

PARODYING POLITICS: HOW TINA FEY AND AMY POEHLER INFLUENCED
POLITICAL THOUGHT DURING THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

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Parodying Politics: How Tina Fey and Amy Poehler Influenced Political Thought during the 2008 Presidential Election

I. Introduction

On September 13, 2008, shortly after Republican Presidential Candidate John McCain announced Sarah Palin's Vice Presidential candidacy, Tina Fey debuted her Palin impression alongside Amy Poehler's Hillary Clinton for *Saturday Night Live's* (SNL) opening sketch. Titled "A Nonpartisan Message from Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton," the sketch portrays the two politicians struggling to send an anti-sexism message as a team. The two comedians set the tone from the start, with "Palin" exclaiming, "I was so excited when I was told Senator Clinton and I would be addressing you tonight!" and "Clinton" passive aggressively inserting, "And I was told I'd be addressing you alone." This sketch was one of the first parodies to produce SNL's highest ratings since 1994, with an audience of over 14 million (Carter 2008), and inspire journalists' fixation on the impact SNL's political parody was having on audiences.

Following these sketches, popular media propagated the belief that SNL's political comedy was having a real impact on audiences. In an article published in the *New York Times* during the 2008 election, SNL Creator and Executive Producer Lorne Michaels expressed a belief that SNL cast members' impersonations are a major advantage during election years (Carter 2008). Building on this sentiment, former head writer Seth Meyers stated that elections are an ideal time for comedy, because an above average amount of Americans are engaged with the news and come to the sketches familiar with the references (Carter 2008). On top of SNL's impression-focused political comedy and the election's parody-conducive atmosphere, Poehler and Fey took the media by storm in a way that former cast members had not. In a recent *Salon* article, Andrew O'Hehir claims Fey's impression of Palin "went beyond impersonation or

mockery into some higher, Zeitgeist-capturing form.” In 2008, the Editors of *Advocate.com* deemed Tina Fey one of their “People of the Year,” stating her impression accomplished “profound political commentary” and her delivery of Palin’s words “had the whole world laughing at her obvious intolerance.”

This inspired more serious attention to the possibility that comedy could influence the political thought of viewers. In *Big Girls Don’t Cry*, Rebecca Traister claims Fey and Poehler made “the circumstances of both liberation and lingering double standards laughably clear” (258). She also claims nothing had before conveyed the gender dynamics at play between Clinton and Palin “as quickly and as firmly as Fey and Poehler did in five and a half minutes” (260). Jody Baumgartner, Jonathan Morris and Natasha Walth (2014) expressed similar sentiments after surveying thousands of college students across the nation as the SNL spoofs were airing. They found that exposure to 2008 SNL parodies had a significant negative effect on participants’ actual perception of Sarah Palin (101). Dannagal Young also conducted research on the impact late night comedy had on viewers’ political perception during the 2000 election. He did not find that caricatured traits of parodied politicians garnered increased salience with viewers, but he did find that viewers that would otherwise go unexposed to political issues now had a more developed knowledge of ongoing politics than individuals who did not watch late night comedy (Young 12).

In 2009, Young published further research on the subject in “Late-Night Comedy and the Salience of the Candidates’ Caricatured Traits in the 2000 Election,” and writes,

This project was one attempt to move from speculation to empirical analysis by taking into consideration the unique psychological mechanisms at work in understanding political humor and positing outcomes grounded in the content of late night jokes. The

results do not provide evidence of late night's ability to prime caricatured traits among the general population. However, consistent with past research (Baum, 2005; Young, 2004), they do point to the possible moderating role of political knowledge. (357)

It is important to note that these findings regard the work of men joking about men in politics. 2008 was a special year, though, as it was the first year with such a public focus on the participation of women in presidential elections.

