methods of film financing are fundamentally different than America's or even the UK's and the logic of capitalism is less ingrained in their cultural institutions (and, it is important that in those countries filmmaking is regarded as a primarily cultural not business-minded activity). Gender parity is encouraged not just as a step toward greater social equity, but also as an opportunity for greater creativity and diversification of product (though Sweden's film industry would probably not use the latter business-speak to describe their methods). By focusing on women working in the mainstream, this dissertation seeks to analyze the complex discursive relationship between female authorship and commercial processes. Furthermore, in a media landscape where the divisions between art and commercial modes of mediamaking are eroding, this intervention is particularly timely.

In the long history of women in film and television, comedians have had the greatest success and degree of agency over their work. From silent film

comediennes like Mabel Normand to Lucille Ball, Carol Burnett, and more recently Tina Fey and Amy Schumer, women comedians have resoundingly had success behind-the-screen as well as in front of it. For many reasons that will be discussed at length throughout this dissertation, comedians particularly have been able not only to have career longevity, but also careers that showcase their diverse creative talents, often as the head writer, showrunner, director, or other position of power. Given the history of discrimination against women in the industry, the persistent and consistent success of women comedians is a crucial history to expose. Film comediennes of the 1910s and 1920s had the spotlight (and the attending controversy and criticism) over the bathing beauties and chorus girls. Still, female comedians are more likely attributed their credit for producing, directing, or writing as a part of their creative package, far more than when dramatic actress' ventures outside their niche.

One of the issues to contend with when writing about women in comedy is how comedy has been since the 1920s, a "sort of generic ghetto, a starting point that must be abandoned as soon as possible if one had any hopes of becoming a legitimate actress" (Wagner "Silent Comediennes" 239). This designation began when comedy itself was deemed a genre not befitting a proper young woman, but it has continued on as comedy has been one of the most welcoming genres to women in film and television. Much of this can be attributed to the ways the family sitcom, the rom-com, or the chick flick are

gendered as women's genres, and comedy is generally seen as a more "family friendly" entertainment genre than drama. It is also notable that most of the women I discuss in this dissertation also began in television, a less prestigious medium until recently that has consequently been more open to women in the writers' room or the production studio.

There is still a kneejerk move for actresses toward dramatic roles after a while in comedy, however in recent years comedy has become less and less a "training ground" for drama, and has developed its own cultural prestige. The development of comedic segments on late-night talk shows and outlets like *Saturday Night Live* and *Lip Sync Battle* emphasize the need for actresses to have a comedic side. There are fewer women actresses now whose careers are composed solely of dramatic roles. Furthermore, the evolution of "comedy" into a genre that allows for dramatic moments and nuance has not only inflated its status as a genre capable of "quality" productions, it also allows women "comedians" to show their range as actresses.

All the comedians I have chosen as objects of study are hyphenates, occupying 2 or more roles of writer-director-producer-creator-showrunner-actress. Additionally all the women I have chosen to focus on have cultivated a networked formation similar to those of previous women comedians. Through popular press and social media, these women position themselves as part of a distinct cluster of writer-directors defined by similar artistic and political sensibilities inflected by generational ties as well as common creative

influences. Since they control the many facets of production and distribution, the author becomes central to conversations about their work. Thus the critical discourse around the work of the female auteur examine not just the content, themes and aesthetics of particular texts but also criticize the industrial strategies they use to promote and distribute their work.

One of the primary methods of analysis is close reading. John T. Caldwell notes that, “political economics and textual and cultural analysis are not mutually exclusive, but rather are inseparable from each other” (“Para-Industry” 157-8). Caldwell argues that “jettisoning textual analysis as we move to industry research only means that we will dismiss much of what industry itself obsesses about,” (158) and yet that is usually the first to be excised from analyses of culture industries, and the Hollywood industrial complex. Film scholar Thomas Schatz also point out that in an edited collection on media industries that included his own work there was little on the “individual agency in the creation of media content, about the formal style and expressive qualities of individual works, and about the analysis and assessment of media texts” (39).

For the women I write about in this project, self-reflexive critique of their own positions within the entertainment industry fuels their comedy. Whether it is “authentic” self-awareness or a comedic persona, the ways in which they talk about themselves and their jobs within their television shows, stand-up routines, or interviews are crucial to putting together a sketch of how they

relate to their occupations. Though “oral history” typically encompasses a formal interview process, the meta-commentary on their own work through various outlets I also see as a kind of oral history that tells us the development of their relationship to their own work. It is no coincidence that one can find commonalities between the experiences of women comedians, as well as thematic concerns that play out in their fictional and “real” lives. As Miranda J. Banks notes, “[A] reason for this turn to interviews and oral history is that as a method they are particularly rewarding for studying craftspeople whose central tools are words [...] [Writers] are not just aware of their position and role within the industry – as many are – they are also uniquely articulate in their analysis of that role” (547). For most of the women studied in this dissertation, they are writers who not only write fictional television, but have also taken pen to paper in the form of memoir and a deliberate discussion of their craft.

### **Chapter Summaries**

By shifting from a symbolic study of gender as representation, to a more embodied or materialist based study of production culture, my dissertation refocuses on the creative process of women artists. My dissertation will show the methods of production, distribution, and exhibition contemporary female mediamakers use to create their work are constantly de-legitimized, which perpetuates women’s exclusion from mainstream media.

With this framework, my dissertation is contributing to an existing pool of scholarship concerned with production culture. Recently, a core group of

scholars has begun writing about how film production practices and discourses are affected by gender or race. A production culture study focused on issues of gender opens up ways of exploring the range and complexity of production practices in Hollywood at a critical moment when women are severely underrepresented behind the scenes.

The dissertation is organized with three chapters each focused on either production or distribution. The first chapter, “Agents and Comedian Networks,” foregrounds talent acquisition – or, how someone might enter Hollywood and establish themselves as a player. This is an overlooked facet of Hollywood, with most book-length studies of celebrity and production beginning at the moment of recognizability and hireability. However, when it comes to opportunities for gender, racial, and ethnic minorities in Hollywood, part of the onus falls on agencies, who, like studios, consistently overlook women and people of color in favor of “bankable” and “mainstream” options (meaning, white, straight, and devoid of class status markers).

Since the Golden Age of Hollywood in the 1930s through the 1940s, agents have played a key role in the development of stars and the development of the industry as a business. Compensation, whether it is in the form of actual dollars, investments, creative control, or cultural cache is the wheel that keeps the Hollywood machine turning. Agents are at the forefront of the negotiations that in effect set the standard for succeeding years and “eras” of Hollywood, because they broker both formal and informal hiring practices. With a quick

history of the Wheel of Comedy in the early 2000s that spawned an entire generation and brand of comedy of closely-knit male comedians, we see the ways in which agents are a key mechanism for trendsetting and taste-making within the industry. The Wheel of Comedy is to a lesser extent being replicated today by a dozen women comedians who have worked together and maintained visible friendly relationships via social media. This not only adds to a cultural cache akin to the “squad” of the 2010s, but it also creates a network through which women hyphenates can tap into each others audiences and create collaboratively.

This chapter also addresses a misconception about celebrities’ lack of agency over their negotiations and dealings. Many stars throughout Hollywood history have teamed with their agents to declare to the studios and their audiences new phases in their careers with certain kinds of demands. Not only do agents negotiate rates and pay, they also negotiate a slew of cultural signifiers that are tied to financial viability and financial worth.

This chapter also takes a closer look into the celebrity as freelancer, a phenomena that, as indicated previously has become de rigeur for above-the-line workers. Though actors and filmmakers have the mechanisms to create job stability such as agents, other professional connections, and personal methods of persuasion, work is still not guaranteed. Furthermore, their job stability is less reliant on "need" than on the whims of trends and tastes. Though development deals are common in Hollywood as artists partner with studios

and networks, these deals are also likely to expire before a concrete product emerges. Hollywood is notoriously slow on the development front and has sidelined several large, promising projects. As a whole, the production component of creative work is more precarious than the distribution or exhibition side of the industry. Essentially, actors, directors, and writers are increasingly freelancers, which allows them greater creative agency, but also puts them in a less stable work environment. Precarity has come to define the cultural and creative industries in the age of neoliberalism.

By tracing a history of the woman actor as freelancer, we can put contemporary comedic hyphenates into a history of women vying for artistic control via their financial stability. This history also allows us to see the ways in which the economics and business logic of Hollywood has allowed for women to take greater control over their work in this way, even when supposed stringent studios and laws prohibited actresses from exercising total “agency” over their careers as we describe it today. As Emily Carman notes in her groundbreaking book, *Freelance Women in Hollywood*, freelancing is “an overlooked but significant trend” in 1930s Hollywood. I argue it is a trend that not only continues to present-day, but is one of the defining characteristics of how labor works for actresses, writers, and showrunners.

The second chapter on the writers' room thinks through the gendered dynamics in the production process. The argument is two-fold. First, the chapter looks at the culture in improv comedy circles that perpetuates a

gendered hierarchy, with women at the bottom. It is important to start with improv comedy because it is the training ground for the majority of comedy writers and actors. By understanding the culture of improv comedy, we can begin to understand the dynamics that are carried over to Hollywood. I argue that within improv comedy there is a problematic hierarchical structure that encourages women to take less creative risks in favor of assuaging the group (which is usually majority male). In turn, this method of collaboration and creation inflects the dynamics in the formal writers' room, where women are once again asked to be part of team that bases its comedic sensibility in large part on comedy that is insensitive towards women and minorities generally. By looking at the 2002 court case of Lyle vs. Warner Bros., which saw a comedy writer in the *Friends* writers' room sue the Warner Bros. television studio for harassment and discrimination, I illustrate how sexism in comedy is formalized through law and the bureaucracies that regulate creative labor in Hollywood.

Then the chapter focuses on the role of “showrunner,” who is the head writer/producer of the television sitcom and dramedy. In 2016, *The Hollywood Reporter* released their “Hollywood’s 50 Most Powerful Showrunners of 2016.” According to *Women and Hollywood*, “To qualify for the list, a showrunner has to achieve some combination of the following: notable prolificacy—for example, Shonda Rhimes’s Shondaland empire — ‘pull exceptional ratings,’ be critically acclaimed and awards-worthy, or have a vision so specific [...] that a network or streamer is willing to build a brand around their vision” (Montpelier). The

report included individual showrunners as well as showrunning duos and teams. *Women and Hollywood* reports that, “Of 69 individuals highlighted in the list, 20 are women—29 percent” (Montpelier). Of those 20, 11 were women working in comedy or comedy/drama hybrids. Though this is only representative of the most bankable showrunners and television programs, it is a good indicator of the power of comedy, not just for television, but also for women as a creative space. The showrunner is itself a hybrid model of writer and public figure, the closest televisual analogue to the film auteur. By looking more closely at the mix of creative talent and business savvy needed for the position, we can begin to discern the qualities Hollywood deems “necessary” for its leadership positions.

The third and last chapter looks at how women mediamakers market, publicize and distribute their work. Caldwell points out that, “the industry’ is not a monolith controlled by five or six giant conglomerates but rather a series of dense rhizomatic networks of sub companies held at a safe distance, loosely structure to flexibly adapt to new labor markets, new digital technologies and consumer unruliness” (“Para-Industry” 161). This chapter uses comedians’ careers to trace the ways different “rhizomatic networks” come together to influence and bolster the comedian’s earning potential and ultimate star power. Using a lens of celebrity studies and franchising logic, I explain the ways women necessarily diversify their body of work to maintain visibility in the Hollywood landscape and to create more economic opportunities for

themselves. I argue that their efforts at diversification take on the strategies and qualities of studio franchising logic.

In her book, Emily Carman introduces the phrase “professional agency” to describe how some 1930s stars “used the legal terms of their labor as actors and their unique creative public personae – their “celebrity” images – to attain increased professional visibility in the Hollywood industry.” In the last chapter I put forth the phrase “creative agency” underscoring not just the professional credibility attached to the women comedians I discuss, but also to cement the fact that ultimately, what is at stake is not more work, but the ability to fashion oneself as an artist.

This chapter, more so than the previous chapters, addresses the contradictions inherent to studying the cultural and creative industries. As Stephen Shukaitis and Joanna Figiel point out, “while it might be easy for critical writing on cultural work to dismiss arguments about the democratizing potential and creation of meaning and worth within cultural work, doing so discards some of the main rationales and values that people involved in forms of cultural work rely on to explain the importance of what they are doing” (538). While the chapter spends a lot of time problematizing the idea of creative agency, it also acknowledges that there is a degree of self-motivation and self-regard that drives these particular women comedians to maintain their positions in Hollywood. Their own sense of themselves as creators of culture is as important as the ways the industry fashions their creative output.

In a broader sense, the dissertation also shows how certain institutional frameworks and discourses serve to perpetuate the exclusion of women. I am especially concerned with how industrial practices are organized by hierarchies of power such as class, race, and gender that influence both the production of art and the value we place on certain modes of artistic expression. Ultimately, I want to suggest that cultural industries like film and television offer revelatory sites for the study of sexism and the obstacles women face in male-dominated fields, making the dissertation important beyond the confines of film and media studies.

## CHAPTER II

### AGENTS AND COMEDIAN NETWORKS

In an interview with the *New York Times*, *Daily Show* host Trevor Noah explained the difficulties he had in cultivating a diverse writers' room for his takeover of the show post-Jon Stewart:

So I went to all the young comedians I knew — black, Hispanic, female, whatever — and I said, 'Are you interested?' And they all said: 'Are you crazy? Of course, I'm interested.' So I asked, 'Why didn't you audition?' And they said, 'We didn't know about it.' But they told me they'd sent it out to all the agents and managers. And they all went: 'Oh, that's where you made the mistake. We can't get agents or managers.' We can say we want diversity, but there's this little roadblock that no one tells you about. (Galanes)

Actress Lupita Nyong'o, his fellow interviewee, responded knowingly, "The gatekeepers."

The talent and management agency is rarely seen as an integral hub of creative production, but the management of actors, writers, and directors is integral to the economy of Hollywood and a pivotal component of the production process. Studies of film and television production, especially those focused on diversifying Hollywood, are concerned with what seems to be the most immediate pipelines: studio and network production and distribution channels. Studies quantify how many projects by or about women get funding,

the proportion of women-helmed to men-helmed films presented at film festivals, how many women-helmed films are bought by studios, how many woman showrunners are in a given television season, and if audiences are receptive to these films, in terms of good word of mouth, or in terms of dollars earned at the box office. But the pipeline into Hollywood begins further back. Without the representation of a well-connected agent or manager, a filmmakers' or actress' "reach" is narrowed exponentially. Effectively, a lack of representation can equate to a financially non-viable career – even if studios *were* willing to make female-centric fare.

However, artists without agents or managers have devised ways to create the connections necessary to obtain one, or to obtain work independent from these gatekeepers. The small world of comedy allows for comics to create their own social circles which function as informal networking groups. Aspiring filmmakers or writers may rely on an established network of friends and colleagues to connect them to funding, producers, distributors, and PR people. Additionally, comedians frequently write collaboratively and/or revise each other's work, which can be a stepping-stone to less informal, paid work and access to the kind of visibility that interests agents and managers scouting for new talent.

Whether connections are made via an agent or via another comedian, I argue the success of female comedians is reliant on their entry into or formation of these exclusive comedy cohorts, which are usually controlled by

men either at the informal level or at the level of an agency. Couched in language encouraging team building, cooperation, and collaboration, both formal and informal institutions require women to acquiesce to patriarchal institutional frameworks and obtain a public stamp of approval from their male counterparts. In turn, the popular press explicitly frames discussions of female-led comedic projects as products of collaboration between upcoming female comedians and prominent male mentors.

The formation of comic networks is strengthened by talent agencies. In turn, agencies shape trends in comedic styles and privilege certain “voices” effectively taking part in the formation of comedic taste cultures. The resurgence of female comedians like Melissa McCarthy and Amy Schumer in the mid-2000s highlights the ways women creatively profit from an inclusion into the boys’ club of film and TV comedy. Both women are actively critical about Hollywood comedy’s systemic exclusion of women, influencing a shift in the sexist rhetoric (if not the practices) that pervades the comedy scene.

I begin this chapter with a brief history of the talent agent and manager in Hollywood in order to establish the ways in which agents have long held crucial creative roles in Hollywood. Then I turn to look at the roles of agents and managers today, explaining the legal and informal ways they can influence genres and comic sensibilities at any given time. I turn to the work of Emily Carman and freelancers in early Hollywood to establish continuity between women’s professional agency over their work and the ways in which women

comedians today function as freelancers. The trailblazing strategies of 1930s actresses set precedent for women comedians today who not only command creative agency, but along with their agents, have built powerful businesses and brands.

### **The Origins of Talent Agencies**

According to Tom Kemper, the consolidation of Hollywood into an oligopoly in the 1930s was accompanied, and perhaps pushed along by, the formalization of talent agencies. Whereas in the early days of Hollywood agents were seen as superfluous “flesh peddlers” (3), agents proved to be increasingly vital for the movie industry, even as sentiments about them stayed the same. As Kemper notes, agents did not come out of nowhere (5). They had early predecessors prior to the 1930s; there was already a thriving booking and managing system in place for Broadway actors. However, agencies spawned quickly as Hollywood became vertically integrated. According to Kemper, less than 20 agencies were listed in industry directories in 1925, compared to more than 60 only eight years later. As intermediaries, agents could supply studios with the actors they demanded, facilitating production.

An established agent was able to “open studio gates, contact studio executives and producers, to know which doors to knock on” (6). An agent’s connections in Hollywood, more than anything else, gave value to their services. Broadway agents who attempted to crossover to Hollywood found it difficult. Outsiders who had in previous occupations created relationships with

producers and studio heads found the transition to agent work fruitful. As Kemper points out, agents essentially functioned to “[streamline] the process for incoming talent” and simultaneously “perform[ed] gate-keeping duties for producers” (ibid).

Though studios were reticent to outsource the role of agent, they found that it was difficult to centralize that task within the studio. Given their ability to house and streamline so many other difficult processes of production, distribution, and exhibition, this is notable. According to Kemper, studios found it difficult to bear the costs of acquiring and maintaining talent, and found that it would be difficult to convince talent that the studio was not invested solely in their own interests. Independent agents would be able to bear the costs and create a beneficial relationship for all parties involved.

There were instances in which the relationship between studios and agents was less than amiable. Agents were accused of “star raiding” meaning, attempting to get stars to break their current contracts and go to a different studio (11). Since stars were an integral part of a studios’ brand (and, therefore, a huge factor in box office earnings), any efforts to poach stars or to upset the stability of a studio could be particularly damaging. Stars were seen as the single most important asset of a studio, and agents’ dealings had the potential to upset the balance of power.

Studios balked at the idea of an interloper affecting their dealings with stars. The “option contract,” which ensured studio exclusivity of a star for a

number of years, at a fixed salary, was one way the studios thought they could mitigate dealing with agents. Since this contract was on a fixed term, agents were limited in what they could do. However, at certain times, like review periods, contract expirations, and unprecedented box office returns, agents could renegotiate for their clients. They not only controlled compensation, they could set terms like working hours, publicity demands, as well as dressing room “riders” (12). Agents also controlled the terms of “loan-out” contracts, where stars were “lent” to another studio. Loan-outs allowed stars to work with new directors, or in new genres, and it was a way of advertising their home studio. The home studio would get a percentage of the profits from the film, and agents could flex their negotiating muscle without directly changing the terms of a star’s option contract.

As their influence became more obvious, agents wanted to become more than unofficial allies of the movie industry. They sought reputable actors to work with, publicizing their roster of artists, and ensuring their actors were part of important organizations like the Academy. They also intended to take action against what they saw were retaliatory tactics from studios. The Artists’ Managers Association was created to “[defend] their presence and purpose in the industry and negotiate with the producer’s’ association on such issues as studios’ barring agents from their lots, the proposed central booking office, and talent raiding” (13). Though the Association quickly lost steam, that organization sparked the idea for agents to find their own support within

Hollywood. They sought to become part of the Academy themselves. In 1932, agents were able to persuade politicians to introduce a bill in the California State Legislature that would reduce the amount of oversight the state labor commissioner had over talent agencies. Academy members were shocked, and thought agents were attempting to “extricate themselves entirely” (14) from a system of accountability. The Academy had little choice at that point than to create their own Code of Practices for agencies that address the complaints of agents, as well as producers and talent. Kemper best describes how the Academy and their chosen committee on the matter responded:

“The committee divided the agency problem into three areas: the ‘responsibilities between agent and artist,’ ‘practices’ between agents and producers, and ‘conditions’ involving all parties.’ This last area basically covered the playing field—contracts, arbitration and negotiation—and the discussion of the first two areas—responsibilities and practices—would generate rules governing ‘fair play.’”

The Academy had little jurisdiction over the enforcement of contracts—that was a legal issue—but they could streamline the relationships between agents, producers, and talent. In this way, the Academy gains some oversight by handling some of the “agency problems” as ones of conduct and ethics, rather than financial and legal issues. The industry would have its own way, outside of the government, to oversee agents.

The final Code of Practice outlined a formal description of agents' services, with the most important principle being, "to use his [sic] best efforts to further the professional interests of the Artist, to develop the personal abilities and increase the earning power of the artist and to obtain and maintain for the Artist a favorable and valuable professional reputation" (18). Additionally, they were responsible for procuring employment, negotiating contracts, and advise their clients to the best of their ability. Agents were now an integral cog in the Hollywood machine, with their positions validated by an influential organization in the industry. It cannot be stressed enough that agents are imbricated within the Hollywood industry, not just by their association or proximity to the industry, but the industry itself. From the early days of Hollywood, the value of agents as gatekeepers and as brokers was undeniable. They serve that same function today, but to a higher degree. With greater specialization and industry savvy, agents today have a high degree of influence in shaping who and what is onscreen.

Though this chapter began with a brief history of agents, we must also take into account the similar influences of managers, who are now part and parcel of a talent's stable of employees. Managers, who are now part and parcel of a talent's stable of employees, are similarly influential in the industry. Though the role "manager" is one that has been part of the stage and music world for decades, managers have become prominent in Hollywood only recently. In the mid 1990s, two of the top Hollywood agencies, Creative Artists

Agency (CAA) and the William Morris Agency (WMA) underwent a series of power shifts that changed their composition and their focus. Other agencies like United Talent Agency (UTA) expanded exponentially. During this upheaval, many clients sought managers to guide them. The continually tenuous world of talent agencies, with its constant mergers, restructurings, buy-outs, lay-offs, firings and non-Hollywood related dealings, creates a good environment for managers to become sought-after advisers. Managers have a smaller stable of clients, and their expertise is all encompassing. Former agent and manager Gavin Polone wrote about the manager versus agent divide and wrote, “Whenever I read one of these stories, my first thought is, ‘great for the managers’—because all of this distraction and job cutting only means that agents don’t have the time nor interest to be as attentive as they once were and that gap in the process of representation still needs to be filled by someone.”

