Feminism and Political Satire: Excavation through Humor

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Feminism and Political Satire: 
Excavation through humor

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Preface

I took an interest in comedy as far back as I can remember. In elementary school, I was “fashionably late” to the puberty party and quickly learned that humor was an easy way to ease the struggle of being lowest on the elementary social totem pole.

I didn’t really engage with professional comedy until the 2008 election year. At the time, I was just entering high school, and was noticing the consistent chatter about Tina Fey’s portrayal of Sarah Palin on Saturday Night Live (SNL) from my teachers. I, feeling the need to be recognized as an adult, began scanning the internet for these Palin skits. They became a weekly event. At night, I would run into my parents’ bedroom, find my mom reading before bed, and make her close her book so she and I would sit and watch the political bits from the previous SNL episode.

The older I’ve become, the more comedy has embodied a part of my life, and the more I’ve begun to appreciate the complexity and skill in its art. I’ve also begun to appreciate the strength and influence that comedy has. Nearly everyone knows Tina Fey’s character of Sarah Palin and the “I can see Russia from my house!” line, and can acknowledge the publicity that Palin and McCain gained because of that.

Feminism and comedy grew into essential parts of my life around the same time. While my Women’s Studies peers were diving into writers and poets, I was diving into stand-ups and sitcoms. I loved comedy because I found a significant niche of comics who were doing feminist work and talked about feminist ideas. It became a daily ritual to listen to a stand-up and analyze her work and her messages under the guise of a lighthearted joke, or to watch sitcoms over and over and over to find the subtle social comments woven in by the writers.
From there my comedy eye began to look into political satire, specifically, Stephen Colbert. I used to watch The Colbert Report daily to both inform myself of current news and issues, and was surprisingly consistent because of the genius humor in the show. Of course Colbert then led to Jon Stewart and John Oliver, who also blend comedy with journalism.

I was not alone in liking these men and their political shows. Millions of people tuned in with me on a weekly basis to both laugh and become updated on the daily news. According to TV by the Numbers, The Colbert Report and The Daily Show were the two most watched late-night shows in the first quarter of 2013. This enormous viewership meant that these shows had (and still have) tremendous influence.

Political satire— to me—is an underappreciated art in the Women’s Studies field, and one that I believe is worth looking at. Because of its enormous viewership and its potency for influence, along with the feminist issues it tends to look at, I believe that political satire shows are one of the most powerful forces in the feminist movement. That’s why I chose to write a thesis on it, and that’s why I hope you, my readers, take an interest in it too.
Part 1: Satire, Sexism, and Sausages
Decoding, Excavating, and Connecting Satire with Feminism

Satire is a well-known comedy form, and currently the most popular in mass-media. On first glance, satire and feminism are not a natural pairing. As a form of comedy, satire is usually associated with insignificant jokes, concerned more with humor than social issues. Feminism, on the other hand—in my own definition—is the practice of becoming more aware and critical of what forgets marginalized voices and people. The two subjects come from very different worlds.

Where I believe they join is the skills that they require from their audience. Satire is the most complicated form of comedy; it requires an audience to understand the satire and to know enough context to appreciate the message. A satirical joke taken at face value will not convey the same message as its simple comedic effect. This is because within the joke there are different layers of meaning. In order to understand a satirical joke, a listener must go through two processes. The first, which I will deem “decoding,” is a term I am using from Carla Canestrari in her work analyzing verbal humor and adapting to my own analysis (Canestrari 327). In this thesis, “decoding” will be defined as breaking down the information presented at any level of interpreting a joke. The second I am calling “excavation.” When understanding a satirical joke, context is needed. This context can come from the background knowledge of an audience, but can also build on knowledge derived from a previous attempt at decoding a joke. Interpreting a satirical joke, I will argue goes through a process of decoding at a level, then using that knowledge to excavate to the next level, and the process repeats itself. This analysis of multiple layers of meaning is how satire calls upon critical thought.
I have called feminism: the practice of becoming more aware and critical of what forgets marginalized voices and people. An engaged feminist must constantly be engaging critical thought when looking at the world. Feminist awareness comes from looking at experiences—both one's own and other people's—and analyzing the voices and structures that reinforce oppression.

Critical thought is where feminism and satire can meet. These two don't resemble each other much in content or history, but rather in the skills that they call upon.

In much of the academic discourse surrounding women and gender studies, there is an effort to look away from the forms of mass communication in order to see the stories and information that are often overlooked. In this way, feminism can seem to be a doubling back on itself: when a feminist looks at the overlooked, she may miss the usually looked upon (the dominant mass-media). This seems especially true of the informal mass-media forms like comedy.

This is the gap of information I'd like to fill in.

I believe that political satire, especially on the wide-reaching platforms of television and the internet, is an extremely powerful force capable of influencing and informing millions of people. Because of its influence, feminists need to pay attention. Feminism in political satire on these mediums can influence a cultural shift—which is after all the point of feminism in the first place.
Women and Late-Night Comedy

Before considering feminism alongside satire, it is important to understand the history of satire on television (its most potent media outlet). Satire tends to be a more radical and controversial form of comedy, which is why the majority of it is televised in a late-night time slot. “Late-night,” of course, applies to the talk shows airing late at night. While other types of comedy outside of late-night television usually contain much more diversity¹, late-night shows have been almost exclusively, white, cis, straight men.