Before 2008, presidential contenders on SNL's radar were white, heterosexual men. Consequently, white male comedians had the opportunity to parody politics for the American public. Now, the presence of women and people of color in American politics and the comedy industry are growing. And because women and people of color are subjected to different treatment by the media and the American public¹, comedians have more to work with than just the personality of the politician—they can also parody the circumstances and behavior sexism and racism create. Because Fey's impression of Sarah Palin and Poehler's impression of Hillary Clinton garnered unusual success and acclaim, I focus mainly on the gendered aspect of comedy's political influence.

Tina Fey and Amy Poehler's impact on politics during the 2008 presidential election brings to light the potential comedy holds for individuals to share their understanding of ongoing politics with large audiences. In what ways did Saturday Night Live's parodies of the 2008 presidential election have a significant impact on the American public's perception of politics? How did SNL's political parody manage to comment on ongoing political events in a manner exclusive to comedic productions? Using a methodology of Deconstructive Validity grounded in postmodern feminist theory, I argue that Tina Fey and Amy Poehler's parodies of the 2008

¹ See Lynn Ford's "Women in Politics: The Pursuit of Equality" and Nayda Terkildsen and David F. Damore's "The Dynamics of Racialized Media Coverage in Congressional Elections"

presidential election wielded significant influence on constituent perception and opinion of American politics through acts of *Identity Theft*, *Same-Gender Drag Performance* and the *Conceptual Differences* between political and comedic spaces. In this context, I define Identity Theft as the appropriation of a constructed persona for one's own use. Same-Gender Drag is the theatrical performance of a gender by an individual who identifies as the same gender. The Conceptual Differences between political and comedic spaces are the differing social conditions of public platforms that inform the expectations and approaches to a serious space like the Supreme Court versus a silly space like SNL's location Studio 8H.

It is also important to note that these parodies took place during an election year. During presidential election years, the American public's engagement with politics and news media increases (FairVote.org). Seth Meyers, SNL's head writer during the 2008 season, said elections are "an ideal time for comedy because so many people are engaged with the story. 'It's the best for a writer when 70 million people see a debate because everyone knows the lines'" (Carter 2008). Since people are more engaged during elections, comedians can reference events and politicians' actual dialogue with the assurance that many audience members will understand. This is important, because the political arena is slowly becoming less white and less male as time passes. As the political arena continues to evolve, comedy can serve as an avenue for marginalized voices to express their understanding of ongoing politics and the dynamics institutionalized sexism and racism at play.

II. Methodology

In order to analyze the ways in which SNL's parodies of the 2008 election influenced political thought, I considered four particular sketches, all of which opened their respective shows. The first sketch, aired on March 1st, 2008, revolves around an MSNBC debate between

“Clinton” (Amy Poehler) and “Barack Obama” (Fred Armisen), moderated by “Brian Williams” (Bill Hader) with questions from NBC News Washington Bureau Chief “Tim Russert” (Darold Hammond). Throughout the sketch, the two hosts interrupt and purposefully challenge “Clinton,” while offering “Obama” softball questions. The second sketch is the parody I referred to earlier, “A Nonpartisan Message from Governor Sarah Palin and Senator Hillary Clinton” aired on September 13, 2008. The third aired on September 27, 2008, and parodies the highly publicized interview between “Katie Couric” (Poehler) and an underprepared “Palin.” The last sketch, aired on October 4, 2008, is a parody of the Vice Presidential debate between “Palin” and Democratic Vice Presidential Candidate “Joe Biden” (Jason Sudeikis). I chose these particular sketches for their focus on women in politics, their parody of the treatment of women in politics, the roles media figures were given (as a target in “Nonpartisan Message” and journalists in the additional three sketches), and the above-average excitement and viewership from national audiences. Using these sketches, I will highlight the instances of Identity Theft, Same-Gender Drag, and the Conceptual Differences between political and comedic spaces. From this point on, I will refer to performers’ impressions by the name of the politician in quotations.

I construct my argument using Paula Saukko’s Deconstructive Validity methodology, which she defines as evaluating “research in terms of how well it manages to unravel social tropes and discourses that, over time, have come to pass for a ‘truth’ about the world” (20). Since the parodies aired, ongoing support and discussion of their political influence by popular media and academic voices purport that Tina Fey and Amy Poehler’s parodies influenced the political thought of audiences. By exploring the theoretical basis for their influence on audiences through political comedy, I attempt to provide an explanation for the claims that their impressions

influenced audiences and how political parody can serve as an avenue for voicing one's understanding of politics.