However, more often than not, agents and managers work together to ensure their client is making the most lucrative business decisions and investments. It behooves them to work together, possibly trading clients to strengthen each other’s portfolios. It is more common now for managers to become agents and vice-versa, guiding their clients with the insight gained from their experience as both, even though each has specific roles and functions attached to it.

### **The Roles of Agents vs. Managers**

Agents and managers have distinct roles that are regulated by state legislatures and the entertainment industry itself. An agent's primary job is to find and secure employment for their client. Managers have a more wide-ranging set of tasks. They essentially "shape artists' careers" (Zelenski 979) by advising them on career choices from which jobs to take, making financial decisions, and they can even provide personal counsel. Though the division between the two seems arbitrary, there are strict legal regulations that delineate who can act in what capacity. Agents must be licensed by the state, and are legally the only people allowed to procure employment for talent. Only they can negotiate contracts and wages. Talent managers are barred from doing this. They may advise talent on the opportunities presented by an agent, but they cannot, by law, solicit jobs or negotiate with their clients' contracts.

There are a few reasons why the California and New York Legislatures, arguably the most important in the regulation of entertainment labor, decided this separation of labor. First, talent agents are paid a commission (usually ten percent) only when their client secures a job. This incentivizes them to do their job well. Industry specific guilds like WGA and SAG also do not let agents act as producers:

An agent or an owner of an interest in an agent shall not be an active motion picture producer.... [A]n agent or an owner of an interest in an agent shall not engage in the production or distribution of motion pictures or own or control, directly or indirectly, any interest in a motion

picture producing or distributing company. [...] no person, firm or corporation engaged or employed in the production or distribution of motion pictures or owning any interest in any company so producing or distributing, shall own any interest in an agent, directly or indirectly, nor shall any such person, firm or corporation ... share in the profits of the agent. (qtd. in Zelenski 990).

This prevents conflicts of interest between an agent as an representative of the client and the agent as the potential employer of the client. It also stops agents from hiring their clients exclusively in their own productions.

Managers do not have the same rules. Because they work in an advisory capacity, and generally have a larger hand in the actor's career, they tend to have less clients than agents, thus a smaller number of commissions overall. In order to compensate for this, they can act as producers on their clients' work and earn revenue that way. As Zelenski argues, "Given the risky nature of their work, they arguably are entitled to the increased earning potential that comes with owning financial interests in their clients' possibly successful television programs and feature films" (992).

There are also drawbacks that come with this arrangement. Agents may feel pressure to only represent established actors, ensuring that studios and networks will want them in their employ. They may be less willing to take a chance on an unknown or up-and-comer. Managers have less conflict of interest. They are invested in the well-being and marketability of their client.

Though they may also feel pressure to work with established actors, they also have more control over the actors' image, press, and decisions about their career. A good manager can have greater influence in making a newcomer appealing, than an agent. However, once a manager becomes a producer, they may find conflicts between business decisions they must make for their product, and those that behoove their client. Zelenski notes an example where a producer may try to cut the cost of production by limiting their client's salary (984).

Despite the clear delineations between the roles and services of agents and managers, they take on each other's roles much more often through legally sanctioned, yet more informal channels. Zelenski notes that managers today are in a difficult situation. Often, they must act as agents and procure employment for their clients, particularly when they take on new clients with a small resume. They either do so without an agent license, or they obtain one and, by law, must obtain smaller commissions for the work of two individuals.

On the opposite side of the scale, managers –as-producers has become a workaround the employment procurement law. Many managers, especially those of comedians, own large production companies to the extent that many comedians, such as Tina Fey and Aziz Ansari, , are almost always co-billed as producers alongside their manager. Fey and Ansari's manager, David Miner, was not only the producer on *30 Rock* and *Master of None*, but has also produced Ansari's comedy specials and *Parks and Recreation*, an Amy Poehler

vehicle which gave Ansari his breakout role as Poehler's friend and co-worker. These manager-producers, as Zelenski calls them, wield enormous control over their clients' employment by being able to finance their clients' projects. Technically, this does not fall under procuring employment for their clients. Chinn v. Tobin concluded that agents act as an intermediary between client and employer. Since manager-producers are hiring their talent directly, like any producer may choose to do, they are not beholden to the Talent Agencies Act that prohibits them from procuring employment (996).

Agents are also exploiting legal "loopholes" in order to widen their scope of investments. Though agents cannot be "producers" by name, they can practice "deal-packaging." Agents can "package" together teams of their clients. For example, they can team up actors they manage with writes and directors they manage and offer them as a group to studios and networks. When an agent does this, he or she forgoes their commission for each individual client, and instead they can bill 10% of the entire production budget (which is usually a higher figure). As Zelenski points out, agents are only limited to the percentages they can bill clients, not the percentages they can bill to employers or non-clients (999).

Not only are agents then earning a producer's salary, they also have great creative control over the clients they want in the project, and the types of productions they want to support. Agents can use big-name clients to sell less known, riskier clients, and they can pull from their stable of bankable clients

to create the most attractive deals for studios and networks. In practice, only big name agencies do deal packaging; they are the ones with enough bankable artists to work as a team. This creates powerful agencies that can easily lure clients away from smaller agencies. Although agencies have always specialized in certain areas, such as sports or music or film, within Hollywood there are also agencies that are better known for certain genres or for certain aesthetic preferences. Part of this identity is created by the packages they have put together and the reputation they have achieved in the industry as supporters or promoters of certain kinds of clients.

The creative control of managers and agents is not only theoretical, nor is it inconsequential. Like the comedy schools that train comedians and the writers' rooms that employ them, agents and managers have the power to exclude and include writers, actors, producers, and directors at will. When managers and agents act as producers or pseudo-producers they are in a position to influence aesthetic trends, create careers, and ultimately shape the entire film and television landscape. However, agents and managers have been most effective in shaping the face of comedy because comedy already relies on the creation of cohorts and an air of exclusivity.

Scholar Sam Friedman followed several comedy scouts at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe – one of the largest arts festivals to feature comedy in England. Many of these scouts are also agents and bookers, brokering the relationship between comedians and comedy producers. As scouts, and then when they

sign comedians as agents “perform a distinct tastemaking function” (24). They choose to promote or work with comedians who cater to specific audiences, making assumptions about the comedian’s financial viability as an entertainer. These assessments, as Friedman points out, are made on intuition and “gut” feeling than on quantifiable data. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on Friedman’s description of “entrepreneurial brokers,” who function in the “turbulent” and “competitive” commercial spheres of pop culture production. These agents have a great degree of “professional and aesthetic autonomy” and have the resources and connections to guarantee comedians wide creative freedom (25).

Friedman outlines several ways that scout-agents make decisions on which comedians to court. The most important ways they learn about upcoming talent is to get “tips” from “non-competitive ‘informal networks’” (31) that they trust. Critics, other comedians, and affiliated industry reps might be known for having particularly on-trend tastes, and agents tend to have a wide-range of contacts they can get advice from. Relatedly, they rely on the vast infrastructure of festivals, awards, publications, and gossip channels (from insiders to tips from other comedians) to inform their choices. Though agents get plenty of requests from lesser-placed agents looking to move their client to a higher tier, they are less likely to respond to unsolicited requests for meetings or to catch a show.

However, ultimately, agents use rather nebulous terms with which to

judge the quality of the comedians they see. The term “talent” is widely used, although this may mean different things to different agents. Some scouts Friedman interviewed preferred experimental styles, and unusual joke formats, while others attributed talent to charismatic and effortless-seeming comedians (32-33). It was not always necessary for the scout to like the comedian in question. One of Friedman’s interviewees previously worked for a large comedy agency in Britain and noted how sometimes she would make financially motivated decisions rather than ones based on her own tastes. This might mean assessing what the imagined audience desired, contributing their comedians to a notable existing trend, or identifying a niche that needs to be filled. In Britain, it might also mean signing talent who can fill “policy imperatives around diversity and variety” (34).

Friedman found that scouts and agents defined comic tastes according to class, knowingly or not. The way they spoke about comedy and defined their audiences showed that their delineations of what kinds of comedy appealed to who fell along class lines. So-called “high-brow” comedy supposedly appealed to a higher socioeconomic class, while lower classes had less sophisticated or “low-brow” tastes. The most desired audiences correlated with the most financially stable audiences who had money and time to spend on entertainment experiences. They most often searched for comedians that would cater to these audiences, emphasizing the difficulty of finding the “right” or the “best” talent. Friedman concludes that their methods of selection also

reveal a much closer relationship to audiences than previously noted. Agents and scouts “thus act as *hidden tastemakers*, intensifying the scarcity of certain comic tastes, helping to categorise [sic] them as ‘objects’ of cultural capital, and ultimately strengthening the ability of audiences to use comedy as an instrument of cultural distinction” (40).

Though Friedman was more interested in how agents used class divisions as to construct categories of taste, it is clear in the American comedy landscape that race and gender also play a large factor in categories of taste. Agents tend to give priority to white male comics, as they supposedly are appealing to “universal” audiences. Women comedians and comedians of color are more likely labeled as niche comics, for a small audience. As the rest of this chapter will illustrate, sometimes the individual tastes of influential people in Hollywood can define the prevailing comedic sensibility, and agents and managers also work to “tap” individual comedians as the prevailing comedic voice of the times.

Agents and managers coordinate or foster strategic alliances among their talent that directly affects content from inception to production. By acting as producers they have as much or possibly more influence on who is onscreen and the shows and films that are financed. They have unprecedented creative control yet are rarely given that credit. Though deal-packaging and managers as producers happens in Hollywood generally, agents and managers are particularly powerful in the comedy world. The breadth of a comedian’s skills

and potential venues makes them particularly suited to the ways in which agencies and management companies are built to diversify their own portfolios. Comedians can do stand-up or improv live shows, comedy tours, televised specials, sitcoms, film, podcasts, and are usually adept writers and content producers themselves. In the early 2000s, the power of comedy managers and agents became very apparent. They contributed to defining the prevailing comedic trends using their influence and power to make stars and shape audience expectations.

### **The Wheel of Comedy**

In the early 2000s, UTA developed the Wheel of Comedy. Through a series of package deals they brought together a group of comedians who, though well known, magnified their star power through collaboration and improvisation. The comedy mill, as it was referred to in industry press of the time, relied on networks of established and rising comedians, writers, producers and directors created through agents and managers to produce lucrative film, television, and online content. The Wheel included comedian-writers Will Ferrell, Ben Stiller, Steve Carrell, David Koechner, Rob Riggle, Judd Apatow, Adam McKay and actors Vince Vaughn, Owen Wilson, Paul Rudd, Adam Scott, and John C. Reilly. All the men were represented by UTA and shared managers Eric Gold and Jimmy Miller of Mosaic Media Group.

The comedy mill resembled early film comedy production in a lot of ways. In the very early days of film, studios commissioned work from a particular

group. The entire group participated in writing, set building, acting, and directing. Though the people in the wheel of comedy stuck to above-the-line work, the concept is very similar: an insular group of comedians produces a specific style of film attributable to them that is then sold to studios with a provisional script, casted talent, and producers already decided. President of 20th Century Fox, Hutch Parker, observed at the time, “They seem to function somewhat as an informal kind of comedy troupe. [...] If you check around town and see what projects they all have in development, you find the same alliances” (Waxman “They’re In on the Joke”). The men collaborated on and appeared in one another’s movies, from *Zoolander* (2001) to *Dodgeball* (2004) and *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (2004), creating a slew of films that were uniquely free from creative input from the studios. A *New York Times* article details their creative process:

[...T]he stars and their representatives live, work and play in a continuum that has virtually shut the studios out of the development process. By coming up with their own concepts, finding screenwriters and then offering the whole package for production—script, director and cast, take it or leave it—this group is reshaping screen humor to their liking. (Waxman “They’re In on the Joke”)

As detailed earlier, for agents of the Wheel, there was clearly a financial benefit from deal packaging and for their managers also gained by acting as producers on their films. As Will Ferrell’s star rose, for example, through films like *A Night*

at *the Roxbury* (1998) and the *Austin Powers* franchise, his agents and managers benefitted. After *Zoolander* became a box-office hit in 2001, Ferrell was able to capitalize on the strength of his supporting role for his own star-vehicle, *Old School* (2003). Soon after, hits *Elf* (2003) and *Anchorman* solidified his position as a king of comedy. He brought in other bankable stars, as well as lesser-known comedians who, because they shared his comedic sensibility, could take advantage of the “bro-comedy” moment.

For comedians in the Wheel, agents and managers were more than employees or representatives of their best interests. They were also an integral component of production. As Sharon Waxman writes, “they actively edit[ed] and shape[d] their clients’ ideas; the stars implicitly trust[ed] their comedy judgment” (“They’re In on the Joke”). Managers and agents contributed to shaping the prevailing comedic trend by deciding who is included and excluded from the Wheel. Waxman details an incident that is worth quoting at length:

During the making of *Elf*, [manager Jimmy] Miller and [Will] Ferrell differed with the editing choices of the director, Jon Favreau [...]. Both versions were tested with audiences, but the creative differences led to Favreau’s not being involved in the sequel at New Line, executives in both camps said. Though Favreau’s choices tested better with an audience and won out, he [was] considered creatively out of sync with Miller and Ferrell, and New Line [...] confirmed that he [would] not be part of the sequel. (“They’re In on the Joke”)

Of course, the comedian and manager did not make these decisions unilaterally. The studio also recognized the benefit of letting the Wheel of Comedy dictate creative decisions. They were making successful films without the studio's intervention. This relieved the pressure off the studio in case of a box-office disaster.

The Wheel had a few iterations and configurations before it became the dynamic group of the 2000s, yet its composition always depended heavily on personal connections in the comedy scene. Managers Jimmy Miller and Eric Gold began their careers in comedy clubs. Miller, the younger brother of comedian Dennis Miller, worked in comedy clubs in the 1980s and 90s. Gold himself was a comedian turned agent, then manager. One of his first clients as manager was comedian-writer-director, Judd Apatow who led him to another up-and-coming comedian: Jim Carrey. Gold placed Carrey in UTA. Apatow also introduced Gold to frequent collaborator, Ben Stiller. Together, the three comedians, created *The Cable Guy* (1996), which Apatow produced, Stiller directed, and starred Carrey, fresh off his successes with *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994) and *The Mask* (1994). Stiller was instrumental in connecting the managers to Will Ferrell, who brought with him another group of comedian friends and collaborators.

As the Wheel of Comedy expanded to encompass a greater network of who's who in comedy, UTA and managers Gold and Miller wielded greater power and leverage against studios and networks. UTA was known as an

agency that specialized in comedy, and Gold and Miller had proven track records of success. The managers demanded higher salaries, and more creative input, sometimes angering studios. Yet, as their success grew, as a team, the comedians and managers earned the respect and trust from the studios, who signed off on projects with as little as a pitch. Though the studios still designated the budget, they strongly believed they would recoup their investment. Waxman details how easily two films came together for the Wheel. Sony Pictures agreed to finance *Tallegda Nights: The Legend of Ricky Bobby* with a budget of \$20 million before it had been written. The Steve Carrell star vehicle, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, began as an informal pitch from the star to Judd Apatow during downtime on the set of *Anchorman*. Universal Studios heard the pitch and said “yes.”

These movies also had much more in common than just the talent representatives behind them. The Wheel of Comedy’s character-based humor derived largely from the comedic sensibilities of *Saturday Night Live (SNL)* and Canadian *Second City Television (SCTV)*— where a majority of the Wheel was introduced to the public. These programs were (and still are) a training ground that professionalizes writer-comedians, teaching them both improv in the live format and scripted television in its method of generating sketches.

As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter III, these shows also pass down a legacy of gendered and racial non-diversity that translates into a comedic sensibility that prizes the comedy of white men. A quote from Judd

Apatow is telling of the sensibility created by an allegiance to a specific kind of comedy: “We are all the spawn of Hal Ramis,” Apatow said in an interview, referring to the director or co-writer of the last generation’s touchstone comedies, like *Animal House* and *Meatballs* “We all grew up on *Stripes* and *Caddyshack* and *Animal House*. We’re heavily influenced by Second City and Albert Brooks. As a result, a lot of us have similar sensibilities” (Waxman “They’re In on the Joke”). These films, which feature frat boys, scantily clad comedians, and gross-out humor defined comedy for about a decade.

However, in July 2005, two long-time UTA agents, Jason Heyman and Martin Lesak, left to join Creative Artists Agency (CAA), bringing along Ferrell and Carrey. Heyman and Lesak worked alongside Gold and Miller and the Wheel of Comedy. They were largely responsible for the agency’s reputation as a comedy beacon able to transform comedians’ careers and catapult them to superstardom. Their defection from UTA contributed to an increasingly fragile entertainment landscape. In comedy, and in the larger entertainment industry, rising production costs and a weakened American economy made studios reduce the number of films produced each year. They began devoting more money to larger action projects that would garner massive audiences, and deprioritized comedy, with its respectable audience size. Comedians were also commanding higher salaries, topping out around \$20 million, with increased budget sizes to match. In 2006, Fox stopped production of the film *Used Guys*, weeks before production. The Stiller/Carrey film had spiraled into a \$112

million production, with package deals and producer-manager costs to match. The studio decided the film was not worth the costs. Similarly, Paramount cancelled a Jim Carrey film when the budget rose over \$150 million (Waxman “Not So Funny Anymore”).

One of the most attractive qualities of the Wheel was their films’ modest budgets. But the rising costs of stars and their entourage created a “comic oligopoly” (“They’re in On the Joke”) that became very expensive, and increasingly less lucrative. Though the Wheel arguably continued for a few more year’s with Apatow’s younger friends and collaborators like Jonah Hill and Seth Rogen, that iteration of the Wheel was even more exclusive, and, consequently less prolific.

### **The Wheel of Comedy Redux**

In an unprecedented and controversial move, Heyman and Lesak returned to UTA in April 2015. With them, they brought almost all of CAA’s comedy division, which had grown exponentially under their care. The team represents comedians as well as comedy writers, directors, and producers. Described in trade press as a “raid,” CAA, as well as their clients, were unaware of the duo’s plans. In the end, about 15 top agents defected to UTA, and the ramifications highlighted the importance of comedy in Hollywood.

UTA had slowly been rebuilding its comedy brand since Heyman and Lesak first left. Amy Schumer and Keegan Michael-Key among others were signed early on in their careers. This appealed to Heyman and Lesak. They

were also reportedly offered substantial raises and partnerships in the agency. When they left CAA, Ferrell and *Broad City*'s Ilana Glazer followed them to UTA, as well as Sarah Silverman and SNL head writer Colin Jost. Ultimately, about 200 actors, writers, and directors left CAA.

One client was key to both agencies' reputation: Melissa McCarthy. After the success of the 2011 film *Bridesmaids*, McCarthy had become one of the most sought after comedians. *Bridesmaids*, starring *SNL* alum Kristen Wiig and McCarthy made \$288 million dollars worldwide and garnered two Oscar nominations. Her next venture, the buddy-cop comedy "The Heat," co-starring Sandra Bullock, made \$230 million. According to Kim Masters and Stephen Galloway, McCarthy's agent at CAA attempted to persuade her to stay by arguing that if she went to UTA, McCarthy would forever remain just a *comedian*, pointing out that none of the departed agents had any experience cultivating major female *dramatic* talent. CAA had a formidable slate of lauded actresses and could provide her with similar opportunities. McCarthy decided to stay at CAA.

Though it would be easy to attribute her decision to her desire to be a serious actress, CAA would also provide further comedy opportunities for one key reason: writer-producer-director Paul Feig. The successful relationship between McCarthy and Paul Feig was created at CAA. Feig was responsible for *Bridesmaids* and *The Heat*.

After a slew of male-driven superhero films, *Bridesmaids* catered to a neglected audience by packaging itself as close to bro-comedy as possible. In that way, it was an alternative to the fare offered by Hollywood, but close enough to a familiar version of comedy that it would draw in a crowd. The *Bridesmaids* approach placed top women comedians in a familiar scenario. The story is centered on the relationship between two women, and this sweet story is punctuated by moments of gross-out humor and raunchy dialogue. In their next two films, *The Heat* and *Spy* (2015), Feig and McCarthy followed the same formula: place unglamorous female characters in the storylines and genres generally dominated by men. The perspective allows Feig and McCarthy to give audiences familiar worlds while challenging sexist production processes that normally keep women from starring in certain genres. *The Heat* played with the male buddy cop world. *Spy* dismantles James Bond's masculine domain by changing the often-reductive treatment of women in the spy genre. Though Feig and McCarthy stayed at CAA, the comedy world's women are by and large housed at UTA. The all-female cast of Feig's next project, *Ghostbusters*, was culled from UTA's comedy talent: *SNL* cast member Kate McKinnon and ex-*SNL* cast member Kristen Wiig, as well as writer Katie Dippold. Though the two seem to have a symbiotic relationship, Feig's involvement also points to a significant issue within the world of comedy, and demonstrates a drawback to the way the Wheel works.

P. David Marshall argues that “celebrity status confers on the person a certain discursive power: within society, the celebrity is a voice above others, a voice that is channelled [sic] into the media systems as being legitimately significant” (qtd. in Taylor 762). Women benefit from what Mark Lutter calls “open, diverse structures” of friendship, networks, and influence (332). Lutter argues that networks made up primarily of women have several disadvantages. One is that women’s networks tend to be less associated with power and authority. Second, and crucial in this example, is typically in the entertainment industry, men are in power, and women-only networks sometimes do not have access to crucial information that may get passed down through male networks. Women must “borrow” social capital from men (since they are usually lacking women mentors), and they are repeatedly shut out because men are the main decision-makers. Female networks seem to necessitate crucial male influencers to “validate” them and help their careers (332-3). In other words, the “stamp of approval” of men like *SNL* producer Lorne Michaels, Judd Apatow, and Paul Feig goes a long way.