Women entering into the late-night comedy sphere is progress of a sort—albeit like the progress made in the 1970s, where the majority “feminist” view of progress simply meant women entering male spaces. Female comedians beginning to enter into this late-night space have made strong efforts in increasing the diversity beyond boundaries of sexism, bringing a second wave of diversity along with them. Celebrating women’s progress in late-night also celebrates more diversity to come. However, the current discussion of progress remains in the male/female gender binary.

Sexism in Comedy

To understand why women have taken so long to take their place in comedy, we have to look at how comedy works. Comedy in some ways involves a certain behavior: being brash, aggressive, and commanding. As Aristotle writes in his Poetics, “‘comedy embraces the worse types of men, worse however, not in the sense that it embraces any and every kind of badness, but in the sense that the ridiculous is a species of ugliness or badness. For the ridiculous consists in some form of error or ugliness that is neither painful

¹ Think Ellen Degeneres (queer female), stand-up comedians like Wanda Sykes (queer
nor injurious’” (quoted in Women and Laughter by Frances Gray, 24). Thus, things are funny when the “perfect” has an acceptable flaw. Men are the standard (“perfect”), so flaws and humor are easier to accept coming from a man than from a woman. Frances Gray, professor of drama and literature at the University of Sheffield, shows that sex—the perpetual comedic topic—is a good example to show that comedy is a masculine space. The rules of discourse about sex are different from rules about other topics. Sex is usually a heterosexual conversation, separating men from women. In this heterosexual conversation, men—as the more “perfect” bodies—are authorized to discuss and like sex, whereas women are encouraged to turn away from sexual discussion. So, basically, funny women often make audiences uncomfortable, so we see them less.

Get it? Men are supposed to be commanding and brash, women are supposed to be quiet and kind and pretend sex doesn’t exist. Jokes (and sex) aren’t quiet and kind.

The Current Late-Night Climate

Guess how many women are late-night hosts right now?

One.

It’s Samantha Bee.

Before that, there was Chelsea Handler for almost a decade, and before that, in 1986, Joan Rivers had a stint on late-night for less than a year. That’s all. It’s a sausage fest. See below:

[Cue a violin solo. Open on an art gallery where all the pictures are of late-night hosts. Samantha Bee is looking at the pictures.]
**Bee’s voice:** You know, when I take a look at each piece individually, I like it. Then when I take a step back, I feel like something’s missing.

[Server enters with a plate of sausages]

**Server:** Sausage? I have, uh, mild, extra mild, I have no idea what that one is, and I hear really good things about that English banger.

Current Late Night “Sausages”, as told by Samantha Bee

![Sausage Selections](image1.png)

Figure 1: Samantha Bee "Sausage Fest"

Or even more dramatic still, here’s who was on late-night before Bee jumped on the scene according to Vanity Fair:

![Late Night Hosts](image2.png)

Figure 2: "Host-to-Host Sensation" (Kamp)
Notice anything? Well at least we know the suit and tie business is doing well. And at least these men aren’t thirsty anymore.

Late-night is, and has been, male dominated. For more typical late-night talk shows like *Late Night* or *The Tonight Show*, not only the hosts, but also the writers, bandleaders, and other staff tend to be men. The more left-leaning the show, the greater (if only slightly) the diversity.

We can attribute the paucity of women in comedy to simple sexism; comedy has long been a “man’s game.” Simple sexism about what is acceptable for a woman to say has always worked against female comedy. In a popular and controversial article for *Vanity Fair* in 2007, “Why Women Aren’t Funny,” Christopher Hitchens, the literary critic, argued that women simply aren’t funny because they don’t need to be. Men have always needed to be funny to get women. Of course this theory has been disproven by the likes of Carol Burnett or Sarah Silverman, but the world of late-night remains a white, male universe.

Women’s chances in late-night are further limited by the networking that staffs the shows. While the comic-host and his writers require skills, the support staff are often hired simply because they’re “friends” of those who run the show—typically, other white men. According to Sarah Schneider, a writer for *College Humor*, as far as sitcoms go, 11% of sitcom creators are women; women account for 26% of writers (Schneider). In late-night shows, *Jimmy Kimmel Live* has only 2 women of the 12 current (wrote episodes in 2016) writers and a male co-host; *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* has only ever had 3 of 26 writers and a male co-host and band; *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* has only 2
women of 19 writers; even *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* has only 3 women on its 13 writer “news team” (information found on IMDB and on Comedy Central websites); we can also merely read the credits at the show’s end. And we have a further perpetuation of the white male hegemony: being on staff on a talk show often leads to being a late-night host down the line.

There is also extreme bias in favor of men when it comes to hosting in general. There seems to be an assumed tendency of audiences to prefer men to women as hosts. What women in late-night have taught us, is that it’s a men’s game that’s hard for women to play. As Nell Scovell points out in her *New York Times* article, “A Woman's Place is on Late Night,” within the last two years, six late-night talk show spots have opened and not a single woman was chosen to fill the position (Scovell). In fact, before James Corden took over *The Late Late Show*, Kathy Griffin sought an audition for the show, but was told “They're not considering females at this time,” as quoted by Jethro Nededog in his article in *The Wrap* focusing on the event. So the bias is explicit and is a bias of which the producers are unashamed: they openly rule out women as hosts.