Throughout my analysis, I ground my arguments in tenets of postmodern feminist theory. In "Just Methods," Allison Jaggar writes, "Postmodernism resists postulating any underlying mind-independent reality or any natural kinds whose "essence" could be discovered by science. Rejecting essences and natural kinds, postmodernism contends that things exist only insofar as humans "construct" them through language and discourse" (Jaggar 343). For me, this means that identity is an ongoing performance, which relates to politician's statuses as public figures and the specific performance of gender on the part of both politicians and comedians. Additionally, I theorize with the belief that social meaning is constructed and prescribed by individuals to ideas, spaces and beliefs. In "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism," Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson argue that a feminist postmodernism "would tailor its methods and categories to the specific task at hand, using multiple categories when appropriate and forswearing the metaphysical comfort of a single feminist method or feminist epistemology" (361). Feminist postmodern theories of social construction and performance are vital to the three concepts I explore, but my explanations are also informed by non-postmodern sources.

III. Literature Review

Developing an impression of a politician requires observing and understanding their public identity. In "Of Politicians, Populism, and Plates: Marketing the Body Politic," Jefferey Broxmeyer (2010) unpacks the implications of democratic elections becoming public spectacles, including the transformation of politicians into public commodities. Regarding politicians as

performers, he writes, “We should not be shocked to discover the dramatic separation of politicians from the image that they project onto the electorate” (143). The public image politicians strain themselves to craft and fulfill becomes a separate entity, a fictional character. Comedians understand the politician’s public image as a fictional character and critique the politician through parodying different aspects and quality of the character, rather than the politicians themselves.

Joanne Gilbert considers the unique aspects of women performing comedy in “Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique.” She explores the context and implications of performing live stand-up comedy for an audience as a member of a marginalized group, the dynamics between the humorist, the humor itself and the receiving audience, and the role context and space play in a comedian’s performance. Additionally, she discusses the circumstances that a comedy stage affords performers. She writes that comedy “affords female comics the freedom to engage in rhetorically charged social critique cloaked in the trappings of entertainment” (3) and that “their social critique is potent, and, because it is offered in a comedic context, safe from retribution as well” (137). Audiences do not submit SNL’s political parody to the standards and expectations that they hold politicians and journalists. It is media news sources and politicians that they expect to be honest, transparent and supportive—not SNL.

Judith Butler’s discussion of the compulsive performative nature of identity in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” speaks to the dual performance of gender and the “ideal American” that female politicians take on. She specifically discusses the regenerative nature of identity categories, explaining,

There is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, being gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the

very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself. In other words, the naturalistic effects of heterosexualized genders are produced through imitative strategies; what they imitate is a phantasmatic idea of heterosexual identity, one that is produced by the imitation as its effect. (313)

The notion that there is no original gender to imitate complements my concept of Same-Gender Drag, the intentional performance of a gender by a person of that same gender. Pushing this concept further, Butler argues, “The parodic or imitative effect of gay identities works neither to copy nor to emulate heterosexuality, but rather, to expose heterosexuality as an incessant and panicked imitation of its own naturalized idealization” (314). Fey and Poehler’s performances of Palin and Clinton’s differing femininities takes on the social policing of women’s gender presentation in political fields and the artificial construction of gender ideals.

On the topic of political influence, Lotz (2001) provides a framework for discussing the growth of feminist ideas in television. She argues for the importance of interrogating televised media with a feminist lens, explaining that an examination of popular narratives and stories can reveal unconsidered dynamics between gender and power. She writes, “Scholars generally concur that feminist discourse is predominantly found in the comedy genre because of narrative and generic qualities that both introduce and then contain potentially subversive content” (111). This sentiment pertains to SNL’s political parody, which fits into Lotz’ description of feminist television as content that “illustrates the way that all women, including feminists, do not have the same choices and options, and deviates from liberal feminist discourses focusing on the commonality, or supposed sisterhood, among women” (115). Fey and Poehler construct dynamics between Palin and Clinton that speak to their differences as people, countering the common urge for political actors to consider “women” a monolithic group.