The case of Amy Schumer’s collaboration, for example, with Apatow on her film *Trainwreck* demonstrates how Apatow’s reputation as a talent scout was played up in order to promote Schumer as a comedian, and her film (he was the director). Judd Apatow, for example, has seemingly moved on from his “bros” and has made it a point to creatively and financially back women like

Lena Dunham and Amy Schumer. In an interview with *Variety*, Apatow tells the story of how he “discovered” Schumer:

I was in my car. I was not that familiar with Amy Schumer’s standup. She was talking to Howard Stern, and she was so engaging. She was talking about her dad having [multiple sclerosis] and what her relationship is like with him. It was very dark and sad, but also very sweet and hilarious and she clearly adores him. I thought, ‘This is a very unique personality and I’d like to see these stories in movies.’ In the middle of *Freaks and Geeks* Jake Kasdan and I were watching Seth Rogen shoot this scene and we went, “We think he’s a movie star.” It just hit us in a flash. That happened sitting in a car listening to Amy.

(Setoodeh)

According to the timeline given by Apatow, at this point Schumer is already a *successful* stand-up comedian, with her own show on Comedy Central, *Inside Amy Schumer*. Furthermore, years earlier Schumer had a deal for a network sitcom pilot that did not work out. Schumer had been on many people’s radar when Apatow had a “flash” of genius.

However, because of Apatow’s success with *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, *Knocked Up*, and *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, the studio was even more eager to work with a comedian who had been “vetted” by a trusted comedy heavyweight. With the help of Apatow, Schumer cultivated a networked comedy group similar to that of the Wheel of Comedy. She has made women like Tina Fey,

Julia Louis-Dreyfuss, Vanessa Brayer, and Bridgett Everett an integral part of her projects. Through popular press and social media, Schumer positions herself as part of a distinct cluster of writer/directors defined by similar artistic and political sensibilities inflected by common creative influences as well as common friends and agent/managerial representation. By extension, audiences are likely to sense the connections among these women through their work, which emphasizes female friendship. This ties in nicely with the emphasis on the women comedians' friendships in the press.

Though it might be easy to either dismiss the ways these men have been crucial to the careers of women comedians, it is also easy to aggrandize their role in the process. Though Lutter's study suggest women's networks are not powerful entrees into Hollywood nor do they guard against sexism and discrimination in the industry, the current slate of women comedians seem to have found successful ways of collaborating and cross-promoting their work. Many of women comedians' successes are wrongly attributed to their male mentors, as if their success is owed to them.

### **Stars as Freelancers**

In many ways this phenomena traces back to early Hollywood when actors, especially women, supposedly had little agency over their labor. Emily Carman's *Independent Stardom: Freelance Women in the Hollywood Studio System* details the ways in which some 1930s actresses were able to work freelance, that is, secure work without entering into long-term, studio-bound

contracts. Carman looks at the careers of Carole Lombard, Constance Bennett, Clara Bow, and Irene Dunne, among others and untangles the reasons why these particular women were able to exercise more creative and financial agency than ever before. Lombard, for example, was one of the highest paid actresses in Hollywood. Much of this can be attributed to her own instincts as a film producer, buttressed by the savvy negotiations of her agent, Myron Selznick. Carman meticulously details Lombard's percentage deal, which included many creative terms as well as financial ones. Lombard was entitled to story approval and a clause set that her co-stars would only be established leading men. Lombard was also able to keep an unprecedented amount of her earnings because they were taxed at the capital gains rate, which was significantly lower than the personal income tax rate. Lombard's successful freelance-based career was rare, but not entirely without peer. Though many histories of stars' professional agency begin with the De Havilland Law, which freed Olivia De Havilland from her cumbersome Warner Bros. contract, and James Stewart's lucrative percentage deal, Carman argues a group of powerful Hollywood women set the stage for these larger scale changes in the industry. In fact, these events, Carman argues, "are the culmination of the self-determining actions and negotiations of women in the 1930s." I would venture to argue that these women's careers are prototypes for contemporary women comedians, who have a great degree of creative agency, and can benefit from all the career opportunities freelancing opens.

Most importantly, freelancing “challenged the hierarchical and paternalistic structure of the film industry” (4). By setting the terms of their contracts themselves, they were able to escape an otherwise rigid studio system. Carman notes that, “consequently, independent stardom changes the way in which we think about stardom, gender, and power dynamics in 1930s Hollywood” (ibid). For Carman, these powerful freelancers mobilize the “contractual, cultural and legal” vehicles of stardom for their own benefit. Their financial and creative independence serves to re-frame the way most historians and film scholars conceptualize early Hollywood, and create a continuity with the labor practices of stars of today, more specifically, the labor practices of women comedians.

Carman shrewdly points out that Stewart’s deal, for example, is historically relevant as an example of overblown publicity. Stewart’s percentage deal involved a large sum of money, but it was not the first of its kinds. Charles Chaplin and Mary Pickford negotiated similarly structured deals, though not in a systematic way as freelancing actresses did in the 1930s. Carman is interested in recuperating the agency of these women back into film history. As Carman suggests, where Karen Ward Mahar, for example, sees the diminishing role of women behind-the-scenes, Carman sees the rise in power of women onscreen.

Granted not all women could risk their careers on the unstable and unpredictable freelancing market. Also, not all who tried a freelance career

found it most beneficial for their careers. Carman delves into the professional lives of Anna May Wong and Lupe Velez, a Chinese-American actress and Mexican actress, respectively, who were “independent” by force, not by choice. As Carman states, “free agency was a hindrance, rather than an advantage, to their film careers” (9).

For white actresses, however, freelancing allowed them to take charge of the direction of their careers and shape their onscreen and off-screen personas as they’d like, becoming “architects of their images by correlating their contractual agency with their creative-image commodity” (10). Though I will look at the contemporary models of this in the last chapter, it is important to note that a significant portion of 1930s freelance actresses’ press revolved around their “independence,” selling to fans a vision of a financially liberated woman who was still glamorous and ladylike. Though freelancing was not the sole province of women, women outnumbered men as freelancers, suggesting that there was a correlation between gendered stardom and creative agency in early Hollywood.

## **Conclusion**

Though contemporary Hollywood has a different economy, it is important that women were able to wield their star power to negotiate better terms for themselves early on. Alongside agents, they worked to secure their best interests, even though the industry preferred stars thinking that professional

independence was a great risk. Financial independence went hand in hand with creative independence, and a good agent was a route toward both.

When the Wheel of Comedy came about in the late 90s and early 2000s, they similarly commanded unprecedented levels of creative control, dictated by the terms of their contracts and the informal relationships they fostered with other comedians. The Wheel of Comedy, though almost exclusively male, importantly demonstrated that comedy is an important genre. There were fundamental changes in the industry following the dissolution of the Wheel in the entertainment landscape. Though Apatow's brand of comedy was successful, the widespread impact of *Bridesmaids* made clear that the genre needed a revival. It is important that another comedy network formed that prominently featured women as authors of the genre. Though women have contributed to comedy throughout Hollywood's industry, this particular moment had a salient effect on that continues to today. In the decade previous to *Bridesmaids*, film comedy was largely the province of men, geared toward a young, male audience. Since that collaboration between Feig and McCarthy, the profile of women comedians has raised, not only for their good work, but also for the importance of their contributions.

One of the most important takeaways from studies on women in media is that female audiences are powerful and seek out projects that reflect their voices. As long as agents and managers recognize the financial potential of women comedians and women-helmed projects, they will keep backing these

projects. The renaissance of women comedians recently has been in part due to agents and managers who are willing to devote energy on nurturing the careers of young women comedians. But this moment, like that of the Wheel of Comedy, is at the whim of Hollywood's gatekeepers. The future of women in comedy is contingent on more women, especially women of color, entering comedy in a prominent way in order to create a diverse landscape for a wide variety of audiences. Essentially, the potential growth of what seems like a movement in the entertainment industry can flourish with the aide of those whose job it is to maintain the industry a viable and vibrant place. Though, at times, they may seem to wield too much power, creative or otherwise, it is crucial that individuals can influence the industry for the better, without having to wait for the infrastructure of Hollywood to change.

### CHAPTER III

#### VARIATIONS OF THE GENDERED WRITERS' ROOM

Screenwriting was not always a predominantly male vocation. Denise and William Bielby point out, “Film writing is one of the few professional occupations in which a labor force with a substantial female presence has been displaced by men” (252). Even at the inception of television, which arose during film writing’s masculinization, there was possibility for women to define the career as their own. Anne Berke notes, “in this historical moment, it [was] impossible to say who or what a television writer will be” (1). And yet, decades later the statistics show that film and television are dominated by male writers, directors, producers, and actors.

This chapter takes up several ways of framing this turn of events. One is with a case study of an early television comedy-variety program, *Your Show of Shows* (YSOS). This program helped create the myth of the writers’ room as we know it now: a raunchy, creative, and vibrant place where comedians riff on each other’s best bits to create comedy gold. YSOS formalized comedy production practices, as well as developed the idea of the writers’ room as a communal space – though one that was, and still is at many times, unwelcome of women. YSOS demonstrates that from as early as the 1950s, the writers’ room came to be described in gendered terms.

Another way of framing today’s gender disparity in comedy writing is to interrogate the pipeline feeding into the writers’ room. Specifically, I will argue

the gendered culture of improv comedy has highly influenced the writers' room by standardizing methods of comedy production. I argue the gender exclusivity of improv comedy helps shape the sexist culture of Hollywood comedy production. It influences the interpersonal dynamics in the sitcom writers' room and justifies a continual exclusion of women. By turning to the case of *Lyle vs. Warner Bros.* I will argue sexism in the comedy writers' room is overlooked and protected as a form of creative expression, and an essential component to comedy production.

Finally, I will look at the showrunner, who is in charge of the writers' room as both a creative and administrative head. As Phalen and Osellame note, "Television screenwriting is a creative occupation within an institution," (5) and the showrunner must be adept at navigating both worlds. Again, women showrunners are a minority in broadcast, cable, and streaming platforms. Though there are diversity initiatives that attempt to rectify this inequity, most fail to address the hiring practices that keep women out of positions of power, instead choosing to offer workshops, mentorships, and classes that treat women's inequality as if it is a by-product of insufficient training, not bias.

This chapter stresses that many of the barriers put before women in film and television comedy are sexism masked as "tradition." The conventional operations of the writers' room, the culture of improv comedy, and the hiring practices of Hollywood follow outmoded notions of the way quality entertainment is made, and dated business models that are not aligned with

what we now know makes a profitable and popular product.

### **The Myth of the Writers' Room**

According to Felicia D. Henderson, in the writers' room "ideas are negotiated, consensus is formed, and issues of gender, race, and class identities play out..." (146). In the following section, I explore some of the industrial practices and social dynamics of the comedy workspace through a discussion of *Your Show of Shows*, one of the first shows to establish a writers' room with conventions that are still practiced today.

*Your Show of Shows*, a comedy-variety show starring Sid Caesar was hailed as an acting and comedic triumph for three brief years. Writers for the show included head writer Mel Tolkin (later of *All in the Family*), Carl Reiner, Neil Simon, and Mel Brooks. YSOS had one women writer, Lucille Kallen. She was Tolkin's writing partner. In 1949, both joined Broadway theater entrepreneur/TV producer Max Liebman, as the creative team for the television program, *Admiral Broadway Revue* starring Caesar. When the show got cancelled, Liebman alongside Sylvester "Pat" Weaver, president of NBC, expanded *Revue* for a new variety show, *Your Show of Shows* in 1951. More writers were hired, and soon expanded "from an intimate collaboration to something of a comedy factory" (Berke 3).

At the beginning, YSOS included music, ballet numbers, opera, monologues, and most importantly, comedic sketches that were mostly written by Liebman, Kallen, and Tolkin. Unlike revues with similar content, the show

took inspiration not from vaudeville or radio, but Broadway theatre. According to Karin Adir, Caesar slowly shifted the focus from song and dance to an emphasis on comedy, playing to his own strengths. He assembled a team that could cater to his comedic sensibility and churn out new and edgy content quickly.

Caesar wrote in his autobiography, “Someone would begin by saying, ‘How about a...?’ and we’d all start screaming and yelling and discussing it. The place was littered with cigarette butts, partly smoked cigars, and half-empty cups” (qtd. in “Setting the Standard 35). The fast-paced, collaborative nature of this show shaped what television writing would become and who would be hired to write for similar comedy-variety shows. When the operation became bigger was when, as Kallen writes in a 1992 *New York Times* article, “[she] realized [she] was surrounded by men, and the men realized that someone of a different species was part of the inner circle” (5).

According to Berke, “writing for *YSOS* worked like a theater production in some respects, but also resembled corporate employment, with its business-like dress code, its 9-5 work hours, and the ‘company objectives’ that characterized much of the *non-creative*, white-collar labor of the day” (2). However, even within this corporatized environment, writers were able to “play at work” and “buck certain hierarchical behaviors” in the service of creativity and comedy (3).

The writers’ room atmosphere was rife with reminders of the boys’ club

Kallen was entering. She describes a writers' room with cigar smoke, jock straps, and old tights hanging from the ceiling. She writes, "I labored under three major disadvantages in that room, in terms of physical size, vocal power and aggressiveness. These men were big, they were loud and they were belligerent" (5). Kallen continues, "I was 5 feet 1, and a girl. I say 'girl' because in those days men rarely used the word woman about anyone who wasn't their mother. 'Girl' put you – fondly – in your place, serving much the same purpose as 'boy' once did in the South" (5-6).

Kallen's statement is revelatory about the tensions between her and the rest of the writers. Though Kallen means to remember her years at YSOS fondly (the article is titled, "A Comedy Writer Reminisces About Her Favorite Years"), this statement itself indicates how the writers' room functioned to normalize sexism and to undermine her authority in a troubling manner. The comparison of the writers' use of "girl" to the Southern use of "boy" equates the writers' language with demeaning and racist language directed at African-American men. Though Kallen characterizes the men as "fondly" putting her in her place, the invocation of a racist South alongside descriptions of her co-workers as belligerent and aggressive does little to temper the sentiments behind her words. As Berke notes, the dynamics in the room suggest "the writers' room should be understood not only a male-dominated space but as one in which white, heterosexual (often Jewish) masculine identity was being communally constituted and affirmed, specifically those writers' roles as breadwinners,

fathers, husbands, and buddies in the same comedy family” (4). In the same way that “boy” was used to assert supremacy over Black men, their teasing use of “girl” in turn validated their own feelings of superiority over women.

Kallen claims some complicity in their behavior towards her. She writes, “We –the girls – were not blameless: we played up to it. We’d been persuaded that it was more important to be feminine than to win. We knew that brains might get you respect, but female charms got you everything else [...] So when it came to being heard in that room, I was walking a very fine line: a little too combative and I would lose my cherished femininity, a little too much delicacy and I would lose my career” (6). Yet, as Berke notes, “Kallen mobilized different strategies for making herself heard and making a mark on what got broadcast” (4). To stress Kallen’s status as a victim of the industry rather than as an active agent (that may have problematically allowed herself to be subjected to unfair treatment) is to miss out on the complexities of her role and of her tactics in the writers’ room.

As the only typist in the writers’ room, she exerted a great deal of control over what jokes would or would not make it into the script. She was able to write not just for the show’s lead actress, Imogene Coca, but was also a primary writer for Sid Caesar. Yet, Kallen’s tenure with *YSOS* ended with a falling out with fellow writer Mel Brooks. According to Berke, when Kallen refused to write down one of Brooks’ sub-par jokes, he snapped, “Don’t you tell me what’s funny, you just type.” As Berke notes, “in this single retort, Brooks

reduced Kallen to a secretary, using her place at the typewriter as a pretext for undercutting her authority” (7).

In 1954, Kallen left *YSOS*. Replacing her was another women writer, Selma Diamond. Kallen recalls “I met Selma on the street after she’d been in Sid’s Writer’s Room [sic] for six months. ‘How did you do it for *six years?*’” she wailed. ‘How did you *survive?*’” Though her article ends with a cheeky response to think of the show as “the Harvard of television,” it also demonstrates how Diamond, who also maintained a career in a male-dominated field found that particular room difficult. Kallen’s response alludes to her own feelings that “graduating” from the room was an achievement – a feat. The invocation of Harvard is fraught, reminding the reader that success in the television industry does not only require skill, but the attendant marks of prestige (like class, race, and pedigree) that makes a successful Ivy-league candidate. As Kallen notes earlier, though she did not always play her femininity perfectly, she compromised enough to be allowed to stay in the room. In her article about race and gender in the writers’ room, Henderson notes that Kallen’s position is still quite common, “The cultural and structural stability of the writers’ room over the last half century is also illuminated by how the othered are forced to function if they desire continued employment” (151).

*YSOS* ended after five seasons with a spin-off show. Kallen became the head writer for *The Imogene Coca Show*. Coca was a crucial part of the success of *YSOS*. According to Todd VanDerWerff, “Liebman [suggested] her name be

given equal billing to Caesar's in the first few weeks of [YSOS], something Caesar immediately and heartily agreed to." Though the show only lasted a season, Coca and Kallen set a path for female comedians and comedy writers to come. As Coca's obituary attests, *The Imogene Coca Show* and YSOS "started the careers of some of the nation's most successful writers and performers and set comedic standards that gave rise to Carol Burnett, Gilda Radner, Lily Tomlin and others" (McFadden).

The writers' room of YSOS anticipates the tensions that appear magnified in contemporary writers' rooms. Caldwell suggests that in early shows like *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (led by YSOS alum, Carl Reiner) the writers' room was made up of "collegial, good-humored turn takers" (*Production Culture* 211). However, YSOS seems representative of the general atmosphere of 1950s writers' rooms, and a precursor to the writers' rooms of today.

### **The Gendered Culture of Improv Comedy**

The development of YSOS from a Broadway inspired revue to a decidedly televisual comedy-variety show also coincides with the increasing medium-specific specialization of other forms of live comedy. Improvisational, or improv, comedy theatres are a known breeding ground for commercially successful comedians. Famed theatres like Second City, the Groundlings, and the Upright Citizens Brigade use the basic structural format of Chicago-style improv. This specific form originated with Chicago's Compass Players in the 1950s; it was later shaped and formalized by Second City. This format follows a basic

premise: the small group of “players” uses audience suggestions in tandem with basic rules and game structures to create comedic scenes. The games used to create content can range from simple word association games to ones designed to generate complex, scripted scenarios. The format of Chicago-style improv is solidified through Second City’s training program, where time is spent learning improv games and mastering the “rules” of improv. All other prominent improv theatres based in Chicago, Los Angeles or New York also have established training centers. The training centers are integral for establishing a culture of improv comedy as well as for training aspiring comedians in stage technique. As Amy E. Seham argues, the rules of improv and the culture of improv are inseparable— they both reflect the young, white, heterosexual male worldview that dominates the elite comedy scene. Consequently, this presents particular obstacles for aspiring improv actors who do not agree to the rules of the games or do not assimilate easily into improv comedy culture.

Chicago-style improv relies on one basic tenet: the “Yes, and...” rule. In order to move the scene forward, actors must respond affirmatively to another player’s actions and add to it. Denial or questions are considered blocks to the forward momentum of the scene. This rule forces players to agree to and expound upon scenarios presented by other players. It has several functions which are explicitly laid out in Second City’s improvisation training manual: “By being forced to accept and enhance what their partner has provided,

improvisers find themselves surrendering their own 'better' ideas and instead creating a concept that could not have existed without the participation [sic] of the entire ensemble" (10). This vision of collaborative and egalitarian play is at the center of improv comedy. It allows all actors to participate freely and contribute equally to the game. This rule suggests the creative priority of actors should be (and what the audience rewards is) a solid collaborative product over any individual contribution. However, improv also affirms that each individual contribution is valuable and valued in the group. The Upright Citizens Brigade (UCB), an improv theatre also based in Chicago, uses the term "group mind" to describe how "a team incorporates multiple, individual voices into one single voice [...]" (Walsh et. al 220). Group mind, also called groupthink, emphasizes teamwork and a willful submission to the goals of the group. Seham argues, "For some, this [group mind] is a utopian picture of belonging, but for those who feel marginalized by the group, it can seem more like a frightening loss of identity" (xxv).

Despite the liberating force of comedy and improvisation as a method of artistic creation, in practice, the "Yes, and..." rule can also work to affirm and perpetuate dominant viewpoints, excluding less forceful voices. In terms of scene construction, the first person that speaks initiates the terms of the scene for the rest of the players establishing content, setting, and characters. As Seham argues, "[w]omen and minorities are often marginalized by the mode of play on stage, through the manipulation of rules and structures, and by the

rigid control of what improvisers acknowledge as *funny* (xviii). “Yes, and...” as a default response encourages consent to a variety of scenarios for the sake of narrative progress and comedy from those that ethically represent social issues and minorities to those that utilize problematic stereotypes or are based on non-universal cultural assumptions. Though improv, like other forms of performance, generally relies upon exaggerated essentialist representations for comedic effect, at stake is the creation of a comedy culture that discourages the exploration of worldviews and comedic styles that diverge from the young, white, straight, upper-middle class, male point of view that dominates improv comedy.

Improv comedy training at both Second City and UCB attempts to ground comedic performance in authentic and realistic responses to situations. In order for “Yes and” to work, the actor must also learn how to read and respond to a multitude of situations. UCB’s training manual emphasizes establishing and acknowledging “status” to concretize realistic relationships between characters and determine the proper response to a given scenario:

In real life, more often than not, there is almost always a difference in status between two people. You talk differently to your boss than you talk to your wife, son, garbage man, etc. Establishing and respecting status in a scene is important. How someone speaks to you will always cause some sort of specific internal reaction no matter who says it.

However, the manner in which you express your reaction after it has

passed through your filter depends in part on the status of the person with whom you are dealing (83).

Ultimately, establishing status is essential to the internal coherence and logic of an improvised scene. UCB suggests status creates believable and relatable character relations to anchor otherwise over-the-top comedic scenarios (85). However, the reliance on “real life” experience to craft interactions between fictional characters in a comedic scenario does less to interrogate or critique established hierarchies than it does to affirm the status quo. The introduction of the Second City “almanac of improvisation” corroborates this interpretation. It stresses the importance of hierarchy and status within the framework of the club itself: “From 1959 to the present day, Second City alumni make up the comedic backbone of North America’s entertainment industry. Second City alumni are known for ‘breaking the rules.’ But to break the rules you have to know them inside and out” (Libera X).