No one’s heard of *The Late Late Show* anyway, unless they’ve been exhaustively trolling YouTube to come upon one of the videos. You’d think someone would be willing to give one of us ladies at least a pity late-night slot\(^2\).

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\(^2\) We’d also be saving them, considering they’d be able to pay us less. I’d also love the job and would be willing to be paid next to nothing; after all, that’s what getting a college degree in women’s studies has taught me is my fate.
Feminism’s Role

Feminism, as an increasingly popular topic, has resurfaced in the mass media. We can see this in more apolitical shows like *The Ellen Show* or *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* and even more so in progressive shows like *The Daily Show* or *Last Week Tonight.* As the discussion of feminism and feminist issues becomes more main-stream, spaces for representation of more marginalized groups become gradually more accessible.

One of the best examples of this progress is on *The Daily Show.* While Trevor Noah hosts, the diversity of his correspondents expands the show’s topics. As both a parody of the idea that someone can fully embody an identity, and to emphasize the diversity, Noah’s correspondents are given titles such as: “Senior Indian Correspondent,” “Senior Youth Correspondent,” “Senior California Correspondent,” or “Senior Caucasian Correspondent.” These “correspondents” and their titles afford more diversity than simply having Noah talk about things himself. Increasing diversity has created more space for people other than white men to hold leading positions—even women.

Although we only have two examples of modern woman-hosted late-night, both Samantha Bee (2016) and Chelsea Handler (2007) has made efforts to diversify their staff and cohosts. For instance, Handler had significant diversity in her roundtable discussion segment (“Chelsea Lately”). Samantha Bee, as will be discussed later, created a blind process for hiring writers, which generated a staff of half women and men, with increased racial and background diversity. When the diversity of the writers increases, the diversity of the topics and stories being discussed also increases.

If a female host of a political satire show can prove that she relates to other women’s issues across the board, she can criticize the more universal sexist tropes. These shows
focus on political issues such as the current HB2 bill, reproductive rights, sexism in the workplace, and then, of course, other issues pointed out by their more diverse writing staff.

Last, as women and political satire (or even just basic comedy) collide, we get a wider representation of people who can be smart and funny. This allows more voices to be heard, and more perspectives to be joked about.

So really, when women enter power positions in comedic late-night shows, diversity is celebrated, more people are represented, and progress is made.

When political satire meets journalism, we get feminist skits and stories in places like The Daily Show and The Colbert Report. When women factor in as hosts, we get Full Frontal with Samantha Bee.
Understanding Satire

I will make this as brief as I can, but thoroughly explaining satire is a difficult project. In short, satire is a type of humor that makes fun of an entity, a government, a group, or a person—to make a point. According to Lara Cox’s “Standing Up against the Rape Joke” in Signs, satire “depends on communities not being able to understand the [satire], therefore humor depends on the notion that there’s someone out there who won’t ‘get’ the joke” (967). Agreeing with Cox, Nicholas Diehl shows in his article “Satire, Analogy, and Moral Philosophy,” that satire, as well as the “insider” audience, attacks a group or an idea through a veil of a subtle statement (313). The humor is found by the group or individual who “gets” the joke and who both understands the subtlety of the humor and agrees with the satirist’s values herself. As one of the most popular types of humor, satire’s appeal is the reward the audience feels when they are in the “in” crowd who understands the joke—the “smart crowd” who likes to see their own beliefs validated.

“Satire achieves its aim by shocking its audience,” writes Lisa Colletta in her article “Political Satire and Postmodern Irony in the Age of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart” (860). That’s a brief quotation, but also speaks to another important aspect of satire. For the mechanisms of satire to work, the shock-value of the joke must indicate the humor. For instance, when Amy Schumer jokes, “I went home with this French guy because he said something adorable like ‘I have an apartment,’” the shock-value is in the mundane achievement of having a place to live. She has New-York-based humor, where the running joke is that no one can afford an apartment. The joke itself pushes a boundary because it bears both a hint of truth and of humor. In its inevitable absurdity, it overlooks the casual sex as incidental to the story. Another example is Wanda Sykes’s joke in her HBO Special
*I'ma Be Me,* “There are some things that I had to do as gay that I never had to do as black. I never had to come out as black!” The shock-value here is that in talking about LGBTQ issues, she refers to race as an incidental matter of fact.

As a general warning, because satire is created by and for “in” groups (those who understand the message) laughing at “out” groups (those who do not understand), there can be mis-reading. As explained by Jörg Matthes and Adrian Rauchfleish in their study of effects of political parody: satire and other humors “vary in the extent to which an implicit message is present” (603). Some messages are more subtle and harder to infer from a joke. The ability to “decode” satire’s messages requires skills from the audience: comprehension of satirical tools, knowledge of the subject, appreciation of the satirist’s personality and values, social context of the humor, and more. As explained by Deborah Rossen-Knill and her partner Richard Henry in their article “The Princess Bride and the Parodic Impulse”, “The parodic message [taking parody as a form of satire], whether it highlights the criticism or humor, cannot take an explicit form....Even minimal parodic messages must be ‘worked out’ by an audience, with the understanding that the Speaker expects her audiences to work [them] out” (46).