Mikhail Bakhtin's "Rabelais and His World" illustrates the exclusive manner in which comedy comments on ongoing political events. Bakhtin discusses the historical roots of the comedy genre, the dynamics of performance and laughter and his theory of "carnival" as an alternative reality. He writes that comedy productions of the Renaissance "built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less, in which they lived during a given time of the year. If we fail to take into consideration this two-world condition, neither medieval cultural consciousness nor the culture of the Renaissance can be understood" (6). This "two-world condition" speaks to my theory on the conceptual differences between political spaces and comedic spaces, as it situates serious and non-serious spaces as tapping into unique information.

IV. Analysis

Identity Theft

One of the ways SNL's political parody influenced the political thought of audiences with salient commentary and insight into ongoing political events was through acts of Identity Theft. Politicians are constantly crafting their own identities for the American public. In order to gain the approval and trust of the greater American public, politicians must fit into the American schema² of what a well-rounded, trustworthy leader is. Politicians often draw from the behavior and strategies of successful figures before them. As a result, political theatre is constantly repeating itself, depending on what's worked before to work yet again.

Comedians existing on the outside of this political theatre have the ability to observe this process and use it as material to parody. Broxmeyer states, "Obama and Palin, as aspiring transcendental leaders, rode a wave of populist antipolitics within their respective parties and underwent spectacular transformation during the campaign, from politician to commodity, and

² Usually a family-oriented, religious, hardworking individual with an unthreatening past and attitude.

then to carnivalesque parody” (142). This refers back to Bakhtin’s concept of “carnival” as a “two-world condition,” which Broxmeyer further builds on when he writes “In the case of Obama and Palin, there is a similar split between the physical body of the politician and its representation as simulacra. In neoliberal democracy, a politician’s image is a capital-intensive investment. Their financialization has resulted in a spectacularization, separating the politician into a physical corpus, the living individual, and a mass-mediated image, the simulacra” (148). While elections occupy this carnivalesque sphere, comedians occupy an outsider sphere, which allows them to observe the characters at play and understand the “simulacra” in order to perform it on stage.

Through performing politicians’ public identity for audiences, comedians are able to express their understanding of politicians and their surroundings. Impressions involve mimicking the politician’s voice, attire, mannerisms and recognizable sentiments to a tee. Once a comedian has the shell of the character down, they can begin to emphasize and exaggerate certain aspects of the politician’s identity and experience. What aspects they choose to emphasize are entirely in the hands of the comedy writer and performer, and carry with them the bias of the creator’s understanding. However, stealing the identity of a politician does not include stealing their policy, thought or beliefs. The comedian does not have to express honest facts, reliable reflections or upcoming plans from the politician; they only embody personal aspects of their identity.

At the beginning of SNL’s parody of MSNBC, Poehler commits Identity Theft when “Russert” asks “Clinton” to explain why she believes she can make change. As her respond progresses, she begins to describe herself using the media’s gendered language. She explains America needs,

Someone who is aggressive enough and relentless enough and demanding enough to take them on. Someone so annoying, so pushy, so grading, so bossy and shrill, with a personality so unpleasant that at the end of the day, the special interests will have to go ‘Enough! We give up! Life is too short to deal with this awful woman! Just give her what she wants so she’ll shut up and leave us in peace!’ And I think the American people will agree, that someone is me. (2008)

This line begins calling for traditionally desirable qualities of leaders, and then quickly illustrates the conceptual manipulation that occurs when a woman embodies them as opposed to a man.

“Clinton” accepts that if people identify her as “so annoying, so pushy, so grading, so bossy and shrill,” that it’s out of her control and she may as well convince the people that’s what they need.