Seham details several examples where men consistently initiate female comedians into scenarios to play the wife, mother, secretary, prostitute, and other gendered roles. A refusal to ascribe to these positions results in a “spoilsport” moniker in addition to long-lasting consequences that threaten a woman’s comedic success (xxxiii-xxiv) because it seems as though she has violated an important rule of improv comedy: “Move action forward by adding to the last moment, not sideways by trying to wedge your idea into the fray” (23). The conscription of women into minor female character roles is coupled

with sexism that inflects the working dynamics between the men and women of the troupe. As Seham argues, “[...] Improvised comedy scenes often reinscribe conventionally gendered relationships despite (or because of) the politics of the players” (xii). Thus, improv, when played to its most conservative tendencies, is structurally suited for reaffirming prevailing ideology.

This makes improv’s structure perfectly suited for working within businesses that produce products or immaterial goods systematically. In fact, businesses like Nike, and Farmer’s Insurance have used improv workshops to improve their bottom-line. These services are offered on Second City’s and The Groundling’s websites. Managers striving to foster creativity use improv workshops to create a sense of cooperation and affirmation that is foreign to highly competitive workplaces. Improvisers, by definition, take the kind of conservative risks that is encouraged by businesses. Thus working in improv comedy cultivates transferable skills moving into the comedy writers’ room. Chris Earle describes the influence improv had on his approach to creating scripted comedy for television: “[...] I discovered that improvisation could be more than just an end in itself; that it could also be a process whereby performers who’d never considered themselves writers could create funny satirical scene complete with all the trappings of a written script—characters, dialogue, and structure—and that they could do this not by putting pen to paper but by playing in front of an audience” (Libera 153). It not only provides comedians with the creative discipline of producing material regularly by

consensus, it also makes comedians better suited for a corporate culture that stresses collaboration and aims to mold flexible laborers who are adept at all aspects of the job— making no one indispensable.

### **The Contemporary Writers' Room**

The process of the writers' room varies slightly from show to show, but there is a general procedure for writing a television sitcom. For comedies, about five to eight writers begin drafting scripts months before production begins. Though freelance writers are more common in reality television and web-based episodes, most major television comedies have staff writers. The WGA Writer's Handbook describes staff writers as "a specially defined entry-level position with specific MBA [minimum basic agreement, part of the WGA's collective bargaining agreement] provisions that allow showrunners to hire you at a minimum of cost and risk" (18). Compensation for staff writers may vary, they can be in contracts for as little as six weeks, to as much as 40 weeks. More senior writers receive script fees for every script they are credited as author, but staff writers are generally paid a weekly salary (18-19).

Prior to production, writers convene to map out the season's trajectory, from stories to character arcs. Staff writers can have as much input as senior writers, though the hierarchy of the room necessitates that the showrunner have final approval over the series' direction. When the series is underway, this process does not stop, casting, ratings, and audience and executive feedback might change the direction of the season, and writers also begin to work in

more detail on episodes. The studio and network holds final approval over the series. They receive “beat sheets” which detail the events that take place in a show. This beat sheet is turned into an outline, then a draft script. Though one or a few writers may be assigned to write the episode, in comedy writing after a draft is written, it is essentially workshopped with the rest of the room. The rest of the writers give notes, clean up dialogue, and punch up the jokes and comedic moments. In dramas, the script is in the hands of individual writers who may work more closely with the showrunner to polish the script.

The writers’ room ensures that no individual writer has full responsibility for the success of a series, or even an episode. The responsibility rests with the showrunner, who has final approval before sending off the final episode to the network and studio. The process also makes for a fast script turnaround time. Writing for a half-hour comedy format is a fast-paced activity, the more high caliber writers in the room, the more insurance there is that episodes are ready on time. Phalen and Osellame note, “A comedy series requires an active writers’ room to generate the constant flow of jokes that defines the sitcom structure” (9). With some many different compatible but distinctive comedic sensibilities, there is always a better or more suitable joke that is sure to connect with audiences.

However, the collaborative, and sometimes rowdy, nature of the writers’ room sometime encourages the loudest or more outrageous voices to be heard. According to Phalen and Osellame, “Power relations affect the way writers

behave in the room and the manner in which they are allowed to contribute to the process” (11). These power relations are established by a comedian culture that diminishes women’s voices and a business culture with standardized business practices that excludes women. “‘The girl in the room,’ the lone woman writer on a white, male staff, is a long-standing and long-suffering tradition in comedy” writes Alessandra Stanley. This tradition—established in part by the writers’ room dynamics in show like *Your Show of Shows*— help perpetuate the idea that comedy writers are by default men.

Unless a show is specifically targeted for women, women are more than likely the minority in the writers’ room. According to TV executive logic, shows with broad appeal should be mainly written and run by men, whereas domestic comedies or comedies featuring a majority female cast (which is rare) should be created by women. This flawed reasoning affects content and encourages a homogenous work environment that is not always welcome to women.

Phalen and Osellame’s study of writers’ rooms yielded many interesting anecdotes from writers working in both comedy and drama. However, the highly collaborative nature of sitcoms yields its own particular issues. One woman comedy writer revealed, “...the room I’m in now is certainly the meanest room I’ve ever been in ... over [the] years I’ve seen rooms getting harsher and meaner and certainly more sexual. As they are younger and younger” (14). For all writers, but especially women, “knowing one’s place” is crucial to being a part of the team, and continued employment (17). Even the WGA’s writer’s

handbook alludes to the possible antagonisms that can arise in the writers' room:

Working with your fellow writers in the writers' room is a bit like being on an extended tour in a submarine. Certain protocol is required if you and your colleagues are to avoid destroying one another. A writers' room should not be viewed as a competitive arena in which those who speak loudest and most often win. It should be a collaborative environment in which ideas, not egos, dominate. Keep your comments and tone positive. Offer criticism, but if you have a problem with a story, or a line, or a scene, or a script, don't just register it, pitch a solution. (21)

A case in 1999 tested the boundaries of what is allowed in the writers' room. Amaani Lyle, a writers' assistant on the hit NBC comedy *Friends*, sued Warner Brothers Television and associated producers and executive producers for harassment and discrimination, citing conversations that happened in the writers' room. Lyle's suit had many consequences, to be discussed, but Phalen and Osellame found that the writers they interviewed conclusively condemned Lyle for making public the private conversations of the writer's room, "she was derided by writers themselves, even by those who would like to see these rooms change" (17). In part, writers felt that Lyle's accusations misrepresented the boundary-pushing creative process of comedy television writing, and Lyle herself misunderstood the ways the writers' room is supposed to work like a "dysfunctional" family (ibid). Part of the reaction towards Lyle may very well

come from her own status as a woman of color and as a “lowly” writers’ assistant. Phalen and Osellame argue, “In the political space of the room, writers play out their agendas. Winners get to keep playing the game; losers don’t. A competitive-cooperative dynamic develops among the writers, who rely on each other for input on scripts, but compete with each other for assignments. The power relations in the hierarchy are inviolable – at least without penalty – and there is a strong belief that writer have to pay their dues to earn the respect of their colleagues” (ibid). Lyle did not do that, and the writers, nor the courts felt her complaints were justified.

In the article “What Happens in the Writers’ Room Stays in the Writers’ Room?: Professional Authority in *Lyle v. Warner Bros.*” scholar Josh Heuman delineates the various ways the studio and related entities were able to absolve themselves of responsibility for the language and behavior in the writers’ room. Heuman notes, “the Writer’s Guild of America simply rejected legal authority over the room as illegitimate” (3). *Friends* creators Kevin Bright, Marta Kauffman, and David Crane “disavowed their production company BKC’s employership over Lyle,” arguing that control over the show lay with the Warner Bros. Television studio (4). Interestingly, Warner Bros. framed the case within speech law rather than fair-employment law; admitting that sexually explicit and racist language was used in the writers’ room. They argued that those kinds of conversations were pertinent to the creative process and helped create a more dynamic and boundary-pushing show, since they worked on

“generating scripts for an adult-oriented comic show featuring sexual themes” (qtd. in Henderson 151). According to Heuman, “in lurid detail,” Warner Bros. Television traced “connections” between the jokes in the writers’ room and jokes that made in into the script and onscreen. Lyle claimed that “writers instructed her not to transcribe certain conversations inside the room [...] implying their disconnection from creative outcomes” (8) and the writers’ seeming acknowledgment of the controversial nature of their jokes if they became public outside the context of the writers’ room. Raul Perez argues “comics make racist discourse palatable by learning to employ certain strategies of talk which are intended to circumvent the current ‘constraints’ on racial discourse in public” (479). I argue this extends to sexism as well. In disallowing Lyle to write everything said in the writers’ room, the writers seem to realize that real world discourse operates differently from the “open” space of the writers’ room.

Ultimately, the California Superior Court upheld the “creative necessity” of off-color jokes in the writers’ room. California’s Supreme Court justices, sides with the studio, affirming that “trash talk was part of the creative process, and that the studio and its writers could therefore not be sued for raunchy writers’ meetings” (Henderson 150). Though Heuman sees the specifics of the case as an example of “frictions between artistic freedom and social responsibility, read here as boundary tensions between the writers’ room and its social environment” (10-11), I argue that the aggressive tone of the

writers' room identified by Lyle is more than a case of "artistic freedom." The case attempted to challenge the normalized racist and sexist discourses that happen in the writers' room in the service of "comedy" and the verdict did nothing to provide protection to those who most often see themselves lampooned. Offensive behavior was rationalized as an integral component of the production process—as entrenched in the business of television production as in the culture amongst comedians.

Heuman points out, "If not legal harassment, the behavior in the *Friends* writers' room represented a sort of hazing ritual. As writers performed a particular identity, affirming values such as unruliness and irreverence, they staged a trial of membership—one that tended to disadvantage women of color such as Lyle" (5). Lyle's case is greater than just a repeat of the sexism Kallen identified at *Your Show of Shows*. Lyle's experience suggests persistent exclusion of women, even when they have already earned a place in the room. As Henderson points out, "a female writer who does not laugh along with off-color jokes [...] may be labeled incapable of being 'one of the guys' and therefore 'not a good fit' with a predominantly male staff. This writer, if she is unable to feign a level of comfort with such jokes, the writer may not last more than a year or two in the male-dominated world of television comedy writers" (152). Women writers must often learn to laugh at their own expense.

The case is an example of the kinds of difficult decisions women have to make when they are faced with harassment in the workplace. Patricia Phalen's

2000 study with women in entertainment yielded two kinds of responses. One respondent said of her harassment experience, "...could I have filed a lawsuit? Sure, I thought about it. You bet I did. But I decided I didn't want to spend two years, three, four, years of my life being deposed or having close colleagues being deposed. I didn't want it to become like the central issue of the next four years of my life" (243). Henderson begins her article with the following quote from comedy writer Daley Haggar, "if you're not comfortable with sexual humor or with crudeness or with all sorts of people being really honest about certain emotions, then yeah, this job is not for you" (145). *Lyle vs. Warner Bros.* is an example of how within the space of the Hollywood writer's room humor is generated through marginalization.

In a compilation of oral histories interviewing over 100 writers, Miranda Banks came to the conclusion that writers generally are concerned with "their role as both as an insider and an outsider within media production. Writers in theory and reality are both inside (and integral) and outside (and replaceable) the creative process of American entertainment production" (548). Though Banks does not provide the data, it is not difficult to imagine that women writers feel this tension more acutely, given the blatant ways in which they do and do not belong. Instances like the *Lyle* case coupled with the overwhelmingly masculine landscape is only one of many psychological, emotional, and practical obstacles that stand in the way of women writers working widely in the industry.

In 2016, the Writers Guild of America, West (WGAW) commissioned a report on the progress of women writers, as well as minority writers and older writers, in the industry. The report measured employment as well as earnings since 2012, the date of the previous report, to 2014. The report's title, "Renaissance in Reverse?," hints at the WGAW's dismal findings. Researchers found that specifically, the numbers "reveal a mixture of slow, forward progress, stalls and reversals on the Hollywood diversity front" (1). Key statistics find that "though women writers [...] made small gains in film employment [...] they lost ground in sector earnings by 2014" (ibid). However, the report later goes on to describe these small gains as "merely tread[ing] water" (2). In terms of earnings, the report points out that "the gender earnings gap in film has traditionally been greater than the gap in television" (4). With that in mind, since 2012, the earning gap between the two has widened further: "In 2012, women film writers earned 78 cents for every dollar earned by their white male counterparts (\$62,138 versus \$80,000). By 2014, the relative earnings figure had dropped to just 68 cents" (ibid). Though the report does not separate out women minorities, or women of older age, it can be assumed that their positions within Hollywood are financially tenuous at best, under-earning even their under-paid white peers. In fact, for minority television writers both employment and earnings stayed the same in two years.

The WGAW and the Director's Guild are both organizations that, in their press materials and public statements, understand the necessity of diversity.

For example, Darnell Hunt's conclusion at the end of the WGAW Report reads as follows:

"For nearly three decades, the Hollywood Writers Report series has championed the cause of increasing diversity among the ranks of television and film writers. This issue is a critical one because the Hollywood Industry plays a major role in the process by which a nation circulates stories about itself. To the degree that female, minority and older voices are left out of this process, large segments of America's increasingly diverse audiences are denied access to characters and situations that resonate more fully with all of our experiences. If this rationale is not compelling enough, recent evidence suggests that diversity among writers is also good for the bottom line. It turns out that television shows with writers rooms that roughly reflect the diversity of American's population tend also to have the highest median ratings" (14-15).

Yet, despite this, there are still not enough actresses or writers of color, and many have recently tired of being the outspoken proponents of closing the wage gap. In the 2016 Oscars Actress Roundtable with *The Hollywood Reporter*, to a question about employment, actress Amy Adams responded: "Who you should be asking [about inequality in the business] is the Producer Roundtable: 'Do you think minorities are underrepresented? Do you think women are underpaid?' We are always put on the chopping block to put our opinion out

there, and that question is never asked. I'm like, 'Why don't you ask them and then have their statements be the headlines in the press?' I don't want to be a headline anymore about pay equality" (Galloway.)

### **The Showrunner**

*The Hollywood Reporter* has been publishing a list “The Top 50 Power Showrunners” since 2008. The list creates a correlation between the showrunner’s vision and the show’s comedic or dramatic sensibility. But as Cindy Y. Hong points out, despite the word being common vernacular now in academic and mainstream talk about television (especially in conversations about so-called “quality” television), the term “showrunner” appears nowhere in the credits, and is both a formal and informal term that defines a set of tasks and skills that varies from show to show that can include writing, casting, running the writers’ room, maintaining a production schedule and budget, editing, overseeing social media, product placement and ancillary materials (Farr 21).

According to Hong, trade paper *Variety* began using the term showrunner to describe producers in 1992. Three years later the New York Times published a profile of John Wells writer-producer of ER. That piece also served to explain the showrunner’s role to a lay audience. According to the piece, a showrunner is responsible for “the series’ scripts, tone, attitude, look and direction” (qtd. in Hong). The prevalent thinking is that the showrunner is essentially a manager of a “very complex and fast-moving organization”

(Melvoin qtd. in Farr 21). In fact, many of their successes hinge on their managerial ability as “compared to a creative failure, a managerial failure can make it tougher to land the next opportunity” (22)

The term “showrunner” may have become popular during the 1990s, however writer-producers, such as Norman Lear, served in the role of showrunners prior to then. Lear was arguably the first to have such a singular influence on a television show, and Lear set a precedent for individual writers creating a trademark style that was recognizable to a larger audience. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the studio primarily ran television shows, with writers and directors deploying the story lines concocted by executives. In the 1970s this hierarchical structure began to break down, and television became much more of a writer’s medium.

The showrunner is an interested writer hybrid that does not neatly translate onto other more well-defined roles. Scott Collins of the *Los Angeles Times* describes a showrunner as necessarily a hyphenate, “a curious hybrid of starry-eyed artists and tough-as-nails operational managers. They're not just writers; they're not just producers. They hire and fire writers and crewmembers, develop story lines, write scripts, cast actors, mind budgets and run interference with studio and network bosses. It's one of the most unusual and demanding, right-brain/left-brain job descriptions in the entertainment world.”

In 2014, a documentary titled, *Showrunners: The Art of Running a TV*

*Show* spoke with dozens of contemporary showrunners on their jobs. To accompany the documentary, an eponymous book was released, complementing the film's interviews with a longer oral history and interviews with prominent showrunners. Like Collins, the book's introduction to a section titled "What a Network and Studio Expect from a Showrunner" attempts to clarify the expectations and tensions that showrunners must negotiate. It is worth quoting at length:

When looking at the chain of command in television, the showrunner is responsible for overseeing the cast, producers, directors, and everyone in the crew (or those below the line). While it may seem like the pinnacle position, the showrunner is actually beholden to the network, which licenses and broadcasts their show, and the studio, who helps finance the production of the series. Those two entities represent the purse strings, and the bosses of a showrunner. The showrunner's function is not only creative, but also serves to ensure that the financial backer's investment has the potential to recoup their money and eventually become profitable when the series is eligible for syndication or foreign-market sales. Because of that, most showrunners understand that adopting a maverick attitude against their financial overlords isn't the smartest way of handling creative conflicts. (Bennet qtd. in Zalben)

Like Collins, the book places showrunners as go-betweens, caught between their creative, writerly side and the business aspects of creating a profitable

television show. While the showrunner is, most of the time, the head writer or steers the show's creative direction, the showrunner is also an employee of a studio and a network. The showrunner must balance what she decides is a good creative risk, and what the studio and network would approve. As the book notes more crassly, "[M]ost showrunners have figured out their individual ways of making their bosses happy without selling out creatively to every whim of often jittery studio and network executives" (ibid).

The WGA prints its own booklet titled, *Writing for Episodic TV: From Freelance to Showrunner*, providing advice for newly minted showrunners. A piece from *Joan of Arcadia* showrunner Barbara Hall begins with an acknowledgment of the showrunner's complicated allegiances: "This is complicated. Making the transition is difficult, which is why it's so hard for great writers to become great showrunners. You have to acknowledge the transition you've made, and in the process you have to throw out 90 percent of what you've learned to be or do as a writer" (Jean 48). She goes on to stress the importance of collaboration, insinuating that relationships that were once fraught (for creative reasons) must now be smoothed over for diplomatic reasons: "...now you have crossed over into the business of maintaining a show. You have to stop seeing the people around you as adversaries and you must start seeing them as partners. This includes everyone from the prop guy to the network. Everyone is trying to help you realize your position..." (ibid). Finally, she stresses the tension between the administrative and creative roles

of a showrunner: “Know that you have entered into this strange marriage of art and commerce. Don’t resist it; instead, attempt to understand it [...] The hardest thing for a writer who is suddenly a showrunner to realize is that you’ve necessarily entered into this strange relationship. Stop trying to get a divorce. Figure out how to make it work” (ibid). This guide, aimed at writers, attempts to validate both the writer and the showrunner hyphenate. By framing the art and commerce union as a marriage from which there is no “divorce,” Hall manages to bring together the main ideas of creative labor: do what you love... for money.

Hall is not that only one who seems to think there is an inherent incompatibility between writers and administration. In 2005, The Writer’s Guild Association in partnership with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers developed a Showrunner Training Program that is “designed to help senior-level writer-producers and recent creators hone the skills necessary to become successful showrunners in today’s television landscape.” In a brochure created for the program’s 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, there is further elaboration of how what “skills” are necessary to be a showrunner. Peter Roth, President and Chief Content Officer of Warner Bros outlines the Showrunner Training Program’s goals, “Writers are counseled on the importance of the subtler elements of the job, including network and studio relationships; the value of fiscal responsibility; and the strength of true leadership – how to inspire, galvanize and utilize the best talents of their

teams” (3). Veteran producer and co-founder and chair of the Program Jeff Melvoin writes:

“The ongoing upheaval in the television industry has dramatically intensified the demand for show runners, creating a turbulent environment that thrusts an increasing number of writers into show-running responsibilities without benefit of much, if any, on-the-job apprenticeship” (5).

The Showrunner Training Program is meant to correct those oversights. But the Program is also a self-selective and competitive program. Though it may reflect writers interested in becoming showrunners, it is unclear what the pool of candidates looks like in terms of demographics. As mentioned previously, the “qualifications” necessary for the program may bar many women from applying for the program in the first place, let alone getting in.

The program’s gendered dynamics are on par with what is actually happening in Hollywood writers’ rooms. In June 2016, *Variety* did a study of the gender and racial/ethnic breakdown of showrunners for shows at the five broadcast networks (ABC, NBC, Fox, CBS, and the CW) for the 2016-17 season. Based on the information provided by the networks, they found that out of 50 showrunners of 38 series, 90% are white and almost 80% are male.

These statistics have dire two-fold consequences. Because showrunners are both writers and executives, the dearth of women showrunners compromises responsible and complex representation of women on-screen.

Women writers tend to write more women characters. According to studies by USC Annenberg's Institute for Diversity and Empowerment, women creators are more likely to give prominent speaking roles to women than male creators (Smith). Women of color are more likely to feature characters of color than white creators. At ABC, CBS, and the CW, there were no women of color slated as showrunners. According to *Variety*, only two women of color were listed as showrunners overall in the 2016-17 season (Ryan). Without gender parity in the industry, coupled with racial and ethnic diversity, storytelling suffers, yet networks repeatedly undervalue the importance of diversity in creating inclusive and quality television shows.

The continued exclusion of women as showrunners also affects the employment of women behind-the-scenes. Maureen Ryan points out, "Showrunners not only determine the creative direction of their programs; they also oversee the hiring, firing, and mentoring that gives the next generation of creators a chance to ascend." Women in positions of power tend to support and hire women more often. Without women in key hiring roles, it becomes more difficult to women to get hired across the board, in writer positions or other staff positions, and it prevents women looking to move into more administrative roles from finding successful mentors to provide career advice.

In the recent proliferation of mainstream articles about the lack of women showrunners in network television, there have been a few shows that tout the diversity and openness cable and streaming platforms such as

Lifetime, HBO, Netflix, and HULU. Broadcast television is usually (and rightly) criticized for its exclusion of women and people of color, but cable networks overall do not fare much better. With the exception of Lifetime, which I will discuss in detail later, most cable and streaming platforms also have issues of gender and racial/ethnic parity. The 2015 UCLA Bunche Center Hollywood Diversity Report found that in the 2012-13 television season women were credited as creators on only 22.6% of scripted cable shows. In digital platforms, women were outnumbered 4 to 1 as creators. Though the study does not include “showrunners” as a term, these statistics hint at the proportion of women helming shows in the cable and digital streaming space.