**Political Satire**

Shows like *The Daily Show,* or *Last Week Tonight* (examples when this thesis refers to “political satire shows”), have become increasingly influential in informing and captivating their audiences. Comedy, especially in the current media climate, is one of the most popular forms of media.
Political satire is where politics meets satire...obviously. Despite its popularity, political satire tends to ask more of its audience when it comes to knowledge and skill than traditional satire, invoking more decoding and excavating.

In the case of current public issues, usually mass-audience satirists like Samantha Bee, Trevor Noah, or Jon Stewart give a brief background before giving a comical update on their subjects. Nonetheless, general political knowledge is still helpful (and sometimes vital) for understanding the jokes. For instance, Samantha Bee started one of her earlier shows with a “Don’t be c*nty” bit that discussed the “friendly” advice given to her when she was starting her comedy show. The bit bled into the similar “tips” given to Hillary Clinton. The two women in power struggle with the sexist critiques and “advice” that are somehow not shared by their male counterparts:

Bee: Now last time [at the debate] Hillary got slammed for being too emotional while the cantankerous windmill [Bernie Sanders] didn’t. This time, Hillary’s handlers sent her on stage with reminders to stay cool.

[Reminders shown in Figure 4]

Bee: [Laughing] Oh my gosh! What a coincidence, TBS gave me the same note!

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3 Hey look! Sarcasm!
This bit demonstrates the overlap between feminism and political satire. Politics inevitably involves women, and critical political onlookers must also look at the way politics influences women. In other words, feminism is pretty much inevitable in political satire.

Bee’s two lines show the overlap between the sexist criticism of her yet-to-be-aired show and of Hillary Clinton. It can serve as a test-case showing the “decoding” that is asked of the audience. Bee is expecting the audience either to bring their own knowledge of the sexist double standard faced by women who are in powerful positions, or to inform themselves on the spot, by decoding the joke.

This joke strongly shows how satire requires analysis. Bee is asking her audience to notice a few points: that she and Hillary are in the spotlight and pressured to have mass appeal, that she and Hillary are both female, and that these criticisms are given specifically (and only) to women (also hinted at with “cunty,” exclusively for women). Depending on how an audience member approaches the joke, these three observations must be made in order to “get” the joke: women are held to a different, and unfair, standard from men.

Political satire also typically has a liberal message and is—Hoon Lee puts it in his study of “The Affect Effect of Political Satire,” “predominantly aggressive and unflattering towards politics” (310).
As an aside: I sense a question of “chicken or the egg”; maybe if we didn’t have Donald Trump or Ted Cruz as the frontrunners in our current political debate, our political humorists wouldn’t be so negative about our politicians. You know? Maybe if decisions made 40 years ago in Roe v Wade weren’t being threatened by cases like HB2, we’d be a little more optimistic. Just saying...anyway back to the paper.

Lee shows that these fake-news shows tend to express a “disappointed idealism” that agrees with their viewership’s (311). While the house and audience feel that change can happen (potentially through more political involvement), there is frustration that change is not happening fast.

Political satire “fundamentally differs from critical coverage of hard news” (Lee 311) because satire is dependent on the opinion of the satirist. Political satire, of course, has an inherent bias. For viewers, the choice to watch a usually liberal political satire is to choose a show that aligns with their own views. This factor makes political satire perpetuate its audience’s views, as those views become more exaggerated and unwavering.
Part 2: Samantha Bee, Queen.
Jon Stewart: Like many of you, I heard some interesting, let’s call it news, today, about a certain, let’s say gift from heaven. Entering the presidential race, because apparently Huckabee-Santorum wasn’t far-fetched enough... (Democalypse 2016)

Yes indeed, on June 16th of 2015, Jon Stewart announced the arrival of Donald Trump to the Republican race to presidency. At the time, the announcement was an absurdity; we could still comfort ourselves with the somehow false notion that Trump could never be taken seriously as a political presence.

The bit continues, as Stewart turns to Jordan Klepper (Daily Show “correspondent”) outside the Trump headquarters who begins to orgasm with the pleasure of striking such comedic gold. Stewart stops him and turns to Hasan Minhaj (another “correspondent”) purportedly at the White House, who joins in on the orgasmic news. Turning back to Stewart, all three men are shown getting close to climaxing. Then Stewart asks his female correspondent Jessica Williams (supposedly at Trump International), and she proceeds unenthusiastically to join in with a fake orgasm about the news.

Williams: Oh, my god. Yes. What a big announcement. Definitely the biggest I’ve ever seen. I don’t even know if I can take it anymore it’s SO big.

Stewart: I feel like—Jess, I feel like you’re not really into this. I feel like you’re not really into this Jess.

Williams (still obviously with fake enthusiasm): What? No. This is amazing. It feels so great [checks watch]. I just actually really have an early day tomorrow, so are we going to get done with this segment or...
All the men are shown finishing their orgasm. They all announce that they’re done. Klepper falls asleep. The bit ends.