Clinton’s identity as a shrill woman was not of her creation, but rather the creation of the media and Poehler calls it out by mocking peoples’ fear and making “Clinton” own it through proudly prescribing to the sexist traits.

In “Nonpartisan Message,” Fey and Poehler use Identity Theft to provide audiences with a scene they would never see otherwise; “Clinton” and “Palin” next to one another, acknowledging the sexist ways in which the American media treats them. In addition to this critique of the media, Fey and Poehler provide commentary on their two characters as individuals through their impressions. Fey’s natural physical resemblance to Palin, skilled Alaskan accent and general impression of Palin’s mannerisms made it all the better when she performed “Palin” saying, “Just look at how far we’ve come. Hillary Clinton, who came so close to the White House, and me, Sarah Palin, who is even closer. Can you believe it, Hillary!?”

“Clinton” responds with a strained, “I cannot!” The lines are simple and the expressions from the

characters are working on the basic framework that “Palin” is cheery and “Clinton” cannot believe her defeat.

They draw not from politics, but from the identities of these two politicians and in their performance suggest our political institutions must be flawed if “Palin” is closer to the White House than “Clinton.”

In the parody of the Vice Presidential debate, the Identity Theft of Sarah Palin’s persona is made clear when Queen Latifah’s “Gwen Ifill” asks “Palin” if she would like to rebuttal Biden’s stance on financial reform. “Palin,” responds:

No thank you, but I would like to talk about being an outsider—you see, while senator Biden has been in Washington all these years, I’ve been with regular people. Hockey moms, and Joe six-packs and I’d also like to give a shout out to the third graders of Gladys Woods Elementary, who were so helpful to me in my debate prep. Also too, you see, I think a little differently from an insider. I don’t think it’s patriotic to pay more taxes, I don’t think it’s patriotic to criticize these wars we got going on. I do think it’s patriotic to tell the government “Hey! Get out of my way! Stop trying to impose on my right to shoot wolves from a helicopter! (2008)

This parody does not provide any sort of journalistic or academic critique or analysis on Palin’s actual stance on financial reform; there is no news or information given underneath a veil of jokes—Fey simply takes on the identity of Palin and says “This is who I am and what I think.” Palin tried to shape her inexperience as a strength, using buzzwords like “outsider” and “maverick,” to appeal to disillusioned voters. The monologue focuses entirely on Palin’s personality and experiences as well, but paints them in a very different light. In thanking third graders for help and defending her hobby of shooting wolves, “Palin” comes off as a frivolous

individual who does not belong in the White House. Broxmeyer states, “[Palin’s] image has proliferated endlessly and floated across the public sphere” (147). Palin’s image became a separate entity from her physical self and made itself readily available for parody. This separation gave SNL the caricature they needed to effectively critique her through an entirely fiction portrayal.

Same-Gender Drag

In these four sketches, Tina Fey and Amy Poehler not only parody politicians, but they also parody gender. Traditionally, “Drag³” as a term refers to the performance of one gender by an individual of another gender. Drag as an act is subversive because it forces the audience to confront the reality of gender as a performance. Usually, the more flamboyant the performance, the more power and reach the performance is given by theorists and critics. This privileges men performing femininity, as the concept and action of femininity offers a campy, energetic horizon for a performer. Masculinity depends on the repression of emotions and subtle authority, which, especially in comedy, doesn’t offer the excitement of femininity.

I propose the concept of Same-Gender Drag. Women can also subvert gender by theatrically performing femininity, which is exactly what Fey and Poehler accomplish in the sketches I’m working with. Because female politicians have to downplay traits of their persona that may be perceived as threatening to more traditional constituents, their performances of femininity and the media reaction to their performances are readily available for comedians to parody. In performing a performance of femininity, Fey and Poehler challenged essentialist views of gender and exposed the ways in which the public rewards and punishes female politicians regarding their femininity.