The end of the *Variety* piece ends with a telling and dismal note: “Presented with *Variety*’s findings, reps for the five networks gave background information on efforts to create opportunities for women and people of color, but all declined to address the statistics for the new season on the record.” Though networks repeatedly assure the media that they are invested in creating more diverse writers’ rooms, casts, and boardrooms, their reticence to acknowledge their persistent shortcomings belies these statements. Many networks have diversity initiatives similar to the WGA’s Showrunner Training Program, but that still cannot overcome biases when it comes to actual hiring practices. Networking “opportunities” and resume building can only go so far in a business that consistently promotes white, male writers over their equally talented women counterparts.

Diversity initiatives have a history of, if not failure, lack of substantial impact on the demographic makeup of the industry. According to Leah P. Hunter, 1996 marked a crucial year for diversity in television. Facing an impending boycott from coalitions representing people of color, major networks undertook sustained diversity initiatives. In their most current form, the major networks like NBC, CBS, and ABC have diversity initiatives that place underrepresented writers and directors in workshops, shadowing, and in-house program development. Hunter outlines the specifics of a few of these programs and interviews past participants on their views on the efficacy of these programs and the issue of diversity in the entertainment industry. According to Hunter's research, ten of the eleven interviewees agreed with a statement by Shonda Rhimes in which she voiced her frustration with the accolades that come with hiring diverse staff and casts. She says:

There's such a lack of people hiring women and minorities that when someone does it on a regular basis, they are given an award ... It's not because of a lack of talent. It's because of a lack of access. People hire who they know. If it's been a white boys club for 70 years, that's a lot of white boys hiring on another. (qtd. in Hunter 162)

Though diversity initiatives attempt to redress a lack of experience by providing opportunities to work on prestigious shows or talk to high-profile mentors, Rhimes suggests that that is not enough to address the barriers for minorities. Hunter quotes the following exchange between comedians W. Kamau Bell and

Chris Rock:

Bell: What did you tell me when we first talked about this show? Do you remember what you said?

Rock: What did I say?

Bell: You said, 'Unknown Black guys never get TV shows. So, you're going to need my help.' (audience laughter) Which I was kind of like 'Awww, yay!' I'm good at the end. I like that.

Rock: Yeah, they give unknown white guys shows all of the time. I mean, no one knew who in the fuck Conan O'Brien was. Or Jimmy Kimmel.

Bell: Yeah.

Rock: Or, you know, Craig Ferguson. Like white guys crawl out of holes and get shows. (audience laughter) It's like, who is this white man? They will take a chance on a white boy. A brother's got to be a proven commodity. I've had a show, and they'll give Cedric [the Entertainer] or Steve [Harvey] [one], but they won't try nothing [sic] with a new brother they don't know. (qtd. in Hunter 154)

Network diversity initiatives either fail to understand, or have not yet found the most appropriate model to combat the ways "inner circles" become the established network through which hiring happens. Though networks have attempted to systematically address inequities in the industry, they also seem uncomfortable with blatantly discussing race and gender, or targeting only minorities for these diversity initiatives. Hunter notes, "In looking for different

viewpoints, however, instead of looking toward women and people of color, many of the broadcast networks have instead broadened their diversity initiative programs to include people who have interesting and different backgrounds.” One of Hunter’s subjects offers her opinion on the networks’ new definition of diversity, “It looks like well, [the networks are not] just not trying to give you some Black girl, some Latino guys. We are also giving you a woman who was a ballerina on Broadway for six years.” But as Hunter points out, the outrage over the lack of diversity onscreen and behind the scenes “was not because the viewpoints of white ballerinas were not being included” (166).

This is a misguided attempt to address what Henderson sees as a lack of cultural difference in television writers’ rooms. She writes, “In a post- network era dominated by ‘color- blind’ and ‘multicultural’ hiring, attempts at inclusion are based more on visual difference than on cultural difference. Without consideration of cultural differences in the creative process, color-blind and multicultural casting of both the writers’ room and on-screen characters becomes a means of instituting ‘uni- culturalism.’ In other words, the more race, gender, and class are used to other writers, the less comfortable these writers are with expressing creative and cultural difference” (152). In an effort not to tokenize women or people of color, when training initiatives focus on “cultural diversity” they get it sorely wrong.

The Lifetime Network, a subsidiary of A+E Networks, has long been touted with their tagline “television for women,” but even the network with

women-oriented content identified gender disparity behind the scenes. In May of 2015, Lifetime announced Broad Focus, an initiative aimed at increasing women's opportunities to write, develop, produce and direct network programs. Broad Focus' aimed to "identify and develop entertainment's best and up-and-coming creative talent with a specific lens focused on developing content dedicated to the female experience." For Lifetime, this was aimed not just at increasing women in their network, but to demonstrate their commitment to gender parity in Hollywood. President and CEO of A+E Networks, Nancy Dubuc stated, "Broad Focus will inspire us to look deeper and in non-traditional places to discover women among [...] storytellers. I'm proud we are challenging ourselves and our friends in the industry to do more to support them."

The initiative is more than just a vocal commitment to diversity. In a groundbreaking move, Lifetime partnered with the AFI Conservatory Directing Workshop for Women, guaranteeing every student a job at Lifetime when they graduate. This move does much more to address the (diversity) program to (television) program or movie pipeline. Tanya Lopez, senior vice president of Lifetime's original film programming states, "Hiring women *works*. Mentoring, internships, all those things are fine at a certain entry-place level, but the truth of the matter is people just want to go to work. Our North Star is: Give. Women. Jobs. That's the only way it's gonna change" (qtd. in Goode).

At the 2016 Television Critics' Association upfronts, Lifetime presented preliminary statistics on the efficacy of their initiative. According to *Deadline*,

“More than half of Lifetime’s movies and series in 2016 were written by women, up from over 30% in 2015. While the portion of female movie directors stayed at 29%, in episodic directing, the percentage jumped up from 13% to 55%. There were also increases among the producing ranks with the exception of series exec producers, a category that saw the only year-to-year decline” (Andreeva).

Not only has the initiative changed the network’s approach to production, it has also changed the working conditions on the set of their films. In Goodes’ pieces, she quotes director Melanie Aitkenhead, “For the first time in my career, I was working on a set and nobody was being treated differently. I seriously called my friends and said, ‘I worked on a movie, and none of the stuff that happens on that blog [*Shit People Say to Women Directors*] happened to me.” The first 18 months of the initiative shows a promising direction for practical measures that can bolster women’s roles in the writers’ room, director’s chair, and network or studio boardroom.

Granted, the changes at the Lifetime network are not enough to change gender inequities across film and television. Goode claims that “Lifetime originated a whole genre of ‘women’s entertainment’ in the 1990s, 20 years later, it created a meta-genre of entertainment that *comments* on the conventions of ‘women’s entertainment.’” Where some may see a safe space, others may see Lifetime as another “ghetto” where women go to work when they cannot find work at the more prestigious, larger networks. Even with the

critical acclaim of *UnReal* and the overtly satirical takes on their usual fare, Lifetime is a smaller network that must overcome misconceptions about its brand. It would be heartening to see the kinds of policies at Lifetime has implemented at networks that are mainstream, and that presume to have a majority male audience.

## **Conclusion**

The gendered practices of the comedy industry help shape the dynamics in the writers' room. They infuse the room with the collaborative spirit of improv comedy, as well as the exclusionary spirit of a male-dominated art form. By presenting improv comedy and the writers' room as allied spaces of comedy production, we are able to see the similarities and continuity between them. This analytical pairing helps emphasize that though Hollywood's gender politics are fraught, ancillary creative spaces are equally so. The gender disparities in these feeder industries influence and maintain a tradition of gender inequity in Hollywood.

Analyzing the writers' room helps us examine how gender dynamics behind the camera interplays with Hollywood's institutional politics of gender. This kind of analysis becomes more important as Hollywood itself is run less by specialized movie executives and producers, and more often run by businesspeople coming from the technology world and financial corporations. Hollywood's business practices and its financial logics are inflected by the worlds of those who run them, and with that comes flawed rationalizations for

the exclusion of women and other minorities.

Though it is important to take action and expose Hollywood's gender inequity, it is less productive to do so without understanding why a tradition of sexism has perpetuated for decades in the industry at large, but also within discrete, smaller spaces like the writers' room. By putting into perspective the insidious nature of sexism in the writers' room, it is less of stretch to think that diversity initiatives and training programs that stress resume building only tackles a piece of a larger structure making television and film writing a male-dominated career. If women overcome biases to gain a spot at the writers' table, then, more often than not, they must negotiate a room that if not blatantly hostile, is difficult to be in.

Granted, this is not the experience of all women writers, and the examples given in this chapter is not representative of all writers' rooms. However, the consistency in scholarship and trade press of the same kinds of stories, complaints, and concerns points us to the notion that a good majority of rooms deal with the kind of gender politics described and discussed in this chapter. As will be discussed in the next chapter, there are ways in which women can successfully navigate the creative and corporate demands of their jobs. By using an arsenal of skills to their advantage, some women writers and showrunners have, for decades, modeled ways to overcome the structural inhibitions of Hollywood.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE FEMALE COMEDIAN AS FRANCHISE

In February 2015, Mindy Kaling appeared in two commercials as “herself”—Mindy Kaling, the star. The first commercial, for American Express, titled “Mindy Kaling: The Unlikely Leading Lady” focuses on Kaling the writer and actress. With a voiceover that emphasizes Kaling’s racial difference to the uniform white femininity of the Hollywood landscape, the commercial highlights Kaling’s auteurship as facilitated by a credit card that also allows flexibility, independence and loyalty. Kaling narrates over a sequence that shows her getting up in the morning and making her way to the set, where she puts on her headphones, ready to direct a scene. The narration is as follows: “When I got to Hollywood they said, maybe you should be the best friend or the sidekick. It was very difficult. I was told that they don’t put girls who look like me on TV. I guess, they can’t say that anymore.” The voiceover then switches to another female voice: “To the next generation of unlikely leading ladies: wherever the journey takes you, membership will be there.”

The second commercial, for Nationwide Insurance, has a more humorous take on Kaling, but again emphasizes her “invisibility”—quite literally, as the source of the premise and eventual joke of the commercial. Again, a female narrator begins the mini-story of Mindy: “After years of being treated like she was invisible, it occurred to Mindy she might actually *be* invisible.” To the soundtrack of “Pretty Woman,” Kaling snags food from people’s plates,

sunbathes nude in the park, and frolics in a carwash. The punchline of the commercial comes when the narrator interjects, “But Mindy was actually *not* invisible.” At that point, Mindy is at a restaurant face to face with actor Matt Damon (playing himself). She moves in close to sniff his neck and he pulls away. She asks him if he can see her and he says yes, taken aback. The exchange goes on for a few seconds, and the narrator adds to her previous statement, “She had just always been treated that way. Join the nation that sees you... as a priority. Nationwide is on your side.”

These commercials expand on Kaling’s star persona, but they also do more than take advantage of people’s recognition of her, the commercials expand the universe of Kaling-starring media. The star text of Kaling is intimately connected to her role as writer, producer and showrunner—and the way this plays out is Kaling’s emphasis on her disposable income—a phrase she uses often to describe Mindy and herself. In an interview at Paleyfest 2013, when asked about her goals for *The Mindy Project*, she answers by detailing the comedy writing style she learned as staff writer for *The Office* (NBC, 2005-2013) then quickly conflating writing style with a more personal fashion and lifestyle. She emphasizes that the writing style for the show was not “[her] style.” Kaling says, “I learned to love *The Office* and its unglamorous-ness [...] but I love wearing nine bracelets and sequins and kissing guys and living in New York City and having a disposable income. That’s *my* personality. So [*The Mindy Project*] is more about my organic interests before I started *The Office*”

("Paleyfest 2013"). Kaling emphasizes that *The Office* does not reflect her *personal voice* in the way it was aesthetically and formally different than her "true" self. Kaling emphasizes Kelly's lack of style and a distinctive *image* as antithetical to Mindy, further confirming that Mindy is more like the "real" Kaling. If the star vehicle must be the perfect match between narrative and actor, Kaling herself has acknowledged that *The Office* was not that vehicle for her as neither a writer nor an actress because it did not reflect her tastes as a consumer.

Indeed, this work on *The Office* seems to be a departure from the ways Kaling normally positions herself on social media sites and blogs as an avid consumer. Back in September 2006, Kaling posted her first blog post under the pseudonym Mindy Ephron (an allusion to rom-com director Nora Ephron). The blog, called "Things I've Bought That I Love" featured reviews and musings on an array of "frivolous and fun" hair, skincare, technological, and sartorial products that Kaling bought or intended to buy. The description of her blog is worth quoting at length:

"I don't have kids or a mortgage yet. I do however have an [sic] fairly lucrative job playing a seldom-seen tertiary character on a network television program [*The Office*]. The point is, I have oodles of disposable income to throw around until I need to start behaving like a grown person."

Kaling's Twitter and Instagram accounts are likewise littered with pictures of her recent designer purchases, which act as both a way to align herself with neoliberal consumer practices, and also to advertise for these companies that can serve to position her as powerful brand spokesperson. Not only do these commercials play with Kaling's already established brand of quirkiness and sad-girlhood, they also play to Kaling's well-known love of celebrities, her character Mindy Lahiri's persona, and take place within the New York space of her popular sitcom.

Through this lens, the Kaling commercials are more important to an understanding of a new kind of strategy employed for women comedians that can be seen in similar commercials of female comedians like Tina Fey (also for American Express), but also more generally in their work as they craft their stand-up personas, writerly personas, pick their roles as actresses, and play out their personas in the press. Though this may seem like a traditional use of star power for building a brand and targeting specific demographics, the tailored styles of the commercials are rather unique. Instead of seeming as though the celebrity has been plugged into the world of the brand, the brand uses the sensibility and world of the comedian herself, to not only sell itself, but to sell the comedian's brand values as well.

Before continuing further, it's important to clarify essential terminology that will be used in the chapter. There are distinctions in terminology between "star" and "celebrity" that, so far in scholarship, do not allow one to be another,

and much of this has to do with the “talent” of the public figure in question—which is exceedingly problematic. An excerpt from Barry King’s essay on stardom and the money form highlights the problematic categories between traditional conceptions of “star” and “celebrity”: “Whether on stage or screen, an actor is always a signifier with at least three intertwined referents: the private person, the fictive person or character, and the type under which these two dimensions of identity are categorically subsumed” (8). In his most recent book, King’s distinction falls in line with conventional distinctions between “star” and “celebrity,” the former being reserved for those who have earned fame through talent and the latter for those less known for a particular set of skills and more widely known “without any necessary or demonstrable link to specific achievements” (5).

Christine Geraghty makes a distinction between three different types of stars: celebrities, professionals, and performers. For Geraghty, “celebrity” type stars have personal lives that circulate possibly more widely than their own work. “Professionals” maintain consistent personae throughout their careers and “performers” are renowned for their chameleon like acting skills. Though these might be important categorical distinctions to define different forms of acting, these terms and King’s leave little room for actors who actively seek to create a seamless transition from their personal to their public lives, to the point where they become indistinguishable. What Geraghty nor King account for are for stars like Whitney Cummings, Roseanne, and Margaret Cho (for

example) that have various “roles” as performer. Cummings for example, is an actress and a stand-up comedian, with each “version” of “herself” closer to her “true” self.

In this chapter, I use the terms “celebrity” and “star” interchangeably because the women I discuss have exploited both terms to their advantage: they are good at their craft and yet because of the mediums they work in, the genres they work in and the scope of their work, are less associated with *exceptional* talent. Though they are well-known, they are also niche stars—more powerful within the comedy community, feminist media circles, and elite media circles that dabble in “the popular.” This distinction, these female comedians’ particularity is important to amend the definition of “star” slightly. Their high profile in high profile publications and media outlets belies the actual “popular” impact of their work. For example, for Amy Schumer and Mindy Kaling, their shows have a significantly smaller audience than any of the top network shows, but it is their ability to circulate within elite media circles that inflates their impact. And this is not to diminish the work of these women, but it must be pointed out that there are plenty of potential “stars” if “talent” is the only basis. However, without an ability to garner praise, press, and a growing public, their talent would be unacknowledged. Thus the media becomes a crucial component to celebrity making, not just in terms of tabloid or paparazzi coverage, but also as a way to validate talent and cultural timeliness. Celebrity is necessarily mediated and the popular media is in many

ways responsible not only for disseminating the images of celebrities, but also for providing what we know of them. This, however, does not suggest the media are the only ones responsible for how we view stars.

Ever since Richard Dyer's seminal works *Heavenly Bodies* and *Stars*, star studies and celebrity studies have been able to explain the phenomena of stars and their concomitant use for product differentiation. Studies of studio era Hollywood star-making make it abundantly clear that though Hollywood, in its contemporary iteration, drastically departs from the studio era's model of star "ownership," they also make clear that contemporary processes of star-making are quite similar to studio era processes, except now the responsibility of star-making is dispersed amongst various independent sectors rather than controlled by the studio itself. For example, Cathy Klaprat uses Bette Davis to argue that the classical Hollywood star operated like an indentured servant to the studio. As a brand ambassador, the star was a mark of quality—a logo, essentially, that identified and differentiated the studio product from others. Similarly, a "Tom Hanks film" or "Sandra Bullock movie" indicates to a contemporary audience not just that the film is a star vehicle, but it also serves to indicate the film's genre, stylistic qualities, and possibly even its thematic concerns—essentially stars work as branding in the same way that a superhero icon signals Marvel or DC, with the same amount of agency as an animated character.

As Lorraine York argues, often celebrity and star studies errs toward theorizing a celebrity without agency, precisely because of the power of allied circles to make or break a star. Even given Dyer's intentions to round out a flattened notion of celebrity, scholarship still tends to ascribe a certain degree of powerlessness to the celebrity. Actors are rarely discussed as having access to substantial creative control or control over the manipulation and dissemination of their image. Instead, for scholars, the intangible forces of the Hollywood industrial complex are the masterminds behind the curtain. As a cog in the Hollywood machine, stars are just one of many ways branding occurs. It is crucial that Klaprat's analysis, and those of many other scholars, hides the ways that stars then and now lend a hand in molding their own image, by carefully selecting their wardrobe, by tipping off gossip columnists about their own whereabouts and those of their enemies for tabloid exposure, and by how they often resist or sneakily rebel against the demands of the studio and their fans. Though, certainly, the studios exerted a great degree of power over stars during the studio era, accounts also underestimate the ways stars set about making themselves indispensable within a system that constantly reminded them of their ephemerality. Dyer and other scholars like Chris Rojek and P. David Marshall attempt to account for this by focusing on moments of disjuncture between the star and previous versions of the star. By tracing the career moves of Jimmy Stewart or Tom Cruise, for example, it can

be seen when the Hollywood machine has successfully placed him in the “type” they set forth for him and when he is willfully attempting to shed that role.

As can be seen in the example above, in contemporary illustrations of celebrity, the mechanisms of capitalism frequently overshadow the ambition that drives young men and women to willfully change themselves for fame. By focusing on when an actor “breaks from type” scholarship reifies the power that publicity mechanisms seek to enforce. As York asks, “is that all that celebrity agency can ever be: an opting out that ultimately reinforces the power of the twin forces of production and consumption” (1336)?

Of course, to say the complete opposite, that is, that the PR machines behind celebrities only work *for* a celebrity underestimates how they are an essential component of the star/audience feedback loop. Publicists, managers, lawyers and agents as much as they are employees of celebrities are responsible in large part in creating perfect servants of the studios and of the audiences. However, in the case of women comedians it seems it is more so collaboration between the star and his or her publicity team than it is a top-down manipulation of star image and text. Though Dyer acknowledges that stars “are involved in making themselves commodities” (*Heavenly Bodies* 5), this acknowledgment is more gestural than built into the theory of stardom he sets forth. The stars’ involvement is more passive, lending their aura, their lives and their careers over to manipulation rather than having any say in the ultimate persona they put forth. Though scholars like Paul McDonald make an

effort to point out the increasing degrees of freedom stars have in a post-studio, post-network era, as York points out, “the persistent vestige of manipulation theory” pervades the work of even the most well-meaning scholar (1332).

Though this theory may be an accurate representation of the actual way many actors as stars and celebrities are built, sold, and bought, it fails to encompass the more complex ways that women comedians are currently and have historically built their brands. Because of the depth to which the women comedians discussed in this dissertation are involved in aspects of production as other than actor, the assumptions of how celebrities function in the Hollywood industrial complex are seriously brought into question. Rather than just an “image” or “text” to “read,” as producers, directors, and writers, the women discussed have an unprecedented amount of creative control over the content of their work, and they control how that work is connected to the myriad publicity mechanisms, intertexts, and paratexts involving them.

Current conceptions of the star do not account fully for the control stars hold over their own career. York suggests turning to models of literary celebrity to invest stars with agency. In its current configuration, models of literary celebrity resolve the tension between production and consumption that York believes fuels the insistence on manipulation as central to celebrity-making. And though scholars are more willing to nuance these tensions when studying literary celebrity, it is rarer to see this nuance in scholarship about film or television stardom. Scholars such as Loren Glass and Joe Moran have been

able to reinvest public, famous artistic figures with independence from the many publicity and publishing mechanisms that go into crafting literary celebrity personae. Significantly, their conception of literary celebrity is not solely dependent on the dichotomy between a writer with “talent” and a writer whose fame is more dependent on their “personality”—a dichotomy that pervaded very early conceptions of literary celebrity, and still pervades media celebrity theories. Glass, Moran and Timothy Brennan advocate for literary celebrities’ “situated agency.” That is, “an agency that operates alongside and even within structural forces and constraints” (1339). What situated agency also allows for is an acknowledgement of the push and pull of these forces on the celebrity. Instead of the celebrity as the sole creator of his or her image, the celebrity and the other people of his or her “team” work together, or sometimes, work at odds with one another, to create an image that is at times cohesive, and at times marked by ruptures and divergences from type.