When we decode and excavate this bit, the layers of meaning can be seen. We know that the bit was performed in June of 2015, just as serious candidates for the Republican nomination were being considered and Jeb Bush still looked as if he had a chance. The first “layer” of this joke then, is as Stewart announces the absurdity of Trump’s candidacy, an absurdity even greater than those of Huckabee and Santorum. The studio and the TV fans are presumed to both share the general opinion of Stewart (against these candidates) and have enough knowledge of the status of the Republican candidate race. Further to the decode the humor, the audience must see Trump’s announcement as a perpetuation of the incredible incompetence of Republican Party. As we move to excavate the next layer of the bit, we appreciate the perspective of the writers, allowing the jokes to add a personal element into the show (although this isn’t really important). The male correspondents and Stewart all “orgasm” to show their excitement for the content that Trump will give for future jokes. Decoding further, we begin to enjoy the bit’s sexual undertones. Finally, we get down to the last layer, given by Jessica Williams. She is the first woman to enter into the bit, and begins to comment on the Trump nomination with phrases that are associated with sexual double standards: women are expected to fake orgasm. When she says, “Definitely the biggest I’ve ever seen. I don’t even know if I can take it anymore it’s SO big,” she is simultaneously referring to, not only Trump’s announcement, but to the trope that women are always expected to tell a man his penis is “so big” and “the biggest I’ve ever seen.” Analyzing her monotone delivery and her haste to get the bit over with, we see the traditional fake enthusiasm associated with the double standard of how men and women
are supposed to experience sex. Williams’s part in this bit reminds us of the pressure on women to fake enthusiasm and praise during sex—and how stupid that pressure is. To summarize, this short bit informs the viewers of Trump’s announcement, then asks the audience to critically think through the rest of the bit to enjoy the struggles of the Republican Party, and to sympathize with Stewart’s writers and performers in the relish of the new topic, and, yeah, not to forget the double standard.

Through excavation and decoding, an audience of this event is both informed and prompted to do an exercise of critical analysis—the same critical analysis always expected of feminists. This bit too shows the intersection of feminist issues with political satire, and the power of that combination.

Jessica Williams’s presence in this sketch—indeed giving her the last word, the climax in fact—is the mark that women are beginning to show up more and more in comedy and political news. Williams’s part here is a good introduction to the next subject.

*Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* is similar to *The Daily Show*, but with a stronger feminist focus. The show is also the first political satire show to be hosted by a woman.

**Becoming Samantha Bee**

Samantha Bee holds the record as the longest running correspondent on *The Daily Show*, according to CNN’s “The Daily Show’s’ Famous Alumni.” She is female, she is feminist, and recently, she followed Chelsea Handler and became the only current late-night female talk-show host. Enter *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*. First airing on February 8, 2016, the show has graced us with political ingenuity. It’s been successful, and has even had its first season order extended by an extra 26 episodes on account of its success (Andreeva).
Just like our friend Ted Cruz, Samantha Bee was born north of the American border. Unlike Ted Cruz, she was born Canadian. Bee was in an all-female improvisation troupe called The Atomic Fireballs in Montreal before her manager called her and asked her if she wanted to audition for *The Daily Show*. Of course she ended up getting the gig, and then pulled Jason Jones, now her husband, to the show shortly thereafter.

In 2003, Samantha Bee became a correspondent on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. From 2003 to 2015, her work on *The Daily Show* gained her notoriety as both as a talented and fearless star of multiple political bits and as the only female correspondent (until Kristen Schaal joined in 2008, and later Jessica Williams), as reported by Jeffrey Feishman. She left *The Daily Show* in 2015 and took on the challenge of starring in her own talk show *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*.

**Creating Full Frontal**

Despite her obvious talent, Bee wasn’t considered to replace Jon Stewart. Instead, when Bee stepped down from her position as a correspondent, she and her husband pitched a various ideas and eventually had their show *The Detour* (also still airing) picked up by TBS. TBS then began to talk about pairing Bee with Conan O’Brien (by airing their shows back-to-back) as late-night talk show hosts, and *Full Frontal* began to take shape, according to Dave Itzkoff in the *New York Times*.

Rebecca Traister notes that, while there have been female-hosted talk-shows such as Chelsea Handler’s *Chelsea Lately* and Joan Rivers’s *The Late Show Starring Joan Rivers*, Samantha Bee is the first female host of a late-night satirical news show (Traister).
Feminism in Creating *Full Frontal*

*Full Frontal* is progressive in its execution (not just in the sex of its host). To start, candidates to join this writing staff went through a completely blind audition, removing the “who knows who” aspect of much of comedy staffing, and giving those with less experience a better chance to be hired. Bee sought talent, and her wide net of applicants turned up untapped talent. The blind auditions also landed Bee a diverse writing staff, half men, half women, and 30% people of color. That’s about as diverse as it gets (Traister).

*Full Frontal* also structures itself differently from most late-night talk- and satirical-news shows. For one, Bee has no desk, and no guests; she has a more direct communication to her audience and talks exclusively about news (rather than plugging a new book or film by a guest). She also ventures outside of the studio (her second episode featured her at a refugee camp in Jordan), to get closer to the news she reports on. She also opts to do a once-weekly episode instead of a nightly one. These characteristics all reflect the decision to “cut the bullsh*t” characteristic of the medium; delivering the show weekly means the writing and the quality can be that much better.