³ See Judith Butler’s “Gender Trouble”

“Clinton” losing her composure in “Nonpartisan Message” is an example of how Fey and Poehler employed Same-Gender Drag to counter essentialist notions of femininity and expose the price women pay under standards of gender. When “Palin” inadvertently highlights her success to make it closer to the White House, “Clinton” breaks:

No! Mine! It's supposed to be mine! I'm sorry, I need to say something. I didn't want a woman to be President! I wanted to be President, and I just happen to be a woman! And I-I-I don't want to hear you compare your road to the White House to my road to the White House. I scratched and clawed through mud and barbed wire, and you just glided in on a dog sled wearing your pageant sash and your Tina Fey glasses! (2008)

On the surface, “Clinton’s” message to the audience is very clear. It is not about electing a new gender into office, it is about electing a qualified candidate. However, this clear message may be lost to many viewers as “Palin” steals attention from “Clinton’s” cries by performing Miss America poses beside her. “Clinton’s” desperate words are disempowered by “Palin’s” oblivious self-objectification. Gilbert argues that “marginalized individuals are afforded a freedom unique to their insider/outsider position [...] women who perform their marginality may offer a potential subversive critique of the hegemonic culture” (3). Indeed, Fey and Poehler perform the different types of marginalization occurring with the treatment of Palin and Clinton. This representation of Palin and Clinton’s relationship serves to subvert essentialist notions of womanhood by highlighting the differences in subjectivity and experiences among the two, instead of painting a picture of a given “sisterhood” among women (Lotz 115). Viewers of this sketch must confront that differences do exist between women in politics and that these politicians must carefully navigate gender performances in a way male politicians do not have to.

Additionally, Fey and Poehler expose the feminine performance of female politicians by showcasing different attempts to embody it as women. Femininity is not natural, because we see “Palin” over-the-top performing it and “Clinton” continually receiving punishment for failing. They represent the success and the failure—and how whether women are referred to as “MILFs” or “Flurges,” they are not taken seriously. These dynamics come to life when “Palin” says, “Reports and commentators, stop using words that diminish us! Like pretty, attractive, beautiful...” and “Clinton” adds “Harpy, Shrew and Boner Shrinker.” Whether you succeed or fail at femininity, your status as a female will be used against you.

Poehler and Fey also perform Same-Gender Drag in the parody of Katie Couric’s well-known interview with Sarah Palin. Much like the actual interview that took place, the parody of it shows “Couric” repeatedly offering “Palin” chances to give a clear, specific answer to how she would spread democracy abroad. Each time, “Palin” gives a vague, diplomatic response until she has exhausted her vocabulary of key terms and has nothing left to say but “I’d like to use one of my lifelines.” When “Couric” makes it clear no such option exists, “Palin” childishly responds “Well, in that case, I’m just gonna have to get back to ya!” Taken aback, “Couric” presses on: “Forgive me, Mrs. Palin, but it seems to me that, when cornered, you become increasingly adorable. Is that fair to say?” In response, “Palin” adorably shrugs her shoulders, squeaks, “I don’t know, is it?” and fires her fingers like pistols, making accompanying high-pitched “pew” noises. “Couric” calls out “Palin,” not only for her attempt to avoid accountability via cuteness, but also for trying to use distraction tactics that have worked on journalists before her. Indeed, Traister expressed the belief that this sketch “distilled a gender dynamic—wherein women infantilize themselves as a defensive strategy—it might otherwise take thousands of words to unspool” (260). By calling it out, femininity is revealed as a strategy, a tool—something woman

employ, but only when necessary. Additionally, like Clinton, “Couric” is resisting the “Woman” label people umbrella her under with Palin by challenging her as she would a man. If Palin is a “woman,” “Clinton” and “Couric” do not want to be associated with that label—they rather be defined by their success in their respective fields.

SNL’s parody of the Vice Presidential debate ends with Fey blatantly mocking Palin’s commitment to embodying typical femininity through Same-Gender Drag. When “Ifill” asks for closing statements, she interjects, “Oh, are we not doing the talent portion?” and plays a quick, childish rendition of “The Hustle” on the flute with a wide smile and wink. Fey’s wide-eyed performance of blind eagerness not only skewers Palin’s approach to politics, but the condescending attitude towards women’s worth and value. Governor Palin had taken part of beauty pageants before, an institution that is commonly regarded as a traditional reinforcement of hegemonic femininity. At this moment, Fey’s parody of Palin also becomes a parody of what society values women for.