As York acknowledges, the processes of celebrity making are more apparent than ever before—and the agentive hand crafting the image is also front and center. That the self-made stars like Paris Hilton or Kim Kardashian are derided for their constructed-ness is a direct reflection of how the processes of Hollywood must still remain more or less occluded, but not by going back to the strict star management of the studio era, but by selling celebrity-making as “creative agency.” In invoking a turn to a model of literary celebrity, York is really invoking a model of creative agency. Unlike in literature, there has hardly

been a push to ascribe creative agency and authorial providence to any single person over a media text because media creation is a highly collaborative activity. And though auteur theories of the 1960s allowed for an interpretation of film directors (and in later scholarship, briefly, actors and screenwriters) as the source of a film's style and content, in the 1980s, this was quickly curtailed as directors and other creatives were re-categorized as stars and celebrities, with, at best, a similar lack of agency—or at worst, a more nefarious, capitalist agenda underlying their creative output. York attempts to present a definition of celebrity agency where “the celebrity need not be determined to be either powerful or powerless” (1341). As Marsha Orgeron writes, many stars begin their pursuits by attempting to “broker in or manage *reputation*” (qtd. in York 1342) with little foresight as to how that management might be beneficial or detrimental to their fame. Though York comes to a different conclusion than Orgeron about what exactly Orgeron's study *proved*, both come to the conclusion that the infrastructure of Hollywood is both “implacable” and allows for a “productive refocusing of energies” (ibid).

York is optimistic that situated agency can “break this production-consumption deadlock” and applies the logic of situated agency to a close reading of an American Express commercial starring Robert De Niro, which interestingly, closely mirrors the Kaling commercial for the same brand in how it attempts to distill the star image to a single distinctive trait: authorship. The title for the ad is a “Love Letter to a City.” In it, the camera lovingly films a post

9/11 Manhattan, hovering over Little Italy and later, Ground Zero. As York illustrates, the short-film like advertisement promises insight into the reclusive star's "roots" but this is constantly displaced. The ad ultimately utilizes "the discourses of secrecy and privacy onto a public space [Manhattan]: a redirection of individualizing celebrity onto the polis" (1344). But the ad is also not just an example of an actor using his persona for personal or corporate financial gain. The advertisement is also a part of a series of TV and print ads for the TriBeCa film festival, which De Niro founded after the 9/11 attacks in an effort to economically and creatively revitalize a devastated city.

Also, De Niro's cultural capital resulted in an advertisement with as much artistic cache as corporate cred. Martin Scorsese directed the ad, Annie Liebowitz photographed the print ad images, and a Philip Glass composition is used as the soundtrack. Not only are De Niro's collaborators well regarded in their fields, they are themselves New York institutions, each having a history of working in and around Manhattan. Though it is not as easy to separate out with creative decisions were those of American Express and which were ones of the artists creating the advertisement, it is clear that the ad brings together De Niro's persona, the value system he represents (which is deeply rooted in an urban, east coast, artistic sentiment), and a brand (AmEx) that has great stakes in being associated with art and cultural patronage (as "the official card" of the film festival).

De Niro profits from the advertisement by amassing funds for the film festival, and publicity for the festival. But most importantly, De Niro is able to protect his brand. American Express' desire to seem artistic and creative allows De Niro to participate in an ad with a veneer of intimacy, without actual disclosure, as York attests. By offering a component of his brand (his artsiness), De Niro is able to protect other areas of his life he is less willing to compromise (his privacy). This reading of the advertisement possibly ascribes him more creative agency than he had in the actual creation of the advertisement—but in many ways that is the intention of the advertisement, to make indistinct the boundaries between actor and author, person and persona.

In the series of commercials described at the beginning of the chapter, Mindy Kaling similarly trades on her well-known persona(s) as comedian and writer to showcase the products. But even thematically both commercials are similar, despite the fact they are advertising dissimilar products and despite that tonally, each commercial is approaching their product with differing levels of seriousness. Yet both commercials solidify a narrative of invisibility to visibility that correlates with Kaling's self-constructed persona, epitomized in her book title *Is Everybody Hanging Out Without Me?* — a title that indicates Kaling's constant suspicion, performed or not, that she is being excluded.

But Kaling's commercials also center on a narrative that relates to the treatment of people of color in the media and the business world. American Express makes this most obvious in their tagline that directly targets “unlikely

leading ladies.” The American Express commercial is explicitly playing to Kaling’s authorial importance and their role in facilitating success for women in media. *The Mindy Project* is the first sitcom created by and starring an Indian-American, though this fact was largely buried in media articles that instead focused on Kaling’s showrunner status. Because the half-hour sitcom debuted fall of 2012, it was quickly absorbed into the pantheon of other network and cable “girl” shows (similarly showrun by and starring women) that debuted within a year of *The Mindy Project* such as *New Girl* (also on FOX), HBO’s series *Girls*, as well as short-lived NBC series *Whitney* and ABC’s *Don’t Trust the B in Apartment 23* and *Super Fun Night*. But Kaling’s sitcom stands apart from these contemporary “girl” sitcoms in how it is also part of a (rather short) history of sitcoms created by and starring women of color. Before Mindy Kaling, the last woman of color to create and star in her own sitcom was Wanda Sykes in 2003 with her FOX sitcom, *Wanda At Large*. With a three full seasons airing on FOX, *The Mindy Project* surpassed the longevity of both Sykes’ show, which was cancelled after two seasons, and Margaret Cho’s one-season 1994 comedy series *All-American Girl* (the first Asian-American sitcom). Kaling’s sitcom is of historic importance for those who do not often see themselves represented onscreen lending the show particular import in a scenario where despite all claims to diversity, whiteness continues to permeate the film and television landscape.

Similarly to American Express, Nationwide promises to “see” customers who are often overlooked and uses Kaling’s comedic abilities to drive that point home. Using a whimsical tone and narrator, the commercial plays with the rom-com and fairy tale aesthetics Kaling uses in her own sitcom, but also sets up the commercial like a traditional joke: with a set-up and a punch line. The humor in the commercial, as in the *The Mindy Project*, arises from the juxtaposition between Mindy’s conception of herself and how others see her. For example, early in the first season Mindy meets an architect at a bookstore who takes her out for frozen yogurt. Yet, as they stroll out the yogurt shop, she heads back inside to change the flavor of her treat. This happens twice more until she decides she’d rather have a pretzel from a street vendor. The comedy of the scene comes from the contrast between the scene’s initial promise to follow romantic comedy convention that suffuses quotidian outings such as these with effortless romance and Mindy’s pickiness, which defies the persona of a congenial romantic comedy heroine. In the commercial, Kaling’s quotidian day is marked with magic (another rom-com trope) by the very fact that she thinks she is invisible, but she is not—upending her worldview in a silly way.

In both commercials, Kaling is the “author”—explicitly in the AmEx commercial and implicitly in the Nationwide commercial in the way that she lends her comedic sensibility to the commercial’s tone, content, and themes. Furthermore, they are complimentary to the themes of her books (the second book is titled *Why Not Me?*—another nod to exclusion, although in this case,

slightly bolder in its questioning). As York notes in her article, “[Celebrity] agency need not originate or somehow be synonymous with individual action; it can be constructed through the interactions of various cultural agents and media, and those agents may or may not realize their objectives in a simple, straightforward way” (1344-5). The series of commercials, the way they both establish authorship yet clearly *use* Kaling’s image to their own interests are a perfect example of the way various agents can each have different investments in upholding or validating authorship.

Lee Barron puts forth an intriguing rationalization for stars’ “career diversification”—that is, the phenomena of stars taking on many roles, which may or may not be directly related to the primary role they are known for—which, at first glance, may seem to describe what is happening in these commercials, and possibly not any sort of agentive move on the part of Kaling. Barron argues that for stars that attempt to take on as many roles as possible, like model slash actress Elizabeth Hurley, they must solidify their fame through a “continuously active process of media diversification” (533). Barron uses the business concept of “synergy” to explain how a fluid “fit” between different business sectors become not just important to global corporations, but a kind of ethos that has come about in the post-Fordist era. Workers in Henry Ford’s production company were not only perfectly regimented inside the factory, but the Fordist production system also influenced their private lives with the creation of a flexible citizen who must constantly adapt to new roles in

an ever-changing workplace. As Barron sees it, “in the face of such rapid turnover of cultural products, once a level of success and recognition has been achieved, the drive for greater personal career control is advantageous, both in terms of ensuring career longevity and in generating financial benefits” (535). As Barron suggests by quoting Ian Katz, “in America, there is a far greater acceptance that any really successful franchise must sooner or later be spun-off into a host of different products” (536). Barron argues that star career diversification is employing the same logic and “process of synergy and the drive for the kind of vertical and horizontal expansion located usually at a corporate level” (ibid).

For women comedians to take on several roles there are also other more important consequences, and one of these greater economic benefits and creative freedom. Although many celebrities may rightfully be called the “powerless elite” as Barron refers to them, career diversification, or self-franchising ensure a level of power and agency that is not usually granted within fixed roles as actress, writer, producer, and even director. Though Barron quite dismally interprets this as a possible sign that “these [public] figures may be slaves to the forces of flexible production and ever more rapidly shifting public tastes; and who are therefore impelled to gather their nests while they can and diversify, for artistically rewarding purposes, but more crucially, to ensure career longevity” (542).

This interpretation is distinctly different from the celebrity agency and creative agency bestowed upon filmmakers and creatives generally by auteur theory or that given by a few scholars of celebrity studies. The female comedian holds agency as both a celebrity and as a creative figure. Their image is not a simple case of auteurism, nor is it a simple case of celebrity career diversification. Brett Mills argues *against* the formulation of comedian as a star, stating that the comedian is “neither star *nor* celebrity”—that is, the comedian is neither defined by her public nor private self, but instead draws on both in ways unique to comedians particularly. Mills argues that the comedian “while drawing on representations processes similar to those for stars and celebrities is, in fact, of a sort all of its own” (189). Mills insists that the way comedians conflate their public and private selves is different from previous theorizations of televisual stardom and celebrity, as well as the way the relationship between the public and private is configured in the typical star text (197) precisely because the hyphenated role as writer-actor-comedian-performer complicate conventional formulations of the star and the celebrity. Furthermore, comedians often necessarily remark on their own status as hyphenates and participate in meta-media in which they play a “version” of themselves—which is in direct contrast to stars who are purely diversifying their portfolios to accrue wealth or validity in a separate entertainment field.

Though Mills’ formulation will be crucial to the next part of the chapter, it also does not fully account for the ways female comedians particularly deploy

their creative agency to build their formidable reputations. It is crucial to understand how stars have traditionally functioned with the political economy of Hollywood in order to fully grasp the significance of female comedians' wide-ranging power and agency over their own work. As Barry King points out, in the Hollywood Studio era in the 1920s through the late 50s, stars were employed by studios, and were bound exclusively to their studio by contract. It was not until the late 50s that actors like Jimmy Stewart and Elvis Presley that actors shared in the profits of the films they starred in (12). King identifies this moment as crucial in the "shift in the status of the stars from employees to free-lancers and ultimately entrepreneurs [that] led to the superstardom context possible in contemporary Hollywood" (ibid). According to Barry King "film stardom is no longer, as it was in the studio system, a career centered on filmmaking, with a set of subsidiary engagements in areas such as product sponsorship and advertising. [...] Product sponsorship and advertising have gained equal or greater weight in the star's income..." (9).

The publicity and marketing of film comedy and stardom has been inextricable since the silent era. Though Hollywood uniquely standardized the use of stars in service of product differentiation, the interest in stars and the casting of familiar faces to engage audiences arguably began with the unexpected audience fascination with the offstage persona of Biograph's Florence Lawrence, otherwise known as the Biograph Girl. Lawrence became the first person to receive billing on the credits of her film, despite the reticence

to give a star that much leverage on future products. However, film comedy was suited to not only credit and promote stars, but to use the star persona itself as a narrative device, crafting characters that in both action and name blurred the line between character and star.

Only two years after Lawrences' successful film *The Broken Oath* (1910), Mabel Normand was one of the first actors to have her name appear in the title of a film, a marketing move that capitalized on Normand's increasing popularity at the time. However, the "Mabel" of the first set of movies with this name at Keystone Studios also created a "type" that Normand would play during her tenure at the studio. Though Normand's contribution to film comedy is frequently connected with the development of Chaplin's Tramp, Normand's own comedic style borrows from a Vitagraph character she played earlier in her career, and developed at Keystone. Soon, she was "directing" her own films at Keystone, in a sense controlling her own fictional image. This same kind of agency continues on for women comedians today. In the next section, I will build upon the idea of creative agency to show exactly *what* female comedic hyphenates are striving for, and how this falls in line with goals of contemporary Hollywood.

### **Franchise Logic and World-Building**

Franchise discourse and celebrity discourse intersect in the way the female comedian is deployed by studios and networks to sell her product. The comedian, for instance, does not only lend her brand name as author and star

of new projects, but usually her name is subsumed into her fictional world, seamlessly transitioning “Mindy Kaling” to fictional character “Mindy Lahiri” or “Roseanne Barr” to “Roseanne Connor” eventually making both personas indistinct from one another, multiplying the strength of her brand. This may be the premise informing the underlying logic of the female comedian driven franchise. But before discussing how the women comedian’s franchise is re-purposing a proven industrial marketing strategy, first the term “franchise” must be defined as it’s related to Hollywood moviemaking and television production.

In Derek Johnson’s groundbreaking book-length study of franchises he argues that the franchise, as it exists now and has developed historically in media is not “reducible to a tidy, universal definition” (29). However, he offers multiple ways to begin to contextualize their rise and their function:

[W]e might start by conceiving of franchising as an economic system for exchanging cultural resources across a network of industrial relations, we also have to recognize it as a shifting set of structures, relations, and imaginative frames for organizing and making sense of the industrial exchange and reproduction of culture. (29)

This chapter is interested in re-formulating the standard definition of the franchise as has been typically used by media scholars. Though Johnson sets out to define the parameters used by media scholars, as well as create a well-rounded “definition” of the franchise, he also leaves room for other dimensions

and utilities of a “franchise.” As he notes early on in his study, the media industrial use of “franchise” varies widely from the traditional economic business model used by companies such as McDonald’s, and thus shows that underlying the term “franchise” is a common economic *logic* that is not necessarily defined by a specific set of practices, but instead defined by a set of *strategies* and *goals*. It is with this view that I proffer a more liberal definition of the term “franchise,” in how it can be used to describe a much narrower set of strategies used within a very specific realm: transmedial female comedy stars. But what this chapter intends to show is that franchise logic not only determines how women comedians currently and have historically been bound up in Hollywood’s economic goals, but also how franchise logic itself has implicitly framed the discourse around female comedians. As Johnson suggests, “Franchise systems support serialization and sequelization to keep generating content over time— whether confined to a single medium like television or multiplied more promiscuously across media” (45).

A significant reason for using the term “franchise” to describe a strategy of marketing, branding, and building the world of a female comedian is precisely because of the transmedial roots of the term “franchise.” In *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins explains that Hollywood has moved away from developing stories for films towards developing or adapting characters that will sustain sequels. Furthermore, these characters are crucially part of an expansive filmic world that can be played out across multiple media platforms.

A film like *The Matrix* is an example of this tendency towards transmedia entertainment and storytelling. The films focused more on world building than on character or plot. *The Matrix* stretched its material across films, animations, comics, and games, while providing little redundancy across the various platforms.

Also integral to Jenkins' description of transmedial storytelling and franchises are the "strong authorial figures" (Johnson 31) behind the franchises he studies. The Wachowskis and George Lucas figure prominently as integral components of the success of these franchises. Though Jenkins is less interested in auteurship per se and more interested in the consumers' or fans' paratextual authorship via fan fiction or fan vids, the constant presence of auteurs within Jenkins' close readings and analyses make it clear that franchises are in large part an authorial project.

However, for Johnson, it is this focus on transmedia that is lacking in the studies of Jenkins, Marsha Kinder, and Michael Kackman, who similarly focus on transmediality, intertextuality, and convergence culture. Johnson argues that the persistent focus on transmedia elides "insight into decentralized, episodic, and non-narrative modes of multiplied industrial production" by valuing "unified" and "serialized" forms of media (31). In fact, Johnson goes as far to say that "[media scholars] have become too enamored with the sexiness of the transmedia in transmedia franchising to think much about what other cultural trajectories and industrial formations have been

entangled in franchising” (32). Johnson instead proposes shifting away from transmedia toward a consideration of “what franchising has connoted and enabled at the levels of both culture and industry” (33) by examining corporate structure and the “economic organization of [...] labor” (33). Johnson is correct in acknowledging that this does not necessarily mean coming to the conclusion that all cultural products made as a part of the Hollywood franchise model is solely determined by economics and created to pursue a bottom-line (33-4). By moving toward a “cultural economy” model, Johnson ameliorates this scholarly knee-jerk conclusion and attempts to show the negotiation of social, cultural, and economic logics within the media industries, namely Hollywood.

However, where Johnson’s study of franchises is lacking is in its diversity of texts. He falls back on looking at mega-billion franchises like *Star Trek* and only peripherally considers how franchising is now the predominant mode of Hollywood mediamaking, spanning both film and television. Now, even projects that did not begin as franchises like *Twin Peaks* and *Full House* have been resurrected by streaming services like Netflix and Hulu to en-franchise them, that is, to make them into franchises retro-actively with largely un-demanded sequels, spin-offs, and “reboots.” Very few commercial media projects now exist outside this space for the fact that in order to be viable economic investments, projects that get funded are necessarily primed to take advantage of Hollywood’s horizontally and vertically integrated structures.

The most compelling reason to re-think female comedians as a franchise is due to the changing model of Hollywood that has largely shifted to content ownership precisely because content ownership is the most economically prudent investment. Especially in television, networks are motivated to create content under their own studios rather than share profits by buying content from other studios. Furthermore, in many cases dwindling ratings and the diminishing power of networks make it so content ownership is recourse to maintain economic and creative control over content. As *Variety* reports “networks no longer can afford to carry the programs that used to be found in lower-profile ‘hammock’ slots on the schedules. To survive, shows have to be buzzy enough [...] to be sought out by viewers who may only sample them through on-demand platforms. That shifts clout to creatives—hence the reign of the ‘uber producers’” (Littleton.). Though the report specifically cites the diminishing power of comedy generally as a ratings booster and schedule mainstay, the report overlooks the fact that a shift to “uber producers” also includes a new auteurship given to comedy producers such as Dan Harmon, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Ryan Murphy and other producers who specialize in comedy and a specific aesthetic in a similar way that “Shondaland” shows are all trademarked with Rhimes’ singular aesthetic. The shift to content ownership has been particularly beneficial for a new crop of comedians who would like to fashion themselves as auteurs—indeed, the new media landscape relies on that.

As much as Johnson might protest against Jenkins' and others' over-emphasis of auteurs in their studies of franchises, now more than ever, the "auteur" whether or not she convincingly falls under the rubric of "auteur" as conceived by film critics, is crucial to the existing landscape of television because they are what the television industry relies on to create "buzz." In many cases, it is auteurs who are more able to get projects off the ground, which itself is a monumental "success" given the various factors that have to come together before a pilot is green-lighted and then aired.

However, to give Johnson credit, part of his critique is valid—there has been an over-representation of *male* auteurs and *male-driven* franchises to the exclusion of other texts that are deploying similar franchise strategies as *Star Trek* and *Battlestar Galactica*. Niche programs such as *Dawson's Creek* and *Gossip Girl*, were highly influential in online promotion and web-based content, as well as validating a powerful female teenage demographic that is often underserved in primetime television. Furthermore, the exclusion of women from the exclusive canon of "uber"-producers elides how women like Shonda Rhimes, Jenji Kohan (*Orange is the New Black*), and Jennie Snyder Urman (*Jane the Virgin*) and others have managed to create powerful franchises that make a point of telling stories about women and people of color. However, because a lot of these franchises are women-oriented, or women-helmed, they have to work harder to prove that they are "worthwhile" ventures—meaning, that they are as lucrative *economically* as they might be critically buzzworthy.

Though the content of Fey's, Poehler's, and Schumer's shows, for example, are sometimes "women-oriented" using comedic tropes of the spinster, the single girl, and feminism in its episodes, all these shows also make efforts to not be gender-exclusive so as not to shrink their marketability and financial viability—that is, they make efforts to not be "women's television," even though their audiences may be primarily women aged 18-45.

At the CW, for example, a network which early on became associated with teen (read: women) melodramas with *Dawson's Creek*, *Felicity* and *One Tree Hill* (shows inherited from the creation of the network as a merger between the WB and UPN), executives had to take extra precaution when they aired new female-oriented programming like *Gossip Girl* in 2007. Johnson highlights how gender frames franchise discourse by delving into how the television network The CW went about establishing their network identity through the *Gossip Girl* franchise. Part of their efforts were purely set on validating the tawdry content of the *Gossip Girl* series by emphasizing how the franchise was part of the network's "sound economic practice" (61). As Johnson observes:

In an industry where masculinized, patriarchal notions of taste, decorum, and quality had historically helped define perceptions of cultural legitimacy, the imagination of *Gossip Girl* as a franchise emphasized not its soapiness or trashiness, but its economic potential, thereby rationalizing its ongoing, multiplied production. (62)

For Fey and Poehler, for example, the networks of their shows were not, like the CW, burdened with the stigma of making women or teen-oriented media. Though these networks certainly do have programming aimed at women, scheduling mitigates the stigma of “women’s television.” The shows of the women comedians I look at in this chapter traditionally have been paired in a “comedy block” rather than with other women-oriented shows. Additionally, for each of these women, the emphasis of their star image lies in their resilience in male-dominated fields. Fey and Poehler gained credibility as part of a particularly strong couple of years for women comedian on NBC’s long-running sketch comedy show, *Saturday Night Live*. Schumer’s stand-up cred as well as her “raunchy” subject matter have made her especially primed for crossover, when smart “blue” comedy is having a resurgence, especially amongst female comedians. Thus their success is partly based on their ability to “hang with the boys” both as authors, but their shows too, as stand-alone products more “comedy” than “girly” stuff.

It is important that Johnson points out how these shows have to make their case in regards to the masculinity of their content, or authors, because economic viability in and of itself, is not always convincing enough to a network board of executives that a show is a good financial investment. In a similar move to how The CW went about validating their investment in *Gossip Girl*, FOX attempted to validate the low ratings of *The Mindy Project* by pointing out how the show scored unusually high with the coveted demographic of high

earning, young women. Though eventually the show was cancelled on FOX, when Hulu picked it up, they made a similar statement on the financial prudence of picking up a show with low network ratings. First of all, *The Mindy Project* performed much better on DVR and online viewing than live airings. And second, “The show is creatively vibrant, and has a passionate, *upscale*, loyal audience, and *it is a top performer on Hulu*. So this makes a lot of sense [emphasis my own]” (Nededog).