With so much effort put into news reporting, Samantha Bee also has become one of the first significant female comedians to focus her comedy beyond feminist issues (although that’s certainly a huge part of her presence) (Traister).

*Full Frontal’s* presence is not limited to Monday nights on TV; Bee also publishes satirical articles online. Akin to *The Onion, Full Frontal’s* on-line articles poke fun at current events. An example of one such article is a
group of purported texts from Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders as they seek endorsements from significant black figures (example shown in Figure 5, p. 23). With these articles, Full Frontal deepens its cultural penetration.

You can also go ahead and call 1-844-TROLLZ to get a hotline set up by the show that comically shames rapists—Bee’s is probably the only show with one of those.

**Pre-Frontal**

As is to be expected, male late-night hosts are much more prominently featured in the media than their female counterpart. In October 2015, Vanity Fair published an article by David Kamp that celebrated the “titans of late night.” The article mentioned the absence of women from late-show hosting—and the lack of diversity in general—but hardly addressed the image of the nine white men (and Trevor Noah). The article pointed out that both Chelsea Handler and Samantha Bee were at that time planning on (re)entering the hosting scene, but neither woman was pictured. Samantha Bee here comically corrects the error.

Here’s what else the article did say: despite the most liberal, open, feminist culture that The Daily Show seems to foster, women were still missing from the pool of those considered to fill Stewart’s position. Yes, as Jonah Weiner points out in the New York Times, the Amys (Schumer and Poehler) were asked, but their notoriety is far greater than Trevor

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Figure 6: Samantha Bee Instagram; Modified from original picture shown in Figure 2
Noah’s, female comics like Chelsea Peretti or Jen Kirkman whose popularity/name recognition was on par with Noah’s, were not discussed. Not even Samantha Bee was interviewed for the position. Trevor Noah, a non-white South African man, was considered more seriously than equally capable women.⁴

The media coverage of Samantha Bee and her show emphasizes her intelligence, and every one of the features and reviewers mentions her gender. There had been media discussion in favor of Bee replacing Jon Stewart instead of putting Trevor Noah in the position for The Daily Show. Of course Bee’s sex is “news” in such a male-dominated kingdom, but articles about Bee seem to harp on topics like the extra space between the tops of her thighs and the skirts and dresses she puts on. Bee commented on this during her very first Full Frontal episode:

[Samantha Bee sits at a table in a press conference]

Bee: *Anybody have any questions? Oh yes* [points at journalist]

Journalist 1: *Is it hard breaking into the boys club?*

Journalist 2: [Interrupting] *What’s it like being a woman in late night?*

Journalist 3: *How can I watch your show as a man?*

Journalist 4: *What’s it like to be a female woman?*

Journalist 5: *Sam, what did you have to do differently to make this show a reality? ... as a woman?*

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⁴ I too would have gladly interviewed for the position, but was not considered.
Bee: Okay you know what it took? Hard work, a great team, and maybe just a little bit of magic... [She winks]

[Horrific zombie/witch sequence happens where Bee stars as the main witch]

Bee: It's true we're all witches. Any other questions?

Sexism is cleverly embedded in this bit. Bee’s first layer shows how, according to the press, inescapable gender is. This finding comes as we decode the repetition of “woman,” especially with Journalist 4’s question of, “What’s it like to be a female woman?” Bee shows media’s absurd fixation. The second layer of meaning in this sketch comments on how men see a woman: they are intimidated by her womanhood. With lines like, “Is it hard breaking into the boys club?” and “Sam, what did you have to do differently to make this show a reality? ... as a woman?” Bee shows that she faces the well-known difficulty of breaking into a predominantly male space. The quotation, “How can I watch your show as a man?” emphasizes how her female presence threatens and intimidates men. The witch sketch that follows the questions parodies this male fear and the absurdity of the sexist structure that makes a female identity seem so foreign that entering into its space must be done by magic. The witch skit also comments on the old sexist tropes of women being witches (commentary that requires prior knowledge).

Coming to Full Frontal, Bee had a lot of critical attention and high expectations to contend with. She was known to have succeeded on The Daily Show, and was a woman too. Full Frontal faced a tough challenge.

So you know, challenge was accepted, and the high-set bar met.
Influential Effects of *Full Frontal*

Samantha Bee is doing strong and influential feminist work. Here’s why:

Bee is good at what she does, meaning people will listen. She is not afraid to take risks and say controversial things, and she does it with smarts and with the writing of her intelligent staff. More than anything, *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* focuses on things that tend to get overlooked by the majority of Americans—who know more about Kanye West than they do about Syria. Ellen Gray quotes in her article for *Philly News*, Bee’s policy: “What we want to do is take stories that we don’t think receive enough attention and stab them with the hot poker of comedy.” She is fearless; any topic can be treated, and anyone and everyone can be lain victim.

Let’s take a look at how Samantha Bee took on the topic of Syrian Refugees. Bee is showing the absurdities of the discussion of the topic during the 2016 election process. This bit is much more direct and easy to understand, but there is satire at each level.