Conceptual Differences Between Political and Comedic Spaces

At many points in the four sketches I analyze, SNL cast members reenact political events and dialogue exactly as they happened. I find it significant that audiences respond very differently to the same event depending on the spatial context. It is the Conceptual Differences between political spaces and comedic Spaces that offer comedy the ability to critique current events in a way unavailable to other outlets.

Whether a single event is offensive or funny depends on the spatial context. In political theatre, audiences do not find sexism a laughing matter. In comical theatre, audiences find it hilarious. Usually, exposing sexism and other ongoing issues in a political sphere comes with the risk of backlash and the need to over-prepare beforehand, but in a comical space you can voice

an understanding through parody, in an atmosphere prioritizing entertainment and laughter. In a comical space, the actions seemingly do not carry the same weight. Gilbert writes, “The distinctions between performance in everyday life and performance onstage are often arbitrary. Audience plays a crucial role in these distinctions, [...] theater is actually a attitude on part of the spectator.” This protective layer offers comedians a chance to tap into sensitive and controversial material and make points through absurdity—all to the joy of a large audience. In serious spaces, such as a stage on which a presidential candidate makes a speech or the set of a news program, audiences police individuals to a much larger extent and participants need to have a pre-prepared docket of facts, references and credentials to lean on.

The advantages of a comedic space are made clear when “Clinton” inquires as to why the hosts are coddling Obama in the MSNBC sketch. “Williams” immediately responds, “Uh, excuse me, we’ll ask the questions here, *sister*.” The emphasis on the word “sister” elicits laughter from the audience. Blatant sexism reenacted onstage is a laughing matter in this space, as opposed to sexism in a serious space. Yes, Forte is mocking sexism and it’s cathartic to see, but politicians and journalists are also putting on a performance for audiences. When current day politicians and journalists imitate the public figures that came before them, audiences feel proud, angry, upset, frustrated—not gleeful in the way they do when Forte does it. The laughter Forte’s performance elicits demonstrates Bakhtin’s assertion that laughter “has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole [...] Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter” (66). When audiences laugh at events that are seen as anything but humorous in reality, they are supporting an unspoken critique that could only be made in a comedic space.

It is fitting that shortly after this bit Vincent D'Onofrio makes a cameo as "Law & Order" Investigative Detective Robert Goren. He interrupts "Russert's" over-the-top interrogation of "Clinton" regarding her 2002 stance on the North American Fair Trade Act and sneers, "What do we have to do to convince you that this is not a joke?" He forcefully turns "Clinton" to face him. "Look at my face. Do I look like I'm laughing?" On the one hand, the audience understands this bit as just another example of American's double-standards regarding expectations of men versus women, but I argue that Goren's demanding inquiries are actually directed at giggling viewers. "What do we have to do to convince you that this is not a joke? Do I look like I'm laughing?" On this comedic stage it's certainly a joke, but the sexist treatment of Clinton and other female public figures is not a laughing matter.

The space that "Nonpartisan Message" occupies also harkens back to Bakhtin's conception of "carnival." On the ensuing laughter, he states,

It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some "comic" event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. (11)

No one goes unscathed in the sketch, including the audience. At the beginning, when "Palin" announces their attention to combat sexism in the media, "Clinton" asserts, "An issue I'm surprised people suddenly care about." The people she's referring to could easily be the people in the audience, but they laugh nonetheless. If more people cared about the issue of sexism, the mistreatment of these two women would not be a big enough concept to parody. This

fact is not funny, and it certainly wouldn't be humorous if the actual Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton banded together to make a Public Service Announcement about it, but calling it out in a comedic space in the caricatures of these two women allowed people to laugh at an otherwise uncomfortable, grim reality.