But *The Mindy Project* also did not have ideal scheduling: it was paired with *The New Girl*, a comedy starring Zooey Deschanel who was also, a single girl in a city (Los Angeles) looking for love. Furthermore, Kaling’s persona is not quite that of Fey and Schumer, who generate respect on being the strong women in the room, at the very least Kaling’s character, an aspiring rom-com heroine draped in brightly colored and rhinestoned dresses was not the kind of character that networks believed would appeal to men. Whereas *30 Rock*’s brand of comedy did rely on broad gender stereotypes, the protagonist was not unabashedly feminine—in fact, the comedy of the show revolved around Liz Lemon’s sexual unattractiveness. Though Johnson is clear that “Franchising does not [...] carry a stable set of meanings and values, but proves to be an imaginative field in which gender differences and other vectors of social power can structure and shape ongoing bids for economic and cultural legitimacy” (64), it becomes apparent that where franchising can be used to give value to female-oriented texts, it can also be used to question the legitimacy of texts

because franchising can be seen as a threat to masculine creativity. Though Johnson uses the example of *Battlestar Galactica*'s gender-swapped Starbuck and original cast member Dirk Benedict's sexist tirade against feminists and "metro-sexual money-men (and women) who create formulas to guarantee profit margins" (qtd. in Johnson 62), the same uneasiness is visible around the *The Mindy Project*'s move to Hulu, where it would find the niche audience (read again: women) that the networks could not afford to serve.

The franchise is not only determined by its economic model, but is also determined by its aesthetics, which are intimately tied up to its profitability—and its gendered reception. The "franchise" is often bound up with the "blockbuster" to the point that they are sometimes used synonymously with one another. However, a blockbuster is an immensely profitable stand-alone product, usually a film. A franchise is not necessarily made up of "blockbusters" that garner money at the box office. A franchise like *The Fantastic Four*, for example, is currently made up of films that underperformed at the box office. Furthermore, in the contemporary franchise landscape, franchises like *Star Wars* will not make the bulk of its money from the titular films, but from the ancillary products that make up the franchise universe. However, "blockbuster" can be a useful term to designate a kind of film that is made with a big budget accompanied by big buzz. The blockbuster also adheres to certain formal conventions that allow a greater insight into how content and form combine to target audiences.

Ashley Elaine York and Kyra Hunting both argue the women's blockbuster adheres to traditional characteristics of the blockbuster. Though they speak specifically of women's blockbuster *films*, the terms they set forth also translate to televisual marketing strategies precisely because the personas and sensibilities of the women comedians are necessarily transmedial. It is, as I see it, no coincidence that the film industry began busily "spinning female-driven narratives into gold" (York 4) at the same time that television was having its own female renaissance, with a new crop of women writers, showrunners, and "girl" shows as a visible part of a more diverse TV landscape. Furthermore, in a new television landscape that creates television with "cinematic" production values, narrative complexity, and the marketing logic of Hollywood filmmaking, the blockbuster is a useful term to think through how women comedians shape their shows into must see TV. Though Ashley Elaine York's study of the "women's blockbuster" concentrates on women-driven narratives in the mid to late 2000s, this trend has only since become more prominent and has moved beyond the film arena, to a type of televisual blockbuster that has been adopted since streaming channels like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon have become viable competitors to network and cable television.

York begins by arguing that the televisual blockbuster, like its film counterpart is high concept, that is, its premise is easily summarized in a punchy, compact sentence or two, that is, "the image, narrative and advertising are conceived, pitched and marketed in one fell swoop: in a single-sentence

catch-phrase that easily translates among cultures and across borders” (8). In turn, the high-concept formula easily conveys the narrative to its viewers, not just in the diegesis, but, more crucially, to *potential* viewers, through its advertising in print, television, and radio spots. Trailers and sneak peaks for television show are geared to convey this sentence visually and aurally.

Second, women’s blockbusters have a focus on “spectacle aesthetics,” in the same way male-driven franchises do. However, contrary to the action “shoot ‘em up” (13) aesthetics of male-driven franchises, women-centric media take advantage of “chick” aesthetics—that is, they feature “superficial” aesthetic tropes such as fashion montages, contemporary rock music, and a whimsical color palette. In terms of editing, York compares the style of the women’s blockbuster to music video: a “combination of a highly mobile camera, rapid cutting, and the music video-paced montage shots serves the film’s compositional qualities by driving both the visuals and the narrative throughout the diegesis” (14).

That York chooses three women-centric films that are essentially comedies to illustrate the spectacle aesthetics of blockbusters is particularly significant. *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Sex and the City* were both adapted from novels (and the latter from a televisual adaptation of a novel) and *Mamma Mia!* is adapted from a musical that repurposes ABBA songs as the soundtrack of the film. This is, of course, in keeping with Hollywood’s turn toward the tried and true as they are more willing to adapt successful novels, comic books, and

television shows with proven fan bases than risk investing in a flop. However, as York points out “no longer sad or complicated storylines that appeal to a domestic few” these films are fun and *funny*, not as York points out, the dreary “weepies” that dominated women’s films through the 1980s. Their saturated mise-en-scene and fast-paced editing match the upbeat tones of the stories. This shift in sensibility, from sad to joyful is what York identifies as a key change in the profitability of new women’s blockbusters. I would say that this more explicit turn towards comedy only highlights female comedy’s history of being seen as having a high entertainment value coupled with profitability by its intended audiences.

Third, women comedian franchises, like all high-concept franchises, “need only be tweaked with a shift in emphasis or attached to a different star to be refashioned into novel vehicles over and over again” (5). This can be seen in the ways that the personas of each comedian are variations on one prevalent “type” of female comedian: the lonely spinster. Whereas in Tina Fey’s inflection singledom is inflected with either bitterness (*Liz Lemon*) or wistfulness for motherhood and domesticity (*Baby Mama*), in Amy Schumer this same perpetual singlehood gets reimagined as self-destructive alcoholism and caustic personality (Schumer’s *Trainwreck*). For Mindy Kaling, her singleness is transmitted via pointed references to other famous single girls like Carrie Bradshaw and Bridget Jones. Her singleness is a witty, upbeat singleness,

marked by overdramatic longing for love cancelled by exceedingly high standards on her romantic prospects.

In blockbusters featuring women comedians, the persona is the most important factor in women comedian blockbusters because unlike in other franchises, the character these women play is what is moving to other films, TV, books, cartoons, and merchandising. As seen in the opening example, “Mindy” in the NationWide commercial exists outside the world of *The Mindy Project*, though it is a similar one. The franchise “universe” of women comedians relies on their persona far more than any aesthetic or narrative construction of their media texts. Furthermore, this phenomena also brings attention to the fact that their personas are intermingled with their “real” selves—that is, the “Mindy” of the NationWide commercial can also be seen when Kaling is being interviewed on television, or when she is voicing an animated character.

This is common in comedy: Jerry Seinfeld, Louis C.K. and Marc Maron, for example, have all benefitted from the erasure of boundaries between their “real” and fictional selves. As Brett Mills points out “the notion of someone playing themselves is quite common in comedy, and comedy remains the only mode within which this is a possibility” (193). And these comedians “act in their own names” (Pavis ctd. in Mills 193), meaning, Jerry Seinfeld plays “Jerry Seinfeld” in *Seinfeld*, Larry David plays “Larry David” in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and Louis C.K. plays “Louis C.K.” in *Louie*. In a sense, this conflation of

identities makes the comedian far more indispensable to their project than in any other situations where another could easily replace an actor. As Mills points out “it makes no sense for someone else to play Jerry Seinfeld in *Seinfeld*” (194) and in that way the show is not only a star vehicle, it is completely defined in tone, content, and aesthetics by its star, which is not the traditional conception of a star vehicle, even in the Golden Age Hollywood studio model when films were “tailored” for emerging stars.

Steve Seidman has named this a genre all its own dubbed, “comedian comedy” and according to Melanie Piper, there are large stakes in a stand-up comedian’s “self-presentation.” Using a persona studies methodology, which “look[s] at how the constitution of our fictional narratives is shifting in an era of presentational media and persona” (Marshall qtd. in Piper 14), Piper studies the complicated ways that Louis C.K. “asserts his public persona as a self-presentational meta-presence within the representational depiction of his fictionalised [sic] self on television” (13). The contiguity between C.K.’s televisual persona with that of his stand-up persona gives an overwhelming impression of authenticity, which allows him a greater degree of agency over the kind of material, and rhetoric he can use on both stages (18-19). Thus, C.K.’s stand-up performance, as it is presented diegetically in his sitcom is also a primer for how to “read” and extrapolate the irony, sarcasm, and humor of C.K. As with *Seinfeld*, the diegetic stand-up comedy routines provide context, not only to remark on the occurrences that will happen in the show (a sort of

commentary on the “inspiration” for the show’s events) but in and of itself stand-up comedy acts as a way to build up the comedian’s ethos and represent the psychology behind his comedy.

However, for female comedians circumstances are different in two very crucial ways. First, “[the] equivalence [between comedian and character] is less transparent [when] it is only the first names that match” (193). For example, when Roseanne Arnold plays “Roseanne Connor” in *Roseanne*. British comedian Miranda Hart plays “Miranda Preston” in the sitcom *Miranda*. Second, unlike Seinfeld, David, and C.K, women comedians rarely *play* “themselves” as comedians. The character Mindy Lahiri in Mindy Kaling’s *The Mindy Project* is a gynecologist. “Ellen” of *Ellen* by Ellen DeGeneres owns a bookstore. Tina Fey’s Liz Lemon on *30 Rock* who differs in playing a differently named character that most closely but not completely mirrors Fey’s (former) role as head writer of sketch comedy show. In *Wanda At Large*, a 2003 FOX sitcom starring Wanda Sykes, she *is* a comedian—however, she is a comedian out of water working for a political talk show in Washington D.C., where her comedic sensibility is a detriment to her success in the workplace. Women comedians disproportionately play non-comedians, which is especially unusual given the fact that television has been historically welcoming to female-helmed sitcoms.

However, the consequence of this is that it makes female authorship less visible in the diegesis of the show. Lori Landay argues that for Lucille Ball, the

easy conflation between her character and her “real self” was precisely what made her so easily commodifiable. Ball, on the show and outside it, embodied a “housewife” persona that at times occluded her power as a businesswoman as it emphasized her domesticity. Her relationship with Arnaz further blurred the boundaries between her real life and her character, and created a peculiar problem for her creatively, following the dissolution of their marriage. As Doty notes, to become Lucy “Ball found it necessary to publicly deny her film career-image to a great extent, as well as to soft-pedal her behind-the-scenes collaborative work with writers, directors, producers, and technicians on *I Love Lucy*.” Ball had to downplay her creative agency, and her past as a sophisticated actress in order to fulfill her role, but this had its own drawbacks. Ball’s brand depended on set personas that were later much harder to break, and that the women had to actively work to change. Landay, Alexander Doty, and other scholars have parsed out precisely what it was about Ball’s persona that made her and her show as remarkably successful as it is. Many of their arguments revolve particularly about the points at which Ball and her character come together and divert from one another. But their astute observations elide one important, and quite commonsensical reason for the easy conflation between the character and the person: their name. “Lucy” as Ball’s name and as a character is itself transmedial, in the sense that it crosses over not just across different media, but also across from media to “reality” and back again.

In many ways, this phenomena also highlights the length Hollywood will go to occlude women's authorship. For many female comedians, their oeuvre begins not at the televisual or filmic product, but in stand-up comedy or sketch comedy. In the case of Jerry Seinfeld, for example, he is adapting his stand-up routine in his sitcom, and in the sitcom this process is made even more clear in a meta-textual move that shows the fictional Seinfeld preparing and filming a pilot about a show based on his life and "about nothing" (creating a show within a show). But because women comedians do not translate their stand-up personas as overtly, the origins of their franchise, their extra-televisual work is seen as *peripheral* to their role as actresses, not contingent on their role as unruly stand-up comedians or sketch comics. This is a point that cannot be overstated. The process of taming the unruly comedian in the sitcom is important especially because it has political dimensions: it is gendered and raced. The sitcom of Margaret Cho, for example, attests to how eliding over her stand-up persona covered up crucial factors of her identity that are not just important to her personally, but are a crucial component of her comedic aesthetic. The sitcom, by virtue of excising performance as a part of her character's life, cuts the political component of her stand-up from the show. In the case of Cho, her show possibly failed because the audience familiar with their work felt alienated from her new TV persona, and new fans were possibly put-off when attempting to cross-over to consuming her raunchier stand-up (Park 6).

But the comedian's main source of livelihood, stand-up comedy, is itself a perfect business model that is compatible with franchising logic: it is low-cost, yet provides a lot of publicity and buzz for the comedian. In recent years, the stand-up comedy special like those that air on HBO, Comedy Central, or Netflix are the most lucrative in that they take little money to make and yield high returns. Brian Volk-Weiss, a producer of stand-up comedy specials told *The Hollywood Reporter*, "With the exception of porn, there's nothing cheaper to do" (qtd. in Rose). Though Rose points out that basic cable networks have balked from airing stand-up specials because "the genre doesn't provide ancillary opportunities in international or syndication" she also indicates that the Comedy Central network has often packaged their stand-up specials with development deals that promise to expand the comedians' brands. So though most basic cable networks have been too shortsighted to see that stand-up can create ancillary pathways, Comedy Central and networks like HBO, Showtime, and now streaming services like Netflix recognize that filmed stand-up is a crucial component of building a comedian's brand, expanding that brand, and having that brand validated with prestige. Furthermore, as comedians like Amy Schumer and Tig Notaro rely on their stand-up material to shape their other work, the stand-up special also works to monetize similar material presented in different mediums.

Brett Mills uses the career of British comedian Rob Brydon to analyze the complicated personas of the stand-up comedian within a universe of related

texts. Mills unites the work of Brydon under an umbrella of performance, as Brydon “performs” versions of himself throughout sitcoms, films, interviews, and reality shows. However, the consistency of the easy conflation between the public and private in all Brydon’s work is also worthy of comment for the way that it creates consistencies among his various economic endeavors. To reiterate Johnson, Brydon, and the comedians I study cannot be characterized as solely motivated by a profit motive, but the profit motive exists among the various actors that utilize the star for financial gain. It would be naïve to deny that there is an entire economy built around the success of Brydon, and any comedian of his caliber and renown. Though Mills argues that viewers do not necessarily need to be familiar with Brydon’s previous work in order to comprehend his latest project, I argue that being familiar with Brydon’s intertexts and paratexts lend to a deeper understanding of the comedian’s universe, which crucially includes methods for “reading,” in this case, Brydon’s ironic and metatextual comedy that would go unnoticed without a familiarity of his past work.

For contemporary American women comedians, this is also true. Part of this is due to the more recent explosion in the speed of circulation of clips, memes, and other media that allow easier access to the breadth of a comedian’s work. For example, part of Amy Schumer’s success comes from the format of her show, which seems tailor-made for a media landscape that now relies on “going viral” as free advertising for their projects. *Inside Amy Schumer*

is composed of short sketches that can easily circulate online, and are easily comprehended out of the context of the episode and the series as a whole. However, the whole of them can be used to track themes and content in her film, *Trainwreck*, showing the complete synergy between her cinematic and televisual work. The concept of synergy and the transmedial nature of the female comedian's work will become especially important to discuss the most significant feature of the franchise in the last section of this chapter: ancillary marketing.

### **The Self-Help Memoir as Ancillary Product**

Ancillary marketing is primarily what defines a franchise as such. Hollywood now treats female comedians as franchises themselves rather than standalone movie stars of "chick flicks." In this way, these filmic texts are tied to a complex series of retail tie-ins and cross-promotions as well as tied to the creative networks made by the female comedian (the latter which is discussed in Chapter 2). According to Ashley Elaine York "In an effort to maximize vertical integration and content-sharing among their brands, [...] Hollywood uses all branches of their conglomerate structure to repurpose the product up and down the corporate food chain" (York 16).

However, this is not an entirely new strategy associated with the franchise; it can be seen prior to the term as it is used currently, and it becomes especially salient for describing the ways women comedian television was marketed to a female consumer. For example, for Lucille Ball, the meteoric

success of *I Love Lucy* spawned merchandise to the degree that we now see with the biggest franchise blockbusters. Lori Landay's list of merchandising is worth quoting at length to illustrate the all-encompassing nature of Lucy paraphernalia:

Desilu, the Ball-Arnaz production company, received five percent of the gross earnings of the products the stars endorsed; beginning in October 1952, there were 2,800 retail outlets for Lucille Ball dresses, blouses, sweaters and aprons as well as Desi Arnaz smoking jackets and robes. There were pajamas for men and women like the ones Lucy and Ricky wore and a line of dolls. In one month in late-1952, 30,000 'Lucy' dresses dresses, 32,000 heart-adorned aprons, and 35,000 dolls were sole. The pajamas sold out in two weeks, and the Christmas rush sole 85,000 dolls. In January 1953, the first month of selling a line of bedroom suites, \$500,000 in sales in two days were reported. As of January 1953 there were layettes and nursery furniture, Desi sports shirts and denims, Lucy lingerie and costume jewelry, and desk and chair sets. There were also *I Love Lucy* albums, sheet music, coloring books, and comic books.” (30).

Landay is more interested in these products as part of the show's self-reflexive commentary on consumerism and commodification, as well as how products shape the show's imaginary of the 1950s time period. However, the persistence of Lucy, in syndication, and in its enduring place in televisual history attests to

the power of the show precisely because it was able to encompass so many spheres of American life quite literally. By providing products from home décor, to fashion and entertainment, and even baby products, Lucy was successful at entrenching itself firmly in millions of households via what we would now call ancillary marketing. In fact, *I Love Lucy* continues to be a great source of revenue for CBS. As *Variety* reports, “CBS has made about \$15 million a year on licensing deals for ‘I Love Lucy,’ a show last produced in 1957” (Littleton).

As Derek Johnson astutely points out, what most scholars of franchises gloss over is the extent to which the Hollywood franchise system depends also on entirely different systems that act more or less independently: “Though a corporate entity may hold economic ownership of trademarked or copyrighted intellectual properties, franchised production from them requires contractual exchange and sharing across the social relations of industry” (45). In the case of *I Love Lucy*, the concept—a bored housewife and aspiring performer wreaks havoc and silliness on the life of her husband, Ricky—lends itself to the production of domestic items, coloring books, and the like. But those ancillary products are themselves “produced in different industrial contexts [than the show] by different writers, artists, and crews” (ibid).

Johnson identifies two “modes” of franchising: inter-industrial franchising and intra-industrial franchising. The former distinguishes a transmedia extension of a franchise concept across “the social and industrial context of multiple media industries.” The latter refers to the “multiplication

across productions in a single medium or institutional context” (ibid). Though the two often overlap in the way franchises usually deploy both modes, these strategies bring to light how a franchising concept (that is, what is being franchised) can be best understood “not as a brand or even a narrative, but as the multiplication and exchange of cultural resources across a network of industrial relations” (46).

This way of defining the franchise concept, as a multiplication and exchange of a cultural resource will frame the subsequent discussion of a crucial ancillary product in the arsenal of female comedians: the self-help memoir. The memoir itself becomes a gendered form of writing that signals a collapse between the character and the self—it mimics the dilemma of the female comedian: both a “real” person and a persona at the same time. Furthermore, the memoir promises to give the reader access to this private self by providing a *behind the scenes* look into the comedians’ lives that is as *witty and funny* as is expected. The cultural resource here (the franchise concept) is the comedian herself, and her life. It is re-worked (in some cases) in an ongoing series of forms: from stand-up comedy act to television sitcom, to commercials, to a written memoir form consistently. The self-help memoir facilitates how the franchise “create[s] links between content production in different institutional spaces and temporal contexts, making them nodes in a shared, institutionally and culturally meaningful structure” (46).

In April 2011, Tina Fey's memoir *Bossypants* inaugurated a slew of comedian-penned memoirs that also incorporated elements of the self-help book. Advertised as a book that would include the wit and feminist bent of Fey's network sitcom *30 Rock* and the insight of a Fey as a successful comedian, the book was a success. As Martha Lauzen notes, the book portrayed Fey as "superwoman and everywoman," encapsulated by the cover, which depicted Fey in a man's white button-up, tie, suspenders, hat and masculine arms replacing her own. The succeeding memoirs by SNL alum Rachel Dratch, Mindy Kaling, Amy Poehler, and Lena Dunham (to name a few) have much in common with Fey's showing a shared aesthetic and tonal sensibility to deal with similar themes and content.

Suzanne Ferris has dubbed the genre of this slew of books the "comedic memoir" or "chick non-fic." Ferris is interested in the ways that these comedic memoirs deploy the literary tropes of chick-lit, a genre of literature that is somewhat derogatorily characterized as shallow and flawed because of its aim toward a primarily white, single, and affluent female audience. In a piece for *Slate* reviewing Poehler's *Yes Please*, Amanda Hess uses the phrase "comedy/memoir/advice book," which begins to describe more accurately the lifestyle component folded into these memoirs. I am using the phrase self-help memoir because the books exist precisely of the nexus of both. Though memoirs and biographies of great icons always seem to acknowledge the aspirational component for the reader, in these books, the comedians

themselves dole out advice, and speak directly to the presumed female reader. The books are funny, however, that is not their intent, as I see it, so I have excised “comedy” from the generic designation. That they are funny are reflective of their authors but not of the particular genre they participate in. There is a very careful tone of disclosure in these books that is far less “put-on” than the comedy of these women and the content of the books are far less about re-telling stories for comedic effect (like, for example, Chelsea Handler’s series of books which pre-date Fey’s) and more about exploring topics important to women.

Ferris is careful is passing value judgments on chick-lit and the memoirs that mimic them, however, Ferris’ definition of the genre focuses too much on the politics of the book itself. It is less important to my study whether women comedians indeed have a “post-feminist” or “third-wave” approach to sexuality, for example, and more about how they use the memoir to concretize aspects of their persona, brand, and authorship. Though Ferris identifies valuable aesthetic corollaries between the comedic memoir and chick-lit, I find the *goal* of the self-help memoir is slightly different than that of chick-lit. Though, as Ferris points out, both genres rely on crafting an aspirational narrative, the authority of the comedian matters far more in the self-help memoir than it does in chick-lit. The aspect of “reality” that these female comedians do “live” these aspirational lives adds a crucial element to the books in making them more than aspirational and converting them into “how-to”

guides that almost serve as “competence porn” which can be defined as “the frisson of watching smart people tackle tasks with freaky aptitude” (Shetty). The cult of admiration surrounding these women comedians is crucial to the reception of the book, but most importantly, a crucial factor in its production, affecting its content.