[Cue Drum Intro]

Bee: *One of the major themes of this election is: who shouldn’t be in America?*  
*And one of the major answers to that question has been Syrian Refugees...*  
*despite Vladimir Putin working day and night to create more of them.*  
[Horrid Footage of a demolished Syrian city]

Bee: *Who are these refugees, and why do they hate America so much that they’re willing to be bombed into homelessness just to freak us out?*
Cue some parody of America’s “welcome video” in contrast to Canada’s real one, and then Bee sets out for a refugee camp in Jordan to meet some of the refugees herself.

Syrian woman: *We’re like any other person. We wear clothes, eat, drink, and our kids go to school.*

Bee: *You sound very reasonable to me. That alone, makes me feel suspicious.*

[Switching to interviewing a refugee man]

Bee: *What are your thoughts on ISIS?*

Syrian man: *I hate ISIS. The whole world must unite against them.*

Bee proves, of course, that Americans have no information. She shows a few more FOX News clips to prove her point, then moves to the idea (quoting both Trump and Huckabee) that “we don’t know who these refugees are,” and they “could easily be ISIS members in disguise.” Flash to Kate Dorsh, a member of the International Organization for Migration, who inspects each refugee candidate and helps filter them through refugee resettlement.

Dorsh: *The refugee program undergoes the most amount of security screening than any other immigrant visa.*

*It’s times like these that you really get an appreciation for the existence of FAUX—excuse me, “FOX”—news.*
Bee goes on to show us really how tough the screening is. It’s a long (18-24 month) process; the information about every person screened is entered into a database, and shared with security branches of the US government.

[ Presidential candidates freak out that the majority of refugees are ‘able bodied men’]

Dorsh: No, it’s actually about 2% of our caseload are single men. These are survivors of violence and torture, or they also could be LGBT refugees.

[Obviously, the most likely type of person to be an ISIS member.]

In just seven minutes, Bee has shut down the lies about Syrian refugees that swirl around in the Republican desperation to get elected and the fear-mongering that has been stirred up by news stories. This bit is much more straightforward than some of Bee’s others. There is no creative underlying message than beneath the first layer. That layer—the lies spread by the Republican candidates—is simply disproven through parody. Nonetheless, Bee still spreads information.

Samantha Bee has also showed some more specifically women-centered issues as well. She interviewed Texas state representative Dan Flynn about the HB2 bill, interviewed female survivors of sexual assault in the workplace, and tracked down the truth about Planned Parenthood issues. Here’s a bit about the scandalous backlog of analyzing rape kits held by US law enforcement.
The bit begins with numerous states (Tennessee, Arizona, Oregon, Virginia, Texas) admitting their multiple thousand untested rape kits. Texas holds the prize with a whopping 20,000 kits not yet analyzed. Next, Bee gets real with some hard-core satire:

Bee: *Is there anything worse than putting a woman through a four-hour rape exam and then just stuffing the evidence in a closet? Of course there is.*

Next we learn that sheriffs’ departments are taking a step further, actually destroying the untested rape kits, with plans to destroy more.

Bee: *You wanna see a map of the states where police can legally incinerate your rape kit before the statute of limitations expires? [Image of the US shows up]*

You’re looking at it! It’s ALL OF THEM.

We then learn that, of course, there are some state legislators who are working to fix these issues—countered by select few who prevent said fixes. And then, worse, we learn that there are police who don’t even believe that rape exists.

Idaho Sherriff Craig Rowland: *I believe the legislation needs to take a strong look at allowing law enforcement to do their job, and not try to dictate what we need to do... they need to let us decide if we’re gonna send the [rape] kit in and when we send the kits in.*
Voice Overlay: Rowland says after interviewing an alleged rape victim police often find it was not actually rape, things just went too far and someone got scared.

Bee: Things went too far and someone got scared...[yelling] THAT'S WHAT RAPE IS.

Again, through ingenuity and comedy, Bee covers six topics: the trauma of undergoing a rape kit (on top of the trauma of rape), legislative letdowns, ignorant politicians, bad policing, victim blaming, and rape ignorance. She achieves this with humor—and in under seven minutes.

These two examples of bits will give a sense of the intelligence and skill that makes up the comedy of Full Frontal.

**The Reception of Full Frontal**

This section was written on April 12, shortly after it was made known that Full Frontal with Samantha Bee would be renewed for 26 episodes. This means that of six newly hosted late-night shows it’s one of the few that’s gotten good ratings. In other words, sucks to suck Comedy Central.

According to TBS, Full Frontal is currently averaging about 2.1 million viewers and 29 million views on their YouTube channel. In comparison, The Daily Show with Trevor Noah can’t seem to break one million.

Critically, Full Frontal is also doing well. For example Kristin Hunt of GQ argues that Bee is “The Real Heir to Jon Stewart’s Daily Show” and Christine Jun of Inverse says,
“Samantha Bee isn’t just one of the funniest hosts of late night. She’s the most prop-innovative.” It seems that the majority of what is being said praises her humor, her bravery, and her innovative approach to satirical journalism. Critics basically say the same as this thesis: Samantha Bee good, Samantha Bee smart, Samantha Bee funny.

Her negative critiques? Mostly that she is too liberal. Also these mostly come from FOX. I’ll let you decide what you think.