Along a similar vein, it is remarkable how similar Katie Couric's interview with Sarah Palin is to the SNL parody of it. She avoids giving direct answers, uses vague terminology and offers no substantial explanation as to what her and McCain would do in office. When the interview aired, people were perplexed, frustrated and angry. When the sketch aired, people were laughing. Often, politics take no more than a reenactment to parody, but why is it that viewers do not laugh at laughable events such as this interview until it is happening on stage? Viewers perceive similar actions and events differently depending on the construction of space. Comedy occupies a silly space, one that remains on stage or inside a television screen. The public regards Politics, however, as the determinant of values, rules and influence. Political figures, events and processes carry tangible consequences for the people; Comedy and its producers simply put on a show. But by occupying a silly space, comedy writers, directors and performers are able to steal content from a serious space and critique it for a cheerful audience. Furthermore, in this comedic space, writers and performers are expressing an understanding of current events as opposed to a report or professional response. As a result, they have more freedom to comment on and critique whatever aspect of politics they want without relying on credibility and facts.

At the end of the Vice Presidential Debate parody, Fey indirectly comments on the space she occupies as a comedian parodying Sarah Palin. When "Ifill" asks her for a closing statement, she responds,

I liked being here tonight without the filter of the mainstream Gotcha media with their follow-up questions, or fact checking, or incessant need to figure out what your words mean and why you put 'em in that order. I, um, I'm happy to be speaking directly to the American people. To let them know if you wanna' Outsider who doesn't like "Politics as usual," or pronouncing the "g" at the end of words she's sayin, I think you know who to vote for. (2008)

It is quite clear that this response speaks to Palin's difficulty articulating knowledgeable and specific responses to challenging questions from journalists. However, this response also speaks to the space Fey is occupying as a comedian on stage. She is not subjected to the standards that Palin and other politicians must abide by. On a basic level, she is trying to use what has already happened in the political arena to make people laugh—not dissuade voters. On the topic of whether or not she influenced voters in the 2008 election, Fey responded, "Americans are smarter than that" (Lauzen 110). This may be true, but it is also true that the statement, "I'm happy to be speaking directly to the American people. To let them know if you wanna' Outsider who doesn't like "Politics as usual," or pronouncing the "g" at the end of words she's sayin, I think you know who to vote for!" would much more likely come from Tina Fey herself than Sarah Palin. Following this sketch, nobody questioned whether Palin did not pronounce gerunds. Fey tapped into Palin's shallow political sentiments and used them to make people laugh. Through Identity Theft and Same-Gender Drag, Fey was able to politically influence viewer's perception of Palin in a comedic space where audiences did not hold her accountable—they just wanted to laugh.

V. Conclusion

Now, six years later, Sarah Palin is working as a political media pundit and Hillary Clinton has recently announced her presidential campaign for the 2016 elections. As always, the upcoming elections will shine light on the political theatre that is American politics and above average numbers of the American public will pay attention to the news for the time being. However, the presidential elections are a period of time where power is redistributed among a small amount of people within the country. Politicians fight for power from different sources and their public persona is one of the avenues with which they garner support. Furthermore, it seems safe to say that we should expect to see more women and people of color generating a presence in the public eye. As it did during the 2008 elections with the four sketches I have analyzed, comedy can serve as an avenue for individuals to subvert traditional power structures and exert political influence in response to conventional politics and unjust institutional sexism and racism.

Through acts of Identity Theft, Same-Gender Drag Performance and the Conceptual Differences between political and comedic Spaces, Tina Fey and Amy Poehler influenced the political thought of American audiences. Their ability to take on the public identities of Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton allowed them to subvert traditional notions of femininity. The context of a comedic stage allowed them to critique individual politicians, expose the media's sexism and rely on fictional sketches to make serious statements without the fear of backlash, fact-checking and accountability that individuals must face in other public forums. Given this form of commentary and influence, an alternative path to having a voice in politics makes itself available to people with different talents and resources than more traditional political actors, like politicians or journalists. The ability to draw critiques from reality and funnel them into a fictional piece intending to make audiences laugh is another way an individual can share their understanding of politics with the public.

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