For women comedians, their use of a “confessional voice” has much greater stakes than the “confessional voice” of a fictional character like Carrie Bradshaw or Bridget Jones. Though Ferris notes that the way these comedians “capitalize on the principle of reader identification central to chick lit” she spends no time thinking about how a “real-life” corollary might affect the strength and importance of that identification. Though sometimes this identification with character becomes displaced onto the author herself as can be seen with the fascination revolving the authors of the Bridget Jones series or the authors of popular YA series like Francesca Lia Block, the use of verisimilitude by chick-lit writers Sophie Kinsella or Helen Fielding is mitigated by their use of a fictional stand-in. This is not to say that women comedian memoirists do not similarly go to great lengths to establish a persona in writing, but it is crucial that Mindy writes as “Mindy” and not as a differently named character (as we have discussed above). The women comedians discussed here are far less interested in promoting consumption of certain brands (with the exception of Kaling), than with attempting to cultivate a “real woman” voice.

Along with cultivating a “real woman” voice, the content of the memoirs by women comedians also indicate a desire to be relatable and, in a sense, political. Martha Lauzen identified key areas interviews with Fey typically ask about. I propose that these areas translate directly to sections in Fey’s self-help memoir and subsequently create a blueprint of topics that the other self-help memoirs, like Mindy Kalings’ first memoir, *Is Everyone Hanging out Without Me?*, also circle on appearance and talent, the Superwoman and Everywoman dichotomy, and women in comedy.

The first category, “Appearance and Talent” begins to break down the celebrity persona of the comedian in favor of exposing the truth about Hollywood beauty ideals. The recent cohort of female comedians in film and television relies on publicity that emphasizes their wit and their beauty. Though the adage that female comedians are “ugly” certainly still exists (and has a longstanding history), the hyper-visibility of female comedians in Hollywood necessitates that they take on the role of attractive Hollywood star in the press, and Fey, Poehler and Kaling acknowledge this in their memoirs. Their desire to dispel the idea that they are beautiful (they all ascribe to thinking of themselves somewhere between “plain” to “not bad looking”) is in direct contrast to how women comedians have historically attempted to construct their femininity. As Kristen Anderson Wagner argues, early film comediennes were uneasy sometimes with the way their physical comedy diverted from traditional notions of femininity. But for contemporary

comedians, the transformation from funny lady to glamorous star is framed as another source of comedy for the comedian herself, who relies on her “unattractiveness,” that is, how *unlike* Hollywood actresses she is, for comedic fodder (“Have Women a Sense of Humor?” 44).

In Kaling’s *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me? (And Other Concerns)*, Kaling devotes a section of her first chapter to detailing her struggles with her weight. In the first part of the chapter, she sets about creating her own dictionary of weight-related terms, clarifying the difference between “overweight” and a “tub o’ lard” (12-14). Then she tells a story about a crush that she had in middle school that humiliated her for her weight (14-17). Though the story is told humorously, in contrast with the rest of the section, it is a tonal shift that signals a confessional moment. She seems earnest and genuinely hurt, weaving in her own reflections on the situation. The chapter then ends with her declaring that she will never look like supermodel Giselle Bundchen, but that she has come to terms with that if it means that she is able to achieve other goals like “film a chase scene for a movie” (20). By prioritizing her career over her looks, she shows readers that she is down to earth. By admitting her flaws with a realistic perspective she comes across as someone who is trustworthy and worth aspiring to be. Kaling returns to the topic near the end of the book, snarkily commenting on the way society treats overweight women. Because weight and self-image is frequently framed as a “women’s issue,” beginning the book with this topic immediately establishes a

rapport with the reader and sets the tone for the rest of the book, which is similarly littered with touching stories, Kaling's musings on life, and a confident outlook on her own capabilities. Ending with a similar section provides neat narrative closure, but also suggests that Kaling's musings on the topic are deeper than her own personal experiences; the last section snarkily comments on the fashion industry's lack of fashionable clothes for "not skinny" women. That she saves her most sarcastic laden entries on the topic for the end of her book might also speak to a hesitancy to suggest to the reader that she is "bitter"—a common temperament too often ascribed to women who unabashedly speak their mind.

The second category "The Superwoman and Everywoman Dichotomy" addresses the notion of women comedians as "unruly women." Profiles of Lucille Ball, Roseanne, Tina Fey and Amy Schumer who through their work "revel in excessiveness, disruptiveness and unapologetic spectacle" (38) are also deeply concerned with women's aspirations to "have it all" in a culture that demands women split their time between work and their personal relationships. And it is not surprising that in their own memoirs, these comedians seem to be pointedly speaking to the ways they have to reconcile their various roles as mothers, daughters, sisters, businesspeople, and entertainers.

The second and third section of Kaling's book is devoted to her many "jobs." This section intertwines her career as writer and actress with her duty

as a best friend. Though there are few narrative links between these two (besides the fact that she used to work with her friend as writing partners), that Kaling frequently goes from one topic to another shows a balancing of priorities that her readers can relate to. Kaling glosses over stories that highlight her fame, choosing to focus on embarrassing incidents that happen while she is working rather than highlighting her competency for her job. Instead, Kaling chooses to write a list of “Best Friends Rights and Responsibilities,” commandments that all friends (and presumably, she) must obey (80-84). From seemingly innocuous rules like “When I take a shower at your place, I won’t drop the towel on the floor” to “If you’re depressed I will be there for you” (83), Kaling outlines rules for friendship success in lieu of rules for professional success. Though this might be in keeping with Kaling’s self-deprecating style to undermine her own accomplishments, instead of explicitly discussing how she negotiates her personal and private life (like Tina Fey does, for example), she implicitly prioritizes her personal life by choosing to place it front and center even in sections that purport to be about her career.

Another topic that circulates in women comedian memoirs is the topic of women and comedy, a fraught topic that many of the comedians have strong feelings about. Most women like Fey and Poehler directly respond to the oft-repeated declaration from Christopher Hitchens that “women aren’t funny.” The arguments regarding women’s comic deficiencies were then and are now still based upon formal and informal rules about female propriety, generic

hierarchies created by prevailing taste cultures, and influenced by cultural shifts in gender relations. The bulk of women comedians, Fey, Poehler, Sarah Silverman, and others are insightful cultural commenters on this topic, picking up exactly onto the larger cultural anxieties brought on by women involved in comedy, which may be due to their own experiences within the male-dominated field. The comedians' desire to stress their non-Hollywood looks and deliberately question the value of idealized feminine traits might be a reaction to this very issue of "women and comedy." By fashioning themselves as unruly women in look and action, they can parlay the power of comedy to exercise social change. However, most of these women also attenuate their "unruliness" by stressing their traditional roles in heterosexual marriage and in the family—they show that they can "have it all."

The self-help memoir is a crucial ancillary product because it utilizes the persona of the comedian and expands it into a new medium. By collapsing the persona and the personal sphere of the comedian, it signals the transformation of a celebrity from a brand to a franchise that can be replicated and deployed across various media. The self-help memoir though is not just important in how its content shapes the reception of a comedian. It is not just a product through which a comedian identifies her personal brand. It is also a lucrative venture that, in franchising logic, is worth buying into for executives because it provides solid returns on investment.

In September 2015, Amy Schumer signed a multi-million dollar book deal with publisher Simon and Schuster said to be worth between \$8 and \$10 million. The history of Schumer's book deal, which was covered extensively by the *New York Times* as well as *Deadline*, is a perfect example for the ways in which comedians can position themselves advantageously and create synergy across multiple platforms. Initially, Schumer signed a deal with HarperCollins in 2013 (after a year of courting and negotiations that upped her contract from \$500,000 after her agent at the time, Yfat Reiss Gendall told David Hirshey that Schumer was looking for bids from other publishers) and received a \$1 million advance. Schumer reportedly began work on the book, which was set to be a series of essays, but the project stalled in spring 2014 due to Schumer's booming career. According to the *New York Times*, Schumer willingly opted out of the project because she was "too busy" though they also cite a *GQ* article in which she refers to the cancelled contract and says, "I had a whole deal, but I decided to wait – I thought I would make more money if I waited."

After Schumer dropped out of the HarperCollins deal, she also switched literary agents. She hired David Kuhn who has a more extensive celebrity client list than Gendall. According to Gendall's website, she specializes in "[representing] practical nonfiction projects in the areas of health and wellness, diet, lifestyle, how-to, and parenting and a broad range of narrative nonfiction that includes humor, memoir, history, science, pop culture, psychology, and adventure/travel stories." In contrast, Kuhn Project (Kuhn's agency) claims

they're first area of specialization is "narrative nonfiction,"—the purported genre of Schumer's book. Kuhn's tier of celebrity authors includes artist Marina Abramovic, activist Maria Shriver, and Academy Award nominated writer and actress Nia Vardalos.

The deal was highly publicized in various news outlets for the enormous dollar amount. When Lena Dunham struck her book deal for *Not That Kind of Girl* with Random House for \$3.7 million, there were already conversations if Dunham was "worth" a multi-million dollar book deal. However, Schumer's deal vastly outshines Dunham in sheer numbers; it is the highest ever given to a pop culture figure (Shephard). As Alexandra Alter notes in a piece for the *New York Times*, ever since the success of Fey's *Bossypants* which sold 3.5 million copies (Fey's deal was for about \$6 million) "editors and publishers have [...] been betting huge sums on comedians who have potential to become breakout literary stars."

The appeal of the celebrity-penned memoir is three-fold. First, at the outset, a comedian as a celebrity has access to media outlets to publicize the book that traditional authors may not (unless that author is a celebrity author like J.K. Rowling) and those connections are crucial to the ultimate sales of the book. Second, if the comedian is in the spotlight consistently (or, in the case of Schumer, at a high point in her career), the comedian's book sales are rejuvenated every time he or she has a new project. Third, the comedian herself has her own (comedic) aesthetic that, like in television and movies, serves to

help readers anticipate the tone and content of the book. In this sense, readers do not feel like they are “taking a chance” on a new author, but are instead buying into a brand that they are familiar with. Literary agent Kate McKean told *The New Republic* shortly after Schumer’s deal that “[publishers are] paying for the luxury of not having to market the book so much—or to be able to have an easier time marketing it” (Shephard). Furthermore, in the case of comedians, many of them have honed what publishers quite often prioritize even above content: a distinctive voice. The aesthetic of the comedian, if accurately translated to the page, should recreate the spark of the performer on stage.

As Alex Shephard’s piece in *The New Republic* points out, there are several valid reasons why publishers, like Hollywood, might want to fund “bankable” celebrity authors rather than take a chance on an unknown author. However, in publishing, rarely do they “earn out” or recoup the losses of not just the extensive marketing and advertising costs, but even match the advance given to their celebrity authors. In other words, unlike films, though there is profit, an \$8-\$10 million dollar contract will most likely only yield \$3-7 million dollars in book sales—it will not “earn out” and match the “worth” of the advance. As Shephard lays out the math, the \$3.7 million Lena Dunham advance only yielded about \$1.3 million in revenue.

But profit in the publishing industry also comes from far more than just the hard copies of books themselves. More recently audio books have become a

booming industry. Options on film rights to memoirs or novels are also a way for a publisher to make more money off a book, and celebrity-authors have far more chances to be able to be involved in these multi-media ancillary projects because, again, they already have connections and resources to bring to a Hollywood adaptation of their memoir, for example. Chelsea Handler, for example, created an adaptation of her series of memoirs in a (failed) television series titled, *Are You There, Chelsea?* (a slight change-up from her memoir's title, *Are You There, Vodka? It's Me, Chelsea*).

What maybe Shephard and Alter do not consider is that the advance amount itself works as a marketing strategy. It is “worth” the price because the deal garnered free press in reputable places, the exact places that when the book is published they will want reviewing it. Just as a blockbuster is built not just around hyping the *film itself*, equally important is crafting a good narrative around the creative process. It may seem ludicrous, but the publisher may be banking on book purchases made on pure curiosity on whether or not the book is indeed “worth it.” As John B. Thompson notes, “Big books do not exist in and by themselves: they have to be *created*. They are social constructions that emerge out of the talk, the chatter, the constant exchange of speech acts among players in the field whose utterances have effects and whose opinions are trusted and valued to varying degrees” (193). Furthermore, it is possibly less risky to acquire a book by a comedian than a book by any other kind of celebrity. All of these women comedians are writers, though they have largely

written either for television or for stand-up comedy. But, as can be seen in the previous chapter, women comedians have the tools and skills that are seen as important within a business setting and hold creative assets businesspeople hold in high regard.

Another important fact to consider is that for some publishers these ancillary products are already tied to other media corporations by nature of horizontal integration. For example, Simon & Schuster is owned by CBS, a network that was very early on involved in Schumer's career. In 2012, before *Inside Amy Schumer*, she was developing an untitled project produced by Sony Pictures and Olive Bridge Entertainment for a sitcom to air on CBS. The premise is described as "a comedy series centering on a single women [sic] who re-evaluates her life when her best friend tells her she's pregnant." That same year, however, negotiations began with Comedy Central (a Viacom company) for what would become *Inside Amy Schumer*. She became involved in the project in June 2012, with her stand-up comedy special *Mostly Sex Stuff* premiering on the network in August 2012. Though it is unclear why the Sony pilot did not get off the ground, as of April 2012, it was still on the docket of shows in development at Sony Pictures, months before the Comedy Central deal. The deal also plays out (whether coincidental or not) an interesting rivalry between CBS and Viacom, two companies that split assets in 2006. Though Schumer may not be directly involved in these dealings, they also show how ancillary products are necessarily tied up in the business dealings of companies that

represent interests other than the comedian herself. However, for comedians it is worth it and crucial to navigate these structures to build their franchise. More specifically, for female comedians this particular ancillary product, the self-help memoir, is especially important to validate them as creative agents over their work, especially given that their televisual texts tend to occlude this fact. By expanding their world beyond performance texts, they create tangible products that can be bought by consumers.

### **Conclusion**

The franchise is frequently framed as an economic response to the contemporary entertainment landscape. Declining film audiences have supposedly put an increased financial pressure on the studios and in response, studios are less willing to take risks on creative, mid-budget films, choosing to fund expensive tent-pole films, that adapt well-known comic books and graphic novels, and extend pre-existing franchises in a series of “reboots.” However, this franchise logic can be characterized as a “response” to a changing landscape, despite the fact that it seems that landscape has definitively stabilized into its current form for some time. Furthermore, the strategies of the film franchise are no longer endemic to film; they are utilized in television, in publishing, and in other creative spheres that also rely on a narrative of “precariousness.” I would like to extend this further. Franchise logic, in this sense, also *makes* sense as a strategy deployed by female mediamakers, who

themselves are under constantly erased from history and production narratives of the sexist media landscape.

Barry King notes, “the omnipresence of the same names—not merely across time but more extensively through a ramified space of visibility that saturates the present—gives an impression of monopoly” (“Stardom” 17). This is especially true when it comes to the media images of female comedians. As mentioned earlier, the conversations in mainstream media about the lack of female mediamakers and the lack of strong leading roles for women has put this “impression of monopoly” under scrutiny. Yet, with the same vigor, reports circulate about the incredible amount of creative agency of the women I have studied in this chapter, which seems to undercut the woes of feminist media critics who consistently point out that women have monumental obstacles to overcome for success in Hollywood.

Fey, Kaling, and Schumer are frequently invoked as example of how women can indeed “easily” overcome sexism in Hollywood to gain unprecedented amounts of clout. However, I argue that this is exactly what franchise logic intends to do. Franchise logic at its core is about, as mentioned earlier, hype and image. Hollywood is producing fewer films at ever-greater budgets, giving the impression that Hollywood is constantly churning out new products. Similarly, as the numbers of women in Hollywood dwindle, the hype and visibility of women in Hollywood expands ten-fold. Hollywood has always thrived in times of strife and scarcity particularly because it is so good at

mounting large productions, creating buzz, and employing its various mechanisms to work seamlessly to spout the same message “It has never been better.”

To study the female comedian as a franchise exposes the careful balancing act between persona and “person” that female comedians are constantly negotiating, in order to translate their experiences into lucrative creative ventures. Though this is not unique to the female comedian, it is a strategy that is not just currently crucial, but one that has historically been deployed to respond to the discrimination of women in Hollywood.

## CHAPTER V

### CODA

The emergence of women comedy hyphenates like Tina Fey and Amy Schumer in the mid-2000s highlights the ways women creatively profit from a seeming inclusion into the boys' club of film and TV comedy. But their success belies the sexist practices that pervade the comedy scene. The pipeline of stand-up and improv comedy to Hollywood brings with it practices that exclude women or force them to be complicit with their own marginalization. Hollywood itself has industrial barriers to an inclusive environment, that when compounded with the traditions of comedy makes it difficult for women to succeed.

One of the common traps of a study like this dissertation that focuses on exceptions, rather than the standard, is that it can err on making the subject seem exceptional. Though women like Lucille Ball or even Margaret Cho have made important and lasting contributions to Hollywood comedy, this dissertation does not forget that their success is not in and of itself a validation of the high quality of their work. That being said, authorship is about control and power, and hyphenate women comedians have had unprecedented authorship over their stories onscreen and behind the scenes. Most women comedians allude to the responsibilities that come with being one of the few, and popular press highlights whenever they may have shortcomings as role models or exemplars of progressive identity politics.

This dissertation has attempted to show that impediments to female authorship are shaped by gendered expectations about the content, theme, publicity mechanisms, and production and distribution methods appropriate for women mediamakers to use, standards which implicitly frame all discussions of their work. The ways contemporary women comedians negotiate the exclusionary space of Hollywood and respond to these demands, is both in line with a history of women comedians and wholly adaptive to the current landscape of Hollywood. By poking fun at the commonly held beliefs, assumptions, and absurdities rooted in everyday life, and simultaneously positioning themselves behind a shield of “it was only a joke,” comedians are uniquely positioned to challenge and potentially disrupt the traditional gender order. By using the tools it has at its disposal, such as franchise logic, high entertainment value, and celebrity mainstream culture create expressive excess that occasionally ruptures hegemonic ideology.

The year 2015 closed out with a brilliant essay by pop culture writer Rachel Syme with the headline “Pay Women the Money They Need to Make the Culture.” The lede read, “Sure, 2015 was ‘great’ for women. But only if 2015 marks the last year in which things can be so very bad.” Syme went through the various ways 2015 was the “year of the woman,” in creative fields like film, television, and music: Amazon’s *Transparent* and Netflix’s *Jessica Jones* provided models of women never before seen on television. Tens of women in the industry gave high profile interviews to the press speaking about the

gender wage gap in Hollywood, being a women filmmaker in a sexist industry, and calling for more diversity in Hollywood. And yet, as Syme points out, the statistics and frustrations of women remain the same. Despite the high profile success of women in media in 2015, in 2016 there was little to no change within Hollywood.

There were a few more sitcoms helmed by women, such as Issa Rae's HBO series *Insecure* and comedian Samantha Bee premiered her own satirical news show, grasping her place as the first women in late night in decades. The Comedy Central hit *Broad City* solidified itself as an important show for young women, nabbing a cameo by 2016 Democratic Presidential nominee, Hillary Clinton. Tig Notaro's Amazon series *One Mississippi* combined her comedic talents with drama to create one of the most unique shows written by a woman comedian that year. Mindy Kaling began filming the all-female reboot of *Ocean's Eleven*, titled *Ocean's Eight*, alongside Hollywood heavy hitters like Academy Award nominee Helena Bonham Carter, and Oscar winners Cate Blanchett, Sandra Bullock, and Anne Hathaway. There were many achievements for comedians individually, but as a collective the same names continue their success, and up-and-comers are nearly invisible.

One of the challenges of this project was how to discuss women comedians, and the lack thereof throughout history, without making the dissertation a project about "the plight of women in Hollywood." The danger is in tackling the topic of gender parity in Hollywood is that pointing out all the

ways Hollywood attempts to dissuade women from entering it can make women seem idealistic or worse, naïve, for wanting to be a part of a corrupt system. I have attempted to make clear that though Hollywood is possibly by default set up to work against women and people of color, business savvy can overcome the industrial and cultural hurdles of the business. In fact, women must necessarily do so. Every time a woman has successfully taken on a role usually reserved for men, a shift has happened culturally on how women are depicted throughout the industry. An inclusive Hollywood would be a powerful tool that not only affirms the necessity of understanding and sensitivity towards others, but also reaches millions in a more personal and resonant way. The demand for more women in the industry is a demand for Hollywood to have more creativity: to think outside the typical white, male audiences at the core of their production strategies.

Two central claims of this dissertation are that the Hollywood industry has mechanisms that perpetuate the exclusion of women and that by close-reading the work of women who were able to break through these barriers, we can see the strategies used to overcome them. The book combines cultural studies and political economy analysis to arrive at a fuller picture of sexism in the Hollywood industry. I argue we cannot understand the gendered practices of Hollywood without looking at how comedians write about and talk about them. We cannot understand the comedian self-help memoir as a creative

product, for example, without thinking about it in a larger context of publicity, marketing and franchise logic.

This dissertation does not address a complete history of women comedians, although the selection of case studies it includes attempts to be inclusive of different ways comedians have navigated the industry as women. The prevailing theme amongst all of them is ambivalence toward their positions as “women” comedians. Admittedly, problematizing the category of “woman” is outside the scope of this dissertation. In many ways, it is fitting that this dissertation, like Hollywood itself, simplifies the ways people enact this category. However, the comedians at the center of this dissertation have all at one point refused or played down their status as “women,” in order to minimize their own feelings as “tokens” or as “exceptional.” Though this is an understandable gesture, I see their momentary frustrations as indicative of the continued necessity of that category. If only as a barometer for how far we have left to go.

There are reasons, maybe, to be cynical about Hollywood’s ability to become more inclusive. The stagnant statistics coupled with the general cultural turn against “political correctness” (that is, a turn towards a more vocal and adamant misogyny) may indicate that soon, Hollywood may be accountable to a different audience, one that cares little about diversity and difference. However, gender parity in the industry will not begin with gender blindness. The goal of the push for more women in the industry is not to make

gender, or race, or ethnicity moot. It is to make Hollywood an inclusive space that recognizes, values, and responsibly speaks to the differences among us.

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