**Final Thoughts on Samantha Bee**

Samantha Bee is feminist in her work and has made an effort to bring that to the television stage. Her feminism stretches from her position as a woman in a male space, to her subject matter, to her satirical techniques. With her popularity, she is also proving that her approach to television is effective, which adds to the push to make a more diverse and feminist media space. As *Full Frontal* and Samantha Bee herself force our structural, marginalizing, and feminist issues into the media sphere, she pioneers the way for progress effectively and intelligently, and more so than any of her.
Work We Still Need To Do

Today marks the day that this thesis is due, and so I will leave this paper as is to show what happens when a white feminist writes a thesis. In a discussion with one of my thesis readers, they brought to light that I was in fact being an ignorant white woman, and I had that familiar feeling of realizing that I am oppressive. I know that I am a product of my environment and the structures that favor me, but that does not give me an excuse, and I do want to make sure that you as a reader recognize my weaknesses.

Through my own decoding and excavating, my level of analysis only reaches the level that I know and can understand. As I recognize what I wasn’t seeing, I can use those tools of decoding and excavating to try to see more, but unfortunately the process will happen after this thesis is finalized. That means that for people like Jessica Williams—who is both female and black—I only mentioned her womanhood, because that is what I saw as most important in that bit (p. 19). It also means that in the discussion of Samantha Bee, or Trevor Noah, or Jon Stewart, there are inevitable gaps that I neither see nor mention.

If I—as a feminist and women’s studies major—can fall back into the easiness of enjoying all the privileges I have and can not see people different than myself, then so can most of the world (and so does most of the world). Therefore moving forward, voices unlike my own need to be more obvious, more discussed, and more acknowledged so that my ability to not see the people oppressed by our structures is no longer possible.
Works Cited


List of Terms

Amy Poehler: Also a female stand-up comedian. Arguably the most famous female stand-up comedian at this time. She is known for her feminism, her body positivity, and her brash humor. She writes and stars in her show Inside Amy Schumer, and also starred in the movie Trainwreck.

Amy Schumer: Really? You’re back here again? Amy Schumer is one of the top stand-up comedians currently. She also wrote and starred in the movie Trainwreck and has her own show Inside Amy Schumer. She is celebrated widely for her feminist take on jokes, but criticized because her feminism is often regarded as too white-centric and lacking in more inclusive feminism.

Carol Burnett: One of the first extremely successful female comedians, winning her first emmy in 1962. She is famous for her show The Carol Burnett Show, which was a variety show she hosted for 11 seasons from 1967-1978.

Chelsea Peretti: Another stand-up comedian, who is likely known best by her Netflix specials and her role on Brooklyn Nine-Nine.

HB2 Bill: Bill currently to be seen by the Supreme Court that will decide whether or not states have the ability to restrict abortion clinics.

Jimmy Kimmel Live!: Late-night talk show hosted by Jimmy Kimmel. Fairly apolitical, although Kimmel’s popularity has allowed him to be able to do more serious jokes.

Jen Kirkman: An up-and-coming female stand-up comedian.

Jon Stewart: Previously and the most famous host of The Daily Show. Hosted for 18 (?) years. Do you live under a rock? You really should know who Jon Stewart is.
Kathy Griffin: Female stand-up comedian. She is known for her brash comedy, her “gays” (gay male following), her Bravo! TV show My Life on the D-List, and as a brief host in place of the late Joan Rivers on fashion police.

*Last Week Tonight:* A weekly show for an hour on HBO. Hosted by John Oliver, this is a weekly show that is also a satirical show like *The Daily Show.* One of the most prominent qualities of this show is that the bits tend to be longer and more informative about the topic, but covers less topics. It’s a little more investigative, but covers fewer topics than the cable counterparts.

*The Daily Show:* Satirical News show, probably the most famous one created, and the single largest pioneer work for humorous famous news. The most famous host of this show is Jon Stewart, who hosted for nearly 20 years. Stephen Colbert and *The Colbert Report* was a spin-off show. Currently hosted by Trevor Noah on Comedy Central.

*The Ellen Show:* Most popular talk show currently on air. Hosted by Ellen Degeneres, and hosted daily during prime time.

*The Late Late Show:* A late night talk show that isn’t wildly popular due to its extremely late time slot (12:35 am). Currently though, with its new host James Corden, the show has jumped ratings and will move to 10:30 pm.

Trevor Noah: Current host of *The Daily Show.* He is from South Africa, and has a large presence outside of the US. He was a bit of an unknown in the US, but because of his credits abroad, has been more noticed in the US. His first US show was at Cobb’s Comedy Club in San Francisco, where my boo-thang David Naimyar does shows
sometimes (plug for David—he’ll get a website soon, so you should Google him and tell your well connected comedy friends).

Wanda Sykes: Wanda Sykes is a famous stand up comedian. Her most popular work was in the late 90s and early 2000s, which is why maybe you haven’t heard of her (I’m giving you the benefit of the doubt... you ignorant youths). She is also a recurrent character in Black-ish where she plays Daphne Lido. She is known for being a black lesbian comic, and also is known for her unique voice, which has landed her parts as the voice in numerous animated works such as Ice Age, Futurama, The Simpsons, and Bob’s Burgers.